Images of Ambivalence: Photography in Margarethe von Trotta’s *Die bleierne Zeit*  

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**Abstract**

Taking John Tagg’s intervention in “Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State” as its principle point of departure, this paper will investigate the hybrid meanings of photographic imagery in New German Women’s Cinema. Of particular interest will be the marked instances of photographic portraiture in Helma Sanders-Brahm’s *Under the Pavement Lies the Strand* (1974) and Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane* (1981). Drawing from the student movements of ’68 and their aftermath, the crisis of terrorism, the specter of state surveillance and the complex struggles of the feminist movement, my argument will also move in the direction of seeing these phenomena in the context of much broader historical developments in institutional practices across the spectrum of social life. More specifically, I will attempt to articulate and explore the complex inter-textuality that informs the appearance of photographic images in these films, arriving at a perspective that reckons with the over-determined role of photography in modern society. In this way, the photographic image enfolds and disseminates an ambivalent and contradictory set of discourses that resist both state practices of social control, and leftist attempts (in the realms of cinema and art photography) to dramatize a counter-photographic practice. In Derridean terms, then, photography—and in particular portrait photography—is always somewhere “in-between” the discourses which attempt to pinpoint and define it. As such, it (and cinema) is always haunted by a trace-structure which leaves it open to both progressive and regressive lines of flight.

**Keywords**

Photography, Surveillance, Invagination, von Trotta, Derrida.
In “Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State,” John Tagg outlines the complexity of the photographic sign in modern life, and articulates a program for its study: “Photography as such has no identity...Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.”¹ The “as such” of Tagg’s formulation makes one thing clear: any rigorous encounter with a photograph in its specificity will also have to take into account the range of practices that situate it. This means that the concrete manifestation of any image will be haunted by the totality of its implementations, the contradictory spectrality with which it appears as a ubiquitous and ambiguous figure of private and public practices. As a result of its uncontrollable inter-textuality, the photographic image dissimulates the concrete intentions and political ambitions of its specific uses, opening up to unpredictable lines of flight which will haunt any single claim for the status of photography, both as theory and as practice.

I read John Tagg’s intervention as a deconstructionist gesture, and to that extent we may speak of photography as an example of what Jacques Derrida called “invagination”: the photographic image enfolds within it a spectrum of discourses, practices, and identities that are larger than—we might say in excess of—any particular image. Because of this, photographic imagery is subject to a dialectical play of metonymy and synecdoche.² Every photograph, wherever it occurs, will always register itself as a partial object, even when it appears as a totalizing truth-claim. To this extent, the whole which inflects (and is inflected by) the image will necessarily be fractured, contingent, and fluid. This incompleteness, moreover, is the very condition of photography, and by extension we may say that photographic images are fundamentally ambivalent.

As an invaginated medium, photography poses a fundamental challenge to the question of modern identity, which is itself subject to a multitude of unpredictable and potentially transgressive “snapshots.” Again, this means that it will be impossible to speak neutrally of “identity” as such—rather, one will always have to attach a proliferating series of signifiers to it: “social,” “historical,” “gendered,” and so on. Each instance, because it cannot be transferred to another, must cope with a discursive play that constitutes identity as an undecidable totality of inscription. It is
this complex definition that, I believe, informs Margarethe von Trotta’s controversial New German Cinema classic *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981). I have chosen this film because its historical placement makes it a nodal point for two major reasons: the paranoia and political malaise experienced during and after West Germany’s terrorist crisis, and the way in which these phenomena foregrounded major issues surrounding an increasingly pervasive (and global) surveillance state. The question of the social in such a context is, I will argue, at the center of von Trotta’s project. What is more, because the film takes seriously the ambivalence of social identity, it proves recalcitrant to both scholarly attempts to dismiss it as a work of reactionary national binding and to arguments which attempt to view it in a more progressive light. Rather, the film tries to cope with an intertextuality that renders it constitutively problematic, both as a work of art and as a political gesture.

To begin, an engagement with the film’s title is of interest, for it raises the dual questions of context and translation: its literal German title translates to “The Leaden Time,” itself a nationally- and historically-specific term as defined by its director. Its title in the UK was *The German Sisters*; in the U.S., it is known as *Marianne and Juliane*, the names of its two protagonists. In this process of translation, we have a fascinating and circular movement of signs, from a phrase that is vigilant to the complexities of German history and identity in the original German, to a cruder abstraction suggesting an archetypal national identity in the UK translation, and to a more specific identity formation in the U.S. title, one that appears to efface a more general history in favor of discrete individualities. In each translation, the identities of the lead characters are put to work in fundamentally different ways: partially subsumed into a historical malaise in the film’s original title, virtually consumed by an archetypal formation in one translation, and specified at the expense of historical context in another. Which of these translations has precedence? Which could be claimed as the “proper” title of this film? Like photography, the film’s status as a transnational object is already subject to a constitutive movement across practices and institutional contexts, rendered plural and fractured in each and every manifestation. Nevertheless, I claim some privilege for the German title, as I believe it most elegantly expresses the nature of the film’s ambivalence about West Germany’s social crisis—an ambivalence in which photography plays a distinct (if rarefied) part.

If the presence of photographic imagery in von Trotta’s film both produces and conveys ambivalence, then a particular genre of
photography proves especially important for our considerations: the portrait, which I define as any instance in which a human figure is singled out by the camera-eye, especially (though not exclusively) when she appears alone. Indeed, the film begins with a prominent photo of Marianne, the fictionalized version of iconic terrorist Gudrun Ensslin. The film's first shot introduces a sustained close-up of an apartment building, identifiably viewed through a window because of the presence of the pane which separates the two glass plates. As the camera zooms out from its close-up view, we see Juliane (the fictional version of Ensslin's sister, Christiane) pacing back and forth in front of what we assume to be a private bulletin board covered with newspaper clippings and photos, the most prominent of which is a bust-style portrait. As Juliane paces back towards the right side of the frame in a medium shot, the camera tracks her to reveal a wall of book shelves which contain numerous binders, each labeled according to a year, the total collection appearing to comprise the period from 1973 to 1978. The spectator has time to process this not only because the binders are viewed in another long take, but because the camera emphasizes their importance by holding its view of them even as Juliane paces off-screen and back towards the bulletin board. Eventually, the camera cuts to a close-up view of Juliane writing some notes at her desk before turning towards the board; an eye-line match gives us her point-of-view, in which the above-mentioned portrait is placed at the center of the frame, revealing the image of an unsmiling and intense-looking woman (Fig. 1). As the spectator gazes with Juliane, the camera zooms into the photo, anticipating the next cut, which moves us out of this initial space and into the film's first flashback.

The following aesthetic features mark this image as a police photo: the framing from the shoulders up, the direct address of its subject, her unsmiling expression, and the clinical and apparently non-decorative method in which the picture was taken all reference a multitude of similar portraits in both fictional and nonfictional contexts. Indeed, it is the potentially infinite nature of the photo's metonymic function that is striking: a single instance of a genre, it is also a part that extends through an overwhelming sequence of "others." I make this claim not only on the level of inter-textuality, but also in terms of history: the generic features of the photograph (as a police photo) do not claim recognition solely through their ubiquitous appearance in other contexts; rather, the photograph's metonymic sequence is significant on another, more abstract level—one having to do with an experience of modern social life that is only partially visible to the senses.
In order to get closer to this admittedly vague idea, a look at another generic context will prove useful: the related institutional medium of the passport photo. Similar in many respects to the prison photo, the passport photo exists within an official context designed to situate a personal identity. This context functions both for the purposes of control and surveillance, and for the corresponding promise of personal civil liberties and services (the right to cross national borders, the right to vote, and so on). The social relationship that the passport photo references, then, is (at least) two-fold: on the one hand, it marks the subject as a legitimate member of a social formation; on the other hand, it also opens the subject up to a spectral economy that is informed by suspicion, discipline and order. In this way, the individual who is situated in the frame of a passport photo is simultaneously an object of approval and suspicion. Writing about the evolution of the search warrant in nineteenth-century Germany, Peter Becker concludes with this provocative formulation, one that pinpoints the significance of photography in such institutional contexts: “[P]hotographs, which helped to objectify the representation of physiognomies, always served a dual purpose for practitioners. First, they provided access to the personal identity of suspects; second, they seemed to contain direct evidence about their criminal identity.” Becker’s analysis points, in my opinion, to an abiding suspicion that was implicitly in force even in cases where the represented subject was not actually a criminal. The “standardized gaze,” to use Becker’s term, threatened each documented identity with the potential for a criminal inspection; suspicion and its attendant programs for discipline were generalized across the spectrum of standard practices. Julian Stallabrass develops Becker’s idea in order to focus on the colonized subjects who were documented through an abstracted, Western-capitalist gaze.9

Stallabrass’s analysis is of particular interest because of his subject: modern art photography, as practiced by figures such as Rineke Dijkstra and Thomas Ruff, both of whom invoke the generic features of institutional portrait photography in their highly experimental—and highly politicized—works. Ruff’s “Passport Series”—a collection of frontal portraits that closely duplicates the stylistic “blankness” of official portraiture—is of particular interest for my purposes. For Stallabrass, the choice to ape the generic features of institutional portrait photography results in a complex play of what Norman Bryson and Trevor Fairbrother have called “Spectacle and Surveillance.” Using cutting-edge digital technology to blow up the image, sharpen its detail, and present it on a massive scale, such photographs at once present a level of visibility that was previously impossible, while at the same time producing
an abiding suspicion of the ethical and epistemological import of such unfettered looking. Bryson and Fairbrother (speaking about Ruff’s “Passport Photos”) put it this way: “[Ruff’s photographs] induce in us a liberating freedom to look while instilling on a visceral level an awareness of the power relations implicit in the looker's gaze.” Stallabrass, for his part, is more circumspect: “While such photography may offer a critique of the classifying impulse that lay behind imperial ethnographic photography at home and abroad, it is not one that impedes the guilty pleasure of viewing these contemporary subjects as mere image.”

This idea of “mere image,” however, is problematic precisely because it fails to consider the other side of such surveillance: the extent to which the site of such an institutional inscription constitutes social being itself, and especially in the West German context that von Trotta’s film addresses.

This last point is crucial, for even as the police photo of Marianne marks her as a criminal, its role as a visual trace also functions as an historical and temporal identity, one that circulates in time and space even after her death. I read this as a more or less explicit claim of Die bleierne Zeit not only because the film emphasizes the photograph through the devices of the close-up and the camera zoom—and through Juliane’s point-of-view—but also because it offers the spectator Marianne’s photo as primary; that is, it precedes the viewers encounter with her as a flesh-and-blood human being. As “origin” of her character, the photo haunts Marianne (and the viewer) as a signifier of social life. A constitutive ghost that contaminates the self-present status of identity, the mug-shot also ensures Marianne’s historical survival as a trace. Furthermore, because this trace is invaginated by the asymmetrical projects of state surveillance, colonial ethnography and modern art photography, the photo will always be a site of contention. This is not merely a matter of saying that several different contexts influence the interpretation of the image; rather, the possibility of comprehending the photograph at all depends on the simultaneity—the constitutive aporia—of these discourses, in the complex interplay of presence and absence, part and whole that the photographic image evokes. More specifically, the portrait of Marianne is legible precisely because it is an inscription that degrades her memory at the same time that it saves her from the immense anonymity of history.

For this reason, I am more forgiving of the film than Barton Byg. In his “German History and Cinematic Convention Harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta’s Marianne and Juliane,” Byg attempts a comprehensive dismissal of the film based largely on its use of the
conventions of classical narrative cinema ("seamless" editing techniques, melodramatic tropes, two dimensional character types, a causally-motivated plot structure, etc.). More specifically, he argues that these conventions are utilized in the service of a mystifying narrative that consolidates—by the end of the film—a unified German national identity at the expense of the "political and historical reality of the German Democratic Republic." While I find numerous sections of Byg's argument compelling, it is in the moments of photography that the film seems most recalcitrant to the kind of suturing project that Byg outlines. In this way, his analysis falls short because of the constitutive ambivalence of such moments. Therefore, we must attend to those isolated moments that inflect and haunt the larger narrative. Byg is no doubt right that von Trotta's film is far more conventional than numerous other offerings of the New German Cinema, by both male and female directors. Nevertheless, the role of photography in her film—though fleeting—strikes me as singularly unconventional because of the questions it raises about identity.

I have already spoken of the photograph’s “originary” status in relation to Marianne; what I have yet to do is articulate the extent to which it functions as a trace. That is, it not only functions as an inscription or signature of Marianne’s identity; it also disseminates an institutional logic that haunts both of the lead characters. For instance, the film’s first flashback introduces us to Marianne in the flesh; in addition to the esoteric setting of her introduction (an isolated public square surrounded by stately statues), what strikes the viewer most is the momentary blankness of her expression—one that resembles more than a little her photograph (Fig. 2). It is almost as if, like the photographic image, Marianne finds herself locked into position, a feeling suggested not only by the transient stasis of her expression, but also by the slightly surreal surroundings.

In other words, there is something about the context of this first meeting that is arrested, caught in a liminal zone of sorts. The fact that the meeting is a flashback makes this even more palpable. It should be noted, however, that the uncanny way in which this first encounter strikes us is not merely a matter of resemblance and formal presentation; rather, I locate the significance of Marianne’s expression in its metonymic function—it references a historically-determined way of being in the world. Julian Stallabrass’s discussion of Dijkstra’s portraits of adolescents helps to explicate this mode of being:

![Figure 2. Marianne in the flesh (video Still from Die bleierne Zeit).](image)
While the particular circumstances of [Dijkstra's] photography are novel to its subjects, none of them are remotely innocent of photographic effects, having been saturated in them since birth. Above all, the confrontation here is between marginalized offshoots of the multi-billion photographic industry: the artist...with those subjects who (far from being the confident, mature representatives of a rising class) are half-formed adolescents of no professional status, or are emerging shaken from the bullring, the firing range, or the obstetrician's ward, or are in the process of transforming their identities—those, in other words, who have uncertain control over their reserve...If the poses seem familiar, it is because capitalist subjects are schooled in uniform disciplines of self-presentation...

If Dijkstra's images can be said to show anything, then, it is the extent to which the poses adopted by her subjects are indicative of a modern capitalist formation that increasingly has effaced the boundaries between public and private, global and local, inside and outside. In this way, photography can be read as a privileged signifier of institutional intervention that has come to be seen as an abiding aspect of social identity. The blankness of Dijkstra's subjects and Marianne's expression, then, has its traces in a much more general historical progression, one that we are still in the process of coping with. More specifically, the very idea of "pose" indicates a relationship to public identity as a play of surfaces—an oscillation between showing and hiding that functions as one of the major coping mechanisms of modern surveillance subjects. It is a coping mechanism that Bryson and Fairbrother refer to as a "survival skill," making explicit the stakes of the equation:

"[T]he sitters [of Ruff's portraits] share a general urban lore of how to manage the social gaze, how to play with it, how to reverse its lines of force...They have grown up within these great social forces. And they know the trick of staying calm under the double pressure: you just have to turn one social force (the spectacle) against another (surveillance). No need to be distorted in either direction: to cope, you have neither to be abject (a mug shot) nor mutinous...you just have to stay cool."

The preceding quote not only supplements the analysis of Stallabrass's capitalist subject, but also articulates the nature of Juliane’s degradation; unlike the "cool" subjects of Ruff's series,
von Trotta’s protagonist is marked and delimited by a discourse of abjection that attaches to her from the very beginning. The generic resemblance of her image to a mug shot and its clinical project render her a figure of deviance bounded by and disseminated through an institutional discourse that has effectively written her history from the first shot of the film. Indeed, the invagination of the film-text carries this further: perforating the diegesis and West Germany’s embattled historical context, the discursive history of Gudrun Ensslin not only precedes any attempt at its fictional reiteration; its inscription is also in itself originally fictive and reiterative. That is, it exists only through the prosthetic violence of an institutional enunciation that functions as the condition of its possibility. The spectral role of history thereby gives the film’s first scene a doubling effect, rendering the image immediately plural at the same time that a seemingly monolithic force directs its apprehension. More specifically, the image of Juliane is caught between an institutional decision already made and a challenge to this decision that becomes the narrative’s explicit project. How, in other words, to take Juliane’s identity beyond the discourse of abjection that infects its appearance?

If Marianne’s photograph is problematic from the beginning, it also plays a hegemonic role in the film’s formal structure. The repeated motif of the flashback is of interest here. Not only does Marianne’s image appear to instigate the first flashback (thereby implying that film form is infected by similar aporias), but the specific contexts of each site of memory are deeply significant. The scene in which Juliane visits Marianne in prison for the first time is especially suggestive. As she waits in the confined, banal space of the meeting cell, Juliane gazes outside through the lone window. An eye-line match reveals an enclosed interior square that appears perfectly compatible with the space of the prison. However, an adult voice suddenly beckons Marianne and Juliane to come to dinner, and we realize that the film has transitioned into a childhood memory. Other than a relatively quiet string of non-diegetic music, the cut to the past is all but unmarked, and it functions as only a mild temporal disjuncture. What is truly striking, however, is the spatial continuity between the present-day prison and the austere building that the young sisters inhabit. This visual alignment of past and present could easily be dismissed as a conventional device for establishing continuity, but it is precisely the conventionality of the device that leads the viewer to a startling conclusion—the generalization of the prison system as a constitutive historical presence, defining both the individual lives of the sisters and West German identity as a whole. Bounded as children within a space in which they are tightly monitored and controlled, the two sisters are
similarly confined in their adult lives. From one “prison” to another, their identities are marked in time as subject to the vicissitudes of institutional coercion. Repeated at least once more, the formal decision to entomb the flashback within an institutional space that precedes it haunts the film’s use of flashbacks. In this respect, von Trotta’s film enacts a systematic challenge to the conventional use of flashbacks in narrative cinema: instead of signaling the nostalgic return to an idealized past, the film shows us that the lives of its protagonists have always been subject to a coercive play of forces over which their control is severely limited.

The symbolic significance of the first flashback finds its way into the diegetic present during another one of Juliane’s visits to Marianne. Seated facing each other across a clear glass window, the two women are filmed at an angle that blurs their two reflections, resulting in a ghostly mise-en-abyme effect (Fig. 3) that temporarily ‘freezes’ them both in a surreal doubling. In this way, von Trotta disseminates a logic of stagnation, surveillance and discipline that questions the sovereignty of any private space, up to and including individuated symbolic identity; like Juliane’s mug shot, the film’s flashbacks are over-determined by a contested discursivity that haunts von Trotta’s film on multiple temporal levels. In addition to gesturing towards the attenuated status of both of their historical identities, this scene also dramatizes the emotional connection that Marianne and Juliane experience – a private relation that is itself generated by the institutional context of Juliane’s confinement.

At this point, it is perhaps unnecessary to make Foucault’s influence on this project explicit. Nevertheless, an analysis of the Foucauldian “author function” by Giorgio Agamben provides a crucial dimension to my analysis of von Trotta’s formal constructions. Responding to Foucault’s famous disdain for the author concept, Agamben articulates an ambiguity in the former’s argument that is crucial to an understanding of what I have previously referred to as the “trace-structure” of the photograph. While the ostensible goal of Foucault’s intervention was to problematize the traditional notion of the author to the point of its outright dismissal as a referent and an epistemological category, Agamben pinpoints another notion of the author that informs Foucault’s work. Engaging with Foucault’s oft-quoted “What matter who’s speaking” refrain (itself a quote from Samuel Beckett), Agamben pinpoints a conceptual slippage:

But in its very enunciation the Beckett quote contains a contradiction…There is…someone who,
while remaining anonymous...proffered this statement, someone without whom the thesis denying the importance of the one who speaks could not have been formulated. The same gesture that deprives the identity of the author of all relevance nevertheless affirms his irreducible necessity.\(^{16}\)

Agamben goes on to specify the two notions of author that are simultaneous components of his argument: the actual individual who does not make her way into the text, and the discursive phenomenon of authorship, in which strategic activities of selection, classification, exclusion and effacement are marshaled in the service of an epistemology (a canon, an oeuvre, a biography, etc.).\(^ {17}\) The relevance of this duality is crucial for what Agamben asserts next: that even within the most coercive and over-determined sites of exploitation or abjection, there remains a trace of the author’s singular identity that would otherwise have remained anonymous, lost to the archive of history.

Agamben’s privileged example is another Foucauldian object: nineteenth-century criminal records of the French state archive. While these records reduce and degrade their subjects into the closed categories of deviance, they also affirm an existence: an identity that functions and asserts itself in excess of the generic project: “[A]t the very moment when they are struck with infamy, the encounter with power pulls from darkness and silence these human existences that would otherwise not have left any traces.”\(^ {18}\) This is the other side of the trace’s dyadic structure: while the criminal record inscribes its subjects as deviants for all time, the archive also ensures the incarcerated identities a spectral survival that exceeds their physical deaths. In this way, the archive’s function is effectively “auto-immune,” to borrow another term of Derrida’s; that is, in order to exist at all, a subject must be inscribed as a trace. In the same stroke, however, this inscription also threatens the subject with erasure, since it opens itself up to the violence of an epistemology.

The general ambivalence of the trace described above is met and equaled by its contextual singularity, as Agamben’s reading reminds us. While it describes an ontology that holds true without exception, it is always bound by context. Because of this, particular historical junctures may suggest themselves as spaces in which the trace-structure becomes especially marked. I assert that the West-German historical context of von Trotta’s film is such a context: the political violence so prevalent in the seventies—
perpetuated by both the terrorist movements and the galvanized surveillance state—disseminated a spectral and ubiquitous reminder of the contingencies of survival and the aporias of life, necessarily understood as inherently social, discursive and prosthetic. Marianne’s mug-shot functions as one of the privileged nodal points of this violence, as do the flashbacks described earlier. The film’s conclusion offers perhaps the most elegant argument about the paradox of survival as an inherently violent project. To speak about it, however, we must return to the film’s opening. The reader may remember that the film’s first scene features several rows of shelves that contain binders—the accumulated documentation of Juliane’s attempts to exonerate the memory of Marianne and expose the corruption of the state. On the face of it, we are invited to interpret these binders as a heroic personal archive, one composed and collected in opposition to the institutional project. However, as the mug-shot makes clear, Juliane’s project is immediately problematic because of its essential continuity with the state’s own means: in other words, she has no choice but to construct her story within the same structure—and with the same material—as the file-based bureaucracy that has written off her sister as an abject figure of an official past. Marianne’s portrait again assumes significance as metonymy, for even as it serves to motivate and inspire Juliane, it also functions as the major site of an effacement that has been achieved through the very means that are now marshaled in the opposite direction. The fact that an almost-identical portrait later announces Marianne’s death on a news program makes this explicit (Fig. 4). Like the initial mug-shot sequence, this scene uses an eye-line construction, but this time we view the image through the eyes of Wolfgang (Rüdiger Vogler), Juliane’s boyfriend, a key difference that emphasizes the unpredictable contingency of the image’s emergence; literally and figuratively, it catches Juliane by surprise. As for the means through which she attempts to construct a counter-narrative of Marianne’s death, this scene reflects upon the doubled nature of the televised image: both a haunting trace of Marianne’s identity, and a testament to the effacement of that identity within an institutional sphere of delimited social dissemination. At once the bearer of life and death, the photograph moves pensively in contradictory directions. In each case, the impossibility of predicting what the outcome will be points not only to the difficulty of interpretation, but also to its necessity. Ethically, Juliane has no choice but to proceed, perpetuating the memory of her sister even as its traces are exposed once more.

The continuity of means and material that I have spoken of is one of the fundamental objects of inquiry for deconstruction. In
Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, “monolingualism” signifies that, while we cannot be said to possess or contain the language that we speak to any extent, we must nevertheless use it in order to inscribe ourselves in time, even when such an inscription threatens to eradicate the very identities that it was meant to preserve. Born into a history and a culture that precedes and outlives us, we are granted a provisional right to language which is never totally our own, but which lives innumerable other lives in pensive simultaneity with the transient uses to which we might put it.\(^\text{19}\)

We may finally speak, now, of the film’s conclusion and its relevance to this question. As the recently-traumatized Jan tears up the photograph of his mother, Marianne (Fig. 5), we must ask: what is the object of his violence? On the one hand, he destroys one of the major traces of his mother’s existence; on the other hand, he has also eradicated a major signifier of his mother’s actual and historical incarceration. The problem is deepened when he demands that Juliane give him the *complete* story of his mother’s life—an impossibility, as her response explicitly states: “I can tell you what I know, but it won’t be everything.” Momentarily stymied, Jan orders her to “begin.” As he repeats himself, the camera presents the spectator with a close-up of Juliane, silent before his frustrated exhortations. Just when it appears as if she may speak, the camera freezes her in time (Fig. 6), indicating both the impossibility of meeting the demand that has been made of her, while at the same time suggesting the importance of making some kind of start, however provisional. The final shot is also significant because Juliane’s expression invokes the “blankness” of the modern subject of photography—the protective ambiguity of her face indicating, one more time, the limitations of the modern surveillance subject. In von Trotta’s film, it is this rhetorical protection that Marianne lacks, and in light of this we might read Juliane’s archival efforts as a way to recover the dignified, sheltered ambiguity that the state has stolen from her sister.

In summary, von Trotta’s film engages with the photographic portrait as a site of ambivalence: at once a specter of epistemological violence and a constitutive inscription of modern historical memory and identity. Functioning across the spectrum of its practices and dissimulating any specific instance of each, the photograph is a signifier of the monolingual history of which we are all a part—and which we can never *not* participate in, even when it threatens everything with erasure. Whether we encounter photographic images in a film, a museum, or in private, they are never “at home” anywhere. As such, they indicate the extent to

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*Figure 6. Juliane in the film’s final shot (video still from *Die bleierne Zeit*).*

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which modern identity is displaced and de-centered: abandoned to and ensured by an invaginated intetextuality.

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Notes

2 I am grateful to Peter Brunette and David Wills, Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 46-47.
3 The film’s title is derived from Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Der Gang aufs Land,” often translated to “The Walk in the Country.” The first six lines of the English translation are especially significant (von Trotta’s film references the sixth line of Hölderlin’s poem: “Come, friend, and into the open! True, the sun’s hardly/ Shining today, and the sky hems us in./ And neither have the mountains or treetops appeared/ As we wished, and the air rests empty of song./ It’s so cloudy today, the pathways and alleys are dozing./ And it almost seems to me we’re in an age of lead” (Odes and Elegies, translated and edited by Nick Hoff [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008], 129).
4 Barton Byg offers a withering critique of the film’s politics in “German History and Cinematic Convention Harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta’s Marianne and Juliane,” in Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions: Volume II: German Film History/German History on Film, ed. Sandra Frieden, Richard W. McCormick, Vibeke R. Petersen, Laurie Melissa Vogelsang, (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 259-271; For an argument that attempts to read the film in a more politically-progressive light, see: Susan E.

5 Linville, “Retrieving History,” 449.

6 The German title claims special significance for a consideration of the film’s deployment of photographic images because bleiern (“leaden”) could easily be taken as a reference to the fundamental importance of lead (Blei) as a chemical component of photographic processes, particularly those involved with the congealment or “freezing” of the image in time and space. See, for instance, Julius Schnauss’s Photographisches Lexicon: ein Alphabetisches Nachschlage-Buch. Leipzig: O. Spamer, 1860, esp. pages 31-33 and 152-158. Schnauss’s manual is at pains to point out the ambivalent role of nitrate of lead or acetate of lead: although lead components heighten the sensitivity and interactivity of the other chemical components, it is also a toxic substance that can prove harmful, both to humans and to the photographic process. Both poison and medicine, Blei acts as a sort of pharmakon, or agent of auto-immunity: it simultaneously describes both a primary supplement in the chemical bath, and a potential threat to the whole material and semantic context of portrait photography. The auto-immunity of Blei finds its analog in the film’s deployment of institutional photography as a doubled agent of subjectivization: it inscribes Marianne as a trace that can endure in time, but it also opens her up to spectral violations that include her eventual, literal death. On the level of allegory, the spectator may quickly extrapolate from Marianne’s dilemma to West Germany’s national and historical context, in which terrorism and state surveillance were accompanied by discourses of survival, protection and affliction that disseminated a national narrative of irretrievable auto-immunity. (This footnote is indebted to the comments and advice of an anonymous reader, who pointed out the inter-textual significance of the film’s German title. Indeed, his or her anonymous—but indelible—contribution can only be described as a spectral co-authoring of the present argument.)

7 The feminine pronoun is not (or should not be) a casual gesture. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to eventually articulate the extent to which I believe portrait photography in its various contexts raises fundamental questions about gender and its relationship to the photograph as a site of inscription.

12 Although colonial ethnography and modern art photography do not actually appear in von Trotta’s film, their foundational role in the discourses of modernity—as well as the intertextual invagination accomplished by the diegetic presence of photographic portraits—renders them constitutive for a complete comprehension of the role of the photographic images in the film, at least in my reading.
13 Byg, “German History and Cinematic Convention,” 271.
18 Ibid, 65.
19 Derrida’s short essay engages in a deeply auto-biographical engagement with the idea of monolingualism via his ambivalent relationship to the French Language. He is especially concerned with the following paradox: while French is his “first” (i.e. “native”) language, it is also the Language of a nation that colonized and repressed the Algerian population, and engaged in acts of malevolent anti-Semitism during the German Occupation of WWII. Derrida’s status as a Jew with Algerian heritage leads him to articulate the spectral power relationship that is inherent in his ability to speak at all—not only in his first language, but also within and across the other discourses that he came in to contact with over the course of his life. See *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Bibliography


