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Lars Kraume's *The Coming Days* (2010) and the History of Tomorrow

Apocalypse Not Yet

Early on in Lars Kraume's *The Coming Days* (*Die kommenden Tage*, 2010), Laura Kuper, the daughter of a wealthy and well-connected Berlin family, explains that a war is under way in Saudi Arabia. Fighting has broken out over the Saudi oil fields, Islamists have tried to bring down the royal regime, and the fourth Gulf War has begun. Laura watches as her sister Cecilia sets off with her boyfriend Konstantin to protest the Saudi prince, and she wonders, in voice-over and from a later standpoint in the narrative's timeline, how the war managed to force its way so deeply into the heart of her family. The Kupers' crisis, the film's main subject, is thoroughly entwined with ongoing social, political, and environmental crises, and the class-conditioned psychological turmoil endured by the film's bourgeois characters overlaps at every moment with disasters unfolding in Western Europe. Kraume's film deals with how one family comprehends and reacts to historical change, and in doing so it adopts a critical perspective vis-à-vis the ideology of progress. Set during the eight years that follow the outbreak of its fictional war, beginning in the year 2012, its events take place in the near future, but the film is not a work of science fiction. In its focus on one family its themes resonate with historical novels. It inquires into the impact major historical events have on that family's members, even though the era it elects to portray is allo-historical; it is a history that has not come to pass. Dressed in the pattern of a historical novel *The Coming Days* is more concerned with critiquing ideologies of the future: the future is always deferred because it promises something better, but Kraume's film deals with how that deferral is a diversion from our confrontation with contemporary catastrophes.

In his 1937 study *The Historical Novel* Georg Lukács analyzed how social life was depicted in literature as a function of revolutionary transformation. In the type of historical novels in which he was most interested, authors' central figures were said to emerge from the being of the age. According to Lukács such novels do not explain the age from the position of its great representatives, "as do the Romantic hero-worshippers."¹ Historical novels do not subordinate their bourgeois characters to world historical ones, and in

this way *The Coming Days*, owing to the attention it pays to a Berlin family's domestic life at a historically transformative moment, can be viewed as a historical novel adapted so that it appears to be a historical film of the near future. Lukács's foremost point of entry into the problem of historical novels concerned their affirmative or critical orientations toward the future. The barometer of changing attitudes to history—specifically during the Enlightenment, the *Vormärz*, and the years immediately following the revolution of 1848—measured novels' attitudes toward bourgeois ideologies of progress, as well as their orientations toward historical evolution, which here can be understood from a Hegelian viewpoint. Where did the West stand relative to Hegel's idealist teleology? Was the rational unfolding of reason an inevitable course of events, and to what extent do the trajectories of historical novels' narratives account for progress's neglected dialectical and irrational underbelly?

As with a number of the historical novels Lukács analyzes, Kraume's film is focused on a family at a crossroads. The father's patriarchal authority is undermined when it comes to light that an uncle might in fact have fathered Philip, the family's only son. Although the revelation poses a threat to the family's stability, the disclosure is also fundamentally intertwined with looming historical crises. The instability and its attending anxieties become a function of broader social instabilities, including food shortages, terrorism, and Germany's imminent involvement in a foreign war. During the family meeting at which the information about Philip surfaces, Laura articulates a premise that could also be understood as the film's own apothegm: "No one here has a future, if we don't know the past." (*Niemand hat hier 'ne Zukunft, wenn wir die Vergangenheit nicht kennen.*) She ultimately comes to discover that it is useless to distinguish the future from the past and present, because the future inevitably arrives. Laura realizes that there are no coming days; the present is perpetually asserting itself. Throughout the film the family's drama is given equal weight with the plight of Western Europe; their orientation toward the future *is* the bourgeois ideology of progress. An alternate beginning of the film included on the DVD makes the domestic crisis even more central. The film would have opened with the disclosure of the family secret. In that version Laura is at home on what appears to be Christmas of 2012. She summons her father and Cecilia for a festive dinner, but they have just then received the call from Uncle Freddie claiming Philip's paternity, and their domestic difficulties commence.

Kraume, however, decided to begin farther into the narrative's timeline. The film's theatrical release starts at the point after Europe is already deeply

mired in trouble, on November 14, 2020. The choice to open the story in that year is linked to the recurring metaphor of sight, insofar as 2020 recalls 20/20 vision and is a frequently made allusion in science fiction. *Blade Runner* (1981), for example, is also centered on vision and the future, and it self-consciously begins shortly before 2020 (in November 2019). Sight is a key metaphor throughout Kraume's film because his screenplay takes seriously the question of what it means to foresee a future that is already upon us; the film does not portray a remote dystopia. Kraume does not isolate this future via the radical breaks generally coupled with speculative science fiction. The landscape of his film's near future is purposefully contiguous with our own. In *The Coming Days*—as in reality—Western consumer habits are in precarious balance owing to growing dependence on foreign oil. At the film's onset Laura is seated on a coach bus, and through its windows blimps can be seen careening across the sky, indicating that Europe has been forced to seek alternatives to fossil fuels. She travels with her son Johann into the Southern Alps, beyond what she describes as the newly defined boundaries of Europe. Europe, she informs us, "has walled itself in" (*hat sich eingemauert*) to guard against an influx of African refugees, and it now resembles a fortress.² She ventures out to find Hans, her former lover, and soldiers wearing Frontex uniforms attempt to talk her out of exiting the walled-in zone. Frontex, a real organization, was instated in 2005, and the reference to these pan-European troops who are currently responsible for external border security rather than to fictional ones highlights the connections between the film's unreal future and its actual present.

Depicting the far future has long been a convention in film, but depicting the near future, as Kraume does, is less common. Imagining the day after tomorrow comes with its own complications. Ernst Bloch once described related complications that arose when he reflected on a photograph he stumbled on in the newspaper. The photo depicted an accident on the Zackelfall bobsled run at Schreiberhau in which spectators alongside the course were struck by a bobsled that had veered out of control.³ The photograph shows the spectators at the moment immediately before the sled flew into them. Bloch writes: "One sees the sled with its front runner already passing over the barrier, one meter away from the spectators at eye level and heading straight toward them."⁴ He is surprised by the spectators' incomprehension of the misfortune that is already upon them. On the verge of being dealt a blow, their faces bespeak none of the anticipatory signs. Bloch observes: "They ... gaze out of the picture with complete indifference." He looks for any indication, which a viewer of the photograph could construe as suggestive of an

impending calamity, but he concludes: “No habit or routine, the means by which we ordinarily colonize the future, could have come to the rescue here.” Concerning the aesthetic effect of looking at such a photograph, Bloch adds: “The spectators clearly shown here in their obliviousness are more frightening than the blurry figures of the bobsledders riding wildly to their doom. None of the spectators here confronts the terrible situation at eye level.”⁵ What might it mean to confront a catastrophe at eye level? Confronting a situation implies that it is upon you, but if it is upon you then it is no longer impending—it is already a catastrophe. Bloch finds it more frightening to see people who do not recognize a terrible event is befalling them, than to see those who do. Kraume’s film concerns the moment prior to what might be described as a catastrophe in Europe, but the moment at which his film’s timeline begins—the time *prior to* the catastrophe—is divided by only the most negligibly thin line from the catastrophe itself. He would like his viewers to look at the present and recognize that the coming catastrophe is, paradoxically, already upon them.

The saga of *The Coming Days* spans from 2012 to 2020, and for some that may evoke comparisons with Roland Emmerich’s Hollywood event film *2012* (2009), which dealt with an impending, near-future catastrophe, and was also directed by a German filmmaker. The film *2012* deals with a total terrestrial cataclysm, one attributed in an unspecific way to neutrinos and solar flares, alongside a reference to apocalyptic Mayan predictions. Unlike Emmerich’s earlier *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), which concerned a catastrophe caused by climate change, *2012* deals with a disaster that has little or nothing to do with human causes. As is the tendency of Hollywood disaster films, both of Emmerich’s productions repeatedly linger on the astonishment written across the faces of victims of catastrophe in the moment that they confront earthquakes and tsunamis. His films make spectacles of the destruction of cities, and human expressions of fear and awe become their principal objects. By contrast to Emmerich, one of the problems with which Kraume implicitly contends is the extent to which imagining confrontations with future horrors is a diversion insofar as futures, at every moment, resolve into presents. If the future is now, one cannot see it coming. To draw on Bloch’s example, *The Coming Days* concerns people who are unaware that the bobsled has jumped its rails. It is more disquieting to see a fear that only dimly, if at all, dawns on its victims than it is to witness their panicked confrontations with calamity. Arguably more important than this aesthetic dimension (that is, the affective impression made by the dismayed and fearful subjects of the film) is the difference in the depiction of familial

attachments. In Emmerich's disaster films, *2012* and *The Day after Tomorrow*, crises present an opportunity to cement relationships. Families grow sturdier as a result of disasters. It is as though Oedipal dynamics and the state of the world act in opposition to one another: the crueler the fate of the world, the stronger the familial bonds. Emmerich's families are composed of stalwart individualists in whom disasters produce courage and determination; cataclysms reinforce attachments between family members. In Kraume's film the opposite dynamic prevails: the family symptomizes the crisis. Disasters, particularly those produced by people rather than meteorology, are measurements of the West's contradictions, and the family located at Kraume's film's center is exempt neither from being embroiled in them nor from its share of culpability.

Applying pressure to the bourgeois family in *The Coming Days* is the overall scarcity of goods produced by disruptions in Europe's supply of foreign oil. In Kraume's film, conflict in the Middle East has pulled the economic carpet out from underneath Europe. Scarcity can be seen in the streets, which are now filled with flea markets, but the most disconcerting visualization of scarcity takes place at the grocery store. The scene hardly depicts a catastrophe, but it is unnerving nonetheless. Laura goes shopping, and Kraume's camera surveys the mostly empty display baskets where fruits and vegetables would normally be located (fig. 1). The stark portrait of unfilled shelves echoes the supermarket scarcities depicted in Steven Soderbergh's bird flu anxiety film *Contagion* (2011). Both films depict how quickly people in the Western world, who regard themselves as civilized, shed their veneer and become brutal, even at the slightest intimation of shortage. A woman approaches Laura's shopping cart with an illegible affect; it is not clear what she is up to, nor is it clear that she herself thinks what she is about to do is wrong. Customary codes have begun to erode. She leans over and takes from the cart one of the market's last remaining containers of milk. Angrily and despairingly, Laura exclaims: "Unbelievable!" (Nicht zu fassen!) Her language is revealing: this theft is indeed incomprehensible to her insofar as Laura and those around her cannot fully grasp the changing norms. The climate in Kraume's Europe has not yet descended into the apocalyptic atmosphere characteristic of *The Road* (2009) or *The Road Warrior* (1981); it is more akin to our present than to those far-flung futures, but Laura lacks the language to bemoan lapses of morality along these lines. When Konstantin asks Laura what is wrong, she replies, "Nothing" (Nichts), and apparently resolves that the matter either is not worth relating, or it is not relatable. Then, as though it were quite typical, they have a security guard accompany them on the trip home. The scenario is

all the more frightening because the erosion of bourgeois norms and laws is only partial, and because the bare-knuckled competition for goods can, from our standpoint, too easily be imagined.



Figure 1. Laura (Bernadette Heerwagen) among the empty display baskets where fruit and vegetables would normally be located in Lars Kraume's *The Coming Days* (2010). DVD still.

Much of the film centers on the question of whether one can observe a crisis as it occurs. In one of the film's earlier sequences a man moves toward the camera through a dense urban crowd. He is muttering, and, in keeping with the film's theme of visibility, he mumbles that he sees around him "dead eyes" (*tote Augen*). Eventually he proclaims, "It's all about oil and water," and he then starts dousing people in the crowd with oil. Despite the fact that his behavior is to all appearances irrational, he asserts what can be interpreted as the reasonable and defensible criticism that European consumers are turning a blind eye to their foreign wars; ground offensives are tolerated in Saudi Arabia, he maintains, but people have no stomach for belligerence when it hits close to home. Laura, who had been paying the man on the street some attention, now ducks into a bookstore, possibly to get away from the spectacle. She bumps into Hans, whom she knows because her father had until recently employed him. They talk about his interest in birds while the ranting continues outside, where the man exclaims: "You are following a death drive [*Todestrieb*] that compels you to destroy yourselves." His use of the term "death drive" corresponds to the film's outlook on human nature: humanity tends toward destruction. The reference explicitly echoes claims made by Freud, most explicitly in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), that the suppression of a persistent subconscious death instinct prompts the need for

social restraints. In this way—insofar as the man's ranting seems to express a valid point—the film takes a pessimistic view of human nature; it is instead sympathetic to psychoanalytically inflected views that cut against concepts of progress, which, as Lukács asserts, are the identifying characteristics of bourgeois ideology. In *The Historical Novel* Lukács observes that Hegel's dialectical historical account carried with it a self-consciously contradictory understanding of progress. However, after the fall of the Hegelian account—specifically, after Hegel's death—only bourgeois ideology remained, and “every element of contradiction” was “extinguished.”⁶ In Emmerich's disaster films, *The Day after Tomorrow* and *2012*, the bourgeois family, alongside the better angels in the state, which converge in the interest of the common good, overcome society's self-destructive instincts. Here, however, the death drive looms over Western civilization, and Kraume's film does little to mitigate its gloomiest implications.

Billed in the credits as the “Arkadenprophet” (Prophet of the Arcades), the ranting madman in the street can be understood as a voice of truth. The film's principal seer, however, who is treated as more legitimate by the unfolding narrative, is Hans. The most evident sign of the validity of his prophecies is his mounting macular dystrophy, which, we are told, may or may not ultimately become total blindness. Based on his description of the symptoms, his condition may be Vitelliform macular dystrophy, an ailment that causes progressive vision loss, one that impacts the macula and impedes sharp central vision. Hans will soon recognize heads but not faces; he can distinguish outlines, but not details. Because he leaves his professional career and opts for a life of seclusion in the woods this particular prophetic disposition may be taken to indicate that he recognizes the overall shape of things to come. To see the center clearly would only distract insofar as it is the larger movement of history that matters.

Hans is an avid bird-watcher who keeps falcons and owls in a makeshift aviary behind an Alpine cabin that once belonged to his grandfather. A striking image that appears late in the film seems calculated to link his avian interests with Glaucus, the owl of Minerva. When Hans's birdcages are set on fire at the film's dramatic climax, his pets fly through the darkness, escaping the conflagration. The portrait of owls and falcons with their wings spread wide in the darkness near the end of a film about a crisis in the West strongly calls to mind the conclusion of the 1820 preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Those paragraphs deal with philosophy's belatedness. They rationalize philosophy's lack of impact, arguing that it cannot do its work while historical events are unfolding. Hegel writes that philosophy always arrives on to the

scene too late to give instruction as to what the world ought to be, and concludes: “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy’s grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.”⁷ Philosophy, according to Hegel, first comes to understand a historical epoch as it ebbs. The owl, which stands for the philosopher, also symbolizes vigilance because it can see in the darkness, and the name of Minerva’s owl, Glaucus, means “glaring eyes.” Because Hans is a seer who senses the direction in which Europe is headed, but believes that he cannot change its course, his actual vision has, by the film’s end, almost entirely degenerated. Hans wears half-darkened glasses that draw attention to his fragmentary sight (fig. 2). His refuge burns to the ground, his owl takes flight, and with it fades the last of Hans’s sight.



Figure 2. Hans (Daniel Brühl) wearing half-darkened glasses in *The Coming Days* (2010). DVD still.

In this respect it may be revealing that November 14, the date on which the film begins and on which Laura ventures out to see Hans, is the date on which Hegel died in 1831. Lukács refers directly to Hegel’s owl in *The Historical Novel* when he describes the period between the Enlightenment and the revolution of 1848 as characterized by a feeling that “one is experiencing a last brief, irretrievable intellectual prime of humanity,” which “manifests itself in the greatest representatives of this period in very different ways.” Lukács continues: “Think of the old Goethe’s theory of ‘abnegation,’ of Hegel’s ‘Owl of Minerva,’ which takes flight only at dusk, of Balzac’s universal doom, etc.”⁸ Goethe’s *Faust* was, akin to Hans, nearly blind by that drama’s end.⁹ Hans

likewise is attuned to the fact that civilization as he has known it is waning, and, assuming the posture of the secluded scholar, he has locked himself away with nothing more than his birds, his books, and a lone assistant. He and Laura—owing to her positive disposition—are in metaphysical opposition to one another. As someone who prophetically prophesies the end of Western progress, he perceives her positive attitude as naïve. She longs to complete her dissertation, but Hans has the intuition that sooner rather than later no one will care about it. When he verbalizes his cynicism, it wounds her terribly, but in the film's terms it appears that Hans perceives the truth. His visual disability corresponds to his comprehension of broad outlines; because he does not get lost in the details, he does not misperceive the forest for its trees. Europe's drama manifests itself in both Hans and Laura as a feeling—foreboding, anxiety, or loss—to which they react in different ways.

The theme of Laura's dissertation is key: it deals with evolution and is centered specifically on some illustrations in Darwin's work. When the topic is introduced we have just encountered Laura at the natural history museum, where Kraume situates her among an array of taxidermic models of owls and other birds. Like the animals in the dioramas, Laura is here enframed in what appears to be her natural environment. These dioramas, each depicting falsified nature, suggest a counterfeit natural history. They construct a mise-en-scène that recalls its culture's preference for preserving owls and other animals only in their stuffed, derivative forms. Hans may be, in terms of the film, a more authentic bird watcher. At the museum Konstantin, who is as false as the museum's stuffed birds insofar as he is pretending not to be a terrorist, runs into Laura. (We later learn that this chance encounter was a contrivance.) Following a short sequence in which Cecilia—who, owing to her vanity, serves as a foil for Laura—is shown receiving cosmetic injections in the area around the eye, Kraume then returns us to Laura, who is in the midst of explaining her dissertation project to Konstantin. She elaborates that her work concerns four illustrations that were decisive for Darwin's theory of evolution. Konstantin, making a show of his arrogance, says: "I thought we had reached the end of evolution." Laura, by contrast, expresses her more affirmative belief that evolution is an ongoing process. Kraume's film is not Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in which the concept of an evolutionary turn signals a radically altered and mostly incomprehensible stage of humankind; it is instead about evolution as a metaphor in the sense that Europe will have to evolve in order to confront its diminishing supply of fossil fuels; it will have to adapt to a changed environment. As Laura explains herself Kraume's camera lingers on two illustrations, the first of which

appears to be Joseph Wolf's 1871–72 drawing of the *Cynopithecus niger*, and the second of which depicts an evolutionary progression of skeletons: gibbon, orang, chimpanzee, gorilla, and, finally, man.¹⁰ Cecilia, receiving her cosmetic injections, is depicted struggling against nature, and Konstantin is too egotistical to consider seeking another place within it. Laura, however, in her fascination with Darwin, is depicted as modestly attempting to adapt to new conditions.

Darwin is explicitly mentioned in Lukács's *The Historical Novel*, particularly in his discussion of historical novels' outlooks on history and progress. Lukács notes that when historians and sociologists in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the revolution of 1848, "attempted to make Darwinism ... the immediate basis of an understanding of historical development, this could only lead to a perversion and distortion of historical connections." He adds: "Darwinism becomes an abstract phrase and the old reactionary Malthus normally appears as its sociological 'core.' In the course of later development the rhetorical application of Darwinism to history becomes a straightforward apology for the brutal domination of capital."¹¹ For Lukács, the reliance on Darwin by economists typifies how interpretation is colonized by the historical moment it inhabits: Darwin's theories, he maintains, have been dishonestly domesticated as justifications for capitalism. For her part Laura seems not to be referring to survival of the fittest, but rather to the optimistic idea that humankind would transform to counter limitations on fossil fuel production. Less apocalyptic than the image of the embryonic next stage of evolution that appears in the celestial heavens at the end of *2001*, the illustration of the stages of man's development that Laura is studying—an image that served as the frontispiece for Thomas Henry Huxley's contemporaneous defense of Darwin, *Man's Place in Nature* (1863)—is meant to highlight her own progressive thinking about the possibilities for human progress.

It is, however, a challenge for Laura to maintain her positive attitude while her situation, along with that of Europe, grows worse. Her wedding day with Hans is a dismal affair. She begins bleeding in her bridal gown on the way to the ceremony, and efforts at the hospital to prevent a miscarriage are portrayed as painful, intrusive, and alienating. The medical environment is hypertechnological, and science is hardly valorized. The child inside her dies despite the doctors' efforts. At one well-meaning doctor's suggestion they bid a proper farewell to their unborn son's corpse. It is an excruciating scene, but the film here makes explicit the very moment at which its protagonists are, against their wills, abandoning an ideal. As they say good-bye to the child,

they say good-bye to hope. Not only are they compelled to bid that future farewell, but they are immediately thereafter informed that they will not be able to conceive. A doctor explains to them that Laura's body rejects Hans's gene type. They may be able to have children, but not with one another. Here the film resonates with Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006): an obstacle, whether as accident of nature or divine determination, undermines the reproductive capacity of even those with good intentions. The decline of Western civilization, having overexploited its resources, is directly bound to the protagonists' inability to have children, an inability that they experience as nature's active resistance.

Laura assesses her own changing attitude with respect to the word *Konsequenz*, or "consistency." After Laura finally has the child she wants—with the terrorist Konstantin, rather than with Hans, whom she loves—she wonders what kind of world her child has been born into. Holding the infant in her arms, Laura returns home via the Viktoria-Luise Platz subway station in the fashionable neighborhood of Schöneberg, a station that was depicted in an earlier shot. Now, a few years later, the station looks very different. Gates and security fences surround the exit. She stumbles over a dead policeman on the street, makes a desultory attempt to alert the authorities, and we then begin to hear her compose a letter to her brother Philip in voice-over. She says that she has given up trying to make sense of the world around her. It is a strong statement, given that we know she is an academic who has devoted herself to study. She adds that she once thought she could find her way in the world by being consistent (*konsequent*), but, she adds, "that's not so." She then concludes: "Consistency always leads to terror." (*Konsequenz führt immer in den Terror.*) Consistency is here one and the same with ideology and rigidity, which characterize the belief systems of both Konstantin and her parents. It indicates their indisposition to evolve.

In this context the use of the word *Konsequenz* connects Kraume's film with Hans Weingartner's *The Edukators* (2004), another postmillennial German film that features protagonists (in this case, a small group of rabble-rousers who call themselves "The Edukators") looking for a sensible political path, after traditional political protest movements appear to have grown anachronistic. In that film, one of the main characters, Jan, who is played by Daniel Brühl, who also plays Hans in *The Coming Days*, despairs; Roger F. Cook asserts that Jan is experiencing anxiety because The Edukators's actions lack "Konsequenz." Cook writes: "[Jan] seems to want a resistance movement that can maintain logical consistency—that can be *konsequent* in its adherence to certain philosophical underpinnings."¹² However, as Cook observes,

“this same demand for logical consistency can also be turned against the hegemonic power system it serves. ... The Edukators can best maintain this posture as a small group that devises its own form of opposition, rather than as members of a large political front that subsumes individual subjectivities within a disciplinary regime on the Left.”¹³ Cook concludes that their resistance to rigidity is itself political in that it avoids mirroring that which it seeks to critique:

Just as [the Edukators] protest tactics avoid direct confrontation with the authorities, they also reject doctrinaire political ideologies that would place them in diametrical opposition to the hegemony of globalized capital and compromise their autonomy. If they were to become fixed in a binary opposition to the system they are attacking, they would risk succumbing to its system of legitimacy and taking on its structures and practices unwittingly.¹⁴

The two films, *The Edukators* and *The Coming Days*, have in common a search for an adequate mode of postmillennial political engagement in circumstances where historical forms of resistance, from demonstrations to acts of terror, are taken to be ineffective. In Kraume’s film Hans abandons society, and here, as in *The Edukators*, the actor Daniel Brühl again finds himself in an isolated cabin. However, it would be wrong to see the posture struck by Brühl’s character in either film as a paean to the type of radical individualism whereby, in Adorno’s words, “the individual stands forth with unquestioned dignity” as though it were not itself the “offspring of individualist society.”¹⁵ These cabins are less romantic alternatives than they are strategies of avoidance, which in both cases fail; isolation cannot be sustained.

Konstantin and Cecilia’s political activities, by contrast, are treated as a foil for Hans and Laura’s choices. The aims of their terrorist organization, the Black Storm (*Der schwarze Sturm*), are never lucidly articulated; we only know that the group demands tremendous sacrifice from them. Owing to their entanglement with this radical group, and arguably its rigid demand for *Konsequenz*, Konstantin and Cecilia reproduce the intransigence of the society they aim to critique.¹⁶ This reaches its most vivid expression when Cecilia is tricked by the members of her own organization into outfitting herself as a police officer and shooting down an antiwar protestor in order to provide the protest movement with a martyr. When Konstantin, as part of his intricately concealed identity, needs to play the part of a contented bourgeois, he happily mirrors exactly the lifestyle he professes to despise. He begins a

love affair with Laura and has no trouble acting the part of her partner. It is also apparent from the outset that life with Laura, or at least an affair with her, was something he long desired; he is as much if not more motivated by self-interest and libido as by political convictions.

Konstantin's revolution is thoroughly entangled with bourgeois aesthetics, and Kraume takes a cynical view of this character's radicalism. At the lair where Konstantin and Cecilia convene with their terrorist counterparts, highbrow modern art covers the walls, and the many installations suggest the atmosphere of a salon or a gallery space more than a criminal hideout. Artwork and icons frequently encircle Cecilia, and in several sequences an outsize neon sign that reads CAPITALISM KILLS LOVE looms in the background. The members of the Black Storm are so stylized that their depiction borders on parody, and their fascination with fashion recalls the stylized terrorists in Fassbinder's *Third Generation* (1979). The only attack of theirs that is depicted is a brief interruption in Berlin's Internet and power grid. The action is disruptive, but it is also aesthetic: the skyline in midtown, viewed from the plaza at the front entrance of the city library, is darkened, and the name of the group is displayed across the façades of buildings as if the goal of a terror attack were to advertise itself, and as if such an advertisement would do well to resemble a campaign for a newly opened film or a big budget theater production. The organization's revolution is directed more toward style than toward substance. Konstantin is consistently superficial; he criticizes the shape of Cecilia's nose, which she treats as a request that she have rhinoplasty. These terrorists never hesitate to mimic the power that fascinates them, and they clearly succumb to the legitimizing norms of the culture they protest. Neither Laura, who attempts to find another, more positive way to engage with Europe's crisis, nor Hans, who simply abandons civilization, runs similar risks.

The film thus constructs a conventional dichotomy between the sisters Cecilia and Laura, and the duality is underscored in their corresponding relationships with the Janus-faced Konstantin. Laura, the blond-haired sister, who is optimistic and family oriented, finds solace in contemplative study, while Cecilia, the dark-haired sister, sees little hope for the future, is vain, and is ultimately ensnared into committing murder. The film is, in this sense, binaristic, yet by its end it has sublated this binarism in asserting that none, including Hans and Laura, can avoid confrontation with Europe's most pressing problems; the future is upon them all, and they are each in the position of dealing with the consequences of decisions that have long been made. The sisters' convergence begins in the moment of silence immediately

after Cecilia detonates a bomb and unsuccessfully attempts suicide in the restaurant where she works. Laura comes looking for her at the wrong moment, and Cecilia saves her, delivering her at the last second to the other side of a door. After the explosion Laura stumbles out into the wreckage. At first we hear only a high-pitched ringing that suggests the noise in Laura's traumatized ears, and then, accompanying the handheld point-of-view shot as Laura surveys the scene searching for Cecilia, the ringing fades to silence. Rather than signaling a gap between them, the silence may be taken to suggest their shared despair.

Not long after the attack Laura visits Cecilia in prison. The bomb has scarred Cecilia's face, which is ironic: she had undergone cosmetic surgery and was always preoccupied with looking attractive for Konstantin. That her face is half-scarred down the middle indicates an externalization of the duality in her relationship with Laura, as well as the literalization of the double life that she had been leading. In several shots Kraume depicts the reflection of Laura's face in the prison glass, and its superimposition over Cecilia's image suggests that the sisters' two identities have started to integrate. In the low lighting their clothing appears a similar shade of green. Additionally, Laura's hair has grown dark, while streaks of blond can now be seen in Cecilia's. The silence that followed the bombing extends into this exchange. Once the short time of their visit is over, the intercom is turned off, and we can no longer hear Cecilia. Between the two remain only an enforced silence, feelings of remorse, and hand gestures. It is not entirely clear, but Cecilia may here be urging Laura to go to Hans, partly because she feels apologetic about her earlier skepticism; she had suggested to Laura that she reconsider becoming involved with a man who may be going blind.¹⁷ In despair Laura holds her head in her hands, and then, at this moment, when they both seem to be bearing similar measures of sorrow, we see that the film has brought us up to date. Following a fade to black the next cut takes us to the border of Europe, where we were at the start, as Laura is making her way to Hans.

In the film's grim final act Hans's cabin burns to the ground. Laura has set out to reunite with him, and when she arrives, he greets her with distrust. After some time it looks as though they may be able to reconcile. They enjoy the fleeting impression of a new beginning—a romantic alternative to the unreasonable state of the world—but the world still haunts them. Konstantin arrives and attempts to abduct Laura and his son by force, setting fire to everything in the process. Konstantin *is* destruction, and, either owing to his forceful political ideology, his vanity, or both, he desires to leave behind no remains. Hans's assistant fights back, killing Konstantin, and then at Hans's

orders he saves as many of the birds as he can from the fire. Because of Hans's injuries he and Laura have no choice but to return to civilization. As in *The Edukators* the cabin in the woods is merely a temporary solution; there is no utopian refuge. The film ends with Hans and Laura outside the gates, pleading for entry and pledging their devotion to one another. Along with Johann, they form a portrait of a holy family at the threshold, waiting to be admitted. The image suggests that there may be a heaven beyond all this, but that there's little left for them here. The end of the logic of deferring the future is an infinite allegorical deferral; the film no longer sees earthly salvation as an option. This theatrical final cut makes hardly any allowance for the ideology of inevitable progress. In the words of Adorno, referring to those aspects of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) he saw fit to praise, it "makes no concessions to the childish belief that the alleged excesses of technical civilization will be ironed out automatically through irresistible progress."¹⁸ Although Laura and Hans profess their love for one another, it is no shield. Even if the gate should open, they will be exiled back into society. Behind the walls we have seen a brief glimpse of new solar panels being built on Berlin's Teufelsberg, but apart from that there has been little confirmation of Europe's intention or capacity to save itself.

The alternate ending on the DVD release of the film may serve as Kraume's compromise with the ideology of progress. In the director's alternate version the door of the fortress opens to Laura and Hans, and an intertitle then explains that two years pass. They are now living in a changed Europe, and the telltale signs of difference include retinal scans and the presence of numerous Asian passersby. Hans's eye seems to have been somehow replaced or repaired, and the two of them enter into a family scene. It is a special day: Philip, who is still serving in the military, is supposed to be coming home. The family eats in silence as they wait for his return. Cecilia is still in prison, and we never actually see Philip arrive, but with Hans's sight returned to him the ending of the film is, by comparison with its bleak theatrical release, mildly encouraging. Laura is given the last word, and in a voice-over directed at the audience she concludes by describing the future as "something that is for the most part already there before we expect it." Underscoring the film's preferred conflation of present and future, she adds: "Our future has already begun, but today, we can still change it." In light of Hans's Hegelian resistance to action, Laura's last words can be understood as an echo of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach ("Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it"). Marx's thesis explicitly challenges Hegel's argument as to the limitations on philosophy's capacity to

change the world. Laura has hardly provided enough evidence to suggest that she speaks on behalf of historical materialism in the film, but insofar as her perception of evolution entails a willingness to transform, she is asserting, similarly to Bloch, that major changes “will only take place in a world which is *qualitatively transformable*, and alterable in essence, and not in a world of mechanical constancy [*nicht in der des mechanischen Immer-Wieder*] and of pure quantitiveness, in which history counts for nothing.¹⁹ Laura is no Marxist, but her interest in evolution, in contrast to Konstantin’s narcissism and obstinacy, bespeaks a desire to change. Despite returning Hans’s sight to him, Kraume’s more positive alternate ending still highlights the need for new social thought vis-à-vis the exploitation of natural resources, and the imperative to work toward evolutionary, qualitative transformation.

Writing about Huxley’s *Brave New World* Adorno indicated that the key question was how it confronted “whether society will come to determine itself or bring about terrestrial catastrophe.”²⁰ He was ultimately critical of that novel’s romantic individualism. It is clear that films such as *2012* and *The Day after Tomorrow* are each also invested in the belief that people are distinct from those developments that bring about their decline. The promptings to live differently or bring about qualitative change are rarely portrayed as necessary, because in such films human integrity has been there all along. More interesting, however, than Hollywood-style disaster films, which tend to depict catastrophes as events that befall us suddenly and can be overcome with recourse to our ever-present integrity, is to challenge the futurity of calamity itself. Instead of pretending to undo the horrific consequences of avoidable accidents that we ourselves have brought about, we might imagine a different perception of the passage of time, one that understands terrestrial catastrophe as an ongoing process.

Notes

Where possible I have cited English translations of sources. Translations of quotations from the film are my own. I am grateful to Gerd Gemünden for first drawing my attention to this film. This essay is for him.

- 1 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937; Lincoln, NE, 1983), 39.
- 2 The film, as it depicts Laura leaving through the gates of a fortress, concretizes the term “Fortress Europe” (or *Festung Europa*), and thereby emphasizes its exclusionary character. Kraume depicts this new Europe both as protecting

itself from persons seeking refuge from civil conflicts and as a market for their labor. In this sense the prediction about the coming days has a political edge. In the film, Europe has retreated into itself to solve its problems; in turn, everything outside of it becomes the frontier. On the term, see Robert Miles, *Racism after "Race Relations"* (London, 1993), 18.

- 3 Schreiberhau is now Szklarska Poręba in Lower Silesia.
- 4 Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron, Helga Wild, Jack Zipes, and Frank Mecklenburg (Stanford, CA, 1998), 191.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 174.
- 7 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (1820; Oxford, 1973), 12–13.
The reference, according to Knox, is to Goethe's Mephistopheles in *Faust* ("Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum"). See Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 304 n. 41.
- 8 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 30.
- 9 The second part of the drama, *Faust II*, in which the protagonist goes blind at the end, was completed in 1831 and published in 1832.
- 10 It closely resembles the frontispiece to Thomas Henry Huxley's defense of Darwin, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863). That frontispiece is attributed to Waterhouse Hawkins.
- 11 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 175. The Marxist debate on this point goes back to Marx himself, who wrote to Engels in 1862: "It is remarkable how Darwin has discerned anew among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labor, competition, elucidation of new markets, 'discoveries' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence.' It is Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes* and it reminds me of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, wherein bourgeois society figures as a 'spiritual animal kingdom,' while in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as bourgeois society." Karl Marx, "To Frederick Engels (in Manchester), London June 18, 1862," in *The Letters of Karl Marx*, trans. Saul K. Padover (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1979), 157.
- 12 Roger F. Cook, "*Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei*: Edukating the Post-Left Generation," in *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics and the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit, 2010), 320.
- 13 Ibid., 321.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno, "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (1951; Cambridge, MA, 1981), 115.
- 16 This drive for consistency or constancy is, of course, echoed in Konstantin's name, which shares with those words a Latin root.
- 17 The name Cecilia means "way of the blind," and Cecilia is also the name of the patron saint of music. The connecton to Saint Ceclia is reinforced by the

alternate ending of the film, in which Cecila offers a composition for her soldier brother Philip, who has not yet returned from the war.

18 Adorno, "Aldous Huxley," 99.

19 Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (New York, 1971), 105 (emphasis in original).

20 Adorno, "Aldous Huxley," 117.