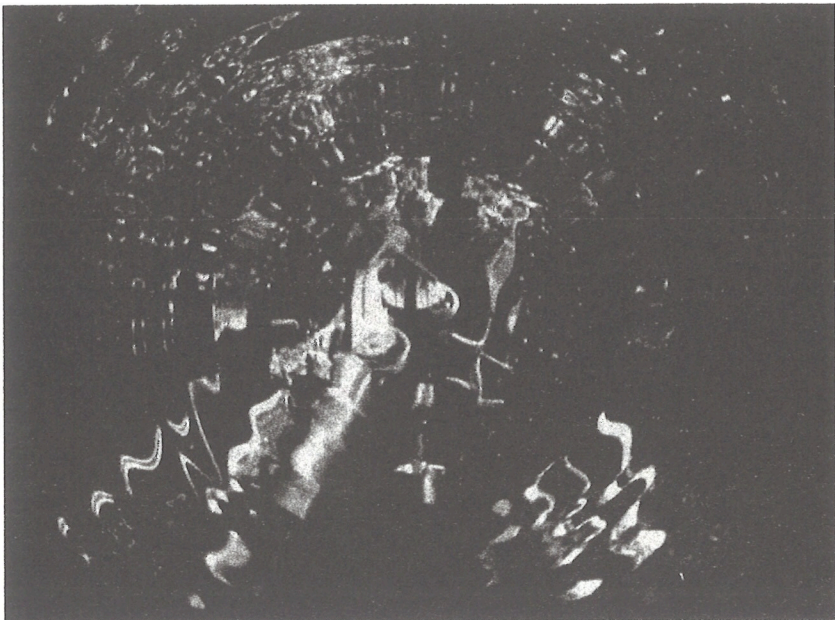
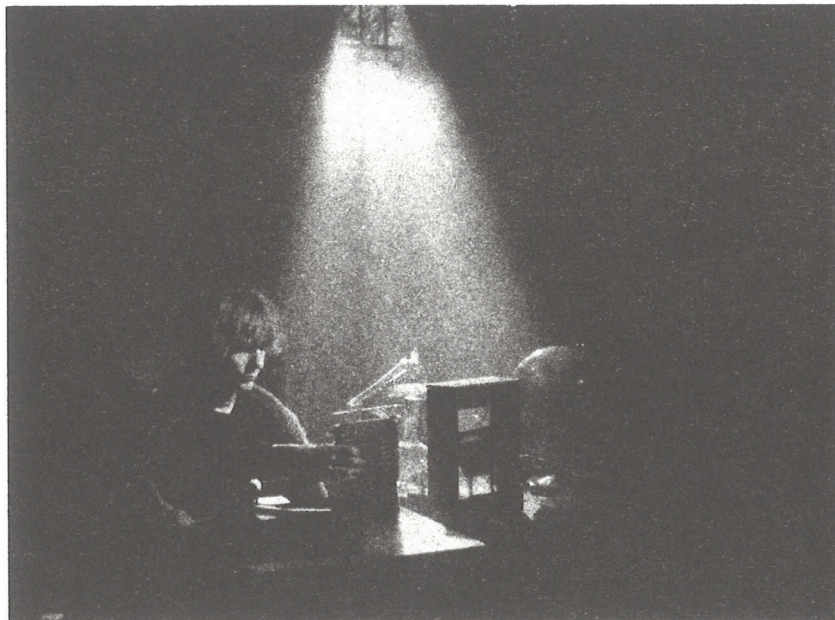




Der Tag ist nah (The Day is Nigh) (1997, 15 mins.)



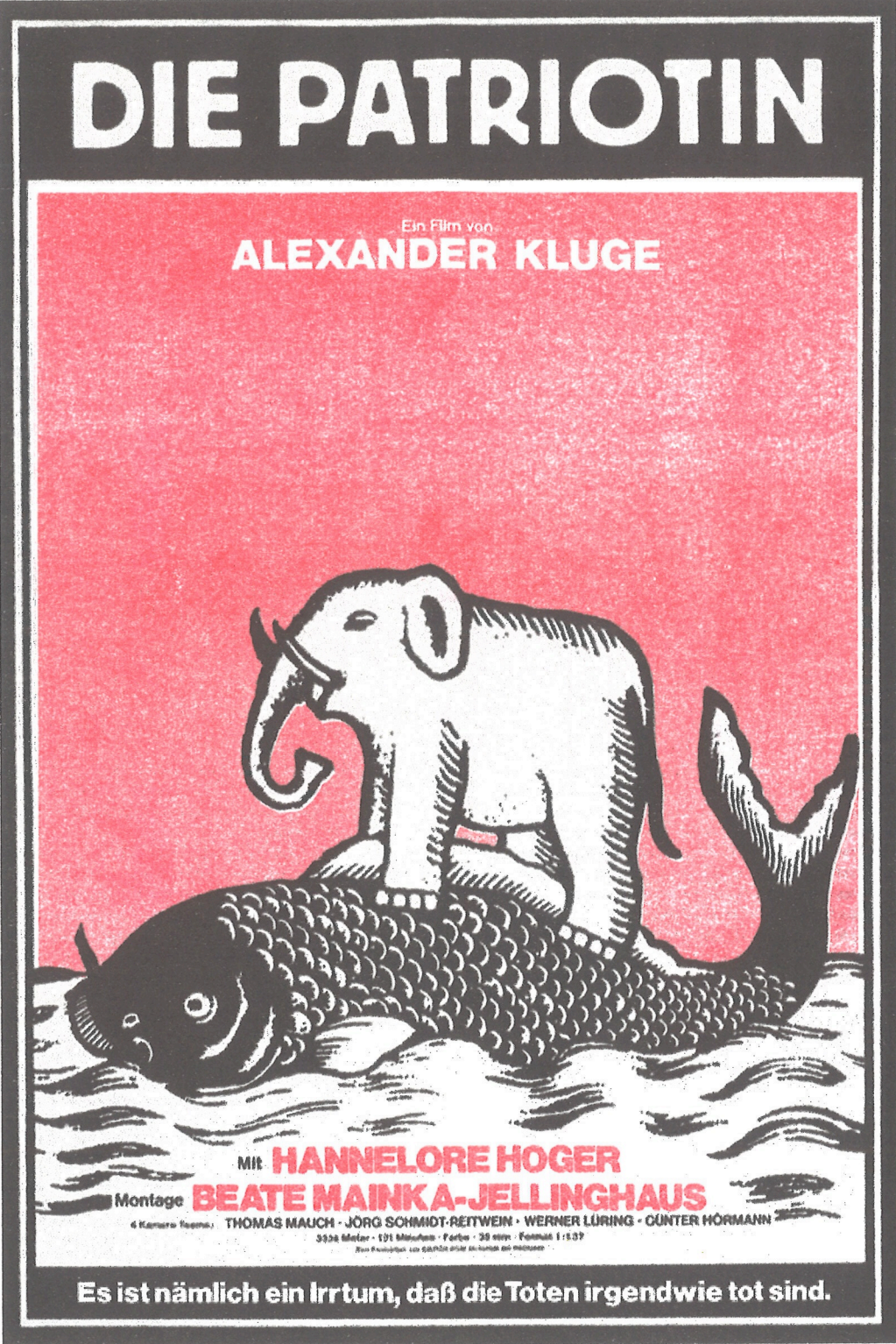
Die Patriotin (The Patriotic Woman) (1979, 121 min.)

“The bourgeois public sphere rests on a separation from the life-processes of society; what does not fit into its forms of articulation remains excluded, yet continues to exist as experience.” – A.K.

PDF text team Kluge edit. Negt, Oskar, and Alexander Kluge. *The Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Previous Alexander Kluge screenings organised by Terrassen:
Die Macht der Gefühle (The Power of Emotion) at Empire Bio
on Tuesday September 2, 2025, at 19h30.

Terrassen presents a screening of Alexander Kluge’s film *Die Patriotin* (The Patriotic Woman)
Wednesday May 6, 2026, 20h00



Free entrance – no ticketing
Park Bio, Østerbrogade 79, Copenhagen

Generously supported by the Danish Art Council,
Rapid Eye Movies and Goethe Institute.

Public Sphere and Experience

Toward an Analysis of the

Bourgeois and Proletarian

Public Sphere

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge

Foreword by Miriam Hansen

Translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff

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varian public sphere" can be reduced to idealistic platitudes. In a far more cautious tone, Jürgen Habermas speaks with regard to this of a "variant of a plebeian public sphere that has, as it were, been suppressed within the historical process."¹

During the past fifty years the concept "bourgeois" has repeatedly been devalued: but it is not possible to do away with it so long as the facade of legitimation created by the revolutionary bourgeoisie continues to determine the decaying postbourgeois forms of the public sphere. We use the word bourgeois as an invitation to the reader to reflect critically upon the social origins of the ruling concept of the public sphere. Only in this way can the fetishistic character of the latter be grasped and a materialistic concept be developed.

We are starting from the assumption that the concept proletarian is no less ambiguous than bourgeois. Nonetheless, it does refer to a strategic position that is substantively meshed with the history of the emancipation of the working class. The other reason we have chosen this concept is because it is not at present susceptible to absorption into the ruling discourse; it resists being categorized into the symbolic spectrum of the bourgeois public sphere, which so readily accommodates the concept of a critical public sphere. There are objective reasons for this. Fifty years of counterrevolution and restoration have exhausted the labor movement's linguistic resources. The word proletarian has, in the Federal Repub-

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied and Berlin: 1969): 8. Habermas's choice of the concept of a "plebeian" public sphere can be justified by the fact that, throughout its history, the proletariat has never attempted on its own to constitute a public sphere without including elements of the bourgeoisie or of the lumpen proletariat. It was the heterogeneous urban lower classes who undertook to form a public sphere appropriate to them during the French Revolution or during the French nineteenth-century class struggles that can be defined with the term "plebeian." Moreover, the inaccuracy of the concept that makes it so handy for historical analysis (it must be able to condense together entirely heterogeneous historical moments) is more evident in the term "plebeian" than in "proletarian," since the latter term seems to have a more specific analytical meaning. We have nonetheless chosen the designation *proletarian* public sphere because we believe that what is at issue here is not a variant of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather an entirely separate conceptualization of the overall social context, which has been established in history but has not been included within the parameters of the term public sphere. Thus, a plant where there is a strike or a factory that is being occupied is to be understood not as a variant of the plebeian public sphere, but rather as the essential core of a *conception of public sphere that is rooted in the production process*. The same difficulty would also arise if one were to speak of "the people" (*Volk*) (a term Habermas always uses in quotation marks), since this term is inadequate for expressing the quality of working people as producers. The dialectic between historical and systematic methods of analysis is of central importance for the method of analysis practiced here and in what follows. The systematic method seeks out precise concepts and terms that are analytically articulate and capable of distinguishing between phenomena. However, the historical method of analysis must, in order to grasp real historical movement, repeatedly sublimate the apparent precision of systematic concepts, especially their tendency toward exclusion. Therefore, our use of the concept of a proletarian public sphere can only be understood within this conceptual dialectic, and does not claim to be more precise than, for instance, the term "plebeian public sphere"—although this choice of an alternative term does indicate that an alternative set of interests is at issue.

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Federal elections, Olympic ceremonies, the actions of a commando unit, a theater premiere—all are considered public events. Other events of overwhelming public significance, such as childrearing, factory work, and watching television within one's own four walls, are considered private. The real social experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work, cut across such divisions.

We originally intended to write a book about the public sphere and the mass media. This would have examined the most advanced structural changes within the public sphere and the mass media, in particular the media cartel. The loss of a public sphere within the various sectors of the left, together with the restricted access of workers in their existing organizations to channels of communication, soon led us to ask whether there can be any effective forms of a counterpublic sphere against the bourgeois public sphere. This is how we arrived at the concept of the proletarian public sphere, which embodies an experiential interest that is quite distinct. The dialectic of bourgeois and proletarian public sphere is the subject of our book.

Historical fissures—crises, war, capitulation, revolution, counterrevolution—denote concrete constellations of social forces within which a proletarian public sphere develops. Since the latter has no existence as a ruling public sphere, it has to be reconstructed from such rifts, marginal cases, isolated initiatives. To study substantive attempts at a proletarian public sphere is, however, only one aim in our argument: the other is to investigate the contradictions emerging within advanced capitalist societies for their potential for a counterpublic sphere. We are aware of the danger that the concepts "proletarian experience" and "prole-

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lic, taken on an attenuated, indeed an anachronistic, sense. Yet the real conditions it denotes belong to the present, and there is no other word for them. We believe it is wrong to allow words to become obsolete before there is a change in the objects they denote.²

Whereas it is self-evident that the bourgeois public sphere is not a reference point for bourgeois interests alone, it is not generally assumed that proletarian experience and its organization likewise form a crystallizing point: namely, for a public sphere that reflects the interests and experiences of the overwhelming majority of the population, insofar as these experiences and interests are real.³ Proletarian life does not form a cohesive whole, but is characterized by the blocking of those elements that, in reality, hold it together. The

2. It is not our intention as individual authors to replace central, historically developed concepts that, as real concepts, designate real-life circumstances that have not been sublated and that possess so little purely definitional character. The formation of new concepts here is a matter that will require collective effort. If historical situations really change, new words will come into being accordingly.

3. The concept of the proletarian public sphere is not one we originated. It has been used variously in the history of the labor movement, but frequently in an unspecific way. As regards the period following World War I, one peculiarity stands out that is significant for the way this concept is used, particularly with reference to the communist parties. The proletarian public sphere is not exactly that which could be characterized as the public sphere of the party. Anyone who appeals to the proletarian public sphere also appeals initially to the party, but is in fact addressing the masses. Here it is striking that the concept of public sphere that is used always puts forward the mobilization of the masses or of party members for specific decisions that cannot be realized within the organizational apparatuses or are controversial. Thus one speaks, for example, of actions "that are capable of seriously jeopardizing the status of our party in the eyes of the proletarian public sphere" (Hermann Weber, *Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, documentary appendix, Rote Texte, Reihe Arbeiterbewegung, n.d., p. 416). Appeals are made to the proletarian public sphere whenever it is a matter of implementing the decisions and analyses of a particular faction within the party leadership or of criticizing something that cannot be reconciled with the interests of the proletariat as a whole. However, this instrumentalizing appeal to the masses and their acclamation corresponds precisely to a principle of the bourgeois public sphere.

The proletarian sphere does not function in this way. Here the concept has an almost spontaneous, ad hoc quality, which is attributed to the masses from without. The situation is characterized by a state of affairs in which party organization and the masses are no longer united by a common experiential context. An even more graphic example for the way in which the concept of proletarian public sphere is taken up can be seen in the action that was organized by Trotsky and his supporters to parallel the official October demonstration during a phase in the development of Soviet society in which there was in practice only little possibility of implementing Trotsky's Left Opposition. Lenin also refers in various ways to appealing to the party in order to put through specific decisions in opposition to the majority in the party leadership. In all of these cases, the proletariat is viewed as a totality, as the material carrier of a specific public sphere. For Marx, the concept of "the proletariat" resonates with a meaning content that is not reflected in sociological and political-economic definitions of the working class, although it constitutes their material foundation. In the proletariat there is concentrated the practical negation of the existing world that need only be conceptualized to become part of the history of the political emancipation of the working class. In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx remarks that all of the demands of the working class are forms of expression of the mode of existence of this class itself. "When the proletariat announces the dissolution of the existing social order, it only

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horizon of social experience that reinforces the block of these coherent elements is the bourgeois public sphere.

What is striking about the prevailing interpretations of the concept of the public sphere is that they attempt to bring together a multitude of phenomena and yet exclude the two most important areas of life: the whole of the industrial apparatus and socialization in the family. According to these interpretations, the public sphere derives its substance from an intermediate realm that does not specifically express any particular life context (*Lebenszusammenhang*), even though this public sphere allegedly represents the totality of society.

The weakness characteristic of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely, that the bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole. To enable it to fulfill its own claims, it must be treated like the laurel tree in Brecht's *Stories from the Calendar*, about which Mr. K. says: it is trimmed to make it even more perfect and even rounder until there is nothing left of it. Since the bourgeois public sphere is not sufficiently grounded in substantive life interests, it remains compelled to ally itself with the more tangible interests of capitalist production. For the bourgeois public sphere, proletarian life remains a "thing-in-itself": it exerts an influence on the former, but without being understood.

The tendencies of the consciousness and programming industry, advertising, the publicity campaigns of firms and administrative apparatuses have altogether different roots. These—along with the advanced production process (itself a pseudo-public sphere)—overlay, as *new public spheres of production*, the classical public sphere. These public spheres of production are nonpublicly anchored: in contrast to the traditional form of public sphere, they work the raw material of everyday life and they derive their penetrative force directly from the capitalist production interest. By circumventing the intermediate realm of the traditional public sphere (the seasonal public sphere of elections, the formation of public opinion), they seek direct access to the private sphere of the individual. It is essential that the proletarian counterpublic sphere confronts these public spheres, which are permeated by the interests of capital, and does not merely see itself as the antithesis of the classical public sphere.

At stake is a practical, political experience of the working class: the working class must know how to deal with the bourgeois public sphere and must know what threats the latter poses, without allowing its own experiences to be defined by the latter's narrow horizons. The bourgeois public sphere is of no use as a

declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the effective dissolution of this order. When the proletariat demands the negation of private property, it only lays down as a principle for society what society has already made a principle for the proletariat, and what the latter already involuntarily embodies as the negative result of society" (in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, trans. T. B. Bottomore [New York: W. W. Norton, 1972]: 23).

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experience is. But our political motive is to uncouple the investigation of the public sphere and the mass media from its naturally rooted context, where all it yields is a vast number of publications that merely execute variations on the compartmentalizations of the bourgeois public sphere. What we understand by "naturally rooted" is evident in the ambivalence—one that has never been examined—of the most important concepts associated with the keyword "public sphere": public opinion, law enforcement, freedom of information, the production of a public sphere, mass media, and so on. All of these concepts have developed historically and express specific interests. The contradictory nature of social development is sedimented in the contradictory nature of these concepts. The inquiry into the source of these concepts and who employs them tells us more about their content than do any excursions into philology or the history of ideas.

The bourgeois public sphere is anchored in the formal characteristics of communication: it can be represented in terms of a schema of continuous historical progression, insofar as one focuses on the ideas that are realized within it. But if, by contrast, one takes its real substance as one's point of departure, it is not unified at all, but rather the aggregate of individual spheres that are only abstractly related. Television, the press, the public sphere of interest groups and political parties, parliament, the military, public education, public chairs in the universities, the legal system, the churches, industry, and so on, are only seemingly fused into a general concept of the public sphere. In reality, this general overriding public sphere runs parallel to these fields as an idea, and is exploited by the interests contained within each sphere, especially by the organized interests of the production sector. What are overriding, however, are those spheres that derive from the production sector, which is constituted as nonpublic, as well as the overwhelming collective doubt—a by-product of the capitalist mode of production—in the production network's ability to legitimate itself. Both of these tendencies come together and combine with the manifestations of the classical public sphere, as these are united in the state and in parliament. For this reason, the classical public sphere, despite its state of decay, is anything but a mere illusion behind which one could come into direct contact with capitalist interests. This assumption is just as false as the opposing one that, within this aggregated public sphere, politics could make a decision that ran counter to the interests of capital.

To simplify our account, concrete examples have been restricted to two relatively recent mass media: the media cartel and television. We have not examined in detail other spheres such as the press, parliament, the public sphere of interest groups and political parties, trade unions, or science and research. Individual aspects of the proletarian public sphere are discussed in a series of commentaries following the main chapters.

It is our political interest in this book to provide a framework for discussion that will open the analytical concepts of political economy downward, toward the real experiences of human beings. Such a discussion cannot itself be conducted in

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medium for the crystallization of the particular experience of the working class—it is not even the real enemy. Since it came into being, the labor movement's motive has been to express politically proletarian interests in its own forms of public sphere. At the same time, the goal has been to contest the ruling class's enlistment of the state, Marx recognizes this when he describes the theft of wood as analogous to the propertied class's theft of the public sphere by appropriating the executive power of the latter without paying for it through engaging thousands of gendarmes, foresters, and soldiers for its own interests. If the masses try to fight a ruling class reinforced by the power of the public sphere, their struggle is hopeless; they are always simultaneously fighting against themselves, for the public sphere is constituted by them. It is so difficult to grasp this because the idea of the bourgeois public sphere—as "the bold fiction of a binding of all politically significant decision-making processes to the right, guaranteed by law, of citizens to shape their own opinions"—has, since its inception, been ambivalent. The revolutionary bourgeoisie attempted, via the emphatic concept of public opinion, to fuse the whole of society into a unity. This remained as a goal. In reality, although this was not expressed in political terms, it was the value abstraction founded on commodity production that forced society together. The extent to which the public sphere holds society together was therefore never gauged. It seemed possible, however, that society could be founded on something other than commodity exchange and private property. In this way the idea of the bourgeois public sphere created, in the masses organized by it, an awareness of possible reforms and alternatives. This illusion repeats itself in every attempt at political stocktaking and mass mobilization that occurs within the categories of the bourgeois public sphere.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after centuries of preparing public opinion, bourgeois society constituted the public sphere as a crystallization point of its experiences and ideologies. The "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" articulates itself in the compartmentalizations, the forms of this public sphere. Whereas the bourgeois revolution initially makes a thoroughgoing attempt to overcome the limits of the capitalist mode of production, the forms—for instance, the forced separation of powers, the division between public and private, between politics and production, between everyday language and authentic social expression, between education, science, and art on the one hand and the interests and experiences of the masses on the other—prevent even the mere expressions of social criticism, of a counterpublic sphere, and of the emancipation of the majority of the population. There is no chance that the experiences and interests of the proletariat, in the broadest sense, will be able to organize themselves amid this splitting of all the interrelated qualitative elements of experience and social practice.

We do not claim in our book to be able to say what the content of proletarian

4. Jürgen Habermas, Introduction to *Theory and Practice* (Frankfurt: 1971): 32.

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the forms of the bourgeois or the traditional academic public sphere alone. It must have recourse to investigative work that brings together existing social experiences with newly acquired ones. It is plausible that such investigative work must, above all, concern itself with its own bases of production, the structures of the public sphere and of the mass media.

Frankfurt am Main, Summer 1972
Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge

