

Preface

TRANSIT vol. 10, no. 2

Nina Berman

Nina, good to hear from you. I think it's best not to meditate too much about one's life, if it's good or bad or strange . . . who knows. I am busy doing 20 different things that keep me totally but productively superficial; I have not much of an urge to ruminate about my life in an essentialist and pop-psychological way. I think you should work on your diss., rework the article, go to conferences . . .

I no longer have a copy of the email that I sent to Tony Kaes back in 1994, but I must have been whining to elicit such a response. These few lines say so much about who Tony is and why his doctoral students (as well as other students and colleagues) continue to be deeply connected to him, years and decades after they completed their dissertations. There is the personal investment and encouragement; the sense of humor; the self-deprecation; and the pragmatic, no-nonsense advice that got us all to move forward.

When thirteen of Tony's students got together in April 2015 for the first alumni conference that was held at the Department of German at UC Berkeley, we found out that we share more than an emotional bond to our advisor. During the day and a half of presentations, what emerged was a sense of a "Tony Kaes approach to German Studies," a kind of "School" held together by a specific method, intellectual commitment, and relationship to context. This approach to German Studies was born in the context of events and debates that occurred in the United States and Europe, at a particular institution (Berkeley), and in a particular moment (1980s/1990s). Let me review some of the key points that were articulated over the course of the symposium and that define this school.

Time and place. One sentence that was repeated like a mantra at the conference and that many of us—students as well as colleagues—have heard from Tony in seminars and conversations is the simple phrase: *What is the question to which this text/film is the answer?* Responding to this phrase necessitates an engagement with context and the historical moment, with pressing issues that were articulated by individuals or groups during a particular period and with regard to a particular place. Related to this query is also the Benjaminian emphasis on the relationship between our moment (acknowledging the present) and moments of the past: How can we bring these diverse histories into conversation?

Archives. The preeminence of a deeper understanding of time and place brings with it the need to consult existing archives—as well as to create new ones, whether textual, architectural, or material in other forms. Being in, traveling to, and working in archives, even simply going into the stacks and browsing the shelves for unexpected discoveries is central to the approach. But archives can also be a trap, an illusion; being aware of the incompleteness and unreliability of archives and devising methods to corroborate evidence (through, for example, using comparison and interdisciplinary combination) will always remain a key component of historical work on culture.

The technological moment. Tony is one of the founders of German film studies, and acknowledging the impact of technology on cultural production is a central element of his

work and that of those who have been inspired by him. The changing modes of producing and engaging with culture through technology, including the opportunities opened up by digital forms of production, communication, and scholarship, have augmented and enriched archives and agendas of cultural inquiry tremendously.

Materiality of culture. Paying attention to context, historical dimensions, archives, and technology highlights the material dimensions of texts, films, and other forms of cultural production. Exploring the materiality of culture in its multilayered dynamic dimensions allows for resonance—another key term often used by Tony—to become visible.

Multiplicity of readings. The possibilities that result from embracing the reality of a wide range of coexisting readings and readers of culture facilitate productive forays into complexity. But the question remains: What narratives about those readings and readers are we, as scholars, going to tell?

Participatory history. Another point that was raised during the conference centered on the question of what participatory history may be. How do we make what we research and teach count? One of the tangible links between the participants was the commitment to responding to political questions of our times, in the context of universities located in the United States, by using German Studies material as a vehicle. For example, participants described how they were teaching about racism and social inequality in the United States through a German Studies framework. Reflecting on Tony's approach to the study of culture brought with it consideration of another topic of the moment, the sense of crisis that prevails in the humanities. Participants rejected what was described as a "siege mentality" and encouraged one another to confront the changing university landscape by insisting on the relevance of exploring culture and history for envisioning "the future of the past."

Ethics of generosity and "intellektuelle Redlichkeit" (a disposition emphasized by Karl Jaspers). Tony has always been extremely generous in his support of his students and colleagues, and he has modeled for us an intellectual ethics and standard that we deeply respect.

We can certainly find the origins of much of what I have identified here as the "Tony Kaes approach to German Studies" in key theoretical and methodological debates of the past forty years, from Walter Benjamin's ideas of historical inquiry to Cultural Studies and New Historicism, from the linguistic to the material turn. But the unique constellation of inquiry and method that is reviewed here emerged through the scholarship, teaching, and person of Tony Kaes. We are grateful for the years of inspiration by and creative thinking with Tony, and look forward to many more to come.