

## University of Groningen

### Uncanny Europe

Lippert, Florian

*Published in:*  
Austrian Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.5699/austrianstudies.29.2021.0144](https://doi.org/10.5699/austrianstudies.29.2021.0144)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lippert, F. (2021). Uncanny Europe: Derridean Hauntologies of History, Unity and Identity in Films by Nikolaus Geyrhalter. *Austrian Studies*, 29, 144-160. <https://doi.org/10.5699/austrianstudies.29.2021.0144>

#### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

#### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Uncanny Europe: Derridean Hauntologies of History, Unity and  
Identity in Films by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Florian Lippert

Austrian Studies, Volume 29, 2021, pp. 144-60 (Article)

Published by Modern Humanities Research Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aus.2021.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/846251/summary>

# Uncanny Europe: Derridean Hauntologies of History, Unity and Identity in Films by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

FLORIAN LIPPERT

*University of Groningen*

## I

Quelque chose d'unique est en cours en Europe, dans ce qui s'appelle encore l'Europe même si on ne sait plus très bien *ce qui* s'appelle ainsi. À quel concept, en effet, à quel individu réel, à quelle entité singulière assigner ce nom aujourd'hui? Qui en dessinera les frontières? [...] Nous nous demandons dans l'espoir, la crainte et le tremblement à quoi va ressembler ce visage. Ressemblera-t-il encore? Et à celui de quelqu'un que nous croyons connaître, Europe? Et si sa non-ressemblance avait les traits de l'avenir, échappera-t-elle à la monstruosité?

[Something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is still called Europe even if we no longer know very well *what* or *who* goes by this name. Indeed, to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity should this name be assigned today? Who will draw up its borders? [...] We ask ourselves in hope, in fear and trembling, what (Europe's) face is going to resemble. Will it still resemble? Will it resemble the face of some *persona* whom we believe we know: Europe? And if its non-resemblance bears the traits of the future, will it escape monstrosity?]<sup>1</sup>

What Jacques Derrida noted some thirty years ago, in a paper at a colloquium on 'European Cultural Identity', is remarkable in at least three regards. First, it appears to have lost little of its timeliness and diagnostic applicability: if we did not know when this was written and by whom, we could very well take it for a comment on Europe's contemporary crises of solidarity and migration, and the rise of right-wing populism — all the more since, as we read further on in Derrida's text, his 'in hope, in fear and trembling' regarding Europe's borders in 1990 did not, as one might expect, pertain to the continent's future after the fall of the Iron Curtain, but rather, 'les crimes de la xénophobie, du racisme, de l'antisémitisme, du fanatisme religieux ou nationaliste [...] se mêlent, se mêlent

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, '*L'autre cap*' suivi de '*La Démocratie ajournée*' (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit), p. 12. In English translation as *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 5–6.

entre eux mais se mêlent aussi, il n'y a rien de fortuit à cela, aux souffles, à la respiration, à l'*esprit* même de la promesse' ['the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism [...] mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also, and there is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very '*spirit*' of the promise'].<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the passage is also remarkable since it manages emblematically to compress and condense several diametrically opposed European extremes into one single scenario — a familiar Derridean method which we might call the antagonistic principle: there are both 'hope' and 'fear and trembling', and there is also 'promise' mixed with horror, resemblance and non-resemblance. Europe is a space in which contradictions collide and might transform into something entirely new, for good or for bad — again, a diagnosis that has easily endured three decades since 1990, and has in fact a much longer history. Europeans, Derrida continues to explain, are 'plus jeunes que jamais [...] puisqu'une certaine Europe n'existe pas encore' ['younger than ever [...], since a certain Europe does not yet exist'], but are, at the same time, 'déjà épuisés' ['already exhausted'] by the reappearing problems *of* and continuous debates *about* European identity: 'les jeunes vieux-Européens' ['young old-Europeans'].<sup>3</sup>

The antagonistic principle reaches its peak when Derrida, in a crucial passage, addresses the topic of the colloquium to which he was invited, adding a gentle but nevertheless effective deconstructivist twist to it:

*le propre d'une culture, c'est de n'être pas identique à elle-même. Non pas de n'avoir pas d'identité, mais de ne pouvoir s'identifier, dire 'moi' ou 'nous', de ne pouvoir prendre la forme du sujet que dans la non-identité à soi [...], la différence avec soi. [...] Cela peut se dire, inversement ou réciproquement, de toute identité ou de toute identification: il n'y a pas de rapport à soi, d'identification à soi sans culture, mais culture de soi comme culture de l'autre, culture du double génitif et de la différence à soi. [...] L'Europe [...] n'aura-t-elle été qu'un exemple de cette loi? Un exemple parmi d'autres? Ou bien la possibilité exemplaire de cette loi? Est-on plus fidèle à l'héritage d'une culture en cultivant la différence-à-soi (avec soi) qui constitue l'identité ou bien en s'en tenant à l'identité dans laquelle cette différence se maintient rassemblée?*

*[what is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself. Not to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say 'me' or 'we'; to be able to take the form of a subject only [...] in the difference with itself [...]. This can be said, inversely or reciprocally, of all identity or all identification: there is no self-relation, no relation to oneself, no identification with oneself, without culture, but a culture of oneself as a culture of the other, a culture of the double genitive and of the difference to oneself [...]. Will [...] Europe [...] have been merely an example of this law? One example among others? Or will it have been the exemplary possibility of this law? Is one more faithful to the heritage of a culture by cultivating the difference-to-*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 13; p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *L'autre cap*, p. 14; *The Other Heading*, pp. 7–8.

oneself (*with oneself*) that constitutes identity or by confining oneself to an identity wherein this difference remains *gathered*?<sup>4</sup>

Those familiar with Derrida's work will recognize here an echo and variation of his core principle of *différance*: the unity of difference and postponement, in this case not referring to the non-identity of linguistic signs and their meaning, but to that of culture and those who are united by it. Culture, as it entirely consists of what people think and do, cannot reduce itself to a fixed 'subject', can never be definitely grasped and fully determined; people, in turn, are 'cultural' beings in their thinking and doing, but only so in their relation to the other. Identity is thus always productively postponed in the realms of culture just as it is in those of language and meaning.

Those familiar with ongoing discourses on European cultural identity, in turn, might recognize in Derrida's elaborations a European core challenge that already haunted the continent long before it became — ironically, some might say — the European Union's official motto: the challenge of *unity in diversity*. This theme seems to be addressed by Derrida's text on at least three levels: the level of people forming European culture, the level of nations forming Europe, and finally, the level of Europe's many colonialisms. He says: '[L'Europe] n'aura cessé de faire des avances: pour induire, séduire, produire, conduire, se propager, cultiver, aimer ou violer, aimer violer, colonizer, se colonizer elle-même' '[Europe] will have never ceased to make advances on the other: to induce, seduce, produce, and conduce, to spread out, to cultivate, to love or to violate, to love to violate, to colonize, and to colonize itself'.<sup>5</sup>

If we re-read the introductory passage in this light, we can conclude that, while 'unity' might indeed seem to be the 'promise' on which both pan-Europeans and nationalists, both progressive and reactionary forces, can agree, it is the relation between unity and its counterpart, diversity, that will make all the difference. The uncertainty of how this relation will develop in the future seems to be at the core of Derrida's 'in hope, in fear and trembling': are we moving towards a re-nationalization or a de-nationalization? If the latter, what kind of unity can we imagine, aside from the 'monstrosity' of former colonialist and fascist fantasies? Will Europe be able to create and retain a new *balance* between unity and diversity ('cultivating the difference-to-oneself'), or will it rather move towards an *identity* of the two that would 'gather' a *past* balance? In any case, it seems that its future can only be imagined as a state of constant tension bordering on aporia, as Derrida concludes later in his talk with an exemplary reference to artistic practices:

[D]'une part, l'identité culturelle européenne ne peut pas se disperser [...] en une poussière de provinces, en une multiplicité d'idiomes enclaves ou de petits nationalismes jaloux et intraduisibles. [...] Mais, *d'autre part*, elle

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *L'autre cap*, pp. 16–17; *The Other Heading*, pp. 9–11. Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *L'autre cap*, p. 50; *The Other Heading*, p. 49.

ne peut ni ne doit accepter la capitale d'une autorité centralisatrice qui [...] contrôle et uniformise, soumettant les discours et les pratiques artistiques à une grille d'intelligibilité, à des normes philosophiques ou esthétiques [...]. Ni le monopole ni la dispersion, donc. Bien entendu, il y a là une aporie.

[*O*n the one hand, European cultural identity cannot [...] be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable. [...] But, on the other hand, it cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority that [...] would control and standardize, subjecting artistic discourses and practices to a grid of intelligibility, to philosophical or aesthetic norms [...]. Neither monopoly nor dispersion, therefore. This is, of course, an aporia.]<sup>6</sup>

The complexity of these meta-questions of Europeaness leads us, thirdly, to another remarkable feature of Derrida's text, one which is very relevant to a discussion of the uncanny: it delivers nothing less than an outline of the *uncanniness of European identity*. All core elements which are, according to Freud's seminal work, key for defining and understanding the uncanny can be found here, intertwined with variations of Derrida's own takes on Freud — as developed in 'La double séance' ['The Double Session', 1970] and *Spectres de Marx* [1993; *Specters of Marx*, 1994] — and all focused on the European question.<sup>7</sup> First, the repressed familiar: while the memory of fascism and war remains the most prominent justification — 'never again' — for any project of European unity, the threat of the fascist perversion of 'unity' remains intertwined with it. Secondly, the unsettling effects of the repressed coming to the fore: the dualism of 'hope' and 'fear and trembling' alongside the question of what we should wish for, the 'old' Europe or a 'young' one. And finally, resulting from these effects, the impossibility of 'closure': the uncertainty about established 'knowledge' when it comes to the question of how Europeans should relate to the 'other'. As Anneleen Masschelein noted on conceptual overlaps following from Derrida's take on Freud: 'the uncanny, like hauntology, *différance*, and dissemination, signifies the return of the repressed that haunts the pretense to conceptual discourse and exposes the ideological closure of definitions and concepts'.<sup>8</sup>

Departing from Derrida's observations, we can thus differentiate between two basic dimensions of the European uncanny: 'old' problems of a European past which is, to appropriate Faulkner's famous sentence, 'never dead. It's not even

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *L'autre cap*, pp. 41–43; *The Other Heading*, pp. 38–40. Italics in original.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La double séance', in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 199–317. In English translation as *Dissemination*, trans. and intro. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 173–286. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993). In English translation as *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, intro. by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Anneleen Masschelein, 'The Concept as Ghost: Conceptualization of the Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 35.1 (2002), 53–68 (p. 62).

past;<sup>9</sup> and ‘young’ problems of the present (the ‘today’, as Derrida quotes from Paul Valéry’s ‘Notes sur la grandeur et la décadence de l’Europe’ [‘Notes on the Greatness and Decline of Europe’]), which revolve around the relation between a European ‘cultural identity’ and the other, and which seem impossible to solve without either neglecting the former or rejecting the latter. In the following, I want to discuss these two dimensions of the European uncanny as they are negotiated in the films of Nikolaus Geyrhalter (born in 1972), one of the most prominent Austrian filmmakers working today. The aim of this application is twofold: on the one hand, I will exemplify and specify facets and effects of the uncanniness of European identity as they evolve from aesthetic cultural production — the best possible field for explorations of the uncanny, as Freud explained and exemplified in his famous analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, this exploration will also shine a new light on Geyrhalter’s oeuvre and on its rich and complex hauntologies of Europeanness. After briefly discussing some general recurring motives of the European uncanny throughout Geyrhalter’s work, I will mainly focus on three films: *7915 km* (2008) and its depiction of postcolonial ‘spectres’ on the African continent; *Abendland* [international title: *Europe*; literal translation: ‘Occident’ or even more literally ‘evening land’, 2011], which contrasts inner de-nationalization with outer re-bordering; and *Die bauliche Maßnahme* [international title: *The Border Fence*; literal translation: ‘the construction measure’, 2018], which exemplifies the ‘openness’ of ‘cultural identity’ by means of the ‘Europaregion Tirol’ [European Region of Tyrol].

## II

Motives, forms and facets of the uncanny in Freud’s original, general sense can be found throughout Geyrhalter’s work from early on. His first major documentary *Angeschwemmt* [*Washed Ashore*, 1994] portrays life and death around the banks of the Danube. Its title refers to the corpses washed ashore at a particular river bend close to Vienna; the bodies often cannot be identified and are buried in the city’s notorious ‘Friedhof der Namenlosen’ [Cemetery of the Nameless]. Motives of reappearance and defamiliarization also take centre stage in *Das Jahr nach Dayton* [*The Year after Dayton*, 1997], which documents the first year of peace in Bosnia after the Dayton Agreement and follows survivors in their search for a new normal; the topic is later revisited in the short TV film *Fremde Kinder: Senad und Enis — Es war einmal der Krieg* [Foreign Children: Senad and Enis — Once Upon a Time, There was the War, 2003].

<sup>9</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Das Unheimliche’ in *Studienausgabe*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2000), IV: *Psychologische Schriften*, pp. 241–74. In English translation as Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. by Alix Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), XVII: *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (1955), pp. 217–52.

Similarly, *Pripyat* (1999) focuses on contemporary everyday life in the restricted zone surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the shadows of the 1986 catastrophe, while the TV production *Temelín: Ein Dorf in Südböhmen* [Temelín: A Village in South Bohemia, 2002] juxtaposes the construction of a new nuclear power station with long-lasting political tensions between Austria and the Czech Republic. *Allentsteig* (2010), in turn, investigates work and life in and around another restricted zone, one of Europe's largest military training grounds in northern Lower Austria — established in 1938 by the Wehrmacht, which cleared forty-two villages for this purpose, thereby allegedly also destroying evidence that one of Allentsteig's inhabitants, Hitler's grandmother, worked for a Jewish family in one of the villages. What all these works have in common is their focus on spaces of past European trauma and the ways in which these traumata resurface and are dealt with today. As Volker Pantenburg puts it: 'Geyrhalters Filme [...] sind Variationen über verschiedene Formen des Danach' [Geyrhalter's films are variations on forms of the 'afterwards'].<sup>11</sup> By means of paradigmatic *topoi* — in the double sense of specific places and topics — Geyrhalter confronts representative spaces of European history with Europeans' contemporary attempts to overcome this history and to live with it, rendering them, in Derrida's terms, 'young old-Europeans'.

Patterns of a suppressed, resurfacing European past are also present in core episodes of Geyrhalter's most recent films which do not exclusively focus on Europe, but rather discuss global matters in the Anthropocene. Here, the uncanny often literally evolves from unearthing what was buried a long time ago. For example, *Erde* [Earth, 2019], which investigates how humans transform the face of the earth in gigantic mines, quarries and construction sites all over the world, contains a sequence set in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, where radioactive waste had been stored in an old salt mine for several decades. Now it has to be removed since the geological studies on which the choice of location had been based turned out to be mistaken. Geyrhalter's arguably most 'haunted' work to date,<sup>12</sup> *Homo Sapiens* (2016), features a wide array of deserted spaces of former grandeur, such as the ruins of a roller coaster by a beach in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. The film also depicts places of hidden misdeeds — such as the 'Cavern of Lost Souls' in Wales, an underground car junkyard in a disused mine — delivering both darkly fascinating and deeply disturbing images of what might be called an environmental subconscious.

<sup>11</sup> Volker Pantenburg, 'Arbeit am Inneren des Films: Schnitt, Buch, Dramaturgie: Wolfgang Widerhofer', in *Räume in der Zeit: Die Filme von Nikolaus Geyrhalter*, ed. by Alejandro Bachmann (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2015), pp. 50–57 (p. 55).

<sup>12</sup> See Sonia Shechet Epstein's analysis of the film's 'vaguely unsettling undercurrent' and 'hypnotic appeal': 'if it was a music genre, it's safe to say that the film may be Ambient but it's never New Age'. Sonia Shechet Epstein, 'The Ruins of Civilization: Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens*', in *Sloan Science & Film*, 3 August 2016 <<http://www.scienceandfilm.org/articles/2747/the-ruins-of-civilization-nikolaus-geyrhalters-homo-sapiens>> [accessed 20 January 2021].



Apart from the focus on topoi of resurfacing trauma and unearthed problems from the past, a third, more complex strand of Geyrhalter's approaches to European history can be observed in *7915 km* (2008). This film, edited like many of the above by Geyrhalter's long-term collaborator Wolfgang Widerhofer, quite literally follows the tracks of what Geyrhalter considers a new 'Form von Kolonialismus' [form of colonialism]: through five African countries, Geyrhalter and his team follow the route of the 2007 edition of the Dakar Rally.<sup>13</sup> However, the only thing we ever see of the actual race in the film's main narrative are myriads of tyre tracks on the ground (Figs. 1 and 2).



Figs 1 & 2. Stills from *7915 km* © Nikolaus Geyrhalter Films (NGF).  
Reproduced with kind permission of NGF.

While these recurring long shots of traces left by the motorized Western 'adventurers' serve as a visual leitmotif for the film, marking the transitions between places and countries, they also highlight, at a much more profane level, one core problem of the rally: the destruction of roads which are important for

<sup>13</sup> 'Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Wolfgang Widerhofer über *7915 km*', Interview with Karin Schiefer, para. 5, in *Austrian Films* (2008) <<https://www.austrianfilms.com/jart/prj3/afc-new/main.jart?reserve-mode=reserve&rel=de&content-id=1422972471829&j-cc-id=1221754200617&j-cc-node=artikel>> [accessed 20 January 2021].

the local residents, on whose perspective the film focuses exclusively. Apart from destruction, all that the Western ‘ghosts’, who remain absent throughout the whole film, leave behind for these locals are old tyres, cheap marketing giveaways and a mixed bag of stories: adults recall being treated rudely or being recruited as *pro bono* road security, children remember trying to catch up with cars and motorcycles. In the end, the only place truly to witness the ‘event’ is in front of the TV set. This rally-related micro-hauntology mirrors the larger historical scale of problematic European ‘leftovers’ and ‘exports’ which are also addressed in *7915 km*: the Western Sahara conflict following the withdrawal of former colonial power Spain, a growing drug problem in Mali and the mass emigration of those who are able to work, leaving behind villages mostly populated by children and their grandparents. Besides cheap labour, further ‘imports’ to Europe include Mauritanian iron ore, which is mined and immediately transported abroad for further processing.

By applying the conceptual approach of following the rally’s tracks literally and documenting what they find on the way, Geyrhalter and his team thus provide viewers with a cross-section of representative European ‘spectres’ on the African continent. Some of the consequences for the locals are emblematically presented in the film’s second leitmotif: people waiting or queuing — for a chance to see the Western adventurers up close, for money transfers, for work, for the opportunity to travel to Europe. The consequences for Europe, in turn, are most clearly represented in the opening and closing sequences of Geyrhalter’s film, which provide a subversive, self-reflexive commentary on prototypical filmic depictions of Europeans and Africans. The first sequence, shot during the screening of a PR film for the Dakar Rally in a cinema at the opening event in Paris, showcases Europeans showcasing themselves as motorized daredevils who fight their way through the African wilderness. The very last images, in turn, show another complementary, common European perception of Africans: onboard a border control plane, we see surveillance footage of boats on the open sea, presumably carrying ‘illegal’ migrants embarked from Dakar. Here, Geyrhalter’s film provides an early example of what has become a veritable trend in more recent films on the European ‘migrant crisis’: the subversive, critical use of surveillance footage — which usually evokes frames of threat and crime<sup>14</sup> — for a counter-hegemonic purpose, known as ‘counter-surveillance’ or ‘sous-veillance’.<sup>15</sup> In the final sequence of *7915 km*, this purpose is twofold: to remind the viewer that there are individual, relatable stories (such as those provided throughout the film) behind every uncanny surveillance image of

<sup>14</sup> Roy Coleman and Michael McCahill, *Surveillance and Crime* (London: SAGE, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of these films and terms, see Florian Lippert, ‘Watching Europe Watching its Borders: Cultural Self-Reflection and Surveillance in Films about Migration’, *Perspectivas de la Comunicación*, 11.1 (2018), 95–150 <<http://www.revistas.ufro.cl/ojs/index.php/perspectivas/article/view/861/1721>> [accessed 20 January 2021]. For further information on the term ‘sous-veillance’ see Jana Light, ‘Sousveillance’, *RESET; Digital for Good*, n.d. <<https://www.en.reset.org/knowledge/surveillance-11152016>> [accessed 20 January 2021].

anonymous ‘masses’ of migrants and, as editor Widerhofer puts it, to ‘play the ball back to Europe’. He writes:

Ich finde, dass diese Klammer alles wieder nach Europa zurückspielt, am Ende wird Europa wieder kritisch befragt. Man tritt aus dem afrikanischen Kontext heraus und nimmt wie zu Beginn mit dem Video-Clip der Rallye wieder die Maschinen-Perspektive der Europäer ein. [...] [W]as macht Europa eigentlich die ganze Zeit? In diesem Sinn ist der Film eine Parallelmontage von zwei Haltungen — der Blick von Europa auf Afrika und gleichzeitig eine afrikanische Wirklichkeit, die zurückschaut.<sup>16</sup>

[I think that this bracket plays everything back to Europe; in the end, it is again Europe which is critically questioned. We step out of the African context and, as at the beginning with the video clip of the rally, we adopt the machine perspective of the Europeans once more. [...] [W]hat is Europe actually doing all this time? In this sense, the film is a parallel montage of two attitudes — the view from Europe to Africa and at the same time an African reality that looks back.]

### III

As the comment above demonstrates, there is in addition to diachronic or ‘vertical’ discussions of re-evolving historical problems and traumata a second important strand in Geyrhalter’s oeuvre of filmic uncanniness. This consists of synchronic, ‘horizontal’, comparative tableaux which depict ‘younger’ problems of a complex European present. The richest example of this strand is *Abendland*, which provides a kaleidoscopic view of a variety of European places and scenes that are often hard to locate and/or to connect with each other — neither off-comments nor interviews, not even intertitles or location inserts are provided.<sup>17</sup> This radical openness, characteristic also of *Homo Sapiens* and *Unser täglich Brot* [*Our Daily Bread*, 2005], renders *Abendland* a mystery to be explored — if not to be solved — by the viewer.<sup>18</sup> It opens the floor for associative explorations which are only loosely guided by recurring aesthetic patterns: carefully composed, highly detailed symmetrical panorama shots — in the case of *Abendland*, often over a minute long — enable the viewer to explore or search for clues in an overwhelming array of details,<sup>19</sup> while

<sup>16</sup> Geyrhalter and Widerhofer, Interview with Schiefer, para. 23.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this film’s use of counter-surveillance, see Lippert, ‘Watching Europe’, pp. 126–42. For a detailed discussion of Geyrhalter’s and Widerhofer’s use of the cross-sectional montage of the Weimar-era *Querschnittfilm* in *Abendland*’s surveillance constellations, see Brook Henkel, ‘Watching the Night: Surveillance and Cross-Sectional Montage in Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s *Abendland* (2011)’, *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 52.4 (2016), 449–64.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed analysis of such openness in *Unser täglich Brot*, see Helen Hughes, ‘Arguments without Words in *Unser täglich Brot* (Geyrhalter 2005)’, *Continuum*, 27.3 (2013), 347–64. For an analysis of *Homo Sapiens* as an ‘imaginary documentary’, see Tiago de Luca, ‘The End of the World Viewed, or The Wind in the Things: On Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s *Homo Sapiens*’, *Discourse*, 41.1 (2019), 112–41.

<sup>19</sup> Contextualized with film-historical debates on the role of the camera, Hughes’ comment

selective phantom rides — one of Geyrhalter's recurring key techniques to explore, individualize and ultimately politicize space, as Alejandro Bachmann has lucidly analysed<sup>20</sup> — add a third dimension to the mystery. Finally, subtle match-cuts between heterogeneous sequences often implicitly suggest some kind of connection without ever making it fully explicit.

In the case of *Abendland*, the title itself appears to deliver the most reliable clue for connecting the dots and shots: all sequences are shot 'abends' or at night, all depict somewhat representative scenes of 'abendländischem Leben' [occidental life] and many of them ask questions about European wealth, well-being and decadence, as discussed in Oswald Spengler's notorious *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* [*The Decline of the West*].<sup>21</sup> However, while Spengler was convinced that prosperity and a pampered lifestyle would ultimately lead to Europe's downfall, Geyrhalter and Widerhofer show these as something rather beautiful and desirable. Whether we see premature babies in neonatological care, seniors looked after in a retirement home, or professional workers in a high-tech crematorium: from the cradle to the grave, care is provided, and the fact that we often cannot find out where the respective sequences are shot leads us back to the film's title, which suggests that they are prototypically 'abendländisch' [occidental]. The latter is also true for the film's party sequences, the presentation of which appears much closer in tone to Spengler's sinister vision of a decadent culture in decline: masses of people dancing, singing, binge drinking, whether at the Bavarian Beer Festival, in a gigantic techno club or even at a spontaneous open-air rave during a demonstration against a nuclear waste transport; while such protests are often regarded as an explicitly political tradition in countries such as Germany or France, Geyrhalter's film depicts this one as a slightly surreal mix of activist routine and party event.

Such contrasting sequences of care and excess — people being either supported through the night or dancing through it — appear to encapsulate Europe's basic cultural consensus: this, they seem to say, is how we help each other and help ourselves, this is what we can afford. Irritations arise when differences amongst 'us' are openly addressed and Derrida's 'aporia of monopoly or dispersion' comes to the fore. In the European Parliament in Brussels, we witness the film's only moments of open conflict, when angry parliamentarians debate the 2010 action plan for Afghanistan as well as the

on *Unser täglich Brot* also applies to *Abendland*: 'The cinematography in Geyrhalter's film cannot be categorized as either a "fly on the wall" or as a "fly in the soup" approach. It could be called "the fly in the best seat in the house" perspective', Hughes, 'Arguments without Words', p. 360.

<sup>20</sup> Alejandro Bachmann, 'Räume in der Zeit: Über Konstanten und Verschiebungen in den Filmen Nikolaus Geyrhalters', in Bachmann, *Räume in der Zeit*, pp. 26–33 (pp. 28–29).

<sup>21</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, I: *Gestalt und Wirklichkeit* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1918); Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, II: *Welthistorische Perspektiven* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922). In English translation as Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, ed. by Arthur Helps and Helmut Werner, trans. by Charles F. Atkinson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

growing militarization problems in Bosnia and Iraq, questioning the very principles of the EU's military actions and crisis strategies abroad. In another session, a Portuguese MEP complains that his language is not being translated (despite his country being, as the MEP claims, 'almost as big as' the chairing minister's, Italy); and in the sequence's final shot, the audio tracks from all translator cabins are combined into one Babelesque chaos of voices, reminding us of Derrida's 'multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms' (Fig. 3).



Figs 3 & 4. Stills from *Abendland* © Nikolaus Geyrhalter Films (NGF).  
Reproduced with kind permission of NGF.



The most surreal sequences of nocturnal Europe, however, are once more those which depict its relation to what is considered *non*-European. As borders frame the EU, the depiction of border control frames *Abendland*. The first sequence shows a patrol car on the border between Slovakia and Ukraine, standing in the middle of a wide field in complete darkness. The driver, we learn, uses night vision cameras to scan the surroundings, but the only eerily glowing shapes he catches are other patrol cars and rabbits. At the end of the film, we follow a border policeman patrolling the notorious hyper-securitized triple fence that separates the Spanish exclave Melilla from Morocco, and resembles a giant illuminated snake in the dark (Fig. 4).

In between, we visit intra-European ‘borderscapes’, as Prem Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr term them:<sup>22</sup> internal peripheries at which ‘bordering’ practices take place, such as the *Rückkehrberatung* [return assistance section] of the *Empfangs- und Verfahrenszentrum* [reception and procedure centre] in Basle — another eerily illuminated ‘island’ in the dark (Fig. 5).



Fig 5. Still from *Abendland* © Nikolaus Geyrhalter Films (NGF).  
Reproduced with kind permission of NGF.

Inside, a rather subtle eeriness arises from the conversation between an asylum seeker from Nigeria whose application has been rejected and a representative of the International Organization for Migration. Formally, the procedure runs smoothly: the individual rejected is informed about his ‘options’ — handing in an appeal, staying despite the rejection, or returning voluntarily. On closer inspection, however, none of the so-called options are actually feasible: 99 percent of appeals are unsuccessful, staying means ‘becoming illegal’ and the

<sup>22</sup> *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, ed. by Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

perspectives upon return to Nigeria are overshadowed by the insecure political situation after president Yar'Adua's death in 2010. The matter-of-fact tone in which the applicant explains that he will stay illegally, followed by a calm exchange of superficial pleasantries, contrasts with the real-life consequences this decision is likely to have. If the 'moral test' of a society is how it treats 'those who are in the shadows of life',<sup>23</sup> *Abendland* projects this 'test' onto the peripheral night spaces and figures that remain in the shadows of the continent's self-consciousness as a place of wealth, well-being and care.

#### IV

While *Abendland* thus depicts the recent interplay of Europe's wide inner 'debordering' with its manifold outer 'rebordering' tendencies,<sup>24</sup> *Die bauliche Maßnahme* provides a complementary perspective. With its focus on the Brenner Pass and the Schengen border between Tyrol (Austria) and South Tyrol (Italy), it presents an area that is emblematic both for the volatile histories of European bordering and for the continent's rich tradition of regional cultures, which remain largely unimpressed by the former. In 2016, a massive intra-EU 'rebordering' project was planned here: the construction of a new border fence between Austria and Italy to control the 'Balkan route' in the aftermath of the 2015 'migrant crisis'.<sup>25</sup> While national and regional politicians, screened on the locals' TV sets, try to justify these plans with grotesque warnings of an 'unrecognizable country' and scenarios of military intervention (while numbers of actual arrivals remain stable), Geyrhalter contrasts such alarmist media frames by once more focusing on the complexities of the locals' own perspectives. The film's tableau presents a multitude of positions, many of which connect the local situation with European and global matters in nuanced, sometimes unexpected ways. For instance, a police officer not only reflects on the practical challenges and difficulties of illegal border crossing, but also on global inequity; a plumber, company owner and expert in matters of fence-building makes a fiery plea for a borderless Europe; a Senegalese pipe worker

<sup>23</sup> Hubert Humphrey, 'Remarks at the Dedication of the Hubert H. Humphrey Building, November 1, 1977', *Congressional Record*, 4 November 1977, 123 (1977), 37287.

<sup>24</sup> James Wesley Scott, 'European Politics of Borders, Border Symbolism and Cross-border Cooperation', in *A Companion to Border Studies*, ed. by Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 83–99.

<sup>25</sup> For more details see Hans-Peter Siebenhaar, 'So schützt sich Europa vor Anschlägen', *Handelsblatt*, 13 February 2016, p. 2 of 8: 'Österreich: Historische Narben brechen wieder auf' <<https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/terror-oesterreich-historische-narben-brechen-wieder-auf/12950024-2.html?ticket=ST-1928093-sCLCN69KWfTmiV6P4Zld-ap3>> [accessed 15 September 2021]. See also Susanne Lettenbauer, 'Ein Rückschlag für Europa?', *Deutschlandfunk*, 21 March 2016 <[https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/grenzkontrollen-am-brenner-ein-rueckschlag-fuer-europa.724.de.html?dram:article\\_id=349022](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/grenzkontrollen-am-brenner-ein-rueckschlag-fuer-europa.724.de.html?dram:article_id=349022)> [accessed 15 September 2021].

discusses matters of postcolonial justice; a goose farmer provides a poignant, ten-minute analysis of European crises and populist manipulation. Other interviewees, in turn, replicate populist slogans and narratives themselves while trying to express their worries: two hunters show pity, even admiration for lightly dressed migrant families crossing the Alps, but nevertheless stress the need to ‘protect’ the border in the abstract; a highway toll collector speculates about wealthy ‘Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge’ [economic refugees]; a milk truck driver is afraid of migrants bringing their customs.

Throughout the documentation of voices shifting between ‘hope’ and ‘fear and trembling’, the ambivalence of cultural identity and its relation to otherness — in Derridean terms: the European *différance* — surfaces as a core theme of Geyrhalter’s film. The ‘Tyrol’ with which many locals identify is the traditional region on both sides of the border, enclosed by mountains that have always been there — a quintessential example of the much-discussed ‘Europe of the regions’.<sup>26</sup> This local patriotism includes, on the one hand, strong aversions to nationalism and European rebordering. On the other hand, it is repeatedly used to justify fears of ‘cultural change’ — the most prominent social factor for the rise of anti-immigrant, right-wing populism everywhere in Europe.<sup>27</sup> Despite the fact that none of the interviewees is able to give an explicit and concise definition of their Tyrolean cultural ‘identity’ (initial responses vary from broad nature references to ‘der Wald, die Erde, die Berge, die Luft — eigentlich alles’ [the forest, the earth, the mountains, the air — actually everything] to mere shrugs), the film does not simply dismiss the identity question altogether. Rather, instead of insisting on what Derrida would consider a fixed — and hence unreachable — ‘subject’ of culture, *Die bauliche Maßnahme* searches for exemplary traces and stories of cultural and communal practices that would allow for an indirect and partial answer. In this context, two separate strands of responses to what the daughter of a restaurant owner calls ‘die Sozialität’ [sociality] can be observed, both characterized by inherent tensions: some responses become more specific in content, but at the same time less local to Tyrol — from ‘Nikolaus’ [Father Christmas] to the ‘Christkindl’ [Baby Jesus], the traditional Christmas gift-bringer in Austria, Switzerland and southern Germany, and from the ‘Trachtenverein’ [society for traditional costumes] to the ability to move freely and without fear. The other strand of specific, sociality-related answers strikingly evolves around topics of inclusion and cooperation — from the Tyrolean ‘culture of sharing’ and histories of migration after the Second World War to cross-border exchange and trade itself, within

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the discussion, see Ulrike Guérot, ‘Europe of the Regions: A Genealogy of an Ambiguous Concept’, in *European Regions: Perspectives, Trends and Developments in the 21st Century*, ed. by Elisabeth Donat, Sarah Meyer and Gabriele Abels (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), pp. 231–44.

<sup>27</sup> Lars Rensmann, ‘The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in The Digital Age’, *Politics and Governance*, 5.4 (2017), 123–34.



the ‘Europaregion Tirol’. By presenting such inclusive and procedural, never-fixed sociality as a prominent cultural self-attribution in a cultural identity discourse that often proclaims a ‘fixed’ culture and aims to justify exclusion, Geyrhalter and Widerhofer’s film raises again the question posed by Derrida, rephrasing it: is there a way to make the cultural ‘difference-with-itself’ more explicit and productive in the minds of people, beyond patriotic, national and folkloristic ‘short cuts’? If so, can and should Europe go this way, or will rebordering prevail?



Fig 6. Still from *Die bauliche Maßnahme* © Nikolaus Geyrhalter Films (NGF).  
Reproduced with kind permission of NGF.

Concerning the latter question, the film itself displays quite subtle, but nevertheless obvious preferences: whenever it shows actual border territory, the border appears as either superfluous — as in the very first shot at the Brenner train station, with a worker matter-of-factly crossing two weathered border signs stating ‘Österreich’ [Austria] and ‘Italia’ [Italy] (Fig. 6) — or clearly grotesque, like the shot of the border stone set amidst the spectacular natural panorama of the Pfitscher Joch mountain pass, displaying a literally uncanny valley (Fig. 7).

The artificiality and epistemological dubiousness of borders, a much-discussed topic in philosophical Border Studies,<sup>28</sup> is very pragmatically pinpointed in a conversation with the owner of a ‘divided’ mountain inn that attracts tourists and wanderers due to its exotic positioning on the border line: ‘Die Grenze ist ein Kuriosum’ [The border is a curious thing]. And even the police officer whose duty it is to make regular checks on the container in which the rolled-up fence is stored, laconically states after two years of debates and

<sup>28</sup> Achille Varzi, ‘Boundary’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 edition) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/boundary>> [accessed 20 January 2021].



Fig 7. Still from *Die bauliche Maßnahme* © Nikolaus Geyrhalter Films (NGF).  
Reproduced with kind permission of NGF.

filming: ‘Wir hoffen, dass er hier liegen bleibt’ [We hope the fence stays in here]. With this ‘hopeful’ ending, both the Derridean ‘permanent postponement’ and the impossibility of ‘closure’ take on an unexpectedly positive undertone.

## V

Le *devoir* de répondre à l’appel de la mémoire européenne, de rappeler ce qui s’est promis sous le nom de l’Europe, de ré-identifier Europe [...] dicte aussi non seulement d’accueillir l’étranger pour l’intégrer, mais aussi pour reconnaître et accepter son alterité: deux concepts de l’hospitalité qui divisent aujourd’hui notre conscience européenne et nationale. [...]

Je suis européen [...] et pourquoi m’en défendrais-je? Au nom de quoi? Mais [...] je ne veux pas et ne dois pas être européen *de part en part*. L’appartenance ‘à part entière’ et le ‘de part en part’ devrait être incompatibles. [...] Si je déclarais [...] que je me sens européen *entre autre choses*, serait-ce être par là, en cette déclaration même, plus ou moins européen? Les deux, sans doute.

[[T]he *duty* to respond to the call of European memory, to recall what has been promised under the name Europe, to re-identify Europe [...] dictates welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them but to recognize and accept their alterity: two concepts of hospitality that today divide our European and national consciousness. [...]

I am European, [...] and why would I deny it? In the name of what? But [...] I do not want to be and must not be European through and through, European *in every part*. Being a part, belonging as ‘fully a part,’ should be incompatible with belonging ‘in every part’. [...] If [...] I declared that I feel

European *among other things*, would this be, in this very declaration, to be more or less European? Both, no doubt.]<sup>29</sup>

Derrida's final reflections on Europe as 'L'autre cap' ['The Other Heading'] also aptly serve as a closing frame for our observations on Geyrhalter's European hauntologies. The 'spectres' of 'European memory' presented in *7915 km* — post-colonial and quasi-colonial practices of cultural othering, economic dependencies and inequities — are complemented by perspectives on an uncanny nocturnal continent that seems to compensate for inner cultural debordering by means of outer rebordering, as shown in *Abendland*. *Die bauliche Maßnahme*, in turn, discusses the inherent ambivalences of a European cultural identity that is to remain programmatically 'partial' and 'not identical with itself'. As Fatima Naqvi comments on the fundamental role of defamiliarization in Geyrhalter's work: 'The world as we think we know it is always on the verge of disappearing in his films, but it is not an apocalyptic dystopia that emerges. It turns out that we never really knew this world at all.'<sup>30</sup> When applied to the uncanniness of European identity, it turns out that this lack of definite 'knowledge' marks a desideratum as much as a precondition for keeping the European 'promise'.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *L'autre cap*, pp. 75–81; *The Other Heading*, pp. 76–83. Italics in original.

<sup>30</sup> Fatima Naqvi, 'Ephemeral Spaces and Pneumatic Architecture: The Films of Nikolaus Geyrhalter', *New German Critique*, 46.3 (2019), 125–55 (pp. 126–27).