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THE AESTHETICS OF VIOLENCE AND POWER IN ULI EDEL'S DER BAADER MEINHOF KOMPLEX

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The confluence of art, politics, and aesthetics has a troubled and troubling history, and the article reflects on that by examining the aesthetics of Uli Edel's film *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* in terms of its use of iconic historical and—in terms of film history—stereotypical images. The absence of conventional narrative structures in the film opens it up to methods of understanding and critique that use image and montage as a means of analysis, rather than examining a cogent (because absent) narrative. By cataloguing the use of different genre conventions and iconic film images and tropes, the article points toward the development of a "terror(ism)" genre.

Les relations entre art, politique, et esthétique ont, historiquement, toujours été troubles et continuent de résister aux schémas interprétatifs. Cet article propose de repenser ces relations à travers l'esthétique du film d'Ulli Edel: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, dont les images iconiques, représentatives d'une certaine période, et stéréotypées en termes d'histoire de la cinématographie, permettent de renouveler ce débat. En l'absence de structure narrative conventionnelle, le seul recours interprétatif possible repose sur une analyse visuelle et structurelle du film. On s'aperçoit que le catalogage des conventions et genres cinématographiques, des images iconiques et des tropes, tend vers le développement d'un genre de la terreur et du "terror(isme)".

Uli Edel's 2008 film, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, is a montage of file-footage, fiction, filmic tropes, and political maneuvering. It purports to tell the story of the actions the RAF took against the West German state without taking a definite political, ethical, or moral position. The film instead adopts an aesthetic position. According to the filmmakers, it is a "shredded drama," with moments and images "ripped" out of their context and put into a sort of "mosaic," connected "in a different way than a film where you identify with the main character: here we have many people, and no ones [sic] to identify with" (Dittgen 26). The filmmakers see the film as a "complex:" a constellation or collage, and not a traditional narrative. The film opens itself to a wide range of critical methods because it lacks a traditional narrative, and it encourages the viewer to focus on moments and images as a method of story-telling. This focus on specific images also allows critics to construct genre conventions and the social aesthetics of the "terrorist film."

Constantin Film, the production company for *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex,* sets up the action of the film in blockbuster style with the following, "Germany in the 1970s: Murderous bomb attacks, the threat of terrorism and the fear of the enemy inside are rocking the very foundations of the yet fragile German democracy." The "radicalized children of the Nazi generation," lead by Andreas Baader (Moritz Bleibtreu), Ulrike Meinhof (Martina Gedeck), and Gudrun Ensslin (Johanna Wokalek), are fighting a violent war against what they perceive as "the new face of fascism: American imperialism supported by the German establishment," many of whom have a Nazi past. Their ostensible aim is to forge a better and more humane society, but by employing inhuman means, they not only "spread terror and bloodshed, they also lose their own humanity." Setting up a classic thriller motif, the synopsis continues, as "the man who understands them is also their hunter:"

the head of the German police force Horst Herold. And while he succeeds in his relentless pursuit of the young terrorists, he knows he's "only dealing with the tip of the iceberg."[1] Already, then, the film is being framed both as a real, historical conflict between generational German ideologies, and as action blockbuster and crime caper. While the film's dust jacket synopsis certainly boils down the action and conflict of the film, it reflects neither the goals of the filmmakers nor the structure of the film itself.

A key to exposing the aesthetics of the film are through the ideas of the "constellation," "mosaic," and story-telling, which are all key concepts in the writings of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin wrote the following of the confluence of art and politics in the early days of film: "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life…. All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war" (241).[2] He was concerned that film would be used as a tool of Fascist institutions to incite and propagate war, and he saw Communism as the antidote to this poisoning of art: "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (241).[3] Both Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno argued that "cultural forms like films can provide 'dialectical images' that illuminate their social environments" (Kellner 16).

This early consideration of the confluence of art, politics, and aesthetics serve the discussion of *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* and films like it, both fictional and "documentary." These films aestheticize political life. However, they can also politicize art, if Uli Edel can be taken at his word. The confluence of these opposing aesthetic and political tendencies in one film opens a critique of film based on its aesthetic choices, and also allows for discussion of the possibility of a "terror(ism)" film genre. The development of a genre points to an aesthetic code and a cultural sensitivity

that exist beyond the individual film maker or cultural and historical context. Critics can uncover these codes and sensitivities by examining films about "terrorists" and looking at the qualities those films share with other genres and the tools the film makers use to tell the story. In this particular case, the representations of and relationships between Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Ulrike Meinhof create relationships to other genres, and those genres in turn have an aesthetic code and grammar that bears on this film. These relationships, this social aesthetic, could lead to the development of a new genre, or at least a heightened awareness of the effects terrorism has on a culture.

For-profit depictions of left-wing terrorism in a capitalist police-state have a multitude of intrinsic political problems and sources, and there are tensions between totalitarian impulses on both sides. Critics may emphasize the political and aesthetic messages and tropes of the films as a method of cultural critique, which reveals the hidden system of signs and signifiers through which we (as a culture) represent terror, the state, political action, and rebellion. The social aesthetic of the film tells us not only about the historical events it depicts, but also about the culture and political climate in and for which the artwork was produced. According to Karin Bauer, this aesthetic constellation is all the critic and audience can hope to grasp: "The RAF is not simply a terrorist group founded in 1970 and disbanded in 1998, but a continuing and continuous spectacle performed in the public sphere" (3).

The spectacle has diverse political and aesthetic sources, and, to draw on Guy Debord's concept of the hegemonic spectacle, it is "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). If that is true, then by examining film, we can come to a better understanding of the relationships we have with one another, and with our social and political environment. If film is a visual relationship between people, or between groups of people, then those images can be revelatory and deserve attention beyond or despite their role as spectacle. Film, then, is not just entertainment, though many film critics have argued that that is all *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* is.

Der Spiegel criticizes the film harshly, saying it was "'event cinema without impetus […] behind the action and the film's finesse hides a history lesson that lacks a clear position' (September 18, 2008)" (Gerhardt 60). While this statement criticizes the clarity of the film, it also reveals the political and aesthetic positions the filmmakers develop through their work. The lack of an ethical or aesthetic one-liner calls into question not only the actions of the terrorists, but those of their antagonists, and the conditions that fostered their extremist violence. It also allows the film's audiences to develop their own positions.

Walter Benjamin could not and did not foresee the way film would continue to develop, and his binary notion of film's role in politics and culture demands reconsideration. However, his idea that a spectator of mass media or entertainment can become an expert and a critic capable of nuanced insight has proven true, and is liberating to the audience and professionals in the field (Kellner 46). In order to decode and confront the "terror(ism)" film, though, newer and more nuanced theories of politics, culture, and mass media prove useful. By re-contextualizing some of the films iconic images, drawing parallels across genre, and examining the aesthetic, social, and political messages of those images and genre, the critic and viewer can glean useful insight even from a film in which "detail overwhelmed any analysis: 'For all the action, attacks and assassinations, there is barely any time to breathe, because all the slogans and rallying

cries that one knew from the era had to be tallied up, all the images recreated' (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 24), indicative of a 'decision to show but not to interpret' (*Der Spiegel*, September 18)" (Gerhardt 60). Critical constructs allow the viewer to enter the film through specific images and tropes in the same way the filmmakers use them to tell a story, which reveal their larger cultural and social-aesthetic functions, and reduce the visual clutter about which the film's critics so loudly complain.

The identity of the "terror(ism)" film lies both in its narrative and in its particular images, which often appear in other genres as well: action movies, crime capers, and melodrama among them. When films from different genres share imagery, they are—per definition—intertextual. This intertextuality in turn leads to a host of conclusions that the viewer can draw about the film(s) under consideration. The filmmakers say the film is about '"what actually happened here, exactly,"' and that, for the style of the film, "[a]uthenticity was key. The French call it *cinéma-vérité*"' (Sklar 43). This claim falls apart immediately, first and foremost in the form of a script which is largely based on the eponymous book written by Stefan Aust and the imaginations of the writers. Its second failure comes in the form of the actors, who are some of Germany's most beautiful and well known stars. As Sklar notes:

Performance isn't 'truth,' it's interpretation. Although all three [actors playing Baader, Ensslin, and Meinhof] may have been cast because of a certain resemblance to the individuals they portray, and they're certainly dressed and made up to heighten the similarities, each is undoubtedly more physically attractive than his or her original, and they probably shape more coherent, if reductive, character traits. (43)

This allows a sympathy toward and an understanding of the on-screen figures that the historical ones would likely not enjoy. The film is not about "what actually happened here, exactly." It is about representing the past, and representing difficult and frightening social relationships. How the film does that, and the consequences of its methods, are vital to the social-aesthetic role of film.

The key to criticizing the film is the observation that the audience views representation instead of history and those representations have an aesthetic code that bears meaning. The filmmakers want to remain politically and morally neutral, to "show" the events, and not comment upon them, but the mere existence of the film and the order of scenes always-already produce commentary (Sklar 42). Critics often argue, though, that even as the events were unfolding, representation and narration constantly mediated truth, which contributed to both the myth and the mystery of the RAF. As Bauer puts it: "as a contested site of negotiation, there is, methodologically speaking, no RAF outside of the myriad of myths and imagery of the ghastly spectacle that is continuously performed" (3). The critic's remaining task is to point out the political and social ramifications of the contradiction that is *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, which, in its most basic element, is a blockbuster studio movie made about terrorists trying to bring down the system which produces just these sorts of films.

Public and critical reaction to the film reveals much about the power and longevity of the historical representations, and by extension, the power of the contemporary ones. Ewa Mazierka notes that, "The involvement of the television and popular press […] helped the group shape its identity as a victim of the conservative press and state-run television. Their actions inspired art and were themselves akin to an artistic production" (101–2). The

manipulation of media, images, and narrative is not a twenty-first century development in the RAF's history, but rather was an integral part of building their identity and myth as they gained popularity and infamy. Already at their inception, the media perception of the group had stark political and social hues. Those same political attributes cannot be absent in a re-telling of the RAF's history. Indeed, the filmmakers, by structuring their film around moments and images, confuse the political landscape entirely, giving us glimpses of the "terrorists," their lifestyle, and their personas that encompass the political spectrum.

As Nick James posits in his review of the film, "*The Baader Meinhof Complex* simultaneously mocks and venerates these figures by turning them into Bonnie and Clyde-style bandits. The sexy brooding and posturing with guns of some of Germany's most attractive actors […] makes the life of the terrorist seem unfeasibly glamorous, though it does make the sympathy of much of German youth towards their cause easier to understand" (5). However, despite how the film glamorizes the terrorists and contributes to their myth at early points in the narrative, the audience later sees a completely different representation of terror and those who perpetrate it. Again, James points out that "the latter parts of the film underline the terrorists' idiocy or insanity. *The Baader Meinhof Complex* therefore takes us on that 'journey' that script theorists eulogize as the basis of all successful films, although […] many will get lost on the way because the film's ultimate viewpoint remains obscure, and it does not give us enough hard information to allow us to make up our own minds" (5). James is correct up to a point. What he fails to mention here, though he does pick it up elsewhere in his review, is that the audience can make up its mind, but not in a 1980's action film way, where everything is morally and ethically clear, and the good guys always win. Furthermore, from the perspective of the filmmakers and

recent scholarly work, the film's social and political position is clear. In a nod to the post-9/11 ethical and political landscape, the film presents a "complex" of images with diverse moral and political contexts and connotations, many with distinct and conflicting histories and discourses surrounding them.

Rather than detracting from the aesthetic value and truth content of the film, its moral, if not political, ambiguity does the film service. As author, historian, and Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien eloquently puts it:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (68)

Now, all war films are not terrorism films, but all terrorism films are war films, in the sense that "terrorists" engage in asymmetrical, ideologically motivated warfare with a State. War films also have an established grammar and iconography with which filmmakers can play and to which they can adhere. As Donald and MacDonald write, "in the social constructions of masculinity found in war films, stereotypes take on meaning beyond manipulations of cinematic grammar: They describe the archetypes of appropriate masculine behavior for their viewers" (42).

Genre distinctions grow more fluid as war films focus less on genre conventions and more on the auteur, or at least, star power (Eberwein 6). As a result, filmmakers tend to focus on moments and motifs instead of plot arcs or convention. Some critics, like Dana Polan, disapprove of the trend, saying that these type of films produce "the glimpsing

of experientiality itself, a pure immersion in temporality, in a duration that only vaguely adds up to either meaningfulness or anything resembling realism" (quoted in Eberwein 6). This is an abstract and normative judgment which places the highest aesthetic value on realism, and disregards both the immersive and alienating aesthetic qualities that develop from a focus on particular filmic moments or tropes. One contentious critical point with *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, if it is not a problem outright, is that the viewer sees only particular moments, which means that, as a war film, it becomes a series of "non-cumulative explosions of violence that lead nowhere and mean nothing" (Eberwein 6). This seems congruent with what the filmmakers purported to desire: a collection of moments tied together with the semblance of historical accuracy. The claim that the explosions of violence "lead nowhere and mean nothing," however, rings polemic. Just because films do not follow conventional heroes who endure conventional trials of combat to reach certain moral conclusions do not devalue them as aesthetic and cultural products. The manly men of the bygone eras of war cinema have no place in a globalized or multi-cultural context, and to tell conventional stories of war is to lie to the audience and perpetuate a system of signs and behavior that leads to conflict in the first place.

Discussions of the role of men and the soldier aside, the grammar and icons of the (white male) warrior and his ways are useful in examining the representation of Andreas Baader, and thereby European terrorism, in the film. The first image that demands attention is that of Baader training at the terrorist camp in Jordan, where he disobeys his orders and, from the hip, empties the magazine of his iconic AK-47 into the practice targets (fig. 1).

The image is a powerful one, because, on the one hand, it reveals much about Bleibtreu's character, and on the other, it fits into the

FIG. 1.

places filmmakers have made for action heroes in our aesthetic semiotics. As Ayers writes: "Within film scholarship it has often been taken for granted that contemporary Hollywood action films are 'dumb movies for dumb people' (Tasker, 1993, 5), viewed as inherently conservative, superficially spectacular, and narratively simplistic" (41). The film undermines this notion and complicates the audience's relationship to the image by placing the leftist anti-hero into a semiotic slot assumed to be reserved for right-wing, conservative American models of machismo and masculinity.

Baader displays a well-established disregard for rules and authority, both in traditional terms (the setting of the scene is a Fatah training camp), but also in more subtle ways: he disobeys his terrorist instructors, does not speak to them except to curse and complain in German (because he does not speak English), and is generally lazy and uncooperative, which indicates his lack of discipline, and displays the myopia, impatience, and intemperance that allowed him to become the revolutionary he was, but also led to his capture and death. His non-conformist image and attitude make him sexy, infamous, and dangerous at home, but in the company of war-fighters, and "real" revolutionaries, Baader appears impetuous and immature. The contrast of the (relatively) privileged West-German hedonist with his hard-core Islamist hosts highlights all of the traits that make Baader a "bad" terrorist and allow for viewer catharsis at his

subsequent capture and death, which critics find lamentable.

Conversely, in terms of the iconography of (especially) Vietnam- and Cold War-themed Reagan-era action cinema, Baader fulfills the roles and strikes the iconic poses of the action-hero. Disobeying orders and firing automatic weapons from the hip are hallmarks of the hard-body empire built by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, among others. Media Arts professor Helena Vanhala contends that "the era can be analyzed well through the [series of Rambo films]. All three films portray the hard-bodied white Vietnam veteran, John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone [….] Stallone and the decade's other masculine hero, Arnold Schwarzenegger, stood 'for a type of national character—heroic, aggressive, and determined' as well as for the country" (qtd. in Eberwein 112) (fig. 2).

When Baader goes to the wilderness to find aid and comfort on his mission to defeat the Evil Empire of the West German state, he reminds audiences of John Rambo in *Rambo III*, when he travels to Afghanistan to aid the freedom-fighting-heroes-cum-terrorists, the mujahidin. In fact, that film's dedication is to "the gallant people of Afghanistan." That Baader's and Rambo's political ideologies and the cultures they represent are diametrically opposed do not enter into the image. The image is not overtly dialectically political—or better—it always already contains both ideologies.

Stallone and Schwarzenegger's characters embody everything Baader and his group fight against, and yet, at his most masculine and violent moment, Baader precisely resembles the figures he vehemently opposes (fig. 2 and fig. 3).

Baader's image, then, is politically problematic, which is precisely the standpoint the film claims to take and the filmmakers claim to want

FIG. 2, 3.

to show. Not only is the image troublesome because of its left-and-right wing contradiction (which is a comment on extremism in general), but it has a problematic historical dimension as well. The film participates in a widespread "tendency to reduce a movement to a few trademarked representatives or iconic leaders," and in doing so succumbs to the melodrama of individual emotional lives, not political "movements" or social statements (Rethmann 47).

Nick James continues this critique and posits that the film, rather than being complex, is politically apathetic, confused, and lazy: "films like *The Baader Meinhof Complex* can cancel out their politics, allowing the apathetic parts of ourselves to say, ah, so that's life's rich tapestry, whereas a more provocatively

slanted film prompts the desire in us to find out more" (5). James assumes that the audience is interested in more than mere entertainment and titillation. If his assumption is correct, though, and if the film were concerned with more than images of Baader wielding an automatic rifle and the sexy posing of the film's female ingénues, many of these images would be politically or culturally problematic within their context. Out of context, though, they are politically and aesthetically significant regardless of the filmmakers' intent. The film "cancel[s] out [its] politics" because it offers competing narratives and iconography without commentary. It is precisely a critical position that makes a film political, or socially important. The filmmakers have left any meaning and importance their film could have to the critics. James gives a possible explanation for this: "It could be, however, that the vaguer variety of political presentation is one symptom of the decline of the auteur. To get films made and distributed now requires the interference by and collaboration of a great many people" (5).

This truism covers up the real problem at the center of the film: it takes no position, except an aesthetic one of juxtaposition and collage. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* is not an action film from the Reagan era. Its paying audience is in large part a group of people sick of war, death, and terrorism in their own lives, but eager for a look at "life's rich tapestry." The political action films coming out of Hollywood in the 80s showed how, as Vanhala points out: "The one-man war machine restores pride in American military forces as well as the power of the white male in American society by his denial of women and sexuality" (112–13). This sort of film does not weave a rich tapestry through the warp and woof of its narration and representation. It is a pointed, even one-dimensional, politically conservative statement. Baader, unlike America's military heroes Stallone and Schwarzenegger, denies neither women nor sexuality and actively opposes

American military forces. His character also does not make a definite political statement in terms of his actions, as Rambo and Matrix do in *Rambo* and *Commando* (Vanhala 112, 115) (figs. 2 and 3). Instead, the film tells a lovers' tale.

Baader and Gudrun Ensslin form an outlaw dynamic duo of sorts, a West-German-terrorist Bonnie and Clyde. If they make a coherent political statement, as their 1980's action-hero counterparts do, it comes from Ensslin, and it is this: "Fucking and shooting, they are the same." Ensslin is on screen for sex and violence, for sultry posing, titillating innuendo, and, like Baader, is a site for the filmmakers to confuse and inhibit clear political interpretations. Though most film critics and gender theorists will immediately adopt a Freudian or Lacanian method of interpretation for the role of strong or violent (and sexual) women in film, Ensslin is not a generic *femme fatale*, though her blonde locks and smoldering stare (not to mention her unabashedly naked body) may remind audiences of Sharon Stone's Catherine Trammel in *Basic Instinct* (Caputi 329) (fig. 4 and fig. 5).

In fact, one could argue that very basic instincts drive the film's leading pair: lust, wrath, and sloth among them. Indeed, Carol Hanisch—with whom the historical Ensslin and Meinhof may have been familiar, and with whom the film-makers certainly seem to be—said that "the personal is political," as Ensslin's filmic actions aptly demonstrate (Hanisch 5).

Ensslin displays all the hallmarks of a textbook leftist revolutionary: she leaves her infant child with her *Spieß*er partner, renounces her devoutly religious and (presumably) erstwhile-fascist parents, bathes with strange youths in a *Hausbesetzer*-style commune while she reads political theory and talks to and kisses her lover, and engages in acts of terror (or revolution) against the state (fig. 6).

In the first half of the film, she seems to have thrown off entirely the yoke of the Western woman, and become some sort of leftist, hedonist Amazon, interested only in the freedom and liberty of her fellow oppressed Germans. This is a fine caricature and would be appropriate for any number of other films.

Ensslin's strengths, the attributes which make her both revolutionarily viable and attractive to the audience, are those of the classic *femme fatale*. Ensslin, the strong woman, is inevitably punished and killed, effectively exorcised from the patriarchal police state, but her figure (both physically and narratively) remains with the viewer (Tasker 140). Ensslin is active, not a static symbol, she is "intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive[s] power, not weakness, from [her] sexuality" (Tasker 140). This sexuality manifests itself on screen both as nudity (for political and sexual purposes) and as persuasive, even seductive, power over Baader and Meinhof. Ensslin uses sex as a tool, a weapon, and as a simple pleasure.

Despite her superficially strong sexual and political position, in the same scene where Baader exhibits his Rambo-esque pretentions and contradictions, Ensslin reveals other aspects of her character, which do not fit the generic mold of the *femme fatale*. She is a poor excuse for a revolutionary. She can't even hold her weapon correctly on the firing range. For all of her talk and sexy posturing, she's a middle-class *Kleinburger* wearing too much eye makeup, playing soldier in the desert with her boyfriend (fig. 7).

The soap-opera quality of Baader and Ensslin's relationship is carried over in the film's representation of Ulrike Meinhof and her relationship to the revolutionary lovers. In the figure of Meinhof, the critique of the film's simplicity and incoherence becomes most obvious. "[W]hile perhaps we'll never know what drove the brilliant journalist Ulrike Meinhof into the radical underground, she

FIG. 4, 5, 6.

was undoubtedly much more than the meek little lamb that we're given here, gaping with fear and fascination at the macho exploits of the RAF" (Nicodemus 59). The melodrama of their interpersonal relationships distracts the audience from the real psychological and physical trauma the three are experiencing and inflicting on their fellow Germans:

> Conventionally, the psychic and social processes at work in the melodramatic imagination perpetuate the patriarchal order and leave the viewer with the sense that traditional family and gender roles are intact. In order to secure the imagination of stable societal and family relations, melodrama indulges in strong emotionalism, moral polarization, and overt schematization. Yet, at the same time as melodrama renders complex psychic and social relations into easily identifiable codes that produce specific emotional effects in the spectator, it also reveals what is repressed in this process. (Pinkert 120)

Edel represents Meinhof as the impressionable child, open to Baader and Ensslin's revolutionary parenting, or the adoring fan following blindly after her murderous rock stars. This characterization describes a confined space in which the historical Meinhof can confront the audience, and her filmic relationship to both Baader and Ensslin leaves both women looking weak and mentally unbalanced, which ultimately robs them of their disturbing qualities and allows the audience to accept their actions as the result of personal weakness, rather than political statement. The melodrama in the film allows for their redemption, where, arguably, there should be none. Anke Pinkert argues that, in this kind of melodrama, "women are ultimately perceived as the locus of responsibility and blame" (130). The audience can blame Meinhof for her turn to the radical left, and they can blame Ensslin for

orchestrating both Meinhof's inclusion in the group and her eventual mental and political collapse. Ultimately, the filmmakers show that the characters' personal relationships are responsible for their acts of terror, not their radical political convictions.

The arch of Meinhof's character development, from discontented middle-class family woman to socially-conscious reporter to wild-eyed revolutionary, would ideally stir the audiences' emotions and sense of social conscience. Ryan Gilbey argues that there is a moment in the film where that social conscience could have been activated: "There is a haunting image of Ulrike's daughters staring out to sea after she has abandoned them—this, remember, was an unenlightened era when women were forced to choose between motherhood and a career in international terrorism" (43). His somewhat caustic remark is evidence of dissatisfaction with the way Edel treats Meinhof as a site of ideological, moral, and political conflict. Gilbey continues, saying: "If the picture had explored even briefly how Ulrike could excise her children from her life as neatly as snipping them out of a family portrait, an invaluable gain could have been made in our comprehension. But faced with the choice between truth and fiction, Edel has taken John Ford's advice and printed the legend" (43). Meinhof, then, is fundamentally gutted of ideological, political, and moral strength. She is a legend in multiple ways: a good story, an unrealizable and unrecognizable model, only real on paper.

She, more than Ensslin and Baader, is initially an understandable character, if not a sympathetic one. "The point is not to win audience sympathy, but understanding. At a key moment, Ulrike Meinhof, until then a sympathetic journalist, flees through an open window after members of the Red Army Faction. The camera stays fixed on the window, through which they've all passed the

point of no return. From then, taking up arms, they're underground, losing touch with the socialist and student movements, more and more isolated, fighting a private war" (Lewis 34). Meinhof's development into an extremist alienates the audience, and her depressive bouts and weakness in front of Ensslin undermine her political and ideological fortitude. "The film suffers for being un-able to decide what kind of ambiguity they want to portray— weak moral condemnation combined with an admission of terror's spectacular allure is the overriding effect of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*" (Power 30).

This sentiment is echoed in other critiques of the film. Meinhof embodies the wide-spread cultural fascination with and horror at the representation of terrorism: Gary Indiana notes that Gedeck plays Meinhof "with a mixture of astute curiosity, willful delusion, and self-abnegation," and this combination leads her, seemingly inexorably, into the ranks of the RAF (73). As Indiana continues, Meinhof could have "feigned horror at the whole business [of Baader's escape] [...]. Instead, while truly horrified by the violence, she, too, makes the leap out the window: The legend of the 'Baader-Meinhof Gang' originates in this leap" (73). This leap of faith, as it were, this blind acceptance of Baader and Ensslin's plans and charisma in the film, contributes to a dynamic in the "Baader-Meinhof Gang" that leaves Meinhof out as a third wheel. Indeed, it "has been noted elsewhere that the group ought to have been called the Baader-*Ensslin* Group, since Meinhof was, from the outset, routinely dismissed as a 'bourgeois cunt' and denigrated for the comfortable life she had lived before going underground" (Indiana 73). Her role as mere figurehead or hanger-on, and the tension that that bred between her and Ensslin, is a driving force behind the personal drama that develops between them through the course of the film.

The repeated dismissal of Meinhof's value and virtue prefigures the power- and love-triangle reminiscent of day-time television programs, which figures into the emotionally soothing role of melodrama. Meinhof becomes Ensslin's mirror: the quiet, eloquent, and politically astute brunette, affected by her conscience, foiled by the bold, brash, ultra-violent blonde, whose goal is seemingly to "break all ten Commandments" (Indiana 74). The power struggle between the two women, the petty squabbling and torment Ensslin inflicts on Meinhof, especially after their capture, replaces the strong and well-argued political and moral positions the historical Meinhof held in the courtroom. The personal replaces the political in Edel's film, but in spite of that, the triumvirate of dysfunctional and perhaps psychotic personalities still provides useful information about prevailing attitudes toward terror and its representation.

Baader needs and respects Meinhof for her political mind and as the group's media mouth piece (Grawe 174.) In their "war" against the State, she is the RAF's diplomat. Her isolation, mental collapse, and eventual suicide serve as synecdoche for the group. However, whereas Baader and Ensslin are horrifying, alien in their hubris and violence, Meinhof's fall is understandable, and because of that, the audience is able to experience some sort of catharsis. Catharsis might be a staple of Aristotelian tragedy, but the question is whether it is appropriate in the context of the relationship between a culture and its terrorists (Grawe 176.) The overwhelming critical response is "No." As Indiana puts it, the film strikes "many viewers as fundamentally skewed, in attempting to 'balance' the hubristic excesses of increasingly deranged idealists with the predictably excessive reactions of a modern state. 'The six against six million,' as Heinrich Böll dubbed the RAF, accomplished nothing positive and left nothing behind except a still-festering historical wound" (74).

With this in mind, it is useful to return to the filmmakers' goals: to show and not interpret, to show what "actually happened here, exactly." The question that lingers in any dealing with the RAF is that of objectivity, or of objective representation. The historical and critical consensus is that objectivity is impossible. The logical recourse is then to choose a perspective. Edel's perspective, the context in which his film occurs, is within this group (Grawe 176.) The film is fundamentally skewed; it has to be. From Meinhof's perspective, everything, including the members of her own group, is against her. It would make sense, then, that the hubristic excesses of her cohorts and the state's reactions would be commensurate. By that same token, Baader and Ensslin are the vehicles for that "hubristic excess." In representing the terrorists from within their context, Edel does balance the concerns of the terrorists with those of the terrorized. Edel cannot show this kind of psychological drama without Meinhof. Ensslin and Baader by themselves are too extreme, too foreign. Meinhof acts as an emotional bridge between the RAF and the audience; she is a conduit through which the RAF can begin to be reintegrated into the German past, although in her case, that reintegration appears to take place in patriarchal, conservative terms. This demarcated sympathy is most obvious when the audience notices "Meinhof's silence and slightly pained expression when she agrees to Ensslin's proposal that her twin daughters be brought up as Palestinian terrorists, never to be seen again […]. [The image] cannot but affect the viewers" (Grawe 176).

There are obvious contradictions and flaws in the representations of Baader, Ensslin, and Meinhof, but they can be argued away, as many critics have, as ineptitude or inconsistency on the part of the filmmakers. However, the picture they paint of the whole group lends more support to a consistent representation of the RAF than incompetence on the part of Edel and his cohorts. Naked, pasty, theory-

FIG. 7.

reading Westerners in the middle of desert, "training" with hardened warriors completely alien to their way of life is a paradox, a contradiction, beyond what the filmmakers could accomplish unintentionally. In fact, within this contradiction lies an important aesthetic and social statement: the naked, feminine form can overcome the power of militaristic, fanatic patriarchies. This image fits snugly into the discourse surrounding women and war, where the original and most powerful expressions of violence, of power over life and death, were feminine ones (Caputi 253).

The Western women are alien to the camp and the way of life it represents, and, if what Ensslin says is true, and fucking (and by proxy a focus on the body and sexuality) is like shooting, then the German women are winning the war of representation (fig. 8).

The female warrior, and even more so the suicide bomber, is the most uncanny figure of the action genre (see *Black Hawk Down*, *From Paris with Love*, or *The Kingdom*, among others, for examples of this.) The image of the naked revolutionaries is designed not only to stir the Islamist terrorists, but to disrupt the audience's notions of femininity and the role of violence in the Western world.

This image of the women of the RAF is important for two reasons: contextually, it situates the film historically, because

the filmmakers meticulously recreated the *mise-en-scéne* from historical photographic evidence, which gives their fictions historical verisimilitude (Hope-Jones 34). Out of context, however, the image provides a powerful commentary on how culture aestheticizes and politicizes the female form, and shows how film, especially a "terror(ism)" film, can confront an audience with its own ideological failings and epistemological blind spots. The contextual importance of the image is limited and undermined by the film's other methodological and structural failings, but the filmmakers' reliance on historical imagery provides the audience with commentary on the roles of women and violence in a post-9/11 society (Hope-Jones 34). Critics argue that, despite its subject matter, *Baader Meinhof Komplex* is a post-9/11 film (James 5). Despite the historical context of the imagery, the film develops an aesthetics that directly engages the violence (both physical and cultural) with which its audience is regularly and systematically confronted. This scene questions the perpetrators and victims of systematic and ideological violence, and this violence is an integral component in the rise and ever-increasing intensity of international terrorism, in particular. The "terrorists" (that is, the members of the Fatah) in this scene are terrorized, "coerced by violence, fear, threats, etc.," as much by the brash nakedness of the German revolutionaries as those same revolutionaries terrorized their fellow citizens.

The images force the audience to regard bodies, and systems of power relationships, from multiple perspectives. This is one of film's important social functions, and the "terrorist film," along with film noir, horror, science fiction, and even action cinema, has a critical role to play in the way filmmakers and audiences engage with the shifting aesthetic and ethical landscape of the early twenty-first Century.

FIG. 8.

The final element of the film, and that which undermines, or at minimum makes ironic, the progressive political or social message the film could contain, is the melodramatic, middle class, Bonnie-and-Clyde story that overwhelms the independent revolutionary stories of the two lovers (fig. 9).

Their star-crossed love story distracts, and the critics argue detracts, from the political and social meaning and conflict inherent in both domestic and international terrorism. It is finally this love story, absent from the classic action blockbusters of the 80s, which cripples the political thrust of the film. The complex of sex, violence, myth and filmic convention are just that: a constellation of volatile elements that build an interesting film. The film's focus on the emotional lives of the main figures detracts from the historical figures' main focus: politics and violence. It is in this aspect that Edel's claim to *cinema verit*é rings most hollow, and the film proves itself decidedly un-political (Sklar 43). Though the historical Ensslin was certainly devoted to Baader, it was her commitment to the overthrow of the (in her view) fascist and oppressive West-German government, and not the excitement of a life of crime and adventure with her lover, that drove her political and revolutionary actions.

The film poster, in particular the one for the U.S. market, tells the story of the film, sets up the audiences' expectations, before they even enter the cinema (fig. 10).

The film, as advertised, is not about Baader and Meinhof, not about violence and politics and social justice. It is rather a criminal love story, a romantic escapade in period clothing. The film provides an escape, just as Bonnie and Clyde did. In the words of Faye Dunaway, "[Bonnie] wanted to get out of wherever she was [….] But with Bonnie there was real tragic irony. She got out only to see that she was heading nowhere and the end was death [….] She knew the only way to get what she wanted was through her own sheer force of will. She was driven by her own desire. [….] She did] whatever it takes. She wanted to be something special, something out of the ordinary" (Dunaway 131). The tragic irony of *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* is that it subsumes its strong representation of Ensslin as either *femme fatale* or action hero under her role as a lover. The film's lukewarm expression of her power and independence do little to break Ensslin out of the mold of a supporting character, or a caricature of femininity (Grant 82).

The romance inherent in Baader and Ensslin's relationship is their headlong rush toward self-destruction. In their haste to destroy everything the generation before them held dear, including social conventions and cultural traditions, they effectively removed themselves from the public sphere. By alienating themselves, the historical figures doomed themselves to fecklessness. The filmmakers attempt to make their figures sympathetic, and thereby undermine their social impact. The romance undoes the positive social and aesthetic work of the film, it "cancels out its politics" as James claims, though not completely, and not in the simplistic terms in which he couches it. The film still examines some of the causes, symptoms, and consequences of extremism, which most "terrorist" films—or rather, films about terrorists—fail to do. However, romance and the excitement of danger hold such central positions in the film, that the historical, "true"

FIG. 9.

depictions of people and events becomes spectacular, not political.

Despite its narrative failings, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* contributes significantly to the possible development of a terrorist film genre and its iconography and syntax. Like the action and horror genres before it, or the style of film noir, the terrorist film can help mediate traumatic social events, and give the audience a vocabulary of images with which to engage their circumstances (Grant 26). The social aesthetics the film helps to foster, taken out of context, allow the audience to evaluate contemporary gender relationships and sexual politics, as well as question the role that ideology plays in everyday life. It is this last point that is the most important. The terrorist film genre is still nascent, and as such, there are no canonical terrorist films, or at least, no films that can provide a comprehensive grammar for the genre. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* is therefore not a genre film. From a critical perspective, it is not a particularly good film. It is, however, a complex of images that invite critical attention and are clearly meant to be read intertextually. Just as the noir films of the post-war period, many of which were B movies, developed a style or aesthetic that eventually gained wide acceptance as a genre, films about and influenced by terror will develop an aesthetic and a visual semiotics that will allow audiences to engage in different ways with

FIG. 10.

their social circumstances (Grant 26, 29). The images of the hapless hero-terrorist and his sultry-but-doomed lover allow the audience to identify with the terrorist, the "other," because they play with well established conventions of filmic grammar. The audience identifies with them enough to break down their dialectic perspectives on "us" versus "them," but the film also allows audiences to maintain enough intellectual and emotional distance that the audience still experiences catharsis when the terrorists are ritually purged from the screen, and thereby from the collective memory and consciousness. This re-negotiation of social binaries is an important aspect of the *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, and perhaps a future genre of terror(ism) films. The examination of these complicated political and aesthetic topics will have to be taken up in future research by a broad spectrum of scholars.

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Image Notes

Figure 1: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 2: *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Dir. George Cosmatos. Tri-Star Pictures, 1985.

Figure 3: *Commando*. Dir. Mark Lester. Twentieth Century Fox, 1985.

Figure 4: *Basic Instinct*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Le Canal +, 1992. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 5: *Basic Instinct 2*. Dir. Michael Caton-Jones. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 6: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 7: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 8: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.
Figure 9: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Figure 10: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*. Dir. Uli Edel. Constantin Film Production GmbH, 2008.

(**Endnotes**)

1. Plot summary for "The Baader Meinhof Complex," from its official IMDb page.

2. "Der Faschismus läuft folgerecht auf eine Ästhetisierung des politischen Lebens hinaus. [...] Alle Bemühungen um die Ästhetisierung der Politik gipfeln in einem Punkt. Dieser eine Punkt ist der Krieg" (384).

3. "So steht es um die Ästhetisierung der Politik, welche der Faschismus betreibt. Der Kommunismus antwortet ihm mit der Politisierung der Kunst" (384).

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