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Der Baader-Meinhof Komplex

Abstract

This is a review of *Der Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008).

The German film *Der Baader-Meinhof Komplex* depicts the founding years of the Red Army Faction (RAF), West Germany's Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. Director Uli Edel follows the early history of the RAF from the perspective of its first-generation leaders: Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and Gudrun Ensslin. The lives of these RAF founders are traced from their activities during the unrest of the student movements in the late 1960s to their violent deaths nearly a decade later. Edel unifies this sweeping narrative with a question inspired by historical hindsight: how is it that so many bourgeois German youth were willing to kill and die for the RAF's violent vision? At one point in the film, Horst Herold, the head of the German police force, explicitly entertains and answers this question. He says they do it because of "a myth." But Edel's portrayal of the RAF says more. It also suggests a demythologization of the RAF. This is first captured by the title's psychologizing slant: the RAF is a media-hyped 'Komplex.'

This complex has little explicit reference to religion. However, viewers can draw their own connections. During the opening credits, Janis Joplin's "Mercedes Benz" invites one to contextualize the following events in terms of the tense relationship of materialism and salvation. One could also uncover the following themes within the film: a genealogy of terrorism, sacrifice and violence, the contentious 'Christian' achievement of secularization, and the mythologization and demythologization of Marxism and the RAF.

The film demythologizes the RAF by separating its historical brutality from its mythic idealization. This is partially accomplished by the film's 'realistic,' über-violent scenes. These loud and explosive scenes are nerve-racking because they are portrayed as chaotic, excessive and impersonal. A dead body is not an honored hero, nor a life sublated to a larger vision. It is rather some thing that was once alive, but is now dead – forever. It is just a soulless, bullet-tendered slab of meat. Edel uses graphic visual effects to both unsettle and repulse the viewer. If myth calls for the heroic sacrifice of a victim, there is little room for the violence of the RAF to fulfill this task. Instead, the RAF's violence becomes the disgrace of the myth. The myth-makers degrade the myth.

Violence degrades the myth because it never finally resolves the myth-maker's conflict. Rather, the myth simply functions as the perpetual legitimization for ongoing terror. Edel presents the terror of the RAF in light of the torch passed from the secular terrorisms of the Cold War-era to the rising religious terrorisms of the Middle East. The viewer is reminded that the RAF was trained for guerrilla warfare by the PLO and the PLFP in Jordan. They are also reminded that the release of RAF prisoners was demanded both in the abduction of the members of the Israeli Olympic team at Munich '72 and in the hijacking of Lufthansa Flight 181 in '77. This historical synonymy – terrorism, both secular and religious – could displace the viewer's contemporary discomfort with religious terrorism onto their

perception of the RAF. RAF militants are less likely perceived as martyrs of conviction, but more so as insecure individuals trying ‘to prove’ themselves, in the worst of ways.

Thus, the film’s most poignant demythification of the RAF occurs through its depiction of the group’s leaders. Baader is at once a repeating misogynist and an occasional liberator of feminine sexuality – as long as he can sleep with them. Meinhof is a happenstance revolutionary whose loyalty mostly stems from her fear of ridicule and imprisonment. Ensslin is Baader’s girlfriend who is left out of the limelight, jealous of Meinhof’s celebrity status. On this depiction, camaraderie is mostly just a pretense used to justify self-aggrandizement and back-biting esprit de corps. It seems that the ‘great’ RAF myth is little more than the social fallout of personal wet-dreams.

Edel’s film is controversial. It was attacked by RAF faithful and victims alike. Because it was written for a German audience, a working familiarity with the issues surrounding the RAF is assumed. There is little context offered for the events depicted. English viewers might want to brush up on their RAF history. Otherwise, Edel’s portrayal of the RAF might seem more authoritative than provocative.