

The Baader Meinhof Complex: Transcript

Hello, my name is Maren Thom and I want to talk about the film, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008). It is a film about the West German terrorist organisation the Red Army Faction that was active in West Germany from 1968 until 1989. It is a film that stars Moritz Bleibtreu, Johanna Wokalek and is directed by the German director Uli Edel.

I want to talk about the filmmakers' approach the subject matter and how the film was received in Germany.

The RAF

The Red Army Faction in German is Rote Armee Fraktion or the RAF for short. The RAF, as they called themselves, or Baader-Meinhof Gang as the Group was called by the state, was a left wing terrorist organisation that had its origins in the student movement of the late sixties in West Germany.

The student movement's main aim was to bring about a political change in society in order to extinguish what they saw as the institutionalised authoritarian political structure that enabled fascism to happen in the 1930s. It is widely assumed that it was the events of the 2 June 1967, the Shah's visit to Berlin and the death of student protestor Benno Ohnesorg (also shown in the film), that radicalised the later terrorists Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin and Brigitte Mohnhaupt, and it is also assumed that the events of the 2 June 1967 became the ideological point of origin for the RAF.

The group committed a series of terrorist acts in the early 1970s, however the main figures of the RAF were captured by 1972. Their followers continued kidnapping and killing people over the next five years in an effort to secure their leaders' release from prison.

The Baader Meinhof Complex is a film that can be described as an 'illustrated' history of the RAF. It is designed not to be a history lesson but an experience of history.

The film's narrative is an unfolding story, covering ten years of German history in 143 minutes. It starts with events that happened in Berlin on the 2nd June 1967 and it ends with the events of what is called the *Deutscher Herbst* or the German Autumn.

The German Autumn was a set of events in late 1977 and it was a series of terrorist attacks designed to free the imprisoned RAF members Baader, Ensslin and Raspe. It culminated in the suicide of the said prisoners and the murder of the kidnapped industrialist Hans Martin Schleyer by the second generation RAF.

The Film

The Baader Meinhof Complex is a film not driven by a traditional narrative – that means there is no distinguishable beginning middle and end – but instead it is a representative chain of scenes handpicked from the canon of the historical events that continue to define the cultural memory of the RAF.

Cultural Memory is the interplay of present and past in a socio-cultural context.

So, the film is a re-imagination of the RAF in terms of contemporary preoccupations, even though it is trying to recreate the past in authentic detail.

The film's dramaturgy –the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation – is like a non-fiction book or a newspaper article, while at the same time still being a feature film.

The Book

The film is based on the journalistic accounts of the RAF by Stefan Aust which he called *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Aust published the first edition of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* in 1985 and it became the standard text of the history of the RAF in Germany. The book uses interviews with witnesses, terrorists and their families, police and judicial documents, materials by the RAF and Aust's own experiences to present a history of the RAF that even today is regarded as one – if not the – defining text on the Baader-Meinhof Group, and according to the newspaper *Die Welt* (Kellerhoff 2008), 'has dominated the image of the RAF in Germany for the past 20 years'.

Aust's book is written as a record and document of the events and has been described as a personality profile of the terrorists and the agents of the German state of the time (Schoen 2009). One of the reasons the book has become one of the defining histories of the RAF is because Aust emerged from the same political scene as Ulrike Meinhof and their relationship is also re-created in the film.

The Filmmakers

The form of *The Bader Meinhof Complex* is very deliberately a coming together of realist film techniques and the dramaturgy of a fast-paced thriller. This combination of methods

results in a highly verisimilitudinous telling of a story, a representation of the events that constitute the history of the RAF.

You can see how in their desire for authenticity the filmmakers take great pains over historical accuracy in the *mise-en-scène* (the way things are put in the frame). Not only are the material details correct – for example, from shooting on original locations to the meticulously researched props like the leather jacket Baader wears and the twenty-seven records in his prison cell – and the significant moments associated with the RAF are also carefully chosen.

The writer and producer of *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, Bernd Eichinger, had just finished the highly acclaimed film *Der Untergang / Downfall* (2004) before he started to make *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. *Downfall* is a film depicting the final ten days of Adolf Hitler in his bunker in Berlin. This film also dealt with a part of German history previously considered unshowable: Adolf Hitler as a naturalistic character. The film's strategy, in order to show the unshowable, was to aim for a realism within the characters and realism in the depiction of the final days of the war in the bunker. Authenticity as the pathway to truth – a demythification of the 'monster' Hitler by showing him as a realistic character, a human being.

The reason why Bernd Eichinger insisted on making a feature film about the RAF instead of a historic docudrama is, he said:

The Baader Meinhof Complex is the story of the *Täter* (the perpetrators). In a documentary you can show the effects the and consequences of the terrorists deeds but you cannot show how they are doing them. (Eichinger 2008, 12)

Eichinger emphasised that he is not interested in the *why* but the *how* of the RAF. He intends to let the deeds speak for themselves and let the audience create their own reading, their own

synthesis of the story and of the visualisations provided by the film. It therefore depends on the audiences' prior understanding of the RAF on how they will read the film.

Eichinger's approach to the subject reflects contemporary ideas that subjects contain a diversity of views, in opposition to one single approach or method. The word 'complex', meaning a whole that is comprised of interconnected parts, shows Aust's and Eichinger's pluralistic understanding of the RAF.

Eichinger describes his adaptation of the book as a '*Fetzendramaturgie*', which describes the film's dramaturgy as a collection of shreds, scenes and images that have to be 'puzzle together' by the audience. This strategy, he says, was to avoid any kind of moral interpretation on the side of the filmmakers. The same goes for Eichinger's decision to forgo any dramaturgy that would let the audience identify with any of the characters.

Eichinger (2008, 25) describes how the story would be propelled by the 'speed of the events' which become a tidal wave that would sweep the audience along over the cliff where a violent ending is to be expected. It would start idyllically on the coast of Sylt in the north of Germany and end in a blood-bath.

The score for the film also adds to this need to rush the film's narrative through a dramatic ten years towards a disastrous end. On the one hand, scurrying strings provide an ever escalating anxiety. On the other hand, propulsive tribal drums relentlessly manipulate the heartbeat.

Eichinger chose Rainer Klausmann as director of photography for *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Klausmann had already worked with Eichinger on *Downfall*. *Downfall* also was a film that was composed as a sober realist film, a method embraced by Klausmann, who argues when talking about his approach to photographing *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, that

one 'has a responsibility towards history' and that this demands 'honesty' of the images toward the subject matter (Eichinger 2008, 44).

The Baader Meinhof Complex mingles archive footage into the film that, instead of drawing attention to the film form, enhances the film's realism. One of the ways this is done is that the film often shows how the characters are watching footage on TV. Also the film incorporates original media footage and makes it part of the narrative. The mingling of historical material and the film itself establishes a historicised visual style. Klausmann says:

The colour matching of the film was influenced by what we used, because our movie had to fit with the real stuff; we avoided strong reds, blues or greens and we desaturated the image in post-production. Otherwise, it would have looked like two different movies, and that's not good (Eichinger 2008, 44).

The film's director, Uli Edel, explains why Klausmann's camerawork was informed by a news-gathering style in that it 'would complement the spontaneous energy of the archival material' (Hope-Jones 2009). 'The idea was to make the whole film in this documentary style so it matched the original footage,' says Edel. He continues to say:

I gave the actors a lot of freedom, especially in the bigger scenes with all the extras. It was very important that we could really follow the action; we did not want to create the action through cuts. That's why there were so many Steadicam and handheld shots.

So, what the filmmakers did was to provide new versions of images that were already present in German cultural memory of the history of the RAF: in the book, in historical images, in news and magazines and also of cultural adaptations and retellings such as films, plays and lifestyle products.

The film, rather than being an interpretation, is a repetition of the conventional narrative as laid out by the book, *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. The interpretation of history has been abandoned in favour of a connection of the images and myths that shape the understanding of the RAF today. The influential weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* (Kurbjuweit 2008) writes:

Until now there have been many words about the RAF but not the pictures. These are the pictures of the deeds. Bernd Eichinger follows this when he says, 'it is not why they do it but that they do it.

In *The Baader Meinhof Complex* actions speak louder than words and cinematic action becomes the method of choice to disclose the RAF mythos.

RAF Mythos

The concept of the RAF mythos is difficult to define. What is important to understand is that the RAF Mythos is more than the complex mythologisation by the media, or by the German state or by the RAF themselves.

It can be said that what drives the interest in contemporary depictions of the RAF, including *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, is the intellectual consensus that there is a mythology around the RAF, by which gullible people will be seduced unless they are educated about it. The RAF mythos is a slogan that is commonly used to convey an idea about the RAF; especially that the RAF's methods and goals to bring about radical change to society are inherently flawed and conveys by extension the implicit idea that radical change itself is a dangerous fantasy.

Reception

The Eichinger method of a representational cinema as a way to approach defining moments in, especially German, history was welcomed by the news magazine *Der Spiegel* (Kurbjuweit 2008). *Der Spiegel* proclaimed the film would destroy the RAF mythos, and thus remove any seductive powers the RAF still has; a claim so significant it made the title page which also included a quote of the last line in the film – ‘Hört auf sie so zu sehen, wie sie nicht waren’ (‘Stop seeing them as they never were’) – the final sentence spoken in the film by Brigitte Mohnhaupt (Nadja Uhl) to the second generation of the RAF. It is easily interpreted as an appeal to the film’s audience.

However, as Chris Homewood (2011, 136) points out, the great majority of Germany’s press was not of the Spiegel’s opinion:

Far from seeing *The Baader Meinhof Complex* as a corrective to entrenched cultural myths, in most quarters of the print media the film was considered to serve the inverse on the intended functions.

They were emphasising the way *The Baader Meinhof Complex* perpetuates the RAF myth. What is also criticised by the press is the film’s refusal to critically engage with the past in a cinematic fashion that would engage the audience through a traditional narrative where the burden of creating meaning lies with the authors of the film instead of the audience. Chris Homewood concludes that, instead we get a film that sells us terrorism back to us, the selling points being stars, action and violence.

The Baader Meinhof Complex is ‘neither a documentary nor a history film [...] but has something of a parallel universe about it’ and it is this new thing which has become a ‘second

order reality, a second order memory system, and more comprehensive filmic reckonings with the legacy of the RAF are to be found elsewhere' (Schirmacher 2008).

Conclusion

However, what the film's method demonstrates well is not that the film fails in its aim to demythify the RAF – which it obviously does – but that this need for demythification is the driving force not only of this film but can be found in many post-millennial German films, from films like *Downfall* to *The Lives of Others*, from *Napola* to *Sophie Scholl* and *Barbara*.

That idea that everything needs demythification and the modern fixation with transparency of social life points to a greater problem. Where once we had a historical framework through which to understand the past, today there is an endless retelling and rehashing of events. *The Baader Meinhof Complex* with its aim to demythify the RAF, reveals the shortcoming of looking at history without a greater historical framework.

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