

Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei / The Edukators: Transcript

Today I will be discussing Hans Weingartner's film *The Edukators* with particular focus on the critique the film offers on the state of political activism within youth culture in Germany. *The Edukators* tells the story of Jan and Peter, two Berlin friends who have taken to breaking into the houses of the city's rich whilst the owners are away on holiday. However, once inside they do not steal the luxury items they find but instead rearrange them. As a result, they leave behind an unnerving scene of chaos along with a note of warning about capitalist excess, which they sign the Edukators, to greet the household when they return. Jan and Peter see their break-ins as a piece of political protest against Berlin's elite, and all initially seems to be going well for the pair as they begin to generate some press coverage for their acts.

Yet, things quickly become more complicated when Peter's girlfriend, Jule, finds out about what they are doing. Jule is a waitress who is struggling to get by due to a massive debt she owes to a rich businessman called Hardenberg following a car accident she had the previous year whilst she was uninsured. She knows the businessman's address and persuades Jan to spontaneously break into his house one night. However, when Hardenberg returns home unexpectedly, Jan and Jule panic and with Peter's help they quickly come up with a crude plan to kidnap Hardenberg and take him to a hut in the Alps owned by Jule's uncle.

Through this kidnapping a situation is created which allows the film to explore issues of generational conflict in Germany. This is because, whilst the trio of Jan, Jule and Peter belong to a generation who grew up following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, Hardenberg reveals that, despite his big business credentials, he was once a leading figure in the student riots that rocked Germany in 1968. These two generations, the youthful 89ers and the older

68ers, are a prominent feature of discussions surrounding the state of German society and the interaction between the generations in *The Edukators* is used to explore both the legacy of the student movement of the 1960s and the current level of political activism in Germany's youth population. Therefore, during this presentation I will look to answer the following two questions; namely, how is the legacy of the 68er generation dealt with in the film and what sort of effect is this legacy shown to have had on the political engagement of young people within unified Germany?

Who are the 68ers?

If we start by looking at the role of the 68er generation in the film, it is important first to understand the context surrounding the student riots in 1968 which gives this generation its name. Traditionally, the German student population had been relatively passive and conservative. Yet in the 1960s, a new movement began to emerge which signalled a radical break with this past. The motivation for this came as West Germany entered recession in 1966 for the first time in 15 years, whilst at the same time the government began to pursue a series of reforms which were seen as authoritarian and undemocratic by many young people. Consequently, in universities all over West Germany, students began to form political groups which were aligned to the left and influenced by, amongst other things, Marxist theory.

Whilst the student movement actively protested against numerous issues, the focus of their action was the perceived unfair distribution of wealth that existed in the country, as well as the legacy of the Nazi period that remained in West Germany as they felt that their parents had not properly addressed issues surrounding the Second World War due to the fact that many former Nazis still occupied positions of power and influence within the country.

Although it was not popular amongst the older population, the student movement rapidly grew in stature amongst West Germany's young people and things came to a head in 1968 as, following the attempted assassination of one of the movement's leading figures, Rudi Dutschke, a number of large scale riots broke out.

In *The Edukators* Hardenberg claims to have been a member of the student movement's leadership. He mentions Rudi Dutschke by name and also says he lived in a Berlin commune with several other members of the movement. Therefore, given his strong 68er credentials, it is through Hardenberg that the student movement is explored in the film.

The student movement had become a particularly hot topic in Germany at the time of the film's release in 2004 as the coalition government of Gerhard Schröder was coming to the end of its second term in power. Schröder's coalition was between his own leftist party, the Social Democrats and the Greens, another party of the left, and within his cabinet there were several people who had played an active role within the student riots. Thus, Schröder's government was inexorably linked to the 68er generation and so, following his election in 1998, people had been looking to understand what such a government said about the lasting impact of the student movement.

For many, the emergence of the 68er generation within the establishment of Germany suggested at the very least a softening of this generation's views, if not a total failure of the student movement to enact change. This is a viewpoint into which Hardenberg's evolution from student protester to global businessman feeds as he has completely abandoned what he fought for during the student riots. Such a negative image of the student movement's legacy can be seen in the film in the contrast drawn between the homes of Hardenberg and the film's younger characters.

Jan and Peter live in Prenzlauer Berg, an area of East Berlin that at the time was run down and awaiting renovation, and their apartment is shown to mirror this. It is shabby and in a state of disrepair with the old plaster exposed; a living space that in many ways resembles the squatter lifestyle that members of the student movement famously lived.

Indeed, whilst in the Alps, Hardenberg reminisces about the old commune that he lived in during his period of political activism, yet his current home could not be further from this sort of lifestyle. He may have married his girlfriend from the commune, but the home they now occupy together is the very epitome of capitalist living with its large expanses of glass, private dock and indoor swimming pool. Jan, in particular, fails to understand how Hardenberg can have made such a transformation, but Hardenberg shows little remorse and instead describes to Jan his evolution as a natural progression as he got older, which has now left him as a conservative-voting industrialist, a transformation that could be applied to many of the 68er generation.

It is not just through Hardenberg's past that *The Edukators* draws on the legacy of the 68er generation. Following the riots in 1968 the student movement began to decline but in its wake several people who had had links to the student protests came together to form the *Rote Armee Fraktion*, commonly known as the RAF. The group saw itself as a communist and anti-imperialist urban guerrilla group, but the West German government labelled them a terrorist organisation. This was because the group planted several bombs within West German department stores and funded their activities through bank robberies. Their acts usually targeted leading capitalist companies and figures within West Germany, something which was typified by several kidnappings enacted by the RAF of bank bosses and conservative politicians; kidnappings which ended in murder more than once.

However, whilst Hardenberg's direct link to the student movement means that he comes to symbolise the problematic legacy which the 68er generation's political activism has created, he does not have any connection to the RAF. Instead, the history of the RAF's terrorism is used within the film's narrative as a point of comparison for Jan and Peter's actions as the *Edukators*. Although the RAF officially disbanded in 1998, Jan and Peter's anti-capitalist activities can be seen to have strong references to the attacks carried out by the RAF. This link is further strengthened when they are forced to kidnap Hardenberg as it mimics the RAF kidnappings of the 1970s. Yet, in order to understand the way the film uses this comparison, it is first necessary to look at what exactly is meant by the 89er generation to which young activists in *The Edukators* belong.

Who are the 89ers?

If the 68er generation are defined by the student riots of that year, then the event which defines the 89er generation is the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet, whereas the 68ers actively took part in the student movement, the 89er generation were not the ones who brought down the Wall. Instead, the term is used to define the young people in Germany who have grown up in the aftermath of unification. Therefore, the members of the 89er generation may have been born into a divided country, but they are the first generation to come-of-age in unified Germany. Whilst this explains the background to the 89er generation, their importance also stems from the fact that this generation is made up of many of the offspring of 68ers and, as a result of these family ties, social commentators in Germany have taken to comparing the two.

Although the unification of East and West Germany may have been officially completed in October 1990, the country which the 89er generation have grown up in is one dominated by the subsequent problems which unification created. The rapid commercialisation of East Germany caused massive changes as the existing economy struggled to compete which led to an increase in unemployment in the eastern states. Similarly, West Germans complained that they were being forced to unfairly take on the financial burden of unification through policy developments such as the solidarity tax which raised money to aid the development of the infrastructure of the former East. It is within this societal climate that Jan, Jule and Peter, as well as the rest of the 89er generation, have grown up; a situation which you would expect to have impacted both their individual political ideals and the wider beliefs of this generation.

Yet, the 89er generation have been accused of being far more passive and apolitical than their parents as the youth population of unified Germany have failed to rally in protest about the post-unification economic and social problems which have afflicted the country. The evidence used to support this argument is that within modern-day Germany there is a noticeable lack of either a widespread radical and politicised student movement, such as that found in the late 1960s, or the more extreme urban terrorists of the RAF. Hence, it is the perception that Germany's young people are less politically active than previous generations which is at the centre of narrative of *The Edukators*.

A Critique of the 89er Generation?

Within the three young main protagonists in *The Edukators*, it is through the characters of Jan and Jule that the film focuses its discussion on the state of political activism within youth culture in unified Germany. However, rather than supporting the stereotype of apolitical

young people which dominates wider concepts of the 89er generation, through Jan and Jule the film offers a more nuanced depiction of the political beliefs and activities of Germany's youth population. This discussion is split into two halves in the narrative, with the first half of the film set in Berlin exploring the perception that all young people are uninterested in politics, whilst the second half set in the Alps goes on to highlight the differences which exist between the 89er generation's political activism and that of the 68ers.

The political ideology of the young characters in *The Edukators* comes to the fore in the scenes that take place between Jan and Jule whilst Peter is away from Berlin DJ-ing in Barcelona. As Jan begins to explain his beliefs to Jule, it soon becomes clear that these views are far more politicised than may be expected from a member of the 89er generation. Whilst he does accept that there is a level of apathy amongst his contemporaries, Jan does not blame the young people themselves. Instead, for him the problem centres on the appropriation of former revolutionary icons such as Che Guevara into part of contemporary pop culture. This is particularly pertinent given the film's wider generational discussion since, for youth culture in the 1960s, figures like Guevara were symbols of left wing rebellion which meant that they could be used as a focal point to help to motivate and enthuse political activism, such as that found within the student movement. However, nowadays images of these revolutionaries have become commoditised as they are found on t-shirts, mugs etc. and so have lost their revolutionary associations. Instead, much like Hardenberg, these images have become part of the capitalist system of commerce. This is no different for the leading figures of the RAF within Germany, as their images are now sold alongside those of Guevara in shops across the country. Therefore, although revolutionary figures may remain popular within youth culture, they have been depoliticised which means that, rather than joining radical political

movements, the young people who adopt such symbols are simply conforming to consumerist pop culture.

Furthermore, alongside the commodification of revolutionary images, Jan also laments the dominance of other elements of pop culture within the lives of young people. In particular, he attacks television as having a negative impact on the political sensibilities found within German youth culture. He uses the slang German word 'Glotze', a word that means 'idiot box', when talking about television rather than the more formal 'Fernseher', a choice of words which help to illustrate Jan's argument that television is limiting people's capacity for revolutionary thoughts as it pacifies rather than motivates the country's youth population.

In many ways, Jan's beliefs in the film seem to mirror the general critique of the 89er generation found within wider society as he highlights their passive acceptance of the commercial products of capitalism as the main reason for the lack of any political youth movements. Nevertheless, rather than seeing the rest of his generation as a lost cause, Jan hopes that through his actions with Peter he can inspire other people to break free of societal constraints and reengage with political activism. Therefore, whilst *The Edukators* constructs a view of young people that largely conforms to the idea of the apolitical 89er, through Jan it offers hope that this could change.

Of course, Jan uses these arguments in part to seduce Jule, who herself is typical of the problems found within the 89er generation. She attends protests rallies in her search for a cause in which to believe but she struggles to become excited by any. Yet, unlike Jan she does not see the root cause of this to be solely within pop culture and the commercialised grip it holds over present-day young people. Instead, she points to the past as also playing a role as political actions such as the student movements of the 1960s tried to change the world but

ultimately failed. She is, therefore, disenfranchised with the whole political system as for her there seems to be little point to mimic the extreme actions of the 68ers due to the fact that she feels, no matter what her generation does, they are doomed to fail, just like their parents.

For Jule, the failures of the past – and the confines which her own life must now operate in because of this – is symbolised by the debt she owes to Hardenberg. She suggests that she was far more open to the freedom and rebellion which Jan talks of before her car accident but now the crippling repayments that she must make to Hardenberg dominate her life as she strives to earn enough money to pay the debt back as quickly as possible.

However, as she begins to fall for Jan's charm and political arguments, Jule's views start to change as she begins to embrace the activism which Jan promotes. Yet, Jule's new found enthusiasm for rebellion is exactly what leads her and Jan to Hardenberg's home and begins the series of events which culminate in the kidnapping of Hardenberg. Whilst superficially this kidnapping could be seen as a further continuation of the film's promotion of a new found revolutionary spirit both within Jule and the wider 89er generation, the manner in which it is dealt with in the second half of the narrative instead becomes a critique on the problems young people today have in attempting to be politically active whilst also dealing with the expectations of the 68er generation.

The kidnapping of Hardenberg may signal a change in approach for the Edukators in their activism, from the relatively low risk break-ins to something which has the potential to be more high profile and dangerous, but this is not a planned escalation in their actions. Instead, it is a panicked move following their discovery by Hardenberg which means that, whilst the kidnapping may have similarities to those carried out by the RAF in the 1970s, the trio are shown to be far less extreme in their convictions. They are unwilling to make the kidnapping

public as they could then be required to take the sort of drastic measures, such as murder, taken by the RAF. Thus, by the standards of their parents' generation, they may be judged to be less committed to their political ideals as they are not prepared to make moral sacrifices to further their cause.

Yet, given the violent implications that such sacrifices could have, the film does not necessarily show Jan, Jule and Peter's hesitation to be a negative thing. By choosing to disregard the legacy of the 68er generation and follow their own path, the film highlights that the young characters in *The Edukators* have learned from previous generations' failings and, as a result, are not looking to copy earlier actions but are instead trying a different method to achieve similar goals. As Jan says at one point in the film; 'The best ideas survive', a statement which could be taken to mean that, despite their different approaches, the activism of *The Edukators* is done in the same spirit as that of the 68er generation.

This connection can be seen in the way that Jan and Hardenberg become linked in a pseudo-father son relationship. The trio is forced to allow Hardenberg into the village to make a telephone call to his cleaner to prevent the discovery of his kidnapping; a journey which Jan accompanies him on as they are concerned that Hardenberg may try to escape. Yet, when they are approached by a villager, rather than call for help, Hardenberg passes Jan off as his son. The association between the two is then seen again in the journey back to the hut as Hardenberg is shown hanging out of the window of the camper van, a position which Jan also occupied earlier in the film.

Therefore, rather than supporting the idea of the 89ers being an apolitical generation, the narrative links between them and the 68ers in the film demonstrate that, like the student movement of the 68er generation, Jan, Jule and Peter are attempting to inspire their

generation to rise up against the capitalist establishment and it is this, not the methods and ultimate outcomes, which is shown to be important.

This is a feeling which is seen in the ending of the film as the trio recognise that they were wrong to kidnap Hardenberg and return him back to his Berlin home. The closing scene in Berlin shows the police conducting a raid on Jan and Peter's apartment following a tip off by Hardenberg. However, the apartment is empty as the trio have escaped to Spain where they plan to carry out an attack devised by Jan on a TV satellite hub which, if successful, will cause a loss of signal all over Europe. We do not learn whether they manage to achieve this or not, but this ambiguous ending offers hope for the revolutionary nature of youth culture in Germany.

Conclusion

The political activism of the 89er generation may be judged largely by the legacy and standards set out by the student movement in the 1960s and the subsequent terrorist acts of the RAF, but the ending of the film illustrates that this is the wrong approach to take. It may be true that the 89er generation has not lived up to the extreme examples of their parents' generation but this does not mean they are incapable or unwilling to enact political protest. Whilst their *modus operandi* may be different, the revolutionary spirit of the 68er generation lives on in their children. It is just that, as the ending shows, they are attempting to change the world in a different way.