

Germany in Autumn

Film on a crisis

by Glenn Walton

It is hard to impress on an outsider the emotional impact of the terrorist Baader-Meinhof group on the West German body politic. The group was, and is tiny, and its tactics strictly hit-and-run. Over the past decade it has staged bank robberies, kidnappings, and outright political assassinations. B-M exploits culminated in the Fall 1977 abduction and murder of leading industrialist Hans-Martin Schleyer, and the subsequent suicides of the group's imprisoned leaders at Stornheim. Like no other events of the last ten years, the Baader-Meinhof heists have galvanized the security-obsessed German nation. The right-wing press has had a field day. Laws have been strengthened to keep radicals (read: leftist radicals) out of the civil service, and the apartment of Nobel prizewinning novelist Heinrich Böll was illegally ransacked by police because its owner had a slight acquaintance with someone connected with the gang. This last episode prompted Böll to write *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharine Blum*, which became a critical and popular success as a film. It was not the first film to be spawned by terrorist hysteria: after the Schleyer drama, a group of German directors got together

and all contributed to a film on the crisis. The result is *Germany in Autumn* (Deutschland im Herbst).

I saw the film first-run, in Germany, and the atmosphere in the student-filled theatre I attended fairly crackled with tension. Now Haligonians see what all the controversy was about at the National Film Board on Barrington Street. The film begins with its weakest section, that contributed by the prolific Hans-Werner Fassbinder (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*) perhaps the best-known of the current group of directors who have caused somewhat of a Renaissance in the German film industry. Fassbinder's view of the October crisis is strictly personal, a sort of intellectual onanism.

All You Didn't Want to Know About Fassbinder's Reaction to the Crisis But Were Afraid You're Going to Get Anyway. The viewer is presently mainly with the director's own chaotic personal life at the time of the kidnapping. Fassbinder's restaging of the day the phone call does contain an interestingly testy discussion between Rainer and his mother, but on balance it is the least interesting part of the film. Better are the sections by other directors which follow: both Schleyer's funeral, attended by high

dignitaries (including a grim Chancellor Schmidt) and that of the terrorist leaders are documented, and the contrast between the two public events illustrate the maxim that one picture is worth a thousand words: both sections are full of images that define what cinema can achieve. I will never forget the perverse scene of Mercedes banners wafting alongside the West German flag while a Bach Passion drones on in solemn illustration of the continuing marriage of industry and government in a modern state.

Other sections present an interview with Horst Mahler, one of the gang's lawyers, and a highly amusing fictional staging of a radio board's debate over whether or not to broadcast Sophocles' *Antigone*, which is accused by a Catholic priest of subversive political sentiment.

Germany in Autumn, employing as it does such diverse techniques and visions, is of course uneven, and much of its effect is aided by a knowledge of German social and political life. Still, it is a valuable document of a society not all that divorced from our own, and its directors are clearly concerned with the dilemma of maintaining civil liberties even during a crisis of state (We had our own version, the War



Measures affair). That *Germany in Autumn* attracted the talent it did, and was so widely discussed and attended, attests to the seriousness, in a

country with a dark past, of the stakes involved: the always present danger of authoritarian reaction, and the survival of democracy itself.

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