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Art and Terror: Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Relation to the Red Army Faction

Joanie Lange
langej1@unlv.nevada.edu

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The Red Army Faction, known also as the Baader-Meinhof Gang, is Germany's most infamous, although not its most deadly, far-left, urban guerrilla terrorist organization. The urban guerilla trend is a slice of German history that defies simple explanation. Called terrorists by most, members of the RAF considered themselves activists and used violent methods to protest what they saw as a fascist, Nazi-run West German state. Their ideology was a mix of popular leftist sentiments from the student movement of the late 1960s and extreme Marxism-Leninism. Its members were mostly middle to upper-middle class educated youths who became radicalized enough to risk their lives and futures for the armed struggle against what they saw as an unjust and immoral Western world. Many of the RAF's members were or had aspired to be members of the creative intelligentsia, and these experiences influenced how the group portrayed themselves and their ideology. Within the group's first seven years, twenty seven people were killed by the group or in exchanges of gunfire, two were accidentally shot by police during investigations, and seventeen RAF members died.[1] Despite their brutal methods and extreme beliefs, the group's association with popular movements like anti-Vietnam and antifascist activism endeared them to some German leftists.

The Red Army Faction was formed in part as a response to Germany's past mistakes and contemporary political issues. Far-leftists in West Germany saw many aspects of their government as being fascist, such the polices' sometimes brutal treatment of political protestors.[2] Members of the RAF such as Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin engaged in conversations about Germany's Nazi past and its legacy in contemporary politics and society long before they became radicalized. In many ways these women embodied the idea of

[1] Stephan Aust, *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside story of the R.A.F.,* trans. Anthea Bell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 433.
[2] Ibid., 24-27.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung in their political beliefs before and during the RAF's existence. The term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which roughly translates to 'coming to terms with the past,' describes the public debates that take place over past atrocities. It is primarily related to discussions of the Nazi Era, but it can also be applied to other historical issues and other countries. In this project I argue that this term can also be applied to both the RAF's interpretations of National Socialism and to artist's historical and ongoing interpretations of the RAF itself.

The RAF, while not the most prolific of leftist terrorist groups in the 1970s, has been a surprisingly popular topic or source of inspiration for numerous artists over the past four decades. Similar to how the RAF used words, images, and then direct action to address Germany's Nazi past, artists have used their works to come to terms with the legacy of RAF terrorism. The principal goal of this paper is to explore the development of the RAF and subsequent artistic interpretations of it in relation to the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It will begin with a discussion of the contemporary political and historical questions posed by the RAF and then their efforts to artistically express their political beliefs. Then, I analyze the development of RAF-inspired art with a group of artworks created both before and after the RAF's dissolution in 1998.

Background to the RAF's Formation and Continued Popularity

The RAF's first generation was active during the "Red Decade" in West Germany, the most violent and militant time in the country's post-war history. Leftist terror in the Federal Republic was born out of the death of the Student Movement, which fractured into violent and nonviolent segments after two attacks on student protestors. The killing of Benno Ohnesorg by a plain-clothed officer during a protest against a visit to West Berlin by the Shah of Iran on June 2,

1967 is considered one of the catalysts for the formation of terrorist groups like the RAF, the Revolutionary Cells, and the June 2 Movement. This murder enraged student activists and radicalized many, as they thought it was clear evidence of a German police state. Student Movement leader Rudi Dutschke spoke out against this murder, and when an assassination attempt was made on his life by an anticommunist, angry students felt more convinced that peaceful protests were not enough and that armed resistance was necessary.

What sets the RAF apart is how they interacted with the public through words, images, and even their behavior in court. Both in the 1970s and today, the RAF was more well-known than their contemporaries and many civilians sympathized with their cause. RAF's militant actions protesting the Vietnam war endeared many student activists and leftists to their cause, as did their commitment to punishing ex-Nazis and criticizing the failures of denazification. Two out of three of its original leaders, Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, and around half of its members were women. Although they were not a feminist group, its members exemplified the sexual revolution of the '60's and the apparent gender equality within the group continues to interest people. The Revolutionary Cells and the June 2 Movement had similar ideologies as well as female members. However, there are not nearly as many books, movies, or paintings about the Revolutionary Cells, despite the fact that the Cells were responsible for more terror attacks and more deaths. While the Cells preferred its members to go about their normal lives, participating in jobs and normal political activities, the RAF required its members to go underground and abandon their normal lives.

The RAF as a Response to National Socialism

During the 1960s, German youths like those in the Student Movement tried to come to terms with their country's Nazi past. Often, debates over National Socialism and its legacy were

quite personal to Germans, with many expressing guilt and embarrassment over the mistakes of their country's previous generations. *Verganenheitsbewältigung* is often associated with a number of German authors, like those in Group 47, but it is not limited to the sphere of literature. Many of Group 47's authors, such as Heinrich Böll, wrote about life in the post-war period and the difficulties that that entailed, but during this time, it seemed that many Germans did not want to hear their viewpoints.[3]

The tendency to avoid discussing the Nazi Era changed when students during the late 1960s began to seriously re-evaluate their country's history as well as their families' roles in it.[4] Pondering the past for many Germans meant dealing with personal feelings of guilt and responsibility. Many youths worried that they had inherited the traits that made Nazis what they were. After all, many young people's parents had been Nazis or Nazi supporters, and many students of the previous generation had themselves been members of the Hitler Youth. Students and leftists began questioning why ex-Nazis could still hold power and wealth despite their past actions. For example, Kurt Kiesinger, West Germany's third chancellor, had himself been a member of the Nazi Party beginning in 1933. Within the German Student Movement, there was a strong feeling that words and politics were not enough to repent for the past and that direct actions were required to right the wrongs of their country's past and present. RAF members Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin were involved in discussions of National Socialism and its legacy before the creation of their group.

Before becoming radicalized, Ensslin was engaged in student protests and articulated strong moral and political convictions. The daughter of a Protestant pastor, Ensslin had been

[3] Vicki Lawrence," *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past," *Agni* no. 48 (January 1998): (110-114), 101.
[4] Ibid., 101.

deeply religious in her youth and saw the world through Puritan eyes. While spending a year in the United States on an exchange program, she developed a dislike for American Christians who, "turned Sunday service into a fashion show." [5] Ensslin's strong sense of morality ironically led her to become a terrorist. At first, she participated only in peaceful protests, but after Benno Ohnesorg's murder, she told a group of demonstrators that, "this fascist state means to kill us all… violence is the only way to answer violence. This is the Auschwitz generation, and there's no arguing with them!"[6] She saw the government as a continuation of National Socialism and became radicalized into believing that action was more important than peaceful protest.

Ensslin's first act of terrorism was committed in 1968 with the help of Andreas Baader, her boyfriend and future co-founder of the RAF. Together, they planted bombs in a department store that detonated in the middle of the night, harming no one. In a statement during their trial, Ensslin claimed that the bombing was committed, "in protest against people's indifference to the murder of the Vietnamese… We have found that words are useless without action."[7] Ensslin truly believed that violent action was the only appropriate response to the federal republic, which she deemed fascist. After the trial, her father called the crime an act of "holy self-realization such as we find mentioned in connection with saints."[8] Since the bombing injured no one and protested the Vietnam War, it was easy for some people, like Pastor Ensslin, to empathize with Baader and his daughter. Ulrike Meinhof, who was working as a columnist for the leftist magazine *Konkret*, was impressed by Ensslin after interviewing her in prison. She saw many similarities between the two of them.[9]

[5] Aust, Baader-Meinhof, 15.
[6] Ibid., 27.
[7] Ibid., 37.
[8] Ibid., 41.
[9] Ibid., 39.

Ulrike Meinhof was not raised as religiously as Ensslin, but she too was brought up as a Lutheran and maintained strong moral convictions which would impact her political beliefs. Protestant faith does seem to have some connection to German left-wing terrorists, as the majority of them grew up Protestant or without denomination.[10] In the 1950s she was a member of a socialist student union and formed an antinuclear weapons committee.[11] She also became enthusiastic about the Communist Party of Germany and the East German government. Communism, in her belief, was the," solution to lingering national socialism in West Germany."[12] West German emergency laws, which reduced some civil rights in case of an emergency, were evidence of latent fascism to Meinhof.

She compared contemporary politics to the Third Reich directly in the controversial column, "Hitler in You" when she wrote, "Just as we ask our parents about Hitler, one day we will be asked by our children about [Minister of Defense] Mr. [Franz Josef] Strauß."[13] Strauß tried to sue her for this slander, but the courts rejected his lawsuit, and Meinhof became a household name in West Germany.[14] Her desire to combat what she saw as latent fascism led her eventually to join forces with Ensslin and Baader and to become one of the founders of the Red Army Faction. Analyzing the Nazi Era in relation to contemporary politics and culture was integral to the formation of Meinhof and Ensslins' political beliefs, and the RAF would not have been formed if not for the Nazi Era and its historical implications.

The Red Army Faction and its Relationship to the Arts

[10] Leith Passmore, *Ulrike Meinhof and the Red Army Faction: Performing Terrorism*, (New York: Palgrave Mamillan, 2011), 6.
[11] Ibid., 13.
[12] Ibid., 14.
[13] Ibid., 15.
[14] Aust, *Baader-Meinhof*. 22.

Although the RAF had a real political ideology and at least reasonably clear goals, its members also embodied some of this concept through the imagery and words they used. The RAF produced a number of highly influential photographs and images that have since been ingrained into German pop culture, such as their insignia showing an MP5 submachine gun on a red star. By using the USSR's signature red star behind a gun, the RAF was stating its purpose as a part of the armed struggle to bring a Marxist revolution to Germany and then the world. Even the RAF's name is meant to harken back to this idea; they called themselves *Die Rote Armee Fraktion* because they truly saw themselves as just a *fraction* of a larger armed resistance. These are just a few examples of the ways in which the RAF artistically expressed itself and developed an aesthetic that would later become separated from its original meaning.

In academic literature about RAF's imagery and related artworks, little attention has been given to the subject of art that RAF members themselves made, and a thorough analysis of their works before the RAF existed could help to contextualize their radicalization. Many of them had already produced writings or works of art that addressed contemporary and historical social and political problems before the birth of the RAF. Meinhof became well known in leftist circles not only for her articles dealing with politics and social issues, but also her appearances on TV debates. In the late 60's she wrote and directed a film, *Bambule*, roughly translated as *Riot*, about the oppressive conditions experienced by youths in a girl's home.[15] Meinhof's fateful decision to help participate in Andreas Baader's escape from prison happened just days before *Bambule's* first scheduled airing, and the film was then not shown and subsequently released only in 1994.

[15] Ibid., 53-56.

Ulrike was not the only RAF member who had made herself known for artistic work before going underground, however. Holger Meins had attended film school and produced a few films in the late 60's, such as a documentary on a homeless man living with tuberculosis titled *Oskar Langenfeld* (1967) and a short film showing how to make Molotov cocktails which has since been lost. As an active RAF member, Holger and Jan-Carl Raspe began making a film that was to focus on liberation movements and international politics. Seeking the help of a leftist sculptor and welder, they designed prop grenades, pipe bombs, and later a device called the *Babybombe*.[16] This device was shaped like a pregnant belly and could be strapped onto a woman's torso. Although this prop was never used by the terrorists, and their film was never finished, this baby-bomb was an instance of RAF members weaponizing the feminine, and this image would later be referenced in RAF artworks. Ulrike, Jan-Carl, and Holger used their art works to explore societal woes and express their own political beliefs.

Ensslin made her first and only acting appearance in a short film titled *Das Abbonement* (*The Subscription*) in 1967. This experimental film was long thought to have been lost, but short clips can now be found in various documentaries.[17] The plot revolves around a man who has become tormented over the news that he receives daily from his newspaper subscription. The world described in the newspaper is cold and dark and causes the man extreme grief and anxiety. Ensslin portrays a sort of dream girl for the disturbed man, who photographs her in nude poses as she dances around and snorts something off of her hand. The story is meant to symbolize the power that media has over its viewers, but it is also emblematic of the Zeitgeist of the late

[16] Charity Scribner, *After the Red Army Faction: Gender, Culture, and Militancy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 28.
[17] *Tödliche Illusion*, directed by Helmar Büchel, (2007: History Channel).

1960's. The grief the man feels over world news can be compared to the attitudes the RAF members which contributed to their radicalization.

Another RAF member, Astrid Proll, studied photography and met Andreas Baader through her brother, Thorwald, who joined and left the group quite early in its history. Astrid took pictures of the group and later combined these with other photographers' works and complied them in a photo-history book, *Pictures on the Run 67-77*. She begins her book by briefly discussing her involvement in the group and describing the RAF's attitude towards art and aesthetics. Ironically, in the intro to this book of pictures she states that they considered art "bourgeois" and aesthetics unimportant.[18] Despite her statements, images were central to the RAF's terrorism.[19] Images like Holger Mein's emaciated corpse after his death from hunger strike served as a rallying cry for the RAF and its sympathizers. This photograph appears in Proll's book, as does one of street graffiti reading: "Holger Meins, the people will avenge you."[20] Photos like these, whether bourgeois or not, were integral to the RAF's communication as they served to rally German citizens to their cause. Printed images of the RAF were later used in artworks such by artists like Gerhard Richter, who will be discussed later, as reference pictures. Regardless of what Proll stated, art became central to the way that the RAF has been interpreted.

On some occasions, the RAF's communication through photographs hurt their public image. Public sympathy for the group decreased after photographs and videos of kidnapped industrialist and ex-SS member Hanns Martin Schleyer were released. Second generation RAF members abducted him and unsuccessfully attempted to coerce the West German state into releasing the surviving first generation leaders during the events of the German Autumn. The

[18] Astrid Proll, *Pictures on the Run 67-77*, (Zurich, Berlin, New York, Scalo, 1998), 9.
[19] Passmore, *Ulrike Meinhof*, 5.
[20] Proll, *Pictures*, my translation, 110-111.

photos of Schleyer in captivity portrayed a weary and at times annoyed looking middle aged man.[21] Despite his history in the Nazi Party, the public could not help but sympathize with him.

Prada Meinhof and the Evolution of RAF-Inspired Artworks

Terrorism is always intended to convey a message or ideology and with this in mind, some authors have analyzed terrorist acts themselves as a kind of performance upon a public stage. Sociologist Brian Jenkins argues that, "terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not the actual victim. Terrorism is theatre."[22] While this certainly is an oversimplification of violent acts, this statement is not meant to downplay their seriousness but rather to shape a way that terrorism can be understood.

The idea of terrorism as performance can also be tied to the concept of *Prada Meinhof*. This term was invented by artist-historian duo Scott King and Matt Worley in a 1999 issue of *Crash!* magazine. [23] It is a term for political actions or demonstrations in which the participants see themselves as actors on an alternative stage, with aesthetics being more important than ideology. It is the antithesis of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as it disregards serious analysis of past atrocities. Art about or inspired by the RAF often falls under one of these categories: either it is serious, somber, and attempts to address historical questions, or it uses the aesthetics of terror superficially without deeper consideration.

Prada Meinhof can be simplified as terrorist-chic. It is exemplified by fashionistas who wear combat boots, red stars, and Che Guevara's face purely for aesthetics and with little regard for political theory or history. The RAF's imagery has reemerged at times in popular counter-

[21] Ibid., 126-127.
[22] Passmore, *Ulrike Meinhof,* 2.
[23] Scott King and Matt Worley, *Prada Meinhof*, in *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach, (Berlin: Steidl/ KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2005), 224.

culture fashion, similar to how punks like Sid Vicious in the 1970s appropriated Nazi imagery by wearing swastikas in an effort to shock rather than as a display of personal beliefs. The modern band Prada Meinhoff, whose lead singer seemingly emulates Gudrun Ensslin and whose music videos visually reference the RAF, is unsurprisingly a perfect example of this term. This band is only one example of *Prada Meinhof* in recent art.

Art About the RAF Prior to 1998

Author Heinrich Böll, who was an author associated with postwar literature and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung,* wrote a novel inspired by the violent political climate of the 1970s. *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, addresses the feelings of suspicion and irrationality that plagued Germans because of leftist terrorism, as well as the hysteria that can be caused by news media.[24] Its main character, Katharina Blum, is an innocent woman who finds herself at the center of a media frenzy that destroys her life. Blum is quickly accused of being a criminal after she begins a relationship with a man who, unbeknownst to her, is accused of being an anarchist and terrorist. Police suspect her of being his accomplice. Throughout the novel, Blum's dignity and mental health are tested by these accusations and by an unscrupulous tabloid reporter who will not leave her or her family alone. In the end, Blum becomes the violent criminal that she was accused of being when she murders the tabloid reporter. Her lover, it is revealed, was only a thief and deserter of the Bundeswehr, not an anarchist or terrorist. *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* shows how an innocent life can be turned upside down by the combination of judicial blundering and an unrestrained media frenzy.[25] It was written in 1975, in the midst of the Red

[24] Heinrich Böll, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum: How Violence Develops and Where It can Lead*, trans. Leila Vennewitz, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).
[25] Kimberly Mair, *Guerilla Aesthetics: Art, Memory, and the West German Urban Guerrilla*, (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 179.

Decade, and thus cannot be classified as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It is an instance of Böll trying to "come to terms" with his contemporary society.

An early portrayal of the RAF in film has been integral to the interpretation of post-militant Germany. In 1978, only a year after the events of the German Autumn, the film *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*) was released.[26] The "German Autumn," a term coined by this film, refers to the events surrounding the kidnapping of industrialist and ex-SS member Hanns Martin Schleyer and the hijacking of a Lufthansa flight by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, both in an attempt to force RAF prisoners' release. After the *Landshut* plane was stormed in Mogadishu and its passengers freed, the Stammheim "Death Night" occurred on October 18, 1977. On the morning of the 18th, RAF members Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were found dead in their cells from apparent suicides. Imprisoned RAF member Irmgard Möller survived four stab wounds to the chest and has since maintained that she did not attempt suicide but was the victim of a failed extrajudicial execution.[27] The three prisoners' deaths were ruled suicides by the state, but to the free members of the RAF and its supporters, it was murder. Schleyer was executed a day after the Death Night.[28] The German Autumn was a shock for Germany, and it inspired the creation of a number of films in the few years immediately after 1977.

Deutschland im Herbst is an omnibus film, an episodic collection of various directors' short films. All are centered around the German public trying to come to terms with the aftermath of the German Autumn and the Death Night. It includes real footage of the funerals of RAF members as well as their victim Schleyer. The interplay between documentary and fiction

[26] *Deutschland im Herbst.* Directed by Rainer Fassbinder, et al. (Germany: Arthaus Filmverleih, 1978)
[27] Aust, Baader-Meinhof, 411-412.
[28] Ibid., 418.

and the diversity of emotions and reactions shown in the film effectively capture the confused and mournful attitudes that the German people felt about the events of late 1977. Its episodes portray the anxiety and despair that Germans felt about the Death Night as well as the social questions being posed by leftist circles.[29] A discussion of all its episodes would be far too lengthy, so for the purposes of this work, only one director's contribution will be analyzed.

Director Werner Fassbinder's episode in *Deutschland im Herbst* is seemingly autobiographical. He is its main character, his boyfriend and mother make up its supporting cast, and it was filmed primarily in his apartment. The plot centers around Fassbinder's frustrated and aggressive emotional state after the events of the German Autumn. Over the course of the episode he gets into a physical altercation with his boyfriend, snorts cocaine, and berates his mother for her seemingly conformist response to the RAF. She, who has personal experience living under Hitler's regime, is uncomfortable discussing the RAF publicly, as she is worried that whatever she says might be twisted and misconstrued by others. Fassbinder criticizes his mother's discomfort over speaking publicly about the RAF and calls her desire for the imprisoned terrorists to be executed antidemocratic. They continue arguing about democracy until the end of the episode, when in the last line Fassbinder's mother states that the best kind of government would be run by an autocrat, albeit one who is good and orderly. Fassbinder's episode in this film gives a juxtaposition between the opinions of younger and older generations over the German Autumn. Fassbinder, who is somewhat sympathetic to the RAF, wants desperately to talk about it and criticize the Federal Republic for all of its perceived un-democratic ways, while his mother seems to revert back to how one would speak behave during

[29] Schribner, After the RAF, 29.

the Third Reich. She is afraid of the consequences of speaking up, while her son is afraid of what will happen if he does not.

In *Die Dritte Generation*, Fassbinder returned to the subject of terrorism but approached it with a much different tone.[30] The plot of this film is darkly comedic and centers on a group of middle-class Germans who decide to follow in the RAF's footsteps. Unbeknownst to the so-called Third Generation, their leader, August, is in reality an agent provocateur working for the government. They make a plan to kidnap a capitalist, P.J. Lurz, who happens to be secretly funding their organization by making payments to August. Lurz supports them in a bid to sell more security-related computer programs to the federal government. The satirical plot shows how the would-be terrorists, despite wanting to continue the RAF's work, end up working for the forces they want to destroy. In the end, the government is able to erode German's civil liberties in their quest to stop terrorism, Lurz makes more money selling his security systems, and a number of the self-declared Third Generation die.

Both of Fassbinder's works explore feelings of mistrust for the government and its policies in searching for wanted terrorists. Some of the plot points in *Die Dritte Generation* were based in reality. For instance, Peter Urbach worked as a counter-intelligence agent in the late 1960s. He was assigned to investigate Berlin's communist scene, much like the character of August. Urbach interacted with members of Commune 1, a group with which which Baader had once lived, as well as members of the RAF and other leftist-terrorist groups. [31] He supplied

[30] *Die Dritte Generation*, directed by Werner Fassbinder, (Germany: Tango Films, 1979).
[31] Aust, Baader-Meinhof. 28-29, 36.

leftists with Molotov cocktails and other explosives but also provided the federal government with information that led to the arrest of Baader. [32]

The real West Germany government, much like the version portrayed in Fassbinder's film, sometimes took measures in their fight against terrorism that were illegal or immoral. In one blunder, while Schleyer was being held hostage, police officers were able to locate an apartment that "met all the criteria [the police were searching for], and had been rented in a rather suspicious manner."[33] A few police officers even visited this apartment complex in which Schleyer was being held, but since they did not have the authority to act on their own, they chose not to storm it.[34] Authorities tried to cover up this blunder, but eventually it was revealed.[35] The erosion of civil rights that occurs in *Die Dritte Generation* also happened in reality. By 1977, the West German government had become almost omniscient by the use of, "investigation by scanning, surveillance, the PIOS computer system, […] more money, more offices, better equipment for the police, for Counter-Intelligence, for the Border Police; new laws, fortified courtrooms, high-security sections in prison."[36] Indeed, these measures made the West Germany regime much more authoritarian than it had been during the late 1960s, when the Student Movement began accusing it of being fascist.

In 1988, the painter Gerhard Richter displayed his cycle of paintings titled *18. Oktober 1977*, and this cycle has also been foundational in RAF interpretation. The oil paintings are based directly on black and white photographs of Meinhof, Baader, and Ensslin, both alive and

[32] Ibid., 58.
[33] Ibid., 320-322
[34] Ibid., 331-323
[35] Ibid., 425.
[36] Ibid., 420.

dead, as well as some of their belongings, scenes from prison cells, and their funeral.[37] His reference photos were taken directly from news publications, so they would be familiar to most German adults. Richter's paintings look almost identical to their references except for a stylistic blur that gives the figures an eerie and dream-like quality. Richter has never described what the paintings were intended to mean; he instead has left it to the viewer to interpret the cycle. However, he has explained why he chose the Baader-Meinhof group as inspiration. Although he did not sympathize with the group's methods or goals, he did respect their unwavering determination and bravery. Concerning the events of the German Autumn, Richter explains that they stood, "for a horror that distressed me and has haunted me as unfinished business ever since, despite all my efforts to suppress it."[38] His paintings were a way to express his feelings over the German Autumn in a detached way, by portraying the terrorists as they were but making no clear statement about his feelings towards them.

Seeing the terrorists portrayed in this somber yet artistic fashion has made it easier for some people to deal with their deaths and with the destruction they caused. Astrid Proll, a former member of the RAF and self-described "activist" states that it was not until this cycle was displayed that she was able to look upon the pictures of her dead friends and comrades. Freed from, "mass media context," these paintings allowed her to deal with her own past.[39] Richter's cycle was the first well-publicized fine artwork to directly portray the RAF, and it unsurprisingly garnered mixed responses. Many early reactions scrutinized Richter and his intentions, suspecting that he meant for the paintings to illiterate sympathy for the terrorists.[40] Others have

[37] Gerhard Richter, *18. Oktober 1977*, (New York: The Modern Museum of Art: 1988).
[38] "Baader-Meinhof", Gerhard Richter, accessed October 25, 2019, https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/baader-meinhof-56.
[39] Proll, *Pictures*, 7.
[40]Mair, *Guerilla Aesthetics*, 177.

suggested that the paintings should be seen in relation to the year they were first displayed, 1988, and the political landscape in Germany which was centered around questions of East-West relations.[41]

When the cycle was sold to the Museum of Modern Art in 1995, some Germans spoke about the loss of a significant piece of German art, as "*18. Oktober 1977* was then regarded as a work of national significance."[42] Foreign museum-goers cannot understand the cultural significance of the cycle's images and titles unless they are educated on the RAF before viewing, but many exhibitions fail to provide audiences with adequate context of the painting. Richter's cycle has been significant to the interpretation of RAF history, but removed from its homeland and context, the cycle eludes the understanding of many audiences.

Art About the RAF After 1998

The Red Army Faction officially disbanded in 1998, announcing it via a letter sent to the Reuters news agency, sparking a surge in RAF art and bringing the history of the organization to a new, younger generation. A period of RAF revivalism ensued, peaking during the 2000's and including many satirical interpretations of the group and its legacy. The ending of the RAF's turbulent history certainly stirred up new public interest, but it also ensured that artist could feel less threatened by the possibility of a violent reaction against artistic portrayals that took liberties in their interpretations.

One of the most controversial examples of this revivalism was an art exhibition hosted by the Kunst-Werke Institute in Berlin in 2005. Originally entitled *Mythos RAF*, the name later changed to *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF Ausstellung* (*Regarding Terror: The RAF*

[41] Ibid., 185.
[42] Rainer Usselmann, "18. Oktober 1977: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience" *Art Journal* vol. 61 no. 1, spring 2002, 4-25.

Exhibition) after a public backlash. The original title was criticized for being insensitive to victims by mythologizing the group, but the new name did little to quell complaints that the exhibition should not exist at all, regardless of its title. The exhibition was modeled after another milestone of post-militant interpretation, Stephan Aust's book *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, which focuses primarily on the lives of the first leaders: Ensslin, Baader, and Meinhof.[43] Like the book, the exhibition begins with an exploration of postwar democratic initiatives and ends with the group's disbanding in 1998, and it ignores the group's connections with East Germany and Palestinian liberation groups. Author Charity Scribner criticized the way that the exhibition emphasized the media's role as opposed to, "the questions of why so many visual artists have fixated on the RAF's actions, how the artists have handled and transformed documentary material, and what we can learn from this aesthetic formation."[44] The exhibition, in Scribner's opinion, left serious analysis to the artists themselves.

This exhibition was the culmination of decades of artworks about the Red Army Faction. It was a comprehensive display of the numerous ways artists have dealt with the subject of RAF terrorism as well as the political debates that arose from them. As well as including the cycle of paintings *18. Oktober 1977*, *Regarding Terror* included over 50 artists with differing interpretations of the RAF, some of which will be later analyzed. Speaking about the exhibition, one German newspaper argued that, "in the art system, extreme, utopian, and even inacceptable moral positions can find their representation".[45] Indeed, many critics found artworks of terrorists morally inacceptable, both for their dismissive attitudes toward victims and for the possibility that these works could lead to a new generation of radicals wanting to follow in the RAF's

[43] Scribner, After the RAF, 55.
[44] Ibid., 163.
[45] *Zur Vorstellun des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung, Band 2*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach, my translation, (Berlin: Steidl/ KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2005), 16.

footsteps. Although this exhibition came soon after the disbanding of the RAF and the subsequent popularity of *Prada Meinhof*, not all of its works can be said to fall under this category. While some of its works lack serious consideration of RAF violence and can be classified as examples of *Prada Meinhof*, many others take a more serious approach in portraying the RAF.

Although no copycat crimes arose because of this exhibition or the works displayed within, some of the works themselves dealt with the potential of youths becoming radicalized through an unhealthy obsession with the terrorists and *Prada Meinhof.* One such example is the novel *The Baader-Meinhof Affair*, described by its author Erin Cosgrove as a, "manifesto of romance."[46] Cosgrove also produced a short animated film narrated by Italian romance-novel model Fabio entitled "A Heart Lies Beneath" that includes some of the novel's key points and best lines.[47] *The Baader-Meinhof Affair* satirizes both *Prada Meinhof* and the romance genre of novels in general. Cosgrove is a performance artist from the United States, which makes her unique amongst the mainly German artist whose works were exhibited in *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors*. Since her novel is set in the United States, it contains an outsider's perspective of the RAF's legacy and *Prada Meinhof* phenomenon.

This satirical novel describes a love affair between two students, a naïve sophomore girl who studies serial killers, and a junior boy who as well as being a "card-carrying Maoist" is in a Baader-Meinhof cult. The cult is made up of mainly rich kids who choose to dress in tatters, abstain from shampoo, and obsess over, "all things Baader and/or Meinhof." The novel mocks the contemporary trend of young people modeling themselves after or even worshipping the

[46] Erin Cosgrove, *The Baader Meinhof Affair*, (New York: Printed Matter Inc., 2003), 5.
[47] Erin Cosgrove, "A Heart Lies Beneath," *Youtube*, video file, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxbKl-2WeGc&t=373s.

RAF as a show of rebellion. It also mocks the tendency of some people to adopt violent personas or beliefs in a bid to fit in with a group or, in this case, attract a crush. Mara, the leading lady, spaces out whenever her Baader-Meinhof obsessed friends and love interest talk about Marxist theory or RAF history. She prefers instead to daydream about what she would wear to their hypothetical bank robbery ("a black rubber t-shirt like that chick in the *Matrix*"). Mara's character is a perfect representation of *Prada Meinhof*; styling herself after the RAF purely for fashion and popularity's sake.

Since the characters are Americans, they often apply the RAF's way of thinking onto American subjects. A reoccurring topic discussed by the Baader-Meinhof aficionados, and ignored by Mara, is the imprisonment and death sentence of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Abu-Jamal was a journalist and political activist before being accused of murdering a police officer in 1981.[48] While incarcerated, Abu-Jamal has written prolifically on the subjects of the American criminal system, his time in the Black Panther Party, and so on. Mumia's death sentence was reduced to a life sentence in 2011.[49] When Cosgrove's novel was published in 2002, Abu-Jamal was still on death row. In the novel, the aficionados hold meetings discussing Abu-Jamal and organize "Free Mumia" activities.[50] By applying RAF talking points and politics to an American issue, the characters engage in a kind of American *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As opposed to National Socialism, the history they try to come to terms with is that of African enslavement and its legacy of racism in society and the judicial system. The characters, who are all white and upper-

[48] Nyle Fort, "Insurgent Intellectual: Mumia Abu-Jamal in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 28 no. 3, December 2014, 140-152.
[49] Ibid., 142.
[50] Cosgrove, Afair, 40-45.

middle class, exhibit personal feelings of guilt towards this issue as well as an obligation to help Abu-Jamal, much like how RAF members felt about the Nazi Era.

The film *Raspberry Reich* takes the concept of romance and *Prada Meinhof* to the next level, while also calling back to earlier pieces of RAF history. It references agit-prop films like the previously discussed *Die Dritte Generation* that, "playfully illustrate revolutionary principles."[51]The plot centers around a young woman who desires to emulate Gudrun Ensslin enough to change her name to Gudrun. As the leader of a group of young male revolutionaries, each named after a RAF member or other revolutionary, she convinces through badly acted, Marxist jargon that, "heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses!" and that this fascist theory of relationships must be replaced with homosexual praxis.[52] The film quickly devolves into gay porn as she convinces her boyfriend and comrades to join the "Homosexual Intifada." As absurd and explicit as this film is, it has some basis in RAF history. For instance, the real RAF also had members who were in same-sex relationships, such as Astrid Proll. Framing this film around the character of Gudrun also references back to the short film that the real Gudrun once performed in, *Das Abonnement,* which also contained many nude scenes.

Director Bruce LaBruce stated that he did not intend for *Raspberry Reich* to be taken seriously as an investigation of terrorist practices.[53] The plot's purposeful absurdity perhaps criticizes the *Prada Meinhof* trend. However, LaBruce also describes how the process of filming the movie resulted in the cast and crew feeling a bit like urban guerillas themselves. They constantly had to evade police while shooting without permits, or when actors wearing balaclavas and wielding fake guns scared neighbors. The crew emulated urban guerillas by

[51] Mair, Guerilla Aesthetics, 244.
[52] *The Raspberry Reich*, directed by Bruce la Bruce, (Berlin: GMFilms, 2004).
[53] Mair, Guerilla Aesthetics. 234.

dressing up as terrorists and breaking laws. LaBruce's handling of the RAF legacy is mostly nonintellectual and farcical. Although Gudrun's monologues offer a bit of education on RAF history and ideology, they did not attempt to seriously interpret this information. Gudrun's fledging terrorist group, despite their knowledge of leftist politics, are portrayed as naïve and incompetent. However, their method of filming allowed for the crew themselves to take on the role of urban guerillas and understand how RAF members might have felt while evading arrest. The creation of *Raspberry Reich* was thus in some ways a more personal way of interpreting the RAF in comparison to other artworks.

Upon the 30th anniversary of the German Autumn, a return to more serious portrayals of the RAF occurred. The Baader Meinhof Complex was released in 2008, and it is arguably the most well-known film about the Red Army Faction. Based on the book of the same title by Stephan Aust, the movie tries to give an objective, nonbiased account of the group's first generation.[54] Aust himself once trained as a journalist under Meinhof while she was still with *Konkret*, and although Aust was not a member of the RAF, he was involved with returning Meinhof's twin girls to their father from Palestine. Peter Homann, once a journalist and friend of Meinhof, had joined the RAF and went to Jordan to train with them. However, after he was suspected of being a traitor, he escaped and called up Aust, who was researching Meinhof for a magazine.[55] Meinhof was considering placing the girls in a kind of school for suicide bombers, so the two men swiftly intervened and fetched the girls from their hiding place in Italy and brought them to their father. Aust may well have saved their lives.

[54] *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, directed by Uli Edel, (Berlin: Constantin Film, 2008).
[55] Aust., Baader-Meinhof, 75-78.

Despite his personal connections with Meinhof and the RAF, Aust's account of their history is not overtly sympathetic. As previously mentioned, he often glosses over the group's connections with foreign politics and focuses mainly on the lives of Ensslin, Meinhof, and Baader. This is even more apparent in the film adaptation. Some German critics, like those at *Der Spiegel*, criticized its lack of a clear position, while *Die Tageszeitung* praised its open-endedness.[56] Aust does not condemn or support the RAF's actions, nor does the film, so it is open to a wide range of criticism. The film is useful in its simplified summary of the RAF's history, but says little of the RAF's victims who were not politically significant and give viewers only a surface level understanding of the RAF. This is likely due to its relatively short length, as a comprehensive account of the RAF and its connections to foreign politics and contemporary terrorist groups would necessitate volumes of writing.

Despite the serious tone throughout the film, critics have complained about the glamorization of RAF members. One critic compared *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*'s portrayal of the terrorists, specifically of Ensslin and Baader, to the American criminal couple Bonnie and Clyde. He went on to write, "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."[57] However, this changes when, "the latter parts of the film underline the terrorists' idiocy or insanity." The famous actors, stylish costuming, and numerous nude scenes probably contribute to the interpretation of this film as an example of *Prada Meinhof*, but it would be unfair to categorize the entire film under this label.

[56] Christina Gerhardt, "The Baader-Meinhof Complex," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 63 no. 2, winter 2009, 60-61.
[57] Noah Soltau. "The Aesthetics of Violence and Power in Uli Edel's *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex," Imaginations: Journal of Cross Cultural Image Studies*, Vol. 5 no. 2, February 2016, 29-45.

Recently, a return to the trend of *Prada Meinhof* can be seen in the Band Prada Meinhoff that formed in 2017 and is composed of a duo who makes techno-style dance tunes. The band's singer, Chrissi Nichols, seems to model her appearance after Gudrun Ensslin, and perhaps this contributed to their chosen name. Prada Meinhoff is the ultimate realization of the *Prada Meinhof* concept, it has taken the aesthetic of RAF's urban guerrillas and divorced them almost entirely from ideology, history, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The duo's songs do not focus specifically on politics, and in interviews they avoid explaining the choice of their band name and the original inventors of the concept. Instead, they have opted to leave it up to their audience to interpret their name.[58]

Music videos like the one filmed for the song "Cocktail" aesthetically reference RAF terrorism.[59] In the video, a middle aged man has a sack put over his head with Prada Meinhoff's symbol, a handgun over a red star, printed on it. He is taken to a dance club where he soon is overtaken by the music and begins to dance along, eventually kissing another man before being returned to where he was found. The most overtly political line within its lyrics translates as, "Molotovs and boots and fairness/ cocktail party, today nothing awareness/ Politics and wild mob/ No opinion on it today." The line "no opinion on it today" is a constant theme in their work, which lacks any consideration of the history of their aesthetic inspiration. Politics occasionally appear in their songs, but it never very clear. The band is probably aware of what the *Prada Meinhof* critique is, and thus their aesthetics seem to be more political than their lyrics.

[58] "PRADA MEINHOFF Machen Elektro-Punk-Rock und "haben relative wenig Angst vor Irgendwas"" The Pick.De, May 19, 2017, accessed December 1,2019, https://thepickde.wordpress.com/2017/05/19/interview-sind-prada-meinhoff/

[59] Prada Meinhoff. "PRADA MEINHOF – Cocktail (Official Video)." *Youtube.* Video file, April 18, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esHKfmq3ZM0.

Conclusion

How one chooses to react to historical violence can directly impact the future. The RAF proved this in their quest to terrorize West Germany. RAF members like Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin grew up with strong moral convictions and feelings of obligation to prevent fascism from reemerging in Germany. Ironically, this resulted in a tightening of security measures in West Germany, and the necessity for a new generation of Germans to interpret a new violent historical phase. Artists, authors, and film directors interpreted the RAF in many different ways. The way these artists have dealt with RAF history can be divided into two camps: on one hand, works that try to seriously address historical questions, and on the other hand, works that reference the aesthetics of urban guerillas without meaningful interpretation. Germany's violent past, both in relation to National Socialism and leftist terrorism, is constantly being reinterpreted.

The Red Army Faction has been and still is a popular source of inspiration for artists of all kinds and this trend has in part happened because RAF history is still relevant to modern day Germany. The RAF brought the issues of the Vietnam War, the continued influence of ex-Nazis in post-war society, and immoral or illegal acts of the government to the forefront of the German Zeitgeist in the 1970s. Why the group's members became radicalized, whether or not they committed suicide or were murdered, and to what degree sympathy for their ideas is appropriate are just a few of the questions artists have posed over the last four decades. None has been satisfactorily answered, and this contributes to the RAF's ongoing infamy. Undoubtably, art concerning the Faction will continue to be made, and considering the 50th anniversary of the German Autumn will occur within the next decade, a fresh public debate will probably occur.

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