

Document Citation

Title	In gefahr und größter not bringt der mittelweg den tod
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	In gefahr und grösster not bringt der mittelweg den tod (The middle of the road is a very dead end), Kluge, Alexander, 1975

The Middle of the Road is a Very Dead End.

In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod

IN DANGER AND, IN GREATEST NEED, THE MIDDLE WAY TO DEATH MUST LEAD.

Federal Republic of Germany 1974. Production: RK-Film Munich.
Direction: Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz. Photography: Edgar Reitz, Alfred Hürmer. Editing: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus.
Cast: Dagmar Böddrich, Jutta Winkelmann

Frankfurt, ten days in February 1974: a fragmented world.

"By giving us a 'look at the world', it remains itself invisible: its methods remain invisible, the laws of the world which it presents us with remain incomprehensible".

"The central theme of the 'Wochenschau' (weekly film news magazine) is destruction: it is discernible throughout".

Kluge's and Reitz's new film immediately reminded me of Enzensbergers essay of 1957, "Fragmented world: anatomy of a 'Wochenschau'", from which I have taken the quotations above. Kluge and Reitz spent ten days (approximately the period covered by a "Wochenschau") filming public events in Frankfurt: house occupations, house demolitions, a carnival, the local branch conference of the SPD, a refresher course of young managers, a meeting of astrophysics experts, street clashes. The fictional figures, a woman who 'sleeps around' and an East German lady spy, are introduced into the film so incidentally and realistically and they leave so inconspicuously, that one hardly registers them as having been 'planted'. Viewers of this film will undoubtedly make the same criticism as Enzensberger did of the original 'Wochenschau'. There is no analysis, no perspective. All the film shows is a chaos, a 'fragmented world'.

Here are some suggestions as to how Kluge's and Reitz's film could be read: the film really IS a 'Wochenschau' (i.e. a look at the week) and it consciously follows 'Wochenschau' rules. That's to say: it makes the public aware of these rules. For decades hardly anybody protested about the 'Wochenschau', because the chaos presented was artificially made coherent, but now people are getting worked up about "In danger and in greatest need", because just such a sugar coating process is not to be found. There's no commentator to emphasize the scientific value of the astrophysics experts conference, or to point out how beneficial well-schooled junior managers are for the 'common good'. There is no newsreader to assure us how jolly the carnival is, no link man to emphasize the benefits of ripping down houses for urban replanning. Everybody - the boss of a demolition firm, the carnivalists, the up and coming manager, the astrophysics experts - speaks for himself in a completely meaningless often inhuman manner, far removed from human beings or human needs. This speech making is as sad as it is grotesquely funny. What could be more tragic than a carnival of professional carnival makers ?

What could be funnier than a police president, who justifies himself at the SPD conference without being able to justify himself? Indeed the last two sentences could be reversed: what is funnier than a sad carnival and what is sader than a funny police president? This ambivalence is one of perhaps the only constant factor in the film. People who expect a film to make straightforward statements will be disappointed.

Enzensberger's call for a critical 'Wochenschau' is not answered by Kluge and Reitz, but they do prepare the ground. Remnants of the old 'Wochenschau' that might have stayed stuck in our heads, are cleared out. How successful they have been in this respect is shown by the following example: in the traditional manner a newscaster announces that Kissinger has once more embarked upon a peace mission in the middle east, but as yet has had no success. Seated before our TV sets we would receive such news in a suitably serious manner, but in the cinema we roar with laughter, because the film has succeeded in sharpening our wits enough to recognise 'misleading' voices.

Destruction is the central theme of this film: with Frankfurt as example we experience the grotesque and depressing decline of our capitalistic industrial, bureaucratic state. At the same time, however, destruction is the formalistic method of the film: it destroys the usual fear - allaying, wishful - thinking, manner of representing this decline.

I could imagine the same directors making a second film, which also had Frankfurt as its theme, and which developed radical concepts for townplanning, environmental protection, and organisation of town life. Both films then run in adjacent cinemas. Regardless which film the public sees first, they would be amazed (or complain about) too much optimism in the one and too much pessimism in the other; the second puts the first one in perspective, but can itself only be correctly read with reference to the first. That is to say: radical THINKING does not exclude a compromise in TREATMENT, indeed it CONSCIOUSLY allows for it.

In saying that I don't want, with the advantage of hindsight, to attribute to "In danger and greatest need" a meaning it doesn't have. I merely mean that on the one hand the film is crying out for a counterpart, and that the viewer is justified in demanding some sort of perspective, but that on the other it is precisely this film that has prompted the viewer to make a demand. Perhaps we should make this demand of ourselves: as long as this other film ISN'T showing at the cinema next door, then it should be taking shape inside the head of the viewer.

Wilhelm Roth
"Film-Korrespondenz" 2/1975,