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THE FILMS OF R. W. FASSBINDER

October 5, 1974: KATZELMACHER (THE FLATTERER)

As noted in our October Calendar, this film does not have English subtitles. The following synopsis and reviews should provide enough information for a good comprehension of the action and meaning of the film.

SYNOPSIS:

Marie belongs to Erich. Paul sleeps with Helga. Elisabeth supports Peter. Rosy does it with Franz and gets paid: a group of youths without illusions, without hopes, living in grey rear buildings. Then Jorgos the Greek arrives, a worker. He cannot understand German, but has to defend himself straight away against the aggressive hate for foreigners which the young men confront him with, especially because his shy charm is attractive to the girls.

The male members of the clan want everything to be the way it always was, with orderly relationships above all to their girls. They brutally beat up the incomprehending Greek.

EXCERPT FROM A GERMAN CRITIQUE:

"Fassbinder demonstrates the mechanisms of a latent fascism and of an escalation of denunciation and violence with the cool abstractness of a model. The environment of the depicted group is only felt through the impressions of the direct soundtrack. The film has a chance of being convincing because it functions smoothly and perfectly. It has the proving power of a demonstrational model. Fassbinder's film also achieves the beauty of a model; which means it is suspenseful and entertaining. The interest in that which is to be proven is not suppressed by theorizing. One recognizes the way they speak, but it is new nevertheless, because they pronounce it in a different way. The light, almost white compositions seem everyday-like, but just that frightens because of its isolation: the meanest conversation on the Greek takes place in the pub. Just as the butcher at the market talks about a pig, the youths describe the vilest acts of vengeance on the Greek, while he sits there and is as friendly as the pig at the market, which also doesn't understand a word.

That is when the film really works. It is frightening to observe what emotions are released, but one still has to laugh when the blond hits his girl on the head to make her shut up.

'Katzelmacher' may be too slick for cineasts. It will find its support in the small towns and not only there, because the people won't say: it's only a poorly made film or only art, so it can't be true."

-- Wolfgang Längsfeld,  
Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1969

VARIETY REVIEW:

"Katzelmacher" is, after "Colder than Death," German entry at the 1969 Berlin Film Festival, the second full-length feature of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. While this young director's initial opus didn't make too much of an impression, there is good reason to laud his second one. "Katzelmacher" emerges one of the most interesting and important young W. German pix of 1969. It captured the Prize of International Film Critics at the just terminated Mannheim Festival.

"Katzelmacher" (whose literary translation would be "cat maker") is a Bavarian abusive word for "Gastarbeiter" - foreign guest workers in Germany. One of these, a Greek, is the central figure. He rents a room in the household of an unmarried young couple who, as often happens to foreigners here, overcharges him. There are several couples in this house, more or less all provincial-minded people, and their banal talk displays narrow-mindedness. Most of the time they feel bored. Occasionally they go out for drinking and there is also a girl who "makes it" for money in the house.

Arrival of the Greek "guest worker" interrupts their stupid boredom. The men have an immediate grudge against the foreigner and show their open dislike. Their ire grows when he goes out with a German girl. They think him a criminal or a Communist, and finally find it more than justified to beat him up.

Fassbinder's film is a heavy attack against German intolerance and prejudice which, even in this aggressive form, is often very evident among narrow-minded people. It's an undisguised attack against Fascist-like behavior and mentality.

He doesn't deliver the story the conventional way. After all, he is a representative of Germany's anti-theatre movement. His entire film is stylized. Everything is stylized. The young director maintains this difficult style with remarkable skill and conviction.

--October 15, 1969