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Making Invisible Memory Visible: Communicative Memory and Taboo in Andres Veiel’s Black Box BRD

Andres Veiel’s *Black Box BRD* (2001) readdresses what it views as the highly polarised, reductive dominant cultural memory of the RAF which had instrumented the memory of the politically turbulent 1970s in West Germany in terms of a neat division between victims and perpetrators. Through its recourse to communicative memory Veiel’s film seeks to balance out official public memory, suggesting that there is more to be said on a topic considered to be a dead socio-political and, for filmmakers, a dead aesthetic phenomenon. This essay considers the perceived creation of a dominant cultural myth surrounding the RAF, before considering the ways in which *Black Box BRD* attempts to break an ostensibly taboo, namely a ‘them and us’ ideological deadlock.

Introduction

Beginning its domestic run in 2001, Andres Veiel’s documentary feature *Black Box BRD* was greeted with unanimous praise by German critics who regarded the film as a decisive juncture in the discussion of the legacy of the Red Army Faction, not least because, as Marianne Quoirin suggested, ‘vielleicht bricht er [der Film; CH] sogar ein Tabu’. The taboo that Quoirin and her peers referred to centred around the apparent prohibition on discussing the terrorist legacy in anything other than polarised terms, which divided the protagonists neatly into ‘Täter’ and ‘Opfer’, and had developed as the defining characteristic of the dominant cultural memory of the RAF in Germany. *Black Box BRD*, the dual biography of the lives of a RAF-‘Täter’, Wolfgang Grams (who posthumously rose to prominence as one of the key figures of the third generation of the organisation), and a RAF-‘Opfer’, Alfred Herrhausen (‘Vorstandssprecher’ of the Deutsche Bank until his assassination by the group in 1989), readdresses West Germany’s terrorist legacy, purposefully exploding the neat separation between perpetrator and victim by exposing hidden layers of memory omitted from the official public memory of the RAF which, as we shall see, can be read as having aided the transformation of the terrorist legacy into a dominant cultural myth through which the identity of the ‘old’ FRG could be asserted. As the ultimate ‘victors’ of the conflict with the RAF, the state was able to shape the memory of the recent past more to its liking, casting itself as the valiant defender of a democratic system and it citizens who were ostensibly
being threatened by the terrorists, and the RAF as monstrous, suicidal murderers. Counter-memories existed, of course, and most notably in film, but although they occupied a place in the collective consciousness they failed to embed themselves in the official public memory of the terrorist legacy, which viewed the immediate past in the highly polarised terms of ‘them and us’.

The German Autumn represented the height of terrorist activity in West Germany. Although the RAF did not disband until 1998, the state reaction to its campaign in the 1970s, through which, as Jeremy Varon suggests, ‘the RAF provoked reactions vastly disproportionate to the violence they unleashed’, was not repeated with the same level of intensity in response to the more sporadic acts of terror which continued in to the 1990s. Indeed, following the assassination of Detlev Karsten Rohwedder (who was head of the ‘Treuhandanstalt’ responsible for the privatisation of former GDR assets) in 1991 and the bombing of the construction site for a new prison in Weiterstadt in 1993 (in which there were no human casualties) RAF initiatives against the now unified Federal Republic appeared to have ceased and as early as the mid-1990s the organisation was considered to be a dead socio-political phenomenon. Nonetheless, in 1997, the year that marked 20 years since the events of the German Autumn, the television station ARD could not resist the commemorative impulse and released the five-part documentary *Im Fadenkreuz – Deutschland und die RAF*. The same year saw the release of Heinrich Breloer’s two-part TV-film *Todesspiel*, which similarly deals with the events of 1977. But, rather than being an opportunity to reopen a line of dialogue on the terrorist past that would lead to a renewed process of critical engagement, such projects represented a self-contained act which consolidated the ‘them and us’ rhetoric of the politically turbulent 1970s and underscored the end of the RAF’s project, preempting the organisation’s decision to disband the following year.

In the same year that a firm line was being drawn under the memory of the RAF, Andres Veiel began planning *Black Box BRD*, but as the director subsequently explained in interview his feeling that there was more work to done on the RAF ran contrary to mainstream opinion:

Nachdem 1997 Breloers *Todesspiel* herausgekommen war und die ARD dann noch einen Fünfteiler *Im Fadenkreuz der Haft* [sic!] gebracht hatte, haben mir alle Leute gesagt: Bist du blöde, jetzt kommst du mit diesem alten Hut an? Es wurde dann auch nochmal, wie im *Todesspiel*, festgehalten, daß das Thema