

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Katzelmacher 1969 Werner Fassbinder. 1945-1982

STORY

Fassbinder has a brilliant sense of social dysfunction, and can display it in all its squalid normalcy. Think of the teeming would be film stars in *Holy Whore*, the big time Foreign Legion returnee, in the *Merchant of Four Seasons*, or the just released self-destructive con in *Gods of the Plague*; on all sides we are looking at losers to or perverters of the good in the human condition; victims of their own inability to 'make something of themselves'. The director's genius is to make these characters, in their situations, fascinating to us. That he does, with the brilliance of a John Steinbeck, in *Of Mice and Men*, or of Arthur Miller, in *The Death of a Salesman*; he can make loss compelling, and include us in the pride of the fallen human condition. It is this genius Fassbinder displays in *Katzelmacher* ("troublemakers" among many other candidates for the meaning of this title) in which he pushes almost to the limit the depiction of feckless, goalless, self-punishing urban youth. It is a cross section of such youth, perched like birds on benches in front of their low-cost Munich apartment building, that confronts us at the outset of this brilliant despondent film.

Plot There is no plot, but only what happens. Little guys from the petty fringes of the hood—daytime blue collar industrial workers—coagulating together, gossiping in the sun, appearing in a pub playing cards, or showing up in couple pairs, each pair coupling with its own Jack or Jill, in one of the bed sitters disposed around the apartment building. Petty jealousies, rumors of pregnancy and gossip of hirings and firings; the very essence of time caught in its own tracks. Much of the film time is spent looking at these commonplace perched losers as they leave and return to the eye of a camera which pierces them with its deadly unmoving gaze. What can happen, to break the (nonetheless very interesting) stasis of this loser community?

Development. What can happen? Elizabeth, who lives in another part of the condo, is in charge of renting and accounts, and takes it on herself to rent a condo room to a Greek worker named Giorgos, a significant break in the homogeneous society of blue collar German workers who by this time know each other only too well. The news circulates instantly, evoking concern from the guys, and some titillation from the gals, especially when Gunda—up to now unpaired and hungry—lets it be known that she has met Giorgos in a local park, and that he has 'attempted to rape her.' The inevitable will not be put off for long. Gunda was a loner, when she made her report of 'attempted rape.' So her account could be ascribed to self-promotion. But Marie, a pretty lady with romance on her mind, and seemingly addicted to her boyfriend Erich, decides she is more attracted to Giorgos, with whom she indulges in the only hot sex of the film. The whole group, whose attention shifts en masse at any development, is electrified by this class break on the part of Marie. The plump and narcissistic Erich is stunned.

Gang-up. Male fear of the Greek builds up in the small blindered mini community, which specializes in sitting around and seething, and it is not long before a conflict with the guest worker is inevitable. (Fassbinder's own savage critique of the post-war industrial boom society of Germany—the German miracle!—finds a perfectly concrete victim of that society in characters like Giorgos or Ali (In the film of the same name). Loser lower middle class Germans are waiting to take it out on the immigrant workers who have been introduced to Germany to fuel the new economy. And lo and behold it turns out that way! As the gang is perched on its benches and stoops and plastic chairs, in front of the apartment building, along comes Giorgos. Without even signaling one another, the guys descend on the guest worker and beat him up badly. He is left crumpled on the sidewalk.

Finale. Giorgos survived it. At the end, in fact, he is snuggling again with Marie, and together they are making plans to return to Greece together, where everything will be better. (Giorgos, by the way, has

already confided that he has a wife and two kids waiting for him in Greece, but that little matter seems to trouble no one.) Giorgos, played by Fassbinder himself, is only marginally wider awake than his hostile German hosts.

CHARACTERS

Giorgos. A Greek guest worker, Giorgos is the fly in the ointment for the scruffy indigenes who lead their small lives around a Munich apartment building. All Giorgos does, in order to arouse the wrath of the locals, is to play with the girls and ignore—after all he can't speak much German—the guys. It's enough to get himself beaten up.

Marie. Marie is the pretty and pretty romantic chick of Erich, who's a self-important punk who is developing a nice waistline, from just sitting around. Marie is the daredevil who decides to leave Erich for Giorgos, and thus sets off a chain reaction of male hostility to the Greek.

Gunda. Gunda, without a guy, is odd-chick out, in the gang in front of the apartment. Not surprisingly, then, she is the one who reports that she has been 'nearly raped' by Giorgos, whom she has accidentally encountered in a park.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

GIORGOS

Character Giorgos is the main character, for he is the intrusive factor—like Ali in the film of his name—who sets the small group of discontents into action. We don't know much about Giorgos, except that—as we see in one clip—he is glad to show that he prioritizes sex before friendship or loyalty to family. He is as pitiful as the rest of the gang, as we see him crumpled up on the sidewalk, and yet he is ebullient enough to feel sure that all will be well when he and his new chick get back to Greece.

Parallels. The atmosphere of sex and violence, which enters the film with the arrival of Giorgos, reminds this critic of the world of Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*, or of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Both of these plays deal, as does Fassbinder's movie, with pent up violent libido, and the mode of broad social degradation. The mode of 'lower class' desuetude and pent up anger is strictly out of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) or a factory based novel by the Goncourt Brothers in France.

Illustrative moments

Fiery. In a few clips Giorgos makes clear to us that he is happy to prioritize sex. He is making out with Gunda, and in response to some moral issues she raises, he replies that sex comes before fidelity or friendship. No apologies, no further explanations. Go for it man!

Crumpled. After he has been beaten up by the 'guys in the gang,' In front of the apartment house, Giorgos looks pitiful. Our hearts go out to him.

Joyous. Giorgos and Marie appear together at the end of the film, joyfully looking forward to their return to Greece together. 'In Greece everything's different,' says Giorgos optimistically.

Discussion questions

Why do you suppose Fassbinder chose the part of Giorgos for himself? Is Fassbinder on Giorgos' side?

What is the larger political-economic point of Fassbinder's film? Do the losers featured here represent a significantly large spectrum of the post-war German population?

Fassbinder's early professional work was in theater. Can you see the marks of a theatrical imagination, in the way the present film is staged?

THEMES

Hostility. As we saw in Fassbinder's wonderful *Ali*, we see again here the theme of hostility to the other, in this case the guest worker who has been invited into a more prosperous country from a Third World country. (This theme is more than familiar from the international political scene of our own times, in which both guest worker and refugee status have reached historically high levels.)

Apathy. The static panning shots, of lounging or card playing indigenes, in *Katzelmacher*, imprint on us a deep image of apathy. The characters in this mini drama are without much color or motivation, although the news of Giorgos' sexual prowess brings the men to their feet. We feel these characters trapped in a situation endurable to them only if they don't make any remarkable demands.

Fun. Sex, cards, and endless chit chat about very local matters make up the local entertainment scene. One might say that this scenario is like that of a retirement community in reverse, seen from the far end of life. One has abandoned excitement, but resists total lapse into a vegetal condition.

Gangs. As we see, from the way the local team turns on Giorgos, the group has a strictly gang mentality. On the lowest level of solidarity, they have pledged their allegiance to one another. Although they are not 'happy' people, in their present situation, they will fight any intruder who dares to disturb the stasis of their way of life.