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**Christina Gerhardt. Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Cultural Memory. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018; Christina Gerhardt, Marco Abel, ed. Celluloid Revolt: German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968. Camden House, 2019.**

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**Abstract**

Review of Christina Gerhardt. *Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Cultural Memory*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, xii + 307 pp. and Christina Gerhardt, Marco Abel, ed. *Celluloid Revolt: German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968*. Camden House, 2019, 330 pp.

**Keywords**

terrorism; film; 1968; Red Army Faction

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Christina Gerhardt, Marco Abel, ed. *Celluloid Revolt: German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968*. Camden House, 2019, 330 pp.

The 1960s and 70s have been met with growing interest by critics, scholars, and artists working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whereas the attacks on September 11, 2001 brought terrorism into public focus, prompting a return to the phenomenon of 1970s leftwing terrorism and its ensuing nexus of culture and politics, the neoliberal deadlock and bourgeois complacency of the new millennium led to a search for alternatives, which some hope to find in the social movements of the long 1960s. The monograph *Screening the Red Army Faction: Historical and Cultural Memory* by Christina Gerhardt and the volume *Celluloid Revolt: German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968* edited by Gerhardt and Marco Abel are part of these pursuits. They focus on West and East German as well as Austrian screen cultures, which they make accessible for a non-German speaking audience. Their common impetus is a critical rereading of the period through the medium of film and some art that seeks to return complexity to historical narratives that have been told time and again. Diverting from generic stories and solidified ‘truths’ about 1968 and the Red Army Faction (RAF), they apply a double-vision that considers local and global social histories in connection with cultural expressions. Yet, while *Celluloid Revolt* takes the production period of the long 1960s as its organizing principle, *Screening the Red Army Faction* focuses on the content of the films, starting with contemporaneous productions and leading up to the study’s present of the early 2000s.

Although both books deal with the recent past, they are also written with an eye to the present. In their introduction to *Celluloid Revolt*, Gerhardt and Abel suggest that the radical potential and promise of 1968 is still in the process of becoming. The impetus to look at that period of German film hence derives from the wish “to see and of course to provoke more thinking about ... what the possibilities for something else were—and, perhaps, still remain today.” (9) Quite fitting to such a non-linear understanding and slow-processing of time, the publications were subjected to long production times themselves. *Celluloid Revolt* goes back to the 2008 German Film Institute organized by Anton Kaes and Eric Rentschler, and *Screening the Red Army Faction* was prompted by the increasing number of films released between 2000 and 2008 that tell various stories of the RAF.

As Gerhardt stresses, there was a significant lack in English-language scholarship at the time. It has been starting to fill since with publications by Karin Bauer, Clare Bielby, Sarah Colvin, Patricia Melzer, and Charity Scribner in

addition to numerous titles published in German.<sup>1</sup> When assessing *Screening the Red Army Faction* and *Celluloid Revolt*, the latter are best left aside, however, because the books need to be seen in the light of North American German Studies. On the one hand, the field's commitment to cultural studies and its disciplinary openness made it possible to approach the topics of 1968 and the RAF in the first place; and it furthermore enabled inquiries that situate German cultural histories in their global contexts. On the other hand, the North American framework necessitates explanations that can appear redundant at times for a German-speaking audience.

Gerhardt's *Screening the Red Army Faction* is instructive in this regard. Walking a fine line between global history, social history, and cultural studies, the mission of *Screening the Red Army Faction* is to explore the relationship between historical and cultural memory beyond the fixed narratives and frameworks by including "the international context as well as other vital domestic factors" (2). It is an approach that draws inspiration from Kristin Ross' *May '68 and Its Afterlives* and Quinn Slobodian's *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany*.<sup>2</sup> The six chapters are organized chronologically, with the first two chapters providing a broad socio-historical context for the close-readings of the films that are to follow. That is not to say that films and other cultural products are not mentioned in the first chapters; they are, however, rarely analyzed in detail. The advantage of such an approach is the remarkable breadth of material that Gerhardt is able to cover; the resources contained in the footnotes are impressive and will serve anyone well searching for information on the period. The disadvantage is a lack of attention to formal details when, for instance, treating the underground journal *Agit 883* with its peculiar juxtaposition of text and image and its unique countercultural aesthetics. The last four chapters of the book counterbalance the more historically-oriented survey in the beginning, by providing close readings of films that are paradigmatic of their time, including such canonical works as *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (*The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*), *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*), and *Die innere Sicherheit* (*The State I am In*). Most compelling in its consideration of aesthetics and politics is chapter 4, which deals with political alternatives to the RAF in the form of labor struggles, feminism, and alternative child-care. Via her careful analysis of Rainer Werner

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Bauer, ed. *Everybody Talks About the Weather—We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*. Seven Stories Press, 2008. Clare Bielby. *Violent Women in Print: Representations in the West German Print Media of the 1960s and 1970s*. Camden House, 2012. Sarah Colvin. *Ulrike Meinhof and West German Terrorism: Language, Violence, and Identity*. Camden House, 2009. Patricia Melzer. *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl: Women's Political Violence in the Red Army Faction*. NYU Press, 2015. Charity Scribner. *After the Red Army Faction: Gender, Culture, and Militancy*. Columbia UP, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Ross. *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. University of Chicago Press, 2002. Quinn Slobodian. *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany*. Duke UP, 2012.

Fassbinder's *Mutter Küsters Fahrt zum Himmel* (*Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*) and Margarethe von Trotta's *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (*The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*) and *Die bleierne Zeit* (*Marianne and Juliane*), Gerhardt traces the connections between domestic concerns and international struggles while also situating the films within the layered and sometimes asynchronous time of film history.

The cultural artifacts covered in *Screening the Red Army Faction* are mainly films—an interest the monograph shares with the anthology *Celluloid Revolt*, which unfolds the decisively filmic possibilities of the year 1968. The volume brings together fifteen essays and three interviews with filmmakers. Read together, the essays reveal the strengths and weaknesses of an anthology. No doubt, approaching the topic of *German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968* from multiple vantage points is much needed, as it broadens the scope and diverts attention from the narrow focus on films produced in the nexus of the newly found German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB). There are still several essays dealing with these films; and their need to retell the story of how German film was reinvented in the 1960s makes for some awkward repetitions. Yet, the most compelling essays go beyond the by-now familiar set of filmic examples by Helke Sanders, Harun Farocki, and Holger Meins and open up connections to a wider range of feminist films and practices (Madeleine Bernstorff), or worker films and new documentary forms (Thomas Elsaesser, Fabian Tietke).

Providing room for such openings is precisely the point of the volume, which not only considers different genres and conventions by treating art house cinema and film experiments alongside television and other forms of popular entertainment, but also looks at film cultures in both Germanys and in Austria. It enables one to see the heterogeneity in 1968 that is indicative of the filmic, aesthetic, and political multiplicity of the time—not all of which was progressive, as Lisa Haegele argues in her analysis of St. Pauli exploitation films. Furthermore, broadening the scope leads to surprising discoveries, one of which is the alternative film history offered by Klaus Lemke in his conversation with Abel. Lemke's films appropriate his fascination with America as a different kind of take on German reality—in life and in film. Viewing German (film) history through them might offer a different picture than the DFFB films can offer. The same holds true for artists starting to work with film around the time. The relationship between art and film is explicitly addressed in the interview by Randall Halle with Birgit Hein and in Andrew Stefan Weiner's essay on Valie Export and the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative. Nevertheless, media art is sidelined in favor of film in *Celluloid Revolt*, which is a lost opportunity to think the diverse practices to create visual arguments and aesthetic experiences together.

All in all, Gerhardt's *Screening the Red Army Faction* and her volume *Celluloid Revolt* co-edited with Abel give readers the opportunity to acquaint

themselves with the radical period of the 1960s and 70s through the medium of film. They treat the material in a way that makes it accessible for a non-German speaking audience and provides an overview, thereby contributing to the English-language scholarship on a topic that is still far-too often perceived as ‘very German’. The books challenge that point of view in more than one way by going beyond the narrow confines of West Germany and its film canon of New German Cinema. They lay out new discursive, historic, and aesthetic strands that are best explored one essay and one chapter at a time.

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