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Packing the Affective Moment

Key words: affect; Berlin School; emotion; framing

Abstract: If much contemporary German-language art-house cinema exploits film's potential to use space and time to extend the affective moment, focusing on the gap between action and emotional resolution, *Die Jacke* does the opposite. Instead, it creates a moment of claustrophobic intensity, that nonetheless similarly pivots on the function of affect in film.

Since the early 2000s German-language film has enjoyed a period of international success not seen since the 1970s, when the 'New German Cinema' won international acclaim for its aesthetically challenging, searing indictments of post-war German society. While not always commercially successful, much of German-language film's recent critical plaudits have come from the work of the 'Berlin School', a strand of filmmaking that in many ways is closely aligned with the traditions of the New German Cinema. Although coined as a term to describe a group of filmmakers who were trained at the *Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin* (dffb, German Film and Television Academy Berlin), over the last decade and a half it has been used in connection with a wide range of German and Austrian filmmakers, from Christian Petzold and Angela

Schanelec to Valeska Grisebach and Matthias Luthardt, many of whom have a far more tenuous connection to the training tradition of the dffb (Abel 2013). What links these filmmakers is their approach to cinematic affect. Indeed, as I discuss in more detail elsewhere, the pared-down style of these films might best be described as a crucible of affect that dwells on, and thus foregrounds, the moment before, for example, the flicker of an impulse across a character's face can be resolved into emotional expression and ultimately action, thereby forcing the spectator to engage both emotionally and intellectually with the film in order to fill in the gap and provide this resolution themselves (Cooke 2013). Such films reject the narrative tropes of mainstream cinema, frequently presenting moments of inaction in the stories they tell, focussing on the gaps between events rather than the events themselves. The narrative always seems to 'happen' outside the frame and in the cuts between shots, at a different space and time to that which we experience. Thus Schanelec in *Marseille* (2004) presents the spectator with a long take of her protagonist sitting silently in a police station with little or no explanation of what has happened to bring her to this point. An extended close-up of her face shows her beginning to be overtaken by emotion, but the shot is cut before she is overwhelmed by it, refusing to give the spectator any sense of emotional resolution.

If the Berlin School is focussed on exploiting the affective potential of cinema by focussing on the space and time outside that which is directly represented on screen, this is antithetical to the aesthetic strategy of *Die Jacke*. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that Vollrath began his film training in

Munich, a region much more connected with the mainstream, commercial industry than Berlin. Nonetheless, while clearly very different in pace and style, the exploitation of affect is similarly central to this powerful short film. If *Marseilles* is about the opening up of space and time, *Die Jacke* radically condenses both. Played out in real time and largely in a single location, the film seeks to pack out the space of the frame. Shots 5-10 consist of a rapid series of close ups of the couple's faces, the camera's shallow depth of field intensifying the focus, leaving little room for anything else. The screen is overwhelmed by facial expressions that underline the flirtatious nature of their banter. The camera's impulse to highlight the intensity of this encounter and to keep up the sequence's emotional momentum is then further emphasised in the jump cut between Shot 9 and 10. This allows no pause for breath before transitioning to Shot 11, an extreme close up of Paul's hand tentatively exploring Kaya's thigh, signalling the couple's growing intimacy, an intimacy that comes to its culmination in a further short series of extreme close ups of their first (and final) kiss (Shots 24-26). The intimacy of the framing of the majority of the film's first Act is also complemented in the sequences' establishing shots. To begin we are given wider shots of the couple's environment, the city they walk through at night (Shot 2); the bar as they enter it (Shot 4). Yet, even here there is very little empty space in the frame. We see a deliberately cluttered mise-en-scène, a city full of advertising hoardings, street signs and buildings, with no glimpse of the sky or the world beyond the street; a bar where our focus on the film's protagonists is crowded out for a moment by the other customers, its décor, its bar paraphernalia.

The density of the film's framing in turn echoes its emotional intensity which allows no space or time for reflection. There is nothing but the here and now of the image. However, it is this intensity which, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, would seem to link the film to the use of affect we find in the Berlin School (a link that might in fact be hinted at in Vollrath's later film training in Vienna under the tutelage of Michael Haneke, a school with a far more avant-garde sensibility than Munich and which has produced one of the key Berlin School filmmakers Valeska Grisebach).

Rather than attempting to extend the affective moment between the visceral sensation a character initially experiences and its resolution into emotion, such as we see in the Berlin School, *Die Jacke* focuses intensely, and repeatedly, on the moment of resolution. Rather than the gap between actions, which gives the spectator context but with no motivating action or event, in *Die Jacke* we have one action after another in rapid succession, but with no context. In so doing the film troubles how we are ultimately to read the apparent emotional resolution we are offered. Indeed, in the end, instead of resolution, the film leaves us with a string of emotional surface gestures that are entirely performative and which themselves, like the Berlin School, ultimately lock the film into an extended moment of affective potential that the spectator is forced to resolve for him/herself.

At times the film itself self-consciously performs a sense of unreliability that its focus on surface gesture suggests. Remaining with Act One, in Shot 15 Paul attempts to kiss Kaya but pulls back, losing his nerve. It is, of course, clear

to the spectator that his advance would have been accepted. How are we to read this? Is this feigned bashfulness? With the benefit of hindsight, this might be read as the moment when we can first sense Paul's insecurity, an insecurity that takes centre stage in Act Two, when he is confronted by one of the bar's other patrons. However, there are no markers beyond the here and now to help us understand Paul and his motivations. While his insecurity remains central to the narrative, the frame now moves him physically to the film's side-lines. He is displaced from subject to object. The earlier shot of his hand caressing Kaya's thigh replaced now by his face being subjected to the violent grip of the bullying patron's hand (Shot 31), a marginalisation that continues as Kaya re-enters the narrative, controlling the frame as she straight-forwardly deals with the issue of the jacket (Shot 36-41). It is easy to read the film as a study in gender dynamics/politics. Paul's masculinity is challenged first by the bully taking his jacket, then by Kaya's easy resolution of the situation. However, we are only left with supposition. In order to understand the narrative we must reflect upon the character's motivations ourselves.

Over the course of 8½ minutes our sensations are bombarded by a barrage of emotions that allow us to enjoy a moment of salacious voyeurism, the outcome of which would seem inevitable, before the film abruptly changes direction. In the process, we are left with a series of shattered illusions: the intensity of the couple's feelings, created in the first seconds of the film and then undermined as quickly in its closing moments; the bravado of the bullying patron, immediately undermined when someone stands up to him. The film repeatedly

highlights the unreliability of its characters' performance of emotion, continually forcing the spectator back into the affective moment before emotional resolution. How are we really to understand this narrative? Is it simply a lesson in the fragility of masculinity? Or is the film pointing to the performativity, and consequently the unreliability, of all emotional encounters? How are we to read the final Shot (44) in this regard? Has the romantic moment simply been lost, Kaya now reprising Paul's earlier attempted kiss, that she now pulls back from, in order to signal that he has blown it? Or might this signal that there is a further Act for the couple, or at least that this moment might lead to a new phase of reflection in Paul's life. The final shot of Paul's face, however, like the repeated shots of faces in the Berlin School, ultimately give us no resolution. The emotional barrage pauses and we are only left with the affective gap that we must fill for ourselves.

(1485 words)

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