

If Not Us, Who?



DIRECTED BY: Andres Veiel

CERTIFICATE: PG

RUNNING TIME: 124 mins

COUNTRY: Germany

YEAR: 2012

SUITABLE FOR: 14-19 media/film studies, German, history, politics

SYNOPSIS

Based on a true story, *If Not Us, Who?* concerns Bernward Vesper, a politically motivated student and aspiring writer in 1960s West Germany who is trying to escape the spectre of his father's pro-Nazi beliefs. Whilst at University he meets Gudrun, a literature student and teacher. A relationship grows and together they start a publishing house with the intention of printing material that will challenge the traditional values of German society. But as Bernward decides to print writings that contradict their own beliefs in order to develop income, Gudrun is seduced by an exciting but dangerous group who think the key to change is not in literature and peaceful protest, but in increasingly destructive and aggressive acts of violence...

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

GERMAN CINEMA AND HISTORY¹

The history of German cinema is as fascinating and turbulent as the country itself. Its film narratives have attempted to come to terms with the shadow of the Holocaust in a variety of ways. For instance, German films made in the years after 1945 (at a time when it was controlled by the allied nations) were intended to show a new generation the errors of Nazism. As Communism became the new threat, German cinema (still under Allied influence) developed more politically conservative and romantic stories. But by the late 1960s, as Germany's youth protested against America's involvement in the Vietnam War, a new German Cinema emerged which was more critical of the state, though in some ways this was encouraged by the government so they could appear more liberal to audiences abroad (and counter the more conventional mainstream German Cinema). However, Germany's sense of guilt over the Holocaust was still a taboo subject for filmmakers and the atrocity was normally hinted at through metaphor or a muted, introspective style. It wasn't really until 2005s *Downfall* (a film which charted the last ten days of Hitler's reign before his suicide) that German Cinema explicitly addressed the era in a way that was accessible to wide audiences. In fact, this was the first time that a German actor had portrayed Hitler onscreen. After this, a number of German films emerged which focused on key moments in its past including *The Lives of Others* (2006) *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008) and *If Not Us, Who?*

Research the following questions:

- What external factors might have forced German Cinema to the brink of collapse in the early 1960s?
- Why did the actions of the Baader-Meinhof Gang (the foundations of which are explored in *If Not Us, Who?*) spell the beginning of the end for new German Cinema in the late 1970s?

¹ Further historical context outlined in this passage can be found in 'New German Cinema' by Ulrike Sieglöhr in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (eds J. Hill & P. Church Gibson, Oxford Uni Press, 1998)

POLITICAL CONTEXT

If Not Us, Who? is set during a time of change in Germany's history. It is a film that assumes a degree of historical knowledge on the part of the viewer as many different political groups, writers and activists have a bearing on the ideologies of its protagonists. So before viewing, do some further research into:

- Author Hans Henry Jahn
- African American militant group The Black Panthers
- The Baader-Meinhof Gang
- West Berlin Protests of 1968
- The Vietnam War

As you watch the film, think about how Bern and Gudrun and their parents view each of these things.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

OPENING SCENE

The opening sequence of *If Not Us, Who?* is full of visual metaphor and clues as to the formation of one of the main character's political ideologies.

- What significance does Bern's father's killing of the cat in the opening scene have on Bern's outlook?
- What metaphors can be drawn from the cat attacking the nightingale's nest?
- In what way is Bern's father's racist ideology exposed as he tries to justify killing Bern's cat?
- What repercussions does the opening scene have throughout the rest of the story?

DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER

In order to ensure that protagonists' fates are emotionally rewarding for an audience, time must be taken to develop characters. It's what encourages us cheer at the end of a film such as *Avengers Assemble*, drop our jaws at the end of *The Sixth Sense* or cry (maybe) at the end of *Titanic*. What is trickier is when a film is about characters that may not be sympathetic.

- How do the filmmakers make us care about Bern and Gudrun?
- What compromises do Bern and Gudrun have to make in order to get the publishing business off the ground?
- What sacrifices do Bern and Gudrun make in order to remain in a relationship?
- What flaws and strengths do the central characters have that make them likeable or dislikeable?
- How are the sensitive issues of self-harm, child abandonment, infidelity, national guilt and political violence handled and how do these themes affect your empathy with Bern and Gudrun?

RECREATING A CULTURE THROUGH FILM

America was one of the nations that controlled West Germany after the war, which highlighted the divide between Germany's generation gaps. This contrast is reflected in the film as are many other conflicting issues of culture and tradition. The film covers more than ten years of political turmoil and generational shift so the filmmakers have deployed a number of techniques to make the passage of time and culture coherent.

- How would you describe the culture, style, fashion and atmosphere of West Germany in the film and in what ways does American culture intrude on this way of life? Consider costume, politics and soundtrack.
- What ideological differences do Gudrun and Bern have with their parents and what confrontations do these differences lead to?
- What transitional methods are used to contextualise the era and to note the passing of time and the changing political climate?

ACTIVITIES

One of the criticisms of films such as *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, *Downfall* and *If Not Us, Who?* is that they have the potential to humanise people who have done abhorrent things. To what extent did you feel sympathy for Bern and/or Gudrun at key points throughout the film?

- Complete the line graph on the next page by filling in all the major events that impact upon Bern and Gudrun's characters throughout the film. As the film goes on, where do your sympathies lie?
- Create a trailer for a true story about a loathed and hated figure from history or the newspapers. Will you choose to show them in a sympathetic light? What narrative conventions could you use to ensure that they are not sympathetic?

Written by Gareth Evans

A U D - E N C E S Y M P A T H Y

Bern's cat killed	Bern and Gurdrun meet	publishing business started	eg	eg	eg	eg	eg
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