



The Germans and Their Men

by Helke Sander (1989)

Program Notes by
Kurt Easterwood.

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THE GERMANS AND THEIR MEN: REPORT FROM BONN (1989), *dir. by Helke Sander, 16mm, color, sound, 105 minutes. Starring Renée Felden as Lieschen Müller; photographed by Lilly Grote; edited by Claudia Vogeler, Sander; script by Sander.*

Helke Sander's most recent film establishes from the outset a documentary mode with its definitive and all-encompassing title. This mode is further stressed in the film's subtitle, "Report from Bonn", with its connotations of an authority-laden, official government document. Yet Sander's film is not a report sanctioned by the German state, but rather a personal examination of that state as it is characterized and defined by its men.

Sander achieves the personal by using the fictional character of a woman on a quest for a husband in Bonn. By focusing the film on Lieschen Müller's very real (but fictional) search for a man "who will look me in the eye and not at my breasts," Sander re-routes the documentary impulse from a documentarian putting forth facts in support of an agenda, to a character whose personal needs result in questions that comprise an agenda.



Müller, on vacation from her native Austria, decides to spend her holiday in Germany to look for a husband. Bonn is the likely choice in that as capital of the Federal Republic, it is therefore the seat of thousands of men. Notepad in hand, Müller sets out to interview these members of Parliament, State secretaries, taxi drivers, civil servants, salesmen, and even the Federal Chancellor, eventually recasting herself as documentarian.

The fiction of Müller the husband-seeker goes hand in hand with that of Müller the documentary interviewer. In the end, it is the latter fiction which proves the more subversive, for it is the pose (which is after all only half feigned) of documentarian that gives Müller (Sander) the access to their subjects. Although some of the interviewees are clearly put off by the questions they are asked, most willingly respond. To be interviewed is seen by them as a measure of their own importance, a signification as steely and empty as a bureaucrat's tie.

Whether investigating the significance of men's ties (who wears what type, and when) or probing larger questions of male responsibility and shame by conflating the raping of millions of German women with the extermination of the Jews, Müller is both documentary interviewer (acting on) and protagonist (acted upon). The questions she deems important to ask of prospective husbands become in the end questions all women must ask, and which all men must face up to.

Ultimately, Sander's fact-finding "report" results, like Müller's search for a husband, not in answers but in more questions. More importantly, though, it also results in more people being interested in those questions.