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*Dealing with Austria's dark heritage and contemporary extremism  
Peter Patzak's adaptation of Helmut Zenker's «Kassbach» (1979)*

ABSTRACT. This essay explores one of the films which dealt with the above-mentioned topics and had its cinematic release in the period under discussion – *Kassbach*, an adaptation of Helmut Zenker's novel, which was made by Peter Patzak, a prominent Austrian director who passed away in 2021. In this respect, *Kassbach* would be a work that preceded numerous other Austrian films with a cinematic release in the 1980s and which, even before the Waldheim affair, would touch upon Austria's difficult past. This article focuses on the film's message that the lack of de-Nazification at the time, understood not only as a political and bureaucratic, but also as a psychological and social process, facilitates the establishment of right-wing radicalism.

After the screening of W. G. Pabst's *Der letzte Akt* (The Last Ten Days) in 1955, National Socialism disappeared from Austrian cinemas for an extended length of time. Apart from the television film, *An der schönen blauen Donau*, directed by John Olden, which was produced by two television channels, the Austrian channel ORF and the German regional channel NDR, Austrian cinemagoers were not able to watch any film in the cinema whose plot would be set in the times of National Socialism or would deal with its ramifications. At the same time, however, the problem of Austria's "dark heritage" (to cite Axel Bangert)<sup>1</sup> was continuously touched upon by ORF, which, as recent Austrian television studies have demonstrated, produced numerous teleplays, docudramas and ultimately full-length fictional dramas.

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<sup>1</sup> See Axel Bangert, «Facing Dark Heritage: The Legacy of Nazi Perpetrators in German-Language Film», in *Screening European Heritage. Creating and Consuming History on Film*, eds. Paul Cooke and Rob Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 107-126.

In this essay I concentrate on Peter Patzak's *Kassbach* (1979), which, although almost forgotten today, was in my view, the first cinematic film dealing with Austria's Nazi past to have had a traditional, cinematic distribution in over a decade. As has previously been mentioned, *Kassbach* would be the forerunner of numerous other Austrian films with a cinematic release in the 1980s which would touch upon Austria's dark heritage even before the Waldheim affair. Films such as Franz Antel's *Der Bockerer* (1981), Lukas Stepanik's *Kieselsteine* (1982), Wolfram Paulus's *Heidenlöcher* (1986) and Wolfgang Glück's *38 – Auch das war Wien* (1986) triggered innumerable consequences both for Austrian political culture and the collective memory of the country's Nazi past.

This article will demonstrate how the narrative of *Kassbach* is constructed on the message that the lack of de-Nazification, understood not just as a political and bureaucratic, but rather as a psychological and social process, facilitates the establishment of a right-wing radicalism which jeopardizes the rule of law and democratic order. Thus, the eponymous character in Patzak's film is pictured both as an ex-Nazi who once believed in some of the tenets of the National Socialist ideology, and as a neo-Nazi who supports violence as proposed by extremist activists. To explore these subtleties, the article examines the way the main character is constructed, while also paying attention to the visual style of the film.

### *An ordinary man*

Based on the novel *Kassbach*, written by Helmut Zenker in 1974, *Kassbach – Ein Porträt*, tells the story of the eponymous Karl Kassbach (played by Walter Kohut), a Viennese greengrocer aged fifty-four. Kassbach usually spends his leisure time with friends, playing cards, bowling, and taking part in a newly established association, *Initiative*, uniting right-wing radicals and planning attacks against political enemies – above all Communists and Social Democrats. Kassbach and his clique are full of anti-Semitism and disgust towards immigrants, and delight in venting their emotions against the weaker members of society. They practise shooting at guinea pigs kept in the basement of a summer house that belongs to one of the men; they attack

a waiter verbally, and ultimately physically in a bar because of his Yugoslav extraction. They also take part in actions recommended by *Initiative*, vandalizing properties of their political opponents.

The film reveals that Kassbach's family is dysfunctional. Kassbach can no longer communicate with his wife (Immy Schell) and adolescent son (Konrad Becker). The inability to communicate gradually transforms into open hatred and maltreatment of the boy, while his mother, whose name remains obscure throughout the whole film, does not react to her husband's recurrent paroxysms of rage. In fact, Kassbach's wife resorts to taking a lover (Franz Novotny). Kassbach also has a secret to conceal – he tries to seduce and abuse a 15-year-old girl, Liesi (Monika Schöpfer), who works with him as a sales apprentice. The film does not end with a classic dénouement, but rather leaves the audience with a climax formed from two scenes that unveil Kassbach's ruthlessness. First, Kassbach kills a man who catches him and his group during an act of vandalism. Being aware that the man has recognized him, Kassbach shoots the man without hesitation. Soon afterwards, he again falls out with his son, this time, however, reaching for the gun. The closing scene leaves Kassbach aiming his gun at Georg. We do not learn how this most violent of quarrels ends – will Kassbach shoot his son, thereby eliminating the person he loathes the most, or will he control himself and put the gun away? The closing scene, unlike the script<sup>2</sup>, leaves the ending open. Even though we read in the original script version that Kassbach pulled the trigger, as viewers of the film we still do not know what happens to Georg.

The film does not offer a coherent, linear narrative, addressing particular threads chronologically, but employs elements of a collage composed of scenes shown by an auctorial narrator, interviews with witnesses who speak about Kassbach, as well as reminiscences and Kassbach's own short monologues. Kassbach, when introducing himself, and the witnesses look directly into the camera, their statements sounding like answers to questions

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<sup>2</sup> In the script we read: «Ein Schuß fällt. Das Bild bleibt stehen. Stabliste. Ende». Script, p. 128. Archiv der Zeitgenossen, Vorlass Peter Patzak, file *Drehbuch*.

posed by an off-screen interlocutor. In this respect, Patzak follows the collage aesthetics created by Zenker in his novel and appears to follow the style of the German director, Alexander Kluge, who avails himself of a wide range of materials for his montage. While Kluge composes both fictional and documentary fragments for his collage, such as excerpts from other motion pictures, still photographs or paintings<sup>3</sup>, Patzak moves mostly within the framework of fictional scenes intertwined with pseudo-documentary interludes – scenes where the characters look directly at or very close to the camera, so as to engage the audience and maintain the suspense. The statements of the witnesses appear as though they were part of a television report or a documentary and were probably produced in the wake of some intriguing or disturbing events revolving around Karl Kassbach. It is likely that the story comes to a sudden, unhappy end, with Kassbach killing or wounding his son. A reporter (an off-screen person, whose presence is perceivable) now tries to find out the motives of the act.

However, the statements of the witnesses paint a rather positive or at least neutral image of Kassbach while other people describe him as nice and courteous. At first glance, Kassbach appears as a quite ordinary man, indistinguishable from other people, who runs a grocery store, leads a normal family life and spends his free time with friends. This impression is conveyed by the self-introduction delivered by the character at the beginning of the plot, where he even describes his culinary preferences. These statements present a portrait of a most ordinary man. Only the last sentence of this description, when he states that he could eat green peas and bacon “until full gassing” (bis zur Vergasung)<sup>4</sup>, sounds disconcerting and could make

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter C. Lutze, *Alexander Kluge. The Last Modernist* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 100.

<sup>4</sup> «Also am liebsten hab ich a kalter Bier, a bissel abgestanden, mit net so viel Kohlen-säure. Un in der Früh Kakao. Am Donnerstag da iß i gern Spinat mit Spiegelei, am Freitag gebackenen Seefisch und am Sonntag hab i gern kalte Platten. Sehr gern iß i a Eiernockerl, Lungenbraten, Gulasch. Und für an Bauernschmaus da fahr ich kilometerweit, und Erbsen mit Speck, des könnt i essen bis zur Vergasung. Dialogliste, Archiv der Zeitgenossen, file Drehbuch Dialogliste. In the file there is an English dialogue list, where we can read the

the audience consider whether the expression is the result of using the word in the colloquial sense, common at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or of a deliberate, obscene linguistic association with the Holocaust.



Figure 1 – Kassbach listening to the leader of “Initiative” – a right-wing extremist group.

Nonetheless, as Sylvia Szely points out in the booklet of the film’s DVD edition, this innocuous impression is just «die Oberfläche harmloser wienerischer Normalität, die jedoch alles andere als unschuldig ist». Beneath the veneer of an ordinary representative of the Viennese petite-bourgeoisie, there is a character with whom one can under no circumstances identify, an anti-hero devoid of any positive characteristics. Kassbach is depicted as a negative type, a neo-Nazi skillfully exploiting the anxieties caused by the new sociopolitical conditions of the 1970s: waves of immigration to Europe, a

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translation: «What I like best is a cold beer, a little flat, not so aerated. Early in the morning cocoa. On Thursdays I like to have spinach and egg, or beef, on a Friday baked salt-water fish, and on a Sunday, I like cold meat dishes. I’m also fond of egg dumplings, lung and goulash. To be able to have a peasant’s feast, I’d drive for miles. I could eat peas and bacon until I was gassed». Archiv der Zeitgenossen, file *Dialoge Engl. Untertitel*, p. 2.

continued sense of losing power and prestige in the political life of the country in the face of the continuing rule of the Social Democrats<sup>5</sup>, and the constant threat of war and terrorism. In the case of *Kassbach*, the last factor appears as a significant motivation behind the character's actions. In the scenes showing Kassbach driving his bus, the actual diegetic sound is that of a news report on the radio describing the actions of left-wing terrorists in West Germany. It is not clear to what extent his world-view is moulded by *Initiative*, however, during the meetings of the group he is depicted as someone in full alignment with the group's leader, Lothar (Walter Davy). In the scene of the second such meeting, Kassbach's profile is depicted in a long take, in unnaturally shallow focus, which blurs the silhouette of Lothar speaking in the background [figure 1]. Kassbach's sober facial expression and nodding head in the foreground imply that he listens carefully to the speech and agrees with the arguments. He accepts not only the objectives outlined in Lothar's speeches, but also the methods of achieving them, which are based to a large degree on violence.

It is the penchant for violence that predominantly defines Kassbach's dark nature, and which is usually directed against those who are weaker or defenceless. There is a slight difference between the novel and the film in the depiction of the character's obnoxious personality. The novel includes numerous scenes where Kassbach revels in his sadism. He conducts a number of pseudo-experiments on guinea pigs – for instance, he isolates one animal from the rest, he starves one of them, he lets a dog hunt for three other animals and then observes their mutilation and agony, or brutally squeezes them. These “experiments” evoke an association with the Nazis' medical crimes in the concentration camps. Furthermore, the novel includes streams of Kassbach's thoughts written in the first person, which reveal his darkest fantasies. In one of them, Kassbach imagines applying the same experiments to other animals and humans:

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<sup>5</sup> Between 1970 and 1983, Austria was ruled by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), headed by chancellor Bruno Kreisky. Thus, this period is colloquially called “the Kreisky era”. See e.g. *The Kreisky Era in Austria*, eds. Günter Bischof and Anton Pelinka (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

Ich werde meine Versuche ausdehnen, auf Menschen erweitern: Experimente, die vorläufig nur in meinen Gedanken stattfinden können. Eventuell kaufe ich mir Kaninchen. Nach Ostern, da ist das allgemeine Interesse an Kaninchen weg und der Preis dementsprechend niedrig.<sup>6</sup>

His sadism is combined with shrewd, pragmatic thinking. Therefore, his sadistic actions are not a result of paroxysms or uncontrolled emotions, but appear rather as well thought-out actions. In the film, the guinea pigs only appear in one scene. Kassbach, instead of tormenting the animals continuously, kills them with his gun. However, it is his son, Georg, who becomes the object of Kassbach's greatest act of violence. The father treats violence as an educational method and conflates it with the demand for respect. Some acts of violence literally resemble the totalitarian practices of depriving a human being of their individuality, intruding ruthlessly into the son's private life, with Kassbach reacting to the slightest signs of objection or disrespect. All these elements appear in one scene when Georg does not respond to his father's knocking on the door of his room. Kassbach flies into a rage, breaks the glass in the door, enters the room and, after noticing some evidence of drugs that Georg probably took, brutally drags his son out of his room and into the bathroom, where he pours cold water onto a fully clothed Georg.

In comparison with the novel, the film places stronger emphasis on the trans-generational relations between father and son. Even though Georg undertakes some attempts to talk to his father, Kassbach instantly begins to yell at his son, claiming that any discussion with him is impossible. In a scene which does not appear in the book, Georg helps his father load the van with goods for his grocery shop. As soon as Kassbach gets angry, he leaves Georg alone in a large parking lot. The depiction of Georg's silhouette standing alone in a full shot against the sun and then his slow walking out of the frame underlines the loneliness of the boy and accentuates his terrible situation – Georg is left on his own and has no-one from whom he might find support. The fact that Georg participates in the left-wing pro-

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<sup>6</sup> Helmut Zenker, *Kassbach* (Wien: Franz Deuticke Verlagsgesellschaft 1995), 53.

tests organized against the assembly of *Initiative* underlines the trans-generational breakdown in communication. Kassbach participates in the assembly and then, when the clash with the protesters turns into riots, he physically attacks his opponents. However, when he notices that Georg is among them, he refrains from attacking him. A brief exchange of looks between father and son shows the gulf between the men – whereas Kassbach’s facial expression displays embarrassment and astonishment, Georg’s face does not show any sign of surprise at the fact that his father is a member of a far-right group.

In the novel, Georg’s physical appearance is not described. In the film, the physical aspect of this supporting character is essential since filmmakers employ the psychological assumption that matches physical appearance with personality. In the portrait of Georg we can see a young, innocent boy, who is about to become an adult, quite tall but thin. He has an ectomorphic figure which can be associated with sensitivity and solitude<sup>7</sup>. Together with his long hair, delicate earrings and lack of facial hair, Georg looks androgynous. His external appearance, defined by vulnerability, renders him more susceptible to the acts of violence executed by his father.

Karl Kassbach is constructed by means of the contradictory aspects of his personality, which, although they do not arouse the audience’s sympathy or any endearment for him, still mean that his actions, to a certain degree, are comprehensible. As Tibor Zenker points out in one of the articles relating to *Kassbach*, «Seine Sichtweise und Taten sind nicht zu entschuldigen, aber zu erklären; sie sind vorstellbar, so sehr man sie auch ablehnt und verurteilt»<sup>8</sup>. His frequent outbursts of aggression express the inner feeling of uncertainty which he cannot overcome. The anti-hero probably becomes

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<sup>7</sup> In the description of the character, I employ the terminology proffered by Jens Eder in his standard book about the analysis of film characters. See Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film. Grundlagen der Filmanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2014), 254-257.

<sup>8</sup> Tibor Zenker, «Normalität und Widersprüchlichkeit des faschistischen Kleinbürgers. Gedanken zu KASSBACH – EIN PORTRAIT», in Peter Patzak, *Filmmacher, Autor, Maler*, eds. Karin Moser and Andreas Ungerböck (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2009), 140-171; 156.



aware of the imminent crisis in the grocery sector which is being caused by the growth and competition of supermarkets. He is also certainly aware of his clumsiness in his sexual life. Kassbach makes attempts to make love to his wife and when he finally induces her into a sexual act, intercourse lasts only for a few seconds.

*An ex-Nazi is a neo-Nazi*

His far-right world-view and an inclination to violence define Kassbach as a typical neo-Nazi, a type which could be found not only in Austria, but also in many other developed countries. As the director, Peter Patzak, notes, «dieser Einzelfall zeigt die traditionelle Bagatellisierung neofaschistischer Kräfte und Aktionen. Kein speziell österreichisches Phänomen»<sup>9</sup>. However, *Kassbach* may be interpreted not only as a film about a neo-Nazi, but also about an ex-Nazi. As Annette Insdorf claims in her short note about the film, «this contemporary portrait of a middle-aged, neo-Nazi grocer and the right-wing organization to which he belongs proposes that the dangers of xenophobic racism have not disappeared»<sup>10</sup>. Kassbach's anti-Austrian "great German" nationalism, expressed by his conviction that Austria is a part of a German Reich and the desire for a renewed annexation of his country, sets the motif of an authoritarian personality in a particularly Austrian context. Kassbach's world-view in contemporary times (the 1970s) had probably been shaped much earlier. His letters written on the Eastern front and cited by his mother, who appears in documentary-like scenes, are rife with hatred towards Russians. Kassbach comes over as a zealous Nazi when he reads aloud a poem called *A whole Nation* (Ein ganzes Volk) written in 1943. The poem avows in a typically Nazi manner the belief in the German nation's superiority over the life of an individual, commends German militarism, and refers to the distorted image of family as a guarantee of the German nation's persistence. The scene is one of many collage elements

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<sup>9</sup> Cited from the website of Filmarchiv Austria, [LINK](#).

<sup>10</sup> Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193.

woven into the *synzhet*, to adduce Russian formalists' terminology. In this scene, Kassbach, with his back to the camera and his head lit by a lamp's dim light, reads his poem aloud. His voice is accompanied by the non-diegetic sound of marching soldiers. There is no doubt that German militarism is still very close to the character's heart, as is his hatred of the Russians, which can be seen not only in a letter he wrote to his mother, but also in the present, when Kassbach is playing fruit machines with his friends, saying it would be easier for him to shoot a bear if it was wearing a red star.

One element of the collage that straddles both the Nazi past and the ex-Nazi present is the photograph that appears at the very beginning of the film (00:00:40-00:00:55) depicting three naked women running in a street in front of several fully clothed men. The character of this event suggests the photograph had been taken either in a concentration camp or at an execution site in the German-occupied Eastern territories where the victims were often forced to undress before being shot. The photograph does not depict any act of execution itself. However, it does show an act of humiliation as the victims stood entirely at the mercy of the perpetrators, one of many actions that lead to the "final solution". The archival still photograph, black-and-white and a little grainy when magnified, then dissolves into another grainy, almost monochrome still shot showing Kassbach consuming his meal. The freeze-frame shot initiates the scene where the character speaks about his eating habits. The transition from a medium which preserves the memory of past events into the contemporary times when the plot is set implies that the world-view predicated upon prejudice and an inclination to violence has survived the war, or, more generally, that to a certain extent the country has not come to terms with its difficult past. The element that parallels the past with the present is the impunity of the perpetrators – the Nazis were able to commit their hideous crimes because they had received general consent, resulting in numerous culprits being able to evade responsibility for their atrocities. By analogy, Kassbach, his friends, and members of *Initiative* escape punishment since the responsibility for the current acts of violence is ascribed to the victims of the neo-Nazis or those who demur to them in demonstrations. The transgressions and crimes committed by Kassbach and his friends remain unpunished because *Initiative* functions as

a legal group, and when the clique attacks the Yugoslav waiter (one of the men stabs the victim twice with a knife), the police suspect other immigrants of committing the assault. Thus, the existence of the extreme right is a corollary of two essential factors – firstly, negligence in coming to terms with the difficult past after the war, and secondly, the political climate created by the institutions which either tolerate, downplay, or clandestinely go along with far-right ideology. Neo-Nazism is also entwined with post-Nazism through the age-range of Kassbach's clique. Whereas three of the men, including the main character, are in their fifties, another member of the group is much younger in appearance. The emphasis on the group's wide age range is intentional. In an interview with *Volksstimme* the director explains: «Wichtig war uns bei der Beschreibung dieser Gruppe, daß sie nicht nur aus "Veteranen" besteht, sondern bis in die Altersstufe der 20jährigen reicht»<sup>11</sup>. Hence the inclusion of both young and old in the group gives the impression that the problem of neo-Nazism is trans-generational, and therefore very serious. The fact that the main role in the film is played by Walter Kohut, who fifteen years earlier had impersonated the young, zealous Nazi participating in a failed coup against Engelbert Dollfuß in the aforementioned docudrama, *An der schönen blauen Donau*, is a very meaningful coincidence.

The novel and its adaptation sometimes take different paths in undermining the apparently orderly lives of Austrians. In his novel, Helmut Zenker does not mince his words when bringing it home to his readers who, apart from the police, is to be blamed for keeping the neo-Nazi sociopolitical climate alive. Numerous pages of the novel contain the names of more or less radical right-wing parties: VDU – (Union of the Independent – Verband der Unabhängigen), a national-liberal political party, FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), a right-wing party that still operates today, and NDP (National Democratic Party – Nationaldemokratische Partei), a far-right political party banned for violating the country's anti-Nazi legislation in 1988. Kassbach has an affinity with all of these

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<sup>11</sup> Lutz Holzinger, «Absolute Stille und dann der Applaus». Interview with Peter Patzak, *Volksstimme*, March 30, 1979, 13-14; 14.

parties, either by belonging to or voting for them in elections. Furthermore, the collage-novel embraces elements of an Austrian chronicle which includes the dates of establishment of various social groups, such as the veterans' union (Kameradschaftsbund) which acknowledged and supported former soldiers while treating anti-Nazi dissidents as traitors<sup>12</sup>, and becoming embroiled in political affairs, such as the controversies that surrounded Taras Borodajkewycz and the death of Ernst Kirchweyer, the first political victim in the Austrian Second Republic. The chronicle of public events intermingles with the political engagement of Kassbach. We learn that he was active in far-right and veteran groups, distributing their leaflets and participating in their marches and assemblies. It was when he, together with his friend, Werner, participated in demonstrations which supported Borodajkewycz, that Kassbach assaults one of the counter-demonstrators<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the character is a construct of the post-war reality that encapsulates his susceptibility to nationalism and political radicalism. We may again note that Kassbach's activism is rather secondary. He does not aspire to be a leader in any of the groups he sympathizes with, but rather remains an ordinary representative of the Austrian petite bourgeoisie.

The film, in contrast, avoids pointing out particular political parties or associations, rendering Kassbach even more ordinary and mundane. Without defining any political background, Karl Kassbach appears to be literally an everyman. On the other hand, as Peter Spiegel argues, Kassbach still proves to have a specifically Viennese character, since he combines the contradictory features of characters typically depicted in Austrian drama and literature:

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<sup>12</sup> See Heidemarie Uhl, «Landscapes of Commemoration. Historical Memory and Monument Culture in Austria (1945-2000)», in *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes in Europe. Legacies and Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jerzy W. Borejsza, Klaus Ziemer (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 578; and Peter Pirker, Magnus Koch, Johannes Kramer, «Contested Heroes, Contested Places: Conflicting Visions of War at Heldenplatz/Ballhausplatz in Vienna», in *Views of Violence. Representing the Second World War in German and European Museums and Memorials*, eds. Jörg Echternkamp and Stephan Jäger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 182-183.

<sup>13</sup> Helmut Zenker, 101.

Insbesondere aber trifft der Filmemacher das Lächerlich-Unheimliche, Komisch-Tragische, Banal-Gefährliche von Kassbach und der ihn umgebenden Typologie Wiener Charaktere. Diese Dialektik – die man aus den vielen Figuren der Wiener Literatur her auch kennt – verpackt Peter Patzak in einen Streifen, der zugleich die formalen Qualitäten eines Psycho-Thrillers ausspielt.<sup>14</sup>

So one could sum up that *Kassbach* delivers a story about an everyman, which is, however, told through the means of a Viennese dramatic style.

It is above all the juxtaposition of two contradictions – power and helplessness – which leads us to ponder whether there is a connection between Kassbach's sexual behaviour and his susceptibility to neo-Nazism. Fascism, Nazism or neo-Nazism are the key words that emerge in literature, although there is a dearth of articles connected with *Kassbach*, with one of the hypotheses about the essential factors responsible for the fascist inclinations of an individual to be found in the theories addressing the questions of sexuality, violence, psychology of the masses and fascism. Karl Kassbach is awkward and even bashful with sexual partners who appear equal to him – his wife and a prostitute he invites into his car. This is illustrated by Kassbach only being able to satisfy himself very rapidly during sexual intercourse with his wife. Furthermore, when Kassbach is with a prostitute, he cannot even pluck up the courage to initiate intercourse. From time to time, he resorts to spying on his neighbour – a pregnant woman doing exercises in the evening.

Before meeting Liesi, this voyeurism appears to be his only means of finding an outlet for his unsatisfied sexual needs. Interestingly, Kassbach's relationship with Liesi is preceded by sexual contact with her mother (Erni Mangold), who offers the protagonist sex in exchange for accepting Liesi's apprenticeship in the grocery.

From the outset, the anti-hero puts himself in an unequal position with Liesi. Kassbach persuades the girl to take off her shirt and bra, while he does not remove any part of his clothing. When he stresses that he needs

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Spiegel, «Der Faschismus beginnt in der Familie», in *Peter Patzak. Filme*, ed. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Film des Europaverlages (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1983), 165-167; 167.

to see her bust, it is clear that he relegates the female to merely her body parts. When Liesi resists Kassbach's growing interest in sexual intercourse, he brutally breaks her resistance and rapes her. In contact with someone who is his inferior, Kassbach turns his clumsiness and helplessness into physical aggression. His deeds reveal a great deal of corruption of human relationships conceived beneath the veneer of a seemingly decent image of the Viennese bourgeoisie. In her analysis embracing several examples of literature when sex is enmeshed with power, Joanne Pettitt states:

If sex is, biologically and socially, a foundation of humanity, its corruption and deviation express a more fundamental severance with normative humanity. This is not to say that sexual deviancy may not form part of normal human experience, more that, in the context of the Holocaust, the politicization of sex and its relationship to power is suggestive of the breakdown of human relationships in a more general sense.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of *Kassbach*, Liesi, Kassbach's victim, appears from the outset as the weaker person – she attends a special school (Sonderschule), suggesting she has special educational needs. Giving the impression of an adolescent adrift, who is rather vulnerable, and who cannot articulate her own wishes, she easily falls victim to Kassbach's power, a power seen as the only tool to satisfy the desires of this anti-hero.

There is a temptation to conflate the sexual behaviour of Karl Kassbach with his Nazi world-view, even more so due to the reported affinity of the petit-bourgeois with right-wing extremism and the hypothesis of inclination towards sexual aggression in someone whose sexuality is repressed. This is in accordance with the hypothesis disseminated by the once popular theory of Wilhelm Reich<sup>16</sup>. In his complex analysis of the film, however, Tibor Zenker points out that one must be cautious in the psychological judgment of the character:

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<sup>15</sup> Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives. Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 45.

<sup>16</sup> I refer to the translation based on the third, enlarged edition from August 1942, published in 1946: Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, transl. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: The Orgone Institute Press, 1946).

Hier ist keineswegs ein kausaler, geschweige denn ein monokausaler Zusammenhang zu entdecken. Eine Unfähigkeit zu “normaler, zwischenmenschlicher emotionaler und sexueller Interaktion führt bestimmt nicht zu faschistischer Gesinnung – und ebenso wenig umgekehrt”.<sup>17</sup>

However, in his interpretation, Zenker concentrates only on the sexual awkwardness of Kassbach and his inability to have normal sexual relations, while seemingly downplaying the significance of the sexual violence which Kassbach perpetrates. According to Reich, «sexual weakness undermines self-confidence; compensation is affected by rigid character traits or brutal sexual behavior. The necessity for sexual self-control, for maintenance of sexual repression, leads to the development of compulsive, emotionally highly charged ideas of honor, duty, courage and self-control»<sup>18</sup>.

In the case of Kassbach, the use of violence compensates for his inner uncertainty and restores his sense of sexual self-control. Moreover, inner weakness and uncertainty are not the only explanations for Kassbach's sexual brutality. The crisis in his life also affects his sexual relations with his wife. From her reaction to Kassbach's sudden wanton lust – a combination of astonishment and dismay – we may infer that the couple stand aloof sexually from one another. The coldness, in turn, engenders the feeling of unsatisfied desires. Once again one might adduce Wilhelm Reich who posits that «the suppression of natural sexual gratification leads to various kinds of substitute gratifications. Natural aggression, for example, becomes brutal sadism which then is an essential mass-psychological factor in imperialistic wars»<sup>19</sup>. In this context, Reich exploits and develops the notion of sublimation proposed by Sigmund Freud, which he understood as the transformation of inadmissible impulses or idealizations into socially acceptable actions<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Tibor Zenker, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Reich, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Reich, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, «Civilization and Its Discontents» (1930) in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud – The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its*

Even if Reich's limited theory relating to the consequences of sexual suppression that appear in the film is too far-fetched, we should bear in mind that Reich's criticism was levelled generally against numerous aspects of an extremely conservative lifestyle – first of all, the values of a traditional family, mysticism and selected tenets of Christian ideology. In this regard, *Kassbach* also deconstructs, in an uncompromising manner, the traditional image of Austria. There is, however, one element of Kassbach's personality that goes against part of Reich's theory – his anti-religiosity. Freud, and especially Reich, perceived religion as an element of oppression that blocked the path to a person's sexual satisfaction. Kassbach, in contrast, does not evince any signs of religiosity. A more profound psychoanalysis of the character is impossible since we have only some excerpts from his background at our disposal. As Harald Leupold-Löwenthal stresses, «Kassbach mit den Kategorien der Psychologie oder Psychoanalyse zu "analysieren" wäre unangemessen und ist glücklicherweise aus der Erzählstruktur und dem angebotenen "Material" heraus gar nicht möglich»<sup>21</sup>.

Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the fact that the hypothesis of the popularity of authoritarian ideas among the middle-class belonged not only to the theory of Reich. In their path-breaking monograph, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford contend that «It is a well-known hypothesis that susceptibility to fascism is most characteristically a middle-class phenomenon, that it is "in the culture" and, hence, that those who conform the most to this culture will be the most prejudiced»<sup>22</sup>. Narrow though this focus may be, the authors of the study believed «that the findings they discovered in this focus group would apply more broadly»<sup>23</sup>. Regardless of the methodology of the Frankfurt School

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*Discontents, and Other Works*, transl. James Strachey (Hogarth Press; London, 1961), vol. XXI, 79-80.

<sup>21</sup> Harald Leupold-Löwenthal, «Alltägliche Umgebung», in *Peter Patzak. Filme*, ed. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Film des Europaverlages (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1983), 169-172; 170.

<sup>22</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 229.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Gerhardt notices that «the narrow focus merits reconsideration and further



studies, it is “*licentia poetica*” that allows a film to magnify or even exaggerate a social phenomenon which in this case relates to some characteristics of the middle-class. Considering the popularity of the Austrian film motif of a middle-class man who is susceptible to complicity or even perpetration of crimes under a non-democratic regime, Karl Kassbach appears as a “darker” variant of the originally jovial and seemingly innocuous Mr. Karl, a middle-class Austrian everyman. In his comments on the film, the journalist of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* remarked: «Kassbach ist der Herr Karl, der wieder anfängt, uns fürchterlich zu werden»<sup>24</sup>. However, while in the case of *Der Herr Karl* it was mainly opportunism that motivated the character in his abhorrent deeds, in *Kassbach* it is rather the penchant for authoritarianism and violence. In this dark vision of the attraction of the middle-class to authoritarianism and violence, Kassbach becomes the epitome of all the evil that consumed Austrian society thirty years after the end of the Second World War. Kassbach's affinity to Mr. Karl consists in the construction of both characters as ordinary people – as one of us, and in the effect on the audience attained by having an insight into their minds. In a letter to Zenker, Patzak alleged: «Dieses Eindringen in die Gedankenwelt des Protagonisten stellt eine interessante Beziehung zum Zuschauer her»<sup>25</sup>.

### *Entering into a dark world*

In the creation of his anti-hero, Patzak employs the model of anti-stardom, which was not anything unusual for modern cinema. However, the very uncompromising manner of criticism adopted in the film evokes an association with the “art of exaggeration” (*Übertreibungskunst*) characteristic of the oeuvre of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, whose literary

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scrutiny». See Christina Gerhardt, «The Authoritarian Personality: Then and Now», in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, eds. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), 61-73; 65-67.

<sup>24</sup> F. Walden, «Neue Filme dieser Woche. Kassbach», *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, March 31, 1979, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Patzak, letter to Helmut Zenker, Vienna, January 27, 1978 in Archiv der Zeitgenossen, Nachlass: Peter Patzak, file *Kassbach. Korrespondenz Peter Patzak / Helmut Zenker*.

career began in the 1960s. Throughout his entire life, Bernhard became renowned for his use of hyperbole in describing his characters, replete with repetitions and general overstatements which are suffused with pessimism. However, while Bernhard's principle of exaggeration is applied consistently to grotesque effect<sup>26</sup>, the exaggeration and radicalism used in Patzak's film stress the highly pessimistic message. While the film elides the political context sketched in the novel, it puts a strong emphasis on decrying several aspects related to the traditional image of Vienna and its petite bourgeoisie. The anti-hero is depicted not only as an anti-Semitic, anti-Slavic, racist, nationalist old Nazi and neo-Nazi, but also as a sadist, a brute, a pathological father, pedophile, rapist, vandal, anti-democrat, and murderer. However, the art of exaggeration manifests itself not only on the level of the film's narrative, but also in the visual style. Vienna, or the 20<sup>th</sup> city district where the anti-hero lives to be exact, is devoid of any of the artistic or architectural traditional images popular amongst tourists, and looks like the suburbs of any other European city. Patzak links the visually unpleasant and Vienna at its least flattering with the motif of the human inability to establish firm and satisfying relations with other people. This motif would later be characteristic of the oeuvre of such Austrian directors as Götz Spielmann, Barbara Albert and Ulrich Seidl, who also avoid the iconic landmarks of Vienna<sup>27</sup>. As Karin Moser points out, for Patzak this visually new depiction of Vienna is the continuation of the picture and sound composition he introduced in the crime series *Kottan* in 1976: «Wien [...] ist jeder tourismustauglichen,

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Bowles, *The Ends of Satire. Legacies of Satire in Postwar German Writing* (Berlin/München/Boston: De Gruyter 2015), 87-90.

<sup>27</sup> See Mary Wauchope, «Place and Space of Contemporary Austria in Barbara Albert's Feature Films», in *New Austrian Film*, ed. Robert Dassanowsky and Oliver C. Speck (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 108-121; 111; Tobias Heinrich, «Too close to home. Heimatkonzepte im österreichischen Migrantentfilm», in *Alpensagas und Modelldörfer. Heimatbesichtigungen in Literatur und Film*, ed. Wolfgang Straub (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag 2020), 203-214; 206; Sara F. Hall, «The Lady in the Lake: Austria's Images in Götz Spielmann's *Antares*», in *New Austrian Film*, ed. Robert Dassanowsky and Oliver C. Speck (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 356-367; 362.

idyllisch-gemütlichen Bild- und Tonkomposition weit entrückt. Kalt, dunkel, trist und unterschwellig bedrohlich mutet die Stadt an»<sup>28</sup>.

This impression is discerned by the journalist of *Volksstimme*, who stresses the significance of the evening and early morning scenes: «Eine düstere und abgestorben wirkende Großstadt, die schon bald als das Wien der Jetztzeit erkannt werden kann, Morgen- und Abendstimmungen sind mitbestimmend für die atmosphärische Dichte dieses Porträts»<sup>29</sup>. In this way, in its coming to terms with the Nazi past, contemporary right-wing radicalism and domestic violence in Austria, the film resembles entering into a dark world. The *mise-en-scène* remains gloomy both in scenes shot in the district where Kassbach lives and in the suburb where he meets a prostitute. A number of interiors – the pub, where *Initiative* organizes its meeting, another pub where he and his friends regularly meet, a second flat where Kassbach abuses Liesi – are filmed with a scarcity of light and with the use of cold colours, especially blue, which emerges in the scenes shot in the evening. Cold colours are also predominant in the costumes: Kassbach wears a dark grey coat, a grey shirt, a black tie; Liesi wears a blue coat and a blue skirt; while Georg wears a bluish shirt, dark green pullover, and in the closing scene is dressed completely in blue. The same pertains to the scenes of riots in the street taking place in the evening and in the apartment that the clique vandalizes, which are both recorded with low key lighting. The available light in these scenes is so dim that we cannot recognize the faces of the characters. The semi-darkness impinges on the bluish and greyish tones of the frames in the scene when the Yugoslav waiter runs into the ambush of the clique. In the winter night's glow, even the snow has a bluish shade. Furthermore, Kassbach's Volkswagen bus, used to transport goods, is always dirty, shabby, and grey, the symbol of his gradual downfall.

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<sup>28</sup> Karin Moser, «Offene Wunden – Generationen auf dem Prüfstand», in *Peter Patzak. Filmmacher, Autor, Maler*, ed. Karin Moser and Andreas Ungerböck (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2009), 126-139; 127.

<sup>29</sup> Anonym, «Begegnung mit einem wichtigen österreichischen Film: Was Kassbach zu Kassbach macht», *Volksstimme*, March 31, 1979, 9.

The gloomy, pessimistic atmosphere of the film is accentuated by the accompanying music. The soundtrack, generally restrained in its musical expression, comprises two themes, one played on a harpsichord (sometimes accompanied by the variable sound of wind instruments), the other on a violin, both striking a sad and wistful tone. Whereas the first theme usually illustrates acts of violence – for instance in the scene of the assault on the waiter or in the scene when Kassbach abandons his son in a parking lot – the second theme surfaces in the scenes showing Kassbach acting alone – driving his bus, walking at night, and spying on a neighbour. This music accordingly corresponds with the specific frame arrangement<sup>30</sup> – the view of Kassbach alone – and accentuates the alienation of the anti-hero.

Two places where Kassbach fulfils his dark fantasies appear particularly gloomy and repulsive. The secret flat where Kassbach abuses Liesi is sparsely furnished with only a bed, a chair, and a small heater. A harsh, white light emanates from a ceiling light whose lampshade comprises a couple of wires coated with the remains of some material. The shabby look is emphasized by numerous stains on the bland wallpaper. The second location, where he satisfies his fantasies by killing guinea pigs, is the basement of the summer house that is owned by Walter, one member of the clique. The basement is in a dilapidated condition – squalid, with the walls badly plastered and decorated with faded posters of roosters. Large cobwebs are hanging from the staircase, and in one of the corners lies a pile of coal. When Kassbach and one of the other men shoot at the animals, the room becomes suffused with bluish-grey smoke emanating from their guns.

Therefore, in *Kassbach* we find one of the first contributions to the popular motif of an Austrian basement in literature and film, depicted as a place of obscene and shocking activities and the fulfilment of dark fantasies. The motif probably existed much earlier in literature than in reality (the most appalling case was the imprisonment of Elisabeth Fritzl in 2008, followed

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<sup>30</sup> I employ the typology of film music proposed by Pauli, who distinguishes its three categories: paraphrase, counterpoint and polarization. See Hansjörg Pauli, «Filmmusik: Bin historisch-kritischer Abriss», in *Musik in den Massenmedien Rundfunk und Fernsehen. Perspektiven und Materialien*, ed. Hans-Christian Schmidt (Mainz: Schott, 1976), 91-119; 104.

by that of Natascha Kampusch in 2010). Novels which feature child incarceration in the basement of a family home are, for instance, Adalbert Stifter's *Turmalin* (1852) and Franz Nabl's *Das Grab des Lebendigen* (1917). Furthermore, the basement as a place of terror and perversion would often appear in later New Austrian Film: in Ruth Mader's *Struggle* (2003), Markus Schleiner's *Michael* (2011), Uli Seidl's *Im Keller* (2014) and Andreas Gruber's *Hannas schlafende Hunde* (2016). In *Kassbach*, however, the basement is a place to give vent to the dark needs not of a single individual, but of a group of men.

The *mise-en-scène* and sophisticated framing considerably contribute to the questioning or even mocking of some Austrian traditions and are key formal elements in rendering the film an example of the “art of exaggeration”. This is best displayed by the bar where the meetings of *Initiative* are held.



Figure 2 – The place where the meeting of right-wing extremists takes place.

The building does not distinguish itself from any other location shown in the film. On the facade one can notice a sign stating that the club serves Viennese cuisine. However, none of the guests inside consumes anything in the bar, the guests are rather concentrated on the purpose of their meeting. The space inside appears reduced since the bar is replete with people and a

little bit blurred due to the fact that the air is suffused with cigarette smoke (again conferring a bluish tone to the frame).

All the guests gathered in the bar, including the hosts of the meeting, are men. As if that were not enough to underline the very masculine tone of the scene, the set design of the room is dominated by a number of conspicuous antlers decorating a wall, in front of which Lothar, the *Initiative* leader, speaks. In one full shot depicting the interior of the bar, the antlers fill the width of the frame. Shown in the background, they tower over the guests located in the foreground and middle ground. Another large single antler is hanging on the opposite wall [figure 2]. The large number of antlers in the bar evinces a difference between the film's script and the novel, in which the narrator mentioned only one set of antlers hanging on the wall. The decoration attracted the attention of the critic from the weekly news magazine *Falter*, who ironically stated: «In der Gaststätte, wo sich die Faschisten treffen, hängen nicht zehn, sondern hundert Hirschgeweihe»<sup>31</sup>. Antlers, which are the most visible remnants or tokens of hunting, symbolize virtues traditionally ascribed to men, such as power and dominance. In *Kassbach*, bearing in mind the aforementioned reflection on the question of sexuality and fascism, it is worth mentioning that the ritual of hunting, expressed by the symbolism of the antlers, is predicated on the ambivalence of the connection between the love towards an animal often declared by the hunter and the will to kill the animal. This ambivalence can be explained by the semi-erotic aspect in the act of hunting and killing, or, in other words, with hunters' relation to hunting in terms of sex and affection<sup>32</sup>. Approaching the prey, killing it and celebrating the hunt by taking pictures with the dead body of the animal resembles an act of sexual conquest, while the «power of life and death is central to the seductive, exciting romance of hunting»<sup>33</sup>. Taking pride in a successful hunt and flaunting the prey echoes the efforts of a heterosexual man to dominate a woman. The location of the symbol

<sup>31</sup> Hans Hurch and Armin Thurnher, «Kassbach», *Falter*, no. 44, 1979, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Luke, «Violent Love: Hunting, Heterosexuality, and the Erotics of Men's Predation», *Feminist Studies*, no. 3 (1998): 627-65; 628.

<sup>33</sup> Luke, 630.

of power in a bar that is hosting a fledgling neo-fascist movement emphasizes very strongly (in the manner of the aforementioned art of exaggeration) the connection between a patriarchal culture and the propensity for (neo-)fascism.

However, one may question Horkheimer and Adorno about whether the act of domination does not serve as a veneer which hides the true character of the hunter. In their notes and sketches about the human contradistinction to an animal, the authors of critical theory point out: «Yet behind man's admiration for beauty lurks always the ringing laughter, the boundless scorn, the barbaric obscenity vented by potency on impotence, with which it numbs the secret fear that it is itself enslaved to impotence, to death, to nature»<sup>34</sup>. Here we again may refer to the origins of the right-wing radical movements which are to be sought in the feeling of an inner crisis and premonition of external danger. Thus, the manifestation of a sign of power is aimed at effacing the feeling of inner insecurity.

The combination of a murky *mise-en-scène* with a specific, extensive *mise-en-cadre* is also used in the scene in the summer house belonging to Walter, where the clique meets. Four men playing cards, although set in the foreground, are only one element of the wide shot. Thanks to the deep staging combined with deep focus and the use of a long take (the camera stands still for approximately 27 seconds), we can discern many other telling details that reflect the nature of the neo-Nazi characters. In the background we may notice Nazi symbols – Hitler's portrait hanging in the upper left-hand corner of the frame and numerous small swastikas employed as a pattern for the grey-blue wallpaper [picture 3]. Other obtrusive items located on the walls are three tiny antlers, which can symbolize, as already mentioned, power and dominance. Another symbol of a human being's superiority over an animal is a large bear hide lying on the floor, close to an adjacent room which is the source of natural light. The few elements of interior decoration – a wooden clock, a small statue, a lamp, and the furniture – imply that the

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<sup>34</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 207.

characters are representatives of the petite bourgeoisie. The last meaningful item embraced in the frame is the blow-up doll lying on the bed. As an object of mocking remarks and laughter, the doll serves as an allegory of sexual impotence, expresses the semblance of male power, and in particular that of Kassbach, whose inability to sexually satisfy a woman goes together with his treating of women as objects. Hence in one single frame the director of photography embraces all the elements characterizing an average middle-class neo-Nazi and male misogynist.



Figure 3 – Accumulation of symbols of male Nazi power

### *Reception and resonance*

For Patzak, *Kassbach* is another work which contributes to the establishment of a critical position that some of the viewers cannot align themselves with. Patzak shot the film before getting to work on the fifth episode of the series *Kottan*<sup>35</sup>. In this series, he depicted an Austrian police officer in a manner that was perceived as a denigration of the police. After the transmission of the controversial episode in 1976, the television channel received a deluge of complaints in which viewers expressed their outrage and dismay<sup>36</sup>. One

<sup>35</sup> Anonym, «Milieuetreu und präzise», *Profil*, no. 8 (1979), 58-60; 59.

<sup>36</sup> Moser, 128-129.



year earlier, ORF did not approve Zenker's proposition to produce *Kassbach* as a television film. Instead, a television manager tried to talk the writer into other material which should be lighter and "less polarizing in the field of politics"<sup>37</sup>. As already mentioned, the film which eventually had its cinematic release in 1979 does indeed circumvent the novel's unambiguous allusions to contemporary right-wing political parties and organizations. Nonetheless, in 1978 Patzak still claimed that the production of *Kassbach* would not have been possible fifteen years earlier as he thought that only at this time was there an audience capable of calmly absorbing the film's message<sup>38</sup>. The film was eventually produced by the Viennese SATEL film production company and received a subsidy from the Federal Ministry of Education and Arts (Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst), which covered approximately one third of the production costs<sup>39</sup>. Support was possible due to the positive decision of the film advisory council (Filmbeirat), a body established by the ministry in 1973 to decide on the funding of "artistically and socially relevant films"<sup>40</sup>. However, Patzak had to personally cover approximately one third of the production costs. The possibility of shooting the film in the late 1970s, and particularly the fact that the production was financially supported from a public source, would indicate that the development of a critical, modernist cinema was an ongoing process. In an interview Patzak acknowledges that the sponsors had no objections to the script<sup>41</sup>.

The film was very successful both abroad and among Austrian cinema-goers. It was shown at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1979, where it

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<sup>37</sup> Tibor Zenker, 141-142.

<sup>38</sup> Tibor Zenker, 143-144.

<sup>39</sup> Anonym, «Gespräch mit Peter Patzak», in *Peter Patzak. Filme*, ed. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Film des Europaverlages (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1983), 153-156; 153.

<sup>40</sup> The establishment of Filmbeirat was a step of public funding from the federal budget which preceded the passing of film funding law in 1980. See Walter Fritz, *Im Kino erlebe ich die Welt. 100 Jahre Kino und Film in Österreich* (Wien: Christian Brandstätter, 1996), 273.

<sup>41</sup> Anonym, «Gespräch mit Peter Patzak», in *Peter Patzak. Filme*, ed. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Film des Europaverlages (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1983), 153-156; 153.

received the award of the UNESCO International Committee for the Diffusion of Arts and Literature through the Cinema (CIDALC). The verdict stated that the film presents «a courageous depiction of a problem of our times»<sup>42</sup>. According to the study that I conducted on the basis of cinema programs, printed in the Viennese daily *Wiener Zeitung*, we can see that the film was screened for eight weeks (from March 30 to May 24, 1979) in the Viennese traditional cinema *Urania*. According to the news magazine, *Profil*, *Kassbach* was a domestic box-office success. In the spring of 1979, 32,000 Austrian cinemagoers watched the film, meaning it was one of the most successful new Austrian films. In the opinion of the journalist, *Kassbach*, along with Valie Export's *Unsichtbare Gegner*, are examples of works that revived an Austrian film industry that had been regarded as dead and unviable<sup>43</sup>.

Readiness for a critical approach to a highly negative image of an ordinary Viennese person manifests itself in Austrian press reviews. The adjective “critical” is the key word of the review published in the film industry magazine, *Multimedia*. The critic finds the art of exaggeration in *Kassbach* problematic. In her view, the definitely negative picture of a milieu which stands for the whole of society and the absence of any alternatives or ways out of this general corruption requires a critically distanced audience, especially as the performance of Walter Kohut was exceptionally convincing. The review ends with a very specific recommendation: «Nur für kritische Erwachsene»<sup>44</sup>. Whereas *Multimedia* expresses doubt about the existence of such critical awareness among the audience, the daily *Die Presse* criticizes the film precisely for its penchant for exaggeration. The reviewer argued that someone – either Patzak or Zenker – was overzealous during the film's production: «Der österreichische Kinofilm gleicht momentan einem zarten Pflänzchen, dessen Gärtner aus lauter Sorge um sein Überleben möglicherweise da und dort zuviel oder falsch gießen möge»<sup>45</sup>. In the journalist's view, the exaggeration

<sup>42</sup> Cited after the synopsis in *Filmkunst*, no. 84 (September-October) 1979, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Anonym, «Neues Selbstbewußtsein», *Profil*, no. 33 (1979), 52.

<sup>44</sup> Christl Stadler, «Kassbach», *Multimedia*, no. 8 (1979), record no. 12432, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Franz Manola, «Polit-Thiller vom großdeutschen Nirvana», *Die Presse*, March 31/April 1, 1979, 6.

actually begins with the selection of topics since the problems that the film raises barely exist in Austria. On the other hand, we can read that *Kassbach* proves that technically immaculate films can be made in Austria. *Die Presse* returned to review *Kassbach* in April 1979, repeating that the plot has little credibility<sup>46</sup>.

In the case of *Kassbach*, the reception parallels the political orientation of the Austrian press. The conservative *Die Presse* is the only newspaper to formulate a negative judgment about the film, while the press that represented a neutral or more liberal political world-view had a quite different opinion of *Kassbach*. The critic of the *Wiener Zeitung* does not argue that the problems depicted in the film do not exist. The journalist hopes rather that people like Kassbach belong to a minority in society and notes that the image of Vienna is strikingly dark and unattractive, and even gloomier than in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), the famous British noir drama set in early post-war Vienna. Furthermore, the critic claims that, thanks to the exaggerated way of depicting the city and its inhabitants, Patzak achieves a much stronger effect<sup>47</sup>. The newspaper that paid a great deal of attention to *Kassbach* was the communist *Volksstimme*. Firstly, in a short note published on the day of the film's Viennese premiere, the newspaper called the film "more than necessary"<sup>48</sup>. Here *Kassbach* was set against the backdrop of recurrent neo-Nazi incidents in West Germany and Austria as well as the premiere of the mini-series *Holocaust*, which, according to the newspaper, was very much needed in the face of increasing neo-Nazi aggression<sup>49</sup>. In fact, *Volksstimme* printed a long interview with Patzak in the same issue<sup>50</sup>. Finally, *Volksstimme* published a long review completely commending the film in its next issue<sup>51</sup>. Out of all of Austria's major daily newspapers the

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<sup>46</sup> Otto Schulmeister, «Ein Wahlkampf sondergleichen», *Die Presse*, April 21, 1979.

<sup>47</sup> Anonym (L. Ch.), «Allerlei Menschen und Phantastik. Neu in Wiener Kinos: Österreichischer Berlinale-Film und Auslandsware», *Wiener Zeitung*, March 3, 1979, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Anonym, *Kassbach* und der Faschismus, *Volksstimme*, March 30, 1979, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Anonym (HKS), «Neonazi – nicht nur in der BRD», *Volksstimme*, March 30, 1979, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Holzinger.

<sup>51</sup> Anonym, «Begegnung».

tabloid newspaper, *Kronen-Zeitung*, was the only publication to refrain from reviewing the film. In a short overview, the author of the column *Filme dieser Woche* only briefly mentions *Kassbach* stating: «Erfreulich, daß Peter Patzaks “Kassbach” sich trotz des politischen Themas so erfolgreich in der Urania hält»<sup>52</sup>.

The liberal news magazine, *Profil*, reviewed the film in a text entitled *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, implying that Austrians still have not come to terms with their difficult past<sup>53</sup>. The magazine praises the film particularly for its credibility: «Alles, was die Neonazis in “Kassbach” sagen, ist authentisch und wird so auch immer wieder auf unzähligen rechten Flugblättern verteilt. Alles, was der verschreckte Kleinbürger Karl Kassbach sagt und treibt, ist zumindest glaubwürdig»<sup>54</sup>. Judging by the political world-view of *Profil* and its contribution to the development of politically independent, critical journalism in Austria, this evaluation of the film should not be a surprise.

### *Closing remarks*

*Kassbach* was released at a watershed moment for Austrian memory culture – at the end of March 1979, four weeks after the broadcast of the American mini-series *Holocaust* on Austrian television, which irreversibly changed the culture of remembrance in Germany and Austria. Just as in Germany, the transmission of *Holocaust* triggered spontaneous reactions from the audience and generated a wide response in the press. The mini-series was announced many weeks before the broadcast and was accompanied by documentaries and public affairs television programs addressing the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in Austria. Although the first harbingers of a shift in the culture of remembrance had already occurred one year earlier with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the annexation, it was this mini-series and the mostly positive reactions to its narrative that contributed to the development of the new,

<sup>52</sup> Gino Wimmer, «Filme dieser Woche», *Kronen-Zeitung*, April 21, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> *Die Mörder sind unter uns* was the title of the first German post-war film made by Wolfgang Staudte. It is very likely that the journalist adduces this title on purpose, to place emphasis on the questions of de-Nazification and post-war reality.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Khely, «Die Mörder sind unter uns», *Profil*, no. 13 (1979), 52.

critical culture of remembrance in the late 1970s<sup>55</sup>. Heidemarie Uhl advances the hypothesis that its first effects became noticeable in 1983, when Friedrich Peter, chairman of the populist FPÖ, withdrew his candidature for the president of the Austrian parliament after a public outcry. The “new sensibility”, as Uhl calls it, would not let a former SS member hold this prominent office for the third time. This event would foreshadow a general change in Austrian memory brought about by the Waldheim affair<sup>56</sup>.

*Kassbach* was screened precisely at a time of a “new sensibility” being formed. The conformity of narrative and style contributes to the film being a particularly remarkable example of the emerging New Austrian Film which questions the established authorities, the traditional images of Vienna and Austria, and employs a different visual language in order to emphasize a critical message. In terms of the narrative, it is the indisputable merit of *Kassbach* to link the problem of Austria coming to terms with its Nazi past with the more contemporary problems of xenophobia, extremism, and violence. The new approach to the difficult past and problematic present the film offers found considerable interest among the audience and the acclaim of the more liberal press, indicating that this new sensibility in memory and politics was not only a cultural process, but a social one as well.

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<sup>55</sup> In her analysis of the response on the miniseries, Heidemarie Uhl names a few examples of positive press comments, such as the article *Hoffen, dass der Schock kommt* (To hope that the shock will come) published in the daily *Kurier* by Peter Rabl, representative of the new, critical generation in Austrian journalism. See Heidemarie Uhl, «Von “Endlösung” zu “Holocaust”. Die TV-Ausstrahlung von “Holocaust” und die Transformationen des österreichischen Gedächtnisses», in *Zivilisationsbruch und Gedächtniskultur. Das 20. Jahrhundert in der Erinnerung des beginnenden 21. Jahrhunderts* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2003), 153-179; 165.

<sup>56</sup> Uhl, 173.

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