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ALI: FEAR EATS THE SOUL - STRANGERS IN THE CITY

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Learning Goal:

Attendees at this paper will confront the mechanisms and impacts of social exclusion and trauma as illuminated by theory, research, and a close examination of a major work of cinema. They will encounter the potential healing in social connection, and the obstacles to be overcome.

Abstract Text:

A great deal has been written in epidemiological, medical, sociological and psychoanalytic literature about the corrosive effects of social exclusion, alienation, and humiliation – arising from perceived “otherness,” whatever its source. In his 1974 film, “Angst Essen Seele Auf,” Rainer Werner Fassbinder vividly traces this process through the lives and improbable love of two characters, each a stranger - forgotten, neglected or foreclosed from meaning, importance, and nurturant social connections.

As the film opens, it is raining. Seeking shelter, an awkward older German woman ducks into a bar – a local hangout for the displaced Arabian men who have come to Germany as euphemistically named “guest workers.” As Arabian music plays on the jukebox, the group taunts Ali, a Moroccan man 20 years her junior, to ask the older woman to dance. When she accepts, a halting but genuine conversation and connection begins -a connection immediately assaulted by the stigma, humiliation, and shunning arising from each of their fragile social worlds toward this intruding “other,” and toward the group member who has dared to violate the rules and boundaries that create precarious safety.

Immersed in such a corrosive experience, one is excluded from the social link that offers both support and the possibility of speech and thought (Davoine and Gaudilliere: “History Beyond Trauma”). Unrecognized and unacknowledged loss, pain, loneliness, and fear find their expression in action and symptoms – are spoken in madness or experienced in the body. Psychotic or bodily expression points to and communicates the unexpressed, unthought trauma that has been and continues to be lived wordlessly.

Using Fassbinder’s visually powerful and emotionally inescapable film, this paper will trace the embodiment of these forces in the lives of the two protagonists, examine their personal and social cost, and illuminate the human struggle for community, understanding, and self-worth.

**ON THE HEALING POWER
OF HUMAN RECONNECTION**