

From realism to abstraction
and back, Philip Guston's painting makes
him unique in his generation.

By April Kingsley

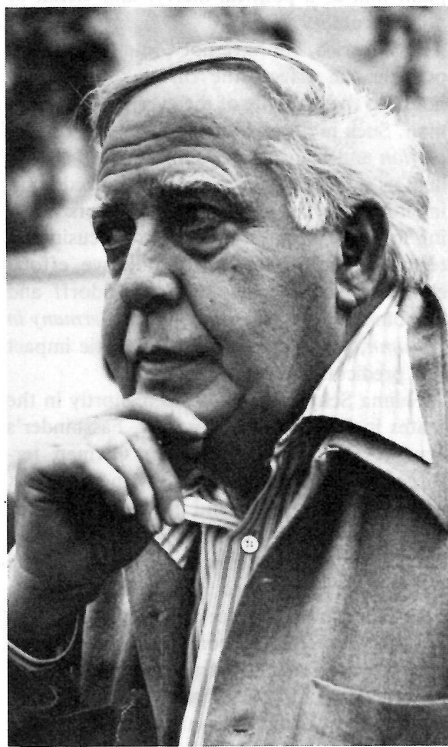
Philip Guston's Endgame

"Painting is a clock that sees each end of the street as the edge of the world," wrote Philip Guston in 1958, about midway through his career. Abstraction and representation seem to have occupied the two ends of that street during this century, and Guston has lived in both houses. When he wrote this enigmatic and somewhat foreboding statement, Guston was one of the famous pioneering abstract expressionists who had just recently wrested center stage from the artists of Europe. He was pouring his emotions onto the canvas in a stream of impulsive marks and agitated strokes, but unlike Pollock and de Kooning, he had given up a highly successful career as a figurative artist to do so.

Considering the magnitude of his commitment to abstraction, it seems ironic that about ten years after making that statement Guston weathered an unprecedented storm of criticism when he returned to representational painting of a decidedly odd-ball sort. The cigar-puffing goons in his plotless pictorial dramas of the seventies that linger somewhere between Franz Kafka and Krazy Kat do indeed seem to reside at the "other edge of the world" of painting.

Guston's statement may also be telling us about painting's role as a teller of past, present, and future time. In the 1930s his Picasso-like figures set in compressed surrealist spaces often referred back to Renaissance masters like Piero della Francesca and Uccello, despite their modernist manner. The abstract-expressionist paintings of his middle period were in perfect temporal tune. His recent, quirkily cartoonish canvases with their tragi-comic imagery are right at home in our manic-depressive era, an era that has learned to live

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on a daily basis with terrorism—but in other ways these new paintings also look backward and forward in time.

In fact, few artists have predicted the future nearly as accurately as Guston did when he startled everyone with these eccentric figure paintings in 1970, works which since then have spawned a whole generation of odd-ball clones. We'll probably be seeing even more evidence of his influence on the younger generation now that his enormous traveling retrospective (which opened last month at the San Francisco Museum of Art) and accompanying monograph from Braziller by Ross Feld

will bring his underground reputation as the guru of "New Image Painting" to the surface.

At sixty-seven, Guston is a chain smoker who seems beset by perpetual anxiety. He divulges his vast knowledge of art, music, and literature in intense monologues that seem in direct contradiction to his own sadly florid, heavy-jowled, truck-driverish appearance. Guston's hypersensitivity germinated during his upbringing in Los Angeles where his parents had moved from his Montreal birthplace in 1919 when Guston was six years old. As an adolescent he took a correspondence course in cartooning before being kicked out of Manual Arts High School, along with his friend and fellow-rebel Jackson Pollock, for satirizing the teachers in a caricature-filled broadside.

Guston was still the nonconformist later when he was on a scholarship to the esteemed Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles; he piled up all the classical plaster casts he was supposed to be drawing from individually and painted the whole mess. Though eighteen-year-old Guston was busily copying Giotto, Mantegna, and Piero from reproductions, he was also poring over art magazines for glimpses of the latest modern art, some of which he was also fortunate to see in the flesh at the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, who housed their fabulous collection of Dadaist and cubist works in a Hollywood Hills mansion designed by none other than Frank Lloyd Wright.

As a raggedly handsome young man, Guston did stunts and bit parts in the movies—including one prophetic role as the high priest in the film of H. Rider Haggard's *She*. His lifelong habit of marathon movie viewing

*Left above: Philip Guston at sixty-seven.
Right: Green Rug, 1976, oil on canvas, 68½
x 94 inches.*

Recent films have dealt with terrorism.

long, dark nights of the north were horribly lonely for him, and when he again sees his wife he says his love for her is now even stronger. But she explains "I had a strange idea . . . a sudden illumination . . . that you went away and left me alone." And so she decides that is what he must do; he moves out of the house. Although nearly everyone finds her behavior strange and inexplicable, the woman struggles to put another life in order. Although Wenders got the germ of his idea while in Frankfurt and chose France as the locale, he claims that the major influences on the film's visual imagery were the paintings of Andrew Wyeth—"images of a naked, bright worldscape in Pennsylvania and Maine with the colors of brown, white and gray predominating." Even the woman's clothing and her heeless shoes, were inspired by Wyeth's *Christina's World*.

Volker Schlöndorff, born forty-one years ago in Wiesbaden, received much of his regular schooling and film education in France, and was an assistant director for Alain Resnais and Louis Malle. He has made a dozen films since returning to West Germany from France fourteen years ago. Schlöndorff's first film, *Young Toerless* in 1966, is credited by some observers as having inaugurated the new German cinema, although no such impact was perceived at the time. Its lush cinematography and poetic feel would be hallmarks of many subsequent German productions, but *Young Toerless* was even more of a breakthrough for its thematic content. It dared to comment openly on the nation's recent past: in a pre-World War I boarding-school setting, *Young Toerless* showed how the roots and regimen of fascism could prosper in an enclosed community.

Schlöndorff and his wife Margarethe von Trotta were two of the first to tackle the terrorist issue, he in *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* in 1975, and she in 1978's *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*. *Katharina Blum*, Schlöndorff's best-known achievement previous to *The Tin Drum*, is based on Heinrich Boll's novel. Fraulein Blum, after a brief liaison with a man hunted as a dangerous murderer, is relentlessly crucified in the press by a reporter whose sense of sensationalism surpasses anything Rupert Murdoch ever dreamed of.

Of course Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, and Schlöndorff are not the only active German directors to have made worthwhile films. Others are less known, but one whose reputa-

tion should grow in this country in 1980 is Reinhard Hauff, whose *Knife in the Head* recently opened in American theaters.

Hauff's *Knife in the Head* centers around the character Hoffman, an apolitical violinist and biogeneticist. He happens to be in the way and gets shot in the head during a police raid against a group of radicals. He is left with impaired speech, partial paralysis, and no memory of the events surrounding his injury. Hoffman, played by the ubiquitous Bruno Ganz, becomes a cause celebre; the police insist he is a dangerous terrorist, while leftists paint him as a political martyr and victim of police brutality.

In America, we have not come to fully appreciate the effects the threat of terrorism holds on the daily life of the average West German. Such motion pictures as *The Third Generation* and Hauff's *Knife in the Head* should help us to an understanding. It is indeed striking how many leading German directors working in a contemporary milieu are focusing on terrorism. In one rare collaborative effort, eleven directors, including Schlöndorff and Fassbinder, handled the subject in *Germany in Autumn*, yet the artistic and thematic impact was predictably mixed.

Hanna Schygulla will be seen shortly in the States in *The Third Generation*, Fassbinder's acute examination of modern German terrorists. This film may be Fassbinder's most overtly political film and possibly his most controversial; it is even weirdly comic in spots. He depicts modern terrorists mired in naïveté and triviality, and their motivation may be a desire for fun and a sense of daring rather than any deep-rooted social consciousness. Another part of Fassbinder's message is a variation of an old adage: if there hadn't been any terrorists, the West German authorities might have had to invent them, possibly to divert attention from subtle but pervasive forms of political repression.

Fassbinder explains that an understanding of the motives of these new radicals does not come easy: "It seems to me that the third terrorist generation has less in common with its predecessors than it has actually with our society and the oppression this society exercises to the benefit of whomever." As in his earlier crime films, the director sees those outside the law and those who enforce the law as having much in common.

He notes further, "I am convinced they [the terrorists] do not know what they are doing

and the sense of doing it is in the doing itself, in the seemingly exciting danger in this more and more frightening, perfect system." It is their wont "to act in danger but without perspective, the ecstasy of adventure experienced in the absence of ulterior motive."

In a 1974 interview in Berlin, Fassbinder had discussed his interest in "finding out how one can use the strength those people have." He saw the terrorists as having "great intellectual potential, but also an over-sensitive despair which I don't know how one would use constructively. Because they don't know how themselves either, they have started using those stupid methods."

This generation of German directors does not believe in taking a breather. Fassbinder, who directed the insightful working-class study *Eight Hours Are Not a Day* for television, is busy with thirteen hours of TV programming called *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which is expected to be distilled into a theatrical feature. Herzog is back in Peru, the land of Aguirre, for *Fitzcarraldo*, which examines the turn-of-the-century rubber boom in South America. Schlöndorff's recent projects have been overtly political. He has been following conservative Bavarian Premier Franz Josef Straus, a curious and perpetual phenomenon, as Straus campaigns for Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's job. Schlöndorff is also reportedly trying to prepare a script which would examine his nation's relationship with the East Germans.

In 1980, *The Third Generation*, *In a Year of Thirteen Moons*, *The Tin Drum*, *The Left-Handed Woman* and *Knife in the Head* will all be in commercial U.S. release. At the start of the seventies one would have had a hard time finding any West German film outside a festival revival or art house. That dearth has been wiped out by a group of prodigiously talented film makers who are finally getting the attention they deserve. And these whippersnappers are just getting started.

A previous generation of American movie directors found much to admire in the work of their German confreres: John Ford and King Vidor, for example, have acknowledged a debt to F. W. Murnau. Now a new generation of German directors has absorbed our culture, combining it with other influences and inspiration to create a totally new body in cinema art. It will be interesting to see how young U.S. directors respond in kind. If a cycle such as this continues, the harvest can only be bountiful. □