**Rainer Werner Fassbinder** (31 May 1945 Bad Wörishofen, Germany—10 June 1982 Munich, Germany, o.d.) **Joe Ruffell in Senses of Cinema:**

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was a filmmaker prolific to the point of being a workaholic. From 1969 to 1982 he directed over 40 productions, most of them feature films, a few TV specials and one huge 931-minute TV mini-series *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1979-80). More remarkable than this perhaps is that these films were nearly all written or adapted for the screen by Fassbinder himself. He was also art director on most of the early films, editor or co-editor on a lot of them (often credited as Franz Walsh), and he acted in nine of his own films as well as for other directors. On top of this, he occasionally performed many other roles such as cinematographer and producer on a small number of them. His films tackle a wide variety of topics and, to be frank, range from the astounding to the amateur. They give an incisive picture of post-war Germany, at first through ironic and nearly plotless deconstructions/pastiches of Hollywood genre cinema with a formally experimental and astute provocative political edge, yet they remain relevant to urban life in contemporary times and human relationships. Some of the films (especially the ones centring on a group rather than a single victim figure) are also endowed with a decidedly dark and sardonic sense of humour.

Though his films were often very compassionate studies of outsiders unwanted by society for reasons beyond their control, he was publicly notorious for being a difficult man, and deliberately cultivated an image of being a rather dislikeable figure. If his work displays a deep understanding of the bitter power struggles of those apparently in love it is because he practised those cruel games himself, not just in his relationships but also in the stock company of actors that clung to him (although to be fair it does seem that his closest associates were weak people with a penchant for masochism and backstabbing). However, a self-awareness of his own torturous personality is also the source of his undeniable genius. Fassbinder made no bones about the fact that he was an oppressor and had compassion for both victims and victimisers (often one and the same). In this light, his work is both a unique personal catharsis and a break from the crude moralising of directors who look down on the fiends they create for dramatic purpose (many of his most monstrous creations are self-portraits). His work, inspired by his own feelings of rejection and alienation as left-leaning and overweight bi-sexual in the repressive new ‘economic miracle’ of West Germany, was forever willing to tackle difficult subject matter such as terrorism, racial tension, alienation, class exploitation (on the political left as well as right), trans-sexuality and masochism in a provocative but non-sensationalist manner. As Gilbert Adair has noted, Fassbinder was also one of the most personal filmmakers in the history of the medium, particularly exploring his sexuality with unmatched candour.

There are three distinct phases to his career. The first ten or so movies (1969-1971) were an extension of his work in the theatre, shot with an almost always static camera and with deliberately unnaturalistic dialogue. The second phase is the one that brought him international attention, with films modeled, to ironic effect, on the melodramas Douglas Sirk made for Universal in the 1950s, films which use (usually working class) victims to explore how deep-rooted prejudices about race, sex, sexual orientation, politics and class are inherent in society, while also tackling his trademark subject of the everyday fascism of family life and friendship. The final batch of films, from around 1977 until his death, were more varied, with international actors sometimes used and the stock company disbanded (although the casts of some films were still filled with Fassbinder regulars). He became increasingly more idiosyncratic in terms of plot, form and subject matter in movies like *Satan’s Brew* (1976), *In a Year with 13 Moons* (1978), *The Third Generation* (1979) and *Querelle* (1982). He also refined his ‘victim cycle’ in more cinematic terms and articulated his themes in the bourgeois milieu with his trilogy about women in post-fascist Germany (see below). His masterpiece *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was also made in this period. Obviously to go into detail about all these films would take a book so therefore I have decided to look at some films from each of
these cycles and some of the more idiosyncratic ones mentioned above.

Produced by his 'Antiteater' company (the theatre group in which he cut his teeth as a writer), Fassbinder's first feature length film Love is Colder Than Death (1969) already showed that he had Godardian talent by deconstructing the gangster film genre. However, unlike Godard, its desolate and lonely worldview made the film's content more than just a celebration of cinephilia. Katzelmacher (Cock Artist, 1969) went much further in its social critique with the unsurprising story (of a Greek immigrant) given a stylistically bare and stage-bound treatment which only enhanced its sad poetry.

Two of the best works of this period are Beware of a Holy Whore and The American Soldier (both 1970), the former a black comedy of difficult movie making and sexual frustration, the latter quite possibly the best of his gangster films. Holy Whore, based like so many Fassbinder movies on a personal experience - the shooting of his earlier Whitey (1970) - shows a film crew beset by production problems, waiting for the director and star to show up, and they slowly try to destroy each other. The pet subjects of (lack of) self-expression, masochism, cruelty, unresponsive and obsessive love-interests all crop up. And it ends with typical Fassbinder-esque brutal irony (never the subtlest of directors) as the crew - working on a film about state-sanctioned violence - gang up on the director. The American Soldier is pretty much a remake of his partly botched Gods of the Plague (1969), the minimal and unrealistic plot and stylistic poverty heightening the mood of depressed urban life as the eponymous hit man of the title (actually a German, played by Karl Scheyd) goes about wiping out half the Munich underworld for the corrupt police. An assured genre mood piece and document of suppressed emotion (it plays like an Aki Kaurismäki blueprint), like many Fassbinder films it is littered with great characters and lines, and an absolutely killer ending.

In 1971 Fassbinder helped organise a Douglas Sirk retrospective and got to meet the great man who had by now returned to Germany. This must have surely been the spark that set the second cycle of his work off - to make "Germany Hollywood films". After The Merchant of Four Seasons (1971) came The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant (1972), which was based, like Katzelmacher, on a Fassbinder play. The film is a claustrophobic hothouse melodrama set in the apartment of the fashion designer of the title, both a provocative comment on the representation of 'love' in Hollywood women's weepies and a tribute to the garish genre itself. At the time The Bitter Tears must have marked the arrival of an important new artist. Petra (Margit Carstensen) wallows in her own grief at being jilted by a young wife she fell for whilst mistreating her devoted and subservient assistant Marlene (Irm Hermann). The film works remarkably well as an expose of the lies that relationships (parent / child, master / servant, lovers, etc.) can be founded on, especially the lies in those idealised cinematic representations of relationships we often consume and take for truth. It also says a lot about the way we can let ourselves be abused by others in the hope of gaining their love, or out of fear of being alone. Only the obvious ending of Marlene walking out when Petra promises to be better to her and Michael Ballhaus' sometimes imprecise camera movements (probably due to Fassbinder wanting to shoot it in 10 days, a usual feat even on location for him) are sour points.

Following Martha (1973), his Sirkian abstraction on the cruelty of a bourgeois marriage, and the justly famous immigrant drama (extended from an anecdote in The American Soldier) Fear Eats the Soul (1973), came Fox and his Friends (1974). Fassbinder, in his only self-directed starring role, plays Fox, a recently unemployed former fairground worker. Again working within the limits of Hollywood melodrama (though the film is partially based on the plight of his then lover Armin Meier, to whom the film is dedicated), the unlikely event of a lottery win proves to be Fox's downfall when he is picked up and systematically exploited by a group of middle class homosexuals in financial trouble. The film is notable for its then controversial but now revelatory presentation of gay relationships to be not that different from straight ones, and also Fassbinder's remarkably believable performance as the unlucky Fox. However, Fassbinder himself was aware that he was repeating himself, and Fox is one of the most obvious of the victim cycle. He would rarely tackle the subject of victimised innocence again, and never again so plainly and naturally.

For many years Fassbinder had been saying he would try to stop interfering with others' lives and maybe this is a reason for the Fassbinder stock company's demise around the time of Satan's Brew and Chinese Roulette (1976). These films both explore group behaviour in an extremely critical way. The first is a grotesque and surely autobiographical melodrama that turns the victim formula on its head when it is revealed that the plagiarist, self-obsessed protagonist (Kurt Raab) enjoys his torture. The intentionally unrealistic satire Chinese Roulette takes a scalpel to marriage with a definite intent, however only the final guessing game, which gives the film its name, hits the right note of cruelty, irony and truthfulness. It is worth mentioning that it was around this time that Fassbinder came to use drugs more and more, which finally resulted in an incredible daily intake of alcohol, sleeping pills and cocaine. However, it seems his general impatience and argumentative nature was as much to blame as his substance abuse for any unevenness in the later films (this problem was apparent in the earlier films too when he was, according to Hanna Schygulla, weary of drugs).

Working for the first time for television since Nora Helmer in 1973, I Only Want You to Love Me (1976) has been seen as a key text in relation to the director's lonely childhood (a severe lack of maternal love, few friends and no father-figure marked him for life). The protagonist Peter (Vitus Zeplichal) seeks to buy love but this only leads to accusations of stealing and total ingratitude from his mother who blames him for her miserable life. Peter eventually becomes a murderer (making an interesting comparison with L'Argent [Robert Bresson, 1983]) but it would seem that the film's painful scenes of its protagonist trying to buy love are autobiographical.

Fassbinder spent recklessly on friends and the little family he had (famously, lover Gunter Kaufman smashed up four Lamborghinis in a year) and this was a recurrent theme in his work which reached its most tragic variation with In a Year with 13 Moons. This film combines irony with a great deal of heartfelt feeling as it tells the story of transsexual Elvira / Erwin (Volker Spengler), who on a love-interest's whim goes to Casablanca for the operation. However, when s/he is later rejected, s/he admits s/he has ruined his/her life. The character of the recently wealthy 'capitalist bloodsucker' Anton Saitz (Gottfried John), who Elvira had the operation in hope of love from, is unseen for more than half the film's length, making it all the more powerful when he is revealed in tennis shorts and shirt impersonating Jerry Lewis on television. The strange lighting effects and often fragmented and dark compositions place this among Fassbinder's most experimental films and one of his most harsh and sincere
investigations of minority urban life. Indeed the film was explicitly personal, a reaction to Armin Meier's suicide. He wrote, directed, shot, designed and edited it. Like in the earlier films where the space for personal monologue and storytelling is expanded for even very minor characters, Elvira's brutally honest tape-recorded interview in the final moments combines with the image for one of Fassbinder's most moving and penetrating moments in one of his best films.

Slightly before 13 Moons came the first part of his trilogy on 'the entire history of the Federal German Republic' (a worthy title for his entire oeuvre) and his biggest international success The Marriage of Maria Braun (1979). It is probably best to look at this film with Lola (1981) and Veronika Voss (1982) as they all centre on women in WW2 and its aftermath - a wife looking for her missing husband, a cabaret artist caught between two powerful men and a washed up Third Reich film star. These films offer careful analysis of the social make-up of those years in terms of dissonance and the changing and unchanging nature of Germany through that period. Fassbinder's greatest achievement is perhaps his ability to put everyday life onto screen in short sagacious parables. Stylistically these films are more assured than before (not least because of bigger budgets) as Xaver Schwarzenberger's masterly camerawork and Rolf Zehetbauer's production design for Veronika Voss attest.

Fassbinder's seething politics was never far from view in all his films and, like Buñuel, but unlike so many other 'political filmmakers', he hated liberal compromises. Mother Kusters' Trip to Heaven (1975) is a provocative attack on left-wing exploitation, while The Third Generation, a response to the Baader-Meinhof deaths, scandalised both the left and right. Revolving around the concept that the state could invent left-wing terrorists to conceal its own growing totalitarianism and returning to the tradition of Satan's Brew, The Third Generation teases in visual grotesquerie. The script's intelligent provocations, the cluttered form (shades of 13 Moons) and the excellent performances mark it as a major work. One of Fassbinder's most personal statements was his segment for the compilation film by the New German Cinema about the aforementioned terrorist crisis, Germany in Autumn (1978). Fassbinder is shown arguing with his mother, who he coaxes into making some reactionary statements, and mistreating the soon-to-be-dead Armin. This segment remains one of the most personal and self-revealing pieces of film that Fassbinder ever made, and therefore one of the most revealing confessional statements by a director in the history of the medium.

Although films like Despair (1977) and Lili Marleen (1980) became increasingly garish, Fassbinder's masterpiece Berlin Alexanderplatz was a naturalistic adaptation of Doblin's novel. It shows, through unanimously great performances, cinematography and direction, how a man through his personal faults and an unmerciful society is unable to fulfil himself. An obvious subject one might say, but given its length (931 minutes) and director's incredible incisive understanding of its themes (the book was Fassbinder's lifelong inspiration, the epilogue is an astounding personal meditation on his feelings about the protagonist), it is in Tony Rayns' words "the work of a genuine master with nothing left to lose or hide".

The last film Fassbinder made was also from an esteemed literary source, however whereas before the book/play adaptations he had made were from writers with a certain classicism and narrative clarity (Ibsen, Graf and Nabokov, for instance), Jean Genet's novels, especially Querelle de Brest, are deliberately fractured and difficult. Although Dieter Schidor approached him to make the film, he rewrote the script with Burkhard Driest (who also plays Mario) and got regular production designer Rolf Zehetbauer onto the project. Zehetbauer's work on Querelle is quite remarkable, the studio set of the ports of Brest is bathed in a decadent orange glow like the town is on heat (complete with unsubtle phallic architecture, seamy sailors and perverse bars and brothels). Fassbinder never matches the provocative intellectual vision of Genet's remarkable novel but captures the mood of his writing through the stylised presentation. Whereas a number of the novel's most brilliant scenes had to, understandably, be cut from the film version, the narrator's grating American accent works quite beautifully to suggest the characters' suppressed emotion and sexuality and the fade-to-white quotations device also works well with the dream-like presentation. Querelle is not one of Fassbinder's best movies, however the critics who have suggested that is laughable and a bore had best check out Genet's writings (which I doubt they have) as it captures his bizarre and morally ambivalent world with some force. As Genet biographer and celebrated author Edmund White has written, film is a medium that often has difficulty in translating writers like Genet "unless the director establishes from the first shot that everything, from lighting to sets to action, is to be stylised - which is precisely what Fassbinder does with his magisterial adaption of Querelle".

Shortly after finishing that film Fassbinder was found dead in his Munich apartment. It wasn't, as had been reported, suicide, but his suicidal lifestyle had finally caught up with him - cocaine and alcohol-use in particular had caused his heart to fail after only 37 years. Unlike the case of Jean Vigo, for instance, it is hard to call his early demise a tragedy, for he made some 30-odd feature films. But it is interesting to wonder about what the '80s and '90s Fassbinder would have done - it's hard to imagine him ever settling down to direct mainstream fare or classical European art movies. His next film was to be I'm the Happiness of This Earth, a drama about three failed detectives set in a discotheque. It is intriguing to wonder if the strange stylisation of Querelle would have been extended to say something about demoralised contemporary times....

If, finally, Fassbinder is not one of the most endearing directors, he remains a remarkable figure for both his unwavering commitment to a socially aware cinema and his rare capacity to use the packaging, the form and, to some degree, the content of Hollywood cinema to produce passionate artistic and political statements. There is no other director whose work constitutes the history of a (now defunct) country, West Germany, in personal everyday terms. Through a series of variations on the themes of (lack of) liberty, freedom and individuality, he was able to explore the disappointments and cruelties of urban life. His work shows the horrifyingly bare and mechanical reality of family and working life of society if it allows materialism to become more important than its inhabitants. This had (and has) lessons for us all, and not just regarding '70s Germany. Fassbinder was that rarity - a truly (and repeatedly) dangerous director.

All films also scripted or co-scripted by Fassbinder unless noted:

The City Tramp (Der Stadtstreicher) (1965, WGer, 10 mins); The Little Chaos (Das Kleine Chaos) (1966, WGer, 9 mins); Love is Colder Than Death (Liebe ist Kälter als der Tod) (1969, WGer, 88 mins); Katzelmacher (Cock Artist) (1969, WGer, 88 mins); Gods of the Plague (Götter der Pest) (1969, WGer, 91 mins); Why does Herr R. Run Amok? (Warum läuft Herr R. Amok?) (1969, WGer, 88 mins. Co-directed with Michael Fengler. Script
improvised); Rios Das Mortes (1970, WGer, 84 mins); The Coffee House (Das Kaffeehaus) (1970, WGer, 105 mins); Whitey (1970, WGer, 95 mins); The Nicklashausen Journey (Die Nicklashauser Fahrt) (1970, WGer, 86 mins. Co-directed with Michael Fengler); Beware of a Holy Whore (Warnung vor einer Heiligen Nutte) (1970, WGer/Italy, 103 mins); The American Soldier (Der Amerikanische Soldat) (1970, WGer, 77 mins); Pioniers in Ingolstadt (Pioniere in Ingolstadt) (1970, WGer, 84 mins); The Merchant of Four Seasons (Der Händler der vier Jahrzeiten) (1971, WGer, 89 mins); The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant) (1972, WGer, 124 mins); Wild Game (Wildwechsel) (1972, WGer, 102 mins); “Eight Hours Are Not a Day” (“Acht Stunden sind kein Tag”) (1972, WGer.

Five episodes for television: 101 mins, 100 mins, 92 mins, 89 mins and 89 mins); Bremen Coffee (Bremer Freiheit) (1972, WGer, 87 mins); World on a Wire (Welt am Draht) (1973, WGer. Two parts for television screening: 99 and 106 mins); Nora Helmer (1973, WGer, 101 mins); Martha (1973, WGer, 112 mins); Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf) (1973, WGer, 92 mins; Effi Briest (1974, WGer, 141 mins); Fox and his Friends (Faustrecht der Freiheit) (1974, WGer, 123 mins); Like a Bird on the Wire (Wie ein Vogel auf dem Draht) (1974, WGer, 44 mins. Co-directed with Christian Hohoff); Mother Küsters’ Trip to Heaven (Mutter Küsters fahrt zum Himmel) (1975, WGer, 120 mins); Fear of Fear (Angst vor der Angst) (1975, WGer, 88 mins; I Only Want You to Love Me (Ich will doch nur, daß ihr mich liebt) (1976, WGer, 104 mins); Satan’s Brew (Satanbraten) (1976, WGer, 112 mins); Chinese Roulette (Chinesisches Roulette) (1976, WGer, 86 mins); Bolweiser (1977, WGer. Two parts for television screening: 104 mins and 96 mins. Feature film version approved by Fassbinder, 112 mins); Women in New York (Frauen im New York) (1977, WGer, 111mins); Despair (Despair - Eine Reise ins Licht) (1977, WGer/France, 119 mins. Script by Tom Stoppard); Germany in Autumn (Deutschland im Herbst) (1978, WGer. Fassbinder episode 26 mins. Script improvised); The Marriage of Maria Braun (Die Ehe der Maria Braun) (1978, WGer, 120 mins. Script by Peter Marthesheimer & Pea Frohlich); In a Year with 13 Moons (In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden) (1978, WGer, 124 mins); The Third Generation (Die Dritte Generation) (1979, WGer, 110 mins); Berlin Alexanderplatz (1979-80, WGer. Originally screened for television in 13 parts: 81 mins, 58 mins, 59 mins, 59 mins, 58 mins, 58 mins, 59 mins, 59 mins, 59 mins and 111 mins. Also screened for the cinema over a number of nights.); Lili Marleen (1980, WGer/Italy, 120 mins); Lola (1981, WGer, 113 mins); Theatre in a Trance (1981, WGer, 91 mins); Veronika Voss (Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss) (1982, WGer, 104 mins. Script by Peter Marthesheimer & Pea Frohlich); Querelle (1982, WGer/France, 106 mins)


from World Film Directors Vol II. Ed. John Wakeman, H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988

entry by Thomas Elsaesser

German director, scenarist, cameraman, actor, and producer. Born into a cultured bourgeois family in the small Bavarian spa town Bad Wörishofen, but grew up amid the rubble and moral chaos of postwar Munich. Raised by his mother as an only child, Fassbinder virtually lost contact with his father—a doctor—for many years after the divorce of his parents when he was five. Educated at a Rudolph Steiner elementary school and subsequently in Munich and in Augsburg, the city of Brecht, he left high school without graduating. He was a cinema addict (“five times a week, often three films a day”) from a very early age, not least because his mother needed peace and quiet for her work as a translator; “the cinema was the family life I never had at home.” This childhood may have induced a sense of rejection that set a permanent pattern: Fassbinder would always alternate between defiantly aggressive behavior and recklessly generous attempts to “buy love.”

Fassbinder made his first two short films at the age of twenty, persuading a current male lover to finance them in exchange for leading roles in both. He also applied for a place at the Berlin Film School (DFFA), but was turned down. Fassbinder acted in both his early films: Der Stadtstreicher (The City Tramp, 1965), which also featured Irm Hermann (later often used in character roles); and Das kleine Chaos (The Little Chaos, 1966). In the latter, his mother (under the name Lilo Pempeit) played the first of many bit parts in her son’s films. Only after these amateur directing-scripting-acting efforts did Fassbinder take lessons with a professional acting studio, where he met Hanna Schygulla (his most important actress, who became thanks to him an international star). It was through her that he turned his interest to the theatre.

In 1967 Fassbinder joined the Munich action-theater, directing, acting in, and adapting antiestablishment plays for a tightly knit group of young professionals, among them Peer Raben and Kurt Raab, who with Schygulla and Hermann became the most important members of his cinematic stock company. ...In 1968 Fassbinder directed the first play written by himself,
Katzelmacher, a highly choreographed encounter between Bavarian villagers and a foreign worker from Greece, who, with scarcely a word of German, becomes the object of intense racial, sexual, and political hatred among the men, while exerting a strangely troubling fascination on the women. A few weeks later, in May 1968, the action-theater was disbanded after its theater was wrecked by one of its founders, jealous of Fassbinder’s ever growing power within the group. It promptly reformed under Fassbinder’s autocratic command as the antitheater, which pursued an equally radical and frequently outrageous production policy.  

The years from 1969 to 1976 were Fassbinder’s most prodigious and prolific period. An outstanding career in the theatre (productions in Munich, Bremen, Bochum, Nürnberg, Berlin, Hamburg, and Frankfurt, where for two years he ran the Theater am Turm with Kurt Raab and Roland Petri) was a mere backdrop for a relentless outpouring of films (up to six a year, for a total of sixteen feature films, eleven feature-length TV films, a five-part TV series, two two-part adaptations for TV and a TV variety show). During the same period, he also did four radio plays and took on ten roles in other directors’ films, among them the title part in Volker Schlöndorff’s Brecht adaptation Baal.

Fassbinder’s unparalleled productivity has given rise to much speculation. He himself admitted that “it must be some kind of sickness.” Many saw it as an escape from his personal life, a pathological need to surround himself with people and commotion day and night. It certainly led to his dependence on alcohol and drugs to control his body, and in this sense he literally worked himself to death. But very early in his career, Fassbinder showed a remarkable ability not only to recognize the principles of successful filmmaking, but to put them into practice: a regular team to ensure smooth working conditions and economical shooting schedules, a continuous flow of product to guarantee financial liquidity, and a turnaround of production capital.

Working in a country that had not had a viable film industry since 1945, and where television was local and highly decentralized, Fassbinder opted for what he himself referred to as his “mini-studio” system, a team of actors and technicians whom he could trust—some would say whose emotional or sexual dependence he could exploit, manipulating their loyalty by playing them off against each other, or controlling them by a calculated mixture of bullying and magnanimity. But he allowed most of them to acquire technical skills on the job, so that actors like Kurt Raab and Harry Baer would double as art director or production assistant. And he undoubtedly fostered hidden talents in people, few of whom either before or after their collaboration with Fassbinder did anything comparable in the cinema. It speaks for his organizational ability and discipline that he could integrate and make his own the work of so many diverse individuals.

He also quickly discovered how to survive in the “jungle of state subsidies,” the funding system whereby West German government agencies during the 1970s directly and indirectly created a flourishing and remarkable successful independent film sector. Although he went on record saying he could shoot an entire film in the time it took to read the small print on the application forms for a state grant, he was busy collecting cash prizes, subsidies, and television advances, and using to the hilt the incentives and tax advantages that the system permitted.

All this meant a decisive break with the practice that had bedeviled both independent and commercial filmmaking in Germany since the war: the custom of contracting for a single picture at a time, making a film and then waiting for it to succeed (or more often fail) at the box office. In order to keep his team together Fassbinder had to give them regular work; in order to stay where he was he had to run very fast himself: in a sense he had to overproduce in order to produce at all.

As a result his films were shot fast and made cheaply, but with pretensions to production values to rival Hollywood’s, even if his budget rarely allowed crashing a single car in a chase or a shoot-out. The result was the shabby glamour that became the hallmark of his early style. To stay in business, German commercial producers had to resort to churning out films in series—Karl May Westerns, Edgar Wallace thrillers, pron-films, classroom-comedies. Fassbinder’s output, by contrast, while formula-bound in some respects, remained highly personal and distinctive, and testified to an unmistakable love and knowledge of the cinema. The films also reflected an innate and passionate professionalism, an admiration for the American cinema, the Hollywood studio system, its proven genres, and the box-office power of its stars. “I want to make Hollywood films—in Germany,” Fassbinder was fond of saying.

Fassbinder’s work in film and television can be divided, without doing undue violence to either chronology or style, into three major periods, beginning with four deliberately parodic reworkings of Hollywood gangster films, in the manner of early Godard, made in 1969-1970.

...The underlying pattern, common to all four films is fairly clear and brings into the open all the misogyny and homoeroticism implicit in many American gangster films and thrillers: a male friendship, thwarted and betrayed by women, ends in violent death. Yet the four films are quite different in mood, and in the way they move from extreme stylization to moments of almost documentary realism. For Fassbinder, they were about “little people”—outsiders and failures in the real world, but authentically human in their capacity for passion: love, hate, adventure (however second-hand and depraved their dreams might be). Also, as the name Franz self-consciously advertises, the heroes are modeled less on American gangsters than on Franz Biberkopf, the protagonist of Berlin Alexanderplatz: Fassbinder’s first films already prefigured his last. ...

In both Why Does Herr R. Run Amok? and Whitey Fassbinder had turned to domestic violence as his chosen theme. Prompted by his discovery of the 1950s middle-class, middle-America melodramas of Douglas Sirk, this subject and genre, adapted to a German environment, inspired some of Fassbinder’s best-known films....

In view of the importance male friendships have in his early films, it is perhaps surprising that not until Faustrecht der Freiheit (Fox and His Friends, 1975) did Fassbinder directly portray a homosexual love story; less surprisingly, it followed the pattern of economic and emotional exploitation established in his social melodramas....

Fassbinder, (playing the production manager in Beware of a Holy Whore), says, “The only feeling I can accept as honest is despair.”

By 1976 Fassbinder had himself become an international star. Prizes at major film festivals; premieres and retrospectives in Paris, New York, and Los Angeles; and the appearance in London of a first critical study on his work had made him a familiar name among cinéphiles and campus audiences the world over. He owned a house in Paris and could be seen in gay bars in New York, earning his cult-hero status but also a controversial reputation off-screen as well as on....

His flamboyant and at the same time seedy life-style, his
openly displayed and well-advertised homosexuality, his boasts, scandals, and bouts of self-pity ensured that in Germany itself Fassbinder was permanently in the news, making calculatedly outrageous remarks in interviews (“rather a street-sweeper in Mexico than a filmmaker in Germany”).

The third major group of Fassbinder films, dealing with German history, can in retrospect be seen to have begun with Effi Briest. However, it was from 1977 on that Fassbinder’s projects took on a more self-consciously “German” flavor, as he tried to capitalize on his international reputation. Eine Reise ins Licht (Despair, 1977), written by Tom Stoppard after Despair, a novel by Vladimir Nabokov, was Fassbinder’s most ambitious film to date.

Fassbinder teamed up with a shrewd and successful producer at West Germany’s most prestigious network, Peter Märthesheimer of WDR, and he turned with even more determination to recognizably German subject matter. Together they made Die Ehe der Maria Braun (The Marriage of Maria Braun) Fassbinder’s commercially most profitable film and the first in his “postwar German trilogy” (the other two were Lola and Veronika Voss).

Viewed in isolation, The Marriage of Maria Braun (1978) is first of all the story of a self-made woman (Hanna Schygulla), whose rise to prosperity parallels that of West Germany between 1945 and 1954. At one level, the secret of Maria’s success is that she exploits men the way men usually exploit women. Beyond that, two principles keep her going: the skills as “double agents” that women have to acquire in the world of sexual politics are useful in the economic battle as well; and, second, however much she loves her husband (Klaus Löwitsch), this love gives her strength only as long as it remains un consummated. The perversity of these two precepts is not immediately apparent as the story of Maria unfolds: a war bride, she waits past hope for the return of her husband from the front, and while she likes Bill (George Byrd), the GI lover who supplies her with cigarettes and nylons, she does not hesitate to kill him when it is a matter of proving whom she truly loves.

Similarly, her employer and benefactor Oswald (Ivan Desny) is allowed to sleep with her but not to fall in love with her: it is the self-discipline of a ruthlessly double existence in body and soul that is the guarantee of Maria’s success. When love and sex finally come together with the return of her husband, the wires get crossed and Maria accidentally blows up the house, just at the moment when West Germany wins the football world championship, symbolically—and for Fassbinder highly ironically—finding its identity as a nation.

Maria Braun confirmed Hanna Schygulla as Fassbinder’s ideal actress. It set the style and tone for a number of historical films centered on strong female characters by German directors, some of these films well-known abroad, like Helma Sanders-Brahms’ Germany Pale Mother and Edgar Reitz’ Heimat, others familiar only to German TV audiences, like Jeanine Meerapfel’s Malou (which stars Ingrid Caven, a Fassbinder regular and once his wife, together with Ivan Desny, the industrialist from Maria Braun).

As a contemporary counter-example, Die dritte Generation (The Third Generation, 1978) studies the disintegration of this same truncated nation into a police state, in a story that explores the make-believe world and paranoid universe of urban terrorists, now in their third generation....What is new is the emphasis on politics as a branch of show business in which the powers that be are implicated as deeply as their opponents.

This indeed is the basic motif in Fassbinder’s most expensive venture ever, Lili Marleen (1980). Financed by a producer notorious for having made much of his money from porn and exploitation films, it seemed to be an attempt to cash in on the Maria Braun formula. With Hanna Schygulla again in the lead, Lili Marleen takes the wraps off Germany’s fascination with fascist spectacle: here even the Jews in the underground smuggle sensational films and pull spectacular stunts. Ostensibly a fictionalized biography of Lale Anderson, performer of the famous wartime song of the title, the picture concentrates on the meteoric rise of Willie (Hanna Schygulla) within the Nazi hierarchy and her current secret love affair with Robert Mendelsson (Giancarlo Giannini), son of wealthy Swiss Jews masterminding the resistance within Germany and using their son’s infatuation as a cover. Willie’s political naive is, like Maria Braun’s a function of her love, strengthened by absence and separation. Once the war is over, she discovers that Robert, following expediency rather than his feelings, has married someone else.

Too sophisticated in its play with clichés and too twisted in its storyline for the general public, the film’s sardonic treatment of war as only another face of show business also made the critics nervous. Abroad the film was felt to be in very poor taste, since it depicted the Zionists as either terrorists or multi-national businessmen. Coming at the tail-end of a Nazi film wave among European directors, it seemed to most critics to have missed its moment.

Running like a linking thread through Fassbinder’s career are a number of films, often improvisational and exploratory, centered on the psychosexual dynamics of closed groups—especially power relations and victimization. These are often seen as his most directly autobiographical works. They would include Katzelmacher, Beware of a Holy Whore, Chinese Roulette, The Third Generation, and also, though in a slightly different vein, his television adaptation of Clare Booth’s The Women, Frauen in New York (1977).

Querelle (1982), after Jean Genet, and Fassbinder’s last film, shot but not edited at the times of his death, symbolically completes with cycle with its hermetically sealed artificial paradise of Brest harbor, luxuriating in an obsessively phallic world of sailors and leather boys. What emerges from the story of Querelle, the beautiful sailor, desired and exploited and in turn desiring and exploiting, is once again a complex charade of disguises and doubles, brothers and lovers, betrayals and denials. Critics did not like the film...Yet once again it is possible to admire Fassbinder’s honesty in creating such a democratic vision of perversion....

For a final reckoning with German history, Fassbinder had returned to the more intimate format of a television series, expanding Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz into a thirteen-part panorama of Germany from the end of the First World War to the rise of Hitler meant recreating an entire era....

This most egocentric and self-obsessed director, who according to numerous biographies that have appeared since his death fed off his associates, friends, lovers, and collaborators like a vampire, and who poured out film after film with scarcely a pause to draw breath, seems to have had a very clear sense of wanting to give his furious productivity the shape of a rounded and achieved life work....

What is hardly in doubt is that with Fassbinder, the private and the public were inseparable. “My life is my films and my films are my life” is true of Fassbinder to an even greater
degree that of Werner Herzog, who coined the phrase...

What seems clear is that Fassbinder became the engine and motor, the “heart” as Solfram Schütte put it, of the New German Cinema. His sudden death from a drug overdose virtually brought to an end the most exciting and experimental period the German cinema had known since the 1920s.

from The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia, Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink NY 1998

entry by John O’Kane

In an interview in 1971 Fassbinder asserted what has come to represent his most convincing justification for his innovative attachment to story: “The American cinema is the only one I can take really seriously, because it’s the only one that has really reached an audience. German cinema used to do so, before 1933, and of course there are individual directors in other countries who are in touch with their audiences, But American cinema has generally had the happiest relationship with its audience, and that is because it doesn’t try to be ‘art.’ Its narrative style is not so complicated or artificial. Well, of course it’s artificial, but not ‘artistic.’

This concern with narrative and popular expression (some of his productions recall the good storytelling habits of Renoir) was evident early in the theatrical beginnings of Fassbinder’s career, when he forged an aesthetic that could be safely labeled a creative synthesis of Brecht and Artaud oriented toward the persuasion of larger audiences.


Is there any connection with the fact that in the epilogue to The Marriage of Maria Braun you show the pictures of the German postwar chancellors, but significantly not the picture of Willy Brandt?

[RWF] Yes, I have the impression that the period under Willy Brandt was an exception, that Brandt actually encouraged self-questioning, which Wehner apparently didn’t want, to be specific, keeping the elements that support the state open to criticism. I just have the feeling that what Brandt did was something not everybody was happy with. I understand democracy as something that functions like a kaleidoscope, that is not permanent revolution, but permanent movement, permanent questioning by every generation. When I see the fuss being made over Holocaust, I wonder why they have to make such a fuss; have they really repressed and forgotten all of that? They can’t have forgotten it; they must have had it on their minds when they were creating their new state. If a thing of so much significance could be forgotten or repressed, then something must be pretty wrong with this democracy and this “German model.”

You dedicated your film The Marriage of Maria Braun, which was finished last summer, after Despair, but only now introduced at the Berlin Film Festival, to Peter Zadek. What meaning do such dedications have for you?

I don’t do my dedications in such a way that I say, This film has a lot to do with so-and-so, who it’s dedicated to, but in this case, for instance, I want to say that Zadek is one of those who shattered the ossified way of life that The Marriage of Maria Braun describes. From a certain point on, Zadek was also very important to me, as a person, as someone to talk to. It liberated me a bit to know there was someone who was over fifty and completely set in his ways and then changed himself so totally. I find something very positive and hopeful in that. Five years ago he was a major figure just as he was. And then he changed himself totally.

When you speak of encouraging things, was Zadek the only one who gave you hope?

In the last few years I’ve seen eight or nine films that meant a lot to me, and two theater productions and a few musicals that contained more hope and utopia than a thousand encounters. I’m thinking of Solaris [by A. Tarkovsky], then Le diable probablement [by Robert Bresson], Zadek’s two most recent productions of Othello and A Winter’s Tale; there’s a film by Maurice Pialat with the title We Won’t Grow Old Together; then I’ve seen Visconti’s The Damned thirty times. Le diable probablement is certainly the film of an old man, but no one can deny that the film is incredibly young in spirit—whether it’s a glorification of suicide or an acceptance of it, or, as I think, the opposite, that is, that Bresson says: You have more opportunities to live your life if you accept death. It’s simply incredibly beautiful, even just from the point of view of form, when you see that someone who’s so old, and had already reached an end with Lancelot, didn’t simply churn out an “old man’s film: with Le diable probablement. Because that isn’t an old man’s film but a young film.

Next Monday night, November 28, 7:00 p.m., Amherst Theater: Diane introduces, screens and discusses the Powell-Pressburger classic A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven), with David Niven and Kim Hunter.

ONLY TWO MORE FILMS IN THE FALL 2005 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

Nov 29 Terry Gilliam BRAZIL 1985 (35mm)
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPARDO 1963 (35mm)