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Fear Eats the Soul (12a)

Dir: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Starring: Brigitte Mira, El Hedi Ben Salem

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Synopsis: Emmi Kurowski (Brigitte Mira), a cleaning lady, is lonely in her old age. Her husband died years ago, and her grown children offer little companionship. One night she goes to a bar frequented by Arab immigrants and strikes up a friendship with middle-aged mechanic Ali (El Hedi ben Salem). Their relationship soon develops into something more, but soon becomes the target for criticism.

Although Rainer Werner Fassbinder was known for his prolific output, even by his standards *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) was a bit of a rush job. He shot the film in just 15 days as something of a stop gap between working on two other films from the same year, *Martha and Effi Briest*. Outlining the romance between sixty-something Emmi, a German cleaner, and fortysomething Ali, a Moroccan Gastarbeiter (guest worker), the film examines the reactions that their relationship provokes and, in turn, the effect society has on their relationship. A powerfully moving tale of intolerance and prejudice, *Fear Eats the Soul* manages to be both tender romance and fiercely political moral fable. Here are six reasons it deserves your attention.

Often described as a remake of Sirk's 1955 film, the plot of *Fear Eats the Soul* actually stems in part from a story told by a barmaid in another Fassbinder film, *The American Soldier* (1970). In this version – itself based on a news item – Emmi winds up murdered, but Fassbinder said that he wanted to give the couple the chance to live together. He became fascinated with Sirk after seeing a retrospective of the director's films in 1971, and in *Fear Eats the Soul* he uses aspects of *All That Heaven Allows*' melodrama and social oppression but ratchets up the stakes through the use of a racial and national divide. The scene in which a television is kicked in is a brutal homage to Sirk's famous shot in which Jane Wyman's socially enforced loneliness is heartbreakingly reflected in a TV screen.

There are few films that employ such a powerfully suggestive use of composition to complement their themes so devastatingly. Via a rigid sense of framing, through doorways or windows that seem to imprison the often static characters in a narrow gap within, Fassbinder comments on the characters' essential isolation. And even when Emmi and Ali are together they are frequently depicted in wide shot with empty space surrounding. This, coupled with a habit of cross-cutting between the characters and the staring faces of disapproving



neighbours or family, makes both an affecting and ironically distanced statement regarding the social forces that entrap them. If you've ever wondered how film form can create meaning, Fassbinder makes it visible for all to see. Intolerance towards economic migrants, complaints that 'they' can't speak the language, Arabs described in terms of, "You know what they're like. Bombs and all that" – it's not difficult to see the relevance of Fassbinder's film for modern-day Britain. But it's not simply a case of ignorant racism against saintly, hard-working victims of discrimination. Fassbinder sees hypocrisy everywhere – even kind-hearted Emmi wants to visit Hitler's favourite restaurant and finds herself blithely adopting her neighbours' culturally superior stance in an effort to be accepted. Prejudice begins in attitudes that are unthinkingly and uncritically enacted, and – again – it's Fassbinder's framing that aptly makes the point, as Emmi leaves new foreign worker Yolanda excluded on the stairs in a masterful repetition of an earlier shot that highlighted Emmi's own ostracisation. And so, the cycle continues. Fassbinder's early career often saw his actors employing a Brechtian 'anti-acting' style, a mode of performance meant not to encourage empathy but rather to reveal the mechanisms of power and exploitation to an audience. Later, however, in part influenced by Sirk, he moved towards a more natural style. *Fear Eats the Soul* contains a touch of both to great effect. Professional actor Brigitte Mira brings a kindness and warmth to Emmi that's hard to resist and rounds out her character. El Hedi ben Salem, Fassbinder's partner at the time, was a non-professional and effectively plays himself as Ali. His deliberately impassive, stiff and stoic performance creates a distance that calculatedly illuminates his shameful treatment at the hands of German society.

Supporting the performances are lines of dialogue that often sound like simplistic generalisations, almost clichés, but in the context of the film they pack a hefty, if ironic, dramatic punch. From the opening credits dedication of "Happiness is not always fun" – appearing over a dark puddle, an encouraging welcome to a film if ever there was one – to lines such as "German master. Arab dog," "Think much, cry much," and the "Fear eat soul" of the title, the unsophisticated phrases belie a depth of commentary and emotive power that surprises on first viewing. There's something of this uncomplicated yet

insightful straightforwardness in Fassbinder’s descriptions of Sirk: “People can’t live alone, but they can’t live together either. This is why his movies are so desperate.” While Fassbinder’s acerbic bite is always present, perhaps what is most responsible for *Fear Eats the Soul*’s continued popularity is the surprisingly touching and tender romance at its centre. Its director may have seen love and especially marriage as oppressive forces, with the “exploitability of feelings” one of his most cherished themes, but almost in spite of himself Fassbinder seems to have taken on at least some of the sentiment of Sirk, whose work he described as “the films of someone who loves people and doesn’t despise them as we do.” When Emmi says, “When we’re together, we must be nice to one another,” it’s another modest line, but coming as it does after so much pain, suffering and betrayal on both sides, this seemingly naive statement (briefly) becomes a heartbreakingly poignant call to hope.

Credits

Emmi	Brigitte Mira
Ali	El Hedi ben Salem
Krista	Irm Hermann
Mrs Kargus	Elma Karlowa
Mrs Ellis	Anita Bucher
Paula	Gusti Kreissl
Mrs Angermayer	Doris Mattes
Hedwig	Margit Symo
Girl in bar	Katarina Herberg
Mrs Munchmeyer	Lilo Pempeit
Bruno Gurowski	Peter Gauhe
Gruber	Marquard Bohm
Angermayer	Walter Sedlmayer
Waiter	Hannes Gromball
Doctor	Hark Bohm
Mechanic	Rudolf Brem
Mechanic	Peter Moland
Kurowski	Karl Scheydt
Barbara	Barbara Valentin
Director/Screenplay	Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Cinematography	Jürgen Jürges
Editing	Thea Eymész
Sound	Fritz Müller-Scherz
	Germany 1974. 92 minutes