



Profile: Rainer Werner Fassbinder (31.5.1945-10.6.1982)

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 modelled, 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 Scheydt) 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 Herrmann). 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 naturalistically.

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* (1978). 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 dissidence 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 Küsters' 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* revels in visual grotesquery. 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 Dublin'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 adaptation 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. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's productivity was such that some movies are almost impossible to see; personally I am still yearning to see *Eight Hours Are Not a Day* (1972) and *World on a Wire* (1973) amongst others. And I haven't been able to mention in this essay such works as *Effi Briest* (1974) or *Bolweiser* (1977).

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.

Secrets of Cinema