

# Fassbinder's Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven

## German director's work available on DVD

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*"My subject is the exploitability of feelings, whoever might be the one exploiting them."*—R. W. Fassbinder

Rainer Werner Fassbinder directed 41 films and was a major figure in the German cinema from the late 1960s until his death from a drug overdose at the age of 37 in June 1982. A serious study of his work and its considerable contradictions is long overdue. The release of a series of his more significant films on DVD in North America will perhaps facilitate such a re-examination. That Fassbinder is something of a "dead dog" in the contemporary cinema is not principally due to his undeniable weaknesses, but to his greatest strengths: sensitivity to the brutality of everyday life in capitalist society and hostility to all forms of accommodation with it.

*Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* [*Mutter Küsters Fahrt zum Himmel*] (1975) is a complex look at the social and emotional consequences, both overt and subterranean, of a society based on exploitation. It is also the film in which Fassbinder dealt most directly with the contemporary German political situation and the political problems of the working class, with uneven but suggestive results. It is perhaps the last work of his most valuable and politically radical phase of filmmaking, 1971-1975, during which he directed (among others) *Beware of a Holy Whore*, *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *Effi Briest* and *Fox and His Friends*.

As a title *Mother Küsters...* references several works, most immediately (and ironically) *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* [*Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück*], a 1929 German "proletarian" silent film, directed by Piel Jutzi (who also directed a version of *Berlin-Alexanderplatz*) and based on a story by Heinrich Zille, about a working class woman brought low by circumstances. The film ends with scenes of demonstrating workers. Another possible reference point is Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel, *Mother*, about a Russian working-class woman who develops political consciousness and joins the revolutionary movement. The story was dramatized by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in 1930. And there is of course, "in the distance," so to speak, Brecht's own *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941).

We first see the hands of Emma Küsters (Brigitte Mira) in closeup, as she repetitively performs piece work at home. She is assembling electrical components, placing round parts into small square boxes on her kitchen table. It is dehumanizing work, plus she is abused by her pregnant daughter-in-law, Helene (Irm Hermann). The latter reacts with disgust when Emma opens a can of sausage for her husband Hermann's supper. Helene says haughtily: "Everything is chemicals... People don't know what's good for them." Emma, trying to appease her, replies, "One man's meat is another man's poison." Helene continues to chastise her long-suffering mother-in-law, while her benumbed husband Ernst (Armin Meier) occasionally assists his mother with the piece work.

Emma hears of a horrible killing on the radio. A chemical factory worker has murdered a supervisor and then himself. When her husband is late, she begins to worry. One of his workmates comes to the door. He

tells Emma that "Hermann must have heard something about mass layoffs and he just blew a fuse." Her husband, it turns out, is the "factory murderer."

Kindly but passive, Emma is at first helpless in face of Hermann's murder/suicide. Her even more passive son and his tense, domineering wife—who aspires above all to a petty bourgeois existence—turn away from her, determined to avoid involvement in the "factory murder scandal." On the other hand, daughter Corinna (Ingrid Caven), a seedy nightclub singer, uses the publicity in an attempt to further her career.

After the tragedy, *Mother Küsters* is set upon by the locust-like media, in particular magazine photographer/journalist Niemeyer (Gottfried John)—a former leftist—who pretends sympathy to obtain intimate details about Hermann.

When the narcissistic Corinna arrives home, family tensions are ratcheted up a notch. She and Helene do not get along. In an extraordinary scene at a Japanese restaurant, journalist Niemeyer asks Corinna, who imagines herself a creator of serious art, whether her singing career will be advanced or hindered by her father's notorious action. She has already begun to market herself in clubs as "The Daughter of the Factory Murderer." Corinna and the corrupt journalist eventually move in together.

As Emma's children and daughter-in-law abandon her, they all tell her, "Don't cry, mama." She is the only who permits the tragedy to affect her. The rest of the family go about their selfish business.

Niemeyer, after gaining Emma's confidence, ends up writing a filthy piece about a child-abusing, wife-beating, drunken "bloodthirsty monster." When challenged later, Niemeyer, whose dirty profession is to "create sensation," claims he was just doing his job. This justification obviously echoes the excuses used by Nazi flunkies. Horrified at the injustice of Niemeyer's lies, Emma begins a crusade to clear her husband's name and thereby comes into the orbit of various left-wing forces.

Vulnerable and lonely, Emma is approached by the Thälmanns (a reference to pre-Hitler German Communist Party leader Ernst Thälmann), wealthy Communist Party members who tell her they "want to find the true cause" of her husband's actions. They proceed to lecture her: "In a sense, what your husband did is revolutionary... Your husband's problems are the problems of all workers. Your husband tried to solve his problems in the worst way, through individual action... Only a strong and united working class can achieve socialism." Emma, shocked that she is in the company of Communists, people that her husband called troublemakers, replies: "Hermann never said he was oppressed."

The Thälmanns soften their stance—"He killed that man to liberate others." Emma finds some solace in these words, remembering that Hermann told her he was particularly concerned about the plight of immigrant workers at the factory. Abandoned by her family and betrayed by the media, Emma gravitates toward the Communist Party. When she tells daughter Corinna that she has joined the party, surprised that its

leadership is not “dirt poor,” the latter cynically explains to her mother: “There are Communists and there are Communists... It is the same in East Germany—party bosses have their villas.”

Later on, Emma solemnly states: “Everybody is out for something. Once you realize that, everything is much simpler.”

When Emma goes to Hermann’s factory seeking financial help, management tells her that she will not receive a pension due to the disruption of “industrial relations” produced by the murder/suicide. This decision, she is informed, has the approval of the union.

The film’s most moving scene is the Communist Party meeting. The setting is significant. In an elegant hall hung with Old Masters, Thälmann, now decked out in a “worker’s” leather jacket, introduces Emma to the party membership. Her speech, however, cuts across his posturing: “I think I can make you understand why I joined the Communist Party at my age... There’s a reason for all the terrible things in the world ... [Married for forty years,] I did what was expected of me. Hermann went to work and to war and did what was expected of him. Is that really life? Is that the way others wanted us to live?... I thought I knew him and there was no reason to talk. But that’s not true. How my husband must have suffered to do what he did, and I knew nothing about it. Is that life? We never really learned to live together... How desperate he must have been... My husband is no murderer, and he’s not crazy either. He’s a man who hit back because he was beaten all his life... Beaten by that 1 percent who own 80 percent of the wealth... I, Emma Küsters, will join you in your struggle for justice.” One feels Fassbinder himself speaking with considerable passion here.

The director once told an interviewer that he was not criticizing the leftist Thälmanns for being well off, but for being ashamed of it. Although wealth is a factor in the film’s critique of the Communist Party, Fassbinder primarily takes aim at its opportunism and its establishment character. Despite the genuinely friendly hand extended by the CP leaders after Emma’s tragedy, she is eventually discarded because of an election campaign and “more pressing problems.”

An anarchist, Knab, is waiting in the wings, knowing that the Stalinists will eventually leave Emma in the lurch.

The recent DVD release contains the two different endings Fassbinder shot for his film. In the original *Mother Küsters*, Knab and a group of anarchists attempt to take over the editorial office of the publication that slandered her husband. Much to Emma’s surprise and horror, the anarchist takes out a gun and threatens the editor with violence if the lying story about Hermann Küsters is not retracted. This version of the film ends with a freeze-frame. A concluding text explains that the security forces gunned Emma Küsters down.

In the second and more effective version, Emma and two anarchists stage a sit-in at the magazine editorial offices. When the editor and his staff simply ignore them and leave for the day, the pair of anarchists take off too, leaving Mother Küsters alone in a heap on the floor. A night watchman, a widower, invites her to his home for “heaven and earth,” a meal of apples and potatoes. In the end, she is betrayed by everyone, but her humanism and class instincts have matured in the process.

In an interview in 1977, Fassbinder spoke about the two versions of the film: “And really I prefer the so-called happy ending [the second ending]. I made it because many people told me that the first ending was too hard. So I tried a gentler ending which I prefer because it is actually tougher than the original. The first ending, with the text, is perhaps more intellectual—but the other affects people more emotionally.”

He suggested that the second ending was, in fact, more uncompromising, “When the woman has fought for something for so long—and even gets sympathy for it...but has to give up, because no one will support her.” A critic once referred to Fassbinder’s cinema as a “solidarity of victims.”

*Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* stands out in many ways from most

contemporary cinema, including “art” and European cinema. In the first place, it is an extraordinary-looking work in which every physical detail cries out to be taken seriously. The vivid coloring of objects and scene accents contrast with a certain dreariness attached to the central characters. Constricting rectangles—doorways, halls, and the piecework items—are in continuous juxtaposition to circular objects, including Helene’s pregnant belly. The characters move about in settings that visually mirror physical, emotional and mental states. (Mirrors are often present in Fassbinder’s films. Their presence hints at a social and psychological problem. A character like the image-conscious Thälmann, who frequently studies his own reflection as he lectures Emma, is obsessed and allows himself to be dominated by what others think of him.)

Fassbinder raises more questions in this film than he could ever answer. The employers and the media, on the one side, the trade union, the Communist Party and the anarchists, on the other—all either oppress or betray Emma Küsters. What, then, should she do? What should the working class as a whole do? Presumably, Fassbinder wished this *question of questions* to arise in the mind of the viewer. That he provided no adequate reply, and, in fact, retreated farther and farther as his career proceeded from any consideration or even interest in providing a reply, does not detract from the objective seriousness of the issues raised in *Mother Küsters*. They remain posed to each viewer of the film.

Fassbinder’s intuition about the dilettantism, opportunism and arrogance of the petty bourgeois politicians—Stalinist or “ultra-left”—is infallible. The scenes in the Thälmanns’ tasteful home, as the two CP members gingerly, sincerely and condescendingly deal with Emma Küsters, are unforgettable. They would make her into another ornament, to match the elegant and stylish furniture and *objets d’art*.

The film also makes clear that the Thälmanns, along with the anarchist Knab, can come and go. They can put Emma’s tragedy on the “back burner.” She cannot. And her political commitment, when she arrives at it, is wholehearted and complete. Even Emma’s children, striving for a socially acceptable lifestyle (or in the case of Corinna, trying to attach herself opportunistically to some sleazy operator’s coattails), stand out in sharp relief to their mother.

*Mother Küsters* is undoubtedly the high point of Fassbinder’s efforts to question and deal with the problem of working-class leadership, although he would probably not have viewed the matter in that light. Beyond that, and for perhaps the only occasion in Fassbinder’s work, the director portrays without cynicism (although not without irony) the ability of a downtrodden person, a middle-aged working-class woman, to attain a considerable degree of personal and political enlightenment. Such a possibility, with all its implications, again raises issues to which the filmmaker would never adequately or even seriously respond during the rest of his life.

The criticism of petty-bourgeois radicalism, in the form of the anarchist Knab and his followers, is particularly noteworthy. Fassbinder called himself an anarchist, although not of the terrorist variety. He emerged from the radical, counter-cultural milieu in Germany in the late 1960s that spawned the student protest movement, as well as the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group.

In the first version of *Mother Küsters*, the anarchists bring an unsuspecting Emma on a futile adventure that ends up getting everyone killed. In the second, the anarchists give up when difficulties arise. The equally impotent political efforts are presented as two sides of the same coin.

The limitations of the film are very real. While the filmmaker’s instincts about the character of the middle-class politicians are correct, they do not advance beyond a certain level. The film’s examination of the Stalinist leadership, for example, largely limits itself to the external—the latter’s vanity, self-absorption and condescension. The party elite lives

fashionably, holds meetings in expensive locations, respects the constitution and, in Thälmann's words to Emma, "can't perform miracles." Obviously, the organization is a respecter of bourgeois mores and norms. The word or concept "Stalinism" never makes an appearance.

Sympathy for the victim, without confidence that the victim can overcome his or her victimization, is the movie's and its creator's great failing. Fassbinder never entertains the belief, one is aware throughout, that the class of people for whom he feels great empathy can actually carry out a radical social transformation. In fact, he was always pessimistic about such a possibility, and the end of the radicalization in the mid-1970s merely deepened this pessimism. It is outside the scope of this brief comment to discuss the problem, but clearly, Fassbinder's growing cynicism helped weaken his art and send him to an early grave.

One needs more than clear eyesight and good instincts to address the most complex social problems. One must understand the problems as historical phenomena. This was more or less a closed book to Fassbinder. When interviewer Wilfred Wiegand commented that his films often expressed ideas that were "thoroughly identical with the objective tendencies of historical development," Fassbinder replied: "Generally speaking, history doesn't interest me. What interests me is what I can understand about my possibilities and impossibilities, my hopes and utopian dreams, and how these things relate to my surroundings, that interest me. I'm interested in solidarity, and the potential I might have to overcome the things that bother me, fear and all that, much more than theory." This outlook proved far too narrow and unreliable a guide in complex and demanding circumstances.

Fassbinder's personal fate and failings were bound up with more general difficulties and tragedies. Born only a few weeks after the Hitler regime's collapse, the director was part of that generation of German youth, growing up in the shadow cast by the Nazi crimes, which felt horror and shame for what had taken place. Everything about official bourgeois Germany repelled them. Ironically, however, the very tragedy that had befallen the German working class, the historic betrayal of Stalinism and Social Democracy in the face of the fascist forces, continued to have consequences.

The revolutionary Marxist trend, having suffered enormous blows at the hands of both fascism and Stalinism, remained isolated. The police-state regime in the DDR (East Germany) presented itself as "real, existing socialism." In highly confused political conditions, many middle-class members of Fassbinder's generation perceived or chose to perceive only a semi-bohemian anarchism as the alternative to the bureaucracy. When that mood dissipated, some took the path of careerism (leading in some cases to government ministries); others, in one way or another, destroyed themselves.

The release of Fassbinder's films on DVD is a welcome event. It should help encourage a discussion on the filmmaker's work at a time when the issues that animated his best efforts once more press themselves on the most serious artists. *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, despite its shortcomings, is one of the artist's most politically coherent and aesthetically and intellectually rich works. It is an excellent starting point for a consideration of his film career.



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