

R.W. Fassbinder at 70: the German filmmaker's life on display in Berlin

Hiram Lee
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German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982) was born seventy years ago this May. To honor the anniversary, a number of events have been held in Berlin.

An exhibition on display at the Martin-Gropius-Bau museum until the end of August, entitled *Fassbinder Now*, features several artifacts from the director's personal archives. Annekatrin Hendel's new documentary, simply called *Fassbinder*, has been shown in cinemas and on German television.

Throughout July and August, Berlin's Arsenal cinema is screening some of Fassbinder's classic films, including three of his best works—*Effie Briest* (1974), *Fox and His Friends* (1975) and *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979). Fassbinder's plays, or plays based on his films, have recently been staged at the Deutsches and Gorki Theaters.

A serious appraisal of Fassbinder's work on the occasion of his seventieth birthday would have been most welcome. Unfortunately, the exhibition in Berlin and Hendel's documentary do not by and large rise to that level.

While it has certain worthwhile features, the *Fassbinder Now* [*Fassbinder—JETZI*] exhibition is a mostly superficial affair. Curators have culled a number of items from Fassbinder's personal archives, though some of the materials chosen for inclusion are puzzling.

It is difficult to imagine why anyone should be especially interested in seeing a pinball machine once owned by the director, or his bicycle for that matter. This is not an appraisal of Fassbinder the artist, but a presentation of Fassbinder as icon or celebrity. One is even invited to take a seat on the director's sofa.

More interesting is the collection of home video cassettes that once belonged to the filmmaker. These include the works of Douglas Sirk, of course, whose influence on Fassbinder is often noted. But his library also contained a large number of major and minor films from Orson Welles, Michael Curtiz, Howard Hawks and several other of cinema's greatest storytellers. Fassbinder was well versed in the works of classic Hollywood and European cinema, as his own efforts demonstrate.

Most significant is the large selection of Fassbinder's shooting scripts, handwritten notes and other working materials on view. For all the attention paid to his private life, Fassbinder appears to have spent most of his time working. He was a tremendously prolific artist, creating 41 feature films as well as numerous works for the stage during his short life.

Included in the collection are materials from his epic-length adaptation for television of Alfred Döblin's classic novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), a work that held a lifelong fascination for

Fassbinder, and his notes toward a film about Rosa Luxemburg, which he was preparing near the end of his life. A version of her life story would ultimately be filmed by Margarethe von Trotta, one of Fassbinder's early collaborators, in 1986.

While such materials are worth seeing, the museum provides little context for them and offers generally poor introductions to the different pieces shown.

Regrettably, several of the exhibition's rooms are given over to works by contemporary artists said to follow in Fassbinder's footsteps. *You're the Stranger Here* (2009), a short film by Belgian filmmaker Tom Geens, is a nasty piece of work, in which a middle class family is victimized by an unstoppable military dictator who rapes and murders at will. There is no escape, not even an attempt is made. The film has far more in common with Pier Paolo Pasolini's severely demoralized 1975 film *Salo* than it does with any of Fassbinder's work.

A 2005 video installation by Maryam Jafri entitled *Costume Party* depicts a room of partygoers who adopt the dress of various social types and perform the roles associated with them. The implication is that we are all complicit in the social order and conform to this or that role, taking part in our own oppression or that of another. Apparently there are no innocent parties.

To the extent that these artists were influenced by Fassbinder at all, they have gravitated toward whatever was weakest or most pessimistic and cynical in his work. What was a limitation for Fassbinder has become a priority for them.

There is, more generally, an attempt on the part of certain middle class critics and admirers of Fassbinder to over-emphasize the director's sexuality and play up the treatment of sexual orientation and "personal identity" in his films. The social content of his best work and his hostility to capitalism and opportunism are obscured in the process.

Hendel's documentary *Fassbinder* is the summer's other major tribute to the director. While it is a more sympathetic film than the tabloid documentary *Fassbinder: To Love Without Demands* (Christian Braad Thomsen), which debuted at last year's Berlin International Film Festival, both works tend to gossip about Fassbinder's sex life and do what they can to confirm his reputation as cinema's *enfant terrible* in a leather jacket (the jacket too is on display at Martin-Gropius-Bau). There is something unseemly about watching Fassbinder's former friends and collaborators badmouth him in these documentaries, giving voice to petty jealousies and other personal grievances.

If Fassbinder only paved the way for second-rate artists and abused many of his collaborators in the process, why should anyone pay

attention to him today?

Character assassination aside, Fassbinder made one of the more remarkable contributions to film in the second half of the twentieth century. One can see powerfully dramatized in his work the consequences of sacrificing one's principles to careerism, status and the pursuit of wealth or friends in high places. With often painful accuracy, he describes the debasement of human relationships under conditions in which success is defined by those very pursuits.

Among the film clips on view in the *Fassbinder Now* exhibition is the devastating scene from *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971) in which the status-obsessed middle class family of a fruit peddler, now that he appears to be taking a step up the social ladder, finally permit themselves to speak openly to this black sheep of the family. One by one, the family members freely—and with relief—admit how they had hated and been embarrassed by his manner of making a living. The fruit peddler suffers in silence. It is a deeply affecting sequence. There are many more such examples to be found throughout Fassbinder's work, especially in the films made between 1969 and 1976.

During his career, Fassbinder tackled virtually every period in German history from the late nineteenth century onward. There was the minor aristocracy of the late 1800s in *Effie Briest*, the Weimar Republic in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), fascism and the Second World War in *Lili Marleen* (1981), the postwar period and the “economic miracle” of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and radical terrorism of the 1970s in *The Third Generation* (1979).

Two films about anti-immigrant chauvinism—*Katzelmacher* (1969) and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974)—appear even more relevant today than at the time of their release.

Fassbinder saw a thread of continuity running through German history. In film historian Thomas Elsaesser's *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (1996), one finds the following comment in which the director spoke about his film *Lili Marleen*: “[It] is my first attempt to make a film about the Third Reich. And I will certainly be making other films about the Third Reich. But that's another subject, just as the Weimar Republic is another subject. This cycle will also be continued. Maybe at the end, a total picture will emerge of the German bourgeoisie since 1848 ... I think, there is a logic in all this. Just as I think that the Third Reich wasn't just an accident, a regrettable lapse of history, as it is so often portrayed. The Third Reich does have a sort of logic, as well as what carried over from the Third Reich to the Federal Republic and the GDR.”

However, an interest in history is not the same thing as understanding it. Of course, the Third Reich was not an accident, but neither was it the inevitable and “organic” outcome of German history. The horrors of Hitlerism were only made possible by the historic betrayal of the working class by Social Democracy and Stalinism in the years 1914 to 1933, in the course of which numerous opportunities to overthrow German capitalism and prevent the barbarism of Nazism presented themselves.

The concrete problem of the crisis of working class leadership in the 20th century—above all, the life-and-death conflict between Stalinism and Trotskyism—was largely a closed book to Fassbinder and other radicalized intellectuals and artists in Germany in the 1980s. Many settled for a relatively lazy, semi-anarchist bohemianism and consoled themselves with the thought that the critical political questions of the previous half-century were “old hat” or solely the concern of “Old Leftists.” And they paid a high price as a consequence.

Another remark featured in Elsaesser's *Fassbinder's Germany* is telling. “Freud sometimes seems more important than Marx,” says

Fassbinder. “The changing of productive relations in society and the exploration of interpersonal communication must be achieved in parallel fashion ... I find that psychoanalysis from childhood on should be the right of every citizen.”

This sort of Freudianized Marxism, associated with the Frankfurt School, held sway over the student protest movement of the late 1960s, which played a prominent political role in Fassbinder's formative years.

Through this body of thought, many of his generation were directed away from the most vital questions of class society and directed instead toward individual psychology, sexuality and consumerism. According to the co-founders of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno, capitalist society had developed powerful mechanisms to integrate the broad masses of the population into their own oppression. One of the products of this political-intellectual process in Germany today is the pro-imperialist Green Party.

It is interesting to note that Fassbinder's film *The Bitters Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) was subtitled “A medical history” and not, for example, “A social history.” *Effie Briest* carried the cumbersome subtitle: “Many people who are aware of their own capabilities and needs just acquiesce to the prevailing system in their thoughts and deeds, thereby confirm and reinforce it.”

This was a demoralized perspective, an outlook that emerged following the trauma of fascism and the Second World War and the brutal crimes of Stalinism, taking root under conditions in which German capitalism was able temporarily to restore its equilibrium after the war.

Fassbinder's best films evinced a real sympathy for ordinary people, but only rarely did he demonstrate any great confidence in them. Toward the end of his career, in the last years of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, he churned out one story after another in which individuals compromise themselves, conspire with reactionary elements and are destroyed in the process. Something in him had been fatally worn down. He died, tragically, in 1982 from a drug overdose. He was only 37 years old.

A critical appreciation of Fassbinder's work on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his birth, taking up the significant strengths and weaknesses in his work and placing them in the appropriate context, would be of great value. This is not to be found in the *Fassbinder Now* exhibition or in the recent documentaries of his life.



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