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ANTI-CINEMA

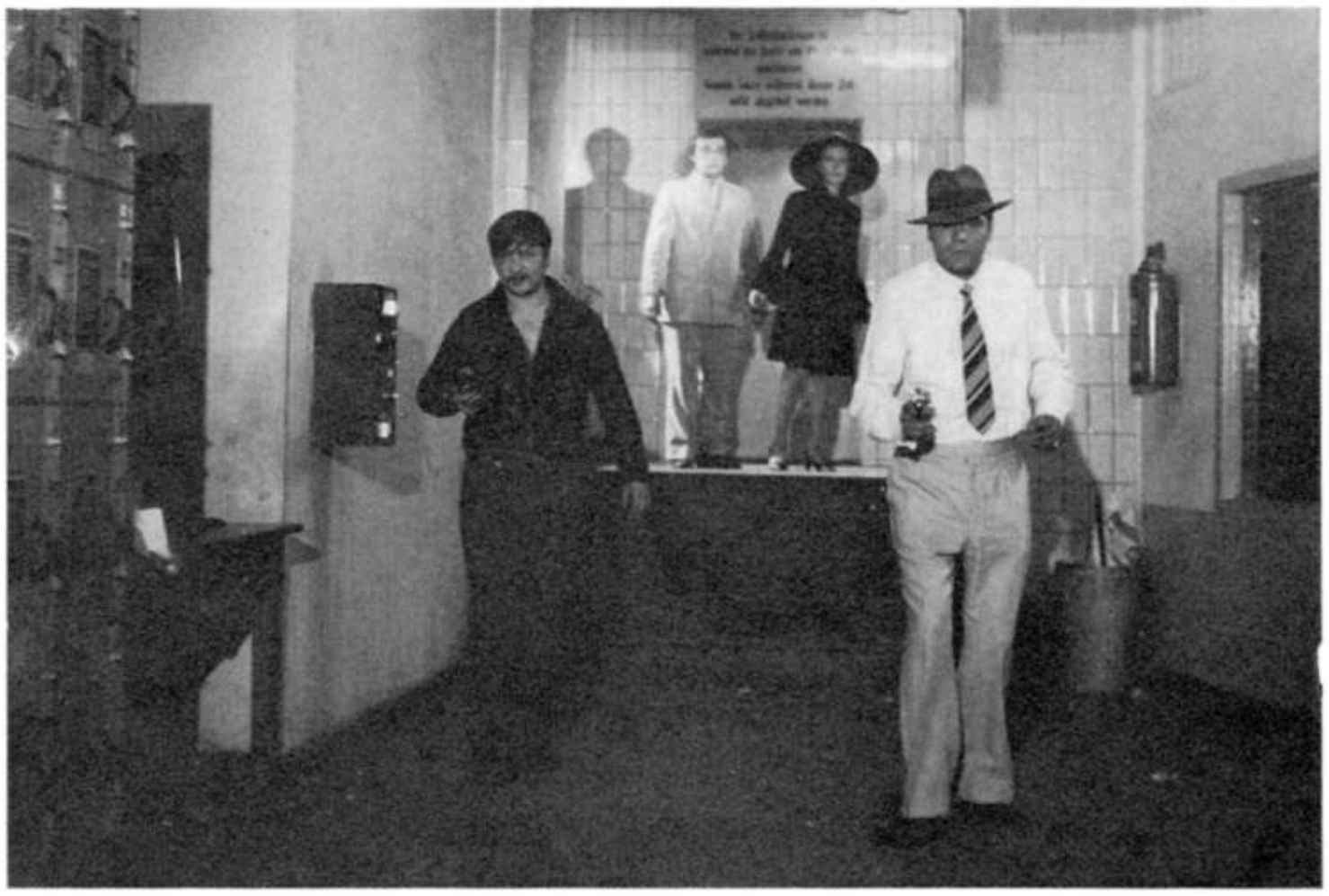
Rainer Werner Fassbinder

David Wilson

Rainer Werner Fassbinder will be twenty-six next month. So far, since 1968, he has made eleven films, directed at least as many plays (several of them his own), and frequently appeared as an actor in the theatre and on television. This whirlwind career suggests a dynamo. In fact, Fassbinder is a short, podgy man with an old-fashioned clipped moustache, in appearance the archetypal *gemütlich* Bavarian. As in his films, though, appearances are deceptive.

Fassbinder's account of how he came to make films is characteristically laconic. Nobody was working in the theatre in 1968, he says, but a lot of people were making films; so why not join them, using the ideas tried and tested in his own Munich Action Theatre? Those ideas had been revolutionary, even by the standards of a modern German theatre founded on experiment. Fassbinder saw his theatre group as a blitz on theatre as the cosy and at that time mostly exclusive province of the cultural bourgeoisie. So he monkeyed about with the classics, slapped critical faces with idiosyncratic versions of Büchner and Ionesco, and put on plays of his own which exposed raw nerves in the complacent burghers and tame radicals of a boom economy. The group soon changed its name to Anti-Theatre. Décor was minimal, often just a table and some chairs against a monotone backcloth; and the productions were characterised by a similarly monotone acting style.

This austere aesthetic is also to be seen in the films of Jean-Marie Straub, who has clearly been a formative influence on Fassbinder. Straub incorporated his own Anti-Theatre production of Ferdinand Bruckner's *Krankheit der Jugend* into his short film *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp*, and the pivot of that film—



Top: Fassbinder and Karl Scheid in 'The American Soldier'; centre: Hanna Schygulla in 'Gods of the Plague'; below: 'Katzelmacher'.

a five-minute tracking shot along a Munich street—finds a conscious echo in Fassbinder's first film *Love is Colder than Death*. This gangster movie pastiche also reveals the influence of the Godard of *Bande à Part*, but the uneven structure, as well as the overall tone of precocious bravura, make both these influences look unassimilated; the best sequences in the film are also the least original. Fassbinder had still to find his own style. But this first film, for all its formal inconsistency, pointed up in embryonic form some of the themes which recur in his work. In particular, the corrosive lure of money, and the insane fantasies it engenders (Fassbinder's crooks are always dreaming of flying down to Rio or thereabouts); and the casual violence, both physical and emotional, of a group whose mutual dependence saps their capacity for individual action.

Group identity, its insularity and its paranoid hostility to outsiders, is the basis of Fassbinder's second film *Katzelmacher*. A Munich apartment block houses several interchangeable couples, all of them bored, listless and totally self-engrossed. The threat to their complacency comes from a 'Katzelmacher' (Bavarian dialect for *Gastarbeiter*, or foreign worker), a Greek immigrant who rents a room in the block. The newcomer, played by Fassbinder himself with an impishly deadpan innocence, is both an object of curiosity to the group and the catalyst for their previously suppressed internal dissension, of which in the end of course he is the victim. Irrationality runs rife, characterised by sudden outbursts of petty violence (one of the women keeps getting her face slapped) as quickly forgotten as they are perpetrated, and fanciful expressions of prejudice, like the revelation that the Greek must be a Communist because Greece is full of them.

With *Katzelmacher*, Fassbinder articulated a style which fits his material like a glove; indeed, form and content are here virtually indivisible, since the 'narrative', as in most of his films, is essentially trivial if divorced from its formal context. He has constructed the film like a rondo, or a game of musical chairs (literally—the actors are frequently caught changing their positions round a table) in which the players finish where they started. This circular effect is underlined by two recurring formal variations. The actors are periodically seen, in a static medium shot which in itself is an expression of the director's cynical view of them, sitting on a wall exchanging banalities about each other and the Greek; and there is a repeated interlude in which the camera accompanies alternating pairs of actors as they walk arm-in-arm across a courtyard gossiping about the rest of the group, their self-righteous pomposity punctured by a Schubert melody on the soundtrack.

As usual in Fassbinder, except for isolated and unpredictable bursts of temperament, the dialogue is delivered in a soporific monotone. Speech is timed to a rhythm which has the effect of disengaging the audience from the characters and obliging them to reconsider the status of what at first seems naturalistic. And just as the audience is kept at one remove from the characters, the actors (Fassbinder's stock company) wear mask-like expressions throughout. It is as though the characters were sleepwalking through their encounters, which is of course exactly what Fassbinder wants to suggest. This vocal camouflage, along with Fassbinder's static long takes and deliberately unaesthetic group settings, deflects identification while at the same time forcing a re-evaluation of the audience's stance in relation to the actors and their roles. The facile temptation to see in *Katzelmacher* a microcosm of German bourgeois society is thus offset by the realisation that the lessons of the film can be universally applied.

This conscious lack of definition is Fassbinder's version of what Bazin called 'existentialist physiognomy', an artifice perfected in the films of Dreyer, Bresson and Straub. The artifice lies in the compression, the abstraction of any 'significant' extraneous detail: the settings of *Katzelmacher* are bare white walls and the deadening perspective of the side of a building shot flat on. The consequent absence of psychological nuance is an effect Fassbinder plays on in most of his films. Like *Katzelmacher*, *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* is more of a comment on individual behaviour than on any identifiable social group, even though the group here—the army of the petit bourgeois—is instantly recognisable. Herr R. is a draughtsman; he has a wife, a child, a comfortable flat, amenable colleagues and friendly neighbours; by the social standards to which he himself subscribes he should be content with his lot. Why he isn't, why indeed he finally goes berserk, impulsively murders wife, child and neighbour and hangs himself in a lavatory, Fassbinder charts with a devastatingly accurate catalogue of torment, the more telling precisely because each detail, trivial events as well as the final cataclysm, is given equal weight. The interminable minutiae of the daily round have seldom seemed so enervating, and the measured, unpunctuated pace establishes a tension that is almost tangible. Seemingly oblivious of the monotonous babble of the neighbour or the trite embarrassments of an office celebration at which he has to stumble through a speech, Herr R. wears throughout a glazed expression behind which boils a volcano of resentment. The explosion, totally unexpected though implicit in the film's every scene, comes as he is watching television while his wife chatters away to the neighbour; without saying a word, he picks up an alabaster lamp and beats them over the head.

During the climactic scene Fassbinder's camera is fixed on the television screen, apparently mesmerised like Herr R. by the flickering continuity of mind-numbing trivia. This device of focusing off-centre is a Fassbinder trademark. He is constantly disconcerting his audience, fastening their attention by paradoxically distracting them from a scene's focal centre. *Gods of the Plague*, another of his pastiche gangster movies, uses this trick throughout. The opening is a classic piece of Fassbinder double-take. A gangster just out of jail enters the Lola Montès nightclub (like Godard, Fassbinder peppers his work with film jokes, though they are usually incidental and so unobtrusive). Backstage a roulette game is in progress, the table spotlit out of the surrounding shadows. It might be a scene from an archetypal Forties gangster movie, and this is exactly the conditioned reflex Fassbinder wants from his audience. Having set it up, he confounds it at every turn, parodying the Hollywood Forties conventions in a story of betrayal and incompetence which is very much of the Sixties. The hero is disconcertingly a black, in a Munich underworld characterised by a penchant for white coats; his former girlfriend now sleeps with a corrupt detective; and after everyone in the film has talked incessantly of money and the price of betrayal, the final shoot-out is staged amid the coffee tins and canned uniformity of a supermarket—the nonconformist trapped among the symbols of consumer conformity.

Throughout the film Fassbinder indulges his own variation of the Brechtian *V-Effekt*, manipulating expectations in his audience which he then confuses with a startling but studied shock tactic. We are constantly being challenged to rethink our jaded responses to the cinema's icons. In sharp contrast to the earlier films, *Gods of the Plague* is almost decorative in style: the images are worked on, there is a highly theatrical use of chiaroscuro in the interiors, there's even a free-wheeling helicopter shot as gangster and friends drive through the countryside. The relative elegance seems almost dilettantish until one realises that the very artificiality of the style, in conjunction with the mannered atonality of the dialogue, is part of Fassbinder's ploy to lull the audience into expecting something very different from what he in fact delivers. Like Godard and Straub, Fassbinder knows how to use theatrical mannerism to point up more sharply his own awareness (and so the audience's) of film language, its limitations as well as its potential. And the film past. Fassbinder's love affair with the gangster movie is both critical and self-critical, as another parody, *The American Soldier*, makes abundantly clear.

The opening scene is again an affectionate evocation of the idiom of the Hollywood gangster film. Three men sit playing poker at a table in a basement room; a lamp casts the only light in the room full on their faces; somewhere in the shadows a clock ticks. A telephone rings and the trio's leader, readily identifiable by his authoritative calm (as well as the fact that he keeps winning the game), picks it up, listens in silence and announces 'He's here'. Expectations are again left dangling in the air, as the mystery man turns out to be a German-American just back from the Vietnam war, returning as a hired killer to the now unrecognisable Munich of his childhood. He duly despatches his assigned victims, efficiently, anonymously and without a flicker of emotion, before being himself killed at the hands of the trio, who turn out to be cops doubling as gangsters. The killer, laconic, white-suited, distractedly pulling on a whisky bottle, is both a traditional figure and a contradiction of that tradition. He acts in a moral limbo, in a city seemingly bereft of people. The individuality of the Hollywood gangster is replaced by a mechanical anonymity, and his milieu, once governed by codes of behaviour even in its darker quarters, is a moral wasteland of hotel rooms and bars where only the messages on the neon lights are to be taken at

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face value, and crime and the force of law exist indistinguishably in the same figures.

Fassbinder's self-criticism here is implicit in the character of the killer's neurotically adoring younger brother, whom he bluntly ignores when he visits his mother's home, where an old piano and a pinball machine seem to be the only concessions to furniture. His brother sees him shot down—in a long slow motion dance of death—and then virtually rapes the dead body as it lies under the mocking gaze of row upon row of station left-luggage lockers. An ironically inapposite theme song in English ('So much tenderness') repeats itself as Fassbinder holds this last shot until it offends the audience. It's a ludicrous scene, and that is Fassbinder's point: the traditional American gangster is finally dead, in a double sense, and to try to revive him is folly.

Self-awareness, and its implied self-criticism, is a key factor in Fassbinder's films. It is present again, along with the caustic humour which often accompanies it, in his most recent film *Warning of a Holy Whore*, which I wrote about from Venice last year. This film, in which a movie director and his cast and unit indulge emotional cannibalism as they wait stranded by lack of money and equipment in a luxury hotel, is Fassbinder's most conscious statement of the boundaries as well as the far horizons of film as a form of self-expression. Like all his films (I haven't seen *Whity* or *Pioneers from Ingolstadt*, but by report they are characteristic), it reveals an innovatory director very much alive to the cinema's capacity for deception. The holy whore is the cinema. ■