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Bolwieser (1976-77)



The small Bavarian town of Werburg in the 1920s. The Stationmaster Xaver Bolwieser (Kurt Raab), in his mid-thirties, is married to Hanni (Elisabeth Trissenaar), the daughter of a brewery owner. He is sexually dependent on her, and subjugates himself in other respects also to her orders and real or imaginary desires. This apparent harmony is shattered when Hanni takes up first with her onetime schoolmate, the innkeeper Merkl (Bernhard Helfrich) and then with the hair-

dresser Schafftaler (Udo Kier); she also has business dealings with both. Bolwieser does not want to accept reality; he commits perjury in order to defend his wife against the malicious gossip of the neighbors. When Hanni breaks with Merkl and demands back the money she lent him, he denounces the stationmaster to the authorities. Bolwieser is sent to prison for four years: left with nothing after his release, he takes lodgings with a ferryman (Gerhard Zwerenz) and finally assumes his job when he dies.

Oskar Maria Graf wrote his novel *Bolwieser* in 1931. Fassbinder made two versions of his adaptation of the book: a three-hour television film which is almost fastidiously faithful to the novel and a more freely adapted two-hour theatrical film. The central theme of both versions is the same: the slow destruction and self-destruction of a petty bourgeois individual by his wife, by small-town hypocrisy and jealousy, and by his own subservient mentality.

The television version lays the story out for the viewer in detail; Bolwieser and Hanni are surrounded by a gallery of George Grosz-like German philistines of the Bavarian variety. The theatrical version, on the contrary, concentrates wholly on the two-character drama of husband and wife, in which even Hanni's two lovers are nothing more than incidental figures. Hanni is more active and resolute. She, and no longer her father, gives Merkl the loan to open his inn in Werburg. The fusion between business and sexuality has never been more clear. The end is tighter and tougher than in the epically broad television version. Bolwieser refuses the reconciliation between himself and nature. The closing music, the alto solo from the Fourth Movement of Mahler's Second Symphony ("Der Mensch liegt in grosster Not") resounds no longer with mythical water-images reminiscent of Dreyer's *Vampyr* or Wysbar's *Fahrman Marie*, but with the feelings of Bolwieser, who is led to his cell, gradually disappearing into the depths of the frame.

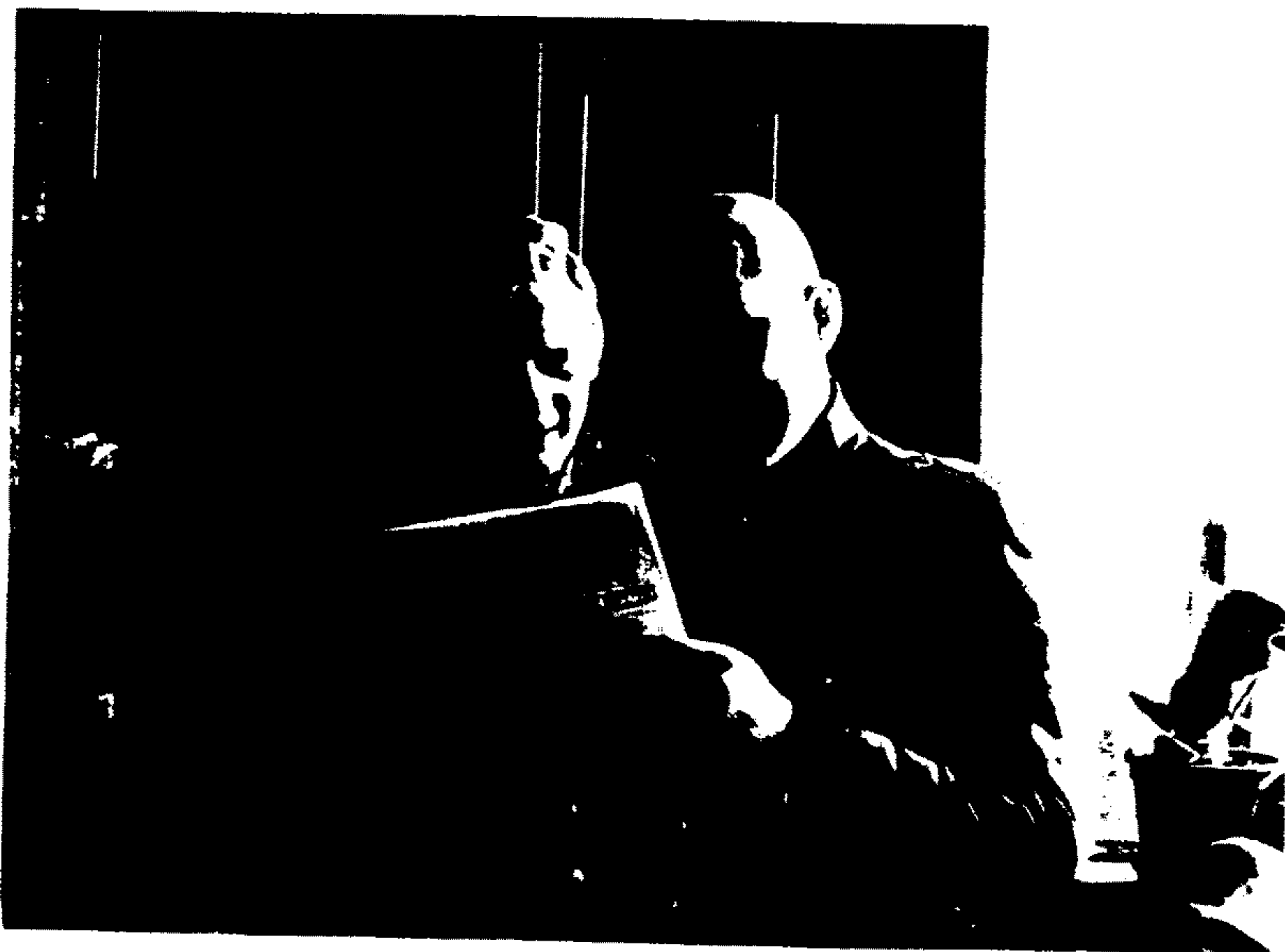
As closely as Fassbinder has followed Graf's story, in any event in the television version, the casting of the title role and the directorial methods make Bolwieser another unmistakable Fassbinder film. Kurt Raab's Bolwieser doesn't have much more in common with the goodnatured, but strong,



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hero of the novel than a middle class mentality. He is weak from the beginning, a loser, while Graf grants his hero at the beginning the composure of a "conquering hero." The physical attraction between Xaver and Hanni is obvious in the novel, but in the film, only alleged. What in Graf is a headlong fall from grace becomes in Fassbinder the gradual deterioration of a condition which had existed from the beginning.

In the first half of the film, Hanni and Xaver are drawn differently. Hanni's alienation from her husband shows signs of emancipation. In the second half, however, the film takes Bolwieser's position more and more. He is the disappointed, deceived party, and all the sympathy goes to him. "Dismembered! Torn to pieces! She has torn out my guts and trampled on them!"—the painful words (which are also in the novel, in an interior monologue) are cried out in jail in an outburst of the deepest despair and isolation. Bolwieser continues the long series of betrayed lovers who were usually played by Fassbinder himself in the early films and again in *Fox and His Friends*.



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One of the strong points of *Bolwieser* is the depiction of the social reasons for and results of the deformities of the main character and the people around him, especially his subordinates at the Railroad Station: if the callow petty bourgeois Bolwieser represents the type of subject upon whom the imminent Nazi regime can depend, then the underlings at the Station, one of whom already wears an S.A. uniform, represent the type of sadist also needed by the Third Reich for "special" tasks.