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A Fassbinder from the Trunk

By Tom Allen

WHY DOES HERR R. RUN AMOK? Directed and written and Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Michael Fengler. Released by New Yorker Films.

There once was a young filmmaker by the name of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In 1970, at the age of 24, his *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* was an official German entry at the Berlin Film Festival, and two years later it was one of the selections at the Museum of Modern Art's new German Cinema. *Herr R.* was Fassbinder's fourth movie in as many releases between 1969 and June 1970. Now the film is opening this week in New York at the Cinema Studio.

Fassbinder, the shifting enigma, may be an almost irresistible topic of discussion. I know at least four other *Voice* writers, some of them associated with other disciplines than film, who on a moment's notice would be happy to deliver a major piece on him. Any director who attracts this kind of attention would automatically seem to merit the systematic exhibition of all his works. But in what context? Is Fassbinder's reputation best served in this case by the marketplace or by a semipublic museum retrospective? The issue is relevant because in beginning his career Fassbinder did not bolt hot from the gate, like the classical auteur, with all his money riding on a single entry. Some of his earliest films are more private exercises than the kind of bravura work with which a new filmmaker alerts the critics, challenges his peers, and announces his presence to the public.

Kurt Raab is a middle-class clerk who would be as at home in Manhattan as in Berlin. Actually, he could be my cousin in Elmhurst.

Although *Herr R.* was made for German television, it is not on a par even with the *Visions* series on American Public Broadcasting, which gives young playwrights and filmmakers a forum. Fassbinder's exercise is more the equivalent of a loft production or an unpublished novel in the trunk. As I see Fassbinder's career in a spotty perspective, the film predates even his first tentative sparring with the aesthetic options of cinema, his so-called Sirkian conversion.

In *Herr R.* the minimalist format of cinema verité is artificially trained on a fictional story. This is a film style with obvious, inherent contradictions: cinema verité is the rubric under which reality is recorded on the spot, and fiction the stuff of invention at a filmmaker's discretion. The Englishman Ken Loach, a kitchen-sink atavist, is virtually the only international director shallow enough to commit his whole aesthetic to such a bastard hybrid.



Fassbinder: premature revival?

For Fassbinder, however, the contradiction is only a noncommittal gambit. If he is using cinema verité in *Herr R.* to build a portrait of a donkey (a metaphor for the middle-class beast of burden), it is so that he can pin a tail of irrational chaos (running amok) on it.

Fassbinder painstakingly uses a probing hand-held camera in murky underlit interiors and blazing overlit exteriors in order to build up a dossier on Kurt Raab, the Herr

R., whose real name is used in the film. It is a case history of banality with each entry contributing to the construct of a seemingly complacent architectural draftsman. The everyday abrasions from his wife, son, boss, and neighbors are within the general norm. Kurt Raab is a stereotypic middle-class clerk who would be as much at home in Manhattan and Tokyo as in Berlin; and I don't believe that it would be fair to Fassbinder in this particular film to read into Raab's regimented social life a metaphor for fascist programming in contemporary German society. Actually, Kurt could be my cousin in East Elmhurst. *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* is a composite of such noncompelling familiarity.

The larger issue is whether Fassbinder is well served by waiting seven years to revive a feature that is atypical of his current reputation. The cinema verité form, when not illuminating a real person or institution, is exceedingly tedious. The look is dishwasher drab. The camera slavishly follows the character's dialogue, which, in *Herr R.* is improvised babble (though always within the overall portrait). The simulated immediacy is further undercut by the artificial distancing of subtitles necessary for an American audience. When Ingmar Bergman wrestled with a variation on cinema verité in *Scenes From a Marriage*, he did so in the international spotlight, knowing that his critical reputation was on the line. In *Herr R.*, however, a young man tested an option of his passing fancy. In 1977, his one-note, ironic gag seems indecently revived. ■