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# HANS JÜRGEN SYBERBERG ON FASSBINDER

The films of Hans Jürgen Syberberg are postmodern meditations on German history, a romantic's view of this century. Americans know Syberberg's work mostly through his studies in guilt and redemption, the eleven-hour Hitler, a Film from Germany (1977) and Parsifal (1982). He has also been keeping a journal of notes on recent events, which has been published in France and Germany as The Joyless Society. The following essay is a condensed version of what he wrote in immediate response to the death of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the filmmaker generally thought to be the most important figure in the New German Cinema. This is the first time the essay has appeared in English. It will be included in the next volume of the German edition of Syberberg's journal.



Syberberg in his garden in Munich

The man who once, in his early work, had rejected the customary shot/countershots, tracks, and zooms became in the end a master of a style he had himself discredited, the practitioner of a banal craft. In this way he became the bootlicking mirror image of the German establishment, the showpiece, in the guise of an outsider, of a corrupt and disaster-stricken Germany into whose favorite and most syrupy clichés he breathed new life, without any of the irony or the checks you would expect from a detached or objective mind. It was a pact forged by the outsider with the old oligarchs of the film industry, to turn the overworked formulas of the "Heimatsfilm" [cozy middle-class movie] into those of the faggot film. . . .

Robin Holland

In the South of France, June 1982. News of Fassbinder's death has arrived.

The figure of Fassbinder has acquired for the postwar generation of Germans a documentary quality the nature of which is, in the final analysis, stupefying and horrific. In his person one finds a model of the German identity: if I had to come up with a concrete example of Germany's dilapidation, I would look no further than this face, this character, these films with their flayed sensibilities and their devastated loneliness. Just compare him and his fate to Pasolini and see the difference. When Romy Schneider, born under Hitler, was found dead the previous week, they could still say she died of a broken heart. But what can they say about Fassbinder, born in Germany one year after Hitler and found dead on the floor of his trendy Munich apartment? The last things he had spoken about and the subjects of his upcoming

*'Everything I despise about Germany, everything I damn, everything I hate, everything about this country that inspires me with horror, is literally incarnated in him.'*

films seemed to revolve around the notion: "I am the hope of the world." What a desperate error!

The myth is being constructed. They are starting to consecrate his image, erecting a monument in every soap-opera television town. But a distinction should be made between the media-man, in uneasy alliance with today's powerful establishment—in the end a sort of suicide pact—and the man he sold out. For Fassbinder's story is a history of a sellout, a sellout of the new style he could have developed, and of his own life.

Thus he was called upon to choose between self-destruction and a sense of responsibility, and his failure turned him into the hero of the German media machine.

He was never a friend of mine, he never tried to make contact with me, and as the manipulating media-man he was necessarily my opponent, the unlikely hero of others. I have no doubt that he found my films incomprehensible. He never forgave those friends of his who had the nerve to say that Fassbinder's greatest movie was Syberberg's *Ludwig*. And yet Fassbinder was one of the few German filmmakers of his generation to have seen my films; he and I were after the same thing but followed different paths. My *Ludwig* would not have been what it was without his *Katzelmacher*. But whenever I quoted him he would get upset, unable to grasp the irony of the dialogue I was opening up. And then one day he quoted from my *Hitler*. For the



last part of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* he wanted somehow to round off the character of Franz Biberkopf with a vintage Fassbinderian dream, but in the style of my Hitler film, which he so utterly misunderstood that he was bound to fail. When he found out that I was making *Parsifal*, that great myth of redemption, he said that this subject was really his. Naturally he felt he'd once more been robbed and cheated. Even if he didn't know it, he couldn't but have liked *Parsifal*, were he still around to like anything.

Germany's post-Hitler generation craves victims. He and I are separated by ten years in age, and by his having been raised in the Allied zone and I in the Russian. Thus Fassbinder was able to become the symbol of the Germany of the Western world, and a modern icon for media commentators—the people who are building his myth at the moment, with their talk of “our Balzac” and comparisons with Greek heroes. They invoke Mozartian legends whereby those whom the gods love die young, in the spirit of their years, in a state of innocence. Fassbinder has already become the mythical genius “whom Germany has insulted above all others.” (Can you imagine? Him!) A parallel with Freud's analysis of Leonardo da Vinci has been mentioned, and Hanna Schygulla was said to exclaim, “Had it not been for him, the New German Cinema would not have existed. . . .” So he has become the conformist Narcissus of a broken-down Germany, with his bloated German soul, a cliché Ugly German, somebody out of one of Diane Arbus's photographs of freaks, a legendary figure whom the media live off as he lived off them, crusty, brutal, exploitative, and, as they note proudly, asocial, in short the true (as far as they're concerned) rationalist artist. But what they call “the thirst for love” should be called hysterical oversensitiveness, pathological egomania, vanity, and exhibitionism. He was a workaholic taskmaster, like those of the German Economic Miracle of the fifties, for whom everything could be judged in terms of numbers, who repeated themselves with a maniacal obstinacy because if you say something often enough it must be true. Every story told in some bar could be immediately sold as a script idea. He was fast, cheap, and the master of the convenient, disposable product. Greedy for recognition but incapable of love, Fassbinder put on his outsider's mask and thanked himself in an incredibly self-serving and self-indulgent way. Thus he moved toward the inevitable showdown with the world.

Fassbinder, the figure of the media, became the symbol of contemporary Germany, as the posthumous paeans have once again demonstrated. They made him the derisory hero, the court jester, his own slave, a symbol of tragic self-destruction.

Everything I despise about Germany, everything I damn, everything I hate, everything about this country that inspires me with horror, is literally incarnated in him. This generation of plastic never achieves, writes, thinks, or feels what it really wants to. Instead it rushes headlong in a spirit of conformity through a life of corruption, smug right up to the final self-destructive conflict.

The man who is saying all this was among the staunchest defenders of Fassbinder's early films, defending them against those who are now engaged in celebrating and paying homage to Fassbinder. I also pay homage to him today—to the spirit of his life and his death. He was unhappy and betrayed at the end. Sometimes it's much harder to survive.

He was the master of film in Germany—the symbol of the way we came to grief at the moment of our cinema's bankruptcy. And if he is remembered as the one who discovered Hanna Schygulla, that lovely face which brightens these times, it is also he who destroyed her. He was, at one and the same time, victim and perpetrator, naive, out of control, obtuse, the open wound and the knife wielded by self-pity, sunk into the grieving soul of our existence. This man, often accused of dragging women through the mud (quite wrongly, for he was too stylish to do that), saw everything bathed in the delicate and melancholy colors of truth; he was the irrationalist, spat on by all for being an obscurantist. This was the man I could lovingly defend, and he is the one whom, in 1970, I asked to show his films at the Arri, the theater where the New German Cinema was born and made its home. Back then, I could see his sufferings and could tell they were real. But I could no longer stand by this man when, almost immediately, he made compromises for the sake of his own glory, unable to keep away from what was anathema to him. He was watched to see what he would make of his success, and it was this success that was his undoing.

It goes without saying that with his passing the world can never be the same. One thing, at least, is lost: the provocation. Also lost is the film school that arose from his collaborations, in which was formed the great team he had the good sense to gather around him, the family he

created to make up for something he lacked. It was an important factor for German film production, which had never known anything like it. He always hoped that with his melodramas he would bring Hollywood to Germany, but in spite of this he remained trapped in the chic bohemian ghetto he created for himself.

He always wanted to escape, to emigrate, . . . but he was the only one to stay as I did, while Herzog, Wenders, and Schroeter left. He stated that every artist has but one subject, and that everything else is simply a variant. In the end this simplification of things for the sake of expedience had to be paid for. It was a shortcoming that made him fragile and weak in the face of his uncontrollable, explosive energy. What was meant to be “the utopian search, probably childish and shamelessly stupid, for something resembling love” led him to a state of impotence. But this search is what makes him worth bothering about.

The simplicity of pop psychology informs his instant, disposable films of “the-poor-man-who-must-beat-his-wife-because-he-had-a-difficult-childhood” sort. The films show a world painted in lurid colors, a drugged vision of sadness and clotted responses, a world of disconnected characters. The lack of connection can be seen in the arbitrary unraveling of shots, the framing, the disjointed soundtrack. What impotent impulses, what misunderstanding, could match that of conceiving of the voice as music, the destroyed figures in this sentimental ballet as expressions of love, or ability to love, or perhaps only the desire to love.

These eccentric fantasies are associated with a total loss of detachment, exacerbated by drugs. Narcotics provide what ransacked nature can no longer produce. They can stimulate the most acute sensitivity to reality but eliminate any critical sense. This self-seeking and narcissistic escape into suffering has come to constitute for many people the symbol of Fassbinderian exhibitionism.

Fassbinder poetically transposed philistinism into the shrill register which marks his final films. The grandeur of this world's theater to which he secretly aspired, he never attained. . . . He was the victim of drugs (loss of self-control and willpower, lack of any critical self-awareness, chronic depressions in the wake of a flood of images and uncontrollable spasms of work, both artificially induced). So why surround his inebriety with this heroic aura? Why make a myth out of his weakness? . . . His story could be seen as criticism of these times. Were



this sad and harrowing biography to be written, Fassbinder would have the chance of attaining real greatness, and would be the legitimate object of tremendous mourning, for he was his own victim.

The heart of the Fassbinder legend is this: a short but intense life for which, as the saying goes, it's not the number of days but their weight that counts. But this distinction is double-edged, to say the least—forty films in twelve years, films like no others, not counted but weighed.

He was a star, a star director, made of the same stuff as all stars from Marilyn Monroe to Romy Schneider, but in the

style of these times, rather like politicians, from Stalin to Reagan. Looking at it this way, he is a terrifying prototype.

*Postscript.* My wife has read what I have written and she is upset, quite rightfully. There should be no hate, but compassion for a dead man. A colleague, from the same land, in the same time. The Fassbinder they strung up gave himself body and soul, he gave in to temptation, to these times, to this country. In the end he was an individual who was no longer himself, who wrenched himself in two, between his own desire for an original way of doing things and a media-manufactured version of himself. And it's

only with his demise that he can really be marketed. He mindlessly delivered himself to them. . . . You'll see this in the worst scenes of his movies, the ones I dislike the most but which nonetheless are the ones which are most his. What you'll see, amidst all the willing blindness, is the warm throb of the original ambition, the thing that saves him from himself, despite everything. I also acknowledge fully the way he quite properly demanded respect from me, and I willingly gave it. For the way I see it, he was a friend, even though he will always appear a very different figure from me, an alternative to me, the other way of overcoming, and coming once and for all to terms with, this Germany of ours. □

## NOTES ON 'BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ'

*Syberberg's comments on Berlin Alexanderplatz, Fassbinder's 15½-hour film on lower-class life in Berlin in the twenties, were written three years before the film's recent commercial release in the United States, where the critics have been extraordinarily enthusiastic. The New York Times suggesting that it is "a vision of the movies' future."*

*Munich 1980. On the Occasion of Fassbinder's Alexanderplatz.* A resounding "Yes" is heard from every important German film critic. The tabloids like *Bild* are against it, so the "serious" *Spiegel* is the only point of reference for the anxious reader. It is clear: the enlightened citizen should be in favor of the film. If the *Bild*'s against it, then everybody standing together is called for. One writer refers to Fassbinder as "the messiah of New German Cinema," then another one suggests he is "the thermometer up the backside of culture." The *Spiegel* immediately concludes that there's a controversy. Well, if there is a controversy, it is the one in which the public takes the critics to task (that is, if the public is still free to decide for itself and to think openly, in the wake of this media offensive). As it is, were it not for the shot in the arm administered by the united scribblers, *Alexanderplatz*'s ratings on TV would drop below the magic 10 percent mark. . . . None of this is meant to suggest that either the public or the critics are in the right, or even the film.

Only twice in the history of the media in Germany since the last war has such overkill been used: with the TV series *Holocaust*, and now with the *Alexanderplatz* film.

The *Spiegel*'s hero reflects our times. This is how he appears: dressed in leather, in a sort of working-class chic, his collarless flannel shirt open to the navel, wearing a hat and dark glasses,



*Fassbinder (right) on the set with Gunter Lamprecht, the star of Berlin Alexanderplatz*

unshaven, unwashed, talking in that fashionable, singing, sentimental stammer, pitiful and aggressive by turns, intimidating, bedecked in his American badges, a guru, an idol, clowning around recklessly. Do they love him? Is he the affected antithesis of the establishment with its defenses, its inhibitions, its fears, its subconscious hatred? He is the German artist. He serves as a reminder that we're not a bunch of Hitlers. We like that, so we leave him in peace.

*Plagiarism.* I finally got to see the epilogue of *Alexanderplatz*, the screening of which was kept secret. Friends of mine had mentioned, and newspapers abroad written about, the similarities to *Syberberg*, the "plagiarism," the "ironic references," but here, nothing but silence. And yet, isn't this something for the newspaper film critics to get between their teeth? The bits lifted out of *Ludwig*—the hero's resurrection amidst the lightning and the smoke, the music that turns into a yodel, the Death Song from *Tristan and Isolde*, the Strauss waltzes, the whole Schroeterian repertoire for a concert performed before a homosexual audience, with no other function than that of the beauty of the lulling, sentimentally bastardized sounds. Then, from *Our Hitler*: the Madonna carrying the marionette of the principal character mounted on a swastika, the brutal metamorphoses of religious music into jazz, into dance music; the welding together of the Horst Wessel "March of the Brownshirts" with the "Internationale" and the national anthem. But how could you discover the plagiarism, the resemblances, the lack of understanding, the quotations, the games played between colleagues and contemporaries, if you didn't know the original, if you didn't want to get to know it? The film writers are incapable of noticing the borrowings, the quotations, the modifications, the hijackings which Fassbinder inflicted on *Syberberg*. □