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Fassbinder's **3rd** The Generation

THE NEW YORK TIMES,
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1980

By VINCENT CANBY

THERE no longer can be any doubt about it: Rainer Werner Fassbinder is the most dazzling, talented, provocative, original, puzzling, prolific and exhilarating film maker of his generation. Anywhere. I say this based partly on "The Third Generation," his 1979 German film that opens today at the Public Theater and which is one of his best. Mostly, though, I'm thinking of the 23 Fassbinder features I've seen (including "Katzelmacher," "The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant," "Effi Briest," "Fox and His Friends," "Despair," "The Marriage of Maria Braun" and "In a Year of 13 Moons") of the 35 he has made since he turned to movies in 1965 at the age of 19.

There hasn't been a comparable phenomenon in films since Jean-Luc Godard came on the scene in the early 60's.

Mr. Fassbinder has demonstrated that he is quite capable of adapting his cinematic vision to fit the works of others (Fontane's "Effi Briest," Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading"), but it's his original screenplays that give the true measure of this great, unpredictable talent. He makes movies the way other, lesser directors talk about them — easily, quickly and precisely. When he shoots a film, he is speculating about the subject as well as about the craft of film making, examining both as he goes along, freely, without being bound to arrive at some preset destination. His movies are the logbooks of an adventurous mind.

Some Fassbinder films are, of course, less successful than others, but that's beside the point. Each is a part of what can now be recognized as a single continuing work, and if one film ends in something of a muddle, there's always another coming along that may clear things up. A Fassbinder movie isn't necessarily an end in itself. It's a way of thinking.

Fassbinder films are so packed (visually and aurally) with informa-

tion, references, asides, questions and unexpected connections (and, as a result so demanding) that most other contemporary movies look puny in comparison. Watching a good Fassbinder movie is like doing a double crostic after too many games of tick-tack-toe.

"The Third Generation" has you sitting on the edge of your seat even before you are sure what it's about. Scene: an elegant office high above a bustling city. We see a young woman, the secretary, watching a television set. A telephone rings. There's a mysterious, enigmatic message: "The world as will and idea." Cut to a cheap hotel room. The secretary of the earlier sequence is just getting out of bed after an assignation with an older man, who turns out to be not only a police inspector, but also her father-in-law. Cut to a rich, bourgeois home where an old man argues with his grandson about movies and war. Cut to a classroom. A student objects to the way the teacher is imposing her particular interpretation on history.

In this way, Mr. Fassbinder introduces the more than half-dozen principal characters of "The Third Generation," a cruel, sometimes very funny comedy about terrorism, a subject he has treated with a certain amount of sympathy in the past but one that he now ridicules in a way that implicates virtually everyone, from the members of the New Left straight across to those of the New Right.

The film is about a cell of "third generation" terrorists, earnest, humorless, committed, largely middle-class boobs for whom terrorism has become a style of living without connections to political passions of any sort. They include Hilde (Bulle Ogier), the history teacher; Edgar (Udo Kier), a composer who doesn't compose very often; his wife, Susanne (Hanna Schygulla), the secretary; Rudolf Mann (Harry Baer), a clerk in a record store; Petra (Margit Castensen), a bored wife, and August (Volker Spengler), the always busy self-important leader of this particular cell of terrorists. They are small-timers with access to real explosives, and there's not a single coherent

political idea among them.

It's not by chance that whenever we see the conspirators, either singly or in various combinations, we always see a television set flickering somewhere in the vicinity. What ideas they do possess have arrived predigested, second- or third-hand, and have more to do with fashion than with intellect. They ridicule mercilessly a young man who comes into their midst with a suitcase loaded with books — books! — the weightier passages of which have been laboriously underlined with a pencil.

These people are mutations, distant spinoffs of the members of the notorious Bader-Meinhof gang. They are people for whom political commitment is a matter of secret passwords, disguises and assumed names. Unknown to them, but apparent to the audience early on, is that they are being manipulated by a rich, influential businessman, played by the venerable Eddie Constantine, who orchestrates their activities to increase his sales and to frighten the Government into taking more repressive measures against the Left. The only character in the film who has the slightest suspicion about what's going on is the police inspector, played by Hark Bohm, who is himself an assassin of sorts.

"The Third Generation" is one of the richest looking and sounding films I've ever experienced. Like Mr. Godard, Mr. Fassbinder is extremely fond of printed titles, words seen on the screen as well as heard, and like Mr. Godard, he seems incapable of shooting a scene that isn't dense with detail, sometimes breathtakingly beautiful ones, which, in this case, serve to emphasize the deadly foolishness of the lives being lived in the foreground.

One especially stunning sequence is layered in sound, like a *pousse-café* meant to be heard rather than seen. As the conspirators meet to plan their next fruitless caper, we hear, simultaneously, two separate conversations, someone's reading from a book, a song being played on a guitar and sung, and the voice of a man on the television screen. As one sound is no more or less important than another, an assignment to rob a bank or blow up a public building is accepted with no more thought of its importance than a request to go out for cigarettes.

The members of the Fassbinder "stock company" are in top form, and they're well complemented by Miss Ogier and Mr. Constantine. The photography, also by Mr. Fassbinder, recalls the ravishing work of Raoul Coutard when he was cameraman-in-residence to Mr. Godard.

"The Third Generation" is fascinating. It's also worrying. I keep wondering how long Mr. Fassbinder can continue this remarkable pace.

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2 col x 50 lines = 100

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Fassbinder's **The 3rd** Generation

With Eddie Constantine, Hanna Schygulla, Bulle Ogier, Volker Spengler
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