

Document Citation

Title	Man to man
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Fassbinder, Rainer Werner (1945-1982), Bad Wörishofen, Bavaria, Germany
Film Subjects	Querelle, Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 1982

Man to man

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was, and still is, the most original, talented and productive director/writer in German cinema after the Second World War. The bizarre relationships he designed between whores and pimps, homosexuals, petit bourgeois housewives and husbands, cleaning women and their Arab boyfriends, are all mirrors that can be held up to average, so-called normal relationships. For Fassbinder, to be extreme is normal. Fassbinder's films portray the artist's revolt against the ugly repressive reality of post-war Germany.

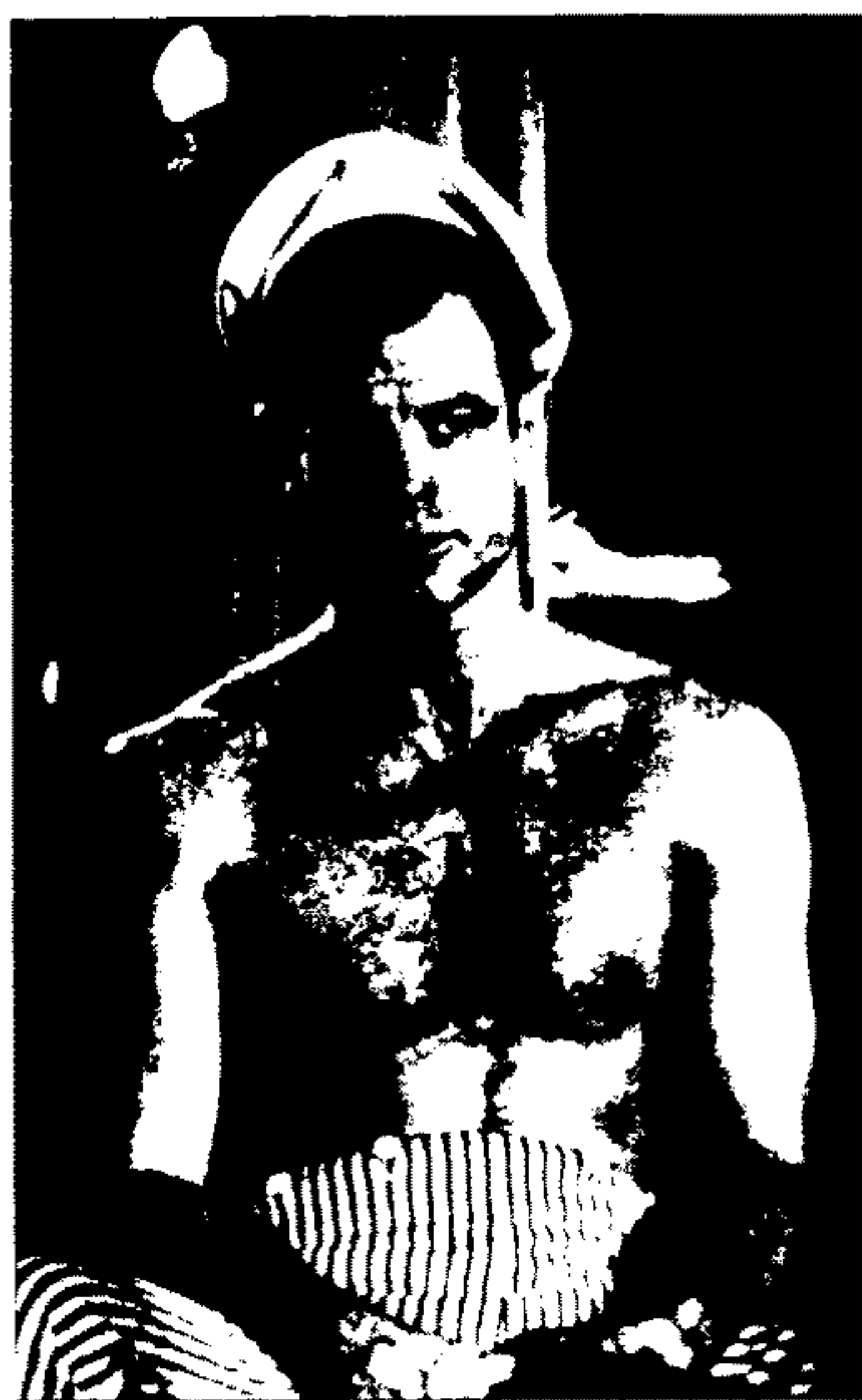
Before I became a film-maker I would eagerly await every new film by Fassbinder, always hoping to be surprised by his films which, though often different from one another in style, consistently proved radical in their expression. And, from experimental films like *The Third Generation* to the tight narrative of *Lola*, which attracted a more mainstream audience, and his prime-time television series, he never disappointed me. Fassbinder played with his favourite subject – the power games between the genders, homosexuals (*Fox*) and lesbians (*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*) – over and over again. Conservatives often found his films provocative and controversial, but so have gay communities and left-wing groups. Fassbinder was ahead of his time, he was one of the first queer film-makers and did not care about portraying homosexuals in a politically correct way.

His sympathy was with the underdog, the abused, the victim. Women played an important part in his films as well as in his life: Hanna Schygulla, Irm Herrmann, Ingrid Caven, Margit Carstensen, his mother Lilo Pempeit and his editor Juliane Lorenz. He even gave the male members of his "family" female names; he called himself 'Mary', Kurt Raab was 'Emma', Dieter Schidor was 'Kitty', Peter Kern 'Paula'. Quite a few of Fassbinder's films have been called 'women's films'. In these, he expressed an identification with strong female characters who struggle with an overpowering male-dominated society; *Veronika Voss*, *Effi Briest*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* – to name but a few. *Querelle*, on the other hand, is probably his most outspoken homosexual movie.

The final picture

Querelle is the 42nd and last film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Fassbinder died aged 37, only two months after wrapping-up *Querelle*. The movie sums up what Fassbinder expressed in many of his earlier films, especially *Satan's Brew*, *Fox* and *In a Year With 13 Moons* – films whose worlds consisted of betrayal, love, crime and strange rituals.

Based on the novel *Querelle de Brest* by Jean Genet – written in prison and published in 1947 – the project was developed by Munich based producer, actor and film-maker Dieter Schidor. Schidor first offered the movie to



Male glances: Brad Davis in 'Querelle'

directors such as Roman Polanski, Sam Peckinpah and Werner Schroeter, before it was taken up by Fassbinder. Fassbinder rewrote the script and collected a superb international cast including Brad Davis, Jeanne Moreau, Franco Nero, Laurent Malet, as well as members of the German 'film family' – Günter Kaufmann, Hanno Pöschl, Burkhard Driest and Dieter Schidor.

The movie's budget was modest in comparison to his previous big-budget films such as *Lili Marleen* – only about 4,400,000 DM, and Fassbinder and his set designer Rolf Zehetbauer decided to create the feeling of a surreal, artificial world by shooting the film entirely in the CCC Studios in Berlin.

The story of *Querelle* is simple. The young sailor Querelle arrives in Brest on board the 'Vengeur'. He goes to a brothel to sell opium to its owner Nono. In the bar he meets his brother Robert (who is having an affair with Nono's wife, Lysiane) and Mario, the local policeman. Querelle decides not to share the money from the drug deal with his accomplice Vic, and instead kills him. To atone for his sins he allows Nono to fuck him. Everybody is smitten by Querelle: Lysiane, Nono, Mario, Lieutenant Seblon (the ship's captain) and Gil, a workman who has killed a colleague by accident. Querelle is extremely attracted to his fellow 'brother' murderer Gil, who hides out in the bagno, and Querelle pretends to help him. In order to 'possess' Gil, Querelle tells the police where to find him and also frames him for Vic's murder. When the ship leaves, Querelle gives himself to Seblon who has for a long time dreamed of becoming Querelle's lover.

Fassbinder considered *Querelle de Brest* a third-rate crime story. He was interested in recreating Genet's universe of mythological fantasy – a universe not far from his own. Genet and Fassbinder were kindred spirits, both having taken a similar path of radicalism in life and art. When asked to be the narrator of

the movie, Genet declined, saying, "The book *Querelle de Brest* which I wrote approximately 40 years ago, lies far behind me. I've forgotten all about it, as well as everything else I've written. Please tell this to Mr Fassbinder, I'm sure he understands."

Perverse passion

In *Querelle* Fassbinder does not translate literature into cinema, but uses the film to expose the distance between the two. A narrator is used throughout the film and inbetween scenes Fassbinder employs title cards with lines from the novel on a painfully white screen. The appearance of the young, beautiful 'angel of the apocalypse' who can only find the core of his being by murdering and betraying the one he loves, needs a stage which enhances the 'perversity' of this kind of passion; a nightmarish scenario of artificial terror painted in orange. The film's cinematographic space is framed by bars, mirrors and views into rooms through windows and doors. The characters act like prisoners of a strange pompous ceremony where there is no room for spontaneous expression or simple communication.

Querelle is a movie about men – a bewildering cosmos of supermachos. The 'studs' Nono, Mario and Gil are so secure in their straight identities that they can fuck men without threatening their maleness – yet they would never consider themselves homosexuals. Querelle is a novice who enters into the world of male ritual. He is humiliated by Nono, who initiates him into the group by fucking him. But Querelle's real quest is for a brother, to find his missing half. Not knowing how to express his love to Gil, instead, by betraying him, he kills him. Lysiane asks Querelle why he fucks her and his answer is, "I fuck you to betray my brother."

Lysiane represents the image of 'the woman' in this macho world. A beautiful but passive outsider, excluded from the brotherly rituals of power and eros, she is a cross between the eternal mother who loves unconditionally, and a saint who forgives all. In this role she is doomed to observe, understand and wait while singing the Oscar Wilde line from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* – "Each man kills the thing he loves."

Querelle is a hard film to love. It impressed me tremendously as a movie about maleness. Being male is something we don't know much about. But in *Querelle* we can study maleness by watching the protagonists act like members of an unknown – and at the same time familiar – tribe. Through a magnifying glass we see a claustrophobic, frozen environment of male paranoia.

Querelle is a romantic piece without the slightest sense of humour. Fassbinder's next project would have been a comedy entitled *I'm the Joy of the Planet* (*Ich bin das Glück dieser Erde*). 'Querelle', an Artificial Eye Video release, is available from 3 May