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FILM

A joke without a punch line

Fassbinder films the unfilmable

by Stephen Schiff

DESPAIR. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Written by Tom Stoppard, from the novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Photographed by Michael Ballhaus. With Dirk Bogarde and Andrea Ferreol. At the Orson Welles.

When I read Vladimir Nabokov's sardonic early novel, *Despair*, several years ago, I thought it among the least filmable stories I'd ever come across. Set in the Weimar Republic and narrated by its eccentric hero, *Despair* is a quirky, stylish yarn about one Hermann Hermann, a bored, wealthy Berlin chocolate manufacturer tortured by the condition that has since come to be known as the Midlife Crisis. On a business trip to Prague, he happens upon a tramp whom he immediately recognizes as his exact physical double. Inspiration seizes him: here is an opportunity to escape his humdrum lot by committing the perfect crime — his own murder. He will dress the tramp in his clothes, kill him, don the tramp's identity and then order his doting wife to collect on his life insurance and meet him in bucolic Switzerland. Only there's a hitch. After the foul deed is accomplished, poor Hermann discovers he's the only one on earth who thinks the tramp resembles him at all, and soon the police are on his trail — which, of course, arouses in him plenty of "despair."

I rather enjoyed Rainer Werner Fassbinder's witty, rococo film of *Despair*, but it only left me more convinced than ever that the novel is unfilmable. Not among Nabokov's more distinguished efforts, the book depends for its several modest successes upon our gradually dawning awareness that its hero, for all his cultivation, is quite insane — the revelation that the double is no double at all is saved for the end, as a sort of punch

line. The difficulty in putting this droll fable on the screen is obvious: how are you going to handle the encounters between the look-alikes without revealing that they aren't? Nabokov seemed perfectly aware of the dilemma when he wrote *Despair*: his Hermann imagined himself the actor-director of a grand movie, one in which he beguiled his audience — the police, his wife, us — with the fiction of his own murder. At the center of Nabokov's joke was the understanding that Hermann's movie would fall apart as soon as the phony double appeared onscreen — and that Hermann, the filmmaker, would be the only one taken in by his own deception.

Apparently, Fassbinder has accepted Nabokov's movie jest as a sort of challenge. Not only has he made of *Despair* his first big-budget, English-language production — with a dazzling screenplay by Tom Stoppard — he's even used the very shots that Nabokov's Hermann prescribes. And in place of the novelist's bejeweled prose, Fassbinder has concocted a rich, absurdly artificial visual style — full of mirrors, windows, bright colors and gleaming surfaces — that combines the most extravagant flourishes of Luchino Visconti, Ken Russell and whoever it was who invented Viennese pastry. Dressed in outlandish exaggerations of Weimar costumes, Fassbinder's delicate decadents waltz through byzantine sets while the camera circles around them as if they were on a merry-go-round. Peer Raben's music alternately sighs and oom-pahs and Stoppard's screenplay glitters with phlegmatic insults ("Lydia, my dear, intelligence would take the bloom off your carnality," Hermann coos to his wife). The characters are something else: Dirk Bogarde's splendidly neurasthenic Hermann, whose major business decision each day is based on a nibble of the company's chocolate, is sorely distressed: lately, while making love to his wife, he's been looking up to find his spitting image (a real one this time) staring calmly at him from across the hall. His vacant, portly wife, Lydia (Andrea Ferreol), never seems to notice a thing; with her complicated lingerie, her platinum curls and her scarlet, bee-stung pucker, she is an instant camp figure — a moo-cow coquette.

This is all rather rarefied — and, in the end, trivial — but for its first hour, *Despair* is very funny. It is mad-

ness viewed as farce, and the tricks Hermann's mind plays on him become a sort of perceptual slapstick. Unfortunately, it isn't long before the hysteria gets a bit too rich for the blood — like spending a week in an amusement park. Fassbinder puts off the introduction of the *Doppelgaenger* as long as he can (in the novel, it's the opening scene), but when he finally lets the cat out of the bag 45 minutes into the film, the fun is over. What was for Nabokov a delicious joke seems a mere curiosity here, and the film quickly veers from the sublimely ridiculous to the just-plain ridiculous. It's one thing to watch Hermann getting hysterical about his crazy wife, his crazy job and the crazy image of himself that haunts his love-making; it's quite another to try to feel something for him when he gets all worked up about a resemblance we can't even see. Meanwhile, the film's tone shifts, and what had been a sort of operatic screwball comedy dips towards the lugubrious. At the very mo-

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Bogarde in *Despair*

ment we dismiss Hermann as hopelessly nutty, Fassbinder tries to make him a tragic hero — perhaps to cover up the hole that the double's appearance has blasted in the center of the film. Still, even after *Despair* takes its turn for the worse, it's fun watching Fassbinder create a madman's inner world with his patented arsenal of visual devices: the elegantly choreographed camera; the columns, doorways and bits of furniture that frame his characters; the blatant, hilarious plundering of old movie clichés, the sighs, lingering looks, grand gestures and weepy speeches. Those who come expecting a great, grave masterpiece from the union of Fassbinder, Stoppard, Nabokov and Bogarde (not to mention the ironically *angst*-ridden title) are bound to be pretty disappointed. But wait a few months, and *Despair* will make a terrific midnight show.