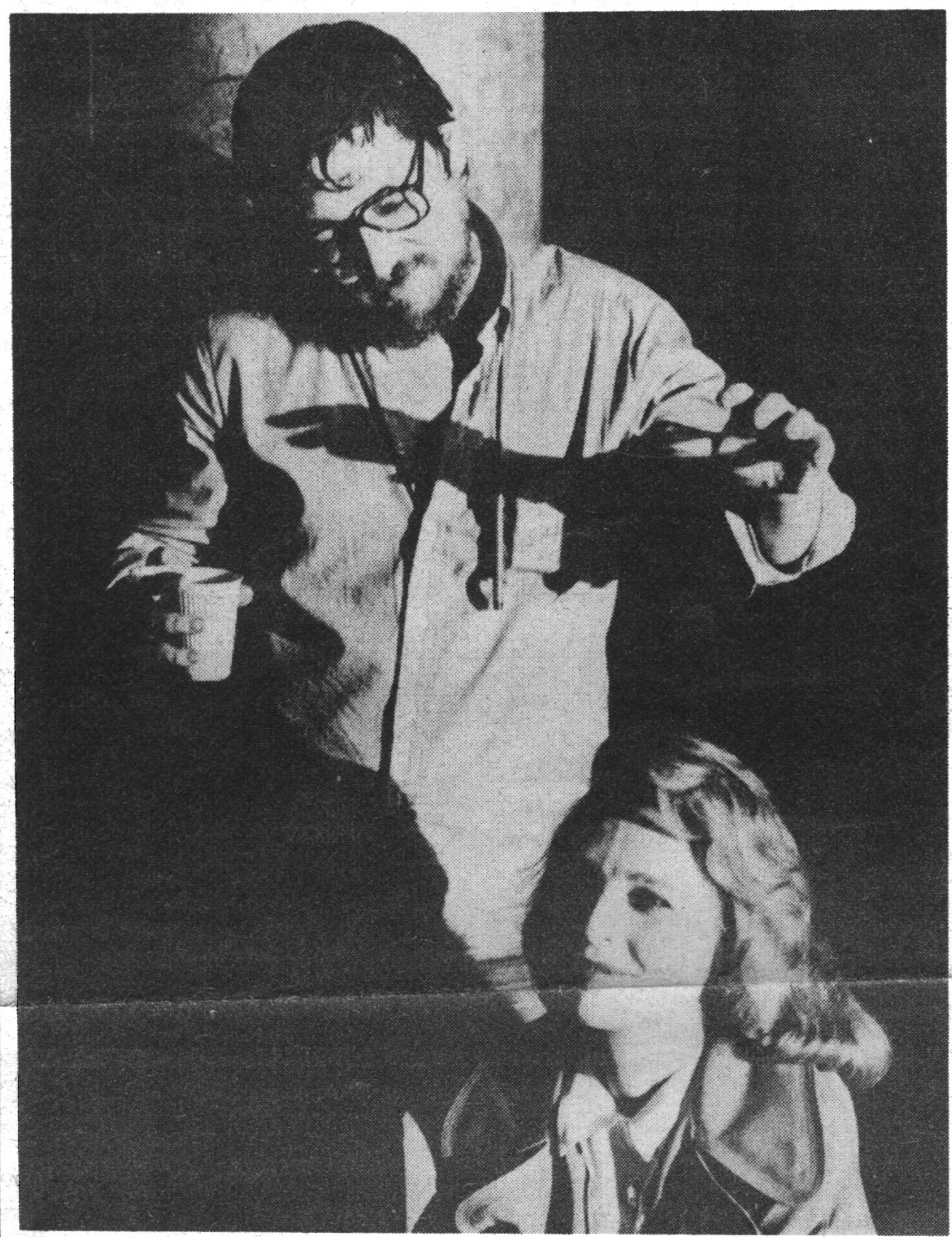


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Fassbinder & His Films: Art Conquers Death



Rainer Werner Fassbinder directs Hanna Schygulla in *Lili Marleen*

By David Ehrenstein

"I have so much energy I cannot even die," Rainer Werner Fassbinder announced to an interviewer for German television on June 9. Less than twenty-four hours later the great modern film maker was dead.

There's a chilling irony in this macabre conjunction of speech and circumstance, but to anyone appreciative of Fassbinder and his many accomplishments there's a simple truth as well. In a scant fourteen years, the incredibly brilliant artist wrote and directed thirty-two feature films, a dozen or more television productions, twenty-eight stage plays and radio dramas, innumerable critical analyses, the nightclub act of his frequent leading lady (and for a brief time wife) Ingrid Caven, and even found time in between to appear as an actor in a number of films by other German directors. In the face of such creativity, death appears almost a minor technical malfunction—a momentary interruption in a communication that has by no means ended.

As was the case with the death of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Fassbinder's passing will provide the occasion for some to neatly encapsulate his life as art. In some ways this isn't difficult to understand. He is, after all, dead at thirty-six from a lethal combination of sleeping pills and cocaine—just like a scene out of one of his films. *Fox and His Friends* in fact ended with a shot of its protagonist—played by Fassbinder himself—lying dead from a Valium overdose. Life imi-

tates art—a logical conclusion to a career devoted to depicting desperate characters in sorry circumstances. The titles alone give the show away: *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, *Gods of the Plague*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, *Fear of Fear*, *Despair*. Then the facts of Fassbinder's personal life must be considered: the suicide of his lover Armin Meir two years ago and the renewed frenzy of activity to which the tragedy reportedly drove him (three feature films plus the fifteen-hour television miniseries *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, all finished in less than a year and a half).

Yet as logical as these explanations may seem at first, at heart they tell us little about Fassbinder or his work. No one given over so totally to depression and anguish could go about analyzing such emotions as lucidly as Fassbinder did. Moreover, if any meaning is to be found in his death, it will have to proceed from a place apart from tabloid scenarios of life in the fast lane or romantic mystifications of a brilliant but tormented homosexual artist working himself into his grave. The best place to look for answers would be the films themselves. But not on their surface level, where doomed individuals find themselves at the mercy of societal forces. One must instead examine the play of Fassbinder's simple linear narratives against the grain of his highly sophisticated mise-en-scene, for this is where the truth of his life and art resides.

This gap between complex format and matter-of-fact content has always been a sore point with Fassbinder's detractors. How, they ask, are we to take these overwrought tales of passion with their chill, flat images? Are we supposed to find the spectacle (in *Fear Eats the Soul*) of an elderly cleaning woman in love with an Arab workman half her age funny or touching? Is the sight of a lesbian fashion designer (in *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*) howling in anguish over the loss of the woman she loves merely an exercise in camp posturing or was true pathos intended? The answer of course is that this very uncertainty is the desired effect.

Like many other politically attuned artists emerging from the May 1968 period in Europe, Fassbinder was always possessed of a healthy distrust of film's manipulative potential. Where he parted company with the rest of the avant-garde was in its rejection of all narrative and character psychology. Forging his style from many different sources (Godard, Warhol, Straub), Fassbinder created his own version of Brechtian alienation in such early works as *Katzelmacher* and *Beward of a Holy Whore*. By foregrounding formal film devices through emphasis (bizarre camera angles, long takes that consciously called attention to themselves) and elements of staging (actors facing the camera and speaking in a flat, uninflected manner), Fassbinder held story and character at arms' length. By putting quotes around the action in this

manner, Fassbinder enabled the viewer to adopt the skilled remove of a surgeon in regarding material of soap-opera turpitude. Against this emotional *tabula rasa*, the political context of his films comes through loud and clear.

In *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, for example, the heroine's rise from B-girl to industrial magnate emerges unmistakably as a study of the postwar German nation-state yet never becomes an outright allegory. Fassbinder takes his cue from Godard's *Vivre sa Vie* and sets the fact of Maria's life and Germany's history side by side. But by filming his star Hanna Schygulla with the sort of care Curtiz lavished on Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (Hollywood's classic woman-on-the-rise saga), Fassbinder goes Godard one better, giving the film a darkly satirical edge.

It was through *Maria Braun* that Fassbinder acquired international fame. But for those who had been following the work of this film maker from the beginning, its mixture of politics and pulp, Warner Bros. and UFA, Thomas Mann and Fannie Hurst, came as no surprise. The only child of a highly intellectual household (his father read him Goethe when he was five, his mother—who went on to become part of her son's repertory company of actors—translated Truman Capote), Fassbinder was from the beginning marked by both high and low cultural influences. A fervent admirer of the gangster films of Raoul Walsh and Samuel Fuller, Fassbinder's earliest films, *Love Is Colder Than Death*, *Gods of the Plague*, and *The American Soldier* were Brechtian B-movies, filled with the references and homages typical of a true flick fanatic. At the same time these first productions were being filmed, Fassbinder was beginning to make a name for himself in the theater with his unconventional adaptations of plays by Goldoni, Bruckner, and Lope de Vega. Putting modern

political references into highly idiosyncratic interpretations of obscure works by classic authors, Fassbinder's *Anti-Theater* troupe quickly forged a style that mixed operatic overstatement (shouting, declamatory gestures) with moments of extreme reserve. It was this acting style that became the keynote of Fassbinder's second period of film production, from 1971 on. But bored with in-jokes and cultural nose-thumbing for its own sake, Fassbinder had by this time marked out a territory that was soon to be known more or less exclusively as his own. In *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, *Jail Bait*, and *Fox and His Friends*, Fassbinder devoted his full attention to the lower middle-class lives of quiet desperation. His theme is neatly conveyed in the subtitle to the one classic adaptation he made during this period of Fontane's *Effi Briest*: "Many who have an inkling of their possibilities and needs none the less accept the prevailing order in their head in the way they act, and thereby strengthen and confirm it absolutely." Fassbinder never tired of displaying this precept in stories of petty social prejudice and interclass exploitation set in the

continued on page 15

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Fassbinder

continued from page 11

squalid apartments, factories, bars, and coffeehouses where the administrators of the so-called "German economic miracle" had confined so many of their subjects.

Yet as socially conscious and responsible as this sort of film making would seem on paper, actual practice was another story. Fassbinder's films never failed to arouse the ire of the German Left for one reason or another. The greatest director of actresses since Kenji Mizoguchi, Fassbinder constantly dealt with women and their problems, but because he consistently refused to present any solutions, his films came under attack from women's groups. Fassbinder replied that he was simply being honest, but it isn't difficult to understand their

upset over Fassbinder's adaptation of *A Doll's House* in which Nora, at the action's end, elects to stay. "Where would she go?" Fassbinder asked.

The Left as a whole came under fire in Fassbinder's *Mother Kusters' Trip to Heaven*, a drama about a housewife taken under wing by a chic Communist couple after the suicide of the woman's factory-worker spouse. In action and dialogue, *Mother Kusters* was broad to the point of caricature. But at the same time, it clearly represented Fassbinder's distaste for radical chic and the smug assurance of certain leftist factions that he was one of them.

In much the same manner, many homosexual politicians in Germany took exception to *Fox and His Friends*, a scathing attack on social snobbery within the gay subculture. A thoroughly out-of-the-closet homosexual, Fassbinder depicted the gay life onscreen with direct matter-of-factness and absolute authenticity. But instead of the "positive" images gay liberationists insisted upon (Fassbinder creating "positive" images is a contradiction in terms),

what *Fox* presented was a riveting Marxist analysis of the way one class exploits another—in a context where sexual preferences were a secondary concern.

Seen in this light, Fassbinder's personality would suggest that of an intellectual gadfly, a deliberate provocateur leaping from sensation to sensation. This aspect of Fassbinder's artistic personality is undeniable, but at the same time the objections raised by his more socially conscious detractors spring from their inability (or unwillingness) to read Fassbinder's films with the thoroughness they demand. Fassbinder's cinema is one where nothing is left to chance. Every aspect of design, lighting, color, and vocal intonation is meant to be examined with a microscope. What confuses most critics is that while the films' narratives move forward with a simple, almost inexorable logic, the expressive surroundings continually cancel any univocal meaning. In *Fox and His Friends*, for example, Franz (a *lumpenproletariat* who wins a fortune in the national lottery) is the nominal

hero, and Eugen (his petit bourgeois lover who quickly divests him of his just-won bounty) is the nominal villain. Yet Fassbinder refuses simply to divide them in this manner—love one, hate the other. Fassbinder's primary sympathy is with Franz, but it doesn't prevent him from being highly critical (in the film's second half) of the way his hero allows emotions to overwhelm him. Similarly, the awareness Eugen shows of his own nature doesn't cancel out his exploitative nastiness, but it does provide him with more than a trace of humanity.

This insistence on reversals of expectations is perhaps the most marked aspect of Fassbinder's approach—especially when its emergence comes in an abrupt manner, as in *Fear Eats the Soul*. The moment the audience accepts the film's washerwoman heroine as a sweet, lovable, old dear is when she casually remarks about the good old days of Hitler. In Fassbinder's view, double-faceted individuals are nothing compared

to double-faceted countries.

Germany during and just after World War II had been an obsession in recent years with Fassbinder, as manifest by *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Lili Marleen*, *Lola—A German Woman*, and *The Desire of Veronica Voss* (the latter pair to be released presently in the United States). With echoes of Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* and Visconti's *The Damned*, the films of this series have often been misperceived as ain't-decadence-wonderful entertainments on the order of *Cabaret*. But Fassbinder films cannot be reduced to a simple common denominator. Like the man who made them, the works remain perpetually ambiguous and open to question.

Next week: The meaning of Fassbinder's World War II series in relation to German history and his other, more personal projects.

■ Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and *In a Year of 13 Moons* play July 12 at the Fox Venice Theater.