

Document Citation

Title	"Despair": the ultimate form of exile
Author(s)	Robert di Matteo
Source	<i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i>
Date	1979 Mar 22
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	31-32
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Despair, Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 1977

"DESPAIR": THE ULTIMATE FORM OF EXILE

DESPAIR. Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Screenplay by Tom Stoppard, from the novel by Vladimir Nabokov. At the Lumiere, SF.

Punk meets pun in *Despair*. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film of the Vladimir Nabokov novel. With playwright Tom Stoppard's witty screenplay acting as intermediary between the pugnacious ironies of Fassbinder and the baroque conceits of Nabokov, the film is like a marriage of brilliant show-offs. The subjects are the heavy ones of obsession and dissociation, yet this is the first Fassbinder film with a tempo that one might be tempted to call sprightly. (Who knows, this West German wunderkind may one day make a film that is gay in both senses of the word.) I'd rank *Despair* with Fassbinder's best, alongside *Katzelmacher*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and *Effi Briest* (the latter is considered a masterwork even by those who don't much care for Fassbinder and is currently enjoying a six-day run at the Surf Theatre).

Despair offers an acute sense of what it feels like to be an outsider, pushed to the point where one becomes an outsider even to oneself. In this regard, there's an interesting symmetry on-screen and off—a life-into-art labyrinth that is itself worthy of one of Nabokov's convoluted wordplays. The novel was written in Berlin in the early 1930s, its author a recent emigre from Russia. Hermann Hermann, the protagonist of *Despair* (and precursor to Nabokov's Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*), is a chocolate manufacturer living with his wife in Berlin in 1930; the couple have emigrated there from St. Petersburg. Screenwriter Stoppard may be known as England's peacock of letters, yet he's also an emigre—from Czechoslovakia. The fact that *Despair* is Fassbinder's first English language film—a move said to be at least as much an economic concession as anything else—makes him, in a filmmaker's sense, an emigre, too. Add to this the fact that much of Fassbinder's previous work has directly and indirectly addressed the state of being cut-off: the plight of foreigners in



Dirk Bogarde as the dissociated, fantasizing Hermann Hermann and Andrea Ferreol as his wife Lydia in Fassbinder's "Despair."

Germany; the plight of homosexuals in a heterosexual society; the plight of post-war Germans who feel like foreigners to their own country's past and present.

Despair's Hermann Hermann (Dirk Bogarde) falls victim to the ultimate form of exile—he's dissociated. He makes love to Lydia (Andrea Ferreol), his dumpling of a wife, while his "other half" sits back in a chair and watches. We get to see both Hermanns, in a feat of visual reflexiveness that extends Fassbinder's perennial fixation on mirrors and glass. Through cinematographer Michael Balihous's seductively circling camerawork, and the shiny Art-Deco surfaces of Hermann's apartment, the film achieves the disorienting look and feel of a funhouse Hall of Mirrors. (Indeed, Fassbinder includes one fantasy scene that is an *homage* to Orson Welles's famous funhouse shoot-out in *The Lady from Shanghai*.)

What has turned Hermann Karlovich into a "double"—into Hermann Hermann? Among other things, his choco-

late business is in financial trouble, not to mention the encroaching (and individually felt) chaos of a nation still paying reparations for one war and getting ready to enter another. The most heinous sort of split is about to occur in the collective German mind—a splitting off of conscience from the will to power. Hitler will soon attempt to replicate himself—to make "doubles" out of as many Germans as he can.

Hermann doesn't know this (and neither on a conscious level did Nabokov in 1931—the clarity of the Third Reich metaphor is Fassbinder's and Stoppard's contribution). Yet the potentially painful consequences of Hermann's life make him opt for fantasy—make him prefer to *take leave of himself*.

Much of the preceding must be caught on the wing. On the most basic level, *Despair* follows Hermann's efforts to plot an insurance fraud, a swindle that requires the death of his supposed look-alike in his place. Unfortunately, the man Hermann takes for his physical duplicate looks nothing like him—we see the dissimilarity, but Hermann doesn't. The perfect crime is foiled from the start because the criminal is hopelessly blinkered. And while Hermann deliriously hatches his scheme, his wife has found time to cosy up to her bohemian-artist cousin. . . .

The film is a maze of styles, moods, and attitudes. One finds frightfully knowing epigrams, elegant kinkiness of the sort that Helmut Newton's photographs favor, socio-political allusions, Teutonic angst, deadpan parody, Brechtian distancing effects and visual and verbal nods to other films (the ending of *Sunset Boulevard*, the work of Douglas Sirk). Lesser Fassbinder films (e.g., *Beware of a Holy Whore*) have entertained

as much stylistic chaos without successfully binding us to their vision. Here, all the disparate elements cohere into a swansong for poor solipsistic Hermann. Dirk Bogarde's performance in the leading role has a droll edge and a sustaining power: no actor is better able to make us cast a caring eye on the effete and the neurasthenic in a character. Hermann has both qualities in abundance—he's a very fussy madman. Whenever the movie threatens to dissolve into swirling filigree, Bogarde's tight presence serves to tidy things up. He's the movie's interior decorator, pun intended. And Andrea Ferreol's Lydia is a kitschy-Rubensesque creation. Like Hermann, we are drawn to her fleshy aliveness, and yet we can't help but see that she is dumb. A life force to be molded by a strong leader. (The Fuhrer would have use for her kind of blind energy.) Fassbinder doesn't sugarcoat his characters, though one feels, in the case of Lydia, that he's mucking around with a sexist stereotype. But then, his films have always gloried in

continued next page

FILM

continued from previous page

their ability to offer something to offend everyone.

Rabid film buffs don't need to contemplate a journey to L.A.'s mammoth two-week Filmex, now unreeling in Century City; Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive is bringing the best of it to us. From March 20 to April 3, the Archive will present one of their typical coups: "Highlights of the 1979 Los Angeles Film Exposition." I have seen one of the scheduled films, a pitch-black comedy from Greece called *The Idlers of the Fertile Valley* and described by one critic as "The sleeper of the year." Like a low-key version of one of Bunuel's shaggy-dog stories, the film follows a father and his three sons as they literally waste

away on a country estate. The film is a study in sloth carried to the nth degree: the men's single-minded pursuit of leisure leads them to the point where they find no reason to even get out of bed. The last hour of the movie is *really* a sleeper, with the drowsy characters in unrelievedly horizontal position. (A maid attends to them.) To stay with this long film is to surrender to stupor. The idea of lulling the viewer to sleep along with the characters on screen is certainly unusual. Zzzzzzz.

Check with the Archive (2625 Durant Avenue, Berkeley; 642-1124) for the complete schedule of Filmex showings. The following three selections sound particularly tantalizing:

Knife in the Head, the latest work of Reinhard Hauff, who brought us the superb prison film, *The Brutalization of*

Franz Blum. To be shown on Wed., March 21, at 7 p.m., Wheeler Auditorium, UC Berkeley Campus.

Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts, a film essay on gay liberation shot in San Francisco and all across the U.S. Directed by Rosa Von Praunheim, perhaps the most provocative director (outside of Fassbinder) when it comes to gay issues. To be screened Fri., March 23, at midnight at SF's Castro Theatre.

Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's outrageous, seven-hour epic *Hitler-A Film from Germany*, a work that Susan Sontag considers one of the supreme film achievements of the Seventies. To be shown on Mon., March 26, at 4 p.m. in the University Art Museum Theatre (2625 Durant, Berkeley). ■