

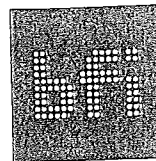
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For Barbara and David Stone

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Five Interviews with Fassbinder

Christian Braad Thomsen

1: Berlin 1971/Venice 1972

Before you began making films, you wrote and produced plays in the theatre – or rather the ‘anti-theatre’, as you called it. Why did you gradually turn to cinema?

In the very beginning, I actually made two short films. I *then* went into the theatre. It was theatre, not anti-theatre. ‘Anti-theatre’ was just the name we gave it, in the same way that another stage might be called the ‘Schiller Theatre’. I have learned a lot in the theatre, about how to work with actors and how to tell a story in a new way. Incidentally, I’m a trained actor myself: it’s the only training I’ve ever really had. Everything else, I’ve had to teach myself. I wanted to make films from the start, but it was much easier to begin in the theatre. And it has paid off: when I *did* start making films, my previous work in the theatre made it much easier to get credit. The success of my early films, the very fact that they were invited to festivals and that sort of thing, had something to do with theatre enjoying more respect than film in Germany. You’d hear, ‘Well, yes, he makes films – but he’s done plays too, so the guy must have something’.

Most of your films are influenced by American gangster movies and melodramas, although they are quite different from them. What attracts you in genre films by directors like Raoul Walsh and Douglas Sirk?

It’s not easy to explain. Those films tell their stories simply, straightforwardly, suspensefully. Before I made *Whity*, I looked at several Raoul Walsh films, especially at *Band of Angels* (1957, with Clark Gable, Yvonne de Carlo and Sidney Poitier), which is one of the loveliest films I’ve ever seen. A white farmer dies, leaving behind the daughter he’s had by a black woman. The girl looks completely white, but as soon as the old man is dead she is sold, to help clear his debts. Clark Gable plays the slave trader who buys her: he knows she is a negro and she knows he is a slave trader. Then the Civil War starts. Sidney Poitier plays the slave trader’s faithful servant and, even though he is fighting on the other side, he helps his master to flee with the girl. So everything works out fine. Or does it? A good director can contrive a happy ending that leaves you dissatisfied. You know that something is wrong – it just can’t end that way.

American cinema is the only one I can take really seriously, because it’s the only one that has really reached an audience. German cinema used to do so, before 1933, and of course there are individual directors in other countries who are in touch with their audiences. But American cinema has generally had the happiest relationship with its audience, and that is because it doesn’t try to be ‘art’. Its narrative style is not so complicated or artificial. Well, of course it’s artificial, but not ‘artistic’.

But your films are ‘artistic’.

Yes, but that’s because a European doesn’t have the same naiveté as a Hollywood director. We have no choice but to consider very carefully what to produce and how to produce it. But I am sure that one day I will succeed in telling naive stories. I am constantly trying to do that, although it’s very hard. American directors can work from the idea that the USA is the land of freedom and justice . . . I find that very beautiful. But I’ve never tried to copy a Hollywood film in the way the Italians have. Our films have been based on our *understanding* of the American cinema, or at least, they were at the beginning.

When you say that the only films you can take seriously are those that reach an audience, how does that leave you feeling about your own films, which haven’t had much of an audience so far?

That isn’t my fault. It’s due to a specific economic situation in Germany today. When that situation is changed, my films will have an audience. They show third-rate stuff in German cinemas. The cinema is a business, and it’s easier to sell poor films. But I’m sure this will change. It has already changed in France: Chabrol now makes films for a big audience, but he, too, started out making them for a small group. It took him twelve years to reach a wider audience.

Unlike many other so-called ‘radical’ directors, you give your films a very direct emotional appeal – which might win the public over.

Feelings are very important to me, but feelings are being exploited by the film industry today, and that is something I hate. I am against speculation in feelings.

Perhaps your ambivalent attitude to emotions finds its way into your films when you show an emotionally charged scene but hold the shot so long and move the camera so slowly that you produce a kind of alienation?

Yes, stylistically it is a kind of alienation. I approach the subject of a scene like this: when the scene lasts a long time, when it’s drawn out, then the audience can really see what is happening between the characters involved. If I started cutting within a scene like that, then no one would see what it was all about.

So you don’t consider these drawn-out scenes as parodies of American genre films?

No, not at all. Some critics think that I use references to American genre films in an ironic way, and of course I can understand how they get that idea and I must accept it. To me, though, it isn't like that. The main difference between American films and mine is that the American cinema is not contemplative – and I, too, would like to achieve a style that unfolds freely, without all these reflections.

I normally divide my films into two groups. There are the bourgeois films, which are all set in a fairly well defined bourgeois environment, and then there are the cinema-films, which are set in typical film environments and contain action of the sort you usually see in cinemas. The first group mirrors quite specific bourgeois mechanisms, and the second group is inspired by films of various genres.

But the genre films, too, are played out in bourgeois surroundings.

Yes, the gangster environment is a bourgeois setting so to speak turned on its head, with the same old bourgeois ideals instead of alternative ideals. My gangsters are victims of the bourgeoisie, not rebels. If they were rebels, they would have to do something else. Since they aren't, they do fundamentally the same things as capitalists do in bourgeois society, except that they do them as criminals. It really makes no difference whether a character in my films is a gangster or a lousy capitalist: the gangster's goals are just as bourgeois as the capitalist's. Perhaps this is another difference between my films and American films, where gangsters sometimes really are outsiders. My gangsters and small-time thieves are actually integrated into society.

2: Berlin 1973

Most of your films see the world through the eyes of a man. But since you've started working with the actress Margit Carstensen, you've centred several projects on a female protagonist: the stage and TV productions of Bremen Freedom, and the TV adaptation of Ibsen's A Doll's House. To start with Petra von Kant, though: why does the servant Marlene walk out at the end, when Petra offers her freedom and equality?

Because the servant accepts her own repression and exploitation, and is therefore afraid of the freedom she is offered. What goes with freedom is the responsibility of having to think about your own existence, and that is something that she has never had to do; she has always simply followed orders, and never had to make her own decisions. When she finally leaves Petra, she is not, I think, heading for freedom but going in search of another slave-existence. Many people seem to have the impression that she is finally freeing herself, but I don't think that at all. It would be wildly optimistic, even utopian, to imagine

that someone who has done and thought nothing for thirty years except what others have thought for her would all of a sudden choose freedom.

What was the thrust of your interpretation of A Doll's House for TV?

There, too, I made it quite clear that I didn't see it as a question of a woman's emancipation, which is the way the play is conventionally read. All the people in the play, including Nora, need to gain their freedom; Nora is not someone who finally 'sees the light'. At the end, she's as stupid as she always was, and the struggle between her and Helmer seems to me to be a fight over petty details. It's not a serious effort to find a plausible way of living together. On the contrary, it's a struggle to win on certain points, which is something I find very cheap, but also very realistic. I haven't been able to find a shred of evidence in Ibsen's text for taking Nora as an advocate of women's liberation.

I'm often irritated by all the talk about women's liberation. The world isn't a case of women against men, but of poor against rich, of repressed against repressors. And there are just as many repressed men as there are repressed women.

Did you change Ibsen's text?

We didn't change anything, but we eliminated quite a lot. Our Nora, for example, doesn't leave at the end. She stays. You can find the kind of problem that Nora and Helmer had in ten thousand other marriages, and the wife doesn't usually leave – where would she go? People usually try to manage one way or another, which is really even more appalling. You can criticise a set-up like that rather than simply saying a person is free to leave, because people are *not* really free to walk out. It is so hard for people to be alone; we must always try to find ways of staying together, not of leaving each other.

Your feature films are pessimistic, in that they show that people cannot free themselves or live freely in this society. But your TV series Eight Hours are not a Day is very optimistic: it shows that people can free themselves. Why this striking difference between your films and your TV productions?

Because all the films and plays I've written were intended for an intellectual audience. With them, you can very well be pessimistic and let a film end in hopelessness. An intellectual is completely free to work on the problem with all his intellectual capacities. In the case of the larger public that the TV series reached, it would have been reactionary, even criminal, to give a hopeless picture of the world. Your first obligation is to give your audience strength, to say 'You do still have possibilities – you can make use of your power, because the repressor is dependent on you'. What is an employer without an employee? Nothing. But you can certainly imagine an employee without an employer. For the first time I've made something positive, something with hope, basically on account of this analysis. With an audience of 25 million ordinary people, you cannot allow yourself to do anything else.

The TV series is about a family: a young man, his parents and his grandmother, plus a girl he gets to know and a friend that his grandmother makes. The young man's place of work is important, and the group he works in is almost like another family. I decided to use the same characters throughout the series because people identify with them. When they reappear from episode to episode, viewers are glad to see them again and that helps them participate in the development of the characters – at first in imagination only, but possibly one day in practice too. A series is a better format for describing personal development than a single film. If you describe such a process in a single film, the process ends when the film ends, but the series format makes it easier to carry the issues over into the lives of the viewers. An important element of the TV aesthetic, in fact, is the way that the same programmes come back time and again: the news, the series and so on. This principle should be applied to the features and entertainment programmes you make for TV.

And so your TV work is aesthetically different from your films?

Yes, in the films I've worked according to the aesthetics of pessimism, but in the TV-films I've worked according to the aesthetics of hope, which of course is different. The form also changes when you want to reach a larger group of people. You can use more close-ups in TV than in the cinema, and zooming is often used in TV photography whereas it can be very disturbing on the cinema screen. In film, you prefer to use a tracking-shot. TV-films work more directly with feelings and effects, with real laughter, but films depend more on atmosphere. The TV series was quite popular, but it divided the critics; sometimes opinions differed widely in the same newspaper.

Your theory, then, is that you can allow yourself to be pessimistic in the cinema because you aren't going to reach anyone but the 'art film' public anyway. But isn't that really a rationalisation? Isn't it truer that you have actually become more optimistic? Why couldn't you make optimistic films for the cinema as well as for TV?

You're right, I certainly could do that. The fact that I haven't probably does reflect the fact that I've been more pessimistic than I am now – and the fact that I prefer tragic films when I go to the cinema myself. But my cinema films are made for people like you and me, not for taxi drivers, workers and servants. In a certain sense, it's right to work for a limited audience, so long as you don't do it all the time.

In the TV series, we dealt with problems relating to the workers' mutual solidarity and unity. The employer treats them as isolated individuals, which threatens their solidarity. We have tried to say: unity makes strength. We have documented the proposition in various ways. Basically, we show that the workers do have means of defending themselves, and that they are most effective when they stick together.

We did research for the series for nearly a year; we talked with workers and union people, and visited factories. It was important to us that what we

produced would be along the lines of what the workers themselves liked, and so we asked many of them: 'If you saw something about your own situation, what should it be like?' I wrote the series according to the answers we got, and then presented the script to a group of workers we were in touch with. They suggested certain changes. This process took a long time, and the script was rewritten two or three times according to their suggestions.

3: Berlin 1974

Is it true that Fontane's Effi Briest was your first film project?

Yes, but in 1969 I couldn't raise the capital, and today I'm thankful for that. At that time I would probably have tried to adapt the story instead of – as now – simply filming the book. Given the little technique and experience I had at that time, my film would probably have looked like the two earlier film versions. There are certain things you shouldn't do as soon as they occur to you: they should be held over until you are *really* ready for them. *Effi Briest* is my dream film, and I decided to make it in black and white because they're the most beautiful colours I know. It's a film that I made exactly as I wished, with no other consideration. If it gets its money back, then that's fine, but that wasn't the reason I made it. It's my most expensive film, and the actual shooting took more than a year.

You see a difference between telling the book's story and filming the book?

Yes, but the difference is mine. I kept close to the novel . . . not to the story it tells, but to Fontane's attitude to the story. Of course you could make a lively film just telling the story (a young girl marries an older man, is unfaithful to him, and so on), but if you're just telling a story like that there's no real need to film Fontane's novel. You might as well find a similar story yourself, which is what I did when I made *Martha*, my personal version of the same story. For me, *Effi Briest* is about Fontane's attitude to society, which is re-created in the film by the distance between the audience and what is happening on the screen. There's explicitly something between the two; it may be the author, or even me as director. Through that built-in 'distance', the audience has a chance to discover its own attitude to society.

How do you see Fontane's attitude to society?

That's very easy. He lived in a society whose faults he recognised and could describe very precisely but all the same a society he needed, to which he really wanted to belong. He rejected everybody and found everything alien and yet fought all his life for recognition within this society. And that's also my attitude to society.

That's why you are criticised by so many student-Marxists?

Yes, but not just because of that. Perhaps more because I make something very clear and precise which is very close to their attitudes . . . and this worries them.

Your principle in making films from literature seems related to Jean-Marie Straub's, and your first film was dedicated to Straub, Rohmer and Chabrol. What was your relationship to Straub at the start of your career?

It's difficult because it's a long time ago, and many things have changed since then. But even today I can accept Straub's relationship to his work because he is so extraordinarily serious and yet still has room for improvisation. He is not as inflexible as he appears; the inflexible aspect is his wife Danièle Huillet. Aside from his stubbornness and seriousness, Straub likes to have fun while working. For our Action-Theatre in Munich he directed Ferdinand Bruckner's *Die Krankheit der Jugend*, which is a three-and-a-half-hour play. Straub gradually reduced this to a ten-minute version which was very beautiful and still retained the essence of the original. We worked four months for those ten minutes. Straub used a method where he never said to the actors that they were right or wrong; he simply said 'You know yourselves how it should be'. He directed the actors in such a way that they became aware of themselves, and that I found marvellous. I'm more reserved about his later films. I like best his short films *Machorka-Muff* and *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp*, which stemmed from the Bruckner piece. Also *Not Reconciled* is a very concrete and beautiful work. Straub's weakness is that he continually works against his public. *Othon* is a film which I reject completely.

The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach achieved a certain amount of public response . . .

Yes, because of the music. It's a film about Bach music as heard by Straub, and that has a certain objective interest. But *Othon* . . .

In the Bach film there's a principle which I think is also found in Effi Briest: that of not showing the key scenes, but only referring to them.

That's right. Had we made 'action scenes', we would have asked the audience to identify with the characters. But having decided beforehand *not* to make such a film, we had to reduce the action scenes to a minimum because they got in the way of the argument. To show the narrative on film is like an author telling a story, but there's a difference. When one reads a book, one creates – as a reader – one's own images, but when a story is told on screen in pictures, then it is concrete and really 'complete'. One is not creative as a member of a film audience, and it was this passivity that I tried to counter in *Effi Briest*. I would prefer people to 'read' the film. It's a film which one cannot simply experience, and which doesn't attack the audience . . . one has to read it. That's the most significant thing about the film.

The clearest example is your handling of the duel scene, where you stress the discussions leading up to the duel but show almost nothing of the duel itself.

That's right, you see hardly anything. The duel is a pretty logical development of the way these people think, but as a duel in itself it is not very important. The only important thing is that it occurs as a consequence of their ideas. The film presents a society where certain things lead to duels, and this particular duel has certain important consequences. I'm interested in what lies before and after the action sequences. The action scenes as such don't interest me.

Actually, the same could be said for the love scenes, although they are hardly described in the novel either. You wonder whether Effi and Major Crampas ever really got into bed together or not.

I guess they did, but the question is open. Fontane doesn't insist on reading it either way: if you want to read it as a case of adultery, then you are free to let your imagination run along those lines, but if your bourgeois morality stops you from doing that, then it's a love story without sexuality. That's how it is in the film too. In my mind, of course they have slept together. But the reader and the viewer must decide in their own imagination whether or not these characters are able to commit this act of adultery.

Why have you concerned yourself so much with women characters? Your attitude surely has nothing to do with Women's Lib?

No, not at all. I'm just as critical of a woman as of a man. The point is that I feel I can express what I want to say better when I use a female character at the centre. Women are more exciting, because on the one hand they are oppressed, and on the other they aren't really, because they use this 'oppression' as terrorisation. Men are so simple: they're more ordinary than women. It's also more amusing to work with women. Men are primitive in their means of expression. Women can show their emotions more, but with men it becomes boring.

Have you seen your early films recently? What do you think of them today?

Not long ago I saw all 23 films in four days, because a book is being published about them. There's a great deal in the first nine films, up to *Beware of a Holy Whore*, which I quite like. The films give a concrete expression of my situation at the time. When you see them all, it's clear that they were made by a person of great sensitivity, aggression and fear. But even so I don't think the first nine films are right. They are too elitist and too private, just made for myself and a few friends . . . It's important that I made them, but even if it was right for me to do so, then objectively speaking it wasn't right, because you must respect your audience more than I did. *Beware of a Holy Whore* may also look very private, but it's different. It is a film about film-making, but its real theme is how a group works together.

It's strange to see this film today, when it's clear that it marked the end of the first period of your work, and represents a very real self-criticism. Were you aware when you made it that this was the end and a new beginning?

I wasn't sure that it was a new start, but I knew it had to be the end. With that film we buried the *anti-teater*, which was our first dream. I didn't know what would happen from then on, but I knew it had to change.

I think it would have been better if you rather than Lou Castel had played the film director . . .

Many people have said that. Maybe it's true, but I wouldn't have been able to make the film the way it is. I would have played him more unsympathetically and that wouldn't have been right, because the film's attitude to that character is already critical and it would have been too much if he'd also been played unsympathetically. It may seem better for the initiated if I'd played the director, but for the normal audience Lou Castel was better.

Both your film and Truffaut's Day for Night deal with the problem that film is something which stands between people and their lives. You even call the art of film a 'holy whore' and warn against it in the title.

Yes, but there is a mania in film-making. It's not like an ordinary eight-hour-a-day job. Film has to do with everything . . . Your normal life disappears when you're filming.

Unlike Truffaut, you criticise the view that film is more important than life, and your films after Beware stem from that criticism . . .

Yes, I'm still fighting for true life and reality.

How was it for you when you re-saw The American Soldier?

Gods of the Plague is more personal, but *The American Soldier* is perhaps a more perfect film. It derives from *Love is Colder than Death* and *Gods of the Plague*, and is quite concrete and professionally made. The two earlier films were more exact reconstructions of the atmosphere prevailing among people of that sort at that time in Munich, whereas *The American Soldier* is a more conventional fictional-narrative film, and is full of film quotes from both Hollywood movies and French gangster movies, particularly the films of Raoul Walsh and John Huston. At the time I interpreted the film more politically, but now I think the 'film quotes' were more important.

Your earlier films evoke for me the relationship between the police and the Baader-Meinhof group . . .

That's all to do with the atmosphere in Germany when I made those films. But at that time I couldn't make a film specifically about the Baader-Meinhof group, and even today I would find it difficult. What Claude Chabrol has done

in *Nada* is really quite false; it isn't the film about anarchists I'd hoped for. I think highly of Chabrol and I was therefore very disappointed that he was as cynical in his attitude to the terrorists as to society . . . that's a little too easy.

Why don't you make a film with that theme?

It's difficult because I can't quite define my attitude. If I clarify my position, then I'm sure that I'll make a film about anarchists sometime.

On the one hand you can understand public attitudes to the anarchists' use of violence, the way they work against their own goal; on the other hand, you can sympathise with the anarchists' situation, and their criticism of aspects of our society . . .

True enough, but I'm very interested in finding out how one can use the strength those people have. Now it's very important to me to make very positive films, and they are very clever people. They have great intellectual potential, but also an over-sensitive despair which I don't know how one would use constructively. Because they don't know how themselves either, they have started using those stupid methods, and so even with their strength they haven't really progressed. They've been terribly impatient. They thought the revolution must happen tomorrow and because it hasn't they've flipped. You have to reckon in centuries, but they thought only in decades. But I don't really know what their alternative is, and that's why I couldn't make a film about them. *Nada* isn't a real film because Chabrol hasn't given it the degree of despair which is necessary. It doesn't interest me, because he looks at both parties from the outside.

4: Frankfurt/Cannes 1975

Films like Effi Briest and Martha are controversial because they depict women who accept – even desire – their own repression.

Most women have been brought up to be completely satisfied when these mechanisms of regression take hold. That doesn't mean that they don't suffer under them . . . of course they do. How one reacts has a lot to do with her personality. I know some fairly emancipated women who enjoy being repressed and at the same time fight against their repression. It's a state full of contradictions.

Militant Women's Liberationists have been particularly critical of Petra von Kant and Effi Briest.

Some women do criticise me very sharply, and call me a misogynist – an

accusation that I always repudiate. I am not a woman-hater, and such accusations can only come from people who (consciously or not) choose to overlook what my films actually say. Even in *Martha*, where Martha herself to a great extent shares the blame for what happens to her and in some ways enjoys it, even there it seems to me entirely clear that the basis for her reaction lies in her upbringing. From that point of view, *Martha* and all my other films are for women, not against them. But almost all of them hate *Petra von Kant* – at least, those who have the kind of problem that the film is about but won't admit it. I can't help it.

In find my own attitude to women quite honest. All in all, I find that women behave just as despicably as men do, and I try to illustrate the reasons for this: namely, that we have been led astray by our upbringing and by the society we live in. My depiction of these conditions is not misogynistic. It is honest. At the same time, though, I don't think it's for me to say how women should set about liberating themselves. Every woman must decide that for herself. All I can do is point out that certain things are wrong, and that something must be done about them.

In connection with your portrayal of women, you have sometimes used cannibalism or vampirism as a metaphor – for example, in Martha and in your play The Burning Village.

That's a Catholic motif, and it has something to do with my friends Kurt Raab and Peer Raben, both of whom had Catholic upbringings. The entire Catholic religion is built on such bizarre questions as the signification of bread and wine. I am strangely drawn to cannibalism. It's not a positive attraction; maybe it's a negative one. Whatever, there is an attraction of some sort which I'm trying to work my way through, even though I wasn't raised as a Catholic myself.

I was brought up in accordance with the theories of Rudolf Steiner, which are not religious but based on the pedagogical principle that children shouldn't be forced to do anything, but should always decide for themselves what they think is right. They are allowed to do whatever interests them, and are not forced to do things that don't interest them. The idea is that children should grow up like little flowers.

And that suited you?

Even that was too much compulsion for me. I grew up in a family where there was none of that at all, where no one worried about when I ate and slept and that sort of thing. The only times I experienced coercion were when I visited neighbours or relations, never when I was with my own father and mother. From the time I was four, all my decisions were left entirely to me. And so when I first went to school, I wasn't used to being punctual or obeying rules. I always hated that.

Do you plan to go on with this staggering rate of production, or are you considering taking things a little easier?

Sometimes I think of taking it easier, but at the same time I've discovered that work is necessary for me. I get very depressed when I'm not working. For the time being, my plan is to make my thirtieth film when I turn thirty. I've achieved a lot of the things that directors aspire to, I've had more success than most and I earn more than most – but none of that in itself has made me any happier. I can't see any reason to be happy when I see how people live. When I meet people in the streets and in railway stations, see their faces and their lives, it fills me with despair. I often want to scream out loud.

People often criticise my films for being pessimistic. There are certainly plenty of reasons for being pessimistic, but I don't see my films that way. They are founded in the belief that revolution doesn't belong on the cinema screen, but outside, in the world. When I show people, on the screen, the ways that things can go wrong, my aim is to warn them that that's the way things *will* go if they don't change their lives. Never mind if a film ends pessimistically; if it exposes certain mechanisms clearly enough to show people how exactly they work, then the ultimate effect is not pessimistic. I never try to reproduce reality in a film. My goal is to reveal such mechanisms in a way that makes people realise the necessity of changing their own reality.

5: Berlin 1977

What I've long wanted to discuss with you is your attitude to masochism, especially in relation to the films Satan's Brew and Shadow of Angels.

There's no such thing as masochism without sadism. And relationships between people are always sado-masochistic as a direct result of their upbringing. That rule also applies to the individual who is not just a masochist or a sadist: it isn't that easy.

If one looks at the reasons for Walter Kranz's masochism in Satan's Brew one doesn't really learn anything about his upbringing.

Of course one knows something. We see his meeting with his parents, and from the way he treats them we can see how they have treated him and why he must live under such pressure that he really rejects his parents.

How have they treated him?

As well as they could. They've tried to suppress him, so that later he has – as far as he could – tried to develop. And it's exactly because of this that he stays small, because of the way they've treated him. The film provides an opportunity for the relationship to be thought through to the end. Of course, one doesn't need to do that. The more films I see here at this Berlin Festival, the more I'm really sure that the way I describe people in my films is more

accurate and true. These films today don't portray people. They show people as religious beings, and even then they're missing a dramatic story within the framework of the film. I really don't understand today's films.

Do you really mean, then, that the reason for Walter Kranz's masochism is that his self-assertion is false and he wants to be punished in order to be suppressed again, as he was by his parents?

It really is like that. Everyone who comes into the world is not taken seriously as a human being, because obviously it's difficult for an adult to take such a little unformed thing seriously. As time passes, the parent becomes the figure which the child in one respect accepts as dominant, which means that all through their lives they will accept dominant figures while at the same time trying to destroy this dominance in order to exist. Actually a child develops a dual need for dominance and destruction, which is to say that one becomes sadistic and masochistic at the same time.

If one looks at some of your other films or characters, for example Marlene in The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, or your own character in Shadow of Angels, perhaps there's another reason for people's masochism. They are so destroyed that they are simply unable to change their lives or the world around them.

It's very complicated because I mean that only those individuals who can accept their own masochism are on the way to being healthy. It's when people suppress their problems that they're really sick. They ought to live their lives outwardly. When you live with problems rather than hiding them, then you can analyse them and overcome them. And in that way masochism can lead to something positive. Self-knowledge is essential. Take the Jews, for instance. For hundreds of years they've shown their masochism, but at the same time it's brought them so much further than other people. It's no coincidence that the two most important figures of our time – Marx and Freud – were both Jews. The Jews as a race have lived through a very masochistic experience and from it they have produced many people who have contributed to human knowledge. This will sound terribly anti-semitic, because one is always misunderstood; but if you're always trying to avoid being misunderstood, you're finished.

But this Jewish masochism is probably also because you can't change your conditioning, so you're bound not just to accept it but to enjoy it so as to get something more out of life.

Yes, to enjoy the pain is always cleverer than simply to suffer it. That goes for all minorities, by the way, but so far as I can see only the Jews have exploited it. Other minorities haven't suffered in quite the same way, but they've suffered more inwardly and so they haven't gained as much from their suffering as the Jews.

By other minorities you also mean your own minority, homosexuals?

Yes, of course. But homosexuals have been very self-pitying, and also most of them are dominated by a sense of shame, which the Jews haven't had. The Jews have never been ashamed of being Jews, whereas homosexuals have been stupid enough to be ashamed of their homosexuality. The Jews have believed that they are God's chosen people, which comes from their experience.

But many people share that attitude. You find both men and women homosexuals who think they're here to save the world.

Various groups have split up now. Also among gays you find those who don't use their homosexuality to indulge in self-pity, but take the 'black is beautiful' line. But that only goes hand in hand with the awareness that one is suffering, and this awareness means that one can't enjoy the suffering, which is the most difficult thing. It isn't easy to accept that suffering can also be beautiful.

Under what circumstances can suffering be beautiful?

Physically? Well, it's difficult. It's something you can only understand if you dig deeply into yourself. If you mean you don't know from your own experience then I can't explain it.

How are you going to tackle the 'German Jewish complex' as it's dealt with in Gustav Freitag's novel Soll und Haben?

I've not got permission to film it. The Controller of Plays for Westdeutsche Rundfunk has said no to the series. And I'm sure it's the first time in German television history that a controller has made such a decision without seeing the material. We've been working on the project for eighteen months and there is a 30-page treatment where we've explained how we'll tackle the subject. On top of that we've written three scripts for the series – but he's simply refused to read the material and won't enter into any kind of discussion. He just said no, and that makes me mad as hell because the novel explains German history from the middle of the last century to the breakthrough of National Socialism. Also it expresses the complete opposite of what Mr Joachim Fest did in his Hitler film [*Hitler – a Career*], which is terribly reactionary and really tries to let the bourgeoisie off the hook. Because Nazism is quite clearly an extension of the bourgeoisie's position, and if Fest doesn't show that in his film it's because it still exists today.

My project was a ten-part TV series in which we were trying to trace the characters through the whole history of the period up to the present. We wanted to show that National Socialism wasn't an accident but a logical extension of the German bourgeoisie's attitudes, which haven't altered to this day. And it's obvious that if one takes that line one's work will be jeopardised. This is what I've come to realise, and to accuse me of anti-semitism is nothing more than a clever pretext, since my aim is simply to show what anti-semitism has brought about. It's possible that some asides in Freitag's novel are anti-

semitic, but it's precisely because of them that the book can be used to portray anti-semitism – and surely the journalist Freitag is not anti-semitic when he describes ghetto life and the hopeless situation the Jews are in, where they have to be negative in order to exist? I don't find it anti-semitic to describe the depths a Jew may have to sink to in order to exist. [Actually I find it anti-semitic to say about Jews – and other minorities – that just because they are minorities they are blameless. To believe that is dangerous and fascist. The best way to describe the majority's view of a minority is to show the kinds of failure and cruel pressures an individual member of that minority may be forced to accept.]

But isn't that exactly the objection made about some of your 'women's films'?

It's precisely the same. If one is looking seriously at women, one has to take into account their faults – what they've had to do to compete with men. It may not be easy to sympathise with them for this – but you don't hate women because of it. I find the people who don't like women are the ones who always show them as beautiful, elegant – and that's because they don't take women seriously. But German films are suffering increasingly from the committee structure – because the financiers are afraid of films they don't understand. And when there's suddenly a very personal and original film – like Walter Bockmayer's first film, *Jane bleibt Jane* – there's a danger of it being totally neglected. Ten years ago that film would have created a sensation because then we had a cultural climate which would have recognised its special qualities. Now the film is rejected; in Berlin it's neither the official German festival entry nor in the market. What people want now is middle-of-the-road, impersonal 'perfection', the kind of thing which doesn't upset anybody. *Jane bleibt Jane* is a very painful but funny film, with a couple of scenes which will certainly go into film history. It's about an old woman who is terrified of old age and starts to imagine that she's married to Tarzan and lives that fantasy to the bitter end. And in describing what fear of old age does to an old woman like that the film really questions the sickness in our society which creates that kind of fear in people.

The last film I saw of yours was Chinese Roulette, which had the most perfectly realised camerawork.

It's the first of my films where I don't just tell the story with the help of actors. People's relationships are built up out of ritual and repeated patterns. We didn't just want to show how people behave or what they do with their faces; we wanted to show it with camera movement. Because when the camera moves a great deal round something that's dead, it's shown to be dead. Then you can create a longing for something that's alive. I tried to make a film that takes artificiality to its limits, precisely to examine that question. I'm sure there's no other film in the history of cinema with as many camera movements, tracking shots and movements around the actors as we had in this one. I made the film first because it looks like a film about marriage as an institution, and then

because this is such an infantile notion that you can show more about how false marriage is.

Do the numerous mirror shots in the film express the longing for things to be reborn?

I hope so. That's how I see it: the rituals go on in the mirrors, where they are broken up, and one hopes that these fractures are so pronounced that the audience unconsciously prepares itself to break with rituals of this kind. Of course, it's too much to ask that a film should have this kind of impact. Take for example Robert Bresson's *Le Diable, Probablement*, which is the most shattering film I've seen in this Berlin Festival. I think it's a major film; but then people say – but what if you show a film like this to the man in the street and he doesn't understand it? First of all, I think that's wrong. But even if it's true, doesn't it mean that in the future – and this world will probably last for another few thousand years – this film will be more important than all the rubbish which is now considered important but which never really goes deep enough? The questions Bresson asks will never be unimportant.

What about the problems raised in Bresson's film – are they rejecting all existing political forms?

Yes, rejecting every commitment. Because commitment for the film's young characters – whom he seems to understand so well – is mainly an escape into an 'occupation' which keeps that commitment alive. An escape from the awareness that everything goes on regardless of you and your commitment.

You seem to have changed your position. When you made the television films Eight Hours are not a Day, you still believed in the importance of commitment.

I still do – don't get me wrong. I'm always saying that as long as I live I will do whatever I can. But at the same time I could also say it's meaningless, and in the last analysis I'd probably be right. All the values one has, and the fear and pain linked to them, are ultimately quite unimportant when set against higher values. You have to understand that everything is unimportant before you can become really committed, because then it becomes a fearless commitment.

I was a little surprised by the ending of Chinese Roulette, with the procession and that Catholic hymn they were singing.

It's not Catholic, it only sounds like it. Peer Raben wrote it – he also sings it – and it comes from the end of *Gods of the Plague* if I remember rightly. It appears in *Niklashauser Fahrt* in a different version. The problem is, when you're working with the interior of a character you reach a point where you really understand their need for religion. Since I'm not a second Marx or Freud who can offer people alternatives, I have to let them keep their own wrong feelings. And I don't believe that melodramatic feelings are laughable – they should be taken absolutely seriously.

But in Chinese Roulette it's you who put the hymn at the end of the film, which makes it seem like an expression of your need for religion . . .

Did you see the film with or without the concluding text? Along with the procession and the music there should be a text – the text of the marriage vows. It looks as though a few prints have been made without this text. This happened at the Paris Festival when a few critics, who liked the film, were confused by this apparently religious ending. But when the text is there, the religious music and the procession have the effect of an escape ritual – a false ritual. And then the music is not a ploy by me as director but a way of describing people's hopeless attempts to escape. The procession which ends the film just happened – I didn't stage it. We were about to shoot a scene of the house with the lights showing through the windows, at dusk, when this procession passed by. Michael Ballhaus turned the camera on them as they passed the house. At first I thought that was nice of him but it didn't interest me. Then during the night I began to think how strange it was that in front of that house, where everything is possible, a procession should suddenly just pass by, making the precise symbol of what these people needed. That was a good enough reason to include it in the film. But a procession by itself would probably have looked too puritanical, so I asked Peer Raben to put some music to it. When you've looked at people for over an hour and a half in their stiffest and most formal rituals, it's obvious what their religion is. Also it's just a pure formality.

Since we're talking about endings, there are two endings to Mother Küsters' Trip to Heaven: the original ending, where Mother Küsters is gunned down, which is also explained by a concluding text; and a later version with a happy ending, where the terrorist lets her live and she goes home with the night porter. I think this second version was shown in Britain and the United States.

Yes. And really I prefer the so-called happy ending. I made it because many people told me that the first ending was too hard. So I tried a gentler ending, which I prefer because it is actually tougher than the original. The first ending, with the text, is perhaps more intellectual – but the other one affects people more emotionally.

Doesn't the first ending conclude the story in a more uncompromising way?

Not at all. When the woman has fought for something for so long – and even gets some sympathy for it – but has to give up because no one will support her, what happens with the first ending is almost the worst thing that could happen, and there's no consolation at the end of the story. I think it's a really clinical ending which turns against the system that the film itself is criticising.

As I understand Nabokov's novel Despair, its main theme is the 'identity problem' as an art form – something you've touched on before, in Satan's Brew, for example. Is that why you filmed it?

The reason I made *Despair* came from an awareness that in everyone's life there comes a point where not only the mind but the body too understands that it's 'all over'. I want to go on with my life, but there will be no new feelings or experiences for me. Everything will be repeats, and the fun I have will be the fun I have forced myself to 'enjoy', what I know should be fun. One no longer gets a naive pleasure out of things. At this point most people start to rearrange their lives. They go in for politics and start to defend the system. *Despair*, for me, is about someone who doesn't stop at that point, but tells himself that a life which consists only of repeats is no life at all. And instead of committing suicide, as the guy does in Bresson's new film, he openly decides to become insane. He kills a man he thinks is his double and tries to take over his identity, even though he knows very well that they are not look-alikes. He moves of his own free will into the land of the insane, because he reckons that that's where he can start a new life. Whether it's possible or not I don't know, because I haven't yet been quite that mad. But I can well imagine that you have to take that step. In a way it's also about a suicide. He's got to kill himself first, and that's why he kills the other person, who he imagines to be his double.

This is the first film you've made with another scriptwriter – Tom Stoppard from England. How did it work out?

Well, it was meant to be an English film, so it was very important to work with an English scriptwriter. I met Stoppard five times when we were writing the script. We had long 'battles'. The funny thing was that Stoppard suddenly reached the point when he wanted the two roles – the main part and the double – to be played by the same person. Which for me was impossible. The thing didn't interest me at all if it was simply about a person who met another man who looked like him. In fact, it's quite a complicated story when you think about it, but as a film it's very simple.

There's a different perspective in the book . . .

Yes, when you read the book you're not quite sure that the characters are not look-alikes. But when you see the film, it's clear from the start that Dirk Bogarde and Klaus Löwitsch don't resemble one another. When you read the book it seems even more abstract than the film, and I really do think it's possible to make a proper film of Nabokov's story.

Did you have any other differences of opinion with Stoppard?

No. I wrote a few things into the script which he approved but didn't like. Dirk Bogarde told him that his work was greatly respected by everybody but once shooting began he would have to stay in the background and believe in our work without our having to follow the script 100 per cent. While directing I tried to forget the script and return to the novel, which has that darkness and strangeness which wasn't in the script. It is the scriptwriter's job to provide material for the director; and the better the material the better chance there is

of the director creating his own fantasies. Under certain circumstances one could say that the more the film gets away from the material, the better. The less breadth the script gives your fantasy and the easier it is to read as a script, the worse it really is as a screenplay:

With your huge output, has the point arrived where you've run out of ideas? Your last three films – Bolwieser, Frauen in New York and Despair – have been based on literary works.

Well, I've filmed other people's work before – *Effi Briest, Pioneers in Ingolstadt, Fear of Fear*. When I film other writers' work, it's because I could have written them. That's to say, they're concerned with the same problems I concern myself with. My own ideas I get all the time – that's the least of my worries. I have to hold back my own ideas because every day I find three stories which could make a film – *stories* I've never been short of. What can sometimes be a problem is the experience of the mechanics of film-making. When it becomes mechanical, the medium loses its original fascination. But with *Despair* I really had a problem, because Dirk Bogarde is such a marvellous actor to work with that every day was a challenge. In future, I'd like to work with actors who – without being false – can express what I want and at the same time bring so much of themselves to the role that the work never ceases to fascinate me.

Does that mean you have more or less abandoned working with your regular group?

To a certain extent. I've certainly finished working with actors who don't contribute anything themselves. I have to make my next film abroad because I can't do what I want in my own country – and that means I have to work with other actors.

What about your plans to film Freud's Der Mann Moses?

I'm going to try to make a television series from it. The television medium is fantastically right for a work with a psychoanalytical basis. What with the news, sport and TV drama with 'nice' ladies in hats and lots of make-up, it's all plastic. I think TV as a medium is only properly used when you show things which go straight to the viewers – talk directly to the family sitting in front of the screen. It sounds idiotic to say that I want to popularise Freud, but I would like to make him more accessible – for those people who can't afford psycho-analysis. I believe, by the way, that it's easier for people to have that experience in the cinema, because there you're surrounded by strangers whereas with TV you're usually watching with your family.

In the cinema you're much more defenceless because of the darkness and isolation, whereas with television you've always got an excuse for not concentrating.

It depends how you show what people don't want to watch. You can show it in a way which makes them reject it. But another way is to learn how to show viewers the things they don't want to see in such a way that they *will* watch because it's excitingly made. Whether I'm allowed to make this TV series or not is still uncertain. WDR have recently developed a new organisational structure where the power is more centralised. They've done away with small groups who could fight for a particular project. The whole arts department is suffering under this structure – everything is 'kaput', everything is divided . . . you know, Germany is really a very tiny, provincial country. I'm afraid about developments over the next few years, because Nazism is creeping back in new forms – just like a repeat of the 1930s.

How conscious are you that your films find inspiration in pre-1933 German culture? Mother Küsters' Trip to Heaven is derived from Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück, Franz Biberkopf in Fox comes from the main character in the novel Berlin Alexanderplatz, and Bolwieser is from Oscar Maria Graf, who fled the Nazis in 1933.

True, but it's not just for me that this is an important period – there's a whole stream of new directors, Herzog, Wenders, Kluge and two or three others. If we'd oriented ourselves to what was being made elsewhere in the world, we'd have been making rubbish. We had to start where things ended in our own country in order to pick up the pieces. With me it's probably more noticeable. I'm not as self-absorbed as Herzog, but even he gets inspiration from the old myths, and Wenders has also tried to use stories from films made before 1933. The directors who came just before us were very much involved in the 'New Wave'. And look at the young Czech directors who went elsewhere for their inspiration and never made it. Before I started to make films I was interested in the pre-1933 period in my theatre work, and I worked with expressionists – but like the people from that period I feel that I have to go into exile if I'm going to go on existing . . .

Interviews 3 and 5 translated from the Danish by Søren Fischer. English translations of interviews 1, 2 and 4 revised by Tony Rayns.