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"I LET THE AUDIENCE FEEL AND THINK": An Interview with Rainer Werner Fassbinder

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"I LET THE AUDIENCE FEEL AND THINK"

An Interview with Rainer Werner Fassbinder

INTERVIEWED BY NORBERT SPARROW

Q: What immediately strikes the uninitiated observer of one of your films is the melodramatic structure. How did this formal choice come about?

A: Any life-story that deals with a relationship or whatever is a melodrama and, for this reason, I think melodramatic films are correct films. The American method of making them, however, left the audience with emotions and nothing else. I want to give the spectator the emotions along with the possibility of reflecting on and analysing what he is feeling.

Q: You have a profound admiration for Douglas Sirk; what is it that attracts you in his films?

A: Sirk managed to exploit all that Hollywood had to offer to make melodramas that seemingly conformed to the studio's demands but which in fact destroyed the very life-style they wished to exemplify—the sort of thing where one is fortunate to have a color TV, an expensive car, etc. Sirk showed the studio line in his films but in such a way that the audience could never really be happy with it. They had been satisfied—they didn't react by saying this is a terrible film, it's attacking my mode of life—no, Sirk's was a very tender kind of destruction. At this time, it was of course impossible to make a big, expensive film and take an overtly critical stand against materialism.

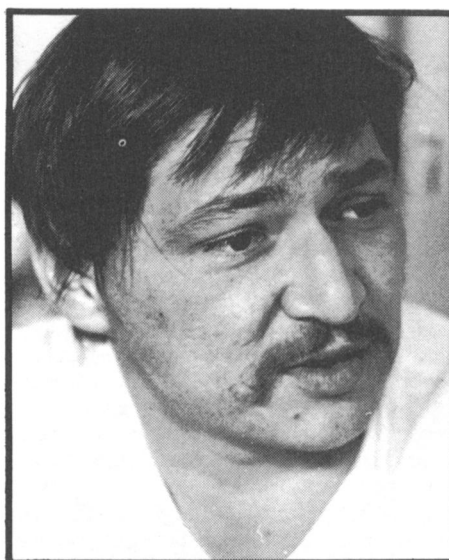
Q: In one of your essays on Sirk's films, you said that while we have a happy ending, in fact these people can't be happy.

A: The filmmakers in Hollywood were forced to shoot happy endings but a critical cineaste finds a way of getting around that, making one that is ultimately unsatisfying. And that's what Sirk did. There were others...

Q: ... such as ...

A: Jerry Lewis. His films contain a very destructive streak. He really showed that a TV, an apartment were worthless and he got away with that because during the last two or three minutes of the film the studio got its happy ending. Even then, it's so exaggerated that it's not believable.

Q: While your films are melodramatic, you have added the dimension of distancing the emotions with respect to the spectator. Some critics have compared this to



Brecht's verfremdungseffekt; you reject this analogy, don't you?

A: Absolutely! Intellectual thought is a process of references and categories but it shouldn't be practiced in such a quick and facile manner. With Brecht you see the emotions and you reflect upon them as you witness them but you never feel them. That's my interpretation and I think I go farther than he did in that I let the audience feel and think.

Q: In MOTHER KUSTER'S TRIP TO HEAVEN, I assume that you didn't show her being shot because, at that point, the audience would have identified too strongly with her, thereby nullifying any sort of distance between the spectator and the story?

A: It'd be terrible if the audience were to see this poor woman killed after all the suffering she had undergone. They would leave the cinema with an impression of sadness and think no more of it. I was going to show the shooting in the original script but fortunately I realized that it would be a great mistake.

Q: I understand that this film has two endings. Why?

A: Some of the group who worked on this film asked me to shoot a friendlier ending, so I shot the one where the worker invites

her home to eat a *himmel und erde* (blood sausage). I've come to prefer this ending over my original one—someone coming along and finishing her emancipation with a private thing—I find it so much sadder and more terrible.

Q: In both cases, we encounter a recurrent theme in your proletarian melodramas: even though the protagonist has gained an awareness of his socio-political and economic position (what could be presumed as the birth of a class consciousness), this doesn't resolve anything. On account of this, some people dismiss your films as fatalistic...

A: They are not! And for the following reason: the film, possessing a fatalistic ending, creates a need on the part of the audience to search for the idea of a utopia. The more fatalistic the film is, the more hopeful it is.

Q: You've said elsewhere that "I make films that have a bearing on the spectator's reality: this (in conjunction with the filmic reality) gives rise to a new reality that is situated in the spectator's head."

A: And if the film has a terrible conclusion, an ending that you can't live with, you must find something else. Death is emancipation... not in the sense that the word is commonly used but emancipation meaning that the protagonist, representing the audience, learns that a utopia is necessary. They need it.

Q: What is your conception of this utopia?

A: That's a problem. I don't want to formulate this utopia for you because if I do, it ceases to exist as a utopia. It's an idea and it can be struggled for. Take Marxism as an example—this good idea is formulated in an inhuman manner. I think the way to change the situation is in a sort of anarchy; not an anarchy that is combined with terrorism nor one that conceives of life without feeling, without pain... everyone has to become himself to hope. It's not up to me to tell him what to hope; if I do this, I dominate him. We have to find new modes that everyone can feel or know... there could be a form of life which is important to live.

Q: That's the reason why you don't propose any solutions in your films?

A: I never have and I hope I never do.

Q: In FEAR EATS THE SOUL, as long

as Ali and Emmi have to collectively struggle against their neighbors' racism and prejudices, the marriage prospers. But when they, for various reasons, relent and accept the couple, the relationship deteriorates. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the couple, in and of itself, is necessarily self-destructive.

A: Whenever two people meet and form a relationship, it's a question of who dominates whom. I've always found that people look for someone to play the paternal or maternal figure. Whenever this happened to me, I generally played the father or mother for a while. Sure, I liked this; I liked to dominate. But then came a time to reflect upon what I had done, I'd feel grieved and I'd end this dependency.

People haven't learned how to love. The prerequisite for loving, without dominating the other, is your body learning, from the moment it leaves the womb, that it can die. When you accept that a part of life is death, you have no more fear of it and you don't fear any other 'conclusions' but as long as you live in terror of death, you react likewise to the end of a relationship and, as a result, you pervert the love that does exist.

Q: You don't see oppression as a simple question of good and bad; your films point out that it is a complex and insidious thing. This has been the cause of some misunderstandings... you've been called a misogynist for the alleged anti-woman attitude of your films, for example.

A: If you look at women seriously, you can't show them better or poorer or I don't know what then they are in reality because, since they have been oppressed a long time, they have found ways of overcoming it and if you show precisely these possibilities, it says more about oppression than would a simplistic black and white/bad and good 'painting' of the poor woman as opposed to the tyrannical man. This doesn't prove anything.

I ran into this problem when dealing with the oppression of the Jews. When I was systematically making films on minorities, I used to show the oppressor as a mean, unsympathetic person and the victims as good and kind. It became clear to me that this was not the right way to portray the oppressor/victim relationship. The really terrible thing about oppression is that you can't show it without showing the person who's being oppressed and who also has his faults. For example, you can't talk about the German treatment of the Jewish minority without evoking the Jews' rapport with money, but when you do this it seems as if you're explaining or accounting for this oppression. Now, oppression allows very few possibilities of reaction, survival. There's very little choice. I stand firmly behind this thought: you must show the victim with his qualities and his faults, his strengths and weaknesses, his mistakes. And for this I've been called an anti-semite!!! And when I show the mistakes made by the woman living with this fucking man, they say I'm a misogynist! And when I made a film about

homosexuals and showed the mistakes that, within their social context, they are forced to make... because if they didn't commit any errors, then they might just as well die. They must save themselves through their mistakes and, in showing this, you point out just how awesome and powerful the oppression has been: you show that the victim is *compelled* to do this or that *because* he's been oppressed.

That is what I'm trying to clarify when talking about the oppression of women, Jews and homosexuals, and for this I've been called an anti-homosexual, an anti-semite, a misogynist... it's really laughable. After making FOX, I ran into so much trouble with German homosexuals. They were so aggressive towards me; they kept asking me why I showed them so negatively...

Q: But you didn't...

A: That's what I told them!

Q: In the final analysis, the film is about the class struggle that happens to take place in a gay milieu, but homosexuality per se was never posed as a 'problem.'

A: That's the film I made but they didn't see this film; they only saw homosexuals making mistakes. They wanted to be exhibited as good, kind and friendly people, and that would have been a lie. I'd have been saying that they didn't have any problems. If everything's great... fine, you've got nothing to change.

Q: Some factions of the left have also attacked your films quite vehemently.

A: No one who thinks according to an ideology that comes from outside himself can like my films. I make films for people that don't think in terms of pre-formulated doctrine; the others go to see my films and they must hate me because they understand.

Q: MOTHER KUSTER'S TRIP TO HEAVEN, in particular, caused quite a stir among the left: its screening at the Forum during the 1975 Berlin Film Festival was disrupted by protests. You were very sarcastic towards the communist couple in the film: the ostentatiously expensive furniture...

A: That's not sarcasm, that's realism. What's important is not the fact that they have a color TV or whatever but that they're ashamed of having it. They need to justify their possessions by saying that the wife inherited it. I don't think that the revolution necessitates poverty.

Q: Did you start your career in the cinema?

A: Yes, I made two shorts (DER STADT-STREICHER, DAS KLEINE CHAOS) after which I devoted my time to the theatre because I didn't have enough money to continue making films.

Q: Yet you occasionally return to the stage.

A: Yes, but only under certain circumstances: if I have the possibility of doing the production in a city I like, with people that I like, and who enjoy being together. If we come up with an idea that strikes our fancy, then I write the play. When I'm doing

theater work, it's for myself; I'm not interested in an audience. The horrible thing about the theater is that, having found an idea that you like, you must repeat it night after night after night... it'd be much better if you could just put it on TV.

Q: What is the theater's role today?

A: I think it's dead. The cinema is much more interesting. Film is at the point where the theater was before Sophocles: an embryo, it hasn't even come out until now.

Q: You've also done some things for TV.

A: Yes. It's an interesting medium—and it is a medium as opposed to film which is an art. Aesthetically, my conception doesn't change but the point of departure, the reason for doing it, is different.

Q: Are you acquainted with Godard's work in video?

A: I haven't actually seen any of it but from what I've read in the interviews and so forth, I get the impression that he's not interested in an audience and this I can't understand. To work with as technical an instrument as a video camera and ignore the audience is beyond my comprehension. I can see doing that in the theater because there is an exchange between the people involved, relationships are formed.

Q: I think that Godard is doing what could be termed 'research' on the medium's mechanism and function.

A: You may be right. I think he will come back and give us something tangible one day but if he is attempting to make the medium richer, in fact, he never expresses that.

Q: You admired his early films a great deal.

A: Some, especially VIVRE SA VIE.

Q: Some of your early films have been described as Godard-influenced.

A: That's not really a just evaluation, at least not in a thematic or formal sense. What I did learn from Godard was a way of reacting quickly to the cinema in terms of my own reality.

Q: At this time he was making films for an audience whereas you consider your early films (up to BEWARE OF A HOLY WHORE) to be too private, too elitist.

A: Yes. A BOUT DE SOUFFLE is a film everybody can enjoy; it really touches people. I feel touched myself when I see it and this is what I don't like about the film... I don't like to be touched in that way.

Q: What do you mean by 'touched'?

A: Well, to put it vulgarly, I felt as if he'd touched my cock, but not because he wanted to do something for me; he did it so that I would like his film. He didn't do this afterwards.

Q: I presume you don't consider A BOUT DE SOUFFLE to be his masterpiece?

A: I think VIVRE SA VIE may be his masterpiece... but, really, this question of masterpieces is irrelevant. In the final analysis, all that matters is the body of work that you leave behind when you've disappeared. It's the entirety of the oeuvre that must say something special about the time in which it was made... otherwise it's worthless. ■