Fassbinder, Rainer Werner **(31 May 1945 – 10 June 1982)**

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was one of the most provocative and prolific figures of the New German Cinema. He wrote, directed, and acted in dozens of films, and stage and radio plays. He was also a founding member of the Filmverlag der Autoren, established in 1971 in Munich to finance and distribute work by independent directors frustrated by the state subsidy system.

Fassbinder was born in Bavaria in May 1945, just weeks after American troops occupied his small town. His parents separated when he was still a child, and his mother, a translator, often sent young Fassbinder to the cinema. He later claimed to have regularly watched three or four films per day. The cinephilia that he developed, and particularly his affection for Hollywood, would profoundly shape his work. However, Fassbinder began his formal training in the theatre.

In 1963, he began studying acting in Munich. At the Friedl-Leonard Studio, he met Hanna Schygulla, who would become a key member of his troupe, and shot his first 8 mm films. After being rejected by the Berlin Film School, Fassbinder joined the Munich Action Theatre; he soon became its director and renamed it the *Anti Theatre*. There, he began working with actors who would form the core of his company. In 1968 he wrote and directed his first play, *Katzelmacher*, which he adapted into his first feature the following year.

Scholars tend to break Fassbinder’s filmmaking career into three distinct phases. The ten or so films that he made between 1969 and 1971 built directly upon his work in the Anti-Theatre, using static camera and self-consciously non-naturalistic dialogue; they clearly reflect the influences of Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard. Starting around 1971, however, Fassbinder shifted toward the aesthetic that made him internationally famous: critical melodrama. His encounter with the  “women’s films” that German émigré Douglas Sirk directed for Universal Studios in the 1950s were one major inspiration for this change of course.

In an appreciation published in the journal *Fernsehen und Film*in 1971, Fassbinder praised Sirk for using a popular genre to communicate social criticism. In his “victim cycle,” Fassbinder borrowed heavily from the conventions of Hollywood melodramas, but focused on working class characters, abused or exploited because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. *Ali: Angst Essen Seele Auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974) was made in homage to Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows*. Fassbinder also praised Sirk for his portrayals of women. “Women think in Sirk’s films. Something which has never struck me with other directors” (Fassbinder 1975).

During the final phase of his career, Fassbinder experimented with both form and subject matter. He contributed a deliberately shocking, autobiographical segment to the omnibus documentary film, *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1977).  His *BRD Trilogie* (*BRD Trilogy*, 1979-82), exploring the landscape of post-fascist Germany through three female protagonists, reflected Sirk’s continued influence. His thirteen-plus-hour TV adaptation of Alfred Döblin’s modernist epic, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, was more idiosyncratic in both form and content.  When he died of a drug overdose in 1982, Fassbinder was working on the script for a film about Rosa Luxemburg. Many scholars have dated the end of the New German Cinema to his death (e.g., Corrigan 1994).

**References and Further Reading**

Corrigan, T. (1994) *New German Cinema: The Displaced Image*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, xvii.

Elsaesser, T. (1996) *Fassbinder’s Germany: History, Identity, Subject,* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press.

Fassbinder, R.W. (1975) “Six Films By Douglas Sirk,” *New Left Review* I: 91.

Peucker, B. (ed.) (2012) *A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Töteberg, M. (1992) *Anarchy of the Imagination*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

List of works:

*Liebe ist kälter als der Tod* (*Love is Colder Than Death*) (1969)

*Katzelmacher* (1969)

*Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* (*Merchant of the Four Seasons*) (1971)

*Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*) (1972)

*Ali: Angst Essen Seele Auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*) (1974)

*Martha* (1974)

*In einem Jahr mit dreizehn Monden* (*In a Year with Thirteen Moons*) (1978)

*Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*) (1979)

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980)

*Lola* (1981)

*Veronika Voss* (1982)

Paratextual materials:

German language TV documentary on Fassbinder: “Deutsche Lebensläufe: Fassbinder”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6134P1LmHcU]

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