Fassbinder and Spectatorship

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# Fassbinder and Spectatorship*

by Judith Mayne

It is nearly impossible to imagine a discussion of film as an ideological medium which does not focus at some point on Hollywood cinema. Hollywood's domination of world-wide film production, ranging from approximately the post-World War I years through the 1940s, firmly established the film industry within the laws of monopoly capitalism. Hollywood cinema has thus been a central factor in understanding the nature of art in capitalist society as a kind of merchandise to be consumed. It is as well through Hollywood cinema that we understand the cinema, in ideological terms, as an apparatus, i.e., as a vast network of machinery which delivers and produces on the scale of commodity production.

Hollywood cinema, too, has defined what most of us expect from films and how we watch them. Such expectations and attitudes include terms like pleasure, fantasy, identification, enjoyment and, of course, the most common of all, entertainment. That these too are a part of the ideology of cinema is beyond question. What is questionable is whether they are ideological in the way that the conditions of Hollywood production and distribution imply. The model of a cinematic apparatus perhaps suggests that pleasure in watching a film is the simple result of manipulation, suggesting in turn the equation of cinema with a passive vehicle for bourgeois ideology at its hegemonic best.

But if we focus on that "vast network" of the cinematic apparatus, comprised of a series of relations between, for instance, industry and art, production and finished film, viewer and screen, then it is possible to speak of the ideology of cinema as a multi-dimensional process. The cinematic apparatus is both an extensive business machine, an appendage of corporate power and the complex technical procedures which determine how spectators watch and enjoy films.

Rainer Fassbinder's 1974 film *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*) raises many crucial issues concerning the relationship between film and ideology, issues which focus precisely on the conditions of film viewing: the relationship between viewer and screen, the Hollywood legacy and the "entertainment factor," and the possibilities of radical social analysis within a conventional narrative framework. *Ali* tells the story of an unlikely romance between a German cleaning woman in her fifties and a Moroccan immigrant worker twenty years her junior. Such beginnings are reminiscent in a general way of Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s. The two meet in a Munich bar, the Asphalt Pub,

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frequented by immigrant workers from North Africa. Emmi, the German woman, is clearly established as an outsider when she steps inside the bar to avoid the rain. As a joke, one of the women in the bar tells Moroccan Ali to ask the old woman to dance. This initial encounter sets the tone pursued through the entire film as Ali and Emmi discover a relationship based on common loneliness and isolation. In so doing, they face the rejection of Emmi's children, her neighbors and her co-workers.

The relationship between Emmi and Ali that we see is constantly defined by the constraints imposed by others. They dance together at the request of someone else and later decide to marry only when Emmi's landlord accuses her of violating her lease by taking in a lodger. Emmi and Ali's first meeting is characterized by a highly ritualistic quality: they literally march to the dance floor and exchange the clichés of small talk while they dance. This sense of stylized ritual dominates the entire film, accentuated by the way in which transitions are made from one scene to another: each scene appears as a single, autonomous tableau rather than part of a fluid dramatic development.

Throughout the initial Asphalt Pub scene, our attention is drawn, as spectators, to the act of looking, relentlessly portrayed here as the interplay of objectifying gazes. The encounter of Emmi and Ali is initiated under and subjected to the stares of the other patrons and the bar owner, a pattern repeated in the film as the couple is portrayed, most often, being watched. Emmi's relationship to Ali exists for the viewer through the disapproving gazes of her co-workers, neighbors, children and nameless figures in public places.

The exclusion of Emmi and Ali appears to reach such enormous proportions that Emmi, in exasperation, proposes a vacation where they can at least momentarily escape social prejudice – or, as she sees it, jealousy. She describes the vacation as a way of escaping the "stares" and "horrible grins" of other people. As if to suggest that our "stares" as spectators of the film have something in common with those chilling looks of characters within the film, the vacation is never represented on the screen. Yet, it marks the turning point of the film.

Upon the couple's return the tone of the film suddenly moves from the register of rejection to that of re-acceptance, although the basic attitude remains the same. The neighborhood grocer, who refused to serve Ali until he "learned to speak German properly," now unashamedly panders to Emmi to win her back as a customer ("Everyone is shopping in the new supermarket now," he says. "Business must come before pleasure.") Emmi's grown children, who referred to her as a "filthy whore" when she introduced her new husband to them, are ready to make amends and conveniently so: one son wants to take advantage of Emmi's free afternoons for a baby-sitting service. Her neighbors are all smiles as they ask Emmi for the use of her basement storage area.

As false as this reacceptance and reintegration is, it does not come cheaply. Emmi hovers in an uncomfortable space between her relationship to Ali, making her other, the object of vision and her milieu, that of the onlooker. The dis-

tances between Emmi and Ali begin to grow, predictably so, and they climax, almost farcically, in Emmi's refusal to make couscous: "I don't know how. And besides, Germans don't eat couscous." Ali temporarily seeks shelter in the bed of Barbara, owner of the Asphalt Pub. This refuge is as tenuous as Emmi's so-called reacceptance; for just as Emmi must accept the terms of exclusion and objectification, so Ali's relationship to Barbara is first and foremost that of customer and proprietor.

Emmi and Ali, each in her/his turn, appear to have internalized the objectification that previously defined the reaction of other figures in the film to them. Emmi's co-workers come to her apartment, and she unwittingly joins them in making Ali into a circus side-show. She shows off his muscles, his "good grip," proudly announces that he takes a shower every day, and, when he leaves the room somewhat abruptly, she says he has his "moods sometimes – that's his foreign mentality." Later in the film Emmi goes to the garage where Ali works. When one worker asks if "that's your grandmother from Morocco," Ali joins in the general laughter.

Ali drinks and gambles back at the Asphalt Pub until Emmi comes looking for him. In a repetition of the opening scene of the film they dance, this time clinging to each other and resolving not to part. Just when their difficulties seem to be resolved, Ali collapses. In an ambiguous final scene at the hospital, a doctor informs Emmi that Ali suffers from a perforated ulcer, common among immigrant workers because of the particular stress to which they are subjected. The film closes on an image of Ali, unconscious, next to a blank window, with a tearful Emmi at his side.

Like countless numbers of narrative films, *Ali* traces the history of a love story. Perhaps it is the unlikelihood of Emmi and Ali's romance in the first place, or the age and cultural differences between the two, or the cliché-ridden dialogue which occurs between them, that makes the viewing of *Ali* an unsettling experience. For *Ali* is, certainly, a disturbing film. But I think this is due less to the more obvious features which violate our expectations of a love story than to its social dimensions. The relationship exists in the tenuous margins between public and private life, between social and personal existence. Put another way, the love story between Emmi and Ali occupies an ideological space where private and public exist in precarious balance – ideological space because people's lives in capitalist society are divided between their places within the social division of labor, and their personal lives of leisure, intimacy, friends and home. The apparent split between production and consumption, work and leisure, public and private, masks the ways in which the development of capitalist society is marked by relentless and increased domination of the commodity form over all aspects of life. The context of Emmi and Ali's relationship is, in a word, that of reification.[1] Thus, Emmi's apartment is only briefly glimpsed as a refuge from the

1. For a definition of reification as used in this essay, see Georg Lukács, *History and Class*

public humiliation inflicted upon the couple, becoming, rather, an arena for the same factors of exclusion operative in the public realm.

The social history of the cinema reflects the extent to which the cinematic apparatus is an instrument of reification. When the first American films were shown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they catered primarily to the urban working class and immigrant population. In a limited but nonetheless significant way, the cinema brought technology into the lives of people whose participation in technological change had been limited to their roles in production. "Five, ten, and fifteen cent prices brought theatrical entertainment to audiences that neither vaudeville nor the popular stage had ever touched. . . . Families went to the movies together, local merchants advertised on their screens, audiences sang together from song slides, people met and socialized — all for nickles and dimes. (Subtitles, of course, taught thousands of immigrants to speak English.) A city movie house could gross a thousand dollars a week with ease in 1908, and by that time every major city had a hundred or more of them."[2] Movies responded to a genuine desire for collective entertainment and leisure, defining, at the same time, the conditions of that desire within the laws of commodity production.

The beginnings of moving pictures firmly situate the cinema as a mediation between private and public realms. Often metaphorized as either dream-like or more real than life itself, the cinema delivered fantasies to satisfy personal desires and produced images of the world inviting collective participation. The cinematic apparatus which has evolved from those beginnings depends upon three interrelated mechanisms of containment, naturalization and identification. Film genres contain what can be represented on the screen within certain boundaries: "It is clear that the optimal exploitation of the production apparatus, which ties up considerable amounts of capital, requires the containment of creative work within established frameworks and that genres, film kinds, even so-called studio styles, are crucial factors here."[3] The cinema's impression of reality, its apparently inherent realism, allows a transformation of reality to the

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*Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 89. "Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalized and mechanized his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e., a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world; it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space."

2. Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse* (New York, 1970), p. 364.

3. Stephen Heath, "On Screen, In Frame: Film and Ideology," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 1 (1976), 256.

screen in such a way that social and political realities can be obscured and contradiction dispelled since whatever passes on the screen is simply "natural." Just as cinema is a naturalizing force, so it assigns the spectator a specific place, an ideal vantage point from which the individual's perception is guided through the film.

Fassbinder's film works through these components of the cinematic apparatus. While *Ali* is not strictly a genre film, it relies heavily on conventions of the Hollywood melodrama perfected in the 1940s and 1950s. It is tempting to refer to Fassbinder's use of genre as a politicizing of the melodrama. Certainly *Ali* reflects and reflects upon the social reality of West Germany and of modern capitalism. Those political realities so often repressed in mainstream cinema appear to surface in this film, creating a confrontation between melodrama and politics. Yet, there is little in Fassbinder's film that can be called political documentation. Even though nearly all the tensions generated in the film stem from Ali's position as an immigrant worker, there is little direct exploration of the political nature of that position. Rather, attention is focused on attitudes towards Ali as an outsider, attitudes conveyed primarily through a stunning interplay of gazes and exchanges of looks, nearly all of which possess an objectifying quality. The basic elements of cinematic continuity are replete with cultural significance in this film. The identification of the viewer with the film is mirrored by the use of shot/reverse shot to construct a series of spectacles within the film.

The ways in which *Ali* works through these components of the cinematic apparatus raise fundamental questions concerning both the ideology of cinema and its potential for radical critique. Fassbinder's use of the Hollywood melodrama invites a consideration of the social significance of popular culture and the extent to which the entertainment factor can function in a critical way. Melodrama is one of those categories which is difficult to understand in a general way because it is so widely used and often conveys negative judgment rather than description. In the strictest sense, melodrama refers to a type of drama developed in the 18th century in which spoken words and music were heard alternately: music was a form of punctuation rather than simple accompaniment and served to orchestrate the emotional effects of the play.[4] The musical element in what was referred to as melodrama, especially on French and British stages of the 19th century, gradually dwindled, although the emotional principle which it served did not. Melodrama came to mean a dramatic form characterized by at least three basic features: sensationalism, intense emotional appeal and a happy ending. Frank Rahill's definition is helpful in defining the

4. Sources for the discussion of melodrama are Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations of the Family Melodrama," *Monogram*, no. 4 (1972), 2-15; Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park, 1967); and James L. Smith, *Melodrama, The Critical Idiom* (London, 1973).

general parameters of melodrama: "Melodrama is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished. Characteristically it offers elaborate scenic accessories and miscellaneous divertissements and introduces music freely, typically to underscore dramatic effect."[5] More often the term melodrama is used as the equivalent of second rate artistry, cheap sentimentalism, implausible plot and character development, and far-flung excesses. That many melodramas merit such judgment is beyond question, but of perhaps equal weight in the relegation of melodrama to the margins of official art is the fact that it is a popular art form *par excellence*.

However many definitions and forms of melodrama may exist, they share an emphasis on intense emotion. From this perspective *Ali* can be seen in direct link to the amorphous tradition of melodrama. That melodrama relies so heavily on emotional trauma in its structure and invites strong emotional response from its audience has often been taken for granted as proof of a direct link between melodrama and pure escapism. Rahill points out, however, that along with the escapist trend, melodramas were used as vehicles for social commentary and outright calls to action: "During the nineteenth century this instrument was pressed into the service of innumerable crusades: national patriotism, anticlericalism, abolition of slavery, prohibition, and even tax and prison reform, to name only a few. There was an avowedly Socialist school of melodrama in France during the period when the Communist Manifesto was proclaimed."[6] Characters in the melodrama often exist as elements in an absolute typology of good and evil, and psychological complexity is downplayed for the sake of conflicts waged against external adversaries. The conflicts generated are extreme, as are their usually unambiguous resolutions. That sense of excess results not only from the intensity of conflict, but also form an intensification of the rituals and banalities of everyday life to create a highly-charged emotional atmosphere.

*Ali* is neither escapism nor a direct call to action, but rather hovers between those two functions which the melodrama has historically served. Characters in the film are initially drawn as figures in a social, rather than universal, typology of good and evil. "Good" is equated in the characters of Emmi and Ali with the innocence and transcendence of social barriers – however unconscious. "Evil" is equated with crass economic motivation and transparent internalization of

5. Rahill, p. xiv.
6. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

cultural conditioning. Symbolization revolves around a heightening of the commonplace: a jukebox symbolizes the cultural parameters of Emmi and Ali's initial encounter and eventual relationship; the simple acts of eating in a restaurant or sitting in a park become intensely charged social acts; and the cultural connotations of food represent the differences that separate Emmi and Ali. *Ali* derives much of its strength from the melodramatic tradition that it taps without completely defining itself within its boundaries. Much of the tension and conflict in *Ali* stems not directly from its melodramatic characteristics, but from a refusal to take the conventions of melodrama to their logical conclusion. Rather, Fassbinder exploits certain elements of the melodrama without giving us unequivocal resolution or continuous waves of high-pitched emotion. In short, Fassbinder exploits the radical potential of the melodrama which Thomas Elsaesser has described as follows: "The melodrama, at its most accomplished, seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality, and class consciousness, by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collide to become their agents."[7]

The specific contours of Fassbinder's use of melodrama are shaped by another filmmaker's experience with that form in Hollywood during the 1950s. German born theater director and filmmaker Douglas Sirk emigrated to the United States in the late 1930s and worked under contract as a Hollywood film director. Sirk directed his most famous films – *Imitation of Life, All That Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind, Tarnished Angels, Magnificent Obsession* – for Universal Studios in the 1950s when it was under the control of Ross Hunter, known as master of the "weepie." Fassbinder's admiration for Sirk is well-known. "I have seen six films by Douglas Sirk," Fassbinder wrote in 1971. "Among them were the most beautiful in the world."[8] In those films, Fassbinder sees the possibility of working within a particular genre while simultaneously undercutting the social values that genre is designed to perpetuate. "In other words, use the emotions generated to a particular end. It's a preliminary stage in a kind of political presentation. The main thing to be learned from American films was the need to meet their entertainment factor halfway. The ideal is to make films as beautiful as America's, but which at the same time shift the content to other areas. I find the process beginning in Douglas Sirk's films."[9]

*Ali* is a conscious homage and, in some instances, makes explicit reference to Sirk's 1955 melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*. In that film, a May-December

7. Elsaesser, p. 14.
8. "Six Films by Douglas Sirk," *New Left Review*, 91 (May-June, 1975), 96.
9. "Forms of Address: Tony Rayns Interviews Three German Filmmakers," *Sight and Sound*, 44 (Winter, 1974-75).

romance joins middle-class widow Jane Wyman and her nature lover, the gardener Rock Hudson. Predictably, Wyman's children and friends are horrified. She bows to their disapproval until tension, loneliness and physical sickness mount to the point that she can no longer repress her desires. She drives to Hudson's home but hesitates at the last minute while he, having spotted her, falls off a cliff. They are reunited at his sickbed. Beneath the polished, tear-jerker facade of this film lies a subtle critique of middle-class values. ("After seeing this film," Fassbinder writes, "small town America is the last place in the world I would want to go.")[10]

Certain melodramatic elements of *All That Heaven Allows* are so overdetermined as to function both within the boundaries of intense narrative configuration and as social commentary which bursts through the confines of that configuration. Jane Wyman makes an initial choice to abandon her love for Hudson in favor of her suburban home, her children and her friends. The real choice the woman has made is revealed at Christmas time when her children, who had so emphatically invoked the authority of family tradition to dissuade her from marrying Hudson, announce their plans for independent lives. A salesman arrives to present their Christmas gift to their mother – a television set, "life's parade at your fingertips," in the salesman's words. The children leave, and in a close-up of the television screen we see the reflection of Wyman's face, isolated, lonely and doomed, it would seem, to a future of passive contemplation. We as spectators witness Wyman's confrontation with the futility of the life which she has opted for; and yet, that vision turns back onto itself, onto our own conception of family life equally dependent, although not as dramatically, on the banality and emptiness of a television screen.

I am not suggesting that Sirk openly subverts the conventions of the melodrama, but rather that we are held within the sphere of narrative configuration in such a way that direct social commentary is possible. Fassbinder's film works on this model, shifting it so that our vision of the film is a constant movement between narrative intensity and social critique, never totally anchored in either one. In *Ali*, a scene similar to the one described above occurs. When Emmi calls her married children together to announce her marriage, Ali waits in the wings, as it were, for his cue to enter. Emmi's children look bored and anxious to leave. As Emmi introduces Ali, camera movement records the disgust on the faces of her children to this unexpected spectacle. One son actively expresses his disdain by kicking in Emmi's television. As in Sirk's film, the television screen symbolizes the shallow middle-class morality unwittingly rejected by Emmi, whereas it was unthinkingly embraced by Wyman. Yet, in Fassbinder's film there is no ritual of gift-giving, no pretense of devotion on the part of the children, no family holiday to enshroud the television in narrative intensity. Nor

10. Fassbinder, p. 89.

is there a figure comparable to the salesman to disrupt a family gathering with an ironic sales-pitch. In Sirk's film, social values are gradually revealed with the development of the narrative to be hollow and empty, whereas in Fassbinder's film there is no revelation, but rather a constant exposure to human beings who look at each other as if at a blank television screen. It is that act of vision that captures us in *Ali*, a vision that is one step removed from participation in dramatic action, and not yet a vision turned against itself.

Sirk's film is a brilliant example of some of the strategies which, in Hollywood cinema, displace potentially subversive political considerations – in particular, those concerning social class. What is particularly interesting in Sirk is that, while class conflict is averted, it remains beneath the surface of his films like a subconscious dynamic capable of surfacing any time. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Wyman and Hudson's first meeting is on the terms of employer and employee: he is her gardener and has come to her house to prune trees. Quickly, however, Hudson is attributed with a certain amount of individual status, for he runs a nursery inherited from his father. In a later meeting, Hudson admits that his true vocation is growing trees and that he plans to give up maintenance work. The differences between him and Wyman are gradually displaced into the realm of cultural, rather than specifically economic factors. Hudson not only loves to grow trees, he is committed to a life style which draws him close to the earth, and he appropriately considers *Walden* his bible. His circle of friends covers a range of diversity lacking in Wyman's country-club set, including first-generation Italians, a painter, a beekeeper and a birdwatcher. In Wyman's first introduction to them, they dance to impromptu music in obvious contrast to the stilted atmosphere of the country club where Wyman's social life has been centered. Only briefly does the specific issue of class resurface through the web of Hudson's appealing life style, as when Wyman's best friend, upon learning of the romance, greets her with: "You can't be serious – your gardener?"

In a different way, the use of chance accidents in Sirk's film attributes the success or failure of a relationship to fate or destiny rather than the material conditions of class society. Thus, Wyman wavers in her decision to leave her suburban life behind her and marry Hudson. She drives out to his home, but changes her mind at the last moment and leaves, just as Hudson falls off the cliff and suffers a concussion. The accident seals the bond between the two and allows for the necessary happy ending. Yet, while the moment of the accident is, according to the laws of the genre, the turning point of the film, it is deliberately downplayed. The real turning point in the film is, I think, that Christmas scene described earlier in which Wyman comes face to face with the terms of her choice – the social terms of that choice.

Some of the formal means of displacement are present in Fassbinder's film but pursued to different ends. For example, Fassbinder drains a convention of its depth. The potential is certainly there, in *Ali*, for the Moroccan to represent, if not an alternative life style, at least a kind of exoticism. But the differences in

culture are reduced to a jukebox and couscous, on the one hand, and to the racist clichés of sex-starved Arabs told by Emmi's co-workers, on the other. Fassbinder's alternative, having reduced cultural difference to a mere surface, is not to replenish the convention with a well-articulated class dynamic. Rather, Emmi and Ali's love story is told without the embellishment of conflicting "life styles" in such a way that the line between the demands of the story and an overtly expressed class dynamic is still drawn, but it is significantly thinner. Fassbinder also reinvests some of the conventions of melodrama with political substance. In the last scene at the Asphalt Pub, Ali's sudden collapse initially appears to be one of those chance events in the same order of Hudson's fall from the cliff. However the final scene of the film reveals that it is not a *deus ex machina* device which caused Ali's collapse, but rather the fact that he is an immigrant worker. Ali's situation is presented in a fatalistic way – the doctor promises little hope for recovery since the tension which produced the affliction will doubtless remain – and in that sense at least a minimum of melodramatic decorum is maintained. However, the roots of that "accident" are clearly the material conditions of Ali's existence.

Sirk's film is a special kind of melodrama which focuses on a love story and evokes tears, known by the name, the "woman's film."[11] The only comparable genre which can be called "men's film" is that of war movies and adventure stories which openly celebrate machismo values. Cinematic space is genderized, in other words, along the lines of the private and the public. In reality as in the movies, to women belong the tribulations of personal life, of love and of the family. Yet, while Sirk's film projects into that private space, it transcends it at the same time. Wyman falls in love with Hudson not primarily because she is a cliché of the frustrated housewife and he the available young stud, but rather because he represents an alternative that puts the very basis of her own life into question. The love story here questions, rather than maintains the boundaries between the personal and the social.

In a different way, Fassbinder, too, turns around the expectations of his audience. Fassbinder's films are well-known for their exposés, if not always critiques of bourgeois values: they are films which do not carry the facile denominator of "weepies," for example. That *Ali* works through the conventions of the melodrama suggests an affinity with many contemporary films which self-consciously and critically examine the nature of cinematic representation. Yet, alongside of that examination, *Ali* tells a straight love story, drawing us into the cinematic space traditionally defined as "women's" space and forcing us to see – as Sirk does in reverse fashion – the tenuous boundaries between private and social experience.

There are other ways in which insights of a political nature inform the

11. See Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (New York, 1974), chapter four.

development of Fassbinder's film. The pattern of exclusion and pseudo-reacceptance which shapes the film reflects the prevalence of crass economic concerns. Social behavior is seen as the function of basic economic motivation: "Prejudice" is no longer indulged when child care service is necessary or when groceries have to be sold. Emmi and Ali themselves are working-class characters reflecting a particular phenomenon in capitalist society, the industrial reserve army which can be tapped at small cost when the need for cheap labor arises. Women in capitalist society have always been a part of this labor force, and more recently, in Western Europe, immigrant workers have been its primary component.[12]

However, Emmi and Ali's exploitation as workers, at the workplace, is not a central concern in this film. More important is the specific form of alienation each character represents. Alienation is perceived in this film against the background, once again, of people split into the two halves of work and personal life. Emmi's job as a cleaner is "women's work," an extension of her position within the family. Similar to her are those widowed women in her apartment building whose social activity is limited to gossip and maintaining order in the "home," even though they are no longer responsible for family duties. Work, social life, public space: these are, for women, an endless magnification of the home, the private, the personal. Ali, on the other hand, has no real private life, given the ways in which all aspects of his life are governed by his visible otherness, his exclusion from German culture while an integral part of the German economy. John Berger describes the phenomenon as follows: "What has happened within him is not distinct from what happens within million of others who are not migrant workers. It is simply more extreme. He experiences suddenly as an individual, as a man who believes he is choosing his own life, what the industrial consumer societies have experienced gradually through generations without the effort of choosing. He lives the content of our institutions: they transform him violently. They do not need to transform us. We are already within them."[13] Emmi tells Ali early in the film that her husband, too, was an immigrant worker from Poland, suggesting at the very least a shared situation. For precisely, Emmi and Ali share the impossible task of disentangling the tightly interwoven threads of public and private existence. Independently and together, their lives are an extreme crystallization of reification, of the permeation of capitalist values – exploitation, the false separation of home and work – into personal experience.

*Ali* does not fit the traditional conception of a "political film," since it does not analyze social reality suggesting how it might be changed; nor is it at the service of a particular political line. Yet, that traditional conception of what is political and not political is itself grounded in the separation of the personal and

12. See Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack, "Immigrant Workers and Trade Unions in the German Federal Republic," *Radical America*, 8 (November-December, 1974), 55-76.

13. *A Seventh Man* (New York, 1975), p. 197.

the political. As Sheila Rowbotham points out, for example: "The manifestations of the specific manner in which the dominant relations and values of capitalist society penetrate all the supposedly 'personal' areas of human life are still largely unexplored. The political expression of personal experience was traditionally confined to novels and poetry. Lenin told Inessa Armand that discussion of free love was out of place in a pamphlet."[14] The scope of *Ali* includes emotions, everyday experience, and commonplace gestures, a scope which works to enlarge our vision of the political. Fiction film may be in an ideal position to explore these areas because of its particular appeal to emotional response and its own tradition of turning personal experience into a commodity formula. The issue concerns what is political about film: film technique, style, etc.

Fassbinder draws heavily on the implications of cinematic form. Our perception of Emmi and Ali is directly formed by how they are looked at, and how they relate to language – by image and sound, the basics of cinematic form. Neither character is in her/his element with verbal expression: Ali speaks broken German, and Emmi relies on cliché-ridden speech. Nor are they comfortable within the unrelenting stares of other people. The difference between public and private space are levelled by the ways in which scenes are filmed. From the beginning, Emmi's apartment is shot through slightly open doors with an emphasis on tight framing. Similarly, Emmi's workplace is depicted through a window or a staircase rail, and we see Ali and Emmi in the restaurant where they celebrate their marriage in a long shot through an archway. As Emmi and Ali are contained by image and sound, so the contexts in which they appear are marked by a series of formal constraints.

A majority of the tableau-like sequences in *Ali* are structured according to a spectacle principle, where the basic continuity device of shot/reverse shot becomes an authoritative principle of objectifying gazes. The opening sequence of the film, in the Asphalt Pub, is characterized by a single continuous activity, that of looking. The effect is accentuated by an unrelenting duration of shots with minimal camera movement, and still bodies disinterestedly absorbed in the act of staring. Emmi is the object of vision when she enters the pub, and she and Ali become a literal spectacle when they dance, carefully watched by the bar owner and the other patrons. As in other scenes of the film, all activity is stripped down to the bare essentials of looking. When Emmi and Ali eat at the Osteria Italiana, they are the only patrons in the restaurant. Their discomfort at being in such luxurious surroundings is magnified by the waiter who stares at them unrelentingly. In another scene the couple is alone in a vast public garden of tables and chairs, except for a small group of people who, once again, do nothing but stare at them. The individual and total effect of these looks conveys

14. *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (Baltimore, 1973), p. 55.

a reduction of human beings to the status of spectacle, objects existing solely for the viewer.

A number of recent studies have examined the various ways in which spectators identify with films and how, for example, the basic continuity principles of cinema – rules of editing, camera position, relation between sound and image, etc. – are designed to assign the spectator an ideal vantage point from which to witness the unfolding of the cinematic spectacle.[15] One such technique is shot/reverse shot, which constantly defines and redefines the viewer's place within the film narrative.[16] Shot/reverse shot is the basis for the establishment of a spectator within the film, a device common to the classical Hollywood cinema and appearing in varying degrees in different types of films.[17] One particular point of view is given more power than others as the perspective of truth, as the organizing principle of vision. In some films, such as the 1933 *King Kong*, the point of view is literally one of control over spectacle, that of filmmaker Carl Denham. We apprehend the world as spectacle – and most emphatically, women as spectacle – through his eyes. In other films, the spectator-within-the-film principle cuts across several registers. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, for instance, we see Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell against stage backdrops, ourselves spectators-within-the-film. At the same time we are identified with that figure Malone, a private detective, whose literal purpose in the film is to re-establish correct vision.

Many films display a fascination with the function of spectatorship. Spectatorship is understood here as the manipulation of spectators-within-the-film to mirror the ways in which we, as spectators in the audience, identify with film. A fewer number of films elevate these reflections upon the act of seeing to a central narrative concern – as, to name a few, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Resnais' and Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour*, Godard's *Le Gai Savoir*. Spectatorship is a key element in Fassbinder's film. The process of the film focuses on the nature of the gaze, the objectifying look which transforms its field of vision into a stage, its object of vision into a spectacle. The permutations of these gazes mirror and reflect upon our situation as spectators. Fassbinder

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15. The British journal *Screen* has been the primary source of these discussions in English. See also Jean-Louis Baudry, "Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique*, 7-8, n.d., 1-8; and Jean-Paul Fargier, "La Parenthèse et le détour," *Cinéthique*, 5 (January-February, 1970), 45-55.

16. See Jean-Pierre Oudart, "La Suture," I and II, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 211 (April, 1969) and 212 (May, 1969). Oudart's analysis is presented in English in Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly*, 28 (Fall, 1974), 22-31.

17. For application of the concept, see Nick Browne, "The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*," *Film Quarterly*, 29 (Winter, 1975-76), 26-38; my "*King Kong* and the Ideology of Spectacle," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 1 (November, 1976), 373-387; and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16 (Autumn, 1975), 6-18.

marks off emotionless spectators-within-the-film whose major activity is simply looking, punctuated only by scenes in which frames within the frame and long shots are so prevalent that vision itself – its containment, its constraints – is remarked upon.

And yet, if attention is focused upon the spectacle form in *Ali*, upon our roles as spectators, that attention is not limited to the space of the movie theatre. What we see in the film is not simply vision mirrored as an objectifying act, or the conditions of cinematic representation; rather we see spectacle as a social form in its totality *through* the basic elements of cinema. Fassbinder has understood the extent to which the appeal of cinema and its significance as a mass medium depend upon the effective means it has at its disposal to work upon and around and through the spectacle as social form. The spectacle is a guise through which the commodity form permeates social relationships; it is, in other words, a form of reification. The spectacle is a relation between observer and observed where the object of vision is rigidified, reduced to one-dimensionality. Yet, the seeming power of the observer's gaze is illusory; like the observed, she/he is locked into the spectacle *relationship* as a form of power.

In *Ali*, the precarious boundaries between public and private life are apprehended – are viewed – through the spectacle form. Much of the appeal, the social function and the mechanisms of spectator identification of cinema can be illuminated by an understanding of cinema as both an instance of reification and the projection of a reified form. In its turn cinema illuminates the extent to which reification pervades social life in the particular guise of the spectacle, precisely because of the extent to which the pleasure and the manipulation of cinema revolve around the organization of looks, gazes, eye contact. Fassbinder's film indicates some directions such an undertaking might pursue: a dialectical examination of spectatorship which, by stripping cinematic continuity down to its bare essentials of looking, of vision, simultaneously lays bare the totality of the spectacle as a social form.