

Fassbinder as Addict Savant

Fassbinder's imagination did not soar. It writhed.

B Y W . C . M c R A E

Ten years ago, Rainer Werner Fassbinder was the toast of the international film industry. Today, Fassbinder is out of fashion, along with other vestiges of the 1970s — poppers, disco, sex, drugs. The German director had made, at his death in 1982 at age 37, some of the most provocative films of the 1970s and early '80s. Now they seldom, if ever,

Books

appear on the art film circuit.

After reading Robert Katz's fine gutter-eye-view biography, *Love Is Colder Than Death* (Random House, cloth, \$19.95), I understand why Fassbinder's stock has fallen so precipitously. To read about his life and to remember his films is to look back to another age: Fassbinder is about as far from "just say no" as Berlin is from the Betty Ford Institute. These differences aren't measured in years, but in ideology.

An only child, Fassbinder grew up in post-World War II Bavaria, in a then-normal irregular family. Adenauer's economic miracle notwithstanding, Fassbinder spent his adolescence in a raffish neighborhood of prostitutes, transvestites, and itinerant workers. During the Sixties, Fassbinder became involved with an avant

garde theatre in Munich. Using actors from this repertory, Fassbinder began to write and direct films, often with his male lovers cast in leading roles. He gained European acclaim by 1970, when he was 25.

Fassbinder brought to films a taste for melodrama, an appetite for despair and the kinky, and an incredible energy. In 1970, he completed seven films, and he vowed to finish his thirtieth film by his thirtieth birthday (he missed his goal by three films). A Fassbinder film typically sets a weakened or abject character against indifferent forces, or isolates an individual in a nexus of power relationships. Fassbinder focused on the suffering of the character; however, he refused to invest his victim with any moral worth or value. The cultural soporifics that we benevolently worship in our secular humanist temples — love, universal brotherhood, peace, the family — are exposed as depravities and deceptions. In Fassbinder, the moral dimension exists only as a venue for duplicity and the exercise of power. "Love," Fassbinder claimed, "is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression."

With their stylized despair, it is no surprise that Fassbinder's cinema of cruelty finds no audience in the anodyne 1980s. In *A Year with Thirteen Moons*, a man who changed his gender to better suit his male lover, only to be then further spurned, con-



templates his life and commits suicide. In *Chinesel Roulette*, a young physically disabled girl uses guile to lure her callous parents, with their respective lovers, to a country chateau, where nasty parlor games lead to suicide. In *Veronica Voss*, a do-good journalist attempts to aid a former Nazi film star held in drugged bondage by an unscrupulous doctor, with suicides as the unfortunate result. "I detest the idea that love between two persons can lead to salvation," said Fassbinder. "All my life I have fought against this oppressive type of relationship."

Not surprisingly, his life was no prettier than his films. Fassbinder's drug addiction and alcohol dependency were both truly monumental, and seemingly inextricably

entwined with his creative process. One of his lovers committed suicide with drugs, another hung himself in jail. Fassbinder was a tyrant to his actors. Katz recounts in unjudging detail the drugged, drunken wallowing in the temptations offered for sale to habitués of the international art/gay scene. Katz doesn't reveal a new Fassbinder; he simply exposes more of the old.

However, Katz avoids drawing easy morals from Fassbinder's life and early death by overdose. Katz instead presents Fassbinder as an Addict Savant against a backdrop of the times: drugs were *de rigueur*; Germany was repulsed and fascinated by the radical chic of the Baader-Meinhoff gang; New York clamored to Andy Warhol and slunk about in black leather; fisting was just another souvenir from America; Paris was caviar and champagne; wealth meant a chartered jet just to fly in cocaine.

Fassbinder's life and films, message and messenger, now seem symptoms of a decade that no one wants to exonerate: too soon the *fin de siècle*. But our repugnance at Fassbinder's over-abuse — of despair, of drugs, of anger — is as much a symptom of our age, as the over-indulgence was a symptom of the 1970s. To draw a moral from Fassbinder's life would be to fall into a trap that the entire *oeuvre* disclaims: There is no edifying moral lesson to be drawn from individual experience. In the vale of tears that is Fassbinder, there are only varying degrees of oppression. Given this philosophy, self-oppression with drugs becomes self-determination, and a tentative personal freedom. •

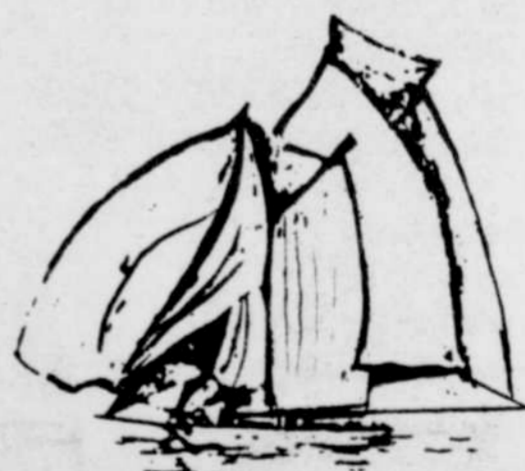


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