



Fassbinder, Rainer Werner (1946-1982)

by Mark Allen Svede

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Directing over forty films in a seventeen-year period, Rainer Werner Fassbinder was responsible for bringing the much-acclaimed New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s to the attention of international audiences. From early on, Fassbinder's ambitious, often audacious films used the cinematic conventions of Hollywood to deliver the ideological arguments of the New Left.

Fassbinder simultaneously transformed the practice of political film-making and prompted critical reevaluation of certain under-appreciated genres of American commercial cinema, such as the "women's picture" and domestic melodrama. His films not only articulated issues of gender and sexual relations, but also framed these issues within broader (and certainly no less problematic) social and political circumstances.

Homosexuality is an important presence in his work, but it most frequently is used to articulate or illuminate interpersonal themes and political issues.

Born in Bavaria on May 31, 1946 (or 1945), Fassbinder recalled spending his childhood in movie houses--five times a week, often three times a day. His parents divorced when he was five or six years old. Feeling abandoned by his father, he found comfort at the movies. The Allied military presence in post-World War II Germany assured his exposure to mainstream American film.

Fassbinder made his first films while in his early twenties, two short works starring his mother and male lover. These productions foreshadowed a career in which the personal and the professional were often coextensive. Soon thereafter, when denied admission to Berlin's DFFA film school, Fassbinder turned to the theater. He joined an activist company in Munich, where he met key actors whom he would cast repeatedly in future projects, and where he became politically conscious.

The stage experience also compelled Fassbinder to hone his acting skills, and he went on to appear in many of his own films as well as those of numerous other directors. Until his untimely death from a drug and alcohol overdose on June 10, 1982, Fassbinder tirelessly produced work for stage, screen, television, and radio, his prodigious career sustained by state subsidies and bolstered by a flamboyant persona that sometimes generated more publicity than his art.

Homosexual themes featured in Fassbinder's films almost from the start, variously central or incidental to their plots, but always handled so that sexuality is just one factor within a complex of social forces buffeting his hapless characters.

Early works parody 1940s gangster films, foregrounding that genre's homoerotic motif of pivotal male friendships at odds with romantic male-female relationships. Fassbinder's international reputation was established with *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), whose narrative centers on a fashion designer's obsessive love for her model, a woman who, for a host of reasons besides sexual identity, is unwilling to submit to a suffocating lesbian relationship.

With *Fox and His Friends* (1975), Fassbinder directly addressed gay milieus in a story about an affable carnie (played by himself) whose sudden wealth propels him into unfamiliar social territory, where a lover exploits and ruins him. Criticized for portraying clichés of gay culture, Fassbinder insisted that his satire focused attention on the class conflict he believed to be paramount. That is, the cause of the problems experienced by the characters is not their sexuality, but their class differences and individual flaws.

Himself an exploitative personality, who was later to feel responsible for driving his lover Armin Maier to suicide in 1978, Fassbinder acknowledged that his role as victim in *Fox and His Friends* reversed unflattering autobiographical parallels.

In a Year of Thirteen Moons (1978) explores complicated issues of sexual identity, as it recounts the final days of a male-to-female transsexual, who is rejected by her lover after she has had surgery to please him. The protagonist is finally brutalized when a group of gay men discover she is not the homosexual transvestite they presumed. The film may reflect Fassbinder's pessimistic assessment of our ability to transcend our notion of binary gender roles.

Despite the violence and austerity of his work, Fassbinder also understood the campier pleasures inherent in cinema. Whether by showcasing a degraded movie-star protagonist (*Veronika Voss*, 1981), reprising Marlene Dietrich's iconic *Blue Angel* role in *Lola* (1981), or adapting Clare Booth's *The Women* for German stage and television, Fassbinder reveals a camp sensibility.

In his final film, *Querelle* (1982), Fassbinder interpreted Jean Genet's controversial novel *Querelle de Brest*. In this work, Fassbinder refracted his exploration of cruel interpersonal rivalries through the brutish homoeroticism of sailors and leathermen.

Fassbinder died, perhaps a suicide, on June 10, 1982 of an overdose of sleeping pills and cocaine.

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About the Author

Mark Svede is a historian and curator whose work often addresses marginalized artists and communities. He publishes extensively about Latvian visual culture, ranging from nonconformist art and underground film to hippie fashion and dissident architecture. He also works as a residential architect.