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I Only Want You to Love Me: Fassbinder, Melodrama, and Brechtian Form

THOMAS E. ERFFMEYER

Over the course of thirteen years and forty feature-length films, Rainer Werner Fassbinder established an international reputation as an extremely prolific director, who worked within a wide variety of film forms. Specifically, many of his most important films adapted and transformed many of the conventions of popular Hollywood film genres, while maintaining a decidedly German milieu. Fassbinder once stated that he wanted to become a "German Hollywood director."¹ This geographical contradiction makes ideological and cultural sense in at least two ways. First, Fassbinder has consciously aimed his films at a mass audience in the best commercial/capitalist tradition of Hollywood production. In large part, this attempt to reach a wider audience resulted in some of his best work done for German television (e.g., *Eight Hours Are Not a Day* [1972], *I Only Want You to Love Me* [1976], and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* [1980]). The second and related interpretation of the phrase "German Hollywood director" refers

to Fassbinder's utilization of Hollywood generic conventions. As many critics have noted, several of his most popular films must be seen within the traditions of the domestic melodrama (e.g., *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *Fox and His Friends*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, etc.).

Equally, Fassbinder was known for making politically or socially analytical films which have often inspired inflammatory, personal attacks from diverse segments of European society. Is there an inherent contradiction between the desire to reach a mass popular audience through the form of melodrama and the possibility of radical social criticism and political filmmaking? I would argue, no.

Fassbinder's films often do follow many of the traditions of nineteenth-century melodrama such as: extremes of emotion, stylized acting, the use of outrageous coincidence, and a generally "excessive" level of spectacle. However, as Judith Mayne has pointed out, the nineteenth century also had a tradition of quasi-revolutionary melodramas which frequently served as "vehicles for social commentary and outright calls to action."² In a related sense, Chuck Kleinhans has analyzed the ways in which melodramas often specifically address the tension between the sphere of production (the workplace, the world of men, of action, decision, but also alienation) and the sphere of reproduction (the home, the world of women, of childrearing, of emotional fulfillment and psychological rejuvenation), a division which is at the root of industrialized

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society.³ While these tensions have received implicit treatment in many Hollywood film melodramas, Fassbinder often raises such issues for explicit plot treatment. To cite the film *I Only Want You to Love Me*, as a single example, the story treats these domestic tensions, as well as several ancillary social issues including: the neglected elderly, housing for foreign "guest workers," excessive income taxes, the emotional dislocation of the mobile society, the evils of consumer credit purchasing, the modern fetishization of handguns, and the recurrent authoritarian impulse in German society.

Perhaps more important than explicit plot treatment, Fassbinder's melodramas have demonstrated a consistent visual style which serves to challenge or call into question the "simple entertainment" function of popular genre filmmaking. I would argue that Fassbinder adopted many thematic concerns of domestic melodrama (the home, the family, courtship, marriage, the emotional life in general), but presented them within modernist or Brechtian forms. When confronted with the adjective "Brechtian" applied to his films, Fassbinder was quick to dismiss the association by stating his disinterest in what he considered the exclusively *intellectual* experience of Brecht's "alienation" effect. In contrast, Fassbinder stated he wanted to make the audience of his films both *feel* and *think*.⁴ In fact, this goal was not far removed from Brecht's project for the "epic theatre," which he thought should be a theater for *pleasure* as well as a theater for *instruction*.⁵

In any case, Fassbinder's dual goal of making the audience both *feel* and *think* is responsible for the sometimes confusing changes of mood and emphasis in the course of his films. In contrast to Brecht, Fassbinder seems to promote an intense audience identification with his characters, but only at intervals interspersed with techniques designed to impose a more critical or intellectual distance on the part of the audience. There is nothing wildly

original or innovative about most of the techniques which Fassbinder used to "distanciate" or "alienate" his audiences. On a superficial level, his adoption of various Sirkian devices (the symbolic use of mirrors, flowers, color schemes, etc.) has been well documented. In addition, certain of his films show the obvious influence of both Straub/Huillet and early Godard.⁶ What is innovative about Fassbinder is the degree to which he has used these modernist devices within a popular generic form such as melodrama. The three most important of these recurrent stylistic features in Fassbinder's melodramas are:

1. internal framing devices including objects which serve as partial visual obstructions in the frame;
2. the use of mirrors and other reflecting/distorting surfaces to structure the *mise-en-scene* and comment upon character;
3. the choice of camera placement, especially the choice of unconventional camera angles and camera-to-subject distances.

The Fassbinder film I have chosen for analysis here, *I Only Want You to Love Me*, (*Ich will doch nur dass Ihr mich liebt*) has several striking examples of these three elements of the *mise-en-scene*.

Summary of Plot

I Only Want You to Love Me is a story of a repressed young man who tries to buy the love which his parents always denied him. As an accomplished brick-layer and construction worker, Peter builds a new house for his parents in which they quickly make him feel unwelcome. He moves to a new city with his recent bride, Erika, and rents an apartment which she finds empty and depressing. They completely furnish the flat with expensively chic furniture, purchased on installment payments which depend on his substantial overtime earnings and her full-time job. When Eri-

ka becomes pregnant and must give up her job, and Peter's overtime steadily falls off. Peter must approach his wealthy father for help. These requests simply confirm the father's opinion that Peter would "never be able to make a living, never make a success of anything" as an adult.

After several such bailouts, Peter exacerbates their financial problems by continuing to buy his wife expensive presents, supposedly with his saved overtime pay. Inexplicably, Peter stops going to his job and spends his days aimlessly riding the subways. One day, again for no apparent reason, Peter buys a handgun from a decorative store display. Finally, when a tavern owner who resembles Peter's father has an altercation with a young customer, Peter bludgeons the tavern owner with the telephone he was about to use to call his father. Peter is found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in prison, from which he narrates this story to a psychologist/author.

So far I have argued that Fassbinder transformed the generic elements of the melodrama both on the level of explicit plot treatment (thematic concerns) and on the level of recurrent stylistic motifs (formal devices). I will now analyze both aspects with specific reference to *I Only Want You to Love Me*.

As implied above, the film noticeably differs from classical Hollywood melodrama in that it directly addresses the tensions created between the economic and emotional spheres. One major theme of film melodrama which has received little analysis is the actual project of setting up a middle-class, domestic home environment. In other words, the actual buying, selling, furnishing, or redecorating a (often suburban) single-family home. (For examples from Sirk see the films *Magnificent Obsession*, *All That Heaven Allows*, or *Imitation of Life*. For other examples from Fassbinder, see among others *Why Does Herr R Run Amok?*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, or *Lili Marleen*.) The human labor and economic

factors involved in these constructions are rarely depicted in classical film melodramas. However, in *I Only Want You to Love Me*, the main character is literally depicted building a new house for his parents, and much of the rest of the film is concerned with the young couple's economic failure in setting up their own domestic space. One striking example of this stands out: the scene in which Peter and Erika buy new furniture for their new apartment begins with an extreme close-up of the adding machine tape which totals up their purchases. Subsequently, the furniture salesman withholds approval of their installment purchase until Peter submits evidence of his overtime income and Erika's employment. In another key emotional scene (striking for its visual style discussed below), Peter and Erika review their strained household budget in minute detail: so much for rent, for installment payments on the kitchen utensils, furniture, television, for the newspaper subscription and T.V. magazine, etc. When analyzing a similar set of concerns in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Thomas Elsaesser has called this emphasis on the economic an inversion of:

the conventions of melodrama, where the economic is usually the dimension that is repressed. . . . In concentrating on the economic repressed of Hollywood melodrama, Fassbinder offers a view of the genre's social function within the historical context of the 1940s and 50s.⁷

The same can be said of the historical context of the 1970s with reference to *I Only Want You to Love Me*.

In spite of these thematic inversions of the conventions of melodrama, the introduction of radical or possibly "materialist" content into traditional melodramatic film forms does not necessarily comprise a materialist social critique. As Tony Pipolo has noted in relating Fassbinder's work to the writings of Walter Benjamin:

There is, however, no automatic connection between critical or taboo subject matter and radical form. Walter Benjamin . . . noted that “the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it seriously into question.”⁸

Therefore, a full consideration of Fassbinder must involve analysis of formal, stylistic features as they relate to innovations in melodramatic themes.

As an initial observation, it can be asserted that Fassbinder’s visual style follows a convention in melodrama which Elsaesser has labelled the “symbolization of everyday objects.”⁹ As in Sirk and other Hollywood melodramatists, Fassbinder’s compositions demonstrate a high incidence of meaning-laden domestic objects such as flowers, mirrors, portraits, smoking paraphernalia, articles of furniture, clothing, religious icons, reflective surfaces, etc.

An important early scene in the present film (barely five minutes into the running time) crystallizes several of these object motifs. The scene is the only flashback to Peter’s childhood within the overall flashback structure of



Figure 2



Figure 1

the film. In a carefully static, composition-in-depth, Peter’s mother (characteristically dressed in black) stands in the extreme background and scolds Peter for stealing some flowers which he has given her as a sign of affection. In the foreground is the back of the child’s head, partially obscured/framed (in the extreme foreground) by the stolen flowers and a neat stack of reflective cafe glasses. In a single shot, the spatial relations and the contrast between glass surfaces and flower arrangement graphically state the ongoing relationship between emotionless mother and loving son. (See Figure 1.) This relationship is restated in almost identical visual terms at several key points throughout the film.

In one explicit Sirkian image (compare with the last scene of *Magnificent Obsession*), Peter attends to his mother, who is ailing with a severe headache. Almost the entire scene is reflected in an ornately-framed mirror. The mother is reclining on a couch in the extreme background. Another vase of flowers (from Peter) sits in the middle ground. In the extreme foreground (on the table in front of the mirror) sits a water pitcher (with floral decoration) and a porcelain icon of the Virgin and Child. Peter’s movement from background to foreground, viewing his own image as nurturer to the Mother, and his mother’s typically emotionless response to him, have a perfect correspondence in the spatial arrangement of symbolic objects in the frame. (See Figure 2.)

A more significant and more Brechtian motif in the film is the recurrent use of glass surfaces to create internal frames, which constrict or comment upon the action. Both the opening and closing shots of the film involve views through the barred windows of the prison/asylum. In the first truly "domestic" scene of the film, when the four principal characters are together for a family dinner, the scene begins with a shot through a distorting cafe window (compare this with a similar shot in *Lili Marleen*). In several other sequences within public spaces, Peter and Erika are framed by the glass and metal grids of shop windows, telephone booth, or the ever-present mirrors. For their key discussion of the household budget, the setting is a public aboretum in which the openness of the glass surroundings is countered by

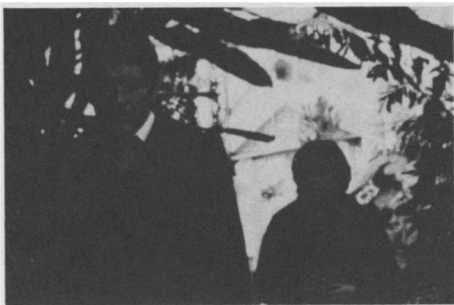


Figure 3

an oppressive "tunnel" of leafy fronds over their heads (all of this photographed from a low-angle, reverse tracking shot). (See Figure 3.) For the pivotal scene in which Erika tells Peter of her pregnancy, the camera actually tracks laterally behind a framing, frosted-glass door, from which point the spectator "watches" the rest of the scene. Finally, at a crucial turning point near the end of the film, Peter is once more confined by the moving "frames" of stopping and starting subway car windows in a station scene. (See Figure 4.) In general, the incidence of internal framing devices and fracturing, reflective images increases in the course of the film, parallel to Peter's own psychological deterioration.

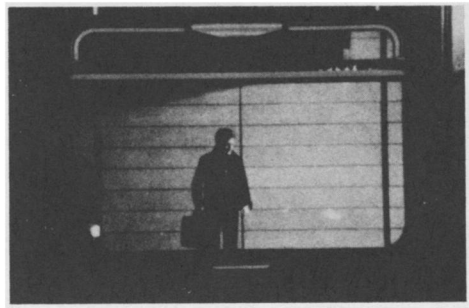


Figure 4

Nowhere in this film is the Brechtian use of internal frames and non-conventional camera placement more significant than in two emotionally-charged generic scenes—the marriage proposal and the first love-making scene.

Working against generic expectations of a romantic setting, the scene in which Peter proposes marriage to Erika takes place in a barren industrial park, with machinery and factories dominating the background. Secondly, Fassbinder staged the action with the two characters at some distance apart and at a considerable distance from the camera. Finally, instead of the traditional shot/reverse shot close-ups (or close two-shots), which might be expected in such an emotional scene, the camera records the characters at a long, low-angle shot with a clump of weeds in the foreground of the frame. (See Figure 5.) This uncharacteristic,



Figure 5

“alienated” treatment of a romantic action dictates a relationship between the characters and their hostile environment and emphasizes the inapplicability of traditional romantic behavior in a modern industrial setting.

The next scene for analysis involves the first time Peter and Erika have sex (and the only “sex scene” in the entire film). As in many of his other films, Fassbinder demonstrated this example of physical intimacy or lovemaking to be a passion-less, ritualistic, almost painful experience. Peter and Erika are kissing on a bed, which is overshadowed by a large metal crucifix. At one point, Erika stops Peter and asks him why he cannot wait the final ten days to their wedding. In response, Peter angrily lights a cigarette and throws the lighter across the room. Then in a single take, the camera pans to follow Erika as she gets out of bed, closes the curtains, and begins to undress on the other side of the room, with her back turned. Peter rises from the bed and is reflected in a full-length wardrobe mirror immediately to left of Erika. In a perfectly symmetrical, full-length composition, Peter and Erika simultaneously disrobe, side-by-side, as if they were. When Erika turns to face Peter (still offscreen), the screen image of Erika and the reflection of Peter in the mirror, are actually facing in the same direction, but not toward each other. (See Figure 6.)

The formal use of mirrors and the resultant distortion of screen direction, underscore both the emotional separation between the two characters and Peter’s own sense of psychological fragmentation. Fassbinder’s stylistic presentation of this scene potentially functions to distance the audience from a generically emotional identification scene, and allows/encourages a dispassionate (possibly Brechtian) analysis of social behavior.

Conclusion

How did this “distancing” or “alienating” formal style affect Fassbinder’s stated at-

tempts to reach a mass popular audience? Does any attempt at modernist or Brechtian form necessarily limit a filmmaker to an art-house audience?

First of all, it should be recalled that *I Only Want You To Love Me* was produced for television (by Westdeutscher Rundfunk—WDR) and was first released on T.V. with little or no theatrical distribution. Furthermore, this film must be considered in the larger context of Fassbinder’s very considerable body of work for television. Although we lack specific data on the reception of *I Only Want You To Love Me* when it was first broadcast, there is gener-



Figure 6

al evidence to suggest that Fassbinder’s television productions were significantly more popular with German audiences than his theatrical films (especially the earlier theatrical films). For example, his five-part television series on German working class life produced in 1972, *Eight Hours Are Not a Day* (*Acht Stunden sind kein Tag*), averaged between a 40% and a 65% viewing share when it first aired.¹⁰ Significantly, this series shared many of the identical thematic and stylistic features of *I Only Want You To Love Me*.¹¹ (In fact, one critic attacked the series for its melodramatic treatment of important social issues and its “mannered” visual style with many visual obstructions and mirror shots.¹²) However, the impressive television audience figures imply that German audiences were not put off by its formal devices or thematic concerns.

In summary, Fassbinder demonstrated an ability to reach a mass popular audience with his transformation of Hollywood genre conventions. Specifically working with the traditions of the melodrama, Fassbinder introduced the possibility of a radical social commentary through the use of modernist and Brechtian elements of film form.

¹Tony Rayns, ed., *Fassbinder* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), p. 24.

²Judith Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," *New German Critique*, No. 12 (Fall 1977), p. 66.

³Chuck Kleinhans, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism," *Film Reader 3* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University, 1978), pp. 41-42. See also Rayns, p. 39.

⁴Norbert Sparrow, "'I Let the Audience Feel and Think': An Interview with Rainer Werner Fassbinder," *Cineaste*, 8, No. 2 (Fall 1977), pp. 20-21.

⁵John Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 71-72.

⁶J. C. Franklin, "The Films of Fassbinder: Form and Formula," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 169, 174; Richard

Collins and Vincent Porter, *WDR and the Arbeiterfilm: Fassbinder, Ziewer and others* (London: British Film Institute, 1981), pp. 52-53; Wilfried Wiegand, "Interview With Rainer Werner Fassbinder," in Peter Iden, et al., *Fassbinder*, trans. by Ruth McCormick (New York: Tanam Press, 1981), pp. 61-64. The two most apparent Godardian devices in *I Only Want You to Love Me* which serve to "distance" the audience are: the use of four long, lateral tracking shots (as in *Weekend*) and the use of three editorial intertitles which comment on the action (as in *Vivre sa Vie* and many others). The three intertitles in the present film were:

"Two weeks after the house was finished his parents seemed to have forgotten that it was Peter who had built it."

"The money arrived the next day. Without any greeting, almost like an insult."

"His parents loved him for building them a house for exactly two weeks. Then everything was the same as before."

⁷Thomas Elsaesser, "Lili Marleen: Fascism and the Film Industry," *October*, 21 (Summer 1982), p. 127.

⁸Tony Pipolo, "Bewitched by the Holy Whore," *October*, 21 (Summer 1982), pp. 88-89.

⁹Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," *Monogram*, No. 4, p. 35.

¹⁰Porter and Collins, p. 164.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

¹²*Ibid.*

I Only Want You to Love Me (Ich will doch nur, dass Ihr mich liebt), 1976.

Screenplay: RWF, from an interview in the book *Lebenslänglich* by Klaus Antes and Christiane Ehrhardt. Camera: Michael Ballhaus. Editor: Liesgret Schmitt-Klink. Music: Peer Raben. Set: Kurt Raab. Assistant Directors: Renate Leiffer, Christian Hohoff. Producer: Peter Märthesheimer. Production: Bavaria Atelier GmbH (for Westdeutscher Rundfunk). 16mm, color, 104 mins.

Cast: Vitus Zeplichal (Peter), Elke Aberle (Erika), Alexander Allerson (father), Ernie Mangold (mother), Johanna Hofer (grandmother), Katharina Buchhammer (Ylla), Wolfgang Hess (construction supervisor), Armin Meier (foreman), Erika Runge (interviewer), Ulrich Radke (Erika's father), Annemarie Wendl (Erika's mother), Janos Gönczöl (innkeeper), Edith Volkmann (innkeeper's wife), Robert Naegele (court bailiff), Axel Ganz (house master), Inge Schultz (Mrs. Emmerich), Heinz H. Bernstein (furniture salesman), Helga Bender (boutique salesgirl), Adi Gruber (post-office clerk), Sonja Neubauer (jewelry salesgirl), Heide Ackermann (sewing-machine saleswoman), Reinhard Brex (building contractor.)