

Visual and Other Pleasures

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Fassbinder and Sirk*

* Written as a review of *Fear Eats the Soul* for *Spare Rib* in 1974.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder is proving to be one of the most important directors of the 1970s, and his film *Fear Eats the Soul*, which launches London's new art cinema, the Gate, is a good example of his recent work. Fassbinder's films are not specifically feminist but they are of interest to women because they deal consistently with themes in which women have an independent importance, and have been emphasised by the women's movement: the family, hysteria, and the contradictions between the oppressed and the oppressor within a class. His particular interest, the individual's desire that finds itself in direct conflict with class and family ideology, links him to the Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s. Fassbinder acknowledges his debt to Hollywood. His understanding of the Hollywood melodrama, the way its greatest directors built up a picture of ideological forces and the insoluble problems of sex and desire within them, contributes to the complexity he achieves in his own work.

Fassbinder came to the American cinema through the influence of the French New Wave and its acknowledged debt to Hollywood. (His first feature was dedicated to Chabrol, Rohmer and Straub, showing in itself a sense of history and of heritage.) But much more than they, he has looked back to Hollywood melodrama in its own right. He takes it further along its own path, transposing and bringing out its essential themes with a clarity that comes from both the passing of time and freedom from studio supervision, and a bitterness that comes from his perception of contemporary German society. There are two important ways in which Fassbinder develops the American melodrama. First, he focuses on hysteria or the symptoms of repression in the oppressed. Although hysteria has traditionally been considered a female phenomenon, Fassbinder has brought out its meaning in men, by dealing with men who are in an ambiguous and oppressed situation (most particularly in *Merchant of Four Seasons*) in relation to their class and family, men who are trapped, as women are, in a way they can neither grasp nor articulate.

Fassbinder uses role reversals and sex confusions in his own manner, but particularly to expand the American melodrama in a second direction, to take it outside the confines of the bourgeoisie. While Hollywood in the 1950s dealt above all with the oppression and frustrations of the

bourgeois woman, Fassbinder goes into the repressions of bourgeois ideology within the working class, the lumpen proletariat and its tyranny within the *petite bourgeoisie*. Women still have an unusual importance in his films, maintaining the subtly subversive tradition of the Hollywood genre at its best (made about women and for women), where women are a sign of desire that makes them a potential weak link in the ideological structure.

Fassbinder has particularly acknowledged his debt to Douglas Sirk, pioneer director of some of the greatest melodramas, first in Germany in the 1930s and then reaching the peak of his career with his so-called 'women's weepies' in Hollywood in the 1950s. Both come from the theatre, both brought to the cinema a sense of theatrical distancing (drama as spectacle) that works against the tendency of film to absorb the spectator into itself. (They are both also conscious that the cinema is in the camera. Fassbinder quotes Sirk as saying: 'A director's philosophy is his lighting and camera angles'.) *Fear Eats the Soul* is loosely based on Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, not as a re-make but as a transposition. The plot changes bring out, to begin with, the way in which working-class people are infinitely more trapped than the bourgeoisie when in an intolerable personal situation. Having no means of escape, no economic alternatives, their problem is not one of emotional choice but of facing the situation, going under, struggling against it, in a succession of desperate attempts at mastery over the world. At the same time, Fassbinder himself has pointed out that the escape of Sirk's hero and heroine contains the irony of the happy end: you cannot escape from yourself and your past as easily as all that.

In the Sirk film, a rich country club widow falls in love with the free-lance gardener (who comes to prune her trees), young, handsome, poor and from the wrong social class. The revulsion of her teenage children, her friends and her small town, country club community put her in a state of agonised conflict. Her love for the gardener is not only based on deep sexual re-awakening but on an identification with the Utopian dream of complete social and economic self-sufficiency he is attempting to create for himself (and for her, if she can break with her past) in the countryside. In the Fassbinder, an elderly working-class office-cleaner falls in love with a Moroccan immigrant worker. They marry and she tries to incorporate him into her world, thus bringing down racist ostracism from her grown-up children, her fellow workers and her whole neighbourhood. But the greatest crisis comes after the couple have finally become accepted; it is difficult for her, in her gratitude at being allowed to *belong* again, to stay uncontaminated by the racism that pervades her surroundings. Both films bring the couple together at the end, as they realise how much they mean to each other, but the

man falls victim to the stress of the relationship and ends an invalid, with the woman at his bedside.

The two films have more in common than a romantic love story of an older woman ostracised for her love for a younger man of different social status. They both depict the contradictions of a woman's economic position within her own class, and the way she is torn apart by trying to move outside a predestined path. In these two relationships, the women are culturally dominant, belonging by birth and marriage to a dominant class, in *All That Heaven Allows*, the higher bourgeoisie, in *Fear Eats the Soul*, the white, indigenous working class. But both have a lower economic status than the men of their own class; one is a housewife living off her dead husband's legacy and the other is an office-cleaner (Emmi is reluctant at first to admit what she does). There is an implicit identity in both films between the economic position of the woman and that of the man she falls in love with. In *Fear Eats the Soul* the two protagonists belong to the main sectors of casual, unorganised labour that capitalist society depends on but refuses to recognise as an integral part of the work-force. Nor are they treated as serious workers by the unions, who see only the casual intermittent nature of the work, ignoring both the degree of exploitation involved and its meaning for the capitalist economy as a whole.

The lower antinomy in the polarisations – man/woman, indigenous worker/immigrant worker – creates an unexpected parallel between the two terms, underlining the closeness of indigenous woman/immigrant man. Although the Sirk film takes place within a bourgeois milieu, there is also a parallel economic interest between the protagonists. The isolated unproductive labour of the housewife is comparable to the isolated unproductive labour of the gardener. But together they can achieve social independence through economic self-sufficiency, outside capitalism and its urban services: the gardener to control his own labour power and the widow to find her place as an equal and useful partner in the primaeval division of labour that has always played a part in the rural American dream. Fassbinder acknowledges the power of Sirk's film, and brings out its social implications as he transforms it.

The sexual implications of both films are complex. The woman's higher social status contributes to her sexual fulfilment and allows her to find equality and solidarity with a man for the first time. But an active/passive role reversal is no solution. The man loses dignity, risking stereotyping as sex-object, for example, when Emmi asserts her triumph over the other women and displays Ali to them as a man would a woman. And Sirk has often dealt with the humiliation heaped on a mother (not necessarily, even, an 'older woman') who still publicly asserts her active sexuality. Cary's romance becomes a source of scandal

and gossip. The *mother* who refuses to be made a back number attracts the otherwise indifferent gaze of her neighbours. In *Fear Eats the Soul* the spectator has the sense of staring along with the whole neighbourhood; the heroine has literally made a spectacle of herself.

It is satisfying to see the hidden strengths of the American melodrama brought out so vigorously. Sirk's clear sense of the oppression of family life, the repressive nature of bourgeois society, his irony and unusual grasp of the dilemma of women, should be used and remembered. And Fassbinder does not work, as Sirk did, with one hand tied behind his back by the restrictions of Hollywood. Finally, in structure and composition Fassbinder has learnt from Sirk this crucial fact, as he quotes: 'Sirk has said: you can't make films about things, you can only make films with things; with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, in fact with all the fantastic things that make life worth living'.