

Fassbinder and the Search for Identity in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*

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When Germany capitulated at the end of World War II it found itself confronted by a massive identity crisis: its first attempt at a democracy, the Weimar Republic, had ended in disaster, the ensuing Nazi dictatorship had thrust the country into a destruction not witnessed since the 30 Years' War. Now at the so-called *Stunde Null* (zero hour), the German people stood at a crossroads. On the one hand their initial reaction was a desire to forget the immediate past and their complicity in the Nazi regime's crimes, resulting in a sort of self-willed collective amnesia and a general reluctance to admit their own Germanness. On the other hand, despite this sense of shame there remained still the awareness that behind the shattered country lay a long and great cultural heritage that could justify a sense of national pride. What it meant to be a German was pitched between these two conflicting attitudes.

This internal tension was exacerbated by the presence of the occupying forces, particularly the Americans, who for reasons of their own wanted to reshape the country into a reflection of their own values. Before the end of the war people like Henry Morgenthau Jr. had recommended (1944) that "at the conclusion of the war Germany be changed into farmland; in other words the German nation should be broken up". However, political developments in Europe with the descending of the Iron Curtain prompted a major rethink: it was important, as President Truman maintained, that German "industry must remain in German hands"¹, in order that the country become a bulwark against the

¹ These statements are from a radio broadcast that is heard on the soundtrack of the film as Maria walks through the ruined city with her friend Betti. In the background so-called

expanding Soviet bloc, "not to make the world safe for democracy", as US Secretary of State James Byrne said, "but to make it safe for the United States"². Consequently the Marshall plan was adopted whereby between 1948 and 1951 approximately 13 billion dollars was pumped into the German economy.

This investment however came at a price: the need to develop along American lines, to become the "image of American consumer capitalism"³, in short "die Coca-Cola-Republik Deutschland"⁴. While this was partly achieved through propaganda, "information which will influence (people) to understand and accept the U.S. program of occupation"⁵, even more was achieved through the cinema: in fact "one of the initial steps the American occupiers undertook in the reconstruction of Germany was a rebuilding of its motion picture theatres"⁶. Throughout the Nazi regime the American film industry was denied access to the German market; the occupiers' control meant that twelve years of film stock could be flooded into the country, a bombardment of a value system that a defeated nation would be too weak to fight against – perhaps only too willing to accept. And it did.

Regarding economic development, American investment combined with stereotypical German industriousness brought about the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle) through which, by the end of the 1950s, Germany had become the richest nation in Europe. In regard to cultural development, particularly the film industry, the presence of the occupier and its product was disastrous. Despite occasional serious attempts to address contemporary issues – Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946), Harald Braun's *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (1947) and Peter

Trümmerfrauen (rubble women) are engaged in clearing the destruction to make way for the foundation of the new country.

² Katz, Robert. (1987: 18) *Love is colder than death. The life and times of Rainer Werner Fassbinder*. New York: Random House.

³ Elsaesser, Thomas, (1980: 51) "Primary identification and the historical subject: Fassbinder and Germany". In: *Cinetracts*, 3/3, pp. 43-52.

⁴ Baer, Harry. (1982: 15) *Schlafen kann ich, wenn ich tot bin. Das atemlose Leben des Rainer Werner Fassbinder*. Darmstadt: Kiepenheuer und Witsch.

⁵ Katz *op. cit.* 1987: 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Lorre's *Der Verlorene* (1951) - the German film industry through this period ignored contemporary issues and produced mainly bland Hollywood imitations. When German topics were addressed they were either sentimentalised in escapist historical melodramas, such as the *Sisi* trilogy of Ernst Marischka, or sanitised in the only original German film genre, the *Heimatfilm*. The typical plot of the latter involved a psychologically damaged city-dweller entering the idyllic world of nature (usually the Black Forest or the Alps) which had somehow remained untouched during the war; falling in love with a local inhabitant (usually in traditional costume) the city-dweller is 'cured' by this relationship, regaining thereby, beyond the chaos of reality and the ever-present American influence, his supposed essential German identity. That these films answered a need in the German population is indicated by the fact that over 14 million viewers went to see Hans Deppe's *Schwarzwaldmüdl* on its release (1950), making it the most successful post-war German film⁷.

The German film industry continued along these lines until in the 1960s a group of young film-makers rejected it, referring to it as *Opas Kino* (Grandfather's cinema); in their Oberhausen Manifesto they declared their intention to make films that would address more directly the issues of the day, confront the Nazi past and attempt to define anew the nature of German identity. Although not a signatory to the manifesto it was Rainer Werner Fassbinder who emerged as the most significant film-maker of this movement. Throughout all his films, on both public and private levels, Fassbinder examines what it is to be German, and this reaches its culmination in the so-called BRD (Federal Republic of Germany) trilogy of films: *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun), *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (Veronika Voss) and *Lola*.

Fassbinder was born in May 1945, the baby crying in the opening sequence of *Maria Braun* to the sound of the sirens and gunfire a

⁷ Fassbinder makes reference to this film tradition when he has Maria's doctor retire to the Black Forest. When her baby is due she goes to him, but the baby is still-born; she thus misses out on the restorative effects of the area.

specific reference to his autobiography⁸, and died in June 1982 having completed in his short life over 50 full length films. In these the central theme remains constant: the “search for (German) identity”⁹. In films such as *Katzelmacher* and *Angst essen Seele auf* (Fear eats the soul) he explores Germany’s racist attitudes. In *Die Niklashauser Fart* (The Niklashausen Journey) he examines how and why social revolution fails. In *Der Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* (The merchant of four seasons) he describes how the mentality of the period of the Economic Miracle ultimately perverts and destroys individual personality. In the costume drama *Fontane Effi Briest* (Effi Briest) he shows how Germans refuse to change; they realise their social system is in need of change, but fail to do so, thereby confirming and strengthening its rigid control. In *Die dritte Generation* (The third generation) he attempts to come to terms with contemporary terrorism, sparing no side of the political spectrum: “Whether it’s now right or left, up or down, I don’t give a shit! And I shoot at all sides, where I notice that it stinks”¹⁰. However it is in the films of the trilogy that he holds up the most critical mirror to post-war German society, illustrating, through the depiction of political, sociological and psychological connections, “how the years of the 50s formed the people of the 60s”¹¹: “When you closely examine the 50s you can see exactly how a certain society forms itself – that quite special federal German kind of democracy, which made our life into what it is today”¹². And the kind of society he refers to here he found in essence because of its rigidity, its prejudices and its maintenance of a patriarchal social structure still fascist and therefore indictable.

The immediate precursor to the trilogy films can be dated to 1977. In this year three major political events took place: the kidnapping and murder of the industrialist Hans-Martin Schleyer in

⁸ Lorenz, Julianne, (ed.) (1995: 53) *Das ganz normale Chaos: Gespräche über Rainer Werner Fassbinder*. Berlin: Henschel.

⁹ Fassbinder in Baer, *op. cit.* 1982: 181. The original is of course in German. German references have been translated by the author.

¹⁰ Lorenz *op. cit.* 1995: 319.

¹¹ Fassbinder makes this comment in the press materials for *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss*.

¹² Fischer, Robert, (2004: 579) *Fassbinder über Fassbinder*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.

Bonn; the hijacking of a Lufthansa jet by German terrorists to Mogadishu; and the mysterious suicides of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan Carl Raspe in the maximum security prison of Stammheim. A collective of film-makers produced as a response to these events a collaborative film, *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in autumn), in which each described what they were doing at the time the events occurred and what effect they had on their lives. Fassbinder's 25 minute contribution is a sort of confessional analysis of his political and social views: the depiction of his autocratic behaviour towards his then male lover as a reflection of the fascist attitudes he saw at work in German society; the depiction of the fear of a society under siege to measures against terrorism; and most importantly a discussion with his mother about the political climate in Germany at that time. The mother claims the climate reminds her "a lot of the Nazi time when people were simply quiet to stay out of trouble"¹³, and then argues that "the best thing would be a kind of authoritarian ruler who is good and kind and orderly"¹⁴. Fassbinder attacks these attitudes, his mother's resigned equanimity, and cannot understand why she or anybody who lived under the fascist dictatorship would condone intimidation and what he believes is the violation of democratic principles. Has his parents' generation learned nothing from their past experience? Have they become blinded through the achievement of financial success to such an extent that they will sacrifice all sense of morality? How indeed have they become what they are today?

The issues Fassbinder raised here he found he could not treat adequately in this small segment, and he decided to make a feature length film entitled *Die Ehen unserer Eltern* (The marriage of our parents)¹⁵. However after immersing himself in a study of the 50s ("In order to understand the present, what has and will become of a country, one has to understand its whole history or to have

¹³ Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, (1986: 215) *Die Anarchie der Phantasie. Gespräche und Interviews*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 1986:218.

¹⁵ Lorenz *op. cit.* 1995: 184.

assimilated it"¹⁶) the material was so chaotic that he could not pull it together into a filmable scenario. He therefore presented two colleagues, Peter Märthesheimer and Pea Fröhlich, with a thirteen page exposé entitled *Die Männer der Maria Braun* (The men of Maria Braun¹⁷) with a request to turn it into a script. The result was *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, the film destined to "revolutionise the new German film industry"¹⁸. After the critical and popular success of this film, Märthesheimer and Fröhlich then wrote scripts for the other two films of the trilogy, again basing their material on ideas suggested by Fassbinder.

The Marriage of Maria Braun is both a melodrama, modelled on films by Douglas Sirk, Fassbinder's idol¹⁹, dealing with a woman struggling to succeed in a man's world, and the story of the age in which she lives. The director contrives the connection in such a way that Maria's individual fate becomes emblematic for the political development of West Germany from the end of World War II through to the Economic Miracle, (ie: 1945-1954), though he extends his criticism up to the time of the film's production (1978). The first image, prior to the credits, is of Adolf Hitler in the registry office where Maria and Hermann are about to exchange their marriage vows. Exploding bombs cause the image to crash to the ground and the Hitler regime is symbolically at an end. The film ends with Maria's house exploding while in the background the enthusiastic report of West Germany's victory in the World Cup is broadcast. The final credits are followed by a series of images depicting, with the exception of Willi Brandt, the German post-war chancellors up to Fassbinder's contemporary Helmut Schmidt. The criticism of 1950s Germany is thereby extended to 1978, the years since the war being "in my opinion ... no democracy, but a continuation of this

¹⁶ Quoted in Spaich, Herbert, (1992: 320) *Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Leben und Werk*. Weinheim: Beltz.

¹⁷ Lorenz *op. cit.* 1995: 616.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1995: 140.

¹⁹ Fassbinder wrote an analysis of Sirk's major melodramas; the essay appears in Fassbinder 1984 : pp. 11-24.

authoritarian society, wrapped up in a democratic guise"²⁰; German identity is still subject to its fascist heritage.

According to Fassbinder, at the end of the Nazi dictatorship, Germany had a "chance to set up a state, which could have been more humane and freer than any German state before it"²¹, a true democracy. This is what Maria seems to be endorsing with her clearly enunciated "Ja" at the registry office and what the musical accompaniment to the scene, Beethoven's ninth symphony with its associations of humanity and joy, seems to be promising. However, by the end of the film it is clear that society is "drifting to the right, that it is going in a direction which is rather upholding the status quo than changing it"²². Maria's success, which represents in any case only a Pyrrhic victory since it has been conditional upon the sacrifice of her own humanity, has been undermined by the deal done by the patriarchy which has returned to take over control. That Fassbinder is critical of this development, a situation which, as has been noted, he believed continued till his own day (and this despite Willi Brandt's chancellorship which, Fassbinder claimed, had represented yet another "possibility the Germans had to get back on to the right tracks"²³), is made clear by Hermann's last word "Nein", shouted as Maria enters the kitchen to light her cigarette. This exclamation is in fact Fassbinder's authorial comment on the country's development: Germany has taken the wrong turning and has failed to establish a new identity: 'the structures and the values on which this state, now as a democracy, rest, have remained in essence the same'²⁴.

The quest for identity is in fact the central leitmotif in this first film of the trilogy, on both the personal and public levels. After the all-clear siren closes the credits sequence, the film opens with Maria returning from the black market. Hearing someone entering the flat,

²⁰ Fischer *op. cit.* 2004: 477.

²¹ Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, (1984: 73) *Filme befreien den Kopf. Essays und Arbeitsnotizen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

²² Fischer *op. cit.* 2004: 565.

²³ Fassbinder *op. cit.* 1986: 138.

²⁴ Fassbinder, quoted in Iden, Peter, et al., (eds) (1974: 100) *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*. München: Hanser.

Maria's mother asks: "Is that you, Maria?" This is the first of a series of questions and incidents in the film where characters go searching for Maria, literally in the case of Oswald, her French-German businessman-lover, who spy-like pursues her to uncover the truth about her identity, and figuratively as other characters (e.g. her friends Betti and Willi as well as her mother) register the changes in her character and become alienated from her new identity as a successful self-made professional woman. That Fassbinder intended the question of Maria's individual identity to be representative of the German situation as a whole is made clear by the radio broadcast that is heard as Maria returns home. The playing of the Beethoven symphony is interrupted by the *Suchmeldungen*, a programme providing details of missing persons²⁵. Significantly this opens as follows: "For each of the names listed here there is some news. 5821: Adler, first name unknown ...". The list has indeed begun alphabetically, but since the *Adler*, i.e., eagle, is the symbol of the German state, the implication is obvious: not only is the individual searching for his or her identity, Germany as a whole is trying to find itself after the chaos of the war. The connection between the personal and the public is continued in the following sequence. Maria goes to the railway station carrying a *Suchschild*, a sandwich board with a picture of her husband and the written question: "Do you know Hermann Braun?" The railway station fence is plastered with *Suchzettel*, scraps of paper requesting information about missing persons while in the background, asynchronously, the radio broadcast of the *Suchmeldungen* is carried over.

At the railway station Maria confronts an American GI who had made an indecent remark to her. Her standing up to him gains her two packets of Camel cigarettes²⁶ and with what was then the gold standard of the black market she begins her way towards fashioning

²⁵ In this word and subsequent items referred to in the text the central part is the verb *suchen*; this means "to seek, to search for".

²⁶ That Fassbinder is not restricting his criticism of Germany to the 1950s is indicated by the close-up of the cigarette pack; it is obvious from the health warning that it is a packet from the 1970s, illustrating thereby that his contemporaneous society is being criticised as wanting in the same way as that of the 1950s.

a new identity. Though steadfastly maintaining her belief in ideal love and marriage, she adopts a more pragmatic approach to reality: she turns her back on the past, represented by her throwing her sandwich board beneath the wheels of the train, and abandons therewith the traditional role of women prescribed during the Nazi period, the three 'K's: *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church). (This individual act of deliberate forgetting is echoed in the scene at the black market where nobody is interested in buying the music to the German national anthem and where people even try to get the man playing it fracturedly on the accordion to stop.) Armed with the dress purchased at the market she coifs herself in what she believes to be the preferred American style and enters a relationship with the black GI Bill, who not only provides her with material goods and knowledge of English, but makes her pregnant. Significantly the German term used for pregnant here is *guter Hoffnung sein*, literally "to be of good hope", an indication of Maria's positive view of the future. Again Maria's individual story is given general resonance by means of a radio broadcast: as she prepares to move out of the family home the radio plays a *Wunschkonzert* (a concert of requested or wished-for items) beginning with the song *Wenn die Glocken hell erklingen* (When the bells brightly ring). On the personal and the public levels then the conviction is that a new and more positive identity is about to come into existence, a notion underpinned by the broadcast of a speech by the then Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in which he argues (and Fassbinder has Adenauer's point of view stated twice to emphasise the message) that as a Christian party his government is in principle against the rearmament of Germany and the establishment of a new German army: Germany has had too many dead and a change is needed.

Maria takes control of her life and succeeds in establishing a new identity in the business world, her material success conveyed by the gradual improvement in various items. Foodstuffs progress from the barely staple in the immediate post-war years to the extravagance at the mother's birthday party in the 1950s; that the over-abundance of food is the result of the adoption of American consumer society values is demonstrated by the mother's imitation

of American cheesecake photographs when she poses before the celebration. Clothing progresses from basics and improvised items to sophisticated haute couture from Paris, the source suggested by the playing of "I love Paris" on the soundtrack. Accommodation progresses from a bombed out apartment to a luxurious, private house furnished with a superfluity of valuable art objects. However this new identity comes at a price: Maria becomes, as her mother says, "strange" and "cold", qualities Maria declares to be "nothing special" for the time. Economic success has meant a denial of human emotion and Fassbinder interprets this development as a failure on the part of his parents' generation to achieve a valid new identity after the war; it is a betrayal of what he regards as the true value of humanity, and the personal failure is reflected again on the public level when Adenauer, betraying his convictions, is heard changing his stance on rearmament as he joins the NATO alliance. As Adenauer makes this statement, Maria rises from the table in the noble restaurant where she has just dined and throws up, a clear indication of Fassbinder's indictment of the period, an indictment emphasised by the subsequent surreal image. As Maria vomits the camera pulls back to reveal a man sensually fondling a woman's breast; the faces show obvious enjoyment of a natural passion now at odds with the person Maria has become.

In the following and final sequence of the film Maria seems shattered. Instead of being totally in control of her movements and emotions as she has been until this moment, she now seems disoriented (reflected in her decentralised behaviour and the jerky, circulating camera movement). She seems to have realised the consequences of the change in her identity and to regret what she has become. When she then discovers through the reading of Oswald's will that, despite her belief, she has never really been in charge of her life (the men in her life, or in general the patriarchy, had manipulated her identity) she takes revenge by destroying herself, her material possessions and the husband who had betrayed

her.²⁷ This is not the identity she wants. However, that it is the identity that Germany as a whole wants is ironically conveyed by the radio broadcast that accompanies the scene.

For the last seven minutes of the film the last seven minutes of the 1954 World Cup final in Berne between Germany and Hungary is heard above and behind the Maria-Hermann dialogue. As Maria's house explodes the commentator Herbert Zimmermann, beside himself with excitement, declares Germany *Weltmeister* (master of the world). With this so-called 'Miracle of Berne' the catch-cry *Wir sind wieder wer!* (We are somebody again!) echoed throughout Germany, the victory being hailed as the "first identity establishing event for the young Federal Republic"²⁸. However the juxtaposition of the film's action and the broadcast indicates that Fassbinder does not endorse the sentiment of the latter; in fact, the final images of destruction which return to the chaos of the opening sequence are meant to suggest that, despite the material success of the Economic Miracle, Germany still stands before the task of finding a 'more humane and freer' identity. This is made clear by the repetition at the end of the film of the *Suchmotiv* as Senkenberg, the accountant in the firm where Maria had achieved success, comes back to the exploding house calling out her name.

Fassbinder had been acquainted in his early years in Munich with some of the German terrorists of the period, but he rejected their methods saying: "I don't throw bombs, I make films"²⁹. Like all his films, *The marriage of Maria Braun* is his equivalent of a bomb, a "terrorist act"³⁰ intended to "wake the spectator up"³¹: "For the

²⁷ Secondary literature is divided as to whether this act is deliberate or accidental. A close reading of the images however supports the notion of deliberateness. Briefly Maria tells Hermann that she has devoted her whole life to him and that everything she has is his. As she says this she takes up a cigarette - and it should be remembered that the bartering of cigarettes is what set Maria on the path of searching for her new identity - and taps it against the roses which had been sent monthly by her husband, a convenient way he had of keeping her bound to him. A look of insight and determination crosses her face and she quickly goes into the kitchen where she had earlier forgotten to turn off the gas.

²⁸ Krasza, Peter, (2004: 185) *Fußball spielt Geschichte. Das Wunder von Bern*. Berlin: be.bra verlag.

²⁹ Elsaesser, Thomas, (1996) *Fassbinder's Germany. History, identity, subject*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 37.

³⁰ Kaes, Anton, (1987: 105) *Deutschlandbilder. Die Wiederkehr der Geschichte als Film*. München: edition text und kritik.

viewer the film should begin exactly when it comes to its end ... The viewer should have the possibility at the end of the film to begin to think about his own reality and in doing so perhaps come to the realisation that there are other ways of living"³². As the screen fades to white (Fassbinder often utilised this technique in preference to fade-outs to black arguing it represented the way to waken the mind of the viewer³³) and the tone of an unanswered telephone is magnified on the soundtrack, the director is casting down the challenge to his German audience: the need to keep searching for a new and valid identity, the "need to search for a concept of utopia"³⁴.

³¹ Fischer *op. cit.* 2004: 356.

³² *Ibid.* 2004: 381.

³³ See Fassbinder *op. cit.* 1986: 55.

³⁴ Fischer *op. cit.* 2004: 407.