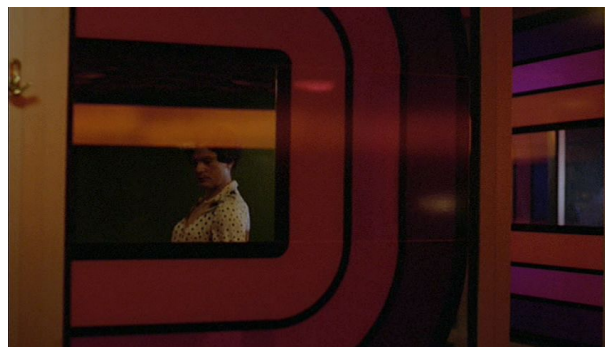


My Own Private Casablanca

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This perpetual play of mirrors passing from color to gesture and from cry to movement leads us unceasingly along roads rough and difficult for the mind, plunges us into that state of uncertainty and ineffable anguish which is the characteristic of poetry.

Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*

1

Fassbinder has said: “Everybody has their song. I’d say there is music which expresses what I am. I’ve found out that it’s the music of Gustav Mahler; I think he best expresses what I think I am¹.” Theodor W. Adorno’s remarks about Mahler’s radical, “serious pastiche”-style of composition may shed light on why Mahler fits so perfectly with Fassbinder’s own aesthetic:

What is decisive today is what occurs above the immanence of musical life. [...] or beneath that immanence in deepest depravity. The genuine significance of Mahler that can be discovered for today lies in the very violence with which he broke out of the same musical space that today wants to forget him. Admittedly, Mahler’s break-out from bourgeois musical space is not unambiguous and can be truly understood only from within the dialectical opposition to the thing from which it launched itself; not as flight. [...] So every gaze

¹Quoted in *I Don't Just Want You to Love Me* (1993 documentary, directed by Hans Günther Pflaum)

of Mahler's observing, recognizing music holds fast to the world that he painfully transcends. This says, above all, that Mahler wanted to salvage the integrity of the very music to which he was bidding farewell. [...] For Mahler, the depraved essence underneath the form is the only place where the true images are stored, to which form speaks in vain. [...] It is not stifled pantheistic love of created beings and Nature, not a romantic return to lost simplicity that is occurring in Mahler's work when it inclines toward lower things. Rather, he is searching for the higher contents in their downward plunge through history in the place where they appear to him here and now. The ruins of moderate, formed musical practice are transparent to him right through to the starry heavens that once shone down upon it².

In Mahler, an eclecticism that is sometimes fond and heartfelt, and sometimes savagely ironic, becomes the agency of a rigorous critique of *fin-de-siecle* Viennese society through that society's traditional musical forms: the composer wove popular airs, folk melodies, and ersatz waltzes into a fevered chromatic stew, ripe with intimations of rampant decadence and melancholy. We can say that this corresponds almost perfectly to Fassbinder's free usage—both critical and deeply affectionate—of certain moments and conventions from old Hollywood movies (many of which he must have seen, in dubbed versions, in the postwar Munich theaters of his boyhood). In his own refined, eclectic, savagely ironic way, Fassbinder was engaged in a similar practice of revising, vis-à-vis traditional *film* forms: the glamorous and romantic Hollywood movies that Fassbinder loved become glimpses of the idealized “images” that must be made to more accurately reflect “the depraved essence underneath the form” by being re-tuned, *downwards*, into a harsher key or realm.

Many have already described (including Fassbinder himself) how Douglas Sirk's films showed Fassbinder that he could be emotionally affecting without losing any of his toughness. Sirk's influence on Fassbinder really can't be minimized: in those glossy yet harrowing melodramas and “women's pictures” Sirk made in the Hollywood of the Eisenhower 50's, there was a stinging social critique behind the candy-coated visuals and star-powered tinsel. Sirk had detected ugliness and hostility under the smiling surface of America—indeed, he was one of the few émigrés of the time who seems to have been willing to “bite” the giant's sheltering hand (Brecht was another).

Here is what Fassbinder saw: Sirk's characters inevitably find themselves trapped between conforming to the dictates of their society *or* fulfilling themselves as they would like. In response to the pressure of this dilemma, they do not stage an open revolt against society because it isn't within their natures to do so; such a revolt is simply not available to them. Instead, they enact helpless forms of negation, by “going crazy” in one way or another (the Hadley siblings in *Written on the Wind*, Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*, the reporter in *The*

²Theodor W. Adorno “Mahler Today” in *Essays on Music* (Edited by Richard Leppert, translated by Susan H. Gillespie, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 604–605

Tarnished Angels, the wife in *Intermezzo*) or simply by dying (Roger Shuman in *The Tarnished Angels*, Annie in *Imitation of Life*). Madness and death are the two poles of negation available to the denizens of film melodrama, and while some have argued that this insistence on pessimistic extremities is limiting and inherently unrealistic, Fassbinder found it to be a more accurate assessment of the individual's true choices in a repressive society.

Moreover, the camp elements of Sirk's world—tearful women who love too much, men who shoot guns in moments of sexual frustration, drinks flying through the air—must have made Fassbinder's gay repressions squeal with glee. If Fassbinder's father was, by all accounts, rigid and authoritarian, exacting the demands of a painful conformity, then Sirk clearly advertised a surrogate Daddy who would understand Fassbinder's pain, and let him indulge in over-the-top emotions. (To sweeten things, Sirk had staged Brecht's plays in the 1920's, and had had the heroic courage to say no to Hitler and leave Germany at a decisive historical moment.)

But most importantly, in the Hollywood melodrama, again, “madness” and “death” were de-stigmatized as real options for the long-suffering individual to register a kind of protest against society, however stillborn and self-destructive that protest might be; just as these same taboos were de-stigmatized in the writings of certain European modernists like Georges Bataille, Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Antonin Artaud. Indeed, around the mid-70's Fassbinder began to refine his abiding interest in the social causes of mental illness, partly due to his interest in Artaud. The films of this period could be called examples of a new combinative: Sirk-with-Artaud. *Despair* is dedicated to Artaud, *Satan's Brew* begins with a quote from one of his poems, and *Chinese Roulette* features a lengthy passage from his novel *Heliogabalus, or the Anarchist Crowned*.

Fassbinder once named Artaud's *Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society* as his favorite book of all time, a poetic study of the creative artist psychologically oppressed by the conspiracy of middle-class conformism at its most sinister. (To be suicided is to be driven to kill oneself by the hatred and hostility of one's environment: Hans Epp in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* could be said to have been suicided, as well as Fox in *Fox and His Friends* and Elvira in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*.) Artaud's sense of compassion for those who are driven mad or suicided—he himself spent most of his adult life in asylums—came at the price of a ferocious insistence that there can be no escape from the harshness of the world, that cruelty in all its forms is the consistent driving element of life. In *The Theater and Its Double* Artaud defines cruelty (though we might substitute the more political word, “oppression”) as the one constant in nature and societal existence:

Effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty. Rising from his repose and extending himself into being, Brahma suffers, with a suffering that yields joyous harmonics perhaps, but which at the ultimate extremity of the curve can only be expressed by a terrible crushing and grinding.

There is in life's flame, life's appetite, life's irrational impulsion, a kind of initial perversity: the desire characteristic of Eros is cruelty

since it feeds upon contingencies; death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty, since nowhere in a circular and closed world is there room for true death, since ascension is a rending, since closed space is fed with lives, and each stronger life tramples down the others, consuming them in a massacre which is a transfiguration and a bliss. In the manifested world, metaphysically speaking, evil is the permanent law, and what is good is an effort and already one more cruelty added to the others.³

To accept, to go down, to succumb—all of these hopeless gestures nonetheless register a protest against the nature and order of things. The exhaustion and disillusionment produced by the constant “dog-eat-dog” struggle of life is evinced in Fassbinder’s characters as a kind of chronic depression, and also as those desperate, impulsive acts of violence by which they try to break out of the futile, defeating cycles they find themselves trapped in.

The influence of psychology begins to arise more strongly, as Fassbinder probes the underlying, *internalized* causes of social oppression, and—what will become the great theme that preoccupied him for the rest of his life—the helpless complicity of the oppressed in the very process of their own oppression. Suddenly, class becomes a less intrinsic identifier than “sensitivity”, the fragility of the individual crushed by the heartlessness of the world and by his inability to grasp his own emotions. By the mid-70’s and beyond, the range of the “typical” Fassbinder protagonist had enlarged to include not only bedraggled lumpen-proletarians and clueless, uptight bourgeoisie, but those oppressed/oppressive “privileged” artists (Walter Kranz in *Satan’s Brew*, Lili Marleen, Veronika Voss) and even wealthy people whose wealth clearly doesn’t save them from alienation and destruction (Herman Herman in *Despair*, Gerhard and Ariane Christ in *Chinese Roulette*, Maria Braun after the *Wirtschaftswunder*).

Because madness indicates just such a sensitivity, an inability to survive in the world and in society, Artaud attacks the profession of psychiatry as a fraud, and raises up the “madman” as a new existential hero. He writes in *Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society*:

[A lunatic] is a man who prefers to go mad, in the social sense of the word, rather than forfeit a certain higher idea of human honor.

That’s how society strangled all those it wanted to get rid of, or wanted to protect itself from, and put them in asylums, because they refused to be accomplices to a kind of lofty swill.

For a lunatic is a man that society does not wish to hear but wants to prevent from uttering certain unbearable truths.⁴

The spectacle of individual madness stands as a violent negation of the toxic social order, an idea that Fassbinder has already identified with Sirk: “Insanity

³Antonin Artaud *The Theater and Its Double* (Translated by Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 103

⁴Antonin Artaud “Van Gogh: The Man Suicided By Society” in *Artaud Anthology* (Translated by Mary Beach and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco: City Lights, 1965), p. 137

represents a form of hope in Douglas Sirk's work, I think."⁵ If the madman is possessed of truth—"unbearable truth," as Artaud says—then society must be indicted, not only once, for driving the individual mad in the first place, but twice, for persecuting him in the form of bogus "cures" and "punishments". Fassbinder's mid-70's films are intricate stagings of this idea. *Fear of Fear*, for example, demonstrates a deep ambivalence toward the institution of psychiatry: one doctor diagnoses Margot Staudte as schizophrenic, while another shrugs her off with a prescription for Valium. Her pharmacist, taking advantage of Margot's weaknesses and insecurities, sleeps with her then casts her aside. (The patient literally in bed with her druggist was an acerbic predictor of the current "medicated society") Medicine and psychiatry turn out to be as flawed, as dehumanized and exploitative, as the rest of the society which they represent.

In the end, Margot's "cure" is reduced to a single interview with a third doctor, in a clinic, over whose shoulders big portraits of Freud and Jung loom like stern patriarchs; but in fact Margot is *not* cured, for once she has returned to her malignant family environment (where her breakdown took place), her hallucinations begin again. Fassbinder shows us with his camera what the doctors fail to see: the relentless hostility of Margot's family environment. (*Fear of Fear* follows the logic of such science-fiction/horror films as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where the protagonist finds herself as "the only one still human" in the midst of a vast conspiracy masquerading as the established social order.)

Indeed, in other films from this period—*I Only Want You to Love Me* (1975), *Despair*, *Bolwieser*—everything in the heroes' environment, family, marriage, work, the economic and political tenor of the times, combine and conspire to crush them: like a series of masks for the same cruel face of the social order, whose oppression the heroes see through and rebel against by "going insane." We see Herman Herman, for instance, refusing, more and more, to play the various roles that are expected of him: the "masterful" lover with his wife; the jealous, possessive husband with his wife's lover; the lucid, self-controlled businessman at work. He is literally dropping out of society by dropping his societal roles one by one, and the schizophrenia which begins to overwhelm him actually reveals the matrix of multiple roles and identities that always already tyrannized his life: in place of a man brutally divided among the responsibilities of "husband" and "boss", there is now only the "lunatic," alone and ruined but finally at one with himself. Fassbinder: "The few who rebel... even in a totally irrational way... discover something that gives them new hope... I prefer the person who's at least still capable of hope, even in madness."⁶

⁵Rainer Werner Fassbinder "Imitation of Life: On the Films of Douglas Sirk" in *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, p. 82

⁶Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, p. 125



Many of Fassbinder's films could be said to be "haunted" by old Hollywood movies; yet even when he quotes almost directly from specific films, there is a deliberate lack or loss of innocence, a darkly cathartic shadow cast over the proceedings. *Beware of a Holy Whore*, a film about filmmaking, is just this kind of "dark dream" of Vincente Minnelli's *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962), itself already a fairly dark film in many respects. It isn't just the way details from the earlier film get shuffled around and quoted—white tailored suits; scenes of driving; people sacked out on couches when they're supposed to be working; sexual affairs that create unhappiness; hysterical breakdowns from stress and nervous exhaustion; a tough-guy director who goes around threatening to punch people and who is embroiled in various "scandalous" liaisons; even a knife fight. More than the sum of all these analogous details, it's the way in which Fassbinder not only repeats them but extends their meaning, and the way the libidinal and aggressive energies of the characters get opened up, heightened and made to flow in surprising directions. Thus, the theme of bisexual love, hinted in a low whisper by Minnelli's film (in the bizarrely violent relationship between the ageing director and the young male *ingenu*), becomes full-blown and open in *Beware of a Holy Whore*. Similarly, in *Fear Eats the Soul*, Fassbinder's "dream" of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, we are shown, very early, what Sirk's film goes to great lengths to avoid at all costs: an image of the socially ostracized couple in bed together after sex.

Certainly, many of these distinctions can be defined as the difference between the *mores* of the 50s and early 60's, and those of the 70s; Sirk and Minnelli showed their characters struggling against a puritanical atmosphere of fear and repression. And yet, Fassbinder himself *preserves* this same stifling atmosphere of fear and repression, as a background for his modern stories, even as he tweaks that atmosphere with more candid expressions of sexuality and violence. What Fassbinder seemed to appreciate the most about those old Hollywood films—apart from their obvious stylishness and their mixture of social critique with entertainment—was precisely their tainted and constrained *context*, that "straitjacket" which the director (and his characters) were forced to wear. In a wide open field where anything goes, the individual's bid for liberty goes unchallenged and often unnoticed, and the grand gesture becomes redundant; in this sense, successful social revolutions—like the sexual revolution of the late 60's, for instance—can be disastrous events for artists. With nothing

to struggle against, and all restraints removed, there's little or no expressive tension left. Fassbinder recreates the 50's again and again in his films (both literally and figuratively), in order to set in motion (against this artificial backdrop) a protagonist who does not fit, who moves to the beat of his or her own drummer: this is the story of Hans Epp in *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, Emmi and Ali in *Fear Eats the Soul*, Martha, Effi, Margot in *Fear of Fear*, and Fox, as it is, later, for the heroines of the BRD Trilogy.

Elvira, in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*, poses a similar challenge to the world of the sexual revolution: even by its liberal standards she has "gone too far," and finds herself an alienated, lonely, misunderstood object. In this sense, she is ripe to become a creature of melodrama, with madness and death her only options. One of the old Hollywood movies referenced here is Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), perhaps the most famous film ever made about a great doomed love between two people who cannot find a way to be together. Fassbinder was an enormous Curtiz fan, and admired *Casablanca*. How could he not? In its classic showdown between love versus the Nazis, *Casablanca* anticipates the dilemma of humanity versus fascism that occurs in so many Fassbinder films. In "Michael Curtiz—Anarchist in Hollywood?" (an essay written in 1980), Fassbinder calls *Casablanca* a "masterpiece," and describes Curtiz as a "film author who has been cruelly overlooked."⁷ Fassbinder argues that Curtiz represented a political and philosophical principle of "anarchy", smuggled (from Europe) through the back door of the corporate Hollywood film industry; nonetheless, Fassbinder avowed, "I'm almost sure. . . Curtiz would have contested with genuine conviction the idea that he was an anarchist, or would even have found it ridiculous. . ."⁸ Fassbinder is acknowledging not only that Curtiz was an anti-intellectual, and a devout believer in the often shopworn dreams he sold, but also the degree to which Hollywood maintained its iron-fisted say over Curtiz's output: escapism necessarily triumphs in all commercial filmmaking over the more uncompromising vision of the artistic "film author".

Not so in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*, one of the most uncompromising of films. In an early scene, Elvira's ex-wife Irene (from the time when Elvira was still a man) comes to see her. Irene is upset and complains about, among other things, Anton Saitz, the man whom Elvira got her sex change for: "He's already destroyed everything he could—first that jail term, then the trip to Casablanca." Elvira, of course, went to Morocco to get her sex change, which ended her marriage to Irene. Irene's line is the introduction of a theme, taken up by other characters throughout the film: "going to Casablanca" becomes a metaphor, in shorthand, for Elvira's Great Love. (No one ever utters the words "sex change".) She "went to Casablanca", and also, we note, to *Casablanca*, her own private version of the film.

But if *Casablanca* itself is essentially a positive statement, in which Humphrey Bogart's personal sacrifice of his Great Love for Ingrid Bergman during World War II has some noble purpose by furthering the fight against fascism, then *In a Year with Thirteen Moons* needs to be read as a cynical x-ray of that film,

⁷Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, p. 104

⁸Fassbinder *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, p. 105

almost an anti-*Casablanca*. Elvira is the unlikely Bogart, the selfless sufferer for love; Anton is in the Bergman role—he betrays Elvira’s love and ends up by profiting from this betrayal. The sacrifice that takes on an idealistic cast in *Casablanca* is shown to serve no purpose whatsoever in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*: not only does Elvira’s sex change fail to “save” Anton, but it does nothing to prevent the further proliferation of fascist values (Anton has founded a corrupt business empire based on the same ruthless principles he internalized as a boy in the concentration camps).

Formally, too, *In a Year with Thirteen Moons* echoes *Casablanca* as an excavation of personal memory: the extended Paris flashback which occurs in the middle of *Casablanca*’s narrative, and which Bogart has repressed for a long time, corresponds to the expanding self-knowledge that comes to Elvira about her own past (and Anton’s) in the middle of *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*. However, where Curtiz provides a glamorous and romantic setting for Bogart’s retrieved memory (poignant “better days of *auld lang syne*”, so to speak), Fassbinder provides no such consolation for Elvira: the traumas of her life are peeled back like the layers of an onion only to uncover a bitter, rancid core; and she’s flatly told the details of her own past experience in a manner so stark that her forced absorption of these memory-stories permits her no refuge in even the thinnest of fantasies.

There is another scene where Elvira sits in an Americanized video arcade, her face framed by garish swathes of magenta neon, and begins to sob uncontrollably to a Roxy Music song, exactly like Bogart’s emotional eruption to “As Time Goes By.” Bogart is all alone when he breaks down, the masculine code of the 40’s demanded this; but though Elvira is in a crowded public place, she might as well be alone for all the sympathy she evokes: two men do notice her, but move away quickly. Elvira’s public tears become an empty signifier: the melodramatic moment, humanly necessary as a release of emotion and an authentication of that emotion, has no more validity in the “real” world of the film’s dramatic space than if it were taking place on a screen within the screen. (Indeed, the way Fassbinder frames Elvira in a kind of boxy neon grid suggests that she is set off, captioned, unreal; more artificial and remote than the other characters.)

What’s audacious, too, about Bogart’s tearful outburst, his hijacking of standard “women’s picture” melodrama (making it a uniquely “male melodramatic” moment), reverts to a female (or at best, gay) context in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*, where Elvira’s crying falls into line with many such moments, in Fassbinder, where the naked display of feelings has more to do with lack of power than anything else. It is common, in Fassbinder films, for weeping women to draw sexual attention from sadistic men, who see in the suffering woman an ideal, readymade victim. In *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, Hans’ wife, having been bent sent home from a bar by her angry drunken husband, walks down the street sobbing; a man in a car pulls up alongside her and, sexually aroused, asks, “How much do you charge?” Later, the wife takes home a man whom she doesn’t know and commits adultery with him in her marital bed; they are interrupted by her daughter—this causes the wife to stop having sex and burst into guilty tears, standing in a corner of the room. Rather than get upset that

she has left the bed, the lover settles back and watches her cry with a big satisfied grin on his face: the voyeuristic spectacle of the wife's pain pleases him more than the sex itself. In *Martha* (1973), Helmut's initial attraction to Martha stems from the fact that, when he first encountered her in Rome, she "had tears in her eyes"; when she later marries him, he turns out to be an extremely sadistic husband. In a softer replaying of the same scenario, Petra von Kant's attraction to Karin becomes more intense after Karin shares her tragic family history: her father murdered her mother and then killed himself. In a jaded world, personal tragedy (or "everyday melodrama") becomes a kind of aphrodisiac, in particular a stimulus to sadomasochistic energies (Fassbinder takes this trope of the crying woman as sexual object directly from Sade): the crying woman is like a doll, or little girl, to be picked up and controlled by a dominant, (usually) male figure.

However, we see that Elvira is no longer a desirable element in this sexual exchange. Bogart remains a strong and capable man after crying, while Elvira is no closer to being accepted as a woman (what she yearns for most). Her tears do not denote a metaphor for the male fantasy of sexual submission, they do not signify anything but tears, an overwhelming, disturbing sorrow that speaks to her deletion from the social-sexual combine: in this sense, she is kin to Lily Brest in *Shadow of Angels* (1975), whose sadness and longing to die make her incapable of going on with her lucrative work as a prostitute. "You can't deal in this kind of despair," the Rich Jew tells her, identifying Lily's sadness as a real emotion and therefore beyond the grasp of commodification.⁹

The struggle against commodification must be played out on the same ground where this commodification remorselessly takes place: in cinema that knows itself to be artificial and yet substitutes shamelessly for real life, expressing false emotions more freely than their real counterparts can be expressed in life; and in life that likes to think of itself as cinematic, i.e. with a continuous, preordained meaning and logic. The emptiness that is invariably revealed becomes an epitaph for the dreams of both cinema *and* life; and yet, this epitaph remains the only knowable truth about the world, that human beings are creatures of emotions they can little understand and just as little express (a truth which is also familiar from the methods of psychoanalysis¹⁰).

There is another Hollywood film which seems to have informed parts of *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*, William Dieterle's supernatural love story *Portrait of Jennie* (1949). *Portrait of Jennie* is, frankly, a turgid potboiler, but fasci-

⁹This suggests a way in which Elvira is allied with the character of Nana in Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*: Nana (Anna Karina) weeps in the movie theater, watching Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc*, but no one acknowledges how moved she is; she also cries when she is picked up and questioned by the police for petty theft, but the police officer ignores her tears and implacably continues typing his report. We can deduce from this that the woman whose tears are ignored in the public sphere is more likely to eventually become a victim/martyr of that sphere.

¹⁰Fassbinder upholds the tenets of psychoanalytic theory—particularly that human lives are damaged or impaired texts that can be deciphered for the scars of past traumas and losses—more than the actual practice of psychotherapy. He himself never entered therapy, partly because of his doubt that he could find the right doctor (one senses he was holding out for no less than Freud himself!)

nating in one aspect: the Great Love at its center, which spans decades and is always being lost and found again, could be nothing more than the ongoing hallucinations of a sensitive artist who is a kind of misfit in the world. It's typical that Fassbinder was able to find, even in such corny material, a poetic truth. In spite of his distaste for certain kinds of emotionality (that "stupid love" which he criticizes in *Love is Colder Than Death*, for instance), Fassbinder saw that it was a crucial fight to redeem real human emotion from its devalued status as a second-hand commodity. Ultimately, he saw that people suffered from not being able to express their emotions honestly, and from not being able to love as they needed to.

Eban (Joseph Cotten) is a struggling painter who meets a strange little girl in the park one day; it becomes clear, later, that this girl, Jennie Appleton (Jennifer Jones), may in fact be nothing but the ghost of a girl who died long ago. Nonetheless, because of her beauty, her charm and (perhaps especially) the purity of her untouchable remoteness, Eban becomes obsessed with her. She becomes his muse, eventually enabling him to paint one masterpiece: the "portrait of Jennie".

In one scene Eban visits the convent where Jennie grew up, and asks the Mother Superior (Lilian Gish) to tell him what she knows about his mysterious lost love. He and the nun ultimately agree that "we know so little" of each other's lives. Fassbinder extends this idea to suggest that we also know so little about *our own lives*, since in his film it's Elvira who returns to her former orphanage to ask the Mother Superior about her own life. Where the exchange in *Portrait of Jennie* is inherently conciliatory and humanistic (Eban leaves with renewed faith in the future, his love for Jennie strengthened by the kindly Mother Superior), Fassbinder's scene is nihilistic, another dead end for Elvira.

Fassbinder may well have seen *Portrait of Jennie* as a dubbed import in the Munich theaters of his boyhood. It is interesting as, again like *Casablanca*, an inverted male melodrama: the man suffers and quests after an absent, roaming female figure; the drama centers around the emotional male rather than the emotional female. As such, it derives from the classic relationship of the artist to his muse, but characterized here as unnerving and even potentially psychotic, a kind of ghost story: none of the other characters has ever seen Jennie, and they believe her periodic reappearances are only Eban's hallucinations. Like Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) -- another film specifically referenced in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons*—*Portrait of Jennie* could be said to be about corporeal hallucination, succubi and phantasms: the lost love returns to haunt the lover in the shape of physical apparitions that are tantalizingly or painfully "real"-seeming, but ungraspable and unverifiable, and also reminiscent of the disturbing symptoms of schizophrenia. As such, both films are meditations on the vicarious nature of film-watching: cinema could be called the art of corporeal hallucination, providing us with bodies who tempt and tease, who lure us and even make us fall in love with them, but who are ultimately beyond all reach, fleeting, nonexistent to the world of the real.

Jennie occupies the same position of the unsubstantiatable and isolating Great Love that Anton holds for Elvira. Just as Elvira is not "believed" in her love for Anton (although Zora, with her pragmatic mind, seems convinced

that Anton must have slept with her at least once, to provoke such a dramatic act as Elvira's sex change), so Eban's friends are all convinced that he is insane and merely hallucinating Jennie. In the end, Eban is briefly reunited with Jennie, only to see her get swept away by a tidal wave after she has told him: "There is no life, my darling, until you have loved and been loved, and then there is no death!" This florid sentiment recalls Soul Frieda's dream of the graveyard of true friendships, where only the dates between which one has known real love can be called the true span of a human life.¹¹

When Eban does go on to become a master painter, it's through a movement of classic Freudian sublimation, which Fassbinder pointedly rejects for Elvira—there is no hope for her to survive the loss of her Great Love—but which he, significantly, assumes for himself in the wake of Armin Meier's death. There is an extent to which Fassbinder clearly identified with male melodramas like *Casablanca* and *Portrait of Jennie*.

The most audacious metacinematic, Hollywood reference in *In a Year with Thirteen Moons* is undoubtedly the use of Jerry Lewis in the climactic scene where Elvira has her reunion with Anton Saitz.

When Elvira first re-encounters Saitz (she has made a kind of pilgrimage to his office headquarters), she looks in on him from the other room and has some trouble recognizing him among his henchmen and gunsels. Fassbinder shoots them through the doorframe, a visual trope used by him in numerous films to make his characters look like posed models in a display-case, human specimens in some ghastly diorama. In such shots the framing device of the doorway becomes the ironic offer of a freedom that goes rejected and unused. (Fassbinder's conception of the middle-class room-as-prison may have been inspired by Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, where a bunch of dinner guests find themselves trapped in a parlor as if by some force field; during their period of confinement, their entire social breaks down.) It's the scornful perspective of the wife in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* when she looks in on her depressed husband, who has just smashed his favorite record and passed out in a chair. She stands at the door for a moment but does not go into him, then sniffs at him, turns on her heels and leaves him alone in his misery; a scene later, he is dead. It's also the contemptuous perspective of the waiter who barely agrees to serve Emmi and Ali at their wedding dinner. To look at someone from the other room is to be aware of human isolation, of all the unbreachable off-limits of relationships. But it's also to invoke a state of being banished, whereby, in any living space as in the whole of society, there is the perspective of those who are "in", the powerful, and those who are "out", the powerless ones who nonetheless see a little too clearly, burdened with an often painful and unwanted subjectivity that does them no good—i.e., does not give them access to the "main room". This idea of the main room versus smaller outlying ones becomes structurally intrinsic to *Chinese Roulette*, where the opening of closed doors reveals startling secrets; and in *Despair*, we see that Herman Herman's schizo-self is

¹¹ This dream, resonant with so many of Fassbinder's ideas about how only the truly fulfilled life is worth living and how few people actually achieve such fulfillment, was actually taken from an anecdote told by Orson Welles in *Mr. Arkadin/Confidential Report* (1955).

banished to the other room from his own master bedroom (where he watches himself having sex with his wife) even as Herman banishes the oppressive image of the maternal (his middle-aged secretary, played by Fassbinder's mother) to a glassed-in box in the middle of his office space at work.



As powerful as he may be, though, Saitz's actual physical presence turns into an object lesson in the banality of evil. Gottfried John plays Saitz as a poster-boy for the new capitalism: hip, youthful and tasteless. In white tennis shorts and short-sleeved shirt, he's like a Hollywood mogul on a gym kick, signing billion dollar deals between rounds of handball and betraying a frustrated urge to be in front of the cameras rather than hidden back in the production office. In the wake of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, successful businessmen were treated like celebrities in West Germany, akin to athletes and actors; and after the kidnapping and murder of Schleyer in 1977, prominent businessmen also considered themselves hunted men. Hence all the security around Saitz, his fleet of gun-toting bodyguards.

Fassbinder's casting of the likeable John not only emphasizes Saitz's all-important charm (Mephistophelian as it might be); it's an example of the director's penchant for "reaching out" to a potentially unlikeable character. For example, in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, Fassbinder signals that Karin (the girl who uses Petra and leaves her broken-hearted) is really meant to be sympathetic by giving this role to the warm, natural-seeming Hanna Schygulla; Schygulla plays Karin in a subdued way, letting us see that she is young, confused, a little scared, trying to please. There are moments in the dialogue when Karin seems to be nothing more than a rude, drunken slattern—but she isn't *played* that way. Therefore, even her streak of cruelty is humanized and

balanced out by her vulnerability. She actually appears more reasonable and “normal” than Petra¹². Jeff, the director in *Beware of a Holy Whore*, is transparently a caricature of Fassbinder himself, but Fassbinder refused to play the role, giving it instead to the blond, glamorous, sympathetic Lou Castel. In this way, Gottfried John’s scarred, weathered face, with its enormous, broken boxer’s nose, counteracts the impression we might have of Anton, hinting at the sufferings he endured as a boy in Bergen-Belsen and inviting a slightly terrified empathy, akin to the worshipful love Elvira feels for him.

Even more so than in early Fassbinder films, where the gangster characters were presented as integrated members of bourgeois society, Saitz and his henchmen are a collective imago of the straitlaced corporate. The underlings wear suits and kowtow like office workers hopeful of promotion. Gangsterism, as such, has passed through the mirror of society and emerged as a cleansed, respectable enterprise (in a more glamorous Hollywood way, Martin Scorsese takes up this theme in his Mafia movies). We begin to understand how much Elvira has given up by becoming a woman: *Erwin* could have become one of these blank-faced, impassive gunsels attending to the needs of their king. Instead, Elvira is now little more than the founding crime behind Saitz’s crooked fortune: willingly forgotten, swept under the rug, abandoned to the limited province women occupy in this male-identified business world.

In fact Anton doesn’t remember her at all, even when she blithely steps forward to announce that “she” is “Erwin”. Suddenly shifting gears, he says that his memory will come back to him while they are doing their “number”. They return to watching their movie, the Jerry Lewis-Dean Martin musical comedy *You’re Never Too Young*; startlingly, Saitz and his men launch into a rehearsed reenactment of the routine, the shy Lewis’ reception by an all-girl high-school marching band. It’s a kind of group karaoke that feels more like Theater of the Absurd. Saitz takes Lewis’s starring role. He shrieks again and again, in mock sexual terror, “I don’t want a welcome party!” He buries his face against the wall and pounds his fists; chased by his right-hand man Smolik, who is playing Dean Martin, Saitz extends this tantrum all over the room, leaping into the window-sill where he crouches with his arms around his head, then rolling under the desk, only to get back up and vault over it.

Elvira gamely throws herself into this playacting, running back and forth in her high heels, holding her large hat on her head; at one point, she jumps in the air on cue, only to fall off her heels when she lands, tumbling pathetically at Saitz’s feet. It’s at this moment that Saitz begins to recognize her, and they exchange looks, a touching island of quiet reflection in the midst of all the slapstick. But the tender moment is not to last: there is a brutal cut to a close-up of the TV screen at full volume, as Lewis races around like a maniac among the young girls¹³.

¹² Other clues that Fassbinder’s sympathies lie with Karin include the facts that she’s from the working class and she isn’t a racist.

¹³ Elvira here reminds me of Margaret Dumont, the character actress and matronly “straight-woman” humiliated again and again by the Marx Brothers in their 1930’s comedies. Dumont, a large woman like Spengler’s Elvira, was a figure-head of worked-up female snob-bishness and propriety; she always appeared as the coy society lady affronted by the



The Saitz gang starts to sing the song from the movie, “Face the Music”, with its insipid lines about letting “worries scurry” and “Every day’s a happy day!” Of course the anodyne sentiments and mechanical, sing-song melody chime like tin on tin against the despairing landscape of the film. Lewis is getting pep-talked to be more confident; his shtick expresses a child-like sexual insecurity. Yet, with only slight encouragement, he rises up to lead the march. Saitz, as the boss, gets his way just as Lewis, the star, gets his. Parading before his troops in various spastic poses, Saitz makes them imitate each of his ridiculous gestures, at one point marching them into a wall, where they crash into each other in a big pile-up.

Lewis’ anarchic comedy is transformed, here, into a slightly sinister metaphor for absolute power, or rather, the anarchy of power: the business tycoon makes the others march to his beat. It’s the revenge of the outsider, the camp kid, on society at large; and it points to the darker undercurrent in not only Lewis’ gangly surrealism but all comedy, particularly the absurdist, nihilist-tinged humor that emerged in American movies and TV after World War II (Frank Tashlin, Ernie Kovacs, Uncle Miltie), satire and negation masquerading under a big happy face. It is no accident that many of these postwar comedians, including Lewis, were Jewish: comedy became a secret weapon. The spastic Lewis forcing the others to mimic his actions is a sign that fulfills two functions: first, the figure of the Jew is presented as a harmless, even pathetic, clown, passing himself off as a laughingstock to make a triumphant joke out of his “difference” and thereby spare himself future victimization; and second, the Jew becomes a leader in unlikely guise, turning his “pariah” status back on society, which he conquers, not through warlike might but entertainment. Fassbinder is recognizing something here that numerous comedians and theorists have acknowledged, that comedy is often born of pain, a kind of survival mechanism¹⁴. As a comprehensive encyclopedia of successful and unsuccessful survival mechanisms, *In*

Brothers’ anarchic, proto-immigrant shtick, and at the same time, one sensed that she loved the wry, ribald Groucho. “Why don’t you whistle at the crossing?” he shot at her once, after literally running into her, causing her to wince through her lorgnette with pinkie extended—a big woman embarrassed to be caught out in her own bigness. Like Elvira, Dumont’s persistent sense of dignity was always at odds with her role as a punching bag.

¹⁴On Larry King’s cable-TV show, I heard Jon Stewart talking about this same phenomenon of Jewish comedy springing from persecution: “I think it’s experiential. There isn’t one country that doesn’t have a museum going, ‘And this is when we chased you out’. That’s why so many of us are in comedy. We want to stay! ‘Like us!’” (12/8/2004)

a Year with Thirteen Moons would hardly be complete without this one, so central to the growth of the modern culture industry: since the mass audience for these entertainments is also participating, from its side, in the same process of neutralizing traumatic memories and exorcising scary demons into benign laughter, laughter that already heals somewhat even as it covers up the true source of the pain itself.

We are also seeing a separate phenomenon enacted in this scene: the businessmen, who correspond in the film world to the producers, money-men and financiers behind the scenes, are stepping out from the shadows and becoming the real stars. No longer content to be silent partners, as it were, they are taking over in a more visible way. This is Fassbinder's warning of what would, in fact, happen to world cinema in the 80's: the heavily bankrolled film, planned and designed by committee and geared to the lowest common denominator of audience tastes, would arise to supplant the personal auteurist film that had its day in the 50's, 60's and 70's. Fassbinder's troubled vision of himself as one of the last *auteurs* becomes expressed, through Elvira, as the cry of the artist bemoaning that the technical means of production itself, the bread-and-butter of his art form, are being hijacked out from under him. The producers are becoming the prime artists, the creators, the "names above the title," just as Saitz the businessman reserves his right to be the star, the center of attention, in this group dance. The sensitive, ungainly, awkward Elvira, with her gender controversy, represents the embattled artist trying to fit in to this frantic, money- and power-driven dance—and falling flat on her face¹⁵.

This, then, is the ultimate insult of the powerful toward those who are beneath them socially and economically; it is the ultimate vampirism of power itself. The powerful reserve the right to appropriate even the mischievous, expressive, rebellious energies of those who are misfits and lepers, those who do not belong. Saitz-as-Lewis sports and cavorts with the abandon of someone who need take no responsibilities in life. His power nonetheless remains the granite bedrock on which his mocking freedom rests. He loses nothing by playing with his own power. What makes this especially sardonic is that, given the fact that Jerry Lewis' persona represents psychosexual hysteria and ambiguous sexuality, Elvira is closer to Lewis than Anton is: Anton finally steals even Jerry Lewis

¹⁵ It should not be surprising that Elvira is made to represent the dilemma of the artist in society. Many Fassbinder films double as commentaries on Fassbinder's own participation in the arts and culture. *The Niklashausen Journey* and *Fox and His Friends* replay the early anti-theater days as rather grubby carnivals of idealism and disillusionment. *Katzelmacher* and *Rio das Mortes* center around scrounging money, a problem that beset Fassbinder's early days as a filmmaker. *Beware of a Holy Whore* is an autobiographical film about filmmaking. The glamour and fame that Petra von Kant offers Karin suggest the world of show-business. *Mother Kusters Goes to Heaven* and *The Third Generation* treat politics as a circus-like offshoot of show-business. In *Despair*, the mentally crumbling Herman Herman confuses his life with a series of film sets. Finally, Lola, Lili Marleen and Veronika Voss all derive their identities from being showgirls, iconic stars, actresses, "imitations of life". In a world where all identity is conditioned as use value, as a function of capitalist rates of exchange, the deliberately false, larger-than-life persona of the star is both a triumph over the extinction of individuality and the ultimate reification of this extinction: since only in the impossible, mediated figure of the star is the yearning of the average person expressed and allowed to live, albeit in completely inaccessible and unreal form.

from Elvira the way he has already stolen so much else. As Ed Sikov writes in *Laughing Hysterically*:



Martin and Lewis were understood and enjoyed for maintaining themselves as a couple...Not all romantic comedies are screwball, but every screwball comedy is romantic in its own tense way...and Lewis and Martin's updates are no exception. But Lewis was already playing the girl in parody form even before these explicit contemporary revisions of classic romantic comedies were made. The romance between [Martin and Lewis] is always there, and it is always suppressed by an imperative heterosexuality that asserts itself, often in a ridiculously unconvincing manner, in the form of brute convention, namely Martin's female love interest¹⁶.

Lewis's act was a symptom of the raging neuroses beneath the placid surface of the sexually repressed, Cold War-era 50's. We see, in the figure of Saitz, that the open-ended option to be both the rational, successful, money-making businessman *and* the free-wheeling, creative, neurotic mess is only available to the businessman who has already "made it". Having achieved real power, he can afford to pretend to throw it away, to indulge his fancies. But those who are truly neurotic, and who live and die by their fancies, must reign themselves in and carefully negotiate their dealings with the powerful: this is also one of the subjects of Goethe's play *Tasso*, quoted earlier in the film.

This idea of Anton, as the capitalist exploiter, being able to "call the tune", so to speak—to have his fun—is also reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer's perceptive remarks about Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Odysseus, in that he uses the cunning powers of reason to master the unruly forces of nature and the instincts, represents the beginning of Enlightenment thinking in Western culture, but he is also, for the same reason, the first bourgeois capitalist and the first fascist. When confronted with the deadly lure of the Sirens, he is the only one on the ship permitted to hear their beautiful song, albeit tied helplessly to the mast; the others must row with their ears plugged up. Odysseus' ability to experience this pleasure, to "consume" the Sirens' song, is purchased at the cost of the alienated labor of his men, who are a collective allegory of the proletariat: compelled to work, they are a featureless mass deprived of personal enjoyment and fulfillment. The fact that Odysseus, though allowed to hear the Sirens, is also partly unfulfilled (because he can not get at

¹⁶Ed Sikov *Laughing Hysterically* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 187

the sirens themselves, for this would mean his death) serves to demonstrate the extent to which a puritanical hatred of nature itself lies at the core of all of man's attempts to master it—and master himself—through reasoning and through the artificial structure of a class society: what must be avoided at all costs in the name of finding material success becomes stigmatized as unimportant, devalued, worthless—or indeed, dangerous, dirty, unhealthy, fatal. Love and sexuality fall into this same stigmatized wasteland: the body that becomes a would-be locus of pleasure must yield to this stigmatization and be banished from the productive world of work, as Elvira has been—banished to a lonely, mirage-like Casablanca of the mind.

—Justin Vicari