

# H-Net Reviews

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Christian Braad Thomson. *Fassbinder: The Life and Work of a Provocative Genius*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. 358 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-571-17842-1.

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## Several Themes

Since Fassbinder's death at age thirty-seven in 1982, the number of articles and books on his troubled life and wild oeuvre has become legion. Today, his status as the most important post-war German filmmaker is firmly established, as is his mythology serving, pseudo-intellectual appetites for bohemian anarchy and scandal.

In the vastness of the literature, Christian Braad Thomson's book stands out for its honesty and human warmth, its critical alertness and impeccable professionalism. And although Thomson did not shy away from describing Fassbinder's many personal demons—his habit of systematically destroying those he loved and who loved him, for example—he deliberately rejected any sensationalism dealing with this “provocative genius.” The author, a Danish friend and a filmmaker, has produced a monograph sufficiently scholarly to be taken seriously for research and used for teaching purposes, yet also personal enough to share dreams and complex feelings for his subject.

Thomson has arranged the book's seventeen chapters in a nonchronological order; moreover, the principles according to which he grouped them are not consistent, ranging from genre (“Television Series,” “Video Films”) to themes (“Loving Without Demanding,” “Fascism Will Be Victorious”). The chapters consist of several parts, each analyzing a film or a play. Naturally, Thomson gives most attention to those works which he considers Fassbinder's greatest achievements—the terrorist farce *The Third Generation* and the sixteen-hour long Doeblin adaptation *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

His appreciative analyses of the life-affirming working class saga *Eight Hours Are Not a Day*, the fragile beauty of Fontane's *Effi Briest*, and the pessimistic marriage drama *Martha* are highlights of film analysis and human empathy. On the other hand, *Lilli Marleen* is disqualified as a “commercial misunderstanding” and stored away under “Commissioned Works.”

Several themes run through the book as leitmotifs: Fassbinder's view of love in a market society as a commodity and a weapon; his notion of oppression used by the oppressed groups as an instrument of gaining power; workaholic as a compensation for lack of personal fulfillment; his quasi-masochistic relation with his audience, which he irritated and alienated but to whose preferences he catered as well; finally, the peculiar manipulation of language in his films.

Thomson frequently employs psychoanalytic methods for the interpretation of both film and filmmaker, but he does so with common sense and taste, without ever appearing scholastic or overly speculative. Still, the most useful parts of this book are the observations of cinematic techniques based on Thomson's keen attention for minute details and his rich associative abilities. The scholarly apparatus is superb, particularly the filmography; it includes, aside from meticulous information about crew and production schedule, budget figures which allow the reader to evaluate the practical aspects of Fassbinder's cinema.

Quite in tune with his subject, Thomson ends his book on a bleak note, a chapter on Fassbinder's gloomy

testament, *Querelle*, and a Cocteau quote of cinema being the art that “catches death at work.” But the general pessimism also has to do with Thomson’s decision to remain within the frame of Fassbinder’s horizon: a chapter on this director’s worldwide reception, or a survey of scholarship and criticism would have historicized the phenomenon and thus transcended his own hopelessness. Thomson’s political standpoint is so close to that of Fassbinder that objectifying it becomes impossible. But the author is an artist first and foremost; this quality necessarily has its advantages and shortcomings.

One aspect that warrants further research should at least be mentioned. Namely, the extent to which Fassbinder’s artistic persona reflected the status of the nation is nothing short of astonishing. After all, he began his frantic career when Willy Brandt’s Social Democrats won the elections and led Germany to an era of cultural openness and internal turbulence, and he died the year Helmut Kohl came to power.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder became the filmic chronicler of the 1970’s with that decade’s uncertainties—class identity, violence, justice, gender roles. Paraphrasing a Fellinian bon mot one might say that he was the “White Clown” of the Fourth Republic, sharp and morose, mercilessly puncturing the neuralgic points of wealthy and insecure West Germany: the authoritarian state, the formalistic Church, the repressed Holocaust. And Thomson’s book is also indicative of the fiasco of the Western European Left, a fiasco that Fassbinder had long anticipated—he never was an idol of that motley lot—and the author is ingenuous enough to concede.

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