A welcome reminder of Fassbinder’s astonishing breadth and continued resonance, this wide-ranging and brilliant collection of essays is an indispensable resource.

Anton Kaes, University of California, Berkeley

As varied, unique, and edgy as Fassbinder’s work itself, and as deftly edited, this montage of essays takes the measure not just of an oeuvre but of an epoch.

Garrett Stewart, author of Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema

Few filmmakers in the history of cinema have been as productive, as important, and as provocative as R. W. Fassbinder. With this stellar collection of essays, the achievements of his career unfold in all their astonishing range and diversity, across all their beauties and shocks, with all their pleasures and difficulties.

Timothy Corrigan, University of Pennsylvania

Brigitte Peucker is the Elias Leavenworth Professor of German and a Professor of Film Studies at Yale University. She is the author of many essays on questions of representation in film and literature. Earlier books include lyric descent in the German Romantic Tradition (1987), Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts (1995), and The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film (2007).

A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder

A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder is a groundbreaking collection. The first to engage fully with this important figure, whose untimely death in 1982 is said to have marked the end of New German cinema.

Twenty-nine chapters consider this controversial director’s contribution to German cinema, German history, gender and queer studies, and auteurship. Riding a wave of renewed interest in Fassbinder as a result of the increasing availability of his work, this collection puts the enigmatic director, actor, and character in context and considers the reach of his influence on a new generation of filmmakers.

These contributions by an international group of scholars provide a range of multiple perspectives through which Fassbinder emerges as an even more engagingly complex—and more brilliant—figure than ever before.

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO FILM DIRECTORS

A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder

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Photo of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Image courtesy of Bjoerka.

A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors

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Published
1. Companion to Michael Haneke, edited by Roy Grundmann
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A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Edited by
Brigitte Peucker

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Juliane Lorenz, President of the Fassbinder Foundation, has been a source of inspiration and support for this venture. The Foundation’s important work of releasing digitally re-mastered DVDs of Fassbinder’s films ensures that Fassbinder’s work is increasingly – and more beautifully – available to scholars and fans.

Heartfelt thanks go to Jayne Fargnoli, Executive Editor at Wiley-Blackwell, for her enthusiastic sponsorship of this project, and for the patience with which she oversaw its completion. Her open-mindedness and well-informed opinions have made it a pleasure to work with her. I have also had good advice from editors of other volumes in the Companion series – especially from Roy Grundmann, Tom Leitch, and Brad Prager – and I thank them for their counsel and support. This volume could not have been completed without the help of Lucian Ghita, a candidate for the Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Yale University, who assisted me with computer-related and other matters essential to preparing the manuscript for publication.

As ever, and most importantly, my husband Paul H. Fry has been a vital source of support. Essex, too, has contributed to my peace of mind during the process of assembling this volume.
Introduction

Brigitte Peucker

Despite the untimely death that ended his career at the age of thirty-seven in 1982, Rainer Werner Fassbinder remains the preeminent filmmaker of the New German Cinema, the international presence of which was established in the 1970s. There is a large body of work: during a career that spanned sixteen years, Fassbinder directed thirty-six feature-length films (primarily from his own scripts), two television series (the second, Berlin Alexanderplatz, 1979–80, is over fifteen hours long), four short films, two documentaries for television, twenty-four stage plays, and four radio plays. He wrote, co-wrote, or adapted thirty-one plays; his poetry has recently been published. As an actor Fassbinder performed in thirty-six films (many of them directed by others) and in any number of plays. Under the pseudonym Franz Walsch, Fassbinder co-edited many of his own films, and he is known to have taken over the camera from time to time. An auteur par excellence, Fassbinder imposed his unique aesthetic on his co-workers as well as his texts, acquiring a reputation as something of a tyrant in the process.

During a two-year stint in underground theater, Fassbinder was the central figure in an ensemble of actors with whom he worked closely in the years of filmmaking that followed. The Action-Theater group, which Fassbinder joined in 1967, and of which he soon became the leader, dissolved, then reformed to become the antiteater in June 1968. Alongside the experimental plays this collective collaborated upon, they began to work in film. Their first feature, Love is Colder than Death, was shot in 1969, one of eleven feature-length films produced by this group with Fassbinder as its director. Undoubtedly his theater work shaped Fassbinder’s filmmaking, but no more than the films he’d watched avidly since early childhood. There were the Hollywood films of Douglas Sirk, Raoul Walsh, Michael Curtiz, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Josef von Sternberg, Nicholas Ray, and Orson Welles, as well as the European art films of Max Ophüls, Carl Theodor Dreyer,
Brigitte Peucker

Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub, Luchino Visconti, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Noted less frequently as an influence on Fassbinder is the German cinema of the Weimar period, from which he learned a great deal about *mise-en-scène* and the image. Intertextual in the extreme, straddling high and low culture, Fassbinder's films reference not only filmic and theatrical traditions, but a rich literary and visual culture as well.

Of particular interest, too, is the way Fassbinder's films locate themselves with respect to the cataclysmic events of German twentieth-century history. While obviously in evidence in *Despair* (1977) and the films that Fassbinder retrospectively called the BRD trilogy, the Nazi period, its anticipation, and its aftermath find their way into most of his films. Intense controversy has been generated by the perceived politics of several of his texts: charges of anti-Semitism most notably surround the play *Garbage, the City, and Death* (1974–75), and its several attempted stagings. Needless to say, his films' orientation towards the politics of the late 1960s and 1970s is also centrally significant: whether they address the effects of capitalism and the "economic miracle" or problems of race and gender, Germany's socio-political world enters the texture of Fassbinder's films directly and indirectly, reflected in *mise-en-scène* and narrative alike. Fassbinder's filmic responses to terrorist activities are complex and diverse, as suggested by his contribution to *Germany in Autumn* (1977), as well as to *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975) and *The Third Generation* (1978–79), both of which outraged the German left. Given his sexual orientation, it is surprising that Fassbinder's highly personal approach to filmmaking resulted in only two explicitly lesbian and gay films – films that were often faulted by contemporary gay critics – but much of his work suggests a queer subject position that begs for queer theory approaches.

Long revered by historians and theorists of cinema, the director who was once the *enfant terrible* of the German scene is now touted by an international cultural establishment. Major retrospectives of his films were held in Berlin and Paris in 2005. Re-mastered prints of Fassbinder films released on DVD by the Fassbinder Foundation have in past years contributed to his international reputation – witness the stir created in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Review of Books*, and in numerous film journals by the 2007 release of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Fassbinder's epochal film. It is an ideal time, then, to revisit Fassbinder's cinematic achievements with a comprehensive volume of new critical essays, one that expands the existing field of study by positioning his films within a broad range of filmic as well as cultural issues. Fassbinder's oeuvre demands interdisciplinary approaches: this volume draws primarily on new work by scholars from the fields of Film Studies, Gender and Queer Studies, French and German Studies, from Comparative Literature and the Arts. The collection's many contributors hail from the UK, Europe, and Canada as well as the United States. Their approaches are diverse; their work both well informed and fresh.

Several leitmotifs emerge from this collection. The most pervasive of these is identity, about which questions are posed time and again, openly and covertly, by
Fassbinder’s patently autobiographical films and writings. Played out thematically and even more intriguingly, perhaps, at the formal level, the question of identity is tied to other aspects of Fassbinder’s work. Evidently central to the sexual politics taken up by a number of essays in this volume, it is tied as well to questions of genre, in particular to the melodrama. Fassbinder’s citational practices are also addressed by many of these essays, if only as a secondary focus of interest. The intertextual nature of Fassbinder’s films is a given, but the question of how to situate borrowings or citations from other texts remains open, since it cannot be accounted for by a “postmodern” attitude towards textuality. Arguably Fassbinder took a modernist stance towards his work, one perhaps learned from Godard, who likewise practiced a “cinema of citation.”

This collection of essays, then, deepens and gives texture to our knowledge of Fassbinder’s work by providing its reader with intersecting points of view, perspectives that complement and supplement one another as they shed light on a complex film practice and its practitioner. Given the sheer volume of Fassbinder’s body of work, the aim of this collection has not been to account for each film, especially those most often addressed in recent critical writing. Rather, it has been to bring a variety of contemporary paradigms to bear on Fassbinder’s complex oeuvre, and to reinvigorate spectatorial and critical interest in his films by this means. In the interest of space, no filmography is included in this volume; they are readily available elsewhere.¹

Part I: Life and Work

As our first four essays variously suggest, the short and tempestuous life of Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982) is complexly interwoven with his work, erupting in this film or that one as occasion, as transmuted subject matter, or as symptom. Fassbinder’s fraught relationship with Germany, with his cohort of friends and lovers in art, with the films and books he voraciously consumed—all are threads in a day-glo tapestry in which now one, now the other provides the dominant motif. It’s no surprise, then, that Fassbinder’s work invites viewing though a biographical lens, albeit obliquely, at an angle. Under examination as well is the response of the director’s German audience, which tended to look at Fassbinder—surely the most brilliant German auteur of his time—askance and with trepidation.

As an editor of many Fassbinder films, his final partner, and current head of the Fassbinder Foundation, Juliane Lorenz herself embodies that conflation of life, work, and cultural politics that also characterized Fassbinder’s life. Her contribution to this volume begins by elaborating the mood and circumstances of Germany in the late 1960s, especially its anxieties concerning the Baader-Meinhof group and terrorism that set the stage for Fassbinder’s creative work during this era. It takes up charges of anti-Semitism leveled against Fassbinder in the mid-1970s in
connection with *Garbage, the City, and Death*, by way of which Lorenz describes the filmmaker’s relation to German theater. Fassbinder’s attempt to balance his work in film and theater – not to mention television – and the production difficulties surrounding all three is supplemented by a look at the director’s method of working with an ensemble of friends and lovers. Appropriately in this context, Lorenz doesn’t neglect to examine her own working – and personal – relationship with Fassbinder. Thomas Elsaesser, author of the magisterial *Fassbinder’s Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (1996), returns to Fassbinder here to consider the director’s posthumous place with respect to his German audience, for which Fassbinder still remains something of a “monstrous body.” Stressing the productivity networks that enabled Fassbinder’s work, Elsaesser outlines the way in which Fassbinder’s surrogate family (composed of co-workers who typically lived together and exchanged partners) is complemented by another system, by the image and sound world of cinema and its representational possibilities. As a collage of sound topographies and film quotations, Elsaesser suggests, Fassbinder’s films are located at the confluence of the Hollywood style, the German UFA style, and the European auteur cinema. Insofar as Fassbinder was attentive to history, Elsaesser argues, it was not as a chronicler of that history but rather as a “time traveler.” Further, it is argued that Fassbinder’s films developed a new concept of victimhood, and that they never ceased to ask the question: “What does it mean to be German?”

One thing that being German may have meant for the young Fassbinder was the need to explore German literature. Fassbinder had a deep-seated love of reading and for him reading led to writing. As Leo A. Lensing points out, the teenaged Fassbinder wrote lyric poetry modeled on that of Rainer Maria Rilke; a bit later he would imitate Goethe and write short pieces of prose influenced by Kafka and Beckett. Lensing’s essay provides an important look at Fassbinder’s plays and the acts of “literary cannibalism” that produced them. Other significant texts for Fassbinder were of course Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest*, on which he based an inspired film (*Effi Briest*, 1973). Fassbinder’s lifelong obsession with Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* famously provided the model for his adaptation of this modernist novel (1979–80). Another collusion between life and work derived from Döblin’s text: it inspired one of Fassbinder’s favorite pseudonyms, Franz, borrowed from its central character. As Lensing points out, alongside Fassbinder’s literary fathers, Fassbinder’s mother also haunts his work: Lilo Pempeit, sometimes credited as Liselotte Eder, appeared in no fewer than twenty-three of his films – which may shed light on the director’s lifelong interest in psychoanalysis. Fittingly, and in keeping with this double focus on literature and biography, Wayne Koestenbaum confesses that he writes as a poet watching movies, and as a gay man. He writes as a cineaste as well who, even as he “dwells inside” aspects of Fassbinder films, casts a net of intricate allusions to other filmmakers and artists – to Douglas Sirk, Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, Rudy Burckhardt, the poet David Antin. “Inhabiting” sequences from *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971), *Fear of Fear* (1975), *Gods of the Plague* (1969), and *Effi Briest*, Koestenbaum evokes their “look” in a manner at once
witty and moving. Actor blocking and *mise-en-scène* come in for their share of attention, and fashion details are not omitted – witness the drab skirt that doesn’t match an evening-sheer blouse in *Fear of Fear*. Koestenbaum also comments upon the director’s “involuted” casting, as when Fassbinder’s mother, his former wife, and his lover appear together in one movie. Reading Fassbinder’s films radically and autobiographically, Koestenbaum confesses that he is drawn to “textual moments … that give up.”

**Part II: Genre; Influence; Aesthetics**

Our second group of essays stakes out a panoply of different positions towards the director’s notable film style and his experimentation with genre. Fassbinder’s reverence for the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, which he discussed in interviews and took up in essays, repeatedly comes into play. A pronounced focus on the body in Fassbinder’s films is related to issues of style as well as to recurrent thematic concerns, as is the impact Fassbinder’s sexuality had on his film work. This section of the collection continues the focus on the boundary crossings that link life to work in Part I, but in a different mode, often with regard to the intertextual borrowings that characterize Fassbinder’s work. We begin with Laura McMahon’s analysis of Fassbinder’s debt to Godard. McMahon’s essay addresses structural and formal concerns in the early films. While Fassbinder’s nine-minute short, *A Little Chaos* (1967), recycles Godard’s images, his relation to Godard becomes more complex in his gangster trilogy (*Love is Colder than Death*, 1969; *Gods of the Plague*, 1969; *The American Soldier*, 1970), where the influence of Hollywood on both directors comes into play. Fassbinder’s stance towards the gangster film is one of “loving inhabitation” as well as critical distance, McMahon argues. Questions of seriality, reification, and reproducibility that likewise permeate *Katzelmacher* (1969) are central to Fassbinder’s debt to Godard, a debt he alternately avows and disavows. Embracing mimicry and role-playing, Fassbinder adapts Godard’s principles of life as imitation and cinema as citation to his situation as a gay director. Godard’s influence ends, McMahon suggests, when Douglas Sirk’s begins.

The representation of the body is central to Fassbinder’s work; his is a decidedly corporeal cinema, writes Claire Kaiser in an essay that surveys a breath-taking number of films. Bodies in Fassbinder films are sites of personal as well as political significance; they are markers of identity. Establishing a polarity between nude and clothed bodies, Kaiser reads clothing as an extension of the social framework and hence as a constraint imposed upon the body as, for example, in *Lili Marleen* (1980) and *Querelle* (1982). Nudity is multivalent; it speaks to desire, but it also suggests a lack of protective barriers. The body in distress, the mutilated body, and the formal degradation of the body are surveyed in the context of the social order, after which the concluding section of Kaiser’s essay concerns
figures of petrification and shapeless bodies of abjection. It is in the context of bodies, specifically transsexual bodies, that Victor Fan’s essay develops the poignant argument that “autobiographical art is a performance that conceals memories too private to be turned into public discourse.” The boundary between auteurs and their characters is indeed permeable, but how are we to understand it, Fan asks? Certainly not directly, as his resonant essay on In a Year with 13 Moons (1978) read with Pedro Almodóvar’s Bad Education (2004) makes clear. Using Almodóvar’s film (clearly influenced by Fassbinder) to answer questions about In a Year with 13 Moons, Fan concludes that both films are made by directors who wish to expose memories that are fantasized – and that this is in and of itself a strategy of concealment. The trauma that resides within films such as these ultimately remains inaccessible. According to Fan, neither film simply re-narrativizes fantasized memories: both end with “the tragic necessity of narrative circulation.”

In a similar vein, Eugenie Brinkema asserts that Chinese Roulette (1976) resists psychological characterization. Even as the film suggests that unconcealment is its theme, it resists thematization. Narrative certainty is ultimately withheld and replaced by “the manifest visual certainty of style.” Brinkema’s philosophically informed close reading addresses two important props in the film – a painting of a nude, and a glass cabinet, which she sees as resisting the psychologizing of the visible. “A logic of nudity” gives its form to the cruelties of the Chinese roulette game that structures the film’s narrative – but it is the form of the game that matters, not its detail. Chinese Roulette uses style to present violence as something that cannot be exposed, rendered nude, unveiled. Similarly to Fan, Brinkema reads Fassbinder’s film as a roulette machine whose movement is “non-arrival.” For Brian Price, like Brinkema, Fassbinder’s films are concerned with the relation of the cinematic medium to philosophy. With recourse to Jacques Rancière’s reading of Godard’s histoire(s) du cinéma (2004), Price argues that Fassbinder’s films “raise philosophical issues that are themselves interventions in the history of philosophy.” The relation of Douglas Sirk’s use of color to Fassbinder’s is another focus of this essay: according to Price, Fassbinder resists Sirk’s use of color: With respect to color, too, it is a matter of how Fassbinder’s film style relates to interiority, to what Fassbinder recognizes is the contingent nature of being as produced by the social. For Price, Fassbinder’s refusal of color matching in films such as Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1973) and Lola (1981) is a staging of the refusal to read the relation between inside and outside in metaphoric terms.

John David Rhodes has another take on Fassbinder’s relation to Sirk, although he also addresses the work of Fassbinder and Sirk with respect to formal issues. Rhodes reads the problem of style during Fassbinder’s Sirk period in the context of the labor it occasions. Fassbinder’s homage to Sirk is most apparent in Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, but one of Fassbinder’s swerves away from Sirk in Ali is located in framing and editing strategies that evoke Hollywood style, but nevertheless remain foreign to it. Further, in contrast to Sirk’s signature arrangement of objects in the mise-en-scène, Rhodes suggests that Fassbinder’s films set up an agonistic relation between
object and camera. And while Fox and His Friends (1974) draws upon Sirk in its use of reflective and reflexive shots, the film suggests that the relation to Sirk is “less a matter of genealogy or allusion,” but the way in which style articulates queer identity. In these and other films, Rhodes notes, Fassbinder meditates on aspects of style that render filmmaking a specifically queer labor. In likewise taking up the vexed problem of Sirkean influence, Joe McElhaney’s intertextual reading of Martha (1973) emphasizes camera movement as well as the movement of figures in the frame, noting the way in which these movements embody a “contradictory drive towards happiness and suffering.” For McElhaney, Sirk’s aesthetic resides in Martha’s excessive mise-en-scène, as well as in its costuming, framing, and lighting. The film’s citations do not derive from Sirk only, however: Fassbinder’s film draws on the female gothic genre of the 1940s and it also reworks the tyrannical male figure of Weimar cinema. Further, Martha’s ending suggests a shift into comedy in the manner of Jerry Lewis, whom Margit Carstensen is actually seen to resemble. As melodrama becomes farce, McElhaney suggests, both genres provide Fassbinder with a model for an “anguished body beyond spoken language,” one in which pleasure and pain remain indistinguishable. Peculiar to this film is its use of Carstensen’s body as vehicle for the “nagging physical discomfort” of McElhaney’s title. It is the gendered body that is central to Nadine Schwakopf’s analysis. In her reading of Effi Briest, Martha, and Fear of Fear (1975), medial self-reflexivity is anchored in reflections on gender and, as Schwakopf cogently argues, it leaves its index on the bodies of the female characters. But Fassbinder’s semiology of subjecthood is one in which female identity is obliterated: in Effi Briest, Effi ultimately serves as a filter for the film’s exploration of narrative structures. While the evacuation of female interiority does not prohibit the exteriorization of affect in Effi Briest, in films such as Martha or Fear of Fear it results in bodies that have no emotive force. With its emphasis on mirrors, looks, and the gaze, Martha is an “optical text of muteness.” Fear of Fear is a film in which female identity is likewise evacuated and transmuted, but here “the semantics of female subjectivity are projected into the plot’s spatial parameters.” Repeatedly, then, in Fassbinder the rendering of female subjectivity is displaced into film style.

Reflections on genre take a different turn in Brad Prager’s essay on Fassbinder’s science fiction film, World on a Wire (1973). Prager begins by contextualizing this made-for-television film within an account of Fassbinder’s televisual politics, especially as they emerge from production difficulties surrounding Fassbinder’s series Eight Hours Are Not a Day (1972). Citation is again at issue as the essay relates World on a Wire to contemporary science fiction films such Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and Tarkovsky’s Solaris (1972). In World on a Wire, the central character’s dilemma is what to do upon realizing that his world is a fiction and he is an “endlessly circulating image.” An assortment of intertexts collide in Fassbinder’s film, among them Godard’s Alphaville (1965) and the film noir genre more generally; Zeno’s Paradox; Theodor Adorno’s critique of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World; and Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass. The proliferation
of mirror images in World on a Wire, writes Prager, reflects “the circulation of the self as image, its contingency and manipulation.” This is a characteristic it shares with many another Fassbinder film.

Part III: Other Texts; Other Media

Fassbinder’s films are known to take an intermedial approach to the cinema. The third section of this volume addresses some of his adaptations of literary texts, films that revolve around paintings, that incorporate theatrical conventions, and films in which music asserts its place among other textual systems. Since intertextuality is necessarily an issue in this section as well, the question of authorial identity or its lack comes up in several of these essays, too. Prager’s focus on science – even if it is science fiction – creates a bridge to this grouping of essays, since Elena del Rio’s work on Fassbinder’s adaptation of Berlin Alexanderplatz takes up the role of physics and other materialist discourses as a passage into the de-subjectivization of its central character, Franz Biberkopf. Del Rio’s essay resonates with several contributions to Part II of this volume as well, when it argues – this time with reference to Deleuze and Guattari – that the film’s goal is to arrive at a sense of affective intensity that is beyond subjectivity. Central to del Rio’s discussion is Franz’s becoming animal: three sequences in the film that draw on the image of the slaughtered animal are seen as indicative of Fassbinder’s desire to involve himself through voiceover in Franz’s “unnatural” participation in other bodies, hence as creating an interiority that “no longer belongs to any individuated body or subject.” In del Rio’s reading Franz is a “network of constantly shifting forces” and all of the novel’s systems – the aesthetic, linguistic, semiotic, and political – are subjected to an “affective synthesizer.” Brigitte Peucker’s essay on Despair (1977), Fassbinder’s adaptation of Nabokov’s novel, contends that for Fassbinder identity is a “tissue of performed textualities,” and subjectivity is extended through a variety of citational strategies. Despair’s movement among fantasy, diegetic reality, and aspects of its auteur’s biography is not surprising in a work based on a Nabokov text. Its more radical strategy is to model the permeability of reality and representation to one another as it figures the conflation of identities and bodies under the sign of cinema. Peucker’s essay emphasizes the recurring structure of relations in Despair, one that shapes relationships from the erotic to the political, and promotes the collapse of identities into one another. She suggests that the recourse to intermedial citation and performance in this and other Fassbinder films is a strategy that empties out identity even as it shores it up.

Film sound, specifically music, is addressed by Caryl Flinn, who asks what role the analysis of repetition in a film’s soundtrack can play in queer scholarship and theories of queer identity. With respect to Querelle (based on a novel by Jean Genet, 1982), where fused identities and genders abound, Flinn is concerned with the
repetition of lines from a song composed by Peer Raben and performed by Jeanne Moreau’s Lysiane, a song whose lyrics derive from Oscar Wilde. Like Lili Marleen (1980), Flinn points out, Querelle is a monomusical structured around one song – in the case of Querelle, however, it is a song that never moves forward. Music in Querelle’s is read as centrally contributing to the film’s erosion of identity categories. Basing her argument on those of contemporary musicologists concerned with the connection between race and repetition in music, Flinn discerns in the film’s refusal of a forward-moving melody an intended queering of music. Olga Solovieva’s contribution is also focused on Querelle, but from a different perspective. Solovieva examines several Fassbinder mise-en-scènes that exhibit traces of Genet, beginning with costumes in The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (1972). Sadomasochistic relations between its protagonists are reflected in this film’s costumes, she argues, and fashion is used as a melodramatic metaphor here. As in Genet, Solovieva suggests, the governing idea in Bitter Tears is that artifice paradoxically brings us closer to our identities. The surrealist landscape of Querelle reenacts Genet’s, and it imitates Genet’s tendency to embody ideas in objects as well as to allegorize relationships in the design and choreography of the mise-en-scène. By way of lighting, color, and mirror effects, Fassbinder creates the equivalent of Deleuze’s “any-space-whatever,” which figures as a counterpart to Genet’s experimental literary space.

Brigitte Peucker’s essay on The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant focuses on the function of framing and un-framing in painting and film, and on the intermedial blurring of boundaries among painting, film, and theater in Bitter Tears. The film deliberately transgresses against André Bazin’s distinction between painting and film, which insists with Kant on the separation of the space of painting from the real world by way of the frame. Poussin’s dioramas, Nietzsche’s reading of Dionysos as a figure for dissolution, the marked presence of Bergman’s Persona, and the erotic implications of mannequins and dolls are harnessed to an argument concerning the film’s masochistic theatricality. It is suggested that the film’s collection of “citation objects” produces the art world of masochism, and that Bitter Tears displays masochism’s metastatic aesthetic, one that un-frames and thereby conflates art with the real.

For Elke Siegel Effi Briest demonstrates that word and film are multiply connected, that there are myriad relationships between word and image. Its full German title, Fontane Effi Briest, underlines Fassbinder’s contention that the film is not about a woman, but rather about the writer Theodor Fontane, whose novel Fassbinder uses to clarify his own position towards the society in which he lived. (The film’s long subtitle makes this project explicit: “or Many who have an idea of their possibilities and their needs and still accept the ruling system in their heads through their actions and thus stabilize it and indeed confirm it.”) More centrally, however, Siegel’s close and intricate reading confirms how rigorously the film “pursues its task of showing the reader a book.” Effi Briest revolves around adaptation in all senses of the word, maintains Siegel – adaptation to society, to a system of the arts
in 1895 (the date of the novel), and of art to life. There is also, of course, the adaption of fiction to film, which Fassbinder partially stages with respect to Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), another film that sees its task in the representation of writing. While Paul Coates’s essay begins with a reading of *Effi Briest*, it is primarily concerned with Fassbinder’s adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The essay’s overarching topic is the “deep gorges of divergence”—despite the overt signs of allegiance—that it finds between Fassbinder’s adaptations and the texts on which they are based. Drawing on Freud, on Deleuze’s take on masochism, on Mitscherlich’s understanding of homosociality, and on the work of Juliet Flower MacCannell, Coates explains what he sees as Fassbinder’s “simulation of piety” towards Fontane’s and Döblin’s novels. The repeated presence of Fassbinder’s mother in his films, the familial structures that govern *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the “band of brothers” that reconstitutes the family in the manner of Warhol, and the pervasive tendency towards the destabilization of the couple—all point towards a private sexual politics. Fassbinder’s “infidelity” to the novels of Fontane and Döblin, it is argued, lies in his transformation of these authors’ heterosexual world into a commitment to homosexuality.

**Part IV: History; Ideology; Politics**

Part IV of the collection seeks to come to terms with the sometimes-troubling ideological and political positions that are imbedded in many of Fassbinder’s films. These include Fassbinder’s largely negative responses to the German student movement and his relation to the German gay movement, its filmmakers and critics. Centrally important is the vexed representation of race and of Jewishness in his films. Fassbinder’s films have been accused of resorting to Nazi aesthetics and—most problematically—the director and his work have been charged with anti-Semitism. The majority of the essays in this section focus on specific films, but they also take up matters of ideology in the context of Fassbinder’s work more generally.

Focusing primarily on *The Niklashausen Journey* (1970) and *Rio das Mortes* (1970), Eric Rentschler investigates these early films as instances of a post-1968 desire to challenge the status quo. Both films centrally exemplify Fassbinder’s dismay over the failures of the German student movement. Pointing to the idiosyncratic style of these films, with their anthology of quotations from film history, German cultural history, and references to other revolutions (such as the Cuban Long March), Rentschler unpacks their allusions, reading them within the context of their historical moment. In the midst of their eclectic assemblage of quotations, scenes with a documentary impetus shed light on this era. Rentschler suggests that the interest of these films lies primarily in their reflection of the youth culture of this period, and both films ultimately reflect the “new and heightened ways of being in
the world” that defined their time. Writing chiefly about *The Third Generation* (1979), one of Fassbinder’s most Godardian films, Frances Guerin suggests that Fassbinder’s “strategies of discordance” are at their most extreme here. This film about 1970s’ Germany, terrorism, the public sphere, and private lives resorts to a high modernist, Brechtian approach that takes the form of visual and aural excess, perhaps because its subject remains in some sense unrepresentable. Guerin’s close reading maintains that the film’s “surfeit of representation” – which includes an emphasis on performance and audacious camera movement, as well as a pronounced disjunction between image and a garbled soundtrack – makes the film ultimately unreadable. In *The Third Generation*, she suggests, public and private collapse into one another, and the distinction between terrorists and the law is non-existent. Why, Guerin asks, does terrorism remain a topic that German film cannot readily represent even today?

Many of Fassbinder’s films are understood as confronting aspects of German fascism. But *Lili Marleen* provoked critical unease in Saul Friedländer and others, since it seemed to represent the Nazi period in what appeared to be a Nazi film aesthetic. However, as Laura J. Heins points out, Fassbinder’s style has not been examined against this aesthetic in a sustained way. In her essay Heins undertakes to do just that, asking also just how excessive excess must be to be seen as a distanciation technique. Could *Lili Marleen*’s glitzy surfaces represent an attempt at ideological critique at the level of the *mise-en-scène*? Revisiting these questions in the context of melodramas by Nazi-era filmmakers Veit Harlan and Detlef Sierck (who would become Douglas Sirk after he left Germany for Hollywood), the essay considers several of their films against Fassbinder’s *Lili Marleen* from the perspective of style. Concluding with a consideration of the Jewish figures who populate this film, Heins takes a position on the debate concerning Fassbinder’s alleged anti-Semitism. Rosalind Galt pursues this troubling issue in her essay, beginning with a discussion of the critical reception of Fassbinder’s infamous *Garbage, the City, and Death*. Reviewing the spectrum of critical opinions on this play, Galt notes a divergence of opinion between film scholars and scholars of German Studies. Their readings of the play, she asserts, “are entirely incommensurable,” their diverging opinions being another chapter in the culture wars. Galt rightly asserts that “radical art must be defended,” and one of the issues at stake along the way is queer representation. In some of the critics she surveys she finds that “progressive political critique becomes a reactionary rejection of queer representation.” For such critics the *Bilderverbot* (injunction against visual representation in Jewish law) is not just limited to the representation of the Shoah, but extends to that of other spectacular and violenced bodies, bodies such as we find in *In a Year with 13 Moons*. Fassbinder’s ugly bodies serve as a challenge to the aesthetics of the *Bilderverbot*; they also serve as a response to the belief that withholding representation can produce a radical politics. The bodies of Jewish characters and other outsider figures, Galt asserts, demand “an aesthetic of ugly visibility that radically provokes the limits of German representation.”
Elena Gorfinkel’s essay on *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973) stresses the impolitic nature of the bodies of this film’s protagonists even as it attests to their existences as a problem of “social specularity” in the visual field. *Ali* relies on embodied signification, on the “surface of the skin” that speaks to age and race. Yet how is it, we may ask, that Ali’s raced body and Emmi’s aging body take an affective toll on the film’s spectator? Gorfinkel argues that the spectator has no choice but to inhabit a look that “rends a prior moment” of completeness within a “shifted frame.” The asynchronous effects of these characters’ embodiment are echoed by the nonsynchronicity of melodramatic desire, the “too late” temporality of the melodramatic genre, one that does not allow for reciprocity. Despite the film’s utopian drive, then, the affects that impress themselves upon spectatorial vision are shame, embarrassment, and refusal. Looking at race from another perspective, Tobias Nagl and Janelle Blankenship focus on Günther Kaufmann’s performances in Fassbinder’s films, situating them in a consideration of the possibilities of black stardom on the German screen. Nagl and Blankenship’s investigation of blackness across Fassbinder’s oeuvre is a first in Fassbinder scholarship. Kaufmann’s performances spanned the director’s entire career in filmmaking. The actor was cast in Fassbinder’s first feature, *Gods of the Plague*, then had important parts in other early films, and starred in *Whity* (1970), discussed in detail in this essay. Kaufmann continued to be cast in minor roles in Fassbinder’s films, finally appearing as Nono in *Querelle*, his last. Questions of race are inflected by queer subtexts in Kaufmann’s performances: Kaufmann was notably one of Fassbinder’s lovers, and racialized desire and a queer subject position are implied by most of the roles that Kaufmann plays.

Randall Halle situates Fassbinder’s role as a gay German filmmaker with respect to fellow gay German directors Werner Schroeter and Rosa von Praunheim. Von Praunheim’s groundbreaking *It is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives* (1971), Halle asserts, should be acknowledged as the first of the gay movement films. It was von Praunheim, Schroeter, and Fassbinder who established the aesthetic and material pre-conditions that made the New Queer Cinema of 1992 possible: for Halle there was no “historical rupture” at the moment of this movement’s founding. Halle is also concerned with the reception of Fassbinder’s work by gay and straight critics alike: why, he asks, is Fassbinder’s homosexuality so infrequently incorporated into discussions of his auteurism? Fassbinder understood himself as a gay man making films, Halle contends, even if he did not make them for a movement. Unlike more topical queer films, Fassbinder’s overtly gay films – *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and *Fox and His Friends* (1974) – are not only important indices of their cultural moment, but have a lasting value. In his essay on *Fox and His Friends*, Ronald Gregg points out that Fassbinder challenged heteronormativity by normalizing homosexuality in the film’s narrative. Further, Gregg writes that gay critics have tended not to recognize the radical gay apparatus put into play in *Fox*, whose style productively bridges neorealism, art film, and the Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk. The gay kiss the film puts
on screen at its beginning may have been a shock for contemporary audiences, he contends, but the film embraces a desiring gay gaze even as it de-eroticizes it by means of real locations and the use of naturalistic sets and sound. Male nudity in gay settings is treated matter-of-factly and incorporated into the film’s naturalistic setting. But the film also draws upon Sirkian melodrama: Gregg reads Fox as an inverted version of Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), where class is also the obstacle to happiness. *Fox’s* Sirkian use of *mise-en-scène* with respect to color, spatial composition, actor movement, and posing creates a space for audience reflection that disrupts the dominant ideological position. Pointing out that Fassbinder’s final film, *Querelle*, has been marginalized by academic scholarship, Roy Grundmann maps out a new critical and theoretical field within which the film can be viewed. Preceding his analysis within discussions of Fassbinder’s films by Kaja Silverman and Steven Shaviro, and contextualizing it within theoretical work on gay male sexuality by Leo Bersani, David Halperin, and others, Grundmann addresses the vexed conflation of desire and death in male homosexuality critiqued by contemporary theorists. Drawing both on Fassbinder’s film and Jean Genet’s play to elucidate issues currently debated by queer theory, Grundmann foregrounds the practice of unprotected anal sex known as barebacking. From this vantage point, *Querelle* becomes a meditation on abjection as posited by Halperin and Genet; and Querelle, the film’s central character, undergoes a self-transformation that resembles an “idealist model of queer abjection.” Grundmann closes his essay – and this volume – with the observation that the gestural impact of Fassbinder’s ending redeems abjection, releasing it from its fraught connection with death.

At the nodal point of the multiple and overlapping perspectives contained in this volume, Fassbinder emerges as an even more engagingly complex – and more brilliant – auteur than ever before.

**Note**

1 Complete filmographies are available in Thomas Elsaesser’s and Wallace Steadman Watson’s books on Fassbinder. See Bibliography for further details.