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Fassbinder's *Despair*

Robert T. Eberwein

Rainer Werner Fassbinder tells us he tried to capture Theodor Fontane's "attitude toward the story" in his filmic adaptation of *Effi Briest* (1974)¹. In his most recent adaptation, *Despair* (1977), Fassbinder and Tom Stoppard, the scriptwriter, prove equal masters to Vladimir Nabokov, the author of the novel. Nabokov's verbal ingenuity and linguistic pyrotechniques are matched again and again by the visual brilliance of the film. In addition, Fassbinder displays an equally sympathetic attitude toward the hero, Hermann Hermann, who figures in a complex allegory directed at the nature of art.²

Part of the appeal of Nabokov's work for Fassbinder must have come from its concern with art and its use of cinematic elements. In the novel, the hero Hermann Karlovich writes a record of his experiences with Felix, an itinerant worker whom he murders, mistakenly thinking him to be a perfect double, and, hence, a means to collect insurance money. The deluded Hermann sends his work to a Russian émigré novelist who can have it published.³ As he proceeds, it becomes clear that Nabokov intends the novel to be a commentary on the nature of art, for Hermann conceives of his crime as "creative art" (p. 132); views his murder of Felix in the way he does art, as a "deception" (p. 188); labels the police "literary critic[s]" (p. 201); and excuses his lack of compassion for his victim on the grounds that "an artist feels no remorse" (p. 187). Scattered throughout the text are cinematic references and motifs, including Hermann's pretense of being a film actor needing a double; discussion of "the line down the middle" when one actor plays two parts (p. 26); and specifically filmic imagery. For example, Hermann speaks of his "camera-type memory" (p. 71); frets because he cannot imagine Felix's past life or "rerun his life on my private screen" (p. 54); describes Felix's appearance in terms of a pan shot (p. 83); and compares filmic and literary fades and ellipses (p. 54).

In the film, the chocolatier Hermann Hermann (Dirk Bogarde) is bothered by dissociation, a splitting of his personality caused, we infer, partly by his fragmented background (a Russian émigré transplanted into Berlin after the Russian revolution). He hopes to solve his psychological and economic troubles by murdering Felix Weber (Klaus Löwitsch) whom he thinks is his perfect double, and by substituting himself for the victim. The failure of his plot suggests that Fassbinder and Stoppard wish to demonstrate how the artist's susceptibility to self-absorption threatens to invalidate the value of his productions. Those who shape reality solely by means of private vision are doomed to fail, and, worse, be caught up in the art of others. All Hermann does is look for another "Mr. Hermann." By ignoring other human activity and by apparently remaining indifferent to political realities in order to concentrate only on himself, one will be like an artist who limits his vision, unable to distinguish between appearance and reality. The work produced by such a person, in this case a mad scenario, will not organize life, or redeem it, only bring more chaos to the world.

The result of Hermann's art is death. Central to the working out of this allegory are motifs of filmmaking, playacting, and illusion.

Elsewhere I have suggested ways that films within films can function structurally and thematically.⁴ Fassbinder and Stoppard provide one of the most brilliant examples of the device I can recall. The film within a film adumbrates plot development; introduces important visual constructs; intensifies the dislocation theme; and figures significantly in the allegory of art.

The film within the film is preceded by dinner at a restaurant where Hermann meets Orlovius (Bernhard Wicki) who looks like a "Viennese quack." Actually Orlovius is actually an insurance salesman, a fact revealed only after he hears Hermann explain his concern with dissociation. We have already witnessed this condition, having observed Hermann watch himself make love to his wife Lydia (Andréa Ferréol) in their apartment: his chair neatly arranged for the best view, the door left open, the correct robe—all parts of a scenario created, directed and acted by Hermann.

The conversation with Orlovius ends with the latter trying to sell Hermann insurance, and is followed by a straight cut to a movie house where Hermann, Lydia, and her cousin Ardalion (Volker Spengler) watch a silent American crime picture (one made for this film), with German subtitles for the English silent titles. We have already heard the theme music for the interior film, Peer Raben's fine score from the main film. At the point we join the film within a film the police have surrounded a large house in which Silverman hides out. His brother, Sergeant Brown of the police, volunteers to go in to bring out Silverman. The men resemble each other, and one actor plays two parts. As Brown confronts his brother in the house, we read dialogue indicating long-standing enmity: "Mother always loved you more than me," says one; when asked if he ever thinks of his mother, another hears: "The many tears she shed have washed the life from her eyes." And then, after a cut from the conversation, the supposed "Sergeant Brown" comes out, says "Silverman" is dead, and attempts to leave in a police car. The others recognize that Silverman has assumed Brown's clothes and identity in order to escape. They gun down the criminal, and a policeman who enters the house discovers Brown dead.

During the film, the distraught Lydia, moved by the story of the brothers as she will be later by Hermann's tale of *his* brother, asks for a handkerchief. As Hermann reaches for one, he experiences another instance of dissociation, for he sees a second Hermann farther back in the auditorium also reaching for a handkerchief. The flickering projection lamplight plays on both of them. But we do not see them looking at one another face to face in the same frame; nor do we at any other point in the film. Lydia and Ardalion have been discussing the use of one actor to play two parts in the silent film. Ardalion explains that one sees them both in the same shot by means of a trick, the line down the middle: "A line has length but no breadth. If you could see it, it wouldn't be a line." Later, Felix will also talk about this type of trick, calling it "a swindle. You only saw one of them at a time except when there was a line down the middle."

The relations between the interior and main films are extensive. First the names: either Brown or Silverman has give up his name in order to assume

another Eberwein: Looking for Mr. Herman Fassbinder's «em» Despair «/em» situation. The brothers are supposed to be physically identical, hence the use of one actor for both parts (and "the line down the middle"). But their makeup and appearance do not strengthen the similarities, a point which explains how Brown's men recognize Silverman so quickly. Structurally, the scene demonstrates that assuming another's name and clothing will not guarantee successful assumption of that person's identity as well. Silverman murders Brown, but is killed by the police: Hermann murders Felix, but is captured later by the police (whose cars are positioned in a way reminiscent of those in the interior film).

The home where Silverman hides (in black and white) appears in a dream Hermann will have shortly after meeting Felix. In that, Hermann sits in a chair, wearing the robe he had on in the first dissociation sequence, and appears to be welcoming a second Hermann with a warm smile. The latter has entered the house (in color now) and walks toward Hermann. No doubles here, no lines down the middle of this film—Fassbinder crosscuts as he had earlier. When Hermann reaches the seated Hermann, he leans over and begins to turn the head gently, in much the same way the policeman turns Brown's head. But the face turns out to belong to Felix. Hermann wakes up with a start, but the dream image recurs.

Fassbinder uses the interior film comically as it plays off against Lydia's anguish, and seriously as it occasions a scene of dissociation in Hermann. More, the dissociation which Hermann experiences as he reaches for the handkerchief connects to the bifurcation of the fictional Brown/Silverman, and to Hermann/fictional brother Felix—one "good," one "bad." The use of another's identity to escape one's current predicament, and the errors of misjudging similarity figure here as well. But, of special note is the aspect of artifice. Ardalion's explanation of the trick which allows Brown/Silverman to appear in the same shot functions as the *aesthetic* equivalent of the policeman's discovery that "Brown" is Silverman; that is, both Ardalion and the policeman expose artifice. When the home appears in Hermann's dream, the meeting of the two Hermanns recalls Brown/Silverman's encounter, but Fassbinder does not put each one on either side of the frame, nor does he play with doubles. Rather he crosscuts between the two Hermanns until the point at which one Hermann becomes Felix, and then has both men in frame together. It isn't that Fassbinder is afraid to use the line down the middle (although that would invite our irony); he has said, in fact, that film should not hide its methods of production.⁵ Fassbinder refuses to put Hermann face to face with Hermann, as Brown is with Silverman, because of the dictates of the plot. He can't put them together in the same frame because *no one* can put them together. Hermann Hermann is very much like Humpty-Dumpty—broken for good. In this respect, the projecting of the credits over the opening scenes of the film is a particularly well conceived idea; during part of them, someone (Lydia or Hermann) is making a goggle-moggle or a chockywocky, and tosses the broken eggs into the sink in such a way that they catch drops from a dripping faucet. This procreative/split image relates to the numerous discussions in the film about closeness and identity (Hermann and Lydia as a perfect match; Hermann and his brother as alike as

"two drops of blood," etc.). The dripping water appears again at the end of the film, but this time falls, significantly, into a broken bowl.

Fassbinder introduces the interior film as a "real" film which acknowledges the illusion of the filmmaking process (shots of the projection lamp, discussion of the line down the middle) while it offers a story about illusion (assumed identity, self-delusion). To an extent, Fassbinder, Silverman and Hermann share the same problem: through artifice, winning the acceptance of their respective audiences. Only Fassbinder succeeds, because Silverman and Hermann cannot distinguish the limits of illusion: they do not come to terms with the realists in the audience like Ardalion and Felix, or the policemen in the film and the film within a film. All would expose the means of illusion.

At this point it will be helpful to examine other specific film references in *Despair*. The projection of the credits is noteworthy, not only for the broken eggs, but for the way Fassbinder forces us first to view Hermann and Lydia. Fassbinder shoots from outside, presumably in rain, through the window of their apartment as we hear Hermann reflect on the past in Russia. This introduces us to a method Fassbinder follows at many points in the film: shooting through glass, here a single pane. As the film progresses, he will shoot through two and three layers, sometimes frosted (as in the apartment), sometimes virtually opaque (as in the post office). The glass layers function like a series of investigative lens. Characters may remove themselves directly from us, and, as Hermann does later, try to escape behind multiple layers. But he can't hide from Fassbinder, for whom the glass becomes an extension of the camera's lens—a projection of the cinematic apparatus into the narrative space of the characters.

Fassbinder also uses the optical devices of mirrors extensively. The mirrors appear in the circus fun house where Hermann sees Felix for the first time. Thus Hermann's initial misperception that Felix looks like him occurs in a visual context replete with glass and mirrors; he looks through them and sees only himself. The optical instruments fail Hermann, as he finds an illusion and takes it for a reality.

At other times, Fassbinder uses glass as a mirror, allowing us to see a character's face inscribed on another's by means of reflection. Thus Mueller's face appears superimposed on Hermann's during the discussion or reparations. Again, as Hermann explains part of his story about his "brother" Felix to Lydia, his face and hers blend in the etched glass walls of their apartment. The constant presence of mirrors reminds us of the use to which Fassbinder puts them in other works, particularly *Effi Briest*, with its very Sirkian employment of reflections. They function more directly here, emphasizing the theme of perception, or, more properly, double vision.

Another significant process at work in the film involves Hermann's relation to visual structures: the glance and works of art. People constantly stare at Hermann with fixed looks very reminiscent of those directed at the hero and heroine of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974). Hermann's status as an object of vision, particularly in the courtyard outside Ardalion's and at the post office, relates to the camera's penetration of him through the layers of glass mentioned earlier.

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Hermann asks Ardalion to paint his picture (presumably one element in his plot), but criticizes the likeness: "it looks like Hermann in Ardalion's cesspit mind." Ardalion thinks "it looks more like Hermann than Hermann himself." Nonetheless, it provides an example in which Hermann, who is busy arranging people into one kind of artistic structure, a drama, is himself framed by someone else's art. Observe other cases in which we find Hermann in the same situation. In his first conversation with Felix, Hermann's face obscures and fills in the face of a clown on a circus poster behind them. He is unaware of this, as he is of a similar occurrence in the first Swiss hotel. There he discusses the perfect crime ("one in which the victim is the murderer") while standing so that his head is framed by an oval portrait on the wall. Thus one who thinks he can capitalize on and control others' perceptions is seen often as a passive object, enclosed by images of dominance—the frames; and at the end of the film, the cracked mirror in the hotel reflects part of the totally fragmented and broken face of Hermann.

The various examples of dissociation need close scrutiny, particularly in light of the images thus far discussed. In the first, Hermann controls the actual dissociation; indeed, he prepares for it, as I noted earlier, by positioning his chair, and setting the scene. This includes putting on a robe he keeps under the bed. As he reaches for it, he discovers Ardalion's socks. It soon becomes clear to the viewer that Ardalion and Lydia are having an affair, a fact which Hermann seems not to understand or acknowledge, particularly now as he prepares for his dual roles as lover and voyeur. Fassbinder crosscuts between the lover and observer, emphasizing the cinematic dimension of the activity by introducing into the *mise-en-scène* a flashing light from outside their apartment; this light anticipates the flickering projection lamp we will see in the theatre. Hermann (lover) clearly looks at Hermann (voyeur) in separate shots. The second seduction scene begins with a shot of Lydia in bed caressing and kissing a very military-looking boot worn by Hermann, who stands over the naked woman; he is clad in green fatigue-like pajamas, wears a military cap and holds a whip. Fassbinder again crosscuts between this scene and the voyeur down the hall, on whom the flashing light plays. But we soon hear Lydia's voice asking Hermann to bring her a book, and recognize that we have been watching a fantasy, a false *imagined* reverie of being dissociated. In the first bed scene, Hermann "really" observes himself making love; but the second one is only an illusion of an illusion.

The position of this scene is crucial. It occurs after his dissociation in the movie house, which, unlike the first bedroom scene, is not *willed*; rather, it simply happens—in a context involving illusion and doubles. In the presence of a "real" illusion about two men played by one actor, Hermann lacks the power to control and structure his dissociation as he could earlier. The second bedroom scene also occurs after Hermann's comment to one of the workers at his chocolate factory that he has seen him at the cinema. The worker protests that he never goes to the cinema, but Hermann insists that he saw the man there. Thus the failure to master illusion in the second bedroom scene occurs after Hermann's initial control of reality and illusion has begun to break down, a condition highlighted by Fassbinder with specifically cinematic elements: the

The next example of mistaken vision occurs in the fun house where he first sees Felix; as we saw, the mirrors and glass he looks through only contribute to his distorted perception of reality. Although Hermann says, "I behold myself," we see the difference, as does Felix. Significantly, the mirrors and glass in the fun house create a great number of panels or frame—in effect a visual construct replete with visible lines down the middle.

In a later scene, having returned from his first meeting with Felix, Hermann hears that "Mr. Mueller has resigned," and thinking the person to be his employee, rants on, asks why he wasn't told, and says: "Am I some tramp, wandering around looking for a job?"—that is, he has begun to assume the identity of the man he thinks resembles him, here drawing his lines from Felix's condition. He learns, though, that it is the chancellor, not his employee who has resigned. He compliments the worker seen earlier on his "excellent performance."

Hermann seems oblivious to the political implications of most events in his world. Curiously, his behavior throughout seems to support Orlovius' comment that "Insurance is above politics." Hermann's insurance money, which he will realize through his successful completion of the scenario, is, of course, tied to art and the control of illusion. Hermann tries to extricate himself from the political problems of the Germans, since as an outsider, he claims: "It would be presumptuous for me to have a political opinion, and bad manners to express it." When asked about the current chaos in Germany, he replies: "I don't think. I just insured my life." Insurance and art are above politics for Hermann, but not for Fassbinder who thinks that the artist should be politically involved.⁶

In the dream sequence, as distinguished from the willed, spontaneous or fancied instances of dissociation, Hermann encounters Felix in the house. As we saw, Felix actually takes his place as one of the two Hermanns. The voyeur watching himself enter the house, seen first in a film, subconsciously substitutes the new identity for the voyeur, and is plainly disturbed by the dream. But, since Hermann sees Felix as *his* double, he must be reacting to the felt *presence* of Felix/Hermann, whom we can see only as Felix. This represents a marked step on his path to becoming a killer like Silverman; and, as noted, the turning of Felix's head recalls the movie policeman's gesture with the dead Sergeant Brown's face.

The next encounter with Felix occurs in a long sequence with three parts. First he meets him in a park, and learns of his philosophy, love of animals, etc. Next the men appear in a broken-down inn, seated in the dining area. The jagged glass surrounding them displays designs etched on the panes, one of which appears to be a representation of an alpine inn like the one seen earlier at the restaurant; like the one at which Hermann will end his flight; and, like the painting on which Ardalion works at the end of the film. The scene is visually disorienting for a number of reasons. First, several identical lamps on different tables create perceptual confusion as the camera tracks laterally through the *mise-en-scène*, catching the characters' movements and reflections, intensified by all the glass; Fassbinder seems to have duplicated the structure of Hermann's office, with an exterior glass section within the larger dining room. The

illumination. Eberwein, *Looking for Mr. Herman: Fassbinder's Despair*, showing the stark shadows of *film noir*.

The lighting and glass heighten the reflections of Hermann as he tries to convince Felix that he is a film actor who needs a double at crucial points in the shooting of a film. He promises Felix money if he will stand in for him, but Felix is having none of it; he says, "I believe you are a story teller" and holds film actors in contempt, in addition to rejecting the "swindle" of the line down the middle.

The unsuccessful attempt to trap Felix into acting Hermann's double is followed by a scene in which the characters move outdoors into a rainstorm. Felix stands with his arms around his cane, in a position reminiscent of the Crucifixion. Fassbinder does not mean to suggest that Felix is Christ, but, rather, that he functions ironically in a Christlike way to offer redemption for Hermann by offering new life. This is emphasized several ways: by the cross which dangles from the scissors Hermann uses to cut Felix's hair; by the sign on Orlovius' office, "Neues Leben"; and by the sequence in the Dusseldorf chocolate factory. There Hermann sees thousands of little chocolate men, like puppets. These had been a big Easter novelty the previous year, and the owner hopes they will be successful again. One chocolate man is indistinguishable from another; there are *really* no differences because they all come from the same machine. Fassbinder underscores their sameness as he photographs Hermann from the chocolate men's side of the glass while Hermann recounts his story of a fragmented past, a life of forged papers.

The last part of the interview with Felix takes place in a bedroom, in which Felix strips at the request of Hermann who wants to check for scars (ironically following the Crucifixion scene). To gain a better look, Hermann holds up a ceiling lamp, then releases it; the light continues to swing for several minutes, producing a flickering effect such as we have seen from the projection lamp in the cinema and also from the flashing light in Hermann's apartment. Hermann seems almost to be acting the part of a casting director here, while he looks over the actor/double. As Felix falls asleep, having wondered if the plot is all really a *doublecross*, Hermann has another fantasy. In it he imagines himself and Felix back at the circus house; Felix has a gun, and fires at Hermann, but the shots go into Felix, as if driven back into him by the mirrors. The stop-action photography makes the event seem particularly chilling.

Shortly afterwards, as Hermann explains the scheme of *Brudermort* to Lydia, and coaches her future performance ("When they come to tell you, don't carry on like a Greek tragedy; you know what a rotten actress you are"), we are given a visualization of the confrontation he describes between himself and his "brother." By this point in the film, Hermann has ceased thinking of the *essence* of Hermann as being distinct from what we perceive to be the physical *existence* of Felix. In the dream, we see Felix beginning to take over Hermann the voyeur; in the mirror house fantasy, there still exists some suggestion of otherness. But now, as Hermann describes his wastrel brother and the latter's near suicide at the tavern, Fassbinder crosscuts between Felix embodied as Felix and as *Hermann* (tramp costume and conservative blue suit); we hear Felix's voice

The final imagined scenario begins as the slumping Felix, murdered by one shot from Hermann, says "Thank you." Immediately we enter Hermann's mind: Lydia plays the part assigned to her perfectly, and accepts the insurance check. She appears next in Switzerland, in a dreamy overexposed sequence, and meets "Hermann," visualized as Felix in a dapper white suit, with Felix's voice and past. As they kiss on the bridge, we hear another shot and see Felix fall. Only then do we realize that the fantasy has begun *before* Felix fell; he did not say "Thank you" as Hermann's real "bad" brother would have said.

With the death of Felix for a second time, we see no more fantasies, dreams or instances of dissociation. Eventually Hermann's overlooking of the cane allows the police to identify the victim, thus ironically proving the truth of Hermann's comment about the perfect crime, one in which the victim is the murderer. He pretends to be Felix, but has murdered him; he is actually Hermann, believing that Felix will be acknowledged as himself, as a dead man. But the only things Felix has to indicate that he is Hermann are clothes and a passport—in effect more forged papers. Hermann flees finally to an inn where he is apprehended. As he walks out of the room, the line between illusion and reality seems to have been totally obscured. He says: "Good people, we are making a film here. In a minute, I'll be coming out. But you must keep the police back so that I can get away. I'm a film actor. I'm coming out....Don't look at the camera. I'm coming out." As the film ends he has lost all control over personal identity; the policeman asks, "Hermann Hermann?" and the answer is: "Yes. No.."

Like an artist, Hermann writes, directs and acts in a scenario designed to remake reality. To save himself he tries to create a new life by finding a double to die for him; but he can only effect salvation through murder. Just as the film company killed the innkeeper's bird, Hermann kills the man who loved sparrows (the sparrows themselves died of parrot fever). The film began with the dissociated Hermann watching and enjoying his own performance; it ends with him unable to distinguish performance and reality. He has become the double he said was needed for a film, and, in so doing, lost his mind.

Finally, the film says something to us about the intractability of the world with which we must come to terms. Life resists our attempt to remake it according to our private visions. Our attempt to make sense of our lives will not assume the sensational form of the events in the film. But, like the failed artist, Hermann Hermann, we share the creator's problem: mastering the world we construct out of our imaginations to make life bearable. His search for Mr. Hermann is a symbolic version of our own quest for self.

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NOTES

¹Fassbinder, ed. Toby Rayns (London: British Film Institute, 1976), p. 45.

²For commentary on the film, see: Robert Ashina, "Teutonic Tedium," *The New Leader*, 23 October 1978, pp. 19-20; John Fell, "Despair," *Film Quarterly*, 33, no. 1 (Fall 1979), 59-61; Penelope Glliatt, "Lamplights," *The New Yorker*, 19 March 1979, p. 126; Robert Hatch,

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"Films," *The Nation*, 10 March 1979, p. 284; Jack Kroll, "Candy Man," *Newsweek*, 12 March 1979, p. 90; James McCord, "Percival and Other Knights," *Film Comment*, 14 (November/December 1978), 58; David Robinson, "Fassbinder after *Despair*," *Sight and Sound*, 46, no. 4 (Autumn 1977), 216-217; John Skow, "Doubled Up," *Time*, 6 November 1978, pp. 82-83; Colin Westerbeck, "Arts Gratis Artis," *Commonweal*, 27 October 1978, pp. 689-690.

³Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966); subsequent references to this work are given parenthetically in the article.

⁴"Comedy and the Film within a Film," *Wide Angle*, 3, no. 2 (1979), 12-17.

⁵Paul Thomas, "Fassbinder: The poetry of the Inarticulate," *Film Quarterly*, 30, no. 2 (Winter 1976-77), 4.

⁶In this regard, see Fassbinder, "Insects in a Glass Case: Random Thoughts on the Films of Claude Chabrol," trans. Derek Prouse, *Sight and Sound*, 45, no. 4 (Autumn 1976), 205-206. My colleague at Oakland University, Professor Dolores Burdick, has completed a thorough study of the political context in Fassbinder's *Despair*.