

Exhibition reviews

Fassbinder Frankfurt

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The exhibition Fassbinder – NOW: Film and Video Art was installed at the Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt from 30 October 2013 to 1 June 2014. It juxtaposed excerpts from films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-1982) with works of contemporary film and video art by Tom Geens, Runa Islam, Maryam Jafri, Jesper Just, Jeroen de Rijke & Willem de Rooij, and Ming Wong, all of which connect to Fassbinder's work either topically or aesthetically. Fassbinder's films offer a social critique and are concerned with failed relationships, emotional exploitation, discrimination against minorities, and the burden of the past. My focus here is on the aspects of his critique, alienation, cultural identity, and sexual identity which are re-articulated in the works of these contemporary artists.

A key to this exhibition is the theme of commemoration, cultural memory, and re-enactment. Even though cinema as popular memory is less pronounced here than in Douglas Gordon's and others' re-appropriation of popular Hitchcock films in the late 1990s, the signature of Fassbinder still serves as the cultural heritage of these artists who explore this reference conceptually while ascribing new meanings to it. It is the institutional and pedagogical ambition of this exhibition to reassess Fassbinder 'the auteur' and Fassbinder's archive from the point of view of contemporary art. For Claudia Dillman (director of the museum) and Anna Fricke (curator of the exhibition), their main motivation for the show was to raise the question of how film history can be made accessible. Moreover, I think the exhibition shows the influence films by Fassbinder have on visual strategies explored by contemporary artists who use the techniques of remake, mash-up, pastiche, and citation.



*Fig. 1: Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1970.
Quelle: DIF © Peter Gauhe.*

When visiting the exhibition I was interested in the influence on their aesthetics, especially when thinking of Fassbinder's (Douglas Sirk-inspired) *mise-en-scène*, where the colour and framing of the film, the mirrors, the decors, and costumes tell the story. Often walls occupy about two-thirds of the screen, leaving only small rectangular frames inside which the characters have to find space to move. Door frames become picture frames for the protagonists. The artificial character of such images, a key criterion in his style, is enhanced by a distanced camera. Another component typical of Fassbinder's style is the mixture of pop and rock music with classical music.

During the exhibition, in the same building, a retrospective of Fassbinder's films was shown in the cinema as well as a programme of contemporary film-makers such as Pedro Almodóvar, Martin Scorsese, and François Ozon, who claim to have been influenced by him. Therefore the film museum became a house of Fassbinder: in the basement is the cinema, in the corridor one can find documents, and in the exhibition hall different installations are on display. In front of the entrance of the exhibition screenplays and production stills from the archive

of the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation (RWFF) are displayed close to an installation of video screens showing Fassbinder in television interviews.

Ming Wong's installation, which is also on display outside the main exhibition space in the hallway on a monitor, mirrors the mise-en-scène from Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) by using a television screen on a white rug; this screen shows Wong's video piece *Learn German with Petra von Kant* (2007) in a 10-minute loop. Playing all of the roles himself, Wong dresses as the original film characters, lying on a similar white rug and repeating lines from the film in broken German. He uses the same strategy with *Eat Fear* (2007), which not only works as a re-enacting of Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973) but also as a parody of the film.



Fig. 2: *Angst Essen / Eat Fear* (Ming Wong, 2008).
© Courtesy of the artist and carlier | gebauer Berlin.

There are seven compilations of Fassbinder's films in the exhibition which are grouped at the center of the exhibition in two black boxes under the headings 'relationships' and 'social criticism'; these two black boxes are the only individual spaces for Fassbinder's films – the other excerpts are visible in the corridor under the titles 'light and colour', 'framing and mirroring', 'theatrical singing', and 'group behavior'. The contemporary video works form a dialogue with these bits. When entering the exhibition an excerpt of Fassbinder's melodrama *Martha* (1973) is shown, using a scene which highlights the famous 360-degree tracking shot where the camera revolves around a woman and a man during their first encounter. This excerpt is part of a seven-minute loop showing a compilation of different camera movements in Fassbinder's films. In proximity to this screening is the exhibition of the three-screen installation *TUIN* (1998) by Runa Islam, projected on 16 mm

film. This piece deconstructs and radicalises Fassbinder's method of the 360-degree tracking shot. When the visitors walk in the black box towards the screens, which hang freely in the middle of the room, they become part of the overall narrative.

Due to an event of this size which includes different media, the exhibition questions any easy definition of 'gallery films', 'cinematographic installation', 'entre-image', 'cinéma d'exposition', 'relational aesthetics', 'extended cinema', or 'othered cinema'. The reason for the difficulty in defining the art works is that the excerpts of Fassbinder's films themselves become 'cinematographic installations'. In *Mandarin Ducks* (2005), Jeroen de Rijke and Wilem de Rooij refer to Fassbinder in terms of both aesthetics and narrative. The protagonists' struggle with society is similar to those in Fassbinder's *Chinese Roulette* (1976) and *In a Year with 13 Moons* (1978). *A Fine Romance* (2004) by Jesper Just is a trilogy of short 35 mm films projected on digital video which recall Fassbinder with their melodramatic staging of men in the mirror-surfaced space of a brothel, where the mirrors reveal the emotional states of the protagonists. *Costume Party* (2005) by Maryam Jafri plays with the particular staging of characters from Fassbinder's films, echoing for example *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. When asked about Fassbinder's work Jafri is quoted in the exhibition catalogue: '[h]is work can be sometimes cynical, often cruel, but he does not foreclose the possibility of political or social transformation – this balance is what I find relevant today'.

The entire exhibition shows the impact cinema has on current artistic media and also how the boundaries between film and video art are blurred. To younger generations the exhibition provides an opportunity to get to know Fassbinder's films; for others it is an occasion to examine the films in a new perspective. This approach shows that museums can provide a unique strategy for learning about film history through contemporary video art.

In his short video *You're the Stranger Here* (2009) the artist Tom Geens depicts a totalitarian society and in this process draws aesthetic parallels with Fassbinder's films about the persistence of fascist structures in post-war Germany. Geens states that Fassbinder's films are timeless and that their imagery and narratives 'stay in our collective subconscious'. During the opening week of the exhibition, at a podium discussion in the cinema of the film museum, Geens talked with students about the ways in which history is treated and visualised in contemporary art. The discussion followed a screening of excerpts of Fassbinder's film *In a Year with 13 Moons*, which is set in Frankfurt in 1978. After my own presentation on Fassbinder, Geens's film *You're the Stranger Here* was also shown on the big screen. We then discussed the different phenomenological experiences of the films shown in these unequal dispositifs. These experiences refer to a broader discussion on mobility and attention. While some audience members criticised the poor sound quality of the exhibition space, because one is able to hear the soundtracks of other video

works or of Fassbinder's films, others favoured the possibility to walk in and out of the black boxes inside the museum. One might also argue that it is exactly those overlapping sounds that entice the viewers to stroll between the different parts of the exhibition. The sound dilemma is typical of contemporary art exhibitions, but here, with Fassbinder's films, it is particularly drastic since speech, noise, and music play such an important role in his work.



Fig. 3: *You're The Stranger Here* (Tom Geens, 2009).

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Considering *In a Year with 13 Moons*, the feeling of inescapability sticks to the film characters as well as the film images. Beyond the verbal construction of meaning, music is a key element to represent the sphere of the unspeakable; music continually thwarts the spoken word; it creates its own rhythmical patterns which undermine the visual impact. The collage of different musical styles can be interpreted as Fassbinder anticipating the technique of sampling. The cut-up on the soundtrack is a sample indeed, a specimen that shows how different sounds and music pieces are assembled and even cross-faded. The volume of outside noise, footsteps, or machine sounds is often oversized, even tending to become dissonant, penetrating the inside. Inside noise can also be present outside, thus the border between the two is abandoned – there is a kind of musical de-bordering. Essentially, music does not have an illustrative function in Fassbinder's films; it does not support the image harmoniously and instead creates a very idiosyncratic quality of expression.

In Geens's film *You're the Stranger Here* the eerie quality of sounds, voices, and music enhances the strangeness of the protagonists' behaviour. Geens creates a dystopian world which could be anywhere, anytime. Due to the sound quality the experience in the cinema is more intense than in the exhibition. For some the screening conditions of all the films and videos could be enhanced by having more headphones in the exhibition. Unfortunately, the spaces for contemporary video art are larger than those which show the excerpts from Fassbinder's films. I would have preferred a more balanced exhibition architecture, as most of the excerpts were squeezed into corridors. Furthermore, I found the show to be too didactic. Nevertheless, the show succeeds in granting access to Fassbinder's oeuvre through the looking-glass of present-day video art.

All of the new works play with the topics and aesthetics of Fassbinder's films. The re-contextualisation allows the films to become even more innovative and modern than they already are. In this context I agree with Julia Noordegraaf when she states for gallery films in general that 'the coexistence of various mediums, formats, and exhibition techniques and styles is not something to be avoided, but a way to make the past experiential in the present'.¹ Still, I would have preferred placing a sign showing the times of the film program in the exhibition space in order to connect the video works not only to the excerpts but also to the full-length films shown in the cinema.



Fig. 4: *Fassbinder NOW*
© DIF / Photograph: Uwe Dettmar.

Moreover, in the Frankfurt exhibition different types of audiences are enabled to experience the works beyond the boundaries of one discipline or generation. The 'now' in Fassbinder – NOW: Film and Video Art is visible and palpable throughout the whole exhibition, as the repetitions of the films and videos function like feedback loops in time. This phenomenon is not only connected to the exhibition practice but also to the quality of Fassbinder's films. In the catalogue Thomas Elsaesser describes their own historicity as an 'effect of *something appearing in retrospect as prescient and prophetic*: a sort of short-circuiting of causality and consequence in the convergence of retroactive recognition' (p. 75).²

In this context I argue that it is important to pay particular attention to the relationship between the functions of memory and film aesthetics at the site where cinema and exhibition practices come together. This means that film foundations such as the RWFF are gradually gaining in significance under the banner of the reflexive historicisation of media culture. Therefore, the horizons of previous reflections on film theory have to be expanded and opened up to the assumption that screening practice plays just as important a role in determining the subject and aesthetics of a film, as is the case for a performance of a musical piece, for example. This is one of the many unique lessons we can take away from Fassbinder – NOW: Film and Video Art.

Notes

1. Noordegraaf & Saba & Le Maitre & Hediger 2013, p. 411.
2. Elsaesser 2013, p. 75.

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