

The Marriage of Maria Braun (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979)

Werner C. Barg

dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder;
prod. Michael Fengler; screenplay
Peter Märthesheimer, Pea Fröhlich;
photography Michael Ballhaus;
music Peer Raben. 35mm, color,
115 mins. Albatros Filmproduktion,
distrib. United Artists.



The melodramatic entanglement of characters had already been a central element in German director Rainer Werner Fass-

binder's early films. In *Katzelmacher* (1969), the appearance of the Greek guest worker Jorgos (played by Fassbinder himself) upsets the power structure of a young gang in a suburban Munich neighborhood. Jorgos is met with jealousy and xenophobia when he begins a love affair with one of the young women in the clique. In *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1972), Fassbinder tells the love story of a German woman and another guest worker. The older cleaner, Emmi (played by Brigitte Mira), falls in love with the younger Moroccan, Ali (played by El Hedi ben Salem), triggering racist reactions among neighbors and family members. Here, Fassbinder uses the melodramatic construction to show a cycle of exploitability of emotions. After exclusion comes exploitation. In order to regain recognition, Emmi gladly takes on the additional, yet thankless job of babysitting for the family next door, and Ali is called upon by the neighbors as a strong handyman for all needs in the household, without, of course, compensation.

The German-born U.S. director Douglas Sirk had perfected the melodramatic narrative principle of *mésalliance*—that is, the depiction of relationships between (socially) unequal partners disdained by the society around them and put under high social pressure—in films such as → *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Fassbinder, for whom Sirk was a key role model, transferred Sirk's concept of melodrama from the U.S. upper class milieu to the everyday reality of ordinary people in West Germany in his films of the early 1970s. He employed the melodramatic concept toward building biting critique of the petit bourgeoisie. However, through character studies of his protagonists, most of whom yearn for a different life, Fassbinder also revealed the psychological injuries inflicted on people by the structures of the authoritarian conditions shaped by

the deplorable traditions of German history. In *Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* (*The Merchant of Four Seasons*, 1972), for example, Fassbinder condenses central motifs of his socio-critical underpinnings of cinematic melodrama in the portrait of a man whom people had not always treated kindly: emotional coldness, social and intellectual narrowness, the exploitability of feelings, war trauma, longing for another life, combined with experiencing a true »great love.«

All of these motifs can be found in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*. This film—with which came the international breakthrough for both Fassbinder and the leading actress, Hanna Schygulla—allowed Fassbinder to establish himself as a recognized European *auteur* filmmaker. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* marks the beginning of the so-called FRG trilogy, in which Fassbinder tells the stories of three women's fates in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s, completed by *Lola* (1981) and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (1982).

During the hail of bombs in World War II, Maria and Hermann Braun (played by Klaus Löwitsch) have but half a day and one night left to spend together after their wedding, before Hermann must return to the front. At the end of the war, Maria looks for her husband among the returnees at the train station. But he is never among them. Maria takes life into her own hands, waitressing in an »off-limits« bar run by the U.S. Army. A returned comrade-in-arms of Hermann informs Maria that her husband was killed in action. She begins a torrid love affair with a U.S. soldier, Bill (played by George Byrd), and becomes pregnant. Hermann then returns and surprises Maria while she is in the middle of an erotic moment with Bill. Full of guilt, but also in order to prove her true love to Hermann, Maria slays Bill. During trial before a military court, Hermann unexpectedly takes responsibility for the bloody deed and goes to prison for it. After having aborted her and Bill's child, and at the dawn of the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* (»economic miracle«), Maria builds a career as private assistant to Oswald (played by Ivan Desny), a factory owner who also becomes her lover. Maria tries to keep her professional and private life separate in this affair, and to remain self-determined and independent in both spheres. In doing so, her plan is to acquire wealth in order to be able to present Hermann with a »new life« after his return from prison. However, Hermann follows his own agenda and rejects the new life that Maria longs for and offers to him. After prison, he leaves her to become a »new man.« In the final scene, following Oswald's death, the two fatefully entangled characters are finally united in Maria's villa. Oswald's will is opened. Maria considers herself the sole heir but is surprised to learn that he has also bequeathed half his factory's assets to Hermann. The two men had made a pact behind Maria's back. Shortly afterwards, there is a gas explosion in the villa, cruelly ending Maria's life, and thus putting an end to her marriage. Fassbinder's film leaves open whether Maria truly did not notice the smell of gas when she lit a cigarette in her kitchen, or whether she committed suicide because she felt betrayed by the two men who loved her and was disappointed in her own intention to lead a self-determined marriage, materially independent from her husband.

Die Ehe der Maria Braun tells the story of a woman who yearns to live together with her great love but is not able to fulfill this longing due to historical circumstance. In Fassbinder's film, melodrama and the portrayal of history are combined in a sophisticated way, providing a dramaturgical pattern still used today in countless so-called docudramas in the context of »history television« and to great public effect. Historical television-film events have boasted powerful audience ratings in Germany, for exam-

ple, where more than eleven million viewers tuned in to watch *Die Sturmflut* on RTL, and more than twelve million to see the 2012 docudrama *Dresden* on ZDF. Yet Fassbinder's melodramas differ from these television products, especially with respect to the director's tremendous intuitive feeling for not simply shooting his melodramatic stories in conventional ways, but for really *telling* them through the formal means of film. Fassbinder himself explains: »I believe that in film it is not enough to simply think up something that is worth telling, because that is only half the battle. That's why I think the atmosphere and composition of films are so important otherwise you'd just have to take some clever sociological books and implement them somehow [...]. But those are truisms« (Pflaum and Fassbinder 17).

The sociological »truism« contained in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* is the fact that many women, left to their own devices after the war, built or established something for themselves, or at least wanted to do so—but their efforts were thwarted when the men returned, as they restored the old, traditional distribution of gender roles. Fassbinder asks what this does to women, but also to men. Maria makes herself unassailable by trying to control every situation and dominate in it. This way, she intends to escape the exploitability of her feelings. In the development of his main character, Fassbinder shows that this behavior costs strength and that Maria pays for the growing material fulfillment of her desires with growing emotional coldness. She reacts increasingly domineering. Her facial expression is rigid, the makeup makes her appear more and more mask-like, statuesque. Fassbinder also elegantly refines the pictorial design of earlier films in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*: »We made images that constrict, that give people so little air that I have the feeling that you can only fight this constriction with very brutal means. So even there I find the images important, and the movements with which something is told« (Pflaum and Fassbinder 17).

In *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, Fassbinder does not excessively use the principle of the constricting camera perspective, in which the characters are framed by door frames, windows, or scenery elements in the *mise-en-scène* and appear restricted in their range of movement, as done, for example, in *Angst essen Seele auf*. However, Fassbinder narrates the conflict that Oswald gets into through his connection to Maria and Hermann by, for instance, constricting image tableaux. Furthermore, Fassbinder and cinematographer Michael Ballhaus use camera movement within scenes more sophisticatedly and brilliantly than in earlier films, finely choreographed to the spoken word, through parallel and travelling shots of individual characters to expose their reactions to the scenic action. This way, sometimes supplemented by the editing of the image, Fassbinder creates revealing scopic discourses that help the audience to better understand characters' behavior in particular scenes: for example, when Maria stands before the military tribunal. As Fassbinder throughout his life saw himself as a political filmmaker, he also employs image-sound montage in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* as part of commentary on postwar West German history. For example, in two scenes clearly separated by time, he allows the dialogue of two news reports be drowned out by original quotes from German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, so that the audience is encouraged to parallel the auditorily presented political discourse on the rearmament of West Germany with the growing emotional coldness of the film's protagonist.

At the very end of the film, portraits of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany's Chancellors Adenauer, Erhard, and Kiesinger—who had been in office before the film's making—are faded in as negative images, in a kind of epilogue. The

image of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany's Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, in office at the time of the film's production, changes from negative to positive. Furthermore, by omitting the SPD reform Chancellor, Willy Brandt, from his montage, Fassbinder provides a predominantly negative commentary on the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. The epilogue is preceded in the film's final scene by an image-sound montage in which the reunion of Maria and Hermann is accompanied by audio commentary of the legendary 1954 World Cup match between Hungary and West Germany. The explosion of the house, which signifies the end of Maria's longing to live out her great love, is accompanied by the frenetic exclamation of sportscaster Herbert Zimmermann: »Over, over, over—over!—The game is over—Germany is world champion.« A Germany of callousness and materialism: as Fassbinder's melodrama shows, one that was never Fassbinder's Germany.

References

- Barg, Werner C., and Michael Töteberg, eds. 2020. *Rainer Werner Fassbinder Transmedial*. Marburg: Schüren.
- Pflaum, Hans Günther, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. 1976. *Das bißchen Realität, das ich brauche: Wie Filme entstehen*. Munich: Carl Hanser.
- Töteberg, Michael. 2015. »Bibliography.« *Text + Kritik*, no. 103, 129-47.