

## ***Die Ehe der Maria Braun / The Marriage of Maria Braun: Transcript***

In this presentation, I will be discussing how Rainer Werner Fassbinder explores the history of West Germany in his 1979 film, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. I will be discussing not only how he shows elements of post-war West Germany on screen, but also how the central character of Maria Braun, played by Hanna Shygulla, represents West Germany herself.

### **Fassbinder and the New German Cinema**

Fassbinder was part of a movement of West German directors which came to be called the New German Cinema. This was a group of young filmmakers who were aiming to reject the kind of films that their predecessors had made. The New German Cinema directors felt that previous generations had failed to deal with the legacy of Germany's Nazi past and had not seen West Germany's history in a critical enough light. To remedy this, they aimed to portray West Germany and its history in a way that acknowledged Germany's problematic past.

### **Historical Context of Post-War West Germany**

In the case of this film by Fassbinder, the primary aspect of West Germany's history with which he is engaging is that of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or Economic Miracle. In the immediate post-war period, West Germany was still in a dire state. Food prices were exceptionally high and there was a gender imbalance because of the amount of male military casualties. Eventually, due to currency reform and the introduction of the Marshall Plan wherein the US helped West Germany financially, the nation underwent the economic rebuilding that came to be called the Economic Miracle.

Fassbinder's aim in this film is to not only show the development of West German society on-screen, but also to show this in a critical light. Despite West Germany's undergoing an economic rebirth, many of those who had been involved in politics during the Nazi period were still in political positions of power, and those who had been Nazi collaborators were also heavily involved in the industries that supported the economic reconstruction of the country. An example of this is the industrialist Hans Martin Schleyer, who had been a member of the Nazi Party and later became an industrial leader in West Germany. The Economic Miracle was not an entirely positive phenomenon in Fassbinder's view and the view of those involved in the New German Cinema, as it represented the continuation of Nazis holding positions of power; an element of history which Fassbinder felt was being ignored by the public at large.

Fassbinder uses his film, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, to explore these historical topics surrounding the economic rebirth of West Germany. Firstly, I will describe how Maria's character is depicted as part of a simple historical narrative. Then I will explain how Fassbinder uses her character to represent the more problematic aspects of West Germany's fascist past.

## **Film Summary**

To summarise the film: It opens with shots of Maria marrying her husband Hermann, in amongst a bomb attack. He then goes off to war, and she is told that he is killed while on duty. She then becomes a bar hostess in a bar frequented by American occupying soldiers, and enters into a relationship with one. Hermann, her husband returns and surprises her and her GI partner, leading to a fight in which the GI is killed by Maria. At a military trial for the

murder, Hermann takes responsibility and is imprisoned. On the way back from the trial, Maria meets an industrialist, Herr Oswald, who offers her a job. She becomes his mistress and becomes wealthy at the same time. Herr Oswald visits Hermann in prison and they make a deal that, if Hermann does not return to Maria when he is released from prison, then she will become the heir to Herr Oswald's wealth. After this agreement, Maria continues her affair with Oswald, unaware of the deal. Oswald dies. The executor of Oswald's will comes to see Maria and Hermann, who are now reunited in her grand new house. Maria causes a gas explosion, blowing up the house and the film ends.

Now I have summarised the film, I will explain in more detail how Maria's character represents developments in West German history.

### **Maria representing West German women**

Even before Maria is shown, Fassbinder asks the audience to pay attention to the historical context of the film. The opening credits roll over an image of Hitler. Over this image of Hitler, there is a voice-over of an official marrying Maria and her husband, Hermann. There is then an explosion, removing the image of Hitler, which is replaced by Maria and her husband. Maria is depicted marrying her husband amidst the rubble of war, which is directly related to the Third Reich. Her romantic relationships are immediately linked to problematic West German historical events by Fassbinder before the plot even has time to develop.

She is also depicted by Fassbinder as being part of the *Trümmerfrau* phenomenon. These *Trümmerfrauen*, or women of the rubble, were those who were left to clear away the rubble of the bombings on West Germany. They not only represented West Germany trying to deal with the physical devastation of its cities, but also the gender imbalance left due to war

casualties. Maria is depicted against the backdrop of these women when her husband goes off to war and is shown with a placard asking for information on his whereabouts. Fassbinder is once again clearly trying to link her character to the consequences of World War II. The fact that she has to deal with her husband's supposed death, as does her friend Betti, also reflects what women of the time had to go through in being separated from their husbands by war.

Maria's relationship with Bill, the American G.I. also fits into stereotypes of how women were perceived at the time of the post-war American occupation of West Germany. There was a great fear at that time that women would be fraternising with these American soldiers and thereby weakening the reconstruction of West Germany by being morally degraded through these relationships. These men could provide consumer goods such as cigarettes and stockings in return for romance, making the women involved in these relationships appear to be like prostitutes to those around them who did not approve. Maria's involvement with Bill is reminiscent of these relationships. Once again, Fassbinder is using Maria to show historical developments in West German society.

The emotional impact of war on the women of West Germany and the changes their lives had to undergo are clearly being depicted by Fassbinder through the character of Maria at the outset of the film. This is before she has to deal with the trauma of her husband returning and of the killing of her new partner, the American G.I, Bill. This relationship between Maria and Bill also shows Fassbinder using her in a symbolic way to represent not just West German women, but West Germany as a nation and the consequences of the Economic Miracle.

### **Maria symbolically representing West Germany as a nation**

When Maria kills her new romantic partner, Bill, the American GI, this could be interpreted as a violent reaction to the re-emergence of a traumatic past. In this scene, Hermann Braun arrives un-announced. When he and Bill fight, Maria kills Bill by smashing a bottle over his head. A violent reaction has been caused by the return of someone who is connected to West Germany's past, as Hermann was supposed to have been killed when in fact he was being kept as a prisoner of war. Fassbinder is, therefore, showing that West Germany's dealing with its problematic past – represented by Hermann's return – could cause emotional discomfort for those involved, and even pain.

As Maria becomes more involved with Herr Oswald, the industrialist, and improves the way the factory is run, she becomes more aggressive, and less romantic, and causes unhappiness in those around her. This development in Maria's character shows Fassbinder portraying the West German economic miracle in a negative light. As Maria becomes more successful economically, she becomes colder and less emotional. We can see this by comparing her relationships with Bill, Hermann and Herr Oswald. Maria makes it clear at the beginning of the film that she does truly love her husband, even though they were only married for a very brief time, as she walks around with her placard, waiting for him to come back, and declares her love for him at her trial for killing Bill. Her relationship with Bill is defined through their passion, as their love scene together shows. Both of these relationships are before Maria becomes entangled with industry and with Herr Oswald's factory.

While she is with Herr Oswald, Maria becomes extremely cold and is even aggressive to Herr Oswald, even though she is his mistress. This is shown frequently throughout the second half of the film when they interact. When they are together in her office, he asks her to spend a weekend with him in the country, which she refuses, saying 'Last night I was Maria Braun who wanted to sleep with you; today I'm Maria Braun who wants to work for you.' She

remains cold and business-like throughout the encounter. In a scene set in Herr Oswald's bedroom after Maria has been involved in factory negotiations, they appear to have just been intimate together as Maria is wrapped in a bed sheet. Despite this, she says bluntly to Herr Oswald that she hates him. Again, Maria is depicted as cold and emotionless. In another scene, Herr Oswald is on the phone to Maria, who tells him that it is her mother's birthday today. He asks if he should pick her up, to which she replies 'no', and hangs up the phone on him. Herr Oswald then is shown sighing and moving around his office in a listless fashion, showing the emotional effect that this interaction has had on him. Maria's coldness and lack of emotion because of her economic involvement is shown as negatively impacting on her inter-personal relationships and on those around her.

In the scene where she moves into her new house, which she is able to buy because of the deal struck between her husband and Herr Oswald, her mother notes how cold and unemotional she is. The fact that Maria having a house is a new achievement for the family is also emphasised by the interaction between Maria and her mother. Maria's mother says that she is the first to ever actually own a house, to which Maria replies that someone had to be first. Maria also callously talks about her dead father, and her mother replies, 'How could you say such a thing? You've changed so much Maria! You've become like a stranger.' Maria then notes herself that she has become cold. Her mother is also shocked at the way that Maria interacts with others. As her things are being moved into the house, Maria shouts at a workman for dropping a box, in an aggressive reaction. This aggression is also highlighted because while Maria shouts at a workman in the background of the shot, her mother is embracing her new romantic partner in the foreground, heightening Maria's aggression and callousness even more. Maria's being able to own a house and her economic success is directly linked to her aggression, hurting those around her.

Before Herr Oswald dies, he and Maria have one last meal together and there is clearly tension between the two rather than sexual chemistry as he says he is 'almost afraid to breathe'. When he dies, it is of heart failure, which could be linked to his emotional rejection by Maria and her lack of feelings towards him. Herr Oswald's being an industrialist, and Maria's involvement with these economic aspects of West German society is a clear example of Fassbinder showing the negative parts of the economic miracle. It is her involvement with Herr Oswald, that causes her to become emotionless and cold, which in turn is linked to his death.

It is not only those around Maria who are negatively impacted by this relationship. The explosion at the end of the film which kills Maria herself is also connected to the economic success of West Germany. In this scene, Maria and Hermann are in Maria's large house, having Herr Oswald's will read to them. Maria has left the gas cooker on without realising it. After the will is read, she goes and lights a cigarette, causing an explosion which kills both her and Hermann. Over this entire scene, Fassbinder overlays the sound of a radio broadcast of Germany winning the World Cup. Maria and Hermann are also denied the opportunity to consummate their new status as a couple actually living together as they are interrupted by the arrival of the executors of Herr Oswald's will.

This scene is highly significant as Fassbinder is showing the emotional impact of West Germany's economic success on Maria, not just on those around her. Although she is allowed to access Herr Oswald's riches, this is immediately followed with her death in a very violent fashion. The entrance of his will's executors which interrupts the romantic reunion of Maria and Hermann is another example of Fassbinder portraying the way in which this economic success can have negative results; they have been separated for the entire film and theoretically could now actually consummate their marriage, but are denied this opportunity

by the intrusion of the possibility of having new money in their house. Fassbinder thereby links the intrusion of capitalism into Maria's house with her death.

Another way that the intrusion of capitalism prevents her and Hermann from consummating their marriage is the way she frequently changes clothes throughout the scene. She begins the scene where she and Hermann are re-united in a suit, but is then shown in her underwear. She then changes into a different dress, into her underwear again, and finally chooses a white suit in which to deal with the executors of Herr Oswald's will. These frequent costume changes are accompanied by Maria walking around the house rather than choosing to be intimate with her husband despite the fact that they have just been re-united. As the clothes appear to be formal and expensive ones, they are representative of economic success. Therefore, Maria's frequent clothes changes in this final scene once again show Fassbinder displaying the negative consequences of economic success: economic success, represented by Maria's clothes, is shown to prevent intimacy between her and Hermann.

The function of the radio broadcast which is played by Fassbinder over the entire scene is not only to associate the supposed success of West Germany (as it is of a West German football victory) with Maria's death. Fassbinder's film is also trying to make the viewer confused, or alienated, by what is going on on-screen. This is because the sound of the radio broadcast does not match the events happening visually. Therefore Fassbinder is trying to use this disconnect between the levels of sound and image to get the viewer to think more carefully about his message. In this case, it is the message about the negativity of the Economic Miracle, despite its being perceived as a great success for Germany, because of the fact that it was built on the legacies of West Germany's Nazi past.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many ways that Fassbinder engages with West Germany's historical past in the film *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. Firstly, he shows Maria as being part of historical phenomena such as the Trümmerfrau, and the many women who entered into romantic relationships with occupying American soldiers. In addition to this, Maria is also a symbol for the negative aspects of the Economic Miracle. These negative aspects are reflected through the development of Maria's character who becomes cold and emotionless after being involved with the industrialist Herr Oswald. Finally, Maria's death at the end of the film is inextricably linked to West Germany's economic success and also sporting success through Fassbinder's use of the World Cup radio broadcast. This radio broadcast is evidence of Fassbinder trying to make the viewer pay more attention to the negative aspects of West German society by mismatching what is on-screen and what is being heard by the viewer.

Fassbinder uses the film to portray the history of West Germany not only on a simple level of what is going on on-screen, but also using Maria as a symbolic figure, embodying West Germany and the problematic aspects of West German history.