

Names in the Films of R. W. Fassbinder

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The films of R. W. Fassbinder employ character names which are different from character-naming practices in literature. Fassbinder often uses an actor's personal name or a variant as a basis for naming the character. Nicknames from Fassbinder's inner circle are also used, as are names based on figures from literature or history; one of the most important is *Franz Biberkopf*, the hero of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

The German film maker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the leading figure of the New German Cinema, made over forty films before his death from a drug overdose in 1982 at age thirty-seven. In his early twenties he had run an avant-garde theater group, the action theater, later anti-theater, in Munich, and with his young troupe of actors and actresses, many of whom had received their start with him, he made a number of low-budget feature films in a very short period of time. In his first burst of creative energy he produced ten feature films (1969 through 1970), along with many stage and television productions. This period ended with Fassbinder's first film success, *Der Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* 'The Merchant of Four Seasons' in 1971. It was acclaimed at the New York Film Festival. His greatest films include *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* 'The Marriage of Maria Braun' (1978), *Despair* (1977), an international production of a Nabokov novel with book by Tom Stoppard and starring Dirk Bogarde, and *Angst essen Seele auf* 'Ali: Fear Eats the Soul' (1973), the story of a misalliance between a sixty-year-old German cleaning lady and a younger Arab worker. Fassbinder filmed *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the classic Weimar novel by Alfred Döblin, for television in fourteen installments (1980). His last film, in 1982, was an adaptation of Jean Genet's novel *Querelle de*

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Brest, a novel so radical and sexually explicit that many had doubted it could ever be filmed.

For this onomastic study we can exclude those films based on literary models, such as *Wildwechsel* 'Jailbait' (1972), a filming of a play by Franz Xaver Kroetz, and *Nora Helmer* (1973), a filming of Ibsen's play *Ghosts* which Fassbinder also had staged; in these the character names are unchanged. Yet in filming Marie-Luise Fleisser's *Pioniere in Ingolstadt* 'Pioneers in Ingolstadt' in 1970, Fassbinder retained the main character names of the original while changing others and assigning names to many characters who were originally identified solely by their roles in the play.

The relations between directors and contemporary authors are particularly strong in the post-war German film world: Heinrich Böll worked with co-directors Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta in filming *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* 'The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum' (1975), Peter Handke cooperated with the director Wim Wenders, a personal friend, in the filming of *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* 'The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick' (1971). Günter Grass worked with Volker Schlöndorff in filming Grass's famous *Die Blechtrommel* 'The Tin Drum' (1979).

In addition to his films based on literary works, Fassbinder also produced film scripts of plays he had written and directed himself, for example *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* 'The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant' (1972) and *Schatten der Engel* 'Shadow of Angels' (1975), based on his play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* 'Garbage, the City, and Death,' called anti-Semitic by some. As with his adaptations of literary works by others, each secondary creation has a set of character names available to be employed, altered, or suppressed.

A similar problem of taking over or changing names embodied in the model occurs in films based on history rather than literary models, such as *Die Niklashauserfahrt* 'The Niklashauser Journey' (1970). This recounts events of the Peasant Wars of Sixteenth Century Germany. Fassbinder adds new episodes and characters in this film, even characters from his contemporary radical scene such as an American Black Panther.

Two further films are based on autobiographies: *Lili Marleen* (1980), from Lale Andersen's autobiography *Der Himmel hat viele Farben* 'Heaven Has Many Colors' and a filmed collection of autobiographical reports, *Ich will doch nur, daß ihr mich liebt* 'I Only Want You to Love Me' (1976), which is derived from a series of interviews with convicts serving life sentences.

The interaction which I have described between history or biography on the one hand and fiction on the other is common in works of literature as well as the films of Fassbinder (and others). Here I will consider those films which are not based on literary or historical models, whether their names are taken over from the literary texts or modified.

Because the director Fassbinder generally was his own scriptwriter, and at times modifying while directing the scripts of others, almost all of the character names in his films not based on models in literature or history were devised by Fassbinder himself. With few exceptions, such as *Die Niklashauserfahrt* mentioned above or *Bremer Freiheit* 'Bremer Freedom' (1972), Fassbinder's films are set in contemporary Germany, or in the earlier Twentieth Century of the Weimar Republic or the Hitler period. Unlike other directors of the New German Cinema, such as Wim Wenders, Volker Schlöndorff, and Werner Herzog, Fassbinder never uses non-European settings. Thus a fairly homogeneous, and usually contemporary, German society is portrayed throughout Fassbinder's film oeuvre. His characters are drawn from the middle class (especially the petite bourgeoisie) or the working class. These people appear in conjunction or in contrast with many criminals, prostitutes (male and female), and otherwise marginal characters such as the *Gastarbeiter* (foreign workers) of Germany.

As in the novel and drama, a certain, often large, proportion of the characters who appear or are mentioned is not given personal names. If these minor characters are identified at all, in dialogue or in a screen listing, it is by role rather than by name. We hear of a taxi-driver, a prostitute, an old man.

Sometimes Fassbinder's character names do not appear in the film credits, or in reviews, or in filmographies. These names (forenames, nicknames, or surnames) must be gained from actual

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viewings of the films. For instance *Hans* is the forename of the main character in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1972), as we learn from listening to the dialog; his personal name is not specified elsewhere.

One of the more common practices Fassbinder employed in choosing character names was to use the actual, real life name of the actor or actress, exactly or with only slight variations. Thus Hanna Schygulla, a Fassbinder star, often is given her own forename in films, especially in early works such as *Rio des Mortes* 'River of Death,' *Whity*, and *Warnung vor einer heiligen Nutte* 'Warning About a Holy Whore' (all 1970). She plays herself, an actress named Hanna. In three films Hanna Schygulla plays a character named Joanna, a possible full version of the short form Hanna, and in a 1979 film she is named Susanne, another variant. In *Der Händler der vier Jahreszeiten*, Hanna Schygulla plays the sister of the main, autobiographically inspired character and is named Anna, a lightly disguised variation of Hanna. In the same film, one of Fassbinder's closest friends (and lover), Kurt Raab, plays the protagonist's brother-in-law Kurt, a very negative character, while the wife of the main character is named Irmgard after the actress Irm Hermann who played her.

The actress Barbara Valentin, one of Fassbinder's choices of established stars to supplement his stock company, plays the bar-owner Barbara in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. Fassbinder must have known which actress would play the part and used her real name (actually her professional name) even while he was writing the screen play. In that film Ali is not the correct name of the actor who plays him, or even the character, a Moroccan guest worker. *Ali* is applied to him by the racist German characters as a collective, stereotypical name for Arabs. The correct name of the actor, and of the character, is El Hedi Ben Salem. Others in the film find it too hard to use.

Margarethe is the forename of a character in *Götter der Pest* 'Gods of the Plague' (1969), who was portrayed by Margarethe von Trotta, an actress who was not in the Fassbinder inner circle, but was married to Volker Schlöndorff and later herself became a noted director of the New German Cinema.

In *Warum läuft Herr R. amok?* 'Why does Mr. R. Run Amok?' (1969), the initial *R.* conceals or alludes to the surname of the actor Kurt Raab; only the initial is used in the film. This use of an initial to conceal the full name of a criminal or suspect is familiar from police reports and *M*, the spectacular serial murderer film of Weimar Germany, which starred Peter Lorre.

Fassbinder's friend Günther Kaufmann was twice allowed to use his own forename as a character name in films of the period of his greatest intimacy with the director, 1969-1970. Katrin Schaake plays a Kattrin and a Katharine in two films of 1970. Further examples of names deriving from the actor's name include *Jim* for the actor Raul Jimenez in *Schatten der Engel*. There Fassbinder uses part of the surname to create the forename by which the character is known in the film.

It is uncertain whether Fassbinder intended the character name *Irene* to reflect the name of the actress, the well-known Anna Karina, with *Irene* echoing *Karina*, in the film *Chinesisches Roulette* 'Chinese Roulette' (1976). This performer's professional name is of course derived (and slightly modified) from *Anna Karenina*, the Tolstoy novel (more correctly *Anna Karenin*).

The use of the actor's name for the character he or she plays is almost never used on stage because the play is written before it is cast in nearly all cases. It is rare in film as well. Its use in Fassbinder films creates a kind of Brechtian alienation effect, as the audience often knows the actors' names from their repeated roles in successive Fassbinder films and recognizes their "correct" naming during the course of the film. Thus the illusion of watching real life is suspended, distancing the audience from uncritical consumption.

Intertextuality also arises from a knowledge of both names and previous roles played by Fassbinder's performers. This might happen in any acting troupe, but it is reinforced by the repetition of character names. One *Hanna* is a variant or commentary on previous *Hannas*. Using different names, Margit Carstensen plays a second Petra in 1979 (*Die dritte Generation* 'The third Generation') after starring in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* in 1974. Or a bit player, Elga Sorbas, plays characters named Rosa or Rosy in several films of 1969 and 1970.

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In addition, occasionally actors were given minor roles, even non-speaking parts, or even degrading roles as punishment for falling from the director's favor. In *Warning About a Holy Whore* (1970), Irm Hermann was ordered to dub the voice of the actress who was chosen to play her role based on a real-life situation. This was done to humiliate her personally, according to Katz (58). Thus the interplay between the personal lives of the players and especially their relation to the director is expressed even in name-giving in Fassbinder's films.

In linking characters' names to the real or professional names of those who portrayed them, in Fassbinder's films nicknames were also used. Many of the actors and actresses had nicknames not known outside Fassbinder's circle and yet these names were also used as character names. *Willy* was the name used in the Fassbinder circle for Peer Raben, whose legal name was Wilhelm Raben. There are allusive *Willys* in at least two of the films. In Fassbinder's gay or bisexual world, men were often given drag nicknames: Dieter Schidor was called *Babuffke* 'Kitty'; Kurt Raab was *Emma* with the English surname *Potato*, and Peter Berling (plump and ostentatiously effeminate) was called *Mutti*, or 'Mommy.' *Emma* is sometimes used as a name for female characters. As in the films of the American Andy Warhol (as Leonard Ashley pointed out),¹ private allusions and in-jokes doubtless extend far beyond what is accessible to the general public. These references are fully comprehensible only to insiders.

Whereas Fassbinder often used actors' real or professional names in selecting names for the characters they played in his films, in at least one case this procedure was reversed. After Monika Stadler played a character named Monika Nüchtern 'Sober' in the film *Liebe ist kalter als der Tod* 'Love is Colder than Death' (1969), a parody of American gangster film titles, she used her film character's name as a *nom de plume* and published a series of books about film, perhaps wishing to capitalize on the fame derived from appearing in a film by this notorious director, perhaps simply charmed by the ironic meaning of her character's name 'sober.'

Fassbinder chose as the professional name for a new friend, Harry Zöttl, who played in many Fassbinder films, the name Harry

Baer. As a special friend of the director he was three times privileged to play characters named *Franz*, a name that had a special significance for Fassbinder, as we shall see. When one of Fassbinder's leading ladies, Irm Hermann, had a child as a single mother, Fassbinder, who was not the father, persuaded her to name the baby Franz.

As a final example of actor-inspired character names in his films, we may mention Fassbinder's use of actors' names for characters played by other actors in other films. The character August Brem in *The Third Generation* (1979) shares the surname of the Fassbinder actor Rudolf Waldemar Brem. A character in *Lola* (1981), Bohm, has another such surname (from Hark Bohm, most remembered for his role in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*).

In literary onomastics we often search for and identify allusions to literary or real-life figures contained in a character's name. Fassbinder frequently uses names with such allusions, but in a highly personal manner. The most important allusive name used by Fassbinder both as a character name in film and in his personal life is *Franz*. Franz Biberkopf is the hero of Döblin's novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), the great novel of the Weimar period, for which Fassbinder created a spectacular television version (see above). Fassbinder is said to have carried this novel around with him for years. He identified personally with this petty thief and part-time pimp, sympathetically portrayed as a victim of the corrupt and decadent Germany between the wars.

Fassbinder uses the name *Franz* for many characters, generally autobiographical, in films made between 1969 and 1972 such as *Katzelmacher*, *Gottes der Pest*, *Der amerikanische Soldat* 'The American Soldier,' *Wildwechsel* and *Acht Stunden sind kein Tag* 'Eight Hours are not a Day.' Occasionally the name *Franz* is found in literary sources such as Kroetz's *Wildwechsel*). The complete character name from Döblin's novel, Franz Biberkopf, Fassbinder uses for an autobiographical hero, a crude male hustler who wins the lottery, in *Faustrecht der Freiheit* 'Fox and his Friends' (1974). When Fassbinder made the television film *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he of course retained the character name.

The allusive name *Franz* was combined with the surname *Walsch* in *The Third Generation*, where the character *Franz Walsch*

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was played by Günther Kaufmann, one of Fassbinder's greatest loves, a Bavarian actor whose father was an American Negro in the U.S. occupation of Germany after World War II. The name was also used for a character played by Fassbinder himself — he often acted in his own films — in *Love is Colder than Death*.

Franz Walsch combines two names: the *Franz* of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the surname *Walsch*, from the American film director, Raoul Walsch. Walsch was a German refugee from Hitler. Fassbinder revered and studied his work extensively. The director Wim Wenders also frequently used the names of film directors, American and French, as character names in his films, most notably in *Der amerikanische Freund*, where the aged American director Nicholas Ray also appears as an actor.

There are nine characters named Franz in Fassbinder's films. Fassbinder also used the name Franz Walsch nine times in screen credits as an imaginary film editor. Even Harry Zöttl, or *Harry Baer* as Fassbinder renamed him, once signed a photograph of himself, which he gave to Fassbinder, Franz Walsch (Katz 41, 42).

Twice Fassbinder used the forename of director Raoul Walsch as a character name in a film (*Love is Colder than Death*) and *Shadow of Angels* (1975), in a role played by Fassbinder himself.

Another borrowed literary name appears in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, where Peter Berling plays a character named Bronski. The name *Bronski* is derived from Günter Grass' novel *Die Blechtrommel*, where he is the Polish lover of Oscar's mother (possibly Oscar's father) signifying the dual heritage, German and Polish, of Danzig and its citizens. In *Lola* (1981) a government bureaucrat is named von Ensslin; this surname occurs in recent German history for Gudrun Ensslin was a member of the revolutionary Baader-Meinhof group who died in Stammheim prison under mysterious circumstances in 1977.

In the character naming process in Fassbinder's films, we find two basic systems of naming. First, Fassbinder makes wide use of the actors' personal names as names for the characters they play. This procedure is never used in fiction and only rarely in film. Second, Fassbinder employs names which refer to figures from literature or history. Foremost among these is *Franz* (from *Berlin*

Alexanderplatz). Sometimes Fassbinder gives the surname *Biberkopf* from the novel and sometimes uses the surname of a film director he greatly admired, Raoul Walsch (who re-spelled his name *Walsh* upon coming to Hollywood).

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Note

¹ Ashley made this observation in the discussion of an earlier version of this paper, presented at the annual meeting of the American Name Society in 1992.

Work Cited

Katz, Robert. *Love is Colder than Death. The Life and Times of Rainer Werner Fassbinder*. New York: Random House, 1987.