

FASSBINDER

THE VICTIM AND THE VICTIMISER

By Elena Gorfinkel

Human suffering and humiliation are the fundamental materials that furnish Fassbinder's cinematic cosmos. While his characters' torments are psychological, their victimisation is made visible on and through the flesh. The Moroccan *Gastarbeiter* Ali experiences racial deprivations and buckles from an ulcer at the end of *Fear Eats the Soul*. The masochistic Martha's histrionic gestures reveal her fatalistic submission to her gaslighting husband Helmut in *Martha* (1974). The unrequited transgender Elvira/Erwin changes sex in a failed attempt to woo the aloof magnate Anton Saitz, in *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978). Fassbinder's oeuvre portrays the panoply of cruelties and the despairing paroxysms of subjects bound by uneven relations of domination and exploitation, code written on the body.

The relations between persecutors and their prey are present even in the earliest films. *Katzelmacher* (1969) figures the social abuse of the "Greek from Greece" Jorgos. For a group of dissolute petit bourgeois German youths, the immigrant stranger becomes their fantasy object, a surface for projection and aggression. They fabulate from his foreignness his egregious crimes as a pretext to beat him. No doubt deriving such dynamics from his own troubled childhood and his volatile relationships with male and female lovers, Fassbinder complicates any sanctimoniously rigid opposition between righteous innocents and morally bankrupt violators. Instead he implicates all his characters in the inevitability of exploitation in the post-war capitalist economy.

At his most provocative, Fassbinder relishes the byzantine ways that victims seek subjection, and the ways that perpetrators are desiring subjects, falling prey themselves, tangled in webs of debt, guilt and obligation. In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), Petra's obsession with young Karin is facilitated by Karin's cynical awareness that she can benefit from the relationship; when Karin leaves Petra after advancing her career, Petra attempts to broach intimacy with Marlene, the silent servant she has consistently dehumanised. Marlene rejects her, and packs her bag. Marlene can give no more of herself than she is contractually obliged, or, rather, she prefers the ideality of Petra's abuse with its severe architecture of control. Eschewing neat binaries that distinguish the moral code of oppressors and oppressed, Fassbinder's films reveal devastating scenarios of insurmountable dependency, impossible attachment and corrosive cathexis. His Sirkian 'victim cycle' films find an expanded modicum of expression of the unequal power exchanges that plague suffering minority, marginalised subjects. The predicaments of women, gay men and lesbians, immigrants and other outsiders give voice and body not only to repressed historical violence, but also to the ugliness of banal everyday aggressions.

Martha (1974) is perhaps the apogee of Fassbinder's interest in the victim, or takes its purest form, a gothic melodrama that depends on its titular character's acquiescence to the curtailment of her freedom, in the interest of an ideal marriage. The imperious Helmut takes Martha to a fairground, insisting they ride a rollercoaster despite her protests. Martha grimaces in pain while

Helmut evinces lurid joy at her suffering; Michael Ballhaus's camera, positioned from their point of view, emphatically careers and swoops with the chassis. The ride collapses romantic enthrallment and Helmut's psychic terrorisation. Martha rushes off and vomits in the corner; Helmut immediately proposes marriage to her, as Martha gushes with thank yous. Later, on honeymoon, Helmut demands Martha get a suntan and lets her fall asleep in the sun. We then see Martha sunburnt and lying like a corpse stripped naked on the hotel bed. Helmut proceeds to maul her seared flesh, marital consummation literalised as a torturous rape. Fassbinder infamously claimed, "Women who let themselves be oppressed are more beautiful than those that fight back." Despite its rhetorical opposition to a feminist critique of patriarchal violence, this statement also announces that humiliation and abjection afford radical access to characters' subjectivity, concentrated through allegory. Martha by the end is permanently enslaved; fleeing, she gets into a car crash, and is paralysed, wheelchair-bound, to be forever locked up under Helmut's watchful eye. The brutality of a romantic fantasy of marriage and its assertion of possession are enacted, *in extremis*.

Throughout his work, Fassbinder's focus on power plays and their psychic tolls rests on a premise of incommensurability. The impossible chasm between lovers, friends, amatory dyads – Emmi and Ali, Elvira and Saitz, Petra and Marlene, Martha and Helmut, Fox and Eugen – always edges towards forms of refractive betrayal. While Fassbinder sought the aesthetic potentials of cruelty, *pace* Antonin Artaud, his films always stake a fundamental claim on the impossibility of equivalence, as the film historian Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, between different experiences of that pain yielded by the rending of the subject's inexhaustible desire from the vicious realities of their spoiled, venal world. ☪

GATES OF HELL
Martha (below) is the purest example of a Fassbinder 'victim', a gothic melodrama about a brutal marriage

