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Impossible, Impolitic

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul and Fassbinder's Asynchronous Bodies

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Human beings can't be alone, but they can't be together either

(Rainer Werner Fassbinder)¹

Fassbinder made "impossibility" a subject in itself

(Tony Rayns)²

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (*Angst essen Seele auf*, 1974) negotiates the melodramatic conundrum of its ill-fated interracial and intergenerational lovers through a twinned logic, articulated narratively and aesthetically, of the impossible and the impolitic. The trope of impossibility, rendered through the diegetic architecture of its narrative, is embedded in the social conflicts engendered by the formation of a couple, Emmi (Brigitte Mira), a widowed German cleaning woman in her sixties and Ali (El Hedi Ben Salem), a Moroccan guest worker and mechanic, thirty years her junior. The film's narrative, in its adaptation of the features of the 1955 melodrama by Douglas Sirk, *All That Heaven Allows*, tracks the couple as they fall in love and marry, only to confront an unbearable fate of social condemnation by Emmi's children, racist neighbors, friends, and co-workers. They are challenged in the first half of the film from without, by social pressures, and then after a trip away, from within, as the constitution of their relationship falters despite the seeming incorporation and "tolerance" of their social and economic utility into the social organism.

Ali and Emmi's racial, cultural, and generational difference, despite a class affinity, marks their bodies as impolitic, improper, and "unnatural" by the venal and racist social world of working-class Munich that they inhabit. The impolitic of their juxtaposed corporeality and comportment manifests itself as a fundamental problem in the visual field, as manifested by the aesthetics and syntax of the film – one

that consistently figures their co-existence and co-habitation as a problem of social specularity. The film materializes, in its narrative and visual form, the correlation between the impossible and the impolitic as a challenge to both reproductive futurity and to embodied mutuality. As an inevitably foreclosed relationality, the very idea of the couple is signaled by a predisposition to expiration. Ali and Emmi's romance is prescribed to have no hope, to be finite, whether or not the social world they inhabit reacts with explicit and overt racism, as it does in the first half of the film, or with disingenuous approbation, as it does in the second half of the film. The ending of the film sees Ali and Emmi reunite, albeit through the terms of corporeal failure and physical pain. Ali, who strays from the marriage in response to his oppression within it, collapses as they dance in the bar where they met, from an ulcer. This is a condition that the doctor in the film's final scene tells us is a chronic one for immigrant guest workers, one that is likely to return, despite surgery. Mapped onto and into Ali's body, the inhospitable malaise of racial oppression becomes a physiological, yet invisible sign, an indictment of a larger body politic that exists beyond it, and whose condition is implicitly terminal, in its repetition.

We could ask, why these bodies, of Emmi and Ali? And we could come to a series of answers: from Fassbinder's own escalation of class, status, and generational difference into a racial, cultural, and age difference, in his transliteration from Douglas Sirk's American 1950s to his own contemporaneous Germany of the 1970s; to the conflation of the quasi-biographical and the authorial, in the cinephilic knowledge that the statuesquely, stoutly muscular El Hedi Ben Salem as Ali was Fassbinder's then, and soon-to-be-ex, lover, and that Brigitte Mira as Emmi, in her plump, aging, and sagging flesh, and her expressively creased face, might serve as the director's sublimated surrogate in the sphere of fiction. Fassbinder himself appears as Eugen, Emmi's racist son-in-law in the film, filling out an inverse triangulation of the latter reading. Yet these commonplaces don't seem to explain the materialist power of *Ali's* embodied politic – and its strategic impolitic – sufficiently enough to appease the film's forces of affective persuasion. How is it that the spatial, compositional proximity of *these very bodies*, of a sixty-year-old cleaning woman and a much younger Moroccan mechanic, in the space of the diegesis, in the socio-historical space of 1970s' Germany, and in the wider landscape of romantic cathexis, still so deeply wrecks such an affective toll? Perhaps in the restaged shift from the Sirkian dyad of Jane Wyman's Cary and Rock Hudson's Ron as one of more radically opposed racial difference in the embodied form of Mira and Ben Salem, Fassbinder also moves the conflict away from the internalization of social pressure evident in *All That Heaven Allows*, into an exteriorization that rests in the brute logics of embodied signification, on the surface of the skin. The epidermal signifiers of age and race both, while by no means equivalent or necessarily analogous, expose more explicitly the politics of social marginalization, externalizing the un-assimilability of racial difference. Emmi, previously socially invisible, a discarded figure of the German economy, becomes suddenly visible, through a prejudicial negation by virtue of her relationship with Ali.

Critics return to the ways that these two actors' performances, their very embodiment, burn through or exceed the limitations placed upon them by the ironies of its fiction and the limiting conditions of their diegetic existence. Examining this aporia – situated in both the history of this film's criticism and the history of academic film analysis, in its reflexive attention to Fassbinder's allegorization of vision, as the incontrovertible condition of our material and political existence – is to cross-examine these bodies against the grain of such readings, to temporarily grasp them from the sharp framings and foregrounding apparati of looking relations, the fleshy and recalcitrant object and subject of that very network of looks and gazes.

Exemplary of both a transitional moment in Fassbinder's career in his shift towards a melodramatic mode and his work's gaining a wider audience, *Fear Eats the Soul* embodies and gives shape to the specularizing function intrinsic to processes of social oppression and exploitation of marginalized bodies. Its self-consciousness consistently draws the spectator towards an awareness of the compositional architectonics through which its primary protagonists are constituted, in their alterity, precisely through the processes of being seen. The film's status as an excursus on the conditions of social specularity has engendered an expansive literature within film studies.³ Among them, film historian Thomas Elsaesser suggests, regarding the relation between the film's form and its core thematic paradox,

Ali and Emmi suffer from ostracism because of a liaison that is considered a breach of decorum. But the way it presents itself to the couple is as a contradiction: they cannot be seen together, because there is no social space ... in which they are not objects of aggressive hostile disapproving gazes ... Yet conversely they discover that they cannot exist without being seen by others, for when they are alone, their own mutually sustaining gaze proves to be insufficient to confer on them or bestow them a sense of identity.⁴

To extend Elsaesser's delineation of Emmi and Ali's predicament, a fundamental question regarding the impossibility of their relationality, to each other and to the world that contains them, persists: how can Ali and Emmi *be* together if they cannot *be seen* together? If being is subordinated to and conditional to being seen in Fassbinder's dramatic universe, the intensity of a struggle and aspiration to exist outside of the network of gazes, outside of the specular imperative, outside of representation, becomes the particular crux of Fassbinder's well-worn *subject, pace* Tony Rayns above, of impossibility. This is an impossibility deeply tied to the ways melodrama negotiates the ideological and the ideal, and as Christine Gledhill reminds us, the mode "addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological, or political discourse."⁵ The problem of "being," of material and psychic existence, is one rendered by the incontrovertible conditions of becoming a visual object for another, and this conflict provides the wrenching pathos of

Fear Eats the Soul. This impossibility of being – being together, being "happy" – is an impossibility conceptually amplified by the strain and duress Fassbinder places on Ali and Emmi's being in the field of vision, palpably held in the materializing gazes of the world which contains them. As the credo that emblazons the credit sequence of the film reminds the viewer, "happiness is not always fun"; that is, the social conditions of self-sustainability, of self-completion, are impossible, bound as they are in a continual struggle between internal and external, private and public demands, expectations, forms of reckoning.

As the wide corpus of Fassbinder scholarship has reminded us, there is no value neutral mode of looking, without being caught in a hierarchy of power relations, an exegetic that goes back as far as the political urgencies of gaze theory and the ideological critique of cinema as a mass cultural form. The spectator of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is herself reminded of this, time and again: this spectator is often described as coming too late, as if to a "spoiled feast," as Elsaesser notes, of retroactively recognizing her ensnarement in a set of pre-determined conditions of looking, calcified formalizations of discernment, judgment, moral censure.⁶ In sum, these looks constitute a logic of ideological and cultural valuation, a tendering of individual bodies' use or uselessness within a capitalist system of production. Racial, class, and sexual identities are always those things that are constituted through, apprehended by, and which clothe us in the look of the other. The "look" that Fassbinder's cinema mobilizes, which Elsaesser aptly elucidates, is one that the spectator has no choice but to uneasily inhabit, is one that operates belatedly in the spectator's recognition, rendering a prior moment of what seems genuine feeling or action, pro-filmic beauty, an image's or scene's sufficiency to itself, with a shifted frame, within which we feel ourselves to be occupying the sightline of some judging Other, sharing their place, despite our own sympathies. These sympathies, implicitly liberally pious ones, sit in uneasy tension with our awareness of the radical implausibility of the proceeding fiction, the sense in which the impossible nature of Ali and Emmi's romance stretches our capacity for empathy, credibility, belief, despite ourselves.

These operations of looking at bodies and bodies aware of their containment in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* are tendered through the work of a highly wrought style which compounds traditions of cinematic realism with a heightened sensorial experience of textural artifice and theatricality, in which *mise-en-scène* and cinematography form and reform an aesthetic both significantly minimalist – in its stillness, its performative austerity, tableau structure – and simultaneously, extraordinarily overfull – in its tactile, compositionally rich, materialist design. Drawing from his aesthetic and political encounter with the films of Sirk, Fassbinder famously wrote, "Sirk has said you can't make films about something, you can only make films with something, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, with all these crazy things that make it worthwhile."⁷ The abstraction of the "about," that is, an imagining of conceptualization, requires the forging of an aesthetic out of material beings and things, a claim for the density of

the cinematic object as itself a layered density of material, put to work, arranged, extracted. People, light, flowers, mirrors, and, the final component, blood – signify an aesthetic, and a drive towards the aesthetic, which returns us to and is anchored in the phenomenal and the mortal body, its fundamental circulatory possibility, its liquefied substance a metonym for that which is animating and that which is spilled, in the ecstatic and pained modes of creation, human conflict, and suffering.

Fassbinder stages bodies, bodies which are given the labor of methodically and strategically *taking their place* within, and occupying as well as being occupied by the diegesis and its frames. These bodies are also given the weighty task of animating its world, from the inside outwards, of holding it up, even as they falter. At the same time, the visual architecture of this world – frames, arches, grates, windows, doorways – in many ways dwarfs, presses down, or frames bodies in ever more complex impositions of scale, size, and graphical accentuation. Fassbinder's bodies, in their oscillation between stillness and movement, move us – because of, despite, as well as beyond the reflexive structure of looking relations through which the film is often articulated by and read through. Bodies, in their gestures, their performance, in their tremulous excrescences, sometimes mutely, sometimes stirringly, resist – even as the film itself at every turn insists on its corporeal subjects' ensnarement in inhospitable structures of a hegemonic, predisposing vision. To attend to the corporeal vitality that this film arrests, and resuscitates, in turn, is perhaps to reexamine a foreclosed potentiality within Fassbinder's cinematic imaginary – a potentiality, I would argue, that can be read in terms of an incisively queer analytic, one which takes as its locus the asynchronous affects of embodiment. This is also a potentiality that negotiates the political meanings and scripts of "happiness," writ large, through the specificity of bodies that can and cannot enact or experience it.

Thus, *Fear Eats the Soul's* corporeal vitality, its sense of life and liveliness, resides in a series of gestures, repeated motifs, moments of exchange, confrontation, and ruptures in the film's narrative – in which the *work* – narratively, visually, conceptually – of bodies is made visible and emotively palpable, even when these bodies are still. Emmi and Ali, the *Putzfrau* and the *Gastarbeiter*, whose bodies are riven in differential ways by both their social, economic, and racial positions, are put in the service of both a logic of absorption and of consumption, in which their comportment absorbs the brutalization of their environment, responds against it, or is consumed by it. One particular scene that bears this out is the medium close-up of Emmi on her lunch break on the day after Ali spends the night. After Emmi mentions obliquely that a foreign worker spoke with her on the train, her co-workers unleash a range of racist presumptions and opinions about Arabs and immigrant workers. Emmi is mortified and hemmed in as she eats her banana, as her co-workers continue to expose their acerbic views, as dialogue serves to present a countervailing mirror to Emmi's naive romantic optimism and budding feeling for Ali. The scene ends with a shot of the stairwell (which we will see Emmi later occupy by dint of exclusion) as the women return to work. As bodies move back

to the time of production, and through the established frame of the window, Emmi walks over to that window. As she stands looking out, the camera tracks in to a medium shot in which Emmi's expression, contoured through stillness, bespeaks a slow incorporation and absorption of what she has just heard. The shot lingers on her arrested expression, allowing her to look off-screen to an undesignated space, to evoke the conflict between the weight of her recent experience with Ali and the crushing absorption of the conversation she has endured. This moment of reactive contemplation, while framed as a portrait, also bears a quality of arrested temporality. Emmi's taking of a place before the camera, and the mobile camera's taking of a place in front of Emmi, signals a moment in which the affective envelope of Emmi's experience is pierced by a recognition of its limits.

We can also recall the scene in which, on their wedding day, Emmi takes Ali to dine at an Italian osteria she tells him Adolf Hitler frequented. After hostile service from a waiter, in which Emmi is tacitly chided for not knowing the difference between rare and medium Chateaubriand by the imperious waiter, we are given an image of resounding, almost photographic, if not painterly, stillness in which the couple, seemingly the only people in the restaurant, are framed in long shot, perfectly centered, sitting staring directly at the camera, framed by the dark doorway into the dining room. The weight of history is transubstantiated into an immobile image and a weighty, grave form of framing. Ali and Emmi are suspended in the frame, consumed by it, arrested temporally and rendered bereft of movement, in a tableau that feels anachronistic but strangely produces an almost vibratory quality. Time is here distressed through these bodies' absence of mobility, and we feel that absence as a consumption and subsumption into a representational vacuum, into which the characters seem to be staring, as if into a mirror.

Fassbinder's cinema, preoccupied with the embeddedness of the social and historical in the bodies of his suffering – yet non-virtuous – subjects, takes in this film its perhaps most restrained form. Yet in its subtlety, delicacy, and restraint, *Fear Eats the Soul* nevertheless attests to the resounding materialism of Fassbinder's cinematic project. The film makes visible its investment in the bearing and comportment of bodies as a telescopic lens for seeing sociality in the inarticulate language of gestures, movements, moments of exchange, and shuttled, distressed temporalities. Bodies make us feel the incommensurability of its subject's times, particularly when those bodies begin to move "out of synch" with one another.

Indeed, the knotty difficulty of synchronicity is central to an understanding of the script of romantic aspiration in the modality of melodrama. Many scholars have explored the melodramatic form's defining temporal organization of the "too late," of an intrinsic belatedness.⁸ Desire, its expression, moves from one time to another, from one body to another, precisely "too late." The structural principles of "too late-ness" organize both the mode's glimmers of utopian aspiration and simultaneously its inevitable groundings in the romance of impossibility and the impossibility of romance. The happenstance of chance in the meeting of lovers yield to the workings of an indissoluble, unflinching fate – destiny as destination – in the

form of a fatality manifested in plot. The non-synchronicity of melodramatic desire is instantiated by a belated transmutation, a transmission of affect. It is perhaps this experience, the pleasurable burden of bearing a distressed temporality – and the trouble of and with futurity – in melodramatic forms that spurs the most havoc. The “too muchness” of melodrama is in its twinning of romantic aspirations with its halting, lurching “too late” temporal schemes. Melodrama presents us with the manifestation of the impossibilities of reciprocity, of mutuality. Instead of a shared space of synchronicity we are given only the fugitive moments of a chanced pleasure, often in form of the arrested relational fragment. We may not have enough time, or we may not occupy the right time in relation to the other, but we have the sensual plenitude of all those images, unmoored and set adrift from the teleology of togetherness.

The temporal fantasy of melodrama’s belatedness is refigured in *Fear Eats the Soul* in the unexpected rhythms and exchanges of Ali and Emmi’s asynchronous bodies. Belatedness is less a function of plot than it is an indissoluble difference located in their very embodiment. Evoking two convergent histories, Ali and Emmi’s bodies signal different experiences of time and space, as well as incommensurabilities of historical change, geopolitical mapping, and geographical orientation. Emmi’s age, and post-reproductive femininity, as well as her past, signal an era of postwar German reckoning, a barely repressed negotiation of the fate of the generation that participated and inculcated the ideology of the Third Reich. Ali’s raced body, considerably younger, signifies another German history, more contemporaneous, of diasporic mobility and redistribution, refracting the history of post-colonial expropriation for the shifting demands of an emergent market for cheap transnational labor. Shuttling different histories and implicit times, spaces, generations, the coincidence of their flesh in the space of the diegesis is from its outset figured as a problem of spatial visibility, even as it is already marked as a connection that has no conceivable future as well as no imputed past.

The range of responses to Ali and Emmi as a couple consistently negotiates their unfigurability as a problem of both pathological embodiments and futurity: when Emmi tells her daughter Krista and son-in-law Eugen about her new love object, they respond incredulously as if Emmi is joking, suggesting after she leaves that she has gone crazy; as Emmi and Ali celebrate their impending marriage at the Asphalt Club where they met, Paula, one of the white habitués of the bar who expresses sexual interest in Ali early in the film, states while staring fuming at the scene, “It’ll never work out. It’s unnatural, plain unnatural,” to which Barbara the more cynical bar owner replies, “Of course it won’t, so what?”

The film offers a way to think the relation of corporeal politics across the narrative and aesthetic fields, in terms of the asynchrony of its protagonists’ embodiment.

Generational difference serves to significantly catalyze and magnetize the couple’s racial and cultural difference, accentuating both the improbability as well as the resistant tenderness of Ali and Emmi’s alternative kinship formation. Emmi’s

age and Ali’s youth signify their asynchronous, indeed anachronistic relationality; the romantic mutuality they represent is one that signifies a model of kinship formation decidedly on the margins of a heterosexual topology of proper objects. Whereas, as menial laborers, their class affinities draw them together, through an exchange – albeit limited by language and culture, of tenderness, care, and mutual recognition – their inculcation into a field of visibility defined by racial difference also highlights the non-reproductive nature of their romance, even as their relationship operates and enacts a script of heteronormative romance.

Their relationship is thus anchored less in the spectacle of erotic desire and sexual connectivity, which the film considerably avoids, if not elides. While the parameters of Ali’s body as erotic object are substantially elaborated, especially in the scene in which he showers as Emmi looks on, the relation between the couple is couched more in a mutuality that is physical but sexually de-dramatized. The first night that Ali and Emmi spend together, for example, in which Ali wants to talk and enters Emmi’s bedroom is punctuated by Ali’s stroking of Emmi’s bare arm, at which point the shot cuts to the morning after. The film can itself only create an erotic imaginary through a third term, through the function of mediation, be it the mirror in the bathroom which contains Emmi’s gaze at the naked Ali, or via the figure of Barbara, the bar owner who makes Ali couscous as a tacit exchange for sex. Rather, Ali and Emmi’s relationality is forged in the quotidian exchange of the habits and habitus of care, bound in primarily domestic scenes of breakfast, coffee, kitchen table, brandy. And it is no wonder then that the metonymic capacity of the request for “couscous” itself satellites a range of cultural and racial differences that the terms of the film cannot broach otherwise. Thus the momentary, mutual recognition of everyday commonality, is broached particularly in scenes of habitus and in times between labor productivity. As Paul Thomas notes regarding the reliance of Fassbinder’s cinema on the rituals of the quotidian, “in a society divided into classes and races, having an elaborate sexual division of labor into the bargain, all real communication, all love, all compassion, is impossible; we can only engage in precautionary movements, gestures, rituals, habits. Fassbinder’s films delineate these rituals.”⁹ These moments become the affective material that secures Ali and Emmi’s mutuality, even as their sexual relationship is de-prioritized, reinforcing something unfigurable about the impossible asynchrony of their relationship, while still securing the delicate nature of the claim to a sphere of intimacy, privacy, and togetherness outside of the public eye.

Impossibility is also configured narratively, a device of charting incommensurability and difference. The film’s very structure confounds a logic of discreet causality, despite its participation in the momentum of telos. On the one hand the twinned parts (not quite halves) of the film represent a progression across and through them: the couple is formed, social responses to their relationship brutally accumulate, the couple takes a trip away, and Ali and Emmi return to a seemingly different set of reactions, in which neighbors, children, co-workers suddenly treat them with some modicum of tolerance. Nevertheless, Ali and Emmi’s relationship

begins to falter as a consequence, as the social pressure from outside, in the first part of the film, is replaced, as many critics have noted, with inequities and conflicts within the relationship itself. On the other hand, the two parts of the film are ruptured by a pivotal scene in which Ali and Emmi directly address and acknowledge their status as objects of specularly in an outdoor café. Crying while sitting in the rain, Emmi expresses a wish for things to be different, and for the world to be “nice” to them upon their return from a vacation. The improbable, implausible nature of this narrative device – materializing Emmi’s wish as reality – cleaves the story into a mirroring structure in which racism and economic exploitation merely take different forms in these two narrative segments. As Salome Skvirsky suggests, the second part of the film can be seen as a “remake” of its first half, presenting a different narrative iteration of the same problem – Ali and Emmi’s impolitic union.¹⁰ If the first reading, the presumed liberal enlightenment of teleological progress in the transition from a mode of exclusion to one of incorporation and inclusion, relies on faith in causality, in the second reading, the film operates as an allegorical re-enactment, a conceptual riposte to the social conditions of bodies marked as marginal by temporal and spatial modes of un-belonging. In this latter reading, repetition is sustained on the ideological level, while concealed on the level of social action and reaction. The explicit visibility of racism is merely made exchangeable for a more hypocritical model of the social management of relational alterity – a form of bad faith that exposes the liberalizing lie of advanced capitalism’s need for both productive and consuming bodies. Ali and Emmi are “put to work” by family, neighbors, co-workers and, at the crux of things, Emmi puts Ali to work in the service of her newfound belonging – entreating her co-workers to feel his muscles and conscripting him to help her neighbor move things into a storage unit. Their exchange value as laborers within the network of social utility and capitalist economy necessitates an active incorporation of their bodies into the social organism. The grocery store owner suddenly recognizes that business is bad and Emmi is a valuable customer; Bruno the son who had reacted most violently to the marriage requires her babysitting skills; and Emmi’s co-workers suddenly include Emmi in their circle once a new, lower echelon worker from Herzegovina enters the workplace, at a lesser pay rate.

Thus, we can understand these two ways of reading the temporality of the film’s narrative organization, which works at the level of the spectatorial experience, as an overlaid asynchronous structure. It moves forward, in a causal linearity of action and consequence, as well as backward, in which a series of repetitions and recurrent scenarios – at the level of composition, framing, and *mise-en-scène* – remind us of the inflections of the previous half’s ostracism. Emmi’s isolation at her workplace is visually reformed in the figure of her new co-worker, who is framed sitting at the stairwell in a similar pose. This shuttling between a forward momentum and a drive towards belatedness and retrospection produces an asynchronous relation, in which *déjà vu* echoes throughout the experience of the film’s compositional architectonics. These impossible repetitions with-a-difference signal

both an allegiance on the part of the film to particular modalities of melodramatic form, but also a quality that inheres in the basic asynchrony of Ali and Emmi themselves. The couple becomes a unit of sense-defying relationality, even in their insistence on the sustainability of their togetherness.

The moment of Ali and Emmi’s first encounter, enacted in their first dance at the Asphalt Club, represents the coalescence of their relationship, as well as an “originary” moment that the film, in its formal and narrative repetition, restages in its later portions. Embodying and mobilizing much of the film’s implicitly utopian drive and romantic aspiration, the sequence congeals and establishes a set of tropes that telescope both impossible beginnings and fateful endings. As an introduction to the film, as well as the diegetic introduction of Emmi and Ali, this scene bears a particular weight, even as it establishes the heaviness and weighty incommensurability of bodies as they try to keep time with each other, in a provisional scenario of understanding, in the halting rhythms of movement, music, speech. Escaping the rain, an elemental force seen in the credit sequence and which itself recurs as a materialist sign of chaotic force and emotion, Emmi’s solitary figure enters the bar and hesitantly seats itself in a medium long shot. Her entry is amplified by the establishment of the film’s own patterning of looking relations. A figure for discernment, her presence is met with intense immobile stares by a group of patrons, both German and Arab, at the end of the bar. These looks are architectonically organized in terms of stillness and performative frontality, arrested in time by their own act of gazing. The visual spatiality of the bar is structured by this directionality of looks, in which Emmi has entered the point of view of this previously unseen public, whose position, and suspended immobility, is thus revealed in the reverse shot. Emmi’s physical bearing, the micro-aesthetics of her slightly fidgety yet polite gestures, reads as a form of displacement, of being, and matter out of place. Her hair matted, and her coat wet from the rain, the formality of her comportment registers as self-consciousness, slight discomfort, even as her speech and behavior indexes a naivety and simplicity – a rhetorical register of narrational austerity which Fassbinder privileges throughout the film. Exchanging niceties with Barbara, the bar owner, Emmi asks about the language of the music, and Barbara responds that the song is in Arabic, and that her patrons prefer the music from “back home.”

Ali, at the other end of the bar, is propositioned by one of the pub’s habitués, a young German woman. In the first lines of dialogue spoken by Ali, he refuses her invitation to go home with her with the response “cock broken.” This introduction to Ali foregrounds his body as a site of sexual exchange and consumption, even as his refusal earmarks a certain weariness, a potential desire for something else, outside the sphere of a customary exoticization. On the heels of her rejection, Paula, the spurned woman, puts on a record “The Black Gypsy,” and suggests that Ali dance with the “old girl.” Ali, in a gesture of obligating this lark, accedes. A joke, proffered as a corrective of humiliation by Paula, becomes the precipitating condition for Ali and Emmi’s encounter, couched in the presumptive impossibility of their relational juxtaposition. A publicized demand for an impolitic spectacle,

motivated by the spurning of one German woman's desire, redirects Ali into the field of a less probable object. The visual organization of what follows, as Ali enters the frame of Emmi's shot, and stands behind her, stages the awkward tentativeness of their bodies in relation to each other. Their first words to one another occur with her back to him, as Ali is positioned behind and to the right of Emmi, and as Emmi remarks that she has not danced in twenty years. This shot, which expresses a certain formality as well as the demand to sustain the spatial function of these shots' relations to one another in terms of the confrontation of gestures, also frames Emmi and Ali not in a face-to-face conversation, but in a spatial-relational logic of indirection. Emmi and Ali's movement up from the corner of the bar and to the dance floor is also precisely blocked to highlight the awkwardness of their mistiming – Emmi trailing slightly self-consciously behind Ali as they walk along the expanse of the bar which has previously so much defined the distancing function of the exchange of looks, as well as the spatial austerity of the scene. The camera, mobile, tracks slightly ahead of Ali and Emmi as they walk into the space of the forcefield of onlookers. As Paula urges Barbara to turn off the lights, and as the couple's dance is buffeted by further stares by the patrons, Emmi and Ali are framed in a tightly foregrounded composition, in which the back of a chair, the red of a tablecloth are positioned in the forefront of the frame, and as darkened red light edges the contours of their figures in medium long shot – Emmi in a loudly patterned geometric yellow and white dress, and Ali in a brown suit.

The dance itself becomes a frame for a conversation, as Ali speaks, in a clipped German, about his work, and his home in Morocco, of the very same political and social conflicts that the architecture of the sequence has heretofore spoken visually. "German and Arab not good together," "German master, Arab dog," Ali casually intones, as he and Emmi dance. Creating an envelope of intimacy and provisional privacy in an inhospitable environment buffeted by public stares, as Emmi responds "half of life consists of work," the quotidian nature of the conversation inscribes this moment of bodies not at work, in an ensconced sphere of potentiality amidst impossibility. The movement of Ali and Emmi in a circular formation, first in medium long shot, then in medium shot, is intercut with their onlookers in consistent observational stillness. Called upon to perform a scene, Ali and Emmi's "origin" here maps the crux of the film's utopian aspiration around the asynchronous becoming synchronous, and of a private possibility eclipsing – for a moment – the weight of public scorn, the force of the specular which bears down upon them. Instead of the more excessive enchantments of a lilting romanticism, Ali and Emmi's "beginning" is forged through the movement of their unremarkable, work-worn bodies, and by their cultural and social alienation from one another. If the space of looking expresses a quality of stillness and suspension, the dance through movement temporarily suspends the social conditions that would prohibit Ali and Emmi's introduction, and their movements with and towards each other. Dance itself, a formalization of courtship that congeals within it a narrative of seduction, is here made the stage and frame for the capacity of bodies to be in

time, however briefly, with one another, even if they emerge and are molded by other times and other histories. To believe in Emmi and Ali is to believe in the impossible becoming possible, to subscribe to the abstract idealism of love's stake – mutuality, recognition, the ability of bodies to meet and further, to *coincide*, in time with one another, in fused synchronicity. The rhythmic nature of this idealized coalescence finds no better apotheosis than in the opening sequence in which Ali and Emmi first dance.

That the dance becomes a site of recurrence, return, and reenactment in the film is neither arbitrary nor incidental, as it is the improvised moment of synchronicity in the face of indicted impossibility that motivates the temporal fantasy structure of the film. As a coming together of bodies in time, it becomes an origin motif that, more than any possible sexual scene, secures a continuum across Ali and Emmi's embodied histories and differences. The irony of the song, "The Black Gypsy" which becomes "their song" undercuts the capacity for pure absorption and the delusion of a liberal white fantasy of "color-blindness." The dance is a site of return on the evening in which Emmi and Ali announce their engagement to Ali's friends, and on which Paula marks their relationship, which she inadvertently initiated on a dare, as unnatural.

The penultimate site of the dance's return operates at the conclusion of the film, in the very moment of Ali and Emmi's reconciliation. In this scene Ali, gambling his wages away in the prior scene, enters the bathroom and methodically proceeds to slap himself. Enacting the suffering of a postcolonial body at its tether, Ali's performance of externalized self-abnegation precedes the final internalizing blow to his body in the form of his collapse due to an ulcer, an unseen, yet grave manifestation of the pressures of social and racial alienation. When Emmi enters the bar, she is seen in the distant background of the frame as she sits down in the chair in which we saw her at the opening of the film. She asks for a cola, and requests that Barbara put on the "Black Gypsy" song. As it comes on, in a repetition of the movements of the film's opening, Ali approaches Emmi and asks her to dance. The dance, again the stage for a conversation, provides a reckoning around Ali and Emmi's faltering relationship under the strain of their new social "acceptance." Ali confesses to sleeping with another woman due to his nervousness, and Emmi forgives him, acknowledging her age, and insists that they be nice to each other, saying "together we are strong." At the very moment that she completes this statement Ali begins groaning violently and tumbles to the floor. The rhythm of reconstituting the relationship at its origin and through the dance is ruptured abruptly by Ali's fall, instantiating and recalling the previous dance scene in which Paula and Barbara discussed the relationship's failed future. The formalized improvisation of the dance meets the workings of narrative's fatal contingencies in the form of the device of illness as mortalizing ending. Ali's suffering, represented as physiological, counters Emmi's suffering, which the film presents as psychological. These two different exteriorizations of emotional interiority, in the metastasis of the ulcer and in Emmi's convulsive tears, one opaquely readable, and

one expulsively so, are not only gendered, but produce in their modes of suffering a map of victimization and suffering inscribed on the performing body. The capacities of the body to absorb and to differentially manage oppression here reach their end point. If the deployment of stillness and tableau reaches its apotheosis here, it reaches it in a series of force fields in which bodies literally perform expiration. It is Ali's body that is given the task of doing this narrative and aesthetic work, as it returns, in the film's final scene, to the stillness of the hospital bed.

Deploying the melodramatic modality of the suffering body, yet stripping this pained body bare of qualities of virtue or virtuosity, Fassbinder's cinema has been examined by Richard Dyer, for one, as indicative of a certain bad faith in its sexual politics, due to its indulgence in gendered suffering and victimhood, and on the other, of deploying suffering in the service of a purloined "masochistic joy" and the de-phallicization of male subjectivity, as suggested by Kaja Silverman.¹¹ Nevertheless, what these readings, in their radical opposition circulate around and towards, is an acknowledgment of Fassbinder's extraction from its performing bodies a political supplement of "bad feeling" – in which the foreclosure on the happiness script also opens up a space that grounds oppression's material visibility in the affective operations of shame, embarrassment, refusal. Negative affects, long the province of marginalized subjectivities, are here put to work as a horizon against which its ostracized protagonists resist – but also express – their relationality to and against each other.

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul reminds us that there is no Edenic moment that exists outside of ideology, or outside of the debasements of the socio-political reality of our protagonists' daily lives. Yet within the temporality of Fassbinder's diegetic universe are fragments of a surplus, fragile moments of encounter that seem to speak – perhaps utopically, if overwhelmed by the din of the guiding frames-within-the-frame – to another mode of mutuality, to the possible within the impossible, the probable within the improbable, the politic within the impolitic. Beyond a continual reversion to self-consciousness and tropes of reflexivity rests another register that gives Fassbinder's cinema its particular "weight" – the gravity and gravitas of embodiment, of the purchase of pro-filmic plenitude as it impresses itself on our vision, even as it is framed as corrupted, always already tainted by an unsavory impulse to taxonomize, to fix, to judge. An image that provokes "feeling and thinking," evoking a space beyond the limits of the frame, beyond representation: this is the utopian possibility of Fassbinder's asynchronously embodied sincerities – and of his ironies, as well.

Notes

- 1 Fassbinder (1992: 79).
- 2 Rayns (1980: 80).
- 3 Mayne (1970: 61–74); Ruppert (1989: 28–47); Silverman (1989: 55–84); Elsaesser (1996: 45–72).

- 4 Elsaesser (1996: 65–6).
- 5 Gledhill (1987: 38).
- 6 Ibid., p. 60.
- 7 Fassbinder (1992: 77).
- 8 Doane (1991); Williams (1991, 1998).
- 9 Thomas (1976–77: 16–17).
- 10 Skvirsky (2008: 101–2).
- 11 Dyer (1980); Silverman (1989, 1992).

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