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Leitmotif and Structure in Fassbinder's *Effi Briest*

It is surprising that a filmmaker so averse to realism in presentation as Fassbinder would choose a realistic novel like Fontane's *Effi Briest* as the subject for a film. Yet Fassbinder's aesthetic theory corresponds closely to that of Fontane, who believed that "the novelist must create an *image* of life and society and that it must not be a distorted one; . . . this image is no mere photographic reproduction, it is the product of the author's imagination, and he must ensure . . . that it has the . . . heightened intensity of feeling achieved by the transfiguration which is the task of art."[1] What is true of the novelist applies to the filmmaker as well. Fontane deals with nineteenth-century Prussian civilization. Until his death in 1898, he lived in Berlin, and as a journalist and chronicler witnessed the social, political, and cultural manifestations of almost an entire century. The social background and milieu which he experienced firsthand and which are as important as the plot in his novel are history for Fassbinder and rendered only by allusion: the costuming and an occasional remark about Bismarck. But his film is not a distortion of the reality presented in the novel. It is, rather, an artistic transformation through an impressionistic selection of visual and verbal highlights.

Anyone expecting a realistic portrayal of the events in Fontane's novel in Fassbinder's *Effi Briest* is in for disappointment and perhaps even shock. On first viewing, the film may seem a disjointed and fragmented presentation of the novel. Because of the frequent fade-outs, the plot seems truncated and without continuity. On the one hand, this technique serves to "signify the passage of time, to distinguish event from event, and to distance the event from the spectator in such a way that the spectator is obliged to fill in the spaces for himself/herself."[2] On the other hand, Fassbinder himself implies that he wishes to achieve two levels of alienation: "According to Kracauer, when it gets black, the audience begins to fantasize, to dream, and I wanted the opposite effect through the white. I wanted to make them awake.

It should not function like most films through the subconscious, but through the conscious."[3] Coming from the Anti-Theater in Munich and profoundly influenced by Brecht, Fassbinder uses in film concepts long applied to the stage since Brecht's theory of the epic theater. The technique of alienation is of central importance here, achieved by the interruption of the story for commentary, such as, "A story that ends in self-sacrifice is never *bad*" (p. 18). It takes on significance only in relation to the whole of the plot, which in Fontane's novel is a continuum, but which has to be pieced together by the viewer of the film.

Fassbinder is known for the extreme formalism of his style, and in *Effi Briest*, too, he treats his literary model in a highly stylized fashion. In spite of this, he keeps the essential structure elements of the novel in his film, as well as the mood and a sense of contrast. Effi moves from her world of childhood and innocence at Hohen-Cremmen to Kessin, a provincial town and seaport, which in her fantasy promises exotic new experiences. The symbol for the unknown and exotic is the Chinaman, who is rumored to have loved Captain Thomsen's granddaughter. The mysterious disappearance of this young woman of twenty on the night of her wedding to another man and the death of the Chinaman two weeks later gave rise to the legend surrounding the mystery of the house in which Effi lives. Also paralleling and foreshadowing Effi's forbidden love is the story of King Pedro and the Knight of Calatrava, as well as the play Crampas directs: *Ein Schritt vom Wege.*[4] Frau Kruse and the black hen lend an ominous note to life in Kessin and the events which lead to death for both Crampas and Effi.

The story of the Chinaman, never fully told, because no one knows the full truth, is mystifying on the one hand and haunting on the other. Together with other Gothic elements in Fontane's novel, like the White Lady from the travel guide that Effi reads and the ballad of *Ritter* Olaf, which Tripelli sings at a social gathering, they make up an occult motif associated with Kessin and particularly the house in which Innstetten lives. This man, highly cultured and educated, is linked with a trend toward mysticism. His best friend is an apothecary, Gieshübler, also referred to as the alchemist (p. 92). According to Effi, "he is the only person with whom one can talk, the only real human being here" (p. 68). Fassbinder renders this allusion visually by using the image of a man and a woman in the cut glass of the apothecary doors.

If Hohen-Cremmen is associated with light and bright sunshine, with happiness for Effi and naïveté, Kessin belongs to a realm of darkness and mystery. At first, Effi is intrigued by it, but Innstetten warns her: "What seems so attractive to you . . . usually has to be paid for at the expense of your happiness" (p. 85). In Kessin, Effi finds a world very different from the one she has known in Hohen-Cremmen. Kessin is a seaport, open to the world, with an exciting mixture of people. Effi has her meetings with Crampas by the sea, where she becomes unfaithful to her husband. Here, too, the duel takes place that costs Crampas his life. Perhaps

it was the contrast of light and dark which prompted Fassbinder to make this film in black and white, to capture the mood, the atmosphere, and the symbolism of opposites.

When Paul Thomas claims that "the plot of Fontane's novel does scant justice to Fassbinder's treatment,"[5] he overlooks the fact that Fontane is a master in the use of the symbolic object and the leitmotif.[6] Fassbinder uses both of these to give his film the quality of musical composition with recurring themes. The script of the film is quite literally lifted from the text of the novel, closely approximating its meaning as well as its structure. Only the most important passages and quotations are selected, as well as the most important images and scenes from the novel. If reading a novel, as Fassbinder himself implies, is having your own fantasy,[7] we must probe further to determine wherein that fantasy consists. His film is based on an amazingly accurate reading of the novel, because all the important elements, including paradox and irony, most difficult to render visually, are there. He uses a musical leitmotif to convey irony. In the scene where Effi's mother discusses the idea of love with her daughter, Effi confesses that she is afraid of Innstetten because he is a man of principles. Her words are accompanied by a romantic violin theme totally at odds with what she is saying. Instead of love, the violin theme connotes fear. It appears again after she, motivated by a longing for protection, has hired Roswitha. Roswitha is Catholic, and Effi believes that her faith will prevail against the spirit of the Chinaman. Again and again it occurs in connection with commentary on Effi's fear of her husband or indirect allusion to her guilt. When she is alluded to as a white lamb, white as snow, the violin theme implies the opposite. It accompanies the scene where Roswitha offers to live with Effi and share her sadness in Berlin after the discovery of her infidelity, and it contrasts with Effi's anger at Innstetten's pedagogical efforts with Annie and her resentment at the alienation of her child. Finally, it supports Effi's final judgment of her husband: that he was as noble as a man can be who is incapable of love.

The statuary, too, is symbolic of certain themes and is conspicuous by its abundance. Of minor importance is the statue of an ivy plant climbing around a pole, echoing a comment made by Effi's father on the day of her engagement to Innstetten:" . . . the name Geert meant a tall, slim tree trunk and so Effi would be the luxuriant ivy clambering round it" (p. 25). The image defines her father's expectations of Effi's relationship with her husband. Of central significance is the statue of the girl with the dog. In the film, Rollo is mentioned only in the letter Roswitha writes to Innstetten, requesting that he send Rollo to Effi. In the novel, however, he appears in a leitmotif connected with loyalty and devotion, which is linked with Roswitha, too, who is a truly human figure, close to Effi's natural instincts. Innstetten suggests to Effi on her arrival in Kessin that Rollo will protect her, alive or dead, and Crampas ties him into his story about the Knight of Calatrava, where the dog exposes the cruel murder of his master

by the king. At the end of the novel, Rollo lies by Effi's grave, which is the round flower bed with the sundial, surrounded by the heliotropes mentioned in the opening lines of the novel and recurring as another leitmotif connected with time and change. In the end, the sundial is gone, replaced by a white marble stone, because Effi has escaped the limitations of time. Rollo, lying by the grave, has stopped eating altogether, which prompts Effi's father to remark that instincts, after all, are the best thing (p. 266), implying that the tragedy might have been avoided if human beings were capable of feeling and following their natural impulses. In the film, Effi is standing next to the statue of the girl with the dog when she accuses her husband of being "as chilly as a snowman" (p. 68). Fassbinder has endowed Effi's home in Kessin with lamps supported by the statues of robed women, reminiscent of the caryatids supporting the tympanum of a Greek temple. In the scene where Effi talks to Roswitha about the benefits of Catholic confession, her posture is strangely reminiscent of the caryatids. Her right hand is raised, supporting a shadow which may very well signify the burden of her guilt. In the recess of one of the windows of the living room stands the figure of an angel, perhaps a guardian angel to guide or to protect, as Roswitha's Catholicism is supposed to protect Effi. Since it is visible in the scene where Innstetten announces his promotion to Effi and the prospect of leaving Kessin, it may be connected with Effi's hope that she will be saved from herself and her love affair by this seemingly fortuitous turn of events. That this is not so is indicated visually in the scene where Effi says farewell to Gieshübler. The tall apothecary scales on the counter loom like the scales of justice in this parting scene. One of the cut glass doors stands open, so that the man and woman on the panels are separated.

One of the most striking images in Fassbinder's film following soon after this encounter is the shot of the spiral staircase which Effi and her husband are ascending when they move to their new apartment in Berlin. As the camera slowly and endlessly follows their upward climb, the spectator gets a sense of dizzying height and a feeling of vertigo at the seemingly endless rotation of the staircase. The image suggests the theme of social climbing; the circularity, the repetition of it all. In his youth, Innstetten had courted Effi's mother, who married another man, who was older and more established—already district governor and owner of Hohen-Cremmen. Effi, too, rejects the idea of marrying Cousin Dagobert, whom she considers half a boy. When she arranged the marriage of her daughter to Innstetten, Effi's mother had proudly declared that at the age of twenty, Effi would be where other women were at forty, and that she would go further than her mother (p. 24). When he moves to Berlin with his wife, Innstetten has achieved the rank of Council to the Minister and has almost made it to the top in his career. The dizzying feeling accompanying the prolonged shot of the staircase implies the impending danger for Effi: the fall from her social position when Innstetten accidentally discovers the letters from her lover.

The clue to Fassbinder's interpretation of the film is given in the opening quotation: "that society carries on because of the actions of people, people who, by taking no action *against* it, enable it to continue."[8] Applied to the novel, this statement refers to the moral dilemma Innstetten confronts when he has to decide whether to duel Crampas and revolves around the question of the time lapse since Effi's adultery. According to Douglas Parmée, "that is the whole crux of the novel—a question which conceals beneath an apparent triviality a host of moral and even philosophical implications . . . how long must an act of adultery have been committed in order to have become, if not innocuous, at least forgivable?" (p. 8). The real crux of the matter is, however, whether Innstetten could let his feelings overrule his reason. He does admit to his friend Wüllersdorf that he still loves Effi: "I love my wife, yes, strange to say, I still love her, and however frightful all these things appear to me, yet I'm so much under her spell, she's so lovable and so gay, she has such a special charm all of her own, that, in spite of myself, I feel tempted, in my heart of hearts, to forgive her" (p. 214). Yet he chooses to duel Crampas neither for love of Effi, nor for hatred of Crampas—too much time has elapsed for a duel of passion. He goes through with the duel as a matter of principle, because society expects guilt to be expiated:

> . . . it's got to be done . . . I've turned this thing over and over again in my mind. We're not isolated persons, we belong to a whole society, and we have constantly to consider that society, we're completely dependent on it . . . with people living all together, something has evolved that now exists and we've become accustomed to judge everything, ourselves and others, according to its rules. And it's no good transgressing them, society will despise us and finally we will despise ourselves and not be able to bear it and blow our brains out." (p. 215)

Wüllersdorf calls this Prussian concept of honor an idolatrous cult (p. 216), but finally, after vainly trying to dissuade his friend from the duel, he concurs with Innstetten: " . . . we must submit to it, as long as the idol stands." With his duel, Innstetten confirms the social order, even though he is not at all sure of the legal aspects of the case.

The lack of action commented on in the beginning of the film is epitomized by the extreme economy of movement and by the paralyzing still shots before the camera fade-outs. The control exercised by society on the characters is reflected in the controlled form of the film. The characters appear marionette-like, controlled by forces from without rather than able to determine their life from within. Their faces barely show emotion and are more like masks. Their lack of freedom is reflected in specific images: They are "trapped in doorways or between other vertical edges, unable to move,"[9] because they are existential prisoners of the social roles they play. And society constantly reflects, in the shape of mirrors, on people.

The theme of freedom is associated with the character of Effi. She yearns to be free, to fly away, both on her swing,[10] and on the sleighride with her husband. It is, on one level, simply a wish

to escape the natural limits imposed on her by society and the law of gravity. But she becomes the victim of the society in which she lives as well as a prisoner of her own self.[11] And toward the end of the novel, this wish for freedom is transformed into a transcendental longing: the wish for death and the liberation of her soul. Near the end of both the novel and the film, Effi once more tries the swing with Pastor Niemeyer standing by. To his comment that she hasn't changed at all, she replies that she wishes it were true and explains that whenever she used the swing, she felt as if she were flying up to heaven (p. 255). When she asks him if she would go there when she dies, he assures her that she will. In her marriage with Innstetten, Effi feels imprisoned because of the life of deception she is leading and the fear of discovery. In the film, Fassbinder uses the veil to indicate the recurring theme of hiding which characterizes Effi's life. The morning after the fateful ride with Crampas, the image of the veil covers the entire screen. Behind the veil, Effi is conversing with her husband, who has had premonitions of Effi sinking with Crampas into the Slough. After the duel, the veil hanging over her bed is half open. She is wearing a hat with a veil when Geert first tells her about the Chinaman associated with illicit love as they are driving into Kessin for the first time, and she fixes her veil in front of a mirror after taking Crampas as a lover.

If we follow the clues Fassbinder gives us in the objects on the screen, our fantasy may lead us back to the wealth of leitmotifs Fontane used and we will find them transformed into imagery and music. Fassbinder is not content to copy the reality of the novel onscreen: "He is interested in creating a new reality: one that exists in our heads."[12] Fassbinder overlooked no detail, but chose to include in his film what was most significant for him, giving it concrete visual expression. In this way, his imagination transforms the reality of the novel.

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NOTES

[1] Douglas Parmée, trans., *Effi Briest* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 7. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

[2] Paul Thomas, "Fassbinder: The Poetry of the Inarticulate," *Film Quarterly*, No. 30 (Winter 1976), p. 14.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] The title is translated as *The Slip*, literally meaning "a step off the right path."

[5] Thomas, p. 15.

[6] The term derives from music and refers originally to a short musical phrase which recurs periodically—in opera, for example—with a given character or situation. In a verbal composition like Fontane's novel, it has thematic significance and defines the structure of the work.

[7] Thomas, p. 14.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[9] Penelope Gilliatt, *The New Yorker*, May 30, 1977, p. 104. Paul Thomas also comments that "the characters are constantly framed . . . by buildings, household objects, doorways, windows, mirrors . . . . The price of lack of liberty is the eternal vigilance of a prim, repressed society, its code of loyalty, its frigidity, its poses" (p. 15).

[10] The swing as a symbol is important to Fontane, because of the danger connected with it. Frau von Briest refers to her daughter as "always flying through the air on a trapeze" (p. 16). Being called a circus rider or trapeze acrobat associates Effi with unconventionality.

[11] Fontane comments that Effi "felt like a prisoner, unable to escape" (p. 157). She is limited by her own character—the inability to resist temptation: "But although she was capable of strong feelings, she was not a strong character, she lacked endurance and all her good impulses came to naught. And so, she drifted on, one day because she felt unable to change anything, the next because she didn't want to. She was strongly affected by all that was mysterious and forbidden and so it came about that, though free and open by nature, she became involved more and more in a life of deception" (p. 157).

[12] Penelope Gilliatt, *The New Yorker*, June 14, 1976, p. 96.

Stills Courtesy of New Yorker Films.