

A FATAL GERMAN MARRIAGE.

THE NATIONAL SUBTEXT OF *DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN*

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the connections between the development of Maria Braun's marriage and the political and economic conditions which made the economic miracle of the nineteen-fifties possible. Whereas Fassbinder scholarship has tended to seek parallels only between the character of Maria Braun and general developments in German society, it is argued here that both her marriage and her love affairs need to be included in such an interpretation. The analysis of non-realistic, theatrical or extra-diegetical elements in the film's style discovers a subtext which revolves around symbols of national identity and sovereignty and which is directly linked to the development of Maria Braun's marriage. Within this framework, the symbolic function of Maria Braun's lovers and of her husband are re-examined.

Any consideration of the remarkable domestic and international success of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* quickly leads to the film's apparent departure from Fassbinder's earlier style as a decisive factor. For once, Fassbinder seemed to disavow most of the distancing and alienating stylistic features which had been his trademark until then in favour of a decidedly 'realistic' aesthetic strategy. In an almost conventional manner, *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* appears to aim at a faithful historical reconstruction of the post-war period in tandem with a highly engaging plot that even allows the audience to empathise with the protagonist, a young woman struggling to survive in difficult times.

Closer inspection quickly reveals, of course, that Fassbinder's historic reconstruction is first and foremost a 'construction' or 'spectacle' that creates the impression of reality through heavy reliance on contemporary films, radio broadcasts and narratives rather than any unmediated reality.¹ But so successful was Fassbinder's strategy that the highly selective character of his portrayal of the post-war period has rarely been noticed. Instead, the film's

constant references to historical details and developments have inspired readings which concentrate on possible connections, parallels or tensions between this historical period and the story of Maria Braun. Despite the film's outward realism, the connections between Maria Braun's success and West Germany's economic miracle have always prompted critics to interpret Maria Braun's story as symbolic of developments in West Germany after the war. In the words of the French critic, Jean de Baroncelly, the 'fate of the heroine actually parallels, point for point, the fate of Germany, conquered and reconstructed. Maria Braun not only symbolises Germany; in Fassbinder's eyes she obviously "is" Germany'.² Alternatively, the heroine has been seen as the victim of Germany's post-war recovery rather than its embodiment,³ but despite these differences few critics would dispute that Maria Braun has an allegorical function and that Fassbinder's film should be read as one of his 'parables of historical German society'.⁴

A similar unanimity characterises interpretations of the 'message' contained in this parable. Despite some disagreement concerning the assessment of Maria Braun's character and career, the director's critical intention to draw a bleak and damning portrait of West German history is undisputed. To quote Jean de Baroncelly once more:

What has become of Maria, what has become of Germany? In cynical, horrid images, Fassbinder gives the answer: a creature dressed in obviously expensive clothes that has lost its soul; a winner whose head has been turned by fortune and who has courted disaster.⁵

This wholly negative view of Germany's development is unequivocally shared by those critics who perceive Maria Braun as a victim rather than the embodiment of West Germany's post-

¹ For an analysis of the film's far from 'realist' aesthetics cf. Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany. History, Identity, Subject*, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 97-128.

² Quoted in Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat. The Return of History as Film*, Cambridge/Mass. 1989, p. 97.

³ Cf. Wilhelm Roth, 'Kommentierte Filmographie', in: *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, Munich, Vienna, 5th edition 1985, p. 215, Joyce Rheuban, 'The Marriage of Maria Braun. History, Melodrama, Ideology', in: Joyce Rheuban (ed): *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1986, pp.14-20.

⁴ H.-B. Moeller, 'Fassbinder's use of Brechtian aesthetics', *Jump Cut* no. 35 (1990), 102.

war recovery, interpreting her violent death as the brutal termination of the hope for female independence and self-assertiveness in post-war Germany, 'the negative affirmation of an alternative after 1945 that had not worked'.⁶ Such views can claim a certain plausibility, not least in view of Fassbinder's own statements about West German society. In 1978, shortly before the premiere of *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, Fassbinder explained:

Ich glaube, daß speziell Deutschland sich in einer Situation befindet, wo sehr vieles sehr rückläufig ist. Das heißt, ich würde sagen, daß 1945, als der Krieg zu Ende war, als das Dritte Reich zu Ende gewesen ist, daß da die Chancen, die Deutschland gehabt hätte, nicht wahrgenommen worden sind, sondern ich würde sagen [...], daß die Strukturen letztlich und die Werte, auf denen dieser Staat jetzt als Demokratie beruht, im Grunde die gleichen geblieben sind.⁷

There are, however, some shortcomings in these symbolic readings which reduce the film to an indictment of West Germany's materialism and the perceived continuity of authoritarian, patriarchal or even fascist attitudes. Perhaps their most obvious - but strangely underestimated - omission is their disregard for the topic which, according to the film's title, ought to be seen as its central issue: Maria Braun's marriage and its implications for the story. There have been some attempts to broaden the national-historical interpretation of the film by focussing on its unusual and possibly subversive portrayal of gender roles and 'sexual politics',⁸ but while they provide a useful analysis of the different stages of Maria Braun's career and the strong link between love and (economic) exchange in Fassbinder's work, they tend to reduce the film's historical and political aspects to a mere backdrop and have curiously little to say about the men in Maria Braun's life.

This omission makes it not only difficult to explain some of the central twists and turns of the plot, it also misses the more subtle points which Fassbinder makes about the post-war development. In addition to the obvious thematisation of the impact of materialism and

⁵ Quoted in Kaes, pp. 97-8.

⁶ Elsaesser, p. 103.

⁷ Peter W. Jansen, 'Interview 2', in: *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, pp. 100-1.

economic success on West German society, the film discreetly develops a discourse about German identity and sovereignty which critics have so far overlooked.

Any symbolic interpretation of the film will need to demonstrate that it is not just based on the critics' expectations but has at least some basis in the narrative construction of the film and contributes to an understanding of this narrative. One can distinguish three main features of the film which justify and support such an approach: First, the film's representation of West German history and politics is deliberately shaped in such a way that it does not merely provide a realistic background to the main story of Maria Braun, but instead functions as a framework that creates the impression that the private story and the general historical development explain and determine each other. Secondly, a number of crucial scenes are presented in a theatrical rather than genuinely filmic style, loading the events with an additional meaning that transcends the interaction between individual characters. And finally, Maria Braun's story contains a number of mysterious and seemingly unmotivated actions which cannot be explained simply through the psychology of the film's characters but instead point towards their symbolic function.

The significance of the film's historical content is brought to the fore in the framing sequences which open and close the film, showing first a portrait of Adolf Hitler and finally a series of portraits of West Germany's chancellors from Adenauer to Schmidt (nos. 1 and 594-597).⁹ The opening shot of the Hitler portrait is diegetically motivated and turns out to be part of the setting of the marriage scene, but the closing images have no basis in the film's narrative and settings, thus inviting the viewer to read this sequence as a direct commentary by the writer/director and to search for a symbolic interpretation. The need for such a reading is

⁸ Cf. Mary Beth Haralovich, 'The Sexual Politics of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*', *Wide Angle* 12 (1990), 6-16.

⁹ To facilitate identification of individual scenes, all references will be to the segments identified in the continuity script in Rheuban (ed), *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, pp. 35-161.

reinforced by Fassbinder's double manipulation of this sequence: First, without any obvious reason, the chancellors' portraits fade from positive to negative and finally back to positive, and secondly the picture of one politician, Willy Brandt, is missing from the series. Both the technical manipulation and the historical intervention set the sequence further apart from the film's mostly realistic style and underline its function as an extra-diegetical commentary or summary. More specifically, the sequence establishes a connection between the historical narrative, set in the immediate post-war period, and the director's present, thereby suggesting that Maria Braun's story contains an indirect statement on 1970s West Germany.¹⁰

In view of Fassbinder's comments on West German history, the film's opening and closing sequences have been interpreted as a confirmation of the unbroken continuities in post-war society and politics from which only Willy Brandt, the socialist and former emigrant, is exempted.¹¹ But the film's closing sequence not only extends the impact of its story into the future (the director's present), but also suggests a retrospective re-interpretation of the film's narrative which adds a symbolic dimension to the realistic story and elevates its protagonists to the status of 'typical' or symptomatic representatives of the German condition.

Such an approach is supported by Fassbinder's selection and representation of historical details and particularly his use of radio broadcasts as a source of information. In the early parts of the film, radio broadcasts with the names of missing persons may only be regarded as a simple way of creating the impression of 'authenticity', but with two news broadcasts dealing with Konrad Adenauer's shifting stance towards re-armament the medium not only helps to date the events but also conveys political messages for an audience looking for explanations. While the film's characters pay little attention to the radio and continue to discuss their private lives while the news items can be heard in the background, the irritatingly

Quotations from the original dialogue are based on the video edition from Connoisseur Video, CR155.

¹⁰ Cf. Kaes, p. 82.

loud volume of the radio makes it impossible for the audience to ignore the content of these broadcasts. The characters' clearly established oblivion of these political developments may be seen as a symptom of the time, pointing towards an explanation for the historical continuities and missed opportunities which - according to Fassbinder - characterise the post-war period: Too busy with their private lives and the struggle for success, ordinary Germans ignored the politicians' decisions until it was too late.¹² Less obvious and far more ambiguous is the parallel between these developments and Maria Braun's career: While political 'restoration' appears to coincide with Maria Braun's economic success, the film suggests neither a direct, causal connection between the two developments nor a tension or contradiction. Only in the closing sequence does Fassbinder indicate any direct link between his heroine's story and the political developments, but the nature of this link remains unclear.

A more straightforward commentary seems to be implied in the spectacular final radio broadcast which accompanies Herman Braun's return, the reading of Oswald's will and the explosion which ends Maria Braun's marriage (nos. 555-597). When the sports commentator can be heard screaming 'Aus! Aus! Aus! Aus!' through the sound of explosions (no. 593), it is difficult not to interpret the coincidence of the narrative denouement and Maria Braun's violent death with West Germany's success in the 1954 World Cup Final as a blunt comment on an event which was seen by contemporaries as the final confirmation of West Germany's normalisation. But while the earlier radio broadcasts may have suggested a parallel between political developments and Maria Braun's career, this one is built on contrast. The parallel between Maria Braun and the FRG ends here and gives way to a reversion which turns Maria into the victim of the very development she previously seemed to represent.

¹¹ Cf. Roth, pp. 215-6.

¹² In reality, these issues caused serious conflicts and initiated the first of a series of protest movements against the FRG's re-militarisation.

All this suggests that the two conflicting interpretations of Maria Braun's role are based on two separate, seemingly contradictory strands of the film. While one reading concentrates on Maria Braun's successful, but increasingly unsatisfying career, the other one focuses almost exclusively on her violent death. It is true, as Elsaesser states, that this 'ambiguity makes [the] film especially productive in the viewer's mind',¹³ but it remains to be seen to what extent it is 'structurally motivated' and can be attributed to an underlying complex of ideas and motivations.

The most important clue in this direction is provided by an absence. Despite the film's final allusion to unbroken historical continuities, Fassbinder avoids any reference to the one continuity which is usually at the centre of his generation's discourse about post-war German history: the role of former Nazis in the rebuilding of West German society and the continuing power of the industrial elites who had supported - and benefited from - the Nazis' war efforts. The question of guilt or responsibility for what happened during the war is not once raised. Contemporary audiences may have taken the issue for granted and assumed that it was somehow implied in the film's closing sequence. Equally, it could be argued that the absence of any discourse about Nazism, the Holocaust and German guilt merely reflects West Germans' own attempts in the nineteen-fifties to displace and deny any personal, emotional involvement with this issue. But in retrospect the omission casts an ominous reflection on the film's discourse. What, if not the continuity of guilt for the Nazis' crimes, constitutes West German society's main characteristic?

On the one hand, and in accordance with the established left-wing view of post-war history, it is the focus on economic recovery, on the production and acquisition of material goods and the pursuit of an individual career which motivates the film's protagonist so much that it displaces her personal and emotional life and turns her into an increasingly cold and

¹³ Elsaesser, p. 101.

isolated character. It has to be pointed out, however, that despite Fassbinder's comments concerning the 'missed opportunities' of the post-war period, the film does not share or encourage the nostalgia for the anarchic moment of 1945 which is so often associated with this view of German history.¹⁴ Instead, it portrays the immediate post-war period in bleak and depressing scenes which suggest that the country was defeated rather than liberated in May 1945, making Maria's determination, that things must change, all the more understandable. It is only at a much later stage, in the final part of the film, that this determination turns into a destructive obsession, so that the audience may see Maria Braun as an embodiment of all that is negative about the economic miracle: She severs almost all personal and emotional ties to her friends and family and tries to replace them with relations built on the exchange of goods and services.¹⁵ The attempt at a clear separation of emotional and objective, unemotional relations establishes Maria Braun's independence from other people (mostly men) as well as from contemporary moral codes, but eventually seems to make it impossible for her to have any emotional ties at all.

The obvious parallels between Maria Braun's story and West Germany's economic miracle are in themselves not sufficient to explain the development of the film's story and characters, but rather pose new questions. It is time, therefore, to pay closer attention to a second, less obvious topic of the film: a discourse which centres on the issue of independence or sovereignty - both of the protagonist and the nation. The individual dimension of this discourse is only too apparent as Maria Braun's attempts to control her own life are explicitly discussed in the film on many occasions. They rest not only on her determination to build a new life and provide for the future of her husband, but more importantly on her belief that she

¹⁴ Cf. Axel Eggebrecht (ed), *Die zornigen alten Männer. Gedanken über Deutschland seit 1945*, Reinbek 1979.

¹⁵ Cf. no. 506, towards the end of the sequence which shows Maria Braun moving into her own house: 'So, dann brauch ich auch nicht noch Dankeschön zu sagen. Ich zahl nämlich lieber, als daß ich mich bedanken muß'.

can and must keep the economic, emotional and moral implications of her actions neatly apart in order to stay in control. To the viewer it must become clear, however, that the separated aspects interact in a complicated way. The intricacies of this strategy are demonstrated in a scene early in her relationship with Oswald (nos. 375-383): When Oswald expects Maria Braun to act as his lover after they have slept together, she rebukes him and insists that he calls her 'Frau Braun' in public. She rejects the demands he makes on her private life, but continues to hold out the prospect of an affair as long as he accepts the distinction between 'Maria Braun, die mit Ihnen schlafen wollte' and 'Maria Braun, die für Sie arbeiten möchte' (no. 380). This distinction is immediately confused, however, when she starts discussing her salary with Oswald. While Maria Braun insists that she only wants him to pay 'wieviel meine Arbeit Ihnen wert ist', it is obvious that Oswald cannot separate that from 'wieviel Sie mir wert sind' (no. 381) and continues to believe that a generous pay offer will make Maria Braun more inclined to cede to his romantic wishes. Hermann Braun's reaction to his wife's report of the exchange indicates the symbolic meaning of the dialogue: 'Ist das jetzt so zwischen den Menschen? So kalt?' he asks when his wife tells him about the relationship (no. 388).

This question is not the only indication that Maria Braun's behaviour should be interpreted as symptomatic of general developments in West German society. Instead, Fassbinder subtly hints that in conjunction with Maria Braun's unconventional struggle for control of her own life the viewer should consider the sovereignty of Germany as a whole. One such hint is contained in the news broadcasts which Fassbinder selected for the film: The debate about West-German re-armament was not only fuelled by fears of a new war and the continuity of German militarism, but was equally concerned about German sovereignty and the partition of the nation state. While the Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, claimed that re-militarisation and close economic and military co-operation with the West would pave the way for a full restoration of German sovereignty and eventual reunification, opposition parties

and a sizeable minority of the population accused him of serving the Allies' interests by turning Germany into a potential battlefield and destroying any prospect of reunification.¹⁶

This aspect of the debate was largely forgotten in 1978 and apparently not picked up by the film's audience, but there are some indications that Fassbinder was well aware of the implications of his chosen topic. In a highly charged scene early on in the film, he establishes a direct, if ambivalent link between Maria Braun's career and the question of German sovereignty: When Maria Braun is buying a glamorous dress for her work in the American bar, she is also being offered an edition of the complete works of Heinrich von Kleist. Maria Braun declines the offer on purely pragmatic reasons: 'Bücher brennen so leicht und machen deshalb nicht warm' (no. 95). But viewers should note that Kleist's work does not simply represent the tradition of classical German literature which has suddenly lost its value. Rather, Kleist could be seen here as a patriotic, possibly nationalistic writer whose work was concerned - amongst other issues - with the occupation of Germany by foreign troops and the possibility of resistance against this occupation. To reinforce this aspect, Fassbinder has underlaid the scene with a soundtrack which contains the rather unsuccessful attempts of another black market dealer to play Germany's national anthem on a concertina he wants to sell (no. 83). The theatrical, symbolic quality of the scene is reinforced by the fact that Fassbinder himself plays the role of the dealer who offers Maria Braun both her new dress and Kleist's books and eventually sends her on her way, wishing her good luck (no. 96).

Control, independence, or sovereignty thus emerge as the film's secret issues, the 'blind spot' of the otherwise meticulously reconstructed historical atmosphere. Maria Braun may reject the offer of Kleist's works (and implicitly his radical political ideas for Germany's future), but in her own private life these very issues soon emerge at the core of her relation with the three men who fall in love with her. Kleist's male guerrilla strategy is replaced by the

¹⁶ Cf. Karl Holl, *Pazifismus in Deutschland*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 222-6.

actions of a female spy who describes herself laughingly as 'Mata Hari des Wirtschaftswunders' (no. 397) who entices her lovers in the service of another power. Any attempt to interpret Maria Braun's story as symbolic of the West German economic miracle must thus investigate not only Maria Braun's career, but also the nature and development of her relationships with these men in order to identify the implications of her story.

While these three relationships seem to have some common features, Maria Braun is at pains to establish a clear distinction between her marriage to Hermann Braun and her relationship with both the American soldier, Bill, and the industrialist, Oswald, investing her marriage with an almost otherworldly, decidedly unpragmatic emotional significance which her other relationships are apparently lacking. Even when she believes - mistakenly - that Hermann Braun is dead, she leaves no room for doubt in Bill's mind that her marriage will nevertheless continue and cannot be replaced by any other relationship: 'Ich habe dich sehr lieb und ich will mit dir zusammen sein, aber ich werde dich nie heiraten. Verheiratet bin ich mit meinem Mann', she tells Bill (no. 188). When questioned about the relationship by an American military judge, she explains: 'Den Bill habe ich liebgehabt, und ich liebe meinen Mann' (no. 234). This distinction - which combines the slight semantic difference between 'lieben' and 'liebhaben' with the temporal distinction between a finite (and terminated) relationship and an indefinite one - may indeed be 'very fine' (no. 237), and in fact neither the court's interpreter, nor the American judge manage to grasp the issue (nos. 236-7),¹⁷ but it has a dramatic impact on Hermann Braun, who until then has listened impassively to the proceedings, but reacts to his wife's explanation with a sudden change of expression,

¹⁷ The problem is reiterated in British and American versions of the film: Rheuban tries to indicate the distinction and translates Maria Braun's explanation as 'I was fond of Bill and I love my husband'. (p. 78), while the Connoisseur Video omits any subtitles so that viewers have to rely on the interpreter's insufficient version: 'She loved Bill and she loves her husband'.

signalling a revelation that changes his entire view of the whole affair and prompts him to take responsibility for the killing of Bill (nos. 234, 239).

Once again, the scene transports a symbolic subtext which links the story of Maria Braun's marriage to more abstract historical developments; this time German-American relationships. The sequence begins with an opening shot which does not immediately establish the location of the trial, but combines the sound of Maria Braun's interrogation with the image of a huge American flag, hung upside down at the back of the improvised court room and dominating the location. This visual domination is accompanied - and eventually subverted - by the Americans' need for a translation of Maria Braun's statements. On the surface they are in control of the proceedings, but it soon becomes apparent that they cannot truly understand what Maria Braun is telling them. In stark contrast, Hermann who doesn't need an interpreter immediately understands his wife's statement because of their emotional bond. The scene thus reinforces Maria Braun's claim that her relationship with her husband is fundamentally different from that with Bill (and potentially any other relationship), and locates the difference in the context of a national discourse. While the German wife may have entered an intimate, sexual relationship with a black American soldier, she has remained committed to her German husband who is the only one who can truly understand her actions.

For the viewer, however, it remains difficult to understand her motive for killing Bill, and it is telling that most commentators avoid any attempt at explaining the act. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the scene in question which immediately precedes Maria Braun's trial. The sequence begins with Maria Braun telling Bill that she is pregnant or, as she explains to Bill, 'guter Hoffnung' (no. 197). In a very tender scene, Maria and Bill start undressing each other, all the time telling one another how attracted they are to the other (no. 202). Once again, the scene is tinged with allusions to national (rather than racial) differences, with Maria telling her lover that all but one American men are ugly, and Bill replying that the

same is true of German women. In the middle of this shot, however, the viewer will notice Hermann Braun entering the frame and watching the couple who are unaware of his presence. He is only spotted when Maria briefly turns away from Bill. Showing no sense of guilt, fear or even shock, Maria tells her lover 'Schau mal Bill, das ist der Hermann', then - after a moment's hesitation - rushes towards her husband to greet him. As she is struck down by Hermann, Bill who is by now completely naked follows her and kneels down by her side while Hermann rushes towards the table, grabs a cigarette and sits down. There follows another exchange of silent glances, now from opposite positions, until Hermann starts to pull at the bed covers and tear the sheets (no. 215). The camera now presents a more objective view of the scene, showing all three characters in the same shot: Bill moves towards Hermann to try and restrain him and calm him down. Eventually, he holds Hermann, who has started to cry, from behind in a gesture that entails power as well as affection. At this moment, Maria who has until now watched the struggle impassively picks up a bottle, slowly walks towards Bill and hits him over the head. Bill falls down, and the scene closes with another exchange of glances, this time between Hermann and Maria whose expression shows a faint, tearful smile (nos. 216-8).

The whole scene appears subdued and emotionally ambiguous. The only aggressive element is contained in Hermann's actions, but even his emotions are diluted by his long, impassive observation of the couple and his craving for cigarettes. Maria's attack against Bill seems devoid of any emotions which makes it even more difficult to understand. But the timing of her actions is significant: She strikes Bill down at the very moment when Hermann appears to be at his weakest. It is the strange image of the naked black man embracing her husband, consoling and restraining him at the same time, which triggers Maria's action. The final exchange of glances between Hermann and Maria then suggests that by eliminating Bill from the emotional triangle she has reconstructed the original dyadic relationship on which all her emotions are focussed.

So strong is Maria Braun's fixation on her marriage that she does not subsequently show any sign of guilt or remorse over the death of Bill. Her love for Hermann excludes mourning for the victim of this love. Instead, Maria Braun silently accepts her husband's decision to go to prison in her place while she continues her attempts to build a secure and comfortable life with renewed energy. Even the death of her stillborn baby son, whose conception had inspired such 'good hope' in her, appears to leave no emotional marks. The loss only seems to inspire Maria to forget the past and start building her (and her husband's) future: The very next scene shows Maria's Macchiavellian strategy to win the attention of the wealthy industrialist Oswald whom she meets on her train journey back home immediately after the her baby's death.

Maria Braun shows neither the willingness nor the ability to mourn. But while socio-psychological explanations of post-war mentality would have the economic miracle rooted in an attempt to suppress all memories of the war,¹⁸ in Maria Braun's case the displacement of a normal and necessary emotion concerns the deaths of Bill and her baby rather than anything that might have happened during the war. In any case, the exclusion of these two dead bodies from Maria's emotions signifies a crucial turning point in her development. Her previously pragmatic and relaxed attitude becomes rigid and calculating, almost completely devoid of authentic emotions (cf. no. 389). Successful she may well be, but the film makes it perfectly clear that this success is inextricably linked to solitude, boredom and, eventually, self-loathing. The more energy Maria Braun invests in her economic rise, the less she seems to be able to enjoy the fruits of all her work, and one cannot help wondering what path she might have taken if her black American lover or the love-child from this relationship had survived. If there is a sense of missed opportunities in this film, than it must be related to Maria Braun's affair with Bill.

Maria Braun's relationship with Oswald looks at first just like a repetition of her affair with Bill, but on closer inspection Fassbinder subtly points out the changes in her behaviour and attitudes. From the very beginning, the calculating, materialistic aspect of her behaviour is played out much more strongly than in the affair with Bill. After the loss of her baby, Maria may again need someone to hold and console her, but this time she hides any such needs both from her lover and from herself, putting up a facade of cold, professional determination instead. While the film almost repeats itself with its images of physical intimacy between the couple, the tender and humorous dialogues which characterised Maria's relationship with Bill are missing from her affair with Oswald. Instead, the relationship is increasingly dominated by a tormented struggle for control.

The description of the relationship would be incomplete, however, without reference to Oswald's symbolic status in the film. Just as Bill, Maria Braun's first lover, Oswald is a foreigner, an alien whose social and economic position ultimately depends on Germany's military defeat. His individual background is never fully explained in the film, but his unmistakably foreign accent and the fact of his long exile in France mark him as an outsider. His precarious position is underlined when even Senkenberg, his usually devoted accountant, bitterly attributes Oswald's exile to cowardice (no. 370), voicing the all too common resentment of the defeated Germans against those who fled from Hitler's reign rather than to serve him.

It is remarkable that German industry and the economic miracle should be represented in this film not only by a manufacturer of women's stockings but by a returned emigrant who is half French (nos. 283-4), rather than an opportunistic former Nazi who might have functioned as a symbol of those unbroken continuities in German society which left-wing critics used to attack in the sixties and seventies. But in the context of the film's discourse

¹⁸ Cf. Alexander and Maragarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen*

about the state of Germany after the war, Fassbinder's choice of character makes sense: Being an outsider or a foreigner does not preclude either Bill or Oswald from gaining influence and material wealth at a time when the Germans are a defeated and dispirited nation under the control of their conquerors. What's more, because of their strangely privileged position they can also appear to be more attractive and more 'manly' than German men. 'Das sind keine Männer mehr heute', remarks Maria Braun early in the film about German men (no. 74), before she embarks on her relationships with her two foreign lovers.

In this perspective, Maria Braun's lovers represent the German men's worst fear: the victorious, attractive, wealthy and sexually successful alien who has come to take their women from them. But of course, in Fassbinder's Germany nothing is quite as simple as the established stereotypes would suggest. First, Maria Braun, the only woman in the film seen to enter such a relationship, insists on her unwavering love and faithfulness for her German husband. Rather than abandoning him, she makes plans for his future and invests all her energy to fulfil these plans. On the other hand, Maria Braun's lovers can hardly be seen as domineering, sovereign winners: While Bill may have won Maria's affection, she does not hesitate to eliminate him the moment he threatens to come between her and her husband. Oswald is even more unlucky, as Maria Braun's insistence on her independence seems to make him all the more dependent and turns him into the object of his feelings for her, a lonely man who is constantly waiting for little glimpses of her affection. And although Maria Braun doesn't kill her second lover, Oswald's fatal illness which leads to his early death coincides all too conveniently with his attraction to Maria not to be invested with some symbolic significance. In the final instance, love for Maria Braun turns out to be fatal to both her foreign lovers.

But this is not the end of the story, as Fassbinder has added another significant twist to his depiction of Maria Braun's relationships. Although Oswald appears powerless against her, it is exactly Maria's emotional independence and financial success which eventually provides a lever for him to gain at least some control over her life. Having discovered the secret of Maria Braun's marriage, he offers a deal to Hermann Braun which - behind Maria's back - puts the two men in charge of events. Rather than competing for the woman they both love, the two men enter an agreement which removes Hermann Braun temporarily from the scene in return for half of Oswald's fortune, preventing Maria from leaving Oswald before his death. In his will, Oswald describes Hermann Braun's acceptance of this agreement as an indication of the latter's understanding for his competitor's emotional needs, even as a sign of friendship, compassion and love (nos. 581-4). But Hermann's own explanation of his mysterious disappearance suggests that he felt so threatened by his wife's independence and prosperity that he needed to make himself financially independent, too - and at any cost - before he could return to her. 'Wir werden zusammen leben, wenn ich ein Mensch geworden bin' (no. 490),¹⁹ he explains in the letter which he leaves for Maria after his disappearance, and after his return he tells his wife: 'Ich hab' es für uns getan, für dich, weil ich dich liebe. Weil ich dich nur lieben kann als dein Mann, nicht als einer, dem du erst das Leben schenken mußt. [...] Ich wollte groß für dich sein, damit du mich lieben kannst' (no. 561).

Thomas Elsaesser has attempted to find a positive, even utopian dimension in the couple's final, unconditional exchange of their possessions (nos. 561-569), claiming that in the end 'everyone has become so wealthy as to allow them to suspend all exchange values in the gesture of the gift, itself the mark of a quite different economy'.²⁰ But although it is tempting for once to ascribe to Fassbinder a positive view of a love free from all exploitation,

¹⁹ Rheuban, p. 130, translates this phrase slightly misleadingly, but to revealing effect: 'We'll live together, when I've become a man'.

²⁰ Elsaesser, p. 124.

the very fact that Hermann Braun has acquired his wealth by turning his wife into an object that he can exchange at will with Oswald must subvert such an attempt. Instead, it is much more plausible to describe this part of the plot as an attack on the traditional gender roles which Maria Braun seemed to subvert but which are re-established through the agreement between Oswald and Hermann Braun. It is, after all, Hermann Braun's male insecurity, his inability to accept his wife's independence as the basis of his marriage which motivates him to sell her like a pimp sells a prostitute. But our discussion of the film's discourse on German nationality suggests that his actions are also linked with the issue of sovereignty and self-determination and can thus be interpreted in the context of Fassbinder's depiction of West German identity in the post-war period.

While it has been widely accepted that Maria Braun should be seen as a representative of the German experience, the same interpretation is rarely applied to her husband, let alone his actions. But the German soldier or POW who returns home only to find his wife in bed with another man is one of the central images of the post-war period, articulating not only a private fear or experience of many German men, but more significantly a male perspective on the defeat of the German army. The loss of control over German women who surrender themselves to other, preferably foreign, men comes to symbolise the German soldiers' complete defeat - and the experience of this defeat probably helps to explain the impact of such fantasies which mirror Maria Braun's own observation that German men have lost their manhood (no. 74).

In the film, Hermann Braun has to confront this experience of defeat and weakness. Although he learns quickly of his wife's uncompromising love for him, and even sacrifices his own freedom in exchange for her love and as a token of his will to protect her, his sense of injured pride eventually motivates him to conspire with Oswald and to arrange another exchange, which at least partially re-establishes his control. In order to become a (male)

human being again, Hermann Braun sells three years of his wife's lifetime to a foreign industrialist - and receives as his payment half of the inheritance which should have gone to Maria. Hermann's treatment of his wife is indicative of a narcissistic need to receive confirmation of his own strength from the object of his love, and in his quest for a restoration of his confidence he shows little regard for his wife's feelings and needs.

More important than Hermann's financial gain, however, is the position of power over his wife which both men gain as a result of their secret co-operation. Hermann Braun returns to his wife not as her husband, but as Oswald's heir, thus assuming a position in the line of Maria Braun's lovers and destroying the marriage which she had been trying to keep separate from her other relationships. The unique bond which Maria had imagined to be the basis of her marriage is replaced by another exchange of money, goods and the capacity to control the other.

The revelation of this development in the final scene not only reveals the true character of Maria Braun's marriage, but also sheds light on the problematic parallels between Maria Braun's story and the history of West Germany in the early fifties. Interpretations of the film which focus on its heroine have tended to concentrate on the parallels between the economic miracle and Maria Braun's depiction as 'a creature [...] that has lost its soul'²¹. But as Maria's increasing desperation stems primarily from her husband's absence, it is necessary to include Hermann's actions in the equation. As Maria Braun's career turns out to be based not only on her decision to sell herself to Oswald, but also on her husband's secret contract, a much more complex allegory of post-war Germany emerges than a simple moral villification of West Germany's new materialism. Hermann Braun's actions can be linked to the one political development of the period which Fassbinder included in the film: Konrad Adenauer's preparations for re-armament. Just as Adenauer was accused of 'selling out' national interests

²¹ Quoted in Kaes, p. 98.

for the sake of prosperity, Hermann Braun's 'business arrangement' with Oswald leads to the 'sale' of his wife in exchange for financial and psychological advantages. If - as so many critics believe - Maria Braun 'is' Germany, then the film's explosive closing scene opens a sinister perspective not only on her ambitions and illusions, but also on the politics of Adenauer and his successors who - it seems - have destroyed what they claimed to restore: Germany's sovereignty.

Fassbinder's portrayal of this period is clearly not as unambiguous as most critics assume. The film's 'structurally motivated ambiguity'²² extends far beyond the question whether Maria's death is the result of an accident or a deliberate action. It is ultimately rooted in a complex discourse on Germany's sovereignty and identity after the war in which private emotions and actions are reflected in public developments and vice versa.

Thus, Maria Braun can believe that regardless of her relationships with other men, her independence and identity will remain intact as long as she clings to her marriage, while Hermann Braun, on the other hand, feels so threatened by his wife's actions that he has to destroy her independence in order to restore his own self-regard. But while Hermann's betrayal, coinciding with West Germany's glorious return to normality, terminates Maria's independence, this independence has itself been shown to be based on the determined displacement of all true emotions, resulting in an increasingly empty life which can hardly be described as the 'failed alternative', the aborted utopian potential of the post-war situation.

If Maria Braun is indeed a victim, it needs more than a male conspiracy to destroy her. Her own determination never to look back at the victims of her career contributes as much to her final desperation as her husband's betrayal. But while Maria Braun may be seen from one perspective as an allegorical representation of a materialistic, soulless Germany, bound for self-destruction, the film does not overlook the fact that she has also been used and

²² Elsaesser, p. 101.

manipulated for other people's purposes. Fassbinder's allegorical representation of Germany would be incomplete without Hermann Braun and the couple's strange marriage itself. As the dramatic and fatal results of Hermann Braun's two returns to his wife demonstrate, the couple complement each other in an ultimately fatal way: It is the characters' shared fixation on their - imagined rather than practised - marriage and their fantasies about their own role in this relationship which motivates their actions and causes the film's explosive ending.

Such an interpretation might be accused of replacing the film's ambiguities and mysteries with a seemingly clear-cut meaning that can only be sustained by over-allegorizing Fassbinder's story and characters. On the other hand, its advantage lies in its ability to address the main turns and problems of the plot and relate them to the two stories which the film purports to tell: the story of Maria Braun's marriage and that of West Germany's rise to prosperity. By focussing allegorical readings exclusively on the character of Maria Braun, previous interpretations have tried to contain the explosive significance which Fassbinder ascribes to her marriage, reproducing a safe and widely acceptable view of West German history. But as we know only too well, Fassbinder's approach to questions of history and identity was usually scandalous and scandalising rather than conventional. An exploration of the hidden subtext of *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* may help to rediscover this quality of his film.