

The socially critical films of 1974: Part 5

## R.W. Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974)—A story of enduring affection and protest: “Together we’re strong”

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*This is the fifth and final part of a series of articles on the socially critical films of 1974. An introduction and Part 1 were posted May 6, Part 2 May 8, Part 3 May 10 and Part 4 May 13.*

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) is an often tender-hearted and unconventional love story set against the backdrop of racial prejudice and social repression prevailing in a divided postwar Germany.

The film's striking theme of human desire and affection that transcends social prejudice has retained its freshness and appeal through the decades and continues to move contemporary audiences. At the same time, *Ali's* moving treatment of the central characters often collides with the ambivalent and increasingly pessimistic social outlook of the filmmaker, which gave rise to contradictory impulses not easily reconciled in Fassbinder's short lifetime (1945-1982).

The drama opens with 60-year-old widow Emmi (Brigitte Mira), stepping into an “Arab bar” in Munich seeking shelter from the pouring rain. She asks the barmaid, Barbara (Barbara Valentin), “I pass by here every day and hear that foreign music. What language are they singing in?” Hanging out at the counter is a much younger Moroccan man, Ali (El Hedi ben Salem), whose friend coaxes him into dancing with “the old girl.”

As the couple dance they chat about their lives, both evidently lonely. Ali, an auto mechanic, asserts that he spends his free time in the bar because “Germans and Arabs don't like each other.” Emmi explains that her husband died many years ago. Ali walks Emmi back to her apartment, and they wait in the foyer for the rain to subside. Emmi explains that she's a building cleaner: “I never got a proper trade ... Who am I to refuse.” She confesses that her adult children live nearby but “have their own lives,” and outside of work most of her time is spent alone. They continue their exchange in Emmi's apartment and Ali spends the night.

The pair become quickly involved and Ali moves in. Trouble starts when the landlord's son (Marquard Bohm) shows up, informed by the haughty apartment manager Mrs. Karges (Elma Karlowa) that Emmi is subletting a room to a “foreigner.” Emmi quickly maneuvers, explaining that Ali is not her tenant but husband-to-be. Ali finds the idea appealing and convinces Emmi to marry him.

The first few months of the couple's unconventional romance pass by happily. However, the corrosive racial prejudice that predominates in Emmi's social orbit begins to impose itself. Emmi's three semi-

estranged children react to her new marriage with hysterical anger and disgust, her pious and interfering neighbors make themselves a nuisance, and at work her colleagues avoid her. When she confronts the local shopkeeper about his refusal to serve Ali, Emmi is banned from the grocery store.

*Ali* stands out for its perceptive and sympathetic treatment of the most mistreated individuals in the working class. Despite the hostile atmosphere, Emmi and Ali treat each other and those around them humanely. Their private moments of mutual affection, the most touching and heartfelt, speak to the more enduring human feelings of tenderness and companionship.

There are some remarkable lines that show the complexity of German society at the time, both the challenges workers face and the ugly racism and xenophobia promoted by the ruling class. Some of the ugliness: “I'm not letting you tell me a black man can speak better German than me;” “Germans with Arabs not good.” The difficulties of life for working people: “Half of life is work;” “Working nights really takes it out of me;” “The subway rates are going up.” Sentiments of aspiration and tenderness also emerge throughout: “Buy ourselves a little piece of heaven.” “You're very beautiful, Ali.” “When we're together we must be nice to each other. Otherwise, life's not worth living....Together we're strong.”

Fassbinder's body of work often focused on the oppressed, the suffering and the socially marginalized. A prolific artist and pioneer of the New German Cinema, Fassbinder took from films by the French New Wave (Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol) and the operatic works of Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti, as well as the American big studio films, first and foremost, the melodrama created by German émigré Douglas Sirk, but also in particular, films by Raoul Walsh, Michael Curtiz and Howard Hawks.

*Ali* draws special inspiration from Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), which involves a lonely middle class widow (Jane Wyman) who falls in love with her much younger working class gardener (Rock Hudson), scandalizing her children and her socialite milieu. In an essay about Sirk, Fassbinder once wrote that this “is the kind of thing Douglas Sirk makes movies about. People can't live alone, but they can't live together either. This is why his movies are so desperate.”

Fassbinder was an immensely talented artist, perhaps unique in his acute sensitivity and passion for exploited individuals and those

spurned by conservative social expectations. However, the explosive contradictions of the postwar era that he lived through, the past horrors of Nazism, his limited understanding of the history of the twentieth century and social orientation, led him to a growing pessimism toward German society as a whole. Earlier in the aforementioned piece he writes that Sirk's "tender" films are from "someone who loves people and doesn't despise them as we do." He also once said, "American cinema is the only one I can take really seriously, because it's the only one that has really reached an audience."

Fassbinder grew up amid Germany's postwar industrial boom based on the political neutering of the working class by the pro-capitalist Social Democratic Party (SPD), assisted by the Stalinists.

He matured in a period of political and social turbulence of the 1960s and 70s when the anti-capitalist struggle by the international working class and student youth sharply posed the need for socialism. That this period of betrayals and defeats was not clearly understood by his generation, helps to explain *Ali*'s uneven and often contradictory elements.

While there is a profound humanity that runs through Emmi and Ali's relationship, there tends to be too narrow a focus on the characters' private emotional lives, which seems to exist largely in a vacuum, outside of the social fabric. Despite the many moving scenes, there are just as many where the characters, including Emmi and Ali, interact stiffly in emotional (and physical) semi-isolation from each other.

Many of the scenes in *Ali* are potent and compact, but there is a claustrophobic character to them as well. Fassbinder is able to conjure up a social world and people are often seen as an "ensemble of social relations" as Marx put it. But here too there are limits in the art and politics of Fassbinder. In general, the behavior of the supporting cast—the neighbors, shopkeepers, barmaid, etc.—tend to be treated in a flat and schematic manner, often characterized as one-sidedly mean-spirited, backward, and petty. For example, in one scene during lunch break one of the cleaners says of foreign workers: "With people like that, dirt takes over." In these less convincing scenes, it's difficult to believe that such heavy-handed, *universal* bitterness would come from people who themselves confront similar oppressive conditions. Fassbinder himself plays Emmi's son-in-law Eugen in a heavy-handed, one-sided manner, bringing out the very worst in such an individual.

As well, the better-off characters such as the shopkeeper and landlord are presented as either hostile, apathetic, self-interested or a mixture of all three. ("In business, you have to hide your aversions"). All in all, social life is presented as rigid and conservative, leaving one with the view that Emmi and Ali are two stranded individuals up against the inescapable backwardness of the whole of German society.

Fassbinder directed *Ali* during his most productive and valuable period, the early 1970s, the years during which he also made *Beware of a Holy Whore*, *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, *Martha*, *Effi Briest*, *Fox and His Friends*, and *Mother Küsters' Trip to Heaven*.

The unresolved artistic issues in Fassbinder's work have to be located in the broader cultural and political problems of the 20th century. The general social atmosphere in *Ali* expresses something of the general moods that prevailed in sections of artists and radical intelligentsia who grew up in the postwar decades in which the workers' movement was dominated by the reformist, nationalist labor bureaucracies. Lacking a progressive political outlet, members of the

so-called New Left, including many in the German student movement with which Fassbinder was associated, turned toward various currents of "critical theory" and the Frankfurt School, and their increasing focus on problems of personal and sexual identity and various middle class issues over politics based on the class struggle. (Fassbinder referred to Marx and Freud as "the two most important figures of our time.")

These anti-Marxist tendencies emphasized the role of psychological and existentially based "alienation" in modern capitalist society, claiming that workers were hopelessly backward "consumers" complicit in the very capitalist system that repressed them, and powerless to fight back.

In one of *Ali*'s few political references that reflects some of the political confusion that predominated in artistic circles, Emmi mentions briefly to Ali that her father had been a member of Hitler's Nazi party and hated all foreigners ("I was in the party too. Everyone was, or almost everyone.") Later Emmi takes Ali to dine where Hitler once ate. This view of the working class is the outcome of the irrationalist (and false) historiography peddled by the Frankfurt School to explain the horrors of World War II, which dismissed the mass opposition in the German and European working class to Nazism and the complex political issues bound up with the crisis of its political leadership.

Unable to break free from these damaging political conceptions, Fassbinder's subsequent artistic trajectory reflected increasing personal, artistic and political demoralization, which produced what the WSWS has described in the past as, "one story after another in which individuals compromise themselves, conspire with reactionary elements and are destroyed in the process." His films from the early 1980s are simply difficult to watch. Fassbinder died, tragically, in 1982 from a drug overdose, having burned the candle of his life at both ends. He was just 37 years old.

*Ali* continues to endure as a courageous example of affection and working class solidarity that transcends race and nationality and all other artificial social divisions promoted by the brutal capitalist order. No doubt, the new generation of politically awakened workers and youth being mobilized around the world will find inspiration in the strongest aspects of Fassbinder's work.

Fassbinder once acknowledged that "generally speaking, history doesn't interest me," but history and social development took their devastating toll on him. The art critically needed in our day will be created by those who grasp essential political and social experiences of the 20th and 21st centuries and face up to the convulsions and challenges of our epoch.

*Concluded*



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