ON THE DANGERS OF IMAGINING A FUTURE: A REVIEW OF FAßBINDER'S VERONIKA VOSS

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INTRODUCTION BY DONALD MOSS

Fassbinder is dead. That is, he has taken off, finished at last. He leaves behind a slew of films — a sustained, high-pitched curse, a renunciation of the tawdry pleasures available via the vocabularies of desire, the politics of touch.

His was a language of negation, of refusal, images scrutinized and discarded, inevitably revealed as fake, inauthentic, the real item always elsewhere. No I, no You, only It, a malevolence born with the Subject, each of us sibbed to an evil long immune to the neutralizing efforts of our yearning bodies. Love and sex turn into mere narcotics; memory and imagination offer only cheap thrills and cheaper comforts. He roared, vengeful, but unlike Ahab he had no target, nothing to make him grand, nothing in particular to hate. Grim, eager to establish his own innocence, he accused by staking a claim on the Absolute: truth and love reserved for that which had never been known, never been dirtied by nervous hands and silly talk. The rest was Sodom, doomed.

He abandoned the territory early, his films made as though he were looking in a mirror at the dreadful turf from which he fled. Direct gaze would have been too much. His eyes were elsewhere, his work a record of the images stirring behind his back. He was a man on the run, more kin to Jonah than to Beckett, no place to hide. So he picked up the pace and in a miracle of flight his work began to glow, its flesh as palpable as heat, love’s ghost returning in spite of the order that it be banned. Here was his greatness — he was incapable of quieting his body. It spoke furiously, like Bolwieser, the central character in perhaps his finest film, who is pinned to a prison wall for following the rules, loses everything, and then, educated into the power of the lie, learns that he too has a story to tell, a true one.

Perhaps Fassbinder was a coward, the work just an elaborated nightmare intended to wake someone up, a bad faith plea, maybe even an apology. But to leave it at that would be to join the patriots in saluting the brave and to affirm, against anything resembling good sense, that we, bags packed, chained by nostalgia, are free enough to judge.

Fosha’s review is tough-minded, street-wise. Nevertheless, I wish I could have seen his eyes; I wish he could have seen mine.

REVIEW

When the past holds only unrelenting horror, the activity of imagining the future can be entered into reliably only if it is preceded by suspicion. Events must be dissected and scrutinized to rule out convincingly the possibility that within them they might contain the potential to erupt into evil, terror and decay.
Post-dissection and post-scrutiny, the question then becomes: When is it safe to abandon suspicion? When can the possibility be entertained that the future might be different from the past? If the answer is never, if the answer is that one becomes addicted to the steely security that suspicion provides, then the transition from suspicion to the activity of constructing vigorous possibilities for living cannot be effected. There is a further danger if the transition is never effected: suspicion is no longer the process that precedes the generation of a guiding vision. Instead, suspicion — with fragmentation, isolation and defeat as its invariant sequelae — becomes itself the guiding vision. And once again, we let ourselves get perilously close to allowing that ashes might be building blocks. We should already know not to be seduced by the idea of the Phoenix.

“Light and shadow, the two secrets of film,” says Voss. Fassbinder knows the secret. Sharp outlines. High contrast annihilating detail. Grainy detail only when ideologically necessary.

Germany, 1955. The players: Veronika Voss — platinum blonde, husky voice, Aryan darling of Goebels, she reached her apogee as a film star in ’43. Her raison d’être: to flesh-and-blood the Image of Woman men needed to have so they could fill out the Image of Man they needed to be in order to win a war. As a person, she was solely defined by the closeness with which she approximated the image deemed essential to her culture. A decade later, a self-less, dream-less, memory-less morphine addict, her survival rides on her ability to keep the image alive for herself. The self survives only if the image still convinces. We meet her watching herself in a movie; we last see her dying, gazing at her own reflection in a make-up mirror. In between, it is chilling to watch this shell of a woman, aswirl in booze and morphine, singing “Memories Are Made of This”, a boy/girl song with, comparatively, only a touch of cynicism. The incongruity of it holds one like a gruesome accident.

Robert Krohn — rumpled clothes, unshaved, his sleep surrounded by spilled beer and cigarette butts. A sportswriter, he says “my life is monotonous; no victories, no defeats.” He is warm and humane and kind and so very sad and so very resigned. His is a life that does not partake of dream or illusion. His very appearance shouts out the price he pays for having given up hope. His appearance and his autistic/suicidal verses. If Veronika Voss is all light and shadow, Robert Krohn is unremittingly grey.

Dr. Marianne Katz — neurologist specialising in the soothing of pain, the eradication of memory and the management of illusion. She is malignant power personified. Driven by greed, she is the sinister agent who sets in motion the destruction of all connections out of which meaning might be constructed — connections between past and present, between men and women, between memory and dream, between act and desire. Her sterile white clinic, the “10 a.m. Country and Western Hour” playing at all times, the anonymity disguised as confidentiality, her surroundings smack of terminal solutions: no pain, no germs, no culture, no time. No will.

The Black American soldier — fat, passive, a bag of flesh shining his own boots, blithely singing “I sold my soul to the company store.” Another icon that works by virtue of contradicting the very expectations it sets up.
The old Jewish couple — concentration camp survivors, yet not very much alive. “My world consists of dreams,” the old man says, and then, baring the number tattooed on his arm, he adds “Treblinka. That’s why I am no part of your world.” Even the deep love of devoted husband and wife has no chance against the pain of memory, a pain that must be wiped out at any cost. To the degree that their memories could function as a superego — that is, a structure where a sense of history is essential to its operation — those memories, like the potential for anger and action of the Black soldier, have been lulled into a narcotic stupor.

With *Veronika Voss*, Fassbinder demonstrates breathtaking skill with the scalpel: not a wasted moment, not a moment of hesitation. Methodically and irrefutably, he exposes one of the mechanisms by which defeat, cynicism and resignation are produced, with horror thus allowed unchallenged reign. The mechanism is that of splitting, and the segregation of illusion from lived life is its result.

The realm of illusion is peopled by those who personify the desired attributes of sex and beauty and glory and wealth. But content aside, the quality of the personification is deficient: those behind the images, with all their efforts going into the activity of representation, are caught in a self-referential tailspin, e.g. Voss dying in the mirror. Out of touch with others, lost is their capacity to feel, to love, to remember. The images they attempt to bring to life do not inspire and motivate, but inhibit and paralyse. Cut off from the stream of lively connections provided by memory and current experience, illusion is drained of its potential to inform future-making. Proliferating instead in autistic isolation, illusion, like yet another narcotic, dulls the senses and serves only denial and escape. Anemic and two-dimensional, it poses no threat to the status quo.

In opposition to the realm of illusion is the realm of the experiential day-to-day world. It is inhabited by stoopshouldered folk, evacuated of desire and of dream. Their lives informed by unquestioned acceptance of their powerlessness, they are in no doubt that sex and beauty and glory and wealth can never be terms in the lexicon of their lives. Their resignation total, their capacity to desire, to hope and to imagine has become atrophied.

The images of drabness and defeat are as archetypal, that is, as extreme, as primitive and as invulnerable to moderation by actual experience, as those of grandeur and glamour. The enforced segregation devitalizes each realm. This is Fassbinder’s take on how a people could have been seduced and mesmerised into compliance by a vision: divide, and make them dream re-union, divide further and conquer.

In each world, those trapped within it are rendered impotent by their own sense of lacking something vital. The Veronika Vosses can no longer feel and remember. The Robert Krohns can no longer hope and dream. Neither can act. Hovering toward each other but never meeting, these are the archetypal products of a split imagination, one that cannot conceive of alternatives.

Fassbinder tells a story about two extreme worlds and one rule. The rule is that the two worlds shall remain impenetrable to one another, that the segregation shall continue undisturbed. Questions and wishes, essential to dramatic tension, are allowed as long as they are questions to which the answer is
known before the question is asked, as long as the wishes co-exist with the certainty that their satisfaction is impossible.

Then the unbreakable rule is broken: the possibility of a connection between Voss and Krohn is raised. A question has been asked and no one knows what the answer will be. A troublemaker skips a stone across the gleaming surface of the still lake. The interest of the narrative shifts: the focus becomes what Fassbinder does with the turbulence he has created. In the end, the surface of the lake is once again gleaming, unrippled, very very still. Maybe even more still than before. It is as though nothing has happened. And we shudder.

For one brief moment, possibility and even actual movement are allowed: Robert Krohn allows himself to be seduced into dreaming. Even though when dreaming, he is also seduced from his volition, his judgment, his anticipation — without questions, without suspicion, he, the journalist repeats again and again “I don’t know” — his disorientation is in and of itself not worrisome. He is a foreigner in the land of dreams, and new languages take time to learn. What matters is that the spell of stasis is broken and he is moved, as is Veronika Voss. Inspired by Krohn’s devotion, she takes a chance and bets on human contact and felt emotion: in defiance of Dr. Katz, she refuses morphine and she refuses tear-simulating glycerine in the filming of a scene. She bets, but she loses. Her collapse wakes up Krohn. Fassbinder plays the ace up his sleeve, the character who defies the dichotomies so meticulously adhered to in the others.

Enter Robert’s girlfriend. It is possible to imagine her as a heroine. Unlike the others, she has ambiguity and detail. Capable of laughter and some humor, she feels sadness and yearning. She can ask questions and nonetheless, she is able to love. It is all the more interesting that of the four principals, only she remains nameless: though Voss once calls her by her last name, we never learn her first name. It is as though Fassbinder confesses that, to him, she is the most improbable one of the lot. Love for Robert, compassion for the Jewish couple, gut-level outrage at unfairness propel her into action, an action so potentially effective, it costs her her life. She takes on Dr. Katz’s morphine trafficking and she is murdered.

With her murder — and the other three only slightly more indirect murders of those who accepted doled out doses of dreams from their oppressors — the moment of tension has passed. Equilibrium has been restored. Dr. Katz’s control is supreme: the administrator of illusion retains ultimate power with official backup. And then Robert Krohn. He also remains. Defeated, dream-less, and will-less once again. Unable to believe in his own power, he knows the truth but cannot bring himself to believe that it matters. For him, truth is a disembodied notion that can exist at best only in dissociation. And so he goes on with his life. If you can call it that. When he delivers the last line of the movie — he hails a cab and orders the driver “To the stadium” — he reeks with complicity, the complicity of passivity. The show must go on.

It might be argued that Fassbinder performed his analysis ruthlessly and thus admirably, reaching the only conclusion to be had; anything else would have been deluded or sentimental. I disagree. *Veronika Voss* is a movie where Fassbinder’s imagination fails him in the end.
It is not interesting to watch an unknown take on the world champ if the unknown gets in the ring in order to get pummelled and to demonstrate the superior ability of the other. Regardless of its outcome, the contest is interesting only if it is undertaken in a spirit of contention, a spirit of maximal possibility. Striving for historical exorcism, Fassbinder undertakes a no-holds-barred confrontation with the past. We participate, presuming that the aim is to emerge inspired from the ordeal, the fear of inadvertent repetition of past horrors sufficiently subordinated to the excitement of creation. Fassbinder dares one step in the direction of construction: a new possibility having something to do with memory and dream co-informing future action is hinted at. The tension, the trouble, the ripple in the lake, the moment of excitement occur when the integration of the split is risked and the possibility of effective action empowered by strong feeling is allowed play. But Fassbinder is unable to sustain the act of hopeful imagination in the absence of suspicion. Too vulnerable, afraid of relinquishing total control and being swept up in a momentum of unimaginable events he only set in motion, he retreats to the familiar position of defensive defeat and secondary cynicism. To the stadium.