

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Fox and his Friends*** 1975

Werner Fassbinder. (1945-1982)

### STORY

**Setting** Money, sex and death are the starring actors in this drama of urban hardness, in which love is temporary and easily crushed. That the action plays out in the night world of urban industrial Germany lends the harsh events an unsparing brutality.

**Lottery** The loser protagonist of this film is a working class gay, whom we first meet on a day full of implications for him. He is working as a specialty act in a traveling carnival, when the police raid the act, arresting the owner, and folding up the show. Franz is left with almost nothing, and after visiting his hapless alcoholic sister he realizes that he is on his own. Having lost the money he still has, he turns to his wits to see him through. Cruising a public restroom he meets an elegant hedonist—a gay antique dealer who picks him up—and then, following a hunch that he is due to win the lottery; Franz succumbs to the strong feeling that he must fill out a lottery ticket before four thirty that afternoon. The fact that he does win, a good hefty sum, is the turning point for the film, for it makes Franz Biberkopf into a hot sexual item—at least for the duration of his hold on the cash—who has just the money a set of fast gay friends will be happy to share with him.

**Sex** The initial beneficiary of this financial windfall is Max, the antique dealer who opens the relationships with Franz; but a month later Max introduces Franz to Eugen, the gay scion of a wealthy industrialist in the printing business. The demi monde of gay urban society encloaks the behaviors of Eugen and Franz, who teach one another their mutual desires, by the codes recognized around them, and they are soon an item. What particularly seals their mutual lifestyles is Eugen's desire to make Franz over in his own style image: setting him up with an apartment which is elegant—and aesthetically right on—and with just the requisite style-of-the-moment suits, jackets, and appurtenances.

**Style** The two men quickly become an item, each fulfilling the desires of the moment for the other, but against a background of snarky jealous hot sex, taking place on all sides, and effectively hardening relationships, until sexuality and money seems to have replaced every vestige of tenderness in this underworld gay realm. Eugen, of course, is all the time feathering Max's nest, by promoting to Franz the expensive *objets d'art* which Max sells in his antique store. By the end of the film Franz will have been thrown out of the apartment Eugen bought him, with Franz's own lottery money,

**Business** Franz, fatefully enough and because he has cash to burn, from his huge lottery win, finds himself incorporated into Eugen's family business, and included in family affairs and family planning—without realizing that he is essentially being used as a cash cow. In a complex set of tactics, Eugen, Max, and Eugen's former boyfriend Philip manage to take Franz to the cleaners in almost every possible way, stripping him of the expensive flat, furniture, and clothes he himself bought, fleecing him for money to salvage the failing business of Eugen's dad. In the midst of this general exploitation of Franz, he and Max take off for a vacation in Morocco, but nothing, in the end, can straighten out a relationship which is hedged in greed and lust, and deprived of love.

**Crash** Things fall apart after the trip. The guys get home, to discover that Eugen's dad's business badly requires an infusion of cash, and Franz is left to swing a loan that will save the day. By this time, though, Eugen's interest in Franz has as a whole waned, and the pressures of being screwed (in every way) are becoming too much for Franz. He has a mini heart attack, but when he tells Eugen about it he gets an indifferent response. On the following day Franz learns that his money and apartment have been entirely taken from him. He overdoses on the pills a doctor has given him, and the next day he is found dead on the sidewalk of the underground, his pockets rifled, for what cash he has left, by two teen age kids.

## CHARACTERS

**Fox** (played by Fassbinder) is first known to us as a carnival performer, whose show folds around him, thanks to the manager's failure to pay taxes. On that same fateful day Fox wins big at the lottery, strikes it off with a money hungry gay boyfriend, and enters the margins of a gay underworld in which he will subsequently be wined, dined, and eventually stripped of everything he has.

**Eugen** is Fox's new gay boyfriend, and the principal lover of Fox. From the start, Eugen bestows gifts, trips, and compliments on his new buddy, but underneath the surface Eugen is looking out for number 1, and in the end he leaves Fox a dead man in the underground.

**Max** is a very upscale antiques dealer, from whom Fox—without knowing that he is playing into the hands of the Max-Eugen plan—buys a complete antique furniture set for the apartment which he is (for a short time) being given by Eugen—who acquires the apartment with some of the money Franz got from winning the lottery.

**Hedwig** is Franz's sister. Every time we see her she is pouring herself a drink. She is a major downer for Franz, and plays her part in abetting his spiral into a chaotic life.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### FOX

**Character** Fox, played wonderfully by Fassbinder himself, is from the outset, as he scampers from the failing carnival, a beguiling figure. He is impulsive, ingenious—think of his trick for separating the florist from enough money to buy a lottery ticket—and inclined, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, to think the best of people. As his downfall deepens, however, he inevitably sees that he himself is the object of no reciprocated love, and is increasingly left out in the cold of the hard boiled demi monde. The one family that greets us is in fact that of Eugen's dad and mom, who create around them a small oasis of good nature and charm.

### Illustrative moments

*Abandoned* At the outset of the film we are forced to recognize Franz as a figure who has just lost his job—with the carnival—and who has nothing to hold onto. The only family member he is in touch with is his alcoholic and depressed sister Hedwig, and she has no personal margin to reach out to him.

*Clever.* Dead broke, but determined to get enough money to try the lottery, Franz tricks the owner of a floral shop into lending him a ten dollar bill—which Fox then steals and rushes with to the lottery kiosk.

*Duped* After Franz has realized that his salary, at Eugen's dad's factory, will not be paid to him, he hurries to his apartment to cool down. To his horror, though, he realizes that the apartment has been taken back by Eugen, and Franz has been locked out. And it was Franz whose money had bought the apartment!

## THEMES

**Lust.** When we meet him, Franz is gay, living with his boyfriend but in the straight world—more or less—of carnies, lower class crowds of entertainment seekers, and day laborers. After his initial pick up by Max, the art dealer, Franz is swept into the fully gay demi monde of prosperous, flashy, and sex driven homosexuals. As a lower class member, of this desire driven sub class, Franz is like a new kid on the block, popular because cute and shapely enough, but forever under tutelage, of lovers who want to upgrade his dress and behavior, for their own interested reasons.

**Chance.** The Franz we first meet, at the carnival where he is performing, will on that very day, when chance has taken his job away from him, be overwhelmed by the sense that he is destined to win the lottery that day. He makes exaggerated efforts to reach the lottery kiosk on time, scores big, and takes this success (unfortunately) as a great omen for his future. He wins big, then loses big.

**Class.** The highflying, if underground, world that Franz is seduced into is very style-and-class conscious. By style I mean things like trendy tight fitting pants; by class conscious, I mean that Eugen, Franz's lover, wants him to seriously upgrade his table manners and his repertoire of tastes in wine.

**Inequality.** In the end, upon analysis, this film has seemed to many critics to be a Marxist critique of social inequality. Gay culture, having made a sophisticated entry into the decision making strata of social life, then imposes its financial and 'moral' power on the working class gay culture that feeds it. Perhaps. But in 'the present case there is also a flavor of My Fair Lady, a musical comedy satire on both lower class foibles and upper class pretensions.