

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Gods of the Plague 1969

Werner Fassbinder (1945-82)

STORY

Gangster. Fassbinder's gangster film reminds us of the dark and dangerous city of *Fox and his Friends*, which takes a gamey gay guy into the lethal underworld of the sexual city, and eventually leaves him dead on the cement floor of the underground, his pockets being thoroughly picked by a couple of teen age hoods. Fassbinder's colleague, Werner Herzog, plays a special version of this dangerous kind of 'entrance into the city,' which has fatal consequences written all over it. In his *Stroszek* Herzog takes us on a journey with a freed convict, who is stepping out into the world preceded by the words of wisdom of his jail counselor, who threatens him with the consequences of finding himself back in jail again.

Franz. *Gods of the Plague* opens with the same anxiety we find in the character Stroszek, the fraught emergence from prison of a guy who is clearly not ready to face the social challenge in any way the warden would like him to. Unlike Stroszek, who has a survivor's instinct and a whimsical love of life, Franz, Fassbinder's dark figure, is clearly an ex con destined to bring suffering to the social system. The trouble is in him and we see it there, without being told anything about the issues that put Franz in the slammer in the first place. Franz just looks like trouble, for himself and his world, as we see him sliding along a dark street as he emerges into the city again.

Insider. Every released ex con hits the world in his or her own way, and Franz is unmistakable as he saunters into his exit. A dark suit, an old fedora, droopy moustaches, a sensitively devious expression, he wanders, as if on ancient radar, toward the night club where a former girlfriend, Lola Montez her stage name, is wrapping up her nightly performance. Right from the outset, as he approaches the night club, Franz tips us to his insider mind—he is back in his element. He is ready to trick the system; thus, when the bouncer pushes him back, as he tries edging through the gate of the night club, Franz slips in around the side, past the guy, and in the shadows presses a hefty greenback into an outstretched palm.

Women. Lola Montez is overjoyed to see her old boyfriend, and is only the first of the individuals with whom Franz falls back into intimate relations, during the brief period of his return to life on the outside. We see from the way Lola re falls for him, mothering him and nursing him, that his morose and sinister gangsta fashion is decidedly erotic. Several women become touch down contacts for him, in short order, as does Gorilla, an old friend who was in fact responsible for murdering Franz' brother, a crime initially pinned onto Franz himself.

Entanglement. The criss crossing erotics of Franz, with several women who dig him, the feelings of Franz for the Gorilla—in 'real life' Fassbinder and the Gorilla were an erotic item—the implication of Franz in the murder of his brother, whom in fact the Gorilla killed, and finally the colluding of Franz and the Gorilla, for whom money has very quickly become an urgent desideratum, and who plot to rob a supermarket—all these tightly concentrating story elements converge quickly, to bring the film to a fiery conclusion. That conclusion, a shoot out in a suburban super market, does away with Franz and the Gorilla, if only because Franz's out of prison love life has led to a revenge plot against him. Too many women at a time, huh! And because one or another of them feels left out they settle for vengeance, letting the cops know about the impending supermarket robbery. The shoot out will be the bloody conclusion of a morose, antisocial, and gloomy life passage.

CHARACTERS

Franz. Franz is a petty criminal who has just been released from prison, and who is repatriating himself by visiting old girlfriends and planning a heist in a local supermarket. His efforts to start a new life are pitched low, and result in his premature death by gunfire.

Joanna. Franz' girlfriend, who takes him to a restaurant for his first taste of freedom, and who expects him to show some enthusiasm at the return to 'doing what he wants to do.' She is the first to be disabused. For his pleasure he orders Spam and eggs, typical prison breakfast food. At this point Joanna asks him how he liked life on the inside; she must satisfy herself with the despondent response, that life on the inside 'was no worse than life on the outside.'

Margarethe. Girlfriend the second, a stunning beauty, a sucker, it seems for the languid passivity with which Franz allows her to peel off his pants, and expose his dark quiescent dong.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

FRANZ (unconscientious)

Character Franz occupies the center of this film noir, which opens with his release from prison, back into a static world of vamps and criminals. He allows himself to be swept up and defined by women, on his emergence, and makes no effort to 'rehabilitate' himself, for in fact he has no interest in the rewards that a 'normal' life in society could bring him. He meets his downfall—gunned down in an attempted supermarket robbery—in a quixotic effort to stash away cash for an exotic pleasure trip, 'perhaps to Greece.' We are left wondering what kind of 'pleasure' Franz would be capable of, after squandering his pleasure zones on self-interested bitches who have no interest in him.

Parallels. Franz is part of the ex con world, surrounded, as he is released, by shadowy figures on the margins of crime, imprisonment, or flight; Franz lives in that dark social world which embraced the fugitive central figure of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, or even Raskolnikov, the haunted murderer of *Crime and Punishment*. Kafka's Josef K lives in a penumbra of semi existence on the edge of society, Stoner, in John Williams' novel of University life, adultery, and isolation, *Stoner*, writes a keen analysis of the inwardly marginalized figure, who is as inwardly beat up as Franz, by a society that has no place for his values. And what about Camus' *The Stranger*, that consummate portrait of a little man without coordinates in a society that has no need for him?

Illustrative moments

Released. The Franz we see, upon his release, is a furtive, dark figure skirting through the side streets of Munich, heading for a nightclub where he hopes to meet his one time girlfriend, singing under the name of Lola Montez.

Morose. Franz' girl friend takes him to breakfast, on the first morning of his freedom, hoping to find some joie de vivre in him. However, he is not up to it, and opines that jail is as good as being on the outside. His sensitive and gloomy face perfectly matches his long black moustache.

Passive. Franz' passivity clearly turns on the women in his life. Nothing they do brings out expressions of hope or desire, for reasons which we don't fully grasp. (It is an element of the noir genre?) We do not feel that Franz' spirit has been broken in prison; in fact we don't detect any direction at all in Franz' behaviors.

Reckless. Under the prompting of Gorilla Franz agrees readily to the robbery plan at the supermarket. Franz seems undaunted by the possibility of being arrested again and returned to prison. Is he reckless? Or is he indifferent, without strong feelings? Would the latter answer not fit best, with the artistic tenor of the noir genre?

Discussion questions

What point is Fassbinder making in this film? Does he feel sympathy with Franz, as he tends to toward Fox (in *Fox and his Friends*) or Hans (in *The Merchant of Four Seasons*) ?

Why do Franz' two former girlfriends gang up on him, and rat on him to the police? Is it because he can no longer be of use to them?

How do you explain Franz' statement that life in prison is just about the same as life on the outside? Is he depressed? Is he angry?

THEMES

Erotics. Franz emerges from prison into a world of eros, which would simply seem to have been waiting for him. From the get go, Lola Montez sweeps him up, feeds and beds him—though Franz is at best lethargic and exhausted, and unwilling to admit that there is any great difference between prison and 'life on the outside.' Margaretha, sexually obsessed with Franz, quickly enters the picture, and treats us to reasons for wondering why Franz would ever have wanted to leave this artificial paradise of the bedroom.

Intrigue. Women prove to be the source of the intrigue, in this film about their power over men. Franz, who exists in a vacuum, cynical and value empty, follows his erotic nose (like his creator) into more than one person at a time, and more than one gender at a time. The results, quite naturally, are involved and hazardous. Finally women are his downfall.

Violence. The conflict forming in the present film is one in which violence is inevitable, given that Franz lets himself become a pawn manipulated by greedy and Immoral figures, whose only allegiance is to their own pleasure. He himself is ready to kill the supermarket manager, for the simple convenience of a shortcut to money. The murder of his own brother is only one piece of the violence which clearly has accustomed Franz to a contempt for human life.

Cynicism. From the emergence of Franz from prison, which, as he tells Lola is 'no worse than being on the outside,' we know that Franz is not thrilled by 'being back in society.' He takes his pleasures as they come, but without having bought into any of the norms of caring social existence. We are with Franz, accordingly, truly moving into the *noir* of the *film noir*, the region (admittedly with some attractions), in which we are temporarily freed from some of the prices charged by society for successful co-existence with it. It is the genius of the skillful *film noir*, to salve evil with a certain undeniable gloss, the kind of sharkskin smoothness with which the just released Franz slithers through his first night back in 'freedom.'