Voicing a Radical Love: 
Queerness, Style, Sadomasochism, 
and the Spectator in Fassbinder’s Cinema

Janett Daisy Buell*

Two of the more explicitly and thoroughly queer films among the astonishing number of works produced during the brief career of the New German Cinema’s enfant terrible, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, are the feature-length dramas In a Year with 13 Moons (In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden) and The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant). In these two films issues of gender and sexuality, desire, identity, and queerness within a heteronormative society are explored stylistically in ways that open up to and engage the spectator’s fantasies, creating the possibility of a queer spectatorial position – or at least queering the spectator’s existing position.

However, a closer look at these films also appears to reveal a perhaps unsettling entangling of the queer with a more or less sadomasochistic vision of art and human relationships. What are we to make of this, and how? A prudent place from which to depart is perhaps a consideration of the set of relations constructed between the films’ style, their linkage of the queer and the sadomasochistic, and their engagement with the spectator. Due to a link between the stylistic and the sadomasochistic facets of the films on the level of aesthetic structure, which Alice A. Kuzniar names “allegory” and Victor Fan the “mise-en-abyme” of the films, approaching the question from the direction of the queer stylistic labor shaping the films provides a way of engaging with both the spectatorial and the sadomasochistic aspects of this set of relations while steadily coming to grips with a greater understanding of Fassbinder’s constituting of the queer specifically.

* Janett Daisy Buell is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Departments of Film Studies and German Languages and Literatures at Yale University. Her research interests include contemporary media theory, the relationship between film and other media, New German Cinema, and twentieth-century German literature.
Much scholarly work has already been done on this topic, a fact that is unsurprising in light of Fassbinder’s status as a figurehead of what, in her thusly-titled book, Kuzniar calls the “Queer German Cinema.” However, previous studies have by and large focused overwhelmingly on the scopic regime of these films (the body, image, appearance, and gaze) with only minimal attention paid to the voice and the auditory regime in passing. My contention here is that the queer, sadomasochistic allegorical structure Kuzniar sees as fundamentally shaping and queering these films extends in a significant way beyond the scopic, imagistic realm of visual performance, theatricality, and gesture, and includes specifically the auditory realm – especially the human voice – as a key element of its double-movement towards and away from the spectator. Thus, considering the workings of the human voice within the queer aesthetic structure Fassbinder’s works put forth is a fruitful way of engaging the larger project outlined above.

Before zeroing in on this however, a brief overview of these films and their place within Fassbinder’s oeuvre is perhaps due. Although Fassbinder’s death in 1982 is considered as officially marking the end of the flowering of socially-aware German filmmaking during the late 1960s and 1970s known as the New German Cinema (Neue Deutsche Kino), while he was alive this controversial and openly gay filmmaker served above all as the movement’s enfant terrible, and both his personality and his creative works aroused intense emotional reactions from all sides. The full range of Fassbinder’s work embraces everything from the avant-garde and sharp social criticism to elements of Hollywood melodrama, but a subset of more ‘personal’ films can also be discerned. These films, which include In a Year with 13 Moons and The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, bring to the fore the concern with queer themes present to some degree in many of his films. Like nearly all of his socially-critical films, both 13 Moons and Bitter Tears contain characters who to some degree are alienated and suffer under oppressive forces, such as a strict binary gender system, lack of respect and understanding, and abusive partners, but the two films inflect these themes slightly differently.

Begun shortly after the suicide of Fassbinder’s lover, In a Year with 13 Moons depicts the last few days in the life of the transgender woman Elvira. Formerly the abattoir worker turned businessman Erwin, ze has had reassignment surgery in Casablanca in a vain attempt to attract the attentions of hir former business partner, the powerful Anton Saitz, with whom ze had fallen in love. Having been mocked, abused and finally rejected by hir partner Christoph after returning bloodied from an unsuccessful attempt at soliciting sex from a male prostitute at the film’s beginning, Erwin/Elvira proceeds to
revisit places and people from hir previous life in search of a complete identity and love: hir wife and daughter, the nun in charge of the convent where ze had been raised, the abattoir where ze had once worked, and Saitz himself, from whom hir wife wishes hir to gain forgiveness for an interview ze had given detailing the reason for the reassignment surgery, are all returned to, but in vain. Nowhere does ze find complete fulfillment of hir desires for a stable identity, understanding, and love – not even in the apartment of hir likewise transgender acquaintance Soul Frieda – and Erwin/Elvira ends the film by suiciding while listening to a recording the interview, in which ze had explained hir desires and need for love, with those who should have cared for hir reaching hir too late to prevent hir death.

It is clear in the film that the heart of Erwin/Elvira’s struggle centers on the lack of a stable identity that is interpretable within the categories of the society ze inhabits (particularly that of gender), and the consequent denial of full acceptance and love from those ze loves and sacrifices for even though ze requests this explicitly and actively seeks for a way past the confining cultural categories that prevent reconciliation. In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, however, the most clearly delineated forces of oppression stem more directly from within the specific intimate relationships depicted and then secondarily from broader social categories such as gender and sexual roles. The film (adapted from Fassbinder’s play of the same name and contained in a quasi-theatrical manner to the single set of Petra’s apartment) focuses on the triangular relationship between the newly successful and arrogant fashion designer Petra von Kant, the disdainful young model Karin, and Petra’s slavishly devoted live-in assistant (and possible former partner) Marlene. Introduced to the attractive model near the film’s beginning by Petra’s cousin Sidonie, the designer quickly falls for Karin and promises to help her out in her career; they soon begin a relationship in which the younger woman is clearly the dominant partner. However, Karin becomes increasingly unfaithful and cold and after six months returns to her husband, leaving Petra spiraling down into rage, despair and jealousy. Meanwhile Marlene observes, silently tense but unflagging in her attention to Petra, who alternates between rewarding her with verbal abuse and domination, and sudden demands for intimate contact such as slow dancing to music. At one point, observing Marlene crawl under the bed to find Petra’s shoes in order to help Petra on with them, Karin suggests that she has a screw loose. Petra replies that Marlene is not crazy, but simply loves her, at which Karin simply laughs. Soon the relationship between model and designer ends. After a final hysterical outburst on her birthday due to Karin’s failure to so much as telephone, Petra realizes not only the need to let go of Karin but also how
badly she has treated Marlene, and apologizes to the latter, receiving a kiss on the hand in return. But when she for the first time asks Marlene to tell her about herself, inviting her into a relationship of equals, Marlene’s only response is to pack her bags and depart in search of further domination, leaving Petra alone.

Here the forces most directly oppressing Marlene and Petra – whether Petra’s authoritarian cruelty to Marlene, or her own suffering under Karin and the abusive ex-husband she was devoted to previously – emerge from and manifest within the emotional dynamics of specific relationships, both heteronormative and queer. And though Erwin/Elvira ends up in the position ze does out of an attempt to please a potential lover, it is clearly society’s construction of itself through categories that forms the greatest obstacle to hir happiness, while for Petra and Marlene is not primarily the queerness of their relationships as it is the unspoken sadomasochistic dynamic in their attempts at relating that causes them the greatest difficulty and ultimately fractures their connection. This dynamic – an instinctive struggling around needs for domination and submission that are neither openly acknowledged nor consciously resolved – turns nearly every interaction into game of power in which those involved do not express their real needs and desires directly (even if they are desires to dominate or submit), but rather attempt to manipulate the others into providing an ersatz fulfillment, leading to misunderstanding, abuse, and loss of real connection. Although Marlene is ironically portrayed at the end as having been the most powerful of the three women in the triangle (as the late revelation of the pistol she keeps makes clear, she endured Petra’s abuse of her own volition), her ability to form a lasting and fulfilling connection is ultimately hampered by her own inability or unwillingness to speak her desires to another, and we are left to assume that she goes off to seek another master or mistress to manipulate into abusing her, rather than one she can openly offer her submission to.

Given that this dynamic of assumptions, abuse, and manipulative control also infects the heterosexual relationships we are told of in the film (Sidonie’s manipulation of her husband through playing up stereotypical gender roles, and Petra’s ex-husband’s chauvinism and sexual abuse), as well as to some extent Erwin/Elvira’s relationships with Anton Saitz and Christoph, this covert sadomasochism is not linked exclusively with the queer in Fassbinder’s imagination. It seems rather to be a feature of virtually all relationships to some degree for him. However, this dynamic echoes and builds on the oppressive forces of gender and sexual roles at play in society,
as the explicit comparison between Petra and Marlene that the camera’s movement evokes during Petra’s retelling of her relationship with her ex-husband makes clear, and it thus seems to work partially against the otherwise potentially liberating force of queer desire and connection inhabiting the films. This linkage is neither complete nor totally inhibiting of this liberating potential, as the following analysis makes clear, but it does introduce complications that are never fully and permanently resolved in any overarching way in the films.

In order however to come to grips with a suitable understanding of how queerness functions within this nexus of identity, gender and sexuality, and the body/voice relation in these two films, it is prudent to first consider further what specifically is meant by “queerness” here. Perhaps the most centrally useful understanding of the queer for the project at hand is that sketched by Alice Kuzniar in her book on the Queer German Cinema. Kuzniar’s take on the term resonates in the space opened up on the one hand by Meyer’s “deconstructive” theory of the queer as an ontological challenge replacing the bourgeois notion of the Self as unique, continuous, and static with one that is performative, discontinuous, and processual, and on the other hand by Goldman’s conceptualization of queerness as a more general attempt to avoid essentializing identities (6).

Beyond the usual emphasis on performance, theatricality and camp, Kuzniar also draws out a sense of obliquity and transverseness by relating “queer” to the German “quer” (‘oblique, slanted’); queerness here is inherently a challenge to the contained and the restrained, a transgressing of various boundaries and binaries on both the sociopolitical and personal levels. “Queer” is a form of protest, not only against heteronormativity, but against the very structure of binary alternatives such as gay/straight, female/male, normal/pathological, even self/other, and the difference which it signals is not that of isolated, opposed poles but rather the dynamic “deferral of decision” of Derridean différance. In using “queer,” she says, quoting Alexander Doty, she wants to “recapture and reassert a militant sense of difference that views the erotically ‘marginal’ as both (in bell hooks’s words) a consciously chosen ‘site of resistance’ and a ‘location of radical openness and possibility’” (6).

This double functioning of queerness is particularly brought out in the work of Fassbinder, as we will see, but it also more generally reflects the oblique double movement of the allegorical structure Kuzniar sees at work in the Queer German Cinema overall. However, it should be noted that
Kuzniar’s understanding of queerness is here also inflected by three key notions highlighted by some of the most recent work on Fassbinder: John Rhodes’ reading of the queerness of Fassbinder’s style as arising from the way in which his style as a form of queer labor makes queer experience visible and (as I will argue) audible; Victor Fan’s excavation of the re-inscription of narrative and history upon the transgender(ed) body in *In a Year with 13 Moons* (echoing Kuzniar’s own discussion of Zarah Leander and the ventriloquization of the other); and Brigitte Peucker’s application of Finke’s “metastatic aesthetic” to the blurring of the “real world” and “subjective fantasy” in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (Peucker, “Un-framing,” 368). Queerness, as I understand it here, is not only an oblique, dynamic disarticulation of certainties surrounding sexuality, gender, and the like – an allegorically-inclined display of the un-making of identity – but is also the product of an ecstatic stylistic labor: an eternal re-narrativizing of the self in its orientation (erotic and otherwise) towards the other, a shifting, dislocating, and sharing of voices and bodies through a metastatic breaking of or bleeding through right-angled (read: rigid) frames delimiting spaces, experiences, and worlds, both interior and exterior. Nor is this metastatic bleeding merely aesthetic, confined ultimately to the space of the film itself, but rather, it extends from Erwin/Elvira’s haunted abode, through the triangulated space of desire in Petra’s apartment, and beyond the screen into the physical and mental space of the spectator, inciting her to queer desire.

For the allegorical structure that Kuzniar sees as fundamentally shaping the work of Fassbinder and other directors of the Queer German Cinema is inherently not only queer but also participatory, requiring and coaxing forth the active involvement of the spectator in its double movement of, on the one hand, the theatrical promise of clarity and, on the other, the ultimate deflection and deferral of the meaning the spectator seeks. Contrasting it with the “self-sufficiency” of the symbol, Kuzniar observes that “allegory calls upon the reader’s [or spectator’s] involvement, indeed relies upon it in its very structure: because meaning has to be looked for, it is deferred” (9). And through the array of sensuous pleasures it offers, the cinema

when viewed queerly addresses the fantasy of the spectator. He or she erotically supports the film, making sensory, lived experience a part of the field of vision... Allegorical excess disrupts the belief that perception is invariably correct and true...Its eroticism slyly appeals to all. It thereby signals a queer resistance to the reification of sexual and gender difference and the systematic organization of desire in the optic field: these queer allegories deny that the realm of the visible must necessarily codify, inscribe, and delimit sexualities (14).
In this way the allegorical aspect of films such as Fassbinder’s can be seen as a queer intervention into the world of the spectator, turning the concealment/revelation logic of the closet that is the product of a heteronormative society into an aesthetic weapon-invitation directed back at both queer and non-queer members of this very society.

Stylistically a large part of the aesthetic work of the allegorical structure of such films is naturally performed by the visual elements of the medium: the actor’s body and facial expression, costuming and makeup, mise-en-scène, and the framing of the image itself. Scholarly work regarding Fassbinder’s oeuvre has unsurprisingly followed this lead for the most part, focusing on the content, quality and relationships of the image and the body and paying less attention to other aspects of the works in question. However, this narrow focus (carried over perhaps from study of silent films to those of the sound era) often neglects to fully investigate a vital part of the organization and working of films like Bitter Tears and 13 Moons: the auditory, and especially the vocal, register. Even Caryl Flinn’s work – an exception to the pattern – focuses more on the use of music than on the workings of the human voice in Fassbinder’s films, while work like Fan’s foregrounds the body and the image and considers the voice only as an adjunct to it.

Yet as both Kuzniar’s and Flinn’s readings of Werner Schroeter’s The Death of Maria Malibran show, there is ample room for further consideration of the voice in itself as a significant, and signifying, component of queer cinema. I argue merely that, in order to take full account of the role of the voice within the allegorical structure underlying queer cinema, this consideration needs to be extended to the work of directors like Fassbinder whose films may at first seem more preoccupied with the visual-bodily register. For as Fan’s analysis of In a Year with Thirteen Moons makes clear, in the queer cinema of Fassbinder’s Germany one cannot deal with the body without also, at some point, dealing with the voice and its relation to the body as a narrativized (quasi-)being. While in the silent cinema of the Weimar era “the body itself [became] the vehicle for allegorical indirectness and theatricality” (Kuzniar 11), in the sound cinema of post-WWII Germany the voice too labors within the double movement of the queer cinema’s allegorical (quasi-) address to the spectator.

Although Kuzniar limits her comments on the queerness of allegory mainly to the scopic realm, her claim is equally applicable to the auditory realm – especially when considering the human voice, marked as it is as a
cultrually determined signifier of gender and as a carrier of erotic desire. And despite the necessary distance inherent to the act of perception, the voice can bleed past the boundaries of the screen to enter the spectator’s world in a material way not fully available to the image of the body, enhancing its affective potential. The voice narrates – and, alternatively, refuses to narrate – personal as well as political histories, carries markers of stereotypical gender identity, ventriloquizes the fragmented identities and unnamable yearnings of the self through the body of the other, and performs the queer labor of drawing forth “unnatural,” oscillating, “uncategorizable, ornate, and decidedly antihermeneutic” desire (Kuzniar 9, 11).

The voice when it speaks also necessarily bears a relation of some kind – even if only one of dissociation – to the body that produces it. It is this aspect of Erwin/Elvira’s experiences that Victor Fan particularly highlights in his analysis of the narrativized transgender body in Fassbinder’s *In a Year with 13 Moons*. Discussing Erwin/Elvira’s status as the subject of discourse by others, Fan argues that the twofold, overlapping dissociation between the voice and the body, on the one hand, and that between (voiced) discourse/s about the body and the body itself, on the other hand, operates as “a key narrational device that opens up to” what he describes as “the *mise-en-abyme* of the film” – a play of differences and asymmetries, such as those of self/other and the gender binary, that ultimately finds no static resolution (Fan 127).

This *mise-en-abyme* takes over and structurally echoes Kuzniar’s notion of the allegory as at the heart of these films’ queer style, but grounds it more stringently in the realities and relations of the (trans)gendered body and voice. Fan sees Erwin/Elvira’s gender reassignment itself as a symptom that “in-sists” in a Zizekian double movement, not only functioning as the core of the imagined unity of heteronormative sexual and gender asymmetries, but also resisting them (Fan 119). But though Fan puts his focus first on the role of the body as the ground of the inscription of meaning by culture, including through the inscription of gendered markings, and only secondarily deals with the voice as the bearer of discourse about the body, there is also room to consider the voice itself more prominently as both marked by and as a marker of (trans)genderedness and thus queer/ing.

The dissociation between the auditory and optic registers, whose human loci are naturally the voice and the body, respectively, begins with the first scene of *13 Moons*, which John David Rhodes describes as “strikingly condens[ing]” the issues of style, queer subjectivity, and the labor of
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filmmaking. Erwin/Elvira has gone to a park early in the morning dressed as
a man to solicit sex from the male prostitutes there, but is quickly discovered
as lacking the expected equipment (we’re later told that ze was rebuffed when
ze tried while dressed in female clothes as well) and is brutally beaten. We
hear words that are not German, and “grop after” the visual content of the
shots depicting Erwin/Elvira’s rejection by the hustlers – a rejection whose
reality we grasp before we grasp its reason, the camera being either too
enmeshed in the scene or too distanced from it to provide the necessary
intimacy we crave. “Always either too close or too far away,” Rhodes states,
“we feel the intervention of the film’s style as the mediating force that has
shaped these events and our vision of them in so peculiar a manner” (198).

The dissociation of (the image of) the body from the voice continues on
multiple levels of the film, however, and partly through citation. As both
Kuzniar’s and Fan’s readings make clear, Fassbinder’s melodramas are
haunted by the transvestitic presence of Zarah Leander, the Nazi diva who
queerly became Germany’s greatest gay icon, and In a Year with 13 Moons is
no exception. The clearest and perhaps most multi-layered manifestation of
this haunting comes, of course, during the scene in which Erwin/Elvira visits
the office of Anton Saitz – the man (we are told) for whom Erwin became
Elvira – in order to obtain forgiveness for having given the interview about
hir desire for Saitz. Here Erwin/Elvira appears dressed in a tightly-bodiced
black gown and black hat with a veil that visually cite a similar costume worn
by Leander at the end of the 1937 Sierck film La Habenera when her character
Astrée speaks of her “refusal to regret” the choices she’s made (Kuzniar 83).
However, Fassbinder’s work is marked not only by visual echoes of
Leander’s increasingly transvestitic performance of femininity, but also
particularly by the famous “hermaphroditic” baritone voice that
ventriloquized the forbidden desires of Leander’s gay songwriter Bruno Balz
and that originally made Leander such a star. It is this voice that
Erwin/Elvira imitates in the office with Saitz (Kuzniar 83), a “dark, soft-
spoken voice” that ‘transgendered’ Leander’s female body with is masculine
resonance (63).

Yet this citation of Leander’s vocal hermaphrodisim is but a redundancy
within the film, a folding back on itself of a far more pervasive underlying
use of the voice within the mise-en-abyme of gender (re)orientation in the film
– a doubling-up which seems to have escaped the notice of Kuzniar and Fan.
For Erwin/Elvira is unmistakably already aurally marked as transgender by hir
voice at the beginning of the film, from the scene in her apartment onwards.
Erwin/Elvira’s gender reassignment is made particularly present through the
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high-pitched, stereotypically feminine voice and manner of speaking that Volker Spengler adopts for the role, contrasting with Spengler’s broad, heavy, masculine-appearing body. Whether whispering in embarrassment at being caught in men’s clothing by Christoph after returning from the park at the film’s beginning, crying at his subsequent abuse, or, during the tour of the abattoir with hir friend Red Zora, voicing the words of love and acceptance hir had wished to hear from Christoph, Erwin/Elvira’s voice oscillates from a quiet murmuring to a high shriek, reciting virtually all of the classic stereotypes of what a woman’s voice should sound like. Hirs patterns of speech similarly echo the indirect, circling rhetorical figures women in western culture are often socialized into adopting. The explicit citation of Leander is thus simply a deepening of the oblique mise-en-abyme of gender instability already set up early in the film by Spengler’s voice: Erwin/Elvira imitating Leander is a vocal transvestite aurally ‘dragging’ as another such hermaphroditic voice, masculine becoming feminine performing masculinity. Thus Erwin/Elvira’s already uncategorizable, transgender body-voice complex is further queered through the labor of precisely the sort of stylistic citation that Brigitte Peucker reads as serving Fassbinder as a means of both shoring up and emptying out his own authorial identity, at once an Apollonian affirming and a Dionysian dissolving of form (368).

The use of the voice to highlight the dissociation of the discourses surrounding and narrating the history (or histories) of Erwin/Elvira’s multivalent body from that body and from Erwin/Elvira’s identity also plays into the mise-en-abyme of gender instability, as Fan discusses. Erwin/Elvira’s story is spoken multiple times within the film by multiple people on behalf of Erwin/Elvira in their attempts to explain the choice of gender reassignment – that is, to explain hir queerness. When asked about Erwin/Elvira by others, Red Zora and Saitz both provide “explanations” or stories disavowing any actual reason for the reassignment, while the nun Sister Gudrun narrates the history of the child Erwin’s “giftedness” (which Fan reads as his “queerness”), changing identities, and abandonment by his mother (125). Meanwhile Soul Frieda and the author of the anonymous note we see in Frieda’s apartment, lamenting the fear of what would happen should the writer reveal hir obscure longings, ventriloquize Erwin/Elvira’s (and Fassbinder’s) unnamable desires and longing for recognition. All of these attempts to vocally inscribe Erwin/Elvira’s transgender body with a single coherent history are, however, both contradictory in their details, and visually or spatially dissociated from it. In the end it adds up to only a fragmented, unstable and self-contradictory narrative identity springing from a source outside the very body it attempts to grasp and explain, thus further
marginalizing it. Even when Erwin/Elvira is permitted to speak for herself with her own voice, that voice is again dissociated from her body. In the abattoir scene for example, as Fan points out, Erwin/Elvira’s voice is “disembodied” (127), laid over an image not of Erwin/Elvira but of the dead cows as it speaks lines from Tasso (placing these, further, in the absent Christoph’s mouth) and the words Erwin/Elvira “in vain waits to hear coming from others, ‘I will not desert you in such need’” (Kuzniar 83).

In the end Erwin/Elvira finally comes to a vocabulary and language of her own and speaks of her own story and desires – the story of a curious, processual, dynamic, discontinuous, and boundary-breaking self whose “authenticity and integrity reside[s] not in a gender or sexual affiliation she could call her own but in her articulation of a need, whose very nature is that it cannot be defined,” and a desire that is “different,” a hope and longing for love that is open to various potential objects (Kuzniar 85-86).

However, even this voicing of Erwin/Elvira’s own self-understanding is dissociated from her body, as it comes as “a memento from beyond the grave” (Kuzniar 84) and fails to overcome the mutual alienation of those gathered around the dead Erwin/Elvira’s abject body, who ought to have cared for her but did not. The voice itself thus oscillates in its boundary-blurring force: it can leap over and collapse the border between self and other, ventriloquize or be ventriloquized through others’ bodies, but even in transgressing the boundary between life and death it cannot (or at least does not always) lead to a collapsing of the alienation of others and selves, and the expression of identity that it offers cannot be grasped as a whole in the present, but only retroactively at the end of the process of living experience.

Ultimately, Fan argues, once we grasp the dissociation between the body and the discourses around it (and by extension the voice that narrates), we arrive at an understanding of identity and desire that sees binary categorizations and explanations (the products of discourse) as not mattering, and even impossible. But this realization does not hinder the feeling in us as spectators that something still ought to or does matter beneath it all, for Erwin/Elvira and for us – a longing in us for something unnamable and seemingly ever out of our reach (130). And Fan reads the acts of filmmaking and film viewing as equally symptomatic of this “in-sistence,” an engagement with the process. This engagement is supported by the intimate parallels between the profilmic and the filmic realms, and thus between the filmic and the spectatorial realms, enabled by the “act of self-offering in the course of inscription and narration” of the body (120) – enabled, that is, by the very
gesture of transition that Erwin makes in becoming Elvira and so opening himself to the possibilities of queer desire. Even Erwin/Elvira’s suffering at the hands of heteronormative society draws us in and engages us actively, for the paralleling of the cows’ pain and hir (past? present?) pain, for example, is not “guaranteed” until we choose to intervene in the film and read it this way, a fact which is again highlighted by the dissociation of voice and body in the scene. Erwin/Elvira may here be “resonat[ing] to a pain which is no longer his own,” but we are equally called to resonate to Erwin/Elvira’s pain in order to give meaning to the senseless images and disembodied voice we are confronted with (Fan, 128).

Fan argues that we are also drawn into the film through Soul Frieda’s functioning as a ventriloquist for Fassbinder and the film itself, which in turn ventriloquize “all those who may speak through him/it, an empty space that draws into it traumatic memories. . .that constitute the core of human subjectivity” (123). Given the parallels laid out between profilmic, filmic and spectatorial realms, and the link of Erwin/Elvira, whose self-offering enables those parallels and who Frieda ventriloquizes, this suffering core of human subjectivity can be read as extending from Erwin/Elvira right through to the spectator, who is queered in the process by being caught up in the mise-en-abyme of gender and identity play circulating around Erwin/Elvira.

This capability for layered ventriloquism, however, arises from the opposite possibility to the voice’s speaking: its silence. Frieda is a stubbornly, “insistently taciturn” figure, about whom we know very little beyond hir detachment from the world outside the apartment. The camera additionally frames Frieda so that it, and we, seem to be in the place of hir mirror, neither addressed by nor not addressed by the character. And in hir semi-detached, abject status Frieda suspends and “in-sists between” the state of the other and that of the self (Fan 123), thereby opening up space for the multiple layers of others’ othered voices.

In this functioning of silence as a strategy engaging the spectator in the queer labor of the film, the style of In a Year with 13 Moons intersects with that of Fassbinder’s earlier, and more pessimistically queer, film The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant. While the queer stylistic workings of 13 Moons organize themselves primarily around the dissociation between the body and the voice as a means of opening up the instability of gender and sexual identity, the stylistic labor of Bitter Tears uses the contrast of speech and silence to play the bodies and selves inhabiting the queer space of the film off against each other and engage the spectator in the circulation of fantasy and desire.
Specifically, the volitionally withheld voice forms one of the most immediate and effective organizing features of *Bitter Tears*, though it is also paired with a similar form of visual restraint or withholding in the dimension of color. The withheld voice is that of the paradoxically marginal yet central character Marlene, played with exquisite nuance by Fassbinder regular Irm Hermann. Marlene, the first character of the all-female cast we are introduced to, is Petra’s patient and slavishly devoted assistant, and she performs virtually all of the labor in the film; as Petra says of her, “she is a good girl. She does all of my work”\(^1\) (*Bitter Tears*). Marlene stands out in the film not only visually, dressed as she is in stark unchanging black against the riotous color of the apartment and Petra’s shifting costumes, but also aurally. Unlike the other characters, Marlene never speaks, and we never learn her story or the details of her thoughts on the events she witnesses.

For, unlike Erwin/Elvira, Marlene does not suffer the *loss* of her voice or the consequent ventriloquization of her narrative by another character (with the single brief exception of Petra’s claim that Marlene loves her, which Marlene seems to visually assent to). We are given to understand that her silence is volitional and contingent, rather than the result of forced marginalization. At one point she answers the phone and it seems as if we will finally hear her voice, only to have her hand the phone, frustratingly, to Petra instead. And at the end of the film it is not simply Petra’s apologetic solicitude, but specifically the demand to *speak*, to narrate her own history instead of merely listening, that drives Marlene to abandon the repentant Petra in search of further domination. The closest we come to receiving any sort of auditory communication from her is the occasional clacking of her typewriter as she does Petra’s typing throughout the film, an essentially meaningless and thus teasing noise that marks her presence but refuses hermeneutic processing, revealing virtually nothing about her as an individual. It seems at one point to express some sort of anger or negative emotion regarding Karin and Petra’s new relationship, but this is fleeting, subjective and inconclusive, again leaving us with no firm place to stand and gain perspective on Marlene. Though she is present in virtually every major scene of the film, visually and/or aurally framing the interactions of the other characters through her pose or her typing, for the most part Marlene remains on the sidelines as an observer rather than a narrator. What we can piece together of her story from her gestures toward Petra and Karin is purely circumstantial and tentative, unresolved.

\(^1\) In the original German: “Sie ist ein gutes Mädchen. Sie macht alle meine Arbeit.” Translation mine.
Yet Marlene’s thematic and stylistic centrality to the work is repeatedly emphasized: not only is her name literally the first word spoken in the film, but in the closing credits Irm Hermann is noted for having participated in a special way (“unter spezieller Mitarbeit von Irm Hermann”) and the film itself is dedicated – in a typically coded and multivalent manner – to “the one who became Marlene here,” a possible reference to both Irm Hermann, whose relationship to the director notoriously resembled that of Marlene to Petra, and Peer Raben, another in Fassbinder’s series of collaborators/lovers. And though she refuses to narrate her own story for us, Marlene as Petra’s amanuensis also controls all the means of representation made available in the film: writing, sketching, costuming, and directing. She raises the ‘curtain’ on the film (the blinds) at its beginning and turns off the lights at its end, and her entrances and exits shape the film and control our reaction to it (Peucker 365-366). In her chosen muteness she is the vital organizing backdrop for the film, the restrained foundation against which the at times violent excess of the film is made both visible and audible.

For it is not only in the visual realm that Fassbinder’s film draws on the performance of excess so central to the queer sensibility of camp; aurally, too, the film repeatedly foregrounds a near-hysterical performance and narration of identity laden with vocal as well as emotional excess, as Jan Mouton notes in her analysis of the film (29). Petra particularly is prone to it: she discourses at excruciating length on the intimate details of her life with and break from her now-ex husband, until the plot of the film seems to have utterly vanished; she orders around and verbally abuses Marlene; she interrogates Karin about the latter’s sexual doings, rhapsodizes over her love for her, begs Karin over-theatrically to stay instead of returning to her husband, and flies into shrieking fits of alternating rage and despair over her failure to call on Petra’s birthday. Marlene’s mute witnessing of these scenes, however, at once foregrounds their excessiveness and serves as a focal point for our attention through which we can enter into these scenes from backstage, as it were. Her silence thus sets off and further opens up the queer potential of the film’s auditory overdetermination, framing it for us only in order to break with it and offer us as spectators a way into the film.

For within the stylistic economy of the film one of the most crucial aspects of Marlene’s willful and frustrating silence is its function as a central mechanism for engaging with the spectator – specifically the spectator’s fantasy and desire – and bringing them into active relation with the film. As

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2 Original German: “Gewidmet dem, der hier Marlene wurde.” Translation mine.
such, this silence plays a fundamental role in the film’s allegorical (and thus to Kuzniar queer) modality. As with any imputed knowledge or experience presented allegorically, the sound of Marlene’s voice and her narration of her story – her self-identity – are infinitely deferred, forcing us to actively mine the film for clues that, however, will never yield a full satisfactory result. Instead we as spectators become caught up in the double movement of invitation and denial, desire and frustration that structures the film. We are mutely invited into the work by Marlene’s withheld voice, but only at the cost of realizing that even this provides no certain way past the instabilities of sexuality and identity that weave through the film to a stable, unified, graspable instance of either the self or the desired other.

In analyzing the role of Marlene’s muteness, Jan Mouton draws on Metz’ notion of “flight.” Reading the scopic and invocatory drives (i.e. the desires to see and hear respectively) as sexual but self-sustaining and independent of the pleasure derived, Metz points out that these desires are never satiable, seeking as they do no real object but only an imaginary, always already “lost” object, and that they thus doubly thrive on distance: the distance between the perceiver and the object perceived, and that between the perceived object and the desired object. Cinema, then, is “infinitely desirable” as it exists in a “primordial elsewhere” (qtd. in Mouton 27-28). Mouton then applies the notion of “flight” – the slippery something that occurs when something allows itself to be seen without “presenting” itself to be seen – to the auditory realm. Here, rather than not/hiding as in the visual realm, the character “can decide to maintain silence, and the effect of this...may be to quicken the viewer/listener’s imagination in pursuit of the desired, lacking object... . Though we see [the character’s] infinitely communicative eyes, hands, and face, our desire to hear – to hear her story – to hear her tell her story – is never satisfied. This imaginary object has taken flight, and its absence is what keeps our desire alive” (28-29).

Mouton reads Marlene’s desire-invoking silence from a specifically feminist perspective, as an instance of the assertion of female power in contrast to the stereotype of the forcibly silenced and thus disempowered woman in cinema (27-33). However, this analysis can creditably be applied as part of a queer reading of the film as well, for a couple of reasons. First, beyond the apparent surface congruence of feminist – that is, gender-oriented – and queer approaches to works existing within and challenging a patriarchal and so heteronormative social context, there is a deeper structural similarity between Mouton’s understanding of the working of the withheld voice and Kuzniar’s notion of the allegorical indirectness of queer
representation. Though Kuzniar sees the “enigmatic, oblique signification of
allegory” as perhaps stemming historically from the epistemology of the
closet, its function in the Queer German Cinema is broader, an “oscillation
between concealment and revelation. . .in order to thwart the spectator’s
pretense of reading (for) homosexuality. The ‘open secret’ of someone’s
imputed sexual being remains elusive” (9). Similarly, though Marlene’s silence
might initially be mistaken for a being closeted, her moments of open
potentially erotic contact with Petra – slow dancing at the latter’s insistence,
putting on Petra’s shoes for her – as well as her possible jealousy towards
Karin undermine this reading. And Petra’s announcement to Karin that
Marlene loves her does not function as the revelation of a hidden truth so
much as the gesture of a haughty, controlling woman who may or may not
be entirely correct in her subjective reading of Marlene’s desires. Marlene’s
silence thus serves only to at once engage the spectator’s fantasies and
frustrate his or her desire for certainty, a gesture enabling at once both
openness and obscurity. Such silence, we might say, is inherently queer, or at
least queering in function.

Secondly, there is Marlene’s status as a queer figure. Though the precise
nature of her relationship with Petra is never disclosed, the film hints that
some sort of sexual and/or romantic relations might hold or have held
between them. Petra for instance feels a right to and desire for intimate
physical contact with her assistant in the form of slow dancing and the like,
while Marlene indicates her ostensible devotion through erotically-tinged
gestures such as putting on Petra’s shoes and kissing her hand. Yet there are
also indications that Karin may be Petra’s first same-sex partner, a rebound
from her abusive husband, and Petra does not refer to Marlene with any
significant endearments or the like, treating her mainly as a live-in servant
and business assistant. Marlene’s sexual status is thus suspended; she cannot
be read clearly for either homosexuality or heterosexuality, but instead seems
to collapse the notion that such a binary reading is possible in the first place.
This queerness on Marlene’s part is of course made possible by her volitional
silence. Where Erwin/Elvira was queered ultimately from without, as well as
from within, by the failure of external categories to contain hir and hir failure
to conform to these categories despite effort, Marlene queers herself by
refusing to assent to the possibility of such categories as valid, refusing to
narrate her identity in accordance with the dictates of the binary thinking
lying behind them. She thus serves, not only as a figure of female power, but
as a figure of queer power as well.
However, the working of Marlene’s silence also brings to the fore a sadomasochistic dynamic deeply embedded in the film, and entangles it with the film’s approach to queerness in such a way that the two, troublesomely perhaps, cannot be completely separated. Although this dynamic is most clearly highlighted on the level of content and character, through Petra’s cold and vicious verbal domination of Marlene and the latter’s pained but obedient acceptance, it also shapes the film on the level of its stylistic labor. There it is performed most effectively by Marlene’s obstinate refusal to speak and thereby fulfill the spectator’s desire, leaving her in an eternally-desiring, eternally-frustrated masochistic engagement with the film on the level of fantasy. Each (re)viewing of the film is thus an exercise in pointless pursuit of an ungrasppable object (namely, Marlene’s voice and identity), a painful-pleasurable repetition of an unchanging engagement in a queer fantasy of hearing and knowing the other.

Ultimately, though, this sadomasochistic impulse stems from the obliquity of the allegorical structure informing the work and its queerness, as Kuzniar, following on from Benjamin, explicitly acknowledges. There is indeed a “sadistic tendency in allegory” recognized by Benjamin, she states, rooted in its gesture, not so much of revelation, as of “the exposure of earthly things” like the body’s malleability and vulnerability (14). And the endless oscillation between the promise of pleasure in clarity and knowledge, and the pain of confusion and ever-deferred meaning, that constitutes the allegorical gesture itself as understood by Kuzniar seems inherently, not only queer, but also somewhat sadomasochistic in structure. Thus the sadomasochistic dynamic between the silent Marlene and the spectator merely rehearses the more fundamental sadomasochistic gesture of the film itself.

The queerness of the film’s stylistic labor, which is the product of course of the same underlying allegorical structure, is thereby bound up with the scene of covert and manipulative sadomasochistic desire – at first glance a rather more pessimistic view of the radical possibilities of queer desire in a heteronormative, binaristic world than might be expected from so celebrated a queer filmmaker. Seen from a certain perspective a linkage between the queer and the sadomasochistic in general is not immediately problematic or negative. Indeed, the sadomasochistic might be seen as carrying a potential queer “charge,” given the way in which it too functions to expand beyond or overturn elements of the standard heteronormative script and to make explicit and consensual the workings of power and potential violence within intimate relationships. However, the particular vision of the sadomasochistic
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presented in Fassbinder’s works does not operate solely or even mainly according to so positive an understanding of the sadomasochistic dynamic. Rather, as mentioned earlier, this dynamic is mapped onto common patterns of abuse, manipulation, and lack of direct communication between partners, that echo and build off of the society-wide power imbalance created by heteronormative sexual and gender roles. This then links the patterns of emotional violence and the pain-pleasure dynamics in which the characters in these films find themselves to patterns of oppressive violence stemming from social constraint and inequality: the more or less covert and systematic violence of heteronormative cultural norms bleeds over into and infects queer relationships as well. For example, Petra’s description of how her husband insisted on being the only breadwinner and used this as an excuse to control and abuse her is visually linked to her unthinking domination of Marlene by the camera’s shift of focus from Marlene’s tearful face to Petra’s cold countenance, while Erwin/Elvira’s violent rejection by the male hustlers and Christoph, like her rejection by Saitz, stems from her inability to fit neatly into predetermined social categories surrounding gender and sexuality, and her submission to their violence comes about from her vain attempts to make herself perfectly fit the cultural box labeled “woman.” Nor does the desire for domination or submission itself exempt one from the pessimism of Fassbinder’s view here, for the liberating potential of sadomasochism can only be usefully engaged when it is, not only consciously and volitionally entered into, but also openly communicated. Otherwise it becomes merely a tool for the coercion and control of others: by not speaking her desires plainly, for example, Marlene manipulates Petra and provokes the situation at the film’s end in which Petra’s attempt to communicate is rewarded only with abandonment, neither of them ending up with what they really want and their previous relationship completely destroyed. Pain and pleasure and their mutual relation to each other are thus not taken up by Fassbinder as potentially queering tools, but fit into his broader pessimistic vision of human relationships of all kinds as shot through with alienation and oppressive violence; and the sadomasochistic dynamic of the allegorical structure underlying the films then takes on a more potentially coercive cast even in relation to the viewer, inflecting the possibility of engagement with one’s queer fantasies through either of these films with a note of warning.

For this sadomasochistic dynamic is also of course present to a degree in the later In a Year with 13 Moons, given that it also shares the allegorical structure Kuzniar describes. However, unlike the earlier film The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, with its pessimistic depiction of failed reconciliation and the covert masochist, the story level of 13 Moons offers a somewhat more
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nuanced and optimistic take on this dynamic despite the initial bleakness of the queered world it depicts and the structural sadomasochism of the allegorical foundation. Though the queer desires expressed in and by the film do bear the stamp of mixed pain and pleasure usually associated with masochism, and Erwin/Elvira's recorded voice does both acknowledge as well as deny that hir gender reassignment acted as the site of masochistic pain/pleasure (Fan 127) due in part to society’s oppressive categorizations, these mark desire and erotic relationships here only insofar as all such desire and relationships in Fassbinder’s work are in some way touched by pain, pleasure, and their combination. An internal desire only for domination/submission does not here directly cause the sort of manipulation and abuse we see with Marlene, but is the product only of the heteronormative social categorizations that the queer force of the film is working against. Despite the interpretation of Erwin/Elvira’s “affirmation of suffering” in the abattoir scene by some critics as lying within the “psychic economy of masochistic ecstasy,” Fan reads this rather though the system of multilayered exchanges of pain and pleasure constituting “ex-centric” identification with an overdetermined other, Erwin/Elvira’s resonating “to a pain no longer his ‘own’,” strictly speaking (127-128); that is, it is less a repressed masochism than a kind of empathy that is at work here.

But even read more simply as belonging to the masochistic economy, this at times abject and degrading mix of pain and pleasure is not necessarily and inescapably inherent to Fassbinder’s view of the queer here. As the scene with Christoph in Erwin/Elvira’s apartment near the beginning of the film makes clear, the radical opening gesture of the queer, the *mise-en-abyme* that cuts across apparent certainties, extends even to the certainty of degradation when mirrored back at itself. When Christoph forces Erwin/Elvira to look in the mirror, telling hir that ze’s a disgusting and useless “blob of flesh,” Erwin/Elvira replies that ze sees only hir loving him instead. “This nadir thus converts into the utopic,” Kuzniar points out, “as Elvira moves for a moment beyond identifying with the gaze others cast upon her. . . [using] her transgendered inbetweenism not in a mimicry of others’ desire but precisely in order to express, bodily, ‘a different desire’” (82).

This suggests that the irresolvable economy of the painful-pleasurable *mise-en-abyme*, the eternal sadomasochistic obliquity of the allegorical, can be, at least momentarily, transcended in an even more radical gesture away from the back-and-forth double movement of these structures. It is perhaps to the ecstasy of this gesture, rather than any merely masochistic identification, that Erwin/Elvira refers in the description of the cows going to their death –
their “deliverance” – joyful in the rich sense of its beauty and meaningfulness for life. Here the queer comes together with love. Erwin/Elvira loves Christoph, queerly, and so is able to escape for a moment from the degrading position he attempts to force hir into. Even the stubborn silence of *Bitter Tears* leaves open the possibility that some degree of love, in addition to a need for domination, motivates Marlene’s devotion to Petra – after all, her silent tears during Petra’s narration of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband can as easily be read as tears of empathy for a beloved Petra as tears of pain at the implicit parallel with Petra’s treatment of Marlene herself. “Loving,” as Andrew J. Mitchell points out in his reading of *13 Moons*, “finds within the limiting conditions of life not an end but an opening. Love transforms the body, locating life within its conditions but exuding it out beyond itself in the warmth and smell of life” (132). Love in this sense, Fassbinder hints, is perhaps the queerest thing of all.

Although this potential for escape from the sadomasochism of allegory is depicted as unstable and fleeting, it does provide for at least a momentary disentangling of the queer and the sadomasochistic, an opening for further potential liberating work. It is thus not truly accurate to see Fassbinder’s understanding of the queer specifically as any more inherently linked to the sadomasochistic scene than heteronormative desire – indeed, if Erwin/Elvira’s transcending love is the queerest thing about hir, that understanding has it precisely backwards. Fassbinder’s art retains a perhaps pessimistic strain when it comes to the issue of human relationships, but the radical liberatory force of the queer challenge he voices to society’s heteronormative discourse remains.

Crucial to the staging of this challenge in his films, as I have but sketched out here, is the multivalent potential of the human voice. The spoken voice narrates the history inscribed on the body and carries the expression of desire, while the withheld voice excites the spectator’s longing and draws him or her into the film. Integrating a fuller survey of how Fassbinder’s use of the voice in particular plays into his other aesthetic strategies thus promises to further illuminate the complexity of both his understanding of the queer, and his directorial relationship with the audience to whom he reaches out through his own defiant, interrogative, and unashamed queerness – a queerness experienced, to borrow Kuzniar’s phrase, not as a stable or romanticized reality but very much as “a transgression lived every day” (86). In this way, it is hoped, we can further unearth those elements of his work that voice a transforming radical love extending beyond the edge of the screen to encompass us and queer us where we sit.
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