

Retroactive Prescience: Fassbinder's *The Third Generation*

© Thomas Elsaesser, 2013

A Year in History

June 2012 marked the 30th anniversary of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's premature and unexpected demise. In retrospect, it was 'the year of a death foretold', because 1982 has, over time, become a watershed for German historians and film historians in several different ways. What made 1982 a fatal year for the New German Cinema, for instance, was that the death of its creative centre and beating heart, as Fassbinder was referred to in the obituaries, coincided with a change in funding policy that tilted the various state and federal subsidies decisively in favour of more 'commercial' productions: a change of direction that for a decade and a half made German cinema all but invisible on the international scene.

A retrospective inevitably focuses on the special significance of criss-crossing time frames, intersecting dates and overlapping timelines. Since 2012 was also the 50th anniversary of the Oberhausen Manifesto (28 February 1962), generally celebrated as the birth date of the New German Cinema¹ (of which Fassbinder remains the most widely recognized 'unrepresentative representative'), the years 1962 to 1982 have become something like a separate epoch in German film history, unified by a number of distinctive features, to which the death of Fassbinder has given both an exclamation mark and a closing bracket. 'Epoch' comes from Greek *epochē* and *epechein*, meaning 'pause', 'cessation', 'a holding back' or 'closing off': in other words, a punctuation mark, a break, as well as a fixed point from which to make a retrospective turn. I am choosing another year – 1979 – and *DIE DRITTE GENERATION* (*The Third Generation*, 1979) as the Fassbinder film that might justifiably claim epochal status, permitting me to probe the idea of the historical moment in both directions and to comment on Fassbinder's continuing and therefore contemporary relevance.

Specific dates and anniversaries generally tempt one to track with films how political trajectories and cultural trends traverse each other, intersect or find themselves bundled together in the symptomatic cipher of a single year.² Such archaeological enterprises play with two opposites – contingency and predestination – as if to challenge fate to show its invisible hand. Select the topic and the year in question, and the events that match the pre-set parameters almost choose themselves: proof, if nothing else, of the

productivity of creative constraints and arbitrarily imposed limitations, but also proof that history has a way of writing its own scripts!³

Yet taking a particular year and reconstructing through its heterogeneous elements a sort of topography of historical simultaneity is also treacherous. Besides discovering surprising connections and illuminating parallels, one may find oneself in a vicious circle of tautologies. Nonetheless, Germany is a special case: its history in the past century has not only been exceptionally violent and disruptive, it has also seen so many uncanny returns and unexpected repetitions that the present seems to remember the past, only in order to rewrite it and uncover causalities in reverse.

The Moment, the *Longue Durée* and the Power of Retroactive Causality

This causality in reverse comes in two forms: as the singular moment that reveals itself in retrospect to have been a tipping point, and as a dilation in time, an interminable rumination over what is past and cannot be undone. Certain films, for instance, that deal with the period of National Socialism, the Holocaust and its different forms of afterlife – I am thinking of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *HITLER, EIN FILM AUS DEUTSCHLAND* (Hitler, a Film from Germany, 1977), Edgar Reitz's *HEIMAT* trilogy (1982–2004), Claude Lanzmann's *SHOAH* (1985) as well as Fassbinder's *BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ* (1980) – have in common their inordinate length: 7, 15, 9 and 16 hours, respectively. While 'epic' is the word that comes to mind, the effect is also that of slow motion, as if this terrible period between 1933 and 1945 had been so compressed, so multilayered, but also such an insane acceleration of history, that it took most of the second half of the 20th century to re-examine, to *process* (never mind, to comprehend) these 12 years and put them under the magnifying glass of the slow-motion action replay.

Alexander Kluge's films often literalize this anamorphosis or distorting mirror in time by using slow-motion or time-lapse photography, most strikingly in *DER ANGRIFF DER GEGENWART AUF DIE ÜBRIGE ZEIT* (The Blind Director, 1985). But Kluge is also the filmmaker of the tipping point, where "a single moment can swallow all that went before and came after".⁴

The moment that consumes everything puts Kluge on one side of an ongoing debate about history and memory in the 20th century. His side favours radical breaks, aligns itself with Walter Benjamin's 'messianic time' and Alain Badiou's notion of the 'event'. It contrasts with the idea that an ever-finer mesh of causal factors, drawn from all areas of life, including climate and geography, is what weaves the web of the slowly

emerging constellations we later call ‘history’. The other side – let’s say, Syberberg, Reitz or Fassbinder – needed large and extended time frames in order to reveal the significance of their stories for the ‘here-and-now’. The contrast between the flash of the moment (Kluge’s *Augenblick*) and deep time (Reitz’s *longue durée*)⁵ throws an interesting light as well on the secret connection in Germany’s post-war society between *commemoration* and *trauma*, under whose double sign of *recurrence* and *repetition* so many of its national but also biographical anniversaries still take place. Commemorative occasions generally behave according to a form of *retroactive causality*, where the effect (i.e. the present state of affairs) imagines from within itself the causes to which it owes its existence, thereby implicitly presupposing the proleptic (anticipatory) anchor function of the date it commemorates or seeks to celebrate.

Fassbinder was one of the earliest directors to understand the powerful pull of retroactive causality. For instance, in the BRD Trilogy⁶ or in HÄNDLER DER VIER JAHRESZEITEN (The Merchant of Four Seasons, 1972) the present is not so much overshadowed by the past; instead, characters create pasts to explain to themselves the misery they feel and suffer in the present. But Fassbinder was also a film director and storyteller who had a keen sense of forking paths, who worked with coincidences, in order to highlight the roads not taken (and thus to sharpen our appreciation of counter-factual possibilities), even in films as desperately fatalistic as the DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1978), as intricately hypothetical as WELT AM DRAHT (World on a Wire, 1973), as prophetic-proleptic as DIE DRITTE GENERATION and as historically situated as LILI MARLEEN (1981). Perhaps his reliance on coincidences was too quickly assigned to his preference for melodrama and should now be re-evaluated in the light of probability theory, of ‘six degrees of separation’ and the so-called ‘small world syndrome’. His way of indicating a particular event’s significance becoming apparent only in retrospect was achieved through strategically placed anachronisms: a cigarette packet from a later date, a piece of furniture that did not belong, an odd turn of phrase. They were designed to jolt us out of any nostalgic reverie or sentimental self-oblivion; they challenged us into think about what the past has to tell the present, either as a reminder of what lingers and still festers or that part of the past was never redeemed nor fulfilled its promise.

The dilemma of our present ‘culture of commemoration’ is that it demonstrates a *belief in history* (that is why we pick a date from the past) while also betraying immense *scepticism towards history* (that is why we now read the past transversally or spatially,

rather than in linear fashion). It is this paradox that I want to explore around the case of Fassbinder, as a way of understanding his work's historicity. I want to argue that his films are very precisely of their time, place and moment, *and* that they constitute a kind of feedback system, open towards the future which is our present as well as doubling back to re-inscribe our present in a history. Such a historicity would be the effect of *something appearing in retrospect as prescient and prophetic*: a sort of short-circuiting of causality and consequence in the convergence of retroactive recognition. Yet, if with hindsight we can designate something as prophetic, we open a closed loop: we do not discover some sort of necessary causality, although it might seem so. Rather, a moment in the past reveals itself as especially pregnant and prescient for the future, in order to affirm not only that our present has a past but that this past can empower us to face an uncertain future. It is a historicity that strongly confirms the contemporary predicament: the more we are traumatized by the present, the more we 'remember' the past. This would be my primary claim to Fassbinder's relevance and topicality: not that he predicted a specific event or outcome; rather, that he – perhaps better than any other modern filmmaker besides Luis Buñuel – understood the logic of why we have to replay the past, in order to even imagine a future, and why we have to see the present – any present – in terms of history, in order not to be swallowed by the eternal presence of the past, which the very existence of the cinema has brought into the world.

1979: Contingent Date, Negative Conjunction or Future Constellation?

Turning to Fassbinder's *DIE DRITTE GENERATION*, what are the conditions of its historicity qualifying as an 'epochal moment'? At first sight, 1979 does not seem such a propitious year for radical breaks, singular events or potential turning points, especially not in Germany, where the German Autumn of 1977 was the landmark event, defining powerful lines of force way beyond its brief duration, consuming what preceded it and much of what was to follow. But look up 1979 on Wikipedia and you will find: on 28 March, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident occurred – at the time the most serious in the history of nuclear energy; on 1 April, the people of Iran voted for a new constitution, which would see Ayatollah Khomeini become the supreme leader; on 11 April, the president of Uganda, protégé of the West, Idi Amin, and one of the worst leaders of post-colonial Africa, was forced into exile; also in April, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, with Robert Mugabe as its first (and so far only) president; on 4 May, Margaret Thatcher became the first female prime minister of Great Britain; on 16 July, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq; on

18 June, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the 2nd Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty; on 19 July, the Sandinistas entered Managua and formed a revolutionary government; on 24 December, the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan; and on the same day, the European Space Agency successfully launched the first Ariane rocket.

Reading these primarily political events, one is tempted to reconstruct a causal nexus of interrelated events, most of which point in one direction, especially with hindsight. Discernible are the outlines of a shift: the reassertion of powerfully autocratic and conservative tendencies, both in Europe and the Middle East, after the revolutionary movements that began in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the Sandinistas' successes in Nicaragua would be undermined by the CIA and the Reagan administration's support for the Contras, the Iranian Revolution would lead to a repressive theocracy, Mugabe would turn out to be an autocrat and near dictator and America's support for Saddam Hussein as well as for the mujahedin in Afghanistan, against the Soviet invasion, would come to haunt successive U.S. presidents to this day.

The events are a good example of what Marxists call 'over-determination', for the list, as I have presented it here, seems to confirm *the end of revolutionary aspirations* of the previous two decades and thus explain the paralysis and stasis of the 1980s, coming to an unexpected end in 1989. The list even provides a contingent but cumulatively persuasive historical logic for the contradictory effects of decolonization, still felt today, while contextualizing the failed aspirations of May '68, including the turn to violence in the case of the Red Army Faction (RAF). One could (yet again) invoke Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*: "His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet."⁷

Read, however, from the opposite end of the temporal arrow, not with the angel contemplating the mounting mass of rubble nor with the 'storm from Paradise' mistaken as 'progress', but from our present world, living in the shadow of the 9/11 catastrophe, the contingent events of 1979 chart a constellation we also recognize only too well: as the confluence of forces that put in place *the elements of the surveillance state*. Consider the following: in a counter-current to the political disasters which the list charts, it is easy to draw up a list of major technical 'breakthroughs', such as the invention of the compact disc, the introduction of the Sony Walkman, Apple's marketing of the VisiCalc spreadsheet as the first computational business application and IBM's first attempt at developing the personal computer, all of which also belong to the *epochē* of 1979. If one

adds to this the massive surge in satellite technology, of which the launch of the Ariane rocket is both a symptom and a result, then the year 1979 can credibly claim to be pivotal in the other tendency that still dominates our lives today, namely the relentless growth of the surveillance state (the *recto* of which post-9/11 terrorism is the *verso*). Once again, when viewed from our own ambiguous position (or Benjamin's dialectic of disaster and progress), the cumulative effect of computing power, compact storage, space research and autocratic governments ushers in what at first appeared as an ad-hoc alliance in response to 'terrorism'. It was Michel Foucault who systematically examined this alliance and formulated it as both an epistemic break and the transformation of elements rooted in the European Enlightenment, from Jean Jacques Rousseau's demands for self-disclosure and social transparency to Jeremy Bentham's self-policing Panopticon.

Foucault's thinking thus combined the confluence of forces with the historical specificity of the 'moment'. In many of his writing from that period – *Discipline and Punish* was published in English 1979, and his lectures on 'governmentality' and 'the birth of biopolitics' were held at the College de France in 1978–79 – he examined such coming together of seemingly distinct and at first sight disparate phenomena under the notion of '*dispositif*', which Foucault defined as "a heterogeneous ensemble of material and discursive practices whose configuration is historically specific."⁸ The surveillance and security paradigm – what Gilles Deleuze a few years later would summarise in his "Postscript on the Control Societies"⁹ – is precisely this: a *dispositif* in Foucault's sense, an ensemble where 'power', 'paranoia' as well as 'pleasure' come together in a peculiarly unique but potent combination.

This paradox of paranoia, power and pleasure is what Fassbinder recognized lucidly and intuitively, not least in his contribution to DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST (Germany in Autumn, 1978). Foucault's *dispositif* and Fassbinder's instantiation of it thus belong to the specific markers of the 'historicity' of 1979 – and our peculiar proximity to it some 35 years later.

"I Don't Throw Bombs, I Make Films"

On the poster advertising DIE DRITTE GENERATION, a handwritten note proclaims "I Don't Throw Bombs, I Make Films." It was used in the publicity material distributed by the Filmverlag der Autoren at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1979, and is Fassbinder's reply, taken from a 1977 interview, to a question implying that he was siding with the

terrorists on the basis of his very autobiographical contribution to the omnibus film *DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST*.

Fassbinder did not have to wait until the events in 1977 (i.e. the German Autumn) to understand that political activism always contains an element of provocation, and that in Germany, too, violence and counter-violence had a way of escalating each other. He also understood that one of the aims of the RAF was to provoke the government into taking the ‘iron fist’ of the security apparatus out of the velvet glove of liberal democracy, in the hope that the population would be persuaded into realising that underneath the surface of a mature West European country there still lurked the spectre of fascism: a strategy common at that time among radical fringe groups in the United States as well (the Weathermen, the Symbionese Liberation Army), Italy (the Red Brigades) and Japan (the Japanese Red Army, or *Nihon Sekigun*). Fassbinder, it is fair to say, was intellectually attracted to the ruthless radicalism of the Baader-Meinhof group. As an anti-bourgeois outsider who sympathized with the anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin – and Bakunin plays an important if paradoxical role in *DIE DRITTE GENERATION*, along with Arthur Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* – Fassbinder was nonetheless only too aware that the brutality of the RAF’s actions would isolate them from any political efficacy and deprive them of mass support. By saying “I don’t throw bombs, I make films” he demanded the right to be judged by his work and not by his personal opinions, wanting to keep faith with his own political project, which was to make films that provoked questions, not violence.

In one sense, the plot of *DIE DRITTE GENERATION* is ingeniously simple, linear and straightforward. A loose group of urban guerrillas, all of them middle-class and almost all of them with respectable daytime jobs, form a kind of underground cell, mainly, it seems, to escape their bored unfulfilled lives and as a kind of parlour game – somewhere between playing charades, card games and Monopoly. They are constantly making arrangements for secret meetings, or they telephone each other with coded messages and passwords, until one of them is brutally assassinated, whereupon they suspect that they have been infiltrated and betrayed to the police, start to panic and decide to strike. They kidnap the Berlin-based director of an American computer company, not realizing that this is in fact part of the trap into which they have been lured and which will cost most of them their lives.

Fassbinder himself provides a more laconic summary: “On the one side, there is an industrialist (Eddie Constantine), on the other a policeman (Hark Bohm). Together they decide to form a terrorist cell, the first man because it will be useful for his business ventures, the second to justify his repressive activities. Their idea is very simple: nowadays

it is capitalism that brings forth terrorism, in order to boost itself and strengthen its system of hegemony.”¹⁰

This is both accurate and misleading in that it leaves out the network effects and media interfaces, reducing the web of power relations to their shortest link. Yet the ‘historicity’ of Fassbinder’s film lies precisely in this tension between the intricate generational, gendered and technologically mediated networks that Fassbinder lines up (there are father figures like Lurz, the industrialist, but also grandfather Gast and a father-in-law who has an affair with his son’s wife) and the brutal simplicity of the power structures that mastermind them (police protection for the industrialist, who pays a homosexual to play agent provocateur in an anarchist cell). Historicity is here understood as a ‘time exposure’ of heterogeneous forces at work, a sort of ‘snapshot’ of incompatibilities captured at a precise moment in time, the winter of 1978/79, and in a precise place, West Berlin. Little could he know how this ‘place’ was to change out of all recognition during the next generation, but the very self-evidence of his Cold-War Berlin in the late 1970s gives the film the dense documentary texture that makes it so evocative.

Among the character constellation, the peculiar dynamic derives from the sense that the centripetal impulses (fear and paranoia as corroding factors in human relationships) and the centrifugal forces (fear and paranoia as a political weapon used by terrorism to undermine and, by the state, to consolidate political legitimacy) are poised in a precarious equilibrium. This, in turn, is amplified but made even more volatile by Fassbinder immersing all parties – police, would-be terrorists and the industrialist – in the atmosphere of 24-hour news cycles and permanent states of exception, made possible by media technologies and their network effects. He is, in other words, offering a ‘paranoid’ interpretation of our own network society, where everything connects and mutually interacts – part of the very *dispositif* and *episteme* earlier identified with the year 1979 and the name of Michel Foucault, but also offering a historical commentary on something we only appreciate now, as if our future was already a presence in Fassbinder’s present.

Yet from a more conventional vantage point, say, an *auteurist* perspective, DIE DRITTE GENERATION joins many other Fassbinder films and merely reiterates or varies some of the director’s most predominant themes throughout his work. Among these we could name:

- The *asymmetrical, often sado-masochistic, but also highly volatile and thus reversible power relations* among the members of a tightly knit group: whether a multigenerational family (THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN), a professional team

(WARNUNG VOR EINER HEILIGEN NUTTE [Beware of a Holy Whore, 1970]), a group of homosexuals (FAUSTRECHT DER FREIHEIT [Fox and His Friends, 1974]), a utopian commune (NIKLASHAUSER FART [The Niklashausen Journey, 1969]) or, as in the case of DIE DRITTE GENERATION, a self-styled conspiratorial ‘terrorist’ cell, there has not been a filmmaker since Fassbinder who can orchestrate group dynamics as complexly and incisively. This becomes even more striking when one considers that ensemble films, of the kind pioneered by Robert Altman with NASHVILLE (1975), reprised with SHORT CUTS (1993), and Paul Thomas Anderson’s MAGNOLIA (1999), or multi-strand narratives like Alejandro González Iñárritu’s AMORES PERROS (2000) and BABEL (2006), have become something like the norm of contemporary art-house cinema. Perhaps the only film that comes close to presenting a similarly intricate web is Lars von Trier’s IDIOTERNE (The Idiots, 1998), a kind of Danish remake of DIE DRITTE GENERATION, insofar as both directors emphasise how the ideals of the ’68 generation, addressing sexual liberation or anti-bourgeois emancipation in general can take on a dynamic that leads invariably to forms of authoritarian rule, reflecting at the micro-level what I indicated about the year 1979 at the macro-level of world politics.

- The *convergence of different forms of addiction and dependency*: the film draws analogies between drug dependency, sexual dependency and media addiction. The former nexus is well known from many of Fassbinder’s films, such as DIE BITTEREN TRÄNEN DER PETRA VON KANT (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, 1972), LILI MARLEEN or DIE SEHNSUCHT DER VERONIKA VOSS (The Longing of Veronica Voss, 1982) as indeed is the role of the mass media in fostering such addiction. A startling condensation of the media as a drug is a shot in DIE DRITTE GENERATION where Fassbinder draws a link between the film’s over-saturation of ambient sound and Ilse’s – one of the doomed characters
- The craving for drugs: we see Ilse with her arm outstretched, reaching towards a radio antenna that looks like a heroin needle, as if she needed to be ‘connected’ to the world and to others by any means, however desperate or desultory.
- The insistence on *the ‘cash nexus’ holding human relations together*, irrespective of how rich or poor the protagonists are, and irrespective of whether they genuinely love one another or not: money is the only true measure of self-worth, recognition and self-esteem. By fervently and openly embracing this otherwise disguised ideological motivation, Fassbinder’s protagonists implicitly subvert the value

system, which forces them to ‘sell themselves’. However, underneath this seemingly ‘materialist’ deconstruction of hypocrisy and double standards there is another economy of exchange in Fassbinder: one that is based on giving to excess, of sacrificing without demand, of self-sacrifice and the pure gesture of handing over to the other what is most precious to the self.

Several of the characters in *DIE DRITTE GENERATION* are capable of such gestures of giving, even if the film barely pauses to mark their moment of ecstatic sacrifice, notably Franz Walsch, who knowingly lets himself be shot by the police. The fact that the character is played by Günther Kaufmann gives a hint, for those who know Fassbinder’s work, of the element of idealisation behind such self-sacrifice.¹¹ ‘Giving’ in advance of receiving, ‘choosing’ ahead of being targeted is the micro-ethics of Fassbinder’s macro theme: how to assert agency in situations governed by multiple temporalities, each of which is under the sway of retro-action: in Fassbinder, to act is to take charge of the effects in the hope that they body forth their own causes, thus creating the historicity of the singular event out of the otherwise closed feedback loops of mutual antagonism and mutual dependency.

Such a retroactive breaking open of a closed loop is, according to Slavoj Žižek’s argument, “the only way to save historicity from the fall into historicism” – the latter being merely a linear succession of “a series of ultimately failed attempts to deal with the same ‘unhistorical’ traumatic kernel.”¹²

The Generation Paradox

What, then, would be the ‘un-historical traumatic kernel’ that saves Fassbinder’s film from historicism and allows it to acquire the kind of ‘historicity of the moment’ I am claiming for it? In one sense, there are plenty of traumas in the personal obsessions and transhistorical themes I have just enumerated, all of which revolve around modes of symbolic exchange and asymmetrical but reversible power relations. Yet, in another sense, the traumatic kernel might be hidden in the title itself, which draws attention to the trope of ‘generation’ as an increasingly prevalent but also problematic gesture of redemptive historiography in the way that Germany endlessly works on its past, in order to derive from it the grounds for a present that can legitimate the future.

It is easy to see how contradictory but also how convenient the use of ‘generation’ is when applied to the historical moment and to historical succession. First of all, it signals a break with the Marxist notion of causality and determination, no longer identifying either

the class struggle or the inherent contradictions of the mode of production as the driving forces of the historical process. It wants to retain, however, the group element of the 'collective historical subject' (G. Lukacs) against the great man/single actor theory of historical agency, as it has tempted so many Germans who first saw in Hitler their salvation and then the source and origin of all evil.

Yet the generational paradigm also breaks with any notion of progress or *telos* in the Enlightenment sense; it has no grand narrative to offer other than biology and thus can be seen as one of the many ways the latter part of the 20th century is turning towards 'natural history', 'evolutionary psychology' and 'cosmic disaster' as ways of charting human time in relation to geology or to the paradoxes of astrophysical space-time. But generation is also an inherently contradictory way of grasping the dilemma of sensing oneself both in time and exempt from its consequences. For the 'generation' paradigm is either framed negatively, as a fatal legacy or curse, in the biblical sense: the sins of fathers are to be visited upon the subsequent generations.¹³ Or the paradigm is lifted out of time, insofar as a generation is deemed to have a unique outlook on life shaped by shared experiences. This would be Karl Mannheim's definition, emerging out of World War I, of a group or cohort that, at an early age, participates in, experiences or is traumatized by the same historical events of a given time period.¹⁴ This generational concept was revived in the early 1970, to retroactively designate a particular group whose members had been old enough to experience the Nazi period firsthand, but also felt sufficiently young enough to be exempt from personal responsibility and capable of claiming for themselves a *Stunde null*, or zero hour, i.e. a re-setting of the historical clock and a new beginning after 1945. They came to be known as the *Flakhelfer Generation* (boy-soldiers manning anti-aircraft guns in the last months of the war): they were born between 1926 and 1929 and included Günther Grass, Hans-Dietrich Genscher (former Minister of Foreign Affairs), the philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, Josef Aloisius Ratzinger (former Pope Benedict XVI), as well as many writers of the Group 47, such as Martin Walser and Siegfried Lenz.¹⁵ Best known is the phrase by another prominent member of the *Flakhelfer Generation*, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who, on a state visit to Israel in 1984, reclaimed for himself 'the blessing of a late birth' (*die Gnade der späten Geburt*).

There have been several 'generations' since Fassbinder used the term, yet the notion of generation has regained traction, once more in the sense mentioned above, namely as a burden or curse, insofar as the present economic and political crisis in Europe should lead to a feeling of *Schuld* (guilt) for burdening future generations with the

Schulden (debts) of the present one: not necessarily because their future is bright and might be blighted, but because the future as such has become both precious (there are not enough being born) and precarious (there is less and less for them to inherit or look forward to).^{15a}

[...] It is telling that Fassbinder has given different explanations for the title, which retrospectively both reinforces this new trope of historical succession and determination, and deconstructs it by multiplying the frames of reference. In an essay for an issue of the German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau* published on 2 December 1978, while he was shooting the film, Fassbinder reasoned that “The Third Generation can mean:

1. [The First Generation] The German bourgeoisie from 1848 to 1933;
2. [The Second Generation] Our grandfathers, how they experienced the Third Reich and how they remember it;
3. [The Third Generation] Our fathers, who had an opportunity after the war to set up a state that could have been more humane and free than any had ever been before, and [look] what became of this opportunity in the end.”¹⁶

Yet DIE DRITTE GENERATION is more often interpreted in light of another statement made by Fassbinder, after the film had been completed: “The first generation was that of ’68 idealists, who thought they could change the world with words and demonstrations in the street [he presumably is thinking of Rudi Dutschke and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, whom we see arguing with an interviewer on the television set in one of the pivotal scenes of the film]. The second generation, the Baader-Meinhof group, who moved from legality to the armed struggle and into total illegality. The third generation is today’s, which just indulges in action without thinking, without either ideology or politics, and whose members, probably without knowing it, are like puppets whose strings are pulled by others.”¹⁷

We can see how the ‘traumatic kernel’ here revolves around the paradox of agency and autonomy: on the one hand, the very point of identifying a generation is to be able to assign to it a distinct form of agency, within a succession and thus a history, preparing a future. But the ‘third generation’ is one that is effectively perverted in its agency by being unwittingly manipulated. Sharing a particular past experience may create a generation whose identity constitutes itself around a trauma, which, in turn, renders the agency illusory: unable to break out of the loop, the gesture that was meant to liberate turns out to be part of the trap, for which the very notion of a *redemptive historicity*, i.e. a messianic moment, a radical rupture or the spontaneous event, *was the bait*.

The Open Loop and the Power of its Retroactive Recognition

The question, therefore, is how this trap of the generational paradox nonetheless strengthens the claims of DIE DRITTE GENERATION to stand both at and for the intersection of the forces I earlier identified with ‘1979’. The obvious answer would be: by way of a certain reflexive doubling, which enacts a *mise en abyme* of the traumatic kernel. For just as ‘generation’ in Germany is the code word for an unredeemed past of which it is the failed repetition, so the revolutionary aspirations and post-colonial liberation movements might be said to have been diverted, hijacked or turned on their head by disruptive media technologies and neoliberal globalization. Politically speaking, 1979 would prove *in advance* that the hopes placed in 1989 were misplaced, and that the ‘new world order’ (that of the post-9/11 permanent war) had already begun to take shape by 1979. This is more than hindsight; it is a way of retroactively charging ‘1979’ (and Fassbinder’s film of that year) with the status of ‘historicity’ as outlined above: that is, representing a past that impacts upon the present, insofar as this present is able to recognise something of itself in this past and thus effectively create this past as a memory for its own present, and thereby reinserting the differently rupturing agency of the ‘event’.

This brings me back to one of my main criteria of historicity: that of the retrospective prescience and the loop of anticipated fear and foreboding. At the heart of the argument that Fassbinder is putting forward in DIE DRITTE GENERATION lies a kind of reciprocal relation between terrorism and its traumatic aftermath. The conjuncture is not causal but viral and names the already mentioned asymmetrical, but nonetheless intertwined power relations at stake, which propagate by contagion. When the industrialist Lurz and the policeman Gans share the joke that underpins the film, namely that it was capitalism itself that had invented terrorism, in order to force the state to better protect capital’s interests, a reviewer ten years ago added: “Sounds much like what W. has done in Amerika since 9/11”.¹⁸ Today, one would say: ‘Politicians have invented the debt crisis to better protect the interests of finance capitalism.’

That Fassbinder’s DIE DRITTE GENERATION should be such a kaleidoscopic film is appropriate for the kind of historicity I have been trying to distil from the film, because on the one hand it affirms the fragmented and contingent nature of every moment in the present and therefore also in the past – everything that happens could have been otherwise – leaving the counter-factual and the counter-intuitive in play while not diminishing the tension this creates with ‘historicity’ as the decisive moment, which we retrieve every time we retroactively attribute prescience. The film’s powerfully paranoiac overall structure –

capital and its security apparatus is masterminding the terrorist menace, while being itself masterminded and possibly self-deluded – emphatically affirms and insists that nothing is an accident, and yet its open form also wagers that everything is an accident. In Fassbinder, “actions have consequences”, to use a phrase from David Lynch’s *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006) (a film that, in this respect at least, out-Fassbinders Fassbinder), and at the same, these consequences seem to form a loop and possibly even a Möbius strip (i.e. an ‘endless loop’) which also brings Fassbinder closer to Lynch than one might have hitherto suspected: another effect of retroactive causality, which makes Fassbinder in this instance ‘Lynchean’, while still allowing Lynch to be a follower of Fassbinder.

What can we conclude? Each scene – and often even each image – of *DIE DRITTE GENERATION* is so densely layered and packed with references to the political or topical contexts that what seems fragmented merely appears as such, because it is one strand in a tapestry of topological and temporal references woven into the film, which – viewed from a certain angle – freeze into quite a coherent historical snapshot of West Germany at that time, while also pointing to the future, where events like the ones we have witnessed since (9/11, the ‘war on terror’) give *DIE DRITTE GENERATION* a new urgency by reviving some of its more outrageous conceits, as if life was not only imitating art, but as if the past had already anticipated the future, and that a year like 1979 – perhaps even more than over-determined dates like 1968 or 1989 – is the horizon we are approaching the further we move away from it. It gives us one more reason to take seriously, but also to examine critically, the commemorative turn of our culture. The paradox I have been exploring is this: the historicity of the single event, the special moment or the key year, is not inherent in the event itself, but the effect of a loop: revealing with hindsight its prophetic, predictive prescience, whereby tautology and repetition effectively function as the breakthrough moment: *the present needs the past more for its future than the past needs the presence for its survival.*

I have tried to show how one can construct such a loop for the more or less arbitrarily chosen year of 1979, and for a film that Fassbinder made that year almost by accident. Yet my intention has not been to deconstruct such ‘historicity’ as merely an optical trick or a parallax illusion. On the contrary: repetition, under the special conditions of the open loop, may be the only way the ‘new’ can be made to emerge, which is to say that it may be the only possibility to envisage a future that is both legitimated by the past and liberated from it.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13684768.html>, reviewed: 4 September 2013
<http://www.oberhausener-manifest.com/>, reviewed: 4 September 2013
- 2 Stefan Andriopoulos and Bernhard J. Dotzler (eds.): *1929: Beiträge zur Archäologie der Medien*. Frankfurt am Main 2002.
- 3 Jon Elster: *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints*. Cambridge 2000.
- 4 “Splitter der Wirklichkeit, die aber doch allesamt streng den einen Gedanken verfolgen, wie ein einziger Augenblick alles Vorher und Nachher verschlingen kann.” In: URL: <http://www.kluge-alexander.de/filmmacher/der-angriff-der-gegenwart-auf-die-uebrige-zeit/print.html>, last accessed 4-9-2013
- 5 For a lucid introduction to the Annalists’ *longue durée* and its critics, see Peter Burke: *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89*. Stanford 1990.
- 6 DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1978), LOLA (1981) und DIE SEHNSUCHT DER VERONIKA VOSS (Veronika Voss, 1981).
- 7 Walter Benjamin: Theses on the Philosophy of History. In: Id.: *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt (ed.). Harry Zohn (trans.). London 1970, pp. 259–60.
- 8 Erika Balsom: *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam 2013, p. 16, in: URL: www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=442726.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze: Postscript on the Societies of Control. In: *October*, 59, Winter 1992, pp. 3–7.
- 10 R. W. Fassbinder: The Third Generation. In: Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing (eds.): *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*. Baltimore 1992, pp. 125–126.
- 11 Fassbinder often signed as Franz Walsch when working on his films in a role in addition to that of director, e.g. as cameraman or editor. Günter Kaufmann seems to have aptly chosen the date of his actual death (as opposed to his death in the film): his sudden passing away in March of 2012 inadvertently or unconsciously renewed the link that forever ties his life to that of Fassbinder.
- 12 Slavoj Žižek: *Enjoy Your Symptom*. London 1992/2001, p. 94.
- 13 See the poster from a 1929 campaign against the Versailles Treaty, warning: “Bis in die dritte Generation müsst Ihr fronen” (“You’ll be slaves until the third generation”). It

depicted a slave driver at the centre of a circular winch to which are chained a father, son and grandfather. German Historical Museum, Berlin, in: URL:

<http://www.dhm.de/lemo/objekte/pict/p74-3797/index.html>.

14 Karl Mannheim: The Problem of Generations. In: *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge by Karl Mannheim*. New York 1952, pp. 276–322.

15 On the case of Günter Grass as *Flakhelfer*, see Nathan Thornburgh: “Günter Grass’s Silence”. In: *Time Magazine* (New York), 14 August 2006,

<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1226380,00.html>

For a critical history of the Gruppe 47, see Stephan Braese (ed.): *Bestandsaufnahme – Studien zur Gruppe 47, Philologische Studien und Quellen 157*. Berlin 1999.

15a. “The only future of a "generation" is to be the preceding one. On a route that leads inevitably to the cemetery.” Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection (Semiotexte, 2009)*, 18.

16 Fassbinder 1992, op. cit., p. 123.

17 Ibid., p. 106.

18 Dennis Schwartz: Review of *The Third Generation*. In: *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews*, 23 May 2006, in: <http://homepages.rovers.net/~ozus/thirdgeneration.htm>. Last accessed: 15-9-2013