

Prodigal Son, Not Reconciled: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

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Munich, Reichenbach Square

In 2002, the Reichenbach Square in Munich was to have been renamed after one of the city's more famous, but notorious sons: Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Even though he had died in his apartment there twenty years earlier, the proposal drew such heavy protests, especially on the part of the Jewish community, that the city council rejected it. Another attempt was made two years later, to honour Fassbinder in this traditional way, and – just in time for what would have been his 60th birthday – a “small, still to be developed area” by the main train station, between Lili Palmer Street and Erika Mann Street, became “Rainer Werner Fassbinder Square”. Who was Fassbinder, and why did Germany have such a hard time – and for so long – with Fassbinder and his ambivalent world fame?

Fassbinder live

At the time of his death from a drug overdose on June 10th, 1982, aged 37, Fassbinder was best-known as one of the key directors of the so-called New German Cinema, along with Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Margarethe von Trotta. Celebrated first in London, then Paris and New York for his unconventional mixture of avant-garde techniques and sentimental plots that ranged from suburban would-be gangster-films and dark comedies, to literary adaptations, social realist drama and female melodramas, the majority of Fassbinder's films were not popular in West Germany. But by dying so young, in the middle of working on *Querelle* (1982) and at the height of his reputation – after the world success of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), after one of the most expensive, but hugely impressive if controversial television series *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) – Fassbinder did become one of Europe's tragic genius-artists, sometimes compared to Georg Büchner (27), Franz Kafka (39) and Vincent van Gogh (37), to whom Fassbinder dedicated one of his films. One of the reasons his recognition in Germany remained muted for such a long time, was that both his life and his work was overshadowed by controversies over drugs, personal quarrels and professional rivalries. These, trivial as they may seem, go to the heart of the matter, and help to explain why Fassbinder is such a representative figure of the BRD, not just in the realm of cinema, even though his personality, political stances, sexual preferences and general *habitus* made him a rebel, an outsider and – in the eyes of most Germans – completely unrepresentative.

One fascinating perspective on this paradox, for instance, opens up when one compares Germany's Fassbinder to Italy's Pier Paolo Pasolini and Japan's Yukio Mishima. All three were

the unreconciled sons of formerly fascist regimes that in varying degrees had to come to terms with their national disgrace, their tainted father-generation, and their de facto liberation (and ‘cultural colonization’) by the United States. All three experienced their homosexuality in equal measure as political protest, poetic inspiration, and personal self-affirmation.

Thus, for a long time even after his death, Fassbinder’s unconventional life-style and flamboyant entourage were so much in the public eye that they all but consumed his work. Scandals, suicides, confessions and indiscretions, an openly waged “family feud” among his former collaborators and an even more public controversy over alleged anti-Semitism in one of his plays gave those who did not like him sufficient reason not to deal with the challenges posed by his films. Things have changed somewhat since unification, not only because AIDS decimated the ranks of those who fought over his posthumous fame, or because the ‘old’ BRD is now considered a distinct chapter in Germany’s history. Yet were it not for the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation and its director, Juliane Lorenz, few might now regard Fassbinder as more than a footnote to this history. As his editor and longtime companion, Lorenz took over the Fassbinder estate after his mother’s death, a particularly thankless task, given the lack of tangible assets, the disarray regarding copyright and ownership, which she had to buy back, film after film, while trying to raise public interest in Fassbinder’s other works: his theatre plays and radio features, the many interviews, prose pieces and poems, collected and published for the first time. Without Lorenz’ entrepreneurial energy and steely determination, Fassbinder’s films would not be shown, indeed could not be shown, and his work might have disappeared from our film cultural mental screen as completely as his films after 1982 disappeared from German film and television screens. Lorenz’ rescue mission came at the right moment: once she had secured the rights, the new technology of the DVD greatly aided her efforts, as did the growing interest among museums to stage major exhibitions around film directors. Curators now embrace them as major 20th century visual artists rather than keep their films confined to a retrospective at a cinematheque. Today, Fassbinder is alive and lives on, thanks to exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, thanks to his screenplays being turned into theatre plays and once more performed on stage, thanks to adaptations and re-makes by other directors, such as Francois Ozon or Todd Haynes, and above all, because his film oeuvre is available on DVD: as boxed sets with attractive designs, in digitally ‘remastered’ versions, complete with bonus and documentary material. The 2007 re-issue of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – as a DVD set, a touring exhibition, and a big screen revival, proved a major cultural event the world over.

The Historian-Chronicler of the BRD

Aside from this concerted effort to consolidate his market value and cultural capital, why is his work worth preserving in the first place, and what does his work mean when one takes it as both representative and symptomatic for Germany and German cinema during the 1960s and 1970s? Jean Luc Godard once said: “It may be true that all his films are bad, but Fassbinder is nevertheless the greatest German director. He was there when Germany needed films to help it re-discover itself. The only one with whom he bears comparison is Rossellini, because even the *Nouvelle vague* did not succeed in making France [rather than Paris] as present in their films as post-war Germany is in Fassbinder’s.” Godard makes an important point: that Fassbinder’s work is also a matter of the right came at the right time. Wolfram Schütte, too, captured one crucial element of Fassbinder’s project, when he called Fassbinder ‘the Balzac of West-German society’. Schütte was right to identify in this Munich director, with very Bavarian roots, one of the most astute and passionate chronicler of the Federal Republic. But the task also had a very personal dimension, for as he once put it in an interview: *How do I fit into my country’s history? Why am I German?* Fassbinder was born on the last day of the month in which Germany surrendered to the Allied Forces, making him one of the first children of the post-war period. Yet like so many of his generation born between 1942 and 1948, his childhood and adolescence were marked by the terrible legacy of Nazi dictatorship, as it affected intimate relations with family and parents, as well as the political stances one could adopt and the cultural values or taste in music and movies one was likely to espouse. But unlike many other young Germans whose writings and films began to try and ‘master the past’, Fassbinder reached back even further, most notably to the Gründerjahre (founding years) and the root of modern Anti-Semitism in Gustav Freytag’s *Soll und Haben*. However, this project did not come to pass, and what one might call the chronicle of modern Germany or Fassbinder’s *Comédie Humaine* begins with the decline of Prussianism in Fontane’s *Effi Briest*; following this are the turmoil of the Weimar Republic (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*), the rise of National Socialism (*Despair – Ein Reise ins Licht*), Hitler’s war (*Lili Marleen*), the rubble years (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*), the „economic miracle“ (*Lola*), the late 50s (*Veronika Voss*) and early 60s (*Der Händler der vier Jahreszeiten*), the arrival of guest workers (*Angst essen Seele auf*), the “hot autumn” of 1977 (*Deutschland im Herbst*) and the end of the Red Army Faction (*Die Dritte Generation*). These chronicles did not follow the style of Reitz’ *Heimat*, but rather tried to capture the crisis moments and turning points of history, which are usually bound up with the modest, yet oftentimes failing, hopes and dreams of the petty bourgeoisie, of conformists, anti-heroes and asocial figures on the margins of a society at war with itself. If, at the beginning of the bourgeois era, Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine* dealt with money, power and the rising passions of greed and avarice, Fassbinder’s films document the

break-down, if not outright end, of this age: of interest now are the sellout of bourgeois morality, the free market of humanistic values, and the meritocracy turned black market of emotions. Everyone tries to get more for of his/her exchange value, or to express his/her love to the highest bidder, but they're all deceived in the end. Salesmen, receivers of stolen goods, pimps, dealers, middlemen are the crummy heroes of this world, but it would be too easy to see them only as the distorting mirror of a disappointed idealism which creates only images of self-hatred or self-renunciation for itself. Fassbinder's heroes were too rebellious for that, too realistic, because in the general barter business new possibilities are revealed, alternate courses recorded, and fresh energies set in motion.

The Dracula, rather than the Heart, of New German Cinema?

What kind of role did Fassbinder play in Germany's film culture that gave rise to such an ambivalent after-life? What does this conflation/confusion of art and life tell us about creativity and cultural production in the BRD? One of his favorite sayings was "Schlafen kann ich wenn ich tot bin" (There will be time to sleep when I'm dead"). With it he managed to keep both admirers and skeptics at bay who wondered how it was possible for a single human being to make 40 feature films in only 14 years, not to mention TV series (*Acht Stunden sind kein Tag*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), theatre plays (*Katzelmacher*, *Blut am Halsband der Katze*, *Tropfen auf dem heissen Stein*, *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*), stage productions (in Munich, Bremen, Frankfurt), critical essays (on Douglas Sirk, Claude Chabrol, Werner Schröter, Michael Curtiz), numerous interviews and even playing lead roles in films by other directors (Volker Schlöndorff, Daniel Schmid, Wolf Gremm).

Yet the phrase: "schlafen kann ich wenn ich tot bin" also has another, perhaps more ominous meaning. It hints at restless sleep and a certain kind of haunting presence. In his obituary from 1982, the writer and critic Wolfram Schütte could still grieve for Fassbinder as the "heart" of the New German Cinema, which had just stopped beating. But if over the following decade Fassbinder remained present in body, it was primarily as a monstrous one. While alive, the photos that circulated showed someone bloated by alcohol and drugs, physically unattractive, a black hat over his unkempt hair, a straggly beard, a greasy black leather jacket only half-covering his beer-belly. Fassbinder liked it that way: he had no intentions of either being photogenic or acting the smooth media-personality. But after his death, these same images also suggested a Dracula figure: he remained "undead" and without heirs, haunting his former friends and assistants, sucking the blood and paralyzing even of those who were to remain faithful and wanted to follow him as a director: to them he was the "gentle destroyer", or "Rainer and his willing victims". One is – not for the first time – reminded of Andy Warhol, known to his

intimates as “Drella” (Dracula-Cinderella): give his taste for manipulation and intrigue, “Drasputin” might have suited Fassbinder, had he not already chosen the nickname “Mary” for himself.

The tension here hinted at is a double one: it concerns the inherent relation between his life and his films, so many of which – from *Katzelmacher* (1969) and *Beware of the Holy Whore* (1971), to *Fox and his Friends* (1975), *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – could be regarded as autobiographical and auto-reflexive, in the manner of the great European film *auteurs* like Ingmar Bergman or Federico Fellini, especially since he often also acted in them, sometimes even playing the lead, as in *Fox and his Friends*. But it also concerns the working conditions of an independent director in one of Europe’s new wave cinemas. Fassbinder had to make films at a time and in a country, where a film industry in the normal sense of the word, i.e. with studio-facilities, professional producers and a roster of under-contract actors, no longer existed.

Instead, Fassbinder had to create on a one-man-star-and-mini-studio-system, which also helps to explain his phenomenal, super-human output. The inner circle initially comprised Hanna Schygulla, Kurt Raab, Peer Raben, Irm Hermann, Ulli Lommel, and later: Margit Carstensen, Harry Baer, Klaus Löwitsch, Peter Chatel, Barbara Sukowa. Fassbinder was seconded by cameramen Dietrich Lohmann, Michael Ballhaus, Xaver Schwarzenberger, while the music was almost always composed by Peer Raben, a school friend of Kurt Raab and a member of the clan from the start; Peter Märthesheimer was a long-time Fassbinder producer and screenwriter, Thea Eymesz and Juliane Lorenz regularly did the editing, and a whole list of other regular faces are well-known to anyone familiar with his films and their credits.

The impossible feat of so many films in so few years also relied on a manic, drug-induced creativity, in which life and work, work and life constantly mingled and interfered, but also cross-fertilized each other. Fassbinder might have taken the idea of such a personalized talent factory from Julian Beck's Living Theatre and, of course, from Andy Warhol. As with Warhol’s ‘factory’, the manipulation of fragile egos, the preying on human weaknesses and dependencies, as well as the power-play among gay sub-cultures among Fassbinder’s entourage was perhaps less a psychological personality trait of the director himself, and more a part of his essential means of production, when money was scarce, future projects uncertain and the need to keep these talents’ loyalty nonetheless a paramount consideration. Also not unlike Warhol, the promiscuity of the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ often enough also had fatal consequences, claiming a number of lives in killings and suicides, even before the ravages of AIDS further decimated the Fassbinder family during the 1980s.

Thus, before judging the heady mix of sex and drugs, work and death as typical of those post-68 excesses (which gave rise to the scandals and the mostly negative publicity), one must not forget a crucial historical fact: Fassbinder was obliged to overproduce in order to produce at all. In his production methods he illustrates a problem of European cinema in the 1970s and 1980s: that thanks to the availability of certain 'cultural' forms of governmental film funding, the New German cinema seemed to blossom. Yet few of these filmmakers were able to sustain a career beyond the first or second film, even fewer reached a cinema audience, and only a small handful ever managed to show their films internationally.

In Fassbinder's case, then, the conflict between "life" and "films" cannot be resolved in terms of either of collapse of the two into 'autobiography' or a direct opposition, which rejects the messiness of his life in favour of the autonomy of his art. Like both sides of the same coin, or better: like communicating vessels, the two elements account for the (irresistibly attracting but also repelling) fascination, which the name "Fassbinder" continues to elicit. The British critic Ronald Hayman once found an apt metaphor when he likened Fassbinder's ability to infuse his art with his life and his life with his art, to the skill of a cook who "has two pots on the stove" and "skims from one in order to season the other". The comparison is pertinent insofar as Fassbinder had more pots on the stove in yet another sense: not only did he, as indicated, work in various media (theater, film, television, even radio), but he also achieved success in the most diverse genres (gangster film, melodrama, black comedy, historical monumental films, film adaptations, televised theater play, gay film). This versatility differentiates him from other *auteurs* and brings him closer to the Hollywood directors whom he admired and modeled himself on. Michael Curtiz alongside Douglas Sirk, Claude Chabrol alongside Jean Luc Godard: i.e. not only 'art cinema', but also films for mass audiences. Yet rather than 'selling out' to popular taste, Fassbinder's active participation in so many different media and public spheres also confirms the fact that he never quite betrayed his beginnings in the Munich avant-garde. He almost literally followed Brecht's motto: in order to change an artistic practice, one has to intervene in all its manifestations and institutions as much from the 'inside', as one must oppose them from 'outside'. It makes him the embodiment of the tensions so typical of the 1970s, between radical refusal to the point of violence (the choices made by Ulrike Meinhof and Holger Meins) and the so-called 'long march through the institutions' (taken by former 'rebels' like Joschka Fischer and Daniel Cohn-Bendit).

Fassbinder did not have any real successors, at least not in Germany. Lars von Trier's *Europa* is a genuine Fassbinder film, and *The Idiots* is Trier's *Third Generation*: carnivalesque terrorists of normality. In France, Frédéric Ozon und Gaspar Noé share what one might call Fassbinder's cinematic heritage: one focusing on the comedic puzzle of feelings, the other on the

darker side, with its not-so-innocent victims, its malicious scapegoats and outcasts who can act as wickedly as everyone else.

Fassbinder, the Production Machine

In discussing Franz Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari developed the model of a “minor literature” as a way of escaping the psychologizing reading of a work of art, yet without having to suppress or ignore the author’s life. What they looked at was how such an artist can, between various languages, a multi-ethnic state, and Jewish patriarchy, between autobiography and (a non-functional) love life, create an “alignment” that draws strength from life’s blind alleys and produces literature. Creativity and substance do not derive from the (futile) search for identity, but from the transgression of boundaries, the ability to resist tensions, to maneuver and position oneself in the fields of language, religion and sexuality, of love and betrayal, bureaucracy and one’s status as outsider, without thereby thwarting the energies set in motion by the incommensurable, by the abuse of power, or by injustice.

To be sure, this model cannot be applied literally to Fassbinder. But if one tries to uncover the secret of this uncanny production machine, several analogies present themselves. The German director found himself at the confluence of three impossible yet productive “film languages”—Hollywood, the UFA style, and the European auteur cinema—on the basis of which he ultimately developed his own style. Particularly striking in his life and work is the “fault line” of bisexuality, which accounts for ever new combinations of femininity and masculinity in his characters, as well as the theme of “exploitation”, Fassbinder’s code word for the ambivalent and reversible relations between minorities and power structures, victims and authority. How these complexes manifest themselves in Fassbinder is very important. For instance, the symbiosis of his filmmaking and his bodily presence makes sense only if understood as the coupling of a series of networks: the strategic, Don Juan-esque use of his homosexuality, his abuse of alcohol, pills and drugs, his nomadic existence alongside his almost bourgeois domesticity. It is furthermore apparent how graciously Fassbinder was able to make his way through the maze of film subsidies and cope with television and the leftovers of (the German) film industry in order to shoot his “German Hollywood films” (*Eine Reise ins Licht, die Ehe der Maria Braun, Lili Marleen*). Seen from outside: a sex, money, and drug machine; seen from inside (by his collaborators): a sadistic, manipulative power game machine. But from yet another—hopefully our present—perspective, it all had to do with uniquely productive networks characterized as much by disruptive factors, malfunctions and short circuits as by diligence, ambition and what one would easily call genius.

Fassbinder's productivity networks can be grouped, on the one hand, around the affective apparatus of "the surrogate family" and, on the other, around the cinematic apparatus of artificial worlds brought forth by mirrors and gazes, image spaces, film quotations, and sound topographies. It is to these labyrinths of the self and to its echoes that characters devote themselves, and against this background that love stories develop between men, between women, between men and women. Particularly women, who, be they prostitutes, chanteuses, femmes fatales or simply part of the show business of self-dramatization, navigate among various instances of the law and of society, traverse the boundaries of emancipation and oppression in both directions. In melodrama and in his desperate, comical and tragic relationships, impossible pairs such as Ali and Emmi (*Angst essen Seele auf*), Franz and Hanni (*Wildwechsel*), Petra and Karin (*Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*), Elvira/Erwin and Seitz (*In einem Jahr von 13 Monden*), Maria and Hermann (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*), Franz and Reinhold (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*) invent and lose themselves, only to ultimately perish by each other's hands.

Fassbinder's "one-man-studio" usually maintained a balance between the two systems of family and cinema. He transformed luminary actresses—from Hanna Schygulla, Ingrid Caven and Margit Carstensen to Barbara Sukowa, Elisabeth Trissenaar and Rosel Zech—into "stars". By contrast, men were emotionally, financially or sexually dependent on Fassbinder, and he supposedly exploited them by playing them against one another or by bribing them through a calculated combination of chicanery and generosity. Such biographical details are also important for the implicit double binds, which held the production machine together, as if the most contradictory feelings had been the best fuel, and the deepest anxieties the best mechanics to keep the engine running.

Fassbinder's surrogate family, with all its dependencies, was simultaneously archaic, atavistic, pre- and post-oedipal: it constantly created and destroyed identity and self-worth, and it ventured beyond the usual forms of socialization. At every stage of his short life Fassbinder managed to use the loss of childhood and the renunciation of the nuclear family to his advantage so as to create and experiment with new forms of communion: the surrogate family or the film location as a laboratory for "late capitalism", but also its antagonist, a rather anarcho-communist inspired "bio-power" of feeling and relationship building, with all its possibilities and abysses (*Warnung vor einer heiligen Nutte*). There is, however, a harmonious line running from one to the other, from the Bavarian-bucolic extended family to the hippie commune, from the conspiratorial "unit" to the homo-clique. Fassbinder seems to have been a master at imitating non-bourgeois as well as overly bourgeois lifestyles, as well as at employing in a productive way their respective modes of associating and networking. The claustrophobic inner spaces did make

room for an outside world, even though Fassbinder's camera did not leave the studio almost at all. The kitchen and bedroom led directly into the socio-political space of the post-war republic.

His Relevance Today: Germans as Victims?

In his first suburban gangster films the idea of exploitation is polarized between exploiters and exploited, and characters often present themselves as sore points of capitalism. In his later works, however, Fassbinder uncovers another area of conflict. At first it was women who, by virtue of their mute or silent presence, became all the more eloquent accusers of the system and grew to represent the bad conscience of patriarchal society. Then the victims were homosexuals exploited brutally or cynically by other homosexuals, as in *Faustrecht der Freiheit* and *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden*, or lesbians as victims of power games and blind passion, as in *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*. Finally, the power relations between majority, minorities, and the ruling power were presented in such a way as to suggest that perpetrators and victims are bound together by more than antagonism. This led to the afore-mentioned double binds (as in *Die Dritte Generation*, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, or in *Querelle*) out of which people could not break and, even more surprisingly, did not want to break. That was Fassbinder's way of keeping up-to-date with and commenting on the 'identity politics' of the 1970s. Women's emancipation, the gay movement, 'terrorism'—these were all developments he kept up with but also blew out of proportion in a tragic-comic way, often to the displeasure of all concerned parties: the Left saw him as an anarchist and crypto-Fascist, the Jewish community suspected crass anti-Semitism, gay people took him for a homophobe, and Feminists considered his statements, according to which women only wanted to be exploited "better", downright misogynistic.

Was there some misunderstanding? Or was Fassbinder concerned with something completely different, with a new concept of victim in general? Although even today power by no means rests with victims, it seems that everyone wants to be a victim, because that is where one finds the strongest subject-effects. Here too Fassbinder did some preliminary work, and, as usual, he was not shy of demanding the most from everyone: with him it does not suffice to be a victim, or to feel like one; one must first of all "become a victim".

Becoming a victim does not imply only being aware of the injustice and power relations that have caused the suffering. A victim carries responsibility. Only in melodrama does the victim trade its suffering in for righteousness, for moral superiority. The latter must constantly be put to the test through repetition, which is why the heroines of melodrama are often mislabeled as masochists. They are repeat offenders, but in noble affairs. In Fassbinder there is more at stake: victims are the ones who have completely fallen out of the symbolic order, who have nothing to lose anymore, nothing more to exchange or sell, not even their own body. Julia

Kristeva calls these *abject bodies*, whereas Giorgio Agamben uses the term *homo sacer*. By contrast, the dependencies of the double binds or the juxtaposition of perpetrators and victims are still caught up in the asymmetry of guilt and debts, and in the illusion that one can find a valid currency in the dialogue between memory and recollection, reconciliation and oblivion. *Truth and reconciliation in the face-to-face*: for Fassbinder, this kind of victimhood is a dead end. That is why some of his heroes look for victimhood not outside the boundaries imposed by sexuality and class, but in the fact that they consciously lead a life of exploitation within the relations of exploitation themselves. It is only after shedding their self and the fetishes that sustain it (most painfully and vividly in films like *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden* and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss*) that these heroes attain freedom. What seems to be pure self-abandonment, justifies another truth of the subject and thus makes way for a new ethics. The purpose of this ethics of becoming a victim is to strip the self of all its physical, psychic and symbolic means of exchange, and in this way achieve a radical openness towards life.

“We know what we know, we had to pay dearly for it”, says *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Fassbinder did not approach history as a chronicler, but as a time traveler, and, like every time traveler, he was allowed to go “back into the future” on condition that he leave the past untouched, with the sole exception of bringing himself into the picture and of sharing the responsibility for what has already happened and cannot be changed anymore. History, therefore, must not be approached by setting ‘their’ victims off against ‘our’ victims, nor by transforming the Other and Otherness into one’s equal, and also not by taking leave from the past as something which has passed. Fassbinder’s films seem concerned with completely different things, yet they all boil down to the same idea: one must be able to love the Other to the point of self-abandonment, and the latter does not imply sacrifice, but experiencing for oneself the Otherness of the Other. This is why to the question *How do I fit into my country’s history, why am I German?* Fassbinder’s films replied: to be German means learning once more to ‘become’ German. Alexander Kluge once wrote: “Germany—the more one looks at it, the farther away it moves”. This may hold true for Kluge’s films, but it does not for Fassbinder’s. When Gertrude Stein complained that she did not look as Picasso had painted her, the painter replied: “No, but you will”. The same could be said about Germany: it resembles more and more the image that Fassbinder created of it. This is at least what one hopes for, in the Germany of thirty years after his death, where Fassbinder’s place in the life of the nation may well be more or less secure, but where its potential lives on and should be continued as an ‘area waiting to be developed’.