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Melodrama of a Marriage

With *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Fassbinder created an emotionally charged movie that leaves little room for apathy in its audience's response. The movie's impact relies on its unconventional use of the melodramatic genre. The melodrama is defined as "a work characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization."¹ Melodrama films are "characterized by a plot to appeal to the emotions of the audience."² In this paper, I will examine the use of melodrama in *The Marriage of Marisa Braun*. I will also briefly discuss Fassbinder's themes regarding German culture and show why the melodrama was the appropriate vehicle for presenting these themes. In the beginning of the film, the tone for a typical formulaic melodrama is established. The larger issues that Fassbinder would like us to recognize revolve around the historical drama enacted in Germany between the end of the Second World War and 1954.

For a melodramatic film, we expect the plot as follows: boy and girl meet, boy and girl fall in love, tragedy strikes which separates boy and girl. Heightened emotional scenes culminate in the reunion of boy and girl in a final union of death or marriage. In this film, Hermann and Maria have already met, and are married within the first few minutes of screen time. The opening scene mocks the conventional love story, which might have the relationship between two star-crossed lovers end in marriage, rather than begin the story with the marriage. Already in this first scene, substantial character development has been left out in favor of actions in the story. A wedding takes place before the credits have even finished rolling. The red letters filling up and overflowing the scene impress upon the audience an image of excess. Maria and Hermann's concern for their marriage certificate is ridiculous, as we see by the other marriage certificates blowing to and from in the wind following the explosion of the government building. By the time the opening credits have finished rolling, we are sure that this film will challenge our expectations of the melodrama. In comparison to the customary melodramatic movies in which the main character pines away due to the loss of his or her true love, the progression of the plot in this movie takes unexpected turns, forcing us to focus on the larger issues Fassbinder portrays.

¹ Merriam Webster Dictionary

In keeping with our expectations of melodrama from movies we've experienced such as *An Affair to Remember* or *Casablanca*, we expect redemption for their love and forced separation. In *An Affair to Remember*, the female protagonist suffers a terrible physical tragedy, which prevents her reunion with her lover. Yet in the end, they find their way to one another. In *Casablanca*, the doomed couple meets years after their failed affair in Paris. There is some tension in *Casablanca*, and we're not sure if the two will someday reunite. We hope that they will get back together. Either ending is possible with the melodrama, which seeks to heighten the emotional intensities of the two characters. In both *Casablanca* and *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, the separation due to war evokes sympathy. The later separations between Maria and Hermann are less understandable, more convoluted. As in *Casablanca*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* achieves its heightened emotional charges in the scenes when the character development is sacrificed to the plot action.

One instance of sacrificing character development for plot is in the death of Bill. We admire the relationship between Maria and Bill. They seem to respect each other. They teach each other their native language, and help one another. Bill is very supportive of Maria. So, why does Maria kill Bill? This question of motive is lost in the purpose of moving the plot along. Hermann remains aloof, out of reach emotionally and physically, as he serves the sentence for Bill's death. Once Hermann is released from jail, the melodrama continues. The joyous reunion, which we await as an audience, hoping that Maria's coldness in character will be melted and she will be redeemed as a person, does not occur. Instead, Hermann disappears to Canada. The marriage of Maria and Hermann is again in limbo. We have expected a reunion or redemption in the end. We're fooled into believing that Fassbinder has prepared a predictable experience for us. After all, we think, this is why we love melodramas, because we can let ourselves be taken away with the emotions. What Fassbinder does is to use these elements of the melodrama to set the tone for the movie, and then he surprises us with the twists in the storyline.

Although this film can be categorized as a melodrama, the film achieves its success by manipulating Hollywood's conventions into something more substantial. Girl has lost boy and by the end of the opening credits we have developed sympathy for Maria. She hopes and dreams that Hermann is not dead. She defiantly proclaims to the other waiting women that Hermann is not dead because she wants it

² <http://www.filmsite.org/melodramafilms.html>

so. Later we despise Maria and her coldness, her lack of sympathy. When moving to her new villa, she remarks upon her preference to pay the moving man rather than say thank you. She enjoys her right to treat that man as an object, a thing, rather than a fellow human being. Maria's response to the final return of her husband is surprisingly sedate. She hugs Hermann stiffly, reminiscent of a mannequin, arms jutted out at a weird angle and no emotion. She is in shock from her experiences.

The Marriage of Maria Braun took place in the same timeframe as the “Economic Miracle” of Germany. The transformation of Germany’s “rubble women” from independent, strong women who pulled the country together to subservient wives is also addressed in this movie. Maria worked hard to attain financial security, sacrificing herself to create a home for Hermann and herself. She was selflessly devoted to her concept of family. By the end of the film, Hermann has returned and has essentially sold Maria to another man. This situation in the film parallels the fluctuations in gender roles during this time. In general, it is the man in melodramas who must prove himself worthy of love. Maria tries to redeem herself in Hermann’s eyes, to cast herself once more in his eyes as his wife. It is as though she tries to prove her love, yet she fails to be fulfilled by her love.

The various characters view love and the meaning differently. Maria believes in the ideal of one true love. Betty and Maria sing a well-known 1950s song about waiting for the one man. Maria stands by her “Mann,” her husband. She declares at the inquiry of Mr. Bill’s death that though she was indeed fond of Bill, she loves her husband. This meaning is purposefully lost in the translation from German to English. The English translator translates the meaning to be the same, and the official cannot understand the difference between her love for Bill and her love for her husband. Maria claims that it doesn’t matter, that he will never understand the difference that she could only ever truly love her husband. This love, which motivates Maria to sell her soul in the pursuit of economic well being, seems false. How can Maria *love* a man she barely knew for two weeks? As is stated time and time again, the marriage lasted for half a day and a whole night. She spent much more time with Mr. Bill, and they seemed to share a rapport that perhaps could have been transformed into a loving marriage.

The death of Mr. Bill is shot hazily, giving the effect of a dreamlike sequence. This dreamlike quality to the filming helps to explain Maria’s state of mind that she probably did not intend killing Mr. Bill, but that her actions were almost inevitable. It is not clear that Hermann takes the blame for Bill’s death

because he loves Maria or because he feels he owes it to her love for him, which she insists pales her fondness for Bill. In the shot where he listens to Maria clarify her feelings for her husband, Hermann seems to debate within himself whether Maria's freedom is worth more than his own.

During the postwar years in Germany, people focused on day-to-day survival. As the economy improved, their denial of emotion was great. They did not properly deal with the aftereffects of losing a major war. People became cold. In one of the prison visits, Hermann asks Maria if everyone is so cold. Maria answers, "It's a hard time now for feelings, I think." During the prison visit, the point of view of the audience is shared with the point of view of the warden. From an alienating distance, we watch Maria and Hermann's conversation from just behind the warden's hand holding a set of keys. Maria assured Hermann that their life would begin again once was released from prison. The warden jangles his keys nervously. Does he not believe Maria? Perhaps as an audience we also share his nervousness in hearing Maria's promises. The keys, which have many associations, could just be the keys to the prison but their prominence in this scene suggests otherwise. They could symbolize the key to freedom, the key to understanding, perhaps alluding to this scene being the key to Hermann and Maria's relationship. In spite of Maria's words, Hermann leaves prison alone. He makes his own way in the world, leaving Maria behind to somehow keep her fragile sense of survival in her day-to-day world intact.

"Love and murder, loyalty, betrayal, yearning for an absent lover, suffering, and death"³ are the embodying elements of the melodrama. In his portrayal of a traditional subject, Fassbinder uses these melodrama elements to achieve a broader statement of German culture and society in the years of Reconstruction. This element of separation occurs frequently. Maria's mother lost her husband during the war. In one of the first scenes, she keeps up the pretense for Maria that she could never sell her husband's clothes. Meanwhile Betty and Maria pine away together for the return of their men, daring to hope that Willi and Hermann are alive. The reunion and the uncertainty of men missing during the war was a harsh reality during the postwar years. The radio in the background in an earlier scene lists missing people. The women in the film were shown to hover in the train stations searching for their loved ones, presumably much the same way that German women did during the late 1940s.

³ Kaes, Anton. *From Hitler to Heimat*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989).

Absence of a lover is touched upon as an element of melodrama as well. In later years, Willi vocalizes his yearning for a partner who is not emotionally and intellectually absent, which is how he perceives Betti. Oswald fears the absence of Maria as his lover. He repeatedly expresses his desperation and frustration. Oswald also experiences tension due to the absence of Maria as his lover. He wants Maria to love him fully, and he is insecure because Maria is emotionally absent. On the other hand, Hermann, who is loved by Maria, seems to regard her with great distance, almost as though he believes they are not married. Given Maria's actions, Hermann believes that she is living her life not for him, but for herself and an ideal marriage that did not survive the war. She betrays this marriage, her love for Hermann, with her affair with Oswald. Although she tells Oswald that she will not love him and she wants to be in control of their relationship, she is unknowingly anything but in charge of her situation.

Oswald, on the other hand, is clearly in love with Maria. He seems haunted by her apparent callousness to his feelings, and questions why she cannot love him. The character development for why Oswald should have such emotions for Maria is rather sketchy. The addition of such tensions at the expense of portraying the inner workings of Maria seeks to make a point about her life. Only at the end of the movie are we allowed to know that Oswald has in his own way, manipulated his affair with Maria. Maria can no longer lie to herself and believe that she is the one who has been having an affair with Oswald. Instead she finds out that she was never in control of her life. In buying Maria from Hermann, we kind of see that Hermann has lost touch with the meaning of love.

This film dramatically ends in death. During the real time ending, we hold our breath, hoping that Maria will remember having left the gas on. These last moments, which are the last moments of Maria's life, are tense. The radio drowns out the dialog. An announcer describes the German victory at the World Soccer Cup on July 4, 1954.

Either Maria is to be redeemed by her love, find new love, or be reunited with Hermann in a happy ending is what we expect from this kind of melodramatic movie. We expected Maria's character to be developed as the archetypal woman. A woman who carries her burdens with an inner strength, or one who finds an inner strength she did not know she had. We allow the movie to toy with our emotions because we feel comfortable that our anticipation of a happy ending will be met. This movie builds up our expectations and then disappoints them.

Melodrama literally means song drama or play with music. The soundtrack of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* is astounding, and is clearly used to play up the emotional disparities in the movie. In the opening scene, the sound is a very important element in this film as it is in a melodrama. In one of the scenes, Oswald plays a few bars of familiar classical music on the piano. These bars of code are repeated by the symphonic soundtrack and overcharge the scene with the mood of the symphony. This technique makes the audience clearly aware of the contrast between the beauty of the song and the ugliness of Maria's behavior in this particular scene. In the transitioning scene between Maria finding out from Willi that Hermann is dead, the song from the next scene at the bar, which is a jazzy number, infringes on the sadness of the film.

Fassbinder adds an additional dimension to this movie in that Maria Braun's life strongly parallels the economic life of Germany during the Reconstruction period. Maria moves through the world of Germany, highlighting different facets of that period. Her character portrays the fate of German women. Her economic rise from selling wedding dresses for food to managing a company was clearly a statement about the effects of Germany's "Economic Miracle Wonder." Fassbinder directed a film with many layers and dimensions carefully constructed to tell both the story of Maria Braun's marriage and the history that influenced German people from 1945 to the victory of the World Cup in 1954.