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Franz (Gunter Lamprecht) talks with his friend Meck (Franz Buchreiser) when he sees Lina (Elisabeth Trissenaar) for the first time.

Sheldon Film Theatre

Marathon film will endure forever

Review by Eric Peterson

Berlin Alexanderplatz, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 15½ hour serialized film, will always be one of the great works. Hundreds of students in future film classes will talk about how long and boring and depressing it is, and for thousands of others it will loom, becoming something too big and strong to quite take in.

The time and the characters of Alfred Döblin's novel are grisly. According to Peter Reinkordt, a scholar of German, real unemployment in Berlin was near 45 percent in 1928, and prostitution was extremely frequent in a city with many more women than men and most jobs closed to females. The people on the screen who move viewers so deeply are pimps and thieves and prostitutes — and there is a real separation between what characters do and the emotions they arouse.

That might be because of how the film looks. Although a sharp or a grainy texture would give a realistic feel to the film, Fassbinder chose to do it with subdued and mottled colors and a soft, hazy effect caused by the use of a Blue Angel filter, named after a picture made by Josef von Sternberg.

When Lina stands in the light of a window, the outer waves of her hair forming a lovely red halo, we don't think that she is an unstable wreck, but simply dwell on the soft beauty. The filming technique here becomes an emotional attitude and a consistent mood of sympathy. The conspicuous crosses and stars which appear in eyes, on teeth and doorknobs, really do add a kind of glamor. Pulsing light from neon signs makes the apartment of Franz Biberkopf, the main character, a place where the passions of blood and breathing rule, and the pulsing blue on the evil Reinhold's face is soft and terrifying.

Berlin Alexanderplatz is a film of motifs. Even the small floating images, like the funny looks that strangers give Franz or the letters which always bring bad news, have a powerful effect — and the big one, the connection between murder and sacrifice, is central to the film.

The film starts when Franz gets out of prison after a four year sentence for killing his girlfriend Ida. The scene of the murder is shown repeatedly, sometimes longer than other times, and from differing viewpoints. Ida starts to leave after a violent quarrel, and Franz pulls her back in. She screams, he puts his hand over her mouth, and she screams again. Franz hits her with a wooden utensil, smashing her ribs. She staggers back several steps, falls, and in an extraordinarily painful shot, her mouth opens in agony and fills with blood. He rushes over, drags her to another spot, and slaps her into the stiffness of death.

Fassbinder as narrator makes soft voice-overs, starting with the Newtonian law of momentum (the cream stirrer bashing into her chest) in two different formulations, an Abraham-Isaac dialogue which underlines the sacrifice image the scene becomes, and a troubled, haunting passage from a letter Ida wrote just before — the approach to Ida's murder seems to become less and less detached. The scene is so powerful that its tension fills every moment of another scene in which Franz comes to the edge of beating his wonderful lover Mieze to death in the same way and for the same jealous reasons.

In spite of his violence, Franz is an extraordinarily sympathetic character — perhaps because he has an almost childlike incomprehension of the evil forces stirring in the world and in himself. Gunter Lamprecht's characterization is amazingly convincing; Lamprecht's stupefied gape seems to express Franz in the space of one moment. Franz has a mysterious appeal to women. His landlady Frau Bast, a real sweetheart, says there's something special about him, an allure which may elude many viewers. Hanna Schygulla, a splendid actor who played in an astonishing 18 Fassbinder films, is Eva here, an old lover of Franz's who still loves him. Her role within the film, as the woman of strength and health that Franz could always turn to is weak and sentimental. Any character who can say "I'll always be here for you" has to be a little flabby. However, Schygulla's performance sends across a stirring strength and wit.

Franz has quite a literal Madonna-whore complex. Lina cradles her rosary and madonna figure, while his lover Mieze, his saintly lover, walks the street for him. Her real name is Sonia, the same as Dostoevsky's saintly prostitute whose sacrifice will redeem Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. She is "as gentle as a feather, and always a little serious, and he can never quite figure her out."

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