

THE FASSBINDER AFFAIR

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1. The historical context

For the Germans of the Federal Republic, the problem of integrating the memory of the Nazi era within collective self-perception remains an open and recurrently acute issue. Since the beginning of the eighties, a series of public debates have taken place, which seem to indicate a significant transformation of German collective memory as far as Nazism is concerned. Two contradictory tendencies, neither of which seems to indicate what representation of the Nazi era will be in Germany when the passage of time will have completed the transfer of this epoch from individual to collective memory, have emerged in the process of this transformation. These tendencies show its paradoxical dynamics, but not yet its result. On the one hand, a "yearning for normality" is perceptible at all levels of West German society, especially within the younger generation, and there is a wish to draw a "Schlussstrich", a "final line" over the constant recollection of Nazism. On the other hand, the past has returned more intensely than ever during the recent debates, and the very tendency implied by the "yearning for normality" to deny its absolute specificity has created, within some limited but influential circles, a new awareness of its uniqueness. Thus, the Bitburg ceremony was supposed to be the expression of some kind of general reconciliation with history. In fact, it was to unleash passionate statements from all sides of the Federal Republic about the significance of the Nazi past for present German identity; statements which had a "trigger action" for all the further debates. Then came the Fassbinder affair which this article will deal with. A controversy about the building of historical museums in Berlin and Bonn

and of a war memorial for the dead of the Second World War, also in Bonn, took place at the same time. Finally, the "Historikerstreit" crystallised most of the current opinions on an academic level, with the effect that the fronts are clearer now, that the issue is recognized to be a vital one for German self-understanding and, that Auschwitz, as a common metaphor for the whole of this past, seems to be more present than ever.

From another point of view, what has become apparent through all these controversies, seems to be the need for a new national identity in West Germany. It is shared by all political tendencies, as the search started on the left, in the late seventies, and was then taken over by the conservative liberal wing, after the "Wende" of 1982. For such a new identity, the reworking of the significance for German history as a whole of what was accepted until now to be the major event of the Nazi era, i.e. the extermination of the Jews, is essential, because, since the end of the war, Auschwitz has become a reference not only for State criminality, but for evil as such in all western societies. Much of the reworking on the symbolic level is generally done by the arts, and that is why, of all recent debates, the Fassbinder affair was perhaps the most interesting one. The controversy arose from a theatre play which was considered, by its author and by its critics, as a work of art, be it a poor one, and it involved a much broader spectrum of West German society than, for instance, the "Historikerstreit". As our analysis will show, it dealt with a whole set of intertwined issues, ranging from the problem of freedom of art to that of moral responsibility in history. It took place at the same time on an abstract, theoretical level, where the argument tended to be philosophical; on a practical level, where it implied action and reaction; and on the level of its political exploitation, where both were used as a weapon for other ends. Its chronology goes right back to the seventies and gives an insight into the evolution of the position of the different age groups toward the Nazi past, especially that of the older generation and

that of the rebellious sons of the sixties to which Fassbinder belonged. Thus, on the one hand, the Fassbinder affair is one of memory, of the relationship of generations and the sense of moral responsibilities; on the other hand, it is a political affair. For this reason, in each case a manifest discourse covers various latent meanings: our attention will be directed to both, but more specifically to the latent level than to the manifest one, which we will but describe.

The social groups directly or indirectly involved in the affair were manifold and represent, on an official level, the major spokesmen of German society:

- First of all, the political circles: the city administration of Frankfurt with its conservative (CDU) mayor Walter Wallmann, since June 1986 first Federal Minister of the Environment "*Umweltminister*" in Bonn, then Prime Minister ("*Ministerpräsident*") of the federal "Land" of Hesse; the cultural deputy ("*Kulturdezernent*") Hilmar Hoffmann (SPD); the City Parliament, where the Fassbinder affair was discussed; and all political parties which took up a position on the question;
- the press, that adopted the affair to fight its own war;
- the Churches, using it to settle their own accounts with the past;
- the banks and the big businesses whose speculations in the Frankfurt quarter of the "*Westend*" were one of the major issues of the controversy;
- the Law, as the affair was brought to the Frankfurt Office of the District Attorney ("*Staatsanwaltschaft Frankfurt*");
- the publishers, one important publishing house having withdrawn Fassbinder's play from the market, a smaller one having taken it over;
- the world of the theatre;
- the German Jewish Community;
- Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals taking positions in the controversy.

No other affair in post-war Germany involved such a wide range of social groups in a question directly linked to the core of Nazi ideology, i.e. the problem of anti-Semitism. It implied constant references to the Shoah and its meaning for present day Germany. The way this catastrophe was perceived by the different groups and individuals shows a definite breakdown of what might be considered a general consensus about the moral responsibility of the Germans, even by the generations too young to have taken part in it, which had determined the political climate in the Federal Republic since 1945. It is now being replaced by a new discourse about Nazism which we will try to elaborate as the latent meaning of some of the manifest statements. Since the Fassbinder affair, this discourse has been openly defined on the intellectual scene, especially during the "*Historikerstreit*", but, as will be seen, it has been present within deeper layers of West German society for a long time. The affair shows its gradual unfolding, and that gives it its peculiar significance. It shows that a community of values is breaking down, and a new mode of perception of the past is changing the landscape of German memory.

2. Fiction and reality: Fassbinder's play and the speculations in the "Westend"

From the beginning to the mid-seventies, real-estate speculations changed the "*Westend*" of Frankfurt from a residential district to commercial quarter. Having been one of the few remaining beautiful districts of the city, which a wild and not always lawful urbanism had transformed into one of the coldest and most uninhabitable towns of the Federal Republic, these speculations generated a good deal of public opposition. There were some Jews active in the real estate business, but the attention which they drew

upon themselves was disproportionate to their number. The German enterprises, who had the major part in the speculations, profited from the fact that they could pursue their activities unimpeded, as most of the opposition was directed against the Jewish speculators. The matter was broadly discussed in the local press, and already then, parallels were drawn that should have indicated that something essential was changing in German society.¹

People were insisting on the fact that the Jews, who used to live in the "Westend" before the war, were now demolishing it.

*"At that time, people in the tramway who were passing by the excavators and the building sites at the Bockenheimer Landstrasse would grumble 'The Jews are back again!', and at the fences one could read some anti-Semitic slogans. Names like Buchmann, Selmi and Bubis became famous. When fire broke out in the Selmi skyscraper at the Platz der Republik, people were looking and rejoicing that the house of the Jew was burning."*²

Selmi was not a Jew; he was Iranian. But Ignatz Bubis is Jewish, and in 1985 he was even the chairman of the Jewish Community of Frankfurt and one of the protagonist of the Fassbinder affair. Although he possessed only a single house in the *Westend*, already in the seventies his name was known by everybody, because his house was squatted by a

¹ See the weekly "Die Zeit", the articles of Ulrich Greiner, November 1st, 1985, "Der Jude von Frankfurt"; of Gunter Hofmann, 15. 11. 1985, "Hinter den Fassaden von Mainhattan"; and "Der Spiegel" of November 11, 1985.

² Ulrich Greiner, "Die Zeit", 1. 11. 1985.

group of leftwing students headed by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. In a discussion with Bubis, organized by the weekly *"Der Spiegel"*, the "Red Dany" admitted:

"You really had no luck to possess the house that was squatted by the group that was politically the most active of all. Your house provoked the fiercest discussions..."

Ignatz Bubis was to become the prototype for a character called "the Rich Jew" in Fassbinder's play *"Garbage, the City and Death"* (*Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod*). This play, which was at the origin of the whole affair, was written by Fassbinder in 1975, and was never performed before the film director's death in 1982, at the age of 36, of alcohol and drug abuse. The author had drawn his inspiration from Gerhard Zwerenz's novel *"The Earth is as uninhabitable as the Moon"* (*Die Erde ist unbewohnbar wie der Mond*) published in 1973, one year after his first book about the Frankfurt real-estate speculations, *"Report from the Countryside"* (*Bericht aus dem Landesinneren*). Zwerenz was also, together with Fassbinder, the co-author of the script for the subsequent film on the same subject, *"Der Schatten der Engel"* (*The Shadow of the Angel*), director Daniel Schmid, first shown in 1976 with Fassbinder playing one of the main parts, the role of the homosexual, Fassbinder being the new victim, the victim of the victim, i.e. the victim of the Jew. It is worth while analysing the position of the two men, Zwerenz and Fassbinder, who are both representative of significant ideological currents for two German generations.

Gerhard Zwerenz belongs to the generation whose men had been soldiers during the Second World War. He was an opponent of the Nazi regime and a deserter. In his vision, the only pertinent opposition in life is the political one between right and left. He is a pacifist, a socialist, a moralist, an intellectual, the typically German version of what was called

in the sixties *"ein alter Sozi"*, a mixture of humanism and ideological blindness. In his view, left anti-Semitism is impossible, *a contradictio in objecto*. He has the firm belief that he and his peers are the last fighters for equality and brotherhood, and because of this immune to any kind of anti-Jewish prejudice, that are to him a prerogative of the Right:

"The reason why I was so hurt by the reproach of anti-Semitism formulated by the *"FAZ"*³ is that it insinuates, that we are suffering from the same incurable mental defect which the German Nationalists were born with. Alright, comrades, you may insult us, but not by attributing us your own unfathomable stupidities."⁴

Zwerenz does not seem to be aware of the fact that, in his novel, he himself conveys a very ambiguous image of the Jew, full of age old clichés: his Jew is rich, vigorous, unscrupulous, lascivious and, of course, melancholic because he is a stranger on earth, *nah va nad* in Hebrew. As he is meant to be a type as much as a character, he is called Abraham, "whom we all descend from".⁵

Zwerenz describes how he had first intended to write a novel about a German speculator, but, not being convinced by his own character, eventually turned to a Jewish one:

"In the beginning, the first hundred pages of the "Earth-novel" dealt with a little social democrat who develops into a great speculator. (...) But this man was only pale and boring, contrary to the real-estate jugglers of Frankfurt, to whom I responded with confused and mixed reactions: their impudent "Manchester"-capitalism provoked

³ The daily *"Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung"*

⁴ Gerhard Zwerenz, "Müll-Stück", *"TAZ"*, 26. 10. 1985.

⁵ Ibid.

my anti-capitalistic wrath, their energy and their subtlety fascinated me, and their past as persecutees of the Third Reich brought them near to me; as a deserter, had I not endured the same kind of dangers?"

This kind of amalgam is typical of the total lack of understanding for the specificity of the Jewish situation under the Nazis, which characterizes many leftwing German intellectuals. The fate of a deserter is the same in every war: if caught, he is shot. This has really nothing to do with the systematic annihilation of Jews in the gas chambers. Zwerenz continues with an even more astonishing parallel:

"Oh, as human beings they were like brothers to me, and when one got to know them, they proved to be colorful characters with much imagination in their hearts and even more dreams in their heads. I had the same feeling towards them as towards the old, mighty communists of the GDR, who had been in penitentiaries and concentration camps and drew from this fact the legitimation never to be victims again. Thus the ones who had been incarcerated were now incarcerating; who had been oppressed and persecuted were now persecuting. My real-estate sharks from Frankfurt had many similarities with the Eastern comrades. The only difference was that they did not look for protection in bare, direct power, but in money and capital. Being divided between admiration and social disapprobation, I found my way out by writing a book, which had a thousand characters, but the main part was held by Abraham, the vigorous, invincible speculator. We all descend from Abraham, and I could not do the favor to my left friends of presenting a book with crystal-clear class oppositions. Abraham became a human being as you and I, but stronger, and more colorful, more vulnerable and more

*energetic. And also more lascivious, more melancholic, more tender and with more imagination."*⁶

□□

Everybody who has any familiarity with the arsenal of anti-Jewish clichés in Western imagination will recognize them here. The point is that Zwerenz draws upon them at the very moment he tries to be impartial, original, and free of social prejudice. This is true of a whole generation of German leftwing intellectuals who admit the Jews as long as they are free of all Jewish "particularism".

*"When I recall the last decades, I can remember many Jewish intellectuals, but none of them belonged to a Jewish community, they all felt like strangers towards this institution, it was even one of their principles in life to become emancipated from it. With friends we were used to not caring for matters of faith, origin and tradition. We simply forgot them. To be a Jew or not was as unimportant to us as any other question of faith. Maybe we did not understand that the type of our Jewish intellectual friends from the Weimar era was dying out."*⁷

In this, Zwerenz is totally right. Unfortunately, for his milieu and generation, this Jewish type is the only one they understand, because it is the only one they know. Any kind of Jewish specificity is to blame in their view, and that is why they become critical even if one talks about a specifically Jewish death:

"We are used to provoking rich and mighty non-Jews in that way. But we don't like to ask questions of a rich Jew, because Germany has become guilty of the Jews because of the murder of six million

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

of them. But we simply forget, that Nazi Germany also killed twenty million Soviet citizens, not to mention other suffering peoples."

The ideology of Zwerenz's point of view is particularly clear in this statement. Although he was an opponent to the Nazi regime, he does not seem to understand that the Jews were not just victims among other victims in the Hitler era, but that their annihilation was at the very core of the Nazi ideology, something indispensable for the regime's self-perception and for our understanding of it. Zwerenz views Nazism in terms of fascism only, i.e. an ideology that fits into the categories of right and left. The idea that the Shoah was *"some radical evil, previously unknown to us"*⁸ is not acceptable to him. For him Auschwitz is just a tougher version of other concentration camps, it is a by-product, not the essence of the regime⁹.

According to his own definition, Fassbinder's position is less innocent, far more ambiguous, made of fascination and resentment. His generation does not even know the type of the Weimar Jewish intellectual; it does not know any Jews at all.

"Perhaps I am playing with fire," Fassbinder told "Newsweek" in 1976, "but Jews should be more discussed in Germany. So little is known about them here that many in my generation can only guess about them. This ignorant guessing is just as wrong as open hostility. Using the old cliché of a money-grubbing Jew as a shock

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, Deutsch, London 1986, p. 438.

⁹ See the end of the article in the *"TAZ"*, loc. cit., Zwerenz is an utopist and a fighter, his enemy has a clear-cut complexion and a social definition. Jewish fate does not fit into this kind of *"Weltbild"*.

*effect is a good way to set off a discussion particularly over a hushed-up subject like this."*¹⁰

What kind of discussion should originate from the above-mentioned cliché is difficult to imagine in postwar Germany. Fassbinder's resentment must be quite profound if the only alternative concerning a possible attitude towards the Jews he seems to imagine is that of *ignorant guessing* and *open hostility*. The following statement gives an idea of the psychological roots of his position:

*"Theater plays are always spontaneous reactions to some kind of reality and this play is a spontaneous reaction to a reality I was confronted with in Frankfurt. I think that the constant putting under taboo of Jews, which exists in Germany since 1945, can produce anti-Jewish reactions, especially among young people who have no direct experiences with Jews. When I met a Jew as a child, I was always told behind the hand: 'This is a Jew, behave yourself, be kind.' With some variations this continued till I was twenty-eight and wrote this play."*¹¹

Fassbinder, who was the "enfant terrible" among the young German film directors, did not like to be told to behave himself. In order to counter accusations of anti-Semitism which the play created, Fassbinder wrote an open letter in 1976:

"He (the Rich Jew) only carries out the plans conceived by others, but the realization of which one leaves, consequently,

¹⁰ Quoted in "Newsweek", 11. 11. 1985.

¹¹ Interview of Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the weekly "Die Zeit", 9. 4. 1976.

to somebody who seems untouchable because he is under taboo. The place where this can be observed in reality is Frankfurt-upon-Main. The thing itself is nothing but a repetition on another level of the conditions of the 18th century, when only Jews were authorized to make financial transactions and these transactions, (that constituted the only possibility for the Jews to survive) eventually provided arguments against them, for use by those who had forced the Jews to do the job, and who were their real enemies. The same thing here: the City has the pretended necessary dirty work done by a tabooed Jew, which is particularly infamous; for Jews are under taboo since 1945, and that will lead to reactions. I think everybody agrees that taboos give rise to fear of the dark and mysterious thing that is put under a taboo, which finally provokes hostility. To put it another way: those who are against a clarification of these facts are the true anti-Semites, the ones whose motives should be examined more closely. (...) Of course there are anti-Semites in this play. Unfortunately, they exist not only in the play, but also, for instance, in Frankfurt. I think it is unnecessary to say that these people do not reflect the author's opinion, whose attitude towards minorities should be clear from his previous works. But the hysterical voices in the discussion about this play confirm my fear of a new anti-Semitism, out of which I wrote this play."

Whether it was really the fear of a new anti-Semitism that motivated Fassbinder to write *Garbage, the City and Death* becomes doubtful if one examines the play thoroughly. Is this rich Jew, who does not even have a name; this unscrupulous, potent stranger who kills the prostitute he loves and talks in a totally artificial language about life and loneliness really a "reflection of reality"? In long and, for a businessman, rather hazy tirades,

he

explains that *"the system"* or *"the city is responsible for everything"*.

"I buy up old houses in this city, tear them down, build new ones and sell them at a good profit. The city protects me. They have to. I'm Jewish." (..) "It must be indifferent to me if children cry, if the old and decrepit suffer. I must not care."

As Ignatz Bubis put it ten years later in the controversy, the strangulation of prostitutes was not among his habits. As for the *"reflection of reality"*, the same doubts arise when examining the other characters of the play: the beautiful, tubercular whore Roma B., who rises from the pavement of her profession to the top by becoming the Jew's kept woman, rich now, but unhappy, and with a vocation to be a saint. As she explains in a monologue to God, she wants *"to sacrifice herself, on behalf of the City that needs victims in order to feel alive."* Similarly her pimp, becoming homosexual out of despair, because Roma gave herself to the Jew, and eventually being murdered with the consent of the President of the Police in order to cover the Jew's crime (the pitiful strangulation of the prostitute - on her demand). There are also the old and the new Nazi: the old one is Roma's father, who works as a singing transvestite in a nightclub. Her mother is a cripple in a wheelchair, undressed on the stage by her husband who wants to disguise himself as a woman. The new Nazi is Hans von Gluck, one of Roma's customers and perhaps the personification of Fassbinder's "fear of a new anti-Semitism":

"He sucks us dry, the Jew. He drinks our blood and puts us in the wrong because he is a Jew and we bear the guilt. (...) If he had remained where he came from or if they had gassed him, I could

sleep better now. They forgot to gas him. That's not a joke. That's how it thinks in me."

In German, *"es denkt in mir"* is as alarming and absurd as it is in English. Does Fassbinder mean that two thousand years of anti-Semitism *"think"* within / or by the means of Hans von Gluck? And where else can *"it"* think like this? Is this really a way to show a young German public, that *"has no direct experiences with Jews"*, the dangers of new anti-Semitism?

The message of the play is not clear. The critics talked of violence and expressionism, and of fantasies of apocalyptic destruction. There were not many who really tried to claim a high artistic value, which would have been difficult to maintain. But quite a number pretended that it was not anti-Semitic, and this is an important point to stress, because it shows what happens to anti-Semitism when there are no Jews any more: the small German Jewish community has no impact whatsoever on the life of the Federal Republic. Ten years after *"Garbage ..."* was written, when the Fassbinder affair was at its peak in November 1985, there was only one paper, the *"Süddeutsche Zeitung"*, where the analysis of the prejudices the play conveyed went beyond the quotation of some anti-Jewish sentences and showed a real understanding of the phenomenon. It is certainly not by chance that the author of the article is Jewish.

"The question is not one of intention, but of function - more exactly, we should ask: what kind of role plays the anonymous (archetypal?) "rich Jew"? What qualities is he supposed to have? What kind of associations and resentments provoke the sentences the author has put into the mouth of his characters? (...) There are three elements present all over the play: stereotype, demonisation and defamation. (...) (Fassbinder's Jew) shows a frightening potency just in the classical fields of anti-Semitic demonology. The prostitute Roma can

*report on his "extraordinary" sexuality. (...) His deadly sin is not what he does, but what he is. (..) It is difficult to find a "better" defamation of the Jew than being "existentially guilty."*¹²□

Those who maintain - and there is no doubt of their sincerity - that Fassbinder's play is not anti-Semitic show that they have become so unfamiliar with the phenomenon that they do not even recognize it any more; which does not mean that they are free from prejudice. As we are going to see more clearly during the process of our analysis, anti-Semitism in Germany today has become in great part subconscious, especially when it comes from the Left. We shall insist on this point because it is not easy to grasp: sometimes good intentions disguise ugly feelings.

When Fassbinder wrote his play, he was the director of the Frankfurt theater TAT (*Theater am Turm*). A discussion about "*Garbage...*" arose in the ensemble that divided the cast and finally led to its dissolution; Fassbinder withdrew from the theater and devoted himself to the script of "*The Shadow of the Angel*"; clearly it was not the subject he had lost interest in! Zwerenz proved his good intentions by trying to mitigate the impression of Fassbinder's "Rich Jew" by calling him "Rich poor Jew":

*"When the rehearsals started at the TAT, I suggested to the directing RWF to correct his name into "rich poor Jew", for even the richest Jew is a poor Jew because of the persecutions under the Third Reich. But my suggestion was lost in the chaos where the Fassbinder group of the TAT got lost too."*¹³□

¹² Josef Joffe, "Die Süddeutsche Zeitung", 5. 11. 1988.

¹³ Gerhard Zwerenz, "Müll-Stück", "TAZ", 26. 10. 1985.

Zwerenz fails to notice that his suggestion is not exactly an amelioration. His Jew is no more of a person than Fassbinder's; he also has no name, he is a type. But the association of poor and rich is even worse than the old cliché of the rich Jew, because it gives a weird idea of what persecutees of the Third Reich looked like and what they had become. This lack of sensibility is not to be mistaken for conscious anti-Semitism. It is an inability to *perceive* the problem, inability which has its roots more in an abstract, ideological shape of mind than in inherited convictions.

3. The affair: first round

The same thing cannot be said of Joachim Fest, author of the well-known Hitler biography published in 1973, and instigator of the whole affair as far as its political character is concerned. Fest's book, and even more so the film that had been made of it with his collaboration, had been widely criticized for being too sympathetic to its hero. Out of the several hundred pages of his book, only four had been devoted to the extermination of the Jews, and this under the Nazi designation "Final Solution", without quotation marks. Fassbinder's play was a welcome opportunity for Fest to reconfirm his (previous) image of a conservative German with a sense for historical responsibilities. In the daily "FAZ" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), the coeditor of which he had become some time before, he wrote two articles about the problem of left anti-Semitism that caught a lot of attention. The political definition of the problem and the aggressiveness of his tone were to determine the character of the whole affair in its first as well as in its second "round". It is not without interest to note that ten years later, during the "*Historikerstreit*", Fest was to defend the apologetic tendencies of Ernst Nolte. Without doubt, anti-Semitism from the Right seems to be much more bearable to him than anti-Semitism from the Left. In his first article about "Garbage, the City

and Death", called

"*Reicher Jude von links*" ("Rich Jew from the Left"), he stated:

"Whatever shape left fascism may have had in our society, up to now it has been more or less free from anti-Semitic feelings. It was only the anti-Israeli policy of the Soviet Union, unscrupulously mobilizing anti-Semitic emotions, that gave the Left in the Federal Republic the feeling that anti-Semitism is an element of World Revolution and has nothing to do with the Jew hatred of the Third Reich. That allows Left anti-Semitism a good conscience. Besides, the anti-Semitism of Fassbinder's play seems to be more a matter of tactic and radical chic than one of resentment. Maybe one of the motives for it is the fact, that for a long time now the Left no longer has a suggestive antagonistic image (Feindbild). But it needs the figure of a concrete enemy in order to compensate the by now well proven feeble appeal of its own ideology. For the first time, this is again the "Rich Jew". Another reason may finally be seen in the desire of the younger generation to show itself unembarrassed in front of the whole world, not to recognize any taboos, to face the horror cynically. In the hangman's house the sons like to speak casually of the rope."¹⁴

In the same article Fest warned Suhrkamp, one of West Germany's biggest publishing houses, not to compromise itself by sponsoring a play like this. Speedily Suhrkamp withdrew the play from the market. At the same time, the "Filmförderungsanstalt"¹⁵ refused to grant a credit to Fassbinder's and Zwerenz's script of *"The Shadow of the Angels"*. When the film came out in Paris, many well-known critics, among them the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, celebrated its somber aesthetics and

¹⁴ Joachim Fest, "Reicher Jude von links", "FAZ", 19. 3. 1976.

¹⁵ German institution that grants credits to scripts or films.

expressionistic desolation and denied that it was anti-Semitic.

From 1976 to 1985, seven attempts were made to stage Fassbinder's play: two in the city supported *"Städtischen Schauspiel"* repertory theater of Frankfurt directed by Peter Palitzsch, and another one with Palitzsch as stage manager; one by Wilfried Minsk, one by Johannes Schaaf and one by Adolf Dresen. In 1984, Ulrich Schwab, the director of the "Alten Oper" in Frankfurt lost his job in another attempt to perform the play. In every case, it was blocked by the city authorities to avoid an anti-Semitic slant. If one takes into account the fact that the artistic value of *"Garbage..."* is admittedly not extraordinary, the determination of so many stage directors to put the play on stage is quite astonishing. Did they enjoy the idea of the scandal the play would provoke? Did they hope to fill their theaters? Or were they really convinced by the text, by its aesthetics and by the message it conveyed? Fassbinder's aesthetics are not to everybody's taste, but appeal to and fascinate a broad and often cultivated public across the boards. There is no reason to think that the directors who recommended the play were not impressed by it. Consequently, the problem is not one of aesthetic judgment but one of content.

This content is not harmless. *"Garbage, the City and Death"* was the first West German play since World War Two to present a negative portrait of a Jew and to talk of the Holocaust in a detached manner, by showing on a German stage an anti-Semite who claims that one forgot to gas this Jew. Since the end of the War, the extermination of the Jews of Europe by the Nazis had been perceived by the Germans of the Federal Republic as a major catastrophe

that compromised their identity in the past and in the present. In Western imagination, it had become the prototype of Evil. It was weighed as something unprecedented, not so much in the sense of the not yet seen or known, but because it escapes the normal moral categories inherent to our society. The “*systematic production of corpses*” that was, according to Hannah Arendt, the very core of the system, is the transgression of a taboo for which we have no conceptual framework. The Shoah

*"became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive."*¹⁶

Thus, its significance is not only historical, but also symbolical: it is a subject one cannot be neutral about, a theme that cannot be represented in any haphazard way. This means that the subject itself seems to impose limits on aesthetisation. These limits had never been clearly defined, but for a long time they were respected in a kind of silent consensus. By treating his subject the way he did, Fassbinder was, for the first time since the war, going beyond these limits. The slow unfolding of the affair – ten years between the time it was written and the theater scandal in Frankfurt – shows that this was by no means accepted as something natural by the intellectual opinion of the Federal Republic, or as something that had to happen any way, and the strong reactions it provoked proved that the problem touched deep layers of public consciousness. But the fact that there were so many attempts to stage the play and that in 1985, “*Garbage...*” found so many advocates, indicates that, during this decade, important changes were taking place in Germany as far as the perception of the past is concerned.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism*”, *loc. cit.*, p. 459.

4. The Fassbinder affair in Frankfurt

In 1985, Günther Rühle, who had been the editor of the cultural section of the "FAZ" and consequently one of Fest's closest collaborators, was named manager of Frankfurt's city supported repertory theaters. During the previous flare-up of the affair in 1984, when it had already become the subject of all German newspapers, Rühle had judged "Garbage..." as a play without any artistic value. But in April 1985, his intention became known to open the season precisely with Fassbinder's play. His argument, that remained identical during the whole affair, was that he was opposed to any censorship of art. The "FAZ" was the first paper to react:

"Only an ignoramus can reproach the city of Frankfurt of censorship. Our former colleague Günther Rühle should know that nobody called for censorship, neither the city of Frankfurt nor anybody else. The city is not opposed to the fact that Fassbinder's play is performed here. But for good reasons many are opposed to the idea that public funds should finance its performance. If Frankfurt is a liberal city, this is mainly due to its Jews, who have been banished and murdered. The main character in Fassbinder's play is the anonymous "Rich Jew"; this does not designate a single bad Jew, it is the "Rich Jew" as a type, an old figure of anti-Semitic agitation. Not to spend any tax money on this is the least the city of Frankfurt should do for its Jewish citizens."¹⁷

This opinion was repeatedly expressed by single individuals of almost all political groups, and by independent intellectuals. The above quotation gives a good idea of the theoretical level of the discussion.

¹⁷ "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" ("FAZ"), cultural section, 25. 4. 1985.

Significantly enough, this simple argument was never refuted in a satisfactory way, i.e. by a reasoning that would have taken the same starting point, but would have come to an opposite conclusion. The counterarguments were all formulated on another level, and were soon bypassed by an all embracing political discourse that aimed at disarming the enemy and made use of the whole issue for its own polemical ends. As a matter of fact, the affair was discussed in the Frankfurt City Parliament by the conservative mayor Walter Wallmann (CDU) as early as July, four months before the opening of the theater season. Another discussion took place in October. One year before, the parliament had already examined the expediency to stage Fassbinder's play within the framework of the Frankfurt summer festival "*Frankfurter Feste*". The performance was to take place in an underground station near the old Opera. Its director Ulrich Schwab, who had put his whole weight into defending the play, had to resign. In 1985, Schwab supported Rühle actively during the whole affair.

The positions of the different political parties did not evolve very much from 1984 to 1985, especially in the conservative liberal wing (CDU / FDP). The two parties behaved as Germany's good conscience, aware of their historical responsibilities and visibly fond of their role as defenders of the Jewish minority. Thus, mayor Walter Wallmann (CDU) declared repeatedly:

"We have a special obligation to protect our Jewish citizens and turn away from them injury and affliction of the soul."¹⁸

The conservatives and liberals were definitely against the staging of Fassbinder's play, first, because they did not want incur the risk of appearing as anti-Semites, either in their own eyes or in the eyes of the

¹⁸ FAZ, local section, 7. 7. 1985.

world, and secondly, because Fassbinder represented in his convictions, as much as in his way of life, a negation of their highest values. In this affair, the conservatives - and this means not only the political parties but also the whole German establishment, from the banks to the Churches and the rightwing press - apparently hoped to settle two very different problems. On the one hand, they used the controversy in their every day fight against the Left, which was relatively easy, because being on the side of the Jews, they had the better starting point for an attack. On the other hand, they seemed to consider this affair as a good opportunity to demonstrate that they, at least, had learned from the past: it was the Christian, and not the National component of their sensibility that was at stake here. The essence of their discourse was that Germany had become guilty of the Jews, but that it had repented its crimes. The word "reconciliation" was uttered repeatedly, but nobody seemed to be aware of the fact that this is something only the Jews can want or initiate. The Christian scheme of crime and expiation is the underlying mobile of this discourse; some of its keywords are *"historical responsibility"*, *"Left anti-Semitism"*, *"reconciliation"* and the very German *"Vergangenheitsbewältigung"*, the fact of coming to terms with the past. All these expressions tend to deny that the Nazi past might be something one cannot cope with, something insuperable; they are full of good conscience, at ease where nobody is at ease, and this very fact makes them appear shallow.

The strategy of the CDU in this affair was the following: in the parliamentary session of October 1985, it brought forward a motion to condemn the play. The *"FAZ"* reported its content:

"Because of everything that happened from 1933 to 1945 in the name of Germany, because of everything that is associated with the name of Auschwitz, we Germans cannot permit ourselves the slightest misunderstanding. The only reason for the persecutions,

humiliations, robberies and the murder of members of a certain group of citizens in the Nazi era was the fact that these persons were of Jewish origin, the CDU motion said. Stupid and mean clichés as, for example, "bloodsucker of World Capitalism" were used to create a climate permitting the worst crimes against people of all groups of professions, income and age. Fassbinder's play uses the same dangerous methods of generalization, the parliamentary conservative party stated."¹⁹

Nevertheless, this strong condemnation did not have any practical consequences. When the Socialists (SPD) decided to side with the other party and to defend Rühle, the affair shifted from the moral to an almost exclusively political level, where it was to remain as far as the political parties were concerned. Thus the SPD reproached the CDU for putting Rühle *"massively under pressure"*. As Günter Dürr, the chairman of the parliamentary socialist party in Frankfurt said, this attitude *"was aimed at undermining the freedom of art guaranteed by the "Grundgesetz"*.²⁰

The CDU reacted immediately. Mayor Wallmann declared *"that he had no intention whatsoever of preventing the play from being staged. On the contrary, he insisted upon the fact that he was not entitled to intervene in the programming of the repertory theater and did by no means ask to do so."*²¹

He actually never did, and so the CDU found a very suitable balance by taking refuge behind an irreproachable legalism: on the one hand the

¹⁹ FAZ, 11. 9. 1985.

²⁰ The *"fundamental Law"*, substitute for a constitution in the FRG. "FAZ", 9. 8. 1985.

²¹ Ibid.

party had proved its concern for the Jewish interests, on the other hand it showed respect for Law and Democracy.

The SPD was in a much less comfortable position. When the debate became political, it had to profile itself as a Leftwing party. It could not simply denounce the anti-Semitism of Fassbinder's play as the CDU had already done so. The problem was complicated even more by the fact that Fest had given the tone of the controversy by taking the opportunity to attack "*Left wing anti-Semitism*" in "*Garbage...*". The whole German Left had reacted violently to Fest's invective. This accusation had come from the wrong side and, as it had been directed more against them as a political family than against Fassbinder himself, (who was personally rather an anarchist), the reaction was quite unanimous: Fest was not the one to give the German Left Wing lessons about a suitable attitude towards minorities. Thus the play was declared to be free of anti-Semitism, from the simple conclusion that somebody like Fassbinder, who had defended the Turks and the homosexuals, could not be anti-Semitic. This is not so much an expression of opportunism as that of a very special sensibility: the lack of historical insight, that does not see anything more to anti-Semitism than an intolerant attitude towards minorities, is quite typical of postwar German Leftism. Nevertheless, in a deeper layer of the Left discourse one can perceive a kind of anger not to be free from the past, although the Left had been opposed to Nazism and had suffered from it, and a resentment that was directed - unconsciously, as I believe - against the Jews as the ones to whom this fact is due. This is the reason why so many Left spokesmen stated that it was dangerous to put "*the Jews under taboo*": a taboo was for them the sign that things were not yet in order, and the "*neue Unbefangenheit*", the "*new ease*" they claimed when dealing with problems related to the Holocaust was but a proof of their uneasiness. An analysis of the Left discourse shows that its keywords are freedom of art, censorship, *autodafé*, catharsis (which the staging of "*Garbage...*" was to provoke); normalization (of the relations to the Jews),

taboo (breaking of..); philosemitism, meant as an insult; and power struggle of the Right.

The evocation of an *autodafé* indicates the hysterical tonality that characterized the whole Fassbinder affair. "*Wehret den Anfängen*", "*protest against the beginnings*" was the slogan of the Left, referring to the Nazi persecution of modern art. It was not difficult to demonstrate that this was an unfitting parallel. The Nazi *autodafé* of "*entartete Kunst*" was by no means comparable to the fact that one did not want to spend tax money to stage an anti-Semitic play. In the Federal Republic of 1985, there was no situation of persecution, and even the keenest eye would have had difficulties in discerning a new totalitarian menace in the protests against "*Garbage, the City and Death*". Strangely enough, the artificiality of the argument was barely exploited by the Right. In a way, the uneasiness in respect to the Nazi past was so general and so overwhelming that free reasoning seemed to be impeded by the anxiety not to be confounded with any of the past excesses, and humour was totally absent from the debate.

This dilemma was particularly clear in the attitude of the SPD, which was hesitating over the controversy. The Socialist Party did not want to appear less conscious of the historical responsibilities of Germany towards the Jews than the CDU. On the other hand, it feared the reproach of censorship and refused to be dissociated from the Left Wing's fight for freedom of art and expression. In the parliamentary debate of 1984, the party voted against the performance of Fassbinder's play. In 1985, the controversy had become so clearly political that there was not a single voice left within the socialist parliamentary party to denounce its anti-Semitism. It was only stated that a public discussion should take place at the same time as the performance in order to avoid any misinterpretation. The cultural deputy (Kulturdezenent) of Frankfurt

was, at that time, the SPD-member Hilmar Hoffmann, whose positions were backed up by the party. Chairman Dürr stated in August 1985:

*"The Parliamentary Socialist Party supports the attitude of the cultural deputy and opposes firmly the attempts of the CDU to put both him and Rühle under pressure."*²²

The Liberal Party, allied with the conservatives but still trying to prove its independence, stated not without satisfaction, that the official controversy was being overridden by a controversy between the conservative mayor Wallmann and the socialist cultural deputy. In the parliamentary debate of October 1985, Hoffmann had declared

*"that there existed, on principle, no censorship in Frankfurt. He added that freedom of art was a fundamental right. This was the lesson to be drawn from the terrible experiences of the German people during the Nazi era and a necessary consequence of the persecution of German intellectuals and artists under the Third Reich, many of whom had been Jewish."*²³

In another statement, Hoffmann compared anti-Semitism to censorship:

*"Is not censorship worse than anti-Semitism? Does not censorship stimulate anti-Semitism?"*²⁴

The extermination of the Jews of Europe seems to have become quite a remote phenomenon in this kind of discourse.

²² FAZ, 9. 8. 1985.

²³ FAZ, 14. 9. 1985.

²⁴ Frankfurter Rundschau, 16. 9. 1985

The attitude of the green ecologist party was even more radical than this. The women, especially, were active in defending the play and attacking the German establishment that, according to them, defended the Jews for inappropriate reasons: Jutta Ditfurth denounced the reigning opportunism towards the Jewish Community. Such an attitude was the *"ideal ground for censorship, she said. (...) Censorship had no justification in Democracy, Ms. Ditfurth stated; and asked if a play would also be withdrawn on the demand of the Turkish government or a women's group."*²⁵

In 1985, Chairman Tom Koenigs proved to be more moderate. He admitted that his party was divided in the appreciation of the whole affair: "Tom Koenigs declared, on behalf of the ecologists, that his parliamentary party had discussed the play and the forthcoming performance at great length, but had come to no conclusion. The ecologist's motion represented the smallest common denominator, he said. 'As for the rest, everybody speaks for himself.' According to Koenigs, the play touches upon delicate problems such as, for example, the German anti-Semitic tradition or the "Westend" speculation of the sixties and seventies with its pitiless alienation of living space and the depopulation of a whole quarter of the City by the speculators. Fassbinder had put his finger on an open sore. Koenigs recalled the fact that not only the SPD, that had been governing at that time, had participated in the speculation, *"but also the CDU and other respectable groups of the City, and the whole High House here."*²⁶

²⁵ "FAZ", 7. 7. 1984.

²⁶ "FAZ", 7. 7. 1984.

Koenigs was the only one to refer to the problem of generations in the appraisal of the debate. This is actually an important issue that was going to play a role in further controversies. It hints about the passage of time and the subterranean changes in the evaluation of historical events or whole epochs:

"Maybe my generation lacks sensibility for the phenomenon of anti-Semitism when Fassbinder's name is pronounced. We believe that the oppressive reactionary tradition of anti-Semitism ceased to exist with the postwar generation to which Fassbinder had also belonged."

Addressing the "established" politicians, he added:

"On the other hand, you don't share our sensibility for speculators and profiteering."²⁷

In another interview, he came back to the problem of the Leftwing sensibility regarding Jews and anti-Semitism. He was asked:

"Was there any anti-Semitism in the protest movement of Left Wing students against the speculations?" – "No", answered Koenigs, "but there was a lack of sensibility concerning this subject. We were totally ignorant, and we didn't care." He tells me that they had fixed placards on the fences with the heads of the Frankfurt speculators on them. Among them were Jews. The slogan was a sentence from the Italian lotta-continua-movement: "The pigs of today are the bacons of tomorrow." One of the persons concerned had later shown him the concentration camp number on his arm. Koenigs was very serious when he said: "There we had gone too far in our ignorance". I asked him: "Should the play be performed?" He returned my question: "If

²⁷ Frankfurter Rundschau, 16. 9. 1985.

it is not performed, will that prevent anti-Semitism? The speculation, the quarter around the Station²⁸, the Jewish speculators, all that existed. "Somebody had to play the part of the anti-Semite - Fassbinder did it."²⁹

The outcome of the parliamentary debate was as follows: the play was condemned, with the voices of the CDU against those of the SPD (two abstentions) and the ecologists. Nevertheless, the decision about whether the play was to be staged or not depended on the theater, i.e. on its manager Rühle. The pressure exerted upon him became rather strong as the summer went on and the opening of the theater season approached. In September, the Churches intervened in the controversy and sent an open letter to Rühle:

"A letter to the manager says that Jews become in this play the symbol for immorality. 'The Church cannot accept such a defamation and degradation of a group of people.' The Church that had itself become guilty of the Jews has to condemn a situation where Jews are shown as a contemptible and odious group."³⁰

The Protestant and the Catholic Churches took the Fassbinder affair as an opportunity for a concerted ecumenical action that aimed at breaking totally with the past. The Churches recognized publicly their faults and omissions in the Nazi period and warned against everything that would create a climate of new anti-Semitism. The day of the première, they celebrated an ecumenical office and demonstrated,

²⁸ This quarter was to be transformed by the same speculators who had already taken care of the "Westend

²⁹ *Die Zeit*, article of Ulrich Greiner, 1. 11. 1985.

³⁰ "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung ("FAZ"), 12. 9. 1985.

together with the Jewish Community, against the play. Of all official institutions, the Churches were the only ones that had an autonomous discourse and escaped the sterile opposition Left / Right. In this controversy, they really fulfilled their role as keeper of conscience and morality.

The Jewish Community got into the affair rather late. The first action did not come from Frankfurt itself, but from Berlin. At the end of September 1985, the daily *"Frankfurter Rundschau"* reported:

"The "Jüdische Kulturforum" in Berlin tries to prevent the première of Fassbinder's play "Garbage, the City and Death" by lodging a complaint of racism and defamation against it."³¹

Jürgen Flimm, the chairman of the influential *"Deutsche Akademie der darstellenden Künste"* entreated the Jewish cultural organisation to withdraw its complaint. Nevertheless, the affair was brought to the tribunal. On October 14, the attorney general dismissed the complaint on the grounds that the play had a right to freedom of expression and art guaranteed by the *"Grundgesetz"*.

Throughout the month of October, the affair was discussed daily by all of the German newspapers. The Jewish Community of Frankfurt, with its Chairman Ignatz Bubis, had announced that it would not tolerate a première and would try to prevent it by every means at its disposal. This was the very first time that a Jewish Community in postwar Germany had become so active on the public scene. When the writer Ernst Jünger, whose affinities with some aspects of the Nazi ideology were a secret to nobody, had received the Goethe prize of the City of Frankfurt and Fest had held the *"laudatio"*,

³¹ *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 25. 9. 1985.

there had been no protestations from the Jewish institutions. Those to be formulated had come from Leftwing Germans. The same was true for US-President Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery. The Leftists were now reproaching the Jewish Community for this.

The misunderstanding was profound. There was no doubt that Chairman Bubis was a conservative, that he had played his part in the "*Westend*" speculations, be it a minor one, and that he was now fighting his own battle. Nevertheless, this did not mean that his battle was not legitimate, even from a leftwing point of view. The problem with the whole Fassbinder affair was that, because of its political character, people in general could no longer distinguish between the political orientation of the protagonists on the one hand, and the causes they pleaded for with their specific content on the other. For the German Leftists, the fact that the representatives of the Jewish Community had a rather conservative tinge and were backed by the CDU, and that Fest had made himself a spokesman on their behalf, made their cause unacceptable to them. Present and past had become so mingled and intertwined in this controversy, that it had become difficult for politically committed people to find a position that would do justice to both. Was it better to betray one's present or one's past? Almost all sided with the present, not recognizing that a present without a past cannot persist. This gives the affair its peculiar character, and is the reason why sincerity and hypocrisy were so close to each other in almost all public positions that only very independent people could find their way out.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit was one such independent person. On November 1, 1985, he attended the première of "*Garbage, the City and Death*" that was to take place in the "Kammerspiele" repertory theater. The evening turned into a happening. Ignatz Bubis and other members of the Jewish Community demonstrated on the stage against the play; the actors asked

to perform it, manager Rühle read a petition in this sense. As the demonstrators did not move, a discussion was launched between them and the public, which proved to be mostly hostile towards them. There was not much communication between the two parties who repeated both time and again their by now well known arguments: freedom of art versus anti-Semitic threat. Finally, the "Red Dany" got up and explained to both sides why they were right. His arguments were comprehensive and generous. In a way it was *his* evening, and could be no-one else's. As one of the main newspaper put it in its comment next morning, in this story there were only losers.³²

The première was cancelled, and when people left the theater, they passed through a row of demonstrators who, led by the ecologist women, paraded outside against the Jewish demonstrators inside. A little further, representatives of the Churches marched silently through the streets of Frankfurt.

The next morning, the incident made the headlines of the whole German press. There were considerable differences in interpretation that often followed the established division Right / Left. Nevertheless, the dominant impression was one of perplexity and embarrassment; and the general feeling was that the past dominated the present where it could not be integrated. One of many quotation reads as follows:

"Some wrong has been done. Those who did it could argue that they did it in order to prevent an even worse injustice. These could be the possible closing words of a long story. But this story is not that

³² Horst Köpke "An diesem Abend gab es fast nur Verlierer", "Frankfurter Rundschau", 2. 11. 1985

easy, it is terribly confused. And it is not yet finished, it is only about to begin."³³

The Fassbinder affair itself finished quickly. The two performances of November 4 and 6 were cancelled by the theater. Instead, there was a unique representation for the press on the 4th. On November 12, manager Rühle announced publicly that he was definitely withdrawing the play. But, as the years to come proved, the story was not finished. It was only about to begin.

³³ Benjamin Hinrichs, "*Hass im Kopf, Liebe im Bauch*", "*Die Zeit*", 8. 11. 1985.