Review of Fassbinder Thousands of Mirrors by Ian Penman

Published by Semiotext(e) May 2023

Ian Penman’s book is structured in 450 fragments, plus three appendices, the first of these appendices is made up entirely of quotations. In one fragment, he describes the prose of Walter Benjamin: ‘Stop-go rhythm of Benjamin’s prose, like someone negotiating a crowded pavement Knight’s move chains of association. Skewed inner metronome, like a footnote-checking Thelonious Monk.’ This could equally describe the tone and movement of the jazz-paced connections in Penman’s own writing. Pleasingly, as much as it resists summing up, it also resists being a biography of Fassbinder. Instead, it is a helter skelter accumulation of details and references to Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s life and work, the roots of New German Cinema, the cultural milieu of post-war Germany, the suffocated awakening and repression of a nation’s consciousness. Political unrest is alive in the streets as self and city reassert themselves. Passages flick between cold war paranoia and empty consumerism; Penman channels a spirit of ambivalence that seems to connect the world of Fassbinder, deadeningly with our own post-truth bland.

Penman’s subject is his own decades-long obsession with Fassbinder: ‘My own equivalent of what Baudelaire was for Walter Benjamin. An urban poet in the turbulent, seed-sown, messy era just before everything changed.’ He quotes E M Cioran: ‘Only one biography should exist: the biography of our illnesses.’ Fitting, as within the fragments are catalogued, the drug-fuelled plume of productivity that would make up the Fassbinder oeuvre. ‘They called this monster by his initials as if to temper his outsize reality with a little compression or economy: RWF… Did he in fact *suicide himself* by trying to live up to an exaggerated version of himself at large in the mirrors of the world?’ Conjecture whirls around his subject as he renders the incoherent, flailing and controlling ego of Fassbinder without diminishing its excesses. Entropy throbs and pulses through the fragments, not only in describing the flawed Fassbinder; our own sense of misplaced optimism is also stripped bare. And this is one of the thought-provoking threads of the book, that sense of time failing to come up with the goods, that failure of systems and ideologies that promised better outcomes for the human condition. The only response possible becomes a kind of taking into your own hands the erasure of self – and with it, the erasure of a future not worth having. ‘Back then,’ he writes, ‘we were trying to *destroy* the self, not define it.’ There is a kind of knowing and niche nostalgia at work here, for a time lost in youth, or a period in history, where self-annihilation was pursued partly as consumer pleasure-principle, partly as fetishized aesthetic. ‘Only part of us is sane, the other half of us is nearly mad… and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations – Rebecca West.’

Penman quotes Robert Musil: ‘The mirror, originally created to give pleasure had become an instrument of anxiety, like the clock.’ In a fragment of just one line, Penman writes: ‘Technology has made dead soldiers of us all.’ Elsewhere, he writes: ‘Capital disapproves of every excess but excess wealth. It is based on the magic belief that capital is productive, when in fact it breeds anxiety and paranoia and dis-ease and debt.’ His cataloguing of the symptoms of unchecked capitalism mirror the self-destructive afflictions of Fassbinder himself. Today, the death-instinct, once the province of human agency, is alive and well and operates at the macro-level. Capitalism as Hemingway’s wounded hyena eating its own innards.

Penman’s characteristic sharp turn of phrase, drip feeds us a distilled version of the Fassbinder myth and aesthetic, words are not wasted, they build on each other, sprawling out to bring in a hundred background relevances. It is not necessary to be a fan of Fassbinder, or even know very much about him, this is a work that draws you in on its own literary merit, its feverish accumulation of detail. He is a quixotic guide to Fassbinder, in turns enthralled by and ambivalent towards the Fassbinder persona. Fassbinder’s films carry this same overloaded circuit of attraction and repulsion in a claustrophobic series of dimly lit rooms, where anomie, boredom, bursts of violence coexist without any possibility of relief or catharsis. Penman writes of his work: ‘Nature is almost entirely absent. Here is another world entirely: a world of dead-eyed consumer glitter, numbing artifice, small verbal poisons, niggling arguments, cage like rooms.’ In these rooms, his characters experience, in the midst of others, a brutalised loneliness, they are alone in their alienation and do not know what to do with it, their only recourse seemingly, a cul-de-sac of clawing from each other in a gesture of reciprocal persecution.

Penman’s own personal details creep in, skirting the contours of his obsession, and are always well chosen, adding to the reading rather than detracting, as can sometimes be the case in our times, with our hyper-addiction to confession. His cultural references, seemingly casual, blister with meaning, building up, snapshot by snapshot, a sense of Fassbinder’s work and world, his relevance to the now. In reference to the films’ framing of the artificial, Penman notes: ‘If nothing else, it suggests the possibility there can be a whole *hierarchy* of different types of artificiality. But one lie tells the truth, where the other upholds everything pat and oppressive and malign.’ The private afflictions and tyrannies of intimacy that Fassbinder depicts are themselves a mirroring of the larger realm of the public, with its own rhizomatic obsessions with manipulation and surveillance, clandestine violence. In another astute fragment: ‘Fassbinder’s picture of post-war West German life is not far removed from the then prevalent image of the nerveless, oppressive, neighbour-snooping East German regime. A bit more garish, a bit more gaudy, to be sure: but just a different set of choices that aren’t really choices at all.’

Its a book that is rich in well chosen quotation; other peoples words, can function like the image, bypassing the constraints of a single subjectivity to present more of a prism to a wider truth. He references Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* which sought to collect quotation and object in this vein.Penman writes of the image (quoting Panofsky) – ‘as a special conduit, enabling us to short-circuit our reasoning mind… “speak directly to the senses and affect the psyche: they address the labile elements of the self and avoid the calming intervention of *logos,* language and reason.”’ The writing in this book functions in the same way, we accumulate a sense of Fassbinder – the man, his aesthetic and his time, through the fragments. The subject seems to transcend the page rather than being diminished by over-wrought and over-earnest linear biographical accounts that often suffocate the subject.

His book reads like a roll-call of cultural significances – and insignificances (he attacks the posturing of Sartre – awful, long-winded, humourless, system building.) Though, Penman reminds us why we might be here in the first place: ‘We must never lose sight of visual pleasure; never forget just how beautiful his films could be.’ He is astute not only on the shifting ground of late modernism and post-modernism, but also on the prophetic gesture of RWF works such as *The Third Generation* and *World on a Wire* (1973) in which: ‘Shady corporations [are] behind a *new generation of computer technology*. The world we inhabit not real, but a computerised projection. No more individuals, only *identity units.* Image triumphing over reality […] Apocalypse in all senses. […] All our thoughts and desires mere programming.’