

Obscure Objects of Desire: The Faustian Theme in Fassbinder and Buñuel

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1989

Goethe's Faust has bequeathed to us, the generations that have followed him, the tantalizing and romantic notion that vital living is constituted by continually deferred satisfaction, by a series of animating and enabling desires that pursue one another without contentment.¹ At the moment he was content enough to linger with his life, Faust was to have lost it. Indeed, in the romantic century and a half since Goethe's day, the very words "contentment" and "satisfaction" have taken on connotations of bourgeois smugness and materialism. Those who are easily contented are the living dead, the "bastards" Sartre parodied so brilliantly in *Nausea*. Those who are readily satisfied are the middle-aged, middle class uncommitted ones ambling in the limbo of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*. It is easy to forget the interesting terms by which Goethe forgave his Faust: salvation through a woman's love, or rather, *das ewig Weibliche*, something eternally feminine, something completely "other" which "pulls us on," standing in for our imperfectly scrupulous desire. Taken together, these two motifs, the inability or refusal of modern man to satisfy the basic desires by which he lives and the hope of salvation through an eternal other, form a myth of modern man's predicament, and it is into this myth that both Fassbinder and Buñuel tap in their films, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and *That Obscure Object of Desire*.

Both films offer satirical portrayals of modern bourgeois life, Fassbinder of life in Adenauer's Germany (the era of *Wirtschaftswunder*), and Buñuel of life in France and Spain in the 'seventies. The protagonists of the films, however, are distinguished from their milieux by the intensity of their obsessions. Maria Braun survives the post war period by clinging to what is obviously a fictional ideal of

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her husband. When the “myth” threatens to become merely real, she destroys herself. Indeed, satisfaction of desire equals destruction. Don Mateo pursues an ideal woman in “Conchita,” perfectly oblivious to her reality as a person. Buñuel suggests this quite cleverly by having the part of Conchita played by two different women, a difference we notice of course, but to which Don Mateo pays no attention. Like Maria Braun and her husband, Don Mateo and Conchita meet a fiery destruction at the moment their mythical relationship begins to coalesce with reality.

Of course these modern Faustus pursue their obsessions against the resolutely absurd background of their societies. In Fassbinder’s film, which takes place between 1945 and 1954, it is the background of the *Zusammenbruch* of Hitler’s Germany and the subsequent *Wirtschaftswunder* of the early Adenauer years. *The Marriage of Maria Braun* is framed with explosions. Its first image is a bomb exploding in the German town where Maria and Hermann Braun are to be married. The background sounds are an absurd mixture of the adagio from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and the sound of a baby crying, suggesting perhaps the new Germany springing from the ruins of the old. The credits seem to bleed onto the screen in a red gothic script of old, official documents. As Maria’s marriage document is being signed, another bomb explodes and scatters the papers, sending her on a comic scramble to retrieve it while Hermann holds down the frightened pastor. She does clutch the paper, but in the mix-up (at least as suggested by the film) Hermann disappears. This is important, because as we will see it is the idea of marriage, represented by the paper, which she cherishes rather than the physical presence of a husband.

Immediately after the credit scene, Maria is shown as one of many women in the period of *Zusammenbruch* who have lost their husbands. As she puts it to her mother, there are “too many brides, too few men.” Unlike the others, however, Maria refuses to admit that her husband is dead; to a friend she denies not being married. Her reason is simply that she wants it to be that way. It is possible that Fassbinder intends to parody the German predilection for idealist philosophies that scorn merely empirical evidence. All around, however, there is evidence that the romantic Germany of the past is dead. The background music fades into the sound of an official voice on the radio droning out the names of the dead. Maria and other women carry sandwich signs asking if anyone knows of their husbands. Most people (though interestingly not Maria) scramble after cigarettes and even cigarette butts as if they were food. An old man, possibly senile, hums “Das Vaterland,” while well-fed American soldiers make vulgar jokes at the expense of the women. One of these soldiers insults Maria. When she challenges him,

he apologizes and politely offers her several packs of Camels. Maria, who is not seen smoking until the end of the film, trades these cigarettes to her mother for an expensive brooch she will use to begin her career (before the post-war currency reform cigarettes were considered better than paper money in Germany). For an idealist, she shows a remarkable business sense. Maria's practical qualities, however, run in tandem with her devotion to the idea of marriage. Hard-headedness enables her to survive on one level, but the obsessive and restless ideal of her marriage is what really pulls her on.

Maria is comfortable with the ambiguity of this dualism. Her marriage does not stop her from becoming a prostitute. She trades her "new" brooch for "work clothes." As she goes on her job interview, we hear the duet from *Der Rosenkavalier* playing in the background, a suggestion of idealistic love superimposed on a corrupt reality. Although she debates with a fellow prostitute about the reality of Love as opposed to mere physical sensation, she does not hesitate to become the mistress of a black American soldier. Interestingly, her sister's husband Willi returns to take up his real but ultimately barren marriage. When Willi assures her that Hermann is in fact dead, Maria pursues her affair with the black soldier Bill in earnest (she even becomes temporarily pregnant by him), but she continually refuses his offers of marriage. "I am married to my husband," she tells him. While she is in bed with Bill, Hermann suddenly reappears. Seeing Hermann, she immediately runs to him, but he throws her down and then (oddly enough under the circumstances) begins frantically puffing a cigarette. Only when he has finished his cigarette does Hermann begin to fight with Bill. Maria clubs Bill on the head, killing him. Questioned by an American tribunal, she explains herself as follows: "Ich hab' ihn [Bill] liebgehabt, und ich liebe meinen Mann [i.e., her husband]." This phrase is not really translatable into English, and of course the American prosecutor does not follow her.

The German distinction between "liebhaben" and "lieben," which she invokes by way of explanation, sums up nicely the dualism of Maria's nature. Liebhaben is the ordinary, colloquial verb for love, suggesting the level of physical reality, in John Donne's phrase, "dull, sublunary lovers' love, whose soul is sense," and which therefore cannot admit absence. On the other hand, lieben can have higher, almost spiritual connotations. It suggests the "great love" that transcends physical reality. This is the love Maria claims to have for Hermann. It is a romantic ideal, and as such, more readily thrives on the beloved's absence than his presence. Tom Noonan is somewhat naive in claiming for Maria a rôle in "familiar melodrama" as "the woman who gives her all for love" (43). The soul of Maria's quite superlunary love is continuing and unsatisfied desire. Indeed, we cannot help wondering, once

we have seen him, what Maria sees in the stolid Hermann. The murder of Bill is paradoxically a welcome accident to Maria, for it has the effect of removing the physical Hermann once again: he takes the blame for the murder, and is sent to prison. Maria is free to nourish her obsession with monthly visits, while pursuing her ordinary life safely without his companionship. As she puts it, "I have very much to do."

One of the things she does do while her husband is in prison is to begin a rather calculated affair with a wealthy German-French businessman, Oswald. Maria contrives to meet him in the first class compartment of a train (interestingly, the only other passenger who can afford this compartment is a black American soldier whom she rebuffs in her best, vulgar English). Oswald, impressed by her self-possession, offers her a job with his firm, and soon promotes her, both in his business and his private life. All this time, she continues visiting Hermann in prison. When he accuses her of taking on the role of a man (he refers to her as a *Männergefüss*), she answers that she is his wife, only brave and beautiful and clever. "Her time," she tells him, "is just beginning." She admits her affair with Oswald to Hermann, but later refuses Oswald's proposal: she will be his mistress, but not his wife. Oswald, who does not expect to live long and wants his last two or three years to be happy, goes himself to visit Hermann, "to meet the man Maria loves." Indeed, though we do not learn it yet, they strike up a bargain to share Maria. Later, when it becomes obvious that her work is bringing in a lot of money, Hermann and Maria argue about whose money she is making. Maria claims it is Hermann's, while he claims it is hers. Hermann is threatened by the rôle in which Maria has cast him. Rather than act the part of ideal (and kept) love object, he would play the more comfortable part of the husband who sell his wife (as indeed he does, for half of Oswald's fortune). Oswald, meanwhile, accepts the rôle she has allowed him. He buys her chocolates, visits her family on holidays (like an obliging bourgeois, he even takes snap shots of the family group), and in general looks after her material needs.

One day Maria is surprised by a phone call to her office informing her that Hermann is about to be released from prison. She rushes there, but learns that he has already left without her and gone to Australia or Canada. He will not return until he can pay back the money she has spent on him. In the meantime, however, he sends her a rose every month. She keeps all these in a vase, another emblem of the fact that their love thrives only on the level of a romantic ideal. Maria appears increasingly as a hardened business woman. She humiliates her secretary and is sarcastic with the workers who move her into her new house. When her mother, who has a rather coarse boyfriend of her own, comments that

no one in family had ever had such a house, Maria informs her that she won't be welcome there. She will live alone in the house awaiting Hermann. Maria's house is yet another emblem of her ideal notion of marriage, and it is to be free of the various entanglements of her material life. In a sense, she has found the perfect balance for the duality of her life. Hermann is safely away, yet remains a presence through his gifts of the roses. Maria continues to see Oswald in restaurants and at work. Interestingly, when she meets with Oswald, the music is not romantic, but classical (Mozart) or baroque (chamber music in the restaurant). Where real marriages, like that of her sister Betti and Willi, break up, her own bifurcated love life continues. And we see Maria smoking cigarettes for the first time. Willi, who admires Maria as a "modern" woman, comments: "Maria Braun, you're beginning to get strange." Phoning Oswald, she says simply: "I need someone to sleep with."

At this point, however, Maria's carefully wrought balance of material and mental life comes apart. Instead of Oswald, his assistant Senkenberg comes to inform her that Oswald has died in his sleep. The background is a political speech by Adenauer. Her reaction is to get drunk alone in her house. Hermann now reappears suddenly. She is ecstatic, but he seems merely taciturn. While she waits on him, gives him presents, and tries on different sets of black underwear, he drinks beer and listens to the 1954 World Championship soccer match (interestingly, Germany's first post-war victory). As they prepare to consummate their "two day old marriage," they argue again over who will own their property. Hermann tells her: "I wanted to be somebody for you so you could love me." She responds: "We'll sign a contract so everything can be yours." But he answers that he can only be her man if everything will be hers. (By this time she has lit another cigarette, leaving the gas at her stove on.) They are interrupted by a ringing of the doorbell. Senkenberg and a lawyer have come to read Oswald's will. Maria greets them in her black underwear, but puts on a white (virginal?) outfit for the reading. As it turns out, Oswald left half his fortune to Maria, and the other half to Hermann, with whom he made an agreement in prison three years earlier, and who he characterizes as having "sacrificed more than anyone can." Left alone again with her husband, Maria rather ominously runs water on her wrists (she looks at first as if she were slitting them), asks Hermann for a match, touches the dead roses in her vase, and then heads for the kitchen stove to light another cigarette. Hermann continues to watch the game. We now hear the announcer screaming: "Tor [score], Tor, aus, aus, aus." Germany has won the world championship. At the same moment, there is the sound of two explosions, and the screen fades to negative images of Germany's chancellors from Adenauer to Helmut Schmidt.

Life having become merely real to her (this is suggested by her smoking finally

like everyone else), Maria dies a virtual suicide in her virginal white dress in the house she has built as much as anything with her imagination. The second explosion suggests that Hermann too may have been a suicide, a victim of his rôle as the ideal object of an obsession. By counterpointing this scene with the soccer championship and the images of official Germany, Fassbinder underscores the fact that the modern material world cannot tolerate for long the romantic ideal of desire continually unsatisfied. Throughout the film, Maria's pursuit and embodiment of this ideal is parodied; indeed, modern life allows such notions to reign only under the conditions of irony.

Buñuel too treats the Faust theme in terms of irony. His romantic idealist, Mathieu Fabert (Don Mateo), plays out his fate against a background of bourgeois smugness and terrorist irrationality. *That Obscure Object of Desire* opens with a shot of palm trees against the sky, a suggestion of romantic aspiration which is quickly mitigated by the sounds of modern traffic. Don Mateo is first seen getting out of one of the big American cars Buñuel favors (the typical vehicle of diplomats or drug dealers—the source of Don Mateo's money is never made clear), and shortly afterward a similar car is shown being blown up by a terrorist group. Like *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *That Obscure Object of Desire* is framed by explosions. Actually, Buñuel has great satirical fun with his terrorist group, "The Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus." Variousy depicted as a group of sinister thugs and comically inept students (the guitar-toting Morito, Don Mateo's "young rival," is one of their number), this unlikely relative of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the Red Brigade is said eventually to be organizing and leading all the major terrorist gangs of Europe. Don Mateo first meets Concepcion (Conchita) while visiting his brother, a judge who is trying a group of the terrorists.

Don Mateo tells his story through a series of flashbacks to a group of people traveling with him on a train back to Paris. This group—a woman and her young daughter, a judge who is a friend of Don Mateo's brother, and a dwarf who is a professor of psychology at the Sorbonne—represents a sampling of modern bourgeois society. Before the train departs, they see him throw a bucket of water on a young woman with a bandage walking beside the train. Don Mateo comments: "It was better to drench her than to kill her," and then proceeds to tell his story by way of explanation. His bourgeois "judges" eagerly accept his version of events, as it is in their self-interest to do. David Overbey has pointed out that while these people "condemn Conchita's emotional and sexual terrorism ... they ignore their own....Their reaction to the acts of literal terrorism is a smug complacency and deluded 'understanding'" (8). They are at once, however, a background and a foil for the purity of Don Mateo's romantic passion.

As mentioned above, Don Mateo first meets Conchita while she is working as a maid for his brother. Noticing her delicate hands at dinner, Don Mateo decides to exercise his *droit de seigneur*, but discovers that the girl has left the next day. Actually, the girl seems in a helpless enough position to titillate the desires of the older “man of the world.” And she seems to us (rather like Hermann Braun in this respect) ordinary enough. She lives with her mother in a suburb of Paris, loves to dance, but cannot make a living at it. (Later, in fact, she will discover a way to make a living dancing.) It is perhaps her banality itself that makes her the perfect object of Don Mateo’s desire. He does not notice, for instance, that Conchita is played by two actresses, an elegant French woman and a rather more earthy Spanish woman. Buñuel’s sleight of hand here suggests something of central importance to the film: Don Mateo’s passion exists really for its own sake and not for the possession of the other, much as he goes through the motions of being frustrated by his lack of possession. His passion is inflamed to a purity wrought by its inability to possess the other. Indeed, Conchita is for him a symbol of the eternal feminine, to whose actual existence he remains essentially indifferent.

Throughout the film, the flames of Don Mateo’s passion are presented in ironic counterpoint with the flames of political terrorism. Conchita herself, on a level Don Mateo does not really care to investigate, is rather ambiguously involved with several young men from the Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus, in particular a guitar player named Morito. When Don Mateo next sees her, it is in Switzerland in the company of a group of men who have robbed him. She claims they are her friends and offers to return his money, but he refuses her offer, preferring to use the money as a bribe for her affections. She will use the money to help her poor mother in Paris. Don Mateo never questions her presence in Switzerland with the terrorists, or the real nature of her relations with Morito. Indeed, he prefers to think of Morito as a stock rival for his romantic love, the “younger man,” the ideal object of ideal jealousy. Morito appears a number of times in the film as an object in Don Mateo’s way. He plays his guitar at Conchita’s mother’s apartment while she dances. When Don Mateo, having paid off Conchita’s mother, expects her to arrive at his house, Morito comes instead with a note telling him that because he tried to buy her she will never see him again. Later, he is discovered hiding from the police in Don Mateo’s villa under her protection. Still later, he plays the guitar while she dances naked before a group of Japanese and American tourists in Seville. And of course she uses him as a sexual partner in her final taunting of Don Mateo. When she then claims that this was all an act and that Morito is really a homosexual, Don Mateo will not believe her. This scenario would contradict the ideal rôles he has imagined for them.

Don Mateo's affair with Conchita is suggested in a series of frustrating vignettes. At her mother's apartment she washes in front of him in her underwear and sings for him flirtatiously. But as she then remarks, "the words [of the song] aren't mine." Her mother, Encarnacion, whose name implies an easy commerce in the flesh, more than once appears ready to sell her daughter's favors to Don Mateo, but Conchita herself, whose name ironically suggests conception, continually refuses the opportunity to conceive. She allows Don Mateo to fondle her in bed, but protects her virginity with a pair of tightly laced leather underpants (the scene in which Don Mateo first discovers them is a masterpiece of comic frustration). When he breaks down in tears, she tells him interestingly, "You know, I don't like what I'm doing either. You only want what I refuse you...that's not all of me." The remark is significant because it is the unattainable in her that pulls him on. Indeed, only when Don Mateo realizes how unattainable she is does he confess to his brother that he cannot do without her.

When he discovers that she has been harboring Morito in his house, he throws her out in a jealous rage and even has his brother arrange for her expulsion from France, but he proceeds to follow her (the psychologist on the train suggests out of unconscious desire) to Spain, where she has found work as a dancer in a nightclub. Don Mateo discovers, however, that her real work is as a kind of prostitute, and he throws another fit. She taunts him at first ("You're not my father—or my lover!"), but then continues to tease him on ("You think you've been chasing me—I'm the one who loves you. I want happiness and you know how to give it to me."). What he gives her is a house of her own, and interestingly like Maria Braun she declares that she will not let her mother live there. In a number of these Spanish scenes, Buñuel suggests Conchita's unattainability by having Don Mateo watch her through Spanish wrought-iron grates, as if separated by prison bars (we should remember Maria and Hermann here). The climax of this imagery occurs when Don Mateo attempts to visit her at night only to find the wrought-iron gate of her house locked. From behind the bars she taunts him, going to the point of calling Morito, undressing, and seemingly engaging in sex in front of him. For Don Mateo, this is the final humiliation. When she comes the next day to try to win back his favor, he responds by beating her up and leaving for Paris. This rounds off the tale he tells the passengers on the train.

Martin, Don Mateo's manservant, who is fond in his inexplicable way of quoting German philosophy, says at one point that a friend of his (he never offers his opinion directly) considers women "sacks of excrement." There are several scenes in the film of men (including Don Mateo) carrying around sacks. In a mysterious way, these images counterpoise the purity of Don Mateo's romantic obsession,

thus subjecting it to a certain irony. At the same time, it is typical that the romantic idealist devalues the mere physical presence of the beloved. In this Don Mateo is like Maria Braun. They are both locked in the contradictions of their dualistic natures. We are not at all surprised, therefore, that after Conchita throws her own bucket of water on Don Mateo, they should be seen getting into a taxi together, apparently reconciled. No longer privy to their conversation, we watch them enter a shopping mall in Paris while a loudspeaker announces the most recent campaign of the Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus (their current victim, a *Monseigneur*, is described as breathing normally thanks to modern science, “although his brain is totally dead..”). As in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, the film offers a modern public sound as background. A girl in a shop is seen picking up a sack with a torn and bloody nightgown in it. Don Mateo and Conchita watch as she begins to repair it. The background changes to music from Wagner’s *Ring* as the two walk away, appear to begin a new quarrel, and are enveloped suddenly in an explosion.

Buñuel’s surrealistic counterpoint at the end of the film makes perfect dramatic sense. Don Mateo’s idealistic passion, threatening to go on and on, can only be brought to such an explosive conclusion in the modern world. Like Maria Braun’s obsession, the modern world has no use for it. The Faustian ideal may provide a vital criticism of the modern bourgeois way of life, but its means of giving life intensity is ultimately despised by complacent “haves” and “have nots” alike. All the world, it seems, does not love a lover, nor tolerate his essentially a-political devotion. Our modern Faustus pursue their eternal others under the threat of a human damnation Goethe himself could not have foreseen.

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