

Encounter RWF

Fassbinder Archive Education

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Alejandro Bachmann, Niels Deimel, Christine Kopf

In May 2019, the DFF — Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum took over Rainer Werner Fassbinder's literary estate from the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation (RWFF). This included his preserved writings, surviving production files, shooting schedules, set photos and still images, posters, advertising material, a few private objects (such as the legendary leather couch from DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST/GERMANY IN AUTUMN, FRG 1978 and a pinball machine), videotapes, and a large number of reviews and academic treatises on his works for cinema, television, and theater. The extensive text and photo archive was simultaneously transferred as a permanent loan. Since then, this collection has been housed in two separate archive rooms within the DFF Archive Center under the label DFF Fassbinder Center, at Eschersheimer Landstrasse 121 in Frankfurt am Main, where it can be (and is) used for consultation and research in preparation for exhibitions, research work, symposia, and retrospectives.

Two questions emerged from an educational perspective. Woven together, they formed the starting point for the "Encounter RWF" project, which this publication attempts to trace, document, and reflect by means of text contributions, artistic works, and selected documents from the collection.

1. What potential do the collection's archival materials hold for aesthetic film education? Film education usually seeks to understand the aesthetics and history of the medium through the experience of the projected film — which articulates itself in time — or through a specific film work. How, then, can textual or photographic elements be used to conceive, expand and potentiate an educational concept?
2. What potential does the work of an unquestionably unique filmmaker, whose films were made between 1966 and 1982, have for the present?

What does it represent for the eyes and ears, the thinking and feeling of people who were born ten or twenty years after Fassbinder's final film QUERELLE (FRG/FR 1982) and his death in 1982? What forms of aesthetic film education are suitable to frame these works as not only historically relevant, but as productive for the present, so that they can be experienced and discussed? What do young people see in these works, what do they not see, where do they feel recognized, and where do they misjudge their intentions? Which elements of Fassbinder's works are timeless, and which have been lost in time (at least for now)?

The convergence of the collection with the questions it brings up forms the framework of the "Encounter RWF" project. Against this background, we asked film educators from Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Paris, Vienna and Zurich, whose work we would define as being in the field of aesthetic film education, to develop a focus (on one or more films, a specific historical or aesthetic topic, or one relating to curatorial education) from RWF's extensive oeuvre. We asked them to initially consider the scope of the project, addressees, places of education, etc. We then invited the educators or education teams to spend several days in the collection, where they could carry out their research under the guidance of the archival staff. At the same time, we asked other curators, artists, and academics to develop their own perspectives on the issues, and to work on these in an encounter with the archive as well. An initial joint meeting lasting several days in Frankfurt am Main offered them the opportunity to exchange first ideas and to refine their projects and approaches. Over the following twelve months, the educators implemented their projects at their locations and worked individually on lectures or film programs that could serve as inspiration for the entire group. They also conducted several online meetings to reflect on the projects together, and to continue thinking them through while they were

still in progress. An online film club was established as well, in which participants gathered in one- to two-hour sessions on a recurring basis to discuss a film that had been agreed upon in advance and that everyone had watched. A final meeting reunited all participants in Frankfurt once more to discuss the completed projects. Topics included education; curation; didactic, pedagogical, artistic and scientific approaches; positive experiences; and difficult moments of resistance. Our last time spent together was used to exchange ideas, wishes, and concepts for the publication.

The result was six educational projects in five cities that were extraordinary in their approaches, intensity and depth. Conducted with young people and students in extracurricular, school and university contexts, they consisted of three film programs, a theater project, several lectures and texts, and a wide range of answers to the questions underlying the project. It was above all a very organic process of collective reflection and exchange on the interaction of education and film with the archive and, of course, on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films. Ideas and approaches developed, changed, and were in constant motion. New, unplanned perspectives were added; these were all the more enriching because word about the project had spread in small circles, attracting interested parties and inspiring them to participate. Like every little act of mediation, the rather comprehensive "Encounter RWF" project was primarily a process that you could only fully grasp if you were part of it. This publication is an attempt to make aspects of it visible, bearing in mind that it cannot be all-encompassing.

In the first section of this publication, the six projects are presented and examined in greater depth in their own chapter sections. The texts, written from the perspective of the educators and education teams, are each preceded by an archival document from the collection of the DFF Fassbinder Center that was of central importance for the development and implementation of the project, whether it served as an inspiration or as a concrete subject of mediation.

For example, Alejandro Bachmann and Stefan Huber take up an article by actress Hanna Schygulla which they discovered in the archive. In it, she questions the "educational, political, and creative potential" of Fassbinder's family series *ACHT STUNDEN SIND KEIN TAG (EIGHT HOURS DON'T MAKE A DAY, FRG 1972–73)*. They use the metaphor of "casting stones" to trace the educational process itself, as it revealed itself in the project on Fassbinder's series that they carried out with artist Alex Gerbaulet in Vienna.

In five dense sections, Nathalie Bourgeois, Michaël Dacheux and Claire Nazikian describe the "Diary of a Workshop," which they carried out at a high school in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil. The text spans from their first re-encounter with the myth of Fassbinder in the rooms of the Frankfurt archive to their various attempts at approaching his work and persona to the resulting project, a collectively produced film essay. Alejandro Bachmann discusses this with a view to the way in which the education processes that took place, and the ideas of film, art and artist implicit in them, can be found as traces in the essay's final form. Bachmann concludes that films such as *FACE À FASSBINDER* can "themselves convey what education is — which social dimensions, aesthetic premises and didactic methods are interwoven in it at every moment, in complex simultaneity." Stefanie Schlüter describes the educational approach of the project she realized with students from the University of Zurich — the result of which was an extensive Fassbinder retrospective in the city's Filmpodium cinema — as "learning by viewing." The text uses excerpts from student emails to provide insights into their individual reception experiences, framing them as part of a methodical procedure for developing a curatorial practice. In many ways, Barbara and Uwe Dierksen recapitulate the Frankfurt educational project "Jukebox West Germany," which relates music and sound in RWF's works to his artistic persona. Their "observations on an educational project and a cinematic battle plan" also make clear their specific approach to education work, both in order "to initiate encounters with art that can and should sometimes be startling" and to maintain openness in the process so as to meet the young project participants at eye level. Jan Künemund paraphrases the "Jukebox" participants' half-hour film essay: "Unravel the stitches, take Fassbinder's shtick seriously, pick it into individual threads. And, of course, reweave them." In her contribution to the "Political Fassbinder" project, which she carried out in cooperation with Wolf Kino Berlin and two school classes, Brigitta Wagner speaks of an "encounter across generations." Daniela Nicklisch, the teacher involved in that project, also describes the "integration of the project in the curriculum," while Niels Deimel discusses the students' short films. The project section concludes with Martin Ganguly's report "From Film to Theater and Back," on the development of the theater piece *Chinese Roulette*. This adaptation from the film was developed step by step, tested, and finally performed in a project with an upper-level course in Berlin. Collected voices at the end of the text document the students' extensive confrontation with Fassbinder's work.

The second part of the publication consists of framing contributions that look at “Encounter RWF” from the perspectives of research, archives, identity politics and art, as well as questions that relate to Fassbinder’s work and estate. They were all written by people who were involved as accompanying experts at the beginning or during the course of the project. In Anna Bell’s contribution, an undead “Rainer Werner Dracula” haunts the collective memory. She describes the potential of this kind of interpretation: “Instead of repeating his established reputation as an enfant terrible, auteur, genius and a tyrannical hero, and interpreting his works accordingly, we could consider Fassbinder an anti-hero like his film characters, whose death could awaken our longing for a utopia.” Jan Künemund examines Fassbinder’s enigmatic relationship to queer political concerns and movements, which he describes as “unmoved proximity.” He counters gaps and dissonances in reflections on RWF with new interpretations, so that Fassbinder can be seen as a “protagonist who was linked to a queer German film network that has so far hardly been described as such.” Künemund’s text is also the manifestation of a method of conducting research in the RWF collection which sifts through it, critically questions it, and reinterprets it at key points from a queer perspective. In their contribution “The DFF Fassbinder Center,” Isabelle Louise Bastian and Hans-Peter Reichmann present the collection they are responsible for, with a view to its specifics and to the particularities and potential of an approach from an educational perspective. In the form of “scenes with Fassbinder,” Jyoti Mistry talks about her various encounters with him in the context of academia and film education. She interweaves these encounters with her research as a participant in “Encounter RWF” — on queer potentiality, the implications of the so-called Global South in a geopolitical context, and film practice as a “response to the themes in Fassbinder’s work.” A conversation between Alejandro Bachmann and the filmmaker, curator and producer Alex Gerbaulet, which took place following a short film evening in July 2023 that was part of the project, is also included in the publication. It draws an arc from forms of representation of working-class culture to Gerbaulet’s own contemporary political film work. Finally, Manuel Zahn reflects on the project from the perspective of aesthetic film education, illustrating his theoretical reflections on the interaction between the archive and education with examples from the projects. These allow aesthetic film education to be understood “as the montage, or construction, of constellations of heterogeneous cinematic and film-related objects.”

The chapters are interrupted and enriched by artistic interventions in the form of two new visual works created for the publication in 2023. Artist Ming Wong’s photo series “PetraEmmiAli” visualizes the process of reenactment ambiguously (a theme that also runs through Wong’s other Fassbinder works such as “Lerne Deutsch mit Petra von Kant”), as a fluid play of identities and costumes.

In “@rainerwernerfassbinder” by Amina Handke, we see excerpts from the imagined Instagram account of RWF’s mother, Liselotte Eder. The media-reflective work combines photographs, quotes from Fassbinder’s artistic “family,” and AI art, thus looking at the idea of “Fassbinder in the here and now” from an artistic and poetic perspective. Both artists took their visit to the DFF Archive Center and their encounter with the DFF Fassbinder Center collection as the starting point for their creative work.

Educational processes that understand cinema as art, and that build bridges to film history for a young audience — rather than just “meeting them where they are” — always question whether the films are relevant to the present. When encounters with works are initiated, “cultural ownership”¹ (Brigitta Wagner) takes place at best, keeping the films alive. Hence the most important task of a cinemathèque is to provide aesthetic film education.² It is now taken for granted that art museums, theaters and literature houses have education and outreach departments, and it is increasingly being recognized that these departments can help the institutions to continue developing social relevance. However, cinemathèques around the world continue to struggle. The DFF’s film education department, and a project such as “Encounter RWF,” are exceptions rather than the rule.

The reasons for this are manifold. One is the automatic association of the word “education” with a process that is strongly hierarchical and therefore cannot be trusted to facilitate “undisturbed” encounters in the dark, or perhaps even to initiate a cinephilic attitude. Another is the reflexive reduction of the utopian potential of these processes to instrumentalized acquisition of a so-called “audience of tomorrow,” thereby keeping today’s young people at a distance. It feels as though film education always has to be fought for at first — even in circles whose progressive, cinephilic, political understanding of film and art we share, and which we actually see as allies.

The editors therefore hope that a project like “Encounter RWF” and the resulting publication will help counter both these reservations and cuts to

aesthetic film education projects. We hope that it might stimulate a different understanding, that it might illustrate the potential depth and significance of such processes. The project is committed to a broad concept of film education which naturally includes curating and talking about programs, and which considers artistic research work in archives to have educational potential. Though these cultural education activities are a natural part of the work of cinemas, film initiatives, cinemathèques, artists and researchers, they are often not thought of as forms of film education — education in, through, and on behalf of film.

What seems to be specific to working in the school context, however, is that film educators who enter the institutional system from outside must first form a kind of pact with the participants. Who is this Fassbinder? Why should we engage with him and his films? The outside educators lack legitimacy as regular teachers, and the proposed subject of the discussion is not known to the students, not “covered” by the curriculum and the school structure. It thus also has to prove its resistance through its potential to open up new horizons. What’s more, the educators are called on to prove that they are serious about their passion and what they bring with them. In “L’hypothèse cinéma,” Alain Bergala pointed out the explosive power of the Other that art can represent in the school context, and the importance of the fracture points that arise in the process. His booklet³, published in France in 2002, continues to occupy a central place in the discourse on aesthetic film education in an institution that has in recent years become increasingly focused on the acquisition of skills and the applicability of knowledge.

Aesthetic education always involves a balancing act: between integration of the subject matter into school grids (grading, homework, et cetera) and the aspiration to open windows onto something different which, in the best case, breaks these grids. The contributions in this book by teachers Martin Ganguly, Daniela Nicklisch and Claire Nazikian bear witness to this.

Over a period of two years, the project group had the rare opportunity to reflect together on the creation of access points, the bridging of historical gaps, the tension between process and “product,” and also the fracture points. The visit to the collection at the beginning of each project proved to be a concentrated opportunity for educators to position themselves as a team of mediators vis-à-vis Fassbinder and his work, and vis-à-vis his films’ significance for contemporary reception. They were looking to find

personal starting points for the education process that would stand up to later questioning by a younger generation.

As Jan Künemund writes of the film essay that was produced as part of the Frankfurt project, the results of the process at best express an “emancipatory gesture” of critical distance, while at the same time paying “tribute” to the artist.⁴ When the participants’ parents watched the film at a screening at the DFF Archive Center, one father commented that he was surprised that the group could relate to Fassbinder, since it all seemed far removed from the younger generation. This prompted an indignant response from the group, who had volunteered to work on the project outside school hours: “These are exactly our topics!” As the “Political Fassbinder” project in Berlin also showed, Fassbinder’s films — his absolute will to express himself, and his resilience in the face of the multiple rejections he experienced as a young artist (from the German Film and Television Academy/DFFB and the German Film and Media Evaluation Board/FBW) — encourage young people to take a close look at their environment and their own situation in German society, and to express themselves as well.

On the other hand, Fassbinder’s swagger and his verbal and cinematic violence, as well as the tendency to exaggerate the genius-like author figure, were met with resistance from project participants and educators. It required them to strike a balance between precisely this paying tribute and keeping distance, which we would describe as extraordinarily productive from today’s perspective. In our view, the cover image of this book, a shot from the final scene in *FAUSTRECHT DER FREIHEIT* (FOX AND HIS FRIENDS, FRG 1975), contains something of the ambivalence-based productivity of encounters with RWF. It shows Franz Biberkopf, played by Fassbinder, lying on the floor of a subway station, exhausted, abandoned, and perhaps already dead. Two children turn him over, taking the few possessions he has left out of his pockets. The photo takes the unambiguousness from this act and indicates a moment of contact, an encounter, perhaps even caring. The RWF collection which, alongside his works, forms a central part of what Fassbinder left behind when he died in 1982, begs to be encountered in this twofold way. You have to wrest and take things from it to keep RWF in the present; in the same motion, you have to face RWF to also see this as a tender, caring, devoted act. We’re sure Fassbinder would have understood this ambivalence about the perpetuation of tenderness and violence.

There are hardly any resources in Germany for facilitating cultural participation — for these fragile, intensive, time-consuming processes in small groups. Those who are active in the field of aesthetic film education often work in precarious conditions, even within seemingly large institutions. There is no cultural or educational policy strategy at the federal level to keep film heritage and film art alive for a young audience. A project like “Encounter RWF” was therefore unable to receive public financing — and despite its international scope, it did not fit in with the objectives of the German Federal Cultural Foundation or The Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, and unfortunately did not meet with the interest of the Goethe-Institut. The project would not have been possible without the important commitment of the Swiss Art Mentor Foundation — which takes cultural education seriously — and without the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain, which regards the Fassbinder Collection in Frankfurt as a regional beacon and was enthusiastic about artists’ engagement with it. We would especially like to thank the late Evelyn Kryst, without whom we might have given up. It pains us greatly that we can no longer present her with the book. We would also like to thank Juliane Maria Lorenz-Wehling for her support through the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation. Fassbinder’s plays can be seen on stages all over the world; contemporary filmmakers process Fassbinder’s genius or are inspired to make new films; RWF’s work is the subject of major exhibitions. When we first posited that a young audience was unfamiliar with Fassbinder’s films, we had to create an understanding of our work, of what aesthetic film education is. In an industry determined by commercialization logic, we used this project to explore the scope of action for educational processes together, and we made many things possible.

It remains to be hoped that the wealth of project methods presented in this book will contribute to the advancement of the field, even if these processes cannot be duplicated. They are not templates that can be replicated one-to-one (which people often expect from us). From the outset, “Encounter RWF” projects were strongly linked to the personalities of the educators and their specific geographical locations. It makes a difference whether Fassbinder is taught in Zurich, Vienna, Paris, or Germany. With this book we aim to provide a productive perspective on Fassbinder and film education. A perspective that critically questions the filmmaker and the practice, the relationship between history and the present, the significance of perspectives and situatedness, the handling and value of documents and films, the possibilities we have right here, right now, to see the works as

historic and at the same time present. We hope this can take place through artistic interventions, curatorial practices, probing questions, committed writing, passionate, reflective speaking, and creative filmmaking.

Since this book highlights the events that took place over the two years of “Encounter RWF,” our thanks go first and foremost to all the educators, artists, teachers, participants, and other people involved in the project.

We would like to make special mention of Barbara Dierksen, whose conceptual input was crucial to the project from the very beginning, as well as Isabelle Louise Bastian and Hans-Peter Reichmann from the DFF Archive Center, without whose expertise and passionate support our project would have been difficult to imagine.

As the latter had an international scope, with the educational projects taking place in several countries, we felt it appropriate to publish this book in two languages. The book at hand is a translation from the German edition; the majority of the texts were written in German and translated into English by Brenda Benthien, while the Text “Diary of a Workshop” was translated from the French by Molly Proctor. We decided to keep the facsimiles of the archival objects featured in the book in their original German language — the way they revealed themselves to many of the non-German-speaking educators and researchers involved, as aesthetic objects.

Although many of them are already among the people mentioned, we would like to thank all the authors of this book once again for their insightful contributions. It is thanks to our translators Brenda Benthien, Molly Proctor, Sonja Riesner and Heidi Ruppert that they can be published in two languages; it is thanks to our editor Michelle Koch and our proofreader Julia Welter that they are linguistically sharpened and error-free; and it is thanks to our designer Gabriele Adébisi-Schuster that an appealing graphic concept was found for them. We would like to thank them all for their meticulous work.

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