

### 3

## Fassbinder and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look, and Image

This chapter will differentiate the gaze from the look, and hence from masculinity. It will also provide a theoretical articulation of the field of vision<sup>1</sup> within which every subject is necessarily held. Although the paradigm which it will advance differs in many respects from that which has dominated film theory over the past fifteen years, my aim is less to displace than to complicate the latter, whose resources are still far from exhausted. Lacan is of course central to this double project. However, since the distinctions that I will attempt to draw depend as fully upon the cinema of Rainer Werner Fassbinder as they do upon *Seminar XI*, it is with that cinema and its exemplary refusals that I shall begin.

Although the descriptive phrase “aesthetics of pessimism” derives from Fassbinder himself,<sup>2</sup> it might well have been coined by one of his critics, who have commented in a variety of ways on the negativity which suffuses his texts. Tony Pipolo complains that Fassbinder’s films do not “work to dispel that sense of helplessness so pervasive in the present atmosphere,” that they generate an “enveloping negativity of affect,” and that in them “conditions are generally depicted as virtually unchangeable and characters are denied the personal redemption of classical tragedy.”<sup>3</sup> Richard Dyer accuses Fassbinder of left-wing melancholy, and worries that “hardly anywhere” in his films “is there a notion of working-class, or women’s, or gay, struggle, whether in the form of resistance . . . or revolution.”<sup>4</sup> More interestingly, Wilfred Wiegand characterizes Fassbinder’s cinema as “post-revolutionary,” in that “it no longer steers a course for the naive pre-revolutionary dream of a better world, but . . . has absorbed the fragments of a negative historical experience.”<sup>5</sup> And Thomas Elsaesser, as always Fassbinder’s most astute reader, writes that identity in his films is “a movement, an unstable structure of vanishing points, encounters, vistas, and absences”—that “it appears negatively, as nos-

talgia, deprivation, lack of motivation, loss," and that characters "only know they exist by the negative emotion of anxiety."<sup>6</sup>

What all of these accounts point toward, although only Elsaesser manages to theorize it, is Fassbinder's radical refusal to *affirm*, his repudiation of positivity in any shape or form. His aversion to the fictions which make psychic and social existence tolerable is perhaps best dramatized by those films which put such fictions temporarily into play. *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), for example, has been hailed as the story of a "strong and believable" woman, who "comes to personify the triumph of the will,"<sup>7</sup> and whose life "stands as a symbol that another kind of life is possible."<sup>8</sup> However, the end of the film detonates this fantasy of the self-made woman, less through the match which Maria lights in her gas-filled kitchen than through the belated revelation of Oswald's arrangement with Hermann, an arrangement which hinges upon the exchange of a woman between two men, i.e. that transaction which Luce Irigaray has shown to be at the center of the existing symbolic order.<sup>9</sup> *Jail Bait* (1972) also puts the torch to positivity, this time in the guise of the romantic love which ostensibly binds the adolescent protagonists to each other, and motivates the murder of Hanni's father. Encountering Franz outside the courtroom where he is to stand trial for their joint crime, Hanni announces the still-birth of their child, and dismisses their relationship as "only physical." *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975) enacts a similar collapse of belief in the capacity of the left to deal adequately with an event like the murder by Hermann Küsters of one of his factory bosses, and his subsequent suicide, providing in the process a searing portrait of political *méconnaissance* on the part both of the Thalmanns, wealthy members of the Communist Party, and Knab, the anarchist.

However, few of Fassbinder's other films deviate even to this degree from an uncompromising negativity, occasionally irradiated but in no way mitigated by an extreme and irrational joy. More is at issue here than a refusal to provide affirmative representations of women, blacks, gays, or the left, although that is already a great deal given the intense preoccupation of Fassbinder's cinema with precisely those sexual, social, and political groupings. What is thus placed at risk is identity itself, which is no longer able to secure an "interior" foothold.

Identity, as psychoanalysis has taught us, necessitates the internalization of a series of things which are in the first instance external. Freud insists upon this principle with respect both to the ego and the super-ego, defining the former as the psychic mapping of what is initially a bodily image,<sup>10</sup> and the latter as the introjection of parental authority, in the guise, for instance, of the father's voice.<sup>11</sup> Lacan's

account of the mirror stage further elaborates this notion of an exteriority which is taken within the subject, first in the guise of its mirror image, subsequently in the form of parental imagoes, and later yet in the shape of a whole range of cultural representations, the *moi* becoming over time more and more explicitly dependent upon that which might be said to be “alien” or “other.”<sup>12</sup> What Lacan designates the “gaze” also manifests itself initially within a space external to the subject, first through the mother’s look as it facilitates the “join” of infant and mirror image, and later through all of the many other actual looks with which it is confused. It is only at a second remove that the subject might be said to assume responsibility for “operating” the gaze by “seeing” itself being seen even when no pair of eyes are trained upon it—by taking not so much the gaze as its effects within the self. However, consciousness as it is redefined by Lacan hinges not only upon the internalization but upon the elision of the gaze; this “seeing” of oneself being seen is experienced by the subject-of-consciousness—by the subject, that is, who arrogates to itself a certain self-presence or substantiality—as a seeing of itself seeing itself.<sup>13</sup>

What happens within Fassbinder’s cinema is that both the gaze and the images which promote identity remain irreducibly exterior, stubbornly removed from the subject who depends upon them for its experience of “self.” Elsaesser has touched upon the first of these exteriorizations in “Primary Identification and the Historical Subject: Fassbinder and Germany,” although his emphasis falls more fully upon the exhibitionism of Fassbinder’s characters than upon the gaze on which they depend:

Their endless waiting wants to attract someone to play the spectator, who would confirm them as subjects, by displaying the sort of behavior that would conform to the reactions they expect to elicit. The audience is inscribed as voyeurs, but only because the characters are so manifestly exhibitionist. Substantiality is denied to both characters and audience, they derealize each other, as all relations polarize themselves in terms of seeing and being seen . . . to be, in Fassbinder, is to be perceived, *esse est percipi*. (542)

The film through which Elsaesser pursues his thesis—and upon which Judith Mayne also focuses in her account of specularity in Fassbinder<sup>14</sup>—is *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973), but there are many other texts in that filmmaker’s oeuvre where characters display themselves in this way to whomever will look, and in which subjectivity is consequently shown to depend upon a visual agency which remains insistently outside. “We are watched on all sides,” the singer, Tripelli (Barbara Valentin) warns in *Effi Briest* (1974), a curse which turns

into a lost source of sustenance when the socius finally looks away from Effi. The gaze is similarly omnipresent in *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, represented this time precisely through the camera to which Lacan compares it in *Four Fundamental Concepts*. The passage to which I refer, which insists once again upon the alterity of the gaze, provides the basis for what I have elsewhere theorized as “the photo session,”<sup>15</sup> i.e. the clicking of an imaginary camera which photographs the subject and thereby constitutes him or her. “What determines [the subject], at the most profound level, in the visible,” remarks Lacan, “is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that [the subject enters] light and it is from the gaze that [he or she receives] its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which . . . [the subject is] *photographed*.”<sup>16</sup>

Among the characters in *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, only Corinna (Ingrid Caven) has reason to celebrate the illumination into which she is thrust, since she alone is able to meet the gaze halfway by offering herself as a spectacle to it. *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* thus suggests that some limited power is available to the subject who recognizes her necessary subordination to the gaze, but finds potentially transgressive ways of “performing” before it. The title character (Brigitte Mira), on the other hand, repeatedly places herself guilelessly in front of a camera, confident that it will record her “true” essence and feelings, only to be constructed anew, and in ways which never cease to appall her.

In a film made a year earlier than *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, *Fox and His Friends* (1974), Fassbinder himself plays a character who is virtually haunted by the gaze, as if to call dramatically into question his own position of apparent visual control. That film begins with a crane shot down from the sky above a circus to the window of a police car waiting near the stage, where Fox the Talking Head (Fassbinder) and a group of female strippers are being introduced to the audience by Klaus (Karl Scheydt), the “ring-master.” We thus look initially at Fox from the point of view of the police officers inside the car, whose eyes might be said to “stand in” for the gaze. After Fox wins the lottery, it is Max (Karlheinz Böhm), the antiques dealer, who takes over this function. He is shown conspicuously and at times ceremonially looking on while Fox meets Eugen (Peter Chatel) and Philip (Harry Baer), takes a mud bath at a man’s gym, and breaks up with Eugen. Max’s presence is particularly resistant to a naturalistic reading on the last of these occasions; it is, indeed, inexplicable in any terms other than the specular. He silently accompanies Fox and Eugen as they descend the blue neon-lit escalators of what is presumably a subway station,

sometimes following at a distance, sometimes positioning himself in proximity to one of the other two characters, but always a necessary but diegetically redundant witness.

At least two other Fassbinder films suggest that it is no more possible to die without a confirming gaze than it is to assume an identity. Having fallen asleep in one of the empty offices in Saitz's apartment building, the central character of *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978) is awakened by the entrance of a man attaching a rope to the ceiling of the room in order to hang himself. That man invites Erwin (Volker Spengler) to watch him die, and as he falls limply from the rope the camera holds on Erwin's attentive face, back-lit against a lurid red. Similarly, the "Epilogue" to *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) builds to a crescendo with the crucifixion of Franz Biberkopf (Günther Lamprecht), an event which assumes the status of a specular extravaganza. Here it is not only the film's protagonist who is "on stage," but the gaze itself, dispersed across the crowd assembled around the cross in a range of historical costumes, their eyes and hands raised theatrically to the dying man.

Elsaesser argues that what is articulated through this constant foregrounding of the look is a subjectivity specific to fascism, whose prototype is "the German petit-bourgeois, identifying himself with the State, and making a public spectacle of his good behavior and conformism" (544). While I am reluctant to minimize any argument which facilitates an historical understanding of subjectivity, it does seem to me that this curious solicitation of the gaze has less to do with fascism than with Fassbinder's refusal to commute exteriority into interiority—his refusal, that is, to naturalize identity by concealing its external scaffolding.

Fassbinder's cinema does more than exteriorize the gaze; it also separates it from its usual support, the look, a dislocation which has extreme consequences for sexual difference. No character within that cinema, male or female, is ever represented as possessing the gaze, regardless of how central his or her look happens to be to the articulation of the visual field. What films like *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and *Fox and His Friends* oblige us to see is that although the look of a character or a group of characters may masquerade as the gaze for another character, that imposture is made possible only through the propping of the look upon the gaze. *Four Fundamental Concepts* stresses not only the otherness of the gaze, but its distinctness from what Lacan calls the "eye," or what I have been calling the "look." (The French language does not, of course, sustain my distinction, offering only one word—*le regard*—in place of the two primary English signifiers of vision: look and gaze.)

Although the gaze might be said to be “the presence of others as such,”<sup>17</sup> it is by no means coterminous with any individual viewer, or group of viewers. It issues “from all sides,” whereas the eye “[sees] only from one point.” Moreover, its relationship to the eye is sufficiently antinomic that Lacan can describe it as “triumph[ing]” over the look.<sup>18</sup> The gaze is “unapprehensible,”<sup>19</sup> i.e. impossible to seize or get hold of. The relationship between eye and gaze is thus analogous in certain ways to that which links penis and phallus; the former can stand in for the latter, but can never approximate it. Lacan makes this point with particular force when he situates the gaze outside the voyeuristic transaction, a transaction within which the eye would seem most to aspire to a transcendental status, and which has consequently provided the basis, within feminist film theory, for an equation of the male voyeur with the gaze.<sup>20</sup> *Four Fundamental Concepts* suggests, on the contrary, that it is at precisely that moment when the eye is placed to the keyhole that it is most likely to find itself subordinated to the gaze. At this moment, observes Lacan, “a gaze surprises [the subject] in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to shame” (84). The subject who thus “feels himself surprised,” Lacan adds, is the subject who is “sustaining himself in a function of desire” (85). What this crucial passage from *Four Fundamental Concepts* suggests is that if the gaze always exceeds the look, the look might also be said to exceed the gaze—to carry a libidinal supplement which relegates it, in turn, to a scopic subordination. The gaze, in other words, remains outside desire, the look stubbornly within.

Fassbinder does more than distinguish between the gaze and the characters who at times function as its representative. He goes so far at times as to suggest an equation between “look” and “lack,” thereby further complicating our understanding of cinema’s scopic regime. His films oblige the look to acknowledge itself not only as a carrier of libido, but as a signifier of castration. They refuse to cover over the void which is at the core of subjectivity, a void which gives rise not only to anxiety, but to desire. In *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, for instance, to which I will return in a few moments, there are characters whose look functions less to confirm or deny another’s identity by standing in for the gaze than to express an erotic yearning. It is in this way that the women stare at Ali in the bar he frequents, and that Emmi watches him when he takes a shower in her apartment. Even more striking in this respect are the looks directed toward the figure of Franz (Harry Baer) in *Gods of the Plague* (1969), not only by Johanna (Hanna Schygulla) and Margarethe (Margarethe von Trotta), but by the waitress in the cafe he visits at the beginning of the film.

As Franz enters the cafe, the camera adopts a position to the

waitress's immediate right, the viewfinder so close to her face as almost to graze her skin (Figure 3–1a). Franz stands at the counter to her left, using the telephone, behind her in the frame. Although the waitress only turns to look directly at Franz once in this lengthy shot (Figure 3–1b), she is covertly watching him all the time, and the camera insists upon showing what she “sees.” Her look is foregrounded again a few shots later as she places the fresh coffee on a table. Franz inserts a few coins in the jukebox, and the affect which has been produced through this foregrounding of the look finds expression with the first bars of “Here We Go Again,” to which he and the waitress dance.

*Beware of a Holy Whore* (1970), which is organized almost entirely around one-way visual transactions, is another film in which the look circulates independently of the usual sexual boundaries, and without any power to subordinate. Babs (Margarethe Von Trotta) and the make-up “girl” watch two men absorbed in conversation; Eddie Constantine watches Hanna (Hanna Schygulla); Irm (Magdalena Montezuma) watches Jeff (Lou Castel); Jeff watches Ricky (Marquard Bohm); and Ricky watches an unknown woman (Ingrid Caven) at the bar. The camera meanders from person to person, and group to group, sometimes by means of a cut, and at other times through some aleatory movement which parallels the libidinal “drift.” However, the syntactic element which most brilliantly evokes the operations of desire also anchors it intimately to the human look. The element to which I refer—a fast zoom in on the face of a watching character at a moment of pleasure, excitement, or shock—constitutes a reversal of one of the conventional signifiers of vision, a zoom in on what is seen. This reversal, which focuses attention upon the look rather than its object, brings the look emphatically within spectacle. The turning of the look back upon itself—the mimicry on the part of the camera of a scopic drive made suddenly to go “backward”—also suggests its inability both to reach and to subjugate its object, and so inverts the usual scopic paradigm.

Whereas classic cinema equates the exemplary male subject with the gaze, and locates the male eye on the side of authority and the law even when it is also a carrier of desire, *Beware of a Holy Whore* not only extends desire and the look which expresses it to the female subject, but makes the male desiring look synonymous with loss of control, dramatized in the film through hysterical outbursts and the reckless consumption of alcohol. It might thus be said doubly to “feminize” erotic spectatorship, and this despite the fact that the male character who is placed most emphatically on the side of desire is also the director of the film within the film. When, near the conclusion of *Beware of a Holy Whore*, the cameraman comes to the director, Jeff,



**Figure 3-1a**



**Figure 3-1b**



and asks him for instructions about the next day's "shoot," Jeff shows him by holding an imaginary viewfinder in his fingers. Here is the male eye standing in once again for the gaze, but off-handedly and even irritably, as if asked to perform a role in which it can no longer believe. For most of the film Jeff is either engaged in histrionic displays worthy of Petra von Kant—displays which locate him decisively on the side of the spectacle—or impotently looking at and brooding upon the one figure who eludes his amorous calculations.

Fassbinder further denaturalizes identity by emphasizing at every conceivable juncture its imaginary bases. Thus he never misses an opportunity to point the camera at a character's mirror reflection rather than at the character himself or herself, and he shoots almost compulsively through windows, as if to deny any possibility of a direct or immediate access to the object of the camera's scrutiny. In *Despair* (1977) and *Nora Helmer* (1973) the windows are lavishly etched, this ornamentation working against the illusion of depth which represents such an important part of the cinematic *vraisemblance*—against that "impression of reality" to which the classic film aspires. A dazzling series of shots from *Chinese Roulette* (1976) complicates the paradigm further by substituting glass display cases for windows, thus giving glass a three-dimensionality which the characters themselves lack.

As Elsaesser remarks, Fassbinder's characters also "endlessly try to place themselves or arrange others in a configuration that allows them to reexperience the mirror stage" (543). One thinks in this respect not only of Erwin's excitement upon seeing the photograph of himself in the magazine which publishes his interview, a photograph which affords a momentary conviction of identity, but the desperate attempts on the part of Veronika Voss (Rosel Zech) to orchestrate lighting and music in such a way as to create the impression that she "really" is the star which her publicity stills declare her to be. There is also the celebrated moment in *Lili Marlene* (1980) when Willi (Hanna Schygulla) lying on the bed in her newly acquired white apartment, and basking in the borrowed glory of her stage persona, kisses her own image in the mirror in a euphoric double *méconnaissance*.<sup>22</sup> In a much earlier film, *The American Soldier* (1970), a homosexual gypsy named Tony El Gitano (Ulli Lommel) attempts to seduce Ricky (Karl Scheydt), the Killer, without recourse to the usual lures of touch, smell, or taste. Instead, he undresses in front of a mirror, with his back to Ricky, as if to suggest that he is offering his image in place of his body (Figure 3-2). Significantly, El Gitano's subsequent death is recorded as precisely the loss of this reflection; as Ricky fires his gun, El Gitano falls to the bed, leaving his fantasmatic murderer in sole "possession" of the mirror.



Figure 3–2

However, it is *Gods of the Plague* which holds subject and ideal image at the most extreme distance from each other, and which hence attests most eloquently to the latter's recalcitrant exteriority. Pinned on the wall over Margarethe's bed is an enormous poster of a blonde woman's face, presumably a blown-up advertisement. The face bears a sufficiently close resemblance to Margarethe as to make evident even to the casual viewer that the poster represents the mirror in which that character sees herself. However, whenever Margarethe appears in the same frame as the larger-than-life woman, she is not only dwarfed, but diminished by the comparison (Figure 3–3). This image is also central to the film's libidinal transactions. At a key moment in the film, Günther (Günther Kaufmann), Franz, and Margarethe form an intimate grouping in Margarethe's bedroom prior to having sex, and talk about traveling to Greece. "We don't need money," says Franz, and Günther adds: "Because we're in love." As Günther utters these words, he embraces the poster above the bed, his body held in a spread-eagle position against the female face (Figure 3–4). This telling gesture suggests that it is not just Margarethe who views herself through that idealizing portrait, but Günther and Franz



Figure 3-3

as well—that *it* is the cause and support of love, the terrain across which the two men meet.

Margarethe is not the only character in *Gods of the Plague* who sustains her identity through constant reference to an external representation. Johanna (Hanna Schygulla), who is a chanteuse in a bar called the Lola Montes, keeps a movie poster in her dressing room which depicts a still photograph of Marlene Dietrich, prototype of all of Fassbinder's torch singers, in what would appear to be *The Devil Is A Woman* (Figure 3-5). Later in the film Franz and Margarethe go into a shop to buy a poster which they pin up in the hall of their apartment, and which henceforth serves as *his* narcissistic support—a poster, that is, of King Ludwig, an epicene historical “personality” whom Baer, the actor playing Franz, would subsequently go on to perform in Syberberg's film, *Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972).

The insistent specularization of the male subject in Fassbinder's cinema functions not only to desubstantialize him, but to prevent any possibility of mistaking his penis for the phallus, a dislocation which is at the center of Fassbinder's “aesthetics of pessimism.” There is ultimately no affirmation more central to our present symbolic order,



Figure 3-4

yet at the same time more precariously maintained, than the fiction that the exemplary male subject is adequate to the paternal function. This affirmation rests upon the negation of the negativity at the heart of all subjectivity—a negation of the lack installed by language, and compounded in all sorts of ways by sexuality, class, race, and history. Fassbinder not only refuses to give us male characters who might in any way be eligible for “exemplariness,” focusing always upon figures who are erotically, economically, and/or racially marginal, but he obsessively de-phallicizes and at times radically de-idealizes the male body, a project which at least in one film—*In a Year of Thirteen Moons*—leads to a corresponding psychic disintegration expressive of the absolute annihilation of masculinity.

Although an extremely early film, *Gods of the Plague* is in this respect fully congruent with Fassbinder’s later texts. Franz Walsh, innovatively rendered by Baer, can perhaps best be characterized as a “limp” male subject. He holds himself as though he were literally bereft of “backbone,” whether walking on the street or sitting at the dinner table, and at one point he huddles on the floor in an infantile posture for at least three minutes of screen time, listening to a nonsensical children’s record. As is so frequently the case in Fassbinder’s films,



Figure 3–5

Franz's character is metaphorically reinscribed through an inanimate object, a rag doll which hangs lifelessly from the ceiling of Margarethe's hall (Figure 3–6).

An important scene near the beginning of the film speaks even more eloquently to Franz's flaccidity. Rescuing him on the street from a group of angry assailants, Magdalena takes him home with her and attempts to seduce him. Franz remains completely inert, despite Magdalena's best efforts, but eventually she maneuvers him onto the bed, where she struggles with his remaining items of clothing. Two extraordinary shots describe what is in effect a sexual pietà: In the first one, Franz sprawls on the bed to the left of Magdalena, his legs on her lap. A reverse shot follows, unmotivated by any diegetic look; in it, the camera takes up a position on the other side of the bed, so that Franz's head occupies the right front frame, and Magdalena's the left rear frame. This second shot accentuates the unnatural, almost Mannerist deployment of the male body, which connotes a passivity akin to death. Franz's eyes are turned away from the woman who holds his lower limbs, and, as both shots indicate, his penis is completely detumescent (Figure 3–7a thru 3–7b).

*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* articulates the marginality of its central male



Figure 3-6

character according to a different logic than does *Gods of the Plague*, focusing upon an Arab *Gastarbeiter* rather than a member of the German underclass. However, once again it is the male rather than the female body which constitutes the object of cinematic fascination, and once again that body is stripped of the usual accoutrements of masculinity. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* displays both to the diegetic and the extra-diegetic eye a body which is barred, by virtue of its skin pigmentation, from representing the phallus, at least within the film's contemporary German context. However, if that body is the privileged object of the gaze, it has the same status for the look; it is the locus, that is, of libidinal investment as well as a kind of social surveillance. (The same, I should note, could also be said of Franz in *Gods of the Plague*, whose "limpness" paradoxically makes him the cynosure of all female eyes.)

In a crucial scene late in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, the camera takes up residence in the bathroom of Emmi's apartment while Ali (El Hedi Ben Salem) takes a shower. Although we are made visual accessories to that event, we are never permitted to glance directly at Ali; the film shows only the image of his body reflected from the thighs up in an obliquely angled mirror hanging on the wall next to the medicine



**Figure 3-7a**



**Figure 3-7b**



**Figure 3–8**

cabinet (Figure 3–8). As in *The American Soldier*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* thus suggests that it is not so much the body itself as the representation of the body which constitutes erotic spectacle, and once again the form which that representation takes is almost classically feminine. This shot of Ali's mirror reflection is repeated four times, with slight variations. After its first citation, which remains unclaimed by any diegetic onlooker, Emmi (Brigitte Mira) enters the room, and what we see is henceforth what she ostensibly sees (Figure 3–9). Her only remark—"You're very handsome"—makes explicit the desire in her look. Ali smiles at her in the mirror, with the modesty of someone whose pleasure in himself is entirely dependent upon the pleasure another takes in him, in a re-enactment of that peculiarly non-narcissistic "narcissism" which Freud associates with the classic female subject. (In one of his metapsychological essays, Freud observes of "such women" that they love themselves "with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them.")<sup>23</sup>

The second scene which works both to specularize and to sexualize Ali occurs after he and Emmi return from their vacation, and in it the desiring look is complexly imbricated with the gaze. Emmi invites two of her co-workers up to her apartment, and introduces them to





**Figure 3-9**

her husband. The women circle around Ali, touching his biceps while murmuring, “Terrific . . . and such nice, soft skin” (Figure 3-10). It is not only the attention which they lavish on the black man’s body which de-phallicizes him—an attention which strays far from the organ to which male identity is pinned, dispersing itself across the entire body in a reprise of female sexuality—but the way they exchange him amongst themselves. If many of Fassbinder’s other films abound with scenes over which “Women on the Market” might well be emblazoned, this scene should surely be entitled “Man on the Market.”

The film’s tone toward all of this is heavily ironic, but the camera itself insists upon Ali’s specular status in a closely adjacent scene. Distressed by his treatment at the hands of Emmi and her colleagues, he abruptly leaves home, ending up at the apartment of Barbara (Barbara Valentin), owner of the Arab bar. The first shot inside that apartment shows him, in extreme long shot, sitting on Barbara’s bed, his head downcast. Because the camera is situated in the hallway, outside the doorway of the bedroom, and because the bed is placed in front of orange curtains which frame both it and a wide window, Ali is doubly framed, even—one might say—“on-stage” (Figure 3-11).



Figure 3–10

In the next shot of the same room, which represents a later point in time, Ali lies on the same bed, face down. As Barbara enters the apartment, and goes into the bathroom to wash, Ali stands, undresses, and faces the camera with his arms slightly raised, as if offering himself up to the gaze (Figure 3–12). Barbara enters the frame from the left, turns off the light, walks over to Ali, briefly embraces him, and falls down on the bed with him. Illuminated by a shaft of light, Ali can be seen to lie passively on top of her. The shot continues for approximately sixteen more seconds, during which nothing moves but Barbara's arm.

A number of questions pose themselves with a certain insistence at this juncture: What is the relationship of the erotic specularization of Ali to the gaze which both sustains him as subject, and appears as the agency of his social oppression? Is it a simple extension of that gaze, or a form of resistance to it? And how are we to read the conclusion of the film, which reunites Emmi to Ali only by confining the second of those characters to a hospital, apart from its obvious reference to the final scene of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)?

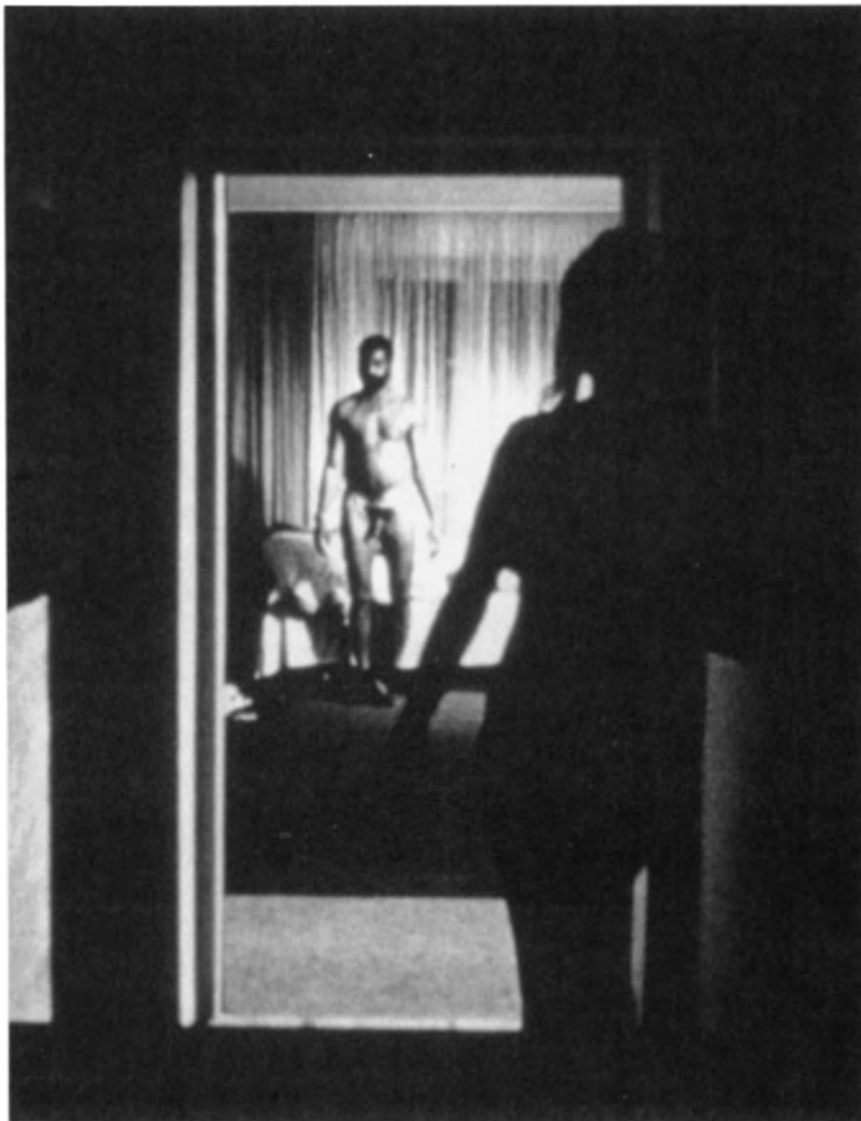
I suggested earlier that unlike the gaze, the look foregrounds the



**Figure 3–11**

desiring subjectivity of the figure from whom it issues, a subjectivity which pivots upon lack, whether or not that lack is acknowledged. In the scene involving Emmi's co-workers, the look attempts to deny the void upon which it rests both through a sadistic identification with the gaze, and through the projection of insufficiency onto Ali. However, in the scene in Barbara's apartment the gaze, as inscribed through the elaborately framing shots of a camera which initially insists upon its autonomy from human vision, is redefined through its alignment with Barbara's desiring and accepting look. Although the film specularizes and eroticizes Ali, and in the process further feminizes a character who is already, by virtue of his blackness, estranged from dominant representation, it also directs desire toward him, through the agency of the look.

I say "directs desire toward him" rather than referring to Ali as the "object of desire" because that latter rhetorical construction has encouraged what seems to me a gross misunderstanding of how women are represented within dominant cinema, a misunderstanding that I am reluctant to extend to the figure of Ali. If feminist theory has reason to lament that system of representation, it is not because



**Figure 3-12**

woman so frequently functions as the *object* of desire (we all function simultaneously as subject and object), but because the male look both transfers its own lack to the female subject, and attempts to pass itself off as the gaze. The problem, in other words, is not that men direct desire toward women in Hollywood films, but that male desire is

so consistently and systematically imbricated with projection and control. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* begins to make it possible to distinguish between those two things, by differentiating as it at times does between the look and the gaze.

It is perhaps obvious by now to the reader that there is still a missing term in this analysis, a term capable of accounting for the social meaning which is assumed by Ali's body even at moments when there is no diegetic viewer present, such as the hallway shot I discussed a moment ago. The gaze confirms and sustains the subject's identity, but it is not responsible for the form which that identity assumes; it is merely the imaginary apparatus through which light is projected onto the subject, as Lacan suggests when he compares it to a camera. We have yet to account for that agency which determines what the viewer sees when he or she adopts a position behind the "camera," if I may extend Lacan's metaphor—for what makes Ali, for instance, the very "picture" of social and sexual marginality. My search for this missing term leads me always back to the same three diagrams from *Four Fundamental Concepts* (see 91 and 106), diagrams which also further clarify the relation of subject to gaze:

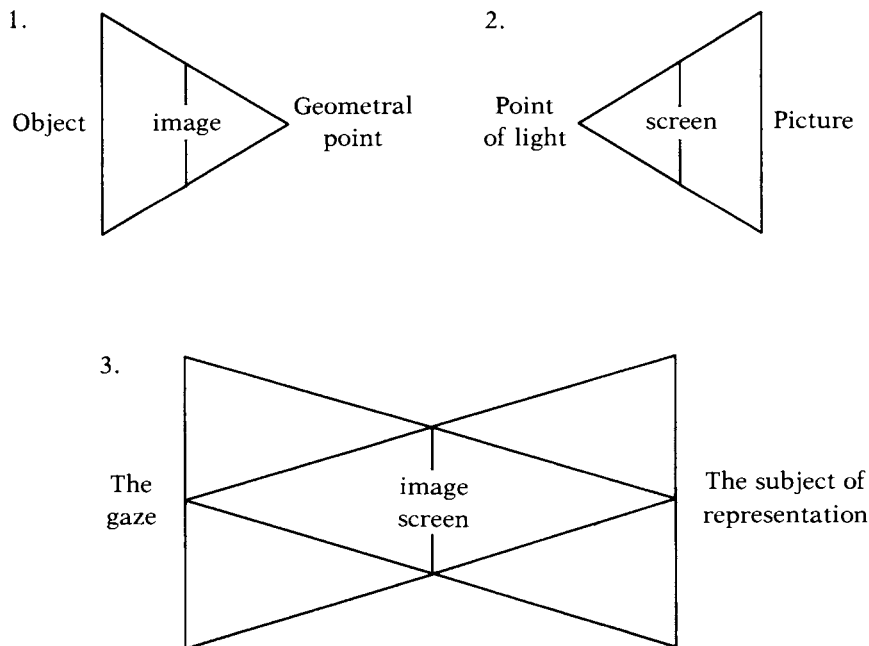


Diagram 1 appears at first to offer a very familiar paradigm, one perfectly in keeping with traditional accounts of geometrical perspec-

tive. The site marked “geometral point” would seem to designate the place from which the artist would survey the object to be painted through the mediating frame of the image. Alberti, whom one can imagine deploying exactly the same diagram, would account for the image as that transparent pane of glass through which the Renaissance artist was to see the object, and onto which—the pane of glass turning into a canvas—he was to draw it.<sup>24</sup> This account of geometrical perspective conflates eye and gaze; the artist serenely surveys the world, whose optical laws he commands.

Lacan, however, whose work stands as a monumental challenge to all such notions of mastery and immediacy, clearly wants us to understand both image and geometral point rather differently. Diagram 1, which articulates the field of vision from the point of view of the one-who-looks, situates the looking subject at the site marked “geometral point.” In occupying this position, the eye emerges from what Lacan calls the “function of *seeingness*” (82), which both precedes and antedates it, and which thus always exceeds it. Rather than representing the locus of mastery, the geometral point is only a “partial dimension in the field of the gaze” (88), one constituted by the straight lines along which light moves. Lacan further diminishes the importance of the perspectival model by suggesting that it has so little to do with vision that it could be understood by a blind man—that it has less to do with vision than space. He also goes on to stress the irradiating properties of light over those which ostensibly convey the object to the viewer. Finally, as we will see, he shows the intervening image to have nothing in common with Alberti’s pane of glass. Consequently, to the degree that the viewer imagines him or herself the agent of vision, he or she is caught within the snares of a scopic Cartesianism, held prey to the belief that “seeing” constitutes “being” (86).

A peculiar feature of geometrical perspective encourages a further deconstruction of the Albertian paradigm, and one which is very much in the spirit of *Four Fundamental Concepts*. That visual system works by inverting the triangle articulated in diagram 1. Whereas the latter fans out from the geometral point, the constitution of depth of field within visual representation requires that linear planes which are widely separated in the foreground converge at a seemingly distant vanishing point. That vanishing point might thus be said to reinscribe the geometral point into the “far” reaches of the representation. In so doing, it calls radically into question the possibility of separating vision from the image—of placing the spectator *outside* the spectacle, in a position of detached mastery. The gaze thus gives way to the eye, and the eye, perhaps even more drastically, to the geometral point,

for at the juncture where planar lines converge within a perspectival painting, drawing, or photograph, it is precisely the viewer him or herself who might be said to “vanish” or “fade away.” All that remains is the inverted inscription of that triangle which pre-and post-dates the subject, what might be called the viewer as function. Lacan’s reading of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* thus provides an implicit meta-commentary not only on the irreducible alterity of the gaze, but on the disappearance of the viewing subject at the perspectival vanishing point. Holbein’s painting, he explains, “makes visible for us . . . the subject as annihilated in the form . . . of castration . . . It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death’s head” (88–89, 92).

Lacan does not say whether diagram 1 is to be understood primarily as a mapping of the viewer’s visual relation to the object, or as a mapping of his or her relation to the image. However, since it is impossible to see the object except through the image, both are presumably at issue. Diagram 1 would thus seem to constitute a vehicle for articulating the viewer’s relation both to “reality,” and to that by means of which we apprehend it.

Diagram 2 represents the subject no longer as a viewer standing at the site of the gaze or geometral point, but rather as the object of the gaze. (It is crucial to understand that for Lacan it is impossible to occupy the first of these triangles without being imbricated at the same time in the second, which is the chief reason why he superimposes them in diagram 3.) In diagram 2, the gaze is indicated through the radically disembodied and de-anthropomorphizing phrase, “point of light,” which conjures up once again the metaphor of the camera. Although the point of light occupies the apex of the second triangle, as does the geometral point in triangle 1, the two are not to be equated. Diagram 2 *inverts* diagram one, situating the subject at the *wide* end of the triangle. In positioning the subject at the site of the “picture,” Lacan thus indicates that he is now concerned with that figure as *spectacle* rather than as viewer.

Intervening between gaze or “point of light” and subject or “picture” is something which corresponds spatially to the “image” in diagram 1, but which Lacan dubs the “screen.” Although *Four Fundamental Concepts* does not here explicitly invoke Alberti, one of the definitions it offers of the screen opposes it implicitly to the latter’s transparent pane of glass. The screen, Lacan insists, is opaque, and hence intraversable (96). The subject who occupies the site of the picture thus seemingly has no choice but to assume the shape predetermined by the screen. (As *Seminar XI* puts it, “if [the subject is] anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen” [97].) In a later passage, Lacan characterizes the screen in terms which are directly reminis-

cent of the mirror stage, as an “imaginary” mapping (107). At the same time, though, *Four Fundamental Concepts* makes clear that more is at issue here than the dyadic relation of the subject to its literal reflection. Diagram 2 is instead centrally concerned with the process whereby the subject assumes the form of a representation, or—to state the case somewhat differently—*becomes a picture*, a process which involves *three* rather than *two* terms: subject, screen, and gaze.

The screen cannot be understood apart from the closely linked concept of mimicry, which Lacan loosely derives from Roger Caillois. In “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Caillois attempts to account theoretically for the process whereby certain insects assume the morphology and coloration of other insects or plant life. Since predators are not deceived by this mimicry, Caillois dispenses quickly with the notion that it serves defensive purposes. He argues instead that it attests to a “disturbance in the perception of space.”<sup>25</sup> The “overwhelming tendency to imitate” found in primitive organisms (27) speaks to a “*depersonalization by assimilation to space*,” hence to a “decline in the feeling of personality and life” (30). For the author of “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” mimicry involves taking a step backward in the chain of being, retreating toward a “reduced existence” (32).

Significantly, Caillois at one point describes mimicry as a photography at the level of the object rather than at that of the image—as “a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or better *teleplasty*” (23). Although he here omits to indicate the apparatus through which this unusual photography occurs, his account of the process whereby an organism assumes the appearance of something external to itself resonates within *Four Fundamental Concepts*. Lacan also at one point illustrates mimicry, and hence the subject-screen relation, through an example which is drawn directly from Caillois:

Let us take an example chosen almost at random . . . that of the small crustacean known as *caprella* . . . When such a crustacean settles in the midst of those animals . . . what does it imitate? It imitates what, in that quasi-plant animal known as the bryozoaires, is a stain—at a particular phase of the bryozoaires, an intestinal loop forms a stain, at another phase, there functions something like a colored centre. It is to this stain shape that the crustacean adapts itself. It becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture. This, strictly speaking, is the origin of mimicry. And, on this basis, the fundamental dimensions of the inscription of the subject in the picture appear infinitely more justified than a more hesitant guess might suggest at first sight. (99)



Finally, Lacan emphasizes, with Caillois, that mimicry serves no inherently protective purpose. As the passage I have just quoted would suggest, however, the uses to which *Four Fundamental Concepts* puts the concept of mimicry exceed Caillois's model.

In the first of the senses in which Lacan uses the word, mimicry signifies not assimilation to space, or the loss of individuation, but rather a *visual articulation*. As diagram 2 indicates, that visual articulation is effected at the moment that the subject is "photographed" in the guise of the screen. Lacan says of this kind of mimicry not only that it involves the reproduction of an image, but that "at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it" (100). He thereby suggests that it hinges less upon parody or deformation than upon the passive duplication of a preexisting image.

*Four Fundamental Concepts* posits a second kind of mimicry, but one which is presumably fully available only to the subject capable of acknowledging the split between its "being" and its "semblance," or, to put the matter somewhat differently, between its "being" and its specular image. Whereas Lacan extends the first kind of mimicry to the entire animal kingdom, he maintains that the second kind, which he associates with "travesty, camouflage, [and] intimidation" (99), is limited to the human subject: "Only the subject," we are told, "—the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man—is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation" (107).<sup>26</sup> This passage reiterates the defining and structuring role of the screen, while at the same time implying that it might be possible for a subject who knows his or her necessary specularity to exaggerate and/or denaturalize the image/screen; to use it for protective coloration; or to transform it into a weapon. *Four Fundamental Concepts* thus provides one of those rare junctures within the Lacanian oeuvre where it becomes possible to impute to the subject some kind of agency, albeit one hedged about with all kinds of qualifications and limitations, not the least of which is the impossibility of that subject ever achieving either self-presence or "authenticity."

Lacan's third diagram explicitly conflates the image in diagram 1 with the screen in diagram 2. The slippage between those two terms suggests to me that by "screen" he in fact means the image or group of images through which identity is constituted. What we are asked to understand by this last diagram is that it is at the level of what is variously called the "image" and the "screen" rather than at that of

the gaze that the subject's identity is established. Since the gaze is ultimately no more than what diagram 2 calls a "point of light," it has no power to constitute subjectivity except by projecting the screen on to the object. In other words, just as Lacan's infant can see him or herself only through the intervention of an external image, the gaze can "photograph" the object only through the grid of the screen.

Although *Four Fundamental Concepts* does not do so, it seems to me crucial that we insist upon the ideological status of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality. The possibility of "playing" with these images then assumes a critical importance, opening up as it does an arena for political contestation. Lacan indicates some of the forms which that contestation can assume when he defines the screen through one of those proliferating catalogues of nouns of which he is so fond. It is, we learn, "something . . . like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield," which "the being gives of himself, or receives from the other [my emphasis]"<sup>27</sup> (107). *Four Fundamental Concepts* thus suggests once again that the screen can assume the status of a shield or defensive weapon. Alternatively, it can become a "lure" or a tool of seduction in a battle of friendlier persuasion. Elsewhere in the same passage, Lacan maintains that mimicry can even assume the proportions of a "struggle to the death" (107).

It is imperative that we keep in mind when reading *Four Fundamental Concepts* that the subject can only be "photographed" through the frame of culturally intelligible images. Those attempts at a collective self-redefinition which rely upon masquerade, parody, inversion, and bricolage will consequently be more successful than those aimed at the *ex nihilo* creation of new images, since they work upon the existing cultural imaginary. It is presumably for this reason that Lacan speaks of "playing" with the screen rather than replacing it with a new one. In positioning its practitioners so tensely in relation both to dominant representation and the gaze, these strategies also work to maintain a productive distance between the subject and its "self," a distance which is indispensable to further change.

The third diagram goes even further in its deconstruction of the eye than I have so far suggested, necessitating in the process a still more drastic reformulation of the paradigms through which we have recently theorized cinema's scopic regime. Lacan speaks at one point in *Four Fundamental Concepts* about the "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function of the gaze" (89), a function which is implicit in the latter's status as light, and which helps to explain why it must be

represented not only as the narrow end of one triangle, but as the wide end of the other. But more is at issue here than the dispersibility of light. Diagram 3 insists once again upon the non-coincidence of the look and the gaze, now not simply by showing the former to be at most a representative of the latter, but by situating the one at the opposite pole from the other. Lacan actually goes so far as to locate the gaze at the site of what the first diagram has shown to be the *object* of vision, and the verbal text provides additional confirmation that this is indeed how we are to read the superimposed triangles of the subsequent diagram. "The phenomenologists have succeeded in articulating with precision, and in the most disconcerting way," remarks Lacan in "Anamorphosis," "that I see *outside*, that perception is not in me, that it is *on the objects that it apprehends* [my emphasis]" (80). Elsewhere in *Seminar XI*, Lacan makes clear that what is at issue in diagram 3 is the conflation of gaze and spectacle, a conflation which is made on the basis of what might be called the spectacle's "lit up" quality. Through the luminousness which imparts specularity to the object, it in effect looks back at the viewer, much like the sardine can in Lacan's anecdote:

... can we not ... grasp that which has been eluded, namely, the function of the gaze? I mean, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty points this out, that we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. ...

The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing. (74–75)<sup>28</sup>

Lacan goes on a moment later, in a passage of staggering implications for film theory, to compare the gaze not to the male look, but to woman-as-spectacle:

At the level of the phenomenal experience of contemplation, this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows.

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic, does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too. (75)

What this passage makes clear is that since the gaze always emerges for us within the field of vision, and since we ourselves are always being photographed by it even as we look, all binarizations of spectator and spectacle mystify the scopic relations in which we are held. The subject is generally both, as indicated by the right-hand side of diagram 3. Moreover, although our look can never function as the

gaze for ourselves, it can have that metaphoric function for others, even at the moment that we emerge as spectacle. Exhibitionism unsettles because it threatens to expose the duplicity inherent in every subject, and every object—to reveal the subject's dependence for definition upon the image/screen, and his/her capacity for being at the same time within the picture, and a representative for the Other of the gaze. It is thus possible to superimpose in an inverted form not only diagram 1 on diagram 2, but my diagram 3 on your diagram 3, which is presumably why Lacan speaks more than once about the immanence of the gaze within the picture (“in the picture, something of the gaze is always manifested” [101]).

Diagram 3 suggests that if the viewer cannot see the object without the intervention of the image/screen, neither does he or she have a direct visual access to the gaze. In both cases the relationship is mediated by a “mask, double, [or] envelope,” and in both instances “misrecognition” would seem to be the inevitable outcome. Foucault has made it possible for us to apprehend some of the cultural representations of the gaze which have been put in place since the end of the eighteenth century, representations which are complexly bound up with the medical and penal institutions.<sup>29</sup> Feminist film theory has foregrounded a number of others through its interrogation of the male look.<sup>30</sup> However, the interrogation has not always been pushed far enough. We have at times assumed that dominant cinema's scopic regime could be overturned by “giving” woman the gaze, rather than by exposing the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency, or of him or herself escaping specularly.

According to the reading of diagram 3 which I have proposed here, the field of vision puts all three of the Lacanian registers into play. The gaze occupies two domains simultaneously; in its capacity as light, and as that which is foreclosed from the subject, it partakes of the real,<sup>31</sup> but in its status as “the presence of others as such,” it clearly belongs to the symbolic. The relationship of subject to screen, on the other hand, is articulated within the domain of the imaginary. However, “captation” can occur only with the complicity of the gaze; the subject can only achieve an invisible join with those images or screens through which the gaze in its capacity as “others as such” looks at him or her. That most apparently claustral of all psychic transactions—“self-recognition” is thus mediated by a third term.

Foucault's account of the gaze does not generally intersect with Lacan's, but it enriches *Four Fundamental Concepts* immeasurably when it suggests that the field of vision may have been variously articulated at different historical moments. *Discipline and Punish* distinguishes between two “modalities of power” according to their

very different scopic regimes. Within the earlier of these modalities, which was organized around the sovereign and his force, "power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested . . . Those on whom it was exercised could remain in the shade." Privilege, in other words, was concentrated at the site of the spectacle rather than that of the gaze. (Twentieth-century fascism has often deployed spectacle in a similar way, as Elsaesser suggests in his discussion of Fassbinder.) However, within the next great power modality, which Foucault associates with discipline, specularly implied subjection; power exercised itself through its invisibility, while "at the same time [imposing] on those whom it [subjected] a principle of compulsory visibility" (187).

Although it cannot be immediately reconciled to the Foucauldian paradigm, J.C. Flugel's notion of the Great Masculine Renunciation also encourages us to think in historically specific ways about our present scopic regime. It is Flugel's contention that prior to the late eighteenth century, masculinity aligned itself with sartorial extravagance—that given the social and economic possibility to do so, it invariably chose to "command" rather than to "lay claim" to the gaze. However, since that time, phallic "rectitude" has increasingly associated itself with sobriety of dress, and the male subject's specularly and exhibitionism have been projected onto his female counterpart.<sup>32</sup>

These two accounts do more than alert us to the historical vicissitudes of the field of vision. They further denaturalize the alignment of masculinity with the gaze. They also indicate that power can invade spectacle, and disinvest from the gaze—that spectacle, in other words, can function phallically. Feminism must consequently demand more than the "return" of specularly and exhibitionism to the male subject. What must be demonstrated over and over again is that all subjects, male or female, rely for their identity upon the repertoire of culturally available images, and upon a gaze which, radically exceeding the libidinally vulnerable look, is not theirs to deploy.

I have indicated some of the ways in which Fassbinder's cinema anticipates the political program that I have just outlined. Not only does it show subjectivity to be at all points dependent both upon gaze and image/screen, but it demonstrates that the look, male or female, is itself within spectacle. It also works to transform the images or screens through which we see the male subject. This last struggle is conducted very much at the level of corporeal representation, suggesting that although the phallus is not the penis, it nonetheless derives its material support from that organ. We do not remember often enough that in "Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire"

Lacan himself defines the phallus as “the image of the penis.”<sup>33</sup> Fassbinder’s films work to ruin or deface that image.

Texts like *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *Fox and His Friends*, *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* consequently make the male body the point at which economic, racial, and sexual oppression are registered. As Wiegand has remarked, Fassbinder—perhaps more than any other filmmaker—“has understood the human body as an arena of social conflict,”<sup>34</sup> and it seems to me that this is precisely how we are to interpret the ulcer which afflicts Ali at the conclusion of the film which bears his name, Hans’s heart attack in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971), and the symptoms from which Fox suffers in *Fox and His Friends*.

Fassbinder’s curious response to the racism of contemporary Germany—a response which evacuates the masculinity and insists upon the vulnerability of the *Gastarbeiter*—might seem indicative of precisely that left-wing melancholy of which Dyer has accused him.<sup>35</sup> The crucial point to grasp here, however, is that he refuses to treat the Arab guest worker differently from his white male protagonists—that he refuses to confer upon that figure a positivity which he eschews elsewhere. Fassbinder is unwilling even for a moment to countenance the notion that a black or third world man operates out of an existential plenitude or a self-sufficiency denied to the first world white man, or that such a figure is any less riven by anxiety or desire. Nor is he ever prepared to forego his assault on the phallus, even within a text which is given over as fully as *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* to a critique of racism.

Fassbinder’s cinema also seems to me exemplary in the particular way in which it approaches the issue of the mediating image/screen. The risk implicit in any politics devoted to what might be described as a “representational contestation” is that it will give fresh life to the notion that what is needed are “positive images” of women, blacks, gays, and other disenfranchised groups, images which all too often work to resubstantialize identity, and even at times to essentialize it. Fassbinder’s films refuse simply to resituate the terms of phallic reference. Instead, they evacuate both those terms and the *moi* which is their imaginary correlate. At its most extreme, Fassbinder’s cinema might almost be said to model itself on Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, with its anamorphotic death’s head—to seek to induce in the viewer a recognition of him or herself as “annihilated in the form . . . of castration.”

Since Freud, we have grown accustomed to thinking about lack according to a specular logic, or to state the case rather differently, as the *absence* of a particular visual term. One of the crucial features

of Lacan's redefinition of castration has been to shift it away from this obligatory anatomical referent to the void installed by language. But Lacan might also be said to "visualize" castration, albeit in very different terms from those suggested in "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" or "Female Sexuality." Despite its failure to factor the look into the three diagrams, *Seminar XI* repeatedly locates lack at the level of the eye, defining castration as the alterity of the gaze. Lacan remarks at one point, for instance, that the gaze is "symbolic of what we find on the horizon . . . namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety" (73), and at another that the gaze, "*qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration" (77). *Four Fundamental Concepts* thus extends castration to the male as well as the female subject, and in an ultimately much more satisfactory way than a text like "The Signification of the Phallus" manages to do. *Seminar XI* also makes it possible for us to understand that if the gaze exceeds the look, the look introduces a term in excess of the gaze.

It is Fassbinder rather than Lacan, however, who assists us in conceptualizing a look which would acknowledge its lack rather than seeking to deny it. Films like *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *Gods of the Plague*, and *Beware of a Holy Whore* work as strenuously to maintain castration at the site of the look as they do to situate it at the level of the male body. As I have already suggested, *Beware of a Holy Whore* even articulates a new formal element—a zoom in on the look rather than its object—for enacting something that might best be described as the reverse of that visual transaction described by Freud at the beginning of his essay on fetishism,<sup>36</sup> a look which, rather than locating castration definitively elsewhere, becomes itself the locus of insufficiency.

As a result both of their oppression, their specularization and their forced confrontation with their own lack, Fassbinder's male characters acquire the capacity to become something other than what the male subject has classically been—to slip out from under the phallic sign, away from the paternal function. They may even approach that condition of "beauty" which Fassbinder associates with victimized women.<sup>37</sup> However, his cinema also at times valorizes the suffering which produces these effects, and it is here that his "aesthetics of pessimism" becomes both most politically dangerous and most libidinally complex.

While *Gods of the Plague* presents the viewer with a "limp" male subject, and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* with one who escapes from the gaze to the look only at the cost of a further feminization, neither violates the integrity of that corporeal "envelope" which constitutes

the male body. In two subsequent films, though, *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the assault upon the male body assumes much more aggressive forms. Within the terrifying confines of those two texts, the male body is subjected to sex-change surgery, amputation, torture, and crucifixion, now at the behest of a negativity which is no longer content merely to exteriorize the necessary supports of identity, but which demands a much more corporeal eradication. Chapter 6 will speak at length about the ruination of masculinity within these two films. It will also explore the masochism which alone makes Fassbinder's negativity endurable, generating those moments of ecstasy to which I alluded earlier.

There is, however, much theoretical ground to cover before we return to Fassbinder. Our immediate concern continues to be the distinction between the look and the gaze, a distinction which the novels of Henry James will help us to refine further. Chapter 4 will attempt to demonstrate that when the male look is contextualized within the framework of the primal scene, it represents the site of trauma and dispossession. The next chapter will also map out the terms of a male subjectivity which is very much at odds with the dominant fiction—a male subjectivity located at the intersection of the positive and negative Oedipus complexes, and deprived of conventional sexual “means.”