

Fugitive Physicality and Female Performance in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun, Veronika Voss and Lola*

An era that has lost its gestures is, for that very reason, obsessed with them; for people who are bereft of all that is natural to them, every gesture becomes a fate.

(George Agamben, 1993: 137)

There are few cinemas as distinguished by the choreographic potency of their performances as that of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. From early examples such as *Love is Colder than Death* (1969), or *Gods of the Plague* (1969), his films use the performing body as an organ of intense expression. The careful orchestration of gestures and movements, giving rise to shifting patterns of bodily organisation is a central feature of Fassbinder's film style. This essay explores the way in which three of Fassbinder's films, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), *Veronika Voss* (1981) and *Lola* (1981)¹ portray the physicality of their characters.

Predominantly, the critical attention Fassbinder has received has a strongly historical or biographical perspective, as opposed to a more aesthetic or stylistic one.² The director's dramatic personal life, the role of his films in the evolution of the New German Cinema and their relationship to German history have all been explored extensively. This essay attempts a more overtly aesthetic treatment of the films, looking in particular at the performances of the three female leads. Giorgio Agamben has stated that '[moving] gesture rather than [static] image is the cinematic element' (1993: 138). As such, the sustained physical forcefulness behind these on-screen presences is integral to the films' expressive capacities. Examining the moment-by-moment execution of these performances, developing as a series of movements and gestures, attempts to account for the vital significance of the role of the body in Fassbinder's cinema.

Thomas Elsaesser has recognised Fassbinder's 'body of work' as a simultaneous 'work on the body' (1996: 255). In these films, the performing body is partly what allows for the attempted negotiations of the great psychological traumas which lie at their centres. By striving to provide a sense of ontological consistency and physical coherence, performance attempts to stave off the threatening movements of the worlds that surround the female protagonists. Elsaesser describes the emotional and psychological experience of trauma as 'something not assimilated, something not integrated in the psychic economy of a subject' (2001: 196). It cannot be situated as part of or within a linear panorama of subjective experience. Thus, the question arises as to how an experience which leaves only traces of absence or a negative of itself can be

expressible. Elsaesser addresses this idea of 'trauma's non-representability' by proposing the possibility of a 'different kind of hermeneutics', one which is sensible to these traces of absence, understood as a kind of 'negative performative'. The central performances of these films appear to function in such a way. Although disconnected from the direct expression of original traumatic events, they enact the continuation of their forces through gesture and movement. Maria Braun's assertive and repetitive movements announce her tendency to displace the effects of trauma into an upwardly mobile pursuit, both physical and social. Veronika Voss enacts a withdrawal from the outside world in a performance which appears to turn the body in, on and against itself. Finally, Lola expels herself outwards in a violent saturation of expressivity that resists all continuity or coherence. All three women manifest a kind of fugitive physicality, which attempts to disavow raw experience by means of composure, retreat or display.

Maria Braun: Asserting Composure

In Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, the central performance by Hannah Schygulla is powered by an implacable forward motion. She is driven by action geared towards an attempt to fulfil the elusive promise of a marital life with her soldier husband Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch). The opening scene is exemplary in this respect. After the brief wedding ceremony is brought to an abrupt halt by an air raid, Maria is seen searching for her marriage certificate amongst the flurry of other papers scattered in the street by an explosion. She crawls on her hands and knees amongst the rubble and dirt, dressed in her bridal clothes. Maria's struggle to retain proof of the marital tie in these opening moments extends into her struggle to achieve fulfilment in the conjugal relationship throughout the film. The exertions ultimately prove to be redundant, however, as Hermann's presence is ever deferred, first through his apparent death and then through his disappearance. He becomes increasingly remote as the film progresses. Her careful and composed physicality disavows the traumatising movement of the world around her, which postpones and delays the life she strives towards.

Schygulla's physical performance unfolds as a response to this suspenseful position. Her face and deportment create a sense of physical composure and self-determination. She appears as the master of her own body. This composure denies the uncertainty of her position within the film's narrative. Left hanging, she is in a constant condition of expectancy. That which she waits for never develops into material presence. Her performance recalls Benjamin's

observation of Baudelaire, that ‘petrified unrest is ... the formula for the image of ... a life which knows no development’ (1985: 40). Following her husband’s disappearance, only days after their wedding, she is left bereft of purpose. She wanders aimlessly amongst crowds and rubble, searching for a sign of him. This absence weighs heavily, a stifling burden inhibiting her activity. This is visually apparent in the card she wears around her back bearing his name and photograph. She struggles to make her way, the card restraining her movements.



The film’s opening had positioned Maria as a wife, only to rescind this role. She is also initially denied the closure that confirmation of Hermann’s death would have provided. Subsequently, the nature of this physical burden becomes inverted, as the signs of her husband’s absence become sublimated and repressed. The resulting performance enacts a struggle to assert the consistency of her active body, continually belied by the external forces that render such self-determination impossible. This denial, in which Anton Kaes stated, ‘practical survival and accommodation take precedence’ over reflection and confrontation with past events, defers the state of indeterminacy brought about by the absence of her husband (1989: 83). Purposeful physical actions and repetitions become expressive of an inability to engage productively in the activities of mourning and memory. Thus, vocal intonation, gesture and movement become indicative of the sublimation of trauma, as her performance positions her body as a centre for the negative depiction of suspended emotion. Even when she becomes pregnant and loses the child, her body never bears any trace of the event. Its surface is resistant to change or influence.

An exemplary scene occurs upon the return of Maria’s brother-in-law, Willi (Gottfried John), from the Russian front, bringing with him the news of Hermann Braun’s rumoured death. The scene sets up a careful dynamic between characters. They displace their distress into aimless motion. This is figured in particular through the character of Betti (Elizabeth Trissenaar), Maria’s sister, and her relationship with her husband Willi. In direct opposition to Maria, she responds to the failure of her reunion with her husband by turning in on herself. Her physicality and deportment are predominantly static, as her sporadic movements express futility and dejection. Later in the film, it is suggested she suffers from habitual overeating. In such a context, with compositions which are prevalently still, the few carefully placed and choreographed incidences of motion possess an expressive intensity.

The trauma depicted in the scene is twofold, involving the abject failure of the reunion between Willi and Betti, and the revelation of Hermann’s apparent death. The former is expressed powerfully through the inert arrangements and gestures of the characters, which establishes a realm of failed movement and interactions. This is subsequently used

to emphasise the contrasting motility of Maria. Her entrance disturbs this stasis. Her response to Willi’s news is developed through a transition from a brief physical paralysis to an eruption of movement, a process which is emblematic of Maria’s performance in the film as a whole.

The scene begins with a static, stylised tableau-like composition depicting the emotional divisions and tensions between the characters in the frame. This is a powerful image of a dysfunctional family reunion, as the stillness emphasises the breakdown of all interaction between the



characters. Seated in profile, Maria’s mother (Gisela Uhlen), weeping with high-pitched and hollow sobs, is framed on either side by Willi and Betti, Maria’s sister and Willi’s wife. Willi is positioned towards the camera in the foreground to the left of the frame. Obscured but for a section of his torso, he wrings his hands, highlighting the presence of his wedding ring and his unease regarding this reunion with his wife. Alienated and also obscured by shadow in the far right is Betti, who stands disconsolately hanging her head, immobile and facing the wall, with her hands clasped together behind her back. She appears enclosed and cut off, physically unable to reach out beyond herself. The characters all face in opposing directions, unable to look at each other or communicate. Their hands are clasped together, forming individual and insular circuits. They are unable to contact one another or to extend beyond themselves to achieve physical or emotional confrontation. The sense of visual disunity is not absolute, however, as a symmetry is introduced through the positioning of hands. This formal patterning seems imposed and artificial, creating another dimension of physical discordance that seems to belie any sense of spontaneity or individuality. The linked hands become a sign of this shared state of alienation and exclusion. The characters are locked tightly into this static choreography, which denies them the ability to confront one another or interact.

Their inaccessibility to one another is further emphasised through the use of light, which separates them further still. They each belong to a different zone within the shot. The hanging lamp illuminates the mother from above, and her figure appears brightly in the centre of an otherwise dark shot. In contrast, the darkness of Willi’s torso against the vividness of his hands, lit from behind, makes them seem superimposed or disconnected. Betti is disappearing into blackness in the corner, only partially lit on her left side, dissolving to shadow on her right. The impression of physical isolation and disunity conveyed by the arrangement of characters, each frozen in their segment of the shot disables the communal function of space. It does not bring people together but operates divisively, magnifying their differences.

Although Willi’s absence is now resolved for Betti, his return has not provided any sense of reintegration. This is

articulated by the mother, who cries, 'What are you crying for you silly cow? You still have your man. He's standing there in front of you'. He is not in front of her, however. He is still concealed behind her back, as before when she carried his missing person card over her shoulder. Whereas the instability of Maria's more suspenseful position creates a space in which it is possible for her to move, here Willi's return has the effect of inhibiting the motility of Betti.

As the scene progresses, the futility of the few movements Betti does attempt becomes apparent. Her slow pace and dejected posture lack conviction or direction. She tentatively begins to cross the room towards Willi, half-heartedly attempting to unite her body with his in a frantic and fumbling caress that only emphasises their alienation and the redundancy of movement. There is no sense of a meaningful confrontation between the two. It is a failed encounter between separate entities. Betti tries to kiss an immobile and expressionless Willi, whose face is a dead and motionless surface that cannot be contacted. The camera pulls back, retreating into a crack in the plaster of the wall (it appears like a tear in the celluloid). As Willi pulls himself away, we see Betti left alone. Once again, spatial congruity disintegrates as the characters are separated or dislocated from the camera.



As the two separate, Willi begins to describe the vague reports of Hermann's death, 'No one came out they say'. His speech coincides with the return of Maria, whose cheery voice, declaring 'It's me!' almost comes into collision with Willi's dreary one. The delay of Maria's entrance heightens the intensity of the moment. Maria's disembodied voice rings out at the thought of an exciting surprise she bears ('Imagine what I have! No, you won't believe it'), whilst Willi's still reverberates in the space, and with it the knowledge of the horror of the surprise that awaits her.

Her entrance marks a significant change in the nature of the actors' movements. She bustles into a realm of undeveloped or failed movement, introducing a sense of physical unrest. Until this moment, the scene has been composed in terms of alternate static configurations, emphasising the separateness of characters in a sequence of tableaux-like arrangements. Upon her arrival, however, unaccountable eruptions of movement begin to take hold of the characters, as they begin to bounce back and forth between one another in brief groupings and then proceed to displace one another in a series of effusive embraces. The characters enact a passionate overflowing of forces, which are passed on and exchanged from person to person, accompanied by piercing and guttural cries from the women. Shot from the other side of the room, all the characters are compositionally united in the space, if only momentarily. Maria's presence briefly transforms the atmosphere of the room into which she has arrived. The emotions stirred up by Willi's return cannot be left to hang suspended in stillness, but must be displaced into physical

expression, manifested in the discomfiture of these awkward clinches.



Like Betti's attempted embrace of Willi, these are failed emotional transactions. They dissipate as soon as they occur, as physical contact with another is only possible if it is transient and short-lived. The hysterical overflowing here extends beyond that of a joyful reunion, as they bounce awkwardly away from one another. The absence of Hermann and the as yet unspoken news of his death, known by all but Maria, weigh heavily on the image itself, in the emptiness of the space that lies between the characters and Willi's gaze towards Maria. As this brief surge of energy begins to wane, Maria pre-emptively begins to isolate herself, walking over to the sink in the corner. Once again the depiction of space becomes divisive and the choreography of movement more rigid. With Maria on the far right, the others congregate together in a medium close up on the left, depicting the distance that the as yet unarticulated knowledge of Hermann's death puts between them.



Following Willi's blunt announcement regarding Hermann's death, a state of physical paralysis seems to take hold of Maria. Her diminishing sobs come to an abrupt halt and the film cuts back to her, panning down her body to show the tap dripping water onto her wrist and hand. This enigmatic image of running water pouring onto her arm is repeated at the end of the film, upon Hermann's final return. It is suggestive of a numbing of sensation, as though she were trying to dull the feeling in her wrist and hand, her right hand in fact, with her wedding ring clearly visible on her finger. She appears paralysed and immobile, in another tableau. In this brief caesura, all progression and movement break down, her stillness accentuated by the flowing of the water over her frozen hand.

The disjunctive switch from a state of stasis and stillness to the erratic fast motion propelled by Maria's entrance earlier in the scene is here repeated. Following this momentary pause, she abruptly takes on a new purposeful and driven motion. Briefly turning towards the others and

approaching them with slow, trance-like steps, she rapidly turns, ducking through a crack in the wall, to the stairs outside that take her away from the house. She impulsively embarks on trajectory that takes her up and away from the space at the centre of her shock experience, in a movement that figures as an emblem of her motion in the film as a whole. It breaks the reflective tension established by the stillness of the preceding moment. Her body does not display any signs of distress or discomposure. Her face remains blank and her movements controlled. Only her actions suggest her distress – this desire to escape into forgetting.

After she has exited through the gap in the wall, the camera follows Betti to the open window from where Maria is seen quickly climbing the stairs until she is stopped by her mother. The camera does not move with Maria but remains inside the house, looking out of the window, which frames her movement.



This scene is left hanging. The other characters are suspended in the disjunctive cut that takes Maria straight from the house to the bar. Maria's trance-like motion resumes following the cut. She appears in the bar in which she works, and walks to Bill, the black American soldier she has been entertaining there (whom was referred to earlier in the film as 'Braun'). She moves through the crowds of

dancers in a direct and unencumbered fashion, seeming almost doll-like in the rigidity and the blankness of her facial expression. This is a strong contrast with the earlier crowd scene at the train station, in which Maria awkwardly searches for a trace of Hermann, unable to force her way through. Here, the crowd of dancers part as she walks through effortlessly. She approaches Bill, in this American bar and asks in English, 'Will you dance with me, Mr Bill?', immediately assuming a position of motility and self-possession. Her arms hang by her side and she has a neutral face and posture; her body is limp, yet composed.

She is devoid of all signs of emotion other than a sense of physical dejection as she propels her body towards Bill, paying no attention to the surrounding dancers who all turn to watch her. He stands and embraces her in a stilted and awkwardly prolonged fashion. His arms encircle her very slowly, as though to draw out the moment for as long as possible, perhaps suggesting the redundancy of any comfort or consolation. Locked in this clinch, the couple begin to dance on the spot in a gentle rocking motion that again interrupts the stillness, mimicking the displacement of physical paralysis that occurred immediately after she received the news of Hermann's death.

This scene highlights the assertiveness of Maria's physicality and her composure. There are no spontaneous outbursts of emotion figured either through facial expressions or gesture. She remains imperturbable in her composure and her deliberate economy of movement. In the provocative confidence of her physicality, directly leaving the house and approaching Bill, there is self-possession and an excessive composure that is suggestive of a distanciation or affective shock. Whereas the stillness of the earlier part of the scene in the scene function to express and crystallise dramatic tension and prolong affective resonance, here Maria's movement inscribes a deferment of any such sense.

Veronika Voss: Brittle Retreat

Rosel Zech's portrayal of the aging film star Veronika Voss, a fictional icon of the fascist era German cinema, enacts a



'Will you dance with me, Mr Bill?' Maria (Hannah Schygulla) approaches American soldier Bill (George Byrd).

thorough breakdown of the body's capacity for vital movement. Hers is a physical presence that has ceased to function as a positive expressive force. It varies between an agitated sense of fragile self-composure and moments of collapse, in which the body turns on itself, in retreat from the outside world. This variation repeats throughout the film, her body often physically withdrawing, becoming rigid, paralyzed and immobile as she is unable to support her own weight, drawing upon objects around her to sustain her upright posture. On the edge of madness, Voss is tormented by a sense of loss that she cannot articulate, barely recognised by those around her. Consequently, she appears as a figure incapable of sustaining herself physically, her body reflecting a state of psychological collapse, punctuated by a few moments of brittle self-control.

Voss's form is drained by the film's monochromatic settings, desaturating her, denying her a solid presence. Unlike Maria, Voss's physicality is not expressive of sublimated trauma in terms of a compensatory motion that drives her ever forwards. Rather, the film depicts the overt failure of the body as a centre for meaningful action. Next to Maria's purposeful composure, Voss appears brittle and fragile, unable to support or sustain herself independently of external supports. (Twice in the film, her body gives way and collapses onto the floor.) This is particularly evident in the several scenes that take place within in the space of the clinic belonging to the sinister Dr Katz. The doctor keeps Veronika contained at the clinic in order to exploit her financially by perpetuating her morphine addiction. In one instance she crawls close to the floor, becoming almost imperceptible, dressed all in white.

The shot, like many others in the film, has a sharp distinction between the dense, omnipresent blacks and the fugitive, transparent whites. Objects on screen are either very apparent or barely distinguishable from the white background. Voss' physical incapacity cripples her body as an expressive entity, a fact extended into the film's

execution of her presence. By dissolving it from view, her body's expressive power is diminished.



Voss' face, as the gaunt features of Zech are emphasised through the whiteness of her make up and her thinly pencilled eyebrows, also contributes to the elusiveness of her on-screen presence. The translucence of her skin and the sharpness of her bony features create a gaunt and brittle appearance, especially when compared to the bright make up and fleshy look of Maria Braun. Her face appears on screen not as a solid or fleshy entity, but as a trace of features that appear to be receding into evanescence, fading from view. Grayson Cooke has written, 'It is the face that appears first when the human is examined; it is the face that we peer into, that we search for and project signs on, that we treat as the document of any person who stands before us' (2009: 89). The face of Veronika Voss leaves a sense of vacancy, remoteness and cold bloodlessness. It is often lit to diminish rather than highlight its features, blurring into the blank whiteness of the mise-en-scène. Frames of glass between Voss and the camera keep her at a remove. Particularly against the white walls and furnishings of Doctor Katz's rooms, there is little sense of contrast between the tones of her face and those of the walls that surround her.



Veronika (Rosel Zech) crawls across the floor of Dr. Katz's (Annemarie Düringer) clinic



Yann Lardeau has suggested that this is not a black *and* white film, but a black *or* white film, in which white drives out the black. During the scenes which take place at Dr Katz's clinic, Voss is nearly extinguished as a presence on screen as she seeps into the white oblivion of the image – 'Without shadows a person cannot live, without it a person has no soul because no secrets' (Lardeau, 1990: 268-269). The whiteness of this space is evocative of more than 'the clinical abstractions and the presence of death emanating from hospitals and medical institutions' (Elsaesser, 1996: 114). It speaks of the film's tendency towards the effacement of memory through the blankness of forgetting, a self-annihilation that involves the blotting out of all traces of the past, including those apparently inescapably bound up with the presence of the body itself. The film explores the idea of cinema's faith in the real by presenting Voss in terms of her invisibility, her forgetfulness and distance.

The crux of the film's execution of Voss' character comes as she takes Krohn, a journalist whose curiosity has been very much excited by his new glamorous acquaintance, to visit her now unoccupied home. Elsaesser observed that the moving effects of Fassbinder's cinema depend on the marked distance between the subjective mise-en-scène of the characters, conveying their narcissistic illusions and larger-than-life aspirations and the more objective mise-en-scène of the camera, which is intent on proving the futility of the character's desires (1980: 29). In this scene, Voss attempts to create her own mise-en-scène, through the manipulation of music, costume, lighting and her own stilted performance as a *film noir* seductress. Her desire to have her own image returned to her and the repeated failure of this impulse is the force behind the scene's visual dynamics.

The use of movement, lighting and costume all contribute towards undermining this attempted self-assertion. Voss' body appears in terms of its failed synthesis with the surrounding environment. In the vacant house, her possessions all shrouded by dustsheets, Voss appears as a relic amongst other relics, illuminated only by candlelight. It is made clear earlier in the film that this is her preferred lighting condition, as though she is herself aware of the fragility of her persona and appearance. However, whatever the desired effect she is attempting to achieve, there is little difference between her appearance here and in the uniform brightness of Dr Katz's clinic. She remains blank and white, her complexion without contour or definition. Voss can only sustain her composure through states of minimal exposure, suppressing any uncontrolled or spontaneous movement.

Once the pair has entered the house, Voss sits down at the piano and begins to play, as Krohn lights candles. The shot implies Voss's attempts to construct a mise-en-scène that will return to her the image of herself as film star. The restaging is a failure, however, as the original force of her lost film presence cannot be recaptured. It emerges as a



stilted and clichéd performance, the artificiality of her behaviour and of the space itself appear stripped of any depth and mystery.

This is extended by the oddly disconcerting presence of Krohn within space. His surly and earthy masculinity, along with the practicality of his movement (searching for a fuse box, lighting candles, turning on the radio) undercut the atmosphere of romance and seduction Voss attempts to cultivate. The shot stresses the effete nature of their romantic encounter, their separateness and their difference. Minimising the imposing presence of Krohn in the shot, who has removed neither his hat nor scarf, Voss' whiteness is once again highlighted through the blunt use of contrast. She performs for Krohn, singing the song for which she is best known, 'Memories are Made of This'. Here, ironically, performance becomes a tool of deflection, a means of forgetting, by striving towards a state of 'hiding in the light from the life she cannot control' (Elsaesser, 1996: 114).

Her performance at the piano concludes abruptly. Her movements are stuttering and rushed, as she appears to be overflowing with a barely contained feverish excitement, on the verge of falling into hysteria. She rises suddenly, laughing anxiously, picking up the candelabra and running out of shot to the left, as Krohn reflects her movement by taking another candelabra off to the right. He appears immune to her movements and behaviour. There follows a slow sideways movement of the camera that shifts the perspective on the space to reveal Voss changing her clothes in the back room. The camera remains grounded in the central room, observing her at a distance in a theatrical manner. The continuity of the cramped space is similar to that of a stage setting, with Voss conducting a quick costume change in the rear of the shot. The space in the centre ground does not appear to be habitable. The random arrangement of objects and the blankness of the dustsheets and shadows situate her actions in a space that has become, like her, empty and functionless. The surrounding black stillness magnifies the intensity of the moment, as her state of near frenzied hypertension appears all the more pronounced.





When Voss does reappear, she is sheathed in a long translucent peignoir, which drapes down her body. The backlit outline of her form is blurred by the peignoir and the shape of her white hair, her body dissolving at the edges. The image again produces a blotting out of Voss's physicality, only here it is achieved through the ubiquity of shadow as opposed to light. She appears concentrated and dense, as opposed to translucent and evanescent. Voss is perceived as a two dimensional surface, stripped of contour or nuance as her presence on screen is seen only as shadow. An inverted projection of her appearance in the over-exposed doctor's office, the backlighting, though blurry and indistinct, gives the impression of a more solid and composed entity. Her manipulation of the setting within the house creates a space in which she can control her own self-image, a persona closer to the heroines she played in her youth. Here, Voss briefly manages to assert her capacity for existence, which is absent elsewhere in the film as events both past and present rear up unbidden, shattering her illusion of composure. The experience of this volatility, of both the outside world and the processes of memory, disable her body's possibilities for action, thought or becoming. By restraining her movements and inverting her visibility in the depiction of this seduction, she disavows the precariousness of her body, its lack of a fixed centre. It arrests its traumatic movement. Thus, even the body in crisis has the capacity briefly to invoke its active or transformative capacities. The darkness facilitates this transformative potential, where white has been the colour of death, effacing the body's presence by dissolving its affirmative visibility into blankness. Here, presence is momentarily entertained and given a density and a mass though the use of silhouette, as light no longer appears to filter straight through her translucent form, functioning instead to pronounce her presence within the obscurity of the black space. As she approaches the camera, and her face becomes visible she appears to look younger. The shadows give her face a sense of definition and softness denied by the use of bright light elsewhere in the film.



At the same time, however, it is also possible to see this moment of apparent accord as another example of Voss' unsubstantiated visibility, as a ghost, still without feature or gradation. The sequence following the culmination of her seduction of Krohn certainly undermines any sense of equilibrium, returning to the failure of Voss's body as a physically sustaining entity. After a brief flashback scene, which depicts Voss with her husband in the occupied house, she is seen lying on the bed, curled in a foetal position which pulls her body in on itself, draped in a white sheet, Krohn seated in the background. The preceding flashback was instigated as he reached to turn on the radio, an act coinciding with a past parallel action of Voss' husband. Voss complains to her husband that she would rather listen to music than a news program. She insists that he reduce the lighting, to create a more intimate space, 'just for us'.



Seated in a rigid and upright position in the centre of the shot, Voss' requests to create a more romantic ambience are met with frustration by her husband. He grudgingly obeys and becomes more agitated as he witnesses her embarking on the excruciating and delirious performance, demanding 'Always the same nonsense ... Why can't we just be what we are?' Met with critical indifference by her husband, the sequence reveals Voss's past attempts to negotiate her presence by breaking it down and condensing it into controlled elements. She attempts to place herself at the centre of her own universe, disavowing any influence from the outside world. However, as the presence of the flashback itself suggests, she has no power to stop the fateful return of the past that reasserts its power over her. As the scene jarringly cuts back to the present, her body returns to its more chaotic, desperate and anxious state.

Krohn's broad and swarthy presence once again contrasts with the pale frailty of Voss, as the two are arranged in a perpendicular relation to each another in the shot. Voss' fragile seductive presence has been replaced by a return to a whiteness that dominates her space within the frame. The wrinkled sheet conceals her body, her limbs





pulled in on herself, in defensive position of retreat from the world around her, and from any contact with Krohn.

The scene proceeds as Voss's returning nervous tension erupts in the form of a loss of self-control. A vase falls from its stand, and it crashes loudly onto the floor. The interruption shatters her already fragile composure, sustained only by denying the encroachment of the outside world. Here, this volatility is reasserted through a disturbance within the otherwise frozen and fossilised interior of her house. Moments before, as Krohn reached out to touch her she responded with disgust and horror to his encroachment on her space. The crash is a reminder that she cannot control the world about her, as she would wish. As the vase breaks, she lets out a piercing and violent scream, emerging from the bedroom gasping for air and doubled over, clinging to the doorframe for support. She is only partially visible, almost entirely obscured by Krohn's presence in the foreground of the shot as he lights the candles, her movements only just distinguishable.



She remains blocked from view even as she begins to thunder awkwardly towards him. This is not an outward display of fury, but a manifestation of an inward collapse, as her presence is negated and subsumed by the surrounding space. As she reaches Krohn, in the moment of confrontation when anger ought to be expressed outwardly, she collapses onto the floor, striking the piano keys as she stumbles with a resounding discordant crash. She slips suddenly behind the piano right at the very second she comes into view, as her presence in this newly exposed, unstable, erratic environment cannot be sustained. Again, it is shown that she cannot tolerate any destabilising exposure or unrest which could undermine her tenuous ability to compose and control herself.

As her crumpled body behind the piano is revealed, her composure is shown to have completely disintegrated. Her face does not express fear or distress. It seems empty and sapped of life force or energy. Her body, weakened as she descends into a state of withdrawal from the morphine to which she is addicted, is contorted and twisted amongst the crinkled sheets.



The conditions which facilitate self-assertion, such as the ability to hold oneself up or to know oneself have dissipated with the return of this whiteness to the frame. As Krohn lifts her from the floor, his hands seem to exert a terrible force over her face, emphasising its weakness and limpness. He physically lifts her body so as to reassert its upright status, shouting 'You are Veronika!' The close-up is reminiscent of a composition which might be used to depict a kiss between two characters, with the camera behind his



shoulder to show her face. Like Betti's embrace of Willi in *Maria Braun*, it highlights the failure of any reciprocity between the two. Veronika's face is distorted as it wriggles awkwardly between his hands, refusing to come close to or recognise him. Throughout the development of this seduction scene, this shot is where the characters are shown to be closest together. In this distorted moment of failed intimacy all meaningful contact is negated and perverted by Veronika's psychological collapse. She refuses his recognition, and her face becomes formless and malleable.



This scene is characteristic of the film's broader tendency to show Veronika's impulse towards self-annihilation through the execution of her visibility. She is a fading movie star who is shown to be physically disappearing into the blankness of obscurity. This fading collapses the body's capacity for vitality or expressivity as it is extinguished as a screen presence. Her frigid, frozen

and paralyzed physicality moves impulsively towards self-destruction, retreating from the traumatising movement of the world around her.

Lola: Sensual Display

The performance of Babara Sukowa in *Lola* differs dramatically to that of both Zech and Schygulla. It develops through an excess of expressivity, as opposed to the reverse. Lola's body is consumed by the various roles she performs throughout the course of the film, occupying each with such a degree of potent physicality that she appears more as an accumulation or compilation of particular performance states than as a developed character. Her wild, uncontrollable desires serve as a catalyst for the film's affective eruptions, as her exuberant and hyperbolic corporeality becomes a force unto itself, devoid of any sense of character or interiority. Her excessive physicality, particularly in terms of the wild dance that forms the crux of the film's narrative, often moves at speed and is expressive of fugitive mobility. In this scene which depicts the revelation of her true identity as a prostitute to her morally upstanding suitor von Bohm (Armin Mueller-Stahl), her performance wrenches itself away from physical coherence to become, in its violence, energy and spontaneity, a furious expression of a resistance towards any containment or definition. This excess does not seem to create an abundance of meaning, but challenges and undermines the possibility of reading her character as a coherent entity. The nature of her performance is volatile, changeable and discontinuous, progressing tangentially rather than in a linear fashion. Lola's body becomes the locus of sentimental oblivion, her movements saturated by a sensual intensity that denies the functionality of movement, bursting forth in unaccountable eruptions of frenzied physical potency and candidness.

Lola's body differs greatly to the frailty of Voss's physique and the graceful sensuality of Maria. She is a more imposing figure due to her tall stature and striking features. As opposed to Voss's pale brittleness and Maria's steady composure, she has a much more carnal and fleshly screen presence. Frequent close-ups highlight the artificiality of her bright make-up and elaborate costumes, betraying the discomposure of her face in its sweaty redness. Unlike Voss, she is not bloodless and withdrawn. Neither is she always in control of her appearance and movements in the way that Maria appears to be. There is a much greater sense of Lola as a vital and visceral creature.



In terms of rhythm, Lola's movements also vary from the others, distinguished by a greater degree of restlessness and frantic energy, created through the bluntness of her gestures and the pace of her movement. The tone is also different in terms of its anarchic humour and speed. The emptiness and the amorality of her character and the sense of slapstick invoked by her hyperbolic performance seem

gleeful, in opposition to Maria's serenity or Voss' morbid hysteria. For instance, in one of the film's first nightclub scenes, Lola is seen to be very drunk. She stumbles about her dressing room in an ungainly manner. Her actions are recognisable in terms of the conventional slapstick depiction of drunkenness in comedy. She talks into a phone with no one at the other end of the receiver and sits on one of her dolls, which she then slaps, only to immediately apologise for having lost her temper. In this scene, as with many of the others, she is drenched in red light. Despite the numerous other discontinuities, she seems to carry a sensual excess with her throughout the film, intensified by the use of this light. It creates a look of vulgarity in its all-pervading neon luridness. Lola's physicality takes up this sense, putting forth a baseness and a physical candidness that differs greatly to the other eponymous heroines.



The use of colour throughout the film is highly stylised. The drab tones of *Maria Braun* and the duality of the black and white in *Veronika Voss* are exchanged for bright washes of red, pink and blue, saturating the spaces of *Lola* and the performers contained within them. Fassbinder develops here a colour dramaturgy which would eventually be pushed to an extreme in his last film *Querelle* (1982). This use of colour as a means of intensifying and heightening dramatic content seems to be inspired by the anti-naturalist styles that utilised Technicolor or Eastmancolor in the 1950s Hollywood productions of directors such as Douglas Sirk, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and Nicholas Ray (whom Fassbinder's cinematographer Xaver Schwarzenberger was reportedly told to study in preparation for the film). Voss retreats from visibility, but in these bright and colourful spaces Lola's performance manifests a perpetual state of frenzied visibility, ascending into a state of sensual abstraction.

Within the already highly stylised and discontinuous spaces of the film, her performance develops its sense of physical and emotional extremity and disjunction. Altering between a clumsy and fumbling drunkenness, childish impetuosity, an exaggerated coy and docile femininity and sexual candour, her performance functions as a violent rejection of coherence or organisation. It is stripped of cause and effect logic or progression, continually shifting attention away from narrative considerations towards overtly performative moments. Elsaesser noted a tendency in Fassbinder's work to move 'towards undoing, the shattering aspect, the anarchic impulse to tear the self down (1996: 225). Sukowa's extreme physicality releases a force that suspends the logic of meaning in performance, as it extends out into an expression of visibility or sensibility.

The film follows the gradual destruction of the regimented and disciplined character von Bohm, who is overwhelmed by the disordered sensuality and *jouissance* expressed by Lola. For example, von Bohm's violin playing

appears initially as a well-practiced and precise ritual performed with care, playing music exactly as written.



Following his discovery of Lola as a stage performer and prostitute, however, it descends into a weak and scratchy rendition of 'Capri-Fischer.' It is the song he sees her perform in the night club, and he has learnt it by ear. The cool blue which saturated the space of his home in the film's first movement is exchanged for the headiness of the reddish pink in which Lola's body is often bathed. Whereas the low angle of the camera in the first scene emphasised his assertiveness and composure, the more amorphous space created through the use of the mirror manifests a withdrawn, hesitant and self-doubting body. The camera now looks through and past him to show the reflection of his image, as his physical presence is no longer clearly assured.



Elsaesser has stated that Fassbinder viewed 'the 1950s as the locus of traumas requiring a more psychoanalytic time'. He employed 'fractured chronologies ... or non-synchronicity or uneven time' to express the disassembling effects of the experience of trauma through narration (1996: 110-11). The discrete spaces constructed by the film's stylised use of lighting and the absence of any transitional movements between them also undermine continuity of action or characters. Lola is expressive of just such a notion of non-synchronicity through her bodily incoherence. She enacts a melodrama of the body and there are scenes in the film in which her violence, her energy and her spontaneity create moments of intensity that resist any definite meaning or interpretation. While the visual style of melodrama can be read as a 'symptom' of narrative anxiety, the same function is here enacted through the style of performance, in its surplus of energy that realist representation cannot contain. As a film presence, she becomes a summation of explosive physicality rather than a coherently formed locus of particular psychological or gestural traits.

The scene which best exemplifies this 'shattering aspect' of Lola's performance, as a body 'which cannot be symbolized' or synthesised, depicts von Bohm's discovery

of her identity as a nightclub singer and a prostitute. He watches her perform her signature song, 'Capri-Fischer'. Her bodily style in the scene extends outwards in an upward motion towards lift and height, again moving away from grounding or stability. The design of the nightclub space emphasises her elevated stature. On stage her gestures project away from the centre of her body, creating a sense of expanse or extension as her limbs become the tools of her physical hyperbole. In her first rendition of 'Capri-Fischer', her height is emphasised by the seated



band and the showgirl who crouches below, holding the microphone that allows Lola to freely gesticulate and extend her arms as she sings the highest notes. Voice and gesture comes into confluence to suggest a sense of corporeal theatricality. Such gestures and movements are characteristic of showgirl singers, as their bodies are projecting outwards as spectacle for consumption by an audience. Here, she remains within the parameters of this genre. It is conducted with enough composure so as to not undermine or transcend the conventions of this type of performance, as she self-consciously and very deliberately controls her body's movements.

Her powerful and resonant voice, however, which becomes tremulous and shrill when she sings high notes contains in its quivering power an impulse to shatter. The sonority and intonation of her impassioned vocal performances are an extension of her intense corporeality, an example of the operatic quality that Fassbinder admired in Sirk's Hollywood work. Thus Fassbinder and his composer Peer Raben chose particularly evocative songs for the film: 'Fahrt ein weisses Schiff nach Hong-Kong' ('A White Ship Sails for Hong Kong'), sung by 1950s pop icon Freddy Quinn over the opening credits, and 'Capri-Fischer.' Both articulate a desire to escape to an exotic elsewhere, a feverish yearning.

Lola's second performance of the song, however, breaks away from the conventions of nightclub singing as her body sheds its self-evident performance status and becomes a destructive force. It is characterised by an expressive incoherence, as her hyperbolic physicality creates a mixture of pleasure and fear in its breakdown of the coherent performing body. The restrained sensuality of her previous performance spills over into a chaotic forcefulness as she becomes a fully sensuous surface. Her physicality now follows a far more extreme trajectory, creating a radically explosive bodily presence which cannot be contained. She spills down from the stage and tears at her clothes as the camera struggles to keep up with the wild path of her movements. This style of performance invokes a bodily representation that is geared towards fragmentation, disjunction, discontinuity and disaggregation.

This switch in the style of her performance of this song is instigated by her discovery of von Bohm's presence

within the nightclub. Until this point in the film, Lola has played the role of a coy, innocent ingénue with him, concealing her true identity and position within the town. The scene is a moment of revelation as she is exposed to him. All existent ties between them are severed as the vacuity upon which their relationship was founded is laid bare and the two are left confounded by one another. As Lola comes onto the stage, von Bohm stands and begins to approach her until she notices his presence. Her body freezes although her singing continues. The following sequence of movements recalls those of Maria Braun upon hearing of Willi's death from Hermann, as she appears paralyzed and immobile. The train of her dress drops from



her fingers, but the hesitation is only momentary: the song continues, as does the downward motion of her arm. Disruption is also avoided because the moment occurs exactly at the end of one of the lines of the lyric. The shot reverse shot sequence stresses the futility and blankness of this confrontation as the two stare at one another with faces drained of any expression, before they turn away and deflect any resonance. Here, unlike Maria, the trauma that initiates this momentary stasis is not one based on an irresolvable absence, but rather on an excess of presence. The self-consciousness of her composed and choreographed performance is transformed. Her body's presence in this tableau becomes a locus of intense force, as a rapid dolly in creates a concentration of visibility, increasing the blue light illuminating her face. This moment of revelation not only functions as a suspension, but also as an intense containment of force, as her face is made all the more conspicuously visible. Lola performs the same song in the same space as she did earlier in the film, but the conditions of the performance are now fundamentally altered. Her status as an object of spectacle, as a visible, performing body is now imbued with a new level of affective potency as she is doubly seen, and the illusion of her ephemeral character is exposed.



The cutting between the pair's actions and the pace with which they are executed correspond to the rhythm of the music. As the song progresses towards its chorus, all the

elements come into a confluence, a crisis building to a crescendo as the song progresses towards its chorus. Just as this chorus is about to begin, von Bohm exits and with the closing of the door, Lola's performance takes a cataclysmic turn. She immediately develops a crude velocity and visible frenzy. Whereas the physicality of Veronika Voss obscured her presence, Lola's seeks to assert her carnality as aggressively as she can. As the first note of the chorus arrives, she immediately tears off the cape draped around her neck and shoulders, beginning her movement towards a state of maximum physical ascension and exposure. She moves out from behind the microphone and begins to rip furiously at the body of her dress.



Climbing down from the stage, she awkwardly removes her dress and stumbles towards the raised platform opposite the stage, where she climbs onto a table. On this even higher platform, her physical potency cannot be contained within conventional boundaries of performance. It is a per-



formance of transgression which continually develops in an outwardly and upwardly direction. Where Voss used objects and people as props to support her body and prevent its collapse, here Lola uses them as platforms for self-display to extend and accentuate her physical appearance. She is taken up on the shoulders of Schukert (Mario Adorf), the nightclub owner and Lola's lover and pimp, who carries her around the room above his head as her arms flail wildly.



She attempts to make herself as conspicuous a presence as possible in her violent and candid physicality. Her arms reach outwards, away from the centre of her body with frenzied force as she gives herself over entirely to the performance of song. Her face suggests a state of rapture, as she appears to shed all self-consciousness. She is carried away by the relentless trajectory of her movement and the song's rising rhythms.

With the expansive urgency of her movements, Lola's physical presence stretches itself into a position of maximum exposure. Rather than turning herself inwards following her exposure, she deflects herself outwards, flying in the face of that which would contain and repress



the movement of the body. Unlike Maria or Veronika, the disjunctive flow of her movements resists repetition or retreat as a means of displacing trauma. Her body appears as something she is barely able to control, exemplified by her stumble from the stage and her position on Schukert's shoulders, bending wildly in accordance with his own erratic movements. She asserts the presence of her body in this scene in terms of its state of instability.

Conclusion

For Heidi Gilpin, performance operates to counter ontological insecurity, affirming the stability and consistency of the body by denying the ephemerality of its traumatic movements. In each of the scenes discussed above, shock experiences arise and expose the women to just this sense of ontological anxiety, by revealing the volatility of the world around them. Through composure, retreat and display, they attempt to reassert their presences in the face of this threatened disappearance. Maria's self-possession affirms her presence as an active body in the world, in spite of her inability to control the events dictating the course of her life. The transient and illusory nature of this asserted control is exposed by the film's conclusion. Her freedom to move has been a consequence of deals made between the men in her life without her knowledge or consent. Veronika's frail and evanescent physicality seems to threaten disappearance at every moment, even as she tries to assert her presence. Her past persona as a film star recedes into obscurity as her image ceases to be returned to her, leaving only blank emptiness. Lola's violent physicality refuses stillness, as she transforms her body into a sensuous surface, deflecting any coherent or sustained engagement with the world around her. All three characters express this quality of fugitive mobility in their performances within the fiction, which itself becomes a means of bearing trauma, dramatising Gilpin's insight:

'Performance is constantly orientated towards the impossible desire to stop disappearance. If disappearance is a condition of performance, repetition is a crucial strategy

that ... manifests the absent presences of that which has disappeared ... Performance is in this sense a survival mechanism ... that allows for the tolerance and endurance of trauma.' (1996: 110)

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¹ The three films are generally taken to be a trilogy, referred to as the 'BRD Trilogy'. See Elsaesser, 1996: 97-128.

² For example see: Elsaesser, Thomas, *Fassbinder's Germany: History Identity, Subject*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University 1996), Katz, Robert, *Love is Colder than Death: The Life and Times of Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, (London: Paladin, 1989) Thomsen, Christian Braad, *Fassbinder: The Life and Work of a Provocative Genius*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).