

## Reading Rainer Fassbinder's adaptation *Fontane Effi Briest*

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**Abstract.** *Fontane Effi Briest* by the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder is arguably one of the greatest adaptations from literature to screen, and the best Effi Briest adaptation. Although the first reception of the movie, when it appeared in 1974, was not without unmixed reviews, most scholars nowadays share the conviction that it is a masterpiece. Elke Siegel defines the film as a success both at the *Berlinale* and at the box office (Siege, 2012: 378). Kreft Wetzel, however, in an interview with Fassbinder in 1974, refers to the ambivalent attitude of the critics abroad at the time of the movie's release, to which Fassbinder replies that Fontane's language is the foundation of the movie and, hence, the film works to its full extent only in German (Wetzel, 1992: 157). Forty years after this interview and judging from the scholarly work carried out on Fassbinder in general and *Fontane Effi Briest* in particular, it is plausible to claim that Fassbinder's art has moved beyond the language barriers and appeals to an audience beyond the German culture and language.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Fassbinder, *Fontane Effi Briest*, (re-)creation

### INTRODUCTION

*Fontane Effi Briest* has a distinguished place in Fassbinder's oeuvre. He claimed that *Fontane Effi Briest* was the first movie that he wanted to shoot when he started making films in 1969. It was only in 1974 that the production was completed. As to the reasons why it took so long for him to finish filming it, especially when one thinks of the astonishing speed he made movies with, Fassbinder pointed out his initial desire to shoot the film in all four seasons. Secondly, the fact that the leading actor became ill during the filming led to the postponement of the project for a long while. Nevertheless, the fifty-eight days of shooting between 1972-1973 is a special case in Fassbinder's career. One fourth of the entire budget (over a million marks) came from a prize for the screenplay and Fassbinder financed the rest himself (Wetzel, 1992: 156). Elke Siegel maintains that the fact that Fassbinder financed the production on his own is a result of his uncompromising approach to

this movie: in order for *Fontane Effi Briest* to be the movie he intended, Fassbinder did not seek external financial support.

The term “adaptation,” which is very often used with *Fontane Effi Briest*, brings in the critical arguments what an adaptation is. Linda Hutcheon maintains that adaptation is a “repetition without replication” and “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” (Hutcheon, 2006: 7). She sees the process of adaptation as “(re-)interpretation,” “(re-)creation” and “intertextual” (Hutcheon, 2006: 8) and believes that “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (Hutcheon, 2006: 9). Fassbinder’s approach to adaptation seems to be in agreement with Linda Hutcheon’s theory, although he emphasizes the reader response methodology in his articulations of the process of reading a work of art and turning it into a different medium. In a short essay entitled “Preliminary Remarks on *Querelle*,” Fassbinder states that to make a movie out of a literary work does not mean to achieve “the most ‘congenial’ possible translation from one medium, literature, into the other, film” (Fassbinder, 1992: 168). For Fassbinder, the task of a director is not to accomplish “the maximal realization of the images that literature evokes in the minds of its readers, since the number of interpretations of a book is directly equal to the number of readers: “any given reader reads any book with his own sense of reality, and therefore any book evokes as many different fantasies and images as it has readers” (Fassbinder, 1992: 168). Fassbinder argues that the only possible option to “turn literature into film” is “through an unequivocal and single-minded questioning of the piece of literature and its language,” “by scrutinizing the substance and the posture of the author’s work,” “by developing an imagination instantly recognizable as unique,” and “by abandoning any futile attempt at ‘consuming’ the work of literature” (Fassbinder, 1992: 168-169).

*Fontane Effi Briest* is not a film that one would immediately categorize under melodrama. Indeed, many would think of it as anything but melodrama: a faithful adaptation of a realist novel, a period piece or a high-brow approach to a canonical work of art. Especially, when one takes Fontane’s novel into consideration. *Effi Briest* is a most refined prose, where the extramarital affair of Effi with Major Crampas is never represented but only subtly implied. Fontane does not show Effi and Major Crampas during any of their many secret meetings, but lets the

reader discover about the affair through their letters years later when the Instettens are already in Berlin. The novel characters are truly decorous: they are extremely courteous to one another and use a sophisticated language. The narrative is free from any coarse phrases or addresses. Therefore, *Fontane Effi Briest* seems ill-fitted for a melodramatic movie. Yet, a closer look into Sirkian melodrama and its deep influence on Reiner Fassbinder yields new perspectives on Fassbinder's enigmatic *Fontane Effi Briest* and some of the stylistic devices used in it. In his "Imitation of Life: On the Films of Douglas Sirk," Fassbinder elaborates on his admiration for Sirk and the reasons behind this high esteem. Of the many reasons for Fassbinder's respect, the most "tender" one is that Sirk loves human beings, instead of despising them like most directors do (Fassbinder, 1992: 77). Secondly, "thinking women" in Sirkian movies are marvelous to watch. Therefore, it is not surprising that women are the leading actors in many of Fassbinder's movies, *Fontane Effi Briest* being one of them. Last but not least, the settings in his movies are "extraordinarily accurate" (Fassbinder, 1992: 81). Fassbinder also claims that "as a viewer [he is] with Douglas Sirk on the trail of human despair" (Fassbinder, 1992: 83). Even this short overview of Fassbinder's reflections on Sirk proves that Fassbinder approaches the Hollywood melodramas of Sirk critically and regards them as a strong critique of society, which, in return, he undertakes in his own movies. It seems that Fassbinder approached a German writer, Theodor Fontane, to criticize his own society in the wake of Douglas Sirk.

If we are to inspect *Fontane Effi Briest* from the perspective of melodrama and find the conjunctions it shares with Douglas Sirk movies, the most obvious and forthright Sirkian characteristic of the movie is the predicament of the leading actress. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler stress, many of Fassbinder's movies, just like Sirk's Hollywood melodramas, are concerned with the dilemmas of the leading female characters (Fassbinder, 1992: 71). Since *Fontane Effi Briest* is black and white – for stylistic reasons, there is no possibility of using Sirkian vivid colors – It is in, for example, *The Marriage of Eva Braun*, *Lola* and *Martha* that Fassbinder uses Sirkian colors to full extent. Yet, the use of mirrors and frames, especially in a confining framing manner, reaches a different height in *Fontane Effi Briest*. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler points out, Sirk's attention to elaborate and stylized mise-en-scène is present in almost every scene in the elegantly decorated space of *Fontane*

*Effi Briest*. Last but not least, the “highly stylised” acting style and “self-conscious manners” of the characters in the movie can be defined as melodramatic (Mercer and Shingler, 2004: 72). It should be also noted that while working intermittently on *Fontane Effi Briest* between 1972-1973, Fassbinder shot *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*) as well, the most recognizably Sirkian melodrama made by Fassbinder. The influence of Sirkian melodrama on Fassbinder in this period is undeniable. Before moving on to analyze the Sirkian elements in *Fontane Effi Briest* in the form of mise-en-scène, music, mirrors and frameworks, I will dwell on the unexpectedly long title of the movie and try to show why this unique title is important for what Fassbinder tries to achieve in this movie.

The title of the movie is interesting in that Fassbinder places the writer's name before the title of the novel, which he adapts into the movie, and adds a very lengthy sentence written by himself. This is a significant deviation in an otherwise very faithful adaptation. In an interview with Kraft Wetzel in July 1974, Fassbinder claims that *Fontane Effi Briest* is a movie about Fontane, not about a woman (Wetzel, 1992: 149). He continues to state that “It is not a film that tells a story, but a film that traces an attitude. It's the attitude of a person who sees through the failings and the weaknesses of his society and also criticizes them, but still recognizes this society as the valid one for him” (Wetzel, 1992). Later in the same interview, Fassbinder likens his position to that of Fontane, because he, like Fontane, criticizes the society he lives in, yet simultaneously confirms it by being a part of it (Wetzel, 1992: 154). These statements demonstrate the multi-layered meaning of the title. On the first layer, those “many” can be the characters in the novel. The referent might be Geert, who recognizes the idolatry of the code of honour system in Prussia, yet affirms it by challenging Major Crampas to a duel, separating from Effi Briest and stripping himself of happiness. It might be Effi Briest, who at first resists the social restrictions imposed on her, but, in her deathbed, seems to be reconciled with all the rules and persons involved in her downfall. On a second layer, the title refers to the writer: Fontane, on one hand, discerns the shortcomings of his society, criticizes them and writes about them, yet on the other hand he seeks recognition and affirmation by the same society through being a part of its structures, using the opportunities it offers him. On a third layer, the title refers to Fassbinder himself: he perceives the failings of

the German society, he condemns them, while at the same time he accepts to be a part of that society and benefits from its structures and institutions to receive acknowledgment. An additional layer might be added to the list: the participation of the audience in all of these processes and adding a level of its own as the outermost layer. By going to the cinema or buying a DVD of a movie as well as being a citizen and participating in – and benefiting from— all kinds of societal structures, yet recognizing the shortcomings of this same society both in the movie and outside the movie adds to the layers Fassbinder has in mind when making the movie. In a way, then, in *Fontane Effi Briest*, Fassbinder carves a space for a critical approach to his movie from his audience, which puts the characters, Theodor Fontane, Fassbinder, and the audience on the same critical level. All in all, then, the title underlines the ambivalent attitude towards society, be it in the novelistic level, or the writer's level or on the director's level.

Fassbinder combines several different techniques of *Verfremdung* (alienation) in order to realize the above-mentioned critical approach to his movie and to create the affects he intends on his audience. The fade-out-to-white is the most striking one of these tools, which has garnered much of the scholarly attention on the movie. Instead of the usual fade-to-black-screen, which facilitates the transition from one scene to another in movies or functions as pauses or passage of time in film art, Fassbinder uses the unusual fade-to-white. He explains that fade-to-white is an experimental tool in *Fontane Effi Briest* to make the audience “mentally alert.” Defining fade-to-black as ‘manipulat[ion of] feelings or time,’ Fassbinder wants his audience to be perceptually vigilant and attentive (Fassbinder, 1992: 151). He also intends fade-to-white to be received as white, blank pages in a book in the form of a “break.” Trying to evade the smooth transitions in mainstream movies, Fassbinder aims at drawing attention to the uneven progress between scenes, since he asks his audience not to “stop thinking, but rather actually begin to think.” (Fassbinder, 1992: 150). He expects them to read the movie and use their “imagination that turns the letters and sentences into a story” (Fassbinder, 1992: 150). Fassbinder gives his audience to “the opportunity and the freedom to make this movie [their] own” thanks to “the triple alienation effect” he employs. Mirrors and the emotionless acting style are the two other components of the triple alienation effect Fassbinder talks about, which will be treated in the following sections.

## MUSIC

In as refined and sublime a movie as *Fontane Effi Briest* is, the most evident melodramatic feature is the romantic melody of a violin mixed with a Latin rhythm. Identified by the scholars as Saint-Saëns's "Havanaise," it lasts for fifteen seconds. This melody is the musical motif, and appears nearly ten times throughout the movie. Edward M.V. Plater describes the music as follows, which deserves full citation:

"Both lilting and languid, sweet and melancholy, this melody, accompanied by a syncopated rhythm, proceeds down the scale over four measures and then reverses itself, climbing upwards with the same combination of notes per measure, i.e. three equal notes to the first beat and two to the second in the first three measures, followed by a single note in the fourth measure. A certain tension arises from the repeated contrast between the more lively triplets and the less spirited pair of eighth notes and it echoes musically the problem emerging in the relationship between the warm-blooded, affectionate young bride and the relatively cold, undemonstrative older groom; and the final measure of the musical phrase, consisting of a single note that slows the music to a momentary halt, foretells the inevitable defeat of the more spirited and passionate Effi." (Plater, 1999: 32)

The contrast in notes and tone within the melody corresponds to the disparity between the young and lively Effi and the stern and dour Geert as well as the inevitable doom that awaits Effi. If one analyzes the scenes where Havanaise plays, it appears that the musical motif underlines the predicament of Effi. For example, the first time it is heard eleven minutes into the movie, at the end of the scene where the betrothed Effi and Frau Briest walk through the park talking about Geert. When asked by her mother whether she loves Geert or not, Effi explains how she is afraid of him and his lofty principles. This first appearance of the sweet yet melancholic melody in conjunction with Effi's fear of Geert demonstrates the connection between the eponymous character and the theme music of the movie. The second time Havanaise is heard is twenty-six minutes into the movie, when Effi and Geert are back in the living room of their house, having completed all of their courtesy visits. Geert wants to do something special such as "play[ing] a victory march" or "bear[ing Effi] in triumph across the hall?" in order to celebrate it. For Effi, "the mere feeling that [they] can relax now is celebration enough" Cooling herself with her big black fan, Effi suggests Geert that

“you might give me a kiss, though,” but immediately reprimands him by adding “but you do not even think of that. Not a token of affection the whole journey. You’re as icy as a snowman,”<sup>1</sup> to which Geert replies “Do not go on! I shall mend my ways.” As soon as Geert finishes his words, the Havanaise melody starts, the camera moves down behind the piano and the screen fades to white. Once again, the musical melody is used to emphasize the incompatible differences between the lively-spirited Effi and the emotionally cold Geert and the inevitable doom that will result from this divergence of characters. The fact that Effi uses her fan to cool herself throughout the scene underlines the stark disparity between the young, vibrant wife and the old, cold husband. When the Havanaise melody is heard again for a third time 13 minutes later (39 minutes into the movie), the purpose seems to be the same: Effi’s passionate, compassionate ideas on human relationships are spurned by the high principles of Geert. A different aspect of the relationship is, however, reinforced through the Havanaise melody when it is played for the fourth time. In contrast with the previous occasions, where Effi and Geert are portrayed as starkly different from one another or in complete disagreement, this scene depicts them when they agree on the decision to hire Roswitha as the nanny/nurse. Effi is happy to learn Geert’s approval and, placing herself in front of the mirror, announces that she is no longer afraid. There appears an ambivalent expression on Geert’s face, he lowers his eyes and the Havanaise melody begins. As an authoritarian disciplinary, Geert uses fear to manipulate his wife. Effi’s pronouncement that she is no longer afraid unsettles his plans. The Havanaise melody in this scene is employed to underscore the emotionally manipulative nature of Geert and the frank artlessness of Effi, unless she is forced to do otherwise, which she will be. In this way, the musical motif is used in this scene to highlight an important aspect of the marriage of Effi and Geert, one that will have grave consequences for all those involved. I will not examine all the scenes that the Havanaise melody is played in the film, yet I believe it will suffice to state that the fatal discrepancies between Effi and Geert is underscored via the Havanaise melody when it is heard in the following scenes: seventy-seven minutes into the movie, having just announced Effi that they will be leaving Kessin to move to Berlin, Geert fails to understand why Effi has been so afflicted in Kessin; 87 minutes into the movie, when Effi

and Geert walk through the park in Berlin talking about Kessin and their former acquaintances there, Geert reporting to Effi a conversation with an old woman about Effi; one hundred-sixteen minutes (1:16:10) into the movie, when Roswitha comes to the lodging of Effi, whose back faces Roswitha and who replies her through the reflection in an old mirror.

Havanaise is heard for the last time in the penultimate scene, one hundred thirty-seven minutes into the movie, in the last three minutes before the film ends with the next and last scene in the same place where it starts, Hohen-Cremmen garden, alas without Effi this time. In this penultimate scene, Effi is in white at her deathbed at her parents' house, her mother in a black dress with a white shawl in attendance by the window next to Effi's bed. Effi requests her mother to inform Geert that although Effi has cursed Geert for what he has done to her, their daughter Annie and Major Crampas before, she now dies persuaded that he has been right all along in all his decisions. As soon as Effi finishes her lines, the now-familiar melody begins. While it continues, the scene fades into an all-white screen with a black square border and the voiceover of Fassbinder starts, reading lines from the novel:

"On the roundel a small alteration had taken place. The sundial had gone; the day before a white marble slab had been laid in its place with the simple inscription 'Effi Briest', and beneath it a cross. It had been Effi's last request: 'On my gravestone I would like my old name back, I didn't do the other one much honour.' And that had been promised her."<sup>2</sup> (2:17:38)

This last combination of the Havanaise melody and Effi reinforces the connection between the musical motif, the title character and her dramatic fate. The lethal differences between Effi and Geert are underlined by the dying Effi.

#### MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND THE SYSTEM OF SYMBOLIZATION IN *FASSBINDER EFFI BRIEST*

If Fassbinder admires Douglas Sirk for the extraordinary sets in his movies, contemporary directors and critics have an equally high esteem for his exceptionally complex settings and remarkable attention to details in his movies, most of which shot in astonishingly short periods. Tony

Ryans claims *Fontane Effi Briest* to be a “most densely constructed text” and calls for “a more intensive reading from the viewer than any of the other films” (quoted in Plater, 1999: 28). Indeed, the scenes in *Fontane Effi Briest* are like a compactly woven dense texture, which still waits and has space for more decoding by attentive eyes and associative minds even after four decades after Tony Ryans’ call. Fassbinder’s intricately planned, systematic mise-en-scène makes many components of the scenes such as costumes, colors and props assume an additional symbolic meaning, and, at times, become the meaning. A careful reading of the props of the scenes delivers the underlying system of meaning. For this purpose, the interiors of the Instettens’ house are especially rewarding. Well-furnished with luxurious ornamentations as well as important status symbols such as statues, pianos etc., the rooms in the Instettens’ house hold the key to not only to the inner world of the characters but also to the inevitable end.

Before continuing with the interiors, it is necessary to start with the opening swing scene, as it exemplifies Fassbinder’s dense construction of symbolic system in the visual texture of the movie. Effi’s swing (die Schaukel) has been widely commented by the critics as the most significant leitmotif for Effi both in the novel and in the movie (i.e. Magretta, 1981; Plater, 1999: 28-42). The swing has come to be regarded as the symbol of Effi’s rule-defying nature and fearful/less love of danger, along with her back and fro movement into the rule-bound society and its opposite. Indeed, unlike the novel, where Effi first appears as sewing with her mother, Fassbinder introduces Effi to the viewer in the first scene through her swing, while Frau von Briest watches her, arms folded (Figures 4 and 5). This specifically unique choice in an otherwise exceptionally faithful adaptation shows how important the swing is in Fassbinder’s approach to the character of Effi. Plater claims that not only Fassbinder makes this change from sewing to swinging in his movie, but also he combines two central symbols related to Effi from different parts of the novel in this scene (30). According to Plater, Fassbinder makes the posts of the swing covered by ivy, to refer to a passage in Chapter 3 in the novel, where Effi’s father, Herr von Briest, likens Geert to a tree trunk and Effi to the ivy (*der Efeu* in German)<sup>3</sup> during their betrothal reception and, in this way, “create[s] a new and complex visual image fraught with irony and foreshadowing with great economy the central events of the story” (Plater, 1999: 30).



Figure 1: Effi on her famous swing in the introductory scene.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

While the swing is arguably the most evident symbol of Effi in the textual construction of Fontane's *Effi Briest* and the visual symbolization of Fassbinder's *Fontane Effi Briest*, some other elements of the mise-en-scène of the movie asks for a more attentive scrutiny and analytical examination. If one makes a color analysis of the movie, it becomes apparent that Effi is represented by white and Geert is represented by black in the movie. Similarly, if more than two dozens of the mirror scenes are studied closely, it becomes clear that Fassbinder uses mirrors to symbolize duality of personality, the difference between social roles and personal desires or at least some kind of conflict for the characters whose reflections are refracted by the mirrors. For example, Johanna's role in the marriage of Effi and Geert is symbolized by several consistent features throughout the movie. The fact that Johanna always appears in black dresses shows her loyalty to Geert against Effi. Her ambiguous relation to Effi is underlined by her dual reflection through a mirror in the scenes with Effi. She has to be respectful, obedient and polite toward Effi, yet since this is not how she truly feels, Fassbinder always shoots her through a mirror to display this incongruity between the surface and the underlying truth. Finally, the collocation of Johanna with the cleave underscores her antagonistic character against Effi and foreshadows her unsympathetic role in the event following the discovery of the affair.



Left Figure 2: The juxtaposition of Johanna and the cleave, symbolizing her role vis-à-vis Effi and Geert.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

Right Figure 3: Geert and Effi in their bedroom with Johanna watching them from the mirror.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

Edward M.V. Plater, in his “Sets, Props and the ‘Havanaise’ in Fassbinder’s *Fontane Effi Briest*,” examines the décor in the Instettens’ house in Kessin with an aim to illuminate Fassbinder’s own creative inventions in turning his reading of Fontane’s novel into a movie, and suggests some very interesting parallels between Effi and the statues at the Kessin house. Plater lists and analyzes the scenes where the statues of a winged, praying, young woman whose curls resemble those of Effi, of a draped woman whose hands are raised to support a lamp, of a plump naked girl and of a young maiden girl with a goat/dog appear and concludes that the folded praying hands of the first statue “objectify Effi’s unspoken yearnings,” the statue of plump girl denotes Effi’s youthfulness (which is what Gieshübler and Effi exactly talk about), while the young maiden symbolize Effi’s artless innocence and the statue of draped figure indicates the rigid life that awaits Effi as a married woman (Plater, 1999: 30-32). Most importantly, Plater points out that the statue of plumb naked little girl is not “free-standing, but is holding on to a vine-clad post” (Plater, 1999: 33). As we have already seen, both in the novel and in the movie, the vine-clad represents marriage. In a way, then, Fassbinder combines two themes in one symbol and imply the dilemma of Effi in her marriage. A similar example is the sculpture of a two faced woman which appears at the end of the scene in which Geert

is in celebratory mood about their wedding anniversary and full of compliments, whereas Effi is internally tormented by her fears about her clandestine affair while keeping calm on the surface (1:32:30 to 1:34:32). One intriguing observation Plater offers in relation to the symbolization of Effi through ornaments and art objects is the small figure of a white horse on a shelf opposite of Effi's bed, when she receives the news of discovery of her past affair with her mother's letter and lies almost unconsciously on the bed of her health resort room (one hundred-seventeen minutes into the movie, 1:53:10) Plater reminds us of Frau von Briest's words about Effi in the second scene: "Effi, eigentlich hättest du doch wohl Kunstreiterin werden müssen. Immer am Trapez, immer Tochter der Luft" or in English "Effi, you should actually have become an equestrian artiste. Always on the trapeze, a daughter of the air" (2:31).

Plater also draws attention to the dark cherub which hangs above Effi's bed, claiming that the dark cherub represents Geert and his emotionally manipulative nature. According to Plater, the dark color of the cherub, as opposed to the light-colored statues, represents its association with Geertz, who is signified by the color black in the movie as well as the fact that Crampas makes reference to a cherub, while talking to Effi about the calculating nature of Geert on the seaside (Plater, 1999: 30). The fact that it is placed right above Effi's head over her bed suggests that Fassbinder wants it to be the symbol of "the fear-inducing apparatus"<sup>4</sup> of Geertz. If there is a second prop in the movie that is a symbol of Geertz, Plater believes it is the statue of a naked man wrestling with a monster on a table in the Berlin living room of the Instettens. This statue appears 95 minutes (1:35:39) into the movie. Plater maintains that since the camera first moves toward Dr. Rummschüttel and depicts this small statue and then withdraws right to focus on Geert, Fassbinder asks us to make a connection between the statue and Geert (Plater, 1999: 39-40).

Paintings are also symbolically charged in *Fontane Effi Briest* and add further subtle layers to the themes of the movie. There are at least three important paintings one should look into in order to unpack the hidden symbolism in the texture of the movie. These paintings are, in order of appearance, a small painting of dunes and waves into 77 minutes into the movie; a painting of a pastoral scene where two couples appear on opposing sides within the frame, which appears 95 minutes (1:35:40) into the movie and the painting of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child which emerges behind Geert at the end of his discussion with

Wüllersdorf on the duel against Major Crampas at around 107 minutes (1:47:05) into the movie. The first painting appears when Geert announces Effi the news of his promotion and their move to Berlin. Effi is overjoyed with this news and kneels down in front of Geert, who fails to understand why Effi is so afflicted in Kessin and asks Effi if he himself is the cause of her affliction. Effi sits down on a chair and rejects this suggestion. She closes her eyes and turns her head to right. Behind her, a small painting of waves and dunes is placed. With this small yet symbolically significant painting, Fassbinder manages to convey the affliction of Effi in Kessin without any recourse to words. The viewer realizes why Effi sees the move to Berlin as her salvation, but Geert himself is in complete darkness (as his garment) as to the reasons of Effi's confusing reactions. I will not dwell on the other two paintings, but I would like to note that the idea of doubling represented through two sets of couples on opposite sides of the second painting should be considered along with the mirror scenes and the duality of the characters, while the analysis of Geert's attitude toward Effi and Annie should take the possible parallels with the story of Virgin Mary and the Christ into consideration.



Figure 4: Geert and Effi in their bedroom, Effi behind a lace curtain, the morning after Crampas gives Effi a lift home.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

Finally, I will briefly dwell on the importance of lace-curtain and how it should be “read,” to use Fassbinder’s phrase for this movie. The first time the lace-curtain appears is the morning after Crampas gives Effi a lift back home while Geert stays behind in the woods, waiting for his horseman to fix his carriage. Although it has been Geert’s own

suggestion that Crampas take Effi back home, he is disturbed by the idea that he has let his wife be alone with Crampas, which he now deems as a mistake. Effi, on the other hand, has been confounded by the seductive advances Crampas has made on her, while nothing concrete has taken place yet. Geert's motive in this scene is to inquire into the night before and learn whether anything has taken place as well as to lecture Effi about how to keep her virtue as a means of keeping her under control. Fassbinder is able to combine all these aspects of the scene into one concrete image by the insertion of the lace curtain around Effi and the positions of his main actors, vis-à-vis the position of the camera. Geert's imposing pose and persistent gaze at his wife stresses his desire to infiltrate through her mind and feelings. He is worried that he might have lost his full control over his wife and wants to make sure that he can put it back in its place. However, Effi is not willing to share her frame of mind at that moment. Although nothing concrete has happened yet, she is bewildered by her aroused feelings toward Crampas, which she tries to hide. At the same time, she is aggravated by the now-familiar manipulative character of Geert. Therefore, her back faces Geert. The lace curtain symbolizes her emotional state at that moment. In another scene after this shot, the lace becomes once again the sign of Effi's need to hide her relation to Crampas. This scene is 77 minutes (1:17:49) into the movie (See Figure 6). Effi is in front of the mirror, using her toiletries and checking herself. Roswitha is behind her, packing Effi's garments. The Instettens are moving from Kessin to Berlin. Roswitha tells Effi that Kessin is good, but does not have much to offer, only dunes and waves, which represent Effi's affair with Crampas. Naturally, Effi immediately associates the dunes and waves with Crampas and she says "Yes, you're right, Roswitha. It rushes and surges, but that's not life. One has all kinds of foolish ideas"<sup>5</sup> and she turns her head around to Roswitha to blame her about flirting with Kruse.



Figure 5: Effi and Roswitha in Effi's bedroom, Effi doubly hiding her true self by means of mirror and lace veil. Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film

While Roswitha is talking about the dunes and waves of Kessin, Effi puts a great deal of effort into placing her lace veil around her face rightly. Only when she feels that she has done so, she turns her face around to accuse Roswitha of something she herself is actually guilty of. In this way, the lace becomes the symbol of Effi's mask to hide her affair, as the whole conversation is about her extramarital affair and her effort to keep it a secret. Nevertheless, I also believe that by making Roswitha talking about the dunes and waves of Kessin, Fassbinder reveals that he thinks Roswitha is aware of the clandestine affair, yet she does not talk about it explicitly and she is happy to see Effi leave Kessin and escape Major Crampas. Fassbinder inscribes his reading of the relationship between Roswitha and Effi by using the symbols associated with the affair.

This section is an attempt at uncovering some of the densely symbolic construction Fassbinder weaves into the visual texture of the movie, yet it is in no way an exhaustive analysis of all the multi-layered components of the *mise-en-scène*. More than what has been covered in this part still waits to be deconstructed by Fassbinder scholars.

#### REFLECTION AND REFRACTION: MIRRORS, FRAMES, THRESHOLDS AND WINDOWS

The sheer number of scenes with mirrors and frames in *Fontane Effi Briest* necessitates any paper on the movie to allocate a section to reflection and refraction. Apart from this indispensable allotment, my aim is also to try to show the influence of Douglas Sirk on Fassbinder in the form of frames within frames and mirrors. Mercer and Shingler state that the significance of mirror for Sirk comes from his belief that mirrors “produce an image that seems to represent the person looking into the mirror when in fact what they see is their exact opposite” (Mercer and Shingler, 2004: 54). Just like in Sirkian melodramas, then, in Fassbinder's *Fontane Effi Briest* mirrors are the symbols of illusion and delusion. All the characters look into mirrors, talk to one another through them, carry out conflicting roles and live in a double existence. The other common feature with Sirkian drama is the frames or frames within the frames. As in the characters of Sirk movies, the *Fontane Effi Briest* characters appear at thresholds, window panes, mirror frames, doorways and picture frames. All these frames signify the entrapment between the conflicts between the Public and the private, the social and the personal.

The abundance of mirrors and the reflections throughout the movie is outstanding. Edward M. V. Plater, in his “Reflected Images in Fassbinder’s *Effi Briest*,” points out that there are nearly thirty mirror scenes in the movie. After carrying out an intensive reading of some of the mirror scenes, he attains that:

”The frame and size may underscore visually the progress of the dialogue, as when Insetten and Wüllersdorf debate the question of the duel. The size and condition of the mirror's surface may provide a visual comment on a character's plight, as when the worn surface of the mirror and the small area enclosed by the frame express Effi's reduced economic and social position. Camera work and acting may also be important, as in the last example, when the repositioning of the camera and the movements and poses of Effi's parents suggest that they have become identical, like a positive image and its reflection, in their attitude toward Dr. Rumschüttel's urgent request. Above all, however, it is the basic property of all reflecting surfaces to form an image of physical reality in reverse that Fassbinder uses to express meaning in the film.” (Plater, 1999: 187)



Figure 6: Geert and Effi are in their Berlin apartment.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

In lieu of a detailed examination of the mirror and frame scenes in the movie, which will be beyond the scope of this paper and a legitimate paper of its own, I will try to touch upon a few important scenes in *Fontane Effi Briest* to show how they can be considered in relation to Sirk's movies. In certain scenes, Fassbinder uses mirrors in order to create illusory effects. In these type of scenes, the viewer is shown a set of characters in a common setting engaging in a dialogue or merely acknowledging the existence of other characters in the same setting with themselves for a considerable amount of time. After a while, one of the characters move and the viewer suddenly realizes that the entire scene has been a mirror reflection and, therefore, in reverse. The famous scene of Geert's arrival at Hohen-Cremmen is one of these scenes. The screen shows the mirror reflection of the actual setting, the first scene that the

viewer is presented with in the movie. When Effi moves down the stairs to meet Geert, she disappears from the frame for a second. When she reappears on the screen, everything is on the reverse side and the viewer is disoriented momentarily. A similar example takes place when Geert talks to Effi through mirror in their Berlin apartment (See Figure 6). There are two mirrors in this scene. The first mirror is a relatively small one into which Geert looks and a big one next to which Effi stands, observing Geert from back in flesh and seeing the reflection of his face in the small mirror. The scene starts with Geert talking into the small mirror, his back facing Effi. When Geert turns his head around to directly face Effi, the viewer realizes the reflection trick. There is a second layer into this scene, which is quite intriguing. Geert turns his head to talk to Effi about the Chinese man face to face and now the back of his head is reflected in the small mirror. Fassbinder might be signaling that there is something more at the back of Geert's mind than what he tells Effi. I believe that this kind of scenes exemplifies the Sirkian idea that mirrors are delusional and its deep influence on Fassbinder. Fassbinder turns this idea into an alienation effect by temporarily disorienting the viewer and reminding them what they see is a crafted art, not reality.



Figure 7: Effi after Crampas has left their house.

Source: *Fontane Effi Briest* (West Germany, 1974), director and producer Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Tango Film.

Lastly, as an example to the frame as the social confinement in *Fontane Effi Briest*, I believe the scene where Crampas comes to visit the Instettens in their house for the first time is appropriate (See Figure 7). After briefly sitting with the couple indoors, Crampas is seen with Effi in

the garden in the next scene. They are on the left side of the screen. On the right side of the screen, Roswitha tends to Annie in her crib. Their dialogue about Crampas' upcoming play shortly turns into delicate matters of marriage, happiness and variety in a flirtatious and seductive manner. Effi feels uncomfortable by what she has said and walks to the crib. She holds her baby up in an obvious attempt to remind Crampas of her status as a married woman with a child. When Crampas leaves, Effi is seen on the left side of the screen with an ambivalent expression on her face. Plater analyzes this scene as follows:

"The area on the right side of the screen, circumscribed by the open door, is the area of marriage and family, respect and order, while the left side of the screen represents the area of the forbidden, transgressions against the established order, behaviour inimical to society, and banishment. The flirtatious gestures, the seductive glances, the suggestive smiles and equivocal stares all take place on this side of the screen. Effi [...] attempts to recover [...] by crossing over into the area of happy domesticity to hold up as proof the fruit of her marriage to Innstetten. Fassbinder, however, by having her go back over to Crampas and, bidding him goodbye, turn and walk toward the camera, obviously taking care to stay within the framework of the closed French door, hints to us that she nevertheless succumbs to the Major's overtures, and though she breaks off the affair, is barred from re-entering the sphere of marriage and family. She does not cross over again to the right side of the screen and enter at the open door but remains standing outside the closed door looking in." (Plater, 1999: 34)

Agreeing with this excellent analysis of the scene, I also want to add that the fact that the transgressions to the society are represented in the form of a window frame and that Effi as a woman entrapped between social rules and individual desires is reflected as confined by convention and window frames shows the deep influence of Douglas Sirk on Fassbinder.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although *Fontane Effi Briest* is not a film that one would immediately categorize under melodrama, a closer look into Sirkian melodrama and its deep influence on Reiner Fassbinder yields new perspectives on Fassbinder's enigmatic *Fontane Effi Briest* and some of the stylistic devices which are in common with Douglas Sirk's techniques. The most obvious and forthright Sirkian characteristic of the movie is the predicament of the leading actress. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler stress, many of Fassbinder's movies, just like Sirk's Hollywood melodramas, are concerned with the dilemmas of the leading female characters (Mercer and Shingler, 2004: 71). For Fassbinder, Effi is the critical tool and the

most evident symbol to show the shortcomings of the German society and subject it to an in-depth analysis, a technique which resonates with Douglas Sirk's leading actresses. The use of mirrors and frames, especially in a confining framing manner, reaches a different height in *Fontane Effi Briest*. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler points out, Sirk's attention to elaborate and stylized mise-en-scène is also present in almost every scene in the elegantly decorated space of *Fontane Effi Briest*. Last but not least, the "highly stylised" acting style and "self-conscious manners" of the characters in the movie can be defined as melodramatic (Mercer and Shingler, 2004: 72). The influence of Sirkian melodrama on Fassbinder in this period is undeniable.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The original is as follows: "Nur einen Kuß könntest du mir geben. Aber daran denkst du nicht. Den ganzen weiten Weg nicht gerührt, frostig wie ein Schneemann." Laß, ich werde mich schon bessern."

<sup>2</sup> The original is as follows: "Auf dem Rondell hatte sich eine kleine Veränderung vollzogen, die Sonnenuhr war fort, und an der Stelle, wo sie gestanden hatte, lag seit gestern eine weiße Marmorplatte, darauf stand nichts als »Effi Briest« und darunter ein Kreuz. Das war Effis letzte Bitte gewesen: »Ich möchte auf meinem Stein meinen alten Namen wiederhaben; ich habe dem andern keine Ehre gemacht.« Und es war ihr versprochen worden."

<sup>3</sup> The original is as follows: "Geert, wenn er nicht irre, habe die Bedeutung von einem schlank aufgeschossenen Stamm, und Effi sei dann also der Efeu, der sich darumzuranken habe."

<sup>4</sup> "Eine Art Angstapparat aus Kalkül" is the only intertitle repeated twice in the movie and they appear consecutively.

<sup>5</sup> The original is as follows: "Ja, Roswitha, du hast recht. Es rauscht und rauscht immer nur so, aber es ist kein richtiges Leben. Und dann kommen einem allerhand dumme Gedanken".