

MARY HENNESSY
University of Michigan

Fassbinder's Female Complaint: *Martha* (1974) and the 1940s "Woman's Film"

Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love,
 and love is the gift that keeps on taking.
 (Berlant 1)

Martha meets Hollywood

Like Paula in *Gaslight*, Alicia in *Notorious*, and the new Mrs. de Winter in *Rebecca*, the eponymous female protagonist of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 melodrama *Martha* finds love abroad. It's love at first sight for Martha (played by actress Margit Carstensen) and her future husband Helmut Salomon (Karlheinz Böhm of *Sissi* fame) when they cross paths in Rome. Like her cinematic predecessors, Martha will fall in love, and she will suffer dearly for it. This essay examines *Martha* as fertile ground for interrogating Fassbinder's relationship to gender politics, to classical Hollywood cinema, and to affect—from the aesthetic representation of emotion to the "affected," or exaggerated, staging of gesture. I consider *Martha* in a comparative framework, focusing on the film's relationship to the 1940s Hollywood paranoid woman's film¹ and to Douglas Sirk's 1950s Hollywood melodramas, both of which are subgenres of the American "woman's film," a label referring to Hollywood films from the silent era through the 1960s that have female protagonists, that take on typically "female" problems—such as domesticity, marriage, love, and family life—and that are, "most crucially," marketed to female audiences (Doane 3). Such an approach illustrates the ways in which *Martha* both draws on and pushes against the narrative strategies, tropes, and images of Hollywood and women's culture in order to take what Lauren Berlant calls the "female complaint"—that "women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking"—to an aesthetic and narrative extreme (1). I consider to what end Fassbinder appropriates such Hollywood aesthetics, drawing on an amalgam of theories of melodrama and of the American woman's film, in addition to Bertolt Brecht's writing on *Gestus*. Though I hardly want to reclaim Fassbinder for feminism,² a film like *Martha*, viewed both transnationally and as a product of Fassbinder's Germany, pushes against Berlant's theory of the American woman's film and the female complaint as tools for women to manage their intimate lives under conditions of patriarchy, inequality, and capitalism, for "bar-gaining with what there is" (31). In bringing Berlant's critique to bear in a 1970s West German context, I also hope to offer a more capacious understanding of the term "woman's culture"—one that includes non-American texts.

"It was like lightning striking"

The viewer first encounters Martha in Rome on holiday with her domineering father, who dies suddenly from a heart attack. After being robbed by a group of Italian students, Martha must seek help at the German embassy in Rome, where it is revealed that her full name is Martha Hyer, that she is thirty-one years of age and single, and that she lives at 21 Detlef Sierk Straße in Konstanz, a lake town bordering Switzerland in southwest Germany.³ Martha takes awkward drags from her first-ever cigarette (her father always forbade her from smoking) as she explains to the bored embassy worker that she was born in Konstanz, went to school there, and works there as a librarian. Before going to the embassy, Martha crosses paths by chance with Helmut. The two characters never speak; rather, they walk toward one another, Martha in the direction of the embassy, and Helmut toward Martha's now-empty taxi. As they approach each other, their eyes lock. Cinematographer Michael Balhaus circles the two figures with a 360-degree tracking shot. This dramatic orbit signals that Martha and Helmut have been mutually—and irreversibly—transfixed by one another. "It was like lightning striking," as Gregory Peck's character says of the first time he made eye contact with Ingrid Bergman's Dr. Constance Peterson in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). Helmut and Martha enter one another's orbits a second time in Konstanz, and soon thereafter they marry. The majority of the film's diegesis follows their honeymoon and their first months of married life, during which Helmut's increasingly sadistic behavior leads Martha to believe that her new husband wants to kill her. Following the film's climax, a Hitchcockian car chase and crash, Martha ends up paralyzed, and completely dependent on Helmut. In a bizarre post-production "Unterdrückungs-gespräch" with Margit Carstensen, Fassbinder claims that, by the end of the film, Martha has achieved "was sie eigentlich wollte" (357).

Lauren Berlant argues in *The Female Complaint* that the American woman's film, as theorized by Mary Ann Doane, can be thought of as part of an American women's culture that mediates conventional modes of heterosexual desire, love, and belonging within patriarchal United States society.⁴ Berlant is concerned in *The Female Complaint* with mid-twentieth century women's culture in the United States, and her ideas are useful for examining *Martha* as a "woman's film" that portrays a fictional German woman's experience of bourgeois marriage. Like the United States' women's culture texts that Berlant analyzes,⁵ *Martha* explores the inherent tensions between romantic fantasy and lived intimacy, and deals in "public-sphere femininity" by presenting women as inseparable from affect, emotion, and intimacy (2). In all of her case studies, Berlant returns to the idea that, while women's culture may indeed criticize ideology and patriarchy for women's suffering, it ultimately remains faithful to that ideology and patriarchy by remaining in the realm of fantasy and affect. Women's culture texts present a sentimental view of the social world as an *affective* world, inviting women, across a variety of boundaries such as race, class, and even time, to see their affective, personal lives as "belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated" (4). In other words, women's culture texts remind female spectators that although they might be suf-

fering, at least they are not suffering alone. *Martha, I will show*, moves beyond the realm of fantasy and the purely juxtapolitical, critiquing the female complaint and the patriarchy even as it revels in the narrative, aesthetic, and affective tropes associated with women's culture and the female complaint itself. I thus challenge Berlant's assertion that the woman's film necessarily invites female spectators to take part in the fantasy of the heteronormative intimacy they see onscreen without asking them to consider the political reality of their own lived experiences.

As Jennifer Fay has shown, German filmmakers who experienced Hollywood films during the postwar period did not simply copy Hollywood imports, but rather "reinterpreted, adapted, and domesticated these fictions" (xvii).⁶ With this idea in mind, I consider *Martha* alongside such 1940s women's films as George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944) and Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Notorious* (1946), all of which can be loosely grouped under what Doane defines as the "paranoid woman's film."⁷ In such films, paranoia is staged "in the formulaic repetition of a scenario in which the wife invariably fears that her husband is planning to kill her—the institution of marriage is haunted by murder" (Doane 124).⁸ Fay's analysis of the role played by Hollywood cinema in Allied postwar efforts toward German "reeducation" considers how films like *Gaslight* might have resonated, both politically and emotionally, with German women's experience of occupation life (xxv). Her reading of the role of the woman's film in postwar Germany is compelling, and I build on her work to show how the "generation after"—in this case Fassbinder—engaged with such Hollywood films, keeping in mind Eric Rentschler's idea of the relationship between American and German cinemas as a complex interplay in which foreign spectators consider the images of another culture's images in order to see their own culture in new light (618). With Rentschler's reading of American and German cinemas in mind, a film like *Martha* must be considered seriously not only as a product of 1970s West Germany, of Fassbinder's oeuvre, or even of "New German Cinema," but also of Hollywood and the American occupation.

Staging Masochism in Martha and the 1940s Paranoid Woman's Film

It is no exaggeration to say that *Martha* would be impossible without paranoid women's films like *Gaslight*, *Rebecca*, or *Notorious*.⁹ Indeed, Fassbinder borrows numerous narrative and aesthetic elements directly from such films. In *Rebecca*, for example, Joan Fontaine's character worries she can never match the sophistication and beauty of her husband's first wife. In an effort to be more like the former Mrs. de Winter (Rebecca), she orders a fashionable dress from London and wears her hair up instead of in her customary plain bob. Her husband, who constantly infantilizes her by referring to her as a child, cruelly criticizes her effort, just as Helmut does when Martha tries a new hairdo. Helmut laughs at her, and suggests that she's too old for such a hairstyle. A few weeks into Martha and Helmut's marriage Helmut has his and Martha's home telephone disconnected, presumably to keep Martha from contacting anyone while he is away, a scene that recalls a similar one in *Notorious*. In Hitchcock's film, Alicia's husband has the

telephone removed from her room after she becomes aware that he has been poisoning her, thus preventing her from seeking help. The valium and alcohol-induced suicide attempts of Martha's mother after her husband's death prompt Helmut to put his mother-in-law in a psychiatric unit, using her alleged mental illness to justify why he and Martha cannot have a child. Gregory Anton similarly tells Paula in *Gaslight* that her mother was insane, insinuating that Paula, too, must be losing her mind. Gregory also criticizes Alicia's appearance in *Gaslight*, commenting at one point on her skin's "pallor," just as Helmut tells Martha that she is too pale and too thin. *Martha* also recalls the paranoid woman's film of the 1940s from a stylistic standpoint with its foreboding mansion, its facial close-ups, and its use of the vertical staircase as a background in key scenes.

Of the female protagonists mentioned thus far, Martha's experiences most closely mirror those of Paula in *Gaslight*. Cukor's film is a paranoid woman's film through and through, complete with a frightening old house, suspense, point-of-view shots (almost invariably from Paula's perspective), a locked attic, and a dashing young hero who saves Paula from her sinister husband and from madness. Similarly, the imposing home Helmut rents for his new bride in *Martha* was the scene of a mysterious murder.¹⁰ In *Gaslight*, Paula's decline from cheerful opera singer to paranoid shut-in results from her husband telling her repeatedly that she is tired, unwell, confused, and forgetful. He manipulates her, for instance, into thinking she has lost his mother's brooch, when in fact he has taken it from her. Helmut makes a similar move in *Martha*. During his honeymoon with Martha, he tells his new wife that his favorite dish is pig's kidneys in burgundy sauce. When she makes him this meal later in the film, he tells her he cannot possibly eat it, because he has "always" been allergic to it. "Du bist nur ein wenig verwirrt," he tells Martha, after she tearfully insists that he must be wrong: "Nein nein, Helmut. Das ist dein Lieblingsgericht." Here lies an almost unbearable tension between what the film's spectators know to be true—that Martha is right—and Helmut's insistence that Martha is simply confused. Fassbinder disregards spectatorial knowledge, forcing the viewer, along with Martha, to accept Helmut's story on Helmut's perverted terms. For Martha, for the women of the Hollywood woman's gothic, and for the viewer, logic, reason, and memory exist on the man's terms.

Another important similarity to *Gaslight* is the way Helmut speaks to Martha. He almost invariably finishes sentences directed toward her with her name, recalling the patronizing way Gregory addresses Paula, as if she were a child in need of scolding: "Du hast nicht etwa Angst, Martha?" Compare Gregory's "Are you becoming suspicious, as well as absent minded, Paula?" or "Don't get hysterical, Paula." In Stanley Cavell's memorable formulation, the woman in *Gaslight* "is meant to be decreed, tortured out of a mind altogether" (49). The same statement could just as easily refer to *Martha*. Helmut's mind games and manipulation make Martha live in terror that she will say or do the wrong thing, or, worst of all, that she will push Helmut away for good. Martha, like Paula, is utterly devoted to her husband, despite his cruelty. And like Paula, Martha begs her husband to

stay with her at home anytime he leaves the house, which he often does as punishment for some misstep or another, as when Martha refuses to listen to the music he wants her to listen to.¹¹ Despite Helmut's bad behavior and outright cruelty, when he tells Martha that he wants to marry her, she is grateful: "Danke Helmut. Danke, danke, danke." Like the female protagonists of 1940s Hollywood woman's films, Martha is grateful for Helmut's love, and she is devastated when Helmut leaves her to travel for work each week. It's "a match made in heaven between a masochist and a sadist," as American film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum suggests ("*Martha*").

It is striking that Berlant's overall view of postwar U.S. women's culture—of which the woman's film is a constitutive element—suggests a sort of masochistic relation of women to patriarchy. Although women's culture texts exist for Berlant as tools for female audiences to engage in processes of negotiating, coping, and bargaining—and should thus be taken seriously—she also criticizes these texts for sustaining the system they seek to critique. This masochistic element of the female complaint is certainly mirrored in—and perhaps magnified by—Martha's marriage to Helmut. *Martha* literalizes the masochistic elements of the female gothic and women's culture, throwing into sharp relief the masochism inherent in women's culture generally and in the female complaint specifically.

For Sigmund Freud, masochism presents a unique challenge to his theory of psychic life: "If mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and the obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible" (274). Seen in this light, *Martha* both stages masochism and conveys Freud's sense of its incomprehensibility by means of exaggeration and of estrangement. In his short essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud identifies three kinds of masochism: erotogenic, female, and moral. Erotogenic masochism refers to the derivation of sexual pleasure from masochism, female masochism to the expression of women's "feminine nature," and moral masochism to "norms of behavior" (276). Key to Freud's conception of moral masochism is that it is only tangentially connected to sexuality, that it is more firmly rooted in the social world than erotogenic or female masochism, and that it can be impersonal: "The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance" (Freud 279). In this sense, Lauren Berlant's theorization of the female complaint can be understood as a kind of moral masochism, conceived of as a means by which patriarchal ideology and gendered power relations are maintained.

Many elements of the 1940s paranoid woman's film manifest in *Martha* as hyperbole or exaggerated affect. In *Spellbound*, Gregory Peck's character encourages Constance to spend time with him rather than at work. Fassbinder carries this idea to an extreme, when, following Martha and Helmut's honeymoon, Martha arrives at work to find that her husband has resigned on her behalf. Moreover, Fassbinder follows through on the violence of the Hollywood woman's film that is often only evident in an angry or threatening male gaze. Beyond being able to frighten Martha with a look or by crossing his arms (which he can and certainly

does), Helmut physically and sexually abuses her on a number of occasions. Whether by forcing her to ride a carnival ride he knows will make her sick, having sex with her after she gets a painful sunburn, or leaving a Nosferatu-esque bite mark on her neck, Helmut's manipulation and control of her are physical as well as psychological.¹² Linda Williams has argued for the importance of taking seriously female spectators' experience of aesthetically mediated female masochism. She is concerned with how female viewers experience masochistic pleasure through identification with the female characters they see onscreen. However, the masochism Martha experiences onscreen, whether moral or sexual, seems to foreclose identification, as Margit Carstensen herself points out in "Ein Unterdrückungsgespräch" when she observes that Martha behaves like a sick person. Fassbinder replies to this that, far from being ill, Martha is no different than any other woman.¹³ Fassbinder's hyperbolic statement certainly intends to provoke Carstensen, but it also emphasizes the identificatory nature of the relationship between the female spectator and the female protagonist of the woman's film pointed to by Williams and Berlant.

Significant, too, are the ways in which *Martha* departs from the Hollywood paranoid woman's film. Unlike Cukor's and Hitchcock's 1940s black and white paranoid women's films, Fassbinder's made-for-television *Martha* is saturated by color.¹⁴ From the film's opening scenes in Rome, to Helmut and Martha's beachside honeymoon, to the portrayal of a lush, green, and sunny Konstanz, there is rarely more than a cloud in the sky. With *Martha*, Fassbinder managed to make "a horror film in broad daylight and on sun-drenched terraces," as Elsaesser writes (280). Finally, unlike the 1940s female gothic, Fassbinder's *Martha* does not displace the *Unheimlichkeit* of domestic life onto a murder mystery, poison, or the theft of family jewels; rather, it is simply marriage itself. This distinction is crucial, as Fassbinder offers neither Martha nor the spectator a way out. The film's lack of diegetic resolution departs from the happy ending brought about by a rescue in the nick of time (as in the tradition of serial melodramas), or the tragedy and catharsis of a rescue that comes "too late" (as in *Titanic*) that are common in American film melodramas (Williams 32). Fassbinder allows his viewers neither smiles nor tears; rather, he leaves them with Martha in some kind of waking nightmare in which she is utterly dependent on her sadistic husband.

Estranging the Woman's Film: The Female Complaint and Fassbinder's Germany
 Watching films like *Gaslight*, *Notorious*, and *Rebecca* today, it is difficult not to see them as critical of the female complaint. As if anticipating my sense that female spectators could not possibly put up with the likes of Gregory Anton, let alone Helmut Salomon, Berlant insists that for all their "orientation toward agency," women's culture texts ultimately help maintain the patriarchy they seek to criticize by remaining in the juxtapolitical sphere of affect, emotion, and intimacy (2). As this article has argued thus far, Fassbinder's film both departs from and brings to an extreme elements of the Hollywood female gothic in a way that forces audience members to think critically about—rather than identify with—Martha's sit-

uation. As the following will seek to demonstrate, *Martha* further estranges the woman's film through exaggerated affect, through Brechtian-Sirkian techniques of distanciation, and through uneasy connections between postwar Germany and 1970s West Germany to level a critique against the female complaint itself. In doing so, *Martha* presents a strong challenge to Berlant's criticism that the woman's film invites female spectators to take part in the fantasy of heterosexual intimacy onscreen without asking them to consider the political realities of their own lived experience.

Many of the elements of the woman's film and of film melodramas—facial close-ups, gestures such as burying one's face in one's hands, or displays of "big" emotions (like love, terror, or grief)—are taken to their limits in *Martha*. Margit Carstensen's superb performance is so overwrought that one is more inclined to laugh at her than to be moved by her suffering. The film punctuates its characters' often-deadened affect with bursts of artificially high emotional outbursts—whether taking the form of manic laughter, hysterical screaming, or rapid shifts from subdued dialogue to shouting. In one scene, for example, Martha screams, dramatically drawing the back of her hand to her mouth in a gesture of horror, when she sees Helmut waiting for her on the stairs (at this point she is convinced that he intends to kill her). He calmly tells her that he has brought her a gift, and that it is on the bed waiting for her, which prompts her to run away in terror. Such imbalanced moments, combined with the film's occasional sentimental indulgence in non-diegetic violin concertos during rare moments of domestic harmony,¹⁵ inevitably produce distance between spectator and screen. By treating Helmut and Martha's relationship as "poker-faced high comedy," as Rosenbaum suggests, Fassbinder makes the uncomfortable effects produced by Helmut's almost laughably cruel treatment of Martha and her increasingly desperate coping mechanisms all the more unbearable ("*Martha*").¹⁶

I suggest that Carstensen's performance is best understood within a Brechtian-Sirkian analytic framework. Carstensen's movements, her speech, and her posture read as a highly self-conscious, exaggerated staging of social gesture, or *Gestus*, which Brecht describes as gestures that resonate with society and that ask theater audiences to think critically about and draw conclusions about the social world (104–105). Much of the literature on melodrama, particularly since the re-discovery of Sirk, emphasizes that the social *Gestus* was always already there, if buried, in classic Hollywood melodramas, legible in their excess, their gendered mode of address, and their glaring contradictions. In *Martha*, however, such contradictions are made explicit. In the women's culture texts Berlant analyzes, *Gestus* might function as a way of satisfying its female audiences' affective expectations, making a story intelligible and relatable. In *Martha*, Carstensen's performance is recognizable, but hardly relatable. Rather than encourage identification or empathy, Carstensen's over-the-top performance turns the familiar gestures of women's culture into social gesture, allowing the audience to consider what are commonly called "social circumstances." Carstensen's masochistic, overwrought Martha is especially jarring when compared to her somewhat sadistic, domineer-

ing Petra in Fassbinder's all-female film *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (1972).¹⁷

Any discussion of Brecht must necessarily take into account Fassbinder's relationship to Douglas Sirk and his 1950s Hollywood melodramas, which are, like the paranoid woman's film or the female gothic of the 1940s, constitutive of mid-century American women's culture. Indeed, Martha and Helmut's home, with its excess of mirrors, its elaborate staircase, heavy furniture, and veranda crowded with plants recalls the mise-en-scène of Sirk's American melodramas. But as Eric Rentschler has shown, one of the most common—and tired—narratives about the relationship between West German cinema and Hollywood is that of the “love-hatred syndrome,” in which Hollywood, as metonym for America, provided “identification figures for a fatherless society” (605). This narrative, he writes, has been influential in terms of Fassbinder's appropriation of Sirk as a leftist Brechtian director who critiqued 1950s America by using melodrama to subversive ends. While Fassbinder's debt to Sirk is certainly important, there is something more complex at work than Fassbinder appropriating Sirkian aesthetics to critique Hollywood or the ubiquity of American culture in postwar Germany. Instead, the following analysis will suggest that Fassbinder uses Sirk, a master at telling women's stories, to expose the politics of gender and of patriarchy in West Germany during the 1970s.

By combining a complex take on the Hollywood gothic woman's film with Sirkian aesthetics, Fassbinder shows the ways in which societal expectations of women's roles in Germany circa 1973 are not so different than they were in the 1940s or 1950s. Indeed, Fassbinder seems fascinated by what Sirk's films get across, writing of Sirk's *Imitation of Life*: “Keinem der Protagonisten wird je klar, daß alles, Gedanken, Wünsche und Träume präzise aus der gesellschaftlichen Realität entstehen oder von ihr manipuliert sind” (*Filme befreien den Kopf* 22). It is clear that Fassbinder was thinking not only about Sirk's style or his strategy but also about the complexities of lived female experience in Germany. *Martha* cannot simply be seen as “Sirkian,” but rather as a complex estrangement of the 1940s female gothic and Sirk's melodramas that emphasizes continuity as much as it does change. In the following, I will point to the specific ways in which Fassbinder's estrangement of the Hollywood woman's film functions in the context of 1970s Germany.

In *Martha*, Fassbinder clearly draws from a narrative and aesthetic mode of filmmaking from an earlier period, one of gender conservatism associated with postwar efforts at reestablishing patriarchal authority. Fassbinder's use of the American woman's film of the 1940s and 1950s is especially striking considering that second-wave German feminism was in full swing when Fassbinder made *Martha* in 1973, the same year as the first international women's film seminar in Berlin and one year before the publication of the first issue of *Frauen und Film* in 1974, the landmark journal dedicated to feminist film theory and practice. Elizabeth Heineman describes the years of defeat and occupation in Germany as “the hour of women,” a particular moment of women's mobilization in which

the figure of the *Trümmerfrau* was preeminent and linked to discourses of reconstruction and rebuilding (75). Heineman observes that during the 1980s, West German women viewed “the hour of women” as a lost opportunity for radical emancipation. Any emancipation that the war brought ultimately resulted in little more than “a reconsolidation of male privilege,” emblematic of “the domesticity of the 1950s” (76). The historical context in which *Martha* was made is, of course, different from that of the immediate postwar period. Fassbinder made the film in a post-1968 West Germany that had already begun to see the social and political agitations of the student movement and of a burgeoning radical feminism. And yet, Martha goes from working in the public sphere as a wage earner to working in the domestic sphere as a homemaker, ostensibly as her husband, an engineer, profits from the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*. In both concrete and imaginary ways, *Martha* suggests that the leftist political movements of the 1960s did little in the way of radically changing the lives of West German women. By transferring the 1940s woman’s film to 1973 in *Martha*, Fassbinder draws an uneasy comparison between gender roles in the postwar moment to gender roles in 1970s West Germany.¹⁸

Unlike most of the women in 1940s Hollywood films (*Spellbound*’s Constance is an exception), Martha is somewhat older and has a career that she is good at and that she enjoys. Yet, despite the fact that she is well educated, sophisticated, and relatively independent, the film makes clear that the death of her tyrannical father signals not emancipation but rather the transfer of her subjection from one man to another, perhaps reflecting the historical situation of German women’s “emancipation” during the war, only to defer again to their returned brothers, husbands, and fathers after the country’s defeat. And, as Fassbinder communicates in *Martha*, post-45 is not so easily separated, aesthetically or politically, from post-68. In one particularly bizarre sequence, Helmut forces Martha to read an engineering book about dam construction. As she, zombie-like, recites a passage about concrete, one is hard pressed not to think of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, and the emphasis on rebuilding Germany, both economically and physically, during the Adenauer years. The image of a dam also suggests a damming of emotions, both for Martha in her marriage to Helmut, and in women’s relationship to its history.

Martha also connects the immediate postwar moment and Fassbinder’s Germany visually, with Martha’s bright lipstick, shining eyes, and impeccably tailored clothes. Indeed, Martha recalls Sirk’s female leads in his colorful 1950s melodramas. Martha, her mother, and her two girlfriends look as if they belong to another era, an idea signaled visually early in the film, when Martha walks up Rome’s Spanish Steps with her father. Her pristine white pantsuit, heavy make-up, and well-coiffed hair recall Marlene Dietrich, and contrast sharply with the appearance of the grubby Italian students spending time on the steps. Martha, it would seem, took no note of the German student movement of the 1960s, nor does she seem to have benefitted from the election of the left-leaning social democrats in 1969. Indeed, there is something decidedly anachronistic about Martha and her social circle. In an early scene after her return to Konstanz from Rome, Martha

shares ice cream with a friend, who explains that Martha simply has no idea how marriage really works, confiding, "Ich habe gelernt meinem Mann immer recht zu geben. Immer und überall." Doing so is more peaceful, she explains, and one needs fewer tranquilizers.

Fassbinder's *Martha* critiques the female complaint by taking it to a masochistic extreme, estranging women's culture within a particular socio-historical context that encourages critical engagement with gender relations in Fassbinder's own Germany. As a woman's film, *Martha* challenges Berlant's assertion that women's culture texts do not ultimately critique the system in which they are made, arguing that even those texts with "surprises and blockages" are merely "part of the convention and not a transgression of it" (4). Whether through harnessing the affective and emotional excess of the woman's film as Brechtian distancing, through exaggerated social gesture, or through the playful appropriation of Sirkian aesthetics, Fassbinder estranges the Hollywood woman's film in *Martha*, critiquing the masochism inherent in gender roles under patriarchy. In doing so, *Martha* refuses its audience "relief from the political," a process that Berlant argues is facilitated by women's culture (Berlant 10).

Taken alongside Fassbinder's performative "Unterdrückungsgespräch" with Margit Carstensen from 1974, *Martha* offers a counter example to Berlant's theory of women's culture texts as resources for helping women manage their intimate lives under conditions of patriarchy and capitalism, without seeking to critique or change those conditions. Consider the following excerpt from the piece, in which Carstensen both defends and pities Martha, while Fassbinder insists that *Martha's* ending is a happy one:

MARGIT CARSTENSEN: . . . Nur verstehe ich dann den Schluß tatsächlich nicht: warum sie damit zufrieden sein soll.

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER: Sie geht doch zu Helmut zurück.

MC: Weil sie keine andere Wahl hat, wenn sie auf dem Krankenbett liegt. Als er kommt, fängt sie an zu schreien und sagt "nein."

RWF: Und dann findet sie sich ab. Weil sie letztlich ihre Erfüllung gefunden hat.

MC: Ich weiß nicht, ob das eine Erfüllung ist, wenn sie nur noch in ihrem Rollstuhl sitzt und nur deshalb nicht mehr von ihm gequält wird, weil sie jetzt an sich eine Gequälte ist.

RWF: Aber das wäre doch die größte masochistische Erfüllung, nicht mehr lebensfähig zu sein. (359)

Whether Fassbinder truly believes that Martha has what she has always wanted—complete dependence on a man—is less important than what his saying so achieves. In both the film and in his "Unterdrückungsgespräch" he brings the female complaint and the idea of "what women want" in heterosexual love relationships to hyperbole, in the figure of Martha sitting passively in a wheelchair

as the hospital elevator closes on her and Helmut's story. Fassbinder, by absurdly insisting *Martha* has a happy ending, criticizes the complacency that women's culture facilitates.

Through hyperbole and estrangement, in both *Martha* and in "Ein Unterdrückungsgespräch" with Carstensen, Fassbinder forecloses the possibility of the character Martha being used as juxtapolitical tool to allow female spectators to see their lives "as part of something social" (x). Instead harnessing affect in such a way that might satisfy the need for political engagement without actually engaging in politics, Martha does so to alienating ends. By negating rather than affirming the female complaint, Fassbinder challenges "the fantasy that love *ought to be* the gift that keeps on *giving*," which Berlant says is the "fundamental commitment of female complaint rhetoric" (15). If women's culture texts document the ways women survive, bargain, and sometimes flourish under conditions of gross inequality—juxtapolitically through intimacy and romantic love—*Martha* suggests that romantic love, as "the gift that keeps on taking," may not be worth living for after all. Through its highly self-conscious, exaggerated take on the classical Hollywood woman's film, *Martha* invites critical spectators to reconsider the "female complaint" through the lens of Fassbinder's camera.

Notes

¹ Mary Ann Doane argues that the 1940s woman's film is a particularly compelling object of study because of Hollywood producers' expectations that most moviegoers during and after World War II would be women. Films from this period, she writes, have "an intensity and an aberrant quality" connected to shifting familial, gender, and sexual roles during World War II (4). Throughout this paper, I use the term "female gothic" interchangeably with "paranoid woman's film."

² Fassbinder was known for being a difficult and demanding director. In 2000, German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim made a documentary called *Für mich gab's nur noch Fassbinder: Die glücklichen Opfer des Rainer Werner F* (released in the United States as *Fassbinder's Women*). For further insight into Fassbinder's relationship with his female stars, see "Frauen bei Fassbinder."

³ Detlef Sierck Straße is named for the German-American émigré director Douglas Sirk, whom Fassbinder famously admired. Although best known for his 1950s Hollywood melodramas, Sirk directed a number of popular films in Germany during the 1930s. For an overview of Sirk reception during the 1970s, see Koch. For Sirk and melodrama, see Klinger.

⁴ Following the work of Christine Gledhill and Maria LaPlace, Berlant theorizes American women's culture as an "intimate public," which may form "when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" (5). For more about the figure of the female consumer in postwar West Germany, see Carter.

⁵ Examples include Olivia Higgins' novel *Now, Voyager* (1941) and Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959).

⁶ Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1945), Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), and Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* (1944) were among those films that

played in occupied Germany (Fay 144).

⁷ According to Doane, the woman's film is easily combined with film noir, the gothic, or the horror film (4).

⁸ As Fay has shown, the paranoid woman's film has roots in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century woman's gothic novel (145).

⁹ As Thomas Elsaesser writes of *Martha*, "The film is such a Hollywood subject that it comes as no surprise that it is based on a Cornell Woolrich story and that Martha Hyer was a chilly Hollywood star of the 1950s and 1960s (starring in Sirk's *Battle Hymn*, and playing the frigid fiancé of Frank Sinatra in Minnelli's classic *Some Came Running*)" (279).

¹⁰ Although in this article I am interested primarily in comparing *Martha* with the Hollywood paranoid woman's film, *Martha* also recalls Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (published serially from 1894 to 1895 and as a book in 1896). Upon moving to the provinces with her new, much-older husband, Effi thinks she hears a ghost above her room. Just as Helmut's motivation for telling Martha about the murder in their home seems to be to frighten her, Effi's husband does little to assuage his young bride's fears. Significantly, Fassbinder made a black-and-white film version of *Effi Briest* starring Hanna Schygulla (with Karlheinz Böhm in a minor role) in 1974, the same year he made *Martha*. For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Fassbinder's adaptation of *Effi Briest* and *Martha*, see Elsaesser (281–282).

¹¹ Helmut demands that Martha listen to music by the sixteenth-century Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso. Martha prefers Gaetano Donizetti's tragic opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a tale of forced marriage that comments on Martha's own marriage, as Caryl Flinn has argued (86).

¹² The aesthetic representation of bodily abuse directed toward women has roots, according to Linda Williams, in Marquis de Sade and Gothic fiction ("Film Bodies" 4).

¹³ I read Fassbinder's statements in "Ein Unterdrückungsgespräch" as primarily performative, though there is ample evidence that Fassbinder was remarkably cruel to his female stars. Hanna Schygulla has been particularly vocal about her fraught relationship with Fassbinder. See, for example, her articles "Wer wirft den ersten Stein?" *Konkret* 3 May 1973: 19 and "Ich will nicht länger seine Puppe sein." *Zeit-Magazin* 8 June 1973: 14.

¹⁴ As David Batchelor has shown, color in Western culture has historically been associated with the trivial, with the feminine, and with the superficial. Color in film is no exception; Hollywood's early color films tended to be musicals, fantasies, and period pieces, while more "serious" genres like drama remained in monochrome (31).

¹⁵ Most of the (pitch-perfect) music in *Martha* comes from the German romantic composer Max Bruch's first violin concerto.

¹⁶ Flinn reads *Martha* in terms of camp, not comedy: "Given the extent to which Martha hyperbolizes male sadism and female masochism and stages them within a hyperconventional bourgeois marriage, it would be ludicrous to deny its potential camp effects. Yet camp is not coterminous with comedy" (52).

¹⁷ Thomas Elsaesser in fact counts both Böhm's Helmut (in *Martha*) and Carstensen's Petra (in *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*) among Fassbinder's "domestic monsters," those characters known for their emotional cruelty (29).

¹⁸ As Rentschler has argued, Fassbinder's films are always reflecting on life in the Federal Republic, especially "its less attractive aspects" ("American Friends" 28). In the case of *Martha*, along with his *Fox and His Friends* (1975) and *In a Year with 13 Moons* (1978), Fassbinder imagines the Federal Republic as a "battleground of sexual politics" ("American Friends" 28).

Works Cited

- Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "On Gestic Music." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. and ed. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 104–106.
- Carter, Erica. *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996.
- Fassbinder, Rainer Werner. *Filme befreien den Kopf: Essays und Arbeitsnotizen*. Ed. Michael Töteberg. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992.
- Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, and Margit Carstensen. "Ein Unterdrückungsgespräch." *Augenzeugen: 100 Texte neuer deutscher Filmemacher*. Ed. Hans Helmut Prinzler and Eric Rentschler. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1988. 355–361.
- Fay, Jennifer. *Theaters of Occupation: Hollywood and the Reeducation of Postwar Germany*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Flinn, Caryl. *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004.
- "Frauen bei Fassbinder—eine Diskussion mit Ingrid Caven, Margit Carstensen, Irm Hermann, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Hanna Schygulla und Volker Spengler," *Frauen und Film* 35 (1983): 92–96.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." *Essential Papers on Masochism*. Ed. Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick Hanly, 274–285. New York: New York UP, 1995.
- Heineman, Elizabeth. *What Difference Does a Husband Make?: Women and Marital Status in Nazi Germany*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Klinger, Barbara. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- Koch, Gertrud. "From Detlef Sierck to Douglas Sirk," *Film Criticism* 23.2/3 (1999): 14–32.
- Rentschler, Eric. "American Friends and New German Cinema: Patterns of Reception," *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982): 7–35.
- . "How American Is It: The U.S. as Image and Imaginary in German Film," *The German Quarterly* 57.4 (1984): 603–620.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Martha: Fassbinder's Uneasy Testament." *Jonathan Rosenbaum*, 18 July 2004. Web. 20 July 2015. <<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2004/07/martha-fassbinder%E2%80%99s-uneasy-testament/>>.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *The Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2–13.
- . *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.