

# Fassbinder's latest deserves acclaim

By DOROTHY ROMPALSKE

Some of my friends have complained that one of the most frequently misused terms lately has been "New Wave." Whatever the art form, from cinema to pop music, get together two or more artists who share a similar origin and idea about their art and there is a good chance that their work will be called a part of a new wave. through overuse, there is the danger that the term may become meaningless. It's difficult to say what constitutes a new wave. (If all the filmmakers in the world went to China and all jumped off their five-foot-high tripods at the same time ....)

## Cinema

Until recently, the phrase "New Wave cinema" belonged almost exclusively to the young French directors of the 1950s and '60s who shared specific critical doctrines about how a movie should be made. But, things have changed. The third-world countries have had their own New Wave, so have the Eastern Europeans and the Australians. Even the most sophisticated film-goer, however, might have a hard time explaining how approximately three films by two very different Australian directors can be legitimately called a wave.

The current New Wave in cinema is from Germany, and, in this case, the term may be a valid one. Though there are some obvious differences in the styles of the directors of the new German cinema, the most successful of whom have been Herzog, Fassbinder and Wenders, there also are similarities. Each one of these directors is a social critic with a caustic sense of humor. Their targets usually are their homeland and a society which, they often suggest, has sacrificed its culture, history and maybe even its morality in order to rebuild itself after the devastation of World War II. Thirty-three-year-old Rainer Werner Fassbinder is the most prolific of these German directors, having made 37 films. His most successful work is *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, which currently is showing at the Carolina Theatre in Durham.

The critical raves that Fassbinder has been receiving for this black comedy are justified. The film is a complex portrait of young Maria Braun's rise to the top of post-war German economic society. On a larger scale, the film documents the changes that occurred in German society itself and the sacrifices that country made to achieve the "economic miracle" of the 1950s and '60s.

The film opens with Maria marrying Hermann Braun during an air attack on their city. He leaves her immediately for the battlefields while she waits for him loyally at home. When the war ends and Hermann doesn't return home, Maria refuses to give up hope. To survive, she works as a barmaid in a smoky tavern catering to American G.I.s.

When Maria is told that her husband is dead, she finds solace in the arms of a lonely black G.I. named Bill. He teaches her English and also gets her pregnant.

With his typical love for irony, Fassbinder shows Maria and Bill about to celebrate her pregnancy by making love, when a man appears at their doorway and watches them undress. It is Maria's husband, Hermann, who did not die after all. He has returned from a Russian POW camp. A painfully comic confrontation between the three of them ends when Maria accidentally kills poor Bill.

Hermann takes the blame for his wife's actions and goes to prison, while Maria passionately prepares a home for the man to whom she has devoted her life. She loses Bill's baby. A chance meeting with a French businessman named Oswald lands Maria a job as an interpreter with his firm. But soon her intelligence and ambition overwhelm Oswald, and Maria becomes his top executive by day and his mistress by night. She is, "the Mata Hari of the economic miracle."

Maria freely tells her husband about her affair with her boss, but she refuses to tell her boss about her husband. She thinks of one thing, making a home for her husband to come to when he is released. Her boss, who is dying, also thinks of only one thing—spending his remaining months with Maria, the woman he has come to love very deeply.

Oswald finds out about Hermann and they make a deal shortly before Hermann is to be released from prison: If Hermann stays away from Maria until Oswald's death, the Brauns will inherit his entire fortune.



Hanna Schygulla as Maria Braun

When Oswald dies and Hermann returns home, life appears to be perfect for Maria, who is about to become a rich woman. But the ending of the film, which I won't divulge, makes it clear that life is far from perfect for the Brauns and, from Fassbinder's perspective, far from perfect for economically stable but psychologically unsound German society.

There are far more plot complications than I can describe in a brief outline and Fassbinder and his cinematographer Michael Ballhaus have captured the perfect atmosphere for this complex tale. Stylized sets, costumes and background acting highlight a society that, as Hermann Braun says, has grown very cold.

It is a bad time for emotion, but Maria claims to like it that way because then, "nothing can really hurt you." The characters are people who have learned that, in order to survive, they must be practical and cold. Yet, sometimes their emotions do show. Maria's warm side is exposed in some of the film's most beautiful scenes when she climbs around the ruined buildings of her childhood.

As Maria, beautiful Hanna Schygulla has already won the Berlin Film Festival's best actress award and critical raves in this country. She is excellent as a woman who manipulates those around her to achieve security for herself and her husband. And, even though Maria's means are suspect, Schygulla's sensitive performance makes it difficult to doubt the sincerity of her character.

If Schygulla is good, much of the credit goes to screenwriters Peter Marthesheimer and Pia Frohlich. The character they have created in Maria is one of the most intelligent and well-rounded portraits of a woman written for films in a long time. The entire supporting cast of this film is very fine, especially Ivan Desny as Oswald, Klaus Lowitsch as Hermann, George Byrd as Bill and Gisela Uhlen as Maria's mother. For serious film-goers, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* is a movie that shouldn't be missed.

Dorothy Rompalske is a movie critic for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

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