

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Effi Briest

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Script: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ingrid Caven

Based on the novel by Theodore Fontane

Cinematography: Jürgen Jürges, Dietrich Lohmann

Music: Camille Saint-Saëns (French composer, 1835 – 1921)

Spieldauer: 2 hours 17 minutes

Release: 1974

Cast: Hanna Schygulla (Effi Briest), Wolfgang Schenk (Baron Geert von Instdetten), Ulli Lommel (Major Crampas), Lilo Pempeit (Mutter Briest), Herbert Steinmetz (Vater Briest), Ursula Stratz (Roswitha), Karlheinz Böhm (Wullersdorf), Hark Böhm (Apotheker Gieshubler)

Precis – Allen Krumm

It seems remarkable that a seventy-something, 19th century literary man could reincarnate an entire era through the sympathetically imagined character of one young woman. Just as remarkable was the achievement of a 20th century filmmaker, who translated that old man's novel into film, preserving the powerful essence of the original story. It is hard to say what Theodore Fontane (1819 – 1898) would have thought of Rainer Fassbinder (1945 – 1982) filming his masterpiece.

Perhaps he would have recognized Fassbinder as a fellow artist. Fontane's novel was a richly detailed commentary and critique of the entire structure of Wilhelmine society, while Fassbinder, of necessity limited by the techniques and grammar of film, focused his story on the young woman's marriage. Yet it is fair to say Fassbinder distills the essence of Fontane's novel in a remarkably faithful manner.

Fontane spent the six years between 1888 and 1894 composing *Effi Briest*. A first draft was written quite quickly, with most of that time span being spent honing the prose and making stylistic emendations. It was published in 1895, his 76th year. Most critics consider it one of the best German social novels of the nineteenth century. As one commentator noted: "*Mit Effi Briest ragt Fontane in die Weltliteratur*".

Like Fontane, Fassbinder took his time, spending 58 days over a period of two years filming *Effi Briest*, a record for a director who usually worked with breathtaking speed and never looked back. Yet it was a labor of love, a project he had long dreamed of undertaking. Fassbinder himself performs as the omniscient narrator, and he cast his own mother as Mutter Briest.

Hearing of the sad history of the marriage of Else von Plotho and Baron von Ardenne at a dinner party, Fontane used this true story as the point of departure for crafting

the painstakingly realist fiction of *Effi Briest*, penetrating the psyches of the main characters with a detached, yet incisive empathy. Fassbinder maintains that detachment, urging us to contemplate the overarching ethos and social dynamics of Bismarckian Prussia that dominate the behavior of the characters.

"*Effi, komm ...*" We hear this haunting summons in the beginning and at the end of the story. It is illustrative of the symmetry with which Fontane constructed his story and which Fassbinder recapitulates in the film. Effi begins and ends her life in the idyllic family estate of Hohen-Cremmen. In between, during her marriage, she experiences the geographical poles of the isolated backwater of Kessin and the metropolis of Berlin, and the psychological poles of childish innocence and tragic self knowledge.

Effi, still a child, acceding to her parents wishes, marries Baron Geert von Instetten, a district magistrate in East Pomerania. She follows him, like "*ein junges Lämmchen weiß wie Schnee*", to his post in Kessin. A sense of foreboding suffuses the story from the beginning, and is intensified by the introduction of one of Fontane's most renowned motifs in the novel, that of the Chinese *Spuk*. Is this phenomenon meant to be taken literally, at least in Effi's mind? Is it merely an *Angstapparat* used by Instetten to control Effi? No one knows for sure what it does mean, which is apparently as Fontane intended it. His use of this type of seductive ambiguity to engage the reader is masterful.

Fassbinder regularly employs Fontane's technique of the internal monologue or soliloquy and in one of these moments Effi tells us that Instetten "*war lieb und gut, aber ein Liebhaber war er nicht.*" The birth of a daughter matures her, yet her inner isolation and emotional hunger continues unabated. Effi's fate is sealed with the arrival of the dashing Major Crampas, who engages in a targeted seduction, skillfully exploiting Effi's vulnerability. Fassbinder's rendition of the episode which finally catalyzes the affair, the slay ride back from Oberforster

Ring's party, eerie and erotically charged as it is, starkly illuminates the synergy of fate and character.

Effi is relieved when Instetten is transferred to Berlin and the affair with Crampas comes to an inconspicuous end. The couple enjoys several quiet and harmonious years in Berlin until one day when Instetten finds letters that Crampas had written to Effi during their affair in Kessin. Ironically, Instetten feels no real hate and is not driven by retroactive jealousy or an ego ridden desire for revenge.

With his friend Wullersdorf, Instetten agonizes over the issue of a duel. The former does his best to find a way out, suggesting at one point a kind of statute of limitations, or *Verjährungstheorie*, in matters of honor. In the end, the analysis bears no fruit. What has been assaulted is honor, not just Instetten's, but the honor which society demands be upheld. Therefore, Instetten can only conclude "*Ich habe keine Wahl. Ich muss.*" Wullersdorf reluctantly agrees, remarking that "*Unser Ehrenkultus ist ein Götzendienst, aber wir müssen uns ihm unterwerfen, solange der Götze gilt.*"

Instetten kills Crampas, divorces Effi, and takes their daughter Annie with him. Fearing ostracism by their own class, Effi's parents refuse to let her live in Hohen-Cremmen. Effi is reduced to living with her servant Roswitha in a modest apartment in Berlin. A brief reunion with Annie is shattering for Effi; the girl is distant and formal, utterly alienated from her mother. Effi collapses after this visit, and at the urging of the doctor, her father sends a telegram: "*Effi, komm.*" Effi dies at her parent's home, while Instetten, alone and joyless, realizes "*dass es ein Glück gebe, dass er es gehabt, aber dass er es nicht mehr habe und nicht mehr haben könne.*"

Effi Briest has been regarded as a classic since it was first published, and Fassbinder's work is a fitting complement to Fontane's masterpiece. It is one of the most successful attempts ever to translate a novel into film. Fassbinder's almost flawless visual instincts undergird his capacity for exquisitely evocative *mise en scenes*. The written tableaux, the fades to white, the formal quality of the

acting and the intricately arranged, almost portrait like settings are all reminders of the literary source of the story, and the cumulative effect of such techniques engenders the sad beauty of the film. Yet in response to any attempt to ultimately analyze how artists like Fontane and Fassbinder do what they do, one can only concur with Baron von Briest; *"Es ist ein zu weites Feld."*