

## Fassbinder in Beijing: Cold Love in the Glass Cube Theater

BEIJING, November 20

How is Fassbinder received in Beijing these days? Meng Jinghui, one of the Chinese "avant-garde" directors with a flawless reputation has just staged "Love is Colder Than Death" at the Fengchao Theater. He installed a glass wall between stage and audience so that you can only follow the dialogue by eavesdropping on the tightly sealed interior using earphones. Before leaving the stage, the actors walk close to the pane and give the public a silvery gaze; some of them even exhale against the glass and then wipe over it. To the spectators, viewing the somewhat hushed action is like watching movements in a fish tank, comparable to scenes that take place in an infinitely distant world blurred behind a veil.

What type of world is this? For Fassbinder, the forced artificiality – the gestures derived from US gangster movies as well as the elegiac yet obstreperous treatment of images – was just a way to reveal the sense of loss and vulnerability of his very real characters. This cannot be said of the Chinese version. There is not one instance where the text, passionlessly recited like a litany, discloses the least interest in any of the figures. Nor do they appear to have anything to do with 2008 Beijing or 1969 Germany, where Fassbinder shot his first full-length movie. The signals are too contradictory for that. Although the actors do speak Chinese, their names are Franz and Bruno; they live in Munich, wear German leather jackets and read "Die Zeit." The American pop music appears to be from the 1940s, the chair beside the bed is faux Rococo. Clearly visible between empty beer bottles on the large table is a coffee table book entitled "Art Now." This very prop proves the point that this is really not about Franz the pimp – who only wants to be loved but does not know how to express it – but about something entirely different: This is a panoptic of art as a lifestyle.

It almost appears that this production aimed at making a connection with the beginnings of Modern Chinese Drama a century ago when reformist circles expected propaganda from the "theater of new civilization" for the "progressive" western culture. Although the Goethe-Institute supports this Chinese Fassbinder adaptation, one would truly expect that the aesthetic realm of Western Modernity would by now be commonplace in China.

Fassbinder has been popular among Chinese intellectuals for years. As of late, the masses visiting factory area #798 – where only contemporary art in sync with Western specifications is exhibited – no longer come exclusively from the "special milieu." However, perhaps one ought to bear in mind to what degree Western culture, which conquered China in record speed, is still considered an exotic and attractive lifestyle. With his Fassbinder glass cube, Meng Jinghui has given a specific shape to this particular desire for projection, where the people gaze sadly, speak somberly and move like sleepwalkers. Although this results in educational didactics, this is not a Chinese Fassbinder.

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