



# The marriage of Maria Braun

**Director:** Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
**Country:** Germany  
**Date:** 1980

**A review by Derek Malcolm in *The Guardian*:**

Just as it would be impossible to ignore the French New Wave in any list of the 100 best films, one must acknowledge the many extraordinary works of the New German Cinema which succeeded it, carrying the flag of European film-making throughout the world.

No film of this genre made a greater impact than Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage Of Maria Braun*, by far that director's most commercially successful film. Like Wim Wenders's *Kings Of The Road*, it was a landmark in German cinema.

Perhaps it was not Fassbinder's most personal film, nor his most interesting cinematically. I'm not sure it's any better than *Fear Eats The Soul*, *The Merchant Of Four Seasons*, *Bolwieser* or the giant television project taken from Alfred Doblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

But since Fassbinder always wanted to make 'German Hollywood films' and invariably insisted that his greatest desire was popular success, *The Marriage Of Maria Braun*, made in 1978, is a particular triumph. He was half infatuated and half repelled by Hollywood, and the film's form shows that. But it could never have been made in America, since it takes a highly political account of a period in German history and, on almost every frame, he stamps his sour opinion of the downside of that country's post-war economic miracle.

Everyday fascism was one of Fassbinder's pet themes - the way we are influenced by more blatant aspects of the society in which we live. His characters' crises, a critic has rightly said, are private re-enactments of the patterns of power and manipulation that surround them in society.

The principal role of *Maria Braun* was to have been played by Romy Schneider, Germany's biggest star of the period. But in the end Fassbinder, by this time pretty far gone down the drug road, apparently called her a 'dumb cow' and chose Hanna Schygulla instead. He hadn't worked with Schygulla for several years and her career had gone rapidly downhill after she was banished from Fassbinder's circle for leading a revolt about low wages during the making of *Effie Briest*. He'd told her then: 'I can't stand the sight of your face any more. You bust my balls.' In *The Marriage Of Maria Braun* Schygulla plays a woman who marries a private in the German army during the second world war, only to have him depart almost immediately for the Russian front. He is soon reported missing and she moves in with a black American GI. When her husband suddenly returns, she kills the GI in the heat of the moment and he nobly takes the rap.

While her husband is in prison, she saves for their future together and, participating cheerfully in the increasing prosperity of the country, also has a productive affair with her boss. Unbeknown to her, the boss gives her husband money to stay away. Finally the two meet again. By now, however, they are complete strangers to one another. Her prosperous new life has suffocated their purer dream of love. Schygulla gives a magnificent performance as a vulnerable young woman who becomes a self-confident, independent and competent survivor yet still comes to a bad end, largely because of the basic corruption of her world. At one point we hear the West German chancellor, Adenauer, solemnly promising on the radio that Germany will never rearm. Later we hear him say that the country has an inalienable right to do so.

Maria Braun is a victim of the same sort of contradiction. She wants to be faithful to her husband, not because she is a good little woman but because she believes in the relationship she has fostered for so long. But the facts of life gradually come to decree otherwise - as, says Fassbinder, they usually do.

The film was the great Michael Ballhaus's last as Fassbinder's cameraman and contained one of the best screenplays written from the director's own outline. In it, he allows us to identify with his heroine utterly, as she ruthlessly gets everything she wants in preparation for her reunion with her husband. But he does so for a purpose - to shock us into the realisation that Germany's post-war prosperity was, like ours, based on a series of false premises, which eventually infected those who believed in it. 'Why didn't I join the Baader-Meinhoff gang?' he once said.

The miracle is that Fassbinder was able, riddled as he was with coke and other substances, to direct Schygulla and the film so precisely. Apparently he even instructed her how to move her fingers. His movies are generally about the oppressor and the oppressed. But *The Marriage Of Maria Braun* was less about Hollywood's familiar idea of the redeeming nature of love than the fact that love is often the worst oppressor of all. In Fassbinder's own life, as in his art, that was certainly true.

*Taken from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/1999/jan/28/derekmalcolmscenturyoffilm.derekmalcolm>*