

# Restored version of Fassbinder's working class drama *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* showing in US

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A digitally restored version of German filmmaker R. W. Fassbinder's 1972-73 television series *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* (*Acht Stunden sind kein Tag*) is now being shown in various theaters in the US for the first time.

The five episodes follow the lives and struggles of a young toolmaker, Jochen Epp (Gottfried John), the young woman he loves, Marion Andreas (Hanna Schygulla), his fellow workers at a large factory in Cologne, various members of his immediate family—including a remarkable grandmother (veteran Austrian actress Luise Ullrich)—and other friends and relations.

The result is surprisingly optimistic and confident, almost light-hearted at certain moments, not what one might perhaps have expected from Fassbinder (1945-82), known for his emotionally dark, harsh and sometimes cynical films.

Whatever the limitations of this attempt at a working class drama and whatever genuine disappointment it generates, the nearly eight-hour series makes significant viewing for anyone serious about postwar cultural developments and problems.

By the time that *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* was shot, April to August 1972, the astonishingly precocious and prolific Fassbinder, who turned 27 during the production, had already directed more than a dozen full-length films (in addition to numerous stage and radio plays), including some of his most intriguing efforts. *Love is Colder than Death* (1969), *Katzelmacher* (1969), *The American Soldier* (1970) and *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971) are among his interesting early films, and *The Merchant of Four Seasons* and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (both 1972) are already more mature works.

In 1970, Fassbinder was contacted by the West German public television channel WDR about making a working class “family series.” German television producer Martin Wiebel later commented, “Every series in those days played in middle-class, bourgeois family circles. A worker series was something—it was almost unimaginable.”

Peter Märthesheimer, the individual who extended the invitation and eventual producer of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, later amusingly described the first production meeting at which Fassbinder, in the company of his director of photography, Dietrich Lohmann, suitably impressed a group of “twenty well-dressed gentlemen... all heads of departments... obviously skeptical and expecting to be in for a long, confused afternoon with one of these artists.” Juliane Lorenz, president of the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation, adds, “By the end of the first weeks of shooting, he had their complete respect: he followed the schedule on every day of shooting [97 days instead of the scheduled 105], sometimes even saving time.”

In fact, the series was intended to be eight episodes long, but the WDR officialdom cancelled the last three, in part because of complaints from

the German tradition *Howsons*, *Don't* although *Make* apparently quite popular with television audiences. Some 25 million people in West Germany watched the first episode. It was broadcast on Sunday evenings, at considerable intervals, from October 1972 to March 1973.

According to his own testimony, Fassbinder made an effort to obtain the input of industrial workers about the series he was proposing to write and direct. He told an interviewer in 1973, “We took almost an entire year for our research, talked to union members and workers and looked at factories. It was important to us for the series to reflect the wishes of the workers and we always asked the workers, how do you want your situation to be shown? Based on these concrete wishes and ideas I developed the scripts and then I showed them to a group of workers we were in contact with. They made suggestions what should be left out and what should be added. It was a very long work process and due to the input of the workers the manuscripts had to be rewritten two or three times.”

One has the right to take some of this with a small grain of salt, in so far as Fassbinder obviously included elements and themes already close to his heart in *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, as indeed well he might, and the series does not have that dry, noncommittal feeling of having been written “by committee” or by a mere researcher.

The five episodes contain far too many incidents to describe in detail, but this general outline may help. In critic Thomas Elsaesser's words, the multi-part program attempted “to deal seriously” with contemporary factory life, “while unfolding in absorbing detail and with much suspense the complications of family life and domestic entanglements that belong to a proper television soap opera.” The significance of the series' title should be evident—that a worker's life was not identical with the time he or she spent directly under the employer's thumb.

We meet Jochen and his family at a birthday party for his lively, independent grandmother. Her daughter, Jochen's mother, Käthe Epp (Anita Bucher), and her quick-tempered, heavy-drinking husband, Wolf Epp (Wolfgang Lier), are present, along with Jochen's younger sister, Monika (Renate Roland), her rigid, petty-bourgeois husband, Harald (Kurt Raab), and their young daughter. Grandmother Krüger's other daughter, the spinsterish Aunt Klara (Christine Oesterlein), and one of Jochen's friends, Manfred (Wolfgang Zerlett), are also on hand for the celebration. Going out to buy more champagne, Jochen encounters Marion and, on the spur of the moment, invites her to the family gathering.

Many of the family and personal relationships that are to work themselves out over the course of the series initially reveal themselves in this opening sequence. The grandmother will acquire a boyfriend, Gregor Mack (Werner Finck), and they will look for a place of their own, much

to the unhappiness of her son-in-law, Wolf, who loves to quarrel with her and misses her presence.

Jochen and Marion will carry on together (and eventually marry), despite ups and downs and despite the disapproval of Marion's excessively inhibited co-worker at the newspaper advertising office where the two women work, Irmgard Erlkönig (the wonderful Irm Hermann), who finds it hard to believe that her friend would actually date a factory worker ("Your father was a civil servant... you're worlds apart"). Irmgard, however, will fall for one of Jochen's fellow workers and soften dramatically with love and emotion. Some of this is very touching and amusing.

Harald will continue to repress his wife ("I buy you what you need so I determine what you need") and daughter ("Children don't need to be happy. Children must be prepared for life, Monika, and that means discipline"), and refuse the former a divorce until the grandmother goes to work on him. Wolf and Käthe proceed in their somewhat dysfunctional way. When he's not roaring indignantly at the top of his voice, Wolf shows considerable affection for his wife. They eventually agree to exchange apartments (since theirs is much larger) with Jochen and Marion, the younger couple who have life in front of them.

At work, Jochen and his workmates undergo a series of experiences with management. In the opening sequence, the workers are promised a bonus if they can complete a particular operation in a given period of time, which seems almost impossible to do. Jochen comes up with a device that makes it feasible, but management turns around and cancels the premium on the grounds that Jochen's invention made the assignment too easy to accomplish. Marion tells him "It's immoral," but the works council decides for the employer (she says, "The works council doesn't work"). The workers sabotage production and force management to pay the bonus.

When their generally decent foreman dies of a heart attack ("Maybe all good hearts are sick"), one of the workers, Franz (Wolfgang Schenck), wants to try for the position, but management plans to bring someone in from outside, and what's more, Franz makes a mistake in one of his mathematical calculations that seems to disqualify him. He goes into a deep depression. His wife explains, "He's so ashamed. He takes everything to heart." Drunk, Franz tells Jochen, "I'm stupid, I want to stay stupid." The replacement supervisor, who doesn't really want the position, tutors Franz and, encouraged by the other workers, the latter eventually passes the test for foreman.

The workers find out that the company is planning to move the plant, seriously disrupting their lives. They decide to draw up a list of demands, including the right to organize their own work. The shop floor manager considers it a bad joke, but the company director, Dr. Betram (Klaus Löwitsch), is intrigued ("Self-organization is very interesting. Workers know better than outsiders") and gives the group of workers the go-ahead. He admits he's doing it because it suits his interests.

We don't know what would have taken place in the remaining three parts. The drama ends in mid-air, so to speak. Fassbinder later suggested how the various personal relationships might have turned out, and added, as a partial explanation for the WDR's decision to cancel the series, "Then, there would have been very concrete things: what the story has to say about these workers' organizations, what's happening to work councils and trade unions... For example, we wanted to say that the trade union is something that really doesn't have anything to do with the people any more, and that if the unions were to be able to do anything for people, they would have to return to fundamentals. That's an example of something that, from all accounts, you are not allowed to say so simply and straightforwardly." We will return to this issue.

In any event, we have the five episodes of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* that were made.

This is not naturalism, although the actors don't have that deliberately

stiff, stilted quality (a variant of the "alienation effect") that Fassbinder favored in his very earliest films. Things proceed at a deliberate pace, in an effort to encourage reflection on the part of the spectator, so he or she can think about his or her own situation, and "to give people courage," in the director's words. *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* was taken to task by both right- and left-wing critics, a little unfairly, for its lack of "realism." For better or worse, Fassbinder was not endeavoring to reproduce everyday behavior and speech, while still attempting to make the action recognizable and identifiable.

There are many remarkable aspects of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, and before we criticize it sharply, we hasten to point out that the mini-series puts nearly all of contemporary television, and not only in the US, to shade.

The series is carefully and often beautifully done, with many unusual and ambitious shots and complicated camera movements, especially remarkable for a director in his mid-20s. The camera tracks, pans and zooms, often unexpectedly. Fassbinder uses various artistic means in an effort to bring out the conflict between what society expects of people and what they truly need and want, and to make the usual (and therefore taken for granted) unusual (something not "natural" or given for all eternity). The formal, almost ritualistic character of certain settings and circumstances is emphasized. A number of times, vertical bars, flowers, leaves or other objects in the foreground or to the side block a full view of the characters. At times this approach seems self-conscious and labored, but on occasion the technique is pointed and meaningful.

For example, from the point of view of the mini-series, an important scene takes place in Episode 5. The workers, along with Marion and Irmgard, having just learned that the factory will relocate, a fact that upsets them all, are discussing their options—or apparent lack of options—in a local bar.

The general attitude, best expressed by Franz, the new foreman, sitting authoritatively at one end of the table, is that any complaints will be rejected out of hand by management, on the grounds that the decision is "about the economic situation" and that "human factors must unfortunately take a back seat." It seems as though nothing can be done. When Irmgard naively suggests the workers should demand the company provide them new apartments or cars, they merely scoff. One says, "That'd be nice, but hopeless. That will never happen." Discouragement and resignation prevail.

The camera then takes in Marion (Schygulla), seated at the opposite end of the table. For the first time in the sequence, our view of a character is partially obstructed. The shot includes her face, but the bottom third or so of the frame is taken up by beer and other kinds of glasses. Marion slowly, almost sadly, begins to speak, looking down at the table. "I don't get this whole thing at all, to be honest," she says, before urging the workers to place their own demands on management. The frame communicates the physical and mental difficulty, as well as the necessity, of seeing through things and of acting in the face of obstacles. It is an affecting, moving moment.

One of the remarkable sequences in *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* is the nearly half-hour scene of Jochen and Marion's wedding reception in Episode 4. (In general, the most appealing scenes involve friends or family eating or drinking.) All the principal characters in the series are present: the workers and their wives, Jochen's mother and father, acid-tongued Aunt Klara, Marion's mother (Brigitte Mira), a few other friends, including one girl (Eva Mattes) who giggles tipsily throughout. In fact, hardly anyone is untouched by alcohol. Some can hardly stand. To popular music, couples dance, separate and find new partners. The choreography of the scene is complex.

In the course of the reception, Harald finally agrees to a divorce... Irmgard quickly gets over her aversion to workers ("None of that matters nowadays anyway") with Rolf (Rudolf Waldemar Brem)... the one Italian

worker, Giuseppe (Grigorios Karipidis), unintentionally charms several of the ladies with his recipes (and himself)... and Marion tells her mother that she and Jochen are not going to live with her, but look for their own apartment.

The mood is warm and informal, boozy of course, but life's problems have hardly disappeared. The final image, against a rather somber, almost elegiac tune, is of Jochen slumped in a doorway and Marion sprawled in a chair, drained by the event and also perhaps overwhelmed for the moment by the future challenge of making a life together.

It's difficult to think of another filmmaker in recent decades with the artistic audacity, social insight and sensitivity to human foibles to carry off such a scene.

These are a few of the strong points of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, and there are others. The actors are all working at a high level, including John, Schygulla, Hermann, Ullrich (who featured in Max Ophüls' *Liebelei* in 1933), Finck and the rest.

But there are glaring problems too, which result overall in a serious disappointment.

One conspicuous weakness is the timid and tepid character of the politics here, particularly when one takes into account the explosive character of the period. This, of course, does not bother any of the series' contemporary reviewers in the US. On the contrary...

None of the workers nor any of their spouses once challenges the framework of capitalism, or even mentions the word. The most radical notions never go beyond the various schemes for "workers' participation," with which workers at the time were duped into "participating" in their own exploitation. It may well be that Fassbinder had in mind the eventual collapse of the labor-management cooperation depicted in *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, but what we see is both meager and utopian.

Marion does offer criticisms of the workers' treatment and questions why management takes 50 percent of the savings that the workers' "self-organization" has produced. And there are various references to doing work one doesn't like and its consequences ("Most people do something they couldn't care less about," "That's what people die of, not being able to do what they want to do"), and vague allusions to economic exploitation ("People like us simply earn too little money for work like that," "When you work, you work partially for yourself," etc.), but this is limited and largely muted.

A sympathetic commentator, Wilhelm Roth, noted that *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* dealt with social problems including "public transportation fares, high rents and the influence of real estate brokers, participation in management activities, antiauthoritarian education, prejudice against members of a lower social class (workers) and minorities (immigrant workers), possible self-initiatives for the politically least active groups in society (pensioners, housewives)."

These are legitimate and even pressing issues, but Fassbinder's series treats them with no regard to their revolutionary political implications, the inability of the capitalist system to solve the population's most elementary needs, even at the high point of postwar economic prosperity.

Episode 2, centered on Grandma and Gregor, is especially weak in this regard. Sweet and sincere, it nearly reduces the lack of affordable housing, transportation and childcare to the small change of a conventional situation comedy featuring an "eccentric," "lovable" older couple. For a Fassbinder film, the results are astonishingly lightweight.

Episodes 1 and 4 are considerably stronger, but the series as a whole conveys a mild anarchism, a kind of "do-it-yourself," "grassroots" politics, with an emphasis on self-initiative, largely compatible with reformist and liberal (in the American sense of the term) illusions. Along these lines, Gottfried John once commented that "the basic idea had to do with real anarchy in a positive sense, that everybody can be emancipated by using common sense. Free from authority, being self-determined and

able to change society... In a certain sense a practical utopia—and that was the provocation."

The series valorizes solidarity, sticking together, on the social and personal level. (Marion, for example, tells a pair of lovers, "You're something great together, because you love each other.") Fassbinder said, "Because the boss treats the workers as isolated persons, it's hard for them to show solidarity. We tried to say, together we are strong. And we documented that with different examples. We show it is possible for workers to defend themselves and the best way to do it is in the group." One of the workers, Rüdiger (Herb Address), on the other hand, always opposes this solidarity, thinks solely of himself and taunts the only immigrant in Jochen's unit.

There's nothing wrong with any of this, of course, but the factory scenes, although absorbing and conscientiously executed, have a timeless feel to them, almost parable-like, a trifle didactic.

The German trade unions were provoked by *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, as noted above, but that is more of a comment on their reactionary and politically sensitive nature than anything else.

Their sensitivity was well-grounded. The artists may not have understood it, but the anti-communist union officialdom certainly grasped the dangers of the radicalization that had seized hold of wide layers of the global working class and oppressed in the period beginning in the late 1960s. The massive general strike in France in May-June 1968 brought that country to the brink of revolution. The Italian "hot autumn" in 1969 and 1970 witnessed a massive strike wave as well. The Heath Conservative government in Britain would be brought down by the working class in 1974, and scandal would remove Richard Nixon from office the same year.

A big movement of the working class took place in Germany too. The *Historical Foundations* document of the German Socialist Equality Party explains it best. In December 1966, for "the first time since the end of the 1920s, the bourgeoisie felt compelled to include the Social Democrats (SDP) in government in order to maintain control over the working class." The SPD's Willy Brandt took over the office of foreign minister and vice-chancellor. Under this coalition government, "a broad extra-parliamentary movement emerged that coalesced, in 1967-1968, into a student revolt. In 1969, a wildcat strike wave erupted in the steel industry that temporarily got out of the control of the trade union bureaucracy."

Also in 1969, Brandt became chancellor of Germany and "brought the situation under control through far-reaching social concessions. Generous collective wage agreements were awarded to workers in both the private and public sectors. Young people 'were brought off the streets' through a reform and education programme. The percentage of high school graduates rose from 5 percent of all young people in the 1960s to 30 percent in the 1970s. The number of jobs for high school and college graduates at universities, research institutes, hospitals, schools, social institutions and public administration increased sharply. The influence of the SPD reached its peak in these years: in the 1972 federal election, it received 46 percent of the vote and had more than a million members."

The first episode of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* aired a few weeks before that November 1972 general election. One does not obtain from the series a real feeling for the explosive social conditions in Germany and Europe generally, and the leftward movement of the working class, except in the sense that the workers do exude a certain self-confidence, even a complacency, and the attitude, once they get under way, that they can push the employers around as they choose.

Another striking weakness of the series is its lack of interest in history, including especially Germany's traumatic and tragic 20th century history. After all, the Nazi regime, responsible for the most barbaric crimes ever committed, had collapsed only little more than a quarter-century before (the equivalent for us would be 1991). The West German legal and

political apparatus in the 1970s, as Fassbinder and his colleagues knew full well, was full of former Nazis. The grandmother and Gregor in particular would have been adults during the entire Hitler period. None of this would have found expression, one way or another, in their psychology and attitudes? It's hard to believe.

It might be that there was a healthy kernel in Fassbinder's decision. He may have desired to distance himself from those who preached "collective guilt" and blamed the entire German population for Nazism. By implication at least, he seems to be arguing that the grandmother, her boyfriend and others like them were not to blame for the catastrophe of fascism.

But simply ignoring the history and its harsh lessons is no solution. The criminal and murderous past of the German bourgeoisie—revealing its essential character—was and remains an objective, enduring issue, with revolutionary implications, as we can see in our day.

Fassbinder explained once that "generally speaking, history doesn't interest me." He continued: "What interests me is what I can understand about my possibilities and impossibilities, my hopes and utopian dreams, and how these things relate to my surroundings—that interests me. I'm interested in solidarity, and the potential I might have to overcome the things that bother me, fear and all that, much more than theory."

As Marx vigorously pointed out, ignorance never helped anyone. Fassbinder was gifted with brilliant artistic intuition and instinct. That was to prove insufficient.

It is telling that other films by Fassbinder from this period, such as the aforementioned *The Merchant of Four Seasons* and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, along with *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), *Martha* (1974) and *Fox and His Friends* (1975), none of which deal directly with economic life, as *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* does, leave the spectator more deeply moved and more hostile to existing conditions. These are for the most part examinations of psychological alienation and emotional exploitation.

This is accounted for by the fact that the left intellectual-artistic milieu out of which Fassbinder emerged was deeply influenced by various forms of anti-Marxism, including the Frankfurt School of Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in particular.

To cite the German SEP document again, instead of capitalist exploitation, these figures and their disciples in the German student movement "placed at the heart of their social analysis the concept of alienation, which they interpreted in a psychological or existential manner. The working class was no longer regarded as a revolutionary class, but, rather, as an apolitical, or even backward mass, thoroughly integrated into bourgeois society via the mechanisms of consumerism, the domination of the media and repressive forms of education..."

"The 'revolution' would proceed not from the working class, but from the young intelligentsia, social fringe groups or guerrilla movements. Its driving force was not the class contradictions of capitalist society, but critical thinking and the actions of an enlightened elite. The goal of the revolution was not—or was not primarily—the overthrow of the existing relations of power and ownership, but the changing of social and cultural—including sexual—habits."

It would not be fair to say that Fassbinder at this point entirely accepted these views, and that, for example, he regarded the working class as nothing but a "backward mass," or else he would not have been able to make his finest films, or the better parts of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, but the influence of these conceptions is obvious.

In 1972-73, Fassbinder still held out against portions of this sort of "leftism," including identity politics ("The world isn't a case of women against men, but of poor against rich, of repressed against repressors," he told an interviewer in 1973). His decision to accept the WDR assignment and direct a "family series" for a popular audience brought down on his head, to his credit, the abuse of Adorno-inspired "left" critics, who

considered the "culture industry" a mere abomination and argued for "avant-garde" inaccessibility.

However, Fassbinder's agreement with the Frankfurt School and other "Western Marxist" trends in writing off the working class as a revolutionary social force comes out in his oft-quoted comments to the same interviewer in 1973 about *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*. The director explained he made quite different films for intellectual and working class audiences, respectively.

"All the films and plays I've written," the filmmaker observed, "were intended for an intellectual audience. With them, you can very well be pessimistic and let a film end in hopelessness. An intellectual is completely free to work on the problem with all his intellectual capacities."

"In the case of the larger public that the TV series reached," he went on, "it would be reactionary, even criminal, to give a hopeless picture of the world... For the first time I've made something positive, something with hope, basically on account of this analysis. With an audience of 25 million ordinary people, you cannot allow yourself to do anything else."

It's not necessary here to go into all the ways in which these conceptions are wrong. Why, to begin with, make "pessimistic" or "hopeless" films for *any audience*? But putting the best face on it, and interpreting Fassbinder's comment to mean that the films or plays he directed for intellectuals went deeper or had more radical implications, that only makes matters worse.

His condescension aside, Fassbinder's "protective" attitude toward the broader population is revealing. At the very least, a social class to whom an artist cannot tell the truth, and to whom one merely passes on, in his phrase, the presumably shallow "aesthetics of hope" (in which one does not profoundly believe oneself), is unlikely to play a revolutionary or even progressive social role.

This outlook clearly colored the making of *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*. The series is not hostile or contemptuous toward its working class characters. Not at all. It expresses real sympathy and even considerable affection. However, there is not a hint here that economic conditions and the objective position of this class will lead on to earthshaking events and that therefore the question of the workers' consciousness carries any great weight. The conflicts in the factory and the clash, let's say, between an unhappy, unsatisfied wife and her repressive husband, or between a domineering parent and his or her child, are granted the same dramatic significance.

In terms of Fassbinder's weaknesses, the receding of the popular radicalization from the mid-1970s onward and the "normalization" of the political situation in Germany only made matters far worse. Tragically, this remarkable artist descended during the late 1970s and early 1980s into a state of serious demoralization and disorientation.

On the night of June 9-10, 1982, he died from a mix of cocaine and barbiturates, with the notes for a film on Rosa Luxemburg beside him.

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