Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Despair* was shot in 1977 and was proudly premiered at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1978. The film is based on one of Vladimir Nabokov’s major Russian novels, *Despair.* The eminent British playwright Tom Stoppard prepared the screenplay for Fassbinder, carefully adapting Nabokov’s text for cinematic staging. The hypotext *Despair* was originally published in 1934 in *Contemporary Letters,* a major Russian–Parisian literary journal of the pre-war emigration, and further issued as a separate book in Berlin (by Petropolis) in 1936. The original storyline was set in Berlin at the beginning of the 1930s.

Fassbinder’s *Despair* has enjoyed wide scholarly attention over the years. Of particular importance are the works of the British scholar Ewa Mazierska and the film historian Thomas Elsaesser. Most recently, the Russian critic Nina Savchenkova organized a special roundtable focused on the film’s reception in Russia which was hosted by the Nabokov museum in St. Petersburg. The ontological discongruity between the two artists was one of the dominant themes of this roundtable. In what follows, I will analyze Fassbinder’s hypertext along with Nabokov’s hypotext in order to address the dramatic dialectical collision that occurs when Fassbinder transports Nabokov’s hypotext to a different cultural territory—namely Nazi Germany. The main differences between these artistic sensibilities are related to two major spheres: “the territory of homosensuality,” as opposed to the heterosexual universe of Nabokov, and the “territory of nascent Nazism” as explored by Fassbinder, which is opposed to Nabokov’s “neutral” German environs. The point is not to illustrate the affinity between the two artists, but
rather to highlight the personal and aesthetical differences that emerge with this border crossing.

**WRITTEN AND CINEMATIC TEXTS**

Before we start the discussion, it is important to account for all of the available versions of the author’s text (the Russian hypotext and then Nabokov’s own modified English translation and the English script-adaptation of the film by Stoppard—both hypertexts of the original). This will allow us to gain the fullest understanding of the movie’s ultimate contextual message, and to differentiate between the latent possibilities of Nabokov’s texts and the actual motifs found (and expanded upon) in Fassbinder’s film. In order to do this, we might examine the original Russian narrative as created by Nabokov along with his English hypertext against the resulting cinematic hypertext of Fassbinder/Stoppard. Identifying keen distinctions between the versions is one of the major analytical challenges a film critic might pursue in this case. To compare and to see the possible differences between the multiple narratives in question appears to be much more intellectually intriguing than to just turn our scholarly attention toward one version of the film’s plot. At the same time we know that as early as 1972, Fassbinder read an English translation of *Despair*, which was published by Paragon Books (1965). The English translation represents a modified version of the Russian hypotext with some minor additions. To make use of only the English translation or of only Stoppard’s screenplay for analysis of this film would be an artificial and unwarranted restriction.

Vladimir Nabokov’s prose has left a profound imprint on Western modernist literature in general and Russian modernism and postmodernism in particular. Having emigrated from Russia—his family departed from the Crimean peninsula during the Russian civil war—Nabokov embarked on an illustrious career in letters and academia in Europe. His career started with well-received novels in Russian, published in France, that were then translated by the author himself for American and international audiences into English (often with content changes to suit a non-Russian readership). After emigrating to the United States and failing to satisfy the Harvard Slavic search committee, Nabokov began to teach at Cornell University. At this time, he also began writing almost exclusively in English. His universal literary fame came with his provocative novel *Lolita* (1955). Multi-dimensional irony and radical individualism seem to be the two main distinctive traits of Nabokov’s unique narrative style.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder in his turn is one the most celebrated German film directors of the modern age. Just as Nabokov never formally (or academically)
learned *how to write novels*, Fassbinder never academically studied *how to shoot movies*.\(^\text{11}\) Yet, even without this formal training, both Nabokov and Fassbinder reached the very top of their professions. Despite Fassbinder’s premature death in 1982, he left an abundant number of feature films, along with various theoretical writings and interviews that shed an explanatory light on his cinematic oeuvre. Relevant for this particular discussion is Fassbinder’s constant obliterating of the boundaries between art and life; between imaginary fiction and a perceived reality. Also germane to the topic is Fassbinder’s preoccupation with various troubling social issues of his time, which can be found in the ideological fabric of his films as an anti-bourgeois social stance. As Anthony Kinik puts it, Fassbinder’s general aesthetics were based on agitational, confrontational, anti-bourgeois politics.\(^\text{12}\) Fassbinder was generally following in the footsteps of another major German modernist director and playwright, Berthold Brecht, who maintained a sharp social activist agenda. As one critic has justly put it, the main difference between Brecht and Fassbinder lies in the fact that Brecht, as a “positive materialist,” stretches his argument somewhat further than Fassbinder, “believing ideistically that man can change unjust social conditions for the better and that this needs to be portrayed.” But according to Kinik, Fassbinder, “a negative materialist,” definitely “lacks Brecht’s optimism.”\(^\text{13}\) At times this combative political stance would lead Fassbinder to polemical statements on Jewish topics as well. By equating Jews with the rich bourgeois world, Fassbinder eventually was accused of latent anti-Semitism.\(^\text{14}\)

Consequently, this kind of political/artistic activism is found in the German director’s adaptation of Nabokov’s novel. Fassbinder dedicated *Despair* to the famous Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, to the French Surrealist author Antonin Artaud and to the troubled, German avant-garde artist Unica Zürn. The common thread among these three is a history of mental illness and the taint of suicide, both of which occur in this cinematic adaptation. Fassbinder’s particular ideological innovations, however, are elaborations on the homosexual and Jewish themes found in Nabokov’s text. Fassbinder augments these rather subdued themes in the literary text by emphasizing the dreadful rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930s. This is the main “deviation” of the film version, a historical perspective that Nabokov could not have completely foretold at the time of the novel’s writing.\(^\text{15}\) After all, it is debatable whether Nabokov tried to embed in this work some of his own anti-German sentiments.\(^\text{16}\) We do not know whether Nabokov could have really anticipated Adolf Hitler’s future crimes against humanity, whereas Fassbinder crafted his cinematic hypertext consciously exploiting the full horror of Nazism.

Significantly, the filmic medium offers a unique opportunity for Fassbinder to create excursions into alternate cultural and temporal spaces. As both Alfred Appel and Barbara Wyllie have convincingly shown, cinema bore an immense
importance for Nabokov the writer as well as Nabokov the human being. Yuri Leving has also aptly observed that “the saturation of prose with visual effects are hallmarks of Nabokov’s narrative technique in general; he was the king of the detail, the king of the particular.” This attitude brings him closer to the main representatives of the **nouveau roman** such as Marguerite Duras and, particularly Alain Robbe-Grillet, who later became involved with the Left Bank film movement (often labelled as part of the French New Wave). Nabokov often assumed a position of “someone who watches the watcher” (**nabliudatel’ za nabliudatelem**). This strategy suggests a mirror effect in which one action has multiple layers of meaning as it passes through the perception of several different participants. These potential visual allusions, which remained dormant in Nabokov’s verbal text, became ripe for Fassbinder’s cinematic vision and allowed for innovative meanings.

Nabokov’s allusive multi-layered narrative style offers a particular challenge to Fassbinder, who observes:

Nabokov handles language as something that reflects, mirrors and in turn re-reflects. If I use glass and reflections in this film, it’s derived from Nabokov’s linguistic structure. The significance of glass in this film is that it’s transparent and yet it closes in on the character—and that’s Nabokov’s style.19

One scholar has noted Nabokov’s “deliberately ambiguous artistic images” that create an “intense pictorial polysemy.” It is just this pictorial polysemy that seems to attract Fassbinder to Nabokov’s works with its many “potential” narratives. As a result, Fassbinder exploits some of Nabokov’s concealed metaphors for his own cinematic benefit.

**FASSBINDER’S HERMANN: JEWISH (HOMO)SENSUALITY**

Nabokov’s novel depicts the story of a well-to-do German bourgeois entrepreneur, whose name is Hermann Karlovich. He occasionally encounters a mysterious vagabond rather ironically named Felix, who, to Hermann, seems to resemble his own reflection in the mirror. Hermann persuades Felix to impersonate him in order to eventually assassinate this poor vagabond. Hermann’s business in Berlin is failing and the substantial life-insurance payment would let him start a new life. As it turns out, Felix looks nothing like Hermann, and it does not take long for the police to determine who murdered the vagabond. Readers only fully realize the extent of Hermann’s self-deception once the police find Felix’s body and reveal the murderer’s mental illness.
Fassbinder’s film narrates the very same linear storyline with several noticeable alterations: The plot’s chronotope is transferred to early Nazi Germany, Hermann Karlovich becomes Hermann Hermann (a direct reference to the main protagonist, among others, of Lolita), his family is Jewish, and he is now a transparently closeted homosexual. A question that might arise here is how does Fassbinder allude to Hermann Hermann’s secret sexual identity? Similarly to Fassbinder’s own “open secret,” the viewer is invited to speculate on the hero’s orientation based on two “iconographical clusters” that generate the relevant meaning. These “clusters” of visual imagery are conveyed through Hermann’s ambivalent relationship with his wife Lydia, and his obsession with the masculine physique of Felix Weber—his “double.” Nothing is pronounced openly, as Fassbinder opts for leaving Hermann’s sexuality as unclear as possible, provoking his viewers to ruminate endlessly on the arising ambiguities of plot and play. The situation is all the more suggestive as the actor who portrayed Hermann, Dirk Bogarde, was an open homosexual in his “real life.”

All other major details remain, more or less, exactly as they are portrayed in Nabokov’s book. At issue then is how placing a hidden Jewish homosexual in Nazi Germany changes the trajectory of a text as it is transported from the pages of an émigré Russian novel into a post-war German film. What might have been a simple border crossing suddenly becomes a distinctively more complex cultural exchange in which sexual orientation and religion commingle with the hypotext’s original emphasis on madness.

At first glance, the issue of Hermann Hermann’s religious background and sexual preference might seem entirely disconnected. Yet, an awareness of the historical attitudes toward Russian Jews and homosexuality immediately enhances our understanding of Fassbinder’s film. 21 The German tradition of Brüderschaft and homosocial male–male friendships informs Fassbinder’s own cultural journey. According to Harry Oosterhuis, during the Sturm und Drang, a proto-Romantic cultural period in Germany, men among the intellectual elite engaged in all kinds of sensual and passionate relationships. 22 Love

Figure 10.1 Hermann parts sexual ways with Lydia.
between a man and a woman was not distinct from male friendships as the ideal emotional and intellectual relationship was tinged in both instances with physicality. As a result, Greek male love and pedagogical Eros were in vogue within certain communities at the time. It was not until the late nineteenth century that romantic friendships between men, even those without sexual overtones, became suspect. At this time, the institution of marriage and the nuclear family began to usurp the intimacy once shared between individuals outside of the home.23

During this time as well, homosexuality in popular culture was transformed and manipulated by psychiatrists. In Europe, the leading theorists associated mental degeneration (Entartung) with sexual perversion and psychopathology. Degeneration theory gained relevancy for intellectual communities across Europe and into Russia as scientific and medical investigation began to address the perceivable problems caused by the fast pace of modern society.24 These theoreticians on degeneration did not discuss sexual perversion as though it constituted primarily a religious or philosophical problem but as an empirically demonstrable medical or biological fact. The Viennese psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886 which included hundreds of case histories of deviant sexual behavior. For him, homosexuality was an issue of identity rather than a specific sex act.

Not all psychiatrists at the time, however, believed that homosexuality should be equated with degenerate behavior. Havelock Ellis wrote the first English medical textbook on homosexuality entitled *Sexual Inversion* (1897). In this book, the author notes how many sexual practices that had long been common, or at least tolerated, were suddenly viewed as problematic. In many ways, it was a plea for tolerance.25 What developed was a broad understanding of male relationships with claims of deviant sexual perversion as one extreme and defense of meaningful male friendships on the other. Fassbinder, by not overtly suggesting Hermann’s sexual orientation, plays on this spectrum moving between homosexual desire and homosocial friendship.

In Russia of the fin de siècle, there was a tendency to link together homosexuality and degeneracy, but to blame it on foreign influences and suggest that it was only a problem in larger cities such as St. Petersburg. Although sodomy was legalized in 1922 by the Bolsheviks, who saw it as a medical, not a legal problem, by 1934 it was again outlawed and vaguely connected with other degenerative diseases—alcoholism, syphilis, and hysteria. According to Dan Healy, Russia in modern times has understood itself as untainted by sexual perversity, while at the same time surrounded by degenerate Europe and the depraved and backward East.26 As to the Nazis’ specific understanding of homosexuality’s illegitimacy—it hardly deserves special attention here, being a well-acknowledged part of their common cultural policy geared against all things “degenerate,” especially “degenerate art” (Entartete Kunst), along
with homosocial sexual and non-sexual relationships. The term of *Entartete Kunst* was de facto applied to nearly all “experimental” (or “modernist”) culture, maintaining that the very foundations of such irreverent avant-garde art are obviously non-German and Jewish or Bolshevist (i.e., revolutionary/leftist). The “ideal” degenerate artist according to Nazi cultural stereotype should be altogether Jewish, homosexual, and engaged in some kind of subversively “experimental” avant-garde activity.

In *Despair*, we meet the corresponding theme of repressed homosexual (and homosocial) realities which came into being during the early phase of German Nazism. The crypto-theme of “experimental” homosexuality as expressed in the movie is associated with a possible “coming out” of the main actor as well as the director. Fassbinder deliberately blurs the boundary between the “real” identity of the one who plays (and directs) and his cinematic character. In principle, the actor and the character are supposed to be two different entities. However, in this particular case, both Bogarde, the actor, and Fassbinder, the director, were in a process of “coming out,” thereby embedding this theme within the consciousness of the film audience. Fassbinder’s own sexual orientation would be confirmed with his final film—a “queer” cinematic piece *Querelle*. At present, the gayness of Fassbinder is a commonly acknowledged topic within scholarly and critical discourse and adds relevance to the present discussion. Thus, Fassbinder draws on his own and Bogarde’s sexual identity in his transformation of Nabokov’s Hermann. It is not surprising then that this non-Aryan, closeted member of German society might want to create an elaborate escape from Nazi oppression, even before the formulation of the “Final Solution” to the so-called Jewish Question at the Wannsee Conference in 1942.
Being situated within the newly emerging Nazi regime, Hermann will imminently find himself under a double danger, so to speak. He will be doomed for being (half) Jewish, but also for being homosexual. As is well known, homosexuals were officially persecuted by the Nazi legislative regulations, which included hunting those who were Party members. Both Jews and homosexuals were forcibly sent to the concentration camps and a great majority of them eventually perished. Some studies even draw a conceptual comparison between the Gay Holocaust and the Jewish one.

Fassbinder’s protagonist’s trouble is correspondingly more intricate. In this case, the matter of Hermann’s homosexuality is further complicated by the matter of Jewish (homo)sensuality. Although it is quite clear that homosexual relationships are strictly forbidden in the Torah (the Pentateuch), we may conclude that homosexual relationships were not completely alien to old Hebrew culture and, possibly as a result, became part of the Jewish mythos, especially exploited by those with anti-Semitic inclinations. In this particular instance, Hermann Hermann is an axiomatic example of an effeminate Russian/German Jew. Homosexual overtones are not alien to Christian gospel narrative as well, particularly hinting at the ambiguous sexuality of Christ (the born Jew) and the community of his (exclusively male) disciples-apostles (all of whom were Jews).

Fassbinder may, in fact, have intended to call upon this archetypal figure of a suggestive effeminate “gay” Jew known to us from a plethora of cultural contexts. After all, the “femininity” of the Jews was discussed in late imperial Russian society, reaching its apogee in the abundant writings of the premier Russian literary critic Vasilii Rozanov, possibly influencing Nabokov on some level as a true contemporary of this period. Fassbinder, in his turn, of course did not know much about this internal Russian debate and most certainly was not well familiar with Rozanov. It is at this point that the archetype of cultural territory shifts in a significant way. In exploring Nabokov’s textual terrain, Fassbinder (more than Stoppard, who was at a certain point “alienated” from the script) brings his own cultural associations to the two major subtexts of the cinematic hypertext (Jews and homosexuals within the German context), even as he retraces Nabokov’s steps.

Aside from expressing himself on the topic of homosexuality, Rozanov had famously maintained that Jewish “religious ethnicity” should be generally grasped as receptive and passive, viewing the entire nation and particularly its males as fundamentally effeminate and accommodating. At the very same time, the generalized effeminate image of Jesus and the receptive suffering of the Jews was quite common in European cultures and would have appealed to Fassbinder in this specific instance as well. Most likely, Fassbinder (and his scriptwriter Stoppard) would have heard of Sebastiane (1976), a highly influential art-house film created by Derek Jarman and Paul Humfress, released
two years prior to *Despair*. *Sebastiane* provocatively depicts dramatic events taken from the troubled life of Saint Sebastian and, especially, his tragic martyrdom brought about by sharp phallic arrows, which penetrated his body of sorrow. Jarman and Humfress bring forth the image of an effeminate, androgynous Christ in this work, mirroring the cultural discourse around the feminine/effeminate Jew.\(^{35}\) The androgynous *Lord of the Jews* might well have offered a unique subtext for Hermann, who is afraid of his ultimate destruction at the hands of powerful forces. Fassbinder certainly was aware of how the Nazis had dealt with transgressive religious and sexual behaviors, which he chose to explore for his film adaptation.

We know that Hermann’s mother was Jewish: “My father was a German speaking Russian from Reval. My mother was a Rothschild.” Hermann’s homosexuality in Fassbinder’s film, as mentioned above, is largely an interpretative conjecture on my part. For instance, there is the following typical exchange: “You know we are … we are strangers. We have, as … as you might say, a … a bond.—You can see it?—Yes. We are as alike as … as two peas. It’s a freak of nature.” The special bond that the characters seem to have might naturally suggest the deliberate blurring of the continuum on the homosexual–homosocial continuum described earlier. In the context of Fassbinder’s own homosexuality, and the earlier representation of homosexuals in his 1975 film *Fox and his Friends* (1975), this bond seems to suggest some kind of same-sex attraction.

**ALIENATION, DEVIANCE, AND TRANSGRESSIVE HOMOSEXUALITY**

One critic of *Despair* has given special attention to the film’s noticeable overall feeling of alienation which results in Hermann’s loss of his real physical body.\(^{36}\) Such an approach raises questions about the main character’s place within society, his desire to avoid detection, and an inability to assimilate. Alienation, or a dissociated personality disorder, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests, should be the key concept in this respect, and it is no coincidence that Fassbinder decides to reinforce that estrangement by adding the aspect of Jewish identity, absent in Nabokov’s text, to Hermann’s background.

Hermann’s feelings of alienation in the film are most certainly enmeshed with the religious and sexual issues, not to mention that he ultimately intended to commit murder in order to start his life anew. Speaking to his wife Lydia in one scene, Hermann states his life credo: “Philosophy is an invention of the rich. So is religion … poetry. I don’t believe in love either.” In this scene Hermann also develops a “Franciscan” theme of embracing the birds as God’s finest creatures, worthy of being preached to. He confesses that he
likes sparrows and he understands them as well as the street painters. He says that he likes squirrels, too, and “moles are all right.” He tells us that he would like the world to be full of squirrels and moles “because they are against landlords.” This statement fits well within Fassbinder’s general activist “philosophy of life,” aimed at the bourgeois and their exploitation of day workers. Animal and bird imagery also has some meaningful sexual as well as social connotations in this respect. Hermann continues: “Now … friendship … that’s a different thing. I’d like to have a friend. I’d work for him … as a gardener. And afterwards, his garden would become mine, and … I’d live in joy, and … ”

Hermann seems to clearly envision a homosensual friendship with Felix in the context of a garden. The garden might well serve as the symbol of their “freakish” bond. What garden does Fassbinder’s Hermann have in mind in this particular scene of the film? What is the potential remote allusion he plays with here? What garden activities would bring an ultimate carnal joy to Hermann? What is this allusive meta-physical garden that would become his? Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights contains some clear (some would say explicit) imagery. Bosch’s art bears a direct importance for Fassbinder’s oeuvre. One of Fassbinder’s favorite collaborators, German actor Harry Baer, describes how the director wanted to create certain visual effects in the style resembling that of Bosch. We might assume that by mentioning the “garden ⇔ carnal delight” kind of nomenclature, the German director might have alluded to Bosch, who happens to be the author of the most powerful imagery created on this topic of human “filthy sin.” Fassbinder’s cinema, and especially Despair, is abundant with cultural and artistic allusions, so it would not be too odd to bring Bosch’s peculiar iconography as a possible explanation of Hermann’s above-mentioned enigmatic words. We find several notable homosexual allusions in this major painting of Bosch, the most prominent of which is called “floral sodomy” (see Figure 10.3), which is well acknowledged in art criticism.

What kind of friend does Hermann imply here with whom he would entertain himself as a gardener? A friend whose private garden would become his own, where he would live and dwell in utmost joy. This theme is related to the transgressively erotic topic of the “garden of love” known from the Persian poet Hafiz onwards. Using the provocatively allusive iconographic imagery of this picture, one might imagine Hermann referring to the anal private garden of Felix where he would be keen to implant some seeds of his own carnal flowers. Exactly as with the entire topic of Hermann’s crypto-homosexuality, there is no “solid” way for us to actually prove that the main protagonist has anal sex in mind. It surely can be just an innocent image of friendship. Exactly as innocent as, say, Hermann’s remarkable tolerance of Lydia’s promiscuity, exactly as innocent and friendly as his attraction to Felix’s rough masculine physique. All these signs might easily designate “normality” in any heterosexual sense of this
term. It is our hermeneutical choice to unfold a hidden homosexual orientation that stands behind Fassbinder’s hypertext. Proceeding in this interpretative vein, carefully gardening the flowers of joy with Felix definitely presents one of Hermann’s inner aspirations and hidden carnal hopes.

In Despair, Hermann first passionately detects Felix on the dark streets of Berlin near cheap hotels, in a manner that is reminiscent of urban prostitution—a world abundantly depicted in Russian literature, including the works of Fedor Dostoevskii and Aleksandr Blok. In Hermann’s own verbal definition he was searching for: “[a] handsome, virile man, if possible, of simple background.” As Ewa Mazierska points out, on another occasion, Hermann (both in the novel and in the film) mentions that his brother “loved to put on his shirt when it was still warm and the two shared a bed with a pillow at each end until it was discovered that the ‘brother’ could not go to sleep without sucking Hermann’s big toe.” Fassbinder’s cinematic Hermann elaborates on this intimate closeness with the imagined brother of his Russian youth:

My dead brother, whom I was so close to … so close, he was almost my second self … This sweet-natured boy that I’ve known all my life … This sensitive boy—this musician—the youngest musician—the youngest violinist in the Bolshoi … where our mother used to dance before Emperors! The same boy. This same boy … Ah, he was a cheat …
One wonders if that imaginary boy who was “corrupted” (in the Platonian sense of same-sex pleasure) was not the adolescent Hermann during the remote times of his troubled Russian youth? Departing from Nabokov’s text, Fassbinder provides abundant representations of Hermann’s “repressed identity”—namely of being a Jew in a German proto-Nazi environment as well as being a homosexual in the world of so-called “normality.”

THE DARK WORLD OF CINEMATIC AND LITERARY DOUBLES

As noted, Fassbinder’s Despair interacts with a mixture of allusions offered by Nabokov’s semantically layered text. The main protagonist Hermann Hermann has two possible predecessors from Russian culture. Fassbinder may be making an allusion to Lolita’s Humbert Humbert, with a secondary reference to Aleksandr Pushkin’s suggestively nocturnal Hermann of The Queen of Spades. Lolita impishly describes the frustrated love of an elderly troubled male, Humbert, toward an attractive prepubescent girl. In its turn, The Queen of Spades is one of Pushkin’s major prosaic texts concerned with the issues of destiny, chance, aging, fate, and, to a certain degree, the sexual complexities of the young vs. the old. More importantly The Queen of Spades also raises the issue of the ghostly dark-doubles as exploited in the main canon of Russian classic literature (e.g., Nikolai Gogol and Dostoevskii).

Fassbinder’s character (as did Nabokov’s Hermann Karlovich) gradually grows delusionary and self-destructive. Is this because of his financial troubles or is this driven by his perplexed sexual relationship with his wife Lydia? Hermann acknowledges the intellectual poverty of Lydia as well as her blatant infidelity, but for some unexplained reason he does not consider leaving her until he meets Felix. A common vagabond, Felix is perceived by Hermann as his mysterious double. Is this attraction to Felix entirely part of Hermann’s delusional state or is it driven by his closeted desire? A characteristic scene from the film illustrates the way Hermann first meets Felix, showing how Fassbinder constructs this particular ocular moment. There is hardly any visibly noticeable homoerotic aspect in it, but it still tells a lot about the way Hermann interprets Felix:

Are you blind, or …? You have my face.—If you say so, mister.—With a haircut and a shave, we would be indistinguishable. … Do you know what a double is? You have been to the cinema? A double, Felix, is a person who, in an emergency, can stand in … for a given actor.

Lydia’s sexual promiscuity and transgressions contribute to Hermann’s deepening psychological discomfort. His mental dissociation from his own
identity is forcibly stressed by Hermann’s recurrent obsessive thoughts of his own self performing violent sex acts with his promiscuous wife. All the while, his double is sitting at the other end of their apartment. This seeing double testifies to Hermann’s troubled state of mind as well.

The murder of Felix in the film is, as Thomas Elsaesser pointedly observes, a symbolic suicide, in which Hermann can effectively punish himself—assuming the role of dominance and submission simultaneously. By killing his stand-in, Hermann eliminates his own inadequate identity, in order to be reborn, so to speak, on the other side of life in some other locality—remote from the financial, marital, and social problems that plague him. Devising and employing false identities was not at all unfamiliar to Fassbinder’s Hermann, who (as is described in the hypotext) escaped Soviet territory by using some sort of obscure illegal papers. Hermann’s Jewish facet seems to somehow integrate with his artistic interests: In the same vein as he was dissatisfied with Russia’s harsh and impossibly atrocious realities, he is displeased with German Ordnung too.

In a rather delusional state of mind, Hermann maniacally conceives of a perfect financial crime (involving a “staged” murder), which would also eventually symbolize his physical rebirth. The idea of some kind of resurrection is noted by critics due to Fassbinder’s original title for the film: “his trip towards the light.” In the movie, there are a variety of suggestive hints: “Lydia!—Did you have a good trip? Yes? Can I help you? Your … Pushkin … letter. Thank you. Life Insurance. ‘New Life’.” They continue to discuss the topic of insurance and of (an imaginary) brother who is supposed to die for Hermann’s benefit. Lydia wonders: “Isn’t it a swindle? A swindle? The insurance money,
Hermann. The insurance money is not the point. We have reached a higher spiritual level.” There seems to be no ethical contradiction between Lydia and Hermann at this point, as for various reasons they have a certain goal to pursue, though a different one for each.

The implied highness of the spiritual quest for this enlightenment constitutes the main agenda of Hermann’s manipulatory criminal actions. Pushkin’s playful masquerade of criminality as depicted in some of his texts, especially in The Queen of Spades, provides a well-motivated background for Hermann’s self-fashioning. Being sexually transgressive as well as “socially” criminal is in the tradition of Pushkin.44

Both Nabokov and Fassbinder rely on the rich cultural strata of doubles. In mythology, doppelgängers are usually quite sinister characters, who bring bad luck or an omen of death to their original’s identity. These evil characteristics were consistently found in the doubles of German Romanticism that, rather directly, influenced Russian writers. The stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Ludwig Tieck fed the imaginations of writers like Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevskii, who, in turn influenced Aleksei Tolstoi and Nabokov. Marina Grishakova observes: “Nabokov’s mirror texts (The Eye, Despair) are structured by the partial or false identity of the doubles. An encounter with a cinematographic unrecognizable double is a leitmotif of Nabokov’s fiction.”45 Nabokov’s Hermann in particular is influenced by Dostoevskii’s Goliadkin from The Double. Goliadkin, a petty clerk, is quickly replaced at his place of work by his double, so to say, another Goliadkin, who is smarter and much more brutally ruthless. This is very troubling for the original Goliadkin, who eventually goes insane. It is rather unclear whether a real double exists or if this is just the perception of a rapidly deteriorating mind, an issue that Nabokov quite clearly found intriguing.46

Nabokov added a mock-ironic attack on Dostoevskii and Goliadkin in his English translation of Despair, which was more or less absent in the Russian hypotext.47 During his literary career, Nabokov regularly displayed complete cynicism for many of Dostoevskii’s ideas and motifs. The most evident is Nabokov’s criticism of Dostoevskii’s troubled literary personae and their desperate attempts to escape their social positions, psychological limitations, and torturous pasts. Possibly this is one of the reasons that Nabokov’s (and in turn Fassbinder’s) Despair could have been regarded as a gloomy Dostoevskian mock parody.48 In fact, we find the name of Dostoevskii ironically pronounced in the second part of the film:

What do you think, Mr. Weber? Hmm? The murder mystery. Oh, I’m afraid I gave up reading those a long, long time ago. Over the years … Conan Doyle, Dostoevsky, Edgar Wallace. So childish! All that worrying about clues and alibis.49
Dostoievskii and his “poor detective fiction” are the constant object of Nabokov’s negative presentiment and resentment, which seems to play well with Fassbinder’s overall mocking stylization as expressed in the movie. Joking about the novel’s title, Nabokov writes in the final chapter of his text: “What should I call my book then? ‘The Double’? But Russian literature possessed one already. ‘Crime and Pun’? Not bad—a little crude, though. ‘The Mirror’? ‘Portrait of the Artist in a Mirror’?”50 By just one short passage he seems to satirize Gogol, Dostoievskii, and even James Joyce altogether (those who by virtue of their erudition are able to understand will enjoy, others who lack this faculty will wonder in a pitiable bewilderment).

Proceeding in the same direction, strengthening the obsessive “doubles” that are already present in Nabokov’s text, Fassbinder also engages this doppelegänger motif, adding his own characteristic twist to this identity crisis. In Nabokov’s text, Hermann carefully prepares a special life insurance policy in order to try to benefit from the future assassination of his alleged “physico-spiritual double.” It is only at the very end of the novel that it becomes rather clear that Hermann’s double is a figment of his demented imagination and looks nothing like him according to the official police point of view. Fassbinder, working in a visual medium, could not delay the issue of the double’s (in)congruency, forcing him to reimagine this dilemma for the cinema. It has been reported that Fassbinder originally planned to use Bogarde for both characters, but then decided to have Bogarde play only Hermann. Fassbinder invited another actor to impersonate Felix, Klaus Löwitsch, who looked nothing like Bogarde.

Nabokov intended to leave the issue of resemblance as opaque as possible, thus keeping his reader constantly guessing (Nabokov’s favorite narratological “device”). Was it only Hermann Karlovich who was so delusional that he believed that Felix was his double? Did other people perceive a physical difference? Was there any affinity between the two? Nabokov does not give any concrete answers to these questions, preferring to leave this completely ambiguous right up to the end. Even then, the German police did not see much resemblance between the two, but maybe Felix’s face and body were disfigured during his murder? Or maybe the officers, in order to close the case, simply deliberately refused to acknowledge the obvious similarity in Felix and Hermann (German)? Thinking on a related matter, playing with the various possibilities of the most appropriate title Nabokov ruminates: “what about ‘The Likeness’? ‘The Unrecognized Likeness’? ‘Justification of a Likeness’? No—dryish, with a touch of the philosophical. Something on the lines of ‘Only the Blind Do Not Kill’?”51

In Nabokov’s hypotext it remains extremely vague and provocatively suggestive as regards the “real” state of affairs of Hermann’s physical resemblance with Felix. Hermann Karlovich playfully laments that the police did not want
to focus on his obvious similarities with the deceased Felix, trying (on the contrary) to stress their physical minor differences. Nabokov writes:

Not only taking for granted, with strange prejudication, that the dead man could not be I; not only failing to observe our resemblance, but, as it were, a priori, excluding its possibility (for people do not see what they are loath to see), the police gave a brilliant example of logic when they expressed their surprise at my having hoped to deceive the world simply by dressing up in my clothes an individual who was not in the least like me. The imbecility and blatant unfairness of such reasoning are highly comic … In getting into their heads that it was not my corpse, they behaved just as a literary critic does … faced by the miracle of Felix’s resemblance to me, they hurled themselves upon such small and quite immaterial blemishes as would, given a deeper and finer attitude towards my masterpiece, pass unnoticed, the way a beautiful book is not in the least impaired by a misprint or a slip of the pen. They mentioned the roughness of the hands, they even sought out some horny growth of the gravest significance, noting, nevertheless, the neatness of the nails on all four extremities.52

Here Nabokov does everything in his power to show the blurred boundaries between Hermann and Felix, to underline their confused closeness which evaporated only because of the police’s intentional malice and ignorance. Nabokov implies that any objective and unbiased watcher/observer would not fail to notice the very close resemblance that allegedly existed between the two.

Yet, Fassbinder eliminates any possible ambiguity immediately and directs the cinematic attention to the mental (in)stability of the film’s protagonist. He then further complicates the issue with the theme of Jewish homosexuality, mentioned above, in which there is a hidden desire to appear as someone
else, someone normal, employing an invented identity at a time when Jews of all types were attempting to hide in plain sight from Nazi scrutiny. Unfortunately, the movie does not provide one single scene in which all of these themes—Nazism, Jewish identity, and homosexual desire—come together. We can only unite them within one conceptual continuum in our mind as a viable hermeneutic critique crafted in order to convincingly interpret this film ad hoc as a whole.

Situated in the increasingly hostile German reality and seeking an existence of some sort, Hermann addresses Felix in Fassbinder’s hypertext and tries to persuade him to take part in the enterprise on his behalf:

Felix, please. Felix, Felix, now … now listen. Do you know what a double is? … A double, Felix, is a person who, in an emergency, can stand in … for a given actor. … I’ve walked a long way to meet you … What do I find?—Filth! Actors … actresses … pimps … harlots …

Hermann is desperately searching for such a double that would fit easily in the context of a future “role.” However, the very context of their meeting dictates a chain of associated metaphors and allusions, which are linked with pimps and harlots. This indeed seems quite suggestive and also touches upon the overall deviant erotic theme that is explored by Fassbinder in many of his movies.

Inherent in this discussion of actors and harlots is an identification of Felix and Hermann with individuals who provide false identities for a specific audience. This particular association again investigates issues of class, social status, and power, or how homosexual desire is reflected as deviant criminality within the film. The male–female relationship in most cultures is usually defined as a single gender with a marginalized subset. Here, Felix is a “stand-in” for Hermann—not much more than a filthy prostitute in Hermann’s opinion. As noted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the male–male relationship is usually maintained as two distinct individuals, while the male–female relationship is organized as a united couple. Hermann’s desire to see Felix as his double is probably only a weak attempt to unite with Felix as his androgynous twin, as his ideal pair, a divine lover. Obviously Felix is incapable of accommodating such high hopes, being nothing but a plain uneducated day-worker. Hence his destiny to pass away (from Hermann’s point of view) can be only logical.

Lydia’s promiscuity complicates Hermann’s deteriorating mental condition. His psychological dissonance is confounded by imagined brutally energetic intercourse with his voluptuous wife. During this process his “estranged persona” is quietly present, patiently staring, creating a remarkably voyeuristic scene. This obsessive scopophilic process of voyeurism informs Hermann’s stumbling state of nervousness and dysfunctional unwellness. Alienation or a “dissociated personality” disorder, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests, should be
the key concept in this respect, and it is no coincidence that Fassbinder decides to reinforce that estrangement by adding the Jewish aspect to Hermann’s identity. As is noted above, the murder of Felix represents a “symbolic suicide,” in which Hermann can effectively punish himself—simultaneously assuming the role of alleged dominance and painful submission.

In the final dramatic scene of the movie, Hermann Hermann tells the viewers about his hidden inclinations and passions. “I am a film actor. I am coming out. Don’t look at the camera. I am coming out.”54 Brigitte Peucker has noted that Bogarde himself is, in some sense, “coming out” as a homosexual, and perhaps Fassbinder for his own part is also doing the same thing by creating a sort of self-identification with the main protagonist of the story. Fassbinder is potentially associating himself with Hermann’s “closeted” desire impersonated by Bogarde’s dramatic play.55 But even more meaningful is that we ought to perceive Hermann’s performed monologue rather “literally.” Hermann as played by Bogarde and directed by Fassbinder appears to be a really potent, “transgressive” character who is able to exist beyond the traditional boundaries of the artistic text. The “cinematic text” is hermeneutically grasped here in the Ricoeourian fashion as a “meaningful event” standing on its own discursive right,56 as if “the screen has become permeable, and the [filmic] image is leaving the screen as the actor.”57 Fassbinder discursively relates his main protagonist’s troubled mental state with what is the German “diseased social order”—one that should be forcibly cured in its turn.58 If Germany is ill beyond any reparation or cure, then how can anyone living in this country be saved? The German director expands on these ideas of “liberation and anarchy” in a particularly important text titled: “Of Despair, and the Courage to Recognize a Utopia and to Open Yourself Up to It,”59 which can be read along with the film itself. This text offers several possible insights for dealing with the movie as well, being, however, quite remote from Nabokov’s core idea of doubles, mirrors, and madness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At issue is the desire of Hermann to achieve a new and alternative life in both the textual and cinematic versions. The most obvious reason for Hermann’s murder of Felix involves an economic motive. Hermann’s chocolate factory is heavily in debt and he hopes to recover the insurance money once his (really Felix’s) body is discovered, so that he can live comfortably in Switzerland. In so doing, Hermann would also be able to end his failed marriage to Lydia. By killing his outdated identity, Hermann endeavors to commit an ideal murder and, in this way, to give birth to a new self—one that might live in the relative safety of a neutral country, away from the social and political repression of Nazi Germany.60
Nabokov exploited the themes of homosexual desire and mental illness in *Pale Fire* in 1962. In *Despair*, these themes remain just below the surface. In Fassbinder’s adaptation, the possibilities for Hermann’s mental collapse are augmented by the psychological pressures of sexual and religious identity. In this version, murder not only allows Hermann to escape financial troubles, but it might also assist him with his sexual liberation. Yet, in both the textual and the cinematic versions, Hermann eventually loses his case and (in the ruthless hands of the German police) is forced to admit his ultimate personal failure.

One may conclude that as a cinematic hypertext, *Despair* offers a playful intersection of the two attitudes of its creators, Nabokov and Fassbinder. Despite their ultimate differences, they do share a number of important features, such as their profound interest in the matter of human doubles, as well as their brave exploration of the various puzzles of human sexuality and its possible conceptual borders. More directly, Fassbinder’s hypertext, upon relocation within Nazi Germany, allows for a more intricate cultural map of sexual and religious identity.

**NOTES**


3. See the especially fascinating scholarship of Brigitte Peucker.

4. Mazierska, “Escape into a Different Person, Escape into a Different Reality”; Elsaesser, “Murder, Merger, Suicide.”

5. See her collection rendered in Savchenkova, “Kruglyi stol ‘Portret avtora v zerkale: Fassbinder i Nabokov.’ Otchaianie.” See also a German/Russian collection edited by Igor P. Smirnov and his various colleagues: Smirnov et al., *Hypertext*.

6. It has been reported that the two quarreled over the process of filmmaking. This is given some credence as Fassbinder’s film has largely disregarded some of Stoppard’s concerns. See this discussed in detail in Watson, “Rewriting Nabokov,” 194; this is also mentioned by Peucker, *The Material Image*, 291. For additional information see also Chamberlin, “Emigrating to Madness.”


8. Nabokov’s poetry is of somewhat less notable quality than is his widely celebrated prose.
9. Nabokov spoke nearly fluent English with the help of a nanny at a very young age—long before his arrival at the University of Cambridge.

10. Nabokov was denied a position at Harvard after Roman Jakobson, who chaired the search committee, apocryphally remarked that Harvard must not let elephants teach the zoology of elephants.

11. Fassbinder never formally studied cinematography and did not hold any official qualifications as a film director.


13. Tyson, “LOLA.”

14. See in particular Vicari, “Fragments of Utopia” and Calandra, “Politicized Theatre.”

15. Nabokov’s own attitude toward homosexuality represents a separate topic, which is rather problematic and difficult to engage in this particular essay. In the simplest terms, homosexuality and sexual proclivities in general gain a greater place in his later novels, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*, but remain undercurrents in some of his earliest works, including *Despair*.

16. On this issue see Urban, *Vladimir Nabokov*.


21. These same issues are examined regarding Pavel Lungin’s film *Taxi Blues*: see Ioffe and White, “*Taxi Blues.*”


23. Ibid., 245–8.

24. For more on this, see White, *Degeneration, decadence, and disease*.

25. Spencer, *Homosexuality in History*, 304–5. Originally written with John Addington Symonds, the book was finished by Ellis after Symonds’s death. Symonds’s family was outraged and his name was removed from the English language version published in 1897.

26. Healy, “What Can We Learn From the History of Homosexuality in Russia?”

27. On this topic see Rozec, *Le IIIe Reich et les homosexuels*.

28. On this topic see the valuable collection in Barron, “*Degenerate Art.*”

29. This film is based on Jean Genet’s 1947 provocative queer-themed novel *Querelle de Brest*, making it Fassbinder’s last movie (it was posthumously released in June 1982).

30. LaValley, “The Gay Liberation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder.”

31. Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*.

32. Spurlin, *Lost Intimacies*.

33. Vasili Rozanov (1856–1919) was one of the most influential essayists of Russia’s Silver Age. He was especially prolific on many controversial subjects such as gender, family life, nationhood, sex, and religion. Being a steady supporter of family procreation as the only hope of humankind, he was a passionate accuser of homosexuality in its various cultural expressions.


35. This particular depiction is not unknown within medievalist scholarship, notably Caroline Walker Bynum’s study *Jesus as Mother*.


40. Ioffe, “The Discourses of Love.”
41. See the context described in Mazierska, “Escape into a Different Person, Escape into a Different Reality.”
42. Nabokov, Despair, 127.
43. As described in media dispersed at the Cannes Film Festival.
44. The most recent collection on this subject is Alyssa Dinega Gillespie’s valuable volume, Taboo Pushkin.
46. For more on this, see Patterson, “Nabokov’s Use of Dostoevsky.”
47. We can relate Nabokov’s attitude regarding Dostoevskii to the unique Russian tradition of stiob: an indigenous Russian mocking irony of a peculiar intellectual form. On Nabokov’s critique of Dostoevskii in Despair, see essays by Connolly, “Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov” as well as Dolinin, “Nabokov, Dostoevsky, and ‘Dostoevskyness’.”
48. See on that matter once more Connolly, “Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov” and Dolinin, “Nabokov, Dostoevsky, and ‘Dostoevskyness’.”
49. On Nabokov’s mocking of the detective genre and Conan Doyle in particular see Oakley, “Disturbing Design.”
50. Nabokov, Despair, 237.
51. Ibid., 237.
52. Ibid., 249.
53. Sedgwick, Between Men, 47.
54. Nabokov’s final phrase in the novel reads as follows: “Les preneurs de vues, my technicians and armed advisers are already among you. Attention! I want a clean getaway. That’s all. Thank you. I’m coming out now.” Nabokov, Despair, 217.
55. This tendency will be reinforced in creating the film In a Year of Thirteen Moons, which bears obvious autobiographical homosexual features. This film (In einem Jahr mit 13 Morden) was created in 1978 and is related to the suicide of Fassbinder’s intimate friend Armin Meier. The movie depicts the sad story of a certain transsexual person Elvira who once was Erwin.
56. Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text.”
58. For a good scholarly study of Fassbinder’s troubled relations with his homeland, see Elsaesser, Fassbinder’s Germany.
60. Trubetzkoy, L’Ombre et la différence. For an alternative critical and philosophical view, see Sartre, “Despair by Vladimir Nabokov.”