



WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO FILM DIRECTORS

A Companion to
**Rainer Werner
Fassbinder**

Edited by **Brigitte Peucker**

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Nudity and the Question

Chinese Roulette

Eugenie Brinkema

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.
(Genesis 3:7)

"Let us suppose," goes an argument by Heidegger, "that someone with his back turned to the wall makes the true assertion that 'the picture on the wall is hanging askew.' This assertion demonstrates itself when the man who makes it, turns around and perceives the picture hanging askew on the wall. What gets demonstrated in this demonstration? What is the meaning of 'confirming' [*Bewährung*] such an assertion?"¹ The consequence of this wondering is that if truth is an accord between assertions and pictures on the wall, then accord or correspondence can only be determined from the point of view of already knowing the truth about whether the real thing is straight or askew. If, however, truth is, as Heidegger argues, about disclosure and not assertion or correspondence (in other words, is not propositional), this uncovering or presencing gesture is primary; it is foundational. Heidegger's conclusion is that: "To say that an assertion 'is true' signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself. Such an assertion asserts, points out, 'lets' the entity 'be seen' in its uncoveredness. The *Being-true* (truth) of the assertion must be understood as *Being-uncovering*. [...] *The most primordial phenomenon of truth is first shown by the existential-ontological foundations of uncovering.*"² Heidegger's well-known formulation of truth is as *aletheia*: *a-lethia*, the not-hidden, that which is brought out of concealment and disclosed; this unconcealment carries with it other forms of concealment.

But for all its consequences for philosophy, I am at least as interested in the *mise-en-scène* and choreography of Heidegger's thought experiment: For if we pause on that "Let us suppose," if we slow down and emphasize the serious pronouncement – that "the picture on the wall is hanging askew" – if we can

imagine the thickened body that would gradually rotate, in close-up, eyes wide, perhaps in a sort of veiled horror, to perceive, ascertain, or confirm this true state of the world off-kilter – and let us make the turning figure a woman, all kohl-lined lids and furious irises – if we catch her visage doubled in a mirror that documents the dawning realization of the stakes of that perception, its complicated confirmation – Does this supposing not suggest everywhere the visual language of melodrama? Once again, then: “What gets demonstrated in this demonstration? What is the meaning of ‘confirming’ [*Bewährung*] such an assertion?” The visual form of Fassbinder’s *Chinese Roulette* (*Chinesisches Roulette*, 1976) is one continual posing of the question of demonstration, and what can be demonstrated in forms of demonstration. What is the meaning of confirming assertions that have been made about the world and its things, each hanging, in their own true way, awry and askew? What is unconcealed or disclosed, and what is unconcealable and disclosable? The film is quite explicit on the stakes of these questions: on the other side of confirming and exposure, what is hazarded in all manner of pronounced demonstration, is none other than the risk of death.

The etymological origins of *concealment* suggest, from *concelere*, hiding, dissimulating, secrecy (*celare*: to hide), while those of a related, but radically different word, *revelation*, suggest the disclosure of facts or information. The relation between un-concealment (as a coming out of hiding, an un-secreting of something) as opposed to *revelare*’s disclosure would seem to be a difference, in part, between emergences marked by their opposite (un-concealment functioning, then, as a double negative) and a pure production of disclosure or information – one, let it be said, with a markedly theological bent. We know, since Heidegger, that un-concealment involves its own concealments; but does revelation imply likewise unrevelatory forms? Just as Heidegger writes about un-concealment in Plato’s allegory in *Republic*, that it is “a theme, and at the same time not a theme” – my argument is that, in *Chinese Roulette*, the difference between un-concealment and revelation is a theme, and at the same time not a theme.³ It is also the film’s form, and one that resists thematization even as it suggests itself as *the* theme of the work. This strange and non-forthcoming work. It is about: A child who may or may not have orchestrated the meeting of her parents, each in the company of their extramarital lover, at their country manor; a mother who may or may not despise her daughter for the girl’s physical disability; a daughter who may or may not have wanted her mother to shoot her as the culmination of their mutual contempt; a final gunshot whose source and target are invisible, which may or may not suggest the daughter’s desired violent event, which she may or may not have desired, has finally taken place; an assassination in Paris (of one “Ali Ben Basset”) that may or may not reveal the political machinations and allegiances of the girl’s father, Herr Christ; and so forth. Every possible narrative certainty is proffered and then confirmation is withheld. The film is either about what Foucault calls, in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday

ere naked.

(Genesis 3:7)

Someone with his back on the wall is hanging who makes it, turns all. What gets demonstrating ‘confirming’ [*Bewährung*] that if truth is an accord or correspondence can knowing the truth about truth is, as Heidegger says (in other words, is primary; it is foundational ‘is true’ signifies asserts, points out, ‘lets’ (truth) of the assertion *cardinal phenomenon of truth uncovering*.”² Heidegger’s is not-hidden, that which concealment carries with it

at least as interested in the experiment: For if we should emphasize the serious going askew” – if we can

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behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us"; or, it is about the persistence of the historical horrors of the past and their guilty inescapability in the present moment; or, it is a modernist metaphor, pace Jane Shattuc's reading of the "ambiguous games families play because they are unable to communicate"; or, it is about the cruelty of psychologically damaged children and their vengeance against resentful parents; or, it is about - whatever.⁴ What replaces the certainty of forms subject to hermeneutics - related to events, characters, meaning, and all manner of knowledge - is the manifest visual certainty of style, a certainty predicated on demonstrating the visual excesses of Fassbinder's unique brand of spectacular artifice. As Brigitte Peucker formulates Fassbinder's aesthetic law in relation to *Chinese Roulette*, his aim "is to take artificiality to its limits in order to examine the place where death and life, the artificial and the real, meet."⁵

These visual forms of unconcealment and these visual forms of revelation (which are different) are linked to two figures in Fassbinder's film: nudity and the acrylic cabinet. Each of these, however, in addition, is linked to gnostic forms of unconcealment and revelation, linkages that are troubled; therefore, to those two figures we must add a third: the question. The matter of nudity comes back to the *mater*, but also a painting (hanging on a wall), and also a skull. The acrylic cabinets that break into the central room of the film's theatrical space are like a structure of troubled nudity, and the question is itself a form for the nudations of knowledge. So perhaps there is only nudity. That possibility must be considered.

The dining room in the country manor is the crucial site of crossing and its attendant terms: double-crossing, erotic swapping, interrogation. It is where the father, entwined with his mistress, finds his wife, entwined with hers; it is where the film's cathected relationship with eyeline matches and entanglements of gaze and object becomes frenetically articulated; it is where the film invests in the game that lends its name to the film's title; and it is also where the two crucial visual forms of knowledge are part of the room's very *mise-en-scène*. Thomas Elsaesser is correct that "Fassbinder's narratives are at once embodied in and suspended by these relays of looks and poses, gestures and gazes, knitting the characters together in a dynamic that has all the affective density and emotional claustrophobia of lived human relations while preserving the immateriality of a dream or a ghost-story."⁶ And it is in the dining room where these networks of affective densities converge. The dining room contains two visual structures for troubled knowledge: a painting and two acrylic cabinets, each standing in for a radically different logic, ethic, and form. While the painting presents co-extensive forms of revelation and veiling, the cabinets articulate and produce a visual logic of unconcealment that conceals. It is worth recalling the literalness of the put-into of what is put-into-the-scene: objects surrounding and framing the room (in the case of the "picture on the wall") and what takes up space, what bodies must move around, in the room proper (in the case of the acrylic cabinets). The painting and the cabinets are *there*, in the room, for the film - and the conceptual

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work they are, not do, derives from this foundational quality of being put-into the scene, of first and foremost being *there*.

The painting in the dining room in *Chinese Roulette* is strangely under-remarked in criticism, save for a brief aside in a reading of the film in relation to disability and representation. But the doubled forms in the painting serve as a visual analog to the forms of troubled revelation in the film. The painting hangs alone on a jutting segment of white wall, itself surrounded on both sides by large windows; the work within the gilded frame is rigorously divided into four quadrants. There are two female figures: on the left, an elongated golden nude with Modigliani hips and an orangey-red halo of a hat; and on the right a fragmented body cut off mid-thigh and behind the veiling scrim of a light gauzy blue swath of paint. Where the teardrop curve of thigh and calf takes up the lower left quadrant is, on the right side of the image, a midnight square, a material block. The tonal echo of the hat in what looks like a bouquet hides behind the fleshy line of the nude on the left; by contrast, the flat transparent blue sheet on the right covers, obscures, and yet fails to fully render opaque the top half of the nude on the right. While a margin of darkness borders and bends away from the nude on the left, the figure on the right is obliterated by the frame, her furthest arm falling off the pictorial world, a specter not fully present but hovering, indeed, in part, behind the thick gold frame that cuts the painting off from the white wall on which it is hung.

The two painted figures stand for two relations to presencing: the self-showing nude on the left, surrounded on four sides by a painted darkness that interiorizes the frame of the image, is an utterly different being than the partially obscured half-image in the process of floating off the painting altogether. Each nude, in turn, stands for a different relationship to revelation: a visual disclosure, on the one hand, and a plurality of ways of veiling a being on the other. (Here, and throughout this paper, I am not talking about the art-historical distinction between the naked and the nude – which is a spectatorial question in relation to desire and framing, voyeurism and self-consciousness – but rather a theological relation of nudity or nakedness to knowledge that will be elaborated fully later.) The lone critic to read the painting does so very briefly and figures it as articulating the film's "depiction of physical deviation from desirable norms."⁷ However, to literalize the blue figure as "cut off at the waist with no legs at all" and metaphorically assign it to anxieties about the daughter as a cripple is to make the very error Heidegger derides: to find an allegorical accordance between representation and character that presumes a critical truth, but can only do so by having made a determination that, in the language of the picture on the wall, the daughter is *askew*, a judgment that converts revelation into the *what* of what is revealed.⁸ If, instead, the painting is taken in its gesture of visual disclosure, what is revealed is a visual logic not reducible to *a priori* notions of bodies whole and fragmented, well and unwell. Rather, what the painting articulates – and with a formal rigor that is proportional, tonal, and materially dense – is the renewable visual energy of forms of revealing and veiling. For the painting is not static and should not be frozen in the effort to make it

legible elsewhere for the themes of the film. With each horizontal pass of the ever-mobile, restless camera, the edges that reveal and the edges that conceal are put into kinetic dialogue with each other: at a pan to the left, a gold bar in what might be a doorway comes into the light, stabilizes the nude on the left, gives her even more internal boundaries with which to interact; but at a cost: each camera movement in this direction ever threatens all the more to cut off the side of the blue figure already hovering on the margins of the image. During the final segment of the film with the cruel game of questions, the figures are set in the party, and become yet more bodies crowding the crowded, cluttered room. At other times, they are isolated in the image, regarding only each other. Yet still other times, each being who passes in front of the picture on the wall functions as ever more frames-in-process, supplements to the gold rectangle, blocking then unblocking portions of the image – at the table, the father's mistress raises her hand, her fingernails an exact match for the red of the encircling hat and her flesh the very shade of apricot that drips from the body in the image; at the light of her cigarette, the flattening of the screen image makes her free left hand appear to graze the skin of the calf of the figure, so close a nail could scrape the painted flesh.⁹

The nudity of the nudes in the painting – and there are two nudes, a veil does not undo the nakedness of the nude – involves two forms of physical presentation: a full exposure of the facticity (even the haecceity) of nudity and the revelation of that presence through the partial and cloaked veiled form to its right. The darkness of the image in the lower right quadrant – what repeats but also obliterates where the bright flesh of the second figure's legs should be – is the marking of the presence of the spill of dark paint, bringing out the material substrate that frames and that therefore makes possible the nudity of the nude figure on the left. If one form of visual revelation is predicated on a maximum of visible access, the other discloses the possibility of deferred and therefore future revelation, which is always the function of every veil. That the possibility of revelation is linked to the figure hovering on (and therefore fully falling off) the edges of the painting suggests that revelation is also a condition of presence in the pictorial – and therefore also, cinematic – image itself. The partial and the cloaked function as analogs for each other: to be partially present is to be partially cloaked, and each presence or instance of revelation is therefore marked by apertures, frames, becomings, and disappearances. This is an ontological problem unique to revelation's disclosing.

The acrylic cabinets, however, figure a different form, one specific to notions of transparency, coming out of hiding, and therefore truth. The transparent towers put into the scene the freneticism of what Heidegger calls *Unverborgenheit*: all the wild possibilities of unconcealment as a formal principle. While the painting in the dining room negotiates revelation – the disclosure, veiling, and unveiling of a certain confirmation or confession of the body – the acrylic display cases and cabinets function under a different visual episteme. Unconcealment, specifically, involves supplementary concealments; every unconcealment also conceals, each acrylic box effects a clearness and framing that also blurs and

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blocks. One of the cabinets contains electronic audio equipment – a receiver, cassette player, and turntable – visually harkening back to the opening scene of the film in which mother and daughter listen to an LP of the extravagantly overwrought end of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, but as though that frame, its visual iconography, were contained and cut off from the mansion: brought in, but bounded; mummified, unplaying. Another case contains embedded figures of glass from bottles of liquor, the lower shelves cluttered with the angles and blown-out curves of glassware. These cabinets and cases allow light to pass through, but not without difficulties: they film over, glaze, and blur the image that is mediated through their panels. I read this structure very differently from Kaja Silverman, who, of the cabinets, writes that "by substituting glass display cases for windows" Fassbinder's image gives "glass a three-dimensionality which the characters themselves lack."¹⁰ This attempt to thicken or loan depth to the acrylic cases, and to make, as Silverman's argument does explicitly, the cases into bodies or subjects, is to freeze the scene, to cause it to fall out of time. For that depth is an illusion of *mise-en-scène*; in the duration of the film, the cabinets are endlessly moved, opened, fractured, and their visual function is not to have depth as a property or characteristic but to throw and disturb, to undo and trouble and fracture the image of beings with which the cabinets cinematically interact. Light passes, but is refracted, therefore is changed, therefore is altered and confused. As Fassbinder said, of his penchant for filming subjects indirectly, through windows and panes, "First of all, you get a refraction that way."¹¹ The eyes of bodies trapped by an acrylic panel are lifted from the recesses of the face and thrown out into the world to glare back at their origin and ground.¹² The clear rectangles frame and delimit: bodies, images, architecture, features, objects. Each framing, however, each presencing, is also an obfuscation, a fuzzing and smearing of the image. Andrew Mitchell's meditation on glare in Fassbinder is astute: "The glare that obscures the character reveals it in a new shape. Glare streaks through the characters in the film; it spreads over their faces and forms revealing whole new dimensions of character."¹³ Though Mitchell does figure glare as dis-figurement, I would warn against reducing the figure to the character, given the radically exteriorizing gestures of this particular film. What glare reveals, first and foremost, always, is glare. Instead of Mitchell's "new dimensions of character," which converts the visible to the psychic, it is as though Fassbinder's film yearns to stay with the visible and fulfill Gertrude Stein's charge: "Give me new faces new faces new faces I have seen the old ones."¹⁴ The acrylics break every image they trap, scatter and dim it; they smear and confuse the visual world, they un-manifest its clarity. Each unconcealment promised by the light-allowances of acrylic, then, is simultaneously a concealment that obnubilates every revelation-promising beam.

The lowered acrylic register of the chess table houses a shelf that contains the gun that ambiguously marks and undetermines the end of the film: one can see the gun through the chess game, but that visibility provides no legibility for the use of the gun. It is simply there; the clarity of the object's housing presences the weapon,

but reveals nothing about it. The pieces float without ground, and that is all. A clearness that clouds also redoubles: the acrylic form can supplement, by iterating the image of the father's face (the doubled image a noticeably weakened image, not a full presence – and therefore an *unheimlich* doubling of the reflection); or it can cut off, as with the bent lower half of the face of the wife's lover: his bits of mouth and chin that are visible through the acrylic door fade in color to an ashen tone, the jaw a millimeter off, the chin shrunken and miniaturized, undoing the affectivity and nobility of the face. These cabinets figure an unconcealing that conceals, produce a clearness that blurs, a border that frames but cloaks. They therefore figure as forms of presencing that alter and undo the object of their presentation; in the dining room, every object and being and pairing is framed at one time through the acrylics, and each and every time, the acrylics corrupt what is seen through them. If the transparency of the acrylic form suggests a kind of nudity, it is the nudity of unconcealment, not the nudity of revelation; the acrylics, for all their visual claims to revealing all, to letting all light pass through untroubled and unharmed, do not disclose or present what is on the other side of each clear panel. On the contrary, the unconcealing labor of the acrylics is each time involved in the concealments of distortion and blurring; in other words, the cabinets suggest a form of nudity that is inseparable from aggressive forms of cloaking. In place of nudity as a figure of revealing or exposure, nudity paradoxically conceals, shrouds, even lies; what the acrylic exposes it simultaneously and inextricably blurs.

If these two visual forms for revelation and unconcealments that conceal provide the twin dimensions of troubled truth in the film, they are each figured in relation to a structural and philosophical kind of nudity. But there is also a nudity of the body, a nudity indeed of the skeleton, in the film. The lovers arrive, and attempt to laugh off their awkward predicament, each feigning a knowing acceptance of the arrangements in which they find themselves caught; late that first night, the daughter arrives, the one who may or may not have orchestrated the prior meetings and uncoverings of infidelity. The next morning (it is always the next morning about which one worries), the daughter proceeds down the wooden hallway, appears to pause and deliberate (though this is captured in the weight of the stance, not any psychological characterization). She glances at each of two doors across the hall from each other, then turns to the one on her right: from the point of view of the room, the door opens towards the spectator and we see the girl Angela's face, all nostrils and ringlets, staring towards the screen. The reverse shot reveals the target of the enigmatic glare: her father, nude and in profile, entangled with sheets and asleep; his mistress, wrapped in royal blue fabric, sits in the window, early sunlight cascading down the bone of her calf. There are two visual citations in this shot: the bent leg and contemplative posture in the window sill is, in part, evocative of the first shot of the film, in which Angela's mother sits likewise, framed by a large bay window in the family's house. The second reference is more significant: if one follows only tone and line, the father and his mistress function as a visual deconstruction of the two figures from

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the painting in the dining room. The pale greenish peach of the long line of the father's leg, thigh, and hip suggests the figure on the left (while even the tones of the pink and white striped bedsheet appear to signal an allusion in the light family of reds); while the compressed figure in the background of the mistress – and her strikingly royal blue wrap – figure her as the fragmented, truncated nude from the right side of the image. The figures here have reversed positions from left to right, and with the father's rigidly horizontal posture have literally turned the painting on its side, have repeated it while rendering it asunder. It is now true that: *The painting on the wall is hanging askew*. If the form of the nudity of the two painted figures was related to markedly different forms of revelation – an exposure of the presentational nude and a presencing of the veiling of the nude – here, where a dark rectangle of paint completes the partial body on the right side of the painting in its aphotic zone, now the light of the window and early morning sun complete the body of the blue-veiled mistress. The consequence of turning the visual orchestration of figures on their side and reversing their positions is absolute: a shift from the presencing of painterly substrate to putting on display the quality of entering light. In other words, at the repetition of nudity as a form of revelation is a shift from a painterly to a cinematic logic, a way the film has taken the form of nudity into and for itself.

When the mistress notices the intrusive look, she bends her eyes down, seemingly ashamed, while the daughter nods her understanding of the order of sleeping arrangements the previous night. The child closes the door and the camera cuts to a long shot of the same bedroom tableau; to the hallway again, the daughter turns a semicircle to complete the line of silent accusation. For this second room is unique – the camera lingers behind her, remains in the hallway on the site of the pivot, even when the second door is opened. A cut to the same affectively blunted face of the girl, then the reverse shot: a very different tableau. Both figures are in bed together, the mother's lover dressed in white, and the mother – the mother, the mother, the mother. Is naked. She sits on her tailbone – a compressed *Olympia* – one leg extended long and bent, echoing in tone and shape that long long leg form that painting and father have previously used to bifurcate space. A blanket is draped across her other leg and stomach, while her left arm extends across her knee, her face tucked almost behind it. Sitting upright quite like this, a triangular frame bordered by arm, back, and thigh puts on display the actuality of the mother's nudity: in the center of flesh's triangular border are her breasts given over simply and obviously to the image. The breasts are shocking in their rigid, small angularity, each dark nipple a deictic vector. The netting around the mother's hair is an inversion of the painted nude's wild aura headpiece: the one extends the apex of the body into the negative space around it, while the mother's beaded netting compresses the head, pushes it out of space towards itself, towards a singular point of collapsed, netted tension. As the camera slowly zooms in towards the mother's rising visage, she lifts her head, turns, and offers the accusation, "Du!" The proportions of the triangle are only accentuated in the

approach of the camera to body: at the instant of the utterance, that left arm cuts across three-quarters of the frame, pulling the eye to the breasts and the breastbone, the ribs, the cage and trap of the body. The mother's arm is a line: above it, the sheer rage of her face; below it, the flat simplicity of the sternum. The mother's arm is a line; it is also therefore a break. If the tenderness of any maternal body is metonymized in the nurturing possibility framed below that break, the calloused cruelty of the site of speech makes the status of that line, that break, absolute.

The mother's single word is a repetition with a difference of the opening word of the film, "Schön?" The two one-word declarations, each addressed to the daughter, have to be read against each other: the opening word is a question; the second a statement or accusation. If the opening poses the question of *relation* (Are we lovely, or its opposite, to each other? Will we be nice to each other, today?), the second poses redundantly the question of declaration in the flatness of its tone and the literalness of what it says: it repeats the visual, stating in the second person the very grammatical presence of what has already been given over to vision. The one poses a question of interpretation (Do we judge this to be nice? Are you beautiful? Am I good?), while the other involves the declaration of presence or being (You!); both interpretation and being are subject to forms of obfuscation. It is significant that the word of aesthetic and moral interpretation comes alongside the in-visible aural (the Mahler) while the statement of being comes at the moment of nudity, the bare presencing of the facticity of the body, for sound and the visible are in tension throughout the film. This is especially true in the final moments: the sound of the offscreen gunshot (its bare aural presence) over a freeze frame allows the visual to refuse to confirm or unconceal or disclose the particulars of this act of violence; it remains present on the level of aural certainty, but concealed on the level of possible interpretation. (There is a third single term, as well, perhaps: Angela's scream of "Nein!" when her governess is shot – the singular word of absolute negation.) The mother's "Du!" is an accusation, an affective utterance of rage and contempt, one to which no response is possible. The daughter treats the assaultive second person, however, as though it had taken the grammatical form of the film's first word; she regards it, in other words, as if it were a question. "Ja?", she responds to the furious pronoun, to which the mother only snorts, emptied of language. It is not until the daughter leaves and the mother is alone with the lover that she leans back and covers her chest with her hands and arms. When the mother is next seen, she and the father perform their morning ablutions in the bathroom and she wears stockings and a coat. What covers over and conceals this move from naked to un-naked is a peculiar image of landscape.

For there are many forms of nudity. To be a skull is one way to be naked. A corpse can be a nude as well. Over breakfast after the visual revelations of each parent's room, Angela speaks aloud, "Denn Ich ist ein Anderes," referencing Rimbaud's famous "I is another." Her spoken words continue over a cut to the early dawn landscape and a languid pastoral pan across muted peaches and greens, a tree, one bench – to arrive at a cross upon which is hanging a dead and naked

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body. The image cuts quickly to a rotted but pulsingly decomposing head of a cow, then as quickly returns to the mother's legs, newly cloaked in stockings, walking to the bathroom. Because I do not hinge my understanding of nudity on shame and self-consciousness but on exposure, revelation and unconcealment, I do not follow Derrida's understanding that there is the possibility of "nudities without nudity" in his analysis of the animal who "is not naked because it is naked. It doesn't feel its own nudity. There is no nudity 'in nature.' There is only the sentiment, the affect, the (conscious or unconscious) experience of existing in nakedness."¹⁵ The bodies of the dead laid bare – equally the Pasolini-esque figure on the cross and the bare vitality of the skull – cover over the duration of the dressing, the absolute transition from the naked figure to the clothed figure. If the rotting skull is another way of being naked in the world it is because it lays bare a certain relation to materiality and the environment, it reveals and self-shows the presence of the certainty of finitude. Every rotting corpse is naked in this way. The relation between these images and the mother is not one of mediation, but of a leap to the state of difference that will herald the crucial second day, the day on which shots will be fired. Recall that there is a family whose last name is Christ, an unangelic daughter Angela, a strangely cherubic boy Gabriel. Something in the relationship between nudity and forms of knowledge seems to resist discarding this information; while it is a problematic tactic to read Fassbinder for a coherent critique (and I am not suggesting we do that here), to ignore the theological beads dotting the film's netting is to ignore one powerful tradition of the thinking of nudity and knowledge.

What the daughter is doing in this scene is confirming: acquiring knowledge about the specifics of the sleeping arrangements. But the nudity confirms something that was known in advance; in that sense, then, nudity forms a form of knowledge predicated on confirmation of an *a priori* certainty. It is therefore a logic of nudity that gives its form to the gnostic cruelties of the game that lends the film its title, and not the game that loans out metaphorical capital. The game of Chinese roulette articulated in the film involves a minimal social commitment: two groups of sufficient number, one of which privately chooses a member from the opposing team. The group from whom a person has been silently chosen poses questions to the first group about the hypothetical members in their midst in order to venture, finally, a guess about that identity; each question, therefore, requires a series of imagined introjections of each answer in which the self functions as a hypothetical target of each query's closure. From Angela's demand to play the game to the end of the *Spiel* is a twenty-minute scene of extraordinary visual, choreographic, and hypothetical density. The nine questions Angela's team poses move from allegory to relation to representation to finitude to identity (gendered, and then historical): If the person were a coin, what coin would he or she be? If the person were an animal? If this person were cast away forever on an island, what would he or she take along? If you were to paint this person, what would we see in the picture? What writer might have invented this person? What kind of death

that left arm cuts
and the breastbone,
line: above it, the
am. The mother's
maternal body is
weak, the calloused
weak, absolute.
the opening word
addressed to the
is a question; the
question of *relation*
each other, today?),
flatness of its tone
the second person
over to vision. The
be nice? Are you
on of presence or
of obfuscation. It
comes alongside
ness at the moment
and the visible
final moments: the
freeze frame allows
particulars of this act
it concealed on the
, as well, perhaps:
a singular word of
effective utterance of
daughter treats the
grammatical form of
a question. "Ja?",
snorts, emptied of
alone with the lover
d arms. When the
ing ablutions in the
er and conceals this

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would be fitting for this person? Would this person make a good mother, whore, or saint? Let's assume we were attacked by a death squad, and the person you have chosen could decide which of us eight should survive, who would that person select? The final question shifts the terms of the game, the "famous question" the father prompts to the mother: What would this person have been in the Third Reich? (The answers: the same as he or she is now; a professor working in euthanasia; a clerk at Gestapo headquarters; and, Angela's answer, concentration camp commandant in Belsen.) The answers are empty and should not be read for their retroactive significance – the aesthetic codes of melodrama (intense and furious glances in close-up; a zooming camera lurching forward for dramatic agony; eye-line matches that fail to match; meaning-laden music; a slow, unnerving pace) provide the anxiety of meaning until history arrives to give its weight to the final question. But the answers do not matter. Even if one reads them for their derived retroactive significance when the target is revealed to have been the mother, the very juxtaposition of banality and extremity (the same and the commandant; the clerk and the professor) refuse a hermeneutics of answers. The answers diegetically provided are as illegible within the film as the opening word, the question without object or context, "Schön?" is to spectators of the film.

It is the empty meaningfulness of the question – the *form* of the game – that is significant. Everything hinges on whether one reads each question as pivoting on the subjunctive *were* or whether one reads the crucial word as the opening *If*: to privilege the former is to concretize each question; to turn on the *If* is to suspend the openness of the possibility each question names, not for the sake of landing on a certainty, but for the sake of the open as such. The game pivots on an "If" and a series of answers from which the recipient of the answer learns nothing. The question is each time posed in order to defer understanding; the contradictory and ambiguous answers each time lessen certainty, purport to reveal while only concealing further. It is worth articulating explicitly the foundation of the game: a question is a request, even a demand, for something – information, action, compliance – but also always forms a supplementary and prior demand, which is for an answer. The question form seeks something. What is sought and what is provided in the game played in *Chinese Roulette*, however, is the same thing: the question and the answer mimic each other, repeat a search for information whose motivation and answer both speak without reference to the question and answer that are meant to be posed. Later in the film, after the game, after Angela's mother has shot the mute governess Traunitz, Angela calmly says to Gabriel, of his writings and pseudo-philosophizing, that she knows he does not write the material himself: "I've known that you steal (*stiehlst*) it all." The meta-form of plagiarism, of doubling, copying, undermining truth status through false attribution of material that pre-exists is a question of confirmation and revelation of what was already known; it therefore undermines the seeking dimension of knowledge for a correspondence and repetitious dimension. To return to Heidegger's worry: to formulate the assertion, the one that is confirmed at the

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instant of that critical embodied turn towards the wall, requires a representation of the picture said to be askew; but "the picture is hanging askew" purports to speak not of the representation in the picture but of the actual material picture hanging wrongly and in the real ("the asserting is a Being toward the thing itself").¹⁶ What is demonstrated in the turn, at seeing that one's suspicions were confirmed is "Nothing else than *that* it is the very being that was meant in the assertion."¹⁷ In other words, it is correspondence not of representation with thing, but a fundamental agreement and confirmation of "the self-showing of the being in its sameness," that the thing as meant (the real picture on the real-wall) asserts in its isness.

What gets demonstrated in this demonstration that is the roulette game? The mother, of course, is the picture. Is the demonstration that the game produces a correspondence between a reading of the mother or an interpretation of the mother (or several interpretations of the mother) and the mother herself – in other words, in order to comprehend, understand, or evaluate? Or, is the assertion that is made the "self-showing" of the mother such that the truth of the mother is merely this uncoveredness? The confirmation, in other words, is not an accord but an unconcealing of the mother in her presence, a presence irreducibly linked to beads and netting, a certain shade of lipstick, a hardness of movements, and all that is captured as surface in the presentational mode of the film. (In a different context, in relation to exhibitionism and specularity, Elsaesser makes a version of just this claim: "to be, in Fassbinder's world, is to be perceived, *esse est percipi*."¹⁸) What is the meaning of confirming each assertion through the retroactive assignation of the mother to a series of abstract and meaningless figures: an Indian coin with a hole in the middle; a creation of Nietzsche's; a commandant; and so forth? The truth of the mother's rage is not disclosed in the revelation that she is the target of the game: rather, the sheer force of the violence of her reaction manifests and discloses the accord – only after the game has been completed. That correspondence, in fact, cannot be determined from within the game, but requires the independent uncovering of the mother as herself, and not as *any* of the figures articulated by the opposing team. There is no ground on which to judge accordance with each answer and the mother: the absurdity, self-canceling opacity of each answer and the anti-psychological characterization make it doubly impossible.¹⁹ What is uncovered, however, in the form of the game is none other than the visual acrobatics of melodramatic cinematic language; what is not-hidden is not the identity of the target of the questions, nor even the mother's nature brought out of thinly veiled concealment – what is made present as itself in its presence is the very style of Fassbinder's visual freneticism. What is revealed in the duration and under the pressure of the form of the question that seeks precisely *nothing* new is the newness of the machinery of the apparatus, the angles of the camera, the beads in the netting, the acrylic refractions, the density of layers in the composed tableaux, the painting and its blue and red figures, and so forth. That *nothing* is what is demonstrated in the

visual forms of nudity: the figures in the painting, the visual acrobatics of the acrylic. The final ambiguity of the gunshot heard at the end of the film – over a cryptic image of a dark parade past the mansion – is the very distillation of the logic of the game, a force whose source and target are unknown but which presents this very force as *there*.

The doubled question that converges the game and the figures of the mother, the skull, and the acrylic is: Why does nudity need the (figure of the) question? And, why does the question need (the figure of) nudity? Put in a clunkier but more specific way: what does nudity, and its relationship to revelation versus unconcealment, do to a theory of knowledge as manifest in the form of the question? For Bataille (let it be said, this would be true as well for Freud), it is non-knowledge that is figured in relation to baring (all): "NON-KNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE. This proposition is the summit, but must be understood in this way: lays bare, therefore *I see* what knowledge was hiding up to that point, but if I see, *I know*. Indeed, I know, but non-knowledge again lays bare what I have known."²⁰ It is non-knowledge that communicates affective intensities (ecstasy, anguish, and elsewhere anxiety, disgust); one must fail to fully grasp in order to grasp, and knowledge must continually depart us. But this form of laying bare strikes me as remaining in the revelatory mode of thinking nudity and knowledge – still demanding of nudity what exposes it (lays it bare) and in what it is exposed or disclosed. The problem of the unconcealment/concealment form of nudity articulated in the perverse knowledge structure of Chinese roulette would seem to resist such a model, predicated as it is not on producing either knowledge or non-knowledge, but in turning towards the picture on the wall and confirming the self-showing awryness of that which it had already correctly named when the back was resolutely turned.

The possibility of critique hinges on whether, in the game of Chinese roulette, nudity is correlated to the "If"; in other words, is it linked to the openness and possibility of the hypothetical? Or is nudity in the supposed unconcealment and disclosure of the mother's violent rage? On the one hand, in the game scenario, Angela appears to follow to the letter Sartre's description of desire, which involves stripping the Other bare: "The Other's body is originally a body in situation; flesh, on the contrary, appears as the *pure contingency of presence*. Ordinarily, it is hidden by makeup, clothes, and so forth; but above all it is hidden by *movements*; nothing is less 'in the flesh' than a dancer, even if she is nude. Desire is an attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothes in order to make it exist as pure flesh."²¹ The making-appear of a stunned stasis in the other would seem to be literalized and visualized in the shocking revelation's conversion to melodramatic pose at the conclusion of the game. But this suggests that the game is an attempt to make-nude the mother. Could nudity be elsewhere in the game? Is nudity linked to the answer, to the exposure or provision of a kind of knowledge or certainty? Or, a third possibility: is nudity related to the conceit and transparency of the very form of the game, and neither affiliated with

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question nor answer but with the *Spiel* as such, in itself? Perhaps nudity is linked to the raw presence of rage, the sheer bare hostility that plays across the surface of the skin of mother, of daughter, in the nostrils and the pupil, in the corners of mouths and the play of netted bound hair against the sly bounce of a child's wild curls. Or perhaps it is none of these. Yes, that is it, it is none of these – rather it is that nudity is ...

Is the problem that one writes: "nudity is"? For in assigning nudity to the language of being, it closes it off from the language of revelation and becoming – the unconcealing/concealing dimension of nudity, the exposing that cloaks. One does not necessarily need the surname of Christ, the bodily weight pulling off the crucifix, the Angela and the Gabriel in order to accept Giorgio Agamben's insistence that "Nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological significance"; the conjunction, however, would powerfully suggest one tarry with this claim. For Agamben, it is not merely the uncovering of the dimension of nudity in Genesis (which is related to prelapsarian coverings of grace standing in for the cloaking but degraded coverings of garments) but the way in which uncovering *reveals* a state that *already existed*. The game, then, is a laying bare: not a discovery but an exposure of what was there. The game removes from hiding nothing new; Agamben continues:

Just as the political mythologeme of *homo sacer* postulates as a presupposition a naked life that is impure, sacred, and thus killable [...], so the naked corporeality of human nature is only the opaque presupposition of the original and luminous supplement that is the clothing of grace. Though the presupposition is hidden behind the supplement, it comes back to light whenever the caesura of sin once again divides nature and grace, nudity and clothing. This means that sin did not introduce evil in the world but merely revealed it. Sin essentially consists, at least as far as its effects are concerned, in the removing of clothing.²²

The formal consequence of this already revealing the already true is that the game functions not as a single instance of unconcealment, but as a duration. It lasts the final twenty minutes of the film, with another six-minute coda that plays out the consequences of the game. Agamben's interpretation of the specific conjunction of nudity and knowledge in theology is a temporal one: "In our culture one of the consequences of this theological nexus that closely unites nature and grace, nudity and clothing, is that nudity is not actually a state but rather an event. Inasmuch as it is the obscure presupposition of the addition of a piece of clothing or the sudden result of its removal – an unexpected gift or an unexpected loss – nudity belongs to time and history, not to being and form. We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession. At any rate, it is difficult to grasp and impossible to hold on to."²³ The expanded time of revelation is one that does not end: nakedness is "an event that never reaches its completed form," and the consequence is that, in Agamben's formulation, "as a form that does not allow itself to be

entirely seized as it occurs, nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring."²⁴ *Chinese Roulette* is likewise an event that never reaches its completed form and therefore never stops occurring, even when the game itself appears to have come to its end: the parade that suddenly and without context appears at the final moments of the film functions as a figure for this "never stops occurring." A procession proceeds. That is all it does. The film is not about some truth (historical, traumatic, national) at which one cannot arrive; it is about letting something be known as that which never stops occurring. Consider, for a moment, the title of game and film: it makes no sense if taken in the sense of randomness or gamble, for Angela's truth game involves the opposite of chance in the dimension of deliberate and specified choice. Assignment of terms like contingency or spontaneity, risk or gamble, do not seem apt here. "Roulette," rather, is referenced in another vein altogether: the roulette form, dating back at least to Pascal's experiments in the seventeenth century, was meant to explore perpetual motion. It is the mobility and processual nature of roulette that is invoked here, and not its landing, which is ineluctably assimilated to chance, uncertainty, or accident. The film is a roulette machine not because it captures a moment of contingency – but for the opposite reason: because it does not fail to move, to process, to proceed. Formally, what roulette puts into the film is the movement of non-arrival.

The gesture of unconcealment, what comes out of hiding but never fully arrives, is something that lets itself be known, that shows itself as self-showing; one name for it is style. But it is also something more than style; for as Benjamin writes of the secret dimension of beauty, "in facing whatever is beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes the idea of its non-unveilability [...] revelation dissolves all secrets" – the film uses style to invert this logic and present violence as what is *unenthüllbar*, "non-unveivable."²⁵ For Benjamin it is beauty, but for Fassbinder it is the violent event that is marked by secrecy, that is "divinely necessary," for which unveiling "takes place outside of time." The violent act, the procession, and refraction as a visual ethic share this in common: they take place; they are there. The film does not allegorize, signify, or mean this taking-place; the film does not interpret the common bonds of violence and style. The film merely unconceals; it exhibits this presence. Agamben's conclusion in *Nudità* is that "There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this pure visibility and presence, that is nudity. To see a body naked means to perceive its pure knowability behind every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates."²⁶ This is the pure state of visibility and presence around which the film turns: the opening of a kind of truth, the revelation of knowability. *Chinese Roulette* is about the conditions of possibility for knowability in the wake of true demonstrations: it takes this gnostic problem and gives it visual life but at one certain cost: presencing hurts. That wounding is the risk of disclosing every secret. Pure visibility and the act of violence are not metaphors for each other; in the film, they constitute the very same thing.

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Notes

- 1 Heidegger (1962: 260). He continues: "The confirmation is accomplished on the basis of the entity's showing itself. This is possible only in such a way that the knowing which asserts and which gets confirmed is, in its ontological meaning, itself a *Being towards* real entities, and Being that *uncovers*" (p. 261).
- 2 Heidegger (1962: 261, 263).
- 3 Heidegger (2002: 90). The full context for the provocative formulation is: "For Plato, therefore, unhiddenness is a theme, and at the same time not a theme. Because this is the situation with regard to *un*-hiddenness, an explicit clarification of the *hiddenness* of beings does not eventuate. But just this neglect of the question of hiddenness as such is the *decisive* indication of the already beginning ineffectiveness of *un* hiddenness in the strict sense. [...] For the unhiddenness of beings is precisely *wrested* from hiddenness, i.e., it is obtained in *struggle* against the latter."
- 4 Foucault (2001: 108). Shattuc (1995: 128).
- 5 Peucker (1995: 152).
- 6 Elsaesser (1996: 61–2).
- 7 Poore (2007: 200).
- 8 This is also why it is so problematic to read the film for its metaphorical weight, as Watson (1996) insistently does in his analysis of its depiction of the "psychological oppression of children" (p. 5), and articulation of the "theme of the wounded child who strikes back at a parental figure" (p. 167). Elsewhere, "This tense psychodrama, made in Fassbinder's most highly mannered cinematic style, also explores the relationships among a married couple and their two lovers" (p. 167), and "*Chinese Roulette* is primarily a tense psychological drama within a small circle of intimates. But broader social and political themes are also suggested" (p. 169).
- 9 Consider Andrew J. Mitchell's insistence that "there is a relation of color that characterizes his films. His worlds are filtered worlds, where everything communicates with everything else colorfully" (2008: 130).
- 10 Silverman (1992: 133).
- 11 Mitchell (2008: 137).
- 12 These refractions are, in Mitchell's figuration, "not simply an interruption of character but a presentation of character beyond itself" (2008: 137).
- 13 Quoted in Mitchell (2008: 137).
- 14 Stein (1973: 118).
- 15 Derrida (2008: 5). "Because it is naked, without *existing* in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor sees itself naked. And therefore it isn't naked."
- 16 Heidegger (1962: 260).
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Elsaesser (1996: 64).
- 19 Like all of Fassbinder's work, this aesthetic and epistemic move is, in Corrigan's formulation, an instance of "overdetermined textuality [that] continually frustrates efforts to make it legible" (1991: 71).
- 20 Bataille (1988: 52).
- 21 Sartre (1992: 506).
- 22 Agamben (2010: 64).

- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
 24 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
 25 Benjamin (2002: 351).
 26 Agamben (2010: 81).

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