

## THE CRITIQUE OF BOURGEOIS LIFE:

### RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER'S *NORA HELMER*

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“One could also—just as a suggestion—let Hamlet have a homosexual relationship with Ophelia’s father Polonius. Someone is bound to find this new interpretation illuminating” (Karasek 119, my translation). Thus ends a scathing review of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Nora Helmer* (1973) in *Der Spiegel*. Hellmuth Karasek brings up a fringe (or, in his view, nonexistent) aspect of Hamlet to point out how ridiculous it is to stage *Nora*, the usual German title of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll House*, with no consideration of feminism. In this example, notwithstanding the real viability and academic interests in seeing and staging Hamlet with an emphasis on homosexuality,<sup>1</sup> Karasek points out most critics’ central problem with this television-film<sup>2</sup>: *Nora Helmer* is not about what Ibsen’s play is “really” about—feminism. By excising this element from his adaptation, so the argument goes, Fassbinder has bungled the work. If *A Doll House* can be adapted into a film that does not take the theme of women’s liberation into consideration, then anything goes: Hamlet might as well be homosexual. Karasek’s view is paradigmatic; most critics have a problem with Fassbinder’s shift in focus.

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Fassbinder effectively excises the feminist element from the play. Many critics who dislike *Nora Helmer* attack it by pointing out one of its main “weaknesses”: they claim that the character Nora is too self-assured at the beginning. During the opening shot of the film, one sees her husband Torvald’s hand draped over Nora’s shoulder, her own hand on top of his. Egil Törnqvist observes that “Fassbinder’s...Nora has, so to speak, from the very beginning the upper hand”<sup>3</sup> (“Opening” 63). John Sandford echoes this view: Fassbinder “had...turned Nora...into a much more self-possessed character from the outset” (85). Karasek writes that the protagonist is “at the beginning no longer a little doll, but rather a woman” (118). In this version: “C’est l’homme qui s’avère faible, la femme qui est forte” (Lardeau 163). These critics point out a sub-

stantial change in power dynamics in Fassbinder's film. This change has important implications, including one that concerns the structure of the work. The play's trajectory depends on the transformation of Nora from a subordinate role in the first two acts to that of an independent, strong woman who has the courage to leave her husband and her children in the third. By making Nora a self-possessed woman from the beginning, this trajectory is lost. As a result, Fassbinder "tak[es] much of the force out of the final confrontation between Nora and Torvald" (Sandford 85). Wilhelm Roth agrees with this analysis: Nora is "completely emancipated from the beginning, because of this, the dramatic curve of the piece collapses" (269, my translation). Indeed, if Nora and Torvald are on equal footing from the beginning to the end, how can her departure be taken as the act of an emancipated woman? Fassbinder paid dearly for this: viewers and critics simply cannot accept this drastic change from what has become the standard interpretation of *A Doll House* and widely panned the film as a result.

**256** These critics decry the film because it does not follow the predominant interpretation of the play. Implicit in their disapproval is the conservative tendency to view the adaptation as a work that should faithfully follow the "spirit" of the original. The critique of *Nora Helmer* as a failed adaptation comes from this impulse. However, the attempt to interpret Fassbinder's film in its own right and its own context reveals interesting results. In this article, I first dissect the various criticisms of Fassbinder's film in order to show the grip that the feminist interpretation has on the reception of the adapted work. I then set up the context of the film by discussing the status of bourgeois life in West Germany in the 1970s. Finally, I analyze several elements in the film that supports my interpretation: *Nora Helmer* is ostensibly not about feminism, but is rather an insightful critique of bourgeois society in that time.

For critics of *Nora Helmer*, without the greater theme of feminism, the film becomes a pointless showpiece for the exaggerated set design and the gymnastic versatility of the cameras. Indeed, the elements in the film that provoked the most vitriol are its stylistic aspects. Benjamin Henrich dismisses these elements by calling the entire film "an empty [öde] exercise in style" (84, my translation). Karasek's criticism is even less generous: "the only thing new about the film was that the characters talked to each other through panes of glass pointlessly [sinnlos]... the characters moved around when filming the dialogues just so that the camera could also move with them" (118). Heinrich and Karasek view the stylistic exercise in this film similarly, as something "empty" and "pointless." Their descriptions reflect what they view as the loss of meaning in Fassbinder's version. According to other commentators, these elements are evidence that Fassbinder overcompensates in this film. Sandford claims that the director "had seriously *over-indulged* his growing delight in mirror images, framed shots, and camera movements" (85, emphasis mine). Watson's critique is similar: "This project is a largely *unrestrained* exercise in mannered set design and camera technique" (148, emphasis mine). Sandford's and Watson's views can also be read as responses to the "loss of meaning" in the film that the critics lament. According to

them, Fassbinder overcompensates in his elaborate stylistic tricks for getting rid of the central concern of the play. Although Henrich's and Karasek's critique are different from Sandford's and Watson's, they are symptomatic of various responses to what they see as a loss of meaning in *Nora Helmer*: by getting rid of feminism, Fassbinder has ultimately directed a film about nothing.

These critics' interpretations are not so much wrong, but rather limited. Their insistence on the singular interpretive framework for the film—feminism—is symptomatic of two things: one, they insist that an adaptation should follow the prevailing interpretation of the adapted work; two, they do not take into account the socio-historical context of the film, but rather only that of Ibsen's play. As a result, their attacks on the film are misguided and they fail to see the innovative and critical changes that Fassbinder makes. Instead of viewing the film as a fruitful and creative reconfiguration of Ibsen's play, critics see *Nora Helmer* as a betrayal of *A Doll House*. In fact, Fassbinder's film is a remarkable adaptation that offers a trenchant critique of bourgeois life in the context of West Germany in the 1970s. I argue that what these critics see as lack serves to bolster this critique. In the following pages, I first discuss the history of *A Doll House* as a feminist play. I then move onto the West German context with references to the RAF (Red Army Faction). Finally, I offer an interpretation of the film in this context and counter the criticism that has been leveled against *Nora Helmer*.

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Although the excision of feminism is partly responsible for the negative criticism of *Nora Helmer*, *A Doll House* has not always been seen as a feminist work. In *Ibsen's Women*, Joan Templeton discusses the various attempts by critics and directors to "save the author of *A Doll House* from the contamination of feminism" (110). These attempts have been made by critics who merely argue the play is not about women's rights, by critics who denigrate the logic of the work, and by directors and writers who completely rewrite the play. The tremendous critical resistance against seeing *A Doll House* as a feminist work can be interpreted as the fear of the social movement in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Indeed, a good way to allay this fear is to decouple Ibsen, the doyen of Norwegian drama at the time, from the issue of women's rights. So the argument goes: Ibsen, having written something that enjoyed such popular and critical success, cannot possibly be seen as someone who would stoop to the level of writing a play about women. These criticisms show the conservatism of the critics and artists at that time.

In 1973, almost a hundred years after the première of *A Doll House*, the feminist reading became solidified in our conception of the play. Fassbinder's *Nora Helmer* is attacked precisely because his film is not about feminism. In fact, the association of *A Doll House* and the women's rights movement is so strong that by 1982, Benjamin Henrichs claims Nora has become a "cult figure" for women's emancipation. He further reports that a new clothing store "for the elegant emancipated woman" is opened in Berlin with the name "Nora" (84). At this time, Nora has become such a potent symbol for feminism that her name can be used to market its image. It is in this intel-

lectual climate that we must view *Nora Helmer's* detractors.

There is a strange symmetry in the criticism surrounding Ibsen's play and Fassbinder's film. Consider Karasek's claim: excising feminism from the work is tantamount to making Hamlet homosexual. In writing this, Karasek participates in a strand of literary criticism that points out a seemingly absurd association to denigrate a particular interpretation. The argument goes: Hamlet is obviously not homosexual; thus to stage the play with this change is to completely miss the point of Shakespeare's play, just as Fassbinder's adaptation has missed the point of Ibsen's play. Michael Meyer similarly writes, "*A Doll House* is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings, or *Ghosts* about syphilis, or *An Enemy of the People* about public hygiene" (457). Note that both critics use identical rhetoric to express diametrically opposite stances: they bring together unconventional interpretations of literary works; however, Meyer attempts to dissociate *A Doll House* and feminism, while Karasek decries Fassbinder's failure to take

**258** into account the women's rights movement in his adaptation.

Fassbinder agrees that *Nora Helmer* is not about feminism. In an interview with Braad Christian Thomsen, he says:

Everyone in the play, including Nora, needs to emancipate themselves, and Nora certainly doesn't see the light of revelation at the end. She is just as dumb as before, and I see the struggle between Nora and Helmer as a battle for points, which I think is cheap, but also very realistic. In reading Ibsen, I have been unable to find any confirmation that she is a pioneer of women's liberation. (175)

Critics vehemently attack the film because it is no longer about feminism. However, it appears that the director himself is in agreement on this point.<sup>4</sup> In 1973, when the name "Nora" has such powerful resonance in feminist discourse, one should not be surprised that the excision of this element from the film is met with fierce opposition. Critics such as Karasek see *Nora Helmer* not as an adapted work in its own right, but rather as a film that does not conform to the prevailing view of Ibsen's play. As a result, much of the language used to denounce the film signals lack: they talk about how this adaptation is "empty" and "takes away" from Ibsen's text. The main problem is that the critics only see Nora as a mouthpiece for feminism—they do not take into account the socio-historical conditions of 1960s and 1970s Germany, which have decisive influences on the film. The disregard for context is so pervasive that even sympathetic reviewers fall into this trap. Maria Brunner, a critic who takes this work seriously and writes about it in length, couples it with Gilles Deleuze's idea of time-image. She expounds on different elements in the film which conform to this theoretical concept without taking into account the historical and social background of the adaptation. In so doing, she continues the strand of criticism that ignores the context of the work. The film was made in a time of tremendous skepticism towards the established bourgeois family environment. *Nora Helmer* is not about feminism; it is rather a critique of bourgeois life in West Germany in the 1970s.

Critics such as Watson and Sandford classify the film as a piece about women. Comparisons are made with other works by Fassbinder that are thematically similar. For example, *Nora Helmer* is often discussed side-by-side with *Martha* (1974), *Angst vor der Angst* (1975), and *Effi Briest* (1974). All these films are about women trapped in unhappy or dysfunctional relationships. This classification is symptomatic of *Nora Helmer* being lumped in a category and viewed as a failed adaptation about a woman's struggle for independence. Another interpretation is possible: the film can be seen as a critique of bourgeois life, precipitated by the social upheaval in Germany and by the rhetoric surrounding the Red Army Faction (RAF) at the time.

In 1968, five years before *Nora Helmer* was shown on West German television, student protests swept through the country. There were different political, social, and economic reasons that precipitated these protests. However, many see the students' reaction to the country's National Socialist past as an important contributing factor to the unrest. At this time, many who participated in the protests saw Nazism as endemic to the education and government systems of West Germany. A good number of the professors active in the universities as well as politicians holding office were members of the Nazi Party, including Kurt Georg Kiesinger, the Chancellor of the time. Closer to home, a large number of the students' parents were also active Nazis before and during the war. The realization that their homestead, their bourgeois lives were possibly built on the exploitation of others has motivated some of these students to protest. Only a few years before *Nora Helmer*, the momentous student movement has tried to topple much of the established political and social systems in West Germany. The most basic of these systems is the family unit. In particular, the bourgeois middle class was seen as an institution to fight against.

Consider, for example, the rhetoric surrounding the RAF, which emerged in the late 1960s as a radical left-wing organization. The early 1970s saw intense terrorist activities from the group. In 1973, the tense political atmosphere in West Germany was palpable. The RAF quickly positions itself opposite the traditional bourgeois life, which they see as embodying repressive and oppressive values. Conversely, the majority of West German society cannot understand the group's motivation. The media's representation of RAF members focuses "on their good looks, their charm, their youth, their good homes, *their bourgeois upbringing*, as counterpoints to their ugly deed" (Meinhof 146, emphasis mine). Contemporary descriptions of the RAF, in particular those of Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, two of its founding members, also underline the general population's disbelief that members of such "normal" Protestant middle-class (read: bourgeois) families can turn to terrorism (Hermann 112-114). Fassbinder's engagement with this theme can be seen in two of his films: he contributes to *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978), a collaborative project between German filmmakers on the actions of the RAF during the bloody autumn of 1977; and he directs *Mutter Küsters Fahrt zum Himmel* (1975), which directly engages in the problem of terrorism. Although *Nora Helmer* and these two films do not have obvious thematic similarities, they can be interpreted as trenchant criticisms of bourgeois

life. In fact, this interpretation is already offered, albeit only in passing, by Törnqvist, who claims that the film “stresses the dehumanizing reification of bourgeois society” (“Opening” 63). In the following pages, I shape this interpretation and discuss this critique.

In *Nora Helmer*, many of the characters are shot through glass and reflected by mirrors. Critics like Henrichs and Karasek do not see a point in these shots, claiming that they are empty and senseless. However, an analysis of their usage reveals the entrapment of these characters. Towards the beginning of the film, we see a shot in which Torvald is framed by an elaborate ornamental grating. Initially, only the grating is in focus, and gradually, Torvald’s figure becomes clear. By focusing on the grating first, and then on Torvald, the setting, which Watson calls “a grotesquely exaggerated version of late-nineteenth-century bourgeois home decoration” (148), displaces the people in it. In addition, framing characters in the decor of the home shows how they are trapped in this home.<sup>5</sup> Characters are, literally and figuratively, framed by these bourgeois decorations and are unable to break out.

260 These frames also underline Fassbinder’s critique of bourgeois life. Throughout the film, characters are often shot behind glass partitions. The symbolism here is highly ambiguous. On one hand, by making characters talk to each other through these partitions throughout the film, Fassbinder shows the alienation and isolation of everyone in this bourgeois setting. On the other hand, the transparency of glass allows visibility and certain information to flow through. Specifically, this flow of information disrupts the class-divide of the film. The housemaid Helene, played by Irm Hermann, and the nursemaid Marie, played by Fassbinder’s mother Lilo Pempeit, are often seen observing the action behind these glass partitions. For example, in a crucial scene in which Krogstad blackmails Nora for a position at the bank, Marie is seen behind glass, presumably having observed the entire conversation. In another important scene in which Nora seduces Dr. Rank for money, a shot shows Helene behind a glass partition seeing the action unfold. These are only two of the many examples in which the partitions allow information to flow to the lower class. However, the glass appears to conversely block information for other characters. In the aforementioned scene where Krogstad blackmails Nora, the viewer sees both of them in the main room. The camera then pans to an angle where the two occupy the right half of the shot; Torvald and Dr. Rank are conversing in the study behind glass doors. Torvald, who previously forbid Nora to speak to Krogstad, is oblivious to what is unfolding in the adjacent room even though the two conversations are merely separated by a glass panel. Throughout the film, the main characters—Torvald, Dr. Rank, and Christine—are unable to put together Nora’s secret of having borrowed money from Krogstad. However, Helene and Marie are often placed behind panes of glass in strategic times—when vital information is disseminated. They see the entire situation much more clearly than most of the main characters. Although the maids are in a lower class than Nora, Torvald, Dr. Rank, and Christine, they have the advantage of knowing more. The bourgeois members of the film are marked by restraint; they do

not willingly tell each other their personal problems. In contrast, knowledge, information, and secrets trickle to the maids. Even though the maids are in a lower social class as their employers, the former are also able to see through the latter's hypocrisy, lies, and pain. The glass partitions disallow information to reach the masters of the house, but simultaneously allows particulars to flow to the maids.

The paradoxical function of the glass is reflected by what they portray. Etched into these partitions are scenes of birds perched on branches. On one hand, these pictures represent themes that are important to *A Doll House*: images of birds are often symbolic of movement, flight, and escape. On the other hand, they are etched in glass; the birds thus remain immobile, grounded, and trapped. Although they gesture towards movement, they are actually motionless. This tension between movement and stillness is crucial to my interpretation of *Nora Helmer*. In this paper, I argue that critics who view the film as a failure have missed the point. They criticize *Nora Helmer* precisely because it does not reproduce the possibility of early feminist interpretations of the play, one that is propounded by critics like Templeton. Instead, Fassbinder presents a much more ambiguous critique of bourgeois life. The symbolism of the birds gestures towards the hopeful dynamism of Ibsen's play; it is evocative of flight, liberation, and escape. However, the birds remain immobile in the medium of etched glass and are incapable of flight. They are symbolic of Fassbinder's deep distrust of the aforementioned redemptive feminist reading.

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As discussed earlier, most critics are irked by Fassbinder's transformation of the narrative trajectory of the play. In conventional interpretations of *A Doll House*, Nora goes through a substantial change from the beginning to the end: she plays a woman who flits around and depends on her husband in the first two acts; at the end of the third act, she becomes painfully aware of her difficult situation and has the strength to leave her husband and children. In Fassbinder's version, Nora is strong from the beginning to the end. As a result of this change, the narrative curve of the play is taken out from the film and is replaced by flatness. The actions of Fassbinder's protagonists are not symptomatic of the struggles in an unequal gender divide. More importantly, the flatness of the narrative structure attests to a certain pessimism surrounding the regenerative value of the bourgeois family. There can be no insight that comes from this inherently dead institution. Nora and Helmer can only participate in what Fassbinder calls a "cheap...battle for points" (Thomsen 175).

The lack of narrative trajectory is intimately related to the acting style of the characters: the flat acting method reflects the flat narrative. Watson writes that the "acting style is stiff and highly choreographed: most lines are delivered in regularly cadenced fashion with a straight-ahead stare and no pretense of naturalism" (148). By bringing up naturalism, Watson implies that this is the preferred acting style for the film. In fact, the association of naturalism and Ibsen has a solid basis on performance history. Gay Gibson Cima outlines this history and discusses how naturalism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a critical response to the melodramatic acting that came before (21). Specifically, she claims that through Ibsen, "actors, par-

ticularly female actors, created the beginnings of what we now call psychologically real acting” (35). Dominant in Western European theatre in mid-nineteenth century, melodrama tends to typecast characters in defined roles such as the hero and the villain, each possessing typical characteristics. With playwrights such as Ibsen and August Strindberg, naturalist drama positions itself as the dominant form in theatre. It demands actors to access the underlying psychological motivations of their characters. In Ibsen’s works, “The actor could no longer speak of the dual consciousness of self and character but rather had to discuss the treble strata of self, character, and the role the character plays, a metatheatrical phenomenon that produced a radical change in the actor’s art” (Cima 43, emphasis in original).

This “treble consciousness” can be found in the female protagonist of *A Doll House*:

262 the actor playing Nora must portray not only the Nora of the realistic play—a woman strong enough to forge her signature, to work secretly to repay a debt, and to walk out on her husband—but also the Nora of the melodrama unfolding in the character’s mind, the birdlike, game-playing Nora who has heroically ‘saved’ Torvald, and who envisions herself ‘tied to the tracks’ as Torvald, in turn rescues her heroically. (Cima 44-45)

This acting style is linked to the feminist interpretation of the play. Although Nora seems like a weak character who needs her husband to rescue her, she is actually a strong woman. The challenge of the female actor playing Nora is to convey both roles so that an audience is able to discern the underlying motivations for her actions. In *A Doll House*, this is predominantly a feminist issue: through these motivations, one can see the unfair treatment that the female protagonist receives. Specifically, it is the desire to save Torvald’s pride and his life that necessitates Nora to forge a signature and subsequently lie about it. By being able to portray Nora’s complex psychological registers, the actor can illustrate the basis of her actions and highlight how she is unfairly “repaid.”

Watson is right to point out that the actors in *Nora Helmer* deliver their lines with “no pretense of naturalism.” They recite the words mechanically, with almost no affect. The acting, accordingly, is stylized and monotonous; the characters look more bored than involved. The departure from the naturalist acting style eliminates the third register in the aforementioned “treble consciousness.” The psychological register of the characters is thus eliminated. There is no clear sense of what motivates Nora’s actions. As a result, she is not portrayed as a victim under patriarchy; she is simply involved in power games with Torvald. The monotonous acting also manifests itself in the movement of the characters, which both Roth and Brunner liken to marionettes (269; 173). Their metaphor shows that the characters are empty; it is as though someone else is controlling them. By making the characters into marionettes, the rich psychological content that Gibson ascribes to Nora in a naturalist production is completely emptied out. What remains is a pessimistic portrayal of bourgeois life where these characters appear dead, and controlled by an external force. The repressive and oppressive atmosphere of such a household can only produce people whose main form of entertainment is to “battle for points.”

The change in acting style is reflected by textual changes as well. Throughout Ibsen's play, Nora asks for money or for favours that would prevent her secret from being leaked by playing her role as the "skylark," the "squirrel," and "songbird" around Torvald. For example, before asking her husband to let Krogstad keep his position at the bank, she desperately says, "Your squirrel will scamper about and do all her tricks, if you'll be nice and do what she asks...Your skylark'll sing all over the house—up and down the scale...I'll be a fairy and dance on a moonbeam for you..." (Ibsen 187). The squirrel, the skylark, and the fairy are all characters that Nora plays to get something in return. Torvald, however, thinks that these personae are genuine. After catching Nora in a lie, he says, "My little songbird mustn't ever do that again. A songbird must have a clear voice to sing with—no false notes" (177). He obviously does not know that Nora's songbird character is itself a lie used to manipulate him. Fassbinder excises all mentions of skylark, squirrel, fairy, and songbird from the film. By taking away these references, the director also takes away several moments in the script when Nora is able to act out these characters to influence Torvald's decision. Fassbinder's Nora does not need to play another personae in this film; she does not need to scamper, sing, or dance for favours since she is shown to be a strong woman from the beginning.

The scene in *A Doll House* that most reflects Nora's songbird persona is the Tarantella dance. Towards the end of the second act, she asks Torvald to help with her rehearsal of the dance, which they are to perform in a party. She wants him to coach her until the last minute so that he would have no time to read the letter from Krogstad that exposes her lies. This scene exemplifies the different registers on which Nora has to act. Her performance, just like the songs of the skylark, delays the discovery of her secret. In addition, she deliberately dances badly so that Torvald has to coach her for two whole days. Not only must Nora convey her concern for performing badly to her husband, she also has let the audience know her true motivation for dancing poorly. The Tarantella scene is thus a perfect example for the different registers of acting in this play. Tellingly, Fassbinder completely cuts the Tarantella from *Nora Helmer*. In so doing, he also excises the part of the play that makes Nora a weak character who has to perform an exotic number to detract her husband from discovering the truth.

When Nora leaves her husband at the end of the play, she literally goes out with a bang. The last line of the work is a stage direction: "From below comes the noise of a door slamming" (Ibsen 232). This door slam was first staged in 1879 in Copenhagen and its echo reverberates throughout many parts of the world in the following years. Not surprisingly, this shocking feminist gesture is controversial. One of the most common practices to deal with this offending noise is to bowdlerize the ending. Under protest, Ibsen rewrote the play for its German première in Munich so that Nora, in despair, stays in the house after realizing that her children would grow up motherless if she leaves. This alternative ending is so notorious that many editions of the play include it as a footnote to the original version. The German première, how-

ever, is by far not the worst. Templeton recounts other examples of bowdlerization, including an egregious performance staged in England where the male protagonist (here called Humphrey) declares his guilt and the female protagonist (here called Flora) subserviently proclaims the goodness of her husband at the end (113). By excising the original ending, these bowdlerizations undercut the courage that Nora has in the scandalous move of leaving her husband and children. It is now easy to see these productions as anti-feminist, since they completely remove the impact of the door slam that shook up the audience of the original performance.

In his decidedly non-feminist version, Fassbinder predictably also excises the door slam from the end. In his version, Nora opens the front door and stands at the doorway for several seconds. The frame freezes and the credits roll. Here, Nora stays at the liminal space of the doorway as the film ends. She appears stuck; the viewer does not know whether she will come back in or leave. With this scene, Fassbinder explores the rich potential of an ambiguous ending. However, criticisms on *Nora Helmer* encourage us to think otherwise. Watson misreads the scene entirely and writes, “the ending of the film comes as no surprise” (148), taking for granted that Nora will leave anyway. Thomsen correctly points out that Nora remains in the doorway. However, he prematurely infers from this observation that Nora will stay because she has gained new power from her confrontation with Torvald (177). Törnqvist holds a similar view: “Fassbinder’s Nora is a shrewd careerist who does not leave her home at the end but, on the contrary, seizes power in it” (“Ibsen on Film and Television” 206). These criticisms show the polarity inherent in our conception of the play and its bowdlerizations: she either slams the door on her family or she is “pushed...back into the doll house” (Templeton 118). In the critics’ eyes, the radical undecidability of *Nora Helmer*’s final scene is eliminated. The ambiguous end of the play gives rise to rich interpretive possibilities. I read this ending as a pessimistic comment on Nora’s situation. Being stuck at the doorway is indicative of the indifference towards the gesture of leaving. Here, it does not matter whether Nora leaves or stays—neither action is redemptive in any way. Not only does Fassbinder drastically change the ending, he uses a specific film technique to do so. As the work ends, the frame freezes on Nora at the open door. The viewer sees the freeze frame throughout the end credits. The constant tension between Torvald and Nora is frozen at the end; resolution is refused. Nora, like the birds etched in the glass partitions, remains frozen, immobile, and unable to fly.

I have outlined here the central problem in the discussions surrounding *Nora Helmer*: critics tend to adopt the dominant interpretation of *A Doll House* and apply it to this film. Because Fassbinder’s version departs considerably from the play, much negative judgment is leveled against the film. Although the source text of an adaptation should be considered, it should not serve as the only interpretive frame of the adapted text. It is certainly legitimate to evaluate the success or failure of any adaptation. However, such evaluation should not be based solely on the faithfulness and adherence of the adapted work to the source. Meaning in *Nora Helmer* does

not only come from Ibsen's play, but rather through a negotiation between the two texts. To simply apply the feminist reading of *A Doll House* on *Nora Helmer* devalues both works: the former is only seen as a spectre haunting the adaptation, while the latter is reduced to being a shadow of Ibsen's play. When evaluating an adaptation, the dominant interpretation of the source work should not be used as a yardstick to measure the adapted work. The examination of *Nora Helmer* in its own interpretive frame restores both Ibsen's play and Fassbinder's film to being autonomous texts and produces fruitful results.

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## NOTES

1. See Doyle, Crist, and Frank.
2. *Nora Helmer* is shot on video for television. The genre of television-film is called *Fernsehspiel* in Germany. To avoid confusion and clumsiness, I have chosen to use the term "film" to describe *Nora Helmer* throughout this paper. For a history of the *Fernsehspiel*, in particular Fassbinder's engagement with the genre, see Jane Shattuc's *Television, Tabloids, and Tears: Fassbinder and Popular Culture*.
3. The idiom also works in German.

4. To be fair, it is unlikely that critics at the time had access to this commentary: it appeared in the Danish publication *Politisk Filmkunst* in 1973 and the interview was only translated into English and German around twenty years later.
5. Although the play takes place exclusively in the Helmer household, directors of *A Doll House* such as Joseph Losey and Patrick Garland add outdoor scenes to their filmic adaptations. Asbjørn Aarseth claims that these attempts at opening up the space of the theater ultimately takes away from the claustrophobic atmosphere in the play (48-50). In this light, Fassbinder's version is faithful to the play in this respect: *Nora Helmer* is shot entirely indoors.