



# BLACK AND WHITE IN COLOR: A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY XAVER SCHWARZENBERGER

*This interview, conducted by Susan Vahabzadeh and Fritz Göttler, first appeared in the booklet of the German DVD edition of Berlin Alexanderplatz, produced by Süddeutsche Zeitung Cinemathek in 2007. It was translated by Stephen Locke.*

*Xaver Schwarzenberger, born in Vienna in 1946, started out as a photographer and only later became a cameraman. He had already filmed a few television movies—including *Alpensaga*, with Helmut Qualtinger—when he began working with Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Berlin Alexanderplatz was their first joint project, and Schwarzenberger continued to be his director of photography until Fassbinder's death. Cinema is the best school, said Schwarzenberger at the time to explain their common interest, and it was their love for Josef von Sternberg in particular that created a bond between them. Schwarzenberger's first effort as a director came about during Fassbinder's lifetime: *Der stille Ozean* was completed in 1983. Since then Schwarzenberger has directed more than forty television and feature films, including *Tafelspitz* (1994) and *Edelweiss* (2001).*

*The difference between the version of Berlin Alexanderplatz that one remembers and the restored version is really striking. What exactly had to be done?*

The difference is: now you can see something. In your memory, you have the technically miserable VTR recording of that time, transferred from a weak 16 mm film, not even Super 16. Prints were made from that, from a 16 mm positive—nowadays you wouldn't even think of doing it that way. If that was seen as quality at the time, it's quite touching, but it's not right.

*In other words, we can actually now see Berlin Alexanderplatz for the first time.*

Strictly speaking, yes. I've graded the light and the color again

for the whole film—I think I know it by heart, because I've seen the material so often.

*How did it happen that twenty-six years ago only this version was made? Was it because of the costs?*

The first mistake was the decision not to film on 35 mm. In retrospect, that was ridiculous. At the time we usually did only one take; we used up very little material. That would have paid off a hundred times when it was to be restored later. But of course nobody thought about that then. And after all, we had a ten-month shooting schedule—people were afraid we wouldn't be able to keep to that and thus the budget. We didn't know that the shadowy parts would look green when they were broadcast—it was different with every broadcaster—and we were all relatively young.

*How did you deal with it when you saw the broadcast? Were you furious?*

In our screenings before it was rerecorded, it was all looking okay, and it was only after that the film was transferred to the electronic medium for television. And then they said: it's that way because that's the way it is. We couldn't do anything about it.

*How did Fassbinder deal with that?*

Everyone knew that we couldn't do anything about it, so Fassbinder pretended it was deliberate. And the poor quality of the broadcast notwithstanding, it was clear that we had really gone to the optical limits and that that was the intention,

and the unusual way we worked. We consciously took risks with the darkness.

*Berlin Alexanderplatz was your first work with Fassbinder. Did you have any reservations before you agreed to do it?*

I didn't, but I hadn't thought very much about him before that. I saw myself more in the Wenders corner. And when the offer came, I thought: well, that's a challenge.

*Were you a little afraid of the notorious Fassbinder clique?*

Yes, a bit, because after all, it was going to be for ten months, and I had heard a few stories. Of course, I was completely different from them, in every respect—but it all went well in the end. He knew how important my job was. He had done the camera work on his last films, but with this big one he didn't dare do it himself. There was a mutual respect; we thought highly of each other—and when we finished filming, we went our own ways. We wanted to get it done without getting into each other's hair.

*Did it bother you that he had taken over the camera in his previous films?*

No—for the first time I was dealing with a director who really knew what he was talking about. I never experienced that before or after with other directors. It was a surprise. The fact that photography is really directing—down to every detail, the choice of the frame, close-up or long shot—is often dealt with in the wrong way. In reality, as a cameraman you do the light, not

the frame. Fassbinder had written almost all of that down.

*You once said that you tried to film black and white in color and would have liked to have forbidden color.*

We both would have liked to film in black and white, but we weren't allowed to. At the time it wasn't possible to desaturate the color and emphasize things digitally and all that. We tried to go in a certain direction with light and color. With *Lola* we had three films on which to orient ourselves, and so the result of that work is what you now see in the restored *Alexanderplatz*.

*Sternberg was one of your models. Did you watch his films together?*

No, we both knew his films. I had never met Fassbinder before this, and so we talked about what we both liked.

*Did you talk a lot on the set about exactly how it was to be?*

Fassbinder was the number one man, and I was the number two man, and that's the way it should be. When you discuss, the problem—not Fassbinder's, but generally—is that it more often gives rise to misunderstandings than serves to inspire. But with us we quickly got used to each other. He said what he wanted, and we knew that we could build on each other, and it went well because for the most part we were able to fulfill what the other envisaged.

*Didn't you ever fight?*

No, not that I can recall. There were no great marital difficulties.

*Was it clear early on that you would continue to work together?*

Pretty much so. We made the few films together then, until the end. What really connected us was our impatience—we were two people who always tried to get things done quickly. With such a big project you have to be that way, because you know what lies ahead of you. With *Alexanderplatz* it was dogma, if possible, to do only one take, to rehearse once with and once without the camera, then shoot, finished. That was psychologically important—nobody wanted to be to blame for a retake. Some of the takes were endlessly long. [Günter] Lamprecht really had to give all he had. That's stress. But everybody pulled themselves together. Mistakes often happen, minor technical stuff. That comes from a lack of concentration. But with *Alexanderplatz* it all functioned well.

*When did you shoot the film?*

The shooting was from June 1979 to April 1980, around 150 days. That sounds like a long time, but it's not much for fourteen hours of film. It was a very tight schedule. Five, six minutes on average per day—that wasn't usual at the time.

*Toward the end Lamprecht got sick as well.*

It was amazing that he stuck it out that long.

*The result doesn't show the tight schedule and quick way of working.*

It was all extremely professional. While I was regrading the light recently, I could see Fassbinder's method of shooting: over-the-shoulder takes, the person turning into the picture again and again—that was highly professional.

*Was it cool on the set?*

He was a magnificent craftsman. Otherwise he appeared to many people to be very aloof and off-putting—but that was certainly a ploy. He also made a show of himself. That saved him from constantly being accosted. There weren't many people he trusted.

*Even though you didn't participate in the psycho-games of the others, did you notice them?*

Well, that usually applied to the actors; there was stress with them very often. Hardly with Lamprecht, though. Once, I think, Lamprecht threw a glass of beer in Fassbinder's face. But usually he gave Lamprecht the cold shoulder; there was no camaraderie between them. Lamprecht just learned and learned. Lamprecht was under great pressure—Fassbinder probably realized that, and still he deliberately turned him into the creature Biberkopf. We never spoke about it, but I believe today that that's how he guided the actor.

*Did you already want to direct at that time?*

No, not at all. But when Fassbinder died, it was clear to me that I would, because I wouldn't have known who to work with. I

worked closely with him for three years. It was clear that that would come to an end at some point. But then I had to work as a cameraman with other people; I gave it a try, but it didn't work, because my demands for quality weren't even nearly fulfilled.

*Would Fassbinder have gone along with the new technological developments, would he have filmed in digital? You still don't do that today.*

If you use film material—I still do that for television as well—then you've got something in hand, and there are no alternative versions, and you go at it in a different way.

*You have to think about what you are doing beforehand.*

Exactly. And Fassbinder was very craftsmanlike when he worked—I don't know whether he would have liked to work in digital. ■

