



**HOOKED TO THE SILVER SCREEN:  
BOWIE AT THE MOVIES**

# Querelle

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*Querelle* is the 42nd and last film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who died aged 37, only two months after it wrapped. The movie sums up what Fassbinder expressed in many of his earlier films, especially *Satan's Brew*, *Fox and His Friends* and *In a Year with 13 Moons* – films whose worlds consisted of betrayal, love, crime and strange rituals.

Based on the novel *Querelle de Brest* by Jean Genet – written in prison and published in 1947 – the project was developed by Munich-based producer, actor and filmmaker Dieter Schidor. Schidor first offered the movie to directors such as Roman Polanski, Sam Peckinpah and Werner Schroeter, before it was taken up by Fassbinder. Fassbinder rewrote the script and collected a superb international cast including Brad Davis, Jeanne Moreau, Franco Nero, Laurent Malet, as well as members of the German 'film family' – Günter Kaufmann, Hanno Püschl, Burkhard Driest and Dieter Schidor.

The movie's budget was modest in comparison to his previous big-budget films such as *Lili Marleen* – only about 4,400,000 DM, and Fassbinder and his set designer Rolf Zehetbauer decided to create the feeling of a surreal, artificial world by shooting the film entirely in the CCC Studios in Berlin.

The story of *Querelle* is simple. The young sailor Querelle arrives in Brest on board the *Vengeur*. He goes to a brothel to sell opium to its owner Nono. In the bar he meets his brother Robert (who is having an affair with Nono's wife, Lysiane, and Mario, the local policeman. Querelle decides not to share the money from the drug deal with his accomplice Vic, and instead kills him. To atone for his sins he allows Nono to fuck him. Everybody is smitten by Querelle; Lysiane, Nono, Mario, Lieutenant Seblon (the ship's captain) and Gil, a workman who has killed a colleague by accident. Querelle is extremely attracted to his fellow 'brother' murderer Gil, who hides out in the bath, and Querelle pretends to help him. In order to 'possess' Gil, Querelle tells the police where to find him and also frames him for Vic's murder. When the ship leaves, Querelle gives himself to Seblon who has for a long time dreamed of becoming Querelle's lover.

Fassbinder considered *Querelle de Brest* a third-rate crime story. He was interested in recreating Genet's universe of mythological fantasy – a universe not far from his own. Genet and Fassbinder were kindred spirits, both having taken a similar path of radicalism in life and art. When asked to be the narrator of the movie, Genet declined, saying, 'The book *Querelle de Brest* which I wrote approximately 40 years ago, lies far behind me. I've forgotten all about

it, as well as everything else I've written. Please tell this to Mr Fassbinder, I'm sure he understands.'

In *Querelle*, Fassbinder does not translate literature into cinema, but uses the film to expose the distance between the two. A narrator is used throughout the film and inbetween scenes Fassbinder employs title cards with lines from the novel on a painfully white screen. The appearance of the young, beautiful 'angel of the apocalypse' who can only find the core of his being by murdering and betraying the one he loves, needs a stage which enhances the 'perversity' of this kind of passion: a nightmarish scenario of artificial terror painted in orange. The film's cinematographic space is framed by bars, mirrors and views into rooms through windows and doors. The characters act like prisoners of a strange pompous ceremony where there is no room for spontaneous expression or simple communication.

*Querelle* is a movie about men – a bewildering cosmos of supermachos. The 'studs' Nono, Mario and Gil are so secure in their straight identities that they can fuck men without threatening their maleness – yet they would never consider themselves homosexuals. Querelle is a novice who enters into the world of male ritual. He is humiliated by Nono, who initiates him into the group by fucking him. But Querelle's real quest is for a brother, to find his missing half. Not knowing how to express his love to Gil, instead, by betraying him, he kills him. Lysiane asks Querelle why he fucks her and his answer is, 'I fuck you to betray my brother.'

Lysiane represents the image of the woman in this macho world. A beautiful but passive outsider, excluded from the brotherly rituals of power and eros, she is a cross between the eternal mother who loves unconditionally, and a saint who forgives all. In this role she is doomed to observe, understand and wait while singing the Oscar Wilde line from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* – 'Each man kills the thing he loves.'

*Querelle* is a hard film to love. It impressed me tremendously as a movie about maleness. Being male is something we don't know much about. But in *Querelle* we can study maleness by watching the protagonists act like members of an unknown – and at the same time familiar – tribe. Through a magnifying glass we see a claustrophobic, frozen environment of male paranoia.

*Querelle* is a romantic piece without the slightest sense of humour. Fassbinder's next project would have been a comedy entitled *I'm the Joy of the Planet* (*Ich bin das Glück dieser Erde*).

**Monika Treut, *Sight and Sound*, May 1994**

## **Un chant d'amour**

Jean Genet's only film was shot (by Dassin's cameraman of the time) in 35mm on specially constructed sets in Paris and on location in the forest of

Milly; the cast and technicians remain anonymous. In his one published interview (with Jonas Mekas), the producer confirmed that Genet scripted, directed and closely supervised the editing, and scotched the persistent rumour of Cocteau's creative involvement. The film is more closely related to Genet's novels (especially *Miracle of the Rose*) and plays (especially *Deathwatch*) than to the long poem which bears the same title.

Its locus is a prison wing housing convicted murderers in solitary confinement; the action occurs in the individual cells, and in the minds of the prisoners and of the guard who, like the audience, spies on them. Specifically, the film centres on the guard's victimisation of one prisoner, through which he tries to exorcise his confused resentment of the prisoners' resilience to the squalor and degradation. The simple plot is cyclic – framed by the guard's approach and departure – and the abrupt end-title, showing the count of days among the graffiti on a cell wall, suggests that it recurs endlessly.

The images are resolved into three distinct kinds: 'realistic' images, the largest group, ranging from straightforward depictions of prison conditions and the prisoners' sexual misery to shots involving a symbolic use of flowers, which are presented as 'realistically' as the rest; the guard's tortured fantasies of homosexuality (chiaroscuro images of male torsos engaged in passionate lovemaking); and the victim's delicate fantasy (conceivably a flashback) of a woodland idyll with the prisoner-next-door. Each strain of imagery is developed in self-contained shots that are edited together fluently into an unequivocal visual language that eschews montage.

The implications are as complex as in any work of Genet's in other media, and would require detailed analysis. Perhaps most striking is Genet's customary spirituality, and his assumption (in common with *L'Age d'Or*) that the deepest passions thrive only in the most deprived physical conditions. These qualities are the more remarkable in that the film is among the most intensely physical ever made, consisting largely of close-ups – faces, shoulders, crotches, phalluses, soiled clothing – all lent an almost Pauline purity by their isolation and the film's silence. Comparable in achievement to certain films of Dreyer and Bresson, Genet's short film is at least their equal.

**Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1973**

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**QUERELLE**

*Director:* Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
*Production Companies:* Planet-Film, Albatros-Filmproduktion (Munich), Société Nouvelle des Etablissements Gaumont  
*Executive Producer:* Michael McLernon  
*Producer:* Dieter Schidor  
*Production Accountant:* Christian Zertz  
*Production Manager:* Rüdiger Lange  
*Unit Managers:* Jürgen von Kornatzki, Dieter Kaiser, Michael McLernon  
*Assistant Directors:* Karin Viesel, Harry Baer  
*Screenplay:* Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Burkhard Driest  
*Based on the novel* *Querelle de Brest* *by:* Jean Genet  
*Directors of Photography:* Xaver Schwarzenberger, Josef Vavra  
*Lighting:* Ekkehard Heinrich  
*Stills Photography:* Roger Fritz  
*Editors:* Juliane Lorenz, Franz Walsch  
*Assistant Editors:* Galip Iyitanir, Stephan Beckers  
*Production Designer:* Rolf Zehetbauer  
*Art Director:* Walter Richarz  
*Props:* Olaf Schiefner  
*Costumes:* Barbara Baum, Monika Jacobs  
*Wardrobe:* Eva Fleischmann, Kurt Schönwälder  
*Make-up:* Gerhard Nemetz, Ingrid Massmann-Körner  
*Music:* Peer Raben  
*Choreography:* Dieter Gackstetter  
*Sound Recording:* Vladimir Vizner, Hartmut Eichgrün  
*Assistant Sound Recording:* Helmut Röttgen  
*Publicity:* Mira Kill

**Cast**

Brad Davis (*Querelle*)  
Franco Nero (*Lieutenant Seblon*)  
Jeanne Moreau (*Lysiane*)  
Günther Kaufmann (*Nono*)  
Laurent Malet (*Roger Bataille*)  
Hanno Pöschl (*Robert/Gil*)  
Burkhard Driest (*Mario*)  
Dieter Schidor (*Vic Rivette*)  
Karl Scheydt (*1st sailor*)  
Michael McLernon (*2nd sailor*)  
Gilles Gavois (*3rd sailor*)  
Roger Fritz (*Marcellin*)  
Werner Asam (*1st workman*)  
Axel Bauer (*2nd workman*)  
Vitus Zeplichal (*3rd workman*)  
Karl-Heinz von Hassel (*4th workman*)  
Neil Bell (*Theo*)  
Rainer Will (*Dede*)  
Harry Baer, Volker Spengler (*Armenians*)  
Isolde Barth, Y Sa Lo (*girls*)  
Robert van Ackeren (*1st man*)  
Wolf Gremm (*2nd man*)  
Frank Ripplloh (*3rd man*)  
Natja Brunckhorst (*Paulette, in the photographs*)

West Germany/France 1982©  
108 mins

**UN CHANT D'AMOUR**

*Director:* Jean Genet  
*Producer:* Nico Papatakis  
*Screenplay:* Jean Genet  
*Photography:* Jacques Natteau  
*Supervising Editor:* Jean Genet  
*Cast:*  
Lucien Sénémaud (*younger convict*)  
Java (*hand swinging blossom*)  
Coco Le Martiniquais (*dancing African prisoner*)  
André Raybaz (*stand-in*)  
France 1950  
26 mins

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Sat 1 Jan 14:20, Sun 23 Jan 18:00, Wed 26 Jan 14:00, 17:30 (IMAX)

**Metropolis**

Sun 2 Jan 12:00, Tue 4 Jan 14:30, Sun 30 Jan 12:00  
(with live piano accompaniment)

**A Clockwork Orange**

Mon 3 Jan 13:10, Wed 12 Jan 20:25, Sun 23 Jan 15:00,  
Wed 26 Jan 20:40 (IMAX)

**Querelle**

Tue 4 Jan 20:20, Tue 18 Jan 18:00

**Taxi Driver**

Fri 7 Jan 18:00, Sun 16 Jan 18:20, Thu 27 Jan 20:45

**The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari)****+ Un chien andalou**

Sat 15 Jan 12:30 (+ Inside Cinema: David Bowie), Sat 22 Jan 15:15

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