

FONTANE'S EFFI BRIEST
(Germany, 1974, Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder)

VIEWING GUIDE

1. Why did Fassbinder make the film in black & white instead of color? What is the effect on viewers who are accustomed to seeing color films? Imagine this film had been shot in color; what would be different?
2. With each scene change the screen goes blank for several seconds. Why does Fassbinder do this? Is this device disruptive or is it in some way integral to the film? If the latter, in what way? One critic has suggested that the "white moments" represent the white pages of Fontane's novel. What do you think of this suggestion?
3. What do you think of the casting? Was it good, or did you imagine Effi, Geert, and the others to be different? Have the roles been transferred directly from the novel, or have they been altered? Any other changes from the text? Any surprises?
4. What do you think of the choice of scenes and texts? Are the most important ones represented in the film? What has been omitted? Why?
5. Why kinds of non-verbal communication are represented in the film? Do they exist in the novel as well, or is this an invention by Fassbinder?
6. What role is played by mirrors in the film (Fassbinder uses mirrors in many of his films, not just this one). Do the mirrors contribute additional meaning that is not present in the novel?
7. There are a number of love relationships in *Effi Briest*, for example between Effi and her parents, Effi and Instetten, Effi and Crampas, Gishübler and Effi, Effi and Annie, Effi and Roswitha, Effi and Rollo (the dog), Johanna and Instetten, Roswitha and Kruse. Which of these are represented in the film, which are emphasized, de-emphasized, omitted? Why?
8. Is the theme "Animals are better than humans" especially emphasized in the film?
9. Sentences from the novel are repeatedly projected onto the screen in the old-fashioned "Fraktur" type as if they had been photographed directly out of the novel itself. One phrase, "A kind of fear-inspiring device by design/calculation" appears repeatedly, although it is used only once in the novel. Is Fassbinder off the mark here? The appearance of these written words on the screen call to mind Brecht's use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). Is the result similar?
10. Does the "ghost factor" receive more attention in the film than in the novel?

11. One critic has commented that all characters are treated equally or even-handedly. Do you agree?
12. When Effi and her mother take a walk before the wedding, they are seen by the viewer only through a stand of trees. Later a curtain of lace around the bed separates Effi and Instetten, and then it separates Effi and the viewer (with a second lace curtain appearing between Effi and Instetten). What is the purpose of all this veiling?
13. What does Fassbinder do to communicate to the viewing audience *the feeling* of German society in the 1880s?
14. Is Fontane's sense of irony preserved in the film?
15. In the film, Instetten's friend Wüllersdorf plays the piano throughout their discussion of the duel. How does this affect you? What does it add (or detract) from the conversation? Their discussion is repeatedly interrupted by the image of a speeding train. What does this train represent; what kind of image is it?
16. After Effi has met with her young daughter, Annie, she suffers a breakdown. In the film, Fassbinder photographs her face through the back and arm of a chair. Why?
17. Fassbinder is interested in silence(s). Fontane too? Are the passages of silence in the film true to the novel, or does Fassbinder add his own interpretation to the original?