

Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing the photo-essay, we aimed for a more fluid Italian and wrote a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!

The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can see the screenshots that go with the text. These visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the video clips and links to other references in the blog itself.

Thank you, and enjoy!

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul

Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974)

Summary:

Emmi, a white woman in her 60s and Ali, a young Moroccan worker, meet and fall in love in 1970s Germany. Their relationship disturbs Emmi's family members, neighbors and co-workers. Can their love sustain them?

In the opening scene, Emmi (Brigitte Mira), an older white woman, enters a bar. The barmaid and the patrons stop and stare at her. Emmi is alone and – seen here in this opening long shot, as the others stare – she appears particularly fragile and isolated.

For some reason, Emmi feels the need to apologize for coming in. She explains that it's only because of the rain. She tells the barmaid that she passes this bar every evening and has heard foreign music playing. But this is the first time she's come in. The place seems foreign. Maybe she wants to fit in or maybe she's just open to new experiences. She asks the barmaid what other people usually have; that's what she'll order. But the barmaid answers that the people there don't really drink anything special, just beer or Coke.

In the other part of the place, with some friends, there's Ali (El Hedi ben Salem), a tall black man. One of them urges him to dance with Emmi. He walks over to her table and, in broken German, he invites her to dance. He tells Emmi that she seems sad and that it's not good for her to sit all alone.

The two dance as the customers watch – no, actually: stare at – them. These are the first of many stares that Emmi and Ali will endure in this movie. The gazes are expressionless but they imply a judgement and an accusation.

Ali tells Emmi that he's from a small village in Morocco. He works as an auto mechanic and he's very clear about the hierarchy in his workplace: German = master; Arab = dog. Emmi tells him that she works hard, too.

When she decides that it's time to go home, Ali offers to accompany her. At the end of the scene, the two leave together and the bar customers stare at the closed door. And we stare with them.

There are many doors and doorways in this movie. In the doorway of her house, Emmi talks a little about herself with Ali. She is embarrassed to tell him that she works as a cleaner. But Ali doesn't think she should be ashamed of her job at all. Encouraged, Emmi shares some details: it's hard work; she cleans one floor in the morning and one floor in the evening.

Emmi is enjoying talking to Ali. She spends most of the time alone; all the time, really. While Emmi talks, she has her back to Ali. He's in the background, out of focus. She still seems to be alone. Talking about family, she turns and faces Ali. He approaches her and comes into focus. Her three children are married and she doesn't see them much. In Ali's opinion, mothers should never be alone. In his country – Morocco – the family is always together.

It's still raining. Emmi invites Ali to her apartment.

More watching: a neighbor watches from her doorway as the two go upstairs. More doorways, grates, railings. More stares at them. As soon as Emmi and Ali are out of sight, the neighbor runs to gossip to another neighbor: "Emmi has a foreigner in her apartment! He's black!"

Through the doorway to the kitchen, we watch and listen to their polite conversation. It's late and Ali lives far away. Emmi invites him to sleep over; she leaves the kitchen to make up his bed.

They say goodnight. Emmi stops in the doorway. Ali lies in his bed, but not for long.

In the next scene – one of the tenderest in the movie – Ali gets up, goes to Emmi's room and knocks on her door. He says that he wants to talk. She invites him to sit down. He talks about how empty his life is in Germany. Suddenly we hear gentle music. Ali begins to stroke Emmi's arm.

The next scene opens in a bright bedroom. Emmi and Ali are in bed together. Emmi gets up and, going to the bathroom, looks back at her bed, horrified. She goes into the bathroom and stares at herself in the mirror; what has she done? Standing in the doorway, Ali says, "Good morning."

The woman gives in to her longing for affection and she embraces Ali.

While they have breakfast, Emmi begins to cry softly. Ali asks her why she's crying. She answers that it's out of happiness but also fear. He responds with the words that Fassbinder chose to title the movie, "Fear eats the soul" – an Arab saying. This couple will need courage to get through what is going to happen.

Emmi is much older than Ali and not particularly attractive. Ali is aware of his place in Germany as a foreign worker: despised and discriminated against. These two shy outsiders have met by accident. Even though they have just spent the night together, they politely shake hands when they say goodbye.

In the next scene, we find Emmi at work, while she talks with her co-workers. The discussion focuses on women who have relationships with foreigners. These are women that Emmi's co-workers look down on. (Emmi, herself, is the widow of an immigrant, a Polish man; her Polish surname makes her suspect.) One of the co-workers mentions a neighbor who has been shunned because she is with a Turkish man. But, Emmi, comments that maybe the woman isn't afraid of being alone. No doubt she is also thinking about herself and Ali. Her co-worker responds, "Nobody can live without others. No one."

The women go back to work. Our protagonist is left with her thoughts of herself, her lonely life, her possibilities with Ali.

In this scene, we see the apartment of Emmi's daughter and son-in-law. The couple bickers. Eugen is rude to Krista and orders her around; Krista complains about Eugen's laziness.

Emmi comes to see them and she talks with them too about foreign workers; Eugen complains bitterly about his Turkish foreman. He can't accept having to take orders from a foreigner.

Suddenly, Emmi makes an announcement: she has fallen in love with a Moroccan, 20 years younger than her. This notion is so inconceivable to Eugen and Krista that the two of them laugh.

Emmi goes back to the bar hoping to find Ali, but he's not there. Then she returns home and finds him waiting in front of her building! They must be excited to see each other, but they greet each other politely.

Upstairs in Emmi's apartment later, their dinner is interrupted by Emmi's landlord, who informs her that Ali must leave; she's not permitted to have a lodger. Emmi assures him that it's perfectly okay because she and Ali are to be married. When the landlord leaves them, Emmi explains to Ali what she said to the landlord in German. Ali likes the idea! And so they decide to get married. Instead of driving them apart, the complaints of the racist neighbors have brought them together.

The couple goes to the bar to tell Ali's friends the news and to celebrate. They dance to their song, a song in Arabic.

When we see Emmi and Ali again, they are leaving the municipal building after their wedding. They walk arm in arm, talking about Emmi's new married name. They stop at a public phone, where she calls her daughter, Krista, to invite the family over the following Saturday. She says she wants to talk to them "about something." But she doesn't say what it is.

It's Saturday and the family is gathered in Emmi's apartment for the big announcement. Ali comes out from behind a door and gives a polite bow. Emmi says, "This is my husband."

Everyone just stares at the couple. The camera does a slow pan – 40 seconds – of their empty faces. The silence is finally broken when Bruno slowly walks over to the television set, kicks it in and then leaves. One by one, the others insult Emmi and leave the apartment.

Emmi and Ali are left alone. Emmi sits and lowers her gaze; she cries softly. Ali strokes Emmi's hair and comforts her. We see in this scene – as we will see again and again with this couple – a shifting of roles. At their wedding lunch, Emmi took charge. She ordered the food and negotiated the hostility and contempt of the waiter. But at the end of this scene, it is Ali, the foreigner, the outsider, who is being strong. He has seen these attitudes before; he is not surprised.

There are more problems. The owner of the grocery store – where Emmi has shopped for 20 years – pretends not to understand Ali's German. When Emmi goes to talk with him, he tells her that she's not welcome in his store anymore. When Emmi returns home, her neighbors are gathered on the stairway. The building caretaker informs her that they have decided that she has to clean the stairs twice a month because now "the situation is changed..." Emmi argues with the caretaker, too. It seems everyone is against them.

A few days have gone by. We see that Emmi and Ali live together normally. Ali brings home his wages and hands them over to Emmi. They talk about all the money that they'll save. Emmi dreams of buying themselves "a little piece of heaven." She's imagining a place far away from this reality that does not accept them.

Emmi peeks in on Ali when he takes a shower. She tells him that he's very beautiful. She seems to be living in a paradise right now – at least when the two of them are alone.

Paula, a co-worker of Emmi's, comes over to ask Emmi to cover for her at work because her sister has died. When Emmi introduces Ali, the woman looks at him with disdain, refuses to shake his hand and says that she has to leave. Emmi tries to persuade her to stay for coffee, but Paula refuses. She leaves without even arranging her substitution. Emmi is baffled and hurt. But Ali is used to these reactions: "that woman is no good," he simply comments.

And so, Emmi has been rejected by her children and by the rest of her world: co-workers, neighbors, her shopkeeper.

Problems with the neighbors continue. One evening, Emmi suggests that Ali invite his friends over, but their evening is interrupted by the police who were called by the neighbors annoyed by the Arabic music. The police officers are kind. Emmi agrees to turn down the volume.

She and Ali gaze out the window at the police car. Everyone seems determined to disrupt their relationship.

Emmi's problems at work get worse. Her co-workers chat with each other and ignore her. Finally, they leave her alone on the stairs to gaze at them through the railing.

In this scene we see the first break from the dark world that director Fassbinder has shown us up to now. Emmi and Ali leave home, greeting two neighbors and the landlord who are standing outside. After they've passed, one of the neighbors asks the landlord to do something about "the situation." He replies that Emmi and Ali appear to be happy and that he doesn't see anything wrong.

In the park scene, Emmi and Ali hold hands sitting at a table. They're surrounded by bright yellow tables and chairs – all empty – and lush, leafy green trees, but it's no paradise. Fassbinder reinforces Emmi and Ali's isolation with long shots like this one, and shots of a group of expressionless people staring at the pair.

Ali is uncomfortable; everyone is staring at them. Emmi begins to cry. She explains that she's so happy and so in love with Ali, but she can't bear the hatred anymore. "This is my husband!" she cries out to the people who are staring, then she asks Ali if they can go away together somewhere, so when they return, everyone will be nice to them.

The couple does go away and, upon their return, Emmi's dream comes true. People have actually changed their attitude.

The neighbors are kind. One of them needs a favor and Emmi and Ali are gracious in spite of the way they've been treated. Ali goes to help the neighbor move some things. The grocer has realized that he needs Emmi's business, so he goes out to greet her when he sees her pass by. Emmi's son, Bruno, goes to her place. He's mailed a check to cover the cost of the TV that he broke. He apologizes and he asks if Emmi can babysit for him.

Ali returns after helping the neighbor. Emmi is preparing food. He asks her to make couscous. Emmi reminds him that she doesn't know how to make couscous; anyway: he should get used to the way things are done in Germany. Finally she admits it: she doesn't even like couscous. Ali has finally been accepted by the neighbors and now Emmi is treating him like an outsider.

Ali leaves to go to the bar to see his Arab buddies – maybe to have some couscous. Emmi wants to go with him, but Ali wants to be alone.

Up to now, Emmi and Ali have felt a connection. But now they both feel isolated, each abandoned by the other. Emmi stands alone. We see her through a partly opened door. The camera stays on her for 15 seconds, as she gazes downward and barely moves.

In a long shot, we see Ali walking down the street to the bar, but the bar is closed.

The barmaid – actually the owner of the bar – lives upstairs. And she makes good couscous.

Ali enters the building. He gets to her landing, then undecided, he sits on the steps outside the door. Here, once again, we have a camera shot of one of the protagonists on the other side of a railing. People in this movie seem always to be imprisoned by grates, rails and fences. Finally, Ali knocks on the door. The woman answers and invites him in.

He asks her to make couscous and she goes to the kitchen right away. Ali goes to the bedroom and stops to stare at the window.

She follows him into the bedroom and embraces him from behind as he lowers his gaze to the floor. She takes off his shirt; he turns around and the scene ends.

In the next scene, Ali staggers home. The door is locked. He bangs on it, but Emmi doesn't answer. He collapses onto the floor. When Emmi opens the door later, he's unconscious. She closes the door, leaving him to spend the night outside in the hall.

The next morning, they have breakfast in silence. Ali doesn't finish eating. He gets up and leaves without saying a word.

Back at work, Emmi's co-workers greet her warmly. What could have happened? It turns out there's a new worker, Yolanda, from Herzegovina. Apparently, that workplace only has room for one outcast. Yolanda sits in Emmi's old spot, on the stairs behind the railing.

Emmi has invited her co-workers over to talk about their pay. Ali is home and she introduces him. One of the women comments on how clean he is. These white ladies don't seem to have an understanding about people who are different from themselves. They talk about Ali in front of him, as if he isn't there. They don't regard him as a person.

Ali doesn't like being treated as an object and so he takes off for the bar owner's place.

He finds her at home, but she is about to go out. So Ali stays there alone.

Back home, Emmi is distraught. She's a kind-hearted, open-minded person, but she still is a product of her society. Fassbinder has not made her a perfect angel.

Some time has passed. We find Ali playing cards at the bar. He's losing a lot of money. We understand that he is unhappy, because at a certain point, he walks into the bathroom, stares at himself in the mirror and slaps himself repeatedly. A little while later, Emmi enters the bar. She sits at her old table in the back and orders a Coke, as she did that first night. She asks the barmaid to put on the gypsy song that she likes. Ali hears it and he asks her to dance.

As they dance, they talk tenderly. Ali confesses that he slept with another woman. Emmi tells him that he's a free man; she realizes that she is old; she sees it in the mirror every day. But, she says, when they're together, they must be nice to each other. Otherwise, life is not worth living. Ali answers that he doesn't want another woman because he loves only her.

They have both lived through experiences that have changed them. They lost each other briefly, but the separation has shown them that they need each other. Their family and neighbors may be kind for a while, but ultimately, they can only count on each other.

Emmi tells Ali that together they are strong. But just as she says that, Ali collapses on the floor, moaning.

The last scene of the film takes place in a hospital room. Ali is lying on the bed with his eyes closed. The doctor tells Emmi that – like so many foreign workers – Ali has a perforated ulcer, caused by stress. Fassbinder has put Ali's bed next to a window. For once, we're not looking at him through a grate or through a partly closed door. Emmi sits next to him on his bed and holds his hand to her chest as he sleeps.