

On *bitterbittertears*

Catherine Pancake's *bitterbittertears* (2010) is a movie that asks to be read as a theoretical fable about artifice and influence, especially as it relates to film-making. It participates in a conversation about how to negotiate the relationship with one's antecedents (in both film and elsewhere) while asking new questions in a reconfigured idiom. This short essay will present a series of observations on the film while occasionally drawing from its relationship to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), which serves as a kind of template for Pancake's work. Special attention will be paid to a painting that appears prominently in both films.

A Wandering Eye

bitterbittertears opens with a woman being filmed in a cluttered studio. She puts out a cigarette, puts on a silk robe, places a record in a record player and sways back and forth as she ties the robe's ribbon around her waist. A song plays ("... they... ask me how I knew... my true love was true...") as she fits a brown wig over her brown hair, adjusting it with a hand-held mirror.

We learn that her name is Petra; she is one of three women in the short film. Each is presented with a different position relative to their 'artificiality' as fictional characters, as inventions. When Petra speaks, for example, her words are de-lib-er-a-te-ly pronounced and evenly spaced. She is performing for the camera. She is, clearly, an actress reciting her lines. A sense of falseness—and a total acceptance of this falseness—is inescapable.

If Petra is presented to us as false, as an obvious product of movie-making artifice, the second woman that we are introduced to is nearly sculptural. Wearing a crude white papier-mâché mask over her head, she does not speak. She acts as though she were Petra's servant, sternly obeying her commands.

The third woman in the film seems to be participating reluctantly. When she delivers her lines certain words are emphasized oddly; she mumbles. She, in her blonde wig, is caught in the movie, caught in her role, and is, at the very least, ambivalent about it. As Petra's married, unenthusiastic love interest, it is often difficult to determine why she is there; the puzzlement extends to her performance.

Very early on, however, the viewer is encouraged to find a way of approaching the movie

that is not based, principally, on the plot or on the content of the lines delivered by the actors. This is accomplished through the pronounced artificiality of each scene, which creates an initial difficulty for viewers anticipating an compelling story. The acting, as noted, is deliberately wooden, false, or tentative. It soon becomes difficult, or unnecessary, to follow the plot of the story. We are being, in a sense, told that it doesn't matter. Our eyes wander.

It is easy, for example, to allow one's eyes to fall on the wall behind Petra and her companion as they recite their lines in the bedroom. Color photocopies of a painting have been attached to it in rows as a kind of improvised wallpaper. It is difficult to identify the painting but the repetition of the images is unusual. The rest of the apartment is furnished as a kind of live-in studio for Petra, who works as a clothing designer. Manikins, wigs and clothing abound. But the repetition of the painting in the background is out of place. It is easy to see it as the mark of the director, a reminder to the viewer of her presence.

Yet if our attention has just wandered to the background, an extended pause in the dialogue eventually brings it back to the actresses. Petra looks away from her companion, turning slightly. She then turns back. And then she does it again. And again. The movement is smooth enough for it to be difficult, at first, to notice that the film is moving backwards and forwards, manipulating the actress like a marionette. After a few repetitions the shifts in her gaze creates a kind of rhythm that, for its predictability, is almost soothing.

The repetition of this gesture functions like a spatio-temporal Rorschach inkblot. The symmetry that is imposed on the random movements gives them a sense of order, an easily identifying form that comes across as completely perfect. Retraced within a perfectly symmetrical figure in space and time, the beauty of the gesture is a surprise in that it emerges from a haphazard awkwardness, a difficult abundance of artificiality. Instead of choosing to have the artificiality of the scene fall away, the director moves in the opposite direction, emphasizing the false, the constructed until it transcends discomfort to become a source of grace.

There are other moments in which the manipulations of the director are more subtle. At one point, Petra, in her brown wig, opens the drapes to let light into the bedroom. She is, suddenly, slowed down by the invisible hand of the director. Slowing the scene brings her blonde companion on the bed to a state of near perfect stillness (we can't even see her breathe anymore) while giving the gesture of opening the drapes uncommon fluidity. The pendulous sway of the jewelry hanging from Petra's arm—the way its rhythm impossibly slows and then suddenly speed up—is the most explicit visual cue that the director has intervened in the passage of time.

In short, as our eyes wander, distracted by the absence of a traditional plot, the very fabric of the movie begins to stretch, warp, and reverse itself. The movie, in this way, overtakes the actors as the principal protagonist. Awkward gestures are slowed down until they become graceful. Haphazard movements are looped backwards and forwards to create perfectly choreographed figures. A voice is caught and played with, made into nonsense syllables. In each of these moments the director makes her presence known, seizing the uncomfortable artificiality of the actors and, crucially, pushing it to an even higher level of manipulation, order, and form. Instead of releasing stiff acting into a liberating context of natural expression, the director goes in the opposite direction, seeking out a kind of artificial sublime.

These moments of explicit manipulation direct our attention to the rest of the film as, itself, a temporal intervention. To record these directed gestures, rendering them as a series of images to be played and replayed, is just as much of an intervention as the act of creating the illusion of temporal loops and drags. We are asked to notice the process of filming as an important aspect of the viewing experience instead of forgetting it along with our suspended disbelief.

Between scenes the director has created a series of transitional moments that are digitally manipulated. The painting that appeared repeated across the back wall of Petra's bedroom is featured prominently. It is cut kaleidoscopically, spinning and moving while Petra and her reluctant lover pose like figures in a painting of their own. Marlena appears frozen into a sculpture. As the painting has, in these moments, replaced the three-dimensional space of the studio with its flat, carefully composed representation, a closer look at it is warranted.

The Golden Touch

From the digitally manipulated transitional scenes it is possible to identify the painting as Nicolas Poussin's *Midas Giving Thanks to Bacchus* (1629-30). It represents the moment in which Bacchus allows Midas to be freed from the ability to turn everything he touches into gold.

In the painting, the king is on one knee, looking up at Bacchus who, completely naked, stretches out his hand, allowing his magical gift to be annulled in the river Pactolus. Surrounding them are eleven figures who recline, play, or sleep with their wine jugs often overturned nearby.

Though the story of Midas is often seen as a parable about wealth and greed, its placement in *Bitter Bitter Tears* suggests other interpretations. The film, by actively slowing its actors, manipulating their movements in time, treats them like marionettes—characters that are both

objects and subjects. This context reminds us that when Midas is granted the ability to turn anything he touches into gold, his world becomes uniquely sculptural. Life is perfectly rendered, by him, as a made object. And this, of course, with minimal effort on the part of the artist. Though the tragic consequences of this ability are often emphasized in retellings of the myth (one cannot eat golden fruit; a golden daughter is beautiful yet tragically no longer among the living) it should also be noted that the objects that resulted would have bested any other 'sculptures' in terms of their realism. They would have been perfect made objects.

Since the director is asking us to consider the value of the artificial above the 'natural,' it is worth taking a moment to appreciate the virtues of the Golden Touch. Midas' wished-for ability, in this sense, speaks to an impulse other than that of greed: the desire to turn everything within reach into art. This perfection of realism, however, is the product of a simple touch—not that of a mastered skill of representation. Life is rendered in gold without an ounce of effort.

If this is a criticism, however, then it is one that has been wielded against photographers and film directors since the beginning of their practices. The tension between the skill of the painter or sculptor and the skill of the photographer or director often lies precisely in the sense that the more contemporary representations are relatively 'automatic.' Their lenses, pointed toward a subject, capture the light that reflects off of them to create an object to be appraised, interpreted, bought, and sold. The slightest touch of light on film renders near perfect realism. By situating Midas at the center of her work, the director allows the curse of the Golden Touch to be reframed as a kind of complex gift to be both utilized and relinquished. She, too, 'turns' the living into lifeless objects with a simple gesture; when she exerts more control, manipulating time, slowing it, making it still, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that these cinematic objects become all the more perfect. This, however, does not belie the fact that one cannot live in a cinematic idiom; being released from the position of 'director' is as important as accepting its possibilities.

There is one scene in particular in which the release from the Golden Touch represented in Poussin's painting is reimagined in a particularly effective manner. Petra—at the end of the movie, without a wig—tells Marlina: “You will have what you are entitled to: freedom and fun.” She then stretches out her hand through a wood structure toward Marlina, who is on her knees. Marlina reaches her hand out as well, which, instead of meeting Petra's, goes around it. And the hand retracts, then moves forward again, temporally caught once again by the camera.

This manipulated gesture is a clear rearticulation of Midas' encounter with Bacchus (a gesture wholly absent from Fassbinder's version of the scene). Marlina, like Midas, is kneeling.

Petra, like Bacchus, stands confidently above. We immediately have to ask what, precisely, Marlena is being freed from, what this release might consist of. Petra's outstretched hand might promise a release from their relationship, from the artificial constraints of the movie, from her nearly sculptural existence. Yet as a part- papier-mâché character literally caught between objecthood and subjecthood she is perhaps more like one of Midas' frozen possessions than the king himself.

In Fassbinder's film, the painting also serves as a backdrop. It, however, is blown up to such gigantic proportions that it has to be cropped to fit on the back wall of Petra's bedroom. Fassbinder uses framing and lighting techniques to direct the viewer's attention away from the gesture between Midas and Bacchus (with their outstretched arms pointing to one another) and, instead, toward Bacchus and the outstretched woman in the foreground. A prolonged focus on Bacchus' genitals and the way, specifically, in which his penis points toward the nude woman is used to emphasize his film's explicit preoccupation with gender roles and power. His Petra is portrayed as conflicted, as 'bitter,' due to the incompatibility of her 'male' impulses with her social role as a woman, wife, daughter, and mother. Her character oscillates between a 'feminine' vulnerability and a position of 'masculine' power throughout until, exhausted, finding some kind of solace in solitude. The painting provides a strong visual corollary to the main preoccupations of the film.

Pancake, however, by using rows and rows of the painting, draws our attention to other ideas. The rows of images recall unfurled rolls of film, they ask us to think about repetition and mechanical reproduction. By taking the emphasis off of Bacchus' genitals pointing in the direction of the outstretched nude, we are able to consider the painting (as a whole) in more allegorical terms that do not deal in such direct, emphatic ways with fixed ideas of gender. The emphasis falls on the principal gesture that the painting 'narrates': Bacchus allowing Midas to be free from his asked-for ability (see Figure 1). Reading the painting as part of an extended allegorical commentary on the act of film-making (via the act of golden object making) takes these contextual shifts into account.



Figure 1. An illustration of the gestures referenced by Pancake (in white) and Fassbinder (in red).

It could also be said that by shifting away from such an explicit preoccupation with gender categories toward a more allegorical meditation on film-making, the director shows her participation in a cinematic tradition while self-consciously reflecting on what, precisely, that might mean. Deciding *not* to continue the previous discussion (on the difficulties imposed by social categories, especially those involving gender) is a way of nodding to a precursor while changing the subject, even changing the idiom. The focus is taken off social 'issues' and placed, instead, on the medium of film-making itself, the nature of influence, tradition, irony, parody and artifice. The flat repetition of Fassbinder's lines can be read, from this perspective, as both a kind of tense mocking of the antiquated notions of gender and sexuality that the 1972 film wrestles with and an acceptance of Fassbinder as a part of the cinematic tradition that Pancake participates in. As such, the repetitions and variations that Pancake utilizes are complex; they do not function as simple commentaries, criticisms, or parodies of the original. Even the doubled word 'bitter' in the film's title is hard to place; it can be read as a sarcastic sending-up of Fassbinder's high seriousness, a nod to a precursor, a push to consider the importance of the copy in art, or a clever foreshadowing of the spatio-

temporal symmetry in the most manipulated scenes of the movie. The same could be said, incidentally, of any of the borrowed lines of the characters. Regardless, turning the film toward questions of art and artifice is a way of actively negotiating this relationship while creating a work that stands on its own.

When Marlena, still wearing her mask, packs her bags at the end of the film, everything is allowed to come to a rather peaceful conclusion. A yellowish doll with a brown face—a direct visual quote, it seems, of the masked cherub from Poussin's painting—is taken with her as she leaves. As "The Great Pretender" plays in the background, Marlena cradles her 'masked' doll/cherub in her arm and confidently exits; it is almost as though we are being told that 'artifice' is leaving the building. Petra, fittingly, is smiling and, when she is alone, goes to bed perfectly at ease. The characters have all been released from the film—from the curse and gift of the Golden Touch—as from an uncanny parallel reality that obeys its own laws of space and time. As, of course, have we. Yet the question of how this interplay of artificial constructs and parodied narrative devices might follow us into the space of the everyday is left open for discussion; this is an aspect of cinematic influence that the film leaves respectfully untouched.

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Works Cited

Bitterbittertears. Dir. Catherine Pancake. (2010)

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