Cinematography

Ein Krankheitsfall - Traces of Patriarchy in *Der bitteren Tränen* der Petra von Kant

Alexander Archer, *United Kingdom*

"I detest the idea that love between two persons can lead to salvation. All my life I have fought against this oppressive type of relationship. Instead, I believe in searching for a kind of love that somehow involves all of humanity."

- R. W. Fassbinder

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was the 'edgy homosexual' of New German Cinema. A man who would sometimes make four feature films a year, his life was a frenzy, and one not without its controversies. In Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant), a film adapted from a play he himself had written, Fassbinder offers a more penetrating diagnosis of himself than the press could ever have hoped to produce in their exposés. Indeed, the film has been described as an exorcism of sorts, an almost masochistic exercise in 'working through' the bitter aftertaste of his toxic relationship with Günther Kaufmann.

To set the stage, we are introduced to a bear-faced Petra von Kant in bed, who is soon awoken by her servant, Marlene. As she gets ready (a process which takes up most of the first act) she applies makeup. This, coupled with her bold words, introduces a familiar tension: is her makeup empowering or confining her? The set, at least, suggests confinement – from the shutter's shadow creating the impression of a cage around Petra as she wakes, to the exposed woodwork in which Petra and Marlene are constantly framed by Michael Ballhaus's cinematography. For the duration of the film (though months elapse) we never leave this room, nor does Petra seem to.

This restrictive environment is coupled with precise composition and blocking, often complemented or echoed by the set. Most notably, Poussin's *Midas and Bacchus* is a constant presence on Petra's wall, the figures of which the actors sometimes imitate, often betraying the balance of power. Although there is not a single male actor, the entire plot is *directed* by men, both by Fassbinder as director and by characters within the film itself. Petra has divorced her husband; her new love interest, Karin, is married. It doesn't take long for their 'love' to quickly deteriorate and for Karin to reveal a capacity for great cruelty, vividly describing her sexual encounter with a man with whom she 'went dancing'. Karin ends up leaving Petra for the husband she was first planning to divorce, never to return to the

screen. Throughout the narrative the presence of the 'man' is felt but never seen; he is an absent ghost who haunts the women of the film. The one remaining visual reminder of patriarchy in Petra's small apartment is the omnipresent Poussin painting.

Petra wishes to be free from patriarchy, yet can never escape it. She all too freely recounts her rape at the hands of her former husband, condemning her cousin's pity for the divorce — "it is easy to pity but harder to understand", she says. She's successfully escaped *this* dagger of the patriarchy, but as the painting still looms, so too does patriarchy's shadow, now internalised in her new lesbian relationship. She speaks of freedom, and how her husband's vanity led to insecurity and violence in the face of Petra's success as a designer. She speaks of how ‚Jeder ist austauschbar, das muss der Mensch lernen' – one must learn that everyone is replaceable. And yet, despite all her theorising, she begins to mirror her ex-husband's behaviour in her relationship with Karin; she starts to play a role which she herself says 'stinks of men'. Petra begins to desire complete possession of Karin.

This corruption is echoed by the numerous mannequins inhabiting her flat, which either form gossiping circles or sexual positions. The mannequins reflect the many replaceable women for whom she designs — in this sense Karin is but a doll too; Petra has even promised to design a collection for her. Indeed, on Petra's birthday her cousin gives her a doll which looks eerily like Karin. When the tables are eventually turned, when Karin becomes a dominating oppressor, Petra is left hysterical; she pleads for Karin to 'lie to her instead', despite having been a champion of honesty in her previous conjecturing.

As it were, Petra lives in a reflection of patriarchy (in the first act we are even shown frequent shots of her face in a hand-held mirror). She is no saint – there is no denying her histrionic and manipulative aspects – but there is something undeniably soul-destroying in seeing Petra, having suffered under the patriarchal institution of marriage, crumble in her love for Karin, who exposes how Petra has become the same vain 'possessor' her husband once was. Petra is ultimately a tragic figure; her fatal flaws imprinted into her by powers beyond her control.

In each act of the film Petra dons a new wig, a new face. These different shades of femininity reflect her fractured sense of self: a different facade for every situation. By the end of the film, she sheds everything and is left in darkness, darkness manifested in bitter sleep. In the end, the sleep which greets Petra was the escape which she longed for in her loneliness, a 'salvation' of sorts. Whether sleep – in other words, complete withdrawal – is the only escape from oppression in the modern world is the dialogue the film starts with the viewer. Going back, at last, to Fassbinder – although he was never able to find monogamous love within his soul, his films were a far greater, external love which 'involved all of humanity'.

For references, click here.