

TRANSFORMATIONS IN FASSBINDER'S *BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT*

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That Rainer Werner Fassbinder is at once the most prolific of the New German directors and the most controversial of the group has a significantly causal relationship: the very rate at which Fassbinder makes films, along with the rapid changes of subject and style, alone is enough to alienate and confound viewers who, at a more leisurely pace, might accustom themselves to perspectives and materials which are deceptively difficult to grasp.

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Fassbinder's films, in short, provoke, and this provocation may be far more important to cinema's rapport with its audience today than at any other time.

The nature of this provocation is, however, the elusive question, again bringing to the forefront the problem of audience and the relationship that Fassbinder's films have with that audience. Most importantly this relationship can not be tied to an ideal conception of the spectator, nor to a similarly static notion of Fassbinder's films. For, unlike Godard, Fassbinder does not aim to return to a utopian zero ground in order to create a new cinematic viewer as he creates a new cinematic syntax. Rather, like many of his German colleagues, Fassbinder has a decided sense of the historicity of his audience, German and otherwise, and he develops the formal and thematic features of his film in accordance with that knowledge. From Fassbinder's position, the point is not to convince viewers of the sophistication and depth of his own mind and politics but to motivate the

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viewer's own emotions and thought along a syntactical path that is accessible to emotional comprehension. Filmic revolution is, for him, an insidious affair.

Obviously the much documented love affair that Fassbinder has had with the films of the German-bred Sirk and other American directors derives in large part from this notion of filmmaking and its demand to communicate with an audience that, in most Western countries, has been weaned on Hollywood tropes. As he says in a 1971 interview, "American cinema is the only one I can take really seriously, because it's the only one that has really reached an audience. German cinema used to do so, before 1933 . . . But American cinema has generally had the happiest relationship with its audience . . . Our films have been based on our *understanding* of the American cinema." In other words, as Fassbinder remarks in his celebrated article on Sirk, "the main thing to be learned from American films was the need to meet their entertainment factor halfway. The idea is to make films as beautiful as America's, but which at the same time shift the content to other areas."

Fassbinder came gradually to this awareness that good politics are incidental without effective avenues of communication, his strategies moving through intellectual phases associated with Straub, the "anti-theater," and the French New Wave. Yet ultimately, with the assistance of his extraordinary cameraman Michael Ballhaus, he allied himself with the American cinema so that they could use its highly developed and proficient syntax to subvert its ideologically unsuspecting perspective. Through his manipulation and intellectual transformation of the Hollywood idiom – from the early seventies to his latest commercial successes, such as *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Fassbinder's efforts have been, as he claims, "to learn how to show viewers the things they don't want to see in such a way that they *will* watch because it's excitingly made."

No Fassbinder film demonstrates these strategies and the problematic response that they have generated better than *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, a film which appears late in Fassbinder's Hollywood phase and which makes use of what becomes one of the defining marks of his films during this period: Sirkian melodrama transformed into critical kitsch or camp, use of popular entertainment formulas but with critical, self-conscious distance. Midway through the film, Fassbinder underlines this not at all facile use of basic emotional formulas when the relatively uncultured Karin says to Petra: "Oh yes, I love the cinema. Seeing pictures about love and suffering. Lovely." The phrase sparkles with a multifaceted irony, most particularly since this is exactly the kind of film *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* is. Yet Fassbinder's film of course becomes more than this: his is also a film about the way individuals relate cinematically amidst those central experiences of love and suffering, and so the film doubles back on itself. Whereas Karin can respond enthusiastically to that fundamental pleasure of the filmic text, Fassbinder's film is an extremely disconcerting attempt to move the viewer to a point where he or she can not only respond on that level but can also examine the murky middle ground where

cinema and social life confuse the clarity of each other's communications. "I don't believe that melodramatic feelings are laughable," Fassbinder has remarked; from his semi-Brechtian perspective on those melodramatic formulas comes his critical camp, his mixture of surface art and real emotions.

This confusion of the cinematic and the social that Fassbinder puts in play in this film accounts to a large degree for the outcries it has drawn from nearly every sexual group with enough political sensitivity to react to the volatile issues that Fassbinder raises. Fassbinder's films are not mimetic; nor are they examples of social realism or utopian politics. They are, rather, relational mergers of different surfaces which do their work along the circuit that makes social reality itself a product of the psychoanalytic identifications that cinema initiates. Missing this relationship, a viewer finds inaccurate distortions where Fassbinder would say there are only distortions. Or put another way: if Fassbinder regularly uses transparently bourgeois figures, it is because these are the figures and images that bourgeois and nonbourgeois audiences alike have been trained to understand and enjoy. To alter ideas structured on these images, moreover, a filmmaker does little good in refusing the mechanisms of his audience's understanding but instead must manipulate those mechanisms toward a new understanding. Hence, as Judith Mayne observes, the crucial import of Fassbinder's use of Hollywood melodrama is that it "invites a consideration of the social significance of popular culture and the extent to which the entertainment factor can function in a critical way."

Like Wenders then, Fassbinder situates his films in an American tradition and employs a high degree of critical reflexivity to mark his distance from that tradition. Yet, whereas *Kings of the Road* uses a realistic surface to tell the tale of two men and their wandering encounter with their own identities, *Petra von Kant* is a film of claustrophobic pessimism in which a lesbian couple substitutes for the standard heterosexual drama. Both films confront the threadbare cliché of the happy or normal family of American films. Yet, conversely, the two films appear as nearly inversions of each other not only in their contrasting use of sexes and space but, most notably, in the relations that the films establish between themselves and a pro-filmic reality: while *Kings of the Road* seeks to introduce new filmic relations by short-circuiting the closed circle that describes the perspective of classical cinema, *Petra von Kant* turns inward to trace the exploitative grip that cinematic posturing has on life. That *Petra von Kant* is so radically insular does not of course mean that it is any less engaged with a social and political audience than *King of the Road*: the exaggerated isolation of this drama is – as with all Fassbinder films and as much as with any film in this study – a function of a complex horizon of historical expectations which have their center in the Hollywood subject but which also include a number of social formulations of a specifically German kind. Of these, there is most particularly the crisis of a social self in Germany as it developed out of the mass spectacle of the Third Reich, through the economic miracle of Adenauer's *laissez-faire* fifties, to its present condition where it remains haunted and divided by those

past constitutions of self. Seen in this context, *Petra von Kant* consequently becomes, in the very irony of its negations and omissions, as much a social and historical statement as any other Fassbinder film: a *Lola* without an explicit description of the street politics, a *Maria Braun* without the larger history of her economic progress to the insulated and fragile home of the final scenes. While both *Kings of the Road* and *Petra von Kant* serve, in short, as historical critiques of film's tyrannical power over perception and descriptions of the problem of identity in modern Germany, *Petra von Kant* argues this point not so much in the discursive or essayistic fashion of *Kings of the Road* but through an exaggerated style and decor which delineate the internal mechanics of the problem while not textually opening it (as Wenders often attempts to do). In this way, Fassbinder's pessimism becomes a pessimism of base content only, his negations traces of historical positives: for, in presenting that negative content, Fassbinder's stylized irony works ultimately to deflect and reflect its emotional pessimism and social isolation to a level which allows an understanding of those emotions and a clear view of those missing historical landscapes.

In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, this work begins with the content itself, where those common cinematic motifs of love and suffering are displaced from a heterosexual couple to a lesbian one. Beginning with this switch in a Hollywood formula, the story then proceeds in a quite unremarkable way. Petra von Kant, a successful designer of women's fashions, lives with her servant-lover Marlene. Once married, Petra has rejected that way of life and men in general, because of the exploitation and oppression that marriage and capitalistic sexual relations engender. In the second of the six sections of the film, Petra meets Karin, with whom she falls passionately in love, only to be abandoned by her at the end of the fourth section when Karin returns to her husband. The final sections describe Petra's complete breakdown and her last attempt to reconcile with the hitherto ignored Marlene. At this point, Marlene leaves.

In terms of audience expectations, the story itself is formulaic, with the important exception that the players of the melodrama are lesbian, a minority group generally ignored by films. In addition to this ripple in the standard Hollywood situation, moreover, the film entwines within the love story several long and self-dramatizing conversations that abstract and underline the important role that political economy plays in the usually foregrounded loves and desires of the characters. Early in the film, for example, Sidonie visits Petra to console her about the collapse of her marriage. In a dialogue that could serve as a subtext for the entire film, Petra explains how the relationship deteriorated, beginning by dispelling Sidonie's conventional expectation that the husband asked for the divorce or that adultery was involved. When Sidonie reproaches her for lacking humility and failing to use feminine wile, Petra snaps back: "I had no time for conjuring tricks. It only makes you unfree . . . It's all very well for you and Lester. Maybe this lack of freedom is just what you need . . . Frank and I wanted a higher love . . . We wanted to be free, awake, know what's going on at all times . . . We wanted to be happy together . . . You

understand: *together*." This romantic ideal of clarity and understanding begins, however, to turn to disgust when male dominance asserts itself through its principal vehicle, economics. "Men and their vanity," Petra complains; "He wanted to molly-coddle me and see I lacked nothing . . . He wanted to be the breadwinner . . . That way lies oppression, that's clear." In a patriarchal society, she says, there are two sets of rules, and her own financial success made these painfully apparent: "at first, it was: all you earn, my girl, will be put on one side; later on we can use it to buy a house, a sportscar . . . At first, it was funny seeing his ridiculous pride being pricked, especially when I thought for sure he realized how absurdly he behaved . . . And later when I tried to tell him that it made no difference who was on top or not, it was too late."

Economic resentment becomes sexual resentment, her husband's failure to control her financially resulting in a desperate attempt to dominate her physically. Sexual and economic exploitation merge, and while glossing over the economic dimension, Petra reacts bitterly against the sexual exploitation and abuse:

The last six months were excruciating. He obviously saw it was all over, felt it at least, but wouldn't accept it . . . He tried to keep the wife, if not wholly, then in bed. I let him possess me, I bore it . . . That man was filth to me. He stank, stank like a man. What had once its charms now turned my stomach, brought tears to my eyes . . . The way he bestraddled me, he served me like a bull would a cow. Not the slightest respect, no feeling for a woman's pleasure. The pain, Sidonie, you can't imagine . . .

The honesty of this description and the reality of the suffering behind it should not be doubted. Yet, at the same time, Fassbinder sets in motion around this verbal discourse a complex series of visual and narrative qualifiers, which clearly reestablish its significance. Much in the fashion of the majority of his films, *Petra von Kant* offers a rather fundamental premise about love, need, and exploitation in a capitalistic society, and so exposes itself to the often facile criticism that the film itself is facile. Yet, the film then goes on to achieve its particular density by ironically layering that base theme again and again, in this way becoming an analysis and critical exposition of the surface predicament itself. Petra's long denunciation of men and description of the pain they have caused her is accordingly tangled through the course of the film in a larger visual and psychological drama which, in recontextualizing Petra and her dialogue, shows her (and all the other women in the film for that matter) exploiting and degrading women in the same manner that a male-dominated society and its cinema does.

Most explicitly, the film exposes the bombastic and indefatigable theatrics of Petra's personal and professional relationships. Elsaesser has rightly recognized these histrionics as a recurring element in Fassbinder's films, and notes that what results from Fassbinder's perspective on them is a "sometimes terrifying and often grotesque distance between the subjective *mise-en-scène* of the characters and the objective *mise-en-scène* of the camera."

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The camera's first encounter with Petra begins on this note. After the credit sequence, during which the camera holds on the base of the darkened steps which lead down into the room, it tracks slowly across the wall-sized reproduction of mythically scaled nudes to the shadowy figure of the sleeping Petra. Light suddenly floods the body, and Petra awakes and quickly telephones her mother, saying, "Mother, I had no time yesterday . . . No, I've been up for ages." She then turns, looks directly into the close-up angle, smiles, and insists, "It's true!" While this lie is ostensibly for the mother, the camera work and direction are clearly for the audience, turning to grotesque mockery the played reality that the audience observes, severing the theatrics of Petra from a perspective on them, yet concomitantly assuring the spectator's complicity in the act. The audience and Petra, in brief, have the advantage of their privileged positions.

The theatrics gain momentum from this point on. Petra's first act after she leaves the bed is to don one of her many wigs and elaborate dressing robes. Her second phone call (to the department store Karstadt) is another hypocritical ruse; during her long monologue with Sidonie, the camera focuses on the preciously tiresome process of making up her face as if for a performance. These painstakingly exaggerated warm-ups then culminate in the third section of the film when Petra and Karin confront each other in outlandish Wagnerian costumes and perform a dance-like ritual of seduction and melodramatic intimacy. It is here that Karin expresses her love of the cinema, and it is here that theatrics and cinema blend most effectively in stylized movements of emotion and manipulation, more like Brechtian "gests" than naturalistic gestures. In the final moments of this sequence, Petra tells Karin, "I can see you now parading in public . . . I'll make a first class model of you, Karin . . . You're beautiful, Karin." And as she convinces Karin to move in with her because "it's cheaper," the statement coincides neatly with the climax of their mutual seduction through sex, theatrics, and economics. The scene as spectacle thus becomes, in Judith Mayne's words, a quintessential "guise through which the commodity form permeates social relationships," a theatrics of sexual reification.

The most salient sign of this reifying conjunction of theater, economics, and sex is Petra's profession itself. As a fashion designer, she markets appearances, self-images made through clothing; the success of that marketing is appropriately the product of sexual appeal and financial interest. In short, she sells sexual images and does it with a great deal of success. Visually the film is punctuated from beginning to end by the tools of this trade – Marlene working with fabric, the mannequins, and so forth – so that as Petra and Karin work in the foreground at their sexual relationship, the business of desire superimposes on the business of design in the background. Both occupations must purvey a more or less fantastic image to a client; both subsist on the repeated and persistent cycle of production-consumption, the underpinning of a capitalist culture. To emphasize this last point, eating and drinking (the elemental and natural art of production

and consumption) take place only on the bed, which is also the place where Petra makes her business calls, makes love, and gives work orders to Marlene.

While this business of theatrics has an obvious and neat correlation with the business of cinema, two other central motifs have a perhaps less obvious but equally significant connection with the film mechanism itself: nostalgia and dreams. Of these two, nostalgia interrupts the action regularly, and it thus contributes most strikingly to the confusion of temporal spheres in the film. Shortly after telephoning her mother, for instance, Petra plays the fifties recording of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" by the Platters, while she dances in a circle with Marlene. The reverie it inspires is repeated at the end of the film's second section when she plays the Walker Brothers' "In My Room" for Karin, and then comments: "... records from my past. They either make me very sad . . . or very happy." That these two instances (along with the Platters' song which ends the film) are American tunes from the postwar years is clearly not insignificant. But, more importantly, they and the parade of period costumes that the various characters wear signal an entrapment in memories which muddle and blur any sort of historical perspective which might lead to self-knowledge. After Petra's comment about her inconsistent emotional reaction to old records, she drifts into a memory of her former husband, and, with her new lover standing before her, she ironically remarks on the inescapable cruelty that emotions perpetrate and which she will soon become the victim of: "That was romance . . . Pierre was killed in a car. He loved driving. He thought he was immortal, but wasn't . . . Yet everything is predestined in life, I'm convinced . . . People are terrible, Karin. They can bear anything . . . anything. People are hard and brutal. They don't need anyone . . . That's the lesson." For Petra, however, these very words suggest it is a lesson unlearned again and again through the alternating periods of her life.

This tragicomic inability to distinguish time and experiences and thus to escape the bitter circle of love and suffering appears most dramatically in the second and third parts of the film. Stylistically and structurally the two parts parallel each other along anchoring points such as the elegant poses of Petra and Sidonie later reenacted by Petra and Karin. Likewise, there are the long monologues which form the core of each episode, in the first Petra telling of the collapse of her marriage, in the second Karin recounting her childhood and adolescence. Petra, moreover, delivers a small speech on humility in each of these sections, the second mirroring and reversing the first according to a pattern which describes the course of the entire film: first, she rebukes Sidonie's belief that humility is the key to a successful relationship; later she mildly urges that same humility on Karin. "You have to learn humility," she explains. "Everyone has his own theory of the world . . . I believe you have to be humble to bear better what you comprehend. I'm humble before my work – and the money I earn . . . In the face of things stronger than myself." These reversals outline the part-ludicrous, part-tragic pattern of the whole film through which Petra changes her stance to suit her desires: her nostalgic desire for what might

have been (those “wonderful chances for that man and me” of her first marriage) forces her to switch her roles and her realities rapidly, and thus to become trapped again and again in the oppressor/victim cycle of sexual desires. This is most evident in Petra’s chaotic movement through her sexual oppression by males, her dominating of Karin in part 3, Karin’s exploitation of her in part 4, and finally Petra’s offering of a new start to Marlene at the conclusion of the film, an offer which actually means a return to the state of the relationship at the beginning of the film. Stuck in a reality which is fundamentally nostalgic and hence utopian, Petra must act out her desire repeatedly in the bombastic terms of a grand soap opera, the artificial pomp of the gestures thus masking the flat redundancy of the meaning. When Petra and Karin first meet, both comment that “nothing much can change in Germany.” Similarly, while Petra views her history and future only from the perspective of her libidinal longings, her temporal reality stalls in nostalgia, the immobile voyage of cinema itself.

These longings and moments of nostalgia naturally manifest themselves as kinds of waking dreams in *Petra von Kant*, thus adding another layer to those central motifs of theatrics, nostalgia, and a film economics whose business is to manufacture dreams. Petra’s first statement in the film is “Marlene, have some consideration . . . I’ve had such awful dreams,” which ironically signals her awakening into a world she will people with equally awful dreams. Later, after Karin arrives for her date with Petra, Petra begins her inquiry into Karin’s past by saying, “tell me about yourself . . . what you dream of.” Petra then sets out to fulfill those dreams of Karin, “to make something of [her] life” by transforming her into a “first-class model,” the dream-image of both their desires. Finally, Petra’s profession itself is a fairly transparent case of an occupation that sells dreams through appearances, and its obtrusive economic base begins to suggest more strongly the crucial connection between Petra, the designer, and Fassbinder, the filmmaker, whose business is likewise the purveying of dreams through appearances and images.

The connection exists, in fact, at the film’s center: just as the theatrical costumes that pervade the film as manifestations of the individual’s dreams seem anarchically nostalgic (recalling without much order a mélange of different historical periods), the cinema itself relies on a manipulation of time apart from the actual present and makes its meaning through the reworking of filmic types and characters that originate in different historical eras. Indeed, establishing this correlation between Petra’s temporal and imagistic disorder and filmmaking is, on the one hand, Fassbinder’s usual attempt at self-criticism, seen in many of his films from *Beware of a Holy Whore* to *Germany in Autumn*. Yet, on the other hand and more importantly, this correlation allows Fassbinder the distance needed to investigate and criticize at once the dynamics of a personality such as Petra’s and the dynamics of a traditional cinema whose internal and external workings are the mirror reflection of that personality. In *Petra von Kant* the story of the loneliness and need that drive an individual to manipulate a personal history by means of artificial images becomes a descriptive figure and

demonstration of a psychoanalytic and cinematic apparatus, which exploits desire with images, and especially images of women.

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That these desires, exploitations, and delusions are so explicitly bound here to that cinematic figure of the circle and the specular giants associated with the filmic screen is the specific center of the film's argument about a perceptual figuration, a particular figuration of the body traditionally fostered and supported by a Hollywood ideology. Besides the many obvious connections in *Petra von Kant* between Hollywood representation and the drama of the characters themselves, Fassbinder's use and critique of this aesthetic, in other words, has focused most importantly on the motif of the human figure as object of desire, a motif which since its historical inception has been film's central subject and the cultural base of its representation. Theoretically, Metz, Baudry, and others have persuasively discussed this cinematic figure in terms of a psychoanalytic model in which scopic desire inscribes itself onto the body as text. And as a material and communication model, this figure as trope has been the dominant presence in film from the time of Méliès's erotic conjuring of dancing girls and polar giants to Pasolini's studies in film as sado-eroticism, the body consistently being the mystery to be resolved and the source of audience fascination. In the middle of this tradition and exemplary of it, moreover, is *Citizen Kane*, a film in every sense about the jigsaw-puzzle pursuit of a figure and lost body across a space whose notoriety is its flamboyant physical depth and different representations of that lost body. More so than in any other medium, as Fassbinder's film makes clear, on the cinema screen the body has been, in Foucault's words, "the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration."

Petra von Kant engages the representational base of this pervasively established cinematic figure on several levels. As I have indicated, the story itself depicts Petra's sexual desire as fundamentally a producer of two-dimensional postures which are the mirror-image of her inflated ego; underlining this point, the camera presents and examines the depth of the film's single space *not* in order to generate an erotic surface (across which scopic desire can play off the ambiguity of depth) but to delineate the separate planes of action which when demystified indicate precisely the emotional mechanics of imagistic desire. What the film describes in this manner is a predicament (that of Petra and of classical cinema) in which scopic desire fluctuates between the utter absence of an object and its exaggerated presence, between the body as an unmarked surface and the body as resplendent giant. The economy of finances of this predicament are, moreover, a crucial element in the dialectic since, in both cinema and social life, the power to seduce a perspective is often a function of

the quantitative value attached to the image, a value frequently indexed by size, texture, and material investment. In *Petra von Kant*, in short, Petra's exploitation of her lovers parallels the exploitation of the spectator by the cinematic image, and Fassbinder's technical deconstruction in this film becomes a bi-level project in which the financial erotics of social life share a space with the desiring machine which is the film industry.