



The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant

Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Production Company: Tango-Film (Munich)

Producers:

Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Michael Fengler

Unit Manager: Karl Scheydt

Production Assistants:

Andreas Schimek, Salem El Hedi

Assistant Directors: Harry Bär, Kurt Raab

Script Supervisor: Andorthe Braker

Screenplay based on his own play:

Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Director of Photography: Michael Ballhaus

Lighting: Ekkehart Heinrich

Camera Assistant: Klaus Jahnel

Stills Photography: Peter Gauhe

Editor: Thea Eymész

Art Director: Kurt Raab

Costumes: Peter Müller

Make-up: Sybille Danzer

Hairstyles: Margarethe Ullman

Sound: Günther Kortwich

Sound Assistant: Harry Rausch

[Dedicated] To the One Who Here Became: Marlene
Cast:

Margit Cartensen (Petra von Kant)

Hanna Schygulla (Karin Thimm)

Katrin Schaake (Sidonie von Grasenabb)

Eva Mattes (Gabriele von Kant)

Gisela Fackeldey (Valerie von Kant)

Irm Hermann (Marlene)

West Germany 1972

125 mins

Digital

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant

A celebrated fashion designer plunges into desperate isolation when the object of her affections, a beautiful yet flighty ingenue, fails to return her devotion. A gender-flipped and painfully vulnerable autobiographical tale, born of Fassbinder's adoration of Hollywood melodrama, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* displaces the artist from the spotlight and sequesters them in a prison of their own obsession.

A contemporary review

On the face of it, the world of Petra von Kant – a supremely stylised region where the rules of play, in décor as in passion, are dictated by the high-fashion, high-camp predilections of its decadent queen – shares very little with the wry social comedy of *Fear Eats the Soul* (made the year after). But there is an odd complementary quality about the two films, the suggestion of a mirror reflection in the way the areas of stylisation are inverted, and a clearly continuing line in the way the form and mannerisms of Hollywood melodrama are worked into the texts.

Where *Fear Eats the Soul* tells, broadly, a mundane tale of love crushed by social prejudice and repression, and lends to the affair between the ageing char and the hapless immigrant both a kind of dignity and a sense of the solid network of social interferences and cultural differences through the applied gravity of its style, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* is, initially, all style, the pleasure dome-apartment of the heroine a theatrical forum for her theorising on life and love, until the mundane matters of doubt, jealousy and betrayal gradually trickle in to give the lie to the whole baroque edifice.

Both films are explicitly symbolic in structure: *Fear Eats the Soul* revolves round various meetings and cultural confrontations; *Petra von Kant*, for all its evidently compacted time scale, proceeds almost as one day in the life of its heroine, a progression from light, with Marlene drawing back the curtains in the morning – suggesting both the opening of a stage performance and an unwelcome exposure to light in this hot-house existence – and revealing Petra as yet unmade-up and unbewigged, to the darkness and isolation of the final shot.

In between, the subject of the film might almost be the steady accumulation and then the gradual dismantling of Petra's style. Through her first conversation with Sidonie, she applies her makeup with the detailed concentration she gives to her analysis of her second marriage, invoking an ideal love which was eventually too absurdly contradicted by the various evidences of her husband's very physical existence, before drawing with unabashed condescension the lesson that her friend may not be ready for such 'higher love' ('Maybe this lack of freedom is just what you need').

Later, with Karin, Petra's disquisition on love turns on more idyllic reminiscences of her brief first marriage; the formula she extracts – 'The loveliest things are the first to end' – both indicates the authority she automatically assumes in determining the course her affair with Karin will take, and ironically reflects on her eventual inability to let go when the affair has soured. The last stronghold in Petra's kingdom to topple is the devoted

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Marlene, lost when an exhausted Petra holds out the one thing it is clearly not her prerogative to give – ‘You shall have what you deserve: freedom and joy!’ – and making clear that in this sado-masochistic relationship the master is as much a slave as the servant.

Fassbinder choreographs the comic-tragic course of Petra's *mauvaise foi* with a sureness only occasionally blemished by a dead moment or an awkward movement from his players, and achieves a greater self-sufficiency of style than in *Fear Eats the Soul*. In this etiolated atmosphere, props and lighting assume a rich and perverse significance: the mannequins dotted about the apartment later wind up in Petra's bed in a parody of love-making after Karin's desertion; the lush textures of light and shadow emphasise both the opulence of the setting and the emotional deviousness which relegates Marlene to the dark corners of the room, typing or sketching; and Petra's records ('Smoke Gets in Your Eyes', 'In my Room') add incongruous but suitably plangent notes, with 'The Great Pretender' rising over the very last shot of the abandoned heroine, suggesting her failure to make this particular imitation of life stick.

Hollywood idioms percolate the emotional tone of the film, not only in the Sternberg lighting but in Petra's early dictation of a letter to a designer called Mankiewicz ('Mankiewicz plus Brecht' was the *Image et Son* tag for *Petra*), hinting at the similarly problematic aspects of love and commitment in *Letter to Three Wives*. And like the paintings scattered through *Fear Eats the Soul*, both identifying and satirising their milieux, a principal icon here is the enormous mural covering one wall, with its classical nudes in easy, bacchanalian love-play mockingly overlooking the attenuated games of Petra's ménage, but also collaborating with the androgynous (not to say drag) appearance of some of the players to soften the strictly lesbian outlines of the relationships and intimate some universal experiences of passion unrequited or simply too idiosyncratic to be long sustained.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1975