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Dergah Campbell, *A Flower in the Mouth*, Cinema Scope, 2022



A Flower in the Mouth

Éric Baudelaire, South Korea/France/Germany

BY DERAGH CAMPBELL

Screening in this year's Berlinale Forum, Éric Baudelaire's unique take on Luigi Pirandello's 1923 short play *The Man with the Flower in His Mouth* assumes the form of a diptych: the first part is an observational documentary of Bloemenvelling Aalsmeer, the world's largest flower market in the Netherlands; the second, a fictional, more explicit adaptation of Pirandello's text, a conversation taking place over an evening in a Paris bar. While these two modes are held apart structurally, they remain in continual psychic dialogue with each other, creating a multi-directional reading that resists the usual linear path of an adaptation.

The Dutch flower market is really something to be seen: it is vast and efficient, with all parts fitting and functioning together, cartons of flowers fitting onto metal trollies that travel along automated tracks. Through the warehouse, workers zoom by on motorized trailers with a casualness that verges on bravado, receiving orders on headsets. We have become familiar with images of warehouses and the gamification of order fulfilment as workers' tasks are digitized to meet efficiency quotas, but the fact that here they're dealing with organic matter that has a fleeting lifespan gives the images an uncanniness that doesn't wane. For a moment, the masses of colourful

flowers appear as symbolic commodity, highlighting the absurdity of perpetual commercial movement in and out of the market. But then again you remember that what you're seeing is a flower, unique and alive. Claire Mathon's camera sits somewhere between machine and body, lightly breathing, with an exciting movement between quick arrhythmic darting and smooth, controlled motions. Together with Claire Atherton's editing, the enormity and intricacy of the operation is emphasized without appearing to be didactic. Rather, the placement of the camera and its movement, with or in contrasting speed and direction to the machines, opens up infinite possible variations of a choreography between camera, machines, workers, and flowers.

In contrast, the flower in the second half of the diptych remains out of sight. Set in the single location of an all-night bar in Paris, the narrative concerns a transient meeting between a regular, The Man (Oxmo Puccino), and The Customer (Dali Benssalah), who has missed the last train back to his mid-sized industrial town and must pass the time until the next morning. The Customer becomes a willing audience to The Man's particular mode of conversation, where his observations are elaborated into detailed imagined narratives.

The play's titular flower is a flower-shaped tumour at the side of The Man's mouth called an epithelioma, a literal harbinger of death at the time the play was written. In the film, The Man gestures for The Customer to follow him into the light and look at the space next to his mouth. He asks, "See that little knob? The colour of royal purple?" but The Customer shakes his head, and the audience remains uncertain whether that space is empty or if they're seeing what he describes. It is as if The Man is pointing to the memory of the play and, while the tumour no longer appears, the flower still exists as a metaphor for his death sentence.

As The Man's poetic imaginings are rooted in the reality of a late-night conversation in a bar, Baudelaire recognized the strange duality this demanded of the central performance. He didn't want to cast a theatre actor who might theatricalize the naturalness of the occurrence, or a film/television actor who might naturalize the theatricality. The casting of rapper Oxmo Puccino is well-calculated, because Puccino's music is especially known for its poetic descriptions of urban Parisian life, but the success of his performance lies in the favouring of a rhythmic over a psychological approach, the varying speeds drawing The Customer close and pushing him away. Through poetic recital, a real-life recognizable character emerges: a person who appears at once wise and unreasonable, intimate and hostile, generous and oppressive. In this way, Puccino's performance is able to hold the poles of naturalness and theatricality simultaneously. As the film moves more deeply into the night, The Man's allusions to his illness become more frequent, and he shifts from sensorial descriptions of life to an erratic nihilism as if, in drawing closer to the reality of death, the ability to assert a fixed meaning becomes destabilized. For The Customer, a night stranded in the city brings him close to the void of death, and the train the next morning will return him to safe ignorance.

In Greek tragedy, violence takes place offstage. Oedipus enters only after blinding himself and says, "Why should I have eyes? Why, when nothing I saw was worth seeing?" The art is not in the action, but in the telling. While this could be chalked up to necessity, elided

because of the limits of what can be portrayed believably, it is also a grammar of inclusion and exclusion that points to the presence of the stage. Pirandello pokes fun at offstage action by having The Man narrate not only what is unseen by the audience, but also what is beyond the scope of his seeing. In adapting a play to film, there is a movement into an unlimited space where anything can be shown, and the text becomes untethered from its theatrical grammar. Through the use of the diptych, Baudelaire preserves the limited space of the stage with the single location of the bar, while holding it in tandem with the unlimited cinematic space of the Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer. He achieves the unique feat of holding theatre and film in co-presence rather than having one subsume the other.

One of the most stimulating aspects of the script, written by Baudelaire and Anne-Louise Trividic, is its movement between strategies—elaborations, transpositions, replications, absences—that create varying distances between the play and the film. Amid the differences, the fragments of text that remain intact appear as a kind of a core, as if they cannot be melted down and reformed. One such text goes as follows:

There's something—we don't know what it's made of, but it exists - and we all feel it, feel it like a pain the throat—it's the hunger for life! A hunger that is never appeased - that never can be appeased—because life - life as we live it from moment to moment— is so hungry itself, hungry for itself, we never get to taste it even! The taste of life, the flavour and savour of life, is all the past, we carry it inside us. Or rather it's always at a distance from us. We're tied to it only by a slender thread, the rope of memory...

The feeling of life as described by The Man is achieved through distances—the distance between the original and its adaptation, between the two parts of the diptych, between the theatrical and the cinematic. Baudelaire makes a unique demand of himself to discover forms that hold differences in relation to each other without collapsing them into easy truths. In *A Flower in the Mouth*, we see the flower both as a commodity and a sacred symbol—and neither one of these alone, but both of them together, is what makes up its meaning.

