

***BREAKFAST ON PLUTO :***

**CHANGING WORLD – CHANGING IDENTITIES**

*by*

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I am prejudiced. Prejudiced, egocentric – even if not yet pathologically so – and, in fact, distrustful of what appears to be different. However, you should know that I am not in the least insensitive to my situation; at times I do severely criticize myself about the way I am, but towards others I feel justified to be myself. If you accidentally hear me talking about these “others” you will surely think I try hard to empathize – I always do – but, somehow, every single time I have sincerely attempted to get into another person’s shoes I have tripped, stumbled and fallen flat on my face. Eventually, I have come to realize it is rather difficult not to be me. Occasionally though, I experience a momentary, transient effulgence of sympathy, compassion and understanding. When that happens I feel so liberated from my own self and its predicaments that my relief in my new-found freedom often turns into terror. Only occasionally, then, I flee my middle-class, mid-twenties, middling “art of the quotidien” and I am transformed into a corrupted politician, a world-weary cop, an forty-year-old working mother of three, a terrorist, a cynical yet caring prostitute, and, lately, an transvestite who simply wishes “to belong” as she declares with all pathos and wounded pride, a modern outcast and transgendered Antigone. The girl who recently upset my microcosm of firm points of view and beliefs is no other than Patricia “Kitten” Braden, Patrick McCabe’s fictional heroine in *Breakfast on Pluto*, the novel that was brought onto the big screen in 2005 under the direction of Neil Jordan. This uncompromising film can be thought of as a *métissage* of (trans)gender politics, nationalist discourses and conceptions of belonging.

With Patricia's story unraveling in front of my eyes, I could not help wondering what was that made her fictional/cinematic entity so particular, so peculiar, and yet so appealing to me. It is undoubtedly particularly interesting for a heroine to have been left as a baby boy on the doorstep of a catholic church, abandoned by his mother and unacknowledged by his father, who happens to be the local priest. It is also equally interesting for a boy to start cross-dressing near puberty and to get into the habit of writing explicit sexual stories featuring male authority figures in his life. Besides, who can be more peculiar than Kitten (Patricia's drag name) who grows to be a sensitive and fragile, yet enduring and adamantly hopeful transvestite, haunted by her mother's abandonment and wish to find her who abandons her hometown only to find herself risking her life as a prostitute in the streets of London? Yet, reflecting on Kitten's situation, I found that it was more than these narrative twists that made Kitten appealing to me. Because, you see, given Kitten's subcultural status, she cannot be firmly positioned in a specific time and place, in a circumscribed ontological and/or phenomenological plane; she is not the point but the vector, or, in other words, a unit of tangent vectors within a tangent space. She is the archetypal subcultural performer, a magician's apprentice and a spatiotemporal traveler on the "Astral Highway": crossing, transgressing, transcending, searching for a sense of belonging. And while she performs gender, politics, or life itself, the world around her spins out of orbit, explodes, collapses and, finally, tries to reinvent itself.

The world that Kitten's story unveils is framed by "Troubles": political turmoils, economic difficulties, social struggles, and racial tensions. The film places its extraordinary protagonist in a social landscape marked by anxiety and fear—fear of poverty, exclusion, change, and terrorism of all kinds. At the same time, it creates unsettling parallels between the film's context of the 1960s and 1970s, and the precarious world of the early 2000s. Kitten's microcosm resonates with the repercussions of the events that have reshaped the Irish macrocosm since the partition of Northern Ireland in 1920. Indeed, state-societal relations in Ireland were anything but stable for more than fifty years after the partition, with the Irish-Catholic community of the north suffering political and economic marginalization. The creation of the Irish Republic in the south, as an independent political entity in 1948, only contributed to the secessionist desires of most Catholics of the north who clashed severely with Protestant Unionist dominance – political, social and economic – in Northern Ireland. As Catholics and Protestants strove for ethnic dominance, violence between oppositional parties increased, leading in the late 1960s the armed wing of the political party Sinn Fein, the Republican militants of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), to the incitement of a civil conflict that ended officially in 1998 after long-lasting negotiations. The definition and formation of Irish national(ist) identity in the years during and after Northern Ireland's "civil war" has acquired major significance but it has also become an increasingly intricate matter.

The shaping of Irish identity in the film's pluralistic setting is subjected to a number of factors and forces. Charlie's case, in *Breakfast on Pluto*, is indicative of the radical changes that have occurred in Irish society. Being Kitten's best friend and a non-white individual with no apparent strong ties to the Catholic community, she struggles over a problematic relationship with her IRA-implicated boyfriend. Things become even more complicated when Charlie gets pregnant and decides to keep the child. The very fact that a non-white female artist gives birth to a child out of wedlock and raises it with Kitten, constitutes a statement about the tensions created within enclosed

communities but also about the possibilities opening up for one to revisit the consequences of exclusion and marginalization. These possibilities that emerge within the maelstrom of violence and tragedy, as featured in the film, also shed light on the compromises that are expected from individuals in their fight against the fear of monolithic reasoning and narrow-mindedness.

The variable cultural spectrum that the film provided with has enabled me to observe the cultural multiplicity of my own reality. I caught myself pondering whether our mentality could be altered, and our life, individually and collectively, could get better, if we engaged, progressively, consciously and willingly, in an intracultural exchange, while remaining, at the same time, grounded in, and well aware of, our own cultural ethos. It is important that more attention is paid to the truth accumulating in various micro-narratives that lay scattered all over our world waiting to be found and taken seriously. *Breakfast on Pluto* hit a soft spot as I was coming closer to the realization that, distrustful of any “other” as I am, I cannot overlook the fact that by moving towards what is different, either on an individual or communal level, I may begin to acknowledge and appreciate its subtlety and uniqueness.

The truth is that I intend to avoid sounding like another clarion call to “*liberté, égalité, fraternité, solidarité*” and to emphasize that thinking about cross-cultural and intracultural differences and similarities need not be done abstractly. It is while watching *Breakfast on Pluto* that I have come to realize all similar issues that plague my own country. Tradition, conservatism and mistrust of what is “foreign” can confuse the public mind to such an extent that this may lead to the multiplication of misconceptions and misinterpretations about ourselves and others.

*Breakfast on Pluto* touches upon the complicated position of peoples who do not conform to specific identity categories. As subcultures come at odds with mainstream society, they challenge norms and principles which are believed to be of extreme value for the existence of the organized and integrated nature of society. Any such position has nowadays become a radically political one of non-normative and oppositional politics, greatly affecting the representations and reception of otherness. On the basis of this position’s scope, alternative value systems and identity patterns emerge challenging deep-rooted stereotypes and assumptions.

This perennial tension between tolerance, acceptance, integration and inclusivity, on the one hand, and intolerance, rejection, marginalization and exclusivity on the other, persistently informs the cultural mindset in a manner similar to that presented in *Breakfast on Pluto*. What matters here though is not the cultural setting per se but the emphasis the film places on the multiple changes, clashes and insights any form of cultural transition generates leading each one of us to variable readings, observations and interpretations. I anticipate a time when difference will no longer be a factor that excludes but enhances identity allowing individuals around the world to negotiate freely as equal interlocutors in a non-teleological, discursive ecumenical cultural space.

### **Works Cited**

*Breakfast on Pluto*. Dir. Neil Jordan. Sony Pictures Classics, Pathé, 2005.