

Spectatorship and Agency in Lanthimos' *Poor Things*:
The Cinematic Emancipation of Ovidian Galatea

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10.243-297), Galatea is portrayed as lacking voice, character, agency, and self-awareness. Likewise, Bella Baxter (Emma Stone) in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things* (2023) begins her journey in a similar way. While scholars have noted the mythological themes that permeate Lanthimos' oeuvre (S. Cooper 2015, J. Clauss 2022, C. Kul-Want 2023), none have specifically drawn a parallel between Bella and Galatea. I argue that Bella's evolution—from a voiceless scientific experiment to an empowered creator—mirrors and ultimately subverts the Pygmalion myth, as Bella herself turns into a Pygmalion. By examining the shared trajectory of Galatea and Bella, from inanimate to animate beings, I assert that Bella's journey can be seen as an extension of Galatea's untold potential. Although Ovid ends Galatea's story with her looking at Pygmalion and then getting married to him, Bella's narrative actively explores themes of self-emancipation and creative agency. Bella not only reclaims her own story but also reframes Galatea's myth in a modern context, fulfilling the emancipatory potential left unrealized in Ovid's myth.

I approach Lanthimos' film through the dipole of spectatorship and authorship as expressed by Jacques Rancière (2009). He argues that being a spectator is not a passive state to be changed but a natural condition, where we actively connect what we see to our past experiences, actions, and dreams. While Rancière's assertion is mainly associated with the cinematic audience, I identify the audience with Bella, who commences her journey of self-reinvention as a spectator and gradually obtains more power, authorship and agency of her own life's narrative, transforming from a Galatea to a Pygmalion. To achieve this, she must undergo a *metamorphosis* on a biological (from dead to alive), narratological (from object to author),

sexual (self-satisfaction to prostitution), sensual (senseless to senseful) and spiritual (innocence to experience and knowledge) level, while contesting the dominant hegemonic logic that seeks to oppress her personal story (Koutsourakis 2012).

In this paper I explore Bella's intellectual development across different phases, highlighting how her transformation is reflected through the film's kinesiology, color palette, music, lens focus, and setting. In her toddler stage, Bella is portrayed as an ignorant yet innocent figure, confined to the sterile and emotionless environment of her home. Her early life is characterized by apathy (Falvey 2022), absence of color and sexual identity, like Pygmalion's desired his Galatea (Ov. Met. 10.255: *reverentia*). When Bella discards her passive, spectator role—marked by the moment she teases the phallus of a dead body and stabs its eyes—she begins to explore self-satisfaction, which coincides with a sudden change in the *mise en scène*, where intense and vivid colors dominate the frame. After leaving her home, Bella's actions are guided by her curiosity and emerging sexuality as she tries to reconcile the separation between herself and the real world, a distance created by her "creator," a Pygmalion-like figure (Willem Dafoe). I then examine how Bella bridges the gap of spectatorial distance through several means: first, by seeking corporeal closeness, and second, by resisting the controlling efforts of three "micro-Pygmalions"—Max (Ramy Youssef), Godwin's student; Duncan (Mark Ruffalo), her first official lover; and her cruel husband Alfred Blessington (Christopher Abbott). Bella consistently follows her own path, refusing to conform to the expectations and norms these men attempt to impose on her.

This analysis reveals Bella's growth as she moves from a passive observer to the author of her own story, ultimately becoming a Pygmalion figure. In doing so, she gives the Ovidian

Galatea not just voice and substance, but also a path to redemption through her own self-actualization.

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