

Critical Analysis: *Bean: The Ultimate Disaster Movie* (1997)

Bean allows the viewer a unique lens through which to analyse operational and cultural practices of historical art institutions. Its purely comedic purpose is able to subtly raise polemic discourse surrounding historical presentation and analysis of art through the eyes of the clumsy, naïve, buffoon of Mr Bean who finds himself mistakenly placed within an elitist private art institution. The questions raised pertain to the rightful ownership of art and cultural artefacts, their commoditisation for the mass market as well as broaching the antiquated subject of who rightfully has the expertise and authority to value and judge art. Mr Bean, although essentially very much an outsider to the art world, ironically ends up as the individual best placed to critique the film's central masterpiece.

The notion of “cultural property”/ “collective ownership”, as Bal would refer to it, is immediately apparent, with America having requested an scholar of the highest calibre to speak at the historical unveiling of *Whistler's Mother* (1871), “welcome[d] back home [to her birthplace America]” from France's Musée d'Orsay. Despite his fifty million dollar donation, General Newton's later speech reveals his true motivation, confessing “not know[ing] the difference between a Picasso and a car-crash... but [unable to] stand the idea of a ‘bunch of Frenchies’ [sic] owning America's greatest painting” - a value judgement in itself.

Dr Bean, the “genius of the very highest order”, is sent to stay with David Langley, head Curator of the fictional private institution the Grierson Gallery located in California. Modern architectural elements, spacious interiors and the excessive set design, for example, the director's kitsch meeting table in the shape of an artist's palette, reveal Grierson as a very wealthy institution which highly values historically significant works yet prides itself on appearing trendy and modern first and foremost to the media - (the first suggestion of a speaker for Whistler's unveiling was Bon Jovi).

Despite the 19th century impressionist artist repeatedly maintaining the work he titled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* was not intended to be a portrait, but rather mostly concerned with aesthetics, composition and decorative elements, the painting as it is more commonly known, *Whistler's Mother*, is consistently personified in *Bean*, adding emotional value to the object itself, thereby affirming the classification of the museum itself as “an institution of recognition and identity.... [selecting] cultural products for official safe-keeping, for posterity and public display” (MacDonald 2006).

Chaos ensues when Bean's London art security-guard position is mistaken for a noble class of citizens whose only occupational purpose is to “sit and look at paintings”. Triumphant music accompanies Whistler's mother as she is revealed for the first time to the staff, its steel safe capsule retracts to show the piece in its very own gallery room, complete with walls lined with bright red velvet. The museum staff are appropriately awed by the cultural significance of this moment, whilst Bean simply nods his head at the masterpiece and comments on its “nice frame” clearly establishing his lack of cultural knowledge and opinion.

Although this reaction is a comedic foreshadow of the film's plot, interestingly, Whistler himself had always “claimed he had little interest in narrative or allegory”; and very much believed in the rejection of didacticism, and instead in the philosophy of “art for art's sake”

<<http://www.theartstory.org/definition-art-for-art.htm>>. Langley and the others are enthralled by what Bal, 1996, would describe as their “over-interpretation” of a famous cultural artefact. Grierson Gallery goes a little further and in a bid to reach many public audiences, exploits the

personification of the piece to market and profit from the event with “something for every member of the family” - the tackiest collection of memorabilia the scriptwriters could think of, including ‘Whistler’s Father’s beer mug’, and an X-rated poster of ‘Whistler’s Sister’. Williams, 1976 makes the distinction between ‘mass-market’ (as opposed to quality market), and it is clear Grierson Gallery are appealing to the masses, despite how consumption may affect the historical museum institution by cheapening it as a place of cultural significance and posterity.

Furthermore, the excessive security designed to protect this wondrous two-dimensional personified woman is essentially irrelevant once Bean is left alone with the masterpiece only to sneeze on and destroy it. The slapstick humour employed as he effortlessly kicks the painting from the frame and attempts to restore it suddenly questions the value of this suddenly tangible, destroyable object which supposedly contains a level of cultural significance which *even the artist did not attribute to it*.

After a midnight escape to de-fraud everyone by replacing the original work with its lifesize poster, finally “Dr Bean” delivers his much anticipated speech on the significance of *Whistler’s Mother* to the benefactor, the media and a host of important gallery employees. It seems fitting that Bean, having absolutely nothing to say, focuses on the image before him, describing its size, physical appearance and minimising the significance of the piece as a portrait by introducing Whistler’s mother as a virtual nobody, which is rather akin to the artist’s original goal (MacDonald 2015).

The audience is left confused about the value and definition of art in general, which deepens during the final scene where Bean is back in England with Whistler’s original work complete with Bean’s cartoon-like goblin face sketched in with a blue biro where Whistler’s mother’s head used to be. In some bizarre way, it almost feels as though the film honours Whistler’s original intentions for *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*, its resting place on the bedroom wall of the only genius who dared to take it for what it was – just a collection of colours and shapes arranged on a piece of canvas, as opposed to the group of elitists seeking to find the work’s cultural significance and mass market value for their own profit.

Bean’s first and foremost purpose is to entertain its audience through humour, however it does not disregard the facts of *Whistler’s Mother*’s historical context nor its place in museum theory discourses of the period.

Bibliography

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