

Some Ruminations around Cinematic Antidotes to the Oedipal Net(les) while Playing with De Lauraedipus Mulvey, or, He May Be off Screen, but...

Yvonne Rainer / April 1986

The Independent Film & Video Monthly

The Audience is once more perplexed after viewing my last film, *The Man Who Envied Women (TMWEW)*.¹ Some of them are once again asking, “What does *she* believe? Where in this welter of ideas, aphorisms, opinions, quotations, ironies, rhetoric, collisions, is *her* voice? Are there really no arguments to follow, no resolutions or conclusions to be gleaned from this overload? Are the meanings so embedded in ambiguity that even the most assiduous concentration is unable to dredge them up, with the various discourses eventually neutralizing each other?” (The Audience of my daydreams, like the voices of my films, is very gabby.)

I hope not. I am not an iconoclast bent on destroying all vestiges of “authorial discourse.” (As a “lapsed” anarchist, I am only too aware that when it comes to authority our choices are merely better or worse compromises.) On the contrary, I would like to believe that I subject such discourses to pressures and tests, or dislocations, e.g., a removal from their ordinary contexts—the printed page, the classroom, or the formal lecture—to unexpected physical and psychic spaces. The space of real estate profiteering, for instance, or the space of seduction, or the space of sexual (mis)representation.

In many ways, *TMWEW* lies outside traditional narrative cinema. There is no plot, for instance, and although the voice of the (absent) female protagonist can

be construed as a narrator, this voice departs from convention by refusing to push a story forward or promote a singular thesis that would tie up the various strands. In the struggle for the film's truth this equivocal, invisible heroine is not always the victor. Consequently, in relation to the social issues broached within the film, the question of an externally imposed, predetermined and determining coherence looms very large for some. If the process of identification with the trajectory of fictional characters is thwarted, we look for opportunities to identify with an extra-diegetic author or ultimate voice "behind" the film, if not camera. We are still not fluent in reading films that, while seeming to proffer this identification process, undermine it at the same time by setting other processes in motion, processes that involve a more detached kind of recognition and engagement. Rather than repositioning ourselves as spectators in response to cues that indicate we are being multivocally *addressed* and not just worked on by the filmic text, we still attempt to locate a singular author or wait for a conclusive outcome. The Master's Voice Syndrome all over again. And why not? Why else do we go to see narrative cinema than to be confirmed and reinforced in our most atavistic and oedipal mind-sets?

Well, now that I've so precipitously catapulted us into the psychoanalytic soup, I have to admit that I'm not entirely satisfied with the model of spectatorship so flippantly refashioned here. For one thing, who the hell is this "we"? Can this indolent pronoun possibly account for the people who like the movies I myself make? Let's say it includes some or all of us some of the time, or enough of us enough of the time for me to justify, within limits, my own cinematic practice.

But there is another reason for invoking this spectre/spectator, and that is to question its *sexual* homogeneity. Over a decade of feminist film theory has taught us the importance of splitting this undifferentiated pronominal mass into two, if not more, component parts. Let us now speak of male and female spectators. The "we" further unravels when "we" think about stories and storytelling. The stories we love the most are those that appeal to our deepest and earliest fears and desires that modulate and determine our placement in society as more, or less, successful adult men and women. The question has come to be asked (and

must continue to be asked inasmuch as those with more power and privilege are always inclined to erase both question and answers): within these stories, quoting from Teresa De Lauretis's "Desire in Narrative,"

... whose desire is it that speaks, and whom does that desire address? The received interpretations of the Oedipus story, Freud's among others, leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social, and source of mimetic violence....²

... [man as] hero, constructed as human... the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot- space. .. a resistance, matrix, and matter.³

Monster and landscape, she adds elsewhere, Sphinx, Medusa, ovum, earth, nature, Sleeping Beauty, etc.

Given that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, it can be said that

... the crime of Oedipus is the destruction of differences and that the combined work of myth and narrative is the production of Oedipus...a mapping of differences, and specifically, first and foremost, of sexual difference into each text... ⁴

The consequence for the reader/spectator is that

each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle- boundary-space [on the side of the object].

She elaborates:

...in its “making sense” of the world, narrative endlessly reconstructs it as a two- character drama in which the human person creates and recreates *himself* out of an abstract or purely symbolic other—the womb, the earth, the grave, the woman.... The drama has the movement of a passage, a crossing, an actively experienced transformation of the human being into—man. This is the sense in which all change, all social and personal—even physical —transformation is finally understood. ³

Another question that has subsequently arisen is, “What’s in it for us ladies?” Do we (ladies) go to the movies to put our minds in the hands of our various Daddies—benign, malevolent, whatever? The oppressed often have a very curious relation to those in power, a perverse identification with the power they lack. Why else would a black taxi driver justify his voting for Reagan with “I want to be on the side that’s going to win?” One of my earliest movie-going memories is recounted in *Film About a Woman Who... :*

She catches herself snorting gleefully at the scene of the two women being totally bitchy to one another. She remembers a similar scene— was it Dorothy Lamour or Betty Grable?—in a movie she saw when she was no more than 9 or 10. One woman had ripped another woman’s dress off. She had stayed in the movie theater long after her friends had left until that scene came around again. And she must have felt guilty about it, because she never told anybody, not her mother, nor anybody. ⁶

During this speech, which is uttered by a female voiceover, we are looking at a snapshot of an elderly woman sitting in a field. I have no idea what the original movie was other than its source, Hollywood, and the approximate year, 1944. I can account for my pleasure in watching that scene as vicarious satisfaction in the eruption of female anger on the screen, an anger that I was not permitted to express in my own family.

Right now, however, I am more interested in looking at my response as an

example of male sadistic identification. The spectacle of two women fighting over a man provoked in me the pleasure that was clearly intended for the male spectator who would “naturally” identify with the absent (from the scene) male character they were fighting over. I don’t remember rooting for either woman, neither the one who would eventually “get her man” nor her rival. The perversity of the situation was that I took pleasure in the humiliation of *both* women. Like the taxi driver, I was identifying with the power of the actual “winner,” the man, rather than with those with whom I shared the same psycho-social disfranchisement, the women.

How does this response, or my interpretation of it, mesh with De Lauretis’s

... If women spectators are to buy their tickets and their popcorn, the work of cinema, unlike “the aim of biology,” may be said to require women’s consent; and we may well suspect the narrative cinema in particular must be aimed, like desire, toward *seducing* women into femininity [emphasis added].⁷

Or with Laura Mulvey’s citation of Freud’s argument about female sexuality as “an oscillation between ‘passive’ femininity and regressive ‘masculinity’” in her effort to account for

... the female spectator’s phantasy of masculinization [which] is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes. ⁸

They are both pointing to a double identification. De Lauretis further specifies the figures of narrative (movement of the male subject) and image (narrative closure/the space and body of the female object, as exerting, in and of themselves, a dual hold on the female spectator.

I have no doubt that I dutifully identified with the more passive, feminine “desire to be desired,” in De Lauretis’s words, at other point; in my 1940s oedipal drama.

(And, as a story of one woman replacing another, it was quintessentially oedipal, a recapitulation of the classical Freudian account of male normative sexual development, with its demand for successful repression of infantile desire conflated with the mother.) But those were not the scenes that kept me in that theater until they came around again. Auguring calamitous consequences in my adult life, it was the scene of the two women fighting each other that gripped me most, a scene that almost 30 years later would be transformed and played out as a real life melodrama of internalized misogyny in my private life. In patriarchal terms, I was a wash-out. It wasn't that I had refused to be seduced into dancing on the oedipal stage. I had simply gone to sleep and missed all my cues. Even the prince's kiss could not awaken me. I refused to wake up, and that is what nearly did me in. If the Medusa had not been sleeping in her cave, could Perseus have slain her? Must it always be either the prince or Perseus who gets you in the end? Here's another story:

On October 25, 1856, on the night after the funeral of his father Jakob, Sigmund Freud had a dream. "I found myself in a shop where there was a notice [*Tafel*, German for tablet (of the law) or table] saying 'You are requested to close the eyes'...." Using Marie Balmary's intricately fashioned key from her *Psychoanalyzing Psychoanalysis*, we can interpret this dream as an "injunction to 'close an eye' to the faults of the deceased." What might these faults have been?

Preceding his father's death, Freud was collecting indisputable evidence that pointed to the father as the cause of hysterical symptoms in the child. His theory of seduction was not well-received by the Viennese medical community. Within 11 months after his father's death, he emerged from depression and mourning only to "close an eye" to his accumulated evidence via the Oedipus complex, his new theory that repudiated his patients' stories by consigning them to the realm of repressed unconscious desire. With his father's death he laid to rest his own unconscious knowledge of his father's unacknowledged past. Rather than two marriages there had been three. The town records of Freiberg reveal a second marriage to Rebecca, a mystery woman who is unrecognized in official Freud

biographies. The fate of this wife and marriage remains undocumented. Balmory speculates that she committed suicide just before or just after Freud's birth.

Oedipus and Freud's theory conjoin as myth to conceal the "hidden fault of the father." Oedipus's father Laius had seduced his (Laius's) half-brother, Chrysippus, who later committed suicide "from shame." Freud's "closing his eyes" to Jakob's part in Rebecca's suicide (seducer and abandonner) is reenacted in his ignoring the part Laius played in the Oedipus myth (first as seducer of Chrysippus and later as violator of the gods' injunction against procreation), and is echoed yet again in the attitude psychoanalysis brings to the afflicted patient: "The fault is *your* desire rather than that of your father." And rather than that of The Fathers, or patriarchal society.

To varying degrees and from early on, all of us can characterize our lives as a struggle between closing and opening our eyes, sleeping and waking, knowing and refusing to know. If, as De Lauretis and Mulvey say, women oscillate between masculine and feminine positions of spectatorship and identification, then it must be said that we also oscillate between knowing and not knowing that this is what we do. It is not the first oscillation that is in itself dangerous, but rather a state of ignorance of that oscillation that will permit Oedipus (used here to stand for the *dominance* of men's faults, fears, and desires) in some form or another to do you in. My archetypal Hollywood Oedipus waited off-screen to claim his true love in what was for my nine-year-old spectator a no-win situation, a rigged game in which the precondition for participation as a female was the willingness to lose. My pleasure was that of a sleepwalker dreaming a dream of perennial tomboyhood. A more bitter reality lurked in the wings: the father I could neither have nor become, already prompting dialogue from the scenario governing the next phase of my feminine life. But this last was a story that no one was telling, therefore one which I could not know.

By now it must be more than clear that one does not have to probe very far into the psychoanalytic uses of Oedipus to find a phallogocentric bias in both myth and theory. The terms of the oedipal formation of the human subject and its cultural

expressions all seem to come down on one side, whether we're talking about women as signifiers of castration threat, voyeurism and the controlling gaze, identity and difference, scopic drives, visual pleasure, To Have and Have Not. The problem is that even as we employ these terms for describing and unveiling the workings of patriarchy, we implicate ourselves deeper into those very operations, as into a well-worn track in the forest. The very notion of lack, as proposed by Lacan, mirrors the prevailing cultural bias by privileging the symbolic threat of loss of the penis over the actual loss of the mother's body. Yes, I know that language is an all-important mediating factor and that loss of the breast predates the acquisition of language. Which then means, of course, that the breast is "less" than the penis. And how can this be otherwise when the clitoris is *nonexistent*? Psychoanalytic hierarchies of sexual synecdoche are mind-boggling and, for psychoanalysis, irrevocable. For women, however, psychoanalysis can only define a site of prolonged struggle.

All of this may seem far afield from my starting place, the authorial voice and fictional subject in cinematic practice, which we may now characterize as our (back to the undifferentiated pronominal mass!) desire for Oedipus in all or most of His manifestations. Although I may have to pay the consequences of breaking the Law of the Father in my daily life, there's no reason I can't give it (the Law) a run for its money as a filmmaker. If I'm going to make a movie about Oedipus, i.e., Eddy and Edy Pussy Foot, I'm going to have to subject him to some calculated narrative screw-ups. It's elementary, dear Eddy: play with signifiers of desire. Have two actors play Jack Deller, the male protagonist in *TMWEW*. Remove the physical presence of Trisha, the female protagonist, and reintroduce her as a voice. Create situations that can accommodate both ambiguity and contradiction without eliminating the possibility of taking specific political stands.

Shift De Lauretis's image/ground of narrative movement by frequent changes in the "production value" of the image, e.g., by utilizing refilming techniques, blown-up super 8, inferior quality video transfers, shooting off of a TV set with bad reception, etc.—not in order to make the usual intra-narrative tropes, however,

such as the character's look at a TV show or a shift in meaning of the image to dream, flashback, or inner thoughts of a character. What I'm talking about is a disruption of the glossy, unified surface of professional cinematography by means of optically degenerated shots within an otherwise seamlessly edited narrative sequence.

Play off different, sometimes conflicting, authorial voices. And here I'm not talking about balance or both sides of a question like the nightly news, or about finding a "new language" for women. I'm talking about registers of complicity/protest/acquiescence within a single shot or scene that do not give a message of despair. I'm talking about bad guys making progressive political sense and good girls shooting off their big toe and mouth. I'm talking about uneven development and fit in the departments of consciousness, activism, articulation, and behavior that must be constantly reassessed by the spectator. I'm talking about incongruous juxtapositions of modes of address: recitation, reading, "real" or spontaneous speech, printed texts, quoted texts, *et al.*, all in the same film. I'm talking about representations of divine couplings and (un)holy triads being rescreened only to be used for target practice. I'm talking about not pretending that a life lived in potholes taking potshots will be easy and without cost, on screen or off.

I'm talking about films where in every scene you have to decide anew the priorities of looking and listening. In *TMWEW* there's a scene in which Jack Deller delivers a rambling lecture to a group of students in what is eventually revealed to be a newly renovated loft-condominium. If one doesn't pay particular attention to the insistent, autonomous tracking of the camera around the space, but puts all of one's efforts into deciphering the spoken text with its ellipses, digressions, and dipping in and out of Foucault, Lacan, Chomsky, Piaget, *et al.*, when Trisha's voice finally begins to talk about the disappeared in Central America and New York, you will have missed the meaning of that space, i.e., an expensive piece of real estate, as a crucial link between the lecture and instances of U.S. international and domestic imperialism. The visual track in this instance anticipates the sound track, but also supplies a subtext for the lecture with its

retroactive associations of urban university landgrabbing.

Later in the film, texts are played off in a different way. In a scene in a narrow corridor between Jack Deller and his ex-lover, Jackie, the main thesis of Foucault's "power-is-every-where" is intercut with documentary footage of demonstrations of power "somewhere" in particular, "on this side" and "on that side." Jack Deller's recitation of the Foucault material is further juxtaposed with Jackie's recitation of excerpts from an essay by Meaghan Morris in which she criticizes theory itself for having "no teeth."¹⁰

Other tensions abound here: the anti-monolithic arguments of Foucault colliding with Trisha's invocation of military/police and medical fraternities, and the disparity between doing and speaking, or image and text, as demonstrated in the seductive moves of Jack and Jackie, a disparity that then collides with Foucault's "There is no opposition between what is said and what is done."¹¹ At another point Morris's description of Lacan's reign at the "costume ball" of feminine writing "not as lawgiver but as queen" is followed by a dream sequence in which a mother and daughter (played by one performer) play a queen of the kitchen who is alternately romanced by her son-in-law and watches him and her daughter in bed, in a short and shifty oedipal extravaganza caustically narrated by the irate daughter. If these scenes are about a conflict between theory and practice, or a contradiction between theory and everyday life, they can also be read in terms of a "return of the repressed" which, operating as more than cheap subversion, constantly pressures theory into re-examining systems of signification, reinventing its own constraints.

Finally, I'm talking about films that allow for periods of poetic ambiguity, only to unexpectedly erupt into rhetoric, outrage, direct political address or analysis, only to return to a new adventure of Eddy Foot or New Perils of Edy Foot. He may still shoot off his big toe while getting or not getting the girl, but he'll also ask a few questions or wait in the wings a little longer to see how the ladies work it out without him. And this time around she may start to rip off her rival's dress, but then stop to muse, "Hey, we're wearing the same dress aren't we? Why don't we

pool our energies and try to figure out what a political myth for socialist feminism might look like?" So they (she and she) make a movie together and....

NOTES

1. 16mm, color, 125 min., 1985; distributed by First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014.
2. Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 112.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
6. Script of *Film About a Woman Who...* (16mm, black and white, 105 min., 1974), published in *October*, No. 2 (Summer 1976), p. 61.
7. De Lauretis, pp. 136-137.
8. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework*, No. 15/16/17 (1981), pp. 14-15.
9. From Sigmund Freud, the standard edition of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 13:213, quoted in Marie Balmory, *Psychoanalyzing Psychoanalysis: Freud and the Hidden Fault of the Father* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 80.
10. Meaghan Morris, "The Pirate's Fiancee," in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy* (Sydney. Feral Publications, 1979), edited by Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, p. 159.
11. "Power and Norm: Notes [taken at a lecture by Michel Foucault], *ibid.*, p. 62.

Yvonne Rainer is a filmmaker and ex-choreographer. A retrospective of her five feature films is taking place at the Whitney Museum of American Art, from March 25 to April 10, 1986.