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Leslie, Esther (2017) Between Brecht and Breton: on Amy! and Crystal Gazing. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Beyond the Scorched Earth of Counter-Cinema ,

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Amy!/Crystal Gazing Another title?

*AMY!* – in capital letters and with an exclamation mark – was made in 1980. A year in which Mulvey and others, as she states in her own introduction to the film at a film festival in Greece, ‘realised that the experimental, radical film movement in the UK was definitively at an end’. Thatcher had come to power in 1979. Utopian aspirations were lost as a result, as was also state funding for the arts. *AMY!* was made after a defeat that was felt palpably. What remained to do but look backwards? *Amy!* looks back to a historical figure - the aviator Amy Johnson, who flew in the 1930s and 1940s. She appears perhaps as an angel, a flying messenger, flitting across celluloid, from her ‘then’ to the ‘now’ of the film. There is little then in the film – some documentary materials, for example. But there is much now – the soundtrack, for one, a collage of sounds from the Feminist Improvising Group, X-Ray Spex amongst others grounds it in its moment of Punk and postpunk. Alongside contemporary music, there is more newness in the form of reconstruction (an actor playing Amy, a person reading newspaper headlines). There are also symbols, systems of representation, in the form of a map, huge and marked by the colonial language of naming. Maps, like newspapers, carry messages, ideological ones that rub uncomfortably against each other. The film is a collage – a ‘collage portrait’ as Peter Wollen named it. Despite the long shots and slow pace within sections, the chops between parts and the abrasiveness within the image/sound complex are disruptive: we see, for example, intimate portraits of tea making, while hearing routines for dismantling engines. What does a woman do?

*Amy!* begins with a kind of homage to political filmmaking of the 1930s. First the crowds appear, a mass event is underway, like those we may be familiar with - political rallies, homecomings, the walkabout of a dictator, a winning football team. It is the past, the one to which the previous decade’s radical filmmaking had related. This is the world that was filmed by Eisenstein and Vertov. A date flashes up, a subtitle....a direct address to the audience- *Are you ready? One, two, three....* AMY in big letters with its exclamation mark, like an intertitle by Eisenstein – excessive use of which has been described as Eisenstein’s predilection for an ejaculatory, phallic symbol. *Amy!* should flash again and grow bigger or smaller. And it does flash again, once more, but as a mechanism to transport us to the present, the film’s present, 1980. We land through its force, through Amy’s force, in the machine, the technology of its day, of the audience’s day, the post-cinema technology, TV. The TV is mediating a girl’s words. Now the overall theme of the film is engaged. It is the spectacle, TV, TV fame,

celebrity. It is the question of how celebrity makes us small because we can never attain it, and are able only to be in a distant proximity with it. It is a question of what TV does to heroes and heroines and how this makes us non-celebrated people feel or not feel our own possibilities for being, when we are absorbed by it. To be a heroine is to be an image. To be an image is to be a fake or to take part in fakery – so say the young women at Paddington College, interviewed at the start of the film.

Back into the reference to history in film: information flashes up in titles like newspaper headlines – Flying Dreams, Financial Backers – the path seems simple from airy imaginings to economic realities. In the titles we witness a process of concretization, a dream, a quest made real by Lord Wakefield's oil interests. Those oil interests that make the flights possible do not easily give up their underpinning, their enmeshment in colonial oppression, capitalist business practices and military adventures. As if to give us an object lesson in the question of perspective, we are confronted with a map, an aerial view and we pass over Europe, over Istanbul, Aleppo and Baghdad, Riyadh, Dubai, Calcutta, Kuala Lumpur to Australia. The aerial view is Amy's, though this is not what she sees, even if, because of the flight's logic, it is what she relates to. On the ground over which Amy Johnson flew, in the reality symbolised by the map and not shown upon it, there were – as there are today - political struggles, violence, war, resistance. Amy transcends this, though she is also enmeshed in it. The news headlines - headlines from *The Times* in May 1930 –make clear how much her flight becomes part of the day's reportage, part of its distractions, along with colonial violence and prison riots. The newspaper's fracturing of experience, its separations out and its lacking totality, is restrung in this rendering for we, the audience, hear connections between events on the ground, as we float across the map's abstraction. 'Peace', says the newsreader, is restored, once Gandhi is arrested and the Peshawar revolts suppressed. Not Gandhi's peace for sure, nor that of many others.

Amy Johnson's flight becomes part of the news in *The Times* alongside riots in India and racist killings in the USA. This map we see tells nothing of the brutality that daily takes place in its real-life analogue, as colonial oppression goes about its business and fascism is on the rise. Miss Johnson's flight belongs more to the map than the reality – it is a quest, a feat, a mythic exploit, a symbol of the victory of technology and the individual spirit. Its resilience and sheer exploit-like nature, its derring-do, its commitment to the map, to distance as an abstract quantity might be the antidote to the chaos and particularity of the ground. The flight is – or it becomes - a thing of human interest. It is, unlike the struggles on the ground, not

divisive, divisively sectional, political, unpredictable. It unites the world as globe, it does not break it into interests. It, this flight, at least as it is mediated to audiences, works to stabilise us. We are its fixed point, all the more fixed the more it moves. We are made all the more stable, by heroism's mythic powers, just as we are made small by the celebrity's larger-than-lifeness. Amy Johnson was perhaps, as the film ruminates, via Michael Balint's *Thrills and Regression*, a philobat, a risk-taker, a thrill-seeker, whose frustrations and fears are a motivation to soar high and away and who suffer gloom when on the Earth with mere mortals, with those who might abandon them at the drop of a hat. Amy stands as a model of what it might mean to be free, all the freer because she, as a woman, might not be expected to make such a claim to freedom. But her exemplary freedom has to be made safe, to be not an example, but an aberration. Mulvey and Wollen made a statement about the film in 1981. The statement reflects on how media works ideologically. Johnson's exploits have to be individualised, they note, in order to make those actions 'safe for patriarchy'. A woman's perverse deeds were translated into 'exemplary exploits' and assigned a 'symbolic role', so that they might be 'stabilised for our identification and entertainment'. She is brought down to our Earth as a God or Goddess. Within the film, though, we see something else – not the truth behind the fiction, but another perspective or representation. Amy Johnson is engaged in the non-spectacular, the silent acts of learning, the tedium of acquiring knowledge and skill, an interior pursuit that cannot be represented easily. And what we see too, and what we hear, is someone mobilised as, in the words of Poly Styrene, a concept, a dream, a reflection, a symbol, a theme, a figure for the sales machine, a victim, a casualty, a casualty of time. The thrills dissipate, even in soaring high, Amy experiences downfall – Amy Johnson desires to lose her identity in order to become herself once more.

We hear Yvonne Rainer read a collage of words from Bryher, Amelia Earnhardt, Lola Montez, Gertrude Stein and others, and we hear from young women on what they think heroism is, and how it might be invisible. Somewhere between and across these points questions of femininity are engaged on representing the female.

If *Amy!* gives us an image of a hero - or heroine - the film *Crystal Gazing*, from 1982 takes place in relation to an absent but pervasive female anti-hero – Margaret Thatcher. *Crystal Gazing* mainly follows four people as they make their way or fail to in London in the early 1980s. It is two men and two women. The men are not heroes. The men are lost, unmoored. Both die, one in an accident, one by his own hand. We learn of these deaths through TV or

video, distanced, mediated – the men are not full-bodied, they are becoming redundant. The women find ways to exist, but this is by becoming pulled into the workings of capitalism, one in relation to the spectacle, again, as a pop star; one in relation to the economy, through photographic work that can be commoditised for financial prediction.

The film is presented in the blurbs and textbooks as ‘the most narrative film’ that Mulvey and Wollen made, ‘a departure from the emphatic formalism’ of earlier films. But if it is narrative is a digressive and wandering one, as episodic and rambling as its characters, especially Neil, who seem not to know where to go or whom to go with, fantasizing futures, but bereft of one, made redundant by new capital, but still bound to it. The film proceeds by use of tableau, one-shot takes, set pieces – such as Keith Allen’s improvised monologue in a taxi queue. The film has narrative but it wanders and it is blocked. It is made of blocks and interruptions, and yet it also flows, or knots together its characters in strange, often stressed relationships, not straightforward but perverse, unhappy, mismatched. And the film gives time to music, to the songs of Lora Logic, which seem to be diegetic and non-diegetic at one and the same time. In some ways the songs tug against the narrative, holding it up – though they also underline how Kim is becoming a pop star. In as much as they hold up narrative, they are ‘individual units, like acts of ‘attractions’, as Mulvey put it in an interview that Mulvey and Wollen gave to *Framework* in 1982. In that one word, a sense of cinema as a popular form, a sensational, event-based frolic combines with cinema as participating in an avant garde project whose terms were identified by a filmmaker and theorist, Eisenstein, whose early cinema was organised as a montage of film attractions, which took popular forms of vaudeville and repurposed them to revolutionary ends. For sure, in *Crystal Gazing* the question of narrative appears as a something that the film possesses, but critically. The filmmakers wanted to break with the trends perceived amongst radical British filmmakers at the time – with the London Filmmakers Co-Op and the political documentary movement eschewing narrative and imbibing the anti-narrative theories of Kristeva or Barthes. But this was not to say that a complete acceptance of it was warranted. Somehow it had to be worked with and against. *Crystal Gazing*, it seems apparent from this interview, was part of another movement, another period. Perhaps that unleashed by Thatcherism, perhaps that which had to begin after the close of the experimental film movement. New alliances and new resources present themselves in this desperate situation which also brings all the potential energies of realignment. The film, basing its characters and their fate on Erich Kästner’s characters in the 1931 novel *Fabian*, evokes the pre-Nazi period of 50 years before. What is to become of this

city and the people in it – what is this new politics on the horizon? How will it change us and our relationships? Will it kill us? How can we fight it? Can we fight it with narrative, or film, or art? *Crystal Gazing* wanted to align not with the ‘nightmare of independent film’, filmmakers but with other independent cultural forms, ones that had more popular reach: independent music, theatre, comedy, science fantasy art, graffiti, busking, video games – subcultures, in short. This is not to say that the theoretical influence that had been so key for British radical cinema was abandoned. As Peter Wollen succinctly put it: ‘Rock n Roll and foreign theory, those are the two backbones of the film’. Accessibility and the right or wrong audience are questioned within the film, ironically, perhaps, but none the less – in relation to Julian’s PhD viva, a radical post-Lacanian reading of *Puss in Boots*. For whom is it written, for what and to whom?

A narrative, but one that wears its constructed nature on its sleeve – with repetitions, scenes that balance each other, interruptions, flows and blockages. The film is conceived as a series of episodes and as a whole. And that has something Brechtian about it – and perhaps indicates again the extent to which this is an epic, a journey, a series of stations along a way, a way that brings death with it, as much as it brings flourishing. The dialectic and all its contradictions are laid out like a tableau in the last scene: a picket line, a company collapse, some scabs, the thwarted journey and death of a non-hero. This death is mediated to us by TV, by the news. This death will be forgotten by the time of the next news, just as Kim barely registers the news of Neil’s friend’s death, caught up as she is in her own journey into celebrity, of becoming a spectacle of the technological imaginary. The spectacle asserts itself in this film and is shown showing. All the characters appear on video or TV, dead or alive. These devices are vectors of oblivion, notoriety or fame – it all depends on who and what you are and when. Is there suggested that there might yet be a more lasting effect of the friend’s suicide, for it is broadcast on home video, doubly mediated, it leaves traces, but what it seems to do more than anything is make out of suicide a theatrical gesture, one enriched by a reading of Antonin Artaud’s caustic open letter from 1925 to the Chancellors of the Universities: ‘Europe is becoming set in its ways, slowly embalming itself beneath the wrappings of its borders, its factories, its law-courts and its universities’. This is a film about decay and hopelessness.

But there were other influences acknowledged by Mulvey and Wollen. Wollen stated: ‘The film is really poised between Brecht and Breton’. It is here I want to end, taking the reading

of the film out of the milieu of ideas that arose in 1982, and crashing it into more recent ideas expressed by Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Uncertainty: Natural Magic and the Art of Deception' from the book *Death 24 x a Second*. Here Mulvey discusses the 'convergence between the arts of reality and the arts of deception that brought about the birth of the cinema in 1895'. Embodying this convergence is George Méliès, a professional magician and illusionist who melded the documentary capacity of cinema with magic and trickery. Méliès devised effects and surrealist scenes, quite unlike the Lumieres' focus on Realism. Documentary and magic, the real and the enchanted might be crudely bannered under Brecht and Breton. Mulvey's essay reflects on how forms of popular entertainment 'arts of deception' emerged out of the growth of a leisured mass audience in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, appealing to 'human fascination with the unnatural, the impossible and, ultimately, the supernatural' and 'its constant readiness to be fooled'. Cinema capitalised on these. In *Crystal Gazing* we have a couple of scenes in a cabaret with a magician. While the cabaret form was an inspiration for Brecht, because of its raucous popular nature, here it is a space of deception, with a magician plying his tricks. In another scene in the cabaret club, to emphasize a link to early cinema and the arts of enchantment, Lotte Reiniger's *Adventures of Prinz Achmed* plays in the background. Cinema has a capacity to deceive, audiences have a capacity to be deceived. Audiences want to be deceived. Cinema too has the capacity to reveal. Modernity's new consciousness, so Tom Gunning, via Mulvey, is one in which audiences partake in: 'Pleasure in the material relation between illusion and optics and between illusion and momentary credulity, playing with the mind's susceptibility to trickery', all of which 'involve various successive phases of exchange between the eye and the mind, belief, doubt, curiosity'. All well and good, but for this film, which wears its fairy tale and fantasy influences quite obviously, in its modern time, new magics are ascendant, or old ones repurposed to new ends. The character Vermillion, a magician's assistant with a magical gaze, by night, does hi-tech augury by day on satellite photographs. Like the photographs of spirits of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which appeared to make invisible forces visible, her photographs visualise the invisible through infrared and the like, and so allow for an analysis of something that cannot be seen – economic futures, the futures of food markets, yields annexed to colours on the images, say, those produced by drought spots, whose poor crops generate out of their nothingness profits in futures markets. The new end of this augury, this crystal gazing, then is economic prediction, here it glimmers as the first twinklings of neoliberalism. There is a deft magic in the film in that it perceived the rise of certain kinds of cultural labour, intellectual labour, as central to a new phase of capitalism. It depicts a future that was, and would be

female, in Thatcher's sense only perhaps, or, with a sliver more hope in the sense of the women on the picket line who appear inside the final crystal ball, fighting back but harbingers of death too. What deaths? Of working class struggle? Of radical possibility? Of old ways? Certainly of our hero who dies, finally a hero, under the wheels of a scab coach, while in the act of saving a child's life. Just like Fabian, on whom he is modelled, both committing their one, final, decisive moral act.

Looked at from the perspective of today, the crystal ball is a stand in for something else. It is the globe, our Earth, as seen impossibly from outside and above, as Vermillion sees it from her satellite photographs. What the film grasps as image in its incipient moments, 'the news on the not yet printed page', is the current phase of global capitalism, of globalisation, of new conditions in a world of flows and borders.