



The Bad Sister

Directors: Peter Wollen, Laura Mulvey

Production Companies:

The Moving Picture Company, Modelmark

Sponsor: Channel Four

Producer: Nigel Stafford-Clark

Screenplay: Peter Wollen, Laura Mulvey

Based on the novel by: Emma Tennant

Photography: Diane Tammes

Editor: Bob Gow

Art Director: Hildegard Bechtler

Music: Karl Jenkins, Mike Ratledge

Cast:

Dawn Archibald (*Jane*)

Isabel Dean (*Mrs Marten*)

Kevin McNally (*Tony*)

Matyelok Gibbs (*Meg*)

Hugh Millais (*Dalzell/Mr Aldridge*)

Neil Cunningham (*Stephen*)

Clive Merrison (*Paul*)

Marty Cruickshank (*Mary/Marie*)

Libba Davies (*Kathy*)

Emma Jacobs (*Miranda*)

Bill Denniston (*Luke*)

Maeve Watt (*Louise*)

Ian Stewart (*Mr Elliot*)

A.S. Ross (*interviewer*)

Allan Mitchell (*doctor*)

Annilee Kuukka (*Jane, girl*)

Harriet Laidlaw (*Isabel, girl*)

C4 tx 23.6.1983

93 mins

Digital

Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

The Bad Sister

The screening on Saturday 22 November will be introduced by Laura Mulvey

The Bad Sister has its origins in a 1978 novel of the same name by Emma Tennant (1937-2017), a writer preoccupied by 'gothic fantasies, postmodern fairytales, prequels, sequels and literary doubles', but who has yet to receive proper critical appraisal. Living in London's Notting Hill, home to many bohemians and counter-culturalists, she founded the literary magazine *Bananas* and edited it from 1975 to 1979. It was influenced, she claimed, by 'Borges and Marquez and *The Master and Margarita*, and featured work by experimental and awkward-squad writers such as Sara Maitland, Heathcote Williams, James Kirku, Michael Moorcock and Angela Carter. Wollen and Mulvey were not only friends; Wollen published various texts in the magazine, including his short story *Friendship's Death* (1976).

It's not hard to see why Mulvey and Wollen saw filmic potential in *The Bad Sister*. Published at the tail end of a decade in which feminist activism, literature, art and theory had made significant interventions in thought and culture, it's a story about a young woman's quest for freedom – from patriarchy, domesticity, possibly even heterosexuality. For Wollen, speaking in an interview with Wanda Bershen, '*The Bad Sister* goes back to the same kind of psychoanalytic material as *Riddles*, in that it's about the place of the woman within the Oedipal structure. *Riddles* was about the mother and the mother's point of view; *The Bad Sister* is about the daughter and the daughter's point of view.' This film thus extended Mulvey and Wollen's poetic engagement with psychoanalysis, which was underpinned by feminist theory and politics, and connected it with an interest in fairy tale, lost cultures of witchcraft and women's stories.

While there are theoretical and conceptual parallels between *The Bad Sister* and Mulvey and Wollen's previous work, it was the first of their films to be shot on video, a medium which had been attracting a growing number of British artists over the course of the 1970s, and was often heralded as an antidote to the monopolistic staidness of broadcast television. For Sean Cubitt and Stephen Partridge, video was able to bridge the vanguardism of the underground and its longer-term commitment – through such innovations as the underground press, the free schools movement and DIY music culture – to the development of grassroots radicalism beyond the traditional trade union movement and Labour Party. Video lent itself to the otherworldly textures and psychological interzones the directors were aiming for.

The Bad Sister also represented a move from the intimate, experimental circles that had helped gestate Mulvey and Wollen's previous collaborations into the intriguing newfoundland of Channel 4 and its state-sponsored avant-gardism. Mulvey has written about this migration in terms of cultural loss, a symptom of the waning resources available for radical (film) production, an acknowledgement that under Thatcher fewer artists would be able to flourish outside the mainstream. (And that mainstream, as far as British cinema in the early 1980s was concerned, was pretty feeble.)

The film's critical reception was scanty. Jean Fisher, writing in *Artforum*, argued that 'While there is much in the film to inspire a healthy critique of theoretical

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Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

25 and Under: An Introduction to Laura Mulvey

Wed 29 Oct 19:15 Blue Room

Riddles of the Sphinx

Tue 4 Nov 20:45; Mon 17 Nov 20:30 (+ intro);

Fri 21 Nov 18:20

Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons

Thu 6 Nov 20:30 (+ intro by academic and writer

Nicolas Helm-Grovas); Sun 16 Nov 12:30

Crystal Gazing

Mon 10 Nov 18:15 (+ intro); Sun 23 Nov 15:10

AMY! + discussion with Laura Mulvey

+ **Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti**

Tue 11 Nov 18:10

Zorn's Lemma + intro by Laura Mulvey

Mon 17 Nov 18:20

Laura Mulvey Symposium

Sat 22 Nov 11:00-17:00

The Bad Sister

Sat 22 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);

Wed 26 Nov 21:00

The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp

Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter

+ **The Woman's Film**

Sat 22 Nov 20:30

Le Vent d'est Wind from the East

Mon 24 Nov 18:15

Disgraced Monuments + discussion with

Laura Mulvey + **23rd August 2008**

Thu 27 Nov 18:10

Antonio das Mortes

O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro

Sat 29 Nov 15:10

See a selection of materials by Laura Mulvey in the
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psychoanalysis, it is at times too elliptical, at times self-consciously didactic.' Film on Four historian John Pym, in his brief synopsis, later noted that one scene featured Jane taking down 'a copy of Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969/1972): a word to the wise, perhaps, that *The Bad Sister* itself should be read as an additional chapter in some future edition of that book.' It's significant though that Jeremy Isaacs, chief executive of Channel 4 between 1981 and 1987, highlighted the film in *Storm Over 4: A Personal Account* (1989): 'Shot on video, it exploited electronic effects to lend a disorienting, hallucinatory quality to Emma Tennant's tale of witchcraft and wild women.'

The minimal response to *The Bad Sister* bothered both directors. Unusually for a Film on Four title it was never repeated. 'The fact that it has come and gone on one Thursday evening I found really frustrating,' admitted Wollen. 'With a film, you can take it round and show it and have a relationship with the audience which is quite different.' For Mulvey, speaking recently, 'It wasn't an experience I wanted to go through again. It was too big. Peter and I both felt that we'd found the process of collaboration easy before; but this was a much more difficult collaboration. There was more of a division of labour, a larger crew, more expectations put on the direction. There were fewer long takes now.'

From today's perspective though, it's the instability and ambition of *The Bad Sister* that makes it so fascinating. It is restless, displaced, a forced marriage of vanguardism and accommodationism, a stab at diversity and escaping the bubble of Co-op-policed experimentalism, caught between eras, too centripetal for the 1970s, too centrifugal for the 1980s, its own kind of filmic juggling. Flawed but simultaneously contagious, it's also a product of an almost-lost and certainly unrepeatable period of public television, as well as a tantalising glimpse of how Mulvey and Wollen's work might have evolved going forward. To watch it, as is the case with so many of their films, involves looking forward as much as looking back.

Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Timeshifting: *The Bad Sister*' in Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)