



#### **Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons**

*Directors:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

*Production Company:* Laura Mulvey-Peter Wollen

*Producers:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

*Production Co-ordinator:* Sharon Russell

*Production Consultant:* Dana Hodgson

*Research Assistants:* Judith Herren, Carol Laws, Guy Brett, Grier Davis

*Screenplay:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

*Photography:* Louis Castelli

*Video realisation of Episode 5:*

Evanston Percussion Ensemble

*Set Decorator of Episodes 1 and 5:*

Jerry Stropnick

*Costumes of Episodes 1 and 5:* Jeffrey Kurland

*Titles and Animation:* Don Lembeck

*Choreography of Episodes 1 and 5:* Bud Beyer

*Sound:* Larry Sider

*Cast:*

Debra Dolnansky (*herself/Penthesilea*)

Michael Thomas

Jan Creighton

Jim Goode

Lisa Kephart

Pat Kerwin

Whit MacLaughlin

Kristine Nielsen

Brian Reich

Jerry Stropnick

Ann Woodworth

Peter Wollen

Grace McKeaney

UK 1974

99 mins

Digital

The screening on Thu 6 Nov will be introduced by academic and writer Nicolas Helm-Grovas

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#### **Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film**

# **Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons**

#### **Laura Mulvey on 'Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons'**

Peter's and my shared love of Hollywood films had, from the earliest days of our relationship, been an integral part of our daily and our social lives. But in the early 1970s our attitudes and commitment to the cinema changed. The Hollywood studio system was, by then, a thing of the past and we began to discover new avant-garde and feminist experimental films: cinema as critique, film as a radical aesthetic for a radical politics. However, our actual move into filmmaking, the beginning of the Mulvey/Wollen collaboration, was more or less a product of circumstance or, even perhaps, chance. In 1972, Peter was invited to work in the Department of Radio, Film and Television at Northwestern University by Paddy Whannel (who had given Peter his first proper job at the BFI Education Department in the mid-1960s). Peter and Paddy's relationship, professional and personal, had been founded on a mutual love of Hollywood cinema and I, although professionally marginal, had always been included in this cinephilic bonding. But with the changing times Peter's interests and writing shifted towards counter-cinema, publishing his essay 'Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est* in 1972, and I began to write 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. At some point in 1973, Peter asked Paddy if he could teach an MA seminar on avant-garde film. Of course, Paddy agreed. But soon after, he said: 'If you and Laura are so keen on the avant-garde now days, make a film yourselves. We have a whole cupboard of equipment here, not used in the vacation. See what you can do!' *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* was made in response to this challenge.

Furthermore, living in Evanston, Peter and I were both cut off from our political roots in London. I had belonged to the History Group, a Women's Liberation reading group, and helped out with the administration of the London Women's Liberation Workshop. Peter was still on the Editorial Boards of *Screen* and *New Left Review*, but at a distance. *7 Days*, in which he had been closely involved in the early 70s, had failed to survive. I sometimes think that, in that comparative political isolation (our son Chad, aged three, was, of course, with us), we turned to each other as though to found a minimal collective, a small filmmaking and study group, as it were. Our first film emerged gradually. It was rooted in our recent polemical writing, inspired by the new horizons of possibility offered by films of ideas and revolved around issues, thrown up by feminism, that directly challenged the cinema, its imagery and its modes of storytelling. The actual process began with research: reading and discussion around, for instance, Amazons in ancient Greek culture and beyond, the psychoanalytic implications of the Amazon figure and Kleist's rewriting of the Penthesilea legend, an interweaving of myth and the historical realities of women in struggle... all producing endless notes, charts and conversations. The process of producing *Penthesilea* did not involve writing a script as such but, in keeping with Peter's and my tendency to think through diagrams and patterns, the words grew out of the film's evolution, through its various planning stages.

## 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  
BFI Reuben Library's window displays in November

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When we moved back to London, in late 1974, we found a new flourishing film cultural environment. Although the independent film movement had definitely been in the process of taking off when we left, it had gathered momentum. Having made *Penthesilea*, we not only arrived back home as filmmakers but also found a film culture that recognised the rationale for this work of feminist counter-cinema. It was this movement and this moment that gave a further impetus to Peter's and my collaboration. I sometimes think that in other circumstances *Penthesilea* might have been a one-off oddity; but it became, in fact, a crucial stepping stone both for our further film production and for the further development of our ideas.

The first step in the composition of all our films (until *The Bad Sister*, that is) was to arrange the thematic material we had collected together into a structure, which was ultimately organised into a series of parts or sequences. In a sense, this represents an aesthetic of layering or 'piling up' of ideas and images; our 'counter-cinema' commitment to challenging the transparency and the horizontal flow of both language and cinema is extended to structure. Rather than 'narrative or cinematic incident' leading seamlessly from one to another, the structure accumulates and also makes visible its fissures and gaps.

In *Penthesilea*, the sequences are visually and thematically cumulative. The first, a simple registration of Kleist's version of the story in mime, is complicated in the second. Here the camera's autonomous movement, its 'take' on the space and the performance, is additional to Peter's commentary on Kleist and the Amazon legend, already as he put it 'a palimpsest and a maze'. In the third sequence, images of Amazons are layered across history and mythology. In the fourth, the layering takes the form of cinematic superimposition; the suffragette film *What 80 Million Women Want* (1913) is switched alternately from foreground to background with an actor who reads from articles written by the contemporary socialist feminist Jessie Ashley. In the final part, the previous four are played on stacked video monitors, filmed by a video camera that picks out and zooms in on each one until they are gradually displaced by an added ending.

Laura Mulvey, Introduction from Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)