



Riddles of the Sphinx

Direction: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

©: British Film Institute

Production: BFI Production Board

Producers: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

Production Assistance: Mark Nash,

Linda Redford, John Howe, Jonathan Collinson

Screenplay: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen

Cinematography: Diane Tammes

Rostrum: Frameline Productions

Lights: G.B.S.

[Cinematography] Assisted by:

Jane Jackson, Steve Shaw

Special Photographic Effects: Burt Maiden

Editing: Carola Klein, Larry Sider

Opticals: Herbert Maiden

Music: Mike Rattledge

Performed with equipment designed by:

Denys Irving

Sound: Larry Sider

Sound Mixer: Peter Maxwell

Video: Evanston Percussion Unit

Child Care: Christine Smith

Cast:

Dinah Stabb (*Louise*)

Merdel Jordine (*Maxine*)

Rhiannon Tise (*Anna*)

Clive Merrison (*Chris*)

Marie Green (*Acrobat*)

Paula Melbourne (*rope act*)

Crissie Trigger (*juggler*)

Mary Maddox (*voice off*)

Laura Mulvey

Mary Kelly

Marion Dain

Rosalind Delmar

Mary Dickinson

Rosamund Howe

Miranda Feuchtwang

Carole James

Claire Johnston

Tina Keane

Lin Layram

Carole Myer

Patsy Nightingale

Brenda Prince

Valerie Neale

Winifred Wollen

Joy Wong

staff of the Kensington Training College

UK 1977©

91 mins

Digital

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by writer Marina Warner

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Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

Riddles of the Sphinx

'A film like *Riddles of the Sphinx* is designed to separate form from content, so that the spectator is simultaneously aware of each.' That is how, in 2002, Peter Wollen summed up one basic strategy underlying the film. There are several devices that work to remind the spectator of the constructed nature of what they see: the explicit flipping through a book with which the film begins ('Opening pages'), direct address to camera ('Laura speaking'), the re-photographing of existing film material ('Stones'), the optical printing of the female acrobats ('Acrobats'). However, the dominant feature in the 13 segments of 'Louise's story', the central chapter of the film, is the horizontal panning motion of the camera. With the exception of Michael Snow's trilogy on camera movement – *Wavelength* (1967), *Back and Forth* (1969) and *La Région Centrale* (1971) – few films are so rigorously based on one single operation.

If we think of Mulvey and Wollen's films of the 1970s as blueprints for and contributions to a 'third avant-garde', we might also think of the panning motion as a third option that overcomes or rather subverts the established dichotomy of montage versus the non-edited long take. Similar to cutting, and yet completely different, moving the camera creates relations. This is why Béla Balázs had intuitively characterised panning as a subcategory of montage, namely 'montage without cutting' in *The Spirit of Film* (1930): 'The camera turns or roams and has images of the objects it fleetingly catches pass muster before us. This is not montage assembled on celluloid; it is filmed as a montage from the outset. Its objects are already present in nature or in the studio. What makes the montage productive here is the selection of objects, and the rhythm of the camera movement in its panoramic sweep.'

There are many things that are remarkable about Diane Tammes's extraordinary camerawork, and especially the pans in this chapter of *Riddles*. First of all, they cover a full circle and register the totality of the given space. Categorically different from a tracking shot, the 360-degree panning motion returns to the very same spot from which it started. In this respect, it is a movement without any spatial progress. The position remains the same, a circle is completed and time has passed. In moving, the surrounding space is registered with a certain sense of completeness. If we wanted to come up with a term to describe this, we might call it a 'cosmological' operation in that it constructs a very specific, well-defined world. Here, in the first three pans, it is the domestic world with its everyday routines and working duties – traditionally a space coded as 'female' – that is quite literally built around the kitchen table.

In its regular and slow motion, the pan also brings up the question of scopic agency. Whose gaze is this? What perspective on the scenes and spaces of motherhood does the film choose? On the one hand, the detached, almost machine-like movement conjures up a neutral, impartial apparatus that records the external world in an act of documentation, almost like a surveillance camera. At the same time, all the parameters of this recording – the position and height of the camera, the framing that precludes any identification with the individual – are deliberate and conscious. The 'tight framing at work-surface height' of pan 1, the movement 'at cot-height' in pan 2 and, finally, in pan 4, the 'framing to show Louise fully for the first time' have the effect that we encounter the maternal spaces as spaces of work, that we get a sense of the duration of that labour. Also, we are made aware that what is shown is not an individual 'special case', but a paradigmatic existence within an existing structure.

Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

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-Groves); 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

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In a discussion event after the screening of the film at the 1977 Berlinale, James Benning asked about the potential tension between the neutral act of registering and the conscious, carefully choreographed scenes that take place before the camera. I would argue that this tension, among other things, creates a compelling alternative to the dominant narrative concerns of conventional cinema. The inherent dialectics of anticipation and remembering, of on-screen space and off-screen space, which defines every panning motion, becomes a simple but powerful tool to think about presence and absence, motion and stasis.

Riddles of the Sphinx picks up this spatial constellation, but transforms it to think about a different set of issues. It is not the 'autonomous person', but the complexities, challenges and politics of motherhood and gender that are investigated. In an important take on *Riddles*, Mary Ann Doane makes a similar argument and points out that, in its panning motion, '[t]he camera consistently transforms its own framing to elide the possibility of a fetishism of the female body.' Stressing the feminist potential of the camera operation, Doane claims that 'the circular camera movements which carve out the space of the *mise-en-scène* in *Riddles of the Sphinx* are in a sense more critical to a discussion of the film than the status of the figure of the Sphinx as feminine. The film effects a continual displacement of the gaze which "catches" the woman's body only accidentally, momentarily, refusing to hold or fix her in the frame.' In their succession and progress, the 13 pans document a shift from the domestic to the social fabric of the nursery, the workplace and beyond, while Mike Ratledge's soundtrack gives way more and more to the conversations and discussions between the women within the diegesis.

Traditionally, the notion of 'filmic thinking' and its primary genre, the essay film, have been linked to the capacities of montage. *Riddles*, in contrast, makes us consider the extent to which camera movement also has the potential to 'theorise'. To me, it seems that the priority that is often given to montage exists for several reasons. On the one hand, confronting two shots via montage establishes a firm and explicit sense of relation. It can therefore be more easily integrated into semiotic systems of signification and effect. In contrast to the discontinuous, abrupt montage of shots – whose principles, taxonomies and potential impact have been discussed in countless studies – camera movement confronts us with transitions, flowing developments, gradual and continual shifts that are much more difficult to describe. While the semiotic register of differences is well suited to analyse montage, the fluidity of the pan might need different theoretical instruments that manage to capture an experience rather than an intellectual form of understanding.

At the moment of its production, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, along with films by Babette Mangolte, Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman and others, broke new ground and opened up a third path to complement the 'two avant-gardes'. From today's vantage point, we see more clearly how this also meant redefining the thresholds between theory and practice, as well as between writing and filmmaking.

Volker Pantenburg, 'Towards New Theoretical Instruments: *Riddles of the Sphinx*' in Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)