Imagining the Seventies

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‘What do you see if you try to imagine the 1970s?’ A number of European artists working with the moving image have recently offered answers to this question. Éric Baudelaire, Filipa Cesar, and Jean-Gabriel Périot are just a few of the most prominent to return to the period and its legacy of vanguard film practices. A 2015 exhibition at London’s Raven Row comprising some fifty hours of moving image work, ‘The Inoperative Community’, was devoted to what its curator Dan Kidner described as ‘the long 1970s (1968–84)’; a key motif was ‘the limits of political activism and the fate of left political subcultures’. Today, these years of interchange between the avant-garde and progressive movements of various stripes seem to exert a determined pull on a younger generation. Is this a classic case of left melancholy, a nostalgic turning-back that is also a turning-away from the impasses of the present? The fetish for radical chic is unrelenting, and it is easy to counterpose the complicities of the present with the convictions of the past. Yet there is no denying that it is easier to see after the dust has settled, and the long 1970s offers a range of aesthetic and political histories that are enduringly relevant, some perhaps newly – or differently – visible in the light of the present.

‘What do you see if you try to imagine the 1970s?’ is also a question that Peter Wollen asks his ten-year-old daughter Audrey in Kerry Tribe’s *Here & Elsewhere* (2002). The split-screen video was positioned near the entrance of ‘Laura Mulvey & Peter Wollen – Intersections in

Theory, Film, and Art', held this summer at Camera Austria in Graz. The exhibition's curators, Oliver Fuke and Nicolas Helm-Grovas, framed their inquiry as a 'belated' encounter, foregrounding the distance that separates them from their subjects. The effect was to partake in the retrospective impulse animating much recent artistic and curatorial practice while also interrogating its stakes. Thanks to meticulous research, the two offered a very different response to Wollen's question than his young daughter. While she answers, 'I don't see anything', Fuke and Helm-Grovas see plenty. The exhibition succeeded in staging a dense network of relations between theory and practice, between Mulvey and Wollen's work and the social context that informed it, and between the heady moment of the mid-1970s and its enduring afterlives.

The core of the exhibition consisted of films made by Mulvey and Wollen, together and separately. Their best-known features, *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), played in alternation as a single projection. An array of other works were displayed around the room on monitors with headphones, including their diptych portrait *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (1984) and Mulvey and Mark Lewis's *Disgraced Monuments* (1994) which examines the fate of Soviet statuary after the fall of the USSR. Initially working as critics and theorists, Mulvey and Wollen ventured into filmmaking in the early 1970s to put into practice their conception of 'counter-cinema', one which would embrace radicalism of both form and content. In a 1976 conversation in *Afterimage,* they described *Penthesilea* as an attempt to bridge what Wollen had identified a year earlier as the 'two avant-gardes' – on the one hand, 'experimental or avant-garde film', and on the other, 'political film, in the agitational or militant sense'. (In another testament to the contemporary fascination with the long 1970s, selections from this little magazine, including Mulvey and Wollen's 'Written Discussion', have just been reissued as *The Afterimage Reader*.)

Forging a counter-cinema meant breaking not only with Hollywood, but also the medium-specific purism of the film co-operatives and realist practices that located their politics exclusively at the level of

content. *Riddles of the Sphinx* tells the story of Louise – a mother who is politicised through her daily experiences and a close female friendship – in thirteen single-shot chapters. Yet all familiar articulations of filmic space and, as a corollary, conventional forms of identification are refused; in their stead is a series of 360-degree pans that rotate with indifference to the action. These are interrupted by title cards and bookended by other material, including a to-camera lecture by Mulvey on the topic of the titular myth. Braiding together semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, and the post-Godardian revival of Brechtian aesthetics, the film dispenses with the pleasures upon which cinema habitually depends, installing in their place the pleasures – powerful, too – of critique.

In Graz, a vitrine displayed the small mercury maze that appears in the final shot of *Riddles*, a children's toy repurposed as enigmatic (non-)ending. Surrounding it were archival documents, scribbled notes and diagrams, salutary reminders that behind these seminal films and polemics lie the false starts, speculations and revisions that form part of the process for us all. On the opposite wall were two sets of index cards that appear in *Penthesilea:* the first, typewritten prompts used by a thirtysomething Wollen, then a visiting professor at Northwestern University, as he delivers a lecture in a house in Evanston, Illinois, parsing the construction of the film ('…our film is un-natural. It is a film which avoids conventional cuts, but not discontinuities or breaks. It is a montage film…'; the second, handwritten in block capitals, are seen scattered around the same space and intermittently captured in close-up by the roaming camera. These artefacts had a multivalence, at once seeming to consign Mulvey and Wollen's work to history, yet also rendering it palpably present in the here and now, by supplementing the immaterial film image with the materiality of *things*. These were things that have survived from the world of the films, the world of the 1970s, to meet us in our own beleaguered time. And if things can survive, so can ideas. The wager of the curators seemed to be that Mulvey and Wollen's theory and practice should and could return to challenge the present with the force of anachronism.

Around the corner was Victor Burgin's *Gradiva* (1982), a series of seven captioned photographs that reimagine Wilhelm Jensen's 1902 novella of the same name, famously analysed by Sigmund Freud. The work primarily featured in the exhibition as an emblem of the longstanding dialogue between Burgin, Mulvey and Wollen; likewise the presentation of Mary Kelly's *Primapara: Bathing Series* (1974), twelve photographs depicting the body of the artist's infant son in fragmenting proximity, closely linked to her landmark work, *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79). In the context of the assorted film props and documents, though, Burgin's photographs took on an added resonance. *Gradiva* is, after all, a story of archive fever, of the impossible dream of defeating time by rematerializing the past. In Jensen's novella, an archaeologist becomes obsessed with a woman he sees represented in a Roman bas-relief sculpture and goes to Pompeii in search of her. There, he believes he finds her, alive. It falls to this woman to explain that he has misrecognized her, that she is not from the ancient past but is familiar from a time much nearer yet nonetheless gone, his childhood. For Derrida, the story spoke of the 'painful desire for a return to the authentic and singular origin' – in short, of the longing for an impossibility, one perhaps familiar to anyone who has engaged in historical research.

Something of this desire could be felt in the exhibition, insofar as it was directed by the urge to recover a time when British cinema was marked by commitment, experimentation, intellectual seriousness and independence – qualities that have undoubtedly atrophied in the intervening decades. Yet as much it was warmed by the flush of archive fever, the presentation deftly avoided succumbing to its delirium. True to their stated embrace of belatedness, the curators chose not to present a time capsule of the 1970s, but rather opened their inquiry outwards by presenting Mulvey and Wollen's later work, as well as instances of artists engaging with their legacy in the twenty-first century. Holly Antrum's contribution self-consciously pointed to the danger of over-identification with the archive. The artist presented a vitrine of barely legible pages written in pencil, facsimile copies of documents in the Peter Wollen collection at the British Film Institute National Archive, credited to the fictional researcher Markéta

Hašková. The implication being that in trying to remain as close to Wollen's notes as possible, Hašková sacrifices not only her own perspective, but also loses sight of the material's substance.

In Em Hedditch's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (2006), Mulvey sits at a desk reading, much as she did in *Riddles* over thirty years before. She recites passages from her much cited (and much misunderstood) titular essay, now and then explaining why she chose to do certain things, such as her controversial choice to describe cinema as having a universalized masculine form of address. Occasionally, clips from films such as Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944) appear onscreen, illustrating the article's claims. It would be wrong though to consider the work as simply an adaptation of Mulvey's essay, in the form of 'videographic criticism' that prevails today; the sparing use of clips alone should be a clue that something different is at stake. Hedditch's gesture is better understood as an act of intergenerational memory, and symbol of the overarching conceptualization of the exhibition.

Similar concerns inform Tribe's *Here & Elsewhere*, which borrows its title from Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et ailleurs* (1976) as well as something of its approach from their *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1977). Wollen remains out of frame, asking his daughter philosophical questions concerning time, existence and the image. The setting is domestic, their rapport intimate. Theory becomes the stuff of bedtime stories; the theorist becomes father, caretaker, teacher. Periodically, panning shots of the Los Angeles cityscape appear, presenting a geography distant from the Englishness apparent in Wollen's voice, articulating an additional notion of the 'here' and the 'elsewhere'. As in Hedditch's collaboration with Mulvey, the act of unfaithful remaking serves to pile temporal layer upon temporal layer, allowing a return to privileged moments in the film historical past while nevertheless remaining firmly anchored in the present.

‘What do you see if you try to imagine the 1970s?’ ‘Laura Mulvey & Peter Wollen – Intersections in Theory, Film, and Art’ reminds us that the wording of Wollen’s question is crucial. One cannot see the past the way one sees a film or a memorable prop exhibited in a gallery space. The 1970s, or any other vanished decade, can only come into view through acts of imagination and creativity. This was something Mulvey and Wollen themselves knew well: as the latter puts it as he roams around the Evanston house in *Penthesilea*, reading from his index cards, ‘It is only through the detours of fantasy and dream that we can return to history and act there’.

Read on: Peter Wollen, ‘Brecht in LA’, NLR 136.