Reclaiming the subject

A feminist reading of
“"I've Heard The Mermaids Singing"

BY GEORGE GODWIN

It is by now axiomatic that the female subject is the object rather than the subject of the gaze in mainstream narrative cinema. She is excluded from authoritative vision not only at the level of the production, but also at that of the fiction. At the same time she functions as an organizing spectacle, as the look which structures the symbolic order and sustains the relay of male gazes.1

This axiom is at the heart of the project of feminist film theory, reflecting the larger question within feminist theory itself regarding the possibility of a female subject within a patriarchal social organization. The tools used for the examination of this problem are semiotics and language-based psychoanalysis. Briefly, the terms of the argument might be stated as follows: where society is patriarchal and identity is posited in terms deriving from the Oedipal situation (difference defined as the lack of the phallus), woman is constituted in terms of the male — what she is different from the male, or more specifically, she lacks the primary signifier of the phallus. Thus the possibility of constituting the woman as subject is forestalled at the source. What is male defines the female by her lack of it. She cannot be subject, only object. By its very nature, then, the gaze — being rooted in the subject — must be male.

Spectatorship, it then follows, must be a gendered concept: different for the male and the female. This is not, of course, the result of biological difference, but rather is an effect of ideology. "Ideology represents "not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" and which govern their existence. "2 In her book Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis examines the means by which ideology produces the "social fact" of gender. She quotes Parveen Adams: "In terms of sexual differences… what has to be grasped is, precisely, the production of differences through systems of representation: the work of representation produces differences that cannot be known in advance.3 The imaginary relations of gender (male=active/passive of the look; subject; female=passive/object of the look) are created in representation. They are attributes imposed by

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Polly is clumsy and awkward under the gaze of the curator in her initial interview; the curator who, to Polly, represents the authoritative look of the world of official art. This aspect of Polly-as-negative-spectacle climaxes in the restaurant scene, again in the presence of the curator, the object of Polly’s identification. But there seems to be something wrong with this scene. It is, in the curator’s words in a later scene, “the tripe made flesh.” Its comic business (involving a bowl full of octopus tentacles) is over-extended and the climax so loudly telegraphed by camera placement and timing that what becomes foregrounded is not an ‘endearing’ quality of Polly’s character but rather the imposition on her of the position of object-of-the-spectacle by the cinematic apparatus itself. In essence, this whole business of Polly’s being a cute, adorable klutz is in fact a lie told about her by an apparatus which would deny her the authority of the look. By exposing the underlying process, Rozema takes away the spectator’s pleasure — we must look to something else or see the film merely as an awkwardly executed comedy.

From this point on, although Polly is occasionally clumsy, less emphasis is placed on the fact and it becomes simply a balanced part of her overall character, rather than the primary definition of that character. But what about that other aspect, her probing look? How does Rozema bypass the problem which is apparently inherent in the voyeuristic position? Once again, the initial strategy of the video camera offers the spectator an alternative: Polly invites us to look at her and, more importantly, to look with her. And her look — unlike that of L. B. Jeffreys or Harry Caul (The Conversation) — is not pathological: it is not essentially linear and focused, but rather is diffuse and exploratory. As a woman lacking in confidence, she is seeking an understanding of the world and a way of being in it. She is looking to learn, not to secretly possess. (There is, however, an element of the traditional (male) voyeurism contained within this broader look — Polly’s ‘spying’ on the curator for whom she develops an emotional attachment. But this leads to a crisis which is ultimately liberating rather than to the traditional exposure to danger.)

Initially, her look is private: she carries a camera and takes pictures wherever she goes (her skill here indicates the falsity of the status initially assigned to her by the cinematic apparatus). But this private look lacks confidence — that is, it is static and colourless, taking on life not at its point of contact with the world, but rather inside Polly, in her fantasies where she establishes an alternative world in which she is self-assured, in control. Her look is turned inwards because no space is open for it in the exterior world. When Polly submits her pictures to the curator (anonymously) they are summarily dismissed as “the tripe made flesh.” We might ask from what position this dismissal is issued.

The curator is, for Polly, a positive figure — idealized in fact: a successful woman in a male environment. But the curator has assumed her position by adopting the dominant (male) look. At one point, Polly looks on admiringly as the curator vies with a male critic for possession of the authoritative critical position on the work of a new artist. Here, as the two of them struggle for possession of the theory, the theory takes possession of the artist’s work: the dominant look is a closed system which consumes its objects. The curator does not even see Polly’s pictures: the position she has assumed is closed to any look which comes from outside of itself.

This process is revealed again when Polly, having discovered what is apparently the Curator’s private look (a series of ‘golden paintings’) makes that look public by bringing one of the pictures out into the open. **This painting is immediately recontoured in the terms of dominant criticism and, in essence, dismissed by the film’s second (of only two) male characters who surrounds his positive comments with snide remarks designed to deny the value of what has been produced by a woman’s look. It is Polly who here speaks up in the painting’s defense (the woman’s defense) because the curator, having situated herself in the dominant position, cannot separate herself from her official role to take full possession of the alternative position. Or, put more bluntly, with the actual presence of men minimized in the film, the curator comes to represent the dominant (male) position as it is internalized by women in a patriarchal system (she even implicitly takes credit for the work actually produced by her female lover).**

These two moments — the dismissal of Polly’s photographs and her defense of the woman’s painting — are critical turning points for Polly. After the first, she symbolically ‘blinds’ herself by smashing her camera and burning many of her pictures; with the second, she has moved away from her private position to a more public one, asserting the value of not just one individual’s work, but the legitimacy of the woman’s look against the male’s denial of it. That is, Polly has moved from a position in which a woman’s look is secret and inwardly focused to a new position from which the primacy of the male look can be challenged. So what she has destroyed in her symbolic ‘blinding’ is not her actual look, but rather the privacy of that look; she has been forced to go public and in doing has gained enough confidence to challenge the authority of the male look.

But she still has one blind spot. She is projecting her position onto the figure of the curator (whom she not only admires, but loves). And so, despite her new public position, she seems able to have access to the look only through this alternative authority figure (who stands in for the male). At this point a non-cinematic feminist concern enters the picture: the lie. Feminists have analyzed the ways in which patriarchal culture separates women from one another, thereby diminishing their strength and isolating them; by setting women in competition with one another, patriarchy establishes the lie as a primary mechanism in relationships (as cinema has helped to reinforce the lie of gender through its traditional narrative mechanisms).

The climactic moment of Mermaids occurs when Polly discovers that the curator did not in
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Notes
3. Quoted in de Lauretis, ibid., p. 7.
6. The title refers to the female voice of (what is to our patriarchal society still) a mythical other reality.

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These paintings are represented as panels from which a rich, warm light flows; unlike Polly's sharp black-and-white photographs, they are not pinned down by concrete visual elements which might allow them to be absorbed into a pre-existing spatial category; they are representative of vision itself.

lie which is a denial of the relationship between the curator and Polly. But while this moment shatters her feelings for the curator, it simultaneously frees Polly from the trap of identifying with her. It is at this point that Polly steals the video camera (takes possession of the apparatus of the look) and uses it to tell her story, uses it to present herself to us, to the spectator; that is, Polly now actively creates herself as subject (in motion and in colour) and gives herself to us by an act of her own will. She establishes her autonomy, denying our possession of her.

This position action might seem like a hollow triumph if it left Polly alone once more, as it would seem to do as the closing credits begin to roll. But the credits are interrupted by the arrival of the curator and the artist; the exposure of the lie has also fractured the untenable position in which they had been placed by their attempt to adapt themselves to the official structure of the art world, to the dominant look — a position which was a denial of their own original way of seeing. They now see Polly's pictures for what they are — a woman's way of looking — and are ready to be shown what she sees. As in the films of Borden and Gorris, these women can now establish a new relationship rooted in a mutual recognition of their position in the larger society and a rejection of that society's definition of their position. In a startling final image Polly opens her rooftop apartment door to reveal a world of teeming with life, out into which she ushers the spectatorship while obviously continuing her position action. Here Rozema ruptures the contradiction of the traditional mechanism of the end.

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