

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 enunciation, but at that of the fiction. At the same time she functions as an organizing spectacle, as the lack which structures the symbolic order and sustains the relay of male glances.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 is different from the male, or more specifically, she lacks the primary signifier of identity, 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/possessor of the look/subject; female=passive/object of the look) are created in representation. They are attributes imposed by

patriarchal formulations, not functions of an "objective reality". Hence, in cinema (one of the "technologies of gender"), male dominance is encoded within the cinematic apparatus, for the "look" itself (as defined by psychoanalysis) is rooted in voyeurism and fetishism – specifically, elements integral to the delineation of male subjectivity.⁴

It has been the project of feminist film theory to analyze the problematic position offered to the female spectator: identification with the woman as object, defined by male desires; or identification with the male subject and his desire for the female object. It has been the project of feminist filmmaking to attempt to alter the terms by which the subject of the gaze is constituted. In the films of Lizzie Borden (*Born in Flames*, *Working Girls*) and Marleen Gorris (*Die Stille Rond Christine M.* and *Gebroken Spiegels*), for instance, the position of the woman in relation to the male gaze (and, on a broader level, to the institutional and economic structures of the patriarchal culture) is analyzed in detail, moving towards a constitution of the female subject by exposing and rejecting the terms of the woman's object-ness. Both *Working Girls* and *Gebroken Spiegels* end with their principal characters rejecting the definition of themselves as mirrors of a wholly male desire, while *Christine M.*, a more complicated case, concludes with the complete impossibility of a connection between male culture/language and female experience (which is, by definition, outside language in a patriarchal society). In each of these cases the exhilaration attending the woman's assumption of subjecthood is accompanied by a vertiginous feeling that there is no available space for her to be a subject in.

While the task of constituting the woman as subject within a culture which remains patriarchal is problematic, feminist filmmakers have been working out strategies which have at least begun to fracture the primacy of the male gaze.

*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing**: a case study

As in all feminist filmmaking, Rozema's theme and technique in *Mermaids* are inextricably bound because in cinema technique constitutes the signifying system. (This explains why, no matter how prominent a female character might be in traditional narrative cinema, such a character ultimately cannot break through into autonomous subjecthood: see Mary Anne Doane's analysis of the strategies for containing

the woman's look in the Hollywood woman's film of the '40s in *The Desire to Desire*). Rozema's technique is to make conscious the mechanism of cinematic looking, while her theme is the legitimisation of one woman's way of looking.

The first step in dismantling an oppressive system must be the exposing of its operating mechanisms. The power of the voyeuristic position lies in the voyeur's not being seen; anonymity allows the voyeur a sense of omnipotence which is the source of pleasure in looking. Rozema immediately short-circuits this system: the film begins with a flickering video image and Polly, who has just switched on the camera, steps into frame (from our own symbolic position behind the camera) and looks out at us. The distance between the cinematic object and the spectator is collapsed and in the immediate awareness of our act of looking caused by Polly's looking at us, we must readjust our accustomed approach to film; we must justify our looking or look away. Throughout the film, Rozema returns to this image of Polly addressing the spectator, preventing any slippage back into anonymity. Our only viable choice, if we are not to reject the film outright, is to reestablish our pleasure in looking by aligning our gaze with Polly's own (as we traditionally align our gaze with the active male subject's gaze).

It is interesting to note that Rozema's use of the video camera here differs from its function in a number of more traditional films. For instance, in Michael Ritchie's *Downhill Racer* and *The Candidate*, multiple video images are used to fragment the primary image, removing it yet another step from the spectator. This increase in distance not only reinforces the voyeur's anonymity, it emphasizes the alienation of the drama's protagonist which is part of the films' theme. And in *The Big Chill*, although there is a certain similarity to Rozema's strategy in the characters' confessional use of the video camera, Kasdan's film still allows the spectator to retain voyeuristic anonymity by framing the moment within the look of the other characters, closing the narrative space in a traditional way. In both these instances, the technique used keeps the spectator outside. In *Mermaids*, by contrast, the distance between Polly and the spectator is collapsed by direct address which does not permit us to place a diegetic recipient of that address before us like a mask.

The second point to note about this aspect of Rozema's technique is its difference from other films in which the voyeuristic aspect of film

spectatorship is an important theme. Typically, this strategy is accompanied by a sense of danger – and in many instances a dangerous eroticism. In films such as *Rear Window*, *Peeping Tom*, *Psycho*, *Blow Up*, *The Conversation*, the conscious act of looking again and again exposes the illicit, the crime of violence, in which the voyeur becomes implicated (both the voyeur in the film/and, through their pleasurable identification with the subject, the people in the audience).

In *Rear Window*, Hitchcock exposes the danger inherent in the voyeur's complicity in the crimes he observes: when Lisa leaves the voyeur's protected position and herself becomes the object of his (L. B. Jefferies') look, she is exposed to danger. And further, because the distance between the voyeur (Jefferies) and the object (Lisa) of his look is collapsed (she is his fiancé and knows that he is observing her as she moves through the scene of the crime) he loses his anonymity and is consequently exposed to danger himself (it is here, for the first and only time, that the film's point of view moves out of the protective cell of Jefferies' apartment). The pleasure of film is the pleasure of illicit looking, the voyeur's pleasure: what these traditional treatments of cinematic voyeurism indicate is the loss of pleasure – the actual threat – contained within the possibility of exposure. (The public's pleasure in all these cases, however, is maintained because, unlike the voyeurs in the films, they – the meta-voyeurs – are permitted to remain anonymous by the films' narrative mechanisms: the pleasure is, in fact, compounded, as it is in the horror film, by the simultaneous sense of danger and safety.)

But Rozema exposes the spectator right at the start of *Mermaids*. Already, we must seek new strategies for viewing if we are not to withdraw our spectatorial investment immediately. As noted above, our first move must be to align ourselves with Polly's look. This becomes more complicated when it becomes apparent that Polly is herself a kind of voyeur; her relation to the world is one of perpetual looking.

But before investigating this – the core of the film – we must analyze the way in which Rozema disposes of Polly-as-object. Early in the film, what is emphasized is Polly's excessive self-consciousness in the presence of others and the clumsiness which results from her consciousness of being watched. We do not have here the poised spectacle of traditional narrative cinema; we have an individual whose functioning is interfered with by being watched.

Winnipeg-based George Godwin has written articles about film for *Film Quarterly* and *Cine Fantastique* and worked on a video about the production *Dune* for *Universal Studios*.



Mermaids – aligning our gaze with Rozema

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 trite 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. Jefferies 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 trite 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 recontained 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 so 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 relationships³ (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

fact paint the 'golden pictures'; they were the work of her lesbian lover. (This revelation parallels the eruption of danger in the traditional

'voyeuristic' film, but here once again the effect is different, and ironically, Polly was not actually 'spying' on the curator when the information is

revealed; she finds out by accident.) It is not the fact of the paintings' authorship itself which is critical; what matters is the betrayal of trust, the

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 light and colour, a rich green summer woodland teeming with life, out into which she ushers her two companions. Here Rozema ruptures the mechanism of closure represented by the film's credits and thrusts us out of the film's diegesis and into the possibility of an entirely new world perceived by the woman's look.

Polly, the subject now, fully in control of the apparatus and its potential, reaches out and turns off the camera – thus ending our spectatorship while obviously continuing her own autonomous existence without us, in direct contradiction of the traditional mechanism of THE END. •

Notes

¹ Kaja Silverman, "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice" in *Re-Vision*, eds. Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, & Linda Williams, University Publications of America Inc., 1984, p. 131.

² Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 16. Quoting Louis Althusser.

³ Quoted in de Lauretis, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 16.

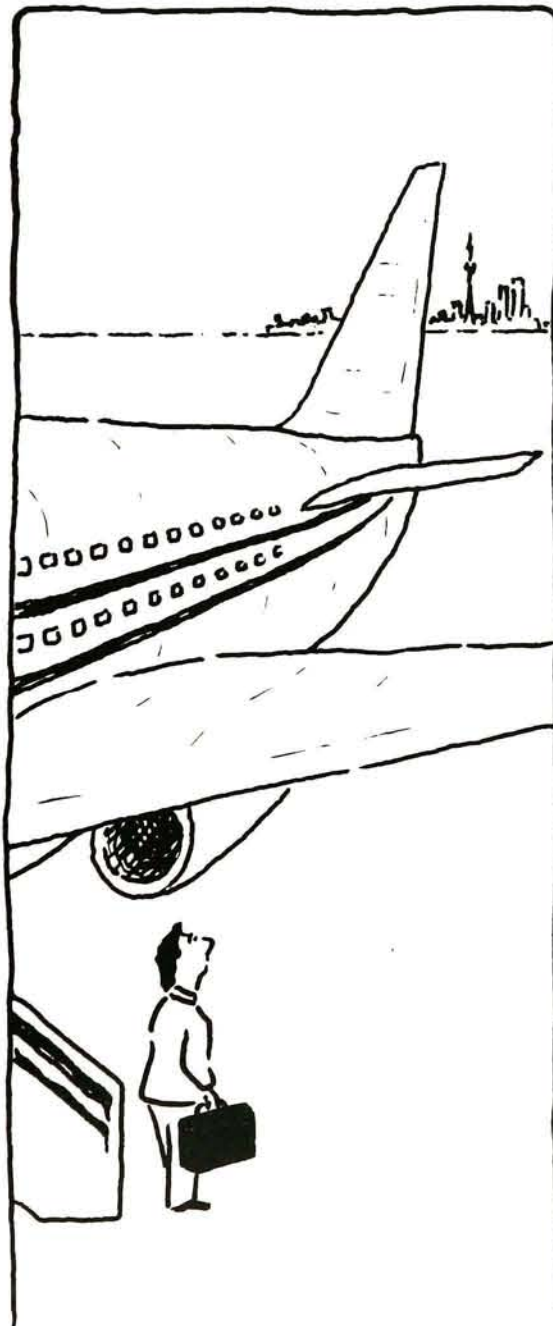
⁵ See, for instance, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" in Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, W.W. Morton & Co., 1973, pp. 185-194.

* The title refers to the female voice of (what is to our patriarchal society still) a mythical other reality.

** 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 critical category: they are representative of vision itself.

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