LAURA AND PETER

Time Out

Laura: Our starting-point was that we wanted a very simple story - Peter called it "a fable of everyday life" or "A political soap opera." Our last film *Penthesilea* had more or less got stuck in 1914; it didn't really deal with any contemporary material. We wanted to situate this film absolutely in the present (despite the fact that we intended to use elements of myth), and to deal with relationships between present-day people. Our first question was: What area of everyday life do we want this fable to examine? *Penthesilea* again helped to provide an answer. That had dealt mainly with male, fetishistic fantasies about women, and introduced direct, political action on the part of women only as a counterpoint. This time, we tried to go into a subject that men have never been interested in - the mother-child relationship. It's a subject that has always been "taboo", except in rather special cases like paintings of the Madonna, where it's put on a pedestal. Our story broaches it as a social and political reality, and asks questions about attitudes to creches, day-care centres and so on, but at the same time uses Louise as the focus for some general questions about the female unconscious. That's where the "myth" comes in.

Peter: The reason we wanted the mythic aspect at all is that it allowed us to come to grips with the whole question of the unconscious in a way that we couldn't have done in a more conventional political film.

Laura: You see, the basic conception of the Louise-Anna relationship was that it was over-close and obsessive. In a sense what the mother does is to refuse to give up her child to the father - to the outside world - and thus to block its natural development, as well as her own. In a society where women's main function is to have children, the one moment of power and significance a woman has is when she bears her child. What Louise does is positive in that it's her act of protest against patriarchal society, but at the same time it's negative in that it constitutes a blockage for both her and her child. The irony here is that to "keep" Anna, Louise gets involved in a political campaign, for day-care nurseries, during which she realises that she's wrong to hold on to Anna. But when she does relinquish Anna, it's to her own mother. When Louise visits her mother, she spends her time looking through old family photographs, and it's like a regression into the past. She doesn't resolve her own Oedipal crisis, because her father is absent.
The challenge that confronts her in the final scenes of the story is to find a resolution to her problems that doesn't contradict her opposition to patriarchal society.

Peter: Freud's theory of the "Oedipus complex" deals with the child's relationship first with its mother, then with its father, and thus finds its place in society, which remains essentially patriarchal. What that involves, evidently, is a repression of the mother at some point. Everything involved in that repression comes back to the surface in the metaphor of the Sphinx. She (the Greeks explicitly saw the Sphinx as female) is the forgotten character in what is otherwise a very well-known myth. We decided not to use the actual riddle and answer from the myth on the grounds that that would localize what we meant too much. We wanted "riddle" to be understood in a much wider sense. There's a famous quote from Freud about female sexuality: "Half my audience will be trying to answer the riddle, and the other half of you are the riddle." We wanted to link that to the Oedipus story.

We aimed to have many different kinds of voice, kinds of language in the film. Laura's introduction is basically informative, and sets out to establish the filmmakers' position. In Louise's story, language ranges from everyday "naturalistic" dialogue to Egyptian hieroglyphics. (Louise is left puzzling over the latter at the end of the story.) It was important to differentiate the voice of the Sphinx/narrator; she articulates the riddles that Louise represents, and her speech is a stream of questions, contradictions and word-associations. The only "theoretical" language heard in the film comes in the video and film material on Mary Kelly that Louise's husband shows to her and Maxine. This shows a woman-artist trying to deal with her own experience as a mother, and it represents a crucial turning-point for Louise... at the simplest level, it shows her that other women are equally conscious of the problems that she's experiencing.

I wrote the dream in the way that I've written some pieces for Bananag, in the fashion of Raymond Roussel. I used a French-English dictionary, opened it at random and made lists of phrases which were, in fact, the English definitions of French words. The text was written so as to include all the words that came from the dictionary, with a number of small variations: I did a bit of cross-referencing, looking some words up in French, and sometimes chose words adjacent to those I was looking up. It's not completely arbitrary a method: one obviously chooses some words consciously, and one includes only words that obviously can be used. As you make up your random list, you see a pattern emerging, you hit on key words and phrases. Then you string your words together into a narrative. It's a way of simulating the dream world.

Laura: Although the centrepiece of the film is a fairly straightforward narrative, the "framing" chapters aren't, and so we decided to use a somewhat unorthodox form for the story, in order to keep the film's formal issues in the foreground. Each scene in the story is shot in one continuous take, varying in length from about two to about nine minutes, and for all but one of the scenes the camera is fixed in one spot and rotated through 360 degrees. That means that the story comes to be dominated by the motif of the circle, which in a way meshes with the vicious circle of problems about motherhood that the film is concerned with. Most people who've seen the film so far find this use of pans very interesting as a formal device; it isn't repetitive, because there are always differences in the
relationship between image and sound, and there's a great variety in the way that
the pans reveal different kinds of space in the different locations. Mike Ratledge's
music is an important factor here too. He felt that the pans needed "a music of
transformation rather than sequence", and so his score is based on notions of
circularity that parallel the visual method.

Peter: But the circle isn't the only formal model that we used in the film.
Overall it has the shape of a pyramid, with two halves that are mirror inversions
of each other, and a clearly marked "tip" that comes exactly at the centre of the
film. And there's also the idea of the puzzle or maze: we ended the film with an
image of a child's puzzle to bring out this aspect. The maze obviously has a Freudian
connotation, but it also evokes the memory that the Egyptian pyramids were actually
mazes.

Phil Hardy and Tony Rayns

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RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX
Peter Wollen & Laura Mulvey
GB/1972/92 mins/U
Ph Diane Tammes
Ed Carola Klein & Larry Sider
Sound Larry Sider
Music Mike Ratledge
With Dinah Stabb & Mardelle Jordine