Title
Stranger than Fairly Tales: Melnitz Movies Screens Two Films by Sara Driver

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4f2465r4

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Publication Date
2012-05-01

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THE FILMS OF SARA DRIVER have recently received a long-overdue jolt of critical and popular attention, with a special screening series at the Anthology Film Archives in March and April in New York as well as additional international screenings. On May 1, 2012, the UCLA community had the rare privilege of participating in this revived interest at an event titled “Stranger Than Fairy Tales: Two Films by Sara Driver,” which was organized by Melnitz Movies and cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Women. The event featured You Are Not I (1981) and a new, particularly gorgeous 35mm print of Sleepwalk (1986). After the screenings, Sam Prime, the director of Melnitz Movies, was joined for a Q&A with Harvey Perr and Ann Magnuson, actors in Sleepwalk, and Suzanne Fletcher, who starred in both films.

The reason behind Driver’s current popularity was apparent when the audience broke into applause as the credits rolled on each film. Their affection and delight at the films was clear. This engagement reflects what Fletcher later described...
as a recent, fresh reaction to Driver’s works as they have enjoyed more opportunities at exhibition.

Driver was one of a group of New York artists and filmmakers who produced a bevy of cutting-edge work in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Fletcher, Driver formed a kind of artist group with her longtime partner Jim Jarmusch and musician Phil Kline (who served as the cinematographer and original music composer, respectively, on both films screened at the event). This group, known as No Wave, also included various other artists living on New York’s Lower East side, a group that was, according to Perr, protected by their shared relative poverty. Their limited means, in addition to what Magnuson referred to as a pre-AIDS notion of freedom, enabled them to produce more radical and experimental art works together. Magnuson also described the bankrupt state of the city as a whole during this period, where she and her fellow community of misfits took the occasional job to get just enough money to pay for rent and a bit of food.

The first film screened at the event, *You Are Not I*, was thought to be lost forever when the original print was destroyed and only a highly damaged exhibition print remained. As Fletcher related to those in attendance, however, a higher quality print was located by archivist Frances Poole in the collection of writer Paul Bowles, which had been carefully preserved and protected from insects with a thick layer of bug spray.

Fletcher also acknowledged Susan Lazarus, who was able to raise funds and digitally restore the newly discovered print. This almost too-good-to-be-true tale underscores the importance of film archives and restoration, as film remains the only high-quality archivable moving image format. The audience at the screening viewed the Blu-ray® version of *You Are Not I*, which was incredibly beautiful and did preserve some of the grainy-ness and imperfections that characterize film screenings.

*You Are Not I* is a haunting and poetic film, relating a mystery that slowly unfolds and never quite resolves, leaving the viewer with an oddly satisfying lack of closure and incomplete comprehension. Indeed, clear plot and narrative closure are not salient aspects of Driver’s films. Rather, *You Are Not I*, composed of long, static shots, highly composed and selective framework, and low contrast grainy black and white images, operates in a much more suggestive, slow unfolding of elements to build a mood and tone that overwhelm any desire for a traditional, logical plot. Driver’s films are often described as strange, uncanny, eerie, poetic, odd, surreal, trance-like, otherworldly, and dream-like, terms that all grasp at the mood that Driver creates in her films—at once distinctive and elusive.

The film opens with Kline’s ominous music and a quiet and staid female voiceover describing the “man’s world” in which we all exist.
We soon see that a car accident has recently occurred, and the woman watches from a distance as firemen attempt to put out the fires that have enveloped the cars. In a particularly incredible shot, she walks in front of a patch of trees, swathed in what at first appears to be fog or mist, but is soon revealed to be smoke billowing from the cars, which enter the frame as the woman continues to walk towards them. She soon approaches the many victims of the crash, their bodies wrapped in white sheets. She places small
stones in their mouths and eventually tries to do so with a single victim when she is stopped by a bystander. The first words we actually see the woman speak come when she repeatedly yells at the man pulling her aside that her sister is dead. Her internal monologue narration has been, for the most part, composed of general observations about being told what to do, about living in a man’s world. Particularly matter-of-fact, logical, and rather cold, this voice-over contributes to the dream-like and seemingly unreal quality of the images: Who is this woman? Is she a woman at all or some kind of specter or ghost wandering about? Why is it that the emergency workers do not seem to see her? Where did she come from? Does she know any of the victims of this crash? Or is she mentally ill, having escaped from the same fenced-in place that we saw the other two women contained in earlier?

Getting a ride from a male bystander, she is dropped off at her sister’s home. The man explains that she is in shock but not physically hurt. Her sister’s inward posture and furtive glances suggest that she is both afraid and confused about why her sister has been brought to her. The voice-over continues as the woman enters the house, declaring shock that her sister seems to have spent all of her money switching the orientation of the house—the staircase, kitchen, and living room are now on the opposite side of the house. The woman sits and her sister brings over two older female neighbors, talking with them furiously and shooting glances at the woman as she sits and stares around the house. We now learn what we had only been able to guess at, that this woman has indeed escaped from some kind of “home” and that her sister is deeply afraid of her. The woman explains through voice-over that she is determined to stay in this “ugly” house, will not speak a word, and that she has the willpower to do so as she works on a “spell.”

The deep-focus, long takes, static camera, and occasional point-of-view shots from the perspective of the escaped woman add to the eerie mood of this section, as does the strange atmospheric sound design. Soon two orderlies appear at the door, and as the woman rises to leave, she attacks her sister and forces a stone into her mouth. Here the spell occurs, and a kind of identity switching takes place—the sister is taken away and the woman remains in the house. We see the sister confined in a room, now writing in the same notebook we saw in the woman’s hands in the first shot. This miraculous occurrence is never explained fully and ends the film on a decidedly unreal and fantastic note.

The themes of female hysteria and mental illness are elaborated upon in a distinctly imaginative and critical way through the use of the voice-over that places us in a contingent alliance with the escaped woman—we are given access to her inner monologue, which is just strange enough to give reason to believe she does require some kind of psychological intervention, yet also just coherent enough to give question to the idea of her being institutionalized. The magical role switching places the entire film even more firmly into a liminal space between magic and reality, between subjectivity and voyeuristic observation, a positioning that also characterizes Sleepwalk. The journey that takes place in You Are Not I is, indeed, much like a traditional fairy tale except that it is firmly from the point of view of an unreliable female protagonist who, for better or for worse, is able to escape confinement and pursue justice against her unkind sister.

Sleepwalk has a rich and highly selective color palette, mixing tones of cement with washed-out blues, dark rich shadows, and hyperpigmented jewel tones in the clothing and makeup of the actors. Several reactions expressed during the post-screening Q&A had to do with the palette and its contribution to the eerie, dark, and enigmatic mood of the film. Like You Are Not I, Sleepwalk is also a mystery film of sorts. In this case, tales from an ancient Chinese scroll, when translated and entered into a computer by the overworked Nicole (again, played by Fletcher), begin somehow to come true. The film’s dense soundtrack, featuring Kline’s original music as well as off-putting sound effects and selective foley, likewise contribute to the tone of Sleepwalk. We are again, as in You Are Not I, faced with questions of reality
and magic, subjectivity and objective voyeurism, madness and sanity. This time, it is the city of New York, shot almost exclusively at night, which forms the setting for the events. This fairy tale New York, as Perr explained, was marked by decay and transition, which were especially palpable in the deserted streets at night.

The film focuses on the bizarre events that follow Nicole’s translation of the scroll: her outspoken roommate Isabelle (played marvelously by Magnuson) loses all of her hair and Nicole’s young son Jimmy is kidnapped. Sleepwalk’s circular structure begins and ends with Nicole asleep at the edge of the East River, drawing the audience into the dark, rich, and carefully composed frames, never sure whether what is onscreen is meant to be “real” or fantasy and, perhaps more importantly, whether such distinctions matter in the film at all. The film ends with Jimmy blindfolded beside the river not too far from his mother, who is exhausted from searching for him all night. As with You Are Not I, Sleepwalk ends with many questions left forever unresolved—pleasure derives not from clean resolution, but from its open-ended opaqueness.

You Are Not I and Sleepwalk both touch on feminist issues, including the issue of feminine hysteria/mental illness, single motherhood, female subjectivity, and female empowerment. Some of these issues are stated literally in the voice-overs of You Are Not I (the film’s title also suggests a firm articulation of female subjectivity), while others are clearly visible in the narratives and formal aspects of the films, particularly through point-of-view camera work. These films relate these feminist issues in non-traditional narrative forms that present events and situations as constantly questionable, fantastic and magical and yet also grounded in the long takes and static camerawork that embed them in reality. Comparisons to such filmmakers as David Lynch, David Cronenberg, and Jarmusch come to mind, as do aspects of the work of John Waters (especially his use of color and period costuming) and Tim Burton (the palette and camerawork in Beetlejuice, for example). Yet, Driver’s films stand apart, expressing variations on her particular tone, subject matter, and sensibility that are the mark of a truly fantastic director working collaboratively with a group of fellow filmmakers. Although Driver was unable to attend the May 1st screening as originally planned, her absence was owing to her plans for creative work and that is a hopeful sign that she will continue to be able to create films. Through future screenings and events like “Stranger Than Fairy Tales,” her work will continue to build the critical and popular following that it so rightly deserves.

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