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RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's Film Work: Straddling Counter-Strategy and Deconstruction

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen are not filmmakers first and foremost; they are film theorists, critics and thinkers. Mulvey and Wollen's texts from the 1970s have utopian and revolutionary perspectives in their sights. Mulvey emphasizes the gestures linked to the battle for liberation in cinema, while Wollen draws on the power of fantasy and secures the role of cinema as a model for a new avant-garde. Both play a role in writing a *manifesto* for a different kind of cinema, whose militant nature is acquired from radical work on (cinematic) symbolization processes.

Their joint work on RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX and a series of additional film projects can be seen as an attempt to honor their written demands for a different cinema in their own film work. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's work was at the same time part of a social movement in England which drew on the mood of the 1970s and the influence of post-structuralist theories from France (Barthes, Derrida, Lacan) in an attempt to create a totally new social practice. While in France the concept of deconstruction gained acceptance to refer to the sort of strategies that evade the classic distinction between text and commentary, Mulvey and Wollen adhered to the concept of "counter strategy". This concept is closely related to various ones used by the artistic avant-garde as well as to forms of political understanding which don't merely seek to do away with the distinction between theory and practice in writing but which also strive for concrete social change in everyday culture. From a contemporary perspective, RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX is less of an attempt to destroy the codes of classical Hollywood cinema as its authors intended than a sustained critique of this cinema using cinematic means.

We understand the sphinx as being a mysterious, inscrutable being. In its original Egyptian meaning, it can also refer to a *living statue*. This old meaning anticipates to a certain extent the *living image* of cinema, whose flux character of becoming is due

to its static images, the cinematographic apparatus and spectatorial participation. As such, the film title RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX can also be translated in a broader sense as referring to the *mysteries of the cinema*. The cinema of today is, however, no longer the medium that Mulvey and Wollen were still able to attach their hopes to in the 1970s, just as the film RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX seldom appears on the big screen, remaining instead stored in the archives and difficult to access. In addition to the many advantages of cinema listed by Wollen, its link to celluloid is a distinct disadvantage, as you can't just leaf through its works like a book.

As part of the Living Archive project, RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX has been digitalized and released on DVD in collaboration with the British Film Institute. The goal of this DVD is to make Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's film work available to be studied alongside their theoretical writings. The possibilities afforded by DVD allow RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX to be read as a text, a "Lehrstück" or learning play to use Brecht's words, or as a piece of *cinematographic ecriture* in more deconstructionist terms. A DVD release of this kind alone cannot of course replicate the same effects as the big screen. It is for this that cinema is still very much needed, as well as the sort of cultural opportunities that allow a film such as this to become an event once again.