

NEW NARRATIVE 1: THE BAD SISTER

Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill

Peter Wollen was born in London in 1938. He is the author of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1968) and numerous articles, recently collected in *Readings and Writings* (Verso Editions: London, 1982). Co-writer of Antonioni's *The Passenger*, he has made several films with Laura Mulvey, including *Penthesilea* (1974), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), *Amy!* (1979), and *Crystal Gazing* (1982). They have also

worked together on an exhibition of photographs by Tina Modotti and paintings by Frida Kahlo, which resulted in the film *Frida and Tina*. Wollen has taught film theory at many universities in the United States and Europe, and is currently teaching in the semiotics program at Brown University. We spoke with him last October at the conclusion of the New Narrative conference.

Reif: I'd like to talk about *The Bad Sister* as an expression of Lacanian theory, relating that to the Oedipal story that it embodies. How did you feel about working your theoretical concerns into a more popular form?

Wollen: If you look at the film from one angle, you find quite a heavy feminist, psychoanalytic film. On the other hand, we wanted to make a film that people could watch on television without quite knowing that that's what they'd seen. So that their immediate reaction *wouldn't* be: "This is a very heavy feminist, psychoanalytic tract."

Reif: Most viewers wouldn't have any background in all this theory anyway.

Wollen: But if you think about the story, it obviously *is* that in some ways. The fantasy material in the film reenacts the Oedipus story in that Jane both kills her father and sleeps with her mother. It's almost an hallucination of the Oedipus complex. The film isn't meant to pose practical solutions; it deals with things in a metaphoric and fantastic way. It shows a completely utopian solution, of a liberation from the Oedipal law through a literal although hallucinated reenactment of the Oedipus story.

Reif: Obviously, the story isn't a tragedy - there's no fall of the heroine.

Wollen: No, actually we changed it. In the book, it's the heroine who's in the grave at the end, not her mother. We didn't want it to be a tragic story; we wanted to carry the hallucination right through to her getting on the ship, liberated.

Reif: The shipyard imagery is yours then.

Wollen: No, escaping and wanting to go away on the ship is in the book. And there was another reason for putting the mother in the grave. There's a theme of law running right through the film - of the two sisters as legitimate and illegitimate and the two mothers as legitimate and illegitimate. We tried to carry that through to the counter-law, so to speak, of the dead mother as a symmetrical counterpart to the law of the dead father which Freud and Lacan talk about.

Reif: What is the significance of that symmetry? Is having the mother in the grave at the end some kind of liberation for the heroine from a fixation? Because her story is really the story of various identifications with various female figures - mother figures - which impel her into a kind of action which seems as unconscious on a certain level as perhaps patriarchy is unconscious for most men.

Wollen: Yes, it is unconscious, but the symmetry is taken a bit further. In Freud's *Totem and Taboo* the dead father is associated with the band of brothers, and in *The Bad Sister* we have the counterpart in the band of wild women, which is a band of sisters, and it seems it should be related to the dead mother. The figure of Meg is the witch/vampire figure; is the imaginary representative of the dead mother, and the inheritance of this illegitimate line is then through vampirization. We envisaged it as more of a direct, bodily line of inheritance

(which probably relates back to a more feminist, post-Lacanian theory), about the passage from mother to daughter through the woman's body rather than through patriarchal inheritance, which is an abstract inheritance of property rather than, in this case, a physical inheritance of power.

So there are two lines of inheritance: One is legal (abstract) through a patrilineal chain marked at each point by the constancy of the paternal name; the other is carnal (concrete) through the medium of the matrilineal vampire bite (initiation).

Reif: It's made very clear in the film that this is happening - it's right there in the dialogue.

Wollen: Yes, on one level it's a play with the theory. But there's always this problem (and this came up at the conference): Freud and Lacan give us a model of how the Oedipus complex works, of how patriarchal power works, how the law of the symbolic works, and so on. Then the question is, what alternative is there? and there are various attempts, and endless disputes over what the alternative might be. In this film we were adding one more model - not an alternative form of identification to the Oedipal, but an alternative trajectory (sequence of positions) *through* the Oedipal. And this model is presented as fantastic rather than real.

Razutis: These considerations seem to stem directly from the proposition set forward in your essay, "The Field of Language in Film" (October, #17, Summer 1981). I am thinking particu-

larly of the opening remarks in which you call for a reinvestigation of the patriarchal character of the symbolic order and the place of both language and women within that patriarchal discourse.

I found *The Bad Sister* very successful in its undoing of patriarchal discourse by the use of a female perspective that constantly shifts through levels of identification and symbolic and imaginary domains. The fantasy element was particularly successful at the level of enunciation. I knew immediately as I watched the film that women would be viewing it in a different way, from a different and sensitized perspective. However, at the level of enunciation, I felt there were also problems. The liberating, language-displacing fantasy seemed to work at cross-purposes with the more conventional mode of fictive enunciation (that of narrative commercial cinema). The former spoke in terms of pre-language, the latter in terms of mass media conventions organized along intact, episodic moments, featuring eyeline and axis matches, over-the-shoulder -

Wollen: Yes, I was quite intrigued with doing it "properly", i.e. doing the eyeline matches and getting the continuity right, and yet producing something which clearly in some ways was wrong from the point of view of the well-made television product. On one level it does look just like how it ought to look, but on another level it's somewhat unsettling. That's what we were aiming for. We wanted to get the *facade* of continuity right. We had a very vague idea about how you do it. How do you learn those things? I guess you either come up through the industry or you go to film school, and we've done neither. During the shoot, I used to go home every night and watch *Smiley's People* to try to see how it was done and I realized it was full of mismatches and bad continuity!

Razutis: There seems to be a contradiction between what I perceive is your artistic credo, the exploitation of alienation between sign and object as proposed in "The Field of Language in Film" and as evidenced in *Amy!*, and your approach in *The Bad Sister*. In the latter film that alienation is displaced in favor of a unified fantasy. An exam-

ple would be the obvious image-sound "mismatches" - a kind of alienating discrepancy between the on-screen character and off-screen voice - contained in *Amy!*, versus the suturing shot-edits and musical accompaniments found in *The Bad Sister*. The first example indicates a continuing strategy of alienating sign/object while the second employs identification and rupture as strategy.

Wollen: Our idea was to set Jane's story in this framing story which represents the world of television production and is shot more or less like television, and in which the characters are all talking about what the truth is, what really happened, how do we explain the motivations, and so on. And we wanted to present in the middle of all that something which was completely excessive and in which you couldn't end up saying what really happened - at all. To escape that kind of discourse, that was our idea. The story is both against the grain of television and also rather bewildering - it is fantastic; you can't quite make out who is who or what the relationships are.

Reif: Having Jane's audio journal which immediately becomes fantasized image for the audience - that was a great device. I loved the way the film went immediately into that unreal world just by -

Razutis: The opening title.

Reif: The level of parody was amusing.

Razutis: I thought that was a cliché of water/the unconscious.

Wollen: The design for the opening title comes from the covers of 40s' detective pulp books.

Reif: There's a direct reference to dreaming in the film. It moves through different states of consciousness which you never really let anyone identify with as "reality". I was very impressed with the lighting. There's a super-real quality to the sharpness and luminosity of the image which struck me as very close to a certain kind of dreaming called a lucid dream. In a lucid dream, the dreamer's ego is present consciously, that is, one is aware that one is dreaming.

Wollen: Laura told me about having a dream like that, in which she said,

"oh, it's all right, I'm only dreaming" and then actually woke up in the dream, so that it wasn't "only a dream" any more. But she was still dreaming!

Reif: The heroine of *The Bad Sister* seems to be in a similar state. She's taken over by this power, and yet her conscious self acquiesces to, is aware of this fact. The experience of this is of bringing the conscious closer to the unconscious - a kind of reconciliation, for a moment at least.

Wollen: That's what the fantastic is. In his book *The Fantastic*, Todorov talks about three types of story; the marvelous, the uncanny and the fantastic. In the uncanny, you're told something more or less unbelievable and then in the end you're given an explanation. So you think, "oh, I see, that's all right then; that explains it all". In the marvelous, you're told, "don't worry about looking for explanations because they don't exist; this is just a tale of myths and the supernatural; there's nothing to do with reality here". Then there's the in-between genre, the fantastic, in which you're constantly disturbed by whether you're meant to be believing in it or not, and what its relationship to truth is - and it's never made clear for you. Which is exactly constantly crisscrossing that borderline between the conscious and the unconscious. That's exactly what we were aiming for.

Reif: In those terms, I think the film had to be shot and constructed the way it is, because one is always playing with an identification that is almost total, and yet being thrown out of that at moments where the logic of particular sequences breaks down.

Wollen: The most difficult things to do were the real-life sequences because we didn't want them to be too realistic. Then people could say "ah, now it's fantasy; now it's real life". We didn't want it to be so simple and we tried to diminish the difference between the two throughout the film. At the beginning the memory and fantasy sequences are highly color-saturated and the so-called real-life sequences have low saturation and long takes. The long takes in the "domestic" sequences diminish as the

color becomes more saturated (and, conversely, less saturated in the "fantastic" sequences) until the two converge. By the time you get to the party sequence - the masquerade at the end - you don't know at all whether this is part of the real life or part of the fantasy.

Razutis: Was that party sequence, with the woman as acrobat, linked to the highly colorized acrobatic sequence in *Riddles of the Sphinx*?

Wollen: There is some connection. There's some fascination with circuses as some kind of liberating metaphor. To me, the liberating moment in *The Bad Sister* isn't the last vampire bite; it's when Jane goes through the tiny door, which is like a circus contortion. That door is less than a foot high, and she really does go through it - it's not a trick. (The actress said if she could get her head through, she could get her whole body through. Like a cat.)

Reif: That's an amazing feat. And it doesn't look hard to do.

Wollen: No, it doesn't look particularly amazing in the film. She just goes through it.

Reif: Somehow it doesn't seem to be that small.

Wollen: That's *because* she goes through it. You're expanding it.

Reif: So the murder of the "good", legitimate sister represents a liberation from the law of the patriarchy as expressed in this rival, double figure to be emulated and destroyed. There's desire and hatred at the same time. And the room she reaches through the tiny door is red - heart color, womb color.

Wollen: Yes, it's womb and tomb. It's out of Edgar Allen Poe iconography on one level and out of Freudian iconography on another.

Reif: I thought all the women were very much projections of a female consciousness that's at the centre of the film.

Razutis: I thought the mother-in-law was very much a projection of a male consciousness.

Wollen: Yes, but she's also a counterpart - just as there's a bad sister, there's a bad mother who's always going to take her son's side against this other woman. She's also part of the splitting that's going on all through the film,

down this axis. In *The Bad Sister* there's a clash between patriarchy and matriarchy, which is there in the Oedipus story itself. Propp argues that there's a matrilineal line visible in the Oedipus story. His interpretation says the Oedipus story is the superimposition of a patrilineal legend on an original matrilineal one, and that that's the basic structure of the story. Oedipus inherits the kingdom of Thebes by marrying the widow of the dead king, which is characteristic of a society with a matrilineal form of inheritance. Yet the story tells of how he tries to discover who his father is, suggesting a line of descent that is patrilineal. In the end, he inherits both patrilineally, because he *is* the son of the king who he's killed, but also matrilineally, because he does marry the queen, who of course is his own mother. You can't inherit both patrilineally and matrilineally, and that's the crisis of the story. (In that reading the sphinx represents a matrilineal principle as well.)

Reif: Who is the sphinx in *The Bad Sister*?

Wollen: I suppose Meg is closest.

Razutis: There was a pre-disposition at the new narrative conference towards early Freud. Why this division? I think the later Freud of Civilization and its Discontents is very appropriate to looking at certain obsessive fascinations that North America has with death and destruction.

Wollen: My bias is towards early Freud. It's all about the Oedipal structure and not much about the death instinct, although I know that's there all the time in Lacan. How do you see the death instinct? It must *relate* to the Oedipal.

Razutis: I think it is pre-Oedipal. Melanie Klein's schema suggests that the good object-bad object (paranoid-schizoid) problem, which is activated through introjection and projection, leads to a gradual organization of the baby's psychic "universe". So the Kleinian split-object involves the competing life and death instincts as instrumental in the formation of the child's paranoid-schizoid "position". This competition and the resultant effect occur prior to sexual differentiation, prior to the Oedipus complex

(and acquisition of language). It seems to be a state of constant antipathy that resolves itself at the imaginary level.

Wollen: Then it's regressive and it's linked with sadism. *Crystal Gazing* is dominated by some idea of the death instinct, which wasn't properly theorized, because our bias was towards early Freud. *The Bad Sister* must relate to all that in some way; I think somehow through the patriarchal law rather than through a regression to sadism. On the other hand, we didn't want the film to be dominated by the death instinct. That's why we wanted Jane to sail away on the ship at the end, although you could argue that because that's a utopian liberation, it's a kind of death.

Reif: And the sea has already been identified with death.

Wollen: Exactly. Although the death at the end is not Jane's but that of her double - she can only liberate herself by ridding herself of her "good" double - still a kind of suicide though, so perhaps it *is* dominated by the death instinct and it's just not fully theorized properly.

Reif: Laura talked about a refusal of sexual difference in the paper she presented at the conference. How do you relate that to the diegesis of the film?

Wollen: The impulse of the heroine was to refuse sexual difference. There are two ways of identifying with the patriarchal order: To identify with being a man, or to identify with the man's image of the woman. To refuse those two choices takes her back into what looks like an androgynous stance - but it's a refusal, rather than the fantasy of combining the two, which would still be staying in the patriarchal order, since both were generated within that order. But a refusal is actually impossible in the real world, since we're living in a patriarchal order, and that's what sets her off on the quest for a way out, a liberation which can only exist on the level of dream.

Reif: She does try living out a male role though, or at least some of the trappings of it.

Wollen: Some of the trappings of it, perhaps too many. This goes back to the question of anorexia. There are different interpretations of anorexia. One

says that in a male society which constantly stresses thinness as a desirable characteristic, anorexia is a mad rush to attain this male-imposed image. We dealt with the rival interpretation, that it's an attempt to stop puberty and therefore refuse the sexual identification and differences which are imposed at that point.

Reif: This refusal of sexual difference theory was brought out through the heroine's refusal to eat during the period when she is possessed, wasn't it?

Wollen: Yes, we wanted it to be that rather than a masculine identification, but I think that the blue jeans and the gun bring it too close to a masculine identification.

Reif: She adopts this kind of identification though in order to attempt to destroy it.

Razutis: At the conference you spoke of the necessity for avant-garde film to engage with dominant cinema. I've identified avant-garde practice as being a textual culture that operates through models but without grammar. I had difficulty seeing how the avant-garde could engage with dominant cinema without capitulating to grammar.

Wollen: This is the same question about the eyeline matches. I would say that avant-garde film does have a grammar, but a different grammar from conventional film - maybe it has a range of ideolectal grammars.

Razutis: Structuralism took a grammatical form for awhile, and then dispensed with it.

Wollen: I'd be reluctant to say you could dispense with grammar at all - I don't know what an absence of grammar would be. I think it would be a blank screen. However, your question holds good even if we don't agree about grammar: The question is still about relationships. I would say that avant-garde films have developed a range of grammars designed to facilitate what you're calling textuality, whereas the grammar of mainstream film is designed, on the contrary, to canalize textuality. The problem then with stepping away from the avant-garde towards a mainstream context is what to do about the latter's grammar, as you said. We decided to go for the half-way house approach - some of the

mainstream grammar and some of the avant-garde grammar. We wanted to use the classical grammar but somehow avoid the canalization which normally goes with it, although our main concern was with narrative rather than with language.

Razutis: The conference contained some curious and disturbing presentations, for example, Paul Willemen's call to reinvestigate realism.

Wollen: Yes, I'm not so happy with that. At the conference Phil Rosen quoted something I said some time ago: That we've got to relate to the 20s or words to that effect. The '68 period, with its enormous political enthusiasm and utopianism, always did look to me like the 20s. Peoples' commitments and hopes after the 60s must have been very similar to their hopes after the Russian revolution - that things were really going to change. I also thought there were real connections between the arts movements of the late 60s and 70s and the 20s - the sudden rediscovery of Brecht and the re-emergence of performance art (the 20s was a great period for performance art). But you could see the 30s looming up - people getting disenchanted, all their hopes broken. In the 30s there was a return to realism and the avant-garde was more or less destroyed. By the 40s there was hardly any avant-garde left. It was reawakened through a form of abstract expressionism.

Razutis: I saw this call to reinvestigate realism as a return to conservatism. Many conference participants seemed to me to share Willemen's interests and I thought, "this is the beginning of avant-garde versus theory all over again". Your reaction, therefore, is quite reassuring.

Wollen: I'm in favor of a return to narrative. That's pretty obvious - all our films have had some relationship to narrative. But I'm not in favor of a return to realism and *The Bad Sister* is set against the return to realism. I don't think the grammar of narrative is the same as the grammar of realism. But there's not a very sophisticated theory of narrative. Most say there's something called, not narrative, but narrativity, which is then given a rather monolithic definition across all possible films. I think there's an enor-

mous range of different types of narrative and the theory doesn't take account of that at all. I'm interested in experimental narrative, in the old sense of experimental.

The theory that developed over the last decade has some connection with modernism: It tended to be a theory answering the question "what is cinema?", which is a classic modernist question of trying to discover the organizing principles of one form, in this case cinema. Modernism assumed a rigid distinction between "high" and "low" art (Frampton's "film" versus "cinema"), and was preoccupied with the internal laws and materials of each medium (the task of self-knowledge and self-realization as an art form). I'm interested in operating on the borders between "high" and "low" and combining "formal" considerations with a concern for extrinsic topics and materials.

Reif: What direction are you taking now in regards to your work?

Wollen: I want to do a lot more work on narrative - on what different possibilities there are for narrative, how narrative works and what it would mean to develop forms of narrative different from those of the dominant forms. I think of "narrative grammar" as a grammar of plot, i.e. the rules according to which minimal story elements, such as Propp described as "functions", can be combined into strings which we intuitively recognize as stories. These are recursive structures (cf. "shaggy-dog" stories, "Chinese box" stories like "it was a dark and stormy night...", etc.) like the transformational grammar of an ordinary language. Plots as such are neither more nor less "realist" than each other. It all depends on the "semantic" and "stylistic" components of the grammar - what the stories are about, who the characters are, what the settings and motivations are, etc. - which are "surface" features. As well as doing more work on narrative I'd like to do a lot more work on culture - but I can't do everything.

Reif: Even so, what do you think needs to be done in film in relation to questions of culture and development of cultural theory?

Wollen: I was interested to see Kay

Armatage's film *Storytelling* because I was thinking about narrative. In that film there's the storytelling of the Eskimos, the string figures, the shadow puppets and the traditional folkloric forms of storytelling. Then there's the modern, poetic re-rendering of the traditional folkloric forms; then there's the street rap. All these different forms of storytelling are not just formally different - and noticeably different from the forms of storytelling which we associate with the international superculture of television - they also belong to different cultures. So maybe you can make some connections.

Reif: But Kay seemed to be pointing out the similar progression: The place of transformation, seasonal references, the life cycle.

Wollen: I'm prepared to assume there's a universal narrative grammar within which there's a whole range of possibilities. Just like with human language - you can see things in common among all possible human languages. Similarly, so far as I know, all human societies tell stories. So we can assume that there is an innate human capacity for narrative, as there is with language, according to Chomsky.

Reif: How do you relate this idea of a universal narrative grammar to specific narratives that you're interested in, which have to do with construction of the subject, the viewer?

Wollen: Well, this goes back to what Teresa de Lauretis discussed in her paper at the conference. She was saying that in dominant types of narratives, the basic transformational or generative rules are those which characterize the Oedipus story. The question is whether that coincides with a universal narrative - in which case all and every possible story is in some sense Oedipal - or whether there are other rules which would allow the generation of other types of stories which run counter to that Oedipal pattern generated by that particular set of deep-structure rules.

Razutis: I would see the output of the deep structure changed at the surface structure level, where you have shifts in emphasis and in semantic orderings.

Wollen: There's a basic disagreement

in state-of-the-art linguistics about the relationship between the semantics and the syntax in a grammar. If there are universal deep-structure rules for narrative, it would be because of the structure of the human brain. But we would also expect great variety, within certain universal limits, as with natural languages. The Oedipal model of storytelling would be one ("dominant") type, rather than a universal "deep-structure".

Razutis: In *The Bad Sister* you're invoking classical text processes in a way that doesn't negate, but displaces visual pleasure. There's pleasure of a different kind.

Wollen: Right, special effects play the role of spectacle and also, special effects are connected in my mind with the *thrill* of looking rather than the pleasure type of looking - it goes back to Melies. Once you're using the codes of dominant cinema you're implicating the kind of visual pleasure which Laura (Mulvey) talked about in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". She differentiates between pleasure and thrill, and her article discusses pleasure.

The same distinction occurs in *Amy!*, our film about the British aviator Amy Johnson, in which we talk about how Amy's relation to flying is in terms of thrill, but when it becomes part of a public discourse she's incorporated into a discourse of pleasure rather than thrill. And in *The Bad Sister*, within the facade of visual pleasure we're trying to let this monstrous thrill keep disturbing the surface.

Reif: What is thrill?

Razutis: Exhilaration -

Reif: Which cannot be recuperated within a conventional narrative structure?

Wollen: Roland Barthes distinguishes between "plaisir" and "jouissance", and I think there are some parallels between what Laura says about pleasure and thrill in her article and what he says about that. We were aware of a rough correspondence between "pleasure/thrill" and "plaisir/jouissance". But we were also displacing Barthes's couplet by substituting "thrill" for "jouissance", since it's not exactly the same and betrays a differ-

ent psychoanalytic structure. (Less mystical, I think; more perverse.)

Reif: So in *The Bad Sister* specifically, discontinuity is the thrill.

Wollen: Yes, and it's connected to the idea of magic too. The best book I've read on thrill - and it's not completely satisfactory - is one we read while researching *Amy!* called *Thrills and Regressions*, by Michael Balint. It begins with a discussion of why people go to fairgrounds. This pleasure that people get at carnivals which is called "thrills" has to do with a loss of control and a loss of identity in which you're taken completely out of the everyday, practical world, and yet you know you'll be back on safe ground at the end.

Reif: Well, Amy didn't know, but the viewer does.

Wollen: No, she did know. It's *necessary* to know that; maybe a disavowal is involved. She doesn't know for certain, but she feels sure she'll come down safely. But all the time there's the appeal of "perhaps she won't". Just like riding the rollercoaster: You *know* you'll come out safely but still you have the feeling that maybe this will be the time that it does fly off the track. I guess it's like that with the special effects. They're those moments when you go outside the normal, everyday safe ground of photographic processes. It's like that bit in Al Razutis's *Lumiere's Train* when the sprockets fly off - I thought that was a fantastic moment, and it was a thrill to me, that moment.

Reif: How were some of the transformational special effects done? I was thinking in particular of the transformation from the mother-in-law's face to Meg's face.

Wollen: That one was quite simple. We lined up both the actresses in the same position exactly, then matted/dissolved one into the other. The bone structures of the two actresses have an unexpected similarity, although at first sight they look very different. It looks uncanny, although the effect itself is not very complex.

Reif: It's definitely one of those thrills that you couldn't do with film.

Wollen: Yes, all the special effects would have been really difficult with film. The most difficult was the scene

in which Jane walks through the blue forest. We made a copy with all the color gone except the blue, which was fairly easy. Then we matted Jane (minus her blue jeans which were already blue) back on frame by frame. Actually I think there was a separate matte for the jeans buttons. It was very difficult because both actress and camera were moving - hence it was a very elaborate travelling matte. It took weeks, and it was very expensive.

Razutis: There's one sequence in *The Bad Sister* where the two women fondle each other - I guess it's Jane and her mother as a kind of sister. I found that action pleasurable, but not from a voyeur's or a sadist's perspective. We know that Hustler and Playboy play out lesbian fantasies all the time for male readers. However in this film there was a sense of an *undifferentiated* pleasure, reminiscent of "imaginary plenitude". Perhaps access to this imaginary pleasure was possible because the differentiation codes had been inverted. One's identification with patriarchal discourse was continually undermined without anxiety or threat. This repositioning of the male viewer in terms of his relationship to Oedipus and castration is how I think the revision of Laura Mulvey's position, as presented at the conference, differs from the one presented in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

Wollen: I think you're right; that scene - if it works - has to do with the negative relation to patriarchy. But in a strange way I think it may have something to do with the long take coming up the spiral staircase which comes just before.

Reif: It's very much a separate space up there, a separate place in Jane's mind, a secret room where mother and daughter make love. (And that goes back to your comment about the physicality of the matrilineal inheritance.)

Wollen: The secret room probably relates to a fascination with the "poetics of space", as described in Bachelard's book. And, of course, the secret room at the top of the tower has a lot of fairy-tale connotations also. Psychoanalytically, secret rooms are surely allusions to the maternal vagina.

Reif: You decided to make this film in a way that could be seen more or less conventionally by a large audience. Let's talk a little about the generation of the project.

Wollen: Well, we knew that Channel Four was going to be founded. I'd been involved in lobbying and campaigning, through the Independent Filmmakers Association, to make sure that it would be as favorable to independent filmmakers as possible. We were comparatively successful - one section was designed especially for independent filmmakers, on Monday at 11 p.m. But Laura and I decided to go for a more central section, the film and drama slot on Thursday at 9:30 p.m. That was obviously a political decision, to go for a more central area rather than a more marginal one which has been allotted to you as a result of your voice being heard. That meant we would necessarily be involved with narrative and drama in some way.

Reif: Are you planning something in the same sphere again?

Wollen: We're still thinking through what to do next. I'd like to do something smaller and on film next. And if we were to do something else on television, I'd like to do a mini-series - five slots of 20 minutes would be preferable to one of 100 minutes, like *The Bad Sister*.

Reif: I think 100 minutes is fine for TV.

Wollen: Sure, but I found it a fantastic investment, making *The Bad Sister*. It cost a lot of money; it was really hard work, harder than making independent films because we weren't used to it and perhaps because we approached it differently from how most people in the TV mainstream do. The fact that it has come and gone on one Thursday evening I found really frustrating. With a film, you can take it round and show it and have a relationship with the audience which is quite different.

Razutis: One thing that fascinated me about the 20s-30s model you outlined earlier is the application of avant-garde to expressive, political interests, an approach that says we don't have to turn strictly to fiction; we can also turn to documentary. (Vertov was an

expressive propagandistic way.) How would you see this process taking place as the avant-garde gets very literate with its use of language and its abilities to form a counter-proposition to existing documentary tradition?

Wollen: I'm wary whenever documentary comes up, because it's so closely tied in with realism. On the other hand, I think two of our films are, in a strange way, documentaries, i.e. *Amy!* and *Frida and Tina* (a film about Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti), but I don't think they strike people as documentaries. But again, we were trying to make documentaries that aren't realist, which is more difficult than making fiction films that aren't realist.

Razutis: One thing you do work with is the documentary obsession with the voice-off commentary - the specifying, the quantifying of all the events that one should be looking at.

Wollen: In *Frida and Tina* we do go the whole way with that: It's a pretty straight, didactic commentary. We wondered a lot about whether to do that, and then decided that it was a didactic film and we should face up to that. In *Amy!* the voiceover derives from Godard. We used a number of different voices, speaking in different modes of discourse, matching or not matching the visual discourse on the picture-track. The context in which we thought about voiceover came very much from Godard.

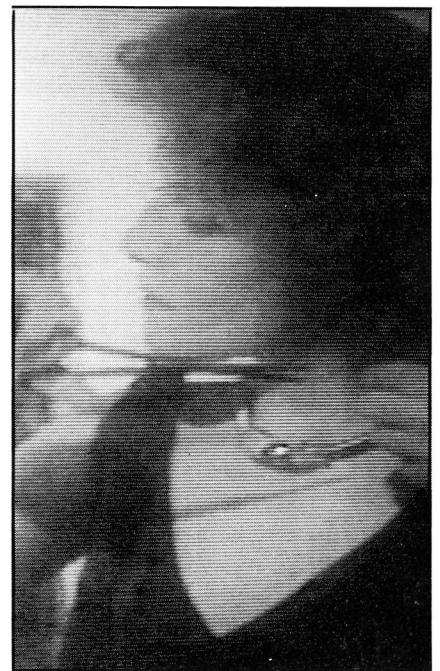


Photo by Eleanor Porter