

Amy Taubin

Amy!, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's most recent film, is about Amy Johnson, the British aviatrix who in 1930 made a solo flight from England to Australia. *Amy!* is also about the idea of a heroine. The structure is extremely elliptical — 33 cinematic minutes divided into nearly a dozen seemingly unedited extended sequences which range from a videotaped interview with a group of women in a job training program about the idea of a heroine (they refuse to admit there is any such thing) to a computerized moving camera, tracing on a map the route of Johnson's flight while a voice reads the headlines that appeared in the *London Times*. There is a newsreel of one of Johnson's personal appearances and several sequences in which an actress does not so much "portray" Johnson as stand as an emblem for her in a contemporary setting. One of these draws together several aspects of the film in a single, disturbing image: The woman applies makeup in a one-way mirror (she sees her reflection but we see through the glass to her face which is directly opposite us). The narrator reads a letter from Johnson to her family in which she accuses them of exploiting her and of being insensitive by referring to her "in public by her real name." The woman begins to draw an outline of her face on the mirror, then violently x's it out. The use of the spy mirror puts us in the position of Johnson's fans and the media; she is self-destructing in front of us because of the pressure of our gaze.

Wollen and Mulvey initially became involved in film through scriptwriting. (He wrote *The Passenger* for Antonioni, as well as several other unproduced scripts.) Around 1968 his thinking changed, primarily as a result of seeing the films that Godard had begun to make outside the industry. That period also marked the beginning of the London film co-op and of the touring packages of American avant-garde films; and although Wollen was more strongly affected by Godard than by the Americans, he cites Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* as being extremely influential. (His oft-cited article, "The Two Avant-Gardes," published in *Studio International*, attempted to define the dif-



Angel Landing: A clip from Mulvey and Wollen's *Amy!*

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ferences between the co-op filmmakers and those who were more politically and theoretically oriented.)

Wollen and Mulvey soon decided that the scriptwriting route was fruitless and in 1974, during a teaching stint at Northwestern, they made *Penthouse* using school equipment and personal money. Their next two films were financed by the British Film Institute. *Amy!* was made for roughly \$10,000 and Wollen's initial response to a re-viewing of the film last week was that it seemed to him a very well-made film for that amount of money.

It does to me, too. The original script called for a much longer film, but when greater financing proved unavailable, it was pared down to the current 33 minutes. Although in conversation Wollen turned up fascinating biographical material that is

omitted from the film, *Amy!*'s elliptical structure is one of its main strengths. I describe it as a series of elegant openings.

"We had in mind Maya Deren, Gertrude Stein and cubist portraits," Wollen said, his quiet voice breaking into a slightly ironic laugh. "Also Straub's *The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp*."

"We were concerned with why Johnson became headline news and, more importantly, how; that she was immediately infantilized, as in the song we use, 'Amy, Wonderful Amy. . . . You know, she was owned by the *London Daily Mail* (a Harmsworth family paper). She had to go on a personal appearance tour with the plane and she began to crack up. They threatened to take it away from her if she didn't fulfill her contract, so she flew it to her family home and had a nervous breakdown."

Wollen and Mulvey are often referred to as theoretical filmmakers. I asked Wollen about the relation of film and theory.

"A theoretical film is a film which raises theoretical questions that can change the ground on which theory is made. Our films would have an impact on why and how people think theoretically. A film is made as much out of words as images and one use of words is theoretical, so there is no reason you shouldn't point your film toward theoretical issues.

"At some point in the film you indicate explicitly what the problem of the film is. In *Amy!*, this would be Laura's voice-over section. It doesn't encompass the film, but it gives you a way you might look at it. Second is implication — formal decisions about what you put in and how you structure it."

Wollen and Mulvey's position differs from the large body of American avant-garde films not just in its concern for the political and the theoretical. Wollen likes as much of the film as possible to be planned before the shooting. He doesn't want to remake the film in the editing and seems reluctant to get into the "hands-on" aspect of independent filmmaking.

Discussing the nature of his and Mulvey's collaboration, Wollen explained that while each of them may bring in ideas, by the time they've finished they've both worked through the material so much that they can't separate their contributions. I was curious about Wollen's specific relationship to these three films which are all overtly feminist (the central figure in each is a woman and the theoretical issues are feminist).

"Laura's involvement with feminism is different and more central to her, but obviously I support the positions she holds. I don't want to put myself forward as a feminist because the feminist movement has a long history of political organization separate from men, which I don't dispute. But any work should be feminist in that it should cause you to rethink general principles and not just specific issues."

Amy! will be shown at the Kitchen with *Christopher Strong*, by Dorothy Arzner, a Hollywood film loosely based on Johnson's life and starring Katharine Hepburn, tonight, March 18. Wollen, currently teaching at NYU, will participate in a discussion after the screening.