



Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

# AMY! + Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti

## AMY!

*Directors:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen  
*Production Company:* Modelmark  
*Made with financial assistance from:* Southern Arts  
*Producer:* Laura Mulvey  
*Screenplay:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen  
*Camera:* Diane Tammes  
*2nd Camera:* Francine Winham  
*[Camera] Crew:* Jonathan Collinson, Anne Cottringer  
*Video:* Evanston Percussion Unit, Fantasy Factory  
*Editor:* Larry Sider  
*Designer:* Michael Hurd  
*Sound:* Larry Sider  
*Thanks to:* Chris Berg, Ian Christie, Rosalind Delmar, Keith Griffiths, Ilona Halberstadt, John Howe, Tina Keane, Tamara Krikorian, Carol Laws, Patsy Nightingale, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Carl Teitelbaum, Chad Wollen  
*Special thanks to:* Feminist Improvising Group, X-ray Spex, Jack Hylton and His Orchestra  
*With:* Mary Maddox (*Amy* / words from *Amy's letters*)  
Class at Paddington College  
(Community Care Course)  
Yvonne Rainer (*voices of Bryher/Amelia Earhart/Lola Montez, S./Gertrude Stein*)  
Jonathan Eden  
(*headlines from the Times, May 1930*)  
Laura Mulvey  
Peter Wollen  
UK 1980  
34 mins  
Digital

## Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti

*Directors:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen  
*Production Company:* Modelmark  
*Sponsor:* Arts Council of Great Britain  
*Executive Producer:* Rodney Wilson  
*Production Manager:* Patsy Nightingale  
*Script:* Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen  
*Rostrum Camera:* Frameline, Peerless Camera Company  
*Stills Photography:* Aurora Mosso M, Prudence Cuming, Jacques Rutten, Red Door Studios  
*Editors:* Larry Sider, Nina Danino  
*Designer:* Julian Rothenstein  
*Super-8 film:* Beatriz Mira  
*Sound:* Colin Martin  
*Narrator:* Miriam Margolyes  
UK 1983  
29 mins  
Digital

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*We are delighted to announce that Griselda Pollock (Professor Emerita of Social and Critical Histories of Art, University of Leeds) will be joining Laura Mulvey for the post-screening discussion hosted by Mandy Merck (Professor Emerita of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London).*

Laura Mulvey: *AMY!* and *Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti*, our two short films, were based on the real lives and achievements of extraordinary women. Although *Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti* originated as a film record of the exhibition Peter and I curated in 1982 at the Whitechapel Gallery, it evolved into a much more complex, and cinematically considered, project. Obviously, the exhibition had consisted of Kahlo's paintings and Modotti's photographs on the gallery walls; the accompanying catalogue essay reflected our interest in the two women's lives and their politics, their attitudes to the female body and the significant, but very different, questions they raise about women's art and aesthetics. On the screen, the images, stories and ideas could come together, fusing into a series of visual juxtapositions.

Although I would say that our previous films had all been constructed around systems of montage (primarily due to the place of pattern and tableaux in their structure), juxtaposition, in both form and content, was crucial for *Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti*. The film's shape and argument had a rigorous binary structure, that became dialectical through montage. The Kahlo paintings and Modotti photographs were grouped thematically into three chapters; the first contrasted Kahlo's persistent return to painting herself with Modotti's engagement with public spaces, the second contrasted Kahlo's roots in her house and in Mexican culture with Modotti's internationalism and the third contrasted their personal, different, relation to the female body and its effect on their art. The combining of ideas, the use of montage, that is, was intended to generate a wider conceptual framework, a reflection on how very varied experiences could still inform a feminist political consciousness. Julian Rothenstein designed an initial 'starting point' for each chapter in which 'Frida Kahlo' and 'Tina Modotti' are juxtaposed in word and image. The montage opens up a space for a 'third meaning', a resonant evocation, through Kahlo and Modotti individually, of women's lives, their struggles and the particularity of their art more generally. Given that the documentary was intended for educational screenings, we ultimately added a voice-over text, taken from the exhibition catalogue, to make the implications of the montage clearer.

We first came across Amy Johnson in 1980, when the fiftieth anniversary of her flight to Australia in 1930 was the occasion for newspaper stories and celebrations of her life. Her story raised the question, difficult for feminism, of a woman's attempt to move into a male role and the associated, but intractable, concept of the 'heroine'. From an Amy Johnson biography we discovered that our original theme of a woman's heroism was complicated by her celebrity. While the public gaze and patriarchal recuperation surrounding her return interested us psychoanalytically, her flight also attracted a certain imperial triumphalism as it was interpolated and 'transcribed', as Peter put it, 'into the language of the Empire in legend.' Coincidentally, the date further drew us to

## Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

### 25 and Under: An Introduction to Laura Mulvey

Wed 29 Oct 19:15 Blue Room

#### Riddles of the Sphinx

Tue 4 Nov 20:45; Mon 17 Nov 20:30 (+ intro);

Fri 21 Nov 18:20

#### Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons

Thu 6 Nov 20:30 (+ intro by academic and writer

Nicolas Helm-Grovas); Sun 16 Nov 12:30

#### Crystal Gazing

Mon 10 Nov 18:15 (+ intro); Sun 23 Nov 15:10

**AMY!** + discussion with Laura Mulvey

+ **Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti**

Tue 11 Nov 18:10

**Zorn's Lemma** + intro by Laura Mulvey

Mon 17 Nov 18:20

#### Laura Mulvey Symposium

Sat 22 Nov 11:00-17:00

#### The Bad Sister

Sat 22 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);

Wed 26 Nov 21:00

#### The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp

Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter

#### + The Woman's Film

Sat 22 Nov 20:30

#### Le Vent d'est Wind from the East

Mon 24 Nov 18:15

#### Disgraced Monuments + discussion with

Laura Mulvey + **23rd August 2008**

Thu 27 Nov 18:10

#### Antonio das Mortes

O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro

Sat 29 Nov 15:10

See a selection of materials by Laura Mulvey in the BFI Reuben Library's window displays in November

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the Amy story; we had already been thinking about the political significance of the year 1930, the onset of the Great Depression, for 1980 in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 election.

From the wider events of Amy Johnson's life, we extracted two pivot points to dramatise the significance of gender and the public gaze for her story. The first: her transition from 'ordinary girl' to aspiring aviatrix; the second: from triumphant heroine to abject celebrity. The first transition takes place through the *mise-en-scène*. Amy as 'ordinary girl' is evoked through soft lighting, colour and the kind of objects she has close to her as she moves together with the camera from her dressing table to the fireplace. As 'aspiring aviatrix' she is shot in day light, wearing trousers, and her dressing table has become a desk where she studies engineering and, accordingly, in her reverse movement from the fireplace, the collection of objects has also changed. There is a very reduced, but still pertinent, homage to Hollywood melodrama's use of *mise-en-scène*, lighting, colour, objects and camera movement in this scene. The second transition is staged through the apparatus. As 'triumphant heroine', Amy is filmed with an extremely long lens. At first, she retreats from the camera's pursuing and phallic gaze but then turns to face the lens with a complicit, feminine passivity. In the fourth scene, she is filmed, in close-up, through a two-way mirror; she puts on layers of make-up, excessively and ironically, and then draws her image onto the mirror as though onto the camera's lens. There is a sense of flatness as though the active presence of the camera had morphed into the passivity of the screen. My theoretical interest in the Hollywood melodrama and my critique of woman as spectacle in 'Visual Pleasure' both inform, if only residually, the representation of Amy.

We had originally planned to make our Amy Johnson film as a feature but failed to get the requisite BFI funding. We immediately reconfigured the project, paring the story down to essentials and entwining the performed tableaux with certain still-extant sites that Amy had, as it were, inhabited in her lifetime: the department store Peter Jones, Croydon Airport, the *Daily Mail* building and her little Tiger Moth hanging in the Science Museum. For Peter and me, these were indexical traces of a once-upon-a-time reality, a tribute to both the complexity of time and the cinema's complex recording of it. The Poly Styrene and X-Ray Spex songs further complicate temporality; evocative of punk from the late 1970s, they would in time acquire a historical patina not unlike that of 'Amy, Wonderful Amy'. In the case of the map, certain places have acquired emblematic and tragic significance due to wars that have spread across the intervening decades: for instance, Banja Luka (Bosnia), Fallujah (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria).

Laura Mulvey, Introduction from Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)