

Cinema Lounge: Dancing In The Dark by Shelagh Carter

This essay *On Dancing in the Dark* was written by Shelagh Carter to accompany a screening of Leon Marr's film *Dancing in the Dark* for the Cinema Lounge series on Wednesday Sept 5 of 2012 at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque.

A middle-aged woman meticulously scrubs and cleans her home, a daily routine that encompasses her world. With quiet observation the camera moves across the screen capturing an exacting character study of loneliness and space and time, with sudden circular flourishes around a dinner table of a husband and wife that foreshadow the 'dancer' to come. The woman is Edna, and as played by Martha Henry, it is a performance rendered with exquisite detail. Edna has the life she thought she always wanted – married to Harry (Neil Munro). He is her husband, and she is thus his wife. There is no confusion about her role, her identity totally invested in Harry. Safe in what she describes as her “bomb shelter of a home”. And yet. Within the confines of Director Leon Marr's carefully constructed sparse mise-en-scène and Vic Sarin's gorgeous cinematography there is the feeling of impending doom. The extreme close-ups of Henry's eyes reveal an inner life ranging between a merciless dark vacuous void, to pure abject terror and pain. Edna is struggling to justify, and understand her life as circumstances, banal as they might appear, propel her towards psychosis and finally a murderess act.

Marr adapts *Dancing in the Dark* from a novel by Joan Barfoot. The character, Edna, is reviewing her life – chronologically in flashbacks- from a psychiatric hospital room, where she has been confined ever since Harry's death. So there are really no surprises for the audience. And yet. It is never boring. We are captivated by the strength of Martha Henry's performance of an inexplicable personae and the sophisticated and understated direction of the film. I had forgotten how truly beautiful the film is, the 35mm print screening at the Cinematheque is in mint condition. The palette of the flashback scenes appears almost lush, even the cooler present day events have richness to them. The excellent supporting cast is lead by the late character actor Neil Munro. His portrayal of Harry, the ambitious career - driven husband, is eerily clichéd, yet so effective. It appears that he loves Edna, accepts her obsessive idiosyncrasies, but in reality this serves him well .His every need is met without complaint. Edna thinks he is sublime and she by association of worth. It is his ordinary tasteless affair that reveals the painful and brutal truth of her wasted devotion.

The sparseness of production, the 'look' of the film, as critics have previously noted, is strongly evocative of the superb *Jeanne Dielman*, by director Chantal Akerman, also about a woman's mental breakdown. I'd like to compare and contrast these two films for a moment here, because what is interesting is the

commonality of the two films, and finally their major difference. Both films deal with ‘a day in a life’ so to speak, and we, the viewer, watch in a voyeuristic way – for *Dancing*, these are scenes in both past and present and in *Jeanne Dielman* the story arc depicts three consecutive days in the life of a widow – a study of crippling monotony and humiliation. Jeanne, as played by the actress Delphine Seyrig, has a routine that she follows like Edna, similar in its repetitive nature and careful certainty. But there is a more obvious tedium to her labors, her lonely toil with each daily duty “unbroken in its sequence, rise early, prepare breakfast, polish her son's shoes, send him to school, do the shopping, enjoy lunch and a coffee, prepare dinner” in anticipation of Sylvain’s (her son) returning home, etc. Every day she sets out the dinner table; each piece of dishware placed exactly where they need to go. She says nothing, and experiences neither joy nor pain. Once the meal is done she will return everything to its “original place, reversing the order, the circle complete”. Jeanne is always moving, never really still, even when sitting. We ‘see’ the evidence of thoughts across the Seyrig’s face, but don’t know their content unlike Edna’s voiceover explaining, questioning, wondering her fate. But like Edna, inevitability and routine keep both women from focusing on their feelings until things get unpredictable and their fragile identity collapses, their denial of the truth of their existence - Jeanne’s unhappiness and Edna’s wasted years - revealed. Additionally the environments of the mise-en- scènes for both films speak significantly to absence presence; what is absent is made present. Particularly for *Dancing*, the narrative unfolds in the present even as the past is made present. But it functions differently for *Jeanne Dielman*. Here it positions us as spectator as ‘she or he who is seeing without being seen’, thus truly succeeding in making us complicit in the action unfolding on the screen in the present, which I discuss further in the following paragraph.

Ultimately, both women experience a breakdown and both commit murder in a stunning, sudden move. Though *Dancing* goes deeply into a woman attempting to sort out what has happened without shame and therefore a disconcerting conclusion and I welcomed Marr’s choice to cut all sound from the track when Edna commits murder, my preference, is the ending of Ackerman’s film. The endless voiceovers of Edna’s literary sounding writings have accumulated into overkill as we learned more about her state of mind now that she is incarcerated, and her almost humorous recollections of sex with her husband, how the latter pales in comparison to the visceral rush of murder. But it is words, words, words, and words. Whereas Ackerman leaves us with the moments, the time after the act of murder in a long take of Jeanne in the semi -darkness. Up until now we have assumed that Jeanne is fine about her daily procuring. But now we witness the evident humiliation and how truly unerotc the sex is. And specifically now, when nothing is working anymore, to keep her unhappiness at bay, how Jeanne breaks. At first we as the spectator are not quite sure if she is in pain, arduous or even climaxing under the john. It is left entirely up to us to understand what has gone terribly wrong on this afternoon. We are challenged to empathize, because of all the cinematic details leading up to this drastic act, and I like the ambiguity the images have left us with.

In those long final “hypnotic moments of semi-darkness” we are united with Jeanne, as various emotions play across the actress Seyrig’s face, despite how much we don’t know.

There are however, many poignant images that stay with me after viewing *Dancing* once again after so many years: the pen as a sudden weapon; the stack of journals; Edna resting in the afternoon; the fatal phone call told over fractured editing; and the final image of Edna dancing. I recently completed my first feature film *Passionflower*, which has its own story of a woman ‘under the influence’ shall we say. As we view films that speak to mental illness/emotional breakdown and most significantly for *Passionflower*, its moving reception recently at the Rendezvous with Madness Film Festival in Toronto, we experience what I hope is becoming a universal truth – a more compassionate understanding of fragility of human feeling. In this regard, Leon Marr renders a film that could have become melodramatic and showy in tone, dulling its effect, with elegant restraint and supports a performance of staggering genius by his lead actress.

Dancing in the Dark remains a Canadian cinematic treasure.

SHELAGH CARTER / BIO

Shelagh Carter is a Lifetime Member of The Actors Studio as an Actress and Director, a Professor of Theatre and Film at the University of Winnipeg and a graduate of the Canadian Film Centre's Directors Lab in Toronto. She has also won world festival recognition with her experimental narrative short films CANOE and RIFTING/BLUE. Shelagh's first feature film called PASSIONFLOWER, the story of Sarah, an 11-year-old girl, forcing her family to come to terms with her mother's increasing mental instability, is presently winning film festival attention and honors. Her experimental film, SPELLBINDING 3D, a B&W dance film, is her most recent artistic short work, and an exciting departure to new technology. She is a recent recipient of the award, Women In the Director's Chair Career Advancement Module 2010, in collaboration with Women in Film Festival Vancouver. Working with actors and teaching the acting process is a long time love. www.darklingpictures.com