

Jennifer, Where Are You?

a film by Leslie Thornton
at Millennium, December, 1981

Jennifer, Where Are You? (1981) is a ten minute, color film by Leslie Thornton. The dominant image is a tight close up shot of a small girl engaged in various activities: playing with lipstick, a mirror, matches. These shots are separated by black leader from other, upside down, images. The soundtrack consists of music, natural sounds (footsteps, water, etc.) and a man's voice repeatedly asking the title question.

Some have said that they don't understand the film: "Nothing happens." Does "nothing" happen when a little girl smiles out of fear? Does nothing "happen" when a man's angry voice haunts the face of a young girl? Does "nothing happen" when a little girl looks aside—for a split second—at you—at her reflection—at the camera—before deliberately doing something "wrong"?

Jennifer, . . . ? Every thirty seconds, a man demands to know.

Jennifer, where ARE you? Jennifer stops, looks up, looks out at someone we can't see, bends back to the mirror, proceeds.

JENNIFER WHERE ARE YOU? Jennifer whose name *isn't* Jennifer enlarges the oval of her mouth, smearing the lipstick in wider, messier circles around and around her grin.

Jennifer whereareyou?! But she can't hear him; he wasn't there; he wasn't looking for *this* Jennifer; and I am trapped in the midst of their absence.

So we are given this simple coincidence of Man's voice and Girl's "innocence." But throughout, his harsh command is surrounded by a cacophony of sounds. Music is reduced to noise while noise is elevated to the musical, and it prances and grunts with and against his constant refrain: And throughout, the camera moves against and with this Jennifer of no name: it demands her direct gaze, it tries to catch her through the mirror's reflection, it closes in too tightly, and always her eyes stare through and through all of us. It *is* the gaze of innocence. Of wisdom? Of both.

Perhaps this convergence of elements is a deceit of the film, and of the filmmaker. Each are filmic fabrications, having been taken out of context (his shout is looped to repeat itself ad nauseum; she was originally filmed for a fire prevention commercial); but then how is it that they complement each other so well, while belonging to such separate events? It isn't simply a marriage of image and sound (a perverse chemistry that makes almost any juxtaposition thick with meaning): because of a fine

control of the materials, it becomes the wedded bliss of authority and fear. The one necessitates the other, the other bolsters the one. This may appear to be a static relationship, monolithic and one-dimensional, but the filmmaker doesn't allow for such a coarse reading. The subtleties of power, far more tenacious than its obvious forms, weigh on the film, drag us in, lead us through precarious detours and leave us unsure of even our most certain responses.

Why does the spellbinding range of emotions expressed by this girl during such a commonplace activity provoke so much anxiety? And why do we feel so anxious when faced with the realization that his voice, although it is a loop, never sounds the same? It is through this chameleon-like quality of both major elements that we sense the damning complexity of their relationship. And then the context for these elements—the other sounds and images of the film—extends our journey into the maze of emotions and questions that are being provoked.

Jennifer unnamed is bracketed by black leader and interrupted occasionally by other, upside down, images. Twice, a man. Once, two smiling women, their faces close together. Twice, painfully red images of fish: one is sinister and sensuous, the other seems stricken and silly. Once, a house above which leaves blow across a grassy sky. These images suggest terror, nostalgia, isolation, awkwardness and mystery. Each sensation has its place in the film, and each corresponds to some aspect of the sounds used. Three dominate: a high-pitched and distant siren, the man's question, and a frantic piece of Baroque piano music. The siren never ceases to wail, his question recurs every half minute, and the too-boisterous piano music is used to shift direction, offer solace, make elegant that which is too raw, etc. There is a discrepancy in feeling and volume between the sounds which when used most aggressively creates a heartbreaking mood. The siren seems to become a *memory* of warning, the piano takes on that awful quality of forced laughter, and there again and again is his question, made ridiculous, menacing, indecent or ordinary by its surroundings.

But a muteness prevails. I'm interested in silent films that are LOUD, but here is a film that is deadly quiet despite a chaos of sound. This too-tangible sense of things being left unsaid or unexplained seems to emanate from the amorphous space (does sound occupy space?) between the siren and his voice. And her gaze. Surely she isn't

hearing his command to make a present/presence of herself. And surely he doesn't understand why Jennifer refuses to make herself present. His voice assumes that his need is sufficient explanation, while her glance admits that she is subject to circumstances that she can control only through minor disruptions and delays.

Until the end. Until exhaustion coincides with instinct and even as she musters all her will to "perform," she cannot. As Jennifer-still-with-no-name tries once again to blow out the match, flashes of white appear to slash her, mimic the flame and suddenly, with a terrifying suction and a piercing outcry of sound, the screen is black. This "failure" is her first real success.

This "failure" is also one of the many (necessarily) partial answers to the central question. It isn't the whereabouts of Jennifer that obsesses us and that man; it is her relationship to the question of her place and her being. The film is a question(ing) of authority and authorship, of the power implicit in authority, of the balance between her fear and her will to disrupt, of the balance between his angry question and his inability to understand her (lack of an) answer. We are led to fear greatly for the separate ground that each of the "characters" maintains. We are also led to fear greatly for the absolute entanglement of the two, which is as dominant as their separateness.

So maybe "nothing happened." No one got killed, no one got kissed, no one even got an answer. But the last match wasn't blown out, by her. Maybe nothing can happen if we watch too closely: people put on their best faces. Maybe nothing happens if we watch too closely: it dissolves into rhetoric. Perhaps if we sit perfectly still and bear witness to the dance between interrogator and interrogated, we can begin to disembody that dance. Jennifer No Name can only *offer* us her true name; under his circumstances she cannot be known. As long as her gaze slips into the mirror and he shouts so mechanically, there remains this coexistence in mutually exclusive space where image and sound, flesh and voice, feed on each other and meet only to seduce, terrorize and be divided, again and again. And *that* is where "everything happens." And that is where one might think nothing happens. But we might begin to ask, as we are entrapped by this strange dialogue, why we are so relieved to find that "at least *something* is happening."

By forcibly conjoining Her gaze and His voice, the film makes us consider the implications of the film medium and our given environment, both of which can create such an agonized resonance between two disparate elements. The fact that we are each victims of our individual and shared memories complicates the effort to expose and



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analyze the dialectic between authority and resignation as it constructs our selves and our world. We are saturated by it; it is embedded in every institution and every relationship. Most people would admit its existence: some to condone, others to condemn.

If one is to condemn it, the question is how to make its function *present*, and its presence dysfunctional. To be spoon-fed a “politically correct” analysis of the seductiveness of power and resignation, and to be told that we must despise and renounce that darkest part of ourselves, is to be left with little understanding of how arduous and gradual the process of change really is. In order to push us past a rhetorical knowledge and acknowledgement of this dialectic, we need something that traces its existence to our deepest memories: our childhood. A film such as *Jennifer...* works because it makes us *afraid*, not in the interests of confirming our fears but in the hopes of making us so vulnerable that we finally become *angry* about the questions, the noise, the camera, and the presence that belies an essential absence.

In the last shot, Jennifer not Jennifer stares at the flame so stubbornly, with such absorption, that for the first time we find ourselves removed from her, by her. Until then, she had made “eye contact”

with us. We had established a compassionate “dialogue” with her through her gaze. Now, as her seductive and playful gaze crumbles into a silent and angry mask, we are staring *at* her and feeling the full weight of her resistance. The situation is critical. She cannot leave, *but she can no longer participate*. The best she can do is to not move, not respond, and not look anywhere but into herself for the strength to ignore his command and to break the cycle.

As we witness the subtle assault on this child of no name yet, and her first stubborn avowal of self, we become part of her struggle against the chaos of authority and fear. Do we all hear certain voices as Jennifer No Name “hears” his command; does his incessant questioning of the “real” Jennifer reflect our own solipsistic moments? Are we as vulnerable to daily assault as we are to his voice and her fragility? Perhaps we demand of the unseen and respond to the imagined (which are both seen and real) more often than we realize. Throughout *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, Leslie Thornton makes it clear that terror and evasion are an inadequate, but nostalgic, sublimation of the need for genuine communication. And she makes it clear that we must break the cycle, or be broken.

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