

Looking Back

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Anybody's Woman, Dorothy Arzner's 1930 louche pre-Code drama, parades as a romance but serves as a portrait. The woman is a scrappy, down-and-out chorus girl who's too smart to not be mostly perplexed by reality. She talks fast so she can hear herself think. Half a century later, Bette Gordon would take Arzner's title for her own 1981 post-post-Code Super 8 short, in which an unnamed woman speaks her fantasies to get closer to her desires.

In a 1985 interview with Coco Fusco, Gordon loosely sketches the film's conceit. 'I asked my friend Nancy Reilly to talk about her porn fantasies in front of the Variety Theater. And I asked my friend Spalding Gray to do the same.... I wanted to hear women talk dirty and to see what kind of power that might yield. I wanted women to look back instead of being looked at.'

In the many discussions of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that have dominated art criticism and film theory since John Berger first appeared on television to talk about male viewership, sight has been so prioritized among the senses that it can sometimes seem that we've forgotten that women, unable to prevent being seen, can also, mercifully, speak. Finding your voice is as useful a skill as training your sights. Forget returning the gaze, which implies that the person on the other side is worth being looked at. Whoever can speak can tell the story.

Arzner's film opens with a blonde in a threadbare dress flopping around in a squalid hotel room, complaining about money. 'Opportunities?' she scoffs at her friend's suggestion, 'You make me sick.' In a Hitchcockian move *avant la lettre*, two men at the opposite window crane to hear them. In Gordon's film, another woman, bedraggled in bubblegum pink tights, clenching a soda straw like it's a weapon, sits across from an unimpressed man at a diner and spells out her fantasy. He asks her, by way of response, if she's paid the phone bill.

Men are the audience in both films, but the women speak for themselves. The smoking man at the diner, who can't meet Nancy's eye as she stares at him dead-on, doesn't matter, just as the millionaire love object in Arzner's story, who far too belatedly notices what is being offered to him, has no great import either. What is significant in Gordon's film is that before telling her fantasy, Nancy sits at her desk and flips through photographs of women. In voiceover, a steady Kathryn Kay recounts the first scene of Arzner's *Anybody's Woman*, with the women, in the dead heat, wondering what to do with their lives. The doubling seems to collapse time. That Nancy's glossy fingernails on the glossy pages of women's photos and bodies is the sexiest part of the sexually explicit script recalls Robert Bresson's belief in 'the intelligence of hands.' She likes to look, but it's touch that's her erotic education. That another woman's story is what we, and possibly she, hears, speaks to the way women look to each other to arrive at self-understanding.

In a slant interior logic, both Arzner and Gordon's protagonists remind me most of *Two Serious Ladies*, a Jane Bowles novel in which two women abandon the life they're expected to lead for a small chance at salvation. 'No one among my friends speaks any more of character,' says Mrs. Copperfield. 'What interests us most, certainly, is finding out what we are like.'

'Anybody's woman': at first the term rankles. 'Anybody,' so anonymous, so broad as to connote no one at all. Too general to be possessive, yet also evocative, implying submissiveness, the expectation of possession.

Anybody's woman suggests a loose moral code: someone available for a price, for a time. Whoever can be *anybody's* can't be somebody's. But the impossibility of being *somebody's* is a kind of freedom. Bound to nobody, she can only belong to herself.