



X Love Scenes / Pearls without a String

By Constanze Ruhm

O'Hara got a better impression of Flynn when they starred in Against All Flags. "He was wonderful to work with," she said. "He came to work prepared, he knew his lines, he knew what he was supposed to do. Only one bad thing he did. By 4:30, 5 o'clock, his drinking would catch up with him, and he was in no shape to continue filming. I did all my love scenes and romantic close ups (shot at the end of the day) to a white chalk mark on a black flag that was supposed to be Erroll Flynn. A script girl read his lines in a dead, expressionless monotone. It was very difficult to react to her delivery and pretend the flag was Erroll Flynn."

– Maureen O'Hara, John Nicoletti: *'Tis herself*

Synopsis

X Love Scenes is the fifth work in the series *X Characters* (initiated in 2001), a project that attempts to re-script the identities of iconic female film characters derived from modernist cinema and its contemporary versions. The productions realized thus far (*A Memory of the Players*, 2001; *Coming Attraction*, 2002; *X Characters / RE(hers)AL*, 2003; *X NaNa / Subroutine*, 2004; *X Love Scenes*, 2007) are drafted as interdisciplinary projects that investigate distinct forms of female identities in the context of contemporary art practices. At the same time, they focus on the history of cinematic and theatrical forms in conjunction with the role of contemporary New Media.

As an installation, *X Love Scenes* consists of six sequences of different lengths, displayed simultaneously on six monitors. Therein a quintessential trope of narrative cinema – Edison's famous May Irwin Kiss from 1896 – is restaged as an unresolved, traumatic, repetitive cycle. An actress, a director and a script girl are on a film set. The male lead is replaced by a mark – a white chalk X – on a black flag that becomes the actor's stand-in. While the script girl reads his lines, the actress performs her part facing the flag, an "empty" sign.

"Giuliana," the lead actress in *X Love Scenes*, is based on a character culled from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (1964). She is presented as being in a constant state of development, from several points of origin, all of which get charted out anew whenever a new production in *X Characters* is formulated with her as the narrative



agent. Since her first performance as a chat room character in *X Characters / RE(hers)AL*, Giuliana, who by now has become an actress, has divided herself into a number of sub-characters. These represent new versions of Bree from *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula 1971) and Hari from *Solaris* (Andrej Tarkovsky 1972). NaNa, the script girl, goes back to Nana of Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962), as well as to the versions already developed in *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* and *X NaNa*. All the characters were introduced in these previous productions. The director is the only role that is not based on a film-historic template.

The unity of the character's identities is retained, rooted as they are in past icons of modernist, cinematic female representation. In reference to the original Giuliana's tenuous psychological condition, the new Giuliana from *X Love Scenes* is a split personality, moving through different figures until finally freeing herself from the pre-ordained narrative. The already troubled and transforming "unity" of the original signal "Giuliana" is divided into a number of sub-signals intersecting at the figure of "X" – the marker signifying the actress' position, the location of the performance, as well as the representation of an unresolved identity. The "X" here becomes "the location of all possible signs." The original "Giuliana" root is called into play by how the work recognizes its rhizomatic nature, allowing the character to both function as "router" and "splitter." Giuliana thus conveys a "splitting signal" that the new work as a medium attempts to channel. *X Love Scenes* focuses on these interwoven character fragments as rhizomatic updates and identity relay stations.

As a medium, *X Love Scenes* conveys coded messages back from a "comédie humaine," staged under the conditions of contemporary New Media technologies at the moment of the closest contact the cinema allows to the audience: the moment of lie and truth in one. This is where the other side of a lover's gaze – or at least, the reverse shot of the passions required in the cinematic love scene – becomes visible. This "reverse shot," the "other side" of the "love scene," is rendered as a view of the production aspect of the cinematographic apparatus.

Each of the six sequences tag basic coordinates of a love story's course – from the first meeting, falling in love, conflicts to separation – and are always dedicated to one character. The love scenes that are to be performed by the actress refer to their filmic templates and are rehearsed and shot in ever new versions.



Love Scene

In North by Northwest, when Eva Maria Saint asks Cary Grant his name, he says, Roger O. Thornhill. She asks him what the 'O' stands for and he zings back, 'Nothing.' And then again with his personalised matchbooks on which are emblazoned his initials: R.O.T. When he tries to get her attention when she is getting ready to fly away with James Mason and the pre-Columbian sculpture with all the microfilm in it, he tosses one of his matchbooks at her. Of course, David would never get the joke. I suppose he thought of himself as one of the O'Selznicks of Cook County. Thank God no one ever asked me what was on that microfilm that was so important to everyone.

– Alfred Hitchcock and Mark Rappaport'

X Love Scenes uses the filmic convention of the confessional love scene as a starting point for its *mise-en-scène*. The "love scene," staged through a doubled scenic resolution (as a film being shot in a film), is rendered as a standardized narrative trope. Moreover, it is located as "the repressed" at the fissure of shot and reverse shot, in the cut between frames as well as in the off space. Here, the cinematic convention or trope of one actor speaking to the (beloved) Other (whose position is taken by the camera) is transformed. The common method, illustrated in O'Hara's quote above, is to shoot these scenes as special constructions. One actress or actor stands alone, speaking to a less-expensive functionary who delivers lines that are not recorded. In this way, the functionary is only there for the actor, providing cues to emote by. It is that which *X Love Scenes* attempts to reveal. The counter shot of an "Other," required in order to maintain the reality effect of cinema, is staged as a visible absence.

X / Marker

Is whether they get married in the end really all you want to know? Look, really, there is no film that ends badly, and the audience enters into happiness at the hour appointed on the program.

– Jean Epstein, *Bonjour Cinéma*

Cover: *X Love Scenes / Pearls without a String* (detail), 2007
 Left: The May Irwin Kiss (Edison, 1896)
 Center: *X Love Scenes / Pearls without a String* (detail), 2007
 Right: *X Love Scenes / Pearls without a String* (detail), 2007

The position marks that appeared in *X Characters / RE(hers)* *AL* were placed on the floor in order to orient the actress. In *X Love Scenes* the same marks converge into one sign referring to "absence." They are charged by the character's multiple identities striving apart, an abstraction towards which the actress declares her love, unbowed. The marks thus become a sign of being in the "zone," of fulfilling the character's duty to re-create a unity long lost to her. A standpoint turns into a counterpart, a vis-à-vis. In turn, the actress' position is short-circuited with a blank. The "X" as individual position mark, designates the spot where the performance takes place and is subsequently transformed into a universal identity that attempts to localize the position of "contemporary cinema."

Cinema / Love

Love on the screen contains what no love had contained till now: its fair share of ultra-violet.

– Jean Epstein, *Bonjour Cinéma*

Giuliana is an agent of desire, a confused messenger of her own passions, and, at the same time, a projection surface and apparatus. Her statements seem logical but are betrayed by her longing for love.

The histories of "cinema love," "love of cinema" and "love in cinema" are profoundly inscribed in the history of cinema itself. Giuliana, and the characters emerging from this original template, are reunited by their desire, as well as by a desire to render a fictitious character a real human being. These characters display "passion" as an inverted form of fiction, at once opposed to the reality of love and fundamental to it. "Passion" is thus shown to be a constructed operation vis-à-vis a camera that seemingly records the "confessional love declaration" objectively. In this way, access is opened to the "other" side of performance. One can perceive slight or more profound variations in attitude, emotion, and text. And one is able to experience the distance between real and fictitious characters, as well as the moments of transition in between.

The looped narrative short-circuits the beginning of the story with its ending. The camera shows the love scene in the form of a *mise-en-abyme*, or a "film-in-film," recording the events on the set as a making-of version. In the end, the project is realized as a mirrored construction, which also indicates the split in the character's psyche on the level of the filmic form.

By overlapping the syntax of cinema, New Media and performance, *X Love Scenes* marks off a contemporary coordinate through which the characters and their passions are channeled. At times, the dialogue comes to a standstill – but just in order to take a new direction. We listen to residual texts, to fleeting lines from a logbook registering "identity," fragments of a declaration of love directed to an unknown address, and maybe to cinema itself.

"X" is a substitute – it becomes "the location of all possible signs." The sub-characters are illicit subjects, as they are poor witnesses of themselves. They render a perspective onto the margin of the media as a character longing to be pure passion and thus human. As ghosts uttering memories in the mass-media machine of their *past* constructions, they are always on the verge of being resolved in "passion," "love" and "eros." As discussed above, their new character

versions are configured around the love scene as the archetypal scene in cinema. And yet, it is in the new versions that the sub-characters, as ghost-like appearances, send messages from New Media's past – that moment when the unity of identity was still intact. As both cinematic and New Media constructions, the characters are thus suspended between redemption and resolution.

It could be said, then, that *X Love Scenes* recounts the story of a persona's production. A meta-character is brought to the fore by those sub-routines, standing as a model for a contemporary cinema, transformed through New Media practice and rooted in contemporary cultural and technological discourses. It speaks with the voice of cinema, but through the syntax of New Media, and feeds from a stream of distinct identities based on cinematic modernism. A fragile constellation appears – a contemporary "star" based on tenuous, fragile and distinct identities.

In the course of this transformation, an updated version of "Giuliana" comes into being. But at the same time, "Giuliana" represents cinema's psyche itself. This new character is rendered as a collage, a synthetic ornament who's meandering, turning and twisting configurations accompany and record sub-plots and sub-characters. As a result, tenuous and fragile sequels of an identity, which were once homogeneous, have now fallen apart. *X Love Scenes* is thus a story of absence, female desire, projections and transgression. It tells of the final breakdown of communication, the end of a love story and the absence of the "other." At same time it speaks of the "other" that is profoundly inscribed in our own identities. Outlining a map of absences and presences, *X Love Stories* renders the image of a yet uncharted wilderness of an island of meaning, where the new characters are stranded - a peculiar party looking for orientation, on a search for new identities and scripts that still have to be written.

Edited by Juli Carson

1 Alfred Hitchcock and Mark Rappaport, *When I made the Paradine Case*, in: www.rouge.com.au/4/paradine_rappaport.html

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Jan 7 - Feb 6, 2010

