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FILM

## SHADOW PLAY

January 24, 2019 • Amy Taubin on “Out of the Shadows: Experimental Feminist Films by Jane Arden, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Penny Slinger” at Anthology Film Archives



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Un rêve plus long que la nuit*, 1976, 16 mm-to-digital, color, sound, 75 minutes. Production still. Photo: Laurent Condominas.

I DON'T REALLY BELIEVE IN CANONS, but if Anthology Film Archives were to expand their Essential Cinema collection, one of the films they should add is Niki de Saint Phalle's 1976 *Un rêve plus long que la nuit* (A Dream Longer Than the Night). The film is having a rare American showing in “Out of the Shadows: Experimental Feminist Films by Jane Arden, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Penny Slinger.” Curated by Alison Gingeras and Nicoletta Beyer, the series will be presented by Anthology from January 25 to January 31.

A fairy tale that, like the revisionist fairy tales of Angela Carter, refuses the traditional purpose of such stories—cautionary tales for girls—*Un rêve* plunges into the depths of its maker's psyche, which is also the source of Saint Phalle's best-known paintings and sculptures: the scrumptiously colored “Nanas” and the monumental figures of the “Tarot Garden” in Tuscany, with their yawning mouths, emptied eyes, and, occasionally, cavernous vaginas. Regardless of medium, Saint

Phalle's images are at once alluring and terrifying, primal and sophisticated, ironic and deadly serious about sex and mortality. The film opens with hand-drawn tarot cards and then discovers preadolescent Camelia, playing in the woods with two others who are perhaps her older siblings. Along with time and space, relationships are fluid in Camelia's stream of consciousness. Soon these three and many others are assembled around a dead man with a silly mustache—Camelia's father, who once sat on her bed to read her a story, or perhaps it was something more nefarious. Camelia steals a ring from the corpse and is seemingly rewarded with two guardians, a frolicsome dragon and an accommodating sorceress. Camelia wants to understand why there is death and if she will find love and marriage. To this end, she is transformed into a teenage beauty, clad in a scanty bridal dress, at the center of an orgy, where other women are bound and stripped bare while bachelors flaunt humungous exploding phalluses. Camelia escapes only to wander onto a bloody World War II battlefield. I wept so hard when the dragon died that I can't remember how it all ended. No matter: It's a modern surrealist film masterpiece.



Penny Slinger, *Lilford Hall*, 1969, 16 mm-to-digital, black and white, sound.

Saint Phalle's earlier feature, 1973's *Daddy*, was not available for preview. Made in collaboration with British filmmaker Peter Whitehead, it is described as a more explicit autobiographical coming-of-age incest narrative. Whitehead is the connecting link among the three women artists and filmmakers in the "Out of the Shadows" series: the French-American Saint Phalle, the English Penny Slinger, and the Welsh Jane Arden. Slinger, whose project was to infuse surrealism with a feminist consciousness, is best known for her photographic collages and her first-

person photo romanza, *An Exorcism* (1977). At Anthology, she will present three of her silent short films and an excerpt from her ambitious collaboration with Whitehead, *Lilford Hall*, all from 1969. Slinger is also the subject of Richard Kovitch's 2017 documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, which places her work in the context of the burgeoning British feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. (Slinger and Kovitch will introduce both screenings of the documentary.) A performance artist in that she is the central figure in her own often phantasmagorical photographs, Slinger was also a member of Jane Arden's radical feminist theater group, Holocaust. In Arden's 1972 feature, *The Other Side of the Underneath*, Slinger plays a near-catatonic inmate at an asylum in the Welsh countryside where everyone wears Victorian garb—as in the photographs of patients in Jean-Martin Charcot's clinic, though the explosive acting has more in common with what one might have found on an R. D. Laing commune. Once a successful theater and television writer and director, Arden moved far out of the mainstream as her feminism led her to explore performance as therapy, most boldly in *The Other Side of the Underneath*, and with dire intimations of disintegration in three other films made in collaboration with Jack Bond: *Separation* (1968), *Vibration* (1975), and *Anti-Clock* (1979). If your understanding of the conjunction of feminism and psychoanalysis in British film and art of the '70s is focused on the analytic work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Slinger's and Arden's films, at the very least, will open a far less cerebral perspective.

— Amy Taubin