

Art in America

April 1987

By Vera Dika



Cinema

A Feminist Fairy Tale

In her new film Cinderella Ericka Beckman reforges the old tale into a contemporary story about image replication and identification.

BY VERA DIKA

Ericka Beckman's new 16mm color film *Cinderella* is deceptively simple. The title, of course, refers to the ancient fairy tale and the film itself retells or, more accurately, reformulates that story. But as the opening treatment implies with its jerking pan across a papier-mâché furnace to the blocky letters of the title, the film is self-conscious in its construction, foregrounding its artificiality rather than masking it.

The film proper opens with an apparent counterpoint to this artificiality: a live action shot of a rural setting. A horse-drawn carriage slowly approaches the camera as the rhythmic sounds of wheels and hooves evoke the tranquillity of a past time. On the facade of the barnlike structure in this scene hangs the sign "FORGE," also in blocky letters. Here Beckman's characteristic play on words begins the symbolic process of the film, with "forge" referring both to a workshop, later a factory, in which Cinderella works minting coins, and to a literalization of the term "to forge an image." Both meanings are crucial because in the course of her story Cinderella will attempt to forge herself into a conventionalized image based on proper appearances and behavior, one that will determine her value and marketability.

The realism of the opening shot is quickly replaced by the abstracted black space of the forge interior, populated by papier-mâché models of a large furnace, bellows, pulleys, etc., and by actors with manifestly artificial costumes and props. As the film continues, the realistic space appears only intermittently, while the abstracted one predominates, often becoming gridlike—a playground for computer-generated images and double exposures.

This space is one of fantasy, a timeless, boundaryless space of the "once upon a time," but it is also a kind of game board, a place in which a conventionalized set of actions and expectations are played out. For Beckman structures the tale as a game, with Cinderella the key player as she actively strives to catch the prince and to win the party dress. In her quest she is directed by a chorus of singing voices variously informing her of the rules of the game and of her errors, and by a series of superimposed titles arbitrating her status in the game. Each of these serves consecutively as a kind of externalized superego, as a judge



Production still from Ericka Beckman's 16mm film *Cinderella* (1986, 27 minutes); in the forge Cinderella builds a fire out of which comes a gift—her dress.

or referee—extensions of the viewer aware of the conventionalized form of the story.

The rules of the game are essentially those of the Cinderella fairy tale: the heroine must get the dress, attract the prince, lose the shoe and be home by midnight. But in the film Cinderella fails three times to comply with the game's rules. At each error a large blocklike "X" is hurled at her and she is taunted with such titles as "Not Home By Midnight."

Eventually, however, Cinderella learns how to model herself after the prescribed image of woman—which the film presents as a sort of consumerist princess-cum-Barbie doll—and at last she wins. Playing by the rules, she gains the prize and literally acquires her own voice. In the final segment of the film, Cinderella's singing voice is dominant, virtually replacing both the chorus and the titles. But her victory is bittersweet. Growing in awareness, Cinderella sees that the prince is more interested in her image than in her self, and so she finally rejects the game, the prince and the dress, which serves as a metaphor both for her sought-after conventionalized image and for her entrapment.

On this level, Beckman's *Cinderella* has

feminist implications, with her protagonist breaking her chains, raising her voice, rejecting the conventionalized image of woman. She rejects the party dress, a rigid, green, constricting garment, and an equally rigid blond wig for her more natural clothes and hairstyle, and she rejects the prince, a character that appears both as a man and as a robotlike metal figure which obsessively hurls itself against Cinderella's shadow image. But ultimately Cinderella rejects the very process of image-making itself, specifically one that encourages the replication of preformulated models.

Beckman's metaphors for this process proliferate toward the end of the film and are centered primarily on the fabrication of a Cinderella doll and the variety of forms in which it is presented. Cinderella works at a factory where we see the serial fabrication of this doll, first as a computerized gridlike image, and then as a completed object, also in computerized form. In addition, the doll appears as a wooden dowel which is incessantly turning, and as a shadow image projected onto a film screen. The turning of the doll is then mimicked by records, also presented as gridlike

WHERE IS THE SHOE



Cinderella leaves the castle and enters the game board, a computerized grid.

models and as flat computerized images, and by a large stylus which "records" these images. Here the chorus, for the only time in the film, speaks in the first person and sings such verses (composed by Beckman and Brooke Halpin) as: "I'm the model / perfect model / it all generates / from me" or "I make records / perfect records / I record the / company" and "Bands of circles / bands of certainty / endlessly / returning." In Cinderella's final acts of rejection, however, she sings her desire to make this all stop: "Listen to the record / spinning like a top / I can put my finger down / I can make it stop."

The reference here is not merely to the process of replication implied in the Cinderella fairy tale (which takes as its very subject the shaping of oneself in terms of a culturally prescribed image) but also to the process of identification encouraged by popular narrative as a whole. One has only to look at Beckman's earlier work to see how this critique of representation continues her cinematic interests. Beckman's films have moved from a playful inquiry into the earliest process of childhood symbol-making as a basis for language acquisition in *Out of Hand* (1981), which revolves around a magical chest of toys and objects, to an abstract dramatization of the basic gaming structure of cinematic narrative itself in *You the Better* (1983), complete as this film is with players, goals, conflicts and resolutions.¹ Now in *Cinderella* Beckman tackles the mythic substructure of popular narrative itself. As in her earlier work this exploration is visually dazzling, inventive and playful, and even more explicitly here it is a search for origins, for the underpinnings of a larger symbolic process. The Cinderella fairy tale is an ideal choice for this endeavor because it is both an archetypal story about image-making and a cultural form which through example and repetition encourages

identification and replication. With this tale as her text, Beckman is able to foreground the gaming quality and ideological assumptions of conventionalized narrative.

The Cinderella fairy tale is also of particular interest to Beckman because it has been mythologized by the Walt Disney Company whose film version of the narrative most Americans would identify as being the definitive Cinderella story. (As Beckman discovered while researching this project, the Cinderella fairy tale, like most such tales, exists in many variations.) In the Disney version, Cinderella transforms herself into a commodity: she is beautiful, well dressed, compliant, and is therefore marriageable, i.e., marketable. An important lesson in capitalist society, this example demonstrates one cultural function of popular narrative: to provide a structure through which questions or conflicts within a society can be answered or explained.² For example, Disney's *Cinderella* suggests to girls that in order to get their prince they must be beautifully packaged. It is precisely this ideology that Beckman's *Cinderella* dramatizes, exposes, finally rejects.

The fact that Beckman's *Cinderella* addresses a fairy tale which has been popularized in cinematic form also helps to position her work within the tradition of recent avant-garde film. Since her work criticizes the Disney version of the tale as an allegory of feminine success in a capitalist, patriarchal society, she continues the avant-garde's opposition to Hollywood's ideological forms of filmmaking. But whereas earlier avant-garde filmmakers had been stridently anti-narrative, often involving themselves with the more painterly or formal concerns that dominated the art movements of their time (for example, the Abstract Expressionism of Stan Brakhage, or the Minimalism of Michael Snow), Beckman's work, like that of her postmodern contemporaries Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman and

David Salle, is often narrative-based. And yet Beckman does not simply appropriate and rework an existing text; she also zeroes in critically on an analogous practice employed by many contemporary Hollywood films. In this regard, a comparison between Beckman's *Cinderella* and recent Hollywood practice is revealing.

The tendency of contemporary film to produce remakes is, of course, quite pronounced. This is evidenced not only by recent remakes of such classics as Godard's *Breathless* or *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but also by the resuscitation of older forms such as Saturday afternoon action/adventure serials as in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). A closer look, however, reveals that these remakes are not simply re-presentations of earlier material, but are reformulations often using somewhat archaic genres (e.g., the Western, the hard-boiled detective film, the science-fiction film or even the fairy tale) as a way of recasting a present reality in terms of old and usually discarded assumptions.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, for example, the costume and setting conventions of Saturday afternoon serials are re-presented, as are many of the character oppositions and plot conventions. But these conventions are then transplanted and shown within a socio-political context very different from that of the 1930-40 originals. The context in which *Raiders* was first seen was that of the Iran hostage crisis and the Reagan inauguration. By using old genre conventions and by adding a highly inflated central hero, a white American who is virtually a superman, *Raiders* addresses an ongoing cultural conflict (how do we deal with terrorism and the Third World?) but speaks it through an old popular formula, and therefore in terms of old assumptions.

A more pertinent example of this type of film practice is John Hughes's *Pretty in Pink* (1986)—quite literally a Hollywood Cinderella story for the '80s. Many of the conventions of the Disney-style fairy tale are here, but now this childhood fantasy is made into a modern reality, and the present is recast in terms of the past. In *Pretty in Pink* the "prince" is now the son of a corporate head, the father of Andy, the Cinderella character, is not dead but merely a deadbeat (he has no career) and the "fairy godmother" is a post-hippie punk lady in early middle age who gives Andy her old prom dress. Literally, from that cloth, a discarded dream, Andy refashions herself into the image of an ideal bourgeois with an '80s retro edge. She is beautiful, full of integrity, and boy can she dress—always that dress. She is an object but a spunky one—the quality that will raise her from the cinders to the upper classes. (The overall use of costume in *Pretty in Pink* is, in fact, quite significant. Andy nearly always dresses in pink or soft pastels and in flower-patterned materials. She is meant to be a nonconformist, even "new wave," but her use of color and pattern recalls—as does the title of the film—a "pinkness," a sickly sweet femininity long since

rejected by feminists.)

The reactionary position of this film is supported by its narrative structuring. Although Andy is the visual center of the film, occupying most of the screen time, she is not its protagonist; i.e., her actions do not generate the flow of narrative. Instead the young men move the narrative forward; Andy is merely the bait, the object which the prince, but also Duckie, a love-smitten stand-in for the mice in the Disney version, and Stef, the bad guy, strive and compete for. Andy's desire is passive, while that of the young men is active. In *Pretty in Pink* the conventions of the old fairy tale are re-presented, updated, reformulated in such a way as to bolster the contemporary return to reactionary attitudes regarding feminine behavior.

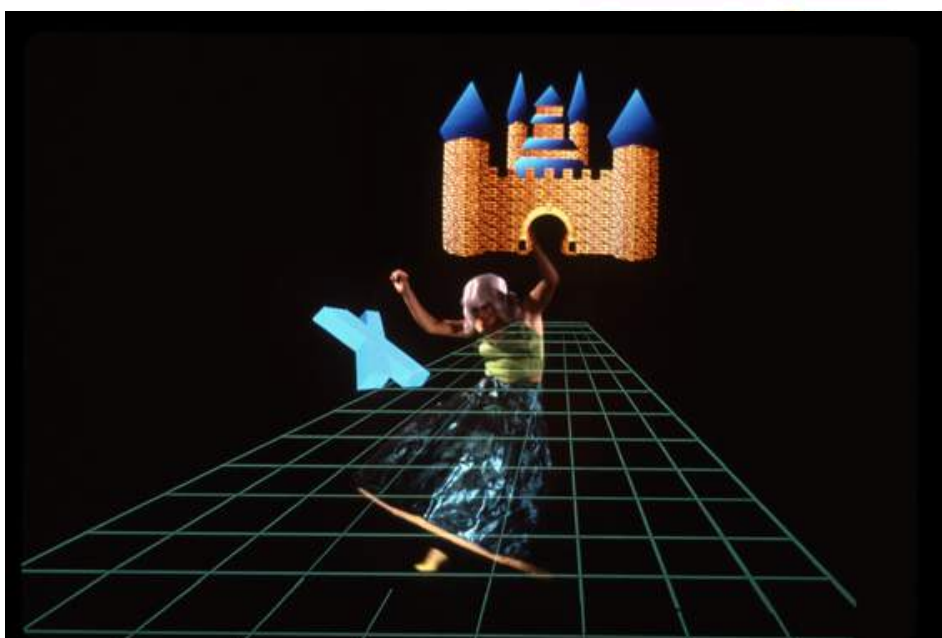
By contrast, in Beckman's film, Cinderella is the protagonist, actively playing the game, moving toward the goal, with the power not only of rejection, but also of awareness—the ability to refashion herself. Within the cultural and artistic milieu outlined above, Beckman's work thus resists the assumptions of movies like *Pretty in Pink*, pointing critically to current film practice which uses past forms to speak a reactionary text. Although Beckman has also used an old story on which to base her film, her method breaks open the myth. By foregrounding the gaming structure of her film, she not only presents the conventions of the Cinderella fairy tale as conventions, but she does so in an abstracted space and image environment that can in no way be taken as an emotionally seductive "reality."

In the final scene of the film, a hilarious but unsettling production number alluding in makeshift fashion to similar presentations in Hollywood musicals, Cinderella sings a stridently feminist song, essentially declaring "no" to patriarchy. The intensity of its cliché distances the viewer, and it is here that the third meaning of "forge" is brought into play. Although Beckman's *Cinderella* is basically a story about stories, it is also a forgery, manifestly a fiction. By thus underscoring its own artificiality, the film works to break the illusions by which all popular narrative delivers its ideological assumptions. □

1. See Vera Dika, "Ericka Beckman's *Out of Hand*: In Search of Meaning," *Dreamworks*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1982, and Sally Banes, "Imagination and Play: The Films of Ericka Beckman," *Millennium Film Journal*, Winter 1983.

2. The notion that popular formalized stories explain ongoing cultural conflicts is derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth (*Structural Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, 1963) and has been extended to the study of other popular forms by such writers as Will Wright (*Six Guns and Society*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975) and John Cawelti (*Adventure, Mystery, Romance*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976).

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Cinderella fails to return to the forge by midnight and is forced to try again.



Above, the forge becomes a factory; below, the copy stand where the dolls are made.

