

On *Female Perversions*: A Conversation with Susan Streitfeld

Zoë Druick

***Female Perversions*: Conversation avec Susan Streitfeld**

Susan Streitfeld est la réalisatrice du film Female Perversions lancé en 1996. Zoë Druick est une écrivaine indépendante et une candidate au doctorat en Pensée sociale et politique à l'Université York. Son interview avec Susan Streitfeld, une partie duquel est reproduite ici, a paru dans Exclaim! l'été dernier. Leur conversation commence avec une discussion sur le livre de Louise Kaplan, Female Perversions, duquel Streitfeld s'est beaucoup inspiré pour son film.

Zoë Druick: Can you talk about Louise Kaplan's book, *Female Perversions*, and your process of adaptation?

Susan Streitfeld: The book is really an analytical theoretical treatise. Louise Kaplan is a Freudian feminist therapist and her book deals with the psychology of being female. What she does is take the concept of perversion and looks at it in terms of gender. She's exploring what happens to women in the world as they are trying to attain the image of what it is to be a woman. She divides the book into chapters devoted to different perversions such as kleptomania, delicate cutting, homovestism – or, dressing in same-sex clothing – and extreme submission: she is looking at the extreme end of the scale of women's perverse behaviours. If you pull it back, though, we all fall somewhere on that scale. The book is challenging and extremely liberating; it identifies behaviour as something not solely of your own making. Behaviour is something that comes from family and society and has a long history intertwined with social, economic, and political factors.

ZD: I read an article about your film which surprised me because the writer claimed that perversion has not traditionally been thought about as female. But if you look at Freud, for example, it would seem to be the reverse, that the female gender is precisely perverse because it always

deviates from the male norm. Let me ask you if I've understood this correctly: in some sense the perversion of your film is brought about by the necessary paradox of femininity wherein the rules that you can possibly follow are so many and so conflicting that no matter which ones you choose, you're always transgressing other ones.

SS: I would say that is true. I think that the challenge is for women to turn around and find their own identity within themselves away from the rules and the imagery that are constantly presented to us.

ZD: Success in your film is portrayed as somewhat pathological. A character like Eve who is very successful, is also quite crazy. Yet you don't offer an easy answer like "drop out of this." Is there another option being put forth in the film?

SS: Success is a very internal thing. For me, the more aware of myself that I am, the more successful I am. Now, the hard thing about this is that it might not be reflected at all in terms of one's power and prestige. Everything that western civilization marks as successful, be that financial earnings, or professional position, or the number of children one has, are things one might not have if one is focussing on internal success. For Eve, the success that she has could be fine, if she were connected to herself within that. The problem for her is that she's disconnected from herself and all of her imagery about sex and power comes from the world around her. The crucial difference is really between internal and external power.

ZD: Eve is always aware of being judged by anyone who is looking at her, and I felt complicit in that at times because there I was, looking at her. Were you playing with that awareness of the spectatorship of the audience?

SS: You really see that in the courtroom scene. You initially see a very strong woman at a very powerful moment. That last shot where you see her walking toward the judge with a look of total seduction on her face, an awareness of her sexual power – it is not just happening to her, she is using everything available to her at that moment. It is important for women to be conscious of their complicity in that.

ZD: In many ways her own awareness of her performance parallels the recurring image of the strip-tease. Did you use this as a metaphor for a certain sort of femininity?

SS: It is a kind of power that can fall on the extreme area on the continuum of perversion. She is of the belief that she is in complete control when her power comes in large part from the use she makes of her body, which obviously cannot go on forever.

ZD: You include a number of scenes where elderly or working class or immigrant women – let's say women to whom that form of corporeal power is not available – sort of shadow Eve's rocket to success.

SS: I live in L.A. where there is a certain look that women who visually display power have. By and large, they look like Eve. The more you deviate from that ideal, the less power you tend to have. In some ways those mostly Latina women that are shadowing her are an echo of the fact that her power is not her own. It is not internal power. It is power she has gotten by playing the game a certain way and it can't last.

ZD: The adolescent, Ed, is a character who is refusing to enter into the game of femininity, and who can blame her? There don't appear to be any good options.

SS: Ed is the soul of the film. She is the part of all of us that we have repressed in order get what we have gotten in the world. She is the part that we need to reclaim because if we don't do it for ourselves, we pass it on to future generations. This kid doesn't understand what is happening to her body and mostly feels only terror and horror about her disintegrating body. Yet when she looks around her, her role models are her mother, who she can't stand, and her aunt, who produces a lot of anxiety in her. She doesn't have any imagery that makes her want to embrace being a woman at all. Her action of cutting into herself is an attempt to get control of her own body. I think in the end of the film when Eve has compassion for her and embraces her there is a dark hope that we don't have to pass on the pain of being a woman. When you look into Ed's eyes, there is so much pain there. The pain of being a women is so great and we all share it.

ZD: The mothers of the film are ambivalent characters. On one hand they are weak and they aren't there for their daughters, yet on the other hand, they are repudiated by just about everyone. You seem to offer hope for the possibility of another form of care-giving at the end.

SS: For me the hope is for us to connect to ourselves. If we can do that, we can recuperate the parts of ourselves that we have lost, and that is comforting.