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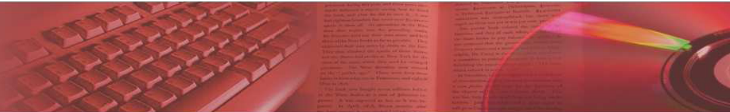

Artemisia. Miramax.

Reviewed by John C. Tibbetts
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Agnes Merlet's biopic of <cite>Artemisia</cite> Gentileschi (1593-1653), the internationally renowned Italian female painter in the Caravaggio school, is as much a study in sexual and gender identification as it is about a crucial period in the maturing artistry of this remarkable woman. Here, they are tantamount to the same thing. <p> Rome. 1610. The film opens (significantly, as it turns out) on a tight closeup of an eye. The shot widens to a full view of the wondering face of young Artemisia Gentileschi (Valentina Cervi). Although she is in a convent, that intently gazing eye is averted from the religious ceremony and studying instead the frescoes on the wall. As she files out with the other novices, she secretly pilfers a candle and hides it beneath her robe. Later, huddled in bed by candlelight, she loosens her gown and studies her body from many angles in the mirror. It is an absorbing moment, and a defining one. It is not just a young woman curiously examining her maturing body; more importantly, it is an artist studying anatomy–particularly, her own anatomy (both an objective inquiry and an exercise in narcissism). It is a perfect precis for the entire film. <p> When her father, the famous fresco artist Orazio Gentileschi (Michel Serrault), comes for a visit and sees her accomplished anatomical sketches, he is impressed. Pronouncing her ready to be an artist, he hurriedly whisks her out of the convent, to the astonishment of the nuns, and takes her back to his studio as an apprentice. Her duties are limited, and she is relegated to putting the finishing details on her father's paintings. But when it comes time to paint the nude male model, Artemisia is banished behind a curtain because female artists are forbidden to paint nude subjects. In defiance, Artemisia builds her own studio outdoors, away from her father's studio, and secretly bargains with her young fisherman friend, Fulvio, to become her nude model–a kiss in exchange for a few poses. <p> When the Florentine painter, Agostino Tassi (Miki Manojilovik), famed for his mastery of perspective, arrives to work on a Papal commission with Orazio, Artemisia petitions to study with him. He is reluctant at first to take on a female pupil; but after seeing her nude studies, he accepts her. She in turn is fascinated by this dashing, darkly handsome artist, whose penchant for painting outdoors–not to mention his taste for the local prostitutes–earns him a fair degree of scandal. Inevitably, perhaps, their sessions together turn into occasions for passionate lovemaking. <p> When Orazio discovers his daughter's affair, he flies into a towering rage and confronts Agostino, almost knocking him off the scaffold where he is working on a fresco. Orazio hauls him into court on charges of raping his underage daughter. When Artemisia denies this, claiming still to be a virgin, she is subjected to a humiliating vaginal examination by a nun. (The composition and camera placement of the ensuing image, the poor girl supine on her back while the nun spreads wide her thighs, exactly resembles the precise moment earlier when Agostino had despoiled her virginity.) A little later, after refusing to condemn Agostino's actions in the affair, the court judge orders her to have her hands bound by constricting ropes until she confesses to the alleged rape. As her fingers begin to bleed, the distraught Agostino shouts out a confession to save her further injury. <p> Agostino is sentenced to two years in prison. Artemisia packs up her things and prepares to leave. A series of concluding titles explains a few facts about her later life, including her position as the first woman to be elected to the Florentine Academy of Design and the first woman to accept Royal commissions. <p> Few films–and I am considering such standbys in the genre as Alexander Korda's Rembrandt, Peter Watkins' Edvard Munch, and Robert Altman's Vincent and Theo– have so generously depicted the details and procedures of a painter's life. In this instance, the rough-hewn studios, the practice of arranging on pulleys and ropes of the figures and props of

religious subjects, the preparation of fresco "cartoons," the procedures of mixing paint from ground-up powders, the utilization of grids and perspective instruments, afford a rich view of painterly practices in the Baroque period. <p> For the most part, the film remains true to the scant details known about Artemisia's biography. As Germain Greer has noted in her study of women artists, <cite>The Obstacle Race</cite>, Artemisia's life and work have been attended by a "fog of inattention." But thanks to pioneering research by R. Ward Bissell, some details have emerged from the murk. It is true that Artemisia grew up a precocious artist under the informal tutelage of her father. It is also true that she had a liaison with the artist, Tassi (1580-1644); and in 1612 Orazio charged Tassi with deflowering his daughter under the false promise of marriage. And there is no question that after the trial Artemisia married and traveled to Florence and England, where she gained court patronage and a measure of fame. Although the film acknowledges she was driven by a willful, sensuous nature, and probably was in love with Tassi, it omits the trial testimony that she may have shared sexual pleasures with Tassi's drinking companions, opening her to charges of whoring. The record shows that she denied this, and under the torture of the thumbscrew cried out sardonically to Tassi: "This is the ring and these the promises you gave me." After five months of what Greer describes as "sleazy revelations"–including the news that Tassi not only already had a wife but had committed adultery with her sister–the trial ended. Contrary to the film, the record shows that they released Tassi from jail. <p> Here the film's chronology ends, but it does suggest that Artemisia, now a notorious character, apologized to no one. Her paintings were largely bereft of the pathos and "softer emotions" expected of a woman. Her series of Judith paintings, particularly the Judith Beheading Holofernes (which is frequently visible in the film), depicted the apocryphal Jewish heroine as a cold-blooded killer. Full of irony and detachment, her images celebrated the power of women in a strikingly new, controversial way. In her private life and in her artistic career she did indeed reject conventional feminine roles for more revolutionary ones. <p> Since the film deals only with Artemisia's youth, it maintains a highly romanticized posture toward its subject, depicting a woman full of fierce feminist tendencies and passionately erotic energies; a woman whose rage toward Tassi the rapist is tempered with her love for him as a man and artist. Her life and art are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, her very body, as indicated in the mirror sequence at the beginning, is the source of that art. Her paintings derive from the intensely felt physicality, nay, eroticism, of life within and without. For example, her religious scene of Judith's decapitation of Holofernes–a subject she painted at least seven times in her career–she uses Agostino as a model for the doomed Holofernes. Although there is no historical evidence that she used Agostino as the model, it creates a satisfying dramatic irony, because in so doing, she produced an image that not only incriminated her in the eyes of the court as a painter of "forbidden" subjects but also served as evidence in support of the charge that she was having an affair with Agostino. Indeed, that affair had begun when she started the painting: After posing him in the studio and "arranging" his recumbent form on the table in the desired position, she puts away her brush and, fully aroused, slowly and deliberately mounts him, her full red gown blooming outward, like a flower. In finding a subject, the artist has also found a lover. <p> Artemisia would pay a heavy price, of course, but this film is not limited to indicting the attempts to stifle the energies and genius of this gifted female artist. Nor does it portray Artemisia merely as the hapless victim of rape (director Agnes Merlet is much too careful to show Artemisia as a willing, even aggressive participant in the affair with Tassi). Rather, it has a much broader canvas to cover, one as big as any church decorated by the Baroque masters of the day. And that is nothing less than a meditation on what, indeed, constitutes a truly artistic vision. <p> There are two kinds of seeing exemplified in this film. Artemisia's wide open eyes eagerly seize upon the human body as if to appropriate it and merge with it. Sensuality is her "all-seeing" preoccupation. By contrast, Agostini Tassi squints at the world through a grid, a kind of view finder–a bomb sight, if you will–that targets the world for the artist's gaze. This device (also prominently featured in Peter Greenaway's The Draughtsman's Contract) consists of a wooden rectangular frame across which strings are tightly drawn at right angles to each other. Sighting through the grid, the artist sees a world subdivided into mathematically-ordered sections which can subsequently be proportionately enlarged to produce images of any desired size. It becomes a metaphor for the artist's ambition–to seize upon the physical world, calculate it, and extrapolate upon it. However, the metaphor assumes another, altogether more terrible implication when Agostino is thrown in prison. Now, standing in the dark cell, his view of the outside world is reduced to a tiny patch of light intersected by the crossed bars of the cell window. This, too, is a grid, but instead of liberating his vision, it now delimits it. It suggests that the artist's ambition to entrap the world within the interstices of the grid is not an artistically liberating ex-

perience at all, but a confining one. By his method–or should it be called a philosophy? –Agostino has not only found himself in a jail, but his vision in a straitjacket. <p> Yet, there is a final victory for the two lovers, one that is artistically and emotionally liberating; and it is one that, ironically, has nothing to do with skin and paint. When Agostino describes to Artemisia his view through the grid of the prison bars, the "picture" he paints is verbal, and his "medium" is his fancy. "I see two hills," he begins, "and they run together [...]." His world now is compounded as much of dream as reality. From a tiny square of light he has apprehended a gorgeous, expansive vista. And, as he talks, he and Artemisia both "see" it with their eyes closed. Whereas the movie opened with the image of Artemisia's wide-open, seeking eye, it concludes with her eyes closed, discovering a truly magnificent vision at last. In the final analysis, Artemisia is not only about a woman's discovery of her body, her initiation into sex, and her revolt against the restrictions imposed upon women painters. It is also about her recovery of the most extravagant gaze of all–the imagination. <p> <i>Artemisia</i> is a vivid portrait of artists, art, and artistry. But I would advise viewers to keep their eyes open. Wide open. <p>

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