

Sex and Class in the Hollywood Cinema: The Seductive Illusion, Part I

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L'auteur discute les valeurs sociales et sexuelles des films et se demande jusqu'à quel point ceux-ci sont un reflet de la société de leur temps.



Paul Mazursky and Jill Clayburgh on the set of *An Unmarried Woman*.

Everyone remembers all those films of the '30s, '40s and '50s from the ones with musical numbers like 'We're In the Money', made in the depths of the depression, to those made in the '50s, projecting a blonde, beaming, 'wholesome' picture of sexual relations in a decade of pure sexual misery.

But very few of us remember that the sexual and class values in these films were by no means a true reflection of what was happening in society. Nor were they even the spontaneous expression of writers, directors and actors. The *explicit* values of the movies in America

were *dictated* for more than 20 years by the Hays Production Code (1933-1951). For example, in relation to matters sexual, this meant that: all films had to have a 'happy ending' — marriage for lovers, reconciliation for troubled partners, whatever was necessary to restore the family unit again.

Bedroom scenes were permitted only if there were twin beds, and each person had one foot on the floor!

The infamous 'Code' didn't reflect social reality. It reflected capital's complete control over the industry and the values it needed to maintain control in all

other spheres of life. It further reflected a certain relationship between the capitalist class, working class and women, insofar as the capitalist class was able to impose, through its monopoly, a direct censorship of what appeared to be the 'harmless' entertainment industry.

Although every state and province still has its board of censors, today no such *official* code exists to regulate the 'moral' content of American films. As a result, many of us have become accustomed to thinking that the images, situations and patterns we see in the movies are in

some sense a real reflection of life. After all, isn't *Saturday Night Fever* a film about the alienation of urban, working class youth? Aren't *Girlfriends* and *Norma Rae* feminist films? Aren't films like these evidence that Hollywood has its thumb on the pulse of the 'nation'?

The New 'Woman's' Film

Hollywood films have changed — at least in some measure — in their presentation of women. This has taken place due to two over-riding factors. First, due to the direct effect

of the women's liberation movement on Hollywood itself. Women writers, actors and directors have all felt the supportive and challenging impact of the movement, and have begun to push away some of the old barriers in their path. Increasingly, they are demanding that role, job and script come more into line with their 'reality'.

Second, the men who largely control the industry have also felt the impact of the movement, in two ways. Doubtlessly, there are some who have re-thought certain attitudes toward women, and whose contribution to certain films comes from what we could call positive motives. But largely, the pressure of the women's movement comes in the form of a large audience outside Hollywood who have also been affected by this movement and will pay to see films which deal with its life experience.

This kind of motivation by its very logic implies an imperative to play down the revolutionary possibilities of women's liberation. If this seems too crass or cynical an explanation for the minor proliferation of films like *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Julia* or *Girlfriends*, a brief look at these films reveals that this tendency is very much at play, mixed in with the positive motion toward change for women.

Alice and *An Unmarried Woman* both revolve around the adventures of women who are left on their own in the world (widowed or divorced). Ellen Burstyn plays Alice, a working class woman who supports herself by waitressing, and would like to sing for a career. Jill Clayburgh plays the ex-wife of a stockbroker, a woman with few visible skills but with some undefined artistic aspirations. They both have pubescent children. While these two women live on

opposite sides of the class fence, their situations are otherwise similar. They even have similar coteries of women friends, cynical and heart-broken, but full of wit and courage, waitresses in one case, idle ex-wives in the other.

If these similarities are remarkable, even more remarkable is the symmetry of the resolution in each film. The working class woman goes off into the sunset with her handsome, burly and affluent cowboy, and the petit-bourgeois woman goes off into the New York twilight with her handsome, burly and established artist. Despite a short stint of singlehood, neither woman can really be said to have resolved her struggle for independence, nor to have realized the possibilities of friendship with women.

Nevertheless, these films were greeted as 'feminist' simply because they took the first steps to bring women out from the shadows of the kitchen and nursery onto centre stage.

Julia was released at about the same time as *Unmarried Woman*, and it was quickly followed by *Girlfriends*. *Julia* told the story of a friendship between Lillian Hellman (Lilly), the playwright and novelist, and her friend Julia, a woman who studied philosophy at Oxford, and went to Vienna to work with Sigmund Freud. She became a highly committed socialist and anti-fascist in the '30s, a commitment which led to her assassination.

Julia represented a major advance over *Alice* because it gave us a sense of the role which social and political commitment can play in women's ability to transcend traditional female barriers, as well as the profound role it plays in deepening the friendship between women.

Julia lends itself immediately to a

comparison with *Girlfriends*, the story of two young contemporary women, and how their friendship evolves as they grapple with the implications of singlehood and marriage, children and work, and of course, sexual relations (essentially with men). Where *Julia* takes place against a sweeping backdrop of world shattering events, *Girlfriends* is very much an 'everyday' film. Its success lies in the way it conveys the contradictions between what the 'old' woman wants ('I want Martin to look after me', says Annie) and what the 'new' one aspires to ('You don't need anyone to look after you, you can take care of yourself', Susan replies).

Good as these films are from a feminist point of view they still exhibit several important, even central flaws. First, while they explore some of the issues in male/female relationships, they do no exploration of either lesbianism or collective living and child-rearing as potential alternatives to 'normal' sexual and family patterns.

Nowhere do we get even a flavour of the woman's movement itself — the very thing which makes Susan and Annie's new 'lifestyle' possible, (not to speak of the film itself). From consciousness raising groups to building demonstrations, there is nowhere any sense that women can improve the quality of their lives if they are engaged in the process of collective activity for change.

Lilly and Julia, Annie and Susan, all are women who have the advantage of comfortable to wealthy families. Located from the middle to the top of the class structure, they are able to forge their independent way thanks also to their class position. No worries about where the next paycheque will come from, childcare,

rent, abortions, get in the way of living a rich and varied independent life. In this sense, their life-stories do not yet represent the life-situation of the majority of women, working class women.

The 'Working Class' Film

The film industry has shown a marked aversion to combining the themes of women's liberation with class politics in the spate of films that have emerged to respond to the appearance of the working class, as a class, since the mid '70s. Speaking loosely, one could include such films as *Taxi-Driver*, *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever* and the *Deerhunter* in this category. But those films most concerned with working class politics are *Blue Collar* and *F.I.S.T.* In all these films, men alone control the action. Women are not even 'sidekicks' to men, let alone equal participants.

In the two union films, *Blue Collar* and *F.I.S.T.*, the problems are graver still. Not only is the union comprised completely of men, whether membership or bureaucracy, but union life is depicted in extremely brutal and alienating terms. The protagonists of *Blue Collar* are young, adult men working in the automobile industry, screwed by the union and the boss simultaneously.

Whether consciously or not on the part of their producers, writers and directors, the purpose of both these films is to give a very precisely *distorted* picture of union life, one in which bureaucratic control, class collaboration and sexism appear as completely integral and inevitable to it.

Protagonist rebels (always male) invariably meet one of the following ends: either they are smashed completely (i.e. killed), leave the union,

flee to outposts away from the control of the bureaucracy, retreat into inactivity, or, in the case of Sylvester Stallone's rendition of Jimmy Hoffa, become the big working class daddy himself. Women are supportive wives, nagging wives, mistresses, whores. They are never co-workers in plant or union.

In today's Hollywood films, one has to watch out for what's *missing* from the film, as well as what has been put in. Many unions — including the UAW and the Teamsters, the two unions in question here — are overwhelmingly male in their composition. But it is equally true that the UAW organizes women — in Ontario, for example, we can look to the exemplary Fleck women — and that the Teamsters have one of the proudest traditions of class — struggle unionism in the United States — the history *not* depicted in *F.I.S.T.*

The opposition to this kind of treatment of working class and feminist issues comes primarily in the form of films made by independent producers, writers and directors, films like *Harlan County U.S.A.*, *Union Maids*, *Les Filles du Roi*, and countless other films which express the many dimensions of the women's movement — from daycare to rape.

It seems to me that recently *Harlan County* is the film which could be singled out as representing the greatest threat/challenge to Hollywood's view. A non-fictionalized 'real-life' struggle is documented with all the emotional charge which real life experiences of struggle involve. Although the miners are male, the role of women — toughest and most willing to fight up to the use of arms, excellent

organizers — clearly repudiates the image of women as *either* independent and individualist middle-class women *or* passive, helpless working class 'girls'. Because of the quality of the film and the breadth of its distribution, some response was necessary.

Enter Norma Rae

Hollywood's production of *Norma Rae* was the perfect answer. A woman protagonist standing up for what she believes in — worker's rights and her own rights to independence — combines the feminist and working class themes effectively. Sally Fields' wonderful performance adds irresistible charisma. Yet if one stops to think about it for a moment, the realization dawns that this film is in many ways a carefully *laundered* version of what a real Norma Rae's struggle would be.

As far as feminist themes go, Norma Rae fights the battle against husband, union and boss without the aid of other women. Nowhere do we see the dynamism between women in situations of struggle so clear in *Harlan County*, or in the Sudbury strike more recently, to cite only two examples. Norma Rae herself does not really become more of a *feminist* through the process of her struggle, as most other women in her situation and position do.

But the omission is equally serious from the class point of view. Norma Rae's fellow workers are never shown grappling with their own needs and strategies, collectively deciding on their actions. Instead, their rebellion against their conditions takes place through almost passive trust in their leaders, in this case Norma Rae and the young, idealistic male organizer who has arrived from union headquarters in New York.

The crushing problems of union bureaucratization, so dramatically posed even by *Blue Collar* and *F.I.S.T.*, are disposed of neatly when the organizer explodes at two New York bureaucrats who have arrived to suggest that Norma Rae should be abandoned by the union because of her (falsely rumored) sexual proclivities. After his tirade, they meekly disappear!

Most glaringly conspicuous by its absence is the extreme violence which confronts working people when they organize in the South. This violence, depicted so graphically in Harlan County — is reduced to a scuffle between Norma Rae and the local sheriff.

For all *Norma Rae's* problems, it shines in comparison with *A Coal Miner's Daughter*, which is truly a regression in political terms. Yes, it's about a working class woman, and a wonderful, heart-warming, brave woman at that. But the message is dishearteningly clear: stick with your husband and with the two of you against the world, that very world will eventually be yours.

The latest commercial film about working class women comes to us from the Hollywood bred feminist film network, using big names and a fair amount of money, but working outside the mainstream production companies. This is *Nine to Five* and it's an interesting combination of subversion and co-optation. Any woman who has ever worked as a secretary can attest to the total accuracy of office dynamics portrayed, and she can also vicariously share in the wild (but very much 'true-to-life') fantasies of revenge. The film's strength lies in these two areas: it unsparingly shows

areas: it unsparingly shows what *does* go down in many offices, and thus helps women to fight this degrading and exploitative situation. On the other hand, while the film clearly affirms the necessity of women's solidarity, it stops short of explicit affirmation of their reality as working people: that is, their need for a union to make that solidarity really effective. One could leave *Nine to Five* thinking that with good intentions and a little audacity it might be possible to transform women's working conditions (including such things as childcare, job sharing and other advanced demands) short of union organizing, an expectation conclusively disproved by real life experience. Only equal pay remains to be resolved — and there is no indication that this points to unionization.

The Seductive Illusion

In contrast to the blatant manipulation of the Hays Production Code, a very subtle manipulation is going on in *Norma Rae* and the other films I have mentioned. By giving us back our own 'reality' in an altered, watered-down form, the Hollywood cinema also *hides* that reality, and the possibilities inherent in it.

One would not want to say that the effect of these films is by any means all negative. By portraying strong women and working people fighting for their rights, greater legitimacy is gained for a change in sex and class conditions in society as a whole. But we must always keep in mind that the way these issues are presented is Hollywood's *reaction* to social developments, in large part a commercial reaction. We should never approach these films without being on the lookout for those missing dimensions of social reality. ⑥