

Clayburgh's missed opportunity. (And missed Maudie's most telling revelation, when Bates tells Clayburgh he "proves" of her working, thus summing up centuries of condescension whereby men have whipped women's self-confidence more effectively than if they had beaten them.)

The sticking point, of course, is star chemistry: the two paragons act as magnets not only for each other but for all of our hopes and fantasies of True Love. The tidal wave of attraction that enlists us in the devout wish for their consummation was inscribed into the very syntax of the cinema. We absorbed the cinema's lessons in love willingly and greedily during our growing-up years to the point where we salivate like Pavlov's dogs for the happy ending, the "forever" union of two perfect creatures that corresponds to our own drugged fantasies of love. And no wonder, for here was a convention, the courtship duet, conducted on neutral turf and culminating in marriage, that exalted woman, holding her as equal to the male, even as women in society were still regarded and treated as inferiors. In a sense, we created the stars and then they created us; that is, we made them into embodiments of an ideal, equal love which we were then doomed to yearn for, to dream of, to try and duplicate, and to comb the earth in search of in a state of perpetual disappointment, blaming Hollywood for our failure to achieve similarly glittering romantic destinies. There's a group of "realistic" women in *An Unmarried Woman*, Clayburgh's slightly dumpy careerwoman friends, all of whom are in the throes of various messy romantic entanglements; but do we identify with them? Do we accept this homelier version of the war between the sexes? No, no more than these women poring nostalgically over pictures of the old stars, identifying with Eve Arden instead of Joan Crawford, Thelma Ritter instead of Grace Kelly! In the bickering, bitter marriages endured by character actors, Hollywood had always offered

ample clues of the thorny path ahead. But these were warnings no one chose to hear.

Nor did women accept the ending of the Australian film *My Brilliant Career*, about a would-be writer (Judy Davis) who forces herself to refuse the well-nigh irresistible offer of marriage from the gentleman farmer played by Sam Neill. Gillian Armstrong's movie is about a writer's realization that comfort and domestic bliss are the enemy, solitude and anguish the necessary soil out of which the author develops her literary consciousness. But women, chucking their own feminist principles in a collective longing for Mr. Right, yearned for the happy ending and were furious at Judy Davis for not working out some compromise modus vivendi (a log cabin out back with a padlock on the door?). If the screen lover "completes" the woman, whose vocation is romance, so their union seduces and fulfills us.

The very strength (we might say stranglehold) of romance lies in its fusion of two powerful strands: the desire for love, that noblest urge to transcend the boundaries of the self (and gender) on one hand and, on the other, the narcotic of fantasy—an addiction all the more powerful because, unlike other addictions, it can be prolonged and replayed indefinitely in the imagination. The seductiveness of this combination suggests both the difficulties in wresting ourselves from so powerful a drug, and the degree to which we have a vested interest in our own "subjugation." In leaning so heavily on the unilateral notion of male oppression, a good many feminists ignored the other half of the equation, the active role of women in permitting, encouraging, and controlling scenarios of dominance and submission. As habitual (and not unwilling) exhibitionists, we're entitled—and compelled—to acknowledge a certain complicity in the shadowy delights of male voyeurism. In denying this complicity, in insisting on the thesis of victimization, feminists

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damage to the self, the warping of a woman's belief in and capacity for loving. So be it, these films (and women) would probably say; love is invariably a sexist enterprise. But is aping men the way to change it? In trying to hang onto control, salvage her self-esteem, isn't the prostitute-heroine in danger of losing control and her soul to boot? *Working Girls*, interesting as a feminist (and leftist) take on the sexual commodity market, is finally more depressing than straight porn. The combination of cheap caricature (the materialistic madam), amateurish acting (except for the superb Smith), and a theme that requires a deadening of the responses—their and ours—in order to be accepted, leaves a sordid aftertaste. The movie means, like Borden's other work, to be a parable of the exploiters and the exploited in a capitalist society (a theme for which female garment workers or Mexican grapepickers might have served better, if less commercially), but it is really the story of different degrees of powerlessness. In effect, the Johns here are really metaphors: they, like the prostitutes, are losers enacting a defensive ritual against those in power: men who don't have to pay for sex, and women (the smaller group) who get what they want without it.

Nevertheless, the spirit of *Working Girls* was in keeping with the depressing note struck by most women in movies about sex. From the fascinating but darkly morbid sisterhood dramas of von Trotta to *Smooth Talk*, Joyce Chopra's disturbing young-woman-coming-of-age film (from a short story by Joyce Carol Oates), sex, male sex, was a menace to body and soul. Was it perhaps a new feminist twist on sexual Puritanism? For nowhere was there a glimpse of the life-affirming, passionately erotic female to which the women's movement and the sexual revolution were meant to give license. Nowhere a sense of that glorious sexually complete woman to which early twentieth century writers like Colette and Lou Andreas Salome pointed the way in their life and

interesting thesis, but requires a lot of explaining; if glorious sex requires tubs (otherwise how give), how can the AGE OF AMBIVALENCE experience be an anomaly for one but "normal & continual" for the other?

Lou Salome, though not a feminist, was a passionate supporter of women's superior capacity for love. The extraordinary life-affirming intellectual who enraptured the leading geniuses of her day (Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud being only the most famous) traced woman's sexual glory to her ability to give with her whole body and soul, as opposed to man's partial and spiritually neutral participation. Erotic passion, which was an anomaly for a man, was normal and continual for a woman, and could open her up to her innermost self.

But like shell-shocked veterans of love's wars, women were in retreat, emulating rather than rejecting men's compartmentalization of sex. Prostitution was the perfect way of beating men at their own game by imitating them, and the climax to this hostile power play was not fornication but murder. A film that worked its way mesmerizingly from one to the other was Belgian director Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dieleman*, #23 *Quai du Commerce*, 1080 *Bruxelles* (1975), a three-and-a-half hour long avant-garde film about the compulsive orderliness of a bourgeois housewife-cum-prostitute (Delphine Seyrig). Like the title, the movie followed, at a systematic snail's pace, every domestic detail of the woman's life, from chopping onions, skinning potatoes, and scrubbing the tub (minute by tedious minute) to disappearing into the bedroom, with clockwork predictability, for her no-less-solemnly conducted afternoon tryst. We wait, in horrified anticipation, for that tiny break—an accident, an unforeseen disruption—that will trigger madness, breakdown, and the violence we've been dreading and waiting for. It comes: she takes a kitchen knife to her John. Dutch director Marleen Gorris imagines a similarly savage, similarly ice-cold *crime passionnel* in *A Question of Silence* (1983), the shocking film in which three women shoppers, strangers, suddenly and without consultation kill a store manager who has been guilty of nothing more than smug condescension. Like the murder of