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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Affectional Preference on Film: Giggle and Lib

Romantic attachments on screen these days require at least a hint of something kinky to draw the pop audience which in the days of yesteryear thrilled to Bogart and Bacall, but which now winks knowingly at Julie Andrews in drag. Something equally aberrant, in fact moreso, more blatant and proselytizing, quickens the mental loins of the liberal film-going mind; anything less denies the backbone upon which liberal sentiments are structured. Pop audiences want just a hint of the arcane to tease the appetite, to let everybody know they know what is going on these days. In the Goldie Hawn vehicle *Foul Play*, for example, Dudley Moore makes a smash appearance, revealing his apartment to be fitted with all the pleasure devices one reads about, even blow-up dolls of women which, unfortunately, pop into view at just the moment he approaches Goldie, much to his embarrassment and our knowing chuckles. The intelligentsia also need to know that they are no longer hooked on old fashioned desire, or, in the other direction, anything base for that matter; even their sex is to come wrapped in the plain brown envelope of some liberation movement or other. Goddard's *Every Man For Himself* was thus hailed as a feminist film because it supposedly protested sexual exploitation of women, when in reality it supplied graphic erotic detail to those liberals with their eyes glued to the screen. Straight sex hasn't yet disappeared but high and low brow both need the aberrant to set the libido free.

Is the simple love of a man for a woman and vice versa a remembrance from our emotional bourgeois past? If today's films mean anything, the answer is yes. The pop audience needs to giggle at sex via the straw man aberrance, which it secretly uses and discards for its own safety, while the liberal relishes the aberrant, welcomes and sings the new lifestyle, under cover of liberation. Pop audiences really don't want to see so much as wink; liberals, whatever their excuses, demand the incarnation of their ideas. They want to see skin.

Woody Allen's foray into the pop arena may be the last celluloid stand of

the romantic man whose passionate desire is for a person unquestionably of the opposite sex. So straight are his lusts that no one seemed to notice the dilemma posed in *Manhattan* of a man in his mid-forties having physical congress with a fifteen year old. This year, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* renders two points of sexual metaphysics for those still lost in memories of a gender-differentiated past, the first oddly enough insisted upon by the women: if a man overwhelmingly wants a woman, he must, therefore, by definition, also love her. Allen in his role as a crackpot inventor voices the second himself: love is worse than sex; sex relieves anxiety, and love creates it. "Think about that," he crows. His mentor for this and other Allen films, Ingmar Bergman, the most expansive artist in cinema, has all but abandoned romantic love, his staple for over thirty years. Two decades ago he proclaimed, "Marriage is the base upon which hell is built." His last film reduced men and women to marionettes, robotized children tearing physically and psychically at each other, and gave his most moving scene to a homosexual who doubts the substance of his own skin. These are the male-female polarities, one by a solid, popular artist, and the other by a cinematic, but despairing, genius.

With the great artist abandoning romantic love--Bergman has lately announced that his next two films will be his last--leaving the field to an oddity like Allen or television's "Love Boat", the pop audience, which never warmed to Bergman or his like anyway, might find solace in Blake Edwards, an intriguing director whose last three films and his wife's, Julie Andrews, changing image in them illustrate a synthesis of audience demands with a crowd pleaser director's offering. Prepped by years of psychoanalysis, Andrews has long sought to shed her innocence, and Edwards has anxiously tried to project her inner woman. Thus *10* gives us a suggestive older woman in leather boots, Dudley Moore's choice over the plasticized vulgarian Bo Derek. For giggle power there is a gay lyricist and the neighbor's orgies viewed through Moore's telescope. Ms. Andrews' further unveiling was the sexual intent of the very clever flop *S.O.B.*, a box office failure because it starred no more than, in Robert Preston's praise, "a first-class pair of knockers," -- old hat, even if they do belong to the ex-Mary Poppins. Perhaps European directors just do better with their lovers on screen, for Mr. Edwards is so chaste in the revelation scene that it is enough to turn the viewer back to her opening "Polly Wolly Doodle" number where one can wonder at a remove just how passionate Ms. Andrews might really be. The film proves she is a lady whether she, her husband, or her analyst know it or not. Let us wonder about stirring her passions if we want. A lady is a lady after all because she forces eroticism where it should be--until the time comes--in the mind.

The last film, *Victor/Victoria*, tries harder by pushing her image still further. She plays a woman--breasts, it is loudly trumpeted throughout the film, strapped down--who imitates a man disguised as a woman. Again the giggle is a gay farce in the background which fools no one; we know what is what. Our appetites are teased but our cerebral maidenheads remain intact.

The liberal mind is far more canny at disguising its hollow heart, usually claiming to see a beam of moral



The Laughing Audience

William Hogarth 1733

liberality where there is rarely a speck. Ironically it is the liberal who needs to see in order to believe. Bertrand Blier, a French director whose *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* won the best foreign film award in 1978, and whose *Going Places* introduced France's two most popular male stars, De Pardieu and Dewaere, is an example to contemplate. Female critics ponder Mr. Blier's subtleties. Pauline Kael called her earlier effort a "sexual keystone cops," and Molly Haskell, author of the feminist approach to this whole issue *From Reverence to Rape*, mused over what his films can actually mean. Here are the complexities of *Going Places*. The heroes debauch each other when there are no women to assault. They take turns on one woman for so long, she begins to enjoy the company of these two boyish fellows, decided to tag along with them, and a nursing mother in the back of a public bus is forcibly suckled by one of your heroes who is trying to reassert his potency after a gunshot wound in his private parts. Believe it or not, when Mom came to her senses, so did I. We both left the film, in our own ways.

Handkerchiefs, not as crudely made, was, in fact, hailed as a typically joyous French lark. To be quick, in this one, a thirteen year old, after opening the legs of the heroine to inspect the wonders therein -- my mind sticks (or blocks) as to whether we see anything -- bests the two heroes, plus his own father, and impregnates her. Forget your hanky, and get out your barf bag.

Lest anyone rejoin that Edwards and Blier are only examples, keep in mind that they are successful types of what appears in film. For example, pop audiences were recently

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faced with a rush of gay films, and even Dustin Hoffman looms in our future in drag as *Tootsie*. But once again the liberals go all the way. *I Love You*, a Brazilian film, acclaimed by conservative critics too as a sensual delight, is really an endless X-rated film. Of course if anyone hungers for a scrawny woman and a pot-bellied man, here is the lib film of films. Real life extends celluloid life in some way also with the premier German director, Fassbinder, a transsexual, recently overdosing while watching a video type of his latest film. After three films with Blier, Dewaere abruptly, and for no published reason, committed suicide. Even the dean of auteur critics (and husband and mentor of Molly Haskell) Andrew Sarris, accused non less than Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*, of

latent homosexuality because he stares at the ceiling thinking of his friend's tragic war experiences rather than rolling over to solace the abandoned and vulnerable girlfriend.

Two points come to mind by way of conclusion if I can pull back long enough from the complete retinization that threatens all filmgoers. The first is that in an overly psychoanalytical consciousness like ours, perhaps the kind prompting Ms. Andrews to show what we really don't want to see, the arts are a last refuge to teach how and what the human spirit really does think and feel. If we need the vile and art gives it to us to feed a famished appetite, we lose touch with what the universal man and woman feel. We capitulate to the aberrant, be it giggle or lib. Bergman is, to my mind, the great artist of our dismal century, and he sees the darkness clouding the soul more clearly than anyone else has. Having revealed it to us in an output more insightful and shattering than we perhaps deserve, he now threatens to walk away from what he has found, rather than repeat it. The second point will sound more fundamentalist than Jimmy Carter defending himself with an oar against a white attack rabbit, but I believe it to be true; certainly Bergman, a minister's son, would understand. Jesus said that in the end times, "Because lawlessness has increased, most people's love will grow cold." For lawlessness, read any of the giggles and libs mentioned herein; for love that's grown cold, we need only keep our eyes on the big silver screen.

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A Scene from
Bergman's
The Silence