

Sexism in Fantasyland - A Feminist Looks at Hollywood

By Kathleen Vickery



A criticism of the movie industry is that traditionally it has been a masculine profession that very few women have access to but the North American **Kathy Maio** is one who has. Her strong and assertive column published in the feminist newspaper **Sojourner** from Boston, inspired **Kathleen Vickery** to interview her for the **Mujeres en Accion** publication of Isis International, Santiago, Chile.

Kathy Maio confesses herself to be a film buff, it is difficult for her to reject any film as being totally bad, even though she does not miss the opportunity to inform and comment on what could be called 'women's films', in other words, independent productions made by women. Generally her columns are reserved for films selected from the current showings of Hollywood movies made for the masses.

"The real challenge in being a feminist looking at the film industry is not only to accept and praise the positive elements, but to make the effort in distinguishing between the bad and the distortions, the negative elements and the hatred directed towards women in films. You cannot allow yourself to be seduced by a film and accept all that it reflects,

one must question some of the things."

With regard to the relationship between Hollywood's films and women, **Maio** considers that there have been significant changes over the past 20 years from the 60's when the ideal woman was represented by the happy and complacent **Doris Day**.

"Gradually we began to notice the impact of feminism in the 70's with films like Alice doesn't live here anymore. Towards the end of the decade, there was a certain sense of hope. It was not only the women's movement that impacted on Hollywood but also the entire social movement of the time. The film Norma Rae, still stands out as a great film of a woman's struggle, it's an especially positive example because it's the story of one woman who takes possession of her own life, learns to trust herself, to recognize her own strength and use it, not only to better her life and family, but an entire community."

A Backlash?

However, towards the end of the 80's the women portrayed as successful in films were women characterized by their own individualistic ambition

and heartlessness. **Maio** compares films of the 70's like **How to Eliminate your Boss**, in which women workers struggle against a particular situation and oppression by men, to the recent formula used in stories like **Working Girls** where the women compete savagely among themselves for work positions and the desirable males.

Could one conclude that the impact feminism has had on Hollywood in the past years has been to provoke a backlash [as seen in] the treatment of women in films?

"Not completely" states **Maio**, even though she does attribute a particular formula to this sort of reaction:

"I call these films the women from hell or the basic instinct fantasies with equal opportunities, Fatal Attraction was the first successful film of this kind, the most financially successful film of that kind. Some people have asked me how can I critique these films, because the women in these films are portrayed as strong characters, and yes they are, but they are absolutely destructive, they want to destroy the man, life, corporations, families, everything and at the end they must be punished or better yet, killed. Why should I like these films? Unfortunately, the stories that contrast these images are few. One has the impression that for every step forward, the industry takes two

back."

She adds, *"On the other hand we have seen some very emotional and controversial films, like Thelma and Louise and the Piano. These films make people think and debate. This is what we want from the arts, to incite thoughts. It's alright if not all the feminists are in agreement with the interpretations. I see in the controversy proof of success and value in both films."*

Very Few Women Producers and Directors

Very few women producers and directors have the opportunity to surge ahead in the film industry, while the financing and distribution of independent films confronts enormous difficulties.

"The studios", observes **Maio**, *"are getting larger and larger, because they are being bought out by conglomerates that are larger each time. The industry that now produces the hardware, in other words the television equipment, the videos, are buying those that produce the software, in this case, films. The Sony Corporation is an example."*

On the one hand, many independent studios are being bought out by other larger independent studios, such as Disney who has bought Miramax, the independent studio that distributed the film the Piano by Jane Campion."

Sexism . . .

"On the other hand, the majority of women actually working in Hollywood do what they have to do to work, so they generally are not producing things that we need. The most successful female film director at this time is Penny Marshall. She has directed some very interesting works, including the important film starring Geena Davis, *A League of Our Own*, which had a successful run with the North American audience. But her last film is the comedy with Danny De Vito, *The Renaissance Man*, evidently she tried a typical product that did not contribute anything special."

"However, some women including big name stars like

Meryl Streep and Michelle Pfeiffer, are showing signs of becoming more conscious and radical, denouncing publicly discrimination and speaking of changes they would like to see. I praise their efforts to make these changes from within, as well as praise the efforts of the independent film women who try to produce films that are a reaction against Hollywood and allow us to see real alternative films."

"Nowadays," says Meryl Streep, "not only are we paid less, we are blamed for the results of a fiasco, whereas our male companions are left unscathed by a failure". Of the same opinion is Sharon Stone, the leading lady of Sylvester Stallone in *The Specialist* for which he received 12 million dollars

whereas Sharon received only five.

"Since this industry started, it has been ruled by men", declared Jodie Foster recently when informed that Schwarzenegger charges 15 million per film, "and he is not required to perform but only to sell himself as a commodity. Michael Keaton received the same amount for *Batman III*. If anyone of us demanded such fees, we would immediately be blacklisted".

Nevertheless some actresses are demanding different roles which question set feminine images. They are engaged in a real search to give value to their profession as well as to honor real women.



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Q: Women like you and I are in our 40s and 60s, how are you holding out?

Isabel: I am enduring it much better. We are helping each other, we are happy, we gather to meditate, exchange books, look for answers to old questions, share experiences.... Menopause is a wonderful thing! We are now more secure, freer, and can begin new lives.

Q: And how do they put up with us?

Isabel: You would have to ask the others.... I find that I am not so difficult and not so hard to live with and the same can be said for the majority of the women that I know. But, of course, I can be wickedly vain.

Q: A few months ago the United States and the world at large was moved by the live television telecast of the hearings on the case against the Latina who cut off her husband's penis, what are your thoughts on this?

Isabel: I ask myself why did she cut off the most insignificant part of his anatomy. This

A glimpse of Isabel Allende

by Patricia Verdugo



guy raped and beat her, sexism and evilness are not contained in this small appendage. She should have cut off his head. Millions of women in the world now are having their genitals mutilated or their vaginas stitched in initiation rites....In more civilized countries the breasts are being sliced for silicone implants or the faces are being cut to remove the wrinkles.

Everywhere magazines or pornographic videos can be bought where there are pictures of women being tortured or mutilated to excite the men. There are countless films of the same. Maltreatment of women is so common it goes unnoticed. But, oh, if you touch a man's penis! The police flew out with lanterns onto the freeway in search of his penis. They would most likely have not troubled themselves so much if they were in search of a woman's head.

Source: *Story and photo from Mujeres en Accion*, 2-3/94 Isis International, Chile, Casilla 2067, Correo Central, Santiago, Chile. Translated by Mylene Soto-Sol Cruz, Isis International, Manila, Resource Center and Information Program.