

# CINEASTE

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): a woman under the influence by Sam Shaw and John Cassavetes

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in which he grew up portrayed women as "separate entities; and the madonna-whore dichotomy encouraged fear of them, distrust, and, because they didn't seem like real human beings, difficulty in relating to them." Making ALICE, he says, was the first time when he could "sit down in the same room with women and really be comfortable without being afraid." More crucial, perhaps, Scorsese is also an old-movie freak of the first order, and is, with ALICE, consciously emulating that which he loves most. The film opens with a weird, obviously studio set shot scene, with Alice as a young girl, pretending she's Alice Faye. The impression given—and reinforced by the campy romance-tune and cursive titles at the very beginning—is that this film is going to be a send-up to all those old musical weepers. But ultimately it proves only to be a latter-day extension of them. "Eventually," Scorsese explains, "the style of the picture becomes similar to an old film and refers back to the beginning."

If there was anyone in charge of the film, it was Burstyn, who took the script to Warner Brothers, selected half the cast from her friends at the Actors' Studio, picked a good deal of the crew, and chose Scorsese as director. Impressed with MEAN STREETS (a film about Little Italy's male street society), she thought Scorsese would be good at working "with a basic script, but letting the actors swing a little." Apparently this interested her more than getting someone with a genuine sensitivity toward women; for, in choosing Scorsese, she explicitly turned down Barbara Loden, the talented but usually unemployed director whose acclaimed film, WANDA, was also about a wandering woman on the road.

One would think that Burstyn could have provided a more 'liberating' tone to the film. The story, improvised over by Burstyn and her Method friends, is said to be somewhat autobiographical for Burstyn, who's been divorced three times and has suffered many of the same emotional trappings as Alice for a good part of her life. She indicated in a *New York Times* interview, however, that she has broken through. Whereas it once was that "I couldn't imagine getting out of bed if you didn't have to make somebody's breakfast," she can proudly proclaim today, "Happiness to me now is solitude." Too bad that this new attitude was not in any way incorporated into this film, that ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE tosses out the window every important question that its premises and, presumably, Burstyn's life raise.

Even had the ending been less ethereal, however, inadequacies would still mar the product. For nothing displayed in Alice's character indicates her being capable of making rational decisions. All through the film she pouts, cries, screams, shudders, breaks down, blushes, and indulges in self-pity. Had David said, "Go to Monterey, I'm heading back to my ranch," she probably would have gone running to the door—at least shortly after Flo's spirited pep-talk vibes had worn off—pleading that she'd rather stay with him than go on to a lonesome career. "I can't live without a man," she tells Flo in the outhouse behind the cafe, shortly before the finale. At the end, there's no evidence that things are any different, that she's attained any self-sufficiency, or come to 'know' or live with herself any better. Alice's integrity is saved only because Scorsese digs happy-endings and old-time movies, and perhaps because

Burstyn is still confused about where she—in many ways, the real subject of the film—is going and what she's all about. The only thing that's changed in Alice's life is that she's finally met a cuddly man.

This is all a shame, because there are things about ALICE to be praised. Particularly noteworthy are the two scenes with Alice and Flo (the latter rousing played by Diane Ladd) exchanging fantasies, complaints, tales of their struggles and attempts to overcome their problems and let-downs—few films have so humanely and credibly portrayed friendship between women. All the games and frustrations between Alice and her son (remarkably played by Alfred Lutter III) are engaging and recognizable. Harvey Keitel is frightfully fine as Alice's first lover on the road. And Ellen Burstyn, as an actress if not a feminist, is wonderful—despite the whimpering character she portrays, Burstyn displays such a wide range of emotion, conveys such a broad yet painstakingly precise sense of fragility, tempered with a hard crust built up by necessity over the years, that one cannot help but cheer her on. And Scorsese knows how to make a film lively. As in MEAN STREETS, the pace of that ever-moving camera, the rhythm of the dialogue, the energetic response he gets from performers—all this makes for a likeable movie, despite its rude shortcomings.

But one should not mistake an enjoyable movie, particularly this enjoyable movie, for a work of social profundity. That ALICE has been heralded as a great blow for women's lib is due not so much to any breakthroughs initiated by this film—for, really, there are none—but rather to the intellectual poverty and social backwardness of 'women's films' of the past.

Fred Kaplan

## a woman under the influence

Produced by Sam Shaw; directed by John Cassavetes; screenplay by John Cassavetes; cinematography by Mitch Breit; music by Bo Harwood; edited by Bob Heffernan and Tom Cornell. With Gena Rowlands, Peter Falk, Matthew Cassel, Matthew Laborteaux, Christina Grisanti and Katherine Cassavetes. Color, 155 minutes. A Faces International release.

A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE has been abundantly praised for the power of Gena Rowland's acting and there have been many interesting discussions of the film's technical merits. It is more important to understand what this film is about, however, than to dissect its composition. For in A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE, we have a film that successfully explores the complications of the sexual division of labor under capitalism, the social relations within the nuclear family, and the disintegration of personality. Compounding this achievement is that these large social questions are raised through an examination of the details of daily survival and in a context which has generally received the most trivialized and

stereotyped treatment in American culture—domestic life.

The world of Nick and Mabel Longhetti are worlds of perpetual crisis and disruption—plans cancelled, privacy denied, dreams deferred. They live in two separate worlds where the tension between personal fulfillment and socially responsible behavior stretch them beyond endurance; hazardous worlds, where bodies and spirits are easily crushed. The stability and comfort suggested by having their own home on a palm-lined block, living in a Southern California climate, and having the perfect number and assortment of children is a fragile web of order perpetually rent by the brutal realities of the work each has to do to maintain it. If that seems circular, so are their lives.

Nick's job as foreman of a highway repair crew is a shit-job. It gives him unpredictable hours, long shifts, heavy responsibility coupled with little authority, and physically taxing crisis situations where acknowledging human weariness and frailty is a luxury. Only a step away from convict labor, it is easy to imagine the strain of the work. In exchange for these hardships, Nick gets the company of the men in the crew, the satisfaction that 'the city needs him,' and a paycheck which is sufficient to buy emblems of security and respectability, such as the economic ability to keep one's wife at home.

Mabel's job is to stay at home and organize that space so Nick can 'get some rest.' She is to cook, clean, sew, raise the kids, coddle the relatives, welcome Nick's friends, look physically attractive, be entertaining while circumspect, lively but proper, and, above all, stay calm. In a word, Mabel is expected to be Nick's better half. More malleable and reasonable than the earth that Nick as breadwinner must bulldoze and level and subdue, Mabel is to be the personification of grateful and joyful pliability in a grimly resistant world. This job also involves unpredictable hours, long shifts, having responsibility without ultimate authority, and enduring physically taxing crisis situations in which acknowledging human weariness is a luxury. In exchange for performing all these duties, Mabel gets Nick's love—but no rest and no pay. She is allowed to express occasional wackiness, but only in private. She has no relief crew, no peer friendships, and no personal refuge except the privy and her own mind.

As we enter the action of A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE both Nick and Mabel are at the breaking point. The demands of overtime have gotten to both of them. They have promised each other uninterrupted time together to recuperate; but social reality intervenes. Although Mabel successfully packs the kids off to her mother's and the house is finally peaceful, the Pacific Palisades start crumbling. The double shift Nick and his crew have just finished count as nothing in the face of this catastrophe. Nick's authority as foreman cannot hold sway over orders from the central office. He must drive himself and his crew to respond to the city's latest crisis. He doesn't get home and delays phoning because he is worried. His Mestizo co-worker Eddie rebukes him, saying, "Mabel is a delicate and sensitive woman." Nick replies "Mabel's not crazy. She's unusual, that's all. She cooks, cleans, keeps the kids and the house, does everything. What's crazy about that?" But he's still worried. "What can happen to a woman left alone?" he asks.

"She could get hit by a car. She could burn down the house. I don't know what she could do."

In this series of speculations we become aware for the first time that the dangers to be explored are those of Mabel's situation, not Nick's. For Nick, imagining Mabel alone is equivalent to courting calamity. Either through her ineptitude, helplessness, eccentricity, or angry hysteria, she will be the victim of misfortune. Something will happen to her. She might even deliberately bring disaster on herself and others. He considers himself her guardian and is anxious because although he trusts Mabel to be 'his,' she remains a mystery to him. She's unpredictable. "I don't know what she could do"—and, by implication, what she is capable of. Home is sanctuary; it is also fraught with imponderables, with hidden snares. Mabel, left alone, doesn't know what she'll do, either, but knows it will be something. She starts with the most obvious—get out of the house.

From here on, a war is raging. The issue is 'acting right' and the home contains the trenches and the front lines. In the one place where working people assume their right to retreat while exerting supreme control, to relax, to create their own ordered world, to define, develop, and enforce their privately held definitions of socially desirable behavior without outside intervention, the Longhettis stand and face each other. On this ground, Mabel battles simultaneously to 'please' Nick, to break through social barriers, and to retain a sense of her own identity. Nick battles for order and against change and growth. Their weapons, tools, and allies, all inadequate, clashing, are drawn from the arsenal of an Italian ethnic heritage and their discrete life situations. Their mutually recognized enemy is insanity, not each other. But they have different perceptions of what is crazy. They fight to break through each other's craziness with the partial rationality produced by their respective frames of reference.

Mabel, having been 'stood up' by Nick, begins to make her frantic loneliness public through the most traditional vehicles known to working class housewives—liquor, another man, and children. Particularly in the context of Italian Catholic culture, where there is no secular middle ground for women between the home and the street, it is entirely appropriate that Mabel's first venture out of the house takes her into barrooms, shopping for anonymous male company. It is the most desperate response to her unfulfilled sexual need to be with her husband; it is also the most conservative. No acquaintance or friendship is involved. Drunkenness absolves her from full responsibility for her situation. Her pick-up's ability to subdue her protests on the brink of adultery can be explained in terms of the superior physical strength of the male. And her morning-after refusal to admit that the man she's spent the night with is not her husband is her final imaginative denial of her rebellion. The reality of the experience is erased. The barroom adventure and the man, Garson Cross, recede as in a bad dream. Since Mabel is the only witness, they only have the existence her mind chooses to give them. She is back in control. She is also back in the house. Waiting.

Her husband's re-entry with all of his work crew for a spaghetti breakfast metamorphoses Mabel into the eager-to-please but somehow consistently insubordinate wife. She is galvanized into action by the demands of welcoming

and feeding twenty hungry men, distinguishing between old friends and new faces, treating blacks without prejudice, keeping her kitchen clean, and trying to let Nick know of her need to be alone with him, all at the same time. They are contradictory demands. Her attempts during this scene to make normal conversation leaves us wondering whether there is any such thing. Asking the names of her guests gets treated as an interruption of the meal. Encouraging male performance gets interpreted as inviting sexual aggression. Her gestures are met with the final order to "get your ass down." She is to be seen and not heard. For Mabel, the surprise and dilemma is that she is expected to be both mother (feeding all the boys) and child (keeping in the background). And while she can easily treat men as children, she cannot understand why the other role is required.

In fact, the first time we see Mabel asking others how they see her and trusting the response is when she is with her children. Her questions to Nick are "what do you want me to be?" To her children she asks, "how do you see me?" Her declaration to him is "I can be anything you want"; to them, she gives a simple "Thank you." The irony is that the children are the only others that Mabel consistently communicates with in a natural way, on something approaching an equal basis. She resists Nick's suggestion that they refer to her as "mom" and presses them for their sense of her person-hood. To make the conversation easy, she caricatures herself with attributes reminiscent of the Disney version of the Seven Dwarfs (Dopey, Sleepy, etc.) and gets an answer from her oldest son that no, she's "smart, and pretty, and nervous." She finds herself in them, even saying "The only thing I've ever done in my whole life is make you guys." They are the only thing about her that seems substantial. She is grateful at the wonder that they can talk together—in a way which recognizes the adult in children and with a spontaneity lacking for her in all other human contact. It is not that she is infantilized by being around only her children. Rather, the adult world and attendant roles that she takes in it so diminish her that she seeks refuge in the less socialized company of the young. Unfortunately, her children cannot be expected to be

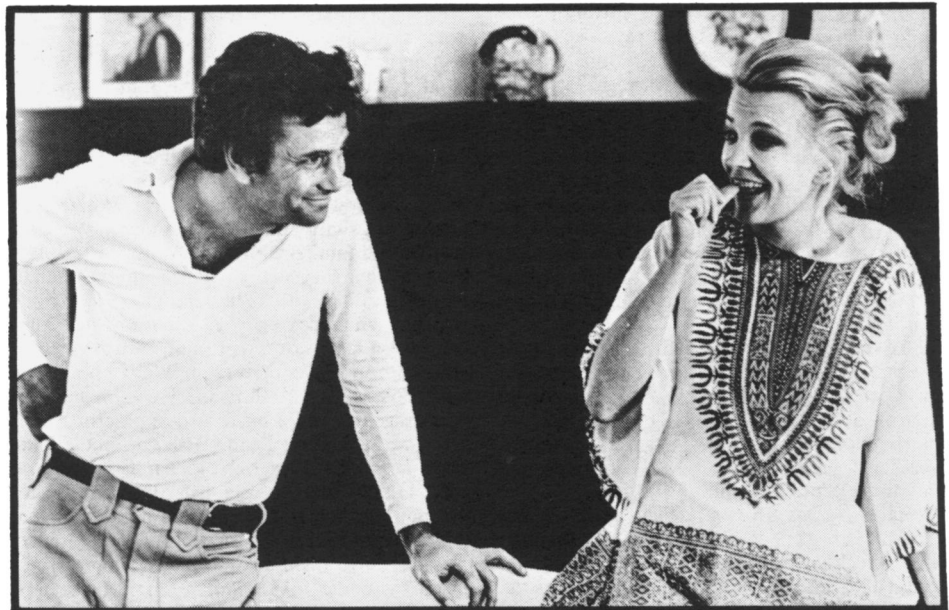
her sanctuary, any more than alcohol, stray men, relatives, or husband. They participate in the playfulness which helps Mabel challenge the hegemony of the adult world. But the children have their own needs too, and take their toll.

With this, we are put in touch with the dread and danger inherent in Mabel's social situation. She exists for everyone except herself and, when alone, has no existence. Meredith Tax, writing in the voice of woman confined to the home, puts it this way:

*When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world. Other people recognize him as real and take him into account. He effects other people and events. He does things and changes things, which are different afterwards. I stay in my imaginary world in this house, doing jobs I largely invent, and that no one cares about but myself. I do not change things. The work I do changes nothing; what I cook disappears, what I clean one day must be cleaned again the next. I seem to be involved in some mysterious process rather than actions that have results. The only time that I think I might be real in myself is when I hear myself screaming or having hysterics. But it is at these times that I am in the most danger—of being told that I am wrong, or that I'm not really like what I'm acting like, or that he hates me. If he stops loving me, I'm sunk; I won't have any purpose in life, or be sure I exist any more. I must efface myself in order to avoid this, and not make any demands on him, or do anything that might offend him. I feel dead now, but if he stops loving me I am really dead, because I am nothing by myself. I have to be noticed to know I exist. But, if I efface myself, how can I be noticed?\**

It is a basic contradiction. Nick is always

\* Meredith Tax, *Woman and Her Mind: The Story of Daily Life, Bread and Roses*, 1970.



saying, in one way or another, "Be calm." He simultaneously orders, "Be yourself." Both seem increasingly impossible. To understand the particular logic of Mabel's extremity, it is necessary to concentrate, for a moment, on her mate.

Nick is a leader who always fails, but whom people love anyway. His authority on the job cannot insure the hours, work-load, or safety of his crew. He is an authoritarian father; a husband who always breaks promises; a son who has married a 'crazy' woman; a host who is never prepared. His behavior can best be described as blustering indecision. Trapped in an emotional style of back-slapping camaraderie, he finds it easier to express open public affection for his male co-workers than his wife. He expects to be taken care of, but can't ask for help. His most consistent physical gestures are the clenched fist and the pointed finger—beating the world into submission or fixing it with his will.

To the world of the home, Nick brings desperate attempts to impose the prerogatives and manners of patriarchy. To be master of his own household minimally requires keeping an opinionated and possessive mother at bay, preventing his wife from embarrassing him, and keeping his children innocent. But it is too late, historically and personally, for any of those things. His work is outside the home and he is not responsible for or capable of the organization of household labor. That's Mabel's department. He is not able to be present regularly enough to know or raise his kids. That, too, is in Mabel's hands. His mother is the bearer of neighborhood gossip and real or imagined community morality. And as far as Nick can see, everybody's out of control; nobody behaves. It becomes his burden and duty to set things right.

In every situation portrayed in the film, however, Nick's presence adds elements of shame, forced suppression of spontaneous affection, rigid definitions of propriety, and physical violence. In place of friendship, Nick demands uncritical agreement. Instead of community, Nick organizes spectacles and planned entertainments. For human warmth, Nick substitutes food and drink. For quality of human interaction, Nick provides quantity. His search for standards of decency and decorum in a confusing world is reduced to putting people in their place. But because he, too, longs for the human understanding and recognition that must be present to give dignity to his struggle, because he has lost his own place, he vacillates. Mabel is encouraged to be wacky under cover of darkness and sheets, but not in front of Nick's friends. Children are to keep their clothes on at all costs, but are allowed to get drunk on beer. Nick refuses to accept spontaneous expressions of concern from his crew regarding Mabel's mental illness; yet he corrals their presence to witness Mabel's return to normalcy.

All this pushing and pulling creates chaos. His private drive gets in the way of common sense. It is as if the shame of not being in control of his own affairs compels Nick to assert supreme mastery wherever possible, whether it makes sense or not, and with the only tools left to him—physical force.

Mabel resists this tendency with all the weapons at her command—levelling distinctions, breaking through barriers that Nick and bourgeois society create. She angrily mocks the affected bearing and dress of 'nose-in-the-air'

women who literally won't give her the time of day. She treats her children as human beings capable of thought, conversation, and independent action. She assumes that play is as appropriate for grown-ups as for the young. She burlesques the social rituals she is forced to observe. She tries to be honest rather than polite. But her resistance only produces more evidence of her instability in the eyes of those around her. When even Nick can no longer deal with the criticism implied by that honesty, she retreats behind such a rapid succession of personae that Nick says "I don't know who you are anymore." Her last reflection of herself, the most important one, is gone. Now, she is lost, too. Her gestures become those of a caged animal. She is changed from house pet into wildcat. A professional is needed to control her. She is committed to an asylum.

For Mabel, the magic, music, and physical discovery of childhood seem infinitely superior to the 'get up, go to bed, get dressed' on-time regimentation of Nick's world. That, as she says to the family doctor, is the insanity she must protect her children from. No one, however, listens to this moment of lucidity wrung from a rapidly crumbling psyche. She is put away for six months. But again, it is a brief vacation, with no rest. Work therapy, shock treatments, and home again to the unchanging constraints and repressed protocol of the family circle.

This time there is no escape. Suicide, madness, every flight becomes a luxury as Mabel watches her children try to protect her from Nick and reclaim her for themselves. In their extremity, her children become the final calming influence.

There is no happy ending to this story, no ending at all. Just a bang, and a whimper, and a band-aid to cover the wounds as kids are tucked in, the house cleaned up, and husband and wife prepare for bed after just another hard day. Mabel's only language to describe her ordeal is "I don't know how all this got started. I just got so tired..." Her perennial question is asked again: "Nick, do you love me?" His answer is to bandage her hand and turn out the lights.

Though *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* projects a powerful critical realism, it is not political in the ideological sense. The only explicit reference to politics is when one of Nick's co-workers mentions a younger brother who got educated, went to college, became a communist, and now can't keep a steady job. That reference ends with a comment to the effect that reading should be left to girls because they enjoy it and wouldn't do any harm with what they found in books.

The black men in Nick's crew want to fit in. Their survival consists in getting along. Our fascination with them is physical. Grouped around the family table, one brother is cajoled into twirling spaghetti as the Italians do instead of just dealing with it like noodles. He messes up. No manual dexterity. Another brother sings for his supper—not a spiritual, but a Verdian aria—and does it to perfection. What a powerful voice-box he has! A third black crewmember is encouraged to share his record of paternity and is promptly dubbed a good Irish Catholic. While these interactions are rich in meanings, they are used in the film to establish that blacks are people, too, and to add another unmentionable (race) to the pervasively dangerous topic of sex.

The only unambiguous moral judgment is made by Eddie's Amerindian wife who stands totally apart from the action—racially and

culturally—and from that perspective says to Nick: "You're a shit."

If there is a large social statement, it is that the home and the nuclear family, however augmented, are too embattled to be recuperative zones in modern society. *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* stops at the point where the human convulsions produced by attempting to live sanely in America are treated as individual pathology. As yet, no explosions detonate in realms larger than personality and family. That larger American film and that revolution have yet to be made.

Michele Russell

## shampoo

Produced by Warren Beatty; directed by Hal Ashby; screenplay by Robert Towne and Warren Beatty; cinematography by Laszlo Kovacs; music by Paul Simon; edited by Robert Jones. With Warren Beatty, Julie Christie, Goldie Hawn, Lee Grant and Jack Warden. Color, 112 minutes. A Columbia Pictures release.

SHAMPOO is a successful sexual farce in quest of cultural significance. With Warren Beatty as a triple threat (star, producer and co-writer with Robert Towne of *CHINATOWN*), SHAMPOO generates complacently ironic laughter at the expense of Nixon-Agnew of 1968, and tepid satire of the whole Beverly Hills scene.

Beatty, Towne and director Hal Ashby (*THE LAST DETAIL*, *HAROLD AND MAUDE*) do initially succeed in jarring a few primitive cultural assumptions by presenting the hair dresser as culture hero. George the hair dresser (Beatty) works in a sexually ambiguous profession, but transcends it by emerging as a super-star of studdom. Success at puncturing such modest culture cliches, however, especially when there is now little that is taboo sexually, doesn't suffice when one's artistic aspirations are much grander. So George must serve other functions in the film—he is used as a passive medium to satirize the 'scene', and even as a character who can experience true anguish. George is no radical or rebel, he voices no criticism, he is merely there—a man who rarely judges what happens around or to him. He is primarily a sexual presence who loves fucking, aggressively careens around the Los Angeles hills with his Triumph, mumbles in an alienated manner, and wants a beauty parlor of his own—'a petty bourgeois stud.' He knows hair and bodies but not finances or how to con up-tight bank executives. When George goes to negotiate a bank loan, it is his impotent petulance ("you ass-hole") and ignorance of business detail which the film affirms as it puts down the respectable banker.

As a sexual dance, the film often works beautifully and hilariously. George screws Felicia (Lee Grant), a sexually hungry, frustrated matron, and at her urging goes to see her crude, businessman husband, Lester (Jack Warden), for a loan. Lester's mistress happens