

EGGS - MAPLE SYRUP

FRIDA
CINEMA



THE FEMALE GAZE

Issue #19

IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND CURRENCY OF WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY



IN 1980S INDEPENDENT CINEMA

by Brian Ly

Women have historically, and arguably still are, among other marginalized groups, underrepresented in Hollywood when it comes to both their recognition and their creative output. There are few women directors that have sustained success throughout their careers in Hollywood, leading them to often turn to independent filmmaking both for opportunity as well as control over their voice, and even within those avenues are they often met with great friction in an inherently

commerce-driven industry. It makes the voices of women all the more urgent, representative of a canon that would otherwise not exist without their own sheer will to create film.

The 1980s were a peculiar time of creative innovation in independent film, with the prior decades serving as more experimental periods within the medium of film itself as the most commercially successful era of film transitions into a completely productized version of itself, and in its

wake emerges independent filmmaking by women that serves as a stark contrast to the more one-dimensional portrayal of women in typically machismo-driven narratives. That isn't to say that there wasn't strong representation of women, as there certainly were, even if often written by men. It only solidifies the truth that women truly operated within the shadows, even when they had significant output. The only way women would have their truly unadulterated visions would be to do it themselves.

We see Susan Seidelman making an immense splash onto the scene with her bold debut, *Smithereens*, which centers on the quandary of a female social climber in the punk scene that's keenly aware of her own social positioning as a woman. While her position uniquely empowers her to seize her body and gain control in an inherently patriarchal society, she is very much just as shackled

by her own perceived sexuality. The agency she gains is one that is only doled out to her, a sobering realization that her value only presents itself through her body as currency, yet it's a necessity to navigate a world where her value is only defined by the particular gaze cast on her by men. There's a certain freeing aspect in understanding exactly where you stand, even if it's acknowledging

that it's admittedly a pretty terrible place. When the depiction of female sexuality tends to manifest itself either as a heightened sense of promiscuity and excess or sexual exploitation, Seidelman portrays it for what it truly is, an inherently transactional exchange that occurs when value is placed on the sexuality of a woman, and it serves as the only way by which she gains any sort of power in a world that devalues her existence.



In a more confrontational turn, Lizzie Borden takes an overtly political stance with *Born in Flames*, depicting a fictionalized idealization of a post-modern liberal society, one that champions freedom and equality, but the reality manifests itself in the continued oppression of women and racial minorities. There's a certain performative aspect when it comes to socially expedient political practice, where the noble intent is valued over the actual outcome, creating what is ultimately just a cycle of platitudes with zero action. It demonstrates that behind the empty promises and continued disrespect, the only ones who could truly seize a future for women are women.

As pure forms of raw representation, these early narrative films by Susan Seidelman and Lizzie Borden are war calls in their own ways, expressions of a perspective that had until then not been strongly represented in cinema, a



predominantly male space (though honestly, what isn't), and though subversive both in presentation and in theme, aren't truly radical when distilled to their very core concepts. They each sought to demonstrate a certain intentionality and agency from a uniquely female position, one that wasn't predicated on how a woman exists in a world based on her relation to men, though it certainly couldn't be entirely divorced from it because of the pervasive dynamic that ultimately defines how she operates within society. Seidelman presents a sort of reluctant acceptance of reality as it is and learning to navigate culture accordingly, whereas Borden presents an overt rejection while acknowledging that even if action may have limited resolve, it doesn't make it any less worthwhile.

There's a stark stylistic contrast with Seidelman's sophomore effort, *Desperately Seeking*

Susan, but it absolutely exists within the same lineage and trajectory she had been building toward. Though the film exists largely in the same cold space, it introduces a certain pop of color with the particular mystique of Madonna, where the larger-than-life star both consumes her actual role in the film and permeates a certain female ideal of escapism as one who has completely weaponized her own femininity for gain. The film acknowledges the inherent oppression existing as a woman within society, where the lead finds her

own autonomy and power by occupying the role of the Madonna character, even if nominally as a facade, as it's from this stronger position of negotiation that she sheds her meek personality and perception in exchange for a woman that is truly in control. This may initially frighten men and perhaps even turn them off, but it becomes clear that sexuality is the ultimate form of currency for a woman when it comes to seizing power in a patriarchal society that is constantly sexualizing her at every moment.



This is sort of the sobering conclusion reached by Lizzie Borden in *Working Girls*, stripped of any sort of actual agency into the pure machine that is the sex industry that runs like clockwork. The life of sex workers is presented as distilled into the pure motions of the actual profession and all the undignified ugliness that comes with dealing with admittedly reprehensible men, but it's all a part of the job. While women in the trade are not inherently deprived of their own sense of control, as they are ultimately the gatekeepers of their own bodies, it's an awareness of their circumstances and the structure within which they exist, an understanding that it's less about empowerment from any ideological perspective so much as it is a practical way to seize some sort of power while systematically disadvantaged in a system that wasn't built by them or for them. The structures that perpetuate oppression maintain this dynamic, but there is value in protecting their peace and developing some form of stability in any way they can.

Though stylistically manifested in different ways, each being representative of the respective directions their careers ultimately took, Seidelman and Borden didn't particularly have very different perspectives in the way they experienced the world. They were

both women working in independent film, with their breakthroughs coming about from the purity of their raw visions, an unadulterated portrayal of the position of women in patriarchal society. Seidelman starts from the acknowledgement of the female body as currency, leaning entirely into this aspect, and while not ever truly giving way to the more heightened portrayal of sex work or the promiscuity of women, it allowed her to pivot to at least somewhat of a career in Hollywood, at the very least as much of one as a female director could typically have. Borden carries a stronger ideological bent that is ultimately stripped down to its most foundational parts, deconstructing how women truly exist within a space. Though not necessarily deprived of a voice, it means little when their cries are often met by deaf ears, and at some point, it's just about surviving within the system as effectively as they could.

She did not find much work beyond this while working purely on her own terms.

It's hard to say who truly had more success in their respective careers, with neither particularly having remarkably noteworthy films following their early efforts, but that isn't unusual for women with particularly bold statements and stances that, in retrospect, really aren't truly all that subversive or radical. Each sought to empower women with a voice and perspective in a society and industry that didn't aim to authentically present the world as it existed for women, and it's not one that the powers that be and, unfortunately, the market and audience seem to care much for. Nonetheless, we are left with these artifacts that exist as raw statements of the position of women, a position that may have superficially improved but fundamentally remains largely unchanged since then.



THE TIES THAT BIND

LOVE AND CRIME IN BOUND

by Rosemary Morse

The Wachowski sisters have always been brave filmmakers. Few would attempt cinematic feats such as *The Matrix* tetralogy, or the cerebral and epic *Cloud Atlas*, or an adaptation truly ahead of its time with *Speed Racer*. It's easy to see where this all comes from, as their very first effort was *Bound*, a lesbian crime thriller made with an ease and confidence that's truly spellbinding coming from first time filmmakers. The film is immense and remarkable, with a love story between Gina Gershon's Corky and Jennifer Tilly's Violet that grounds the mafia plotline with an exhilarating sensuality between two people caught in binds, in connections they work to escape.

Corky, played by Gina Gershon at the top of her game, is an ex-con, trying to scratch by working as a plumber and carpenter, struggling to escape her past to the point where cops accost her at a bar for her chequered past. Violet,

performed by the incredible Jennifer Tilly, is tied to her mobster boyfriend Caesar, a wound-up Joe Pantoliano in his first collaboration with the Wachowskis. Upon the first meeting of Corky and Violet, the chemistry is palpable. The exchanged glances, and the body language, the space of the room and the distance between them feeling smaller and smaller with each second, the connection becomes crystal clear. Their need for each other culminates not even fifteen minutes into the film with their first sensual scene.

Conversations around the idea of male gaze and female gaze within cinema have been ongoing for years at this point. To me, *Bound* exemplifies the female gaze over the male gaze, particularly with its first sex scene between Corky and Violet. The way the camera lingers on their faces, both highlighting the agency and personal pleasure behind the act, and help-

ing to sell the sensuality to the audience with the intimate visual language. Contrast this with how a filmmaker with the male gaze would've potentially handled it, focusing on a voyeuristic view of the act, centering on their bodies for a presumed audience of men thinking "hell yeah, two chicks at the same time". There's a long history of sapphic relations being filtered by and for an audience of men who find lesbians attractive but also view lesbian relationships as inherently frivolous and ultimately existing for male pleasure, but the Wachowskis understand the sapphic gaze intensely.

The Wachowski sisters are not just idols of mine for their fervent creativity, but also for being incredibly notable trans artists. As a trans artist myself, I aspire to their confidence of vision.

Within *Bound*, there is a core of sapphic love surrounded by a darkness of violent patriar-

chy. Caesar is in the mob, a world defined by strict hierarchy and where violence and domination is key. Caesar is a rival to the boss' son, Johnnie (played by Christopher Meloni in one of his earliest roles), an incredibly violent and sadistic bastard, who has it out for Caesar and Caesar has it out for him in return. In the middle of all this is Corky and Violet. Corky, trying to live life after five years of prison time, seeks respite and a stable living while avoiding getting wrapped in the kind of situation that led to her imprisonment in the first place. Violet leads a life of forced subservience to her boyfriend Caesar, being viewed more as an object than a person. Corky and Violet begin seeing each other and these encounters become an escape for both of them. Corky and Violet aspire to leave their present circumstances, and have a plan to do just that, though it involves stealing \$2,000,000 dollars from the mob. The plot is full of intrigue, close

calls, and finally ends with the duo escaping with the money and, more importantly, each other.

The Wachowski's use of the cinematic language here is divine. Beyond just the masterful use of close-up camerawork in the intimacy scenes, the film is gorgeous from stem to stern, with a beautiful use of its color palette of black, white and red, and incredible blocking. The darkness and sterility in Caesar's apartment, feeling more prison-like than homely, is excruciatingly palpable. Contrasting with the well-lit, open spaces of Corky's apartment. The way the camera captures these environments and the subjects within is marvelous, with my favorite shot of the film being Corky and Violet touching hands separated by a wall, with an incredible wall-to-wall transition shot. The score by future *Matrix*-alum Don Davis is fantastic as well.

Bound is one of the most remarkable thrillers of its



time. Brilliant performances and direction give a thumping beat to the sapphic sensuality and dark underworlds that comprise the heart of the film. Within the Wachowski's discography, it is an immensely impressive debut that gives a human grounding to their artistic vision, and shows that even under all the high concepts of their worlds, they're very familiar with the human core of love, especially when it must thrive through the darkness.





(left) by Scarlett Kirn
@punkheart11

(top) by Rachel Dinsdale
@archnemeses