

Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Working Girls

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Teaching Sociology, Vol. 18, No. 1. (Jan., 1990), pp. 115-116.

Stable URL:

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man. In turn, Bob refuses to allow Emma to visit their children. Pastor John, apparently in adherence to traditional notions of the male's dominance in the household, ignores the moral implications of spouse abuse. He pressures Emma to repent, but she files for divorce. In response to these events, Bob rejects his faith and leaves the church. Thus the film reveals the authoritarian character of the religious right (Shapiro 1984) and shows how simple rules of living fail when moral dilemmas are encountered.

All told, the subject matter is presented objectively. It is filmed in an unobtrusive, impartial manner without narrative interpretation. The production is unlikely to offend true believers, and may, in fact, reassure them of the righteousness of their cause. At the same time, although the film does not center on the political organization of the religious right, it does reveal the political side of religious fundamentalism. The film serves as a period piece in the long-term development of politico-religious fundamentalism in America; it raises questions about this movement's relationship to the industrial revolution, secularization, and social democracy.

As a pedagogical device *Born Again* would be useful in introductory courses in religion, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and American studies. With the proper study guides (some available with the film), it would suffice in courses on social movements, social change, gender roles (the profamily movement), and social control and deviance.

The film lacks two points which, if provided by the instructor, would greatly enhance its utility in the classroom. First, there is little description of the community where the church is located, and it is not easy to gauge outsiders' points of view. Massachusetts is a state dominated by old denominational religions. Would a fundamentalist Baptist church in Massachusetts be perceived by outsiders as a sect? Second, the film unfortunately preceded the downfall of the televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker. It would be interesting to hear Pastor John's opinions about how religious agents of social control tend to self-destruct when they begin to use God's name in vain. (I suspect that he would say that the devil had scored a victory.) Notwithstanding, *Born Again* is filled with points of departure for a wide range of classroom discussions.

The following questions might be used for study:

1. What does it mean to be "born again"?
2. Many of the "born again" Christians in the film seem to have found contentment, and strive to share it with those still struggling to find it. Is this always a positive experience, or

can fundamentalist zeal be harmful to an individual or to others? To society?

3. Is fundamentalism a new type of religious movement or does it have its roots in frontier society? Is there something about rural life that leads people to see religion in a fundamentalist way? Do members of some social classes or statuses have a greater likelihood of undergoing a "born again" experience?

4. Would a fundamentalist church in Massachusetts be more or less likely to be viewed as a sect than such a church in the south?

5. Has the fundamentalist movement made a significant impact on American Society? If so, in what ways? Will resurgent fundamentalism ultimately succeed in establishing a new political order? Will it succeed in ameliorating social problems?

6. Marsha, Pastor John's wife, stated that we all have a cause — we are partial to Christ or we are not partial to Christ. What does this statement reveal about the essence of fundamentalist thought? Do the saved-unsaved, savior-demon dichotomies encourage forms of social bigotry?

7. Fundamentalism has been described as profamily. How does fundamentalism respond to societal changes in gender role expectations?

8. Bob, a church member separated from his wife, Emma, kept their children from her with the assistance and encouragement of Pastor John. Was this morally right?

9. What are the limitations of film observation as a methodological device? How generalizable is *Born Again* to the fundamentalist movement nationwide?

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Working Girls. 93 minutes. 1986. Available on VHS and Beta from most major video stores.

The recent spurt of films dealing with prostitution began several years ago with *Klute*, which became the first commercial film to define this genre. In the last 10 years we have witnessed several new films with hooker themes: *Pretty Baby*, *Half Moon Steel*, *Some Kind of Hero*, *Crimes of Passion*, *Mona Lisa*, *Broken Mirrors*, and *Personal*

Services. The release of Liz Borden's narrative film, *Working Girls*, marks a movie first, however: women filmmakers have now created a movie about prostitution in which they control the theme. Borden's script is closely based on interviews and observations made in New York brothels.

Feminist themes are subtly woven into the script as Borden gives the viewer a day in the life of a prostitute. Molly, played by Louise Smith, is the film's central character: a Yale graduate who has decided to turn tricks for a living. The film begins as Molly wakes up next to her lover, Diane. After a quick shower and breakfast, she bicycles to a modern duplex apartment on Fifth Avenue that serves as a bordello. There her work day begins. After a long day with her clients plus forced overtime mandated by Lucy, the brothel madam, Molly decides to quit work. She is pictured cycling home, feeling free and liberated.

The film would be appropriate for a number of courses, including social problems, deviance, and introduction to sociology, as well as classes dealing with sex roles and gender studies. Multiple themes provide the viewer with a new slant on the oldest profession.

1) The film strips prostitution of its traditional garb—turning tricks is a job like any other. Molly and her friends are just taking care of business. They have job-related problems like everyone else: poor working conditions, forced overtime, insensitive managers, and rude customers. Borden knows of a number of women in New York who work as prostitutes a few days a week; their experiences helped formulate the film's main focus. These women are just trying to make a buck. They are not so bad! Besides, the pay is good, work days are usually flexible, and it beats waitressing and word processing. The viewer can readily observe that Molly takes in about \$900 on what we are to believe is a typical day.

2) Nevertheless, *Working Girls* communicates in various ways that sex for hire can be quite boring. Molly and her colleagues go through the motions, serving their clients and generally hanging out in the bordello. Drawing on the film's deromanticized aesthetic of prostitution, we observe dispassionate sex scenes, clock-watching, and a ho-hum nudity that reduces prostitution to the tedium of doing shift work in a sex factory. *Working Girls* is really an anti-erotic film that amounts to a protest film. This veiled protest highlights the exploitation of women by men and women by women (the madam). The film tries to turn us off to prostitution because clockwork sex from the hooker's point of view is a loathsome labor of love in the bordello. To some extent the film is convincing.

3) The reciprocal nature of roles is highlighted as the triad of prostitute, john, and madam un-

folds. The ever-smiling Lucy, played by Ellen McElduff, is a greed-incarnate madam who has become "respectable" at the expense of her girls. Unlike the warm and friendly madam in the *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, Lucy is the worst offender when it comes to feminist values. Molly and her friends must weather Lucy's wrath and neurotic managerial style to get through the day. The johns, on the other hand, represent garden-variety men who are looking for a sex fix. Yet as the film progresses, we discover that some johns want more. The bedroom scenes—shot at crotch level—provide us with a working girls' work. There is variety and sameness. Johns are depicted as men who are lonely, some of whom want to meet Molly and the other girls on the "outside." This, they are quickly reminded, is against the hooker ethic: working girls cannot allow freebies! In this sense the hooker is depicted as having control over her clients. In this single-set, claustrophobic environment, supposedly similar to the brothels visited by Borden in New York, the viewer is struck by the social skills required of hookers to deal with such egocentric relationships.

4) Despite the above themes, one is left with an overriding message as the film ends: the celebration of Molly's freedom when she tells Lucy that she is not coming back; this will be her last day. Unlike previous movies in this genre, where the hooker is depicted as the victim or the damsel in distress, waiting to be delivered from evil by a true lover (a male), Molly realizes that she has options. She may turn to a former client whose business card she has slipped into her purse, or she may explore a host of other possibilities. It is clear that the choice is hers and hers alone. She is in control. She is no longer hooked!

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Stale Roles and Tight Buns: Images of Men in Advertising. 29 minutes. 1988. Rental \$100, purchase \$540 from O.A.S.I.S., 15 Willoughby St., Boston, MA 02135.

The Marlboro man has been established in the American cultural vocabulary as a symbol of masculinity. This and other images of men in advertising are the subject of *Stale Roles and Tight Buns: Images of Men in Advertising*, produced by the men's collective Organized Against Sexism and Institutionalized Stereotypes (O.A.S.I.S.). Although the film addresses an important issue, I can neither give it an enthusiastic thumbs up nor a critical thumbs down. *Stale Roles and Tight Buns* evokes the still widely shown film *Killing Us Softly*. These films overlap both in form and in content;