



Prostitutes in films: the new voyeurism?

Cinema's Exotic Secrets

Do you remember a couple of years back when every third film that came out seemed to be about India? With one or two notable exceptions, the films were more like dramatised travelogues, exploiting exotic locales, colourful backgrounds and romantic interludes, with the occasional nod in the direction of an assessment of the legacy of the British Raj. Well this year, prostitution dominates the silver screen.

Mona Lisa has already been a box-office hit and waiting in the wings are several others. There is *Half Moon Street*, about a high-class call-girl (Sigourney Weaver) who finances her continuing education from her earnings; *Personal Services*, about which it is impossible to say much because the whole thing is tied up with Cynthia Payne's court-case; and numerous other thrillers, horrors and vigilante movies with street girls very much in evidence. Part of the appeal of these films is precisely that very same travelogue approach which allows the viewer a tantalising glance at the exotic secrets of a world most of us only know about by rumour.

But it is also too easy to write off the whole trend as male voyeuristic fantasies (although many of them are exactly that). In the current era of moralistic Thatcherism,

both *Half Moon Street* and *Personal Services* have a refreshingly open approach to sex in which women can be seen to enjoy it (given the right circumstances) and men's whimsical little demands are loudly made fun of.

In addition, they both have strong, self-determined heroines, part of whose motivation is to maintain their own independence in a male world. But at the same time, the impetus of mainstream cinema to glamorise and romanticise is as strong as ever, and the more sordid side of the business, which *Mona Lisa* revels in, is missing.

In this context, Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (she made the popular feminist cult movie, *Born in Flames*) takes the bull by the horns. Her film is a sensitive documentary-style fiction about a day in the life of a prostitute working in a brothel.

It is the only film of the current wave that conveys, with any sense of reality, what it must be like to turn tricks for money - the boredom, the relationships between the women, the mechanics of the job and all the little telling details.

But *Working Girls*, partly because of its gritty, uncompromising approach, will not reach a large audience. So, the big-budget movies will inevitably dominate, leaving an unsatisfactory resolution between the degrading reality of this world and the inevitable glitter of the movies. •
Sally Hibbin

New Country Hillbillies

Outside of chartland, country and western is the biggest American music both sales-wise and culturally. In Britain it rests somewhere between cultdom and sheer obsession. Over Easter weekend, in the concrete heartland of the Wembley Arena, British devotees will descend from far and wide to pay homage to the old, the new and the mediocre.

Every few years country reinvents itself, trying for all its worth to shake off the 'yee-haw', 'hillbilly' factor that still discourages all but the most curious. Last year Dwight Yoakham and Steve Earle caught the mainstream imagination and were heralded as the saviours, the bringers of 'new country'.

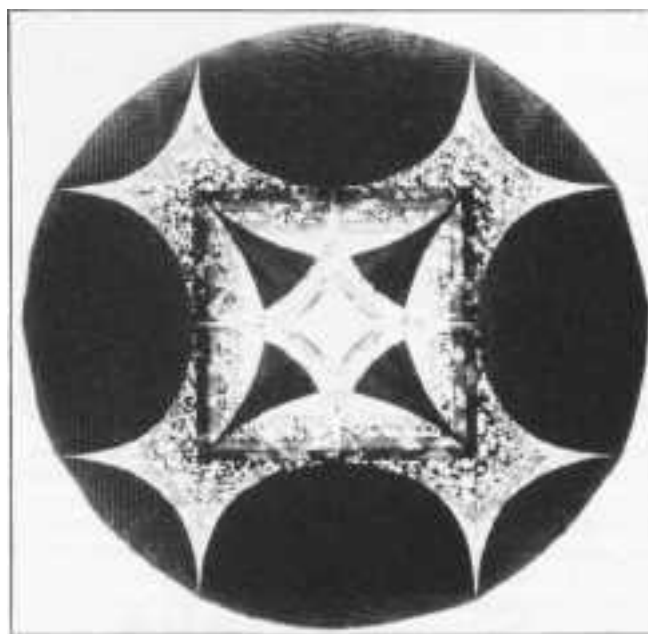
In a vague, left-field way, country has always been hip and has always had its share of respected champions. Elvis Costello was the most vociferous. He even went so far as to cover an LP of standards.

Almost Blue, with the doyen of Nashville producers, Billy Sherrill. In addition, films like the excellent *Sweet Dreams*, the evocative *Tender Mercies* and the faithful *Coalminer's Daughter* have all helped alert a young audience eager for old gold.

This year at the Silk Cut Wembley Festival of country and western the legendary appearance will be made by Jerry Lee Lewis. The closest they've got to 'new country' is David Allen Coe and the dependable Emmylou Harris. For the rest, you'll have to swallow the ridiculous (Boxcar Willie, Riders In The Sky) with the 'steadfast' and 'true', ie, the slick (Tanya Tucker, Bobby Bare, Connie Smith).

At Wembley there'll be popcorn and country corn, stesoned Neasden cowboys, suburban squaws, spurs and six-guns, straw hats and sequins - all the cheap hallmarks of an alien culture railroading the imagination of a captive audience. Surreal and tacky, the festival should be experienced once. •

Sean O'Hagan



A Stitch In Time

'Great claims are made for the pen, the brush and the sword but the needle can be as sharp, as mighty and as moving'. So says Dawn Pavitt, organiser of the Flying Colours exhibition. A collection of needlework that ranges from early suffragette and trade union banners to the

famous anti-nuclear Pentagon ribbon, it marks important personal moments with wedding and mourning quilts, and also great social commitment in the work of the Zamani sisters of Soweto. Catch it at Hinde St Church, London, until April 4. It then tours to Newcastle, York, Edinburgh, Bristol, Birmingham. See local press for details. •



Gabo at the Tate: the message removed

Pretentious Exhibits

Never did an exhibition so effectively caricature the fate of its own subject matter as does 'Naum Gabo: 60 Years of Constructivism' currently showing at the Tate Gallery in London. And so pretentiously; with so little sense of art, let alone of history.

We know the British find theories 'foreign' and manifestos most undecorous, but if you seek an explanation for the flabbiness of the concurrent British Art Show at the Royal Academy in London, look to the Tate Gallery. Diligent cataloguers here blame public ignorance of Naum Gabo's work on the fact that 'Gabo himself was not always sympathetic with art historical interpretation' and even 'discouraged certain scholarly projects'. Well I've

news for this incestuous gang: that sparkling little Russian knew a thing or two. What the art historians have done here is exactly what he feared.

The *Realistic Manifesto* which Gabo plastered on the trees around his provocative little programmatic show on Moscow's Boulevard, in 1920, was 'one of the key documents in 20th century art', they say; which is true. The manifesto's ideas 'remained the basis of Gabo's "constructive" approach to art until the end of his life.' Of all the famous modernist refugees who collected here in the 30s, Gabo was 'the one who made the closest and most enduring link with English art'. Even after crossing the Atlantic in 1946 'he seemed to continue to exert a stronger personal influence in this country than in America.' Also true. But at the Royal Academy you could never possibly suspect it.

Amidst all the myopic foot-

noting at the Tate they haven't even dared tell the public what that crucial and magnificent manifesto actually says. Gabo's own uniquely preserved copy has been framed like a suburban flower-print, hung on the grand axis of a dreary white space, and labelled with a minimalist gallery caption. Some banners, some quoted slogans? Oh no. Not even one phrase of it translated. As they say in the circles of good taste where these exhibitions are unfortunately created, 'it might frighten the horses.'

As the certainties of 19th century science and politics had been destroyed in their revolutions, said Gabo, so futurism and cubism had destroyed the secure art of appearances. As a new science and a new social order were the positive constructive tasks of the new century, an equally unrhethorical art must be built out of 'reality'. Its content, its subject matter, would no longer be 'tenderness and sentiments', but those 'kinetic rhythms which are the basic forms of our perception of real time.' Its forms would not be 'shaped' in the old manner but 'constructed', 'as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits.' Most revolutionary of all, its aesthetic criteria were behavioural rather than formal. 'Efficacious existence is the highest beauty.'

In the England of 1937 it seemed possible to realise this synthesis between the thought-modes of art and science. With the artist Ben Nicholson and the architect Leslie Martin Gabo assembled the writings of sympathetic artists and scientists into a book-long manifesto called *Circle*, which was the main vehicle for his influence in this country. Long propagated by Martin through his architecture, that positivist programme has also fallen to English conventionalism.

But the most sinister threat is the displacement of creativity itself from the focal-point of our collective value system. 'In the light of the constructive idea' Gabo wrote in *Circle*, 'the creative mind of man has the last and decisive word in the definite construction of the whole of our culture.' The Tate reminds us that even those rooted in this drama by family ties are more concerned about the horses than history. •

Catherine Cooke

Best Of Country

Have you always secretly liked country but never dared to admit it? Never known how to separate the great from the ghastly? Some recommenda-



tions from Hank Wangford, Britain's leading cowboy, and country and western fount of knowledge, will help you on the way.

Gram Parsons *GP* or *Grievous Angel*. Both with Emmylou Harris. The track '1000 Dollar Wedding' epitomises the strong, deep side of country. The man that turned Hank onto country!

George Jones and Tammy Wynette *George and Tammy* or *We Go Together*. Classic country sound from the Nashville producer Billy Sherrill.

George Jones Hank says any LP would be great but try *Heartaches and Hangovers* or *The Lonestar Legend*. A country and western legend with a wonderful voice.

Lefty Frizzed Hank's personal favourite. A true honky tonk singer, caressing the notes. Try *His Life, His Music* or *Lefty Goes to Nashville*.

Randy Travis The modern successor to Lefty and George Jones. The new country name to watch. Try *Storms Of Life*.

Joe Ely Powerful stuff, influenced by Tex-Mex, an exciting fusion of country and western and Mexican folk. Especially good are *Honky-Tonk Masquerade* or *Live Shots*.

The Louvin Brothers *The Best of the Early Louvin Brothers*. Sweet harmonies.

Blue Sky Boys Wonderful sentimental heart voices fired with passion and religious inspiration. Look for their LPs on Rounder Records.

Hank Williams *Greatest Hits Vols 1&2*. U you buy no other album get these. A stunning blend of honky tonk and bluegrass, brought from the hills to Nashville, that has had the greatest influence on modern country music.