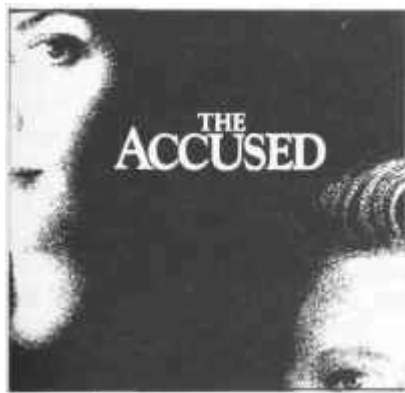


The Accused On Release

After much controversy in the United States, *The Accused* is now opening in British cinemas. **Beatrix Campbell** suggests that it will turn out to be one of the most important movies of the decade

The Accused is the first popular movie of the 80s to self-consciously take the side of women and invite men to take responsibility for rape. Its commitment to that project is a kind of redemption for the producers, Stanley Jaffe and Sherry Lansing, whose big hit, *Fatal Attraction*, was a real shocker, a serious regression. It seemed to be emblematic not so much of 1980s' postfeminism as anti-feminism. *The Accused*, in contrast, takes its form from mainstream melodrama and its consciousness from modern feminism.

Unlike many movies which occupy the landscape of sexuality, *The Accused* does not face the woman viewer with the dilemma of her own self-destruction as a woman-with-desire, while she watches the drama of desire played out as woman's destruction. What the film offers women is the affirmation of their pain as victims, but more than that, it offers pleasure.



There's pleasure in the metamorphosis of the classic portrayal of women as victims (they're both doomed by men and yet dependent on the protection of men) into women as survivors, and more than that, as protagonists. For once, women aren't

defeated. And they defend themselves.

Women's pleasure as spectators is multiplied in solidarity with the performers. Jodie Foster and Kelly McGillis, who play the rape victim and the assistant district attorney who prosecutes her case, have expressed not only pride in their performances, but in the politics of the whole project. Foster, the child star who took herself off to Yale University, said that she wanted to play Sarah Tobias, the raunchy, working-class waitress, who is gang-raped, because she was 'close to my heart'. She wanted to enable Sarah 'to find her own voice, to prove to society that she could rise above their low expectations of her'. McGillis wanted to play either Sarah or Kathryn Murphy, the cool, chic, district attorney, because she wanted to 'help give other rape victims a voice'.

There is another level of identification with Foster and McGillis. They're both stars and yet for once that doesn't exempt them from the world of women - the debates in the United States have invoked both women's real-life experience of sexual harassment and rape. When it comes to the reality of sexual terrorism, they're women just like any others. They've suffered, and they're using the power of stardom not to transcend our reality but to intervene in it.

It is a measure of the permanence and yet the precariousness of patriarchy and of women's insistent presence that popular Western culture gives us not only the trashy *Fatal Attraction* but also serious and popular interventions in sexual politics like Farrah Fawcett's chilling melodrama, *The*



The waitress and her attorney: No spontaneous solidarities

Burning Bed, about a battered woman who kills her husband; *Nine To Five*, the secretaries' revenge movie; and now *The Accused*.

It is within civil society and the courts, (it's no surprise that *The Accused* becomes a court-room drama), that we see the most dramatic expression nowadays of how the power struggle between men and women is regulated and resolved. It is there that we see sexual politics in the raw rather than within the political domain which remains aloof from the seismic shifts in contemporary sexual culture. It's another example of the isolation of the political domain from politics as she is really lived.

Much of the debate about

The Accused in the US has focused on Sarah and the rape scene. It is detailed and relentless. The question is: does it titillate? It's an interesting question that, isn't it? The assumption is that to show the abuse of a woman always risks the arousal of men. The film also pushes the audience to the limits of conventional wisdom by making Sarah a sexual outlaw - she drinks, she likes to smoke dope and she flirts with her assailant.

But *The Accused* is meticulous here. Sarah is raped in a bar by a preppie, good-looking student while a posse of men cheer and join in. The camera is positioned so that it neither identifies with the victim nor with her assailants. While she lies,



prone, on a pin-ball machine, buried under the bodies of the rapists, our eye is guided around the clamouring, cheering men who not only let it happen but make it happen. They're never allowed to be neutral.

There is also a modesty in the camera's gaze. The movie makes no effort to dramatise Sarah's pain and shame. To let us see into her would seem like another invasion. For women spectators, perhaps, we bring to her what we already know. And men? Well, they have to use their imagination. They are confronted by what they, too, know about their own sex, but in this scene they also have to see men as women see them and thus, as men must, too.

Interestingly, Sarah can't see them. She is doomed to feel them and their effects. We, the spectators, also see the crowd through the eyes of two critical characters, the woman working in the same bar, who averts her gaze and gets on with her job. She wants no trouble, she's got two children to take care of. And then there's the preppie student's admiring buddy, who can't take his eyes off what's going on, and who hates what he sees. It is he who follows Sarah as she flees and it is he who calls the police to report the rape.

This brings us to another feature of the film's politics: there are no spontaneous solidarities. It's not a case of men are beasts and baddies and women are only goodies.

The goodies have to get better before they get to be goodies, and it is through the process of consciousness-raising that the film constructs the drama. It is the drama of self-discovery and the difficulty of solidarity which gives the narrative its *frisson*. Because we know from the beginning who has done what.

Here the film offers a fresh variant on what the feminist film critic Judith Williamson has designated the phenomenon of the 'single working woman' in the movies of the 1980s. These two are not professional women severed from communal or sexual context, but working women who are also sexual.

It is class which divides the women: the waitress from her attorney. McGillis as district attorney, is aloof and disinterested. She treats the victim, just as her assailants did, as an object, never consulting her, never confiding in her, never respecting her. The rapist student's wealthy parents employ classy lawyers, and ultimately they do a deal. The law is not about the truth, after all, it is about winners and losers.

Sarah finds her redemption in her revolt. She storms into the attorney's coolly-exquisite apartment - a domestic laboratory - one night while she's entertaining, and plays hell, as only a woman from her class can. It is then that the professional woman finds sexual solidarity with the working woman. Only then does the attorney take responsibility by deciding to prosecute the bystanders. To do that she also has to face out the opposition of her male colleagues in the district attorney's department.

The film confronts all bystanders with their culpability by adopting this ingenious strategy of taking a legal action against some of the bar-room bystanders as accessories. By their inertia they are not innocent or exempt, they are involved. And in their indolence, Murphy's colleagues also forfeit the claim to innocence. They, too, are to blame.

The film dares not only to explore the difficulty of

sisterhood, it also illuminates the swamp of male solidarity. The reluctant and scared male witness is tormented by his loyalty to the lads as well as to their victim. And the film lets us see why.

Two words haunt the trial of the bystanders. Sarah is asked what she said when she was being raped. Did she cry for help, her interrogator asks. No, says Sarah, but what she did say, over and over again was 'NO'. Was 'No' not enough? These are key words, they challenge women's historic subordination in film - the heroine's salvation is traditionally supposed to lie in her proper dependence on a solitary hero, who in avenging her also avenges his own insulted masculinity. Here, Sarah's integrity is restored by her own demand that her word was enough.

The Accused is suggestive of the political problems

'It is within civil society that we see sexual politics in the raw, rather than within the political domain which remains aloof from the seismic shifts in contemporary sexual culture'

which challenge us in the late-80s and which are about nothing if not the dissolution of old solidarities and the discovery of new ones. Neither gender nor class alliances are immaculately conceived, made in heaven. Shared class or gender does not bring with it equivalent knowledge or identical interests, and this film's maturity lies in its refusal of sentimental solidarities. Sure, it's got gross, queasy music, and yes, it carries some soppy characteristics of melodrama, but it is also disciplined in its refusal of easy unities.

That discipline is what gives *The Accused* its happy ending. The slut gets her proper status as a person; not as a victim but as a survivor. The snob discovers sisterhood. The scared boy becomes a man by joining women. And patriarchy, for once, gets the blame. •