



RE-RELEASES

Variety

Variety

Director: Bette Gordon

Production Companies: Variety Motion Pictures, ZDF Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, Channel Four, Arnold Abelson

Financial assistance:

New York State Council on the Arts

Producer: Renee Shafransky

Production Manager: Renee Shafransky

Post-production: Michael Carton

Production Assistants: Ayesha Abdul, Elyse Dayton, Jay Krieger, Julie Pelavin, David Spitzer, Louis Tancredi, Christine Vachon

Assistant Director: Tim Burns

Screenplay: Kathy Acker

Script Assistance: Jerry Delamater, Peter Koper

Additional Dialogue: Nancy Reilly

Original Story by: Bette Gordon

Directors of Photography: Tom Dicillo, John Foster

Additional Photography: Bette Gordon

Assistant Photographers: Jim Mayman, Michael Humold

Editor: Ila von Hasperg

Assistant Editor: Cyndy Schneidau

Costumes: Elyse Goldberg

Titles: The Optical House

Music: John Lurie

Additional music: Pat Irwin

Music Recording: John Lurie

Sound Recording: Helen Kaplan

Sound Re-recording: Magno Sound

Cast:

Sandy Mcleod (*Christine*)

Luis Guzmán (*José*)

Will Patton (*Mark*)

Nan Goldin (*Nan*)

Richard Davidson (*Louis Tancredi*)

Lee Tucker (*Projectionist*)

Peter Rizzo (*Driver*)

Mark Boone Jr (*business manager/porn customer*)

April Andres, Suzanne Fletcher, Peyton Green,

Cookie Mueller, Norma Rodriguez, Sally Rodwell

(*women in bar*)

Scotty Snider (*mother's voice*)

Spalding Gray (*obscene phone voice*)

Usharbudh Arya (*relaxation voice*)

USA/UK 1985

100 mins

An Other Parties Film Company release

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

A contemporary review

Variety is likely to arouse a fair deal of interest on the basis of Kathy Acker's script credit. And there are certainly elements in the film which relate to the writer and her work, from the basic premise of a woman finding employment within the pornography business (an experience undergone by Acker herself), through the heroine's bodybuilding exercises, to the whole notion of relocating pornography in contexts where its 'meaning' becomes unstable. It seems equally clear, however, that the theoretical motivation behind the film is particularly cinematic, and that in order to engage with it one must move beyond glib invocations of cultural shock value. Compounding the problem is the fact that a certain kind of feminist puritan would see the very subject of pornography as taboo, and thus block any consideration of the issues which the film attempts – with deliberate provocation – to explore.

In this light, it needs to be stressed from the start that *Variety* is not 'about' women and pornography. Various pornographic discourses are scattered through the film – movie soundtracks, the heroine's speeches, the pages of magazines – but these are seen (and heard) as one kind of story, to be set against other possible narratives. Thus we are told stories about the experiences of looking for work, about union connections with the Mafia, about being arrested by vice cops, about a bar-girl who stuns her male customers by exposing her bald head, etc. This idea is frequently stressed in the dialogue: 'You want a story, I'll give you a story', remarks Christine to her friend Nan in the first scene; Mark describes his union/Mob investigation as the 'kind of story you get from the edges'; if he has to pass on information to the police, it becomes 'a whole other story', a phrase which in turn inspires Christine to launch into one of her own erotic monologues. The point being that for a film so full of stories, *Variety* remains quite unresolved at its own narrative level. Indeed, the final, brilliant shot is effectively the start of the movie, the point at which Christine's attempts to inject herself into what might be a thriller plot look likely, at last, to come to fruition. The image, abetted by a bluesy score, is laden with *noir*-ish overtones – a city street corner at night, with lamplight on wet ground forming a glistening pool in the surrounding darkness (the image actually looks as if it were in black-and-white). But nothing is delivered except the credits.

For the most part, the film remains precisely suspended *between* narratives, with Christine oscillating between the regime of pornography – with its obvious investment in woman as object – and the masculine world of crime and union corruption, where she attempts to function as an investigating subject. The use of pornography is vital, since its subject/object relations are so fixed, to the extent that Christine's appropriation of the genre's narratives is enough to suggest the radical dis-location of her whole existence. Her increasing fascination with the pornographic world (the lure of the film sound tracks; the turning pages of magazines; the repeated ventures into sex shops and peep shows) also works as a repetitive, degree-zero parody of the spectator's insatiable desire for narratives which repeat, with variations, familiar pleasures and then reach appropriate climaxes. It is exactly this kind of pleasure which *Variety* plays with and finally denies.

The use of a sex cinema as a central setting also foregrounds the issue of looking itself, underlining the point that the spectator's gaze is never 'innocent'. This is made apparent in the opening scenes at the swimming-pool. Christine's body is first dissected by close-ups (to no obvious narrative end), and her conversation with Nan about the difficulties of finding employment is then offset by the overt display of their bodies (emphasised by the use of Christine's

NEW RELEASES

Talk to Me

Continued from Fri 28 Jul

Kokomo City

From Fri 4 Aug

Paris Memories (Revoir Paris)

From Fri 4 Aug

L'immensità

From Fri 11 Aug

Scrapper

From Fri 25 Aug (Preview + Q&A on Tue 15 Aug)

RE-RELEASES

Variety

From Fri 11 Aug (Q&A with director Bette Gordon on Fri 11 Aug 18:00)

Serpico

From Fri 18 Aug

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

reflection). Thereafter, we are constantly made aware of a distinction between the more or less 'unmotivated' look directed at Christine and the hoped-for narrative which would subsume and efface this look through the protagonist's 'point of view'. This is emphasised by a split between sound and image (as with the shots of Christine accompanied by off-screen, sex-film sound, or the lengthy scene in her apartment in which she is observed listening to her answerphone messages), and by the evocation of other 'looks' (documentary in the scenes with the group of female friends and at the fish market). In this sense, *Variety* reverses the central device of Bette Gordon's earlier *Empty Suitcases*, where the protagonist was represented by various different actresses. Here, by contrast, the central, enduring female presence is constantly asserted as an image: the customary alibi of a relation between 'character' and plot is left in suspension. This central tension between image and function is best expressed by Christine herself: 'Sometimes I think that they [the cinema's customers] come here because they think I'm some sort of attraction...'

One should add that the look of *Variety* itself is beautifully rendered by Tom Dicillo and John Foster's outstanding cinematography, and that the latter is atmospherically complemented by John Lurie's sparse and moody score. While audiences may have problems with the film's deliberate lack of pace, the only real structural flaw lies in the trip to Asbury Park, a sequence which merely duplicates Christine's earlier tracking of her quarry. Otherwise, the film is the most convincing evidence from New York of life beyond punk since Michael Oblowitz's *King Blank*, a rather different meditation on similar themes.

Steve Jenkins. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1984

Bette Gordon on 'Variety'

My life, my sexual identity, is as a feminist, but my films don't fit easily into that category – they are not easy films at all, in fact. Films like Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, which I really like, and Michelle Citron's *What You Take for Granted*, are a lot more comfortable for women to deal with and simpler to use in an issue-raising way. Mine ask difficult, disturbing questions and come from another place, a different category. Or maybe no category at all, which is very exciting for me as a filmmaker. *Variety* is a curiosity piece. It is there to raise a lot of eyebrows.

Variety comes out of the fact that the whole sexuality question is very big in New York at the moment. Women who have worked together politically for a long time are finding themselves split around issues of what you can show, what you can want sexually, what you can even think. *Variety* fits right into that split. It is a dividing film, with the project of forcing people to confront things. Some women come up to me afterwards and say thank you for dealing with those issues, while others won't even talk about it. Even among my friends, there are those who rush up and those who hide. It is as though the film touches something deeply repressed.

For myself, I took the risk of coming out and saying things about my own sexuality that won't be popular, in talking about things that contradict the positive view of women that you are supposed to show. I guess my view of things is much more like Fassbinder's: looking at the way things are and hoping that the audience will see that and make changes, as opposed to prescribing the way things ought to be.

Bette Gordon interviewed by Jane Root, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1984