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Blu-Ray Review: *Girlfriends* [Criterion Collection, 2020] (Claudia Weill, 1978)

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Girlfriends [Criterion Collection, 2020] (ClaudiaWeill, 1978), 88 Minutes, spine #1055, (Blu-ray).

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Claudia Weill's independently made tragicomedy, *Girlfriends*, is a coming-of-age story of a young photographer in New York in the second half of the 1970s. In a 2019 interview, included among the special features on this Criterion Blu-ray, Weill describes the film as being about female friendships, something which is foregrounded in the many reviews and think pieces about the film. Despite some spurious claims (not perpetuated by the insightful material on this Blu-ray), *Girlfriends* was not the first film to feature female friendships, rather it follows in a rich tradition of Hollywood gal pal films, including *Stage Door* (Gregory Le Cava, 1937), *Dance, Girl, Dance* (Dorothy Arzner, 1940), and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953). The plot of one such film, *Old Acquaintance* (Vincent Sherman, 1943), bears remarkable similarities to *Girlfriends*, with the fractious friendship between Kit Marlowe (Bette Davis) and Millie Drake (Miriam Hopkins) tested by careers, marriage, and jealousies. Notwithstanding this provenance *Girlfriends* is quite rightly regarded as a landmark work, because with the advent of New Hollywood, the strong complex women of the classical era morphed into mere objects of desire in the new male buddy movies. The *Girlfriends* girls are not there to simply be looked at, they are too busy working, and doing, and answering back. They are also decidedly different from 'Golden Era' girlfriends, such as those in the New York set, depression era musical, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933), in which despite the protagonists' desperate financial state a gown by Orry-Kelly and makeup by Perc Westmore is still rustled up for an audition. *Girlfriends*, with its female lens on the struggles to establish a career and form relationships in a decidedly non-glossy New York, is a film world from a different era.

At the beginning of *Girlfriends*, friends, and roommates, Susan (Melanie Mayron) and Anne (Anita Skinner), are preparing to move into a new apartment in Manhattan. This is disrupted when the more conventionally attractive Anne, announces she is getting married. Lonely and jobless, we see the somewhat awkward Susan gloomily sitting at the hairdressers, the shot is closely cropped, her head and shoulders in front of his torso. Despite her protests that she won't be able to see, the hairdresser forcefully suggests that she remove her glasses, because 'You have a great face I don't know why you're hiding it'. Handing him a page torn from a magazine she asks, 'what do you think of this?' He pushes around her unruly hair before replying, mater-of-factly, 'your face isn't shaped like hers it wouldn't work on you'. To which her deadpan reply is, 'would anything?' This sharply observed humour peppers the film, with the stabs of petty 1970s misogyny still acutely pertinent.

Another powerfully visual scene is preceded by a series of black and white stills of Anne's wedding. From these we cut to a closely cropped Susan, roller in hand, painting a wall a rich shade of red, especially vibrant in this Blu-ray release. As she moves across

the wall (and screen) she tries (and fails) to cover a crack. This is Susan attempting to be bold and strident, on her own now without her married friend. As for the effective use of stills, Weill explains that this was a budgetary necessity rather than an aesthetic choice, because they could not afford a location shoot, 'with food and lots of extras.'

Weill's background as a documentarian influenced her desire to make *Girlfriends* feel real, with techniques that included supplying her actresses with tequila and keeping the camera running after calling cut. But beyond the immediacy of the filmmaking, it is her depiction of 1970s New York that grounds the film. This is a city populated by young people in tiny shabby apartments, grungy lofts, downtown galleries, and late-night parties, trying to make it as artists, writers, filmmakers, and musicians. This set-up, which Molly Haskell charmingly terms (in an essay included with the Blu-ray), 'the bohemian milieu of a now-vanished New York', was to become more familiar on-screen in the 1980s in films such as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985) and *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985). *Girlfriends* evokes this temporal moment whilst also feeling familiar both stylistically and thematically, because its themes of independence and loneliness in the big city with related sub-plots of, career versus family, unwanted pregnancy, bad relationships, and terrible living conditions, are still relevant, and have even entered the mainstream (terrible living conditions aside) in the New York based, friendship sitcoms, *Sex and the City*, and *Friends* (and in the edgier but more closely connected *Broad City* and *Girls*). The struggles of young women to take the path that they want, whatever that might be, and however long it takes to find it, are also the foundation of the work of a group of independent minded, contemporary US female filmmakers including Miranda July and Greta Gerwig.

Aside from its ongoing influence, the importance of *Girlfriends*, and its recovery for contemporary audiences, is apparent when it is placed alongside its better-known contemporaries, films which too often showcase troubled men and their out-of-control egos. Consider *Carnal Knowledge* (Mike Nicholls, 1971), a film partly set in New York, in which Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) rates women by the size of their breasts and is unpleasantly dominant (and unfaithful) to an impossibly gorgeous (but barely articulate) Bobbie (Ann Margaret). As Carol Gilligan points out in another of the essays that accompany the Blu-ray, *Girlfriends* is both time-bound and timely: 'by pointing her camera towards these girlfriends, Weill was tapping into bedrock; the struggle a creative woman faces within a patriarchal order and, more specifically, what it takes for her to hold on to her honest voice and to be truly a friend.'

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

