

Cinderella Goes to Work: the New Woman of Mike Nichols's *Working Girl*

Carmen Indurain Eraso

Half way through Mike Nichols's *Working Girl* (1988) Tess Mc Gill (Melannie Griffith), its female protagonist, tells Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford), a businessman she would like to become her business partner:

I've got a mind for business and a body for sin. Is there anything wrong with that?

This is a key scene for an understanding of the film because it shows a crucial moment in the action: Tess, a working class secretary, has taken over the post of her boss, Katherine (Sigourney Weaver), a successful manageress, after discovering that she has stolen from her a business project she had entrusted her with. Through these words Tess vindicates her rights to be both female and professional or simply, a woman and a good worker at the same time.

The aim of this paper is to explain how the success of women in the world of business is closely dependent on gender and social class. Although Mike Nichols's presentation of the story may show a positive view of 'The American Female Dream' represented by a 20th century working Cinderella, it also offers a more profound negative reading resulting from the power of patriarchal stereotypes of women causing the inequality and devaluation of female workers in the current capitalist system.

Right from the very beginning and by means of the lyrics of the Oscar-winning opening song, song title and singer, the main theme of the film is anticipated: the story of a 'working Cinderella' and her struggle to make her dream come true: getting a good post in the world of business, her new Jerusalem:

*Let the rivers flow
Let all the dreamers wake the nation
Find the New Jerusalem...*

The song's message of hope is emphasized by the singer's voice and the style of music which make us think of Black Spirituals, of faithful voices praying to God for a better world.

At the beginning of the film we see Tess, a young, ambitious, hardworking girl who is not succeeding at work mainly because of her sex. Her plight reminds the viewer of Judi Marshall's description of men's attitude towards women at work: 'Women are patronized, ignored, taken advantage of, criticized and mistaken for someone's assistant by men, that is, they are treated differently because of their sex.' (1984:8)

It is this different treatment that Tess is going to experience: firstly from her boss, who will rudely make her fetch some toilet paper, as if she were his maiden, and who will repeatedly turn down her application for an entry program even though she has proved to be more deserving than her chosen male colleagues. Tess's present predicament with regard to her chances of improvement seems to neatly fit A. Mackinnon's theory that:

Under capitalism, women are horizontally segregated by gender and occupy a structurally inferior position in the workplace (...). The workplace, among other social institutions, is a place where women have learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries as the price of survival (in Rich 1993:234,235).

Therefore, it is not her skills as a worker, what Tess is like, but how she is seen by her boss, his stereotyped perception of women, that determines her lack of opportunities to prove her worth.

A second example of Tess's condition as a victim of sexism at work is this time provided by her male colleagues and senior staff who prove right Marshall's conclusion that 'there is a reluctance from men to work with or for women and if they have to, they make their lives difficult' (37). They will play the trick of arranging a 'job interview' for her which will turn out to be a 'sex date' resulting in her being sacked once again, in spite of the positive attitude, efficiency and good will she has shown towards work. This scene recalls Judith Mayne's theory that 'the representation of working women almost inevitably involves an invocation of sexuality/sexual performance' (in Tasker 1998:6), something already inherent in the phrase: 'working girl', which, as she notes, 'has a double meaning (...) in its innocent literal sense and in its acquired sense that women who worked outside the home were morally suspect, this term becoming a code for prostitute' (1994:95).

But Tess's female condition makes her be exploited, objectified and oppressed not only at work but also at home, that is, in her relationship with her boyfriend, Mick, who will treat her as a sexual object, offering her as a birthday present only lingerie, nothing to wear outside the apartment, and finally being unfaithful to her. He will use her as yet another commodity until she reacts and tells him:

I'm not a steak, you can't just order me!

Friedrich Engels affirmed that 'to emancipate woman and make her the equal of man is impossible as long as she is shut out from social productive labour and restricted to private domestic labour' (1986:184). Yet this is hardly Tess's case. Despite rejecting the 'female dome of the house', remarkably absent in the film, she is still underestimated by men in the labour world. When too involved in work,

she is even accused of lack of femininity by her boyfriend, who will laugh at her new, stylish briefcase and unappealing way of dressing.

Notwithstanding this sequence of disasters happening to our female protagonist, a little ray of hope suddenly appears when she finally gets a job as a secretary in an important business company only to find that her new boss is a woman who could have been her older sister. Right from the very moment they meet we are presented with a clear opposition between these two female characters by various means: the actresses' previous roles and even their star personae, the characters' physical appearance, their way of speaking and dressing, even their habitual readings. Melanie Griffith's blue eyes, fair hair and shapely figure are features which are closely linked to the previous roles given to her in films such as *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn 1975) or *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme 1985), in which she plays the part of sweet and childish and at the same time sexy and passionate girls with a great power of seduction. In these films she represents spontaneity, self-will and determination, building a protagonist who is, as she will confess: 'very similar to my own self: all smiles in the outside but steel in the inside' (1995:38), therefore a perfect choice for this 'feisty heroine, (...) a woman with a strength and spirit that is regarded as atypical' (Tasker 1998:82).

As a contrast, Sigourney Weaver's hard physical features –dark-haired and eyed, tall and slim and with a piercing look– have won her roles of independent, active women like this one, in which, although usually as a heroine, she stands for intelligence, power and self-sufficiency, 'the all-powerful phallic mother of the child's pre-Oedipal symbolic' (Williams 1991:314), a castrating threat to men in features such as: *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979), *Aliens* (James Cameron 1986), *Alien 3* (David Fincher 1992), *Halfmoon Street* (Bob Swain 1986), *Gorillas in the Mist* (Michael Apted 1988).

The female protagonists' ways of speaking and of dressing are completely different as well: Katherine is an upper-class yuppie who knows perfectly how to say the right words at the right moment and how looks, clothes and hairstyle are vital to 'guess the woman' as she quotes from Coco Chanel.

Tess, on the other hand, is a working class girl who is trying to educate her highpitched voice and who has an exaggerated and unrefined taste for clothes, make-up and hairstyle. Even their readings differ: Katherine would never read the kind of cheap literature we often see Tess engrossed in. Yet, ironically, this 'low' literature associated to women will be her main source of success (providing her with the information she needed to plan her project) and is consequently vindicated by the film, which is, after all, a product of popular culture itself.

Contrary to the surveys that Marshall has carried out stating that 'there is a close correspondence of male and manager in both men's and women's eyes and a relative incompatibility of female and manager' (24), and after so much male wrong-doing, Tess will be delighted to have a female boss who will become her fairy godmother or Propp's 'Father Figure', a helping hand and a fascinating role model to follow and worship. Tess has started, as Adrienne Rich affirms, 'to feel the depth and breadth of woman identification and woman bonding that has run like a

continuous though stifled theme through the heterosexual experience' (1993:227), and to have a relationship which is an example of Nancy Chodorow's theory about female bonding:

A boy develops his masculine gender identification in the absence of a continuous and ongoing relationship with his father, while a girl develops her feminine gender identity in the presence of an ongoing relationship with the specific person of her mother (1991:313).

Tess and Katherine, because of their female condition, manage to build a relationship based on cooperation, support and sympathy which is essential to women. They have a richer, ongoing inner world to fall back on which men usually lack. The fact that all the workers at the typing pool where Tess works are women should not therefore be read as mere coincidence but as a way of creating a female atmosphere of understanding and well-being.

It is in this ambience that Tess decides to confide in Katherine the business project she has been devising. Katherine's deception, her treacherous appropriation of Tess's idea by making use of her upper position in the working scale, will turn this female bonding into sheer women's competition both in the labour and emotional spheres. This great disappointment at work, in addition to a second one at home in the form of Mick's infidelities, will trigger the turning point with which this paper started: Tess's reaction to the gender and social class-based system that has placed her at the narrative and moral crossroads of the film.

So far we have seen a girl whose main quality has been ambition, a deep desire to improve professionally through work, a desire which has proved fruitless once and again. But the moment Tess, thanks to Katherine's long absence, decides to take the lead occupying her position in the company in order to wield Power, a reversal of the status quo comes about. Tess will fight for a double denial: denial of her condition as 'working' and as 'girl'. She will react against the negative implications of her female condition at work, which will also extend to the 'home': the traditional messages from patriarchal society that women are the sexual and emotional property of men and that the autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion and state. As Engels affirmed:

The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children (...). This degraded position of the woman has gradually been palliated and glozed over and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished (59).

At a second level she will react to her 'working' condition of oppressed and exploited individual because of her belonging to the working class, a fight she had started long before, taking up evening classes to improve her qualifications to climb the professional ladder. Her transgressive ambition will thus lead her to gather up enough courage to arrogate to herself her boss's status and perform the lesson Katherine taught her: 'YOU make it happen'.

In order to achieve her aims she will become a class-cross dresser undergoing a complete physical change including new hairstyle, change of voice and the

appropriation of Kath's clothes and even her own apartment. In a word, she will imitate her refined ways, and moreover, acquire other aspects of her personality, especially her attitude: she will show herself as more self-confident, will-powered and action-taking than ever before, disregarding her best friend's warning that she is committing a social transgression by rejecting her working class origins and wishing to be something better than a secretary. As Yvonne Tasker argues: 'For women in the cinema cross-dressing is almost always about status' therefore showing the pleasures of the possibility of change or escapist freedom of 'becoming something other' (1998:26,27).

With that goal in mind she will use the same type of devious means as Kath, learning how to behave 'like a man', e.g. paying for Jack's drinks and drinking in one go when she tries to look businesslike, but especially resorting to her 'female weapons', e.g.: dancing with and flattering Oren Trask, a media tycoon they want to make business with, at his daughter's wedding. She will also dare to call for Jack Trainer's help on her way to attain financial success and to attend meetings and parties as if she were a real manageress. It is at one of these business parties that she will coincidentally meet Jack, who will unconsciously take up Katherine's position of 'Father Figure' (once Katherine has become the witch of the Proppian fairytale), guiding Tess into the world of business and embodying at the same time the role of 'Blue Prince', the heroine's partner who will fill her solitude and exclusion now she no longer fits in any of these two worlds, a stranger even in her home, working-class background. As Tasker puts it: 'Heterosexual romance offers to bridge these two worlds providing a magic solution to the isolation of the individual achiever' (1998:28).

Harrison Ford's performance proves most adequate for Trainer's role, since the audience has always associated him to the ideal, up-right, honest American man, the sensitive guy figure common to the 80s constructed through both his previous and later films: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the two other films of the Ark trilogy (Steven Spielberg 1981, 1984 and 1989), *Witness* (Peter Weir 1985), *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols 1991), etc. All these protagonists share a hard, unyielding surface which contrasts with their humane concern for the feminist discourse, proving therefore not to be as 'macho' as the traditional adventure hero. His relationship with Tess will consequently provide a romantic ending for the storyline, which we cannot help but compare with those in other contemporary films such as *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall 1990), a similar illustration of a class-cross dresser who climbs up the social and economic ladder though following a different path.

Jack and Tess will form a winning team that will have to overcome several obstacles: first of all, convincing Trask of the advantages and benefits of their project, which he will eventually accept, converting himself into a second 'Father Figure' for Tess. He will do so, not only by acknowledging Tess's worth but also by giving her the job of her dreams which will place her on a nearer position to Katherine's, though legally this time. They will also have to expel Katherine from the love triangle situation created by the film, and get reunited after the discovery of Tess's trick, which will constitute the main character's comic flaw or 'lack'.

Difficult though it may seem, 'Trainer's forgiveness will come straightaway after Tess's realistic answer to his question:

'Why didn't you tell me that you were a secretary?'

'If I had told you I was just some secretary, you would never have taken the meeting. Maybe you would have fed me a few drinks and then tried to get me into the sack. End of story',

a reply which brings to the fore the close relationship established between gender and class stereotypes in the film. Jack's failure to deny this possibility confirms the film's awareness of the links between these stereotypes in contemporary 'liberated' American society. Tess has undergone a double male dominance, emanating both from gender and class: she has been sexually harassed in the workplace and regarded as a commodity at home. Only after rejecting her working class condition and abating her feminine complaisance to the rules will she reach professional success.

To conclude, on the one hand this film's first success concentrates on the depiction of what Annette Kuhn describes as a 'positive strong female character with whom the female audience can pleasurably identify without experiencing feelings of guilt or remorse' (1991:10), a character who, moreover, represents 'the girl next door', that is, any young girl who, should she be gifted with great ambition, working power and a little dose of reactionary attitude could eventually succeed both in the labour and personal spheres. The film's resolution, presented in a more realistic, less improbable way than that of the average romantic comedy, helps the viewer relate better with the protagonist and thus, reach the fulfilment of the 'American dream'.

However, there is a second, deeper reading of this film, which proves that its optimism is only apparent: if women (in this film the inductive version of any American citizen) want to get a career for themselves, they will have to fight against all the obstacles emanating from their social and gender origins. Furthermore, the film's acceptance of Tess as a professional person is linked to her approval of and integration in the capitalist structure and to her being conceived as a woman with a 'body for sin', that is, with an undeniable erotic content. This is the role allotted by patriarchy to women so that they do not stray too far from traditionally expected stereotypes of femininity. The success of the heroine seems inevitably joined to her ability to integrate herself in the predominantly male world of business seen through her relationship with Jack and finally sanctioned by 'Trask, the highest representative of male power. Therefore the film proves Marshall correct when she affirms that:

Women are faced with a series of double-binds which encourage them to copy men's characteristics and behaviour to become acceptable managers, but which punish them for departures from stereotypes of female behaviour (40).

Thus, this reading of the film shows women's success at work as totally dependent on the opposite sex and plausible only if they still abide by patriarchal society's stereotypes, allotting sexual performance and care-taker skills to women,

or, in the much more graphic terms used by a female character in the film *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson 1992):

These days a woman can feel like a failure if she doesn't bring in fifty grand a year and still make time for blow jobs and homemade lasagne.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the representation of US American working women in a sample comedy of the 1990s: Mike Nichols's *Working Girl*, (1988). Throughout this film we will witness its female lead undergoing a double

male dominance. Sexually harassed in the workplace and regarded as a sexual commodity at home she will only reach professional status after rejecting her working class condition and abating her allotted feminine complaisance to patriarchal rules. Despite this witty comedy's presentation of a positive, strong heroine finally succeeding both in the labour and personal spheres, a deeper reading of this film proves less optimistic since presenting women's success as workers as inevitably linked to not only heterosexual romance, but also women's sexual performance and their integration in the capitalist structure, therefore closely dependent on gender and social class.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la representación de la mujer trabajadora norteamericana a través de una comedia de los años 90: *Working Girl* (1988) del director Herbert Ross. A lo largo de esta película presenciaremos a su protagonista femenino bajo un doble dominio masculino. Acosada sexualmente en su trabajo y considerada como un objeto sexual en el hogar, la mujer trabajadora triunfará en el campo profesional únicamente tras rechazar su condición de miembro de la clase trabajadora y su condición de mujer. A pesar de que ésta ingeniosa comedia presenta un protagonista femenino fuerte, luchador y reaccionario que triunfa tanto en el campo laboral como el personal, una interpretación del filme en mayor profundidad resulta menos optimista. El éxito de ésta mujer trabajadora aparece ligado no sólo a su relación sentimental con un hombre, sino también a su actuación sexual y a su integración en el sistema capitalista, dependiendo por lo tanto de su sexo y de su clase social.