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Roger Ebert and the Terrifying Girl Next Door

By Richard Leader

While Roger Ebert has long had a reputation of being a Liberal—in 1996, Michael Medved, an also-ran film critic and conservative pundit, made Ebert the target of his own personal crusade out of some sort of revenge for his approval of Oliver Stone's *Nixon*—it took Michael Moore to make that liberalism finally matter to Ebert's sizeable mainstream audience. In a series of columns about *Fahrenheit 9/11*, its victory at Cannes, and Moore's subsequent speech at the Oscars, Ebert made his own views on the Bush presidency abundantly clear to his readers across the political spectrum.

Backlash centered not just on those views but his very right to make them as he existed in their minds as a mere film critic, a box that he dare not venture from; an especially ironic position to take if one considers that Medved has done the reverse over the years, opportunistically attaching himself to the hip to demagogues from Rush Limbaugh to Pat Robertson, hoping to finally be taken seriously as a film critic. One of patriarchy's greatest coups is the compartmentalization of human activity, dividing everything into disparate spheres that cannot be compared or contrasted—preventing a big picture look that might call the system as a whole into question—and Ebert argued valiantly that to be an informed critic, and reader, one must be honest and upfront about one's own political views and how they intersect with popular culture in a holistic way.

With Ebert's newfound fame as a Liberal celebrity those with less mainstream audiences began courting him with keen interest, Matthew Rothschild of *The Progressive* inviting him to a radio interview. It proved popular on the internet when transcribed at Progressive.org and was syndicated to other web-

sites such as *Alternet.org*. Ebert was asked questions concerning films that dealt with race, labor relations, and class—although the largest and most universal class divide, gender, warranted neither a question nor an answer. While Ebert is largely trusted to ‘do the right thing’ when it comes to issues of race, even bringing up the subject in reviews of less predictably obvious films than the sort suggested by Rothschild (*Hoop Dreams* and the oeuvre of Spike Lee) such as *Conan the Barbarian* and *Predator 2*, there has been some controversy. Such was the case when he took the time to revisit his review of Tyler Perry’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Perry himself plays a woman, dressed in drag) after his one star appraisal of the film unleashed a torrent of mail from readers that Ebert claims to have dwarfed that generated by *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Passion of the Christ* (which he reviewed quite positively) combined.

Even if his attempt at reconciliation in that situation fell short, where he unsubtly implied using a number of carefully selected letters that the only African Americans taking issue with him were anti-intellectuals or wild eyed reverse-racists, at least he felt some sort of active urgency in responding to criticism—the column was perhaps published online before it had even seen an editor, judging by misspellings of his own. While Ebert and Rothschild have a high mental investment in being ‘good white folks,’ there is seldom any demonstration of that same sense of responsibility to women as a people, whatever their color.

Of course, all men are conflicted on that account, their sense of ethics and class identity tugging at them from different directions: but then most men have not collaborated on a soft-core film (*Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*) with Russ Meyer. Fortunately for Ebert, if one looks hard enough, one can find a feminist out there who thinks just about anything and in a 1995 revisit of *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* he used the film critic B. Ruby Rich to prove that Meyers was really about

female empowerment, echoing a column he published a decade earlier that sophomorically argued that “if Meyer is a sexist pig, then so is Madonna.” While such statements were invariably toned down in the following years, whether that was due to a change in his personality or the professional climate remains unknowable, Ebert still often resists moving outside of his own perspective when it comes to such matters. His 1999 review of *American Beauty* stands as one of the more egregious examples of self-centeredness: regarding the teenage daughter, Jane (Thora Birch), he writes that she is “saving up for breast implants even though augmentation is clearly unnecessary; perhaps her motivation is not to become more desirable to men, but to make them miserable about what they can’t have.”

In a fit of surrealism, reviews of both *Born into Brothels* (the Oscar winning documentary about children living in the red light district of Calcutta) and *Inside Deep Throat* (a collection of interviews old and new about the 1972 pornographic film that have been collated by Universal Pictures) appeared on *RogerEbert.com* on the same day. While the former received a more positive review, by the slim margin of a mere half-star above the three granted to *Inside Deep Throat*, the latter received an additional bonus by Jim Emerson, Ebert’s web editor. In its honor he devised a special section dedicated to “The X-Rated Roger Ebert,” creating an essay with links to various reviews of pornographic films that Ebert had covered early on in his career. The section received top billing on the website for a week in an attempt to stir up some added interest in the site (and the *Chicago Sun-Times*) as a whole. Emerson’s efforts did generate incoming web links from a variety of third-parties, among them the anti-feminist site, *Men’s News Daily*—ostensibly a reactionary effort against the alleged sexism of the existence of several feminist news journals although it barely rises to the level of parody given the meager male talent available to it.

The three stars awarded to *Inside Deep Throat* seem to be less connected to its quality as a documentary and more to its ability to allow Ebert to reminisce: even he points out that it is firmly a product of the establishment, Universal Pictures being a far cry from backroom deals (which can equally be part of “the establishment,” it must be noted, it now being easier to exclude women from the bar room than the boardroom) that led to the creation of *Deep Throat*. The new project was produced by Brian Grazer who has such credits under his belt as *A Beautiful Mind* (not so much a film about the deranged genius of a single man but a blowjob to the superego of the Everyman, no matter how banal his own talents and existence, who can somehow more easily relate to the fearsome god soaring through the stratosphere than the beleaguered wife that must clean up the messes he makes), and such ‘family friendly’ fare as *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. This combination might seem highly curious but all three movies serve a similar social function in perpetuating patriarchal norms, something their compartmentalization into different genres serves to obscure. What *Inside Deep Throat* does do, Ebert wrongly remarks, is present “headlines that go against popular wisdom.” His first item of note is:

While everybody remembers that Lovelace [Linda Marchiano] later said she had virtually been raped on screen, the movie suggests that her troubles were the doing of her sadistic lover at the time, not Damiano. By the time she was 50, she was posing for *Leg Show Magazine* and saying she thought she looked pretty good for her age.

The documentary might have suggested one thing but by Ebert’s second sentence it seems evident that he had moved out of the realm of exposition and synopsis, and was willing to

make a conclusion of his own, drawing on both the material of the film and the cultural context he brought as a viewer. Her status as a victim was invalidated by his own petty male contempt for a woman’s petty vanity, a purported sin that is highly encouraged in women by male culture: not because men enjoy looking at women’s legs, but because vanity exists as such an effective tool in justifying feelings of superiority and the very political actions that proceed from those feelings. It is fairly easy to imagine Ebert, as a Liberal, feeling sympathetic to the plight of Norma McCorvey—the Jane Roe of *Roe vs. Wade*—who has been so thoroughly courted as a trophy by conservatives that it would be almost inconceivable that she would have not recanted on the subject of abortion, and yet like a battered wife who has no choice but to return to her husband, any economic or social pressures that Linda Marchiano might have been suffering under in her later years can easily be discounted by an allegation that she was shallow and thought highly of her legs.

While the existence such pressures are easy to imagine in the red light district of Calcutta, hence *Born into Brothels* being a shoo-in for an Oscar in the land of Guilty Liberals, they are all but forgotten when discussing things closer to home (where the superficial divas that we feel safe to judge and despise all live): in a currently republished 1974 interview with the maker of *Deep Throat*, Gerard Damiano, Ebert quotes him on his principal casting choice for another pornographic film, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, “She [Georgina Spelvin] came to the set originally to run the commissary, be the cook. But there was something about her...” In any other industry when a woman takes a job as caterer and ends up having sex for money along the way, it is called harassment or prostitution, not business as usual.

Things have changed little in the twenty years since that interview if one examines the case of *The Brown Bunny*, a

strange saga in which Roger Ebert came to feature prominently. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, telling the story of a disillusioned motorcycle racer on a meandering journey, fraught over his lost love—or obsession. It stars Vincent Gallo, who serves not only as an actor in the film, but as its producer, writer, and in just about every other conceivable role, save that of cocksucker, a position reserved for Chloë Sevigny, an actress so typecast as a sexual ‘bottom’ that she has been cast as the real-woman, in the sense of being subordinate, even when played against another female: Hilary Swank in the 1999 *Boys Don’t Cry*. The very real act of oral sex—popular reporting usually included some genteel equivalent of “apparently to completion”—was in that sense both an artifact of gendered politics and an outright display of male power in that Gallo was able to orchestrate the sexual encounter into existence so thoroughly from his imagination to commercial reality. This involved the transformation of a woman, one 12 years his junior and with whom he had once previously enjoyed a sexual relationship, into a product that would one day end up being advertised on a billboard, her face pressed against his pelvis.

The existence of the film’s Sunset Boulevard billboard itself was perhaps one of privilege: Gallo claims to have paid the nearly \$40,000 for its installation out of his own pocket (despite *The New York Times* reporting that the film’s distributor, Wellspring Media, had ponied up \$50,000 for the billboard), a price that he admits eclipses the money he earned from his *Buffalo ’66* and *The Brown Bunny* combined. Despite his oft repeated boot-strapping story of being kicked out of his father’s house at 16 and his subsequent attachment to the arts scene in New York City, his pockets are now rather deep (to the tune of purchasing a perhaps still empty \$2.15 million apartment with his company, Brown Bunny LLC, apparently without a mortgage), which he maintains are lined with wind-

falls from lucky real estate deals over the years. That much luck is always suspect, and in such endeavors success is something that traditionally flows in the direction of men—hence the example that had to be made of Martha Stewart—who are at least given the option of getting their foot in the door when it comes to speculative risk taking.

As murky as his finances might be, the transfer of privilege and influence is rather easy to track in the case Gallo, his primary claim to fame being his association with Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist who was constructed into a luminary by the even more infamous Andy Warhol. These events came to a cinematic head in 1996 with the release of two films surrounding the periphery of Warhol’s life, the eponymous *Basquiat* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*, both of which received reviews by Ebert totaling three and a half stars, making for a unique symmetry of coincidence. The later tells a fictionalized version of the story of Valerie Solanas, a prostitute and a writer who found betrayal at every turn in life, finally turning a gun on Warhol in a failed assassination attempt. Ebert lauded the director of the film, Mary Harron, saying that she accomplished “remarkable things in her movie: She makes Solanas almost sympathetic and sometimes moving and funny.”

Thus he finds a person who was molested, found her way into prostitution, and exploited by the inner circle of the arts crowd until she was no longer interesting to be a life *almost* deserving of sympathy: for comparison, Ebert’s 2004 ode-like review of *Bukowski: Born Into This* paints a fairly vivid picture of a life that is worthy of such sentiment. In his description of the poet, “He was 24 when he had sex for the first time. She was a 300-pound prostitute. He remembers her name. As he tells the story, he does an extraordinary thing. He blushes. Here was a man who made a living and became a legend by being hard-boiled, and he blushes, and in that moment we glimpse the lonely, wounded little boy inside.”

Even if, nine times out of ten, Ebert finds himself more sympathetic to “wounded little boys” (who so often grow into powerful old men) over prostituted women, Solanas’ humor still should have come as no surprise because she was indeed quite funny. Her “SCUM Manifesto” (Society for Cutting Up Men), is still remembered fondly as the unapologetic underbelly of the feminist movement—even as literalist men insist on acting appalled, as if they have already constructed bunkers in their backyards for that fateful day when the SCUM holocaust begins—and it certainly is interesting to suppose that had she been successful in her attempt to murder Andy Warhol, while she might not have altered the course of human society, she would have likely prevented a woman from fellating one Vincent Gallo onscreen three decades later, an interesting accomplishment in any case.

Sevigny, despite being widely reported—including by Ebert—as crying during the sex scene as it played at its Cannes’ premier (although evidently no one sought further explanation or context for those tears), claims that the film as a whole was a good experience for her. In an interview, she said, “It was the toughest thing I’ve ever done, but Vincent was very sensitive to my needs, he was very gentle. It was one take. It was funny and awkward, we both laughed quite a bit. And we’d been intimate in the past, so it wasn’t that strange.” The statement is an interesting paradox in that while Gallo devised the toughest thing she has ever had to do, his deft handling of events outside the scene allowed for that moment of perfect gentleness on his part (the apparent responsibility was neatly shifted onto her shoulders and lifted from his), any possible coercive elements were allowed to remain just off stage or veiled by the past. Even if no harm did come to her as an individual woman at the moment of filming—to say nothing of how it might have affected her career, or the careers of women who are similarly typecast and what directors might feel

increasingly confident in asking them to do—it must be said that sexual-precedent can also be a dangerous thing in Hollywood: Jane Fonda, in her autobiography, *My Life So Far*, accuses her late husband, Roger Vadim, of pushing her not only into group sex but also of forcing her to reprise her 1971 Oscar winning role as a prostitute in *Klute* in his own bedroom.

Those tears of Sevigny served as a hallmark and a capstone to the event at Cannes: critics from all walks of life found the film drudgingly interminable and were willing to think the worst of Gallo, because they wanted to, not because of any true concern for Sevigny. This is similar to how Liberal men revel at the discovery of sexual impropriety on the part of the Republican “Moral Majority,” finding dirt on their peers and rivals is more useful, interesting, and humorous than taking an actual moral stand of their own on the mistreatment of women—beyond this ironic heckling and finger pointing. Walking out at the conclusion of the screening, Roger Ebert remarked that *The Brown Bunny* was the “The worst film in the history of the festival,” making for the beginning of a popularly-celebrated personal feud between himself and Gallo. In his write-up on Cannes, Ebert did note Sevigny’s stoic job at acting in the film, although his statement, “If Gallo had thrown away all of the rest of the movie and made the Sevigny scene into a short film, he would have had something” seems to operate on several levels, as it will be demonstrated below. In the same column, Ebert takes up the Leftist banner, suggesting that Donald Rumsfeld could benefit from a viewing of *Fog of War*, a documentary that consists of interviews with Robert McNamara on the Vietnam War; the importance of sexual politics once again eludes the masculine political radar.

The day after the screening Gallo went into a media frenzy, simultaneously apologizing for his film and making accusations of conspiracies. He latched onto Ebert with partic-

ular ferocity, attacking him in a variety of newspapers and magazines: later, he famously cursed Ebert to develop prostate cancer, something that Gallo later retracted, claiming he was principally worried about his own health at the time, and related in an interview: “Because of the stress levels that I put myself under to make *Brown Bunny*, I have a swollen prostate. They have to go in there with a couple of fingers and do this massage, which you can’t imagine the brutality of it.” One must wonder about his eagerness to insert his own body parts into others on film, given how adamant he sounds about the implicit violence involved in penetration of various sorts.

For his own part, Ebert joined fully in the feud (after writing a factually morose article detailing Gallo’s initial apologetics), although he did this on two levels, taking it in good stride on television appearances, using humor, though his written response operated somewhat differently. While still superficially jovial, Ebert used some of Gallo’s more outrageous quotes (“I’m sorry I’m not gay or Jewish, so I don’t have a special interest group of journalists who support me.”) to paint him as a homophobe or anti-Semite, but-not-really, reminding the reader of Gallo’s almost farcical earnestness in his proclamations of being a Republican: this was less about politics than it was about arriving at a punch line. If Ebert had taken the quote he was reprinting seriously, with grave sincerity, it would have been one thing; but if Gallo was indeed a demented paranoid only worthy of mockery, and certainly no political rival, the use—exploitation—of the quote would have been a gross miscarriage. Reality was something halfway between the two extremes: the use of the quote proved Gallo and Ebert to be political peers.

Over a year after its disastrous showing at Cannes, a revised version of *The Brown Bunny* found its way into Ebert’s hands, with 26 minutes of the film being left on the cutting room floor. And he liked it. “The Cannes version was a bad film, but now Gallo’s editing has set free the good film inside.”

He also revisited his prior statement on the sex scene, how it was the only segment of the movie worth keeping, making a concerted effort to move away from prurient interpretations:

The scene, and its dialogue, and a flashback to the Daisy character at a party, work together to illuminate complex things about Bud’s sexuality, his guilt, and his feelings about women. Even at Cannes, even after unendurably superfluous footage, that scene worked, and I wrote: “It must be said that [Sevigny] brings a truth and vulnerability to her scene that exists on a level far above the movie it is in.” Gallo takes the materials of pornography and repurposes them into a scene about control and need, fantasy and perhaps even madness. That scene is many things, but erotic is not one of them.

This varies wildly with an account Sevigny herself has given, where she described it as “a really intense romantic scene, really beautiful,” something very much at odds with third-party accounts. In many ways, men are often free to arrive at the more objective or even feminist-sounding interpretations (if not feminist in result: those pornographic “materials” were still erotic enough to sell the film outside of the festival-circuit) that women are not, as our mental survival is assured whether we admit our complicity in patriarchy or not, whereas women continually struggle with their own sense of agency. Ebert concludes his review with, “I will always be grateful I saw the movie at Cannes; you can’t understand where Gallo has arrived unless you know where he started,” siding once again with the wounded little boy. Whether Gallo is a Republican or a lunatic or just a narcissist matters not, he is a man, and hence a peer to Ebert in a way no woman can be; not because it is a factual impossibility, but through political actions large and small, he—and all men—work to make it so.

Even as it is nearly inconceivable that a woman could make a film in the same way that Gallo did, from the amorphous funding situation to the casting of oneself as the recipient of oral sex from a name-actor, men found a way to reverse even that in their imagination. Stuart Alson, who orchestrates a New York 'independent film festival' (many argue that as filmmakers have to pay a large entrance fee to be included it is more of an advertising showcase, though even far less generous opinions of the event are circulated), gave Gallo a gushing interview, calling his critics "pedestrian" and other similarly affected insults in his nouveaux-literate opening:

When I attended the 2003 Cannes Film Festival and witnessed the fiasco surrounding Gallo, my instinct told me that if Gallo's film were credited to a female director or even better to Chloe or better still was a homosexual love story, festival prizes would have been thrown at it. I guess it's hard for some people to "swallow" Gallo directing himself in a film in which his character receives a blowjob. Even so, the much talked about graphic scene is completely overshadowed by a very complex and beautiful drama. Still, reactions to the graphic scene were all the thin minded could talk about. Reading negative comments about *The Brown Bunny* is usually very laughable. Both because of the weak arguments made against Gallo personally and against his film, plus all the very obvious personal hang-ups that the negative commenters bring to their reviews. Judging from their writing, the film is usually very much over their heads and very much under their skin. I feel sorry for Mr. Gallo that he lives in a world where profound vision is so unrewarded and instead highly resisted or diminished. I consider him the best young American filmmaker and was very excited about conducting this interview.

Thus the fact that certain projects receive more acclaim when accomplished by members of subordinated classes (although such actions are not always to the benefit of their own class as a whole and instead often work to the advantage of their oppressors, hence the impetus behind such acclaim) is turned around: not only are misogynist endeavors frequently palmed off to females who can then occupy themselves with the grunt work (as the white media has equally done with the racist and exploitive roles it encourages minorities to take up), that process is used to vindicate white males as well. Gallo is rewarded both for his work and the fact that similar work is denied to women, first in point of fact and then here in theory, the lack of evidence becoming evidence of some sort of deliberate discrimination against him and his film. Female directors rarely get a second chance to redeem themselves (or even a first) as few male critics wonder about the wounded little girl inside, where they started, or how they might arrive.

It seems fairly evident what precedents Alson is using to bolster his claim, even if they remain unmentioned: morbid films about 'female sexuality' created by women have been a hot-ticket item for some time now, being that they can appeal to both patriarchs and feminists for disparate reasons, though—regrettably—the very difference between those two sorts of appeal seems to be rapidly disintegrating as of late. Catherine Breillat stands at the forefront of such work, setting the stage with her *Romance* and *Fat Girl*, and though the 2002 *Secretary* was directed by Steven Shainberg, it was written by two women (Erin Cressida Wilson and Mary Gaitskill). The 2003 *Thirteen* (Christina Hardwicke and Nikki Reed) followed suit, using a similar exposition to that of *Secretary*, each showing females in the situation of hitting 'rock bottom' in an eroticized way, only to suddenly shift backwards in time by several months, turning the story from a narrative to a parable. All of these films received a solid thumbs-up by Ebert, and most critics for that matter, male or female. While most are indeed

examples of good filmmaking (in how good filmmaking is usually understood), if one can say anything about these movies to tie them together into some sort of genre it is that they present ‘complexities’ that border on sophistry. As much as it is frequently deemed improper to assume an ethical program on the part of writers and directors—it is thought that having one is unsophisticated and disrespectful of the urbane audiences that are made to feel elite for viewing non-blockbuster fare—critics have little problem projecting that ambivalence back towards the filmmakers forming a vicious circle of absented-meaning as Ebert does in his review of *Romance*:

There is a fantasy scene in “Romance” where a woman’s body is divided by a wall. On one side, from the waist down, she is in a brothel. On the other side, from the waist up, in a delivery room. What is the message of the scene? Don’t be too sure you know. I know I don’t. It isn’t some kind of simplistic message linking childbirth with misuse by men. The woman having the fantasy isn’t really against the activities on either side of the wall. Maybe the scene is intended as an illustration of her own confusion about sex.

While perhaps entirely correct in this estimation, Ebert’s take is proof enough that people who have been raised to be men by society (no matter their current sense of identity) can learn precious little from any of these films and too often draw erroneous conclusions; as progressive as we might be or think we are, the danger of objectification (whether this plays out as the male gaze or the paternalistic Liberal male ego) is all too real and overshadows the lessons that could be learned. Ebert continues on *Romance*: “it is an intelligent, radical film by a woman, and at the same time it contains explicit nudity and, as nearly as we can tell, actual sex. It is not arousing or porno-

graphic, because the sex isn’t presented in an erotic way; it’s more like a documentary of a dogged woman’s forced march toward orgasm, a goal she is not sure she values.” Just as Ebert declared the sex act in *The Brown Bunny* to be un-erotic or perhaps anti-erotic—in stark opposition to the actress with her mouth around that penis, who herself advertised the scene as intensely romantic and beautiful—again he lets the narcissism of his own ego and self conception (believing himself the good sort of man who would not find such a thing to be a turn on) lets him ignore the fact that members of his gender class are busy downloading these anti-erotic scenes off of Mr. Skin.com and other such pornographic websites, more than willing to view that material out of any sort of artistic context, whether that original artistic context was in fact real or merely presumptive.

Many would take issue with my branding of these films as “parables,” though I would argue that complexity, sophistic or not, does not automatically obviate against such a reading (as many seem to assume); the plot regressions of *Secretary* and *Thirteen* seem to preclude against sound political judgments by viewers, especially male ones it would seem, by imbuing a sense of fate to the tragic women on screen—who are where they are not because of patriarchy but because of some inevitable and essential trait of femaleness. Indeed, Ebert defies any sense of rationality in his reviews of both, reversing obvious power differentials. For *Secretary*, a tale of a self-destructive young woman who finds salvation of a sort in slavery by giving the faculties of her abuse over to the hands of the sadistic lawyer that employs her, Ebert writes, “The movie does not argue that S/M [Sadomasochism] is good for you, but has a more complex dynamic. What they discover is that, in the long run, S/M is more fun (and less trouble) for the ‘M’ than for the ‘S.’” In his take on *Thirteen*, while deliberately setting up examples of how much danger the two young protag-

onists are regularly at risk for, he hamstringing his own argument in order to present a beleaguered male party: the girls “all but rape ‘Luke the lifeguard boy’ (Kip Pardue), a neighbor who accuses them, accurately, of being jail bait,” when the only risk the older male is undertaking is of his own making. The 13 year old girls’ crass attempt at emulating the sorts of behavior that society deems seductive hardly justifies the use of the word “rape,” qualified or not; using it in this case was an utter lapse in both ethics and professionalism.

Yet Ebert has had some stark moments of conscience over the years when it comes to sexual exploitation: they tend to occur more often when reviewing ‘bad’ movies than ‘good’ ones, are full of the same sort of cynicism that radical feminists are often accused of, and yet such outbursts are more about himself than any true pathos for the girls and women who are being exploited and subjected to male violence. One of the more recent examples is his 2004 review of *The Girl Next Door*. The film is really about the boy next door—or more accurately, in or at the door, being that the male gaze is a more important focus for the title’s generation than strict accuracy—who serves as the real protagonist: a high school senior (Emile Hirsch) who leads a rather sedate existence until a young relative of his neighbor moves in, a woman (Elisha Cuthbert) trying to escape a life in the porn-business.

He becomes infatuated with her, her often reckless behavior drawing him out of his boring academic shell, and their relationship grows until the sex industry begins to assert itself into both of their lives: she has both an old boss (James Remar) and a former boyfriend (Timothy Olyphant), each bitter rivals, trying to draw her back in for their own benefit while the boy’s friends discover her secret identity and expose her, causing him to treat her less like the girl next door and more like a porn star. After calling him out for his behavior she returns to the sex industry; he decides to win her back, becom-

ing a middleman of sorts in the war between her old boss and her ex-boyfriend. The film concludes with the boy siding with the boss and creating some sort of pornographic sex education film with his friends at the prom, and then finally coming clean with his parents who are eventually won over into being proud of his various activities. Ebert begins his one and a half star review of the movie with:

The studio should be ashamed of itself for advertising “The Girl Next Door” as a teenage comedy. It’s a nasty piece of business, involving a romance between a teenage porn actress and a high school senior. A good movie could presumably be made from this premise—a good movie can be made from anything, in the right hands and way—but this is a dishonest, quease-inducing “comedy” that had me feeling uneasy and then unclear. Who in the world read this script and thought it was acceptable?

It is hard to disagree with his assessment. On the other hand, the film is not nearly as horrific as he makes it out to be, or at least no worse than many with which he finds little fault. Why *The Girl Next Door* is singled out with such vehemence then becomes a puzzle. Ebert claims, reasonably enough, that he watches little television—that one has little inclination after watching upwards of a thousand films a year and more active pursuits are sought for one’s off hours—but it should be noted that the titular girl next door, the object to be objectified, is Elisha Cuthbert, who in her role on the series *24* as Kim Bauer has become perhaps the most hated damsel-in-distress within the past decade. So much vitriol has been spilled, particularly by male writers, that people who have never seen the series (myself included) have an inkling of its maleficence. It is improvable, but it seems possible that some of the animosity

towards the actress by the male-world at large spilled over into the review, given that Ebert's take on the character is so completely devoid of charity, even though none of the character's actions warrant such a hostile reading. He writes:

Danielle (Elisha Cuthbert) has two personalities: In one, she's a sweet, misunderstood kid who has never been loved, and in the other she's a twisted emotional sadist who amuses herself by toying with the feelings of the naive Matthew. The movie alternates between these personalities at its convenience, making her quite the most unpleasant character I have seen in some time.

His primary evidence of her dire "sadism"—and remember, as he said of *Secretary*, that being a sadist is a less rewarding job than being the willing recipient of it, at least when the male character is the one dishing it out—happens early on in the film when the boy first gets a glimpse of the girl next door in a state of undress through their respective bedroom windows. Rather than inviting herself over to complain, she summons him out for a car ride, during the course of which he is stripped and kicked out of the car to run home naked. This seems less of an indictment of her personality and more a case of something that happened merely because that sort of thing is expected to happen in teenage comedies. Ebert continues, moving on to the men of the film:

This character, named Kelly, is played by Timothy Olyphant with a skill that would have distinguished a better movie, but it doesn't work here, because the movie never levels with us. When a guy his age (36, according to IMDB.com) "used to be the boyfriend" of a girl her age (19, according to the plot description) and she is already at 19 a famous porn star,

there is a good chance the creep corrupted her at an early age; think Traci Lords. That he is now her "producer" under an "exclusive contract" is an elevated form of pimping. To act in porn as a teenager is not a decision freely taken by most teenage girls, and not a life to envy.

There's worse. The movie produces a basically nice guy, named Hugo Posh (James Remar), also a porn king, who is Kelly's rival. That a porn king saves the day gives you an idea of the movie's limited moral horizons.

Ebert is completely correct. The question remains: where was all of this knowledge lurking when he treated other films involving sexual exploitation with kid-gloves, and what was so peculiar about *The Girl Next Door* to turn him towards pro-feminism? My argument is that the "dishonesty" he saw in the film was really the dishonesty of the sex industry, and not, as he would claim, that of the filmmakers. Unlike their "betters" who produce movies like *Secretary* that seek to accomplish exactly the same patriarchal goals of making dominance and subordination sexy, and yet package them as documentaries of a sort as if they were chronicling sexism (ironically like the nudist 'volleyball' flicks of yore) rather than reveling in it, the makers of *The Girl Next Door* were too uncouth to disguise that dishonesty. One of Ebert's principal objections is how the sex education film—which is thought to be a hardcore pornographic video up until a final revelation scene—is handled at the end:

Kelly steals the money that Matthew has raised to bring a foreign-exchange student from Cambodia, and to replace the funds, the resourceful Danielle flies in two porn star friends (played by Amanda Swisten

and Sung Hi Lee), so that Matthew, Eli and Klitz can produce a sex film during the senior prom. The nature of their film is yet another bait-and-switch, in a movie that wants to seem dirtier than it is. Like a strip show at a carnival, it lures you in with promises of sleaze, and after you have committed yourself for the filthy-minded punter you are, it professes innocence.

The sex industry (similar to how the tobacco industry has targeted minors) has spent massive amounts of money to encourage its own vision of human sexuality: this has meant that prostituted women have been renamed sexual professionals or sex experts, where their condition is promoted as an enviable one for women everywhere. Sexologists, sex therapists, and porn stars mix on penis-enlargement infomercials and this commercialized view of sex is indeed making its way into sex education, as they have worked hard to make their own agents the only authentic voices on sexuality, shouting out any challengers. *The Girl Next Door* is actually fairly accurate in its account of this process and its feel good response to it is quite inline with that of most of society's.

While Ebert is fairly sentimental about the change over in the adult film industry at the advent of VHS sales (which can be seen in his admiration for the 1997 *Boogie Nights*, a film that portrays the business on a whole as more devastating to males; Julianne Moore's character inexplicably falling in love during the course of one take, begging the protagonist to ejaculate inside her, despite the obvious wishes of the fictional scene's director, played by Burt Reynolds), something that has gone through yet another change since the arrival of the internet, the one constant has always and will likely always be the fact that women are exploited for the pleasure and financial benefit of men. When presented clumsily, as it is in *The Girl Next Door*, the abject hypocrisy of the new model is readily apparent; however, the more clumsy movies that are made, the

more able their deft peers will be at seducing critics and audiences alike: that is the real danger here, not how poorly this single film was able to emulate *Risky Business*, or how it was not clever enough to package its sexism into a more sophisticated or melodramatic parcel, as Ebert complains:

"*Risky Business*" (1983) you will recall, starred Tom Cruise as a young man left home alone by his parents, who wrecks the family Porsche and ends up enlisting a call girl (Rebecca De Mornay) to run a brothel out of his house to raise money to replace the car. The movie is the obvious model for "*The Girl Next Door*," but it completely misses the tone and wit of the earlier film, which proved you can get away with that plot, but you have to know what you're doing and how to do it, two pieces of knowledge conspicuously absent here.

One might ask if it is a noble endeavor to construct a film that is witty enough to "get away" with being pure racism; clearly it would not be, a Liberal like Ebert would never advocate such a thing (nor "get away" with advocating it himself), and yet for sexism, making the attempt and presumably succeeding is seen as bravely panache. Ebert's four star review of *Risky Business* is blunt in its esteem: "Here is a great comedy about teenage sex," as if the scores of women marching in and out of the Cruise character's large estate to gratify a male cast purposefully shared with the *Revenge of the Nerds* dynasty (men who are ostensibly harder to judge for buying sex, according to conventional wisdom) in return for money are simply experiencing the joys of teenage sex..

While Ebert focuses on the Rebecca De Mornay character (who "somehow manages to take that thankless role, the hooker with a heart of gold, and turn it into a very specific character. She isn't all good and she isn't all clichés: She's a very complicated young woman with quirks and insecurities

and a wayward ability to love.”), her humanization is directly at odds, inversely proportional, with the rest of the women who are treated as errant pieces of furniture; their lot is used to demonstrate how special and worthy she, and she alone, is of winning the protagonist’s interest. Despite all the gravitas afforded by an intimate scene on a train, she, like Cuthbert’s girl next door, is still an object and not a real protagonist herself, even if the unblinking focus makes it easy for viewers to persuade themselves otherwise (again, as it is *The Girl Next Door* and not the more honest “Boy’s Lust for the Girl Next Door,” the male gaze remaining transparent).

In both his review of *Risky Business*, written over two decades ago, and his contemporary revisitation of it through *The Girl Next Door*, politics are strangely absent. Though he does attempt to tackle sexual politics in the latter, the utterly conservative values of both in their admiration for wealth and success at any price go without remark. Pornography is a profoundly conservative institution, despite the industry’s hostage taking of the Democratic Party in a rally for ‘free speech,’ and these films make that conservatism abundantly clear. Which is why one, with accomplished actors and careful writing, is required to be seen as mere “satire,” while the other one—lacking such advantages—is a travesty that should be avoided; keep that price of admission in your pocket, move along, and do not stop to ask questions.

Another crisis of conscience for Ebert occurred within his 1982 review of *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*, panning it with one star, calling the largely-beloved film a “scuz-pit of a movie.” While praising all of the individual performances (including that of his now favorite Sean Penn), of the review’s seven paragraphs four are principally devoted to Jennifer Jason Leigh—and not her character. He gushes over her, saying:

How could they do this to Jennifer Jason Leigh? How could they put such a fresh and cheerful person into such a scuz-pit of a movie? Don’t they know they have a star on their hands? I didn’t even know who Leigh was when I walked into “Fast Times at Ridgmont High,” and yet I was completely won over by her. She contained so much life and light that she was a joy to behold. And then she and everybody else in this so-called comedy is invited to plunge into offensive vulgarity.

....

Leigh looks so young, fresh, cheerful, and innocent that we don’t laugh when she gets into unhappy scenes with men—we wince. The whole movie is a failure of taste, tone, and nerve—the waste of a good cast on erratic, offensive material that hasn’t been thought through, or maybe even thought about.

While Leigh has indeed had a solid-enough career since then, his patronizing affection for her is not an entirely unique experience: many men look at one actress or another in pornography and declare that she is “too pretty” or “too special” to be doing *that*, and should then instead be the girlfriend, wife, or kept object of a man like himself who would treasure her qualities. A feminist axiom argues that Conservative men want to own women personally while Liberal men wish to own them as a public trust, a harem for men of status to indulge in per their whims. Indeed, would Ebert wish the same fate on a woman less pretty?

Leigh, for example, plays a virginal young student at Ridgmont High. She’s curious about sex, so the

script immediately turns her into a promiscuous sex machine who will go to bed with anybody. And then her sexual experiences all turn out to have an unnecessary element of realism, so that we have to see her humiliated, disappointed, and embarrassed. Whatever happened to upbeat sex? Whatever happened to love and lust and romance, and scenes where good-looking kids had a little joy and excitement in life, instead of all this grungy downbeat humiliation? Why does someone as pretty as Leigh have to have her nudity exploited in shots where the only point is to show her ill-at-ease?

His review of Breillat's *Fat Girl* answers more forthrightly, allowing for and making senses of the injustices that occur to someone who fails to strike his fancy in quite the same way:

Young love is idealized as sweet romance, but early sexual experiences are often painful and clumsy and based on lies. It is not merely that a boy will tell a girl almost anything to get her into bed, but that a girl will pretend to believe almost anything, because she is curious, too. "Fat Girl" is the brutally truthful story of the first sexual experiences of a 15-year-old sexpot and her pudgy 12-year-old sister.

Ebert's complaints are more about him and his own unease than any genuine concern for Leigh or her Stacy Hamilton: it is, however, relevant to note that her character's name goes completely unmentioned in the review and all of the events, including the nudity, are reported as things that happen to her, directly; this is precisely the opposite of how reporting is done on pornographic films, where the reality of prostituted women can never be discussed and everything is

absolved through the artifice of characterization. What Ebert was unable to come to terms with, however, is a dilemma that more males should find themselves obsessing over: if heterosexuality is such a risky enterprise for women, why then do so many of them purposefully engage in it? When stripped of male vanity that automatically presumes that we are worth the risk, as we clearly often are not, and a more honest analysis is done, patriarchal society's educational effort towards compulsory-heterosexuality for women appears all the more unseemly. Ebert rejects that analysis in his review of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, coming up with a complete reversal of the truth:

If this movie had been directed by a man [it was however written by one, he neglects: the celebrated Cameron Crowe], I'd call it sexist. It was directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling—and it's sexist all the same. It clunks to a halt now and then for some heartfelt, badly handled material about pregnancy and abortion. I suppose that's Heckerling paying dues to some misconception of the women's movement. But for the most part this movie just exploits its performers by trying to walk a tightrope between comedy and sexploitation."

That is a tightrope that all women walk in their daily lives, something that Ebert obviously knows and occasionally comes to grips with, when circumstances permit (in this case, a bad film or a crush on an actor), even if the results have been problematic. I am not arguing that *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is not a sexist movie, it both catalogs the reality of sexism in society as well as embraces that same sexism when doing so is to its own economic advantage, but like *The Girl Next Door*, as a film and as a cultural text it is hardly out of the ordinary. However, it is rather facile to rail against the obvious, that

unapologetic sexism, and yet to fall victim—often intentionally—to the more sophisticated kinds that abound.

Some might believe that such an intense biographical look at Roger Ebert, filtered by a pro-feminist lens, is silly or unneeded, in that it overemphasizes his importance. Given his newfound fame as a Liberal spokesperson, I would argue otherwise; even barring that, his corpus of film reviews—encompassing decades—is a unique and valuable historical resource, regardless of one’s personal inclination to agree or disagree with his tastes and subsequent criticism. Instead, this reading of both his work as a critic and how that work has functioned in the movie business (and beyond), is to serve as both a plea for him to be more careful, more reasoned, and more just in the future, and as a reminder to myself and others who have made similar mistakes on scales lesser and mightier.

It should be obvious enough that I have spent some time considering Ebert’s words on various films; nothing I have written here is at odds with his very own requests for himself and his readers. “It was Edmund Burke that said an elected official owes his constituents more than simple obedience to their desires. He owes them his full intelligence and judgment to make decisions. I think movies are so important that their critics should subscribe to the same wisdom. No work of art exists in a vacuum, and a critic that isn’t engaged in society serves no useful purpose other than to judge technical competence.” Yet moving past those selfish desires, imagining vistas beyond one’s own reality, is hard to put into practice, especially for those of us who were raised to become men, trained all of our lives to do the exact opposite. After all, the girl next door already has enough problems without being painted as a “sadist”—especially when Larry Flynt (or *The People vs.*) goes on to collect four stars.

