

Exhibitionists

Actors are exhibitionists. They feel compelled to show us themselves. So do writers, in their rather more circumspect manner. For proof, consider two recent films, *In the Cut* and *Shattered Glass*.

If we ever needed an illustration as to why the Hays Office was invented in 1934, *In the Cut* would more than suffice. It was once thought that someone had to keep the wraps on film performers. Now that there is no enforcer, nudity reigns at the multiplex—so much so that it has lost all shock value. Well, not completely, as director Jane Campion demonstrates in her adaptation of Susanna Moore's novel. She hired America's perky sweetheart, Meg Ryan, to wow us by appearing starkers. Ryan is a 42-year-old mother who made \$15 million for appearing clothed in each of her last two films. Naturally, the question arises: Why is she baring all today? To show us that she is in good shape? (She is.) Or, perhaps, to prove herself an artist? The test of thespian seriousness is no longer how well an actress emotes but rather how well she looks *au naturel*. Consider what it did for Halle Berry. Who wouldn't strip for Oscar?

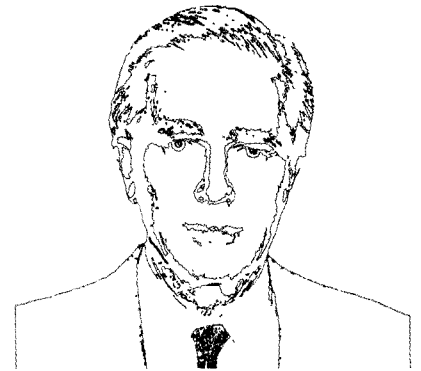
I do not think pornography was Campion's intention, but there is no other word for what is on the screen. Following Moore's novel, Campion orchestrates Ryan and her costar Mark Ruffalo through various erotic exertions to illustrate her feminist misgivings concerning the supposed inequities inherent in heterosexual relations. The audience, however, must be forgiven for not attending to the political lesson while the performers are making such a convincingly libidinous spectacle of themselves.

Although Moore collaborated with Campion on the screenplay, the film never registers the creepily compelling power of her novel, which reads like a low-grade fever dream. Its woozy, uninflected narrative voice belongs to Frannie, an adjunct writing instructor at New York University. She is a deeply confused young woman whose masochistic neurosis perfectly matches the predatory expectations of the several men with whom she has been foolishly involved over the years. When a woman's dismembered body turns up in her low-rent Manhattan

neighborhood, Frannie meets Malloy, a detective on the case, who becomes her new Mr. Wrong.

Frannie graphically reports a sordid sequence of misadventures in her nearly affectless voice, as though no new outrage against women could possibly surprise her. As the plot unfolds, more women are murdered offstage, all presumably by the same man. Meanwhile, Frannie finds herself becoming Malloy's willing sex toy. The juxtaposition between murder and sex is, of course, not accidental. Frannie begins to suspect several of her male acquaintances of being the serial killer: the boyfriend she dumped who now stalks her in a desultory manner; her black student who wants to write a paper on John Wayne Gacy; Malloy's lascivious partner who makes vulgar passes at her; and Malloy himself, arrogant, foul-mouthed, and tirelessly priapic. Moore's multiplication of suspects is not just a matter of artfully deployed red herrings. We are to understand that the murderer, whoever he turns out to be, is not different in kind from other men, just in degree. Although only the extreme fellow would insist on literal dissection, the male animal, Moore suggests, takes its pleasure in figuratively anatomizing women. Hence the title, *In the Cut*, with its play on a vulgar word for vagina, an anatomical cut, a wound that marks women as weakened prey. Women—at least women such as Frannie—accept this perverse dynamic, mindlessly succumbing to male aggression. The consequences are quite ugly and are fully meant to be.

Intentionally or not, Moore's novel indicts a culture that has deliberately turned a blind eye to the differences between men and women and has, thereby, put women at risk. It was once understood that courtship and marriage were institutions designed to allow the sexes to live in relative harmony while they went about the important business of begetting and rearing the next generation. It was also understood that this institutional channeling of otherwise unruly desire could only be sustained by the full force of both morality and law. To say this aloud today in certain enlightened circles is to invite open mockery.



In the Cut

Produced by Pathe and
Red Turtle Productions
Directed by Jane Campion
Screenplay by Jane Campion
and Susanna Moore
Distributed by Screen Gems

Shattered Glass

Directed by Billy Ray
Screenplay by Billy Ray
from an article by Buzz Bissinger
Produced by Cruise-Wagner
Productions
Distributed by Lions Gate Films

Hence the plight of Frannie, a well-educated woman only too willing to accept, in lieu of more delicate courtship, Malloy's crude description of how he plans to handle her in bed. Frannie's intellectual sophistication gives her the illusion that she is in control of her life when she has actually rendered herself quite helpless before the sway of impulse.

There is no question that Moore pushes at the boundary between literature and pornography, but, in doing so, she uses the obscene against itself. She powerfully illuminates the pathology of our pornography-saturated culture, in which men are encouraged to behave as though women are appliances, using them as long as they fulfill sexual expectations and then trading them in for newer models when they cease to function according to specifications.

As a filmmaker, Campion has chosen to make this point as explicit as possible by adding a sequence of scenes not in the novel. This is easily the best element in her film. In hallucinatory black-and-white flashbacks, Frannie recalls the

story of her parents' first meeting. Her father was skating with his fiancé when he noticed Frannie's mother, a lovely young blonde. Without a moment's reflection, he skated away from his betrothed to skim the ice with this new, delightful creature. The problem was that he made a habit of skating away. He left Frannie's mother a few years after her birth to skate with another lovely creature. And he continued to skate into four more marriages. Campion visualizes the damage the father inflicted on his wife and daughter with a close-up of his skate making a cut in the ice that oozes blood.

Unfortunately, Campion has not been as adroit throughout her film. Elsewhere, she indulges in the very pornography that has helped to create the conditions she seems to deplore. It is one thing to read a first-person narrator's description of what has happened to her; it is quite another to show it. In the novel, Frannie's voice controls our response to what she is reporting, distancing us from the erotic aspect so that we focus on the abusive. The film's images, on the other hand, overpower its well-meant but finally feeble attempts at such narrative nuance. True, Campion shot these scenes in a claustrophobically cluttered room under murky, unflattering light in order to convey their sordid, dehumanizing nature. Nevertheless, what we are left with is not Frannie, but an exhibitionist Meg Ryan nude and still nubile at 42. Yowsa!

Shattered Glass is about another kind of exhibitionism—the journalistic. As I watched it, I was reminded of Robert Frost's mock hysteria concerning ice-encased birch trees thawing in the sun. "Shattering and avalanching," the ice falls from the trunks, leaving "such heaps of broken glass to sweep away / You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen." The heaven in director Billy Ray's film is the *New Republic*; the shattering inner dome, Stephen Glass, the kid reporter who unaccountably tricked his angelic editors into publishing 27 or more articles he had fudged, cooked, or cut from whole cloth. How shaming! And to do this at such a prestigious journal! As Ray presents the story, you would think Glass had threatened life as we know it in our United States. To put things in perspective, however, we need to know this: When interviewed about his new film, Ray told the *New York Times* that he is convinced Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate production "saved our country." Such faith in the heavenly

power of journalism is touching but perhaps not entirely sound from a practical standpoint.

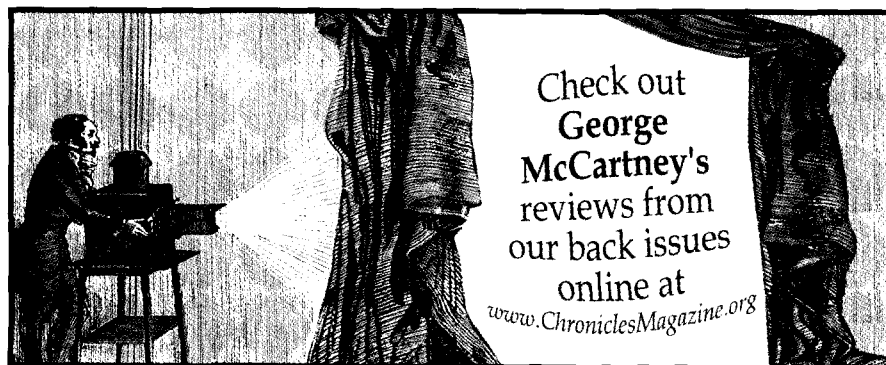
Most of us know that it is a good idea to read journals of opinion with our b.s. meters set to high. Such publications are by nature tendentious—and some more than others. There can be no better example than the *New Republic* itself. When Martin Peretz used his wealth (courtesy of his marriage to the Singer Sewing Machine heiress) to purchase the journal in 1974, he gave its editorial policy an almost fanatical Zionist twist and has been arguing ever since for a nearly total alignment of U.S. policy with Israel's every wish. Why would anyone be surprised, then, that his hired help would follow his lead, assuaging rough facts until they smoothly conform to their own pet causes? Glass just took this policy a few inventive steps further.

The film gives an insider's view of the Glass case—literally. Ray retained the services of several TNR staffers, most notably Chuck Lane, Glass's last editor at the magazine before he . . . ah . . . left to pursue other interests. (Glass recently brought out a novel entitled *Fabulist*. What else?) It comes as no surprise, then, that the film stinks with the disease endemic to journalists: self-importance. As portrayed by Peter Sarsgaard, Lane is nobly, even doggedly, loyal to truth. Once he sniffs falsehood in Glass's articles, he will stop at nothing to corner the vicious weasel who has crept into the virtuous henhouse of journalistic probity. The story that undoes Glass concerns a fictitious software company, Micronics, that is supposed to have paid off a teenage hacker to cease tampering with their products across the internet. When a *Forbes Online* reporter blows the whistle, Lane does some overdue digging and discovers an alarming paucity of traceable fact. He hounds Glass for his sources, and the 24-year old makes the mistake all liars do: He heaps one lie on top of another to cov-

er the original falsehoods. Soon, he is printing phony business cards for nonexistent executives, inventing a Micronics website, and having his brother call, pretending to be the CEO. Lane is implacable, however, undermining each ruse until Glass hangs himself.

Played convincingly by Hayden Christensen, Glass comes across as the kid you always hated in school: the clever, calculating one who got good grades by telling the teachers what they wanted to hear and then snickering behind their backs. Even more infuriating, he was often a genuinely talented student who nevertheless insisted on taking short-cuts to top his classmates. Glass had perfected the *shtick*. As he tells us in a voice-over, "If you're a little bit humble, a little self-effacing or solicitous, you stand out." You certainly do in the company of the driven, self-regarding Young Turks at TNR, each metaphorically waving a frantic hand to get the attention he craves.

Among this crowd, Glass seems disarmingly modest about his ability. Asking a colleague to review his work, he says, "It's the worst thing I've ever written." Overheard talking to *Vanity Fair*, he shrugs and says, "It's just probably nothing." When called on his dishonesty, however, he turns petulant. "I feel really attacked. You're supposed to support me," he whines. Despite all this, Lane is so glumly self-righteous that my sympathies began to shift from Ray's program. In the last scenes, Glass is alone in an empty classroom where he was supposed to address students at his former high school. Meanwhile, Lane is surrounded by his editorial staff, cheering him for having purged TNR of such a noxious infection. I am afraid I felt far more sympathy for Glass than I did for Lane. Publicly orchestrated rehabilitations always bring out the worst in me. And I admit I slipped into an unholy mood upon discovering that the *New Republic's* website has been proudly touting Ray's movie.



The Best Revenge

by John Carney

Smoke-easy

STOP SMOKING FAST' read the advertisement on the subway car, and it is probably good advice for people such as my father, who continues to smoke even after having had two stents inserted into his badly clogged arteries. I wanted the opposite, however: I wanted to *start* smoking fast.

There are no 12-step programs for would-be smokers. I assumed the tobacco industry would offer support, but I was wrong: Even they insist on warning would-be smokers about the hazards of addiction and stubbornly aim their advertising at those with preexisting habits. "If you do smoke, try . . ." In other words: *If you don't smoke yet, you're on your own.*

Since I recently turned 30 and had never so much as held a lit cigarette, my decision to become a smoker strikes a lot of people as bizarre. But there are, I have discovered, good reasons to smoke. Cigarettes offer real benefits for the elderly, the clumsy, the forgetful, and the easily distracted. (These benefits have been intentionally underplayed by the public-health community.) My decision to smoke was much less sound. It was based on a phenomenon too recent to have been the subject of statistical studies or biological analysis: New York City's ban on cigarette smoking in indoor public spaces.

I bought my first pack of cigarettes on a Monday. I knew I wasn't going to smoke lights: There's no point in going halfway. I also knew I wasn't going to roll my own or smoke unfiltered: This is the 21st century, after all. But how to choose? I decided to let quality be my guide and ended up with a pack of Nat Sherman Classics, which came in a dapper crimson box and had a gold band around each filter.

I know others who have started smoking, or given up on quitting, in a fit of libertarian rebellion against the ban. But just as campaign-finance reform has not driven me to send bags of cash to the RNC, the smoking ban alone would not have driven me to smoke.

My smoking project arose from a secondary effect of the ban: the birth of the front-door smoking scene. Immediately after the ban was imposed, all my usual drinking holes sprouted new appendages—clusters of smokers gathering togeth-

er just outside the bar. Between drinking, even during drinks, smokers step outside to mingle among their own. As time went on, I sensed the smokers bonding in their shared exile, while the crowd inside became increasingly irrelevant. The insides of bars, from dives to places people once struggled past velvet ropes to get into, were becoming superfluous. Outside is the new inside.

I planned to debut my new interest outside a bar on Avenue A that has a decent pool table, a great jukebox, and an active smoking scene. But I didn't want to go unpracticed or risk getting caught in some *faux pas*—choking, not inhaling, or otherwise revealing my smoking innocence. So, on my way home that evening, I lit my first cigarette. It took four matches. I learned not to try to light the cigarette in the sulfur but to wait until the flames caught the cardboard match stem, and I learned to cup my hands just so against the wind.

My lungs felt as if they were being pulled apart. My eyes watered. I kept spilling ash on my lapels and had trouble not burning my jacket. I experimented with a few different grips, settling on a cupped-in-the-hand style that not only kept the tip away from my clothes but made me feel like Steve McQueen. Best of all, I didn't cough.

I soon discovered that smoking conveys a privilege denied other New Yorkers: the privilege of littering. A nonsmoker who throws something as inconsequential as a soda-straw wrapper on the street risks invoking the furious glares of passersby, but, as a smoker, I can throw cigarette butts on the streets with licensed abandon. (Some smokers even throw empty packs on the sidewalk, but, like Antigone mourning her brother, I thought the Nat Sherman hardcase deserved a more decent final resting place.)

I smoked one cigarette that night outside the bar. Caught up in a game of pool, I almost forgot to smoke until one of the women I was with announced she was stepping outside. This was my chance. I grabbed my pack and followed her out. I lit my cigarette and hers with one match. The smoke still pulled at my lungs, and I'm afraid my eyes watered a

bit, but otherwise my initiation was without incident.

That night, I applied the patch before falling asleep. The habit of smoking takes time to acquire, and I thought an overnight dose of nicotine would speed the process. Actually, I recommend that even those who are not seeking to become smokers experiment with patched sleeping. It poured color and abstraction into my dreams—blue trees, women with square legs, skies with wood-grain patterns, and conspiratorial plotting. When I awoke, I tore off the patch, hoping the sudden nicotine deprivation would send me scurrying for a smoke. The sought-after nic fit did not arrive. In fact, the thought of smoking first thing in the morning turned my stomach.

At work, I took two smoking breaks outside my office building, but both were fake—cued by my Microsoft Outlook calendar rather than by responses to physiological cravings—and my smoking project was still far from becoming a habit.

I had drinks at a pub near work with three young men and a silver-haired sage, all employed by a local tabloid newspaper—all smokers, of course. When the moment arrived to stroll outside and light up, however, I felt a panic: I had forgotten to bring my cigarettes. Luckily, smokers are a generous breed, and one of my companions let me "bum" one. We were a fellowship of smokers. I was arriving.

I kept working at it throughout the week. Patch overnight. One smoke with my morning coffee. Two smoking breaks during the day. A cigarette after dinner. At least one trip out with the smokers in front of the bar. I didn't have the habit, but I had the pace, the rhythm, of smoking.

Late in the week, I went with friends to a gypsy-punk dance party in a small Eastern European bar in lower Manhattan. The crowd was young and smoking—not outside the bar but *inside*. The place was a *smoke-easy*. This posed a dilemma—without an outdoor separatist scene, my smoking impulse vanished. But the real smokers were lighting up, and I had to decide whether I was one of them or simply a poseur. I struck a match and, for the first time, enjoyed a cigarette beyond all reason. This might work out.