

**Femininity**

By Susan Brownmiller  
 Linden Press/Simon and  
 Schuster, 270 pp., \$14.95

By William Leach

Susan Brownmiller's latest book, *Femininity*, is well crafted and nicely written, reflecting a keen and intelligent mind. It is also a very curious feminist book. If feminism means empowering women to change society in their own interests, then this book has almost no feminist content.

It is, rather, a dirge about powerlessness and defeat—so much so that it tends to glorify heterosexual masculinity in a capitalist society as the most attractive model for success and achievement. This is a highly ironic perspective—one you would not expect from a woman who has led the battle against rape and is now at the helm of the anti-pornography movement.

Brownmiller approaches femininity (not femaleness, which she never clearly defines) from two directions. First of all, it is a camouflage, an illusion that profoundly handicaps women and that conceals their true, natural selves. From this point of view all women who wear makeup and high heels, speak softly and fret over hairstyles and diet are essentially female impersonators.

Second, femininity is fundamentally a response to the desires of men who have historically determined how women behave and what they think about themselves. According to Brownmiller, heterosexual men have always wanted women to act dependently and passively—behavior that stimulates male sexual desire and makes men feel strong and powerful by comparison.

So, in order to win men over, women have endured great physical and emotional misery, from footbinding to corsets, dresses to heels. They have worn furs and long hair because men have demanded it. To appease men, women have "specialized" in sentimentality, empathy, vulnerability and politeness—"characteristics that most men try to avoid."

"Femininity," Brownmiller writes, is "a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations." Whatever a feminine woman has done, in fact, has come from her need to "prove her heterosexual good will" at the expense of her humanity. Brownmiller contends matters have gotten worse today, since so many successful women are throwing in the towel, returning to the old hobbling habits in order to compete for a diminishing pool of desirable heterosexual men.

Against the femininity of women—and against gays, blacks, entertainers, etc., who, she claims, display some "feminine" traits—Brownmiller sets the blessings of untrammelled heterosexual masculinity. Unlike feminine women, dominant heterosexual men do not suffer from a crushing "duality of purpose"—the need to please and the drive to succeed. Free and single-minded, they embrace the future, use their bodies fluently and dynamically and choose to repudiate all artifice in dress and behavior.

"Men of action and power," Brownmiller writes, "are colorless by choice, it would seem, while their status is unchallenged and secure." Men don't need cosmetics to look good, she says: they glow naturally from the effects of achievement. Reversing an older argument linking cul-

# WOMEN

## Is it feminism or fatalism?



George Hoyningen-Huene

ture to men, nature to women, Brownmiller appears to say that heterosexual men are completely natural or outside of history. Presumably, if given the chance, everyone would choose to be heterosexually masculine.

This argument, if taken seriously, can lead to unacceptable conclusions. To say that powerful heterosexual men are free and most women are restricted, and that male freedom is dependent upon female restriction, is to offer women no escape. Brownmiller herself seems to believe this. Time and again she speaks of the "inevitable" retrenchments. It was "inevitable," therefore, that 19th-century dress reform would yield "blithely" to a "glamorous rivalry over how much nudity could be revealed." And again, "it was probably inevitable that the anti-makeup forces" of the late '60s "should lose. We were bucking too much history."

Brownmiller saves her strongest fatalism for the last pages. "Without a radical restructuring of a social order that works well enough in its present form for those extremely ambitious, competitive men whose prototypical ancestors arranged it, and who have little objective reason, just yet, to change the rules, what hope is there for a real accommodation to dual-purpose ambition? ...Pursuit of achievement in literature, science and the arts is a singleminded ambition that will never be restructured, for the competition, understandably, is fierce."

What hope for change, indeed, given the fact that men in power like things the way they are and most women, according to Brownmiller, live their lives by a "desperate strategy of appeasement."

If one accepts this argument, which emphasizes the powerlessness and victimization of women above everything else, there is no alternative but to feel despair. Yet Brownmiller's argument is too lopsided to be persuasive. She is wrong when she says that men have not suffered from any restriction and that they have no-

thing to learn from women.

The contrary case has been made repeatedly that women, not men, have enjoyed greater liberty in appearance and emotional behavior. Today, women can wear almost anything they please, while men struggle against rational homogeneity in dress and behavior demanded of them by repressive corporate practices. Translating the relative liberty that many women have in

these matters into symptoms of powerlessness misses the enemy, which is a society that rests on bleak hierarchies that serve men and require great emotional and sensual renunciation.

But this is not really the point. The fact is Brownmiller flubbed an opportunity to explain why more women than men "infuse" so much "passion into the stuff of everyday life" (an immensely attractive trait), why they feel so much freer to be emotional and more responsive to the needs of others, and why they more readily indulge themselves in makeup, color, ornament and whimsical dress even when they have power and success. Brownmiller attributes this behavior to victimization and subordination, but femininity (as well as masculinity) as a gender formation is much more complex, much more socially textured (does she really have to be reminded?) than her shallow, simplistic cultural argument indicates. It cannot be reduced to mere appearance.

Underlying such a conception of femininity is a rational functionalism that would strip all gender behavior of its irrational elements, its theater and play. The fact is, people often do silly things, wear silly things, even while they exercise mastery over their lives. Maybe silliness increases mastery, who knows? But Brownmiller is too wedded to a dreary functionalism to tolerate this contradiction. Indeed, she disparages all apparently non-rational female characteristics, including the biological ones—everything that prevents women from smoothly and single-mindedly climbing up the professional and corporate ladders.

Brownmiller's functionalism brings me to the most important weakness in *Femininity*, and one that also seriously marred her book on rape—the almost complete absence of historical perspective. Any radical politics

must be based on the transformative messages of history, on the potential and reality of change. But this approach is missing here.

Not only does Brownmiller collapse great stretches of time into a few paragraphs, she also appears to have done little reading in contemporary feminist scholarship. Why has she ignored the work of such scholars as Mari Jo Buhle, Bonnie Smith, Nancy Cott, Barbara Epstein, Nina Auerbach, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg? Their scholarship has clearly proven that a great many women, feminist and reformist, have been deeply empowered to attack the "male way" on the basis of inherited gender differences. Brownmiller contends that "motherhood and ambition have been opposing forces for thousands of years," but thousands of women have been radically politicized by female traditions of nurture and maternity to demand single-mindedly a transformation of the social system into a more humane, non-sexist, cooperative and democratic order.

Brownmiller argues for only one myth of femininity, but if she had read Nina Auerbach's study, *Women and the Demon*, she would have discovered another myth—a 19th-century one—that viewed woman not as a victim but as a "transformative power" with "infinite capacities of regeneration" and "self-creation." Brownmiller is absolutely correct when she observes that the "cutting edge of the movement for equal rights" is "being listened to." Why has she decided not to listen to her own history?

William Leach, a fellow at the New York Institute for the Humanities, NYU, is author of *True Love and Perfect Union, the Feminist Reform of Sex and Society*, and is currently researching a book on the history of American department stores.

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# Sayles

Continued from page 16

wearing a cross nads. "Brother—hmm, that's good, that's good. I came on over here, see, because nobody who looks like you ever comes up here unless they're gonna tear something down. But bless you with your picture. Bless you. I won't be trouble. I'll stay out of your way now. Bless you."

"I think coming up here opened the eyes of some whites," says black script supervisor Marco Williams, who works with the Black Filmmakers Foundation. "It sure did," says Bob Marshak, who's usually a potter in Santa Cruz, Calif., but is here taking photos. "You come here with a certain amount of fear—it's outside your experience. But it's much more neighborhoody than I had realized."

The first day they shot in Harlem, the crew got a quick education in the plusses and minuses of Harlem street life. They had locked the keys inside their van; a passerby helped them break into it, thus salvaging the production schedule. But the street samaritan had put down his travel bag to jimmy the window, and in seconds the bag—with his all-important methadone—had been stolen. Producer Maggie Renzi spent the rest of the day

filing a police report so he wouldn't be stranded without his methadone fix.

If the white crew members had never walked the streets of Harlem, neither had a lot of the blacks. "I had a thousand misconceptions when I started," says production assistant Kurt Douglas, fresh from film school downtown. His job is mostly talking to people; "crowd control" means something special on this shoot. "But it's been a lot of fun." Even so, he admits he secretly hoped he'd get sick to get out of this all-night shoot on Harlem's abandoned lots. But it's going well, and he goes back to hanging out with the hangers-on.

For assistant director Craig Rice, Harlem has been something of a shock. "I've been in the entertainment business all my life," he says. "But this is a hard shoot. I'm learning a lot. I'm a social worker here, and a counselor. A lot of these people are desperate, on the edge. But if you film here, you'd better involve the community."

Even for crew members who know Harlem well, fears die hard. "I grew up on 125th Street, and I moved back to Harlem as an adult," costumer Karen Perry says. "My daughter goes to school down the street. But my mother always told me, 'Don't go uptown—too rough.' When she found out I was working at night on 148th Street—well, my brother has been to the set four times now, just to make sure I'm O.K."

9:00 p.m.: A couple of middle-aged men amble up, craning to watch Brother discover his one-time mugger dead of an overdose. One catches Perry's eye, and she's about to give him a perfunctory nod when she does a double-take. "Sam, how are you?" she says. They swap stories of showbiz unemployment; they are not just neighbors, but colleagues from the days a decade ago when things looked more promising for black actors.

Scenes being filmed keep echoing with scenes on the street, especially fantasies of escape. In a bar scene, the drinkers speculate about life in outer space while playing a Space Invaders game. On the shoot, locals easily launch into talk of Venus, astrology and UFOs. But Harlem dwellers, too, keep asserting their sense of place. In a movie a small thing like choosing a restaurant can become a political act; one character refuses to go below 110th Street, even for Chinese food. Meanwhile, on the set people treat the film crew at first like tourists to be fleeced and then like foreign dignitaries.

10:00 p.m.: Someone gingerly approaches a white crew member. "Thank you," he says. "Thank you for visiting Harlem."

The residents of Harlem come out, not to gawk, but to assert their prior claim. Turf isn't just to be defended, however; it's also something to take pride in and even to show off. As much as their pride in ownership, they register an intense will

to communicate—on their terms. They like the idea of a movie made not only in their world but about it, and they like the idea of a black man starring in it. Harlem wants to go Hollywood, but not if it means leaving Harlem behind. They flock around Joe Morton whenever he finishes a shot.

Morton is something of a sensation. They recognize him not so much from his movie work as from the soaps and especially from an educational TV show called "Watch Your Mouth."

Morton, unfailingly polite, cool and respectful—he re-does Wilhelmina's autograph when he finds out it's her birthday—is happy to be there, both for them and for him. "It's almost impossible to find roles in the movies for a black actor," he says. "And most science fiction is like what Richard Pryor said about 2001—they must think there won't be any blacks by then."

"This role is great because I don't speak, and it brings out everybody's expectations when they imagine who I am and what I want. The role makes the audience look at Harlem from both white and black perspectives. It's Harlem seen not as a jungle, but from the eyes of innocence. That's why people get so excited when they hear the story—it'll finally be a movie where they'll get to see themselves on the screen."

A longer version of this article recently appeared in *Film Comment*.

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By Pat Aufderheide

6 p.m.: "Hey. What's the movie called?" Clutching his plastic cup, the guy warily thrusts out his chin.

Night is falling on 148th Street in Harlem as a raffish film crew sets up on an abandoned lot. An aimless crowd of kids on bikes, couples on a stroll and seasoned drunks gathers. Some people are setting up chairs and those little plastic cups circulate.

The young white woman juggling camera lenses says, "THE BROTHER WHO FELL TO EARTH. Or maybe we'll call it THE BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET."

"BROTHER, huh?" Suddenly the man straightens up. "Good title. What's it about?"

"A slave from outer space who falls to earth in Harlem."

"Man, he come to the right place. This here is the center of the world. Hey, it is out of this world."

John Sayles is making a science fiction movie about a place that might as well be outer space to most of us—the streets of Harlem. He's making it with \$200,000 of his own money, hoarded from scripting work on Hollywood features and from the cushion that the prestigious MacArthur grant he won last year has given him. It draws from his double-track movie-making background—both his exploitation and mainstream Hollywood work, and his personal features like *Return of the Secaucus Seven* and *Lianna*.

*Brother* is science fiction with a twist: this time, the alien comes home. The intergalactic slave escapes on the otherworldly underground railroad, which, just like in slavery days, ends in Harlem. Pursued by bounty hunters (one of them played by Sayles himself), he is rescued with the help of the people of Harlem. Befriended by barflies, mugged by junkies, tended by social workers, and first fussed over and then thrown out by his AFDC-mother landlady, the impassively naive alien (played by Joe Morton, seen recently in a lead role in PBS' *The File on Jill Hatch* and in a small role in *And Justice for All*) encounters the lived reality of racial discrimination and poverty. What's odd about him is not how otherworldly he is but how well he fits into the scene, where each person reads his silence and befuddlement differently.

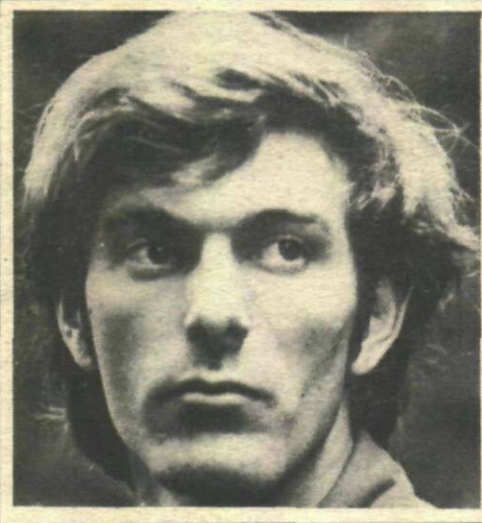
6:30: "Can I be inna picture? Who do I ask? Lemme be an extra. I'll do it for \$10."

"No, no me, I'll do it for \$5."

Sayles, with a social conscience forged in the '60s and a filmmaking style fed on mass-appeal Americana, wanted to make a movie with guts that black people would watch. "We knew we had to make it with the people of Harlem," he says. "And we knew we wanted to work with a largely black crew. The only hard part so far has been that everybody wants to work on it, and you wish you could employ them all."

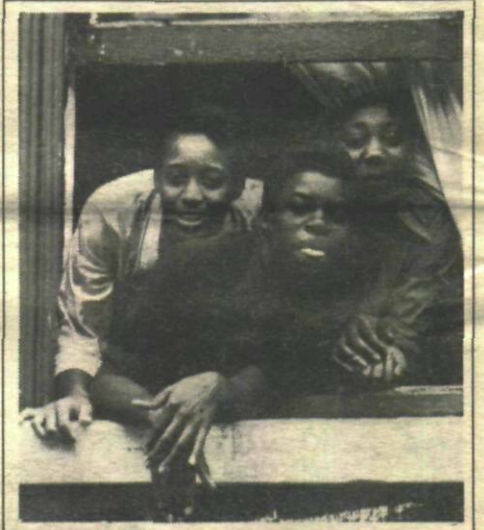
A friendly relationship with the locals is crucial for visitors from the planet below 110th Street, especially for a low-budget production. "We need to have them want us here," says white location manager Paul Marcus. "We're on their turf. But I think it makes a difference what we're doing; people like the project."

The crew is a mixture—black and white, experienced and novice, women and men. For many of the blacks this is a Big Break; for the pros among them this may be the first time they've not been the *only* black on a crew. But within the crew, the interracial mixture turns out to be surprisingly unimportant. "I think the male-female divisions are more defining," says Fronza Woods, working the boom. She came to the project after making several shorts with the Women's Interart Center. "Just like in any shoot, the men talk to the men, and that's a habit that's hard to break," Marcus says. "It's been no different for me to work with a black crew. People who love this industry



# Family Affair

sayles goes to harlem



have some basic similarities. They are sophisticated and professional—the movie comes first." Maybe that's because of what the movie is. Everyone seems to agree that this independent production is a family affair. It's the kind of shoot where people sit around and talk for an hour after they knock off for the day.

They have something else in common, too. This is a first-time experience for nearly everybody—making a movie in Harlem. Hell, even *being* in Harlem is a first for many.

8:00 p.m.: The tidy middle-aged lady  
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