

LIZZIE BORDEN'S WORKING GIRLS: INTERPRETATION AND THE LIMITS OF IDEOLOGY

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"The ideology of clarity masks the clarity of ideology."

Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*

Working Girls, Lizzie Borden's 1986 film concerning middle-class prostitution, may serve as the topic for a case study of the role that ideology can play in interpretation. The comments that Borden offers about *Working Girls* in several interviews reveal her intentions as a filmmaker and constitute her attempt to construct a coherent, unified interpretation of the film; however, Borden's interpretation achieves unity only by suppressing significant elements in the film itself. I believe that the contradictions and significant silences in Borden's interpretation indicate the conflicting demands posed by her intention to present realistic yet neutralized images of prostitution. To examine how these conflicting demands constrain Borden's options as a filmmaker and critic, I will use a procedure that Fredric Jameson calls "cognitive mapping." Basing my analysis on Jameson's definition of ideology as "the representation of the subject's *imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence" ("Postmodernism" 90), I will examine how Borden's ideological assumptions require her to limit the interpretations that her film invites, thus necessitating the contradictions and gaps in her own interpretation. In pur-

suing this strategy, I will adopt a critical agenda that Jameson identifies in *The Political Unconscious*: the reunifying of the contradictory text, "if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent functional operation in its own right" (56).

BORDEN'S INTENTIONALIST INTERPRETATION

The intentionalist position in interpretation holds that the author or producer of a text occupies a privileged position as the interpreter of her own work. In *Women's Pictures*, Annette Kuhn describes the intentionalist stance as the belief that "texts are reducible to the conscious intentions of their producers. That is to say, the meanings obtainable from or readable in texts of various kinds are, or ought to be, no more nor less than the meanings which authors or producers intended to put there" (9). This position has been under attack since Wimsatt and Bardsley's 1946 publication of "The Intentional Fallacy," and few critics today would find the position tenable; however,

an author's interpretation of her own text can be considered without giving the interpretation a privileged status. Borden provides an intentionalist reading of *Working Girls* in several interviews that she has given, and these interviews provide a useful point of departure for considering the role that ideology plays in her interpretation of the film.

Concerning her intentions in filming *Working Girls*, Borden observes that she sought to provide an alternative to "[t]he conventional social criticism" of prostitutes



Lizzie Borden, director of *Working Girls*.

which says that "[t]hese are bad women, fallen women, degraded and victimized" and to the feminist viewpoint that "criticiz[ed] these women for perpetuating the sex industry. [while] also telling [them] that they are victims" ("Labor Relations" 4). Elaborating on the intentions that inform her work, Borden asserts, "Women in the sex industry have been so reviled on both sides that there must be a way in which we can establish a dialogue which is not against women who work in this way. I wanted to eliminate that automatic sense of degradation for women who have worked as prostitutes or done anything like it" ("Labor Relations" 4).

Borden's primary strategy for portraying prostitution is her attempt to relocate it from the realm of sex to the realm of work, thus neutralizing much of the myths that surround prostitution. Borden notes that she "wanted to place prostitution solidly in the context of work as opposed to sex since, for prostitutes, it is not about sex at all" ("Labor Relations" 6). In explaining this strategy, she observes, "What I'm doing in *Working Girls* is trying to neutralize the image of prostitution. . . . My feeling, once I saw the people who worked in this situation, is that it's very neutralized. They go to work and there are bad things about it, but the bad things are just a little different from the bad things about other kinds of jobs" ("An Interview" 74). In placing prostitution within the context of work, Borden attempts "to strike a balance in *Working Girls* between, on the one hand, demystifying and demoralizing it without, on the other hand, making it look like the best job in the world" ("Labor Relations" 6).

In light of the intentions that Borden has expressed, we may consider her view of "the neutralized image of prostitution as work" in *Working Girls*. That image may be assembled by considering the observations concerning the job of prostitution that Borden presents in her interviews. These observations—concerning the people who work as prostitutes, their motives for working, and the conditions in which they work—represent Borden's reading of the *Working Girls* text. However, in keeping with the position that I advanced at the outset of this essay, Borden's observations also may be seen as indicators of the ideological assumptions that inform her reading.

Concerning her decision to focus on prostitutes who work in middle-class houses, Borden notes that feature films have propagated two images of prostitutes: "the romanticism of the street [and] the romanticism of high-class call girls, like Jane Fonda in *Kiwi*" ("Lizzie Borden" 4). She also notes that middle-class prostitution "was never presented correctly in movies" ("Lizzie Borden" 4) and that she was surprised by

what she discovered when she visited a house to see what prostitutes are like: "Many of them were choosing to work as prostitutes for economic reasons, but they didn't come from poverty or broken homes" ("Working Girls" 6). Borden asserts that "[p]rostitutes aren't all stupid, drug-addicted, neurotic women" ("Labor Relations" 7), and she populates her film with characters who oppose that stereotypic image. Most notable among these is Molly, the lead character in *Working Girls*. Played by Louise Smith, Molly is a Yale graduate and a lesbian. Concerning the lead role, Borden observes that she "wanted the lead character to be the one least like anyone's concept of a prostitute" ("Working Girls" 7). Borden also suggests that Molly typifies many of the women who actually work as prostitutes and that she presents an image to which audiences can relate:

A lot of guys think she is like their sister or the girl next door. One of the things that struck me about working girls is that they are very much like Molly or any of the girls in the film. After I cast my film, the actresses came to rehearsals wearing what they fantasized a hooker would have on. I made them all go to a brothel and apply for jobs, and they came back shocked because the women there were like their college roommates. ("Labor Relations" 7)

The three images that Borden uses to characterize prostitutes—"sister," "the girl next door," and "college roommates"—epitomize the neutrality that she seeks in her alternative to the stereotypic images of prostitutes.

Borden posits an economic motive for women who work as prostitutes, noting that "in this culture the kinds of work that are available to educated women are still shockingly, horribly, inadequately paid" ("An Interview" 72). She suggests that "[a] lot of the women choose to 'work' because they would rather rent their bodies for maybe two days a week than work at a 40-

to 50-hour a week job" ("Lizzie Borden" 4).

This view of prostitution as an economic choice informs Borden's analysis of *Working Girls*. Countering the idea that prostitutes are victimized, Borden observes, "In *Working Girls* I wanted to present that sense that women who work are conscious of the choice . . ." ("An Interview" 72), and she adds, "That's the whole point, that people hopefully would walk out of the film and say, 'Wait a second, there are women who do it who don't feel like victims,' that these women aren't victims, period" ("An Interview" 72). Borden's view also is a neutralized alternative to the psychosexual motives commonly attributed to prostitutes. She notes, "I didn't want to get into any psychological analysis, because then it becomes too easy to make a cause and effect relationship to explain why a character is working. Prostitutes don't all have daddy problems, they don't all hate men, so to get into anything heavy about it would be false. People insist that working as a prostitute has got to mean something more, but it doesn't really. Many women do it and the reasons all come back to money" ("Labor Relations" 6). Borden sees this view of prostitution reflected in the character of Molly, and she asserts that Molly's attitude toward her work is a feminist position: "Molly's whole stance as a working girl is as a feminist. She is living with a woman and she doesn't particularly need men, although she doesn't hate them by any stretch of the imagination. When she sees a client, it is on a contractual basis—X amount of time for X amount of money" ("Labor Relations" 6).

Concerning the working conditions that prostitutes encounter, Borden advances a position that is consistent with her view of prostitution as an economic transaction, noting that prostitutes exercise a high level of control in their dealings with customers. She points out that "the women have the commodity to sell. Therefore they can make a lot of decisions about who they sell it to, how they sell it, what's their attitude when they do it" ("An Interview" 75). Borden believes that this high level of control is

evident in *Working Girls*, and she asserts that "Molly is very much in control of all the sessions, as all the girls are" ("An Interview" 75); however, Borden does acknowledge that Molly's control slips in one instance—the session in which Paul humiliates Molly, calling her a whore. In three interviews Borden offers two differing explanations for Molly's loss of control. In two interviews she attributes Molly's vulnerability to the long hours that she has worked, placing Molly's situation "on the same level as a double shift anywhere . . . Molly would have been fine if she had left at 6 o'clock when she was supposed to have left" ("Labor Relations" 7). In this explanation, Borden suggests that Molly has "gone beyond whatever it is, exhaustion, she's giving more than she's been able to get. Money at that point isn't worth anything and she's become emotionally confused" ("An Interview" 75). Borden's second explanation attributes more significance to Molly's loss of control. She prefaces the explanation by noting that "[t]he session with Paul is the cornerstone of the movie" ("Lizzie Borden" 9), and she then offers the following analysis:

Nothing gets to Molly emotionally the way that Paul does. It is this session that brings out all the contradictions in prostitution. It brings out Molly's self-deceptions about being there and her recognition that some men use the money as a total weapon. Somebody like Paul is a complete sadist. He has spent weeks working Molly up to the point where he could hurt her . . . What Molly saw in Paul was his desire to degrade women, his superiority about himself. He requires the thrill of paying for it and thinking, "I'm sleeping with a whore." That's his erotic excitement. ("Lizzie Borden" 9-10)

Although she recognizes that Paul hurts Molly, Borden argues that the "kind of humiliation [that Molly suffers in the session with Paul] is the worst it gets. She doesn't

get slashed or beaten" ("Labor Relations" 8). Borden asserts that her film offers a realistic presentation of prostitution as a safe activity: "One of the things I found about the brothel, but I think one can also extend this to street prostitution, is that it's not dangerous, like all the movies that have a slasher or rapist or other violence. Women are very smart, and there is a lot of protection and a lot of protective devices that are able to be used by the women, which even includes their camaraderie" ("Lizzie Borden" 6). Borden also believes that the control prostitutes exercise in their sessions with customers protects them from diseases and other dangers, and she states that "[p]rostitutes in a middle class brothel are safer than women who sleep around. A woman who works in a house is free to say to a john, 'You have to use a condom.' The job is not completely free of danger, but to show only the danger is unfair" ("Labor Relations" 8). She identifies a scene in *Working Girls* that addresses the safety issue:

There is a scene in *Working Girls* where the madam says, "You won't get busted, you won't get hurt and you won't get sick," and one of the girls says, "That's because we take care of ourselves." In a house they do. They see a doctor once a month. They are cleaner than anybody else. Very often ordinary women might get some kind of infection but they ignore it and it gets worse. In brothels they take special precautions and go through regular medical screening procedures. I think it is as safe in many ways as any other kind of job. ("Labor Relations" 8)

In Borden's analysis, the real problems in prostitution exist between the madam or pimp and the prostitutes, paralleling the problems in other employer/employee relationships. She notes that "[t]he real fight, as in any employment situation, is with the employer—in prostitution . . . the madam ends up being more of an enemy than the men, who are sometimes horrible but more



Dawn (Amanda Goodwin) haranguing Lucy (Ellen McElduff) for badgering her.

often benign" ("Working Girls" 6). Although Molly's session with Paul provides the immediate motive for her to quit her job, Borden suggests that "ultimately [Molly's] argument is with Lucy [the madam]. The whole film is really about an employer-employee relationship. . . ." ("An Interview" 72). In this regard Borden notes that she "wanted *Working Girls* to echo other employment situations. For some people the film works on that level. They have had jobs where their battle wasn't with the customers but with the employer, the conditions of employment, and the manipulation that goes on between employer and employee" ("Labor Relations" 7).

Borden's attempt to neutralize the image of prostitution is consistent with the stance that she believes feminists should assume in viewing prostitution and the women who work as prostitutes. Borden notes, "[f]or me, feminism is about seeing

the world as it is, pragmatic in a real way, and seeing those elements that women can control, especially our own images of it" ("Lizzie Borden" 11). She acknowledges that "everyone shares a vision that one day prostitution will cease to exist," but she also notes that "[i]n our lifetime, however, prostitution is not going to end. To invalidate that it shouldn't exist, truly hurts women who are in it because it doesn't give them any options" ("Labor Relations" 9). Borden then suggests the following agenda for addressing prostitution:

We need to create a greater level of awareness about prostitution and less of a negative value judgement regarding the women who work in it. A feminist position on prostitution would involve getting more control over it. Women have to start controlling the images about prostitution and the conditions in which it happens. There

has to be better protection for women on the street, there should be some kind of union. There must be some way of protecting women instead of saying, "They deserve what they get" ("Labor Relations" 9). Borden concludes, "In this sense, I hope *Working Girls* will help to validate prostitution, or at least to raise some serious questions about the way it is perceived in our society" ("Labor Relations" 9).

In sum, Borden's intentions as a filmmaker and her reading of the *Working Girls* text are informed by an ideological perspective that could be characterized as feminist, although such a characterization does not imply that all feminists share her viewpoint on prostitution and on the women who work in that field. On one hand, Borden is critical of the limited economic options that make prostitution an attractive choice for some women, and she is critical of the people who exploit the limited options by reaping profit from prostitutes' labor. On the other hand, Borden is not at all critical of the women who, faced with limited economic options, choose to work as prostitutes. She attempts to neutralize the negative image attached to these women, showing them as people whose choice of employment does not imply any intrinsic fault in their character and whose conditions of employment need not be any more onerous than those found in other professions. The duality in this perspective satisfies Borden's desire to strike a balance between "demythologizing and demoralizing [prostitution], without . . . making it look like the best job in the world" ("Labor Relations" 6).

IDEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION

Although Borden's intentionalist interpretation of the *Working Girls* text merits serious consideration, her reading need not be considered authoritative. As Annette Kuhn notes, although "texts may embody 'preferred' readings, a dynamic notion of texts as processes of signification or mean-

ing production allows for a consideration of the possibility of interventions in cultural practice being generated elsewhere than solely in the consciousness of authors or producers" (12). Kuhn elaborates on this position, noting that "[w]hatever the overt intentions of producers, in many cases readings of their works must often take place outside any control they may wish to exert" (16). In keeping with Kuhn's position, we may scrutinize Borden's reading of *Working Girls* and question its adequacy, thus casting into doubt the unified text that Borden perceives.

In analyzing Borden's reading of *Working Girls*, we may begin by assuming that the apparent unity of her reading results from her ideological assumptions as much or more than it results from any determinate properties of the film itself. This assumption is consistent with theories advanced by several Marxist critics, who have suggested a variety of terms and phrases to describe the appearance of coherence that an ideological perspective can impose on a contradictory text. Terry Eagleton uses the term "concealment" to describe the role of ideology in interpretation, and he asserts that the process of concealment "is revealed by the very *incoherence* of the text, by the significant disarray into which it is thrown in its efforts to operate its materials in the interests of a 'solution'" (86). Fredric Jameson offers the phrase "strategies of containment," and he suggests that such strategies enable readers "to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (*Political* 10). Despite the difference in their descriptions, Eagleton and Jameson agree that an appropriate function of criticism is to reveal the contradictions that an ideological reading disguises. Eagleton asserts that the role of criticism is "to explain the ideological necessity of those 'not-said' which constitute the very principle of [a text's] identity. Its object is the unconscious of the work—that of which it is not, and cannot be, aware" (88). And William C. Dowling clarifies Jameson's view by observing that "[t]he ultimate aim of a Marx-

ist criticism remains, as always for Jameson, the isolation and dismantling of the strategies of containment embodied in literary works, the opening up of the individual text into that *hors texte* or unspoken (non-*dit*) ground of intolerable contradiction that it cannot acknowledge" (84-85).

Although the critical practice described by Eagleton and Jameson achieves the poststructuralist goal of exploding the apparent unity of the text, it differs from other poststructuralist criticism in that it seeks an ideological origin for the text's appearance of unity. Jameson describes this critical practice as conforming to "the Althusserian/Marxist conception of culture," a conception that requires the exploded text "to be reunified, if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent functional operation in its own right" (*Political* 56). Jameson distinguishes his criticism from other contemporary practices by noting that "the current post-structuralist celebration of discontinuity and heterogeneity is . . . only an initial moment in Althusserian exegesis, which then requires the fragments, the incommensurable levels, the heterogeneous impulses, of the text to be once again related, but in the mode of structural difference and determinate contradiction" (*Political* 56).

To achieve the goal of reunifying the fragmented text at its level of production, Jameson recommends a process of "cognitive mapping," a practice that the grounds in "the great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence'" ("Postmodernism" 90; also see "Cognitive Mapping"). Insofar as Jameson elaborates on the definition of and procedures for cognitive mapping, his comments seem consistent with Ulrich Neisser's definition of a cognitive map as a large-scale "perceptual schema" that "accepts information and guides exploration" (123). Neisser observes that "[e]very organism that can anticipate

the arrangement of things in its environment has cognitive maps" (131); however, these maps need not conform to the actual order of the environment. In Neisser's view, cognition is a constructive process bounded not only by the environment itself but also by a person's anticipations concerning the environment. As Neisser notes, "No behavioral or perceptual choice is ever free of the information on which it is based. Nevertheless, the information is selected by the chooser himself" (182). To pursue Jameson's goal of representing "the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence," it is necessary to explore how a person's ideological assumptions determine his or her selection and framing of available information. Used to pursue this goal, a cognitive map will chart how a unified reading achieves its coherence only by selecting elements that are consistent with the reader's ideological assumptions while suppressing inconsistent elements; thus, the cognitive map "explains" contradictions without "explaining them away."

It is inevitable that a cognitive map of someone else's interpretive process will be a speculative structure, judicable not by appeal to any absolute standards of verification but rather by its utility in positing a plausible explanation of the premises governing the reader's attempt to limit the text. What follows is my attempt to explain the ideological assumptions that inform Borden's interpretation of *Working Girls* and to map how those assumptions necessitate contradictions in her reading.

MOTIVES AND METHODS

To construct a plausible map of Borden's interpretive process, I must posit two motives that constrain her options as a filmmaker and a critic. The first motive is Borden's desire to offer realistic images of prostitution. Because Borden's sense of the "real" necessarily is bounded by her perceptual schema, "realism" is an unattainable goal, and "verisimilitude" must stand

in its place: if realism is a measure of an image's accuracy, then verisimilitude is a measure of its *appearance* of accuracy. An image of prostitution possesses verisimilitude if it conforms to the perceptual schemata that condition a viewer's reception of the image, regardless of the extent to which the schemata themselves conform to the actual conditions of prostitution in a society. Within this conceptual framework, Borden's desire for realism imposes a "verisimilitude constraint": it compels her to provide images that both she and her audience can accept as accurate representations of middle-class prostitution.

The second motive constraining Borden's options is her desire to eliminate that automatic sense of degradation for women who have worked as prostitutes. . . . ("Labor Relations" 4). This motive results from Borden's belief in a feminist media agenda that should "establish a dialogue which is not against women who work in

this way" ("Labor Relations" 4). This motive imposes an "ideological constraint" on Borden: it compels her to provide neutralized images of prostitutes, because such images are necessary to counter the prevailing negative images.

The two motives that constrain Borden are partially compatible, and Borden's work is unified to the extent that the motives are complementary. However, when the two motives are incompatible—when the demands of verisimilitude conflict with the demands of ideology—then Borden faces a difficult task of conflict resolution. Two methods for resolving conflicts are evident: (1) Borden could falsify the image of prostitution in order to satisfy the ideological constraint (thus sacrificing the verisimilitude of the film), or (2) she could satisfy the verisimilitude constraint (thus sacrificing her ideological intent). It is obvious that neither of these methods could be acceptable to Borden. However, a third solution is



Richard Leacock and Louise Smith in *Working Girls*.

possible: by acting as both filmmaker and critic, Borden can divide her labor in pursuing both goals. "Borden the filmmaker" can produce a film that satisfies audience expectations for verisimilitude, even when doing so requires her to present images that conflict with her ideological intent. Then "Borden the critic" can contain the excesses of meaning in the film by offering a reading that is consistent with her ideological position. This appears to be the strategy that Borden has employed. When analyzed from this perspective, Borden's film and her criticism reveal predictable patterns of consistency and contradiction, both of which are determined by the extent to which her two motives are compatible.

PROSTITUTION AS WORK

In her attempt to represent prostitution in images that are both realistic and neutralized, Borden's main strategy is to subsume prostitution into the realm of work. In doing so she attempts an erasure of difference; that is, she tries to present prostitution as merely one manifestation of general issues that arise in many work settings. The equation of prostitution with other forms of work meets the demands of both verisimilitude and ideology: an economic motive is a plausible explanation for Molly's choice of employment, and the identification of prostitution as a form of work neutralizes some of the psychosexual interpretations that Molly's choice otherwise could invite. Borden establishes Molly's perception of prostitution as work in a conversation with Bob Burler, Molly's first customer in the film:

Molly: How's your office?
 Bob: Things are humming—we have a new secretary. The old one quit last week.
 Molly: Yeah, we've been pretty busy here, too.
 Bob: Yeah, I'll bet.

This conversation suggests that Molly equates her work as a prostitute with Bob's

work as a businessman, and it also indicates that sexual dimensions are present in conventional work settings. These two effects diminish the difference between prostitution and other jobs, establishing at the outset of the film that Molly views prostitution as an employment choice, not a sexual choice.

Borden's location of prostitution in the realm of work succeeds in reducing the "automatic sense of degradation" commonly associated with prostitution; however, her equation of prostitution with other forms of work does not eliminate all of the conflicts that prostitutes encounter in their relationships with their employers and customers. These conflicts serve two purposes in Borden's film: (1) they meet the demands of verisimilitude, since a representation of prostitution without any conflict would defy viewers' expectations to an extent that would undermine the film's credibility, and (2) the conflicts also serve the ends of dramatic filmmaking, since they allow viewers to sustain interest in the plot of the film. Nor is Borden's inclusion of these conflicts necessarily antithetical to her ideological intent: insofar as the conflicts in *Working Girls* appear as similar in type and degree to those experienced in other forms of employment, they are consistent with her goal of "demythifying and demoralizing [prostitution], without . . . making it look like the best job in the world" ("Labor Relations" 6).

In cases where the conflicts in prostitution clearly are consonant with those in other employment situations, Borden the critic need not comment on the images presented by Borden the filmmaker. Consider first the economic motive for prostitution. Although some of the characters in *Working Girls* find prostitution more lucrative than the other work opportunities available to them, at least two of the women do not. Dawn, the youngest of the prostitutes in the film, observes about her previous night's work, "You know, after I paid for food and rubbers last night, I left here with twenty-five bucks in my pocket. Even a goddamned waitress in a diner makes more money in



Preparing for work.

tips, and I'm showing up for what? Twenty-five bucks?" And April, the oldest prostitute in the film, observes that she doesn't know why she bothers showing up for work, since the younger girls get all the tricks. Although these observations raise questions about the economic benefits of prostitution, the prostitutes' disillusionment with their earning power is similar to that experienced by many salespeople who work on a commission basis. Borden the critic does not call attention to the gap between prostitutes' expectations and their actual earnings in the film, but neither does she attempt to explain it away.

Consider also some other conditions that supposedly make prostitution an attractive employment option: the brief and flexible working hours. In *Working Girls*, these conditions are cited as a motive by Gina, who notes that they rank with the financial motive in importance. In keeping with the demands of verisimilitude, Borden the filmmaker shows working conditions

that differ significantly from Gina's perception. Of the prostitutes in the film, only Molly has a regular work schedule; the other prostitutes' schedules are variable, but they are arranged in accordance with the needs of the house. So Dawn, who has worked late the previous night, returns to work early in the morning. Debbie, a new employee, is coerced into working the same day that she applies for a job, even though she had not planned to work that day. And even Molly, whose hours are supposed to be regular, is coerced into working a double shift, an experience that leaves her distraught. Although the conditions shown in *Working Girls* suggest that the benefits of prostitution might be illusory, the conditions described above do not suggest that conflicts between prostitutes and pimps are different in kind from those between other employees and employers. So Borden the critic is not compelled to control these images of conflict—once again the demands of verisimilitude and ideology are compatible.

INTOLERABLE IMAGES AND THE

MYTH OF IMMUNITY

The representations in *Working Girls* that Borden must control in her interpretation are those that threaten to reopen the distance between prostitution and other professions. If Borden is not trying to make prostitution appear to be the best job in the world, neither can she let it appear to be too bad. Images that allow such an interpretation could return prostitution to the realm of difference, establishing it as qualitatively distinct from other work options. Although these intolerable images may be useful—may even be essential—to meet the demands of verisimilitude, they jeopardize Borden's ideological objective. She must neutralize images that suggest prostitution is not merely an economic transaction with no greater significance for the women who participate in it, even when neutralizing them requires contradictions and significant silences in her interpretation. Borden's need to limit the excesses of meaning in *Working Girls* is most evident when her interpretation is compared to the film's representations of the risks that prostitutes encounter. Such a comparison suggests that Borden's interpretation is a more appropriate target than the film itself for the charge that Molly Haskell levels against *Working Girls* in *From Reverence to Rape* (2nd edition): the charge that Borden's work "enacts a new feminist fantasy, that of a miraculous immunity" (387).

Perhaps the most striking contradictions between Borden's interpretation of *Working Girls* and the events actually depicted in the film concern the safety of prostitution. Borden has argued that prostitutes control their transactions with customers and that the prostitutes' control insures their safety. Although *Working Girls* does offer images of the control that the women exert—several of the prostitutes in the film either refuse customers entirely or refuse to perform specific sex acts—the limits of their control and safety also are evident. When a customer penetrates Gina without a condom

and she then demands thirty dollars extra, her control is limited to establishing the price for an act that is a *fait accompli*. And when Dawn refuses a belligerent customer, we learn that he already has given her—and two other prostitutes—a venereal disease. In the age of AIDS, these cinematic images acquire an ominous resonance that belies Borden's comments concerning the safety of prostitution.

Also significant are the detrimental effects that the prostitutes in the film experience in their lives outside of work. Although Borden suggests that prostitution has only economic significance for the women who participate in it, she provides little detailed analysis of how *Working Girls* represents the prostitutes' lives outside of work. This silence is both significant and ideologically necessary, because the film provides images that undermine the myth of immunity. In one scene, Dawn observes with disgust that she wants to go home and have sex with her boyfriend, just so she'll know that it means something. Molly expresses surprise at Dawn's reaction, noting that she personally can't stand to be touched when she leaves work. Certainly people who work at jobs other than prostitution may be too tired to enjoy sex, but the intensity of the prostitutes' reactions in *Working Girls* suggests a physical distaste for prostitution that threatens to reopen the distance between prostitution and other forms of work.

Even more troublesome for Borden's attempt to reduce prostitution to a neutral activity are the scenes showing that those involved in personal relationships with the prostitutes often cannot accept the neutrality of sex for pay. It is ironic that Borden, who uses neutral terms such as "sister" and "the girl next door" to characterize prostitutes in her interviews, nevertheless is compelled to represent judgmental attitudes in her film, attributing those attitudes to the people about whom the prostitutes care most. Neither Dawn nor Molly is able to tell her lover about her job; Dawn observes that her boyfriend would kill her, while Molly says that she simply doesn't want her girl-

friend imagining what she is doing at work. The difficulty of viewing prostitution nonjudgmentally is best exemplified by Gina, who has just broken up with her boyfriend. "I thought if he really loved me he could accept my working," laments Gina, "but then I knew that if he really loved me, how could he accept it?" Gina's comment indicates that she is no more able to view prostitution as a neutral activity than her boyfriend is. She is not immune to the attitude toward prostitutes that prevails in this society: her comment reveals a view that is closer to the negative stereotype than to the neutral ideal that Borden advances in her interpretation.

The contradictions between the images offered by Borden the filmmaker and the interpretation offered by Borden the critic suggest the dichotomous nature of prostitution. While Borden does succeed to a significant extent in her effort to place prostitution in the context of work, she is unable to dislodge it completely from the value-laden psychosexual context that it occupies for most people. As represented in *Working Girls*, prostitution exists in both contexts. The dichotomy is best represented by the two terms that are used with equal frequency in the film: "working girl" and "whore." In a scene in which Dawn calls Molly a whore, Borden's characters discuss their attitudes toward the two terms:

Molly: I just hate that word.

Gina: "Working girl" is better.

Dawn: Well, don't mind me. I've been called a whore so much that it doesn't bother me anymore.

While Dawn is injured to the term "whore," Molly is not. She is hurt by the contempt that it conveys. Her sensitivity is evident in the scene in which Paul calls her a whore; the scene that Borden describes as the cornerstone of the film. Borden states that Molly's session with Paul "brings out all the contradictions in prostitution" ("Lizzie Borden" 9). However, Borden does not elaborate on the nature of these contradictions; instead, she equates Molly's vul-

nerability with that of any tired worker finishing a double shift, an explanation that leaves prostitution lodged safely in the context of work.

But Molly's session with Paul assumes greater significance if it is viewed as one manifestation of a recurring conflict in *Working Girls*. The conflict arises whenever Molly's ability to view prostitution as an impersonal economic activity is undermined by her awareness of the contempt with which people view her profession—for example, when she imagines her lover's reaction, or when a co-worker or a regular customer calls her a whore. The dichotomy represented by the terms "working girl" and "whore" is apparent in these scenes: Molly sees herself as a working girl with economic motives for choosing prostitution, but she cannot escape the prevalent perception that she is a whore. Although Borden the critic is generally successful in purging from her interpretation the word "whore" and the stigma that it conveys, Borden the filmmaker has not purged from *Working Girls* either the word itself or its impact on the consciousness of her main character.

THE LIMITS OF IDEOLOGY

In the efforts of Borden the critic to limit the meanings available in the images produced by Borden the filmmaker, I see evidence to support Bill Nichols's assertion that "[t]he ideology of clarity masks the clarity of ideology" (*Ideology* 67); that is, the appearance of unity in a text actually reflects the desire of the interpreter to limit the text in an interpretation that then is purporting to be the "reality" of the text in question. By situating prostitution simultaneously in two conflicting contexts, Borden the filmmaker has produced a complex work that represents the incompatible images of prostitution that the terms "working girl" and "whore" exemplify. When the demands of verisimilitude and ideology are incompatible, Borden the filmmaker opts for verisimilitude. But Borden the critic is con-

strained by the ideological goal of neutralizing the image of prostitution, a goal that she can accomplish only by limiting the meanings available in *Working Girls*. As Bill Nichols notes, "Stories place us in their webs of meaning in ways inseparable from the politics of gender. They do so in ways intimately related to narrative structure and the psychic processes by which we engage with a story, and that extend far beyond matters of content" ("Form" 488). In valuing ideology over versimilitude, Borden the critic offers a unified but partial interpretation of *Working Girls*, an interpretation that results as much from her ideological assumptions as from any determinate properties of the film itself. That her interpretation mirrors the "reality" of *Working Girls* may be self-evident to Borden, however, as Robert de Beaugrande observes, "'Reality' is never more political than when it is asserted to be self-explanatory; and this relation holds especially for the reality of a text or discourse" (13).

If one sense of the phrase "the limits of ideology" is revealed by Borden's attempt to interpret *Working Girls* in a manner that limits the meanings it makes available, then another sense of the phrase is revealed by the failure of her interpretation. Borden's interpretation is unsuccessful precisely to the extent that it is ideological; that is, to the extent that it falsifies the experiences of prostitutes. It is easy to accept Borden's goal of "establishing a dialogue that is not against women who work in this way" ("Labor Relations" 4); however, such a dialogue must not deny the problems of prostitution in an effort to prove "that these women aren't victims, period" ("An Interview" 72). Nor is the recognition that prostitutes may be victimized by their economic choice necessarily counterproductive to the dialogue that Borden wishes to establish—unless, of course, the dialogue deteriorates into an exercise in blaming the victims.

Borden's unsuccessful effort to limit the significance of prostitution acquires special significance in light of her assertion that "feminism is about seeing the world as it is,

pragmatic in a real way, and seeing those elements that women can control, especially our own images of it" ("Lizzie Borden" 11). If one accepts Borden's definition, then feminism must not be ideological; that is, it must not be an imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence. It cannot neutralize the image of prostitutes by divorcing their economic choice from the physical, psychological, and social effects that the choice engenders. Only through examining these effects can feminists determine whether it is both possible and desirable to legitimize prostitution.

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