An Unmarried Woman (1978)

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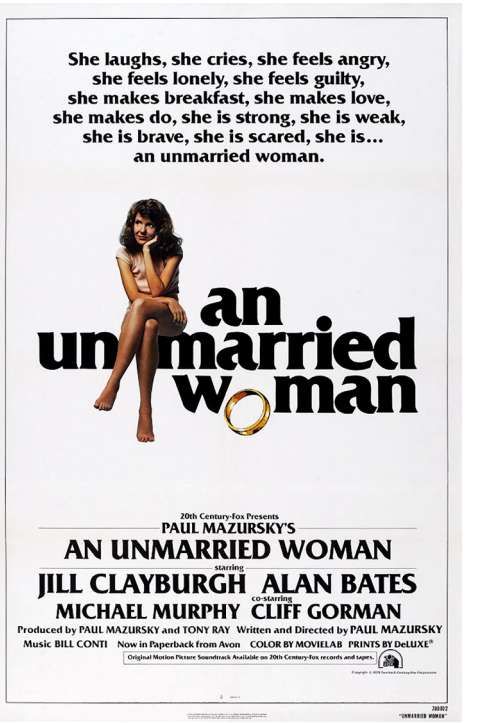
dir. Paul Mazursky; prod. Paul Mazursky, Anthony Ray; screenplay Paul Mazursky; photography Arthur J. Ornitz; music Bill Conti. 35mm, color, 124 mins. Twentieth Century Fox, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox.



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United States film production in the 1970s was characterized by a massive transformation as a new generation of directors, producers, and actors took hold under the name »New Hollywood.« However, New Hollywood was not only a group of ambitious younger filmmakers but was also characterized by new values, morals, and self-image. In particular, the upheavals of 1960s counterculture (student marches, Vietnam protests, the civil rights movement, women's movements) were not only carried along, but were also negotiated, by artists through film. In addition to Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, and Steven Spielberg, Paul Mazursky became known as part of this new wave. The film *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) cleverly and eloquently interrogated problems of equality, polyamory, and sexual needs in relation to the institution of marriage by focusing on two couples.

A mere ten years later, the radicalism of New Hollywood had largely exhausted itself. Some protagonists had retired, while others, like Spielberg and Lucas, turned to blockbuster cinema. It was at this point that *An Unmarried Woman* premiered. Mazursky realized the film in 1978, after his greatest artistic success, *Harry & Tonto* (1976). The story is simple: Erica Benton (played by Jill Clayburgh) has been with her husband Martin (Michael Murphy) for seventeen years in a picture-perfect marriage with a traditional division of gender roles. He works as a stockbroker; she has a part-time job in a gallery and takes care of their teenage daughter, Patti (Lisa Lucas). They live in a fancy apartment on the Upper East Side in New York City, and their biggest worries are that

their chosen vacation spot might be fully booked or deciding who gets to pick the place for Sunday dinner. All of this changes abruptly when, over lunch, Martin announces that he will leave his wife and daughter to move into an apartment with a much younger woman whom he has known for a year. Erica's reactions range from frustration and sadness to anger and recklessness. After a period of self-reflection, she meets and eventually falls in love with the British painter Saul Kaplan (Alan Bates).

Mazursky's film manages the tightrope walk between ironic lightness, on the one hand, and threatening crisis, on the other, in an extraordinarily delicate manner. His film does not choose the path that the hugely successful *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) took in showing the demise of a marriage like clockwork, from first conflicts to a court verdict over child custody; nor is it a portrait of an emancipated woman fighting against the immorality and seductibility of men. The film is first and foremost about Erica Benton, played with almost documentary precision by Clayburgh. Erica is in every scene of the film, and she gains more independence and freedom with every laugh, every tearful outburst, every argument that she has. With this, the film almost perfectly executes what Alison Bechdel asks of movies in her popular test (Selvaraj 2020). The film features many female characters (daughter Patti and Erica's four friends), who meet regularly, argue, and laugh with each other. They talk a lot, but not exclusively, about their relationships with men, as they also discuss jobs, children, and vacation plans.

It is thanks to Paul Mazursky's sometimes trivial, word-heavy style—often reminiscent of Woody Allen—that the film is neither a revenge thriller (like *The War of the Roses*, 1989) nor an academic copy of *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). It is precisely its matter-of-factness and lightness that makes the film a typical melodrama of New Hollywood. According to Annette Kuhn, the achievement of this movement is to no longer only present women as victims, rivals, or conspirators, as in many films of the 1930s to 50s (e.g. in film noir), but to present them as round characters with relationships, occupations, worries, fears, hardships, and joys (151-71). With this in mind—according to Kuhn and Mellen—the women's film (not only as a genre *about* women, but primarily as a genre viewed *by* a female audience) gains a new quality that is no longer a representation of the problems of gender roles, but of the opportunities, self-confidence, and hopes of gender identity. The film also explicitly shares this with comparable New Hollywood films such as *Wanda* (1970), *A Woman under the Influence* (1974), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975), *Harlan County, USA* (1976), and *Julia* (1977).

If one were cynical, one could say that Erica does not actually suffer, since she keeps the apartment, continues to live with her daughter, and receives alimony from Martin. She even gains new insights and freedoms that at no point threaten her existence. But it is precisely the sincerity of this development and the way of dealing with the main character, who is not overloaded with problems, that makes the film so unpredictable and suspenseful—even if there is no grand finale. As critic Dennis Schwartz remarks: »Even if the Clayburgh character is rich, healthy, attractive, smart, and has supportive friends, when she's on her own it's still a tough scene for a single woman to overcome, and this film proves that is so despite the new type of feminism in the air giving women more choices and freedom.« By putting the main character (and her self-reflection) at the center of the film, it represents a new kind of melodrama: one not focused on social circumstances, the relationship, or the demands and challenges other people bring forward, but rather a melodrama about the sometimes light, sometimes hard burdens of embracing free choice in life decisions. As Peter Hanson remarks: »To get a

sense of why essayist/novelist Tom Wolfe christened the 70s ›The Me Decade,‹ look no further than *An Unmarried Woman*, one of the deepest dives into feminine psychology any mainstream American filmmaker has ever attempted. Although the movie nominally tells the story of a woman trying to find love again after her husband leaves her, the real goal of the picture is to let one individual express her personal angst.« More positively worded, it can be said that the film's rigid focus on Erica indicates the openness of her new situation, her agency, and the rationale behind her decisions, making it an overly unpredictable, personal, but, above all, straightforward film.

In terms of aesthetics, three things are striking. First, unlike many films of the time, Paul Mazursky uses New York City not just as a backdrop but as a specific socio-cultural location with distinct characteristics. This includes not only focusing on the popular views and well-known buildings but also incorporating smaller restaurants and nightclubs, side streets and jogging tracks, into the film. Secondly, while the film is made relatively independently with a smaller budget, costumes, décor, and especially the friendly and upbeat music by Bill Conti (who had just achieved world fame with *Rocky*) round out character portrayal and plot development. Last but not least, the rhythm of the storytelling makes a critical difference to similarly themed films. Robert C. Gumbow wrote in a contemporaneous review: »I am won over by its crisp, crackling competence, the literate wittiness of its script, Mazursky's sensitivity to pace in the editing of both image and music, and his powerful economy of characterization.« The film takes some time to develop its story. Many scenes do not have a loaded meaning in the sense of a classical narrative, but show Erica lingering and dancing to music, listening to the psychiatrist, or walking through the park with Saul. In this way, a special trust and empathy is established for the viewer that makes the film a lifelike and credible experience. *An Unmarried Woman* was a moderate success at the box office and received three Academy Award nominations.

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