

# FILM REVIEW

## August & July

### One Woman's Notes on August and July

The interviews with Murray Markowitz, Sharon Smith, and Alexa de Wiel help to explain why **August and July** fails to achieve its objectives. The opposing forces involved in making this film strangled each other. What emerges from this power struggle is a confused film.

Murray Markowitz intended to make a film about the conflicts between two people involved in a love-hate relationship; filmed in the conflicting styles of lyricism and *cinéma vérité*.

Sharon Smith and Alexa de Wiel wanted to make the film about themselves – two very individual women who are lovers; filmed subtly to catch nuances of feeling.

Somewhere in the middle of shooting, these two ideas collided head-on, and production came to a complete halt. The women realized their film was not going to be made. The director (should have) realized that the anger, hate and frustration he was interested in did not exist in his characters at that point in their relationship; and they were incapable of acting as if it did. For reasons I can't understand, both parties nevertheless agreed to go on with **August and July**. What results is an unloved child that doesn't fulfill either of the parents' desires for the film.

One can argue that the film honestly portrays people suffering from poor communication. But art is meant to illuminate – if not answer – basic questions. **August and July**, instead of crystallizing this problem, gets lost in it.

The feature-length saga is split down the middle into two distinct realities. The first is a drama, is almost always indoors, and is filmed through close-ups in a loosely *cinéma vérité* style. The second reality is peaceful and erotic and chronicles vignettes of two women spending their summer together in the country. However, neither reality is convincing.

The dramatic sequences were set up because the director and two stars had agreed that love was equal to hate, forgetting that although the emotions are equally intense – they are not necessarily present at the same times. Thus, Sharon and Alexa were forced to act out emotions they did not really feel towards each other. (It is extremely difficult to be angry, frustrated, jealous, and hateful while spending a quiet summer in the country with someone you love.) It is no wonder, then, that the 'dramatic' sequences seem so false. Unfortunately, the camera accentuates the lie by recording all these scenes close up, and allowing us to see mischievous glints in eyes even when they are supposed to be glaring with anger.

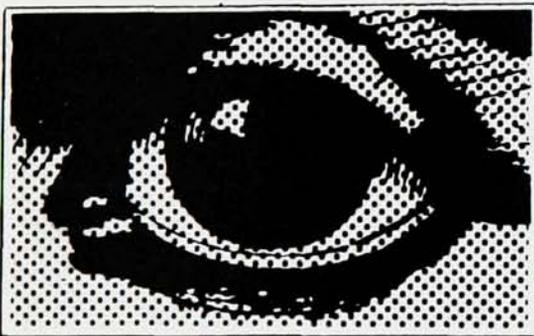
During the pastoral scenes, the audience is given brief peeping-tom glimpses at the lovers. The camera keeps an enormous distance – never giving us the chance to be enveloped by the tenderness and sensuality of the women. A perfect example of this occurs when Alexa and Sharon are bathing in the river. Sharon playfully covers herself with mud so that Alexa can wash it off her. The inherent erotic qualities of water and mud and touching bodies are lost because all we can see is the act of bathing. We're not close enough to experience the touching. This same bashful ness (or fear of the unfamiliar) is evident during the few love scenes. Although these were filmed inside the house, the distance between the camera and the lovers is so great, that we are again left to be purely spectators. We cannot get involved to experience the love.

What is disturbing about **August and July** is the constant awareness of its potential to take off – to soar above its faults. But just as Sharon and Alexa start revealing little nuances about themselves, the scene is aborted. This is due to a very basic misconception, I feel. The film is constantly trying to emphasize that we are watching a 'couple' and understates the individuality of the two women. But the only way to make a couple interesting is by defining the differences between two people. The excitement of the contradictions, the pushing together and pulling apart is what prevents 'A Couple' from being a non-descript, amorphous and boring creature. By not portraying the women as two distinct individuals, **August and July** prevents the audience from caring whether the relationship will survive, since we don't even know what forces pulled Alexa and Sharon together in the first place.

There are some interesting attempts made in this film. Attempts to blend two distinct styles of film-making; to discover the dynamics involved between two people; and to explain realities of non-heterosexual love. But I can only hope that Murray Markowitz' next film (and, indeed, I hope he makes another film) will concern a theme he is not afraid of, and one that he understands.

**August and July** has a slight perversion to it – that of allowing men who are totally bewildered by lesbianism to thrust aggressive-yet-frightened cameras into the lives of two women - whose reality they cannot, and would not accept.

—A. Ibrányi-Kiss



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