

# The Arrangement, John & Mary

Film review

George dePue

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Newsreel-ARM — Hollywood began to appreciate some years ago that the vision of life it was projecting for the people was increasingly irrelevant to their lives and uninteresting. It was a basic marketing problem—how to catch up with a broad social process that has some of the aspects of pre-revolutionary alienation from the system, without giving into it and confirming its concrete revolutionary potential?

One solution employed by Hollywood is exemplified in the recent spate of highly sophisticated “outlaw” flics—period and contemporary—ranging from Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda’s *Easy Rider* to *The Wild Bunch*. But this mode, while striking most closely to the deep anger of the masses, especially young, Black and middle class working people in their lives in the system, requires that the rebellious protagonists, with whom the audience identifies, must be defeated and destroyed, if not entirely disproved.

Another example of Hollywood’s cooptive efforts is the trend of “problem” flics, fairly conventional dramas about people working out their problems within the system. Two Christmas season releases—Elia Kazan’s *The Arrangement*, and *John and Mary*, with Dustin Hoffman and Mia Farrow—attempt this resolution of the industry’s continuing basic marketing problem.

Elia Kazan, a writer, stage and film director, and producer, is almost personally responsible for *The Arrangement*. He wrote the novel, adapted it for the screen, and produced and directed the film. In addition, the entire work derives quite closely from his personal problems of frustration and despair within the system, and what seems to him to be their resolution.

Eddie Anderson, played with a great confusion of mannerisms but considerable energy by Kirk Douglas, is a very successful advertising man in Los Angeles. He “has it all”—the house, cars, swimming pool, the patient, understanding and socially useful wife, and “as much nooky on the side as he wants.”

Only he ain’t happy, and has an unfortunate and somewhat embarrassing habit of attempting suicide. He meets the boss’s girlfriend/researcher, an entrancingly beautiful, independent, slightly hippy, young woman—Faye Dunaway—who seems to spend most of her time hanging around the agency jiving the executives because they’re such phony sell-outs.

Eddie she likes, however. He’s kind of soulful in his despair, and she believes in “what he could have been.”

They begin an eight-month affair that takes the form of a dialog about his reform. She shows him up at every step, and demands that if he loves her, he should leave his wife and live with her. He stalls, alibis, stalls, and cops out with a dangerous theatrical suicide attempt.

Convalescing from his accident, Eddie stops talking to everybody—his wife and daughter (he’s busily fantasizing Faye Dunaway bobbing up in the nude in his pool, or walking reflectively in his grape arbor), and also his boss and fellow workers, who stop by the house to ask when he’s coming back to work. He finally says only one thing, “I’m not coming back.”

And he never does, all the way. He goes through memory trips with his dying father in Connecticut, tries a reprise of his relationship with the girl, cops out into a sanitarium, runs changes on his severely straight wife and

her psychiatrist and lawyer, and at the end of the film, is standing at his father's graveside with the girl, smiling sweetly and sadly. It is not clear how he proposes to make a living.

*John and Mary* is a somewhat overlong romance about this guy and this girl who meet one Friday night in one of those swinging singles bars on New York's upper East Side, go to bed together that night, and then have to work out a "stable, satisfactory relationship" afterward.

Dustin Hoffman sleepily walks his way through the part of an obsessively neat and clean and slightly paranoid furniture designer. Mia Farrow is a fey, straightly wacky salesgirl in an African sculpture gallery. Both have been burned in previous affairs—he by a plastic bitch of a fashion model, she by a poor man's JFK-type lib politico, married, of course. It's all very sad and tortured, but predictably, they are able to work out their anxieties and come to a satisfactory adjustment.

Both films are very beautifully photographed in color, and fairly well cut, but both fail completely to realize filmically their material. It is true that successful advertising men are pretty much of a boring type, but Kirk Douglas's evil alter-ego in pin-stripe suit and diamond stick-pin suavely arguing the case for a complete surrender to despair while reclining across the top of the upright piano Eddie is playing is more than a little broad.

Kazan generally fails to stop at the line of taste and realistic probability in spinning out his yarn; he seems too much entranced with how interesting it all is, to him.

The director of *John and Mary* makes a different kind of error. Working with two talented, faddishly-mannered but still fairly stable performers, he does not try to cut right to their indications of character dynamics and propel the film through their internal emotional/thought processes, but gives them, and a rather thin script, all the time in the world to hang themselves in the false resolutions of their problems.

*The Arrangement* might well be seen, especially on a snowy Sunday night. It is an accurate, self-indulgent portrayal of the problems and imagination of a talented part of that generation now in their fifties. When a man lays out to you what he believes is his soul, it can't all be just bullshit.

But *John and Mary* is an affected drag. The hollow pomposity of a mausoleic movie palace like the Michigan Theater, is the perfect setting to its genteel preciousness. But don't feel you have to see it to check that out.

It is, of course, not an accident that Hollywood's marketing problem—relevant themes and content—precisely parallels the "personal" problems it undertakes; nor is it an accident that the filmic/dramatic resolutions to the personal problems are as false as the resolutions to the marketing problem.

When a social system is in crisis, it is natural and necessary that individuals mirror the despair of the system in their personal lives, since it is the system's failure to serve and liberate them that is its final defeat. But of course, there is a life, and an art, within the process of resolving personal/social contradictions in concrete terms, and it is the social/cultural/political revolution. POWER.

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