A Room of Their Own: Claudia Weill's 'Girlfriends'

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Wherever women go, pairs proliferate. The virgin-whore complex splinters into the heroine plus sidekick, the lucky and luckless in love, the daffy Marilyn Monroe wed with the sly Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1943), the brilliant friend and her inscrutable shadow. Each reflects and reveals the other. Take *The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* which ran from 1970 to 1977: Rhoda Morgenstern offset Mary Richards's chipper can-do-ism with an acidity that made the second-wave sitcom less cloying, like cake with coffee. The soi-disant spinster was a relief valve for spinier sentiments. In one episode, Rhoda soothes Mary after she performs in an ill-starred play: 'You were so good, I was filled with hate and envy.' Hate, envy, that perpetual push-pull of comradery and competition – such are the stock ingredients of friendship between women in fiction.

'There was a whole lineage of Rhodas', director Claudia Weill said in an interview tracing the genesis of her debut fiction film, *Girlfriends* (1978). 'I wanted to make that person the protagonist – the person who doesn't get married right away, the person who's not living the dream life, the person who's having to create a life for themselves.' (Also, she noted, the person who, like Rhoda, is Jewish.) Rhoda becomes Susan Weinblatt; Mary, Anne Monroe. Together they inhabit a bare Manhattan apartment, where their proximity produces an enmeshed, boundaryless intimacy. Susan photographs Anne asleep in the silvery half-light of dawn; later, Anne insists on reading her new poem to Susan, who's on the can, a perfunctory flush punctuating her scattered feedback. So seamless is their orbit that we are not sure, at first, where their desires diverge. Not until they secure another place does Anne, abruptly and as if wishing to disentangle herself, marry Martin, a graduate student who seems to have confused her aspiration to be a writer with his need for a typist. Susan spends the rest of the film just trying to be in a room with a woman she has seldom been without.

Unmoored from her anchoring friend, Susan neglects to unpack and sulks alone in the apartment they were to share as life jostles outside. Stressing the city's vexing mix of isolation and suffocating closeness is a *musique concrète* of offscreen sounds: dogs barking, sirens wailing disconsolately, the drip of an unminded tap, the clack of a typewriter. Amid this chorus characters mishear each other: when Susan meets a mop-haired boy at a loft party, their flubbed flirting is not only funny but also morphs into a mutual code, making their mix-ups the point. (He asks if she wants to dance; she says no. She asks if he does; he assents as if starting anew.) Back at home, Susan sends out tendrils via telephone, crowning herself the 'Princess of Plums' in an impish answering-machine message, play-acting a phony career as a *Vogue* photographer, or calling up other, unseen women, only to be sidelined for their men ('Say hi to Jack!'). When Susan and Anne do reconnect, intermediaries half-relay their words, scrambled in a static that keeps them separate. Susan refocuses on photography, a distancing medium: we experience Anne's marriage through black-and-white snapshots, her travels traced in colour slides, the bar mitzvahs and weddings that Susan lenses floating to the surface of her darkroom sink.

What the two have lost is articulated in one obvious child of *Girlfriends*, the hyper-referential *Frances Ha* (2012). In an oft-quoted scene, a drifty dancer played by Greta Gerwig describes her ache for a 'secret world' created with another, special person: an out-of-touch girlfriend. Speaking recently as the director of a fresh adaptation of *Little Women* (2019), Gerwig trod similar ground, elaborating protagonist Jo March's 'possessiveness and anger that [her sisters] couldn't stay in their female utopia.' The women lose touch, their intimacy severed by marriage. The path is more explicit for the wed, but the unmarried are burdened with choice and its attendant risk of failure. Susan stumbles after Anne leaves, screaming 'I hate it!' in the darkened apartment after the unpaid-for electricity has been turned off; Anne bristles at Martin cajoling her to write thank-you notes after she stabs at being playful, rebellious, in the way she would have with Susan. Only a chance meeting with another woman photographer, who encourages her work and hires her as an assistant, persuades Susan to hoist out of her rut. As new people enter her life, Susan struggles to assimilate them into her frangible independence; an independence achieved only by experimenting with the limitations others bring. In the meantime, she envies Anne's travels, her sprawling upstate home, and the constancy of her contact with other people. Anne, meanwhile, envies Susan's freedom. Weill has said she was inspired to make the film by a quote from Eleanor Bergstein's 1973 novel *Advancing Paul Newman*: 'This is a story of two girls, each of whom suspected the other of a more passionate connection with life.' Believing that other people are living their life more rightly is not a gender-determined feeling, but the paucity of choices and models available to women exacerbates the risk of forward motion. An expecting Anne insists she will continue to write, but when the baby arrives, its wails and Martin's intrusive questioning puncture her shaky solitude.

The sapping of women's time is an issue Weill dealt with before, in her collaborative, memoiristic documentary short with Joyce Chopra, *Joyce at 34* (1972), about Chopra balancing the birth of her first child with her continuing career as a filmmaker. Weill started out in documentaries, including *This Is the Home of Mrs. Levant Graham* (1970) and *The Other Half of the Sky: A China Memoir* (1975), but grew frustrated waiting for her subjects to say what they wanted to say – not unlike like her jittery, inarticulate fiction characters. *Joyce at 34* feels like a clear precursor of *Girlfriends*, with some scenes from the former seemingly restaged in the latter. For example, Joyce Chopra says that if she 'had another baby, it would be the end'; like Anne struggling to maintain focus at her typewriter while her baby crawls in the doorway, Chopra is seen snapping at her infant daughter, who grabs at strips of film on the editing table. Later, when Weill appears in the background – craning to adjust towering lights, sheepishly lifting a light-metre to blithe children playing, cranking a 16mm camera – the film teases out another, subterranean concern: women artists' need for each other, as sympathetic collaborators and sounding boards. Of her work with Weill, Chopra speaks of a generative correspondence: 'Really, for the first time, I don't worry about whether I'm being taken seriously as a filmmaker.' Such sentiments surface in *Girlfriends*: Anne, stung after Martin calls her a dilettante, vents to Susan, who says she takes Anne (and her writing) more seriously than Anne does herself.

Propped up by a hodgepodge of grants (including one from the American Film Institute), favours and donations

from friends and family, a cameo from her parents, a cold call to actor Eli Wallach, and a waiving of standard union rules, the production of *Girlfriends* stretched from 1975 to 1978. But its long gestation bore unexpected fruit: a crop of so-called New Woman films had made women seem marketable. Films like *The Turning Point* (1977), *Julia* (1977), and *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) staged the thorny tug-of-war between love and career, with many wringing tears from the compromises inherent in both branching pathways. But Claudia Weill, as Marya Montañez Smulker has stressed in her book *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema*, was the only woman to direct a movie in this loose genre. And her divergent approach, aided by screenwriter Vicki Polon, is evident: while a film like *An Unmarried Woman* ends with a woman plunged into a romance with an improbably passionate painter, the crew of woman friends who helped her through her divorce disappeared, *Girlfriends* finds its coda with Susan and Anne, at last alone together in a brief but generative reprieve.

Weill went on to make only one more feature film in Hollywood, *It's My Turn* (1980), about a math professor who, among other things, believes she is being interviewed for a university administrative position just because she is a woman, only to find out that she is right but for different reasons: the gaggle of male academics who surround her would rather she push paperwork than pursue her own research, which they view as stalled and unimportant. One can't help suspecting a kinship between this character and Weill, who felt women directors were treated like 'the company freaks'. To say Weill faced barriers to entry feels rote and obligatory. Notorious Hollywood producer Ray Stark ran his hand up her shirt to check if she was wearing a bra, an anecdote Weill describes with the aside, 'Talk about #MeToo!' A 1978 *New York Times* headline asked, 'Women Film Directors: Will They, Too, Be Allowed to Bomb?' The answer being, of course, no. Now? Still no. 'It's my turn', and if you fumble, there will be no other turns.

After the modest failure of her second fiction feature, Weill turned to the sparser budgets and shorter schedules of television and theatre, which were more amenable her desire for child-rearing. But *Girlfriends* has cast a long shadow. One can't help thinking of the glance shared between the two women, alienated but once again curious of each other, in *Frances Ha*, or Hannah and Marnie's raw need for renewed connection in Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* (2012–17), an episode of which Weill directed. Called 'Boys', as if in a tongue-in-cheek wink at *Girlfriends*, it tracks Hannah and Marnie, like Susan and Anne, not talking but talking a lot about each other. Hannah frets over a book deadline; Marnie loiters in a drizzly train station after having been humiliated by her artist non-boyfriend. Clutching their phones, both dissemble, pretending better lives, suspicious and sure of the other's success. Neither manages to get the message.