

Sexism is business as usual for Hollywood U.S.A.



By KEN BURKE

To anyone with even a passing interest in movies or modern culture, these names should be familiar by now—*Ghostbusters*, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Together, they were the blockbuster film events of the summer of '84 (excluding *Gremlins*—see sidebar), grossing over \$300 million to date and still filling theatres across North America as fall approaches. Clearly, they are a reflection of what Hollywood says the movie-going public wants. But are they what women want . . . or need?

For years, women looking for genuine images of themselves have had to look outside the world of mainstream movies. Few feature films have women as main characters and even fewer are directed by women—of the 224 films listed by *Variety* as 1984 major distribution releases, only seven had women directors. Yet movies, and especially those from the Hollywood system, define the image women have in our society like few other mediums can. Looking at women and their role in the summer of '84's mega-hits, it's clear that sexism is business as usual for Hollywood, U.S.A.

At first glance, director Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* might seem a good deal kinder to women than his previous buddy-buddy comedies *Animal House* or *Stripes*. There's no gratuitous pornopeeping, one of the main characters is a successful independent woman, and the film's heroes spend their time chasing after ghosts, not cheap sex. But Reitman hasn't reformed. His misogyny is more refined this time around—that's all.

Ghostbusters tells the tale of three single, upwardly-mobile young men (and a token black added later on) who become famous snaring ghosts with ray-gun-like devices. Interestingly enough, the ghosts these guys "bust" come in two varieties: A) sexless protoplasmic blobs looking like riled-up

cousins of Casper the friendly ghost, and B) women.

The first ghost seen in the movie is that of a bookish "spinster" in a library. Head ghostbuster Peter Enkman capably handles the situation by breaking the ice with a cheap singles-bar line. "Hi, I'm Peter. Where are you from, originally?" he oozes. Then again, this makes sense as University Prof Enkman was just interrupted in an attempt to seduce a brainless-but-beautiful male fantasy of a student during an "experiment" of his. Ghosts may be real in this film, but sexual harassment's just a myth.

Willie's feminine stocks in trade are hysteria, selfishness, vanity and stupidity.

After another ghostbuster has a wet dream of a levitating, wind-blown female ghost, the movie's women-as-demons view comes into clearer view. But it's up to our chief here to give the real tip-off. Enkman investigates some supernatural doings at the apartment of a concert violinist, who just happens to be a beautiful woman, and begins actively pursuing her. She also has to contend with pathetic advances of a nerd accountant living down the hall, but her troubles don't end there.

Both the violinist and the accountant become possessed by spirits of the ancient Babylonian god, "Gozer". But while the nerd retains his personality and becomes a (genuinely funny) dork of a demon, she turns into an evil bitch in heat. With satanic make-up, wind-blown hair and dress slit up to her thigh ("revealing a pair of tall, supernaturally sinewy legs," slobbered David Edelstein in *The Village Voice*), she looks like a character in a heavy-metal rock video. As she craves nothing but sex, she provides Enkman with plenty of opportunity for cute asides. "I don't think there's room in there for three," he leers. She even levitates, becoming the floating fantasy dreamed of earlier.

In case the point could have been missed, Reitman (and writers Harold Ramis and Dan Aykroyd) provide grade-six sexual symbolism to indicate she is possessed by the spirit of the "gatekeeper" and the nerd, that of the "keymaster". Thus, they gotta have sex in order for Gozer's kingdom to be established on Earth. So why does this nerd remain a nerd and the independent woman become a slut? When ghostly Gozer finally arrives, the reason is obvious.

"Gozer can take any form he wants," says a ghostbuster to his colleagues. He's right, and the form which the big nasty takes before our male heroes, presumably the most threatening one available, is that of a modern woman. With fashionably short hair and reptilian eyes, she is sheathed in what looks like leftover saran wrap. No doubt this is meant to make her the total (-ly evil) woman. And the rousing finale has Enkman & Co. calling her a "tramp," "wench," "minx," "prehistoric bitch" and the like before eventually triumphing over a huge marshmallow man created for their destruction.

Good, clean fun? *Ghostbusters* is misogynist wish-fulfillment for the backlash '80's, well-coded and hidden beneath its ghostly surface.

Compared to the mythic bombast of *Ghostbusters*, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* is more

straightforward in its portrayal of women. It's also far from something to cheer about in the (few) women it does show. While it's the first *Star Trek* creation in years to give women pants to wear, even in

space a few centuries from now, it seems women still have a long way to go.

As in all *Star Trek* episodes, the film centres around the men of the

Gremlins fight the backlash

By KEN BURKE

Oddly enough, the most positive images of women in a blockbuster this summer came in a film linked to Steven Spielberg - *Gremlins*.

Although "Presented by Steven Spielberg," *Gremlins*' merits lie with its director, Joe Dante, and novice writer Chris Columbus. Known as a director who slips "subversive messages" into his films, Dante's distinctive vision dominates the film. As executive producer, Spielberg set up the deals and provided the name to get the film made. As Dante noted in a recent interview, the movie is in many ways the darker side of *E.T.*, "except he (Spielberg) really doesn't want to do it himself." It's also interesting to note that Spielberg's one major script change was keeping the "cute" mogwai creature Gizmo alive throughout the film. Spielberg controls the film's merchandising rights.

While far from a feminist film, or even a "women's film," *Gremlins* plays against clichés of women in several key scenes. The best example of this is the reaction of Lynn Peltzer, the mother of the film's main character, to an assault by the gremlins on her house.

By lighting, music and scene-setting, Dante creates probably the archetypal modern horror-flick scene—a woman, alone and isolated, is menaced by a violent, unknown force. He then proceeds to delightfully turn the scene on its ear by showing the mother to be no helpless victim, but a quite capable (and inventive) woman battling the monsters. Perhaps their mistake was invading her space and pigging out on cookies she was making. At any rate, she furiously battles them with her kitchen appliances, putting the malfunctioning, self-destructing inventions of her husband to good use for the first time. "Get out of my house," she yells after puréeing a gremlin with a handy mixer. Even after a particularly violent attack, she doesn't turn into a stock hysterical mess.

Equally capable of handling herself in a tight situation is Kate Berringer, a young bank teller (and love interest of the film's main character). While doing volunteer work in a bar she's attempting to save from demolition, she finds herself facing a throng of surly gremlins in search of a rowdy good time. She meets the challenge and threat admirably, keeping the creature boozed-up and relatively content until she can devise a way out.

It is also interesting to note that the gremlins, while sexless (reproducing by contact with water), quickly learn and take as their own the worst traits traditionally associated with men.

They are caricatures of muggers, flashers, delinquents and obnoxious bar-buddies. Like men through the ages, they are also fascinated with technology and all the latest products of our society for their destructive capabilities. And while the film sets up rich Mrs. Deagle as the film's villain during its first half-hour, she proves to be small potatoes indeed compared to the rampaging male horde of gremlins which follows.