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THE BIKINIS, HAIRSPRAY, AND SHATTERED CEILINGS OF BIMBO FEMINISM

ANITA ROSENBERG'S

Modern GIRLS

&

Assault OF THE KILLER BIMBOS

BY JONATHAN PLOMBON

If one was given a guess as to where the brains lay behind Empire Pictures, the small-scale international distribution company of the 1980s, one, after repeated viewings of its 1988 flick, *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama*, would probably conclude a head. Nonetheless, it's what kind of head belonging to its long-standing mastermind, Charles Band, and its equally erect audience ogling Brinke Stevens' breasts, that would be a more telling revelation. This is because, if Empire Pictures' library of films is any indication, it's the helmeted male libido that molded much of its content in an effort to realize the unreachable hopes and moist dreams of its intended audience.

Despite being an obvious fan of women by its use of babes in the title of one of its films, Empire Pictures dealt almost exclusively with male-gearred exploitation flicks. A consciously female voice, one that might have objected to using silicone scream queens dipped in semen as a replacement for character development or, you know, a plot, almost never factored into its releases.

Almost.

At one time in its breast-trailed, laser-illuminating, space-alien-invading history, Empire Pictures did boast a sole woman reclining in its director's chair: Anita Rosenberg. Her contribution resulted in more than just another *Breeders*, *Princess Academy* or *Valet Girls*. Her film, *Assault*

of the *Killer Bimbos* remains as a cinematic gender battle fought through the subtle creative compromises, victories, and defeats of its characters and plot lines by simultaneously embracing and rejecting the expectations of its male audience. It's the embodiment of the struggle and success of female filmmakers breaking through the glass ceiling in a male dominated industry.

However, before *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*, Rosenberg embarked on *Modern Girls*, her 1986 break into feature films that preceded the eventual gender battles raging in her second film with a revelation of the industry's gender inequality. Even after achieving an MFA in Film Directing at New York University, Atlantic Releasing didn't consider Rosenberg as a director for the film despite her impressive qualifications. "In the late '80s there were only a few female directors," Rosenberg said in an interview with *ModernGirlsMovie.com*. "So, I stayed in the sidelines and gave my input from there."

In addition to Rosenberg being regulated to a glorified consultant role, she was distanced even further from the project by having another scribe revamp her autobiographical tale of early-hour eyeliner romance. Although Rosenberg was given a co-writer (and associate producer) credit, Laurie Craig penned the final draft.

With Rosenberg removed from much of the production, Jerry Kramer plopped down behind the camera of *Modern Girls*. And while Kramer was deprived of the personal insight into the content, he did contribute the elaborate flare of his music-video expertise to the project.

It came at an expense. While stylistically competent, Kramer's talents turned out to be more successfully lent to short-form pieces or long-form pieces consisting of several pithier works, such as the Styx's robot-gone-best-friend-forever epic, *Kilroy Was Here* and the Michael Jackson vehicle, *Moonwalker*. After all, *Modern Girls* may play like a neon-sparkling '80s comedy doused in hairspray and set to a soundtrack of Toni Basil, but its hidden core throbs with a female-envisioned critique of superficial Los Angeles club life. It's a core that Kramer, probably due to his practice with three-minute works, wouldn't pause long enough to procure.

Modern Girls follows a trio of trendy hot-spotters and their geeky male hanger-on through the whirlwind of free drinks, dance clubs, and the general undoing of humanity's moral fabric with one-night-stands. When former-latchkey-child Kelly (Virginia Madsen) dumps her roommates for her DJ boyfriend Brad (Stephen Shellen), ice-princess Margo (Daphne Zuniga) and the irresponsible-but-kind-hearted CeCe

(Cynthia Gibb) coaxes Kelly's stood-up date Clifford (Clayton Rohner) to chauffeur them around town. As Margo and Clifford gradually kindle the sparks of romance in spite of their intellectual squabbles and CeCe combs the streets for her elusive rock-star crush, Bruno X (also played by Clayton Rohner), they veer between the hopelessness of Kelly's quick chemical fixes that provoke a melancholy, hollow view of glamour to scenes in which a convertible top hilariously malfunctions in the rain.

Unfortunately, Kramer places more time on the latter than on the former, ideologically distancing the issues involving the independent-minded, strong-willed female characters from the concerns of the audience. His choice to pry instant comedic gratification out of each scene of *Modern Girls*, minimizing the time needed to reflect in scenes of female bonding, convinces the audience to ignore the severity of the rampant drug use and the abusive relationships.

One of the film's most unavoidable examples of Kramer's disconnect with pressing female issues occurs when Kelly, fresh from downing ecstasy, sprawls out on a pool table at a redneck bar. She drones on about her father's critical view of her life and her deceased mother ("Daddy always told me what to do," she recalls. "He said if I didn't mind him, I'd end up just like my momma"). With a gasps of desperation, Kelly reaches out for attention from the gruff, burly cretins that frequent the establishment. As they surround her, grinning, hinting at a possible gang rape, Clifford rushes in and claims to be a doctor chasing after radioactive victims in a ruse to sweep her away from the clutches of the bikers. "This woman has been contaminated by toxic fallout!" he shouts. "I'm talking about slow death! Two-headed babies! Baldness!"

Kramer quickly slips out of the scene, belittling its importance by never referencing the possible molestation again, and reducing it to filler between lighthearted comedic sketches. Kramer relegates rape to just a setup for Clifford's punch line.

Later in the film, when Ray (Chris Nash), a mysterious, reappearing stalker, attempts to

sexually victimize Kelly, Kramer falters again by treating it with irrelevance. After Kelly knees the assailant, Clifford, Margo, and CeCe pounce the attacker in choreography similar to a Three Stooges short.

"WHILE MODERN GIRLS IS AN INTERPRETATION OF A ROSENBERG FILM, A CHICK-FLICK MADE UNDER THE CONTROL OF A MAN, ASSAULT OF THE KILLER BIMBOS IS A ROSENBERG FILM. IT'S A WOMAN'S INTERPRETATION OF A MAN'S FILM."

After the arrest of Ray, Margo confronts Kelly. "Kelly was almost raped tonight," Margo says. With a moment of rare assessment at hand, Kelly finally has to respond due to the straightforward inquiry. However, she responds with dismissal. "I'm okay, Margo. It's all right," Kelly utters. Although Kelly's answer could be accurate because of the shock she just endured and the emotional detachment from her father and boyfriends, it does not excuse Kramer from jumping right into a new scene with CeCe rushing to the airport for one last grasp at fairy-tale love with Bruno X. Who cares about the victimizing of Kelly, Kramer argues with his frantic direction, when a fantastical climax looms ever closer and Clifford can drive through a security railing?

It wasn't lost on critics. Roger Ebert found the handling of rape by the filmmakers to be revolting and in poor taste. "[The pool-table scene] seems to be a direct steal from the infamous New England rape case from a few years ago and what were the writer and director thinking of when they put that scene in there? I don't think they like women very much," he preached on Siskel and Ebert.

According to Rosenberg's interview at ModernGirlsMovie.com, Tom Coleman, an executive producer on the film, later admitted that Rosenberg should have taken the reigns. "After the film was made, Tom Coleman admitted that I should have directed this film," she wrote. "It would have had more character and personality." Even though it's still slathered with sweetness (especially Gibb) and humor, *Modern Girls*' character and personality is left murmuring under Kramer's sleek commercial artistry.

Rosenberg wouldn't give her input or leave her personality and character on the sidelines for her next project. In order to attain control over her next film, Rosenberg would have to direct like a man. She'd have

to be a Kramer, or, in this case, a Charles Band and act like she didn't care much for women. She'd have to adapt to fit the style of her next film's genre — at least externally.

Underneath the layers of predictable, seemingly objectifying clichés, Rosenberg would embed a feminist message to shatter the glass ceiling of male directors. The hard-up audiences would think they were about to drool over a skin flick, but in 1988, when they peeled their eyes off of a Ginger Lynn porno long enough to watch something else, what they would see would be *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*.

While *Modern Girls* is an interpretation of a Rosenberg film, a chick-flick made under the control of a man, *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* is a Rosenberg film. It's a woman's interpretation of a man's film. And it's a movie seemingly at odds with itself using a script that battles the industry that has closed doors on Rosenberg in the past through its title, characters, sexuality, and plot.

A mix of self-deprecating camp and pure unadulterated silliness, *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* follows the cross-country road trip of two go-go dancers, Lulu (Elizabeth Kaitan) and Peaches (Christina Whitaker) and their kidnapped-victim-turned-party-pal, Darlene (Tammara Souza) after they're framed for murdering their boss, Shifty Joe (David Marsh) by underworld hit man Big Vinnie (Mike Muscat).

With a humor-drenched theatrical trailer teasing dimwitted female protagonists in easily removable tops ("Call them bad, call them beautiful, call them brainless," the narrator exclaims), *Assault of the Killer*



Bimbos first manipulates the audience into expecting a degrading foray into sleaze with its title. It's the word bimbo that first coaxes the audience into expecting bikini-clad babes eager to dole out celluloid fantasies, but it's also one of a myriad of behaviors that the script discourages (even if it also coins and encourages the use of the word, scute which is an adjective meaning that a woman is "kind of sexy and kind of cute").

By naming the film *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*, Rosenberg constructs a paradox that'll be apparent throughout the film. While the title encourages the behavior, inviting crowds to label women as bimbos, the film itself argues for the opposite action. "Don't you know that is the most demeaning word a guy can call a girl?" Peaches screams at her former employer after he spews the offensive slur. Peaches denounces the word bimbo, but more so she's denouncing it in a film called *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*.

The word bimbo lays the groundwork for the film's battles between the marketing of female objectification to the male audience and the message that it hides beneath the objectification. Reaching well beyond the semantics of the title, this struggle between the mores of the *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* script and the reality of the sexploitation-industry also materializes in the most obvious attraction of the genre: sexuality and nudity.

As riddled with sexuality as it is, the world of *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* approaches it on the female's own terms, not a man's. While an Empire Pictures film like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama* depicts

the possessed female characters as using their bare bodies to lure men by the hook of their male hormones, *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* discredits this idea. After entering a greasy, middle-of-nowhere diner to a room of trucker's whistles and catcalls, Lulu bows her head. Peaches, however, flaunts her self-confidence. "The way a girl dresses is her statement — if a guy can't handle it..." Peaches says before being cut off. She's speaking as much to the inhabitants of the truck stop, those male chauvinists who are making crude jokes about breasts resembling donuts and slapping the waitresses on their rears, as she is to those inhabitants of the movie theater who are craving to see the expected gratuitous flashes of "boobs" (and who probably also compare them to donuts).

While the film includes the obligatory female nude scenes, it's done so on conditions other than the audience's expectations. In order to fully contrast the expectations with the results, it must first be established what those expectations entail.

The colleagues of *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* are those flicks in the Bimbo Collection (a term used when Cult Movies, a Charles Band-distributed home video label, rereleased them as Collector's Editions on VHS). One of which is the aforementioned *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama*, which flaunts roughly six minutes of nudity. However, *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* sneaks its bosom-baring in at a total of six seconds (a shock to viewers of the trailer, one of whom on YouTube commented that it's "like 5 seconds away from being hard core porn" after viewing the trailer).

Along with its nudity being visually berated into bite-sized increments, its indictment is also explicitly stated. While the actresses (specifically Kaitan) may flash flesh, the characters condemn it. Lulu performs poorly in her debut dance at the Aladdin-a-Go-Go, wailing her arms about and jerking her head in the most epileptic of ways, as her DIY-outfit of plastic fruit stapled to a bra quickly diminishes to its sheerest of fabrics. "What do you think you're doing?" Shifty Joe exclaims. "This ain't no crummy strip joint!" And these aren't strippers. They're go-go dancers (and the go-go, according to Peaches is a "highly respected art-form" and "interpreted dance in a rock-and-roll format").

It's nudity on Rosenberg's conditions, nudity that is too minimal to be gratuitous — and if a guy can't handle it...

While the characters occasionally use their sexuality to advance their standing, it's never without regret. Even though Stevens in *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama* shamelessly sheds her clothes to murder fraternity nerds, Peaches would rather risk prison time than kink it up with Broadway-producer and all-around "perv" Barry Shemgman for a coveted role on the stage. "I made it with guys for a lot less before, but this guy was a fucking creep," Peaches explains to Lulu just minutes into their getaway. "He handcuffs me to his German Shepherd and makes me wear a Wonder Woman mask — so I popped him one." When Peaches and Lulu demand that Darlene seduce the hit man into their hotel room so they can capture him, she agrees yet continues to be reluctant, shouting, "I cannot believe I'm doing this!"

The message is clear: *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* will provide sexuality, but it'll only be on its terms. When the cops pull the girls over, they order the luscious trio to "spread 'em." The cops probe further, remarking that they want to see "what's under those pretty dresses." With probably as much velocity as she attacked the sadomasochistic animal-lover Barry Shmegman, Peaches physically reacts, reverse crescent-kicking the officers, revving up their car, and hightailing it out into a high-speed chase. If the girls of *Assault of the Kill Bimbos* were the girls of *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama* then they would have had hot, simulated, male-genitalia-obstructed sex with the police in exchange for their freedom, an excuse for the filmmakers to cram a few minutes of excessive nudity.



It doesn't, because the film professes that sexuality should be judged on the individual's decision, not any audience. No moment in *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* expresses this sentiment better than when surfer nitwit and romantic interest Wayne-O (Nick Cassavetes), upon catching a glimpse of Lulu after her makeover by Peaches and Darlene, remarks, "I think you look like shit. A good-looking babe like you don't need to wear no makeup." What's right for one woman isn't right for another, and what *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* needs isn't what *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama* shills.

And those sexploitation fans of that all-imposing, all-deciding male demographic who have declared what kind of sexuality

to expect in a film named *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*? They're in the film. The leering crowds are the owners of the Aladdin-a-Go-Go, the police officers, the truck drivers, the hotel owners, the gas-station attendants. All the authority positions are assumed by men, those who are consumed with defacing the bimbos.

However, while men run the world of *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*, they're not the center of it. The camera does not linger on the gas-station attendant and his pursuit to rip off unsuspecting marks and it doesn't follow Big Vinnie as he runs from the heat of his latest hit. It's how the women, the "bimbos," react to Big Vinnie's actions, and how they combat the gas-station attendant's unscrupulous behavior (for those unfamiliar

with how it pans out, they Super Glue his hands to the wall, even though Peaches is sure that he thought they were about to glue his hands to his "you-know-what").

It's indicative of the audience and their inability to be the star. Even though the audience, the ones who seemingly have the power to decide which movies become a hit, and even though the owner of Empire was a man who decided which films got released, sexploitation is not about them. All the Empire Pictures sexploitation films, not only *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*, revolve around the fairer sex. No matter how they're portrayed or how they're written into precarious positions, the scantily-clad bombshells of the Bimbo Collection and

sexploitation can't be replaced with men. The babes in the *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-Rama* would be far less attractive to the hormonally overloaded boys who watch the film for the nudity had the babes been hairy, slightly overweight dudes. And *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* probably would have sold a lot less tickets had it been named *Assault of the Killer Mimbos*. Men can do everything in the sexploitation genre but be what the audience wants to see. Men may be able to organize the show, but they can't be the show.

However, for that one film, they were not only the show, but they made the show as well. It's much like the scene in *Assault of the Killer Bimbos* when the Sheriff (Arel Blanton) barges in the hotel room well after Peaches, Darlene, and Lulu have just incapacitated Big Vinnie with a baton and hairspray. "I told you I'd save you, Darlene," the Sheriff mentions. "Excuse me, cowboy, but we saved ourselves, thank you very much," Peaches reminds him. It's as if Peaches is Rosenberg's on-screen counterpart, telling the audience, "We did this one ourselves, thank you very much." In the battles of *Assault of the Killer Bimbos*, it's the message that won: the message that a woman can play by a man's rules and still retain her integrity.

While constant project cancellations and developmental hell derailed Rosenberg's film career, alienating her from the industry (she's now an in-demand author, journalist, artist and a Feng Shui consultant with clients that include Tom Hanks, John Travolta, and Tom Cruise just to name a few), Rosenberg is still the quintessential 1980s female filmmaker. She's the filmmaker who's essential, yet deemed replaceable when it comes to the director's chair. She's the filmmaker who wrote *Modern Girls*, developed its story, constructed the characters, and lived it, yet couldn't be considered to make it. She's the artist; the star; the personality and character missing from other films; the bimbo kicking the grab-happy police, the crasher of ceilings.

And if a guy can't handle it...

(Special thanks to the owner of *ModernGirlsMovie.com*, Jenny Day, for her assistance in this piece.)