

Truth and consequences

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Adrian Lyne's *Unfaithful* is more graphic in its portrayal of the act, but it comes no closer than most recent films to confronting the issues surrounding adultery. Once again, it is the physical activity, not the consequences, that gets most of the attention. *Unfaithful* starts out horribly and ends on equally shaky ground, with only an involving second act helping to prop it up.

The film centers on the Sumner family, which lives in a ritzy suburb of New York City. Husband Edward (Richard Gere) runs a successful armored car business, while his younger wife, Connie (Diane Lane), spends her days taking care of social activities and school events revolving around their eight-year-old, Charlie (Erik Per Sullivan). They appear to be a happy-enough family, but we know that something is amiss right off the bat as Connie starts the day amid a heavy windstorm (the winds of passion and all that--Lyne's approach is not subtle).

This ill-wind blows the high-heeled Connie to the ground when she's in SoHo that afternoon, and later into the arms of Paul Martel (Olivier Martinez), a hunky book seller who starts licking his chops the moment he spots the wounded Connie. The fact that they meet-cute by running into each other as Paul is carrying a stack of books (the oldest cliché in screenwriting) suggests that writers Alvin Sargent and William Broyles Jr., who have done far better work, are already grasping for straws. The initial seduction scenes are also clichéd, with lots of heavy breathing and poetry reading, as Paul zeroes in on his prey, a passionate woman who seems to be searching for something missing in her cozy and outwardly satisfying suburban life.

The film picks up steam when it focuses on Lane, a fine and underrated actress who showed how terrific she could be in the television mini-series *Lonesome Dove* and later in the unheralded *A Walk on the Moon*. Connie's dangerous obsession with Paul comes across loud and clear, particularly on the train ride home after their first sexual encounter, where she twists, writhes and cries as she remembers every detail of what has just happened. Lane is so good, in fact, that she is able to keep her head above water even when subjected to a series of patented "spontaneous sex scenes"

that look and feel like outtakes from old episodes of *Red Shoe Diaries*.

Eventually, Edward finds out what is going on, and his anguish at being betrayed is palpable. But just when it appears that the film might try seriously to examine the marital repercussions of betrayal, the movie becomes a story about murder.

There have been films willing to take a longer look at the intricacies and ramifications of adultery, like Liv Ullmann's *Faithless*, based on an Ingmar Bergman script, which is ruthless in analyzing the ways lying and deceit can destroy a relationship. And the sections on adultery and "coveting thy neighbor's wife" in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Decalogue* burrow into the psychological motivations of the characters. There is also *Betrayal*, based on the Harold Pinter play, which picks apart the root causes of adultery by telling the story of the affair in reverse.

Unfaithful has been roundly applauded by critics, which I fear will encourage the talented Lyne to keep making hollow films like *Unfaithful*, *Fatal Attraction* and *Indecent Proposal*, while shying away from his more challenging efforts like *Foxes* and *Jacob's Ladder*. This acclaim suggests that we are getting just the sort of shallow filmmaking that we deserve.