WHO REMEMBERS MAMA? 58 minutes, color, 1978. Made by Cynthia Salzman Mondell and Allen Mondell. Rental $75, Purchase $550 (also available in videocassette) from Media Projects, Inc., 5215 Homer, Dallas, TX 75206.

*Who Remembers Mama?* is a film that provides vivid images of older women injured by divorce, but one that aims at accomplishing much more. It intends to make evident that the distress of displaced homemakers is a consequence of their having devoted themselves to the roles of wives and mothers, therefore permitting themselves to become financially dependent on their husbands. It also argues that power in our society resides with men and that women are largely defenseless against exploitation by ungrateful husbands, abetted as the husbands are by a male-staffed legal system. But the arguments of the film are weakened by incoherence in the film’s sequences, by a one-sided and sometimes strident presentation of materials and by occasional inconsistencies.

The film begins with an anniversary party where a couple, prosperous, good-looking, Jewish, are celebrating thirty years of marriage. The friends of the couple are funny and likeable, the occasion is warm with reminiscences. It is a marvelous sequence and only later are we aware that it has nothing to do with the rest of the film. Indeed, its message that some people grow old together and remain happy with each other misdirects the viewer, for this is a film about the discarding of women by husbands who have grown tired of them.

We cut from this first sequence to a nightclub comic, alone against a flat backdrop. The comic tells a series of jokes about divorced men being taken to the cleaners by their former wives. None of the jokes is funny, and only the first is supplied with a laugh track. Then we cut to a woman, older, real, saying, "I have nothing." She tells how she lost her home and everything in it to her husband and his new woman. Then we cut to a bridal shop and a woman sitting in front of a mannequin dressed in a bridal gown. We are told by a subtitle that the woman teaches Women’s Studies. She says that no-fault divorce is leaving women with even less protection than they had had under the previous system. She gives statistics about how badly women fare after divorce. Then we cut to a lawyer talking about how divorce is an adversary procedure and how he tries in court to win his cases, no matter what he has to do. And then, finally, ten minutes into the film, we come to the device that is supposed to give the film structure, a trial for divorce. Not an actual trial, to be sure, although it takes place in an actual courtroom with an actual judge and actual attorneys. Rather it is scripted and uses actors as its divorcing protagonists. However, we are assured that what we are to see is not essentially different from trials occurring every day.

We begin with the husband on the witness stand. He is about fifty, good-looking in the fashion of a faded stage actor. He is suing for divorce because there is no
communication in his marriage. Pressed by his own lawyer, he admits to an affair with a younger woman. When his wife is on the stand she says that she doesn’t want the divorce. She has been a good housekeeper, although not, as the man’s lawyer forces her to admit, as sexually compliant as the man might have wanted. The two are battling over custody: each wants the children. The woman is badgered by the man’s attorney into conceding that the man, who intends after the divorce to give her as little as possible from his thoroughly adequate income, will be better fixed to provide for the children. The man’s case is supported by testimony from a male psychologist who says that the man has been visiting him to learn how to be a better father. The judge’s decision is not given, but the viewer is left with the feeling that the woman’s chances are at best fifty-fifty, and that this is thoroughly unfair. At the very end we have a voice-over saying that whatever happens the woman must lose, since even if she gains custody she will not be able to provide adequately for the children.

The court scenes are interspersed with sequences of a support group attended by five women and with interviews with an older divorced woman working at a low-paid job, with a single mother worried about whether her husband can be counted on to send support checks and with a woman who is heading a program for displaced homemakers. All these interruptions of the trial are intended to amplify points the trial is making. Thus, when the woman whose husband is seeking divorce says that she never prepared herself to be self-supporting the film cuts to an interview with the woman who is working at a low-paid job who describes her difficulty in finding work.

The film is slow to make its point, just as it was slow to begin. After we leave the trial there is an interview with the woman’s lawyer, followed by an interview with a congressman who comments on legislation that might be helpful to women, and another appearance by the specialist in women’s studies. The specialist in women’s studies says that the problems that have been displayed aren’t anyone’s fault, that society is changing and these women are caught in the crunch. And then the mannequin wearing the bride’s costume is caught in a freeze frame. But no, this isn’t the end. We are back again to the woman in the low-paid job who says that she did just what everyone expected of her and wound up with nothing; and then, finally, we see from the back a woman walking downstairs, turning out a hall light, and walking out the front door, as though never to return. Background music: “The Night We Were Wed.”

In this film there is too much reaching for effects, many of which don’t come off. The ironic treatment of the hopes of marriage through the display of the bride’s costume and the choice of background music is not really justified by showing that for some women marriage has led to disaster. The opening scene in which the vows of marriage were maintained for thirty years undercuts the idea that marriage is, through and through, a fraud. And, in any event, the point of the irony is inconsistent with the point of the film: the irony questions marriage, while the film questions men.

There is in the film a strident note contributed by its selection of materials, by the scripting of the divorce suit, and by the editorializing of those who speak for the film’s makers. Again and again the message is that older women are discarded by callous husbands and then shrugged off by an equally callous and largely male-dominated society. The specialist in women’s studies may say that the distress the film pictures is no one’s fault, but everything else in the film argues a different brief one in which the fault is society’s insistence that women accept dependency on men. The film is insensitive to the anguish both parties feel in any separation, to the damage that any separation must do to both parties’ financial situation, to the extent to which men, as well as women, experience loss on separation from their children, to the extent to which divorce is a family matter. The film instead assimilates divorce to the on-going problems of women and particularly older women. Although older divorced women