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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Rob Waring](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#waring)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0274812)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A261189)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |     The extreme metaphor of S&M starkly highlights the power dynamics of workplace sexual harassment. This film ought to be part of any course or program intended to prepare lawyer for the challenges of running a practice without trampling the self-respect of their staff. | |  | | --- | | ***Secretary***  by Rob Waring  Although on some levels a kinky love story, the film *Secretary* is one of the most provocative workplace films ever made. Most anyone who has ever worked under the supervision of others is familiar with the obsessive boss, the one who micro-manages or compulsively focuses on minute details. Dilbert, the wildly successful cartoon sendup of the modern office environment, mines this behavior for its comic value everyday. Scott Adams, the cartoonist, seems to get most of his material from the actual work experiences of his readers, who are encouraged to send him material. *Secretary* shows how deep the veins of workplace torture go through its dogged pursuit of the depths of sadomasochism (S&M) found in one boss/subordinate relationship. The film sheds new light on dominance behavior in the workplace.  The possibility that a supervisor's neurosis can sometimes fit in with personality dysfunctions of subordinates is not virgin territory. Yet, this film challenges modern boundaries by presenting its heroine as a special case, a former mental patient whose illness is far worse than her submission to the obsessive domination of her boss. In this way, the viewer's perception of his cruelty is blunted. What is left is a fantastical story of how two dysfunctional people sometimes find compatibility in an office setting.  *Secretary* has two legal angles. The first is that the boss, played by James Spader, is a lawyer, and evidences the barely repressed anger stereotypical of lawyers. The second is that his methods of controlling his secretary, played by Maggie Gyllenhaal, quickly take on the dimensions of sexual harassment that all too frequently pervade relations between domineering, successful men and struggling, young women trying to make a living. The extreme metaphor of S&M starkly highlights the power dynamics of workplace sexual harassment. This film ought to be part of any course or program intended to prepare lawyer for the challenges of running a practice without trampling the self-respect of their staff.  Early on, the film visually hints that the lawyer may be domineering and cruel to subordinates. The first tip-off to the lawyer's personality is the "trophy" corridor leading to his door, complete with designer lighting, and the dark, power decor of his office. The second clue is his permanent "Secretary Wanted" sign, surrounded by a border of lights that can be switched on and off like a motel vacancy sign, suggesting that high turnover is routine.  This unconventional romantic fantasy skirts some real world problems. For example, although the secretary quickly grows to need the abuse dealt by her boss, deliberately making mistakes to bring on his wrath, off screen that perception is a huge part of the problem in abusive situations. Often, the abuser is somehow convinced that the victim wants the abuse, just as many child molesters persuade themselves that their victims invited the abuse or will find it beneficial. The fact that it is not welcome does not seem to enter some abusers' minds.  If the harassment portrayed in this film were to have led to litigation with consent as a defense, it would becomes the task of the adjudicator to examine the facts and decide whether the defendant's perception of consent was reasonable under the circumstances. The appeal of the lawyer's abusive behavior to a former mental patient might be understandable, but it might not be reasonable because he knew that she was unusually susceptible to abuse. At two points during the film, the lawyer realizes he has crossed the line and tries to end the relationship. In both instances, her need proves stronger than his self-control and it literally forces his hand.  The film does illustrate one way that lawyers should realize they have a problem. If their former employees must compensate for the loss of their jobs by answering S&M ads in the newspaper, perhaps the work environment could use some restructuring.  Posted November 27, 2002 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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