

Sex & the cinema

a lecture by Brian McNair

introduction

Tom Hickman in *The Sexual Century* has argued that the cinema “gave shape and form to sexual desire” in the twentieth century, and that it has been “one of the main engines of the sexual revolution”.

In this lecture I want to explore how cinema has represented sex, from the era of the stag reel and the silent screen goddesses to the culture of (almost) anything goes exemplified by such films *A Hole In My Heart* (Lucas Moodyson) and *Shortbus*.

We’ll see how cinema has steadily pushed the boundaries of the possible in sexual representation, shattering taboos as it reflects them back at us.

If cinema can’t be given the credit, on its own, for changing society’s moral values, or our attitudes to sex and sexuality, or for progressive trends such as the rise of women’s rights and gay liberation, I want to argue that it has certainly reflected those changes, and often anticipated them. Cinema is a key place in the culture where we have, as societies and as sexual communities of various kinds, talked

about sex, made it visible, and thus created the climate where progressive sex-political change becomes possible.

Show us the porn, you might be thinking, and I will, some at least, because porn is part of the story of sex in the cinema. But sex in the cinema is more than just what we see, full frontal as it were. It is about sexuality and eroticism, which is just as much about what is hidden as what is revealed. Often, that which is covered up, or only partly visible, is more sensual than the clinical explicitness of porn, and of much of cinematic sex today.

Early days

But let's start with cinema's early history. As with most media, from the wall paintings of the cavemen to the internet, it was sex, and the compulsion to depict sex, that fuelled the development of the moving image in the early twentieth century.

Linda Williams argues that modern moving image pornography grew indirectly out of Edward Muybridge's stop-motion experiments, published as *Animal Locomotions* in the late nineteenth century. These not only pioneered the technology and aesthetics of the moving image in general but also, she suggests, 'fetishized' the female body for the benefit of the male viewer (1990).

One of the first recognised genres to emerge in film culture was the stag reel – silent films, sexually explicit, shown in smoke-filled, men-

only spaces. Like all pornography before and since, their appeal lay in their transgressive quality.

Like most pornography, stag reels assumed what we can call 'the male gaze' – a man's (and a heterosexual man's in particular) perspective on the sex act. Men doing things to women; women doing things for the benefit of the male spectator; the pleasure of the male as the primary focus of the sexual performance; the objectification of the female body.

Stag reels, like all porn, made public what had hitherto been the realm of the private. By revealing the secrets of the female body and the sex act, stag reels broke the moral taboos of Victorian society. They put the obscene, in the scene.

Pornography has evolved since then, of course – sound, colour, gay porn, porn-for-women, porn for every kind of sexual fetishist. It has lost much of its heterosexist exclusivity – but it still works in the same way, no matter by whom and for whom it is made, representing desires and activities which are in some sense taboo – cheating housewives, randy nuns, nymphomaniac secretaries.

In pornography, nothing matters but the sex – plots are redundant, scripts and acting mere excuses for moving from one sexual episode to another. The purpose of porn is to turn you on, in a very physical sense. Linda Williams notes that

Pornography aims frankly at arousal; it addresses the body of its observers in their sexual desires and pleasures. It boldly sells this sexual address to viewers as a commodity and it does not let aesthetic concerns or cultural prohibitions limit what it shows.(1994, p.3)

Clip 1 – ‘Good Morning fuck’

If pornographic cinema is about sex, then non-pornographic cinema is about sexual desire, and has indeed, as Hickman says, reflected changing fashions in feminine and masculine attractiveness since its invention. Clara Bow, Marilyn Monroe, Uma Thurman; Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Tom Cruise, Russell Crowe. Cinema has been the cultural platform from which, more than any other, our desires are given shape and personality, in the form of our movie stars.

One spouse, one bed

If our societal notions of what is sexy in a man or a woman have changed, so too has the moral climate within which sex in the cinema has been treated. Pornographic film has been produced and distributed mainly in the cultural underground, outside of the mainstream and out of the reach of the censor (that indeed is a large part of its transgressive appeal).

Mainstream narrative cinema, on the other hand, has always been subject to prevailing moral codes, and to legal regulation such as the

Hays Code, which governed film production in the US between 1930 and 1966. Before 1930, American cinema could be quite raunchy, with the occasional flash of nipple or thigh. *Inspiration* (1916) featured the now-forgotten Audrey Munson in a nude role. (see too Hedy Lamarr, Busby Berkeley)

The Hays Code was one product of a puritanical trend in early twentieth century American culture which also targeted pornography (such as it was at that time), radio drama, theatre and other media. Driven by religious conservatives, but also commonplace amongst liberals and leftists, it reflected anxiety amongst cultural elites about the vulnerability of an emerging mass audience to corruption and degradation at the hands of popular culture. In the 1940s, for example, the leading German marxist intellectuals Adorno and Horkheimer wrote of Hollywood:

This bloated pleasure apparatus adds no dignity to men's lives. The example of movie stars encourages young people to experiment with sex and later leads to broken marriages.

The solution? Strict policing of any cultural material likely to be morally harmful.

The Hays Code addressed cinema in particular, and declared in relation to sex that :

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.

b. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.

c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element.

4. Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.

5. White slavery shall not be treated.

6. Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.

In practical terms this meant, for example, that married couples had to be shown sleeping in single beds.

After the 2nd world war, as consumerism and youth culture flourished in the 1950s, and idols such as Marlon Brando, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe traded in their smouldering sexualities, the Hays

Code began to jar with the shifting zeitgeist. The sexual revolution of the 1960s finished it off, and it was abolished in 1966.

That year, Andy Warhol produced *Blow Job*, about well, a blow job, filmed in real time in the Factory. Warhol's silent film suggested more than it showed, and has become symbolic of the idea that when it comes to sex in the cinema, less is more. Though maybe not quite so little as that... This was a film-maker, remember, who gave us 8 hours of a man sleeping.

That same year, Michelangelo Antonioni made *Blow-Up* (1967) the first English-language film to show a woman's pubic hair. From then on, film makers have been pushing the boundaries of the possible in sexual representation.

Four years after *Blow-Up* another Italian, Bernardo Bertolucci, was responsible for the film that, to this day, epitomises sex in the cinema at its most transgressive. *Last Tango In Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972). Today it seems rather pretentious, comic even, as in the scene where Marlon Brando's character suggests some novel things to do with butter. But then, its story of obsessive, self-destructive desire was ground-breaking, very controversial, and very, very successful at the box office.

A sophisticated take on sexuality has often featured in the work of one of the greatest British directors, Nicolas Roeg. *Don't Look Now*, from 1974, contains what is still thought of by many as the sexiest

sex scene ever shot, played by Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie. Roeg was also involved in 1969's *Performance*, during which it's said that Mick Jagger actually had sex with his co-star Anita Pallenberg on camera (much to the annoyance of her then boy friend, Keith Richards). Roeg directed David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, one of the few films that disproves the rule that musicians should never be allowed to think they can act, and contains some of Roeg's most erotic scenes.

Roeg is one of the cinematic auteurs to have placed sexuality at the forefront of their work, aspiring to represent the erotic, rather than merely showing sex. Other include Peter Greenaway, David Lynch, Michael Winterbottom, and Nagisa Oshima, whose 1976 film *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976) tackled the taboo subject of sadomasochism and sexual obsession with unprecedented explicitness.

All of these film-maker were somewhat marginal to mainstream cinema culture. But even at the heart of Hollywood, the late 1960s onwards was a period of increasing interest in, and engagement with sexuality. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Bob Rafelson's remake of the 1946 noir, featured Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange in a torrid kitchen table scene that guaranteed the film's commercial success, bolstered by the tag line, 'You Will Feel the Heat'.

Porno-chic

The cinematic liberalism unleashed by the sexual revolution, and which made all the above films possible, went a step further in the early 1970s, when pornography itself broke into the mainstream, in the form of *Deep Throat*.

Deep Throat opened the era of porno-chic, or I should say, the first era of porno-chic. The term was coined by a journalist, as he observed the phenomenon of celebrities, grandmothers, god-fearing christians, all queueing in New York to see a film which was, in essence, a somewhat surreal celebration of the blow job. But where Andy Warhol hid it off camera and let the viewer's imagination do the work, *Deep Throat* thrust it in your face, literally, and led a series of hard core porn films into the mainstream cinema.

We Brits had our own version of porno-chic, though being British, we were a little more reticent about the subject. While American cinema audiences were watching Harry Reems being deep throated by Linda Lovelace, in more conservative Britain we were having a bit of a snigger in classic films such as *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, (Val Guest, 1974), *Confessions of a Pop Performer* and, lest we forget, *Confessions of a Driving Instructor*. Periodically revived as much-loved examples of retro-chic from the decade that taste forget, the great British sex comedies of the 1970s reflected the UK's traditionally coy attitude to sex – they weren't very sexy, even to a kid like me who managed to con his way into the cinema for an illicit peak. They were essentially sexed-up Carry On movies, and not nearly as funny.

But funny or not, cash in they did. They were the most successful British-produced films of their time, proving that even bad sex, done with a nudge and a wink, could sell cinema seats to an audience starved of it.

Deep Throat and the wave of porno-chic it generated reflected a time before anti-porn feminism demonised the genre, and its bizarre plot reflects that naivete. What? A woman with a clitoris in her throat, who can't have an orgasm without oral sex? Great idea! And very convenient for us men.

Anti-porn feminism:- expand

The mounting critique of pornography which developed in the 1970s, from both feminist and moral conservative directions, was reflected later in the 70s in films like Hardcore (Paul Schrader, 1979). If Deep Throat was porno-chic, this was porno-fear, with the industry and those who worked in it being presented as hellish and demonic. In Hardcore, George C. Scott plays a religious patriarch with a bad wig, in search of a daughter who has run off to join the LA porn industry. As he pretends to be a porn producer auditioning likely performers, his, and our disgust with the whole sleazy business, is total.

The film 8mm, directed by Joel Schumacher is 1998, is a more recent example of porno-fear and, as Schrader's Hardcore was a reply to

Deep Throat, a reaction to the second wave of porno-chic represented by films like Boogie Nights (I'll say more about that later).

The 1980s

In those days, and into the mid-1980s, it was still possible to talk about sex, in cinema as elsewhere, without mention of the H-word. HIV, AIDS. But as the virus emerged and the epidemic spread in the late 1980s, talking about sex in public became a matter of public health, as well as a familiar tactic for selling culture. Thereafter, sex in the cinema was often infused with anxiety and tension, and a growing recognition of gay sex which, not least because of HIV and AIDS, was forcing its way onto the political and cultural agenda. From now on, sex on screen was not just transgressive, it was dangerous.

Capturing this mood was Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*, made in 1987, the film which produced the phrase 'bunny boiler'. Glenn Close's character, Alex, is a single, successful, sexually assertive, professional woman, who has a one night stand with family man Michael Douglas. He regrets it, of course, and tries to walk away, but Alex is having none of it. She transforms from everyman's dream into his nightmare – a deranged home wrecker prepared to go to any lengths to get her man, including boiling the kid's bunny rabbit. In traditional Hollywood style, Alex is a bad girl, who in the end pays the price. Many critics saw her as a metaphor for AIDS, and a warning to family men everywhere not to stray off the marital path in pursuit of unsafe sex.

The 1990s

Five years later, there was another kind of bad girl stalking the bedroom. In Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*, Sharon Stone's sexually assertive bad girl gets away with it. Here is a woman who may or may not be a serial killer, who is bi-sexual, who manipulates and dominates the men who come into her orbit. Unusually, however, in Hollywood's moral universe, she gets away with it.

So what had changed? The global celebrity of a certain Madonna Louise Ciccone. (a brief history of Madonna...)

Back to *Basic Instinct*. The scene where she is being questioned by Michael Douglas and his male detective colleagues exemplifies the post-Madonna, post-feminist climate of the 1990s, in which women were recognised as having sexual desires, and as having the right to explore them with just as much enthusiasm as men.

Reviewing Sharon Stone's performance in *Basic Instinct*, one critic called her a 'Madonna who can act', and there is no doubt in my mind that without Ms Ciccone's sexually transgressive performances in the *Sex* book and elsewhere, *Basic Instinct*'s depiction of female sexuality would not have been possible.

The return of porno-chic

The Sex book was also a homage to pornography, though, and the 1990s was the decade of the second wave of porno-chic - films which, though not in themselves pornographic (as Deep Throat had unquestionably been) were interested in exploring the world of pornography – the industry, the performers, the consumers. Unlike Paul Schrader's Hardcore, films like Boogie Nights and The People versus Larry Flynt avoided the demonisation of porn. In these films, porn was just a business, a surrogate family even, as in Boogie Nights, where Burt Reynolds' producer is a benevolent father figure to the collection of waifs and strays who have fallen under his wing.

Milos Forman's The People Versus Larry Flynt dramatised the life of the infamous owner of Hustler magazine, but again, refusing to demonise him as a misogynist, and instead to explore the issues of free speech and motivation which Flynt's long battles with the moral majority in America threw up. Forman almost seems to be comparing Flynt with another talented anti-establishment outside about whom he made a film, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

The film was nominated for two Oscars.

This was a period in which sex on screen could still cause controversy. David Cronenberg's Crash, released in 1996, was based on J.G. Ballard's novel about people, including disabled people, who have sex in cars.

The film became the focus of a media panic in the UK. National Heritage Secretary Virginia Bottomley urged local authorities to refuse to screen the film, and Westminster Council threatened to ban it unless specific cuts were made, notably a sex scene involving a disabled woman played by Rosanna Arquette. The BBFC, after a long delay, passed it uncut in March 1997, after which Westminster banned the film, with other local authorities following suit. One Tory councillor suggested that the ban was justified because it might encourage dangerous driving.

With hindsight, the reaction to *Crash* was the last gasp of sexual censorship in the UK, the last occasion on which there was anything like significant public controversy around the sexual content of a film. In 2000 the rules regarding film censorship were relaxed (because of the impact of NICTS, Europeanisation, more sex talk in public because of HIV/AIDS/feminism/gay rights), allowing more explicit porn to be legally sold in the UK, and paving the way for UK releases of a wave of films which further broke the boundaries of sexual explicitness.

Films which could be defined as 'art', and shown in cinemas like this one, were able to push the boundaries furthest. Moral censors have always been most anxious about what the masses see...

Lars Von Triers *The Idiots*; Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible*; Lucas Moodyson's *A Hole In My Heart*. The sex in these films was rarely of the kind which could be described as erotic, but embedded in

powerful stories about social attitudes to disability, or how a random act of violence can ruin lives, or how working in the sex industry can be a rational choice for some people.

Part of this new wave was Catherine Breillat - a French feminist who used the new permissiveness of the late 1990s to explore female sexuality in ways which intentionally crossed the line between art and porn. *Romance* (1998), adopts the structure of a porn movie as it follows a young woman around Paris, in search of some kind of sexual satisfaction, which she finds in a series of increasingly graphic encounters with strangers.

A much darker vision of sexuality was presented in the provocatively titled *Baise-Moi* which, in the nearest English translation I've read, means, if you'll excuse this kind of language on a Friday morning, 'fuck me'. Directed by Virginie Despente, the film is a post-feminist rape revenge thriller in which extreme violence and explicit sexuality combine to provide a genuinely transgressive experience. Very French.

Even this nihilistic, sexually violent film came and went to the UK screen with barely a mention in the *Daily Mail*. Now that almost anything was allowed, and the excitement of breaking taboos was gone, it really wasn't that interesting to anyone but the genuine film buff.

Breillat's countryman, Patrice Cherau, made *Intimacy* in 2001, starring Kerry Fox and Mark Ryland, and featuring the first explicit depiction of oral sex by an actress formerly starring in a Jane Campion movie.

This trend in British cinema continued with Michael Winterbottom's *Nine Songs*, the story of two people who meet, have sex in various positions, and then separate. It's a film about the evolution of a relationship, from birth to death, in which the sticky, squelchy bits are left in.

Nine Songs took only £200,000 at the British box office, which just goes to show that sex doesn't sell anymore, not necessarily, and not even if you get a front page article in the *Guardian*, as *Nine Songs* did, declaring that this is the 'most sexually explicit mainstream movie ever made'. *Shortbus*, too, was described on its release as the most sexually explicit ever shown in the mainstream cinema, and I'm inclined to agree. This is a film which gives the phrase 'don't try this at home' a whole new urgency. If any film screened at a mainstream cinema in 2008 can shock you, this one will, at the same time as making you laugh, and maybe even cry. It's a bit like 'Friends' with fucking. Again, though, no-one really noticed.

By 2008 the erotic charge, and commercial appeal of the taboo-breaking, transgressive cinema of the past had been replaced by general apathy.

Thank you, and let me now invite comments and questions.