

Screening sex

LINDA WILLIAMS, 2008

Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press

412 pp., ISBN 978 0 8223 4263 2, £75.00/\$89.95 (hardback); ISBN 978 0 8223 4285 4, £18.99/\$24.95 (paperback)

Sex in movies: what else can arouse, fascinate, disgust, bore, instruct and incite us as much? In *Screening sex* Linda Williams courageously tackles this volatile subject. Focusing on the double meaning of 'to screen' as both revealing and concealing, she explores how sex has been relentlessly revealed in hardcore pornography and conspicuously concealed in the simulated sex acts of mainstream American cinema since the late 1960s.

The history of sexual representation is characterized by what Williams calls 'the long adolescence of American movies' (p. 25). From the beginning of cinema, exemplified by Thomas Edison's *The kiss* in 1896, till the end of the Hollywood Production Code and its prohibition against 'scenes of passion', illustrated by Andy Warhol's *Kiss* in 1963, a romantic kiss was all that was allowed to be seen. The kiss thus had an enormous electrical charge as the 'be-all and end-all' of movie sex (p. 49). In an interesting passage on the eroticism of orality, Williams suggests that women are drawn to the egalitarian reciprocity of the romantic kiss involving the same organs (unlike heterosexual intercourse), where 'mouths and tongues can interpenetrate in a potentially mutual give-and-take' (p. 49).

Adolescence eventually gave way to adulthood and more explicit sex acts came onto the screen. Carnal knowledge found its way into the movies first through sex talk, the emphasis being on the talking before and after, and not on the activity during the sex act. *The graduate* in 1967 is the first American mainstream film to show the sex act. It does so in what Williams calls the tame convention of a 'montage of Hollywood musical sexual

interlude', involving a lyrical conjunction of music, sound and image as a tasteful way of suggesting the sex act, which is both revealed (we know the couple has sex) and concealed (we do not see the fact of genital coupling; p. 82). The sounds of sex are important to confirm the reality of the act that is depicted.

The 1960s genres of sexploitation, blaxploitation and the avant-garde push the representation of sex further, until in 1972 two films change forever the attitude of the American audience towards on-screen sex, reflecting the sexual revolution that had taken place in society: art film *Last tango in Paris* and porno chic *Deep throat*. Cinema finally lost its sexual innocence. Both films were considered perverse for their explicit content (of anal sex and fellatio, respectively). While art cinema combines complex emotional relations with the performance of a simulated sex act, porno chic represents graphic sex with a minimum of narrative and a maximum of a wide yet standardized repertoire of sex acts. As sex had to be made visible, sexual display was focused on the visible climax of male ejaculation; the 'come shot' or 'money shot' became the staple ingredient of hardcore.

Whether erotic art or porn, the spectacle of non-normative sex is mostly heterosexual and certainly phallic. Williams therefore dedicates a full chapter to the fate of the female orgasm in mainstream Hollywood film, which she locates in the figure of Jane Fonda. Firmly embedding the films in the context of emerging discourses of sexology which proclaimed the clitoral orgasm, films like *Barbarella* (1968) and *Coming home* (1978) show Fonda to have multiple orgasms outside the phallic regime. She literally embodied the political slogan 'make love, not war'.

In another interesting chapter Williams explains how films like *Blue velvet* (1986) and *Brokeback mountain* (2005) brought primal scenes of several 'perversions', such as sado-masochism and homosexuality, onto the American screen for a general audience. Resisting a reading of the cinematic representation of sex as the liberation of repressed desires, Williams instead argues that these films show the tension between desire and the fear that inhibits but also eroticizes it. In Williams' view *Brokeback mountain* does not shatter the confinement of the gay closet, but 'glimpses inside and discovers the reasons for there being a closet in the first place' (p. 255).

In other chapters Williams explores the eroticism of foreign films, like the Japanese/French classic *In the realm of the senses* (1976) and European films of the 1990s, deftly analyzing the imagination of sex beyond the familiar formulas of either simulation or hardcore. The book focuses on sex in movies on large public screens, while audiences today predominantly watch sex on smaller private screens at home. In the last chapter Williams (briefly) discusses on-screen sex in the age of the Internet and of pornofication, finding little jewels like a website showing the 'pulsating vulvas' of female orgasms by amateurs defying the ubiquity of phallic pleasures (p. 321).

Screening sex is an intelligent account of how 'the very act of screening has become an intimate part of our sexuality' (p. 326). Throughout the book Williams stresses that screening sex involves our 'entire sensorium', activating our flesh and our senses (p. 20). We are thus back at the beginning: sex in the movies can arouse, fascinate, disgust, bore, instruct and incite us. Linda Williams' book helps us make sense of those spectatorial sensations and of the enjoyment they can bring us.

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