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Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Gill Woodhams

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Formal Conventions of Cinematic Sex

Representations of sex in cinema have taken a vast array of textual forms, a factor which presents a problem for a book such as this that seeks to map such broad terrain. Sex is the primary focus of genres such as soft-core and hard-core and each has an established set of conventions used in the depiction of sexual activity designed to attract particular target markets. It has already been noted that some of these conventions have at various points in time found their way into mainstream and art films. Sex and sexuality also appear in a more general way across most genres and styles. It is therefore difficult to make the case that sex in cinema is guided by a particular aim, mode or form (as with comedy or tragedy for instance). It should also be noted that sex in cinema is not simply an issue of formal content as the erotic dimensions of fantasy and desire also play a significant role in the way that spectators are sold films and the way they are engaged with. Potential audiences are often lured by the prospect of seeing certain stars in an erotic context and the reception of a film can be based on the solicitation of sexual or erotic investments on the part of the viewer. For example, the presence of an admired star might attract a viewer to watch a film in a genre that is not of immediate interest. Cinematic representations of sex and sexuality are subject to some very different types of moods, aesthetic forms and strategic narrative intent, yet it is possible to identify certain patterns, conventions and trends. Before going on to identify and explore the effects of genre, style, themes, narrative and textual devices on the representation of sex, it is useful to consider in more detail the way that the form of cinema itself has a significant role to play in the shaping of representations of sex.

One of the distinctive formal issues presented by cinematic sex is born of the specific nature of cinematic form. Cinema relies on a combination of visual and auditory devices to entertain and captivate audiences. It seems obvious to say that audiences are spectators of what is presented; some consideration of this factor is important as it is part of the specific nature of cinema that a story unfolds without direct intervention on the part of the viewer

(even if we might imagine or wish to do so). This is why some theorists have emphasised the role played by voyeurism in the pleasure of watching of a film. This does not mean that watching a movie is a form of cold observation, however, as there are many ways in which viewers can become intellectually, emotionally, even sexually engaged (boredom or disbelief might be experienced, yet even these are forms of emotional engagement). In the main, cinema trades precisely on its ability to involve and engage us with a story and characters; in this sense it is an affect-driven medium. For many film historians the history of cinema lies precisely in the development of techniques to facilitate greater spectator involvement. Most mainstream films, as well as many others, deploy continuity devices to enable audiences to focus on character and action rather than on form or production, for example. The aim of such continuity tactics is to encourage viewers to develop empathy with characters and the situations that they are faced with and aid in the process of suspension of disbelief. Soliciting emotional engagement is important to making a fictional narrative construct engrossing and believable in some way (no matter how outlandish the story or situation might be). Such involvement is, for many films, a prerequisite for audiences to be able to regard sex as part of a story. The 'continuity' approach to filmmaking does, however, raise some very interesting issues about what is constituted as 'valuable' in moral, aesthetic and institutional terms, and it is here that we are brought to the fraught debate of what constitutes *pornography*.

One way that cinematic pornography has been defined and separated from other film-based representations of sex lies in the extent to which a film makes scenes of sexual activity a part of a general storyline (this is often less ambiguous than defining pornographic films in terms of whether the sex is 'simulated' or 'acted'). Said in this way, it would appear that it is simply a matter of a formal and aesthetic distinction with no moral judgement attached (this 'aesthetic' approach is often used by regulators to skirt the moral implications of their judgements). The pejorative use of the 'pornography' label is often used to suggest that a film has no redeeming narrative or artistic value and is only preoccupied with exploiting the commercial gains of salacious content. By contrast, it is often the case that the shortened term 'porn' is used more affectionately by those who enjoy watching sex films. Whatever view one has of explicit sex films, it is nonetheless the case that like mainstream cinema even the most pared-down hard-core film is dependent on the use of established formal cinematic devices to facilitate the viewer's entry into the onscreen space, an aspect often sidelined by critics who argue loudly and in a generalised way for increased censorship of sexually explicit material.

The presentation of sex in mainstream cinema is often exhibited in conventionalised ways, which are wrought in terms of style, genre conventions and target audience. Many of the conventions used to represent sex in cinema are governed, at least in part, by the need to translate the very tactile experience of sex into an audiovisual medium. Certain themes, conventions and stylistic devices have been reiterated so regularly that they have come to provide powerful shorthand ways of invoking fairly complex ideas. Such devices may pro-

vide ways and means of suggesting sex without actually showing it. These devices can also be linked to the demands made on films that seek a broad audience, which must accord with the various classification criteria employed by regulatory bodies at a given time, such as the British Board of Film Classification or national equivalents.

One such device that has widespread use, to the extent that it has become something of a cliché, is the ellipsis. A typical scenario is to build towards a sexual event and then, at the point it becomes fairly obvious what will occur, the scene fades to black. Alternatively a cutaway shot might be used to present an event that occurs at the same time elsewhere, returning to the original scene at a later point. Elliptical edits may well be book-ended with various indicators to help manage what the viewer infers has happened in that offscreen time. The fact that viewers understand what is happening in these jumps in time works with their knowledge of cinema. A useful example is provided by *Out of the Past*, a film made when sexual imagery in American legitimate cinema was tightly regulated. As the illicit couple make for the bedroom to consummate their affair, the camera pans away from them back towards the front door which has been blown open by a tropical storm. The only lamp left on in the room is blown over and darkness falls. The strong wind provides a diegetic justification for a fade to black that signals an ellipse in time. The ellipse allows the film to suggest rather than show sex (necessary under the controls over sexual content at the time the film was made). While such controls might be seen as a constraint on artistic freedom, the resulting work-arounds contribute to the development of a pronounced cinematic style that is dripping with suggestive symbolism of the type that enrich so many melodramas and noirs made during the 1940s in Hollywood. The storm in *Out of the Past*, to which our gaze is drawn, evokes intense passion and foreshadows turmoil, and the fade to black which follows expresses in cinematic and symbolic terms the main character's fall from moral grace. The ellipse, as it is staged in this film, has, therefore, an important role in urging the viewer to actively read the cinematic 'signs'; the viewer is invited by those signs to infer intense sexual passion and imagine what it is that might be going on in the offscreen room. As such, one of the strengths of the ellipse is that it allows the viewer to project into the gap their own personally tailored fantasy.

There are many other ways of suggesting that sex has taken place without showing it. In *Now, Voyager* (1942), for example, the couple who have been kept apart by his unhappy marriage stand on a balcony, he lights two cigarettes and passes one to her. This act seems very intimate, as the cigarette goes from his mouth to hers, something that might be regarded as a post-coital act. It is never clear that sex has taken place, however, but this neat little device suggests it has. The exchange stands in for the missing sexual event, an event that explains the bond between the couple, reinforced perhaps by the fact that cigarettes were an illicit pleasure for the main character when she was living under the rule of her overbearing mother. Elsewhere in the film, and earlier in the female protagonist's life, a passionate sexual encounter is actually interrupted by the intrusive and controlling mother-figure; well-timed interruption is another common device used in film, where it is often used to create narra-

tive and dramatic tension (as occurs in many films focused on adultery), as well as evading potential censorship.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), a rather different type of interruption device is used. Around two-thirds into the film, as the couple reach the apparent safety of a sea-going ship, the potential moment to act on the obvious sexual spark between them occurs at last. Marion (Karen Allen) has just been given a glamorous satin nightdress, and enters the cabin in which Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) lies on a bunk taking stock of his many wounds. She begins to kiss his wounds better, moving closer progressively towards his mouth, but Jones is so tired from his vigorous exploits that he falls sound asleep. This is a neat comic device that has multiple functions: it postpones the consummation of their romance and keeps sexual tension in play; sex is kept safely offscreen, necessary because the film is targeted at an audience that will include children (the film has a 'PG' rating in the UK and US), while at the same time 'winking' at an informed adult audience about the sexual desire that underpins the couple's rather fraught relationship; in kissing Indiana's wounds, Marion does what most mothers would do when their child scrapes a knee or bruises an elbow, a factor that may help make sense of the scene to younger children.

Another blocking device used in films to enable sex or nakedness to be shown in less explicit ways is the use of visual barriers. Physical barriers such as legs or arms, strategically-placed props or clothing keep genitals and breasts out of sight (a convention treated comically to demonstrate the contortional absurdity of such censorship effects in an independent gay short film entitled *What Can I do With a Male Nude* (1975)). Often such barriers or strategic framing permits simulated sex to imply that penetration is taking place. In *Don't Look Now*, for example, the pivotal and transformational sex scene is carefully arranged to keep the inferred genital contact out of the frame. Yet the positions taken by the characters and their movements lead the audience to believe that genital contact is taking place. Similar strategies are often used by producers of explicit sex films where two versions of a film are made; one shows penetration and genital contact and one where these are kept out of frame (genital close-ups, for example, can be left out in the edit process). 'Masked' versions of hard-core films made for the soft-core market can make it difficult for censors to judge whether real sex is taking place or not (even if offscreen). Such films work the rules of the regulation system to maximise their potential market. It could be argued that regulatory rules, which outlaw the display of the mechanics of sex – what is, after all, a common activity – actively promote an unregulated underground market.

These are just a few of the numerous inventive devices that have been used throughout the history of cinema to suggest, rather than show, sex. The onscreen kiss is often acceptable as an indicator of love or passion; perhaps the kiss invokes romance more effectively and provides just enough information to spark viewer-generated fantasy for some viewers than is the case with the fleshly presence of 'vulgar, groaning fornication' (Žižek 1991: 110). Nonetheless the coyness within which sex is so often treated in mainstream cinema constructs more fleshly encounters as taboo, giving them an edge that adds up to greater sen-

sationalist impact. Managing the presentation of sex through suggestion and interruption lends it a mysterious transgressive caché, but it is this reticence to deal with sex explicitly that some films use to sell themselves by claiming that they reveal more than their predecessors dared, as is the case with hard-core and exploitation, as well as more legitimated examples such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *Baise-moi*.

Cinematic sex is figured through a host of formal and aesthetic rhetorics: two that are commonly in play in the representation of sex in cinema are idealism and realism. These are powerful agents that shape the way that sex, sexuality and desire appear in cinema and they have the power to both construct and challenge the normative. While these concepts operate in some ways as opposites, they can and regularly do appear in conjunction in a given film. The lines between them are not always clearly drawn, making for some interesting problems and tensions in the representation of sex in cinema.

Idealisms: perfect sex

Idealism underlies the representation of cinematic sex in several dimensions, including narrative, theme, ideology and style. By virtue of its thematic emphasis on the joy of being in love, traditional romance is perhaps the most obviously idealistic, in sexual terms, of all film genres. Romance often frames sex in the normative terms of ideologies of ideal heterosexual love and courtship. These aspects are reflected in the trajectory of the narrative and in the stylistic and thematic treatment of sex. It is also common for such films to take place in attractive settings that provide visual spectacle and underscore the escapist fantasy-led agenda of the genre. *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Titanic* (1997) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001) are good examples of romance-based films in which the ideal nature of a central courtship is supported by a glamorous location: gloriously sunny 1950s Rome in the former, the decadence and overt theatrical spectacle of *fin de siècle* Paris in *Moulin Rouge* and the opulence of the Edwardian-era ship-board interiors in *Titanic*. Richard Dyer has argued that Hollywood entertainment rests on providing a respite from the drab weariness of daily life by providing sounds and images that are suffused with exuberance, intensity and abundance (1992: 20–1). The appealing settings used in these films are visual metaphors for the pleasures of romantic dalliance as a sensual 'holiday' from the tedium of everyday routine, but also from emotional and sexual confusion, dissatisfaction or complexity.

The narrative arcs of these three mainstream romances are geared around the union of a complementary couple, who represent the romantic ideal (the idealised complementary couple are not limited to romance, however, and such is the importance of the 'proper couple' format in the history of sex in cinema that it will be returned to later). Obstacles are set up that defer the sexual consummation of the romance. As well as lending a necessary dramatic dimension, the struggle to achieve union places even greater value on the relationship, reinforcing its ideal status. Unlike most upbeat romantic comedies, *Titanic* and *Moulin Rouge* add a 'weepie' dimension through the death of Jack (Leonardo di Caprio) and

Satine (Nicole Kidman) towards the end of the films. While there is no happy ending, Jack and Satine's deaths are designed to elevate the romance to the very loftiest podium of the ideal. Loss of passion through familiarity, domestic hardship, class or lifestyle differences that may have ensued if the couples had gone to marry are transcended through death; romantic love, which will inevitably evolve into something else, is preserved in aspic. The ordinary, cooler business of domestic life that we all know is kept offscreen.

Lust too, it seems, is anathema to romance; the two are often kept firmly apart structurally and thematically. The construction of the romantic ideal in cinematic romances frequently entails that lust and enjoyment of sex for its own sake is confined to villains or antagonists. In both *Titanic* and *Moulin Rouge* lust combines with moral decadence to define the gothic villain of the piece who, in both cases, seeks to prevent the ideal, complementary couple from being together and who desires to possess the woman on his own terms (in the case of the latter for 'perverse' sexual ends). The presence of the lustful villain in these films inversely reinforces normative notions of ideal sex as the preserve of romantic love, with its qualities of mutuality and complementarity. In general, traditional romance-based films tend to steer clear of direct representations of sex, preferring instead to invoke it through tacit references, interrupted trysts or symbolic acts. The passionate screen kiss is generally the closest that many romances come to showing sex; even this is left out in many Hollywood films from the classical era. There is, for example, no consummatory kiss or romantic clinch in the archetypal romantic comedy *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)). Reflecting shifts in regulation, in *Titanic* there are a few sex scenes. These are shot using conventions that are more commonly associated with soft-core erotic films, particularly the use of soft focus to give a flattering diffused glow to the image of trysting bodies. Context dictates meaning, however. In soft-core the use of soft focus visually articulates the glow of erotic sensuality, whereas in the context of *Titanic* it signifies the idealistic aura of romantic love. Both instances speak of something ideal, but they are somewhat different. Soft focus unites couples in the visual field, making them seem to meld together slightly. In soft-core this is a mode of signalling perfectly absorbing sex; in romance it contributes to the coding of a relationship as 'right and proper' – fated. In *Titanic*, the complementary nature of the couple is so powerful that it transcends their class differences.

In most romances the constitution of the ideal is highly normative. Romantic love is mainly the preserve of young, white attractive men and women, although gay romances like *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997) seek to recoup the format from the hetero-normative and there are a few examples of romances where the complementary couple are differently raced such as *A Bronx Tale* (1993). Romances between older people are less prevalent perhaps because, logically, they are more likely to be mired in domestic entanglements – older people have 'histories' that produce emotional and familial baggage that might detract from representing romance as ideal (*The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) is a fairly rare exception, discussed in Part II, 'Adultery: Domestic Transgressions'). Young romance is, it seems, the primary convention signifying hope and idealism. Within most romance films

sex is deferred until the conditions are 'right', and on the whole it is hinted at but not shown explicitly. Under the conditions outlined above, which operate in concert as a kind of protective magic circle, sex becomes more than a physical and emotional experience. It is not lust, fornication or illicit, but sublime and transcendent – ideal. The strategies used to present and lend meanings to sex in these films that aim to appeal to a wide audience have a number of attributes that consolidate and preserve the idealistic framework of romance. Any explicit sexual imagery is kept offscreen, and sexual passion is often indicated metonymically by a kiss or a body-entwining clinch. The absence of direct representations of sex places greater emphasis on the emotional rather than the physical register, the latter recast in the antithetical domain of lust. Such deft management of the conditions of sex reserves its place as the apotheosis of love. Importantly for the ability of the romance genre to involve its viewers, its elliptical format leaves room for viewers to fantasise about what sex between the couple might be like, and thereby its idealistic nature is, potentially at least, kept intact.

Such idealistic representations of sex are not the sole preserve of the romance genre, however. Soft-core sex films designed for mainstream consumption, and beginning with those made in the 1970s, also often present sex in melodious, idealised visual tones. The gauzy soft-focus visual style of *Bilitis* (1977), for example, tallies with an impossibly idealised take on the sexual initiation of a young girl or woman (a common theme almost always idealised in soft-core, discussed in more detail below). Even the bondage and domination film *The Story of O* (*Histoire d'O*, 1975), which focuses on the initiation of a woman into the intense pleasures of sexual submission, is mostly shot in soft focus. In conjunction with fairytale settings, the film has a dreamy quality. This approach lends the film's more violent scenes visual sensuality, rather than brutal realism. It also ties into the film's attempt to capture the imaginary nature of sexual fantasy, where what would, in reality, be deeply unpleasant becomes in the world of make-believe the source of sensual pleasure. In keeping with its soft-core aesthetic, *The Story of O* deals with the erotics of submission in a highly idealised way in aesthetic and narrative terms, and, at the end of the film, O (Corinne Clery) finds sexual and intellectual satisfaction when she establishes a partnership with a dominant man who loves, respects and tests her sexually. In this sense the film is an idealistic romantic love story, where the complementarity of the couple lies primarily in their interlocking sexual predilections.

Other films that are not straightforwardly idealised romantic fantasies may also deploy aspects of idealised sex, but often what seems to be ideal sexually becomes its opposite, a dramatic device that is used often in thriller and horror films. In *Fatal Attraction* (1987), for example, an extramarital 'affair' appears at first as an idealised erotic dalliance until the jilted female protagonist begins to persecute the male protagonist and his family. Rendered within the generic conventions of horror, the moral message is made clear: an escapist, extramarital sexual fling has horrific repercussions, which Susan Faludi (1992) sees as expressing a backlash against feminist gains. *Cat People* (1982) presents an idealised and quite tender

sexual initiation scene, lit beautifully to accentuate Nastassja Kinski's supple body. Soon after sex has taken place she transforms into a panther, able and poised to rip her tender lover apart (she does not; love prevails just in time on her animal mind). Such beauty-turns-beast transformations are quite common in horror- and fantasy-based films, as with the beautiful witch who, when she reaches orgasm, becomes a lethal flying fireball in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). An apparently ideal sexual encounter is apt therefore in some genres to become the source of danger. This also turns out to be the case in the Mexican-beach love affair between Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) and her dupe, Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum) in *Out of the Past*.

The duplicitous ideal provides the fuel for many narratives, creating the type of transgressions and dramatic tensions deemed to lure audiences, but are often given a moral lesson-style rider. Jeff Markham, for example, was weak in giving in to Kathie's spider-woman charms when she walks back into his, now settled and decent, life. The punishment for Kathie's romantic duplicity and Jeff's complicity through inaction ('Baby, I don't care') is their death. The principle of 'what looks and feels good may in fact be bad' operates in numerous noirs, horrors and melodramas. In other contexts the duplicitous or impossible ideal may provide a means of exploring the dividing line between fantasy and reality, as in *Eyes Wide Shut*, or, as a means of questioning attitudes to marriage, sexual desire and sexuality as in ... *And God Created Woman*.

Like many romance-based films, *Roman Holiday*, *Moulin Rouge* and *Titanic* complement glamorous locations with glamorous stars in the central romantic roles. Linking physical beauty to romantic love provides another means by which romance-based films enter the ideological and normative terrain of ideal sex, desire and sexuality. Cinema's ability to foreground and accentuate ideal sex and create idealised sexual bodies is in part constitutional of its norm-producing potential. It has a taste-setting function in making certain looks fashionable and erotically charged. Not only are certain physical features valued more highly than others (some shift quite rapidly over time, whereas others, such as youth and facial symmetry, seem more deeply rooted), there is also often a connection between physical appearance and a character's 'soul'.¹³ This is part of the way that cinema uses visual signs to code character and their sexuality. Frequently such associational logic is used to yoke physical beauty of a certain kind to sexual moral alignment. Often this works in conjunction with the coding of clothing and acting, neatly illustrated by the two female protagonists of the action-adventure film *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (*Le Pacte de Loups*, 2001), which is set in eighteenth-century provincial France.

Sylvia (Monica Bellucci) has dark eyes and hair, her eyes are quite small, often narrowed as if scheming, she has a husky voice and foreign accent (Italian rather than French as with the other characters) and her breasts are prominently full. Marianne (Émilie Dequenne) has a round face, lighter hair, large light-coloured eyes, a slighter body and a wide smile. Sylvia first dresses in black lace (she is also shown nude), her face is often veiled, her movements and speech are slow and languorously seductive. Marianne wears a more diverse range of richly-coloured clothes, some of which are like those of a boy, she moves quickly and speaks

impetuously. Sylvia not only uses sex for pleasure and power, she is highly morally ambiguous, saving the hero for her own pleasure. Marianne is a plucky, virgin 'princess', the love of the hero's life and is morally upright both sexually and in her dealings with the world. She looks much younger than Sylvia and her demeanour and face is more open. The cleanly-divided moral world of much mainstream cinema, where appearance corresponds with sexual moral standing, is in itself highly idealistic and frequently shapes the meaning of sex. In *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, sex with the morally ambiguous exotic woman is an amusing dalliance for the hero, whereas romantic love and courtship, which, if less erotically charged perhaps, carries greater affective weight in the film than the former.

The cinematic drive to maximise beauty is born in part of the need for cinema to arrest the gaze and conjure erotic desire, in the service of which impossibly ideal bodies are manufactured. Along with all the other accoutrements in play to help create the illusion of the ideal body (make-up, high heels or other elevation devices, steroids, silicone, nip/tuck), strategically placed and hued lighting can help to hide blemishes, accentuate musculature, sculpt inviting curves and hollows. Golden, glowing bodies, shot through filters and gauze, that appear across a variety of genres and cinema types follow the 'glamour' techniques used to film female stars in classical Hollywood. It is the allure of the ideal sexual body that underpins the star system. Offered up as objects for the gaze (male or female), stars who are signified as ideal in some way act potentially as triggers for romantic and sexual fantasy and are often marketed as such. Dirk Bogarde and Rock Hudson, for example, were sold by cinema and women's magazines in the 1950s as 'eligible bachelors', inviting readers to fantasise becoming their partners. Stars are less 'groomed' now in terms of lifestyle than was the case in classical Hollywood, but they are still proffered as idealised objects of desire worthy of pin-up adoration and marketed often to a particular audience. Looking around our staff office there are posters of Johnny Depp and Viggo Mortensen, for example, both stars marketed as 'thinking-girls' pin-ups. Stars are often used to brand a film, as trailers and posters often testify, and as commodities they are frequently represented in their best and most appealing light. It is not simply a star's face and personality that attracts attention, a body part or bodily characteristic may become an important part of a star's 'meaning' in the public domain and help to turn their bodies into cinema-friendly spectacle: long legs (Betty Grable, Nicole Kidman), large breasts (Marilyn Monroe, Pamela Anderson), muscles (Marlon Brando, Arnold Schwarzenegger), a swaggering walk (Errol Flynn, John Wayne), full lips (Brigitte Bardot, Angelina Jolie), and so on. These provide examples of the way that the bodies of stars have been emphasised and sold as ideal sexually – often in conjunction with other attributes – to create a marketable, idealised difference from other stars.

Cinema's investment in ideal sexual bodies is interestingly illustrated by the use of body doubles for sex or nude scenes. Examples include replacing Catherine Deneuve's body in a shower scene in *The Hunger* (1983) (she was in her forties when the film was shot), the replacement of Britt Ekland's body by another's when seen nude from behind in *The Wicker Man* (1973) (she was, it is said, in the early stages of pregnancy at the time), and the 'bottom'

double used by the lead female in *Preaching to the Perverted* (1997). Body doubles are not always used simply because of modesty or not having the required ideal body: the time-equals-dollar factor is significant. Yet in most cases the drive to create the impression of physical perfection is at work. In addition, the body double allows a star's body to remain a mystery and may in some cases preserve the star's status as 'respectable' or modest (thereby making a further claim in a different way on the ideal). Commenting on the subjective and political effect of using of a 'breasts' double in *Demolition Man* (1993), Sandra Bullock has said 'there was the virtual reality sex scene ... and they wanted to see breasts. Obviously mine didn't stand up to the task so they got other breasts. I said, "At least let me pick them out, so I can be in charge of my own boobs"'.¹⁴ Knowing this somehow makes her more 'human', more likeable and perhaps easier to identify with, an actor doing her job rather than an embodiment of the impossibly ideal. But, in the same article, John Travolta's comments demonstrate that an ideal body is, however, required if a star is to retain their screen appeal: 'If it's a nude scene and you're not in the shape you want ... you use a double'.¹⁵

A star, as opposed to an actor, is a mythical figure who, it seems, must represent physical-sexual qualities deemed ideal and that audiences are thought to admire, covet or regard as erotic. This is why the star system deployed in cinemas that place emphasis on glamour can be seen to serve the purposes of consumer culture. The rise of the Hollywood star goes hand-in-hand with the use of stars to advertise glamorous products. Sarah Michele Gellar has appeared in television adverts for Maybelline's make-up brand, for instance. She follows in the promotional footsteps of many female film stars of the past, a trend pursued and consolidated by Max Factor in 1930s and 1940s. There is an interesting dual approach here: the 'sexy' star is deployed as an ideal figure, yet they require some help from the product. They are therefore presented as being both like us and not like us: an ambiguity that serves to wed the ideal, normative creating values of film to the machinations of consumer culture. The implication being that if a star-endorsed product is purchased, the consumer will almost magically be afforded the ideal and idealised sex appeal of the star.

Where does this notion of identification with the ideal come from, in theoretical terms? In seeking to understand our relationships with others, psychoanalysis provides a rhetorical vocabulary through which this idea is formulated. The psychoanalytic term 'ego-ideal' expresses that which an individual adopts as a model to aspire to (see Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1991a)). The 'ego-ideal' plays an important role in the way that people become socialised and relate to the world around them. Parents are often adopted as the first ego-ideals but as the child's contact with the world broadens other attributes belonging to other people are likely to be adopted as ego-ideals. This involves an imaginary identification with the attribute, deemed sexually attractive or otherwise, that is aspired to, but because what we aspire to be is often impossible to achieve in reality, it can also create a sense of loss or anxiety, which might prove motivational or to be debilitating. It could be argued that cinema and consumerism exploit a fundamental gap between reality and what we aspire to, and perhaps the model helps to explain the persistent popularity of always-

triumphant heroes and heroines in popular culture. The same principle applies to the draw of the sexually-alluring body, which cinema would have us believe opens doors on to pleasure, happiness, sexual plenitude and even power. Cinematic ideals often do seem designed to temporarily fill the gap of lack with identifications with fantasy figures and circumstances, yet these might also prove in the longer term to widen that gap. While the psychoanalytic understanding of identification with the ideal proves fruitful, it should also be remembered that the ideals of cinema are in themselves social and rhetorical constructs, created to give pleasure; they carry with them a range of values that are often in themselves ideals centred on sexual and gender performance that are impossible to achieve.

The ideal in cinema is not simply present to promote viewers' aspirations and anxieties, it is also important in terms of style, dramatic tension, censorship and the politics of gender and the gaze. The combination of sex, romance and beautiful bodies couched primarily in idealistic aesthetic terms have often provided cinema with a way of escaping censorship; a way of making sex into 'art' and thereby evading accusations of judicial obscenity. Cinema has often had recourse to such a strategic marriage of sex and aesthetic beauty, a precedent set in painting and sculpture, but despite this sex is likely to be related to different forms of transgression, conflict and blockage mainly because the simply ideal has little dramatic potential. *Stealing Beauty* (1996) provides a useful example. Following the narrative path trodden by earlier soft-core sex films, the film focuses on the 'natural' allure of a young girl's awakening sexuality. However, the emphasis, as signalled by the title, is on 'stealing' Lucy's (Liv Tyler) beauty, which goes beyond surface appearance as it also refers to her burgeoning sexuality. The entire story arc builds towards Lucy losing her virginity. Her beauty and sexuality are made available to the gaze and sexual investments of both the filmmaker and viewers. While in many films the pleasures of voyeurism are masked and/or disavowed, they are foregrounded here, creating, potentially, an extra sense of intimacy for the viewer with Lucy. The viewer, of whatever gender, is actively invited to contemplate under the protective kudos of aesthetically inviting art cinema the flowering and deflowering of a highly idealised young woman. Lucy is heterosexual, interested in all the men she meets (she is looking for her father as well as a lover) and she is photographed to emphasis her beauty, even at one point posing for an artist with one of her breasts exposed (who it turns out is in fact her father). As a well-made character she has her reasons, but she is clearly designed to be consumed as 'art' by all comers.

In other films there is often an attempt to draw a line between voyeurism as a sexual perversion, embodied by a pathologised character, and the voyeurism of the viewer (although in films such as *Rear Window* (1954) or *Peeping Tom* (1959) the distinction is deliberately blurred so that viewer becomes discomforted by their own urge to look). What insists on this line-drawing is a rather prudish, but nonetheless pervasive, assumption that 'decent folk' ideally would not undertake to have sex in public nor would they want to watch other people have sex (at least not without the anonymity afforded by the mediation of the camera). Hence the erotic pleasures of looking, which are impressed with a perverse coding, are



Art object: Lucy (Liv Tyler) posing for an artist in *Stealing Beauty* (1996)

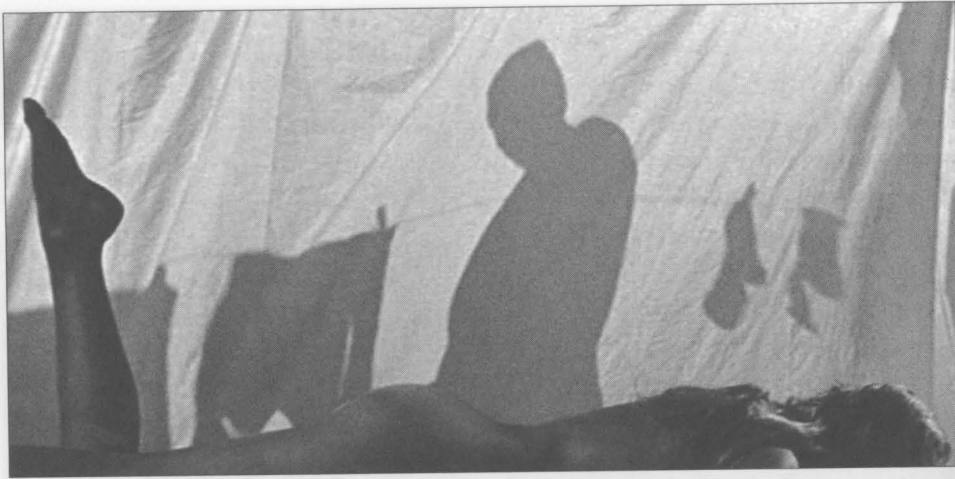
authorised in some instances by devices such as the presence of onscreen audiences or a character with whom the viewer is invited to identify (safety afforded by the presence of other consenting and appreciative others perhaps). While Western society might consider itself generally liberal about sex, it is still the case that sex should, ideally, be kept private and intimate. This is grounded in the sex-in-the-context-of-romance equation that operates normatively as the sexual ideal. When an actor takes part in a sex scene in a film they are, in a sense, committing a form of transgression by making sex public, and the viewer too, by virtue of being a viewer, becomes complicit in that transgression. Idealised beauty can, in part, ameliorate this act by sanctioning the gaze because beauty as an ideal is coded to be looked at in art and elsewhere. By the same logic the elevating presence of ideal beauty attenuates the audience's 'perverse' voyeuristic activity in watching filmed sex. This is the way that ideal beauty is 'stolen' in *Stealing Beauty*.

As has already been noted, adult melodramas of 1950s Hollywood explored the social and psychological tensions around sexuality. Adult melodramas were produced in conjunction with the weakening of industry-based regulation rulings on the representation of sex in the US which in part enabled Hollywood to compete with more risqué 'foreign' films, such as ...*And God Created Woman*, that were proving popular at the box-office. A common strategy in such films was to present a character, played by a known star, who has to deal with the problems that ensue from the experience of insistent sexual desires. Although

melodrama has been defined in many ways, it is commonly understood by most as the type of film that focuses intensively on the emotional register of interpersonal and familial relations. In contrast to contemporary romantic comedies such as *Pillow Talk*, where sex is talked about but kept offscreen to uphold the ideal notion that sex should be an expression of love, private and intimate, the focus of 1950s family melodramas is the failure of the ideal. Within this context sex and sexual desire become problematic and disruptive. ...*And God Created Woman* typifies the trend.

Juliete Hardy (Brigitte Bardot) embodies the cliché of innocent sexuality. She is a creature of nature, wilful, yet gentle, and ignites passion in the men she meets. This unwitting power stems from her ideal and idealised beauty, yet it causes pain and strife to her and others. She is not a scheming urban 'vamp' or a wicked seductress of the type seen in noirs or in earlier films, such as those played by Theda Bara. Instead Juliete is a free spirit, her bare feet and Dionysiac dancing to African rhythms links her to primitive, 'pagan passions' (a description used in the voiceover of the American trailer for the film). Yet she cannot attain the man she desires so strongly and the practicalities of her life lead her to marry the younger brother of the man she truly loves, leaving her to cope with the difference between her ideal object of desire and reality. Like the barefoot witch Gillian (Kim Novak) in the near contemporary *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), Juliete has to relinquish her 'wild' ideals to be able to conform to the very different – idealised – behaviour required to make herself into a good wife. Juliete knows and takes pleasure in the power afforded to her through her attraction to men, yet she nonetheless retains an air of child-like naïveté. She regularly appears nude, or in a state of partial undress – although she is framed so as not to reveal genitals or give a complete view of her breasts. As it is contextualised within the film, nudity serves to demonstrate an idealised, untamed 'naturalness', providing a Rousseauesque critique of social repression filtered through the super-innocence of nudie-cutie pin-ups. Here nudity is not linked to shame as it is in the Bible, yet her ideal form causes (diegetic) problems. Bardot's 'natural' nudity also marks her out as the (ideal) object of both the onscreen and offscreen gaze. The conflicts that Juliete experiences between differing ideals are never fully resolved at the end of the film. By contrast, and under the aegis of the fantasy-romance genre, a far greater sense of resolution is achieved in *Bell, Book and Candle*. With some regret, Gillian seems relatively happy with the exchange of her witchy-wildness for love and marriage. Although Juliete is seen hand-in-hand with her jilted husband at the end of the film, there is still a sense that she will continue to be led by her passions, as she had been before. Her past behaviour cues the assumption that she is simply, and understandably, looking for comfort at that juncture, but that will not be sufficient as time goes by.

Both ...*And God Created Woman* and *Bell, Book and Candle* show women who are struggling with conflicting ideals. To find acceptance they must conform to a set of ideals that suppresses aspects of their characters. In both films, to become an ideal, successful wife (and mother) and enter into domestic service comes at a heavy cost. Juliete had little choice; if she had not married she would have been placed in a children's home until she came of



Juliette (Brigitte Bardot) in her 'natural' state in ...*And God Created Woman* (1956)

age at 21. But for Gillian it was a choice; romantic love was the pay-off. The situation seems to beg viewers to ask if that pay-off is too costly.

Like ...*And God Created Woman*, Hollywood melodramas such as *From Here to Eternity*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Baby Doll* and *Written on the Wind* do not provide idealised anodyne romantic resolutions that contain and channel sexual desire within the safe confines of a solid, complementary marriage. These films tend to present sexual desire as disturbing and dangerous, out of step with both the desire of the other and the constraints made on desire in the context of conventionalised social mores and family life. Sex and desire are therefore less idealistically rendered than in some other genres: both are full of pain, problems, tensions and irreconcilable power relations. These problems are, however, often cranked-up to hyper-proportions, to the extent that they are now regarded by some as camp. And, importantly, even if these films uncover the problems of sex, desire and family life, they still work, inversely, to affirm normative ideals, especially as often the cause of narrative tension is that the married couple do not conform in some way to the ideal status of complementarity.

In a broad cultural sense, the ideals of a given time and context are not always complementary. Often they conflict and confuse. Ideals might express the unachievable, the sublime and they may support insidious and harmful ideologies. For all this, the ideal, in whatever rhetorical guise, serves cinema well and plays an important role in shaping the representation of sex and sexuality. Ideals regularly generate narrative, are taken up thematically, and work through representational schemes. Ideal sex in cinema is cast between two poles: the first is found in the way that romance and sex are paired; its naughty twin, found in many films that focus directly on sex, is perfectly absorbing 'pornutopian' sex. Sitting between the two are films where the ideal romantic context for sex acts as a benchmark against which a drama of dysfunctionality plays out. This is evident even in the apparently

non-romantic and 'feminist' *Romance*, a film that hinges on the female protagonist's quest for a relationship that is both loving and passionately sexual. The cinematic need for dramatic tension means that the ideal is problematised on a regular basis; the way that this is achieved is dependent on institutional regulation and industrial factors such as presenting stars as objects of desire. Cinema's demand for narrative disruption and for visual spectacle often means that the invocation of the ideal is often couched within the dangers of thrilling and transgressive seduction or that it remains an unachieved goal (as in 1950s Hollywood adult melodramas). The ideal therefore often goes hand in hand with danger, transgression and peril (physical or moral), and this is not simply confined to genres such as the horror film or the thriller. One of the main arguments of this book is that because of its need for narrative disruption and spectacle, cinema has a significant investment in representing sex as excitingly transgressive and dangerous. The ideal in its many forms therefore has an ambiguous and conflict-generating status in most films. While in some the ideal sexual-romantic relationship is served up to audiences as a dream of achieving the plenitude and richness missing in real life, in others it is also often a lure, a trap woven out of unwholesome, wild sexual fantasies into which the hapless fall. Perhaps such dramatic twists are intended to act as a warning to viewers about becoming too captivated by the rich and impossible sexual fantasies paraded on the silver screen.

Realisms: imperfect sex

Alongside idealism, various forms of realism play an important role in the cinematic mediation of sex and sexuality. Realism and idealism can be regarded as diametrically opposed, but frequently they have a systemic and contingent relationship; often the one depends on the other for its meaning. Broadly, there are three types of realism that imprint strongly on cinematic sex: that which focuses directly on the 'realities' of sex and sexuality as a social problem, the logic of which dictates acting style, theme, narrative and setting; the second focuses on the psychological and affective realities of sex and sexuality, and these might appear in a more fantastic, overblown or more obviously artificial context; the last is the use of certain sexual acts or indicators of arousal to guarantee that the sex seen on screen is 'real'. Some films mix together these types, perhaps most obviously in those that fall under the aegis of art cinema: *Summer with Monika* (*Sommaren med Monika*, 1953), *Betty Blue* (*37°2 le matin*, 1986) and *Virgin* (*36 fillette*, 1988), for example. In many films that deploy realist aesthetics, love and romance are often either absent (as is also the case with most hard-core films) or they operate as unattainable ideals that ultimately cause pain. Most fiction-based films combine aspects of realism with fantasy and the ideal in some way, thereby reflecting the subjective nature of sexual desire. Often this mix produces the type of tensions that might be called 'melodramatic'. In the particular context of hard-core, real sex is expected, and this is coded in certain ways, but in the majority of hard-core, the real of sex is balanced with other factors that are clearly the stuff of sexual fantasy. In recent years films like *Baise-*

moi, for instance, deploy images more commonly seen in hard-core. In combining these with rawer and more disturbing images, such as rape, the viewer's experience that what they are watching should be taken as real, at least within the frame of representation, is consolidated.

A key motive behind the use of realism, either in terms of a documentary-style aesthetic or psychological realism, is to show that sex is a physical and problematic business. Realism is often used in films that focus on sex in the light of problems originating within the social order, and, in some cases, facilitate the demonstration of the effects of a hierarchical differentiation in the exercise of power. In some genres, such as melodrama, aspects of realism may be employed to highlight the difficult relationship between the ideals of romantic fantasy and the harsh realities of sex and sexual relationships. Realist representations have often been subject to closer censorship than more idealistic representations, partly because they are less inclined to provide imaginary and ideologically safe solutions to real social problems or because of rules that regulate the presentation of authentic sex in the public domain.

Pre-Code American cinema and European cinema of the 1920s and 1930s was often in the business of addressing the social and personal effects of pre-marital sex, with films often termed 'fallen women' movies.¹⁶ In D. W. Griffith's version of *Way Down East* (1920), poor country-cousin Anna (Lillian Gish) believes she is married to the man of her dreams. When she tells him she is pregnant, he informs her that their marriage was a staged hoax and leaves. She is left with no money or support. Life becomes hard, her baby dies in her arms and she is destitute, hounded out of rented accommodation and work for being an unmarried mother. Gish's innocent, open face increases the pathos of the scenario. The effects of her sexual pleasure may be melodramatically overblown, but the frame of melodrama enables the raw realities of sex outside of marriage to be explored at an emotional and social level (the acting style in the film may seem overwrought to us now, but at the time it was considered to be understated). Granted Griffith had his own idealist agenda to pedal about the need to respect the innocence and frailties of 'woman', but nonetheless the film uses sentimentality and melodrama to represent the emotional and social effect of sexual transgression on women at that time. As Nicholas A. Vardac has said, Griffith 'developed the realistic capacities of the medium to serve in the exploitation of his romantic conceptions' (1991: 360).

Way Down East uses big-budget spectacular effects (the infamous ice-flow sequence, for example) and melodramatic tension to purvey a reformist agenda and, therefore, carries an idealistic notion of how society should operate. In its sympathetic focus on the plight of an unmarried mother, *Way Down East* demonstrates the profound effects of the then real social stigmas on illegitimacy and pre-marital sex that affected many women at that time, illustrated by the historical and horrifying fact that some unmarried mothers were incarcerated in insane asylums in Britain. Griffith's earlier film *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Through the Ages* (1916) uses a documentary-style aesthetic combined with melodrama to convey the harsh realities of life in urban America in the 'Mother and the Law' episode. In one scene a women's

child is taken from her by a group of 'do-gooding' women who wrongly believe the mother is a drunk. This represents an attack on what Griffith sees as middle-class reformists meddling in working-class lives. The events of *Way Down East* and *Intolerance* may seem highblown to audiences today, but, as Scott Simmon has said, *Intolerance* 'transmute(s) into the stark morality of melodrama certain crisis points in rapidly evolving American society' (1993: 139).

Melodramatic modes combined with what can be thought of as a realist approach have often been used in cinema to explore the effects of sex and sexual desire, heightening emotions certainly, but nevertheless providing an expressive form through which the psychological economics of sexual relations can be explored. Christine Gledhill argues that melodrama provides 'an aesthetic apprehension of reality that could manage the enormous social changes accompanying the secularisation and industrialisation of the Western world' (1992a: 131). And, further, she suggests that Hollywood cinema meshes together 'the melodramatic and the realistic – the metaphoric and the referential, the social and the psychological' (1992a: 165). A pertinent example is Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), in which a girl (Joan Fontaine) falls in love with a musician (Louis Jourdan), and, despite several affairs with him throughout their lives, he never recognises her as the same woman. During one of these she becomes pregnant, he learns this only after she and the child are dead, through the eponymous letter. The cinematic style and setting of the film are 'romantic', but the story is not. As the film progresses her firm romantic belief that he will finally recognise her is gradually undermined, and she realises that her view of him was a fantasy that bears no relation to actuality. The trajectory from romantic illusion to disillusion, pain and death underscores the film's ironic take on romance. This is no Griffithian morality tale; instead it is a sophisticated engagement with the mismatch between the ideal and the real. Here melodrama and psychological realism meet. The social and emotional consequences of obsessive romantic fantasy that have real effects on the protagonists' lives are primed to deliver a high-impact melodramatic experience. Through its focus on psychology and emotional affect, the film is able to speak to audiences about the gulf between reality and the ideal. The film also offers a sophisticated reflexive comment on the way that Hollywood cinema and the star system rely on eliciting imaginary romances with distant and idealised movie stars. The reflexive take on the impact of cinema on the sexual imagination of young women is also something that appears more blatantly in the less baroque and more realist context of *Summer with Monika*.

Sex in art cinema is framed by various realist modalities. Some films deploy realist aesthetics whereas others use more stylised, expressionistic and allegorical forms to reveal the emotional, experiential and social realities of sex and sexuality. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Arabian Nights (Il fiore delle mille e una notte, 1974)* lies somewhere between these two forms. Taking a series of nested, episodic fantasy tales about sexual couplings, the film uses natural light, location shooting (North Africa mainly) and, in some cases, non-professional actors to present fairytale fantasy in a realistic way. The driving idea behind the film is the joyful 'naturalness' of sex relationships between people of whatever gender and age, even if some end in

psychological pain and physical violence. Unlike many other films focused on sex, there is no direct thematic or narrative use of shame or repression (such films are discussed below). In this fairytale world sex is essential to human life, abundant and transient. Bodies are naked rather than nude – they are not adorned in the usual conventional softening gauzes or contour-enhancing lighting commonly found in art-stylised soft-core of that era. Male and female genitals are shown, yet not in close-up or specially foregrounded, as is characteristic of hard-core and soft-core. Intercourse between men and women in the film involves no frenetic pumping action, just gentle movements – not very realistic perhaps, but this adds to the general picture of innocent, shameless sex. Same-sex desire, female interest in sex, and group sex are not couched in overtly transgressive rhetoric: all the sexual acts shown are mutually desired and enjoyed by participants. These textual factors create the sense that sex is an ingenuous expression of life and the source of joy and pleasure. In many ways the film's view of sex is idyllic because it is thematically free of the rhetoric of sexual shame.

The search for his abducted lover, Aziza (Tessa Bouché), undertaken by Aziz (Ninetto Davali), links each of the film's nested stories. Although this complementary couple are deeply in love they do not stop having sex with other people when they are apart. In this film sex is about pleasure, embracing the sensuous experiences offered by life rather than anchored in love and marriage. Youthful bodies are certainly of central importance; their presence contributes to the pre-lapsarian atmosphere, but these are not the idealised manicured bodies of those we might expect in Hollywood films. All the film's characters, no matter what gender, age or ethnicity, are active sexual beings. The film's realist aesthetic combines with an adult fairytale to demonstrate an idealistic view of sex unconstrained by social taboo and regulation. By contrast *Last Tango in Paris* (*Ultimo tango a Parigi*, 1972) uses a realist aesthetic in a very different way, and unlike *Arabian Nights*, repression and shame are central to its realist erotic agenda.

Last Tango in Paris has been described as a hybrid film that embraces Hollywood forms as well as European art cinema. The film charts the 'deterioration' (Lev 2000: 79) of a romance that starts with anonymous sex in an empty apartment. It is an open essay on the realities, emotional highs and lows of a sexual relationship, and focuses on what Bernardo Bertolucci, the director, has called 'the present of fucking' (cited in Mellen 1974: 131). The intention to capture the suspension of time in the act of sex operates, as Joan Mellen says, as 'a pure cinematic moment of authenticity beside which every other experience in the film is derivative' (1974: 142). The central theme of the film is the search for authentic experience that is masked by the affectations and taboos of bourgeois life. Sex is the primary route to existential authenticity. The present of fucking is further underpinned by improvised speeches, method acting, and the way in which Marlon Brando stitches truths about his own life and role as an aging man into his performance (Brando is trained in the Method acting style, which seeks to build realistic psychological and even physiological elements into a performance). However, sex does not prove to be the universal panacea for healing the distortions inflicted by social conditioning. Instead, it remains as a moment of respite

in which authenticity is only fleetingly achieved. As with Ophüls' melodramas (and indeed in the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan), sex and romance is flawed because it resides mostly in fantasy and, despite the idealistic optimism of the Hollywood romance, we never truly know the other: herein lies one aspect of the film's psychological realism, which is combined with the location of the film in the 'here and now' of the time the film was made. Many other art movies, such as *Romance*, *Summer with Monika* and *Ai No Corrida* (*Empire of the Senses*, 1976) for example, inhabit similar territory. These films are deeply pessimistic about the possibility of achieving a reciprocal rich and lasting sexual relationship, a theme that works in tandem with a realist aesthetic and the here-and-now locations that allow sex and desire to be seen within a broader social context. Such pessimism, alongside psychological realism, is at odds with the rosy picture of love present in many light Hollywood romances. And, it also contrasts with the less idealistic but life-enhancing view of sex and inter-couple relations that features in *Don't Look Now* (albeit that this serves relationally to inflate the tragic/horror elements of the film).

Sexual themes in art cinema often carry intellectual and/or psychological dimensions to differentiate them from other forms of sex-based cinema. *Last Tango in Paris*, *Ai No Corrida* and *Romance* gained notoriety for their explicit treatment of sex (which helped boost box-office returns). To some extent the explicitness of each film is sanctioned because the films do intellectual or philosophic work, notably around Lacan's psychoanalytic observation of the impossibility of a truly complementary 'sexual relation'.¹⁷ (The qualifications that authorise sexual explicitness in art cinema are explored in greater detail in Part II, 'Real Sex'.) Bertolucci has spoken of the centrality of psychoanalysis to his life and cinema (see Mellen 1974: 136). As such *Last Tango in Paris* laces its explicit images with psychoanalytic concepts that are used to theorise the construction of adult sexuality, such as unconscious fantasy, repression and the Oedipus complex. Key to the attraction of an art cinema audience as well as informing the psychological realism of these films is the notion that sex provides a potential liberation from everyday repressions, rituals and family ties. But none of the couples in *Romance*, *Last Tango in Paris* or *Ai No Corrida* fully achieve release and each film ends with the death of the male partner at the hands of the female protagonists (even if for different reasons). The realist aesthetic of these films lies, at least in part, in the way that they seek to engage viewers' interest with the real and knotty complexities of desire. In so doing these films expose the illusionary and anaesthetic properties of anodyne cinematic romances. While they have complex psychological dimensions, some use is also made of the rhetoric of authentic sex, as developed within the context of hard-core, with which to lure audience attention.

In Britain, in particular, *Romance* pushed the boundaries of cinema censorship because it uses certain images that are common to hard-core (hitherto excised from films seeking British Board of Film Classification certification outside the 'R18' category).¹⁸ *Romance* uses images that speak of the materiality of the sexual body: erect penises, penetration and the graphic and close-up depiction of a child being born. Each of these real, rather than simulated, acts lends the film a greater air of visceral authenticity. But despite such strategies

the film is not made in the conventional mode of hard-core. Instead, it focuses intently on the subjective experiences of Marie (Caroline Ducey), the central protagonist. Through a combination of direct speech and dialogue she contemplates the construction of masculine desire, particularly in terms of the operation of the Madonna/whore binary,¹⁹ which is clearly at work in the way that her husband treats her – particularly his disdain for her interest in sex. This duality which Marie sees in her husband and all men (Marie is speaking for the director/writer Catherine Breillat it seems) is typified graphically in a fantasy scene where a number of women are laid on tables in a circular room. The women's lower bodies are separated by a wall from their upper bodies. While heads and torsos are located in a clean white room brightly lit, with their lovers stroking their faces, their lower bodies are in a darkened and dirty space, their legs dangling down, where they are inspected and fucked by a group of large men. In voiceover, as if she were speaking to her lover, Marie states 'you can't have a face when a cunt tags along'. In expressing the subjective reality Marie experiences, the film makes its intervention into sexual politics. The sentiments of the scene echo certain feminist critiques of patriarchal culture and analysis of the representation of women in cinema (Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* in particular), that argue that heterosexual men view women either as sexual objects (whore) or de-sexualised objects of worship (Madonna/mother). The scene also illustrates the film's core distinction from hard-core convention. The film makes use of graphic sexual imagery which carry a realist caché because the acts depicted are not simulated, but unlike hard-core these are designed to address real-life problems, tensions and conflicts of interest that arise in relation to sex, including gender politics and the complexities of interpersonal relations.

Romance may not be 'feminist' in a classical sense; there are no 'solutions' presented here. Instead the pleasures on offer are revenge – although the killing of the father of her child could be said to stand for the death of patriarchy – and the portrayal of a woman who is a complex sexual subject and who is in search of sexual romance on her own terms. Like *Ai No Corrida* and *Last Tango in Paris*, the film deals with the intersection of conflicting pressures: fantasy, sexual needs and desires, and social reality. What these films have in common are narratives that focus, in terms of psychological realism, on the lack of true romance and complementary sexual relations, and their broadly realist representations of sex are framed by this theme.

The type of realism used in these films is markedly different from the form of politically informed social realism deployed in films that follow the path taken by British television play *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and, more recently, *Vera Drake* (2004). Social realism deals with sex, more likely its consequences, in terms of the inequalities in the social order. Such films often aim to make inequalities clear as a counter move to the escapist fantasies of Hollywood-style films. Often these films are set in urban locations that are far from glamorous or picturesque – backstreets, tenement blocks, run-down housing estates. Unlike the gritty working-class reality of social realism found, for example, in *Intimacy* (2001) and *Vera Drake*, *Romance*, *Ai No Corrida* and *Last Tango in Paris* utilise art-house conventions

that are most apparent visually in their carefully choreographed colour palettes. White and beige predominate in *Romance*, signifying the; passionless, clean and narcissistic order of Marie's husband's life. This is juxtaposed with the red and black used in the apartment of middle-aged and tender Robert (François Berléand), who helps realise Marie's exploration of her more *outré* sexual fantasies. The apartment in *Last Tango in Paris* is flooded with golden light, signifying the outside-of-time aspect of the sexual encounters that occur there. With an emphasis on beauty the film contrasts very strongly in stylistic terms with those films that utilise the aesthetics of social realism; the room in which the adulterous couple have sex in *Intimacy* for example, is the front room of a shared and ill-kept house. It is harshly lit and full of debris – empty beer cans, records, ashtrays. In this film sex happens in the midst of the everyday banal rather than outside it. *Romance*, *Ai No Corrida* and *Last Tango in Paris* draw on the values of art cinema in their use of classical forms of composition, their contemplation of the human condition and their markedly beautiful colour schemes. These afford the films a certain status that enables them to circumvent the censorship that their authentically coded sexual content might solicit, and differentiate the films from the raw visual style more common to social realist-based films or some forms of hard-core. Thereby realism operates in the representation of sex in different ways, according to the aesthetic framework, genre or style, and the target market identified for a given film.

Hard-core makes its entry into the domain of realism mainly through its promise to portray authentic rather than simulated sex. Psychological and social realism are absent,



Paul (Marlon Brando) and Jeanne (Maria Schneider) wrapped together in post-coital glow in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972)

however. Such films rely on coding certain sexual activities as indicative of 'authentic' sex to create a marketable difference from soft-core and mainstream sex films; these include penetration of various kinds, erection, the visible presence of bodily fluids (mainly, but not exclusively, what is termed either the 'money shot' or the 'cum shot'). Recent films, such as *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), *Romance* and *Baise-moi*, are beginning, to some extent, to blur the boundaries between simulated sex and authentic sex as they deploy some, admittedly fairly limited, representations of penetrative sex.²⁰ While hard-core is defined by the presence of penetrative sex, we ignore at our peril the genre's wide diversity of narrative types, intertextual references and target markets. Hard-core ranges from slick and narrative-heavy productions, typified by Michael Ninn's *Latex* (1995), through to low-budget parodies of Hollywood productions, such as *Rambo the Destroyer* (1985), to rough and edgy fly-on-the-wall-type videos, typified by no-budget *Punky Girls* (c. 1995). The latter is perhaps closest to the grainy video-based forms that have a realist currency in contemporary media and various sexual activities carried out by the two women who feature in the film provide transgressive spectacle.²¹

In most hard-core films there is often a rather thin line between the realism provided by the presence of real sexual acts and the grotesque. The overt focus on various body fluids, poses designed to enable camera access to the mechanics of sex, women who appear to be in a perpetual state of orgasm, bad acting and poor dubbing; hard-core sex can easily become a bizarre novelty (something some films seek to capitalise on). These features can, however, be regarded as reclaiming base sexual matters for comedy, parody or even in some cases noted for their ability to provide viewers' with a visceral jolt. Despite the way that various aspects of hard-core create a sense of transparency and immediacy, it is nonetheless a highly escapist, fantasy-based and idealistic genre. In almost all hard-core films, sexual satisfaction is shown to be achieved by all participants. It comes with no psychological problems or hang-ups to get in the way of sexual plenitude. *Latex* is a rare exception, and comes from an inventive filmmaker with a budget. Unlike most hard-core, *Latex* has a narrative, and it is based on the psychological problems experienced by John Doe who can 'see' the sexual fantasies of everyone he meets. This provides the premise for various types of sexual encounters that are evenly spaced out through the film (episodic structure is ubiquitous in hard-core). More generally, there is no such thing as 'no' in hard-core, it is governed by the pleasure principle; despite its particular claims on realism, this is what makes it a 'pornutopian' genre.

It should now be clear that the modal qualities of idealism and realism are rarely mutually exclusive and the two often intersect, either through a relative difference deployed in a given film to create visual and narrative tension, or because realism is framed by an idealistic impetus (to expose gender inequality, for example). While the thematic and/or stylistic aspects of idealism and realism have a strong influence over the meanings assigned to sex in cinema, they also interlink with other formal factors, particularly in relation to the shaping attributes of narrative and generic patterns, the subject of the next chapter.

Narrative Formulas

As we have already seen, narrative plays an important role in shaping the meaning of sex as it provides, amongst other things, a context that affects character function and actions. While narrative can take potentially many different forms, it often keys into genre-based thematic patterns. Narrative and genre forms may evolve into certain common patterns, but they also respond and adapt to changes in regulation and culturally specific pressure points. This chapter maps some of the chief types of narrative formations that frequently appear in films that are concerned with sex and/or sexual desire. It is not, and cannot be, an exhaustive list but certain types that have been commonly used in cinema, or that have proved influential or significant in some way, are identified.

Proper/improper couples

One of the basic building blocks of narrative in general terms is the use of obstacles to prevent a protagonist from achieving their goal. This device is found in the earliest known stories, including Homer's *The Odyssey* (c. 800 BCE), and other myths and fairytales. It is extremely common to find that in romance-focused films the moment when a couple cement their relationship sexually is deferred until the end of the film; this is not the case in hard-core where narrative is often of little importance and sex rather than romance is the focus. Delay does help, however, to keep sexual tension in play, but provides a structure and focus very different to that found in the more episodic forms found in hard-core or the escalation formula of increasingly more intense or *outré* sexual acts often found in soft-core (as is typified by *Secrets of a Chambermaid*). This structure appears across a number of genres including romance, melodrama, action/adventure, comedy, musicals, thrillers and teen movies, and is also present in a slightly distorted way in some art films (as is the case with *The Piano Teacher* (*Le Pianiste*, 2000)). The trajectory of such narratives involves a series of blocks on a

- 9 For an extended discussion and introduction to 'New Queer Cinema' see Michele Aaron (ed.) (2004) *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, and Robin Griffiths (2006) *New Queer Cinema: Beyond the Celluloid Closet*, London: Wallflower Press.
- 10 The Book of Genesis describes in mythical terms the way in which the first man and first woman were cast out of the Garden of Eden or paradise (Genesis 3:23). In transgressing God's one rule (Genesis 3:3) by eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve experience nakedness as shame (Genesis 3:7–11) and at God's command Eve was henceforth to be ruled over by Adam (Genesis 4:16). As well as establishing a gendered order, the myth conflates entry into the knowledge of good and evil with sexuality. Ironically it is the biblical association of sex and shame that lends many cinematic representations of sex their transgressive appeal.
- 11 The term 'homosocial' is used to describe the organisation of inter-male relationships under heterosexuality and patriarchy, a concept developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) to help explore the effect of homophobia on society and sexuality.
- 12 See Evans & Gamman 1995 for a useful overview.
- 13 For a discussion of the way that fairytale and horror films often present witchy seductive beauty as a mask for an ugly soul see Krzywinska 2000a.
- 14 <http://www.etonline.com/celebrity/a3279.htm>. Accessed 9 February 2002.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 See Jacobs 1995 for a detailed account.
- 17 See Lacan's essays 'In You More Than You' (1987) and 'Encore' (1998).
- 18 The film was banned in Ireland but received '18' ratings in most countries; <http://www.imdb.com>. Accessed 21 June 2002.
- 19 This binary is not simply identified by modern feminist theorists of gender. It has a presence in literature and in the gothic novel *The Monk* (first published in 1796). The villain of the piece, the eponymous Monk, says 'What charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior Being, would disgust me, become Woman and tainted with all the failings of Mortality' (Matthew Lewis cited in Clemens 1999: 74). This view of women is echoed in a non-religious context by the husband in *Romance*.
- 20 See Lewis 2000 for more on the reception and the self-imposed 'X'-rated classification of *Romance* in the US.
- 21 See Krzywinska 1998a, 1998b and 1999 for discussions of these films.
- 22 'Circle' is derived from the latin *circulus* denoting a circus ring or circle. An etymological factor that, coincidentally or not, has a resonance within many of Schnitzler's stories and plays as well as the iconography of *La Ronde* and *Lola Montès* (1955).
- 23 <http://www.bbfc.co.uk>. Accessed 13 June 2002.
- 24 See Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1993) in which he argues that all exchange is based on pleasure and desire; Jacques Lacan's emphasis on the notion that desire is radically other and endlessly deferred; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-*