

EROTIC TENDENCIES IN FILM, 1900-1906

John Hagan

One of the main attractions at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the unveiling of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope, a peep-show machine which could show a film with a maximum length of about ninety seconds. On April 14, 1894, the Kinetoscope made its commercial debut in New York. This event was followed two weeks later by what may have been the first recorded protest against a film, the work in question being Edison's DOLORITA IN THE PASSION DANCE. This film, which went on to hold the box office record for peep-show machines at Atlantic City's Boardwalk, consisted of an Americanized version of a North African dance which had been popular at the Columbian Exposition.

Other protests followed. Soon afterwards, a pantomime of a bride's wedding night preparations was closed by order of a New York judge who denounced it as an "outrage upon public decency." Senator Bradley of New Jersey expressed shock at a film in which the Spanish dancer Carmencita revealed her ankles. The proprietor of the New Jersey parlor in which the film was being shown was ordered to replace it immediately with something more suitable. Similarly, the owner of the Kinetoscope parlor on the Boardwalk was asked by legal authorities not to show the film of Dolorita's dance. In light of this, he cancelled orders from the Kinetoscope Company for films of a similar nature.

Some officials found the erotic elements of these pictures to be only one indication of their general vulgarity and attempted to stop the burgeoning film industry altogether. In 1895, the Mayor of New York tried to shut all nickelodeons as immoral places of amusement and in this and other states heavy license fees were charged in the attempt to curb the growth of the movies. These large-scale attempts did not prove very effective and action against particular films continued. A film of Fatima, another "exotic dancer" who had appeared at the Columbian Exposition, fell victim to the whims of a censor who placed a stencil - - which, in the felicitous words of Knight and Alpert, "resembled two New England fences" - - over the offending portions of the dancer's anatomy.¹

The Edison studio was not above exploiting the erotic nature of Dolorita's dance. A Kinetoscope exhibitor, looking for a film suited to the tastes of his copper town audience, received this reply to an inquiry in 1896: "We are confident that the Dolorita PASSION DANCE would be as exciting as you desire. In fact, we will not show it in our parlor. You speak of the class of trade which wants something of this character. We think this will certainly answer your purposes. A man in Buffalo has one of these films and informs us that he frequently has forty or fifty men waiting in line to see it. We do not send out films for inspection."²

Edison's Vitascope, which made its debut in April 1896, was considered an improvement over the Kinetoscope since it actually projected figures upon a screen. One of the early Vitascope movies showed what may have been the screen's first kiss. THE WIDOW JONES, then a hit on Broadway, had as a highlight a prolonged kiss between the actors May Irwin and John C. Rice. This

moment was photographed on fifty feet of film and released under the title of THE MAY IRWIN-JOHN C. RICE KISS. However, when the film reached Chicago in June 1896, Herbert S. Stone, publisher of the literary magazine THE CHAP BOOK, did not hesitate to denounce it: "Now I want to smash the VITASCOPE. The name of the thing is in itself a horror. Its manifestations are worse...Whole scenes are enacted on the screen. La Loie [Loie Fuller] dances, elevated trains come and go, and the whole thing is...a pretty toy for that great child, the public...When only life size, it [the Irwin-Rice stage embrace] was pronounced beastly...Magnified to Gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over, it is absolutely disgusting...The immorality of living pictures and bronze statues is nothing to this."

In speaking of "living pictures," Stone is referring to the stage tableaux which were by then common in the theatre in both America and Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century in London, despite censorship and licensing laws, there existed music hall spectacles known as "poses plastiques," "tableaux vivants," or "Living Statuary" in which girls in revealing tights posed for such depictions as NYMPHS BATHING or DIANA THE HUNTRESS. In America, as far back as the Civil War period, troupes of models appeared in Living Pictures at New York theatres on programs with vocalists and minstrel acts. Many early French films, in which attractive girls posed in tableaux, were inspired in part by the tableaux vivants popular in French casinos and music halls. American movies of this period were also influenced by the tableaux vivants and American newspapers contained comparisons between the motion picture and the Living Pictures.

Many of the erotic aspects of early cinema could be found previously in some form in European and American popular theatre. For example, in English supper clubs during the first half of the nineteenth century, caricatures of divorce cases were staged in which female witnesses, usually comics in drag, would be called upon to offer evidence. They would then present their salacious testimony to a lecherous judge. When the trial was over, the platform would be cleared for an exhibition of Poses Plastiques. Along with burlesque comedy, these supper clubs formed the basis of English music halls of the 1850s and '60s. In France, Pathé produced a considerable number of erotic films during the last years of the nineteenth century which had their origins in paintings, picture post-cards and music hall pantomimes. These films included scenes of women undressing for bed; tableaux of women posing as mythical or historical figures; dramas of infidelity. The early American cinema drew its erotic elements both from these French films and from its own vaudeville tradition.

American vaudeville began about 1870 and had its roots in both European entertainment and in the institutionalization of such established American amusements as the minstrel show, the circus and the traveling player troupes. Vaudeville, as eclectic as it was derivative, consisted of diverse forms of entertainment enacted by performers who could present a routine within the short amount of time allotted to each act. In America, vaudeville grew rapidly between 1870 and 1915. Considering the eclectic nature of vaudeville, it is not surprising that the motion picture -- short and to the point -- soon became a staple of vaudeville programs. Just as the first Kinetoscopes

had included vaudeville performers as subjects, vaudeville soon began to include the movies.³ As if reflecting both its varied origins and the hetero-cinema often did not deal with eroticism explicitly and neatly but instead reflected the eroticism which subtly permeates society's humor and drama: which is intertwined with its ethical, ethnic and class concerns.

For my purposes, I would define the erotic elements in film as those elements which explicitly or implicitly deal with sexual desire or appeal. Such elements can take several forms, many of them not obvious and not easy to discuss adequately in a paper of limited length and scope. Some film critics -- the most celebrated being Parker Tyler -- have analyzed in detail the mythological and psychoanalytic aspects of cinema as a popular art -- that is, an art which reflects, in symbolic forms which need to be deciphered like a dream, the subconscious sexual and social beliefs of the masses.⁴ This type of analysis might be kept in mind when looking at the early films under consideration here, even the most innocent of them, with their reams of suggestive imagery: the depiction, for instance, of innocent but seductive young girls; or of women who are magically transformed or dismembered.

Consider, for example, the possible significance of the robber as a sexual bandit -- "stealing" a man's wife in A MODERN SAPPHO or hiding beneath the bed of young girls in THE GIRLS, THE BURGLAR AND THE RAT. These films have a certain erotic quality which is absent from more explicit films since, by not making eroticism explicit, they unconsciously suggest its ambiguity and secrecy.

I do not mean to suggest, by the way, that the film routines, often based on stage routines, in which erotic elements appear are used only in relation to women. Men, as well as women, are seen being dismembered or eyed by huge insects or with their clothes askew. In these instances, it is the manner in which the routine is presented which is pertinent: the particular "allure" which characterizes most of the women as opposed to the men.

There are a number of ways in the early cinema in which women are depicted in what might be said to be a sensual manner. For instance, young women are shown as being essentially innocent but naughty and vivacious: enjoying a holiday away from academic regimentation (BOARDING SCHOOL GIRLS, Edison 1905); gigglingly posing for a perhaps deceptively genteel man with a camera (TOO MUCH JOHNSON, 1900)⁵; attacking, spiritedly and without any real sense of outrage, a man hiding under their bed but then losing their courage when they see a rat (THE GIRLS, THE BURGLAR AND THE RAT, 1905).⁶

Women in these early films are often vulnerable or the victims of attack (e.g. UNPROTECTED FEMALE, 1903; THE FIRE BUG, 1905). Frequently, they are the victims of adulterous love affairs. In THE DIVORCE (1903) and in TWO ARDENT LOVERS (1903), a wife finds her husband having an affair with another woman. In THOSE WEDDING BELLS SHALL NOT RING OUT (1900), a woman holding a baby arrives at a wedding and shoots the groom -- who is obviously the father of her child. On the lighter side, when the bigamist is brought to court and prosecuted in THE BIGAMIST'S TRIAL (1905), one wife kicks her heels with delight while the other wives attack the hapless, oft-times married husband. As in THE GIRLS, THE BURGLAR AND THE RAT and many other films, morality

and mischief coalesce: to those posing a threat to the virtue of women, justice is administered with a heavy but playful hand.

Some women are actually licentious. In A MODERN SAPPHO (1905), a woman is kissing her husband in the hall of their home when they are interrupted by a burglar who assaults the husband and then carries the delighted wife upstairs. In THE SOCIETY PALMIST (1905), women visit a fortune teller and, after they pay him (is this a ruse or is he a gigolo?), he begins to kiss them until his irate wife jumps out from behind a curtain. In ROOMS FOR GENTLEMEN ONLY (1905), a woman sneaks into a man's room by hiding herself in his trunk. Other women are schemingly seductive. For example, in FEMALE CROOK AND HER VICTIM (1905), a woman robs a man by falling seductively against him. She then raises her dress to hide the man's wallet, providing the audience with a glimpse of her leg. Still other women are contemptuous of traditional morality -- a morality which was frequently personified by the Salvation Army. In SOUBRETTES IN A BACHELOR'S FLAT (1900), a young woman mockingly dresses as a Salvation Army member; in BLESSING FROM ABOVE (1904), a Salvation Army woman is hit with flour. One finds a similar situation in THE CHORUS GIRL AND THE SALVATION ARMY LASSIE (1904).⁷

The female characters in these movies are often completely unaware of their mildly, and often amusingly, erotic actions. For instance, in THE SLEEPY SOUBRETTE (1905), a girl's legs are slowly revealed as she moves in her sleep. Some women seem unaware of the erotic aspects of their otherwise practical behavior: the tightrope walker who removes her clothes to balance herself better in THE STRENUOUS LIFE (1904); the woman in ATHLETIC GIRL AND THE BURGLAR (1905) who takes off her dress in order to exercise; the woman in MUST BE IN BED BEFORE 10 (1903) who undresses before retiring for the night. On the other hand, some characters seem aware of not only their actions, but of the audience as well. The woman who looks into the camera as she removes her clothes in FROM SHOWGIRL TO BURLESQUE QUEEN (1905) in effect acknowledges the voyeuristic response of the audience.

Voyeurism is also evident in such "keyhole films" as THROUGH THE KEYHOLE IN THE DOOR (1900), PEEPING TOM IN THE DRESSING ROOM (1905) and HE WENT INTO THE WRONG BATH HOUSE (1905). A particularly bizarre example of this "genre" is INQUISITIVE BOOTS, an early British film in which a man looking through the keyholes of various rooms sees such things as another man dressed in female attire and a woman mothering a pig. The keyhole film, of course, has long been a staple of pornographic cinema although the erotic appeal of the films listed above is, to put it mildly, considerably different than it is in more hard-core fare.

In these early films, there is an almost fetishistic attention paid to certain objects, especially women's legs. The plots at times acknowledge this, as in IT'S A SHAME TO TAKE THE MONEY (1905) where the action centers around a policeman and a shoeshine boy getting to look at a woman's legs. In other pictures, though, one finds provocatively active legs introduced in a sly fashion and incidental to the plot. In THE ELOPERS WHO DIDN'T ELOPE (1904), the legs of the bride-to-be are seen kicking wildly as she is transported from

the site of her thwarted attempt to elope. In THE PRIMA DONNA UNDERSTUDY (1905), an actress' understudy (it might even be her maid) is carried away kicking after she has been discovered trying on the star's stockings. A psychoanalytic and mythopoeic critic more daring than myself might propose that in each of these films a woman subconsciously simulates orgasmic movements after having been frustrated in her attempt to gain erotic pleasure -- in one case, the pleasure of a honeymoon; in the other, the pleasure of wearing exotic and forbidden garments.

In each of these two films, an emphasis is placed upon the woman's legs to the extent that they come to seem almost separate from her as a person. This is made explicit in other works in which women's legs literally become objects. In such films as FOUR BEAUTIFUL PAIRS OF LEGS (1904), THE SHOCKING STOCKINGS (1904) and 2 A.M. IN THE SUBWAY (1905), the jokes centre around the fact that the attractive pairs of women's legs that we see are, in fact, artificial ones such as those found in clothing stores for display purposes. One occasionally even comes across undergarments exhibited in a dramatic film. This may have been done less for atmospheric purposes than to provide a little titillation for the viewer -- consider, for instance, the pair of stockings which hangs prominently but gratuitously upon the clothesline in THE STRENUOUS LIFE (1904).

Trick effects were often used to display women in an erotic fashion: the merging of several women into one in a number of Méliès' films as well as in THREE GIRLS INTO ONE and PIERROT'S PROBLEM (1900), to cite a few examples; conversely, the "dismantling" of a woman in THE WAY TO SELL CORSETS (1904) in which, when the woman suddenly becomes a mannequin, she is taken apart and her clothes removed; the evocation of a beautiful woman by an opium user in TOUR DE MONDE DE POLICIER (Pathé, 1905); a nude seductress' transformation into a skeleton in TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY (1900; perhaps based on Méliès' similar 1898 film). In all of these films, "magic" is used to touch upon the mystique of women: multiplying or dissecting their allure; transforming them into sensual fantasies or harbingers of misery.

It is curious how films made on the same set, and around the same theme, treat eroticism differently. For instance, the same bathhouse serves as the site for various kinds of mildly erotic misadventures in A POOR PLACE FOR LOVE MAKING, ON THE BEACH AT BRIGHTON and HE WENT INTO THE WRONG BATH HOUSE (all 1905). In a crude way, these films made on the same set utilize, through variations on the same basic plot, the tinge of eroticism, and the sensual aura which characterize a place like a bathhouse. Or consider A MODERN SAPPHO, POMPEY'S HONEY GIRL and LOVE'S PERFIDY (all 1905). All three films use the same set, which provides for one character to enter through a door in the background while another character stands unseen in the foreground. Although the plot changes from film to film, each film uses this specially designed two-area set in order to develop a narrative which centers around sexual infidelity.

Three other 1905 films, all made on one day and with the same actors, involve variations on the theme of seduction. In TEASING, a man is seen advancing towards a woman on a couch, pulling her arms back as she flirtatiously teases him; he finally gives her a lingering kiss. In ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE MORE,

the same actors go through essentially the same actions but this time on a chair and, in UNLUCKY AT CARDS, LUCKY AT LOVE, they repeat their amorous behavior while sitting on a table. These three slightly risqué pictures resemble the most blatant pornographic movies in the attempt of both types of film to make the most common physical attractions seem unique by varying the locales in which, and the objects upon which, such attractions are manifested.

Sometimes, however, films made on the same set and around the same theme -- and on or about the same day -- have completely different meanings. For instance, KISS ME! (1904) seems to have been made only to display some tantalizing posters of a woman, while COMMITTEE ON ART uses the same posters, this time not for purposes of tantalization but rather to show the moral outrage engendered by the posters. Comparably, in SAILORS ASHORE (1904), girls are carried through the windows of a building for an obviously lascivious purpose while, in A FIRE IN A BURLESQUE THEATRE, equally raunchy girls are carried through the same windows but this time for a more honorable, even noble, reason: they are being rescued.

Erotic films at times resemble other films which are not erotic. For instance, Edison's 1902 BURLESQUE SUICIDE is a close shot of a rotund man taking a drink, then pretending to kill himself, and finally pointing at the camera and laughing. In a similar film, THE WINE OPENER (1905), the viewer is not the butt of a joke this time but rather the object of a flirtation: the film consists of a close shot of a laughing woman, her dress slipping off her shoulder, looking into the camera as she opens a bottle and then drinks wine. Both pictures would seem to fall into that category of film known as the facial. In her history of British cinema, Rachel Low observes that filmmakers began to use close-ups in the late 1890s in the production of "facials". In these films, which were based on vaudeville routines, an actor with a comical expression would be seen in a tight shot doing something amusing.

The close-up was a device used many times to increase the erotic quality of a film. Besides the examples already noted, one might mention THE TROUBLESOME FLY (1903) which consists entirely of a close-up of a woman's feet with a fly hovering over them; or A PIPE DREAM (1905) in which a woman in close-up smokes a cigarette (opium?) and then, as she smiles seductively, imagines that she is holding a passionate young man in her hand. At one point, she looks into the camera -- as if making the audience conspirators in her naughty fantasy.

The close-up also provided a means by which early films could display to full advantage the novelty (and naughtiness) of the silhouette. For instance, in SILHOUETTE SCENE (1903), a woman standing before her home sees her husband inside the house kissing the maid behind a window shade. This kiss, shown as a silhouette, is seen in close-up through a rather awkward inset of the silhouette within the window frame.

Perhaps the film that most dramatically uses the close-up to increase the sense of both voyeurism and eroticism is THE GAY SHOE CLERK (Edison) and his female customer, to a close-up of his hands tying her shoe; the film then cuts to a long-shot of him kissing her. In effect, the sudden change in camera position from a long to close shot indicates, even hypostatizes, the intense erotic desire which the characters have come to feel for each other.

FOOTNOTES

1. The erotic appeal of the dancer was also put to good use in many fictional films of the period. One of the most interesting is the "trick film" ANIMATED PICTURE STUDIO (1903) since a rumor persists that the dancer in the film is Isadora Duncan. However, I once attended a showing during which one of the original Duncan Dancers slowly approached the screen as the film was being projected and, standing eye to eye with the tiny image of the dancer, began protesting vociferously that "No! No! It's Not Her!"
2. A comparable mixture of propriety and prurience can be found in the Biograph Bulletin for LIFTING THE LID (1905), in which it is stated that the film is "somewhat spicy, but is unobjectionable in every way..." See Kemp Niver's BIOGRAPH BULLETINS 1896-1908 (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group, 1971).
3. The factual information found in this paper has been compiled largely from the sources listed in the Bibliography. As regards eroticism in early cinema, several of these sources also contain a good deal of information which fell beyond the scope of this paper.
4. Among Tyler's writings, see particularly THE HOLLYWOOD HALLUCINATION (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944). Note also Stan Brakhage's discussion of how Méliès "drew upon the whole mythic history of women," which can be found in Brakhage's FILM BIOGRAPHIES (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1977).
5. One finds this same combination of innocence and flirtatious naughtiness in the behavior of young girls being photographed for the non-fictional early film BRIGHTON SCENES AT AMUSEMENT PARK.
6. Many of the films mentioned in this paper are not being shown at the FIAF conference since they are of little consequence except as illustrations of certain points which I wish to raise. Except where noted, all of the films mentioned in this paper were made at Biograph. Unless otherwise indicated, the dates shown are the years of both production and copyright except for the Biograph films copyrighted in 1902, in which case the films may have been made earlier.
7. Traditional morality was also satirized in the character of the hedonistic monk -- see, for instance, THE SIMPLE LIFE (1905) or WINE, WOMEN AND SONG (1905).

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SIMULTANEOUS ACTION IN FILM, 1900-1906

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The early cinema employed a number of types of simultaneous action. On a very basic level, this could involve having a number of simple, incidental actions taking place at the same time within a shot in order to make it seem more realistic and less theatrically structured. This might be achieved through something as elementary as having extras walk in different directions in the foreground of a shot, as is found in the 1903 Biograph film A VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.¹ Another rudimentary use of simultaneity can be found in many chase films - such as the early British picture THE CHICKEN THIEF - in which a number of actions occur within a shot but with all of these actions functioning as elements within, and subservient to, the chase itself.

There were, of course, also other types of simultaneity. Many early trick films, such as those of G.A. Smith in England or of Méliès and Zecca in France, incorporated a dream or fantasy which was meant to be experienced by both the character and the audience as occurring at the same time as the film's more realistic action. This effect could be achieved through double exposure, by inseting one shot within another, and through optical projection or mattes. Early examples include Smith's SANTA CLAUS (1898), Zecca's HISTOIRE D'UN CRIME (1901) and Méliès' TUNNELLING THE ENGLISH CHANNEL (1907), in which Méliès also used a cross-sectional set to present simultaneous action.

The insertion of one film into another was not a device used only to depict a dream or fantasy or fantastic experience. In THE BOASTER, an early British film, the character's boast is visualised on a screen behind him - a sort of mental projection - as he "speaks". In UNCLE JOSH AT THE MOVING PICTURE SHOW (Edison, 1902), Uncle Josh and the movie that he is watching are shown simultaneously. Another type of simultaneity can be found in the "combination film" in which one film is printed over another in order to create a new film - for instance, A NYMPH OF THE WAVES (1900) in which a shot of a woman is superimposed on a shot of the ocean. A semblance of simultaneity was also achieved in such trick films as TWENTIETH CENTURY TRAMP, OR HAPPY HOOLIGAN AND HIS AIRSHIP (Edison, 1902) in which a sense of movement through the air was created by placing the tramp in his airship above a moving panorama of the city.

Not all simultaneous activity in early cinema occurred within the shot. Charles Musser has drawn attention to Porter's THE TRAMP'S DREAM (1901) in which the tramp dreams that he is being attacked by a dog although the next shot reveals that he is actually being shaken by a policeman. Musser suggests that what one finds here is a "metaphorical" shot relationship which reinforces the film's simultaneity of action.² However, I would prefer to concentrate for the most part on films in which the simultaneous activity occurs within the shot itself.