

Women, Sexuality and the Commercial Cinema: The Seductive Illusion, Part II

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It was inevitable that the so-called 'sexual revolution', unaccompanied by any fundamental changes in economic, social and political relations, would lead to the appearance of sexual decadence on the one hand, and a wave of neo-puritanism on the other. Between and also above these polarised expressions, and due to the strong ideological challenges of the women's and gay liberation movements, however, better expressions and models of sexuality have begun to gain a tentative foothold.

I want to explore some of the relationships between these developments and the movies in this article.

Film criticism is, by its very nature, interpretive and tends towards subjectivity. I want therefore to draw on psychoanalytic theory for criteria which will make my own interpretation both more coherent and more generalizable. Two terms will serve us well in this effort, borrowed and updated from two thinkers who spent a good part of their lives investigating links between sexuality and social and political relations.

The first of these terms is 'sex-positive' and with it goes its corollary, 'sex-negative'. We owe this useful construct to the young Wilhelm Reich, working in between-wars-Germany when mainstream attitudes to sexuality were characterized by harsh

official puritanism and repression on the one hand, and by extravagant libidinal expression divorced from love relations on the other — in short, sexual degradation. One of the clearest and most brilliant cinematic expressions of this socio-sexual context can be found in the story line, character development and symbolism of the famous Sternberg-Dietrich collaboration, *The Blue Angel*. This film stunningly demonstrates that any sexual expression which does burst forth within such a context is permanently scarred by its original overall repression.

Condoning the sexual life which flourished in the underbelly of the official morality was not the answer for Reich. Instead he insisted on opting for a different kind of sexuality altogether — natural, healthy, a part of respectful loving relations, freely exchanged between consenting equals. Whatever cultural artifacts endorsed this kind of sexuality he called 'sex-positive'; those that uncritically partook of the former were considered 'sex-negative'. Reich believed that sexual relations belonged squarely inside the nexus of economic, social and political relations. For the privileged few, therapy could help to bring about a sex-positive life. But it remained at best an individual solution for a tiny minority.

The second term — 'repressive desublimation' — comes from Herbert Marcuse and his elaborator, Gad Horowitz. Their ideas were developed in the context of post-war capitalism and the 'liberalization' it brought to sexual mores and standards. Repressive desublimation refers to processes by which available energy, tending towards activities which would bring an individual or group into conflict with the dominant, oppressive social order is, through its sexualization, turned away from this goal, that is diverted from social and political activity. Of necessity, such a process will produce a mindless kind of sexuality which will bear the marks of its lobotomization. An excellent example of this process at work is the development of the disco-bar/singles scene. One of its most seductive cinematic expressions is *Saturday Night Fever*. If one contrasts the use of sexuality in this film with its use in Bertolucci's *1900*, particularly in the highly erotic relations between the peasant protagonist and his anarchist woman friend, the meaning of the term — which is very much pro-erotic — becomes clearer.

If we combine these two terms within a *feminist framework*, we have at our disposal a set of criteria which we can apply to a very broad body of film. These criteria reject both the neo-puritanism of the anti-feminist, anti-gay

backlash and the soul-destroying commodification of sexuality on the late capitalist sex market. They assert women's right to a free, loving and active sexuality, as part and parcel of life and women's larger struggle to create a society where they, and by extension children and men, are all free. With these criteria in mind then, we can develop a classification system which allows us to examine pornographic and horror films, European so-called art films and a series of films which have come out of the more 'mellow' part of the Hollywood industry — including the heirs to *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *An Unmarried Woman*, etc.

Fear and Loathing at the Movies

For many in the liberal North American middle classes, life expectations have come to include an orgasm in every bed along with a chicken in every pot. However, much of the old, misogynist, sex-negative attitudes lurk just, below the surface of this sophisticated and wholesome veneer. First, it would be dangerous to forget those many advertisements in the entertainment section of every major metropolitan newspaper offering hardcore porn with tempting titles like *A Very Small Case of Rape*, etc. These films are made by entrepreneurs who demonstrate that they will

make money any which way they can. But the films continue to bring in the dollars because, like striptease and prostitution, they fill needs created by acute poverty in their audience's socio-sexual relations. With few exceptions they substitute for, and thus reinforce, the absence of these relations and are the very opposite of the 'erotic aids' they are advertised to be. These films are consumed by members of all social classes. They are sex-negative, repressive desublimation at its very worst, and almost always misogynist.

The audience for these films is virtually all male. But not so for movies like *Dressed to Kill*, Brian De Palma's latest contribution to the sex-horror genre. Films like this constitute much of the Saturday night dating fare of teenagers and young adults, and they have developed quite the following among many serious critics, including those sympathetic to feminism. Because many horror films take the claustrophobic nuclear family for their dramatic arena, imbuing 'normal' patriarchal relations with terror and violence, they do point to sexuality as being 'problematic'. In this sense, they are often judged as making a positive contribution and aiding in the demystification of oppressive institutions. But within our criteria of sex-positive and repressive desublimation, most of these films score very low indeed. Few — including *Dressed to Kill* — display any elements of positive critique, and it is truly difficult to know whether in most of them, the negativity attached to sexuality can really be called a critique at all — except as interpreted by highly sophisticated, psychoanalytically informed viewers. Their

impact on the vast majority of viewers would, it seems to me, hinder rather than encourage a challenge to the very oppressive institutions they caricature.

Less Than Discreet Charm

Many of us find European films that reach us extremely interesting, skilfully and innovatively wrought and very thought-provoking, perhaps more so than most Hollywood films. They tend, as a group, to be more politically (self-)conscious and, as a result, we often expect, and even assume, them to be more progressive in relation to their treatment of women as well as other socio-political themes. While the names of Godard, Tanner, Rivette and Bertolucci, come to mind in the progressive camp, to a certain extent, a quick look at three of the most successful of the new German crop will, I think, strongly suggest that we revise our expectations.

Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* uses the sexual exploitation of a German capitalist by an erotic and manipulative working class woman as an extended metaphor for post-war Germany's remarkable economic recovery and moral bankruptcy. The film is crafted in such a way that we can't help wanting, at the same time, to partake of them. Through the use of explicitly erotic scenes of female sexuality, we are inexorably drawn to desire (or to desire to be like) Hanna Schygulla's Maria Braun: she is so sexy, so delicious, so well-dressed and comfortable. In this film, the use of female eroticism in the service of misogynist metaphor undermines the themes of social criticism with which it is interwoven, nullifying

the film's overall claim to progressive critique.

The Tin Drum directed by Victor Schlöndorff is also ambiguous, to say the least. Clear in its condemnation of fascism, its attitude toward women leaves much to be desired. The film's focus on women remains defined by the region between their thighs. Not only is this region decisive, as far as men are concerned, it virtually defines woman's essential nature. This is not new: woman has always been defined by patriarchy as cunt-mother. But what is new is the extreme lyricism of the erotic scenes. They are so attractive that many women might miss the reactionary nature of their representation, indeed, be happy to accept it if they too could have such an eroticized life. Is it necessary to add that women are completely passive socially, politically, militarily, while the men who so desire them define all *that* type of action? As appealing as the treatment of eroticism appears at first glance in this film we cannot call it sex-positive because it does not point to sexuality exchanged between social equals; it leaves women very much in their traditional place.

Angela Winkler, who plays the role of the erotic mother in *The Tin Drum*, also plays a vaginally over determined woman in *Knife in the Head*. Here she exemplifies the kind of smouldering but stupid sexuality so favoured by many male filmmakers, and the implication of fault for the hero's victimization is clearly laid at her adulterous feet. There is a veneer of modernity. At one point, she abandons both men in disgust, but only to return later, further tormenting her hard-done-by husband. In this case, we have a clearly female sex-negative film, almost of the old school, despite

contemporary filming techniques.

It's hard to leave the subject of films from the other side of the Atlantic without a few words on the latest 'artistic triumph' to assail us, this time from Britain. I am speaking of Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession*. This film embodies everything I abhor in a movie — from its gross, heavy-handed acting and direction to its brutal, sexist ideology. Far from denouncing the male protagonist's (played by Art Garfunkel) emotional and physical violence against the woman whom he 'loves' (played by Theresa Russell), identification, and therefore sympathy, is built completely around him. She is presented as existing only for the purposes of relating to him and other men, but not in any truly critical sense. Constant changes of clothes, makeup and hair and a lifestyle empty of all vocation make her nothing more than an object for male sexual exploitation. Yet the Garfunkel character escapes all social and emotional consequences for his protracted rape at the end, including even the shattering of the illusion of his 'love'. And there is no implication that, living as she does, a woman is bound to be violently exploited and suffer suicidal depressions.

The Hot Tub Theory of Social Change

Unfortunately, cinematic co-optation of women's sexuality is not restricted to the horrors of porn and terror, nor to the excesses of the European film intelligentsia. It also comes to us via the affluent sunshine of California middle-class film land. Of those that deal explicitly and centrally with women's

sexuality, there are two broad sub-categories. The first is defined by the implicit or explicit notion that while women may be sexual, this should not be construed to mean that they are worthwhile human beings of any intelligence, reliability or competence in their own right.

The Ann-Margret character playing opposite Bruce Dern in John Trent's *Middle Aged Crazy* epitomizes this pathetic and insulting type. As the film opens, we hear her off camera voice calling 'Bingo, bingo, bingo' in a dimly lit room. We become aware that these bingo's are supposed to represent her multiple orgasms! It soon transpires that she is 'killing' her husband with demands for sex, so what does he do? Why he beds down with a cheerleader nymphet, logically, what else? Unforgiveably, and true to her refurbished cinematic type of 'liberated' sex-kitten, the young woman has the timidity to be sleeping with another man when our hero is in crisis and comes knocking on her door. He must gracefully accept the burden of his wife's sexuality, the last example of which takes place in their modest little hot tub, next to the modest little pool, in the yard of the modest little 20-room ranch-style bungalow. She, of course, with no independent wage, profession or, apparently, social life, is delighted with the solution. 'Sub-category one' then is characterized by overt, if liberally honey-coated misogyny and traditional roles.

The best example of 'sub-category two' opens in a hot tub. I am referring here to that well-known pre-credit scene in Richard Lang's *Change of Seasons*. We are titillated by a liberated co-ed (Bo Derek) as she sports herself with her married English

professor (Anthony Hopkins). They live in a New England town peopled exclusively by witty male persons with professions and female persons without, all of whom drive only late-model European cars — Volvos, Porches, the like. (Even the sole proletarian character is so by choice, not necessity.)

Other examples of this category — which is not misogynist at all, in fact which scores some really good points on women's behalf — are *Private Benjamin*, strongly influenced by Goldie Hawn and directed by Howard Zieff, and *It's My Turn*, directed by Claudia Weill of *Girlfriends* fame. (Blake Edward's '10' falls somewhere in between the sub-categories, as do others.) The trouble with all of these films is that in opening the steam valve and releasing pent-up anger from the middle-class woman's area of the overheated social system, they finally stabilize the system as a whole — not because of what they do criticize, but because of what they don't.

Affluence, for some in North America, is firmly based on deprivation for others and women's overall oppression — erotic, economic, political — is an essential pillar in the edifice of hierarchy and privilege. The entire structure is responsible for 'lifestyles' (the very term is ludicrous in this sense) of great hardship for the large majority of women. The films in question in no way direct the attention of middle class women (or upper or working class women) to the larger social reality compounded of sex, economic and racial inequality; indeed they direct this attention away. By implying that sexual fulfillment can be achieved if one has an income of \$50,000-a-year (via

husband, father, or well-paying profession), these films divert attention from the roots of the problems that affect all women, if unevenly. It is very important to note that in these films women are effectively still separated from one another, despite some superficial signifiers of friendship and solidarity.

**The More
I Make Love
The More
I Want to
Make the Revolution
/The More I
Make the Revolution
the More
I Want to
Make Love**

These words, slogans scrawled on walls in the revolutionary May-June events in Paris in 1968, encapsulate, for me, the ideal relationship between eros and social action. It is true that there is still something of the masculine in their tone, for they do not specify 'free, quality birth control, abortion and childcare' as necessary corollaries. Still, in their connection of love-making to the desire and activity for a better world for all, they express the direction in which a sex-positive cinema, working against repressive desublimation, would travel. Such cinema would have to be developed within an explicitly feminist framework, however, since no treatment of sexuality which takes women's subordination as an acceptable starting point can, by definition, be truly sex-positive.

Although not concerned primarily with sexuality, one commercial film was released in 1980 which wins my 'Feminist Oscar' — Lee Grant's direction of Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me A Riddle*. This film follows

Eva (Lila Kedrova) in her last year of life, especially as she lives it with husband and youngest daughter. Without a shred of didacticism, the film recounts the story of a truly brave, integrated feminist life, fraught with all the pains and contradictions that fighting for others; as well as oneself, brings. Eva is shown to be connected to other women in deep bonds of solidarity through sisterhood, friendship and motherhood — a revolutionary in spirit and action. Although no special emphasis is given to Eva's sexual relationship with her husband, when, towards the end, the film finally does take up the theme, the tenderness and meaning is so deep that many women and even men in the audience I sat among openly wept.

Kedrova's old, wrinkled working class woman more authentically represents the real needs and aspirations of every woman regardless of social class than, say, Shirley MacLaine's affluent, articulate, sleek character possibly can in *A Change of Seasons*, and this for two reasons. First, because we humans are spiritual and emotional beings and we only feel truly fulfilled when all dimensions of our being — including sexuality — are integrated with our deepest values. Second, because the working class woman can represent the interests of all women, where the bourgeois woman whose story is told *within* the values of her class can only represent a much smaller number.

Tell Me A Riddle is not primarily concerned with sexuality. We must wait for the commercial film which will explore eroticism with the same depth, commitment and sensitivity as *Tell Me A Riddle* does other aspects of women's lives.