THE EROTIC SCREEN

Desire, Addiction, and Perversity in Cinema

Thomas Wolman

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About the Author

Thomas Wolman, M.D., was born and raised in New York City, where he now lives after residing in Philadelphia, PA, for forty-four years. He attended Johns Hopkins University and the Pennsylvania State University Medical College. Subsequently, he trained at the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic Center, where he taught in both the psychoanalytic and the psychotherapy training programs. Until his move, he held the title of assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He has written on Winnicott, Mahler, Kohut, and Lacan, as well as on contemporary films, and more recently on greed, bereavement, and privacy issues. Currently, he teaches a course on the history of psychoanalysis at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute.

Introduction

Movies have depicted sexuality in one form or another since their inception in 1896, when Thomas Alva Edison produced *The Kiss*. Despite its brief duration of 18 seconds, this film proceeds in three acts. In act one, a man and a woman nuzzle each other around the lips and cheek, while engaging in intimate conversation. In act two, the man abruptly steps way, ostentatiously grooming his moustache—a sign of his virility. In act three, he leans in for a deep kiss, while nibbling the edges of his partner's lips. Thus the sheer length of the kiss, its formal progress from foreplay to climax, and its in-your-face close-ups make its sexual implications unmistakable. And the sexual aspect was not lost on the film's audience. The disgust it aroused in many reflected moral outrage, but also the perception that something "excessive" was invading the viewer's imaginary space. Indeed, some even branded the film as pornographic (Wikipedia)—or at least as its precursor. And even after the screen kiss had become an acceptable symbol of movie romance, it never quite shed its prurient undertones.

It is therefore not surprising that *The Kiss* (1896) gave rise to the first calls for movie censorship. Censorship—official or unofficial—has always regulated the relationship between movies and sexuality. It must be understood that censorship originated in the collective mentality of filmgoers—in the moral restraints imposed by individual minds acting in concert and

as a national consensus. Hollywood responded to this consensus with a set of self-imposed restrictions known as the Motion Picture Production Code. Of the code's eleven prohibitions and twenty-five constraints, at least thirteen pertained to sexuality (Wikipedia). The consensus upon which the code was based remained in effect from 1927 until 1945, with the year 1934 serving as a fulcrum. After this date, any film that did not receive a certificate of approval could not be released. Thus 1934 can be considered the high-watermark of Hollywood censorship. And almost four decades later, after the code was abolished, we could say that censorship reached its nadir.

But, in another sense, the year 1934 simply changed the battle over censorship into a guerilla war waged by filmmakers. In *It Happened One Night* (1934), for example, the Director—Frank Capra—*exploits his own compliance with the Censor* in order to put across his own subversive message. Early in the film, the screenwriters introduce a running gag involving the walls of Jericho whose hilarity is only enhanced by its biblical roots. The censorship expressly forbade the depiction of unmarried couples sharing a bed or even a bedroom where proximity offered too great a temptation. Hence it sought to exclude the mere suggestion of premarital sex. Capra solves this problem by having his male lead, played by Clark Gable, hang a somewhat threadbare blanket between the two beds that he and his future bride were compelled to share due to lack of funds. He then depicts his two stars—the newspaperman and the runaway socialite (Claudette Colbert)—behaving *like an ordinary married couple*. They bicker, they haggle over money, and Gable's character cooks his "wife" breakfast. Meanwhile, the blanket satisfies the censorship and probably fools the naïve and the willfully ignorant. But does any thinking person believe this flimsy piece of cloth poses a real barrier? Thus Capra gently mocks the censor *sotto voce*, so to speak. Specifically, he places a "screen of propriety" over a scene whose sexual possibilities are transparent. In this way, the threadbare blanket unconsciously suggests the titillating image (especially for male viewers) of Gable's character "deflowering" his future wife in an obscure hotel room. Eventually the two get married and we chuckle when "the walls of Jericho" do come tumbling down.

But in 1934 a mass movement was under way that would decisively alter the dynamic interplay between censor and moviemaker. I refer to the immigration of the German film industry, the majority of whom were Jews, to Hollywood. These filmmakers brought with them a European sensibility quite at odds with America's dominating strain of Puritanism.

During the pre-code era, the most avant-garde films were being made in Berlin. Hollywood responded to these films with admiration and envy in equal measure. The industry knew—even in the 1920s—it was barred from making such sexually candid movies. But the Berlin output had a powerful effect on the studios' collective psyche.

During this era, three groundbreaking films depicted sexuality in a manner that would have been considered brazen—if not salacious—in America: *Pandora's Box* (1929), *The Blue Angel* (1930), and *M* (1931). On this side of the Atlantic, directors marveled at the screen presence of two actresses, Louise Brooks and Marlene Dietrich. Dietrich was invited along with her director Joseph von Sternberg to Hollywood where the pair made a string of successful movies together in the 1930s. Brooks on the other hand (an American actress), never found her footing in Hollywood after her brief run in Europe. Their contrasting fates reveal Hollywood's contradictory attitudes toward women who choose not to hide their sexuality.

The most shocking of the three—*Pandora's Box*—is a kind of sexual three ring circus portraying every variety of illicit coupling. But what was most disturbing to viewers, then as now, is Brook's out-and-out naturalism. She approaches every sexual encounter with the innocence of a child. On an unconscious level she evokes the way children gleefully engage in sexual games without any awareness of transgression. Another factor affecting viewers was the state of psychosexual disorder in the film that led some writers to cite it as a symptom of the even greater decadence in Weimar society (Weir, 2018).

But it would be wrong to view the film as devoid of restraint. There is a famous scene, for example, that shows Brook's character dancing with a lesbian woman during her own wedding reception. Her husband stands with his back to us, signaling: "his back is up." The woman shoots him a proprietary look that challenges his virility. The two seem to be sparring over who has the phallic member—or who may claim rights to Brooks as the universally desired object. But the film never makes this encounter explicit. The viewer is free to infer that the woman is, or is not, a lesbian. There is thus an element of self-censorship at work: it is OK to insinuate sexual liaisons so long as their nature remains tacit. Early American talkies of 1930–1933 adopted this attitude up to the point of mild suggestiveness.

Starting in the late 1930s (with rare exceptions such as *Sunrise* (1927)) European filmmakers got their first crack at making films in Hollywood (or, to a lesser extent, in London, as was the case with Alfred Hitchcock,

who served his apprenticeship in Berlin). The most successful practitioners, such as Billy Wilder, made films infused with a European sensibility while still adhering to the letter of the law. In the case of film noir—arguably their own invention—they injected low budget crime thrillers with a supercharged eroticism that no amount of censorship could erase (Naremore, 2019). In the process, they imported the idea of sex as an irresistible force that overrides considerations of conscience, propriety, and even self-preservation. It was the concession that illicit sex always brings about its comeuppance that satisfied the censors. And after a steady diet of bland optimism, a dose of European fatalism gave post-war audiences a twinge of *Schadenfreude*.

The year 1934 also ushered in other means of circumventing the censor by exploiting loopholes in the code. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, a national mood of indulgence set in regarding the representation of alcohol consumption. *The Thin Man* (1934), for example, presents a running gag wherein the married sleuths solve a crime while visibly intoxicated for much of the movie's running time. In this film, and others like it, we are invited to revel in the loss of inhibitions and the barely hidden assumption that such loosening might lead to sexual activity.

Another "loophole" was onscreen violence in films such as *Scarface* (1932) that stirred audiences with their gleeful mayhem. And ever since 1922's *Nosferatu*, the vampire genre was "cloaked" in a penumbra of dark sexuality. In the 1950s filmmakers amped up the element of horror in science fiction movies to induce "spine tingling" thrills and chills. The basic idea was that any visceral "kick" or thrill—whether emanating from violence, exuberant imbibing, bloodsucking, or the shock of horror—gave sexual satisfaction in displaced form. Two such films discussed in this book—*The Thing from Another World* (1951) and the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)—deploy this trend in low budget vehicles that flew under the censor's radar. In a later film discussed herein—*Alien* (1979)—the director consciously exploited the psychosexual potential of the alien entity.

Meanwhile, however, World War II had changed America into a global society and weakened the national consensus that had supported censorship since 1934. Thus it is perhaps not just coincidence that the first to challenge the Production Code head-on was Otto Preminger, an Austro-Hungarian by birth. He had already raised eyebrows with his film *Laura* (1944) that subtly tweaked gender stereotypes, and in the waning years of the Production

Code, his *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) found a way of presenting sexual content in a context that demanded truthfulness: the courtroom.

But his most direct challenge to the censorship involved a rather tame romantic comedy—now remembered more for its moment in history than its artistic merit. In 1953 that film, *The Moon Is Blue*, was rejected for its treatment of "illicit sex." The official reason for the ruling was a "light-hearted" attitude toward sexuality, but the Breen Office might never have taken this position if not for the use of the words "virgin," "pregnancy," and "mistress" in the script. And in just this way, they pushed their mission to the point of absurdity and self-mockery. They were asking producers to censor words that even in 1953 were part of everyday speech. And they were behaving as if adults were incapable of judging these matters for themselves (or as if children harbored no doubts regarding the stork myth). The censors were also accused of extreme literality since the context of these allegedly "forbidden" words was a completely innocuous plot in which the female lead fends off two male admirers until one of them proposes marriage to her.

The release of the film after a court battle paved the way for further weakening of the censorship in the following decade and its eventual abandonment in 1968. The new MPAA rating system instituted by Jack Valenti attempted to eliminate the code's major abuses (Wikipedia). And for the critical years 1968–1972 it succeeded. For the first time since the 1920s mainstream movies were free to address sexuality in a free and open manner. During these years, filmmakers experimented with sexual themes and in many cases their sheer exuberance caused them to include nude scenes that in retrospect seem gratuitous. This trend in world cinema led in turn to the first non-pornographic film incorporating explicit sexual acts: *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). Setting aside the question of artistic merit, this film was widely regarded as a historical turning point and a trendsetter. Instead, it hit a dead end. In an ironic sense it performed the necessary "last tango" of unfettered sex.

Many reasons have been proposed for this outcome, but I would claim that *Last Tango in Paris* butted against a contradiction inherent in cinema as a mass medium: that the voyeuristic delight in seeing requires that the so-called "primal scene" be barred from view (Žižek, 1991). In the context of mainstream cinema the "primal scene" means sexual intercourse or its equivalent. And from this requirement it follows that mainstream movies

will henceforth impose some degree of censorship upon themselves even while retaining a greater frankness toward psychosexual themes.

The new censorship emerged from several sources. For audiences, it was not so much they disapproved of explicit sex per se. After all they had lined up in droves to see *Deep Throat* (1972) released the same year as *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and the first pornographic film to reach a wide audience. No, it was more the feeling that explicit sex was occurring *in the wrong place*. In one sense it was as if such scenes breached the protective "screen" guaranteeing privacy to moviegoers. And the non-acceptance by audiences went hand-in-hand with a renewal of official censorship when the "X" rating was abandoned in favor of the NC-17 (Wikipedia). From that point on, filmmakers strove for the coveted "R" rating, mainly by eliminating or abbreviating nude scenes.

A new movie genre arose that portrayed men and women struggling to place a limit on the unfettered expression of their sexual drives. Since prototypes like *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), these films give a more nuanced and certainly more problematic take on the role of sexuality in human relationships. Even in the earlier sci-fi movies, that limit is implied in the decision to shield the alien sexual object from full exposure. In the more contemporary *Secretary* (2002) and *Little Children* (2006), that limit is reached when the participants realize that their miniature sexual utopia fails to provide the be-all and end-all of their respective lives.

The genre revealed a kinship to the pioneering *The Lost Weekend* (1945) both in its reaction to excess, and its explicit linkage of alcoholism and sexuality. Two parables of greed directed by John Huston—*The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948)—depict men whose overwhelming drive to possess an impossible object (a mythical statuette or the mother lode of gold) leads to ruin. In the succeeding decades the cyclical ups and downs of excess and reaction—comparable to the earlier vicissitudes of censorship—re-emerged in exposés of alcohol and greed in films like the *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962), *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), and *Wall Street* (1987). And in each succeeding reiteration the relationship between addiction, greed, and sexuality became more apparent. Thus the cycle of overreach and correction grew into an attempt at self-regulation.

My first close encounter with film censorship occurred during repeat viewings of *The Thing from Another World* (1951). I had always marveled at its ingenious special effects but now I sat in awe at its accomplishment in

the face of burdensome constraints. These constraints were of three kinds: official censorship, budgetary limits, and pressures to conform to studio expectations. The movie's romantic sub-plot, for example, was designed to suggest—but not to exclaim—issues of male harassment, sexual bondage, and reversal of gender roles. The budget required the film to be finished in record time (a few weeks). Hence there was neither time nor money to build a detailed replica of a spaceship nor to design elaborate costumes for the alien creature. The cinematographer got around these restraints by giving us only brief glimpses of the alien entity. And finally, the Studio executives put pressure on the producers to include a happy ending—which in this case meant the destruction of "The Thing".

It then became evident to me that these internal and external restraints resembled the effects of censorship in so far as the central "thing" remains invisible—or at least ambiguous in shape and form—and only its effects on crew members' minds can be inferred. Moreover, if we assume that "The Thing" is in some sense a sexual "thing", then that "thing" is literally eclipsed from the movie. Moreover, the film's B movie status, its escapist appeal to teenagers, and its remoteness from the concerns of everyday life allowed it to fly under the radar. But on a deeper level it dawned on me that the film delves into the problems humans face when confronting an alien force in their midst. Readers of the chapter devoted to "The Thing" will decide for themselves whether I have made the case that the "thing" is the elusive sexual object. But I believe most will concur that the filmmakers' efforts to accommodate the restrictions imposed upon them can add layers to a film's subtext that, like impasto, enriches its artistic texture.

One idea threading its way through all the chapters of this book is the idea of human sexuality as both a *force majeure* and a conundrum challenging the human mind. In response to this challenge, the films raise questions about the nature of sexuality. *The Thing from Another World* (1951), for example, asks: what is the nature of the sexual object? In the case of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), it could be: what if desire was eliminated from our collective mentality in favor of mass sexual surrender? And does *Alien* (1979), for its part, ask whether it is possible to expel the alien aspect of sexuality from the psyche? And picking up the alien theme, is Mark, the serial killer of women in *Peeping Tom* (1960), a monster—an alien in human form? Or is he a human being struggling against an alien force? And finally, the films *Secretary* (2002) and *Little Children* (2006) make explicit

their question: If the infantile roots of human sexuality are inherently "polymorphous and perverse," who then is the true pervert?

Of course the films decline to say whether these questions can be answered to our satisfaction. Indeed their ambiguity on this point adds to their enduring achievement. Hence, the assertions and conclusions to which I am led in my explorations of these movies are mainly intended to stir up discussion and debate—to help these movies live on in our minds.