

Don't Smile: You're on Carnal Camera

by Ira Nayman

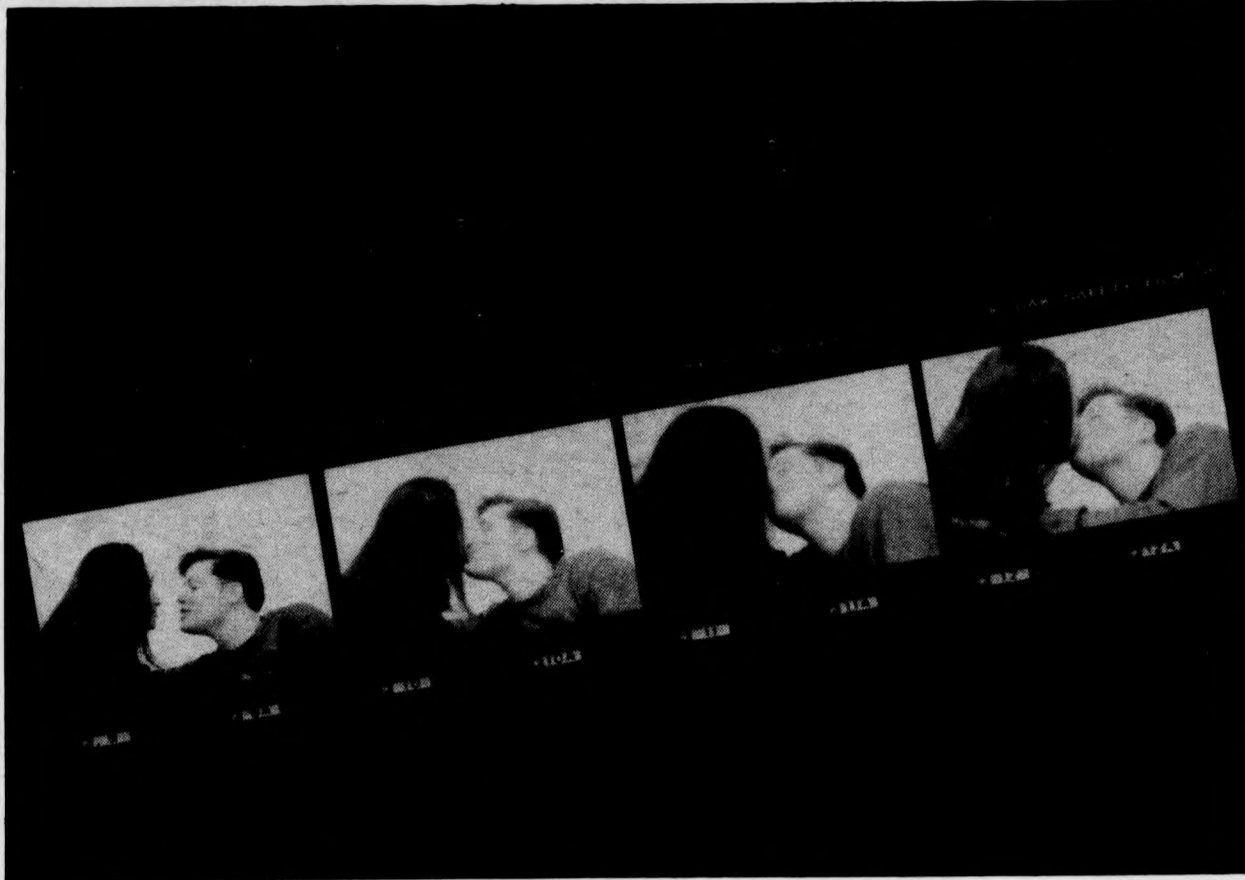
There is an ugly truth about sex that nobody wants you to know. You'll never see it in a movie. It won't be shown on any television show, even by Fox. What is this dirty secret?

You have to wash the sheets the morning after.

Of course, the media is full of half-truths and distortions about the intimate physical relations between consenting adults (in other words, sex). While nobody is going to lament the fact that we don't see lovers cleaning up the bedroom the next day, we should worry about the distorted idea we get of sex from some of the things movies don't tell us.

I miss laughter. It's not that I expect everybody to be Groucho Marx in bed (although the thought does boggle the mind); it's just that laughter denotes pleasure. People who laugh together are obviously enjoying each other.

Except for the most basic physical gratification, pleasure is absent from most cinematic depictions of sex. This is because sex is thrown into many films for formulaic reasons which have nothing to do with the internal needs of the characters.



The ratings system, for instance, determines whether or not sex will appear in a film. The ratings system? Look — a G rating, which allows

general audiences into a film, is generally the kiss of death at the box office; kids from 17 to 24, Hollywood's core audience, stay

away from G movies in droves. Filmmakers can add three elements to boost the rating to something which will attract a wider audience: dirty language, violence or nudity. Dirty language is an uncertain method at best, and violence doesn't fit well into your average comedy, so nudity is most often employed. Of course, the simplest justification to have a nude scene is sex.

This is complemented by the idea in Hollywood that a film isn't complete unless there is a love interest. Most mainstream filmmakers cannot conceive of a film without such a love interest, but they don't have a clue how to make it original or true to human experience.

These two streams of thought lead to a great deal of mechanical sex, poorly motivated and unrealistically portrayed, something to break up the car chases and lame humorous set pieces.

Nobody talks about sex in the movies. Occasionally, somebody talks dirty to turn another character on (although any self-respecting phone sex service would put such "dirty talk" to shame), but nobody actually complains or works out moves or sets boundaries. According to the movies, sex is right first time, every time.

Maybe you're lucky enough to have had that kind of experience. But, for most people, sex doesn't

start perfect; it gets better with experience, as partners get to know each other's quirks, foibles and fetishes. It can take months before people get over all their inhibitions and get to know their partners well enough to have really great sex; but it happens on the first date in movies all the time.

This leads to our expectations being divorced from our experience. We want sex to be perfect first time, every time, even if our experience tells us that realistically it takes work and time, an ability to listen, compromise and mutual respect.

Finally, we don't get any real sense of sexual experimentation or difference; bi-sexual and homosexual relationships, for instance, are virtually non-existent in films, even though as much as 10 per cent of the North American population is gay. When such characters do appear, they are most often stereotypes used for easy laughs (*Beverly Hills Cop*) or deranged murderers (*Silence of the Lambs*).

This is a result of homophobia within Hollywood, which is a reflection of homophobia generally in the US; unfortunately, such portrayals tend to increase hostilities towards gays. Gay activism has made a dent, however slight, in the Hollywood monolith: films like *Desert Hearts*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Young Soul Rebels* and *Longtime Companion* signal a change in the portrayal of homosexuals and lesbians on screen.

Of course, we get a lot of things from sex in movies that we don't want. Violence, for instance. In everything from slasher films to vigilante films like *Death Wish* to blockbusters like *Fatal Attraction*, the message is clear: unsanctioned sex (ie: outside the marriage) will be punished with death.

If this only discouraged people from having sex (which, after all, is a natural act which we all have the right to enjoy), it would be bad enough. What is really reprehensible about this trend is that it trivializes the real harm done by the sexual violence most prevalent in our society: rape and wife battering.

On a more positive note, safe sex has appeared in a number of recent films, usually in the form of a woman lecturing her male partner on the use of a condom. While this is rarely put into context (AIDS is the disease that dare not speak its name in Hollywood), and the impulse already seems to be waning, it was humanitarian and worth supporting.



Sexy Celluloid

Okay. Sex in the cinema sucks. But there are bright spots, sexual relationships that real people can identify with. Here is a personal list of films I would recommend.

Philip Kaufman's adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and, more recently, *Henry and June* mixes sensuality with political sensibility. The sex is unapologetically erotic, yet portrayed as only one part of complex, adult relationships.

Another director who mixes sex and politics is Stephen Frears. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* has gotten the most attention in North America, but *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* place a wide variety of sexual sensibilities (gay, straight, confused) within the context of Margaret Thatcher's England.

Many people object to the way director Peter Greenaway connects sex with filth,

degradation and death. But, there are many honest moments in *Drowning By Numbers*, and real tenderness and joy in the controversial *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Even the parts that disgust audiences reverberate with the truth that real sex is not always pretty.

Although much maligned for his portrayal of female characters, Spike Lee manages to convey their sexual pleasure in many of his films. Individual scenes in *Jungle Fever*, *Do the Right Thing* and even *Mo' Better Blues* contain a sense of fun and erotic excitement. Lee's first film is his most sensual, *She's Gotta Have It*, although there is a nasty rape scene towards the end, and some critics have objected to the main character as a male fantasy figure rather than a realistic woman.

Actress Greta Scacchi has had highly erotic scenes in a number of films: check out *The Coca Cola Kid* if you've ever

fantasized about having sex with Santa Claus, or *White Mischief* for an almost surreal decadence. Sarah Miles, who also stars in *White Mischief*, should also be looked for in *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*. Most people will find *Sailor* incredibly hot, as long as they can accept Kris Kristofferson as a leading man.

Finally, almost anything by Woody Allen, especially *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (but not, ironically, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*). Underneath the humour you will find real adults grappling with their sexual and emotional needs.

Hollywood is almost solely driven by financial considerations; it will keep making the same kind of movie as long as it makes money. If you want to see more realistic portrayals of sex, support filmmakers whose works contain them.

