

THE *MISE-EN-DISCOURS* OF SEXUALITY IN HOLLYWOOD CLASSICAL CINEMA

NÚRIA BOU

It is no secret that the storylines developed in Hollywood in the 1930s, after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, reflected a constructive, optimistic, confident mindset intended to raise the country's morale in the midst of the Great Depression.¹ There is a consensus among historians, from Georges Sadoul (1987) to David Bordwell (1997), that the films of the 1930s were the most conservative of the classical period: the economic and social context resulted in plots characterised by "reactionary virtues" (Robinson, 1981: 189) which, especially after 1934 (the year that the Motion Picture Production Code was officially established), conformed to the restrictive guidelines of a code that controlled the moral values of Hollywood movies.

The Hays Code prevented films from showing "excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures" (Black, 1994: 63). It is obvious that the Code did not prevent Hollywood films from including erotic scenes that drew in all kinds of audiences. But it is not so obvious that it was precisely the decade after the Crash of 1929 that would see the emergence of one of Hollywood's most hedonistic discourses

on Eros. In this article, I will identify the "*mise-en-discours* of sexuality" (borrowing an expression of Michel Foucault's) that emerged out of the Hollywood love stories of the period; through the behaviour of the lovers, the gestures of the actresses and some of the elements of *mise-en-scene* most commonly used by certain directors of the era, I will show how Eros was expressed in the same language used by Hollywood's filmmakers to portray the transcendent experience of love. The ultimate objective is to show that classical cinema developed erotic imagery through a metaphorical depiction that was sometimes extremely indirect, always weaving a daring and exalted discourse on sexuality.

THE SUBLIMATION OF EROS THROUGH SPIRITUALITY

Historians who have dealt with the topic of censorship tend to concur that it was far from easy for the censors to establish a universally applicable moral standard. A proposed draft written by Daniel Lord and Martin Quigley suggests that

“impure love” (love associated with carnal attraction) “should not be presented as attractive and beautiful”, but “pure love” (love that elides sexuality) should also be policed, because it could also veer “outside the limits of safe presentation” (Black, 1994: 307). In response to this draft, Gregory D. Black suggests that there was widespread confusion among producers, who didn’t know how to interpret the Code and worried that perhaps it meant they would have to abandon love stories altogether. Nevertheless, love continued to beat at the heart of Hollywood’s major movies. I find it highly significant that the censors believed that an inoffensive (“pure”) love story might contain *unsafe* elements, thus explicitly recognising the eroticism of the physicality that could be detected even in the protagonists’ most ostensibly innocent gestures.

In 1953, Ado Kyrou (2005: 141) insightfully suggested that cinema is the best art form for consciously destroying the distinction which, since Plato, has been made between body and soul, between Eros and Love. Indeed, while Love involved inevitable displays of physicality, Eros also fed on the spiritual dimension that love stories usually contain. From the films of Frank Borzage to the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, love in classical cinema was presented to the spectator as something extraordinary—transcendent—that transfigured the lives of the protagonists. This sublimation of passion not only expressed what was happening in the souls of the lovers, but also revealed what was happening in their bodies: love *discursively expressed* sexuality.

Greta Garbo is without doubt the star who best embodied this sublimation of passion: while *La Divina* was the purest representation of the female soul, the ethereal, otherworldly body that experienced the most extraordinary love stories, she was also, as Mick Lasalle puts it, a “saint of sex” (2000: 50), a spirit that reclaimed the physicality of the body and conveyed the “divine mysteries of the flesh”. Consequently, Garbo encapsulated a

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discourse in which *purity* and *impurity*—Love and Eros—were intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable.

I will consider two scenes from her film *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) to show how Greta Garbo constructed this double discourse of love and sex. The first sequence opens in a humble inn, where Cristina (Greta Garbo), dressed in men’s clothing, passes herself off as a young intellectual and falls in love with Antonio (John Gilbert), a Spanish ambassador. By chance the two new friends end up having to share the same room at the inn, with only one double bed. It is in this bedroom that Antonio discovers his “companion’s” real gender: for this revelation, Rouben Mamoulian chose to present the actress in an apparently neutral posture, where she removes her dress coat and then stands still without taking off anything else, wearing a baggy shirt that shows absolutely no signs of her female curves. It is thus not Greta Garbo’s sexualised body that tells the spectator that John Gilbert has finally realised that his roommate is a woman, but an ambiguous ethereal image that makes no effort to render the star’s sexual identity visible. What is it, then, that John Gilbert sees exactly? Does he sense Greta Garbo’s *soul*, rendering it unnecessary for him to fix his attention on any specific part of her body? Clearly, the transfer of the physical to the intangible allowed classical cinema to abide by the censor’s restrictions. The continuation of the scene, with the exchange of an intense gaze between the lovers, who smile for a long time until the image finally fades to black, would not have been a sur-

prise for the spectators, who were accustomed to the protagonists' sexual encounter being relegated to the off-screen space. In other words, just as the spectator understood that John Gilbert had guessed his partner's gender without the need of a direct image, with the fade to black the audience could assume that the lovers might possibly have had a sexual encounter. What is notable here is the *possibility* that these images suggest, and therefore their lack of explicitness: neither the way that Greta Garbo takes off her coat nor the prolonged gaze exchanged between the lovers are obvious metonymic images of sexuality. They are indirect images; but they can *possibly* be read as physical and sensual.

Up to this point, we have seen that Hollywood's creators more than complied with the censors' demands: the physical body was presented as unimportant, and of course, the sex scene took place off screen.

However, after the elided *act*, Mamoulian makes it explicit to the spectator that the protagonists do not want to leave the space they have shared together: the four-poster bed, shrouded with curtains that prevent us from seeing what the characters are doing, keeps them cut off from reality. Through Antonio's servant we discover that the lovers not only have spent a night together, but that, taking advantage of a snowstorm, have languished for three days and three nights in their love nest. After this, we see one of the star's most famous scenes: having decided to leave the bed, Greta Garbo's character looks over and touches all the things in the room that have borne witness to her passion, demonstrating that the experience—of love, but also sexual—she has enjoyed in the past few days has been a paradise, a wonderful erotic refuge that Queen Christina sublimates when she seeks to engrave every part of the bedroom in her memory. Greta Garbo expresses the transcendent dimension of love immediately after the sexual experience with her lover. In her discourse on love—or on sexuali-

ty—Queen Christina revels in a long monologue in which she tries to verbalise what she has experienced in her soul—and her body. Her words could not be more fervent and impassioned: "This is how the Lord must have felt when He first beheld the finished world with all His creatures breathing, living." The explanation of her experience is offered with a literal religious parallel. In this way, *La Divina* turned the *impurity* of sexuality into pure transcendence. This scene of Greta Garbo's underscores the extent to which love in classical cinema *discursively expressed* sexuality, thereby sublimating both the spiritual and the carnal experience. And even more importantly, in these scenes there are no metonymic images that lead the spectator from love to sex; there is a single discourse, which expresses the happiness of the ineffable that is felt in the souls and the bodies of the protagonists.

THE SUBLIMATION OF EROS THROUGH COMEDY

The 1930s was also the decade of actresses like Jean Harlow, Mae West and Marlene Dietrich, constructions of the feminine that were anything but ethereal. The physical presence of these women did not evoke the spirituality of the flesh but allowed the spectator to gaze directly on a body with no pretensions to transcendence: the suggestive rocking of Mae West's hips, the "most beautiful legs in the world" of Marlene Dietrich, and the plunging necklines of Jean Harlow, calling attention to the curves of her bust. If Jean Harlow had starred in *Queen Christina*, at the moment of discovering her female identity, she would no doubt have at least displayed a provocative cleavage. And before the fade to black, the lovers' gaze would have been replaced with a passionate kiss, thereby rendering it obvious that the sexual relationship would be consummated off screen. Indeed, as Jesús González Requena suggests, it is common in classical cinema for the lovers' kiss

to serve as a metonymic signal of the sexual act, which “is thereby named while at the same time alluded to” (1993: 95). Jean Harlow certainly preferred *naming* to portraying ethereal images. Her films rarely contained the kind of *possibility* that Greta Garbo proffered; with Jean Harlow, the spectator is invariably left with the certainty that the elided sex scene has taken place. In her films, the “Blonde Bombshell” effectively constructed a female archetype synonymous with the most unbridled erotic frankness. Her characters were ingénues who were not at all spiritual but effusively carnal. Harlow broke the rules by depicting “good girls” who gave free rein to their sensuality. While it is true that there were other “dynamite” good girls on the screen at the time, such as Gloria Swanson, Clara Bow, Norma Shearer, Mae West or Marlene Dietrich, what made Jean Harlow unique was her way of exaggerating her naivety, making a show of her voluptuousness, mocking the ethereal potential of the female body with an irresistible charm that anticipated by twenty years the figurative revolution of Marilyn Monroe. Jean Harlow was able to get away with a festive celebration of sexuality because she expressed it at a comedic distance. The star’s gestures and attitudes were not initially called out by the regulators, who viewed her as behaving in keeping with the standards of the comedy genre and, therefore, outside the context of reality.

Numerous authors, from Raymond Durnat (1972) to Stanley Cavell (1999), have theorised about the playful scenes performed by the romantic leads in comedy films, concluding that the sophisticated (and sometimes surreal) comic structures were simply expressions of the repressed sexuality of the lovers. The absurd actions of the lead characters of the screwball comedy, for example, served to release the erotic impulse, allowing the man and the woman to touch each other and to interact playfully with each other. In this way, these films not only presented a *mise-en-discours* of sexuality for the amusement of the

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spectators, but also indirectly expressed the idea that Eros was a source of joy for every audience.

The liberation of the characters’ erotic impulse is thus more easily identified in classical cinema when the lovers act under the laws of a different discursive logic, whether melodramatically transcendent or comedic. In this sense, the protagonists of the musical genre, as will be explored below, were also positioned in a different universe in which sexuality could be glorified in dance numbers or songs. What is significant here is that the comedy, dance or melodramatic religiosity articulated a *mise-en-discours* of sexuality in keeping with the logic of each genre, so that the erotic content projected on the screen maintained a distance that had nothing to do with the reality of the spectators: the lovers *driven wild* by love (and sex) embraced Eros in an idealised way, and what they conveyed was pure comic, musical or spiritual fantasy. The discourse was not constructed from the perspective of reality, but within the boundaries of fictional fantasies. As Lea Jacobs (1997: 111) points out, the censors were very forceful, even with the smallest details, when any forbidden content was presented realistically or directly (in such cases, the regulators might cut scenes or add dialogue, sometimes at the risk of rendering the plot incomprehensible). On the other hand, the censors were unable—or unwilling—to control what the images might imaginatively suggest, as is clearly evidenced, for example, by the risqué scenes that the screwball comedy came to be known for. The comedic element made it possible to allude to the sex act without ever showing a sex scene by stimulating the

imagination of audiences to get them wondering about “how and in what way” sexual relations between the leading characters were initiated (Bou, Pérez, 2016: 46).

Even Greta Garbo demonstrated that the sublimation of Eros could be achieved through the most prosaic levity of comedy without undermining the vitality of the discourse on love or, consequently, on sexuality. In *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939), Garbo—who appears at the beginning of the film as sexless female, stiff, incapable of acknowledging her own emotions—embarks on a transformation into a new incarnation when the male lead, Melvyn Douglas, simply falls off a chair and lands in a ridiculous position sitting on the floor: this simple gag is what causes her to laugh without inhibitions. “Garbo laughs” announced the posters promoting the film to celebrate this major event in the star’s expressive history. And it is from this moment that her character begins to *become* another woman, as her repressed erotic side is unleashed: Ninotchka can no longer concentrate on her work, she laughs as she remembers her lover, she treats her colleagues more kindly... Garbo consummates this transformation when she can’t resist buying herself a sophisticated Parisian hat that she had criticised earlier in the film as frivolous. Pablo Echart (2005: 265) suggests that in Hollywood’s romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, clothes—and especially hats—were used to underscore transformations in female characters. Greta Garbo effectively swaps her Soviet beret for a fashionable French accessory to give visual expression to her inner conversion. In the privacy of her bedroom, *Ninotchka* admires the new object she has purchased, handling it with the utmost care until finally she places it on her head in front of a mirror. The scene ends with the actress looking at herself for a long time, but with hardly any expression on her face (in the end she even rests a cheek on one of her hands, as if not quite sure what to do with her new look). Her expression could be described as neutral, as if the specta-



Ninotchka (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939)

tors were being given a blank space to imagine for themselves how the character must be feeling. A little later, she goes to her lover’s apartment. The fade to black, which will elide the sexual encounter between the couple, is preceded by the act of removing the Parisian hat. What does this hat mean exactly? Why the mysterious pause in front of the mirror? Is it a metaphor for her sexuality? I don’t believe it would be wise to respond to these questions as if they had only one answer. It is my view that Hollywood’s creators established a kind of open, indirect, polysemic image whose imaginative value would be reduced if it were assigned a single meaning.

EROS AS A DREAM STATE

If, in the scene in *Queen Christina* discussed above, the transfigured lovers describe their physical encounter as a spiritual experience, could such a transfiguration occur in scenes where there is no clear religious correlate? It is easy to find evidence that it could. Again in *Ninotchka*, after relegating the sex scene between the lovers to an off-screen moment, we are shown the couple acting in a totally different manner, because they need to underscore the fact that what happened *off screen* has transfigured them and taken them out of ordi-

nary reality; while in Mamoulian's film the lovers behaved as if they had been spiritually consumed by the experience of love, captivated by the effects of passion, in Lubitsch's film the protagonists are shown to be just as thunderstruck, in this case in a clearly playful version, revealing that thanks to their experience they are able—and more than willing—to cut themselves off from reality. *Ninotchka* expresses this transfiguration by literally abandoning her original personality—her initial stiffness—and expressing her happiness by drinking champagne, while asking her partner to tell her jokes, or dancing uninhibitedly. Afterwards, the two characters, both clearly drunk, go into her bedroom, where they play innocently, celebrating their joy and laughing incessantly. The scene does not show the sexual encounter between them, but the erotic thrill of the attraction between their bodies is constant. In the end, she lies down on the bed, happily entering the literal space of dreams. Lubitsch evokes the dream state to suggest that the experience of love between the couple has its logical continuity in the mental space of the fema-

le protagonists, confirming the imaginative experience that Eros always offers.

Three years before *Ninotchka*, the film *Desire* (Frank Borzage, 1936), produced by Lubitsch, underscored this idea even more powerfully: after the fade to black that ends the scene of the couple's first passionate kiss in the moonlight, the director shows us the two characters sleeping in separate bedrooms; yet despite their separate locations, their behaviour blatantly exhibits their sensual pleasure. In both cases, when they are woken up, they each blurt out an ecstatic flurry of words. Judging by the profound dream in which they appear to be immersed, they seem to have enjoyed some kind of sexual experience during the night. Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich, in the role of a couple madly in love, hint playfully to the spectator that the fusion of bodies has occurred in one of their dreams. Sex has thus *taken place* in private individual realms of the imagination. Being unable to show the two characters in the same bed for obvious reasons of censorship, Borzage appeals to the spectator's intelligence to reiterate, with a hu-

morous wink to the audience, that the erotic experience is located outside the frame of the explicit images, in the dreamed paradise of each viewer: the audience can therefore smile at the outrageous boldness of showing the two characters separate yet immersed in an exhausting pleasure experienced outside the realm of physicality.

THE METAPHORS OF EROS

In the films analysed in this article, it is always the female protagonist who highlights the *mise-en-discours* of transfiguration in the most uninhibited manner. And this is generally the case in

Queen Christina (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933)





Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939)

other classical films as well. In classical cinema, it is even easy to identify a set of revealing conventions of female gestures to express it: the girl displays satisfaction with her intimacy, sometimes in her bedroom, in many cases gazing at herself in a mirror—like the one featured in the image of the female protagonist in *A Woman Rebels* (Mark Sandrich, 1936)—or with even greater self-assurance she sings, dances or leaps about happily, with a visibly childlike expressiveness that recalls the hyper-expressive naivety of the first actresses of silent film.

This repertoire of gestures to portray the satisfied female after the elided sexual act had become so habitual by the end of the 1930s that Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) was even able to display satisfaction the day after her husband had raped her in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939): after the sharp fade to black that ends the sequence in which Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) takes her by force to the bedroom, the next shot, in daylight, shows Scarlett alone in bed, smiling and singing happily, revealing in her expression a certain confusion over what happened and yet at the same time apparently pleased with what she experienced the night before.

These female expressions are not always so explicit in classical cinema, but they are certainly

quite common. Did such details always slip past the censors unnoticed? This seems unlikely, but evidently it was not a concern for them: on the one hand, such expressions did not form part of the sex scene itself, and, on the other, the attitude of these characters could not be taken seriously, given that they presented sex as an unproblematic experience, always joyous and even celestial.

If we examine the stylistic resources used by Hollywood's creators to signal the elided sex scene, we will find that before the fade to black there is often the same technique: the moment the characters begin to kiss, the camera moves towards another location, turning away from the intimate exchange between the protagonists. The camera directs the spectators' view to a new space, forcing them to wait elsewhere. The slow deliberate movement of the camera serves as an explicit statement that the spectator should not be there. So where is the spectator taken to? To a new space that has no relation whatsoever to the sexual act: on the contrary, it might be argued that the directors understood that it would be futile to attempt to reconstruct the *transcendence* of sexual relations with an image. Some examples include: a living room with a parrot in *Red Dust* (Victor Fleming, 1932), an urban landscape viewed through a window in *Ann Vickers* (John Cromwell, 1933), or a porch in the rain in *The Devil Is a Woman* (Josef von Sternberg, 1935).

Obviously, these are all intended as metaphors. It is worth remembering that the Greek word *metaphora* is derived from *meta* (beyond) and *phora* (to take) and thus etymologically means "to transport". Chantal Maillard (1992: 97) points out that metaphors do not present an image similar to the thing being referred to; on the contrary, the more unrelated it is, the more it invites the reader—or spectator—to construct another universe out of pure abstraction. Because Eros could take as many forms as there are views of the screen, directors, with their metaphorical *movement*, invited spectators to give free rein to their imagina-

tion. Anne Carson, a scholar of Eros in Western literature, sums it up beautifully: “Imagination is the core of desire; it acts at the core of metaphor” (2014: 77). The screen is thus transformed into an erotic space because, as Carson argues, “what is erotic [...] is the play of imagination called forth [by writers] with their metaphors and subterfuges” (109), inciting the spectator/reader’s pleasure to build their own worlds.

This is why it is important to stress that the less the images correspond to the visual depiction of bodies engaged in the act of love, the more freedom the spectator is given to visualise sexuality (and love) in the most varied forms. In this way, metaphor incites the audience to *create at a distance*. This invitation to construct *their own abstract world* of sexuality reveals the daring, subversive and thoroughly modern nature of Hollywood classical cinema, even after the imposition of the Code.

THE EDENIC INNOCENCE OF EROS

In the film *Rockabye* (George Cukor, 1932) the camera moves slowly over to a frying pan when the two lead characters, Judy and Jake, begin a passionate kiss. At this point we recognise the metaphoric movement that *obliges* the spectators to let their imagination take over. After a fade to black, a multitude of floating balloons fill the screen. Finally, we see the hand of the female protagonist, Judy (Constance Bennett), moving the weightless objects aside to reveal, firstly, her enraptured facial expression, and then, the bed in which she is lying, dressed in a nightshirt. *Enchanted* by her experience that night, she says to Jake: “I’ve got a balloon,” as if comparing the sexual experience to the effect potentially produced by an inhibition-reducing narcotic. Reacting somewhat slowly, in a state that could be described as volatile, Judy wears her elation on her sleeve, calling Jake “darling” seven times with her arms outstretched as if wanting to embrace him. The

maid enters the room; with an expression of disapproval at the sight of so many balloons, she complains about the state of the kitchen which, in her words, looked like a cyclone had struck it. Judy responds by raising her gaze to some undefined point above her—underscoring the imaginative dimension of sexuality—and replies: “Oh, it did, it did...” It is obvious that her intention is to glorify the events of the night before, as if singing a hymn to the physical experience. The scene is comical, but it also contains a certain gravitas when Jake explains that he has just passed by a church, as a kind of spiritual reaffirmation of their passionate experience. Once again, comedy is combined with the transcendence of passion to suggest that the lovers inhabit a different reality, a different discursive logic.

But it doesn’t stop there: this scene in *Rockabye* ends with Judy inviting Jake into the bed, because she wants to play a joke on a friend who is about to come in. The visitor enters the bedroom, where he finds the two lovers together in bed, amid all the balloons, and he is too annoyed to laugh when they reveal that they are actually fully dressed under the sheets. The joke is certainly not malicious: on the contrary, the characters are so happy that they feel the need to convey their excitement in an innocent, ingenuous way, even suggesting that social decorum is beneath them, as they play at being little gods in a world where all rules can be happily ignored. Giorgio Agamben (1993: 116) points out the need that writers have had in literary expression to associate the liberation of sensuality with a return to paradise: “That, at least from the twelfth century onward, the idea of happiness should appear intertwined with the notion of the restoration of the ‘sweet play’ of Edenic innocence—that happiness should be, in other words, inseparable from the project of a redemption and a fulfilment of the corporeal Eros—is the specific trait (even if rarely perceived as such) of the modern Western conception of happiness.”



Rockabye (George Cukor, 1932)



Ernst Lubitsch expresses it concisely in the opening credits to *Trouble in Paradise* (1932): a marriage bed is superimposed on the screen as the word “paradise” slowly fades from view. Eden is located in the space where sex conventionally takes place. In Hollywood, the paradise of happiness could not be dreamed of if the body were undervalued. Eros was always a wellspring of delights for the lucky lovers. Busby Berkeley confirms this in one of the most beautiful choreographies orchestrated for the film *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1933). In the musical number “Pettin’ in the Park”, the protagonists describe sex as “a little exercise” for relaxation, a playful and even infantile activity that makes everyone happy: “Every night a body should relax. Get that oxygen your body lacks... Maybe this is wrong. But gee, what of it? We just love it!” The ensemble scenes reinforce the idea that love is everywhere and that people young and old, of all races and social classes, and even animals, engage in its physical expression.

The culminating moment comes when the dancing girls go up to their bedrooms, after getting wet in a sudden rain shower: after a wide

shot of a single set replicating the façade of a building with large windows whose translucent blinds reveal the provocative silhouettes of the girls as they change, a close-up shows us a small boy dressed in baby clothes in the foreground, who gives the camera a mischievous grin and begins raising the blinds to reveal the girls getting undressed. Obviously, the child is well aware of the fascination that the female body holds for the adult male spectator. For this very reason, this rather disturbing little character will end up helping the male characters to become more intimate with the girls when they come back out to find their partners: the girls are now wearing steel-plate armour to hinder any physical contact, but to overcome this obstacle the little boy provides the male protagonist with a huge can opener. As he holds out the utensil, the child gives the protagonist a conspiratorial nudge, gazing upwards and raising his hands, thereby indicating with familiar body language that what lies beneath the armour is *paradise*. In this way, the little boy officiates the preamble to the sexual ceremony, emphasising the transcendent experience that all the characters will soon enjoy (obviously, off camera). What is striking about this scene is that the *mise-en-discours* should be established by a small child. Or perhaps this is not so strange: given that in the films of this period sexuality is depicted as a playful and even infantile activity, a child could be the holder of all its secrets, the chief representative of the liberating *Edenic* innocence of sensuality.

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Gold Diggers of 1933 (Mervyn Le Roy, 1933)

However, from 1939 onwards, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the imagery of Hollywood classical cinema offered its first signs of openness to new discourses. In this regard, it is worth analysing what happens after the fade to black that follows the flashback of the lovers' kiss in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942): the famous kiss in Paris between Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman signals the idyllic moment of passion, but for the first time in the history of classical cinema it is followed by documentary footage of war. A montage of different shots depicting the Nazi invasion of France "irrupts", in the words of González Requena, "in the most violent way into the timeless space of the lovers' relationship" (1993: 96). The portrayal of the woman's satisfaction is thus replaced with Ingrid Bergman fretting, huddled over a newspaper, that she cannot dream about her relationship because she is trapped in the terrible present of the war. The real world is imposed on paradise, signalling to the spectator

that the myth of Love and Sexuality is an imaginary construction that clashes with the devastating Reality. While it is true that this scene did not suddenly change the representation of the erotic imagination in classical cinema, it also appeared in other films that signalled the need to express Eros under new coordinates. Clearly, in the 1940s directors like Hitchcock, Preminger and Lang dared to recreate a poetics of sexuality that was less concerned with celebrating its sublime qualities than with inserting problematic nuances, sometimes generating a tension between the fantasising depictions of the past and the discursive needs of the present, opening the representation of Love to new possibilities, while still maintaining a dialogue with the erotic imagination of the 1930s, because the sublimating construction established around the sexual body after the Crash of 1929 could be gradually transformed but not abandoned altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

The essence of the erotic imagination that was established in the 1930s and extended substantially throughout the classical period was the uninhibited sublimation of Eros in keeping with an idealised view of love. As the human embodiment of the myth of Love, Greta Garbo canonised the idea on the screen that the emotional experience was intimately tied to the physical. Garbo established a *mise-en-discours* of an idealised sexuality that transfigured the body and conveyed the notion that the carnal union was an extraordinary, transcendent experience. In a similar vein, other actresses of the 1930s, like Jean Harlow, Mae West and Marlene Dietrich, used comedy to suggest that love and sexuality were indistinguishably wondrous, sublime experiences.

To develop this imaginary and still get past the censors, Hollywood's creators experimented with a metaphorical form of expression that the regulators did not object to. The censors did not discuss

the possible sexual interpretations that the images might lend themselves to, but focused exclusively on the explicit, and thus tacitly encouraged filmmakers to express sexuality indirectly. Along the same lines, the censors were more permissive with love scenes that seemed largely unrealistic; because of this, filmmakers turned increasingly to the sublimation of Eros through spirituality and comedy, presenting lovers as if they inhabited a different reality, where they could use gestures to express the pleasure of sexuality or to suggest that it was a memorable, enjoyable or healthy experience. Eros lived on the screen, but it formed part of the fictional world; it appeared intangibly between clever editing techniques or through obviously neutral images that compelled spectators to construct *their own abstract world* of sexuality. The regulators thus encouraged a metaphoric language and an expressive style that was indirect and distanced from reality, and the creators of classical Hollywood cinema demonstrated their talent by constructing, through the purest abstractions, a daring *mise-en-discours* of sexuality.

This fertile form of expression was developed precisely in the 1930s, when the studios of the "Dream Factory" sought to make stories that could foster optimism and confidence among its audiences. In keeping with this bright and orderly world, Eros shone like a benevolent entity, offering power and vitality. In the playful and transcendent expression of the constant attraction exerted by the bodies of the stars, Hollywood's creators, through the popular trend of sublimating Eros, developed an ultimately hedonistic discourse that proved a more powerful force than censorship. ■

NOTES

- * This article is a revised version of the lecture in Spanish, "Eros pese a la censura: el cuerpo femenino de los años 30 en Hollywood" ["Eros in Spite of Censorship: The Female Body in 1930s Hollywood"], presented at the international conference "Cuerpos de mujeres,

Imagen y Tiempo: una historia interdisciplinar de la mirada”, Universidad de Granada, 26-28 June 2014, and subsequently published in: Ursache, O. (2017) (ed.). *Éste es mi cuerpo. Estudios de cuerpología femenina artística*. Turku: University of Turku.

- 1 There were exceptions, especially in the gangster genre, where filmmakers boldly depicted a more critical economic and social reality.

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THE MISE-EN-DISCOURS OF SEXUALITY IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Abstract

What erotic discourse underlies the optimistic, seemingly conservative films of classicism, especially those of 1930s Hollywood? This article responds to this question by taking into account that sex could not appear directly on the screen, especially after the definitive imposition of the Production Administration Code in 1934. With this in mind, I focus on the gestures of the actors, the dialogue and the mise-en-scene before and after the fade to black that signals the omission of the sexual scene. Through metaphorical language, Hollywood's creators developed erotic imagery that exalted the physical and sensual experience of lovers in a vital, playful and unproblematic way.

Key words

Erotic Imagination; Metaphor; Classical Hollywood Cinema; Stars.

Author

Núria Bou is professor and director of the Master's program in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies in the Department of Communications at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. She is the author of *La mirada en el temps* (1996), *Plano/Contraplano* (2002) and *Diosas y tumbas* (2004). The anthologies *Políticas del deseo* (2007) and *Las metamorfosis del deseo* (2010) feature her main line of research: the representation of the erotic female imaginary in Hollywood silent and sound films. She is the principal investigator for the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness R&D project "Representaciones del deseo femenino en el cine español durante el franquismo: evolución gestual de la actriz ante la coacción censora" ["Representations of Female Desire in Spanish Cinema during the Franco Era: Evolution of Gestures of the Actress under Censorial Coercion"], and in 2018 she coedited the book with Xavier Pérez *El cuerpo erótico de la actriz bajo los fascismos: España, Italia y Alemania (1939-45)*. Contact: nuria.bou@upf.edu

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LA PUESTA EN DISCURSO DE LA SEXUALIDAD EN EL CINE CLÁSICO DE HOLLYWOOD

Resumen

¿Qué discurso erótico esconden las películas optimistas, aparentemente conservadoras del clasicismo, sobre todo las de los años treinta en Hollywood? El presente artículo responde a esta pregunta, teniendo en cuenta que el sexo no podía aparecer de manera directa en la pantalla, sobre todo después de la imposición definitiva del Production Administration Code en 1934; por ello, se estudian los elementos gestuales de los actores, las frases de guion o la puesta en escena que se encuentran antes y después del fundido a negro que elide la escena sexual. Desde un lenguaje metafórico, los creadores de Hollywood elaboraron un imaginario erótico que exaltaba de forma vitalista, lúdica y desproblematizada la experiencia física y sensual de los amantes.

Palabras clave

Imaginación erótica; metáfora; cine clásico de Hollywood; *stars*.

Autor/a

Núria Bou (Barcelona, 1967) es profesora y directora del Máster en Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneos en el Departamento de Comunicación de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Es autora de *La mirada en el temps* (1996), *Plano/Contraplano* (2002) y *Diosas y tumbas* (2004). En los libros colectivos *Políticas del deseo* (2007) o *Las metamorfosis del deseo* (2010) se encuentra su principal línea de investigación: la representación del imaginario erótico femenino en el cine mudo y sonoro de Hollywood. Es la investigadora principal del proyecto I+D del Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad «Representaciones del deseo femenino en el cine español durante el franquismo: evolución gestual de la actriz ante la coacción censora» y en 2018 coordinó con Xavier Pérez el libro *El cuerpo erótico de la actriz bajo los fascismos: España, Italia y Alemania (1939-45)*. Contacto: nuria.bou@upf.edu

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