

## Sex in film

Is it any surprise that what men and women want to see happen is different?

By GUY GARCIA  
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If you ask women what movies they think are erotic, chances are the steamy thriller "Basic Instinct" will not come up in the conversation.

While male sexual fantasy on screen can be pretty well summed up by the words "nude blonde," women's tastes tend to meander into romance-novel territory: flirtatious glances, smoldering passions, a steamy kiss in the rain.

The subject is hardly the stuff of academic social-science research, and generalizations about taste are always tricky. But there seems to be surprisingly broad consensus among students of both Hollywood and sexual politics in America, buttressed by informal conversations with dozens of moviegoers around the country, that male and female tastes differ sharply when it comes to sexual situations on screen.

Typically, women are happier with the metaphors for sex on screen (and the coy banter of seduction), while men prefer watching the act itself.

As Andrew Sarris, film critic and professor of film at the School of the Arts at Columbia University, puts it: "I think it's the old story. Women see sex as an organic whole, and men are fetishists."

That statement would not surprise the authors of "Sex in America: A Definitive Survey," published earlier this month. The survey of more than 3,000 adults found that while 54 percent of men think about sex daily, only 19 percent of women do. More to the point: While 34 percent of younger males thought watching others "do sexual things" was appealing, 66 percent of younger women said it was not appealing at all.

"Men and women live in different sexual worlds," notes John H. Gagnon, a co-author of "Sex in America." Women equate desire, he says, with the things that "indicate the man's interest and caring and affection."

"What's happening is that women are responding to the stuff that leads up to the physical activities."

Because Hollywood is controlled almost exclusively by male directors and studio executives, what women value is often ignored and what men respond to — "breasts and nudity," as Gagnon puts it — has become the norm.

Yet as social attitudes toward sex continue to evolve, so, presumably, will the ways sex is portrayed on the screen. "Movies reflect the prevailing sexuality of the culture," points out film producer Lynda Obst, one of the women behind "Sleepless in Seattle."

"Filmmakers sometimes push the envelope in one direction or another. They explore the boundaries of male fantasies. But as men's fantasies change and women's fantasies change, I expect to see more scenes embraced by both genders."

Until that day, for many women, the sexiest part of a movie is over by the time the actors toss off their clothes.

"If you ask young women to sit down and write about the most exciting scenes they can think of," Gagnon says, "they will tell you about candles and fireplaces and beaches and walking together."

For the most part, movies with these kinds of scenes passed into history in the 1950s, with such notable exceptions as "Sleepless in Seattle" and perhaps the new "Love Affair," a remake of a remake of a 1939 film.



Critics say women prefer the seductiveness of "The Year of Living Dangerously" (with Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver, bottom) and "The Big Easy" (with Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin, top right) to the rough stuff of "Basic Instinct" (with Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas, above).



Men, on the other hand, tend to respond erotically to a mix of sex and violence — think of "Basic Instinct," "Fatal Attraction," "Body Heat" and "Body Double." In fact, it is the combination of ready sex and the possibility of danger that many men find especially alluring.

"In 'Fatal Attraction,' the idea of this hot woman is very exciting," Gagnon suggests. "But the hot woman is always dangerous. She'll destroy your marriage, and in the end your wife will have to kill her."

That's a combination that extinguishes most women's erotic feelings. "It's discomfiting to see female sexuality portrayed in a way that says it's going to be dangerous and it's going to scare men and bad things are going to happen," says Susan J. Douglas, a professor of American studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., and author of the book "Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female in the Mass Media," published earlier this year.

Molly Haskell, critic and author of the book "From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies," thinks that most people have ambivalent reactions to any sex on screen that involves a willing woman. "The problem is that deep down we still believe that

a sexual woman is a bad woman. I think female desire is very threatening to everybody, because it means that mother is sexual. It's not something that a few feminists in Hollywood are going to change. Because women are afraid of female sexuality too."

So if women do not want to see women on screen as victims or as aggressors, or even willing participants, what do they want? Perhaps one problem in portraying female sexuality on screen is that each woman's answer is somewhat different.

Sallie Tisdale, the author of the forthcoming book "Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex," says: "The sex we see in films is very limited in scope; it's an extremely narrow band of people's sexual fantasies. I don't think that anyone's sex life is reflected even remotely on the screen."

Yet many women do find some mainstream movies sexy, especially those in which male characters practice the fine art of seduction: when Mel Gibson takes Sigourney Weaver in his arms in "The Year of Living Dangerously" or Dennis Quaid charms Ellen Barkin into bed in "The Big Easy"; more recently, when Warren Beatty and Annette Bening merge in those lin-



gering Hollywood kisses in "Love Affair," and when Robert Downey Jr. is ready to do anything, including change his name, to win Marisa Tomei in the new film "Only You."

Men may not think holding hands is erotic; women often do. So while men watched the 1992 French film "The Lover" for its nude sex scenes, women were intrigued by the sight of a young French schoolgirl (Jane March) clasping hands with a handsome older Asian man (Tony Leung) in the back of a limousine.

Despite the seeming disparity in tastes, efforts are under way to concoct works whose eroticism will appeal equally to men and women. Lonnie Barbach, a clinical psychologist in San Francisco and the editor of "The Erotic Edge: Eroticism for Couples," published earlier this year, is producing a video for men and women, "The Voyeur," based on a story from her book.

The secret of appealing to women erotically, she says, is "being tasteful, showing women not being degraded and having a relationship where you're involved, that you care about."

"In the popular cinema," Barbach says, "I think there's very little of that. In 'Sleepless in Seattle,' they had all the chemistry but none of the sex. You can have the other as well. It doesn't have to be 'Sleepless in Seattle.'"

In Tisdale's view, sex in the cinema will never be truly liberated until it reflects the diversity of the audience. "It's not necessarily progress for women to act more like conventional men," she says. "And it's not necessarily progress for men to act more like conventional women, though I'd be more inclined to see that as progress."

Progress or not, Hollywood has done just that. In a number of movies this season, men's bodies have been displayed sculptured and nearly naked, like those in a Calvin Klein underwear ad. (Nude poses in film used to be the woman's domain.)

Bruce Willis is shown skinny-dipping in the pool in "Color of Night." During the shower scene in "The Specialist," the camera lingers longer on Sylvester Stallone's physique than on Sharon Stone's.

And several current and forthcoming movies show women who experiment boldly with sexuality. Dana Delany plays a dominatrix in "Exit to Eden"; Bridget Fonda and Camryn Manheim appear as turn-of-the-century women seeking sexual liberation in "The Road to Wellville"; and Isabelle Adjani has the title role in the period film "Queen Margot," opening in December, in which Queen Margot dons a mask and looks for anonymous sex in an alley.