

Angela Fabris, Jörg Helbig (eds.)

Cinerotic

Eroticism in Films and Video Games

Ute Fendler, Werner Röcke, Gerold Sedlmayr (Hg.)

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>Angela Fabris and Jörg Helbig</i>	
From <i>erōtikós</i> to <i>sexout</i> : Literary Knowledge about Eroticism.....	9
<i>Susanne Bach</i>	
Eroticism and Film	
MA L'AMOR MIO NON MUORE! (1913), IL FUOCO (1915) and the Beginning of Eroticism in Early Italian Cinema.....	17
<i>Angela Fabris</i>	
The Diva and the Seduction of Female Sickness in Early Italian Cinema	33
<i>Catherine Ramsey-Portolano</i>	
"We love beautiful ladies, and how!" <i>Cinema nuovo</i> , Cinematic Eroticism and Masculinities in Post-war Italy	45
<i>Elisa Mandelli and Valentina Re</i>	
"The Sexiest Film Ever?" How Michelangelo Antonioni Sexed up British Cinema....	61
<i>Jörg Helbig</i>	
Jane Fonda's Orgasms – Bad Sex and Good Sex in the New Hollywood	73
<i>Linda Williams</i>	
Of Sex Objects and Sex Subjects: (Fe)male Gaze and the Capitalisation of the Body in Jerzy Skolimowski's DEEP END	87
<i>Willem Strank</i>	
Sexual Dystopia and Excess in the Italian Erotic Comedy of the 1970s	103
<i>Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca</i>	
Shakespearean Double-Play and Illicit Desires: Erotic Twinship in Lucio Fulci's LA PRETORA.....	113
<i>Wieland Schwanebeck</i>	
The <i>giallo erotico</i> : Seduction and Submission <i>all'italiana</i>	127
<i>Georgi Wehr</i>	

The Erotic Triangle: The Feminine Body, the Cinematic Gaze and the Video Camera.....	137
<i>Angela Krewani</i>	
"Maybe it is about you." Intertextuality, Arousal, and World Experience in Peter Strickland's THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY	147
<i>Benjamin Moldenhauer</i>	
No Sex, Please! Sex and the Erotic in Irish Film and Television	159
<i>Stephen Doheny and Mark Schreiber</i>	
 Eroticism and Videogames	
For(e)Play: Remediations of Ludic Intercourse	175
<i>Felix Schniz</i>	
The Casanova Fallacies: Hegemonic Masculinity and Sexual Agency in Videogame Design.....	189
<i>René Reinhold Schallegger</i>	
From Dating Simulators to Milestones of Video Game Culture: Dating Patterns and Eroticism as Reward in Games	203
<i>Marie-Luise Meier</i>	
Notes on Contributors.....	219

Introduction*

ANGELA FABRIS AND JÖRG HELBIG

"Sex", as Andy Warhol once claimed, "is more exciting on the screen and between the pages than between the sheets."¹ This entertainment value partly explains why erotic movies – in the broadest sense of the word – are as old as film history itself and have generated one of the most popular film genres ever since.

The popularity and long tradition of cinematic eroticism is, however, not reflected in academic research. On the contrary, compared to other film genres erotic cinema has been largely ignored by film scholars. Much has been written about eroticism in literature and theatre, while in films, and video games for that matter, this subject still seems to be a *terra incognita*.

One can only speculate about the reasons for this astonishing research gap. Of course, for many decades erotic cinema had to cope with censorship issues and was looked upon as trivial and inferior. But why do film scholars still shy away from this subject matter in the 21st century? Are Film Studies more conservative than other disciplines such as Literature Studies or Art History? According to British film director Michael Winterbottom this assumption is not so far-fetched. In 2005, after the release of his controversial film *9 SONGS*, Winterbottom asked:

Why can't you show sex in the cinema? What's wrong with that? It's not only that everybody wants to have sex in their lives – it also is a very openly present theme in art. [...] Many contemporary novels contain very explicit descriptions of sex, the newspapers are full of sex and so is TV. Only the cinema seems to avoid it anachronistically – as if cinema had a completely contrary morality. Though actually, cinema is the best place for it.²

It seems possible that the anachronistic conservatism of the film industry deplored by Winterbottom might have rubbed off on Film Studies. However, in the face of countless masterpieces of erotic cinema it is, in our view, high time to seriously appreciate the genre and to consider a rehabilitation of this flourishing branch of film history.

As a step in this direction the editors of the present volume started a research project in 2016, aiming at retracing the history of erotic cinema in England and Italy (which explains the emphasis of this volume on these two countries). Our definition of erotic cinema comprises a broad range from voyeuristic films of the silent era to ro-

* The first section of the introduction (pp. 1-2) was written by Jörg Helbig, the second section (pp. 2-4) by Angela Fabris.

1 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/andy_warhol_385056 (last accessed 06.11.2019).

2 Qtd. in Suchsland, Rüdiger. 20.01.2005. "Der Fisch und das Fleisch." [Interview with Michael Winterbottom] http://www.artechock.de/film/text/interview/w/winterbottom_2005.htm (transl.: J.H.) (last accessed 06.11.2019).

mantic love stories, intimate dramas, sex comedies, erotic thrillers, sexploitation films and recent artcore movies.

As a spin-off of the research project an international conference on eroticism in films and video games was held in November 2017 at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, where most of the papers collected in this volume were first presented. This conference, hosted by Angela Fabris and Jörg Helbig, was part of a twin conference whose counterpart took place in October 2017 at the Universität Kassel, Germany. The topic of the German conference, which was hosted by Susanne Bach, was "Erotik in Literatur und Theater" (eroticism in literature and theatre). The idea behind the twin conference was to approach the aspect of eroticism from different medial and diachronic perspectives. And it was part of the concept to invite the organisers of the sister conference as keynote speakers in order to hint at the creative diversity of erotic subjects (hence Susanne Bach's contribution to this volume).

*

Any attempt to comprehensively define filmic eroticism ultimately faces a number of complications: first of all, erotic film as a genre does not benefit from an exhaustive definition. It often happens, in fact, that eroticism positions itself within other film genres. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a discourse that provides space for the inclusion of these genres and which allows for a consideration of eroticism as a shared element within them. Potential definitions of erotic film and cinema must also take into account a historical perspective and a series of related aspects such as censorship, which differs both across time and between various national film cultures. This issue also plays a major role in a comparative discussion of the different developments within societies of distinctive moral and religious orientations – for example, Great Britain and Italy – or with regard to Catholic societies such as Ireland, Italy and Spain. In contrast to the latter two, in Ireland, films are often much more tied to debates of national and cultural identity rather than to their treatment of sexuality and eroticism per se.

Apart from the different historical phases of erotic cinema, it is also necessary to consider prevalent discourses around and about gender as well as psychoanalytical approaches to film and studies conducted in the receptive sphere; think, for example, of the contribution of neuroscience or tactile cinema (e.g. the studies of Laura Marks). One also has to consider the growing and increasingly differentiated attention to issues of gender and ethics in both cinema and video games.

Most existing studies and volumes dedicated to eroticism in film are characterised by their attempts to classify this kind of cinema according to its engagement with different erotic categories, filmic aspects, or a historical or cultural subdivision. These approaches, as useful as they may be, often fail to engage with a more general theoretical discourse on filmic eroticism, a terrain still unexplored in its vast complexity. From this perspective, the analysis of single cases or significant aspects such as voyeurism and eroticised bodies leads to the identification of common characteristics. A significant approach also concerns the depiction of the female body,