14 * Critics and the Sex Scene

RAYMOND J. HABERSKI JR.

New Yorker film critic Pauline Kael declared that the night of October 14, 1972, "should become a landmark in movie history comparable to . . . the night *Le Sacre du Printemps* was first performed." She wrote this after attending the American premier of *Last Tango in Paris* (see figure 14.1), Bernardo Bertolucci's erotic melodrama. So moved by the film's daring sexuality, the audience for the closing night of the tenth New York Film Festival gave the director a standing ovation. But Kael also observed that later in the lobby, the moviegoers, as individuals, were quiet. Perhaps she mused, this was because they were in a state of shock—they had just witnessed the "most powerfully erotic movie ever made," a film that "altered the face of the art form."[1]

Pauline Kael was no pushover. Her praise for any film was hard won; her dedication to a film with sex as its theme was almost unprecedented. By the early 1970s, though, critics had reason to hope that movies might absorb aspects of the sexual revolution and provide mass and authentic, erotic experiences. *Last Tango in Paris* seemed to promise the dawning of a new era of sexualized films for critics such as Kael. And yet, for a combination of reasons—financial, artistic, and legal—the sex scene fell flat on the big screen for most American film critics.

The summer before Bertolucci released his film, New York audiences had also lined up to see the soon-to-be-classic X-rated phenomenon *Deep Throat*. Audience reaction to a wave of sex films was not fickle, but voracious, and thus both emboldened and confounded critics. On one side was the hope that authentic erotic films could become popular, confirmation of critic Susan Sontag's hope in her essay "The Pornographic Imagination." On the other side was the crass commercial exploitation of cinematic sex, as Ellen Willis complained in the highbrow *New York Review of Books*: "As an ideology the fuck-it-and-suck-it phase of the sexual revolution may be passé," but, "as a mentality it is nonetheless big business."[2]

The paradox of this particular moment rode on the back of two trends in American movie culture: the rising significance of film critics and

Fig. 14.1 Film critic Pauline Kael dubbed *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) "the most powerfully erotic movie ever made" after attending its American premiere.

the avalanche of sex films. The publicity campaign for *Tango* confirmed the convergence of these trends by reprinting Kael's review as an ad in the *Times*. The use of the review illustrated how important it was for a well-known critic to establish the legitimacy (because she in fact could establish the legitimacy) of a highly sexualized film. The assumption of course was that readers seeing the ad would understand the importance of the film through the critic's declaration; here was a sex film of real artistic consequence. Thus *Last Tango* presented an auspicious juncture: filmic liberation coupled with sexual liberation. Yet, cinematic sex placed critics in a profound bind—few, if any, knew how to approach the most hyped movement in film history since the introduction of sound.

Many American critics writing in the late 1960s saw the sex scene as part of a larger, radical revolution that had begun to sweep through movie culture with the advent of the French New Wave and the elevation of their profession to intellectual respectability. Movies had matured as an art, and audiences all over the world had come to embrace cinema as vital, as well as popular, cultural expression. Expectations among critics and moviegoers were very high when the sexual revolution came to the big screen. Thus when critics viewed sex films, they did so in terms simi-

lar to those they used to champion art films and condemn Hollywood's tired genre pictures. Yet, most American film critics wrote for publications that had given almost no attention to sex films until the mid-1960s. Moreover, even though audiences had grown more accustomed to sex in the arts, critics still needed to maintain a kind of distance from or coolness toward such films in order to maintain the edge they had over the popular tastes. It was not surprising, therefore, to hear critics rail against sex films for being devoid of intellectual substance. At the same time, however, many of them nearly rejoiced that these films reflected popular expectations of a sexually liberated era. Thus it was possible at once to dismiss most sex movies as commercial trash and accept that some sex films someday might be worth real thought.[3]

In her essay from 1967, "The Pornographic Imagination," Sontag provided insight into the desire for real thought about real sex. Her vision coupled the image of the heroic artist with the liberated audience joined together in a revolutionary project of transgressing boundaries. The artist would offend public norms so that the audience could acknowledge and participate in what amounted to a radical cultural crime. She called this the "poetry of transgression." "He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don't know."[4]

Critics had the task of mediating this cultural crime for audiences. Moviegoers made easy accomplices; they became rebels by simply seeing sex movies. But they also wanted confirmation from critics that this cultural rebellion was for real. For their part, critics risked ruining the moment by talking too much. Sex films were not going to remake filmmaking by introducing new techniques or even new narrative structures. The important thing was the sex—nudity, naked bodies, erotic scenes, lovemaking in the raw—this was the stuff that audiences finally had a chance to see. Moreover, critics had to be careful not to sound anachronistic when writing about the easy exploitation of cinematic sex. No critic wanted to suffer the same kind of fate as Bosley Crowther—the powerful *New York Times* critic who was rhetorically crucified by his colleagues and moviegoers for panning *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) because he found it excessively violent. Crowther's tragic mistake had been to misunderstand the rise of New Hollywood and the visceral connection it had with audiences. Like violent movies, sex films projected a new intellectual freedom and a stylized social revolution.

What did moviegoers want from their experience? Movies have always created the illusion that audiences could become what they saw on the screen. People could smoke like movie stars and be heroes like

Hollywood cowboys. Now fans could cross-copulate with the stars of sex films. Critics had to be careful not to ruin this illusion. But they also had to be careful not to be willing accomplices and advertisers for huckster producers looking to make some easy money.

Oh, *Fuck*

Sex had been an important part of the history of filmmaking from the beginning—"The Kiss" might be the first "sex scene." Yet, film history had also been burdened by censorship and industry codes. Scenes that went beyond much more than a passionate kiss were simply cut. Thus developing in the shadow of the legit film history was a rather diverse body of sex films, known alternatively as "blue movies" or "stag films." During the postwar period, that world—though rarely acknowledged by mainstream society—began to emerge. The sexploitation films of the 1950s and 1960s established a kind of industry standard for the carnal experiences audiences craved. A few foreign films had also tantalized the sexual appetites of moviegoers, though such pics rarely delivered on what they advertised. And Hollywood movies occasionally suggested strong sexual content, but for the most part regimes of censorship effectively prevented any substantial glimpses of naked bodies.

By the mid-1960s, magazines that catered to these movies and their audiences began to appear. In 1965, Marv Lincoln of the Golden State News became a pioneer of the business, publishing *Wildest Films* which was followed by *Torrid Film Reviews, Daring Films and Books*, and *Fiery Films*. Orbit Publications and Classic Publications joined the fray in 1968 providing screen shots of such classics as the "Nazi" sexploitation picture, *Love Camp 7*—a film that enticed viewers with the tag, "All the youthful beauty of Europe enslaved for the pleasure of the 3rd Reich." Within five years, this genre of magazine offered constant publicity for the explosion of films that, as another line for the poster of *Love Camp 7* declared, went beyond "X." Movie culture had clearly matured.[5]

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the web of control that knitted together Hollywood production codes, conservative morals, and civil servant censors unraveled in a series of legal challenges. Film critics cheered the demise of censorship and the rise of a free screen; after all the one thing that almost all could agree upon was their general disdain of censors. For example, Bosley Crowther wrote a number of pieces for the Sunday "Arts" section throughout the 1950s and 1960s defending the ability to see more adult pictures. Of course to Crowther that did not mean hard-

core or even softcore pornography, only films with themes and subjects that were more mature. In one notable piece he asked:

> What do we expect the medium of motion pictures to convey? Do we allow that motion pictures should be free to contemplate life as it is, which means aspects of it that may be seamy, such as infidelity, prostitution and treachery, as well as aspects of fine and noble nature, such as devotion, courage and self-sacrifice? Or do we expect motion pictures to be only about the good and cheerful things—about absent-minded professors, Swiss families and Dalmatian dogs?

A few months after making these remarks, Crowther defended Ingmar Bergman's film *The Virgin Spring* and its depiction of a rape in his Sunday column against action taken by New York's censors. Crowther thundered, "What amounts to a valid and artistically brilliant scene has been denied to New York viewers of this picture on the stupid pretext that it is 'obscene.'"[6]

Somewhat unwittingly, Crowther had identified a transition that defined the sexual awakening of cinema. In the past, the depiction of sexual acts had been almost completely eliminated from the American screen. By 1966, such nonsense was fading fast as the use of sex as action as well as subtext became more commonplace. Rather than merely showing naked bodies or intimating sexual relations, movies appeared that showed the real thing. However, the ability to see the most private of acts portrayed in the most public of places presented a new problem for critics.

It took the ironic mind of Andy Warhol to reveal where movie culture was headed. In 1969, he released *Fuck* (retitled, *Blue Movie*). He made a blunt statement—two people fucking—and as result provided with excruciating clarity the implications of the emerging sex scene. No one knew how to deal with this sexual turn. New York City officials reacted as they had in the past by attempting to confiscate, prosecute, and ban the film. When *Fuck* went before a panel of city judges, it was a film critic, the precise and prescient Parker Tyler, who had to explain that the film showed "attitudes of the cool world toward sex . . . an indifference to emotions, everything in a cool way." What were the judges preventing, then, if the film failed to do anything? Was it obscene or pornographic if it wasn't titillating? And what were critics left to discuss? Was it good or bad; art or entertainment; banal or significant?[7]

So, here it was: the scene censors and moral guardians had most feared—two people having real sex on a movie screen. But this wasn't a

stag film; this was film by a major American artist. Moreover, this was reality, not a depiction of reality or a simulation of the real thing. Parker Tyler noted at the time: "This film is not meant *to represent*; it is meant *to be*. And therein, like it or leave it, lies its great, really cool distinction." *Fuck* was different than any sex film yet created, and at the same time so commonplace as to suggest a future no one in 1969 could possible have understood. After all, fucking happens, and now it had happened in an art film. How would one critique it? Tyler suggested you couldn't. "*Fuck* is not a sexploitation film. . . . In those, everything is calculated, however gauchely, to provide an illusion of erotic pleasure or lust, whether by innuendo of supposed actual copulation. *Fuck* is definitely not as exciting as possible to the emotions. Which is the one sole reason why it is so exciting to the intelligence." In this way, Warhol established a dichotomy for movie culture as he had for the art world. One could either accept cinematic sex or reject it; there would be no unifying theory, no "mise-en-sex."[8]

Warhol's artistic achievement had been to reduce the desires moviegoers had harbored for years to single sexual acts—a blow job, fucking—and then parody the emotions one felt. One might want to think deeply about a Warhol movie but doing so risked realizing that you had failed to enjoy the sex. One could approach a Warhol film just hoping for a turn-on only come away feeling cool, not hot. In short, his films were antiaesthetic statements. What you wanted to find wasn't there. Yet, by creating this anti blue movie, Warhol also revealed something about exploitation pictures that had both preceded Warhol and capitalized on the fame of sex in the underground. Writing in *Films and Filming*, critic Colin Heard wondered if the time wasn't "ripe for a similar reassessment of *Whip's Women, The Animal, The Taming*, and so on. If artistic justifications can be read into one particular case, there's no reason why this method of criticism can't be applied wholesale."[9]

Did *Curious* Kill Criticism?

Heard touched upon a concern that persisted among critics throughout this period, that criticism would be either so expansive that any film, no matter how exploitative, could be found redeemable or that criticism would simply become irrelevant. Many mainstream critics never paid attention to sexploitation, but that didn't mean they didn't care about sex. What critics hoped for was a test case, a film that used sex in a way that was smart and significant. In the same year *Fuck* hit screens, so did

I am Curious (Yellow), a Swedish film that attracted critical and popular attention.

Critics wrote about this film with verve and commitment. Never had a film with a reputation built on sex elicited this much ink, and it was the film that became the first touchstone for a critical debate over the cinematic sexual revolution.[10] Two critics in the *New York Times* dwelled on the meaning of this phenomenon. In parallel columns Vincent Canby and Rex Reed took shots at each other and the film. For Canby, the film was a "wise, serious, sometimes deadpannedly funny movie about the politics of life—and of moviemaking." He explained that even though the movie was *not* his favorite kind because it did not appeal to him "on all levels," he felt compelled to defend it."[11] Canby argued that using sex in this movie to sell it was no different from song in *The Sound of Music*, concluding that the moral opponents of *Curious* had to be "right-wing moviegoer[s]" who had deluded themselves by buying the sugarcoated world of Old Hollywood. *Curious* was not a landmark film, but it did mark another stage in "a revolution in movie mores of really stunning rapidity and effect." And he observed that the sex scenes were real enough to make one wonder what it was like for the actors to perform them, and to imagine—without much trouble—that in the future these new conventions would most likely be broken.[12]

Reed was his reactionary self. He considered the film part of a "trash explosion" and a movie that was at the "bottom of the garbage dump." "This genuinely vile and disgusting Swedish meatball is pseudo-pornography at its ugliest and least titillating, and pseudo-sociology at its lowest point of technical ineptitude." What most "distressed" Reed was the popular reaction to *Curious*—the movie was a hit. He strongly suggested that the people lined up to see it were a bunch imbeciles being duped by a pretentious filmmaker and a dishonest marketing campaign. "All this pretentious, revolting, cheapjack Grove Press sideshow proves . . . is that there are as many stupid and provincial no-talents trying the make a fast buck in Sweden as there are in every other part of the world. They're just more devious about it in Sweden; they call it art there."[13]

Philip Hartung in *Commonweal* dismissed *Curious*, saying it lacked little if any social or aesthetic significance. As a statement about the decline of film censorship, he conceded that it was undoubtedly an important document—but for a critic that was a thin line to peddle. Hollis Alpert in the *Saturday Review* saw the film for a second time months after he had watched it as part of his obligation to testify in the legal case against it. Upon viewing it again, Alpert said he saw less and en-

joyed more. He liked the film's politics and the way it used sex to say something about contemporary social issues. In the *New Yorker* Penelope Gilliat wrote that upon her second viewing, she stumbled into a telling scene: she arrived for the last five minutes of the previous show and "noticed that there were no subtitles." The projectionist fixed the problem, but it didn't matter much to the audience "who had been sitting through the length of this Swedish-language film and losing the redeeming social worth in its hours of puerile street interviews without missing redemption one bit." While the public cheered the fall of censorship, it had little time for the heroic work of the critic who survived its collapse.

Stanley Kauffmann, the erudite critic for the *New Republic*, captured this dilemma in brief: "The film seems to me an utterly serious work. But that's not much of an aesthetic recommendation." Indeed, critics could discuss the heroic accomplishment of depicting sex on the screen and report on the audience's euphoria, but so what? Such observations couldn't pass as criticism. Kauffman explained that what interested him the most about "this quite honest and quite mediocre picture [was] its possible effect on concepts of privacy." He reasoned that "all of human behavior ought ideally to be available to the serious artist. On the other hand, human beings do need areas of privacy for themselves." As a critic of the theater as well as the cinema, Kauffmann had seen eroticism, nudity, and sex in as many performative forms as was legally possible in 1969.[14]

This was certainly the fear of Andrew Sarris, the most severe formalist among American film critics. Sarris had created a reputation based on his interpretation of the auteur theory and deployed an encyclopedic knowledge of (mostly) Hollywood movies with a razor-sharp analysis of their directors. Like almost all other critics, Sarris was happy to bid farewell to censorship, but he too had objections to "sexual intercourse and nudity on screen." He had no moral or social objections; rather, in a series of articles published in the *Village Voice, Sight and Sound*, and the *New York Times*, he argued that the closer films came to showing real sex, the less ably they would approach drama. "Pornography by its very nature," he wrote, "is more concerned with certifying its own criminality than with establishing an erotically viable point of view." So, in this sense Warhol's film *Fuck* should have the final statement on the sex act—we've seen it, let's move on. Instead, Sarris feared that *Curious* and films to follow would "destroy the fictional facade of cinema" by focusing exclusively on sex acts, as if that kind of realism made enough of an artistic point. Exhibitionism was not art but rather a kind of "nihilism of nudity." "Apart from the rhetorical reflex of defending the artists against

society on every possible occasion, it is difficult," he argued, "to become concerned, much less inspired, by the issued involved in *Blue Movie, I am Curious (Yellow)*, and all the other cheerlessly carnal exercises in filmmaking."[15]

In an astute observation made in the *Times*, Sarris thought that part of the problem with sex films had little to do with the films themselves—most made few pretensions to be anything but skin flicks. What annoyed critics like himself was the media storm that accompanied the wave of sex films. In "30 or 40 years no one will mourn the coming of skin," and like the coming of sound in 1929, the coming of skin in 1969 would not, despite reports to the contrary, bring the end of Western civilization. In another *Voice* essay he concluded: "It is a mistake to overdramatize the situation. The saga of the screen's liberation is singularly lacking in heart-warming heroics." There had not been and most likely would not be the kind of history-defining moment that some revolutions provide. The sexual revolution was a big letdown for the cinema. "Doity movies," as Sarris called exploitation films of the late 1950s and 1960s, had a filmic style that created the only kind of theatrical atmosphere required—"steamy temptation, degraded and disreputable . . . proceedings." Elevating sex films to either revolutionary proportions or, even worse, artistic pretensions destroyed the only suitable context for them.[16]

Confession

Underlying Sarris's view was a relatively simple proposition: these films were titillating though not provocative. If they did provoke anything it was a singular emotional reaction to watching sex on the screen. Thus it was unnecessary to give this genre much thought. Rather, at least a few critics took this opportunity simply to confess they liked to watch. Among mainstream critics who provided this sort of approach were two who would eventually share reviewing duties at *Time* magazine: Richard Schickel and Richard Corliss. In 1970, Schickel was the better established of the two, writing for *Life* and, in a memorable essay, *Harpers*. Corliss wrote a number of genuinely insightful and humorous pieces revealing his interest in sexploitation films for the *Voice*. The common link between the critics was humor. Schickel attended a film festival on Russ Meyer at the most ivy-covered of the Ivy League schools: Yale. In his essay entitled "Porn and Man at Yale," Schickel noted the unavoidable box-office success of Meyer and the effect such success had on opening American theaters to the "skin trade." Thus while he acknowledged

that such films usually existed "beneath the critic's lofty gaze," they were popular and therefore "attention should be paid."[17]

In a review of Meyer's *Cherry, Harry & Racquel* (1970), Corliss suggested,

> a distinction has to be made between the movie masturbator of the early and middle '60s (my heyday) and the patron of today's theatrical stag films. I and my kind were romantics. . . . The films of the era nurtured those lewd but laconic tendencies. . . . We aficionados realized that sex films had to be romantic in temperament and fictional narratives in form.

Success came, so to speak, when the viewer (almost exclusively male) forgot he was in a theater with a hundred other men. Although Radley Metzger imported films that did the job, Metzger and Meyer both used stylistic devices that ultimately placed viewers at a distance. To Corliss, the best year was 1965 when *Sexus, Erotic Touch of Hot Skin*, and Metzger's own *The Dirty Girls* (figure 14.2) appeared and played the grind house circuit for the next few years. "A genuine scene of romance pervaded that otherwise syphilitic film genre—an odor, with mixed associations, that has been replaced by the smell of fuckers' sweat." In the end, though, he found that "the love of a good woman" trumped anything he had discovered in a blue movie house.[18]

The same could not be said for Brendan Gill. Gill was a drama critic for the *New Yorker*, and his interest in "blue movies" was fairly well known to his coworkers. In an especially revealing piece for *Film Comment*, he lamented that his defense of porn had not endeared him to colleagues who dismissed the whole genre with "aggressive indifference." Thus it must have been somewhat cathartic for him to have an opportunity to put his passion in print: "I go to as many blue movies as I can find time for and it amounts to a blessing that two of the most important theatres housing hard-core porn in New York City—the Hudson/Avon for heterosexual blue movies, and the Park–Miller, for homosexual ones—are within a couple of hundred yards from my office." Gill made his remarks with a kind of nostalgic reflection for this unprecedented period of permissiveness. His essay "Blue Notes" was a swansong of sorts to films and experiences that he believed would soon be gone.[19]

Gill did not offer criticism so much as confession. "Many otherwise sophisticated men are embarrassed to be seen entering or leaving a blue movie house." Not Gill. Upon leaving such a theater, he said,

> my own tendency is to saunter. Since I have the reputation of being an exceptionally fast walker, my own pace under the marquee must be a way of

Fig. 14.2 By the late 1960s critics such as Richard Corliss were waxing nostalgic for films from a few years earlier that featured a "genuine scene of romance"—for example, *The Dirty Girls* (1965)—in contrast to more explicit films.

> affirming that attendance at blue movies is not to my mind a clandestine activity. Grubby, yes, it may be that, but I have long since made my peace with grubbiness. There are a number of things in my life that I cherish and that lack elegance.

Gill's experience in hardcore exceeded that of Schickel and Corliss, but like them he too mourned the passing of an era. "The present license to depict anything one pleases on the screen has led to a falling off in the ingenuity of the plots of blue movies—never a strong point in the best of circumstances—therefore to a lessening of sympathetic interest on the part of the spectator." The combination of technical progress and increasing popular interest had sapped the blue movie experience of its peculiar charm. The turn to massive close-ups and constant action dehumanized the "plot" for Gill, and depersonalized the enjoyment of watching.[20]

Taking Measure

The much more common experience for American men was to encounter the cinematic sex scene through stills in the magazines. By far the most

popular venue for presenting sex in movies was *Playboy*, the wildly popular mass-marketed publication. *Playboy* inaugurated a popular series called "The History of Sex in the Cinema" written by two well-respected film critics: Arthur Knight and Hollis Alpert. Both men had written for *Saturday Review*, perhaps the single most popular magazine in American history, and neither had any connection to the underground world of skin flicks and blue movies. Their original project for *Playboy* was a series of essays, accompanied by hundreds of stills, documenting sex in movies. The series ran from 1965 through 1969, and in twenty separate essays encompassed an admirable array of topics, from nudity in the silent era to stag films and homosexuality in the postwar period. The success of Knight and Alpert's "The History of Sex in the Cinema" led to an annual review of *Sex in Cinema* in *Playboy*. Knight ended up producing a television series by the same name for *Playboy* in the mid-1980s. *Playboy*'s exposure of cinematic sex helped to hasten the transition in movie culture from a world of censorship to an era of relative sexual freedom by illustrating how often sex was part of mainstream, as well as underground, cinema. But by cataloguing stills, and offering relatively little real criticism of the films themselves, the magazine also continued its tradition of divorcing sex from any genuine thought. After all, the point was to titillate not provoke.

Magazines outside the mainstream took that aesthetic to its logical end. Al Goldstein and his New York City–based magazine *Screw* were among the most often consulted sources for softcore and hardcore films. Goldstein rated, or measured, each film by his perfectly crass "Peter Meter." Each film was scored by how well it aroused the reviewer; the better the score the "harder" the "Peter" measured on the "Meter." This system avoided any criteria that might make the review needlessly ambiguous, an especially appropriate gesture to an audience that typically went to theaters with one thing in mind.

Reviews in dozens of skin slicks that appeared in the early 1970s had enough respect for their readers to tell them whether or not a movie was worth the relatively high ticket price. These readers sought arousal and required little more than confirmation one way or another. A rather extreme illustration of this single-mindedness appeared in a *Naked News* review of the film *Hot Circuit*. The reviewer recounted that the day he saw it, a man in the first row of the theater had begun to make terrible noises about an hour into the film. Patrons in the surrounding seats scurried away from the disturbance as ushers in the theater began hustling around the man. It turned out that the guy was suffering a heat attack, and "all the others could think about was getting new seats and

getting away from this nuisance who's distracting them from the sweet porn up on that screen."[21]

Warren Beatty could only have dreamed that his magnetism had such an effect on moviegoers. Unlike critics for the mainstream press, writers for these magazines didn't need to sell any particular idea regarding the films they reviewed. Their most immediate obligation was to the sex; their long-term engagement with it now helps us understand these films as a genre. We read about films that attempted to integrate underground-filmmaking styles (with little success); about the hope that the *Story of O* might be made into a movie; about how when porn stars looked like they enjoyed their job, the audience seemed to enjoy the movie; and about the steady improvement of production quality as sex films matured from the days of nudie-cuties and blue movies, to the early 1970s, when porn producers made sizeable sums of money by attracting some critical attention. As one writer in *Naked News* put it: "With the imagination thus freed to explore eroticism in film, we can expect nearly anything in the way of non-sexual film elements, such as story, pacing, tone, meaning, though so far there has been a lamentable lack of exciting material." The appearance of *Deep Throat, The Devil in Miss Jones*, and *Behind the Green Door* in the early 1970s seemed to signal a change, prompting the question: Could sex films retain their credibility and add a measure of respectability as entertainment?[22]

Contending with Porno Chic

To Al Goldstein and his compatriots, talk about sex films in the early 1970s must have sounded like a lot of blathering. Many of the articles, essays, and pieces in the mainstream press contained the requisite exclamation regarding just how much sex one might see in new films. Yet the overall tone of these many pieces suggested that their authors felt compelled to react to a trend like one reacts to a dramatic change in the weather—we might be surprised by the severity of a blizzard, but talking about it pretty much states (and restates) the obvious. The year 1973 was the peak of this scene.

By January 1973, *Deep Throat* had been pulling in money for more than six months and breaking box-office records for a hardcore feature (figure 14.3). Moreover, its success opened the turnstiles for *The Devil in Miss Jones* and *Behind the Green Door* to reap financial windfalls. In light of such hits, the term "porno chic" had officially entered into the American lexicon through Ralph Blumenthal's essay by that title in the *New York Times Magazine*. As one of the reporters who had provided extensive

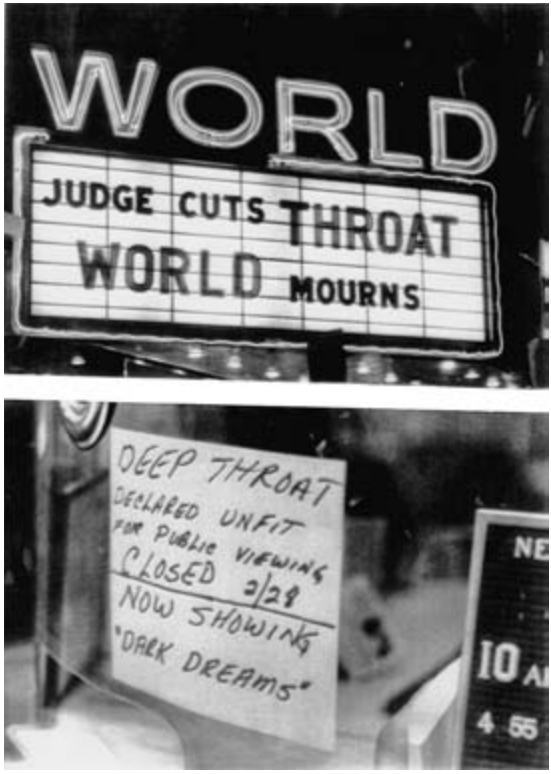

Fig. 14.3 Film critics and the press expended large amounts of ink on *Deep Throat* and its legal woes at the World Theater in New York City and in the process helped popularize the notion of "porno chic." (Courtesy UPI.)

coverage of the New York City trial involving *Deep Throat*, Blumenthal seemed uniquely qualified to explain the significance of popular porn. At almost the same time, America's two biggest political weeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, both ran sensational stories on *Last Tango in Paris* (it opened in the United States on February 1, 1973), thus securing at least for a moment the landmark status of the film that Pauline Kael had first declared in October 1972.

The media created the idea of porno chic; critics did not. The attention that critics had paid to sex films was a combination of legitimate interest in the implications of sex for the cinema and journalistic obligation to speak about something because it was popular. For example, Vincent Canby, who became Bosley Crowther's successor at the *New York Times*, explained in a Sunday column that he "undertook . . . an urban field trip to study examples of the four main categories [of porn]." Canby concluded that the genre would never produce anything of worth. The *Voice*'s fashion writer Blair Sobol felt duty bound to see *Deep Throat* because "it

was part of my higher education." She went to the World Theater with a male friend of hers, felt quite conspicuous as the only woman in the theater, and left a bit nauseated. The *New York Post*'s longtime movie critic Archer Winsten saw *Deep Throat* because "public curiosity, not to say demand, [had] forced the issue." He found it boring. Shana Alexander wrote in *Newsweek* that Truman Capote had encouraged her to see that moment's most notorious sex film, but came to the realization that "after only a few moments at 'Throat,' one's lifelong opposition to any form of sexual censorship becomes difficult to defend." But Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* promised to redeem the sex scene.[23]

Charles Champlin declared: "If *Deep Throat* is the cost of the new freedom, *Last Tango* is the reward." The *Los Angeles Times* film critic expressed a hope that many of his fellow critics shared, that *Last Tango* would bring a seriousness to cinematic sex and, therefore, provide critics a way to combine popular fascination with critical discourse. Even if one was not willing to fall in behind Kael's rather overblown rhetoric, few critics passed by the opportunity to wax profound about *Tango*.

It is easy to understand the excitement surrounding *Last Tango*. Marlon Brando, the most iconic American actor of the time, played a role that required him to use his legendary hypermasculinity to ravage a young French actress in scenes that were notable for both their nudity and graphic expression of physical sex. Although Brando is never naked and his costar, Maria Schneider, often is, Brando's character Paul has that sort of "nakedness of the soul" that makes critics swoon. Thus, it was not surprising that this potent combination of star power and almost insanely high expectations would produce, in a historical sense, a burnout of porno chic. As David Thomson more recently noted, the hype surrounding the film made it the most fashionable film either "to laud to the skies or snidely put down." In short, this was the moment of truth for the sex scene.[24]

At the end of her infamous review, Kael explained that she had "tried to describe the impact of a film that [had] made the strongest impression on me in almost twenty years of reviewing. This is a movie people will be arguing about, I think, for as long as there are movies." Among Kael's strongest assets as a critic (and I think she had many) was her attentiveness to audience reactions. She was at her best when explaining why we respond strongly to movies. Thus when she sat with the kind of audience that attended the New York Film Festival and registered their shock, it was almost inevitable that she would read audience members' passion and complexity into the film itself. In other words, though she

might have exaggerated the significance of the film for cinema, she was right about how deeply the audience—including her fellow critics—wanted it to be *the* film that revolutionized movie sex.[25]

In *Last Tango*, many critics (but especially Kael) had found the work of art that transgressed a boundary of the mind, not merely of the law. Champlin summed this up nicely: "It would be hard to think of another movie that needs to be defended quite so urgently from both its enemies and its friends." Isn't this often what happens with the best art? Indeed, taken in its parts, *Last Tango* was a culmination of sex films to that point: it had narrative eroticism to get one interested, salacious nudity and sex to get one hot, and a cool undertone to keep one thinking. Was it a singular statement on film sex?[26]

No. Instead, the film became the biggest target for critics of all stripes, so much so that a good number of critics ended up ruminating over what was being written about the film rather than the film itself. James Wall, a critic for *Christian Century*, both summed up this situation and contributed to it. "As a film, *Last Tango in Paris* is not 'available' at the moment for clear analysis. It is rather a social phenomenon, elevated to superstar status by a rash of media attention." He believed that what made "it difficult to deal with *Tango* as either art or social statement [was] the awareness that the significance of this creation may in some way be related to the dollars involved." And so, the movie sells because of the sex in it, or the sex advertised as in it, thus making it nearly impossible and perhaps impractical to discuss the film apart from the circus of which it was a part.[27]

Two weeks before *Last Tango* opened in American theaters, *Time* told its readers they could expect "frontal nudity, four-letter words, masturbation even sodomy" but that all of it was handled by acclaimed Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci, albeit with "a voyeur's eye, a moralist's savagery, and an artist's finesse." Here then was a cultural event of which audiences needed to be a part. Just in case anyone missed the progression in sex films recently, *Time* explained that *Last Tango* was part of a new tradition that included *I am Curious (Yellow), Midnight Cowboy*, and *A Clockwork Orange*. "Going beyond all of these, *Tango* proclaims the liberation of serious films from restraints on sex as unequivocally as the 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde* proclaimed liberation from restraints on violence." So don't be square, the essay seemed to say; this was a movie missed at great peril to one's ability to posture at cocktail parties.[28]

With such publicity, it was no wonder that scuffles literally broke out among New Yorkers over tickets for *Last Tango*. Critic David Denby noted

Fig. 14.4 Critics noted that whereas Marlon Brando may have bared his soul in *Last Tango in Paris*, it was Maria Schneider who bared her flesh. This provocative image of Schneider frequently accompanied reviews and stories about *Last Tango*.

that *Time* also had a fight on its hands. "Within two weeks the magazine had received over three thousand letters, almost all of them negative and many of them furious, as well as hundreds of subscription cancellations. It was the largest outburst of reader antagonism since the 'Is God Dead?' issue a few years ago." So what did Denby think of the actual movie—not merely its hype? Like Kael, the vulgar, physical, erotic power of the movie knocked him over. "If people can discard all the nonsense they've heard about the movie, it could provide one of the strongest moviegoing experiences in recent years."[29]

The hype about *Last Tango* led many to believe the sex would be extraordinary. It wasn't. Critics howled at the unequal naked time between the actors (figure 14.4). David Brudnoy wrote in *National Review, Last Tango* "is not . . . an utterly honest film as its devotees insist; it bares Brando's backside but no more, while exploiting Schneider's exquisite body as in pre-'liberation' days, and it is at times revoltingly arty, movie-ish, hence inherently fake." Thomas Meehan in *Saturday Review* wrote that for him it was a "sexual turn-off. . . . I can think of practically nothing that is more of a drag to watch on a movie screen than scenes of

heavily breathing couples pretending to have sexual intercourse." Meehan didn't reveal whether couples actually having sex did anything more for him. For Robert Hatch in the *Nation*, Schneider's body was everything he had hoped it would be, but felt "the erotic scenes [ran] away with the story, the way tabasco runs away with a sauce." Moira Walsh writing for the relatively staid *America* brokered, "If this a breakthrough, I'll eat my mid-Victorian bonnet." Stanley Kauffmann concurred: "A lot has been written about the 'breakthrough' in *Tango*, about how porno films have paved the way. Don't believe it. In explicit detail *Tango* does nothing that has not been done in the past 'program' films, and it is physically fake where porno is not."[30]

In the age of *Deep Throat*, sex on the screen had become unremarkable. Thus that left one final area open to discussion: the philosophical aspects of sex scenes. Critics debated Bertolucci's and Brando's existential relationship to the film's sexuality. In *New York*, Judith Crist offered a frustratingly mixed review: she charged that it was both "all machismo filled with such detestation of and contempt for women that its universality is limited" and that the sex was so powerful it "causes us to explore ourselves." In *Film Quarterly*, Joan Mellen said much the same thing, though in decidedly more rigorous terms. "What is interesting about *Last Tango* is not its simulation of forbidden sex (sodomy and masturbation), but its tracing of the boundaries of free choice in controlling one's relationships and forging one's separate identity. . . . It is . . . the use of sex as a catalyst to explore our mythological capacity to forever begin anew and live life in defiance of what we have been."[31]

Yet, if the catalyst was the film's sex, the meaning of that sex came completely out of Brando's character. Reviewers who remarked about the blatant misogyny of the film decried Maria Schneider's character. E. Ann Kaplan tore into Bertolucci on this point:

> For all his claims to be on the side of woman's liberation, Bertolucci cannot have it both ways. . . . As it is, the relationship is presented in a sexist way. It is not enough to argue that the entire sexual relationship is intended to symbolize Paul/Brando's hatred of bourgeois society; or that there are in fact girls like Jeanne who deserve all they get by putting themselves in the situation in the first place. Men's hatred of bourgeois society does not justify taking out this hostility on women.

In short, Jeanne was as useless as any of Russ Meyer's overdone vixens.[32]

What had *Last Tango* done? Despite all the hope, hype, and discussion that attended porno chic, *Last Tango* marked the end of an era. *Variety* critic Addison Verrill explained why. Verrill was not one to pon-

tificate about the transcendental quality of really good sex scenes; he was much more likely to explain what worked and what didn't and why. And throughout his columns in 1973, he recorded the fading of cinema's sexual revolution in legal, commercial, and intellectual terms. In the legal realm, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions in the summer of 1973 that caused a fundamental shift in authority over who could define and prosecute obscene material. No longer would a national standard prevail and thereby protect sex films; from then on, communities would be able to determine local thresholds for the public display of sex. Verrill reported that the Court's decisions had an immediate effect on the porn industry, forcing companies to rethink how their production, distribution, and advertising could avoid endless legal entanglements.

However, Verrill's reviews of sex films told an additional story. Unlike many of his colleagues, Verrill consistently reviewed hardcore offerings. He did so within the typical condensed and concise *Variety* style. Thus, in his reviews for 1973, one can also see a steady decline in the commercial quality of cinematic sex. Porn, both hetero and gay, had hit a wall. Although the production quality of porn films had improved and the number of films had increased, Verrill seemed to suggest that at least for the moment the industry had run out of ideas. Thus, he might praise a film such as *High Rise* for its "technical slickness," but find that such quality "overwhelm[ed] the sexpo content." "Performers tend to get lost in the visuals," he explained, "and disappoint the more avid hardcore buff since it lacks some of the 'essential' climactic moments now de rigueur in porno features." Likewise, in his review of *It Happened in Hollywood* (edited by a young Wes Craven), he suggested that the picture failed because it capitalized on "the recent trend of porno-comedy features . . . some of them funny, some very flat, but all working against the kind of sustained sexual passages with 'communicating' characters so necessary for real erotic involvement." Even movies he liked, such as *The Devil in Miss Jones*, posed problems. He called it the first porno that approached an "art form," containing a performance by Georgina Spelvin that was comparable to Marlon Brando's in *Last Tango* for its "nakedness." "Pic poses one problem," he thought. "Booking a film of this technical quality into a standard sex house is tantamount to throwing it on the trash heap of most current hardcore fare. On the other hand, more prestigious houses may shy away because of the explicit nature of the material." The film contained "some of the most frenzied and erotic sex sequences in porno memory."[33]

Verrill was especially disappointed with the direction of gay porn.

Very few critics in the mainstream press ever bothered to review such films. For gay male porn the standard seemed to be *Boys in the Sand* (1971). According to Verrill, few films matched the "elegant eroticism" of that one and the promise of its star, Casey Donovan. And very few films were worth the relatively high $5 admission.[34]

Verrill's overall dissatisfaction turned to ironic nostalgia when he reviewed the porn industry's first musical: *The Newcomers*. It was not much of a stretch for him to imagine that the release of this film had symbolic significance as he wrote: "It bows at what could be the end of the porno pic era, and its one 'redeeming value' for hardcore buffs is its cast." The film was a catchall of New York's porn industry set to music. Verrill noted that this "mass casting . . . combined with knowledge of the recent Supreme Court decisions, gives pic an instant nostalgia flavor. It almost plays as a swan song, and the only thing the script leaves out is a booming narrator at the finale saying: 'As porn sinks in the West, we bid fond adieu to Georgina Spelvin, Harry Reams, Tina Russell, Marc Stevens, etc.'" Indeed, many of his colleagues had already said good-bye to their short-lived attraction to porn.[35]

In January 1974, Verrill wrote a piece for *Variety* on a trend among journalists to distance themselves from porn. He reported: "The chic is thoroughly tarnished now, and some media outlets, apparently embarrassed by their excess, have begun to act like adolescents caught playing 'doctor' behind the garage." He gave a brief but telling overview of press coverage of porn, noting that the paper most sympathetic to it was the *New York Post*. But the new executive editor, Paul Sann, had established a policy that would severely limit coverage by critics and writers. Gone would be interviews with porn actresses that were usually accompanied by photos of the subjects. *Post* film critic Archer Winsten had given a decent amount of coverage to porn movies, but his columns expressed a fatigue with the scene. The *Post* was far from obsessed with the industry, but it had been the only New York daily to give porn enough attention that the paper attracted publicists. Of course the *New York Times* had given the legal case involving *Deep Throat* an enormous amount of coverage, which included the entire cultural staff attending a matinee of the movie. However, *Times* critic Vincent Canby probably spoke for many of his colleagues when he suggested in a Sunday opinion piece that perhaps the attention given to *Deep Throat* and to porn in general had been "warping the minds" of his fellow critics.[36]

Porno chic has had a lasting and determinate effect on critical discussion of sex films. Canby's suggestion has lingered as a warning—discussing sex films only provides free advertising for porn, and besides

a journalist just might lose his integrity from all that watching and talking. Moreover, the attitude projected by critics such as Schickel, Corliss, Sarris, and Gill suggested that the only way to think about sex films was to reject serious thought at all. It was as if the act of taking intercourse as a legitimate means of expression undermined whatever cinematic enjoyment the audience was suppose to receive. Linda Williams responded to this point in a strong essay on cinema and sex acts in 2001. She acknowledged that in the early 1970s "porno chic" had indeed "devolved into 'porno gonzo,'" but contended that such a development did not, in theory, rule out the possibility of "emotionally complex erotic performances." The larger problem, Williams argued, was that "the popular mainstream still turns away from—or looks elliptically at—the physical and emotional details of sex."[37]

A few recent films—including Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy* (2001), and Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* (2001)—gave Williams an opportunity to extend a debate she had reawakened in the early 1990s regarding the audience's relationship to porn. In this essay, she engaged with admirable directness the role film critics play in mediating audience taste for sex scenes. "In the U.S. we have grown so used to the separation of pornography from art that we tend to assume—sometimes rather hypocritically—that any arousal response is antithetical to art and emotional complex art antithetical to arousal." Although we might quibble over Williams's definition of "arousal" (after all *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* had to arouse a few moviegoers), her point seems especially relevant when she discussed the reaction of *Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan to *Romance*.[38] Turan is no prude, but his objection to the film echoed a familiar line—sex and thought cannot be a turn-on and therefore can only be pretentious. Turan argued: "Distant sex, no matter how explicit, and bogus posturing turn out to be a deadly cinematic combination." The voice-over during the sex scenes—too much talk—ruined the moment for Turan. Williams countered:

> It is as if, for Turan, the French tradition of philosophy in the bedroom spoils the 'pure' pleasure of the sex. But it is precisely the firewall between philosophy, politics, and emotion, on the one hand, and 'pure' pornography on the other, that this new European cinema is breaking down, forging new ways of presenting and visually experiencing cinematic sex acts.[39]

The conflict between Turan and Williams is a product of the sex scene of the early 1970s. It is the legacy of porno chic that pretentious talk about truly awful films created a context that continues to stifle even the

ability to imagine a different cinematic world. There is no doubt that critics should be free to denounce those films that are artistically pathetic. When art exploits emotion for the sake of profit or grotesque shock, fire away. However, as Williams points out:

> What kind of moving-image art do we condemn ourselves to if sex must be so compartmentalized? I would argue that the even greater pretension may be the very idea that sex is mindless. If it seems pretentious to Turan to mix ambivalent emotions and philosophical thought with sex, it is also simplistic to assume that sex is monopathic and without thought.[40]

It's not the sex warping the minds of critics and audiences; it's the lack of thought about the sex. Should we welcome every sex film as a triumph, as was seemingly the case during the sexual revolution? Of course not, but we shouldn't approach any other cinematic innovation with such blanket euphoria either. When taking a long look back at Pauline Kael's reaction to *Last Tango* and, perhaps as important, her observations of the audience's reaction, we might conclude now that just maybe she had witnessed an authentic and intellectually honest experience.

Notes

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2. Ellen Willis, "Hard to Swallow," *New York Review of Books*, January 25, 1973, 22.
3. For more on the emergence of a new postcensor movie culture, see Raymond J. Haberski Jr., *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), especially chaps. 6 and 8.
4. See the essay "The Pornographic Imagination," in Susan Sontag's *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Viking, [1969] 1994), 45.
5. Schaefer, "*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), esp. chaps. 4 and 9; Tom Brinkmann, *Bad Mags: The Strangest, Most Unusual, and Sleaziest Periodicals Ever Published!* Vol. 1 (London: Headpress, 2008), 107.
6. Bosley Crowther, "Not for the Children," *New York Times*, April 4, 1961, sec. 2, 1; Crowther, "Around in Circles," *New York Times*, August 13, 1961, sec. 2, 1.
7. Morris Kaplan, "Professor Defends Warhol 'Blue Movie' As 'Not Stimulating,'" *New York Times*, September 17, 1969, 55.
8. Parker Tyler, *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera in the Film* (New York: Horizon Press, 1969), 16, 17.
9. Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practice of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 144; James Lithgow and Colin Heard, "Underground U.S.A. and the Sexploitation Market," *Films and Filming* 15, no. 11 (August 1969): 25.
10. For more details on *I Am Curious (Yellow)* and its legal travails, see chapter 4.

11. Vincent Canby, "'I Am Curious (Yes),'" *New York Times*, March 23, 1969, D1, 16.
12. Canby, "'I Am Curious (Yes).'"
13. Rex Reed, "'I Am Curious (No),'" *New York Times*, March 23, 1969, D1, 16.
14. Stanley Kauffmann, "I am Curious (Yellow)," *New Republic*, March 15, 1969, 22, 32.
15. Andrew Sarris, "The Nihilism of Nudity—II," *Village Voice*, March 27, 1969, 51; Sarris, "A View from New York," *Sight and Sound* 38 (autumn 1969): 203.
16. Sarris, "A View from New York," 203; Andrew Sarris, "If Rhett Loved Scarlett Today . . . ," *New York Times*, December 14, 1969, D23+; "The Ethos of Doity Movies," *Village Voice*, October 7, 1971, 76.
17. Richard Schickel, "Porn and Man at Yale," *Harper's*, July 1970, 34.
18. Richard Corliss, "Film: Cherry & Harry & Racquel," *Village Voice*, June 11, 1970, 56, 59; "Confessions of an Ex-Pornologist," *Village Voice*, June 3, 1971, 62, 64, 70.
19. Brendan Gill, "Blue Notes," *Film Comment*, January–February, 1973, 7.
20. Gill, "Blue Notes," 8, 11.
21. "Hot Circuit," *Naked News* 1, no. 10 (1971): 10–11.
22. "The Long Swift Sword of Siegfried," *Naked News* 1, no. 14 (n.d.): 12.
23. Vincent Canby, "The Blue Movie Blues," *New York Times*, May 10, 1970, 89+; Blair Sobol, "The Only Girl in the World: Seeing 'Deep Throat,'" *Village Voice*, September 14, 1972, 75; Archer Winsten, *New York Post*, November 27, 1972, in "Deep Throat" Clippings File, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center, New York; Shana Alexander, "At the Sexual Delicatessen," *Newsweek*, February 5, 1973, 43.
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25. Kael, *For Keeps*, 456, 450.
26. Charles Champlin, "Last Tango in Paris," in Peter Rainer ed., *Love and Hisses: The National Society of Film Critics Sound off on the Hottest Movie Controversies* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 62.
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31. Judith Crist, "Last Tango in Paris," in Rainer, *Love and Hisses*, 67; Joan Mellen, "Sexual Politics and 'Last Tango in Paris,'" *Film Quarterly* 26 (spring 1973): 15.
32. E. Ann Kaplan, "Last Tango in Paris," *Jump Cut*, 4 (1974), accessed at www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC04folder/LastTangol.html.

33. Addison Verrill, *Variety*, January 17, 1973, reprinted in *Variety Film Reviews 1973* (hereafter, VFR); Verrill, *Variety*, January 31, 1973, and February 21, 1973, reprinted in VFR.
34. Verrill, *Variety*, February 21, 1973, and March 7, 1973, reprinted in VFR.
35. Verrill, *Variety*, July 18, 1973, reprinted in VFR.
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37. Linda Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," *Cineaste* 27 (winter 2001): 20.
38. Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," 22.
39. Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," 22.
40. Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," 22.