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Hard-Core Art Film:
The Contemporary
Realm of the Senses
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Since the nineties, critics who discuss the performance of sex in movies have often distinguished between simulated sex, in which great care is taken to avoid the display of sexual organs, and unsimulated sex, in which male and female sexual organs are aggressively on display. When shown on American screens, simulated sex usually receives R-ratings; unsimulated sex either gets NC-17 or no rating at all, consequently reaching very small audiences. In this talk I propose we call this emerging class of films hard-core art and recognize their ambition to be something like—but also more than—pornography. I also propose that we eliminated the awkward term unsimulated sex entirely.

Hard-core art films do not single-mindedly display sexual organs in the manner of hard-core pornography, but neither do they artfully hide sex organs the way simulated R-rated films do. These films are the bold inheritors of Oshima Nagisa's *In the Realm of the Senses* even if they no longer share the politics of revolutionary transgression that marked that “benchmark” film. The films of hard-core art may be aggressive, violent, humiliating, desperate, alienating, tender, loving, playful, joyous and, of course, boring, but they are art films that, like *Realm*, embrace explicit sexual content.

It is something of a critical truism that works about sex that “leave nothing to the imagination” are inferior because of pornographic expectations that seem to come with the territory.

George Steiner once famously accused pornographers of subverting the “last, vital privacy” of sex by doing “our imagining for us.”¹

But rather than complain that movies increasingly leave nothing to the imagination, I argue that we might do better to approach the imagination as a faculty that perpetually plays with the limits of what is given. Christian Metz has described the cinema as a kind of “permanent strip-tease” whose “wandering framings (wandering like the look, like the caress)” can even take back what it has already given us to see.² This talk offers a few recent examples of the ways the imagination has been invited to respond to hard-core sex beyond pornography.

It is an unfortunate fact that most of the films I want to discuss below, with one important exception are not American. This fact is partly the result of what I have described in the full version of this book³ as the artificially “long adolescence of American movies,” occasioned first by the Production Code and then later the MPAA ratings system of the late sixties, neither of which really allowed American cinema to “grow up.” This more system of assigning presumably age-appropriate labels avoids the outright prohibitions of the Code but has undoubtedly contributed to the continued arrested development of American movies, and American audiences, with regard to genuinely adult sexual content. While short duration female nudity is tolerated, male nudity is not, and an acute double-standard, brilliantly illustrated in Kirby Dick's 2006 documentary, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, prevails in the simulated representations of gay and straight sex.⁴ My aim is not to rail against these systems, however, but to begin to organize a typology of the hard-core art film chosen from a range of possibilities. I have four to offer.

Lyrical Sex

When the acclaimed British art film director, Michael Winterbottom, decided to tell the story of a love affair by concentrating almost exclusively on its sexual content, his *Nine Songs* (2004) immediately became the most sexually explicit film in the entire history of British cinema.⁵ In this film Winterbottom stages a very slight story about a man and woman who meet at

¹ George Steiner, “Night Words.” New York: Atheneum, 1967.

² Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, London: McMillan, 1982, p. 77.

³ Editor's note: This text is a part of *Screening Sex*, a book to be published by Duke University Press in Fall 2008.

⁴ In addition to Kirby Dick's excellent film, see also Joan West and Dennis West, “MPAA Ratings, Black Holes, and My Film: An Interview with Kirby Dick.” *Cineaste* 23.1 (Winter 2006), pp. 14-37.

⁵ *The Guardian* makes this claim, listing the sex scenes as unsimulated “fellatio, ejaculation and cunnilingus, many in close-up.” (May 17, 2004) <http://film.guardian.co.uk/cannes2004/story>.

a London concert, have sex and begin a relationship. The rest of the film portrays their attendance at subsequent concerts inter-cut with further sex and small fragments of meals, holidays, pillow-talk and mornings-after. All of this is framed by the man's sparse voice-over recollection of the affair as he does climate research in the icy regions of Antarctica.

All of the songs contribute to a lyrical portrayal of sex. Literally so, for each sex act behaves like a song, with something akin to a song's effusion of emotion and economy of presentation. But despite this superficial resemblance to what I call the "musical sexual interlude of Hollywood tradition," and to the regular sexual "numbers" of hard-core pornography, none of the lyrical sex moments are matched up to, or accompanied by, the music of the songs. Instead of *adding* music to sex, which would have amounted to a sort of hard-core MTV, Winterbottom seeks to discover the lyricism within the sex, most of which is presented unaccompanied by the concert music, or with just a small bit of piano.

To appreciate *Nine Songs*—and not everyone does!—one must abandon the expectation that the sex scenes will become part of a larger plot and character development. Winterbottom's gamble—which only partly pays off—is that the sensual substance of a love affair can just as well be captured through sexual and musical lyricism as through dramatic event or extended dialogue. The sex scenes, like the music scenes, offer moments that are set apart from everyday life. Yet Winterbottom also keeps them remarkably separate, one from the other, respecting the different spaces of noisy public concert and quiet private sexual encounter.

Like many sexually explicit filmmakers of his generation, Winterbottom has claimed that Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* was his "benchmark." Yet he does not reproduce the "mad love" and sexual excess of that earlier film. Rather, he chronicles the male lover's recollections of the arc of a love affair that reaches its peak at about the fifth concert and that afterwards fades, apparently more quickly for the woman than for the man. After the third song, while on a brief holiday, the man, Matt, declares his love after plunging into the frigid sea, yelling to the woman, Lisa, "I love you!" She does not answer. Later, we see the couple in the bathtub. Lisa casually caresses Matt's erection with first one and then both of her feet. The gesture speaks volumes about the casual intimacy and playfulness of this "middle phase" of their affair, but also, through the feet, about Lisa's slightly more cavalier attitude. Following upon Matt's profession of love, this scene suggests that while Lisa is seriously engaged in their lovemaking, she is not also equally in love with Matt, even though the passion of their affair is still on its upward arc.

On the one hand, we can see that Lisa is the perfect sexual partner: adventurous, aroused, playful and willing to ask for what she wants. On the other, we know that Matt is recalling the affair, apparently trying to comprehend a relation that we already suspect did not end happily. In keeping with his determination to show a relationship *through* its sex acts,

Winterbottom next shows Lisa confessing that sometimes when they kiss she wants to bite him hard enough to make him bleed. We see the couple next at a sex club, not their usual concert. The rock concerts are Matt's passion and Lisa will tellingly opt out of the next one. The sex club, however, seems to be her passion. During this brief scene, we hear a woman in a recording sing the blues. Though it is only a snippet of sound, it forces the realization that all the other music in the live concerts has been by male rockers. Whatever Lisa's song may be, it may not be any of the other songs we hear in this film.

Soon after we see Lisa alone in bed with a vibrator as Matt forlornly looks on. We can only surmise that she no longer seems to find Matt fulfilling as a lover. After Lisa appears to orgasm she weeps, perhaps mourning what she now anticipates to be the end of the affair. We may recall at this point that in most of their sexual encounters it has been Lisa, not Matt, who has been the first to pull apart. Now, Lisa clings to Matt, but it is the clinging of the partner who best knows that the end is near and is mourning the relationship's loss.

If we accept *Nine Songs*' premise that what we learn about the couple must come from the substance of the sexual relationship itself, then we should not look for a narrative explanation for why Lisa leaves but to the story told by the sex. What we learn from its performance is that Lisa is more "out there"—both more sexually frank and more sexually demanding: she reads pornography out loud and speaks her sexual fantasies. Matt does neither. We also suspect, from hints about female friends, that she may be inclined toward women. When Lisa demonstrates that she can satisfy herself through masturbation with a vibrator, the point is not the inherent alienation of technologically-aided masturbation, but a way of showing the disconnect occurring between the once-passionate couple. We have been witness to a highly nuanced chronicle of an affair presented and understood primarily through its many and varied acts of sex. And we are given to understand that sometimes the "hottest" sex in a relationship can occur after the potential for mutual love has been foreclosed, when a certain desperation has entered the proceedings.

Though the film does leave one hungry for more story, especially Lisa's, the development, mood and execution of each sexual scene creates a coherent arc of relationship that is discernible through the "sex itself." The way Lisa masturbates alone with a vibrator while Matt sits apart has the same emotional resonance as a scene that might show Lisa eating alone. Sex, like food, is a bodily function with its own automatic pleasure and satisfaction. Indeed, Winterbottom is on record saying, "If you film actors eating a meal, the food is real; the audience know that. But when it comes to sex they know it's pretend. You'd never do that with food and so I started thinking we should make sex real."⁶

⁶ Michael Winterbottom quoted in James Brown, "Lights, camera, explicit action." *The Independent* (May 13, 2004), <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/film/features/story.jsp?story=520636>.

The director cites the age-old realist imperative: if one part of a film is real then the rest shall be too. His example of food prompts us to ask if all the drugs and alcohol consumed in *Nine Songs* are real as well. My guess is that some are and some aren't and that much the same thing can be said about the sex. Not every thrust that we see Matt make into Lisa is that of a certifiably erect penis, but we see enough of that penis to believe more in the authenticity of the rest. Nor does every moan that Lisa emits as Matt performs cunnilingus correspond directly to the moments that his lips touch her genitals, but we believe in them nevertheless. There is often a very fine line between the real and the performed in screened sex acts, just as there is with food that could easily be spit out before swallowed, bourbon that is really iced tea, or cocaine that is powdered sugar. Nevertheless, Winterbottom's (documentary) portrayal of the sex of his (fictional) couple represents a significant assault upon the heretofore fairly rigid division between pornographic hard-core sex and simulated art sex in feature cinema.

Most critics have been quite careful to distinguish *Nine Songs* from pornography.⁷ Nevertheless, if pornography can be defined simply as a string of sexual numbers hung onto a plot that exists primarily as an excuse for the sex, then, this structurally comes close to conventional pornography. Since pornography's closest genre affiliation is the musical in which the lyrical choreography of song and dance "numbers" resemble the rhythms of bodies in the sex act. The film thus merges the lyrical structure of the musical—in this case "nine songs" by popular bands—with the sex acts performed by Matt and Lisa. If the film were pornography then it would be possible to say that it is the very first work in the genre to possess even half-decent music—not the sort of careless afterthought of most pornography. However, *Nine Songs* is not pornography, if we mean by that a genre with the primary intent to arouse by capturing the exact moments of the hard-core involuntary display of the convulsive body. It is graphic, we might say, without being pornographic. It is one possible, lyrical, direction for a new kind of hard-core art cinema.

Urgent Sex

The acclaimed stage and opera director Patrice Chéreau has said in several interviews that he wants his film sex scenes to begin "where others normally end."⁸ This means that they will have greater duration certainly, but also that they are constructed as dramatic wholes

⁷ "Although you might find the sex scenes graphic, it is certainly not pornography." *The Independent* (May 13, 2004), <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/film/features/story.jsp?story+520636>.

⁸ Patrice Chéreau has famously staged Wagner's *Der Ring des Niebelungen* at Bayreuth. He has more occasionally made films, including the period drama *Queen Margot* (1994) and the contemporary *Those who love me will take the train* (1998). His comment is quoted from the Press Kit for *Intimacy*, p. 13.

with gestures that function almost like dialogue, as call and response in which body parts normally hidden come into play.

Chéreau's *Intimacy* opens with urgent, hurried and explicit penetrative sex on the floor of a dirty apartment between a man and a woman who barely know one another. Much of the first scene shows them struggling desperately to get a better leveraged position from which to thrust. The difficulty of obtaining the ideal leverage creates a kind of poignancy as the two bodies, so separate in the rest of their lives, work to achieve an always-imperfect physical connection throughout the prolonged scene.

This opening scene immediately recalls Bernardo Bertolucci's 1972 film, *Last Tango in Paris*, which also begins with an urgent, animal act of lust on the floor between strangers in an empty (but cleaner) apartment, emphasizing what Pauline Kael called "thrusting, jabbing eroticism."⁹ But what seemed shockingly "real" in 1972 if screened today seems remarkably stylized and abrupt. Art film audiences, I would venture, have grown more familiar with a certain duration in the sex acts figured on screen, whether from the often absurdly long, extremely graphic, scenes of hard-core pornography or because of the tighter sexual interludes of the Hollywood mainstream. Screened today, the *Tango* sex scene seems short and arch.

In comparison to the stylized "tango" of Bertolucci, however, Chéreau emphasizes the vulnerability of the couple whose naked bodies exude a desperate desire. Nor does he invoke a double standard that displays the woman more than the man. Kerry Fox's Claire has a slight belly and a melancholy need. Mark Rylance's Jay, is slender, with a receding hairline, a hungry look, and sad eyes. He undresses first.

Where Bertolucci's camera holds his couple at a (respectful, goldenly lit) distance, the graphic sex of Chéreau's couple is seen in a cold, bluish light and from much closer views, caught up in the urgency of the act. We become aware through this closeness of the actual physical exertion involved: how the bodies pant and lose breath; how awkward it is to take off clothes in a hurry, how one or the other must occasionally rest before pushing on.

The couple's second meeting is almost as wordless as the first. They lunge at one another greedily while still dressed. They then stop abruptly, making a conscious effort to slow down and savor the experience, and slowly undress. While I do not suppose that it is at all uncommon in the repertoires of action of heterosexual sex, I found myself shocked to see such hunger and urgency. Though she strokes the erect penis, she does not offer the kind of reverential penis worship that so commonly occurs in hard-core pornography and which is usually designed to showcase the penis's outward extension from the male

⁹ Pauline Kael, "Tango," *New Yorker*, (October 28, 1972), p. 130-138.

body. Rather, we feel that she feels both the fleshy vulnerability of the organ as well as its pulsing hardness.

Unlike pornography, Chéreau's camera does not seek to "get in" to look at the sexual organs once the couple is actually coupling. Instead, it backs off, adopting several different vantage points, including a final one that moves all the way down to their feet and then looks up their legs. From this perspective, each thrust by Jay yields small jiggles in the backs of Claire's calf and thigh, which are wrapped around his body. Their faces and chests grow flushed in the heat of their sustained grappling. We understand the poignancy of each half of the couple rediscovering themselves as separate beings. There is something quite poignant about the way Fox's Claire finds herself with her left leg poised upon Jay's ass. The same leg that had jiggled in response to his desperate thrusting now returns to being just an ordinary leg and foot, indicated through a tiny movement of the foot. It is no longer attached to the center of her pleasure. Jay's final, and only, line, "Next Wednesday, is that a Wednesday too?"—a minimalist question about the future of their connections, which have always taken place on Wednesdays—is left unanswered.

Neither "tastefully" erotic, nor pornographically hard-core, Chéreau's film surprises. It makes us realize how impoverished the repertoire of gesture and emotion of most cinematic sex acts have been. In any sex scene, actual sexual intimacy with another person must take place, whether or not one "really" feels desire for that person or whether one "really" comes. This may be one of those occasions where the contemporary sense of the word performance—connoting an avant-garde edge challenging the more safely contained boundaries of acting and role—is more appropriate. If performance is the art of opening the body of the performer up to the physical and emotional challenges of the situation being performed, then Chéreau's film, along with Winterbottom's and several others, can be said to require the performance of sex: the physical motions and the accompanying e-motions, which might be something more "real" than just acting.

Sexual Humiliation: Catherine Breillat's Philosophy in the Bedroom

Unlike Winterbottom and Chéreau, French director Catherine Breillat has single-mindedly explored women's sexuality throughout a long career.

In all Breillat's films, sexual desire is highly ambivalent for the woman. It is often a powerful attraction, but it is also a source of shame and compromise. Most fundamentally, it is some-

thing that her female characters are destined to negotiate, both within themselves and with the men with whom they have sex. Self-conscious, self-reflexive beings contemplate themselves and wonder about the conjunction of conscious thought with animal lust. Sex may be a pleasure but it also causes pain and humiliation. The flesh is both sublime and ridiculous. To be a virgin is to carry around an enormous burden. To lose virginity can be a negotiation of enormous bad faith.

Breillat's 2001 film, *À ma soeur! (Fat Girl)*, concerns the initiation of two inexperienced sisters, one twelve and one fifteen. Anaïs is the younger, and bigger, of the two. It is through her often reluctant eyes that we watch the seduction and defloration of her svelte and beautiful older sister, Elena. However, this is no ordinary, wistful, bittersweet end-of-innocence tale. Nor is it the sex-is-pure-humiliation that we have seen from directors like Todd Solondz or Gaspar Noé.¹⁰ Though the sex acts portrayed are humiliating, and even worse, they are never without ambivalent desire.

These sisters alternate affectionate confidence with the typical cruelties of adolescence. Each indulges the other in her weakness: Elena comforts the unhappy Anaïs with food; Anaïs makes possible her sister's trysts by pretending to be asleep when Elena invites her new boyfriend to sneak into the vacation bedroom they share. Anaïs both criticizes and envies her sister's sexual initiation. Play acting alone in a swimming pool earlier in the film, we see her enact a dialectic between experience and innocence: at one end of the pool she kisses the pylon of the diving platform as if it is her lover, acting the part of the shy virgin. Dogpaddling in her awkward, buoyant flesh to the other side, she now acts the role of the worldly woman to the pool ladder. At night, however, she watches a similar dialectic of innocence and experience play out in the Italian boyfriend, Fernando's, assault on her sister's virginity.

Two protracted sex scenes between Elena and Fernando, with Anaïs as reluctant witness, constitute the dramatic core of the film. Elena both wants and fears the loss of her virginity. She lays herself out for Fernando but her desire is tentative. His is alternately cajoling and bullying. We have heard all the clichés before: she, on one hand, would like to love him, does not want to be a "cock-tease," but worries that she will lose his respect. He, on the other hand, claims to respect and love her but needs proof of her love or he will be forced (out of physiological necessity) to turn to an older woman.

What is new, here, is the remarkable combination of duration with apparent explicitness in the form of Fernando's looming erect penis. Out of this combination, a banal scene of seduction takes on epic proportions in a prolonged battle of wills. All Fernando's actions, and all Elena's reactions, are governed by its visible presence. He argues, for example, that she

¹⁰ See, for example Todd Solondz's *Storytelling* (1998) and *Happiness* (2002), or Gaspar Noé's *Seul contre tous [I Stand Alone]* (1998) and *Irréversible* (2002).

must trust him to “stay on the edge” and not to come. She resists but also pitifully accepts his practiced lies which profess eternal love and the promise of marriage. Thus, each time she rebuffs him and he turns away, she finds a way to give him new hope. Eventually, an unhappy compromise will be reached “the back way.”

What is especially powerful about the scene, however, are the two moments in which the film cuts to Anaïs watching from her bed across the room. In both cases the shift to her distanced point of view occurs at the precise moment that most hurts her sister. In the first instance when Fernando tells how he has enjoyed humiliating other women who invited him into their bedrooms, but not Elena whom he respects, the cut to Anaïs punctuates his bad faith, for she perceives the violation despite its apparent lack of violence. In the second instance, when Fernando anally penetrates Elena, we again watch Anaïs’s face as she hears her sisters muted screams and Fernando’s noisy climax. Thus the eventual sexual climax of the first bedroom ordeal is not viewed “in the flesh,” but on the face of the empathic younger sister who registers its violation.

In the second bedroom scene, Elena more freely “gives” herself to Fernando and Anaïs is this time the silent judge and uncomfortable witness to her sister’s actual “defloration.” We see Fernando put on a condom and climb on Elena. She asks him to be gentle but he insists that “one hard push” is best. As he does, we again cut to Anaïs, now weeping and turned away from the sight of the couple. Behind her, in the distant background, we see the moving legs of the entwined couple and hear, once again, Fernando’s loud climax. Thus the first daughter rids herself of the burden of her virginity while the second daughter weeps for her.

There have been countless scenes representing the loss of innocence in cinema. The mere fact that Breillat’s film offers seemingly more explicit sexual “action” is certainly not the sole cause of the originality and power of these scenes. Indeed, and thankfully, we see no visible penetration. But fragments of seemingly explicit sexual action, along with uncommon duration, allow the battle over the loss of virginity to become a more psychologically and emotionally accurate ordeal often refracted through the eyes of a sister who is simultaneously empathic, jealous and sorrowing. The scene is true, sad, funny and devastating all at once.

Ending with the fearful symmetry of the defloration of the second sister in a violent rape, *Fat Girl* turns out to be a comparative study of the forms of humiliating sexual initiation and the damage they can do to young girls with no real power over their sexual fate. While the film is deeply feminist in its protest against this lack of power, its polemical point is that the more truly violated of the sisters is the one who is not literally raped, the one who convinces herself to love her seducer. This puts Breillat in the provocative position of arguing that a quick rape is actually preferable to a long seduction, and that the raped sister exercises

more control over her fate than the seduced one. None of the sex we see in *Fat Girl* is fully hard-core and if one has seen Breillat’s *Sex is Comedy*, there is good reason to suspect that the erect penis is prosthesis. Yet no other director, male or female, has so effectively presented the complex circumstances in which sexual pleasures are negotiated.¹¹

American Hard-Core Art: The Orgasmic Imperative of *Shortbus*

American-produced films have not entirely been missing in action on the front of hard-core art, but neither have they exactly been the pioneers. What no American film had hazarded was a story that was predominantly about sex in an idiom that was not a poor imitation of European angst but distinctly American. This is the great accomplishment of John Cameron Mitchell’s *Shortbus* (2006). Three years after *The Brown Bunny* had been roundly booed at the Cannes Film Festival, Mitchell’s film received a standing ovation. Acutely aware of all the traditions he is negotiating—European hard-core art, American hard-core pornography, the new realism of musicals that still want to belt out a song—Mitchell set out to make a uniquely American film of hard-core art that might leave his viewers with a feel-good afterglow.

To the cool jazz of *Is you is or is you ain’t my baby?* the camera caresses the nose, lips and toes of the Statue of Liberty and then flies over a stylized, cartoonish model of post-9/11 Manhattan and adjacent boroughs. Peeking into a number of windows we are introduced to a cast of characters, most of which are already in medias sex. In the first live action scene we see a man in a bathtub filming his penis as it floats in the water. For a nation that has become positively phobic of any sightings of erect penises outside the ghetto of pornography, this is a very canny beginning. The penis is only a little erect and the way it bobs in the water is rather endearing and entirely benign. We see it in full view, both as attached to the man in the bathtub and also framed in the digital camera’s screen. Later we even see a little yellowness in the water as the man pees. Body organs and functions are not horrific or to be ashamed of, these first shots of the film seem to say, and they are already very familiar from pornography, so let’s now see what else can be done with them.

Over the initial hump of the penis sighting, the film introduces its cast of characters. A dominatrix sternly whips her young client who questions her about the quality of her orgasms. The man

¹¹ As such, I would argue that Breillat’s films are infinitely more feminist than Virginie Despentes’ feminist rape-revenge odyssey, *Baise Moi*, though I know that some would disagree.

from the bath, attempts, through a series of yoga exercises, to perform fellatio on his own penis. Another man excitedly watches him through binoculars. An Asian-Canadian woman and a white man have vigorous sex in a variety of athletic positions all over their apartment.

Like his European hard-core art counterparts, Mitchell reveals character through the performance of sexual acts. Unlike these European directors, however, his sex is funny. He rapidly intercuts the climax of each of the opening scenes into a crescendo of orgasms in a tongue-in-cheek nod to the conventions of hard-core: the man from the bath comes on his own face; the female half of the heterosexual couple moans in concert with her partner in a way that loudly signals orgasm; the client whipped by the dominatrix ejaculates forcefully and inadvertently onto the multicolored drips of a Jackson Pollock-style action painting hung above his bed. His ejaculate joins all the other little dribbles. Mitchell's film breaks the sexual ice while flirting with our certain familiarity with the money shot convention of hard-core. We know at once, however, from the clever intercutting, the Pollock gag and the over-athletic comedy of positions, that despite the presence of erections, insertions and visible ejaculate that this is too playful, too witty and too little intent on engendering arousal, to be porn, even while the pornographic imperative to signal orgasm is maintained.

If we did not recognize this fact from the witty comedy of sex, we would certainly recognize it from the mood change that follows: behind all these strenuous and diverse sexual acts lurks the deep melancholy of characters who aspire to goals of sexual connection that never measure up. We learn, for example that Sofia, the Asian-Canadian woman who works as a sex therapist, has been faking her orgasms to her husband. We see them here in post-coital uneasiness. And after the self fellator ejaculates on his own face, he sobs. His acrobatic feat proves symptomatic of a larger inability to allow himself to be penetrated or symbolically "touched" by anyone but himself. We later learn that this man, James, has been filming himself not out of narcissistic pleasure but as a farewell suicide tape to his lover. Finally, we learn that the dominatrix, Severin, is an alienated sex worker who goes home alone to sadly soak her tired feet.

Shortbus's narrative thus operates in knowing counterpoint to the classic utopianism of American hard-core pornography in the era of porno chic. It observes the pattern of hard-core pornography of the classic era: sex is the problem; (more and better) sex is the (mechanically simplistic) solution.¹² Mitchell's film expands the range of sexual performances to include male-female, male-male orgies and S/M, but he adheres to the fundamental pornotopian notion that the solution to the problem of sex is more or better sex. Thus, while *Shortbus* does not imitate pornography, it upholds its orgasmic imperative by also seeking solution in orgasm, though not just mechanically through a new kind of "diff'rent stroke."

¹² This is an axiom of golden-age pornography of the seventies and early eighties. See *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* pp. 134-152.

What is new about his approach is an at least tacit understanding that the proliferation of pornography itself has been part of the problem of everyone's performance anxiety. In an interview, Mitchell notes that because young people today tend to learn about sex from porn they can become insecure in their own ability to live up to its hyperboles. But his solution to this problem is not to eschew pornography, but to refunction some of its conventions to more people-friendly, spontaneous ends.¹³

Thus the character of Sofia takes over where the sexually questing female hero of much classic era hard-core pornography leave off: in a polysexual quest for the big O. During a therapy session Sofia blurts out to her clients, the gay couple James and his partner Jamie, that she is "pre-orgasmic." "Does that mean that you are about to come?" asks the naïve Jamie. "No. That means I've never come," responds Sophia. Though the film is smart enough not to insult its female protagonist by identifying any single technique or philosophy as the solution to her "pre-orgasmic" status, and though it has a lot of fun offering Sofia a wide range of contradictory advice and philosophy—from the exercise of Kugel muscles to sensory deprivation, from the idea that orgasm represents immense solitude, to the idea that in it one is "finally not alone"—its narrative imitates the pornographic quest for pleasure but harnesses that quest to the larger social goal of forming a community of "permeable," unafraid beings. Modeled on the quintessential pornographic narrative, *Shortbus* thus also operates as a corrective to the isolation and fixation on bodies and techniques that solitary porn can engender.

James and Jamie send Sofia to *Shortbus*—a bohemian sex club and cabaret, modeled on a number of actually existing venues.¹⁴ Shortbus has one room for screening 16mm avant-garde films, another room for dykes, another room for general mixing, another for music and another for orgies. Queer friendly but not queer exclusive, Shortbus welcomes the old, the straight, the transgendered and the swinging. Named for the other bus that takes the "different" kids (gifted and challenged) to school, *Shortbus* the movie, like Shortbus the cabaret, pays homage to yet another of the ground-breaking films of the porno chic era, *Behind the Green Door* (1972), as well as its 1986 sequel. In both those pornotopias, ordinary people—truck drivers, flight attendants, Vietnam vets—enter a magical cabaret of sexual abundance where polymorphously perverse sexual pleasures are celebrated in complexly staged orgies that culminate in communal orgasms.

¹³ John Cameron Mitchell notes that "young people learn sex nowadays from porn rather than multiple sources—from life or friends or whatever. They become very insecure about how they look and they just don't enjoy it. They figure they have to do this and then follow it with being rimmed and then follow it with coming on someone's back. Sex is supposed to be surprising and spontaneous, and instead it's become another fucking marketing niche." Sean Kennedy, "The Return of Free Love," *The Advocate* (October 24, 2006), p. 46.

¹⁴ It is called Dumba—a queer performing arts collective and occasional site for orgies in Brooklyn—where some of the scenes were actually filmed (Nathan Lee, "Shortbus," *Film Comment* (Sept-October 2006), p. 71. However, other models from the nineties are a rock and roll drag party called "Squeezebox," where Mitchell's original stage play for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* began, as well as another venue in the East Village with which Shortbus MC Justin Bond was associated. Sean Kennedy, "The Return of Free Love," *The Advocate* (October 24, 2006), p. 46.

The film's most often quoted line, that the orgy room of *Shortbus* is "just like the sixties, only with less hope," belies the fact that Mitchell actually seems to place a great deal of faith in his own rejuvenation of the liberatory utopian ideals of the sixties. As Richard Corliss, reviewing the film for *Time* put it, *Shortbus* is "so retro, it seems sparkling new."¹⁵

But *Shortbus* is no throwback. When Sofia confesses to a failure to orgasm and to a general lack of sexual experience, she initially sounds like Linda Lovelace who asserted in *Deep Throat* that she loved "getting laid," but lamented the fact that there are "no bells ringing, dams bursting or bombs going off." Sofia's confession begins in the same way: "Sex feels terrific; I love it a lot, it's a great work out." But unlike Lovelace, and in the security of the "Pussy Room" with only other women listening, she further confesses, "But it's a lot of pressure and sometimes I feel like somebody's going to kill me and I just have to smile and pretend to enjoy it." Though the entire *Shortbus* establishment is enlisted in the project of showing Sofia the road to an earthshaking orgasm, the film is neither so didactic as to tell us how it can be achieved, nor so happy-go-lucky as to imagine that Sofia's "smiling and pretending to enjoy" has not had its emotional costs.

The emotional costs of "bad sex" are indeed everywhere to be seen in *Shortbus* whose three main characters, including Sofia the sex therapist, are all in the line of alienated "sex work." James, the suicidal former "male escort" suffers from a problem similar to Sofia's: the inauthenticity of having had to pretend to enjoy. He cannot connect with anyone and we eventually learn that the video he is obsessively filming is a suicide tape. Even the good-spirited three way daisy chain we see him perform with two others, though comical in its rousing singing of the National Anthem into the anus of one of them, is actually more of an acrobatic feat than a sexual event. The men respectfully adjust positions, give proper feedback to one another, use a penis as a mock microphone, but no one ever comes.

Thus two of *Shortbus's* main characters cannot find pleasure in sex and are unhappily "impermeable"—defined as the key sexual problem. In the second evening at *Shortbus*, Sofia brings along her husband and arms herself with a technological aid that is the film's comic homage to Oshima Nagisa's *In the Realm of the Senses*: a vibrating egg with this same name that she inserts into her vagina. Comic vibrations ensue as the remote control, mistaken for a video game, gets into many hands. Thus the legacy of Oshima looms large but in an era of commodified sex toys a real "realm of the senses" proves elusive.

How then is the problem of sexual disconnection and impermeability solved? If sex is the problem, then in the grand tradition of American pornography, sex is also the solution. Near suicide, James is rescued by his benign stalker who bridges the voyeuristic gap that

¹⁵ *Time* (October 6, 2006), <http://www.com/time/arts/article>

separates him from the object of his desire, and thus breaching his own impermeability, penetrates James anally, in a way that the latter does seem to feel.

Meanwhile, Sofia projects herself into a fantasy world where she finds herself alone by the sea on a park bench flooded with water. She masturbates alone on this bench and seems to come close to orgasm until the power goes out all over New York. This is the film's device for bringing everyone together one more time in the alternative, candle-lit world of *Shortbus* for the grand orgy-finale that will include Sofia's final, earth-shaking orgasm. But this orgasm is not the result of better technique it is the result of better community and trust for which sex now becomes a metaphor. MC Justin Bond leads the group in the finale's song, whose final words sing "we all get it in the end." Getting it in the end is the metaphor for permeability as well as the sex act that will allow the film to end happily and for New Yorkers to have their share of the revolutionary "hope" of polymorphous perversity begun in the sixties, revived momentarily in the good feeling of the immediate post-9/11 era under the sign of the circuitry of connection of a motherboard. The orgy commences and everyone becomes permeable, if not literally penetrated then at least open and available.

Here we see Sofia in between a couple she had earlier watched and envied, discovering that she too can "get it in the end," not by working hard but by letting herself go with strangers. James and Jamie are reunited under the benign gaze of the voyeur, who seems now to find a partner in Ceth, the third man from the three-way. A marching band restarts the song and everyone joins in as Sofia finally begins a literally earthshaking orgasm that has the power to reconnect the motherboard and turn the lights back on in New York.

A retro, sixties style orgy, though one amply supplied with condoms and lube, is thus not only the place for pleasure but for understanding, permeability and even forgiveness. An ethic of "permeability," whose enemy is the fear that closes us off and makes us impermeable, is thus practiced at *Shortbus* in both sexual and non-sexual ways. Permeability, a willingness to get it (and take it) in the end, and every other possible way, such is the retro sexual revolutionary faith in a world in which sex might be "good again."¹⁶

Shortbus might be a better film if it could take the despair of its characters a little more seriously, but if it did it might not be the quintessentially utopian American sex film, and it certainly could not function as the breakthrough film for American hard-core art that it is, even if American audiences have not flocked to something that is still pretty much an anomaly on our screens: hard-core art that isn't foreign, that is, in fact, aggressively American, from its opening on the Statue of Liberty to its singing of the Star Spangled Banner.

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¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*: Vol 1, New York: Pantheon, 1978, p. 7.

We live in a world in which directors like Michael Winterbottom, Patrice Chéreau, Catherine Breillat and John Cameron Mitchell make themselves vulnerable to the charge of being pornographers when they depict explicit sex. These directors have often vehemently protested that they are not pornographers. Patrice Chéreau's defense, interestingly, has been to distinguish Intimacy from what he would term the greater pornographic sensationalism of the French women directors whose explicit works emerged about the same time as his own. Thus he argues that while Catherine Breillat's *Romance* and Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi* are prurient, his film is not. Breillat, for her part, when accused of being a pornographer, argues provocatively that there is no such thing as pornography. What exists instead, she claims "is censorship which defines pornography and sets it off from the rest of film... Pornography is the sexual act taken totally out of context, and made into a product for consumption, by using the most debased feelings or emotions of people, when in fact in daily life sexual acts are surrounded by emotions, consideration for the partner, pleasure and so on, which do not come within the pornographic depiction...."¹⁷ John Cameron Mitchell, for his part, claims to enjoy pornography but asserts that his sex is more metaphoric than it is real.

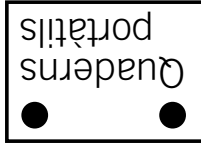
I don't expect the directors defending themselves against the charges of pornography to agree on their terms. And there may even be a value to claiming to make a new kind of pornography. This, in fact, is what Oshima did when he made *In the Realm of the Senses*. At issue, as it so often happens in film, is the vexed question of the fundamental realism of the medium: the fact that cameras and sound recorders register actions that take place before them, even if they are also components in larger fictions and even when some of the acts are faked.

Faced with the idea of cinematic hard-core sex, André Bazin's perplexed reaction to the dilemma of presenting sexual action at the movies was to ask: if one could demand real sex from movies, then shouldn't one also demand real violence? Since such a demand was immoral and obscene, Bazin's uneasy solution was to pronounce that even though nothing is "*a priori* prohibited on the screen," still artists must resort to "the capacity for abstraction in the language of cinema, so that the image never takes on a documentary quality." This caveat fudges Bazin's belief in the fundamental indexicality of the medium, so intensely celebrated elsewhere in his writing. What Bazin's realist imagination does not allow him to consider is the degree to which every sex act that might be placed before a camera is also a document of a performance: it is both real—something that actually happens between people—and a fake, staged for the camera and sound equipment. Neither the directors of pornography nor the directors of hard-core art, from Warhol forward, document "real sex" in the sense of what people do alone, in private.

¹⁷ Interview by Linda Ruth Williams, "The Edge of the Razor," *Sight and Sound*, (October 14, 1999).

The error that Bazin makes when he says "we must stay in the imagination" is both to assume that the imagination cannot itself work with more explicit representations of sex acts, and to assume that these more explicit representations are not themselves the products of a directorial and performative imagination. The imagination does not suddenly lose its vocation when confronted with a penis, a vagina or a blow job, or with the many possible ways of "performing" not just acting or simulating sex. The imagination, and the ability to fantasize, will always occupy that place where the film's necessarily limited vision fails to see all. We do it a great disservice when we imagine that it cannot deal with more to see than previous convention allows.

Whether the current trend towards hard-core art will be a lasting feature of contemporary moving images remains to be seen. Certainly the difficulties posed to actors are great. There are few established male American stars willing to expose themselves, erect or un-erect, for the benefit of film art. Only a realist approach to screening sex can get over the idealized comparisons of body types to the standards of pornography. And perhaps only familiarity with many different kinds and moods of sexual performance—not just the exotic foreign examples that come to American screens from the outside to seduce or offend us, but the home grown kind that can speak to our more American identities and experiences. I can't help but think that in an era in which even the notoriously puritanical American public finds the discussion of explicit sex acts unavoidable, whether in legal cases such as Lawrence vs. Texas, or in rape hearings that must explicitly detail what penises have precisely done, that the continued elision of the emotional nature and physical specificity of the sex acts that so importantly punctuate our public and private lives is going to seem increasingly odd in our movies.

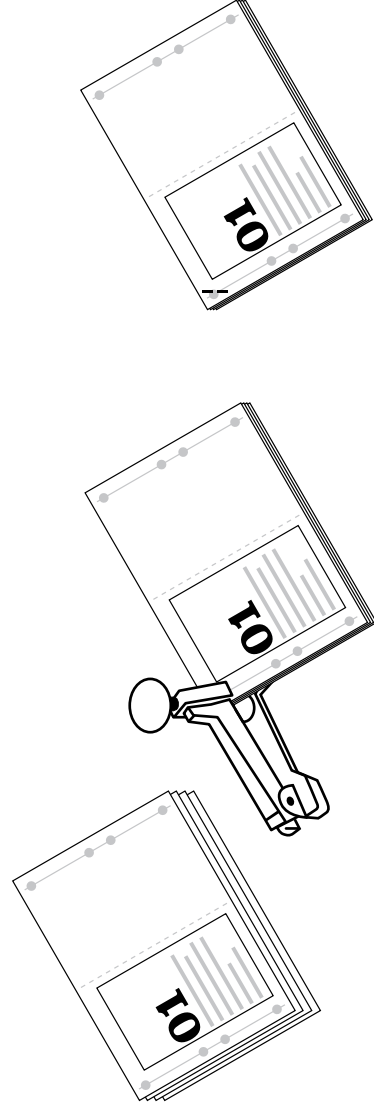


Tres maneres d'enquadrernar els teus Quaderns portàtils

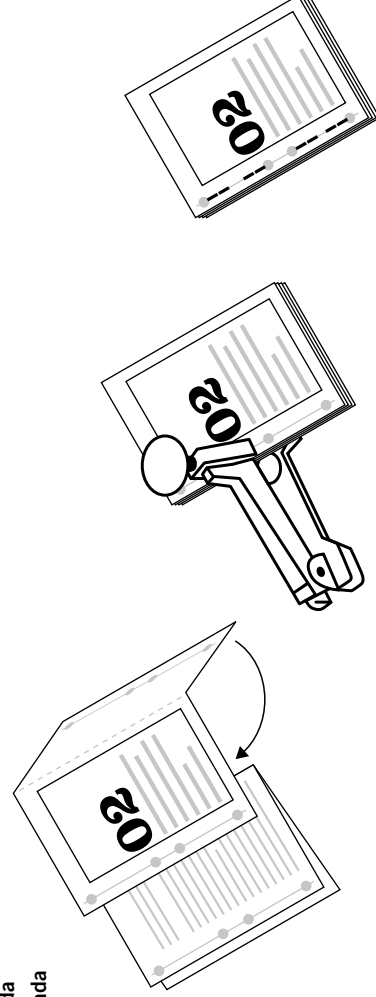
Tres maneras de encuadrernar tus Quaderns portàtils

Three ways of binding your Quaderns portàtils

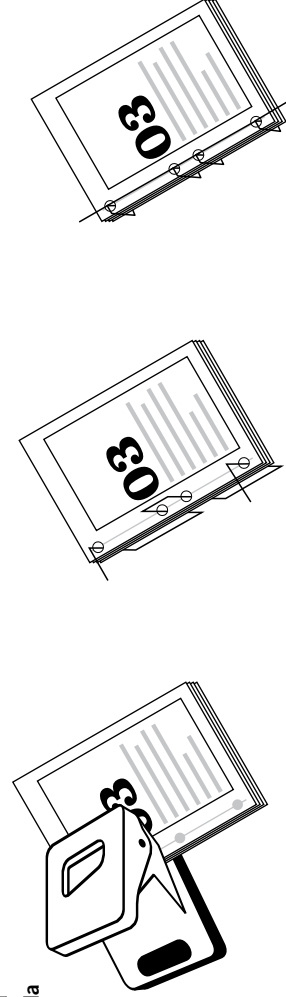
Dossier grapat
Dosier grapado
Stapled Dossier



Enquadrernació japonesa grapada
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Enquadrernació japonesa cosida
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