



PROJECT MUSE®

---

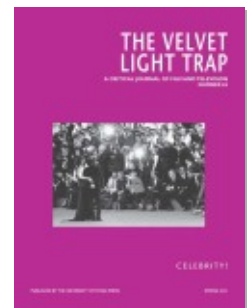
*Screening Sex* (review)

Curran Nault

The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 79-81 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0085>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372714>

## Screening Sex

by Linda Williams



In the 15 July 2009 episode of ABC talk show *The View* cohosts Barbara Walters and Joy Behar gave their assessments of the hot-button summer release *Bruno* (Larry Charles, 2009). Starring British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, *Bruno* tells the fictional story of a flamboyant Austrian fashion reporter who travels to the United States with the hope of achieving stardom. During his voyage he encounters a hodgepodge of real-life characters (from suburban swingers, to backwoods hunters, to Arkansas wrestling fans, to former Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul), all of whom are more than a little unsettled by Bruno's effeminate demeanor and complete lack of decorum, especially when it comes to matters of gay sex. While Behar expressed her approval of the film, stating that she "laughed at its audaciousness," Walters was not quite so amused. Fatuously equating the pornographic with the artistically deficient, Walters accused the film of being "almost as pornographic as any pornographic thing that I've seen" and indicated her particular distaste for the film's "close-ups of penises and pubic hair" and scenes of simulated anal intercourse. Walters's invective lasted for several minutes until moderator Whoopi Goldberg, who had not actually seen the film, effectively concluded the discussion with the irreverent quip, "A twelve-foot penis on a screen is not my idea of a good time. In the house, yes. But not on the big screen."

Yet, given that *Bruno* was number one at the box office during its opening weekend, remained in the top four the following week, and as of this writing has earned a respectable 7.0 rating on the International Movie Database Web site,

Walters and Goldberg may not hold the majority opinion when it comes to depictions of sex on the big screen. To the degree that the multitudes attending *Bruno* screenings across the country knew what was in store for them, it seems that a "good time" for many cinemagoers does not necessarily preclude "twelve-foot penises" and "close-ups of pubic hair." Of course, that moviegoers might actually *want* to view on-screen sex, even in the larger-than-life proportions that Goldberg cheekily derides, is hardly a revelation. In 1972 the film-going public, and not just the usual "trench coat crowd," flocked to the hardcore feature *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano) in such large numbers that the film quickly became the highest-grossing independent film of all time, a title that it still retains. Four years later, at the Cannes premiere of *In the Realm of the Senses* (Oshima Nagisa, 1976), excitement among the crowd gathered to view the sexually explicit art-house picture reached such a fevered pitch that one unlucky film critic was shoved through a plate-glass window. And today films like the gay cowboy saga *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and the provocatively titled *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (Kevin Smith, 2008) are keeping audiences in the theater with the promise of being exposed to new sexual experiences, knowledges, and pleasures.

In other words, sex, in all its myriad forms, was and remains a significant reason why so many of us love the movies. This is a fact that Linda Williams, professor of film studies and rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley, knows very well. In her latest book, *Screening Sex*, Williams confirms her status as the leading scholar of on-screen carnality with an authoritative cultural



history of cinematic sex acts based on the premise that “prurience has always been an important reason for interest in the movies,” even if not all of us, certainly *The View* cohosts included, would care to admit it (7).

Williams is no stranger to writing about sex in the cinema. Her 1989 book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* is a classic account of pornography, its significance, functions, and effects, and it has become a touchstone for all those who have written seriously about pornography in the years since its publication. However, whereas *Hard Core* was firmly (no pun intended) centered on the hardcore genre, *Screening Sex* casts a much wider net, covering both simulated and nonsimulated sexual representations, from the cinema’s first smooch in Thomas Edison’s short *The Kiss* (1896) to the “anything goes” orgies in John Cameron Mitchell’s polymorphously perverse feature *Short Bus* (2006). This makes for a somewhat itinerant text, but what *Screening Sex* lacks in focus, it makes up for in ingenuity and complexity. Indeed, the expansiveness of *Screening Sex* allows for generative comparisons between seemingly disparate texts to be established.

For example, in a section devoted to the films of avant-garde provocateur Catherine Breillat, who in *Romance* (1999) and *Fat Girl* (2001) weaves sexually explicit images into decidedly feminist narratives, Williams notes that Breillat “offers ellipses in plot just as previous directors used to offer ellipses of sex” (260–61). This point returns the reader to Williams’s opening chapter on the use of the ellipsis as a substitute for forbidden sexual contact in classic Hollywood films like *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and thus indicates the ways in which filmic representations of the erotic are constantly evolving, building on previous iterations and, in the case of Breillat, turning them on their head. In this regard Williams likens the history of cinematic eroticism to an extended adolescence, with movies only coming to sexual maturity in response to the sexual revolution. However, Williams is a savvy enough scholar to avoid the facile argument that cinema has developed in an uncomplicated linear fashion toward ever-increasing explicitness and liberation and is well aware that, while taboos have been broken in the wake of the sexual revolution, on-screen sex acts still function to extend the surveillance and regulation of bodies within a social system that, as Michel Foucault famously warned, is intent on making “sex speak.”

Central to Williams’s analysis is her belief that watching sex on-screen can be a pedagogical experience, one that

teaches us not only how to “do it” but how to (re)connect with our own bodies and “enjoy certain sexual ways of being” (6). But although Williams foregrounds the pleasurable sensations and eye-opening information that can be gained from screening sex, she also admits that films rarely show us everything we want to see or completely satiate our desires. Instead, they deploy a paradoxical dialectic of revelation and concealment in which “every revelation is also a concealment that leaves something to the imagination” (2). Williams makes this thesis clear in a close reading of *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), which demonstrates that while the film “reveals” by making the sexual nature of the illicit relationship between Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) and Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) patently obvious, it “conceals” by never allowing viewers to witness the graphic details of the duo’s bedroom rendezvous. For those intimately familiar with *The Graduate*, this may already be understood, but here, as throughout the book, Williams delves deep and writes with such panache and insight that the reader feels he or she is encountering even the most well known film for the very first time.

Organized into a loose chronology, *Screening Sex* includes chapters dedicated to the history of the on-screen kiss; the increasingly bold depictions of 1960s Hollywood; the 1970s flowering of the pornographic; the representation of female pleasure in the films of Jane Fonda; the combination of hardcore sex and erotic art in *In the Realm of the Senses*; the playing out of primal scenes in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) and *Brokeback Mountain*; the aesthetics of contemporary hardcore art films; and embodiment in the age of cyberporn. These chapters are all filled with scintillating details and showcase Williams’s knack for smooth and well-reasoned argumentation, but the chapter on Jane Fonda is a particular standout. In it Williams situates Fonda’s late 1960s/1970s films within changing discourses of female sexuality, partially initiated by Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” and asserts that Fonda’s films introduced American audiences to new, distinctly female forms of carnal knowledge. In the Fonda vehicle *Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968) the titular heroine’s seemingly infinite capacity for sexual pleasure, only rarely achieved through traditional male–female coupling, effectively celebrates women’s libidinal capabilities and troubles the notion that women require “heterosexual coitus to achieve multiple, uncountable orgasms” (170). Likewise, in the post–Vietnam War drama *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), a sex scene between army wife Sally (Jane Fonda)

and paraplegic veteran Luke (Jon Voight) depicts Fonda's character reaching orgasm through "gentle" cunnilingus rather than the "hard thrusting" we have come to expect from pornography. *Coming Home* thus provides an example of sexuality far removed from the "dominant phallocentric model of going all the way" (177).

Another highpoint in *Screening Sex* is Williams's nuanced exploration of the blaxploitation landmark *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971). Diverging from previous critiques of the film, which are mainly concerned with the ways in which *Sweetback* counteracts previous representations of black men as weak and subservient with its representation of black male strength and violence, Williams's primary interest is in the film's taboo-busting portrayal of interracial sex. As she argues, *Sweetback* is daring in its insistence on "an element of black empowerment frequently left out of civil rights agendas: the right for black men to have sex with white women; the black penis as a sign of power and potency" (98). Yet Williams also maintains that *Sweetback's* daring is muted by the burden of having to counteract two black male stereotypes at once—the servile "Uncle Tom" and the hypersexual "black buck"—resulting in a "highly controlled" depiction of black male sexuality that is neither entirely flaccid nor, despite the praise *Sweetback* receives from women in the film, truly potent (101). This is a controversial take on what remains a controversial film and is sure to spark intelligent debate among readers.

In the end, perhaps *Screening Sex's* greatest success is in the ways in which it diverges from *Hard Core* in content and style. For one, whereas *Hard Core*, in its original printing, included only text, *Screening Sex* is filled with tantalizing images, many of which are quite explicit, including a still of an all-male threesome from *Short Bus* and a digital image of an erect penis ejaculating onto porn star Jenna Jameson. These images illuminate Williams's arguments and refuse

the conventional separation of the intellectual from the visually arousing. Second, whereas *Hard Core* was written with the cerebral aloofness that befits a serious academic text, in *Screening Sex* Williams gets cozier, even venturing to share some highly personal anecdotes with her readers. These anecdotes, about such things as Williams's conflicted arousal at the sight of rape in Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1959) and the forty-mile drive she undertook to view *Deep Throat* in the 1970s, are fascinating, enlightening, and refreshingly courageous, especially considering the double standard that continues to mark sex talk as a male prerogative. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, whereas *Hard Core* focused entirely on heterosexual pornography, *Screening Sex* includes both heterosexual and homosexual examples. Thus, unlike *Hard Core*, *Screening Sex* does not keep heterosexuality sequestered from the perverse taint of the queer. In fact, in placing, for example, the sado-masochistic *Blue Velvet* alongside the romantic *Brokeback Mountain*, Williams encourages us to rethink the traditional straight-as-normal, gay-as-deviant binary. This type of sexual intermixing, although not without precedent, is uncommon enough within media studies scholarship to here feel like a watershed.

With these changes Williams moves scholarship on cinematic sex into the future. And, as she has done in the past, she carves a path that others are, undoubtedly, soon to follow. *Screening Sex* is inspiring in its depth of research and fluidity of expression and is convincing in its argument that movies are continually offering us new sexual pleasures and knowledges, even if these pleasures and knowledges are always coming "too early" or "too late." Williams has created that rare text that is both intellectually rigorous and a pure joy to read. This is a great accomplishment.

Linda Williams. *Screening Sex*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 412 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).