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SEXCATRAZ



The invisible prison of sexual shame
behind the Hollywood scandals
and #METOO, revealed
through 31 films

SEXCATRAZ

INTRODUCTION	2
PART I	7
Welcome to Sexcatraz	7
The unholy trinity	9
<i>Boys Don't Cry</i>	9
<i>The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover</i>	14
<i>Wish You Were Here</i>	18
The politics of shame	22
<i>Last Exit to Brooklyn</i>	22
<i>The Magdalene Sisters</i>	27
<i>The Conformist</i>	30
Sexually assured destruction	37
<i>Asylum</i>	37
<i>Auto Focus</i>	40
<i>American Beauty</i>	45
PART II	50
The mechanics of shame	50
<i>Blue Velvet</i>	51
<i>The Brown Bunny</i>	56
<i>The Piano Teacher</i>	60
Slowly setting concrete.....	64
<i>Malèna</i>	64
<i>À Ma Soeur!</i>	68
<i>The Man in the Moon</i>	71
Sexual access rights	76
<i>Eyes Wide Shut</i>	77
<i>Unfaithful</i>	81
<i>Indecent Proposal</i>	85
Oil and water	89
<i>Intimacy</i>	89
<i>When Harry Met Sally</i>	92
<i>Romance</i>	95
Unclean	99
<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i>	99
PART III	106
Parapraxes.....	106
<i>Lolita</i>	106
<i>Shame</i>	110
<i>Swimming Pool</i>	113
Escape from Sexcatraz	117
<i>Sex, Lies, and Videotape</i>	117
<i>Y Tu Mamá También</i>	121
<i>The Singing Detective (TV series)</i>	124
Beyond Sexcatraz	132
<i>Stealing Beauty</i>	132
<i>The Wicker Man</i>	135
<i>Antonia's Line</i>	139
Open water	142
AUTHOR'S NOTE	145
BIBLIOGRAPHY	147

SEXCATRAZ

INTRODUCTION

In October 2017 over a dozen women accused Hollywood mogul [Harvey Weinstein](#) of sexual harassment, assault, or rape. Further allegations followed. Weinstein's wife left him, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences¹ expelled him and—the ultimate ignominy—he was fired from his own production company. On 25 May 2018 Weinstein was arrested and charged with rape.

The accusations against Weinstein were a tipping point in breaking the silence about the sexual abuse that has plagued not just the film industry but society at large since time immemorial. Other courageous women stepped forward with accusations of sexual impropriety. More famous figures, including Oscar-winning actor Kevin Spacey (*American Beauty*) fell from grace. All around the world, victims of sexual abuse broke their silence and vented their outrage on Twitter using the #METOO hashtag.

The sheer scale of #METOO shows that Harvey Weinstein, with his inability to express his sexuality in healthy ways, does not exist in isolation. He is simply at the more extreme end of a spectrum whose statistics are appalling. The World Health Organisation estimates that [35% of women are subjected to physical or sexual violence](#). In Britain, [60% of girls aged 13-21 are sexually harassed](#). The audacity of this abuse can be staggering: a female cyclist had her [top pulled down at a traffic light](#). Sexual abuse ranges from fatal violence to demeaning insults. The [Everyday Sexism Project](#) documents the misery of women subjected to an array of sexual slights that are often so “normalised that you don't even feel able to protest.”

All over the world, people struggle with sex-related issues on a daily basis. Divorce rates remain at historic highs, with infidelity often a major cause. Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá write that marriages are failing “under an unstoppable tide of swirling sexual frustration, libido-killing boredom, impulsive betrayal, dysfunction, confusion, and shame².” Public opinion is deeply and sometimes violently divided over the acceptability of same-sex marriages, sex education, prostitution and abortion.

High schools are a particular hotspot in the shifting front line of sexual permissibility. A survey reveals that [80% of UK teachers are uncomfortable delivering sex education](#) to a generation of teenagers who, though much younger than their teachers, are often more sexually savvy. Schoolgirls dress like the latest pop-cum-porn stars, prompting some British schools to [ban miniskirts as too distracting](#). But technology provides a work-around: students use mobile phones to trade nude pictures of each other. In some countries, including America, these teenagers are technically manufacturers and distributors of child pornography; they face a lifelong criminal record for simply wanting to explore their burgeoning sexuality using the latest technology.

The push for greater sexualisation is not universal: Japan's increasingly asexual³ young males have been derisively called [herbivore men](#) for their flagging appetite for red-blooded bedroom activities. It's not just the men, either: a survey found that [45% of Japanese](#)

1 AMPAS. Their annual awards night, the Oscars, is the pinnacle of the film industry calendar.

2 Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn*.

3 'The lack of sexual attraction to others, or low or absent interest in or desire for sexual activity.'—Wikipedia

SEXCATRAZ

[women aged 16-24 “were not interested in or despised” sexual contact](#). The knock-on effect of a sexually abstinent generation is a rapidly falling birth rate and a long-term population decline with potentially huge repercussions. The United Nations estimates that by the end of the current century, Japan’s population will have dropped from a peak of 128 million to around 80 million. Already, Japan’s rural areas are turning into ghost towns as the country’s aversion to sex becomes socially entrenched.

Even these are simply the outward signs. Most of our struggles with sex we keep to ourselves. The sharp rise of male performance enhancers attests to the prevalence of erectile dysfunction; over [50% of males above 40 are thought to suffer from ED](#). Our inboxes are swamped with offers of sex-enhancing pills from dodgy websites hosted in former Soviet satellites. Thousands of frustrated users throng to adult dating sites. Yet few openly admit to such difficulties. As Brooke Magnanti observes in *The Sex Myth*, “Our disinclination to be perfectly honest when discussing sex is high.” Unlike issues with drugs or alcohol, which are readily admitted these days—and even a badge of honour among the celebrity set—we tend to fight our sexual demons alone and in the dark.

Or we surf for porn. A University of East London study found that [97% of boys aged 16-20 viewed porn](#). Accurate statistics are otherwise hard to come by. According to the web-monitoring site [Top Ten Reviews](#), in 2006 there were 72 million unique visitors to adult websites per month, with 68 million daily pornographic search engine requests. Other estimates assert that pornography accounts for between 14% and 30% of total web traffic, though much depends on how this is measured. Ryan and Jethá claim that porn generates more income than “all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises.” Magnanti, a qualified statistician, disagrees: “The money in adult entertainment is dwarfed by the turnover of all other entertainment.” Which of them is right? For the purposes of this book, it doesn’t matter. The point is that everywhere we turn when trying to scope out human sexual dysfunction we encounter this kind of fog.

The lack of clarity around the extent of porn use is mirrored in the unwillingness to acknowledge its existence. While younger adults may be more open about it, the [sacking of three British judges in 2015 for viewing legal porn](#) on their work accounts shows that it remains taboo. Simply trying to unearth porn statistics gives a glimpse of our society’s inability to face the issue. Typing ‘por’ into Google’s UK search engine yields a list of suggested topics, from Porsche to Portsmouth; but even with the safe search filter disabled, typing ‘porn’ yields nothing at all, as if those 72 million cyber-surfers had vanished into some ethereal Recycle Bin.

Why are we willing to indulge our fascination with, say, food, in minute and highly public detail, but not our fascination with sex? Evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker writes that, “In all societies, sex is at least somewhat ‘dirty’⁴.” Few stop to question why sex has a patina of filth.

Beyond all these visible and (somewhat) measurable issues lies a deeper layer of sexual malaise that is both invisible and immeasurable. How many people have sex with their partners not for love or desire but from a sense of obligation? There are no statistics on those who, consciously or more often unconsciously, have turned their backs on sex: couples whose sexual relationships have stagnated or singles who have abandoned dating—not from an inability to find love, but from a hidden fear that finding love would entail

⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*.

SEXCATRAZ

dealing with all that sticky sexual stuff. As Ryan and Jethá observe, “contemporary human sexuality throbs with obvious, painful truths that must not be spoken aloud.” For countless people, sex has been dumped in the ‘too hard’ bin.

The massive popularity of erotic novels such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and sex-drenched TV series such as *Game of Thrones*, the constant parade of quasi-porn pop singers, the plethora of personal services and high street lap-dancing clubs suggest a world of increasing sexual gratification. The reality, for many people, is diametrically opposite. The myriad ways in which sex can—overtly or covertly—damage our lives is staggering. As archaeologist Timothy Taylor observes with masterful understatement, “the problem of sexual morality remains in many respects unresolved⁵.”

When all these strata are collated and the vastness of the iceberg of sexual dysfunction glimpsed beneath the waterline of mass consciousness, the question arises: “Where is all this heading?” The downfall of Harvey Weinstein and the rise of the #METOO hashtag shows that sexual abuse is no longer under the radar. Yet the question of where that dysfunction originates remains largely unaddressed.

The question is so encompassing that it seems all we can do is watch helplessly as we lurch towards the next X-rated disaster and hope we’re not caught with our pants down. In the thought-provoking conclusion to *The Sex Myth*, Magnanti warns against conflating the various debates on sex into a monolithic issue that creates “a view of the world in which virtually every human interaction is sexually charged—and potentially dangerous.” It’s too late. Research by geographer James DeMeo⁶ suggests this happened some 6000 years ago and, consciously or unconsciously, we’ve been living with it ever since. We’ve simply been slow to recognise it.

In the face of what some portray as an Armageddon of sexual and moral degeneracy, fundamentalists bray unequivocal solutions: ban, control, legislate, castrate. We need more rules, stiffer sentences, a harsher god... but before anyone jumps to the conclusion that this book will blame all this sexual discontent on religion, let me make it clear this is not an anti-religious tract. Psychologist Darrel Ray writes that, “The major religions seek to restrict sexual expression for no apparent reason other than to propagate their particular dogma⁷.” Anthropology reveals that institutionalised sexual negativity predates monotheism by several thousand years⁸ and DeMeo’s research, examined later, shows that historical restrictions on sexual expression are anything but arbitrary. Religion’s traditional antipathy to sex is a symptom, not a cause; having religious or spiritual values and a fulfilling sex life are not mutually exclusive.

The premise of this book is that the root of our sexual malaise is a prison of age-old unconscious, sex-negative attitudes that keep us trapped in patterns of behaviour that are at best dissatisfying and at worst downright damaging—patterns from which there is seemingly no escape. I have called this invisible emotional prison Sexcatraz, after America’s notorious—and supposedly escape-proof—maximum-security jail.

⁵ Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.

⁶ DeMeo’s *Saharasia: The 4000 BCE Origins of Child Abuse, Sex-Repression, Warfare and Social Violence in the Deserts of the Old World* will be referred to in some detail.

⁷ Darrel Ray, *Sex & God*.

⁸ In *The Prehistory of Sex*, Timothy Taylor writes, “the idea that there is a sexual line that must not be crossed... is far older than the story of Eve.”

SEXCATRAZ

I believe that the current rising tide of sexual dysfunction signals nothing less than the onset of a paradigm shift—a quantum leap in human sexual understanding—and, as a result, in the whole way that we think about, perceive, experience and express our sexuality—a “new understanding of ourselves,” to quote Ryan and Jethá. However, to reach the Garden of Eden of a new sexual paradigm we must first escape from Sexcatraz.

But how do you shift paradigms? You can't sign up for an evening course in paradigm shifting. As Albert Einstein noted, “Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” We are blinkered by ancient cultural beliefs, handed down from one generation to another, trapped as surely as the inmates of Alcatraz, locked into sexual attitudes so deeply embedded in our behaviour that, as the Everyday Sexism Project notes, they have been normalised into invisibility.

If these patterns are invisible then how can they be identified? Where can we find minutely documented case studies into the hidden layers of the human condition where sexual dysfunction festers?

The answer lies in the arts: in contemporary literature, music and film. Works of fiction they may be, but they're cultural documents too. The stories we tell about ourselves contain traces of our deepest impulses. Film, in particular, with its ability to reveal with a glance what thousands of words can never convey, has long been fascinated by sexual dysfunction in its myriad forms. It's easy to dismiss the products of Hollywood and other filmmakers as fables unsuited to stringent analysis. Fables resonate because they are emotionally accurate. Idries Shah, an authority on Sufi storytelling, writes:

Most fables contain at least some truth, and they often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting⁹.

In Oscar-winners like *Boys Don't Cry* and *American Beauty*; independent hits such as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *Shame*; European art house gems such as *Swimming Pool* and *The Piano Teacher*; from glossy Hollywood romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* to the quasi-porn of Catherine Breillat to the classic BBC TV series *The Singing Detective*, some of the world's leading writers, actors and directors have contributed to a composite picture of the profound misery that only sex can cause.

Over the course of 31 films, the hidden patterns of human sexual behaviour that keep us trapped in Sexcatraz gradually emerge so they can be freeze-framed, replayed, dissected and analysed. While many of the films reviewed here address sexual issues directly, some do so at a tangent or even by omission. The impulses underlying sexual dysfunction are never particularly obvious, even in films that directly address the theme. They must be glimpsed from the corner of the eye; they lie between the lines (or, in this case, the frames) of the material or may be notable only by their absence. In its search for the wellspring of human sexual misery this book mines the various strata of filmmaking—writing, directing, acting, filming and editing—to uncover and examine the unconscious beliefs that imprison us in Sexcatraz.

Many of these films contain explicit depictions of nudity or sex. Some of them may be considered pornographic. This book is not concerned with demarcating what is or isn't

⁹ Idries Shah, *The Sufis*.

SEXCATRAZ

pornography. The films included here have been selected on their ability to reveal the hidden patterns behind our sexual attitudes and behaviours. On this matter outright porn, which illuminates only skin, has little to say.

This book is not the result of years spent researching arcane documents in lightless vaults, nor is it the product of carefully controlled experiments. It originates firmly in the everyday world of business—process manufacturing, to be precise—where complex processes can be deconstructed into inputs and outputs, phases and stages, common and uncommon denominators, products and by-products.

Observation suggests that beneath the seemingly irrational and unpredictable world of sexual dysfunction there lurks an entirely rational and predictable layer of behaviour based on a few simple, endlessly repeated emotional rules. I don't claim to prove this in any scientific sense. The admonition that 'correlation is not causation' is noted; yet studies of both real life and the many films viewed while writing this book reveals patterns that are repeatable, understandable and ultimately changeable.

The idea that society has a distorted notion of sexual and emotional wellbeing isn't new: Wilhelm Reich, one of the founders of psychoanalysis, called it the 'emotional plague' nearly a century ago¹⁰. Psychologist R.D. Laing wrote in the 1960s, "What we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience..."¹¹ What is new is the use of cinematic case studies to make the emotional mechanics of sexual dysfunction—and the layer of shame that usually hides those mechanics—visible to the naked eye.

I invite you to glimpse this insidious programming at work in the news, in the lives of those around you, and even—with some courageous self-reflection—in your own life. This book is intended not as the end of an inquiry but the beginning of one.

This book is full of what are generally called 'dirty'—as Steven Pinker has it—words; more blasphemously yet, it is filled with what may be considered dirty ideas and a frankness with all matters sexual. It isn't just a vivisection of our moribund sexual mores; it's a search for what it means to be a joyfully sexual human being, free from the numbing, self-censoring grip of frigid sexual shame. This book is, above all, an attempt to move beyond existing stale—and stalemated—discourses. It has been guided throughout by the notion that any solution that favours any one person, group or gender at the expense of any other is no solution at all.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis*.

¹¹ R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*.

SEXCATRAZ

PART I

Welcome to Sexcatraz

On the night of 11 June 1962, in America's premier maximum-security jail, three convicted armed robbers detached airshaft grilles whose rivets had earlier been replaced with soap. The shafts had been enlarged using an electric drill improvised from a stolen vacuum cleaner motor; accordions smothered the whine of the drill during what must have been some very raucous music hours. Leaving behind plaster-cast imitations of their own heads to fool the guards, Frank Morris and the brothers John and Clarence Anglin climbed up the ventilation shaft and emerged onto the roof. The sight that greeted them didn't bode well for their escape bid: the jail was built on a small island. Black water lapped in every direction, the moonlight reflecting off the swells rolling in from the Pacific Ocean. The nearest landfall was over a mile away in the brightly lit, heavily populated heart of San Francisco. Morris and the Anglin brothers stood on the roof of perhaps the best-known prison in the world: Alcatraz.

Alcatraz Island, its name deriving from an archaic Spanish word for 'pelican', is a small, rugged outcrop in San Francisco Bay known locally but unimaginatively as The Rock. Today it is a national park, the home of guillemots, cormorants and gulls. The jail itself is a museum. Built in 1861 to house prisoners from the American Civil War, it was a federal penitentiary from 1934 until its closure in 1963. Its inmates included some of America's most notorious criminals, such as Al Capone, the Chicago gangster behind the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, and Robert Franklin Stroud, the psychopathic 'Birdman of Alcatraz' who spent 42 years in solitary confinement.

Undeterred by the bleak outlook from the prison roof, Morris and the Anglin brothers scaled the fence and reached the island's north east coast. They assembled a raft from plywood and prison-issue raincoats and pushed out into the dark, treacherous bay. The water was frigid, the current against them. The three escapees were never seen again, although debris from their raft was found on a nearby island. Investigators concluded that they had drowned in the turbulent waters of San Francisco Bay. It was the nearest anyone ever came to escaping from Alcatraz.

This daring and ingenious bid for freedom was the subject of the 1979 thriller *Escape from Alcatraz*, with Hollywood legend Clint Eastwood in the lead role of Frank Morris. Occasionally atmospheric but largely formulaic, and surprisingly devoid of tension for its source material, the film's greatest interest lies in its window onto life in Alcatraz. The plot follows the real-life escape attempt, including the uncertain ending. *Escape from Alcatraz* opens with Frank Morris being taken in a launch across the choppy waters of San Francisco Bay to The Rock. A long, silent sequence shows the extensive security precautions at the supposedly watertight prison. The sequence ends with Morris getting locked into his tiny cell. A guard breaks the silence with a sarcastic greeting: "Welcome to Alcatraz."

Thirty-one years on from Morris and the Anglin brothers' escape attempt, on 31 December 1993, and 1,700 miles east in Falls City, Nebraska, an incident took place that, had the jail still been open, might have landed its perpetrators in Alcatraz: ex-convicts John Lotter and Marvin 'Tom' Nissen murdered a youth known as [Brandon Teena](#)—or, as the

SEXCATRAZ

relevant birth certificate would have it, Teena Brandon¹².

Brandon was a young woman from Lincoln, Nebraska, who began identifying as a male during high school. After trouble with local authorities she moved to Falls City, where—dressing as a man—she entered Lotter and Nissen’s social circle and began dating a childhood friend of Lotter’s, Lana Tisdell. A spell in a women’s jail for forging cheques alerted Lotter’s circle to Brandon’s gender identity issues. During a drunken party on Christmas Eve Lotter and Nissen stripped Brandon naked. Brandon was then taken, with chilling irony, to a meat packing plant and raped. Brandon defied the men’s order to be silent and filed a complaint. On New Year’s Eve Lotter and Nissen returned to Falls City and shot Brandon.

Like the Morris gang’s escape from Alcatraz, Brandon Teena’s killing and the sequence of events that preceded it also spawned a feature film. *Boys Don’t Cry* is dour but gripping cinema, driven by a magnificent performance from Hilary Swank who deservedly won the 1999 Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of the emotionally troubled, sexually confused and physically abused Brandon. Just as *Escape from Alcatraz* gives cinemagoers a glimpse into the hidden world of America’s highest-security prison, *Boys Don’t Cry* does the same for the shadowy milieu of transgender sexuality and the repercussions that can occur when society’s unspoken sexual boundaries are violated.

Brandon endured a life sentence of sexual misery: a victim of incest as a child, plagued by gender insecurity as an adolescent, raped and murdered as a young adult. Sex defined Brandon’s every moment: an entire life trapped in a hidden prison just as escape-proof as Alcatraz. When Teena Brandon emerged into the world, the doctor who delivered her may as well have held her up, slapped her backside, and uttered a sarcastic greeting: “Welcome to Sexcatraz.”

¹² By referring to Brandon by birth name and gender I’m not implying any criticism of her choice to present as a man. The English language rigidly enforces orthodox gender orientation; this in itself reveals our narrow view of human sexuality. Carolyn Gage’s insightful essay, [The Inconvenient Truth about Teena Brandon](#), articulates “the issue of pronouns” when describing such lives. But the times they are a-changing: in 2015 a gender-nonspecific pronoun was added to the official Swedish dictionary.

SEXCATRAZ

The unholy trinity

The unconscious programming that traps us in a prison of outmoded sexual beliefs is at its most obvious in dramatic situations, such as those surrounding the life—and particularly the death—of Brandon Teena. The examination of the hidden beliefs that form the walls of Sexcatraz begins with *Boys Don't Cry*, Kimberly Peirce's Oscar-winning biopic. For much of the film this programming courses beneath the surface of the story, erupting into the light of day only in the events immediately surrounding Brandon's tragic death. When they do, they reveal an interlocking trinity of sex-negative psychological constructs that seem to underlie all sexual dysfunction.

Boys Don't Cry

Year: 1999

Director: Kimberly Peirce

Writers: Kimberly Peirce, Andy Bienen

Starring: Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, Peter Sarsgaard, Brendan Sexton III

Boys Don't Cry opens in Lincoln, Nebraska, with Brandon dressing as a young man for the first time. The androgynous-looking Hilary Swank is brilliantly cast in the lead role; not only is she made up to resemble an awkward young man but there are no emotionally braver actors in the business. Brandon skates with a starry-eyed girl called Nicole as a mirror ball showers them with fractured light. Later, Brandon kisses Nicole goodnight then turns away in elation. The audience doesn't know it but this is pretty much the high point of the real Brandon's life. We're not even five minutes into the film.

However, a subsequent episode doesn't go so well. Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen's concise screenplay cuts to some irate men chasing Brandon through the rain, shouting, "You fucking dyke, you freak." What exactly Brandon has done is unknown but the perils of unorthodox sexuality in the American Mid-west are obvious. Why does Brandon's behaviour incite such hysteria and violence? The question is rarely asked, yet asked it must be and this book endeavours to provide some answers. Brandon nips home just ahead of the pursuing pack. The door shudders under their blows. "You are not a boy," squeals Brandon's petrified housemate. "Why don't you just admit that you're a dyke?" Brandon can't. *Boys Don't Cry* offers few clues to what impels Brandon to present as a man. However, out of respect both for Brandon's choice and to make this narrative vaguely readable, Brandon will be referred to from here on by the male pronoun.

Down and out, Brandon hits a country bar and meets Candace¹³ (Alicia Goranson), another troubled figure. Brandon goes for cigarettes; a fat trucker takes over his barstool and fancies some Candace. Weedy Brandon stands up to the trucker and gets a hiding. He also earns major kudos—not just in Candace's eyes but, more importantly, in those of her

¹³ Candace's character is based on the real-life Lisa Lambert, who was murdered along with Brandon. A third person killed in the shooting, Phillip DeVine, was omitted from the film.

SEXCATRAZ

friend John Lotter (a devilish Peter Sarsgaard), who facilitates Brandon's escape by starting a brawl. "I would've had those guys if you hadn't stopped me," Brandon brags.

The charismatic but volatile Lotter takes a shine to Brandon; his acceptance draws Brandon into a social circle that includes Tom Nissen and, fatefully, Lotter's childhood friend Lana Tisdell. They hang out at a bar where Candace works. And here Lana, the femme fatale of *Boys Don't Cry*, makes her entrance. As portrayed by Chloë Sevigny—who earned a Best Supporting Actress Oscar nomination for the role—Lana comes across as a doe-eyed wastrel in a black T-shirt, equal parts angel and dope head. Brandon is mesmerised. Lana, Candace and another girl perform a karaoke version of Restless Heart's haunting #1 country single, 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas'. The camera slowly zooms in on Lana, erasing Candace and the other girl to succinctly convey Brandon's emotional tunnel vision.

Lana becomes the epicentre of Brandon's life. He settles into Candace's Falls City house, stashing a dildo under the mattress like a dog marking its territory. Brandon's breasts disappear under tightly wound bandages as he perfects his male persona. Tension builds as the audience waits for the moment when Brandon's double life is exposed.

The film bumbles along in low gear until Brandon gets a speeding ticket, a scene that also reveals Lotter's violent streak. Lotter's violent streak, neatly inserted by the writers in this slightly off-the-ball incident, is vital to understanding his later actions. The speeding ticket reminds Brandon of an impending court summons. He steals a blank cheque from Candace, the doormat of *Boys Don't Cry*, but Lana appears before he can elope. An awkward, probing conversation turns into a lingering kiss. It's a pivotal moment for both of them—in the film at least. Brandon returns to Lincoln for the court summons but the fear of being jailed and unable to see Lana makes him jump ship.

Brandon returns to Falls City and finds Lana at the local cannery. She goes AWOL from her night shift; they sit in the dark and gaze across at the lights of the plant twinkling in the distance. It's a fine location for a first sexual encounter; for all the film's dourness, Kimberly Peirce turns the Nebraskan industrial skyline into a backdrop of stark beauty. In a fictionalised campfire moment beneath the big Mid-western night, Brandon undresses Lana. She reciprocates by reaching for his manhood, but he stops her. Instead, Brandon slides down and pleases Lana; she lies back with big bright eyes at the wonder of it all. Then comes the moment that can't be avoided. But Brandon has a trick: he surreptitiously uses the dildo¹⁴. However, his thrusting loosens the bandages around his chest, revealing some cleavage¹⁵. Lana does a double take but love carries the day, though it's not clear whether she understood what she glimpsed beneath Brandon's chequered shirt.

From here on Brandon's life unravels. The next sequence is a blur of speeding tickets, unheeded summons and bounced cheques. "Wow, this Teena chick seems pretty messed up," Brandon admits while maintaining an unhealthy distance from reality. He winds up in a women's jail, where Lana finds him. Brandon's first excuse is that it's the system, not him, that's messed up. Lana doesn't buy this so Brandon tries another gambit, much closer to the

14 This scene has a real-life parallel in the 2015 case of [Gayle Newland](#), who presented herself online as a man, befriended a woman and convinced her to have blindfolded sex, during which Newland employed a prosthetic penis.

15 The oddness of this sentence—the concatenation of the masculine 'his' with the feminine 'breasts' and 'cleavage'—is another testament to our society's rigid views on gender delineation.

SEXCATRAZ

truth: he/she's a hermaphrodite with both male and female parts. Lana signals her feelings for Brandon by bailing him to the tune of The Cure's jaunty title song.

But Lotter is a different matter. The name 'Teena Brandon' on a court letter raises his suspicions. He searches Brandon's belongings and finds the stashed dildo (low mileage, one careful owner) and a pamphlet on gender identity crisis. "Get this sick shit away from me," he blurts as the awful truth smacks him in the face. Peter Sarsgaard superbly portrays the torrent of emotions that bombarded the real John Lotter in that fateful instant: shock, denial, betrayal, violation, humiliation, ridicule, a sense of nausea, a profound urge to paper over the cracks and return to normality—or to strike at the cause of this deeply distressing emotional maelstrom.

There is a collective name for this barrage of bewildering and unpleasant feelings that all arise from traumatic sex-related experiences: **sexual shame**. In the process of picking the locks of Sexcatraz, of dispersing the fog that clouds sexual dysfunction, there will be a number of such terms. It's important to understand the discrete components that comprise the bricks and mortar of Sexcatraz, so here's a definition:



Definition: Sexual shame

Shame: "a feeling of humiliation or distress caused by awareness of wrong or foolish behaviour." (Compact Oxford English Dictionary)

Sexual shame is a feeling of humiliation or distress caused by awareness of wrong or foolish sexually related behaviour. Sexual shame is generally unconscious (i.e. repressed) until brought to light by a triggering event.

The revelation that Brandon Teena, a weedy, androgynous-looking youngster who had proven his manhood in a barroom brawl and won Lotter's friendship was actually Teena Brandon, an emotionally troubled transgender woman, violated an invisible, internal **sexual boundary** that Lotter couldn't tolerate, causing him to experience profoundly unpleasant feelings of shame that were usually repressed within his psyche. This is the "sexual line that must not be crossed" noted by archaeologist Timothy Taylor. It has existed since prehistory and exists within every one of us today. The concept of sexual boundaries is vital to understanding the way sexual shame is triggered and how these feelings of shame consciously or unconsciously translate into action or reaction in the physical world.



Definition: Sexual boundary

Boundary: "a line marking the limits of an area." (Compact OED)

A psychological line marking the limit between acceptable (i.e. emotionally comfortable) and unacceptable (i.e. emotionally disturbing) sexual behaviour and feelings.

The crossing of a sexual boundary that triggers previously latent feelings of sexual shame—the shock, nausea, sense of humiliation and violation experienced by John Lotter when he discovered the dildo—gives rise to a third entity: **sexual transgression**.

SEXCATRAZ



Definition: Sexual transgression

Transgress: "go beyond the limits set by (a moral principle, standard, law, etc.)" (Compact OED)

A sexual transgression is an act of a sexual nature that goes beyond the limits of an individual's sexual boundaries and consequently triggers feelings of sexual shame.

Lotter is not alone in feeling violated, as Lana's mother makes clear: "I invite you into my home and you expose my daughter to your sickness." Transgender sexuality is risky enough in cosmopolitan urban centres; in the conservative Mid-west it's a death wish. From every angle (except the fictional Lana) the message for Brandon is the same: your sex is sick and so are you. Brandon's gender identity crisis has been reframed in terms of inherent moral degeneracy.

Here we glimpse the invisible but all-pervasive attitudes leading to Brandon's death: his environment is toxic with sexual negativity. Any expression of sexuality that violates another individual's boundary causes a negative reaction, its strength determined by the extent of the violated individual's shame. This reaction may take the form of a retreat from, or—as in this case—aggression towards the transgressor. Lotter and Nissen hone in on Brandon, who flits from lie to lie trying to dodge the issue of exactly what's inside his Levis. Swank is brilliant as the emotionally floundering Brandon; so is Brendan Sexton III as the viperous Tom Nissen: "There's a real easy way to solve this problem."

Lotter and Nissen drag Brandon into the bathroom and strip him. Having determined Brandon's physical attributes, they force Lana to look. It's a brutal sequence; filming it must have been incredibly draining. *Boys Don't Cry* abandons its linear narrative as Brandon's world spirals into oblivion. Scenes in a police station are intercut with flashbacks into the aftermath of the bathroom inquisition. Headlights slash through the darkness and reflect off rusted metalwork as Lotter and Nissen drive Brandon to a derelict processing plant. In the darkness the locale is vaguely beautiful, unlike what transpires there.

Brandon's rape serves multiple psychological purposes, all of them stemming from his abductors' shame. When he realised Brandon wasn't anatomically male, Lotter would have suddenly and retroactively experienced their friendship as a profound sexual transgression. His shame-induced feelings, shared by Tom Nissen, would have included a deep affront to his sense of manhood; the discovery that a transgender woman had completely duped him made him feel like a fool. The rape serves not only to punish Brandon but also to cleanse Lotter and Nissen of their impugned manhood and to forcibly restore what they perceive as morally correct sexual orientation¹⁶.

Lotter and Nissen are also signalling that any repeat behaviour is unacceptable; by telling Brandon to keep quiet they imply the punishment is merited. In other words, Lotter and Nissen unconsciously position themselves as the innocent parties and the upholders of moral decency, while Brandon—beaten, stripped and raped—is seen not as victim but victimiser. The reality is the opposite. Lotter and Nissen's actions reveal an unconscious belief in their right to victimise Brandon.

¹⁶ This is called [corrective rape](#). The term originated in South Africa, which in 2009 and 2010 had the highest [incidence of rape](#) in the world.

SEXCATRAZ

Brandon flees to Lana's house, an ambulance arrives and the police get involved. The sheriff grills Brandon as if he's entirely at fault. "I have a sexual identity crisis," Brandon stammers. There's no compassion; the sexual landscape of Falls City is entirely hostile to such issues¹⁷. Lotter and Nissen are just as much inmates of Sexcatraz as Brandon. They learn of the rape complaint. In their shame and humiliation Lotter and Nissen cannot let it lie. The irresistible force of their sexual intolerance collides with the immovable object of Brandon's need to present as a man. Brandon gets caught at Candace's house; in the film Lotter shoots Brandon while Nissen kills the long-suffering Candace¹⁸. Lana's mother leads her distraught daughter away; Candace's toddler circles its mother's mangled body. At sunset the colour of dried blood seeps over Falls City; the credits roll as Nina Persson sings a gorgeous cover of 'The Bluest Eyes in Texas'. Down endings don't get much grimmer; I can still recall reeling out of the cinema like a punch-drunk boxer.

Boys Don't Cry employs a documentary style with an attendant refusal to judge. The characters are presented without the moral signposts of glossy Hollywood productions. (In *Escape from Alcatraz*, the criminal background of Clint Eastwood's Frank Morris is glossed over to make him seem 'good' in comparison with the haughty and vindictive warden, who is 'bad'; this allows the audience to empathise with Morris' more noble traits and support his battle with the spiteful warden.) Instead of polarising its characters into good (Brandon; Lana) and bad (Lotter; Nissen), *Boys Don't Cry* puts them on a spectrum of sexual tolerance from high (the fictional Lana; the real one [sued the producers for misrepresentation](#) and settled out of court) to low (Lotter and Nissen, in fiction and real life). The result is an unconscious and uncomfortable reminder that we all have our limits and that, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, we too might respond in the same irreversible manner as John Lotter and Tom Nissen.

The events surrounding Brandon's death show in simple, mechanical terms how a sexually related action by one person may cross another's boundary. This violation activates the latter's shame and gives rise to a sense of transgression that in turn triggers a negative reaction. This can be expressed as a simple emotional formula:

Boundary + violation = reaction.

That this formula is still at work can be seen from Facebook groups that sprang up in the wake of the [2009 Plymouth child abuse case](#), when a nursery worker was imprisoned for photographing and molesting children in her care. A typical example was 'Vanessa George needs a DEATH sentence'¹⁹; the capitalisation—and its attendant hunger for capital punishment—was the group owner's.

But is this formula consistent and repeatable? In *Boys Don't Cry* the sexual shame of Mid-western misfits Lotter and Nissen is latent; it's not immediately apparent that they would react with terminal violence to such a transgression. In the next film, the antagonist's

17 Brandon's mother won a court case against the real-life sheriff for failing to prevent her daughter's death. During the case, the judge reprimanded Sheriff Charles Laux for his attitude after he referred to Brandon as 'it'.

18 Lotter and Nissen made contradicting claims about who shot whom. Nissen received a life sentence while Lotter was sentenced to death. Lotter's appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States of America was declined in 2012. He remains on Death Row.

19 The group has since been deleted from Facebook.

SEXCATRAZ

level of shame is so high that his sexual boundaries are almost constantly violated. This makes the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction particularly prominent.

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover

Year: 1989

Director: Peter Greenaway

Writer: Peter Greenaway

Starring: Michael Gambon, Helen Mirren, Richard Bohringer, Alan Howard

Peter Greenaway's 1989 film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is by turns operatic, comedic and repulsive. It tells the gastronomically and astronomically unlikely tale of the love triangle between shady, rags-to-riches businessman and self-proclaimed *gourmand* Albert Spica (Michael Gambon), his wife Georgina (Helen Mirren) and her refined and educated lover Michael (Alan Howard). Caught in the middle of this *ménage-a-trois* is the brilliant chef Richard (Richard Bohringer), who enjoys Albert's highly lucrative patronage but detests his gutter antics. From Michael Nyman's lush score to the theatrical lighting to Greenaway's deft direction, the film exudes a fabulous sense of cinematic mischief.

While viewers of *Boys Don't Cry* must wait well into its narrative before the symptoms of sexual shame erupt onto the screen, no such dawdling attends *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. The film opens with Albert and his cortege of toadying thugs arriving at Richard's restaurant. But before Albert and Georgina can dine there's some unpleasant business to attend to. The owner of a "dirty little canteen" is dragged onto a car bonnet, where Albert forces him to eat dog shit. "You must learn the rules," Albert rants, reminding the canteen owner to pay his debts.

After this delightful bit of *coprophagia*²⁰, Albert has the man stripped naked. Enforced public nudity or participation in humiliating sex acts, already seen in *Boys Don't Cry*, is a recurring punishment administered by the sexually ashamed: it is what they most fear and thus, they assume, what their enemies most fear²¹. "Albert, leave him alone," cuts in Georgina's voice from off-screen. Ignoring her, Albert completes the humiliation of the canteen owner by urinating on him. Peter Greenaway's biting screenplay and Michael Gambon's brilliant performance as Albert Spica highlight how those who are most ashamed of their own body are the first to resort to sex- and toilet-based insults.

Albert's outburst on the way into the restaurant delineates his bodily preoccupations: "Georgie, you've got a smudge on your face and ash on your tits... Don't smoke... It ruins your taste buds, burns your tongue and makes your pee stink... When are you going to learn, smart arse?" Tits, pee, arse. Starting from a simple cigarette, within a few short sentences Albert makes derogatory comments about all of Georgina's sexual parts. The intense shame of his own animal nature—which he tries to deny through his taste for *haute*

²⁰ The consumption of faeces, from the Greek *copros*, faeces, and *phagein*, to eat.

²¹ The use of public sexual humiliation can be traced back to antiquity. In Ancient Greece, the husbands of adulterers were permitted to publicly insert objects into the anuses of their wives' lovers, symbolically placing them in a sexually submissive role to impugn their manhood. (Eric Berkowitz, *Sex & Punishment*.) The Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56-117 AD) writes that, among the Germanic tribes, when a husband learns his wife has been unfaithful he "strips her in the presence of kinsmen, thrusts her from his house and flogs her through the whole village." (Quoted in Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.)

SEXCATRAZ

cuisine—is such that his sexual boundaries are constantly violated. No one in Albert Spica's orbit escapes the endless torrent of bodily- or sexually-fixated abuse that Michael Gambon mercilessly maintains until the end—well, almost the end—of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.

As Albert and his entourage cross the restaurant's threshold they leave behind the bestial gangland of the outside world and enter the sense-cossetting environs of Richard's domain. A choirboy washes the dishes and sings with a mesmerizing, otherworldly voice. Sheets of red and green light bathe a kitchen as beautiful as a West End stage. Fabulous aromas conjured by exotic kitchen-hands assail the nostrils. Georgina, subtly signalling her longing to rise above the swill of Albert's life, gravitates to the choirboy. Albert, noticing her rapt attention, prostitutes the boy by tossing a coin into his sink. Albert is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by all things animal and sexual²². This treadmill of attraction and repulsion is another recurring element among the inmates of Sexcatraz. The corollary of this is an unattainable quest for refinement, which Albert inevitably sabotages by debasing anything noble.

The battle lines are soon drawn between Albert and Richard. For Albert's patronage comes at a price: "Protection against the rash temper of my men. Against the sudden arrival of food poisoning... Against rats... Against the public health inspector." The unflappable Richard ushers Albert into the dining room then displays his humanity by having Albert's shit-smearred victim brought into the back of the kitchen, where (in contravention of all food hygiene standards) he is simultaneously hosed down and given a glass of Chablis.

Albert, meanwhile, holds court in the dining room, directing sexually laden invective at the rag-tag band of thugs and cutthroats on his payroll. Georgina's attention strays to Michael, a gentleman of obvious refinement dining alone and reading a book. Their eyes meet. There's a crash of cutlery on the table: Albert demands his wife's attention. She hasn't been busted, but she will be.

With the connection between Georgina and Michael established the main plot of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* engages. Georgina goes to the ladies' washroom. Michael enters, staring openly at her before gesturing in apology. Georgina hurries back into the foyer, where the 'Ladies' sign couldn't be more obvious. She resolves another wordless encounter with Michael by retreating into the bustle of the dining room, as always dominated by Albert's foul-mouthed imprecations. The fear of violating Albert's sexual boundaries—or, more precisely, the fear of being caught—keeps Georgina's hunger for Michael in check, at least for now. For, no matter how vulgar Albert might be, how ill suited his marriage to Georgina is, traditional expectations of monogamy mean that her sexual interest in Michael has no social legitimacy.

Georgina returns to the table only to find Albert's boorishness insufferable. She makes a quick return to the bathroom on a false pretext. Michael follows. Within moments they're coupling in a cubicle in the Ladies. Albert bursts in, his suspicions raised by Georgina's absence. "What are you doing in there," he sneers. "Are you playing with yourself? That's not allowed; that's my property." Superficially these are run-of-the-mill, throwaway sexual insults. But in the world of sexual shame—the world of Sexcatraz—there's a lot more going on. Albert's constricted sexual boundaries prevent him from letting Georgina have sex not

²² "Beneath a conscious hatred of sex always lies an unconscious fascination with it."—G. Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History*.

SEXCATRAZ

just with someone else, but even with herself. This crucial, highly damaging yet commonplace concept of the ownership of another person's right to make sexual choices will be explored in detail later.

Georgina and Michael's narrow escape heightens their determination to be together. The next night they have sex in the larder while Richard distracts a drunk and provocative Albert. When he eventually finds Georgina, Albert drags her and the long-suffering choirboy out of the restaurant, intent on making the boy watch him screw Georgina on a car bonnet. Albert's real intent is not the boy's sexual education but—like pissing on the canteen owner and Brandon's rape in *Boys Don't Cry*—his wife's humiliation through enforced sex. He pulls up Georgina's dress only to find she's not wearing any knickers. This is the severest violation yet of Albert's boundaries. As seen in *Boys Don't Cry*, when a sexual transgression is severe enough the offended party flies into a rage where they inflict sex-based violence or violence-based sex on the perceived transgressor: this is **sexual rage**. The choirboy escapes while Albert brutally forces himself on Georgina.



Definition: Sexual rage

Rage: "violent uncontrollable anger." (Compact OED)

Violent uncontrollable anger arising from the violation of a sexual boundary and the resulting experience of sexual transgression and shame.

The midsection of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is a drawn-out cinematic tease as the audience anticipates the discovery of Georgina's infidelity. The next scene has Georgina and Michael screwing among the cheese rounds while an increasingly volatile Albert makes himself a nuisance. After Georgina returns Albert inflicts his boorish behaviour on Michael, dragging him over to join their table. Albert instructs Georgina to "tell Michael all about your self" but this backfires when she reveals the three miscarriages that have ruined her reproductive system. The sexual transgressions are coming thick and fast for Albert now; like Lotter and Nissen in *Boys Don't Cry* the point of no return approaches.

At the film's midpoint Albert's entourage swells to include various other cutpurses and dollies. Albert abuses one of the latter only for her to point out his blindness to the fact that Georgina and Michael always go to the washrooms at the same time. Albert can't believe he missed such an obvious clue. He shows his gratitude by stabbing the woman in the cheek with a fork.

Albert composes himself before barging into the Ladies, scattering various women with their underwear at half-mast. He then descends on the kitchen. "I'll kill him. I'll eat him," he vows. Richard hides the naked lovers in the freezer then smuggles them out in a van laden with rotten foodstuffs that Albert had earlier abandoned outside the restaurant. Food, sex, excretion, filth, death... In a single scene, Peter Greenaway collates our widespread repulsion at the most animal aspects of human nature. Albert Spica embodies it to an extreme, but we are all affected to some extent and live with the unconscious fear that our boundaries will be transgressed in the same uncontrollable way that led John Lotter and Tom Nissen to commit rape and murder, and now, inevitably, lead to death in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.

SEXCATRAZ

The outing of Georgina's infidelity comes as a relief as it allows the film to escape the claustrophobic confines of the restaurant. Michael and Georgina hole up in his bookstore. The choirboy brings them a food hamper. This proves to be their undoing when Albert collars the choirboy. He finds a book in the bottom of the hamper and there, on the flyleaf, is the bookstore's address. With no one else to vent his rage on, the choirboy incurs Albert's wrath. Georgina goes to visit the hospitalised choirboy. Michael is alone when Albert and his "rash tempered" men arrive. Continuing the film's farrago of food, sex, and death, the naked Michael is forced to eat book pages until he chokes.

The film's final act is devoted to Georgina and Richard's revenge on the despicable Mr Spica. Their plan comes together in the now-quiet kitchen. Georgina, coming to terms with both Michael's death and her relationship with him, asks Richard to describe what he saw. The farm-raised Richard, comfortable with food, animals, blood, death and sex, pulls no punches in describing Georgina and Michael's amorous encounters. Georgina breaks down and cries. "Do lovers always behave like that," she queries, wondering why something as pure as love is seemingly inseparable from the messiness of sex. "My parents behaved like that," he replies. Georgina is astonished. "They did? You saw them?" Here we glimpse the childhood modelling that allowed one man—Richard—to become comfortable with sex while another—Albert—can be safely assumed to have spent his adolescence in a sexless, cloistered environment. The result: a lifelong sense of sex as repulsive and illicit; constricted boundaries that cause almost anything sexual to be sensed as a shameful transgression; the need to contain sexual expression within socially accepted bounds; and his violent response to his wife's infidelity.

Richard, almost by accident, confesses his love for Georgina. She capitalises on this to ask that he cooks and serves Michael's body. Richard refuses. She offers Richard access to her own, still vibrant body. Again he refuses: she cannot love Michael any more by eating him. Georgina throws down some money. It is Albert who will eat Michael. Richard's throat is dry, actor Richard Bohringer's delivery superb: "Put your money away."

The final scene unfolds as Albert arrives by "special invitation." A table is set for one. A sumptuous covered dish arrives, borne in by Richard, the victimised canteen owner, and the restaurant's long-suffering staff. The gargantuan meal is placed before Albert, who for one moment thinks all is well—until Georgina whips away the covering. Albert recoils as Greenaway's camera trawls along Michael's roasted body with its prominently crisped genitalia.

Georgina reminds Albert of his earlier vow to eat Michael. Albert pulls a gun, but a Mesopotamian *saucier* wrenches it from his grasp. The pistol passes to Georgina. "Try the cock, Albert. It's a delicacy—and you know where it's been." Helen Mirren, superb throughout the film, relishes this final twist. Michael Gambon is equally brilliant. The once-bombastic Albert, now a simpering wreck, tries to eat Michael's love sausage but vomits instead. Extreme sexual shame literally induces nausea to the point of vomiting, as will be seen in other films²³. Defeated, Albert slumps back in his chair. Georgina fires.

Luscious, lascivious, ludicrous and a trifle overlong, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is an excellent portrayal of a man whose entire life is shaped by profound sexual

²³ In *Sex & God*, Darrel Ray quotes Candace Gorham of the Ebony Exodus project: "At times, the guilt and shame were so extreme that I would feel physically ill [after sex]."

SEXCATRAZ

shame. The trinity of sexual boundary, violation and reaction seen at the climax of *Boys Don't Cry* affects Albert Spica almost constantly, triggering a near-continuous outpouring of sexually related vitriol and violence. Like Lotter and Nissen, Albert assumes the right to retribution (sexual abuse of Georgina and the canteen owner; sexually motivated violence against Michael and the choirboy). And, in the final kitchen scene between Georgina and Richard, where the cook describes the rural upbringing that allowed him to accept sex and the other animal aspects of existence, writer/director Peter Greenaway provides a rationale for the difference between Richard and Albert.

Both *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* have antagonists with significant levels of sexual shame, both display the mechanics of the formula *boundary + violation = reaction*, both use enforced nudity and rape for humiliation and punishment, and both include sexually-motivated murders. But does this formula still operate in more mundane, everyday situations? Let's examine the poignant British dark comedy *Wish You Were Here*.

Wish You Were Here

Year: 1987

Director: David Leland

Writer: David Leland

Starring: Emily Lloyd, Tom Bell, Geoffrey Hutchings

Wish You Were Here tells the tale of Lynda Mansell, an unabashedly sexual girl coming of age in depressed and—more importantly—repressed post-war Britain. Emily Lloyd, fabulous as the exuberant young Lynda, deservedly won the 1988 BAFTA²⁴ for Best Actress while director David Leland collected the Best Screenplay award. The script is loosely based on the memoirs of Cynthia Payne, a London madam who was famously put on trial in the 1970s for arranging sexual services for public figures.

Filmed in the nostalgic seaside towns of Worthing and Bognor Regis (Cynthia Payne's actual birthplace), *Wish You Were Here* recreates 1950s Britain dragging itself out of the trauma of world war. Lynda begins the story as an apprentice at a hairdressing salon, but her real interest is the two mounds of flesh swelling beneath her smock: "Have I got great tits or have I got great tits?" she queries, disgusting a co-worker with what is by necessity a rhetorical question. For no one will discuss the frightening subject of sex, certainly not Lynda's father (a prim Geoffrey Hutchings). "There's something wrong with you, my girl," he rails at Lynda after her sacking from the hairdresser's. Although mild compared to Albert Spica's tirades in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* it still shows the formula *boundary + violation = reaction* at work.

Crying in her bedroom, Lynda wonders whether her father is right. But as she ripens from awkward adolescent into cocksure young woman she can no longer suppress her true, joyfully foul-mouthed self: Linda cycles along the seaside promenade, her dress flapping provocatively, flashing her thighs at the town's sex-starved young men.

²⁴ British Academy of Film and Television Arts, Britain's equivalent of the Oscars.

SEXCATRAZ

Lynda's father arranges a job at her Uncle Harry's bus company. This merely serves to transport her from the women-only world of the hairdresser's to the male-dominated environs of the bus depot. Here she meets Dave, a young stud convinced of his sexual prowess. Lynda, discovering a captive audience, stages an impromptu cabaret and shows off her underwear to the cheering workmen. Uncle Harry fires her on the spot. Here again, still in relatively mild form, is the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction.

There's something else, too: the female co-worker at the hairdresser's, Lynda's father, Uncle Harry: the entire community reacts negatively to what they experience as sexual transgressions. Like Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry*, Lynda is surrounded by sexual intolerance. And because the majority determines what is morally acceptable²⁵ the problem, as Lynda's father observed, must lie with her.

Next up for Lynda is a psychiatrist. "I'm here to help you," he states confidently; the assumption that the issue lies with Lynda, and not with a society that can't bring itself to discuss the very process by which it reproduces, goes unquestioned²⁶. "Bloody bastard bugger bum," Lynda gleefully chants when asked to name swear words beginning with 'B'. When she gets to 'C' Lynda plays dumb. The psychiatrist eggs her on: "Something really filthy... very, very dirty." It's back to Steven Pinker. The notion that sex is fundamentally unclean could not be more explicit; fifty years on from *Wish You Were Here*, 'filthy' and 'dirty' are still common sexual adjectives.

Unlike our sexual adjectives, Lynda moves on. She goes dancing with Dave and then back to his house, where she can't wait for sex. Dave presents himself as an experienced and sophisticated master of the bedroom arts, lounging in the doorway in silk pyjamas, languidly smoking a cigarette in a holder. But the truth—which neither Dave nor Lynda realise—is otherwise. He enters her but almost immediately climaxes. "You'll get the hang of it," he says proudly, manful duties done, his lexicon blissfully devoid of the term 'premature ejaculation'. A hilarious incident follows as the arrival of Dave's uncle forces Lynda to hide under the bed. The uncle's dog threatens to root her out until it sniffs the used condom and makes off with it. It's a typical David Leland moment, leavening a heavy story with a moment of absurdity.

However, other eyes have been watching Lynda from a distance. They belong to Eric, a middle-aged bookie with a gammy leg whose marginal place in Britain's rigid post-war society is hinted at by his lack of a surname in the film. Eric (excellently played by Tom Bell) understands Lynda's real need—a good shag—and, gammy leg notwithstanding, is willing to put in the hard yards.

Eric invites himself into Lynda's house, ostensibly to deliver some winnings to her father while the latter is out. The relationship between the old, sexually capable Eric and the young, eager Lynda forms the spine of *Wish You Were Here*. To those unaware of the hidden workings of sexual shame, the sight of Eric groping Lynda—with only a token rebuff from the latter—can make the film off-putting. But when the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction is understood it's clear that theirs is a natural alliance. They are both outsiders whose sexual interests transgress against their host society, and they each have what the

²⁵ The word 'moral' derives from 'mores', customs. In other words, the behaviour of the many is ethical because many behave that way—a dangerously self-supporting construct. [Sigmund Freud](#) alludes to this in his observation that repression creates morality, not vice-versa.

²⁶ "The therapists, too, are in a world in which the inner is already split from the outer... The 'normally' alienated person... is taken to be sane."—R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*.

SEXCATRAZ

other wants. Lynda initially declines Eric's offer and contents herself by taunting him with *Wish You Were Here's* raffish refrain, "Up yer bum!"—an insult she joyfully demonstrates by baring her arse at a nosey-parker neighbour.

Lynda nonetheless finds herself drawn to the alley behind her house that Eric ghosts down each night, collecting illegal bets. They soon have a regular thing happening in, aptly enough, the tool shed. Such trysts don't pass unnoticed in tightly knit Bognor and Lynda is confronted by her angry father. There are two impulses at work here. The first is his disgust at Lynda's behaviour, stemming from the violation of his own sexual boundaries. This is equivalent to John Lotter discovering the dildo in *Boys Don't Cry*. The second is his sense of shame at being exposed before the community for failing to mould his daughter's sexual behaviour to acceptable social standards. Throughout *Wish You Were Here* he shows no concern for Lynda. He never asks how she feels or how he might help; his only concern is his own respectability and social standing. Even the visit to the psychiatrist, outwardly a caring gesture, is fundamentally driven by the desire to curb Lynda's behaviour. Her relationship with her father at an impasse, Lynda grabs some of her long-dead mother's clothes and moves in with Eric.

Standing by the window in Eric's cheap room above the cinema, with the English Channel glittering behind her, the pain of Lynda's lifelong rejection finally gets the better of her boisterous exterior. For all her self-sufficiency and smart-arse rejoinders she craves only to be accepted. Eric, his own emotions long withered, sees Lynda's needs purely in physical terms: "I can just fit you in before the Novices' Handicap."

Lynda's stay with Eric is as brief as her stint with Uncle Harry's bus company. She moves on and finds employment at the Paris Café. Eric comes after her, missing his daily meat. During a row on the windswept pier it emerges she's pregnant. "How d'you know it's mine?" Eric queries. Leland gives Lynda a lovely barb: "If it walks with a limp and thinks with its prick then it's yours."

The news of Lynda's pregnancy shames her father into a highly public demonstration of his disapproval; once again he prizes his own social standing above his daughter's wellbeing. The highlight of *Wish You Were Here*, their climactic argument takes place in the Paris Café, underscored by a delightful old lady playing Beethoven's 'Für Elise' on the piano. Lynda's father claims to seek a sensible conversation but instantly dashes any chance of one by calling her a slut. She asks him to leave; he prefers to bandy insults. His objective is not to reconcile with Lynda but to publicly reject her. While John Lotter, Tom Nissen and Albert Spica react to shame with violence, Lynda's father demonstrates the opposite response: rejection. The argument widens to include some customers and the café's goose-stepping yet supercilious manager. Leland's masterstroke is to have the old lady play not just 'Für Elise' but also judge and jury; at first she is decidedly neutral, but as the argument builds she sides with Lynda, who climbs onto a table top and bellows "I love willies!" before being rugby-tackled by the pastry chef. Lynda dusts herself off and strides out, dignity intact, to scattered applause from various onlookers. It's a fabulous scene.

The swanky surrounds of the Paris Café give way to a greasy-windowed cafeteria where Lynda meets up with a family friend, an older woman who advises Lynda to "get rid of it" and slips her some money. Lynda stares at the crumpled notes in her hand before making her way to the house of a back-street abortionist.

SEXCATRAZ

The film cuts to a shiny green bus pulling into Uncle Harry's garage. He rises with a shocked look on his florid face as Lynda steps off the bus, radiant in a daffodil yellow dress, complete with baby and pram. Her glowing dress makes her what Hollywood screenwriting guru [Robert McKee](#) calls the 'centre of good'²⁷; a shining light compared with the drab, discontented world around her. Lynda has become her own woman but only at the cost of being despised, marginalised and rejected by the majority of her community, including her family, which ultimately drives her alter ego Cynthia Payne into prostitution.

The films examined in this chapter show how the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction operates in any case of transgressive sexual behaviour, no matter how slight or severe. Even this brief foray into films about sex overwhelmingly supports Steven Pinker's assertion that sex is "conducted in private, pondered obsessively, regulated by custom and taboo, the subject of gossip and teasing, and a trigger for jealous rage." Why this particular constellation of behaviours?

Because this is how people respond to what they are ashamed of. All of our skittish, secretive and spiteful, physically, mentally and emotionally unbalanced behaviour around sex springs from an underlying well of sexual shame that is institutionalised throughout society. While the films reviewed in this chapter focused largely on individual experiences of sexual transgression, the next chapter examines how these individual experiences operate at a communal level.

²⁷ Robert McKee, *Story*.

SEXCATRAZ

The politics of shame

The films examined so far show how the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction consistently operates to determine when feelings of sexual shame—shock, nausea, distress and humiliation—are triggered, and how these reactions manifest as aggression (Brandon’s rape and murder in *Boys Don’t Cry*) or rejection (Lynda’s deliberately abusive rejection by her father in *Wish You Were Here*). The latter, in particular, also shows how these individual sexual boundaries work at a communal level. The films in this chapter explore how an individual’s place in their community comes under threat when their sexual expression violates accepted communal boundaries.

The sense of belonging to a community can be understood in many ways, with social, political and religious forms among the most obvious. To belong means to share the beliefs, and participate in communal events and rituals. Religious observation, membership in a political party or workers’ union, supporting a sports team and drinking at the local watering hole are all ways of saying “I belong.” As *Wish You Were Here* demonstrates, in addition to these visible forms of belonging, all communities also have a set of invisible sexual rules to which its members are expected to adhere. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* shows how far a community will go to enforce compliance with these rules and ensure they are passed on to succeeding generations.

Last Exit to Brooklyn

Year: 1989

Director: Uli Edel

Writer: Desmond Nakano (from Hubert Selby Jr.’s novel)

Starring: Stephen Lang, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Burt Young

Based on Hubert Selby, Jr.’s 1964 novel, the film is set in New York’s working-class Brooklyn in 1952. This is the Brooklyn of Selby’s childhood, peppered with thugs, drug addicts, prostitutes and transvestites. Desmond Nakano’s strongly thematic screenplay turns *Last Exit to Brooklyn* into an ensemble piece with three main plot lines, all of which relate to breaking communal sexual rules. Two of the plot lines have down endings, showing the punishment meted out to offenders. The third has the façade of a happy ending—a wedding; perhaps the most powerful of a community’s binding agents—providing validation and positive reinforcement for the community’s tough stance on what it regards as sexual deviance. This, however, is in all likelihood a tinsel ending: there is no reason to believe the marriage will be either happy or lasting. The result is a bleak and uncompromising film whose saving grace, like *Boys Don’t Cry*, is its refusal to moralise.

The backdrop to the story is a strike at the Brickman Metals Company and the community in question is that of the workers, many of them Italian immigrants, who man the picket lines. The strike, into its sixth month as the story begins, has united the workers through communal suffering. It has also heightened tensions between the cash-strapped

SEXCATRAZ

locals and the free-spending soldiers transiting through Brooklyn on their way to the Korean War; the two communities coexist uneasily and fighting is commonplace.

But the strike has made one man into a big shot: Harry Black (an intense Stephen Lang), formerly an anonymous union official at Local 3392 of the Federated Metal Workers, now in charge of the strike office and a union expense account. Although Harry's star is on the rise at work, at home it's a different matter: he's lost interest in his wife, who is saddled with a baby and whose only relief from boredom is sex. Harry rebuffs his wife in favour of a beer and a cowboy show on TV but she's still awake when he goes to bed, lying in the dark, waiting to be galloped. Harry obliges, venting his disinterest with a brutality bordering on violence, using sex as punishment as already seen in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. The rough sex and the preceding scene's street fight between locals and soldiers signal that *Last Exit to Brooklyn* won't be easy viewing.

The second plot line centres on Big Joe (Burt Young, Curly from the 1970s classic thriller *Chinatown*), an Italian-American family man whose overweight daughter Donna (Ricki Lake) won't leave the bathroom. The scene opens comically with Joe relieving himself out of his apartment window onto the neighbours below. Things get serious when Joe discovers Donna is pregnant. The trinity of boundary, violation and reaction triggers Joe into a shame-based response. Echoing Lynda's father in *Wish You Were Here*, his immediate concern is not his daughter's or the baby's welfare but the identity of the culprit—for it's not just Donna's hymen that has been breached; so too Joe's sexual boundary: he believes that childbirth outside of marriage is unacceptable. More significantly, so does the entire community to which Joe belongs. This majority belief creates a communal sexual rule or taboo that Joe and his family are implicitly beholden to.

These communal rules may not be written or openly taught yet they apply as if cast in concrete, creating two things: community-wide unconscious sexual boundaries and an unspoken agreement among the majority of the community to uphold them.

Over the last century such communal conditioning has been given a number of monikers. Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis, referred to the 'communal super-ego' "under whose influence cultural evolution proceeds"²⁸. Carl Jung thought in terms of the 'collective unconscious'. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' to describe culturally transmitted behaviour, while theoretical biologist Rupert Sheldrake used the concept of 'morphic resonance'.

None of these terms has widespread use; they sound too academic, too abstruse and too distant from the sticky reality of everyday life in general and from our instinctive sexual conditioning in particular. They convey no sense of just how powerful an undertow these communal taboos exert on our attitudes and behaviours. I refer to these covert rules as **sexual covenants**.



Definition: Sexual covenant

Covenant: "a solemn agreement." (Compact OED)

An unconscious agreement of what constitutes acceptable sexual behaviour within a given community and specific social situation.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*.

SEXCATRAZ

The word 'covenant' has some attributes that support its use in this context. It derives from the Latin '*convenire*', come together, which highlights the communal nature of these agreements: they represent our individual sexual boundaries aggregated at the group level. The Compact Oxford English Dictionary lists another relevant meaning: "an agreement held to be the basis of a relationship of commitment with God." As *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* Catholic Italian-American community demonstrates, sexual covenants go hand-in-hand with traditional religious beliefs. Today's sexual covenants are far less rigid than those of 1950s Brooklyn, yet they exist nonetheless and are central to understanding the imprisoning nature of our current sexual paradigm.

The existence of these invisible sexual boundaries turns every expression of sexuality into a political act that either conforms to or conflicts with accepted community standards. A pregnancy out of wedlock cannot be ignored in Joe's community and the weight of responsibility bears heavily upon the sinning couple. The word 'sin' derives from the Old English '*syngian*', one of whose meanings is 'to transgress'. This meaning dovetails with the concept of sexual boundaries and their transgression.

Sexual covenants don't just exist for the sake of respectability: children raised within a family that follows a community's practices are more easily inculcated with its values, including its sexual covenants²⁹. This perpetuates the community by transmitting its values to the next generation. Joe's son Spook, who obsesses over having a motorcycle, reveals that Donna's impregnator is another striking worker, Tommy (John Costelloe).

At the next strike meeting, as the workers collect union-supplied groceries, Big Joe attacks Tommy. They crash into the stalls, spilling the grocery bags. Donna's out-of-wedlock pregnancy threatens the fabric of the community, as does the spilling of precious groceries. Intentional or not, it's a nice metaphor. Like Brandon's rape in *Boys Don't Cry* and the bonnet sex in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Joe's attack on Tommy serves multiple purposes, all relating to the violation of sexual boundaries. On the surface it's purely for show, a public extraction of honour for Donna's defloration. More importantly, Joe signals that he disapproves of her behaviour, just as Lynda's father does in *Wish You Were Here*. By asking for a hiding from Tommy, Big Joe accepts punishment for his failings as a father; he unconsciously wants a shiner as a very public *mea culpa* for raising a sexually wayward daughter. Tommy obliges by knocking him out with a chair. It's left to Joe's brother to do the serious business of reminding Tommy that Donna "comes from a good family," i.e. one that abides by the prevailing covenants. The punishment for the young lovers is that they must marry if they are to remain part of that community.

The third plot strand in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* centres on Tralala, a local moll superbly played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, an actress seemingly devoid of boundaries who, like Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry*, immerses herself in the most challenging roles. Tralala has no known abode or employment, prides herself on her ability to pull a man within a count of ten, and makes her money by luring unwitting soldiers into sexual honey-traps where they are easily robbed by her male associates. Despite Tralala's disagreeable *modus operandi*, young Spook idolises her and promises her the first ride on the back of his motorcycle when he finally gets it. Tralala offhandedly agrees; it's a moment that will come back to haunt the impressionable young Spook—and hammer home *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* thematic point—at the film's climax.

²⁹ "Didn't God create you to become like one person with your wife? And why did he do this? It was so you would have children, and then lead them to become God's people." (Malachi 2:15)

SEXCATRAZ

Harry Black's life veers into dark waters with the introduction of the next character, Georgie, a transvestite who gets taunted by some thugs and ends up with a knife in the calf outside Harry's office. Although new characters come thick and fast in the film's first half-hour, it stays true to its theme: anyone who challenges the sexual orthodoxy gets hurt. Struck by Georgie's androgynous looks, Harry goes to the rescue. It's an involvement that will cost him dear.

Last Exit to Brooklyn segues seamlessly between its multiple plot strands. From the stabbed transvestite it cuts to Donna's wedding plans, which involve a dress made from a huge swath of curtain lining. Spook earns a clip 'round the ear from Big Joe for saying he's seen his sister's bush. In the general furore her waters break. (For all its bleakness, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is in places darkly comic.) Joe yells that it's too soon for Donna to have the baby: "She ain't married yet." Once again the need to belong—or, more importantly, to be seen to belong—trumps all concern for individual wellbeing.

The black comedy continues when Tralala lures a sailor into the docklands for a blowjob. She kneels dutifully and unbuckles his belt, waiting for her associates to KO him with a bottle—except that they do nothing more than watch. Tralala's only recourse is to satisfy the sailor while her associates collapse with suppressed laughter. Despite this, they still demand their share of the purse.

Incensed, Tralala hits the nearest bar, tugging her blouse off her shoulders for added effect as she goes into full man-magnet mode. She's soon on her way to swanky Manhattan with a soldier. Tralala gives her one-time business partners the finger as she leaves in a taxi, driven (in an all-but-invisible cameo) by novelist Hubert Selby, Jr. When Tralala's first mark passes out she hits on Steve (Frank Military), a naïve Second Lieutenant from Ohio who has never met anyone like Tralala; based on a statistically invalid sample size he declares her tits "the best in the Western world."

But Tralala isn't the only one in the deep end. Harry Black goes to a party with Georgie and meets Regina (Bernard Zette), a money-grubbing transvestite who sniffs his union cash and lures him into bed. Harry's picked the wrong night. After six months of inactivity, a convoy forms at the Brickman Metals Company—and Harry, ostensibly in charge of the strike office, is AWOL. He turns up later in the day as tension mounts and the cavalry appears. Tralala, resplendent in a low-cut, easy-peeler raspberry blouse from a Manhattan boutique, parades down the street with a troop of mounted police behind her. It's a gorgeous shot in a well-crafted film directed with unobtrusive style throughout.

The film's centrepiece is a night-time clash between police and strikers when the convoy leaves the metal works. Desperate to atone for his earlier absence, Harry becomes the hero by jumping onto a passing truck and beating up the driver. Harry celebrates with another night at Regina's, his wife and baby forgotten. However, the next morning, union bigwigs descend on Local 3392 for a post-mortem on the riot. Harry's absence and expenses come under scrutiny. Within minutes he goes from workers' hero to unemployed zero. Harry's first port of call is of course Regina. Minus his expense account he's of no interest to the gold-digging transvestite.

From there it's all down hill for Harry Black. Another atmospheric shot has him on the Brooklyn Bridge at dawn, looking worse for wear. He finally gets home to his family, but his eyes—and his life—are empty. Harry gets drunk again and that night wanders down to the ol' strike office, where a cosy party is in swing. Gone and already forgotten, Harry collapses

SEXCATRAZ

in the street. A teenage boy gives him a helping hand. Harry shepherds the boy into a secluded yard and angles for sex. The boy flees and calls the mob. The trinity of sexual boundary, violation and reaction already seen at an individual level in previous films here occurs at the group level, as Harry Black learns to his cost. He ends up crucified on a fence, barely clinging to life. Then he's simply cut from the script.

Having unceremoniously disposed of Harry Black, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* wraps up its two remaining plot strands by a contrast of right and wrong choices—relative, that is, to the community's sexual covenants. First, it's the positive reinforcement of the double-whammy of Tommy and Donna's marriage and the baptism of their child. This represents the official rehabilitation of the transgressing couple as much as a celebration of either the wedding or birth. Spook, meanwhile, has finally got his bike but it won't start. He cuts a forlorn figure as he tinkers with his reluctant Harley while everyone else celebrates the joyous news that the management of the Brickman Metals Company has caved in. The strike is over.

Tralala, meanwhile, has fallen on hard times since the highs of Manhattan. Steve has sailed for Korea, promising his undying love in a letter. It's hard currency she needs right now, not the ink-on-rose-scented-paper promises of a starry-eyed Second Lieutenant with a limited life expectancy: cash to buy oblivion, the only exit left to her in Brooklyn. As the film's title implies, Brooklyn is a prison and Tralala tried to use sex as a way out. Her gambit failed and she must pay the price. As seen in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, the currency of her fine will, naturally, be sex.

Hell-bent on self-destruction, Tralala pops open her easy-peeler raspberry top, promoting its contents with Steve's tagline, "the best tits in the Western world." After getting tossed around like a rag doll she's goaded into more than showing off. "I'll do you, all of you," Tralala screams. They carry her shoulder-high to the docklands where the entire male population of the neighbourhood forms an orderly queue. Her demise may be self-inflicted but it's rooted in communal antagonism to her unacceptably overt sexuality.

Spook gets his bike running and searches for Tralala. He finds a ravaged, discarded doll, used and abused by dozens of men. Steve intones his love in a sonorous voice-over, but for Tralala there's no exit from Brooklyn, not even to the oblivion of war. Spook covers Tralala's bruised and glistening body and cries his heart out. He knows, albeit unconsciously, that in a few short years he will have assimilated his community's entrenched sexual values. If the situation arises, he too will participate in the ritualised fucking over of tarts like Tralala who offend propriety. 1950s Brooklyn may be gone but the communal shaming of sexuality continues: [Jennifer Lawrence was criticised](#) for wearing a revealing dress of her own choice in a 2018 publicity shoot for the thriller *Red Sparrow*.

Like Harry Black, left impaled on a fencepost, there's no indication of what Tralala's future might hold. And that's partly the point of the film. As well as demonstrating how communities fight to maintain their sexual covenants, how their Spooks learn the facts of life and how their Tommys and Donnas are brought into line, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* also shows how the Tralalas and Harry Blacks of this world are treated for violating their society's sexual taboos. Partly this is done as punishment, partly as a warning to others to express their sexuality in acceptable ways, and partly it's done to discard those who have shown themselves not to belong. It's sobering to think that, while *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is a fiction, some Western societies have until very recent times responded in even more draconian fashion.

SEXCATRAZ

The Magdalene Sisters

Year: 2002

Director: Peter Mullan

Writer: Peter Mullan

Starring: Anne-Marie Duff, Nora-Jane Noone, Dorothy Duffy, Eileen Walsh

In *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, the devoutly Catholic immigrant community upholds its sexual covenants in several ways, including the public humiliation of Tralala who is forever marked as a soiled woman to be shunned by all self-respecting folk. In the 18th century, Ireland's sexual covenants formalised into communal approval for their Tralalas to be effectively imprisoned for life and commercially exploited.

Although the first Magdalene institution was established in England in 1758, the practice achieved its fullest flowering across the Irish Sea: some 30,000 women were forced into unpaid servitude in [Magdalene asylums](#) for even minor violations of their country's strict Roman Catholic sexual mores. Initially aimed at prostitutes, the Magdalene movement gradually widened its remit to include any young woman with the slightest whiff of sexual iniquity. The Magdalene asylums may have closed, but the sexual shame that gave rise to them remains deeply rooted in contemporary Irish society.

Set in the mid-1960s, Peter Mullen's sombre *The Magdalene Sisters* documents the fate of four typical Magdalene girls. The opening sequence reveals the perceived crimes of the three main protagonists, Margaret, Bernadette and Rose. The film begins at a wedding, where a marvellously intense *bodhrán*-playing priest begs the Lord to spare weak humans from temptation. There's no prize for guessing which deadly sin he's sweating over. It's all for naught as Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff) is lured into an attic by a male relative and raped. Afterwards it's his word against hers; in this deeply patriarchal society Margaret inevitably loses. She is woken at dawn, spirited out of the bedroom she shares with her siblings and whisked away by a priest. The dormer window appearance of Margaret's deeply concerned older brother foreshadows her ultimate fate.

Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone) is an orphanage girl with a smile for the boys and a truculent gleam in her eye. It's that gleam, rather than any failure of knicker-elastic tension, that dooms her to the asylum. For her part, the dreamy-eyed Rose (Dorothy Duffy) has, like Donna in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, committed Ireland's cardinal sin of having a child out of wedlock. "Ma, would you please just look at him," she implores her mother who sits po-faced by the hospital bed. But Rose's mother cannot look; the child is a bastard who, like the poor girl who sinfully begat him, shames them all. Just like Lynda's prim father in *Wish You Were Here* and Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Rose's mother tries to minimise the damage to her social standing by rejecting her daughter and, by extension, her new-born grandson. Rose is emotionally blackmailed into giving up the baby: "Would you have him go through life as an outcast, Rose, rejected and scorned by all decent members of society?" Like Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry*, Rose is treated not as victim but offender.

With the back-stories established, *The Magdalene Sisters* begins in earnest with the girls' arrival at the asylum. There is no trial, no jury, no sentence, no parole; just a lifetime of unpaid laundry work within the narrow confines of the institution and its gardens. The

SEXCATRAZ

superintendent, Sister Bridget (played with soft-spoken sadism by Geraldine McEwan), counts the takings while blathering about “the fallen finding their way back to Jesus Christ.” The original vision for the Magdalene institutions was rehabilitation and a return to society, but as the profits rolled in this charitable notion was abandoned; the return to Christ was postponed from here to the hereafter. Although euphemistically known as ‘fallen women’, the outside world has another word for them, as Margaret discovers when she interrupts Sister Bridget’s diatribe. The superintendent waggles an admonishing finger. “Did no one ever tell you it’s bad manners to interrupt, or were you too busy whoring with the boys to listen?” Regardless of what Margaret did or didn’t do, she’s tarred for life with the worst epithet her sex-negating society can bestow: whore³⁰.

From the plush confines of Sister Bridget’s office it’s down to the workhouse where the girls toil in silence all day. The sight of human flesh is so abhorrent they must don their bulbous nightgowns while fully dressed and only then remove their daytime clothes without exposing an inch of skin. Rose (now renamed Patricia due to the presence of another Rose among the girls) is immediately in pain from the breast milk she’s unable to express. While still dealing with the crippling emotional pain of losing her baby, she’s now advised to bear the physical pain: “The nuns go crazy if you start leakin’ all over the place.”

In Ireland’s puritan society the negative reactions encountered by Lynda in *Wish You Were Here* are amplified to a point of violence that is sanctioned not only by the public but also by the highest levels of political and religious authority. The emotional mechanics are clear: the girls’ behaviour violates communal boundaries, triggering shame-based feelings among the so-called righteous; the girls must therefore be quarantined and punished. The emotional toll on the girls is less than immaterial: it’s seen as merited.

The next morning’s breakfast—a threadbare affair compared with the luxuries served to the nuns at the high table—introduces the film’s fourth protagonist, the mentally unstable Harriet (Eileen Walsh), perversely called Crispina for reasons later apparent. As the horror of the asylum’s institutionalised abuse sinks in, Margaret, Bernadette and Patricia adapt in different ways, just as Crispina lives for those brief moments when her toddler son waves at her through a locked gate. Margaret settles down to life inside by befriending Crispina, while the tougher, street-smart Bernadette turns her mind to escape: “I’ll commit any sin, mortal or otherwise, to get the hell out of here.” Dreamy Patricia wavers between the two.

Bernadette’s first plan involves Brendan, a young man who delivers clothes to the laundry. He breaks the ice by requesting a blowjob. Bernadette rejects him but later realises that Brendan is her ticket to freedom. The next time he visits she suggests they marry and elope. Brendan wavers until Bernadette raises her skirt. “You can look. But if you try and touch I’ll have to kick your teeth in.” Bernadette cannot afford to grant access to the most secret, socially dangerous part of her body for anything less than freedom. Brendan puffs on a fag while gawking at Bernadette. He decides the reward is worth the risk of stealing a key to the asylum. Bernadette runs down to the back door that night, only for Brendan to lose his nerve and cycle off into the darkness. Bernadette is caught and punished like Brandon, Georgina and Harry Black before her. The nuns vent their sexual rage through the savage

³⁰ Almost—‘slut’ is perhaps more pejorative. A whore gets paid—which, from a patriarchal perspective, has some redeeming value: “You had sex on every street corner, and when you finished, you refused to accept money. That’s worse than being a prostitute!” (Ezekiel 16:31)

SEXCATRAZ

lopping off of Bernadette's hair. It's not the last time this sex-based violence, inflicted by women on women, will be seen.

While repeating the violence seen in previous films, the nuns also take the bathroom inquisition in *Boys Don't Cry* and the stripping of the canteen owner in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* to another level. The Magdalene asylum has normalised shaming through enforced nudity: the girls are made to perform physical education exercises naked. A nun disparages one of the girls for having tiny breasts. The derision of the girls' sexual parts develops into a game: biggest and smallest breasts, biggest bottom. "That only leaves us with the hairiest..." The nun breaks into a nervous giggle, unable to even name the next body part to be shamed³¹. The girls endure this ritual humiliation in miserable silence until the straight-haired Crispina breaks into tears: Crispina means 'curly haired'.

Shamed beyond tolerance, Crispina tries to hang herself, only for Margaret to save her. Whether this constitutes a charitable action is, by the film's end, debatable. Margaret later finds an unlocked gate in a remote corner of the asylum. She ventures onto the road beyond, drinking in the wide green rolling hills and the freedom they offer. She stumbles back into the confines of the institution, no longer sure whether she can survive in the outside world. A young woman is raped, imprisoned, forced into servitude and beaten until her spirit breaks simply because sex, in any form other than within narrow bounds, is regarded as so horrific that it must be met with brutal, lifelong punishment. This is the price of our unconscious sexual shame. The most horrific aspect is that no one questions any of this: not only is sex taboo but also questioning the taboo on sex is itself taboo. They are all trapped in *Sexcatraz*, and not one of them even knows it.

Margaret, nonetheless, has a revenge of sorts after she sees Crispina performing oral sex on a priest, Father Fitzroy. She rubs his clothes with some stinging plants, causing him to break out in a rash during a church service and strip naked to relieve the itching. Crispina's contact with Father Fitzroy makes her develop the same rash. It's enough to break what's left of her mind. That night, men in white coats visit the dormitory and spirit her away. Crispina becomes just another ghost haunting the asylum.

With Crispina's demise *The Magdalene Sisters* enters its final reel and the girls are treated to a screening of *The Bells of St. Mary's*. For the first time Sister Bridget shows a trace of humanity, a tear trickling down her cheek as Ingrid Bergman implores, "Dear Lord, remove all bitterness from my heart." This is the two-facedness of sexual shame: a heartfelt piety towards an idealised being, counterpointed by savage brutality towards vulnerable women, all in the name of that supposedly beneficent being.

During the screening a young man arrives at the asylum—Margaret's brother, now old enough to legally reclaim his sister. As Margaret leaves, the humility beaten into her surfaces: she automatically presses herself against the wall to make way for Sister Bridget. Then a spark of her original spirit flares. She steps directly into the superintendent's path. Sister Bridget, like all authoritarian figures, has to have the last say: "If I thought for a second that you would seriously expect one of the persons here to step aside for the likes of you then, brother or no brother, I would punish such insolence most severely." Margaret drops to her knees and recites the Lord's Prayer. The superintendent stares coldly down for one palpitating moment, contents herself with a reminder that Margaret will always be a whore then stalks off. Margaret is free.

³¹ Students in American church marriage classes have the same phobia. In *Sex & God*, Darrel Ray writes that, "Many participants could not even use clinical descriptions of body parts without embarrassment."

SEXCATRAZ

Bernadette and Patricia soon follow. They break into Sister Bridget's office to steal a key, but she wakes and wrestles with them. Bernadette jabs a pair of scissors into the superintendent's throat as her rage finally erupts. "Let go, you fucking twisted bitch," she screams, voicing the audience's long-held sentiments. Bernadette warns off the other nuns, wielding a huge candlestick like a berserker in a moment both humorous and cathartic. And with that release they too are gone, never to return to the horror of the asylum.

A brief denouement shows Bernadette and Patricia's escape and subsequent rehabilitation. There's a tragic shot of Crispina in a mental asylum, now well beyond the reach of even her hand-waving little son. The film closes with accounts of the fates of the real-life women on whom the main characters are based, along with the awful revelation that Ireland's last Magdalene laundry only closed in 1996.

In *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Harry Black, Tralala, and Tommy and Donna all inadvertently fall foul of their community's sexual covenants. They are simply trying to lead their own lives but their transgressive impulses put them in conflict with society. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, that society is so brutal it can legitimately imprison women for a lifetime for the slightest sexual misdemeanour, real or imagined. In both films the politics of shame are overt and obvious: keep your house in order, or else. The next film shows that our sex-negative covenants also operate in a far more insidious way. Described by film historian Michael Atkinson as "the greatest film about being gay," this is Bernardo Bertolucci's ravishing 1970 masterpiece *The Conformist*.

The Conformist

Year: 1970

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci

Writer: Bernardo Bertolucci (from Alberto Moravia's novel)

Starring: Jean-Louis Trintignant, Stefania Sandrelli, Dominique Sanda

The Conformist opens in a Paris hotel room that Marcello Clerici (a razor-wire taut Jean-Louis Trintignant) shares with a currently unknown woman sleeping naked on the bed. Her nudity is no gratuitous show of flesh: it tricks the audience into assuming that Marcello has a sexual relationship with her and is therefore heterosexual. Marcello picks up a gun, flicks a sheet over the woman's bare arse—a beautifully subtle intimation of his real feelings for her—and exits. If Jean-Luc Godard's assertion that all a film needs is a girl and a gun is true then *The Conformist* stylishly ticks all the boxes in its opening scene.

Marcello emerges into a surreal Parisian landscape of Art Deco angles and cobalt blues. He jumps into a car driven by his shady accomplice Manganiello (Gastone Moschin), kick-starting the road trip that forms the spine of this non-linear psychological jigsaw puzzle. As they drive, Manganiello whines about their as yet unknown assignment. But Marcello isn't listening: his mind spins back to how he (and the audience with him) got to Paris in the first place.

Italy, 1938: Mussolini rules with an iron fist. Marcello reveals his engagement to Giulia to his blind best friend Italo Montanari, a fascist propagandist. More significantly, Italo

SEXCATRAZ

introduces Marcello to a colonel from the secret police. Marcello is invited to the ministry, where—along with whipping the sheet over the woman’s buttocks in the hotel—his almost-mincing gait is as much of a clue as Bertolucci gives to explain Marcello’s far-right politics. Marcello is tasked with spying on his former university tutor Professor Quadri, an anti-fascist dissident who fled to France.

Next, Marcello visits his fiancée Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli), an empty-headed member of the *petite bourgeoisie* with a healthy carnal appetite. Marcello has barely sat down before Giulia, resembling a zebra on heat in a black and white striped dress, sets upon him. When the maid enters, Marcello, highly attuned to social *faux pas*, immediately fends off Giulia. Once again, *boundary + violation = reaction*. Giulia chides him that they’re engaged and perfectly entitled to smooch. This little interaction subtly reveals that Marcello’s sexual boundaries are much more constricted than Giulia’s. Then she drops a fly in Marcello’s ointment: he must go to confession before they can legally marry.

In order to understand this confession, Bertolucci inserts two scenes. The first shows Marcello’s father in a mental asylum. Mental wellbeing suffers under the constant anxiety of having to stay within narrow sexual boundaries. The second unfolds at Marcello’s crumbling family pile. His dissolute mother and her Japanese manservant Ki are the only residents. Ki keeps her sedated—to Marcello’s disgust—with morphine and sex. Like Albert in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Marcello’s discomfort with the physical body surfaces when he sees his mother in *dishabille*: “Cover yourself, please. I don’t want to see you half-naked.”

Manganiello, the secret police minder who accompanies Marcello to Paris, arrives. Marcello tells Manganiello about his mother’s nauseating relationship with Ki. “It’s not normal,” the minder mutters as he stomps off. In a beautifully staged shot, the wind whips dead leaves around Marcello’s car while, off-screen, Manganiello gives Ki a primer in fascist sexual etiquette. “Tell the Colonel he can count on me,” Marcello quips, demonstrating his commitment to the fascist ideal of violently enforced sexual conformity. Marcello is on the same wavelength as John Lotter and Tom Nissen in *Boys Don’t Cry*, the mob in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and Sister Bridget in *The Magdalene Sisters*.

Marcello’s confession doesn’t start well: he hasn’t been to church since First Communion. *The Conformist* flashes back to reveal why: when Marcello was 13 he was lured into an empty mansion by a half-Japanese chauffeur, Lino, who let Marcello play with his Mauser pistol. Lino wanted to play with an entirely different pistol: the little pink one between Marcello’s legs. Startled, Marcello pulled the trigger. Lino fell, bleeding heavily. Marcello scarpered, leaving Lino for dead while acquiring a deep-seated loathing for Oriental manservants. A frightening connection between manhood, sex and danger was also seared into his impressionable young psyche. In the confessional Marcello reveals his resulting obsession with conformity. He makes a heartfelt promise to build a normal life with Giulia, who he dotingly describes as “mediocre... all bed and kitchen.” The priest grants Marcello the absolution he craves.

The Conformist elides the wedding and resumes on a train with Marcello and Giulia *en route* to their honeymoon in Paris. Giulia nervously reveals that she lost her virginity to an older man some years earlier. While some might consider this a sexual transgression, Marcello doesn’t care. He married Giulia for her normality, not her hymen. They disembark

SEXCATRAZ

at Ventimiglia. Marcello meets the Colonel's men. His orders have changed. Marcello receives the gun seen in the film's opening scene: Quadri must die.

On the train to Paris, Giulia unburdens herself by recounting every detail of her premarital affair. Marcello undresses Giulia as she prattles. In one of the film's most tender moments, Marcello is momentarily lost in the bliss of married intimacy and empties himself into Giulia's normality. This is the high-water mark for Marcello; the point of his deepest acquiescence to the prevailing sexual covenants and the furthest departure from his true nature—which Bertolucci carefully conceals until the film's final shot.

Cut to the Hotel Palais D'Orsay, where Giulia sleeps while Marcello makes a phone call. Bertolucci, acknowledging his influences, gives Professor Quadri the real-life address and phone number of Godard as Marcello wheedles an appointment. Marcello and Giulia head for the Rue Saint Jacques, where we meet *The Conformist's* last significant character—not Professor Quadri (Enzo Tarascio) but his young wife Anna, played by a sultry Dominique Sanda with a thumbs-in-pockets nod to Marlene Dietrich. As Marcello enters, his gloved hand brushes Anna's fingers, signalling his immediate interest in her. Once again Bertolucci dangles a red herring, using Marcello's fascination with Anna to reinforce the notion that he is heterosexual, just as he did earlier through Giulia's nudity. In fact, something entirely different and as yet concealed draws Marcello to Anna.

The next sequence details Marcello's renewed acquaintance with Professor Quadri while Anna befriends Giulia. Marcello and Quadri exchange political barbs, but the latter is sharp enough to see through Marcello's fascist posturing. Later, Marcello shunts Giulia off to the Eiffel Tower while he visits Anna's ballet studio. Mistaking his own reasons for his interest in Anna, Marcello offers to flee with her to Brazil—exposing his paper-thin nationalism—but he's failed to divine her complex motivations. Quadri and Anna know Marcello is a fascist spy; she goads him that he doesn't have the courage to assassinate them. Suddenly losing confidence, Anna tugs down her leotard, hugs Marcello and begs him not to harm them. Having earlier used Giulia's nudity to lay a false trail, Bertolucci uses Anna's to reveal her vulnerability: she's a lamb at the slaughterhouse gate. Marcello is thrown off-balance. From this point onwards a growing confusion envelops him as his carefully constructed façade of normality unravels.

However, Anna's plea for mercy isn't the full extent of her desires. Back at the Hotel D'Orsay she helps Giulia disrobe to try on a new dress. Anna openly admires Giulia. The audience may not yet realise it, but here Anna reveals the hidden link between herself and Marcello. Giulia was content to be seen nude by her husband but she finds Anna's open gaze intimidating, a minor yet disquieting violation of her sexual boundaries: "Please don't look at me. I'm embarrassed," reads the subtitle. (The Italian word in the original dialogue is '*vergogna*', which refers not to embarrassment but to shame.)

That night the two couples dine in a Chinese restaurant. Here Professor Quadri, the MacGuffin³² of *The Conformist*, takes centre stage. He comments on how serious Marcello was as a student: "Too serious." Giulia concedes that her husband hardly ever smiles. It's a tiny beat but a significant point when assessing the emotional cost of our sexual covenants: among the casualties of Marcello's conformity is his joy. Marcello cannot be relaxed and joyful without fear of letting his mask slip and revealing his innermost, socially dangerous,

³² A term popularised by Alfred Hitchcock to refer to a plot device—typically a person, place or thing—around which a film pivots though, as in the case of *The Conformist*, it may ultimately be of minor relevance.

SEXCATRAZ

sexual desires. Thus he spends his entire life tight as piano wire, a tension fabulously captured by Jean-Louis Trintignant's electric performance. Quadri plays his ace by asking Marcello to deliver a letter to a dissident in Italy. Marcello, compromised by both his puzzling interest in Anna and his fake politics, is at a loss. He signals his ambivalence by returning the gun to Manganiello, who has been playing hide-and-seek with the increasingly conflicted Marcello throughout their time in Paris.

Next comes the beautifully choreographed dance hall scene. Anna dances with Giulia. Here Anna, nipples poking through her parchment-thin dress, lays bare her bisexuality. Marcello, in the meantime, refuses to take Quadri's letter, proving to the professor that his fascism is indeed a facsimile; a real fascist would have handed the letter to the secret police. The professor opens the letter, revealing a blank sheet inside: the blank page of Marcello Clerici's genuine political beliefs.

Avoiding his discomfiting sense of inadequacy, Marcello turns to the dance floor—only to meet an even more disquieting sight: Anna coming onto Giulia in an erotically charged dance whose meaning is unmistakable. I want to bed you. The unambiguous sexual chemistry between two people of the same gender triggers the formula of *boundary + violation = reaction*. Marcello vents the resulting anger by telling Quadri to control his wife. Quadri refuses, effectively signing his own death warrant. Marcello strides away and tells the loitering Manganiello that the Professor will leave for Savoy in the morning—alone. Manganiello goes to arrange the hit while the dancers circle poor Marcello. There he is, the conformist, alone and miserable in a sea of human happiness forever denied him by his own sexual shame.

Then it's back to that long drive through a misty, snow-shrouded French landscape. There's a complication: Anna accompanies the Professor. Marcello and Manganiello catch up to Anna and Quadri just as the hit takes place on a back road through the woods. The attackers stab the Professor on the open road. Anna rushes over to Marcello's car. In his impotence—political, sexual, emotional—all he can do is stare at Anna as she presses against the windowpane. Realising her fate, Anna screams. She flees into the snowbound woods with Quadri's killers in pursuit. Shots echo and fade. Snow drifts down through the trees as silence envelops Anna's inert body.

The Conformist jumps to 1943, with King Victor Emmanuel accepting the resignation of Benito Mussolini, paving the way for the collapse of Italian fascism. Marcello and Giulia now have a child—he has achieved his definition of normality—but Mussolini's demise leaves Marcello with the wrong allies. It's not just Marcello that's worried by this turn of events. In perhaps the film's most monstrous moment, Giulia, shorn of her pre-war frivolity, voices her support for Marcello's part in the assassination of Professor Quadri and Anna.

In the film's closing scene, Marcello goes out with his old friend Italo. They eavesdrop on a conversation between two men, one clearly luring in the other. With a shock, Marcello realises it's the old chauffeur Lino from his First Communion days. A crowd celebrating Mussolini's fall appears. The sight of Lino unbalances Marcello. Fearing he can't contain his repressed emotions, Marcello denounces Lino as a fascist and the murderer of patriotic Professor Quadri. Lino flees. Marcello then denounces the blind Italo who is also swept off into the turbulent night.

Marcello finds himself alone with Lino's companion, who warms himself by a fire. In the film's closing shot, Marcello sits with his back to the man, the light from the fire flickering across his hunched shoulders. Slowly, helplessly, Marcello turns around, blinking

SEXCATRAZ

in terror as he stares into the darkness at his own core. Only with this final shot does Bertolucci fully reveal the repressed homosexuality driving Marcello's violent, shameful obsession with so-called normality.



Definition: Sexual repression

Repress: "suppress (a thought or feeling) in oneself so that it becomes or remains unconscious." (Compact OED)

To suppress (a sexual thought or feeling) in oneself so that it becomes or remains unconscious in order to conform to the sexual rules of a given environment (e.g. family, social, political, religious).

In *Boys Don't Cry*, John Lotter and Tom Nissen's sexual intolerance is latent. It isn't apparent in everyday situations; only the extraordinary circumstances involving Brandon Teena triggers their shame, leading to them committing rape and murder. In *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Albert Spica's sense of sexual propriety is constantly violated by those around him, triggering the abuse and violence that results in Michael's murder and Albert's own demise. That which transgresses their boundaries lies outside them.

In *The Conformist*, it is Marcello's own homoerotic desires that violate his personal boundaries. Because he is the source of his own sense of transgression, both victimiser and victim, Marcello's feelings of shame are constant. This creates a need for constant action—the internal tension brilliantly portrayed by Jean-Louis Trintignant—to stave off the low grade but nonetheless unpleasant shame-based feelings of stress, anxiety and disgust that he perpetually feels.

Marcello's external behaviour thus derives from his sexual repression: while his fascist agenda may seem unrelated to his sexual orientation, the unconscious repression of his homosexuality is the wellspring of his twisted politics. This repression occurs to avoid the painful fate of Harry Black in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, whose sexual behaviour breached his community's standards and led to his beating and rejection.

The films examined in this chapter show how individual boundaries aggregate at the communal level to create sexual covenants that define socially accepted behaviour. Every instance of sexual behaviour thus becomes a political act that either abides by or violates communal taboos. This implicit division unconsciously categorises everyone according to their **sexual-political role** in society.



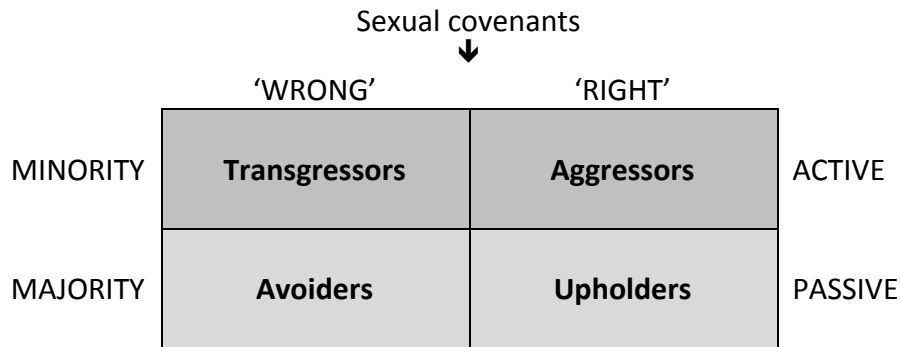
Definition: Sexual-political role

Role: "a person's share, part or duty in life and society; the character, place or status assigned to or assumed by a person." (Compact OED)

The place assumed by a person relative to the sexual covenants of a given community or society.

SEXCATRAZ

In a sexually repressed society there are four sexual-political roles or positions:



- **Transgressors:** people who have sexual impulses that violate their society's sexual covenants and actively express them. They include both those who commit sexual crimes and those who mean no harm but cannot restrain their transgressive urges. Transgressors receive reprimands, legally sanctioned or not, up to and including severe violence and death. Examples include Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* (gender identity crisis; raped and murdered), Harry Black in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (tried to have underage same-gender sex; beaten up) and Donna in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (pregnant out of wedlock; forced to marry). Transgressors tend to be a minority of the population.
- **Aggressors:** people who actively defend the prevailing sexual covenants to the point of harming others. In extreme situations aggressors are prone to sexual rage that can destroy not only others but themselves. Examples include John Lotter and Tom Nissen in *Boys Don't Cry*, Sister Bridget in *The Magdalene Sisters* and Marcello in *The Conformist* who sublimated his repressed homosexual desires into political ideals, leading to the deaths of Professor Quadri and Anna. Aggressors tend to be a minority of the population.
- **Upholders:** people who behave in line with their society's sexual covenants, i.e. they have no sexual impulses that violate those covenants. When confronted with minor violations they react by upholding the status quo fairly passively. In the face of bigger violations they respond through rejection and withdrawal. If sufficiently provoked, upholders can become aggressors. Examples include Lynda's father in *Wish You Were Here* (who harangues his daughter in public and finally rejects her) and Giulia in *The Conformist* (who feels comfortable kissing her fiancée in front of her maid but uncomfortable at being naked in front of Anna, who desires her). Numerically, upholders form the largest single sexual-political role.
- **Avoiders:** people who successfully contain (suppress or repress) sexual impulses that violate their society's sexual covenants. They avoid society's wrath but may marginalise themselves in the process. They live lives blighted by an invisible burden of sexual shame and by multiple fears, including fear of authority, fear of expressing their sexuality inappropriately, and a fear of being exposed for having socially disapproved sexual impulses. Eric, the bookmaker with the gammy leg in *Wish You Were Here*, is an avoider who lives in the margins to escape attention from a disapproving society. Because of their under-the-radar nature, avoiders can be hard to recognise (they pass themselves off as upholders) but their numbers are significant.

SEXCATRAZ

The very nature of sex casts us, like it or not, into a sexual-political role. Our sexual covenants force that upon us. Every sex act is in or out, OK or not OK, acceptable or transgressive. It either triggers our partner's shame or it doesn't. We generally find partners who are comfortable with our sexuality and so avoid transgressing their boundaries. But if we stick to what we know is safe indefinitely, we run the risk of our sex lives becoming stale and dull. Our minds wander to more exciting sex with more exciting partners. Resentment creeps in, poisoning an otherwise healthy relationship. Yet if we seek to expand the parameters of our lovemaking we run the risk of transgression and triggering a damaging reaction. Many of us resolve this dilemma through repression, unconsciously dodging the bullet by sublimating our sexual energies into work, family or hobbies.

But not everyone manages to stay within the narrow tramlines of our covenants. To reveal our deepest sexual selves to our nearest and dearest is potentially dangerous. Hence those feeling the urge to be more adventurous turn to online dating sites, affairs with their partners' friends, or drunken, frenzied groping after the office Christmas party. Whenever genitals rule minds, risk increases. The smallest misjudgement can spiral into tragedy.

The road to sexual catastrophe often starts with something minor, almost trifling—Brandon Teena's sock-stuffed crotch in *Boys Don't Cry*, Lynda Mansell peering down her own smock in *Wish You Were Here*, Harry Black helping the wounded Georgie in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—that only gradually spins out of control. The warning signs are many but often pass unheeded; once the sexual genie is out of the bottle it can be impossible to put it back in. The next chapter takes us down the slippery slope of sexually assured destruction.

SEXCATRAZ

Sexually assured destruction

We like to believe we are rational beings who order our lives as we see fit and all our behaviour comes down to choice. Yet when it comes to sexually destructive behaviour, rational choice is noticeably absent. Why did Teena Brandon choose to present as a man in, of all places, Nebraska? Why not move to New York, where transgender sexuality is more accepted? The same can be asked of John Lotter and Tom Nissen. Why didn't they simply expel Brandon from their circle after the bathroom incident? Instead they committed the rape that spiralled into triple murder and will most likely end in Lotter's execution.

Similarly irrational choices pepper the other films reviewed here. Georgina didn't have to have sex among the Parmesan rounds at Richard's restaurant in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Lynda didn't have to flash her knickers at the workmen in her uncle's bus depot. Harry Black didn't have to solicit sex from a minor in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Why didn't they make safer, socially approved choices?

Many real-life instances where sex destroys lives often have an air of unavoidability about them, a seemingly unstoppable trajectory the participants hurtle along to their doom. Josef Fritzl built the basement where he imprisoned and raped his daughter for over two decades. With every spade of secretively dug earth he could've chosen to stop. He didn't—or couldn't. Ditto Gayle Newland, who presented herself on Facebook as a man. She spent two years cultivating a friendship with a woman that led to blindfolded sex with a prosthetic penis and climaxed in a courtroom. Canadian Air Force officer Russell Williams³³ and London taxicab driver John Worboys³⁴ were equally unable to stop harming others or their own self-destructive slide. It's not uncommon for sex offenders to express relief at being caught, as if they've been saved from an overwhelming force, a madness they couldn't control³⁵.

In this chapter's first film, the protagonist sleepwalks through increasingly destructive sexual choices like those, real and fictional alike, described above. They wake up only when they see but one exit from the path of sexually assured destruction. This film is David Mackenzie's stylish British drama *Asylum*.

Asylum

Year: 2005

Director: David Mackenzie

Writers: Patrick Barber, Chrysanthy Balis (from Patrick McGrath's novel)

Starring: Natasha Richardson, Marton Csokas, Ian McKellen, Hugh Bonneville

³³ [Russell Williams](#), who piloted Queen Elizabeth II when she visited Canada, was convicted in 2010 on two counts of first-degree murder, sexual assault and numerous other sexually related charges.

³⁴ Known as the 'Black Cab Rapist', [John Worboys](#) drugged women with sedative-laced champagne before raping them. Since his 2009 conviction on multiple counts of rape, sexual assault and drugging, the police have received over a hundred more complaints.

³⁵ Dr Lam Hoe Yeoh, convicted in Britain in 2014 on multiple counts of [filming patients in his surgery toilet](#), admitted to the "most enormous relief" when he was caught.

SEXCATRAZ

Asylum begins, like many films, with an arrival. In this case it's the arrival at a 1950s British mental hospital of its new deputy superintendent, Dr Max Raphael (Hugh Bonneville), his wife Stella (Natasha Richardson from *The Comfort of Strangers*), and their son Charlie. Stella, less than thrilled by her new surroundings, anaesthetises herself with champagne and cigarettes while she pokes about. Her first discovery is a dilapidated greenhouse. Max's off-the-cuff remark that they should get it fixed is the flap of a butterfly's wing that ultimately spirals into tragedy.

A garden party to welcome the Raphaels introduces two of the film's leading lights: jovial superintendent Jack Straffen (Joss Ackland), and the asylum's longest-serving doctor, Peter Cleeve (Ian McKellen in an avuncular, Gandalf-without-the-pointy-hat role), who tells Stella that his specific field of interest is "sexual pathology and its associated catastrophes." In other words, the patterns of destructive behaviour examined in these films.

Tensions soon emerge between Stella and Max, an overbearing careerist whose only concern is that his wife conforms to the Women's Institute model of demure appearance and dutiful servitude. Here again is the overarching need for social respectability, seen with Lynda's father in *Wish You Were Here* and Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Natasha Richardson, perfectly cast as Stella, uses a vague sense of fragile detachment to suggest that, on both counts, Max faces disappointment.

That just leaves Edgar Stark (a brooding Marton Csokas) to complete the main cast: he's the inmate tasked with restoring the Raphael's greenhouse. Unlike every other man at the asylum, Edgar is earthy and rooted in his sexuality. His frank, penetrating gaze unsettles Stella. "I killed my wife. She betrayed me," Edgar says flatly during one encounter, leaving no room for doubt that, in sexual-political terms, he is an aggressor. The shot, through the greenhouse's splintered windowpanes, perfectly captures his fractured psyche.

Stella's sexuality—and Max's inability to handle it—surface at the annual staff and patients ball. Her dress is too revealing for Max, mildly violating his boundaries, triggering his shame and sense of transgression. This is the banana-skin moment that precipitates self-destruction. Max fires a warning shot across Stella's bows. Her tart reply ensures the two spend little time together at the ball. Max cosies up to Straffen; the superintendent is due to retire and Max seeks endorsement as his heir. Meanwhile, Edgar dances cheek to cheek with Stella. She craves eye contact but dares not keep it. The sense of her about to crack is palpable. Dr Cleeve watches from the margins, his trained eye—and that of the audience—noting the tell tale signs of unrequited sex.

It isn't long in coming: a quickie in, of course, the greenhouse. Edgar, a psychopath already outside society's accepted boundaries, has no issues with screwing the deputy superintendent's wife. But this is clearly a major transgression and the audience awaits its repercussions. Stella flees to her house, astonished by what she's just done. Partly she feels guilty at betraying Max and fears the consequences, but another part of her feels liberated.

Stella's repressed sexuality doesn't just peep out like a prairie dog guarding its burrow; her newly released libido cannot be contained. Soon she's living for sex with Edgar. Can she not see the writing on the wall? No. For the simple reason that, to quote social theorist Edward Carpenter, "feeling precedes thinking"³⁶. If a situation triggers a powerful emotional or sexual feeling, that feeling will always trump our rationality. Only when a situation lacks a

³⁶ Carpenter, an early advocate of homosexual rights, wrote this in his 1899 book *Civilization: its Cause and Cure*, where he argues that civilization is an illness that no human society has yet survived. Unless we escape from *Sexcatraz* we shall only add weight to Carpenter's argument.

SEXCATRAZ

strong emotional charge are we able to respond rationally. Carpenter's acute observation is entirely supported not only by the behaviour seen throughout this book but also by the destructive real life choices of Josef Fritzl, Gayle Newland and others.

Edgar ups the ante by servicing Stella in her own bedroom, a clear marker that he has usurped Max as her alpha male. Each tryst deepens the divide between Max and Stella, the process seemingly irreversible. We watch with morbid fascination as Stella's misadventures spiral towards disaster. Her devil-may-care couplings hint at a desire to be caught, for her secret to be exposed, for the madness to end. She's on the same slippery slope as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* Tralala and Harry Black.

After screwing Stella in Max's marriage bed Edgar escapes from the asylum in the boot of Max's Jaguar, only for Charlie to raise the alarm. A hunt is organised but Edgar vanishes. A little later Stella takes the train to London. Ostensibly it's a Christmas shopping trip, but in fact she meets Nick (Sean Harris), a down-at-heel artist acting as Edgar's go-between who reunites the lovers. Edgar and Stella have sex in what appears to be a derelict abattoir. The scene is artily shot with the camera tracking past a post in the foreground, obscuring the fleshy tryst behind: a subtle reminder that both showing and watching sex is taboo—yet another of our covenants, as the long history of film censorship attests.

Max becomes suspicious of Stella's increasingly frequent London trips. Belatedly sensing that he's losing her, his veneer of self-control cracks. Max forces himself on Stella. It's clearly an act of violation, despite the ring on her finger that legally sanctions the sex, an echo of Albert Spica's car bonnet sex with Georgina in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. This is sex for punishment, humiliation, ownership and control; not sex for love or even physical pleasure. This is revenge sex; it's how men and women treat each other inside the walls of Sexcatraz.

Stella responds by abandoning both Max and Charlie. But life in the ex-abattoir isn't all wine, roses and the stench of long-dead cows. The sex is great but Edgar's morbid jealousy surfaces when he discovers Nick's love for Stella and beats the life out of his former friend. Boundary, violation, reaction... Stella knows she'll be next, yet she stays, her craving for self-destruction equalling her hunger for Edgar. A detective hired by Cleeve saves Stella by returning her to the asylum.

It's only temporary. Cleeve has replaced Straffen as the superintendent and dismissed Max, who moves the family to a hospital in North Wales where no one knows Stella's past. This is the paper-over-the-cracks aspect of sexual shame at work. Stella is reunited with Charlie. "Are you better now," he inquires, displaying the same association between sex and mental illness previously seen in *Wish You Were Here*. But the battle lines remain: Max sleeps in a separate room, too ashamed of Stella's philandering to share a bed with his sexually soiled wife³⁷. The covenants Max has unconsciously bought into—and is too emotionally rigid to do anything other than uphold—allow no path back to intimacy.

Stella tries to rebuild the family through Charlie and accompanies him on a school trip to a lake. There's a chilling inevitability to the scene: he plays amid the rocks and shoals while she is lost in sexual obsession. Charlie falls in; a teacher appears too late to save him. Stella's lust has cost Charlie his life, Max his career, and robbed her marriage of everything but the registry entry. Max vents his fury but, trapped in a straightjacket of sexual reserve and professional dignity—both reinforced by his profound sexual shame—all he can do is

³⁷ There's an echo here of the ancient Catholic belief that "it is bigamy to continue to sleep with one's wife after she has slept with someone else." (G. Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History*)

SEXCATRAZ

bitterly describe Stella's future in terms of a clinical diagnosis. It comes as a relief when Dr Cleeve slams a car door in his face.

For Stella it's back to the asylum, this time for good. Her uncontrolled passion is a menace to decent society; for everyone's sake she is given a cold shower and locked away. This is an Anglicised version of the treatment meted out in *The Magdalene Sisters*. Of course, Cleeve has a pat solution to all this discontent. He has fallen ever so slyly for Stella. When Max requests a divorce, Cleeve arranges for her release on condition that she marries him. "Are you a passionate man," she asks, in a clear indication of her priorities. Cleeve's reply is non-committal; a fatal mistake: the *über*-psychologist fails to grasp the importance of his patient's question. Stella agrees to marry Cleeve only because it promises access to Edgar, now brooding in solitary confinement.

Driven by professional vanity, Dr Cleeve agrees to let both Edgar and Stella attend the annual ball (yes, time just rolls by in the asylum). She even trots out the same plunging dress that ruffled Max a year earlier. But at the last moment Cleeve's nerve fails and he forbids Edgar's attendance. Edgar's no-show brings icy clarity to Stella: she climbs to the top of the asylum, jumps off the roof and crashes through a conservatory. Only in death does she find her true asylum.

Stella has sensed the walls of Sexcatraz closing in and understood what society in general has not: because her sexual impulses lie outside those sanctioned by the majority (and enforced through the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction) she only has two choices—misery or death. Stella knows she can never truly belong to a community that rejects her sexuality. Instead she chooses the cleanliness of death.

Despite its emotional accuracy, *Asylum* can still be dismissed as a figment of a writer's imagination. Not so the next film. The exploration of sexually assured destruction continues with Paul Schrader's *Auto Focus*, a carefully crafted biopic of Bob Crane, star of the much-loved 1960s sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*.

Auto Focus

Year: 2002

Director: Paul Schrader

Writer: Michael Gerbosi (from Robert Graysmith's book *The Murder of Bob Crane*)

Starring: Greg Kinnear, Willem Defoe, Maria Bello

Auto Focus begins in 1964 when Crane (superbly played by Greg Kinnear) is a well-established DJ in the Los Angeles radio scene. He's married to Anne (Rita Wilson, in a nicely understated performance), they have three children, they go to church, and he even has some healthy—or seemingly healthy—hobbies: photography and playing the drums. In stark contrast to the other real-life example studied to date, *Boys Don't Cry's* Mid-western misfit Brandon, Bob Crane and his family epitomise the American Dream and Bob himself meets every definition of a good man. Yet Crane's sexual urges—repressed at this time—will lead to exactly the same end.

SEXCATRAZ

Being in Los Angeles, Crane isn't satisfied with radio and wants to get into acting. His break comes when he's offered the lead role of Colonel Robert E. Hogan in a new TV comedy series set in a World War II German prisoner of war camp. The premise is daring but the script is genuinely funny and Crane takes the part. *Auto Focus* faithfully reconstructs the birth of *Hogan's Heroes*, even down to Kinnear wearing Bob Crane's actual leather jacket from the show.

On the set of *Hogan's Heroes*, Crane meets John Carpenter, ostensibly a Sony technician who installs hi-fi equipment. But Carpenter, played with a brilliant mix of *braggadocio* and neediness by Willem Defoe, was more than just someone who knew how to twiddle a knob; his real job seems to have been providing celebrities with Japanese home electronics to stimulate demand. Given Crane's interest in photography and Carpenter's in celebrities, the attraction is mutual.

Carpenter soon has Crane down at Salome's strip club, playing the drums while the girls do their thing. Keeping time for the club's house band provides an avenue for Crane's repressed sexuality to emerge; the drumming lends a degree of psychological legitimacy to his presence at the club. The real Bob Crane possibly thought—and even believed—his interest was the music. Nope. He spends less time with his family and more in Carpenter's murky orbit, a slide into the Hollywood underworld that gradually destroys Crane's version of the American Dream and, ultimately, Bob Crane himself.

Like other characters with such dangerous impulses—Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry*, Harry Black and Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Stella in *Asylum*—the question arises as to why Crane didn't make healthier choices. Why didn't he stick to sex with Anne? In social terms she was Crane's legitimate sex partner. But Anne, like most women of her day, was trapped by her own shame in a mesh of severely limiting sexual covenants. Being a good housewife in 1960s middle-class America involved childrearing, churchgoing and baking apple pies rather than sexual exploration. Sex for pleasure equates to lust, and lust is *verboten*. Exactly why lust has historically been socially illicit—and still significantly remains so—will be explored later. For the highly sexual Bob Crane it meant that sex with his wife was most likely infrequent, brief and dull: an insult to the term 'vanilla'. Once Carpenter introduced him to something spicier it was inevitable he would gravitate to Salome's strip joint and the shadow-land beyond.

At first Anne suspects nothing, accepting Crane's absences due to his rising stock. Carpenter, who has a sinister ability to shape-change to exploit different situations, passes himself off as Crane's manager and invites women back to his house with Crane on the pretence of showing off his latest Japanese toys. But the actual toy that Carpenter wants to demonstrate isn't a piece of technology; it's a blood-operated piston inside his pants.

Crane soon finds himself in Carpenter's kitchen, alone with a woman who wants the reflected glory of having screwed a TV star. "I'm married," he simpers. "So am I," she levels, before offering him a sexual *carte blanche*. Crane places his order with a timid question: "Can we do it with the lights on?" It's a tiny beat, perhaps even an ad-libbed line that could easily have ended up on the cutting room floor. In fact the actor fought to keep it in the film against Schrader's initial judgment. It's a telling comment about sexual mores, even in the present day: sex is unconsciously regarded as something that should happen in the dark. Every time Bob Crane had sex with Anne it probably occurred in their bedroom, at night, with the lights out, the door closed and the curtains drawn. Why? Because of the underlying shame: the unspoken belief that because sex is shameful it should not be witnessed, even

SEXCATRAZ

by its participants³⁸. Confronted with a more openly sexual woman, Crane's first desire is simply to observe the sex act and his own participation in it: the wonder in her eyes, the arch of her body, the place where she ends and he begins.

Bob Crane finds the combination of fame, money and women irresistible. How frequently Carpenter leveraged Crane's stardom to attract women can be gleaned from their catchphrase, "A day without sex is a day wasted." After filming it's off to Salome's. Crane gets the big introduction from the MC and plays the drums while Carpenter hits on the women. Afterwards it's out with the cameras and off with the clothes. Both of Crane's previously healthy hobbies have morphed into accessories to his sexual craving. Its power can be grasped by realising exactly how much he stood to lose: family, reputation, career and marketability. Eventually Crane lost them all and more besides, unable to escape the downward pull of **sex addiction**.



Definition: Sex addiction

*Addicted: "physically dependent on a particular substance; devoted to a particular interest or activity."
(Compact OED)*

A compulsive dependence on physical sex and/or pornography to satisfy overwhelming sexual cravings.

From a clinical perspective, sex and pornography addiction don't exist because they lack the physical dependence noted in the first part of the dictionary definition. However, from a behavioural perspective, sex and porn addiction are very much alive and kicking. A brief visit to an online porn addiction forum leaves no doubt that many people suffer from the effects on their families, jobs and their self-esteem of frequent, overwhelming urges to binge on sex or porn.

The dictionary definition seems weak, anaemic, lacking; it gives little sense of the all-consuming pull of compulsive behaviour, the helpless feeling of swirling down a vortex into oblivion. Bob Crane soon finds himself in a behavioural loop—the addiction cycle—in which the actual sex is just one step in a five-step cycle:

- An overwhelming urge
- Gratification of the urge
- Brief respite from the urge
- Guilt and shame about the urge
- Determination to control the next urge

Then it's back to the top and the cycle repeats. At the top of the cycle the addict concedes that this time—just this time—they can't control their urge and will gratify it. Instead they promise themselves they'll stop the next urge. The problem with the next urge, like tomorrow, is that it never arrives; the addict is only ever dealing with their current urge.

³⁸ The shame-based compulsion to have sex in the dark to avoid being witnessed manifested in the actions of Josef Fritzl, who always turned the lights off before raping the daughter he kept imprisoned in a cellar beneath his house for over 20 years.

SEXCATRAZ

This cycle is common to cigarette, drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, self-harm, pornography, or—as in Bob Crane’s case—actual sex.

Crane’s behaviour affects not only his marriage but also his ability to play Colonel Hogan. He begins an on-set affair with Sigrid Valdis, who plays Colonel Klink’s secretary *Fräulein* Hilda in *Hogan’s Heroes*. Valdis’ real name was Patricia Olson; Maria Bello plays the role of Hilda-cum-Sigrid-cum-Patricia with absolute verve.

The film’s highlight is a fantasy sequence during the filming of *Hogan’s Heroes*. Crane’s mind spins off into a dream where Patricia has an orgy with the show’s leading lights. The palette turns a grimy green, foreshadowing the colour degradation Schrader will take to the limit as the film heads for its sordid ending. Patricia vamps for the camera—Carpenter, with his home video—while Colonel Klink fondles her breasts. Sergeant Schultz grins inanely. Crane looks on in confusion, aware that something’s not right but unable to figure it out. Anne appears at a window with their children. “Fuck her, Bob,” she intones monotonously. Crane snaps back to consciousness; he’s just messed a take on the set of *Hogan*.

The film neatly illustrates Crane’s seesawing as he tries to manage his cravings. One minute he sees video footage of Carpenter’s hand touching his backside during a “group grope” and ends their friendship; the next his insatiability puts Carpenter back in the frame. One moment he tells Anne their relationship is fine; the next he tells Patricia—who, in the film at least, genuinely loves Crane—he will leave Anne and marry her.

Exasperated, Anne searches Crane’s den and finds shoeboxes filled with snapshots of his infidelities. In their final confrontation Rita Wilson plays Anne low and straight as she ends their marriage. In sexual-political terms Anne is an upholder; confronted with evidence of Crane’s misdeeds she responds not through violence but—like Lynda’s father in *Wish You Were Here*—through rejection. Crane is left squatting on the kitchen floor in a sea of Polaroids, garish reminders of his compulsive conquests spilled across a white tile floor.

Anne’s departure frees Crane to marry Patricia in a blaze of publicity on the set of *Hogan’s Heroes*. It seems like Crane’s fortunes are on the rise. If ever there was a moment when Bob Crane might have pulled his life together, this was it. The moment is all too brief; the power of Crane’s urges too strong, the slope too slippery. From here his trajectory is entirely one way; Crane is on the Sexcatraz equivalent of Death Row.

This headlong sex-induced fall from grace is a staple of the erotic drama and thriller genres, though the real-life tragedies depicted in *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Auto Focus* as well as the falls from grace of Hollywood big shots Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey show that **sexual self-destruction** is more than a mere fiction.



Definition: Sexual self-destruction

Self-destructive: “destroying or causing harm to oneself.” (Compact OED)

Destroying or causing harm to oneself through socially transgressive sexual activity that negatively affects a person’s family, job, finances, reputation, and/or mental health.

Hogan’s Heroes ends in 1971. With rumours of his nightly activities swirling ‘round gossip-hungry Hollywood, Crane finds himself out of TV work. He lands the male lead in a

SEXCATRAZ

travelling dinner theatre play; the play is lousy but it puts Crane in front of a lot of female fans from his *Hogan* days. Despite his diminished status Crane is still able to trade his past stardom for sex.

By now Carpenter has left Sony. He's no longer a Merlin drawing the latest whiz-bang gadgets from his magician's hat to flatter young women into shedding their skin; he's a middle-aged man sucking on the drying teat of Crane's dwindling fame. The shift in power from John Carpenter to Bob Crane is brilliantly handled—writer Michael Gerbosi (based on Robert Graysmith's book *The Murder of Bob Crane*) and director Paul Schrader as well as Kinnear and Defoe.

Crane and Carpenter's relationship is a classic case of co-dependence; actor Willem Defoe likens them to husband and wife. Initially, Carpenter exploits Crane's fame to procure women for them both. Once Carpenter loses Sony's patronage he becomes an embittered figure, increasingly reliant on Crane to feed his own appetite; this role-reversal is nicely portrayed by a rueful Carpenter donning Crane's *Hogan's Heroes* jacket and cap.

Crane's second marriage heads the same way as his first. He admits that Carpenter is his "only friend." Whether they were truly friends or were merely thrown together by their shared craving is never neatly answered. In their last sexual hurrah, Crane and Carpenter hit the 1970s swinger scene. Paul Schrader brought in a real swinger group to film the scene; they spent the entire day on set having sex. The ghost of Bob Crane would have approved. As Crane's disintegration accelerates Schrader degrades the quality of his images, slowly moving to grainier film stock and bleaching the colour from the palette. Gone are the bright pastel shades of Bob and Anne's all-American family; instead the colours are grimy greys and greens, heading into dun browns. We are watching a man rotting alive.

Somewhere in the miserable tread of the travelling play Crane takes stock of his life. In a soulless bar in Scottsdale, Arizona, Crane tells Carpenter that he's ditching "the broads." Carpenter knows this means ditching him. An argument erupts. Later, Carpenter phones Crane from his motel room. It sounds like two lovers after a tiff, but only one of them wants to make up. Defoe's performance as the insecure Carpenter, rubbing his own crotch while he alternately begs and bullies Crane over the phone, is superb. But Crane refuses to be swayed. That night an unknown intruder breaks into Crane's motel room and bludgeons him to death with a tripod. On that blood-spattered note *Auto Focus* fades to black.

John Carpenter was tried for the murder of Bob Crane but acquitted due to a lack of evidence. The killer remains unknown. From the perspective of *Sexcatraz*, it doesn't matter who murdered Bob Crane. Whether it was Carpenter, a vengeful husband or a random tripod-wielding homicidal Scottsdale motel intruder, Crane's self-destructive arc meant that sooner or later he would come to a sticky ending. While *Hogan's Heroes* is remembered with affection, Bob Crane is an unlamented figure. Paul Schrader can be commended for his humane treatment of a difficult subject.

Asylum and *Auto Focus* reveal two characters, one fictional and one real, whose sexual cravings are so strong they both lead inexorably to their deaths. The next film shows that sometimes it's those in the orbit of these transgressors—rather than the actual culprit—who suffers. It's Sam Mendes' magnificent Oscar-winning drama, *American Beauty*.

SEXCATRAZ

American Beauty

Year: 2000

Director: Sam Mendes

Writer: Alan Ball

Starring: Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch, Mena Suvari, Wes Bentley, Chris Cooper

Brilliantly written by Alan Ball, *American Beauty* tells the tightly interwoven tale of six people whose lives are forever affected by tragic events one rainy night at a house with a red door on Robin Hood Trail. Like *Boys Don't Cry*, the film triumphed at the Academy Awards, winning no less than five Oscars including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Original Screenplay. The similarities between the two films don't end there: both are slow-burning dramas that climax with a murder precipitated by sexual shame. What makes *American Beauty* truly special is the thematic unity its screenplay derives from that shame: all but one of its main characters are prisoners of Sexcatraz.

In a rare example of a successful voice-over, the film begins with the departing soul of 42-year-old Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) soaring over Robin Hood Trail, telling the audience he did not live to be 43. This shifts the film's central question from "What will happen to Lester?" to "Who killed Lester?" In time-honoured fashion, *American Beauty* then sets about creating as many suspects as possible.

The first of these is his status-obsessed wife Carolyn (Annette Bening). While Lester masturbates in the shower ("The high point of my day"), she prunes her perfect roses with matching shears and gardening clogs. The following scenes parse out their sham marriage. He works at a dead-end job while she struggles to compete with rival Buddy King, "The real estate king." Carolyn has lost interest in sex, hence Lester's daily shower habit. Carolyn's early loss of libido is a manifestation of sexual shame. Her worldview is neatly portrayed when she hypes herself up with the affirmation "I will sell this house today," strips to her negligee to spruce up the house then slithers down to the verge of a breakdown when it doesn't sell. Although this book is primarily concerned with sexual shame, Carolyn's quest for success is driven by another shame: failure.

Lester and Carolyn's mutual ennui has alienated their shy teen daughter Jane (Thora Birch). Carolyn railroads Lester to a basketball game where Jane's high school cheerleading team performs. Lester watches disinterestedly—until the half-time cheerleading routine, when his gaze narrows onto a stunning, confident blonde: Jane's friend Angela (Mena Suvari). Sam Mendes takes the tunnel vision seen in *Boys Don't Cry* when Brandon falls for Lana Tisdell to a fantastical extreme as Lester sits alone in the stadium with Angela. She does a striptease, unzipping her cheerleader's top to release a slew of scarlet rose petals.

That night, the petals tumble from the ceiling above Lester's bed. He opens his eyes and there she is: Angela, lying naked on the ceiling in a sea of red petals. Lester's face slowly glows with joy. Suddenly his shapeless life has an objective: sex with Angela.

With the main plot engaged, Ball introduces the last of *American Beauty's* central sextet: the Burnham's new neighbours, retired US Marine Corps Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper), his reclusive wife and their teenage son Ricky (Wes Bentley) who, school gossip suggests, has spent time in a mental institution. Frank opens the door to reveal Lester and

SEXCATRAZ

Carolyn's other neighbours, the obnoxiously happy gay couple Jim and Jim, who good-naturedly hand over a basket of flowers as a welcome gift. There's a comic moment as Frank assumes the Jims use the word 'partner' in a business, rather than Biblical, sense. The comedy is visual, too, as the retired Marine uncomfortably clutches the non-USMC issue basket of flowers in a deft nod to the film's ultimate destination.

"How come these faggots have to always rub it in your face?" Frank later asks Ricky in a clear delineation of his sexual views. This is John Lotter's "Get this sick shit away from me" all over again. "How can they be so shameless?" Frank continues, positing his own shame as a virtue. "Those fags make me want to puke my fucking guts out," Ricky retorts in the first of several straight-faced lies he tells his father as he navigates the troubled waters of the Fitts household.

The film gathers pace at a real estate convention, where Carolyn gushes over Buddy King (Peter Gallagher). While Carolyn sucks up to Buddy, Lester goes in search of a stiff drink. He finds more than that: Ricky Fitts, masquerading as a waiter while he sells dope. Lester and Ricky hit it off, gossiping about cheap horror films while getting stoned behind the building.

Lester's rebellion gains direction when Angela sleeps over at Jane's house. While the virginal Jane has trouble talking about sex—particularly her father's sexuality—the cocksure Angela teases Jane that she would "fuck him until his eyes rolled back in his head." Lester, eavesdropping at Jane's door, clatters down to the garage to work out. His sex life with Carolyn is over; fantasies of Angela are all he's got.

Lester then masturbates in bed, triggering Carolyn's shame. Lester is committed to a monogamous marriage to a partner with no interest in him. This 'enforced celibacy' leaves masturbation as his only sexual outlet. Instead of responding with love, compassion and understanding—all qualities no doubt enshrined in their marriage vows—Carolyn is appalled and disgusted. The misty-eyed notion that we'll support our life partners through thick and thin often evaporates when it comes to sex. This will be explored in more detail in Part II of this book.

Lester's rebellion continues as he gets himself fired and goes in search of a job with "the least amount of responsibility." The desire to avoid responsibility is another side effect of shame. Lester winds up flipping burgers at Mr Smiley's while Carolyn is shackled up in a motel with Buddy King. Buddy dethrones her in the missionary position, legs high in the air as she pleads, "Fuck me, your majesty." Afterwards Carolyn feels refreshed. It is perhaps the greatest tragedy of our imprisoning sexual beliefs that so few recognise the benefits of gratifying sex³⁹. Buddy convinces Carolyn to take up pistol shooting—"nothing makes you feel more powerful"—which turns her into a plausible suspect in Lester's death.

With so many key characters, by necessity *American Beauty* cuts frequently between its plot strands. Jane visits Ricky, where he risks his father's ire by breaking into a locked cabinet and showing her an official Third Reich plate. The link between Colonel Frank Fitts, USMC (Retired) and the Nazi regime is their shared intolerance of homosexuals, founded on shame and maintained through the trinity of boundary, transgression and reaction.

That evening Lester and Carolyn argue. Carolyn goes to Jane's bedroom and passes on to her daughter her own core belief: "You cannot count on anyone except yourself." Jane

39 In *Sex Heals* Laura Moore describes the scientifically proven physical benefits of sex. Our ingrained negativity is such that few people consider—let alone use—sex to enhance their wellbeing.

SEXCATRAZ

rejects her mother's "Kodak moment," earning a slap as Carolyn continues to deny the truth that Angela long ago identified: Carolyn's outward drive for success has alienated her from her emotional core, making her a "phony." This is the cost of Carolyn's shame. She storms out in tears, the truth slowly hitting home.

Jane turns to the only emotional support available: Ricky. She looks out the window and there he is, as always, filming her. They exchange a little wave. As those around them succumb to their own failings, Ricky and Jane become the emotional heart of the film. Jane slowly undresses, revealing herself to this boy who has become the epicentre of her world. It is Thora Birch's not-so-plain Jane, rather than Mena Suvari's dirty angel Angela, who is the film's true titular beauty.

Frank Fitts, having discovered the intrusion into the china cabinet, bursts into Ricky's room and punches him. Ricky's confession—for once true—that he wanted to show the Nazi plate to Jane gives Frank a quandary. Frank, obsessed with structure and discipline, is desperate to see his son grow up straight. "You can't just go around doing whatever you feel like," Frank yells, almost losing control. Only later is it evident that Frank's words aren't primarily aimed at his son.

Carolyn, fresh from popping off a few rounds at the local firing range, drives home singing Bobby Darin's 'Don't Rain on My Parade' with all the conviction she can muster. Just as she sings the song's punch line she swings into the driveway—and there it is, its snout facing her like an angry bull: a blood red 1970 Pontiac Firebird. It's another moment of crashing comedown for poor Carolyn that Annette Bening handles with aplomb.

Inside, Lester sees Carolyn, still flushed from the firing range, and glimpses the woman he once adored and wonders what became of her. Carolyn settles into a sofa upholstered in Italian silk. Lester, clutching his beer, cosies up to her. A spark arcs between them—until Carolyn notes that Lester is about to spill beer onto the sofa. Snap. The moment's gone, and with it their relationship.

The last day of Lester's life begins with Carolyn racing off to shag Buddy, followed by post-coital burgers at the Mr Smiley's drive-thru where Lester now works. Carolyn retreats in shameful confusion while a rainstorm breaks over Robin Hood Trail. The re-invigorated Lester precipitates his own demise by asking Ricky for some dope, just as Angela arrives for a sleepover.

Ricky goes to Lester's garage with the dope, watched by his suspicious father. A pillar between two windows obstructs Frank's view. On one side of the pillar he sees Ricky hunched down, engaged in some hidden task near Lester's lap. On the other he sees Lester leaning back, chest bare, his face suffused with pleasure. Frank's homophobic mind leaps to the wrong conclusion. Just as John Lotter did in *Boys Don't Cry* when he discovered that Brandon Teena was actually Teena Brandon, so Colonel Frank Fitts USMC (Retired) now experiences an overwhelming barrage of unpleasant physical, mental and emotional symptoms—all the symptoms of sexual shame. Unlike the volatile John Lotter, the disciplined ex-Marine bottles it—for now.

Ricky returns to his room. And there's Frank, sitting in the dark, festering over what he just saw. Cooper's performance in the closing scenes of *American Beauty* is outstanding. "I will not sit back and watch my only son become a cock-sucker," Frank explodes. His fists fly. As Ricky crashes to the floor he realises the only truth his father will accept is a lie—but it's also his way out. Wes Bentley matches Cooper's performance as Ricky closes his eyes and surrenders. "I'm the best piece of ass in three states," he murmurs.

SEXCATRAZ

Afterwards Ricky goes to see Jane and asks her to leave with him for New York that night. She agrees. This leap into adulthood unsettles Angela, who tries to dissuade Jane on the basis that they're friends. Ricky sees right through her: "She's not your friend. She's someone you use to feel better about yourself." It's now Angela's turn for some of the same painful self-examination the film's other leads have been undergoing.

While Angela sulks in the Burnham's lounge, Frank ventures across to the garage. Lester raises the door, revealing Frank's bedraggled figure. He stumbles in wordlessly. His eyes and mouth are empty, cavernous orifices. Lester wraps his arms around Frank to give him warmth and comfort. Frank's fingers clutch Lester's skin. Then caress it. Frank has spent his life craving structure and discipline to stave off this moment—the moment he can no longer contain his desire. He kisses Lester. Lester's reaction is beautifully judged, a tensing of the frame and a momentary widening of the eyes. "You've got the wrong idea," he whispers. Frank stares at Lester in horror. Lester's rejection of what Frank perceives as his own morally illicit desires has the same effect as Teena Brandon calling the police in *Boys Don't Cry*. An irrevocable line has been crossed.

Shaken, Lester goes up to the house for a beer and finds Angela alone and vulnerable. Lester's impossible dream has come true. They kiss and gravitate to the sofa (no, not the expensive Italian silk one). Lester peels open Angela's blouse. She stares up with frightened eyes. "This is my first time." The cocksure sex talk was just a façade hiding a young woman's insecurities. Lester stares at Angela for a moment. He covers her with a blanket, redeeming himself by becoming the father that Jane should have had.

The end is just a pistol-shot away. Lester's blood spatters a white tile wall. Ricky and Jane enter. Ricky hunches down and looks into Lester's dead eyes; he smiles as he perceives the beauty of the moment. It's no great surprise when the film cuts to Frank discarding a blood-soaked T-shirt; in terms of sexual shame only he can be the killer. *American Beauty's* ending gives no clue as to whether Frank is identified as the murderer. Intriguingly, in the original screenplay it's Ricky and Jane who take the rap.

In this opening section of *Sexcatraz* we've seen how the fundamental "dirtiness" of sex—toxicity is more accurate—creates both shame and an unconscious set of boundaries within each of us as to what is and is not sexually acceptable. *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and *Wish You Were Here* show the physical and emotional violence that can ensue when these boundaries are violated, according to the formula *boundary + violation = transgression*.

Individual boundaries aggregate at the communal level, resulting in social standards—sexual covenants—that have historically been strongly enforced. *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Magdalene Sisters* and *The Conformist* illustrate the damage these covenants can cause. The impact of this damage can even echo down from the past, as happened in my case. My grandmother's affair in the early 1930s cascaded sexual shame on my family for three generations and the best part of a century, leading directly to the writing of this book.

In *Asylum* and *Auto Focus* we followed the plight of two sexual transgressors whose sexual urges spiralled into tragedy. In *American Beauty* we saw how sometimes it is those in the orbit of sexual transgressors that are most affected. The film's tragic irony is that in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein allegations Kevin Spacey, who played the role of Lester Burnham, was accused of multiple sexual assaults on men⁴⁰. Too ashamed to express his

⁴⁰ Spacey was charged with indecent assault and battery in December 2018.

SEXCATRAZ

sexuality in consensual ways and unable to contain his own transgressive urges, Spacey became Colonel Frank Fitts.

Despite the stain of Spacey's demise, *American Beauty* remains a great film. As far as illustrating the concepts of Sexcatraz it has few equals. Besides Frank Fitts, who structures his whole life around suppressing his homosexuality, look at those around him: Angela is a scared and vulnerable young woman who copes by pretending to be sexually experienced. Jane, ashamed of her body, saves up for breast augmentation. Carolyn is emotionally unavailable and status-obsessed. Lester is alienated from his family and desperately resorts to feeling something—anything—by masturbating. Every single one of them is, to use Jane's word, "phoney." They all present a façade to the world to pretend that their lives are OK when the truth is the opposite.

And this is the great price of Sexcatraz—phoniness. We are all upholders or avoiders, aggressors or transgressors. We all fear collisions between unconscious sexual boundaries and transgressive impulses, ours or otherwise. But, beyond that, ours is a society whose key emotional and sexual characteristic is phoniness. We're all petrified of revealing our true feelings and sexual desires, particularly to our partners, fearing that we'll violate an unseen boundary and suffer a similar fate to Brandon Teena, Lynda in *Wish You Were Here*, Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *American Beauty's* Frank Fitts—or even Kevin Spacey. Instead we present fake versions of ourselves to the world for our entire lives⁴¹. In this sense we are all prisoners of Sexcatraz.

We must escape from Sexcatraz—but how?

⁴¹ "The shamed person actually creates a new identity that incorporates a permanent condition of defilement."—Darrel Ray, *Sex & God*.

SEXCATRAZ

PART II

The mechanics of shame

Alcatraz was supposed to be inescapable, but that's not how Frank Morris and the Anglin brothers saw it. Where others saw a fog of impassable security measures, the Morris gang saw precise details: a vacuum cleaner motor that could be converted into a drill; an air shaft grille whose rivets could be replaced with soap; plywood and oilskins that could be fashioned into a life raft. They assembled these details into an escape plan as intricate as a Swiss watch that ultimately led them into the murky waters of San Francisco Bay.

And there they died, giving the lie to the notion that Alcatraz could be breached.

Or did they? Morris and the Anglin brothers may not have been seen again, but they may have been heard from again. The day after the breakout, a man claiming to be Frank Morris telephoned a lawyer in San Francisco. On learning of his caller's claimed identity, the lawyer hung up. Only at that point did Morris and the Anglin brothers truly disappear. The Federal Bureau of Investigations concluded that the phone call was a hoax, but the FBI's own lack of confidence in this verdict can be gauged by the fact that the case wasn't closed until 1979—seventeen years after the event and, perhaps not coincidentally, soon after the release of *Escape from Alcatraz*. A 2003 recreation of the escape attempt by the TV show *Mythbusters* confirmed that a makeshift raft could get from The Rock to the mainland. As late as 2009 the US Marshals Service was still receiving leads on the whereabouts of the Morris gang. That's pretty good going for three men who supposedly drowned in 1962.

Morris and the Anglin brothers broke out of Alcatraz by studying their surroundings in minute detail. They spent months observing their situation, noting the time of roll calls, the pattern of guards' rounds and the sweep of floodlights. They must have realised early on that the ventilation shafts were their only chance of escape and that a drill was needed to enlarge them. How long did it take them to think of a vacuum cleaner motor?

Clearly, Morris and the Anglin brothers had both patience and perseverance. But more, much more than this: to look at a vacuum cleaner and see an electric drill is a brilliant piece of lateral thinking. Although many elements—the drill, the soap rivets, the plaster casts of their heads, the makeshift raft—all had to work together for the Morris gang's attempt to succeed, the improvised drill was the breakthrough element of their plan.

The same approach is required with Sexcatraz. One must learn its landscape, study the floor plan and absorb the rhythms and rules of life inside this invisible prison, this sexual purgatory. Shame, by its very nature, lends invisibility. Like Morris and the Anglin brothers as they prepared their escape attempt, we must see through the blinding fog of the sheer variety of human sexual dysfunction to isolate the precise physical and psychological responses that are common and consistent in Sexcatraz. From those responses we can reverse-engineer the underlying mechanics, searching for the same kind of insights that allowed the Morris gang to convert a vacuum cleaner into a power drill.

To some extent we've already done this. Part I of Sexcatraz examined the trinity of sexual boundary, violation and reaction. We saw how this stems from a deep sense of

SEXCATRAZ

shame around human sexuality and how individual boundaries aggregate at the communal level into sexual covenants. We saw how those who struggle with these societal boundaries suffer physically, mentally and emotionally, often causing significant harm to themselves and others. But these are only the outward signs of Sexcatraz, the silhouette of Alcatraz glimpsed through the foggy waters of San Francisco Bay.

Part II goes deeper into the mechanics of sexual shame. All the films examined here portray heightened examples of sexual dysfunction. This allows us to slow down and freeze-frame the behaviour to observe the emotional mechanics of life inside Sexcatraz. These mechanics apply to every sex crime that makes the news, the sexual difficulties of all our acquaintances, and our own sex-related beliefs and behaviours. First up is David Lynch's dark masterpiece *Blue Velvet*.

Blue Velvet

Year: 1986

Director: David Lynch

Writer: David Lynch

Starring: Isabella Rossellini, Kyle MacLachlan, Dennis Hopper, Laura Dern

Blue Velvet dives beneath the surface of white picket fence, middle-class America into a murky underworld where profound shame traps two of the film's leading characters—Isabella Rossellini's Dorothy Vallens and Dennis Hopper's Frank Booth—in a deadly embrace of sexual misery. The film opens with a montage of Lumberton, a middle-American town where the fences are white, the roses are red and the fire engines only needed for parades. In this idyllic landscape—a metaphor for compliance with society's sexual covenants—middle-aged Tom Beaumont waters his lawn while his dog toys with the spray issuing from the only blemish in this perfect picture, a leak in the garden hose (the bursting penis as image system!).

Tom collapses with a heart seizure. Lynch's camera loses sight of the immaculately groomed garden, the regulation white picket fence and the happy-yappy dog cavorting beside Tom's inert body. It sinks into the vegetation, disappearing between the blades of grass into a dark stratum crawling with insects: a slimy, repulsive underworld poles apart from the manicured, superficial serenity of Lumberton.

Tom Beaumont's hospitalisation leads to the recall from college of his son Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan). On the way back from visiting his father, the inquisitive Jeffrey takes a short cut through a field and discovers a severed human ear. He pops it into a discarded paper bag, legs it to the police station and asks for Detective Williams (George Dickerson), a friend of his father. Detective Williams relieves Jeffrey of the ear and tells him to forget about it. This is where—in the idyllic world of Lumberton—*Blue Velvet* should end, with Detective Williams quarantining the townsfolk from a gruesome mystery while Jeffrey deputises for his father at the family hardware store.

But Jeffrey can't forget. He visits Detective Williams, only to get brushed off. Leaving the house he encounters Sandy (Laura Dern), Detective Williams' daughter, a year younger than Jeffrey and still at high school. With Lumberton's stiffly upheld covenants it's hard to imagine she's ever heard of sex, let alone experienced it; the only reason she would lie in

SEXCATRAZ

the grass would be for a picnic. In the course of *Blue Velvet*, Sandy, like Lynch's camera, will slip down between the lush blades into the moist, sexual loam beneath. As Sandy strolls down the perfectly safe streets of Lumberton at night with Jeffrey, telling him what she overheard her father saying about the ear, there's a hint of her forthcoming education: beneath her dress her nipples are attentive.

The next day, Jeffrey asks for Sandy's help: "There are opportunities in life for gaining knowledge and experience. Sometimes it is necessary to take a risk." Jeffrey proposes to disguise himself as a bug-spraying maintenance man and weasel his way into the apartment of Dorothy Vallens, a nightclub singer that Sandy's father mentioned in connection with the severed ear. Jeffrey needs Sandy to distract Dorothy by pretending to be a Jehovah's Witness so he can search the singer's apartment. Sandy is both appalled and enthralled.

Jeffrey and Sandy make their way to the ominously titled Deep River apartments. A petrified Dorothy admits him, he half-heartedly sprays the kitchen and—when there's a knock at the door—steals a key. But the knocker isn't Sandy; instead Jeffrey glimpses a man in a yellow golfing jacket (henceforth known as the 'yellow man') whose appearance aborts Sandy's planned intrusion. Intrigued, Jeffrey decides to return to the apartment that night while Dorothy sings at a club. Sandy cancels a date with her boyfriend to be Jeffrey's lookout, unaware of the sexual quicksand she's slipping into.

Jeffrey and Sandy have a beer at the Slow Club where Dorothy sings the film's title tune. Dorothy is a thoroughly sexual creature, caressing herself through the titular blue velvet as she sings. Jeffrey and Sandy are both virgins, but their responses differ. Jeffrey is fixated, not batting an eyelid as he watches Dorothy's snake-charmer act. He's ready to bite the apple. By contrast Sandy squirms, uncomfortable with her own budding sexuality as it presses against Lumberton's picket fence morality. She mimics Dorothy in stroking her own arm, but the meaning is diametrically opposite: Dorothy's is a masturbatory gesture while Sandy shudders against the faint chill of sexual fear. Sandy represses the demons within; Dorothy summons them. It's a subtle and beautiful moment.

Then it's back to the Deep River apartment where Jeffrey pokes about. Sandy toots the horn when Dorothy arrives but Jeffrey, flushing the toilet, doesn't hear. Dorothy enters. Jeffrey scampers into a conveniently slatted wardrobe. He watches as Dorothy strips to her underwear, his quest for "knowledge and experience" swiftly bearing fruit. The phone rings. Dorothy answers in a panic. She begs to speak to a child called Donnie. "Mummy loves you," she parrots to someone named Frank. The phone goes dead. With that cryptic exchange, underlined by an ominous score from Angelo Badalamenti, a threshold has been crossed.

Jeffrey watches from the wardrobe, unsure of what he just witnessed. He squirms and something tinkles to the floor. Dorothy, sharp as an overprotective tigress, seizes a kitchen knife and exposes him. Jeffrey is reduced to the babbling adolescent that he truly is. Most people in this situation would call the police, but not Dorothy: she orders him to strip. Like Stella in *Asylum*, Dorothy is sensitive to both her desires and society's condemnation of those desires. Jeffrey's illegal entry to her apartment presents Dorothy with an opportunity for sex that Jeffrey must not only oblige but also keep secret. She seizes the chance with both hands (well, her mouth, actually).

Jeffrey responds by reaching for her. She recoils, knife raised: "Don't touch me or I'll kill you." Dorothy is so ashamed of her socially illicit sexual desires that she can only access

SEXCATRAZ

Jeffrey's body by objectifying him. Before things unravel there's a rap at the door. Jeffrey scuttles back into the wardrobe as the mysterious Frank strides in.

Frank Booth, played with mesmerising volatility by Dennis Hopper, ranks as one of the great portrayals of sexual shame in film. "Hello baby," Dorothy whimpers. "Shut up. It's 'daddy', you shit-head," he retorts. An abusive tirade follows, Albert Spica (*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*) minus Peter Greenaway's bleak English humour. Dorothy shuttles obediently in response to Frank's whims. He orders her to turn off the light, a link between sex and secrecy already noted. He orders Dorothy to spread her legs. Frank gawks at her, his face twisted with disgust—both for the object of his gaze and his own fascination with it. "Don't you fucking look at me," he blurts, echoing Dorothy. Frank and Dorothy are two of a kind, both so deeply ashamed of their urges they can't abide being seen expressing the sexual aspect of their natures.

As already demonstrated by Marcelo in *The Conformist* and Colonel Fitts in *American Beauty*, Frank and Dorothy's desires violate their own internal boundaries, creating a permanent sense of shame. They are attracted and repelled by sex at the same time, an endless push-pull of conflicting emotions that renders both their lives a misery. The difference is that Frank—typically male—directs the resulting rage upon others, while Dorothy—typically female—turns it upon herself. Frank doesn't accept responsibility for his own shame. He unconsciously blames women for his misery and seeks to punish them for the inexpressible urges he constantly feels. He also wants empathy; he wants Dorothy to experience the pain that the sight of her naked body makes him feel.

Frank pulls out an oxygen mask and inhales. With his blood fully oxygenated another layer of inhibition falls away. "Mummy, mummy," he whimpers. "Baby wants to fuck." Frank's baby talk is significant: he's a supposedly mature man but shame renders him utterly immature in all matters sexual. Frank slaps Dorothy for watching him. Quiet pleasure fills her face. She has received the punishment she feels her illicit hungers merit.

Frank sprawls onto Dorothy and, like Dave in *Wish You Were Here*, quickly climaxes. Premature ejaculation is common among men with significant sexual shame. It doesn't stem from physical over-stimulation but from emotional overwhelm. It's a coping mechanism, a means of short-circuiting the sex act—so deeply desired in the first place—to escape the fear, disgust and shame of it. Once again it's the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction.

Having climaxed, Frank's emotions instantly switch polarity, a pattern that will be seen repeatedly in this book. Lust turns to disgust, which he externalises by slapping Dorothy. Then Frank's gone, leaving Jeffrey—and the audience—stunned.

Jeffrey gingerly emerges from the wardrobe, forgotten during this long, visceral scene. Interestingly, Lynch doesn't show a single shot of Jeffrey witnessing Frank's sexual violence against Dorothy or her fulfilment by it. Jeffrey is certainly affected by it, as we shall see. Did Lynch fear he was giving his audience too much to handle and might alienate them completely if he showed his supposedly sympathetic lead witnessing sexual abuse without responding in the manner expected of a Hollywood hero?

Jeffrey consoles Dorothy. "Do you like me?" Dorothy begs in the same infantile manner—and for the same reason—as Frank. "Yes," Jeffrey replies, suspecting that any other answer is ill advised. She invites him to fondle her breasts. "Feel me," she pleads, "hit me." Dorothy craves sex but believes she must be punished for that craving. Jeffrey refuses.

SEXCATRAZ

Dorothy hurries into the bathroom and stares at her own reflection. Frank and Dorothy spend their entire lives yearning for sex, having unfulfilling sex, or feeling disgusted by sex. It's the same destructive cycle modelled by Bob Crane in *Auto Focus*. Whatever they do feels transgressive, feeding their constant shame—hence the way Dorothy coerces sex from Jeffrey and Frank in turn coerces it from Dorothy. “Help me,” she whimpers. Jeffrey, utterly at sea, recognises his cue to leave.

Jeffrey meets Sandy and recounts his adventure, though he's somewhat economical with the truth. Openly talking about sex is another prohibition of our covenants; that's why sex education remains a contentious issue. Jeffrey knows Dorothy is in danger but can't go to Detective Williams because he entered her apartment illegally. Nor does he want what Dorothy did to him recorded in a police file. “Why are there people like Frank?” Jeffrey wails. “I don't know,” Sandy replies, ignorant of the way that sexual covenants both create and then reject the Frank Booths of this world. It's so much easier to focus on the sweet and the sugary, and at that moment Jeffrey and Sandy fall in love.

Jeffrey gazes meaningfully at Sandy. “I'd better go,” she whimpers. One can almost feel the goose pimples of sexual fear prickling her skin. And here *Blue Velvet* could, once again, have a natural ending, with Jeffrey both chastened and rewarded by his experience with Dorothy, but without the status quo—Jeffrey's virginity and Sandy's relationship with her boyfriend, the quarterback in the school football team—being disturbed by his foray into Lumberton's sexual underworld.

It is Sandy's rejection of Jeffrey—specifically, the rejection of his sexual desire—that propels *Blue Velvet* forward. Jeffrey returns to Dorothy's apartment, where his full initiation into manhood is completed off-screen. Afterwards he watches Dorothy sing at the Slow Club. As Jeffrey looks around he tenses in shock. There's Frank Booth, his violence utterly quelled. As Dorothy sings “I can still feel blue velvet through my tears,” Frank himself sheds a tear. It rolls down his cheek onto a scrap of her dress that he clings to like a life raft. It's a brilliant moment: the most brilliant—and among the least remarked—in the film. Once again David Lynch refuses to abide by Hollywood's hero/villain rulebook. Frank is a monster, yes, but he's human too; and here his humanity rolls right down his cheek. Jeffrey—and society at large—has trouble assimilating the paradox.

Jeffrey tails Frank out of the Slow Club. Frank leads Jeffrey into the true underworld of Lumberton, a wasteland of derelict factories and warehouses. Metal girders and gantries loom out of the darkness. Steam billows from unseen vents, the by-product of nameless industry. The outlines of giant levers rise and fall on brick walls, a shadow theatre of mechanical coitus. Jeffrey stakes out Frank's apartment building and sees him with the yellow man. Later, relating this to Sandy, he voices his motives. “I'm seeing something that was always hidden... I'm in the middle of a mystery”: the mystery of how human sexuality gets warped. Welcome to Sexcatraz.

Again, Jeffrey turns to Dorothy—only this time he hits her. Jeffrey is becoming Frank. Or, more accurately, Jeffrey mimics Frank's unhealthy sexuality as a result of his inability to express it in a healthy manner. With Jeffrey finally acceding to Dorothy's craving for violent sex, *Blue Velvet* loses its last foothold on conventional characterisation. But, leaving Dorothy's apartment, Jeffrey runs into Frank.

Frank forces Jeffrey and Dorothy into his car. He takes them into a Lynchian *demimonde* populated by drug dealers, heavies and prostitutes. *Blue Velvet* veers

SEXCATRAZ

somewhat off-track but it is still riveting stuff. Frank finally parks in a disused quarry, snorts some oxygen and slaps Dorothy. Jeffrey intervenes, the Hollywood hero arisen at last. While a prostitute sways on the roof of the car to a bittersweet Roy Orbison tune, Frank and his lackeys pummel Jeffrey then abandon him to an uncomfortable night in the quarry.

Jeffrey recognises he's out of his depth by going to the police station to tell Detective Williams everything he knows—only to decamp when he discovers that Williams shares an office with the yellow man. Failing to suspect that Sandy's father might be in Frank's gang, Jeffrey visits Detective Williams and unburdens himself. Jeffrey promises that he's through with playing the private dick. But when he calls at the Williams home to pick up Sandy for a date, Jeffrey sees Detective Williams with the yellow man: the odds are worsening.

Sandy takes Jeffrey to a high school party where she finally kisses him. "I love you, Jeffrey," she whispers. "I love you too." It's a long way from the childish "Do you like me?" of the emotionally immature Dorothy. Sandy may not be ready for sex but it's clear that her boyfriend, football team notwithstanding, is on the way out... almost. Leaving the party, a sports car follows them to the Beaumont house. Out steps Sandy's boyfriend. Jeffrey is about to get another beating when Dorothy—naked, battered and in shock—stumbles out of the greenery into his arms. Sandy's boyfriend realises that being a high school football star isn't the education he thought it was and hastily retreats.

But Sandy is in for a bigger shock. "He put it in me," Dorothy blurts, shattering Sandy's innocence. Dorothy's infantile language hints at a sexual maturation process that stalled during adolescence as she became aware of society's restrictive covenants and her urge to violate them. Dorothy pleads for Jeffrey to help her son. An ambulance carts her away. Sandy slaps Jeffrey—out of love, not hate—before he makes for the Deep River apartments to unravel the story.

With Dorothy's exit the tension dissipates. Lynch's efforts to resolve the drug-dealing sub-plot feel lackadaisical; the foreground tale of sexual shame gives *Blue Velvet* its traction. Sandy calls her father while Frank enters Dorothy's apartment. Jeffrey grabs a gun and hides in the wardrobe. Frank pumps himself up on oxygen, opens the wardrobe and... Jeffrey shoots. Dorothy is reunited with her son. The veneer quickly closes over Frank's sordid underworld, the picket fences glisten pristinely and the American idyll returns.

This rapid glossing-over is perhaps the film's most telling point. We don't want to know about the Franks and Dorothys of this world, with their inability to express sex in socially accepted ways; we just want them to fade to black. Nonetheless, if we are to escape from *Sexcatraz*, we must be willing to examine their behaviour without judgment.

Frank Booth and Dorothy Vallens demonstrate a number of character traits that are particular to *Sexcatraz*: an immaturity around sex, the continuous push-pull of simultaneous sexual attraction and repulsion, and the rollercoaster of endless misery that ensues. For all the accuracy of the characterisation, they are clearly both products of the thriller genre; their character arcs are unlike anyone most of us might actually know in real life. The protagonists of the next two films, though still fictional, are significantly more realistic. The first of these is Vincent Gallo's much-maligned *The Brown Bunny*.

SEXCATRAZ

The Brown Bunny

Year: 2003

Director: Vincent Gallo

Writer: Vincent Gallo

Starring: Vincent Gallo, Chloë Sevigny

The Brown Bunny is a road movie about a disaffected motorcycle racer, Bud, who travels across America to a race in California where he hopes to reunite with his former girlfriend Daisy. The film features long, uninterrupted takes of Bud driving, interspersed with cryptic, dysfunctional encounters with several women he meets along the way. It ends with a sexually explicit meltdown between the emotionally crippled Bud, and Daisy, a drug addict with a penchant for self-destruction.

Bunny premiered at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, where it generated a media storm for its climactic oral sex scene between Gallo—who wrote, produced, directed, filmed, edited and played *Bunny*'s lead actor—and indie A-list actress and Oscar nominee Chloë Sevigny (*Boys Don't Cry*). Noted critic [Roger Ebert](#) walked out of the Cannes screening, labelling *The Brown Bunny* “the worst film in the history of Cannes” and opining that those who stayed till the bitter end only did so to boo.

Gallo revealed that Sevigny was his third choice for the role of Daisy and that he had earlier hired and fired both Winona Ryder and Kirsten Dunst. What no one has satisfactorily explained—least of all Gallo himself—is the deeper meaning of *The Brown Bunny*, or why three actresses of the calibre of Ryder, Dunst and Sevigny signed on for this supposedly wretched piece. The superficial plotline about Bud's cross-country drive is as obvious as it is meaningless. The film's onetime official website⁴² described it as a love story; Rob Larsen at [DrunkenFist](#) derided it as “a road movie stuck in the wrong gear” while others dismissed it as second-rate porn. *The Brown Bunny* is none of these: it is a harrowing and courageous depiction of the alienation, both from society and from the self, of a man in the frigid grip of profound sexual shame.

The opening scene establishes the film's idiosyncratic style: shaky home cinema shots of motorcycles circling a racetrack somewhere in America. There is no dialogue to key you into the characters, no signposting voice-over, no bombastic Hollywood score to orient your feelings; the viewer is simply subjected to a stream of images and must find their own way. The entire film is like this. If you prefer your cinema served on a silver platter—or object to graphic fellatio scenes—then *The Brown Bunny* is not for you.

After the race, rendered meaningless by a lack of context (Where is Bud? What is he racing for? Where did he finish?), Bud stops to refuel his van and meets an aimless petrol pump girl (Bambi-eyed newcomer Anna Vareschi). For a man confident at piloting a two-wheeled machine at 200 miles per hour, Bud is remarkably diffident at steering a conversation about refuelling a transit van. He hangs his head. He whispers, stumbles with his phrases, avoids eye contact. These are all symptoms of shame—a fear of presenting the self. He convinces the girl to join his trans-American quest by the simple means of saying

42 www.brownbunny.net is no longer retrievable.

SEXCATRAZ

“please” a couple of times. But, while she’s stashing her baubles in a knapsack, Bud—with equal simplicity—just drives off, leaving both the girl and the audience suspended.

Long driving scenes follow. Bud stops at a dilapidated clapboard house. It feels like Ohio but could be Timbuktu. It’s immaterial. In a well-written script every element of a film is supposed to matter. In *The Brown Bunny* a good many things don’t matter; that is exactly the point of them. Inside the house, Daisy’s mother doesn’t remember Bud, who grew up next door. Nor would she: sexual shame renders its victims invisible. People with significant shame have a curiously self-erasing quality. Daisy’s mother hasn’t heard from her daughter in a while. From the mother’s zombie stare we can understand why Daisy might not spend her evenings calling home. In fact it’s a portent of a much darker truth, a portent delivered in a singularly offhand manner that only comes back to jar our memories as the final reel—and with it Bud’s zipper—unwinds.

More driving follows. Bud stops to buy a Coke from a vending machine. He passes a woman, played by former *Saturday Night Live* presenter Cheryl Tiegs. In the film’s most poignant and elegiac scene, enhanced by its total lack of dialogue, Bud and the woman try to strike a relationship. The craving for human touch, particularly from Tiegs, is palpable. But the shame of the implicit sexual dimension is too much for Bud. He can’t relate to a woman without becoming aware of—and being disgusted by—his own urges. Bud knows, deep down, the sole purpose of him relating to her in any way whatsoever is so he can fuck her. He can hide this from the world but not from himself; hence his sudden flight when the petrol pump attendant accepted his offer of a ride.

Bud drags himself away, forbidden from allowing himself the solace of human touch by the nausea that wells like vomit in his stomach. While it took Brandon’s gender identity crisis to trigger John Lotter and Tom Nissen’s shame in *Boys Don’t Cry*, the simple act of approaching a woman—knowing that his implicit goal is sex—shames Bud into withdrawal. Bud’s constant sense of having to retreat to conceal his shameful sexuality distances him from the outside world. This estrangement from reality is an outward symptom of **sexual alienation**.



Definition: Sexual alienation

Alienation: “cause to feel isolated.” (Compact OED)

Sexual alienation is the state of feeling emotionally remote from both others and oneself caused by the sexual aspect of one’s psyche being rejected due to shame.

Back to the van... More driving. The shots are unflattering. Long, static takes through the van’s bug-smearred windshield. Evening rain. Driving into a city. Taillights dissolve into a blur. At times *The Brown Bunny* rises above its deliberately crude construction to become the most truthful of trans-American road movies. It’s hard to know whom to credit.

Bud stops at the Bonneville Salt Flats. He unloads his motorcycle, bump-starts it and disappears into the shimmering haze in a long, wide take that’s as painful on the eyes as the sun reflecting off the adamantine crust of the flats. It’s another meaningless moment that somehow adds gravity to a film intent on capturing emptiness. Bud’s next stop is Las Vegas, where he talks to a prostitute on the pretext that he likes her necklace. Unlike the Tiegs

SEXCATRAZ

scene and the salt flats, the moment is unconvincing. For once Gallo's touch for making the meaningless feel meaningful through its meaninglessness goes astray.

Leaving Las Vegas, Gallo's story is on the home straight. Bud stops at Daisy's house, bangs on the fly-screen door for a pedantically long time—everything he does is wrung out beyond its natural lifespan; shame makes it difficult to accept reality—and leaves a note for her. Bud checks into a motel in LA. He phones reception and tells them he's expecting a girl called Daisy. Can they please send her up?

And then Daisy appears in Bud's room. The suddenness of her arrival is a clue but in the moment it too gets missed. Bud sits hunched on the bed, not even raising his head for the woman for whom he's crossed America. Daisy clings to her shoulder bag. Their talk is awkward, tangential, defeated. It's also barely audible. It doesn't matter; body language says it all. Gallo is back on solid ground. We are watching two children in adults' bodies coming to grips with difficult emotions. "Do you like me, Bud?" Like Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, Daisy uses the word 'like' in a childish way to describe sexual attraction. "Yes, I like you. I like you best of all." The adult word 'love', complete with slippery sexual ramifications, has not entered their lexicon. Bud's efforts at reaching Daisy are pathetic, a teenager fumbling with his first bra hook.

Then the fellatio scene unfolds—as does Bud's manhood, prosthetic or otherwise. Chloë Sevigny avers the scene wasn't faked; others disagree. No one is willing to perform the necessary comparisons and anyway, once again it doesn't really matter. The scene begins in the same frank manner it will end. Bud pulls down Daisy's bra. As he fondles her breasts the bra hangs around her midriff, an unsightly reminder of society's fundamental antipathy to human sexuality. Daisy's attention turns to the bulge in Bud's trousers. The rest you will have to watch for yourselves; as she demonstrated in *Kids* and *Boys Don't Cry*, Sevigny has no fear of sexually charged material.

The Brown Bunny turns on the moment that the fellatio scene climaxes. Until this point the entire film has been about Bud's quest—fundamentally sexual—to reunite with Daisy. Bud has now seemingly achieved his desire: he has reached Daisy and she has drawn his sex, sucked the poison from the wound.

And at this moment, just like Frank Booth after his premature climax in *Blue Velvet*, Bud's shame lashes out from the darkest, most painful place in his psyche. He turns his back on Daisy, retreats into his shell and echoes Sister Bridget in *The Magdalene Sisters*: "You're a whore. You're a fucking whore. I hate you." Bud doesn't know love but he does know hate. Oh yes, because—as we saw with both Dorothy Vallens and Frank Booth—he loathes himself every moment of every day. Especially now, when Daisy has given him what he most wants but which, like Dorothy, he believes it's wrong for him to have. It's a brilliant portrayal of the double-edged blade of sexual shame.

Like all artists seeking to depict shame, regardless of the medium, Gallo is an artist working without a language. He doesn't seem to know the term or fully understand the devastating effectiveness of its Swiss watch mechanism. All he knows is what he intuitively feels. Bud's behaviour, how the crushing darkness at the heart of Bud's psyche manifests in his world. This much is clear from an interview with Rebecca Murray for [About Entertainment](#) where an increasingly irate Gallo rails against the incessant question of why the graphic fellatio scene was necessary: "I don't need the sex scene in the film, because I didn't need to make the film. But that film includes the sex scene. It's not a separate part. It's not a

SEXCATRAZ

choice.” Gallo doesn’t seem to know—in the conscious, intellectual sense—why the fellatio scene is integral to *The Brown Bunny*. He knows it at an intuitive, unconscious level—and he’s absolutely right.

Gallo must also have known the sex scene would be the focus of media interest, and negative interest at that. Yet he went with it. He knew he was saying something important, even though he couldn’t articulate it to the prudish hacks that savaged his film. In the wake of its theatrical release, many shortcomings were posited for *The Brown Bunny*. A lack of emotional courage by its creator is not among them.

Following the sex scene, the revelations come thick and fast. Shots of Bud and Daisy curled together on the bed of his blindingly bright motel room, its walls of suffocating pastel, are intercut with grainy flashbacks. Daisy was carrying Bud’s child. She got drunk and stoned at a party. Bud stumbled upon Daisy, naked and incoherent, men queuing to take advantage. Bud fled. Shame prevented him from accessing his love, his compassion and his courage. Instead he saw only the whore in Daisy and the whore in himself for having been where Daisy’s abusers so casually inserted themselves.

Bud fled into the humid Los Angeles night, returning to the party only to find an ambulance outside, its lights bathing Daisy’s body on a gurney. “I died,” she whispers as the ambulance drives away, “I threw up and I choked and I died.” Then it’s back to the motel. Only this time Bud is alone, wrestling with the mass of mixed emotions, from love to loss to cowardice to shame to self-disgust, arising from his sexual entanglement with Daisy and her subsequent death.

The Brown Bunny closes the next day with shots of Bud driving out to the racetrack. As originally intended, the film was to end with Bud committing suicide while leading the race. *Bunny* was submitted to Cannes in unfinished form. Its acceptance—on merit, in my view—forced Gallo to abandon the complex racing crash scene for a simple, abstract epilogue. It’s an ambiguous ending that leaves the viewer to choose Bud’s fate. Though the film climaxes in California, it’s unlikely many viewers will imagine a Hollywood ending.

Following its savaging at Cannes, Gallo cut *Bunny* from a ponderous 118 minutes to the DVD’s 89-minute version. It’s too idiosyncratic to be a great film, but as a stark depiction of the misery of sexual alienation it has few peers. As our understanding of sexual shame grows and our language around it develops, Vincent Gallo’s film will be recognised as a pioneering work. *The Brown Bunny* is a film whose stock will rise in time.

Ultimately, *The Brown Bunny* is a portrait of the drudgery that characterises sexual alienation. If its 89 minutes feel like an ordeal, spare a thought for Bud: his entire life is like this. He is, in sexual-political terms, an avoider. He has no friends, no family, no surname. He spends his life crisscrossing America in an unmarked van, occasionally donning a face-concealing crash helmet to pointlessly circle a racetrack, an anonymous also-ran on whom the spotlight never falls. Bud pursues sex only to shun it when it’s available. Although invisible to him, the push-pull mechanics of sexual shame totally shape his life.

And this is the crux of *The Brown Bunny*: there are millions of people like Bud out there, with poor emotional cohesion and correspondingly low social skills, leading dead-end lives because of their overwhelming sexual shame. They too are trapped in Sexcatraz; only a paradigm shift to a society that no longer judges sex as fundamentally shameful can set them free. This notion of sex as inherently negative becomes clearer in the next film, which features one of the most remarkable protagonists ever committed to celluloid.

SEXCATRAZ

The Piano Teacher

Year: 2001

Director: Michael Haneke

Writer: Michael Haneke (from Elfriede Jelinek's novel)

Starring: Isabelle Huppert, Benoît Magimel, Annie Girardot

The Piano Teacher (*La Pianiste* in the film's native French), based on the novel *Die Klavierspielerin* by the Nobel Prize-winning author Elfriede Jelinek, tells the story of Erika Kohut, a highly talented but socially dysfunctional piano teacher approaching middle age.

The source of this dysfunction is immediately apparent: the film opens with Erika (Isabelle Huppert) arriving home to be quizzed like a wayward teenager by her God-awful mother (Annie Girardot, revelling in a waspish role). The sexual underbelly of the mother's concerns emerges when she rifles through Erika's bag and finds a gaudy frock, which she promptly rips. Here again is the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction at work. Erika responds like a fragile teen, crying and whining in the face of this bullying. Like Frank and Dorothy in *Blue Velvet* and Bud and Daisy in *The Brown Bunny*, Erika's emotional maturity has been stunted by sexual shame.

But it's soon back to what passes for normality in the Kohut household: Erika and her mother—whose name is never given—have made up by the time they sidle into the same double bed. Lying in the dark, the opposite side of the mother's worldview surfaces: she still dreams of her daughter being a concert pianist, hissing that, "no one must surpass you, my girl." The action shifts to a montage of Erika's piano lessons, where she passes withering indictments of her students' meagre talents. The mother's propensity for black and white judgements (frock = bad, piano = good) is replicated in Erika's behaviour (no skill = bad, skill = good). There are no shades of grey, let alone fifty, in the Kohut worldview.

Erika and her mother attend a private piano recital. Erika performs in the first half, intently watched by a young engineering student, Walter Klemmer (Benoît Magimel). In the second half Walter demonstrates his own skills. While Walter plays, Haneke's camera locks onto Erika. Isabelle Huppert's face is perfect for the part: high eyebrows arched in perpetual disapproval; the tight mouth pursed from the bitterness of life's fruits; the endless mental machinations; relentless judgment in her eyes. They all stem from the need to stay within the narrow tramlines of society's sexual covenants. Like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, Erika is an avoider—at least for now.

The handsome, cocksure Walter finds Erika, aloof and talented, hugely appealing. He tries to impress her but she dismisses the young upstart. Then it's back to the humdrum of a lesson with Anna, a snivelling girl played with great commitment by Anna Sigalevitch. After the lesson Anna's mother accosts Erika, concerned that her daughter may lose her place as the soloist in an upcoming college recital. Erika makes noncommittal noises. It's a small beat that shapes much of what's to come.

The film then veers sharply into sexual territory as the subtext from the opening scene takes centre stage. Erika visits a convenience store-cum-sex shop (the *The Piano Teacher* was filmed in Austria, in case you're wondering). Clearly no stranger to the locale, Erika stares down the other clients, who are embarrassed and discomfited by a female presence in this usually male domain.

SEXCATRAZ

Erika enters a booth and watches some porn. She stares at images of fellatio with the same fixed expression as Walter's piano recital. Something gives in Erika's steely façade. Her gloved hand recovers a used tissue, the jetsam of a previous occupant, and raises it to her nose. The image is strikingly reminiscent of Frank Booth oxygenating himself in *Blue Velvet*. Erika's face softens... her eyelids, normally so unyielding, flutter. Twenty-five minutes into *The Piano Teacher*, the audience finds itself in the highly unusual position of watching a semen-sniffing heroine relaxing in the reflected glow of hard porn.

Undeterred by Erika's rejection, Walter intrudes into her life. He interrupts a rehearsal then applies to join her class. Erika disapproves but the selection board overrules her. Erika goes home, grabs a razor blade and slashes her own genitalia. It may seem an odd reaction, but it makes sense in terms of sexual shame. Like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, any form of male-female relationship for Erika—outside of student and teacher—ultimately reduces to sex, and Erika knows Walter wants more than a musical education. Erika cuts herself as a coping mechanism, both as punishment for her sexual feelings—a trait repeatedly seen in this book—and to physically prevent the sex act.

From the behaviour of Erika's mother it's easy to imagine the sexual role modelling Erika was subjected to during childhood. She would've been rewarded every time she played the piano but punished every time she displayed any sexual curiosity. These two behaviours became polarised as 'good' and 'bad'; to earn her mother's approval (allaying primal survival fears) Erika would have embraced one and rejected the other.

Psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich describes this process in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*: "The conflict that originally takes place between the child's [sexual] desires and the parent's suppression of these desires later becomes the conflict between instinct and morality within the person." This lays the groundwork for the push-pull treadmill of sexual attraction and repulsion displayed by Dorothy Vallens, Frank Booth, Bud and now Erika. Reich describes the trajectory of this conflict: "The more he resisted his sexuality, the more imperative his desires became. Hence, his moralistic... inhibitions had to be applied more rigidly."

But Erika is unaware of this. All she knows is the nausea, triggered by shame, which she experiences in any sexually charged situation. Like Albert Spica in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, she's unaware of her own twisted beliefs. The next time she visits the sex shop she sees one of her male students flicking through a porn magazine. Blind to her own hypocrisy, Erika gives the student a baleful glare before striding off.

The student's next lesson doesn't go well. He slumps dejectedly over the piano while Erika rails at him: "It sounds as clear as a muddy windscreen. Probably due to the images lodged in your mind." Huppert is magnificent in this, the film's best scene. After further invective the student apologises. "Why?" Erika asks, refusing to let him off the hook. "Are you sorry because you're a pig... or because all women are bitches for making you a pig?" Erika believes that her innate sexuality pollutes her. The shame of that moral pollution contaminates her every moment.

Into this cauldron steps Walter for his first lesson. He tries to keep it light and cosy, revealing his infatuation with Erika. She will have none of it, mechanically repelling Walter to prevent him crossing her sexual boundaries. But afterwards she follows him to an ice hockey practice. Erika's eyelids give that tell tale flutter earlier seen in the porn booth.

SEXCATRAZ

Erika walks into a drive-through cinema. She wanders, seemingly lost among the metal hulks of the cars, peering through their windows until she finds what she's looking for: a couple having sex. Erika creeps closer, drawn by the sight of the man's backside thrusting rhythmically into his unseen, moaning partner. Erika's mouth, normally so tight, slackens. The woman's cries quicken. Erika squats and urinates by the car. Like Lester masturbating in *American Beauty*, it's the only connection with her sexuality she can manage. Humanity animates Erika's face as she pees, redeeming the moment. Just then the man looks up and sees her. Erika flees into the night and back into the bastion of Sexcatraz.

Then comes a scene some critics have dismissed as incomprehensible. It's a practice for the college recital. Anna turns up late, her usual sobbing self. Walter, with his light touch, soon has Anna laughing but this exchange doesn't pass unnoticed. Erika goes to the cloakroom, smashes a glass and puts the shards in Anna's coat pocket. In a moment of pure sexual jealousy, Erika shifts from avoider to transgressor. In her polarised world, in that bat of her eyelids at the hockey rink, she commits sexually to Walter and will brook no rival. In the baleful light of sexual shame the scene makes perfect sense.

After the practice, Anna delves into her coat pocket and screams. Erika and Walter look on as Anna raises her bloodied hand. Erika excuses herself by saying that "the sight of blood makes me ill." This isn't just a writer's trick to transition to the next scene, the pivotal toilet encounter featured on the film's poster. As seen in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, those who suffer from sexual shame struggle with all the animal aspects of life: instinct, sexuality, physicality, rats and mice, spiders, blood. The film's success stems from the accuracy of the underlying novel, its adaptation for the screen and Isabelle Huppert's unflinching portrayal of Erika.

Walter follows Erika into the clinically white toilet. They kiss, Erika's arms hanging at her sides, flaccid as limp celery. Like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, her shame prevents her from embracing what she desperately desires. They grope and slide to the cold tile floor. Walter wants a full relationship with Erika, physical and emotional. For Erika, the two are mutually exclusive: she despises herself for wanting the former while feeling that she doesn't deserve the latter. Walter seeks a romantic moment but Erika turns it into a coldly sexual one by unzipping and stroking him. As he approaches climax Erika stops, frustrating Walter. She tells him she will write down on paper what he can do to her. Both actions stem from Erika's shame-driven worldview where sex and love are irreconcilable. She assumes that if she satisfies Walter he'll lose interest in her—then how will she get what she craves?

The film's remaining time centres on how far Walter will go along with Erika's self-destructive shenanigans to convince her that his love is real. At his next lesson he receives Erika's sexually degrading to-do list. He follows Erika home. Walter doesn't believe she's serious until she produces a box full of fetish toys. How long she has dreamed of those filthy implements being used on her! "The urge to be beaten has been in me for years," she confesses amid tears⁴³. Huppert's performance as the slowly disintegrating Erika is superb.

Walter storms out in disgust. Erika crawls into her mother's bed. She is subjected to a barrage of passive-aggressive cant, with sex a constant presence: we reserve our deepest insults for the sexual aspects of those we profess to love the most. Erika bursts into tears again, clings to her mother and reiterates her love. It's an important moment to remember when assessing the climax of *The Piano Teacher*.

⁴³ "The continual consciousness of a loathsome secret which has to be concealed from others, morally degrades him in his own eyes."—Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

SEXCATRAZ

Despite Erika's pledge to her mother, she's on the same slippery slope as Harry Black in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Bob Crane in *Auto Focus* and Stella in *Asylum*, and—for the moment—equally unable to stop. The next scene sees Erika at the skating rink, where she lures Walter into a storeroom. This time she strokes him to climax. Erika immediately vomits; the sex act feels so illicit it generates a nausea she cannot stomach. Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* and Bud in *The Brown Bunny* have also shown this polarity switch immediately after climax. It's a pattern that consistently accompanies sexual shame.

Erika's shame-driven behaviour finally punctures Walter's Zen-like calmness. He turns up at Erika's house in the middle of the night, full of sex and fury. Erika's mother goes to call the police. Walter, not before time, locks her in another room. He quotes Erika's desire to be hit then complies. This is Dorothy and Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet* all over again, except that in *The Piano Teacher* Erika begs Walter to stop; only by living out her self-punishment fantasy does she finally find a shred of self-worth. His rage expended, Walter forces himself on Erika. Again she asks him to stop but he can't, a coiled spring unwinding mechanically until it's spent. With this joyless exchange his interest in Erika ceases.

The scene's aftermath, when Erika liberates her mother, is omitted. This feels like a misstep; the film's crucial relationship is not between Erika and Walter but between Erika and her mother. Erika's response to her mother's ire would have been instructive; it almost feels like the scene may have been written or even filmed but later deleted. Instead there's a jarring cut to preparations for the college recital where Erika herself replaces the injured Anna. There's a brief encounter between Erika and Walter, inconclusive and unconvincing. Erika excuses herself for a moment. Then, alone in the foyer, she pulls out a knife and stabs herself just above the heart. Erika walks out of the recital and into the night as the closing credits roll.

Like *The Brown Bunny*, the film's ending is ambiguous. Unlike *Bunny*, and despite the fundamental similarity of the two films' protagonists, *The Piano Teacher* was the runaway success of the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, winning the awards for Best Actor, Best Actress, the Grand Prize of the Jury and a nomination for the prestigious Golden Palm, independent cinema's equivalent to a Best Film Oscar.

Given an understanding of sexual shame, it's possible to deconstruct the film's open ending. Erika's self-injury represents an attack on her mother—who will be publically humiliated by Erika's non-appearance—and indicates a deep, lifelong resentment against having to play the piano to appear 'good'. Often mistaken as a power play between the sexes, *The Piano Teacher* is actually a portrait of the sexual shame Erika acquired during her childhood and her rebellion against it. Although it covers only a narrow period in Erika's adulthood, the key events that shaped her life occurred during her adolescence.

The same is true of every protagonist of every film studied to date. Let's turn the spotlight onto three films that show how sexual boundaries form during adolescence to completely shape adult beliefs, behaviours and responses to sex.

SEXCATRAZ

Slowly setting concrete

Children have no conscious knowledge of their society's sexual covenants (in fact, many adults don't either). Yet, by the time they come of age, adolescents have accepted, internalised and—crucially—normalised all the negative reactions to what society deems as inappropriate sexual expression seen in the previous chapters. Some of this programming is clearly protective and valuable. However, as the films examined so far show, if these covenants are too restrictive they can lead to either aggression or transgression with highly destructive results.

This formative process, like slowly setting concrete, takes place in the unconscious as we progress through adolescence into adulthood⁴⁴. While it may seem difficult to objectify the precise moment when society's hidden sexual covenants concretely impact the lives of teenagers, there is a film that does precisely that—Giuseppe Tornatore's Academy Award-nominated coming-of-age drama *Malèna*.

Malèna

Year: 2000

Director: Giuseppe Tornatore

Writers: Giuseppe Tornatore, Luciano Vincenzoni

Starring: Monica Bellucci, Giuseppe Sulfaro

Malèna captures one of the most profound moments in all our lives: the instant when blissfully ignorant adolescence collides with the reality of society's unspoken sexual taboos. This is the moment of innocence lost. The loser is Renato Amoroso (Giuseppe Sulfaro), a teenager on the cusp of manhood just as Italy enters World War II. The story begins on 10 June 1940: the day Italian dictator Benito Mussolini declares war on Britain and France. However, this isn't the most cataclysmic event in Renato's day. His father (a hand-waving Luciano Federico) has bought Renato his first bicycle. This allows Renato to join a gang of older boys whose chief preoccupations are the length of their penises (in thumbs, a somewhat variable unit of measure) and ogling the town's curviest women.

Enter Monica Bellucci's titular Malèna. She seems to be the only woman aware of her sexuality, of the grace of her movement, the shape of her body and its effect on others—and not just Renato's gang. While the other womenfolk abide by the prevailing sex-negative covenants by garbing themselves in drab cassocks or discarded potato sacks, Malèna dresses in a shapely outfit that makes her stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. Her underwear is equally *outré*. As if savouring an after dinner glass of *vin santo*, Tornatore's camera dawdles over the clasp of Malèna's suspenders bulging beneath her skirt. It is this unhurried observation of sexual minutiae that gives Tornatore's film its power.

⁴⁴ While it seems self-evident that parental role modeling is the key factor in child development, psychological researcher Judith Rich Harris' '50-0-50 principle' suggests that genetics (50%) and social influences (50%) are in fact the keys. For the purposes of *Sexcatraz*, the main point is that by the time we enter adulthood we have, by hook or by crook, internalized our society's sexual shame.

SEXCATRAZ

The reason for Malèna's difference is that she's an outsider. She has married into the town and her husband Nino Scordia has been mobilised in response to Mussolini's war cry. As a married woman, Malèna is beyond reproach—in spite of her deeply cut outfit, which reveals a crucifix nestled between her breasts as she strolls along the seaside promenade where Renato and his gang lie in wait. And thus the collision occurs between Malèna's comparatively thinly veiled sexuality and the object that stiffens of its own accord inside Renato's pants. She, of course, totally fails to notice Renato. He, conversely, sees nothing but Malèna.

Renato skips school, climbs a convenient tree and peeks through Malèna's window. Like Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, he seeks the juicy fruits of "knowledge and experience." And like Jeffrey, his hopes are soon fulfilled: the strap of Malèna's negligee slips and a breast swings free. That is pretty much the whole plot. Renato spies on Malèna as the fortunes of war rise and ebb around them. The story is mono-dimensional, as are most of its characters; even Bellucci's Malèna is a blank canvas others, male and female alike, project their sexual frustrations on. Renato is amongst the most passive protagonists in film history as he spies on Malèna. That is Tornatore's great sleight of hand: he has made voyeurism a subject fit for the Oscars. Cinema is by nature a voyeuristic medium. Tornatore has merely turned the screw, building on David Lynch's Jeffrey to create a new and uncomfortable breed of protagonist: the peeping tom as hero.

Renato progresses from voyeurism to fantasy. In an inversion of his passive real-world relationship with Malèna, Renato actively inserts her into his imaginings. It starts innocently enough with Malèna asking Renato to run an errand. Then the fantasy darkens: coins slip from Malèna's hand, as if she's paying Renato to ogle her. As he retrieves the soiled silver she raises her thin wrap, exposing a gleaming thigh to his close and eager face.

Renato's fantasies become masturbatory. He leafs through a pocketbook of nude paintings. And there she is, in the book: Malèna, unashamedly inviting him to feast his eyes. A shaft of light spills across the bed where Renato plays with himself. He looks up—and there's Malèna, leaning languidly in the doorway, wearing a virginal white dress with a nice big bow that may as well be labelled 'Pull here'. All of this Renato takes in his stride as the natural process of male adolescence. Safe inside a cocoon of masturbation and fantasy, Renato fails to notice the community's sexual covenants coiling to strike.

Nino is reported killed. The protection afforded to Malèna by marriage disappears. The womenfolk who stood silent now gossip about who might be warming Malèna's bed. This is sexual shame at work; she dresses like a slut, *ipso facto* she is a slut. Her brazen dress had to be tolerated while she was respectably married. Shorn of that respectability she can be slapped into place. Only Renato knows the truth: he has seen Malèna clutching a portrait of Nino to her heart. Renato watches with silent concern as the lies seep like poison through the town.

Renato begins a single-handed counter-insurgency in defence of Malèna's honour, spitting in the drinks and pissing in the handbags of those who wrongly accuse her of wantonness. But this plot strand withers and the action shifts to Renato's home, where his parents—impelled by the same sexual covenants as the town gossips—try to stop his masturbation, given away by the creaking of rusty bedsprings.

And here Tornatore lays down his ace. It's played as a moment of comedy, perhaps the only way such an awful moment can be conveyed without overwhelming the viewer

SEXCATRAZ

with the enormity of the tragedy. Faced with the dilemma of either quashing his natural adolescent urges or finding a way to vent his Malèna-fuelled desires in private, Renato chooses the latter and oils the springs of his bedstead.

This is the precise moment when sexual shame, the wrongness of sex—emanating from the covenants and reinforced by the church, the townsfolk and by Renato’s family—poisons him. This is the moment when Renato realises that a part of his natural self is unacceptable and must be hidden; that there’s a ‘good’ Renato that can be expressed openly and a ‘bad’, sexual Renato that can only be expressed furtively—*Blue Velvet’s* Frank Booth ordering Dorothy to turn off the light before gawking between her legs. Renato must suppress an inherent part of himself because it’s deemed unclean. Renato is powerless to confront his society’s sexual covenants. Instead he’ll fall into line—then spend his lifetime finding ways to express his now warped sexuality without incurring society’s wrath. This is the fall from innocence. This is Paradise Lost.

Renato’s unconscious division of his behaviour into what’s socially acceptable and what’s transgressive mirrors his psychology. The pressure of the sexual covenants splits off the ‘bad’ part of his psyche from the ‘good’ and buries it under a patina of shame, causing a fracture between these two incompatible opposites. Michael Picucci, PhD, author of *The Journey Toward Complete Recovery*, terms this psychological fracture the ‘sexual-spiritual split’.



Definition: Sexual-spiritual split

Split: “a tear, crack or fissure.” (Compact OED)

The sexual-spiritual split is a division of the human psyche into ‘good’ (non-sexual) and ‘bad’ (sexual) parts. The desire to be perceived as ‘good’ causes people to reject their sexuality, creating a lifelong psychological fissure or wound.

Picucci describes the sexual-spiritual split as “a deep psychic schism within almost everyone in our culture which prohibits enduring, loving relationships to form, which at the same time can remain sexually alive and growing.” He ascribes it to “early religious and cultural training, which teaches that God, love, and family are good while sex is dirty, bad, and perverse.” This division of good and bad determines what we’re ashamed of. While we may no longer be subject to the religious training of Renato’s situation, equally sex-negative cultural training—seen in the films in this chapter—ensures that the sexual-spiritual split remains alive and kicking.

Crucially, Renato has been punished for his first experience of sex. Although the adult Renato will learn about socially approved sex—the three M’s: married, monogamous, in the missionary position—the damage has been done. The sexual-spiritual split has infected him with the belief that sex is inherently bad and will poison every moment of his life.

Wilhelm Reich notes this sense of psychological fracturing in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*: “The feeling of guilt now associated with natural sexuality cleaves the natural, orgasmic [sic] course of sexual coalescence and produces a damming up of sexual energy, which later breaks out in various ways.” We’ve seen some of these ways: the murder of

SEXCATRAZ

Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, Ireland's Magdalene institutions and the self-destructive behaviour of Dorothy, Frank, Bud, and Erika Kohut in the preceding chapter⁴⁵.

All of this lies ahead of the young Renato as he tests the bedsprings and silences every last creak, mistakenly believing he can now fantasize over Malèna at his leisure. It's too late: the rot has set in, and not just for him. Malèna finds herself increasingly marginalised by the lies swirling around her. Echoing Lynda's rejection in *Wish You Were Here*, she's shunned by her father, loses her job and refused food in the market. Finally a lust-crazed dentist creates a public disturbance over her. Like Margaret, raped at the start of *The Magdalene Sisters*, it is the woman who takes the rap. Forced to prostitute herself to meet her legal fees, Malèna thus becomes the whore the townsfolk whispered her to be—and, deep down, wanted her to be, to justify their own latent sexual rage.

As the fortunes of war shift, so do Malèna's. The expulsion of Axis troops from North Africa leads to a German garrison in Sicily to stiffen the defences against Allied invasion. The influx of well-provisioned Nazi troops leads Malèna to capitalise on her physical assets. Now a genuine outsider, she becomes ravishingly beautiful. She struts among the down-at-heel townsfolk and the crisply uniformed Germans, openly advertising her wares and finding plenty of takers. She teams up with Gina, a former baron's mistress now in similar straits. Renato watches as Gina and Malèna are whisked away in a Nazi staff car. For once unable to witness the actual events, Renato's sex-obsessed mind—and with it Tornatore's camera—explodes into a kaleidoscopic orgy in which Gina and Malèna bring the entire German officer corps in Sicily to ramrod-stiff attention.

It's all too much for poor Renato, who collapses under the strain. His mother has an exorcism performed but his father finally realises the truth. As Allied bombs fall (the computer-generated planes make it look like Renato's fishing village is the target of a thousand bomber raid) Renato is taken to a brothel. Renato gives his father a thankful look. As the bombs rumble and the lights flicker, Renato chooses a girl who—surprise, surprise—looks just like Malèna. A tender scene follows as they undress. "Have you done it before?" she asks. "Yes," Renato replies. "I've imagined it many times."

Tornatore segues from Renato's deflowering—the liberation of his adult sexuality—to the liberation of Sicily. Renato rides on a jeep as the Yanks parade through town. But the Axis withdrawal once again leaves Malèna at the mercy of the local womenfolk, who were made painfully aware of their sexual shame by her brazen behaviour during the German occupation.

Cue the humiliation through public nudity and punishment through sexually motivated violence already seen in several films. The women drag Malèna into the street, deliberately exposing her sexual parts to shame her and reassert the supremacy of the community's sex-negative covenants. Her body is now public property and inherently soiled. It's the feminine equivalent of Tralala's communal fucking in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Like the bathroom stripping sequence in *Boys Don't Cry*, this must have been a harrowing experience for both Monica Bellucci and the actresses playing the womenfolk. The whole town watches without lifting a finger as Malèna is stripped, beaten and—like Bernadette in *The Magdalene Sisters*—reduced to a bloodied hag, the very antithesis of the alluring siren she once was.

⁴⁵ James DeMeo writes: "These modes of behavior tend to be transmitted from one generation to the next by virtue of duplication of specific traumatic, anti-pleasure and anti-sexual modes of childrearing." This is a more academic description of the same process that Michael Picucci describes.

SEXCATRAZ

After her public humiliation Malèna leaves town, a broken and anonymous figure in a chaotic swirl of refugees and returning troops. Among the flotsam is her husband Nino (Gaetano Aronica), who lost an arm but saved his life. Like many a returning soldier, he finds himself not a hero but an outcast, an uncomfortable reminder to those who shirked their duty or profited from the war. No one will tell him what happened to Malèna; a crust of shame seals their lips. For the first time in the film Renato does something useful and writes to Nino, informing him of Malèna's departure.

Nino eventually returns with Malèna. She now dresses in a demure russet outfit that melds in with the drab crowd. Her hair is shorn in a shapeless bob. She walks with head hanging, eyes downcast—like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*—clinging to Nino for dear life. All sexuality, all vibrancy, all vitality has been beaten out of her. Seeing the change in Malèna—she no longer poses a sexual threat—the women who abused her now turn Samaritan. Malèna is given a bag of oranges but it spills onto the pavement. Renato picks them up. As he does so his hand brushes hers. It's a profound moment for him but an empty one for her. Renato looks up at Malèna. Lost inside her own pain, she doesn't even see him. Malèna walks off—out of Renato's life and out of the film.

Malèna shows the impact of our sexual covenants on adolescence with startling clarity, forcing a young man to elide his natural sexual experiences into an illicit shadow-land hidden from view. Instead of sex becoming a joyful, consensual, openly but respectfully expressed part of his adult life it becomes a furtive aspect whose chief characteristics are shame, guilt, fear, furtiveness, phoniness and a vague sense of transgression.

Renato makes the rite of passage into sexually active adulthood when his father takes him to a brothel. Many traditional societies recognise the importance of this transition and accommodate it through sex-positive ceremonies and customs. By contrast, most Western teenagers are simply abandoned to cross this bridge on their own because of the underlying shame. When sex is believed to be fundamentally illicit, losing one's virginity becomes, by definition, a transgressive—thus potentially traumatic—act. Controversial French filmmaker Catherine Breillat paints a bleak picture of this difficult and lonely journey in her 2001 film *À Ma Soeur!* (*For My Sister!*).

À Ma Soeur!

Year: 2001

Director: Catherine Breillat

Writer: Catherine Breillat

Starring: Anaïs Reboux, Roxane Mesquida, Libero De Rienzo

This forthright film examines the pitfalls of two teenage sisters making the awkward passage from adolescence into sexual adulthood. Released in some countries as *Fat Girl*, in typical Breillat fashion *À Ma Soeur!* had a polarising effect. Its candid depiction of teenage sex met with significant disapproval in some quarters. The film was banned in Canada and not even submitted to the American film review board. However, it won several awards including Best Film at the 2001 Chicago International Film Festival.

SEXCATRAZ

À Ma Soeur! tells the story of the Pingot sisters, 15-year-old Elena (played by 19-year-old Roxane Mesquida) and her younger sibling Anaïs; the latter's screen age is not specified but she's played with great verve by 13-year-old Anaïs Reboux. The sisters are on a seaside holiday with their emotionally absent, chain-smoking parents. Elena is slim, attractive and feeling her body's yearning for sex but she's saddled with her overweight little sister. Both siblings have low self-esteem. While Elena dreams of losing her virginity to an adoring lover, Anaïs has an emotional maturity beyond her years and recognises the danger of pinning too many romantic hopes on one's first sexual encounter.

The film opens with the sisters ambling from their holiday camp to the nearest town, talking about sex and swapping insults in the way of people who genuinely care for each other. They reach a seaside café only to find all the tables taken. Fernando, a young Italian man, offers them seats. Elena accepts and soon makes her interests clear by French kissing him, while Anaïs wades into a banana split with equal gusto. (Throughout *À Ma Soeur!* all of Anaïs' food choices are phallic.)

That night Fernando sneaks into the sisters' bungalow. Anaïs, sworn to silence, pretends to sleep while a seesaw encounter takes place between Elena and Fernando: the battle between her desire for sex and the restraining influence of her unconscious shame. The conflict hangs in the balance as Fernando insouciantly flicks cigarette ash into an ashtray balanced on Elena's belly. Whether Breillat intended this girl-as-ashtray moment as a metaphor for Elena's self-worth, or whether it was just stage business, it's an intriguing beat. Desire triumphs and they undress.

Elena lies on the bed, her raised nightie revealing her pubic mound while smothering her face, almost like a veil. Even more striking is Fernando's penis, shown in its attentive state with complete contempt for mainstream socio-cinematic mores and their underlying sexual negativity. Elena may see this as a romantic moment but Breillat doesn't mirror that with the colour palette. Instead she foregrounds the young lovers against the room's almost putrescent grey-green walls. Short of cockroaches crawling across the duvet Breillat can hardly have made the moment of Elena's sexual initiation more unappealing. Breillat's point seems to be that if we are ever to understand why sex is such a thorny problem we must stop looking at it through Brigadoon-misted adult eyes and see it as it truly is, particularly for our teenagers as they grope their way to sexual maturity.

It's a good point, too. As demonstrated by Tommy and Donna's sub-plot in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* our covenants admonish sex outside of emotionally committed relationships. Because of this, teenage sexual encounters are all too often scrambled and secretive affairs occurring in locations less determined by romantic fantasy and more by hormone-fuelled necessity, with a corresponding impact on STD's and teenage pregnancy rates.

Fernando and his cinematically inappropriate erection sprawl onto Elena, only to be refused. On the brink of penetration the covenants kick in and Elena suddenly doubts his claim that he loves her. She is trying—and failing—to convince herself that it is emotionally legitimate for her to have sex with Fernando. According to the covenants, sex is only appropriate in the context of romantic love, but this causes Elena a significant problem: she knows even less about love than she does about sex. Elena is physically ready for sex but not emotionally ready for love and cannot resolve the paradox she finds herself in: she doesn't know whether her emotional exchanges with Fernando constitute love. This entire construct—the need to believe in Fernando's love—stems from (and is an attempt to circumvent) Elena's unconscious shame.

SEXCATRAZ

After various linguistic contortions fail to break this impasse, Fernando attacks from another direction—the rear—and suggests anal sex on the basis that it “doesn’t count.” Tired and defeated by an emotional deadlock her upbringing has left her unprepared for, Elena assents (sorry, it’s the only word that’ll do). The camera cuts to show Anaïs, lying in the dark, listening to the intermingled cries and groans from the other bed. This is a critical image: Anaïs rejects the emotional fraud of her sister’s anal defloration and will fashion for herself an entirely different form of sexual initiation.

The sex ends and Elena suddenly feels ashamed. With her physical urges placated, she instantly senses she has transgressed and experiences the same shame, guilt and self-disgust as Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, Bud in *The Brown Bunny* and Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher* after satisfying Walter at the skating rink. But Elena’s newly liberated libido soon reasserts itself; she ushers Fernando out of the bungalow with a kiss and the promise that next time she will admit him through the main entrance.

Following the first sex scene (yes, there is more; this is Breillat) *À Ma Soeur!* enters an interlude where the film is at its most assured. Fernando, Elena and Anaïs visit an isolated beach. While Fernando gropes Elena among the sand dunes the camera lingers on Anaïs, the dumpy unwanted youngster forced to tag along while her elder sibling explores adult concerns. Her mixture of rejection, loneliness, angst and *ennui* is beautifully caught in a series of stark seafront images. Anaïs sits heedless in the surf in a brand new dress, the waves lapping between her legs as she sings malevolent little ditties about sex and death, self-penned and self-directed.

Echoing Lynda Mansell in *Wish You Were Here*, back in the bungalow Anaïs raises her nightshirt and stares at the troublesome swellings on her chest. It’s a troublesome moment for the audience too: a 13-year-old girl staring in the mirror at her own budding sexuality. Then Anaïs and Elena cuddle up together, sharing some girly musings in the film’s most enchanting scene. Anaïs Reboux has earned plaudits for her portrayal of the podgy younger sister, but Roxane Mesquida’s contribution shouldn’t be undervalued. Elena reveals a ring given to her by Fernando and wallows in naïve imaginings of true love. Of course, Fernando has only given her the ring so she feels indebted enough to spread her legs. The audience knows it, Fernando knows it—even young Anaïs knows it. Only Elena is ignorant of the worthless return she will receive for her virginity.

Fernando arrives; the second sex scene is much shorter, the shot of his penis made more graphic by him unrolling a condom onto it. (Say what you like about Breillat but she does promote safe sex.) Once again the camera shifts to Anaïs, crying this time as her sister gets fucked, emotionally as well as literally.

Then Breillat nicely turns a minor incident into something significant: Fernando’s dreadful mother appears, squealing like a stuck pig and requesting the return of the ring her son stole. The Pingot holiday collapses in acrimony over the nature of Elena and Fernando’s contact. Cut to the stony-faced mother driving Elena and Anaïs home (the workaholic father was written out of the script early on). The mother mutters darkly about having Elena “inspected.” It’s clear she’s not talking about her daughter’s teeth. The real driver here isn’t that Elena had sex but her mother’s sense of shame, echoing the misplaced concerns of Lynda’s father in *Wish You Were Here* and Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

The long driving scenes, through the dusk and into the night, create a growing sense of unease. The mother finally pulls into a motorway stop and falls asleep. Elena does likewise,

SEXCATRAZ

leaving Anaïs alone. Elena's last words warn Anaïs to lock her door. Does Anaïs intend to asphyxiate the lot of them? No. Breillat has something much more bizarre in store. A homicidal axe-wielding maniac leaps onto the bonnet, smashes the windscreen, caves in Elena's head then strangles the mother—all for no reason other than it's in the script. Anaïs, who naturally ignored her sister's advice, staggers into the woods. As the maniac looms over her she whispers, "You won't hurt me."

The film cuts to the next morning, with the Pingot car at the centre of a crime scene. A *gendarme* leads the bedraggled Anaïs out of the woods, where she is brought face to face with the captured maniac. Anaïs says he didn't rape her. Her face freezes on the screen and the film ends. Unfortunately, the double murder trivialises everything else, including Anaïs' sexual initiation. This is a major misstep, for it is Anaïs' rape—and her subsequent denial of it—that is the thematic climax of *À Ma Soeur!*; a climax that has been subverted through placing it in the context of an event which is emotionally larger but thematically smaller.

Despite this, *À Ma Soeur!* remains a good film with a powerful underlying idea: many teenagers are ready for sex before they're ready for love; insisting they wait for the latter before engaging in the former creates a tissue of falsehoods around what should be a simple, natural act. Elena fools herself into believing that she's in love with Fernando to legitimise their sex. In the aftermath she feels ashamed, knowing deep down that the tinsel trappings of love were a lie. Anaïs transcends society's unease with teenage sex and avoids the emotional distress suffered by her sister. Breillat's nihilistic suggestion seems to be that Anaïs' choice is cleaner than the sacrifice of Elena's emotional wellbeing on the altar of Fernando's erection.

It's instructive to compare the last two films, not just in content but also in narrative style. *Malèna* has a voice-over from the adult Renato, looking back through rose-tinted glasses at his own coming-of-age. With its lush cinematography the film has the warm, cosy feel of nostalgia; *Malèna*'s emotional destruction along the way is ignored. By contrast, *À Ma Soeur!* depicts what should be one of the most joyful transitions in its protagonists' lives in a harrowing manner. After the double murder and rape that ends the film it's difficult to imagine Anaïs Pingot maturing into an emotionally balanced adult. A third, disingenuously dangerous style of storytelling is used in the next film, the glossy Hollywood fable *The Man in the Moon*.

The Man in the Moon

Year: 1991

Director: Robert Mulligan

Writer: Jenny Wingfield

Starring: Reese Witherspoon, Sam Waterston, Tess Harper, Emily Warfield

Most famous as the film that introduced future A-list superstar Reese Witherspoon to the big screen, *The Man in the Moon* is a much-romanticised look at the perils of female sexual initiation in 1950s Louisiana. Like *À Ma Soeur!* it's narrated from the perspective of a younger sister watching her older sibling make the treacherous crossing into sexually active

SEXCATRAZ

adulthood. Directed by Robert Mulligan (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), featuring Oscar nominees Sam Waterston (*The Killing Fields*) and Tess Harper (*Crimes of the Heart*) as the parents Matthew and Abigail Trant, it is nonetheless Witherspoon, as the tomboyish younger sister Dani, and Emily Warfield as the wide-eyed, ripe-for-the-plucking elder sister Maureen who steal the show.

The film opens one night in the summer of 1957 at the Trant's Louisiana farm as the sisters prepare for bed. The opening scenes are deeply nostalgic. One can easily imagine the hot, humid night with the moths beating against the panes of the glassed-in veranda where the Trant sisters undress and sleep together. This is an innocent Eden, before the days of prowling rapists and GoPro-toting amateur porn site up-loaders. Young Dani is besotted with Elvis while the older Maureen struggles with the tribulations of puberty. The inquisitive Dani presses her sister for details but gets rebuffed for being too young.

The next few scenes flesh out their lives: Abigail is heavily pregnant, Maureen has a date and Dani loves to go skinny-dipping in a swimming hole at the abandoned farm next door. Dani's bare-bottomed rush for the cool of the river gets the central plot underway. While she frolics in the water there's another arrival at the swimming hole: young and handsome Court Foster (Jason London), whose widowed mother owns the farm and has just returned to live there. Already beholden to her society's covenants and—like Julia in *The Conformist*—ashamed of being seen nude, Dani scuttles up the riverbank and darts behind the bushes, one arm clutched over her budding breasts. Court, signalling a lack of interest because of her age, jokes that she's got nothing to hide—but there's a darker moment: as Dani scampers off he can't resist taking a peek.

The dark moments aren't restricted to the story: something's afoot in the production department. When Dani jumps into the creek, Witherspoon (or, perhaps, a stunt double) appears to be genuinely naked; on emerging she wears an ill-fitting skin-coloured shift. Even as *The Man in the Moon* tries to portray puberty it falls prey to perhaps the most powerful of our sexual covenants: the disassociation between childhood and sexuality. This is not to say that the film would be improved by the absence of the shift, only to point out that even when attempting to discuss sexuality our covenants exert a censoring role.

With Dani's journey underway attention shifts to Maureen and her date with Billy Sanders (Bentley Mitchum), tough and smooth as brushed steel. Maureen's father collars Billy and makes it abundantly clear that his eldest daughter must be returned unopened. Matthew Trant's zealous defence of his daughter's virginity is done with her best interests at heart, but they actually contain a good deal of self-interest⁴⁶: if Maureen remains chaste then Matthew and his family are spared any kind of scandal that might threaten their social standing, such as befell Lynda's father in *Wish You Were Here* or Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. With Maureen's body primed but sex disallowed by the same social rules Elena fell foul of in *À Ma Soeur!* it's no wonder the poor girl finds puberty a challenge.

While Maureen goes on her date, Court's family visits the Trant farm. Court and Dani, needling each other, go into town for supplies. Court drives at breakneck speed, narrowly avoiding an accident. Is he trying to scare Dani or impress her? The scene is well handled, without clear signposts. Inevitably, Dani and Court become friends.

⁴⁶ "Present-day civilization gives us plainly to understand that sexual relations are permitted only on the basis of a final, indissoluble bond between a man and a woman; that sexuality as a source of enjoyment for its own sake is unacceptable to it; and that its intention is to tolerate it only as the hitherto irreplaceable means of multiplying the human race."—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*.

SEXCATRAZ

Maureen, in the meantime, gets worked over by Billy Sanders and his father at a dance. The father offers to meet Maureen's college expenses; the repayment structure is unspecified but self-evident. Leaving the dance, Billy (the Fernando of *The Man in the Moon*, minus erection) tries to kiss Maureen. She rejects him because the statutory ingredient—lurrve—is absent. *The Man in the Moon* adheres to our sexual covenants by starkly dividing its characters into 'good' (the Trant and Foster families) and 'bad' (the Sanders family); the dividing line is the latter's transgressive pursuit of sex without love. This separation into good and bad echoes the sexual-spiritual split making the same division within our psyches. Billy drops off Maureen and departs with a squeal of rubber (quite a feat on a dirt road). With that, the Sanders are gone and the film has technically got no antagonist. But, as we shall see, the demon of sex itself soon assumes this function.

Attention switches to the teenage crush between Court and Dani. In a scene that fully showcases the talent that would later catapult Reese Witherspoon to stardom, Dani gets Maureen to teach her how to kiss then discusses her feelings, without revealing their subject: "Have you ever liked somebody so much it almost makes you sick?" There's more: "It's like my stomach ties up in knots, and I can't breathe, and sometimes I think I'm going to throw up." Remember Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*, vomiting after bringing Walter to climax? Dani has all the symptoms of sexual shame. As she faces the prospect of sex her society's unconscious covenants well up inside her. The mere thought of sex causes Dani to experience a sense of transgression that physically translates as nausea.

Dani overcomes her queasy stomach and meets Court at the swimming hole. The portrayal of sex as the archfiend subtly begins with this scene occurring at night. Remember previous associations between sex, evil and darkness? Innocent frolicking turns to danger as the two youngsters embrace. Dani angles for a kiss. Court stares longingly but rejects her. He maintains his stance as 'good' by emphasising that she's sexually out of bounds, calling her a "little girl."

Rebuffed, Dani hurries home just as a storm breaks over the Trant farm, waking her almost-due mother. Abigail discovers Dani's absence, runs across the yard, trips and falls. It's a crucial moment in *The Man in the Moon*. To call it a coincidence misses the point. It's a *deus ex machina* intervention by the screenwriter to indirectly punish Dani for her socially illicit sexual dabbling. As far-fetched as this may seem, the combination of a sexually charged moment followed by a warning and/or supposedly coincidental punishment occurs twice more by the film's end.

Direct punishment for Dani isn't long in coming. After taking Abigail to hospital, Matthew comes home to find Dani sitting on the stairs, very much the little girl in a fluffy pink dressing gown. Matthew whips off his belt and gives her a quick strapping. Dani signals her acceptance of both the punishment and the underlying covenant by rejecting Court the next day. Matthew holds a brief inquisition to establish whether anything untoward passed between Court and Dani ("No siree, not Court Foster"—the 15-year-old Witherspoon delivers the emotionally complex line with ease) but is later overjoyed when Dani forgives him for using the strap. This is a deeply patriarchal moment, recognising the father figure's right to use violence—notably, on a sexual part of his daughter's anatomy—to enforce his community's covenants.

Dani's reconciliation with her father allows her to resume her relationship with Court on a new basis, with sex out of bounds. This frees Dani to enjoy her first kiss without

SEXCATRAZ

worrying where it might lead. While the earlier, transgressive swimming-hole scene took place at night, this one—where sex gets shoved back in its cage and socially acceptable, i.e. platonic, teenage emotions take centre-stage—occurs in bright sunlight. The moral signposts, signalled through the film's lighting choices, couldn't be clearer.

And, just as Dani was earlier punished for her sexuality, she is now rewarded for rejecting it: Matthew sanctions her friendship but asks her to bring Court to the house so he can "get a good look in his eyes." We know what Matthew will be looking for: any sign of shameful sexual urges, manifesting as that inability to maintain eye-to-eye contact that Bud repeatedly demonstrated in *The Brown Bunny*. Court's fulfilment of this request sets up the next plot twist, his encounter with the sexually ripe Maureen. The electricity between them is palpable as Court's interest in Dani evaporates in the Louisiana heat.

Court soon has Maureen alone and makes his interest clear. Emily Warfield handles the scene superbly, her acting on a par with Witherspoon's. Moments into their first kiss, the phone rings—the film's second instance of *deus ex machina*—to announce the arrival of Abigail's baby. "You'd better go," Maureen croaks barely audibly through welled emotions in a beautifully delivered line, heeding the screenwriter's warning—at least for now—about the perils of sex.

There's a brief interlude centred on the baby, intercut with Maureen and Court in the raptures of young love. Maureen's misty-eyed moments with Court contrast with the earlier scene between her and Billy Sanders and signal the screenwriter's traditional sexual beliefs. Just how conservative these are will soon be seen.

Mother and baby arrive home but Maureen is absent. With sex between her and Court emotionally sanctioned by their romance, she's doing it in the grass in a clumsily prudish scene that reinforces *The Man in the Moon's* beat-around-the-bushes fear of its own subject matter. Maureen returns with the fruits of carnal knowledge, her blouse half hanging out and her hair tangled. Dani knows she's been betrayed and rushes to give Court a piece of her mind—only to discover that in a post-coital stupor he's fallen from his tractor and been run over by his own plough: the god in the machine strikes thrice.

Court's death provokes a falling out between the two grieving sisters. After some solid fatherly advice that "Maureen's gonna be your sister for a long, long time," Dani forgives her elder sibling and the girls promise to never fall out again. The film ends with a sense of balance restored but troubling questions remain. *The Man in the Moon* is a gorgeous, sentimental, lyrical film, yet underneath its glossy surface lurks a fire-and-brimstone pulp message that, as seen in *À Ma Soeur!*, is out of step with the biological reality of teenage sexual awakening: sex outside marriage courts divine retribution.

But that's not all. As with some of the other films in this book, *The Man in the Moon* conveys vital information through what it omits.

Firstly, despite the supposedly positive ending of the reconciliation between Dani and Maureen, no attention is given to how their future might play out. Given the moralistic overtones of both the film and the society it portrays, it would be impossible for Maureen or Dani to entertain the thought of sex without fearing a repeat of the heavenly lightning bolt that killed Court. Already programmed with the sex-negative beliefs deeply prevalent in the American South, the impact of Court's death on the sisters' psychosexual development can hardly be understated.

SEXCATRAZ

Arguably that's outside the scope of the film, but it doesn't take much to realise that while Dani and Maureen may be friends forever, like Marcello in *The Conformist* and Anaïs in *À Ma Soeur!* they will also have a lifelong association between fear, guilt, death and sex—an association that the filmmakers at best ignore but tacitly seem to endorse. It is worth noting again that traditional cultures with a natural acceptance of human sexuality provide socially approved channels for adolescents to pass into sexually active adulthood. Studies of such societies reveal little or no sexual dysfunction⁴⁷.

Secondly, *The Man in the Moon* shows that, even with teenagers, the concept that one person can only be sexually intimate with one other is already deeply entrenched. Court must choose: Dani or Maureen. This ensures a fall-out between the sisters, regardless of who he chooses.

Our covenants have historically shoehorned us into a one-size-fits-all monogamous model with no consideration for individual choice⁴⁸ and dire retribution—in both this world and the next—for transgressors. Emotionally traumatized by experiences such as those seen in *Malèna*, *À Ma Soeur!* and *The Man in the Moon*, most teenagers graduate into adulthood totally programmed to regard monogamous relationships as the only socially legitimate sexual model⁴⁹. The next chapter explores the impact of this on our most significant social structure—marriage.

47 The Muria and Maria tribes of central India provided a dormitory called a *ghotul* where adolescents learned to have sex. In *Maria Murder and Suicide*, Verrier Elwin writes: "Sexual jealousy was minimized among the Muria, who retained the *ghotul* and its sexual freedom, but increased among the Maria who were pressured to abandon the *ghotul*. Consequently, suicides and murders increased among the Maria, mostly regarding issues of sex-frustration..." (Quoted in James DeMeo, *Sahasasia*).

48 A [2015 Oxford University study](#) shows that around half the population prefers multiple sexual partners to monogamy.

49 Although marriage rates are declining, lifelong monogamy is equally entrenched in de facto relationships.

SEXCATRAZ

Sexual access rights

Marriage is one of the most powerful coagulants in any society and there are few words we utter in our entire lives of more importance than saying “I do.” Individual vows vary but they generally include a lifelong commitment to love, friendship, and to emotional and financial partnership. Then there is the not inconsiderable matter of sex.

Aside from the few couples that openly allow outside partners⁵⁰, the spectre of extramarital sex hangs over all marriages, often unacknowledged. For many couples the subject is never even discussed prior to the wedding. Him: (during a break in the football) “What d’you think, honeybuns; shall we have sex with others after we marry?” Her: (texting a bridesmaid) “Whatever.”

Few couples directly reference sex—monogamous or otherwise—in their marriage vows. Yet all parties implicitly understand that a deep, binding agreement between the couple and the community is being cemented. Like all agreements, this involves some give and take. On one hand, the community acknowledges the sexual union of the couple. This recognition is formalised in the patriarchal phrase, “You may now kiss the bride.” (For ‘kiss’ you can substitute another four-letter word ending in ‘k’.) But the price society exacts for this sexual licence is high: the commitment to monogamy⁵¹.

Still widely held as a romantic ideal, the purpose of monogamy in social engineering terms is entirely unromantic: management of sex through fear. Historically, this has been considered necessary to maintain a well-ordered society. The fear came through laws, still active in some countries, such as the stoning of women for adultery⁵². In Western societies these laws have been significantly watered down⁵³ and the commitment to monogamy has softened into an expression of romantic love. If we are ever to escape from Sexcatraz, we must cast off the rose-tinted glasses: do we truly choose monogamy from love, or from the unconscious shame and fear of doing anything else?

The question passes unasked and unanswered as the champagne corks pop, the bride flashes her garter, the bridesmaid French kisses the best man behind the port-a-loos and the happy couple commits to monogamy till death do them part. The previous chapter showed that by the time teenagers reach marriageable age they have internalised all of this and are already inmates of Sexcatraz. Clouded by a confetti swirl of feel-good emotions, the reality is that we blunder into committed relationships blindly believing our partners will sexually satisfy us (and vice-versa) for the rest of our lives. The very unwillingness to raise the subject—an obvious red flag—is itself the result of our censoring covenants. But the reluctance to discuss a subject doesn’t eliminate it and many couples experience a sexual crisis involving a third party at some point in their relationship. This is the scenario of Stanley Kubrick’s controversial final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*.

50 Statistics on open marriages are hard to find; unverified [US estimates for 2010](#) are around 1-6%.

51 The groom’s stag night is traditionally regarded as his ‘last night of freedom’. This is reflected in the Spanish word *esposas*, which means both ‘wife’ and ‘handcuffs’ (Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn*).

52 In this regard the Bible is egalitarian in that it imposes the death penalty on both offenders. Deuteronomy 22:22: “If a man is caught having sex with someone else’s wife, you must put them both to death.”

53 The last attempt to impose the death penalty for adultery in Britain was made in 1857 (G. Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History*).

SEXCATRAZ

Eyes Wide Shut

Year: 1999

Director: Stanley Kubrick

Writers: Stanley Kubrick, Fredric Raphael (from Arthur Schnitzler's novella)

Starring: Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Sydney Pollack

Based on Arthur Schnitzler's novella *Traumnovelle (Dream Story)*, Kubrick and co-writer Frederic Raphael transplanted the story of two married people toying with infidelity from an early 20th century Jewish couple in Vienna to a late 20th century 'vanilla American' (Kubrick's words) couple in swanky New York. Typically Kubrick, *Eyes Wide Shut* comprises a small number of long scenes. Every frame is as richly detailed as a Renaissance masterpiece. The lighting and composition are immaculate, every moment and movement studied. The classical score adds to the sense of an opera in celluloid. A giant of the first century of cinema, Kubrick passed away soon after delivering a print of the film to Warner Bros.; accounts vary as to whether it was the first edit or the final cut.

The film opens in the boudoir of the Harfords, where William (Tom Cruise) and Alice (Nicole Kidman) dress for a Christmas party. The party unfolds with a sea of stiffs in tuxedos and evening dresses twirling to a white-suited band. (This is some vanilla!) Bill, invited because he is the host's doctor, finds that the pianist is an old friend who flunked medical school, the poetically named Nick Nightingale (Todd Field). Nick invites Bill to hear him play at a downtown café, an off-the-cuff gesture that leads to *Eyes Wide Shut's* controversial central scene.

For her part, Alice gets tanked at the bar. The rakish Sandor Szavost (Sky Dumont) engages her in a stilted conversation about fidelity. Sandor probes Alice's defences with formulaic jabs. She praises monogamy in equally conventional terms while glancing into the lobby, where two beautiful young women hit on Bill. Clearly angling for a full gynaecological inspection, they overload turgid dialogue like "Doctors always seem so... knowledgeable" with hip-swaying, breast-wobbling, lip-pouting, eye-rolling innuendo. It's an indigestive moment that makes one reach for the antacids, thankfully interrupted by an aide of the host: the good doctor is needed. Bill takes his leave, his exact interest in the two women as uncertain as what awaits him beyond the rising gilded banister.

In the private chambers of Victor Ziegler (Sydney Pollack), high-class call girl Mandy Curren (Julienne Davis) has passed out after taking a speedball, wearing only her stilettos. Bill, the consummate professional, pays no attention to Mandy's imposing superstructure. He coaxes her back to consciousness by the highly technical procedure of calling her name. (Now you know what all those years in med school are for.) Cruise's Bill Harford never displays one iota of medical acumen in the film; he's the biggest quack in cinematic history. He also spends most of the film in a stupor, parroting what others say.

Meanwhile, Sandor offers to show Alice the host's collection of—another moment of Kubrick overindulgence—Renaissance bronzes. A close inspection of Sandor's trouser statuery is clearly included. Alice declines the offer "because I'm married," but kisses her finger and touches it to Sandor's lips as she leaves. One perfect couple, two straying minds: that's the dramatic blancmange of which *Eyes Wide Shut* is moulded.

SEXCATRAZ

Back home, Bill and Alice vent their sexual frustrations on each other. The choice of soundtrack—Chris Isaak’s ‘Baby Did a Bad Bad Thing’—again hints at the fundamentally illicit nature of sex. After a montage of their everyday lives (her: domestic goddess; him: chest inspector to beautiful women) Alice rolls a joint and the perfect couple with their imperfect sex lives get stoned.

When she’s sufficiently addled, Alice asks Bill whether he fucked the two women at the party. Kidman delights in uttering the ‘f’ word, lingering over it like a glass of sweet, sticky Chateau d’Yquem, shaping her mouth into a sexual orifice from which the verb ejaculates. Bill retaliates with questions about Sandor: “What did he want?” “Sex, upstairs, then and there,” Alice giggles with winning honesty. Possession flares in Bill’s reply: “He just wanted to fuck my wife.” Grammatically, the sentence is aimed at Sandor, but Bill is actually reminding Alice of her marriage vow: he’s the only person allowed to have sex with her. In more technical terms, Bill asserts that he is the 100% owner, in perpetuity, of what might be termed the **sexual access rights** to Alice’s body.



Definition: Sexual access rights

Access: “the means or opportunity to approach or enter a place; the right or opportunity to use something or see someone.” (Compact OED)

The right to have sex with a given person, a right that may be held by the person in question or may have been surrendered to or forcibly usurped by another person.

I’ve deliberately used such an objective, legalistic term to take an invisible piece of psychological programming and reveal it for what it is: the right to accept or deny sexual congress with another. Who owns your sexual access rights? The reflex answer is that we each own our individual rights. But if the question is rephrased as “Can you have sex with a third party without repercussions from your significant other?” it’s clear that in reality this is frequently untrue.

Consciously or more often unconsciously, most relationships (wedded or otherwise) involve an outright exchange of sexual access rights. This may not matter; happy, lifelong monogamy may ensue. But if frustration sets in and either partner looks elsewhere then it will matter a great deal: it will entirely dictate the emotional responses that follow (“feeling precedes thinking”), quite possibly resulting in the destruction of the relationship with major long-term emotional damage—not only for the couple but for any children caught in the often acrimonious crossfire.

Challenging Bill’s reminder, Alice embarks on a monologue about a naval officer she once passed in a hotel whose sole glance left her breathless with desire. Cruise, suddenly remembering the maxim that great film acting is about stillness, stops bobbing his head like a parcel-tray cocker spaniel. He sits in rapt attention as Alice relates how she would have given up everything—including Bill and their child (as Stella Raphael did in *Asylum*)—for a single night of navel exercises. Yet, at precisely the same time, Bill felt dearer to her than ever before. There it is: the puncturing of the skein of ordinariness, the paradox whose unravelling leads to deeper truth, the glimpse beyond the walls of Sexcatraz. Kidman’s delivery is magnificent in this, the high point of *Eyes Wide Shut*.

SEXCATRAZ

Like Maureen and Court's first kiss in *The Man in The Moon*, the ring of the telephone curtails the monologue; it's a night call for Dr Harford. And with that Kidman's good work comes to naught. The fascinating, insightful, contradictory notion that Alice's lust for the unknown officer only increased her love for Bill—the one moment in *Eyes Wide Shut* that begs us to truly open our eyes—is thoughtlessly discarded.

During the taxi ride to his client, Bill dwells on what Alice just told him. His mind's eye sees Alice on the hotel bed, the naval officer pawing her breasts through her flower-print dress while she whips off her panties in flagrant breach of his supposedly watertight access rights. Bill experiences Alice's story as a transgression, a violation of his sexual boundaries, whether it's fact or fantasy. His response, fuelled by anger, shame and humiliation, is that what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

Bill has three sexual opportunities in quick succession, none of which he takes. The first comes in the apartment of his recently deceased client Lou Nathanson. Lou's babbling daughter Marion professes her love. Bill shows not the slightest inclination to roll Lou's body off its deathbed and shaft the incoherent Marion on the lukewarm sheets. Leaving the Nathansons, Bill agrees to pay a prostitute one hundred and fifty dollars for unspecified services. In another *deus ex machina* moment reminiscent of *The Man in The Moon*, Alice phones, inducing a sudden flush of guilt that drives Bill out of the prostitute's arms and into Nick Nightingale's conveniently handy club.

Here Bill learns of a secretive gig Nick has later that night at a masked party awash with nude women. Stuttering like a teenage boy seeing his first nipples, Bill strikes up his parrot act. NICK: "Believe it or not, I don't actually know the address yet." BILL: "You don't?" NICK: "It's in a different place, every time." BILL: "A different place every time?" The repetitive dialogue makes both Bill and Cruise look clueless. But with this, Bill's zigzag odyssey suddenly assumes direction.

Bill wangles the address and password off Nick and goes in search of a cape and mask. Bill's fitting session is interrupted by the antics of the costume shop owner, who berates his teenage daughter (Leelee Sobieski) for getting frisky with two Japanese dwarves. She hides behind Bill, whispers sweet nothings in his ear then retreats, dawdling to give him a good look at her curves and the smudge of black beneath her gauzy aquamarine knickers. Despite his supposed fixation with infidelity, Bill ignores her. Sobieski's effortless acting goes to waste in a subplot every bit as fuzzy as her nether regions. With that, Bill is finally on his way to the film's central scene: the gentlemen's sex club.

Bill gains admission to a remote mansion and is ushered into a vaulted hall where a strange ceremony unfolds. Ominous chords issue from Nick Nightingale's organ. (No, that doesn't read right, but I shan't change it.) A papal figure in a scarlet cloak fumigates the place and bangs a staff on the floor. Masked, black-cloaked women react to the deep throbs of the staff. They shed their cloaks, revealing only G-strings beneath... and stilettos. (Did Kubrick have a thing about nude women in heels?) One by one the women are sent to choose from an on-looking circle of masked men. Of course, Bill is amongst the erect (sorry, elect). Somehow Bill's escort recognises him as an interloper. She warns him to leave but the escort herself is whisked away by an unknown man.

Ignoring the warning, Bill explores room after room of elaborately staged sex acts—male-female and female-female; unsurprisingly, no male-male—watched by masked and impassive men. On the surface, Kubrick's orgy is a mishmash of popular misconceptions

SEXCATRAZ

about ritual sex cults and male fantasies of unlimited access to unattainable women. But *Eyes Wide Shut* is open to other interpretations. The [recurring use of Masonic and Satanic symbols](#) such as pillars and pentagrams suggests the film is an elaborate occult initiation. Tim Kreider engagingly argues that it's an indictment of the wealthy [elite's commoditisation of women](#), and that "almost all of this film takes place inside Bill Harford's head." For the purposes of this book, the head it actually takes place inside is Alice's—for reasons that will become apparent.

After several minutes of highly operatic yet somehow flaccid sex, a valet leads Bill back to the main hall, which now hosts a sitting of the Spanish Inquisition. Bill is unmasked before his peers (shades of Pink Floyd's *The Wall*⁵⁴) and ordered to undress. Once again, enforced nudity is used to publicly humiliate a transgressor and curb their behaviour. At this moment the masked escort intervenes anew, offering to "redeem" Bill and be punished in his place. She's then led away, an unknown woman going to an unknown fate (it's rather how I felt on first viewing *Eyes Wide Shut*). Bill is warned to never pry into the cult again and ejected from the mansion.

Bill arrives home to find Alice in the throes of a nightmare. Concerned, he rouses her. Alice recounts walking naked through a strange city, feeling—like Giulia in *The Conformist* and Dani in *The Man in the Moon*—ashamed of her nudity. Alice's most deeply held belief about her own body, accessible only in the dream state, is shame. She sees herself fucking strangers while Bill disinterestedly looks on. Alice is one of the women at the sex party; more accurately, the sex party is Alice's dream. This isn't immediately obvious because we enter the party from Bill's perspective (our perception of cinema is strongly shaped by whose point of view we enter a film or any given scene from).

Let's rewind to the party for a moment: after endless rooms filled with nude women (save for masks and, yes, heels), Bill enters a boudoir where, for a few easily missed frames, a masked woman in a flower-print dress gallops a man on a couch. This intriguingly clothed woman is surely Alice, her dress slightly distorted by the dream state. When the sex party is recognised as Alice's dream, not Bill's, other puzzling elements of the film—such as Bill's punishment and redemption by his mysterious saviour—make sense.

Alice perceives Bill's interest in the women at the Christmas party as a transgression against their mutually exchanged sexual access rights. *Boundary + violation = reaction*. Accordingly, Alice expresses her desire to punish Bill in her dream by ordering him to strip naked to trigger his shame. On the verge of Bill's punishment up steps the mysterious woman who, in the film's thematic climax, offers to "redeem" him.

The word is curious and clearly purposeful; if the sex party is anything other than Alice's dream it's hard to see what Bill's redemption is about. In the context of wavering sexual access rights it makes sense. Alice acknowledges the attraction of other women but forgives Bill while reminding him of his vow of fidelity (the password to the party mansion is '*fidelio*'). Bill can be redeemed only if he acknowledges and accepts Alice's warning: don't drift towards infidelity with your eyes closed.

Having peaked thematically, the rest of the film rams home the point that infidelity is a Bad Idea. Bill ignores Alice's warning and goes in search of the prostitute he met earlier, only to find she's contracted HIV. He learns that Mandy Curren, onetime beauty queen and

⁵⁴ Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, a double album released in 1979, is a rock opera about sexual shame. At its climax a judge tells the lead character, Pink: "I sentence you to be exposed before your peers."

SEXCATRAZ

the call girl he saved at Ziegler's party, has overdosed. Bill visits the morgue. Mandy's greying body slides out on an aluminium gurney. In case you hadn't guessed, she was the woman at the sex party who "redeemed" Bill. Metaphorically, her dead body represents the death of his interest in other women.

Bill arrives home to find Alice sleeping. On the pillow next to her is the mask he waylaid at the sex party. Who placed it there is unknown⁵⁵. Bill stares down at his soundly sleeping wife. Feeling ashamed of how close he came to violating his sexual covenant with Alice, Bill breaks down. She wakes and cradles him. Rest easy, folks: the status quo has been upheld, though at what cost remains unsaid. For all their wealth, education, privilege, and handsomeness, the one thing the Harfords don't have is control over their individual sexual access rights. They were unconsciously surrendered at marriage in compliance with default social programming. Bill and Alice only discovered the cost some years later, with the emotional wellbeing of their daughter now also at stake.

Eyes Wide Shut is a fascinating film but it has its flaws. The pacing is leaden and Cruise is saddled with quite possibly the worst dialogue ever given to an A-list actor. Plot holes abound. Kubrick's visually gorgeous final film provides snapshots of our society's hidden covenants on sexual access rights but their exploration is distinctly lop-sided. There is no recognition of the downsides of monogamous relationships, such as partners with differing sexual desires, desires that change over time, or the simple longing for variety. Cruise's Bill Harford abandons his dalliance into extramarital sex before it's even begun and retreats to the conjugal bed, naïvely believing he has quashed the desires that impelled him in the first place. His eyes are truly wide shut.

Bill and Alice are ultimately able to contain their sexual curiosity—in *Eyes Wide Shut* at least; in real life Hollywood's then pre-eminent married couple, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, separated soon after the film's release. Unlike Bill and Alice, the protagonist of the next film, Adrian Lyne's 2002 erotic melodrama *Unfaithful*, fails to contain their extramarital impulses.

Unfaithful

Year: 2002

Director: Adrian Lyne

Writers: Alvin Sargent, William Broyles Jr. (from Claude Chabrol's book)

Starring: Diane Lane, Richard Gere, Olivier Martinez

Unfaithful charts the fortunes of another well-to-do New York couple, in this case Edward (Richard Gere) and Connie (Diane Lane) Sumner, when the latter strays from the conjugal bed. Lane's Oscar-nominated performance—raunchy by mainstream Hollywood standards—caused a minor furore on the film's release but has since sunk into the great morass of cinematic mediocrity. Judging from reviews on the [Internet Movie Database](#) (IMDb), the public either enjoyed Lane's bravura or failed to understand why her character

⁵⁵ In the original novella the equivalent character to Alice places the mask on the bed, more confirmation that the sex party is her dream. Kubrick opts for the ambiguity of letting the audience wonder whether the cult was responsible.

SEXCATRAZ

wades into the turbulent waters of infidelity. Nonetheless, the film highlights deep-seated beliefs about the sexual sanctity of marriage and the extent to which it's permissible to punish those who disrespect it.

The film opens with a typically languid Lynian scene set in upmarket Westchester, home to Edward, Connie and their cute-but-can't-someone-strangle-him son Charlie (Erik Per Sullivan from the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle*). Edward owns an armoured car business which has provided the Sumners with a sumptuous lakeside home and left Connie with no greater responsibilities than being the perfect hostess, doing school fundraising and wiping up wayward droplets of Charlie's pee. But trouble's afoot in the Sumner's version of the American Dream: a shifting breeze wafts through the garden, spinning a weathervane and unsettling the lady of the house's moral compass.

The breeze follows Connie as she goes into NYC on an errand. By the time she reaches SoHo, a trendy part of Manhattan, it swells into a windstorm that whips open her coat and skirt, exposing her long legs to the hilt. Unstoppable yellow cabs hurtle past. Garbage billows through the air. In this disorienting maelstrom Connie collides with Paul Martel (Olivier Martinez), heading past with a load of old books. Connie skins her knees as she sprawls on top of Paul in a supposedly accidental simulation of the sex act (reverse missionary position). It's a graze with fatal consequences.

Connie and Paul disentangle themselves. He's a hunky but sensitive Frenchman who lives nearby. Paul notes Connie's skinned knees and invites her back to his apartment for coffee and Band-Aids. There's a moment of electricity between them as they read a book together—Paul, a rare book dealer, is well-versed in existentialist prose—but then Connie's gone, back to her staid Westchester life. (By making Paul charming, handsome, emotionally sensitive and suavely French, the writers have joined the dots in creating a bland stereotype of the perfect lover, trying to make Connie's adultery easier to empathise with.)

Feeling frisky after her encounter with Paul, Connie cosies up to Ed. He's more interested in his new video camera and begins filming Connie in her negligee. The writers resist the temptation of making Ed a closet pornographer and eventually he attends to Connie, spouting a goofy grin as he clenches her tit. After all, Edward is the Good Husband and convention dictates that his character be spotless, which actually makes him rather dull. Before Ed can satisfy Connie their son wakes up; the *coitus interruptus* adds fuel to Connie's illicit desire for Paul.

On her next visit to NYC, Connie hesitates but finally plucks up the courage to visit Paul. He touches her hand—wedding ring prominently in shot—but nothing more. Connie, feeling a flush of guilt, buys Ed a sweater. When asked what she's doing in the city Connie tells her first lie. Stupidly, it's a lie that can be exposed, as Ed will later do. Little does Connie realise she has stepped onto the path of sexually assured destruction.

During Connie's next visit to Paul they dance closely. She strokes his chest then loops her arm around his neck, violating her own boundaries. Connie's shame kicks in—feelings of guilt, a sense of wrongness, that disorienting nausea—and she breaks off: "I can't do this." Like Elena's initial rejection of Fernando in *À Ma Soeur!*, the covenants win—for now. Connie strides out but—forgetting her coat in the flush of her shame—quickly returns. Paul grabs her in a fair approximation of a fireman's lift and hauls her into bed.

The film cuts straight to Connie on the train afterwards. The formal train shots—mid-shot then close-up—interpolate with loose, hand-held close-ups of Paul violating Ed's sexual

SEXCATRAZ

access rights to Connie: tracing around her belly button, pressing his hand against her pubic mound, sliding his finger under the hem of her panties. Lane's reaction shots on the train account for a good deal of her Oscar nomination: guilt, fear, nausea, horror, self-disgust: the roll call of symptoms of shame repeatedly seen in this book. The physical, mental and emotional symptoms invoked by Connie's breach of Ed's sexual access rights are all there; it's a fabulous piece of acting. Her acting during the interpolated sex scene is equally impressive: her abdomen twitches with fear as Paul teasingly works his way towards her sex. "This is wrong," she bleats, clinging to the mast of society's sexual covenants even as the lowering of her white panties signals surrender.

Connie wonders why she took such a risk. A good part of the audience does too, when she seemingly has it all: a good husband, a cute son, a beautiful house and enough money to never worry about working again. And there's the clue to the one thing missing from her life: uncertainty. We spend our lives striving for the stability that Connie has, yet there's still a part of us willing to throw it all away, like Alice and the naval officer in *Eyes Wide Shut*, and live life on a precipice—which is where Connie now finds herself. As the train rattles towards Westchester she staggers into the toilet and cleans herself up, trying to paper over the enormity of her transgression and return her life to an even keel.

It doesn't. Like Stella Raphael in *Asylum*, Connie's sexual encounters with Paul become increasingly brazen. He shoves his hand down the back of her jeans in a swanky diner, publicly demonstrating his sexual access to her. Connie gasps as a frisson arcs up her spine. While Connie indulges in a post-coital nap Paul draws a felt pen arrow aimed at her sex. It, too, signals right of entry. Ed almost catches sight of the arrow while Connie has a bath. Is it carelessness or, like Stella, does she hunger to be caught?

For Connie has now been split in two. On the one hand she has the guilty excitement of her affair with Paul, on the other a relatively monotonous life with Ed, Charlie and the school fundraising committee. Between the two lies a wasteland of shame and self-disgust—an external representation of the sexual-spiritual split within her.

Connie distances herself from Ed and the lies pile up until even the cuckolded Good Husband knows something's up. One phone call proves that Connie lied. Ed hires a private eye who takes some shots of Connie and Paul arm-in-arm. Ed's response is muted. The word 'strangely' tries to interject itself into that sentence, but no, denial is a valid response to discovering sexual transgression. Ed knows the truth but it's so awful he unconsciously refuses to take the emotional hit—for now.

Oblivious of Ed's discovery, Connie continues to pursue Paul who roughly shafts her on his apartment landing in the film's rawest scene. This is the same animal fucking that Stella craved in *Asylum*. This time, the encroaching male will pay. Ed arrives at Paul's apartment soon after Connie's departure. This should be a moment of high tension but it's strangely flat. (Ah, that's where the adjective belongs!) Ed peers myopically at the man who has been screwing his wife, his demeanour almost apologetic. Paul, only recently uncoupled from Connie, is equally anaemic. He presses a glass of vodka on Ed, as if soothing a neighbour whose cat has just been run over.

The scene drags until the vodka kicks in, releasing Ed from denial. He's hit by the same barrage of emotions—nausea, ridicule and humiliation—previously experienced by a litany of characters from John Lotter and Tom Nissen to Erica Kohut and Connie herself on the Westchester train. Ed seizes one of those cheesy glass globes that swirl with fake snow and bashes in Paul's head. Paul stands for a long time with blood running down his face before

SEXCATRAZ

collapsing. (It must be an Adrian Lyne thing; Humbert Humbert's killing of Clare Quilty in *Lolita* is equally protracted.) Ed wraps Paul's body in a rug and erases all traces of his presence from the apartment. He removes the body via a rickety old lift that jams between floors as *Unfaithful* unconvincingly shifts genres from erotic melodrama to thriller.

Ed finally escapes with Paul's body in the boot of his car and, with the headlights on, dumps it at the local tip. It's the most unbelievable moment in a film increasingly littered with illogical events. Paul's death destroys the love triangle at the heart of *Unfaithful* and with it the film's dynamic. His body surfaces; the Keystone Cops interview the Sumners but nothing comes of it. (Somehow all that hanky-panky in Paul's apartment didn't leave a trace of Connie's DNA. Perhaps Paul wasn't that accomplished after all?) The audience is left in the unsatisfactory position of rooting for an adulterer, a murderer, or the 'off' button. Were it not for the film's usefulness in the current context the latter would win.

There's no showdown between Ed and Connie, only a brief, inconclusive argument about Ed giving everything for the family while Connie throws it away. Like Bill in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Ed belatedly reminds Connie of their marriage vows. The same shame that silenced Max Raphael in *Asylum* prevents Ed from asking why Connie slept with another man. The implication, abhorrent to the male ego, that Ed cannot satisfy her can only be avoided through silence. In common with *Eyes Wide Shut* there's no exploration of the impulse to infidelity, only the slavish expectation that it shouldn't occur. *Unfaithful* fails to debate its own subject matter and simply upholds default shame-based sexual programming.

Just as Bill redeemed himself in *Eyes Wide Shut* by forsaking his interest in other women, Connie fits back into the family frame by recognising her overwhelming love for Ed. They go out driving one night, once again the perfect family, with Charlie slumbering in the back seat. They stop at a red light outside a police station and talk about moving to Mexico. The film ends with Connie and Ed's SUV stopped at the lights long after they turn green. Did Ed hand himself in? Did he put his foot down all the way to Yucatan? You decide.

Tellingly, the DVD offers an alternate ending: Ed gets out, enters the police station and confesses. This is the ending the studio planned. However, Lyne and some cast members argued in favour of the ambiguous ending of the theatrical release; they either sympathised with Ed or wanted the audience to have the choice. This is how powerful the sense of ownership and violence associated with our sexual access rights is. The ambiguous ending suggests the filmmakers regard Paul's murder as justified: punishing an adulterer is above the law. *Unfaithful* may be *über*-softcore cinematic candyfloss, but here it hit—and the studio green-lit—a hard truth. They gauged their audience, too: on the film's release, there was indignation about Lane's raw sex scenes but not about the implication that Ed was morally entitled to murder Paul. The underlying belief that adultery justifies violence—including murder—retains some currency⁵⁶.

The last two films portray situations where married couples unconsciously embark on a monogamous life only for the spectre of extramarital sex to threaten the marriage. But what happens when a couple consciously grants sexual access rights to a third party? Does this avoid the emotionally destructive conundrums seen in *Eyes Wide Shut* and *Unfaithful*? *Indecent Proposal*, again directed by Adrian Lyne, explores this scenario.

⁵⁶ Judge William Blackstone wrote in 1783 that murdering an adulterer was the lowest form of manslaughter because "there could be no greater provocation." How much have we changed in a quarter millennia?

SEXCATRAZ

Indecent Proposal

Year: 1993

Director: Adrian Lyne

Writer: Amy Holden Jones (from Jack Engelhard's novel)

Starring: Robert Redford, Demi Moore, Woody Harrelson

The film's premise is Hollywood simple: a billionaire bachelor offers a handsome but penniless couple a million dollars for one night of sex with the woman. While the idea is unrealistic, it nonetheless poses an intriguing question—can we consciously override our sexual access rights?

Indecent Proposal has a bookend structure where the opening frames offer brief, enigmatic snippets of the closing scenes, leaving the viewer unsure of the film's outcome and—in theory at least—eager for more. This segues into a banal montage-with-voice-overs (yep, plural) where Lyne sledgehammers home the point that, after meeting on a misty pier, David and Diana Murphy (Woody Harrelson and Demi Moore) are the perfect couple, with “have I ever told you I love you?” as their annoying refrain.

David and Diana embark on their dream life together, central to which is building a house designed by David, an impoverished junior architect. They have their tiffs but these are resolved by sex on the kitchen floor. There's a playful shot where Harrelson nuzzles against Moore's bottom, though the overall effect is somewhat spoiled by a forest of chair legs in the foreground. You'd think that a director of Lyne's experience would have noticed them, or the 1st Assistant Director might have pointed them out. Like the artfully masked abattoir sex scene in *Asylum*, the chair legs remind us we are watching something taboo.

The Murphys acquire a piece of land overlooking the ocean and stake their financial future on building their dream house. It looks like a shack with a giant toilet roll stuck on the side but the Murphys love it—until recession hits. David and Diana are soon unemployed and unable to pay the mortgage. Down to their last dime, David thinks of the perfect solution: Las Vegas.

The ensuing sequence could well be titled 'American Cinderella'. While David gambles, Diana wanders around the Hilton's exclusive boutiques, nicking the fancy chocolates—much to the amusement of billionaire gambler John Gage (Robert Redford). Diana tries on a chic black cocktail dress... and who should walk in and offer to buy it for her? Diana rebuffs Gage with a line that will later come under scrutiny: “The dress is for sale. I'm not.” While Diana licks chocolate off her fingers, David licks the bank and wins \$25,000. Back in their hotel room he showers Diana with his winnings. In the film's luridly iconic moment Lyne's camera slowly trawls over Diana, clad only in white panties, surrounded by crumpled greenbacks. Equating selling sex to purchasing a warm carcass could not be more explicit.

David returns to the tables. The winnings are soon gone, and with them any chance of holding onto their dream home. As they trudge towards the exit David and Diana are drawn to a buzz at one of the tables: Gage, a million bucks down. He sees Diana and, remembering what a minx she looked when she pocketed the chocolates, asks her to be his lucky charm. David eggs her into it. Gage bets a million. Diana rolls the dice and—surprise, surprise!—wins. The inevitable follows: David and Diana get upgraded to an expensive suite, the black cocktail dress arrives and the Murphys are invited to a little *soiree*.

SEXCATRAZ

There's some humdrum socialising before Gage gets serious over the pool table. The talk turns to money. David rashly opines there are limits to what it can buy; Diana clarifies this by saying people can't be bought. "I buy people every day" is Gage's crisp retort. Diana defers but adds a qualifier: "Not where emotions are involved." Gage tests the Murphys' resilience by offering a million dollars for "one night with your wife." Note that the line is directed at David: Gage unconsciously knows that he, not Diana, owns her sexual access rights. A proposal to buy emotions has morphed into an offer to buy sex without the latter being mentioned. This implies the two are inseparable: if you're trading one, you're trading the other. David doesn't respond but Diana tells Gage to go to hell. Instead he pots the black into the bottom pocket.

Gage's proposal gives the Murphys insomnia. David doesn't want a bar of it but Diana craves the financial security. The "one night with your wife" isn't the problem; the difficulty lies in emotionally legitimising the transaction, which Elena in *À Ma Soeur!* and Connie in *Unfaithful* failed to do. How can the Murphys circumvent the covenant against extramarital sex they're unconsciously beholden to? Diana argues that "it wouldn't mean anything: it's just my body; it's not my mind, it's not my heart," before driving her twisted logic to a seemingly unanswerable conclusion: "We both slept with other people before we were married, right? We just have to look at it like that." What Diana doesn't realise is that those prior relationships didn't involve breaches of the sexual access rights she had unconsciously exchanged with those earlier partners.

The deal is struck and sealed with a contract. David goes off for a consolation meal. Unable to stomach the shame, he tries to rescind the deal—only to be left clutching at thin air as a helicopter whisks Diana across a gilded sea to Gage's yacht. Diana joins Gage on the quarterdeck. She wears a smart black Chinese outfit but the moment of enchantment—the Cinderella moment—falls flat. Looking at their eyes, the actors know it too. Diana questions how she's ended up in this position. She signed up for a script that sucks. Gage crows that, "I bought you because you said you couldn't be bought." Diana reasserts her naïve belief that she can separate the emotional from the physical: "I can't be bought. We're just going to fuck, as I understand it."

We'll have to go with that version of events. The story resumes with Diana returning to David's embrace. Diana is in tears: already, on the inside, she knows she's violated a crucial boundary. Her rationalising counts for nothing in the face of her unconscious sexual programming. David smears the lipstick off her lips, a dog belatedly pissing on its own boundary tree, a distant echo of Max Raphael forcing himself on his adulterous wife in *Asylum*. David's sexual access rights have been violated. He, too, senses something irreplaceable has been shattered.

The Murphys quash their doubts and rush to pay off their debt. It's a pedestrian scene but, intriguingly, Diana suddenly sports a crucifix around her neck. Did Demi Moore just turn up on the day of filming with a crucifix and forget to take it off? Did the costume assistant put on the wrong piece of jewellery by mistake? It's hard to believe it's there by error or oversight. The crucifix clearly signals that Diana has transgressed—not just against David but also against God. The insertion of the crucifix at this vital point turns *Indecent Proposal* into a morality tale on the first of the seven deadly sins. Having transgressed, it's necessary for David and Diana to be punished, like the Trant sisters in *The Man in the Moon*.

SEXCATRAZ

The Murphys' first setback comes when they discover the bank has sold their dream house; their ill-gotten million is of no use. Diana learns the buyer was none other than John Gage, always looking for a steal. Diana confronts him to no effect. David is livid when he learns that Diana saw Gage and suspects she has genuine affection for him. But that's not what spouts from his mouth: "Did you fuck him?" The inability to separate love from sex resurfaces. Diana's denial only inflames David's sense of betrayal. He walks out; the dream house, the dream, and the perfect couple all gone.

The recession over, Diana gets a job in real estate. One day she walks Gage. This brings them together for a series of property visits, at the end of which she falls for him. Love is the only way Diana's transgressive sex act can be redeemed (that word from *Eyes Wide Shut* again). We can only forgive her if we accept that her body knew what she truly wanted before her heart did. This construct occurs in other films reviewed here.

Diana and Gage attend a wildlife charity auction. Billy Connolly is the auctioneer, a jarring mix of Hollywood and reality TV that ejects the viewer from the film's already tenuous fiction. Gage bids \$50,000 for a hippopotamus, only to be trumped by a mystery bidder who ups the ante to a million. Who could that be? David. The auction allows the tainted million to be laundered through a charity, which Decency requires.

Like Alice in *Eyes Wide Shut*, David has reached a place of forgiveness. Unsullied by his non-participation in Gage and Diana's transgressive sex act, he is now cast as the film's moral centre. The costume department signals this by dressing him in angelic white. From this vantage point he signs their divorce papers, leaving Diana with the sense that two wrongs haven't added up to a right. Gage reaches the same conclusion and forces Diana's hand with a cock-and-bull story about having bedded other women through similar million-dollar proposals. Diana realises she's been set free.

Dawn finds her down on the pier where she and David carved their initials so many years before—and there he is, sitting in the early mist, his back to her, almost as if he'd read the script. Diana leans against the bench and whispers, "Have I ever told you I love you?" It is, in Hollywood terms, an 'up' ending. We're supposed to believe that David and Diana resume their earlier bliss as if their pact with the Devil (Gage) never happened.

The reality of relationships broken through infidelity is usually quite different. Though some aspects of the relationship can be repaired, the loss of trust that stems from the betrayal of sexual access rights often cannot. *Indecent Proposal* may be fiction, and poor fiction at that, but it explicitly shows what many people know deep down to be true: the emotional sense of wrongdoing is inescapable.

Indecent Proposal reaffirms the taboo of infidelity through its traditional narrative of punishment and redemption. As with *Unfaithful*, Lynne teases his audience with the promise of exploring risqué territory only to uphold the moral status quo with the filmic equivalent of reinforced concrete. Once again he fails to even-handedly question the unconscious exchange of sexual access rights at the root of his story.

All three films in this chapter reveal the sense of sexual ownership that many people feel towards their significant other, and the emotional turmoil that results when either partner strains against that yoke. My purpose is not to denigrate marriage but to liberate it from the unconscious shame that can ruin it, with the emotionally catastrophic effects seen in *Indecent Proposal* and many other films about affairs.

SEXCATRAZ

What's noticeable, not just in the films reviewed here but in real life as well, is our inability to talk about sexual issues—our absence of language. Not only are we ashamed of our sexuality but that shame also deprives us of the ability to discuss the issue. This is one of the reasons sex accounts for so many marital breakups: unable to discuss them because of the shame, sexual issues fester inside us until we 'act out' in some way, like Bill and Alice in *Eyes Wide Shut* and Connie in *Unfaithful*. In both films the marriages were patched up with the screenwriting equivalent of gaffer tape. In real life the tape may not hold.

Until we establish our most significant relationships on a sound psychosexual basis we will fall prey to the entanglements seen not only in these films but—more to the point—in so many real-life relationships. Logic suggests that avoiding the emotional entanglement of marriage allows sexual satisfaction to be found with one or more partners without stepping into the minefield of mutually exchanged sexual access rights. The films in the next chapter test this hypothesis—and find it wanting.

SEXCATRAZ

Oil and water

The films studied so far demonstrate how deep-seated beliefs about the illicit nature of sex condition us to conform to the prevailing covenants, principally through hiding sex behind the closed doors of lifelong monogamous relationships. As seen in the last chapter, this results in an exchange of sexual access rights that is relatively successful as long as both partners are satisfied, but can have very destructive emotional results if these rights are violated. As *Indecent Proposal* shows, even the conscious choice to engage in extramarital sex does not provide immunity from emotional catastrophe.

The rise of ‘friends with benefits’ and ‘no strings attached’ relationships suggests that society is searching for a quick fix to this issue through sexual liaisons low in commitment and, theoretically at least, high in satisfaction. Such relationships may not be everyone’s cup of tea but, if we are to fully map out the floor plan of Sexcatraz, we need to understand their emotional mechanics. Let’s start with Patrice Chéreau’s 2001 drama *Intimacy*.

Intimacy

Year: 2001

Director: Patrice Chéreau

Writers: Anne-Louise Trividic, Patrice Chéreau (from Hanif Kureishi’s short stories)

Starring: Mark Rylance, Kerry Fox

Intimacy charts the decline and fall of a ‘no strings attached’ relationship between an introverted couple, Claire (Kerry Fox) and the recently separated Jay (Mark Rylance). On first release the film generated a shudder of excitement with the undeniable on-screen evidence that the many sex scenes between the two leads were real. This creates a double layer of transgression: Rylance and Fox are not only portraying socially disapproved casual sex but are actually committing it.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—this sense of transgression, *Intimacy* received a generally favourable reception, particularly at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival where it won the Best Film, Best Actress and Best European Director awards.

The film begins with Claire’s arrival at the dishevelled digs Jay calls home. He makes coffee and fills the obvious distance between them with small talk, but the *raison d’être* for her visit soon surfaces and it’s off with the clothes. How or when they arrived at this unusual accommodation is never revealed. The raw sex is reminiscent of the hallway scene in *Unfaithful*; it’s almost sex as punishment, though who is punishing whom and for what is, at this stage at least, unclear.

After the sex Claire exits, leaving both Jay and the audience suspended without context, though it’s obvious the experience wasn’t particularly rewarding for either of them. There’s no war over sexual access rights between emotionally committed partners, as seen in the last chapter. But something just as destructive has taken its place, though it will take a few more bruising encounters between Jay and Claire for its shape to emerge.

SEXCATRAZ

The following scenes flesh out the details of Jay's life. He's a bar manager who left his wife and kids for reasons unknown. Cue a flashback to Jay bathing his children in the well-appointed family home a world away from his slovenly digs. His ex-wife arrives. Throat palpitating with fear, she questions whether Jay loves his little ones. Jay's answer, cutting back to the present in the film's single most effective moment, is a cigarette and a can of Heineken. He doesn't have time for either. The doorbell rings: it's two o'clock Wednesday, otherwise known as 'shag time with Claire'.

Claire pushes past Jay into the hallway before he can close the door on her and their loveless relationship. They start grappling, fully clothed. There's a momentary lapse when both parties stop to consider what they're doing: it's the distant pull of society's covenants. Jay scrapes his fingernails down Claire's calf. Her body arches. Intermission over. The sex scenes are from the European school: unafraid of the human body, particularly the penis. The result is a film often regarded as crossing the line between cinema and pornography⁵⁷.

Afterwards, they lie exhausted but joyless on Jay's filthy carpet, seemingly prisoners of the same primal urges as Stella in *Asylum* and Connie in *Unfaithful*. As *Intimacy* unfolds it becomes evident that things aren't that simple. The film's narrative pace—never more than a dawdle—then dissipates in some stuff involving Jay's best friend Victor, another man on the scrapheap of life, played with sweaty volatility by Alastair Galbraith. Unfortunately it's tangential to the central plot, which resumes with Claire's latest visit to Jay.

The camera picks up the action after the sex, with the two of them asleep on the floor. Jay wakes and carefully disentangles himself so as not to wake Claire, an unexpected tenderness that subtly signals a change of direction. He watches her sleep, seeing more than a naked woman napping on his floor. He follows Claire after she leaves but loses her in a crowd. Nonetheless, some emotional wheels have been set in motion.

The next sex session pushes *Intimacy* furthest towards porn, as Kerry Fox's Claire takes Jay's—make that Mark Rylance's—penis into her mouth⁵⁸. Unlike *The Brown Bunny*, the film would be equally effective without the explicit fellatio shot but the entire hoo-hah over its inclusion illustrates our collective shame. Specific figures aren't available without hands-on (well, mouth-on) research, but the practice deftly executed by Fox on Rylance is not exactly uncommon⁵⁹. That such images should be deemed offensive speaks volumes about our inability to accept humanity's fundamentally sexual nature.

Afterwards Jay follows Claire again, this time to the tiny theatre beneath the Earl Derby pub where she plays Laura in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Here Jay befriends Andy (Timothy Spall from the Oscar-nominated *Mr Turner*) and his son—Claire's husband and child. Andy is the third point of a triangle Jay has unwittingly created through his supposedly 'no strings' trysts with Claire. Jay's thoughtless pursuit of Claire has brought him smack into the realisation that she isn't just a stray fuck; she's a wife and mother too. Shocked, he decides to end their weekly sessions.

However, in the first intimation that Claire's in the driving seat, the next Wednesday she doesn't show. Jay curls up in pain, hurt by the non-appearance of a woman he

57 The film was unavailable from Amazon UK's now-deceased DVD rental branch, LoveFilm.

58 Even cinema's definition of real sex isn't real: in *Indecent Proposal* it's Demi Moore's real nipple that Woody Harrelson sucks on. This is called acting, and requires a lot of training in complicated techniques with Russian-sounding names. Only genital interactions are classified as real sex. Like all aspects of sex, cinema has created shame-based false boundaries that generally go unquestioned.

59 Some people find oral sex too shameful to perform. This fear is termed '*fellatiophobia*'.

SEXCATRAZ

supposedly cares nothing for. Conventional logic suggests that Jay should be able to have sex with her without any emotional side effects; in fact he has unconsciously developed an attachment to Claire to emotionally legitimise their sex.

As Wilhelm Reich observed, our institutionalised sexual negativity creates a conflict between the urge for sex and the shame of that urge. Elena's emotional acrobatics in *À Ma Soeur!* show how we resolve this by making sex a display of romantic love. The logic is that sex is 'bad' but love is 'good'; if sex takes place inside the envelope of love then it can be reclassified as 'good'—hence our society's obsession with finding our 'other half' who, in addition to meeting our emotional needs, satisfies us sexually. But this pressure to contain our shameful sexual impulses within socially approved relationships leads to the destructive booby-traps seen not only between married couples in *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Unfaithful* and *Indecent Proposal*, but also between supposedly free-and-easy singletons in *Intimacy*.

The pain of Jay's bond with Claire propels him back to the pub and the talkative Andy, an easy-going cabbie happy as "a pig in shit" to be married to Claire, leading light of the Earl Derby's microcosmic theatrical world. Cutting straight to the point, Jay asks Andy how he would feel if his wife met a stranger every week for sex. Andy, sweating in the glare of the billiards table lights, claims that as long as his wife came home at the end of the day then everything's fine. Andy has fought and lost the battle for Claire's sexual access rights; the only way he can hang on to her emotionally is to release her physically. As for Claire, she probably couldn't care less who Andy screws. Although she may have claimed the right to have sex with whomever she wishes, the use to which she puts this right is driven by her shame, as eventually becomes evident.

Intimacy is based on several of Hanif Kureishi's short stories. Unfortunately, the subplots cast too little illumination on the central question of Jay and Claire's struggles to achieve sexual and emotional cohesion. After Claire's no-show and Jay's sobering encounter with Andy, the film treads water in a muddled sequence that ends with Jay in bed with a girl called Pam (Rebecca Palmer).

In stark contrast to the silent Claire, Pam babbles incessantly as she wanders around her squat naked, sipping a cheap merlot. "Don't you think it takes time to get to know people," she muses as she almost absently impales herself on Jay. The scene is a breath of fresh air after the emotionally stunted lives of Jay, Claire and Andy. Like Nicole Kidman's monologue in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Pam points the way to a simpler life. Unburdened by shame, she satisfies her sexual urges without the need for any emotional return. Jay tries to erase the pain of Claire's no-show through bedding Pam; having become emotionally attached to Claire he now experiences sex with Pam as a transgression which triggers further shame: when Pam asks for round two he flees down the stairs.

Then it's back to the Earl Derby, Andy and Tennessee Williams. *Intimacy* is an endless round of scenes in the same locations, some barely distinguishable from each other. Jay corners Claire in the squalid confines of the Derby's dressing rooms. It is here that *Intimacy* reaches its apotheosis in a bitter monologue from Jay: "I thought that if what we did together was all that you wanted, it was because you knew more than me. I thought you'd found something... and that in the end you would tell me what you knew."

Jay—and millions of others with him—desperately seeks an exit from the Catch-22 that cripples his life: when he has emotional intimacy he's ashamed of his sexual urges; when he expresses those urges he's ashamed by the lack of emotional connection. This is caused by his unconscious judgment of sex as shameful and the resulting sexual-spiritual

SEXCATRAZ

split within his psyche. An adult version of Renato in *Malèna*, Jay is forced to choose between expressing his ‘good’ (non-sexual) and ‘bad’ (sexual) aspects by his inability to combine the two. His bitterness stems not from a sense that Claire has used him but from the soul-destroying realisation that she is equally lost.

Intimacy fails to capitalise on this moment and wanders into another underwhelming sub-plot featuring singer Marianne Faithfull. The result is a film disproportionately tangential to its theme. As Eric Harrison writes for the [Houston Chronicle](#), “There is an interesting story here, but the movie circles it at a distance.” The film cycles back to Claire and Andy, where to no one’s surprise it emerges that Jay isn’t her first affair. Feeling a similar guilt to Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, Claire punishes herself in demeaning sexual encounters firmly rooted in her shame. But, as Pam shows, love isn’t necessary for sex to be fulfilling: what is necessary is an absence of shame.

Jay finally moves out of his shabby digs but not before Claire turns up one last time. She admits she thought of starting a new life with Jay. Like *Indecent Proposal*’s Diana and Gage, casual sex has morphed into love in an unconscious quest for emotional legitimacy. Jay cries as he begs her to stay. Reciprocal tears fall from Claire’s eyes as she restates her allegiance to Andy and her son. Jay and Claire have sex for the umpteenth time—though now with genuine affection for each other—but it doesn’t help. They’ve just moved from one untenable position to another. This is a portrait not of intimacy but its opposite, alienation. For all their sex, Jay and Claire inhabit the same emotional wasteland as Bud in *The Brown Bunny* and Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*.

Intimacy shows loveless sex between two people who only later fall in love, belatedly aligning with societal expectations. The sex may be cinematically risqué but, emotionally, the plotline is entirely conventional. *Intimacy* is ultimately a disappointing film with too much focus on underperforming sub-plots and two leads that learn little from their time together. This leaves the viewer feeling pretty much the same. A film with a much sharper message is Rob Reiner’s hugely popular 1989 romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*. This film investigates society’s unconscious sexual programming by questioning whether sex can ever co-exist with friendship.

When Harry Met Sally

Year: 1989

Director: Rob Reiner

Writer: Nora Ephron

Starring: Billy Crystal, Meg Ryan

Easily the most accessible film in *Sexcatraz*, *When Harry Met Sally* was a runaway critical and commercial success, grossing US\$92 million in the US alone and earning a Best Screenplay Oscar nomination for Nora Ephron. Although the inspired pairing of Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan significantly contributes to the film’s success, the springboard is Ephron’s screenplay, a savagely accurate vivisection of society’s unconscious, shame-based sexual covenants.

SEXCATRAZ

The film covers a 12-year period from when Harry Burns (Crystal) and Sally Albright (Ryan) first meet to when they actually become a couple. Spanning long time periods can be problematic in cinema. *When Harry Met Sally* neatly solves this by interpolating each time sequence with a brief interview with a married couple recounting how they first met. This artificial device—referenced in the film’s title—is cleverly stitched into the main thread by making an aged Harry and Sally the final interviewees.

The main plot gets underway when Harry, fresh out of college, hitches a ride from Chicago to New York with Sally, a friend of Harry’s then current girlfriend. Harry and Sally are an oil-and-water combination. He’s crude, cynical and opinionated while she’s demure, optimistic but high maintenance. Tempers flare during the long drive but Harry finds Sally increasingly attractive and hits on her. Sally deflects his advances by averring they are “just going to be friends.” The film’s first telling moment comes when Harry rebuts this: “Men and women can’t be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.” Harry’s—and Ephron’s—emotional logic is impeccable but it’s not until later that Ephron, through Harry, deconstructs this statement.

Skip five years and Harry bumps into Sally on a plane. She has a new man. Harry is engaged but hasn’t lost any of his cynicism, as his description of the singles scene reveals: “Go back to her place, you have sex, and the minute you’re finished, you know what goes through your mind? How long do I have to lie here and hold her before I can get up and go home—is 30 seconds enough?” The driver for both responses—her desire to be held and his to elope—is shame. Having satisfied his sexual urge, the man suddenly feels ashamed of his predatory actions. Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, and Jay fleeing from Pam in *Intimacy* all demonstrate this post-orgasmic polarity switch. The sense of having transgressed (sex without love) impels the man’s flight to lessen his guilt and shame. Conversely, the woman feels that the man’s continued presence adds legitimacy to the sexual transaction, in the same way that Elena goes through emotional somersaults in *À Ma Soeur!* to convince herself that Fernando genuinely loves her.

Here we see how gender traits influence responses to shame. This is a generalisation, but men typically respond to awkward situations through action while women respond through emotion. These contrasting traits underlie the contentious question, “Will you still love me in the morning?” If he sticks around after sex for breakfast... then lunch... then dinner... then it must be love. Experiencing the array of unpleasant feelings generated by shame is the last thing most men want, so if the attraction is purely physical he’s off to the pub to catch the early kick-off, leaving her feeling emotionally violated—as Elena felt in *À Ma Soeur!* and as Sally will later feel in *When Harry Met Sally*.

On the escalator after the flight Harry fleshes out his earlier ‘men and women can’t be friends’ dictum: the only reason people in a relationship look for friendship with the other gender is because they’re sexually dissatisfied. In order to disprove this (and prove their fidelity to their partner, with whom they have exchanged sexual access rights) they avoid making friends with the opposite sex. *When Harry Met Sally* is peppered with such revealing exchanges. Nora Ephron’s faultless logic compels Sally to prove she has no sexual interest in Harry: she rejects his offer of friendship.

Jump another five years and Sally is recently single while Harry is getting divorced. The collision takes place in a bookstore. This leads to dinner, over the course of which Ephron unearths another cost of our sexual covenants. Sally voices it: she and her previous partner

SEXCATRAZ

didn't marry because almost all the married couples they knew "practically never had sex again. It's true—it's one of the secrets that no one ever tells you." (Despite revealing this unspoken truth the film ultimately marries off its protagonists, upholding the conventional view, already seen in *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Unfaithful* and *Indecent Proposal*, that romantic love trumps everything else.)

The upshot of the dinner is a platonic friendship between Harry and Sally and the film's most assured sequence, gorgeously framed by an autumnal New York. Both of them date other people but there's a crucial difference: Sally doesn't have sex with these try-before-you-buy partners while Harry does.

Sally's distaste for Harry's behaviour spirals into the film's best-known scene, where she fakes an orgasm in a diner to prove a point. It's a funny moment but it's worth deconstructing the underlying psychology. If a woman is genuinely enjoying sex she has no reason to fake an orgasm. Her joy will be transmitted to her partner, regardless of whether she climaxes. An orgasm is only faked to short-circuit an emotionally unrewarding sex act, making the man feel cock-a-hoop about his sexual prowess as—obeying Harry's earlier 30-second rule—he scurries out the door feeling he can get away with a quick exit. All of the damaging behaviour so humorously documented by Nora Ephron in *When Harry Met Sally* is founded on shame.

As it moves into its second half *When Harry Met Sally* affords progressively more screen time to its protagonists' best friends, Jess (Bruno Kirby) and Marie (Carrie Fisher), with a corresponding fall-off in its charm. The inevitable upshot is a double date where Harry pairs with Marie and Jess with Sally. Equally inevitably, Jess and Marie fall for each other. The progression of their relationship through engagement to marriage forms the arc of the film's final third.

Against this backdrop, the platonic idyll between Harry and Sally can't last. Both are increasingly affected by their shame-based, emotionally disempowering beliefs. Hitting a low, they turn to each other and end up having sex. Harry immediately knows the score: they have violated his own dictum and their friendship is doomed. Here the film makes its only misstep; the usual response to shame-induced feelings of awkwardness, foolishness and humiliation is avoidance, particularly (as already noted) by males. Instead, they meet for dinner the following night in an attempt to paper over their bruised feelings by dismissing the sex as a mistake.

It doesn't work. By the time of Jess and Marie's wedding, Harry and Sally have drifted apart, blaming each other for the demise of their friendship. This sparks an argument that reveals just how important the emotional legitimacy of our sexual liaisons is, particularly to women. Sally: "You want to act like what happened didn't mean anything." Harry: "I'm not saying it didn't mean anything. I'm saying why does it have to mean everything?" Sally: "Because it does!" Sally's heated response stems from the unconscious pressure to frame sex within love already explored in detail in *Intimacy*. Our covenants prevent many people from enjoying sex purely for its own sake, as Harry and Sally now find to their cost. It's also notable that Sally can't articulate her feelings in any detail. This is another attribute of shame: it obscures itself behind a veil of emotional fog.

But this is a Hollywood romantic comedy and we know how it's going to end. Harry and Sally realise they've been in love all along. Their lovemaking, like that between Diana Murphy and John Gage in *Indecent Proposal* and Jay and Claire in *Intimacy*, was emotionally legitimate after all. The audience gets the 'up' ending it craves but the downside—the

SEXCATRAZ

difficulty of cross-gender friendships and the inadmissibility of sex between friends—remains unresolved.

Without showing an inch of skin *When Harry Met Sally* is among the most revealing films ever made about society's sexual covenants. Nonetheless, it follows *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Unfaithful*, *Indecent Proposal* and *Intimacy* in ultimately upholding those covenants; its box office success depended on this, as its target audience largely adheres to the belief that sex is only meaningful within the envelope of love. Films that explore the collision of love and sex—and dare to reject the conventional viewpoint—are rare. Among them is Catherine Breillat's anti-heroine sex odyssey *Romance*.

Romance

Year: 1999

Director: Catherine Breillat

Writer: Catherine Breillat

Starring: Caroline Ducey, Sagamore Stévenin, François Berléand

"Love is desolate. Romance is temporary. Sex is forever." So reads the poster for Catherine Breillat's nihilistic take on the incompatibility of love and sex. Released in 1999, *Romance* mirrors her later *À Ma Soeur!* in comprising a series of tableaux with some telling insights into human sexuality, weakened by a tenuous plotline and ended by an unlikely and thematically dissatisfying climax.

Romance tells the story of Marie, a twenty-something schoolteacher in love with her boyfriend Paul, a handsome male model disinterested in sex. Marie, played with sad-eyed grace by Caroline Ducey, is conflicted over whether she's entitled to physical love when blessed with humanity's greatest gift, romantic love. Marie gets no help from the distant and detached Paul (Sagamore Stévenin), a typical Breillat male character who is little more than a cipher. Marie tries to arouse Paul by going down on him; like *Intimacy* the sex is real. Paul, whose physical interest in women doesn't extend beyond a relationship's honeymoon period, dissuades Marie. When she requests oral sex he replies that, "If I did that, I'd despise you. I couldn't love you anymore." This is the fear and shame of oral sex already discussed in *Intimacy*.

Paul's inability to reconcile love with sex makes him see women in Madonna-or-whore terms. Just as Sally in *When Harry Met Sally* regards emotionally committed sex as everything and casual sex as nothing, Paul divides women into those who embody virtuous traits such as nurturing and mothering, and those who want sex. Paul wants Marie to be his Madonna. He can maintain a sexless relationship because, as will be seen, he sublimates his sexual impulses into other activities. For Marie, more sensitive to her body's urges, this is not an option. It is these urges—and the shame she feels at fulfilling them—that provides the film's narrative drive.

Agreeing to be Paul's Madonna, Marie ventures out to a bar where she meets Paolo (Paul's sexually open alter ego, played by porn star Rocco Siffredi) who takes her back to his apartment. Marie's voice-over reveals that, like Claire in *Intimacy*—and for much the same reasons—she's been having regular 'stranger sex' while Paul sleeps.

SEXCATRAZ

It's hard to fathom what Marie sees in Paul, given his alienation. Yet love him she does. Marie watches miserably while Paul flirts with a woman on a nightclub dance floor. "He seduces because he wants to conquer. He wants to conquer because he's a man," intones the voice in her head. Paul's way of coping with his shameful sexual urges is to channel them into a socially acceptable outlet. He indulges his desires on the dance floor, knowing that when he has a woman where he wants her—wanting him—he will simply walk away, his ego satisfied while conveniently avoiding the sticky terrain of actual sex.

Marie reveals her own shame-based programming when she argues with Paul outside the club. "You pull this shit because I dance with a girl?" Paul enquires. "Not some girl, a slut!" Marie has the same, polarised Madonna-or-whore programming as Paul: she brands a woman as sexually voracious for dancing with her boyfriend while she has a penchant for stranger sex. The hypocrisy is lost on Marie, but this is an entirely accurate depiction of the way sexual shame clouds perceptions. Marie sees herself as the victim here—the same twisted emotional logic that John Lotter and Tom Nissen employ to justify Brandon Teena's rape and murder in *Boys Don't Cry*.

This drives Marie back into Paolo's arms, where Breillat once again reveals society's unwillingness to engage with the basic facts of human sexuality. With Breillat there isn't the insult to the intelligence of Hollywood-staple fully clothed sex, casually rumpled bed-sheets or carefully placed foreground objects concealing socially inappropriate body parts. There are simply two naked bodies and something rarely seen even in art house films: a man touching his own penis. (I was going to write 'touching himself' until I noted the shame implicit in the phrase. Although we all know what it means, like the nun in *The Magdalene Sisters* the phrase cannot bring itself to name the body part in question. Shame litters our lives, our loves, and our language.) It takes a porn star like Siffredi, comfortable with his own body, to commit this image to celluloid.

Marie rolls onto her stomach and Paolo takes her from behind. Marie cannot bear to look in her seducer's eyes; she would see only a reflection of her own shame. "How can you love a guy who doesn't fuck you?" Paolo inquires as he pumps into Marie. "I don't love the guys who screw me. I hate them," she replies, passively projecting the loathing she feels at satisfying her desire onto her partners, like Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*. This is her version of Paul's inability to perform oral sex on Marie without despising her.

But neither can Marie spare herself: "I want to be a hole, a pit," she daydreams. Like the real-life Bob Crane in *Auto Focus* she glimpses satisfaction only in the void of sexual abandonment. Although we don't see it, like Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*, Marie has spent a lifetime unconsciously obeying the dictates of the 'good' side of her psyche. She longs for the relief of expressing her rejected, 'bad' sexual side.

In a typically under-motivated transition, Marie is summoned to see Robert (François Berléand), unassuming and middle-aged, presumably her superior at the school where she teaches. Cut to Robert's house. He—plot twist!—has a talent for domination. The professional implications of an older male luring a younger female colleague into a fetish encounter are ignored. Instead of script plausibility, Breillat focuses on set decoration and lighting, carrying both off with beautiful understatement. Foreshadowing themes Breillat would later explore in *À Ma Soeur!*, the scene is peppered with savage one-liners like "The only way to be loved by women is through rape," "Why do men who disgust us understand us better than the ones we love?" and "Beauty feeds on degradation."

SEXCATRAZ

Amid all this sexual metaphysics Marie winds up tied to a post, mouth gagged, panties at half-mast and a deliciously silky rope pressing between her legs. It's more than she can stand. Robert tenderly carries Marie to a bed where she breaks down and cries—not in misery but at the relief of having expressed her pent-up sexuality.

Marie goes home only to find the apartment empty. This leads her to masturbate; an act she paradoxically performs with her legs closed and finds in equal parts satisfying and shameful. Like Dorothy Vallens, Frank Booth, Bud and Erica Kohut, Marie is caught in the push-pull cycle of seeking sexual release yet feeling ashamed when she finds it. This is both the treadmill of *Sexcatraz* and Marie's yo-yo trajectory throughout *Romance*.

Marie later sights Paul in a Japanese restaurant, enjoying his solitude. In the only truly loving moment between this alienated couple, Marie leaves him alone. On the way home she passes a stranger in her apartment stairwell. She surrenders to the same urge as Connie Sumner on the apartment landing in *Unfaithful* and receives what she craves.

Still unsatisfied, Marie returns to Robert's house. Here Marie—and *Romance* with her—achieves a state of grace. Resplendent in a scarlet dress, the traditional mark of the harlot, she submits wordlessly to being trussed, handcuffed and ankle-braced like a chicken ready for stuffing. A close-up shows Robert cutting a slit up the middle of Marie's panties. He slides his fingers through the slit and the fuzz of pubic hair beneath. His fingers come out glistening. This is a porn moment, but it's rendered with such tenderness—even the word 'love' wants to interject itself into this sentence—that it transcends categorisation. Breillat mounts a full frontal attack on society's narrow, conventional definitions of meaningful sex—married, monogamous, missionary—for which both she and actress Caroline Ducey should be commended.

Marie returns home and—miracle of miracles—Paul wants sex. Marie climbs on board but makes the mistake of mocking his fragile libido: "You be the woman. I'll be your guy, I'll screw you." Paul flings her aside, unable to handle the affront. His self-esteem is so fragile that anything other than a male-dominant position leaves him feeling inferior.

Somehow, in another of Breillat's leaps of faith, Marie gets pregnant from this stunted coupling. "A Virgin Mary moment," she calls it in the voice-over: Hail Mary, the patron saint of lame screenwriting. But the longer *Romance* goes on, the less attention the film pays to Marie and Paul's emotional wasteland. Instead, the pregnancy provides Breillat with the opportunity to subject Marie to further indignity. The next scene has her flat on her back in hospital, vulva gaping at the camera as some trainee gynaecologists poke about.

Later, Marie studies the aforementioned vulva in a mirror and laments that "You can't love a face when a cunt tags along." This is pretty much Anaïs Pingot's conclusion in *À Ma Soeur!* It's also *Romance* in a sound bite and a perfect delineation of the sexual-spiritual split—which Breillat then brings into crystal clarity as the film veers into a fantasy where the pregnant Marie lies on a bed in a misty hospital, fully clothed, a loving Paul in attendance. A guillotine-like wall cuts off sight of her body below the waist. Marie's lower body has been banished to another world—which Breillat unflinchingly reveals in the next shot: a drab, smoky alleyway where Marie's legs protrude from the other side of the guillotine.

This is the same putrescent setting as the grey-green bungalow in *À Ma Soeur!* where Fernando duped Elena into shedding her virginity. Marie's desire to be nothing but a sexual "hole" has found expression. Underemployed porn actors (or possibly executive producers) queue to enter Marie's headless—and, by implication, soulless—body. Breillat rams home

SEXCATRAZ

her assertion that the chasm between love and sex cannot be bridged. It's a brilliant portrayal of shame and the sexual-spiritual split, deep in the human psyche, that divides us into a pure, good, loving, moral and intellectual half (the upper body, including the mind and heart) and an impure, bad, immoral and sexual half (the lower body, including the genitals). This is the treasure Marie's sexual odyssey yields: her heart, mind and genitals are disconnected and at odds. R.D. Laing writes in *The Politics of Experience*: "When our personal worlds are rediscovered... we discover first a shambles... genitals dissociated from heart; heart severed from head; heads dissociated from genitals."

After this moment of clarity *Romance* goes into free-fall. Paul suddenly becomes the doting father-to-be, dragging Marie around like a leashed poodle—until the script has him back on the nightclub dance floor. Paul's behaviour shifts from incomprehensible and dull to incomprehensible and annoying, which perversely makes sense of Marie's next action. She turns on the gas cooker while he sleeps then goes to the hospital. Marie gives birth—shown in a head-on close-up—just as the apartment explodes, eliminating Paul from the script about an hour and a half too late. The film closes with Paul's funeral, which—not surprisingly—is attended only by Marie and her baby.

Just as *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Unfaithful* and *When Harry Met Sally* champion emotionally committed love over sexual satisfaction without even trying to give the latter a fair hearing, *Romance* does the opposite. The character of Paul—vain, narcissistic and impotent, both sexually and emotionally—is fundamentally unappealing. This leaves Marie as more of a marionette than a fully drawn character, making a frequently debasing journey that allows Catherine Breillat to assail us with cogent points about our fundamental unease with sex. Unlike *Eyes Wide Shut* and *Unfaithful*, Breillat tackles the subject matter of her film like the shot of Marie giving birth—head-on and in close-up.

Romance is a bleak film that sees no solution to the conundrum that human beings become inhuman when they show their true sexual selves. Are romantic love and satisfying sexuality an either-or, oil-and-water combination? Are our only choices for role models Bill and Alice in *Eyes Wide Shut* or Marie and Paul in *Romance*? Breillat's film suggests there's no escape from Sexcatraz.

That's not the only unanswered question. All of the films studied to date have been set in some version of late-20th or early-21st century Western society. These films have provided a comprehensive view of the sexual shame that entirely overlays our society, acting as an invisible prison that keeps us trapped in out-dated and destructive beliefs around our sexuality. Yet none of these films answers the fundamental question: where do these beliefs originate?

SEXCATRAZ

Unclean

When and where was the ground plan of *Sexcatraz* laid? Let's turn to David Lean's 1962 Oscar-winning masterpiece *Lawrence of Arabia*. T.E. Lawrence—the single most complex and compelling figure to emerge from World War I—may seem an odd figure to include in a review of films about sex. In fact he sheds light not only on sexual shame but also on what arose from the shifting sands of Arabia some 6,000 years ago.

Lawrence of Arabia

Year: 1962

Director: David Lean

Writers: Robert Bolt, Michael Wilson

Starring: Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif, Alec Guinness, Anthony Quinn

Lawrence of Arabia opens with T. E. Lawrence's fatal motorcycle accident in 1935. The scene ends evocatively, with Lawrence's oil-smearing goggles dangling from a thorn bush. Rewind to a Cairo basement in 1914. Lawrence, marvellously played by a twinkle-eyed Peter O'Toole, is a minor functionary in the Arab Bureau due to his pre-war archaeological work. (Lawrence was recruited by British Intelligence early in 1914 to provide cover for a military survey of the Negev Desert.)

The basement scene illuminates Lawrence with a single gleaming detail: after lighting a cigarette for an orderly, Corporal Potter, he unflinchingly snuffs out the match with his bare fingers. Potter repeats this and finds that it hurts. "What's the trick, then?" Potter asks. "The trick, William Potter, is not minding that it hurts." This is the stuff of Boys' Own adventures, the Lawrence legend. If we add some equally shiny details from his childhood and view the whole through the prism of sexual shame what begins to emerge is not a tolerance for pain but a longing for it.

Lawrence's mother, Sarah Junner, was illegitimate. His father Thomas Chapman was part of the Anglo-Irish nobility until he ran off with Junner and fathered Thomas Edward, or 'Ned', also illegitimately. Junner was a staunch believer in physical punishment. Ned, the eldest of five sons, appears to have borne the brunt of this. Ned learned his parents' secret at an early age and was deeply ashamed of it. This toxic brew of sexual shame, guilt and physical punishment drove Lawrence to hate both the physical body and sex⁶⁰. He escaped into the sexless idealism of Arthurian legends. This led to an interest in the fortresses of the Crusades and, ultimately, to the Middle East.

Lawrence is rescued from his Cairo dungeon by the head of the Arab Bureau (Claude Rains, Captain Renault from *Casablanca*, revelling in a Machiavellian role). He convinces General Murray to send Lawrence to befriend Prince Faisal, leader of the Arab revolt, and

⁶⁰ American businessman Ralph Isham, who befriended Lawrence after World War I, wrote that "His hatred for his body was a boy's hatred; his fear of women was a boy's fear."

SEXCATRAZ

glean his intentions in Arabia. Cue the gorgeous desert landscapes filmed in 70° Panavision by Lean's camera.

Lawrence's guide leads him to a well belonging to a rival tribe. Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) rides up on a camel and shoots the guide. A beautifully observed exchange between Ali and Lawrence follows: "This is my well," says Ali. "I have drunk from it," Lawrence replies, inviting death. "You are welcome." "He was my friend," Lawrence retorts. "That?" inquires Ali, dehumanising the guide. He stoops to recover the guide's pistol (earlier given to him by Lawrence). "This pistol yours?" "No. His." Ali stashes the pistol in his robe: it's booty; had Lawrence said it was his, honour required that Ali return it. Ali struts to the well and picks up a cup. "His?" "Mine," says Lawrence. "Then I will use it." Ali prepares to ride off. He jabs his riding crop at the guide's body. "He was nothing. The well is everything."

Ali's entire worldview is predicated on purity: what is clean and what is unclean. The guide, the well, the pistol, the cup... each has a black-and-white, completely non-negotiable value depending on its cleanliness (or lack thereof). Lawrence, with his childhood steeped in sexual shame, perfectly meshed with this unforgiving world of idealised masculine values. G. Rattray Taylor calls this "the psychological process of decomposition... it simplifies our emotional situation if we can divide people and things into wholly good and wholly bad." The inability to perceive shades of emotional grey goes hand in hand with both judgment and shame, as shown by some of this book's most vivid characters, including Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*, and the real-life T. E. Lawrence.

Lawrence makes his way to Faisal's camp, where he finds the rag-tag collection of brigands, cutthroats and sheep-stealers comprising the Arab army. Prince Faisal (Alec Guinness), astride a white charger, brandishes a scimitar at two Turkish planes that bomb the Arabs with impunity, highlighting the gulf between the Westernised Ottomans and the medieval Arabs. Faisal's forces retreat and, with them, Lawrence. Then, 40 minutes into the film, something remarkable happens: some children appear in shot. Almost half the length of a standard feature and we haven't seen a single female character. Great films are always accurate depictions of their environments and this is a truly great film⁶¹. *Lawrence of Arabia* is the most anti-female, anti-child, anti-sex film in history because it marginalises them into invisibility. It's an accurate depiction not just of Bedouin society but also of the desert tribes that gave rise to sexual shame—to Sexcatraz.

The key word in the last sentence is 'desert'. Prior to about 6000 Before Current Era (BCE), the Sahara, the Arabian Peninsula and what are now the deserts of Central Asia were grassy savannahs teeming with wildlife. They supported peaceful hunter/gatherer and early agricultural societies. In *Sex at Dawn*, Ryan and Jethá argue that sex was freely available in these social groups and was primarily a bonding agent. Socio-biologist E. O. Wilson writes that "all that we can surmise of humankind's genetic history argues for a more liberal sexual morality⁶²" than that of *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* 1950s New York, 1990s Ireland in *The Magdalene Sisters*, or even contemporary films like *The Piano Teacher* or *Eyes Wide Shut*. Hand in hand with sexual openness went a lack of violence. Archaeologist Ofer Bar-Yosef found no evidence of warfare throughout the Near East prior to 6000 BCE. Other regions are similarly lacking in unambiguous evidence for violence up to this time.

⁶¹ *Lawrence of Arabia* was ranked #5 on the American Film Institute's [100 Years... 100 Movies](#) list (1998) while the British Film Institute ranked it the [third greatest British film of all time](#) (1999).

⁶² E. O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*.

SEXCATRAZ

In *Saharasia* geographer James DeMeo documents how drought caused these areas to become arid. The consequences were profound: “After 6000 BCE, sites in Anatolia, Syria, and Iraq yield evidence of drought, decline, and/or disturbed social conditions... Bodies of victims, mostly children... were found.” Climate change across Saharasia (De Meo’s collective name for the Sahara, Arabia and Central Asia) introduced the concept of shortage into the human psyche. As desertification became entrenched around 4000 BCE, a radically different social, political, emotional and sexual paradigm emerged: the fight for survival.

Darwin’s law of natural selection suggests that those who survived were those who adapted best to the changing conditions⁶³. DeMeo’s research confirms this. As Saharasia dried out, the tribes forced to abandon their now-infertile homelands became increasingly violent and seized still-fertile territories.

Ruthless warrior elites arose, along with the concept of superior bloodlines that had to be protected at all costs to ensure survival⁶⁴. Timothy Taylor writes that males were “singled out for a harsh initiation into life by an increasingly populous and belligerent society that required warriors.” This was achieved by withholding colostrum from new-borns through early weaning, preventing maternal-infant bonding⁶⁵. Adult males developed an insatiable rage and an inherent distrust of the emotionally remote mother figure. An entitlement to violence and sexual abuse became embedded in the collective male psyche; it’s been there ever since.

As the deserts expanded, the most violent tribes fanned out with the same inevitable result: to the victor the spoils, to the loser death or slavery, and—for the women at least—use as sexual chattels. Soldiers were spurred to victory by the lure of their foes’ wives and daughters, what Susan Niditch calls “the time-honoured martial custom of rape.” To be forced into sex against one’s will was often a sign of irrevocable defeat⁶⁶. Conversely, sexual control over others conferred overarching power. We’ve seen this in Brandon’s stripping in *Boys Don’t Cry*, the naked exercises in *The Magdalene Sisters*, the public humiliation of Malèna—and it later appears in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Protecting the victorious bloodline meant not only safeguarding its womenfolk but also controlling whom they had children with. Suddenly the absent women in *Lawrence of Arabia* come into focus: they’ve been corralled in the shadows to ensure that only the right men mate with them. Sexual rules evolved that were most stringently applied to the women of the ruling elite—the forerunners of the sexual covenants seen in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Malèna*. In *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex Morality* Wilhelm Reich shows how cultures designed their marriage laws to ensure the ruling males kept a grip on wealth, power and the sexual control of women. Sociologist Maria Mies writes: “The martial pastoral nomads were the fathers of all dominance relations, particularly that of men over women.”

Patriarchy conferred an evolutionary advantage. Survival of the fittest meant enmity over amity and cruelty over empathy. The individual became meaningless, survival of the

63 There are various theories on the origins of patriarchy. I’ve drawn on the work of DeMeo and others as they accurately account for the psychological changes (including the emergence of sexual shame) that occurred during the birth of what we blindly—and blindingly—call civilization.

64 The concept remains active into modern times: in World War II Hitler’s ultra-loyal *Schutzstaffel* (SS) troops had their blood group tattooed inside their left armpit. They had first call on plasma supplies.

65 Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex*.

66 This is why all forms of enforced sex—such as the Iraqi prisoners made to perform oral sex upon each other by US soldiers at the [Abu Ghraib](#) prison—are perhaps the most humiliating human experience.

SEXCATRAZ

tribe all that mattered. Think of Sherif Ali's parting comment at the well in *Lawrence of Arabia*: "He was nothing. The well is everything."

And here, in the emergence of patriarchy, lies the birthplace of sexual shame. With a life-or-death struggle for resources, fighting ability became overwhelmingly prized while any softness was equated with weakness as it endangered survival. Sexuality and the emotions were the Achilles' heel that had to be controlled⁶⁷. Weakness not only incurred personal shame but also made one's family suspect. This sense of needing to disprove suspicions of shame underlie the actions of Lynda's father in *Wish You Were Here*, Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and Rose's mother in *The Magdalene Sisters*, placing allegiance to communal sexual standards ahead of the emotional wellbeing of their daughters.

Over time, conscious suppression became unconscious repression. Anti-sex customs became genetically entrenched as social taboos. To break them was a source of shame; the underlying fear was of expulsion into the pitiless desert. Punishments for sexual misconduct crystallised over time: law no. 7 of the Code of Ur-Nammu (in modern-day Iraq) specified the death penalty for adultery in 2100 BCE. *Boys Don't Cry*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *Unfaithful* confirm that the violent punishment of sexual transgressors retains emotional legitimacy to the current day.

Over the last millennium before the modern era, sexual prohibitions such as those imposed in Ur-Nammu coalesced into the new monotheistic faiths⁶⁸. They were codified in Judaic laws and customs that later migrated into Christianity and Islam. Along the way, the original *raison d'être* for sex regulation sank out of conscious knowledge into humanity's collective unconscious. The foundations of Sexcatraz had been laid.

In *Lawrence of Arabia*, it is Lawrence's knowledge of the Qur'an that ingratiates him with Prince Faisal. He argues that the Arabs should resist military mechanisation and rely on guerrilla tactics: "My lord, I think your book is right. The desert is an ocean in which no oar is dipped. On this ocean the Bedu go where they please and strike where they please." Later, Faisal questions whom Lawrence is loyal to. "To England... and to other things," he replies, those 'other things' being his idealised, romanticised, sexless view of an Arthurian Arabia. Faisal stares into Lawrence's eyes. "You are another of these desert-loving Englishmen." What Faisal sees is the longing for cleanliness, the yearning to be free of the body—and especially the torment of sexuality—in Lawrence's soul. Lawrence may have been raised in Oxfordshire but his psychological makeup came straight from prehistoric Arabia.

Lawrence comes up with his plan to seize the strategic port of Aqaba by crossing the pitiless Nefud Desert. The centrepiece of Part One of *Lawrence of Arabia*, the desert crossing devotes much time to Lawrence rescuing a man called Gasim who had been given up for dead. It concludes with Lawrence receiving an Arab robe to replace his British Army uniform, bringing his external appearance into alignment with the 'inner man'. Like David in *Indecent Proposal*, Lawrence is dressed in white to signify his moral purity.

Lawrence forges a tenuous alliance between Ali and a grizzled mercenary, Auda abu Tayi (a hawkish Anthony Quinn). The alliance is immediately imperilled when one of Ali's men kills one of Auda's. An eye for an eye—a life for a life—requires the culprit's death. It

⁶⁷ "In ancient Greece, the word *aidos* (shame) applied to men and women but with a sexual meaning for women and a more 'honour' meaning for men."—Darrel Ray, *Sex & God*.

⁶⁸ Darrel Ray notes that, "a single god has no sex partner." Monotheism arose in societies where sex was fundamentally shameful. It's important to note the shame came first. The new religions merely reflected it.

SEXCATRAZ

also means the start of a blood feud between the tribes. Lawrence solves this by proposing to be the executor, only to be brought up short—Gasim is the culprit. Lawrence’s idealism has its cost: upholding abstract ideals ultimately requires us to concede our humanity. Lawrence raises his pistol. Pulls the trigger. His descent into inhumanity has begun.

Part One ends with the sack of Aqaba and Lawrence’s return to Cairo dressed as a Bedouin. Once the bumbling junior officer at odds with the military machine, he’s a very unwelcome prodigal son. With his star in the ascendant, his return to the desert—and his full descent into the quicksand of idealism, inhumanity and sexual shame—beckons.

Part One of *Lawrence of Arabia* lasts two hours and a quarter. Apart from a glimpse of some extras in Auda’s tent, we haven’t seen a single female character. Everything that is in any way feminine has been shamed into invisibility, the least transgression punishable by death. Sexual shame entered the human condition with the desertification of Saharasia some 6,000 years ago. Part Two of David Lean’s cinematic masterpiece shows the impact of that shame on T.E. Lawrence himself.

Mercifully, Part Two of *Lawrence of Arabia* clocks in at a mere hour and a half. It charts Lawrence’s return to the desert as a guerrilla leader, crippling the Turkish supply lines with strikes on the Hejaz railway. This leads to the Turkish retreat, the Arab advance on Damascus and the discovery—heart-breaking to Lawrence—that British promises of support for Arab nationalism were mere lip service. For the purposes of *Sezcatraz*, Part Two has two key scenes—Lawrence’s capture and torture by the Turks at Deraa, and his famous “no prisoners” massacre of a retreating Turkish column some months later.

Lawrence’s treatment while a prisoner of the Turks at Deraa is one of the most picked-over aspects of his story. In his Bedouin robe, Lawrence ventures into the town in search of information. In the film, a Turkish sergeant notices and arrests him. He’s included in a lineup and the consumptive Bey (a magnificent José Ferrer) singles him out. Lawrence is stripped. The Bey fondles his skin. Lawrence snaps and hits the Bey: *boundary + violation = transgression*. “Beat him.” Lawrence is whipped then tossed into the street.

Yet Lean’s version is also clearly to be read as a homosexual proposition: the look in the sergeant’s eyes when he stops Lawrence, and again—a specific cutaway by Lean—when the Bey sights him. The Bey’s language: “A man cannot always be in uniform.” The Bey’s disinterest, other than physical, in Lawrence... the tenderness with which he touches Lawrence... the close-up of the Bey’s lips, pursing in anticipation of pleasure... the smirk after Lawrence hits him. Lean, of course, can’t show Lawrence being raped—this is a 1960s film—but he does leave clues: after ordering the beating, the Bey retreats into his office but, very carefully, leaves the door ajar. The guards spread Lawrence’s legs. The Bey’s off-screen coughing during Lawrence’s whipping signals his continued presence in the scene.

In *Lawrence in Arabia*, Scott Anderson describes how Lawrence gave three different accounts of his treatment. The presence of multiple accounts is itself an immediate clue that we’re dealing with shame; that a fog, a veil is being drawn across something too painful for plain sight. In a letter to a friend, Lawrence claimed simply to have escaped. In his own work, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he wrote that the Bey tried to rape him but he resisted⁶⁹. For

⁶⁹ Lawrence devoted five pages to his treatment at Deraa. He wrote that while being kicked in the ribs, “a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me.” Anderson observes that, “there is something in the sheer accumulation of such ghastly detail that serves to cloud the narrative, to make vague what really happened.” Once again we see the collision of sex and suffering, as well as the clouding effect of shame.

SEXCATRAZ

this he was tortured and tossed out—pretty much the film version, minus Lean’s suggestive cutaways, stage business and sound editing.

Lawrence presented a third version in a letter to Charlotte Shaw, the only woman he seems to have trusted. He admitted to surrendering his “bodily integrity” to the Bey. It’s hard to escape the sense of a repressed homosexual, like Marcello in *The Conformist*, forced into an act he was too ashamed to initiate. We will never know for certain, but in his varying accounts Lawrence may have been trying to admit the inadmissible: not only did his socially shameful feelings find a mirror, but—worst of all—it brought a certain relief. Think of Marie trussed up in *Romance* and Catherine Breillat’s suggestion that truly expressing our sexuality requires some level of degradation.

Whatever happened at Deraa, it changed Lawrence. In the film, Lawrence recuperates with Ali before returning to Cairo for a long, talky sequence setting up the political betrayal of the Arabs. It’s a while before we get back to the action. In fact, within days of Deraa Lawrence set out on an arduous cross-desert trek—hardly consistent with being tortured. But insiders noted a distinct change in him, entirely consistent with the one thing a shamed person cannot stand: humiliation. Whatever happened at Deraa crossed a line within Lawrence that, like John Lotter and Tom Nissen in *Boys Don’t Cry*, couldn’t be uncrossed.

Although *Lawrence of Arabia* doesn’t show it, prior to Deraa Lawrence sometimes took prisoners, such as at Fuweila prior to the capture of Aqaba. Ten months after his ordeal, Lawrence returned to the Deraa region. There he would “commit some of his most brutal acts of war, acts that would carry the very strong scent of vengeance⁷⁰.”

Here Lean’s filmmaking—and Peter O’Toole’s acting—is at its finest, in a sweeping battle scene where the Arab army massacres a retreating Turkish column. Ali watches with concern as Lawrence’s bright blue eyes stare beyond the here and now into his Arthurian Arabia. He shudders with the longing for blood. Ali urges him to remember the big prize: “Lawrence. Not this. Go round. Damascus.” “No prisoners,” utters one of Auda’s men. “No prisoners,” bellows Lawrence. Ali watches in dismay as the Arab army swarms towards the Turks. Surrendering to the tide, he unsheathes his scimitar and rides after Lawrence.

Lawrence strides through the fray, shooting Turks, his humanity utterly gone. A Turk surrenders to him. Lawrence shoots him in the face. This is the ultimate cost of a society that values masculinity over femininity: it dehumanises us to survive then shames us for being human—for the very process by which we reproduce or by which we express ourselves most intimately. Lawrence ends up a shuddering wreck, clinging to a blood stained dagger, his once-white robe spattered with blood to signal his defilement. The man who dreamed of cleanliness has become unclean.

From there it’s a hop, skip and a jump to Damascus, political betrayal, and a journey in a staff car as Lawrence faces up to a disaffected future. While sexual shame goes a long way to unravelling the Lawrence enigma, he remains an intriguing and elusive figure. Despite its three hours and three-quarters running time and total absence of female characters, *Lawrence of Arabia* has lasted well. Nominated for 10 Oscars and winner of seven, it’s a cinematic monument that is likely to keep interest in T. E. Lawrence alive well into the second century of film.

Lawrence of Arabia shows how important an understanding of sex is to understanding history. In *Sex in History*, G. Rattray Taylor writes that sex is the “*sine qua non*”—the

⁷⁰ Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia*.

SEXCATRAZ

indispensable ingredient—of “all coherent historical research” and laments that many historians have maintained what is tantamount to a “conspiracy of silence” on the subject⁷¹. This is the taboo of sex at work, the covenant that the matter itself is unfit for discussion and that to do so violates a taboo.

This unwillingness to even discuss sex hides the truth at the heart of Sexcatraz: age-old beliefs about the dangers—physical, moral, and spiritual—of sex were pounded into our ancestors’ DNA several millennia ago as they fought for survival. This sex-negative programming has been handed down from generation to generation⁷², reaching us today as the myriad difficulties and dysfunctions seen in modern society and vividly documented in the films reviewed here.

From *Boys Don’t Cry* to *American Beauty*, from *Eyes Wide Shut* to *When Harry Met Sally*, cinema—the great communications tool of the 20th century—has splashed the hidden workings of Sexcatraz onto the silver screen right before our eyes. Writing in the gender-stilted manner of his time, Wilhelm Reich describes the impact on the human psyche in no uncertain terms: “Man is the only biological species which has destroyed its natural sex function, and that is what ails him⁷³.”

And ails him it certainly does. From the late 19th century, the pressure created by the inability to healthily express sexuality increasingly surfaced (in Western society at least) as neuroses. This was central to the development of psychoanalysis by Austrian neurologist [Sigmund Freud](#)⁷⁴. He stressed how crucial sexual health was for wellbeing when he wrote that, “The behaviour of a human being in sexual matters is often a prototype for the whole of his other modes of reaction in life⁷⁵.”

Character after character in the preceding films have demonstrated the truth of Freud’s diagnosis: as a society, we are emerging from over 6,000 years of sexual repression but we unconsciously resist this because, historically, sex has been inherently dangerous. The result is the array of sexual dysfunction in modern society and the invisible prison of constricting beliefs that I call Sexcatraz.

It’s time we escaped.

71 The history of emotions seems to have received even less attention.

72 This process is known as [epigenetic inheritance](#).

73 Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm*.

74 In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud wrote that civilization “can only produce a state of things which no individual will be able to bear.”

75 Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*.

SEXCATRAZ

PART III

Parapraxes

Freud saw [repression](#) as an unconscious mechanism for warding off socially dangerous impulses, i.e. those that violated prevailing covenants. He considered this “the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests.” No impulses are more dangerous than sexual ones. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) Freud posited the idea of *parapraxes*⁷⁶, better known as [Freudian slips](#), which are attempts by repressed impulses to break into conscious awareness. He termed this process the ‘return of the repressed’.

Freudian slips are usually thought of as spoken faux pas⁷⁷. Freud had a much broader view of parapraxes, including not only supposed errors in speech but also of writing, memory, action and chance events. What identified these seemingly unrelated phenomena as parapraxes was “the ability to refer the phenomena to unwelcome, repressed, psychic material, which, though pushed away from consciousness, is nevertheless not robbed of all capacity to express itself.”

Every film in this book, including those based on fact, contains characters whose lives feature such phenomena—events that act as lightning rods for repressed sexuality. In *Boys Don’t Cry*, the discovery of Brandon’s dildo triggers John Lotter and Tom Nissen’s shame, starting a chain reaction that leads to rape and murder. In *Auto Focus*, squeaky-clean Bob Crane falls in with his alter ego John Carpenter and descends into a sordid underworld of sex addiction. In *Lawrence of Arabia*, when T.E. Lawrence is captured at Deraa he ends up in the hands of the man-eating Bey. This is the return of the repressed.

It doesn’t matter whether parapraxes stem from divine will, random chance, or—as Freud believed—repressed psychic material seeking to intelligently express itself. The crucial point is that the return of the repressed allows us to observe, take responsibility for, and change our dysfunctional behaviour. It’s a self-balancing mechanism that draws attention to what’s awry in our lives so that healing can take place. Let’s observe this at work in Adrian Lyne’s excellent 1997 remake of Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial novel about underage sex, *Lolita*.

Lolita

Year: 1997

Director: Adrian Lyne

Writer: Stephen Schiff (from Vladimir Nabokov’s novel)

Starring: Jeremy Irons, Dominique Swain, Melanie Griffith, Frank Langella

Lyne’s *Lolita* has no less than three beginnings. The title sequence shows a defeated Humbert Humbert—beautifully played with weary-eyed fatalism by Jeremy Irons—weaving

⁷⁶ The word derives from the root *para*, which has multiple meanings including ‘incorrect’ or ‘abnormal’, and the Greek *praxis*, which means ‘doing’ or ‘a deed’.

⁷⁷ I can remember, during a visit to Mount Orgeuil in Jersey, a lady reddening with embarrassment (i.e. shame) after mentioning the castle’s impressive fornications—oops—fortifications.

SEXCATRAZ

his car along a valley road, reminiscing about the titular girl. “But there might have been no Lolita at all had I not first met Annabel,” Humbert informs us by voice-over as the scene shifts to Cannes in 1921.

Humbert meets Annabel Lee, also fourteen years old, and gets his first whiff of sex when Annabel exposes herself to him in a boatshed. But Annabel catches typhus and dies, destroying the adolescent Humbert’s world and creating a profound negative connection in his malleable psyche between sex and death. Humbert will spend the rest of his life trying to return to that unresolved formative moment, knowing full well what will happen should he succeed: “The poison was in the wound, you see—and the wound wouldn’t heal.”

The main plot engages with Humbert’s arrival in New England in 1947 to teach French literature at a private college. He lodges with Charlotte Haze (Melanie Griffith), a young widow in a plunging dress, all bust and rouged lips. “At twenty dollars a month you can’t beat the price,” Charlotte purrs with a suggestive glance as she leads handsome Humbert out of the spare room and up the garden path.

Charlotte’s pubescent daughter Dolores lies on the grass reading a magazine, soft-focus sprinklers spurting onto her, a soaked see-through dress clinging to her skin. Lyne’s quasi-soft-porn directorial style is perfectly suited to the moment. Humbert is paralysed. A close-up of Dolores’ magazine reveals her own preoccupation: men. She glances up at him and cracks a grin that sparkles with the silvery glint of braces. Echoing Brandon’s fascination with Lana Tisdell in *Boys Don’t Cry*, the camera zooms in on Humbert at giddy speed. His long-lost Annabel has been found.

Why does Dolores—soon known as Lo and then Lolita—exert such a magnetic pull on Humbert? Her own beauty aside, the obvious factor is Annabel. But two other influences must be considered. Firstly, Humbert was raised in the profoundly sex-negative world of 1920s Britain; and secondly, he’s sensitive, as indicated by the subject he teaches.

Human sensitivity is not a widely recognized factor but it has a huge impact on our lives. Elaine N. Aron, PhD, writes in *The Highly Sensitive Person*: “One in every five people is born with a heightened sensitivity: they are often gifted with great intelligence, intuition and imagination, but there are also drawbacks. Frequently they come across as aloof, shy or moody and suffer from low self-esteem because they find it hard to express themselves in a society dominated by excess and stress.”

Highly sensitive people tend to have a rich inner life—often reflected in a love of art, music or, in Humbert’s case, French literature—but can be overwhelmed by busy public spaces such as pubs, cinemas and supermarkets. They have a heightened awareness of society’s unspoken rules—including its sexual covenants—and of how their own feelings violate them. Consequently, they can be more heavily impacted by sexual shame, with a detrimental effect on their self-esteem and a tendency to introversion.

The highly sensitive Humbert would have seen the incidents with Annabel through a skewed filter. Although her self-exposure and death were entirely separate, Humbert’s pliable young psyche would have interpreted the latter as punishment for the former—and not just for Annabel. Like Marcello in *The Conformist*, Anais Pingot in *À Ma Soeur!* and the Trant sisters in *The Man in the Moon*, the impressionable Humbert experienced a deeply painful shock as the ‘wrongness of sex’ branded itself into his psyche at a formative age, stalling his natural development towards healthy sexual adulthood.

Humbert thus became a typical bachelor of his day, avoiding women and immersing himself in literature—a long and winding road of sexual repression that ultimately led to

SEXCATRAZ

New England, Charlotte Haze's garden and Lolita lying on the soaking wet lawn. All along there would have been a deep, nagging pain: the repressed seeking an outlet. It finally found it in that lithe young girl in a cling-film dress. "H-how much did you say the room was?" he stammers. Ten minutes into *Lolita* and Humbert Humbert is doomed.

The next sequence, the film's strongest, focuses on Humbert's growing obsession with Lolita and how mother and daughter Haze react to his presence. Dolores responds with seemingly casual provocations, for—as Humbert has correctly divined—she's a nymphet: an adolescent girl attuned to her burgeoning sexuality and its mesmerising effect on some men. Humbert confesses to his diary that he is such a man.

Every inch of the Haze household becomes a minefield, at once deeply desirable and teasingly painful. Female underwear drip-dries in the bathroom. Pink pyjama bottoms litter the landing. Lolita sits in the kitchen slurping ice cream, a milky white line above her lips and her legs agonisingly askew. Dominique Swain brilliantly—and simultaneously—inhabits the worlds of a gawky teenager and a sexually confident young woman, the flame that the moth of Jeremy Irons' Humbert irresistibly circles.

Noticing the cosy relationship developing between Humbert and her daughter, and with her own designs on the former, Charlotte packs Lolita off to boarding school. But Charlotte isn't done with the bold strokes. While out for a day she sends Humbert a note professing her love, instructing him to either reciprocate or leave.

A fortnight later Mrs Haze becomes Mrs Humbert. The shiny new ring on her wedding finger socially legitimises her sexual interest in Humbert. He responds like a vet dealing with an irascible elephant, tranquilising her with sleeping pills and writing vitriolic denunciations in his diary—which, of course, Charlotte finds. She ends their brief marriage and vows that Humbert will never see Dolores again. For the second time his world comes crashing down.

But then comes a stroke of luck. Lyne plays the moment for laughs: Humbert pours a stiff drink while Charlotte, mindless with rage, strides across the road to the mailbox. The ring of the telephone disturbs Humbert. He sets down his whiskey, wanders into the conservatory and answers it. Expecting Charlotte to have returned by now, he calls out that "there's a man on the phone saying you've been killed." There's no reply.

With Charlotte's exit the only barrier to Humbert's sexual conquest of Lolita is his own self-restraint. Thus begins the second phase of his intoxication. This steady cranking up of pressure is a characteristic feature of ignoring the return of the repressed: it knocks on the door of conscious awareness ever more loudly. Jeremy Irons plays Humbert with a winning mixture of helpless vacillation and weary *ennui*; hopelessly besotted with her, yet longing to be free of his endless sexual yearning.

The next sequence follows the battle between Humbert's overwhelming desire and his crumbling self-control. He whisks Lolita away from school and checks into a country hotel where a mix-up (no, a parapraxis!) forces them to share a bed. Humbert struggles with his conscience, putting Lolita in a vulnerable situation (as his desire triumphs) then trying to resist taking advantage of it (as his shame retaliates). This is Elena in *À Ma Soeur!* to-ing and fro-ing over Fernando's sexual entreaties all over again.

Like Elena, Humbert's urges eventually win out—but not yet. "Gentle women of the jury," he pleads to the audience, "if my happiness could have talked it would have filled that hotel with a deafening roar. My only regret is that I did not immediately... leave the town, the country, the planet, that very night." According to society's sexual covenants, Humbert

SEXCATRAZ

should have fled from Lolita's perilous presence. He didn't, partly because of the bliss of her nearness, and partly because he unconsciously knew that no matter how far he ran he was only looking for another Annabel, another Dolores, another Lolita. For the unfortunate Humbert the pressure to transgress is irresistible.

Even more unfortunately for Humbert, the enigmatic playwright Claire Quilty (Frank Langella) is staying at the same hotel and he, too, has an eye for a nymphet. Quilty broods over the rest of *Lolita* like a Georgia thunderstorm waiting to break. "Where the hell d'you get her?" Quilty mumbles when Humbert strolls onto the veranda to escape the intoxicating presence in his room. "What?" blurts Humbert. "The weather's getting better," Quilty clarifies. It's the beginning of a cat-and-mouse game that will lead Humbert to a winding valley road and, like a snake eating its own tail, the first of the film's many beginnings.

Humbert returns to his room and resists Lolita—until the next morning. But sex with Lolita only compounds Humbert's problems. He doesn't understand that the fourteen-year-old Dolores is a living mirror of the sexual trauma he suffered at exactly the same age. His unconscious has been calling out to him all his adult life, trying to return to that moment when the young Humbert's natural development was interrupted by the shock of Annabel's death. All he's aware of is *Lolita + sex*. Humbert adds the two together but, because our society has not understood its shame-based conditioning, he scrambles the message: it's not 'have sex with fourteen-year-old Lolita' but 'Lolita mirrors your psychosexual wound from when you were fourteen'. And so the wound remains infected.

Once Humbert and Lolita's relationship becomes sexual it goes into decline—and with it the film. Like the hospitalisation of Dorothy Vallens in *Blue Velvet* and Paul's murder in *Unfaithful*, the dissolution of the film's fundamental dynamic—Humbert's quest for sex with a substitute Annabel—deprives *Lolita* of its narrative drive. The film toils as Humbert struggles to keep Lolita compliant. The matter resolves when she is hospitalised overnight with a virus. When Humbert returns the next morning Lolita has gone.

The story resumes three years later when Humbert receives a letter from Lolita asking for money. Humbert calls on her at a ramshackle house. Lolita has matured; she's married and pregnant. Humbert learns that her abductor was Claire Quilty. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury... I regret all that I did before that last goodbye in Colemont—but I regret nothing of what came after."

Humbert is now on a one-way ticket. He murders Quilty in an overlong sequence then it's onto the winding valley road with the police in pursuit. Humbert has no will to resist. He stops in a field. A letting go takes place. Relief washes over him at the thought of spending the rest of his life in jail, unable to transgress against society's sexual covenants.

Like *Auto Focus*, Paul Schrader's biopic of Bob Crane, Lyne's is a compassionate reading of Humbert Humbert. Unlike Lyne's other forays into sexual shame included here, *Unfaithful* and *Indecent Proposal*, *Lolita* sensitively examines the socially transgressive cravings of men like Humbert. Although he is a predator he is also a prisoner, tortured for every moment of his life by the sexual yearning trapped inside him at fourteen.

As Freud observed, our psychosexual wounds constantly seek external outlets such as Humbert found in Lolita so they may be recognised, released and healed. The latter didn't happen to Humbert but Lyne, at last, is on the right track. Let's follow it to the New York subway and the one film that, on its title alone, demands inclusion in this book: Steve McQueen's magnificent *Shame*.

SEXCATRAZ

Shame

Year: 2011

Director: Steve McQueen

Writers: Steve McQueen, Abi Morgan

Starring: Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan

Shame opens in a New York subway carriage. At ease in the crowded carriage, Brandon Sullivan (played with brave abandon by Michael Fassbender) is a 21st century NYC alpha male. Tall, handsome, virile and smart, he oozes financial and sexual success from every pore of his handsome frame and every stitch of casually dishevelled designer-label clothing. But the film's opening montage shows that, like Bob Crane in *Auto Focus*, Brandon is plagued by an insatiable hunger for sex. Porn, prostitution, masturbation and stray fucks are all grist to his mill. Every one of these is the repressed returning into Brandon's life but, like *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert, he lacks the self-awareness to realise it.

On the subway a young married woman studies him. Brandon lets his rugged looks do the talking. She fidgets nervously. Her thoughts of infidelity trigger disquieting feelings, a vague nausea at challenging societal covenants... she crosses her legs, closing the door, but can't keep her eyes off Brandon. Sniffing sex, he follows her off the train. She loses him in the crowd. For once he's struck out but it's a fair bet that Brandon's batting average is still intimidatingly high.

Shame's first half revolves around Brandon's friendship with his married boss David (James Badge Dale) and a series of phone calls from an unknown woman that he refuses to answer. The work crew go out drinking. David makes an ass of himself hitting on a gorgeous woman called Elizabeth. At night's end it's Brandon, having made no effort to woo her whatsoever, Elizabeth offers a ride to—yes, that kind of ride. Part of Brandon's problem is that sex is so readily available that he never stops to consider his obsession.

Brandon arrives home to find his emotionally troubled sister Sissy (Carey Mulligan) in his apartment. She's in town for a singing gig and needs a bed. She was the woman on the phone and it's clear why Brandon didn't pick up: their family is completely dysfunctional. This dysfunction is not just at the heart of *Shame*; it is shame. Sissy has no self-worth, while Brandon has achieved success by walling off the gaping emotional hole at the core of his being—a hole that, if only he could see it, constantly cries out to him through sex.

Brandon takes David to see Sissy in a piano bar. In a mesmerising performance, Mulligan's Sissy wears all her vulnerability on her sleeve as she sings. Later, as she sits with the two men, that same sleeve rides up to reveal some scars on her arm—a momentary beat that proves crucial at the film's end.

David and Sissy wind up in Brandon's bed while he's left to stew in a funk. It's a seemingly odd response by someone so highly sexed—until the mechanics of shame are considered. It's the same blind hypocrisy Marie displayed in *Romance* when she berated her boyfriend for his provocative dancing in a nightclub. We berate in others what we deny in ourselves. Steve McQueen's camera captures Brandon's growing pressure by squeezing him into the corner of a shot beside a huge air conditioning unit. Sissy represents the repressed returning into Brandon's life even more than his compulsive sexuality—and he resents it.

SEXCATRAZ

Brandon burns off his pent-up energy by going for a late-night run. Afterwards he rips the sheets off his bed, as if to erase the polluted sex between David and Sissy. What he's really trying to erase is the emotional pain that flares up inside him at Sissy's behaviour. It's the first clear sign that, for all his own promiscuity, Brandon is fundamentally disgusted by sex. This is the same attraction/repulsion dynamic shown by Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, Bud in *The Brown Bunny* and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* and it's tearing Brandon apart.

As *Shame* moves into its second half another of Brandon's colleagues, Marianne (Nicole Beharie), provides the impetus. She corners him at the office coffeemaker with a suggestive question about sugar; it's pretty clear what kind she's offering to stir into his coffee. They meet for dinner. Brandon is late, unsure whether he can be bothered with the tedious formalities necessary to bed Marianne. Their small talk is stilted, hesitant. It's the same immature emotional space as Bud and Daisy in *The Brown Bunny*. Marianne is recently separated. Brandon admits he has never had a relationship that lasted more than four months. Two beautiful people, two economic successes, two emotional failures: shades of Bill and Alice Harford in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Brandon's physical desire trumps his emotional apathy. He invites Marianne on another date.

Back in his apartment, Brandon relieves his sexual pressure by masturbating in the shower—only for Sissy to blunder in. Once again the return of the repressed ups the ante. Sissy peels away, laughing hysterically while Brandon is hit by that same wave of shame-based feelings seen in earlier films: nausea, ridicule, humiliation, a sense of dirtiness, a desire to rewind his life and erase this shameful moment.

Like myriad characters from John Lotter and Tom Nissen onwards, Brandon lashes out at what he perceives as the source of these feelings: Sissy. Bad move. "You fucking weirdo," she retaliates. The insult stings... deep down, Brandon knows it's true. Sissy does too when she sees a web cam girl on Brandon's laptop. Sissy stalks out as Brandon finally admits the truth: like Bob Crane in *Auto Focus*, he's a sex addict. Brandon hurls his entire stash of porn magazines, DVDs and even his laptop into the trash. He sits hunched in his darkened apartment as he cycles through the same behaviour that destroyed Bob Crane. Self-loathing vies with lame promises of future self-control while the hunger for the next sexual high gnaws at his insides.

But Brandon has only dealt with symptoms so far, not causes. Porn and laptops are easily replaced. Genuine psychological change is much harder, as Brandon is now painfully reminded. He takes Marianne to an apartment with an amazing view of the New York waterfront but needs a line of cocaine before he can face her. They kiss. They undress. They... no—Brandon can't do it. With Marianne eager for sex he suddenly experiences an internal collapse, just as Bud accosted then rejected women during his trans-American odyssey in *The Brown Bunny* and Humbert Humbert spent a lifetime trying to get Lolita in a hotel room only to, temporarily at least, refuse her. Brandon's shame kicks in: nausea, self-hatred, disgust and get-me-out-of-here—or, in this case, get-her-out-of-here. "Brandon... you know it's cool, it's okay." Marianne offers a timeout. Brandon doesn't want one. She leaves, feeling rejected, bruised and mystified.

Brandon, however, knows exactly what he must do to quell his painful feelings. He dials 1-800-WHORE and has sex against the window with its gorgeous waterfront view. It may seem senseless that Brandon can't have sex with Marianne but can with a prostitute. According to the logic of *Sexcatraz*—the logic of shame—it makes sense. The prostitute

SEXCATRAZ

doesn't count. She's just a whore. Brandon fucks her and discards her and—crucially—will never see her again, never be faced with her, never be reminded that he used her to expel what he feels are disgusting urges. Marianne, conversely, he will see every day at work, and every time he sees her, her mere presence would remind him of their coupling, repeatedly triggering his shame and causing him to re-experience those unpleasant, nauseous feelings we all desperately try to avoid.

Back at home, Brandon finds Sissy still ensconced—the repressed refuses to budge. They share a tender moment but Brandon raises the issue of Sissy's fling with his boss: "You can't help yourself. It's disgusting." The ability to rationalise one's behaviour into something defensible—while that same behaviour by others is indefensible—is another hallmark of shame. And defend it he now needs to do. After being downtrodden once too often, Sissy goes on the offensive. "Don't talk to me about sex, Brandon, not from you."

Unable to engage with Sissy, Brandon has no recourse but to leave. "Great. Then you'll come back and we'll have the same conversation all over again." They both continually trigger each other's shame; while Sissy is looking for resolution, Brandon is stuck in denial. This time he draws a line: "No. You'll move out." They both know what that means.

An ominous synth introduces the film's final reel. Like *Boys Don't Cry*, *Shame* shifts from a linear to non-linear structure as the increasingly fragmented Brandon goes on an all-night sex bender. First up is a gaming hall, where Brandon talks dirty to a woman at the bar. Her boyfriend lays into Brandon, splitting his cheek. Like others before him—Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, Marie in *Romance*—Brandon craves punishment and degradation, to plunge so far into sex that he never comes out.

Next he visits an underground gay sex club, where a man fellates him. Leaving the club, Brandon finds a message from Sissy begging him to go home. "We're not bad people. We just come from a bad place." Sissy nails it but Brandon can't accept the insight. The line of least resistance leads to a pair of hookers.

In the searing heat of a threesome, shot largely out of focus by Steve McQueen's squirming camera, Brandon's true feelings are revealed. The threesome's body parts mingle indiscriminately. Sex act blurs into sex act. But what some men might regard as the ultimate fantasy turns into something else: a revelation of Brandon's ultimate misery. Brandon's face contorts with primal pain as he wordlessly swaps one woman for another, one body for another and one orifice for another. His eyes stare into the abyss of sexual purgatory. That which he has been pursuing the most is that which pains him the most. That same push-pull cycle of sexual misery seen throughout this book robs Brandon of all joy. He stares emptily from deeply sunken sockets as he exhausts himself of all desire. But there is no end to the cycle that Brandon finds himself in. He could screw every woman in New York and nothing would change.

Somewhere between the hookers' apartment and the New York dawn Sissy's message tugs at Brandon's mind. The subway rattles to a halt at 28th Street. Brandon stands at the door, which refuses to open. He finally emerges onto the street and calls Sissy. He can't get through. Panic suddenly grips him. Brandon runs the last blocks home. Every moment turns to quicksand. Sissy's sleeve, which rode up after her gig, comes to mind: yes, she self-harms. Seriously. He finds her in the bathroom, smothered in blood. Brandon cradles Sissy, wanting her at long last, accepting her plea for mutual healing.

SEXCATRAZ

There are signs of catharsis in the film's denouement. Sissy wakes in hospital with Brandon at her side. He breaks down and cries on a wharf. Finally he rides the subway, and there she is, the woman from the opening scene. This time her smile suggests she won't give him the slip. Brandon gazes at her for a moment before the screen cuts to black. He may or may not bed her; like *The Brown Bunny* it's left to the viewer to decide.

Ultimately, it's immaterial. The real question is whether Brandon has recognised that the events occurring in his everyday life are constantly showing him the damaged parts of his own psyche. Another film that effectively demonstrates the return of the repressed—and doesn't leave the viewer hanging—is *Swimming Pool*, an official selection for the 2003 Cannes Film Festival.

Swimming Pool

Year: 2003

Director: François Ozon

Writers: Emmanuèle Bernheim, François Ozon

Starring: Charlotte Rampling, Ludivine Sagnier, Jean-Marie Lamour, Charles Dance

François Ozon's poolside fable tells the tale of Sarah Morton, a best-selling middle-aged British crime writer on the brink of burnout. Neither commercial success nor public adulation compensate for the emptiness at her core. Superbly played by evergreen actress Charlotte Rampling, Sarah is an arid, desiccated creature with all the vigour of a long fallen leaf. Sitting morosely on the London Underground, her stick-like body smothered by a dull brown trench coat, her skin grey, lips and eyelids heavy, Sarah exudes a vague annoyance at still being alive. Across the carriage a fan, reading one of Sarah's books, recognises her from the dust jacket photograph. When questioned, Sarah lies that she has been misidentified. But who is misidentifying whom, the fan or Sarah herself? Mistaken identity is a theme that surfaces repeatedly in *Swimming Pool*.

It's not even lunchtime but Sarah needs a fortifying dram before she can face her publisher John Bosload (Charles Dance). She's made to wait as John finishes seeing Terry Long, a young author who has won a prize for his first novel. Sarah immediately resents the upstart, opening her conversation with John with a viperous question, "What award did that little shit get?" Sarah doesn't want an answer; it's just an opportunity to vent her spleen. She's jealous not of Long's success but his *joie de vivre*. Long reflects back to Sarah what's painfully absent from her own life: on a minor level he represents the return of the repressed.

Like Brandon in *Shame*, Sarah rejects the invitation to change. She feels hollow inside but, like a litany of other characters in this book, fails to accept responsibility for her feelings. John suggests a change of scene. He offers Sarah the use of his house in the Luberon, inland from Marseille. Sarah asks John to visit her; he declines because his daughter is coming to stay. With deft, accomplished strokes Ozon introduces the key elements of *Swimming Pool*.

All seems idyllic on Sarah's arrival in France. A geriatric gardener collects her from the airport in another seemingly trivial beat that later proves significant. Sarah makes herself at

SEXCATRAZ

home. She looks down from her bedroom balcony on the titular swimming pool, menacingly covered with a black tarpaulin against autumn leaf-fall. She stocks up on provisions in a village. Sarah stops at a café for a drink, where Franck (Jean-Marie Lamour)—a well-built man with a good-natured country air, on whom much will later hinge—serves her. Nothing passes between them as Ozon again shows his preference for introducing significant elements in a low-key manner.

For a few days Sarah eats, drinks, writes and has a good time. Then she is woken one night by a car stopping in the driveway. Suspecting thieves, Sarah hesitantly descends the stairs wielding a lampstand. She finds a young woman, Julie (a magnificent Ludivine Sagnier) who turns out to be John Bosload's illegitimate half-French daughter. Julie has a wild, unkempt look about her. The contrast with Sarah's prim English matron couldn't be greater and the two become instant enemies. "So you're daddy's latest conquest?" Julie asks, more statement than question, firing the first shot in a fusillade whose aim—like Albert Spica's in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*—rarely strays from the sexual.

The next sequence reveals Julie's hedonistic lifestyle. She wallows in a bubble bath, smoking a cigarette, one breast proudly jutting through the foam while Sarah mopes about in a dressing gown as stylish as old wallpaper. Sarah stares reproachfully at Julie's unwashed dishes. She tries to write but constantly breaks off to spy on the far more interesting Julie. Like Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet* and Renato in *Malèna*, Sarah's voyeurism is soon rewarded. The pool's tarpaulin, now half rolled back, reveals a surface awash with dead leaves. Julie swims out from under the funeral shroud of the tarpaulin. She emerges, fully naked, among the detritus. Sarah watches with that same mix of fascination and repulsion repeatedly seen in this book.

Sarah later falls asleep in a deck chair by the pool but is woken by Julie's arrival. Julie is topless. Her firm breasts glow in the sun. Unlike Sarah, Julie is alive, uninhibited, vibrant and connected to her sexuality. Julie's overt sexuality—the naturalness of it, her comfort with it—violates Sarah's sexual boundaries and triggers a reaction. Indirectly attacking Julie's sexuality, she dismisses the pool as a "cesspool of living bacteria"⁷⁸. Julie just sees it as "a bit of dirt and leaves." Julie and that bit of dirt and leaves is nothing other than the repressed slamming into Sarah's life, seeking to bring her into connection with her physicality and her sexuality. Sarah doesn't want a bar of it.

As Brandon Sullivan discovered in *Shame*, the repressed is not easily dissuaded. That night Julie returns from the local disco with a man. The music goes on; the bottle-tops and clothes come off and the visitor tucks into the *specialité de maison*. Woken by their moans, Sarah, lips pursed like Erika in *The Piano Teacher*, watches as they have sex on the sofa. Ozon's camera does a double focus-pull as the attention shifts from Julie to Sarah and back again. Julie senses she's being watched. Knowing who's snooping on her, Julie's pleasure increases. Sarah retreats in poor order to install some earplugs.

The next morning the visitor apologises to Sarah for the noise. Sarah, who has spoken French with ease throughout, pretends not to understand. Once again events are acting as a feedback system, mirroring the precise area of Sarah's life where she needs to change. Once again she refuses the message.

⁷⁸ "The dislike of dirt in the literal sense seemed to go with an extreme interest in dirt in the moral sense."—G. Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History*.

SEXCATRAZ

But all this exposure to Julie's unbridled sexuality has stirred something in Sarah. At the café the next day, she admires Franck's strong looks and unaffected ease. She manages a brief conversation. This tentative intercourse with the virile Franck leaves Sarah a little giddy, the shy schoolgirl who plucks up the courage to talk to a boy and is rewarded with a glimmer of attention. For the first time in the film she smiles without malice.

Sarah asks the old gardener to clean the pool so she can take a swim. She's starting to see leaves instead of bacteria. She also feels inspiration coming on. Sarah creates a folder on her laptop called 'Julie' and begins to write, lips now pursing with the joy of creativity. But Sarah still sits in judgment, chiding Julie for coming home with a different man every night. "You're just a frustrated English woman who writes about dirty things but never does them," Julie retorts. For all her best-selling literary skills, Sarah's jibes lack the barbed accuracy of Julie's sexually poignant invective.

Sarah finds a pair of Julie's panties, then a diary. She can't write fast enough as *Swimming Pool* accelerates towards its climax. Inevitably, Julie returns to the house with Franck. Sarah joins them for a drink and some weed. Julie turns on the stereo and dances with Franck. Feeling unable to compete with the young, voracious Julie, Sarah finds it hard to watch. Julie, equally secure as the sexually dominant female, entices the prim English matron to dance.

The booze, the music and Franck's appeal loosen Sarah's inhibitions. She finds herself in his arms. Franck draws her in. Their lips are tantalisingly close. Their hips bump. Julie snootily dumps herself on the sofa. The music ends, breaking the spell. Sarah experiences a jolt of shame at having pressed her loins against those of a virtual stranger. It's too much, too soon for her: feeling uneasy at this slight violation of her boundaries, Sarah experiences a sudden urge to retreat. She excuses herself for the night.

Withdrawal brings Sarah no respite. Still intoxicated in more ways than one, she can't sleep and pounds on her laptop. Voices carry from the pool. Sarah looks out and sees Julie and Franck frolicking naked. Julie goes down on Franck at the pool's edge, inflaming Sarah's sexual jealousy. That brief bump of the hips was enough to give her a sense of possession of Franck; already her unconscious seeks to legitimise the possibility of sex between them. In a moment reminiscent of Erika Kohut placing broken glass in her student's coat pocket in *The Piano Teacher*, Sarah hurls a stone into the pool, disrupting the sex and precipitating a fight between Franck and Julie.

The next morning Sarah makes her daily pilgrimage to the café. It's closed. Franck has disappeared. The crime writer turns detective: Sarah finds Franck's half-burnt sock in the fireplace and blood stained tiles by the pool. Julie admits she killed Franck. His body is in the shed. The women trundle him in a wheelbarrow past the swimming pool, now with a macabre autumn air as the gruesome trio are reflected in its dark waters. They dig all night and bury Franck at the bottom of the garden as dawn breaks over the Luberon.

The geriatric gardener, so long forgotten, arrives for his daily round. He's drawn to the patch of disturbed earth at the bottom of the garden. Julie lounges by the pool, unaware of the danger—but Sarah spots it from her balcony. Drenched in fresh air and glorious autumn sunlight, she opens her robe and, echoing the young Annabel in a Cannes boatshed in *Lolita*, exposes herself. The gardener blinks at Sarah. He shuffles up to her room.

Sarah lies naked on the bed, revealing not only herself but yet another of the insidious effects of our sexual covenants. For all that the camera has dawdled on Ludivine Sagnier's

SEXCATRAZ

full young breasts it now gives a much fuller view of Rampling's 56-year-old body. This causes a slight formal jolt: societal programming makes us regard nudity in anyone over a certain age—about 40—as both inappropriate and unappealing. Try telling that to the gardener. He caresses Sarah's feet then slides up her shins. She squirms with pleasure as he touches her where she hasn't been touched for a very long time. Exposure to Julie's sexual openness allows Sarah to accept a man's touch without shame and accept physical pleasure into her life.

And then Julie leaves, departing into the nothingness from whence she came. Sarah returns to London and visits John Bosload to discuss her latest manuscript. Sarah's clothes have colour now; so does her face. "I didn't recognise you in it," John opines, as the pack of cards of the film's identities gets another shuffle. He doesn't want to publish the book: "I don't think that writing about feelings is your strong suit."

But Sarah has pre-empted him: she's signed with another publisher. And as she walks out of John Bosload's life, cheeks aglow and head held high, his daughter Julia walks in. Not as curvaceous as Julie, perhaps, and in all likelihood not as sexually ravenous—but enough to have inspired a burnt-out, middle-aged woman to shake off her repressed sexuality and emerge with a new vibrancy and *joie de vivre*.

Sarah has escaped from Sexcatraz.

SEXCATRAZ

Escape from Sexcatraz

The films in the previous chapter show how our repression is constantly mirrored back to us through the challenges we face with our sexuality. They also show how the repressed becomes ever more insistent when its message is ignored. While steadily escalating conflict is a basic principle in fiction, the biopics of Brandon Teena and Bob Crane show the same effect can apply in real life. *Lolita's* Hubert Hubert fails to heed the return of the repressed, but Brandon Sullivan reaches a crossroads in *Shame* and *Swimming Pool's* Sarah Morton finally creates an emotionally and sexually healthier life.

Having established the principle of the return of the repressed and seen—particularly in *Swimming Pool*—how it creates positive change, let's take a closer look at this caterpillar-into-butterfly metamorphosis. First up is Steven Soderbergh's classic independent hit *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*.

Sex, Lies, and Videotape

Year: 1989

Director: Steven Soderbergh

Writer: Steven Soderbergh

Starring: James Spader, Andie MacDowell, Peter Gallagher, Laura San Giacomo

Sex, Lies, and Videotape was among the first independent films combining Hollywood gloss (and telegenic Hollywood actors) with a willingness to frankly address sexual issues. Beautifully written by Soderbergh, it accurately depicts the complex mechanics of shame and is particularly notable for its exploration of the still deeply taboo subject of female masturbation.

The film centres on a four-way relationship between John Millaney (Peter Gallagher), his wife Ann (Andie MacDowell), John's long-time-no-see friend Graham Dalton (James Spader), and Ann's freewheeling sister Cynthia Bishop (Laura San Giacomo). Like Bob and Anne Crane in *Auto Focus*, the Millaneys appear to live the American dream: he's a lawyer on the brink of a partnership while she's the trophy wife who does as she pleases. However, Ann has problems. The film opens with her relating the latest in a long line of phobias to her therapist. The therapist dismisses this and asks about matters with John: "They're fine; they're fine—except I'm going through this thing where I don't want him to touch me."

A strange definition of fine, but Ann's physical unease with John portends something deeper. While Ann admits that she's "never really been that much into sex," he bumps a client to visit Cynthia. She's a highly sexual woman aroused by violating society's sexual covenants: not only does she sleep with her sister's husband but she wants to do it in her sister's bed. Echoing Edgar's sexing of Stella Raphael in the conjugal bed in *Asylum*, this deeply illicit act rewards the transgressing lovers with an extra *frisson* of sexual excitement. The idea appeals to John, but the risk deters him—for now. Ann attributes the decline of her physical relationship with John to her not initiating sex: "It just doesn't occur to me and, well, the few times I have felt like it, I was by myself."

SEXCATRAZ

The therapist questions Ann's attitude to masturbation. She hides behind a laugh then confesses that she found it "stupid." Unlike her sister, Ann is entirely acquiescent to the prevailing covenants. These outwardly simple, inwardly complex strokes reveal that Ann is significantly ashamed of sex, a shame she manages through avoidance and denial.

This triangular arrangement, with Cynthia satisfying John's sexual urges while Ann avoids her fears of the same, is interrupted by the return of Graham, once John's best friend but now somewhat "lost"—John's word—and seemingly on the trail of a former lover called Elizabeth. Like Ann, the highly sensitive Graham is crippled by sexual shame but, unlike her, he's aware of his inadequacies. While Ann regards her dysfunctional sexuality as "fine," Graham—like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*—can't interact with a woman without sex entering the equation. The combination of Graham's inadequacies, and his awareness of them, has channelled his sexual expression along a very particular line.

Graham arrives at the Millaney's house while John is at work. Although dressed conservatively, Ann—signalling her lack of sexual interest in Graham—pulls down the hem of her dress before sitting as far as possible from him. Both are signs of her acquiescence to society's covenants around monogamy. Graham crashes through this barrier by steering the conversation into deceptively deep water: "Have you ever been on television?" Ann feels flattered, as she—and the audience—mistake Graham's meaning.

Ann warms to the bashful, wounded Graham—a far cry from her brash and insensitive husband—and helps him find an apartment. But other kettles are coming to the boil. Knowing Ann will be apartment hunting with Graham, John tells Cynthia to come over. They get their kicks from sex in Ann's marriage bed but, fatefully, Cynthia removes her earrings and misplaces one.

While apartment hunting, Graham lures Ann into an intimate exchange: Graham is the repressed returning into her life. Sensing the sexual undercurrent of his questioning, she tries to secure her boundaries by stating that sex is overrated. Her pathetic attempt trails off into a lame "I'm getting confused" that plays straight into Graham's hands. He confesses that he's unable to get an erection in the presence of women. This lulls Ann into thinking that Graham has no sexual interest in her. Instead of deflecting the conversation away from sex, Ann discusses it with a new level of ease. Throughout this book we've seen characters react negatively to violations of their sexual boundaries. But Graham's vulnerability allows Ann to overcome her initial shame-based discomfort and reject both fight and flight as responses. Instead she chooses acceptance.

The sense of optimism arising from this breakthrough doesn't last long. Cynthia gets a whiff of Graham—and of Ann's fondness for him—and badgers her sister into revealing his whereabouts. Cynthia gets a kick not just from sleeping with the men in Ann's life but from shoving her sister's shame back in her face: "Even if I decide to fuck his brains out, what business is that of yours?" Ann has no answer.

The preliminaries over, Soderbergh starts peeling back the layers. Graham watches a grainy homemade video in his apartment. "What is the most unusual location you have ever masturbated in?" he asks a woman onscreen. This is how Graham gets off: filming women talking about pleasuring themselves. While Ann sublimates her repressed sexuality into a phobia about uncollected garbage, Graham's shame has warped his own sexuality into an obsession with video questionnaires about female masturbation.

SEXCATRAZ

Graham's relationship to the videos is multi-faceted. His voyeuristic hobby is a push-pull cycle of unmet desires and unheeded messages, like Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*. Making and watching the videos helps Graham express some of the desire that—because of his shame-based erectile dysfunction—he can't release through sex. But the more he engages with the videos, the further he sinks into disgust, shame and self-loathing. The videos both lessen and worsen Graham's cravings, but—like *Shame's* Brandon Sullivan in his quest for sexual abandonment—no amount of 8mm videotape can heal the underlying wound.

Ann's arrival interrupts Graham's screening. She discovers the box of videotapes, each one labelled with a woman's name. The ambient temperature drops to freezing as Ann asks what's on them. Graham tells her, partly because he's beyond caring and partly because it's a gambit to tape her.

Realising at last the true nature of his interest in her, Ann flees. While she handled the awkwardness of Graham's confessions of inadequacy, this is a bigger violation of her sexual boundaries. Ann can't contain her disgust at his obsession with the masturbation she finds repellent. She signals her rejection of Graham by revealing his whereabouts to Cynthia.

In the film's most enjoyable scene, Cynthia descends on Graham's apartment in a come-and-fuck-me outfit of silver jacket, black mini-skirt, cowboy boots and a German Army tank top. Contrary to Ann, Cynthia is fascinated by the tapes. There's a gloriously lascivious curl to Laura San Giacomo's Southern twang as Cynthia interrogates Graham about the parameters of his documentary filmmaking.

In no time Cynthia's installed on the couch with the camera rolling. She curls up like the cat that got the cream, recalling formative sexual experiences with a relish that would appal her sister. "Should I take my skirt off?" she inquires after a while. "You're not wearing any underwear," Graham observes from off-screen in an almost neutral tone. Cynthia leaves Graham's apartment hugely aroused and phones John. He reschedules the client he had earlier bumped and heads over to Cynthia's. She rides him into the sexual sunset before dismissing him with a curt "You can go now."

Continuing the unequal struggle between the sisters, Cynthia boasts to Ann that she made a tape but is coy about its contents. Ann's indignation reflects her shame: "You let a total stranger record your sexual life on videotape but you won't tell your own sister?" "Apparently" is Cynthia's beautifully caustic reply. Ann's masturbation phobia resurfaces: "Did anybody touch anybody?" "Well, yes," purrs Cynthia. Ann is deeply shocked, before confessing in a little voice that she "couldn't even do that in front of John." Cynthia understands Ann's hang-ups better than Ann does herself: "You couldn't even do it, period." The repressed bangs ever more loudly on the door of Ann's awareness but—for now—her defences hold. One more knock should do it.

Ann later confronts John over whether he's having an affair with Cynthia. John lies—he's a lawyer, and a good one. To distract herself from the return of the repressed, Ann engages in a cleaning frenzy and finds Cynthia's wayward earring. It's Andie MacDowell's finest moment in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. She stares at the glistening pearl for a long, silent moment—greatly aided by the lack of a background score—before emitting a strangled gasp. This is the same delayed reaction to betrayal Ed Sumner displayed in *Unfaithful*, except that MacDowell carries it off with aplomb. This is a moment of harrowing self-awareness: the moment when Ann catches sight of her own life from a different angle. It's an absolutely crucial, unavoidable step towards escaping from Sexcatraz.

SEXCATRAZ

Ann strips off her dowdy blouse. She storms over to Graham's, intent on masturbating for his camera just to prove Cynthia wrong. For the first time in her life she sees into the abyss of sexual shame: "My life is shit, just shit. Nothing's what I thought it was." Graham shows his sensitivity by trying to dissuade Ann from making a tape, but she only has to force the issue once before he relents.

Unlike the prim Ann who sat with legs closed on first meeting Graham, she now sits with legs askew, her crotch open to his probing camera. Ann's changed posture mirrors her altered reality—her newfound willingness to engage with her repressed feelings. Her body language signals her breach of society's sexual covenants. Whether it was Soderbergh's direction or MacDowell's acting choice, it's deeply revealing. "Are you comfortable there?" Graham enquires. "Yeah, I'm comfortable," she replies in a quivering voice that conveys both the fear of what she's about to do and her determination to do it. This is the emotional courage, the self-responsibility that accepting and releasing our repressed emotions requires. Graham's camera rolls...

Ann goes home and tells John she wants a divorce. When he asks why, she replies in a manner inconceivable earlier in the film: "Fuck you." When he learns that Ann went to see Graham—with all it implies—John drives over to his apartment.

John punches Graham and locks him out of the house before watching Ann's tape. What he expects to see is his wife violating his sexual access rights to her by masturbating for a stranger, something she's never done for him: a different Ann. What he sees is indeed different. Ann is stripped bare now, willing to discuss anything, no matter how raw. She's not sure if she's ever had an orgasm. She hates it when she thinks about men the same way Cynthia does. Shame and sibling rivalry have driven Ann to reject the entire sexual aspect of her personality.

But part way through the interview Ann turns the camera onto Graham, questioning him about events from the demise of his relationship with Elizabeth to the present day. Ann suddenly becomes the repressed not so much returning as bulldozing its way into Graham's life. Ann's relentless barrage strips away the lies Graham uses to keep the world—and his own repressed feelings—at bay. Alienated from both himself and others, like Bud in *The Brown Bunny*, Graham can't explain why he is who he is: "Am I supposed to recount all the points in my life leading up to this moment and just hope that it's coherent, that it makes some sort of sense to you? It doesn't make any sense to me." Graham is a voyeur whose sexual gratification comes from a camera and a box of videotapes, each with a woman's name, and he has no idea how he got there. This is how *Sexcatraz* twists highly sensitive people to the brink of self-destruction—or beyond. "You've got a problem," Ann utters in a voice barely above a whisper. Unlike the Harfords in *Eyes Wide Shut* her eyes are wide open, seeing clearly at last.

Graham holds her gaze, his own inner sight opening for the first time: "You're right. I've got a lot of problems." Ann tells Graham that everyone in his circle becomes part of his problems. Graham is stunned: "I've spent nine years structuring my life so this didn't happen." In *The Conformist* Marcello avoids his own repressed sexuality in a desperate attempt to convince the world—including himself—that he's just a normal, run-of-the-mill fascist thug. It doesn't work for Marcello and it hasn't worked for Graham.

Wordlessly, Graham stares out the window at the soft-focus background, seeing only the devastation he has wrought on other people's lives in a vain effort to avoid the pain and shame inside him. Equally wordlessly, Ann puts down the camera, moves behind Graham

SEXCATRAZ

and caresses his shoulder, nurturing him with the healing power of touch. James Spader, sublime throughout *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, closes his eyes and shudders. For anyone who has experienced the hell of sexual alienation it's a dizzying, heart-wrenching moment.

The tape cuts to static and we're back with John, who watched the whole thing on video. But all this self-appraisal hasn't penetrated John's thick skin. As he leaves he can't resist twisting the knife: "I fucked Elizabeth before you broke up with her." John seeks to humiliate Graham by revealing this violation of his one-time friend's sexual access rights. John thinks he's delivered the *coup de grace* but he's way off the mark.

Focused on Ann's insights, Graham goes inside and smashes his videotape collection. Uncoiled tape, plastic fragments and girls' names on thin cardboard inserts litter the floor. The camera follows. Graham hurls them all into the street, echoing Brandon destroying his porn stash and laptop in *Shame*, but there's a crucial difference: Graham has accepted responsibility for his own feelings and the actions that stem from them. It's a key step on the path to emotional liberation. Like Sarah baring her breasts at the gardener in *Swimming Pool*, there's no going back for Graham.

Neither is there for John. His constant rescheduling loses his firm a significant client and sees him summoned before a senior partner. He began the film with a career, a wife and a mistress; he ends it with nothing. The film closes with Graham and Ann on the stoop of Graham's apartment. Having accepted their repressed feelings and reconnected with the simple delight of human physicality, they're like children alive to the promise of rain.

At the start of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* John and Cynthia are the strong characters. By the film's end that has been reversed; Cynthia treads water while John's whole life unravels. Conversely, first Ann and then Graham find the courage to accept their own repressed sexuality with its deeply painful emotions, through self-awareness, self-responsibility and non-judgment.

This process is so fundamental to escaping from *Sexcatraz* it's worth examining again. Another film that explores the return of the repressed—particularly in relation to sexual access rights—is Mexican writer/director Alfonso Cuarón's 2001 road trip *Y Tu Mamá También*, which translates, for reasons that become clear, as 'and your mother too'.

Y Tu Mamá También

Year: 2001

Director: Alfonso Cuarón

Writers: Alfonso Cuarón, Carlos Cuarón

Starring: Maribel Verdú, Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna

Y Tu Mamá También tells the story of two young Mexican men, Tenoch Iturbide (Diego Luna) and Julio Zapata (Gael García Bernal). Tenoch is the scion of a well-connected family while Julio is middle class, but both are more interested in alcohol, pot, and—in particular—sex than any kind of career. The film, uncompromising from fade in, opens on Tenoch and his girlfriend Ana having sex.

SEXCATRAZ

After climaxing, Tenoch utters one of cinema's classic opening lines: "Promise that you're not going to fuck any Italians." Ana is off to Italy; as her boyfriend, Tenoch is anxious to remind her that he's the only person allowed to have sex with her. Ana requests the same vow from Tenoch. When they became partners they unconsciously traded their sexual access rights as dictated by our sexual covenants. But, like Bill and Alice in *Eyes Wide Shut*, both bristle against those covenants: Tenoch and Ana both make vague promises though neither can quite bring themselves to offer a watertight assurance. This leaves the distinct impression that, while in Italy, Ana will enjoy plenty of the local salami.

Cut to Julio, whose girlfriend Ceci will accompany Ana. While Ceci's parents fret about her missing the plane, Ceci rips down her track pants and issues a boarding call to Julio. "Are you going out tonight?" Ceci asks in mid-fuck, bearding Julio into promising fidelity while the blood that usually circles his brain is pumping elsewhere. Like Tenoch and Ana and most other young couples, Julio and Ceci have unknowingly acquired their society's shame-based, constricting beliefs dictating whom they can and cannot sleep with.

With their girlfriends dispatched, Tenoch and Julio seek other outlets for their sexual urges. They hit on Luisa Cortés (Maribel Verdú, alternately feisty and vulnerable throughout the film), an elegant young Spanish woman married to Tenoch's cousin Jano. They woo Luisa with concocted tales of a trip to a fabulous, remote beach called Heaven's Mouth.

But all is not well with Luisa. First she visits a hospital for the results of some tests. Cuarón downplays this scene, though it later proves crucial. She then receives a remorseful call from Jano who confesses he slept with another woman. Once again the issue of sexual access rights—who owns them and what happens when they're violated—erupts onto the canvas of *Y Tu Mamá También*. Boundary, violation and reaction... angry and tearful, Luisa snatches up the phone and asks Tenoch if the trip to Heaven's Mouth is still on.

The road trip from Mexico City to the beach forms the spine of the film. Despite its resemblance to a buddy road trip, Tenoch and Julio have only one objective: sex with Luisa. As we've seen, our covenants hold that sex is only proper within the sphere of a committed relationship. This restricts sex to one partner at any given time. For the male protagonists of *Y Tu Mamá También* this implicit sexual mathematics means they must compete for Luisa's affection, which is the key to lowering her knickers—and because, like Court Foster in *The Man in the Moon*, Luisa can only love one of them, only one of them can win. This clash over Luisa's sexual access rights drives the film to its climax.

Tenoch and Julio don't actually know where they're going—they only have vague directions from a perpetually stoned friend, but that doesn't impede their quest to seduce Luisa. The conversation in the car soon turns to sex. Luisa proves just as ribald as her male companions—until they stop at a motel for the night. Hoping, like Renato in *Malèna*, to glimpse her naked, the boys spy on Luisa through a broken window. Instead they glimpse an unwanted nakedness as she sits on the bed and cries. Like Sandy's boyfriend in *Blue Velvet* when Dorothy bursts out of the bushes naked and traumatised, Tenoch and Julio hastily retreat, out of their depth and ashamed of their glib voyeurism.

The journey continues until the car blows its radiator, forcing another stop. Tenoch wants a shower but has no shampoo. Wearing only a towel, he goes to borrow some from Luisa. She's crying again. Tenoch turns to leave. She asks him to drop the towel. As he stands naked before Luisa, his machismo vanishes. "Stroke it; touch yourself," she eggs him. Like Ann in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, shame prevents him. Luisa offers to bare her breasts

SEXCATRAZ

but even that isn't enough. She beckons Tenoch and sucks him. "Feel me; eat me," Luisa begs, seeking solace in human touch and granting Tenoch the access he craves. They fuck on a bed that wobbles disarmingly. Tenoch apologises after coming quickly. Not quickly enough: Julio watches from the doorway.

Julio turns away, sexual betrayal rising like bile in his stomach, that same toxic mixture of nausea, disgust and humiliation seen when John Lotter discovered Brandon's dildo in *Boys Don't Cry*. Like Jay in *Intimacy*, Julio has unconsciously fallen in love with Luisa during the road trip to emotionally legitimise his desire for her. What does he get in return for this emotional investment? Betrayal.

This sense of betrayal impels the next plot turn. Julio's bruised ego does the talking when he next sees Tenoch: echoing John Millaney in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, he blurts out that he's fucked Tenoch's girlfriend Ana. It may seem childish and irrational, but through the filter of sexual shame Julio's barb makes sense. Even though Luisa consented to sex with Tenoch, Julio's anger is entirely directed at the latter, firstly because Julio still has sexual designs on Luisa—which requires him to remain affectionate towards her—and secondly because Tenoch's conquest of Luisa has humiliated Julio. Tenoch spends the night raging at Julio as he too feels the pain of violated sexual access rights.

By the morning Tenoch and Julio are no longer speaking. The trip hangs in the balance. Luisa realises she's ruptured the harmonious world that existed before she fucked Tenoch. She redresses this in the only possible way. Still bruised from Julio's revelation of Ana's infidelity, Tenoch pulls the car over and—like *Shame's* Brandon Sullivan when Sissy shags his boss in his own bed—loiters angrily while Luisa straddles Julio in the cramped confines of the back seat. Luisa hopes she's restored order by bringing the two men back to level terms. They have something else in common, too: both ejaculate so quickly—another side effect of shame, previously seen with Dave in *Wish You Were Here* and Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*—they feel impelled to apologise.

But Tenoch still feels stung and boasts he's had sex with Ceci. Whether any of these claims or counterclaims about fucking each other's girlfriends is true is beside the point. Sex with Luisa—the objective of the road trip—has led both men to feel betrayed, as miserable as *Shame's* Brandon Sullivan in his climactic threesome. Tenoch and Julio's repressed beliefs over sexual access rights fly up in their faces—yet both prefer to be petulant. Like Ann Bishop Millaney in the first half of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, self-awareness eludes them. Luisa loses patience and strides off to thumb down a ride. The boys beg her to stay. She agrees if they promise to end their feud.

The threesome drives on into the night. Completely lost, Julio turns onto a dirt road but they become bogged in sand. Tenoch and Julio fall asleep in the car, failing to notice the nagging pain that keeps Luisa awake. In the morning they find themselves on a glorious beach. A local fisherman takes them on a boat-trip around the coves. In the film's only fairy-tale moment, he says the beach is called Heaven's Mouth.

Tenoch, Julio and Luisa find a beachfront motel-cum-bar where, like its male leads, *Y Tu Mamá También* rapidly climaxes. While the boys play table football, Luisa gives Jano a goodbye call without really saying why she's leaving him. She gets drunk and a riotous conversation follows, laden with lascivious toasts; Lynda Mansell from *Wish You Were Here* would have felt right at home. For all its crudeness the scene brims with life and joy. Tenoch and Julio find a new level of self-awareness as they realise they are all sexually sovereign

SEXCATRAZ

individuals. While earlier blaming each other for feeling bad, they now accept responsibility for their own feelings. With this any lingering tension dissipates. The two boys rekindle their friendship as they brag how they fucked each other's girlfriends every which way. Julio even makes the drunken claim that his conquests include Tenoch's girlfriend "and your mother too." The trio dissolves in laughter and the film cuts to their motel room.

Tenoch and Julio simultaneously explore Luisa's body, no longer seeing her as a sexual conquest to be competed for but as a woman to be honoured and served. Luisa abandons herself to their touch. In a clever touch that transcends our ingrained sexual access rights, she takes both men in her mouth at once—Heaven's Mouth indeed.

Tenoch and Julio return to Mexico City. Luisa stays on with the fisherman's family. A voice-over reveals that Tenoch and Julio stopped seeing each other: we prefer to absorb our life-lessons, particularly sexual ones, alone. A year later they have a chance encounter. Tenoch reveals that Luisa died of cancer soon after the road trip. It was her last flowering and she made the most of it.

Like the landscape and culture that spawned it, *Y Tu Mamá También* is a coarse, fiery film, the celluloid equivalent of tequila. There is no Hollywood gloss, the studied artiness of French cinema nor the grimness of English realism. It is pragmatic and unsentimental, and all the better for it. By realising what *Y Tu Mamá También* shows us about escaping from Sexcatraz we glimpse a world where Tenoch and Julio's painful journeys are superfluous. We can cut straight to the beach, get drunk and jest about fucking our friends' mothers.

All of the films reviewed here reveal society's fundamental sexual shame, the trinity of boundary, violation and reaction, and the sexual covenants that ensue from it. Every film reveals a fragment of our hidden sexual programming and the devastation it causes—or how, as in films like *Swimming Pool*, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *Y Tu Mamá También*, it can be recognised and released. Virtually all of the concepts presented in this book are included in the majestic sweep of *The Singing Detective*, a 1986 BBC musical mini-series written by Dennis Potter and directed by Jon Amiel.

The Singing Detective (TV series)

Year: 1986

Director: Jon Amiel

Writer: Dennis Potter

Starring: Michael Gambon, Patrick Malahide, Joanne Whalley, Janet Suzman

The Singing Detective is a six-part multi-plot story where not only do the same actors appear in different plot threads under different guises, but the main threads bleed into each other to blur the story's multi-faceted characters and multiple timelines even further. This might sound foggy but the overall effect is crystal clear and *The Singing Detective* is widely regarded as legendary TV writer Dennis Potter's finest achievement. Nominated for 11 BAFTAs (including both Michael Gambon and Patrick Malahide for Best Actor), it won three, with Gambon deservedly getting the Best Actor nod.

SEXCATRAZ

Episode 1: Skin

The Singing Detective opens in the post-World War II noir-ish pulp fiction landscape of Skinscapes, a seedy nightclub frequented by Mark Binney (Patrick Malahide), a man of uncertain means and motives. The scene shifts to a modern (well, 1986) hospital ward where writer Philip Marlow (Michael Gambon) is bedridden with a crippling skin disease, psoriatic arthritis. Although missing the final 'e' from his surname, it's an explicit name-check of the protagonist of Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled 1940s detective novels.

Marlow's psoriasis is so acute that he's covered from head to toe in a painful rash; his joints so inflamed he cannot hold a pen or that indispensable film noir accessory, a cigarette. Marlow resorts to revisiting his out-of-print dime-store novel *The Singing Detective*. Marlow inserts himself into his own novel as the titular character, a trench-coat-wearing, chain-smoking dance-band singer who doubles as a private eye and fixer: "You've stepped in something nasty and you want me to clean it up, isn't that right?" He stands on the Hammersmith Bridge and watches as, in one of the series' key shots, a woman's naked body is fished from the river.

The connections with skin—and particularly the sexual parts—continue as, in the first of *The Singing Detective's* iconic moments, Nurse Mills (a fabulously wide-eyed Joanne Whalley) greases the immobilised Marlow to reduce his itching. As the nurse greases his thighs, Marlow struggles to think of something boring so he doesn't get aroused. "I'm sorry, but I shall have to lift your penis now," Nurse Mills intones, moistening the corner of her mouth with her tongue as she morphs into a provocative chanteuse at Skinscapes, where sex is dispensed like (and with) champagne.

It's too much for poor Marlow, who—echoing Frank in *Blue Velvet*, and Tenoch and Julio in *Y Tu Mamá También*—ejaculates after minimal sexual stimulus. Deeply ashamed, Marlow mumbles an apology. "We don't need to talk about it, do we?" Nurse Mills says reproachfully, reiterating society's sweep-it-under-the-carpet attitude to sex.

Another of the ward's patients, Mr Hall (David Ryall), reinforces the theme of the shameful nature of the human body. He is outspoken on all issues except requesting a bedpan. Shame at the perfectly natural function of urinating reduces him to a dormouse. In another sexually humiliating moment a dementia patient staggers over to Marlow's bed and tries to mount him.

Back at Skinscapes the setups come thick and fast. Binney is some kind of intelligence operative, though on whose side is uncertain. Two mysterious men (Ron Cook and George Rossi) shadow Binney as he meets a Russian prostitute, Sonia (Kate McKenzie), who will later accompany him home—and later still become the target of Marlow's negative attitude to prostitution in the contemporary plot strand.

Potter then dispenses a large chunk of exposition in a hugely entertaining scene in the hospital ward. Doctors discuss Marlow's medical history with complete disregard for him as a person. Dennis Potter draws on his own long experience of psoriasis, with Marlow hurling savage insults at the medical establishment: "...slobbering cretins who turned out to be escapees from the local loony bin. They thought they were doctors and nurses." The doctors laugh off Marlow's vitriolic ravings as *The Singing Detective* veers into the best of its musical numbers, a hilarious rendition of 'Dry Bones' sung by the doctors while the nurses do the can-can and fake skeletons are pressed into service as percussion instruments.

SEXCATRAZ

But Marlow's problems are more than skin deep. A well-meaning doctor chides Marlow for his attitude, saying he's seen patients with worse symptoms who "don't behave like they've just fallen into a sewer." The doctor foolishly asks Marlow about his beliefs. "Compulsory depopulation by infanticide, suicide, genocide or whatever other means suggest themselves... I also believe in cigarettes, cholesterol, alcohol, carbon monoxide, masturbation, the Arts Council, nuclear weapons, the *Daily Telegraph*, and not properly labelling fatal poisons."

Marlow's worldview is entirely toxic, and it's judgment that makes it so. We may see ourselves as rational humans, free to choose how we think and feel. The reality is that, like Marlow, we are beholden to ancient, unconscious beliefs that divide our world into good and bad. Patriarchy always judges sex as fundamentally shameful, acceptable only within a very narrow range of behaviour, anything outside of which is disgusting and degrading, a moral and mental aberration. Marlow's battle with his own ingrained sexual judgments forms the spine of *The Singing Detective*.

The doctor suggests seeing a psychotherapist. Marlow rejects this, and the implication that he is mentally ill—an association already seen in *Wish You Were Here* and *Asylum*—until the death of another patient makes him reconsider.

Episode 2: Heat

Marlow takes up the doctor's suggestion to visit the hospital psychotherapist, Dr Gibbon (Bill Paterson). Marlow is rattled to see that Gibbon has done his homework: he's not only found a copy of *The Singing Detective* but read it for clues to its author's neuroses. Gibbon is unfazed by Marlow's bilious sentiments, describing them as a "desperate pastiche." "I don't like Italian food," Marlow bites back. The penetrating exchanges between Marlow and Dr Gibbon are among the highlights of *The Singing Detective*, peaking with Episode 5's word association game. "You regard sexual intercourse with considerable distaste or, what's more to the point, with fear," Gibbon observes, eliciting further insults from Marlow in a sure sign that he's hit the mark.

Gibbon questions whether Marlow's skin condition is a mirror of his distaste for sex—his repression returns through his psoriasis—an insight that Freud may have agreed with but Marlow rejects. Current medical knowledge may not corroborate Gibbon's theory, but it's a useful visual metaphor and an idea that Dennis Potter, who suffered acutely from psoriasis, took seriously enough to use as the basis of 6 hours of TV.

Meanwhile, the two mysterious men from *Skinscapes* stake out Mark Binney's flat while he has sex with Sonia, the Russian prostitute. Afterwards he asks why she's in Britain. No answer. Binney looks out the window and mentions the mysterious men. Sonia panics, floors Binney with a head-butt and flees. She ends up face down in the Thames, her luminous skin glowing in the moonlight as the police fish her from the river.

Binney becomes the prime suspect. In a tersely scripted scene he hires the singing detective to clear his name. "I'm not paying you to make me feel small," Binney protests after the singing detective—revealing his adherence to the prevailing sexual covenants—disparages Binney's sexual liaison with Sonia. "You don't have to do that," quips the singing detective. "That's thrown in without charge."

In the hospital ward Marlow isn't faring so well. Following his unsettling visit to the psychotherapist he develops a temperature. His fevered mind spins back to his childhood in

SEXCATRAZ

the Forest of Dean, a magical landscape for Potter as well as for the young Marlow (Lyndon Davies) who loves nothing better than to hide in the treetops. This lets him escape the arguments at home between his sensitive mother (Alison Steadman) and his grandparents, a traditional coal-mining couple. Marlow's father (Jim Carter) won't stand up to his own parents, isolating his mother. She's finally ejected from the family, an emotional disaster for which the young Marlow feels responsible.

In the hospital Marlow's fever subsides and he drifts into the stillness of sleep just as his ex-wife Nicola (Janet Suzman) visits. She watches Marlow at rest then leaves. But he was only feigning. Echoing the character Michael Gambon plays with such verve in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Marlow fires a barrage of sexually-themed insults at the departing Nicola: "Who are you opening your legs for now, you rutting bitch?" Women, sex, betrayal... as Dr Gibbon has correctly divined, it's all Marlow knows. It's the invisible prison of sex-negative beliefs I call Sexcatraz. In Marlow's case, not only is he trapped in a cell of constricting beliefs—his psoriasis imprisons him in his own body.

Episode 3: Lovely Days

"There are songs to sing, there are feelings to feel, there are thoughts to think... The singing is easy, syrup in my mouth. The thinking comes with the tune. So that leaves only the feelings. Am I right, or am I right? I can sing the singing, I can think the thinking, but you're not going to catch me feeling the feelings."

Episode 3 begins with the singing detective crooning 'Paper Doll', a song about the virtues of exchanging a real woman for a lifeless substitute, which—whether it's a stuffed toy or an inflatable sex doll—is incapable of betraying its owner's sexual access rights, preventing the kind of suffering seen in *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Indecent Proposal*, and *Y Tu Mamá También*. Marlow admits his inability to feel in the voice-over. This is no coincidence. He has unconsciously shut down his emotions precisely to avoid those painful, shame-based sentiments trying to burst into his conscious awareness through the agency of the return of the repressed.

The scene shifts to the young Marlow and his distraught mother taking the train to London after the collapse of her marriage. The war is nearly over. The carriage is packed with soldiers. They ogle Marlow's mother, from the glimpse of petticoat beneath her dress to the lipstick she endlessly applies to distract herself from her turmoil. She finally bursts into tears, giving the soldiers the chance to offer her solace. The implicit sexual dimension of the soldiers' offer hangs over the scene like a London fog.

It's a traumatic journey for the adolescent Marlow. Like Spook in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and Renato in *Malèna*, he is a powerless witness as the fallout from sexual shame twists his own childish innocence into emotionally and sexually crippled adulthood.

By the time of Marlow's next visit to the psychotherapist his condition has improved. Marlow may not be ready to feel everything he's repressed, but all this dredging up the past lets the pain seep into his consciousness where it can be acknowledged, accepted and finally released. Dr Gibbon tricks Marlow into turning his previously immobile head, proving to Marlow that—to some extent at least—his illness is psychological.

Just as Marlow makes progress so does his alter ego the singing detective, who accuses Mark Binney of assisting fugitive Nazis—hence the interest of the Russian secret service, firstly Sonia and now another woman who lurks outside Binney's flat where Marlow

SEXCATRAZ

lies in wait: “she’s as red as a London bus; she doesn’t trade in Nazis and she wonders why you do.” To Marlow, raised in the war years as Dennis Potter was, the Nazi is the ultimate fiend. The singing detective’s accusation is confirmed when Binney opens a drawer: there’s a tell tale glimpse of a German Luger pistol.

Flash back to the Forest of Dean. This time the young Marlow spies from the trees as his mother has sex with a man named Raymond Binney; like Mark Binney, he too is played by Patrick Malahide. Ray Binney = Mark Binney; adulterer = Nazi. The ultimate fiend from the young Marlow’s childhood—the man who soiled his mother and destroyed his parents’ marriage—re-emerges as a Nazi sympathiser in the adult Marlow’s novel.

Leaving Binney’s apartment, the Russian agent approaches Marlow. He schedules a meeting for 30 minutes later then strides off, cursing, as if he’s read the script and knows what’s coming: the two mysterious men shoot her then flee into the night. The singing detective rushes to the woman: it’s Marlow’s mother. He cradles her lifeless body. Emotion almost cracks through his previously imperturbable façade before he bottles it up. “I’ll get you, whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are,” he says with a steely voice. Pause. “I’ll get you,” he screams into the night. The cracks are starting to show: Marlow’s ability to resist his own repressed pain is weakening.

Episode 4: Clues

Episode 4 introduces two of the series’ key sub-plots. The first of these involves Marlow’s ex-wife Nicola—ostensibly looking after his affairs while he’s hospitalised—finding a letter from a film company wanting to option the screenplay rights to Marlow’s novel, *The Singing Detective*. Marlow is less interested in this business opportunity than who Nicola is sleeping with. Although they’ve been separated for some time Marlow retains a sense of sexual ownership of his ex-wife and feels his access rights are being violated. This holding onto grudges, the inability to forgive and move on from past disappointments, is another marker of entrenched shame.

The second sub-plot centres on an incident during Marlow’s schooldays, when persons unknown surreptitiously defecated on a teacher’s desk. The teacher, magnificently played with mindless cruelty by Janet Henfrey, casually dispenses violence with unprovoked claps ‘round the ear and prods with the cane.

In a fabulously written scene, the schoolteacher beseeches Almighty God to set aside all duties—“with the whole earth to turn... the weight of the mountains and the deeps of the oceans, the day and the night... all of these things, you oh God, thee oh God, Almighty and awful Creator, you leave for the moment”—and reveal the culprit. By the end of the prayer, young Marlow is in tears. He is hauled before the class and accused of leaving the deposit. Crucially, while young Marlow awaits his fate, Mark Binney (the son of Ray Binney who seduced Marlow’s mother) pulls a face at him. The question of guilt—who done it—hangs over every thread of *The Singing Detective*.

In hospital, Marlow divines that the issue of the screenplay option and Nicola’s current sexual partner are intertwined. Nicola schemes with an aspiring film producer called Mark Finney (Patrick Malahide’s third role) to get Marlow to sign over the novel’s film rights to Finney’s company. At the same time Marlow’s screenplay for the novel—mouldering in a shoebox for years—is passed off as Finney’s own work and on-sold to Hollywood. Marlow would thus receive a pittance. Finney would get both profit and credit. What Nicola stands

SEXCATRAZ

to gain remains to be seen. But as Episode 4 ends there's a notable shift in the overall arc of *The Singing Detective* from development to conclusion.

Firstly, the two mysterious men descend on the Laguna dance hall where the singing detective performs. It's clear the detective is next on their hit list, though why—or even who these men are—less so. More importantly, in his classroom, young Marlow claims he saw Mark Binney leave a particularly smelly calling card on the teacher's desk. Young Binney weakly refutes the accusation until several of Marlow's classmates back up his story. The schoolteacher condemns Binney to “a caning that not one of you will ever forget.” Marlow certainly never did.

The flashbacks to Marlow's childhood represent the release of buried emotions as the bedridden Marlow accepts, processes and relinquishes powerful feelings that have festered inside him since adolescence and poisoned every relationship in his life. While *Swimming Pool's* Sarah Morton and Ann Bishop Millaney in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* gradually open up in the present moment, Marlow releases judgment, the stigma of shame, via his memories. As he does so his psoriasis—the manifestation of his shame—gradually fades.

Episode 5: Pitter Patter

The action resumes at the Laguna with the mysterious men assuming the textbook agents' back-to-back stance on the balcony. This doesn't pass unnoticed on the bandstand, where the singing detective twirls a parasol and sings 'The Old Umbrella Man'. A hail of bullets rains on the bandstand, puncturing the parasol. It tumbles to the ground, revealing the dying drummer. The singing detective opens fire with his own shooter, shattering one of the Laguna's cherubs as the mysterious men flee.

While the flashbacks to Marlow's childhood represent repressed memories, the plot strand with the singing detective represents the adult Marlow's internal landscape as he processes the past. Significant releases provoke an emotional shattering—like the Laguna's cherub—as well as a sense of our old selves dying and a new self being born.

The hospitalised Marlow, now much improved, receives another visit from Nicola. Marlow's attitude is much less bellicose, occasionally even veering beyond mere civility into moments of tenderness. He even fancies sex, though his underlying shame is still there: “I want to sleep with you again, with a big mirror alongside... So when it starts spurting up in me and shooting out of me I can twist to one side, coming off your hot and sticky loins and spit straight in my own face.” Ignoring Marlow's shame-laced diatribe, Nicola wheedles him into signing over the novel's screenplay rights and thanks him with a Judas kiss.

While Nicola and Mark Finney exult in victory, the bedridden Marlow is finally ready to recall the repressed pain of the sexual betrayals that shaped his adolescence: his mother having sex in the woods with Ray Binney, their train journey to London, his mother standing alone on Hammersmith Bridge, working as a prostitute to make ends meet.

A woman's naked body is lifted from the Thames. Who is she? Like *Boys Don't Cry* and *Shame*, as Marlow approaches the core of his repressed emotions the narrative becomes increasingly fractured.

And then the story segues into another of its seminal scenes. In a visit to Dr Gibbon, Marlow continues to argue for the meaninglessness of human existence: “from time to time and completely at random, we are visited by what we cannot know, cannot predict, cannot control, cannot cannot cannot understand, and cannot cannot cannot escape: fate.”

SEXCATRAZ

Ignoring Carl Jung's dictum that "until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate," Marlow clings to the belief that his betrayals, childhood and adult, his misogyny, his disgust at sex, his premature ejaculation and his psoriasis are all random, inchoate, disparate elements, a bad draw in the scrabble game of life that—through no fault of his own—cannot be assembled into a seven-letter, triple score word.

Dr Gibbon begs to differ and engages Marlow in a word association game. But it's much more than a game; it's a battle of wills between the holistic, humanistic, emotionally whole psychotherapist and the cynical, fatalistic, psychologically fractured Marlow. As long as Marlow views all the painful elements of his life as, to quote Bob Dylan, "a simple twist of fate," he can remain the hapless, helpless victim. As soon as he accepts they're part of a cohesive pattern—the premise of *Sexcatraz*—then Reason, not Fate, is the dominant force and he must assume responsibility for changing that pattern.

The game swings back and forth with Marlow's fundamental worldview at stake, dependent on a handful of often-monosyllabic words. Gibbon: "woman." Marlow: "fuck." Gibbon: "fuck." "Dirt." "Dirt." "Death." Dr Gibbon elicits associations between sex, death and pollution, already seen in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Potter's material is magnificent. The actors rise to the occasion, a landmark in 1980s TV. "No diagnostic value... It's words, just words..." Marlow shrugs unconvincingly at the game's end. "Just words," Dr Gibbon mimics, knowing full well who won. Marlow falls silent, the wordsmith for once at a loss. "I don't think I'll come here again."

Potter tightens the noose even further. Flash back to Mark Binney sleeping with Sonia. The shot changes—and it's the modern-day Marlow, prior to his psoriasis, having sex with her. "Doesn't it disgust you, what you do... being paid to stretch yourself out and let a stranger enter you?" Marlow asks. Until now he's dealt with his most distressing feelings by keeping them at a distance, in other timelines. In a clear sign of improved wellbeing he's now able to process the real thing.

Episode 6: Who Done It

Despite his earlier intention, Marlow returns to the psychotherapist. His rash has now almost subsided. His exchanges with Dr Gibbon are open and congenial. The real identity of the woman fished from the river is revealed: Marlow's mother, who committed suicide by drowning. Marlow admits he was responsible for defecating on his schoolteacher's desk, an act he then blamed on Mark Binney. As Marlow recalls the caning young Binney received, his remorse finally breaks through and he sobs heavily. Dr Gibbon seizes the moment and encourages Marlow to once again stand on his own two feet.

The happy moments don't end there. Nicola and Mark Finney celebrate their heist late into the night—until the Hollywood production company who bought *The Singing Detective* calls. And here Marlow has his revenge. The producers want script changes, changes that Finney is unable to deliver⁷⁹.

The conversation shifts to the topic of the lead actress. In a beautiful double-whammy from Dennis Potter, Finney promotes Nicola—her occupation previously elided—for the role. This was to be her payoff for getting Marlow to sign over his rights. But the production company has cast a better-known actress; to protect his screenplay deal Finney sacrifices

⁷⁹ Dennis Potter himself was unable to deliver a workable feature-length script when *The Singing Detective* was finally made in Hollywood with Robert Downey Jr. in the lead role.

SEXCATRAZ

Nicola with barely a whimper. It's her turn to experience the sense of betrayal that so affected the adolescent Marlow.

The scene shifts to the young Marlow returning to his father in the Forest of Dean. But the forest—earlier shown in its summer lushness, now stripped bare by winter—has lost its magic. Cut back to Mark Finney's apartment. Finney lies dead on the floor, a stiletto protruding from his jugular. Nicola, spattered in blood, sits nearby.

The two mysterious men arrive on the scene—except that Nicola has gone and the dead Mark Finney is now the dead Mark Binney, the same knife sticking from the same throat. One by one Marlow lays his ghosts to rest—ghosts that stemmed from walling off his feelings and from a profound distrust of women and sex acquired during adolescence. As the mysterious men search Binney's apartment, they suddenly realise that they—like the audience—have been traipsing through *The Singing Detective* for the best part of six hours without knowing who they are, who they're working for, or what they're doing. There is only one person who can answer: the writer.

The mysterious men enter the hospital ward and demand to know from Marlow who they are. Marlow screams as they wrench open his psoriasis-locked fingers. "Somebody please help me," he begs. His cries echo down a hospital corridor, where the singing detective casually lights a cigarette before pulling out his revolver. "When you're dealing with the devil, then praise the lord and pass the ammunition." Potter remains true to the pulp fiction genre till the end.

A shootout erupts in the hospital ward, though only the two mysterious men and the two Marlows, bedridden and detective, are aware of it. The ward disintegrates around the blissfully unaware staff and patients even as they're killed by stray bullets—intriguingly, Nurse Mills, adorable object of many a teenage male sex fantasy, is not among them. The singing detective finally kills one of the mysterious men. The second one surrenders, standing just behind the bedridden, modern-day Marlow. The singing detective approaches, pistol raised, one bullet left in the chamber of his Webley. A shot echoes. The mysterious man blinks: he's still alive—but the hospitalised Marlow is dead.

"This was one sick puppy," intones the singing detective, "and I reckon I'm man enough to tie my own shoelaces now." The repressed has returned, been accepted and released. The old, toxic, shame-filled Philip Marlow has been symbolically killed off. In his place a new, improved Marlow rises from the plot strand where the bedridden Marlow was adjusting to a life beyond shame—the pages of his dime-store novel. The ward is suddenly restored to its former glory. Marlow, dressed in the singing detective's signature trench coat and hat, hobbles out, a new and better life ahead.

The Singing Detective is a brilliant, complex, but comprehensive portrayal of the rollercoaster journey from within the walls of Sexcatraz to a healthier emotional world beyond. Like Samantha Morton in *Swimming Pool*, Ann and Graham in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, and Tenoch and Julio in *Y Tu Mamá También*, Philip Marlow has escaped from Sexcatraz... but where to?

SEXCATRAZ

Beyond Sexcatraz

The films reviewed so far in Part III of Sexcatraz show characters transcending the outmoded beliefs that trap us in the destructive behaviours seen in Parts I and II. This begs a question: what might a society without sexual shame resemble?

This is the quantum leap I spoke of in the Introduction to this book, Ryan and Jethá's "new understanding of ourselves." As a major change in human social structure, it can't be achieved with a single step or the wave of a magic wand: you can't cross a chasm in two small jumps. Escape from Sexcatraz occurs one day at a time and one person at a time, just as Philip Marlow gradually processed and released lifelong, traumatic sexual baggage over the course of *The Singing Detective*.

The chapter on The Politics of Shame shows that sexual shame is a structural element of patriarchy. We may not think of modern Western societies as patriarchal, but they are built on ancient social models and, while watered down, they still operate to a significant extent—particularly around sex—along entirely patriarchal lines.

Authorities with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo have traditionally acted to ban, discredit or marginalise portrayals of how a more sexually open society might function. There are few films that explore these historically dangerous waters, but they do exist. Oscar-winning director Bernardo Bertolucci's 1996 film *Stealing Beauty* portrays a tiny, self-contained community making the journey towards sexual openness.

Stealing Beauty

Year: 1996

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci

Writers: Bernardo Bertolucci, Susan Minot

Starring: Liv Tyler, Jeremy Irons, Donal McCann, Sinéad Cusack, Rachel Weisz

Stealing Beauty tells the story of a young American woman (a breakout role for Liv Tyler) who flies to Tuscany in search of both her real father and her first love. Though these twin objectives provide the thrust (well, gentle shove, really) for *Stealing Beauty*'s narrative arc, the film's title and poster—a hunched and gawky Tyler, all limbs, hair, and doe eyes—suggests the female form is the real subject of Bernardo Bertolucci's film.

Bertolucci's belief in the naturalness of sex pervades many of his works, including the monumental *1900*, and in *Stealing Beauty* he tackles the issue head-on. Not surprisingly, the film had a polarising effect: the film's softly erotic milieu was a major turn-on—or off—both for those who liked and disliked it.

The film begins with Tyler's Lucy Harmon jetting into Florence and catching the bus up to Siena. Here Bertolucci's camera is at its most invasive: a hand-held camera, directed by an unknown fellow-traveller, films Lucy as she naps with her legs open, one hand on her thigh. The camera zooms in on Lucy's crotch, a fingertip almost touching her own sex. The close-up shifts to her face. A trickle of saliva runs from her mouth. Bertolucci's implication is

SEXCATRAZ

obvious, but he redeems the moment when the cameraman—who has a bit part later in the story—tosses the cassette to Lucy.

Then *Stealing Beauty* rolls into those gorgeous Tuscan hills: vineyards, olive groves, terracotta houses that have sheltered generations of simple living, close to the earth and the rhythm of the seasons. The cinematography is lush, almost tropical; the landscape glows like a pregnant woman. Bertolucci later captures people—particularly Tyler’s Lucy—in the same vein. Antipathy to *Stealing Beauty* suggests that we allow ourselves to gaze openly on the geographical landscape but not upon the human—without objectifying it. Here again is the subtle yet toxic footprint of our shame.

Lucy arrives at Ian and Diana’s villa, two old friends of her mother who run the place like a postage-stamp principality. Friends and relatives ebb and flow. There’s occasional friction but everyone eats together on the *terrazzo* and sunbathes nude. Diana (Sinéad Cusack) pines for Irish rain. Ian (Donal McCann) loves the sun-baked hills and sculpts statues that evoke an ancient fertility cult. Faded *Kama Sutra* prints peer from overgrown corners. The whole place oozes a musty, latent sexuality; Bertolucci’s Tuscan sex cult is far more convincing than Kubrick’s in *Eyes Wide Shut*. This warmly erotic milieu, where sex seeps unashamedly from every pore, is the film’s most endearing trait.

Lucy meets the current residents, including Diana’s daughter Miranda (Rachel Weisz), lounging by the pool. At the sight of Lucy her husband Richard (D.W. Moffet) strips naked and dives in, signalling his entry in the sweepstake for deflowering her. There’s an agony aunt, an aged art dealer and, most significantly, a playwright dying more from cynicism than some nameless disease. Most of the characters have an issue with sex or love, creating an erotic vortex that the virginal Lucy disturbs. But the cast is too large to be fully effective; some weak sub-plots only hinder the story’s generally languid pace.

Lucy’s back-story seeps out as she settles in: her mother, a noted poet, died recently. In her mother’s diaries Lucy found some cryptic references to her father’s identity. Lucy is also on the hunt for Niccoló, a local boy she had a crush on when she visited a few years earlier. Niccoló is absent, reportedly womanising in Turkey. A slight deflection of the eyes signals Lucy’s hurt at the news. This is a film of small moments.

The story meanders on, gently unfolding like a second bottle of Chianti after lunch, or perhaps more like a family Christmas dinner: it takes longer than it should, it’s too rich and there’s buckshot in the turkey; but there are some indulgent pleasures along the way. The plot lines are all fairly predictable. It’s best to lie back in the film’s sexually open arms and enjoy the ride.

Lucy is initially wary of Alex, the dying playwright (*Lolita*’s Jeremy Irons), but in the film’s most satisfying dynamic he slowly gains her confidence and chaperones her towards her first sexual encounter. In return Alex finds a renewed zest for life.

Lucy slowly learns the truth about her mother’s bohemian lifestyle. The cameraman from the opening scene emerges as a war correspondent and is briefly posited as Lucy’s real father. Miranda and Richard argue over the latter sniffing around Lucy. Miranda is liberated enough to lounge topless by the pool but still clings to her husband’s sexual access rights. The infighting gets too much for Lucy. She books a flight back to New York—only to change her mind at the sudden arrival of Niccoló (Roberto Zibetti), with his shy little brother Osvaldo (Ignazio Oliva) and Miranda’s brother Christopher (Joseph Fiennes) in tow.

SEXCATRAZ

Tellingly, Niccoló needs to be reminded who Lucy is before breaking into a grin that would frighten a *T. rex*.

Giddy from the prospect of an amorous encounter with Niccoló, Lucy gets drunk and vomits onto his crotch. The underlying driver is not the bottle of Montepulciano d'Arbruzzo Lucy guzzled but—like Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher* and Dani Trant in *The Man in the Moon*—the gut-wrenching shame of her socially transgressive desires. Nonetheless, the bookmakers still have Niccoló odds-on to grease the pole with Lucy.

The story gathers pace as it approaches the central set piece, a party at Niccoló's family home. Lucy makes a pre-emptive strike on Niccoló's ancestral pile only to sight him in the foliage, sliding his hand up the thigh of a half-glimpsed girl. Lucy lowers her opinion of Niccoló—like the Trant sisters in *The Man in the Moon*, she's been conditioned to believe in 'one love and one lover'. Foreshadowing the film's climax, Osvaldo is conveniently on hand when Lucy somewhat unconvincingly crashes her bicycle.

In this fecund landscape Lucy's sexuality gradually blossoms. She sits for Ian to draw her portrait. She doesn't protest when, in the film's iconic moment, he slips off a shoulder strap, allowing her thin summer dress to fall free of her breast. Of course, Ian will later be revealed as Lucy's father. Whether Bertolucci meant anything to be read into this touching family moment is unclear.

Just then Niccoló arrives for what he expects to be a straightforward leg-over with Lucy. He leads her into an olive grove and helps himself, only—like Fernando in *À Ma Soeur!*—to be unexpectedly spat out. While the overall milieu of the villa is pro-nudity, the strictures on what constitutes illicit sex seen throughout this book remain. Like Billy Sanders in *The Man in the Moon*, Niccoló reveals himself to be unworthy of Lucy because of his interest in multiple sex partners, i.e. outside of an emotionally committed relationship.

According to our sexual covenants, Lucy isn't allowed to exchange her virginity for the simple and instructive pleasure of a good fuck at the hands (and other parts) of a capable lover. If she has any moral fibre she can only swap sex for primarily emotional satisfaction; physical enjoyment is at best secondary and at worst downright undesirable.

Making sex fundamentally an emotional exchange may seem beneficial but there's a major downside: a society ashamed of sex naturally produces men unskilled in the bedroom arts, timid, suffering from erectile dysfunction (Graham in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*) or premature ejaculation (Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, Tenoch and Julio in *Y Tu Mamá También*, Philip Marlow in *The Singing Detective*). Lucy's rejection of Niccoló throws the betting on who will deflower her wide open, just as the plot reaches its centrepiece.

The party at Niccoló's house is a bacchanalian affair of wine, music and sex. Carnal titters come from the bushes. Elegant Milanese dresses fall to the grass. A drunken woman hitches up her skirt and laughs maniacally as she pisses in a corridor. Like a lot of Bertolucci, it's tangential, self-indulgent but generally endearing. Amid all this revel Lucy falls in with the charming Christopher, who sees her as a pleasant sexual nightcap—until he passes out. The betting list shortens. Lucy curls up alone on the couch while much of the cast winds up having sex.

After the party *Stealing Beauty* begins to feel like a hotel on Lake Como in autumn. One by one the sub-plots dissipate. The film loses its only nuanced relationship when Irons' dying playwright departs in an ambulance. Lucy acknowledges Ian as her father, leaving only the identity of her deflowerer to be revealed: shy Osvaldo, who has loved her from the

SEXCATRAZ

shadows all along. First we're reminded that, in contrast to Niccoló, Osvaldo is sexually a 'good' man: when a bee stings Lucy's breast she invitingly opens her blouse but he's pathetically reluctant to apply balm to the swelling.

The love scene itself is a murky, fire-lit hilltop affair to the tune of Mazzy Star's hypnotic 'Rhymes of an Hour'. Osvaldo—with one eye on the American film censors—keeps his jeans on, while Lucy lets the night air cool her cheeks. By the time the credits roll we're suddenly aware how sore our own backsides are.

Stealing Beauty is, by any account, a slight film. If it weren't for Bertolucci, Tyler and Irons (not necessarily in that order) it would surely have sunk without trace. It's one of those films sometimes classed as a guilty pleasure. As [New York Times](#) critic Janet Maslin observed, "for all the film's missteps, there is cause to echo the uncritical compliment bestowed by the playwright (Jeremy Irons) upon the film's ingénue (Liv Tyler): 'I so enjoyed watching you.'" Many reactions to *Stealing Beauty*—positive and negative alike—are less an opinion of the film than a reflection of the viewer's shame. Those who are relatively free of it are able to enjoy Lucy's languid journey of sexual discovery; those who aren't find all that bare flesh a mite uncomfortable.

Bertolucci's film portrays an insular community where traditional restrictions on nudity have waned, although the concept of sex only being acceptable within the envelope of romantic love—with its emphasis on emotional returns and the attendant, potentially destructive exchange of sexual access rights (Ian and Diana, Miranda and Richard, Lucy and Osvaldo)—is still firmly evident. A film that goes further in portraying a society that has relinquished traditional sexual beliefs is the 1973 British cult classic *The Wicker Man*.

The Wicker Man

Year: 1973

Director: Robin Hardy

Writer: Anthony Shaffer

Starring: Edward Woodward, Christopher Lee, Britt Ekland

"Flesh to touch... Flesh to burn!" shrieks the film's poster. "A totally corrupt shocker." Generally categorised as a horror film, aside from the fiery finale of the titular figure it's a rather genteel pastoral mystery. But the copywriters knew the film's selling point: its deeply appealing, transgressive sexuality. The poster's foreground features pin-up pussycat Britt Ekland, her naked back promising tits and titillation. *The Wicker Man* doesn't disappoint; like *Stealing Beauty*, the film is imbued with a wonderful sense of shameless sexuality.

Aside from Ekland, *The Wicker Man* features Edward Woodward—famous at the time for the downbeat BBC spy series *Callan*—in the lead role of Sergeant Howie, a Scottish policeman who visits a remote isle in search of a missing girl, and Christopher Lee as Lord Summerisle, the island's benevolent dictator. Woodward steals the film as the devout and sexless Howie; crammed into the tightest possible police uniform, his pent-up frustration—professional and sexual—is wonderfully palpable as the locals give him the run-around. But the backbone of the film's success is Anthony Shaffer's screenplay, which takes aim at the

SEXCATRAZ

conflict between Howie's staunchly prudish Christianity and Summerisle's sex-embracing paganism, hitting its mark to terrific effect.

The Wicker Man begins with Sergeant Howie returning to the Scottish mainland in his seaplane after visiting some outlying islands. Howie's puritanical streak is the source of great mirth among his underlings. The long-haired PC McTaggart teasingly advises that nothing serious has occurred during the sergeant's absence: "Just the usual: rape, sodomy, sacrilege... you know."

Then something serious happens: an anonymous letter reveals that a twelve-year-old girl has gone missing on Summerisle, a remote island noted (in McTaggart's eyes) for its apples and (in Howie's) for a lack of licensing laws. "However, this is still clearly a law-abiding Christian country," Howie asserts with a hope that will prove false. And with that he wings his way into enemy territory to evocative shots of the Scottish isles and the equally affecting folk music of Paul Giovanni.

Arriving on Summerisle, Sergeant Howie soon finds himself chasing a ghost as no one has seen "hide nor hair" of the missing girl. He finds no apples either: all exported. He is served canned vegetables on an island famous for its produce. Another thing missing is the pub's photograph of the previous year's harvest festival.

What Howie does find is a sex-soaked atmosphere, beginning with a ribald song about the generosity of the landlord's daughter (Willow MacGregor, played by Ekland)—and it's not her purse that's easily opened. Finding the pub a mite sweaty, Howie goes for a breath of air. He glimpses half-dressed women fondling each other. A naked woman cries on a grave, evoking the ancient association of sex with death. Wincing under the assault of all this moral degeneracy, Howie retreats to his room at the pub—only to be kept awake by Willow's orgiastic moans as she beds a young man sent to her for sexual initiation by the benevolent Lord Summerisle.

Contrast this with the Trant sisters, kept under close observation by their father in *The Man in the Moon*, the Pingot sisters, forced into damaging sexual initiations in *À Ma Soeur!*, *Malèna's* Renato, punished for masturbating and subjected to an exorcism before his father has some mercy—or even Lucy in *Stealing Beauty*, who must work her way through a laundry-list of potential suitors to find one who is emotionally worthy but just as sexually ignorant and under-skilled as she is.

The next day brings Howie no respite. Children dance around a maypole, singing a fertility song. In class, with the flat delivery of a maths teacher intoning, "two plus two equals four," Diane Cilento's schoolmarm instructs her young charges that the maypole is "the image of the penis." Howie threatens to charge her with the corruption of innocents, a term as medieval as his attitude. But, at last, a clue: the missing girl's name in the school register. En masse, the islanders' story changes: oh yes, that's right, she died.

Incensed, Howie visits Lord Summerisle. On the way he sees girls dancing naked around standing stones, another collision between sex and divinity the poor sergeant finds hard to digest. Howie's pent-up feelings explode when Summerisle suggests his people are "deeply religious." "Religious?" Howie froths as he hounds Summerisle across the room. "With ruined churches... no ministers, no priests—and children dancing naked?" Lord Summerisle smiles and tinkles a piano as the girls frolic outside (in the same skin-coloured shifts as Reese Witherspoon in *The Man in the Moon*, just in case you're worried): "They do

SEXCATRAZ

love their divinity lesson.” Howie rails uselessly against the serene Lord Summerisle: “Do sit down, Sergeant. Shocks are much easier absorbed with the knees bent.”

But it takes more than a March hare to put off Howie. His quest slowly becomes about exorcising Summerisle’s bacchanalian paganism as much as finding the girl. He breaks into the photographer’s store and finds the absent harvest picture: barren tables surround the missing girl. Heavy-handed flashbacks ram home the realisation that Summerisle’s crops have failed and the girl is still alive—to be sacrificed at the morrow’s May Day feast. Howie will need a clear head to rescue her.

Once again, Willow will deny him. As lilting folk music wafts up the pub’s stairs, Willow lies naked on the bed, tapping an invitation on Howie’s wall to the rhythm of the song. Willow and Howie rise from their beds and amble, zombie-like, towards their respective doors. The missing girl’s fate—and with it Howie’s eternal soul—hangs in the balance. Willow caresses her breasts as she increases the hypnotic pull of her spell. Pinned to the wall, Howie sweats profusely as Willow slaps her buttocks, a few inches of masonry all that separates him from her willing flesh. But the servants of the cross are stubborn. Howie reels from the wall, breaking out of the force field of Willow’s sex magick. He stumbles to his bed where, like Dani Trant in *The Man in the Moon*, he can barely contain the nausea stemming from his transgressive lust for Willow.

The next day, Howie makes for his seaplane to summon reinforcements only for the trap to spring shut. The seaplane’s engine won’t start. Its radio has been sabotaged. Isolated in every conceivable sense, he embarks on a wild goose-chase as the islanders assemble their pagan regalia for the May Day procession. Howie undertakes a house-to-house search that leads through a boudoir where Ingrid Pitt’s librarian wallows naked in a tub. Unlike Dani Trant in *The Man in the Moon*, darting behind the bushes at the swimming hole to hide from Court, she feels no shame. Howie mumbles an apology and stumbles out, a strong man rendered impotent by the sight of a woman’s body.

His search as fruitless as the orchards of Summerisle, Howie infiltrates the harvest procession by knocking out the landlord and donning his Punch outfit. Writer Anthony Shaffer’s choice of Punch is beautifully ironic: all along Howie has been the fool who is king for a day—“And who but a fool would do that,” Cilento’s schoolteacher observes. Now he is dressed accordingly.

Led by Lord Summerisle, with Lee having a whale of a time, the procession leads the disguised Sergeant Howie—along with the audience—on a merry caper. First it’s to the standing stones, where six swordsmen symbolically decapitate a virgin. Kegs of ale are offered to the sea-gods on the beach. And then there she is: the missing girl, dressed as a sacrificial virgin, tied to a stake. Howie rushes to free the girl. He flees with her into a network of caves. The islanders mount a lackadaisical chase.

The girl leads Howie out of the caves onto a headland only to find Lord Summerisle and the swordsmen waiting. The girl—who was never missing—returns to her mother’s embrace, her part played to the hilt. Howie is speechless. “Welcome, Fool,” intones Lord Summerisle. “You have come of your own free will to the appointed place.” Howie is stripped, cleansed and dressed in white by the trinity of Ekland, Cilento and Pitt. Though ostensibly May Day, the scene was shot in frigid mid-winter: Woodward’s skin is almost translucent with the cold.

SEXCATRAZ

Howie becomes a Christ-like figure, a king without a kingdom. The islanders are his Roman guards, Lord Summerisle his Pontius Pilate. “Come,” purrs Summerisle, “it is time to keep your appointment with the wicker man.” Howie is led to the top of the headland. Horror fills his face as he glimpses something as yet unseen. And then we see it: the wicker man, a humanoid figure some thirty feet high, all wood and straw, ready to burn, just as the poster promised. A ladder leads to a cell-like compartment in the figure’s midriff.

The closing sequence is truly chilling, shattering the film’s pastoral idyll. Howie is caged in the wicker man with some bleating livestock. From inside his cage Howie rails with biblical fervour. Torches flare the hungry hay. A silver band strikes a jaunty tune. The cries of the soon-to-be-barbequed livestock rise in alarm. The wicker man—and Howie with it—burns. His lone rendering of ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’ is lost amongst the bleating of frightened sheep and the massed voices of the enraptured islanders. We expect a chorus of ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’ at any moment. Howie disappears into the flames as dusk envelops Summerisle. The wicker man’s burning head topples as the bloody orb of the sun falls towards the horizon. Hardy and his crew only got one take but it’s fabulous.

Whatever one’s view of the relative merits of our Late Patriarchal sexual morality and Shaffer’s pick ‘n’ mix paganism, in *The Wicker Man* it’s clear that Summerisle’s pagans are a lot more relaxed, have a lot more fun—and, not coincidentally, a lot more sex⁸⁰—than Sergeant Howie, formerly of the Western Highlands Police. We leave the cinema hoping his sacrifice will indeed renew the crops on Summerisle.

The Wicker Man rapidly became a cult favourite⁸¹, revered with the fervour usually reserved for sci-fi and fantasy epics like *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Imaginary worlds all of them, worlds their fans wish they could inhabit. Worlds that offer something the contemporary one does not, or where something contemporary is absent.

What is it about *The Wicker Man* that places it in such rarefied company? Shaffer’s screenplay is excellent. Robin Hardy’s direction is understated. The editing of the director’s cut, salvaged from prints of varying quality, can be heavy-handed. Woodward and Lee are fine throughout. Eklund contributes an enticing erotic dance. Paul Giovanni’s folksy score is steeped in pagan earthiness. Somehow, all *The Wicker Man*’s idiosyncratic elements add to the sum of its parts.

In the final analysis, is it not the nurturing, sex-positive culture of Summerisle that fires the imagination? What young man would not like to be taken to a Willow for practical sex instruction, knowing he will be guided every step of the way until he is proficient? What young woman wouldn’t like to frolic naked in a sunlit garden with her friends and—most importantly—with a complete lack of bodily shame? *The Wicker Man* highlights the gulf between the sexually impoverished, rigid, perverted, voyeuristic, emotionally destructive, patriarchal social structure we’re currently trapped in and the sexually abundant, relaxed, shame-free society that lies beyond Sexcatraz—and leaves many of us craving the latter.

The Wicker Man is unusual—and perhaps unrealistic—in portraying a community that is sexually open yet still overseen by a patriarch. Very few films have explored what sexual

80 A study published in the medical journal *The Lancet* predicts that by 2040 [Spanish people will have the longest life expectancy](#). One of the contributing factors is more sex.

81 The burnt stumps of the wicker man at Burrow Head in Scotland were a place of pilgrimage for fans until they were stolen in 2006.

SEXCATRAZ

mores might look like in a matriarchal community⁸². One such film is Marleen Gorris' offbeat multi-generational comedy *Antonia's Line*, winner of the 1995 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

Antonia's Line

Year: 1995

Director: Marleen Gorris

Writer: Marleen Gorris

Starring: Willeke van Ammelrooy, Jan Decleir, Els Dottermans, Veerle van Overloop

Antonia's Line begins with the elderly Antonia (Willeke van Ammelrooy) waking one morning, knowing with contented certainty this is the last day of her life. Her mind flashes back to shortly after World War II when she and her daughter Danielle (Els Dotterman) returned to the village where she was born. Antonia's own mother is on her deathbed. Apart from that, life is pretty much unchanged by the war. The priest spits fire and brimstone (i.e. sexual covenants) from the pulpit, the villagers tend their fields and run their shops, they abuse their simpletons, and the men treat the womenfolk like cattle.

After her mother's passing, Antonia takes over the family farm and haphazardly establishes a tiny feminist commune within the sweep of the wider, still patriarchal, rural Dutch community.

And that is pretty much the plot of *Antonia's Line*. There's no inciting incident, no discernible act structure and little character development. Along with *The Brown Bunny*, it is the most anti-Hollywood film included here. There is no Hero's Journey, no sidekick who must die at the Act Two Climax. The film's ending is given away in the first minute. Many of the scenes are simply backdrops, barely moving *tableaux vivant* to augment the narration that weaves through the film like the ever-changing seasons, accompanied by endless cycles of births, marriages and deaths. And, of course, sex...

Despite the film's casualty list rivalling *Saving Private Ryan*, a gentle humour suffuses *Antonia's Line*. The commune's first recruit is the village idiot, Loony Lips. A young boy spatters him with an egg. Antonia seizes the miscreant and hangs the startled boy from a tree by his collar. Loony Lips does a U-turn with his dung-cart and follows her.

One by one, like wounded sparrows, the downtrodden and the disempowered come under Antonia's sway. There's the Mad Madonna who howls at the moon, much to the annoyance of her downstairs neighbour, known simply as The Protestant. There's Crooked Finger, an atheist intellectual who hasn't left his house since the war ended. There's Deedee, the retarded girl raped by the hulking Pitte who, like the Sanders family in *The Man in the Moon*, is the film's token attempt at a Nasty Piece of Work.

The film bares its feminist breast when Farmer Bas, after 20 years still a newcomer to the village, proposes to Antonia. They're both widowed. His sons need a mother. It's simple

⁸² Anthropologist Joan Bamberger argues that there is little evidence any truly matriarchal societies have ever existed. In societies where women have access to power they typically share it with men. An example comes from the Cayuga tribe, part of the Iroquois nation. Only men represented the tribe at the Iroquois Great Council, but only the women were permitted to choose those men.

SEXCATRAZ

good sense, the kind the Dutch take pride in. Antonia has other ideas: "But I don't need your sons." Farmer Bas hadn't thought of that. "Don't you want a husband either?" he cagily enquires, suddenly realising his poker hand is weaker than imagined. "You can come around from time to time," Antonia allows, tacitly acknowledging her interest. "What's in it for me?" Farmer Bas replies, partly angling for Antonia's bedroom. Not much.

Yet Farmer Bas accepts what might appear to be second-rate status and troops down the road to Antonia's farm with his five sons in tow, from tallest to shortest. But is it really such a bad deal? Bas and Antonia share their lives because they want to, with no sexual complications. They haven't exchanged sexual access rights, with all the misery seen in *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Unfaithful* and *Indecent Proposal*, nor the slippery grappling—both sexual and emotional—of *Intimacy*, *When Harry Met Sally* and *Romance*. Farmer Bas may not get to bed Antonia (or perhaps not often) but nor is he bound to her. And thus they are happy. In the film's frequently recurring motif, the denizens of Antonia's tolerant little enclave gaily gather around the long table outside the farmhouse.

Danielle instigates the next generation of Antonia's line when she decides to have a baby. "How about a husband to go with it?" Antonia queries. No. Unlike Big Joe in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* who goes berserk at her daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy or the nuns in *The Magdalene Sisters* who punish single mothers with a lifetime in the workhouse, Antonia supports her daughter's unconventional approach.

Knowing that no villager could keep his mouth shut after bedding Danielle, mother and daughter take a trip to the nearest city and find a suitable stud. Danielle gets full value from the encounter then climbs out of bed and does a naked handstand to ensure that gravity aids the fertilising process.

Danielle's less-than-immaculate conception invokes the ire of the priest, who churns out some bog-standard shame-based cant to turn the village against Antonia. But Farmer Bas, sensing opportunity, catches the priest with a girl. The following week's sermon is an entirely different affair, combining a sudden humility with a reminder that "salvation came into the world through a woman." Antonia is well pleased. Farmer Bas will reap the rewards long before he gets to heaven.

Danielle gives birth to Thérèse, who turns out to be a mathematical genius. Deedee gets pregnant to Loony Lips. Antonia finally allows Farmer Bas into her room. There is none of the hysterical, destructive behaviour seen in *Wish You Were Here*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or other films. Instead, a simple tolerance for life as it is rather than as it ought to be pervades Antonia's world. In the words of the film's narrator, Time "with complete contentment produced nothing except itself."

At the heart of this contentment is an acceptance of sex in its various forms. Instead of struggling to maintain a fake façade like Marcello in *The Conformist*, Antonia and her clan have simply surrendered to their true selves. *Antonia's Line* breaks the impasse between love and sex so glaringly delineated by Catherine Breillat in *A Ma Soeur!* and *Romance* by the simple expedient of acceptance. Cue another shot of contented domesticity around the farmhouse table.

Thérèse, the precocious little poppet, exhausts the capabilities of her current teachers and the academic cavalry arrives in the form of Lara Anderson (Elsie de Brauw). But where some see only a First Grade teacher, Danielle, with her artist's imagination, sees the nude in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and falls head over heels for Lara. At one stroke Danielle finds

SEXCATRAZ

herself a lifelong partner, gives the film's graphic artist a cover still and earns *Antonia's Line* an undeserved reputation as a lesbian film.

In a beautifully observed scene, Danielle frets like a besotted teenager as she awaits Lara's first visit, vexing the hell out of little Thérèse. Then "love burst out everywhere..." and there's a montage of rather anodyne sex scenes—in this regard the film is entirely vanilla—between Danielle and Lara, Antonia and Farmer Bas, Loony Lips and Deedee, etcetera, with poor Thérèse unable to sleep because of the racket.

But it's not all bedroom jollies in Antonia's world. The Mad Madonna dies. The Protestant, who has long loved her from a distance—more accurately, the distancing effect of sexual shame—adopts her practice of baying at the moon. And, after 15 years of military service in the tropics, Pitte returns to cast a pall over their lives by raping Thérèse.

The film glosses over the emotional effects on the teenager and instead focuses on retribution, which Antonia dispenses with a witches' curse. Just as in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, where the community punished Harry Black for his transgression, the villagers in *Antonia's Line* are finally stung into action and drown Pitte in a water butt.

With Pitte's exit the last opposition to Antonia's little commune dissipates. The film, in which nothing was ever particularly going on, meanders through its last half-hour following the adult Thérèse's quest for a partner. There are lame jokes about the sexual shortcomings of over-intellectual males—the inevitable by-products of shame—before she settles on Simon, one of the commune's children, and becomes pregnant. But Crooked Finger has filled Thérèse's head with existential nonsense that "the best thing of all is not to be born," so the question arises whether she will terminate the pregnancy. Simon doesn't get any say in the matter, though he seems happy enough when the baby arrives.

The film spends its closing minutes killing off a few long-running characters such as Loony Lips, crushed (like Court in *The Man in the Moon*) under a tractor, and Crooked Finger, thankfully crushed by his own über-intellectual nihilism.

Antonia makes a final plod through the snowbound village on her horse before waking one morning, knowing her time is up. The most unsurprising ending in cinematic history is surprisingly affecting, or perhaps what the narrator describes as "the miracle of death" comes as a relief after the film's cloying last few minutes. Antonia passes away but her line continues. The universe doesn't bat an eyelid and the wheel of life rolls inexorably onwards as if she'd never existed.

By its final reel *Antonia's Line* feels a little episodic and over-contrived, but the film is saved by its rootedness in the seasons and cycles of nature. The matriarchal, nurturing, sexually tolerant milieu of *Antonia's Line* is the polar opposite of the emotional and sexual misery of *Boys Don't Cry*, *Wish You Were Here* or *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. It is perhaps the closest cinematic representation to what life might be like outside Sexcatraz. It doesn't make the most riveting cinema but, in terms of emotional wellbeing, it's a quantum leap. Just as the cult status of *The Wicker Man* reflects a longing for Summerisle's sex-positive community, the appeal of the sexually tolerant matriarchy in *Antonia's Line* can be judged from its success at cinema's glittering showcase, the Oscars.

SEXCATRAZ

Open water

On the night of 11 June 1962, Frank Morris and the brothers Clarence and John Anglin broke out of Alcatraz, America's supposedly escape-proof prison, and vanished into the darkness of San Francisco Bay. Remains of their homemade raft were found on nearby Angel Island. Beyond that, the three men simply disappeared. Had they gone to the great gulag in the sky—or had they truly escaped from Alcatraz?

It took the FBI seventeen years to conclude that the three men had drowned and close the case. It was reopened in 1993 when a former Alcatraz inmate, [Thomas Kent](#), claimed in an interview to have agreed with Clarence Anglin's girlfriend to drive the escapees to Mexico but later withdrew. Kent's story was dismissed when it was learned he was paid for the interview. Yet the intriguing possibility that the Morris gang succeeded refused to die. A 2011 documentary, *Vanished from Alcatraz*, gained access to previously confidential police files. It revealed that on the night of the escape three men fitting the descriptions of Morris and the Anglin brothers held up a car on the mainland near Angel Island and drove away. The final verdict on their escape must be in the affirmative.

If the Morris gang can escape from Alcatraz, we too can escape from Sexcatraz and create a world with the improved emotional and sexual wellbeing of *Stealing Beauty*, *The Wicker Man* and *Antonia's Line*. Characters like Sarah Morton in *Swimming Pool*, Ann and Graham in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, Luisa, Tenoch and Julio in *Y Tu Mamá También* and Philip Marlow in *The Singing Detective* have breached the seemingly unbreakable walls of Sexcatraz⁸³. The Tuscan enclave in *Stealing Beauty*, the young man unashamedly initiated by Willow in *The Wicker Man* and the happy community in *Antonia's Line* all benefit from the simple acceptance of our bodies. We have bodies. Our bodies are sexual. What is there to be ashamed of? Can we return to a Garden of Eden of wellbeing free from the toxic effects of shame? As it says in Genesis, "Although the man and his wife were both naked, they were not ashamed⁸⁴."

Like Frank Morris and the Anglin brothers as they stood on the roof of Alcatraz, we are confronted by darkness and open water. We know, at a technical, intellectual level what the floor plan of Sexcatraz looks like and how its largely invisible, shame-based mechanics have kept humanity trapped in a destructive paradigm for the last few thousand years. The question is how do we make the quantum leap across the turbulent waters of San Francisco Bay to the safety of a new, sexually tolerant mainland?

Let us return to an earlier moment, left unresolved and seemingly inexplicable: Nicole Kidman's monologue in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Alice Harford craved sex with an unknown naval officer—yet, at the same time, felt an overwhelming love for her husband Bill. According to our traditional sexual covenants, which equate sex with love, Alice's contrasting feelings are both paradoxical and impermissible. However, in the dilapidated beachfront motel room

83 That Dennis Potter, writer of *The Singing Detective*, was not personally able to escape from Sexcatraz shows that while the theory may be simple, the actual process of releasing age-old judgments from the deepest layers of the human psyche is anything but.

84 Genesis 2:25 (Contemporary English Version).

SEXCATRAZ

where *Y Tu Mamá También* climaxes, with the dim glow of its naked bulb falling on the entwined bodies of Tenoch, Julio and Luisa, the paradox resolves.

Outside Sexcatraz, Alice has two possible solutions. Firstly, accepting sex as not inherently shameful, which lets her reveal her true sexual self to Bill without fear. If Alice was sufficiently unashamed of her sexuality that she could explore it within her marriage, she might have no interest in the naval officer. Ditto Bill with his various dalliances. While in theory they have permission to do so, for many couples anything beyond vanilla sex feels so transgressive that exposing their deepest sexual selves to their significant other is simply too shameful and dangerous.

Secondly, outside Sexcatraz Alice and Bill's love is not contingent on sexual fidelity. When she experiences the freedom to explore her sexuality with the naval officer, she also feels an overwhelming rush of love and gratitude towards the husband who recognises, supports and is unthreatened by her sexual longing. And thus Alice escapes from today's either/or world, where she can only satisfy her sexual desire for the naval officer by destroying her family, into one where she can have her cake and eat it.

Alice's problem lies not with either marriage or monogamy but with the invisible emotional baggage that accompanies them, and has done so for several thousand years: the unspoken understanding that Bill is the only person with whom it is socially—and thus emotionally—legitimate for her to have sex with, and that any violation carries the direst costs for her entire family.

The net effect of this psychological programming is to make her marriage conditional: "I love you as long as you don't screw around." Beyond Sexcatraz, where sex is just a natural part of the human condition and not subject to lifelong emotional repression and unnatural regulation, this simply becomes "I love you."

This is the paradigm shift: to unconditional love. The unconditional love to accept our partners' truest sexual selves. The unconditional love to recognise that our partners may have sexual desires we cannot fill, and the most loving thing we can do is support them to explore their sexuality in appropriate, consensual, respectful ways. The unconditional love to recognise that our partners may not wish to be sexual at all—but that should not consign us to a sexless relationship, to enforced celibacy.

To escape Sexcatraz we must open our hearts and recognise each other's inherent sexual sovereignty. A confetti-sprinkled commitment to a monogamous lifetime may appeal to our inner starry-eyed romantic but for many it's an emotionally unrealistic, insufficiently pliable structure. Its failings are reflected in sexual frustration, jealousy, destabilising affairs, declining marriage rates, increasing divorces and children suffering lifelong emotional trauma. When we love unconditionally we may still have monogamous relationships, but through open hearted choice rather than underpinned by emotionally and sexually crippling unconscious fears.

Similarly, those who are so ashamed of sex that it currently precludes meaningful relationships—like Bud in *The Brown Bunny* and Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*—can, by accepting their own sexuality, gradually emerge from the bleak void of sexual alienation into a less painful, less frightening, less lonely world and accept the solace of human touch.

Sexcatraz is breaking down. There are brave women and men challenging the age-old conditioning unconsciously whirring away in their psychological circuit boards. I've had the humbling privilege of working with some of them. I've heard their screams of rage and pain

SEXCATRAZ

as buried beliefs have broken to the surface. I've seen their tears and shed my own. I've seen—and felt—the joy, relief and emotional freedom it brings.

Uniting the head, heart and genitals is not easy work, but it can be done. As we escape from our current, emotionally destructive sexual beliefs—and the conditional relationships that stem from them—there will likely be a rise both in the number and duration of marriages, providing long-term emotional satisfaction for both partners; open, satisfying sex lives, and the most stable and nurturing environment for our children. In such a society self-regulation, rather than self-indulgence, prevails⁸⁵.

It won't happen overnight. It won't even happen in a generation. But it must happen. We must end the damage seen in Hollywood's sex scandals, #METOO, and the Everyday Sexism Project. During the rise of patriarchy we shamed our natural sexuality, preventing us from expressing it healthily. Ever since, we've tried to protect ourselves from unwanted sexual advances while expressing ourselves in ways that are both satisfying yet socially safe. The result has been several thousand years of damage and depravity, including all the dysfunctional behaviour seen in the films reviewed here. To fully release our shame—and the dynamic it gave rise to—first we must become fully conscious of it.

We must make this paradigm shift. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to each other, and most of all we owe it to our children. We don't have a choice—for every day that we fail to acknowledge the destructiveness of our current sexual paradigm is another day of emotional misery and alienation inside the prison of Sexcatraz.

⁸⁵ This conclusion is supported by evidence from pro-female, pro-child, sex-positive societies that lingered into recent times, such as the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia, the Muria of central India and the Pygmies of the African rainforest. James DeMeo writes that, "As was the case with Trobriand society, the Muria and Pygmy, in spite of the [sexually] free conditions, did not display evidence of 'unbridled promiscuity'."

SEXCATRAZ

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On the day I visited Alcatraz, 10 January 2019, thick fog covered San Francisco Bay. As the ferry neared The Rock, the squat hulk of the island gradually loomed in and out of sight. It was a perfect metaphor for the writing of this book—and for uncovering the floor plan of Sexcatraz, the invisible prison of sexual shame.

I was, unknowingly, handed a life sentence in Sexcatraz as a teenager. My maternal grandparents spent the 1920s living at desolate Royal Air Force bases, devoid of amenities like hot running water. Suffering in this bleak environment, my grandmother had an affair with a wealthy industrialist. My grandfather, a World War I hero twice decorated for bravery, went to court for custody of my mother—and won. The effect on my mother was devastating. The stark reality that her mother preferred extramarital sex to raising her own daughter emotionally crippled her for life. A similar tale of abandonment with a distinctly sexual whiff also filtered down from the paternal side of my family.

Neither of my parents dealt with the societal sexual negativity of their time nor the damaging anti-sex programming they acquired in their troubled childhoods. In all fairness, that kind of self-examination was simply beyond the reach of their generation. They did the best they could—and passed on their deeply buried sex-negative beliefs to me. As a result I grew up in a household where sex was only noticeable by its absence—until I hit puberty.

At that point I somehow recognised that I harboured the same transgressive urges as my grandmother, the black sheep of the family. To quote *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert, “the poison was in the wound.” My teenage years left me remote and alienated from the world, as if I was looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. I stumbled into adulthood burdened by disempowered beliefs and dysfunctional behaviours. I didn't know it, but Sexcatraz was my home.

After a breakup in my early 30s, I committed to change. I began deep, soul-searching personal development work. I uncovered the sexual shame, the sexual-spiritual split and the fundamental judgment of sex as bad that underlay it: the floor plan of Sexcatraz. I am very grateful for the process analysis skills I learned on large-scale industrial software projects. They helped me pierce the fog of unique human behaviour that obscures Sexcatraz to glimpse the underlying universal processes and to recognise we are all its prisoners.

Yet at times that fog was so thick I didn't penetrate it until it was too late. Even while escaping from Sexcatraz, age-old unconscious programming seeped into my own behaviour. I hurt people I care about with all the blindness of many of the characters in the films in this book, which I deeply regret. Shame-based beliefs are so heavily stamped into our psyches that they don't give up without a fight.

As I scoped out Sexcatraz I made a number of short films exploring sexual themes. My twin fascinations with filmmaking and the invisible prison of sexual shame fused in a series of reviews analysing some of the films in this book for the clues to our unconscious anti-sexual beliefs. Over a decade these reviews coalesced into the book you're now reading. It was a long, slow process. I could only identify the components of Sexcatraz as I identified them—and painfully released them—from my own psyche. Reassembling my personal world got harder and was hardest at the very end.

SEXCATRAZ

During this decade Sexcatraz loomed in and out of view like The Rock in the thick fog on the day I visited it in 2019. At times I despaired of being able to describe in an even vaguely accessible way this invisible fortress, this psychosexual purgatory lurking in the fog of our collective unconscious. But perhaps that fog has started to disperse and our shame can, at long last, be brought into the light.

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SEXCATRAZ

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