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Fade to Black: The Vanishing Act of Sex in Cinema

As an avid film lover, I made it my mission to watch, in one sitting, every movie nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture before watching the 2024 Oscars. One Saturday evening, curled up on my couch with a bowl of popcorn and a pint of Ben and Jerry's "The Tonight Dough" ready to go, I decided to start with *Poor Things*, a comedy fantasy based on the 1992 novel by Alasdair Gray, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. While watching the movie, I grew more in shock each second. The lead character's sexual liberation was unlike anything I had seen on screen before. The sex scenes were unconventional, often awkward, yet, they didn't seem designed to provoke desire and tension as in usual film. Instead, they felt like explorations of the character's self-discovery. Sex in *Poor Things* wasn't just about physical intimacy, it was rebellion and identity through expressed sexuality. As I finished the movie, fascinated about what I just witnessed, I ran to grab my phone and rapidly opened TikTok to see other people's reviews of the film. I was very surprised to see that not many people liked *Poor Things*. Most thought the film's portrayal of sex was gratuitous, exploitative, or simply too much. Many reviewers expressed discomfort at the film's rawness, while others criticized it for lacking a traditional narrative structure, arguing that the sexual content overshadowed the story. A few people thought the role of sex in the film was integral to the protagonist's journey, showcasing her struggle for autonomy in a world that sought to control her. In that moment I realized how

divided the cinematic community is, especially when discussing the topic of sex portrayal in film.

In the realm of cinema, few themes captivate audiences as powerfully as sex, a language of its own that weaves tension and desire into the fabric of storytelling. The depiction of sex in film is an essential aspect of cinema, as it reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward sex, intimacy, and relationships. However, in American culture specifically, people seem to have a particular problem with sex in any context, primarily its visual representation in film. The portrayal of sexuality in the big screen has been very controversial, even considered apparently “dangerous” enough to prompt government intervention and federal censorship. This might seem totally crazy, unbelievable and unimaginable but people have sex in America! Yet the mere image of attraction and lust in film is nowadays rejected and criticized by society. What were once called sex scenes in mainstream movies are now immediately labeled as pornography, and what is considered pornography is increasingly marginalized and hidden from public view, further fueling the cultural discomfort surrounding sex in media. Ongoing debates, and what seems like never ending discussions, include questioning if sex in film is helpful, or if it’s exploitative, or if it’s uncomfortable, or if it objectifies human bodies, or if it’s harmful for audiences, or if it’s gratuitous, or if it’s unnecessary for character and plot development, ... Society’s problems and discomfort with the screening of sex keep stacking up, while the importance of it remains unrecognized and ignored. This growing push to sanitize film content reflects broader societal anxieties about sex and intimacy, highlighting the contradictions between the modern normalization of sexual activity and the increasing suppression of its depiction in art. Studies show that the younger generation, Gen Z, want less sex in film and TV, which is ironic as the Gen Z generation prides themselves on being “open minded” on topics

such as inclusivity, mental health, LGBTQ+ rights, access to abortion and gender equality, to name a few. Yet, interestingly enough, sex is often left out of the conversation. A similar situation took place during the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2013. Many sex workers claimed that, despite their experiences with sexual assault, they were being intentionally left out from the supposedly empowering female movement (Cooney). Why, in a world that prides itself on breaking boundaries and embracing openness, does sex remain a subject of discomfort, controversy, and increasing censorship? This modern way of thinking creates a taboo around the topic of sex representation. In a world where society engages in a contradictory battle where they recognize sex as a part of daily life while simultaneously trying to get rid of its visual representation, exploring the depiction of sex in film and how it's gradually disappearing becomes particularly important. The history of sex in film is nowhere near linear. It is all over the place, inconsistent and even contradictory. But throughout we can trace the beginning of a separation between sex and cinema, and the rejection of the artistic representation of sex in film. The disappearance of sex in film stems from deep-rooted cultural influences and historical taboos that continue to shape modern attitudes toward sexuality and are leading to increased rejection from American audiences.

The portrayal of sex in film can be traced back to one of the very first films shown commercially: Thomas Edison's *The Kiss*. This 1896 fifteen second long silent film depicts a re-enactment of the kiss between May Irwin and John Rice in the final scene of the musical *The Window Jones*. Although the kiss was merely a peck and only lasted two seconds, the film became the most popular of all the films being shown at the time and left the audience yearning for more. The audience loved it, not necessarily because they found it arousing, but because they found it funny. The Boston Herald reported on film when it was presented in Boston in 1896, stating: "the

10 pictures included in yesterday's programmes . . . there is no shadow of a doubt as to which created the most laughter. That kissing scene in the 'Widow Jones,' taken part in by May Irwin and John C. Rice, was reproduced in the screen, and the very evident delight of the actor and the undisguised pleasure of the actress were absolutely 'too funny' for anything." (Williams, 29) What might seem like a weird reaction for us reading this review was reason valid enough for the 19th century cinema audience to become amused with the act and demand more of it. The fascination with *The Kiss* even spread to other countries, including the 1897 screening of the film for audiences in Osaka, Japan where the kiss scene was played in a non-stop loop (Hunt). And thus, was born the exciting world of romance and sex in cinema. Of course, like with everything, some writers of the time had negative reviews to share, as did author John Sloan in an article in the *Chap Book* (1896), a Chicago literary magazine, where he stated: "Within a natural scale, such things [as a kiss] are sufficiently bestial. Monstrously enlarged, and shown repeatedly, they become positively disgusting" (Williams, 30). Curiously, John Sloan, along with other critics, found the first sex act to ever appear in cinema to be repulsive and offensive, even "bestial". And thus, simultaneously, began the stigma and rejection of visual representations of sex.

After *The Kiss* proved that audiences were drawn to films with physical sensuality, filmmakers in the 1910's began exploring other sensational topics, albeit subtly, to attract viewers. As storylines grew more complex, filmmakers began experimenting with romantic subplots and themes that implied love and relationships, though still avoiding explicit sexual content. However, by the early 1910s, films with more risqué content, featuring discussions of prostitution and sensual displays of the human body, began to develop and an era known as "pre-Code Hollywood" began. For example, the US 1913 silent film *Traffic in Souls* by George Loane Tucker tells the story of two immigrant sisters, one of whom falls into the clutches of sex traffickers who lure

young women into forced prostitution. While the film doesn't show explicit sexual content, it was one of the earliest to directly address issues related to sexual exploitation. In stark contrast, another development in the 1920's were stag films, short hardcore pornographic films primarily sold on the black market. These films did not simulate sex but showed actual vaginal and anal penetration, erect penises, and ejaculation, mostly about heterosexual and lesbian couples (Kumar). Simultaneously, in America, films began to feature seduction scenes where sex is hidden but suggested. As this content began to develop, so did state and local film censorship boards, which decided what was acceptable for the mainstream audience and controlled the content filmmakers could display in movies. The local censorship board system was deeply flawed, creating inconsistencies in the treatment of films across regions and negatively impacting filmmakers, both creatively and financially. As author Sarah Tew points out in her article, "Cinema & Censorship: The Hays Code", "Sometimes films were edited and had multiple versions created to pass the censorship boards, requiring more time, money, and work by the studios." which presented a problem for studios who were already in debt due to the 1929 stock market crash. Censorship became even more strict when religious leaders started to feel as though the movies created at the time damaged the innocent minds of the American youth. Christian and Puritan communities founded movements that promoted abstinence and portrayed sexuality, particularly women sexuality, as being immoral and shameful. Simultaneously, the Roaring Twenties became a period of decadence in Hollywood when various scandals rattled the conservative community. Amongst the most important cases of influential scandal lies the Fatty Arbuckle case, where the comedian was accused of the rape and murder of a young actress in 1921 (Espar). Additionally, as director David Espar notes in Episode 5 of *Culture Shock*: "Hollywood Censored: Movies, Morality & the Production Code", director William Desmond Taylor was found murdered and actor Wallace Reid

passed away due to a drug overdose. The handful of these factors created a tension between freedom of expression and cultural norms regarding the presence of sex in film. The growing concerns from religious and moral groups, combined with high-profile scandals, led to pressure on Hollywood to “clean up.” To avoid potential federal censorship, Hollywood adopted the Hays Code, which limited portrayals of “vice”, making sure that “no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it” (*Lewis 107*).

Named after Production Code Administration President Will Hays, the code outlined strict moral guidelines, banning portrayals of explicit sexuality, profanity, and certain forms of violence, with the goal of upholding “decency” in Hollywood films. The Hays Code was adopted in 1930, but it wasn’t until 1934 that it was firmly followed by studios, as filmmakers didn’t take it seriously at first. A famous example for this was the 1933 Gustav Machatý film *Ecstasy*, a Czech film starring Hedy Lamarr. The film is renowned for several reasons, including its depiction of what is implied to be the first female orgasm, one of the first instances of female nudity and its exploration of female pleasure. However, the film was denounced by Pope Pius XI, banned in Germany, and although the film was released in Czechoslovakia and Austria, it became the first film to be blocked by the US Customs Service after being proclaimed “dangerously indecent”. *Ecstasy* inspired other filmmakers to also explore nudity and sexuality in film, despite the censorship. However, this whole era came to a stop when, as Espar states, “Continued pressure from the Catholic Church with support from Jewish and Protestant leaders, economic hardships, and the growing threat of federal censorship forced Hays and the studios to change their ways.” The PCA imposed their authority to review and change any movie they deemed inappropriate, gaining the ability to impose a \$25,000 fine to all films that were released without their approval. Filmmakers and writers had no other choice but to accept the Code and its standards, which ended up affecting some actors

and actresses whose trademarks were forbidden by the Code and changing the portrayal of sex in film forever.

Under the Hays Code, physical intimacy, adultery, and homosexuality were either removed or hidden through subtext. Sex scenes were ultimately removed from film, tension and desire had to be carefully measured, and forbidden romance was forbidden. Funny enough, although kisses were already a fan-favorite device in movies of the time, the strict enforcement of the Code in 1934 also came to restrict the act depending on its duration and context. If it was more than 3 seconds, it was not allowed. If it displayed open mouths, it was not allowed. If it was “excessive”, or “lustful”, or too flirty, guess what? Not allowed. The Code not only limited sex acts but other cinematic elements as well, like the display of childbirth or interracial relationships which were also deemed scandalous and indecent. By suppressing discussions of sexual desire and complexity, the Hays Code, along with its origins, further enforced the idea that sexuality was a private, even shameful topic, unsuitable for public exposure or artistic exploration. However, despite its intention, the Hays Code didn't stop all sexual content but rather altered its form, beginning a process of sanitization in the media that we still see till this day. Filmmakers resorted to clever visuals, dialogue, and symbolism to imply sexual themes. Many Hollywood directors incorporated *osculum interruptum*, the practice of interrupting on-screen kisses during the Hollywood Code-era. As Linda Williams describes in her book *Screening Sex*: “Filmmakers found ways to imply romance and sensuality through innuendo, close-ups of longing gazes, and suggestive body language—techniques they would use to circumvent censorship for decades” (38). Directors also began realizing that the build up and tension of a kiss was often more erotic and arousing than the kiss itself. If we really think about it, this type of teasing can be considered the first type of foreplay presented in film. Overall, filmmakers kept trying to incorporate sexuality in their films, which

audiences loved. However, it was the authoritative, continuous enforcement of the Code that further strengthened the idea that sex is “immoral” and dangerous. Films produced under the Hays Code lacked authentic depictions of physical intimacy, distorting societal views by promoting an idealized notion of emotional purity. By avoiding intimate and realistic portrayals of sex, these films contributed to a culture that suppresses honest conversations about human sexuality, which we still see today.

By the 1950s, the Code began to lose its grip as American culture grew more liberal under the influence of European cinema and key Supreme Court rulings, such as *Burstyn v. Wilson* (1952), which recognized films as protected free speech. Directors increasingly defied the Code, with films like Otto Preminger's *The Moon is Blue* (1953) and Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959) achieving commercial success despite lacking Code approval. By the 1960s, audience demand for more explicit storytelling rendered the Code obsolete, leading to its replacement in 1968 by the MPAA rating system, which categorized films by age suitability rather than moral standards. The decline of the Hays Code set the stage for a more liberated Hollywood. As blogger Rhea Kumar puts it: “By the late sixties, however, America was facing a slew of external shocks including the Vietnam War, civil rights movements and student protests. Nudies were too shallow, and young filmmakers were taking an activist approach behind the camera.” Additionally, Hollywood’s sexual revolution was heavily influenced by European films like Federico Fellini’s Italian film *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and Jean-Luc Godard’s French New Wave crime drama *Breathless* (1960). European directors often dealt with adult subjects in a more straightforward manner, free from the moral restrictions Hollywood had long imposed. As audiences responded positively to these films, Hollywood studios began to see a market for similar explorations of sexuality (Kael). Directors began to depict sex, desire, and relationships more openly, with films

like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), directed by John Schlesinger, which is often credited with igniting the new wave of Hollywood. The film openly depicted male prostitution and a male love story in a way that would make the PCA shake in their boots and was the first X-rated film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. Similarly, perhaps the most controversial film of the time was Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). The famous film broke Hollywood with its portrayal of raw passion and psychological complexity. *The New Yorker's* Pauline Kael famously called it "the most liberating, daring movie ever made" (Kael), highlighting its role as a symbol of Hollywood's embrace of sexuality. On the other hand, conservative and religious groups were appalled by such a display of sexuality. Reverend Donald Wildmon, founder of the National Federation for Decency, argued that the film "represents a moral low in the world of film" and warned that such portrayals could lead to the "erosion of societal standards" (Wildmon, 1974). The Catholic Legion of Decency labeled the film "morally objectionable" and several religious leaders called for boycotts. The film's controversial scenes even led to censorship in several countries, with bans enacted in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Once again, we see the importance of the role of religion when it comes to creating a taboo and stigma around the topic of sex, especially in film. While audiences appreciated the shift toward more mature storytelling, many critics argued that Hollywood's sexual liberation was more exploitative than liberating. Notably, feminist critics voiced concerns that these films often depicted female sexuality from a predominantly male perspective, focusing on women's bodies in ways that objectified rather than empowered them. This concept is what we now know as the "male gaze", a term defined by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1973 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which was published in 1975 in the film theory magazine *Screen*. Mulvey's theory applied specifically to Hays Code era films, yet her definition of the "male gaze" is still a term used in the modern world

to criticize cinematic displays of women sexuality, with many feminist critics claiming them to be designed to attract a male audience. These ideas of objectification and exploitation were reinforced by conservative claims that sex for sex's purpose is wrong, identifying this specific type of feminist group as another motivator for the censorship of sex.

It is important to point out the crucial role of the porn industry in the development of Hollywood and film sex portrayal during the sexual liberation of Hollywood, as the industry has long been negatively criticized for showcasing sex for the simple purpose of pleasure. Although it might initially seem irrelevant to discuss the role of pornography in the context of sex disappearing from the media, its treatment is integral to the conversation. Despite its unprecedented accessibility, pornography has historically been silenced through strict censorship systems and the influence of capitalism. These forces marginalize its existence, prioritizing sanitized, marketable content over complex or diverse representations of sexuality, further contributing to the broader erasure of the portrayal of sex in film. While the center of discussion so far has been on the evolution of sex in Hollywood films, it is crucial to acknowledge the complex relationship between Hollywood and the porn industry, marked by a complex interplay of rivalry, influence, and occasional crossover. As Hollywood historically sought to distance itself from pornography, the growth of explicit content in mainstream media, cultural shifts, and the rise of digital technology brought the two industries into closer, competitive, contact. When Hollywood operated under the Hays Code, the underground pornographic industry grew in popularity, filling a demand that Hollywood could not legally meet. Even after the decline of the Hays Code, when Hollywood became more sexually liberated, pornographic films like Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1972) challenged Hollywood's monopoly over film entertainment, reaching mainstream audiences and paving porn's way to the popular media world. *Deep Throat* was one of the first adult films to

achieve significant commercial success and remains the most profitable film ever made. According to film historian Linda Williams, “The success of *Deep Throat* underscored Hollywood’s failure to satisfy a growing cultural interest in sexual liberation, pushing adult films from the fringes into mainstream discourse.” This new-found mainstream acceptance of explicit content was known as the 1970’s “Porno Chic” era. This period blurred the lines between Hollywood and porn, as films like Jim and Artie Mitchell’s *Behind the Green Door* (1972) and Gerard Damiano’s *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) became unexpected cultural phenomena. The crossover success led Hollywood to cautiously explore storylines that were more explicitly about sexual relations. According to scholar Nathan Abrams, “Hollywood was in a unique position; it had to remain distinct from pornography while acknowledging that audiences’ tastes were changing. This led to more daring storytelling that flirted with adult themes without crossing fully into pornographic content.” This exposure to explicit content coincided with a, once again, conservative backlash in Hollywood. Eventually, a combination of factors, including legal problems, social backlash, and technological developments, led to the industry's gradual decline from this peak of public interest. Following the “Porno Chic” era, the Reagan administration in the 1980s implemented a conservative agenda that included targeting pornography through strict anti-obscenity laws. These measures aimed to reduce pornography's public visibility and limit its mainstream influence. As historian Whitney Strub noted in *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*, “Reagan’s government set out to delegitimize pornography as a serious threat to public morality, branding it as both socially dangerous and morally reprehensible.” This governmental stance pushed pornography back, reversing much of its public acceptance. Another significant factor contributing to the downfall was the invention of VHS technology. While VHS initially boosted the industry by making pornography more accessible in private homes, it also diminished the

cultural necessity of adult theaters that had been central to the “Porn Chic” phenomenon. According to Linda Williams in her other book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, "As porno theaters began to die out and high-quality video production became the rule, budgets plummeted" (300). Additionally, the MPAA ended up introducing the NC-17 rating in 1990, a rating that would kill a film's economic success because mainstream cinemas wouldn't carry it and Blockbuster won't carry it unless edited. These shifts isolated pornographic films from the cultural sphere, relegating them largely to private consumption, which inevitably led to a notable decline in quality of the films (Williams). The industry's reputation suffered as it became associated more with low-budget, mass-produced content rather than the cinematic innovation it is. In this time, porn was viewed as a legitimate form of artistic and social expression. It was respected as real cinema and an accepted form of entertainment that audiences loved. It was easily accessible, not originally through dark Internet websites or hidden sources, but through theaters and mainstream channels. The increase of sexual content through VHS technology, and more recently digital platforms, has created a paradoxical reaction. On one hand, sex is more accessible than ever; on the other, overexposure has led to calls for boundaries from conservative groups and concerns about exploitation and objectification from feminist groups. These dynamics reflect a broader societal struggle to truly accept the normalization of sex.

The popularity of pornography during the liberation era underscores its potential as a medium to explore themes of desire, freedom, and human relationships. Pornography offered a space for exploring these ideas, and its public popularity reflected a growing audience interest in challenging restrictive attitudes toward sexuality. This historical context illustrates that pornography is not inherently bad and sex in film is not inappropriate or wrong. The screening of sex serves as a reflection of citizens' daily life and, as we can see throughout history, it is attractive

to audiences worldwide. If film is a portrayal and representation of life, and sex is a part of life, then sex should be portrayed in film. Pornography must be acknowledged as a part of the spectrum that is the artistic representation of sex in film. Its intent to be gratuitous and for the purpose of “sex being just sex” is simply a category within the broad artistic choices and purposes of sex in movies, just as is representing a kiss in a high school film to reflect the innocence of teenage romance, or to imply sex through hidden scenes to portray a forbidden romance. However, despite its significance, pornography is increasingly marginalized and erased from public discourse and media spaces. Censorship, both governmental and corporate, has pushed pornography into the shadows, treating it as purely commercial rather than artistic. This silencing stems not only from moralistic attitudes but also from capitalism, which prioritizes “family-friendly” content for mass-market profitability. In her article “Why Google Makes It Easy to Find Pirated Porn”, The Verge author Alex Cranz points out that Google’s search engine makes it hard to access safe pornographic content. She writes: “Mainstream films point you to a number of sites where you can legally download the whole movie. Add the XXX on the end and suddenly you’re in the darknet.” Cranz explains that unlike major Hollywood studios, adult content creators are often unable to fight piracy through legal means, having people who work everyday to take down pirated content. She reports that marketing scientist Pete Meyers said: “I strongly suspect that Google isn’t going to go out of their way to address adult film industry complaints,” noting that Google’s leniency towards pirated adult content contrasts with its responsiveness to other copyright complaints, revealing a problematic inconsistency in how the tech giant handles intellectual property protection. The growing marginalization of pornography, despite its artistic and cultural significance, also reflects how sex is treated in mainstream media. Capitalism has played a major role in the disappearance of sex in Hollywood, with studios increasingly focusing on mass-market content designed to

appeal to global markets. This drive for universality has led to a loss of complex, intimate storytelling, as the economics of filmmaking have squeezed out mid-budget dramas—once the home for more mature content. Capitalism’s commodification of sex has reduced its portrayal to sanitized or commercialized forms, further discouraging genuine representations of intimacy on screen. This trend is exemplified by the 2022 merger of HBO with Discovery, which marked a shift away from the network’s unapologetic portrayal of sexuality in its programming (Coleman). HBO had long been celebrated for exploring adult themes in its series, but the new direction under CEO David Zaslav emphasized “four-quadrant content” aimed at all age groups. HBO began quietly removing films and series with sexual elements from its library. Notable casualties included classic erotic thrillers and even original productions like *The Deuce*, which explored the adult film industry in the 1970s. This sanitization of content on a major platform underscores the broader industry trend: the push for content that appeals to family-oriented, global markets often leads to the marginalization of adult themes, reinforcing a cultural alienation from the emotional and artistic dimensions of sexuality in modern storytelling. As a result, the diversity and complexity of sex on screen, including explicit depictions like those found in pornography, are close to disappearing.

Going back in time once again, with the beginning of the downfall of pornography, the community of movie-goers began to divide even more. For the 80’s and 90’s, two main phenomena arose in the film industry that would further split cinematic audiences when it comes to portraying sex: the rom-com and the erotic thriller genre. The romantic comedies (rom-coms) of the 80s and 90s marked a transformative period for the genre, shifting how relationships and sexuality were depicted on screen, with famous 80’s movies like John Hughes’ *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and Emile Ardolino’s *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and popular 90’s films like Rob Reiner’s *When Harry Met Sally*

(1989) and Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990). The development of romantic comedies subtly played a part in the gradual disappearance of sex in film. The genre often focused on sanitized portrayals of love, prioritizing the portrayal of emotional connection over physical intimacy. Studios realized these "clean" romances appealed to wider audiences, so they leaned into avoiding anything too explicit to keep things family-friendly. This trend reinforced the idea that romance can exist independently of physical passion, setting a precedent for omitting sexuality in mainstream films. Over time, this approach set a standard where emotional chemistry became the centerpiece, and sex was either implied or completely left out. Rom-coms helped create a culture where sex feels like an unnecessary or even taboo addition to modern storytelling.

The 80's and 90's rise of the erotic thriller genre also marked a significant moment in Hollywood's exploration of sex. *Basic Instinct* (1992), directed by Paul Verhoeven, was groundbreaking for its portrayal of bisexuality and unapologetically complex female sexuality through Sharon Stone's character, Catherine Tramell. Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), on the other hand, addressed themes of marital fidelity and sexual fantasy. However, these portrayals were criticized for using and exploiting sex more for shock value than for artistic depth, as well as projecting sex in a violent way. Many critics argued that women in these horror films needed to be victims of a violent sex act in order to be portrayed as sexual, empowered and independent. As blogger Sydney writes in her *Our Trust Fund* piece "The Misrepresentation of Women in 90s Media", female characters in media were often confined to specific archetypes. The "Damsel in Distress" depicted women as helpless and damaged figures needing rescue, often savaged by their abuser or torturer. There was also the "Femme Fatale", such as Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, portrayed women as using seduction to manipulate or deceive. During this era, sex was portrayed as associated with deviancy, or the root of something bad, and used in violent

ways. In 90's erotic thriller films, specifically those belonging to the rape-revenge subgenre, these women characters and archetypes were often depicted as needing to be victims of sexual violence in order to claim power.

In movies like *Fatal Attraction* (1987), sex is portrayed not as an act of mutual desire, but as a weapon or a sign of a distorted psyche. The female character in Adrian Lyne's film is portrayed as mentally unstable and dangerous, as she becomes obsessed with Dan, a married man with whom she had a passionate fling with. Her behavior escalates from emotional manipulation to terrifying acts of violence, including harming herself, stalking Dan's family, and even targeting their pet. Similarly, in rape-revenge films, the act of sexual violence becomes the catalyst for the woman's transformation into a powerful figure, but it often ties her power to victimization, suggesting that her sexuality is inherently deviant or dangerous. This representation reflects broader cultural anxieties about female sexuality during the era, where a woman's sexual agency was often framed as a destructive force, reinforcing stereotypes of women as either victims or threatening figures when they were sexual. These films illustrate how 90s cinema frequently linked women's sexual autonomy to violence or instability, reinforcing harmful morality norms in the process.

Through the years, Hollywood's portrayal of sex in film has evolved dramatically, reflecting the contradictory societal attitudes regarding the morality of sex. As people continue to grapple with issues like consent, representation, visibility and inclusivity, the portrayal of sexuality in film undoubtedly keeps changing. As the film industry moved on from the 90's and welcomed the 2000's who were right around the corner, Hollywood shifted to strictly promoting authenticity and the importance of consent, with the previously discussed #MeToo movement taking part in reshaping Hollywood's approach to sexuality. This movement, as the Global Fund for Women describes it, "was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence,

particularly young women of color from low-wealth communities, to find pathways to healing.”

With a heightened awareness of power dynamics and abuse, studios claim to have become increasingly mindful of how sexual scenes are presented and have incorporated the role of intimacy coordinators on set. In his article “The state of sex in Hollywood now”, Seth Abramovitch examines how the film industry responds to the #MeToo movement and claims it has forced the industry to become more cautious about portraying nudity and sex scenes in general. The article emphasizes the rise of intimacy coordinators on film sets, a new role created to ensure actors feel safe during sexual scenes. While intimacy coordinators have been a part of live theater for decades, their role in film and television gained prominence following the 2017 exposure of Harvey Weinstein's sexual misconduct, which placed Hollywood at the center of the #MeToo movement. (Hilton) He argues that today’s audiences dislike unnecessary sex scenes or “gratuitous sex” and expect films to show more emotional portrayals of intimacy and consent, completely disregarding the physical aspects of romance. Abramovitch asserts that Hollywood’s challenge lies in finding ways to portray sex meaningfully without crossing into exploitation, stating that “sex can no longer simply be an aesthetic choice—it must serve the narrative or character development.” Meanwhile, other critics argue that the #MeToo has overall benefited Hollywood films by transforming sex and sexuality in film into a more inclusive and responsibly representative portrayal. Writer Dulanjana writes in her article “The Evolution of Sex in Movies and TV Series”, “While explicit sexual content continues to be prevalent, there is also a greater emphasis on consent, diversity, and responsible representation. Filmmakers and TV creators are increasingly mindful of avoiding objectification and exploitation, striving for more authentic and nuanced portrayals of sexuality.” She argues that in recent years there has been a significant increase in the films and TV shows that “explore sexuality from a female perspective.” She uses shows like *Fleabag* (2016), *Euphoria*

(2019) and *Normal People*(2011-2015) to maintain they “delve into the complexities of desire, relationships, and sexual experiences, presenting a more inclusive and empowering representation of sex.” What Dulanjana fails to acknowledge is that the current state of cinematic sex lies not in a utopian world where the representation of sex is performed in a responsible matter and everyone feels included and respected, but in a realistic setting where filmmakers struggle to balance artistic expression with cultural sensitivity and have ended up discarding the whole idea of sex in film. While the incorporation of intimacy coordinators has been an extremely important and positive addition to the production of cinema, the environment and cause of its uprising has led to creative limitations as actors, directors, and coordinators navigate sex scenes and even discouraged filmmakers from including such scenes altogether to avoid controversy and backlash with actors like Penn Badgley refusing to partake in sex scenes (Kohn). The addition of IC’s has been helpful, however, in exposing systemic issues and protecting actors and film staff from sexual exploitation and harassment within the filmmaking space, with directors like Justin Baldoni’s using IC’s to create a safer filming environment and a more openly collaborative workplace. Regarding his recent film *It Ends With US* (2024), Baldoni states, for Riley Cardoza in *Page Six*: “It was so important to have them [intimacy coordinators] on set — not just so that we could all feel safe, but because they were also incredible collaborators with wonderful ideas that really elevated the film.” Yes, the #MeToo movement was very helpful in highlighting the pervasive misuse of power in Hollywood and other industries, making studios care for the wellbeing of their staff and promoting a safer anti-sexual misconduct environment. It has also worked to increase the representation of female sexuality and pleasure, and criticized the “male gaze” and female characters that are portrayed as objects in hypersexualized ways. However, the movement’s manifestation has generated an obsession with limiting the public’s access to sex in film and a particular intolerance

with even the mere idea of gratuitous sex scenes, further enforcing, although unintentionally, the societal bias and stigma that sex is “wrong” and “impure”. Because of extreme worries for the explicit presence of consent in onscreen sex, modern sex scenes have become sanitized and less frequent, emphasizing emotional intimacy over explicit physical acts, not for character relationship development, but so directors can avoid appearing exploitative.

Altogether, modern filmmakers are encouraged to focus on alternative themes and storytelling methods that do not rely on sexual content, a shift due to a cultural demand for narratives that prioritize character development and relationships over physical intimacy because of the negative connotation sex socially has. These changes have caused viewers to scrutinize or reject films with explicit content, even if it serves as part of character and plot development. As time passes and social stigma around sex remains accepted, the film industry continues to grow void of sex to evade public discourse and audiences reject more and more works that challenge traditional depictions of romance and sex, even growing to reject romantic content in general. This is a change I have personally seen happen. As I previously mentioned, I’m a movie lover. I love grabbing a random friend on a Saturday, bribing them with some popcorn and treats, and making them hit the movie theaters with me to watch the newest films released. As I went every Saturday to the theater, I started noticing that fewer and fewer films included actual sex scenes—these days, even kisses seem surprisingly rare. Some movies here and there do display satisfactory exhibits of sex, such as Christopher Nolan’s Best Picture winner *Oppenheimer* (2023). However, popular “sexy” films like *Challengers* (2024) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) are devoid of much activity, only showing kissing scenes and keeping sex an act that is implied. A movie I was particularly disappointed about recently was *Twisters* (2024). I left the cinema shocked, after watching 2 hours of sexual tension between the main characters, at the fact that not one single kiss scene was featured

in the movie. I even waited for a post-credit scene with false hope of catching a glimpse of maybe a quick peck between the characters. There was no post credit scene. Pure disappointment. After much googling when I got home, I discovered that the absence of such a scene was purposeful by Steven Spielberg who “never had much use for sex in his films” (Hellerman). So, it is evident to me that for some time sex has been disappearing gradually from the big screen. However, the disappearance of sex in film isn’t a matter of opinion. Justin Syales, writer for *The Ringer*, and Rob Arthur, full-time data scientist and consultant, have examined data from IMDb Parents Guide for 40,000 films “from the dawn of the millennium through 2023” to reveal that contemporary Hollywood is experiencing a marked decline in sexual content, influenced by cultural, economic, and industry-specific factors. They prove that, while sexuality once played a defining role in mainstream films, shifts in audience demographics, international market demands, and increasing reliance on intimacy coordinators have led to less frequent and less explicit depictions of sex. They assert: “Not only have the numbers of movies tagged as having ‘mild’ and ‘severe’ sexual content declined by as much as 30-50 percent from their peaks but the number of movies tagged as having no sexual content has skyrocketed from less than 100 movies in 2000 to 400-500 in the past few years.” They also present a very interesting comparison on how other “severe” elements in cinema, like violence, gore and profane language, have increased throughout the years, yet sex and nudity have decreased. They say: “While the numbers for movies tagged as having ‘severe’ violence and gore, frightening content, or profane content are still below their peaks or near peaks in 2018, those figures have bounced back since 2020. Meanwhile, the number of movies that users reported as having ‘severe’ sex and nudity remains down—below its circa-2000 numbers. Only 35 movies in 2023 carried that tag, compared with 64 in 2018 and 77 in 2012.” Syales and Arthur’s investigation

underscores the undeniable trend: sex is disappearing from mainstream cinema, both in quantity and explicitness.

The disappearance of sex in film reflects a significant shift in societal values, cultural anxieties, and the priorities of the modern entertainment industry. This trend reveals a growing discomfort with open discussions of sexuality, despite its natural role in human life. By sanitizing intimacy and reducing its representation in cinema, we perpetuate a cultural stigma that treats sex as taboo, inappropriate, or even harmful. This approach not only limits the scope of storytelling but also impacts broader societal issues, such as sex education and the perpetuation of shame around human sexuality. When sex is absent from media, it deprives audiences of opportunities to see intimacy as a nuanced, multifaceted aspect of life. Films have historically been a medium for reflection, helping society explore themselves. The removal of sexual content reinforces the idea that discussions about consent, gender dynamics and sexual empowerment belong in the shadows. It reflects a culture that prizes marketability and comfort over authenticity and exploration. To move forward, the film industry should embrace sex as an essential, extremely beneficial element of cinematic storytelling rather than an issue to be sanitized or avoided. Reintegrating thoughtful portrayals of intimacy into cinema can challenge stigma, foster understanding, and reestablish the medium as a space for honest and inclusive conversations about one of the most fundamental aspects of human life.

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