

DiRECTHER

JUNE 2024

LOUISA SEXTON DISCUSSES
CHALLENGING IDEAS OF
CONSENT THROUGH FILM

ANNA SMITH FROM
GIRLS ON FILM TALKS
FEMALE ORGASMS

RECLAIMING
SEXUALITY
ON SCREEN

Greta
BELLAMACINA

Amber
ANDERSON

Josette
SIMON

Jessica
PLUMMER

Tamsin
EGERTON

Bebe
CAVE

A Film by JACLYN BETHANY

TELL THAT TO THE WINTER SEA

KALIDOSCOPE FILM DISTRIBUTION, SILK YOUTH FILMS, BKE PRODUCTIONS, and VALMORA PRODUCTIONS in association with LUCA SEVERI PRODUCTION GROUP and ELLIPSE PICTURES present a JACLYN BETHANY film Greta BELLAMACINA, AMBER ANDERSON, "TELL THAT TO THE WINTER SEA" JOSETTE SIMON, TAM SIN EGERTON, BEBE CAVE, and JESSICA PLUMMER. PRODUCED BY TESS PARKS WITH DALAL BRUCHMANN HON. JASMIN KNOX AND AMARACHOKWU MOU. COSTUME DESIGNER NINA SCOTT SMITH. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS WENE GOMEZ-EMILSSON AND ROBIN SCOTT LAWSON. PERFORMING ARTISTEER-FELLOWES. SILK YOUTH FILMS, BKE PRODUCTIONS, GIOVANNI LABARESSA, LUCA SEVERI. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS C.C. KELLOGG, ROBERT MONTGOMERY. PRODUCED BY Greta BELLAMACINA and JACLYN BETHANY. JACLYN BETHANY. Valmor Productions, KALIDOSCOPE FILM DISTRIBUTION

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GIRLS ON TOPS

IONING WOMEN IN CINEMA

CELEBRATION OF WOMEN II



EDITOR'S NOTE

We at DirectHer believe in the power of film to change minds and alter our perception of the world around us. Films should reflect the diversity in the world and the experiences of everyday people. This is why we're not impressed with how often women are shafted by the industry. Only 35% of the speaking roles in 2023 films were held by women, while only 14.7% of all directors in the U.S. are women. These are unacceptably low numbers, and we believe film fans deserve a magazine that will bring a feminist lens to the table. DirectHer's goals are summarised by our core values: feminist, inclusive, incisive, empowered, and unapologetic. We're a mature, expressive, and passionate brand that will educate our readers without lecturing or patronising them. For our debut issue, we've gone for one of the biggest talking points for women in film: sex and female pleasure. We are not embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about sex and want to highlight how the film has succeeded and failed in appealing to female desire. Our first piece explores the role of intimacy coordinators in film and will explore their importance in creating a safe on-set environment. From there, we cover genres like horror, erotic thrillers, and romcoms. We tackle issues like ageism and portraying consent on-screen. We examine the cultural effect of Lolita and the sexualisation of superheroes. Shining a light also means celebrating achievements, as well as calling out the industry's failures. In keeping with the theme, the DirectHer team have picked out their favourite sex scenes to hold up as a gold standard for other films to follow. If the magazine appeals to you, and you're craving more from us, you can check out our website, where you'll find us covering an even more diverse range of topics, including film festivals, award-winning filmmakers, and a whole range of topics for Pride Month. You can find us on social media @DirectHerMag on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X, and Letterboxd. Feel free to reach out to us on those platforms. Shining a light on women in film also means hearing from our readers, and we value your input as much as any Academy Award winner. Thank you for reading, and please enjoy the magazine.

Amelia Elder Bijin Chen. *Caillin Mcdaid*
Jess Fitzpatrick *Gana Ming* *Jessie Whiteside*



Amelia Elder

Bijin Chen

Caillin Mcdaid

Gana Ming

Jesselyn Whiteside

Jess Fitzpatrick

Lucy Wilcox

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Stripping a Sex Scene

Lucy Wilcox speaks to leading Intimacy Coordinator, Kate Lush and actors Antoinette Louw and David Chevers to discuss how the grain is changing post #MeToo, actor empowerment and how to create passionate on-screen sex.

The film industry is experiencing a new age from the dawn of the #MeToo movement with shifting attitudes around sex, boundaries and respect.

One major shift for the industry was the recent requirement to have intimacy coordinators on set, challenging the way intimate scenes are performed. This was made mandatory in 2020.

Getting naked on camera. Kissing someone you've never met. Reliving past sexual trauma. These are some complex scenes that can be particularly complicated to navigate on set, as safety and well-being need to be prioritised.

Kate Lush co-founded Safe Sets in 2020, a global intimacy coordination company based in South Africa with employees across Europe.

Lush curated and developed the framework, now used by Netflix, which is paving the way for intimate scenes in their productions.

Lush said: "I think sometimes directors think they've got an idea that they do intimate scenes really well and they're really respectful and great with their actors, but they're not taking into account nuance or power dynamics and how actors are intrinsically programmed to say 'yes' the whole time.

"This relationship doesn't give space to allow any articulation of actors' boundaries because they're worried they're never going to get employed again."

Bridging the gap between those at the top and the actors is where the role of intimacy coordinator fits acting as a mediator whilst empowering actors of their rights.

Intimacy Coordination is a somewhat new career within the stagnant craft of cinema, sparking Lush's interest in 2018 after her career as an actor and movement coach.

She explained: "I first stepped out

on stage at 3 years old. I've worked every single department of theatre. I've trained in Poland. I've toured the world. I've been nominated for best actor. I've done my days.

"Intimacy coordination may not have existed 20-30 years ago, but my understanding of the actor's process is a lifetime's work, and that's what I bring to the role of intimacy coordinator."

With her long history of starring in low-budget horror films, Lush described what a day on set looks like.

"I was performing in one film and there was a young actress who came in because she was doing a scene of sexual violence. She got introduced to her screen partner, she got told that she was going to do the scene in the front room and that they should just go for it.

"So she basically went in that room to be sexually assaulted, simulated but for the scene.

"Meanwhile we had a male senior actor who had simulated sex with the much-younger lead actress, it was a fully nude scene and they had no genitalia covering for him at all, so he literally took his sock and placed it on his penis, and then he did the sex scene.

"I was like, gosh that's quite a day. I'm sure there's probably other ways to do this."

This unregulated and dangerous process pushed Lush into the world of intimacy coordination.

From the characters she had to play to her work in drama schools, her direct connection with acting allowed her to understand the complex emotions that arise around intimate scenes.

"Actors don't get much power, they don't have autonomy over their choices, they tend to get shunted around set.

"[When performing] an intimate

scene with an intimacy coordinator they get treated really quite well, there's someone taking care of them for once.

Antoinette Louw is an award-winning South African actor who has worked with Lush on several films and television shows.

Louw started out as an actor at 28. Her experiences on set prior to the integration of intimacy coordination left her feeling more than uncomfortable.

"I remember there was a director on a movie that I worked on who made sexually inappropriate jokes all the time. He was an older man, which always made me feel like I couldn't say anything because of what I would be perceived as, that I'm not fun and that I'm not likeable."

Louw always felt that the culture among everyone on set was to not speak up over anything. From sexual innuendos to bullying to assault. This suppressed her own voice leading to her boundaries often being crossed.

"I was scared and vulnerable when I had just met someone on the day where I was expected to be intimate on camera, we weren't prepped with intimacy coordinators back then. I'm human so either my body would react or the male actors' body would react, emotions would come up, and things would start to get blurred.

"My body is so interlinked with my emotions, and at the end of the day, it's just so much. I just didn't have the skills. I was in such a confused and anxious state because I had someone at home who was waiting for me, and then I'm walking around with all these emotions: Am I having a crush on this person? Am I falling in love? I could not speak to anyone about it.

"Before having an intimacy coordinator, I suppressed those feelings that would come up during intimate scenes which was dishonouring and disrespecting what was going on with-



CONNECTED BY TOUCH
Kate Lush with Actor on set
of 'Catch Me A Killer'

WE ARE

WHAT WE WATCH



THE AFRICAN DESPERATE
MARTINE SYMS

MUBI NOW STREAMING



ON SET
Louw listens to director Dian Weyns on set of 'Coffee and cigarettes'

in me.

"Intimacy coordination showed me how I could be supported and respected as an individual and as an actor.

Whilst working with Lush on the television show *Dam*, Louw at nearly 50 felt that she no longer met the industry's standards of beauty especially when she had to be naked on screen.

"I was so aware of my body changing and I have hips and I don't have a flat tummy but oh shit this is also going to be exposed to the world and people are going to see.

"It was also part of my journey, to be comfortable in my body and it was incredible to work with Kate who also understands that part of being a woman."

Dave Chevers is another South African actor, with over 30 years of experience across TV, film and theatre. He performed his first sex scene alongside Louw in a film set for release next year, with intimacy coordination handled by Lush

Dave reflected on the experience, saying: "It was a really comfortable and safe position to be left in, feeling like wow, she's on it, and she knows exactly what might come up. Even covering base that didn't come up, but the fact it was discussed really demonstrated a real tenderness and great care about being informed as a person, not just a character.

"We did these exercises where we faced one another and we stood there staring at each other to really work on

eye connectivity, and spoke to each other about our bodies allowing for this cathartic, beautifully constructed moment to happen when we went to shoot."

From attending drama school throughout his teens to entering the film industry during the early 2000s, Chevers experienced firsthand the cultural shifts #MeToo ignited.

"I think intimacy coordination has brought about this whole awakening for actors. It is so necessary and I don't want to know what people were doing before.

"I have noticed that there's less toxic control towards actors, there's less fear-mongering and more information about what your rights are as an actor in every situation."

Chevers' experience highlights how intimacy coordination is becoming a standardised practice across the industry. Those who are just entering the industry are now on set with the knowledge that it should be a requirement.

Although the crux of the job is supporting the creation of intimate scenes, Lush asserts: "The role is really being able to understand the actor process but also completely valuing the work that actors do and actually genuinely caring about their wellbeing to make them feel supported." ■

What do Intimacy Coordinators do?

Before shooting, they consult with actors through meetings where the actor is asked about their personal consent with regards to touching, nudity and sexual boundaries.

When the actors meet for the first time on set, the intimacy coordinator orchestrates a workshop between co-stars where they work on eye contact and start slowly with touch. For example, Louw would start by touching her co-star's head and face, and then going down each other's whole bodies saying where they can and cannot touch.

It's now the intimacy coordinator's responsibility to liaise with production to block and choreograph intimate scenes that fit with the actors' limits but also appreciate the director's creative vision.

Even after the director shouts cut! Intimacy coordinators remain on call allowing actors to check in if they feel affected by the intimate scenes.



TAKE TWO
In order: Louw and Chevers with Co-star Hilda Cronje shooting upcoming film 'Die dekonstruksie van Retto Blom', Louw in 'Die Laste tango', Louw

WATCHERS

From box office poison to commercial renaissance

No genre enters and exits popularity like the romcom. Caillin Mcdaid writes on its resurgence back to the peak of '90s, and how it must change

The rom-com is dead. Or so people have said.

It's a sentiment reiterated time and time again. Not just in the past decade, despite what some would believe, but across Hollywood history.

The infamous article 'Box Office Poison', published in 1938 by the Hollywood Reporter, decried the value of stars most associated with rom-coms and adjacent genres (like screwballs) such as Katherine Hepburn. It described the Hollywood system as 'burdened with stars' with 'negligible public appeal' and 'tremendous salaries'.

It isn't particularly hard to draw the line from this to stars of the rom-com's peak, like Julia Roberts, whose quote peaked at \$25 million.

Film historian and curator Rachel Pronger, when discussing the current status of the rom-com, identifies: "From that point onwards, you get a continual cycle with rom-coms where they are popular and then they are withdrawn again.

"In the 1970s, you could say that films like *Annie Hall* really revived the idea of the rom-com but [with] a postmodern lens because it's a rom-com where the characters don't end up together. And that's a kind of newish take on the romcom that you see then again and agin. But again that was kind of like a trend that disappeared again.

"And in the 1990s, you have this longer trend where you have that boom of Nora Ephron films and Nancy Meyers, *Pretty Woman*, *Four Weddings*, up until really about a lot of people say the cutoff for that is 2004 with *Mean Girls*.

"So I think that it's not so straightforward that the rom-com suddenly dies, and that's it."

So, is the rom-com currently dead? Perhaps not.

Last year's *Anyone But You* has ushered in optimism that the rom-com will thrive again theatrically. In America, the film notably bucked box office trends, rising weekly following its release.

On the more independent side, *Rye Lane* became one of 2023's sleeper hits. A rom-com with a thoroughly modern edge, that went all the way from Sundance to Bafta success.

So, the appetite for the rom-com's return is evident.

In considering how the rom-com should return, it is worth considering why it fell out of favour to

begin with. Pronger notes: "A lot of the most famous rom-coms are known for brilliant female characters, maybe female writers, but because it's such a mainstream genre, I would say it's generally directed predominantly by men."

Nora Ephron and Nancy Meyers are the obvious exceptions to this, but with Ephron's passing and Meyer's struggling to get films funded their rom-com



▲
When Harry Met Sally,
Courtesy Columbia Pictures



◀ Rye Lane,
Courtesy Searchlight

**“ROM-COMS
HAVE THE
STAKES OF LOVE
AND LOSS AND
IDENTITY AND
PRIORITIES”**

reign faded along with the genre's popularity.

Additionally, the genre increasingly became repetitive. If you look up rom-com posters on Google, you'll see a wall of men and women leaning on each other's backs, against white backgrounds with white stars.

Films chasing *When Harry Met Sally*, *Notting Hill*, and *Something's Gotta Give* lacked the originality and spark that made those films connect. Pronger sums it up: "You need to have an element, I think, of chaos and personality there that transcends just the commercial machine of Hollywood."

There is some nostalgia for the Matthew McConaughey era of the rom-com, but those films epitomise that 'commercial machine' and were derided as a series of diminishing returns that necessitated the idea of the 'McConaissance' when he started branching out from them.

Actor and filmmaker Sarah Ann Masse refers to this previous rom-com trend as suffering from the 'homogenisation and sanitisation of what it is to be a person'.

This isn't to say Masse isn't a rom-com fan, far from it. Having written and directed her own rom-com short, *Tristan and Kelly*, she says "[rom-coms] are a place where I went for comfort and escape", but the genre's appeal goes even deeper.

"I think drama should always have a bit of comedy, and I think comedy should always have a bit of drama. Rom-coms always have both. They

have pathos in them. They have the stakes of love and loss and identity and priorities. They make you laugh, and they make you feel butterflies inside."

She draws the line from *When Harry Met Sally* all the way back to Shakespeare, citing his romantic comedies as her favourite of his plays, including *Anyone But You's* basis - *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Masse has been striving to help revive and improve upon the rom-com with her own scripts.

"I very deliberately want to build something that felt structurally familiar and safe and comforting, but put in elements of real life that come up in relationships and the fact that people have baggage from their past and have traumas from their past.

"It's still funny, and it's still romantic, but that reality of being a human being is there. So, I think there are opportunities to sort of put things into the frame of what we understand now about society in the conversations we're allowing ourselves to have



and allow that to be part of the rom-com storytelling."

Pronger echoes this sentiment in how the genre can evolve.

"I think where the rom-com can become more interesting and a bit more political is by people making rom-coms that reflect the changing society and talk about the pulses of our everyday lives whilst heightening and magnifying them.

"So I think any director, regardless of gender, can make a really interesting, thought-provoking, profound rom-com that feels feather-light. It's possible to do that, and they can be films that really tell us something about our current moment in time and society. I think that's the benefit of working in that genre."

Online influencer and self-identified 'CEO of romcoms' Jasmine Perillo (known across social media as 'justmejas') is an expert in all things romantic comedy. She has amassed an audience of over 50,000 followers on TikTok by analysing the genre and has a comprehensive guide to it in Letterboxd list and as a spreadsheet.

Coming at the path to reignited success for the genre from a more commercial angle, she believes rom-coms can learn from the success of *Barbie* and *Anyone But You*, by tapping into social media.

"People undermine the power of social media still when it comes to movies. Making a movie more of an event and a spectacle that people can kind of buy into this whole story and moment in time is something that's gonna get people: one, back to the theatres and two, just kind of talking about this over and over, whether they're talking critically or praising it."

It's clear there is a way to make a modern rom-com that evokes the best aspects of the '90s titans whilst creating something that speaks to the contemporary world. As *When Harry Met Sally* iterated upon *Annie Hall* and sparked the 90s renaissance, *Anyone But You* may well be doing the same for the 2020s, but only time will tell.

Nothing lasts forever. The rom-com can die off and return. It can't, however, return as it was, so the genre's success depends upon being forward-thinking, both in how the movies are made and how they are marketed.

◀ *Anyone But You* still,
Photo Brook Rushton

RISING STARS

Hepburn and Tracy. Hanks and Ryan. Powell and Sweeney?

Rom-coms are a unique genre in that they are particularly hard to sequelise, with the exception of *Bridget Jones*. As a result, The 'franchise' are perhaps the stars rather than any recognisable brand. The 'death' of the movie star is tied to the death of the rom-com itself, and icons who can market a film on the promise of sizzling chemistry alone are a rare and valuable commodity.

Anyone But You's success begs the question of whether its leads are among a new wave of stars needed to help the rom-com soar again, or if it was simply a fluke success. The chemistry between Glenn Powell and Sydney Sweeney certainly ignited early interest in the film, with the actors playing into the rumour of their affair, creating internet buzz about the film that is, in part at least, why the film succeeded.

To be a movie star, though, you must be bankable. It is too soon to tell whether Powell or Sweeney are certified stars, though Hollywood and rom-com fans may say so. Powell in particular is making clear moves to ascend to the next level. *Hit Man*, which he co-wrote with Richard Linklater, spans genres but ultimately settles as a rom-com, and is clear evidence that he understands as a performer exactly how to weaponise his innate charm and physique.

It may fall down however, in its distribution. The biggest Netflix successes generally don't guarantee wider acclaim, and whilst the film is currently showing in theatres, it could easily fall victim to the glut of choice on the streaming service that makes it hard for something to truly stand out.

Talent and acting isn't always enough to be the next Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock. Being a star is about your persona and making it recognisable and exciting for the public. Anyone But You is a good launching pad for Powell's himbo charms and Sweeney's sultry dry wit, but how they capitalise upon it and endear themselves to audiences will determine if they can be compared to the icons of cinema or will simply be talented actors who scored a one-off hit.

▶ Glen Powell in
Hit Man
Courtesy Netflix



STAR WARS



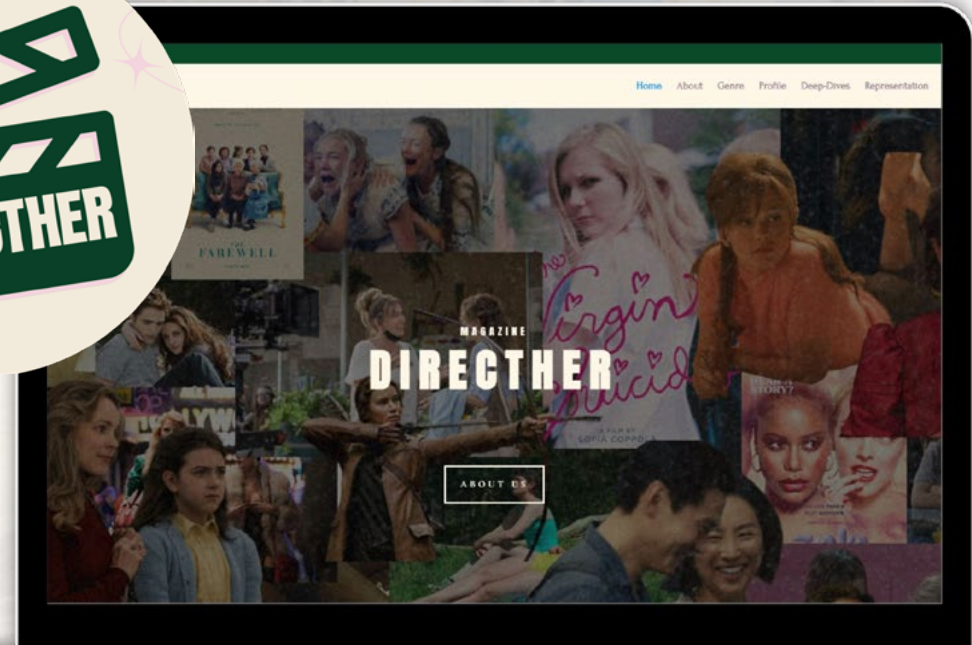
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VIDEO DISCUSSIONS

TRENDING CONTENT AND COVERAGE



Anna Lian Tes

Anna Lian Tes, a Cambodian American, Wwnever thought she could become a director growing up, yet today she has not only started her production company with her husband but also became an advocate for accurate representation in films, *Gana Ming Writes*.

"My family survived an actual war. My parents lived in a refugee camp for about eight years and my mum lost her first baby because of malnourishment."

In spite of this, she has not only started her production company, Tiny Human, with her husband, but has become an advocate for accurate representation in films.

Anna said she has married her best friend and how they have been growing together and positively influencing each other in not just film-making but also in many different ways.

"Growing up, I never even considered making movies. Directing didn't seem like something a woman could pursue," says Anna Lian Tes, 41, now based in LA, is carving her way into becoming a professional filmmaker, and currently working on her third short film, co-producing it with her husband.

"My older sister was born in a Thai refugee camp, and she's only a year older than me."

Anna's parents fled Cambodia to escape the overspilling of the Vietnam War in 1982, and that's when they arrived in the US. Her mum was pregnant and soon gave birth to her in Orange County, California before eventually moving to New Jersey where she grew up.

Anna graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York with a degree in graphic design. She later worked in key art and production design before transitioning to filmmaking.

"During college, the only film-related class I took was an elective called Film Noir. We watched classics like Fritz Lang's *M*, *Night of the Hunter*, and Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. I loved it. I guess that's how I have planted the seed.

"It was the only class where the lights would be turned off, but I didn't fall asleep. I can't say the same about my Art History class," she jokes.

"My graphic design background does translate into my filmmaking as well. I'm very interested in the aesthetics of production design, costumes, etcetera. All the visuals. I've been lucky to work with really talented people who share my vision. I'm also huge into creating mood boards and designing my own film posters."

Anna has produced and directed two short films and currently working on her third. Her first short film, *We Belong Here*, won the Audience Award at the Highland Park Film Festival.

Anna also runs a production company with her husband, Alex Grybauskas. Her film *Like Me*, about modern Asian-American women, was a winner of the Big Apple Film Festival Screenplay competition and made it to the 2nd round of the 2021 Sundance Episodic Lab. She has directed music videos, been on set as a production designer in multiple short films and created posters for films and festivals, including South By Southwest Film Festival in 2015.

Anna has also experienced challenges and doubts, but it is clear that she is determined to fight her way out despite coming from an underprivileged background and not studying film.

"Before I directed anything, there were several men I encountered who would tell me that 'directing is hard'. I was like, 'No shit, I never thought it was easy'. It made me even more motivated to make work."

Knowing the hardship of being a female director from

a minority background, Anna is not hesitant to challenge and provide opportunities and representation.

"There are so many incredible non-white actors out there and people need an opportunity not to be typecasted or stereotyped and that is the responsibility of directors to represent and show the culture properly.

"I always try to hire a diverse crew instead of just hiring based on their experience. It is an easy job for us to hire the experienced but we have to understand that they have experience because they have opportunities because they have privileges, either they went to school or knew people in the industry.

"So, I like taking my chances on people who are newer because that was how I started my journey with filmmaking."

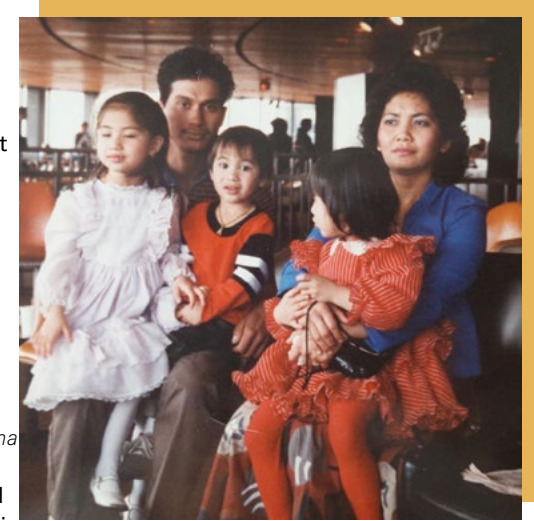
Anna makes a point of ensuring that she is hiring an actor from the same or similar cultural background as the character instead of just hiring an Asian to play an Asian for the sake of it. She believes that accurate representation is important for embracing and respecting diverse cultures.

"For example, my last short, *Twenty-Four Heaven*, had a Vietnamese lead while the original script was based on a Cambodian lead," says Anna.

The short follows a woman who downloads an app to connect with a recently deceased loved one and, in doing so, starts to lose connection with reality.

In the funeral scene, Anna researched the funeral traditions of both Cambodian and Vietnamese cultures and rewrote the part for the main lead.

"Luckily, there were enough similarities where I could go forward with the vision I initially had. I made sure the funeral cultures were there, like having an altar in the home and also wearing white. It's present and didn't need an explanation. Hopefully, the audience felt her grief and loss



Anna and her family

"I Was So Close To Being Born In A Refugee Camp, Today I Am Directing Films"



Anna at work

"A ONE-OF-A-KIND
MASTERPIECE."

-THE PLAYLIST

"A PROFOUND MUST-SEE.
JANE SCHOENBRUN IS
A FILMMAKER FOR OUR ERA."

-VANITY FAIR

"WILL DRAW YOU IN
AND DARE YOU TO LET GO."

-COLLIDER



(sundance)

I SAW THE
TV GLOW

COMING SOON

A24



regardless of her culture.

"Being flexible and talking to your actors is super huge because they can bring so much insight into the story. They see the characters in different ways that you didn't even see and that's what art is, it's up for interpretation."

Being a child of refugees, Anna often struggles with her identity.

"I feel guilty for the privilege of being born in the US, knowing that they went through so much, and I am here, trying to be an artist," Anna says, laughing awkwardly.

Although Anna often feels disconnected from her roots, because she does not speak the native Cambodian language Khmer well, she aims to get the Cambodian American voice out there in film and television in her own way.

"My dream project is to write and direct a film about my heritage, the Cambodian culture. I know many of us are out there trying to be heard. I am rooting for us and hope I can be one of the many to get our stories out there."

"The film project has been living in my brain for probably eight years now, and I have many documents and research about it. I hope one day I will be able to bring it to the world."

Anna was pregnant when she spoke with DirectHer, and since then the director couple has now welcomed a baby boy. She plans

to let her child study Khmer and learn it with them to reconnect with her Cambodian roots.

Anna has a crucial piece of advice for any woman wanting to become a director.

"Watch a lot of movies. Watch them twice. Once for fun. The second time with an analytical eye."

"If you can't or don't want to go to film school, there are so many books and videos online with tons and tons of advice. Also, read or listen to interviews with your favourite filmmakers. Find out what movies inspired them. Go watch those."

"Listen to your gut when you are going to the industry when it comes to assembling your creative team. Don't just hire someone for their talent. Think about who they are as a person and if they will make for a peaceful set."

"Don't feel like asking for help makes you less of a director. It's okay not to know things, everyone's exploring, so don't let them hold against you."

"Lastly, if you want to make a movie, go for it! You can rent gear or even just start with your iPhone. Your ideas matter," says Anna.

Despite everything, her success and her education, she never forgot about her roots and what her family went through. **DH**

"Anna has helped
inspire me to push
even further on
representation,"

Alex Grybauskas, originally from Maryland, is a professional video editor. In addition to his nine-to-five, Alex has directed multiple award-winning short films.

Being together for six years, Alex has always been a great support to Anna by helping with her filmmaking, but Anna has also inspired Alex to look at things from a different angle.

"Anna has always pushed for inclusion, it made me more aware of the diversity of the crew and try harder to make sure that there's enough representation going on. I think I've always been pretty good at that, but sometimes you have to step back and look at the makeup of your crew. It is easy to fall into, realising you hired an all-white-male crew."

"When I think of all the sets that I've worked on, the ones that have a higher percentage of women crew usually run much smoother and better. Sometimes it gets more chaotic for a predominantly male crew, which might be because of bigger egos and less organised in a way that I think women are just better at or have that kind of brain better for compartmentalising different things at once," says Alex.

The couple runs their production company together and have co-produced a few music videos and short films.

"I like partnering with Anna on film production because her films have a better message than mine. Mine is either a lot of horror or weird comedy to either scare people or make them laugh, while she has more to say in a way. I suppose we, working together, could get people entertained and slip in a nice message," Alex says, smiling.

NO Comes in Many Forms

Louisa Sexton, who wrote and starred in *The Ceiling*, tells Amelia Elder why it is important to challenge pre-misconceptions around consent.



The *Ceiling* explores the nuances found in relationships whereby there is a pre-existing sexual rapport, and the unspoken barriers which surround consent. Harriet, played by Louise Sexton, and Jamie, played by Jake Curran, like one another, but this does not mean she is obliged to sleep with him every time they share a bed.

Sexton explained, "In the film she doesn't say explicitly no but she does say no in other ways, she physically recoils, she says things like 'I feel gross' and 'what are you doing'. I don't like to use the term grey areas because I think it lends itself to excuses being made, but sometimes it's not as clear as no means no and an enthusiastic yes."

During the creative process, Sexton and her team had a talk with Beyond Equality, a charity who teach young boys and men about consent. They helped Sexton find the right words to explain these upspoken feelings of consent without using the term grey area.

"They put it really well, they said it's about creating a consensual atmosphere. It's about listening to someone and understanding that things might change and so long as the atmosphere is that of consent, then there won't be grey areas. It's more about that and understanding that there has to be that level of a consensual atmosphere where each party is listening, not just to the no's and

yes's, but to everything in between."

The idea for *The Ceiling*, which won Best Acting Ensemble at the World Indie Film Awards 2023, was originally an idea from a research and development project on safely portraying sex on stage six years ago. The idea stuck with Sexton ever since.

"I took part in this online challenge; it was a self-challenge during one February where you have to write a play every day - I had never written a full play once in my life. I stuck with it and I wrote a play using that idea."

Sexton started fleshing the idea out after conversing with her friends about sex expectations and dating culture among young Britons.

"When I would talk to friends about, not even consent, just about dating it became apparent to me, I mean it might be the same for males as well, but I am talking about my experience talking to my female friends, in terms of what is expected of them if they go on a date.

"They would say things like 'he kept trying' and 'I couldn't be bothered to keep saying no so I just would have sex with him'. It was those kinds of conversations. "I just couldn't sleep one night because I was wound up about it; I just wrote a stream of consciousness that, the next day, I realised tied in with what I had been doing with the other scenes I had written."



"I DON'T LIKE TO USE THE TERM GREY AREAS BECAUSE I THINK IT LENDS ITSELF TO EXCUSES BEING MADE."



Louisa Sexton

- After training as an actor, she attended The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts in 2012
- Sexton entered the theatre industry, performing in *The Play that goes Wrong* on the West End for a few years, before moving to Brazil in 2022
- She played Empress Leopoldina in *Independência*, directed by Luiz Fernando Carvalho
- Since then she started voice acting, even building a home studio which she documented on TikTok
- Now she writes and directs short films like *The Ceiling* and *Third Bench on the Left*.

Sexton built a crew of multiple female industry professionals, assisting in her idea finally coming to fruition. *The Ceiling* was directed by Louisa Connolly-Burnham, who is most commonly known for her acting prowess on CBBC and Nickelodeon.

Elle McAlpine, an intimacy coordinator, assisted Sexton and Curran with their intimate scenes. McAlpine most notably worked on *Poor Things* which caused a stir in the film industry this summer for its raw and provocative sex scenes.

Sexton was nominated for Best Script at Exit 6 film festival in 2023, with the theme of sexual consent evoking discourse.

"To be nominated for best script, it was really nice to feel like ok, it is understood for the right reasons. I wrote the script so it wasn't super obvious, I want the film to be a talking point and to initiate conversations. I think it might cause, not arguments, but discussion as to did she say no clearly enough. I think most women say yes absolutely, or anyone who's been in this situation."

Although *The Ceiling* is currently unavailable to view online due to currently being in the Berlin Lift-Off Film Festival, Louisa hopes audiences will one day use the film as a talking point to educate on sexual consent. ■

WOMEN OF THE NIGHT

Caillin Mcdaid investigates how film's sexiest genre is altered by the female gaze

The expression of 'impure' thoughts that plague the mind. Lethal femme fatales and hapless men. Murder and sex intertwined.

The erotic thriller is a salacious genre, one that exists in a state of contradiction - particularly in Hollywood.

Stephanie Edd, a novelist and film noir enthusiast, observes that no genre quite speaks to America's inherent contradictions like the erotic thriller.

"Erotic thrillers are largely reflections of our society's deeper feelings about sex. So, for Americans, we're in this real constant conflict. We really want sex, but we've been deeply programmed to see recreational sex as sinful and wrong. So we want to have sex, but we need to feel shame about it in order for it to be sex that's acceptable. We have to confess it, or we have to suffer for it."

Hollywood's own relationship to sex is a complicated one, with decades of restrictive practices, barring anything more than innuendo in film. The Hays Code, industry guidelines acting as self-censorship to protect decency in film, prevented a number of things from the 1930s to late '60s but explicit sex was one of the key regulations.

As New Hollywood dawned and the Hays Code vanished, suddenly, what once required a fade to black and im-

plication could be seen in all its glory.

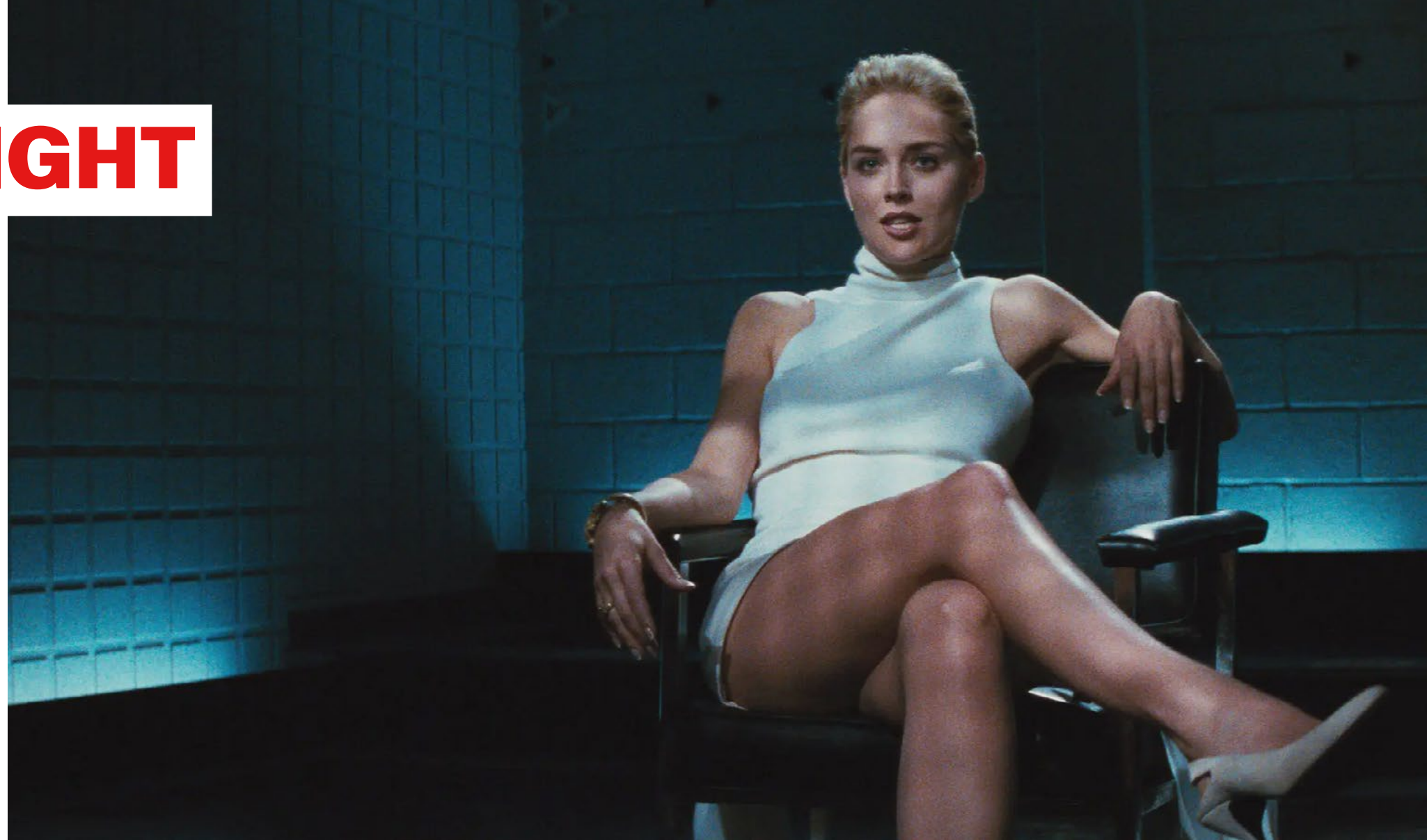
The film that ushered in the erotic thriller as we know it in a contemporary sense was *Body Heat*, Lawrence Kasdan's neo-noir playing off of the classic Hollywood noirs of the 1940s like *Double Indemnity*. From there, the genre transformed and grew in popularity over the course of the 1980s into the '90s, asserting many of the conservative values of those decades.

"The mainstream erotic thriller is primarily produced, directed, and written by a man. Women are usually a victim or a villain, and the thriller aspect of the erotic thriller is usually just the consequences of something illicit, selfish or reckless that the man did.

"*Fatal Attraction* is, in a way, a very status quo cautionary tale of don't cheat on your wife. Your one-night stand my turn out to be a psychotic, obsessive stalker. So it's like these erotic thrillers reinforce a lot of status quo ideas, and so the women do that, too. These women are very superficial and have very particular functions in order to impact the male character.

"They're often in service of the men that they're dealing with, and they're usually defeated in the end, which is very Hays Code."

Michael Douglas, with *Fatal Attraction*



▲ Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, Courtesy Rialto Pictures

◀ William Hurt and Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*, Courtesy Warner Bros.



tion and *Basic Instinct*, is sort of the avatar for this type of erotic thriller. The man becomes embroiled in a situation, partially or entirely of his own making, and then becomes tormented by a woman who becomes increasingly violent and threatening as the film progresses. Those films were, of

"IT'S SUBVERSIVE INHERENTLY BECAUSE A WOMAN IS USUALLY FRONT AND CENTRE AND SHE WINS IN THE END, USUALLY BY KILLING A MAN"

course, directed by men and followed a very male point of view.

People remember Glenn Close and Sharon Stone, but the films' presentation of them is always how Douglas' characters perceive them.

So, if the perspective shifts to a

woman and perhaps even a female director, how does this impact the erotic thriller? Edd pointed to examples such as *Blue Steel*, *Captives* (1994), and *Bound* (all of which are directed by women).

"A lot of these films are about professional women who have substantial inner lives. They have existing problems and existing pathologies and they're working out stuff for themselves. They have things going on in their lives before the start of the movie.

"If you look at these kinds of mainstream movies, like *Fatal Attraction*, it's like she's just kind of nobody. They don't really have any real personality or any real character.

"When you have an erotic thriller that's written or directed by a woman, even if it is often reinforcing lots of status quo stuff, it's still subversive inherently because a woman is usually front and centre and she usually wins in the end, usually by killing a man. And that's a really big deal."

Bound, in particular, stands out to Edd as the gold standard for female-led erotic thrillers.

"I think *Bound* is the pinnacle of the erotic thriller and neo-noir. It is the top of the pantheon. The Wachowskis did pretty much everything right. It's one of the first movies to have an intimacy coordinator, which is so cool. Susie Bright, who's a sex educator, she was there in order to coordinate and choreograph the sex scenes, and I think that you can really tell how thoughtful they were and what the meaning of these sex scenes were.

"The sex is beautiful, and hot, and cool, and it's full of really great banter, and there's a balance in the power."

Of course, *Bound* is a particularly unique example of the erotic thriller. Being a lesbian romance from the 90s directed by two trans women the film occupies a space in the genre, but also cinema from that decade as a whole, that makes it stand out.

It isn't the only example of a female-driven erotic thriller from this era, but not every film was as uncompromised or well-received as *Bound*.

"I think one erotic thriller directed by women that is sort of like a tragedy is *Poison Ivy* from '92, with Drew Bar-

Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly in *Bound*,
Courtesy Lionsgate

rymore. Originally, Ivy was supposed to get away with it—that's the original ending—but the studio decided that she needed to be punished. They saw her as a femme fatale in the Hays Code tradition.

“When these filmmakers get to the point of just doing something genuinely really aggressively subversive, you can see how Hollywood intervenes and kneecaps it.”

The film that marked the end of the erotic thriller's dominance in Hollywood fell into the trap of being too subversive and against expectations expected from the genre. Jane Campion's *In the Cut* was released in 2003 to a vicious reaction and box-office failure, marking not only the downfall of the erotic thriller but also Campion and star Meg Ryan's careers.

In recent years, the film has been reappraised, and much of the criticism from the time can be explained by false expectations. People expected a conventional erotic thriller and were put off by Campion's art house sensibilities.

This isn't the sole explanation for the film's failure and the genre's decline, however. Cultural shifts around this time put the erotic thriller out of favour.

“In the early 2000s, post-9/11, there was a big-time conservative reaction, especially in the United States, and sex became less cerebral. There was less interest in sex and sexual-



ity being cerebral, and it was more simplistic.

“Everyone was just pissed in 2003. I lived in America in 2003. Everyone was mad. It was a very mad, angry toxic time. So I think people were upset that you get these nude scenes with Meg Ryan, but they're not sexy fantasies. I think that people wanted to go, 'I finally get to fantasize about having sex with Meg Ryan' or whatever, and I feel like it just didn't fulfil that for them.”

One aspect of Campion's work that is subversive and so rarely seen in erotic thrillers despite their sex scenes is male nudity. This is a constant that can be seen across her work, right up to Benedict Cumberbatch in *Power of the Dog*, but seeing Mark Ruffalo's penis in the film is disarming and unusual for a Holly-

wood film and speaks to the uniquely female lens Campion brings to the genre.

“That is so rare in American Film, even in 2024. It's incredibly rare for there to be male full frontal for a culture that loves to draw penises on everything. We're really squeamish about looking at real penises. We really don't like it. It freaks us out. And so he's just like laying in bed rolling a cigarette or something, and he's just like whatever, and it's like there's just his penis laying there, and it's just totally normal.”

The modern erotic thriller can best be surmised by the extremes of films like *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *365 Days*, or more artful considered films like *Love Lies Bleeding*, which owes a lot to *Bound* in many ways as a neo-noir crime film where the tension surrounds the central lesbian relationship rather than deriving from it.

There will always be a place for titillation and arousal in cinema, and the role of the erotic thriller as pure entertainment and artful expression of sexuality will be extremes explored by filmmakers for years to come. It's hard to think of a genre more impacted by the dichotomy of the male or female gaze, and seeing how female directors take a genre so heavily associated with heteronormative masculine ideas of sex serves as a solid argument for the importance of female filmmakers. ■

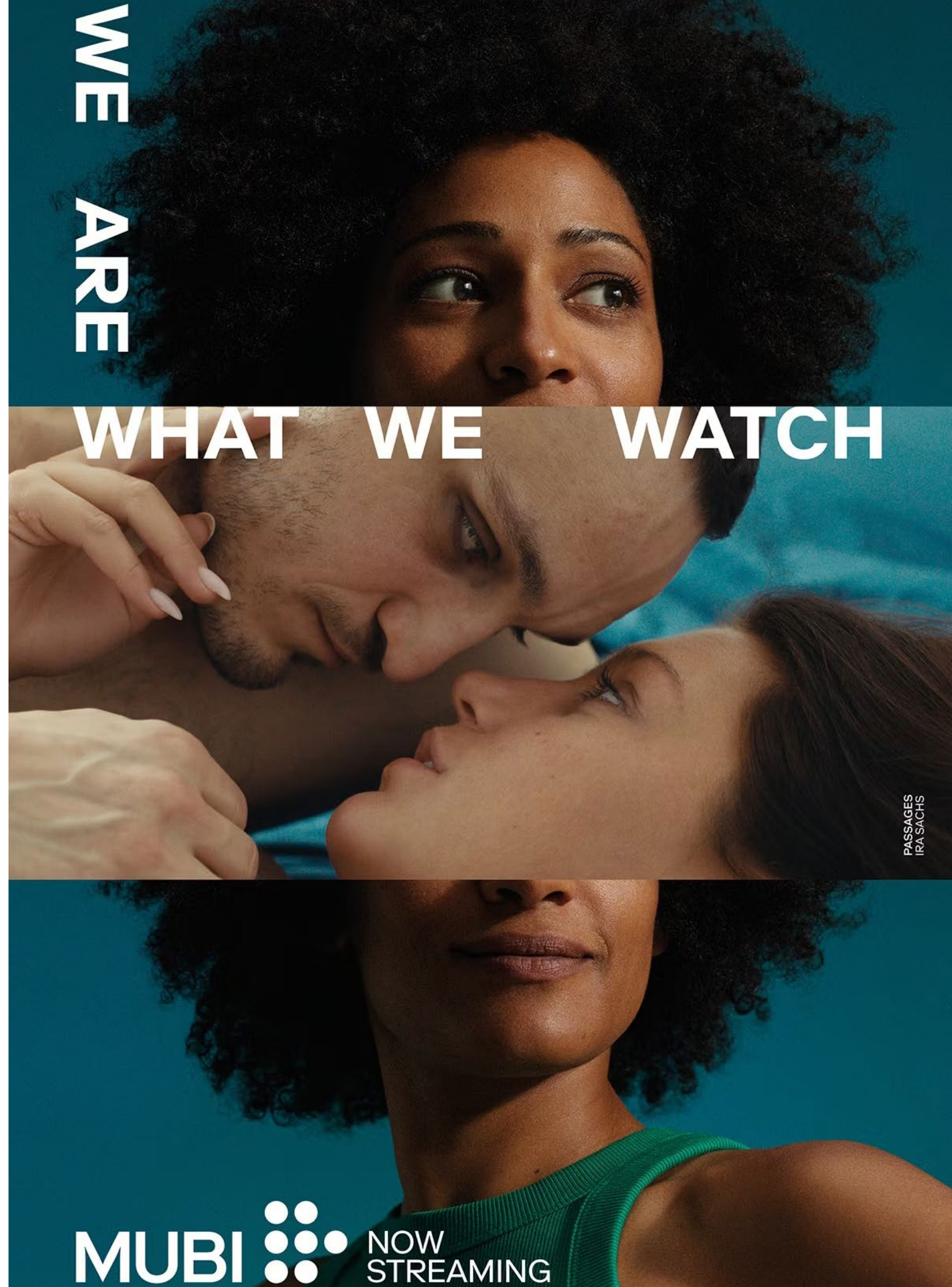
Kristen Stewart and Katy O'Brian in *Love Lies Bleeding*,

Courtesy A24

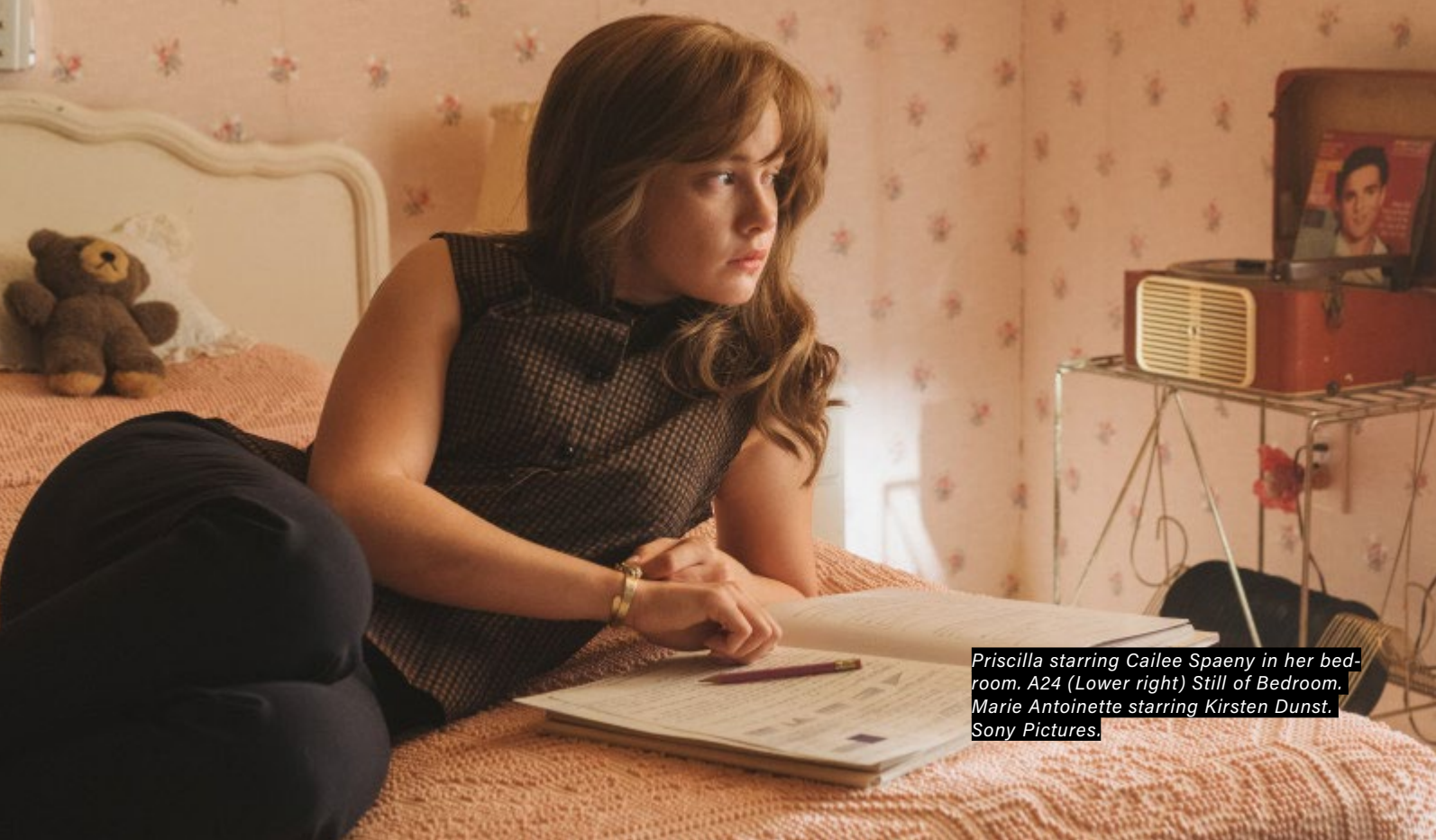


WE
ARE

WHAT WE WATCH



PASSAGES
IRA SACHS



Priscilla starring Cailee Spaeny in her bedroom. A24 (Lower right) Still of Bedroom. Marie Antoinette starring Kirsten Dunst. Sony Pictures.

Secrets of a Girls Bedroom

Amelia Elder explores our personal sanctuaries - as we grew up, our childhood bedrooms were our only private space. They see us through our truest and vulnerable moments.

A personal sanctuary, an escape from the world around you - as we grew up, our childhood bedrooms were our only private space. They see us through our truest and vulnerable moments.

Within teenage years, so many pivotal moments occur within those four walls - from exploring fantasies, navigating your first period, dealing with crushes, sleepovers, friendship fallouts, and maybe even losing your virginity. On film, teenage bedrooms are settings for major scenes. They signify key turning points and enable raw character expression only possible in solitude.

Grease's 'Sandra Dee' scene, where the Pink Ladies gather in Frenchy's room to pamper themselves, is one of the most iconic bedroom scenes in film. Narratively, this scene is a clever way to communicate the personalities of each of the ladies. The girls get Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) to

try a cigarette, sip on some alcohol, and attempt to pierce her ears as her 'initiation' into the friend group. The other ladies are used to this lifestyle of messing about and getting loose.

In a modern context, there are problematic elements, but this is a bedroom scene that embodies what a typical girl's sleepover is like. It's not the stereotypical hitting each-other with pillows. It's messy and cheeky. It enables these girls to let down their hair for once, especially in the 1950s setting. The bedroom is a space for raw exploration of girlhood—a place to explore one's femininity and discuss quirks that girls may not feel comfortable talking about elsewhere.

Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging, directed by Gurinder Chadha, is one of the best depictions of what life is like as an awkward 14-year-old in a British school. In one scene, Georgia (Georgia Groome) and her friends are having a sleepover - they

pause their pizza feast to rate each other, feature by feature, determining who is best suited to date the older boys. Georgia gets the lowest ratings, while her friends are all rated much higher. Although the rating game is rather harsh, the other elements are a reality: sitting on the bed gossiping, picking each other's flaws apart, and brainstorming the most effective ways to improve your chances of getting a boyfriend.

These are the activities that embody true girlhood. Sofia Coppola is celebrated time and time again for her ability to express girlhood and femininity through her set design, and her bedrooms are a perfect example of this.

The Virgin Suicides, Coppola's directorial debut, captures the disorderly chaos of sharing a room with siblings who are all at different stages; the Lisbon sisters range from the ages of 13 to 17. The room is cluttered

with trinkets, clothes strung about, and stuff just lying here, there and everywhere. It provides an insight into how all over the place it feels to be a teenage girl finding who you are.

The Virgin Suicides is an extremely sombre film narratively, contrasting the lovely and girly bedroom design. The Lisbon sisters' room becomes a time capsule of a promise and a life untainted by the real world. Furthermore, the bedroom embodies all-American suburbia in the 1970s—from the wallpaper to the bedding and, of course, a huge cross that hangs above their beds creating that sense of foreboding and symbolising a gravesite.

Marie Antoinette is the embodiment of coquette. As one might expect, Antoinette's (Kirsten Dunst) bedroom is fit for a royal. It is important to note

trasting, reflecting the atmosphere. Priscilla's childhood bedroom is the ultimate girl's room: pink, covered in magazine cutouts and school merchandise. It is full of hope and naivety. The Graceland bedroom is dark and sexy, witnessing the turbulent decline in Priscilla and Elvis' marriage. Eventually the day whereby you have outgrown your room comes about.

Greta Gerwig depicts this coming-of-age moment in Lady Bird when Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) is preparing to leave for college. She removes all her teenage decor collated through the years and paints the pink walls white. In the film, we see her experience two heartbreaks; she writes both their names on the wall, striking them through when the romances come to an end. The shot of her painting over their names is so poignant.

It erases her childhood and visually puts that part of her life behind her.

Regina George's (Rachel McAdams) bedroom in Mean Girls (2004) is poles apart from the typical teenage girl bedroom we are accustomed to seeing in films. Hot pink with a four-poster bed, Regina George's teenage hideaway is, in fact, rather seductive and mature for a 16 year-old-girl. Given the type of person Regina George is, it is evident why she would eliminate all evidence of any embarrassing childhood stages, quickly graduating to a 'grown-up' room. As a young girl watching Mean Girls, these would be the types of bedrooms we would dream of having when we grew up: girly yet mature.

The art of creating the perfect girlhood bedroom is such a difficult feat. So much changes during your teenage years but many do not have the luxury to alter the

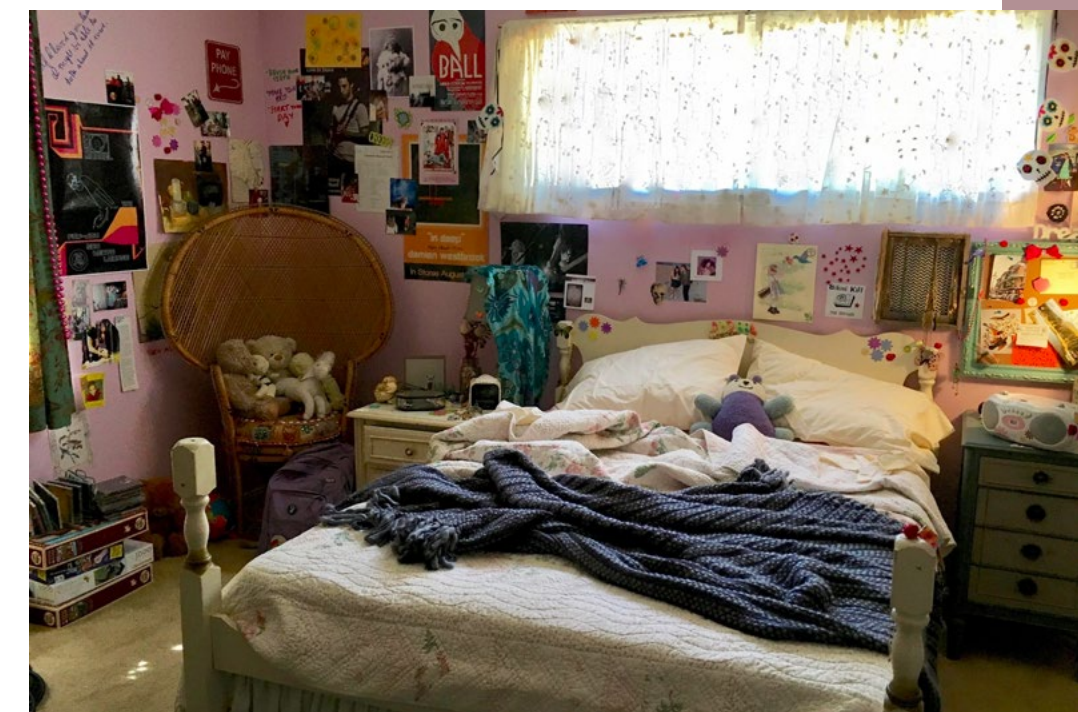
bedroom to match your current life stage. Set designers must reflect the collection of years worth of knick-knacks and signs of girls figuring out who they are - make-up next to your teddies, old clothes shoved to the back of draws, covering doodles left by the ghosts of your past. ■



“PINK, COVERED IN MAGAZINE CUT-OUTS AND SCHOOL MERCHANDISE. IT IS FULL OF HOPE AND NAIVETY.”

that the set design was based on Antoinette's actual bedroom in the Palace of Versailles. Dripping with gold, the finest materials, the grandest of all designs, the bedroom is what dreams are made of. Although very regal, it captures the buoyancy of Antoinette's youthfulness. It is covered with bows and frills, and fabulous ball gowns are scattered about. It is the definition of opulence. Within that one room we see Antoinette blossom from a vulnerable 14-year-old into a powerful Queen and mother. She does not have the opportunity to be a 'real girl'. She has to grow up quickly, which this bedroom reflects.

Priscilla captures the essence of the Americana aesthetic. Set in the 1950s and 60s, the set design perfectly evokes the era through the decor. We see Priscilla's (Cailee Spaeny) childhood bedroom and the room she shares with Elvis (Jacob Elordi) at Graceland which are extremely con-



Still of Bedroom. Lady Bird starring Saoirse Ronan. A24

A Burst Of Energy, Menopause, And Flash Of Inspiration

Caillin Mcdaid speaks to Nuala O'Sullivan, who is rewiring the narrative for older women on film in an ageist industry.

Nuala O'Sullivan

It all began in a bar when Glaswegian writer and producer Nuala O'Sullivan took her first step into the film industry, in her fifties, bringing her short *Microscope* to a short film festival.

"The film was about a woman in her early 50s. When I started to go to film festivals, that's when I began to really see that I wasn't seeing the kind of story I was telling up on the screen.

"The thing that really struck me was in the bar afterwards. I remember tracking people's eyes as they moved across the room, and they went round and went up and went over me and went round again. You read about the invisibility of an older woman, but when it actually happens to you, or it actually happened to me, it was a real shock."

Calling the industry ageist is an easy observation. Three-dimensional roles for middle-aged and elderly women, especially leading ones, are scarce. But despite this commonly accepted fact, it seems like little has been done to change this.

O'Sullivan founded the Women Over 50 Film Festival (WOFF) in 2015 to combat this lack of visibility, agency, and personality provided to older women on screen.

For nearly a decade, the festival has spotlighted films that abide by two simple rules: films must be about women over 50 or by women over 50.

Reflecting on this first experience with a film festival, O'Sullivan saw the invisibility of older women in the shorts as symptomatic of those choosing the films.

"It was predominantly a young male room, and young males were choosing the films, and a lot of them reflected their lives. In the process of talking about it to my partner and friends, we began to recognise what was going on. It was that classic one night in a pub conversation of, 'why don't we just make a film festival that's not like that?'. That was the catalyst for it. I wanted to see if what I was experiencing was just me or there were other people.

"A great feminist mantra, and part of our history, is that when you say something personal out loud, it connects with other people, and they oftentimes say

'it's not just you, it's me'. That's exactly where MeToo and all these other movements have come from."

The ethos of WOFF was in place from their first festival in all but name: "That first year, we called it the 'Short Hot Flush Film Festival', which we thought was funny, smart, and clever. It was about a burst of new energy, menopause, a flash of inspiration. Soon after that, we found that every time we said the name of the festival, we had to caveat it with 'it's a festival for women over 50'. So, after the first year, we thought, why not just call it what it is? Then it became WOFF."

The first festival, held in October 2015 in Exeter Street Hall, Brighton, saw over 70 submissions from across the globe, with 27 shorts screened. In addition, there was spoken word poetry, an all-female panel discussion, and prizes, all of which became staples of the festival.

The festival grew over the following years, finding its home at the Depot cinema in East Sussex in 2018, before going virtual in 2020 in response to the pandemic. The last three editions were a hybrid of in-person and virtual events, with the 2024 festival continuing this approach.

Along the way, the festival has drawn in big names, including Greta Scacchi (the festival's patron), Miriam Margolyes, and Joely Richardson, all of whom have voiced their support for the goal of WOFF.

Despite this personal success, O'Sullivan feels the industry hasn't progressed enough: "I still think on a systemic level there's so much more that needs to be done. I don't think we're hearing enough from the voices we often don't hear.

"I'm not a big one for academic research, but of the reports that have come out, I'm thinking particularly of the Geena Davis Institute and Directors UK, the numbers are not shifting for women, people of colour, and disabled people, and LGBTQI+. The dial is moving a wee bit but not anywhere near where to the amount to reflect who we are in society."

That slow-moving dial for older women does encompass some



Everything Everywhere All At Once, Courtesy A24



Good Luck To You, Leo Grande, Courtesy Searchlight Pictures



Still from Nyad, Courtesy Black Bear and Netflix



REPRESENTATION IN BRITISH CINEMA: THE FACTS

In 2023, The Centre For Aging Better published a report on the UK film industry's representation of older people from 2010-2022. The report looked at representation from a qualitative and quantitative approach, examining how frequently older people are seen onscreen and how well they are represented.

Associate Professor Dennis Olsen, from the University of West London and one of the study's three authors, saw a serious gap between genders: "One of the things that we noticed quite early on is that there seems to be a lot of progress with older men who are given way more space. You have everything from very stereotypical and very reduced older person to the other side of the extreme, which was a very well-developed, very authentic representation. This is something that we didn't see as much for women at all, which was something we found very concerning."

Since the report was published last year, this concern has stuck with Professor Olsen and the other authors, Dr Jonathon Crew and Dr Marcus Nicholls. Most notably, their work continues with a new project supported by The Centre For Aging Better.

Starting in April 2024 and running until September 2025, they will run a new programme, 'Acting Against Ageism'.

Professor Olsen said: "We're developing with experts, as well as with the public, and with an actual group of older actors, to figure out how [ageism] could be addressed in a more meaningful way in the hope that we can come up with recommendations so that at least the British creative industries has a guideline to develop these characters more meaningfully."

This action highlights the steps towards meaningful change and combating ageism but demonstrates substantial work is to be done. This programme and research are strictly based on British productions, and the invisibility of older women in other film industries remains unaddressed.

noteworthy films for her that act as shining examples of offering older women complex leading roles: "Everything Everywhere All At Once", I think that's a really good example of a great film for a number of reasons. That's an older Asian woman who was the superhero, which I just think is brilliant. Jamie Lee Curtis talked a lot about around the time of that release about having held her stomach in for 55 years, and she was actively encouraged to breathe out and let her body show as it really is, and I just think that's incredibly important.

"I don't think it got that much coverage, but it's great to have older women being a central character and figure, and it's absolutely fantastic to at least occasionally have a woman who looks like me with my wrinkles, my middle-age spread, everything that happens to older women, and to see that represented in a character that's lovable, and that we're not laughing at."

'Good Luck To You, Leo Grande' and 'Nyad' were other films O'Sullivan cited as good examples of giving older women depth and agency as protagonists, be that as sexually active individuals or capable athletes.

All of these films were successful, contending for or winning Oscars and Baftas. Still, she reiterated that they're the exception for older women on film, not the rule.

"I think films like 'Leo Grande' and 'Everything Everywhere' are a bit like, and we love her, Helen Mirren. She's kind of our answer

to everything. We've got Helen Mirren, so older women have got her, so we're fine. We've had 'Leo Grande' now, so we don't need to hear about older women's sexuality.

This all comes back to the initial inspiration for WOFF. These films go against the grain, but their success doesn't indicate systemic change. However, it does indicate an appetite for more stories centring older women.

O'Sullivan makes an off-hand suggestion to improve representation, saying: "In the way of the Bechdel Test, about two women characters, who've got names, and talk about something other than a man, I think


**"IF YOU'RE THE ONE PERSON
OF THAT MINORITY IN THE
ROOM, IT'S NOT ENOUGH."**

there's something to a kind of WOFF equivalent which is just two older women talking to each

other in a film.

"Unless it's an ensemble cast [of older women], you will just get your Judi Dench or Helen Mirren. Judi Dench got to be M in James Bond, but she doesn't get to talk to any other older women."

It remains to be seen how ageism in film will be addressed on a grander scale, and if films like 'Everything Everywhere' or 'Leo Grande' remain exceptions. WOFF serves as a corrective to the lack of visibility given to older women in film.

O'Sullivan summarises this: "At the start, the two questions I wanted to answer were: is the work there and the audience there? And it was a real resounding yes to both, and I realised there's no such thing like this in the world. It's kind of my duty to keep going with this." 

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ...CLIMAX.

Amelia Elder speaks to Anna Smith, a broadcaster, film critic and host of the 'Girls on Film' podcast, is fronting the evolution of changing attitudes in how female desire is present in film.

Decades of sex on screen have set unrealistic expectations for women on what to expect from the act, with the performance often moulded to the male gaze and the woman an object of pure desire. Loss of virginity, exploration of sexuality, and of course, female pleasure, are all extremely important elements to portray in a sensitive yet accurate manner.

HONOURING FEMALE DESIRE

In February 2024, Emma Stone won an award for best orgasm on screen. The Girls on Film Awards, which celebrate women in film and promote inclusivity, take place in London, and are hosted by Anna Smith. Along with the conventional awards one would expect, the Female Orgasm on Screen Award is the real star of this show. The award, which is sponsored by Intimacy on Set, went to Emma Stone for her performance in *Poor Things*, which displayed personal pleasure and depicted female characters unapologetically enjoying sex.

The creative mind behind the Girls on Film Awards is Smith. She believes that positive on screen representations of sexual pleasure for women is long overdue.

"We want to honour films, like *Poor Things*, that portray female sexual pleasure in a responsible and realistic way."

With the awards she aims to push back against a film canon which has primarily seen sex from the male perspective, often "objectifying the female body or eroticising it in a way that doesn't give any agency to the woman at all".

"There are definitely things in *Poor Things* to analyse which aren't necessarily feminist, such as a baby's

brain in a woman's body and the consent issues there. But I think generally, thanks to Emma Stone's performance and the writing from Tony McNamara it does shine a light on the female experience and on guilt free sexual pleasure. That's another thing, guilt comes into it so much and into so many films. Women can get very much blamed, or tainted or stereotyped as one thing."

Other nominations included *Fair Play*, *Joy Ride*, and *Saltburn*, which, in particular, caused quite the uproar for its raunchy and primal sex scenes. *Saltburn* was praised for its depiction of period sex. Discourse around sex, especially oral pleasure, when periods are involved is still ridiculously unspoken of, still being viewed as a dirty and forbidden act. Fans labelled the scene whereby Oliver (Barry Keoghan) is seen going down on Venetia (Alison Oliver) as the 'vampire scene'.

"It's just a reality of women's life that you, until relatively recently, so rarely saw on screen and included in depictions of the sexual experience."

Although it provokes a few giggles, Smith ensures the heart of the award is sincere and draws attention to the issue, which is still taboo to many. "We initially started with responsible depictions of female pleasure and things that celebrate the female sexual experience but enhance the story. With something like *Fair Play*, there are very questionable elements to sex scenes that deliberately explore consent and the complexities of an existing relationship and aggression. But we thought (the scenes) were very well choreographed and also took a responsible attitude to exploring all of that and that is what we are looking at. It's a fun thing to look out for but also makes a serious point."

To be nominated, the beginning of, if not the whole female orgasm, must be shown on screen.

SEXUAL REALISM

A huge topic of conversation within the film industry over the past few years has been the involvement of intimacy coordinators. Executing a successful sex scene on screen, especially an orgasm, that is fair and accurate, is not easy performance.

Smith acknowledges that the increased involvement of intimacy coordinators have improved rep-



▲ *Poor Things*. Searchlight Pictures ▼



resentations of female pleasure on screen.

"Intimacy coordinators do a great job in not just making the talent on set comfortable, but helping to choreograph scenes that feel realistic and consensual - if that is relevant to the storyline, or indeed unconsensual but doing that responsibly, not in a titillating way. It doesn't always have to feel 100% real - there's fantasy, there's erotica, it just has to feel that it is serving the story or serving its purpose in a way that doesn't perpetuate any harmful stereotypes - or give false expectations or unrealistic ideas to younger viewers perhaps, in particular men."

Smith believes there is a huge benefit to seeing realistic sex on screen, especially for young people with what to expect when they first start having sex.

"That is one of the reasons we have this award. So often in film, either it's fake and they magically cum at the same time, which is unrealistic generally, or it's a 'wham bam thank you ma'am' sort of thing. A lot of the best examples are actually in queer cinema - women with women or indeed self-love as you see in *Poor Things*."

ON STEREOTYPES

Smith says these issues are relevant to all film genres but notes that horror films particularly categorise women based on their sexual experiences and promiscuity.

"I'd like to see the word promiscuous banned; I don't think it should be a thing because it is usually sexualised and gendered towards women. In the past the typically blonde and 'promiscuous' one dies first and then you'd get to the final girl trope, the brunette virgin."

Smith is urging the film industry to retire lazy and oversexualised depictions of women; she is actively encouraging positive performances of female pleasure.

"There's a long way to go. Some screenwriters are still telling these tired old tropes where women are just idolised for one or the other extreme and there's nothing in the middle - there's no complexity there."

With films like *Poor Things* and *Saltburn* reaching such vast audiences, the future of depictions of female pleasure on screen is progressing in a feminist direction, but as Smith said, there is still a long way to go before it is widely appreciated. ■



Anna with Ita O'Brien presenting Best Female Orgasm at the Girls On Film Award 2023. Tina Korhonen

"A LOT OF THE BEST EXAMPLES ARE ACTUALLY IN QUEER CINEMA, WITH WOMEN OR INDEED SELF-LOVE."

Purging anger and releasing unconscious urges

Once a tool for dehumanising women and demonising female sexuality, Jesselyn Whiteside explores how writing female monsters is evolving into a means of power for women.

"It's not just like 'girl power!', it's like, no, we're gonna fucking kill you if don't stop this shit!", Elza Kephart, a Canadian filmmaker with a particular interest in the vigilante woman, exclaims while describing the narrative of the female monster and the way it acts, for her, as a crusade for justice. Horror is a genre driven by women, positioning them as something to save, and objects to fear. It is the only film genre where women appear,

as speaking characters, as much as men. But what does this say about how we see women?

Video essayist Ellen Jacob explains that "the root of any monster in horror is what we're repressing as a society- including cultural fears about women." As these fears have evolved, so too have monstrous depictions.

If you look at Japanese horror after World War Two, she says, you'll see monsters born out of nuclear disas-

ters. In the 1980s, growing fears surrounding women's independence led to the crazy woman; the bunny boiler.

Classics like *Carrie* and *The Exorcist* equate coming of age to becoming a monster. Puberty is linked, through a girl's first period, to bloodlust, the desire to kill or demonic possession. Womanhood is something to be feared: "It's all centred so much around female sexuality, menstruation and fears about women". In



Ellen's video, 'Creating the Female Monster: the dehumanising treatment of women in horror'



Ellen's Youtube Channel, 'elle literacy', is a platform for her to share video essays on a variety of subjects, especially film discussions

"WE EITHER LIKE TO SEE HER SCREAM OR WE LIKE TO SEE HER DIE"

Still from SLAXX, Courtesy Elza Kephart



1942's *Cat People*, it is the protagonist Irena's sexuality that sparks her monstrosity - a theme that recurs for eighty years. Her urges are, quite literally, animalistic.

Fear of women as a collective, through witch covens and films like *Suspiria*, demonstrate the threat that groups of women pose to the societal order: finding power in numbers, distanced from men, they are seen as unrestrained, evil, and dangerous.

Film theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen says the monster is a manifestation of cultural repressions and anxieties, and in order to restore the status quo, female sexual liberation, shown to be the source of monstrosity, must be clamped down.

Horror films 'Other' the female monster as a way of dehumanising them and reducing them to their monstrosity, Ellen, who studied film at Trinity College Dublin and wrote her dissertation on the topic, argues.

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's theory which states "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other", she explains how, with men overwhelming film production, the power dynamics in society are reflected on-screen, with "the people behind the camera, behind the typewriter instilling those patriarchal views".

"In horror cinema, the Other is always the monster. So if in society, the Other the woman, women translate into monsters within horror."

Kelphart, unaware of this theory when she made her debut film, *Graveyard Alive*, says the feelings of being a monstrous Other made their way in subconsciously - as a reaction to the way, as a woman, you feel the male gaze. "The monster is both how we feel monstrous, but also how the monster is very powerful. It's a way to upturn that feeling of anger and violence."

She's always found the perspective of the monster more interesting. "I remember reading Anne Rice's *Interview with The Vampire* when I was a teenager and connecting to that way of storytelling. That was really a revelation to have the monster telling the tale."

Altering the way that the female monster is presented helps to deconstruct this Othering. Ellen notes how the perspective in *Raw* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* focuses on the monsters, helping us understand the monster as a victim in her own right. Kelphart argues these women find power as monsters to fight back against the things they fall victim to, the systems that oppress them.

Nuanced depictions, Ellen suggests, lie in subjectivity. "By 2000, with *Ginger Snaps*, we see the female monster has more subjectivity. She's more of a person. She's not just a black-and-white figure of fear." In *Jennifer's Body*, we are led to understand where her rage, her monstrosity, is



coming from: she's allowed to be a figure of sympathy.

Even as fears of female sexuality linger, sympathetic portrayals in *Teeth*, *Bones and All*, *The Witch* and *The Love Witch* help humanise the monster, allowing us to see these characters as people.

Kelphart says filmmakers can avoid dehumanising female monsters or falling prey to reductive portrayals by being self-reflective. Putting impulses into context and considering what stereotypes you may be perpetuating – whilst avoiding thinking too much. After all, “there’s something great about the unconscious urge that comes out in art”.

Regardless of the changes in depictions, it is the endings the monsters are destined to that are most impactful. “These women get, maybe not totally happy endings, but they’re not killed or their monstrosity repressed, eradicated”, Ellen says. Tired of the “sacrificial woman monster”, Kelphart proposes that we’ve reached a stage now where female monsters have to stop dying at the end.

“Let’s get to a place where they live, where the woman incorporates the monster and the monster is transformed into a positive force.”

Women today have more power and agency to portray and represent themselves, which is perhaps why the female monster has changed, and our

“WRITING FEMALE MONSTERS IS A WAY FOR ME TO REGAIN THE NARRATIVE”

understanding has shifted. Ellen says that when men are telling the story, they are the subject, and their natural objectification of women is carried into the art they create. When women are telling their own stories, they carry their subjectivity over, their female lived experience.

Kelphart, reflecting on the moment she showed a first cut of *Graveyard Alive*, said: “I remember someone telling me, a man of course, ‘if you add breasts in there, you could sell it more’. And I was really mad. Even the monster is a sex object.”

“I felt almost disgusted with male



▲ Still from *SLAXX*, Courtesy Elza Kelphart

gaze cinema because they were telling me ‘why don’t you take your top off?’ You’re telling my heroine, who is me, ‘let’s see some tits!’”

The idea that a woman’s worth on screen is tied to her sexualisation is attributed by Kelphart to the dominance of the male gaze: “They’ve ruled the narrative for the past 4,000 years and they have the privilege of thinking their view is the majority. That’s why it’s important for women to make films, to counterbalance the representation of women in films made by men.”

“The exploitation of women in the indie scene that existed for decades started to really change after 2000.”

It’s these dynamics, Ellen says, that have made horror, historically, “a kind of fetishisation of women’s fear and pain and suffering. They’re either the monster, or they’re the victim, and either way, they’re often dehumanised, subjugated and fetishised. We either like to see her scream or we like to see her die.”

Kelphart does everything she can not to reproduce the male gaze, internalised as it often is, in her films. “It’s a political act I think, now more than ever, to be a female fiction filmmaker.”

The monster is a source of power for her to wield against the world, to fight against the subjugation and the shit that women are subjected to.

“It’s a way for me to gain power for myself and for other women through narrative. To show that we are powerful. To me, the appeal of the monstrous feminine is how we appropriate the strength of the monster.”

“It’s my way of purging my violence and anger. The monster is like a

pleasurable ‘id’ I get to let loose in my films”, the id being our most primitive desires and impulses.

The idea of the monstrous feminine ultimately comes full circle. As Kelphart describes, “Women get to own being their own monster, and that gives us power.” ■

Still from Maxxxine. Courtesy A24



MAXXXINE (TI WEST) - 5TH JULY

Rounding out the trilogy that started with X and was followed up with Pearl, MaXXXine acts as a direct sequel to X and follows Maxine (Mia Goth) on her journey from adult film star to Hollywood stardom. In her quest to achieve this she accepts a role in a low budget B-horror movie. This is complicated when she's being stalked by a PI (Kevin Bacon). Moving from the 70s rural setting of X to the streets of L.A. and showcasing the dark underbelly of the glitz and glamour of tinsletown. Taking inspiration from Dario Argento and other films of the era, it's set to be a bloody and exciting conclusion to this surprise horror trilogy.

LOOKING FORWARD TO...

Here is DirectHer's picks for this summer's steamiest and sexiest upcoming releases.

A FAMILY AFFAIR (RICHARD LAGRAVENESE) - 28TH JUNE

A romantic comedy evoking a gender flipped Notting Hill with movie star Chris Cole (Zac Efron) becoming intertwined with his new assistant's (Joey King) mother (Nicole Kidman). After being delayed last year due to the strikes, this film is set to debut on Netflix at the end of the month and is primed to be a fun pairing of Efron and Kidman, reuniting from The Paperboy, with a good melding of sexual tension and comedy from this premise. Director Richard LaGravenese has history in the romcom with writing on Barbra Streisand's The Mirror Has Two Faces and directing P.S. I Love You with Hilary Swank and Gerard Butler.



Still from A Family Affair. Courtesy Netflix



Stills from Fly Me To The Moon. Courtesy Columbia Pictures.

FLY ME TO THE MOON (GREG BERLANTI) - 12TH JULY

A true theatrical star-driven romcom that will evoke all the Summer tones in the lead-up to the end of the space race, Fly Me to the Moon follows a team at Nasa specifically planning to fake the moon landing should the real thing go awry.

This ambitious premise is led by a PR expert Kelly (Scarlett Johansson) who aims to improve Nasa's public image and devises the plan for the backup moon landing. She comes into conflict with Nasa employee Cole (Channing Tatum) over this scheme, but of course this is a typical romcom set-up that will lead to chemistry and romance.

Tatum and Johansson are the type of full fledged movie stars who feel like the perfect match for any material, but in this period set romcom with lush colours and large sets it should be a delightful Summer film that will continue where Anyone But You left off in reviving the romcoms of the 90s and 2000s.

KINDS OF KINDNESS (YORGOS LANTHIMOS) - 28TH JUNE

Emma Stone and Yorgos Lanthimos have become a dream team to be reckoned with in the past number of years, with their sexually transgressive and liberating works in The Favourite and Poor Things. Kinds of Kindness, which premiered at Cannes and won Best Actor for Jesse Plemons at the festival, is set to be a return to the more hostile and unusual films that made Lanthimos, like Dogtooth and The Lobster.

An anthology film featuring an impressive ensemble including Stone, Plemons, Willem Dafoe, Hong Chau, Hunter Schafer, and Joe Alwyn among others. The principle cast play different characters across the three segments in the film, which has been described as a dark fable. The film got good notices at Cannes, though many have cautioned that is quite alienating, so expect even more divisive reactions amongst general audiences than even Poor Things.



Kinds of Kindness. Courtesy Searchlight Pictures.

Why Are Female Superheroes Always Sexy?

Jess Fitzpatrick unmasks the truth behind why female superheroes and their power is undermined by their beauty

Superheroes have come to embody resilience, strength, and courage. Their ascendance as the most dominant movies in Hollywood has made one trend painstakingly clear: the over-sexualisation of female superheroes. This often overlooked phenomenon perpetuates a cycle of objectification and disempowerment, one that ironically negates the very essence of heroism superheroes stand for.

THE MALE GAZE AND SEXUALISED COSTUMES

'The Male Gaze,' coined by essayist Laura Mulvey in 1975, refers to the ways visual arts are structured and made for male viewers. With superhero movies, this is best exemplified by how female characters' physical attributes are emphasised in favour of their heroic powers.

Women have predominantly been side characters in these male-centred superhero films, but in recent years, there have been attempts at shifting focus onto female superheroes as the leads of their own movies. For the most part, however, this hasn't been well received by the male audience.

Amanda Castrillo, a popular influencer on TikTok in the Marvel community, posits why this.

"Scarlett Witch was a much more well-received character compared to Captain Marvel. No one had an issue with Wanda because she wasn't a main character, and it's fine when they're just an accessory for a male character.

"But the second it goes into their story, they're not cute, hot or sexy anymore. When Wanda had some autonomy, she wasn't fun to watch anymore."

Castillo addressed that this isn't just a sexualization issue or one

singular issue with superhero movies but a 'multi-layered and multifaceted' issue in the wider industry. As superheroes have dominated the industry for a better part of a decade, they have been the easiest example of this issue.

The sexualisation of female superheroes is seen primarily in the way they're costumed and shot. Superheroes like Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot), Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie), and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) are clear examples of this.

This sexualised costing is particularly egregious when contrasted with male superheroes. Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) wears a nano-tech suit covering every inch of his body, whilst Black Widow wears an impractical sexy catsuit. At best, she gets some kneepads if she's lucky.

Nicque Marina, another superhero influencer and comedian, lambasts this.

"These female superheroes are made to wear these costumes that aren't realistic for a fight. They're always so skin tight or have exposed skin that just makes no sense, but when they are put in practical outfits, they're not sexy anymore; they're strong, and some fans find that to be an issue.

"Even though it's not an exact superhero film, Elizabeth Swan (Kiera Knightley) in *Pirates of the Caribbean* had less and less make-up as the movies went on, and she felt like a fucking girl because her wardrobe didn't lose anything in regards to her femininity

"It wasn't overly revealing, and it never got in the way of her fierceness."

Castrillo jokes: "You see this in *Black Widow*, where [Cate Shortland] braided her hair away from her face, whereas [Jon Favreau] made her hair

so unpractical and unfunctional. "They still think about what looks best over functionality, but Natasha in *Black Widow* still looked really cool."

This underlines how practicality is disregarded in favour of damaging stereotypes for women's looks being prioritised over their strengths. It perpetuates a culture that undermines female superheroes as less powerful than their male equivalents and that their value is from being candy for the audience.

Frustratedly, Castrillo says: "I hate that female characters lose their femininity. There are so many kinds of women, but taking away feminine traits in the name of being strong is also a mindset that will hurt men too."

"Who's to say compassion and softness or crying is a bad thing? These should be things that make some layered but demonising traits often associated with femininity."

She jokes: "Why can't a girl be a badass but like lip gloss? Why should she have to give that up?"

SUBVERTING THE NARRATIVE

It's always one step forward and two steps back when female-led projects are given a chance by the likes of Marvel. Not only are women's projects seen as a

'big risk' by companies that do not get studios' full attention, but even when they're given respect and attention, the fan reception reinforces the studio mindset of these projects being a risk.

Birds of Prey and *Suicide Squad* both featured Harley Quinn, with one sexualising her and the other providing her agency. Of course, *Suicide Squad* was well received by fans and got a sequel, while *Birds of Prey* shied away from gratuitously shooting Robbie, outraged a loud minority, and was a flop.

Castrillo reflects on this: "Birds of Prey was so fun because Harley was just allowed to be a girl and have a good time by herself after going

through a breakup. It's colourful, it's absurd and just watches like a chaotic sleepover."

That film's underperformance can't be solely pinned on a lack of sexualisation, but certainly, with the vocal minority and harsh expectations placed on female superheroes, it doesn't help make the case to the decision-makers to avoid these harmful tropes.

Even a progressive and successful film like *Wonder Woman* features such an ineffective sexualised costume for Gadot and contradicts the feminist themes with such an objectifying-presentation.

THE PATH GOING FORWARD

For Nicque, looking towards the future, says: "Sometimes I feel like there is nothing to do but talk about it and keep conversations about representation going and actively challenge the current narrative.

"All we can do is talk about these female superheroes being sexualized to make people more aware of this issue"

Of course, in the case of a film like *Birds of Prey*, the fan reaction cannot be ignored. Castrillo worries how the loudest and most toxic elements of these fandoms happily sexualise characters like Black Widow, but when the films shy away from this, suddenly, they're pushing a message, and they become incensed.

For Castrillo, the path forward should be about reminding toxic

fans who provide feedback to execs that 'Just because it's a woman story on screen doesn't mean it's pushing an agenda; it's just a story'.

The hope for future superhero films is that they will focus on the complexities of women's strengths, flaws and powers. The frustrating thing is that when looking at TV, there is a blueprint for this. *Jessica Jones* achieved all of this, and if filmmakers learned from this and fans went into these films more open-mindedly, there would be a wealth of superhero films that prioritise performance and character over looks. ■



BEYOND LOLITA:

The Damaging Legacy On Young Girls

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has an immense cultural reputation.

Jess Fitzpatrick discovers that almost 70 years after its initial release, the novel has received two film adaptations, in 1962 and 1997, and has come to embody the deranged and horrible effects of the sexualisation and fetishisation of young girls.



Lolita (1997)

Neither film adaptation of *Lolita* has managed to quite capture the appropriate effect of the novel and has led to some of the more damaging misinterpretations of the story.

Three women from the Novel Book Club in Sheffield shared their feelings about the films and how they've impacted young women.

Emma Teesdale, a 23-year-old from Newcastle, said: "I've read the book and know it wasn't the original intention of the author to have such an impact on young female readers or audiences.

"I don't think [Nabokov] would be happy to see how people have misinterpreted or hyper-sexualised the book in its film adaptations."

Lolita is the story of Humbert Humbert (James Mason in '62 and Jeremy Irons in '97), a French man living in America who is infatuated with young girls. He infiltrates the lives of a single mother (Shelley Winters in '62 and Melanie Griffith in '97) and her daughter Dolores (Sue Lyon in '62 and Dominique Swain in '97), whom he nicknames Lolita. He then kidnaps her, and they end up travelling across the country together.

It's a story steeped in nuance and themes of obsession, desire and exile. The first-person perspective and unre-

liable narration make it an incredibly complex read and something difficult to recreate in other novels, let alone properly adapt to other mediums.

At the end of the day, the book isn't a romance, but the movies would beg to differ with the portrayal of Humbert and Lolita. In fact, the book was inspired by the real-life kidnapping of 11-year-old Sally Horner in 1947.

Anna Teesdale, a 21-year-old from Sheffield, expressed her annoyance about the effect both *Lolita* films had on her: "It's sickening seeing how badly social media and film execs have misconstrued *Lolita*.

"Though the plot is a bit crazy on first impression, there's a weird notion that the media took in exploiting and influencing young, young girls rather than young adults."

The romanticisation and aestheticisation of *Lolita* isn't exactly a new trend. Tumblr emphasised the aesthetic as something desirable in the early 2010s, and it has evolved and made its way onto TikTok in recent years.

Those Tumblr users were predominantly teenage girls and young women, aged 15-25. The 'soft-grunge' aesthetic was a very popular alternative style that incorporated elements of the *Lolita* style popularised by the film.

The *Lolita* style and aesthetic can be categorised as

cute and feminine, with an emphasis on frilly, doll-like clothing. The style can be adapted to dress up or down but will always have elementary elements that feel wrong to sexualize.

The '62 film's poster is an iconic image that best exemplifies the issue with these adaptations and how it has strayed from the entire purpose of the novel.

Anna Teesdale pointed to one example of this aesthetic that she finds wrong: "Unfortunately, I have discovered that there is a very small subsection of the aesthetic that really enjoys the use of pigtails.

"It's a fine and innocent enough hairstyle I have no qualm with, but it's the reaction of certain men it gathers. For example, as a bartender, I've noticed that men tip more when my hair is in bunches or pigtails than when it's down."

The pigtail theory has been floating around the internet for a little while. It explains that women working in the hospitality industry have all experienced something similar when styling their hair in pigtails, braids, or bunches.

The *Lolita* effect or aesthetic has since adapted to platforms like TikTok. While the aesthetic has developed into several subgenres, like the coquette style or the Harajuku style, it still draws on the inspiration of innocent school-

girl-like outfits that feel wrong to sexualise or even wear for tips.

Lottie Brown, a 31-year-old from London, admitted that she finds the whole concept of *Lolita* bizarre: "The films have had such a negative impact on me and other friends when we were young.

"The movie normalised that as young or developing girls, we were allowed to be sexualised and equally fantasise about older men or teachers because older men would do the same to us."

The *Lolita* effect has been a damaging phenomenon in recent history, and the blame can, at least partially, be placed on the film adaptations, which elevated the aesthetic rather than the book.

For Emma, Anna and Lottie, the glamorisation and romanticisation of the *Lolita* has been very damaging to their personal lives in adolescence and adulthood.

They all agreed and shared a similar sentiment that they knew Nabokov's intention wasn't to be pro-paedophilia, and that's a strategic movie made by the filmmakers which has had a horrible domino effect in the later years to come with the rise of social media. ■

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SEX THROUGH THE LENS

Feeling raunchy? This is DirectHer's top pick of sex scenes that emphasise the authenticity and emotional depth of female pleasure from the female gaze.

LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER (2022, LAURE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE)

Lady Chatterley (Emma Corrin) and her gameskeeper Oliver Mellors (Jack O'Connell) star in the newest rendition of the classic risqué novel. The forbiddenness of their affair is fiery and intensely intimate. His gruff and rough combined with her ladylike refinement compels the audience into her fantasy. This sensual story is quite obviously directed by a woman, in this case Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre, who directs the scenes with a tenderness and chemistry that glues you to the screen. All of this is best exemplified in the film's sex scenes. Corrin's stature positions their character as having equal power within the dynamic which is sexually empowering and also refreshing for the film's time period - Lucy Wilcox.

DON'T WORRY DARLING (2022, OLIVIA WILDE)

Although Don't Worry Darling does not feature any actual penetrative sex, the depictions of oral pleasure are a rarity in film and are worth celebrating. Jack (Harry Styles) and Alice (Florence Pugh) live a twee, picturesque life; he works during the day while Alice prepares dinner, lounges and shops. Despite both being very conventionally attractive, the frisky scenes are to be praised for their focus on female pleasure above all else. Within the film canon, we are conditioned to a focus on the male's needs - Don't Worry Darling provides a lovely departure from this. Jack is often shown going down on Alice, most notably in the dinner table scene. The moments are hot and raunchy, especially seeing Styles and Pugh in such a sexy manner - Amelia Elder.

TITANIC (1997, JAMES CAMERON)

Titanic's sex scene with Rose (Kate Winslet) and Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) is one of the most iconic sex scenes in film. Though there is no explicit sex on screen, the audience is well aware of what is going on in the car as the windows steam up and Rose's hand hits the window. This is a quite satisfying sex scene, given the flirtatious build-up between the two is such a slow-burn. The pairs chemistry is palpable and never dulls, making the culmination of their romance in this scene so satisfying - Jess Fitzpatrick-Howard.

ATONEMENT (2007, JOE WRIGHT)

Atonement making a bookshelf sex scene appealing and arousing for audiences is an unusual accomplishment, but is undeniable when watching the finished product. It's a scene that has resonated with both audiences and the actors in the scene.

"[It's] the best sex scene I've done onscreen" said Keira Knightley in an interview with Vulture.

Despite feeling risqué because of the setting, it is a surprisingly tame scene. There is no nudity, no visible touching of private parts, and yet you feel the connection and love between Robbie (James McAvoy) and Cecilia (Knightley). During the scene, they stop and call each other's names and say I love you to one another for the first time with intense and sincere eye contact. This might be one of the most consequential sex scenes in film, setting off the entire plot, but it also enhances the connection between the characters and engages the audience. It ends with the younger sister's (Saoirse Ronan) intrusion into the scene, which ties back to the film's main themes of forbidden love and atonement - Gana Ming.

SHOPLIFTERS (2018, KORE-EDA HIROKAZU)

Ambiguous light, white noise of Summer rain, sweaty reflections on the skin, and overlapped bodies. We can easily tell the tension between Nobuyo Shibata (Sakura Ando) and Osamu Shibata (Lily Franky) under Kore-eda Hirokazu's gentle aesthetic style. The fact that Nobuyo takes the first step showcases female desire. Shoplifters tell a heartbreaking story, providing an unseen narrative of family and love within crime cinema. Nobuyo and Osamu have sex as two individuals and also the mother and father of a family. The scene naturally brings up the familiar embarrassment when children interrupt parents in the moment. Despite being amusing, it also makes this 'strange' family feel more real - Bijin Chen.

OUT OF SIGHT (1998, STEVEN SODERBERGH)

Steven Soderbergh gets sex. You would expect this from the helmer of the Magic Mike series, but his sexual magnum opus is this ingenious encounter between Jack Foley (George Clooney) and Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez). Taking the typical cat-and-mouse chase of a criminal and police officer and injecting it with sexual tension, we see the two characters meet in a hotel bar and declare truce to fantasise over what their relationship would be if not on opposite sides of the law.

Soderbergh is someone who treats film as something to be experimented with. He uses narration, zooms, freeze frames, and fractured timelines, all to service the emotional journey of watching a film. Aided by legendary editor Anne V. Coates, this scene brings to life sexual fantasy in a way only Soderbergh can. It doesn't hurt having the combined sexual magnetism of Clooney and Lopez either - Caillin McDaid



THE LUCKY ONE (2012, SCOTT HICKS)

In the years since first watching The Lucky One, the sensuality of Logan (Zac Efron) and Beth (Taylor Schilling) stripping each other of their clothes after getting caught in the pouring rain remains in my memory. There's just something about her wet dress clinging to her body, water dripping down their shoulders, and the way that they grip each other's bodies. It epitomises the moment of two peo-

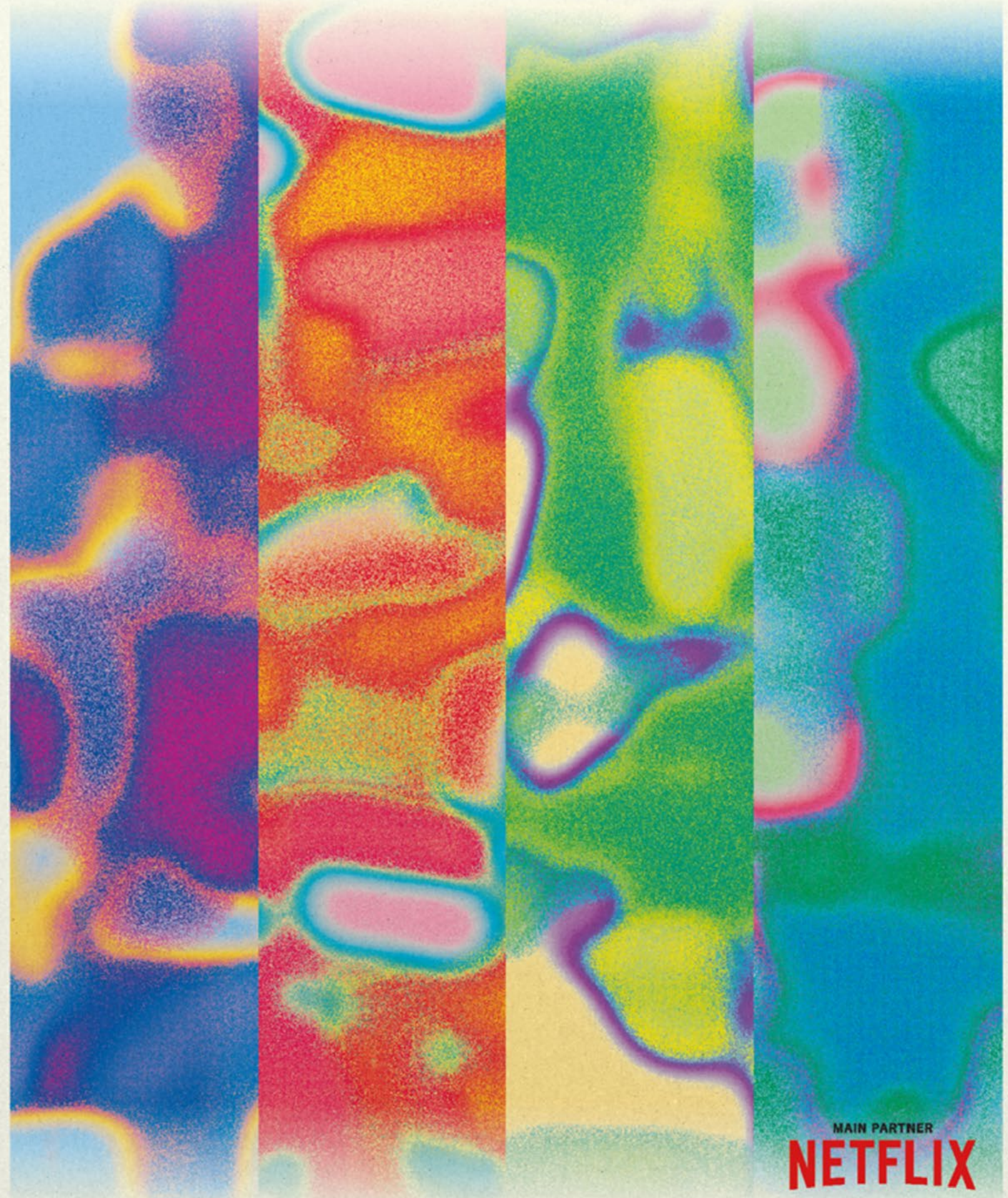
ple finally giving in to the building tension between them and the feelings they've been avoiding. Not to mention the way that Logan kisses her thigh just below her hem and looks up at her while on his knees—it feels like pure devotion. Perhaps what makes this scene so great is the way that all of this combines with moments of the two laughing together and falling over in an effort to get Logan's wet jeans off. In its cinematic hyperbole, this sex scene conveys what that first intimate moment feels like between two people falling in love. All whilst bathed in the golden light of the evening sun - Jesselyn Whiteside ■

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