Screening Sex

Linda Williams, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008

Linda Williams’ work on erotic cinema is unequalled. The influence of her classic book Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’ (1989) is marked not only by painstaking critical research and close analysis of some of the most notorious pornographic films ever made, but also by her earnest, frank and unflinching engagement with both the central theoretical debates and the movies themselves. Hard Core earned her a deserved place at the top of this particular field. Williams clearly has a strong publication history in other areas, with influential essays on gender and body genres such as ‘When the Woman Looks’ (1984) and ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess’ (1991). Although her work on melodrama in Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White, from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson (2002) sadly did not gain the attention it deserved, Williams is renowned as a key figure in the field of erotic cinema and what she defines as ‘porn studies’.

The much-anticipated Screening Sex is a logical direction after the updated re-issue of Hard Core in 1999. With roughly a decade between each book, this current release demonstrates both the progress that on-screen sex theory has made and the ways in which Williams’ own craft – as a writer and as a thinker – has developed. For while Hard Core was far from bereft of descriptions of Williams’ personal experiences in relation to the films and ideas, Screening Sex contains even stronger anecdotal material. (In this sense – and others – it is comparable to Vivian Sobchack’s work, who, along with Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin, provides Williams with the key theoretical concepts that she uses to construct the critical foundations of her own argument.) Williams acknowledges her interest in the subjective experience of erotic film from the outset, locating the origins of the book in a video interview compilation she made of her peers and colleagues in the mid 1990s, where she interrogated them about their most memorable and formative erotic moments in film.

For Williams, then, the personal is very much the political. For example, while her scholarly analysis focuses on the sexual revolution as a direct challenge to the prior dominant assumptions about cinematic eroticism, she frames this explicitly within the context of her own experience – Williams tells the fascinating story of hiding her birth control pills in a hollowed-out lipstick tube as a teenager so her mother did not discover them. Stories such as this perfectly suit the structure of the book as a whole, as Williams draws a clear line between the sexual development of the cinema and that of American culture in general. This is demonstrated by the broad timeline the book follows – starting with the censorship-heavy period that showed little more than kissing (identified in chapter one as ‘the long adolescence of American movies, 1896–1963’), she travels ahead in time to an increasingly more adult comprehension of on-screen sexuality, marked by films from Deep Throat (Gerard Damiano, 1972) and Last Tango in Paris (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) through to what she defines as post-1990s ‘hard-core art films’.

Williams’ analysis centres on a paradox inherent in the act of watching sex on film, observing that ‘it distances us from the immediate experience of touching and feeling with our own bodies, while at the same time bringing us back to feelings in these same bodies’ (p.2). Harking back to the themes of Hard Core (which she refers to in Screening Sex without appearing repetitive), she states ‘sex is too important to be left to the pornographers. And yet … American movies only tackled the representation of hard-core explicit sex within the genre of pornography.’ (p.181) While the focus of her book is clearly the United States, much of her discourse hinges upon comparative analyses with non-American filmic examples: Michael Winterbottom’s 9 Songs (2004), Lars von Trier’s The Idiots (1998), Catherine Breillat’s À ma soeur! (For My Sister, 2001) and, most notably, Nagisa Oshima’s In the Realm of the Senses (1976). The latter plays a significant role in the construction of her broader arguments, and her analysis of both the film itself and the broader field of Japanese visual culture comprise one of the most succinct and eloquent investigations of the much-theorized film.

While the concluding focus on small-screen technologies (Internet, mobile phones and so on) is predictable, it is no less rigorous than the preceding chapters. Williams risks falling into severely hackneyed territory when embarking upon the ‘Internet porn’ topic, but steadily avoids clichés and stays firmly committed to her core arguments. Williams argues that the move for erotica on the shrinking screen supports her claim that ‘the very act of screening has become an intimate part of our sexuality’ (p.326). This eloquent final thought is so powerfully and simply delivered that it alone renders Screening Sex as significant a contribution to the area of sexuality and cinema as Hard Core.

Reviewed by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas