If sexual love has lost none of its crazier tendencies in the twenty-first century, perhaps cinematic treatments of this theme have become more subtle and mature. Brian McFarlane reports.

What titles films used to have! There, in the acres of CinemaScope with pounding score, soaring theme song and fierce Technicolor were the likes of Love Is a Many Splendoured Thing (1955), with Jennifer Jones and William Holden sharing a high-toned and ill-fated love in picturesque Hong Kong; while Lana Turner, Hollywood-made love goddess (though censorship then demanded she keep her clothes on) surrendered to the demands of The Flame and the Flesh (1954), was By Love Possessed (1961), found that Love Has Many Faces (1964), and learnt the pains of Bittersweet Love (1976), each feat a little more daring than the one before. There’s even a breath of incest in the last-named. But it is legendary beauty Merle Oberon’s experience Of Love and Desire (1963) that has anticipated the theme of this issue of Meanjin. How she suffered! A recovering nymphomaniac who falls genuinely in love, only to have her half-brother reveal incestuous intentions, she goes spectacularly bonkers before being rescued by Steve Cochran (Merle and Steve Cochran: what a falling-off was there!) for some hard-to-imagine domesticity in the United States, away from corrupt, exotic Mexico.

And corrupt, exotic Mexico was where Lana Turner, having headed south (to Acapulco) to eye and sample the beach-boy talent, carelessly gets gored by a bull.
before returning to her surprisingly patient husband in *Love Has Many Faces*. (Well, being in love is 'never having to say you're sorry', to quote the motto of the more austerely titled *Love Story*, of slightly later vintage.) Most if not all of these films are deeply idiotic, their titles promising so much more than the Hays Office would ever have allowed them to deliver.

It's a while since I saw *Love Has Many Faces*, but its inanities linger on. Turner, in her early forties at the time, was no doubt finding major roles less plentiful. She could hardly have envisaged the honesty of Lauren Cantet's *Heading South/Vers le sud* (2006, France/Canada) a further forty-odd years on. The scenario, in its broadest outline, is not dissimilar: American women of a certain (that is to say, uncertain) age take themselves off this time to Haiti in search of sexual gratification. But whereas everything in *Love Has Many Faces* was as glossy as could be, *Vers le sud* is interested in what the reality might be, the reality of ageing women in search of sex, perhaps of reassurance, and not disguising it all as romance. 'Strange fits of passion I have known,' wrote Wordsworth two hundred years ago and in another context. *Vers le sud* and some other recent films continue to make us privy to such strange fits but with a refreshing and admirable candour.

*Haiti* in the 1970s may look idyllic on the beach but even there Albert (Lys Ambroise), *maître d'* of the restaurant the middle-aged ladies frequent, refuses to serve their shared black lover Legba (Ménothy César). Albert remembers how his family had fought the Americans in 1915 and his father's view of white men as 'animals'. The women who now seek the solace offered by handsome young black men are in fact acknowledging their animal needs, and their willingness to pay to have these satisfied. 'And that's when Brenda discovered she's a bitch in heat—like all of us,' says one of the three main women characters, Ellen, of another. Ellen (Charlotte Rampling) is a 55-year-old French lecturer from Boston, who teaches 'snobby girls' at Wellesley, and talks of the boys who 'have these girls at their mercy'. She comments with wry realism that 'there's nothing for women over forty in Boston', but in Haiti where she is 'free, alone and unattached', she enjoys the sexual attentions of Legba. Brenda (Karen Young) is a 48-year-old divorcee, who has returned to find Legba, who gave her her first orgasm three years earlier. Less unillusioned than Ellen, Brenda wants more from him than just the slaking of desire. The third woman, plump Sue (Louise Portal) from Montreal is in love with a Haitian boy, Neptune (Wilfried Paul). Each of these women gets a chance to put her point of view in direct address to the camera, but the film doesn't guarantee that they are telling the entire truth about themselves—or that they know what this is.
Behind these personal dramas of women is drama of a different kind. Haiti is in the grip of 'Doc' Duvalier's dictatorship, under which local women know nothing of the freedom and scope for indulgence that the women from the north have sought in this island paradise. Cantet doesn't resort to an easy schematism to spell out the contrast, but the danger is there in street scenes in Port-au-Prince; in the final brutal murder of Legba and his former girlfriend, latterly mistress to a colonel; and, most poignantly, in the opening scene when a mother tries to give her 15-year-old daughter away to a waiter to spare her the sexual exploitation that is almost certain to be her lot if she comes to the attention of those in power.

The presence of the American women is very intelligently treated. Because Haitian women are in danger from an oppressive regime, this is not to deny the legitimacy of the white women's sexual needs—or to deny the element of their corresponding sexual exploitation of young black men, however willing. The responses of Ellen and Brenda to Legba's death have a ravaged honesty to them, avoiding equally sentimentality (think of Lana) or platitude or a fake new-found wisdom that wraps up their sensual recollections of his body in anything more high-sounding. 'God, he was beautiful,' Ellen muses, 'I'd have done anything to keep him.' These women are all played with an understanding that commands sympathy because it is not solicited. In the mid-1960s Charlotte Rampling was the epitome of 'swinging London' in films such as *Georgy Girl* (1966). Now, forty years and fifty-odd films later, she is simply superb: her beauty was always imbued with such sexy intelligence (or is it intelligent sexiness?); now, at sixty, she is still a wonder to behold, and one believes every word she says. British films never made the best of her; she needed Europe, and Europe has been very good to her, as films such as *Vers le sud* testify.

**DESIRING** on the part of women in movies, at least in the Hollywood of post-Production Code days from 1934 on, too often avoided the rawness of feeling that some recent films have dramatised. Of course, there have always been actresses who encrypt sexual avidity in posture and glance and intonation, and they were not always 'fallen women' (was there such a creature as a 'fallen man'?). Think of Barbara Stanwyck, with blond wig, anklet and sensual slouch in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or, in Britain, the young Googie Withers in the likes of *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947): there's no mistaking what they want from the men in their stories. The 'stories', though, were constrained from representing the wilder shores of women's sexual obsessions. In *Notes on a Scandal*, director Richard Eyre, working from Patrick Marber's ferociously clever screenplay (in its turn derived from Zoë
Heller’s Booker-nominated novel), takes us with an unnerving accuracy to the essential helplessness of sexual hunger; helpless, that is, in the face either of its demands or in relation to other, conflicting or constraining demands.

Heller’s novel is told from the point of view of a very unreliable narrator who chronicles the disruption caused by the arrival at a London comprehensive school of a beautiful new art teacher, Sheba Hart, who embarks on an affair with a 15-year-old pupil, Steven Connolly, and excites the obsessive interest of the much older history teacher, Barbara Covett, the narrator-diaryist. Though the film gestures towards Barbara’s status in this matter, through fairly frequent recourse to voice-over, it is inevitable that a lot of the action she describes in the novel, where we are aware that it is possibly skewed by her own emotional involvement with Sheba, has to be shown ‘objectively’. The film inevitably loses thereby an equivocal edge and that may be put down to the exigencies of a medium that depends on things being seen, and being seen as happening now. This is not, however, to detract from the power of the film’s unsparing exploration of two lives in the grip of feelings that all but destroy them and their capacity for rational weighing of these against what they stand to lose.

The film begins with Barbara (Judi Dench) sitting on a park bench looking down on a misty London and reflecting that people have always trusted her with their secrets but wondering ‘Who can I trust with mine?’ Her voice, as suggested above, is the film’s main interpretative instrument, but that doesn’t preclude the play of another level of critique. For instance, we are perfectly aware of the element of snobbery in the way she speaks of the children she teaches as ‘pubescent proles’. It is one of the latter, in fact, who will prove to be the catalyst for the film’s drama. Not only does Connolly (Andrew Simpson) exert irresistible sexual pressure on the upper-middle-class Sheba (Cate Blanchett), to the point where she is ready to imperil family and profession for the sake of his adolescent embraces, but also Barbara, clenched with repressed desire for Sheba, will use Sheba’s intimacy with Connolly to bring about her undoing. The film’s brutal denouement sees Sheba faced with prison while Barbara, back on her park bench, makes a new friend, Annabel (Anne-Marie Duff), to whom she offers a ticket to an Albert Hall concert.

The central preoccupation with the two kinds of passion is underpinned by other explorations of messy feeling. There is Brian (Phil Davis), who seriously fancies Sheba and who, through Barbara’s bitter intervention, becomes the means of both women losing their jobs. Sheba’s husband Richard (Bill Nighy) is a self-consciously eccentric writer who has left his first wife and children for the
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‘bourgeois bohemia’ of life with Sheba and her two children (sulky girl, Down’s syndrome boy) to whom he tries to be a jocularly affectionate father. And the headmaster (Michael Maloney) of the comprehensive school (a long way from To Sir with Love) is engaged in a passionate, and wholly requited, love affair with himself, as he eagerly solicits the approbation of staff for his clammy trendiness—which turns to bitter repudiation when he encounters a real problem.

I wonder if anyone has ever caught on film with such devastating accuracy the life of a disappointed spinster teacher (and ‘spinster’, politically incorrect as the term no doubt is, is what Barbara is) as Judi Dench does. Bravely suppressing her naturally pleasant demeanour, she stomps about in tweed suits and flat shoes, her hair badly done and its colour suggesting that nature has been given help, her mouth set in sardonic lines when not opened to puff hungrily on cigarettes, and her eyes ever watchful, chilled with the loss of expectation. Against all this are the odd gestures—the stroking of Sheba’s arm to ‘relax’ her—that betray the inner turmoil. It is a great performance and the moment when she weeps for her dead cat cuts to the heart. Cate Blanchett, who seems bent on being an actress rather than a star, is the essence of willowy glamour (in a Lawrentian rather than a Hollywood use of the term) as the upper-class Sheba, instinctively careless about everything in the way of one who hasn’t ever had to be careful. This is a brilliantly acted film, not only by the two women, but also by the three men—Nighy, Davis and Maloney—who inhabit their roles with effortlessly right notations of class, temperament and cruelty.

If the film cannot sustain the balancing act of Heller’s approach to the ‘scandal’ wholly through the ‘notes’ of Barbara’s diary, it more than compensates by the accuracy of its mise-en-scène (nothing is exaggerated as the film moves between school, Sheba’s spacious inherited home and Barbara’s cramped, functional flat) and the quality of these performances. Eyre, primarily a stage director, previously steered Dench through Iris (2001) to harrowing effect, as Iris Murdoch in the grip of Alzheimer’s. Here again he shows himself a consummate film director, with not only a capacity to elicit exceptional screen acting but also a command of those other ways in which films mean: sensitivity in, for example, production and costume design and editing. Philip Glass’s score is perhaps too explicit in underlining the film’s emotional charge, but this is a quibble about a film that takes serious matters seriously.

If, like me, you’d begun to wonder if you could ever sit right through another film by Anthony Minghella, after the vacuous pictorialism of The English Patient
(1996) or *Cold Mountain* (2004), then *Breaking and Entering* may change your mind. After making the modestly conceived, affecting love story *Truly Madly Deeply* (1991), he went international and the comparisons with David Lean, sometimes kindly meant, drew attention to the artistic elephantiasis that had overtaken him. Even the tauter *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) had its longueurs, as if Minghella was chronically unable to resist the lure of creating the biggest postcards in the world. *Breaking and Entering* is his first British film since *Truly Madly Deeply*, and for the first time since then the film seems to have settled on a subject and made this its priority. This 'subject', alluded to in its complexly resonant title, is articulated with clear-headed intelligence through the lives of two parallel families brought together by the eponymous criminal act.

Will (Jude Law) is the landscape architect responsible for a major development in London's King's Cross area. His partner is half-Swedish Liv (Robin Wright Penn) whose autistic-obsessive daughter, Bea (Poppy Rogers), is awake practising gymnastics at 3 a.m., while Bosnian Muslim survivor Amira (Juliette Binoche) is wondering what her very anglicised teenage son Mira (Rafi Gavron) is up to in the middle of the night. What he is up to, as one of a gang of thieves, is breaking into the vast structure that is part of Will's enterprise and stealing, among other things, Will's computer ('My life's on that laptop'). Miro is thus seen 'breaking and entering' in the most literal and widely recognised sense, and on this level the narrative concerns itself with Will's lying in wait on subsequent nights for a further break-in and pursuing Miro till he establishes where he lives with his seamstress mother. But the film's major interest is in other, more disruptive kinds of breaking and entering. Will, who has been with Liv for some years and the fact that they are not married rankles with him, has entered her life but hasn't quite overcome 'the distance between [them]' (the first words heard on the soundtrack). He subsequently breaks into Amira's life, entering her bodily and touching in her a sexy neediness that she acknowledges, even as she plans to film their love-making and use it as a means to blackmail him into dropping charges against Miro.

In a surprising, and surprisingly affecting move, Will lies to give Miro another chance, at the risk of his own relationship with Liv. I wish the film had stopped there: instead, in a too-symmetrical trope it takes us back to the opening shots of Will and Liv in their car, the 'distance' between them pronounced. She rages at him for his infidelity, then shouts at him 'Win me back', jumps out of the car and then responds to his embraces on the street. Then, at the end, Miro comes to thank Will for giving him another chance. The film is probably too schematic to be as tough as its awkward scenarios might have dictated: Minghella, screenwriter
as well as director, has spelt out the parallels more obviously than he needed to. Even in the characterisation, he can’t resist statement when enactment might serve him better. So Will has to say, ‘I don’t know how to be honest. That’s why I like metaphor,’ when we’ve already sensed this complex modern man’s difficulty in being direct. We know he’s entered Amira’s life partly to find out about her son’s activities, partly because of sexual attraction. And Amira asks rhetorically ‘Do you know how long it is since a man touched me?’ when Binoche’s acting makes clear the longing that this beautiful woman feels. ‘You steal someone’s heart—that’s a real crime.’ And so on. These kinds of caption-like comments add up to an unnecessary explicitness, as if Minghella didn’t trust us to get the message. Nor are such parallel images as those of Liv in bed with her daughter and Amira snuggling up with her son really needed.

The film’s virtues, however, outweigh this tendency to diagrammatic plotting. Casting alumni from several of his preceding films, Minghella has drawn finely calibrated studies in messy human relationships from Law (also in Ripley and Cold Mountain), Binoche (from The English Patient) and Wright Penn. Each achieves a discriminating balance between our sympathies and our critical distance, and there are several supporting roles that fill out the film’s life with a humour one has not so far much associated with Minghella. Sandy, Will’s partner, who is making out with the attractive black cleaner, Erika, alerts Will to his progress with ‘Lattes have been drunk’, and warns Will not to start ‘fooling around’ when ‘I’m just entering fidelity’. He is played by Martin Freeman, the very engaging young actor from TV’s The Office and the charming comedy Confetti (2006), and there is a very funny sketch of a prostitute who interrupts Sandy and Will’s late-night stake-out of their building. Ray Winstone (from Cold Mountain) as an investigating policeman and Juliet Stevenson (star of Truly Madly Deeply), as the therapist treating Bea, also stamp each of their scenes with a lived-in authenticity of observation.

The last, and possibly least likely, film to be mentioned in the same breath as ‘love and desire’ is Chris Noonan’s Miss Potter. A recent biography of the creator of Peter Rabbit suggests a tougher-minded woman than this prettily presented biopic might lead you to believe. However, it is worth noting briefly that Renee Zellweger (is it true that a syndicate of underemployed British actresses is seeking a restraining order to keep her out of England to stop her snaring the choicest plums?) makes one feel for the constraints of her life and for its brief, doomed, blossoming love of her publisher. Beatrix Potter’s snobbish mother suspects
publishers as 'trade', and tradesmen are likely to bring dust into the home. The gradual move towards declaration from shy Norman Warne (Ewan McGregor) and response from repressed Beatrix is handled with appropriate delicacy, but the strongest sense of passion is that expressed by Warne's sister Millie (Emily Watson). A spinster who has valued women's companionship and tells Potter, 'I warn you I'm planning to like you very much', she receives the news of Potter's love for her brother by assuring her that they must of course marry. She claims that if she found such love, 'I'd trample my mother' to bring it about.

Miss Potter has some real charm, especially in the way Beatrix's watercolour figures caper intermittently into life, in the uses made of a range of settings (the upper-middle-class upholstery of the Potter house contrasted with the freedom of some glorious outdoor settings) and in the inevitable excellence of British character acting (Barbara Flynn and Bill Paterson as Beatrix's parents, Phyllida Law as Norman's sweetly doting mother). But it does tend to prettify when a more austere approach to its tale of passion just surfacing before an unkind fate steps in might have been more piercingly poignant.