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Breaking Conventions? Political Ideology of Films With Explicit Sex

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Explicit sex in films on general release remains rare, even if it has significantly increased since the late 1990s. Commentary on explicit arthouse films has tended to focus on those also containing sexual violence, and debates have often revolved around whether explicit imagery constitutes art or pornography. Relatively little attention has been paid to explicit romantic films, and to what leads some of them to gain notable international visibility, while others languish in obscurity. This article examines *9 Songs* and *Love*, two of the most discussed and financially successful arthouse films with a romantic storyline that also devote significant screentime to explicit images of sex. It argues that their success can be attributed in part to their conservative sexual and gender politics, and their ideological proximity to conventional heterosexual pornography. They are contrasted with *The Story of Richard O.* and *Daughters of Fire*, two explicit films that struggled to gain critical attention or financial reward. These latter films are shown to have fundamentally different ideological foundations, including radical ideas about sex and gender, and an embrace of the artistic value of the pornographic. Such an ideological gap can be considered a contributory factor in the divergent destinies of these explicit romantic films.



Although explicit sex in arthouse films has become increasingly common since the late 1990s, it still remains relatively rare, and for such films financial and critical success is hard to achieve. Most explicit arthouse films, or hardcore art cinema (Frey, 2016), operate within the film-festival circuit, but even there exist in relative iniquity. Better-known explicit films like *Romance* (Breillat, 1999), *Baise-moi* (Despentes and Trinh-Thi, 2000), *A Serbian Film* (Spasojević, 2010) or *The Brown Bunny* (Gallo, 2003) also include scenes of sexual violence, which brought them public visibility for the shocking depictions of rape, which often provoke moralistically tinged debate. When it comes to explicit stories of romance, critical reactions are less extreme, tending to oscillate between dismissal and disinterest, but with a common consensus that explicit sex is not suited to serious reflection on sex, love and romance. Explicit arthouse films' numerous detractors often contend that the visible sex intrudes on and distracts from the narrative, or that it simplifies the cerebral complexities of romance into the supposedly boring mechanisms of bodily contact.¹ In the UK, two romance films with explicit sex did however manage to break through these critical barriers, achieving a measure of financial success and stimulating wide critical discussion: *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004) and *Love* (Noé, 2015).²

Commentary on explicit arthouse films tends to focus on whether they are art or pornography,³ but this does not explain why these two films were able to break out of the marginalisation that most explicit films are restrained by. Pre-determined geopolitical, cultural, racial and industrial factors play an unavoidable role,⁴ but in this article, I argue that the conservative sexual and gender politics of *9 Songs* and *Love* also contributed to their relative success. These films might not be pornographic according to most classification boards, but their success stems from their ideological proximity to much heterosexual pornography. They appear superficially different, but by appealing to misogynistic, homophobic and conservative gender tropes, well known to audiences acquainted with mainstream pornographic conventions, they are reassuringly familiar.

¹ See for instance Žižek (1997a, p. 111), Christopher (2005), Dawson (2005), Snider (2005), Holden (2005). See also Mattias Frey's discussion of the cynicism criticism (2016, pp. 38–45).

² *Intimacy* (Chéreau, 2001) also achieved substantial critical success, but compared to the other films discussed here, is more about loss, despair, and emotional numbness than straightforwardly about love and romance.

³ A substantial portion of scholarly writing about sexually explicit arthouse cinema implicitly comes back to a defence of its status as art rather than as pornography (for instance see Jordan, 2002; MacKenzie, 2002; Nettelbeck, 2003; Krzywinska, 2006; Bayon, 2007; Archer, 2009; Larsson, 2011; Reifenberger, 2012; Barker, 2013; Simonin, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Johnson, 2016).

⁴ For instance, the white male directors' previous arthouse successes, the Western European production and English dialogue, and the focus on heterosexual sex between young conventionally beautiful people.

By contrast, most other romantic arthouse films containing explicit sex struggle to achieve wide distribution or elicit much critical discussion.⁵ At the same time, they frequently present much more progressive, even radical, perspectives on sex, sexuality, romance and gender, in quite startling contrast to the more successful *9 Songs* and *Love*. In order to highlight these differences, I examine *The Story of Richard O.* (Odoul, 2007) and *The Daughters of Fire* (Carri, 2018), which incorporate and reflect directly upon pornography within the narratives, demonstrating a more progressive position on filmed sex and sexual politics, seeking not to separate themselves from and dismiss pornography as inferior. In this sense, *The Story of Richard O.* and *The Daughters of Fire* offer ideological counterpoints to *9 Songs* and *Love* and it is my contention that this is partially able to explain their continued marginalisation from the mainstream, both financially and critically.⁶

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Of all the films discussed here, *9 Songs* has received the most critical attention, with discussion focusing predominantly on the question of whether it is art or pornography.⁷ *9 Songs* was described as ‘the most sexually explicit film in the history of mainstream British cinema’ (Higgins, 2004) and documents the romantic relationship between Lisa and Matt mostly through scenes of explicit sex, and sequences filmed on location at nine concerts. Together with *Romance*, *Baise-moi*, *Intimacy*, *The Brown Bunny* and *Anatomy of Hell* (Breillat, 2004), it was one of the first films containing visible sex acts to be classified for general release in the UK after the legalisation of hardcore pornography, and one of the first explicit arthouse films to focus predominantly on sex without any violent tropes.

Scholars tend to see a certain political radicality in *9 Songs*’s successful integration of explicit sex with a standard romantic storyline, but suggest that its depiction of women and female sexuality draws on a distinctly conservative perspective on gender and sexual politics. Melanie Williams sums these critiques up nicely, claiming that ‘while *9 Songs* is bracingly radical in some respects, in others it feels surprisingly retrograde’

⁵ There are a couple of exceptions to this such as *Wayward Cloud* (Tsai, 2005), which won an award at the Berlin Film Festival and was financially successful in Taiwan, if not further afield, and *Shortbus* (Mitchell, 2000), which rode a wave of community support in the US, gaining cult status and unexpected financial returns (Lewis, 2009). However, at the time of their release, most were not widely available. In Europe, *The Daughters of Fire* was released on Mubi, *I Want Your Love* (Mathews, 2012) was produced by NakedSword, a gay-porn specialist, and *The Story of Richard O.* struggled to find distribution outside of its native France. Other examples such as *Diet of Sex* (Brun, 2014) and *The Night* (Castro, 2016) failed to get distribution beyond the festival circuit, except for very brief runs in their home countries.

⁶ A similar argument could be made with *I Want Your Love*, *Sexual Chronicles of a French Family* (Arnold and Barr, 2012), *The Night*, *O Fantasma* (Pedro Rodrigues, 2000), *Ken Park* (Clark and Lachmann, 2002), *Leap Year* (Rowe, 2010) amongst others.

⁷ See L.Williams (2008), McNair (2013), A.Barker (2013), Johnson (2016) for scholarly analyses in this vein.

(2006, p. 62). Williams argues that *9 Songs*'s female protagonist, Lisa, is reduced to her sexuality, to a 'sexual cipher', often shot in an abstract and depersonalizing way, which characterizes her as the passive object of Matt's and the viewer's gaze. Her central example is the short scene of Lisa masturbating, which Matt watches unhappily from a distance and which is used to signal the beginning of the end of the relationship, as Lisa withdraws sexually from Matt. Unlike all other sex acts in the film which emphasize touch, sensation and feeling, Lisa's masturbation plays a clear narrative role, it is 'burdened with narrative significance', hinting at an 'old-fashioned and uneasy attitude towards female masturbation' (ibid.). At the same time, it is the locus of prurient fascination, as the camera eschews the close-ups used in many other scenes, watching distanced from the doorway with Matt, and this image was used to advertise the film, most notably on the DVD cover: 'Lisa's sexuality is not for herself but for others, and her masturbation only has positive meaning as an alluring spectacle' (ibid.). Read through the lens of the male gaze, *9 Songs* constructs a viewing relation of a male viewing subject and a fetishized female object, even as its display of visible sex within an arthouse film might suggest a liberal outlook on sexuality.

Beyond these specific examples, the film as a whole demonstrates a conservative outlook on sex and romance. Jealousy and a sense of mutual ownership form key parts of their interactions, with the solo masturbation scene and a brief flirtation with a stripper in a bar being triggers for or symptoms of conflict within the relationship. There are repeated references to Lisa's potential bisexuality, but even as Matt initiates the trip to the strip club, he takes umbrage at the enjoyment that Lisa shows at the sexual attention paid to her by one of the female dancers, and leaves the club, suggesting an uneasiness with Lisa's homosexual desires, or with the woman taking on the position of desiring subject rather than desired object. Moreover, Matt is older and works as a climate scientist, while Lisa is a foreign year-abroad student; in other words, the romantic dynamic follows the cliché of the exotic hyper-sexual ingenue, teasing and temporarily spicing up the efficient and controlled life of a serious, thoughtful contributor to society. Far from politically radical, the presentation of romance and gender relations is decidedly conservative.

Moreover, as well as reaffirming traditional prejudices around female sexuality, homosexuality and youth, these particular ways of presenting women fit with standard depictions of women in heterosexual pornography as objects of male-centred desire. *9 Songs* is less a story of their romance told through sex, than an extended visualization of Matt's sexual fantasies, less a depiction of *their* relationship than an enactment of *his* memories of her. The film begins and ends with Matt's reminiscences about Lisa, framing the images we see as Matt's memories of the relationship, a viewing position

underscored by the fact that Matt is the sole character to provide any voiceover commentary. Saddened by his present celibacy, suggested by the vast pristine whiteness of the Antarctic that bookends the film, Matt's current unhappiness is softened by thinking back to the sexual aspects of his previous love. As he says on the voiceover, 'when I remember Lisa, I don't think about her clothes, or her work, where she was from, or even what she said', a phrase which leads into a shot of Lisa's face as she has sex with Matt who remains out of the frame. Subsequent scenes continue this framing of the film's gaze as that of Matt looking at Lisa's body. The next sequence at the music concert where they met is intercut with a sex scene in which Matt's face is all but invisible while we see Lisa's full body during cunnilingus, her face during penetrative sex and a lingering close-up on her breast being squeezed. In another early sequence when they wake up, the camera watches Lisa naked from Matt's position under the bedsheets, as she walks around the room and puts on her underwear; the scene finishes with an iris-in onto Matt's head and cuts to an Antarctic scene, re-emphasising that the images of Lisa's body are his memories or sexual fantasies. Lisa exists predominantly as a sensual aide-memoire, a fantasy only in sexual terms as all other aspects of her being have been evacuated from the image, part of a masturbatory image bank. This framing is evoked several times in the first five minutes of the film.

While the music scenes and the scenes of quotidian banality suggest that his memories are not entirely about sex, the decontextualized presentation of most of the sex scenes frames them as erotic vignettes that Matt dips into for his own viewing pleasure. It is notable that we see little build-up to the sex scenes, frequently arriving *in medias res* as though Lisa is always on sexual stand-by. For instance, the second sequence of the film starts with close-ups on their faces kissing, within seconds, Lisa removes her clothes and mounts Matt, the camera running up and down her torso before fading to black. The next sex scene consists solely of a few close-ups of kissing and of Lisa's breasts, and in the following sex scene Lisa immediately interrupts Matt's attempts to make breakfast by reaching into his pyjamas for his penis, entreating him repeatedly to "fuck me", to "do it faster" and to "cum inside me".

These sex scenes are idealised sexual fantasies, in which Lisa is perpetually aroused, waiting for Matt and his penis to satisfy her desires. While *9 Songs* may justifiably be considered to be aesthetically distinct from pornography, not least because of the numerous music scenes, its portrayal of Lisa still turns to the classic pornographic double fantasy: firstly 'a fantasy scenario in time, of the woman there ready for me, a woman waiting to be pleased, already excited and desiring, a scene into which the spectator can step' and secondly, 'a situation of lack – the sexual climax – which will be supplied by the man, in fantasy as he completes the scene with his penis, and even quite literally,

in his own masturbation' (Cowie, 1992). Throughout the film's many sex scenes, Lisa is always ready for sex, frequently initiating it, waiting for Matt as diegetic partner, or indeed as fantasiser to complete her. In this sense, *9 Songs* has a conservative view of gender politics that has more in common with the deeply misogynistic pornographic films of the 1970s and 1980s to which Elizabeth Cowie is referring, than to any radical view of sexual politics, that its liberal approach to explicit sex might portend.

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Love was released nearly a decade after *9 Songs* but shares many of its ideological premises. In the UK, *Love* was subject to a significant promotional campaign, playing on Gaspar Noé's reputation as an established provocateur, and received a well-advertised nationwide premiere at all of the Picturehouse's chain of arthouse cinemas, including a filmed interview with the director. An added attraction was that it was filmed in 3D.⁸ *Love* follows protagonist Murphy, unhappy with his present life with Omi and their son, as he reminisces about past sexual and romantic encounters, most especially his tempestuous relationship with Electra, on whom he cheated with Omi. One of the film's key subjects is sexual fantasy and experimentation, with Murphy and Electra exploring sex clubs, homosexual desire, sex with drugs, and most especially a threesome, which is how they come to meet Omi. The centrality of the threesome to the plot is emphasised by its length; at over eight minutes long, it is far longer than any other sequence in the film and occupies a pivot position about half way through the running time.⁹ The film alternates between the present and flashbacks of the past, with temporally distinct events often spatially linked seemingly via a *mémoire involontaire* stimulated by Murphy's presence in a particular space. The repeated bookending of past events by head shots of Murphy looking contemplative in the present underlines these flashbacks as Murphy's memories or fantasies, and there are almost no scenes which Murphy could not have experienced himself.¹⁰

Right from the beginning of the film, we are encouraged to see the sexual images not only as memories, but as part of Murphy's present-day sexual fantasising. The film opens with a red-tinged long take of mutual masturbation between Murphy and Electra, their whole bodies visible in the shot; Electra's hand movements increase in speed until Murphy ejaculates into her mouth, at which point we hear an extra-diegetic

⁸ See Nick Jones (2020, pp. 205–219) for the historical links between 3D media and pornography and an extended discussion of how *Love*'s use of 3D increases the sense of frustrated yearning.

⁹ This is similar to the narrative placing of the central rape scene in *Irreversible* (Noé, 2002), which is also a long scene right in the middle of the film.

¹⁰ Even in crowded scenes, we always stay with Murphy, and there are no scenes of Electra or Omi alone. The only exception to this is the shot of penetration from inside a vagina, although the suggestion is that the penis we see is Murphy's.

phone ringing, and the image cuts to Murphy waking up in the cold-coloured present next to Omi. The first images of Electra frame her as a masturbatory fantasy, a wet dream in which he is literally brought to orgasm by his former girlfriend, while his first words on the voiceover lament his current situation. Throughout the film we see Murphy looking through nude images he took of Electra through a stereoviewer, a personal peep show nourishing his unfulfilled sexual desires, as well as his unrequited romantic feelings.¹¹ The first meeting with Omi is also framed entirely in sexual terms with her face and their subsequent flirtation à trois immediately preceded by a discussion between Murphy and Electra of their shared fantasy of a threesome with a blond woman. At the end of the film, Murphy's voiceover complains that he just wants to go back to the beginning, to wake up with Electra, and we see a clear fantasy image of a pregnant Electra comforting Murphy (he has had no contact with Electra for a long time at this point), once again framing the whole film as visualisations of his desires or fantasies as much as his memories.

Just as in *9 Songs*, sex scenes often begin *in medias res* and end just as suddenly, cutting back to a shot of Murphy in the present looking thoughtful, an erotic snippet he is briefly fantasising about. On two occasions, we see a montage of multiple unconnected sexual encounters between Murphy and Electra, one ending in the oft-commented shot of ejaculation towards the camera, a particular spectacle in 3D. Like the photos we see Murphy perusing, these images seem to be examples of a mental scrapbook that Murphy is flicking through, and that the film visualises for us, the viewer. The point here is that like in *9 Songs*, the viewer is positioned with the male protagonist looking at, or fantasising about, his previous partners. While Electra is a much more fully-developed character than Lisa in *9 Songs*, her sexuality dominates her character, and most of the women in *Love* exist as little more than sexual ciphers, even Omi, who is mainly an exotic sexual plaything, a symbol of the breakdown of Murphy's relationship with Electra, and has little screentime in her present-day role as mistreated mother of his child. The narrative problem in *Love* is Murphy and Electra's relationship, which is an issue because they self-admittedly bring out the worst in each other, in terms of drug-taking, and of their constant infidelities.¹² This problem is ultimately unresolvable,

¹¹ See Jones (2020, pp. 213–214) for a detailed discussion of these stereophotos.

¹² Murphy's infidelity with Omi is the most important one in bringing down the relationship, particularly because she is pregnant, an aspiration that Murphy and Electra discuss at length throughout the film, however both have multiple partners outside of the relationship, some agreed upon, some less so. For instance, they engage in agreed sex with others at the sex club, in the threesome with Omi, and with a trans sex worker, but Murphy also has illicit sex with a woman at a party, and someone else at a point when he and Electra are fighting, while Electra has sex with her ex-boyfriend, Noé, which precipitates one of the more violent episodes in the film, when Murphy subsequently attacks him with a bottle.

despite the grand prognostications about love and protecting each other, but Murphy and *Love* both attempt to address it in hindsight in two ways. Firstly, rather than accept the underlying relationship issues, both film and protagonist reframe the problem as located in the single calamitous night of sex, when the condom breaks and Murphy impregnates Omi, who has already stated her stance against abortion earlier in the film (this is the only sex act we see repeated, shown later a second time from a different angle). Secondly, *Love* intercuts copious images of sex with the discussions about the state of their relationship, which forms an analogy for Murphy and Electra's failed attempts to solve their romantic problems through ever more sexual experimentation.

The combination of idealised sexual fantasy, and seeing sex as a solution to larger narrative or societal problems echoes Linda Williams' analysis of the presentation of "utopias" in pornography. Thinking about how narrative and sexual spectacle work together in feature-length 1970s and 1980s heterosexual pornography, Williams argues that these films developed a particular syntax, 'patterns of meaning that formulate sex as a problem and then try to solve this problem through sexual performance' (1999, p. 182). Moreover, she draws a number of parallels between the narrative role of spectacle in pornography and the musical, highlighting the often idealised nature of the spectacle sequences in contrast to the base narrative, with "separated" utopias clearly distinguishing between the fictional world of sexual plenitude and the present, and "integrated" utopias, where the utopian world is somewhere else in the present and therefore less distinctly separated from it (1999, pp. 160–174). In *Love*, the single act of sex that impregnated Omi and thus finished Murphy's relationship with Electra is formulated as the source of the problem, which then extends to an unsatisfying, ostensibly sexless life with Omi and their son. The rest of the film is an attempt to retroactively "solve" this problem. Like in Williams's corpus, this working through of the problem takes place predominantly through lengthy sexual performance. *Love* emulates the "integrated" utopia in that both the present storyline with Omi and the past with Electra are part of Murphy's history, but also evokes the "separated" utopia given the heavy red filter placed on most sex scenes with Electra, firmly distinguishing them from the colder blue tones of his life with Omi. In *Love*, like in the pornographic films analysed by Williams, the present-day situation is a sexual, as much as a romantic, problem which requires solving via a fairly exhaustive fantasy exploration of female bodies. Regardless of how pornographic or artistic the images of sex in *Love* may be, *Love*'s framing of sex and romance, and its sexual and gender politics, align closely with films from the Golden Age of Porn discussed by Williams, a selection of films generally considered to be deeply misogynistic. This comparison becomes even more compelling if we look at Murphy's toxic and abusive treatment of Electra throughout their relationship.

Despite his claims of love, and his sadness at the end of their relationship, it is no exaggeration to qualify Murphy as an abusive, misogynistic partner. He frequently uses misogynistic epithets to insult the women in his life, is violent, aggressive, harassing, and emotionally manipulative, and he constantly frames himself as the victim of his criminal and abusive actions. After one altercation, he pounds at Electra's door screaming that she is a 'fucking bitch ... a selfish cunt', and threatening to kill her, later ringing up their friend Julio to threaten and abuse him for coming to Electra's aid. At another point, they have a screaming match in a taxi, when he shouts in her face that she is a "whore" and a "cunt", saying she will be a useless mother and is a worthless artist, until the driver feels compelled to ask them to calm down. This aggressive misogyny is combined with toxic masculinity as he violently attacks Electra's ex-boyfriend at a party, claiming later to police that he was right to protect his woman [sic], with the film failing to condemn this as the policeman takes Murphy's number in order to go out for a drink with him. Homophobia is also part of this abuse, as he insults a woman as a "dyke" when she refuses to kiss him at the sex party, as he is ashamed of his encounter with the trans sex worker, and as he comments in the voiceover discussing Omi and his son that he 'hope[s] she won't turn him gay'. Finally, we can add that the relationship with Omi is predatory from the start as she admits to being just sixteen years old right before they all have sex, a revelation greeted enthusiastically by Murphy with the words 'I fucking love Europe!'.¹³ All of this controlling and abusive behaviour is then repeatedly justified and turned on its head by Murphy's claim to be the victim at all times: the victim of infidelity even as he has just cheated on Electra, the victim of Noé even as he has just assaulted him, the victim of the break-up even as he precipitated it by cheating with Omi, the victim of his discomfort at seeing Electra have sex with others at the sex club even as it was Murphy's idea to go, and even as he had sex with two other women at the same party. In sum, *Love's* protagonist, with whom the film wholeheartedly identifies, is a thoroughly selfish and unpleasant person, blaming his victims for their abuse and framing himself as the victim of situations he has orchestrated.

While *Love* and *9 Songs* may not be pornographic in terms of genre and aesthetics, they are ideologically aligned with some of the most conservative and regressive examples of heterosexual pornography. Both films operate as the male protagonist's masturbatory re-imagining of their lost relationships, a visualisation of their sexual fantasies, which tend to relegate the women to fantasy objects made available to a male

¹³ The actors were all in their twenties during filming, and visually there is no reason to suggest that Omi is not an adult, not least because she appears to be living independently in a foreign country (actress Klara Kristin was born in 1993 and so already in her twenties during filming). However, she explicitly states her age in the film - 'seventeen, like, soon' - making her seduction by twenty-something students predatory to say the least.

gaze perusing a library of erotic vignettes. They have often been presented as radical for their challenge to generic conventions around filmed sex but their sexual and gender politics are far more traditional and reactionary. Many factors contribute to success in cinema, not least a European production context, well-known male directors and English-language dialogue. Nonetheless, the conservative sexual and gender politics likely also played a role in assuring the establishment critical discussion, newspaper interviews, prominent festival appearances and public interest that enable niche arthouse films to achieve some measure of financial success.

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By contrast, other less well-known films with visible sex often feature more radical approaches to the flows of desire, proposing alternative modes of being-with that privilege intimacy, connection, and solidarity, and which promote ideas about gender and sexual politics that are radically distinct from those discussed so far. This is most evident in the diverse presentations of romance and coupledness. *The Daughters of Fire* promotes comfort and enjoyment above all else: the lines between friends, lovers, partners, acquaintances, fuck buddies and comrades are blurred but this does not lead to tension, power plays, or dominating hierarchies, only mutual understanding, respect and solidarity. *I Want Your Love* similarly places great emphasis on solidarity and friendship, as on a par with, if not superior to, the romantic relationships the film also documents. In a different manner, *Shortbus* extols the virtue of loosening the categories of partner, lover, and friend, inviting all its characters into the pansexual playground of the “Shortbus” salon where the performance of any and all sexual practices is welcome. Branching out from hetero- and homo-normative relationship and sexual tropes is presented as integral to resolving the shortcomings and depressions of modern life. Within a heterosexual framework, *The Story of Richard O.* depicts a sexual odyssey after the protagonist rejects his partner’s desire to have children and enter a normative hetero-parental relationship, experimenting with booty calls, hook-ups with a neighbour, sensuous massage, sex as art, a sex worker, filming women, and more casual encounters with his now ex-girlfriend. Even *Sexual Chronicles of a French Family*, which depicts a relatively traditional family structure, includes an elderly widower’s regular visit to a sex worker who is integrated into the family on his death, the experimentations of the protagonist’s older brother with voyeurism, group sex and bisexuality, and the protagonist and his girlfriend filming their sex to post on an amateur porn website.

As such, unlike *9 Songs* and *Love*, these films question the psychosocial construction of sexual and non-sexual relationships, fundamentally interrogating notions of love, friendship, and romance and thereby, implicitly if not explicitly, presenting

countercultural political structures that challenge existing social norms *as well as* tackling the ever-less-shocking taboo of explicit sex in non-pornographic media. While some more progressive explicit films did achieve some success (notably *The Wayward Cloud*¹⁴ and *Shortbus*), most of these more socially radical films achieved little financial success, which I argue is likely linked to their presentation of love and familial relations as well as more obvious industrial, geopolitical and cultural factors. It is not possible to discuss all of these films, but it is useful to examine two of them in order to demonstrate the ideological gulf separating them from the conservative sexual and gender politics of *9 Songs* and *Love*. First, I look at *The Story of Richard O.*, also directed by a white Frenchman and focussed on heterosexual male desire, then I turn to *The Daughters of Fire*, a lesbian-centred film, directed by an Argentinian woman, and focussed on homosexual female desire. This serves to demonstrate that the relative lack of critical interest in many explicit arthouse films goes beyond the mainstream marginalisation of queer cinema and World cinema, even as these structural impediments play a key role in their limited distribution and critical interest compared to *9 Songs* and *Love*.

The Story of Richard O. has several similarities to *9 Songs* and *Love* as the story of a male protagonist sleeping with multiple women that includes chauvinistic and misogynistic behaviour. Despite its inclusion in this section on progressive imagery, it is important not to overstate its investment in radical visions of gender and sexuality: in one scene he shouts angrily at his ex-girlfriend in public, in another he makes macho comments about the stupidity of condoms. However, the first two scenes, discussed below, as well as tender scenes with a sex worker and with his older neighbour, neither of whom conform to the lithe youthful stereotypes most commonly attributed with sexiness in cinema, demonstrate an engagement with numerous aspects of progressive sexual politics, that are completely lacking in the more critically discussed *9 Songs* and *Love*. Fundamentally, the sexual politics and ideological framing of sex in *The Story of Richard O.* are different. While it is told in flashback, the protagonist dies in the opening scene and so the sex scenes are not framed as his memories or sexual fantasies; moreover, much of the film is devoted to the filming and enactment of the sexual fantasies of women. While Richard sleeps with many women, he is humiliated on several occasions and often reluctant to have sex; rather than experiencing a masculinist ideal of submissive female sexual availability, he is trying to navigate female desires that are

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that, although Tsai Ming-Liang has been read as a queer (if straight) director (Lee, 2007; Martin, 2007), there was significant consternation amongst audiences for the perceived misogyny of *The Wayward Cloud*'s final sequence (Bandis, Martin and McDonald, 2005), and scholars have argued compellingly that it is a critique of pornography and its supposed impact on society (Bao, 2007; Lee, 2007; Eder, 2011; Lim, 2011). *The Wayward Cloud*'s sexual politics are therefore far from straightforwardly progressive, thus perhaps partially explaining its mainstream appeal in Taiwan.

not dictated by the needs or pleasures of a man. Even if there is a romanticised scene of superlative sex with his now ex-girlfriend, she is shown as quite happy with the new casual status of their relationship, which he cannot fully come to terms with. She does not submit to him but rather enjoys the sex without relinquishing her independence or becoming an ever-open sexual fantasy for him.

Most radical in terms of its sexual politics is the film's direct approach to the controversial question of women's fantasies of domination, often known as "rape fantasies". The opening scene involves a woman giving detailed instructions to the protagonist about how to "rape" her once she is asleep, explaining that she could only ask someone to do it whom she knew and trusted. When he does not comply with her wishes, they fight, and he breaks his neck in the ensuing struggle. The second woman he encounters reveals in a video testimony that she wants to be mistreated, 'fucked in a stairwell', 'touched, kneaded, covered and filled with sperm and urine'. When they do meet to have quick, rough, public sex, it is she who demands that he call her a "whore" and after he ejaculates, it is she who pushes his face away roughly and marches out of the room, even as it is the man in her fantasy who treats her in this unsympathetic way. This sex is rough, aggressive and uncomfortably intertwined with violence, but unlike the patriarchal violence imbued into many of Murphy's actions in *Love*, in *The Story of Richard O.*, it serves to reflect on the complexities of masochistic female desire.

These two scenes address the complex sexual politics of masochistic desire. The first scene positions rape fantasy as a masochistic role play, possible only within the confines of the imagination or with a trusted partner because this maintains the woman's control over the situation. The fantasy may superficially appear the same as a rape in that it enacts physical violence, violation, and domination, but the fact that it is consensually orchestrated by the woman, renders it fundamentally different to an actual rape, and provides pleasure precisely because the real danger of being violated non-consensually is absent. Like the masochist in Gilles Deleuze's analysis, who is in control of the ostensibly sadistic situation they set up, the fantasist 'does of course require a special "nature" in the [...] torturer, but he needs to mould this nature, to educate and persuade it in accordance with his secret project' (1989, p. 40). My point here is not to conflate rape fantasy with a desire for masochistic sex in reality, but to show that *from the perspective of the fantasist*, consent and power function like in a consensually masochistic scenario: 'because individuals exert control over the contents of their own fantasies, many rape fantasies involve sexual activities that take place consistent with the will and desire of the fantasizer, even though these activities are against the will of her self-character in the fantasy' (Bivona and Critelli, 2008, p. 58). In other words, in this scene, the woman, like a rape fantasist and in direct opposition to a rape victim, is

in control of the “rapist” who performs the “sadistic” acts on demand for the masochist as part of a role-play scenario. For this reason, this scene could be read as a critique of term “rape fantasy” itself, showing that it has little to do with rape and might be better understood as a sexual domination fantasy or a fantasy of consensual violence, distinct from the term “rape” altogether.¹⁵

Moreover, the second scene can be seen to enact Cowie’s description of the rape fantasy as one that ‘absolves the subject from the guilt and responsibility of his or her desire, which appears to come to it from outside, apparently imposed, but in which the subject will be pleased’ (1992, p. 143). Read thus, the rape fantasy is an imaginative exercise that channels the desire to dominate into an act of ostensible submission, explaining the abuse Richard receives from his would-be victim. While the second woman expresses her desires in terms of being degraded and humiliated by a stranger, it is the stranger (here Richard) who is humiliated. She intimidates him into insulting her; uncomfortable with the public location and shocked, he is abandoned with his trousers round his ankles, he then forlornly follows her through the streets in an erotic game of cat and mouse, in which she plays the mouse but remains entirely in control. The woman formulates a fantasy of degrading submission, but when enacting this, it is transformed into an act of domination, suggesting that the submission fantasy is an elaborate reconfiguration of her desire to dominate in a world which encourages submissiveness in women; there is no telling as to whether in her fantasy, she identifies more with the person degrading her, or with the self-character she invents.

The depiction of desire and pleasure in *The Story of Richard O.* is, with some problematic exceptions, frequently decentred from the male protagonist, and a male-centred vision of sexuality more generally. While the reputations of its male director (Damien Odoul) and main actor (Mathieu Amalric), who had both won major awards for directing and acting, might have suggested a more promising reception for the film, its more radical presentation of sexual and gender politics, in comparison to *9 Songs* and *Love*, may ultimately have been an important factor in its relative obscurity.

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The final film to examine here is *The Daughters of Fire*, one of the most aesthetically, narratively and conceptually adventurous of all the romantic arthouse films featuring explicit sex. Unlike the other films discussed above, male desire and sexual fantasy have little place here, and its sexual and gender politics emphasise a radical decentring

¹⁵ Indeed, this fundamental distinction leads some to criticise the inclusion of the word *rape* in *rape fantasy* (see Seltzer, 2014). Other suggestions to replace this uncomfortable term are ‘consensual non-consensual’ sex, ‘fantasies of being ravished’, ‘consensual ravishment’ or ‘agreed-to aggression’.

of the family, the couple, monogamy and patriarchy above all.¹⁶ The film's story begins somewhat conventionally as a romance and road-trip film, as the two main characters (Augustine and Violeta), separated for some time, become reacquainted with each other's bodies, discover a reason for a road trip and embark on this with a third woman (Carmen) they pick up in a bar. Throughout the film they will then pick up several more women who join them for an erotic polyamorous adventure. Violeta is a film director, who also wants to take advantage of the trip to make a porn film; the voiceover is mainly Violeta's musings about pornography and sexuality, and later we see scenes that she stages with her fellow voyagers that will form part of her film.

What is particularly interesting about *The Daughters of Fire* is the way that the narrative and the aesthetics become progressively freer and less conventional in line with the expansion of the group beyond the original couple. The beginning of the film ostensibly shows Violeta and Augustine to be a couple, and at this point, the film has a clear chronology, clear distinction between diegetic reality and narrator reflection, and clear purpose. The original couple expands into a threesome, a foursome and then into a more fluid connection within a wider network of women, desires, and pleasures, all of which we see in long, explicit sequences. As the film progresses, the narrative becomes less and less conventional: numerous scenes blur diegetic reality, Violeta's fictional concoctions and other fantasy sequences not attributed to any one character are merged with each other, and by the end of the film, the diegesis has been detached from any sense of temporal progression, floating peacefully from one image to the next without any obvious connection between them. In one scene, translucent images of sex, partially new, partially drawn from previous scenes, are interlaced with images of red and blue jellyfish, propelling themselves gently across the screen, neither appearing constantly in front of nor behind the shots of sex. The penultimate sequence features jarring jump cuts of characters on a swing, slow-motion shots of rippling water and blurry images of people imitating animals. By the final sequence, the fairly conventional shooting style, with contextualising shots, eyeline matches, shot-reverse-shot, etc. of the film's opening is completely abandoned for a roving long take that settles upon a character who only joined the group at a relatively late stage in the film, as she masturbates alone in a garden. In other words, *The Daughters of Fire* takes the viewer on a stylistic journey as much as a sexual one, with the increasing radicality of the characters' sexual and gender politics being mirrored in the film's stylistic choices. Indeed this is hinted at by the director in a comment about the film's narrative: 'what we're also going to get rid of is the need to narrate in those terms' (in Jurado Naón, 2018).

¹⁶ Some of the other films I could have discussed here as presenting more radical perspectives on sex and relationships could be described as queer cinema such as *I Want Your Love* and *Shortbus*.

One of the other radical gestures that *The Daughters of Fire* makes is to fully assume its status as pornographic. Debates about whether the film should be considered as pornography aside, Violeta is a self-avowed pornographer and several of the explicit scenes we see are due to form part of her film, while director Albertina Carri happily declared herself a maker of pornographic films (Gallego, 2018). This has undoubtedly fuelled attacks on the film as unartistic or uncinematic (see Soriano and Calcagno, 2018), but it must be seen as presenting a radical view of art and cinema. In essence, the film puts forward a version of sex-positivity, embracing explicit and arousing images of sex as worthy avenues of cinematic exploration, whether it be artistic, pornographic or something else. At the same time, the critiques of patriarchy with the storyline of a straight woman being helped to escape from her abusive husband and an early fight against the homophobes in a bar, as well as emphasis on lesbian-feminist love and community, show that this is not unconditional sex positivity. The film documents a progressive idealist sexual project where hierarchies are flattened (see Jurado Naón, 2018) and where sexual pleasure is embraced outside of judgemental aesthetic categories such as art or pornography. Going a little bit in this direction, Damien Odoul declared himself keen to direct a pornographic film even as he described *The Story of Richard O.* as erotic rather than pornographic (de Médina, 2009). I am suggesting that the open discussion of pornography, the incorporation of pornographic material (*Daughters*), footage of the making of pornographic films (*Daughters*)¹⁷ and filmed interviews with characters explaining their sexual fantasies (*Richard O.*), in a mise-en-abyme of the processes of filming sex, are themselves gestures of a progressive sexual politics. These presentations of sex at least hint at an idealised view of sexual imagery where explicitness itself is not politically or ethically disqualifying, and can be considered as just another element of a film to be taken into account.

Winterbottom, Noé, and their casts, on the other hand, go to great lengths to distinguish their work from pornography, and also assiduously avoid any discussion or representation of pornography within the films (see Hennigan, 2005; Jeffries, 2005; Barlow, 2015; Kenber, 2016). This omission stems from the danger of being openly associated with pornography. They must repeat their claims precisely because the films are so closely linked to conventional pornography, if we expand the analysis beyond the precise mise-en-scène and cinematography of the sex scenes. They deny their

¹⁷ Also *The Wayward Cloud*, *Sexual Chronicles of a French Family* and *Shortbus*. Even if these depictions are a form of 'critical appropriation of the pornographic image [...] to reflect on how mainstream cinema frames the body' (Lee, 2007, p. 128) and eschew the maximalist visibility of much pornography, these images are still overtly engaging with the pornographic, in contrast to *9 Songs* and *Love*, which position themselves as artistic erotica, rejecting any perceived connection to pornography.

films are pornographic, partially because of financial imperatives (pornography will be restricted and potentially subject to punitive tax regimes) but also partially because of a conservative political outlook on pornography which they consider to be inherently ethically compromised. Ultimately, pornography functions as the libidinal foundation of *9 Songs* and *Love*, but their fragile existence as explicit films on general release only holds by disavowing the very libidinal economy which provides their structure. While pornography can remain an implicitly recognised grounding for these films, this connection can never be explicitly acknowledged as this could provoke censorship, and so it is virulently denied.¹⁸ In other words, although *9 Songs* and *Love* appear to reject any connections to pornography (apart from visible images of sex), their success and fame rely heavily upon their unspoken connections to the sexual ideology of vast swathes of heterosexual pornography, which is palatable and relatable for their audiences. In *The Daughters of Fire* and *The Story of Richard O.*, the reverse is true: while they admit to the role of pornography in the formulation of sexual imagery, their libidinal foundations are constituted from more radical ideas about fantasy, sexuality, and sexual politics.

Where *9 Songs* and *Love* remain stuck in a rigid, biologically deterministic attitude towards sex and sexuality, these less well-known films consider sex and sexuality as constructed and mutable. *The Daughters of Fire* makes this performative, malleable aspect of sexuality even clearer in its spectacular cross-dressing set pieces.¹⁹ In *The Daughters of Fire*, this involves an imagined scene, rescuing a floating water nymph, played by one member of the group where the rescuers perform the courageous masculinity of a stereotypical brave man, whilst all adorned with campy moustaches and dressed up as ranch hands. Linda Williams comments on pornography's limited capacity for imagining alternative solutions to its narrative problems, suggesting that it would be 'unthinkable within the limits of the genre' to envisage 'a nonsexual solution to the power imbalance' of the main couple (1999, p. 170). *9 Songs* and *Love* seem to share this limited imagination, returning again and again to sex to resolve the present situation, even as our knowledge of the present moment tells us and the protagonists that this is impossible. By contrast, *The Daughters of Fire* does not see the sexual numbers as resolving anything, nor does it conceive of the present-day situation as something that needs solving. In this sense, despite their close engagement with pornography, and their explicit, sensuous, arousing erotic sequences, *The Daughters of Fire*, and *The Story*

¹⁸ This is analogous to Žižek's discussion of violent hazing practices in the US military: 'when the public disclosure of these practices (somebody secretly shot them on video and made the tape public) caused such an outrage, what disturbed the public was not the practice of hazing itself (everybody was aware that things like this were going on) but the fact of rendering it public' (1997b, p. 33). It was not the violence itself that had consequences but the acknowledgement of that violence.

¹⁹ See also *The Wayward Cloud* for its spectacular musical sequences.

of *Richard O.* approach sex and sexuality quite differently to much pornography. *9 Songs* and *Love*, on the other hand, are underpinned by a similar conservative ideology to that of conventional heterosexual pornography.

In aligning themselves sufficiently with conventional ideas about love, and with the sexual and gender politics of much heterosexual pornography, *9 Songs* and *Love* allow their images of visible sex to be more easily recuperated by the mainstream. *The Daughters of Fire*, *The Story of Richard O.* and a host of other explicit arthouse films instead embrace the pornographic, but in doing so try to say something more complex about sexuality and romance than *9 Songs* and *Love* can proffer. Close analysis of the ideological framing of these films suggests that the divide between them can in part be attributed to their fundamentally divergent visions of sex and sexuality.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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