

MOVIE BOOKS What makes some films sexy? Christopher Wood muses on erotic cinema

EROTIC CINEMA

by Douglas Keeseey.

Taschen, £9.99

MOVIES OF THE 50s

by Jürgen Müller.

Taschen, £19.99

WHAT is erotic? After all, in sex, as in gastronomy, one man's meat is another man's poison. A quick look on the internet (don't try this at work) will confirm the bizarre and ingenious diversity of what people find sexually stimulating. In a world where, during the 1980s, several men put their hand on their heart and sincerely declared a sexual attraction towards Mrs Thatcher, is any kind of consensus possible?

Erotic Cinema seeks that consensus by exploring the buttons that cinema has pushed over the years to try to turn us on. The first screen

'Jane Russell's breasts hang over the picture like a thunderstorm'

kiss came in 1896, and brought with it the first calls for censorship.

"The spectacle of their prolonged pasturing on each other's lips was hard to bear," wrote an outraged publisher in Chicago. "Such things call for police interference." But sex was not going to wait politely outside the cinema as men and women fell in love while keeping one foot on the floor. In 1943 a judge in Maryland banned Howard Hughes's *The Outlaw*, with Jane Russell (pictured), revealing in his poetic denunciation that he was of the devil's party without knowing it: "Russell's breasts hang over the picture like a summer thunderstorm spread out over a landscape."

The boss of 20th Century-Fox, Darryl Zanuck, was canny enough to know that sex and religion made an unbeatable combination:

"When you get a sex story in biblical garb, you can open your own mint." Sex was here to stay. (Religion maybe not.)

But sex is not the same as eroticism. In fact, paradoxically, they may even militate against one another. According to Sophia Loren: "Sex appeal is 50 per cent what you've got and 50 per cent what people think you've got." And the director Elia Kazan claimed: "To show the act itself is not erotic... The arousal of desire is erotic." Which is the problem with *Erotic Cinema*. For all that *Ai No Corrida* (which looms large in the book) — with its tumbling orientals, entwined and strangling for all they were worth — was a groundbreaking film, it is less certain than it was erotic.

Just as Hitchcock realised that suspense often hinged upon what you didn't show, a large part of the erotic is something that occurs in the viewer's imagination and not on the screen. It's not what happens but what doesn't.

In which case, the 1950s might be the most erotic decade of all. All that nothing happening! Lawns grew and were trimmed back as material prosperity seeped into people's lives. In America they could afford psychoanalysis — and just as well, for life was dull as ditchwater.

In the movies, as *Movies of the 50s* reminds us, film noir shook off its widow's weeds and reinvented itself, dandified, as Technicolor. A few lefties were kicked out of Hollywood and ended up in the UK. But that is about as much analysis as you will get. *Movies of the 50s* is really little more than an assemblage of good-looking film stills. For an amusing and intelligent look at Fifties trends and processes, the reader should check out Peter Biskind's writings, and find out what the creatures who emerged from so many polystyrene flying saucers were really trying to tell us.

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