

# Off-screen: Sex and Implicit Signification in Film

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# Off-Screen: Sex and Implicit Signification in Film

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore the phenomenon of implied sex in cinema from the methodological standpoint of film semiotics. The representation of sex in film is interpreted through the prism of signification and signifying practices. Special emphasis is placed on signs which require the viewer's active participation in the extraction of their meaning. Specifically, what is analysed are instances of the depiction of sex via hints within the *mise-en-scène*, suggestive editing, or expository screenwriting. The paper primarily consists of textual analyses of the following films (listed here in chronological order according to release date): *Ecstasy* (1933, dir. Gustav Macahtý), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951, dir. Elia Kazan), *North by Northwest* (1959, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), *Persona* (1966, dir. Ingmar Bergman), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975, dir. Chantal Akerman), *Eraserhead* (1977, dir. David Lynch), *La pianiste* (2001, dir. Michael Haneke). Providing a counterexample, the paper also touches upon the problematic of sexual explicitness, as demonstrated by *Nymphomaniac* (2013, dir. Lars von Trier) and *Love* (2015, dir. Gaspar Noé). The implication/explication dichotomy is put into question throughout the paper, with the aim of putting forward a potentially more nuanced analytical toolkit for the interpretation of sex scenes in cinema. It is, however, demonstrated that a notion of "explicitness" is nevertheless present in the societal and institutional response to films which thematise sexuality. It is precisely this response which points to the broader issue of sex and social control (examined from the perspectives of social theorists Wilhelm Reich and Michel Foucault). It is hoped this study will provide an informed overview of the relationship between sex and signification within film, perhaps offering possibilities for further study.

**Keywords:** semiology, cinema, implicit signification, eroticism, film semiotics, sexuality

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## INTRODUCTION

In the final scene of *North by Northwest* (1959, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), the protagonist Roger Thornhill (played by Cary Grant) helps his lover Eve (Eva Marie Saint) climb on top of the upper berth of a train. They embrace and kiss, sinking into the bunk. The subsequent shot, accompanied by a swell in the soundtrack, famously features a train entering a tunnel. In an interview with François Truffaut (published in 1966 with the title *Hitchcock/Truffaut*), Hitchcock refers to the ending shot as one of the most “impudent [he’d] ever made” and labels the train as a “phallic symbol” (Truffaut 1985: p. 150). Clearly no stranger to psychoanalytic notions of the repressed, Hitchcock deliberately introduces an evocative sexual allusion into a film which otherwise repeatedly *approaches* the ostensibly self-evident physical conclusion of the proximity of two attractive heterosexual characters, but never seems to grant the viewer the voyeuristic pleasure of actually seeing it happen. Instead, what Hitchcock introduces is, to borrow semiotic terminology, an *implicit sign* – a cinematic nudge-and-wink.

If one is to imagine the cinematic sign in relation to verbal language, one distinction that may be made is that the cinematic sign, if we are to follow Metzian semiotics, is not fully arbitrary, but motivated (Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 2005: p. 36). The implicit sign in a film is a heavily coded one, the signifier conspicuously differentiating itself from the signified, yet nevertheless hinting at the existence of a separate, out-of-field world, away from the viewer’s gaze, but still reachable with only a slightly more inspired use of the mind’s eye. This is not a pipe, and that is not a train. Not only is it not a train, but it isn’t even the representation of *just* a train. That-which-is-not-just-a-train exists in the off-screen space, a distinct realm of meaning-formation. The aim of this thesis is, thus, to explore this space in the context of the filmic sexual imaginary. Moreover, I hope to provide a multifaceted textual (and contextual) analysis of several different case studies in order to examine the unique status of sex within cinema and representation in general. Though the primary focus may be on cine-semiology and reception theory, I also hope to pose questions regarding the filmmaking techniques involved in suggestion and metaphor, as well as the societal implications of a coy, yet constantly revisited relationship between sex, sexuality and audio-visual media.

### **Methodological Concerns of the Explicit/Implicit Dichotomy**

When Hedy Lamarr's character (the symbolically named Eva) in Gustav Machatý's *Ecstasy* (1933) experiences an orgasm, the entirety of the sexual contact occurs outside of the viewer's direct gaze. However, Adam's (Aribert Mog) position in relation to Eva's body (his head located beneath her waist) makes sexual association appear almost natural, as what is implied still leaves very few options for a reasonable conclusion as to what is happening between the characters. In this respect, I wish to postulate and hopefully exhibit, through exemplification, the gradation in implicit signification from the seemingly obvious to the mostly metaphoric. In other words, the main question that needs addressing is what type of cultural framework is at play when sex is encoded into the cinematic sign and later decoded by the viewer. Furthermore, what roles do these meaning structures play in making a sexual act appear represented (as well as read) in a more or less straightforward way? One analytical tool I will be consulting in regards to the possibilities and limitations of viewer reception is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, as laid out in his text 'Encoding, Decoding' (1993). Following this model, neither the productive nor receptive ends of a communicative event (in this case, the act of watching a film) can exist independently of the cultural (political, social, ideological, economic) conditions which constitute meaning-formation. For the remainder of this thesis, "meaning-formation" will refer primarily to the decoding process, as the implicit sign not only requires the viewer to *read* and *interpret* it, but to actively construct it, as will be demonstrated by individual case studies later on.

Applying this model to the implication of sex in a visual medium such as film may unearth a broad variety of ways and degrees to which sex can be enshrouded, yet still clearly suggested by certain techniques which can, once again, perhaps be best described as "more or less straightforward". An analysis of several sex scenes in Haneke's *La pianiste* (2001) might provide more clarification. In *Michael Haneke's Cinema* (2009), Catherine Wheatley repeatedly refers to the off-screen nature of the sexual acts represented in the film. She labels these acts as *implicit*, especially in relation to the *explicit* nature of the hard-core pornography viewed by Erika (Isabelle Huppert) in a porn-viewing booth:

In the course of the film, the spectator witnesses three narrative instances of intercourse, but in each case the sexual act either occurs in the off-screen space or

is obscured within the frame. The pornography booth scene thus also serves to remind us what is implicit in Haneke's film. These images act almost as visual aids, to be recalled whenever the spectator is prompted to imagine what it is that lies outside the cinematic frame.

(Wheatley 2009: p. 134)

However, the sex scenes in *La pianiste* all occur, on the narrative level, in front of the viewer's eyes. What makes these scenes supposedly non-explicit is the obfuscation of direct genital contact. When Erika takes Walter's (Benoît Magimel) penis in her hand, the borders of the frame do not extend beyond her wrist. When Walter rapes Erika, the viewer only has access to both of their facial expressions. The sexual acts are, however, directly acknowledged by the characters in terms of dialogue, the scenes play out in "real time" (they are not cut in such a way as to speed the action up), and the bodily motions and reactions involved are presented in a naturalist fashion, supposedly "true to reality"<sup>1</sup>. Wheatley's analysis of *La pianiste* brings to light one very particular definition of what makes a cinematic sign implicit rather than explicit: according to this view, a sign is *implicit* as long it visually obscures a key aspect of the sexual contact (in this case, genital stimulation). As with all signification, the viewer must rely on their own, internal meaning structure to *complete* the sign (at least insofar as the implication can be translated and constructed into a readable communicative moment). It would be difficult to demarcate a specific point where a filmic sign (so reliant on and, indeed, limited by its audio-visual form) transitions from an implicit to an explicit one. In accordance with this, I would like to explore the concept of *degrees* of explication in relation to signification in live-action film.

Compare the rape scene in *La pianiste* to the climax of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951, dir. Elia Kazan), where Blanche (Vivien Leigh) is, it is strongly suggested, violently raped by Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando). As he grabs her, their shattered reflection in the mirror is composed in such a way that it forefronts Blanche's limpness as she's held forcefully in place by Kowalski. The action is frozen for a brief second, underlined by the arrhythmic pause, emphasised as an interaction between the two characters that necessitates a moment of *extended* contemplation. The scene fades out, fading back in to a shot of a man cleaning the sidewalk with a firehose. On a narrative level, the characters don't call what happened between Kowalski

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<sup>1</sup> "True to reality", of course, comes with a significant degree of conditionality and, in fact, a hint of irony, as very few aspects of human life maintain such a transactional relationship to media as sex. *Sex* is by no means a given, preceding its own representation (which can be more or less "realistic" in its depiction). What "true to reality" refers to here is, rather, a depiction of sex almost entirely devoid of conventions used to construct it as a metaphorical, innuendo-laden cinematic spectacle.

and Blanche by its name. Instead, Blanche is clearly horribly traumatised and exhibits signs of psychosis (for which no unambiguous explanation is given) and the supporting characters acknowledge the situation only in very general terms (such as Mitch (Karl Malden) shouting “You did this to her!” to Kowalski). However, once he is stared down by his friends (who tacitly seem to wish to express what Mitch dared to verbalise himself), Kowalski responds with the most damning piece of evidence of them all: the defensive claim that he “never once touched her.” Thanks to only one line of dialogue – a negative statement at that – the viewer’s multiform suspicions crystallise into what would appear to be the only reasonable conclusion: the physical altercation between Blanche and Kowalski was sexual in nature. The crime committed by Kowalski transitions from intimidation and battery to sexual violence, thus saturating the scene with a whole new set of connotations and undertones.

Functioning similarly to the mechanism of the linguistic concept of a conversational implicature, an implicit sign in a film requires *cooperation* between the content and its viewer in order to be completed<sup>2</sup>. In *La pianiste*, the viewer is required to fully comprehend the interactions between the characters as sexual without relying on the direct visual display of physical sexual contact, as the action is always placed partially out of frame. On the other hand, with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the viewer must piece together the action from several distinct and scattered “hints” (which are, still, contingent and depend on each other in order to be legible), including, but not limited to:

- the position of the two characters in relation to each other (i.e. Kowalski’s embrace of Blanche, which, though violent, brings the characters physically closer than they’d been at any point previous in the film)
- the shattered mirror and all of the potential symbolism of such a visual (the fragmentation of identity, a loss of a sense of self, the destruction of something fragile, etc.)
- the brief freeze-frame of the mirror shot, which in itself makes the scene stand out, indicating to the viewer that the action is significant and should be committed to memory

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<sup>2</sup> As phrased by Paul Grice (who coined the term *implicature*), the cooperative principle states that one should “[m]ake [one’s] contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [one is] engaged” (Grice 1975: p. 45). In other words, communication is only efficient if it is assumed that certain maxims are being followed by all parties. It should be noted, however, that while I adopt a significant amount of Gricean terminology, his maxims and divisions of implicature are not to be taken at face value.



- the fade in to the cleaning of a street with a water hose (phallic imagery or, perhaps, an introduction to the following scene wherein the characters are attempting to “cleanse” the neighbourhood of this crime by sending Blanche to a psychiatric institution and confronting Kowalski)
- Blanche displaying signs of trauma and psychosis in the next scene, refusing to show herself in front of the men, avoiding eye-contact, and, in general, exhibiting signs of having been assaulted in a way distinctly different from Kowalski’s previous abusive behaviours.

While *La pianiste* only visually obscures the rape that clearly occurs within the storyline, *A Streetcar Named Desire* utilises nearly the whole filmic instrumentarium in order to get the point across; from character dialogue to shot composition and conspicuous editing, the interaction is painted as sexual by a variety of different brush strokes.

One methodological issue here, of course, is whether the explicit/implicit dichotomy can be expressed as such at all. In a less than favourable review in *The Guardian*’s sister paper *The Observer*, *La pianiste* is described as follows:

Like most people making sexually explicit films for art-house audiences today, Haneke proudly, and rightly, boasts that his film is neither pornographic nor erotic. It is, in fact, limited, dull and often, especially during the latter wild stages, unintentionally hilarious, thus confirming a widely held view that humour disappeared from Austria with the arrival of the Nazis.

(*The Observer* 2001)

Labelling the film as sexually explicit (with the noteworthy addition of placing it in the context of European art house cinema), the author clearly deviates from Wheatley’s notion of implication. *La pianiste* can, apparently, be described in both terms depending on to what it is being compared. Wheatley labels it as implicit in comparison to hard-core pornography, whereas the reviewer seems to consult the genre-based tradition of live-action film which has, historically, understated the sexual nature of certain character interactions by, say, omitting them from the narrative altogether or metaphorising them in order to make them distinguishable from pornographic content<sup>3</sup> (or what would be culturally considered to be pornographic content

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<sup>3</sup> By this it is meant that live-action film often relies on editing disrupting the “real-time” duration of the sexual act, with very little or no dialogue acknowledging the act itself, and on abstracting the act into a vague and generalised depiction of “intercourse”.

at that point in time). The aim of this paper is, thus, not to treat the explicit/implicit dichotomy as a given, much less to reinforce it, but to view implication as a process of negotiation between the viewer and the cinematic sign – a process that does not necessarily end when full frontal nudity is introduced into a live-action film. The *off-screen* space will be treated as ever-present, forming a conceptual margin within which the viewer may take notes, underline certain symbols, or re-write certain pieces of dialogue in order to decode or, in fact, construct the sign's meaning. The way this *off-screen* space is offered to the viewer, however, changes from film to film, the cooperation between the film and the viewer necessitating different sets of meaning structures on both ends. The purpose of this paper is to examine the possible techniques of establishing this cooperation, as well as to pinpoint certain cultural paradigms assumed when both encoding and decoding the sign. What “hints” are given? What elements of the sexual act are omitted? For what possible purpose? Where do concepts of desire and eroticism come into play when the “out of frame” becomes foregrounded? Which common symbols can be immediately recognised? Conversely, which symbols might be more abstract, generating a multitude of possible interpretations? Given the socio-historical context of certain films, what can be potentially said about the ways the *off-screen* space changes over time?

While certainly not in-depth enough a research endeavour as these questions would warrant, my hope for this paper is to provide a basic framework for further study, as well as to touch upon the overall status of sex in live-action film as a topic astoundingly variable and kaleidoscopic in its production and interpretation. As film not only reflects, but has a role in constructing social reality, one of the more pressing questions here should address what can be learned about the discursive attitude towards sex exhibited through these heterogeneous (yet, in many ways, self-consistent depending on genre, period, and location) and, more important yet, *recurrent* implicit portrayals. Finally, can it be said that these conventions of signification simultaneously beget transgressive divergences within filmmaking, and how can this ostensible countercinema orient itself in relation to the socio-sexual *dispositif* which dominates normative representational practices in media?

## Early Examples of Implicit Sexuality and Its Reception

### *Ecstasy*

*Ecstasy*, the previously referenced Czech-Austrian production released in 1933, directed by Gustav Machatý, and starring Hedy Lamarr (then Kiesler) is an oft-cited cinematic “first” of many categories of sexual representation, the two most notable being its depiction of nudity and a female orgasm. While, historically, these weren’t the first instances of such subjects being immortalised on celluloid film, *Ecstasy* was unique in the sense that it was a non-pornographic motion picture which included a sex scene. The scene in question was the encounter between Eva and Adam in his living room. Doused with high-key lighting and slightly overexposed, Eva lies on her back as a close-up of her face is intercut with Adam sinking lower between her legs. The steady increase in excitement visible on Eva’s face indicates that she eventually reaches orgasm, an unprecedented scene in 1930s world cinema. Lucy Fischer describes it in detail in her article on the film:

Both characters are fully clothed as they make love on a bed, and often Adam seems to be sitting beside Eva rather than embracing her. What we do see is a montage of synechdocal [*sic*] close-ups that evoke the sinful event: Eva’s hand dropping, skimming the shag rug; her necklace of pearls breaking and falling to the ground; her chest heaving in erotic hyperventilation; and finally, her face in a grimace of ecstasy.

(Fischer 2001: p. 132)

The “grimace of ecstasy” was caused, in fact, by Lamarr recoiling in pain after Machatý, dissatisfied with her performance up to that take, pricked the sole of her foot with a pin (Fischer 2001: p. 137-1378). As the close-up of her face is edited together with shots of Aribert Mog (presumably) simulating cunnilingus, sexual pleasure is inscribed into what is, in actuality, an expression of discomfort. Discomfort, in fact, is treated as the only *true* signifier of pleasure, as Lamarr’s previous attempts to emulate sexual climax without the director’s intervention were deemed less effective. The scene demonstrates, in the most “textbook” of ways, the remarkable signifying authority of the Kuleshov effect, as described to François Truffaut by Alfred Hitchcock:

In one of [Vsevolod Pudovkin's] books on the art of montage, he describes an experiment by his teacher, [Lev] Kuleshov. You see a close-up of the Russian actor Ivan Mosjoukine. This is immediately followed by a shot of a dead baby. Back to Mosjoukine again and you read compassion on his face. Then you take away the dead baby and you show a plate of soup, and now, he looks hungry. Yet, in both cases, they used the same shot of the actor; his face was exactly the same.

(Truffaut 1985: p. 214-216)

Another motif worth mentioning is Eva lighting a cigarette after the gradual resolution of the sequence – a classic post-coital visual cue. Indeed, the after-sex cigarette is a particularly interesting prop as it contributes to the *retroactive* signification of the previous scene, adding to the implicature only after the implied action has been completed within the film's syuzhet.

Experiencing censorship in Europe as well as the US, *Ecstasy* was clearly deemed objectionable, formally condemned by organizations such as the American Catholic Legion of Decency, which oversaw the adherence of individual films to certain moral principles based in religion and chastity. Some contemporary criticisms of the film include epithets such as “indecent and morally dangerous”, “unsuitable, immoral and lascivious” and “extremely audacious” (cited by Eliza Berman in her TIME article (2015) on Hedy Lamarr). Though there are numerous references to sex and sexuality in the film, including full frontal nudity, Lamarr herself (cited by Fischer) reveals the significance of the sex scene, even when compared to other racy moments in *Ecstasy*:

The primary objection was *not* the nude swimming scene, which you have no doubt heard so much about, or the sequence of my fanny twinkling through the woods, but the close-up of my *face*, in that cabin sequence where the camera records the reactions of a love-starved bride in the act of sexual intercourse.

(Fischer 2001: p. 132)

In Berman's 2015 article, one sentence mirrors a similar, albeit more recent evaluation of degrees of “raciness”:

One day while swimming nude in a lake, her horse runs off with her clothing draped across its back. A naked Eva chases the horse through the countryside, in a scene that was scandalous for its nudity but G-rated compared to what comes later.

(Berman 2015)

("What comes later", of course, being the sexual encounter between Eva and Adam.) The controversy lies not in what is exposed in the film (in terms of female nudity), but precisely in what is *concealed*, yet transmitted to the viewer nonetheless through a complex arrangement of euphemistic signifiers (a broken necklace, a particularly indulgent smoke, sudden excitement on a woman's face). The sexual nature of the character interaction is not only consistently *read* by the film's viewership as such, but also represents its defining feature. Without this cinematic innuendo, on the other hand, the film would fall within the realm of pornography, distributed only on the margins of the entertainment industry.

There is an externally imposed *necessity* (rather than an aesthetic calling) to use implicit signification, yet the nature of the signified is such that it bleeds through the shroud and still marginalises the film to a degree. Could it be said, however, that there is something precisely in this concealment which possesses the potential to change the way meaning is extrapolated from certain signs? Furthermore, within the context of sex, can the eroticism of certain scenes be enhanced by suspending the signified in the mid-space of implication, wherein the viewer's interaction with the sign as a whole becomes more flexible? To explore this question further, I will now turn to the issue of eroticism itself, as well as a different, linguistic mode of expressing it: through the film's screenplay.

## **Eroticism and Implication through Screenwriting**

### *Persona*

In the film studies documentary, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006, dir. Sophie Fiennes), wherein theorist Slavoj Žižek presents a crash course of psychoanalytic readings of a variety of canonical films, he describes a particular scene in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) in the following terms:

There is in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* a wonderful scene where Bibi Andersson tells to mute Liv Ullmann a story about [a] small orgy on a beach which took place years ago. This scene is so erotic precisely because Bergman successfully resisted the temptation of a flashback. No flashback – just words. Probably one of the most erotic scenes in the entire history of cinema.

Andersson's character Alma recounts the story sitting curled up in a large chair, dimly lit, as Elisabet (Liv Ullmann) listens quietly on the other side of the room. The scene plays out as a six-minute monologue, delivered by the character in a condition of simultaneous anguished guilt (as she had cheated on her husband) and recollected, relived pleasure. The small orgy (between her friend Katarina and two young boys) resulted in a pregnancy and subsequent abortion (arranged by Alma's husband, who was unaware the child was not his). This adds a significant degree of dramatic (and potentially erotic) tension to the scene, as Alma's visible distress reveals to the viewer the still-present emotional/sensual connection between the character and the past, out-of-view events which unfold in her story.

The nature of the monologue itself is a frank retelling of the sexual encounter, lacking euphemisms or obvious embellishment. Though Alma appears emotionally distraught throughout the scene (culminating in her crying in Elisabet's arms), she does not deny or even understate the pleasure involved in the experience:

I felt for the first time in my life how he poured inside me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and arched backwards. I came again and again. Katarina was now at his side, looking at him, and held him from behind. When he came, she hugged him and grabbed his hand to masturbate with. When she came, she cried so much.

It would, rather, seem as though the carnal enjoyment derived from the encounter is the very source of her shame and neurosis as she talks to (talks *at*) Elisabet. Though her (or, rather,

Bergman's) choice of words may be candid, Bibi Andersson's delivery seems to portray an unreconciled and lingering disbelief regarding the fact that she herself participated in the described events. The monologue thus reveals to the viewer something that a straightforward flashback might not fully portray: the *lasting* effect of the sexual interaction on the character and the way the memory resurfaces with such force and in such a way that it demands to be re-experienced through language. The memory, naturally, becomes its own, separate entity once it is reproduced as a part of Alma's present context and may be regarded as a new, linguistically mediated occurrence.

According to Žižek's analysis, this mediation and the eroticism achieved are in direct relation – a relation which would be unwoven if Bergman resorted to an explicit visual depiction of the orgy. Eroticism in itself, however, should be explored as a distinct element of this and similar cinematic moments. In the introduction to *Love and Eroticism* (1999), sociologist Mike Featherstone opens the publication by suggesting one possible definition of eroticism based on works by Octavio Paz and Zygmunt Bauman:

Eroticism is this infinite variety of forms based upon constant invention, elaboration, taming and regulation of the sexual impulse. Sexuality, then, makes eroticism possible, but eroticism transcends reproduction through its capacity to elaborate sexual experience and invent a separate realm of associated pleasure. Or, as Zygmunt Bauman succinctly puts it in his contribution to the volume, eroticism is the 'cultural processing' of sex.

(Featherstone 1999: p. 1)

While being depicted in a film may present a first order of the "cultural processing" of sex, its appearance through character monologue may be regarded as a cultural processing of a second order. The viewing pleasure induced is thus marked by meanings and associations of a kind that evolves separately from the immediate voyeurism of observing a simulated on-screen sexual act. This second-order eroticism is achieved through the evocation of taboo, psychological struggle, and shame, as well as the power of that self-same eroticism to prevail over all three concepts once the character submits to it. These associations, dictated in part by the meaning structures immanent from the process of writing the screenplay to its final reception by the viewer of the film, thrive within the off-screen space and, indeed, constitute a "separate realm" wherein sex and sexuality take on a shape not necessarily immediately related to the direct, bodily copulation of two or more individuals (or film characters).

## Minimalist Implication and Anti-Eroticism

### *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*

*Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975, dir. Chantal Akerman; henceforth ‘*Jeanne Dielman*’) is in many ways a counterpoint to the feverish verbosity of *Persona*. The analysed example scene is entirely devoid of dialogue (beyond a cordial “good day”) and hinges on the juxtaposition of two shots of the same hallway towards the beginning of the film. Regarded by many as an early feminist exploration of home-making and women’s responsibility towards it, *Jeanne Dielman* does not seem to aim towards extracting erotic viewing pleasure from the sexual interaction in question. Rather, its exclusion from the viewer’s direct gaze may potentially serve an entirely different function than the off-screen sex of *Persona*’s monologue. Where the *Persona* scene is saturated with tension, shallow breaths and an impassioned delivery by the lead actress, *Jeanne Dielman* is marked by a rigid, minimal frame composition, a brief, bloodless on-screen exchange between the characters, and several motifs which introduce the viewer to the dry, mundane routine of the main character’s daily sexual encounters with different men.

Written by Chantal Akerman, the film introduces us to the titular character (played by Delphine Seyrig) in the environment of her kitchen. Her cooking is interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. She unbuttons her apron, leaves the room, and greets the visitor off-screen. The scene cuts to Jeanne and an older man standing in the hallway. She takes his hat, scarf, and coat, briefly leaving the frame, presumably to hang them somewhere near the doorway. She re-enters the frame along with the visitor (an older gentleman) and walks with him to the end of the hall where she leads him to a room, their backs turned to the camera as he closes the door behind them. What follows is a jump cut to a shot of the very same hallway, this time enveloped in darkness, and both characters exit the room they entered in the previous shot. The scene plays out in reverse, with Jeanne returning the hat, scarf, and coat to her visitor in the same manner with which she put the items aside once he arrived.

Formally speaking, the way the film approaches the relationship between Jeanne and other characters (as well as her environment) is often described as *minimalistic*, *hyperrealistic* and *naturalist*, pertaining to its long takes and static camera placement. R. Patrick Kinsman offers a notable description of this Akerman’s style, arguing for the film as an example of countercinema:



One of the most immediately noticeable characteristics of the film is its reliance on cinematic minimalism, manifested as long takes and medium shots. Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) is almost always in the frame, but wanders in and out, and the camera often begins and ends a shot in darkness as Jeanne turns lights on and off. Nearly all of the film [. . .] occurs in Jeanne's flat, and the vast majority of the film is given to housework: in this we see two elements common in Akerman's work – space and gesture.

(Kinsman 2007: p. 218)

Indeed, each action and reaction within the film is restrained and to-the-point, with a bulk of the film's focus directed at its invisible protagonist: the mere passage of time. Most of the scenes in the film play out in so-called "real time", rarely expedited by cutting. It is no accident, after all, that the film is only a couple of minutes short of being four hours in length.

Why, then, this ellipsis when Jeanne welcomes her guest? In *Ecstasy*, the cinematic implicature of sex is formed through the omission of specific moments of physical contact which are then replaced with metaphors such as a broken necklace. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the pertinent moment of contact between the characters is done away with altogether with no substitute offered to the viewer to serve as a decryption cipher. Yet, in spite of being so drastically truncated, the scene prompts a rather consistent reading: the exchange between the characters is sexual, as well as professional, in nature, with Jeanne's visitor most probably being her "john". The way in which viewers derive meaning from the two juxtaposed shots may very well be once again chalked up to the Kuleshov effect (already mentioned in the *Ecstasy* analysis). As the previous example films relied on visual metaphors and screenwriting, so does the *Jeanne Dielman* scene rely on montage and motivated cuts to build its implicit sign, forming it out of two separate shots placed together.

One may observe, however, that upon discussing the Kuleshov effect in this case, there are two vantage points that need to be addressed:

1. the meaning of the sign is derived through the act of sewing together two shots which independently may signify different things, but together form a third possible interpretation
2. the meaning of the sign is derived not through what the motivated cut *connects*, but through that which it *omits*.

More so than stitching together two otherwise entirely independent shots, the elliptical cut functions in such a way that the metaphorical fabric of the film is *folded over*, and what would initially appear to be a vital part of the scene is reduced to redundant scrap material and discarded. In other words, the viewer must interpolate what is (or seems to be) missing between the two shots by interacting, once again, with the off-screen space. Functionally speaking, the off-screen space possesses the same suggestive properties as those of a fig leaf, drawing attention towards rather than away from that which is concealed. Theorist Florence Dee Boodakian provides a deeper elaboration of the practices of *covering* in the context of the fragmentation of the nude human body, as it becomes itself a collection of signs:

[T]he *culturally constituted gaze*, as I'll refer to the gaze of the culture in the larger sense established earlier, directs the viewer/reader away from the genitals; yet, the very attempt to pivot attention in one direction may lead the viewer/reader in the opposite. [. . .] This fact dates back to the Middle Ages when men wore codpieces, later tights and then, tight pants; all these were intended to cover the male genitals but at the same time display them.

(Boodakian 2008: p. 13)

The process of meaning-formation is provoked by what is felt to be absent, even though, in a material sense, the presupposed sexual act never existed in the first place, even as a mere simulation by the actors involved. The perceived concealment not only diverts the viewer's attention to what is missing, but lets the viewer construct the sign from related, but incomplete, pieces of information (and it is this second step which is defined by the Kuleshov effect).

In *Persona*, the viewer's direct participation in meaning-formation (by joining Alma in her emotional re-processing of the orgy in which she took part) seemed to potentially enhance the viewing pleasure derived from the monologue, yet, in *Jeanne Dielman*, the scene is rendered sterile by the implicature<sup>4</sup>. In a contemporary article on the film for *Film Quarterly*, Marsha Kinder describes a different scene in the film in terms of eroticism and its deconstruction:

When Jeanne bathes before dinner, we don't see merely a few erotic glimpses of flesh in the water; rather, we witness the entire functional process as she actually scrubs every part of her body and cleans out the tub. The graphic details destroy the

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<sup>4</sup> "Sterility" is an effect achieved by various techniques in *Jeanne Dielman*, implicature only being one of them. A case can be made for the equally anaphrodisiacal scenes in which Seyrig's character engages in sex in front of the viewer's gaze. Regardless, in the particular example scene analysed above, implicature does appear to play a meaningful role in draining the sexual encounter of its potency in attracting or titillating the viewer.

eroticism and make us aware of just how unrealistic and contrived most other bath scenes really are.

(Kinder 1977)

Interestingly, it is the “graphic detail” and real-time action that are cited as the anti-erotic elements of the film. In this reading, the viewer is exposed to *too much*, as opposed to being denied by seeing *too little*. It may be argued, however, that these are merely two different methods of ascribing the same quality to Jeanne’s rituals and sexual encounters: their matter-of-factness. Her nude body is presented in its wholeness, exempt from visual fragmentation and figurative codpieces, just as the duration of the washing routine plays out without interruption, aestheticized only to the degree to which the scene’s dispassionateness *is* the aesthetic. The ellipsis at the beginning of the film, on the other hand, serves to imply what, perhaps, needs not be emphasised in the first place – a testament to the diegetic normalcy of Jeanne’s sex work.

Returning to the notion of “second-order cultural processing” in the context of eroticism (i.e. a type of meta-erotic experience; erotic experience depicted through a character, the character being in themselves a form of cultural processing), Jeanne Dielman appears to be written in such a way as to process sex and sexuality in the same manner as she processes her domestic routine. Rather than sexualise her social role as a pseudo-housewife and single mother, this approach appears to de-sexualise her role as a sex worker. The implicit sign now adopts a different function, drawing the viewer’s attention to the sexual act, while simultaneously doing away with it as an event about which the character is so blasé that it requires no further meditation or survey, staving off the voyeuristic impulse.

## Symbolism and Fantasy

### *Eraserhead*

David Lynch's feature-length debut film *Eraserhead* (1977) follows the nightmarish dark-fantasy world of Henry Spencer (Jack Nance), a surrealist take on the everyman character, plain and inexpressive enough to epitomise the claustrophobia of a life guided primarily by circumstance. Spencer becomes the reluctant father of a deformed, vaguely spermatozoon-like (what with its bulbous head and narrow neck) creature, birthed by his girlfriend (later wife) Mary X. The infant's existence entraps the couple as they attempt and fail to acclimate to their abject and bleak new lifestyle. Rich with references to sex and male fertility, *Eraserhead* tackles these themes through the deployment of visual symbols and elaborate set design, almost as if to create a caricature of the techniques employed in films such as *Ecstasy* to signify sexuality. For the remainder of this analysis, I will be borrowing film theorist Mette Hjort's (2001: p. 104) term *hypersaturation* in reference to the visual strategy of inundating the frame with cues meant to thematise a certain issue or concept<sup>5</sup>.

Though this hypersaturation is present in many (if not most) scenes in the film, I will be focusing on the specific encounter between Spencer and a character simply dubbed the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall (Judith Anna Roberts; i.e. Spencer's attractive neighbour). The Beautiful Girl visits Spencer one evening when he is alone at home, emerging ominously from the darkness as she enters his apartment (claiming to have locked herself out of hers). As she asks him where his wife is, Spencer attempts to silence his mewling infant. She takes no notice of this, smiling coyly as she turns away from Spencer, suggestively stroking what appears to be the phallic, elongated armrest of a wooden chair. Turning around, she walks back towards him and, standing only centimetres away from Spencer, asks whether she may stay the night. In one analysis of the film, Greg Olson describes the remainder of the scene as follows:

The director visualises the physical consummation of [the] unseen link between Henry and the Beautiful Girl in an exquisite, unprecedented cinematic image. Henry's bed becomes a dark, earthen cavity filled with a milky white liquid that recalls the fetal birthing pond of Henry's film-beginning dream and the white juice

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Hjort uses the term *hypersaturation* primarily to refer to the thematisation of nationhood in cinema in what she calls instances of the "monocultural thematisations of nation". Still, the term is useful even in a broader application wherein it denotes visual thematisation in general.

that spurts from various squashed fetuses, and also suggests semen. Naked and lost in an endless kissing embrace, Henry and the Beautiful Girl slowly sink into the white liquid until only her black hair floats on the pale surface.

(Olson 2008: p. 78)

Olson further characterises what happened between Spencer and the Beautiful Girl as an “erotic merging” (ibid.), as the scene seems to prompt a reading of sex that is about as tenebrous and metaphysical as Spencer’s cosmic sperm dreams. Olson does conclude, however, that the Beautiful Girl gave him “sex without babies” (ibid.), an important distinction as this is contrasted by the strictly reproductive nature of whatever sexual relationship Spencer had with Mary X.

The implicit sign is, in this case, once again constituted by the absence of “visual closure” – the exclusion of genital contact – which is then replaced by a symbol or cue to aid the viewer in meaning-formation. There is, functionally speaking, very little difference between the broken necklace or post-coital cigarette in *Ecstasy* and Spencer’s bed-crater filled with an unidentified luminous white liquid. Interestingly enough, however, the off-screen space in the *Eraserhead* scene is initially articulated in a way reminiscent of Haneke’s *La pianiste*, analysed earlier. As the viewer is first exposed to Spencer and the Beautiful Girl entering a physical relationship, the white liquid “censors” the action only from the waist down (just as only parts of Erika and Walter’s bodies are kept out of frame as they are engaged in sex, sexual play, or rape). As the scene progresses, however, the characters are slowly submerged and increasingly less visually accessible to the viewer. The distance between the viewer and the presupposed sexual contact only expands, perhaps resulting in a similar effect to the ellipsis in *Jeanne Dielman*: the viewer is informed precisely by that which they are barred from seeing.

Though the resulting effect may be similar, the way Lynch builds the implicature itself is distinctly different from the methods used in *Jeanne Dielman*; the sign is formed through complex set pieces and a highly stylised audio-visual environment. The mise-en-scène thus becomes the vessel of signification, hypersaturated with phallic and otherwise reproductive imagery. The scene *includes* rather than *excludes*; it is exaggerated, rather than abridged. In *Jeanne Dielman*, sex is made mundane. In *Eraserhead*, it is precisely the mundanity of Spencer’s life which is transformed into a fantastic grotesque, his sexual experiences most of all. In his study of the film, Russell Manning writes:

[Lynch] aims to disclose the fantasy and unveil the direct and unmediated experience of Henry's reality to the viewers. It is important to stress here that this first-person point of view of fantasy is not to be confused with an attempt to mask the true perception of reality with fleeting daydreams and distorted realities. On the contrary, with this instantiation of the mundane through the bizarre, Lynch aims to show us the way the mind deals with problems by constructing conscious and unconscious processes to manage these everyday realities. Because we have to exist in the world, we need a fantasy screen to help us do so.

(Manning 2011: p. 68)

What may better describe a "fantasy screen" used to navigate everyday existence other than the continuous encoding/decoding process of signification and meaning-formation, particularly in the context of implicit signs? The sexual act (or sexual acts) is processed through a play of symbols and signifiers which, metaphorically or metonymically, construct sex into an understandable whole, made legible through visual language. The implicit sign is one that conforms (to an extent) to cultural conventions of signification (e.g. the association of a traditionally feminine item breaking with a woman submitting to a man in bed), as well as to the metonymic links between sex and its bodily concomitants (e.g. viscous, white, ejaculatory fluid). The implicit sign is, however, not a *replacement* for some form of presupposed *explicit* sign; the implicit sign is a constitutive part of the sexual imaginary. That which resides within the inaccessible 'out-of-frame' is not a lack of substance, but a signifier in and of itself. Lynch constructs an obscure fantasy world not to set it in opposition to the ostensible realism of more naturalist cinema, but to hyperbolise the necessary reliance on symbols and metaphors once one is positioned within complex social networks and relationships with others, as well as with oneself. Likewise, an implicit sign does not serve as a mere placeholder for "the real thing"; through its own reproduction, it becomes an intrinsic part of that which it attempts to substitute.

## Explication

### *Nymphomaniac and Love*

As has been observed, live-action cinema resorts to the implicit signification of sex for a variety of possible reasons, ranging from stylistic to externally-imposed (with one not necessarily excluding the other). By the repeated processing of sex through an aesthetic paradigm of indication and subsequent denial, a particular framework is constructed by way of which we think about sex itself. Keeping this in mind, is it possible to point to counter-examples of explicit (or, at least, *more* explicit) representations of sex in live-action cinema which purposefully and meaningfully subvert this paradigm? If one imagines the explicit/implicit dichotomy as a spectrum rather than two distinct, binary categories (as described previously), can explication and supposed “naturalism” be achieved without significant points of contention? What is, after all, contentious about placing sex *within* the frame, thus narrowing the space between the viewer and the cinematic sign (i.e. no longer leaving the viewer to their own devices as they infer the nature of the character interaction)?

Lars von Trier’s two-parter *Nymphomaniac* (2013) notably and prominently features what is often referred to as “unsimulated sex”, i.e. sex that is not mimed or otherwise simulated, but fully performed by the actors involved. As the protagonist, the self-diagnosed nymphomaniac Joe (played by Stacy Martin and Charlotte Gainsbourg), recounts the story of her sexual awakening and later addiction, von Trier employs precisely the technique notably absent in Bergman’s *Persona*: the flashback. In stark contrast to Bibi Andersson’s performance, Charlotte Gainsbourg is mostly deadpan in delivering her lines. The visual depiction of full-frontal nudity and genital contact is frequent and occurs in a variety of different contexts. Much of the same can be said about Gaspar Noé’s *Love* (2015), another primarily flashback-driven erotic drama featuring unsimulated sex, released in 3D. Both films earned the “sexually explicit” label upon release from different media outlets (Brooks and Barnes 2014; Smith 2015).

When asked about whether, during pre-production, the storyline of *Love* preceded the desire to make a sexually-driven film, Noé responded by saying that he “just wanted to portray sexual passion as much as possible, because in real-life it’s very common, but you don’t see it properly portrayed on screen” (Smith 2015). Likewise, when asked about the choice to film in 3D, Noé claimed that the effect “makes things more real, more intimate” (ibid.). Von Trier, on the other hand, appears to recognise an element of the pornographic in his own film, treating its

sexually explicit nature as a narrative exercise – a curious accompaniment to everything else that occurs within the story:

I just wanted to make a film consisting of all the things I appreciate. So I collected all sorts of things I like and know something about and put it into a porn film [. . .] I like that you're at the mercy of the director and don't know where you're going. You just decide that fly-fishing is interesting. And almost everything you dive into becomes exciting. Digressions are wonderful.

(Dam 2014)

Though von Trier may have been reluctant in discussing *Nymphomaniac*'s relationship to sexuality (namely female sexuality), it was precisely this relationship that resulted in the film being banned from theatres in Turkey on grounds of “extensive nudity and no-holds-barred sex scenes” (*The Telegraph* 2014). *Love* suffered a similar fate in Russia, where it was denied an exhibition license due to “pornographic scenes” and “explicit sexual content” (Kozlov 2015).

As demonstrated by *Ecstasy*, censorship and suppression are common political repercussions faced by cultural products which foreground sex and sexuality<sup>6</sup>. One possible way of tackling this issue is to appeal to a Reichian outlook based on the societal mass-repression of natural, healthy sexuality. Following this position, it may be postulated that the prevalence of the implicit signification of sex in cinema may very well be the direct consequence of what Wilhelm Reich referred to as “the fiasco of compulsory sexual morality” (Reich 1986). Implication and suggestion could be (according to this approach) the neurotic and unhealthy coping mechanisms of a sexually deprived society, resulting in a system of representation conditioned to a great extent by a normative-patriarchal, moralising social order. In the 1949 preface to the fourth edition of *The Sexual Revolution*, however, Reich argued that this repressive moral structure was beginning to collapse and that “the basic affirmation of natural love life [was] advancing inexorably” (Reich 1986: p. xiii). This optimistic, progressivist view is perhaps difficult to reconcile with the 21<sup>st</sup> century perseverance of censorship practices. Perhaps more appropriate for and true to the analysis of implicit signification (as it is, after all, a discursive practice) is the Foucauldian model. Foucault criticizes the idea of an anti-repressive struggle, suggesting that it represents a mere “tactical

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<sup>6</sup> Likewise demonstrated by *Ecstasy*, what may be considered “explicit” (and thus scandalous) in cinema appears to change throughout different time periods and cultural contexts, as *Ecstasy* displayed no genital contact, but experienced censorship regardless. The explicit/implicit dichotomy is, once again, a variable one.



shift and reversal in the great deployment of sexuality” (Foucault 1978: p. 131). Sexuality cannot be said to merely be denied to the individual, as it is nevertheless an integral and continuously reiterated aspect of social life. Rather, human sexuality is governed by a more nuanced and bottom-up network of power relations, which are often disguised as the collective pursuit of knowledge. Social institutions thus delineate and determine a particular, acceptable, and historically specific sexuality, rather than inhibit it as a whole.

Applying this to signification in cinema, while it is tempting to eschew implication as reactionary and celebrate explicit signification as anti-repressive (and thus transgressive), it’s doubtful that unmediated, uncodified explication within the cinematic sign is even possible, let alone beneficial for a subversive cultural rethinking of human sexuality. The “unsimulated sex” of *Nymphomaniac* was, after all, performed by “sex doubles” whose bodies were superimposed over the main cast’s through digital compositing (Lanxon 2013). To briefly return to Boodakian, it may be worthwhile to ask: what is the functional difference between a computer generated “nude suit” and a Medieval codpiece? Likewise, when talking about *Love*, are the structural preconditions present in an implicit sign not also present in a 3D erotic spectacle, also extensively aided by CGI? That is to say, is sex being *explicated* or merely culturally processed in a different manner? Following Foucault, one possible answer is that attempts at explication merely present a “tactical shift” in a nonetheless discursive and standardising system of signification. That is to say, if the failing (or, perhaps, success) of implicit signs is in their ability to codify sexual experience, the same could very well be said about signs which are read as explicit, yet still come with their own simulacraphic baggage.

## CONCLUSION

Within Deleuzian film theory, the off-screen space, named the “out-of-field” is treated not as an omission, but as the “hidden-yet-existent” of what is depicted: “The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present.” He concludes the paragraph: “All framing determines an out-of-field” (Deleuze 1997: p. 16). This never-ending interplay between what is shown and what is concealed within a cinematic sign is an inexhaustible space of sexological consideration. Sex and sexuality are cultural categories which experience several orders of signification within cinema and are, simultaneously, constituted through those very same signification practices. As *Ecstasy* and *Persona* demonstrate, these practices bedeck sex with a wide variety of other associations, from smoking to physical and emotional pain. Moreover, implicit signification, while denying voyeuristic pleasure, somewhat counter-intuitively may still enhance viewer-involvement and film-watching as an erotic experience. “When done well, implied sex can be more revealing (in one sense at least) than shots of the act itself,” reads one *Guardian* article on sexual allusions in live-action film (Kiek 2013). Conversely, implication may serve to keep the viewer at an arm’s length and reverse the eroticisation process, as is the case with *Jeanne Dielman*.

Perhaps a more abstract question than the issue of viewing pleasure, however, are the potential limitations of cinematic representation as a whole to truly expand the collective culturally-conditioned experience of *sex* as a concept. If what is currently considered “sexually explicit” cinema exists on one end of the spectrum, and stylised, aestheticized, implicit sexuality exists on the other, one might begin to wonder whether a deliberately constructed approach, one which draws attention to itself (as with the *Eraserhead* example), might, if not break representational paradigms, at least reveal the already contingent nature of sexuality as a part of life inextricable from its social (political, historical) existence. Films such as *Nymphomaniac* and *Love*, while supposedly committing to an “explicit” depiction of sex, will invariably be forced to reach into the social reserves of codified signs in order to relay a comprehensible message to the viewer (who, in turn, decodes it in accordance with their own meaning structures). It is nevertheless apparent that such works are still *received* as explicit, subjecting them to various forms of censorship and marginalisation. While the broader implications of this are outside the scope of this thesis, it may be concluded, based on all of the analysed case studies, that representations of sex exist in a very particular social symbolic register, simultaneously spotlighted and shrouded, escaping this duality only with great difficulty.

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