

The Art of Sensuality: *Subtle Eroticism in Film*

by Gary W. Tooze

Erotic -

Etymology: Greek *erOtikos*, from *erOt-*, *erOs*

1 : of, devoted to, or tending to arouse sexual love or desire <erotic art>

2 : strongly marked or affected by sexual desire

I may be getting myself in some trouble here. When someone Googles the word "erotic" and finds a page of "Erotic Favorites" on a site called DVDBeaver, he is bound to be disappointed by my selections.

Choosing overtly explicit or graphic scenes to fill this list would have been far too simple. What I'm striving for instead is the aesthetic definition of eroticism—beautiful, pure, and perhaps initially imperceptible, something often understood only upon reflection. My criteria, and thus my selections, are very personal to me. I find the scenes I have chosen to be sublime. I wouldn't expect anyone to be in total agreement. (The list is in chronological order.)

Musidora as *Irma Vep* in Louis Feuillade's "*Les Vampires*" : Clad only in a skintight spandex-like bodice, voluptuous Musidora gestures with her hands on an extended hip—the perfect femme fatale. She's a thief caught in the act—one of the leaders of a sinister gang plaguing Paris with its underworld activity, which includes the use of poison-pen letters, hypnosis, portable cannons, poison gas through keyholes, poisoned rings, invisible ink, etc. Her corrupt nature and enticing almost-naked appearance are her only defense. Intriguing may be an understatement.

Anna May Wong's entrance down the stairs in *Piccadilly*. This is a sexy film with deep roots in forbidden desire, interracial attraction, and Asian mystique. Chinese-American screen goddess Anna May Wong stars as Shosho, whose exotic dance routines enthrall the suave club owner where she works. This stylish evocation of Jazz-Age London boasts dazzlingly fluid cinematography and atmospheric sets, ranging from the opulent West End nightclub to the seedy Limehouse district. Director Arnold Bennett introduces her as a simple kitchen worker descending the stairs with torn nylons visible in her above-the-knee skirt. Another scheming femme fatale whose smug allure is utilized to propel her up the social and fiduciary ladder. I find it intriguing that more than half of my choices offer a provocative dance sequence in their characterizations. Hmm.....

Rita Hayworth in Charles Vidor's "*Gilda*":

I doubt this picture, one of the most popular of the 1940s, needs a preface. The camera caught young and inwardly shy Hayworth at just the right moment, with just the right lighting, and it generated ardent fantasies for the ages. Today, she may be better known as the coquettish face on the poster that covered Andy Dufresne's (Inmate 37927) escape tunnel in *The Shawshank Redemption*...yes the legend lives on.

Jean Simmons as *Kanchi* in Powell and Pressburger's '*Black Narcissus*':

Kanchi closes her eyes and smells the essence of the young general's perfumed black narcissus. Her powerful allure as an enticing 17-year-old obstinate maiden is obvious. Her eventual conquest (as in the story of the prince and the beggar maid) is imminent. Powell and Pressburger's style is never to overwhelm with a grandiose or flashy fad-like presentation; rather, they gently allow the film to sweep over you and embed itself in your memory banks with a coaxing charm that lingers with gratuitous and gentle determination. Ahhh - the nubile Kanchi... what thoughts you bring.

Setsuko Hara in Yasujiro Ozu's "*Late Spring*" : How perfectly beautiful and fetching Setsuko Hara's Noriko looks after a bike ride with a potential suitor. They sit together and watch the ocean, the wind blows in her hair and she smiles at him, more amused at his pursuit of her than encouraging him. She is far too content to worry about men in her life and this is also expressed in a few smiles. What a beauty!

Patricia Neal in King Vidor's "*The Fountainhead*" : Quite amusingly, *The Fountainhead* is filled with sexual and erotic symbols and motifs that seem to be quite out of place for the time of its release. In the film the protagonist Howard Roark (played by Gary Cooper) is an architect whose large office towers represent phallic metaphors, and a stunning 22-year-old Patricia Neal plays ice princess Dominique Francon. Jack Warner considered and then rejected Bette Davis, Ida Lupino, and Barbara Stanwyck for the coveted role. Neal's Dominique sizzles as a tempest pot of strong-willed feminine sexuality. Initially she is marked as a domineering woman (her first name is no coincidence), complete with riding crop, which she slashes across Roark's face to encourage his aggressive sexual pursuit of her. She eventually turns into a submissive and pouting lover—the passive love slave of Howard Roark, bowing to the strength of his "edifice." Cleverly imbedded, this symbolism is generally oblivious to most. Even when Dominique first spots Roark and his sinewy forearm muscles pumping the drill into the marble at her father's granite quarry, we rarely think twice about the scene's hidden implication.

Audrey Hepburn '*off camera*' after a rehearsal: The unacknowledged camera catches a fatigued starlet, who grows to become arguably the most photogenic film presence that has ever graced the silver screen. Her glowing demeanor still shines through even in this less-than-prepared shot. I could easily have chosen hundreds of photos of her as a pristine affirmation of her on-screen "power." There will never be anyone like her again—on or off screen.

Guilietta Masina in, her husband, Federico Fellini's "*Nights of Cabiria*" :

What a cutie! Cabiria is a prostitute, a painted caricature (not unlike Chaplin's little tramp with an umbrella instead of cane), who exhibits wild emotions and waiflike tantrums. Most films with Masina end with you loving her. This is no different. Probably the penultimate example of inert sexuality, Cabiria, like most of Masina's characters, grows on your very soul. She is perfect! This film is perfect!

Ustad Waheed Khan as the un-credited dancer in Satyajit Ray's "*Jalsaghar*" (aka '*The Music Room*') : People can throw around the term "hypnotic" quite liberally, but this scene honestly hypnotized me. Ray was often criticized on his home turf for not making Bollywood-style films: "Where is the song and dance, Satyajit?" This sequence was his response. Mesmerizing is an appropriate word.

'Tippi' Hedren as the title character in Alfred Hitchcock's "*Marnie*" : Man, could Tippi Hendren ever walk. Her gait was the focus of the opening scene of two Hitchcock classics: *The Birds* and *Marnie*. In *The Birds* she even gets a wolf whistle. Perhaps better known today as Melanie Griffith's mother, Tippi in both Hitch films follows the mold of playing frigid females with a vulnerable core. Femme fatale appeal is very high here.

Kyôko Kishida as 'the Woman' in Hiroshi Teshigahara's "*Woman in the Dunes*":

In terms of contemplative, poetic expression this film is on many a film fan's top list. The black and white contrasts of lightly dusted skin, shifting sands, and shadows and crawling insects are exemplified by some wonderfully framed shots (very Kurosawa-like) that add to the viewing experience. The geographical environment very aptly reflects the captives' sparsely "rationed" living conditions. The most obvious comparison one could make to subtle themes within the film is that of isolation and captivity, both of which are inherently erotic. This eroticism is expressed not only in the major characters but in the constant references to the insects, analyzed and imprisoned, that Niki Jumpei (played by Eiji Okada) is researching. The insects are the very reason he is in the desert village in the first place, unaware that lust will overtake his senses, flooding his thoughts.

Emmanuelle Béart as 'Nelly' in Claude Chabrol's "*L'Enfer*": I don't think I can recall a more desirous female lead than Béart in *L'Enfer*. This woman just drips sex appeal in every film she has appeared in. It is no wonder her husband in the film, Paul Prieur (François Cluzet), goes mad with jealousy. It seems totally fitting, though quite tragic in the narrative of the film.

Maggie Cheung in Olivier Assayas's "*Irma Vep*". Maggie Cheung plays herself as a successful Hong Kong action film star whom Rene Vidal (Jean-Pierre Leaud), an elderly French director at the tail end of his failing career, picks to star in his remake of Louis Feuillade's 1915 silent seven-and-one-half-hour masterpiece, *Les Vampires*. Dressed erotically in tight latex (not unlike Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns*), Cheung cat burgles while skulking around Paris rooftops. This alone is worth watching. This movie is filled with French charm most notably in its relaxed sexual mores, Parisian culture, and filmmaking introspection. My personal highlight of the film is when Maggie, alone in her hotel room, gets into character; she dons her latex costume, tiptoes through the hotel corridors, and spies on a distressed and abandoned lover (played by Atom Egoyan's wife Arsinée Khanjian!). The lady she voyeuristically enjoys is naked in her room and, in a moment of "le fou," steals some of her jewelry. She then flees to the rooftop and in the rain disposes of her prizes over the edge. Magnificent.

Maggie Cheung as Mrs. Chan, nee *Su Li-zhen* in Wong Kar-wai's "*In The Mood For Love*" : I don't need to be told that I am fixated on Maggie Cheung. I am well aware of it. She has commented a few times on how the '60s-style dresses that she wore for this film forced her to walk in a certain way. Well, let me tell you, I like that "way." Runner-up as Miss Hong Kong many years ago, Maggie has aged very well (I think she is almost 40, but you'd never know it). I really think she is the most beautiful, desirable female in film. Yes, a very personal choice, but I'd have noodles with her even if I wasn't hungry!

Ziyi Zhang as dancing, and faux-blind courtesan, *Mei* in Zhang Yimou's overpowering "*House of Flying Daggers*" : Although I cannot deny how attractive Ziyi Zhang is, I suspect my inclusion of this scene is more indicative of the overwhelming kinetic energy and color infusion that Zhang Yimou has brought to film fans in this epic. Truly this scene from the first half hour of the film is as outrageously decadent as it is enticingly addictive. I'll wager I have seen it 30 times, and part of its glory is this pure-skinned and dynamic female moving as an engaging singing acrobat with martial arts choreography. An astounding sequence that remains something you MUST see on the big screen one day.

THE MEN:

Now I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea here, but I thought it was only fair to, at least, mention some male actors as well. I have no intention of "switching teams" as it were, but IF I were to I suppose Paul Newman would have his poster on the door of my locker at the gym. In *Hud* he plays a vicious and cruel man driven by his own self-interest. Ahhhh...but he plays the part so well that you might almost believe it. Unquestionably at the top of the list of my favorite actors, Paul Newman is one cool cat who looks good in a t-shirt.

Franco Nero is one attractive man. I was always surprised that his career did not

move beyond those spaghetti-westerns he did. Pictured here in Camelot, he is THE quintessential Lancelot. He's physically perfect and virtuously compromised by a radiant Guenevere (Vanessa Redgrave, who misses this list by a millimeter). I have a favorite scene in this musical—his jousting leaves the crowd and the royal box with his omniscient-like presence. If we were both so persuaded (highly unlikely), this is one guy I wouldn't kick out of bed for eating crackers!

Regards,

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