

Imitation:



highest form of flattery?

When it comes to sex on the big screen, **Christine Todd** asks if the tables have been turned and if life now imitates art.

Sex and nudity are at the core of art, and have been for centuries. Michelangelo's statue of David is bereft of even a fig leaf. In India, the ancient *Karma Sutra* illustrates sex performed in more positions than most could think up. Nudes are found in paintings across all eras. Successful art places human sexuality within a proper context, its truth lasts.

By the time of the Naughties, movies were naughty indeed and are getting naughtier. Slurping kisses from panting people make us shuffle in our seats, grateful that we left the kids at home and didn't bring mum and dad.

A similar ideal holds for movies. They capture the sexual norms of their era, leaving a lasting resonance. The best of them ring true. 1978's *Coming Home*, starring Jane Fonda and Jon Voight is a brilliant, honest film. Filled with love and passion, its sex scene doesn't jolt. It's in context, connected to the themes of its characters and the era it represents. During the 1950s, sex was rarely addressed, let alone *undressed*. 1950s' movies reflect lives lived on the surface, appearances mattering more than freedoms and no decent woman was supposed to want or enjoy sex – let alone succumb to it on camera.

The '60s Sexual Revolution shook that out, however, landing with such gusto that it changed the world. Birth

control pills were popped, bras were tossed and sexy clothes donned. Freedom and love was the mantra and sex took centre stage. And what it did to the movies...

This cultural transformation enabled such films as *Coming Home* to exist. Yet, the '60s also set a pattern in the sexual arena, namely: of 'going one better'. One-upmanship opened the way for evermore explicit sex: including sexual deviancy, rape and violence. Heart-stopping movies like *Clockwork Orange* terrified audiences and inspired a group of dark thrillers such as *Deliverance*, *The Accused*, *Frenzy* and *Basic Instinct*.

By the time of the Naughties, movies were naughty indeed and have since grown naughtier. Gratuitous sex abounds. Slurping kisses from panting people adorn widescreens, making us shuffle in our seats, grateful we left the kids at home and didn't bring mum and dad. *Sex and the City* sizzles like a skillet over flames, and yet – out of nowhere – the director added a gratuitous and graphic sex image. Once upon a time we'd imagine what came next: a couple reunited and clothes were abandoned. It used to be we could enjoy a good sex scene, provided it was contextual and honest. Now we sit stoically through the most graphic of scenes, while some of us blush.

As the Naughties become their teens, we have twentieth century sexual mores on film, and a start on the twenty-first. Our sexual history, for better or worse, is well-catalogued and it'll be interesting to see how much further we take it.

We say 'art imitates life', but, perhaps these days, it is life that imitates art. We wonder how much explicit sex is too much and consider its cultural influence. One thing is certain: we'll keep on watching until we know. **S**

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