

Leaving Love Scenes to the Imagination

In the movie *Casablanca*, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) demands her brokenhearted former love, Rick (Humphrey Bogart), hand over some letters of transit that will allow her husband Victor to escape the Nazis. When he refuses, she pulls a gun and repeats her request, but Rick tells her, "Go ahead and shoot. You'll be doing me a favor." Ilsa then breaks into tears, confesses she still loves him, and the scene closes with the two of them embracing and then kissing.

The next shot shows Rick standing at an open window, fully clothed, while Ilsa is behind him, also fully clothed. Did their passion end with that kiss? Or did they make love?

Director Michael Curtiz took the old-fashioned approach, once a norm—and a requirement—for American movies. He left such questions to the imagination of his viewers.

For the last 50 years, motion picture modesty has gone the way of the bobby socks. Nudity and explicit scenes of lovemaking on the big screen are now common. The Motion Picture Association's film ratings system includes R, which stands for Restricted, meaning that the film contains adult material and those under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian, and NC-17, meaning that only adults may see the film. These two categories may include extreme violence, cursing, or nudity, and sometimes all three.

Yet in watching these movies we realize that these sexual scenes have little or nothing to do with the storyline and that they could easily have been nuanced rather than explicit. Such movies may stir sexual reactions in some viewers, but many other audience members are left scratching their heads, wondering why these tumbles into bed made it onto the screen

at all.

Worse, you may have seen such a movie on a date, as I have, and you and the person seated beside you stare fixedly at the screen, embarrassed at watching soft porn together. (Here's another thought: Imagine sitting through such a scene with your mother or grandmother. In my case, I'd be heading to the lobby on the pretext of buying popcorn.)

For the last decade or so, I've seen few movies in theaters, and to be honest, gave little thought to the actresses who appeared in these R-rated movies, who are almost always wearing less clothing than the actors who appear with them. I just assumed these women regarded sex and nudity as part of their job.

I was wrong.

The [reactions](#) of many actresses at having to appear nude or in sex scenes are revealed in Christa Stamper's article "Sex (and Sobs) on the Set: Actresses Lay Bare Their Thoughts on Baring it All." Kate Winslet, Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman, and others report sobbing when they had to remove their clothing, taking tranquilizers or shots of vodka to reduce their anxiety, and yet being utterly traumatized.

These women had my sympathy until I remembered that most movie contracts include nudity clauses, explicit requirements—very explicit—delineating what actors or actresses may need to undergo in the film. Did these women sign such documents? Were they somehow tricked or beguiled into participating in nude scenes they hadn't expected? Sometimes these contracts include the use of "body doubles," women hired to stand in for the actress during certain graphic shots. How do those doubles feel, I wonder?

On the other hand, much of my sympathy for these women remains intact. Maybe they wanted a wonderful part and knew that if they didn't take the offer, someone else would. Maybe they

thought that exposing their breasts or faking a love scene naked in front of all sorts of other people—the director, other actors, the crew, and later on, the millions of people who watch the film—wouldn't be as traumatic as they thought.

Here's an idea: Instead of Hollywood making these gratuitous torrid love scenes, which disgust many of the participating actresses, denigrate women in general, and exist to titillate men in the audience, let's imagine a different approach. Let's say we're making a film about Special Agents Sam and Mary fighting terrorists intent on taking down the federal government. While battling the terrorists, the two agents fall in love with each other. At one point, they walk away side by side from the mayhem and violence, their hands brush together, they clasp fingers, pause, kiss, break away, and smile at each other.

Will they become lovers that night? Do we really need a scene showing them naked and rolling wildly about in Mary's bed?

Or are some things best left to that greatest theater in the world: the human imagination?

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