

BLUE MOVIE BONANZA

Art-house Cinema Trend Piece

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After an autumnal wave of feisty film fare including French rape shockers *Baise-Moi* and *Fat Girl*, the chicken-hawk drama *L.I.E.*, and the English-language French production *Intimacy*, the art house has become more risqué than ever. Though these films generated ripples unseen since the horndog heyday of Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* update, David Cronenberg's auto-erotic *Crash*, and Catherine Breillat's *Romance* — which introduced erections and penetration to theaters typically accustomed to lighter fare — they're mild compared to what's coming to a theater near you this winter.

In Claire Denis' elegant vampire movie *Trouble Every Day*, Béatrice Dalle and Vincent Gallo star as voracious modern-day flesheaters running amok in the City of Light, slaking their thirst on two victims who get their windpipes (and worse) chomped right out of them. The film drew jeers and mass walkouts after its Cannes debut last May — mostly due to two ferocious scenes of cannibalism that rank among the most unsettling images in recent cinema. Released this month by New York-based Lot 47 Films, the indie distributor responsible for *L.I.E.* and Tim Roth's incest potboiler *The War Zone*, *Trouble* seems destined for similar controversy.

Alfonso Cuarón's wildly entertaining erotic road movie *Y Tu Mamà También* contains enough crude language, rampant nudity, and ribald sexual permutations among its three attractive leads to have earned an NC-17 rating from the Motion Picture Association of America. Taking into account the box-office doom of past NC-17 recipients *Henry & June* and *Showgirls*, *Y Tu Mamà's* U.S. distributor, IFC Films, has opted to release the film unrated, thereby limiting its advertising and distribution channels and ghettoizing its audience into select urban art-houses. It's a key example of how foreign films get away with so much more than domestic indie and studio fare that is often hoodwinked into decency and conformity by the MPAA, whose voluntary ratings system nevertheless dictates a film's fate at the box office.

In 1972, the X-rated studio hit *Last Tango in Paris* introduced butter to the boudoir while hardcore crossovers *Deep Throat* and *The Devil In Miss Jones* delivered dirty minds into mainstream movie palaces for the first and last time in film history. Nowadays, major studios wouldn't touch a *Last Tango*, in deference to nervous shareholders and for fear of losing valuable ancillary rights in cable and video markets. The hardcore industry long ago dispersed into the parallel economies of video and the Internet (see *Boogie Nights* for the roots of that story), leaving the art house wide open for porn parvenus like Breillat and Patrice Chéreau to push cultural buttons with their beavers, boners and unstimulated blow jobs masquerading as art.

"You can't get away with anything if you're an American director," says John Waters, whose next film, *A Dirty Shame*, focuses on blue-collar sex addicts in search of dignity, and whose midnight classic *Pink Flamingos* was the bane of local censors during its cross-country art-house run in the '70s. "It has to be disguised as art, and we all know, art has a foreign language."

Todd Solondz, America's reigning enfant terrible of suburban disaffection, releases his Fine Line-distributed *Storytelling* this month under the specter of the AOL Time Warner behemoth, opting for an obtrusive red box over a sex scene between creative writing student Selma Blair and her sadistic professor, who orders her to say "Fuck me, nigger, hard," as he takes her from behind. What smacks of censorship was actually self-administered by Solondz, who added the box in order to receive his contractually bound R rating in America. Solondz has once again courted controversy to his advantage — his last film, *Happiness*, drew outrage for its sympathetic depiction of a suburban pedophile, prompting Universal to back out of a distribution deal. *Happiness* went on to gross \$2.75 million in a limited art-house run in select cities. Dirty movies make decent bucks, sure, but they also make for strange bedfellows when major studios come courting.

A case in point is the 1997 Fine Line release *Crash*, a Cannes winner doomed to invisibility in the U.S. marketplace by an NC-17 rating and a smear campaign ignited by media mogul Ted Turner, who feared the wrath of his Time Warner shareholders. No studio or mini-major would go near *The Piano Teacher*, Michael Haneke's French-language sado-masochistic scorcher about a Viennese piano teacher (played by Isabelle Huppert) who embarks on a bizarre sexual odyssey that includes vaginal self-mutilation, the huffing of used Kleenexes plucked from the floor of porno booths and finally, a plea for her student lover to "hog-tie me, then sit on my face and punch me in the stomach." Kino International plans to release the controversial Cannes winner sometime this April — but don't look for it at a multiplex near you. It seems ridiculous that Kino would even attempt to submit *The Piano Teacher* for an MPAA rating — it's the sort of European art-house fare that's better off unrated, like *Y Tu Mamà También*. These films would never play in Peoria anyway.

"They're art films that have hardcore sex as a new interpretation of realism, and it's almost pretentious, but some of them are great," says Waters. "I want to see who's the first American director to try it — I think it's going to be Sean Penn. I say let's put the X back in NC-17!"

Lot 47 president Jeff Lipsky believes directors will be expressing themselves a lot more fiercely in the next few years. "Based on the kinds of movies I've been seeing, both domestic and overseas, and considering the troubled and fractious mindset among artists right now, I think there are going to be more examples of movies that contain very incendiary themes and graphic images," he observes. "I think that artists are going to be trying desperately to hold onto artistic freedom at a time when more freedoms will be taken away. Filmmakers today both here and abroad are unleashing some very powerful visual stories on a public they feel has been led down a garden path by a lot of studio crap, and by their liberties being taken away from them."

The crypto-porno imagery on display in the art house right now is hardly new — it dates back to the banned 1934 Czech import *Ecstasy*, featuring a naked Hedy Lamarr romping through the forest, and it courses through the decades in art films like *Devil in the Flesh* (1946), *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1969), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *Emmanuelle* (1974), the box-office sensation that was the last soft-core X-rated movie to be released by a major studio. And today's cultural landscape is so awash with porn references — in the fashion photography of Terry Richardson and Jeff Burton, the porn-themed cottage industry of style periodicals like including *Purple*, *Richardson*, and *Deliciae Vitae*, the filthy electro musical stylings of Peaches and DJ Assault

— that we're soaked in semen whether we like it or not. We might as well start wearing trenchcoats to the movies like they did in the '70s.

So what's the next frontier in art-house porn, now that virtually every taboo has been broken? "Celebrity semen," deadpans Waters. "We haven't seen that yet." Yeah? Wait until he sees Vincent Gallo's load in *Trouble Every Day*.