



# Porn Again

Hollywood's pornography doesn't excite—it bores.

**M**ovies and pornography were made for each other. The impulse to look at the things which shame would keep hidden can be a very costly thing to indulge, but the unmatched realism of the movies allows us to indulge it cheaply. So cheaply, in fact, that we soon grow bored with mere nakedness and sexual abandon and begin seeking for ways to re-mystify what has been so precipitately de-mystified. This month brings several movies that offer a voyeuristic thrill, but all of them in one way or another dress up mere undress with exotica from the farther fringes of human experience.

The simplest and most harmless example is *Kama Sutra* by Mira Nair, an Indian version of the English bodice-ripper style of historical romance, which relies on sumptuous visuals of an Indian royal court in the sixteenth century and the great beauty of its star, Indira Varma, to make amends for its tediousness of narrative and characterization. Miss Varma plays a servant girl called Maya who, tired of getting all the hand-me-downs of Princess Tara (Sarita Choudhury), decides to avenge herself by seducing the princess's new husband, Raj Singh (Naveen Andrews), on their wedding night. "All my life I've had to wear your used things; now you must spend the rest of your life with something I've used," she says to the princess.

Not very nice of her, you might think, but Maya is supposed to be a sympathetic character, as she is both a proto-republican

and a proto-feminist, and she tells her mother that "I'll make my own destiny." To her, this means going off on her own to learn the arts of the courtesan—so that she can then come back to the palace and do some more damage to the princess's marriage. Along the way, she meets a hunky sculptor (Ramon Tikaram) who follows her like a puppy dog and who naturally makes Raj Singh jealous. She also discovers from the sculptor the exotic religion of hippie pantheism 400 years *avant la lettre*. "I used to worship inside temples," he tells Maya, "until I saw that everything around me was holy.... Now, like a madman, I worship everything I see."

That kind of madness provided a pleasing garnish to easy sex thirty years ago, but now it is as familiar as the undraped female form. Perhaps Miss Nair, being of foreign extraction, didn't know this. But if you are excited by the sumptuous luxury of an Indian royal court of the Mughal period, this film may do something for you. If not, you will just have to rely on the kinky-exotic of the present day, like most red-blooded Americans.

**O**r Canadians, I should say, since both *Kissed* by Lynne Stopkewich and *Crash* by David Cronenberg come to us from our neighbor to the north. The first tells the heartwarming story of a shy and lonely necrophiliac who gets a job in a funeral parlor and gradually learns how to express her sexuality, while the second deals with a yuppie couple into spouse-swapping who find a new and deeper meaning in their rather soulless sexual experiences when they learn to spice them up with death and mutilation in car crashes.

Movie illnesses have always been contracted almost exclusively by beautiful young men and women. In the days when they died from them, the silent killer was sure in its work, but it always left its victims looking in the pink when they finally breathed their last. Above all, movie illnesses did not disfigure. Even bullet wounds did not disfigure until the pioneering work of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah. Nowadays, although the mortality rate among the young and beautiful in the movies is still disproportionate, movie illnesses are often designed specifically to disfigure. In *Crash*, there is physical disfigurement, but in both *Crash* and *Kissed*, there is moral disfigurement. Psychosexual pathology is now a movie illness, and, like other movie illnesses, it is one that people in the real world rarely if ever get. But when we see it on the silver screen, we may persuade ourselves that perversion is as normal as, say, space aliens, who also make much more frequent appearances in the movies than they do in real life.

As I watched James Spader in *Crash*, making love to a livid cicatrix, which ran up the back of Rosanna Arquette's leg like the seam of an old-fashioned stocking, or the handsome young woman played by Molly Parker in *Kissed* climbing naked on top of a corpse on the undertaker's table, I thought: is this it? Have they finally gone, as the innocent in *Oklahoma* thought of the Kansas City Burley-Q, "about as fer as they can go"? It would be a rash man indeed who would make such an assertion with confidence, but it is hard to imagine much more exotic sexual imagery that is not merely comically fantastical. Already in *Crash*, the illusion of reality that is so essential to successful pornography can hardly survive the views of the crash-philosopher, Vaughan (Elias

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Koteas), who solemnly insists that a crash can be “a fertilizing rather than a destructive event.”

Yet presumably there are still enough intellectual sensualists around who are prepared to take such crackpot philosophy seriously for the sake of re-awakening their jaded appetites. For although images of perverse erotic excitement may be finite in number, there are an infinity of ways to talk nonsense. So Vaughan talks of the thrill of “reshaping of the human body by modern technology” (by which he presumably means the elaborate system of braces and prostheses hanging on poor Miss Arquette) or how “there’s a benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us.” Likewise, the distaff pervert (still something of a novelty) in *Kissed* develops a whole rationale for her behavior based on quasi-spiritualist ideas about “transportation” and “crossing over.”

I don’t see how anyone with a sense of humor can watch such stuff in the voyeuristic spirit in which it is intended. Miss Stopkewich, it’s true, makes a few jokes along the way, as when her virginal heroine, in her first sexual experience with a living man, is reassured by being told to “lie still.” But the preponderance of evidence is that this material is meant to be taken seriously—and to take it seriously you need to suffer from a form of perversity almost as rare as the heroine’s necrophilia. The refreshing thing about Howard Stern’s *Private Parts*, brought to the screen by Betty Thomas, is that it never pretends to seriousness. Like Woody Allen’s early *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, it is a procession of gags loosely tied together by their relation to the figure of the neb-bishy hero.

Although the film has a sort of plot in that it purports to be a biopic about Stern, nearly all its energies go into a cinematic re-creation of the radio gags that made Stern famous. In this it is a disappointment. Miss Thomas boldly struck out in a new direction in *The Brady Bunch* and created a model of what such a picture ought to be (given that it has to be at all), but with *Private Parts* she has contented herself with presenting the familiar Howard to a wider audience. Presumably that’s the way Stern wanted it. To be fair,

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the jokes seem to wear well. Although many of them were new to me, I noticed that even long-time Stern devotees who must have heard them many times before were thoroughly delighted with this version of the familiar material. Also like the early Woody Allen (not so much the later one), the guy is funny as only someone prepared to make fun of himself can be.

And yet the perversity of our times gives even Howard Stern a kind of seriousness and self-importance. As he told David Remnick in the *New Yorker*, his “singular ambition” is “to be the most honest man in America.” It may be, as Remnick says, that Stern’s “jokes, bad or funny, gross or sharp, are a cumulative blast at the contemporary rhetoric of piety and identity politics. In part, at least, his appeal is to an audience that feels put upon by a new set of rules—sexual harassment guidelines, the taboo against certain kinds of speech—and wants release, if only in the privacy of the drive to work. Stern’s allegiance to conventional values is the foundation of his comedy, even at its base worst.” But to take him that seriously is itself to undermine “conventional values,” according to which Stern is a mere buffoon.

**T**hat, at least, is where I would like to leave him in order to recommend as Movie of the Month a new “director’s cut” of Wolfgang Petersen’s *Das Boot*, first made in 1982 but now returning with over an hour of additional footage (it runs three-and-a-half hours long, but the time flies) and digital sound. This is perhaps the best war movie ever made, capturing as it does both the excitement, the adventure, and the glory of war

on the one hand, and the horror of it on the other. The press material naturally stresses, as I’m sure most reviewers will do, the “anti-war” angle—especially as it is about the valiant submariners of Nazi Germany, but don’t you believe it. To be “anti-war” it would have to be ideological and doctrinaire and preachy and, well, bad, and it is none of these things. It represents indifferently the good and the bad of war and is neither pro nor anti—which of course is just what is necessary for any film about war to be convincing.

In what is no doubt considered its prime example of “anti-war” thinking, the young war correspondent, Lt. Werner (Herbert Grönemeyer), talks of his romantic illusions of going forth to meet “the inexorable, where no mother will look after us, no woman will cross our path and where only reality reigns with cruelty and grandeur,” he says, quoting his own fine words about the warrior’s life. Now, he says bitterly as he reflects on the certain death that seems to await him and the rest of the crew: “I was drunk with these words.” He weeps and says: “Well, this is reality.” Except it’s not. The chief engineer (Klaus Wenneman) finally gets everything fixed, and the boat pops to the surface like a cork. Reality is both death (which comes to many of them subsequently) and the escape from death that is so exhilarating to the survivors.

If you wanted to be provocative, you could say that here is the pornography of war, because it conveys a kind of forbidden excitement. But if so, it is successful pornography in a way that the sexual kind rarely is. Partly this may be because no sex is really forbidden anymore, or has that thrill about it that comes from enjoying something which we are so unanimously assured, as we are in the case of war, is not to be enjoyed by sane or responsible people. But also it is because *Das Boot* possesses that look that is almost never to be found in pornography and without which it cannot be truly exciting: the look of reality. ❧

James Bowman welcomes comments and queries about his reviews. E-mail him at 72056.3226@compuserve.com. Mr. Bowman’s “Movie Takes” on current films are available on TAS’s web site—<http://www.spectator.org>.

# The Ambivalent Icon

**Whittaker Chambers:**

**A Biography**

Sam Tanenhaus

Random House / 638 pages / \$35

REVIEWED BY

**George H. Nash**

**N**ext year will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the most sensational espionage case in American history. In August 1948 Whittaker Chambers, a senior editor at *Time*, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee that he had been an underground Communist in the 1930's and had known as Communists a number of U.S. government employees in Washington. Among these was an up-and-coming State Department officer named Alger Hiss. Chambers told the Committee that in 1938 he had broken from the murderous Soviet apparatus he served and had tried unsuccessfully to persuade his friend Hiss to do the same.

In the ensuing decade Chambers had carved out a brilliant career as a protégé of Henry Luce. Hiss, meanwhile, had become a high-ranking State Department official and a trusted member of the American delegation to the Yalta conference in 1945. Suave, elegant in appearance, and well-connected, he seemed to epitomize New Deal liberalism, committed to progressive social change and a peaceful world.

In the summer of 1948, as the Cold War turned more rancorous, Whittaker Chambers's testimony stunned the nation. When Hiss, who was by then president of the prestigious Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, aggressively

denied under oath Chambers's charges and sued him for slander, Chambers astounded the nation further by producing a cache of secret government documents given to him by Hiss ten years before. Some were notes in Hiss's own handwriting. Others were copies of highly confidential State Department materials—typed, it was later established, on Hiss's own home typewriter. Instead of turning these items over to his Russian spymaster in 1938, Chambers had held onto them as protection against reprisal by Stalin's hit men. Now, ten years later, he and Hiss stood exposed before their country not just as once-concealed Communists but as spies.

Chambers's electrifying disclosure carried even greater implications. If his testimony was correct—and the purloined documents offered powerful corroboration—Soviet Russia had organized a massive espionage ring in the 1930's which had penetrated the upper echelons of the Roosevelt administration. Even worse: Chambers had warned the U.S. government about the spy ring in 1939, and the government had seemingly done nothing about it. (When an intermediary went to Roosevelt with Chambers's information, FDR brusquely rebuffed him. The story, he angrily declared, "isn't true.") For Republican politicians like Rep. Richard Nixon (who helped to break open the case), the Chambers testimony took on new significance. Not just Communism, but the policy of liberal American officialdom toward Communism, was now at issue. Suddenly (as the saying went) a generation was on trial: the generation of the New Deal and the "Red Decade."

Chambers admitted and repented his terrible past. By 1948 he had striven for nearly a decade—through crusading journalism at *Time*—to awaken America to the menace of Soviet Communism. Alger Hiss, however, made no such con-

fession or atonement. Insisting that he was neither a Communist nor a spy, the former diplomat asserted his innocence with growing implausibility.

Initially, at least, the luminaries of American liberalism (including Eleanor Roosevelt) believed him. In August 1948 President Truman himself denounced the congressional inquiry as a "red herding" created by reactionary Republicans. Distinguished Americans such as Felix Frankfurter and Adlai Stevenson agreed to serve as character witnesses for Hiss. But in 1950, after two traumatic trials, Hiss was convicted of perjury (and, implicitly, espionage) and sentenced to five years in prison. For the rest of his life he and his supporters claimed he had been framed.

For most Americans at the time, the verdict was persuasive. Astonishing as it initially seemed to some, it was Chambers—the self-confessed Communist, pudgy and unprepossessing—who had told the truth. It was Hiss, the "liberal"—well-dressed, well-spoken, a graduate of Harvard Law School—who had lied. The popular understanding of the case was immeasurably strengthened in 1952 by the publication of Chambers's *Witness*, a work properly acclaimed as one of the classic American autobiographies. It was further reinforced in 1978 by Allen Weinstein's volume *Perjury*, which concluded after exhaustive study that Hiss was guilty as charged.

Still, old myths die hard, and in some circles on the left a cult of agnosticism lingers on. Questioned recently on "Meet the Press," Anthony Lake—President Clinton's erstwhile nominee to direct the CIA, no less—opined that the evidence of Hiss's guilt was not "conclusive." And when Hiss himself died last November at 92, both ABC and NBC television news implied that he had been an innocent victim of anti-Communist hysteria. The passions of fifty years ago are not dead yet.

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