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* FILM REVIEWS

**Hard reality: Notes towards a review of penises in the movies**

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view. I was tormented by the ‘present absence’ (Fine, 2002) of Loren’s breasts; it was as if I couldn’t be sure if I had seen them or not (although I knew very well that in actual fact I had not), and for many years afterwards I would in private moments try to conjure them up again in their full voluptuousness.

Much has been written about the psychology and politics of female nudity in the movies, and about bare breasts in particular (e.g., Danielsen, 2007; Flicker, 2003), but in my own work I have increasingly focused instead on ‘full frontal’ male nudity, and in particular on men’s penises as they appear on the ‘big screen’. In this brief review of how penises appear in a selection of movies I attempt to set out some of the key considerations that would need to be addressed in a fuller treatment of the subject.

So how are penises typically presented in the movies? A good example might be a scene from Tom Kalin’s (2007) Savage Grace in which Brooks Baekeland (Stephen Dillane) undresses after a friendly bout of fencing at a sports club. As he does so, and dries himself with a towel, we are allowed repeated glimpses of his penis. This happens in the same way as one might catch a glimpse of a friend’s or a stranger’s penis at the gymnasium, but unlike ‘real life’ (as it plays out at the gymnasium), in Savage Grace we may see such things only from the middle distance. When the camera moves into a medium close-up, our view of Brooks’s penis is obscured by his friend’s shoulder, by a towel, by the camera happening to have moved up, a moment earlier, to show his upper body only.

This is the movie penis law of double pretence: First, we have to pretend that it is no big deal – that it is just a penis, nothing to be ashamed of, something that might of course on occasion find its way into the shot while the camera is focussing on the real action (in this case an animated discussion about Baekeland’s wife’s sexual attractiveness). Second, we have to pretend that the careful choreography of actors and cameras, the intricate ballet of do-not-show-the-penis, is equally accidental – that that towel, that knee, that flower pot (as also satirised in Bean, 1997) just happened to have been there; that the camera just so happened to have moved away at the precise moment when we might otherwise have been treated to a full-on, close-up view of somebody’s dick. Of course it is all a lie: Seeing a penis in a movie is a big deal and we do notice that it is there, if for no other reason than that it is so rare. And, by the same token, we do notice when we are not allowed to see a penis, because in real life legs and flower pots do not so consistently get in the way, and in real life we can always – furtively or otherwise – move our heads to look around such obstructions.

But are movie penises in fact rare? In absolutely terms, no. Approximately 11 000 new pornographic movies are released every year (Wikipedia, 2012) and most...
of them unashamedly show naked men and their, typically outsize, penises. From pornographic movies we know that the proper way for a penis to be is large and circumcised (the latter because the majority of porn actors are American and until fairly recently most American boys were circumcised). It should also preferably be in an erect state, and if flaccid should be rapidly coaxed into tumescence. However, the depiction of porn penises is a subject for a different review, and here I will consider only ‘mainstream’ movies of which, according to a list published by the Internet Movie Database (IMDB, 2012), no fewer than 631 show full frontal male nudity. This may seem like a surprisingly large number, but is miniscule in relative terms, that is when compared to the full 2 425 902 non-pornographic movies on the IMDB database. In other words only 0.03% of non-pornographic movies show penises; the remaining 99.97% do not feature penises at all or, perhaps more accurately, feature them as present absences. The very fact that IMDB considered it necessary, and found it feasible, to compile such a list, shows that full frontal male nudity is decidedly not something that typically occurs in movies.

Therefore, when already in the 41st second of Cédric Klapisch’s L’Auberg Espangnole (2002) we see the main character, Xavier (Romain Duris), naked in front of his computer and are allowed a glimpse of his pubic hair, we would be foolish, statistically speaking, to get our hopes up. And sure enough when, 1 hour 16 minutes and 53 seconds later, we at last see Xavier fully naked again it is from behind and we have to be content with a brief shot of his shapely buttocks as he lies on top of his love-interest, the for some reason fully clothed Anne-Sophie (Judith Godrèche). Similarly when, in Stephen Poliakoff’s (2009) ever-so-British drama Glorious 39, Anne (Romola Garai) and Lawrence (Charlie Cox) get undressed, we should really not be surprised when we do not get to see either of their genitalia, but only his buttocks as the two of them stand pressed closely together. Even in Fassbinder’s Querelle (1982), which is all about raw masculine sexuality and in some ways is as casually sexually explicit as a movie could possibly be, we see endless phallic symbols but never an actual penis. The same goes for one of the first homosexual movies, the silent movie Lot in Sodom directed by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber (1933) that uses the Biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah as a pretext for showing attractive young men cavorting about in various stages of undress, but scrupulously avoids showing their penises. In a typical scene, we see a full-length shot of a naked man held upside down by his ankles, but when the scene cuts to a frontal view, we suddenly see him only from his waist up (or, ironically, from the waist down – given that he is held in an inverted position).

Of course not all mainstream movies go through such contortions to hide penises from view or, when they do show penises, to enforce the law of double pretence
quite so strictly. In Pier Paolo Pasolini’s (1975) *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* for example, there is a scene, ten minutes into the movie, in which a group of young men who have been kidnapped are lined up and ordered to drop their trousers and pull up their shirts for ‘inspection’. The camera pans across the kidnappers’ faces and we see how their eyes scan the young men’s torsos and then quickly flick down to take in the rest of what is on offer. Then, emulating this act of visual rape (and making us complicit in it), the camera shows a frontal view of two of the young men from the chest up before sinking down (in an almost exact reversal of the Sophia Loren moment that so disturbed me as a fourteen year old) to come to rest on a lingering close-up of their genitalia. By acquiescing in this early shameless act of cinematic pleasure we become unable to resist *Salò*’s logic as it inexorably descends through ever more explicit scenes of depravity and degradation, such as young women being trained in the art of masturbating a man with the aid of an anatomically correct dummy (dressed in a white suit) and disgustingly explicit acts of Urolagnia and Coprophilia.

Equally shocking, but in my view considerably less successful as a movie, is “new queer cinema” bad boy Bruce LaBruce’s (1999) *Skin Gang*, which starts with a scene in which a skinhead masturbates and ejaculates (although, it has to be said, with somewhat uncertain aim) onto a copy of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. One puzzled reviewer wrote about this movie:

*I really do not know what this film is about. This is not porn, as there is not as much sex compared to the normal porn movie. The ‘story’ scenes are interspersed between the sex scenes, which makes it more like a porn movie. However, it is not a conventional film either, as it has almost no story. It appears to be a film about the life of skinheads, but it has so little substance, no character development and there is no emotion in it at all. The scenes seem fragmented and haphazard. There is no flow from one scene to the next.*

*(Gordon-11, 2006)*

A heterosexual equivalent is *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004) that features scenes of a couple attending various (mostly) rock concerts interspersed with graphic scenes of them having (rather unsexy) sex. The same can be said of the Mexican movie *Rabioso Sol, Rabioso Cielo* (*Raging Sun, Raging Sky*), directed by Julián Hernández (2009), which is almost as tedious to watch as the worst kind of porn movie, and as grindingly repetitive in its depiction of sexual acts.

Another of Bruce LaBruce’s movies that plays with porn tropes is *The Raspberry Reich* (2004), a kind of re-enactment (complete with delicious German accents) of events around the Baader-Meinhof Gang of the 1970s and 1980s, but with the gang’s guiding ideology re-imagined as primarily a revolt against bourgeois sexual repression. The movie consists of little more than a long string of explicit sexual encounters, interspersed with ‘revolutionary’ slogans such as “Out of the bedrooms into the streets!” and “Heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses”, but nevertheless manages to attain a weird kind of coherence and narrative flow. It is also, in my view,
genuinely witty (and in places sharply critical) in how it plays with stock elements from the silent movie era, modern Hollywood blockbusters, and porn movies. One example: Photographs of George Bush and Tony Blair, as well as a selection of some of the more stupid things they said, are repeatedly superimposed over the actors’ genitalia in apparent conformity with the ‘do-not-show-the-penis’ rule, but are then just as casually removed to frankly display what was supposed to be censored.

A very differently paced movie is Nagisa Ôshima’s (1976) *Ai no korîda* (*In the Realm of the Senses*), supposedly based on true events, in which we see Kichizo Ishida (Tatsuya Fuji) and Sada Abe (Eiko Matsuda) gradually giving themselves over to a kind of languid but intense lovemaking that becomes entirely indifferent to the stylised respectability of pre-war Japanese society around them. Here Ôshima’s and Ishida’s bodies, and the things they do with them, are no longer subject to social and cinematic taboos. He simply consumes her body, and she his, in a feast of sensuality that insidiously prepares the viewer for what is nevertheless perhaps one of the most shocking final scenes of any movie available on general release.

Movies such as *The Raspberry Reich* and *In the Realm of the Senses* resist the cinematic imperative that penises should at all costs be depicted as ordinary by instead elevating them, as it were, to the stars of the show. However, there is also another way of resisting the semiotic tyranny that movie penises are subjected to, namely by explicitly, determinately and consistently, without pretence, depicting them as exactly that – ordinary. The movie *Pixote* (directed by Hector Babenco, 1981), for example, tells the story of a 10-year-old boy, Pixote (Fernando Ramos da Silva), and several of his cronies, such as the transvestite hustler Lilica (Jorge Julião), as they make their way into and out of detention centres, prostitution and petty crime. Throughout the movie we repeatedly see Pixote’s and his friends’ penises, which is entirely inevitable as the movie tries to deal honestly with the usual Brazilian themes of love, sex, crime, poverty and violence. It is clear from the start that we are not here to perv penises, but to be swept up in the kind of narrative that plays out to this day in the streets of Rio and Sao Paulo, and we cannot but agree that there is no use in pretending that nudity and the male sexual organ is not an essential part of what goes on in such contexts. Another movie that unashamedly shows pre-pubescent penises is *Du er ikke Alene* (*You are not Alone*), Ernst Johansen’s and Lasse Nielsen’s (1978) beautifully gentle, but at the same time hard-hitting, treatment of homo-erotic love in a Danish boys’ school.

There are many similar movies, such as Paul Verhoeven’s (1980) *Spetters*, a sort of Dutch *Saturday Night Fever* but with motocross racing instead of singing and silly dance moves, which now comes across as wonderfully retro and cringe-y (those clothes! those attitudes!), but at the time it clearly was a celebration of some kind of
dangerous and sexy new youth culture. The movie contains a fair bit of nudity and what censor boards like to call ‘graphic sex’, and in several cases penises are shown – flaccid, erect, just hanging there, being masturbated, being fellated. However, the movie is far from a penis-fest – the male and female full frontal nudity is (to use a favourite adjective employed by censor boards across the globe) ‘functional’ and the camera, to a far greater extent than in most movies, seems to ‘naturally’ anticipate where the viewer’s eye wants to go. But even if nudity had been less well handled in *Spetters* it would still be light years ahead of what, to this day, is coming out of Hollywood. Try to imagine *Saturday Night Fever* with breasts and penises. Have we ever seen John Travolta’s penis on screen? I doubt it. As an aside: Verhoeven later relocated to Hollywood and, amongst other high profile movies, directed *Basic Instinct* – 1992 – which is famous not for penises but for Sharon Stone’s vagina.

It is hardly surprising that penis-positive movies should in the main be from Latin America, Scandinavia and from the more permissive European countries such as Holland. However, the Anglo-Saxon world has also produced its fair share of movies that refuse the usual conventions of the visible and the invisible. Think, for example, of *Ken Park*, Larry Clark’s and Edward Lachman’s (2002) devastating exposé of (possibly underage) Californian teenagers’ (for the most part) wholesome sexual practices, set off against their parents’ grossly perverted prudery. Another example would be John Cameron Mitchell’s (2006) *Shortbus*, set in a New York sex club, which infamously starts with a close-up scene of auto-fellatio and gets more explicit from there.

So what, then, is the role of the penis in the movies? Clearly, it functions as something that pops up and out – like *Dr Strangelove*’s (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) fascist arm – when most and least desired. It is Lacan’s (1994) ‘partial object’, the ‘unattainable object of desire’ that contains in itself everything that is irresistible and dangerous about the Id. But let us not forget that it also represents the equally irrational, insane, strictures of the super-ego: The movie-penis is not, in the first place, about indulging in the pleasures of raw sexuality, but rather, we should remember in Žižek’s (2007, n.p.) words that:

> The problem for us is not are our desires satisfied or not. The problem is how do we know what we desire? There is nothing spontaneous, nothing natural about human desire. Our desires are artificial. We have to be taught to desire. Cinema is the ultimate pervert art.

> It doesn’t give you what you desire. It tells you how to desire.

Of course these somewhat random notes can only be a beginning to a better understanding of what penises, as they appear and fail to appear in the movies, are all about. A more substantial treatment of the topic would, in my view, contain at least two elements.
First, a full analysis would present a more comprehensive overview of all appearances and absences. No doubt many readers would be disappointed that their favourite movie penis – ranging from the rather tiny, but hugely significant, appendage in Neil Jordan’s (1992) *The Crying Game* to Liam Neeson’s apparently exceptionally large, but rather obvious, member as displayed in *Kinsey* (Condon, 2004) – is absent from this review. A full analysis would go beyond such cherry-picking of notable penises and instead would try to account for the full range of what is shown and not shown. To this end, several of my graduate students are currently engaged in compiling a comprehensive database of penises in non-pornographic movies, carefully recording variables such as state of tumescence (flaccid, semi-erect, erect, indeterminate), sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, pansexual, etcetera) and size (small, medium, large), while also carefully recording absences and the circumstances of their non-appearance.

Second, a review of movie penises would need to more carefully consider than I have been able to do here how the depiction of penises relate to other movie taboos, particularly depictions of female sexual appendages such as breasts and vaginas.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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