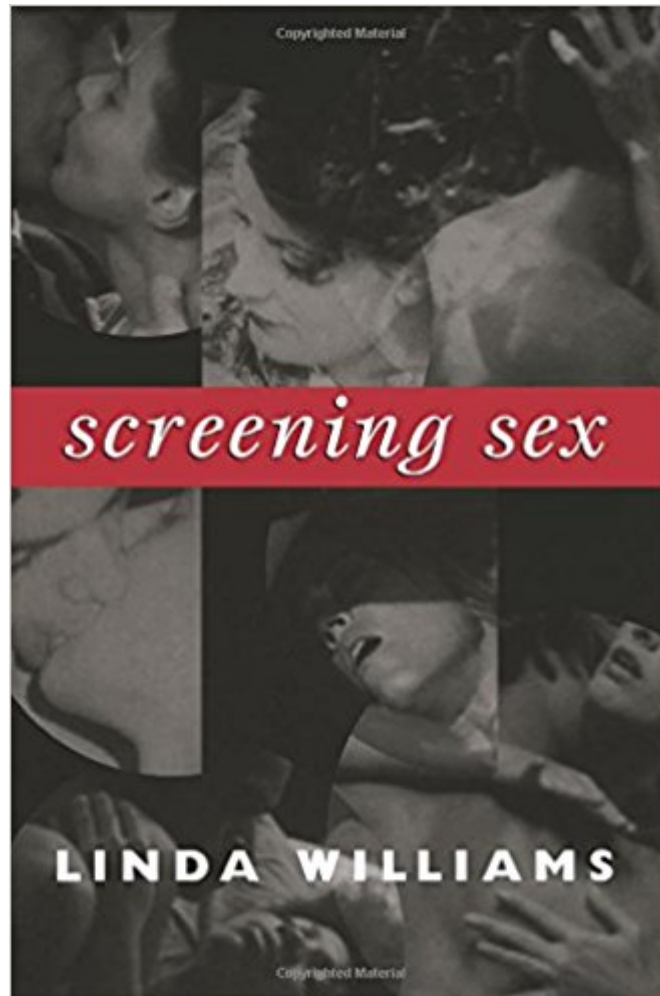


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# Screening Sex (a John Hope Franklin Center Book)



## Synopsis

For many years, kisses were the only sexual acts to be seen in mainstream American movies. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, American cinema "grew up" in response to the sexual revolution, and movie audiences came to expect more knowledge about what happened between the sheets. In *Screening Sex*, the renowned film scholar Linda Williams investigates how sex acts have been represented on screen for more than a century and, just as important, how we have watched and experienced those representations. Whether examining the arch artistry of *Last Tango in Paris*, the on-screen orgasms of Jane Fonda, or the anal sex of two cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain*, Williams illuminates the forms of pleasure and vicarious knowledge derived from screening sex. Combining stories of her own coming of age as a moviegoer with film history, cultural history, and readings of significant films, Williams presents a fascinating history of the on-screen kiss, a look at the shift from adolescent kisses to more grown-up displays of sex, and a comparison of the "tasteful" Hollywood sexual interlude with sexuality as represented in sexploitation, Blaxploitation, and avant-garde films. She considers *Last Tango in Paris* and *Deep Throat*, two 1972 films unapologetically all about sex; *In the Realm of the Senses*, the only work of 1970s international cinema that combined hard-core sex with erotic art; and the sexual provocations of the mainstream movies *Blue Velvet* and *Brokeback Mountain*. She describes art films since the 1990s, in which the sex is aggressive, loveless, or alienated. Finally, Williams reflects on the experience of screening sex on small screens at home rather than on large screens in public. By understanding screening sex as both revelation and concealment, Williams has written the definitive study of sex at the movies. Linda Williams is Professor of Film Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include *Porn Studies*, also published by Duke University Press; *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*; *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*; and *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. A John Hope Franklin Center Book. November 2008. 424 pages. 129 illustrations. 6x9 trim size. ISBN 0-8223-0-8223-4285-5 paper, \$24.95. ISBN 0-8223-0-8223-4263-4 library cloth edition, \$89.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-4285-4 paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-4263-2 library cloth edition, \$89.95.

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## Customer Reviews

“Screening Sex is a truly remarkable follow-up to Linda Williams’s groundbreaking book *Hard Core*. It reaffirms her place as the leading feminist scholar of the history and theory of on-screen sex. Not that it was ever in doubt.” • Jane Gaines, author of *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* “Linda Williams is a terrific storyteller about sex, and, as she tracks the growth of her own cinematically mediated sexual consciousness, we go to the movies with her, imagining as though for the first time new encounters with explicitness, new sexual knowledge, and new spectatorial sensations.” • Lauren Berlant, author of *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* “With *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams establishes herself as not only the preeminent scholar of cinematic eroticism, but also the most significant voice in cinema studies of her generation.” • Eric Schaefer, author of *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1958*

"There's an impressive amount of research here, and Williams casts a wide net to draw examples from mainstream fare such as *Casablanca* and *The Graduate*, controversial titles such as *Last Tango in Paris* and *Blue Velvet*, foreign art films, and varied selections within the hard-core sector. She provides a close, critical analysis of the plot, treatment, symbolism, and technical approach of individual films in terms of their sexual content, discussing these elements in relation to contemporary culture and offering thoughtful commentary about the various components of the audience experience. This is an informed and thoroughly frank study of an expansive array of sexual themes on film, with numerous explicit film stills and graphic narratives tightly woven into the scholarly text." "Williams is a smooth writer, and even her most scholarly arguments feel lively, though far more engrossing are the vignettes about her own coming-of-age as a movie-sex

spectator. . ." --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In 1896, actor John Rice lifted and smoothed his extensive moustache and planted kisses on the mouth of actress May Irwin, and Thomas Alva Edison filmed it. The fifteen second The Kiss was a bit of a scandal. "The idea of a kinetoscopic kiss has unlimited possibilities," gushed the New York World, which had used the film as a publicity stunt. It was supposed to depict part of a musical play that was then in New York, but the kiss was the only thing in the movie. In other words, the film was of a sex act purely for the sake of a sex act, a particularity with which those interested in films would become familiar over the next decades. The movie became the most popular of the projected short films of the time, although a literary magazine protested that a kiss so monstrously enlarged and shown repeatedly became "positively disgusting." No one had made such an objection about the original kiss in the musical play itself. The Kiss is the first film discussed in Screening Sex (Duke University Press) by Linda Williams, who teaches film studies and who in 1989 wrote Hard Core, a book that took pornographic films seriously and showed there was no reason to avoid an academic study of pornography any more than any other field of human activity. In some ways, Screening Sex continues the themes of the previous book, although the world of sexual activity on screens is far different from what it was twenty years ago. The book is serious (and completely referenced) but not solemn, and Williams tackles some dense theorizing with gusto and an appealing sense of humor that nicely fits her subject. Kisses were the limit of movie sex, at least officially, for decades, but there is much Williams has to say about them. The best parts of her book are analyses of specific films. Everyone knows that "A Kiss is Just a Kiss", as Sam sang in Casablanca, but in the film, Rick and Ilsa (Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman) have their share of kisses, with the last big one in Rick's room above his saloon. Again, the kiss is interrupted as the camera moves on to look at a German searchlight, and then back to the couple an indefinite period of time thereafter. Was the kiss just a kiss? Maybe not, but one way or another, the couple are still deeply in love. Whatever its suggestiveness, the Code authorities didn't take out the kiss, probably because it does not, in the end, lead to Ilsa leaving her husband. "Desire and sexual pleasure," writes Williams, "as positive values in themselves have no legitimate, acknowledged place in the era of the Code, though they certainly sneak in around the edges." Full scale sex, although without much anatomical detail, was introduced to theater-going Americans (differentiated from stag film attendees) in imports like Bergman's The Virgin Spring (1959) and De Sica's Two Women (1960). Last Tango in Paris and Deep Throat both came in 1972, and both were greatly different from what had gone before. Tango was a serious film, foreign but starring

American sex symbol Marlon Brando. It had six explicit sex scenes; they are sometimes brutal, but they are not graphic, and the sex is simulated. There had been commercial pornography films before *\_Deep Throat\_*, but this one was the first to get wide theatrical distribution and to become a household name. Williams presents these two films together in one chapter because they represent "a belated coming of age on American screens" and because these were films that did not just depict sex, they were about sex. It is fun to read Williams's extensive quotation of reviews by Pauline Kael for *\_The New Yorker\_* and Al Goldstein for *\_Screw\_* (can you guess which reviewer wrote about which movie?) showing not just an acceptance of the sex in the films, but that America was accepting that sex could be a legitimate chief subject for films to explore. That sex is something in which people (and movie audiences) are interested, and that it is something that can be depicted with beauty and with detail have brought forth what Williams calls the "hard core art film". John Cameron Mitchell produced the first fully American mainstream movie predominantly about sex, the good-humored *\_Shortbus\_*, in which a woman seeking a cure of anorgasmia views and participates in some very unusual, and funny, scenes. The sex in these movies is obviously not simulated, with erections, penetrations, ejaculations, and more. The movies are unapologetically about sex; any of the "redeeming social value" to be found in them is the sex itself, treated in a biting, distressing, or jocular fashion. Of course there is still hard core porn, but it is a shadow of itself from the years after *\_Deep Throat\_* when movies like *\_Behind the Green Door\_* and *\_The Devil in Miss Jones\_* were part of the "porno chic" of the time. There will be further experimentation with interactive media; it is only primitive now, but if you buy *\_Virtual Sex with Jenna Jameson\_*, your in-computer self can connect with the in-computer Jenna in various ways, and you can go to the "I/N" choice menu to have her respond "innocently" or "nastily" (which Williams amusingly says are respectively "just polite" and "just a woman who bluntly commands what she wants"). Throughout this interesting book, which has sections on homosexual and Blaxploitation films as well as a full chapter on the graphic 1976 Japanese art movie *\_In the Realm of the Senses\_*, Williams argues that we are not only making movies about sex, we are responding to them and that screening sex has become part of the way we conduct ourselves sexually. I hope she gets to see a recent article in Salon which advises men not to take porn so seriously. The author mentions a woman who was puzzled by the conduct of a man she had been dating. During sex, he would withdraw his member and thump it on her. This did not increase her pleasure, and could not have done much for him - but it is a standard in porn, and he was just applying what he had seen the pros do.

Anyone interested in the development of sexual expression on film needs to read this book.

Williams lays out a compelling history of sexuality on film that ranges from Edison to Japanese art house to the internet.

The book was very educational. And I appreciate the expedite manner in which my order was handle. Thanks. Job Well Done!

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