

## Practicing Essential Cinematic Sex

A review of the film



### **Lust, Caution**

(2007)

Ang Lee (Director)



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Reviewed by

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Ang Lee has reached the enviable stage in his career where he probably enjoys almost complete artistic freedom. His directorial credits include *Yin shi nan nu (Eat Drink Man Woman, 1994)*, *Sense and Sensibility (1995)*, *The Ice Storm (1997)*, *Wo hu cang long (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2000)*, and *Brokeback Mountain (2005)*, for which he won the Academy Award for Best Director. He has directed actors in both Mandarin and English and in genres ranging from action–adventures to drama–romances. He has been successful directing from both original screenplays (including his own) and adaptations of classic stories and novels (including Jane Austen's).

Lee's cinematic products have won critical acclaim and commercial success; his *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* earned the biggest box office of any foreign-language movie ever released in the United States. To be sure, even Lee can have an occasional off day. For example, he may have stretched too far beyond his capacities when he directed

*Hulk* (2003). That said, it would be very difficult to name another director of his generation who enjoys a more secure artistic reputation.

Furthermore, Lee is willing to take advantage of his reputation to expand the boundaries of mainstream cinema. This willingness became strikingly apparent in *Brokeback Mountain*, a love story about two cowboys. Although the story *Lust, Caution* (2007) centers on a heterosexual love affair, Lee pushes the limit in a different direction: Where *Brokeback* stayed within the bounds of an R-rated film, Lee thrusts *Lust, Caution* quite emphatically into NC-17 territory. The sex is not only explicit but brutal. Judging from the timing for the later R-rated version (which I have not seen), the most objectionable scenes probably constitute about 9 minutes (the R version runs 148 minutes, and the NC-17 is 157 minutes). Because an NC-17 rating seriously hurts a film's commercial prospects, Lee was requested to make the necessary edits but refused. The film's earnings in the U.S. box office then amounted to less than one third of what it cost to make. In a word, it flopped.

Even so, the critical reviews were predominantly positive. Metacritic.com, in summarizing the evaluations of 35 film reviews, assigned it a score of 61 on a 100-point scale. According to the website, this indicates generally favorable reviews. Using the same scale, I would bestow a 70. Even if not a masterpiece, it remains a finely crafted work of art.

The screenplay is based on a novella by Eileen Chang, a highly accomplished writer. (This is said from personal experience because I first encountered her work over 20 years ago when I read an anthology devoted to great Chinese literature.) The story takes place in World War II Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. A young woman (played by Wei Tang) begins a clandestine love affair with a collaborator of considerable power and cunning (played by Tony Leung Chiu Wai). Yet the woman belongs to a resistance group, and her actions are planned to arrange her lover's assassination. Provocatively, the film's narration departs from a linear progression. The script begins near the very end of the story, then goes back a year to furnish the antecedent events before reaching the climax. The middle "backstory" takes up most of the film, and the dénouement is short and sharp. The performances by the two leads are absolutely superb. The adaptation was made by James Schamus and Hui-Ling Wang, who previously shared Oscar nods for *Crouching Tiger*. The film also features excellent music by Alexandre Desplat, period costume design by Lai Pan, and cinematography by Rodrigo Prieto. Notably, both Desplat and Prieto received Oscar nominations for their contributions to earlier films.

Despite all of these aesthetic assets, the biggest question remains the sex scenes. Would it have been even better if it were edited from an NC-17 to an R rating? Here my answer is complex.

On the one hand, there can be no doubt that it would have been more profitable. In addition to reaching more theaters, an edited film would omit some repugnant material. In general, the lovemaking is far from erotic or loving. Depending on one's tastes, it may even be considered repulsive. Few moviegoers will want to see this film just for voyeuristic reasons.

On the other hand, I believe the film would have been worse artistically if Lee had deleted those scenes. The sex (as well as the violence) is an integral part of the story. It helps move the narrative forward, and it reveals the hidden nature of the characters. Although an R-rated version would certainly be more pleasant and palatable, such a watered-down presentation could not make the essential point: The characters themselves tend to be neither pleasant nor palatable.

In thinking about this issue, I was reminded of Bernardo Bertolucci's 2003 *The Dreamers*. Like Lee, Bertolucci has directed successful films in multiple languages (English, Italian, and French), and Bertolucci, too, won an Academy Award for Best Director, in his case for the 1987 *The Last Emperor*. Bertolucci had also earlier tested the limits of cinematic sex in *Ultimo tango a Parigi* (*Last Tango in Paris*, 1972).

However, Bertolucci ventured even further in *The Dreamers*. This film tells the story of three young people in 1968 Paris who—somewhat like the young Chinese resistance members in Lee's movie—frolic in a fantasy world while momentous events beyond their full comprehension whirl around them. Bertolucci's film also got branded with an NC-17 rating for sex that is explicit but not particularly erotic, if at all. Still, I believe Bertolucci, like Lee, was justified in insisting on the retention of that graphic content. The content was faithful to the characters being portrayed.

In fact, I would argue that explicit sex becomes far more artistically critical to the very extent that it departs dramatically from what we would usually expect on the silver screen. In the golden age of Hollywood, when two characters suddenly realized that they were in love, they would just fall into a passionate embrace and kiss while a full orchestra gushed out romantic music. The film would next cut directly to the day after, showing a scene in which the two lovers merely displayed sufficient conversational intimacy that the viewer could infer the rest. Most of us do not need to witness the nitty-gritty details about what transpired because most of us have been fortunate enough to have had comparable experiences in our own lives.

Only when the sex diverges from that predictable script does the activity have to be depicted in the film. A discreet fadeout and some later verbal allusion will just not do. You really have to see it to believe it. That requirement definitely holds for the controversial scenes in *Lust, Caution*. For this reason, we have to be grateful that the director had sufficient artistic freedom to have the final word on the film's Motion Picture Association of America rating. In my opinion, Ang Lee practiced essential cinematic sex.