Screening the Dark Side of Love
For Michael, Jan, Dom, and Lea who show me the light side of love
(Karen A. Ritzenhoff)

For my daughter Vicky, who has taught me how to truly love and be loved
(Karen Randell)
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While explicit depictions of sex in any medium challenge traditional social mores, film uniquely allows viewers to voyeuristically participate and derive pleasure from the desire, pain, and excitement featured on screen. We have increasingly become a voyeuristic society, honing our skills in theaters by watching televisions, and now through sitting in front of our computer screens. We are fascinated by sex, and mesmerized by it once it enters the realm of the moving image. Throughout the history of film, sex has been censored, banned, protested, and condemned, and yet we are bombarded by sexual imagery every day.

—Museum of Sex, NYC, Sex and the Moving Image, 2012

Screening the Dark Side of Love: From Euro-Horror to American Cinema is a collection of essays that engage with film and television texts where notions of sexual pleasure/displeasure, power/powerlessness, form the central focus of the narrative. Obsession, passion, fixation, perversion, jealousy, deviance, pain, desire, madness—the “dark side of love” is a dangerous alternative notion to the softness, enchantment, and heartache of romantic love. Love is at the center of every page of this book, but romantic love is low on the agenda of the films and television programs discussed here; rather it is the notion of transgression, violence, eroticism, power, and play that makes up the dark themes of love explored in this collection. In many of the chapters, sexual attraction gives rise to oppressive power roles based on gender and on the female’s individual identity, which is split between erotic expectations and personal aspirations. Dark love is also the realm where gender transgressions are imagined and practiced. Tensions arise between the roles we are all expected to play in a relationship as well as in society at large. How do we see ourselves? This is one of the reasons we chose the mirror image of a young woman, reminiscent of Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010), for the front
cover of this book. Her quizzical stare and the touch of her hand, to her reflection, suggests a search for herself, of wanting to know; she is leaning in as if to find the answers in her “other” image.

Thus Screening the Dark Side of Love: From Euro-Horror to American Cinema engages with this notion of the screened other, and as Linda Williams points out, screening sexuality both “reveals and conceals” the sexual act and the sexual self (2008). Several of the authors look at nonconformist “dark” types of “love making”: sadism in horror film (Ian Olney), pornography (Sarah Schaschek), or those scenes from independent filmmakers such as David Cronenberg (Janet S. Robinson) or Lars von Trier (Terrie Waddell) that were either edited out due to censorship before the release or cut to secure a more marketable rating. The collection also asks questions of screened sexuality in the twenty-first century: is it transgressive and violent behavior when husband and wife in Cronenberg’s film Crash (1996) have anal sex, or is this no longer stigmatized in the mainstream or considered potentially criminal sodomy? Is the real sexual revolution not the invention of the pill in the early 1960s, which allowed women to have multiple intimate partners without risking pregnancy, but a less obvious sexual revolution that has taken place in the bedroom between consenting adults (Turner 2010)? Did the sexual revolution take place as subsequent generations removed taboos regarding the stigmatization of the body and removed their socially and culturally imposed significance? This collection celebrates and challenges these representations that are possible within the cinematic space.

One of the many questions raised by our contributors is how women either object, consent, or are coerced to follow the dark side of love and how sex signifies an act of love that elicits enjoyment or pain, or both, when sex is commonly paired with violence in film (Ritzenhoff 2010, 2012). Why do audiences worldwide take pleasure in watching women being violated to gratify male desire? Why is sexual violence against women, children, and men still considered entertaining and profitable? Linda Williams has argued that “sex is rarely just repressed or liberated; it is just as often incited and stimulated and nowhere more so than the media. Perversions are ‘implanted’ by the very same discourses that may seek to control them” (2008, 13). The explorations in this book point to this ambivalent relationship to sex—particularly regarding women—taken by the media. While many mainstream movies are displays of excessive rites of masculinity and the lengthy depiction of male crisis, this book attracts attention to the fact that women are rarely seen in cinematic roles where anybody pays attention to their pleasure in sex or their physical needs (Cavanah and Venning 2010).

The recent American remake of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2011) by director David Fincher is an example of this new focus. The film features many explicit scenes of physical abuse, torture, violence against women and
men, mutilation, rape, pornography, and sex, with ample female frontal
nudity (King and Smith 2012). Contrary to the original movie poster in the
United States where a close-up of Lisbeth Salander’s head in profile is super-
imposed with Blomkvist’s figure, the poster for Fincher’s film in Sweden told
a different story. When the American adaptation was released for Swedish
audiences, the actor Daniel Craig (as Mikael Blomkvist) is shown embrac-
ing “the Girl” (Rooney Mara) with a protective hug, while she stands bare
chested in front of him, wearing only a tight-fitting pair of jeans, unbuttoned
on top. Not only does the poster suggest female frontal nudity and have an
aura of sexual temptation, but the male arm around Salander’s shoulders is
a stereotypical gesture of male dominance in a romantic relationship. Given
the fact that “the Girl” is depicted, especially in the first book, as being
autonomous and refusing male protection, this poster seems to undermine
one of the key messages of the original novel as well as Swedish film adapta-
tions. Audiences in Sweden found the marketing message of the American
poster offensive, as it feeds off mainstream stock images of heterosexual
romance. In addition to the embrace, Mara’s pierced nipples can be seen. In
some of the posters, the date of the release on December 23, 2011, is super-
imposed on the actress’s bare chest. The unbuttoned jeans clearly signify
more than a professional work relationship.

One key scene shows an act of revenge abuse in which Salander enters the
apartment of her legal guardian, Nils Bjurman (Yorick van Wageningen),
and rapes him anally with a sex toy after he has been stripped naked on
the floor and tied to his bed; she uses new tools of punishment (a Taser,
surveillance video cameras, tattoo equipment). The question is whether
these visual depictions of inflicted pain, even though they take place in the
guardian’s bedroom, can be described as an example of representing the
dark side of love or not. Moreover, the fact that anal sex is “normalized” by
being shown in a mainstream movie that is geared to a large global audience
indicates the naturalization of sexual practices that were deemed criminal
several decades ago.

The fact that desire, violence, and love are present in many recent movies
is apparent in the latest films by Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar (The
Skin I Live In, 2011); Canadian director David Cronenberg (A Dangerous
Method, 2011); Danish director Lars von Trier (Melancholia, 2011); and
the different film adaptations of Stieg Larsson’s international hit trilogy,
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Swedish and American directors. This
collection and its representations of dark and dangerous love is published
as an increase in mainstream entertainment films that graphically depict
sexual violence against women continue to gain rave reviews from critics.¹
For instance, the road trip movie Jolene (2008), which shows the period of
a young woman’s life between the ages of 15 to 25, during which she gets
married three times to three very different kinds of men. All her relationships end tragically. Even in the twenty-first century, marriage is depicted as being her only option to avoid poverty and homelessness, and each one ends in destruction, pulling her male partners into desolation as well.

Yet Jolene (Jessica Chastain) walks away from intense abuse and violence seemingly intact. This film presents a tamer Hollywood version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* because it is filled with clichés and predictable gender roles. Jolene is seduced by the slick uncle of her first teenage husband, then abused by a lesbian ward in an insane asylum; she escapes the institution with her female lover and meets the subsequent male catastrophe, a heroin dealer who owns a tattoo shop. The next destination on her road trip is Las Vegas, where she first makes a living as a pole dancer and then hooks up with a wealthy mafia boss whose assassination ends her luxurious lifestyle. Her only creative gratification is her expression as an artist, which she struggles to practice and is allowed to develop merely as an aside after her principal sexual role has been fulfilled in each relationship. Her final stop is the dysfunctional and abusive marriage to a bigoted, rich psychopath. Similar to Lisbeth Salander, she experiences different state institutions and criminal activities but walks away unscathed. The message of *Jolene* seems to be that no matter how badly women are treated, they will recover and survive; the possession of her beauty and her sexuality are a means of redemption for the men who desire her. Such films depicting the dark side of love often seem to suggest that violence against women can be overcome.

Another recent film that explores this dark theme but offers resolution is David Cronenberg’s *A Dangerous Method* (2011), which established the correlation between pain and pleasure and continues the Freudian obsession with castration anxiety and penis envy. In this particular film, the female protagonist is “cured” from her hysterical psychosis by being hit in the bedroom, and she completes her “healing” process once she no longer seeks spanking from her psychotherapist and lover Carl Jung. In the end, she becomes herself a doctor of psychoanalysis, marries a “kind” Russian husband, and is pregnant with a baby girl. The film suggests that her desire for violence ceases once she has experienced her fantasy of submission to a male, domineering, fatherlike figure: this acting out of childhood trauma reminds her of being punished as a child, eliciting sexual stimulation that she used to feel ashamed of. Her cure is living through the memory, being able to talk about it in therapy, and the essentialist notion of motherhood; it feels like a retrograde move for the expression of female sexuality.

One of the most provocative films of 2011 is Pedro Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In*, which constructs an appalling tale of gender transformations. It features Antonio Banderas in the role of an erotically obsessed plastic
surgeon who overcomes the grief of his wife’s suicide by artificially creating a remake of her, altering the sex and skin of a young man. Aided by his former surgical team, the doctor performs a sex change and then keeps the victim captive, observing her every move on different video screens, monitored also by his housekeeper. Apart from the violence of repeatedly performing nonconsensual surgery, there is a whole other level of violence, particularly toward women, including those artificially produced, who are habitually subjected to it. The surgically constructed and reassigned sex is repeatedly abused because the artificial woman is raped not only by her captor but also by a house invader. Almodóvar represents the frequent rape scenes in great detail. The backstory for the drama is the fact that the former young man was the rapist of the surgeon’s mentally unstable daughter who then committed suicide (like her mother had done earlier). This seems to suggest that only death can allow women to avoid violence, either by killing themselves or by assassinating their abusers. In the twisted logic of Almodóvar’s film, the transsexual character seems to encourage a heterosexual romantic relationship with the physician and seemingly desires vaginal intercourse. It is only later in the film when the relationship is further explained that this form of intimacy becomes grotesque, because the doctor surgically constructed the orifice that he now invades.

This twist of the film’s narrative is astonishing. It pushes the exploration of sexual activity in cinema to an extreme because Almodóvar also shows in great detail what the victim of the sex change operation needs to do to maintain her newly built vagina. Even though documentaries such as Gwen Haworth’s 2007 autobiographical film She’s a Girl I Knew explain in empathetic detail some of the same issues of male-to-female transsexuality and the physical changes that occur, the Almodóvar movie version seems exploitative and bizarre in comparison. He transposes this topic on gender, sexual identity, and pleasure to excess because it is only when the transsexual character kills his captor that true liberty can be achieved. The role of the transsexual is not played by the same actor (as was “Bree” by Felicity Huffman in TransAmerica) but by two actors, a man and a woman: Vera Cruz as “Elena” plays the transformed character of “Vicente” (Jan Cornet). Almodóvar’s film demonstrates the way that current directors are engaging with a changing landscape of sexual heteronormativity as well as gender and sexuality by imagining ever more grotesque variations of the theme on the dark side of love.

Almodóvar’s film demonstrates, however, the fact that gender roles are increasingly ambiguous and are in constant flux. Even the physical appearance of women changes as body culture and body chiseling in Western societies are turning into a mainstream pastime. As women of all ages are streaming into the gyms, and as new places for yoga, pilates, zumba, step, and spin open up across the United States and Europe, it raises the question
of whether women are more in touch with their body and their body image in 2012 than ever before. Have gender roles between couples in modern society changed in the advent of women entering the workforce and attempting to break the glass ceiling of formerly male-dominated jobs? How could this have affected the way humans interact, especially in the bedroom? This collection engages with these issues but also with a phenomenon that is otherwise underrepresented on screen: the fact that women actively seek sexual pleasure from their bodies both with and without partners—but that ultimately they fail. Directors Michael Haneke and Darren Aronofsky’s films particularly problematize this issue with their inclusion of women punishing themselves by cutting their genitals and abdomen while discovering their own sexuality (see Karen A. Ritzenhoff, chapter 8), suggesting that for some filmmakers, women’s attitudes toward their vaginas and indeed their sexual desires are still colonized by male expectations.

The topic, Screening the Dark Side of Love, was met with an enthusiastic response when the call for papers went out as part of the 2010 biennial Film & History conference in Milwaukee where “love” was the main theme. Most essays in this collection have been presented at that gathering; some were co-opted from other sessions because they fit our special focus well. In this collection we provide a broad spectrum of films that span European, Asian, and American mainstream, independent, art, and experimental cinema across different time periods. Some of the essays engage with historical material (Karen Randell, Cynthia Miller, and Mark Aldridge), and some classics such as Luis Buñuel’s Belle de Jour (1968) are combined with more contemporary themes of transgender issues, surfacing in the work of European cinema such as Almodóvar’s latest 2011 release (Samm Deighan, Tiel Lundy, Suzanne Leonard and Bailey Ray, and Lisa Cunningham).

In chapter 1, “The Whip and the Body: Sex, Violence, and Performative Spectatorship in Euro-Horror S&M Cinema,” Ian Olney argues that two Euro-horror S&M movies, Mario Bava’s La frusta e il corpo (The Whip and the Body, 1963), an example of straight S&M horror, and Jess Franco’s Sadomania: Hölle der Lust (Sadomania, 1981), an example of queer S&M horror, both “challenge established modes of sex and gender representation, exhibiting bodies that subvert or defy traditional categories of sex and gender.” The narrative structures, he argues, allow for multiple viewer positions in ways that mainstream film prevents. The ability to “try on” different subjective positions renders these Euro-horror S&M films playful and thus exposes what Olney suggests is a “bright side” to the dark side of love.

to examine what the critical and social response to the release of *Crash* can tell us about the consequences of censorship. Much of the criticism focuses on female desire and “specifically female desire for transgressive sex,” and Robinson argues that the censorship of these scenes erases transgressive female desire from the mainstream. Similarly, in chapter 3, “Antichrist: Lost Children, Love, and the Fear of Excess,” female transgression is explored by Terrie Waddell in her analysis of Lars von Trier’s film *Antichrist* (2009), which depicts the complicated relationship between husband and wife, who are also male doctor and female patient. Waddell argues that the narrative of female angst and inwardly turned grief is colored by her own subjective position as an Australian and the lost child narrative that endures within that culture. In *Antichrist*, love is associated with loss and guilt that results in self-harm and mutilation in an attempt to work through the pain of separation of the lost child. Waddell argues that this disturbing film is imbued with von Trier’s own depression that found a cathartic release in unraveling the complex psychological distress of *She* (Charlotte Gainsbourg), whose character is trapped by a “retarding force that has no reality beyond her psyche.”

In chapter 4, “Black Bucks and Don Juans: *In the Cut*’s Seductive Mythologies of Race and Sex,” Tiel Lundy argues that while *In the Cut* provides a fascinating investigation and deconstruction of the subjectivity of women and the influential role of the Hollywood romance genre, it fails to negotiate the “mythic topos” that “grew out of the American South’s post–Civil War racial anxieties,” instead presenting black male sexuality as violent and dangerous to white women, echoing the problematic depictions in *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915) nearly 100 years ago. *In the Cut*, Lundy argues, “demands greater scrutiny of the complex relation it bears to its racialized mythmaking past and the legacy it inspires.” Historical precedents are also discussed in Karen Randell’s analysis of the monstrous performances of Lon Chaney Sr., in chapter 5, “Mad Love: The Anxiety of Difference in the Films of Lon Chaney Sr.” Here the dark side of love is inflected by physical disability and the cultural expectations of those living with difference and their (non)engagement in sexual activity and relationships. Randell explores Chaney’s performance in relation to his 1920s films and their propinquity to the aftermath of the First World War. Randell argues that the sexual activity of the disabled and “deformed” was a contemporary anxiety made more complex by the presence of so many veteran “heroes” returning from war and that the notion of disability and the “monstrous” was prevalent (a theme picked up again in chapter 7).

Mark Aldridge discusses the ambivalent relationship to love and sexual activity by Agatha Christie and the ways in which adaptations of her work rely on narratives of love (gone bad) to drive the plot. In chapter 6, “Love, Crime, and Agatha Christie,” Aldridge argues that throughout the history
of her film and television adaptations, the dark side of love has been used as a “key theme and motivator” in ways that Christie did not imagine in her original published mysteries. Aldridge analyzes key films and television series to develop his argument that the dark side of love is used as much as a marketing tool for Christie’s screened work as it is a plot development. In chapter 7, “Monstrous Love: Oppression, Intimacy, and Transformation in Mary Reilly (1996),” Cynthia Miller explores, like Randell, “monstrous love” in the shape of Mr. Hyde. Drawing on ideas from gothic horror, she sees the narrative use of passion, intimacy, devotion, and sacrifice as being inextricably linked to the notion of the monster. Placing her analysis within a cultural critique of Victorian society, Miller sees the intense story contained within a veneer of propriety, keeping passions, terrors, ambitions, and curiosities submerged.

Karen A. Ritzenhoff analyzes issues of self-harm and repressed sexuality in chapter 8, “Self-Mutilation and Dark Love in Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010) and Michael Haneke’s The Piano Teacher (2001).” Here both characters exhibit masochist tendencies and “explore the carnal and destructive power of sexuality” in the pursuit of their sexual being. Hence, the dark side of love is equivalent to a repressed, nonconformist sexuality that is deemed fatal to the woman when released. Similarly, in chapter 9, “Female Pleasure and Performance: Masochism in Belle de Jour (1967) and Histoire d’O” (1970), Samm Deighan explores the representation of female desire in these two European films, which she describes as free-for-all eroticism and exploitation cinema. These films, she argues, still have much to say about gender politics, not least of all to assess whether the representation of female desire has evolved in the 30 years since their release. And as Ritzenhoff finds in her analysis of The Piano Teacher, such notions of sadomasochism allow sexual expression, but this choice is problematized by other patriarchal forces within the societal structure. Likewise, Deighan asks of her focus films, “Is there a way to interpret female pleasure independent of male desire within the context of these films?”

In chapter 10, “‘What’s In the Basket?’: Sexualized and Sexualizing Violence in Frank Henenlotter’s Basket Case,” Lisa Cunningham discusses Henenlotter’s construction of gender performance in Basket Case, which creates its main characters—Belial and Duane Bradleys—as separated, originally conjoined twins who “represent half of a single cohesive male-sexed psyche.” The film, Cunningham argues, explores the dark side of sibling love, where what is often considered a natural bond between twins becomes psychotic, resulting in a monstrous and violent sexuality. Meggie Morris discusses the dark themes of masculine sexuality in chapter 11, “Blood and Bravado: Violence, Sex, and Spain in Pedro Almodóvar’s film Matador (1986),” where her argument focuses on the ways in which Almodóvar’s film
both embrace traditional Spanish culture, such as the bullfight, while drawing out the potential to explore gender roles, sexuality, and performance. Her analysis draws on the sexual parallels between a former celebrity bullfighter-turned-instructor Diego Montes (Nacho Martinez) and the defense lawyer Maria Cardenal (Assumpta Serna). The film engages with the dark theme of obsession and the relationship between sex and death, and Almodóvar plays with the notion of pursuer (bullfighter) and pursued (bull) in his gender battle which ends in the ultimate sexual climax.

Bringing the dark side of love and violence closer to home, Jenise Hudson discusses the ambivalent oeuvre by black American director Tyler Perry who contrasts the female desire of strong, professional black women with the violent response of their male black partners in chapter 12, “The Backhand of Backlash: Troubling the Gender Politics of Domestic Violence Scenes in Tyler Perry’s The Family that Preys.” Here Hudson endeavors to expose the high stakes of the film’s misogynist narratives on black female viewers and explores the “couch chauvinism” that she sees in “ostensible narratives of wholesome, (hetero)normative family values.” She argues that insidious domestic violence as seen in Family needs to be exposed and discussed to enable “urgently needed conversations between African American men and women on how to constructively deal with each other.”

Suzanne Leonard and Bailey Ray explore the racial, class, and gender politics in Obsessed (2009), directed by Steve Shill, a remake of the classic horror film about marital infidelity, Fatal Attraction (1987). They describe in chapter 13, “Fatal Attraction Redux? The Gender, Racial, and Class Politics in Obsessed,” how the paradigms of the conflict are shifted when the man who is pursued is not Caucasian but African-American. Derek Charles (Idris Elba) is a successful businessman in a private investment firm in Los Angeles, happily married to his former office assistant Sharon (Beyoncé Knowles), who is also black. In this filmic version, coined by Leonard and Ray as a “yuppie horror film” because the economic context is affluent and luxurious, a white female, Lisa (Ali Larter), is preying on her black boss. She is a new temporary assistant and poses a threat not only to Derek’s professional and family life but also to his status as a black male among his white peers. Leonard and Ray locate this film within “an American subgenre we are calling the envying woman thriller.” They analyze that Lisa is the archetype of a jealous and lethal home invader who threatens the equilibrium of the domestic space, which “confirms that it is both the figurative and the literal home that is under attack when the envying woman wants in.”

Christine Lang tackles an unusual transnational media phenomenon in chapter 14 to display psychological conflict surrounding love by concentrating on talking heads in “The Idea of Love in the TV Serial Drama In Treatment.” She analyzes “the structure and aesthetic means” of the TV
series and points to its moivielse presentation as a “new genre of extremely long auteur film.” A compelling reason for this label is the fact that this American television series, which was adapted from a precursor in Israel, is consumed in Europe via DVD box sets, making its viewing “similar to that of the movies.” Lang focuses on one of the segments in which a patient’s transference to her psychotherapist is answered by countertransference. Dr. Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne) manages to contain his feelings for his female patient and ultimately allows the therapy to be a success, even though the viewers are not rewarded with a classic happy ending.

Sarah Schaschek engages with a different variation of looking at sex and desire, namely by watching the mechanical display of so-called “fucking machines” that are exclusively accessible via websites. She concludes our volume on Screening the Dark Side of Love in chapter 15 and discusses the “High-Tech Bodies in Pornography.” Schaschek suggests that serial presentations of pornographic images emphasize the way in which repetitious movement on screen makes the sex look “cold,” “dead,” or “robotic,” in other words, how they allude to the body as a machine. The sex machines offer not only voyeuristic pleasure for male spectators but also opportunities for female consumers of pornography; the author argues that these films can be read as “techno-erotic relation,” in which the woman is not simply moved by the machine but in which she herself uses the machine in order to seek pleasure. This chapter is a fitting end to our collection because it highlights female desire when the filmic apparatus thus functions as a lively partner.

These 15 chapters illuminate and question the ideas and notions of representations of transgressive sexuality and troubled love. They seek to offer different perspectives on the interdependence between popular culture, film, and the dark side of love.

**Note**


**Works Cited**


Films

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Sadomania. Directed by Jesús Franco. West Germany, 1981.
She’s a Girl I Knew. Directed by Gwen Haworth. USA, 2007.
TransAmerica. Directed by Duncan Tucker. USA, 2005
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