

How Sex Got Fun in 2006

■ Noah Cowan



Shortbus



À ma sœur!

There has been much tut-tutting from critics about the “wave of porno” strutting its way across festival screens lately. And these reluctant moralists seem to have a point. The last few years have seen a dramatic uptick in the quantity of erect penises, exposed vaginas and graphic anal sex (between all genders) available for cinematic consumption. What most writers have missed – or have only identified wistfully – is that very little of this sexual activity is actually titillating. And that places it squarely outside the realm of pornography, which, as they say, aims to please.

Providing uncomplicated release in no way motivates the recent pioneers of this body-banging bonanza, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat and Lars von Trier. For them, showing graphic sex makes an aesthetic rupture, creating space for cultural deconstruction. So, Roxane Mesquida's deflowering in Breillat's *À ma sœur!* sets up a flashy post-feminist elegy; Noé's deployment of Vincent Cassel's gradually softening penis in *Irréversible* punctuates the destruction of a bourgeois romance; and von Trier's notorious shower scene in *The Idiots* pummels the already-wonky class structure in that film totally flat.

These three filmmakers have more or less shaped our recent critical thinking about onscreen sex, but their approach is

almost nowhere to be found this year. The most graphic films of 2006 display little interest in conjuring up modernity's horrors with penis clubs and vaginas dentata. Instead they seek a rapprochement with sex and sexuality, a process of de-radicalization that, confusingly, requires even more outré bodily combinations to reclaim this most fundamental of human activities.

John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* uses all sorts of sexcapades, including singing into an anus, to open his up his characters to the possibilities of a more compassionate world. But the film is no hippie tract: we still lead bittersweet lives and still have boundaries after a great orgasm; self-fulfillment is just a little easier to fathom.

Jean-Marc Barr and Pascal Arnold's complex cross-purposing of various sexual scenarios in *Chacun sa nuit* rethinks when *amour* actually becomes *fou*. But it's not the sex that's a problem for these kids; it's their inability to unblock the emotions accompanying their physical freedom, a form of human frailty that leads, in this case, to violence.

In *Cages* by Olivier Masset-Depasse, a (practically) mute woman finally reconnects with her estranged husband after she trusses and masturbates him. In *7 ans*, furtively recorded sex with a third person is the only way a couple can continue to

communicate their love. And in the sweet fairy tale *Sleeping Dogs Lie*, Bob Goldthwait refuses to condemn a woman who has oral sex with a dog, nor see her moment of folly as metaphor; he just thinks her inability to dissemble about it is irrational.

All of these films share a more relaxed approach to how sex functions as – and in – narrative. The act, they seem to agree, can actually be quite fun, and so requires no obvious heavy metaphorical baggage. As long as certain sexual moments effectively convey the strengths and vulnerabilities of characters portrayed, why not show them?

Their second insight is that if sex can be used to evoke violence and injustice, then it should also be used to evoke transcendence, ecstasy and the deepest forms of human connection. And yet they have no illusions about Tantric sustainability; a return to reality, slightly more grounded, is seen as a victory in itself.

This decision to play up the positives in sexual play should not raise the porno flag again. For the most part, the sex in these films remains steadfastly untitillating and matter-of-fact. These are important moments for characters but none of them are deluded enough to think that a great lay is going to make it all better – for them or for us.