



THE  
EROTIC THRILLER  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
CINEMA

Linda Ruth Williams

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*For Mark Kermode*

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## PREFACE

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Whole genres and styles of filmmaking arrive once and once only, never to be seen again, swallowing whole any actors or filmmakers who dare patrol their murky depths. One such inconstant genre is the erotic thriller.  
Review of John McNaughton's *Wild Things*<sup>1</sup>

There was a moment in one episode of the British soap *EastEnders*, aired in 2000, which convinced me that this book needed to be written. Long-suffering Natalie Evans (Lucy Speed) complains to her husband Barry (Shaun Williamson) (who had proposed that they lock themselves into his video store to get some privacy) that 'pinning me up against the erotic thriller section' was not her idea of a romantic setting for sex.<sup>2</sup> *EastEnders* has some of the highest viewing figures on British television. That Natalie could speak so casually of the genre (and its presence in video stores) and rely on her audience's understanding is ample evidence that the term 'erotic thriller' – like some of the lurid images and tropes which it has borne ('bunny boiler', for instance) – has a wide currency. Sex inspired by erotic thrillers is one lively audience response which this book touches on in a number of places (the sofa as viewing space is particularly interesting); but the erotic thriller itself as part-sex film, part-thriller, and much else besides, is my terrain.

So why write a book about sex films? Because, as Richard Dyer says, 'sexuality, both as knowledge and solution, is also the means by which men and women are designated a place in society, and are kept in their place' (1986: 26). Gregory Dark's seminal direct-to-video flick *Night Rhythms* (one of the first erotic thrillers I ever saw) begins with Martin Hewitt saying, 'Talk to me, Linda'. Erotic thrillers have been talking to me for some years now, and this book is where I talk back to and of them. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* maps this genre, one which has made liberal use of softcore sexual display in the context of *noirish* plots. It looks at sexy talking-point mainstream erotic thrillers (such as *Body of Evidence*, *Body Heat*, *Sea of Love*) alongside privately alluring direct-to-video formula works (*Night Eyes*, *Animal Instincts*, *Sins of Desire*). Some erotic thrillers are primarily thrillers, some erotic thrillers

are primarily sex films. All contain sex and most use sex as a motivating narrative device. My terrain is quite precise: the films I look at are legally available at 18 certificate (or below) in Britain, or with (usually) an R-rating in the United States. Erotic thriller sex always remains *just* mainstream, available in high street video stores and at the multiplex – but *only just*. Many of my filmography texts have never made it into the academic pantheon of hip neo-noirs because most writers have never heard of them. Of the 300-plus films cited in this book, perhaps 250 are erotic thrillers (or conspirators, hybrids or near-relations of the erotic thriller). This very act of putting a figure on my filmography may mark me with what Peter Stanfield calls ‘a collector’s sensibility’ (2002: 254), though this list is only a start. Of these, perhaps two dozen have been discussed in academic studies, a good many more on film websites, but a large remainder have never been addressed at all (and, I admit, will probably never be mentioned again). This book has partly been fuelled by the impetus to map this fast-fading film history before it is forgotten. Perhaps the Arthur Lyons of 2050, when writing *Sex and Death on the Cheap: The Lost B-Movies of the Erotic Thriller*, will use this book as her starting-point.<sup>3</sup> Of course, few films are now lost; databases such as the IMDb, video archives and DVD re-releases ensure that none of my sometimes obscure titles will ever be entirely gone. Looking at direct-to-video films alongside theatrically-released ones also means that I am at least not constrained by the choices distributors make about what constitutes a ‘good’ (that is, theatrically profitable) movie. It is still the case that the majority of academic film studies (and popular journalistic articles) look only at major, mainstream-released movies. This may be fine if your project is, say, the reception study of a blockbuster. But in a proliferating market which now includes straight-to-cable/made-for-TV and direct-to-video or direct-to-DVD films, any study which confines itself to movies which are defined by the mode of their opening release is allowing distributors to do its decision-making for it.

Furthermore, not only does this book look at the downmarket, low-budget direct-to-video world, it also investigates a number of films which were celebrated flops. The erotic thriller spans the spectrum of success from titles which were amongst the highest earners in their year (*Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*) to those which courted large-scale success and bombed in a highly public way (*Showgirls*, *Jade*). Read textually, there is little to choose between them; indeed, Joe Eszterhas, who penned all but one of these films, is known for repeating the same sex-crime formula. *Jade* has a slick polish which might mark it out as a genre high point; instead, it was one of the worst received of the films I discuss. Read in a reception studies frame all these titles generated considerable critical heat, for very different reasons. Read as genre pieces they form distinct moments in the sweep of the erotic thriller’s history, interesting as much in their market failure as their success.

But *how* to write a book about sex films? The history of the erotic thriller is the history of a genre as fantasy symptom: trace it through the last twenty years

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of the twentieth century and you get something closely approximating a story of the desires, fears, excitements and paranoias of these decades, at least as conceived by Hollywood and its fringes. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* is, then, in part the history of a fantasy. But I have taken these two terms, history and fantasy, seriously in the approach I have fostered in this book, and each requires a number of different methodological lenses, lenses which other writers have preferred to keep separate. Rick Altman laments the fact that 'Genres were always – and continue to be – treated as if they spring full-blown from the head of Zeus' (1993: 28). This book discusses the history of this genre by mapping the ebbs and flows of this film form and looking carefully at a representative range of exemplary films and filmmakers who created that genre. In order to present the history of the genre as an interactive process between competing forces, I have maximised my approaches. Erotic thrillers are read not just as formal exercises in a particular type of filmmaking, but as economic exercises in audience attraction. As a genre the erotic thriller provides a resonant case study for understanding what audiences do to and with certain film forms, and how the agreed terms of a genre are established between audience and producer. I have supplemented this with original interviews with key personnel who have shaped the genre. I augment my readings with social and genre/production histories, approaching texts to show both how each individual film is an instance of its genre (and thus how it contributes to the history of that genre over twenty years or so), and how each film feeds into, and is informed by, wider debates about social definitions – under severe pressure in the 1980s and 1990s – such as sexuality, feminism and censorship. I also use the readings as frameworks to put to work some of the signal tenets of film studies (themselves also under pressure in the 1990s), such as auteurism, star studies and reception analysis. The erotic thriller requires a mixed methodological approach because in many ways it is an exemplary turn-of-the-century genre, the demon love-child of the popularisation of cultural theory on the one hand (postmodern identities; new celebrations of perversity; the feminist backlash), and, on the other, a canny approach to new forms of reception which have shifted world cinema into an entirely different gear (the rise of home viewing through DVD and video; the new respectability of porn; couples audiences). It would also be perverse *not* to turn to psychoanalytically informed theories of spectator and visual subjectivity given the erotic thriller's self-reflexive obsession with sexual spectatorship, its profound awareness of its own textuality and its sometimes blind, sometimes knowing, obsession with formations such as voyeurism, gendered identity and arousal.

But this is not at the expense of discussion of industrial practices which have brought this genre into being, or the observations of its personnel. I have also incorporated as much material from writers on the internet as I could garner – this, essentially, is where the paying viewer is represented in this study. The plethora of discussions and amateur reviews which have been posted on the Net since its popularisation (the rise of internet film discussion coincides with the

rise of this genre as well as the rise of home viewing), through newsgroups and responses written for forums such as the Internet Movie Database, have provided rich source material.<sup>4</sup> Though this group of writer-viewers is highly self-selecting, I have preferred to incorporate this mode of audience discourse because, as well as avoiding the methodological problems bound up with empirical research, this form of writing is much closer to the published review in form and intention. I have also made ready use of popular reviews and print journalism on the erotic thriller, its texts, personnel and scandals. In bringing both forms of writing (professional and amateur, newsprint and webpage) into play I was able to draw on a cross-section of writings from the public arena, though each with different commercial intentions and contexts. Janet Staiger warns of the mediated nature of review material used as a source for reception work (it is 'no direct display of the reviewer's "response" to the film' [1989: 362]), but advocates its use in comparative contexts as a way of asking some of the key questions of reception studies, namely, 'What have been the receptions of cinema/genres/specific films/movements and . . . what explains these receptions' (1989: 354). Presenting a collage of such materials has allowed me to tackle these questions, though they are not the only questions this book is asking. I have also drawn on other published materials, like *The Wise Woman's Guide to Erotic Videos* and *The Psychotronic Film Guide*, which present video and DVD texts directly to the consumer with a strong sense of how materials target audiences, and what one should spend one's money (and one's desire) on. This cluster of sources forms a snapshot of the erotic thriller's contexts, and the debates it has engendered, across the two decades.

I have also kept my original interview material (largely) separate from my argument, though my meetings with filmmakers profoundly influenced my thinking on genre. These interviews are not the final story, the 'real' version of how the erotic thriller was born and nurtured; but they are one story. In researching this book I found that the history I had constructed, based on readings I had made about audience and address emanating from the film texts themselves, and information sporadically appearing in industry publications, was a very similar story to the one told to me by the filmmakers about what, when, how and why they were doing what they were doing, and who they thought they were doing it for. I hope that readers will use this primary interview material (unavailable elsewhere) as a supplement to the argument and history I put forward in my chapters, a fascinating set of material in its own right, and one starting-point for further work on this period of popular American cinema.

A word about titles: many of the DTV films discussed here were released in different territories under different titles. In the UK the thriller *I Can Make You Love Me* was released under the erotic thriller-inflected moniker *Fatal Proposal*. The UK's *Animal Instincts 2* was *Body of Influence* in the US, whilst the US *Animal Instincts 2* was the UK's *Animal Instincts 3*. Then there was

*Animal Instincts: The Seductress*. In the world of direct-to-video films titles are a primary element of film marketing; ‘akas’ (‘also known as’) thrive when a film has to hit the market quickly in a form that will maximise audience recognition. I will be saying more about titles in chapter 1; my filmography does, I think, tell a story about contemporary genre on titles alone. Where possible I have tried to include ‘aka’ titles, but if readers are interested in tracing any of the smaller films to see for themselves, it may be wise to cross-reference them on a film database such as the Internet Movie Database via other details provided, such as year and director.

#### NOTES

- 1 Adam Rivett, ‘The erotic thriller, or how I learnt to love the erotic thriller’ (review of *Wild Things*), from In Film Australia website, <http://infilmau.iah.net/features/erotic/>.
- 2 *EastEnders*, BBC1 television, Monday, 25 April 2000, written by Rob Gittings, produced by Richard Stokes.
- 3 Arthur Lyons, *Death on the Cheap: The Lost B Movies of Film Noir* (2000) has been one of my sources.
- 4 Matt Hills calls the IMDb viewer response sections ‘an intriguing resource for academic study of film interpretation’; like him, I have found it valuable ‘precisely because it is not wholly fan-centric, instead offering a more diffuse forum for film discussion that encompasses fan responses and those of more “generalised” movie-goers’ (Hills, forthcoming).



# I. INTRODUCTION

## CARNAL CRIMES: THE EROTIC THRILLER FROM *NOIR* TO THE 1990S

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‘What is a sex crime?’  
‘Not getting any!’

An exchange between Sergeant Ray Duquette  
(Kevin Bacon) and a high school student in *Wild Things*

Although *Indecent Proposal* may have looked like contemporary cinema’s answer to the game of ‘Scruples’, its source is a maligned direct-to-video genre, which thrived at many a local video store during the 1990s. The film that launched a thousand dinner-party conversations has lower roots than those who saw the movie but wouldn’t dream of renting a B-class erotic thriller would imagine. Similarly, when Willem Dafoe posits the possibility that it’s ‘a crime to be a great lay’ he situates *Body of Evidence* squarely alongside its sleazier, sexier genre sisters. High or low, blockbuster or denigrated exploitation video, the erotic thriller was one of the most prominent products in the late twentieth-century mainstream movie and video market, even though audiences and makers of films such as *Basic Instinct* or *Fatal Attraction* might have disputed their connection with ‘lower’ works such as *Animal Instincts* or *Basic Deception*.

Erotic thrillers are *noirish* stories of sexual intrigue incorporating some form of criminality or duplicity, often as the flimsy framework for on-screen softcore sex. This is as true of the \$45 million *Showgirls* as it is of the \$1 million *Night Rhythms*. Despite the popular image that ‘erotic thriller’ is a blanket term for unchallenging sleaze, like any other genre there are good erotic thrillers and bad ones. Certainly, some of these films are simply feebly acted 1990s exploitation movies in designer underwear (or out of it; in *Acting on Impulse* – itself a direct-to-video erotic thriller – Linda Fiorentino plays an erotic thriller actress who spends her career having to, as she puts it, literally ‘act my panties off’). Other titles are thematically as well as sexually provocative. The classic opening

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narrative runs thus: a neglected wife, some years into her lousy marriage, is advised by her female friend to find satisfaction with some new blood. Early scenes in which wives fail to get their husbands to come to bed are legion: the resolutely downmarket *Carnal Crimes* and *Secret Games* both boast key scenes of pleading in underwear, whilst even the relatively chaste blockbuster *Indecent Proposal* demonstrates its kinship to the B-erotic thriller when Demi Moore places the hand of her scribbling husband on her breast, only to have him remove it so that he can get on with his architecture. Careful viewers of the genre will spot this little gesture as the first step on the slippery slope towards erotic thriller unfaithfulness, and the perils as well as the pleasures of sex. Danger and sex combine in a format which is both thriller and skin-flick, often figuring a female protagonist who herself straddles the roles of sexual interest, enraged victim and vigilante survivor.

The purpose of this book is to map these lively film texts onto (and read them through) several parallel histories, which collectively chart changes in how we watch, enjoy and interact with popular films, and how these films are made and sold. This book thus partly looks at the meanings of a specific genre through the lens the marketplace. It asks what the erotic thriller has come to signify by thinking about how it achieved its position as 'the most popular genre of the 1990s' (Palmer 1994: 168). However we measure success, in the genre's high-water mark of the 1990s, erotic thrillers were *the* most discussed films and amongst the highest earners. Financial returns are impressive: *Fatal Attraction's* domestic box office is \$156 million, *Basic Instinct's* is \$117 million; both are amongst the top-grossing box office earners of all time.<sup>1</sup> One writer calls these 'the two most commercially successful films noirs ever made' (Naremore 1998: 263). Both were also the top opening films in their months of release, and *Fatal Attraction* – perhaps the definition of the 'word-of-mouth' film (it made more money in its second than its opening weekend) – played for thirty-nine weeks. Both films subsequently performed impressively on video and DVD, as they would be expected to after such major theatrical openings. But perhaps more impressive is the performance of a film such as the prototype direct-to-video title *Night Eyes*, which cost \$1 million, and took \$30 million on video alone.<sup>2</sup>

These are striking statistics for films almost entirely devoid of special effects whose subject matter militates against including lucrative family audiences. This book, like the films themselves, probes the conditions of the classification system which constitutes one form of public limitation: the genre's successes are achieved in spite of restrictive ratings – typically R or NC-17 in the US, 18 in the UK. Nor are erotic thrillers lucrative merchandise films: soundtrack CDs may be released, DVDs with 'making of' documentaries, but you won't see Glenn Close dolls for sale in Toys 'R' Us, nor did McDonald's sell *Sliver* Happy Meals in 1993. The payoff for this exclusion is the cultural splash these films make as prime 'talkies', *the* sensational scandal flicks of their moment. They are as loud in the cultural 'noise' they generate as they are lucrative (the two being intimately connected) and that makes them especially interesting to anyone

trying to get to grips with contemporary American cinema. Here, then, I will pose a set of interconnected questions: Why did these films appear when they did, and who are they made for? When contemporary mainstream sex cinema works to the limit of what it is allowed to do, what are we allowed to see? When such films target female as well as male viewers, are different visual pleasures the result? How important is classification to textual content, marketability and a film's potential for scandal? And finally, the question which shapes this introductory chapter, when mainstream film flirts seriously with the concerns and pleasures of the marginalised techniques of pornography and the narratives of *noir*, what genre is the result?

The 1970s and early 1980s were a seed-bed for the erotic thriller, with the basic formula developing through the sporadic release of some key titles (*Play Misty for Me*, *Looking for Mr Goodbar*, *Cruising*, *American Gigolo*), none of which would have appeared under this genre banner when released, but shift genre identities to trade on the new term when re-released. This was followed by a period of increased productivity which takes two paths. Genre formation is commonly understood in three phases: consolidation; 'a Golden Age'; followed by a period of decline, 'in which the played-out conventions dissolve either into self-parody or self-reflexivity' (Collins 1993: 246). This designation is only partly useful (I will open up a more complex view of genre below). Nevertheless, in the mainstream, theatrically-released arena, the 'Golden Age', beginning at the start of the 1980s with *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Heat*, also tracks the career of erotic thriller writer/pioneer Joe Eszterhas, especially the period from *Jagged Edge* (1985) to *Showgirls* (1995), and takes in the aforementioned genre high-points of *Basic Instinct* (Eszterhas' most visible, hyped work) and *Fatal Attraction* (not an Eszterhas screenplay, but a landmark in terms of representations, box office, and the involvement of Adrian Lyne and Michael Douglas). The architecture of the theatrically-released erotic thriller is the subject of Part One of this book. This period also overlaps the rise of home viewing through VHS and later DVD, and constitutes a significant history which runs parallel to the mainstream form. The direct-to-video (henceforth DTV) film has a distinct but overlapping history. The DTV is a film which has had no (or only a very limited) theatrical release prior to its appearance on video store shelves. In the UK the common term for this until recently was 'straight to video', but since DTV has a stronger international currency I will use it throughout this book. Some films are always destined for DTV status; others acquire it by other means. A kinder term is 'video premiere'. Films which went direct-to-video when video was the only available home viewing format may now also be going direct to DVD as well as or instead of VHS release. I am therefore using DTV as a catch-all or shorthand for such movies, whatever form they take when viewed in the living room, or, indeed, the hotel room. (Pay-per-view of soft-sex films is a lucrative revenue source for hotel chains.) The DTV erotic thriller might also have a number of other market destinations,

and might be accessed via a cable or satellite channel as well as the video store. The 'Golden Age' of the DTV erotic thriller was the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. The form has its own discrete 'look', key players, production values and mode of marketing and distribution. Since then, with the video market saturation of the late 1990s, the DTV form has diminished, though a steady stream of identikit texts continues to be released. My interviewees give evidence of a promised resurgence at the cheaper edges of the genre in the wake of new breakthroughs in the DVD market; brand-name directors Jag Mundhra and Greg Dark (aka Hippolyte) report that they are regularly approached to direct new projects.

At the same time, erotic thriller releases in the mainstream consolidated resources into fewer, bigger projects which play well internationally. The high-profile erotic thrillers which have appeared since 1995 have, however, had to navigate the wake produced by the critical failure of *Showgirls*, which caused the industry to lose faith in the new classification category of NC-17 (designed to enable a new wave of *adult* filmmaking: cinema for grown-ups which doesn't pander to the family market, as distinct from 'adult films' which pander to the masturbating market). Since the mid-1990s, a number of films have been promoted as 'steamy', though the trend is increasingly chaste, or rather the explicit has become implicit, and the mainstream erotic thriller has happily got into bed with other genres. Titles such as the costume drama *Original Sin*, or the erotic melodramas *Unfaithful* and *One Night Stand*, give a picture not of end-game or cycle-conclusion, but of a genre finally conforming to the Hollywood norm of saturation-opening, inflated star salaries and careful if over-resourced marketing strategies, as well as a willingness to hybridise further. There is also evidence that the erotic thriller has been annexed by the highbrow auteur, with a select series of prestigious or notorious titles emerging around the new century (Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, Campion's *In the Cut*). Such titles open a new chapter in the genre's story, of a form flourishing on mainstream and art-house screens, providing directors and stars looking for a new career trajectory with the chance to walk on the wild side. Émigré directors of esteemed 'foreign language' films (Chen Kaige, Volker Schlöndorff) have moved into English-language cinema by directing popcorn erotic thrillers (*Killing Me Softly* and *Palmetto* respectively, though Schlöndorff had directed *The Handmaid's Tale* in English in 1990, moving back to German cinema afterwards). Other 'names' have continued to produce interesting work in a genre they helped to forge – David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* are frequently read as neo-noir surrealism, though their cocktail of seduction and secrecy makes them interesting for this analysis. Abel Ferrara has also provided one independent pathway through the genre, from *Ms 45* to *Fear City* to *The Blackout*, whilst Brian De Palma largely mapped out the genre's basic co-ordinates in the 1970s and 1980s; his 2003 film *Femme Fatale* develops questions raised in *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Double*. High or low, seen at home or in the hotel room, in the multiplex or the art-house, this book discusses the erotic thriller in each of its multiple contexts.

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## 1: CHEAP THRILLS AND EXPENSIVE EXPLOITATION

'It takes a lot of money to look this cheap.'

Dolly Parton

However much money you throw at an erotic thriller, it will always look like the sensational genre fare that it is, driven by the values of an exploitation potboiler, with its fingers in a blockbuster's expense account and its feet in the cheap shag-pile carpet. *Basic Instinct* cost around \$40 million, with writer Joe Eszterhas getting the (then) highest ever salary for a screenplay (\$3 million), and Michael Douglas bagging \$14 million for his role. Although it is set in San Francisco, J. Hoberman reads the film as taking place 'in the realm of unfettered desire' in an 'atmosphere of super-consumption'.<sup>3</sup> Blockbusters are all too vulnerable to unfavourable comparisons with cheaper fare, or with each other, on the grounds that they deliver trash culture with a high price-tag. In 1995, reviewing the latest Joe Eszterhas-penned mainstream release, William Leith wrote: 'Unlike *Basic Instinct*, which was quite a good trashy porn thriller, *Jade* is quite a bad one' (1995: 38), whilst *Color of Night* was received as a 'so-bad-it's-good' festival of absurdity, and unfavourably compared to lower DTV genre and softcore works (e.g. Newman 1994b: 216).<sup>4</sup> Against this, B-class erotic thrillers made at one-fortieth of the price are all desperate to look classy, eking out micro-budgets into mini-simulations of *Jade*'s sleek *mise-en-scène*. Marketed as a form of 'quality entertainment' which is synonymous with high production values, massive budgets and stars who can open a movie, the respectability of theatrically-released films is equalled only by the tacky low-life image of the DTVs.

Whilst historically genres come in and out of fashion, some genres have lent themselves to cheaper forms of production than others; some have been consistently favoured for mainstream production (dramas, comedies, musicals), some have fared equally well as A- or B-movies (westerns, thrillers, melodrama), others have spent much of their history – certainly up to the mid-1970s – on poverty row (horror, science fiction, pornography). Sexy *noirs* have appeared across the strata of production and budget. Silver and Ward liken contemporary low-budget neo-*noir* production to classic B-*noir*:

The plots of these pictures, all budgeted at under a million dollars, take only what they can afford from the classic tradition; but that is a considerable amount. All have enough money for a femme fatale, a hired killer or two, a confused and entrapped hero, an employer ripped off, a shake-down. . . . Like its antecedent, neo-noir and neo-B in particular makes few if any extravagant demands in terms of production value. (Silver and Ward 1992: 422)

Yet the high profile of the celebrated genre titles produced by New Hollywood has all but erased the barrel-scraping image of much genre cinema. 1975 is

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often cited as a watershed year, in that the phenomenal success of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* blasted what was essentially an exploitation film into the mainstream, ensuring that many of the most successful titles from then onwards were good old-fashioned genre works wrought in epic proportions – creature-feature or alien invasion drive-in fodder injected with vastly expanding budgets and promoted to family audiences. This progressive ‘mainstreamisation’ meant that science fiction and horror in the 1970s and 1980s, and *film noir* (in the form of ‘neo-noir’ – sometimes called ‘*après noir*’, or ‘*noir lite*’) in the 1980s and 1990s, became genres with a wide audience base justifying larger budgets. The effects of this legitimisation of genre meant that filmmakers working at the bottom end of the market found that their stock-in-trade had been appropriated in a spectacularly inflated form on international mainstream screens. Veteran low-budget genre filmmaker Roger Corman, who helped establish the erotic thriller in the 1990s, said of this:

The major challenge has been finding new markets and recouping costs while the majors have dominated the exploitation genres with budgets ten times higher than ours. . . . [I]t was Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* who once wrote, ‘What is *Jaws* but a big-budget Roger Corman movie?’ But when the Spielbergs and the Lucases make technically exquisite genre films, they cut deeply into the box-office appeal of our kind of picture. (Corman 1998: xi)<sup>5</sup>

Thus it is fortunate for low-budget genre filmmakers that 1975 was also a watershed year in terms of diversity of film exhibition. This was the year in which Sony introduced Betamax, the first home video viewing and recording system, inaugurating an era in which viewers would gain some control over when, what and how they consumed films. Matsushita's VHS (video home system), which successfully competed with Betamax for the lion's share of the video market, was introduced in 1976 and – competitors such as DVD (digital versatile disc) and laserdisc notwithstanding – remained the internationally dominant mode of home viewing at the turn of the century. VHS also became a major format for the release of cheap genre films, including DTV films, which first made their appearance in the video boom of the 1980s when the supply of theatrically-released product (turned around onto video) could not keep up with consumer demand for films to view on those new living-room VCRs. Low-budget producers such as Corman responded to the challenge of the blockbuster by diversifying their sales options, first taking up the opportunity of the expanding television market by selling to network television and the new cable channels also developed in the 1970s, then, as the VHS machine became an established feature of the domestic space, making films only or primarily for video release.

Given the gargantuan video and DVD rental and retail market of today, it is hard to remember a time when it was not possible to own one's own copy of a

film to play when one chooses. The methods of interacting with films continues to change, as television, playback technology, PCs and the world wide web become increasingly interdependent; but as significant as any moment in cinema history (perhaps at least as important as the Paramount decrees) was the moment when it became possible to ‘possess’ a film for long enough to interfere with the shape of its time (through rewind, fast-forward, skip and pause functions, as well as simply choosing your moment to watch it). As I write in the early twenty-first century, this was still relatively recent history, but the notion of experiencing films *only* as and when an exhibitor determined at a place some distance from your home is now a fairly alien model of cinematic consumption. It is worth noting that both the DTV film and the video/DVD industry developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century. New viewing practices ushered in entirely new media industries. The rise of the erotic thriller is coterminous with the rise of these visual and industrial diversifications.

So what impact did these forces have on the erotic thriller? In its current form it did not exist prior to 1975 (though it has significant antecedents in *film noir*), and was therefore neither threatened nor saved in its low-budget format by the rise of the blockbuster or the development of video. Its exhibition history is much more intimately bound up with the new opportunities of home viewing, the development of the genre and the growth of the VCR happily progressing hand-in-hand. The early 1980s, which saw the release of my earliest examples of the genre, was also the period when the VCR became a familiar domestic item, and sales and rentals of tapes proliferated: ‘1984’, reports Cahill, ‘was homevideo’s first “billion dollar year, in terms of the retail value of [pre-recorded] videocassettes”’ (1988: 137).

This was the culture into which the erotic thriller was born. The convergence of the two forms – genre and mode of exhibition – was particularly developed by the early 1990s, by which time the sexual potential of home viewing (you could watch whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted with whoever you wanted, in privacy) and the increasing sexual explicitness of the erotic thriller, met and married, all the better to exploit each other as far as sex and sales would take them. New media technologies are usually seen as affording new sexual opportunities: the sexual potential of the world wide web was manifest from the start. There is evidence that within seven years of cinema’s watershed year of 1895 sexual intercourse had been filmed, though it is likely to be earlier than this.<sup>6</sup> The VCR has always been identified with the illicit.<sup>7</sup> The consolidation of the genre’s and the format’s distinct positions of dominance came in the early 1990s: by 1993, a year of peak production for the erotic thriller in cinemas and DTV, the total number of VCRs owned by American households was 80 per cent; this had risen to 88 per cent by 1997 (Friedberg 2000: 443).

As forms of consumption change due to shifting viewing practices, so too do patterns of production and distribution. It is now commonplace to budget filmmaking in light of significant returns from video revenue, but we should not forget how recent a phenomenon this is. Kochberg (amongst others) discusses

the impact on a film's profitability which results from a film going direct to video: 'Apart from the lost revenue, a film that has not secured a theatrical release cannot secure anything but poor deals for the other windows, because video, TV, etc. rely on the publicity of a theatrical release to promote a film. Without one, the film is a far less valuable commodity.'<sup>8</sup> However, this gives the impression that all films are destined for theatrical release but only some make it, which is not the case. The production realm into which the majority of titles on my filmography are born is one in which budgets are cut to the desires and limits of the living room. Films in this category are able to spend on relatively cheap production areas such as location in order to achieve a 'quality' look whilst they save on marketing costs and star salaries.

It is also assumed that films which receive no theatrical release are inherently less challenging than mainstream movies (the entry on 'Straight-to-video' in Blandford et al.'s *Film Studies Dictionary* bears this out [2001: 227–8]). This isn't entirely the case, for a number of reasons. First, distribution is governed by the limited number of slots and outlets into which a large number of released films must be fitted, so sometimes there just isn't space to release a 'quality' piece into the cinemas, and this differs from country to country. Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale* was theatrically released in the USA, backed by a 'quality' marketing campaign, but went DTV in the UK. *Killing Me Softly* was a video premiere in the USA, but theatrically released in the UK. John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), which made Linda Fiorentino a star, was funded by cable money and first aired on television in the USA, gaining a US cinematic airing following positive European responses. I discuss this film in chapter 2 as a mainstream erotic thriller and in chapter 3 as a star vehicle, but in terms of funding and distribution it looks more like one of the DTVs I discuss in Part Two, with (then) unestablished stars and – as at least one reviewer noted – a 'TV look' about it.<sup>9</sup> *The Last Seduction* challenges our judgemental categories which deem A-list good, B-list bad – or the reverse (the 'so bad it's good' subculture of B-movie veneration will be explored in Part Two). Whilst really big movies are usually guaranteed a theatrical slot, a smaller film aspiring to the cinema might never get there, for reasons entirely to do with what else comes out at the time of its release. The scaled-down sexy *noirs* Dahl made before *The Last Seduction* – *Kill Me Again* (1989) and *Red Rock West* (1992) – were initially forced down a narrow exhibition route. *Kill Me Again* did limited business at the box office, but gained in reputation after European festival success; *Red Rock West* did well at the Toronto Film Festival and in a San Francisco art-house cinema, prompting Columbia Tri-Star (who has 'quickly sold it to HBO and to video stores as an "erotic thriller"' [Naremore 1998: 165] – though it is the least sexual of these early Dahl films) to re-think, giving it a late theatrical release.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, whatever my claims below for the relative panache of films such as *Sexual Malice* or *Sexual Intent*, these are not near-misses hovering at the edges of the theatrical arena. Budgeted at a million or less and marketed almost entirely via their eye-catching exploitation video sleeves, they know what they

are and who (or what) they're for.<sup>11</sup> The 1998 Shannon Tweed vehicle *Powerplay* has the words 'Erotic Thriller' printed on a red banner on the back cover of the UK video sleeve where one would expect the title to be. Inside the pre-release video trade version of the sleeve, dealers are wooed into buying this title for their rental stock with the lines 'Solid Rentable Genre! Eye-Catching Sleeve!'. Similarly, Jag Mundhra's early genre piece *Night Eyes* was marketed with the phrase 'An Erotic Thriller' so closely aligned to the film's title on the American video sleeve that it almost serves as a sub-title. Titles are a primary part of a film's branding, and are particularly important for DTVs which will have to do a lot of selling through a few boldface words in the absence of a large marketing budget. From *Acting on Impulse* to *Dangerous Indiscretion* to *Stripped to Kill* and *Victim of Desire*, here title speaks genre, not necessarily the individual characteristics of the film itself (though the first is about a movie actress and the third is set in a strip-joint, so there's some content clue there). Many titles marry two shocking elements into one come-on message, with the suggestion that any of these words could be remixed into a new combination (and have been). The erotic words tend to be adjectives, adding sexual emphasis to the nouns: instincts are basic, crimes are carnal, proposals are indecent, games are secret, intent is sexual. But this can be easily reversed, for just as dark thoughts are sexy, so is sex deadly, attraction fatal. Upon these banal reversals a whole genre rests.<sup>12</sup> Titles advertise sensations (pleasures, desires) yoked to judgements (illicit, scandalous), first experienced by the characters and then promised to the audience. The genre is, of course, entirely aware of these absurdities: 'Deadly Cleavage – my favourite movie!' says a geeky fan to Linda Fiorentino in *Acting on Impulse*, 'I must have seen that thing twelve times!'<sup>13</sup> The titles also suggest direct reference back to those of classic noir – *Murder, My Sweet, Kiss of Death* and *Kiss Me Deadly* would all do brisk business as erotic thriller titles.<sup>14</sup> The repetition is mind-boggling: hard to remember but easy to categorise, films such as *Hidden Obsession, Naked Obsession* and *Blindfold: Acts of Obsession* may as well have called themselves 'Erotic Thriller 1', 'Erotic Thriller 2' and 'Erotic Thriller 3' for all the distinction the title gives as a designator of individuality (which may be why the DTV form of the genre became so fixated on sequels, more of which later). This is not (necessarily) to say that 'all erotic thrillers are the same', but that genre branding in title form is so strong they may as well be.

Titles can also be misleading, genre-wise. If the format says 'Erotic Thriller' but – by dint of sheer repetitiveness – this in itself makes the distinctions between films almost impossible to discern, it can also be used to sell as sexy films which are anything but. Following the success of *Fatal Attraction*, the word 'fatal' became synonymous with the genre and a metonym not for 'fate' (the inevitability of destiny), but deadly sex. Angela Martin reads the fatality of the *femme fatale* as underpinning the fatality of *film noir* itself: 'The femme fatale carries all . . . levels of meaning [of the word fatal], hence the easy slip-page from deadliness to sexuality as weapon' (1998: 206). In the erotic thriller,

however, the term 'fatal' has become most significant as a marketing hook, and the more the word is repeated, the more insistent 'fatality' becomes as a sales strategy rather than a simple description of (gendered) content. *Fatal Pursuit* (a Shannon Whirry vehicle), *Fatal Past* and *Night Eyes 4: Fatal Passion* are straightforward erotic thrillers, as are the two films released in 1991 and 1993 under the title *Fatal Instinct*, the first (a year before *Basic Instinct*), another story of a cop (Michael Madsen) falling for the suspect and subsequently branded as 'a sexy suspense-laced psychological thriller in the seductive style of *Basic Instinct* and *Sea of Love*'; the second, a star-studded, theatrically-released parody of the genre. Other 'fatal' films are hybrids or non-explicit thrillers which ride on the coat-tails of the sexier genre's success in suggestively aping its trademark title form. Of six such films released between 1988 and 1998 (though the list of 'fatal' films is far longer), *Fatal Secret* is an action film, *Fatal Image* a straight thriller, whilst *Fatal Temptation* and *Fatal Encounter* are American re-titlings of Italian and Hong Kong dramas respectively, both involving infidelity stories, the first a sexual melodrama, the second an AIDS saga. Two *Fatal Exposures*, from 1989 and 1991, are horror and made-for-TV mob-thrillers respectively, if with voyeuristic overtones. However, the first was re-released on video in the UK market in 1992 as a fully paid-up erotic thriller, its serial killer photographer-protagonist rebranded as a sexy *homme fatal*, with a video sleeve featuring a model's torso and legs in profile, clad only in strips of film wrapped around her breasts, groin and thighs.<sup>15</sup> The strong branding of the erotic thriller is thus used to sell adjacent or tangentially-related genres, perhaps to subsequently disappointed customers, who discover that *Fatal Deception* – a biopic of Lee Harvey Oswald's wife – is *not Fatal Attraction*. A similar tactic is the use of scantily clad models, who almost certainly won't appear in the film itself, the staple of DTV box-art. But whilst the DTVs *depend* on a genre-brand title, theatrically-released films deploy them too, even though they have other publicity tools available to them, to the point where title merges into high-concept encapsulation. *Body of Evidence*, slavishly title-led, offers everything in those three little words, as one of the highest of high-concept movies: Madonna kills men with her body, and her body is the evidence.

This deployment of an exploitation tactic is then another one of the cross-influences between 'high' and 'low' forms of the genre: both trade on sex from the title down. Yet the pervasive perception of video erotic thrillers as the poor cousins of the films is still predicated on the understanding that they exist for sex whilst theatrically-released films exist for story. Arousal is an index of marginalisation: 'in general masturbation is that rare thing in modern talk about sexuality', writes Thomas Laqueur, concluding his study of the cultural history of self-pleasuring: 'something best left unspoken and so discomforting that it can only be broached under the protection of a joke' (2003: 496). Video erotic thrillers *are* a joke in many quarters (they also frequently find themselves funny), and this may be linked to the fact that they also specifically set out to be sexually stimulating. In the sense that they operate with a constant cinemat-

ographic awareness of masturbation as a prime audience response and index of the film's success, they can openly flirt with pornography. Private viewing does, of course, change the nature of a film. However hot a blockbuster might become, masturbation in the auditorium is considered less of a 'danger' than in the living room, and it is the living room which is the DTV's primary screening room. Higher-end erotic thriller filmmakers don't see themselves as pornographers because they do not advertise themselves as arousing: 'The stuff that is shot and sold as porn is meant to get you aroused and climax', said Brian De Palma in 1984. 'I don't think my movies have people coming in their seats . . .' (Pally 1984: 14). This is despite the hope that they will arouse nevertheless: Michael Douglas says that he saw *Basic Instinct* as resembling 'the kind of detective novel you might read in the privacy of your own bedroom. Not really smutty but certainly stimulating!' (quoted in Lawson 1993: 211). However, films such as *The Last Seduction* have few sex-scenes to speak of, presenting just one set-piece scene (amidst a range of more fleeting moments) which follows mainstream softcore rules: a thunderstorm enables oscillating lighting, the camera slowly pans up and down naked bodies, gasping voices are woven into the ponderous jazz score. Two sex-scenes were cut;<sup>16</sup> *The Last Seduction* is not, textually speaking, a masturbation film.

But viewing context also determines what is considered 'dangerously' sexual. The Video Recordings Act was introduced in the UK in response to a moral panic about 'private home viewing', and was the first piece of British legislation specifically to take into account the criteria of 'suitability for viewing in the home'. What this has meant is that video certification in the UK is rather more draconian than cinematic certification, despite the persistent notion that sex films released into the home must be riskier, more explicit than anything that could show at your local cinema. The opposite is true in the USA, where more explicit 'director's cut' videos may be subsequently released with a 'stronger' rating (or more usually unrated) following a theatrical classification geared to the widest market (which might include teenagers and children). In theatres, blockbusters are often blander versions – anodyne remakes – of their riskier poor relations, such as the productions of the highly prolific Axis stable – brand leaders of the genre as it existed on video in the first half of the 1990s. *Indecent Proposal* was, after all, released in Britain with a 15 certificate (raising the question of what happens to a film which has its generic origins in pornography when you take out the pornography). Cleansing the plots of their raw, 'deviant' moments, the blockbusters have sanded off the genre's culturally revealing rough edges along with the sexually revealing softcore centres.<sup>17</sup>

The hierarchical differences which privilege the theatrically-released *Body of Evidence* or *Body Heat* above the DTV *Body of Influence* or *Body Chemistry* has meant that the latter have received little serious attention. Low budget does not necessarily mean low interest, and in many ways these rapidly produced, flawed works of schlock confront key sexual political issues in a far more interesting way than their mainstream counterparts. This is no accident, since a

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more intimate relationship of influence connects high and low. Carol Clover makes a similar point in her study of contemporary horror, *Men Women and Chain Saws*. ‘When I see an Oscar-winning film like *The Accused* or the artful *Alien* . . . I cannot help thinking of all the low-budget, often harsh and awkward but sometimes deeply energetic films that preceded them by a decade or more – films that said it all, and in flatter terms, and on a shoestring’ she writes (1992a: 20), a point which genre journalists and fans had long recognised, as they repeatedly saw ‘their’ films remade and blown up for mainstream audiences without a by-your-leave acknowledgement to the original. Maitland McDonagh’s collection of interviews with off-Hollywood filmmakers picks open the intricate ways in which the boundaries between mainstream and fringe are blurred, arguing that ‘exploitation movies and the people who make them’ have changed the face of the mainstream (1995: xii). Clover returned to this issue:

The case could be made that horror movies in general are the repressed of a fair share of American mainstream cinema. Scratch the glossy surface of *The Silence of the Lambs* and you have a slasher film . . . Scratch *Pacific Heights* and you are in an economy of bloodsucking that looks like nothing so much as a vampire film. . . . Even a cursory glance makes it clear that the direction of trickle here is up, not down . . . today’s ‘meat movie’ is tomorrow’s blockbuster. (1992b: 18)

This pattern of authority also marks other genres: today’s scuzzy skin-flick is also tomorrow’s supermovie. But equally, today’s ‘classy’ blockbuster erotic thriller is also tomorrow’s lower-class DTV: here influence flows (at least) two ways. Thus, whilst Kim Newman’s comment, ‘Almost all video genres are cut-downs of big screen trends’ describes the prevailing view (‘the erotic thriller certainly seems to owe its existence to a handful of 80s hits’, he continues [1996a: 112]), this is not always so; DTV erotic thrillers frequently function as the disavowed but influential underbelly of sexy blockbusters. Individual film cases from the late 1980s onwards evidence a ‘trickle-up’ as well as a ‘trickle-down’ effect, with the exploitation fringes providing as much raw material for the theatrically-released blockbusters as vice versa. Sometimes the theatrically-released stories get there first and spawn a spate of DTV clones; some low-budget erotic thrillers are so inventive that the mainstream movies follow their lead (hoping, perhaps, that since the originator of an idea was a small circulation DTV, most mainstream audiences won’t have seen it anyway). Whilst everyone compared *Basic Instinct* to *Jagged Edge*, also written by Joe Eszterhas, an even less flattering comparison could be made with a number of more disreputable films. Sharon Stone as Catherine Tramell is perhaps a more expensive version of erotic thriller video-queen Delia Sheppard as Bridget the avenging lesbian of *Night Rhythms*, who at least sticks to her sexuality and cannot be swayed by the charms of the first man who crosses her path. *Basic Instinct* is surely *The Other Woman* in reverse; instead of the cop falling for ‘the wrong

woman' and in the process persuading her away from lesbianism, *The Other Woman* presents a female heroine turning towards another woman, challenging in part the notion that all women ever need is a good heterosexual seeing to. Individual scenes demonstrate most clearly the exchange between small and big screen. Greg Dark/Hippolyte certainly kept an eye on his classic precedents: *Mirror Images II* boasts a staircase descent which echoes Phyllis's in *Double Indemnity* and a scene in which a woman watches someone having sex through a cupboard door (cf. *Blue Velvet*). But surely Joe Eszterhas – described as the 'meister of porno-noir' (Hirsch 1999: 202) – was taking notes for *Sliver* when *Animal Instincts* was released, since it seems an even more significant influence than Ira Levin's novel. Scratch the surface of *Basic Instinct* and you have a straight-to-video erotic thriller with a bigger budget, whilst *Indecent Proposal* looks rather like *Secret Games* with most of the sex taken out. The soundtrack might tell us that this is 'no ordinary love' as Demi Moore and Woody Harrelson fuck on their bed of money, but it is the love that erotic thrillers are made of. It is also a love prefigured by Jag Mundhra three years earlier. Compare sex on a bed of dollar bills circa 1990 in *Last Call* with sex on a bed of dollar bills circa 1993 in *Indecent Proposal*. In the former it is Shannon Tweed who revels naked in the dosh; in the latter it is rising thespian Demi Moore. Compare, also, Tanya Roberts dripping candlewax on Andrew Stevens' chest circa 1990 in *Night Eyes*, with Madonna doing the same for Willem Dafoe three years later in *Body of Evidence*. The former Mundhra films are cheap DTV, the latter are glossy talking-point blockbusters, the images are nearly identical – it's just that Mundhra got there first (*Mirror Images II* also shows sex with hot wax).<sup>18</sup> Many of these images are born of a real desire to innovate on a budget.

One textual influence I do not have the space to examine in any detail here is hardcore, perhaps even 'lower' in cultural estimation than DTV genre films. Though throughout this book I show how aspects of the hardcore revolution fed into the softcore revolution, providing a parallel history (the VCR as exhibition platform; the rise of the couples audience; porno-chic in popular and academic arenas), I have not looked at how individual hardcore texts form blueprints for later softcore ones. Since some erotic thriller players previously worked in hardcore (the 'Dark Brothers', for example, were central to Axis – producer Walter Gernert and director Greg Dark aka Hippolyte), this may be a fertile area of enquiry. There is, of course, a lively sub-industry producing explicit parodies of mainstream movies, enabling the porno-trainspotter to compile an obscene comedy of titles such as *Shaving Ryan's Privates*, *Forrest Hump* and *Saturday Night Beaver*. This sub-genre might be seen as a witty formation of Clover's 'trickle-down' factor. However, my discussion of the erotic thriller in mainstream markets focuses on the cross-fertilisation between theatrical and DTV forms. There is another story which still needs to be told about hardcore erotic thrillers (the term is used, for instance, in *Adult Video News'* review of *The Fashionistas*), and hardcore narrative inventions crossing over into softcore movies for mainstream markets.

There also remains a problem in seeing either low- or high-budget erotic thrillers (or any genre) as the primary repository of ideas and interest, occupying the moral or inventive high ground. No film form is essentially more liberating or progressive simply because it is cheaper or less processed (to say so would be rather like sanctifying poverty). Noting that ‘many of the best noir films were B film’, Paul Schrader observes the opposite phenomenon when he notes:

This odd sort of economic snobbery still lingers on in some critical circles: high-budget trash is considered more worthy of attention than low-budget trash, and to praise a B film is somehow to slight (often intentionally) an A film. (1972: 62)

Nevertheless I have found that perhaps because the DTVs I am considering haven’t undergone the same processes of smoothing over the cracks that their generic big sisters have, they often contain revealing and contradictory moments, even a twisted kind of feminism, which many viewers have been hard-pressed to find in blockbusters like *Fatal Attraction*. In saying that the paths of influence between the DTVs and the blockbusters run both ways, I hope to give credit where credit is due, but I also want to acknowledge that Hollywood and its fringes operate rather like a sea of sharks: everything is food; every narrative idea, marketing technique and talent resource is up for grabs, and available to the highest bidder (or whoever is willing to buy). Filmmakers and sellers will exploit what the other has to offer as far as they can. Whilst the small films might function like a pre-emptive test screening, trying out ideas to see if they work before studios invest, the big films also provide a cosy context of expectation into which the smaller films can nestle. Andrew Garroni says that *Basic Instinct* did not give Axis content ideas (they had already honed their signature product two years before Verhoeven’s monster came along), but it did give them a sales hook, making their risky-looking commodities a safer bet. High-gloss blockbuster erotic thrillers ‘were advertisements’ which helped producers to reassure tentative distributors that their product was dependable: ‘*Basic Instinct* allowed the middle managers that run the outlets of distribution to be able to point to [a similar film and say] it’s like *Basic Instinct*. It just has David Carradine instead of Michael Douglas in it!’ (see below, p. 69). This is also evident in the customary trade press and video sleeve technique of comparing like with (almost) like, using a range of other titles as market orientation co-ordinates – if you bought *that*, then buy *this*. Roger Corman reports that he put the ‘New’ into New World Pictures because he had read that ‘New’ was one of the seller’s best allies (1998: 179), but genre viewers want the known as well as the new. The trade press understand that they will get nowhere if all they have are genuinely original products; the new must be introduced with reassurances of the old. If likeness is a hallmark of genre, then genre is still primary in the marketing of movies as safe, known commodities.

At one point, of course, the term ‘erotic thriller’ itself was new. ‘Erotic’ started being used as an adjective to give a particular emphasis to the established term ‘thriller’ during the early 1980s; by 1990, just after the success of *Night Eyes*, a number of my interviewees claim to have invented, or consolidated, the concept and the term (Gernert and Garroni, Mundhra, and Dark all tell similar versions of the same story). The video sleeve blurb for one 1993 DTV reads: ‘When the instincts are this basic, the attraction this fatal, there’s no escape for a beautiful college professor who becomes drawn into a wildly sensual relationship with a dangerous prisoner in the high voltage erotic thriller, “Over the Line”’.<sup>19</sup> *Dangerous Touch* was reviewed in *Video Home Entertainment* (the UK’s foremost trade journal from 1992 onwards) through a framework of familiarity, a combination of like-films and known (if has-been) near-stars: ‘A truly erotic thriller in the *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* mould. With a strong sleeve and a cast led by Lou Diamond Phillips of *Young Guns* and *La Bamba* fame this latest PolyGram release should be a dead cert for excellent rental business’ (11 December 1993, p. 22). Similarly, the video sleeve for the Zalman King-produced *Business for Pleasure* contains the legend ‘From the Creator of “9½ Weeks” and “Wild Orchid”’, suggesting that the film is directed by King, perhaps even by Adrian Lyne. *Weekend in Vegas* trades on a DTV ancestry (‘From the producers of “A Woman Scorned”’) and puns on a mainstream connection (tag-line: ‘An indecent proposal. Too tempting to resist!’), whilst *A Murderous Affair* insinuates itself into the camp of both the true-life story and the biggest title in the genre (‘A woman scorned is a deadly enemy. The true story of a “Fatal Attraction” killing’). This is one fertile road in the formation of genre: *Deceptions* – to pick one example from many – helps to consolidate its category as well as situating itself within one when it advertises itself as ‘In the tradition of *Body Heat* and *Jagged Edge* . . . a provocative thriller, intense in passion and seething in sexuality’.<sup>20</sup>

## 2: GENRES AND DEFINITIONS

Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process.

Steve Neale (2000: 31)

We didn’t get up every day and repeat the mantra of the genre that we were in. Once we made the decision we understood the realities of the market place. . . . We understood what we were making.

Andrew Garroni

So how do these thoughts on the erotic thriller as a marketable genre feed into more formal models of genre? Erotic thrillers became so lucrative because they offered ‘a financial guarantee: generic movies are in a sense always pre-sold to

their audiences because viewers possess an image and an experience of the genre before they actually engage any particular instance of it' (Maltby 1995: 112). Genre theorists have often complicated an area of cinema which audiences and the industry have approached rather more bluntly and have adopted a number of different methodologies to address film categories. Genre study began in earnest in the 1970s as a way of engaging with popular Hollywood cinema, sometimes as a challenge or a supplement to auteur theory. This work has too frequently been led by theoretical models which have had little purchase on how the industry itself has made and marketed different types of films, the historical fluidity of key categories and audiences' use of genre – perhaps because of the prestige of the formal over the historical. For instance, in the introduction to an important collection of essays which read genre through, for example, the filters of structuralism, auteur theory, models of ideology, narrative, psychoanalysis, stylistics and formalism, Barry Keith Grant briefly mentions genre's primary commercial function:

Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen. . . . Traditionally, Hollywood movies have been produced in a profit-motivated studio system which, as the result of sound business practice, has sought to guarantee acceptance at the box office by the exploitation and variation of commercially successful formulas. In this system, praised for the 'genius' of its efficiency by André Bazin, genre movies are the Model T's or the Colt revolvers with interchangeable parts. (Grant 1986: xi)

Yet the fact that genre films are mass products marketed to particular audiences, the parts continually interchanged to maximise even wider audiences, is discussed in only a few of the essays which follow this statement (and even then, these think about audiences only as an effect of implied textual meaning). If critics have read movies as celluloid Model T's, it is often only in order to produce a kind of cinematic owner's manual for identifying how they work and categorising their ideal form.

Neale begins his study *Genre and Hollywood* with the definition: "Genre" is a French word meaning "type" or "kind" (2000: 9). Formal approaches, pursued with what Maltby calls 'a cartographer's concern with defining the exact location of the boundary between one genre and another' (1995: 107), have included the identification of motifs, foregrounding the iconographic elements of *mise-en-scène* which characterise a genre, or identifying a set of what Tom Ryall writing in 1975 called 'family resemblances' between members of a genre.<sup>21</sup> Thus genre theorists have engaged in a kind of cinematic genome project, identifying typical characteristics in order to pinpoint the essence of genre via fixed components.

Colin McArthur's *Underworld U.S.A.* (1972) was a pathbreaking categorisation of what now looks like a rather loose genre, running against the grain of the then dominant auteurism, and has been seen as more important for the principles of categorisation it introduced rather than for its definitive statements about 'the gangster film/thriller' (1972: 8). Written before the important wave of work on *film noir* got under way in the 1970s and 1980s, *Underworld U.S.A.* is both definitive and unwieldy, proposing that key elements which define a genre offer a 'continuity over several decades of patterns of visual imagery, of recurrent objects and figures in dynamic relationship. These repeated patterns might be called the iconography of the genre' (ibid.: 23). This iconography is, however, only meaningful to audiences who have been widely exposed and sensitised to a range of different but similar examples of related 'icons'. A seasoned erotic thriller aficionado will recognise, for instance, the 'Fredricks of Hollywood' co-ordinated underwear, the security camera with sexual potential, the half-hidden gun in a lingerie drawer. He or she might also expect a mild lipstick-lesbian performance, a murder or financial double-cross, a scene in a strip-joint. Perhaps a courtroom sequence. A lousy or a dead husband. A *femme* or *homme fatal(e)*. However, these elements are not present in their varying measures because some transcendent generic structure called 'erotic thriller' deems them to be crucial components. They are there because they provide opportunities for innovative variations on dependable staples, satisfy the filmmaker's sense of interesting workmanship, and sell the films to their target audiences. The drives of genre are primarily industrial, and genre films lay bare the poetics of the marketplace. For all the textual complexities individual films might display, a clear generic structure reveals the simple truth that genre is one way of targeting a film to a guaranteed audience sector, an audience that must be reassured by familiarity whilst being entertained by innovation. Genre films thus hang on a dynamic interchange of sameness and distinction, or, as Krutnick puts it, 'genres serve as frameworks for mediating between repetition and difference' (1991: 11). They are repetitive whilst at the same time no two films can be exactly the same – the audience seeks the same but wants it differently encapsulated. This makes sexual genre cinema the perfect partner for sexual behaviour, which also balances the desire for familiar and repeated satisfaction with the excitement of experiment. Sexual genres are perhaps amongst the most successful in cinema because sex itself combines the novel with the known.

So just as genre cannot by definition inhere in any one work (it exists in the repetition/difference between films) so generic hallmarks do not exist as isolated textual phenomena, understood only when the formal analyst magically unlocks them with her critical key. Genres 'are public and institutional – not personal or critical' (Neale 2000: 42). The dynamic interplay between a genre film and its audience means that an element of iconography – the 'tools of the trade' (Buscombe 1986: 14) – such as a murder weapon like *Basic Instinct's* ice-pick, or an item of voyeuristic technology such as *Sliver's* sex-cam surveillance system – signifies not just as a formal component in an individual film's visual

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patterning, but has a more fundamental social currency which the film 'knows' its audience will read for its familiarity and innovation (so that the ice-pick is lined up alongside Phillis's revolver [in *Double Indemnity*], Angela's blowtorch [in *Exception to the Rule*], Rebecca's sexual skills [used to kill men in *Body of Evidence*]).<sup>22</sup> Iconography can also be used by films to signal a genre's apprehension of social change: Stone's climactic act of reaching for the ice-pick under the bed is referenced when Linda Fiorentino seems to do the same one year later in the DTV *Acting on Impulse*, but pulls out a condom instead, the contextualising of safe sex also shifting woman from *femme fatale* to good-bad girl (I will explore her below); prototype psycho-*femme* Evelyn in *Play Misty for Me* also has a key scene with an ice-pick. The sex-cam is aligned with Rebecca's home porno-movies (again in *Body of Evidence*), the multiple viewing positions and apparatus of *Body Shot*, or the reflective surfaces of *Mirror Images*. Guns are also allied with the intimate fabric of fetishism in the erotic thriller (Fig. 1): in *Night Eyes 3* DTV erotic thriller diva Shannon Tweed plays a B-actress playing a *noirish* TV cop who tucks her revolver inside her stocking-top. In *Body of Influence* Lana (Shannon Whirry) orders a dominatrix to have sex with a man at gunpoint. Dolly (Virginia Madsen) holds a gun to the throat of fall-guy Harry (Don Johnson) whilst giving him a blow-job in Dennis Hopper's *The Hot Spot*, whilst a psychotic female patient of Bruce Willis fellates a gun at the start of *Color of Night*. When prostitute Rain is fucked by a murderer in Greg Dark's *Undercover*, the killer places his gun next to her face on the red, crushed-velvet pillow. The combination of sex, flesh, gun, fabric and colour is a classic erotic thriller conjunction, like the accidentally spilt (ejaculated?) bag of blood which Val Kilmer sprays across *femme fatale* Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as she lounges expectantly on a bed, waiting for her death to be faked in Dahl's *Kill Me Again*. Soft S&M is suggested across the genre, such as when Nick Cassavetes give Shannon Whirry roses in *Body of Influence* – she cuts her breast with a thorn and he licks the wound. The aphrodisiac of violence is foregrounded in a number of places, such as when, excited by their conspiratorial amorality, Frank and Cora fuck on a hillside next to Cora's dead husband in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* remake. Repetition itself builds the viewer into an intelligent (in the sense of one who renders a code intelligible) genre reader, the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to a number of similar products producing a genre sensitivity borne of saturation. The genre viewer is thus perfectly placed to do justice to the dynamic of knowing 'nods' across and between films. This is an intertextuality which both nourishes and feeds from the knowing audience, involving them in the complex process of signification. Genre films and generically clued-up audiences are made for each other, and the genre critic must operate with an awareness of both.

This book does, then, address the erotic thriller as a body of texts ripe with a highly charged and abundantly signifying iconography, not in order formally to set in stone a picture of generic hallmarks, but because repetition tells us something about viewing pleasure. Any first attempt at mapping a genre is vulnerable



Figure 1: Guns and sex in the erotic thriller: Shannon Whirry and Maxwell Caulfield in *Animal Instincts*. Courtesy of Upcoast Film Consultants, Inc.

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to the charges of exclusivity and canon formation: because genre is repetitive, textual analysis will reveal regular or obsessively returned to motifs which may amount to an iconography, and any collection of similar texts will equally exclude others. Perhaps the trick is not to be exclusive in this pragmatic exclusion (this book is therefore a starting-point not a sewn-up definition), and to read icons not as fixed elements in a transcendent pattern but tools in a filmmaker's armoury, image templates for the poster designer, moments of genre familiarity which the fan can congratulate herself on recognising.

Many of my films are also, quite frankly, fun films to read: drenched with resonant images, sparking off haphazardly witty screenplays, knowing their own silliness and absurdity, they present a vocal set of cultural symptoms. What viewers do with and to these films – and how far filmmakers and distributors can comfortably rely on this understanding – is central to this study. I am one such viewer, but I am also interested in a complex of other viewers, such as the implied viewer positioned by the film's address (heterosexual men hoping to get off, the girlfriends of those men hoping for 'something for the ladies', other illicit viewers such as lesbian spectators who enjoy sexual spectacle against the grain and through the cracks), and viewers traditionally associated with reception approaches – critics, internet writers, fans.

I also want to think about the erotic thriller as a genre in a rather more pervasive way. Andrew Tudor writes,

Genre notions . . . are not critics' classification made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be. (Tudor 1986: 7)

This 'collective belief' has important implications for how we interpret the 'interplay between filmmaker, film and audience' (*ibid.*). That genre exists both inside and outside of films is taken up by Richard Maltby:

We know a thriller when we see one. Indeed, we know a thriller before we see one, and to some degree we also recognize that, beyond describing the obvious content of a movie, these generic categories have a broader cultural resonance. (1995: 107)

How, then, does the erotic thriller as a genre inhabit a culture wider than that occupied by the films themselves, their producers and their viewers? Would it, indeed, be possible or legitimate to discuss the erotic thriller without looking at a single film – or without reference to audience or industry? This book partly takes as its brief the question of whether we do indeed know an erotic thriller before we see one, or *without ever* seeing one. We all know what a 'bunny-boiler' is regardless of whether we've seen *Fatal Attraction*. Whether or not we've seen *Basic Instinct*, we probably know about Sharon Stone's crotch-flash. Elements from the mainstream form of the genre have pervaded popular

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culture. But beyond this we may be drawn to, or we may shun, the top shelves of our local video store; we may use the distributor's label 'erotic thriller' printed on the video sleeve as a reason to rent or to put the video back on the shelf. Ann Gray found in her study of female video users that 'the video library is a particularly interesting site for the circulation of meanings about genres' (1992: 230–1). Video dealers operate in a world only partly supported by mass advertising; a small proportion of DTV titles may do well because of a TV commercial campaign, but hundreds of others must stand or fall on how well they are presented in the video store. Even if we've never seen an erotic thriller, the 'promise' of explicitness or the attraction of a thriller plot presented by the sleeve design informs our choices. We may also understand the listing in this week's TV guide, telling us that on Friday night in the UK Channel 5 will show yet another Shannon Tweed erotic thriller. Regardless of whether we know who Tweed is, we understand enough to make us tune in or turn off. Beyond the semantics of the term 'erotic thriller' (partly descriptive but, as I'll discuss below, also promising a whole lot more), we might also be influenced by the style of description adopted by the listings writer (and the many listings writers before her), by whether we knew about Tweed's *Playboy* centrefold career, or even by how we read her name.

#### *Fluid Genres: Mutants, Hyphenates and Amoebae*

If McArthur traces a consistent strand running through the forty years of filmmaking which he analyses, he is also open enough to the possibility of difference within this identification of sameness to deem the thriller 'a constantly growing amoeba assimilating the successive stages of its own development'; it is a form the limits of which are 'fluid' (1972: 8). This adaptable (perhaps unstable) notion of genre is useful for thinking about the fluid mutation of *noir* into *neo-noir* into the erotic thriller, an interconnected chain of categories which, through the 1980s and 1990s, fed in and out of each other. Overlapping and cross-fertilisation between predicated groupings extends the market and enables individual films to exploit a wider range of generic influences. This is not a recent phenomenon – Hollywood has long exploited the fact that hybrid genres maximise box office receipts. Genres are less categorical and more open-ended than the critical taxonomist would have us believe. Indeed, the most interesting recent work on genre has endorsed this, emphasising not the purity of categories but genres as mobile groupings. This may be particularly true, or self-consciously deployed, in contemporary cinema. Jim Collins makes a case for a reinvigorated genre theory which can account for the media-aware environment within which contemporary films operate, with genre cinema since the 1980s responding in complex ways to a media-sophisticated cultural landscape. In particular, he discusses a number of 'eclectic, hybrid genre films' which 'engage in specific transformation *across* genres' (Collins 1993: 245). Krutnick advises that 'the boundaries between genres are by no means fixed

and precise, and moreover a genre cannot simply be defined in terms of the elements it contains’:

Rather than seeing genre as a strictly rule-bound context, then, one should stress that any process of generic designation locates very broadly defined sets of discursive configurations, narrative procedures and stylistic emphases. (1991: 8)

Whilst other writers have addressed the historical sweep of a genre in terms of ‘cycles, runs or sets’<sup>23</sup> – shifts in emphases across the developmental history which allows for a certain fluidity or hybridity between categories – Neale is not even particularly rigorous about the differences between genres and sub-genres.<sup>24</sup> Genres are then drawn with wide strokes rather than fine cartographer’s lines, and should be viewed by theorists as openly as they are by studios. This is borne out by a number of recent writers. For Janet Staiger, the fact that ‘Hollywood films have never been “pure” – that is easily arranged into categories’ (1997: 6) – almost constitutes a definition of Hollywood itself: hybridity is endemic to the classical form. For Maltby, ‘a broad generic category such as the romance can be understood as a field containing a large collection of more or less familiar elements: stars, settings, plot events, motives, and so on’, and reminds us that ‘generic hyphenates’ (he also calls them generic mutants) are common: ‘musical-comedy, comedy-adventure, Western-romance’, emphasising the fact that ‘most movies use categorical elements in combination’ (1995: 108). Elizabeth Cowie sees a ‘major aspect of genre and hence of genre study [as] therefore the extent to which any particular work exceeds its genre, how it reworks and transforms it, rather than how it fits certain generic expectations’ (1993: 128). Christine Gledhill bears this out when she writes that all films “participate” . . . in genres of one kind or another – and usually several at once’: ‘Most texts, and most films, are multiply generic: *Star Wars* and *Body Heat* . . . are, simultaneously, “films”, “fiction films”, “Hollywood films” and “narrative feature films”; the former is also “science fiction”, “space opera” and/or “action-adventure”, and the latter a “thriller” (and possibly also “neo-noir”)’ (1999: 147).

The erotic thriller (another of *Body Heat*’s subsequent labels) ought, then, to be seen as a prime example of Maltby’s generic hyphenate. Yet like the marketers of these films, I do not hyphenate the term. This is because a hyphen suggests two separate categories welded together, almost as if two different films politely cohabit a category, but play out separate stories and styles in parallel across their ninety minutes of shared screen time. *Oklahoma!* may be a musical-western, but on some level it remains discretely *both* a musical and a western. The hyphen, then, serves to divorce the two terms, as well as marry them. ‘[M]any Hollywood films – and many Hollywood genres – are hybrid and multi-generic’, writes Steve Neale, endorsing the practice of approaching films ‘under a number of different generic headings’ (2000: 51). There are very few

entirely uncontentious genres, and for most recent writers the more promiscuous a genre term becomes, sliding into bed with any and perhaps all of its neighbours, the more interesting it is. Neale's discussion of the fluid and ubiquitous nature of the term 'melodrama' ('mello' or 'meller' in *Variety*-speak), challenges the now accepted use of the term as a synonym for 'woman's film' (characterised by the analysis of only a limited range of films made in the 1940s and 1950s). 'Melodrama' has lent itself to a number of unholy alliances: there are domestic melodramas, full-blooded melodramas, vivid melodramas, even virile melodramas, not to mention a 'cactus country meller with an all-male cast' (2000: 179–204). The softcore melodrama will also be discussed in this book.

The erotic thriller is a textbook case of a form which 'participate[s] . . . in . . . several [genres] at once'. In particular, the term 'erotic' taken as an adjective is itself highly promiscuous and resonantly trans-generic. It functions in some ways like the term 'adult', used by the industry to designate content (adult = sexual) and to target a limited but dependable audience ('For Adults Only' promises something, like 'Men Only'). Read the erotic thriller as an 'adult thriller' and it becomes more of a Harley Davidson than a Model T: a sexy pleasure model marketed to a wide public, but with no room for the children or the family dog: this is a couples-only, grown-up ride, but no less a mass-produced product for all that. The successes of New Hollywood are predicated on the catchment of a multi-generational audience, the prime age target being PG13 (in the US) or 12 (in the UK) rather than the 18/R/NC-17, which an erotic thriller would attract (the largest single certification category in the UK is 15, however). To work, this exclusion of children must become a virtue: 'Adults Only' is most obviously a term which shuts out a large sector of ticket-buyers, so it must deliver to those who *can* buy. 'Adult' also functions as a metonym for 'erotic' (Adult Drama, Adult Comedy, etc.; the 1990 women-in-prison film *Caged Fury* is labelled an 'Adult Thriller'). But, like melodrama, 'erotic' is also a mobile term, which can form allegiances of description with more distinct and uncontested genre categories. It attaches itself not only to the thriller noun, but to vaguer generic terms. *Feminine Chemistry* (the English title of a 1990 Italian film) plays safe by branding itself an 'Erotic Feature'. The *Wild Orchid* films are described by those marketing the videos as 'Erotic Dramas', and are listed as such in the *Radio Times* when the TV franchise spin-off series is aired in Britain. *The Wise Woman's Guide to Erotic Videos* sexualises soap-opera by referring to *The Red Shoe Diaries* as 'Made-for-TV Soft-Core Suds' (Cohen and Fox 1997: 172).<sup>25</sup> In its most parodic formation the erotic thriller can be excessive in its hybridisation; Roger Ebert reviewed the hysterically misanthropic *Wild Things* as a 'three-way collision between a softcore sex film, a soap opera and a B-grade noir' (1998b). *Caged Women* (like *Caged Fury*, another variation on Demme's classic *Caged Heat* theme) is called an 'Erotic Prison Thriller', whilst *Beach Beverly Hills* is given the genre label 'Erotic Adventure' on the video sleeve. Dealers are also advised in the promotional material that this is a 'Mega Commercial Genre', comparing the film to more straightforward genre

pieces: ‘Essential viewing for everyone who enjoyed “Basic Instinct”, “Night Rhythms” and “Animal Instincts”’.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the allegiance between Eros and Comedy is the least contentious pairing, possibly because of our willingness to laugh at sex – and particularly for British viewers in light of the history of the British sex comedy, hence the ‘Erotic Comedy’ label on the UK-released video of hardcore cut-down title *The Erotic Adventures of The Three Musketeers*. Yet ‘erotic’ can also render uncontested terms such as horror much harder to pin down: *Embrace of the Vampire* is described as an ‘Erotic Horror’ (begging the question of what horror film *isn’t* erotic, and thus what this one does that the others don’t). The English title of one film starring the queen of Hong Kong Category III films, Amy Yip, was *Erotic Ghost Story*, a sexually explicit Category III film (more of which later), which has spawned four sequels.<sup>27</sup>

During the 1990s, also as an effect of the form’s widespread success, a number of films came to be marketed in a way which suggested a relationship to the erotic thriller whilst not quite committing to it as a genre. This has often happened in the re-release of a film onto video, in the wake of the success of the genre. A cult film which was first received as a work of art-house science fiction, *Liquid Dreams* (1992), was re-categorised for its video release as an erotic thriller. Jim McBride’s 1986 corrupt cop thriller *The Big Easy* relied heavily on the sexual chemistry between its stars Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin in its marketing, even though the sex-scenes, whilst suggestive, are few and hardly explicit. The UK video-box text, from 1998, uses ‘erotic’ as an adjective, calling the film a ‘humorous, stylish and erotic thriller’.<sup>28</sup> Similarly Dennis Hopper’s *The Hot Spot* was described as ‘a torrid erotic thriller’ in its 2003 US DVD sleeve blurb, but the voiceover on its original theatrical trailer called it ‘Film Noir for the 90s’ (though against a series of images which repeatedly juxtapose tantalising sexual snippets with violent outbursts). The Checkout.com retail website lists Gregory Hippolyte’s *Undercover* (aka *Undercover Heat*) under ‘Genres: Mystery, Suspense, & Horror’, whilst an IMDb reviewer called it ‘a very nice Erotic-Thriller’. Though the British video packaging (unusually) doesn’t claim a genre for this film, its plot-blurb covers all the bases: ‘She’s young, beautiful and with a body to die for. She’s also a cop . . . . But as night falls in the city, detective Cindy Hanen swaps her police blues for black lace.’ The basic elements of crime and sex are advertised upfront, with the promise of criminal thrills and sexual spectacle set against a dangerous cityscape (which actually hardly features in the film itself – and as a detective Cindy never dresses in police blues either).<sup>29</sup>

‘Erotic’ is, then, no more or less of a firm genre label than melodrama (which is etymologically simply the conjunction of music [melos] + drama). Erotic means sexual love, but the word is also defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a doctrine or science of love’. The term thus has a cultural association with sexual material, as well as a long (if fraught) history distinguishing it from pornography (‘science of *love*’, not sex). In practice, ‘erotic’ as a genre term has meant something less explicit than ‘adult’, with the former fre-

quently standing in for 'softcore' and the latter doing service for 'hardcore'. For almost all of my filmmaking interviewees this was an understood working definition which means something very specific to audiences and classifiers. It is this which guarantees the erotic thriller a place alongside other feature films in mainstream videostores such as Blockbuster, staying out of the designated hardcore terrain (the backroom of 'mom and pop' video stores in the USA; the UK sex shop licensed to sell R-18 films). The erotic thriller is therefore purposely not called the sex thriller (which might be a more accurate term), though not because it is a particularly 'loving' form. It does not cherish tender and respectful sex, nor does it strive to be aesthetically subtler or more suggestive. Like its hardcore bad twin it prefers contextless and often consequenceless sexual display, anonymous encounters, a variety of sexual scenarios and as much diversity as it can get away with within the confines BBFC or MPAA certification. It often sets its narrative clock by the requirement of having a sex-scene every ten minutes, like a production number in a musical (as Linda Williams describes hardcore sex-scenes). A number of key DTV erotic thrillers are extensively pornographic, in the sense that the screen-time taken up by sexual spectacle frequently exceeds that taken up by thriller plot. The spectacle itself may not contain the hardcore checklist of penetration or cum shots, but it pervades the film nevertheless. Yet by calling itself an erotic thriller rather than pornography, a film can advertise itself to those who would avoid the top shelf. That women have been understood as traditionally preferring the 'erotic' over the 'pornographic' (a moot point to which I will be returning in Part Two) only reinforces the need to deploy a term which targets women too, or which at least will not alienate heterosexual women when they join their (male) partners on the viewing-sofa.

Thus 'erotic' is used as both a description of content and a promise of effect: if the film contains erotic scenarios, it ought to produce an erotic response in its viewer. This is also to some extent true of 'thriller'. These are not simply erotic films which hang on a thriller plot, nor are they simply thrillers with a high sex quota. Perhaps this is partly because of the pun on 'thriller': a term which is commonly used as a loose synonym for a *noir* or crime film has been extended to include the thrills of sex as well as suspense. Whereas the musical and the western began as terms of description based on the text's content, the terms 'erotic' and 'thriller' are also terms of response: the erotic thriller should thrill its viewers in a uniquely two-edged way, through narrative suspense and engagement, and through sexual delivery. Each component ('erotic' and 'thriller') is, then, more intimately bound to its other than a hyphen would allow (in 'erotic-thriller' the hyphen serves to separate as well as unite). This interplay between popular terms is reinforced by the fact that erotic thrillers are often referred to by popular journalists as 'suspense in suspenders'<sup>30</sup> films (or sometimes as 'tits and terror' films, a term which would also do service for a number of horror flicks; 'cops and copulation film' is also doing the rounds). Here, says the label, you will be erotically thrilled as well as criminally thrilled,

with the former (sex) taking precedence as long as the latter (suspense) is available to viewers who prefer to think of themselves as narratively – rather than sexually – buying into the film. Wrote *Empire* in 1994, ‘Gregory Hippolyte makes “erotic thrillers”, those top-shelf titles that pretend not to be sex films because they have ridiculous murder conspiracy plots between the shagging scenes’.<sup>31</sup> The term erotic thriller thus promises not just thriller plots, soft-porn spectacle, but an intimate marriage of the two – and somehow more than the sum of its parts. In the erotic thriller the thrills are *in* the sex, the sex drives the thriller action, but the more traditional sense of the term ‘thriller’ strings it all along. Sex and crime are often interdependent, such as in the genre staple when the cop fucks the suspect (in *Sea of Love* the cop’s partner asks him, ‘Should we dust your dick for prints?’). *B-noir*’s time-honoured (and cheap) strategy of deploying chiaroscuro lighting also weds one form to another, literally mapping the ‘look’ of *noir* onto sexual action, such as when the naked bodies of (suspect) Shannon Tweed and (cop) Gary Hudson are liberally striped by Venetian blind shadows in *Indecent Behaviour*. The more recent trend to ring the changes in genre labelling thus misses the opportunity provided by the use of Erotic, which is used both to describe and to promise. Distributors have begun to replace ‘Erotic’ with ‘Exotic’: for their DVD reissue *Sexual Malice* and *Body of Influence 2* were relabelled ‘Exotic Thrillers’. Having done so much to establish the term erotic thriller as a recognisable brand in the 1990s on video, a different but related term was needed for the new world of DVD release to give the same films a fresh twenty-first-century marketable edge. But unlike the selling of kinky lingerie (when exotic passes muster as erotic), the exotic thriller cannot promise its audience feelings of exoticism (whatever they may be – though in *Boogie Nights* porno-auteur Jack Horner says he makes ‘exotic pictures’). As an *erotic* thriller *Sexual Malice* can make powerful suggestions about response as well as content to its potential viewer. DTV auteur Jag Mundhra has suggested the ‘Erotic-Exotic’ as a new marketable development of the earlier form (see interview below, p. 324), trading on elements of travelogue and spectacle which have characterised his Indian-set features.

It may, then, seem that at times in this book I play fast and loose with genre. I read the erotic thriller as a fluid, often hybrid genre, perhaps at its ‘purest’ in the most formulaic DTV examples, bleeding into and out of adjacent forms such as classic *noir*, neo-*noir*, porn, the woman’s film, serial killer and horror films, and the auteur-led art-film. It may also be that film historians will ultimately frame the erotic thriller as a production cycle rather than a fully paid-up genre. Krutnick defines a cycle as ‘a short-term attempt to rework a proven success’ (1991: 12). The parallel histories of mainstream and DTV erotic thriller production do look rather like production cycles linked by proximity under a wider generic umbrella, but a more convincing example would be films such as the female revenge story which sprang up in the wake of *Fatal Attraction*, or the (related) killer nanny psycho-sexual-thriller which sprang up in the wake of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. The erotic thriller must be distinguished from this

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in that its variants are less disciplined, more prone to further hybridisation, and have bled into forms such as the woman's film or the TV serial. I also use some terms interchangeably with the term 'erotic thriller', largely because this generic cycle is nothing if not fluid and hungry to cross-breed with adjacent genre tendencies, creating such variations as erotic melodramas, sex-musicals and sex-romances. In chapter 2 I discuss films which range across the sexually-driven or sexually-explicit spectrum from *Jagged Edge* to *Body of Evidence* to *Guilty as Sin*. If pushed into bald categorisation I might call each of these a courtroom drama. But the central focus of each is sex crime, sexual culpability, erotic implicatedness and guilt; the narratives focus on a *homme* (or a *femme*) *fatal(e)*, seducing and exploiting the fall-girl or guy. It is much more useful to read these films in terms of the cinematic representation of sexual rather than legal practice, and to read them off and against each other rather than, say, against *The Juror* or *Twelve Angry Men*. It is also far more productive to read Joe Eszterhas (writer of *Jagged Edge* and the similarly inflected courtroom drama *Music Box*) in the context of *noir* novelist James Cain than to compare *Jagged Edge* to the legally obsessed adaptations of John Grisham.

Yet happy as filmmakers might be to feed off any and every genre influence, writers often reflect this as a critical confusion, which itself tells a story about genre. A good example of how this bears on the reading of a distinct text is found in the case of *Basic Instinct*. A film's failure to fit neatly into place is often what makes it most interesting for genre analysis (it is this that has kept the *film noir* debate going for so long). In the case of neo-*noir* films, their generic eclecticism has been read almost solely in terms of their postmodern relationship to *noir* itself; Fredric Jameson's early discussion of *Body Heat* as a nostalgia film is perhaps responsible for this all-pervasive notion that deployment of multiple generic techniques is primarily meaningful as stylistic pastiche, a nostalgia of film history (as well as – for Jameson – a more serious incapacity in 'dealing with time and history' [1983: 117]). More straightforwardly, 'noiring'<sup>32</sup> makes sense as marketplace strategy: *noir* sells, particularly when used in conjunction with (and in justification of) sex. *Basic Instinct* has also been vulnerable to this approach. Arguably the most written about erotic thriller of all, both the scandal of its release and the slippery nature of its material have made it attractive to academic and journalistic writers alike. *Variety* called it 'grade-A pulp fiction' and an 'erotically charged thriller', the UK's *Financial Times* called it a 'sexual aggression thriller' (Andrews 1992: 21), whilst Chris Holmlund read it as 'a thriller cum soft core porn film, containing elements of both the slasher and rape-revenge subgenres of horror' (1994: 32). In production Paul Verhoeven was happy to call it an erotic thriller, but, as my interview below evidences, he deployed *noir* and anti-*noir* strategies as an exercise in intellectual play as well as generic branding. It is also true that the genres which the erotic thriller 'participates in' – *film noir*, neo-*noir*, thrillers, women's films, comedies, action-adventure and dramas about the sex industry – are themselves unstable. I now want to turn to the two genres which feature most prominently in the

erotic thriller's ancestry: pornography and *noir* (which itself has fed or bled into neo-*noir*), both of which bring with them their own bank of iconography and audience expectation.

*Underwear USA: From Film Noir to Erotic Thriller*

Somebody has to die.

Crime writer Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*

In many ways, the video or blockbuster 'erotic thriller' is the direct descendent of *film noir*: *Body Heat* (and any number of subsequent erotic thrillers) explicitly references *Double Indemnity*, *Jade* replays elements of *The Lady from Shanghai*, and both *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) and *Diabolique* (1996) show the genre's propensity for sexing up a classic period original as a hotter softcore product (1946, and *Les Diaboliques*, 1955). Though a relatively chaste psychological thriller, the latter film was marketed as lesbian titillation for heterosexual men ('Two women. One man. The combination can be murder'); the inclusion of Sharon Stone as a murderous bisexual drew marked comparisons with her *Basic Instinct* character. The second *Postman* emerged in that *Body Heat* moment when the genre was gathering itself, though what most viewers remember of it is the steamy kitchen table sex-scene (and Jack Nicholson's alleged proclamation that he did it because he always wanted to be in a porn movie; there is, indeed, something beyond verisimilitude in the way he kneads Jessica Lange's crotch). The remakes (and there are others – see Schwartz 2001) remind us (if we needed reminding) that *film noir* was and is centrally about sex anyway, but the erotic thriller, in its confusions and fascinating self-betrayal, also shows *noir* to be at the heart of a certain form of (increasingly mainstream) pornography, albeit one overlit with the bright opulence of Californian primetime soap. Crucially, *noir* lends softcore an aura of psychic and narrative complexity, which justifies its sexual excesses to timid buyers. How ironic that a genre (*noir*) originally associated with the pulpiest of pulp fictions should now lend its new-found respectability to an even more debased form.

If ever any category was heterogeneous it is *film noir*, both as a body of films and in its critical reception. The sheer promiscuity of the term is astonishing. It is no wonder that feminist critics have found it so seductive; not only does it celebrate the bad girl in its images, it is itself a 'bad girl' category which has become all things to all critics, refusing fixed definitions along the way. For Elizabeth Cowie, the term is a critical fantasy which meets a need for genre writers:

Unlike terms such as the 'western', or the 'gangster' film, which are relatively uncontroversial . . . film noir has a more tenuous critical status. This tenuousness is matched by a tenacity of critical use, a devotion among *afi-*

*cionados* that suggests a desire for the very category as such, a wish that it exist in order to ‘have’ a certain set of films all together. Film noir is in a certain sense a fantasy. (Cowie 1993: 121)

Yet as psychoanalysis has suggested, to say that something is a fantasy is not to say that it isn’t real, but that it is – to paraphrase Juliet Mitchell – ‘real as fantasy’ (1984: 299). In this case *noir* functioned first as an interpretative structure: perhaps the one thing that is ‘known’ about it is that it is a critical rather than an industrial category. Critics have variously described it as a mood, a style, a movement and a perspective. Generally associated with a series of films made between 1941 (*The Maltese Falcon*) and 1958 (*Touch of Evil*) (though this periodisation is disputed), it is known for its presentation of the alienated city, a symbolically coded ‘look’ which through its use of high-contrast, low-key lighting and disorienting cinematographic styles, draws parallels between unsettled ways of seeing and uncertain moral positions. *Film noirs* are often, though not always, crime films. Their exploitation of sex may be central; indeed, early French critics, who first gave *film noir* its name, identified the erotic in *noir*, the obsessive forms which its central sexuality took. Jean-Pierre Chartier, writes James Naremore, ‘suggested that the puritanical Breen Office had deflected the characters’ sexual motives into an “obsessive criminal fatality”’ (1998: 16). By 1978, nine years before Adrian Lyne’s film, James Damico had described the crux of *noir* as the hero’s meeting with a ‘non-innocent woman . . . to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted’ (1996: 103).

From the title down, the erotic thriller signals its debt to this *noir* of fatal attractions. *Noir* is as inherent in an erotic thriller’s marketing strategies as it is in its textual content, since in this sex/death combo it is death (or violence or thriller-suspense) which is the more ‘respectable’ pairing, the side of the genre mix which enables it to occupy the shelves of Blockbuster. The tag-line of the starry, \$26 million *Original Sin* is ‘Love is a killer’, echoing *Black Widow*’s ‘She mates and she kills’ and *Sea of Love*’s ‘In search of a killer, he found someone who’s either the love of his life . . . or the end of it’. *Cruising* gives this a gay spin: ‘Al Pacino is cruising for a killer’ (Fig. 2). DTV promotion reproduces – or perhaps initiates – this rhetorical pairing of sex and death: *Sins of Desire* offers ‘The height of Ecstasy. The depth of Murder . . .’; *Animal Instincts II* asks ‘Would you lie? Would you cheat? Could you kill . . . for love?’, whilst *Indecent Behaviour* tells us that ‘Sex this good is murder’. The Debbie Harry vehicle *Intimate Stranger* plays on arousal and aggression with ‘She just turned on the wrong guy!’ All of these *noirish* promises (a number of which could do brisk business for *Double Indemnity*, which would undoubtedly be marketed as an erotic thriller were it released today) are about sex as death, though only the DTVs are brazen enough to promise open explicitness (‘Sex can be an act of murder’, says Nick Cassavetes in *Body of Influence*). Clearly, these examples are prime fodder for cultural psychoanalysis; this is Eros-as-Thanatos thrown to the marketplace. Perhaps the death drive was never put to work in a more

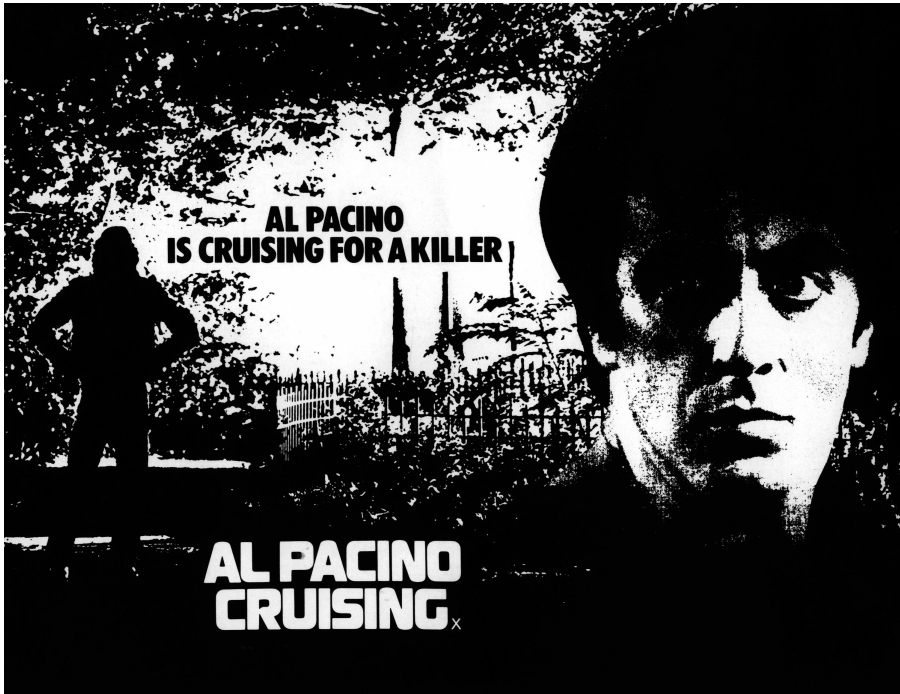


Figure 2: One of *Cruising*'s posters puts a gay spin on the genre's heated mix of sex and death. Lorimar/The Kobal Collection.

debased form than this. Foster Hirsch, however, reads all this sexy death in a very historically-specific way, as a counter-erotic message about unsafe sex – ‘the traditional link in noir narratives between sex and catastrophe is no longer merely symbolic or moralistic’ [1999: 9] he writes, before attributing the success of the erotic thriller to the AIDS crisis: ‘erotic thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s are metaphors for the dangers of sex in the time of AIDS. A simmering offstage “noise,” like World War II in 1940s noir, AIDS is a significant structuring absence’ (ibid.: 188–9). Thus whilst classic *noir* sex-crime films are underpinned by historical trauma, contemporary erotic thrillers are underpinned by sexual catastrophe.

Much of this fatal sexuality is focused on the figure of the *femme fatale*, a *film noir* stalwart and manipulative dominatrix into whose trap the duped hero falls. A number of key *noirs* were based on hardboiled thriller novels, and in particular the men and women of James M. Cain’s work gave *noir* its prime sexual icons, established through the films of Cain’s novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity* and *Mildred Pierce*. Michael Walker sees the Cain story as paradigmatic because of its focus on ‘the femme fatale [as] the key figure who lures/tempts/seduces the hero into the noir world’, ensuring that ‘the hero becomes a “victim” of his own desires’. For Walker, the

Cain male is 'the hero [who] becomes so obsessed sexually by a woman that he is persuaded to murder her husband, and the *noir* world which he enters is psychological rather than physical, characterised above all by corrosive guilt and the fear of discovery' (1992: 12). The first shot of Tay Garnett's *Postman* is of a sign outside *femme* Cora's diner, reading 'Man Wanted'; Frank (John Garfield) becomes the wanted man both sexually and criminally. This duped male is still with us, prototype also for Willem Dafoe in *Body of Evidence*, Peter Berg in *The Last Seduction* or Ed Harris in *China Moon*, as well as Jack Nicholson in the *Postman* remake and William Hurt in *Body Heat*. As the low-budget counterpart of these characters, Will Griffith in *Night Eyes* (the ubiquitous DTV star Andrew Stevens) says at the moment he grasps his own ignorance, his own danger and just how deep in the *femme fatale*'s trap he is caught, 'Someone either tried to kill me or frame me – I can't figure out which'. If 1990s *noir* is primarily a (postmodern) quotation from a (modernist) 1940s source, this male figure, along with his female antagonist, is its clearest reference-point: John Orr sees the plight of the fall-guy as 'pre-ordained as much by film history as by plot' (1998: 210). In Part One of this book I will be discussing this fall-guy more fully, as sex-object and as masochistic figure to which Michael Douglas returns in *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* and *Disclosure*.

The *femme fatale*, for Walker, occupies a range of positions in a continuum of deadliness, from ruthless killer to sympathetic if sexualised heroine – the good-bad girl I will discuss in chapter 2. The contemporary erotic thriller trades in femininities positioned across the range of these possibilities, from the extremes of deadly sadism to a more sympathetic position of sexual self-discovery – Orr also sees the 1990s *noir* woman as ambivalently oscillating between aggressive competitiveness and exultant victimhood (1998: 211). Rarely is she an entirely reprehensible spider-woman; if she is deadly she is also funny (Linda Fiorentino in *The Last Seduction*), or poignantly tragic (Madeleine Stowe in *China Moon*, or Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*, sitting on a tropical beach staring blankly at her losses). More often, this neo-Cainian *femme* has female friends, understandable motives or is an action-heroine-investigator who herself refuses to be duped. Steve Neale has traced the *femme fatale*'s ancestry through a much wider range of films and types, including the 'Inscrutable Female', 'The Evil Woman' and 'murderous ladies';<sup>33</sup> the female forms played out in the contemporary erotic thriller have a multifarious genetic heritage. Stephen Farber's 'Bitch Goddess' would also need to be added to this list. The Bitch has taken on popular currency more recently with the publication of Elizabeth Wurtzel's flimsy but widely publicised celebration of the icon, *Bitch* (1998), followed by *The Bitch Rules* and Camille Paglia's *Vamps and Tramps*. The Bitch has become ever more explicitly sexualised in her passage from *noir* to pomo/porno/neo-*noir*, now not only an exocitised formation of desperate – and excluded – avarice, but achieved pleasure in a position of presumed control over the Symbolic. Whether or how she is a figure of and for post-feminism is central to most writings on films such as *Basic Instinct*, and to this study.

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The erotic thriller is however only selectively neo-*noir* and only partly a crime film; a useful identification text is Charles Derry's *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock* (1988). Of the six categories of thriller which Derry identifies, four are useful here. For instance, what Derry calls 'the thriller of murderous passions, organized around the triangular grouping of husband/wife/lover' (1988: 72) might describe *A Woman Scorned*, *Poison Ivy* and its sequels or *Sexual Malice*. Derry's chapter on this begins with a lengthy quotation from *Body Heat*. The 'thriller of acquired identity', which is 'organized around a protagonist's acquisition of an unaccustomed identity, his or her behaviour in coming to terms with the metaphysical and physical consequences of this identity, and the relationship of this acquisition to a murderous plot' (1988: 175) describes a number of erotic thriller twin or *doppelgänger* films, including James Dearden's *A Kiss Before Dying* and Tom Berry's *Twin Sisters*, and the Hippolyte films *Mirror Images* and *Mirror Images II*. *Noir's doppelgängers* are legion, from the two Albert Dekkers in *Among the Living* (1941), through the two Olivia de Havillands in *The Dark Mirror* (1946) to the two Bonita Granvilles in *The Guilty* (1947). In *A Kiss Before Dying* Sean Young plays both the murdered twin, Dorothy, and the investigating twin, Ellen; Matty sacrifices her lookalike in an elaborate murder-fraud plot in *Body Heat*, whilst in the first *Mirror Images* Delia Sheppard plays sexual and repressed twin sisters Shauna and Kaitlin, the good sister taking the place of the bad. In the sequel, Shannon Whirry plays another set of good and bad twins, but after the bad twin's (faked) death the good twin begins to question her own identity. This is a doubling which liberates, whereby one woman might fetishistically shadow her mirror-image. The twin theme is potent enough for Carl Reiner to incorporate it into his parody, *Fatal Instinct*. For reasons of sexual psychosis or duplication the erotic thriller also trades in situations in which a woman finds herself sexually vulnerable because she is foreshadowed by her (now dead) lookalike. In *Sliver*, for instance, Carly (Sharon Stone) 'replaces' a murder victim who could be her clone, whilst the heroine of De Palma's *Femme Fatale* takes over (or saves, depending on which part of the film you're viewing) the life of her double.<sup>34</sup> *Basic Instinct's* use of doubling is more characteristically *noir*, with female replication used to underpin women's demonism. Catherine Tramell's familiars, Roxy and the older Hazel, all look similar. Lynda Hart notes that 'All three women are of similar build, have long blond hair, and manifest the stereotypical physical attributes of upper-class white women. The threesome resonates with the doubling effect that is characteristic of the lesbian as autoerotic/ narcissistic' (1994: 129). The copycat behaviour between Elizabeth (Jeanne Tripplehorn) and Catherine (Stone) through which one dyes her hair and dresses like the other, also constitutes for Hart a 'diabolical doubling'. This is not unlike the other-replication which takes place between 'bunny-boiler' Jennifer Jason Leigh and her victim Bridget Fonda in *Single White Female*. Jag Mundhra's reincarnation erotica *Monsoon* and *The Perfumed Garden* puts a different spin on this, featuring contemporary multi-

racial couples replaying the sexual Romeo and Juliet sagas of ancient forebears, with doubled identities displaced across time, racial and cultural difference.

Derry also discusses 'the psychotraumatic thriller', which 'is organized around the psychotic effects of a trauma on a protagonist's current involvement in a love affair and a crime intrigue. The protagonist is always a victim – generally of some past trauma and often of real villains who take advantage of his or her masochistic guilt'. Derry cites *Body Double* (1984) as a psychotraumatic thriller, but various 'Out of the Past' films in which a *femme fatale* manipulates a hero through knowledge of his past could also be included here, such as *Body Heat*, *The Last Seduction* or *Body Shot*. Finally, Derry's 'thriller of moral confrontation' describes erotic thrillers which blur as well as distinguish the moral ground between villain and hero/heroine. Any number of erotic thrillers feature attraction, sex and clearly drawn similarities between criminal (or suspect) and his or her pursuer/detective/victim: the juxtaposition of sex and danger on which these films rely so heavily is often played out in a sex-scene between good girl and bad guy, or vice versa, the moment of highest erotic charge being also the moment of most extreme moral culpability. *Cruising*, *Bodily Harm* and *Love Crimes* all deploy this motif. Yet useful as Derry's categories are, they must be taken as basic templates which an individual film will deploy but to which it will only intermittently stay faithful. Perhaps the reason that a film like *Basic Instinct* was so successful as a thriller is because it combined a number of tropes: a film of undeniably murderous passions, it flirts with the acquired identity issue, Douglas is manipulated by Stone because of what she knows of his cocaine-fuelled and trigger-happy past, and the confrontation between Douglas and Stone is moral as well as sexual – one of a long line of 'detective as the flip-side of villain' films. In a number of DTVs this becomes a scenario extended through an undercover theme: cops masquerading as hookers, strippers, models, with the new, sexually performing self as the underside of the repressed, everyday one.

A similar proto-Proppian character taxonomy is enacted by Foster Hirsch in his study of *film noir*. Here Hirsch classifies *noir* protagonists into three types: investigators, victims and psychopaths (1981: 167), a model which was supplemented in his follow-up study of neo-*noir*. Whilst films like *Original Sin* or *Night Rhythms* feature all of Hirsch's types (Antonio Banderas or Martin Hewitt as investigator-victims; Angelina Jolie or Delia Sheppard as *femme fatale* psychopaths), *Black Widow* features a female investigator who desires and identifies with the *femme fatale*, whilst *Dressed to Kill* develops into a story in which a female investigator confronts a *femme fatale*, who is a man in drag. As in both of these cases, whilst Hirsch's victim-heroes are 'stained and transformed' (1981: 178) by 'a dark and capricious fate', the erotic thriller's female protagonist can be empowered by her encounter with the dark side.

Yet whilst the erotic thriller draws on some key *noir* tropes, the question of whether *noir* ever existed as a genre remains open. Richard Maltby prefers to see *noir* as 'a fluctuation in the more persistent genre of the crime film . . . its

specific characteristics could be related to the historical circumstances of the period 1945–55' (1995: 122). For Neale, *noir* 'as a single phenomenon . . . never existed. That is why no one has been able to define it and why the contours of the larger noir canon in particular are so imprecise' (2000: 173–4). In particular, Neale argues that writing on *noir* has tended to stress its hardboiled heritage rather than its relationship to Gothic romance, even though it is difficult to make a clear distinction between *noir* and the gothic women's film. Both forms

frequently centre on an element of potentially fatal sexual attraction; they stress the risks, emotional and physical, this may entail for the central protagonist; they lay a great deal of emphasis on the protagonist's perceptions, feelings, thoughts and subjective experiences; and they share the context of a culture of distrust. (ibid.: 164)

Some of these terms will become useful as I open up the different directions or emphases taken by the erotic thriller, which plays out *noir*'s multiple identities, including female Gothic. I want now to consider the erotic thriller as a branch of the much more certain generic category, neo-*noir*.

*Cops and copulation; censorship and classification*

You gotta decide if you wanna book me or fuck me.

Nora 'Hugs' Hugosian (Gina Gershon) in *Black & White*

In thinking about the generic ancestors of the erotic thriller I have tended to privilege a thread running from the contested genre of *film noir*, largely because this is the genre most overtly acknowledged in the self-consciousness of the films themselves, and because of the erotic thriller's kinship to neo-*noir*. Indeed, a number of films I read as erotic thrillers are more commonly grouped by critics as neo-*noirs*, even when marketing and filmmakers say otherwise. The Hippolyte title *Object of Obsession* was, for instance, made by the dominant DTV production house Axis Films International and branded alongside its stablemates as an erotic thriller, yet one of the few published references to it calls it an 'unusually well-crafted neo-Gothic' (Rubin 1999: 177). This seems to be a prime example of how 'serious' critical recognition effectively renders examples of this discredited form more respectable by refusing (or forgetting) the industry-designated category 'erotic thriller', renaming favoured works with more esteemed academic categories such as neo-Gothic or neo-*noir*. 'Neo-*noir*' sells films to one kind of audience; 'erotic thriller' to another. Neo-*noir* is also written about by one sort of writer (academic), erotic thrillers by another (largely only by reviewers of schlock cinema on websites, or cult movie reviewers). Neo-*noir* has consumed gallons of scholarly ink in its dissemination, erotic thriller very little. Despite the significant overlaps and exchanges between the two forms, and