

## The Performing Cloth

This section will explore the erotic cloth in movement, describing the body hidden or absent. Here the cloth in its performative mode is used to indicate and evoke the erotic, implying what may be beneath it, or drawn away to reveal or expose. This is the cloth in momentum, used to transform: active, mobile and suggestive of the erotic. 62wds

***I will look at you through the muslin veils, I will look at you<sup>1</sup>.***

***Erotic Cloth echoes in film: as metaphor, as symbol and as romantic portent.***

This chapter addresses heterosexual attraction and the erotic as visualised through filmed cloth. Cloth may be given significance in these film because fabric is such basic material within our lives? We might ignore it because of its general functionality yet it surrounds us, covering us, soaking up excretions and retaining imprint and smell, both important elements of sex and consequently of life and death. If a filmmaker can exploit the subliminally referenced acknowledgement of sex through impregnated stained cloth, whether with blood, sweat, semen or other secretion and contrast this with for example, crisp, clean, pure sheets, the range of associated erotic and fetishistic experience together with a gamut of emotions associated particularly with love, can be brought into play. 'Eroticism is, of course, a personal experience, but that does not mean it cannot exist in the generalised world of the cinema. A film is an externalised utterance of the concept of a group of people, but it is also a concept in the mind of the individual viewer'<sup>2</sup>.

The films selected use cloth in role as as signifier and protagonist, integral to the story-lines of five films, four mainstream and one experimental; *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958), *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *Braveheart* (1995) and *MOI NON PLUS* (2015).

Abstract cloth imagery in film uses plot to animate and permit the function of emotive signifier. Cloth can create mood, atmosphere and indicate scene shifts, but with *context* it acquires narrative purpose. Cloth itself can become eroticised but only in conjunction with colour, form, sound and action. I shall analyse and discuss the role and function of cloth in the films. Particular items of clothing or pieces of cloth can denote aspects of the narrative, act as protagonists or focus on the abstract to suggest emotion and atmosphere and thus make the role of fabric integral to the film's denouement.

Despite their different dramatic genres and a production time span of over forty years, the films employ the same visual metaphors to imply similar ideas in a similar fashion. What they have in common is the personal.

The focus is on discreet instances rather than on general costume study. Cloth in various

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<sup>1</sup> Salomé to the Young Syrian in *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Collins, London & Glasgow, 1971, p.557

<sup>2</sup> Peter Webb, *The Erotic Arts*, Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1979. p.290

guises is revisited during the films, in a repetitive, additive fashion. In this way it forms an unspoken parallel with the movement of a weaving machine as it relays and portrays the relationship between matter (raw material) and product (length of cloth) sometimes with decorative detail. The focus on cloth and edited cross-cutting, lends cinematic thrust and a sense of continuity to the storylines without using speech to clarify phases of the plot, in fact, the fabric often binds the stories together. The array of emotions expressed by the actors find their aesthetic expression literally materialised in and through fabric, bound within the format of the film frame, the alternative rectangular weaving frame within which the action occurs. The erotic 'temperature' of the cloth is therefore in symbiosis with the overall atmosphere and context of the form. As stated what is considered erotic is an individual matter however, the dominant male gaze as defined by Mulvey when she wrote 'Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order', is naturally part of the agenda but not specifically the subject of this essay<sup>3</sup>. What is important here is what Freud called the process of scopophilia; the pleasure in looking, we can enjoy the look and activity of cloth as subject matter. It is precisely because of its ambiguity that cloth can be deployed as adjunct to all manner of sexual practice, whether defined by lingerie as interpreted as part of heterosexual sex play or not.

The sexual nature of erotic cloth can be connoted by a variety of interlinked ideas and interpretations, these reflect personal responses within the boundaries and privacy of sexual practice. Thus definitions regarding the erotic as embodied in cloth are reflexively loose, ambiguous and fluid. One can only suggest, make analogies and draw parallels in order to expand on the matter, the stuff or *stoffa* of sex. *Stoffa* in Italian can mean both stuff and textile, paralleling all manner of other word puns associated with sex and stuffing.

The personification of gathered and then explosively active cloth as orgasmic abandon is one aspect of erotic cloth, another can be evoked by the sexual allure and suggestive feel of translucent sheer silk furthermore the notion of cloth as ligature within sexual game play alludes to danger by noting formalised sadomasochistic role play<sup>4</sup>. This could further be related to the ancient practice of foot binding yet another form of sexual control, whereby the female feet were bound tightly from birth, stunting foot growth in order to create the erotic 'lotus' foot.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) - Laura Mulvey  
Originally Published - Screen 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18 <http://www.jahsonic.com/VPNC.html> p.2.

<sup>4</sup> In *Ai no corrida* the kimono belt is used in strangulation in order to intensify sexual pleasure. Shibari is the contemporary name for Kimbaku, the Japanese art of knot bondage, another fabric related sexual role play activity.

The cloth used to wrap around and pull back and forth in the tug of war of sexual encounter emerges as eroticised and fetishised by these actions, becoming an implicit, active yet dumb performer within the sexual dynamic.

There is a danger inherent in explaining the pace and symbolic resonance of film as ideas penetrate visually far faster than the written or spoken word and thus to expand on what one sees can reduce impact. However by eliding similar visual statements one can assess their collective power to communicate. Because of the ambiguous nature of material itself, general themes can be useful in drawing attention to and focussing on similar effects. In these five films it is precisely this communality of inference that gains our attention, as cloth is akin to and connected with skin and touch, it unites a series of hints and implications that together give weight to these effects.

Film can work better than other media in expressing erotic subtleties because the moving image can easily show and imply touch and the physical rhythm of sex. However the cloth examples discussed are relatively 'chaste', presenting an antidote to the explicit nature of pornography<sup>5</sup> be it hard or soft core. What is a 'chaste' example of cloth and can this exist? Historically non-machined cloth has hands all over it, from gathering raw material (for example shearing sheep) through spinning, weaving, cutting and fashioning. The examples in these films stand out as the specificity of the individual experience portrayed is augmented and personalised via the reiterated cloth references. Reverberations pulse through wrapping, embroidery, blood, colour, history and presence, these differently affected and active fabrics influence the unfolding of the films.

In *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse dance a solo together, on a huge open set as part of a separate 'vignette-subplot' to the main story. A wind machine animates a length of white cloth that is used as metaphor for the 'pure' dance of ballet, binding them in an erotic embrace of mutual attraction and love of dance itself. They pretend their intimacy and then despair on separation.

Simultaneous mutual love and love of dance is manifest by the entwining of billowing abstract cloth. The two are bound together during the entire sequence by the white, diaphanous active swathe of moving cloth, and they pulse apart when the choreography dictates. This cameo of enacted physical attraction is subsumed into the sexuality of the dance and further explored by the presence of the entwining, undulating cloth as the third component that represents an active sublimation of their emotional framework, all of which is underpinned by the accompanying musical score. As this sequence happens in parenthesis, it reinforces the role of Charisse as the 'other woman', a dancing girl, not the apple pie girl that the Kelly character is really 'in love' with. Charisse had played a similar role in the first subplot set in New York, where she was type cast as the gangsters' moll, replete with black net tights and in envious green silk. In this instance there is no hiding

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<sup>5</sup> Pornography also uses cloth and the behaviour of material to inject suggestive frisson to sexual proceedings with the portrayal of different kinds of lingerie coming a close second.

or pretending that she is an embodiment of sex on (very long) legs.



The cloth here is actively performative, behaving like a three dimensional serpentine line<sup>6</sup> and becoming a third character in relation to their intense duo; snowy white and suggestive of a proverbial Biblical snake<sup>7</sup>. This is no lightweight and fluttering chiffon nor a ballet tutu but a muscular adjunct to their jazz dance; all sinew and twisted energy. The coiling fabric in their dreamlike tango, arcs and billows in relation to their constant dance negotiations. Prolonged sexual foreplay is conjured through the dance where the sexual tone is set by these physically fit, seductive, handsome, excellent dancers. Their electric attraction is heightened by the tensions displayed in the erotic movement of the white cloth that envelopes, ruffles, tangles, distances, binds and bonds them together. The length of cloth suggests the pure white linen of a bedroom storm while simultaneously and coyly avoiding this. It symbolises the push and pull of coitus yet refrains from showing sweat and remains throughout as a mutable potential between them, a castrated interloper or eunuch conductor. This is the key to the eroticism of this essential third protagonist within their duet, whose role is one of titillation, palpitation and mounting excitement. The fabric, by nature of its innately ambiguous form, connotes a perfect subsidiary presence; energising the dance, punctuating the undulations of the dancers, gathering and unfurling and being set free in a quasi-orgasmic rhythmic wave. But the sequence is a vignette; this sexual activity is self-contained, a seemingly auto-erotic secret that, like a virus, can infect but remain hidden. As a subplot there is no pressure to include it in the suspended belief of the ‘reality’ of the story and it can function independently from the

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<sup>6</sup>Hogarth’s serpentine line; *the line of beauty and grace*, was essential for compositional success according to the theories he expressed in *The Analysis of Beauty*, See also Chapter ?

<sup>7</sup> Symbolising the Devil and temptations of the flesh.

rest of the film<sup>8</sup>. That the cloth that they perform with is sari-like permits another analogy with Indian film. During her discussion about the inception of a western erotic gaze objectifying the female within the Hindu musical, Natalie Sarrazin pinpoints this specific change in the film *Khalnayak* (1993) citing the song *Choli ke Piche kya hai* ('What is under my blouse') also in *Pardes* (1997), the heroine 'is positioned for us in a soft pornographic pose as the wind blows through her hair and teases at her dress'.<sup>9</sup> These pivotal moments galvanise a connection between the genres and the underlying eroticism communicated through cloth in both Hollywood and Bollywood musicals. Further, it is the common aspect of dance that liberates the body advertising and embracing its natural sexuality yet all the while displaying it within the 'chaste' context of a 'parental guidance' approved viewing. Sarrazin's discussion of courtship songs makes another useful comparison as it focusses on the isolation of the pair that we may better zone in on their complicity.

During *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958), different types of cloth impinge on the narrative communicating a range of subtle hierarchies relating to sexuality, work and gender. The practice of foot binding is used as an entree into another culture, revealing it as an arcane yet still desirable practice despite enforced societal changes. Similarly, the focus on a luxurious and precious gifted silk cheongsam alludes to a life of wealthy leisure and entertainment. Both are fabric related, intertwined in their references to sex (romantic or other) and both underpin the narrative. The story is set Yang Cheng, China, the birthplace of silk production in the turbulent years preceding WWII and despite being filmed in the Welsh Snowdonian hills, it has an authentic charm. The exoticism suggested by this Chinese backdrop might imply some predilection towards the eroticism of 'the oriental'<sup>10</sup>, indeed a rampant colonialist missionary zeal is portrayed. However, couched within this atmosphere is an interesting expose of the mixed blood racism that Lin Nan (played by Curt Jurgens) suffered as a child. His Dutch father took him and his novelty 'beautiful Chinese mother' back to Holland, but when she became an embarrassment he divorced her and sent her home. This obviously wounded him psychologically as later he asks Genai (Ingrid Bergman), "Would it offend you to be loved by a man of another race?" the night she wears her red cheongsam, she is "honoured" to accept him. It is Lin Nan who had originally arrived in the province to reinforce the foot binding law programme "aimed at the equality of women".

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<sup>8</sup>The pure dance of ballet is presented as an abstract form different from that of contemporary jazz. This also happens in the dancing duo Astaire/Charisse's *Silk Stockings*, (1957) another dance film, directed by Rouben Mamoulian. This musical remake of *Ninotchka*, includes a risqué underwear scene and a trailer introducing this text: 'The most beautiful legs in the world belong to the girl in silk stockings'.

<sup>9</sup> *Celluloid Love Songs: Musical "Modus Operandi" and the Dramatic Aesthetics of Romantic Hindi Film* Natalie Sarrazin, *Popular Music*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Oct., 2008), pp. 393-411. Published by: Cambridge University Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212399>

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* was published in 1977, attitudes prior to this might be termed 'unreconstructed'.

Why should the story of a missionary in China be relevant to the theme of erotic cloth? On the surface this benign 'feel good' vintage tale contains a strong feminist message tempered by polite romanticism, featuring many orphans who are the natural by-product of sexual encounters of whatever kind. In fact one of these; "Sixpence" is adopted from a woman who is type cast as a prostitute, sporting flash jewellery and a winning if crooked smile. Invited to remain in China as the local "Foot inspector" (by the local Mandarin played by Robert Donat in his last film role) Genaii's character must change public perception and so implement a law forbidding female foot binding; a practice originating with dancers at the Chinese court in the late tenth Century that came to reinforce the hierarchy of the class system. Although strange sounding, this method of imposing form onto the body by restraining growth occurs in different cultures throughout time. In China bound feet became desirable to aspirational families and popular for wealthy women who could afford not to work. Slippers for the tiny, crescent-moon shaped feet (typically four inches or ten centimetres long) were known as lotus shoes; bound 'petal' feet became more prized than facial beauty and essential for a good marriage. The Chinese believed that women obliged to walk with the small uncertain steps that bound feet incurred, signalled the development of strong vaginal muscles that would make for more pleasurable sex<sup>11</sup>. This is reminiscent of present day cosmetic surgery where vaginas are tightened for similar male gain and or the enlarged penis hailed as the most desirable appendage. 'Bondage' is a loaded term sexually, with roles for both the sadist and masochist, referring to foot bondage, the range of inference also includes power play and dominance. The small feet were fetishised, impeded movement and thus female independence was curtailed with women forced to stay in or near the home. We witness a seminal moment in the film, when an old woman helps Genaii to convince the women to unbind their feet. This was dangerous to do after a lifetime of deformity, but with an example by an elder, more women agree to refuse the practice. Although on the surface far from erotic, the very act of unbinding describes a release in three dimensions and with that a sense of relaxation coupled with excitement for having broken through the status quo. In this basic way the parallel can be drawn between this event and that of a woman letting down her hair, abandonment is signalled. The overarching implication is about a step towards equality, if not quite in the bedroom at least on the ground, that is until the freed up women start to wear stilettos.

By contrast in the film, Genaii is independent, emancipated and wears ordinary working clothes, which is why, when presented with the red silk cheongsam in a lacquered presentation box, the luxury item makes such an impact as a different kind of material object. It heralds her future sexuality by drawing attention to her dormant self view as asexual<sup>12</sup>. Red in this context is lucky and is traditionally used in Chinese wedding clothes so that

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<sup>11</sup> Amanda Foreman, Smithsonian Magazine, February 2015. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-footbinding-persisted-china-millennium-180953971/#LpWW36twFwDi6WCV.99>

<sup>12</sup> "I'm not attractive in that way" she tells Lin Nan.

on this occasion, it also hints at her impending romantic, marital attachment. The gift is symbolic, purposely given to her as someone who purports no vanity and always wears a plain Chinese-type workers outfit of jacket and trousers. By contrast the brightly coloured cheungsam is made of fine silk, and so connects to the expensive raiment worn by the dancers who entertain the group of VIP invitees at the special dinner organised by the Mandarin. Their act is enclosed behind stage curtains and they perform at the behest of the Mandarin. The lacquered box is red and intricately carved, heart shaped and opens like a clam to reveal the luscious red cheungsam. She takes it out and presses it to her body, enjoying the silken feel and the projection of how this will transform her. There are <sup>13</sup>shades of autoeroticism implicit in the gesture, her hands outline her form potentially echoing those of Captain Lin Nan. Later, when he finds this garment among the shattered ruins of the inn after the air raid<sup>14</sup> he also caresses it as if it was Genaii herself, making a fetish of it, not knowing then if she is alive or dead. Without her inside the dress making it come alive with movement, it becomes dead and lifeless as so might she be. The garment embodies the potential of their affair so pregnant with possibility, the sex teeters on the edge of these fabrics, ever present and alluded to but ever evasive and postponed. Wong Kar-Wai's film 'In the mood for love' (2000) offers a similarly allusive sexual commentary that is triggered by and revolves around the selection of erotically charged Chinese cheungsams worn by Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung). These are tight fitting, marvellously coloured and denote the passage of time by virtue of their difference. In her paper 'Pleats of the Matter, Folds of the Soul', Giuliana Bruno comments, 'the lovers' eventual erotic encounter - elusive, only ambiguously alluded to, and never shown - happens behind drawn curtains, an actual architecture of the fold. In ornate visual style, the camera tracks to caress the red curtains of the hotel lobby where the lovers are meeting. The curtains move in the wind. As the fabric creases, we can feel the ruffle of their bodies embracing. We feel the embrace, even if it did not happen.'<sup>15</sup> As with Genaii and Lin, the eroticism is all in the allusion.

F.Scott Fitzgerald's fiction of dysfunctional love unfolds during *The Great Gatsby* (1974) where cloth is used symbolically and with implied erotic twists, in two pivotal scenes. Firstly in the flying excesses of Jay Gatsby's expensive rainbow coloured shirts and then as a demarcation line, when the undulating semi-transparent pool curtains split open to

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<sup>13</sup> Much has been written in connection with French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, and the syndrome of erotomania named after him. He also wrote "Passion érotique des étoffes chez la femme" (1908) usefully discussed by Shera, Peta Allen. 2009. "Selfish Passions and Artificial Desire: Rereading Clérambault's Study of "Silk Erotomania"". *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (1). University of Texas Press: 158–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20542723>.

<sup>14</sup> Colonel Lin Nan is a military hero, like Wallace in *Braveheart*, who associates fashioned cloth with their loved one. Perhaps these instances also reflect and characterise the 'softer' (more feminine?) side of the male protagonists.

<sup>15</sup> G.Bruno, Pleats of Matter, Folds of the Soul, Log.No.1 (Fall 2003), pp.113-122. Pub.Anyone Corporation, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41764958>. Accessed: 21-01-2016

reveal Jay in swimming trunks, floating languidly on a lilo seconds before his murder. The lavish and stylish clothes combined with sumptuous interiors add to the dominant atmosphere of magnificent excess. The 1974 film opens with sailing boats, their great white sails, oozing wealth as they glide with sleek hulls across the bay in view of millionaires waterfront properties. Jay Gatsby is shown in an equally white suit and is characterised as the provider of luxuriously laden tables with pristine white cloths for parties "where men and girls came and went like moths". In the novel references to colour pepper the text, and this is reflected in both the 1974 and the 2013 films directed by Jack Clayton (screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola) and Baz Luhrmann respectively<sup>16</sup>. A third black and white film was made in 1949, starring Alan Ladd, directed by Elliott Nugent and a fourth silent film in 1927, the plethora of filmic interpretations (seven in total) testifies to the compelling nature of the story.

The complex love triangle of Daisy (Mia Farrow), her husband Tom (Bruce Dern) and Gatsby (Robert Redford) as narrated by Nick (Sam Waterston), operates on a number of levels throughout Fitzgerald's popular story. The texture, quality and variety of their clothes behave like pastel dabs of paint flitting across the landscape backcloth seeping into the atmosphere of the film throughout. A scene taken directly from the novel is of pivotal importance in the narrative and occurs in Gatsby's dressing room when Daisy reveals her shallow character through her glorification of his shirts. These quality garments represent money, privilege and ownership, much as they do in Renaissance portraits and testify to his worldly success. 'I've got a man in London who buys all my clothes, he sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season' says Jay as he throws the shirts disdainfully into the air and they fall around her in a rainbow coloured ring, Daisy buries her head in them and weeps, expostulating, 'I've never seen such beautiful shirts before'. This focuses our attention on her at the centre of the expensive colourful display. She adores shirts and her power lies in this pathetic riposte...Jay is too blinded by love to realise the poverty of her persona; nice shirts for her are the height of consumer power, the apogee of all wonders in the world and he as possessor of wealth and shirts, is therefore to be admired and coveted. This is also cloth as a sexual bargaining tool within the dynamic of competitive male posturing (does Daisy's husband have such exquisite shirts? Of course he does, but maybe not purchased in England and now that Jay has better ones, perhaps she can swap men?). Although at one remove from Jay's body, as these multi-coloured shirts rain down around her and she gathers them to her face inhaling deeply, they engulf rather than smother her with the essence of Jay<sup>17</sup>...they *are* Jay. After weeping into a peach pink shirt and then laughing she moves to the view at the window, 'I'd like to get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around'. She is enthralled and visibly moved in a way that does not occur in any other part of the film, as

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<sup>16</sup>Billy Wilder famously dismissed Luhrmann's version as being like 'Michael Winner directing Proust'.

<sup>17</sup> Shirts also play an important but differently nuanced part in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). After Jack Twist's (Jake Gyllenhaal) death, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) discovers their shirts in a cupboard, Jack's is revealed on a hanger encasing his own, their fabric and smell entwined. See also Chapter?



she admits that she wants to control him, she wants him now that he is rich. 'Rich girls don't marry poor boys' is the refrain that Jay has kept from their previous youthful encounter, now he is wealthy all is possible and she wants to get back in the game provoked it seems at last by the shirts. It is the setting free of the shirts from their ordered, neat, constricted piles that symbolises the possibilities of their doing likewise. The tightly ironed ('stiff shirts') are liberated in the kind of gesture only a rich man with many shirts could make. Someone will be there to pick them up again and tidy the disorder. They explode after years of repression and denial it seems, opening the way for Daisy and Jay to take up where they left off. The weeping is like the post orgasmic release of tension and this is palpable in Daisy's dry, suppressed, stuttering utterances that create a jumpy, staccato background soundtrack, her voice is constantly referred to in the text,<sup>18</sup> and the pink clouds of nirvana are where they are heading.

The theme of innocent sexual young love is reprised in the violent blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995). The recurring motif of William Wallace and his wife Murron's embroidered wedding band is used to add erotic pathos, purpose and pure sentiment to this re-invention of Scottish history. *Braveheart* is an epic historical war drama film directed by and starring Mel Gibson, who portrays the 13th-century warrior leading the Scots in a War of Independence against King Edward I of England. The story is based on Blind Harry's epic poem *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William Wallace*. The identity of massed tartan patterned kilts<sup>19</sup> versus the primitive and uniquely embroidered wedding band symbolically exchanged during the marriage ceremony, is connected to the potential joining of genetic strands and in opposition to the enforced English law of 'prima noctua': that could be described as rape by genetic invasion.<sup>20</sup> The decorated, homespun talisman becomes a fetish object, evolving like a character during the film and first appearing in connection with the thistle given to Wallace on the death of this father by Murron (played by Catherine McCormack) as a child. The thistle is returned to her when Wallace (now adult) comes home. He takes it out from within a safe hiding place next to his heart, beneath his tartan. We imagine the cloth warm and impregnated with his own musk. The secret wedding ceremony uses the ritual of exchange (usually rings) to symbolise union, here their hands are bound by the priest who ties them with this swatch of embroidered cloth. The same band falls to the ground after Murron's violent murder by the English lord. Picked from the ground, the recognisable but mud-

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<sup>18</sup> "It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again", F.Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 2001, Wordsworth Editions Ltd, p.8. First published in 1925.

<sup>19</sup> Which when seen 'en masse' as the Scottish rebels storm over the glens recalls and references Kurosawa's, *Ran* (1985); the material undulating as a uniformed cohort across the screen.

<sup>20</sup> This tradition was reinstated by Edward I as a method of quelling rebellion and diluting the Scottish gene pool. On the first night of marriage the local lord would take the bride to his bed to inseminate her prior to her husband.

died shred is imbued with the symbolism of their lovemaking<sup>21</sup> and now his rage and revenge. The cloth represents the untainted eroticism of their innocent young love, of sexual awakening, discovery and the awakening of the ideal orgasmic state, the bond of marriage and the idealised marital bliss leading to legalised, expected procreation. The fetishised cloth signifies a new physical and mental terrain altered by orgasm that is later tainted by death, secrecy, political power, loss, betrayal and torture - all of which can also be associated with hard porn. The piece of homespun reflects the narrative of a tumultuous life and at Wallace's visceral death drops bloodied from his hand, relinquished from his grip like the freedom he fought for, yet also ironically proclaiming his failure to secure his genetic sexual heritage. However this scrap of cloth also continues to symbolise the essence of the purity of innocent lovemaking and the potential for a cyclical renewal of hope, love and faith. Unfortunately the film relies on nostalgia to underpin what seems on the surface to be a tale of gallantry, true love and heroism.

In the last film there are no visible people. The focus is on abstract cloth and movement created by air currents and editing. The eroticism here, is suggested by the combination of coloured cloth in action and the spoken word that the viewer hears in tune with the created rhythm of the swathes of material it performs. The focus is on cloth that becomes eroticised itself through the narrative spoken text. 'A successful erotic film will stimulate the imagination as well as the emotions; it will inspire a sort of empathy; it will engage the viewer intellectually through a subtle form of artistic presentation. The 'skin-flick' maker aims at a short-lasting physical thrill, which has little to do with real eroticism.'<sup>22</sup>

Nicholas Poussin's image 'Nymph with Satyrs', (1627, National Gallery) would not have potency as an erotic painting were it not for the cloth being pulled up by the satyr. The tension created by this action embodied in the ruched white sheet where his left hand grasps the material is echoed by the nymph's own, her left hand index finger hovering just above her clitoris. This amounts to a still from a pornographic film, a plain air 'two on one' sex party with an extra cherubic onlooker. Of course painting influenced photography and those traditions in turn affected the visual tropes of filmmakers. When analysed, film sets forth a series of connected stills, however its real power over painting as a medium is movement as illustrated through linear narrative and the juxta-positioning of a series of still pictures<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> After their secret wedding there is a scene when the two make romantic, idyllic love en plein air, referencing Ken Russell's *Women in Love*, 1969, with Alan Bates (as Rupert Birkin) and Jennie Linden (as Ursula Brangwen) caught in soft focus naturism.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Webb, *The Erotic Arts*, Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1979. p.284

<sup>23</sup> See Laura Mulvey (2005). *Death 24 X A Second*. London: Reaktion Books. [ISBN 978-1861892638](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781861892638) for an in depth discussion of the relationship between the selected still and the moving image.

My film, *MOI NON PLUS* (2015), aims at spinning out a series of stills rather than using specific images to connect a storyline. The Ming Dynasty Chinese erotic poems are employed as verbal backbone, enriching the visual pace of abstract cloth and relating aspects of this consequently eroticised cloth to the 'Lotus' (bound) feet of the female lover and the lovemaking described poetically and suggestively through repetition, juxtaposition and movement. The title refers to the Birkin/Gainsbourg duet from 1969; 'Je'aime...moi non plus' ('I love you...me neither'), that caused a furore and was fabled to have been recorded live during sex, in a studio in Marble Arch (there is much heavy breathing). The film conjures three elements; William Hogarth's pornographic diptych, *Before and After*, 1731 (Collection: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), a voice over of poems translated by Robert van Gulik (that accompanied erotic colour prints of the late Ming period) and footage of cloth either at rest or in syncopation, including palimpsest footage of cloth in movement projected onto cloth in motion. This is an example of the voiceover text 'The hundred flowers blossom in the warm spring. The fish play in the placid water. The passion of the pair rises, and her feet in red-embroidered Phoenix shoes are high up in the air. Her legs stand as upright as a pair of round pillars of jade. The Jade Stick is planted firmly between - it has found its way into the Hidden Opening... Their sweat has dampened the red quilt and now her arms are indolently folded behind her head. But who can stay indolent while tasting such joy?' (number 8, *Spring in the Phoenix Tower*).

The question of the ambiguity of sexual power, cloth used as a vehicle in male and female arousal and the tensions surrounding the sexual act are the focus. The film avoids overt pornography and uses voice over to imply, through poetic suggestion, the 'variegated positions of the flowery battle', provoking thought about the complexity of arousal and the repetitive nature of sexual congress. The opening text, *The Bronze Man holding the Dew Basin*, refers to a large bronze statue of a man holding up a basin that belonged to Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. The bowl was meant to catch the morning dew that the Emperor used as an ingredient in the Elixir of Longevity. Referred to in the context of the original print and poem, the implication was that the vaginally ejaculated secretions containing the woman's Yin essence, could be collected by men wishing to attain the goal of immortality. The mixture would 'complete' their Yang essence. Here specific aspects of the intellectualisation of particulars peripherally related to the sexual act broadens the field for the different categories of fetishistic behaviour. It introduces new elements and levels within the patterns that in turn relate to the complexities of individual desire and satisfaction. That cloth is mute but can be the canvas for any type of projected eroticism (painted, photographed or filmed), permits it to be the perfect carrier (canvas) for all fantasies, be they suppressed, sublimated or liberated within this ambiguous realm of sexual excitement and desire.

Further aspects emerge; the quality of cloth and who does what with it to whom, or who experiences the doing or the receiving. The eyes can gauge the textural quality of fabric, however touch itself is necessary in order to complete the circuit of tactile experience. These physical encounters can be translated via the medium of sound as narrative and heightened by erotic suggestive poetry. This is the result of *MOI NON PLUS*, when the tempo of the spoken word reacts in tandem with the visual score of cloth 'in perfor-

mance'. Translucent silks and cottons, together with transparent cottons, wave in graceful action to the tune of saucy text. This poetry, though descriptive of the sexual act is still at one remove, analogies abound and these are eloquent even if interpreted as an extreme form of poetic licence. It is as if a screen exists between the reality of the action of intercourse and the way the flowery description evolves. The drapery is simultaneously the mutable barrier and the equivalent of the pumping action. Much like the bound feet referred to in the text that are exotic and erotic yet remain out of sight<sup>24</sup>, so here the drapery is eroticised, performs the action, whilst hiding any action from view.

All aspects of this complex web of eroticised cloth are intriguing and circuitous, analyses such as the initial threading process (akin to the vagina pierced by the penis) and the weaving of a story (similarly the production of a length of cloth) further embroider the suggestions. This skein of film telling a sexually titillating tale is one of procrastination, delayed gratification and desire held in a constant tremulous stasis like perennial tumescence as opposed to premature ejaculation or a mutually attained orgasm; therein lies the essence of erotic arousal and the elasticity of performative cloth.

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<sup>24</sup> The prints show the women having sex with their lotus slippers on. The actual bound feet were not considered attractive, it was the scale and the effect on the internal organs that was important.