

Sex Doesn't Sell—Nor Impress! Content, Box Office, Critics, and Awards in Mainstream Cinema

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Although it is commonly assumed that “sex sells” in mainstream cinema, recent research indicates a far more ambiguous relation between strong sexual content and financial performance. Moreover, such content may not be justified by either critical evaluations or movie awards. The literature even suggests that cinematic sex may reflect long-term gender biases in the film industry. The current study investigates these issues by addressing two questions. First, what is the impact of sex and other graphic content on the central criteria of cinematic success? Second, to what extent is such content contingent on the proportion of women engaged in filmmaking, whether as producers, directors, writers, or actors? Analyses of 914 films released between 2001 and 2005 indicated that sex and nudity do not, on the average, boost box office performance, earn critical acclaim, or win major awards. Although female involvement does influence a film's content, the only impact on the presence of sex and nudity is the proportion of women who make up the cast. Notwithstanding statistical complications, the best conclusion is that graphic sex neither sells nor impresses.

Keywords: sex, film, critics, awards, box office

Ang Lee's 2007 *Lust, Caution* contained lots of sex and violence, and especially a considerable amount of violent sex. As a result, it earned a NC-17 rating from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). This meant that “no children under 17” could be permitted to see the film in a domestic theater. Because such a rating severely restricts the potential audience during the theatrical release, Lee was under some pressure to edit out the most objectionable material. Believing that this material was essential to the work, he declined. Although Lee's decision was vindicated by film critics, who generally gave the work positive reviews, the consequences for the box office were much more negative. In particular, its U.S. domestic gross was less than five million, or less than a third of the film's production budget. Presumably, if Lee had cut out just nine minutes of sex and violence he could have obtained an R MPAA rating, and thereby make the product more profitable (Simonton, 2008). However, it can be argued that such a film would have had less artistic merit than the uncut version. Furthermore, it is conceivable that an R-rated version would have still done worse in the box office than a version rated PG-13.

Even if *Lust, Caution* represents an extreme case, it illustrates an important question with respect to cinematic aesthetics. What is the justification for strong sexual content in film? Does “sex sell”? If so, how does it compare with similarly intense violence? Might films be just as successful on financial or aesthetic grounds if they concentrated on extreme violence or some other form of “mature material”?

Several cinema observers have offered evidence that strong sexual content does not necessarily make big money in the movie theaters (e.g., Baehr, 2005; Day, 2004). Although surprisingly little scientific research has been directed at this specific issue, two studies published in 2004 cast some doubt on whether sex sells:

1. Thompson and Yokota (2004) scrutinized the box office for movies rated by both Screen It! (www.screen-it.com) and Kids-in-Mind (www.kids-in-mind.com). R-rated films rated by the MPAA for sex and language (relative to R-rated films with other combinations of rating reasons) did better on the authors' estimate of net earnings (U.S. domestic gross minus budget), but did not do better with respect to gross earnings. Nonetheless, violent content independent of sexual content was a much stronger correlate of box office success. Unfortunately, this investigation did not provide sufficient statistics to determine the relative magnitude of these effects.
2. Ravid and Basuroy (2004) examined the box-office consequences of sex and violence as indicated by a film's MPAA (www.mpa.org) descriptions. They found that sex and violence together or extreme violence sans sex did not produce excess returns but did enhance revenues, especially in the international market. Moreover, such films have more predictable returns: They less often lost money. Even so, none of these assets accrued to films that featured graphic sex in the absence of violence. And it remained true that G- and PG-rated films continued to outperform their R-rated counterparts (see also De Vany & Walls, 2002).

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In sum, it would seem that graphic sex alone doesn't sell a film.¹ Yet filmmaking is not just a business but also an art. Perhaps sex is inserted in films because it is thought that it accentuates artistic expression. Sex may be one of the core ingredients of the "art film" that resigns itself to earning a skimpy profit in the art-house circuit. Nonetheless, on theoretical grounds we might expect that highly graphic sexual content might actually detract from a film's aesthetic impact. For instance, according to the classic "Wundt curve" in experimental aesthetics, artistic appreciation should be a curvilinear inverted-U function of evoked emotional arousal (Berlyne, 1971). Perhaps the peak of that function lies at the level of arousal elicited by PG-13 material, whereas R and especially NC-17 sexual content could generate excitement beyond that optimal level. We also might speculate that arousal due to sex scenes, unlike that ensuing from scenes of violence, might induce the wrong kind of arousal—distracting rather than accentuating.

Theoretical expectations aside, the empirical research relevant to this issue is also ambiguous. Simonton (2005b) found that R-rated films tend to receive higher critical acclaim and to gather more awards and nominations in the dramatic categories (directing, acting, writing, and editing). Still, as said before, an R rating can be bestowed for any of a number of reasons, including "adult themes" without any vivid violence or sex. Holbrook (1999) more specifically singled out "objectionability" (largely but not exclusively aggressive content) and "exploitation" (largely but not exclusively sexual content); whereas these two characteristics were both negatively associated with HBO consumer ratings, the expert judgments (as measured by movie-guide ratings) were negatively correlated with objectionability but positively correlated with exploitation. Apparently, the only investigation to explicitly separate out sex and violence was that conducted by Ravid and Basuroy (2004). Besides financial performance these investigators looked at the total number of New York reviews a film received along with the proportion of the reviews that were positive. Films containing extreme violence not only received fewer reviews but also were less likely to garner positive reviews. These negative effects held no matter whether the very violent films were compared to all films or compared to just R-rated films. If the violence was less extreme, then these negative correlations diminished, sometimes to the point of no longer being statistically significant. When sex was combined with violence, the proportion of positive reviews was also reduced relative to other R-rated films. Finally, sexual content alone, in the absence of marked violence, had no effect on total reviews or the proportion of positive reviews, whether compared to just R-rated films or to all films (albeit the trends were all in a negative direction). Although Ravid and Basuroy (2004) did not examine movie awards, it is worth pointing out that the latter indicators of artistic merit are strongly associated with critical evaluations (Simonton, 2009a). Consequently, it does not seem likely that R-rated sex will increase the odds that a film will receive a major award or nomination.

All in all, it appears that sex may neither sell nor impress. This null effect might suggest that most cinematic sex is in fact gratuitous. Even worse, such sex may represent a pernicious manifestation of sexism in the workplace, and perhaps even count as sexual harassment with respect to those actors, predominantly female, who are obliged to perform sexualized content as a condition of employment. This conclusion would be consistent with other studies indicating that male and female actors do not have

equal status in the film industry, namely: (a) women are more likely to have been models before becoming actors whereas men are more likely to have had formal acting training before entering the business (Levy, 1989); (b) movie stars are far more likely to be male, and the few female stars are most prone to have shorter careers and to earn appreciably less money (Lehman, 1941; Levy, 1989); (c) outstanding performances by male actors are more prone to appear in award-winning films, whereas outstanding performances by female actors are more likely to be "ghettoized" in lesser films (Simonton, 2004a); (d) male actors have a much higher probability of being the protagonists in blockbuster movies (Beckwith, 2007; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005); and (e) as female actors get older they tend to perform in fewer and in increasingly unappealing roles (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997; Lincoln & Allen, 2004). So perhaps sex on the silver screen can be added to this list of gender-biased practices. This inference is further strengthened insofar as women are more likely to reveal more of their bodies than men (Greenberg, Siemicki, Dorfman, Heeter, Stanley, Soderman, & Linsangan, 1993). It is not impossible for an almost fully clothed man to engage in sexual acts with a totally naked woman!

Despite the usually marginal place of women in the film industry, women sometimes make important contributions to particular films. We may therefore inquire whether cinematic sex and violence are less noticeable for films in which women played a major part as producer, director, screenwriter, or cast. If such is the case, then it may be that the belief that "sex sells" was a self-justifying myth perpetuated at a time when men totally dominated filmmaking. Contemporary female filmmakers may be more inclined to reject this assumption and create films accordingly.

Hence, the goals of this inquiry are twofold. First, we wish to determine the relation between "objectionable" or "exploitive" content—especially sex and violence—and the three primary cinematic success criteria: box office performance, critical assessments, and major movie awards (Simonton, 2009b). Can graphic sex enhance success by one or more of these standard criteria? Second, we want to examine the relation between this content and the extent to which women are prominently involved in making a given film. Do men and women make different kinds of cinematic products? Is extreme sex and violence a preoccupation of male filmmakers?

Although the main emphasis of this inquiry is cinematic sex, that aspect of a film's content cannot be fully appreciated without comparing its influence with other types of potentially objectionable material, especially violence. These comparisons will permit us to discern whether sexual content has different artistic and financial repercussions relative to other strong content that also might earn a film an R rating from the MPAA.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 914 fiction films (870 live and 44 animated) released from 2001 to 2005, inclusively. Documenta-

¹ Although Anast (1967) found that "eroticism" (e.g., "A young couple walking romantically through a beautiful park; a young couple kissing," p. 87) correlated positively ($r = .18$) with film attendance, eroticism back then, shortly after the Hays Code was set aside in 1966 (Medved, 1992), probably bore little resemblance to sex and nudity in films today.

ries, standup comedy films, and rereleases were omitted.² Each film in the sample was selected because it had detailed content ratings available on Screen It! (www.screenit.com), as will be discussed shortly. Although these 914 films do not include all of the films released in this 5-year period in North America, they do represent the bulk of the films that were widely distributed in mainstream theaters. To put the sample size in perspective, the average of about 183 films per year for this inquiry exceeds the 58 per year in Ravid and Basuroy (2004) and the 106 per year in Thompson and Yokota (2004). In short, the sample is more extensive than those in comparable studies.

Three sets of variables were defined: criteria, predictors, and controls.

Success Criteria

The 914 films were assessed on the following three criteria of cinematic success:

1. *Box office.* All financial data were taken from the Internet Movie Database, the most extensive website devoted to film (IMDb; www.imdb.com). Although figures were most often reported in dollars, these were converted into millions of dollars. U.S. domestic gross was available for all 914 films in the sample ($M = 46.95$, $SD = 61.55$, range 0.02 to 436.47). However, because long-term receipts depends on the world market, two additional measures were also defined: U.K. gross was available for 671 films (in millions of pounds sterling, $M = 5.44$, $SD = 8.98$, range 0.02 to 65.30) and non-U.S. world gross for 300 films ($M = 74.55$, $SD = 107.74$, range 0.34 to 741.86). Production costs or budget were also available for 873 films ($M = 41.94$, $SD = 36.63$, range 0.07 to 207.00; again, in millions of U.S. dollars). The latter data enable us to compute a rough indicator of net returns for the U.S. market, namely, U.S. gross minus budget ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 52.18$, range -174.345 to 340.61). Although this measure follows Thompson and Yokota (2004), it is only approximate because it does not include promotion and advertising costs. Yet the approximation is reasonable insofar as P&A expenses correlate strongly with production costs ($r = .75$, according to Prag & Casavant, 1994).

Because all financial variables except net returns exhibited highly skewed distributions, with a long upper tail, they were subjected to a logarithmic transformation that rendered the distributions more approximately normal. It is noteworthy that U.S. gross correlates .82 with U.K. gross and .84 with world gross, suggesting that foreign and domestic tastes do not differ in any really substantial manner. So they could very well concur regarding the impact of sexual content.

2. *Critical evaluations.* Plucker, Holden, and Neustadter (2008) have shown that the assessment of film critics have excellent psychometric characteristics, including a roughly normal distribution and a strong consensus (see also Boor, 1990). Of the various options available, recent research has focused on two alternative measures (e.g., Simonton, 2005a; 2009a). The first is the Metacritic score (www.metacritic.com) that takes critical reviews from over two dozen different publications, converts them to a 0–100 scale, then creates a weighted average of whatever reviews are available (minimum six, maximum 30). These scores were obtained for all 914 films in the sample ($M = 50.55$, $SD = 17.76$, range 6 to 94). According to Plucker, Holden, and Neustad-

ter (2008), Metacritic scores correlated between .83 and .97 with three alternative critical evaluations.

The second type of critical judgment is based on video and DVD guides (Holbrook, 1999; Simonton, 2002). Unlike the Metacritic scores, which are calculated during a film's theatrical release, these ratings do not appear until after the film is made available for home viewing in either video or DVD format. Although previous studies have used as many as five such guides (e.g., Simonton, 2002), these books are becoming obsolete, one after another going out of print (e.g., Martin & Porter, 2006). Moreover, those that still undergo successive editions do not always provide ratings for the full range of films. Therefore, the current investigation used just two: Craddock (2009) and Maltin (2008). The former assigns 0–4 "bones" (where 0 = "woof!") and the latter 1–4 "stars" (where 1 = "bomb"), assignments that can quite readily be converted into 5- and 4-point scales, respectively. Because the two measures correlated .61 and had very similar means and standard deviations ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.74$ and $M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.65$, respectively), they were simply averaged to produce a two-item movie-guide rating with an internal-consistency reliability of .75 ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.62$, range 0.50 to 3.75). This measure was available for 911 films. As further validation, movie-guide ratings correlated .81 with the Metacritic score, which can be considered as a kind of test-retest reliability with a temporal separation of several years (see also Simonton, 2009b). Admittedly, a portion of this agreement could represent the influence of the earlier evaluations on the later evaluations (Simonton, 2009a).

3. *Movie awards.* A large number of distinct organizations and societies offer awards for the major categories of cinematic achievement (Simonton, 2004b). Of these categories, the most important are the awards for picture, director, screenplay, lead male actor, lead female actor, supporting male actor, and supporting female actor. Not only are these honors bestowed by the most organizations for the longest period of time (Simonton, 2004b), but the last six appear to form a conspicuous dramatic cluster that correlates highly with the best picture awards (Simonton, 2004c). In addition, nominations and awards in these main areas also tend to most strongly correlate with a film's financial success, whether as causes or effects (e.g., Deuchert, Adjamah, & Pauly, 2005; Nelson, Donihue, Waldman, & Wheaton, 2001).

Probably the most prominent of all awards offered in these categories are the Oscars of the American Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Golden Globes of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. The gala award ceremonies for both organizations are widely televised and the results extensively discussed in print, electronic, and Internet media. These honors also appear to have more reliability and validity than alternative honors, such as critic and festival awards (e.g., Ginsburgh, 2003; Simonton, 2004b). As a consequence, two sets of award measures were generated, one for the Oscars and the other for the Golden Globes (using www.oscars.org and www.imdb.com, respectively). In each we counted the number of nominations in each of the seven award categories and then added an additional point if the nomi-

² One and only one film received an NC-17 rating, namely the 2004 *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*). As a consequence, this film was also deleted from the sample. However, preliminary analyses showed that this deletion had no repercussions on the empirical results.

nation resulted in an outright award (for other examples, see Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Ginsburgh, 2003; Sochay, 1994). Thus, the Oscar and Golden Globe award measures had the possible range of 0 (*no nominations or awards in any of the seven categories*) to 14 (*awards in all seven categories*). The actual range for the two measures was from 0 to 10 for the Oscars ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 0.95$) and 0 to 12 for the Golden Globes ($M = 0.36$, $SD = 1.27$). The internal-consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .77 for the former and .84 for the latter, statistics that fall in line with previous research using such award indicators (Simonton, 2004b). Furthermore, the two indices correlate .75, indicating a strong consensus between the two alternative indicators. Naturally, some of this agreement may reflect the influence of the Golden Globes on the Oscars given that the former precedes the latter (Pardoe & Simonton, 2008).

Cinematic Predictors

All 914 films were also scored on the following two sets of predictors:

1. *Film content.* Screen It! is a website that screens and rates feature films for concerned parents at the time they are released (and therefore before there is feedback regarding the film's success). Because it does not have any religious or political affiliation, it provides a suitable source for independent ratings of content. In particular Screen It! rates films on 15 variables: alcohol/drugs, blood/gore, disrespectful/bad attitude, frightening/tense scenes, guns/weapons, imitative behavior (i.e., actions that parents would not want their children to imitate), jump scenes (i.e., that provoke sudden, unexpected fright), scary/tense music, inappropriate music (i.e., containing lyrics that parents would not want their children to hear), profanity, sex/nudity, smoking, tense family scenes, topics to talk about, and violence. Each variable is scored on a six level scale: none, minor, mild, moderate, heavy, or extreme. The latter was converted to a numerical score from 1 (*none*) to 6 (*extreme*). Although the scores for all 15 variables covered the full 1–6 range, the means ranged from 1.61 for jump scenes to 5.30 for disrespectful/bad attitude. It is important to note that the website not only provides the quantitative reevaluation of each film but also provides the specific basis for that evaluation—scene by scene and even line by line. That lends these measures a high degree of prima facie objectivity and validity.³

The Screen It! ratings were used instead of the alternative evaluations provided by Kids-in-Mind (www.kids-in-mind.com) because the latter only provide assessments on three inclusive dimensions: sex/nudity, violence/gore, and profanity (on a 0–10 scale). Nevertheless, Thompson and Yokota (2004) indicated that the two sites strongly concurred in their judgments.

2. *Female involvement.* We began by obtaining producer, writer, director, and cast lists from the IMDb full cast and crew page. We counted the number of all male and female names in each contributor category, and then calculated the percentages that were female. Where the gender of a cast member was not obvious, we followed the link to the performer's page, which lists performers as "actor" or "actress." For writers, directors, and producers, it was not always so obvious. When the IMDb name page did not indicate the person's gender, we had to search the name using Google.com. In some cases, we found information about the spe-

cific person. For some unfamiliar (e.g., foreign) names, we were able to determine the probable sex from baby name sites. Although there remained a residual of ambiguous cases, the sheer number of names involved means that the remaining ambiguities should not affect the results. All told, there were about 7000 producers, 980 directors, 2450 writers, and 49000 male/female actors. The proportion in each of these four groups who were female is 22.58%, 5.83%, 11.77%, and 32.38%, respectively. Astonishingly, despite the fact that all of these films were released in the 21st century, women still make up less than one third of the characters that appear in film.

Statistical Controls

Two sets of variables were introduced as statistical controls for certain analyses to be discussed later.

1. *MPAA ratings.* In estimating the impact of the content assessments on cinematic success, it will be useful to determine whether the relation survives control for the MPAA ratings. After all, it is the latter rather than the former that most directly determines how distributors perceive a film's potential market. So we will want to know whether sexual content affects the outcome measures after controlling for these less finely differentiated judgments. The MPAA ratings for all but one of the 914 films were taken from the Screen It! descriptions (usually included at the top of the description). The MPAA rating for the other remaining one was obtained from the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). The distribution of films in the four principal rating categories was as follows: 28 G, 126 PG, 386 PG-13, and 374 R. Four zero-one dummy variables were defined to code for each category. For example, the dummy variable for an R rating equaled 1 if the film was rated R and a 0 if otherwise.

Thompson and Yokota (2004) showed that the MPAA ratings correspond to the sex, violence, and profanity evaluations for both Screen It! and Kids-in-Mind. For instance, the higher the score received on sex/nudity by either website the higher the probability of receiving an R rating. In the current sample, an R MPAA has the highest correlation with profanity ($r = .64$), followed by sex/nudity ($r = .49$), blood/gore ($r = .48$), smoking ($r = .40$), drugs/alcohol ($r = .35$), disrespect ($r = .34$), violence ($r = .27$), guns/weapons ($r = .24$; all r s significant at the .001 level). Moreover, sex/nudity correlates negatively with both G ($r = -.35$) and PG ($r = -.47$) ratings (both $p < .001$), but almost zero with a PG-13 rating ($r = -.03$), suggesting that the latter represents the baseline for sex in cinema. In any event, these MPAA correspondences provide additional validation for the Screen It! assessments.

2. *Release date.* Even if the films in this study were released just over a 5-year period, it is still possible for various year-to-year changes in extraneous variables to contaminate the results. For that reason it is necessary to control for year of release, as defined by a film's opening in the U.S. market. This control was achieved by introducing a set of zero-one dummy variables that registered whether or not a film appeared in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, or 2005.

³ These 1–6 ratings probably do not represent a precise interval scale. For example, the difference between none, minor, and mild categories appears to be less than between mild, moderate, heavy, and extreme. Nevertheless, these departures are insufficient to overturn the substantive findings. The same results emerged when all measures were treated as ordinal data.

Actually, for purposes of statistical control, it is only necessary to retain the last four dummy variables because a film's release in the first year is completely predicted by zero values on the other four variables. It should be noted that the 914 films were fairly evenly distributed across the five years. The frequencies were 172, 202, 181, 176, and 183, respectively. The differences among these frequencies are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.93$, $df = 4$, $p = .5707$).

Results

The statistical analyses began with the test for simple linear effects, and then turned to tests for curvilinear effects.

Linear Effects

This set of statistical analyses also consists of two parts. In the first the 15 Screen It! content evaluations are segregated as separate predictors whereas in the second part these assessments are consolidated into four general factors.

Separate content assessments. Table 1 presents the correlations between each of the cinematic success indicators and the Screen It! content measures. It is apparent at once that sex doesn't sell by any of the four box office criteria, including the rough indicator of U.S. net. Because the adverse effect of sex is actually greatest for world gross, we cannot assume that returns from the international market compensates for the domestic aversion to sexual content. It cannot just be U.S. puritanical values operating if sex sells even less abroad. In fact, no matter what the market, sexual content appears to have much the same adverse impact as smoking, alcohol/drugs, and profanity. What makes this negative effect all the more outstanding is the fact that the sex/nudity measure correlates negatively with production costs ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$). In other words, although such scenes are relatively inexpensive to film, the loss in audience appeal largely undermines the possible gain, as shown by the negative correlation with the U.S. net estimate. In contrast, violence tends to have a positive effect on U.S. and world gross, a pattern paralleled by guns/weapons. Only the U.K. consumer seems immune to this particular content. Still, the only consistent box office draws regardless of criterion are frightening/tense scenes and scary/tense music, two content variables that tend to co-occur ($r = .78$, $p < .001$). This content provides suspense without brutal imagery.

It is also evident that sex/nudity does not appeal to the film critics, and in the case of movie guides, the relation is actually negative. In contrast, the critics appear more positively inclined toward films that contain smoking, tense family scenes, topics to talk about, and frightening/tense scenes and more negatively inclined toward films that contain imitative behavior and jump scenes, but are more or less neutral toward violence, blood/gore, and guns/weapons. In the case of movie awards, sex/nudity does have a small positive correlation with the Golden Globes, an appreciation not shared with the Oscars. On many of the other content measures, there is a stronger consensus, especially the positive correlations for smoking, tense family scenes, topics to talk about, and alcohol/drugs, and the negative correlations for imitative behavior and jump scenes.

For two reasons these correlations cannot be taken on face value. First, some of the content measures are correlated, making

it difficult to discern their separate contributions. Second, the associations with the criteria measures should be calculated after controlling for year of release and the MPAA ratings. Hence, each of the success criteria was regressed on the 15 content measures with these two sets of dummy variables included.⁴ The standardized partial regression coefficients are given in Table 2.

It is immediately apparent that many content effects are no longer statistically significant. Sex/nudity now only has a negative correlation with U.S. net, the movie-guide ratings, and the Oscars, but the Golden Globes no longer have a positive correlation. Violence only has a negative correlation with the Metacritic scores, albeit blood/gore is positively correlated with U.S. gross (but not net). No content measure has a consistently positive or negative effect on all four box office criteria. On the other hand, frightening/tense scenes and smoking are positively associated with all four indicators of critical evaluations and movie awards whereas imitative behavior is consistently negatively correlated with the same four criteria.

Interestingly, the main source of the contrasting results between Tables 1 and 2 was not the control variables. Few of the latter had statistically significant associations with any of the success criteria. Especially striking was the almost complete irrelevance of the MPAA ratings, a predominantly null result that implies that the 15 content measures completely capture the underlying basis for those assignments. The only exceptions to this inference involved the R rating, which still had a negative relation to US gross ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .05$) and a positive relation with the Metacritic score ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$). Consumers still dislike and early critics still like R-rated films even after adjusting for content, including sex and violence.

The last issue to be addressed is whether the 15 content assessments correspond to the proportion of women who are involved as producers, directors, writers, and actors. The answer is given in Table 3. Clearly, films involving greater female participation differ from those that are dominated by a male cast and crew. In particular, such "female flicks" have less blood/gore, disrespectful/bad attitude, frightening/tense scenes, guns/weapons, jump scenes, scary/tense music, and violence, but more tense family scenes and topics to talk about. Female representation in other filmmaking positions also tends to be negatively associated with potentially objectionable content. This conclusion holds for profanity (producers and writers) and smoking (actors). Yet the proportion of actors who are female is correlated positively with both alcohol/drugs and sex/nudity, and female representation among the producers, directors, and writers has no association with sex/nudity. Although extremely violent content can be attributed to male predominance in filmmaking, heavy sexual content cannot. Indeed, the abundance of female actors in the cast appears merely to provide more opportunities to exhibit sex and nudity in the movie theaters!

⁴ One anonymous referee claimed that the regression equations are misspecified because budget and early critic evaluations should be included as predictors of box office gross. However, we believe that the current equations are most appropriate for addressing our main questions. Moreover, adding these variables does not change the substantive conclusions drawn in this study. Sex still doesn't sell after controlling for budget and early critic evaluations.

Table 1
Pearson Correlations Between Cinematic Success Criteria and Screen It! Content Assessments

Content assessment	Box office				Film critics		Movie awards	
	US	UK	WD	NT	MC	MG	OS	GG
Alcohol/drugs	-.20***	-.19***	-.29***	-.14***	.03	-.02	.09**	.12***
Blood/gore	.04	.02	.03	-.03	.00	-.05	.05	-.01
Disrespectful/bad attitude	-.00	-.05	.04	-.06	-.01	-.05	.02	-.02
Frightening/tense scenes	.14***	.17***	.18***	.08*	.09**	.10**	.06	-.01
Guns/weapons	.11***	.06	.23***	-.05	-.03	-.06	.01	-.05
Imitative behavior	.07*	-.05	.00	.04	-.19***	-.18***	-.11***	-.11**
Inappropriate music	.00	-.08	-.01	-.01	-.11	-.12	.00	.01
Jump scenes	.13***	.08*	.04	.07*	-.09**	-.11***	-.07*	-.08*
Profanity	-.27***	-.24***	-.37***	-.20***	.01	-.04	.04	.06
Scary/tense music	.26***	.17***	.26***	.07*	-.07*	-.05	-.09**	-.15***
Sex/nudity	-.26***	-.23***	-.31***	-.21***	-.01	-.09**	-.01	.08*
Smoking	-.26***	-.15**	-.18**	-.18***	.22***	.17***	.18***	.20***
Tense family scenes	-.03	-.06	-.08	.03	.21***	.26***	.14***	.17***
Topics to talk about	-.12***	-.07	-.08	-.03	.27***	.26***	.12***	.10**
Violence	.11***	.05	.19**	-.01	-.05	-.06	.02	-.05

Note. US = US gross (n = 914); UK = UK gross (n = 671); WD = world gross (n = 300); NT = US net (n = 873); MC = Metacritic score (n = 914); MG = movie-guide ratings (n = 911); OS = Oscar (n = 914); and GG = Golden Globes (n = 914).

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Consolidated content assessments. We noted earlier that some of the content measures were highly correlated. This was true for both sexual and violent content. To illustrate, sex/nudity is positively correlated with alcohol/drugs (r = .57), blood/gore (r = .23), disrespectful/bad attitude (r = .24), imitative behavior (r = .20), inappropriate music (r = .30), profanity (r = .63), smoking (r = .32), and talk topics (r = .17), but negatively correlated with frightening/tense scenes (r = -.19), scary music (r = -.27), and jump scenes (r = -.07; all rs significant at .05 level or better). Likewise, violence is positively associated with blood/gore (r = .73), disrespectful/bad attitude (r = .62), frightening/tense scenes (r = .69), guns/weapons (r = .83), jump scenes (r = .38), scary

music (r = .68), profanity (r = .21), and smoking (r = .17; again, all rs significant at .05 level or better). These correlations are often so high as to suggest that they might represent indicators of an underlying latent variable or factor. To test this possibility, the 15 content assessments were subjected to a principal components analysis. Four components had eigenvalues that exceeded unity, and these were then rotated according to the Varimax algorithm. The resulting factor structure was very clear-cut, with no content variable loading on more than one factor (using a .40 cutoff). The factors can be described as follows (factor loadings in parentheses): (a) violence/fear defined by violence (.91), frightening/tense scenes (.85), scary music (.85), guns/weapons (.82), blood/gore

Table 2
Standardized Partial Coefficients (βs) for Cinematic Success Criteria Regressed on Screen It! Content Assessments Controlling for MPAA Ratings and Release Year

Content assessment	Box office				Film critics		Movie awards	
	US	UK	WD	NT	MC	MG	OS	GG
Alcohol/drugs	.01	-.01	-.10	.02	-.02	-.00	.07	.04
Blood/gore	.15**	.10	.12	.07	-.00	-.05	.08	-.01
Disrespectful/bad attitude	.01	-.03	-.05	.00	-.05	-.06	-.03	-.04
Frightening/tense scenes	.00	.20**	.08	.11	.24***	.27***	.22***	.15*
Guns/weapons	.06	.08	.29**	-.06	.03	.00	-.01	-.02
Imitative behavior	.11***	.01	.06	.11**	-.12***	-.09**	-.10**	-.09*
Inappropriate music	.11**	.01	.11*	.08*	-.07*	-.04	.03	.02
Jump scenes	.01	-.04	-.03	.07	-.17***	-.20***	-.09*	-.04
Profanity	-.10	-.18**	-.39***	-.15*	-.13*	-.10	-.06	-.10
Scary/tense music	.21***	.00	.03	-.07	-.07	-.04	-.27***	-.21**
Sex/nudity	-.06	-.08	-.10	-.14**	-.05	-.12**	-.14**	-.03
Smoking	-.11**	-.04	-.01	-.09*	.18***	.15***	.12**	.14***
Tense family scenes	.07	-.05	.00	.07	.05	.12**	.07	.12**
Topics to talk about	-.03	-.04	-.02	.01	.17***	.18***	.03	-.02
Violence	-.08	-.15	-.11	-.01	-.14*	-.12	.04	.00

Note. See Table 1 for key to abbreviations and corresponding sample sizes.
* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Table 3
Pearson Correlations Between Female Crew/Cast Proportions and Screen It! Content Assessments

Content assessment	Producers	Directors	Writers	Actors
Alcohol/drugs	.02	.04	.04	.08*
Blood/gore	-.25***	-.13***	-.22***	-.32***
Disrespectful/bad attitude	-.20***	-.08*	-.13***	-.22***
Frightening/tense scenes	-.16***	-.15***	-.20***	-.34***
Guns/weapons	-.26***	-.17***	-.25***	-.45***
Imitative behavior	-.06	.01	-.05	-.02
Inappropriate music	-.03	.07*	-.01	.03
Jump scenes	-.13***	-.12***	-.13***	-.11**
Profanity	-.09**	-.00	-.08*	-.00
Scary/tense music	-.20***	-.18***	-.25***	-.36***
Sex/nudity	-.02	.05	.03	.19***
Smoking	-.04	.02	-.03	-.11***
Tense family scenes	.07*	.09**	.12***	.18***
Topics to talk about	.08*	.12***	.08*	.10**
Violence	-.28***	-.19***	-.31***	-.43***

Note. $N = 914$ for all correlations.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(.81), disrespectful/bad attitude (.64), and jump scenes (.62); (b) sex/indulgence defined by drugs/alcohol (.78), profanity (.76), sex/nudity (.75), and smoking (.74); (c) topics/issues defined by topics to talk about (.83) and tense family scenes (.83); and (d) corrupting youth defined by imitative behavior (.82) and inappropriate music (.71).

On the basis of these results, four factor scores were generated by averaging the content assessments defining each factor. The internal-consistency reliability coefficients were as follows: violence/fear .89, sex/indulgence .79, topics/issues .50, and corrupting youth .45. The correlations among the four factor scores ranged from .01 (violence/fear with topics/issues) to .30 (sex/indulgence with corrupting youth), with all but the last correlation less than .16 in absolute value. The eight cinematic success criteria were each regressed on the four factor scores plus the dummy variables controlling for release year and MPAA rating. The standardized partial regression coefficients for the four factors are shown in Table 4.

Concerning the main question of whether "sex sells," the answer remains negative. The sex/indulgence factor still correlates negatively with all four box office variables, including U.S. net. Once again, the negative association is even stronger for world than U.S. gross (which in this case is identical to U.K. gross). Sex/

indulgence also makes no impression whatsoever on the film critics, whether during the theatrical release or later after the video/DVD comes out. Even so, this factor does feature small positive correlations with both movie-award indicators. The violence/fear factor exhibits a quite contrary pattern. This content aspect of film obviously sells in the box office, by any standard. Yet this same characteristic has a detrimental impact on film critics and on the reception of one of the two movie awards, namely the Golden Globes. Films that score high on the Topics/Issues factor enjoy good net earnings in the U.S. box office, and do even better among the critics and in the award ceremonies. Finally, films high on corrupting youth do well in the box office, except in the U.K., but are disliked by the critics and those who bestow the Golden Globes.

Lastly, we looked at how these four content factors correlated with the proportion of women involved in production, directing, writing, and acting. Two of these factors, sex/indulgence and corrupting youth, had no substantial correlations with any of these four variables. Nevertheless, violence/fear was negatively related to female representation as producers ($r = -.27$), directors ($r = -.19$), writers ($r = -.28$), and actors ($r = -.43$; all r s significant at .001 level). Additionally, topics/issues was positively correlated with producers ($r = .08$, $p < .05$), directors ($r = .11$, $p < .001$), writers ($r = .13$, $p < .001$), and actors ($r = .17$, $p < .001$). So the greater the participation of women, the more thought-provoking but the less violent and fear-inducing is the resulting cinematic product.

Curvilinear Effects

It could be that we have overlooked the true impact of sex (and perhaps also violence) by conducting correlation and regression analyses that could only detect linear effects. Consequently, tests were conducted for curvilinear functions. To simply matters, we will only report the results for analyses using the four factor scores generated from the 15 content measures.

In the introduction we mentioned the possibility of an inverted-U relationship between MPAA rating and cinematic appreciation. This possibility was tested by first putting the four factor scores in mean-deviation form, and then squaring them to generate four corresponding quadratic functions. Each of the criteria was then regressed on these linear and quadratic components along with the dummy control variables. The outcome is depicted in Table 5. This suggests the following conclusions:

Table 4
Standardized Partial Coefficients (β s) for Cinematic Success Criteria Regressed on the Four Content Factors Controlling for MPAA Ratings and Release Year

Content factor	Box office				Film critics		Movie awards	
	US	UK	WD	NT	MC	MG	OS	GG
Violence/fear	.29***	.13**	.29***	.07*	-.09*	-.08*	.01	-.10**
Sex/indulgence	-.21***	-.21**	-.33***	-.24***	.07	.01	.12*	.13*
Topics/issues	.03	-.05	-.02	.10**	.21***	.29***	.14***	.14***
Corrupting youth	.16***	-.01	.13*	.13***	-.19***	-.15***	-.07	-.09*

Note. US = US gross ($n = 914$); UK = UK gross ($n = 671$); WD = world gross ($n = 300$); NT = US net ($n = 873$); MC = Metacritic score ($n = 914$); MG = movie-guide ratings ($n = 911$); OS = Oscar ($n = 914$); and GG = Golden Globes ($n = 914$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 5
Standardized Partial Coefficients (β s) for Cinematic Success Criteria Regressed on Linear and Quadratic Content Factors Controlling for MPAA Ratings and Release Year

Content factor	Box office				Film critics		Movie awards	
	US	UK	WD	NT	MC	MG	OS	GG
Violence/fear								
Linear	.29***	.13**	.29***	.06	-.10**	-.09*	-.02	-.11**
Quadratic	.11***	.07	-.02	.11**	-.06	-.07*	-.08*	-.08*
Sex/indulgence								
Linear	-.19***	-.18**	-.33***	-.22***	.07	.00	.10	.11*
Quadratic	.03	.10	-.00	.20***	.12**	.09*	.03	.03
Topics/issues								
Linear	.03	-.04	-.02	.11**	.20***	.27***	.13***	.12***
Quadratic	.01	-.04	-.04	.01	-.03	.01	.04	.06
Corrupting youth								
Linear	.21***	.03	.13	.15**	-.23***	-.20***	-.10*	-.11*
Quadratic	-.05	-.05	-.01	-.03	.03	.05	.02	.01

Note. US = US gross ($n = 914$); UK = UK gross ($n = 671$); WD = world gross ($n = 300$); NT = US net ($n = 873$); MC = Metacritic score ($n = 914$); MG = movie-guide ratings ($n = 912$); OS = Oscar ($n = 914$); and GG = Golden Globes ($n = 914$).

1. The topics/issues and corrupting youth factors only have linear relations with any of the criteria, if they have any relations at all. The first factor has positive consequences for U.S. net, both critic evaluations, and both movie-award indicators. The second factor has positive repercussions for U.S. gross and net but negative repercussions for the two film critic assessments and for the two movie awards.
2. Although the violence/fear factor also has positive linear relationships with U.K. and world gross and negative linear relationships with the Metacritic scores, the quadratic terms for the remaining success criteria are all statistically significant. For the movie-guide ratings and the movie awards, the quadratic component is negative, whereas for U.S. gross and net the component is positive. Complicating matters all the more, the significant quadratic term may or may not be joined by a significant linear term. Still, by combining the linear and quadratic components we obtain the following four possibilities: (a) inverted-U functions (for the Oscars), (b) U-shaped functions (for U.S. net), (c) J-curve functions (for U.S. gross; i.e., extreme high scores are optimal but extreme low scores surpass merely average scores), and (d) backward-J functions (for movie-guide ratings and Golden Globe awards; i.e., extreme low scores are optimal but extreme high scores surpass merely average scores).
3. The sex/indulgence factor has strictly negative linear associations with U.S., U.K., and world gross, the harmful effect again emerging strongest for worldwide returns. This factor also has a positive linear function with the Golden Globe awards. But the factor's impact on the film critics is most accurately described by a U-shaped curve. The critics prefer films either extremely high or extremely low in the various components of this factor, including sex/nudity. Perhaps the most interesting curvilinear function is that for U.S. net. Although the linear term is negative, the quadratic term is positive. This

twofold outcome implies a backward-J function. Although the lowest scores on this factor yield the highest net returns in the U.S., the highest scores do somewhat better than average scores.

Given that sex/nudity constitutes one item of the above factor, the backward-J function relating sex/indulgence and U.S. net might appear to support the belief that sex provides some incremental financial benefit if sufficiently graphic. However, there are two arguments against this inference.

First, the upturn in the backward-J function is actually quite small, as can be seen in Figure 1. Because the effect size is so modest, only the large sample size allowed the quadratic portion of the curve to become statistically significant. It may be worth noting that at the lower end of the factor scale, the outliers tend to have positive values, and hence these films are much more profitable, whereas at the upper

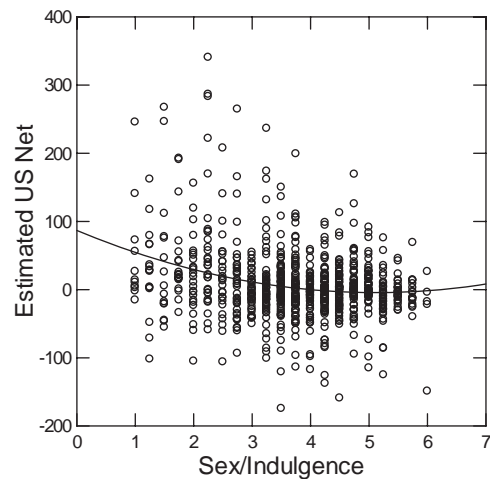


Figure 1. The scatterplot for estimated U.S. net as a function of the film's score on the sex/indulgence factor. The least-squares fit curve depicts the second-order polynomial (linear and quadratic terms).

end of the scale the outliers tend to have negative values, meaning that these films are much more unprofitable. So even at extreme departures from expectation, sex doesn't sell.

Second, when U.S. net is similarly regressed on linear and quadratic components of sex/nudity alone, only the linear term proved to be statistically and substantively significant (viz., $\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = .07$, $p > .1$). So the most reasonable inference remains that the relation is effectively linear and negative. By this particular criterion, sex not only doesn't sell (i.e., earn big box office), but it also isn't very profitable (i.e., repay the financial investment).

Discussion

This investigation had two primary goals. The first was to determine the impact of "objectionable" or "exploitive" content on several crucial criteria of cinematic success. Success was gauged by a film's box office performance (U.S. gross, U.K. gross, world gross, and U.S. net), critical evaluations (Metacritic and movie guides), and movie awards in major categories (Oscars and Golden Globes). Although the principal interest regarding content was sex and nudity, this aspect cannot be fully appreciated without also examining other content that might give a film an R rating, especially graphic violence. So 15 different content categories were scrutinized, using the assessments provided by Screen It! Furthermore, film content was investigated using both the 15 individual measures and 4 composite measures based on a factor analysis, namely, violence/fear, sex/indulgence, topics/issues, and corrupting youth. Finally, we tested for possible curvilinear functions, including U-curves, inverted-U curves, and various J curves. The upshot of these diverse analyses is that, for the most part, sex neither sells nor impresses. If the goal is to make money, cinematic violence is a far more reliable path to a big box office, even if this route can have costs with respect to film reviews and some movie awards.

The second but more subsidiary goal was to learn whether such content variables were contingent on the composition of the crew and cast directly engaged in filmmaking. More specifically, do films that involve a larger proportion of women as producers, directors, writers, or actors differ substantially on sex, violence, and other variables? The answer was affirmative. To the extent that women dominate in these positions, the resulting films tend to display much less violence, including less weaponry, fear-inducing editing and music, blood and gore, and so forth. At the same time, the female presence shows up in more thought-provoking films that deal with difficult family issues. The only surprise was that female involvement does not reduce the manifestation of sex and nudity. On the contrary, sexual content actually increases with the proportion of women who make up the cast. It is likely that men so dominate the industry—and especially the money necessary to finance projects—that the masculine presence will be felt even when women are numerically in control. It may be no coincidence that as the percentage of females involved in a project increases the size of the budget decreases. More precisely, correlations between female presence and production costs (log transformed) are $-.09$, $-.10$, $-.10$, and $-.22$ for producers, directors, writers, and actors, respectively (all $p < .01$).⁵ Women remain a bargain in the film industry, particularly female actors.

Yet by far the most significant issue is why sex neither sells nor impresses. As seen in Table 2, the Screen It! rating on sex/nudity

has a negative standardized partial regression coefficient across all eight criteria even if the negative coefficient is only statistically significant with respect to US net returns, movie-guide ratings, and Oscars in the major award categories. The fact remains that the linear association is never positive. Even the test for a curvilinear function could not get sex and nudity to exhibit a strongly positive impact on box office in some portion of its range. The backward-J curve found for the composite sex/indulgence factor—which incorporates content as varied as sex/nudity, profanity, alcohol/drugs, and smoking—did not hold up for the sex/nudity component separately. What makes us even more confident that sex and nudity neither sells nor impresses is that the per annum sample size in this investigation is far larger than any comparable investigation—an average of about seven films every two weeks! So why do filmmakers introduce sexual content to no obvious benefit? We would like to suggest the following three explanations:

1. At one time the belief might have been true, but it is no longer so. We studied films released in the 21st century, long after even more explicit sexual material became readily available on the Internet. In earlier periods—and especially prior to the 1930 Hays Code and after its demise in 1968—the cinema provided a major way to view sex and nudity in action rather than just in static photographs. To test this hypothesis would require that we examine films from earlier eras. Unfortunately, such an investigation would not be easily achieved. Financial figures are less available for earlier films, and ratings such as those provided by Screen It! do not go back to the era prior to the advent of Internet pornography.
2. Sex does indeed sell, and maybe even impress, but the effect is utterly contingent on a host of more elusive factors. For instance, in our study we made no effort to gauge the impact of stardom. Many studies have examined the somewhat elusive impact of movie stars on box office success (e.g., Sedgwick & Pokorny, 1999; Wallace, Seigerman, & Holbrook, 1993). It is not impossible that sex and nudity portrayed by a star, and particularly by a young female "starlet" or "sex bomb," might recruit more viewers (and voyeurs) than a less graphic performance. If so, this explanation may also account for some of the other gender differences mentioned earlier. If women are largely "sex objects," and their status as stars dependent on when their sex appeal is at its peak, then we would not expect them to have long careers, nor to have their best performances in major films, nor to continue to command major roles when past their sexual rather than thespian prime. Testing this hypothesis could take advan-

⁵ The negative correlation between budget and female representation in the cast suggests that strong sex may be profitable insofar as films that feature sex cost less to make. The crude formula we used to compute U.S. net could underestimate this asset. A better alternative might be to use *profit*, defined as half of gross minus budget (see, e.g., De Vany & Walls, 1999). In fact, U.S. profit yields less negative associations with sex/nudity in Tables 1 and 2 and with sex/indulgence in Tables 4 and 5. But the linear relations still do not become positive.

tage of various rankings of the “sexiest woman alive” that are frequently published in the popular media.

- Perhaps sex and nudity never had any substantial economic or artistic benefits, but rather it was one of those self-perpetuating urban myths. Because contrary evidence is always weak and inconspicuous, such beliefs can never be contradicted outright. In support of this conjecture, we can cite statistics from the current study. Even when the correlations and regressions yielded statistically significant results, the effect sizes were never so large as to render the conclusions obvious in the absence of sophisticated analyses. As an example, the regression equations that provided the basis for Table 2 explained between 10% (Golden Globes) and 27% (world gross) of the variance in the criteria. Even the largest of these percentages is insufficient to rule out a huge number of exceptions to the statistical relationship. After all, 83% of the variance remains unexplained. As a consequence, a few highly conspicuous counterexamples can too easily convince producers that sex does indeed sell.

We can use the 1997 *Titanic* to illustrate the last point. Although Screen It! rates this film as having a “heavy” amount of sex/nudity, it continues as of this writing to be the highest grossing film in U.S. domestic history. Even so, this conjunction of sex and cash cannot be accepted uncritically. In the first place, its status as a blockbuster does not take inflation into account. When corrections are introduced for inflation, the top 10 films of all time are ranked as follows (Garris, 2008): (1) *Gone With the Wind* (rated G by the MPAA on rerelease, minor sex/nudity according to Screen It!); (2) *Star Wars* (PG, no sex/nudity); (3) *The Sound of Music* (G); (4) *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (PG, no sex/nudity); (5) *The Ten Commandments* (G); (6) *Titanic* (PG-13, heavy sex/nudity); (7) *Jaws* (PG, mild sex/nudity); (8) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (G); (9) *Doctor Zhivago* (rated PG-13 for mature themes); and (10) *Ben Hur* (G).

Furthermore, the top 10 films among the 914 in the current sample are: (1) *Shrek 2* (PG, mild sex/nudity); (2) *Spider-Man* (PG-13, moderate sex/nudity); (3) *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (PG-13, mild sex/nudity); (4) *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (PG-13, minor sex/nudity); (5) *Spider-Man 2* (PG-13, mild sex/nudity); (6) *The Passion of the Christ* (R, minor sex/nudity); (7) *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (PG-13, minor sex/nudity); (8) *Finding Nemo* (G, no sex/nudity); (9) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (PG, no sex/nudity); and (10) *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (PG-13, no sex/nudity). In the context of these two rankings, one classic and another contemporary, *Titanic* appears to be an anomaly. But because this film is so salient as a recent money maker and because the overall correlation so moderate even if negative, *Titanic* can be falsely singled out as typical rather than atypical. Because it was a blockbuster, sex must sell.

By the same token, the more artistic criteria may also have an illusory rather than real correlation with sexual content. Even though film as art is decidedly different from film as business (Simonton, 2005b), sex and nudity may become associated with art films because of their linkage with other content that has a more direct relation with those elite products that run the “art-house

circuit.” We saw earlier that sex/nudity was positively associated with a MPAA rating of R, a rating that is positively related to critical acclaim (Simonton, 2005b). Such content is also positively correlated with smoking, another content variable seemingly in favor with the critics as well as the voters who cast their ballots for the Oscars and Golden Globes. Perhaps film critics tend to bestow the highest praise on films that seem unconventional, rebellious, or “edgy,” and sex, nudity, smoking, and a restrictive MPAA rating provide critics cues of what is avant-garde or breakthrough rather than mainstream or routine. And because film critics tend to dislike big-budget productions (Simonton, 2005a, 2009a), even the fact that sex scenes can be filmed on the cheap can be turned into an apparent asset. The aesthetic impact of sex would still remain illusory rather than real. In art as well as business, things may not be what they seem.

To be sure, much more research must be conducted before we can obtain a secure understanding of this phenomenon.⁶ Certainly more empirical inquiries are required before we can provide plausible interpretations of our results. That said, it is manifest that anyone who argues that sex either sells or impresses must be put on notice. At present, no filmmaker should introduce such content under the assumption that it guarantees a big box office, earns critical acclaim, or wins movie awards. On the contrary, other forms of strong film content appear far more potent either commercially or aesthetically. In terms of the four content factors, entertainment-orientated consumers are most attracted to violence/fear, whereas the more art-oriented film critics and award voters prefer topics/issues. The apparent impotence of sex/nudity or sex/indulgence does not mean that films with such graphic content cannot be highly profitable. A film like *Titanic* proves otherwise. Rather, the data presented here establish that, on the average, enhanced sexual representations in mainstream film largely fail to justify their presence, whether according to commercial or aesthetic criteria. Even worse, whatever justification cinema sex may claim may depend on the implicit exploitation of women. The latter possibility emerges from both the current results and those in the past literature on the place of women in the motion picture industry. Certainly, the fact that “sex is cheap” cannot alone justify its inclusion in film.

In light of these empirical results, we are compelled to ask, “Why is sex even there?”

⁶ An anonymous referee questioned whether any inferences can be made on the basis of box office returns alone, suggesting that home entertainment revenue might yield different results. Yet research has shown that home viewing tastes do not disagree substantially from those in the movie theaters (e.g., Prosser, 2002; Taylor, 1974). If anything, home viewers may be more likely to see more family oriented films. So it does not seem likely that negative correlations will become positive ones. But, ultimately, that is an empirical question.

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