

# Permissive British cinema?

by Yvonne Tasker

*Deep End* appeared at a time of transition in British gender culture. The reforms of the 1960s rolled out a significant liberalisation of sexual mores with legislative change on gay sexuality, divorce and abortion. 1970 saw the passing of the Equal Pay Act, the first appearance of *The Sun's* Page 3 girl and the British publication of Germaine Greer's pro-sex feminist bestseller *The Female Eunuch*. In different ways these serve as signs of ongoing concerns about the meaning of sex.

Yet it is easy to overstate the pace of social – rather than legal – change. For example, while oral contraceptives had been available in Britain from the early 1960s, single women's access to the Pill (or indeed to information and advice on contraception) was restricted for much of the decade.

Attitudes expressed in popular polls on topics such as sex outside marriage, divorce and abortion remained typically conservative throughout the 1960s. Indeed the highly marketable image of the Swinging Sixties was centred on and largely derived from a metropolitan elite rather than reflecting the norms of British men and women's experience. The Britain of the late 1960s and early 1970s was characterised by a fundamental uncertainty around new forms of sexual expression. Women's sexuality is acknowledged in 1970s culture, achieving a new cultural visibility, yet women's bodies are first and foremost things for sale.

The very phrase 'permissive society' encapsulates the contradictions of the moment, incorporating as it does a degree of doubt as to what should be permitted in a modern society; suggesting new freedoms viewed with

suspicion, constructions of Britain as permissive were often tinged with conservative nostalgia.

*Deep End* features Saatchi & Saatchi's pregnant man poster, used by the flirtatious Susan to tease teenage Mike. Produced for the Health Education Council, this striking design confronts gendered attitudes towards contraception: addressing men specifically, the slogan asks 'Would you be more careful if it was you that got pregnant?' The pregnant man suggests a world turned upside down; in an attempt to foster male responsibility, it plays on the humour and anxiety of role reversal.

British cinema too was somewhat contradictory in the face of not only new sexual freedoms, but the political challenges of a reinvigorated feminism. Popular culture tended to suggest that sexual freedom was empowering for women, allowing a rejection of repressive codes and structures – the iconic carefree glamour of Julie Christie in *Darling* (1965) is in many ways emblematic. Yet sexual freedom also seemed another way of turning women's bodies into commodities, while narratives repeatedly emphasised the dreary, alienating or even deadly consequences of independence.

Diana Dors' cameo in *Deep End* is telling here. A sex symbol of 1950s British cinema enacts a performance of lusty middle age; her predatory sexuality is presented as both comic and oppressive, even grotesque. By contrast, while Susan's amorality is clearly sexual, effectively echoing contemporary anxieties, her character is figured as much in terms of listlessness and boredom as vitality or sexual energy. Here the bitterness at a bleak, class ridden society expressed so forcibly in realist traditions of British filmmaking collides with a more glamorous presentation of modern Britain as a site of opportunity.

Like most young women in the early 1970s, Susan is committed to marriage although the film hardly offers a romanticised image of her fiancé, who takes her to a pornographic film in which she expresses little interest. Her extra-marital relationships are redolent of exploitation as is her implicit association with the booming sex industry, whether via the

eroticised cut-out with which Mike confronts her on the underground, her place in the audience at the porn cinema, or her collusion in supplying Mike with amorous female customers to earn tips at the public baths where they work.

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s British culture saw an increasingly visible and legitimate (though not respectable) trade in women's bodies and sexual spectacle. Though film production was restricted by censorship, the screening of pornographic films in private cinemas flourished. *Deep End* insists on this public sexual culture – the film is striking in its exclusion of the domestic – in which sex is insistently present and oddly banal.

Wielding his first pay packet, teenage Mike encounters an intensely commercial sexual culture: hovering outside a Soho club which is beyond his price range, paying to hide with a cheery prostitute, absconding with the strip club cut-out which advertises the girls within. Though he consumes little more than hot dogs, Mike encounters a world drenched in sex for sale.

Though British films of the period suggest a limited questioning of male and female roles, cinema is no straightforward historical artefact. The X-rated *Deep End* is part of the very commercial sex culture it works to evoke.

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it was you that got pregnant?**

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