

Look what happened to the big screen



Smooch ain't what it used to be. Cosmo Landesman recalls writing film kisses and asks, can we get back to the romance of old?

Will the romance of Valentine's Day, but have you news? The kiss is dead — at least, as far as the concerned. If you don't believe me, ask yourself did you last see a really great kiss in a film?

I posed this question to a selection of my fellow writers and friends, nearly everyone mentioned all the classics: *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca* and *From Here to Eternity*. Not one film from the past 25 years made it into my survey of classic cinematic kisses.

It will be a generational thing. William Cane is the author of *Like a Star: Smooching Secrets from the Silver Screen* and warns against kiss nostalgia. "We tend to look back at the kisses we saw in our youth as the ones that are the best. But young people today have their own kiss scenes, such as in *Titanic*, or the upside-down-in-the-rain scene in *Spider-Man* and *Mary Jane*." This is borne out by the numerous videos featuring favourite kiss sequences on YouTube.

The kiss is still out there, but does it have the romantic power it once did? It was the power of its day, an act of sexual intercourse in which you got naked.

The first smooch made its debut in 1896, in a film entitled *The Kiss* — and was denounced by American moralists as obscene. It wasn't long, though, before the kiss became a major attraction of films. The 1920s was a golden age of silver-screen smooching. The gods and goddesses of Hollywood — John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo — gave great lip.

In the next three decades, kissing of every kind, from tender to dangerous, deadly and dirty — flourished. The 1940s was the last great era of on-screen smooching. It produced the classic kiss-in-the-rain scene in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). We had the classic, manly kisses of Sean Connery as James Bond in *Goldfinger* (1964). And *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) featured a swirling, 360-degree kiss between Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway.

So, what happened to the kiss? Along came the 1970s and the rise of American indie cinema, and the kiss got pushed out into the cold. Cinema, like the rest of society, was shedding its sexual inhibitions. What place had the romantic kiss when Marlon Brando was reaching for the butter (*Last Tango in Paris*, 1972) and Linda Lovelace was reaching for the you-know-what of her leading men (*Deep Throat*, 1972)?

The new heroes of American independent cinema — Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Martin Scorsese — weren't interested in the kind of boy-meets-girl romanticism that ended in a kiss. By the time Sharon Stone appeared in *Basic Instinct* (1992), the dance of lips had given way to the gymnastics of intercourse. The kiss had become corny.

This fashion for erotic explicitness has ceded ground, in turn, to our current longing for good old-fashioned romance — be it in 1,001 romcoms or in serious tales of love such as Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009). And heaven knows we have no shortage of great kissable lips (Angelina Jolie, Scarlett Johansson, Penelope Cruz) and good-looking, sexy leading men (Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Johnny Depp). Yet we haven't had a memorable heterosexual kiss in decades.

Hugh Grant lands his mouth on the area above the lip and below the nose of his leading lady, and settles down to a nice nibble

Who are the great screen kissers of our era? Hugh Grant? No, he's a nibbler, not a kisser. By this, I mean that he aims and lands his mouth on that small area above the upper lip and just below the nose of his leading lady, then settles down to a nice nibble. See him in *Music and Lyrics* (2007), with Drew Barrymore.) It's a peculiar style of kissing that his old flame Elizabeth Hurley practises too: see her kiss scene with Denis Leary in *Bad Boy* (2002).

You would think that Clooney would be a great screen kisser

in the classic sense, but he, too, often goes for the under-the-nose nibble. And, while he oozes sex appeal, he's yet to give the screen a classic kissing scene. For my money, the last great kiss by a leading man was Harrison Ford's embrace with Kelly McGillis in *Witness* (1985) — a smooch that, once seen, is never forgotten.

I suspect the kiss will never regain its former power — at least outside the films of Bollywood, where it is still frowned upon — because it has lost its transgressive nature. The novelist Lana Citron has just written a new study, *A Compendium of Kisses*, and argues: "All the great screen kisses of the past century are gone. Rhetoric forces his kiss on Scarlett O'Hara in *Casablanca* kisses Ilsa, though she is married. The kiss has become the bland punctuated bland romcoms."

That said, there is an attempt to give back to the kiss of its former power to shock and delight: hence the vampire. Put simply, the bite is the new kiss, at least in the post-Buffy the Vampire Slayer generation. In *Twilight*, and in the hit television show *True Blood*, the vampire bite is celebrated as something both chaste and sexy. It's an attempt to return to the romance of old.

The other attempt to bring back the power of the kiss is the rise of the gay embrace. In 2007, the kiss between Matt Damon and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* was voted the best screen smooch ever by a *LoveFilm* poll. Yet even the gay kiss — once so daring — is being overdone. Woody Allen had a lesbian kiss in *Matchmaker* (2005). Penelope Cruz and Scarlett Johansson in his light comedy *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* — and, I hasten to add, it was the most daring kiss in my life.

The days when eyes met, hearts melted, lips met, and audiences swooned to the sight of a kiss may be gone. The kiss, I fear, has become just a kiss.

Pucker up! From left: Gable and Lombard in *Her Confidential Source* (1959); Gable and Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind* (1939); Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in *Comedians* (1956)