

I love you, Kate Winslet

Marcin Wisniewski

An imaginary invitation to dinner for Kate Winslet based on the author's appreciation of the actress' exploration of female sexuality in her films following her starring turn in *Titanic*.

Kate Winslet, I love you. Well, okay maybe I don't love you. In fact I don't even know you and aside from a few charming interviews (that I've seen or read) I cannot even begin to describe the kind of person you really are. But, let's just say that if I was throwing a dinner party I would want to invite you.

You are probably wondering who I am and why I am making such ridiculously grand statements. Well, let me just say that I'm a graduate student writing an article for the online, cinematic journal *Synoptique* in an issue focusing on film and sexuality. And this is where my love for you, Kate Winslet, comes in.

Like many people I became familiar with you through your starring role in James Cameron's 1996 *Titanic* (though some may argue that the real starring role belongs to the lovingly immortalized ship). I'm not a big fan of the blockbuster genre and what intrigued me in the film was you, more importantly the character you played, Rose. Here was a self-assured, intelligent and most of all sexual young woman on a quest to define herself on her own terms. In a rather cliché scene Rose allows herself to be immortalized as a nude by her lover, Jack. The tableau smacks of traditional paintings of the nude à la Ingre's *The Grand Odelisque*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, or Giorigione's *Sleeping Venus*, all reclining on

cushions, with nothing but a jewel (or a fan, or a hand) to cover their nakedness. But unlike those women who are naked, exposed, shocking (everything for the artist and viewer but nothing for herself) Rose was transgressing a traditional role in a patriarchal society in order to embrace herself; her sexuality being an important part of her identity.

Titanic made you a star, and though you could have followed the Hollywood path, you decided to create your own. This slightly unconventional road took you, and us, to films like Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* (1999), Philip Kaufman's *Quills* (2000), Richard Eyre's biopic of the writer Iris Murdoch *Iris* (2001), Todd Field's *Little Children* (2006), and in 2008 to two extraordinary projects: Sam Mendes' *Revolutionary Road* and Stephen Daldry's *The Reader*. To this list I should also add Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* from 1994, two years before *Titanic* thrust you into popular consciousness.

I hope you can see a connection here; a connection that links you, the characters you've portrayed in those films to the forthcoming issue of *Synoptique*, sex, and my love for you. As a member of a group whose onscreen sexuality has often been censored, ridiculed, objectified, and vilified I welcome any fissures in the traditional, patriarchal representations of sexuality. For you see my dear Kate (I hope I can call you 'my dear Kate') I'd like to argue here that through the characters in the above mentioned films you've begun to create an image of a new woman. To be honest I don't like the word 'new' for those characteristics have probably existed in women for centuries, however our image in art and film of such women is fairly new.

I believe that what all these characters have in common is their attitude towards sex, sexuality, and their bodies. These are not women constricted and oppressed by their sexuality or ashamed of their bodies. Rather, they believe their bodies belong to them and sex and its pleasures also belong to them. Be it Ruth in *Holy Smoke*, Sarah in *Little Children*, Hanna in *The Reader*, or April in *The Revolutionary Road*, what these women share is a strong conviction that sex is an integral part of them. Their sexualities complete them, sex satisfies parts of them, and the acceptance of their bodies (as imperfect as they may be) is an essential part of this equation. In particular Hanna Schmitz strikes me as a powerful woman for whom her body is the most natural part of herself and so, she doesn't embarrass herself, or us, with false displays of modesty and attempts at awkwardly covering herself. And to be fair, these fictional women are not perfect people, they come with their own histories and personal baggage but this is what makes them so much more appealing.

I'd like to say here that I'm not trying to draw a comparison between you and your characters; as I've said I don't even know you. However, through your choice of characters you have added significantly to the discussion of women's sexuality and their filmic representations. You've taken the spectator's gaze off a woman's body and related it back to her, to her attempts at defining herself in a world full of notions of what a woman is and should be. And for that reason, I think you'd be an engaging guest at my dinner party.

Yours truly,
Marcin Wisniewski

FILMOGRAPHY

Titanic (James Cameron, 1996)

Holy Smoke (Jane Campion, 1999)

Quills (Philip Kaufman, 2000)

Iris (Richard Eyre, 2001)

Little Children (Todd Field, 2006)

Revolutionary Road (Sam Mendes, 2008)

The Reader (Stephen Daldry, 2008)

Heavenly Creatures (Peter Jackson, 1994)

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