Catherine is a wealthy, successful writer with a degree in literature and psychology from Berkeley. She also likes to fuck men she does not necessarily like, wears no underwear, and exposes her vagina to five police detectives she has just met during an interview. The spectator sees Sharon Stone’s body from the voyeuristic point of view of the middle-aged male detectives and the protagonist, Nick. *Basic Instinct* (1992), with its classic shot/reverse shot sequences, constructs the type of male gaze Laura Mulvey had discussed two decades earlier. An international blockbuster at the time, this film is remarkably lacking in female point-of-view shots; it sutures the spectator into a male heterosexual viewing position, and the narrative reinforces a male heterosexual construction of sexuality. After an explicit, semi-violent scene in which he forces his girlfriend, Christine, to have sex, Nick criticizes her for not being able to “get off.” Even though the scene does not indicate that Nick makes any effort to satisfy Christine sexually, the plot represents her failure to achieve orgasm as completely her own. Indeed, despite the sexual deficiencies of this relationship, and despite the fact that Nick betrays his girlfriend by having sex with another woman (who orgasms very easily), when Christine is accidentally murdered by Nick at the end of the film, she still manages to whisper “I love you” with her dying breath.

Representing sexuality from a male heterosexual perspective was of course not unfamiliar in film before 1992. What was new in the 1990s, however, was that films such as *Basic Instinct* had become part of a broader cultural trend that legitimized soft porn. From Victoria’s Secret catalogs to the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, which by the end of the 1990s included no articles about sports, pornographic imagery had become increasingly legitimate in mainstream culture and pervaded American advertising, magazines, popular music, and film.
What was also new was that feminist critiques that identified these representations as oppressive to women had broad cultural appeal. Susan Faludi’s bestseller *Backlash* – popular enough to be featured on a *Time* magazine cover – argued that women’s economic achievements were accompanied by an undermining onslaught of sexualized media representations. Naomi Wolf’s bestseller *The Beauty Myth*, which also received a great deal of attention in Britain, asserted that the media was constructing an unnatural ideal of female beauty and sexuality that made women insecure about their bodies and detached from their sexuality, regardless of how successful they were in their careers. Other writers and filmmakers, such as Susan Douglas and Jean Kilbourne, also showed how media representations of women constituted a backlash against feminist success. Although some feminists, including Camille Paglia, argued that representations of female sexuality such as those in *Basic Instinct* were empowering to women, feminist critiques of these new pornographic cultural trends were sold by mainstream publishing houses and had become international bestsellers. It seems that the popularity of this type of feminism was noticed by the international conglomerates with film and publishing interests.

By the mid-1990s a new genre of film had become commercially successful. Adaptations of British nineteenth-century novels, usually novels by women authors, proliferated. Alongside Sharon Stone’s naked flashes and the striptease of popular actresses such as Demi Moore, cinemas pictured the fully clothed women characters of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Victorian clothing was not new on screen, but in the 1990s it took on a different meaning within the more undressed context of popular visual imagery and the increased attention feminism was giving to the way female bodies were represented. Popular films like *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) represented female sexuality in a way that resisted trends in the broader culture. At the same time that films such as *Basic Instinct* provided mass audiences with *Playboy*-style images of sex – naked female bodies filtered through soft lenses, explicit yet aesthetically sanitized copulation – other films were turning back to the nineteenth century to construct an alternative sexuality. The automatically orgasmic women who had walked off *Playboy’s* pages into movie theaters and advertisements across America now existed side by side with women whose erotic needs were more subtle. Like the British Gainsborough costume dramas of the 1940s, 1990s adaptations of the British nineteenth-century novel aspired to represent female sexual desire, and they did so in a way that reacted to...