

Basic Instinct

Stevie Simkin

Controversies



Basic Instinct

X Controversies

Series editors: Stevie Simkin and Julian Petley

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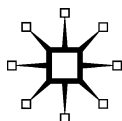
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Kim Newman, novelist, critic and broadcaster

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Stevie Simkin

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For Chuck and Stephie, my two favourite San Franciscans

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✕ Introduction

The reasons why what began essentially as a B-movie thriller turned into an important landmark in the history of film controversy in the United States are many and complex. *Basic Instinct*'s notoriety accrued as much through a set of specific circumstances of production and reception as through the content of the film itself. Those circumstances began with the sale of the script, which made headlines in the Hollywood press, and continued as a peculiarly volatile interaction of personality, politics, circumstance and Hollywood hype set the course for the film's troubled production history and reception.

Basic Instinct is also important as an example of a target of so-called grass-roots censorship – in the first instance, the initiative to try and censor it came not from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) or an equivalent censorship body, but from members of the public – in this case, a specific demographic outraged by what they described as homophobia and misogyny in the original screenplay. According to screenwriter Joe Eszterhas, once his script sold for a record-breaking \$3 million, 'the whole project was in the middle of a goldfish bowl – it became a very, very public project' (van Scheers, 1997, p. 243). Inevitably, the public nature of the film's very difficult journey to theatrical release and beyond was seized upon by those involved in order to enhance further the status it was to achieve as an 'event movie'.

The fact that *Basic Instinct* had a considerable impact on popular consciousness on its release in 1992 is undeniable. Among other things, the film launched Sharon Stone's career, and, in industry terms, had a profound impact on the profile of the screenwriter in Hollywood (Eszterhas's script prompted a bidding war, and began a cycle of inflated bids for screenplays, raising the status of a number of successful writers in the years that followed).

The film's most infamous scene swiftly established itself as a parody staple: being questioned by police officers, Stone's character Catherine Tramell crosses and uncrosses her legs to reveal, for the benefit of her male interrogators, that she is not wearing any underwear. The 'tributes' started as early as the following year, with an MTV Awards parody by the cast of *The Brady Bunch*. Erotic thriller spoof *Fatal Instinct* (1993) followed, its poster featuring a woman, shot from the shoulders down, seated with her legs crossed, and the legend 'Opening Soon' printed across the image. *Hot Shots! Part Deux* and *Loaded Weapon 1*, in the same year, both included versions of the scene, and there have been scores of references since, on film and on TV, including on popular shows such as *Married with Children* (1992 and 1993), *The Simpsons* (1995), *Seinfeld* (1997), *The X-Files* (2000), *Gilmore Girls* (2002), *My Name Is Earl* (2008) and the UK comedy *Life's Too Short* (2011). In November 2010, Alpine Skier Lindsey Vonn recreated the iconic image of Sharon Stone seated in a tight white dress for the cover of *ESPN – The Magazine*. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Verhoeven, Eszterhas and Stone should feel flattered indeed, although *Loaded Weapon 1*'s smoking beaver might be a stretch (see Figure 1).¹

This study of *Basic Instinct* attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the film from pre-production, through shooting, post-production and regulation, reception to after-life. The chief focus of the study is, as one would expect, the controversies that it sparked at every stage. Part 1 covers the first stage of the film's history, and considers the production of the film in the context of the industry at the time. Particular attention is paid to the disagreements between screenwriter Joe Eszterhas and director Paul Verhoeven, as well as the shooting of some of the more troublesome scenes, piecing together parts of this process by referring to the accounts of key personnel, including the actors, gleaned from a range of sources.

The second part considers the attempt made by a number of pressure groups, including Queer Nation and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), to persuade the director, writer and production team to make changes to take account of their objections to what they perceived as a



Figure 1: From *Loaded Weapon 1*'s parody of the interrogation scene.

homophobic and misogynist screenplay. When this effort failed, the groups switched strategy and did all they could to disrupt the location shooting of the movie. The discussion gives due consideration to those on both sides of the divide (and those that crossed from one side to the other, notably Eszterhas himself), and takes account of the reflections of actors, writer and director, in some cases with the benefit of hindsight. In order to judge the protests against the film fairly, it is important to understand the wider context of representations of homosexuality and bisexuality in Hollywood, and in US society more generally at this time. My overview considers in particular William Friedkin's cop thriller *Cruising* (1980), which, with its controversial depiction of the gay and S&M scene in New York City, stirred similar trouble ten years before *Basic Instinct*. Part 2 attempts to make sense of some of the associated issues, including the heated debate about freedom of speech and political correctness, while also offering an assessment of the charges of homophobia and misogyny levelled against *Basic Instinct*.

Part 3 begins with an overview of the state of film censorship in the US at the time *Basic Instinct* was made. The MPAA and Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) were attempting at this time to launch a new adult rating of NC-17 to replace the X certificate, which had long since been rejected by the major studios and appropriated instead by the porn industry. The conflicting interests that came into play at this point – artistic, commercial, regulatory – are complex and worth untangling. The second section of Part 3 looks very closely and precisely at the footage cut at the request of the MPAA (the film was released uncut in the UK and in most other countries, but had to shed around forty seconds for the domestic audience). The intact scenes are compared with their R-rated edited versions and the implications of the cuts are analysed. The third section considers the deliberations of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). Although it was passed uncut at 18 in the UK, the examiners' reports are interesting for what they reveal about the Board's attitudes towards sex, violence and sexual violence at this time.² There is also some discussion of letters written to the Board by members of the public objecting to its decision to certificate the film in its uncut form.

Part 4 considers the reception of the film. There is an extensive survey of the US press reaction, as well as the critical response in the UK, but I also discuss in detail the strategies the pressure groups adopted in this third stage of their campaign against the film. Having attempted to enforce changes to the script and then to disrupt the shoot, they proceeded to make concerted efforts to spoil the film's opening weekend, sparking fresh debates about the limits of protest and where it begins to impinge on freedom of expression. Part 5 provides the most extensive critical discussion of the film and its contested meanings. *Basic Instinct* is considered in the context of a wave of films featuring violent women, and is also placed in the context of the genre to which it owes most, *film noir*. I examine the complex power relations between men and women that the film maps out, including a close analysis of the interrogation scene: when Catherine appears to be at her most 'exposed', she is least vulnerable. The paradoxical cross-currents of gender and power are

evaluated and then related back to the debates over the film's misogyny and homophobia. Finally, Part 6 tries to assess the status of the film's politics of gender and sexuality twenty years on. The conclusion also raises questions about the nature of representation, and the relation between representation and the 'real', partly via a reading of the press coverage of a notorious murder case from 2007 featuring a woman portrayed by some elements of the media as a 'real life' *femme fatale*.

Basic Instinct was undoubtedly a ground-breaking movie, particularly for the way it redrew the boundaries of the depiction of (relatively) graphic sex in mainstream film. It also raises important questions about the politics of representation with regard to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, few popular movies of its era have attracted such a degree of attention from academics in the fields of film and cultural studies. Indeed, it is at the intersection of the popular and the scholarly that *Basic Instinct* is perhaps most provocative. The book attempts to keep both in focus throughout, and concludes with some reflections on the film's legacy in terms of shifts in ideologies of gender and violence, and the way these might filter through popular culture into popular consciousness.

✕ Synopsis

The film opens with a sex scene in which a blonde woman, her face never clearly visible to the audience, straddles her male lover, ties his hands to the bed with a white silk scarf, and stabs him to death with an ice-pick. While she continues her frenzied attack, we cut abruptly to an establishing shot of the street, with a cop car arriving outside the murder scene. The car's occupants join a forensic team examining the bedroom and the body of the murder victim: Johnny Boz (Bill Cable) was a retired rock star and a friend of the San Francisco Mayor. The two detectives from the car, Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) and Gus Moran (George Dzundza), are despatched to question Boz's lover Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone). At Tramell's opulent home, they find only her lesbian lover Roxy (Leilani Sarelle), who directs them to Tramell's beach-house. There, when questioned about the murder, Tramell gives nothing away, and is apparently unmoved by news of Boz's death.

At the station, the audience is introduced to police psychologist Beth Garner (Jeanne Tripplehorn) and two things become clear: Nick has been under psychological evaluation, and Nick and Beth have until recently been in a relationship. At a briefing, Nick and Gus hear that Catherine Tramell, a millionaire with a degree in psychology and a successful author of detective fiction, has written a book about the murder of a retired rock star. Beth and her colleague Dr Lamott (Stephen Tobolowsky) provide the investigating team with a psychological profile of Tramell, and Nick and Gus are sent to bring her in for formal questioning. During the interrogation, she unnerves the detectives by speaking openly of her enjoyment of sex and drugs. At one point, she uncrosses and recrosses her legs, revealing to the police

interrogators that she is naked beneath her skirt. She passes a lie-detector test, and is released without charge. Nick, who seems convinced of her guilt regardless, drives her home.

Nick, who has been teetotal since disciplinary action was brought against him after an accidental shooting, joins his fellow cops at a bar and orders a whisky. Taunted by Internal Affairs investigator Nilsen (Daniel von Bargen), Nick almost comes to blows with him, and leaves with Beth. They go to her apartment, where their sexual encounter is pitched somewhere between aggressive sex and an act of rape.

Nick hears more of Catherine's background, which includes a number of traumatic bereavements: we have already heard of the deaths of her parents in a boating accident when she was a teenager, and of a former lover, boxing champion Manny Vasquez. Now Nick is informed that one of her professors was stabbed to death with an ice-pick during her college days at Berkeley. Nick stakes out Catherine's home and follows her in his car when she leaves. Aware she is being followed, she leads him on a dangerous chase down hilltop roads. Left trailing, he eventually spots her car parked outside the house of a woman named Hazel Dobkins (Dorothy Malone). When he tries to tail her home, she again loses him in traffic. Nick arrives back at her house and watches from her garden as she undresses at the window. Returning to the station to find out more about Dobkins, he meets Gus, who tells him that many years ago Hazel Dobkins was convicted of the murders of her husband and three children.

Nick visits Catherine at her beachfront house, where he learns that she has accessed confidential information about him, and that she is using him as the basis for the main character in her next novel. It becomes increasingly obvious that there is sexual tension between the two of them, but the scene ends with Catherine embracing and fondling Roxy as Nick turns and leaves. Nick returns to the station and challenges Beth, who admits that she passed his file to Nilsen. Curran confronts the IA officer and has to be restrained. That night, Nick is at home alone drinking when Beth appears. They argue and fight when Nick takes back the key to his apartment and dismisses their

relationship as worthless. Beth tells Nick she had to give Nilsen his file to save him from being fired from the force. Later the same night, Nilsen is found dead in his car, shot in the head, and Nick is inevitably a suspect. In a scene that mirrors Catherine's interrogation, Nick is questioned, but Beth comes to his aid with an alibi, claiming that Nick was not drunk when she left his apartment, but sober and lucid.

Nick is no longer considered a suspect but is forced to go on leave pending a psychiatric evaluation. He returns home to find Catherine waiting outside. After another cat-and-mouse exchange, she tells him she will be at Johnny Boz's club that night and he says he will meet her there, which is where the following scene is set. Catherine and Nick dance, and then leave for her beachfront house. They have sex, during which Catherine ties Nick to the bed with a white silk scarf. Afterwards, while Catherine sleeps, Nick goes to the bathroom, and Roxy appears. She tells him that Catherine likes her to watch while she has sex with men. The next morning, Nick talks with Catherine, pronouncing their love-making 'the fuck of the century'. Catherine is cool and mildly amused by Nick's enthusiasm. Nick admits he is in love with Catherine but insists he will still 'nail her' for the murder of Johnny Boz.

That evening, Nick finds a drunk Gus in a club, and Gus is angry when he figures out what has happened between Nick and Catherine. Just after Gus leaves the parking lot, Nick is almost run down by a car. Nick gives chase in his own vehicle and a game of chicken results in the other car careering off a bridge. When Nick surveys the wreckage, he finds the driver dead: Roxy. The next day, he is invited to the station for his psychological evaluation; he mocks the psychiatric team and leaves for Catherine's beachfront house, where he finds her mourning Roxy. They make love. Afterwards, Catherine mentions a woman who was obsessed with her at college. Back at the station, Nick and Gus learn that Roxy also had a violent past, having killed her two brothers with a razor when she was sixteen years old. Nick visits the Berkeley campus to check Catherine's story about the woman from her college days but draws a blank. When he challenges her about it, and she corrects the name, he finds