

Do Women Want Too Much?: *Lantana*

BY CATHERINE WOOD



While 'romantic love' is a perennial concept in Western culture, attitudes towards the concept have differed over time. Our present notions have their basis in the American film culture and have been further delineated and extended through American advertising models.

EARLY twentieth century advertising established a linkage between beauty, youth, romantic love and products that assisted women to retain their man's love. By the end of the century the nexus had become body image, sexual power, orgasmic love and the dedicated pursuit by women of ego-expressive products. In the early twenty-first century, the time set of Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* (2001), the feminine ideal of passive sexuality had given way to a more aggressive femininity in which women took hold of, and assumed responsibility for, their sexual destiny. *Lantana* explores the ways in which the sexualizing of romantic love called into question the role of the male in human partnership.

The new image of the feisty passionate woman rejoicing in her sexuality is referenced in the film through Latin American dance. As promoted by the dance world, Latin American dance is a constructed product, marketed from New York in the 1970s. Promoted as a high-energy dance, Latin is proclaimed as 'sensual and passionate'. In particular, the salsa, prominent in *Lantana*, is 'intimate and sexy'. In *Lantana* this imaginary world of feisty females in minimal, brightly coloured costumes, and sultry slinky-hipped males is undercut by the *mise en scène* of the dance class. A

mixed group of individuals, predominantly women, gather awkwardly in a bare room, waiting to unleash their sexuality under unfriendly lighting. The dance instructor (Manu Bennett) demonstrates with clinical precision to a resentful husband, Leon Zat (Anthony LaPaglia), how to achieve intimate contact with his uncertain wife, Sonja (Kerry Armstrong). Sonja is at once embarrassed by the dance instructor's physical proximity but at the same time gratified by his 'performance' of desire. In fact, it is what she wants. She wants to know that she is desirable, and she wants to hear a man saying, 'Sonja, you're a beautiful woman.'

When women were the passive objects of men's sexual interest men had to do less. In the past, men could affirm their attraction through the complimentary gaze (admiring their wife's schoolgirl complexion) or through gifts, such as small, chaste pearl earrings. By the 1990s, as advertising represented it, women expected the male to affirm her desirability through his passionate response. As we have prior knowledge of the grumpy Leon's impoverished notion of making a woman feel desired – 'I really enjoyed that' he says to his lover, Janie O'May (Rachael Blake), as he dresses – we wonder if Leon can change sufficiently to make Sonja feel that

their relationship, which she describes as 'just going through the motions', can be reinvigorated. However, perhaps we should be asking whether Sonja expects too much of her husband? Or asking how many of Sonja's expectations, or the expectations of Valerie Somers (Barbara Hershey) or Paula D'Amato (Daniella Farinacci) of their husbands, are dictated by an unreal notion of what is possible in modern relationships which theoretically can endure for sixty years. Of the four women upon whom the film focuses, Janie is the only character to consider that her expectations of her husband, Pete O'May (Glenn Robbins), from whom she has separated, have been too high.

Clearly, Janie's expectations of sexual attraction are also too high. In an early interior shot we see her completely absorbed in dancing to Latin music and feel her restless energy. The brown-toned *mise en scène* and Janie's own lack of personal stylishness are an ironic contradiction to the glamorous world of the Latin dance, but her yearning for life lived on a more intense level is made plain to us. In her two sexual encounters with Leon, we see little evidence of Leon cherishing Janie, yet evidently she has built those encounters into a romantic scenario. In a restaurant scene, we watch her girlishly gawky attempts to lead Leon into a commitment or an avowal, and wonder how she can delude herself so completely. Is she really so gullible as to

ABOVE: LEON ZAT (ANTHONY LAPAGLIA)
AND SONJA (KERRY ARMSTRONG)
IN RAY LAWRENCE'S *LANTANA*.

believe that love and sex are identical? And does she really believe, having experienced one long-term relationship, that what she calls love but others might call physical attraction is likely to endure any longer in a second relationship? Her 'romance' with Leon leads to her humiliation when the pragmatic Leon brusquely informs her he still loves his wife. Her second attempt is catastrophic. This is identified by *Lantana* as a social taboo through the use of an exterior shot of Janie coveting her neighbour, Nik (Vince Colosimo) through the grille of the safety door. Her traitorous attempt to seduce Nik jeopardizes her friendship with his wife, Paula, and indirectly results in Nik's concealment of his knowledge of Valerie Somers' last moments.

Janie's sexual interest in Nik demonstrates a very material attitude to human relationship. Her many glances at him show her evaluating him in terms of what he has to offer sexually, detaching him from his domestic context as father and husband. The same materialism is evident in the treatment of her own husband, Pete. The metaphor of the lost and found pearl earring indicates that although Janie is fond of Pete, he can no longer, or never has, satisfied her sexually, a satisfaction she finds in the more macho Leon. Unlike Sonja Zat, she doesn't consider the possibility of reviving her marriage, instead abandoning it. Pete, however, has no understanding of why he is being sidelined. When Janie looked around one day and found she didn't love her husband any more, or in truth, her husband didn't live up to her fantasy, then Pete, on that same day, discovered that he isn't loved any more, or even tolerated. That he is deeply wounded is revealed not only through his conversation with Leon in the pub but also by the sad, inarticulate interchange with Nik. Pete's gently eager manner suggests he believes he is offered a second chance when Janie rings him after she has found Valerie's shoe, but his later tentative sexual overture is brusquely repelled.

Janie does become less hard-edged while she is looking after Paula and Nik's child and she blooms temporarily as a homemaker, although it is Paula's house she annexes for the occasion. Although Pete clearly longs to stay on in the marital home after the crisis is over, Janie refuses. He must relinquish his dream, conveyed to us by a shot in which a beaming Pete alongside a softer, smiling Janie who holds the D'Amato baby are both framed by the doorway of the marital home.

Janie will not forgo the possibility that the future might yet still hold her fantasy of love as enduring sexual union and Pete drives away into a lonely future. Our last image of Janie, wine glass in one hand, cigarette in another, arms outspread and empty, dancing to Latin American music, makes her appear a sad woman. She remains, however, a threat to the fragile balance of the partnered community.

Valerie Somers, connected to Janie by her lost shoe, presents a threat to the fragile balance of power in the marital relationship. While fondness is not enough for Janie to consider rebuilding her relationship with Pete, love is not enough, claims Valerie's husband, to sustain a marriage. Valerie is both an overweening and emotionally needy partner and, whether consciously or not, is both in competition with her partner and emotionally dependent on him. For John Knox (Geoffrey Rush), an academic for whom success is very much dependent on publication, the launching of Valerie's book is likely to engender professional envy. At the same time, he is critical of Valerie for publicizing

■ Of the four women upon whom the film focuses, Janie is the only character to consider that her expectations of her husband, Pete O'May (Glenn Robbins), from whom she has separated, have been too high. ■

private pain; the book launch *mise en scène* which shows the suited Valerie against a background of waving banners inscribed with her dead daughter's name, does suggest that the writing of *Eleanor* is more indulgence than genuine sharing. This impression is affirmed by a later shot of Valerie at a small domestic 'shrine' for her daughter. We see Valerie's face in the small mirror around which the candles are burning. As Valerie expresses her concern at John's disapproval, her face is lit by the reflected glow from the book display window, suggesting that her concern is hypocritical and almost provocative. The shot visually states the problematic state of their relationship. While John's solid suited back faces the audience, Valerie's face and upper body appear to emerge from his left side, giving the impression that she exists as a parasitic form on her host husband.

Some attempt is made to explain her insecurity by John's admission that he has had an affair, but her neediness, which she conceals beneath the term 'sharing', is exceptional. John's secrecy about his solitary vigils at the site of his daughter's death is self-protection, for it is impossible

to imagine Valerie accepting the need for John to mourn alone without feeling excluded. Valerie cannot allow John a private life and she crosses a boundary when she forces her husband to look at her after he has tried to appease her by making love. Her expectation that union means 'mutual surrender', as she says at the book launch, is possibly true but she demands 'mutual and complete surrender', the annihilation of personality. In the end John shuts her out, although we know from the last brooding image of him that he is left with a lifetime of guilt. Ultimately, Valerie's all-consuming neediness impacts not only upon John but also upon the community as whole, and in particular, upon Nik D'Amato.

Although the D'Amato relationship is often seen as a successful example of marital steadfastness, Paula's treatment of her husband is more maternal than marital. A crucial sequence in revealing their relationship takes place as Nik tells Paula about Janie 'coming on to him'. The fact that Nik is so open about the incident ought to reassure Paula of his

attitude but nevertheless she responds at first reasonably, 'she's lonely and you're bored', and then with a measure of anger. While her intimidating remarks, making clear her expectations of Nik, are leavened with humour, the sequence is uncomfortable. The oppressive effect of Paula's assumption of authority and the consequent diminution of Nik's role in the partnership is intensified by the claustrophobic domesticity of the *mise en scène*. As a consequence of Paula's anger, Nik, whom we assume would have otherwise told Paula about the shoe, is afraid and tosses it into the lantana. Nik's gestures, stance and facial expressions show him to be more like a boy that has grown older than a maturing male. Later his total reliance on Paula typifies the relationship of a mother and son, even to the *pieta* pose in the charge room. The reduction of men to boys by women's ability to assume responsibility and stake out their sexual expectations is not an attractive prospect.

The model represented by *Lantana* as offering most hope is that of Leon and Sonja Zat. Their relationship we understand has followed a pattern typical of most long-term Western relationships. Romance fades

as the couple becomes preoccupied with the having, rearing and educating of their offspring, only to find that as the children enter adolescence and need them less or perhaps in a different way, they themselves have to rediscover new grounds upon which to foster their relationship. For some, habit, convention or duty is still sufficient, but the modern woman like Sonja, for whom love has been sexualized, is likely to want a

Yet to say that he capitulates simply because he fears losing Sonja is a simplification. From the opening of the film Leon has been troubled by a sense that something is deeply askew in his life, a feeling that he releases in frustration and anger. After he collides with the lonely Michael (Russell Dykstra) while out jogging, the blood-streaked faces of both Michael and Leon are paired in the one shot indicating that they are both

Leon's growth and transformation as well. We leave them tentatively dancing the salsa, tentative because in this particular dance the leader and the follower change places at regular intervals, a changeover that requires some skill to achieve smoothly.

While women were empowered by changes in perception of their sexuality, men were eclipsed. While women were encouraged to seek self-actualization the assumption appeared to be that somehow men would adapt accordingly. *Lantana*, in exploring the relationships of several couples, shows that, like Pete, men could be sidelined, like John they could be driven back in themselves, like Nik regress to boyhood, or some seek relief in a homosexual relationship. Other men like Leon take the challenge and attempt recast themselves in a newly defined role. The key to Leon's transition is Sonja who is able to balance her needs against their shared past together and offer hope for the future. What a woman wants may equally empower the man.

Catherine Wood is currently doing an MA (Screen Writing, Research) at Melbourne University.

■ **John's secrecy about his solitary vigils at the site of his daughter's death is self-protection, for it is impossible to imagine Valerie accepting the need for John to mourn alone without feeling excluded.** ■

'passionate, challenging and honest' relationship. Women know, as Sonja does, that they can survive husbandless – the possibility of rejuvenation lies in the preparedness of the male to renegotiate his role and relinquish the older-style masculine code to which he has adhered. While Leon struggles against capitulation, 'going over', he eventually makes a beginning by putting their marital relationship on an 'honest' basis.

'wounded men'. As the sobbing Michael is uncertainly embraced by a reluctant Leon in the following shot, a fleeting expression of self-appraisal suggests that Leon for a moment recognizes his own grief in Michael's tears. Leon's story, in fact, comes full circle, as he gives way to unashamed tears when he finally has the courage to listen to the tape confiscated from the office of Sonja's therapist in which Sonja admits that she still loves Leon. What begins as Sonja's attempt at self-actualization becomes the means for



www.metro magazine.com.au
 METRO MAGAZINE > FILM | TELEVISION | RADIO | MULTIMEDIA