



ILLUSTRATION: SOPHIE BASS



A tube of lipstick rolls across the diner floor. The camera pans up the mile-long legs of screen goddess Lana Turner. John Garfield picks up the tube and hands it back to her. She slicks it onto her lips and sidles away, with just a sultry glance back.

So the hero of the 1946 film noir classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice* meets the *femme fatale* who will be the end of him.

Glenn Close's Marquise de Merteuil is exposed as a scheming seductress at the end of *Dangerous Liaisons*. The 1988 film closes with her scrubbing away her rouge lips to reveal a vulnerable woman stripped of her powers.

The scarlet-lipped woman is an enduring icon. The perfect pouts of Clara Bow, Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe are printed onto our cultural consciousness. And with painted models strutting down every Fashion Week catwalk this year, red lips remain synonymous with sex and seduction. Despite all of this, it is anything but a straightforward symbol.

A slick of red lipstick is the timeless weapon of choice for the seductress and with good reason. Scientists at Manchester University have used eye-tracking software to prove that men are hopelessly drawn to a bright red mouth.

When shown photographs of a woman for 10 seconds each, men spent 7.3 seconds looking at red lips compared to only 0.95 seconds on the eyes. Pink lipstick held the gaze for just 6.7 seconds. Dr Geoff Beattie, professor of psychology, says the study suggests that "red lips and perceived attractiveness are still inextricably linked".

Why? It's because that flash of Chanel Rouge Allure is nothing less than a glimpse into a woman's knickers. Naturalist Diane Ackerman, author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, summarises the leading anthropological theory on lipstick: "The lips remind us of the labia, because they flush red and swell when they're aroused, which is the conscious or subconscious reason women have always made them look even redder with lipstick."

No wonder it was banned by the famously prudish Queen Victoria. With cosmetics branded "brazen and uncouth",

read my lips

**Red lipstick
is the enduring
symbol of glamour,
sex and seduction.
But is there more to
it than meets the eye?**

words: Hannah Bass

rouge appeared only on the mouths of actresses and prostitutes during the nineteenth century.

Had Poppy King been around at the time, she would have been horrified. The cosmetics entrepreneur associates the pale-lipped look with "silent-mouthed" women. "A slash of red on the mouth has a clear relation to genitalia, sex and the menstrual cycle, and wearing it is a sign of female power," she says. "You leave your mark on the world."

The Suffragettes were much more up her street. The 1912 New York Suffragette rally saw hundreds of red-lipped and loud-mouthed women reclaiming lipstick as a symbol of their independence. Meanwhile, advertisers influenced by Freud sold lipstick based on its phallic shape. The 1920s flappers scandalised society by applying it in public.

Since then, lipstick has been adopted by punk in the 1970s and Madonna in the

1980s. It has been brandished by first, second and third wave feminists and it remains a powerful, enduring symbol of female sexuality.

Wearing lipstick is a self-conscious performance of femininity. Unlike concealer and blush, red lipstick is not intended to look natural. It retains its theatricality – and that's part of its appeal.

Rachel White, 27, is a journalist and the founder of No Makeup Week, a project which challenged women to go makeup-free and blog about it. White says: "Lipstick is a wondrous tool. Ask any drag queen or club kid or actress. It has the power to transform, to create a character. I would venture that red lipstick is one of the few beauty items that is purchased for this sort of fun escape."

The promise of escape might explain why lipstick sales soared during the Great Depression of the 1930s and again during the uncertain times following 9/11. Leonard Lauder, chairman of Estee Lauder, coined the term "lipstick index" as sales in the US increased by 11 per cent in 2001 – and by 14 per cent in 2011. Cheaper than a whole new outfit, a slick of lippie offers a fleeting taste of Hollywood glamour.

Anita Bhagwandas, *Stylist* magazine's beauty writer and *Guardian* columnist, agrees. "It's the simplest way to transform yourself instantly," she says. "That idea of being a different version of yourself in a few seconds – that's what makes red lipstick so special."

Bhagwandas adds that the crimson-lipped look combines "smouldering sexuality" with a "look-but-don't-kiss power statement". Red might be the colour of love, lust and the labia but it also stands for danger, blood, and screaming STOP signs.

If it draws the eye of an admirer, it warns the mouth. Maggie and Annie Ford Danielson, the women behind Benefit cosmetics, advise girls not to wear lipstick on dates: one kiss and your bloke will be branded with man-eating red. But, of course, that's all part of the appeal for the crimson-lipped *femme fatale*.

*The story continues at xcityarts.com
Sophie Bass' illustrations can be found at
www.sophiebass.tumblr.com*