

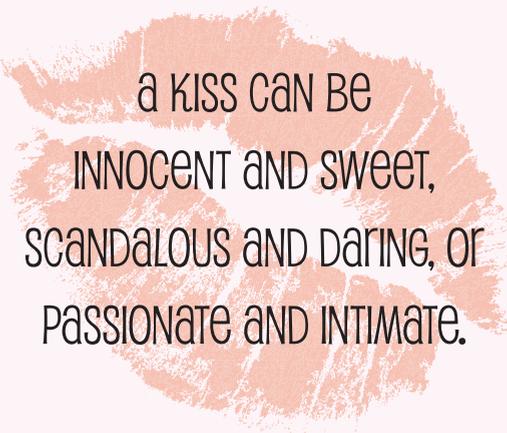
Bearing Witness: The Power of the Observed Kiss

by Chris Friend

Why do we close our eyes when we kiss? Social and cultural precedents make it clear that as we approach the point of contact, our eyes should be shut. The more intimate the scenario, the more passionate the scenario, the less likely we are to look. But why? What is it about the kiss that makes opening our eyes so awkward - so creepy? Sure, closing our eyes allows us to focus on senses other than vision. Sure, a kiss brings our partner's face into such close proximity that open eyes would be either crossed or useless. Sure, it may feel instinctive to let the embrace and the contact take over our awareness. But I assert that we close our eyes intentionally, as a means of protecting the intimacy of—and keeping control over - the wondrous moment.

A kiss can be innocent and sweet, scandalous and daring, or passionate and intimate. Much of the distinction depends not on who's participating but on who's watching. For the participants, a kiss is an opportunity to share, to join, perhaps to taste. It's a physical effort of combination, of connection. Two people decide to offer, to share, to exchange. They spend a few moments alone with each other in a mental space of focused attention. In the midst of an intimate, prolonged kiss, our thoughts often give way to overwhelming emotions and stimulating physical sensations. We are entranced, wrapped up in what our lips are doing with someone else's. It's a sharing and a connection that makes time hold its breath. No matter how brief, the kiss contains a fundamental message: I am here for you right now.

But kisses aren't necessarily discrete. What often feels like a private moment becomes a performance if others are within eyesight of the event. This performative nature gives the kiss power, but it is often power over those involved in the kiss, power given to an outside observer. By itself, a kiss can feel harmless and pleasant; with an audience, it becomes dangerous and bold. That audience interprets the significance of the act, judges its (in)appropriateness,



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and determines whether to tell others that it happened. A kiss is mysterious because its power comes not from the act but from its witnesses. And where better to witness a kiss than in movies and television? Today's media, which doubtless help shape our conviction that eyes should be closed during a kiss, also know that the witnesses of a kiss confer its power and significance. That relationship between observation and power can be seen by reviewing how kisses in popular culture are withheld or exposed.

When people want to kiss, and especially when their lips approach each other's, their actions and expressions create a sort of tension.

This tension can be foiled and continued indefinitely so long as the lips don't connect. But resolving that tension can be palpable, even for people not engaged in the kiss, only witnessing it. Film and television studios understand the power of the withheld kiss. Hollywood manipulates audiences by not showing a kiss. When two characters meet and develop a romantic interest in one another, audiences will continue watching, expectations mounting, awaiting the resolution of the anticipation. They'll continue watching through to the end of a feature-length film, or across several episodes of a television series - think of the success of soap operas here - just to end the tension and see the kiss they know is coming. That tension increases if the couple is prevented from kissing by circumstance or interruption. Such "almost kisses" have become a trope of modern television, manipulating audiences with ease. Ariel and Prince Eric in *Disney's The Little Mermaid*; Luke and Leia in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*; Marty and Jennifer in *Back to the Future*; Gaby and Troy from *High School Musical*; Elizabeth and Will from *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* - the list seems endless.

The suspense before witnessing a successful kiss isn't limited only to fiction. Consider the traditional American wedding ceremony: A couple's matrimony is solemnized specifically with the consent of the witnesses. Those witnesses are given the authority to object to the unity sought by the couple. If no objections are raised, the reward/conclusion of the ceremony is to have the couple kiss publicly,



immediately before they are presented to onlookers as a couple. The kiss comes at the end of the ceremony, as a goal. The audience generally looks forward to it and applauds when it occurs. The applause continues during the reception, when the gathered crowd of onlookers clink silver on glass to solicit another public kiss from the newlyweds. By issuing the call for each kiss, the audience maintains their control over the couple as they order and witness each one.

The change from a passive audience that bears witness to an active audience that controls the actions of the couple essentially occurs with their first public ceremonial kiss.

The relationship between observing a kiss and holding power over the people kissing is best seen in those cases where people are discovered or caught kissing when they thought they had privacy away from prying eyes. In these cases, the exposure signals an immediate shift in power from the people engaged in controlling the expression of their feelings to the people witnessing the exchange. Beyond violating a

sense of privacy, unexpectedly witnessing a kiss allows the observer to tell others about the event or set other consequences in motion. Even as benign a film as *Disney's Tarzan* (1999) plays on the risks involved in having a kiss unexpectedly exposed. When Tarzan and Jane approach their first kiss, they are interrupted at the last moment by the sound of a gunshot, signaling the danger of what they were about to do. The menacing human world intrudes



into Tarzan's and threatens him should he follow through with his plans. It is only until the rest of the humans depart on ships at the end of the film that he and Jane can safely kiss, without worry of the conflicts between the two worlds.

A more severe reaction occurs when people commit some sort of social taboo by kissing. The music video for Hozier's 2014 song "Take

Me to Church" plays on this idea, using imagery of endearment and camaraderie between the two male protagonists for the first minute, until the moment these characters share a kiss. Once the nature of their relationship is revealed (in this case, to the audience), the imagery shifts to scenes of violence for the remaining three minutes. The visual review of the characters' relationship is completed with the kiss, exposing their intimacy. From the moment

that exposure makes their relationship obvious, the audience understands the motivations of the attacking gang. The exposed kiss certainly does not justify the gang's actions, but by seeing the kiss, the audience knows the trigger. The

gang's response provides cultural context and commentary, showing how dangerous a kiss between two men can be when observed by hostile witnesses.

Stark contrasts between private and observed kisses appear in the 2005 hit *Brokeback Mountain*. In that film, Ennis and Jack share their first kiss thirty-three minutes into the film. Tensions run high in the preceding scenes



as the characters discover their unexpected mutual affections. For the scene in which they kiss, the director draws out those tensions by slowing down the pace and keeping the camera zoomed close to the actors' faces. Each slight movement makes audiences anticipate the physical connection; when it finally happens, the audience is quite possibly as satisfied as the characters themselves. That relief is as short-lived as the on-screen embrace, however. The scene that follows is from another character's perspective - literally, as it is shot through the view of his binoculars - as he watches Ennis and Jack rough-housing, then kissing. The tenderness and craving of the previous scene are shattered by the disapproving gaze of the other character. Because he sees their actions, those actions have external consequences. Their kiss becomes a liability and an indictment. Ennis and Jack's relationship, in a single scene change, goes from life-affirming to life-threatening. The outcome of their witnessed kisses is ultimately fatal.

Not all kisses are observed by others, nor are they all so devastating. The kiss between Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* serves perhaps as the quintessential example of the

balance of power and visibility inherent in the act. Script writers for the film intentionally held that important, tension-relieving moment for the end - over two hours into the performance. They did so to maintain the suspense and audience's attention. Immediately before the Will and Elizabeth embrace, every other character leaves the set. This provides the solitude that eluded them throughout the film,



and it allows them to remain in control of their kiss (and, it follows, of their relationship). With no observers remaining to witness the act, the solemnity and intimacy of their kiss is preserved. Even Will and Elizabeth close their eyes as they kiss, meaning no one in their fictional universe saw them. The moment was directly experienced by two people, yet observed by none - the perfect scenario. The mystery of a kiss comes from how it empowers people. When we kiss, there's a reason we close our eyes - kisses are not meant

to be seen. Instead, the wondrous effects of kisses come from feeling.

When we kiss, we close our eyes to preserve the intimacy and focus on the pleasurable sensations of the moment. But when we close our eyes, we also maintain our control over both the experience and the relationship, limiting the knowledge of what happened to the physical realm. If a kiss is experienced solely

through touch, memory of the physical is the only record. This means that public or witnessed kisses take on greater significance than we generally admit. Public kisses take on significance specifically because they have witnesses - and our reactions to a witnessed kiss reveal much about our social

expectations. Whether we rejoice, recoil, or riot at the sight, a single observed kiss has the power to reveal both the connection between people and the values of society.

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