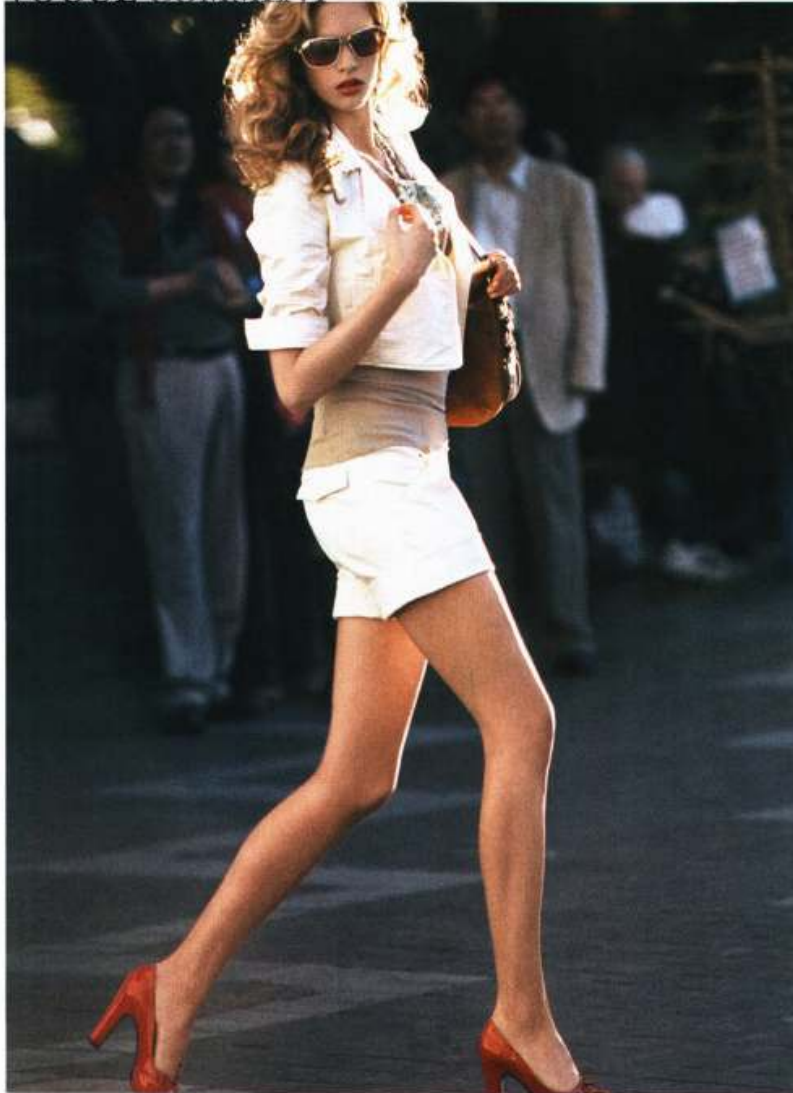




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a dinner party, who told me the most intense, passionate experience she had ever had was at a stoplight 10 years ago, looking across traffic at a gentleman waiting for the light to turn from red to green. I love that!"

Of course, romance has washed through music, painting, literature and architecture for centuries in France and Italy; they have elevated coquetry and seduction to art forms. Italy gave us the original Casanova, not to mention a continuing stream of modern-day, self-styled versions. Our Australian forebears, however, were no doubt more focused on clearing our land with their bare hands, too busy eking out a life amid enormous insects, snakes and harsh sunlight to drape themselves across *chaise-longues*, pondering love and batting their eyelashes.

Psychologist Esther Perel has devoted her career to dissecting romance. Born in Belgium, she now lives and works in New York. Her book about maintaining passion in long-term relationships, *Mating in Captivity* (Hodder), has recently garnered international attention. Chatting on the phone, Perel tells me that when it comes to seduction and flirtation, there are many complex influencing factors at work, including religion and power.

She says societies that are more playful and seductive are often also societies that still experience sexual power as a tool for women who don't yet have other forms of power. We have to be careful about idealising, but, she says, undoubtedly there are societies, such as France, that are more engaged not just in the pragmatics of sex, but in the poetics of sex.

These societies, she explains, tend to be comfortable with ambiguity and the imponderables compared to societies that

Driving in Italy last year, wearied by the crazy traffic, my friend Lizzie and I stopped in the beachside resort of San Benedetto. As we entered a deserted cafe the two male staff immediately leapt to attention. Alas, they said, the kitchen was closed, but for two such beautiful women they would do their utmost. We dined on pasta and a shower of compliments: I on my amazing eyes, Lizzie on her full lips – our time in the cafe was so short, complained the waiter, he had not had sufficient time to steal a kiss from her. We floated out smiling.

I often feel beautiful in Europe – particularly in Italy and France – in a way that I do not in Australia. Granted, I'm on holiday; I'm relaxed and more open, but there is a flirtatious, fun interplay that infuses daily life there in a way that does not exist here. In Australia, for the average woman, an interaction with a waiter at the end of the lunch shift is not likely to end with a delightful romantic frisson, and we

That's amore?

Why is it, asks Suzanne Walker, that when workmen whistle our way in Melbourne, we get all grouchy and think in terms of sexual harassment, but when a waiter winks in Milan we feel alluring and alive?

don't often go out of our way to catch another's eye with an admiring glance. Why not? I wonder every time I return home.

Australian Linlee Allen, who works in public relations for chic department store Colette, has lived in Paris for six years and says there is a definite air of provocation and flirtation in the way Parisians go about their day-to-day life. "It's all about the *coup de foudre* [love at first sight] – they live for that here. My favourite story is from a 60-year-old married woman I met at

are result-orientated and where control is key. "What is it that you have in Anglo-Saxon societies? Societies where control, self control and control in general, are prime values," she says.

"When you seduce, when you flirt, when you play, you have no idea what you are going to get. You don't control anything. It is about letting things unfold, and who knows where they will fall? There is an element of giving yourself over to happenstance." This is something that ▶

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Perel says, in general, is not much part of Anglo-Saxon culture. "These are societies that are more pragmatic, more direct. They prefer unvarnished communication: get to the point, don't beat around the bush and [they ask] 'What is the point of playing for the sake of playing if there's not going to be any result?'"

It's tough to find hard academic research about Australia's cultural heritage and our approach to romance. After calls to five universities, I found Dr Jo Lindsay, a lecturer in the school of political and social inquiry at Monash University. Lindsay agreed that an argument could be made that Australians are more direct and less ambiguous in heterosexual interactions than the French or Italians, but said this does not mean that flirtation or seduction is absent from day-to-day life in workplaces, universities, cafes and bars. "As young Australians delay or avoid marriage, casual friendships and sexual relationships have become more ambiguous," she says.

"There is a time and place for flirtation in Australia," she notes. "In some of the research we conducted on young people socialising in Melbourne pubs and clubs, we found that some clubs (the larger dance clubs in particular) were highly sexualised spaces, and flirtation (and teasing and provocative dancing) was a major mode of interaction. In other venues the social rules were different and interactions were subtler. But in all of these social spaces ambiguity, possibility and longing were part of the atmosphere."

"Where people aim at some kind of integration between the elements of their life, it seems logical that flirtation and seduction, the artful crossing of personal boundaries, becomes easy"

Take a look at the flirting going on around bars and clubs in Australia, however, and it's obvious that much of it is being fuelled with inhibition-reducing substances. Perel tells me that on a recent trip to England she noticed that was the case there, too. "You can see that whole art of communication and seductive talk is not really something people are at ease with [in England], so they drink in order to dilute the tongue and then they go often from something that is at first awkward to something that becomes boorish or sloppy. That's what you get because you get a certain timidity, a shyness, a tongue-tied-ness."

Perel says go-getters and over-achievers have less time for seduction: you can't rush romance. "If you are going to have a quick lunch you don't have time to tease, to play, to seduce ... For that you have to take time at the table and sit. Whenever you are in an expedient environment that tries to get things done fast, efficiently, that's part of this pragmatic orientation. It's idle to play and seduce and to flirt; it produces nothing, it's not efficient."

It's a point Pat Kane, a Scottish creative and organisational consultant and author of a book called *The Play Ethic* (Pan Macmillan), agrees with.

"I must admit that whenever I think of the relationship between Anglo-Saxon culture, sexuality and play, I can't get that sketch from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* out of my head," he tells me. "You know, the one where the schoolteacher [played by John Cleese] does sex education with a room full of bored schoolboys, even though he's doing actual coitus with his wife on top of the desk, in the most diagrammatic fashion."

Kane highlights the influence of the Protestant legacy: "The Puritan revolution was against both unregulated sensuality, and, by association, all forms of play. I love that most resonant of Puritan catchphrases: 'The soul's play-day is the devil's work-day'. We must always remember that the Protestant regulation of sexuality and sensuality was done for really hard-nosed, capitalist reasons: stopping the

are a kind of sensual schizophrenia, divided between extreme work and extreme leisure.

"It's a real phenomenon in the UK and, I hear, in Australia also: people subjecting themselves to regimes of production and efficiency which treat them as bodiless functionaries, and then completely exploding out of that at the weekend, in a compensatory splurge of buying, eating, drinking, dancing and fucking."

Kane says that Catholicism must be a background factor that explains why countries like France and Italy have the easy sensuality and playful nature of the relationships between men and women, despite the general conditions of capitalism.

"As the Protestant reformation pitched itself precisely against the incense, the symbolism, the sheer bling of Catholic ritual and culture, then the failure of those reformations in France and Italy must have preserved a certain flavour for display, for the permissibly excessive meaning and ambiguity of symbols, whether publicly or personally displayed. Isn't this why we still elevate French and Italian clothing, design and cuisine – maybe we can add Spain to that also – so highly? Do they retain a residual Catholic love of symbolism, glamour, the mysticism and mystery at the heart of the religion?" he asks. "It might also be worth noting that the Catholic countries have a strong tradition of putting limits on the working life: the French with their 35-hour week, the Spanish with their siesta, Italy with its notoriously restive workforces ..."

Kane reckons it's significant that we can think of French and Italian phrases for the stylish and sensual life – *très chic*, *à la mode*, *la bella figura*, *la dolce vita* – but can rarely grasp for our own phrases, in either the UK or Australia. "In these environments, where people consciously aim at some kind of integration between the elements of their life – between working and consuming – it seems logical that flirtation and seduction, the artful crossing of personal boundaries, becomes easy and is expected," he says. "All of life has the possibility of being sensually infused, not divided into the austerity of work and the manic hedonism of leisure."

That does explain the Italian waiters and their amorous brand of service. It's one of the reasons I keep getting back on the plane. I came across another reason in a cramped Paris backstreet last year while sheltering from the weather in a doorway. A drainpipe next to me emptied the Parisian rain onto the grey Parisian pavement and right where the water flowed someone had, using white paint, inscribed in small elegant letters one word: *amour*. I floated into the rain, smiling. ■