

IN FOCUS: Why Adult Film History Matters

Introduction

by DAVID CHURCH AND ERIC SCHAEFER

Film studies developed as an academic discipline in the late 1960s—roughly the same time that hard-core pornography emerged from under the counter and into the public sphere in bookstores and movie theaters. In its quest for legitimacy, film studies cast its gaze backward some thirty or forty years, largely focusing on classical Hollywood cinema. After their establishment in the late 1960s in small storefront theaters in the United States, pornographic movies also drew heavily on Hollywood’s past, concentrating on narrative features, building a system largely based on bankable stars, and even mimicking Tinseltown with glitzy premieres for major releases. But even though film studies and pornographic cinema came of age at about the same time, the emerging discipline paid scant attention to adult film. Most academic work on adult movies at that time took place in the social sciences or legal scholarship. Although a few articles appeared in other journals earlier, it was not until 1988 that the first essay to deal exclusively with pornography was published in *Cinema Journal*.¹

A year later, everything changed with the publication of Linda Williams’s groundbreaking book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible.”*² *Hard Core* looked at pornography as a genre with its own distinct conventions and audience expectations—and served as a key intellectual intervention in the “porn wars” that had grown through the mid-1970s and into the 1980s as fundamentalist Christians joined with some feminists to rally against pornography as, respectively, a threat to traditional values and a manifestation of

1 Stephen Prince, “The Pornographic Image and the Practice of Film Theory,” *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 2 (1988): 27–39.

2 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

patriarchal oppression. Notwithstanding the contributions of earlier work, Williams's book invited scholars to look at movies made for sexual arousal in a serious way. Articles in publications such as *Camera Obscura*, *Film Quarterly*, *Jump Cut*, and *Velvet Light Trap* multiplied through the 1990s and 2000s, as did monographs and edited collections. Papers on adults-only material also increased at conferences, no longer consigned to one-off events.

In the inaugural issue of the journal *Porn Studies* in 2014, Williams notes how the study of adult cinema has accrued its own sense of history as a subfield of film and media studies and is no longer in the perpetual state of "emergence" correlative to pornography's culturally suspect status.³ While the movement to reclaim adult cinema as a worthy object of study has been partially won (although scholars may still be pigeonholed as their university's "porn person" for working in this area), a major reason for the subfield's provisional coalescence has been the difficulty of historicizing such a poorly documented and preserved corpus. Most scholars would be rightly skeptical of peers or filmgoers who dismissed any popular genre with a grand "seen one, seen them all" gesture or reduced a whole genre's appeal to one spectatorial purpose—yet this stigma against adult cinema has proved difficult to shake without a detailed accounting of historical diversity in production, representation, exhibition, distribution, and reception practices, not to mention sexual orientation and taste. As a corollary to pornography's reputation as an open secret (existing in the cultural shadows, widely viewed but seldom discussed in serious and dispassionate ways), adult cinema has been too often regarded as monolithic and largely interchangeable, a mass with little historical variation—but this presumption is precisely what the new wave of adult film historiography actively challenges.

At the 2014 SCMS conference in Chicago, Eric Schaefer called for the formation of the Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), citing the critical mass of scholarship that had developed. The mission of the SIG would be to "provide a forum for scholars working on adult film history to collaborate, share information and archival sources, debate issues within the field, and promote high caliber research"; to advocate for preservation of adult films; and to be "a liaison with scholars from other fields and other professional organizations."⁴ The SIG is now thriving and continuing to grow.

The decision to eschew a name for the SIG like "Porn Studies" in favor of "Adult Film" was strategic, because as Walter Kendrick observed, "pornography names an argument, not a thing."⁵ That word has been used to categorize everything from the novels of Zola and Spillane, to *Playboy* pinups and *Debbie Does Dallas* (Jim Clark, 1978). It offers no more precision than "smut," "dirty pictures," or "immoral film"—the latter once a designation employed by the New York Board of Censors. "Adult film," however, can refer to any time-based media designed to emphasize nudity and/or human sexuality and intended for viewing by adults, regardless of the time, place, or age at

3 Linda Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field," *Porn Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 24–40.

4 SCMS Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group Mission Statement, http://www.cmstudies.org/?page=groups_adultfilm.

5 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 31.

which one is deemed to be adult. The flexibility afforded by “adult film” can encompass any moving-image medium and any sexual orientation and act. “Adult film” incorporates not only material designed strictly as entertainment or for sexual stimulation but also films that are educational, experimental, or made for other purposes. Finally, “adult” is the term used by the industry itself since the 1960s—from the trade group Adult Film Association of America to the industry publication *Adult Video News*. Although “pornography” continues to be an easy appellation, a shift to “adult film” could effectuate the integration of such material into the larger continuum of media history.

Adult film has historically been cordoned off from the rest of popular entertainment through censorship, alternative production and distribution channels, and separate physical spaces, resulting in historiographical challenges that are seldom confronted in other areas of media history. Yet adult cinema is a constitutive force in media history, with changing technologies for adult content serving as important drivers for the popularization of successive home-video formats, cable television, the internet—and, by extension, the increasingly hazy border between “cinema” and “media” that our larger field continues to explore.⁶ Meanwhile, the evolution of feminism has drastically shifted the debate over adult content, with the once-dominant media-effects paradigm now supplanted by a sex-positive focus on equitable working conditions in production and distribution. An important implication of the upsurge in adult film historiography is a more ethical reconsideration of the labor of sex workers, including those from marginalized populations.⁷

Rather than rehashing textualist arguments over sexual representation that consumed earlier work on pornography, adult film history increasingly draws from the circulation-centered tactics of “new cinema history,” including inspiration from audience studies, economics, urban studies, and especially media-industry and material-culture studies.⁸ Privileging microhistories and ephemeral outliers as building blocks toward a history written with fewer a priori generalizations, this “trace historiography” enables adult film historians to sidestep wearied debates over the politics of representation and also provides tools for studying a genre in which many films from only a few decades past have already become inaccessible.⁹ In this dossier, Elena Gorfinkel argues that examining a failed sexploitation film can reveal more about the avant-garde milieu of late-1960s New York City than writing that era’s history in broad strokes. Indeed, much as new cinema history studies the social phenomenon of cinema without heavy

6 See Jonathan Coopersmith, “Pornography, Technology, and Progress,” *IKON* 4 (1998): 94–125; Chuck Kleinhans, “The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis,” in *Pornography: Film and Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 154–167; and Peter Aliilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

7 For examples, see Elena Gorfinkel, “The Body’s Failed Labor: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema,” *Framework* 53, no. 1 (2012): 79–98; Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, and Mireille Miller-Young, eds., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

8 Richard Maltby, “New Cinema Histories,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 3–8.

9 Aliilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 30.

reliance on texts themselves, adult film historians often find the contingencies of exhibition, distribution, and reception usurping the authority of textual coherence, as when the use marks left on surviving films (e.g., cuts and alternate versions made by distributors or theater owners) reveal local instances of censorship.

The surge in adult film history corresponds with a broad turn toward exploring archives (formal and informal) that track adult cinema's history of neglect, disavowal, and even outright destruction.¹⁰ Aside from specialist archives on human sexuality and gay and lesbian community archives, however, few official archives openly accept or promote adult holdings. In one regard, the scarcity or lack of access to surviving films, paratextual materials, and industry personnel shares common ground with the orphan film movement's ethos of preservation.¹¹ Adult cinema's survival is also marked by loose, unofficial assemblages of material, including the idiosyncratic archives of desire seen in porn fans' personally curated collections and more instrumentally masturbatory "stashes."¹² With so much material in private hands, the need has arisen for initiatives like the Adult Film History Project (AFHP), which Peter Alilunas and Dan Erdman describe as a means of crowdsourcing adult film-related ephemera for digitization and open-access research. Although adult film's marginalization is obviously rooted in its sexual content, the AFHP nevertheless offers a model for how collaborative archival practices might benefit the study of other niche cinemas.

The state of adult film history differs from other underexamined areas of cinema because of the sheer proliferation of pornographies made available since the rise of the internet. Consider that the historical span and variety of pre-1990s adult cinema has been flattened into the catchall category "vintage" on porn "tube" sites like xHamster and Pornhub, as if treating historicity as just another fetish for the clicking. Rather than a reliable archive, the fleeting nature and poor audiovisual quality of such online videos speaks to adult cinema's contingently uneven survival. Indeed, the adult film industry's early adoption of new technologies starkly contrasts with its lack of efforts to preserve, restore, or even retransfer films predating the DVD era. Such responsibilities have often fallen to for-profit video labels like Something Weird Video, founded in 1990. Since 2013 Vinegar Syndrome's highly professional preservation efforts have helped renew the aesthetic reevaluation of adult cinema's historical texts, allowing their restorations to be programmed in repertory theaters. As historians uncover the details of adult cinema's past circulation, wider public reappraisal of adult film's cultural value has been aided by increased circulation of notable films returned from the private realm of home consumption into public spaces of shared appreciation.

10 See Thomas Waugh, "Archaeology and Censorship," in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 272–296; Eric Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies," *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105; Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires, eds., *Porn Archives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 1 (2017): 88–113.

11 Dan Streible, "The Role of Orphan Films in the 21st Century Archive," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 124–128.

12 On this distinction, see Katariina Kyrölä and Susanna Paasonen, "Glimmers of the Forbidden Fruit: Reminiscing Pornography, Conceptualizing the Archive," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (2015): 601–603.

Along with this respectful treatment of adult films themselves by boutique DVD labels, unofficial archives of recent note include the blog *Rialto Report* (www.rialtoreport.com; created in 2013), which features well-researched oral histories and photo essays with adult cinema's pioneers. Yet the popular-academic divide lingers here, as adult film fans outside the academy alternately dismiss academic writing as highbrow theorization or gross oversimplification, whereas scholars may find limited value in such anecdotal evidence unless marshaled toward some greater level of (even microhistorical) generalization. Mariah Larsson's piece in this dossier draws on the *Rialto Report's* in-depth interview with pornographer Lasse Braun while allowing her to make larger claims about how Braun's pseudonymous performance of pan-European identity allowed his early hard-core loops to travel transnationally.

The distinction between "fan-scholars" (nonacademics who perform scholarship) and "scholar-fans" (academics writing from a personal fan investment) is useful here, for these different types of researchers can learn from each other, even as they make different uses of their accrued knowledge.¹³ Laura Helen Marks argues below that scholars should heed discursive shifts driven by porn fans, rather than ahistorically relying on shorthand terms (e.g., "gonzo") that continue to evolve in online forums.

Issues of fandom raise methodological questions about whether adult film history is explicitly written from a perspective erotically attuned to the films, or whether historical research into primary archival materials aims for "just the facts" neutrality in response to adult cinema's socially dubious status. Although some scholarship gracefully traverses these lines, the issue of whether historical research should foreground one's personal erotic investments hinges on where the researcher's own position falls in relation to the heteronormative status quo and the extent to which one's desires can be admitted within academic contexts.¹⁴ Yet as John Paul Stadler's essay suggests, queer scholars of adult cinema have charted a historiographical path more closely attuned to the affective pull of the researcher's own desires, threading along queer theory's once-renegade, now-institutionalized status.

"Stop Reading Films!" shouts John Champagne's 1997 polemic against close textual analysis, arguing "the historical situation of the exhibition of gay pornography is of far more immediate pertinence than anything that can be said about any individual porno text." For Champagne, adult cinema's counterpublic spaces of consumption must be central to understanding its cultural specificity, whereas textual analysis unnecessarily "straightens" gay pornography by removing it from lived experiences of queer world making.¹⁵ Although we might challenge Champagne that the historiographical project of evaluating adult cinema's texts is far from complete, his call to shift our disciplinary gaze beyond textual representation has proved remarkably prescient. Whitney Strub's essay, for example, explores how assaults on racial and sexual diversity intersect around

13 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–8.

14 On these broader implications, see Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

15 John Champagne, "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 77.

the gentrification of pornographic spaces in the historically African American city of Newark, New Jersey.

So why does adult film history matter? It is an integral—not separate—part of moving-image culture and a space where communities of many stripes form and dissolve. Adult films evidence attitudes, behaviors, and practices regarding sex from different times and different spaces, providing the opportunity to gain perspective through careful scrutiny and comparative analysis. They also serve as documents of places seldom captured in other forms or genres: skid rows, red-light districts, camera clubs, burlesque theaters, anonymous apartments, cheap motels, working-class bars, and nightclubs. Finally, adult film history matters because, as the following essays indicate, it is largely unexplored and has not yet become doctrinaire—thus providing opportunities to engage with a range of methods, to develop and mine new sources, and to intersect with other disciplines in meaningful ways. In short, adult film history is a vital space for experimentation and expansion in the field of film and media studies.

This In Focus is dedicated to Chuck Kleinhans, associate professor emeritus of Northwestern University, who passed away as it was being completed. Most recognize Chuck as coeditor, founder, and publisher of *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, a passionate advocate for radical film and media, and a devoted teacher and mentor, for which he was recognized with the first SCMS pedagogy award in 2007. Chuck was also an ardent supporter of work on sexual representation and adult film as an editor and writer, and in the classroom. He was among the first to sign the petition for the creation of the Adult Film History SIG, and although “retired,” he was an animating force in the group from its inception. The memory of Chuck’s infectious enthusiasm, his humor, and his skills as a teacher, scholar, and editor will animate us over the years to come. *

Microhistories and Materiality in Adult Film History, or the Case of *Erotic Salad*

by ELENA GORFINKEL

To my surprise, I discovered how important to me were, unknowingly, books I had never read, events and persons I did not know had existed. —Carlo Ginzburg

Writing more than fifteen years ago, Eric Schaefer detailed the state of the study of adult cinema in film studies in relation to the place of sex films in archives.¹ Many of the conditions he described exist largely unchanged. Master copies and source materials of adult films are not housed in any single archive, nor are they necessarily located at designated film archives (the UCLA film archive being one specific exception). Many adult films have been lost, but those that remain are found across varied locations and sold by for-profit video distributors.² Whereas producers and studios have been less likely to bequeath their collections to academic institutions, private collections of commercially released material have made their way to archives more readily, especially gay adult films.³ It is not that adult film does not exist in archives; rather, it is collected, accessed, and framed a certain way, and thus assumes specific meanings. Adult films are rarely considered as cinema in their own right; they are treated as emblematic of their sexual content and their lowly status, as defined by public perception.

More recently established distributors such as Vinegar Syndrome, and private entities and collections such as the American Genre Film Archive, have made efforts to collect, restore, and circulate sex films on video. In many ways the fan and collector video market has long provided the preconditions for research on adult film and has shaped the kinds of questions and histories pursued. But a comprehensive

- 1 Eric Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists and Dirty Movies," *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.
- 2 In addition to archives designated for film collections, adult films can frequently be found at sexuality archives, most prominently at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, Bloomington; in the video collection of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, California; and in LGBTQ archives, such as the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives and the ONE Archives, among many others.
- 3 Lucas Hilderbrand, "Historical Fantasies: Gay Porn in the Archives," *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 327–348.

non-commercially driven archive of sex cinema is a pipe dream for most adult film historians. This fact sits in stark contrast to another incontrovertible reality: the sheer vastness and multiplicity of adult film and media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a gargantuan volume of stuff that includes discarded analog media as well as digital material. Print-based and production records of historical adult film practices, when they exist, are spotty or held by private individuals—if they have even been saved at all—and are difficult to parse. More commonly they are not available or are poorly recorded. Box-office figures and industrial and economic details must be pieced together ad hoc through various industry trade sources, such as *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *Independent Film Journal*. Such approaches also presume accurate reporting of grosses by exhibitors.

This archival landscape presents many challenges. One difficulty is balancing local histories and case studies with broader trends and practices. As with all film history, adult films raise the question of the relationship between canonical or representative works and less typical, singular, or “anomalous” cases. But the persistently “disreputable” nature of adult material only catalyzes what can be said to count as a viable object of study. The idiosyncratic, disorderly, uneven nature of the adult film archive as a body of films—simultaneously opaque and voluminous—necessitates different strategies for scholarship. Adult film historians have to contend with how to choose a suitable object, one that might map practices most comprehensively. One of the processes of legitimation for adult film history has been evidenced in macroscale studies that look at adult films not at the level of individual text but as industry, movement, genre, and mode of production.⁴ But in thinking about individual films that make up this broader history, do we choose and analyze typical or exceptional cases?

This question emerges from my research on sexploitation cinema—nonexplicit, feature-length sex films made in the decade before hard-core porn’s public ascendance, and which featured female nudity and salacious situations. In the book that emerged from this research, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s*, I argue that sexploitation films foregrounded spectatorship as the mode’s animating problem in a period in which cinema had not yet gone “all the way.” At the time, I was attempting to ascertain the workings of a mode of production with a specific shape and period—US films made between roughly 1960 and 1972. False leads and dead ends were common. Smaller cases felt more like footnotes or divergences from the “main story” of more typical practices. My goal was to assert the legibility of a larger-scaled unit—of the 1960s sex film as mode of film practice—and to make it visible as cinema in its own right. There also did not seem to be a place for expanded analyses of lingering exceptions. As a graduate student at the time holding varied adjunct gigs, and with no more teaching assistantship funding available, I felt that such excursions into minutiae would be perceived as indulgent or not “major” enough to be valued by the field, especially if such research was to secure the legitimacy of my own scholarship.

4 See, for example, Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Peter Allilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

One such anomalous object illuminates the vital importance of doing and supporting microhistory in adult film and media history, as its singularity as a crossover between underground and sexploitation cinema asserts the valuing of in-depth analyses of individual sex films. In the early 2000s, I encountered a personal website for the film *Erotic Salad*, a sex film directed by Robert Robert (1969), whose real name I later learned was Robert Ringenberger.⁵ Shot primarily in 1967, *Erotic Salad* was a one-off film, made by the artist as a sendup of the sexploitation and skin flicks playing then in Times Square. The film gives perspective on the ways that geographically proximate but artistically distinct areas of cultural practice—specifically avant-garde or underground filmmaking, the downtown scene, and sexploitation production—momentarily intersected and overlapped around sexual expressivity.

Ringenberger had studied visual art at Pratt University and in his twenties worked as a freelance graphic designer while living in New York City's SoHo. A habitué of the music and art scenes, he hung out at the Fillmore East and the Old Polish Meeting Hall, where an acquaintance, Fluxus artist Al Hansen, would stage happenings and performances. Ringenberger was keen on the rising star of Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground; he also had an interest in animation.

Erotic Salad's narrative is structured around the fantasy life of Martin (Danny Landau), a wheelchair-bound photo hobbyist and aspiring peeping tom, who is henpecked by his wife. The film departs, Walter Mitty-style, into his fantasies, as Martin becomes the mod, hip fetish photographer “Martin Kleshay” (“ cliché”). The film alternates between banal domestic squabbling, Martin's wife's quandaries of sexual dissatisfaction, and the fantasy world where Kleshay photographs nude models. While “peeping for his art,” he records an illicit tryst that leads to a mafia shakedown. Scenes of nude women posing and bohemian pot parties draw on the standard tropes of sexploitation sensationalism. Fantasy and reality collide as Martin, now the browbeaten schmuck, discovers his wife in a tryst with an insurance salesman at an orgy. In its final segment the film shifts from black and white to color, as Martin performs onstage in front of a squad of naked men and women, camping for the camera in drag, with feather boa and velvet camisole. The film ends in a diffusion of boundaries between queer and straight, male and female, as intercut images of androgynous, futuristic-glam actors flicker in pink hue across the screen. A fevered Martin/Kleshay succumbs to group rapture as the nude performers engulf him. The end credits roll in black and white with Kleshay's secretary (Patti D'Arbanville), a cool young blonde with sunglasses on, saucily chewing gum and answering the phone while gazing at the camera.

Ringenberger had difficulty placing ads for nude models in the *Village Voice*, so he ended up casting mainly amateurs—friends and artists who had never acted professionally but were part of the downtown scene. The film also featured the actor and soon-to-be Factory grandee D'Arbanville, a SoHo neighbor of the filmmaker, in her first commercial film role, at age fifteen. Only one actor, Landau, was a professional and was acting in *Hair* on Broadway. Ringenberger borrowed a 35mm camera on

5 The *Erotic Salad* website has since expired, although some trace of it remains on a cached Internet Archive site, at <http://archive.is/oUQJZ>. The website was created by Ringenberger's friend Gary Schide, who lived in Maine and passed away in 2013. The subsequent information on this film and its production is derived from the author's interview with Ringenberger, conducted in July 2002 in his Greenwich Village apartment in New York City.

weekends from an exchange. Sound cameras were scarce on weekends, so all was shot without sound, with dialogue added in postproduction—a common practice of low-budget sexploitation films.

Needing funding to finish the film, Ringenberger approached theater owner and distributor Chelly Wilson, who was recommended by a friend from the downtown music scene. Wilson owned a number of skin-flick theaters in Midtown, including the Cameo and the Avon, and was known to invest in films. Wilson asked Ringenberger to add additional “anything goes” footage: more sexual content. (The film’s title was also her invention.) Wilson saw him as a potential moneymaker, a young person affiliated with the art world who—perhaps like Warhol, then coming off successes including *The Chelsea Girls* (1966)—might bring a new, hipper, younger audience to the sex film. Ringenberger added the color footage of his all-nude cast frolicking at the Fillmore East. Landau improvised the drag performance, reappearing in costume while filming went on. Ringenberger had hoped to include an Al Hansen performance in which the artist wrapped his head in masking tape, but given the timing of the filming, it did not work out. The final cut of the film, with added nude footage, was exhibited for two weeks at Wilson’s Cameo Theater in 1969, and there a month later for another two weeks, without much success. Wilson also attempted to show the film to a “straight” audience at the Cinema One Theater, a leading art-house theater in the 1960s, on 59th Street and Third Avenue, hoping that the film would attain highbrow cultural cachet; Ringenberger recalled that she was “laughed out the door.”

The film mocked many of the conventions and scenarios of the sex film, from a youthful, ironic perspective. In general, the middle-aged makers of sexploitation films treated youth culture and young bodies with some circumspection, if also with a desirous gaze. Perhaps more than the sex film, *Erotic Salad* is inscribed with a familiarity with the aesthetic tropes and gestures of the New York underground and art scenes. A scene of a dancing woman posing for Kleshay is dynamized by slide projections being cast on top of her, likely influenced by Ringenberger’s encounters with expanded cinema and Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable. Another scene exhibits a naked woman getting into a bathtub filled with raw meat. As the water runs, she rubs her body as if with a sponge with various hunks of meat—a beef liver, a cow tongue, a whole chicken. The permeation of ideas from the world of downtown performance is a notable element of the film’s pastiche; Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964) is a strong reference point, in its employment of meat and erotics in a live group performance. In several sequences, actors eat apples and celery as they talk, a device to mask the postsync sound additions and ease the addition of dialogue. Yet the eating becomes an aesthetic element that muddles the meanings of consumption in its erotic and alimentary varieties, also evoking strategies from avant-garde performance and underground film. Ringenberger also expressed admiration for Warhol’s minimal works such as *Eat* (1963)—in which Robert Indiana eats a mushroom in extended duration—which he saw during a Velvet Underground performance.

The film likely floundered at the box office because of its transit between worlds that were illegible to each other, even though these were precisely the reasons that Wilson was initially interested in the project. The film’s gambit of needling, if not deflating, the premises of sexual spectacle probably led to the film’s poor reception;

it also earned Wilson's ire, as she had bought the film outright from Ringenberger for \$3,000. Ringenberger screened the film once more for a weekend at the Bleecker Street Theater in 1970, sans promotion; it was not shown again. The filmmaker was able to get a 16mm reduction print for his own safekeeping, and this is the print from which in the early 2000s he made VHS cassettes. As a result of legal and copyright issues, the film did not circulate beyond this attempt at revival, in part because of lost evidence of signed performance releases from the actors. Additionally, Ringenberger worried that D'Arbanville and her lawyers would not want her name associated with it.

What might be drawn as the lesson of this unknown film? Looking back on my reluctance to use this work in my project on sexploitation, my regret now has a corrective dimension. It is clear in retrospect—perhaps because of the openness toward local and orphan histories as important sites for new film-historical research—that the example of *Erotic Salad*, however minor, makes visible the shared geographies of underground and sexploitation cinemas, even when the films themselves are difficult or even impossible to see. The film exposes a common phenomenon: the filmmakers who “dabbled” in making a sex film or two but did not continue on to viable careers in this cottage industry. It can illustrate how a less savvy player in the sexploitation world might have navigated the process of adult filmmaking while pursuing aesthetic aims that were at cross-purposes to the traditional sex film venue and audiences. *Erotic Salad* gives a view onto a broader environment of film experimentation in the context of a low-barrier-to-entry industry, as well as a consideration of networks of affiliation and circulation—and the limits to those networks—in works that did not necessarily succeed.

Erotic Salad's failure at the box office was not surprising given its position at the border of underground and sexploitation modes, as well as its filmmaker's inexperience and his lack of funds. Even if it does not necessarily illuminate the broader, generalizable practices of sexploitation cinema as a “legible unit,” in its specificity an object like *Erotic Salad* allows us to reflect on the outliers at the border of a mode of production, the conditions of sexploitation's economic viability, and the porous site of practice that was the “adult film” in the 1960s. This case also invites us to consider doing adult film history as a shared project that might intersect with other areas of scholarship—in this case, with experimental or avant-garde film history—and in a more collaborative spirit, in which leads, hunches, and small discoveries can be networked and allow for the building of a wider and more sustained inquiry into historical film practices in the independent adult film scene. Of late, scholars have been using personal blogs or social media like Facebook and Twitter to discuss such small cases.⁶ Nonacademic oral history sites also exist, such as the popular *Rialto Report*, which does not use scholarly methods or proper citation practices but presents itself as a journalistic “direct source” of primary research.⁷ Some inroads have also indeed been made in themed academic journal issues, such as the “Canon Fodder” issue of the journal *Porn Studies*,

6 Whitney Strub, *strublog: everything is archival* (blog), <https://strublog.wordpress.com>; *Notches: (re)marks on the history of sexuality* (blog), <http://notchesblog.com>; Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy, *Screening Sex* (blog), <https://screeningsex.com>.

7 *Rialto Report*, <http://www.therialtoreport.com>.

guest edited by David Church.⁸ Yet this “margin work” needs more institutional and disciplinary venues of support, particularly for younger scholars who are testing the viability of new research areas and directions.

Our discipline must find ways to value the practice of going down the proverbial rabbit hole in pursuing stray individuals, footnotes, and minor films. Microhistories are a seemingly paradoxical, yet deeply materialist way to rise to the challenge posed by the overwhelming volume of adult moving-image media that we are confronted with cataloging and historicizing. Such close case studies can open out onto larger questions of the materiality of the film object and the film experience. Further, the field must attend to how failures, unfinished works, amateur works, and never-produced and illicit films are the majority of films that constitute the constellation we call *cinema* in its totality. If we strive to understand that totality, we need new ways of accounting for it. Consequently, the microhistorical allows a reexamination of the very matter of our methods and the nature of what “counts” as a viable object in film and media studies. *

Special thanks go to Lucas Hilderbrand for his insightful feedback on this essay and for years of conversation on sex, media, and archives.

8 David Church, ed., “Canon Fodder: Reappraising Adult Cinema’s Neglected Texts,” *Porn Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017).

The Adult Film History Project

by PETER ALILUNAS and DAN ERDMAN

Eventually, just about every adult film historian encounters a familiar, frustrating scenario. While conducting research, tantalizing traces of evidence—crucial contemporary press accounts, invaluable legal papers, or other primary documents—will come to light, only to vanish again, slipping through the historian’s fingers as if they never existed. Generally speaking, the adult film industries did not create conventional paper trails, nor did they embrace their own long-term legacies.¹ In almost all cases, the bits and pieces they did leave behind have not been preserved or archived with conventional methods.² The result for historians has been a methodologically complicated landscape defined by particular challenges. In this essay,

1 For more on the reasons why, see Eric Schaefer, “Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies,” *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.

2 Prominent exceptions include the preservation done by Steven Morowitz of Distribpix, an early, prolific adult production outfit cofounded by his father, Arthur; and the efforts by Joe Rubin, cofounder of Vinegar Syndrome, to archive and preserve adult films and their legacies.

we describe the creation of the Adult Film History Project (AFHP), a crowdsourced, online repository of adult film-related materials with the goal of remedying at least some of these challenges.

The potential of this project—and particularly the linking together of personal collections—stems from the overwhelming scarcity of necessary research material. For example, a scholar researching the distribution and marketing of a non-adult film such as *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) might be able to assemble, within hours and completely online, a thick dossier of advertisements, detailed box-office grosses, reviews, and trade discourses. A rich variety of physical archives and bricks-and-mortar libraries might also hold material applicable to the project. Should that same scholar research *E.X.* (Domingo Lobo, 1985), a hard-core parody of *E.T.*, they would struggle in vain to find any traces online and would likely find no more success in traditional libraries or archives. This shot-on-video production had no theatrical release, left almost no historical footprint, and was ignored by mainstream publications, as were tens of thousands of adult films.

Digging out the histories and contexts of adult films such as *E.X.* requires patience, creativity, a willingness to work (and occasionally compete) with collectors and dealers, and unflagging persistence and flexibility. These efforts still use time-tested historiographical methods, just applied in new directions and with new targets. Elsewhere, I (Alilunas) have described this process as “trace historiography,” a method that examines fragments of seemingly disparate evidence in an effort to reconstruct a past that seems impossible to locate clearly in predictable and typical ways.³ A crucial part of trace historiography is something that every historian—of adult film or any other kind—understands intimately: the construction of a personal archive. For the adult film historian, however, this personal archive often serves as the only option.

Traditional archives of material related to adult film’s industrial histories do exist; the best known remains the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, Bloomington, home to perhaps the most significant collection of sex-related materials in the United States. As Linda Williams, Thomas Waugh, David Church, and others have noted, however, the institute does not make its collection easy for scholars to access and employs confusing and perplexing metadata and filing protocols.⁴ More recently, the Kinsey Institute has taken disturbing, politically motivated steps to make itself less public and less about sex.⁵ A handful of

3 Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 30.

4 Linda Williams, “‘White Slavery’ versus the Ethnography of ‘Sex Workers’: Women in Stag Films at the Kinsey Archive,” *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 107–134; Thomas Waugh, “Archaeology and Censorship,” in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 272–296; David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Jennifer Burns Bright and Ronan Crowley, “‘A Quantity of Offensive Matter’: Private Cases in Public Places,” in *Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean, Steven Rusczycky, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 103–126 (hereafter cited as *Porn Archives*).

5 Hellie Lieberman, “Desexing the Kinsey Institute,” *New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/20/desexing-the-kinsey-institute>.

collections at other institutions focus on topics related to sex or adult film.⁶ As with any type of archival research, there are barriers to entry: scholars must have the means and opportunity to travel, the time to work in them, and the general knowledge to quickly assess the collected material. That combination can be difficult even for senior scholars and often remains close to impossible for graduate students.

While this small group of “official” collections related to adult film exists, the truth is that extant material exists in all kinds of archives, often set aside in out-of-the-way shelves, uncataloged, ignored, or forgotten, as the archivist Dwight Sanson has described.⁷ Scholars are often quick to attribute such laxity to prudishness on the part of the collection managers, but this neglect can occur for a variety of less exciting reasons. Many archives rely on grants and donations, and managers may be hesitant to upset the (real or imagined) sensibilities of their funders. Similarly, those at state-funded institutions are understandably cautious about attracting the attention of legislators or other political opportunists. But the more common, prosaic, and, frankly, depressing truth is that this material is often not a priority. It sometimes comes as part of a larger collection, often without clear connection to the archive as a whole.⁸ Money, time, and personnel resources are at a premium in the best of cases, and committing these to processing material with no immediate relevance to the focus of the archive is often not an option.

For all these reasons, most adult film historians inevitably turn to the collector’s market to construct an archive. Within this odd and freewheeling space, nonacademic historians, fans, performers, industry veterans, and disinterested capitalists maintain an ocean of historical material. That ocean can be arduous to navigate and its holdings difficult to acquire, if they can be found at all. It certainly does not operate as a lending library. This makes sense: for many, such materials are a source of income, a career legacy, or a lifelong passion. Navigating this market can be both rewarding and frustrating; it is, above all, a vital epicenter for trace historiography. Potential pitfalls loom, however: acquisitions often have no record of provenance (or none that is entirely trustworthy), casting doubt as to their authenticity and relevance. It is difficult to contextualize items available in such a haphazard fashion. With no clear sense of what other items were produced, for what purpose, in what kind of numbers, historians find their ability to make responsible historical generalizations compromised. Finally, constantly circulating is the nagging sense that more evidence exists but is too expensive to acquire or remains in private, inaccessible collections.

Virtual access to these materials would seem to be a potential solution. The growing adult film fan culture maintains a significant online presence. Many fan blogs host

6 For lists of these archives, see Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 491–494; and Caitlin Shanley, “Clandestine Catalogs: A Bibliography of Porn Research Collections,” in *Porn Archives*, 441–456.

7 Dwight Sanson, “Home Viewing: Pornography and Amateur Film Collections, a Case Study,” *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 136–140.

8 Lucas Hilderbrand writes about his experiences in gay archives across the United States, noting that “much of what constitutes their holdings is pornography” and that “such holdings often create an ambivalent affect of custodianship for the archivists, who may blush or boast, depending on the visitor.” “Historical Fantasies: 1970s Gay Male Pornography in the Archives,” in *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 329.

scans of paper material, and various social media groups post similar material. The pinnacle of this growing community is the *Rialto Report*, a blog and podcast operated by Ashley West and April Hall, adult film history fans who pay for interviews with industry veterans and occasionally display rare ephemera from their collection as part of their effort to document the so-called golden age of adult film from the 1970s and 1980s. Although we certainly appreciate these sharing efforts, these sites do not enable long-term, reliable access. Fan collections are hosted by proprietary, privately operated companies such as Facebook, WordPress, or Pinterest that devise restrictive, community-regulated content rules, making life difficult for the amateur adult film archivist. Facebook, for example, will remove any post featuring nudity upon receiving a single complaint, which inevitably happens even in closed, age-restricted groups set up explicitly for the purpose of preserving adult film histories. Beyond these regulatory frustrations lies a more basic concern: the complete and total lack of guarantees regarding longevity, leaving these collections—which might be the product of years of painstaking curating—susceptible to sudden and permanent disappearance.⁹ As Linda Williams argues, “The lack of preservation of the pornographic heritage is appalling, and we cannot count on the hit-or-miss salvages of the Internet to do the job.”¹⁰ If the study of pornographic material is to progress, it is imperative that researchers find ways to overcome these technological limits.

As had many scholars, we observed the archival potential of the Media History Digital Library (MHDL) and Lantern, its search platform, created by Eric Hoyt, Carl Hagenmaier, and Wendy Hagenmaier in 2011.¹¹ For those without the means to travel to archives or to acquire the material themselves, MHDL offers invaluable search capability, with ready access to more than two million pages from classic media periodicals. We began to imagine something similar for adult film history and what effect that might have on our growing field. In 2014, Eric Schaefer founded the Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group (AFH SIG) in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Since then, more than 150 members have joined, with presentations, panels, workshops, and seminars on adult film-related topics continuing to increase at the annual conference, and a dramatic increase in overall community building among scholars. In her recent assessment, Williams notes that, in addition to sustained, rigorous scholarship, journals, and conferences, an archive is a “crucial element necessary for the cultivation of a scholarly field.”¹² The MHDL reimagines what that archive might look like, particularly given the complicated network of collectors, fans, and scholars making up the field of interested parties.

Concurrent with the creation of the AFH SIG in 2014, I (Alilunas) began thinking seriously about connecting these pieces. What if scholars and historians (including

9 The uncertain future of the music-streaming service SoundCloud illustrates these questions, as the potential disappearance of that company would consign the thousands of hours of user-generated material to oblivion. Jenna Wortham, “If SoundCloud Disappears, What Happens to Its Music Culture?,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/magazine/if-soundcloud-disappears-what-happens-to-its-music-culture.html>.

10 Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” in *Porn Archives*, 35.

11 See <http://lantern.mediahist.org>.

12 Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 35.

nonacademic allies) could be convinced to share their personal archives in a carefully maintained, searchable, and digital archive? What might happen to the field if this ocean of material was open to research and preserved in a more reliable manner? What histories could be uncovered? What new directions could the field go in if more material were easily accessible to more people? Rather than the occasional private network of sharing, as all academics do with one another and this particular field has long relied on, why not imagine something bigger that might also send a message about the value, validity, and legitimacy of this kind of work? There is certainly no doubt that part of the reason this material exists in the shadows is the cultural reluctance to accept it in the open. An online archive could serve not only as a research catalyst but also as a voice for the field's continued growth and development. These questions led directly to the creation of the Adult Film History Project (AFHP), which can be found at <https://adultfilmhistoryproject.wordpress.com>.

Early on, the Digital Scholarship Services Center (DSSC) at the University of Oregon, where I (Alilunas) am located, expressed interest in the AFHP. In many ways, this was the ideal scenario: a university-based partner, committed to research, and with the resources, equipment, staff, and experience to build, host, and maintain a digital archive (something it does very well on several other faculty-led projects). Yet over time, an impasse became clear: the DSSC was reluctant to serve as the host of this kind of material, despite understanding and supporting the archive's academic purpose. At that point, I (Alilunas) decided to seek out other opportunities and invited Dan Erdman to be a codirector of the project, given his archival expertise, academic background, and experience as an adult film historian. Despite the unwillingness of the DSSC to partner on the project, the University of Oregon has been supportive in other ways, providing funding and support for the initial research on the project. After the AFH SIG contributed a scanner, and an active collector and historian agreed to loan a significant collection of early sexploitation film-related periodicals from his personal archive, work began on assembling and testing the first pieces of the AFHP.

To address the issue of long-term sustainability, we have decided to house the AFHP at the Internet Archive, a large, nonprofit, legacy institution with broad support, a commitment to maintaining access to archival material, and no hesitation about adult content. As the archive takes root, we hope to find a university partner with a strong interest in building digital collections willing to accept a cosponsorship role alongside the Internet Archive, which would ensure the stability, access, and preservation of this vital material, as well as assisting in stabilizing and growing the field. After the fashion of the MHDL, much of the material we hope to make accessible will be in the form of publications, typically magazines and other ancillary material. (Films present other, more complicated challenges for online archiving.) As magazines and other documents tend to display the usual publication information (e.g., title, publisher, approximate date), they may be cataloged like any other published material. However, the ephemera of adult film history extends beyond bound, numbered publications and into such types of material as flyers, handbills, tokens, and myriad other elements that resist traditional definitions and offer representational and metadata-related challenges. The strategies devised by repositories devoted to material from sexual minorities have proved broadly useful to our effort and provide models from which

to work. The Digital Transgender Archive, headed by K. J. Rawson, with its creative and innovative approach to metadata and spirit of collaboration, has been especially helpful to us as we envision possible archival systems.¹³

The Adult Film History Project is not something that can happen overnight. We envision it as a deliberately long-term project that can develop over time and with changes in the field, rather than as a static and immovable object stuck in an initial paradigm. We have built a system in which anyone, not just us, can scan and upload their collections to a linked space and have provided clear, easy-to-use instructions about metadata and other information that we can update and modify as necessary. This archive will obviously never be complete and is not a permanent solution. In some ways, that recognition reflects Eugenie Brinkema's argument that an archive, particularly one holding adult film-related material, can never fulfill our desires, but that its rough and unfinished nature can be a reward and opportunity rather than a limitation, allowing the archive to match the history it contains. "Let memory remain ragged," she writes. "Let history remain interrupted and uneven."¹⁴ While we acknowledge these inevitabilities, the creation of the AFHP reflects our hopes to grow, stabilize, and solidify the field, and to continue to pull it out of the shadows and into a state of openness that will lead to rigorous, sustained, and serious scholarship. Given the archival structure that we have imagined, the AFHP can grow organically, in ways that reflect scholars' interests and pursuits, connecting them while also preserving for the future images of materials that have for far too long been hidden away or impossible to access. This potential future will require cooperation and trust among colleagues, and sincere outreach to include and collaborate with the nonacademic historians, fans, industry members, and others who often hold long-term skepticism and suspicion as to our motives. Part of the necessary reassurance will be demonstrating the value of an archive, not just as a vital requirement for the next step toward status as a thriving, stable, and evolved academic field, as Williams describes, but also as a repository for the preservation of history that serves interests beyond the small corners of scholarly activity.

Learn more about the Adult Film History Project and how to contribute at <https://adultfilmhistoryproject.wordpress.com>. *

13 See the Digital Transgender Archive at <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net>.

14 Eugenie Brinkema, "Rough Sex," in *Porn Archives*, 281.

Oh Paris! The Journeys of Lasse Braun's 8mm Pornography

by MARIAH LARSSON

An easy way to challenge the concept of national cinema is by drawing on examples: if a Danish film director makes a film, set in the United States, funded by various European institutions and production companies, in Trollhättan, Sweden, bringing in an Icelandic singer as the star of the film as well as a French cinematic icon and American actors—how do we describe that film? Film journalists and critics have used the disparaging term “Euro-pudding” to mark such ventures, but as various recognized auteurs have come to exploit the possibilities of European funding, this type of transnational film production has become much more common and is not routinely disregarded anymore. The same kind of transnationality can be found in a 1970s porn context: if an Italian pornographer, with a production company at the time based in Copenhagen, makes a film in France with French and Vietnamese performers—how do we describe that film, in particular if the film surfaces in an American archive with an Italian title? Such is the case for the film *Hotel Amour* (Lasse Braun), of the Oh Paris! series from 1971 that also includes *Petite fleur* and *Magnifique!* Comparing *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000), described in the first instance, with *Hotel Amour* may seem far-fetched, but I would say that in terms of maverick transnationalism the two directors are not so different. The opportunistic transnationalism—that is, “responding to available economic opportunities at a given moment in time and in no wise about the creation of lasting networks or about the fostering of social bonds”—is evident in both cases, and in their respective contexts both are recognized as auteurs with distinct personal visions.¹

The purpose of this article is not to compare Lars von Trier and Lasse Braun. Rather, I wish to point to and discuss some aspects of late 1960s to early 1970s pornography, using Lasse Braun and *Hotel Amour* to argue that adult film history provides a perspective on transnational film studies that contests received notions about how transnational films are produced and circulate. In fact, adult film and pornography in general challenge three traditionally strong conceptualizations of film history. First, because many such films were made in some

1 Mette Hjort, “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Āurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12–33, at 19–20.

sort of transnational collaboration but were also often excluded from national film histories, they make evident the concept of national cinema as a clearly demarcated canon of films. Second, the history of adult film and pornography contests the notion of a world-dominant American (Hollywood) cinema, as the international diversity of productions on the internet and in the former “adult” sections of video stores demonstrate. Third, adult film and pornography defy the notion that popular European genre cinema and stars have difficulty traveling—that is, that European film stars often have to make a mark in a Hollywood film to be recognized in other European countries than their own.

Transnationality has become something of a buzzword within film studies—and, as Mette Hjort astutely observes, it seems to carry with it an intrinsic value in and of itself. Nevertheless, as Hjort goes on to point out, there are many different types of transnational cinema, and by distinguishing them, their ostensible value can be defined and measured.² In addition, one could argue that “transnationality” per se is a neutral term, simply referring to cross-border interactions. Outside of film studies, it is used in conjunction with both positive and negative issues, like transnational cooperation or transnational crime.

However, what is quite often disregarded in discussions of transnational cinema is the importance of nationality to making someone or something itinerant. Without any kind of acknowledged nationality, travel becomes difficult and may leave the traveler in a state of suspension, an eternal limbo, much like the stranded Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks) in Steven Spielberg’s *The Terminal* (2004), whose passport became invalid when his home country ceased to exist. Nationality, or at least an assumed nationality, is in fact a prerequisite for transnational interactions to take place.

Perhaps the most apparent example of the transnationality of pornography in the predigital era, and also, perhaps, the most famous 8mm pornographer, Lasse Braun, worked in various countries—among them Sweden, Denmark, the United States, and West Germany. Although he took a pseudonym with strong associations of Northern Europe (with the Swedish “Lasse” and the German surname “Braun”), the director was in fact Alberto Ferro, an Italian national born in Algeria. Described by the Finnish porn scholar Susanna Paasonen as a “markedly translocal operator . . . aiming to profile the productions as quality pornography with some narrative framing,” Braun covered most of the world at the level of representation, from the exoticization and eroticization of Black bodies and tropical landscapes in his Trinidad films to the visual spectacle of rapist Vikings.³ At the same time, through the distribution of his films by Reuben Sturman in the United States, Braun became as much a brand name as (American company) Swedish Erotica.⁴

Braun produced his 8mm films in series of three, with a unifying theme, often conspicuously branded by some kind of national characteristics: Scandinavia in the two series *Vikings* (1971) and *Love in Scandinavia* (1971), Spain and Italy in the series

2 Hjort, “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism,” 14–15.

3 Susanna Paasonen, “Smutty Swedes: Sex Films, Pornography and the Figure of Good Sex,” in *Tainted Love: Screening Sexual Perversities*, ed. Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 120–136.

4 Paasonen, “Smutty Swedes.”

Top Secret (1970) (although shot in Málaga, Spain), Trinidad in the series Tropical (1969), and so on. Like art cinema, to some extent, adult film relies on the symbolic value of the national to make itself marketable abroad. By using various stereotypes (Vikings and natural landscapes, bullfighting, limbo dancing, palm trees and waves crashing on beaches), the geographical markers of Braun's films anchored them to the landscape of sexual imagination, providing an efficient point of departure for the brief and condensed narratives of his films.

Hotel Amour. The Oh Paris! series draws on the stereotypical conceptualizations of French sexuality: the cover of *Hotel Amour* features female buttocks, framed by black lace garters and stockings; and *Magnifique!* shows breasts, framed by a black and blue lace bra. *Petite Fleur* has a close-up of luscious lipsticked lips and the end of a Gauloises cigarette. The markedly staged and fetishized posing of the covers invites the spectator to gaze at an inactive object. These images associate Frenchness with a sinful sensuality, as well as an “observational” mode. As noted by Eric Schaefer, this mode is characterized by a kind of “voyeurism from a privileged vantage point” commonly connected to the notion of France as “sexy nation” in sexploitation films.⁵

In addition, illustrative of the transnational and transformative character of adult film, there seem to be at least two existing versions of *Hotel Amour*. One is released on the DVD collection of Lasse Braun films from Alpha Blue Archives. A copy of the other version can be found in the archive of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, Bloomington, under the title *Hotel Amore*. It is obviously the same footage and basically the same narrative: two women—one of them the Asian performer Ky-Sen, who performed in several Lasse Braun films—walk around in Paris, then go to a hotel room where they start to make love. A waiter appears with room service and joins in. However, the version at the Kinsey Institute is several minutes longer and contains an interesting interlude in which Ky-Sen attempts to penetrate the waiter from behind with a strap-on dildo while he is having vaginal intercourse with the other woman. He makes averting gestures with his hand, and she stops. On the one hand, penetrating or attempting to penetrate the male is something of an anomaly in straight pornography, so the interlude evokes issues of gender and agency, passivity and activity, subject and object, in a fascinating way. The man's reluctance also suggests issues of consent and nonconsent. On the other hand, none of these nonnormative aspects of sexuality or sexual imagination is very far off in any of Lasse Braun's productions, which abound with quirky suggestions, fanciful inventions, dark fantasies, and playful moods. “Exploring anal sex, double penetration, fetishes, bondage, domination and urination in close-up, the films were not confined to given notions of sexual normalcy but were in fact branded and marketed as deviations thereof,” Paasonen observes.⁶ One could easily place several of the sexual practices represented in Braun's films at the outer limits of Gayle Rubin's famous model of the sexual value hierarchy, where those sexual practices that are deemed

5 Eric Schaefer, “‘I’ll Take Sweden’: The Shifting Discourses of the ‘Sexy Nation’ in Sexploitation Films,” in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 207–234.

6 Paasonen, “Smutty Swedes,” 127.

normal and natural and therefore accepted by the dominant society are placed in the middle, in the “charmed circle,” and those that are regarded as depraved, perverted, and abnormal are placed along the outer perimeter.⁷ However, that this particular attempt at penetration is not included in the DVD version of the film is perhaps unsurprising, as the scene may have been intentionally omitted by a video label that otherwise specializes in straight pornography. The question is, rather, how the other version ended up at the Kinsey archive—is it an American release of the film, or is it a copy bought by an American during a trip to Europe, perhaps even to Stockholm or Copenhagen, the Scandinavian cities of sin?

Transnational Man of Mystery. Not only did particular films travel across national borders, the director-producer himself moved between nation-states. The biographical legend constructed by and around Lasse Braun places great emphasis on nationality, internationality, and travel. His father was a diplomat for the Italian government, working in Algeria when Braun was born in 1936. The family moved to Germany in 1939, then to Italy in 1940 and to Belgrade in 1942.⁸ According to Braun himself, his venture into pornography started with bringing soft-core pornographic magazines into Italy from Monaco using his diplomatic passport and his car with diplomatic license plates.⁹ Braun claimed that he entered into the pornography business because he wanted to change censorship legislation, and the first country he targeted was Denmark. Indeed, in Braun’s words, it sounds as if, without him, pornography would still be forbidden in Denmark: “The best part of it was that we finally managed to overturn the ban on obscenity in Denmark. . . . In 1969, the Danish parliament passed a law legalizing the depiction of explicit sex in pictures and films. Pornography was finally legal there.”¹⁰ In the account of the Danish criminologist Berl Kutchinsky, however, the publication, prosecution, and acquittal of *Fanny Hill* (John Cleland, 1748) in 1965 was the significant event leading to the legalization of obscene material in Denmark. Braun is not mentioned in this context by Kutchinsky at all.¹¹ This, of course, does not necessarily mean that Braun was not involved. However, while attempting to subvert the Danish penal code on pornography, Braun lived in Stockholm, where his company, Beta Films AB, also was located, but he moved to Copenhagen in 1969.¹² Sweden decriminalized pornography in 1971. Although perhaps driven by the goal of subverting censorship and obscenity legislation, Braun’s

7 Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Some Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–320.

8 “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1: The Early Years of a Trailblazer,” *Rialto Report* (blog), March 1, 2015, <http://www.therialtoreport.com/2015/03/01/lasse-braun-the-early-years-of-a-trailblazer-his-last-interview>.

9 “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1.”

10 “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1.”

11 Berl Kutchinsky, “Pornography, Sex Crime, and Public Policy,” in *Sex Industry and Public Policy: Proceedings of a Conference Held 6–8 May 1991*, ed. Sally-Anne Gerull and Boronia Halstead (Canberra: Australia Institute of Criminology, 1992), 43, http://aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/proceedings/14/kutchinsky.pdf. See also Isak Thorsen, “Family Porn: The Zodiac Film—Popular Comedy with Hard-Core Sex,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 4, no. 3 (2014): 289–304.

12 “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1.”

frequent moves between different locations also seem to have been motivated by business opportunities and a sense of where the risk of his ventures might be low enough to be worthwhile. Consequently, Braun became a transnational pornographer.

Artistic Visions, Distribution, and Censorship. In crossing national borders—informally, through traveling tourists or business men bringing films with them back home, or formally, through distribution agreements—adult films encountered differences in national legislation and censorship. Sources date the US distribution agreement between Lasse Braun and Reuben Sturman to either 1971 or 1972.¹³ Regardless, the Sturman connection provided a robust and profitable exhibition arrangement for what by then was called Lasse Braun Productions. With peep-show booths semiprivately showing loops to customers and Sturman’s peep-show empire rapidly expanding, much film was needed. Paasonen argues that “along with the long-standing reputation of Swedish film, the peep show distribution of Braun’s films contributed to the co-articulation of Sweden and pornography in North America.”¹⁴ In addition, Braun constructed himself as an auteur and marked his own films not only with his name (Beta Films AB eventually became Lasse Braun Productions or LB Productions) but also with his signature. Many are the 8mm films whose origins have become difficult to identify and the 8mm production companies that have disappeared into the great sea of unwanted history, but the Lasse Braun films are instantly recognizable (along with, for instance, films from Color Climax and Swedish Erotica). For the trained eye, their characteristic pacing and imaginative sexual scenarios would probably be possible to identify even without title cards and credits. The distinctiveness of a Lasse Braun film probably also accounts for his reputation and popularity. In Sweden, his films were strikingly often submitted to the National Board of Film Censors for review, compared to other labels, and when asked about films they remember from the 1970s, people mention Lasse Braun alongside the most prolific 8mm porn producer in the region, Color Climax, although Braun’s output never matched theirs in quantity.¹⁵

Adult films were often pragmatically edited and released in different versions to fit the expectations, market conditions, and censorship protocols of different countries. Pornographic 8mm films were not always—not even most of the time—distributed formally, but rather bought privately by mail order, while traveling, or smuggled in large quantities together with magazines and card decks.¹⁶ According to Braun, he traveled to the United States himself with the negatives of the films in his suitcase, hidden among the clothes, delivering them to Sturman to make copies. His only “non-negotiable term was that the films and the box covers would not undergo any changes. I didn’t want my artistic vision to be changed.”¹⁷

13 According to the *Rialto Report’s* interview, it was in 1972. Paasonen dates it to 1971. “Smutty Swedes,” 127.

14 Paasonen, “Smutty Swedes,” 127.

15 Mariah Larsson, *The Swedish Porn Scene: Exhibition Contexts, 8mm Pornography and the Sex Film* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2017), 116–119.

16 Braun describes how his films were sent discreetly “packaged in such a way that no one would know what was in the envelope.” See “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1”; Larsson, *Swedish Porn Scene*, 149.

17 “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1.”

This does not mean that 8mm films were not subject to censorship. In Sweden, when submitted to the National Board of Film Censors, Lasse Braun films were frequently banned or cut; for instance, the Oh Paris! film *Petite fleur* (censorship card 110 891) was cut for its “certain scenes in which dog or dogs participate in intercourse and similar.”¹⁸ In fact, the artistic vision of Braun was at times seriously compromised by the Swedish censorship, as in the case of *White Fantasies / Black Power*. In the last fourth of this film, two Black women who have had sex with a white man are abused and raped by two Black men who suddenly appear. The white man is tied up and finally killed. This part of the film was deleted, thereby radically altering the entire impression of the film.¹⁹ The combination of sex and violence did not sit well with Swedish censors.²⁰

This history might seem marginal, the microhistory of a sleazy pornographer who claimed to challenge obscenity law as an excuse to profit on sexually explicit material. However, as one of the pioneers during the early years of the burgeoning adult industry, Lasse Braun is an example of how the growing porn business in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a vital, creative, and shamelessly commercial activity exploring the potential of the new explicitness. The creativity involved concerns elements of fantasy, of objectification and agency, and a celebration of sexiness that might well diverge from mainstream prescriptions of beauty. Exploring society’s limits of decorum, this early pornography employed racial and ethnic stereotypes juxtaposed in blatantly racist but also taboo-breaking and highly political constellations, and much more.²¹ Beyond the level of representation, the exhibition contexts and patterns of viewing behaviors also provide a history of how people have interacted and related to issues of sexuality and the consumption of sexually explicit materials. More particularly for this brief essay, it says something about how the world is interconnected and how films can be transnational. Long before the internet connected porn producers and consumers across borders, adult moving-image material traveled easily, unlike many other types of film outside the dominant Hollywood cinema. *

18 These “certain scenes” show two dogs, leaping around playfully while a couple is having sex.

19 Mariah Larsson, “Lasse Braun, Rape Scenarios, and Swedish Censorship: A Case Study of Two 8mm Porn Films Featuring Rape,” *Porn Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 23–34.

20 Sturman apparently also found that combination potentially disturbing to the audience and avoided distributing such films. See “Lasse Braun Interview—Part 1.”

21 Laura Kipnis, “How to Look at Pornography,” in *Pornography: Film and Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 118–129.

Porn Drift: Semantic Discord in the World of Gonzo

by LAURA HELEN MARKS

Legal Porno is only one of a few fairly new studios from Europe that provides currently the biggest output on real old school gonzo porn. . . . And I'm talking here from gonzo porn that means scene contains: ATM, DP, DAP, TAP, Face Fucking, Balls Deep, Merry Go Rounds, SWALLOWING MULTIPLE LOADS, CUM GARGLING, ETC. Why can this work in Europe and not in US anymore? Otherwise I would suggest the American girls to visit Europe if they wanna experience some real hardcore poundings. —ultimate_sperminator, "US Porno is Softcore Compared to Legal Porno," *Adult DVD Talk*, October 11, 2015

While ultimate_sperminator, in the epigraph to this essay, is by no means the most articulate member of the fan forum *Adult DVD Talk*, and indeed was taken to task for the loosely defined terminology in this post, his query regarding Legal Porno handily elucidates the focus of my discussion here: the semantic drift in porn terminology. While many fans responded with questions about what he means by "gonzo," ultimate_sperminator's understanding of this term, among others, reflects a larger shift mobilized by industry and fans. Legal Porno specializes in extreme, hyperbolic sex acts—that is, double and triple anal penetration and other so-called circus acts. Not only do fans deploy "gonzo" in fluid ways; Legal Porno itself uses rhetoric in scene titles such as "Jessi Empera is back to Gonzo with DP, DAP & triple penetration [in scene] SZ1826."¹ Contrasting and ambiguous uses of "gonzo" are suggestive of an emerging attitude mobilized by fans and producers that replicates Justice Potter Stewart's infamous 1964 definition of hard-core pornography: "I know it when I see it."² Scholars often invoke this definition with wry humor when explaining the difficulties of defining pornography. Indeed, the history of pornography might be said to be a history of legal definitions, popular terminology, and social taste that shape and determine what

1 "Jessi Empera Is Back to Gonzo with DP, DAP & Triple Penetration SZ1826," *Legal Porno*, dir. Luis, August 13, 2017, https://www.legalporno.com/watch/32894/jessi_empera_is_back_to_gonzo_with_dp_dap_triple_penetration_sz1826.

2 *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964).

constitutes the genre in a constantly evolving way.³ Indeed, pornography highlights the intersection of genre, legal status, language, and consumption in a way that renders the study of adult film history an academic beacon for understanding the visual arts more broadly.

In the years since Stewart's decision, academics have comfortably settled on an understanding of hard-core porn rooted in industry and fan jargon—that is, constituting unstimulated sex, typically depicting penetration of orifices (whether by a penis, finger, or toy) and ejaculation (male or female, although it is male ejaculation that has come to be seen as a staple of hard core). Meanwhile, gonzo has traditionally been understood as a format popularized by John “Buttman” Stagliano in the late 1980s—a type of cinema verité porn in which the performer(s) acknowledge the camera and typically interact with the cameraperson or director.⁴ Yet more recent fan and industry usage of the term “gonzo” indicates an understanding of this subgenre as a style—one that connotes extremity, hardness, and, to use antiporn scholar Gail Dines's phrase, “body-punishing sex.”⁵ For while the standard definition of “gonzo” porn is indeed simply the filmmaking form, the term is routinely deployed by porn studios, fans, performers, and (usually antiporn) scholars to signal a particular, heteronormative, and rather nebulous sexual aesthetic characterized variously as “hard,” “extreme,” or “nasty.”

At some point over the past decade, fan and industry discourse has drifted away from static academic terms that at one time mirrored industry language. This drift has left an awkward chasm in which academics tend to retain a semantic definition rooted in the moment of the terms' origin while fans and industry producers are merrily conversing with a more flexible set of terms that carry a rather different meaning. The result is semantic discord in discussing pornography that reflects a larger anxiety over the distance between scholar and fan, between those inside and outside of the ivory tower. In this piece, I explore the semantic sphere of this discord with a specific focus on the changing meanings of “gonzo” in the Internet era. A meditation on the word “gonzo” might seem so myopic as to be irrelevant even to some porn scholars, let alone those in other fields—and yet consider the history of this single word, dating (at least in print) back to Hunter S. Thompson's 1971 *Rolling Stone* article “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.”⁶ There, it was used to describe a journalistic practice and aesthetic with no connection to pornography whatsoever; today, gonzo porn retains much of that original usage. In 1975, many years before “gonzo” became associated with the adult film industry, journalist John Filitreau of Louisville, Kentucky, determined that “gonzo” “can only be defined as what Hunter Thompson does,” adding: “It generally

3 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 2.

4 John Stagliano's former wife, Tricia Devereaux, provided a definition of “gonzo” for *Adult DVD Talk*'s “dictionary”: “Gonzo can take on several different forms. It can vary from the cameraman (in adult, very often the director) interviewing the actors, or participating in the scene with dialogue and/or sex. It can also mean that the actors are simply acknowledging the fact that there is a camera shooting what they are doing. So, although in adult gonzo, the cameraman is usually somehow visible or audible, simply the actors playing to the camera constitutes a gonzo scene.” See “The Adult DVD Talk Porn Dictionary,” *Adult DVD Talk*, <https://www.adultdvdtalk.com/sextos/dictionary.asp>.

5 Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2010), xi.

6 Hunter S. Thompson, “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” *Rolling Stone*, November 11, 1971.

consists of the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages his audience. It is Point of View Run Wild.”⁷ Such language uncannily echoes Justice Stewart, as well as both Buttman and Gail Dines. My interest in the complicated and conflicted uses of “gonzo” rests in such a conflicted merging of style, practice, and feeling, together with a concern over relying on ahistorical and inaccurate deployments of genre terminology—concerns that I suspect permeate many subfields of cinema and media studies.

Prompted by these concerns, I want to initiate discussion regarding what this semantic discord means not only for porn studies but also for the academic study of media genres, fan cultures, and participatory culture more broadly. Who sets the terms for media and genre discussion? What does it mean when academics resist the semantic drift of fan discourse, and what can the study of such drift do for porn studies and genre studies as a whole? Reflecting on the institutionalization of the phrase “porn studies,” Linda Williams argues that such slippage from “pornography” to “porno” to “porn” risks “aligning our own work of scholarship too closely with the work of the pornography industry.”⁸ For Williams, “adopt[ing] the slang of an industry for the name of their object of study” weakens the legitimacy of an already-maligned field.⁹ Yet if, as Zabet Patterson observes, “to interrogate Internet pornography, we must begin by considering the ways in which the organization of on-line pornographic discourses function to guide, if not overtly discipline, their targeted subjects,” then it seems important to also consider the ways in which these discourses are guided by those very subjects.¹⁰ Moreover, to resist semantic slippage in an attempt to legitimize academic discourse on disparaged subjects strikes me as a paranoid response to external skepticism.

The relationship between fans and academics is fraught with tension, particularly in connection to class, taste, knowledge, and authority. Upstart scholar-fans find themselves in what Jostein Gripsrud calls “cultural limbo,” aware of their new higher standing in the academy while also eager to maintain and demonstrate that they are “one of the people.”¹¹ Fans are often suspicious of academics, regarding them as elitist and Other, no matter how enthusiastic they are about the topic at hand. Matt Hills notes, “Academia is implicitly made other through a denigration of forms of knowledge which are divorced from passion and commitment, as well as through a distaste for the specialist jargon of the academic.”¹² Yet at the same time, fans are specialists themselves who, “like the film elite (academics, aesthetics, critics), [are] particularly rich with ‘cultural capital’ and thus possess a level of textual/critical sophistication

7 Quoted in Martin Hirst, “What Is Gonzo? The Etymology of an Urban Legend” (2004), <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:10764>, 4.

8 Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” *Porn Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 34.

9 Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 34. By contrast, Rick Altman describes how slippages between industrial, critical or scholarly, and fan uses of generic terms are endemic to the ever-evolving process of “genrification.” See Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

10 Zabet Patterson, “Going On-Line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 106.

11 Jostein Gripsrud, “High Culture Revisited,” *Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (1989): 197.

12 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis.”¹³ Fans also create, deploy, and attempt to control their own jargon, which subsequently infiltrates the mainstream and the academy. This symbiotic relationship is vital to the study of popular culture.

A remarkably large part of the historical recovery, analysis, and discussion of porn has been initiated and disseminated by fans and industry workers.¹⁴ Former producer, writer, and performer Bill Margold became one of the foremost historians of the industry, as did adult film director Jim Holliday, who wrote the widely respected *Only the Best: Jim Holliday's Adult Video Almanac and Trivia Treasury* (1986). Director William Rotsler wrote one of the earliest critical discussions of the genre, *Contemporary Erotic Cinema* (1973), and novelist Robert Rimmer turned his efforts toward adult film as a fan, painstakingly producing three volumes of adult film reviews and analysis, *The X-Rated Videotape Guide I–III* (1984–1993) that amount to the porn equivalent of *Halliwel's Film Guide*.¹⁵ If we go back as far as the nineteenth century, we might also mention Henry Spencer Ashbee, bibliophile and erotic literature aficionado who, between 1877 and 1885, produced three massive bibliographies of obscene literature under the pseudonym Pisanux Fraxi. The intimacy of fan and scholar has intensified thanks to the development of online spaces. Fans such as Ashley West and April Hall of the oral history podcast the *Rialto Report*, film documentarian Jim Tushinski, film reviewer Dries Vermeulen, archivist and film restorer Joe Rubin of DVD label Vinegar Syndrome, vintage gay-erotica archivist Tim Wilbur, and Karl of the online “watersports” Tumblr *Yesterdays Erotic* are just a handful of fan-scholars producing labors of love that fill critical gaps in formal academic research—gaps that, while less gaping, surely exist in other fields and might helpfully be enriched by knowledge outside of the academy.

Online fan discourse readily indicates a shift in understanding of gonzo. Fan reviews of the 2014 *Riley Goes Gonzo* (Axel Braun), a showcase for former Digital Playground contract star Riley Steele, signal an interpretation of “gonzo” to mean “dirtier” and “harder” sex. In his review fu_q states, “Bursting through the ‘contract girl’ barrier with abandon, the blue-eyed, blond-haired beauty, Riley Steele, dispels the stereotypes and proves that she’s far more dirty than she is dollish.”¹⁶ These discourses also reveal a merging of the terms “hard core” and “gonzo,” here used to describe each other. In his review, Captain Jack observes that Riley “is going to be shooting more hard core scenes than she’s used to!” though ultimately concludes that the film is, after all, “pretty ordinary and not very hardcore.”¹⁷ We also find some confusion in these

13 Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 375.

14 David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 158.

15 Jim Holliday, *Only the Best: Jim Holliday's Adult Video Almanac and Trivia Treasury* (Van Nuys, CA: Cal Vista Publications, 1986); William Rotsler, *Contemporary Erotic Cinema* (New York: Penthouse/Ballantine, 1973); Robert H. Rimmer, *The X-Rated Videotape Guide* (New York: Arlington House, 1984).

16 fu_q, “Riley Goes Gonzo,” *Adult DVD Talk*, December 31, 2013, <https://www.adultdvdtalk.com/review/riley-goes-gonzo>.

17 Captain Jack, “Riley Goes Gonzo,” *Adult DVD Talk*, December 24, 2014, <https://www.adultdvdtalk.com/review/riley-goes-gonzo-31615>.

discussions. For example, in bono-ONE's review of *Riley Goes Gonzo*, he states: "It is a harder release than what we've been used to with Miss Steele or at least that's what I think they are going for here. Let's find out just how gonzo Riley gets here!"¹⁸ Even when discussing older titles, produced in an era before gonzo porn was a twinkle in Buttmann's eye, fans will describe content as "gonzo" whether due to style or form. For example, in his review of 1977's pseudo-documentary curiosity *Long Jeanne Silver* (Alex DeRenzy), Willie D remarks, "It's shot documentary-style where Jeanne introduces us to various experiences in her life. Each scene has a short intro, followed by some sex. Heck, this may be the first gonzo porno ever!"¹⁹ In contrast, I recall a fan telling me that celebrated sexual dynamo Vanessa Del Rio was "gonzo before there was gonzo," signaling the heat, intensity, and authenticity of Del Rio's performances.

In her discussion of trending porn categories, Chauntelle Anne Tibbals expresses concern that "the term 'gonzo' is commonly misused," citing Dines's loaded use of the term in the latter's book *Pornland*.²⁰ Dines uses "gonzo" to describe a "genre" that "depicts hard-core, body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased."²¹ "Gonzo, however," Tibbals goes on, "is not a genre—it is a filmmaking form. Consequently, it is possible for any and all adult content to include moments of gonzo, the intensity of sex and/or genre notwithstanding."²² Tibbals's concern is understandable, considering the bad-faith application of the term "gonzo" in Dines's book. The danger of Dines's conflation of form and genre is that "subjective assessments regarding the nature of sex depictions" obscure a more complex discussion of production and consumption trends.²³ Dines does not objectively analyze sex styles and positions. Instead, she applies a value judgment of degradation and misogyny as though hyperbolic sexual athleticism were inherently degrading to women. Yet her use of the term "gonzo" has less to do with understanding it as a filmmaking form and more to do with shallow and subjective applications of taste-based politics to particular sexual acts.

Angela White attends to the complex politics of porn terminology in the marketing behind her 2016 self-directed release *Angela Loves Gonzo*. White's video and its surrounding discourse are useful in parsing the shifting, nebulous terminologies of pornography and the way these terms are politicized, weaponized, and deployed in the industry, in fandom, and in academia. Moreover, her commentary indicates the importance of directly engaging with these drifting terminologies. With this title, White signals a stylistic change, shifting away from the more cinematic approach she typically takes to one that breaks the fourth wall and utilizes point of view (POV). At the same time, she is also signaling that she has produced a series of scenes that amp

18 bono-ONE, "Riley Goes Gonzo," *Adult DVD Talk*, January 20, 2014, <https://www.adultdvdtalk.com/review/riley-goes-gonzo-29654>.

19 Willie D., "Long Jeanne Silver (1977)," *XXX Porn Talk*, April 25, 2007, <http://forum.jerkoffzone.net/ubbthreads/ubbthreads.php?ubb=showflat&Number=240619>.

20 Chauntelle Anne Tibbals, "Gonzo, Trannies, and Teens—Current Trends in US Adult Content Production, Distribution, and Consumption," *Porn Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 129.

21 Dines, *Pornland*, xi.

22 Tibbals, "Gonzo, Trannies, and Teens," 129.

23 Tibbals, "Gonzo, Trannies, and Teens," 129.

up the sexual action from vanilla to something more intense. In the text accompanying the scene's release on her website (text that is also used in promotional materials and press releases), White explains the film as a direct engagement with the politics of "gonzo": "As a genre, gonzo has had an onslaught of attacks from conservative and anti-porn feminist campaigners for being the most degrading and misogynistic type of pornography. I wanted to release a gonzo DVD that challenges the assumption that women cannot or should not enjoy rough sex."²⁴ White explicitly positions her use of the term as a political act, one that attempts to redefine our perceptions of "gonzo," particularly in connection to women:

Releasing *Angela Loves Gonzo* is a political statement as well as being another step in my sexual exploration through porn, . . . but another thing I wanted to make clear with this release, and what I think most critics of the genre miss, is that gonzo can also be one of the most intimate and authentic genres. By removing the crew and the artifice of scripts and storylines, gonzo allows performers to focus on connecting with each other. I always find that authentic chemistry is showcased most effectively in gonzo porn and while *Angela Loves Gonzo* features consensual rough sex, it includes an equal amount of genuine intimacy, light hearted jokes, tenderness and mutual affection between performers.²⁵

This marketing rhetoric both circulates and challenges several popular understandings and characterizations of "gonzo": that it is a shooting format (POV), that it is altogether "hard" or "rough," and that it is associated with misogyny and degradation of women. White's hopes for redemption are directed toward two maligned categories: women and gonzo. On the one hand, White hopes to show that women can enjoy rough sex, and on the other hand, she hopes to show that gonzo can be intimate and affectionate. In addition, the rhetoric surrounding White's film signals the extent to which "hard core" has drifted from its standard definition—unsimulated penetrative sex—toward a space simultaneously occupied by gonzo. Hence, White promises "four gonzo scenes that do away with camera crews and professional lighting to focus on real, raw hardcore action," blurring the format-based understanding of gonzo with a stylistic understanding that is "hard core."²⁶

In response to what can appear to be an alarming dissolution of concrete meaning, Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca articulate gonzo style as a logical development arising out of the gonzo format. That is, "the effacement of narration gives way . . . to the expansion of the sexual act."²⁷ In this way, it makes sense that fans might linguistically understand "gonzo" to mean both a format and a descriptor that signals hyperbolic sex acts—a type of pornography that, because of its format, privileges sexual athleticism

24 "Angela White Stars in New Showcase DVD 'Angela Loves Gonzo,'" *Adult Video News*, May 27, 2016, <https://avn.com/business/press-release/video/angela-white-stars-in-new-showcase-dvd-angela-loves-gonzo-668025.html>.

25 "Angela White Stars."

26 "Angela White Stars."

27 Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca, "Contemporary Audiovisual Pornography: Branding Strategy and Gonzo Film Style," *Cinema & Cie* 9, no. 12 (2009): 143.

as the main attraction. Fans, along with the industry, have thus arguably mobilized this dual meaning to the point where it is verging on an institutionalized meaning.

The rapidly proliferating field of porn studies, like many an academic field, tends to retain the concrete definitions of old or steadfastly refuses to deviate from definitions that serve a political or scholarly purpose. Against this backdrop, the vocabulary of fandom and industry rhetoric offers a fruitful site for complicating and shaking up scholarly investigations of pornography. It is important to ask what porn fans and industry workers know that we academics do not; to ask how terms that we might believe are set in stone are being redefined, reshaped, and put to work to discursively navigate the bewildering terrain of pornographic media; and to ask how and why we might attend to this semantic drift in a way that informs and strengthens our scholarship. *

The Queer Heart of Porn Studies

by JOHN PAUL STADLER

In a field retrospective, Linda Williams historicizes the development of porn studies under the tutelage of film and video studies. Williams notes that, in hindsight, porn studies might also have thrived under “history, anthropology, cultural studies, or the then-developing queer studies.”¹ Following this supposition, I want to explore what queerness can teach us about the study of adult film.² The familial resemblance between porn studies and queer studies suggests that their coemergence was perhaps not coincidental at all but resulted from sex-positive feminist and nonstraight scholars who, amid the culture wars (and the rise of neoliberalism), took that indeterminate site of power—sexuality—as their primary object of study. Both epistemological projects are deeply indebted to Foucauldian thought, poststructuralist methodologies, and unabashed interest in perversion. Both emerged in dissent to and reconfiguration of second-wave feminism, both share an objective to denaturalize sex and uncover its social constructions, and both agitate against the patriarchal processes of normalization.

To map their similarities, I turn to queer theory, which inaugurated the development of queer studies in the 1990s. Gayle Rubin’s 1984 essay “Thinking Sex” laid the groundwork for queer theory by asking why feminism had not yet “critically thought” the sexual practices that

1 Linda Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” *Porn Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 25.

2 I am invoking here Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s pedagogy-themed essay “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?,” *PMLA* 110 (1995): 343–349.

fell outside of “the charmed circle” or that imagined division between “good” and “bad” sex.³ In her diagram, pornography and homosexual sex acts both unsurprisingly exceeded the circle’s normalizing boundary. Rubin was responding in part to the infamous 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality that had tumultuously brought together bristling factions of antipornography and anticensorship feminists. Porn studies, too, emerged out of that tumult, for early porn studies scholars had to defend themselves against the media-effects debates of antiporn feminists.⁴ But whereas Rubin wanted to “think sex,” Linda Williams in *Hard Core* sought to “speak sex,” a distinction that highlights the enunciatory imperative for sex to produce discourse. For Williams, pornography holds the vexed position of being “on/scene,” where “a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated obscene and kept literally off-scene.”⁵ The tension of on/scenity positions pornography as an open secret, one that its scholars would need to negotiate carefully, often from the starting position of defensiveness. On/scenity also reveals the arbitrary line between the unacceptable and acceptable, signaling the importance of context. A medical diagram of the naked body in the doctor’s office isn’t pornography, but in a different space it could be. That slipperiness is something to which queer theory was no stranger.

In the essentialist versus constructivist debates surrounding homosexual origins, queer theory faced a debate with no positive outcome, a dilemma that resonates with the media-effects debates in porn studies—the ones that go something like, “Does pornography cause X?”⁶ Eve Sedgwick speculated that the political desire to locate an etiology for homosexuality, regardless of one’s position, distressingly revealed the desire for the eradication of homosexuality, and not the attempt to understand it better.⁷ Rather than engage ad nauseam with the question of adult cinema’s presumed causal effects—which similarly reveal the desire for eradication rather than understanding—porn studies chose a different set of questions to consider, starting with complications to visibility. Williams famously articulated the latter in the expansion of Jean-Louis Comolli’s concept of the “frenzy of the visible,” where tropes like the “money shot”

3 Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319.

4 See, for instance, Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Thomas Waugh, “Men’s Pornography, Gay vs. Straight,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 30 (1985): 30–35; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5 This definition comes from Williams’s introduction to her anthology *Porn Studies*, but she first coined the term in the added epilogue to the second edition of *Hard Core*. In fact, she has revealed elsewhere that *Pornographies On/Scene* had been her preferred title for the anthology that would become *Porn Studies*. See Williams, introduction to *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 5; Williams, *Hard Core*, 282; and Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 34.

6 In the 1980s, the “X” of this formula stood for rape, violence, and misogyny, but more recent media-effects debates have come to treat pornography as a (mental) health crisis. “X” in the latter case can be seen to mean any number of things: erectile dysfunction, lowered libido, heightened libido, depression, anxiety, antisocial behavior, addiction, or—classically—the demise of a relationship.

7 Here I reference Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s queer critique: “There currently exists no origins or development of individual gay identity that is not already structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating that identity.” Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 41.

stand in as constructions of desire's so-called truth.⁸ The political stakes for porn studies have, then, largely centered on obscenity and censorship. For queer theory, they have concerned contestations of heteronormativity, a validation of socially illegible subjects, and an aspiration for alternative social structures.⁹

Although there are resonances between porn studies and queer theory, the two do not always map onto each other neatly. When the term “queer” travels within porn studies, it often fails to denote queer theory's inaugural desire to evade culturally legible sexual-identity categories. In her 1993 essay “Queer and Now,” Eve Sedgwick wrote that “same-sex sexual object choice” remains the definitional center of queerness; simultaneously, she called for “queer” to signify more than same-sex attraction.¹⁰ The tension of making same-sex object choice central while simultaneously refusing to limit queerness to an identificatory understanding of “gay” can also be seen in Sedgwick's development of a universalizing versus minoritizing framework. Sedgwick uses the latter concepts to destabilize and ultimately disrupt the long-standing nature-versus-nurture debates, but this tension also reveals the scales at which her vision for a queer discourse operated: with the universalizing project of coming to terms with myriad forms of sexual “difference” existing beyond discrete identity categories on the one hand and, on the other hand, the minoritizing project of supporting gay men during the AIDS crisis.¹¹ In other words, the “queer” of queer theory often served, at least in its earliest articulations, as a concept whose referent refused capture, and as such it was imagined to offer a radical hermeneutic for disrupting received knowledge.¹²

The “queer” of queer theory, then, initially sought to undermine reference to and question the construction of identity structures, whereas the broader “LGBTQ studies” was more likely to codify identities into discrete and legible categories to further the pursuit of civil rights and recognitions.¹³ “Queer” within porn studies often follows a more identity-centered approach to “queer,” adopting a usage fairly synonymous with “gay” and “lesbian.” Film scholars Thomas Waugh and Richard Dyer were foundational to the study of gay pornography in the 1980s.¹⁴ Their scholarship

8 Williams, *Hard Core*, 36, 112–113; Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machines of the Visible,” in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 122–123.

9 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's notion of heteronormativity, José Muñoz's understanding of disidentification, and Michael Warner's use of counterpublics give a rough sketch of the rich concepts developed under queer theory. See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–566; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90.

10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

11 In an interesting bridging of praxis and representation, the pornography industry was one of the first cultural institutions to heed the call of queer activists by incorporating safer-sex protocols and disclaimers into the gay pornography of the era. See Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 118–138.

12 Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 8.

13 “Queer theory” has not been able to fend off implications of being an umbrella term for minority sexual-identity categories, but I want to follow its initial desire to do precisely that.

14 See Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Thomas Waugh, “‘Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight': A Personal Revisit,” *Porn Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 131–138; Thomas Waugh, “Homosexuality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen,” *Sexualities* 4, no. 3 (2001): 275–291; Richard Dyer, “Male Gay

engaged in the feminist “sex wars” by taxonomizing gay pornography in order to distance it from heterosexual “smut” and in turn legitimize gay and lesbian porn scholarship. From the 1990s onward, gay and lesbian porn scholarship experienced a veritable explosion of scholarly writing.¹⁵ Williams observes that the “queer and ‘queering’ approach has perhaps flourished the most” in the field of porn studies. She goes on to explain that the “growing field [of] studying gay pornography . . . can be expected to flourish because the scholars who write about these pornographies have found them crucial to their identities as gays or queers.”¹⁶ Williams presents the terms “gay” and “queer” alongside each other, almost interchangeably, but also as constitutive of identity. While the importance of pornography to gay culture and identity is undeniable, the way in which “queer” signifies here—as if “covering all the bases”—diverges starkly from queer theory’s hope to disrupt these very identities.¹⁷

Porn studies has recently begun to reflect more rigorously on its critical lineage and approach, toward which this In Focus dossier also contributes.¹⁸ Not only is porn studies beginning to trace its own field formation; it has expanded its methodology into something of an interdisciplinary constellation: in addition to textual analysis, methodological approaches include cultural studies, historicism, archival studies, industry studies, fan cultures, and ethnography. John Champagne’s early polemic “Stop Reading Films!” gives just one example of discursive reflection, when he calls for scholars to leave behind the textual analysis component in gay porn studies for a more contextual analysis of the sexually fluid reception and exhibition practices.¹⁹ Here,

Porn, Coming to Terms,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 30 (1985): 27–29; and Dyer, “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography,” *Critical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1994): 49–62.

- 15 An abbreviated overview: Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 167–197; José B. Capino, “Seminal Fantasies: Wakefield Poole, Pornography, Independent Cinema and the Avant-Garde,” in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 155–173; John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Hayworth Press, 1995); Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Dog Press, 2009); Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis,” in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145–168; Tan Hoang Nguyen, “The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 230–270; John Mercer, *Gay Pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017); Cindy Patton, *LA Plays Itself / Boys in the Sand: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014); Cherry Smyth, “The Pleasure Threshold: Looking at Lesbian Pornography on Film,” *Feminist Review* 34, no. 1 (1990): 152–159.
- 16 Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 26.
- 17 Queer theory has itself also been taken to task for failing to mean more than “gay and lesbian.” See, for instance, Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (2004): 212–215.
- 18 The metadiscursive analysis of pornography studies is limited but beginning to grow. See Williams, “Pornography, Porno, Porn”; Tim Dean, “Introduction: Pornography, Technology, Archive,” in *Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Kipnis, “How to Read Pornography,” in *Bound and Gagged*; and Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 19 John Champagne, “‘Stop Reading Films!’: Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography,” *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 76–97. José B. Capino, Rich Cante, Angelo Restivo, and Samuel Delany have each undertaken reception studies of adult cinema that carry forward Champagne’s call.

then, we see a branch of porn studies that took a demonstrably queer approach—in the sense that it distanced itself from the dominant mode—to apprehend adult cinema’s social meanings.

Contemporary online pornography lends insight to another form of queerness through its expansive naming and categorization processes. One might think this proliferation would codify a host of paraphilias into identity structures. (If you can think it, there is porn for it, the internet meme “Rule 34” tells us.)²⁰ Indeed, writing in 1999, Williams notes that she could not do justice to the variety of pornographic forms that had emerged since the 1980s, although she still compiled a list that includes sadomasochism, yuppie, gonzo, amateur, fetish, bondage and discipline, instructional, “real” lesbian, bisexual, fat, enema, spanking, transvestism, transgender, and racial and ethnic pornography.²¹ Against this proliferation, though, she noted that “unitary categories of identity begin to cross and blur.”²² To her list, we can add feminist porn and queer porn, ready for more ethical consumption, as well as newer digital forms with more complicated ethics: cam shows, revenge porn, dick pics, and so on.²³ In *Carnal Resonance*, Susanna Paasonen echoes Williams’s suspicion that proliferating categories might codify identities, and she insists that “sexual depictions and activities need to be considered outside the framework of fixed identity categories. A queer orientation to pornography involves analytical curiosity and openness that does not start from or resort to binary models.”²⁴

What exactly would a queer orientation to porn studies look like, though? If we treat pornography with less familiarity, and instead estrange our understanding of its formal incitation of rhythms, durations, tropes, forces, and structures, we might open up what Eugenie Brinkema calls the radical formalism of pornography.²⁵ Because porn studies has so aptly deconstructed the fictive representations of female pleasure in the “frenzy of the visible” and “the money shot,” a deconstructive approach to pornography’s rendering of sexual identity would seem fitting. For Whitney Strub, queerness links to questions of both methodology and content. He argues, for example, that the impoverished adult cinema archive has led “porn studies scholars to miss the enormous queer drifts of early hardcore.”²⁶ An answer, then, to locating a queerer orientation to pornography might require first a methodological answer to the question, How do we locate our objects when they are under threat of vanishing? It would seem that the temporal uncertainty and urgency undergirding queer praxis (and

20 Williams, *Hard Core*, 301–303.

21 Williams, *Hard Core*, 301–303.

22 Williams, *Hard Core*, 304.

23 See Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, and Mireille Miller-Young, eds., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

24 Specifically, Paasonen seeks to disband binary thinking about pornography posed in terms of “us and them, in and out, gay and straight.” See *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 153.

25 Eugenie Brinkema, “Irrumation, the Interrogative: Extreme Porn and the Crisis of Reading,” *Polygraph*, no. 26 (2017): 130–164, https://polygraphjournal.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/polygraph-26_eugenie-brinkema.pdf.

26 Whitney Strub, “Sex Wishes and Virgin Dreams: Zebedy Colt’s Reactionary Queer Heterosmut and the Elusive Porn Archive,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 3 (2017): 363.

life!) amid the AIDS crisis in the 1990s might also inform the object of pornography, viewed here as expendable, undervalued, and in need of care.

In this brief sketch, I have traced homologies that suggest a strong affinity between queer theory and porn studies, but their complementarity reflects their particularities as well. For while queer theory and porn studies appear increasingly to intersect, they also leave impressions on one another, which I have tried to make explicit. Linda Williams's suggestion that porn studies might have flourished under queer studies invites us to consider the ways that queer theory—queer studies' instantiating hermeneutic—can reorient our understanding of adult cinema. To study pornography continues to require a rigorous defense—what I call “the disclaimer”—of the critical value of the very object before the analysis we hope to pursue can begin, much as queer theory did in its early days.²⁷ Meanwhile, porn studies can learn from queer theory to be more promiscuous, interdisciplinary, capacious, and reflective of itself. Lee Edelman notes the homologue I have been tracing as follows: “Like pornography, queerness occupies the space of what resists the advances of knowledge, what conceptualization can't domesticate by way of its will-to-identity. As such it never coincides with itself, never quickens into form.”²⁸ It is in this resistance to a preset knowledge that queerness and pornography seem most alike, most challenging, and most productive. *

27 In an ironic turn, it is contemporary queer theory that now appears to be more institutionalized and less in need of a defense.

28 Lee Edelman, “Unbecoming: Pornography and the Queer Event,” in *Post Porn Politics: Queer-Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex-Work as Culture Production*, ed. Tim Stütgen (Berlin: b_books, 2009), 38.

No Sex in Newark: Postindustrial Erotics at the Intersection of Urban and Adult Film History

by WHITNEY STRUB

No masterpiece of pornography by most standards, *Newark Penn Station Pt 1: Dude Fingering My Musty Booty* (neanea14, 2015) consists of fifty-six seconds set in a restroom that foreground a man's thrust-out ass. We peer up into it from below, as another man sitting on a toilet in an adjacent stall reaches under the divide to, indeed, finger it. The man being fingered shoots the scene from his phone camera, held in one hand as he strokes himself with the other, leaving us with a shaky and constrained view. Just before the minute mark, it abruptly stops.

Fortunately for viewers left disoriented or seeking narrative or sexual closure, our cruising pornographer, known only as neanea14, posted a short sequel to his XTube channel. In the caption to *Newark Penn Station Pt 2* (2015), he explains, “i went to the urinals and we went into the stall to finish what we started at the urinals. my dick was musty as fuck. hope you enjoy.”¹ This fifty-seven-second scene brings the video to an orgasmic conclusion, as the two men, now standing inside one stall, jack themselves and each other off to completion, ejaculating in turn into the toilet bowl. In the next stall, a man stands to pee and flushes, seen only by his feet.

We never see faces in the two videos, which afford us mere snippets of the men at play: black, with tight athletic abdomens, dressed casually in sweatpants, jeans, and sneakers. From neanea14’s profile, we get an expanded sense of an attractive twentysomething very interested in public sex, public masturbation, and the act of recording himself. Much of his erotic circuit seems to follow the route of the northern New Jersey Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH) train itinerary, with similar encounters recorded at the Journal Square stop in Jersey City and elsewhere.

Much could be said of the sometimes charming, sometimes troubling erotic subjectivity that neanea14 charts over the course of his fifty short videos, all posted to XTube between approximately 2013 and 2016. As a proud versatile bottom and self-identified Christian, his stated turn-ons include mustiness and men of all varieties, with the exception of “fat guys and Caucasian men.” As an exemplar of Black queer autopornography, he represents do-it-yourself (DIY) culture work of the sort that still receives too little scholarly attention.²

The work of neanea14 also points toward the ways pornography proves useful at the intersection of urban history, film studies, and the history of sexuality, especially when traditional archives fail us. Both the production and the exhibition of porn offer rich resources for documenting precarious postindustrial erotics that too often go overlooked. Notably, neanea14’s “hit me up” geography does not include New York City—a mere three stops and ten minutes past Journal Square on the PATH, and so easily accessible for him. Instead, it comprises a North Jersey nexus of Jersey City, Bayonne, Newark, Hoboken, and East Orange. Nor is neanea14 the only DIY pornographer working in this space; XTube user deesoul87 offers *Penn Station Head* (2011), seventy-five seconds of blow-job footage riskily shot on an elevator inside Newark Penn Station.³

Clearly, Newark affords space for pleasure and desire. One would not know it from the existing scholarship on the city, however. In the dominant national symbolic economy, Newark remains an overdetermined metonym of urban decay, eternally trapped in the shadow of 1967’s long hot summer and its incessant renarrativization everywhere from PBS to Philip Roth novels.⁴ When anthropologist Ana Ramos-Zayas

1 The profile of neanea14, with links to his videos, can be found at <https://www.xtube.com/profile/neanea14-3759531>.

2 Indeed, Black gay porn in general needs and deserves more critical analysis. See Terry Rowden, “The ‘Top’ of the Heap: Race, Manhood, and Legitimation in *My Life in Porn: The Bobby Blake Story*,” *Black Camera* 2, no. 2 (2011): 80–99.

3 deesoul87, *Penn Station Head* (2011), <https://www.xtube.com/video-watch/penn-station-head-1260146>.

4 See, for example, *Revolution '67* (Marylou Tivaldo-Bongiorno, 2007); Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

studied how Newark was rendered legible to Brazilian and Puerto Rican immigrant communities, she found that blackness registered as an affect, defined through aggression, which in turn became the “meta-narrative of emotion in Newark.”⁵ In this reading of the city, otherwise-marginalized groups partook of hegemonic consensus.

Indeed, postindustrial blackness seems to foreclose the sort of urban erotics bestowed on other cities. To pluck from eclectic historiographies for effect: eighteenth-century Philadelphia begins with *Sex among the Rabble* and grows into the postwar *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*; New York gets both *Licentious Gotham* and *Prurient Interests*; San Francisco, simply *Erotic City*.⁶ Even Kansas gets *Sex in the Heartland*; Minnesota, *Land of 10,000 Loves*; and Arkansas, the enticingly queer *Un-Natural State*.⁷ Yet when it comes to Newark—and this could easily be Gary, Flint, Cleveland, or Baltimore—urban history flattens into a familiar but desexualized arc of immigration, redevelopment, riots, Black Power, and urban decay. *No Cause for Indictment* is the connotative apotheosis, a self-declared “autopsy” of the city.⁸ Tellingly, when Kevin Mumford wrote a book about Newark in between his pioneering history of interracial sex districts and his field-defining Black gay history monograph, he attended carefully to gender, but even he saw no sex.⁹

Amateur pornographers such as neaneal4 and deesoul87 thus importantly articulate an urban eros otherwise insufficiently recognized: the simple fact that Newark, like other postindustrial Black and Latino cities, is as sexy as any other place, yet defined through a general absence of the whiteness that corresponds uncomfortably with eroticism in dominant narratives. That said, a representational charting of desire can take us only so far. While scholars of urban film history have generally failed to account for the central role of pornography in both depicting cities and mapping sexuality, recent work has taken up the challenge, from Elena Gorfinkel’s investigation of grindhouse historicity in sexploitation’s recursive reliance on Times Square footage to Jeffrey Escoffier’s argument for 1970s gay hard core as “homorealism.”¹⁰ In my own

5 Ana Ramos-Zayas, *Street Therapists: Race, Affect, and Neoliberal Personhood in Latino Newark* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 41.

6 Clare Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

7 Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Stewart Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010).

8 Ronald Porama, *No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

9 Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

10 Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Jeffrey Escoffier, “Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 1 (2017): 88–113.

work, I have examined Pat Rocco's groundbreaking gay soft-core films as acts of place-claiming in late-1960s Los Angeles, as well as the ways both straight and gay hard core narrate the purported urban crisis of the 1970s.¹¹ The intersection of adult film and urban history remains fertile ground for further analysis, and yet the overwhelming preponderance of this material was shot in three cities. We can find scattered stand-alone examples in Memphis, Seattle, and elsewhere—Detroit's *Hot Summer in the City* (Gail Palmer, 1976) is one striking bit of porno-urbanism. However, other noncoastal cities have even sparser filmic records. New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco dominate the history of hard core, at least until the San Fernando Valley and to a lesser extent Las Vegas begin their ascent (in both cases largely without the rich location shooting of 1970s porn). Beyond the internet-era tube-site videos, I can locate only two adult films shot in Newark, both thanks to the copious documentation at the *Rialto Report: Love Lords* (Bob Mason, 1972), a soft-core crime thriller with some vivid location shooting that was later spiced up with inserts and revived as the hard-core *Saturday Night Special* (Sam Bloch, 1976), and *Joy* (Harley Mansfield, 1977), a primarily New York-based film that concludes with a scene at Newark Liberty International Airport. Neither engages with desire embodied in a specific urban setting the way neaneal4's videos do.

But if we turn to exhibition, pornography returns us to urban histories of film and sexuality largely unrecorded. During the 1970s and into the 1980s, publicly screened hard-core films defined the urban landscape. Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, which brilliantly blends personal memoir with sociological analysis, inevitably stands as the canonical citation for describing the cross-class, multiracial (yet generally homosocial) public sphere of democratic sexuality enabled by pornographic space, in which men seeking to fulfill "needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge" also forge community and solidarity in porn theaters.¹² Delany's depiction, loving yet carefully nonutopian ("humane and functional" is his precise description), seems broadly applicable to other spaces of smut.¹³ But what does it mean to extricate adult theaters from the already-sexualized space of Times Square to the less preemptively eroticized terrain of a place like Newark? Where does this intense, concentrated, complicatedly queer space fit into the narrative of postindustrial Black (and later, Latino) cities?

Newark still hosts the Little Theatre, which has outlasted every porn theater in Manhattan and nearly all in the New York City metropolitan area.¹⁴ To date, no scholar has paid heed to the venue, but if we take it seriously as a sexual institution, it points

11 Whitney Strub, "Mondo Rocco: Mapping Gay Los Angeles Sexual Geography in the Late-1960s Films of Pat Rocco," *Radical History Review* 113 (2012): 13–34; Strub, "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," in *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 27–52.

12 Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 90.

13 For a rare look at heterosexuality in contemporary adult theaters, see David Church, "'This Thing of Ours': Heterosexuality, Recreational Sex, and the Survival of Adult Movie Theaters," *Media Fields Journal* 8 (2014), <http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/this-thing-of-ours>.

14 All that remain of the classic adult theaters in New York are the King's Highway, deep in Brooklyn, and the Fair Theatre in East Elmhurst, Queens.

toward further ways adult film history can enrich our current stories of sexuality, race, and urban history. Moreover, researching the Little Theatre leads one immediately to the perpetual archival crisis of pornography, in which traditional documentation remains elusive. When I interviewed Danny Ganota, who ran the three-hundred-seat theater from approximately 1966 to his death in 2017, I asked what sort of records he had. He told me they all went out in trash bags years earlier.¹⁵ Material in the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records at New York Public Library establishes the theater's early years as a white ethnic haven with second-run Hollywood movies interspersed with films in German, Yiddish, and other languages. We can learn what the opening-night screening was in March 1930 (the 1928 Indian film *Shiraz* [Franz Osten]) but not much about the theater's later sex culture.¹⁶

The Little Theatre followed a standard trajectory for mid-sized venues, shifting to frolicsome nudie films by the late 1950s, grittier sexploitation in the 1960s, and finally hard core in the early 1970s, which it has shown ever since, switching to video projection sometime in the 1980s and digital by the early twenty-first century.¹⁷ Around the mid-1980s it opened an "all-male" screen, located at the top of a tight, winding stairwell and consisting of a large flat-screen television and about twelve chairs. Behind the screen, a small unlit room allows for both sex and conversation. A purported third screen noted on the ad board at the ticket counter merely consists of two small elevated televisions at opposite ends of the main hallway, playing the same video, often louder than the muffled audio on the main screen.

The exhibition histories of such theaters are familiar to adult film scholars, although the Little Theatre's longevity is noteworthy. Framed from another angle, however, the Little Theatre points toward urban sexual geographies less recognized than those of such iconic neighborhoods as Greenwich Village or the Castro. From interviews at the Queer Newark Oral History Project (which I codirect at Rutgers–Newark), we know that the theater was part of a thriving public sex culture as far back as the 1950s, when John, an Irish-Catholic born in 1938, turned tricks with older men as a teenager there, in between his purely for-pleasure dalliances elsewhere across the city.¹⁸ Later, as the sexual revolution was inscribed on the urban landscape, the theater became something of an anchor for downtown Newark's small but robust red-light district, which included two more porn theaters by the 1970s and the Lincoln Motel, where prostitution and in-room adult movies sat alongside Zanzibar, a mixed straight and gay disco and a crucial site for New Jersey house music.

By this point, Newark's demographics had shifted, as it became a Black-majority city around 1965, and the first major East Coast city to elect a Black mayor, Kenneth Gibson, in 1970. Black Power politics, under whose aegis Gibson had run (but would

15 Danny Ganota, author interview, June 15, 2016, Newark, NJ.

16 Invitational flyer, March 14, 1930, box 150, folder 1, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, New York Public Library.

17 Sources for this paragraph can be read in more detail at Whitney Strub, "The Sticky Floors of History at the Little Theater (Pornography in Newark, Part 4)," *Strublog* (blog), September 18, 2016, <https://strublog.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/the-sticky-floors-of-history-at-the-little-theater-pornography-in-newark-part-4>.

18 John, oral history, August 3, 2016, Queer Newark Oral History Project, <http://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/interviews/john>.

not always serve), broke with the old white machine politics of Newark in many ways but shared much with the sexual and gender conservatism of the Catholic and Jewish ethnic groups whose power it otherwise displaced. From Amiri Baraka's deeply traditionalist gender politics to the inability of civic leaders and local schools to openly confront the intersectional issues at stake in the 2003 murder of masculine-presenting fifteen-year-old Black lesbian Sakia Gunn, Newark remained beholden to what Zenzele Isoke, in her study of Black women and the politics of resistance, labels "black heteropatriarchy."¹⁹

Certainly the social violence of heteropatriarchy was felt, in Newark as in all US cities, in a multitude of ways. And yet under Gibson and his successor, Sharpe James (who consecutively governed from 1970 until 2006), Newark showed virtually no propensity for the sort of porn-busting fervor that periodically flared up in ostensibly more socially liberal New York from mayors John Lindsay through Rudy Giuliani. The regulation of sexuality in Newark was enforced not through the moral politics traditionally implemented via vice squads, raids, and zoning laws, but ultimately, instead, through gentrification and redevelopment, embodied in mayor Cory Booker, harbinger of Newark's devolution from Black Power politics to Twitter-based neoliberalism. Still, even when the Lincoln Motel met its end in 2007, eagerly bulldozed by the then recently elected Booker, an amused *New York Times* noted the Cameo Twin Theater down the street, "whose cinematic delights appeal to those of all sexual orientations."²⁰

The Cameo closed in 2010. Danny Ganota passed away in May 2017, and a For Lease sign went up on the Little Theatre the following week. That year brought changes—the disappearance of the two video-game consoles in the hallway, an admission charge raised from ten to twelve dollars—but as of this writing in April 2018, the Little Theatre remains defiantly open. It is a relic, to be sure, anachronistic in the era of Grindr and tube sites, but also a thriving sexual public sphere to the bitter end, inhabited largely but not exclusively by men of color. Its clientele skews middle-aged but includes a sizable contingent of younger men. A typical weekday afternoon might find a dozen men scattered throughout the theater; on a weekend, there are sometimes several dozen. Almost no one sits and watches the films, which lurch erratically from glossy French porno noir to scenes from GirlsRimming.com, from the work of queer feminist director Nica Noelle to such random curios as *Gotcha!* (2008), directed by golden-age performer Paul Thomas. Rather, it is the pornographic space itself that enables the sex culture, which transpires in the seats, bathroom, upstairs backroom, and screen-adjacent exit hallway (which offers no exit, the door to outside being locked).

Again, none of this is exceptional to Newark. But it is important to consider given contemporary queer theory's New York-centric eagerness to mourn the "ghosts of public sex" after Disney killed Times Square and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority locked the bathrooms.²¹ That spirit is alive and well a few miles away, not

19 Zenzele Isoke, *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

20 Andrew Jacobs, "Newark Loses Unwanted Landmark as Lincoln Motel Goes," *New York Times*, October 8, 2007.

21 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

centered on white men, and visible in no small part through pornographic space and production. Consequently, Newark's underappreciated urban erotics and queer history offer a compelling argument for the importance of adult film history beyond the niche of porn studies. *

Sadly, the Little Theater abruptly closed on June 25, 2018. Public sex in Newark, however, lives on.

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