1
History of Early Adult Film

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Encompassing a period that stretches from the birth of cinema until the legal emergence of "hardcore" cinema around 1969/70, the history of early adult film covers a broad span of decades, as well as a broad variety of films. The term "adult film" offers more precision and less moralistic charge than the rather porous label "pornography" (which, since the 1850s, has been applied to many different types of materials deemed worthy of moral opprobrium and social prohibition). Yet, by refusing to make "adult film" wholly synonymous with the material most often considered "pornographic" by present-day standards (i.e. imagery of unsimulated sexual contact), it can also describe "any time-based media designed to emphasize nudity and/or human sexuality for viewing by adults, regardless of the time, place, or age at which one is deemed to be an adult." This includes "not only material designed strictly as entertainment or for sexual stimulation but also films that are educational, experimental, or made for other purposes."[1] For the sake of expediency, then, this chapter focuses on the history of early adult films circulated in the United States, with the full awareness that other national-cultural contexts have their own distinct histories of adult cinema.

From nude photography to early narrative cinema

Alongside the rise of sprocket-holed celluloid film, the proto-cinematic invention of "chronophotography"—as pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey during the 1870s and 1880s—allowed the intricacies of animal locomotion to be captured on film and projected for the first time. Motion studies of the fully nude human body became a core part of Muybridge's lectures at colleges, museums, and scientific societies, with female nudes serving as objects of particular curiosity. Although the educational context of Muybridge's lectures may have mitigated their prurient appeal, these early experiments with moving images reveal adult film's fascination with the "truths" of the sexualized body as undergirding the very birth of cinema.[2]

By the final years of the nineteenth century, however, cinema's growth as a commercialized entertainment in "lower" cultural venues, such as fairgrounds, vaudeville halls, and storefront Kinetoscope parlors, would also open some of its early offerings—such as Thomas Edison's *The May Irwin Kiss* (1896)—to accusations of "improper" or "indecent" displays of sexual conduct. Over the next decade, for example, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced a comedic series of "blue movies" set in burlesque theaters, which feature dancing girls semi-clad in burlesque costumes, or even partially disrobing; some early Pathé films featured frontal female nudity. Unfolding within one or more stationary shots, the

primitive action endemic to this pre-1906 "cinema of attractions" is displayed with an exhibitionism that both foregrounds the novelty of moving pictures and winkingly acknowledges the (male) viewer's desirous gaze.[3] Meanwhile, *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903, dir. Edwin S. Porter) marked an aesthetic advance by cutting from a long shot to an insert of a woman's calf in close-up as she slowly raises her skirt; this use of basic editing to highlight close-ups of erotic spectacle would become a visual motif in more explicit films to come.[4] Indeed, the development of feature-length narratives about alcoholism, rape, and "white slavery" (sex trafficking) led to ongoing skirmishes between film producers and social reformers (with child protectionism as a recurring concern)—all culminating in the *Mutual Film Corp. v Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915) decision, in which the US Supreme Court declared that movies did not qualify as constitutionally protected forms of free speech, and could therefore be subject to cuts by state and municipal censor boards.[5]

Stag films and art studies

Even if these early films were neither pornographic nor necessarily restricted to adults-only audiences, some of them may have also screened at "stag" gatherings (or "smokers"), a specialized exhibition context that would soon lend its name to an underground market of hardcore shorts.[6] Stag parties, many of which were organized by civic and fraternal organizations as men-only evenings, often featured both film screenings and performances by erotic dancers—a combination inherited from vaudeville and burlesque. Indeed, prior to the 1920s, performances by "cooch" dancers or screenings of "cooch reels" (featuring an early style of striptease) became a major reason for police raids at stag parties. After the introduction of 16mm safety film stock in 1923, however, film screenings at stag parties (and, to a lesser extent, in more clandestine venues, such as hotel rooms and apartments) increasingly incorporated short films depicting explicit sex—an underground market spurred by 16mm equipment's lower economic/technical barriers for production and its portability for itinerant projectionists.[7] An estimated 2,000 hardcore shorts may have been produced prior to 1970—and the vast majority were made in the United States after 16mm (and, later, 8mm) equipment became available.[8]

Although stag parties originally featured a variety of films that might appeal to male celebrants, the historical subgenre of moving-image pornography latterly dubbed the "stag film" were likely first screened at brothels. Apocryphal accounts conflict, but these short, silent, anonymously made films featuring hardcore sex began appearing as early as 1904/6, variously credited to France, Austria, Germany, Argentina, Brazil, and other countries with thriving sex work; among the earliest surviving stags are *El Satario* (c. 1907, Argentina), *Am Abend* (c. 1910, Germany), and *A Free Ride* (c. 1915, United States).[9] The female performers in early stags were most likely sex workers, and viewing these films in brothels might therefore serve as a preview of coming attractions.[10] The fact that a small number of western European stags (especially French productions) also depict male homosexual contact—often intermingled with heterosexual contact in a "pansexual" way—could be attributed to the commercial availability of a variety of pleasures at European brothels.[11]

By contrast, when stag films were viewed in the more communal, homosocial atmosphere of the American stag party, the homoerotic potential of "men getting hard pretending not to watch men getting hard watching images of men getting hard watching or fucking women" might be assuaged through forced laughter and sexist banter, sonically shoring up the heterosexual male audience's sense of gender solidarity during films that might otherwise unspool to awkward silence.[12] Moreover, stags could shore up a sense of white racial solidarity through their fetishized depictions of Black and Asian women (the latter typically portrayed by white women in "yellowface") performing with white men, thus reinforcing existing stereotypes about the hypersexuality of non-white women.[13]

In the contexts of both the brothel and the stag party, then, the stag film would seem designed to arouse the male viewer, but not to induce him to masturbate to completion. This hesitation partially explains why the stags' simple narratives often revolve around acts of voyeurism (self-reflexively nodding

to the film's own viewer), and are more likely to culminate with close-ups of genital penetration than with the close-ups of external penile ejaculation (or "cum shots") that would become a much more conventionalized trope in later, feature-length pornography.[14]

Yet small-gauge prints of stag films were also directly sold to consumers for home viewing purposes, via mail-order outlets and under-the-counter sales at photographic supply shops (Figure 1.1). Indeed, in 1925 the US Post Office announced a crackdown on the mailing of obscene materials, and postal inspectors became one of the stag market's most significant opponents through the 1950s.[15] Hence, to assume that stags' formal qualities can be wholly explained by their exhibition at brothels and stag parties downplays the extent to which they retained a "primitive" aesthetic, even into the period after the Second World War, when membership in fraternal organizations precipitously dropped and stag parties themselves became less common.[16] A far smaller corpus of all-male stag films would eventually emerge during the 1960s, but these were largely restricted to a mail-order market fostered via the semi-licit category of 8mm physique films, as discussed below.[17]

Although stag films would remain an illegal market until the late 1960s, they were not the only form of adult cinema sold in plain brown wrappers via mail order and camera stores during the first half of the twentieth century. Emerging in the early 1930s, short 16mm and 8mm "art study" films featured fully nude women holding poses (sometimes while on a rotating turntable) or performing simple domestic actions. Predominantly bought by middle-class men under the pretext of providing aspiring artists with a cinematic substitute for figure models, art studies did not contain the blatantly explicit imagery of stags. Nevertheless, their circulation remained hemmed in not only by local obscenity laws but also by the 1873 Comstock Act—a federal law that prohibited the mailing of "obscene," "indecent," and "immoral" articles, materials, and devices, including information about sexuality, venereal disease, contraception, and abortion.[18]

Classical exploitation cinema

Meanwhile, the Comstock Act's strictures had already helped motivate the emergence of a far less secretive variety of cinema, shown to adults-only audiences in regular 35mm movie theaters since the 1920s: the

Figure 1.1: Ad for 8mm Melton Viewer, a children's toy repurposed for viewing stag films at home. From late 1950s mail-order catalogue of stag party merchandise. From the author's collection.

(classical) exploitation film. As the Hollywood studio system coalesced into a mainstream industry, the studios increasingly found themselves responding to moralistic criticism from various social reformers. To ward off potential government intervention, industry groups began recommending that filmmakers avoid controversial topics such as drug use, sex trafficking, and many of the other topics that the Comstock Act had already rendered verboten. Although nudity had appeared as background spectacle in early Hollywood epics such as *Intolerance* (1916, dir. D. W. Griffith), it too became effectively banned from Hollywood films, regardless of context. These industry recommendations, including the "Thirteen Points and Standards" (1921) and "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" (1927), were formally codified as the Motion Picture Production Code (1930), with the Production Code Administration (PCA) within the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) effectively serving as the major studios' (self-) censorship board. By avoiding potentially offensive topics (especially those that might be subject to cuts by state and municipal censor boards), the Hollywood studios could not only promote their offerings as family-friendly entertainment but also strengthen their dominance on the exhibition/distribution side of the industry by ensuring that studio-owned theaters would not play unapproved films.[19]

The formalization of topics forbidden from mainstream Hollywood cinema meant, however, that enterprising independent filmmakers could exploit such sensationalistic subjects in low-budget, feature-length films restricted to adults-only audiences. Driven by garish advertising, these films were distributed via traveling roadshow engagements or states' rights print exchanges, and necessarily screened at non-studio-owned theaters.[20] By deliberately capitalizing on scandalous themes and (non-explicit) visual spectacle obviated by the Production Code, classical exploitation films thus occupied a distinct market that "roughly paralleled the rise and fall of the classical Hollywood cinema."[21] Among common subgenres, sex hygiene films (whose screenings were often gender-segregated as well) such as *Mom and Dad* (1945, dir. William Beaudine) promised representations of premarital sex, pregnancy, and venereal disease; nudist films such as *Elysia* (1933, dir. Carl Harbaugh) offered quasi-anthropological glimpses into the naturist lifestyle; and vice films such as *Slaves in Bondage* (1937, dir. Elmer Clifton) delved into the underworld of sex work. Even in subgenres that did not specifically center on sexuality, the allure/threat of illicit sex was never far away; in *Marihuana* (1936, dir. Dwain Esper) and other exploitation films about the horrors of cannabis and illicit drugs, for example, wanton behavior and fleeting nudity almost invariably attend the dope addict's decline.

Often framed as cautionary narratives about the moral degradation of white, middle-class Americans, many of these films also awkwardly incorporate snippets of documentary footage (such as clinical imagery of childbirth or venereal disease symptoms, scenes of ethnographic nudity, and so on). Much as art studies typically featured an on-screen warning declaring such films as suited only for art students, classical exploitation films open with an on-screen preface (or "square-up") claiming the filmmakers' moral or educational mission of combating ignorance and alleviating social ills. Roadshow engagements might bolster this educational alibi with a live lecture by an "expert" on the film's topic—even though these lectures were often thinly veiled sales pitches for booklets about sex education and other subjects that the Comstock Act had made difficult to obtain. Overall, then, by directly addressing adult viewers through crude appeals to both education and titillation, classical exploitation films blended B-movie narratives with viewing expectations (e.g. spectacle, novelty, actuality) that harked back to the early "cinema of attractions."[22]

Legal and industrial shifts in the 1950s

If the 1930s and 1940s represented a period of relative stability for the illegal market in stag films and the legal market in exploitation films, the 1950s would become an important transitional decade, largely driven by a series of court decisions that loosened restrictions on permissible screen content. The landmark antitrust decree in *United States v Paramount Pictures, Inc.* (1948) had effectively ended Hollywood's

vertically integrated monopoly on the American film industry, in part by forcing the major studios to sell off their theater chains. Without guaranteed box-office returns from their own venues, the studios began cutting back their annual production slates. Because this decision reduced the amount of products available to the large number of newly independent theaters, exhibitors increasingly turned to other sources, including imported art films (which often featured more sexually provocative scenes than found in American films) and low-budget genre films (predominantly aimed at the growing teenage market). Whereas the "teenpics" churned out by independent producers such as American International Pictures capitalized on a series of mildly controversial youth trends (rock 'n' roll, juvenile delinquency, surfing, etc.), this playful new generation of (post-classical) exploitation films was not restricted to (or even intended for) adults, eschewing educational alibis in favor of a more juvenile, "pop" sense of fun.

As the older generation of (classical) exploitation producers retired, adults-only screenings became less common and exploitation cinema generally became tamer—though notable exceptions would exist. Burlesque films such as *Striporama* (1953, dir. Jerald Intrator) and *Teaserama* (1955, dir. Irving Klaw), for instance, hinge between the two eras, since they were still marketed to adults-only audiences but make no claims to educational or moral value. If anything, these episodic films capture the format of classical burlesque, a theatrical genre then in decline, by alternating between male performers in baggy-pants comedy skits and female dancers in striptease numbers. These numbers contain very little actual nudity, however, even if the skits' lowbrow humor and the dance sequences' fetishization of unclothed women both prefigure the adults-only market for so-called "nudie cuties," an early form of sexploitation cinema inaugurated by Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959), as discussed below.[23]

Meanwhile, art films were increasingly pushing against censorship restrictions, and Hollywood producers began taking advantage of increased demand for more "mature" content, especially since the *Paramount* decision had sapped the PCA's ability to bar unapproved films from large numbers of theaters. The US Supreme Court's decision in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v Wilson* (1952) marked a major sea change, by overturning the 1915 *Mutual* decision and declaring that movies were entitled to free-speech protection. Even though the film in question—Roberto Rossellini's "The Miracle," a segment of the Italian omnibus film *L'Amore* (1948)—had been threatened with state censorship on the grounds of "sacrilege," this landmark ruling paved the way for more sexual content on movie screens. For example, a 1955 decision on the US-made nudist film *The Garden of Eden* (1954, dir. Max Nosseck) declared that nudity in motion pictures was not obscene. By the late 1950s the sex appeal of stars such as Brigitte Bardot was as responsible for popularizing art cinema as the names of major auteurs; more and more US distributors began advertising art films in misleadingly sexualized ways, or even adding inserts of nudity and simulated sex not present in the original versions. Much like the earlier tradition of art studies, "art cinema" and "art theater" increasingly became self-defensive euphemisms for sexual content—a connotation that would persist through the next few decades, even as much more explicit content emerged onto public screens.[24]

Despite these legal shifts, however, the 1950s saw further efforts to police adults-only materials, including books, magazines, photographs, and films. During the Second World War the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had opened an "Obscene File" dedicated to collecting and analyzing obscene materials seized by police departments around the country. By the mid-1950s this centralized effort to stamp out pornography meant that the federal government now assumed a function that had previously fallen to local postal inspectors. In the wake of his high-profile 1954 committee hearings on horror comic books, US senator Estes Kefauver's 1955 hearings on the relationship between obscenity and juvenile delinquency were a cultural turning point, not just for targeting such an unwieldy body of material (ranging from stag films to mainstream men's magazines) but because its moral panic discourse hinted at such shadowy threats as organized crime, Communist infiltration, and other perceived threats to the national body politic. Photographer Irving Klaw was called to testify at the hearings, and the persecution of his non-nude bondage photos and 8mm films made it clear that non-normative sexualities—often

rhetorically conflated with sex crimes—were another target of the government's crackdown on obscenity. The Kefauver hearings not only resulted in new laws against the interstate transportation of obscene materials but also inspired the formation of antipornography groups such as Citizens for Decent Literature.[25]

Physique films

Even as 1950s men's magazines such as *Playboy* and its many imitators heralded an era marked by tastefully posed nudes and a sexual liberationist philosophy largely tailored to straight men's desires, this same period also saw the rise of physique magazines and films—a niche market increasingly composed of gay men. Although the physical culture movement and magazines devoted to fitness and bodybuilding dated back to the early decades of the twentieth century, a specifically gay male market for semi-nude physique imagery began emerging shortly after the Second World War. Even if pre-dated by photographers such as Richard Fontaine, Bob Mizer's Los-Angeles-based Athletic Model Guild (AMG) is often credited as the key pioneer in this regard, having founded *Physique Pictorial* magazine in 1951, shortly after the Post Office announced a crackdown on naughty mail-order ads in other men's magazines. Even if full-frontal nude photos of men may have been available to private collectors via mail-order outlets, physique magazines designed for newsstands initially relied on posing straps and careful camera angles to conceal models' genitalia. This self-defensive strategy also extended to 8mm physique films, which Mizer began producing in 1957. His early physique films feature beefcake models in short narrative setups as characters redolent of the mid-century gay camp sensibility (such as sailors, prisoners, cowboys, and centurions), though Mizer's later shorts consist primarily of models holding poses or wrestling together. As many as 1,500 physique films were produced between 1950 and 1970, mostly sold via mail order.[26]

Much as the AMG studio soon became a literal hub for the city's burgeoning gay subculture, this new generation of physique magazines aimed at gay consumers fostered an important sense of imagined community across the United States (and beyond) during the years of the early "homophile movement."[27] Indeed, much as existing physique magazines aimed at straight men began making homophobic remarks about the queer subtext of their new competitors, homophile groups and their associated magazines (such as *The Mattachine Review* and *ONE*) distanced themselves from homoerotic imagery in the name of integrationist respectability. Nevertheless, sales numbers for these newer, queerer physique magazines vastly exceeded the total circulation of homophile magazines, indicating how a gay consumer culture semi-covertly fostered through physique imagery significantly outpaced the era's gay civil rights advances.[28]

If stags were illicit films about licit desires, then physique films represented their inverted mirror image: licit films about illicit desires in an era when homosexuality was still criminalized.[29] But how licit were these films in actual practice, considering that nearly all major producers of physique imagery faced legal harassment and arrests? Despite their different strategies of fostering gay community (with or without erotic appeals, respectively), physique magazines and homophile magazines alike fought against obscenity charges during the late 1950s, and numerous anti-censorship editorials appeared in both kinds of publications. Although physique magazines and films had a number of pretexts at their disposal—from the standard educational alibi that physique imagery was intended to promote good health and muscular development, to the more "classical" alibi that such imagery recalled the ideals of ancient Greece—these alibis soon became less necessary, and full-frontal male nudity in physique magazines began appearing after a 1967 court decision declared that such material was not obscene, even if obviously catering to a homosexual market. The aptly named "danglies," featuring the flaccid penis in motion, thence became a physique film subgenre—though erections remained legally obscene.[30]

The *Roth* decision

The major turning point in this timeline is the US Supreme Court decision in *Roth v United States* (1957), which upheld the conviction of Samuel Roth (another witness at the Kefauver hearings) for sending

obscene (heterosexual) materials through the mail. This decision set the larger precedent that, for material to be banned as "obscene," it had to be found to be "patently offensive" and "utterly without redeeming social importance." By determining that "the average person, applying contemporary community standards," had to find that "the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest," the burden of proof for successful obscenity convictions became much higher than in the past (when isolated excerpts of a text could render the entire work "obscene" if they were purported to "deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences").[31]

Following the *Roth* test, for example, the Court would decide in *Manual Enterprises, Inc. v Day* (1962) that physique magazines were not inherently obscene, even if they were primarily aimed at gay men; hence, homosexual beefcake imagery could not be held to a different standard from heterosexual cheesecake imagery.[32] Subsequent cases, such as *Jacobellis v Ohio* (1964), would declare that a nationally "average" citizen be used as the yardstick for such "community standards," rather than one's local community, which opened the doors for adults-only content that became increasingly explicit over the course of the 1960s, as demonstrated by the blossoming of sexual explicitness in both sexploitation and art cinema.[33]

Sexploitation cinema and the end of the Production Code

Globally, perhaps 1,000 or so "sexploitation" films were produced during the 1960s—including Japanese "pink films" such as *Gate of Flesh* (1964, dir. Seijun Suzuki) and *Violated Angels* (1967, dir. Koji Wakamatsu), Latin American productions such as *Fuego* (1969, dir. Armando Bó), and "spiced-up" and/or retitled iterations of European art films.[34] In addition to drive-ins and some small-town theaters, they largely played in inner-city areas, where transient foot traffic drove the concurrent spread of adult bookstores. As noted above, *The Immoral Mr. Teas* is often credited as the first sexploitation film, eschewing the ersatz educational alibi of earlier nudist films in favor of a narrative combining the broad humor of burlesque films with the carefully arranged nudity of art studies. These nudie cuties, such as *Not Tonight, Henry* (1960, dir. W. Merle Connell) and *Boin-n-g* (1963, dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis), often feature bumbling male protagonists in a voyeuristic "look-but-don't-touch" dynamic with nude women tastefully posed like *Playboy* pictorials come to life (i.e. no displayed genitals). Some nudie cuties, such as *Hideout in the Sun* (1960, dir. Doris Wishman) and *The Monster at Camp Sunshine* (1964, dir. Ferenc Leroget), are also set at nudist camps, motivating plentiful nudity while discouraging erotic contact between the sexes. With their colorful cinematography, natural settings, and light tone, nudie cuties were typically advertised as bawdy but innocuous comedies for adults only—a self-defensive strategy for avoiding potential prosecution, though state censor boards continued to pose obstacles for sexploitation's circulation.[35]

As the decade continued and screen content became increasingly permissive, sexploitation filmmakers would keep abreast of the boundaries also being pushed by art films and Hollywood films—with sexploitation's advertising often promising groundbreakingly bold new content—though sexploitation's erotic spectacle would remain, by definition, within the realm of plausible deniability, using only simulated (or "softcore") sex scenes.[36] The emerging subgenre of "roughies," as popularized by films such as *Lorna* (1964, dir. Russ Meyer), *The Defilers* (1965, dir. Lee Frost), and *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965, dir. Doris Wishman), were a case in point (also see Eric Schaefer's chapter in this volume). Tonally opposed to the colorful, comedic nudie cuties, these monochromatic melodramas about female protagonists under threat of sexual violence from deviant men exploit the boundaries already pushed by art films such as *The Virgin Spring* (1960, dir. Ingmar Bergman) and middlebrow dramas such as *The Pawnbroker* (1964, dir. Sidney Lumet)—the latter notable as the first Hollywood film containing nudity to be approved by the PCA. If roughies' misogynistic narrative logic tends to depict women's desire for sexual independence as "punishable," then this dynamic ironically echoes the position of sexploitation filmmakers themselves: wanting to push against the limits but not enough to incur the censor's wrath.[37]

Although roughies persisted as a longer subgeneric trend than nudie cuties, some late 1960s sexploitation films began to depict women's desires more sympathetically, through sexual awakening narratives inspired by imports such as *I, a Woman* (1965, dir. Mac Ahlberg) and *Inga* (1967, dir. Joe Sarno). Featuring consensual sex scenes that focus on women's pleasure (as conveyed through facial expressions) and exploit the full-frontal nudity permissible by decade's end, these films at least nod to an emerging second-wave feminist ethos, as well as courting a potential couples market.[38] Whereas gay filmmakers such as John and Lem Amero and Andy Milligan carved out careers in heterosexual sexploitation, others, such as Pat Rocco and Peter de Rome, were beginning to make short softcore films about finding same-sex love in urban spaces—although the latter films tended to circulate in a different market, as described below.[39]

In 1967 President Lyndon Johnson appointed a Commission on Obscenity and Pornography to study the social effects of adults-only materials. By the time *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967, dir. Vilgot Sjöman) beat an obscenity rap and earned a US release in 1969, the apparent lines between art cinema and adult cinema had become largely indistinguishable in the public eye; some distributors-turned-filmmakers, such as Radley Metzger, actively blurred those lines in films such as *Camille 2000* (1969) and *The Lickerish Quartet* (1970).[40] Meanwhile, the major Hollywood studios were increasingly incorporating more "adult" content into their films, attempting to draw back declining audiences and ignoring the PCA's directives to deliver all-ages content. In 1966 the Motion Picture Producers of America (MPAA) loosened existing restrictions and created a new system of warning labels for films, which soon led to the Production Code's 1968 replacement by an age-based ratings system (G, M, R, X) that also sapped state censor boards' remaining clout. But, because the MPAA did not copyright the X rating, intending it to be a value-neutral label to denote any film (including Hollywood studio films) restricted to adults only, adult film distributors began self-applying (one or more) X ratings to spice up their advertising. By the early 1970s the X rating had become synonymous with hardcore pornography, and the Hollywood studios would largely avoid it thereafter.[41]

"Underground" avant-garde/experimental cinema

Due to their predominantly non-narrative form and far more limited audience than art films, avant-garde films needed fewer appeals to pure "art" as an alibi for their existence, even if that did not necessarily prevent them from periodically facing obscenity charges in local jurisdictions. Short films such as *Geography of the Body* (1943, dir. Willard Maas) had pioneered the use of extreme close-ups to fragment and abstract fully nude bodies, an avant-garde strategy also used in *Ai (Love)* (1962, dir. Takahiko Iimura), *No. 4* (1967, dir. Yoko Ono), and *Lovemaking* (1968, dir. Stan Brakhage). Meanwhile, films such as *Flesh of Morning* (1956, dir. Stan Brakhage), *Christmas on Earth* (1963, dir. Barbara Rubin), and *Fuses* (1967, dir. Carolee Schneemann) used more overt manipulations of filmic materiality—such as scratching or painting upon the film strip, or the use of multiple, overlapping projection—to partially obscure even more explicit imagery, including unsimulated scenes of masturbatory, heterosexual, and homosexual sex.[42] Although incorporating much more explicit imagery than was permissible in commercially motivated cinema, these films' limited exhibition (typically on 16mm) at art galleries, museums, and less public venues meant they generally raised fewer red flags for authorities.

More often prosecuted (with convictions typically reversed upon appeal) were experimental films with a gay camp sensibility, ranging from the physique-inspired, sadomasochistic imagery in *Fireworks* (1943, dir. Kenneth Anger) to the fleeting frontal nudity of drag queens in *Flaming Creatures* (1963, dir. Jack Smith) and roughhousing bikers in *Scorpio Rising* (1963, dir. Kenneth Anger). All three films were tried on local obscenity charges—and became minor *causes célèbres* among promoters of what would soon become dubbed "underground" cinema. Underground screenings, often held in bars, basements, art theaters (often at midnight), and college campuses, became important sites of nascent gay male community building. Indeed, police raids at such screenings were akin to raids at gay bars and bathhouses, motivated as much by harassment of the patrons as objection to the films being shown.[43]

The quasi-pornographic tenor of Andy Warhol's films made him a major name in this scene, even if his existing Pop Art reputation helped insulate him from obscenity charges. *Blow Job* (1964), for example, invites the viewer to imagine whomever they want to be performing the offscreen fellatio, while *Couch* (1964) would go much further, with multiple scenes of unsimulated (gay and straight) sex, though this content kept it from being screened uncut in public. The fleeting nudity and bisexual objectification of male trade in *My Hustler* (1965) would prove far more amenable to public consumption.[44] After his multi-projection film *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) proved to be the first commercial breakthrough for underground cinema, Warhol embarked on a series of sexploitation films—including *I, a Man* (1967) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968)—that reached wider audiences, though his "shotgun" approach to sexploitation's erotic appeals may have delivered more of a campy, bisexual tease than actual heat.[45]

By the late 1960s several theaters in Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco had begun holding camp-themed film festivals and specializing in gay programming. Featuring a combination of physique films (e.g. Mizer and Fontaine), avant-garde films (e.g. Anger, Smith, and Warhol), softcore gay erotica (e.g. Rocco, De Rome), and Hollywood camp classics, these programs encapsulated several decades' worth of gay adult cinema, while also bringing this intertwined tradition proudly "aboveground" on the cusp of hardcore's arrival.[46] Indeed, exhibitor Monroe Beehler not only inaugurated such gay-themed programming in Los Angeles but would later cofound Jaguar Productions, one of the emerging gay hardcore industry's leading production-distribution firms, in 1971.[47]

Even Hollywood would nod to this increasing crossover between the mainstream and the queer demimonde, with MGM's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969, dir. John Schlesinger)—the only X-rated film to win a Best Picture Oscar—depicting male hustlers and a Warhol-inspired "underground" party. But, as usual, Warhol stayed one step ahead of the bandwagon, with *Blue Movie* (a.k.a. *Fuck*, 1969) featuring unsimulated scenes of a heterosexual couple squabbling and screwing—one of the first instances of a feature-length hardcore film shown in US theaters.[48]

Peepshow machines and beaver films

Meanwhile, the 1960s had seen the proliferation of a semi-private exhibition context whose roots extended back to the Kinetoscopes, Mutoscopes, and nickelodeons of cinema's earliest era: the coin-operated peepshow machine. The 1940 introduction of Mills Novelty Company's "Panoram" machines, initially designed as jukeboxes for 16mm "soundies" (a precursor to the modern music video), set the stage for more erotic uses of such devices. By 1944 modification kits allowed the Panoram's screen to be restricted to a single viewer, allowing a small degree of privacy for what was screened; signage declaring certain films "For Art Students Only" harked back to the art studies already available for home viewing. Although single-viewer devices had long garnered criticism for supposedly showing risqué imagery, pre-1960s police seizures of the 8mm and 16mm loops used in these machines generally found little more than art studies and striptease content.[49]

Starting in the mid-1960s, however, entrepreneurs such as Martin Hodas, Michael Thevis, and Reuben Sturman began building lucrative distribution networks for Panorams, largely situating them in the backs of adult bookstores. Companies such as Starlight Films specialized in 16mm peepshow loops, which typically featured nudie-cutie-style cheesecake imagery divided into a series of two-minute segments. Other brands of peepshow machines (including 8mm and Super-8 versions) appeared during this period, and their operators soon began producing their own (increasingly explicit) content. In larger peepshow arcades, different machines might also offer a variety of fetish-oriented or gay-oriented content. Yet, because a given machine's solo viewer was physically exposed (sometimes in more ways than one) within the space of the public bookstore, curtains between booths provided slightly more privacy, and walled cubicles with doors would soon follow. That does not mean, however, that peepshow booths only fostered solo masturbatory pleasures, since their walls were often adorned with glory holes, and gay cruising became common. Indeed,

much like the parallel world of underground avant-garde screenings, police raids of peepshow arcades were as likely intended to discourage homosexual contact between patrons as to stamp out filmic "smut." The quasi-private space of a closed booth within a public storefront did not provide the same right to privacy as the domestic sphere—as subsequently affirmed in the case of *Stanley v Georgia* (1969), which declared that the government cannot prevent people from consuming obscene materials within their own home.[50]

Meanwhile, in 1967 a new breed of 16mm shorts began screening publicly, first in San Francisco and then spreading to other major cities: the "beaver film." Like the earlier art studies, these plotless films focus on a fully nude woman, though beavers differ in their explicit focus on the woman's genitals, using close-ups that would still be verboten in sexploitation films until about 1969. Whereas the art study model largely exists as a passive object of visual contemplation, the beaver actor exhibits a far more active, provocative range of behavior—such as humping the furniture, spreading her labia, and touching her genitals.[51] Naturally, "male beavers" quickly followed, for adult theaters specializing in gay content.

Cheap storefront theaters equipped with 16mm projectors began popping up to screen these films, which put beavers in direct competition with the 35mm market for sexploitation films. This conflict reflected not only a format divide between theaters that exclusively used either 16mm or 35mm projection but also a generational divide, with an older generation of sexploitation producers blaming the younger, "free love" generation of beaver filmmakers for drawing unwelcome attention to the adult film market (such as major newspaper bans on ads for X-rated films). Moreover, the younger generation also began creating 16mm "simulation" features that combined beaver-style explicitness with sexploitation-style narratives—thus further collapsing the distinctions between softcore and hardcore territory.[52]

Although major sexploitation producers such as David F. Friedman (Entertainment Ventures, Inc.) and Harry H. Novak (Boxoffice International Pictures) continued to release X-rated softcore films into the early 1970s, they continued to lose market share. Instead, the decade saw far milder, R-rated sexploitation content finding greater box-office success as an exploitable ingredient in a new generation of youth-oriented teenpics, such as *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976, dir. Joseph Ruben), as churned out by companies such as Crown International Pictures.

The (legal) arrival of hardcore adult cinema

In 1969 Denmark was the first nation to outright legalize hardcore pornography (soon followed by the rest of Scandinavia), and this newly aboveground trade had plenty of foreign observers.[53] Adult filmmakers such as Alex de Renzy traveled to Copenhagen to film the burgeoning porn scene. The resulting documentary, *Pornography in Denmark: A New Approach* (1970), features hardcore footage filmed off screens in Copenhagen sex theaters, legally permissible on US screens as second-hand evidence of such important cultural changes. In this documentary and its imitators, adult cinema's time-honored educational alibi proved itself alive and well; de Renzy also used it to repackage a compilation of old stag films as *A History of the Blue Movie* (1970). Other "white coater" documentaries—such as *Language of Love* (1969, dir. Torgny Wickman) and *Man & Wife* (1969, dir. Matt Cimber)—helped bring unsimulated sex into theaters, under the guise of helping married couples have more fulfilling sex. Recalling the ersatz sobriety of classical sex hygiene exploitation films, their visual catalogues of sexual positions remained accompanied by a "medical expert" more versed in Masters and Johnson than in anti-sex jeremiads.[54]

Meanwhile, small-gauge adult films remained a viable market well into the 1970s, still available via mail order, at adult bookstores, and in peepshow arcades. Because the term "stag film" increasingly marked a bygone historical context, the contemporary generation of 8mm and 16mm hardcore shorts became commonly known as "loops." These remained a prolific market for companies such as Color Climax, Limited Edition, and Swedish Erotica, as well as a training ground for the performers who became nascent stars during the "golden age" of pornography. Many in the previous generation of sexploitation filmmakers and performers did not make the leap to hardcore films, though some gladly jumped into the fray.

By 1970 hardcore narrative features without an "educational" premise were beginning to make notable inroads, with *Mona: The Virgin Nymph* (1970, dirs. Michael Benveniste and Howard Ziehm) as perhaps the first such title to receive national distribution (courtesy of Sherpix, Inc., which had previously distributed adult films by Warhol and de Renzy). That same year the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography released its findings, recommending that pornography be legalized in the United States; the then president, Richard Nixon, quickly suppressed the report. Despite such machinations, hardcore features such as *Boys in the Sand* (1971, dir. Wakefield Poole) and *Deep Throat* (1972, dir. Gerard Damiano) would soon usher in a new era of "porno chic" and a "golden age" of adult film in which real (and legal) sex on screen had finally arrived. Responding to such shifts, the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Miller v California* (1973) reversed its earlier *Roth* decision, returning obscenity judgments to the discretion of local community standards. Although this was a legal strike against the free circulation of hardcore films, in the long run the 1970s had already rendered the floodgates of adult cinema wide open.

Notes

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6. Russell Sheaffer, "Smut, Novelty, Indecency: Reworking a History of the Early-Twentieth-Century American 'Stag Film,'" *Porn Studies* 1, 4 (2014): 350–356.
7. Dan Erdman, *Let's Go Stag! A History of Pornographic Film from the Invention of Cinema to 1970* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 43–47, 54–55, 81.
8. Erdman, *Let's Go Stag!*: 70; Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 309.
9. Joseph W. Slade, "Eroticism and Technological Regression: The Stag Film," *History and Technology* 22, 1 (2006): 33–35.
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11. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*: 310–312, 319.
12. Thomas Waugh, "Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen," *Sexualities* 4, 3 (2001): 280.
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14. Williams, *Hard Core*: 71–74.
15. Erdman, *Let's Go Stag!*: 70–71, 76, 79.
16. Slade, "Eroticism": 38–42.
17. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*: 359–360.
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19. Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999): 136–164.
20. Schaefer, *"Bold!"*: 96–135.
21. Schaefer, *"Bold!"*: 8.
22. Schaefer, *"Bold!"*: 69–72, 77–90, 126–135.
23. Schaefer, *"Bold!"*: 303–310; David Andrews, *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in its Contexts* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006): 49–52.
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25. Schaefer, "Plain Brown Wrapper": 211–216; Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 18–33; Erdman, *Let's Go Stag!*: 107–109, 151–153.
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28. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*: 217–219, 242; Johnson, *Buying Gay*: 49–50, 68, 103–106, 154, 169.
29. Waugh, "Homosociality": 287.
30. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*: 219–227, 247–248, 259; Strub, *Perversion for Profit*: 36–38; Johnson, *Buying Gay*: 81–84, 88–94, 131–170, 214–120.
31. This is part of *R. v Hicklin*, LR 3 QB 360 (1868).
32. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*: 275–283; Johnson, *Buying Gay*: 165–170.
33. Whitney Strub, *Obscenity Rules:* Roth v. United States *and the Long Struggle over Sexual Expression* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).
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36. Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade'": 29–31; Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*: 52–77.
37. Andrews, *Soft in the Middle*: 54–66; David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 82–85; Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*: 129–151.
38. Andrews, *Soft in the Middle*: 66–75; Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*: 171–196.
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50. Amy Herzog, "In the Flesh: Space and Embodiment in the Pornographic Peep Show Arcade," *Velvet Light Trap* 62 (2008): 31–37; Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*: 47–50.
51. Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal* 41, 3 (2002): 7–8; Herzog, "In the Flesh": 37–41.
52. Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution": 8–21; Schaefer, "'I'll Take Sweden'": 35–42.
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