

Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 60s*

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In an interview with V. Vale, sexploitation director Joe Sarno claimed that he was a born rebel and worked “outside of the acceptable framework as often as possible” (Vale and Juno 1986, 90). Sexploitation films have for the most part remained outside of the “acceptable framework” of academia and beyond receiving but scant scholarly attention. In fact, Eric Schaefer goes so far as to say that sexploitation films have “always been a disreputable form” (2007b, 19). Tracking this marginal cultural object that has often been overlooked, considered “low,” disreputable, and unworthy of attention, Elena Gorfinkel’s *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 60s* leads us through the thick of this important cycle of films made between 1959–72. Moving across a decade caught between “different regimes of sexual representation” (2017, 4), *Lewd Looks* takes a historical deep dive into industrial contexts, audience receptions, aesthetic configurations, cultural and structural formations, production strategies, and censorship battles to illuminate a very special period of cinema history.

Researching outside the acceptable framework often means writing hidden histories in the absence of dedicated archives, working with fragmentary paper trails, rummaging through personal film collections or video rent-

als, and dealing with what Gorfinkel calls the “lack of a legacy or a sense of historicity” (2017, 16). Under such circumstances it becomes increasingly difficult to put together a historical account, yet this is precisely where *Lewd Looks* excels. Marshalling a wide range of materials from newsletters, advertisements, magazines, newspaper articles, publicity material, court proceedings, censorship elimination letters and other film ephemera, Gorfinkel recovers a lost period in cinema history. This narrative that benefits from her diverse methodological outlook and a materially rich thick description is an important intervention in porn and adult film history. Needless to say, the understanding of film history and screen cultures will remain incomplete if we fail to acknowledge the importance of these disreputable forms. *Lewd Looks* buttresses such groundbreaking scholarship in porn studies, exploitation scholarship such as Eric Schaefer’s (1999) “*BOLD! DARING! SHOCKING! TRUE!*”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959 and Linda Williams’s (1989) *Hard Core: Power Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* by uncovering the salacious years that lie between the dwindling of the classical exploitation films and the emergence of hardcore pornography. Although scholarship on sexploitation

films have made brief appearances in collections such as *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics* (Mendik and Harper 2000), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Jancovich et al. 2003) and *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics* (Sconce 2007), *Lewd Looks* is a noteworthy full-length monograph dedicated to sexploitation films.

Working at the margins of Hollywood with tiny budgets, on express production schedules, and with unknown actors, a cottage industry of independent productions emerged in the sixties with their salacious fares of sex, skin and everything in-between, promising quick returns, and filled up the languishing neighbourhood theaters. The post war era was gloomy for Hollywood as, after the “Paramount Decision” of 1948, the major studios were ordered to sell off their theatre chains, shattering their monopoly on the movie business. This damp climate of plummeting box-office attendance and a sharp product shortage created a space for the independent producers to peddle their wares. These lewd affairs were the Sexploitation films of the sixties that lured the audiences with the promise of sex and erotic spectacle. The history of exploitation lends itself to two distinct periods: the period from 1919 through to the late fifties which is considered as the era of classical exploitation film and a modern period when the classical exploitation films were displaced by more explicit fare like the sexploitation films. As the “black sheep of the film trade” (Gorfinkel 2017, 45), sexploitation films faced substantial censorship challenges at the national, state and local levels

from a range of civic, religious, political, and other pressure groups.

Pieced together from legal proceedings, elimination and licensing letters, court battles and the workings of state censor boards, Gorfinkel’s first chapter provides an extensive account of these clashes and how the sexploitation filmmakers negotiated a complicated and variegated terrain of changing definitions of obscenity and cultural anxieties. For instance, the New York State censor board was “generally quite strict in the rules that governed the evaluations of sexploitation films,” and tolerated no “scenes of female nudity, primarily exposure of naked breasts and buttocks, even when scant, as well as the suggestion of sexuality or the expression of sexual desires, orientations, and acts, when combined with nudity” (2017, 50). As the sexploitation industry was being increasingly targeted, the filmmakers and producers found creative ways to circumvent the censor’s prohibitive injunctions that resulted in such practices as striking “hot” and “cool” prints that served different audiences with different levels of explicitness. These evasive tactics, Gorfinkel argues, defined the sexploitation film’s form and syntax which is found in sexploitation’s unique “strategies of syntactical tease and erotic deferral,” that is a “dialectic of plenitude and absence, circumvention and titillation” (11). Another mode of address that the sexploitation film employed is what Gorfinkel calls the rhetoric of “guilty expenditure” in which “sex is avidly desired and consumed, but not without cost: narrative resolutions run the gamut from moral, emotional, and financial ruin to death and murder” (97). In a film like

The Immortal Mr. Teas (dir. Russ Meyer, 1959), the titular Mr. Teas (Bill Teas) is a salesman who can see through women's clothing. This bumbling character who often finds himself in comic situations is deployed to assuage the conscience of the audience for consuming such erotic spectacles by providing the "gawker in the text" (98). Through detailed analysis of film texts chapter two traces the transition of the sexploitation cycle from the "nudicuties" that negotiated female nudity through light hearted comedy like *Mr. Teas* to the "roughies" that were more aggressive and darker in tone such as Doris Wishman's *Bad Girls Go To Hell* (1965). Dwelling on the roughie form, chapter three explores the emergence of female sexual desire, agency, and the experimentation with sexual "deviance" that were found in such films like Joseph Mawra's *Olga* movies.

In the last chapter, Gorfinkel tracks the historical reception of sexploitation films by bringing together an impressive variety of archival sources. By examining the growing public discourse around sex films in the sixties, this discursive account finds the spectator of sex films entangled in a mire of stereotypes, connoisseurship, art, obscenity, adult markets and class and taste imaginaries. Accounts from publications like *Art Films International*, the recognition of certain filmmakers as auteurs reflected in the nods of acknowledgements in popular press or screenings in rarefied circles and being accounted for in newsletters like *Artisex* that reviewed and rated sexploitation films complicates the stereotypical idea of the spectator of sexploitation films being only a "dupe." Gorfinkel is not only interested in the

historical spectator of the films but also fascinated with the way the spectator was established and dramatized in the films themselves that teases out the conditions and anxieties of looking both within the context of the film text and the space of exhibition where the spectator is situated. The problems of looking are stitched into the sexploitation film's form and structures which facilitates the tension and nudges the boundaries between looking and doing where "the film spectator is central to sexploitation's generic, industrial, and social identity" (12).

In "Exploitation Films: Teaching Sin in the Suburbs," Eric Schaefer (2007a) foregrounds the difficulties of teaching exploitation films to students. One of the main challenges that he records is the struggle to establish the alternative aesthetic universe of the exploitation films, one where students have to get used to the "primacy of spectacle" and the travails of "choppy continuity" (95). However, Schaefer also adds that what makes exploitation films such great study material is that this marginal industry, this shadow economy allows us to understand how society grappled with the complex questions of sex, drug use, nudity, obscenity. Although all sexploitation films do not gain cult acceptance; its short-lived cycle, under-documentation, questionable preservation and idiosyncratic aesthetic configuration puts it well within the scope of cult studies. *Lewd Looks* is not only a great addition to porn studies, gender studies, studies of spectatorship and film studies broadly but also to studies of cult cinema in that through its deeply historical account, presence of major sexploitation figures like Wishman,

Sarno, Metzger, Mahon, Meyer, its close attention to form and the politics of films it throws new light to sexual representation and spectatorship. It is also a good resource for researchers and scholars outside the Global North who are uncovering similar hidden histories of marginal industries and film practice. Exploitation is not a genre but a mode that can be found in different forms of contemporaneous sexploitation and low budget cinema across the South Asian region. In South Asia, exploitation filmmakers and theatre owners have used ingenious tactics like the cut-piece during the celluloid era to evade the censors. In parts of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, pornographic sequences were and in some instances are still expertly spliced onto the main reel in the darkness of the theatre. Since the cut-piece can appear and disappear at will, they have been used frequently to bypass censorship much like the striking of “hot” and “cool” prints in American sexploitation. Gorfinkel’s *Lewd Looks* offers rich methodological and theoretical clues to “historicize and theorize the implicit, rather than explicit” (4) image to scholars outside the Global North, narratives that might warrant methods beyond traditional avenues of research.

References

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