

# From the Classroom to the Theatre

## Public Porn Viewing as Counter-public Engagement

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As I write, it is early August 2020, and SECS Fest is currently preparing for its fourth annual film festival in September. Like many other festivals large and small, the organizers are adapting this year's accepted programs to be accessible via a virtual platform, since indoor theatres remain shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as streaming technologies may allow film festivals to proceed in attenuated form, with their offerings more widely available to a geographically dispersed audience, grumbles over the loss of in-person, communal viewership remain a common refrain across the festival circuit. Yet, for SECS Fest—a sex-positive erotic film festival run by the Seattle Erotica Cinema Society—this year's contingency plan to adopt a virtual platform is particularly ironic, due to the very nature of the festival's primary focus on sexually explicit films.<sup>1</sup>

After all, pornography is most often considered a “domestic” genre today, since the post-1970s rise of successive home video technologies, from analog videocassettes to web-based video, largely privatized porn's consumption. Although the privatization of porn meant that viewers no longer needed to venture to a theatre to watch sexually explicit films, these moves have reinforced the longstanding perception that porn's sole *raison d'être* is masturbatory gratification—thereby upholding the notion that its viewing *should* remain behind closed doors, its “shameful” uses seeming to foreclose more thoughtful discussion of artistic or cultural merit. While not all SECS Fest programming is necessarily “pornographic” or even sexually explicit, its focus on films predominantly about—and therefore often visualizing—sex (including films about sex work, relationships/intimacy, etc.) already makes it a niche-interest festival for adults only. Yet, as one node in the global network of erotic/pornographic film festivals that have arisen since the mid-2000s, largely based in European and bicoastal North American metropolises (Ryberg 2013; Moreno Morillas 2020), SECS Fest is one of the few theatrical venues for independent films whose explicit content would otherwise limit their opportunities for public, collective viewership.

Of course, the growing number of Porn Studies courses at universities offer a notable exception, providing one (semi-)public space where enrolled students might collectively view and discuss adult films—albeit with films typically chosen for their pedagogical value in demonstrating theoretical concepts, historical periods, representational tropes, industrially prominent trends, and so on. But, in most cases, classrooms at public universities are not open to the general public in the same way as a movie theatre, since tuition costs and educational prerequisites

(Porn Studies courses, for instance, are often taught at the graduate level) present greater barriers to access than simply buying a ticket. So where, then, are newly produced forms of erotic cinema able to garner the attentive, reflective, and evaluative mode of viewing more often associated with the communal film-festival experience than the solo masturbation session (Hanich 2011; Hanich 2018, 73–110)? In this piece, I will briefly reflect on my programming experiences for SECS Fest and elsewhere, and how these attempts to bridge the divide between the classroom and the movie theatre might represent a pedagogical-cum-spatial *praxis* by physically grounding adult cinema's ability to generate sexual counter-publics.

The first pornographic feature film I ever saw in a movie theatre, *Café Flesh* (1982), remains one of the most memorable moviegoing experiences of my life. Using a rare 35mm print housed at the Kinsey Institute, I included *Café Flesh* in the inaugural season of a Midnight Movies series that I programmed at the 260-seat Indiana University Cinema from 2011–13. Arthouse theatres and university cinematheques occasionally screen adult films as part of their repertory programming—not always without some degree of trepidation, depending on their intended audience and funding sources—though, in this case, the trepidation was largely my own. After providing a brief introduction, I nervously settled in to observe how a full house, mostly comprised of students, would respond to what might also be their first public, collective porn experience. Although the film's avant-garde influences and ironic metacommentary about porn watching have long made it an object of cult appreciation, an immediate hush fell over the audience during the first hardcore sex scene, but their initial shock at viewing such imagery on the big screen, amongst their peers, gradually lifted. To my knowledge, no one abandoned the screening or lodged complaints afterward, and the audience's post-film conversations were extremely enthusiastic (especially for 1:30AM).

Overall, my first stab at programming a pornographic film for a public audience—in the U.S. Midwest no less—was extremely successful. At a time when most extant cult or adult films can be found online and consumed at home, the sheer novelty value of viewing a 35mm porn film in a public movie theatre recalled, in part, a much earlier era of theatrical exhibition: the early-1970s “porno chic” period in the United States. Unlike that era, though, it may be nothing new for most viewers to encounter a pornographic film today, but the occasion of collective public spectatorship for such content still offers a historical thought experiment that can only properly happen when porn is taken out from behind closed doors and rendered an object for contemplating both the text's design and the mental designs of one's fellow viewers. Indeed, if we consider that adult cinema's erotic, political, and educational uses are difficult to cleanly separate, then the public movie theatre can serve as a vital incubator for encouraging audiences to reflect on adult cinema's multivalent appeals to both body and mind, precisely because such venues physically distance adult films from the private home as a privileged space for autoerotic uses.<sup>2</sup>



Several years later, I taught a six-week History of Porn class as part of the Seattle International Film Festival's year-round education programs (Figure 1). As a course taught outside a university system, and at a cost far cheaper than college tuition, it attracted an older and more diverse range of students than one typically sees in the university classroom: from workers in the adult video industry, to a recently divorced woman taking the class as a "fuck you" to the husband who had given her grief for watching *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), to an older second-wave feminist curious to learn whether porn was more complex than the anti-porn party line had trumpeted decades ago. The course offered a breezy overview of adult cinema, ranging from early staggs to contemporary documentaries about sex work, but still included assigned readings by major porn scholars.

**Figure 1.**

History of Porn course, part of Seattle International Film Festival's year-round education programme.

After the course concluded, several of my students co-founded the Seattle Erotica Cinema Society, dedicated to establishing an annual erotic film festival. To this day, DeAnna Berger still serves as SECS director and Amber Adams as head programmer; alongside a rotating cast of volunteers, the three of us have constituted the core of the festival's programming committee since 2017. DeAnna had previously programmed a sidebar of films at the 2013 Seattle Erotic Art Festival (SEAF) but became frustrated by the SEAF organizers' greater interest in arranging erotic play parties with visiting artists than attending the films themselves. SEAF's organizers, the Foundation for Sex-Positive Culture (now Pan Eros Foundation), typically offer classes on kink and erotic technique, as well as hosting a space for play sessions. Piggybacking on this organizational structure, SECS was first formed as a non-profit organization beneath the Foundation's aegis (and has since broken from the Foundation altogether). Hence, from its start, SECS Fest has operated within a tension between erotic art and sexual practice, much as it also originated at the intersection of two very different pedagogical settings outside the academy.

SECS Fest was also created to offer an artistically richer variety of films than Seattle's existing HUMP! film festival (founded by Dan Savage in 2005), whose submission parameters are closer to a 48-hour student film festival (e.g., 5-minute limits, deliberate calls for amateur/homemade films, bonus points for incorporating humorous "extra-credit" items). Although lacking Savage's name recognition and promotional muscle (one of Seattle's alt-weekly newspapers, *The Stranger*, is at his editorial disposal), SECS Fest was instead intended as a showcase for the vibrant world of feminist, queer, kink-friendly, and sex-positive independent cinema circulating through the PornFilmFestival Berlin (and its international spinoffs), CineKink (New York City), Hot Bits (Philadelphia and Baltimore), and similar festivals.

Although some submissions come from non-professional and student filmmakers, many films are from internationally acclaimed feminist, queer, and indie porn creators, whose work is—sadly—too often left off public screens outside the erotic film-festival circuit. In an average year, perhaps 80% of SECS Fest's accepted submissions are made by women, queer, and trans/nonbinary filmmakers, who together constitute the heart of alternative, "fair-trade" porn producers, and submissions arrive from all over the world. Thematically linked programs of short films comprise the festival's core, frequently addressing fourth-wave feminist issues and providing a vital place for trans/nonbinary folks, people of color, and sex workers to speak their own experience, especially since documentaries, docu-porn films, and experimental works are as numerous as narrative fictions.

Following Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's (2002) theorization of the "counter-publics" formed when collectively witnessing public sex acts, it is precisely because eroticism can blur the lines between discrete identity categories that such sex-positive content also troubles the "safer" forms of identity-based programming so often found, for instance, at LGBTQ festivals. This transgressive quality further justifies why SECS Fest does not segregate its programs along the lines of queer

vs. straight or kink vs. vanilla content; rather, each short program will ideally offer something for everyone, using artistically accomplished films to help viewers find beauty in erotic difference. This means that the selection committee must include people with diverse enough sexual tastes—including members of the kink/poly/sex-positive community—to ascertain what might be “erotic” to a wide variety of potential viewers. For the 2021 festival, I also invited students in my Porn Studies graduate seminar at Indiana University to join the online programming team as a semester-long project, allowing them to put their academic knowledge into real-world practice.

At the same time, though, some submissions were originally made for independent porn websites, so the selection committee must consider which films an in-person festival audience will patiently watch vs. films that (due to length or repetitiveness) might be better suited for private autoerotic viewing—another example of the recurring tension between art and eroticism. Moreover, cultural differences can shape the transnational reception of erotic films when aired in different cities, since some of the stylistically abrasive types of European post-porn might be better received in places like Berlin than Seattle, whereas Berlin audiences might scoff at erotic films that feature more normative body types and seem more targeted at a heterosexual couple’s market (Moreno Morillas 2020, 3). Like any serious programmer, DeAnna regularly travels to other erotic festivals, scouting the year’s most promising new films, and networking with fellow festival organizers and filmmakers.



**Figure 2.**  
Seventy-seat Grand Illusion Cinema.

Still, even in a socially liberal U.S. city like Seattle, a sex-positive film festival can face various logistical obstacles that might not be present in Europe. Many non-profit grants agencies will not help fund sexually explicit art, nor will many newspapers advertise such events, especially in the wake of the 2018 FOSTA/SESTA laws; likewise, some online platforms for submitting films and buying tickets have bans on sexually explicit content. Theatres willing to screen such material are also difficult to secure—but the seventy-seat Grand Illusion Cinema (Figure 2), a volunteer-run art house located near the University of Washington campus, has partnered with SECS for its periodic fundraising screenings and its annual festival. Indeed, the bulk of the festival’s submission fees go toward renting out the Grand Illusion for the multi-day festival, but these rental rates are discounted for educational events. Accordingly, SECS Fest and its associated screenings are often framed as “educational” for both pedagogical and pragmatic reasons, especially when archival films (such as new restorations) are featured alongside the newly created works. Scholarly introductions have been provided, for example, by Greg Youmans for *Thundercrack!* (1975), Erin Weigand for *The Sensually Liberated Female* (1970), Raymond Rea for *Matinee Idol* (1984), and by myself for various other films. Nevertheless, screening archival films for their historical significance occasionally generates friction with SECS Fest’s sex-positive mission, since some older films contain less enlightened attitudes and depictions; SECS Fest, for example, began to apply content warnings about depictions of sexual violence after complaints about a rape-fantasy sequence in *Nightdreams* (1981).

Over its first few years, then, SECS Fest’s programming has experimented with not just what might *turn on* audiences—since arousal may be triggered less by pandering to specific sexual identities than striking unexpected resonances in viewers (Paasonen 2011)—but also what they will legitimately *enjoy* and *appreciate* as artistic fare. When it all works, the intimacy of watching beautifully diverse erotic films, in a small theatre alongside guest filmmakers, creates a uniquely electric ambience that, because promiscuously breaking down the traditional boundaries between public and private spheres, arguably no other genre can emulate. At the same time, though, I have been guided by Linda Williams’ arguments that, in order to destigmatize pornography enough for serious consideration, it should be pedagogically framed as “a genre more like other genres than unlike them” (Williams 1989, 269), without requiring excessive justification or counterproductively over-applied content warnings (Williams 2004, 14). Outside of the classroom, after all, there is only so much context that a 5–7 minute introduction can or should deliver, especially when patrons have paid to see a film, not receive a pre-emptory lecture. But, for that small measure of educational framing to happen, these films have to be *allowed* to actually reach a public audience in the first place. Until the COVID-19 pandemic abates, sequestering erotic cinema in the realm of online, private consumption may be a reasonable stopgap—but once the overall state of public health returns to normal, public porn performance can help push back against more insidious forms of (sexual) “normalcy.”

To conclude with a point of contrast, I want to briefly return to the IU Cinema, where, earlier this year, a selection committee (consisting of academic representatives from across the university—many of them not film scholars) rejected a proposal for a kink-themed program as part of Ryan Powell’s “Queer Disorientations” series. Ryan originally founded Queer Disorientations to highlight films that “queer” the very boundaries of minoritarian identities like “gay” and “lesbian,” and we co-curated this iteration (subtitled “Thinking Kink”) to explore how kink transcends sexual identities and provides spaces for theorizing power within the bounds of fantasy.<sup>3</sup> Despite a strong lineup of critically acclaimed films, plus co-sponsorship from the Department of Gender Studies, the Cinema & Media Studies program, and the Kinsey Institute, the IU Cinema’s advisory committee rejected the series for lacking “academic relevance” and “quality of the film selection(s).”

Of course, exhibiting films at a university cinemathèque *creates* academic relevance by virtue of the venue itself, but even though cinemathèques with deeper pockets of institutional funding may be less beholden to filling seats and therefore able to take more chances with challenging programming, fears of political backlash can also have a chilling effect—especially when sex is concerned. In this case, the committee objected that screening films about (consensual) sex and power dynamics required a pre-emptive defense plan (including post-film discussions featuring outside scholars), that kink was not a form of queerness, and that the relatively large size of Bloomington’s own BDSM/kink community was irrelevant to the proposal. Although both Ryan and I have published scholarship on several of the proposed films (Powell 2019, 164–222; Church 2020), our voices were apparently not considered “expert” enough to provide introductory context for the films—nor did the IU Cinema’s proposal forms allow us the space, or the inclination, to brief the selection committee on three decades of theorization about BDSM’s relation to queerness (Rubin 1984) or the feminist “sex wars” (Warner 2016).

Perhaps most troubling to the committee was the inclusion of Fred Halsted’s X-rated film *Sextool* (1975), whose 4K restoration had recently screened in February 2020 at the Museum of Modern Art series “Now We Think as We Fuck: Queer Liberation to Activism.” Had the Queer Disorientations series gone ahead, audiences would have seen an extraordinarily radical work—and one originally intended as a mainstream crossover film—dating from an era when gay porn cinema was well ahead of the curve in providing cinematic representations of queer sexuality, to say nothing of also providing lived spaces for fostering queer community (Delany 1999).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Ingrid Ryberg (2013) argues that feminist/queer erotic film festivals can create spaces calling back to the dynamics of second-wave feminist consciousness-raising groups, by forming not just overtly politicised *counter-publics* but *intimate publics* affectively united by shared recognition and belonging (Ryberg 2013, 142–44, 147–49). Conversely, by imposing unfair prerequisites for screening such films or by keeping them off public screens altogether, selection committees squeamish about more complex—and often more politically cutting-edge—films about queer and non-vanilla sexual

practices also resurrect a more regrettable legacy of second-wave feminism: sex-negative attitudes masquerading as political correctness.

Indeed, Ryan and I pitched our series as counterprogramming to the local PRIDE Film Festival, where affirmational, desexualized narratives about coming out and overcoming adversity abound. In our homonormative era, when queer sex is itself expected to remain privatized and domesticated in the service of cultural assimilationism (Warner 1999), turning one's back on erotic cinema's *past* centrality to queer life thus represents not only a form of historical erasure, but also a foreclosing of erotic cinema's *present* potential for queer/feminist world-building beyond minoritarian, identity-based understandings of desire. If sexual desire is as complex as it is, then why shouldn't the cinematic art be that reflects it? To educate the wider public of this fact, though, requires the work (and the courage) to connect such films with an audience—a job perhaps better handled by a merry band of perverts outside the academy than a board of university functionaries.

### Notes

1. Shine Louise Houston's Pink and White Productions developed this virtual platform, via their existing server for PinkLabel.TV, with additional crowdfunding, for use with the San Francisco PornFilmFestival. However, they offered free use of the platform to other erotic film festivals affected by COVID-19 theatre closures, proof of the collaborative/DIY nature of the independent erotic film-festival circuit.
2. This is not to say, however, that autoerotic uses can be fully disentangled from such public venues, as I have occasionally witnessed surreptitious masturbation at SECS Fest screenings. Ironically, though, these acts transpired during softcore films, not hardcore ones—thus demonstrating that, much as hardcore films are not necessarily more politically problematic than softcore ones, less explicit sexual content is no sure predictor of audience behavior.
3. The following opinions are solely my own.
4. As part of foregrounding the film's "academic relevance," our introduction to *Sextool* would have discussed Halsted's status as among the most important gay filmmakers of his era, as well as stressing that even its "rougher" BDSM is entirely consensual (thus avoiding the representational gray area flagged in the aforementioned *Nightdreams* example). One of the series' proposed aims was, after all, highlighting the crucial differences between consensual BDSM and non-consensual violence—an especially timely concern amid the #MeToo era—but the series' rejection deliberately sidelined these questions about power and consent.

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