

Dr. Vornoff's Corner: The avant-garde meets the grindhouse

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“Since I wrote about grindhouse films, these professional beatniks accused me of making the world a worse place. Jonas Mekas, for one, was livid that I’d once left (Sleazoid Express) flyers at a screening of *Chelsea Girls* at his Anthology Film Archives. To Mekas cohort Ken Jacobs, I was an example of everything that was evil and wrong with movies and the world in general. On the other hand, Ken Anger loved it.”¹

The above quotation from the introduction of Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford’s *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* typifies the relationship that the American avant-garde had with the sexploitation film industry of the 1960s and 70s. The avant-garde was divided between those who hated the cheap sleazy films made by the sexploiters and the filmmakers whose films were akin to the films of the grindhouses.² Although it is generally understood that these two cinemas are at odds with each other, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry actually share a common space on the margins of the American cinema – a space that thrives upon artistic self-expression and relies upon representations of sexuality to create controversy, address social taboos, and entice audiences.

If we consider the American film industry as a spectrum with Hollywood in the centre, then, historically, sexploitation has occupied a position far off to one side of that spectrum with the avant-garde off to the other. Recent scholarship has proposed that the distance between the high culture of the avant-garde

and the low culture of the sexploitation industry is, perhaps, no distance at all. It is as if the linear spectrum of American cinema had its ends bent in towards the centre; joining the two poles and leaving Hollywood as the point off in the distance. For Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, this cinematic correlation of the arty and the sleazy constitutes what they call American “underground cinema.” They describe this cinema as a vibrant domain that defies the broad classifications of mainstream cinema. They contend that the underground film scene is a space where the art-house stands shoulder to shoulder with spectacle-based atrocity, and where experimentation is a regular feature of exploitation. Moreover, by collapsing many of the standard dichotomies that continue to plague mainstream cinema, the underground cinema remains a realm where maverick directors, producers, and production personnel are able to express offbeat forms of creativity, ranging from the artistic to the absurd.³ In other words, the American underground becomes a space for cinemas that challenge the banality of the mainstream cinema, whether through artistry and experimentation, or spectacle and atrocity. Therefore, according to Mendik and Schneider, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry come together to form the “underground cinema” through their mutual antithesis to the mainstream and their allowance for individual cinematic expression. For some, it may seem like a bold claim to lump together the personal expression of an avant-garde filmmaker and the questionable aesthetic tactics of a sexploitation director; nonetheless, certain similarities are undeniable.

For the avant-garde, the idea of cinematic artistry is

inherent and unchallenged; names like Brakhage, Anger, and Warhol are revered in high culture. However, low culture sexploitation cinema is not without its experimenters and unique forms of cinematic artistry.⁴ The American avant-garde has had numerous scholarly and critical examinations, but the sexploitation industry is only now coming under a critical eye. For many years, the films of the sexploitation industry have been relegated to the wasteland referred to as “Bad” film. While this notion is unquestionably pejorative, it also provides a starting point for critical discussion. For example, *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman declares that the best bad films are personal, even obsessive works. Some guy (or gal) had a story to tell and he (or she) was going to punch it across by whatever impoverished means were at hand. There is in fact but a short distance between high art and trash, and trash that contains the element of craziness is by this very quality nearer to art. A supremely bad movie, an anti-masterpiece, projects a stupidity as awesome as genius. Hoberman’s work by and large seeks to bring the distant ends of the cinematic spectrum together: stupidity and genius, ineptitude and artistry, come together in the margins of cinema.⁵

However, the notion of “Bad” film is misguided, for the films that are relegated to this category are seldom bad. Instead, the cinema at the low end of the cultural macrocosm works on its own aesthetic strategies – strategies that are specifically designed to challenge the mainstream. Yet, this is nothing new; the disruptive qualities of low culture cinema have received recognition in the past. As Surrealist Ado Kyrou (in) famously declared:

I loathe aristocrats and aristocracies (of class or otherwise). They can keep their Bressons and their Cocteaus. The cinematic, modern marvelous is popular, and the best and most exciting films are, beginning with Méliès and Fantômas, the film shown in local fleapits, films which seem to have no place in the history of cinema.⁶

To update his words, the realm of low culture cinema, in this case the sexploitation film, can be a point of convergence for artistry, albeit a different form of artistry. For the surrealists, popular cinema was a locus for iconoclasm: a cinema that used transgression to challenge the strictures of taste and the socially acceptable. Kyrou further states that popular cinema is one where sadism, revolt, eroticism, religion, and melodrama conspire to form a series of problematically linked scenes dependent on the commonplace. For

Kyrou, popular cinema is raised by its rigor to the level of pure involuntary poetry. Furthermore, the absence of scenario, construction, and mise-en-scène bring us some unforgettable images.⁷ Hence, popular cinema, even at its lowest depths, can and should be seen as a place where challenges, transgressions, and experimentation become poetic and artistic.

This notion that “Bad,” popular, or low films bring a unique artistic expression to the screen is further reinforced in the introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*. Editors V. Vale and Andrea Juno state that the “low-brow” realm of low budget filmmaking is a site of unfettered creativity. Often, the films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by individuals freely expressing their imaginations; individuals who, throughout the filmmaking process, improvise creative solutions to problems either by circumstance or budget restrictions.⁸ Therefore, outside the restrictions of mainstream cinema, a filmmaker can explore his or her own cinematic desires such as experimentation with lighting, location, editing, and other techniques. Granted sometimes these attempts have not been fully realised, often due to limitations in budget, time and personnel. However, there are moments within the films of the sexploitation industry, which contain not only spectacle and atrocity, but also visual poetry and artistry.

Moreover, the level of free expression and unfettered creativity of the low culture exploitation film is analogous with the avant-garde’s attitude to their own experimentation. In a 1961 *Village Voice* article, Jonas Mekas stated:

Oh, the helplessness of the professionals, and the creative joy of the independent film artist, roaming the streets of New York, free, with his 16mm camera, on the Bower, in Harlem, in Times Square, and in Lower East Side apartments—the new American film poet, not giving a damn about Hollywood, art, critics, or anybody.⁹

Undoubtedly, Mekas was referring to filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, George and Mike Kuchar, and Andy Warhol. Each of these filmmakers found personal inspiration and artistic expression roaming the streets of New York. However, the sentiment expressed by Mekas could easily be applied to many sexploitation filmmakers also working in New York. Filmmakers such as Joseph P. Mawra, John Maddox, and Roberta and Michael Findlay equally benefited from the poetic backdrop of New York City employing either a verité

approach or an expressionistic style. But it should be stressed that the artistic designs of the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry were not the exact same things. The strategies, techniques, and styles employed by the avant-garde do not find direct translation into the sexploitation industry, rather the two cinemas should be seen as both employing distinct artistic techniques and experiments that are equal in their contrapositioning to the mainstream styles of decidedly more middle-of-the-road cinemas.

In addition to sharing artistic depictions of urban life, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry also shared their ability to shock audiences. And, nothing was more shocking than the human body. Filmmakers of the early to mid Sixties were still living under the spectre of censorship that suppressed any subversive, disagreeable, or sexual imagery.¹⁰ Such restrictions forbade mainstream cinema from depicting nudity, sexual acts and other acts deemed obscene. However, the censorship laws had no power in the underground and filmmakers were happy to play loose and free with sex. As Vale and Juno stated, the low culture film industry often presented unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, they assaulted taboos related to sexuality, violence, and other mores.¹¹ These challenges to social, political, racial and sexual inequities were not exclusive to low art; they were also clarions for the avant-garde. Together, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry challenged the acceptable levels of sexual representation and frequently came under attack for their representations of nudity, sex acts (simulated and actual), sexuality (straight, gay, and lesbian), and sexual violence.

Within the avant-garde, it was unavoidable that the experimentation of filmmakers would eventually lead to the depiction of images of human sexuality. The direct anti-moralistic approach to sexuality by filmmakers like Anger, Curtis Harrington, and Brakhage made it inevitable that sexual acts would ultimately become a natural part of the subject matter.¹² Sex, sexuality, and sexual intercourse began to permeate the film work of the avant-garde: the sexual flauntings of Anger's Leather Boy celebration *Scorpio Rising* (1963), and Jack Smith's transvestite orgy *Flaming Creatures* (1963); the verbal intercourse of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1965-67); the actual intercourse of Warhol's *Fuck* (1969) and Brakhage's *Lovemaking* (1969). The avant-garde was beginning to fill with writhing bodies, but it was far from an erotic experience.

The avant-garde filmmakers that were experimenting with sexuality were doing so in a purposefully non-erotic fashion. Sexuality was often impressionistic, consciously part of the art form.¹³ For example, in *Chelsea Girls* the nudity and sexuality that led to its popularity with audiences is almost invariably arbitrary and unfulfilled. The nudity is made even less erotic as Warhol's concern with camera movement and editing increased, typified by violent zoom shots and flash-frame jump-cuts in picture and soundtrack.¹⁴ The avant-garde filmmakers toyed with sexual tensions by employing cinematic strategies to denude the eroticism of spoken and depicted sexual scenes like Warhol's zooms and jumps, or Anger's disturbing montages of bikers, Christ, and Brando. However, these elements of cinematic artistry did not completely detract from the box office appeal held by any depiction of sexuality.

In the 1960s, some of the more explicit and accessible underground films, particularly Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and Warhol's *My Hustler* (part of *Chelsea Girls*), crossed over into the commercial sexploitation arena by playing Times Square adult houses.¹⁵ During this time of strict censorship laws, any film that hinted at naked bodies and sex acts could be conscripted into the grindhouse theatres of Times Square. Although the avantgarde filmmakers were seeking social commentaries on sexuality, the sheer fact that there was nudity could bring an avant-garde film into the grindhouses. Conversely, the films of the sexploitation industry relied upon the spectacle of the human body to generate box office revenue. However, the films produced were seldom purely erotic. Rather, these films portrayed sex as fetishistic and sadistic fantasies: unforgettable sexual images that contained a covert social critique of mid-sixties sexual repression. This was a critique that went virtually unnoticed by the moral watchdogs protected by the seedy and sleazy bastions of the grindhouses. For example, Andy Milligan's film *Vapours* (1962), a homosexual odyssey set in the St. Marks Baths, was able to elude obscenity charges because of its grindhouse exhibitions unlike Smith's *Flaming Creatures* which was left vulnerable to an obscenity bust. A situation, according to Milligan, that would leave the filmmaker vulnerable while furthering Mekas's agenda and fame.¹⁶ The urban grindhouses became a safe haven to exhibit critical and controversial films. For the sexploitation industry this was day-to-day business, but for the avant-garde it provided protection from antagonistic agendas and attracted new audiences.

It is here with the depiction of the human body, the sexual body, that the avant-garde and the sexploitation

industry find their greatest affinity. As Michael J. Bowen comments:

Both [s]exploitation and avant-garde cinemas are generally credited with an ability to shock, a concept now associated importantly with the cinema in its 'primitive' form – spectacular, nonnarrative, focused around the body. [S] exploitation films would normally seem to shock audiences by recourse to the obscene – through the representation of things that are visible but which are usually proscribed from emerging into sight. The cinematic avant-garde, on the other hand, seems to shock audiences by manipulating visual experience itself, by playing with tolerances of vision in such a way that the act of seeing becomes a shocking aberrant phenomenon.¹⁷

Although artistically the mutual representation of sexuality found in avant-garde and sexploitation films differ greatly, it is their strategy of sexual representation as shock and social critique which sets them apart from the mainstream and creates their interconnection in the underground. Moreover, as Bowen notes, it was the shocking representation of sex that brought recognition to the underground. Quoting from a contemporary commentary: "leaving aside a large proportion of underground films which aren't concerned with sex at all, it's fair to say that the most commercially successful underground artists have been those who feature sex prominently in their works."¹⁸ Hence, when critically examining either the avant-garde or the sexploitation industry, it is important to keep in mind that the two, although not directly related, do contain some cinematic approximations.

NOTES

1 Landis, Bill and Michelle Clifford. *Sleazoid Express: A Mind Twisting Tour through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square*. New York: Fireside, 2002. p. xiv

2 The Grindhouse was an urban theatre that initially catered to low budget genre films, like Westerns, horrors, and murder mysteries. But by the 1960s, the grindhouses exhibited sexploitation films, including Nudie Cuties, Roughies, Kinkies, and Ghoulies; as well as Kung Fu films, Race Hate films, Rough Trade films, and sundry other ultra-violent fare.

3 Mendik, Xavier and Steven Jay Schneider, eds.

Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. p.2.

4 Of all the filmmakers who have worked in the sexploitation industry, the one who has recently received the most critical and scholarly interest is Doris Wishman. See: Bowen, Michael J. "Doris Wishman meets the Avantgarde." *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. eds. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002; Gorfinkel, Elena. "The Body as Apparatus: Chesty Morgan takes on the Academy." *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*. eds. Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper. Guildford, Surrey: Fab Press, 2000; Bowen, Michael. "The Many Bodies of Doris Wishman." *Wide Angle* 19:3, 1997; and Jarmick, Christopher J. "Doris Wishman." *Senses of Cinema: Great Directors*. <http://www.sensesofcinema.com>.

5 Hoberman, J. "Bad Movies." *Vulgar Modernism: Writings on Movies and Other Media*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, p11. In Hoberman's article he specifically focuses on the works of Edward D. Wood Jr. and Oscar Micheaux.

6 Kyrou, Ado. "The Marvelous is Popular." *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*. ed. Paul Hammond. London: British Film Institute, 1978, p 68.

7 Ibid., p 70.

8 Vale V. and Andrea Juno. "Introduction." *Incredibly Strange Films*. eds V. Vale and Andrea Juno. San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1986, p.5.

9 Quoted in Schwartz, David. "Visions of New York: Films of the 1960s Underground." *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. p. 201.

10 Censorship laws were gradually enforced from the early 1920s until 1934 when the Hays Office began integrated into the Hollywood system. In the mid-1960s the Hays Office came to an end, and the ratings system that we are familiar with today came into effect.

11 Vale and Juno, p. 5

12 Curtis, David. *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution*. New York: Delta Books 1971, p. 176.

13 Ibid., p 176.

14 Ibid., p.179.

15 Landis and Clifford, p 50.

16 Ibid. p.50-51.

17 Bowen, Michael J. "Doris Wishman meets the Avant-garde." *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. p.109-110.

18 Ibid., p.110.