

Where Have the Good Old Naughty Days Gone? Curating an Exhibition on Moving-Image Pornography

Exhibition Review by Troy Bordun

The moving-image pornography archive is grossly inadequate for scholarship and curatorship. I came to this conclusion while completing research for, and subsequently curating, a small exhibition on the history of moving-image pornography. Despite the widespread proliferation of the genre, e.g., the uploading of thousands of materials onto the Internet and the possibility for global consumerism on websites such as *eBay*, I nevertheless faced considerable challenges in making a particular strand of its history available to the public. “[T]he history of filmed pornography,” writes Eric Schaefer, “remains fragmentary, frequently unreliable, and as much the stuff of whispers and folklore as of fact” (“Gauging a Revolution,” 370).

Schaefer’s comment is made evident by the fragmentary and unreliable organization of porn websites such as *Youporn* and *Redtube*. The end of this article will briefly consider these sites because they are unfortunately the best collections currently available. I will first describe the exhibition and the research it required. Following this, I will note the difficulties in accessing and presenting the locatable materials, and why I was unable to find other materials. My amateur curatorship also involved an experiment in spectator participation that regrettably fell flat. Based on this failure, the missing archive, and the difficulties in presenting the materials, I will provide some advice for future curators of porn exhibitions.



Fig. 1 Viewing stag films (photo courtesy of the author)

Stags, Sexploitation, and Hard Core: Moving-Image Pornography up to 1972 was held from August 28th to 30th, 2014, at Artspace, an artist-run center in Peterborough, Ontario. The budget was minimal,¹ funded by Trent University's student group Trent Film Society, and admission was free. The research on pornography was conducted for my doctoral special field examination in Cultural Studies at Trent University. During this research I found several authors whose work proved influential for the exhibition. Most significantly, I was inspired by Linda Williams. Williams's writing is well-researched and offers theoretical insight into particular films, trends, and aspects unique to the genre. Richard Corliss's accessible article on 1970s pornography, "That Old Feeling: When Porno Was Chic" (2005), written for *Time*, was also useful. I appreciated the cinephilia and historical situatedness provided by Corliss, a man in the thick of early 1970s artistically inclined porno chic. Although there has not been enough consensus amongst porn scholars to accurately construct a porn canon, due in large part to the current porn archive consisting mostly of private and/or unorganized collections, (Williams,

¹ As I will explain later on, the minimal budget became an issue, especially regarding the materials and formats selected for projection.

“Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 31), Corliss’s account does provide an interesting personal one.

The films discussed by Williams and Corliss therefore comprised the bulk of my exhibition. Additionally, since the exhibition was more or less a history of pornography in the American context, Schaefer’s texts were consulted. A thorough exhibition requires enough materials to paint an accurate picture of the cultural context of the identified period. Although I achieved this to some extent, a larger and more readily available collection—and, as I am now discovering in writing this piece, more research on my part—would have helped to fully achieve historical and cultural accuracy.

In Gallery 1 I traced pornography’s move from the late 19th centuries to 1972: Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs, French stag films of the 1920s, nudie cuties, sexploitation flicks and art cinema of the 1960s, and feature-length hard core in the early 1970s. Alongside projections of individual films I created panels with film stills, promotional materials, posters, and text. The texts were brief accounts of a film or trend, easy to digest theoretical treatments, film reviews, and filmmakers’ commentary. Gallery 1 also held an encased set of 8mm films and an 8mm projector for display purposes only.

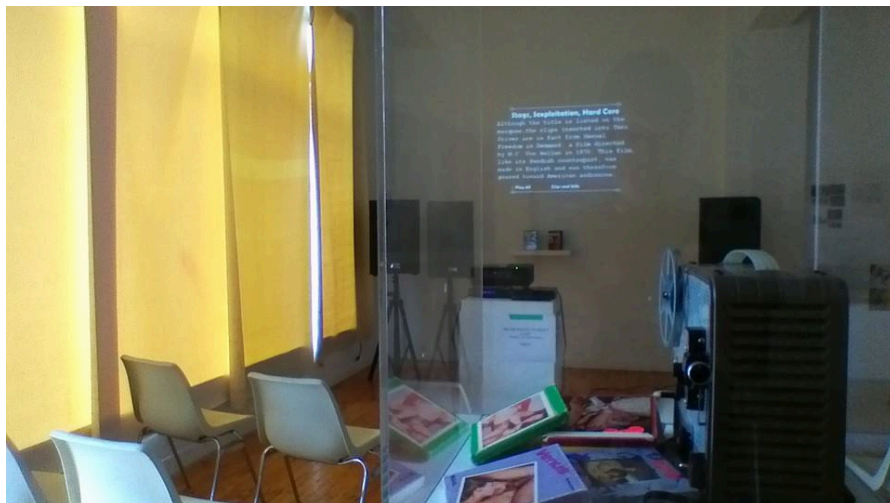


Fig. 2 8mm Projector on display (photo courtesy of the author)

The Media Lab housed a disappointing selection of gay pornography. Thomas Waugh has noted the difficulties in accessing this subgenre (*The Fruit Machine*, 272-296). His struggles to view and publish images from the Kinsey Archive speak to the lack of pre-1972 materials available for public consumption. Fortunately, Gorilla Factory Productions has released a selection of Wakefield Poole's early films and I screened his most important work of the period. *Boys in the Sand* (1971) was the first gay sex positive and artistically-inclined porn to hit the big screen and the film was also a huge success in the home market, abroad, and with celebrities such as Hugh Hefner and Sammy Davis, Jr. Nevertheless, Poole is unacknowledged as a major director in early hard-core pornography. Jim Tushinski contends that the LGBT community wished to de-sexualize their history, and particularly as the AIDS virus took so many lives in the 1980s, "pre-condom porn" has remained marginalized ("Who is Wakefield Poole..."). Hopefully, with the releases by GF Productions, Poole will find his rightful place in porn history.

Gallery 2 projected the most well-known and widely discussed pornographic feature film of the 1970s, *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), a recent documentary on the film, and panels and posters relating to porno chic. Concluding the exhibit with *Deep Throat* seemed appropriate as the film inaugurated the mainstreaming of hard-core pornography. Porn culture and porn aesthetics, critics and scholars contend, changed with the success of Damiano's film (Williams, *Screening Sex*). My curatorship was thus focused on a mainstream or above ground history of moving-image pornography. Aside from the French stags, whose exact audiences and circulation are more challenging to precisely identify, the films from 1959-1972 I curated were, at one point, collectively viewed in a theatre.



Fig. 3 Collectively viewing pornography in public (photo courtesy of the author)

An alternative and more difficult to curate exhibition would have turned to the home market reels from about 1930 to 1970, but the audiences and works that constitute the collections discussed by Schaefer, in his short piece on this topic, are of a different variety. These reels were made cheaply with 16mm and 8mm equipment and sold by the foot, from 20-foot “quickies” to 400-foot “featurettes,” and were available in either black-and-white or colour (Schaefer, “Plain Brown Wrapper”). These films were also less concerned with narrative while the above ground porn was largely invested in it.

On the surface, I was able to visually display one strand of the history of moving-image pornography; however, much of this history was physically inaccessible and at times, surprisingly, virtually absent. Despite the apparent surplus of materials on display, my process in curating the exhibition was proof that much work is yet to be done in developing a scholarly porn archive, which is of a different type than the somewhat accessible DVDs for purchase online. The small selection of DVDs that are available, from what I believe to be mainstream films of the time, was manageable. In addition to some sexploitation flicks and 1960s art cinema, I was able to locate: a DVD of French

stag films (*The Good Old Naughty Days*), a DVD bootleg of a VHS copy of *Mona* (Howard Ziehm, 1970), and a copy of *Deep Throat*. I was enthused about Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959), the first nudie cutie, and hoped Meyer's low-budget flick would be a centerpiece of the exhibition. It is available on laserdisc, VHS, and part of a \$200 13-DVD Meyer collection. The latter option would have been ideal, but its price was well beyond the small budget of the exhibition. I explain below why the other formats of *Mr. Teas* were not used. I was also interested in Torgny Wickman's *Language of Love*, a.k.a. *Swedish Marriage Manual* (1969), and M.C. Von Hellen's *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* (1970). These titles were important works in the early 70s and helped usher in the porno chic era. Their pseudo-scientific lens made them less raw than more generically pornographic films. Although the former is available on DVD in Amazon, I couldn't arrange the shipping with the seller. I would also have liked to show Paul Gerber's *School Girl* (1971), a fun film from the porno chic era, but was unable to find a projectable copy.

Some other films considered for exhibition were available in digital copies or up for streaming on porn websites, but I decided at the time to discard this possibility for hypothetical reasons as well as practical reasons such as Internet connectivity and budget. My hypothetical reason was that the authenticity of streaming or digital copies of films seemed difficult to assess. I accepted *Mona*, a DVD bootleg of a VHS tape, because it was clearly the VHS version distributed by Something Weird Video in 1996 – the company's logo as well as trailers for other releases appeared on my DVD bootleg. I suspected, then, that this distribution company had closer ties to the original work than an uploaded video without any scholarly or historical verification. The practical reason for DVDs was that the gallery space was already equipped with DVD players and, from my years of film programming at Artspace, it was simpler to work with this medium. In a prior exhibition on non-narrative film, I brought a VCR only to have it malfunction (additionally, my last personal experience with the technology involved irreparably damaging a tape). I could have turned to laserdiscs, but I did not have immediate access to a laserdisc player, and not enough budget to secure one. Thus, for simplicity and out of fear of wasting time and possible funds, I chose DVDs. I now realize this was

a mistake; the exhibition could have benefitted had I branched out to other formats. However, if I expanded the exhibition, I would have also needed to turn to reels and projection, and this would have provided yet another challenge for an amateur curator on a budget. Dimitrios Otis, who has researched the history of adult film venues in Vancouver, lent me some reels for display but he felt certain they were too old to project—the film would likely be damaged during use.

In addition to the problems associated with locating and presenting the materials, curating an exhibition that fosters spectator engagement also proved difficult. Recently I have been researching porn aesthetics, movement, and tactility as it relates to this exhibition. My claim, simplified here, is that porn aesthetics attempts to enhance or produce spectators' haptic visuality and tactile engagements (Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 185; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 23-26; Paasonen, "Grains of Resonance"). Reception of porn is therefore determined, in large part, by these haptic and tactile engagements, ranging from a renunciation of control over the image, which fosters a "tactile eye," to a user who controls and manipulates the images according to his or her prurient interest. I find the former to be a productive foundation when assessing soft-core and hard-core pornographies from 1959 to 1972 and the latter for studies of pre-cinema and early cinema as well as on the Internet.

In pre-cinema and in early cinema, according to Williams, porn presupposes "corporealized observers," which means "the plunging of the observer's own body into a transparent immediacy of eroticized self-presence" ("Corporealized Observers," 36). She provides examples of photographs and stag films which, through their style and form, turn the viewer back on him- or herself to have a sensuous experience. This sensorial experience is fundamentally due to the user grasping photographs or cranking devices for projection. Although Williams wrote the essay prior to Internet pornographies, its implications for current porn consumption are straightforward. As one would crank a mutoscope to see erotic images in order to then "crank" oneself (Williams, "Corporealized Observers," 18-19), today's consumers of online pornographies employ a "grab" of the mouse to click and touch images and videos. The

user's interactivity with mouse, screen, and content achieves a heightened sense of "intensity, potentiality and affectation" and, if desired, the user can grab him- or herself as well (Paasonen, "Grains of Resonance," 356-357). Provided that the contemporary media consumer is familiar with the touching and grabbing of online pornographies, and with William's argument in mind, I edited several "Teasers" from digital copies of films and arranged them on a DVD. I set up a projector and DVD player in Gallery 1, and with well-placed signage, indicated that viewers could use the remote to select and scan the clips.

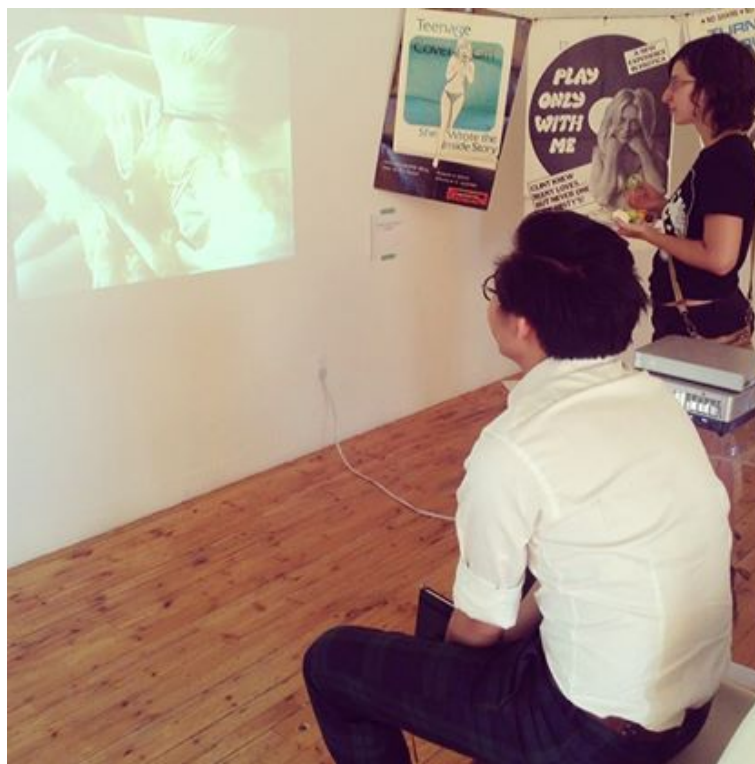


Fig. 4 Visitors to the exhibition, next to signage and digital projector (photo courtesy of the author)

Very few participants took me up on the offer. My desire for interactivity, to bring the public spectator into what I assumed to be familiar movements with his or her apparatus at home, was unsuccessful. I failed to incite viewers' "somatic archives," i.e., linking them to their own habits and practices, and their own nudity and sexual encounters (Paasonen, "Grains of Resonance," 360). Instead, as in a museum, spectators

remained “disembodied, distanced, and centered” rather than “decentered, fragmented, vulnerable to sensation, and directly engaged” (Williams, “Corporealized Observers,” 36). Indeed, one surveyed spectator of my exhibition enthusiastically wrote, “it is all historical like going to a museum,” missing the sensuous experience altogether.²

No one wanted to physically touch the materials, which perhaps suggests that pornography and sex are relegated to certain sites—the privacy of the home or specialized theaters—and inappropriate for others. I take it as evident that people with Internet access can and do consume pornography in private. During the exhibition, however, spectators were reluctant to 1) come to the exhibition alone, and 2) spend too much time in the relative privacy of the smaller rooms. Most wandered about the bright, main gallery, and kept their distance from the materials, both spatially and temporally.



Fig. 5 Reception of the exhibition (photo courtesy of the author)

In an effort to bring the exhibition online, I uploaded the Teasers and a video walkthrough to *Vimeo* and *Redtube*—the latter is an eyesore and is nearly un navigable

² Kelly Dennis found much the same at the Museum of Sex in New York (*Art/Porn*, 159-181). Due to the amount of reading required, the exhibition *NY SEX* was a scholarly procedure rather than one filled with pleasure(s).

(Bordun, “Troy Bordun”; “Mr. Teas”). Tim Dean, editor of *Porn Archives* (2014), proposes that the Internet is an archive for pornography while Linda Williams argues that it is not. An archive, she maintains, consists of materials that are accessible, “collected, identified and preserved” (“Pornography, Porno, Porn,” 31). Websites such as *Redtube* and *Youporn* are none of these, and it is disastrous for scholarship that porn sites are the most accessible place to find materials.

On these sites, pornography is organized according to acts and fetishes, while occasionally featuring a “Vintage” section. The emphasis on acts and fetishes recalls the organizational principle of the Kinsey Archives. Two photos from different time periods and geographical locations could be grouped together for their observable “behavioral data.” Waugh suggests that this biological and anthropological categorization is a questionable archival practice, calling it an “intrinsic denial of the cultural and political valence of an image,” which also makes it difficult for scholars to thoroughly do their research (*The Fruit Machine*, 274-275). We can see the similarities between the Kinsey Archive and porn sites. As an additional strike against their organization, porn sites carry no information about the cultural or political valence of the uploaded videos. Thus the most accessible websites for a study of pornography clearly map onto Schaefer’s observation about the genre’s fragmentary and unreliable history. This is a problem for curators and scholars. An exhibition on the history of pornography would need to distance itself from this sort of behavioural data; it would bring attention to the history and contexts of the films themselves.

Pornography is a field of study to be sure, although I have noted the paucity of historical materials. First and foremost, pornography is a genre of pleasures and heightened interactivity (if we follow the arguments made by Laura U. Marks and Jennifer Barker, porn can touch us even in our theatre seats). My advice for future pornography curators is, first, to be aware of the problematic modes of porn organization and collection and, as best as possible, not reproduce them. Second, if pornographic materials presuppose a “corporealized observer,” an exhibition should therefore solicit tactile engagements.

However, given this aesthetics, experimentation and trials should be conducted before installation.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dimitrios Otis and Artspace for help with the exhibition, and Brandon Arroyo and the reviewers at *Synoptique* for assistance with this article.

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