DISPOSABLE PASSIONS

Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema

DAVID CHURCH

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Various excerpts from Chapters 3 and 4 appeared in the short articles "Desiring to Merge: Restoring Value in Niche-Interest Adult DVDs," *Film International* 11, no. 3–4 (2013): 11–21; and "Something Weird This Way Comes: Mike Vraney (1957–2014)," *The Moving Image* 14, no. 2 (2014): 51–67. Thanks to Daniel Lindvall and Intellect Books for reprint permission for the former; and to the University of Minnesota Press for the latter.

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Introduction

"I should explain that adult movies—X movies, Triple X, whatever you want to call them—have never particularly aroused me. On the contrary, I found myself drawn to them because of my disenchantment with mainstream films," confesses the narrator in the opening pages of Tim Lucas's novel *Throat Sprockets*, shortly before he becomes obsessed with an erotic horror film, chanced upon during a lunch break spent at a local porn theater. "Adult films also had a peculiar knack for capturing the listlessness I found at the core of real life, better than so-called 'legitimate' films," he continues. "By the time you reach thirty, as I had, you're either just learning to appreciate the anesthetic value of escapism or growing sick of the vapors."[1]

Appropriately enough, this sentiment echoes my own thoughts about sexually explicit cinema in many ways. In their often crude attempts to arouse the audience, their hyperbolic depictions of sexual abandon rendered in oddly mechanistic strokes exude a sort of melancholy admission about cinema's overall powers of mimetic representation, as if to ask, "Is this all there is?" For all of its many paradoxical qualities—it is notoriously hard to define, yet we supposedly "know it when we see it" (to paraphrase U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart); it is the most demonized of genres, yet perhaps the most popular in terms of widespread consumption; it is deeply invested in providing documentary evidence of sexual pleasure, yet simultaneously creating fantasies that viewers might seldom live out in actuality—pornographic cinema is perhaps at once the *most* and *least cinematic* of all moving-image genres. While it exemplifies the medium's basic roots in a visual fascination with moving bodies that affectively stimulate the viewer's own body, it can also do so in the virtual absence of conventional standards of narrative, characterization, technical skill, and production values.

In my estimation, adult films from the past are especially adept at encouraging reflection upon such qualities when retrospectively viewed today, for they foreground the cinematic medium's essential physical gulf between spectator and spectacle through a temporal/historical disjuncture between one's present-day self and the films' intended historical audience. With sexually lurid or explicit films in particular, this is precisely because that gulf might be imaginatively reduced through a viewer's acts of autoeroticism surrounding the viewing experience, helping affectively foreclose the apparent distance between here and there, now and then. The historicity of such texts allows one to ruminate on how notions of sexual explicitness and "the pornographic" have or have not changed as social attitudes have shifted over the decades, even as the texts themselves cannot help but still make their original appeals (successfully or not) to latter-day viewers.

Although the primary *intended* uses of pornography may be largely autoerotic, I will illustrate that antiquated pornography also garners the pleasures of collectability, connoisseurship, and historical knowledge that more closely align it with the dynamics of exploitation film fandom than the fandom of most contemporary hard-core pornography. As Laura Kipnis suggests, "There's no reason to assume that pornographic images function any more literally (or produce more literal effects) than other more socially elevated images that we're used to reading for their symbolic and latent meanings—no reason other than class prejudice against 'working photographs' or pure censoriousness against sexual pleasure."[2] Nevertheless, as much as the artifactual qualities of these films may interest historically minded viewers and collectors as surviving curiosities, a large part of their enduring allure cannot be merely reduced to distanced contemplation, instead residing in their present-day capacity to viscerally resonate with viewers. As such, these films' original attempts to affect viewers' bodies can also successfully transcend their bygone production contexts, reminding us of the legacies that early adult films have left—for better or worse—on our cultural landscape.

Furthermore, these various forms of what are today considered "vintage" erotica/pornography/etc. retain their carnal appeal not only *despite* their age, but precisely *because* of it. The archaism and artifactual qualities of these surviving residual texts become framed as potential sources of arousal in their own right, begging the question of how and why *pastness* itself can be eroticized.[3] As Linda Williams argues in her book *Screening Sex*, the history of on-screen sexuality is undergirded by a constant tension between concealment and revelation, which corresponds to an affective tension between the "itch" of a sexual suggestiveness that retains its eroticism through an unfulfilled tease (such as created by censorship restrictions) and the "scratch" of sexual imagery that more viscerally delivers upon its promises through on-screen enactment. Although this dynamic adheres in all manner of films depicting erotic acts, adult films have arguably been the most historically acute nexus of this tension by taking it as their very *raison d'être*. Importantly, though, the march toward greater sexual explicitness as twentieth-century censorship restrictions gradually fell has not necessarily been accompanied by teleological progress from "itch" (prolonged sexual tension) to "scratch" (sexual release). After all, even after hard-core moving imagery showing genital penetration became legally available for public consumption in the United States ca. 1970, cinema in general has not abandoned its representative tension between concealment and revelation, thus allowing the erotic potential and economic marketability of both explicit and nonexplicit sexual imagery to continue unabated.[4]

Building upon Williams's thesis, then, I argue in the coming chapters that the "itch vs. scratch" dynamic between visual strategies of concealment and revelation has become reproduced in the surviving materiality of these otherwise ephemeral texts. That is, at a time when so much sexually explicit imagery is readily available to anyone with an Internet connection, the historical tension between concealment and revelation has become sublimated into more *tactile* questions of cultural neglect vs. cultural visibility. Newer media (e.g., DVD, Blu-ray, and video-on-demand) routinely confer value upon

themselves by repurposing the qualities of older media (e.g., photography and film) in their emergent forms.[5] Yet, in the case of vintage erotic texts, these processes of remediation foreground the apparent "promiscuity" of residual texts that still make themselves materially available to the pleasure of anyone who will have them—despite what I will also describe as their retrospective appeal as once-"transgressive" texts that must now be claimed by viewers with the appropriate critical acumen to seek them out. The sheer visibility of these sexual materials in today's marketplace does not necessarily ensure their eroticism, whereas the more metafilmic tension between the *disappearance* and *rediscovery* of these ostensibly ephemeral texts better renews their erotic potential. By reenacting a longtime historical dynamic between what remains cinematically *seen vs. unseen* through archival and affective notions of *tangibility vs. intangibility*, "vintage-ness" becomes marked by the very historicity of past sexual representations that once pushed at the boundaries of legal propriety and "good taste" in their respective historical contexts, but which are now being rediscovered and made newly marketable again.

For viewers today, the erotic potential of such imagery can thereby become retrospectively infused with taste-based notions of subcultural value when the visually and culturally degraded materiality of past adult texts attests to their apparent difference from present-day pornographic materials—a sense of difference echoing the oft-desired nicheness of subcultural investment. In an era when the one-time legal censorship of such texts is now largely (but not wholly) defunct, vintage texts are now effectively "censored" by the logic of the market itself when they fall out of wider popularity and are no longer easily available. As Ramon Lobato observes, the act of distribution—especially in its more *informal* varieties (such as piracy and other forms of unauthorized circulation, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4)—materially shapes a cinematic text through the accumulation of scratches, pixilation, or other forms of audiovisual degradation. Furthermore, marginalized or peripheral audiences, such as porn viewers, are more likely accustomed to seeing their marginality reflected back to them through viewing such signifiers of cultural neglect.[6]

Yet, as I explain in Chapter 1, for fans of obscure or orphaned films that have fallen into a partial state of cultural obsolescence, such fleeting textual/temporal signifiers of historical marginality can be reclaimed as "oppositional" points of pride. Sarah Thornton's oft-cited concept of *subcultural capital* is important in this regard, since the sense of relative "coolness" rooted in subcultural ideologies and competencies that supposedly mark a subcultural denizen's distinction from the "mainstream" need not be rooted in consumption of the new and cutting edge. Rather, it can also adhere in "lost and almost forgotten" texts that have resisted obsolescence and survived as vintage goods.[7] Nevertheless, the disreputable connotations of autoeroticism can also complicate the supposed "coolness" of the vintage porn aficionado, particularly when these films' uses by past (and present) viewers beyond the present-day fan himself/herself impinge upon one's selective means of remembrance.

Consequently, I argue that *cultural forgetting* fuels the appeal of vintage materials as much as *cultural remembrance*, since value becomes constructed through both processes working in tandem—despite the honorific status so often placed upon

remembrance. Cultural memory is inextricable from the practical necessity of cultural forgetting, says Aleida Assmann, but the question of what constitutes a culture's active "working memory" (e.g., history and canons) vs. its passive "reference memory" (e.g., archives) remains a deeply political one. Canons of great works, for example, gain their traditional power as much through the force of exclusion as inclusion, leading to the selective remembrance of a very small percentage of literary/cinematic texts, with the rest consigned to the so-called slaughterhouse of historical neglect. Whereas some forms of cultural forgetting are actively pursued when societies intentionally destroy certain materials (including pornography), *passive* cultural forgetting occurs through more benign forms of neglect and disregard. Archives often house the passively remembered texts comprising a culture's latent memory, which then require the work of historians and critics to recontextualize and raise them to cultural consciousness (and even eventual canonization).[8]

In my estimation, adult films occupy a blurred borderline between passive archival remembrance and both active and passive forms of cultural forgetting, since many of these texts have been persecuted and destroyed as "indecent" and "obscene"; many more have no official homes within archives; and yet some do continue to linger in archives and are only now becoming subject to greater reappraisal. Still, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, the archival life of adult films remains contested territory, presenting both obstacles toward rediscovery and emergent pleasures for historians/fans. As Michel Foucault has shown, for instance, active efforts at censorship may paradoxically increase the likely survival of the offending text through the proliferation of discourse against and public curiosity about it[9]—but we should also heed how more *passive* forms of cultural forgetting, such as gradual neglect, may leave far less of a discursive trail. Indeed, forgetting is often seen as a shameful failure while remembering is posited as a virtue—but adult films have been subject to various kinds of forgetting, including forms of forgetting deemed valuable for the public good, over the decades.[10]

In the case of adult films, it thus remains important not to merely denigrate cultural forgetting as a *destructive* form of censorial prudery, but rather to also view forgetting as a *productive* force in the creation of residual cultural/economic value through scarcity or endangerment. Vintage pornography's contemporary appeal relies as much upon our society's apparent need to forget these past films on political and aesthetic grounds as on fans/collectors' desires to sustain their remembrance. Therein lies the importance of vintage pornography's ability to tell certain historical narratives but not others, and its lessons for better understanding the contemporary forms of retrospection invoked by film fandom and historiography alike.

Importantly, however, I must specify at the outset that my argument throughout this book applies to vintage forms of *heterosexual* pornography, which will be my primary focus for several reasons. Lucas Hilderbrand observes that, unlike the relative paucity and marginality of pornography within implicitly heterocentrist archives, specialist archives devoted to gay and lesbian history are practically overflowing with porn, often amassed by private collectors on VHS (and far less commonly on celluloid) before the eventual accession of these idiosyncratic indexes of desire. Whereas heterosexual

porn has experienced notable flickers of cultural mainstreaming after hard-core adult cinema's legalization in the early 1970s, the historical coemergence of gay liberation and hard-core cinema meant that porn was always pervasively within the mainstream of gay culture during the years of its most prominent world-making processes, to the point that gay-cultural publications like *The Advocate* largely understood "gay cinema" as synonymous with so-called "all-male" pornographic cinema during the 1970s.[11] The various forms of adult cinema discussed in this book, then, may have once constituted the relatively "mainstream" end of the heterosexual porn market and have only retrospectively become constructed as a special-interest niche, but even the biggest heterosexual porn hits could not approach the sheer centrality of all-male porn in gay culture.

Moreover, in contrast to heterosexual adult cinema's origins in the lowly stag film (discussed in Chapter 1), Ryan Powell observes that the texts constituting gay adult cinema's 1970s "coming out" often self-consciously drew upon the tradition of avant-garde/underground art and theater—thus retrospectively giving gay pornography a more aesthetically redeemable pedigree than most of its straight contemporaries.[12] For both political and aesthetic reasons, then, vintage gay porn's archival life as historical artifacts of cultural pride bears different dynamics than that of vintage heterosexual porn. Whereas vintage gay porn obviously remains more marginalized than vintage heterosexual porn within a dominant heterosexist culture, each corpus bears vastly different valuations within its respective cultural tradition. As such, adequately treating vintage porn's overall sexual diversity is beyond the scope of any one book—although any starting point for a related study on the remediation of vintage gay porn include adult theater owner and film distributor Steven Toushin's company Bijou Video (founded in 1970; rechristened as a video label in 1978), which remains the most prominent video label devoted to circulating vintage gay cinema on DVD, in addition to selling vintage gay ephemera—so I will generally leave discussion of nonheterosexual porn's older forms to historians better versed in that territory.

A note on slippery nomenclature

Another caveat before proceeding: Eric Schaefer offers the instructive suggestion that the overarching term "adult cinema" encompasses a wide swath of cinema that historically targeted adults-only audiences as obscenity standards gradually changed throughout the twentieth century—from classical exploitation films to soft-core sexploitation films to sexually provocative art films to hard-core pornographic films in their various forms.[13] Although I find this a persuasive way to avoid vaguely subjective distinctions between "pornography" and "erotica" and to avoid settling on a threshold for where "the pornographic" begins, I nevertheless retain the politically overdetermined term *pornography* throughout this book, because many of the videos, retailers, and websites under consideration here consciously—and, within the bounds of contemporary obscenity laws, legally—adopt that label as part of their marketing to prospective audiences. In theorizing the retrospective appeal of vintage materials

like stag films, for example, my first chapter looks at how contemporary distributors sometimes deliberately avoid the low-cultural connotations of the term "porn" through reference to more legitimate art-historical traditions and active, literate connoisseurship, but such appeals to differing levels of (sub)cultural capital are ultimately rendered unstable by the more explicitly pornographic circulation of the same material by other distributors.

Consequently, I deliberately commingle broad but slippery terms like "porn," "erotica," "adult films," "sex films," and so on as a means of not only reflecting their varied discursive uses today, but also denying the leaky distinctions that some critics have attempted to make between materials of differing explicitness. As David Andrews says, "*pornography, the dominant social concepts*, cannot possibly cover *pornography, the actual aesthetic forms*," since the presence of "pervasive *and* graphic sex" is no more restricted to pornographic films than to art cinema; nor can a filmmaker's artistic intentions be judged as the qualifying factor, since any text can be marketed and distributed for more blatantly "pornographic" uses against its creators' will.[14] Without sacrificing the specificity of discussing historically localized forms (e.g., stag films and sexploitation films), then, I reject the pejorative connotations of the term "pornography" by indicating the historical variability of what is considered pornographic and suggesting how such distinctions reside less in inherent textual qualities than shifts in sexualized discourse over the twentieth century and beyond.

After the hard-core feature film came aboveground around 1970, for instance, the shots of unsimulated genital penetration separating "hard" from "soft" films became a magical line that removed all plausible deniability while seemingly (and arbitrarily) catapulting hard core into a very different register of aesthetic and political implication that continues to this day. That is, this very move from the faked to the undeniably "real" sex act ironically produces more magical thinking among the genre's detractors than adult films remaining safely in the realm of simulation and illusion.[15] Indeed, the very terms "hard-core" and "soft-core," while originally derived from early twentieth-century sociological literature, also evoke penile tumescence in this context, as though the "hard-core" film has more potential to "violate" viewers' sensibilities—a suggestion that antiporn feminists once used in ridiculously equating the production and reception of fictional pornographic representations with literal, real-life acts of rape and subjugation, whereas they could excuse soft-core representations as the realm of politically acceptable "erotica," differentiated from hard-core "pornography" proper. And yet, antiporn feminists have conveniently sidestepped the inconvenient truth (discussed in Chapter 2) that 1960s (soft-core) sexploitation films are far more likely to espouse blatantly misogynistic and politically regressive attitudes (e.g., eroticized representations of rape) than most of the 1970s–1980s hard-core films that followed. Nevertheless, Elena Gorfinkel observes that at the time when hard core came aboveground, this shift also produced instances of critical nostalgia for the earlier sexploitation films whose visual limitations on sexual spectacle bespoke a temporal distance from the far more explicit forms then coming on-scene, prefiguring sexploitation's later take-up as "vintage" texts.[16]

Hard-core films have often been seen as a major factor in the decline of postclassical exploitation cinema—a sort of teleological endpoint in the display of disreputable spectacle—and are sometimes minimized or segregated in fan accounts of exploitation film history.[17] They tend to exist on the periphery of the exploitation film corpus, but are not unambiguously considered a constitutive part of it (unlike, say, the prolific soft-core cycle of sexploitation films). Some directors celebrated by exploitation film fans spent parts of their early or late careers working in the porn industry; other directors actively transitioned between soft-core and hard-core projects in various genres, even recutting the same film for different theaters and audiences. Since the early 1970s, exploitation film distributors might include hard-core inserts (typically filmed with stand-ins for the original actors) depending on the distribution region. After the emergence of theatrically exhibited hard-core material, limited pornographic content could be thus included as yet another source of spectacle in some exploitation films. Meanwhile, some sexploitation films attempted to compete by incorporating less narrative context and featuring extended, increasingly explicit sexual numbers; for example, Bethel Buckalew's *The Pigkeeper's Daughter* (1972) consists of little more than six lengthy, simulated sex scenes, replete with full-frontal male and female nudity, but no clear shots of genital penetration. Meanwhile, some producers of hard-core films outright relied on exploitation film distributors to gain regional and even national placement in theaters. The presence of hard-core inserts in some exploitation films, the simultaneous release of hard-core and soft-core versions of certain exploitation films, the fact that most sexploitation films were released for an adults-only audience, and the coexistence of such films in the same exhibition settings (such as drive-ins, grind houses, and former art theaters), therefore belie any secure dividing line between "exploitation" and "porn" films.

With brief hard-core scenes and long soft-core scenes increasingly appearing in an exploitation marketplace riddled with adults-only screenings, it became far more difficult to separate the appeals to sexual spectacle in soft-core and hard-core films on purely aesthetic or narrative merits than on the films' relative availability as dictated by changing social and legal standards. Today, such overlaps ultimately suggest some degree of shared object choices and reception practices between vintage porn fandom and exploitation film fandom, regardless of the frequent marginalization of the former by the latter. Andrews, for example, notes that as soft-core sexual numbers grow longer and approach the hard-core film's high ratio of sexual numbers to narrative content, fans tend to "diminish or deny" one side of the "narrative-number dichotomy so as to privilege another, a practice that at times verges on textual amputation or mutilation," especially as fans generally attempt to discursively legitimate more "respectable" aspects of the text that are not associated with autoerotic appeals alone.[18] Nevertheless, an early X-rated video buying guide that focuses primarily on hard-core films also includes a number of so-called "soft X" films by directors like Buckalew, Radley Metzger, Russ Meyer, Just Jaeckin, and Doris Wishman (Figure I.1)—all of which are discussed under comparisons to stocking a vintage wine cellar, with discriminating tastes allowing the adult film collector to have appropriate tapes on hand for any mood or occasion.[19]

Figure I.1 A fan-made cover design for a nonexistent Criterion Eclipse box set devoted to Doris Wishman's mid-1960s sexploitation "roughies," claiming her as a worthy contemporary of European art filmmakers while also playing upon the unlikeliness of her inclusion in the tony Criterion Collection catalogue. Parody design by Robert Nishimura/ Primolandia Productions.

As adult film writer/director William Rotsler (whose work is discussed in Chapter 2) predicted as early as 1973,

> Some day there will be big fat books on the shelves of booksellers with titles like *Early Porno*, *The Love Directors*, *Stars of the Golden Age of Pornopix*, *The Films of Marilyn Chambers*, *How "Deep Throat" Was Made*, and perhaps even *The Golden Book of Sex*. […] Precious prints of early porno films will be salvaged and shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Porno-star biographies will be published with a discreet center section of selected photos. Sure, a lot of it will be commercially whipped-up froth, but there *will* be nostalgia periods.[20]

Many of these predictions have indeed come to pass over the past decade, including, as he says, not only retrospective repackagings of older filmic material in new forms but also the collecting of material ephemera like pressbooks, lobby cards, autographed photos, and other artifacts. Such residual materials form the basis of my second chapter, as they echo the ephemerality of commercially minded films that were generally not intended to last, but have nevertheless gained selective cultural remembrance as exemplars of historical change. Discussing the relationship between fan collections

and processes of recollection, Amelie Hastie says, "The materiality of these collectibles comments on the historicizing function of objects: they embody both history and fantasy, and they lend a materiality to that history and fantasy."[21] Indeed, as I will subsequently elaborate, the ability for erotic ephemera to conjoin fantasy and reality in affectively stimulating ways has allowed these texts to become all the more arousing for both historians and vintage porn connoisseurs.

Writing amid the initial 1970s boom in theatrically screened hard-core features, Joseph Slade, one of the earliest scholars to study adult films on their own terms, noted in 1977 that, "[v]intage porn offers eroticism aged and layered, lacquered in fading sepia tones of nostalgia. Its age confers a kind of innocence, and blunts its threatening aspects—it seems quaint beside the graphic, convention-lacking celluloid which unreels in the peep-shows of the seventies. And yet the early stags are reminders that sexual fantasies change but little."[22] In the article "Vintage Vamp," published in the glossy sex magazine *High Society* that same year, pseudonymous collector "Richard Merkin" also describes collecting decades-old pornographic material since the late 1960s, but having been put off by the increasing explicitness of early 1970s hard-core forms. Porn lost its "psychological and sexual impact" when it was no longer "charming or even witty," he complains, and its eroticism was "castrated" by easy accessibility. Whereas it had once seemed "a very endangered species" garnering little monetary or sentimental/nostalgic value, "[f]requently now, persons possessing virtually *any* erotic photograph taken prior to the Woodstock Festival are convinced that it is worth a fortune."[23]

For Slade and Merkin, collectors gravitated toward archaic forms for many of the same reasons that so-called vintage porn has become a niche market today—although as Rotsler predicted, early-twentieth-century stag films have since been joined by the feature-length forms that Slade and Merkin—writing for academic and pornographic publications, respectively—then saw as too recent and graphic for nostalgization. In a sense, the sliding scale of historicity has since caught up with 1970s–1980s feature films as the very notion of what constitutes vintage-ness has gradually expanded to envelop a wide range of outdated (but not wholly obsolete) erotic cinema. For the purposes of my study, therefore, I do not merely restrict myself to hard-core texts that explicitly show genital penetration (and which have thus often been positioned as exemplars of "pornography" proper), but instead consider a range of moving images—some more explicit than others—which uneasily coexisted both above and below the oft-hazy legal line of obscenity as adult films gained varying degrees of social visibility.

Past and present "porno chics"

In his historicization of the modern "pornosphere," Brian McNair suggests that pornographic films and other materials have experienced (to date) two waves of mainstreaming and (at least partial) normalization in the United States and Western Europe. An outgrowth of liberalized sexual attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s, the first American wave of "porno chic" (and the one which originally coined the term)

coincided with the legal emergence of theatrically exhibited hard-core films like *Boys in the Sand* (1971), *Deep Throat* (1972), and *Behind the Green Door* (1972). Unlike earlier cinematic forms—including the formerly illegal underground trade in hard-core stag films and the legal but adults-only market for soft-core sexploitation films (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively)—these films rendered hard-core pornography not only publicly visible and accessible but also more culturally acceptable and even "hip" entertainment for ostensibly normative citizens. Such developments did, however, lead to political backlash from right-wing moralists and antiporn feminists during the ensuing "porn wars" and "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. McNair dates the second (and current) wave of "porno chic" from the early 2000s, driven by the diverse proliferation of online pornographies and the playful pastiching or parodying of pornographic tropes in advertising, art, and popular culture. As with the first wave, however, this second wave has faced some lingering antiporn feminism—a curious species of 1970s nostalgia in its own right—in the form of sexual panics over the supposed "pornification" of popular culture.[24]

Nor has past and present pornography been unambiguously "mainstreamed," since adult cinema—especially hard-core cinema—retains its disrepute as a corpus with suspect (autoerotic) uses that are generally not discussed in polite company, and it continues to have something of the folk devil about it in many corners. Despite its considerable moves into the culturally on/scene, then, adult cinema's continuing stigmas still render it a large realm of production and circulation that has received only modest recuperative attention from cultural custodians outside the adult film market itself, remaining little more than a footnote in most official film histories. Indeed, if contemporary antiporn activists make nostalgic claims contrasting today's "destructive" porn to "what had seemed genuinely yet innocently transgressive in the halcyon days of the 1970s,"[25] then the sheer diversity of vintage pornography reveals such claims as profoundly ahistorical. After all, when eroticized rape scenes were far more endemic in 1960s sexploitation films than 1970s–1980s hard-core films, and when once-illicit hard-core forms like pre-1970s stag films are explicitly promoted today as revealing the past to be far less "innocent" than we might now assume, the continued circulation of these historical artifacts as potentially arousing texts belies any facile arguments that newer pornographic videos are "not your daddy's *Playboy*."

With the once-enflamed rhetoric of the porn wars having now died down to smoldering embers, a playfully "hip" repurposing of pornographic clichés within popular culture in general has been joined by much more circumspect analysis within the academy. The recent rise of pornography studies (a subfield, emerging from the scholarship of sex-positive, anticensorship feminists, within which I situate this book as well) has helped counterbalance the genre's long-standing neglect and misunderstanding, while forcefully responding to antiporn critics. Although it remains arguable whether pornography effectively can or should be evaluated on the same political grounds as any less controversial fiction film genre, the legacy of porn's much-debated social impact has at least opened the genre's oft-problematic gender politics to more prevalent ideological scrutiny than the average Hollywood offering, thereby allowing pornography studies to gain an important foothold in the academy.

Meanwhile, the past decade has seen a notable number of adults-only art films incorporating explicit hard-core imagery (e.g., *Anatomy of Hell* [2004], *9 Songs* [2005], *Shortbus* [2006], *Nymphomaniac* [2013], and *Stranger by the Lake* [2013]), which has helped undercut the common presumption that images of genital penetration are automatically "pornographic" and lacking in artistic value. Hence, I would argue that these symptoms of porno chic's second wave have allowed "cultural omnivores"[26] to begin cautiously reevaluating the aesthetic and historical worth of adult films at the other side of the cultural taste spectrum from art cinema, especially in light of our current historical distance from the first porno-chic wave three or four decades ago.

Indeed, a specialist demand for these residual films has grown over the past two decades, concurrent with an emergent broader reappraisal of early adult films, filmmakers, and performers. Whether appearing under adjectives like "classic," "retro," or "vintage," a niche market for pornography made between roughly the 1890s and late 1980s has appeared on various websites and in video retail catalogues, and wider attention to such films has appeared in many realms of popular culture. To some extent, this is a symptom of cultish revival, not unlike the renewed hipness attending many cultural phenomena that have been out of the cultural mainstream for several decades, with the seemingly dated qualities of such films becoming upheld as a source of retro-cool for cultural slummers. Such anachronistic or tactile signifiers of pastness call back to the days when adult cinema seemed more "rebellious" because of its semi-licit status as an excitingly naughty sexual commodity only then coming to cultural visibility as a signifier of so-called sexual revolution.

Yet, this latter-day revivalism also appears invested in a more earnest memorialization of an increasingly passing generation of sexual "pioneers." Since merely the writing of this book began, for example, old age or ill health have claimed famed pin-up photographer Bunny Yeager; burlesque star Blaze Starr; influential adult filmmakers like Mac Ahlberg, Lasse Braun, Jess Franco, David F. Friedman, Martin J. Hodas, Fred J. Lincoln, Harry Novak, Candida Royalle, Joe Sarno, and Kirdy Stevens; soft-core stars Pat Barrington and Sylvia Kristel; 1970s–1980s hard-core stars like Marilyn Chambers, Jamie Gillis, Gloria Leonard, John Leslie, Harry Reems, and Jack Wrangler; and tireless genre promoters like Al Goldstein and Mike Vraney. In another sort of "death," even the once-venerable *Playboy* announced in October 2015 that it would stop publishing nude photos in its pages, citing too much competition from online pornography. Meanwhile, memoirs by past porn stars have joined glossy coffee-table books reproducing adult film posters and photo sets. A spate of recent documentaries and biopics has also appeared in the years since Paul Thomas Anderson's indie hit *Boogie Nights* (1997) fictionalized various true stories from the excesses of the 1970s–1980s porn industry.[27] Within the adult industry itself, remakes like *Misty Beethoven: The Musical!* (2004), *The New Devil in Miss Jones* (2005), and *The New Behind the Green Door* (2013) have paid homage to famed genre classics, while 1980s actor-turned-director Tom Byron's *Seasoned Players* series (2007–2012) lured past stars like Kelly Nichols, Ginger Lynn, and Amber Lynn out of retirement. Blogs, fansites, and podcasts devoted to serious consideration of early adult films have also appeared as grassroots sources of cultural remembrance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for my purposes, the films themselves have

gained accessibility in remediated forms—whether restored and rereleased on DVD and Blu-ray, or made readily available for streaming or download-on-demand from online paysites and free tube sites.

These repurposed media depictions of explicit sexuality have thereby gained their apparent significance by capturing the early historical development of the first porno-chic era—a broad period seemingly separated from our second and ongoing porno-chic era by the 1980s–1990s political backlash that pornography experienced. Indeed, the so-called "Golden Age of Porn" in the United States was roughly bookended by two politically motivated government reports. The first, the Report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970), found no evidence linking porn consumption and violent behavior, and recommended lifting federal prohibitions on the availability of sexually explicit material to adults. (Not expecting to receive such panic-free findings, President Nixon and Congress quickly rejected the report.) The second report, from Attorney General Edwin Meese's Commission on Pornography (1986), marked a return to moral panic over porn's supposedly harmful social effects—a less surprising result from a document shaped by Reagan-era religious fundamentalists and antiporn feminists. As materials produced before and during this temporary détente, vintage cinematic forms thus continue to resonate today—both culturally and erotically—as important influences upon the mainstreaming of porn that we are again experiencing with renewed vigor.

Yet, it is difficult to unproblematically reclaim these films as part of our culture's "sexual heritage." After all, if so many of these early films were made for a presumed white, hetero-male viewership, then whose heritage is really being upheld and what are the larger implications of an attendant nostalgia for such texts? This is especially true when we consider that pornography cannot be said to offer transparent glimpses into an actual historical past, but rather, glimpses into the more nebulous realm of past sexual *fantasies* enacted through the indexical participation of flesh-and-blood performers. Although it is important not to automatically conflate political conservatism with nostalgia's privileging of an idealized past over a devalued present, we should remain cautiously attentive to the political connotations of such evaluative claims upon the past. Indeed, as McNair observes, the four decades since hard-core adult films first gained public visibility have actually coincided with declining incidences of sexual violence and the growing acceptance/equality of women, gays, and sexual minorities in those advanced capitalist societies where porn is least subject to censorship and most openly consumed. Despite the oft-apocalyptic rhetoric from antiporn groups with various ideological goals, "pornification" has accompanied—and, in some ways, even fueled—wider sexual liberalization, including feminism, gay liberation, and other progressive advances.[28]

Nevertheless, as Susanna Paasonen and Laura Saarenmaa note, popular historiography about early adult cinema still tends to reductively figure the relative "innocence" of earlier decades compared to present-day porn, focusing more on male pioneers' hedonistic rise and tragic fall, while relegating women and gay men's stories to secondary status. In films like *Bettie Page: Dark Angel* (2004) and *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005), for example, Page is depicted as a naïve Southern girl who only

becomes aware of her modeling's deeper implications (and consequently leaves the business) when photographer friend Irving Klaw is called to testify before a Senate investigation on pornography. Likewise, in *Boogie Nights* and both *Inside Deep Throat* (2005) and *Lovelace* (2013), fictional director Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) and his real-life analogue Gerard Damiano are figured as wannabe artists whose ambitions were diluted by home video's unbridled profitability—despite the actual fact that earlier 35-mm porn films were no less economically motivated and that celluloid has proven no inherent guarantor of quality. (Although *Deep Throat* was itself little more than a crude sex comedy, as its director freely admitted, I would point out that Damiano's later, more self-consciously artistic films like *The Story of Joanna* [1975], *Odyssey: The Ultimate Trip* [1977], and *Skin-Flicks* [1978] are often overlooked in such historiographic accounts, since his more sophisticated films would complicate these latter-day portrayals of Damiano as an obliviously overreaching hack who merely *thought* himself an artist.) As Paasonen and Saarenmaa suggest, the supposed "quality" of 1970s hard-core narrative features has only retrospectively come into view with the shift to more episodic, shot-on-video productions, although the pre- and post-1970s history of pornographic films proves that 35-mm narrative features are more of a historical exception than a teleological peak in aesthetic progression[29]—as does the fact that even during the Golden Age of 35-mm hard-core narrative features, a large market for 8- and 16-mm loops continued to thrive (consisting of short vignettes or plotless numbers, and featuring many of the same performers as 35-mm features), retailed for home use, incrementally viewed in peep booths, or repurposed within a flimsy framing device to form feature-length "loop carrier" films.

This selective remembrance and revaluation of 35-mm narrative features is echoed in the retrospective discourse promulgated by 1970s–1980s adult film actors to justify their own historical value. These actors often assert that not only did performers have better material to work with in the pre-video/pre-Internet days, but that the smaller group of repeat performers in the early days was more talented, memorable, and rebellious before Viagra and home video cameras allowed any rank amateur to become a porn performer, and before legal precedents like *California v. Freeman* (1988) ruled that the shooting of hard-core films did not constitute illegal acts of pandering and prostitution.[30] "There was a certain amount of talent that would compel a consumer to want to sit there and watch something because there was no fast-forward back then," says one former actor. "Now you can't even think about porno without thinking about fast-forward, which is really a testimonial for why people didn't want to do videos."[31] Of course, such discourses downplay the many hundreds of anonymous, interchangeable performers during the Golden Age who did not become recognizable stars, much as they ignore the more diverse and interactive means that present-day porn stars use to actively build fan bases without the luxury of theatrical distribution for their work. These selective remembrances thereby find various ways to assert nostalgia for the past, despite the historical complexities that can—and, in many respects, *should*—nuance less critical (re)appraisals of adult cinema's past emergence.

As early erotic forms on the cusp of such changes, then, vintage porn represents the sleazy residue of cultural transition between a deeply conservative, prefeminist past

and our more "enlightened" but virulently consumerist present, which is one reason why its renewed "chicness" has not wholly upended its stigmatization on both political and aesthetic grounds. As important as these cinematic representations may have been in visually figuring liberalized sexual attitudes, they still remain open to latter-day charges of regressive gender politics and artistic worthlessness, despite the various reclamation strategies that I will outline in the coming pages. Are these now-niche-interest films celebrated today as one-time exemplars of coming sexual liberalization or as a conservative past's "last hurrah" before the groundswell of second-wave feminism and gay liberation opened the traditionally hetero-male realm of pornography to the influence of much more diverse viewerships—or perhaps both? These are the questions the following chapters aim to address, particularly around the complex political uses of taste, historicity, gender, and sexuality.

This book is therefore a modest companion piece to my previous study, *Grindhouse Nostalgia*, which argued that nostalgia arises as a structure of feeling that both threatens and bolsters subculturally valued notions of exclusivity and connoisseurship when once-niche texts become more widely accessible on emergent video formats. Permitting both ironic and sincere revaluations of yesteryear's cheap and sleazy genre films, nostalgia echoes and fuels not only the tongue-in-cheek appreciation of a given film's humorous datedness, but also more earnest appreciation of its status as a historical object that can continue to successfully thrill viewers today. This emphasis on the visible historicity of such films is exemplified by fans' nostalgic fetishization of period-era marketing strategies and the material signs of filmic degradation which signal both the surviving text's past history of use and present cultural neglect.[32]

Much as I argued in that book that the contemporary taste politics of selective remembrance are persistently undergirded by class and gender inequalities, *Disposable Passions* explores the ideologies at play in the *eroticization* of nostalgia, especially among a fandom that has become more visible with the recent coalescence of a niche market for vintage adult films. Since this eroticization of a positively evaluated sense of pastness is entangled with subcultural discourses about the supposed authenticity and exclusivity of more obscure texts, the growing market for vintage porn can therefore be seen as a reaction against the apparent mainstreaming of adults-only materials during our second wave of porno chic—even as the easier cultural accessibility of such materials is also inseparable from the very modes of technological change and remediation (such as online discussion forums and streaming video) endemic to that second wave. Moreover, the temporal distance between our present moment and the historical origins of vintage adult films may lend them a retrospective air of quaintness that could seemingly soften their more politically problematic dimensions. Yet, they remain unlikely to be consumed through a wholly ironic lens that might simply render their potentially reactionary qualities progressive, instead retaining politically regressive implications through their more straight-faced reception as pornographically stimulating objects.

On one hand, the elements of heterosexual male fantasy in most vintage pornographic films may inspire ironic reactions to the silliness or datedness of their clichéd narrative cues—a là the ironic celebration of cinematic failure, famously

described by Jeffrey Sconce as a common means of reading so-called "paracinema"[33]—while the bewildering effect of seeing documentary evidence of sexual acts performed in past time periods not often associated with sexual explicitness can evoke ironic distance as well. On the other hand, this same historical indexicality can still be read "straight" (pun intended) as autoerotically stimulating material even today, as can the bawdy narratives playing into hetero-male fantasies. As Susanna Paasonen notes, vintage porn may inspire camp's sense of ironic/aesthetic distance, but the visceral resonance of certain images upon the fan's body also bridges this distance, even as camp may problematically provide an ironic cover that "protects pornography from critical considerations in its insistence on the nonserious, the stylized, and the exaggerated."[34] Nathan Scott Epley, for example, argues that hip (sub)cultural preferences for retro-chic goods allow past sexist imagery like pin-ups to be consumed as ironically cool—not *despite* that imagery's politically regressive implications, but *because* of them (Figure I.2). A winking guise of knowing irony allows hetero-male consumers to enjoy unreconstructed erotic pleasures that have fallen out of cultural favor in feminism's wake, while simultaneously disavowing the conservative implications of such pleasures through a posture of elitist (or "reverse-elitist," as is typical of subcultural capital) distinction often rooted in a rejection of the supposedly "feminized" cultural mainstream.[35] Such reception possibilities remain central to this book's overall focus on the taste politics that subtend vintage pornography's fraught relationship with unequal histories of gender and sexuality.

Porn fandom and the vintage connoisseur

Even amid the rise of pornography studies, the question of porn *fandom*, as opposed to more casual or fleeting forms of porn consumption, remains a relatively neglected area of inquiry, and thus deserves a few prefatory words to better establish the stakes of this study. This lacuna can be partly explained by the fact that studies of porn fandom could seemingly play into outdated, negative stereotypes of media fans as lone obsessives, sexual deviants, or worse—all those stereotypes that the pioneering work of scholars like Henry Jenkins has helped counter.[36] Moreover, antipornography feminists have long rehearsed the unproven argument that repeated or prolonged exposure to pornography encourages sexual violence against women. Despite ethnographic research showing that porn use does not correlate with negative attitudes toward women (unlike, say, the far more telling correlation between religious belief and misogyny),[37] it is little wonder that fan studies have been reluctant to potentially play into such stereotypes by exploring how fans might actively incorporate porn consumption into their lived identities. On the flip side of this victimization argument, fears about porn addiction and other supposed media effects echo widespread "anxieties about the commodification of sex and technology,"[38] not unlike the erroneous suggestion that all devoted media fans are, on some level, passive victims of a mass-mediated culture, engaging in little more than masturbatory fantasies that attempt to "compensate for a lack of intimacy, community, and identity."[39]

Figure I.2 Cover of Scott Aaron Stine's short-lived adult film fanzine *Filthy Habits: Hardcore & Sexploitation Fare from the 1960s & 1970s* (2002–2003), which primarily espouses paracinematic discourses of "bad taste" and masculinist hipness. Courtesy of Scott Aaron Stine.

In this sense, the porn fan imagined as perpetually self-absent in an uncritical masturbatory haze—supposedly irrational, lacking restraint, and losing distinctions between fantasy and reality—is perhaps too close to other negative stereotypes of fandom

in general to receive much detailed scholarly analysis, while also difficult to reconcile with more academically valorized images of the contemporary fan interactively using technology to share information and content (including his/her sexual preferences) through discussion boards, comment logs, and social networking platforms.[40] I would suggest that this reticence to address the porn consumer as fan also derives from an unresolved methodological struggle within pornography studies between, on the one hand, resisting antiporn activists' behaviorist arguments about supposed media effects and, on the other hand, analyzing media texts as ideologically interpellating the viewing subject. As Jane Gaines observes, for example, Michel Foucault's oft-cited concept of the "implantation of perversions" via socially constructed discourse about sexuality is very useful in describing pornography's ability to teach viewers what and how to desire, but despite its emphasis on the social construction of desires and bodies, this theory could be seen as implying that sexualized media inevitably manipulate viewers' bodies and minds, regardless of the vagaries of reception.[41] No wonder, then, that the resolutely antibehaviorist field of fan studies has been slow to differentiate porn fandom from more generalized forms of porn consumption.

To speak of an average porn user/viewer/spectator is one thing—but to speak specifically of a porn *fan* is a somewhat different matter, although these categories may overlap in practice. Whereas only a minority of porn consumers may purchase and/or consume large quantities of sexually explicit material on a regular basis, the porn fan in general need not fit this picture. Much as one can identify as a fan of a certain genre, text, or performer without necessarily consuming that material on a daily or even weekly basis, the porn fan may not regularly watch a statistically "excessive" amount of porn in comparison to the average porn user. Rather than identifying fans according to the *amount* consumed (although that quantitative measure may certainly be a factor), the *mode* of porn consumption is more important to consider here, since fandom often involves the qualitative exercise of discriminating tastes. Regardless of the degree to which vintage porn fans may still use these films for masturbation, these fans arguably differ from more casual porn users in their degree of investment with specific texts whose historicity can stimulate both body and mind. Unlike the stereotype of the insatiable porn addict, the porn fan—and especially the vintage porn connoisseur, given vintage texts' repute as "rare," "unique," or "endangered" documents—may collect specific types of materials from certain directors, performers, or time periods, often privileging these materials for their ability to stimulate one's own contingent erotic predilections, but not altogether reducing these materials to either masturbatory aids or sources of historically chauvinistic mockery.

Although a minority contingent of contemporary porn fans participate in traditionally subcultural activities such as attending adult entertainment conventions or live appearances by famous performers, porn fandom tends to be a far more diffuse and solitary form of fandom than subcultural models generally allow. Due to its lingering stigmatization and connotations of shamefulness, pornography is an area of popular media consumption where we find viewers especially reluctant to either self-identify as "fans" or to engage in reciprocal exchanges with fellow fans. It represents a salient example of how contemporary fandom can be rooted

as much (if not more so) in the *intrapersonal* pleasures of individual consumption than *interpersonal* pleasures.[42] As Simon Lindgren's analysis of online discussion forums illustrates, for example, fan discourse about contemporary hard-core materials focuses predominantly on the (largely male) viewer's own pleasure, such as egocentric accounts of arousal and masturbation, secondarily followed by almost as many references to the homosocial viewing community as to the (female) performers on-screen. More traditional fan discourses devoted to collecting, reviewing, and ranking content are present, but—I would underline—are of far less prevalence in fandom of *contemporary* porn that lacks the historical distance of *vintage* texts.[43] Although I would not consider *Disposable Passions* to be a work of fan studies per se, then, the figure of the fan as viewer/collector nevertheless lingers in the background throughout this book, with his/her interpretive labor and market demand fueling this study's broader questions about the historical objects and narratives that emerge from the collectability of ephemeral niche-interest texts.

Hence, I opened this introduction with Tim Lucas's novel *Throat Sprockets* not only because it discusses adult films as something more earnestly redeemable than fodder for autoeroticism, but also because Lucas so vividly captures the cultism that, as I discuss in Chapter 1, blurs the lines between fandom and cinephilia in its focus on the sensuous materiality of the moving image. Investigating the provenance of the titular film—the age-reddened print lacking proper credits or even a copyright date—becomes an all-consuming passion that soon destroys the narrator's marriage, sending him into an underground subculture of bootleg video collectors. Although the novel thus plays into the stereotype of the fan as deviant obsessive, his narrator aptly describes how the visual degeneration of his bootleg VHS tape becomes a record of prior use by a wider imagined fan audience: "In essence what I had paid for was the evidence of the cassette's poor image resolution, which persuasively testified to the fact that I wasn't the only collector with an interest in this particular film." He finally realizes, with very mixed emotions, how "[t]he movie that I had always considered mine alone had never truly been mine alone."[44] Such comments about the uneasy relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal pleasures gain autobiographical resonance from Lucas's own background as the founding editor/publisher of *Video Watchdog*, one of the most prominent fan magazines dedicated to serious appreciation of cult genre cinema, including adult films like 1960s–1970s sexploitation. Much as his fictional narrator laments the loss of subcultural exclusivity, even as he remains fascinated by the text's analog decay (whether evinced on celluloid or magnetic tape), Lucas's own video-fueled research demonstrates how the reevaluation of various forms of adult cinema has often fallen to fan cultures due to wider cultural neglect.

And yet, unlike Lucas's fan narrator, I cannot deny the carnal pleasures of studying these texts, since I am as subject to arousal, boredom, disgust, and all of pornography's other occurrent affective states as anyone who might view such material. Although feminist critics have sometimes accused heterosexual male academics of ulterior motives in studying pornography, it is important to heed Linda Williams's observation that if "pornography is not the monolithic expression of phallic misogyny that it has been stigmatized as being, then there is good reason even for heterosexual men to

explore the pleasures of the genre without having to admit too many *mea culpas*."[45] When I first began writing an early version of what became this book's first chapter, early-twentieth-century stag films still struck me as almost surreally strange glimpses into a long-buried sexual past—fascinating as historical documents, but scarcely very erotic on a personal level. As the writing proceeded, however, Foucault's "implantation of perversions" seemed vindicated, for increased exposure to pornographic discourse that framed *how* I might find these surviving images erotic did heighten their visceral resonance with me—albeit without causing me to surrender my critical acumen or self-awareness that one's viewing pleasures are often more fluidly shifting than one's publicly claimed sexual identity. After all, as Paasonen argues, "a scholar studying porn who is never aroused by it is as anomalous and misplaced a creature as a researcher studying comedy who is never moved to laughter or a scholar working on horror who fails to jump or flinch."[46] Remaining somehow open to porn's affectivity thus remains important for scholars interested in combating those antiporn critics who either (a) have not seen a representative enough sample of pornographic material to account for its diverse audiences and uses; or (b) have seen enough porn to inadvertently disprove their own behaviorist arguments about its supposedly detrimental effects upon the viewer.

One might reasonably say, then, that heterosexual (but not heteronormative) men are among the best prepared to study forms of pornography historically targeted at a hetero-male viewership—provided they remain self-reflexively critical about the political implications of their potential pleasures—since they are most likely to avoid "misreading" the genre's intended effects. Of course, the wonderful world of reception studies demonstrates that differing readings are just as valid and useful practices to explore—particularly as we will see in the case of vintage porn imagery that has circulated beyond its originally intended viewership—and these divergent readings are not necessarily less stimulating than intended ones. But even if nonmale and queer audiences have taken up such films in ways that may be more politically recuperable today, the continuing resonance of vintage pornography's originally intended appeals for present-day hetero-male viewers remains a thornier question with important implications for these films' archival afterlives. For, as much as pornography's critics may want to ignore or bury these older texts (or at least downplay them in favor of more contemporary alternative pornographies), such cultural neglect merely spurs greater fetishization of these materials among their continuing viewership.

Whereas the film historian can safely crouch behind primary archival research to offer seemingly value-neutral, "just-the-facts" assessments of these films (though historical and archival practice remains a profoundly political activity, far from the ersatz neutrality after which some historians may style their findings), my focus on the distinctly *affective* uses of surviving ephemera allows me to be honest about my own ability as a researcher to be aroused (and bored, disgusted, etc.) by vintage pornographic materials, without surrendering the need to be self-reflexive about my interpellation as the demographically (if not historically) intended viewer of such films. Indeed, the fact that such images still have a viscerally affective impact upon viewers within and beyond the academy, and are not merely consumable as harmless kitsch, demonstrates