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Microhistories and Materiality in Adult Film History, or the Case of *Erotic Salad*

by ELENA GORFINKEL

To my surprise, I discovered how important to me were, unknowingly, books I had never read, events and persons I did not know had existed. —Carlo Ginzburg

Writing more than fifteen years ago, Eric Schaefer detailed the state of the study of adult cinema in film studies in relation to the place of sex films in archives.¹ Many of the conditions he described exist largely unchanged. Master copies and source materials of adult films are not housed in any single archive, nor are they necessarily located at designated film archives (the UCLA film archive being one specific exception). Many adult films have been lost, but those that remain are found across varied locations and sold by for-profit video distributors.² Whereas producers and studios have been less likely to bequeath their collections to academic institutions, private collections of commercially released material have made their way to archives more readily, especially gay adult films.³ It is not that adult film does not exist in archives; rather, it is collected, accessed, and framed a certain way, and thus assumes specific meanings. Adult films are rarely considered as cinema in their own right; they are treated as emblematic of their sexual content and their lowly status, as defined by public perception.

More recently established distributors such as Vinegar Syndrome, and private entities and collections such as the American Genre Film Archive, have made efforts to collect, restore, and circulate sex films on video. In many ways the fan and collector video market has long provided the preconditions for research on adult film and has shaped the kinds of questions and histories pursued. But a comprehensive

- 1 Eric Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists and Dirty Movies," *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.
- 2 In addition to archives designated for film collections, adult films can frequently be found at sexuality archives, most prominently at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, Bloomington; in the video collection of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, California; and in LGBTQ archives, such as the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives and the ONE Archives, among many others.
- 3 Lucas Hilderbrand, "Historical Fantasies: Gay Porn in the Archives," *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 327–348.

non-commercially driven archive of sex cinema is a pipe dream for most adult film historians. This fact sits in stark contrast to another incontrovertible reality: the sheer vastness and multiplicity of adult film and media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a gargantuan volume of stuff that includes discarded analog media as well as digital material. Print-based and production records of historical adult film practices, when they exist, are spotty or held by private individuals—if they have even been saved at all—and are difficult to parse. More commonly they are not available or are poorly recorded. Box-office figures and industrial and economic details must be pieced together ad hoc through various industry trade sources, such as *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *Independent Film Journal*. Such approaches also presume accurate reporting of grosses by exhibitors.

This archival landscape presents many challenges. One difficulty is balancing local histories and case studies with broader trends and practices. As with all film history, adult films raise the question of the relationship between canonical or representative works and less typical, singular, or “anomalous” cases. But the persistently “disreputable” nature of adult material only catalyzes what can be said to count as a viable object of study. The idiosyncratic, disorderly, uneven nature of the adult film archive as a body of films—simultaneously opaque and voluminous—necessitates different strategies for scholarship. Adult film historians have to contend with how to choose a suitable object, one that might map practices most comprehensively. One of the processes of legitimation for adult film history has been evidenced in macroscale studies that look at adult films not at the level of individual text but as industry, movement, genre, and mode of production.⁴ But in thinking about individual films that make up this broader history, do we choose and analyze typical or exceptional cases?

This question emerges from my research on sexploitation cinema—nonexplicit, feature-length sex films made in the decade before hard-core porn’s public ascendance, and which featured female nudity and salacious situations. In the book that emerged from this research, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s*, I argue that sexploitation films foregrounded spectatorship as the mode’s animating problem in a period in which cinema had not yet gone “all the way.” At the time, I was attempting to ascertain the workings of a mode of production with a specific shape and period—US films made between roughly 1960 and 1972. False leads and dead ends were common. Smaller cases felt more like footnotes or divergences from the “main story” of more typical practices. My goal was to assert the legibility of a larger-scaled unit—of the 1960s sex film as mode of film practice—and to make it visible as cinema in its own right. There also did not seem to be a place for expanded analyses of lingering exceptions. As a graduate student at the time holding varied adjunct gigs, and with no more teaching assistantship funding available, I felt that such excursions into minutiae would be perceived as indulgent or not “major” enough to be valued by the field, especially if such research was to secure the legitimacy of my own scholarship.

4 See, for example, Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Peter Allilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

One such anomalous object illuminates the vital importance of doing and supporting microhistory in adult film and media history, as its singularity as a crossover between underground and sexploitation cinema asserts the valuing of in-depth analyses of individual sex films. In the early 2000s, I encountered a personal website for the film *Erotic Salad*, a sex film directed by Robert Robert (1969), whose real name I later learned was Robert Ringenberger.⁵ Shot primarily in 1967, *Erotic Salad* was a one-off film, made by the artist as a sendup of the sexploitation and skin flicks playing then in Times Square. The film gives perspective on the ways that geographically proximate but artistically distinct areas of cultural practice—specifically avant-garde or underground filmmaking, the downtown scene, and sexploitation production—momentarily intersected and overlapped around sexual expressivity.

Ringenberger had studied visual art at Pratt University and in his twenties worked as a freelance graphic designer while living in New York City's SoHo. A habitué of the music and art scenes, he hung out at the Fillmore East and the Old Polish Meeting Hall, where an acquaintance, Fluxus artist Al Hansen, would stage happenings and performances. Ringenberger was keen on the rising star of Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground; he also had an interest in animation.

Erotic Salad's narrative is structured around the fantasy life of Martin (Danny Landau), a wheelchair-bound photo hobbyist and aspiring peeping tom, who is henpecked by his wife. The film departs, Walter Mitty-style, into his fantasies, as Martin becomes the mod, hip fetish photographer “Martin Kleshay” (“ cliché”). The film alternates between banal domestic squabbling, Martin's wife's quandaries of sexual dissatisfaction, and the fantasy world where Kleshay photographs nude models. While “peeping for his art,” he records an illicit tryst that leads to a mafia shakedown. Scenes of nude women posing and bohemian pot parties draw on the standard tropes of sexploitation sensationalism. Fantasy and reality collide as Martin, now the browbeaten schmuck, discovers his wife in a tryst with an insurance salesman at an orgy. In its final segment the film shifts from black and white to color, as Martin performs onstage in front of a squad of naked men and women, camping for the camera in drag, with feather boa and velvet camisole. The film ends in a diffusion of boundaries between queer and straight, male and female, as intercut images of androgynous, futuristic-glam actors flicker in pink hue across the screen. A fevered Martin/Kleshay succumbs to group rapture as the nude performers engulf him. The end credits roll in black and white with Kleshay's secretary (Patti D'Arbanville), a cool young blonde with sunglasses on, saucily chewing gum and answering the phone while gazing at the camera.

Ringenberger had difficulty placing ads for nude models in the *Village Voice*, so he ended up casting mainly amateurs—friends and artists who had never acted professionally but were part of the downtown scene. The film also featured the actor and soon-to-be Factory grandee D'Arbanville, a SoHo neighbor of the filmmaker, in her first commercial film role, at age fifteen. Only one actor, Landau, was a professional and was acting in *Hair* on Broadway. Ringenberger borrowed a 35mm camera on

5 The *Erotic Salad* website has since expired, although some trace of it remains on a cached Internet Archive site, at <http://archive.is/oUQJZ>. The website was created by Ringenberger's friend Gary Schide, who lived in Maine and passed away in 2013. The subsequent information on this film and its production is derived from the author's interview with Ringenberger, conducted in July 2002 in his Greenwich Village apartment in New York City.

weekends from an exchange. Sound cameras were scarce on weekends, so all was shot without sound, with dialogue added in postproduction—a common practice of low-budget sexploitation films.

Needing funding to finish the film, Ringenberger approached theater owner and distributor Chelly Wilson, who was recommended by a friend from the downtown music scene. Wilson owned a number of skin-flick theaters in Midtown, including the Cameo and the Avon, and was known to invest in films. Wilson asked Ringenberger to add additional “anything goes” footage: more sexual content. (The film’s title was also her invention.) Wilson saw him as a potential moneymaker, a young person affiliated with the art world who—perhaps like Warhol, then coming off successes including *The Chelsea Girls* (1966)—might bring a new, hipper, younger audience to the sex film. Ringenberger added the color footage of his all-nude cast frolicking at the Fillmore East. Landau improvised the drag performance, reappearing in costume while filming went on. Ringenberger had hoped to include an Al Hansen performance in which the artist wrapped his head in masking tape, but given the timing of the filming, it did not work out. The final cut of the film, with added nude footage, was exhibited for two weeks at Wilson’s Cameo Theater in 1969, and there a month later for another two weeks, without much success. Wilson also attempted to show the film to a “straight” audience at the Cinema One Theater, a leading art-house theater in the 1960s, on 59th Street and Third Avenue, hoping that the film would attain highbrow cultural cachet; Ringenberger recalled that she was “laughed out the door.”

The film mocked many of the conventions and scenarios of the sex film, from a youthful, ironic perspective. In general, the middle-aged makers of sexploitation films treated youth culture and young bodies with some circumspection, if also with a desirous gaze. Perhaps more than the sex film, *Erotic Salad* is inscribed with a familiarity with the aesthetic tropes and gestures of the New York underground and art scenes. A scene of a dancing woman posing for Kleshay is dynamized by slide projections being cast on top of her, likely influenced by Ringenberger’s encounters with expanded cinema and Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable. Another scene exhibits a naked woman getting into a bathtub filled with raw meat. As the water runs, she rubs her body as if with a sponge with various hunks of meat—a beef liver, a cow tongue, a whole chicken. The permeation of ideas from the world of downtown performance is a notable element of the film’s pastiche; Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964) is a strong reference point, in its employment of meat andotics in a live group performance. In several sequences, actors eat apples and celery as they talk, a device to mask the postsync sound additions and ease the addition of dialogue. Yet the eating becomes an aesthetic element that muddles the meanings of consumption in its erotic and alimentary varieties, also evoking strategies from avant-garde performance and underground film. Ringenberger also expressed admiration for Warhol’s minimal works such as *Eat* (1963)—in which Robert Indiana eats a mushroom in extended duration—which he saw during a Velvet Underground performance.

The film likely floundered at the box office because of its transit between worlds that were illegible to each other, even though these were precisely the reasons that Wilson was initially interested in the project. The film’s gambit of needling, if not deflating, the premises of sexual spectacle probably led to the film’s poor reception;

it also earned Wilson's ire, as she had bought the film outright from Ringenberger for \$3,000. Ringenberger screened the film once more for a weekend at the Bleecker Street Theater in 1970, sans promotion; it was not shown again. The filmmaker was able to get a 16mm reduction print for his own safekeeping, and this is the print from which in the early 2000s he made VHS cassettes. As a result of legal and copyright issues, the film did not circulate beyond this attempt at revival, in part because of lost evidence of signed performance releases from the actors. Additionally, Ringenberger worried that D'Arbanville and her lawyers would not want her name associated with it.

What might be drawn as the lesson of this unknown film? Looking back on my reluctance to use this work in my project on sexploitation, my regret now has a corrective dimension. It is clear in retrospect—perhaps because of the openness toward local and orphan histories as important sites for new film-historical research—that the example of *Erotic Salad*, however minor, makes visible the shared geographies of underground and sexploitation cinemas, even when the films themselves are difficult or even impossible to see. The film exposes a common phenomenon: the filmmakers who “dabbled” in making a sex film or two but did not continue on to viable careers in this cottage industry. It can illustrate how a less savvy player in the sexploitation world might have navigated the process of adult filmmaking while pursuing aesthetic aims that were at cross-purposes to the traditional sex film venue and audiences. *Erotic Salad* gives a view onto a broader environment of film experimentation in the context of a low-barrier-to-entry industry, as well as a consideration of networks of affiliation and circulation—and the limits to those networks—in works that did not necessarily succeed.

Erotic Salad's failure at the box office was not surprising given its position at the border of underground and sexploitation modes, as well as its filmmaker's inexperience and his lack of funds. Even if it does not necessarily illuminate the broader, generalizable practices of sexploitation cinema as a “legible unit,” in its specificity an object like *Erotic Salad* allows us to reflect on the outliers at the border of a mode of production, the conditions of sexploitation's economic viability, and the porous site of practice that was the “adult film” in the 1960s. This case also invites us to consider doing adult film history as a shared project that might intersect with other areas of scholarship—in this case, with experimental or avant-garde film history—and in a more collaborative spirit, in which leads, hunches, and small discoveries can be networked and allow for the building of a wider and more sustained inquiry into historical film practices in the independent adult film scene. Of late, scholars have been using personal blogs or social media like Facebook and Twitter to discuss such small cases.⁶ Nonacademic oral history sites also exist, such as the popular *Rialto Report*, which does not use scholarly methods or proper citation practices but presents itself as a journalistic “direct source” of primary research.⁷ Some inroads have also indeed been made in themed academic journal issues, such as the “Canon Fodder” issue of the journal *Porn Studies*,

6 Whitney Strub, *strublog: everything is archival* (blog), <https://strublog.wordpress.com>; *Notches: (re)marks on the history of sexuality* (blog), <http://notchesblog.com>; Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy, *Screening Sex* (blog), <https://screeningsex.com>.

7 *Rialto Report*, <http://www.therialtoreport.com>.

guest edited by David Church.⁸ Yet this “margin work” needs more institutional and disciplinary venues of support, particularly for younger scholars who are testing the viability of new research areas and directions.

Our discipline must find ways to value the practice of going down the proverbial rabbit hole in pursuing stray individuals, footnotes, and minor films. Microhistories are a seemingly paradoxical, yet deeply materialist way to rise to the challenge posed by the overwhelming volume of adult moving-image media that we are confronted with cataloging and historicizing. Such close case studies can open out onto larger questions of the materiality of the film object and the film experience. Further, the field must attend to how failures, unfinished works, amateur works, and never-produced and illicit films are the majority of films that constitute the constellation we call *cinema* in its totality. If we strive to understand that totality, we need new ways of accounting for it. Consequently, the microhistorical allows a reexamination of the very matter of our methods and the nature of what “counts” as a viable object in film and media studies. *

Special thanks go to Lucas Hilderbrand for his insightful feedback on this essay and for years of conversation on sex, media, and archives.

8 David Church, ed., “Canon Fodder: Reappraising Adult Cinema’s Neglected Texts,” *Porn Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017).

The Adult Film History Project

by PETER ALILUNAS and DAN ERDMAN

Eventually, just about every adult film historian encounters a familiar, frustrating scenario. While conducting research, tantalizing traces of evidence—crucial contemporary press accounts, invaluable legal papers, or other primary documents—will come to light, only to vanish again, slipping through the historian’s fingers as if they never existed. Generally speaking, the adult film industries did not create conventional paper trails, nor did they embrace their own long-term legacies.¹ In almost all cases, the bits and pieces they did leave behind have not been preserved or archived with conventional methods.² The result for historians has been a methodologically complicated landscape defined by particular challenges. In this essay,

1 For more on the reasons why, see Eric Schaefer, “Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies,” *Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.

2 Prominent exceptions include the preservation done by Steven Morowitz of Distribpix, an early, prolific adult production outfit cofounded by his father, Arthur; and the efforts by Joe Rubin, cofounder of Vinegar Syndrome, to archive and preserve adult films and their legacies.