Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality

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> Pornography . . . is profoundly and paradoxically social. But even more than that, it's acutely historical. It's an archive of data about our history as a culture and our own individual histories—our formations as selves. . . . Pornography is a space in the social imagination as well as a media form.
>
> —Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*

THE FORTY YEARS BETWEEN 1960 and 2000 were among the most tumultuous decades in the history of gay male sexuality. For many gay men who came out in the period after the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, the seventies were a golden age of sexual freedom.[1] It was an era during which it became possible for American men to openly acknowledge their homosexuality and foster a sense of identity and community, and it also initiated a period of sexual experimentation.[2] The advent of AIDS in 1981 changed all that.

The emerging epidemic provoked debate and conflict over what aspects of the so-called gay lifestyle might have contributed to the pattern of immune deficiency among gay men. Many observers attributed the outbreak to sexual promiscuity, the frequent patronage of bathhouses and other public sex venues, along with the general availability of sexual activity in the urban centers of San Francisco and New York.[3] An enormous body of epidemiological literature, social scientific research, and cultural studies, as

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[1] Brad Gooch's novel *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) offers a portrait of the period.

[2] Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 3–15.

[3] Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Invention of Safer Sex: Vernacular Knowledge, Gay Politics, and HIV Prevention," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998–99): 10–14, 16–20.

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well as hundreds of memoirs and volumes of fiction documenting the sexual life of gay men, has identified patterns of sexual behavior, modes of sexual interaction, and the cultural norms and fantasies that shaped sexual conduct before the emergence of the AIDS epidemic.[4] In this article I would like to explore how pornographic films and video could also be considered as documents in the history of gay male sexuality.[5]

According to sociologist Martin Levine, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of the gay liberation movement in 1969, and the increased freedom of sexual expression all combined with the massive migration and concentration of gay men in the urban centers of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to fundamentally alter the forms (both social and sexual) of American gay men's lives.[6] The migration and increased visibility brought together a critical mass of gay men who could economically sustain the kinds of commercial leisure establishments (bars, bathhouses, sex clubs, porn theaters, vacation resorts, and dance clubs) that facilitated sexual expression and generated a thriving and permissive sexual subculture. Patrick Moore has argued that during the 1970s gay men adopted sex as a tool to develop "new models of sexual interaction." It was, he concluded, "an astonishing experiment in radically restructuring existing relationships, concepts of beauty and the use of sex as a revolutionary tool."[7] As a result, gay men had developed "a distinctive life in which the masculinized representation of beauty, sexual experimentation and drugs were central."[8] Moore likened gay men's use of "sex as the raw material for a social experiment" to experimental art. Amongst the artists, he included porn filmmaker Fred Halsted, impresario Bruce Mailman (owner of the famous disco club the Saint), and graphic artist and writer David Wojnarowicz. Moore also includes the Mineshaft in New York and the Catacombs in San Francisco, sex clubs and bars where transgressive and experimental sex took place.[9]

[4] For reviews of this literature, see Edward King, *Safety in Numbers: Safer Sex and Gay Men* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York: Dutton, 1997). For explorations of gay male writing on promiscuity, see Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Criticism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 237–71; and Ben Gove, *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). For a discussion of the political debates in the early days of the epidemic, see Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[5] For a discussion of the significance of increased sexual expression in popular culture and the media, see Jeffrey Escoffier, "Beefcake to Hardcore: Gay Pornography and the Sexual Revolution," and other essays in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. Eric Schaeffer (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 319–47.

[6] Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 10–29.

[7] Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 4.

[8] Ibid., 6.

[9] Ibid., 16–33.

Moore's thesis that gay men were engaged in radical sexual experimentation counters the negative view of the 1970s as a "shameful" episode that set the stage for the AIDS epidemic.[10] In his book on the photographic achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe, philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto adopted a position similar to Moore's.[11] Danto was deeply struck by the impact that participation in the gay male sexual subculture of the 1970s, which included sadomasochism and group sex, had on Mapplethorpe:

> It is the mark of fantasies that we return, obsessively and repetitively, to the same images and the same scenarios, over and over again. We do not for the most part live our fantasies out, and so they never evolve. But the form of life Mapplethorpe had entered had made of sex a public practice, and this enabled it to evolve in ways quite beyond the power of private fantasy to anticipate. Whatever one might think of it, sex was probably lived more creatively in those years when the barriers to its enactment had fallen than at any other time in history. It had become as public as a language.[12]

The arguments of Levine, Moore, and Danto were made within a historical context that implicitly assumed that whatever kind of sex took place *before* the 1970s was not as experimental, adventurous, or creative as that of the 1970s and, more explicitly, that *after* the 1970s gay men's sex was dramatically changed for the "worse" by HIV/AIDS. Danto, however, goes somewhat further than either Levine or Moore and makes two interrelated claims. The first is about the psychosocial impact of what he calls "sex as a public practice," and the second is that "sex was . . . lived more creatively in those times [i.e., the 1970s] . . . than any other time in history." These are two steps of a rather complicated psychohistorical argument in which "sex as a public practice" provides the practical and pedagogic basis for sex being lived creatively. Danto presumes that "sex as a public practice" is a historically specific condition of the period, especially for gay men, between 1969 and 1981. By public sex, I mean sex that takes place in front of others (in a group or in a public space) who are not necessarily in any sort of intimate relationship.[13] While neither Levine nor Moore explicitly assigns causal force to "sex as a public practice," it is clear from their books that they simply take it for granted that during the seventies there was an enormous

[10] Ibid., xxi–xxii. Two early pieces that treated the period as shameful are Bruce Bawer, "Sex Negative Me," *Advocate*, October 23, 1994, and Larry Kramer, "Sex and Sensibility," *Advocate*, May 27, 1997.

[11] Arthur Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7.

[12] Ibid., 8.

[13] For a discussion of the social psychological dynamics of different sized groups (dyads and more), see the classic essay by Georg Simmel, "Quantitative Aspects of the Group," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 87–179.

increase in uninhibited sexual expression among gay men—including sex in groups or in public.[14]

Sex as a public practice during the seventies is explicitly the topic of Joseph Lovett's 2006 documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s*.[15] The film explores the significance of promiscuous and casual sex in public in gay men's lives during the decade.[16] Focused on New York, *Gay Sex in the 70s* is constructed from "memory images" (a term popularized by the interwar German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer) of a dozen or so gay men who are survivors of the period and still alive in 2005 in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic.[17] Somewhat hyperbolically but in line with Danto's thesis, Lovett characterized the seventies as the "most libertine period that the Western world has ever seen since Rome." Supplemented by still photos, artifacts, and film clips from the porn movies of Jack Deveau and Peter de Rome, Lovett sets out to evoke the atmosphere of the period between June 1969 and June 1981, the period from the Stonewall riots, which initiated the American gay liberation movement, to the year that the disease later known as AIDS was first diagnosed. The film offers extensive documentation of Danto's thesis on the importance of sex as a public practice. It is both a documentation of the sexual freedom explored by the generation that had come of age in the era after Stonewall and a memorial to that same generation's devastating experience of the AIDS epidemic. It is precisely the possible role that public sex may have played during the AIDS epidemic that has obscured its historical significance.

This wave of uninhibited and adventurous sexual expression during the 1970s was also captured on film by a group of gay pornographic filmmakers based in New York. These filmmakers sought to document the underground sexual lifestyle that had emerged in the years before and immediately after Stonewall. Like the Italian neorealist filmmakers after World War II,[18] the queer realist filmmakers of New York created a synthesis of a documentary-like view (in this case focusing on the gay sexual subculture) and the more psychopolitical themes of sexual liberation. Filmmakers such as Jerry

[14] This is confirmed by ethnographic studies conducted during the 1970s. See, for example, Edward William Delph, *The Silent Community: Public Homosexual Encounters* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978).

[15] *Gay Sex in the 70s: A Steamy Romp*, directed by Joseph Lovett (2006; Wolfe Video). To view the film and find more information, go to the producer-director's website, LOVETT Stories+Strategies Video on Demand, accessed March 17, 2016, http://www.gaysexinthe70s.com/.

[16] Gove, *Cruising Culture,* 1–19.

[17] Kracauer explored the antagonistic relationship between emotion-laden *memory images* and the more reified photographic images in his essay "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47–63. See also Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 27, 31–32.

[18] Andre Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation," in *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:16–40.

Douglas (under the name of Doug Richards), Jack Deveau, Arch Brown, Peter de Rome, and Avery Willard (under the name Bruce King) shot their early hardcore movies in the style of *cinéma vérité*, using naturalistic techniques that originated in documentary filmmaking, with its stylized cinematic devices of editing and camera work and deliberately staged set-ups to capture the rough and gritty feel of New York City—I will call these filmmakers "homorealists" (see table 1). They were thus both pornographic movies and documentaries about the gay male sexual subculture.[19] Even Wakefield Poole's more fantasy-oriented film *Bijou* offered documentary-like slices of New York City life.[20] Many of the films were produced by either Jack Deveau's Hand-in-Hand Productions or PM Productions, the production wing of New York's leading porn theater, the Park-Miller. These films reveled in the post-Stonewall sexual subculture that had emerged amidst the seedy, rundown, and unused industrial spaces that supplied so many opportunities for uninterrupted sexual activity with multiple and unknown partners. They all made a point to show the streets and the landmarks of the city's sexual landscape. Every one of these movies set sex scenes in public spaces of the city. Some, like Arch Brown's *Pier Pieces,* actually were shot on the piers along the Hudson River, both Jerry Douglas (*The Back Row*) and Jack Deveau (*A Night at the Adonis*) shot group sex scenes in porn theater restrooms, and three of the films were set in bathhouses (*Bijou*, *The Voyeur*, and *Muscle Bound*).[21] Jerry Douglas's *The Back Row*, Peter de Rome's *Underground*, and Ian McGraw's *Subway* each had erotic scenes set in the subway system.[22] Jack Deveau's last film, *Times Square Strip*, was shot at the Gaiety, a famous Times Square strip club.[23] And all of them had sex scenes with three or more partners and ostensible strangers. They used actual locations where public sex took place. They showed the kind of sex that occurred in those locations. And they captured the staging of sexual roles and the silent gestural vocabulary that established communications between participants. These films demonstrate that pornographic photographic media can make a unique contribution to the history of sexuality.

[19] Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life: Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Press / Perseus, 2009), 89–116.

[20] *Bijou*, directed by Wakefield Poole (1972; Cathedral City, CA: Gorilla Factory Productions, remastered 2008).

[21] *Piers Groups*, directed by Arch Brown (1979; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, n.d.); *The Back Row*, directed by Jerry Douglas (as Doug Richards) (1972; West Hollywood, CA: Channel One Releasing, 2001); *The Night at the Adonis*, directed by Jack Deveau (1978; Images of the World / Bijou Video, n.d.); *The Voyeur*, directed by Avery Willard (as Bruce King) (1978; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, n.d.); and *Muscle Bound*, directed by Arch Brown (1978; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, n.d.).

[22] *Underground*, directed by Peter Rome (1973; Chicago: Images of the World / Bijou Video, n.d.); *The Subway*, directed by Ian McGraw (1980; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, 2008).

[23] *Times Square Strip*, directed by Jack Deveau (1982; Chicago: Images of the World / Bijou Video, n.d.).

Table 1. 1970s New York Homorealist Porn Films

Title	Release date	Director
The Back Row	1972	Jerry Douglas (as Doug Richards)
Left-Handed	1972	Jack Deveau
Bijou	1972	Wakefield Poole
Underground	1973	Peter de Rome
Wanted: Billy the Kid	1975	Jack Deveau
Hot House	1977	Jack Deveau
The Voyeur	1978	Avery Willard (as Bruce King)
A Night at the Adonis	1978	Jack Deveau
Muscle Bound	1978	Arch Brown
Pier Groups	1979	Arch Brown
The Subway	1980	Ian McGraw
Times Square Strip	1982	Jack Deveau

Sex, Historical Evidence, and Photographic Media

Historically, most of the physical evidence of sex disappears without a trace. Even the children left behind by heterosexual sex represent only a small proportion of all heterosexual sexual activity. Other historical traces show up in the form of demographic and epidemiological statistics such as birth rates or rates of sexually transmitted diseases. But these sources often convey little about the specificities of the sex itself, about either the sequence or the character of sex acts, positions and duration, or the psychological and social meaning of particular sex acts. And, apart from pornography—whether as prose, illustration, or photography—empirical documentation of homosexual sex is even scarcer.

While sex and sexuality are interrelated phenomena, we generally know much more about the history of *sexuality* than of *sex*. In an important essay, David Halperin posed the question whether *sex* even has a history or whether it is only a *natural fact*. "Unlike sex," he countered, "sexuality is a cultural production."[24] In his account, sexuality refers to the broader

[24] David Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?," *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (1989): 257–74.

orientations of sexual conduct, identities, and attitudes. But sex has a narrower meaning. It refers specifically to the corporeal practices of pleasure and desire that include various kinds of intercourse but also varieties of stimulation, penetration, and/or genital manipulation.

Much of our historical knowledge about sex is either ambiguous or obscured by lies or half-truths, existing in the form of open secrets and complicated evasions.[25] Many different kinds of historical sources enable us to understand the development of the cultural patterns that shape *sexuality*, but we have much less evidence about the kind of *sex* that took place within various cultural frameworks.[26] And indeed, most of our historical information about sex and sexual practices is circumstantial, derived from marriage manuals, volumes of "ars erotica," fiction, police reports, popular anthropology books on sexual curiosities, sexological research, and memoirs.[27] Pornographic drawings and writings can and do offer some more explicit information.[28]

I would like to argue that though sex is indeed a physical act, it still has a history, although a somewhat fraught one, to be sure. As physical acts, acts of sexual intercourse may appear to share common corporeal mechanics, but as Carole Vance has argued, "Physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods."[29] Indeed, while sex is shaped by social norms and personal attitudes, it is scripted and enacted within different historical or cultural contexts—in some periods, certain acts may be proscribed and in others widely practiced.[30] One need only compare the evidence of sex *after* the AIDS epidemic to

[25] Julian Carter, "Introduction: Theory, Methods, Praxis: The History of Sexuality and the Question of Evidence," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (2005): 1–9. Anna Clark notes that "historians of sexuality have to read between the lines for obscure hints" in order to identify sexual behavior. See *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

[26] Documenting sexual behavior in the past requires using existing sources with ingenuity. See Clare Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7–8.

[27] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I, an Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 53–73.

[28] For a classic exploration, see Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, translated by Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989). Gilles Neret's volumes of erotic art provide a rich archive of visual (nonphotographic) representations of sex: *Erotica: 17–18th Century: From Rembrandt to Fragonard* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001); and *Erotica 20th Century: From Rodin to Picasso* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001).

[29] Carole S. Vance, "Anthropology Rediscovers Sexuality: A Theoretical Comment," *Social Science and Medicine* 33, no. 8 (1991): 878.

[30] Writing the history of sexuality inevitably requires addressing difficult theoretical questions, as these authors point out: Stephen Garton, *Histories of Sexuality: Antiquity to Sexual Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–29; David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–23.

the many accounts of sex *before* the epidemic to realize that sex indeed has a history.[31] AIDS changed the social context of sex, and many gay men clearly felt that sex in general, after the advent of AIDS, offered potentially less pleasure and more danger than before. "Sex is just a completely different thing now," porn star and director Al Parker exclaimed. "The entire time you're having sex you're thinking: 'I'm having sex with everybody this person ever had sex with. I wonder what he's done and where he's been and if he's positive or negative. I wonder if I'm giving him anything.' If you can keep a hard-on while all this is going on in your head, you're better than I am."[32]

The AIDS epidemic appeared to be a crisis not only about gay male sexuality in general but also about the kinds of sex that gay men in particular engaged in—fellatio, fisting, anal intercourse, casual sex with strangers and with multiple partners. For example, anal intercourse, one of the most efficient means of transmitting HIV, was and still is considered by many gay men to be one of the most valued aspects of their sexuality—for both the pleasure it yields and the complicated meanings it may have. As Joseph Sonnabend, a prominent AIDS physician, once argued, "The rectum is a sexual organ, and it deserves the respect a penis gets and a vagina gets. Anal intercourse has been the central activity for gay men and some women for all of history. . . . We have to recognize what is hazardous, but at the same time, we shouldn't undermine an act that's important to celebrate."[33]

Pornography, because of its explicit representations of sexual acts, has long played a special role in historical studies of sexual behavior and attitudes. Erotic drawings and paintings, pornographic fiction, ethnographic travel accounts, and sexually candid memoirs have served as sources for *explicit* accounts of sex in different historical periods.[34] For example, K. J. Dover's study of Greek homosexuality relies extensively on the portrayal of sexual interactions on Greek vase paintings, which show that "every point on a scale of intimacy is fully represented."[35] *The Tears of Eros*, the culminating volume of Georges Bataille's life-long study of eroticism, includes everything from Paleolithic cave paintings to the work of modern French painter Baltus.[36] Another prominent example is Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century*

[31] Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 173–91.

[32] Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life,* 177–78; and Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sex, Safety and the Trauma of AIDS," "Safe" issue, *Women Studies Quarterly* 39, nos. 1 and 2 (2011): 129–38.

[33] Joseph Sonnabend, "Looking at AIDS in Totality: A Conversation," *New York Native*, October 7, 1985.

[34] Both Hans Licht in *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (1932; repr., London: Panther Books, 1969) and K. J. Dover in *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) make extensive use of both erotic literature and vase paintings in their discussions of sexuality in classical Greece.

[35] Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, "Problems, Sources and Methods," 4–17.

[36] Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 7, 22–53, 192–95.

England. In addition to drawing on medical studies of gynecology and sexually transmitted diseases, Marcus also explored the extensive collection of pornography amassed by Henry Spence Ashbee, nineteenth-century pornographic novels, and the remarkable, eleven-volume, anonymous sexual memoir, *My Secret Life*.[37] In *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914*, Lisa Z. Sigel turned to pornography as a means to explore the "sexual imaginary" of nineteenth-century England. For her, pornography of all varieties (writing, art, and photography) is like "a series of broken mirrors—that reflects, refracts and distorts a picture of sexuality" and shows a shift from the sexual representation as a political expression to one of consumer pleasures.[38] And Paul Deslandes has explored how erotic representations in gay porn magazines both reflected and validated the sexual lives of gay men during the seventies in Britain.[39]

However, photographic media offer a unique perspective. In Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic typology, photographic images are indexical signs, that is, signs whose referents actually produce the signs—such as a weather vane signifying the direction of the wind or a knock on the door signifying a visitor. In predigital photographic or cinematic media, images are indexical because they are produced by the action of light reflected from objects in front of a camera onto a chemical emulsion.[40] Thus photographic media, because of their indexical qualities, can show actual sexualized bodies and genitalia, whether in dramatized sexual tableaux (as in still photographs) or in performances in motion pictures. Because the photographic trace is recorded at a moment in time and then stored for future viewing, photographic images are *automatically always historical representations*.[41] In pioneering works, both Linda Williams and Thomas Waugh have drawn on

[37] See Anonymous, *My Secret Life*, vols. 1–11, introduction by G. Legman (New York: Grove Press, 1966); and Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966). Marcus's Freudian view of sexual repression and the reaction to it presumed a simple hydraulic model as the basis for a psychosocial interpretation of the history of sexuality. It was Marcus's book that provoked Michel Foucault to mount his scathing critique of the "repressive thesis" and thus effectively change forever how the history of sexuality might be written.

[38] Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 2.

[39] Paul R. Deslandes, "The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain," in *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Brian Lewis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[40] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotics*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 8–13, 141–42, 180–86. See also its application in film studies by Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 18–21, 133–35; Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 157–60.

[41] This point has been emphasized throughout the history of theoretical discussions of photography. See, for example, Kracauer, "Photography"; Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:14.

photographic media to explore sexuality, its history and representations. In her book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Williams explores the generic and rhetorical conditions that underlie the photographic and filmic representability of sex.[42] And in *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from the Beginning to Stonewall*, Waugh has written a sweeping history of gay male sexuality in Europe and North America, drawing on both vernacular and art photography, as well as early film. His work demonstrates the unique "political" role of photographic media—precisely *because* of its indexical character—in validating homoerotic sexual expression and the role it can have in establishing community networks.[43] More recently, Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* explores how contemporary condomless pornographic videos serve as ethnographic evidence about the barebacking subculture among gay men.[44]

For the pioneering film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, the historical significance of film rests on its ability to "record and reveal physical reality," giving film the capacity to record things normally unnoticed, the fortuitous, the fragmentary, as well as the ephemeral phenomena of daily life, as an indexical archive. [45] But Kracauer also always stressed the double status of photographic media as *material objects* that can be seen for their sensory surface (their indexicality, their realist images) and as *symbolic representations* that derive their power from the "evidential force" (as argued by both Roland Barthes and the historian of photography John Tagg) of the photographic media.[46] This analysis is particularly useful for pornographic films, where the line between fictional fantasies and cinematic realism is often blurred. Though they represent sexual fantasies, hardcore pornographic films depend upon what Roland Barthes called "reality effects" (real erections, real fucking, and real orgasms) to authenticate the sexual narratives that are their primary content. In that respect, they are somewhat like documentaries.[47]

[42] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[43] Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from the Beginning to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[44] Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[45] Miriam Bratu Hansen, introduction to *The Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, by Siegfried Kracauer (1960; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), ix; and Kracauer, *The Theory of Film*, 18–23, 46–74.

[46] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 77–92; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 4–7, 51–55, 103–10; John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 1–33.

[47] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 141–48. On reality effects in pornographic films, see Jeffrey Escoffier, "Scripting the Sex: Fantasy, Narratives and Scripts in Pornographic Films," in *The Sexual Self: The Construction of Sexual Scripts*, ed. Michael Kimmel (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007), 60–79.

Softcore porn, lacking erections, penetrative intercourse, and ejaculations, is but a pale simulation of sex. It is impossible to show actual sex without actual sex in cinematic pornography. Only hardcore pornographic cinema has the capacity to preserve live acts of sex. This reliance on reality effects is what distinguishes pornographic films, videos, and live Internet streaming from all other genres of pornography. And together with the penetration, the gritty reality of skin, genitalia, and mucous membranes enhances the realistic representation of sex. Yet it is also an ambiguous medium, which is why porn scholar Linda Williams warns Tim Dean about using e-documentary-style bareback pornographic video as a form of ethnography. "Pornography on film, video or on the Internet," she cautions, "is always two contradictory things at once: documents of sexual acts and fantasies spun around knowing the pleasure or pain of those acts."[48] This warning is equally applicable to treating pornographic photographic media as straightforward historical documents. Pornographic film is both a portal into a fantasy world in which so many things are not realistic at all (the mechanical ease of sex, the lack of resistance, the readiness of all the participants to do anything) and a document of "real sex."[49] And, in fact, the fantasies appear "more real" because they are caught on film and thus confirm the material viability of those fantasies for viewers.[50]

Porn films record sexual scripts (that is, the scripts prevailing in a culture) both among the viewers and the filmmakers. But like any other historical documents, porn films must be critically examined. It is important to date them correctly, determine authorship, clarify their point of view, and authenticate them.[51] In addition, editing can affect the meaning of a film sequence or obscure some of the conditions that make it useful as historical evidence. But the challenge of using a pornographic film as a historical source in the history of sexuality is distinguishing the fantasy script from what the film may reveal about society's prevailing sexual scripts. And in fact, being able to distinguish them is itself historically valuable information. As William Simon and John Gagnon point out, the "cultural scenarios" and "interpersonal scripts" that shape sexual behavior utilize the symbols, norms, and social cues that are prevalent at the time of the film's production.[52] Though the fantasy may be widely held at the period when the porn film was produced, it is important to authenticate the fantasy, and within it the realistic detail must

[48] Linda Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field," in *Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 41. On the use of porn in ethnography, see Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 97–144.

[49] Escoffier, "Scripting the Sex," 63–65.

[50] Ibid., 63–64.

[51] William Hughes, "The Evaluation of Film as Evidence," in *The Historian and Film*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 51–53.

[52] William Simon and John Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts: Permanence and Change," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15, no. 2 (1986): 104–6.

be distinguished from the genre's rhetorical conventions.[53] For example, the standard practice for the male to withdraw from his partner when he has an orgasm is a rhetorical convention of contemporary pornographic filmmaking, but it is not necessarily a standard sexual practice.[54]

Most pornography before the introduction of photographic media incorporated a significant degree of fantasy through fictional exaggeration or artistic license; it often included descriptions of long penises, ample breasts, or complicated couplings. Still photographs give a more realistic, but static, view of attractive bodies. Cinematic pornography initiated a new phase in the historiography of sex and sexuality. It was only after the invention of moving pictures in the 1890s that actual acts of sex could be recorded. While those early films were not intended as documentaries but to entertain and to stimulate arousal, they nevertheless are also historical documents of sexual behavior. But unlike the erotic drawings, paintings, phallic artifacts, and pornographic writing of the past, porn films have not been much used as a source in the writing of the history of sexuality.[55]

In pornographic films, the physical act of sex is embedded not only in grand cultural scenarios or the intrapsychic fantasies of the individual but also in the interactional scripts of everyday life: the gestures, bodily rhythms, sexual comportment, and social interactions—in sum, the physicality of the social fabric of daily life as it was lived at the time. Films can therefore be considered historical evidence of the sociohistorical process within which they enable fantasies or take on sexual meaning and exercise an erotic effect. That effect ultimately depends upon the discursive system within which pornographic films are viewed. It is here, through Kracauer's "realism of the ephemeral," that pornographic films offer some evidential force about sex and its interactional and historical context.[56]

Sex as a Public Practice: Memory, Photography, and Film

Gay writers, historians, and sociologists have shown that public sexual activity flourished among men long before the 1970s.[57] In a world where

[53] Escoffier, "Scripting the Sex," 63.

[54] Williams examines this rhetorical convention in *Hard Core*, 48–50, 93–119.

[55] For a recent example, see Dan Callwood, "Anxiety and Desire in France's Gay Pornographic Film Boom, 1974–1983," in this issue of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*.

[56] According to Kracauer, film's "realism of the ephemeral" allows us to see the typical physical and social patterns of everyday interactions. This was the special focus of Erving Goffman's work. See his "Interaction Order," in *The Goffman Reader*, ed. Charles Lemert and Ann Brannan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 233–61; see also the introduction in *Encountering the Everyday: An Introduction to the Sociologies of the Unnoticed*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–41.

[57] Citing only sources exploring the history of the United States, one could mention George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 179–227; Mark W. Turner, *Backward*

homosexual desire and conduct were stigmatized and criminalized, finding sexual partners was an important and often dangerous activity for gay men. Up until about thirty-five years ago, a vast majority of men who experienced homosexual desire did not grow up in families or communities that recognized homosexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality and thus were never socialized into social and cultural patterns appropriate for their sexuality. They grew up closeted and isolated in scattered families. Since homosexuality was a stigmatized and socially invisible form of sexual desire, it was also difficult to identify other men with similar desires. Cruising was the basic activity—it was the precondition for community among gay men—but successful cruising required decoding a complicated series of signs and at the same time the need to exploit the opportunity for anonymous and swift sexual encounters.[58] Over time, men in search of homosexual sex developed a network of places where they were able to manage the social and logistical contingencies of their stigmatized desires.[59] Many of these places were in fact, public spaces, that is, spaces that were accessible to strangers or other members of local communities.[60] Sex in those public spaces became a common occurrence.[61]

After Stonewall, public sex became even more public. The men interviewed in Lovett's *Gay Sex in the 70s* document that development, noting

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Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 99–161; John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (New York: Grove Press, 1978); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34–77; Allan Berube, "The History of Gay Bathhouses," in *Policing Public Sex*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 187–220; Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1–108; and Delph, *The Silent Community*, 35–108.

[58] See Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity," in *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 52–57. For a historical analysis, see Turner, *Backward Glances*, 7–14, 162–78.

[59] See Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 81–83; and Goffman, "Where the Action Is," in *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 141–270. See also the introduction to Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1–29.

[60] In *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), Erving Goffman explored the basic syntax of face-to-face public interactions; in *The Silent Community* Edward William Delph applied Goffman's framework to public sexual activity (see his discussion of Goffman at 35–42). See also the wonderful discussions of spatial practices and tactics in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xvii–xxiv, 115–30.

[61] For a discussion of these issues in the 1990s, see William Leap, introduction, and Michael C. Clatts, "Ethnographic Observations of Men Who Have Sex with Men in Public: Toward an Ecology of Sexual Action," both in *Public Sex, Gay Space*, ed. William Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1–21, 141–56. For a discussion of the government's regulation of public sex, see Marc E. Elovitz and P. J. Edwards, "The D.O.H. Papers: Regulating Public Sex in New York City," in Dangerous Bedfellows, *Policing Public Sex*, 295–316.

how the new openness of cruising quickly turned into sex—in doorways or the unused corners of subway stations or alleyways. Cruising also led more directly to sex in private spaces. As Rodger MacFarlane explains in *Gay Sex in the 70s*: "I have been walking down Madison Avenue on the way to my office before work, eight-thirty in the morning, and seen a man on the street, exchanged [match-book] covers and have sex during lunch in his office. . . . I have turned the corner at Christopher Street, smiled at somebody. He said, you got a minute; we went upstairs. Everybody I know has those kinds of stories from those days." Photographer Tom Bianchi also recalls: "The subways were always a sexual opportunity, even when they were crowded. If you saw somebody that was sort of attractive on the subway . . . you could move in that direction and you might find yourself with a hard-on pressed against you. . . . Oh my God, we're both getting off at Sheridan Square. . . . You've got somebody back at your apartment before your dinner date."

Gay men embraced the public places they cruised and where they had sex. And these places—the baths, the trucks, the piers—became landmarks of the gay male sexual subculture. As Michael Warner has argued, this culture not only had its own folkways and myths but also helped to cultivate a new eroticized sense of self characterized by "a love of strangers," the allure of anonymity and adventure, and membership in a sexual community.[62] For some, participation in the sexual scene had political significance. A number of Lovett's subjects explain their participation in public sex in part as a reaction to the sexual repression that they had suffered growing up. In his memoir, Samuel Delany recalls his astonishment upon seeing his first orgy at a bathhouse in 1963:

> What the orgy at the baths pictured with frightening range and intensity, was a fact that flew in the face of that whole fifties image [of homosexuality]. . . . Whether male, female, working or middle class, the direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies. . . . But what this experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals . . . not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather millions of gay men and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex.[63]

Participation in public sex (at a bathhouse, porn theaters, or other locales) gave many gay men a chance to exchange sexual knowledge and learn new modes of feeling and thinking. It also allowed heteronormative pretenses to be dropped and separated sex from the distortions of closeted emotional

[62] See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 173–81.

[63] Samuel Delany, *Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957–1965* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 174.

dynamics. New York's raunchy sexual landscape generated a rich body of personal stories and in later years achieved a mythological status through iconic references, such as "the trucks," "the piers," and "the tubs."[64]

Public sex thrived in those parts of New York that were devastated by the city's industrial decline—the empty piers along the Hudson River, the converted loft spaces in SoHo, and the opening up of bars and sex clubs away from residential neighborhoods. A whole geography of sexual encounters was created. As the men in *Gay Sex in the 70s* repeatedly confirm, plenty of gay male sex took place in public: out on the decaying Christopher Street piers, in the trucks parked under the elevated Westside Highway, in the Ramble in Central Park,[65] in the showers at the YMCAs, in the public toilets of department stores and libraries, and in the back rows of movie houses on 42nd Street. "You did not care," photographer Alvin Baltrop observed, "about the broken down, the danger, the dirty, the smell, the raunchiness. You cared about meeting someone and having sex." The men interviewed in the film provide an inventory of venues where gay sex took place in New York City during the 1970s.[66]

The piers were perhaps the most operatic of New York City's public sex venues during the seventies because they were more accessible to the public than many of the secluded groves in public parks where men had sex. Anyone could walk onto the piers at any time of day and there would sex taking place. The fact that these piers had become grand stages for public sex is demonstrated not only by the work of painters and graphic artists like David Wojarnowicz, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Keith Haring, who were inspired by these activities, but by the exhibition of their work at the piers. Photographers such as Vito Acconci, Peter Hujar, Alvin Baltrop, and Arthur Tress and writers such as Andrew Holleran, Edmund White, and David Wojarnowicz also documented the activity at the piers.[67]

That these areas had become available for individuals to repurpose was connected to the economic transformations of the city of New York

[64] Slang term for bathhouse; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_bathhouse, accessed July 25, 2016.

[65] A small enclosed area of New York's Central Park with a lot of shrubbery.

[66] David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 149–51.

[67] See the essays by Jonathan Weinberg and Darren Jones for the exhibition *The Piers: Art and Sex along the New York Waterfront*, Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, curated by Jonathan Weinberg with Darren Jones, April 4–May 10, 2012, https://leslielohman.org/exhibitions/2012/piers/, accessed March 24, 2016. Many of these photographs were also published in Alvin Baltrop, *The Piers* (Madrid: TF Editores, 2015). See also the essays by Rich Wandel, Jonathan Weinberg, and Thomas Schoenberger and the photographs of Leonard Fink for further documentation of how the piers hosted sexual activity and interacted with surrounding communities in Leonard Fink, *Coming Out: Photographs of Gay Liberation and the New York Waterfront* (Biel: edition clandestine, 2014).

after World War Two. As the port of New York declined throughout the 1950s, the shipping industry gradually abandoned piers along the elevated West Side Highway (a nearby section collapsed in 1973) near Greenwich Village; the docks and the buildings that had once served ferries, ocean liners, and cargo ships were empty and had begun to decay. Christopher Street, lined with bustling gay bars, was only a few blocks away. During the daytime, gay men wandered down to the piers to sunbathe, often nude or wearing only underwear or jock straps; during the nighttime, men cruised each other inside the rotting structures. "There were thousands of people fucking in the dark" at the piers, Rodger MacFarlane recalled in *Gay Sex in the 70s*, "every day of the week. No matter what the weather." But the piers were also dangerous. They were neither locked nor maintained nor inspected—and occasionally, in the dark, men fell through rotting wood or holes in the floor. The men lounging around the piers during the daytime periodically sighted floating corpses in the Hudson River near the piers.[68]

Another site of public sex was in the back of "the trucks" that parked at the end of Christopher Street. After unloading their cargo, commercial truck drivers who had brought produce and other goods to the city routinely unlocked the backs of their vehicles and parked them under the elevated West Side Highway overnight, near the piers. Like the piers, every night the empty trucks were typically filled with hundreds and hundreds of men having sex in the dark. The stale smell of sex, sweat, and poppers (inhaled club drugs) emanated from the trucks. The atmosphere could be celebratory: at one point, a street vendor parked a cart there selling food, soda, water, and even lubricant. But the trucks, like the piers, were also dangerous, according to the men interviewed in *Gay Sex in the 70s*: pickpockets, police, and gay bashers occasionally raided them. In addition to the video clips (none of which include sexually explicit scenes) taken from homorealist porn films, *Gay Sex in the 70s* is also illustrated by many still photographs of street scenes, gay pride marches, and people cruising and having sex on the piers, in the trucks, and at many other sites. In addition to still photos used in the film, photographers Alvin Baltrop and Tom Bianchi, both interviewees, have published books documenting the sexual scenes on the piers and Fire Island.[69]

The porn theater was another frequent site of public sexual activity. It was a unique form of public space that allowed different kinds of sexual exchanges to take place simultaneously—cinematic representation of sex (heterosexual or gay, softcore and later hardcore) on the screen and real

[68] See Barton Benes's and Joseph Lovett's conversation in *Gay Sex in the 70s*; and Patrick Hinds, *The Q Guide to NYC Pride* (New York: Alyson, 2007), 95.

[69] Baltrop, *The Piers*; and Tom Bianchi, *Fire Island Pines, the Polaroids, 1975–1983* (Valenza, Italy: Damiani, 2013).

sexual activity in the audience.[70] New Yorker writer Brendan Gill described theaters and the activities that went on in them:

> For the homosexual, it is the accepted thing that the theatre is there to be cruised in; this is one of the advantages he has purchased with his expensive ticket of admission. Far from sitting slumped motionless in one's chair, one moves about at will, sizing up the possibilities. Often there will be found standing at the back of the theatre two or three young men, any of whom, for a fee, will accompany one to seats well down front and there practice upon one the same arts that are being practiced upon others on the screen. One is thus enabled to enjoy two very different sorts of sexual pleasures simultaneously.[71]

In the sixties, the live action in the audience often surpassed the erotic appeal of the relatively innocuous beefcake shorts and rather lugubrious softcore narrative features. Even later, more explicit pornographic films often imitated situation comedies or amateurish melodramas. But pornography also celebrated gay male sexual activity, though, as Rodger MacFarlane observed in *Gay Sex in the 70s*, "pornography couldn't compete with real life. . . . Anything that was in pornography you could have in abundance—on the street, any day, walk in any gym, more beautiful men, more dick, more available dick, right out the door into their apartment, the party starts in an hour, you can go in the backroom right now. It was like life *was* a pornographic film." That glaring disparity encouraged some porn directors to go out and shoot what was going on in public, on the streets, in the porn theater, at the bathhouse, and on the piers. Thirty-five or forty years later, pornography is a primary form of evidence that we have of the gay sex that actually took place in the 1970s.

Barton Benes, one of the men interviewed in *Gay Sex in the 70s*, was an artist who created small ceramic sherds with the photographic headshots of men who died of AIDS. Believing that "you can tell a lot about a civilization through its artifacts," Benes frequently used photographic images in unusual forms (like these sherds) to commemorate the dead.[72] And while photographic images may ultimately lack the emotional resonance associated with the memory images of the living, photographs and even pornographic movies preserve some historical evidence of the quotidian sex lives of gay men in the seventies.[73]

[70] For a personal account, see Delany, *Times Square Red*. On the society-wide impact of the porn theater as a sexual space, see Jeffrey Escoffier, "Pornography, Perversity and the Sexual Revolution," in *Sexual Revolutions*, ed. Gert Hekma and Alain Giami (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 203–18.

[71] Brendan Gill, "Blue Notes," *Film Comment*, January–February 1973, 10–11; Jose Capino, "Homologies of Space: Text and Spectatorship in All-Male Adult Theaters," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 58–64.

[72] "The Curious Closets of Barton Benes," https://www.poz.com/article/The-Curious-Closets-of-Barton-Benes-11353-4477, accessed March 17, 2016.

[73] Kracauer, "Photography," 54–58; Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 100–101.

New York's Homorealist Porn: Hardcore Pornography as Historical Document

There were those in the 1970s who viewed the combination of New York's crumbling urban infrastructure and industrial decay, its high crime rates and heightened racial tensions, and the proliferation everywhere of the effects of the sexual revolution—promiscuous sexuality, pornography, massage parlors, nudity, and prostitution—as a "metaphor for . . . the last days of American civilization."[74] Amidst the chaos, a new style of filmmaking emerged that reflected the urban realities of 1960s and 1970s New York City.[75] The development of faster film, handheld 16 mm cameras, and lightweight quartz-iodine lamps inspired young documentary filmmakers like Richard Leacock and D. A. Pennebaker to shoot dramatic documentaries set in New York in the style of *cinéma vérité*, an outgrowth of postwar neorealism and anthropological filmmaking characteristic of the French *nouvelle vague*.[76] Filmmakers like the American actor-director John Cassavetes made improvisatory dramatic features in the same style. Cassavetes sought to capture the city with an apparent spontaneity that moved seamlessly from street and sidewalk into bars, jazz clubs, rehearsal halls, and tenements and showed the city in all its messy fullness: dilapidated storefronts, trashcans, and abandoned buildings. The homorealist filmmakers adopted a similar style to explore their sexual lifestyle as it emerged within that world during the late sixties and early seventies.

Hardcore porn movies had only begun to appear in American theaters in June 1969, coincidentally, the same month that the Stonewall riots launched the gay liberation movement.[77] Most of the gay hardcore movies shown in theaters were either cheaply made 16 mm shorts originally produced for private distribution or softcore features with extraneous sex scenes interjected.[78] Hardcore porn films represented a shift away from the idolization of the male as an *object* of homosexual desire (as in beefcake photos and films) to one that stressed gay men as *active agents* of homosexual desire.[79] Early

[74] James Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 367. During the 1970s New York City was portrayed, especially in films, as a bankrupt (which it was literally), crime-ridden, and debauched city in decline (see ibid., 365–83).

[75] For a discussion of similar developments in straight porn, see Whitney Strub, "From Porno Chic to Porno Bleak: Representing the Urban Crisis in 1970s American Pornography," in *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, forthcoming).

[76] Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline*, 341–42.

[77] With the legal boundary between nudity and obscenity in constant flux during the 1960s, sexual representations in films and peep-show loops moved from short films that only showed naked female crotches (called "beaver films") to films with women spreading their legs or labia (called "split beavers") to "pickle and beaver shots" (which included the penis and the female crotch) and eventually by June 1969 to films showing oral and vaginal penetration. See Escoffier, "Pornography, Perversity and the Sexual Revolution," 212.

[78] Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life*, 60–74; Escoffier, "From Beefcake to Hardcore," 331–42.

[79] Escoffier, "From Beefcake to Hardcore," 320.

in 1972, *Boys in the Sand* (directed by Wakefield Poole) opened at the 55th Street Playhouse (a mainstream movie theater) in Manhattan.[80] Shot on Fire Island for a mere $4,000, it set a series of explicit sex scenes within a loose thematic frame of fantasy at the popular gay resort: a beautiful man rising out of the sea, and a beautiful man appearing after a magic pill was thrown into a pool. Only one of the scenes shows a sexual encounter resulting from strangers cruising, and even this takes place only in their fantasies. Yet it was a new type of hardcore porn film—affirmative and idealistic. It was a huge success and ran for many months, drawing both gay and straight audiences. This was before *Deep Throat* and other straight porn chic classics had been released. But even before *Boys in the Sand*'s run at the 55th Playhouse was over, other local filmmakers began making their own gay hardcore porn films.[81]

The first film to be released after *Boys in the Sand* was Jerry Douglas's *The Back Row*—it opened at the 55th Street Playhouse immediately after *Boys in the Sand* closed. It was the first homorealist film. Though it was not shot in the *cinéma vérité* style used by later homorealist directors, it nevertheless resembled a travel documentary: a handsome gay man (Casey Donovan) cruises a new visitor arriving from Montana (George Payne) at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and basically takes him (leads him / follows him) on a tour of New York's gay sexual scene. When Donovan leaves the Port Authority Terminal, Payne follows him at a distance, too timid to approach Donovan directly. Yet they constantly cruise each other, rubbing their crotches and opening their flies on the subway and carefully examining the sex toys at a sex shop. Eventually, they go to the porn theater, where they cruise some more in the back of the theater, attempt to have sex in the men's room, and get interrupted. Donovan then becomes engaged in a full-on three-way sex scene in the men's room as Payne watches.

There is no spoken dialogue throughout the movie; all the communication is visual, with gestural and positional signaling taking place in every sex scene of the film. The movie's preamble shows a meticulously choreographed scene between a young man and a sailor sitting in the back row of a movie theater—they are gesturing, rubbing crotches, and shuffling their feet while moving toward each other. Eventually, they nod and open their flies, and the young man goes down on the sailor's cock and eventually jerks him off. This nonverbal communication is characteristic of both the gay porn of the time (in part because synchronized sound was expensive) and the actual practice at the time of gay men engaging in sex in public settings.

In his 1978 ethnography of public sex, sociologist Edward Delph called the world of homosexual public sex "the silent community," a social world

[80] *Boys in the Sand,* directed by Wakefield Poole (1971; Philadelphia, PA: Mercury Releasing, TLA Entertainment, 2002).

[81] *Deep Throat,* directed by Gerard Damiano (as Jerry Gerard) (1972; New York: After Midnight, 2005).

that is without verbal exchanges or communications.[82] Silence was required by the public settings (such as toilets, parks, beaches, and movie theaters), primarily in order to avoid detection by nearby nonparticipants. In this silent world, whether or not sex takes places depends upon initiating a "series of significant communications, and [being] encouraged to continue the gestural conversation. Therefore the social world is transformed into a wide open arena of possible sexual encounters albeit a silent one."[83] Donovan and Payne move through this silent world until at the very end of the movie, at which point they make friendly overtures, abandon the sexual stalking, and finally begin to have an energetic friendly conversation as the film ends.

Left Handed was the other hardcore gay film released immediately after *Boys in the Sand*. Made by Jack Deveau in 1972, it was shot in the *cinéma vérité* style.[84] In fact, Jack Deveau was the primary creator of the homorealist porn genre.[85] Like almost all of Deveau's films, *Left-Handed* was a heavily plotted film that tended toward melodrama. The film showed a cross section of gay male life in Manhattan in the early seventies. The plot revolves around three young men: an antique dealer, his hustler boyfriend, and their pot dealer. The hustler seduces the straight man, but when the straight man becomes emotionally involved and begins to explore homosexuality (even going so far as to participate in a gay orgy), the hustler loses interest in him. While this film was not made in a strictly documentary mode, it does portray "a day in the life" of typical New York City gay men in 1972. For example, the hustler-boyfriend stops in a small local park on the way to meet his boyfriend to have sex in the restroom. The film is shot in the rough, spontaneous style of *cinéma vérité*.

Several homorealist films had scenes in the New York subway system. In *The Back Row*, Jerry Douglas showed his two protagonists cruising each other and playing with their flies, while in Peter de Rome's *Underground* two men cruise and stalk each other in the subway until they find an empty car, where they covertly (as much as possible) engage in anal sex.[86] In Ian McGraw's *The Subway*, the film's protagonist wanders throughout the subway system: cruising on platforms and in subway cars and having sex in subway restrooms (the NYC subway system once had functioning bathrooms at every station), passageways, various odd corners, or an abandoned section of a subway station.[87]

[82] Delph, *The Silent Community*, 19–34.

[83] Ibid., 24.

[84] *Left-Handed*, directed by Jack Deveau (1972; Chicago: Images of the World / Bijou Video, n.d.).

[85] Jerry Douglas, "The Legacy of Jack Deveau," *Stallion*, April 1983, 22–25, 46–47.

[86] *The Back Row*, directed by Jerry Douglas (as Doug Richards) (1972; West Hollywood, CA: Channel One Releasing, 2001); *Underground*, by directed Peter Rome (1973; Chicago: Images of the World / Bijou Video, n.d.).

[87] *The Subway*, directed by Ian McGraw (1980; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, 2008).

Arch Brown's *Pier Groups* (1979) appears to be the only gay porn film that was set in or that featured the piers.[88] In some respects, it is the most documentary-like of all the homorealist films. The set-up is very simple. The film opens with two gay men waking up, engaging in oral sex, and masturbating. One of them then calls a fellow employee (who is in bed with his wife) and asks him to check out an abandoned pier in preparation for submitting a bid for its demolition. While one of the gay men goes off to work, the straight employee puts on his hard hat and heads off to the piers. Before he leaves for work, the gay man's boyfriend gets a call from his job telling him to take the day off. So he heads down to the piers not too far behind the man in the hard hat. After that, we see the guy in the hard hat walking on the pier, taking notes, making structural notations, and passing by all kinds of sex (including a couple of scenes involving the boyfriend). The man in the hard hat looks on impassively and just keeps going on his rounds and doing his job. Though the opening scenes have some spoken dialogue at the beginning, there is almost no verbal communication in the rest of the film. At the end, the hard hat goes back to his wife, and the boyfriend goes back to his apartment. The hard hat's attitude illustrates the casual intersection of gay and straight men (and perhaps a degree of familiarity or even acceptance) of these public venues. One of the men in *Gay Sex in the 70s* observed similar interactions between the gay men engaged in public sexual activities and the straight men who happened to be working nearby. Since the piers were across the street from the meatpacking district, the workers there would eat their lunch sitting along the sides of the pier, making it possible for them to "watch the guys having sex. They would laugh or they would go over and join in."

Jack Deveau's *A Night at the Adonis* (1978) was made in the late seventies and is the culmination of his hybrid style of homorealism. It portrays the well-known porn theater as a community center where friends interact with a cross section of sex-hungry men, meeting up to have impersonal sex with friends, strangers, the theater's employees, or the regular characters who routinely stop by. Sex takes place throughout the Adonis, in the seats (in the balcony and the back rows), in the passageways, in the offices, behind the counters, and in the men's room, the site of a grand orgy. The sexual community at the Adonis contrasts sharply with "the silent community" that exists in *The Back Row*. Everyone here is talking. Released in 1978, it demonstrates the evolution away from the "silent community" of the pre-Stonewall era to what sociologist Etienne Meunier calls "collective intimacy" later in the seventies.[89] Some of the men at the Adonis

[88] *Piers Groups*, directed by Arch Brown (1979; Van Nuys, CA: French Connection, n.d.).

[89] Etienne Meunier, "Organizing Collective Intimacy: An Ethnography of New York's Clandestine Sex Clubs" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2016), 3–4, 19–36. Meunier's dissertation is an exploration of the way that sociality can evolve in certain venues where public sex is taking place.

are friends, others are regulars, and the man running the juice bar acts as the guide to a young "management trainee," who got the gig through the "placement office at his college." The juice bar manager explains the social protocols governing the sexual action that is taking place at the Adonis, and he characterizes each of the regulars by their cruising styles, pick-up lines, or sexual proclivities. "In my experience," he explains, "men fall into three categories: One, 'got a match?' Two, 'what time is it?' And three, 'you live around here?'" People keep propositioning the young management trainee, who turns everyone down because he has chosen to act professionally and is serious about learning the business. But the juice bar manager dismisses the trainee's reserve. "If you're not willing to play yourself," he explains, "you shouldn't be running a playground." Thus *A Night at the Adonis* is almost a parable and shows the progressive development of a community that has emerged from the world of public sex,[90] changing from a silent community dependent upon nonverbal communication and with no social ties extending beyond impersonal sexual encounters to a community where its members have knowledge of other participants over time and recognize public sexual activity as an integral component of the larger community.

The homorealist porn film walks a fine line between documentary and fantasy; it attempts to integrate both sexual fantasy and the actual world. It is what film scholar Leo Braudy has called an "open" form of cinema in which "the world of the film is a momentary frame around an ongoing reality. The objects and the characters existed before the camera focused on them and they will exist after the film is over."[91] Thus homorealism offered another kind of *reality effect*, one perfectly suited to the historical period immediately following the Stonewall riots. It both confirmed and celebrated an *actually existing* sexual culture.

Learning from Pornography

Homorealist porn movies allow us to reconstruct the sexual scripts of public sex in the 1970s. They show how cruising, physical location, and sex itself contributed to the complex sexual geography of New York City. They identify the spaces where public sex took place during the 1970s—the bathhouses, porn theaters, and abandoned piers—and that are almost nonexistent in the same form today. The decaying industrial city, with both its obscure and its well-populated sexual spaces, is mostly gone or at least transformed.[92] These films illustrate how the physical environment created

[90] See Meunier, *Organizing Collective Intimacy*, 194–238, 249–72.

[91] Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1977), 46–47.

[92] The piers were torn down by the mid-1980s as eyesores and safety hazards; porn theaters starting closing in the late 1970s as porn became available on videotape for home viewing; and most gay bathhouses were closed in 1985 as a public health measure because they were believed to contribute to the spread of AIDS.

sexual opportunities, shaped the sexual action, and specified the sexual participants.[93] They are evidence for how sex roles, age, style, class, and ethnicity played out in the public spaces where gay men had sex during the 1970s.

The homorealist films are important not only because they authenticate and amplify the *memory images* of men who were sexually active during the 1970s but also because of what the films show of the surface flux of gay men's sex lives in that period: their physical comportment, self-presentation, and the interactional strategies of people unconscious of their situation, unaware of how their presence will shape history and thus unable to read the signs of their times.[94] Nor are these films purely ethnographic or documentary in style. Most of them embed the sexual activities in fictive narrative contexts: the hick cowboy visiting New York; gay man out cruising and having public sex while a lover is out of town; tensions in a relationship between a young kept man and his lover; or a man coming out or even falling in love. They show cruising techniques, pick-up lines, interactional styles, typical topics of conversation, and bodily comportment, along with physical body types and hairstyles—two of the most noticeable markers in a pornographic film of the time period in which it was made. And, most importantly, they reveal what appear to be trivial and uninteresting aspects of day-to-day behavior that can, with hindsight, explain important aspects of the reproduction of this community's culture. As Kracauer noted about the films of the Weimar Republic, "The inconspicuous surface-level expressions . . . by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things."[95]

These pornographic films portray and accentuate those very qualities that define the particular character of the sexual experiences and encounters of gay men in the decade between Stonewall and the advent of HIV. In Simon and Gagnon's theory of sexual scripts, intrapsychic fantasies, cultural scenarios, and interpersonal (or interactional) scripts play an important role in the shaping of sexual conduct; they "specify appropriate sex objects, aims, and desirable qualities of self-other relations but also instruct in times, places, sequences of gesture and utterance and, among the most important, what the actor and his or her co-participants (real or imagined) are assumed to be feeling."[96] For the most part, at least in the twentieth century and in

[93] For contemporary analyses of how a specific physical space can shape the sexual activity in locker rooms and saunas or at sex parties, see Etienne Meunier, "No Attitude, No Standing Around: The Organization of Social and Sexual Interaction at a Gay Male Private Sex Party in New York City," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43, no. 4 (2012): 685–95; and William Leap, "Sex in 'Private' Places: Gender, Erotics, and Detachment in Two Urban Locales," in Leap, *Public Sex, Gay Space*, 115–39.

[94] Film captures these kinds of things, which, as Kracauer notes, "by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance" of everyday life. See Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in Levin, *The Mass Ornament*, 75.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Simon and Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts," 5.

most Western cultures, homosexual sexual scripts have grown up outside the standard regulatory institutions of sexuality (primarily, heterosexual dating and courtship or monogamous procreative marriage). Many homosexual sexual scripts were situational or opportunistic and were organized around "master statuses" such as gender roles (masculine, feminine), age, and class.[97] As I have argued elsewhere, certain locations, such as restrooms, parks, and porn theaters, could be characterized as "sexual opportunity structures."[98] Gay men's historical reliance on casual contact, cruising, and single-sex segregated environments meant that specific locations, such as public restrooms, bathhouses, porn theaters, and prisons, became important because they offered sexual opportunity. Sociologist Edward Delph noted that such spaces attracted distinct clienteles:

> The Canal Street subway toilet, for example, is heavily used by working-class people, of various ethnic groups, during the workweek. Upper east side IRT [now the 4 and 5 subway lines] subway toilets, reflecting the neighborhoods above the ground, tend to be rather homogeneous white, middle class and white collar. Gay bars located in the isolated extreme West Village [are a] beacon to "western" and "S-M" oriented identities. Subway toilets situated in West Village stations attract the same types. Those who find these categories of individuals of sexual interest will also be drawn to them.[99]

In addition, these films embodied many of the period's sexual assumptions. Most of these films show their characters on the streets of the city, and they most often also show a door or an entranceway from the street to either a public space where cruising and sexual encounter will take place or a private apartment where strangers will have sex. Thus public sex (or sex in general) is not only linked to real places, it is embedded in the routine patterns of movement and familiar locations of everyday city life.

To summarize, an analysis of these homorealist films reveals the following historically specific patterns of behavior and cultural traits:

> 1. Public cruising plays a prominent role, even in cases that lead to sex inside private interiors.

[97] Lauman et al. use the term "master status" to identify how the status of a common social role, such as gender, may be used to organize sexual behavior. For example, a homosexual sexual script in the 1890s might be organized around stereotypical male and female roles. See Edward O. Lauman, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 30–33.

[98] Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sex O'Clock in America: I copioni sessuale in prospettiva storica, 1890–1930," in *I copioni sessuali: Storia, analisi e application*, ed. Cirus Rinaldi (Milan: Franco Mondadori, forthcoming). See also Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution," 52–57. See Certeau's discussion of what he calls "spatial practices" and how they structure social behavior (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 34–42, 92–110).

[99] Delph, *The Silent Community*, 36.

2. Sexual encounters in these films usually take place between strangers.
3. Sex seems to be available in many everyday locations—subways, apartment building basements, abandoned industrial warehouses, and piers that are visible from pedestrian passageways—as well as in porn theaters, bathhouses, and other more protected spaces.
4. Location often defines the encounter as a sexual situation.
5. Sexual activity is usually initiated by an overtly sexual gesture, such as grabbing a crotch, feeling an ass, or kneeling to suck a cock.
6. Within that location all participants take responsibility for maintaining the definition of the public setting as a sexual situation through supportive exchanges between participants or through the initiation of oral sex or other sexual acts.
7. The ritual of smoking marijuana or using poppers before or during a sexual encounter was almost ubiquitous.[100]

Together these features characterize how homorealist porn films allow us to identify the underlying norms and conventions that guided public sex among gay men during the seventies. The presence of stigma, homophobia, and illegality constrained what Erving Goffman has called "the interaction order" as it applied to gay men at the time.[101] The "interpersonal scripts" identified by Gagnon and Simon drew upon the interaction order's "systems of enabling conventions, in the sense of ground rules for a game, the provisions of a traffic code or the rules of syntax of a language."[102] An impromptu sexual encounter in a public space, whether in a subway, on an abandoned pier, or in a porn theater, consisted of focused face-to-face interactions that were sustained by maintaining cognitive and visual attention on fellow participants.[103] As Delph notes, "Individuals not only recognize, exchange, complement and reciprocally sustain the sexual claims of [other men], but through the subtle processes of significant gestural and visual communications are able to reinforce their sexual interests, identities, and roles without having to face the threat of painful rejection."[104] The films showed participants engaged in signaling fellow participants' entry and exit during a public encounter, initiating sex in the public setting, and the importance of reciprocal deference, especially through the reciprocity of sexual acts. Even the particular sex acts that took place were, to some extent, determined by the public space itself.[105] Oral sex was always central, while

[100] Though not discussed in this article, the use of poppers was considered as a possible cause of AIDS in the early days of the epidemic (1981–83), before the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was discovered in 1983.

[101] For a discussion of the impact of stigma on interactional dynamics, see Goffman, *Stigma*, 2–31.

[102] Goffman, "The Interaction Order," 240.

[103] Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (1961; repr., Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 7–84.

[104] Delph, *The Silent Community*, 157.

[105] Leap, "Sex in 'Private' Places," 115–39.

anal sex was dependent on the physical set-up: the missionary position was often logistically awkward, so anal sex while standing was more common. Of course, these actions were scripted and choreographed by the film's director or the performers, but they drew upon their unconscious assumptions of interpersonal scripts in the seventies. Thus it is possible to contribute to an ethnography of sexual encounters among gay men in the seventies using homorealist porn movies.[106] The films showed the interactional ground rules that governed public sex venues and that were necessary to establish a degree of trust among the participants. This was quite remarkable, given the fact that homosexual acts (not to mention public sex) were still criminally sanctioned and stigmatized during this period; it makes these films evidence for the world of public sex in New York as an integral sexual environment, or, as Erving Goffman might have characterized it, "a field of dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself."[107]

About the Author

Jeffrey Escoffier is a visiting scholar at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. He is the author of *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (University of California Press, 1998) and *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Running Press, 2009). He is also the editor of *Sexual Revolution* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), an anthology of the most important American writing on sex during the 1960s and 1970s.

[106] See, for example, Delph, *The Silent Community*. Levine, *Gay Macho*, does not single out public sex specifically.

[107] Goffman, *Encounters*, 26–27.