

The Problem with Sexploitation Movies

The process of researching and writing film history has changed significantly over the past fifty years. What gets written about has changed. Broadly dealing with masterpieces, select auteurs and a few national cinemas has given way to focused histories of marginal forms (as well as marginalized filmmakers and audiences), including films made by or for racial and ethnic minorities, the GLBT community, those made in postcolonial contexts, and a variety of “orphaned” forms — educational films, industrials, home movies, etc. How those movies are researched has also changed, moving from merely watching films and expounding on them in chronological order to conducting extensive archival research and rooting it in carefully considered theoretical propositions. This change finds a correlation in what David Bordwell has referred to as “middle-level research” and has expanded what constitutes our understanding of “film history.”¹⁾ My current “middle-level research” is into the history of sexploitation movies. It has been a frequently fascinating and rewarding experience; it has resulted in a number of satisfying conference papers, some keynote addresses, and several published articles. But it has also proven to be frustrating. That frustration is borne out of the ways in which the films were situated historically, the challenges they

present to any scholar who attempts to approach their history holistically (instead of as cult items or as an excuse to dabble in auterism), and because of the nature of the films themselves.

After completing my first book, *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*, I decided to work on a history of sexploitation films.²⁾ Even though the “classical”³⁾ exploitation films about which I wrote in *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”* represented a variety of sub-categories (including sex hygiene films, drug movies, and nudist documentaries) almost all of them shared a fundamental concern with sexuality. Moving into the sexploitation era, which in popular accounts begins around 1959 or 1960 with the appearance of the first “nude cutie” films, seemed to be a logical extension of the first book. The result would be *Massacre of Pleasure: A History of Sexploitation Films, 1960–1979*, a work, like the prior one, driven by questions without preconceived answers in mind, and based on a minimal number of guiding, evidence-based, assumptions. What I had hoped would be a six or seven year process of research and writing has gone on considerably longer than anticipated, in part due to the methodological and the historiographic hurdles posed by sexploitation movies, in part because of my own determination to be thorough, and in

1) See, for example, David Bordwell, ‘Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory’ in Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 3–36.

2) Eric Schaefer, *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham Duke University Press, 1999).

3) Classical exploitation films are so dubbed because they paralleled the “classical Hollywood cinema”.

part because of the dreary nature of so many of the films in question. Below are some of the problems of sexploitation movies.

Exactly when sexploitation began can be debated to some degree; but the term was in use in the American trade press as early as 1958, and was probably used in conversation prior to that date.⁴⁾ Defining exactly what constituted a sexploitation film is, however, not as easy to determine. In the trades in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the term sexploitation was often synonymous with hardcore pornography and, at other times, critics used the appellation to tar mainstream films of which they did not approve. For my purposes, sexploitation has developed a specific meaning. Sexploitation films were independent productions made on low budgets (relative to the cost of major mainstream releases). The films were advertised for "adults only" and, when the ratings system became operational in late 1968, were either rated R or X, or continued to be shown to adult-only audiences. While classical exploitation movies balanced titillating elements with claims of educational intent, sexploitation films focused on nudity and sexual situations, including seduction, adultery, voyeurism, and various fetishes; but they rarely asserted higher aims (see Figure 1). Like their predecessors, sexploitation movies could be narratives, documentaries or, at times, a combination thereof. Narrative sexploitation films were made in a wide variety of genres: comedies, melodramas, thrillers, Westerns, horror films, science fiction, to name just a few. So, in many respects, sexploitation is less a genre per se, but can instead be seen as a series of strategies (filmic, marketing, and legal) for displaying on-screen softcore sex. The form began to proliferate around 1960 and reached a peak of production and distribution in the United States

around 1970 before gradually tapering off as mainstream Hollywood films began to incorporate softcore elements into juvenile comedies and erotic thrillers. Moreover, the downtown theaters and outlying drive-ins that had been a haven for sexploitation pictures were rapidly falling to urban renewal projects and suburban sprawl. The home video revolution provided the final nail in sexploitation's coffin as low-budget films of any kind, unable to attain theatrical release, went straight to video release. Although softcore films have continued to be made for various media and various audiences, by the early 1980s sexploitation was no longer a viable theatrical form.

The problems in researching sexploitation films extend beyond mere definition. Unlike the mainstream American film industry, the production of sexploitation films reached well beyond Los Angeles. New York, Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, Texas, as well as other places, were all home to sexploitation producers, and sometimes regional differences are notable. Moreover, movies from Europe, South America, and Asia also became sexploitation after they had been, often in altered forms, imported into the United States.⁵⁾ While a few companies made large numbers of sexploitation films, there were dozens of outfits that knocked out a movie or two and then called it a day. The quality of sexploitation movies varies wildly; some compare favorably to the production values of mid-level Hollywood or non-US films, while others, made for a few thousand dollars at best, are virtually incomprehensible and stagger the imagination with their ineptitude. Therefore, it is difficult to generate a clear, overarching narrative about the "production" of sexploitation movies. Unlike the distribution system of the majors, sexploitation producers relied on a scattered collection of

4) A review of *THE SHAMELESS SEX* (a 1952 Italian film originally titled "Wanda la Peccatrice") in *The Exhibitor* (12 November 1958, n.p.) claimed the movie was "strictly for the sex-ploitation [sic.] spots". It was just a short time before the hyphenated "sex-ploitation" had become the word "sexploitation".

5) Imported films were often cut to create a shorter running time or to emphasize nudity or sexual storylines. Alternately, for some movies, racy inserts were shot in the States and edited into the imported version of the film. For *Massacre of Pleasure*, I am looking solely at films distributed and exhibited in the U.S. To consider other countries, with an array of different cultural contexts, film industries, legal systems, and so on, would simply be impossible.



Fig. 1. Typical action in a run-of-the-mill sexploitation film from 1968, *ACAPULCO UNCENSORED* (Hollywood Cinema Associates).

small, regional sub-distributors. This situation meant that, while some movies were able to achieve what amounted to national distribution, others had at best spotty releases. As was the case with production, the picture of sexploitation distribution is fragmented and difficult to chronicle.

As the dominant form of motion picture entertainment in the United States, "Hollywood" movies can usually be considered on their own terms. Sexploitation films, however, cannot be viewed in isolation — they were in their first decade defined in relation to mainstream Hollywood product, to "art cinema", and, to some degree, even to the emerging underground cinema movement. As sexploitation films moved into the 1970s, they were made and exhibited in the context of theatrical hardcore pornography. Any history of sexploitation films must therefore consider the product and its circumstances in light of four other distinct categories of motion picture.

From a methodological standpoint, the best works of film and media history are now interdisciplinary in nature; the days of looking at texts through a single, tightly focused lens are in eclipse. But again, sexploitation demands that a variety of perspectives be brought to bear on it: history, law, sociology, psychology, urban studies, and, of course, sexuality and gender studies. To approach the subject from just one or two perspectives would deprive it of dimension and depth. Indeed, I would venture that the vast majority of books, articles, and other references I have consulted thus far are outside the realm of academic film studies, in part because, to date, relatively little has been written about sexploitation; but also out of the necessity to provide the broadest possible context for understanding the form and its history.

Finding information about the production, distribution, and reception of sexploitation films has been a challenge: there is no "one-stop shopping" for material on these movies. Over

the years, I have made pilgrimages to several private collections and to more than half-a-dozen public archives. Because sexploitation movies were both disposable and disreputable, and because companies came and went, records were seldom retained. Interviews with producers, distributors, and exhibitors (some published; many conducted by myself either in person, on the phone, or by letters and email) have filled several of these gaps. Some figures from the field of sexploitation were dead before my research began, others were reluctant to talk, and then there were those individuals who have been impossible to track down. Examination of years of trade publications (including *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *Independent Film Journal*) has helped me to understand how at the time sexploitation was situated within the wider film industry, and contemporaneous popular press coverage (newspapers and newsmagazines, popular books, and tabloids) has provided an outline of discourse about sexploitation circulating the culture-at-large. Over time, collections of personal and business papers have come into my hands and I have accumulated hundreds of pressbooks and thousands of publicity stills.

It is this gradual aggregation of material that finally has put me in a position in which it is possible for me to construct a fairly broad history of sexploitation films, something beyond the work of a single individual, company, or locale. The key to answering questions has come from the assemblage of a sufficient amount of evidence required to develop compelling explanations. And a sufficient amount of evidence only comes about when a large pile of information — a “critical mess” — has been fashioned. Some years ago, I read an article that introduced me to the concept of the “critical-mess theory of collecting”, a process involving the casting of the widest net possible, amassing material, and then looking for patterns in order to be able to draw conclusions.⁶⁾ The concept resonated with me: I realized that I had, in my work on exploitation

and sexploitation cinema, been engaging in what amounted to “critical-mess historiography”. Critical-mess historiography is slow and it is messy; it relies on chance connections and fortuitous convergences. But ultimately it represents the most thorough and conclusive method of studying fringe phenomena like sexploitation films when compared to faster, more cursory efforts at writing history, especially those that start with a predetermined thesis.

What now slows me down are the films themselves. In the two decades bookended by 1960 and 1979, something in the order of 2000 sexploitation movies were made. While I set out with no intention of watching them all — a not inconsequential number of them are lost evidently — getting through 20–25 percent of this output seemed crucial to understanding the diversity that sexploitation exhibited over time. Accessing the films is one thing, sitting through them is quite another. For every single film that offers some interest, be it aesthetic, or be it in terms of its content or its historical importance, there are five sexploitation films that verge on the unwatchable. Even movies made by “leaders” in the field such as Russ Meyer and Radley Metzger, not to mention those from filmmakers who have become cult figures, like Joe Sarno and Doris Wishman, can be difficult to sit through. After a while, the prospect of watching another hour in which two or three people writhe under the sheets, as a shaky camera hovers above them like a hungry mosquito, is daunting. Even with sexploitation films often running at less than 70 minutes, many of the movies feel far longer than that due to repeated sequences of people wandering through Central Park or driving down the streets of Los Angeles, or of extended scenes of desultory dressing and undressing. Add to these features the muddy cinematography, amateurish performances, non-synch “dialogue,” bleak motel rooms and bland suburban tract houses used as sets, the canned jazz scores, lame comedy, or the strained

6) The idea of “critical-mess collecting” was put forward in a profile of obsessive bibliophile Michael Zinman. See Mark Singer, “The book eater” *The New Yorker*, 5 February 2001, pp. 62–71.

seriousness in so many of the movies, and it is a grim task.

Given the problems with sexploitation films, why bother to write their history? First, the sheer numbers speak for themselves. Even though the films were of meager quality, frequently interchangeable, and often forgettable, they were for twenty years a prominent part of the American movie scene. Their very existence helped to keep many theaters alive and, in some respects, buoyed the entire American film industry in a time of steep economic decline. Although they did not lead directly to the establishment of theatrical hardcore pornography, they contributed to a tolerance for increasingly explicit sexual entertainment, which in turn made theatrical hardcore possible. For better or worse, sexploitation films paved the way for a broadly sexualized popular culture that we now experience in print, on television, in films, and on the internet. So, even though these movies were, for the most part, neither very good nor terribly entertaining, they played a significant role in shaping the contemporary media scene.

So I soldier on, wading through movies like *HIP, HOT AND 21* (1967), *ACAPULCO UNCENSORED*, *THE KISS-OFF* (both 1968), *SEX CIRCUS* (1969), *MOONSHINE LOVE* (1970), *TEENAGE JAILBAIT* (1976), and *SWEATER GIRLS* (1978). As they say, it's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it.

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