



Viva (dir. Anna Biller, US, 2007). Photo still © Anna Biller.
Photo by Steve Dietl

“Dated Sexuality”: Anna Biller’s *Viva* and the Retrospective Life of Sexploitation Cinema

Elena Gorfinkel

Sexploitation films were a finite phenomenon, a bottom-feeder cottage industry that thrived and expired between 1960 and the early 1970s in the United States. There were approximately one thousand such films made in the 1960s. Produced primarily in New York and Los Angeles, on average budgets of between \$10,000 and \$40,000 and in only a few days’ time, the films were defined by their crude mise-en-scène, sensationalist narratives of sex and its discontents, and aggressively lurid marketing strategies. As Eric Schaefer has detailed, sexploitation films inherited some of their presentational and publicity tactics from their industrial progenitor, the classical exploitation film, while narrowing their concern with the body out of control to overtly sexualized subjects.¹ Sexploitation’s subcycles ranged from sex melodramas to narratives of suburban swinging to pseudo-documentaries and sex exposés that capitalized on the currency of sexual and subcultural practices, resembling the lurid strategies of pulp novels and adult tabloids. Sexploitation films negotiated a fine line between

Camera Obscura 78, Volume 26, Number 3

DOI 10.1215/02705346-1415443 © 2011 by *Camera Obscura*

Published by Duke University Press

the permissible and the obscene, featuring nudity and sexual situations while displacing explicit sexual action offscreen. The industrial relevance and illicit frisson of sexploitation would be eclipsed by the public exhibition of hard-core feature-length pornography in the early 1970s, since the soft-core sell of sexploitation was deemed not enough for jaded viewers.

American sexploitation films of the 1960s and early 1970s have gained a second life in the past two decades through a boom in video and DVD distribution and rerelease and, consequently, a new generationally distinct audience, the members of which plumb their depths for their political and aesthetic transgressions. Perhaps more than other forgotten modes of production, sexploitation films maintain a hold on contemporary viewers by the very signs of their “datedness” and by their seeming to be contained in their own historical moment, unable to transcend it. I propose that what appeals to present-day cult film audiences about the “impoverished” tableaux of sexploitation films—with their scenarios of female autonomy and unleashed sexual desire, threadbare plots, occulted *mise-en-scène*, stark cinematography, and often leaden acting—is precisely this shunted melancholia of obsolescence. It is an obsolescence that inheres not only in the strivings of the films’ politically retrograde plots but also in their erotic content, in the material evidence of their *mise-en-scène*, and in the extratextual residues of their embattled mode of production.

Such limitations take on both an ideological and aesthetic cast in contemporary viewings. The censorial restrictions on explicit sexual action and the mode’s troubled relationship to the concurrently developing sexual revolution in the 1960s, one of both voyeuristic indulgence and circumspection and distance, produced texts that may today seem stilted, misguided, and considerably troublesome in their sexual politics. A common narrative trope of the sexploitation film was a sexually curious woman who entered into a broadening field of erotic consumption, be it courtship or sex work, and suffered at the hands of predatory men—for example in the films *Agony of Love* (dir. William Rotzler, US, 1966) or *The Hookers* (dir. Jalo Miklos Horthy, US, 1967). Thus, the “problem” of female erotic agency and subjectivity was

the defining ideological engine of sexploitation's narratives. At the same time, the aesthetic of sexploitation films, while varied, relied on the nexus of nudity and sexual suggestiveness—writhing bodies fragmented on beds, nude female torsos, sinuous dance numbers, and other forms of stagy seduction—in order to elicit the impending yet offscreen sexual act. Inasmuch as the proliferation of sexual representations "on/scene," in Linda Williams's formulation, in the exceeding visibility of hard-core sex in the public sphere, has come to define our present mediascape, sexploitation films represent a transitional moment in the shift from obscene, and offscreen, to the "on/scenity" of contemporary cultural life.² The codes of delimited sexual representation and modes of address of the sexploitation film hold a kind of archival charge, their liminality allied with the peekaboo of striptease, a play of concealment and revelation that is contingent on some modicum of residual cultural or censorial restriction.

Sexploitation films are marked by a contemporary fascination with what I am calling "dated sexuality," in which the traces of sexual history on film, as a repository of bodies and erotic objects, are read through their aesthetic and political terms of limitation. Within a cultural landscape that brings explicit sexual representations on/scene, the draw of more "antiquated" erotic forms, from vintage pornography to the urban practices of neoburlesque, seems to pause on and return to past historical periodizations of sexuality. In these contemporary forms, the taste for history's residue coalesces with a taste for the erotic horizons of past audiences and sexual subjects. This taste for the residual becomes located in objects as much if not more than in the bodies on display. In an incisive assessment of vintage pornography in the feminist collection *Caught Looking*, Jennifer Wicke notes that the images in the anthology attest

not only to the embeddedness of desire in time, but, also in the modern era, to its embeddedness in fashion, style and image, in patterns of consumption. A riveting picture of a man rather desultorily having intercourse with a woman on what looks like a cafeteria table before some slightly bemused onlookers is riveting not for the act in progress,

the flashes of buttock and pubic hair, but for the incredible sideburns he is sporting, as well as the insouciance of the ribbed poor boy turtleneck he hasn't had the energy to doff. The turn of the century photo of a woman easing down on a man's penis is remarkable not for its hearty, graphic genital frankness but for the accoutrements of these organs—the outmoded lingerie styles, the mustache, the grainy texture of the photographic technique and the assessment of how long the participants had to hold their poses in obedient tumescence. The entire book is alluring not as a pornographic volume . . . but instead as a gloss on the imbrication of mass cultural styles in the pornographic styles of modernity. Hair, body language, body morphology, bedroom props only have to be a shade off to sunder any sexual response to the pictures and instead open up a reverie on the *punctum* of any particular image, a *punctum* that is more mass cultural than Barthes' rather ahistorical nostalgia for a past, frozen time.³

What Wicke eloquently describes here is a conflicted pull on spectatorial attention produced by aging pornographic images, articulating an awareness of how the ephemera within the frame and the accoutrements of fashion, decor, style—usually secondary to the sexual act—force a departure from the brute address of copulating bodies. Instead these marginal objects themselves become a rich Barthesian surplus, an unexpected plenitude of historical signs. The datedness of sexuality, which is precisely the artifactually auratic experience that Wicke here describes, inheres in the rift between body and object-world, and in the ways that the products of mass cultural consumption array and frame bodies, infusing them with the meanings of a receding historicity. In other words, the pull of a dated sexuality resides in the conjunction between the seeming self-evidence or transparency of the sexual spectacle of bodies and the negligible objects and throw-away consumer artifacts that litter the frame of the pornographic *mise-en-scène*, locating it in time. These objects and decorative excrescences make us pause, as Wicke suggests, but also become the site of a kind of tangential wandering and historical fantasy, bearing the trace of the sexual while nevertheless departing from the genre's functional insistence on arousal. To be counterfactually seduced by the residual objects within the pornographic

imaginary is to return to the economic and affective logics of an embodied sexuality's emplacement within a world of commodities, details, and things.

The implications of this penchant for the "dated" certainly fans out to other forms of nostalgic appropriation and retro cultural production, but the aesthetic predilection for the evidence of sexual history within cinematic products is especially attenuated in the contemporary market for sexploitation films. While "obsolete" forms of erotic performance can be bracketed within this general retrospective affective sensibility, the resonance of these cultural products, both vintage and remade, means different things to different audiences, especially in terms of gender. The purveyors of vintage pornography have set their sights on a specialty male porn consumer demographic, whereas neoburlesque is defined and drawn from the affinities and energies of third-wave feminist cultural movements and forms of youth cultural production that align with riot grrrl, post-punk, zine and do-it-yourself, and queer performative cultures. While these contemporary forms of cultural production and recycling come with their own gendered modes of address, they also pose the problem of sexuality's embeddings in history in expansive ways, pointing to ways of affectively relating to the artifacts of an erotic past that open out onto more complex modes of recognition and identification that challenge a strictly gendered allocation and eruption of filmic pleasures.⁴ Nevertheless, "dated sexuality" as a preferential sensibility seems a compelling and persistent mode of relating to the sexual and historical past through mediated cultural forms, and we can see sexploitation's status within this larger range of recirculated, cultish texts as one instructive location for articulating the wages of erotic historicity for contemporary viewers.

Undesignated Addressees:

Female Spectatorship/Female Authorship

If sexploitation was a form created largely by men, for primarily male audiences, unfurling melodramatic and oft-apocalyptic fantasies regarding women's newfound erotic agency, how might an

undesigned female viewer engage with these films? Although women and couples became a viable market for sexploitation in the late 1960s, female audiences for sexploitation are a relatively belated reception formation. Feminist critics have historically treated these films with ambivalence at best and disdain at worst, cognizant of the aporias they pose to political exegesis.⁵ Other recent analyses of 1960s sexploitation films by feminist scholars have negotiated the tricky terrain of the genre's seeming malfeasance toward women, in one case addressing the work of one of sexploitation's female directors, Doris Wishman, and the other exploring the resurgent popularity of Russ Meyer's aggressor-heroines in the context of the shifts from second- to third-wave feminism.⁶ Pam Cook has noted, in her critical consideration of the director Stephanie Rothman, that "exploitation film's subject matter, its presumed appeal to retrograde male fantasies, may not appear congenial material for women filmmakers."⁷ Thus, one way into the discourses of female spectatorship in sexploitation film has been through female authorship, both synchronically and diachronically.

The reassessment and renegotiation of the history of women exploitation directors and the problem sexploitation poses to female spectatorship finds an apt contemporary object in Anna Biller's film *Viva* (2007), which reanimates the sexploitation cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Viva* articulates the uses of sexploitation films for contemporary female spectators and represents a remediation and renegotiation of the genre's seemingly "dated" conventions. In binding the charge of the obsolete details of mise-en-scène and sexploitation's generic codes to a decidedly feminist gestural *écriture*, Biller's film operates as a compellingly uncanny time capsule. *Viva* diagrams the dynamics of "dated sexuality" in terms of a feminist reading practice, which seizes on the marginal details of film historical styles, linking the material and cultural pleasures of obsolescence to a wavering, meandering form of looking at erotic forms. By prioritizing the commodified world of objects that arrays the sexploitation mise-en-scène, this film reframes what Wicke discusses as the unexpected auratics of discarded corporeal genres. If the detail has conventionally been



Anna Biller as existential heroine in *Viva*. Photo still

© Anna Biller. Photo by C. Thomas Lewis

treated as a feminized form of realist representation, as Naomi Schor notes, Biller rescues and elevates the details of a mass cultural erotics, making these elements the privileged sites of female spectatorial pleasure and engagement rather than the spectacle of sexual display.⁸

Viva, set in 1972, concerns the self-exploration of a Los Angeles housewife who, dissatisfied with her suburban married life and her emotionally inaccessible husband, ventures into the “sexual revolution”—replete with forays into high-class prostitution, a hippie nudist camp, bohemian swinging, and the mod lairs of lecherous photographers—in order to discover her existential and erotic vocations. Choosing the tail end of sexploitation’s industrial lifespan, Biller situates her drama in the epochal year that would signal the arrival of the publicly exhibited hard-core feature, most notably with the porno-chic of *Deep Throat* (dir. Gerard Damiano, US, 1972). Biller employs the style of sexploitation’s more expansive, larger-budgeted incarnations, setting her film in a moment when the hybridity of adult cinema was confusing the boundaries between legitimate arts and illegitimate entertainments: for exam-



Sexploitation's object-world restaged in *Viva*. Photo still

© Anna Biller. Photo by C. Thomas Lewis

ple, in the coexistence of hard-core, soft-core, adult art-house, and “mature” Hollywood releases.⁹

Considered a *Far from Heaven* (dir. Todd Haynes, US, 2002) for the sexploitation cinephile,¹⁰ *Viva's* meticulous reconstruction evokes the swinger film subgenre of sexploitation most generally and Radley Metzger's lush color soft-core films and the commodified landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s more specifically.¹¹ Through the frame of the historical sexploitation genre, the film resignifies the broader period's consumer objects and artifacts into bearers of retrospective affect and a specific form of erotic historicity. The cinematic erotics of *Viva* is driven by a nostalgia for the look and feel of objects embalmed and enlivened within the historical sexploitation mise-en-scène. This fascination with the object, with the negligible things that clutter the frame of film history, is contingent on a retrospective, cinephilic mode of spectatorship and is certainly facilitated by the freeze-frame, pause-and-rewind functions of video and digital viewing technologies.¹² As Laura Mulvey has so eloquently articulated, the present moment of digital media allows the contemporary spectator to see the history of cinema through the act of the stilling of the frame,

returning to cinema the individual moment of indexical inscription with a particular and uncanny vengeance. She states that the "now-ness of story time gives way to the then-ness of the time when the movie was made and its images take on social, cultural or historical significance, reaching out into its surrounding world."¹³ *Viva's* aesthetic is especially emboldened by the capacities of such a form of historical recall and dissection of mise-en-scène, as the object-world of the late 1960s recorded in sexploitation cinema gestures toward a broader understanding of the period's attitudes and cultural sensibilities.

The retro predilection for the recent past has long been a cyclical feature of reappropriative popular cultural production. Elizabeth Guffey's art historical study of the persistent traditions of revivalism that threads through twentieth-century modern art and design reminds us that "retro" as an aesthetic strategy "memorializes not just the Modern past, but also the utopian and optimistic ideas of these earlier eras."¹⁴ Within the field of film production, where the force of retro aesthetics often intersects with the industrial impulses of the remake, the late 1960s to mid-1970s period of film culture and cultural history has been particularly prone for resuscitation in Hollywood, ranging from the comically ribald revisionism of the swinging sexual revolution in Jay Roach's *Austin Powers* franchise (*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, US, 1997; *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, US, 1999; *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, US, 2002) to the slick remake of Las Vegas crime caper in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* (US, 2001), and from the modernization of the Doris Day/Rock Hudson screwball dyad in Peyton Reed's *Down with Love* (US/Germany, 2003) to Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's homage to the low-budget, bloody action films of the 1970s in *Grindhouse* (US, 2007). Television has also not been immune to the pull of this particular era: the recent series *Mad Men* (AMC, US, 2007–) and *Swingtown* (CBS, US, 2008) have kept audiences beguiled as much in their logics of period detail as in their narratives of erotic experimentation. Yet sexploitation cinema has been resistant to similar treatment, though it garners a retrospective fascination for a small, yet growing, coterie of cult film buffs. Bedraggled in

both its cultural status and its generic (in)consistency, it is a mode that has retained its patina of “sleazy” double-entendre and barely veiled prurient intent. As a dystopian cultural form culled from a period of largely utopian discursive promise, sexploitation’s sexual skepticism and wariness regarding the pleasures of free love and sexual liberation refuse easy incorporation into the trajectory of retro-appropriation. While the erotic syntax of sexploitation may have been incorporated into more upmarket fare—in Hollywood’s shifts in the 1970s toward a variety of mature content and soft-core sex, and in the development of the soft-core cable market—sexploitation’s generic features and gendered problematics have been recalcitrant for recuperation as film art.

The peculiarity and insistence of Biller’s creative project is located in her choice of object and the sincerity of her recreation of the dramatic and spatial universe of sexploitation film, reanimated precisely through the affect of discomfort it provokes in latter-day audiences as well as through the film’s divergence into other historical genres. Yet to fully understand *Viva* it is necessary to look at the contemporary status of sexploitation film as a mode of production, which bears its own cache and contours in terms of reception spheres and retrospective viewership.

Sexploitation Film as Cultist Time Capsule:

An Embarrassment of Riches

The finiteness of sexploitation film as a mode of film practice, the films’ quick obsolescence with the advent of hard-core pornography, the visibility of their seams of production, and the nostalgia that circulates around their sites of exhibition, particularly the “grindhouse,” have given them an atypical if unique place in the pantheon of cult film objects. The video and DVD market for late 1960s and 1970s exploitation cinema has considerably expanded in previous years beyond the primary distributor of sexploitation films, Something Weird Video, as other DVD distributors such as eI Cinema, with its Retro-Seduction, New York Grindhouse, and After Hours Cinema product lines, have rereleased low-budget

soft-core features of the period—and in some cases expanded the available work of soft-core auteurs such as Joe Sarno, Nick Phillips, and others. Other companies, such as Synapse Films, produce the series *42nd Street Forever*, which mobilizes an often-problematic nostalgia for the imagined “seediness” and carnivalesque environment of grindhouse exhibition into collections that approximate or hearken back to the conditions of these films’ reception. For example, one such collection anthologizes trailers of schlock films of the 1970s that would have shown in the theaters. Touristically tinged critical forays into the “shadow world” of the adult theater and the red-light district of the 1960s and 1970s have also contributed to this paracinematic taste market, a place where cultural history and film history intersect.¹⁵

Neither explicit enough to be marked as transgressive as hard-core pornography, nor polished or sophisticated enough to give them the standing of art, sexploitation films have thus accrued the status of the “bad object,” relegated to the province of the “trash” specialist who trades in a panoply of cult film oddities such as the drive-in and B-movie, the educational scare film, the clunky horror film, and the vintage stag film. As artifacts of a subterranean cinema, they inadvertently make visible their filmic labor and the inevitability of its failure. Examining this mythos of failure, Jeffrey Sconce has analyzed how cult film audiences attached to such “bad films”—which he brackets under the umbrella of “paracinema”—privilege extratextual, nondiegetic references. Paracinematic audiences direct the sweep of their attention outward toward their conditions of production, a practice that is a result of the films’ refusal of dominant modes of narrative organization and continuity. Sconce writes,

Paracinematic attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film’s failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms. . . . [It] seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text.¹⁶

As a result of the failure of conventions of a broadly defined realism, sexploitation films vacillate between being unsuccessful fictions to bearers of documentary fact, their profilmic details serving as an index of the scene of their own haphazard construction. The failed illusionist space opens up another form of reading that can fixate, in a cinephilic fashion, on revelatory moments where the border between diegesis and extra-diegesis, on-screen and offscreen space, text and extra-text, breaks down. Counter to the notion of the “classic” that aspires to “timelessness,” the sexploitation text is inscribed by its inability to translate to the present or “travel well.” A common refrain in vernacular and journalistic criticism regarding independent films from the 1960s is their treatment as sometimes embarrassing “time capsules.” While the time capsule constructs a package in advance for a presumed (awestruck) audience in the future, the paracinema spectator salvages the scraps of the unintentional, suggesting that the value of these cinematic artifacts of the 1960s resides in their temporal traction.

Writing in the wake of the broadening video circulation of 1960s sexploitation cinema, veteran film critic Richard Corliss in the late 1990s characterized the aesthetic of these films viewed in retrospect. Discussing the *Olga* roughie series of the mid-1960s, a series of sado-masochistically inclined exposes of drug- and vice-laden brothels run by an imperious, bisexual madam,¹⁷ Corliss writes,

They were . . . paradigms of the Sixties exploitation anti-style: spectacularly uninflected readings from bald, massive, pot-bellied, hunched over actors incapable of taking the simplest direction (like, “Joe, could you please shave your back?”); actresses with oily pores, tons of cellulite, and faces as hard as triple-X porn; mesh stockings and black bras, and for the men, boxers, not briefs. The cinematography is splotchy, grainy, B&W, noir so noir it’s nul. The degeneration of low quality film stock of the Sixties, especially when duped for many generations and transferred to video, is like the next generation of HDTV: for actors it accentuates the negative, brings out the veins and bruises on the skin, folds in the tummy. It’s a miracle that anyone looks good in these movies.¹⁸

Conflating a corporeal aesthetic of imperfection with sexploitation's economic, aesthetic, and archival impoverishment, Corliss focuses on the excessive, over-present materiality that attracts a retrospective gaze onto the films. In the "dated sexuality" of the sexploitation film the traces of the historical get deposited within a micro-aesthetics of banal details. Even nude bodies can be periodized, stamped by time, as well as indicative of a time past. Flesh fuses with the degradation of the film stock, marking the "objectness" of sexploitation as an obsolete form, in both its physical, cultural, archival, and ideological decay. For Corliss, the sexploitation film, a genre that was obsolete even before it ended, accrues value through the logic of depletion, in its underground reproduction and circulation.

It is common to come across reviewers in fanzines, online websites, and cult forums privileging elements of their profilmic reality as a form of historical salvaging. For example, one can discover the retrospective joys of viewing the quotidian Times Square streetscapes in Barry Mahon's leaden potboilers and the documentation of the details of middle-class apartments used as filming locations in the work of Doris Wishman. Reviewers indulge in the saturated colors and textures of Los Angeles motel rooms and apartment pools in the late 1960s films produced by Harry Novak, or take glory in the details of women's period fashion and accoutrements: mod dresses, go-go boots, black lace undergarments, filmy negligees, and bouffant hairdos adorning the bodies of sexploitation's amateur actresses.¹⁹ Thus the spectatorial identifications circulating around sexploitation films in the present exchange the rickety diegesis, which always threatens to unseat itself due to budgeting exigencies and the specter of the failure of verisimilitude and normative narrative plausibility, for the function of the document.²⁰

This converts sexploitation's fictional universe into a historical panorama, a museological archive. This retinue of objects, places, bodies, this "redemption of physical reality," in the words of Siegfried Kracauer, gives sexploitation films the air of documents of obsolescence, in which the lost world of things and bodies of the 1960s is preserved for the outré cinema specialist, made an

amateur historian tout court. Although Kracauer wrote about the still image in his essay on photography, his insights presage this refurbished paracinematic sensibility. In the photograph of the grandmother, Kracauer claims that what strikes us is the opacity of the old things in the photo, the disjunction between the transparency of the person and the stoppage linked to our inspection of the effects and remains of the past object-world.²¹ The grandmother's crinoline and the chignon become the things through which history is recognized and the passage of time palpably felt. Stating that the "spatial appearance of an object is its meaning" (52), Kracauer writes,

These trappings, whose lack of transparency one experiences in the old photograph, used to be inseparably meshed with the transparent aspects. This terrible association evokes a shudder. . . . Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today. Nothing of these contains us, and the photograph gathers fragments around a nothing. (54–56)

For Kracauer the body and visage of the grandmother become unrecognizable just as the supplemental surroundings and decorative things that encircle it persist in their difference. The illusory coevalness of body and thing in the photograph seen in its own moment is ruptured by the passing of time, where only the thing remains, an empty carapace. The valence of Kracauer's observations rubs against Corliss's critical rendering of the recursive materiality of exploitation bodies, of sexploitation cinema as a reproduced body of films, and the materiality of the filmic image itself. The sexed body in sexploitation, in Corliss's estimation, reduced to the thingness of imperfect skin, still has purchase on the spectatorial imaginary precisely through its aesthetic deprivation, archival impoverishment, and historical recency. If Kracauer's reading attests to the receding matter, the withdrawing import of the photographed body as it becomes unrecognizable over an extending span of time, in exchange for the overpresent import of things, we can see the pull of sexploitation cinema as one that forces a continuity between bodies and things, made equally stubborn and mute in their opacity.

Viva, 1960s Material Culture, and the Skin Flick

Anna Biller's cinema has always engaged with these concerns of the material heft of film history, its textures attesting to the purchase of cinematic things, the negligible objects of mise-en-scène, on spectatorial fantasy. Biller, a Los Angeles-based Japanese American artist, received her bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of California, Los Angeles and her master of fine arts in art and film from the California Institute of the Arts. This training certainly has oriented her aesthetic preoccupations, evident from her first short films: *Three Examples of Myself as Queen* (US, 1994), *The Lady Cat* (US, 2001), *A Visit from the Incubus* (US, 2001), and *The Hypnotist* (US, 2001). These artisanal early works negotiate the materialist resonance of studio-based genre filmmaking, recombining and recycling the formal touchstones and spectacular pleasures of the Hollywood musicals, westerns, and melodramas of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.²² In restaging the mise-en-scène of film historical modes, Biller's films seize on the "décor of detail," finding in the object-world of the studio set a redemptive aesthetic.²³

Viva extends Biller's concerns from this earlier work. In conception, *Viva* began with the photograph, an attempt to conceive a creative relation to the cinematic past through the still image. Biller had written a script around the general theme of female sexual desire, then scrapped it. After encountering and being inspired by some old *Playboy* magazines, she did a photo series with friends by a pool in a South Bay apartment complex, staging a scenario of a 1960s-era swinging alcoholic couple. More photo series followed, and the idea for the film, visualized in the photographs, which resembled sexploitation film stills, was given definitive shape. Working backward, against the grain of the teleological assumptions regarding the trajectory of film production, Biller's creative practice had seized on the ancillary materials, the traces and ephemera of the narrative of film production, as her starting point. Similarly, Biller's appropriative aesthetic moves from the source materials of consumer culture outward toward filmic conception; her filmmaking practice in *Viva* is infused with details garnered from a variety of cultural objects such as magazines, dec-

orating books, and advertisements, as well as the material archives of fashion and interior design.

The film engages with sexploitation itself as a plentiful repository of such sociohistorical detail, reanimating the profilmic object-world of the sexploitation frame through an acknowledgment of the delicate tension, the mutable border between bodies and things, subjects and objects. *Viva*, while employing elements of camp humor, takes sexploitation seriously. It uses the artifactual nature of the genre to stage an intervention through the materiality of what I have called elsewhere a film historical imaginary.²⁴ Biller's resuscitation of the "dead" codes of sexploitation is a mark of her own reception and spectatorship, in which the stilted conventions of sexual representation in the soft-core sexploitation era become sites of discomfort, intermingled with pleasure. This kind of critical faculty is reflected by Biller's status as a woman working through a set of dramatic and generic devices authored primarily by men and organized around male desire. In this sense, *Viva*'s distinct style implies a different relationship to the film historical past vis-à-vis the sexploitation film: as it constructs a profilmic landscape of consumer objects, objects that signify the aspirations and disappointments of the historical past, its material details are given life through the lens of female subjectivity. Biller has stated that she wanted to make a sexploitation film for a female audience. In this sense, the film diagrams a form of contemporary female spectatorship of the 1960s sexploitation genre, in Biller's aesthetic, performative, and literal habitation within the genre's anachronisms.

Biller's narrative in *Viva* deploys some of the stock arcs of the sexploitation film in its high period in the late 1960s, elaborating on the life of Barbi (played by Biller herself) and her neighbor Sheila, who follow a path of erotic self-exploration in their departure from the constraining space of suburban Los Angeles domesticity and their arrival in "the city." This is a remaking of the self that stages the performance of historical and generic cliché. For example, Sheila encourages the more demure Barbi to take off her bra, stating, "This is the seventies; we're liberated women now. We're dressing for ourselves." Set against the dramatic



Viva's Barbi and Rick amid shag textures. Photo still
© Anna Biller. Photo by Steve Dietl

action, this canned statement can easily read as “we’re undressing for ourselves,” and marks an entry point into a new set of stereotypes and gendered expectations. The two friends attempt to find adventure in a consecutive set of bohemian relationships amid a new class of purportedly liberated acquaintances: the demimonde photographer, the nudist hippie musician, the pretentious theater producer who is a sexual predator at heart. Much as 1960s sexploitation films—for example, *Agony of Love* or *Free Love Confidential* (dir. Gordon Heller, US, 1967)—depended on the articulation of female frustration and domestic boredom as a narrative route to an elaboration of the ends, and usually ill consequences, of female sexual hunger, *Viva* too appears as if a story structured around the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale: an innocent among a pack of wolves, irrespective of their mod clothing.²⁵

However, it is the specific formal construction of the film and its mise-en-scène, as well as its engagement with the conventions of sexploitation, hybridly combined with motifs of 1930s- and 1950s-era Hollywood musicals, that makes *Viva* an interesting

departure from the contemporary penchant for retro homage or period film re-creation. *Viva* instead addresses an audience that is both cognizant of the codes of the sexploitation film and also wary of the easy pleasures of condescension they may often provoke. Ironic reading practices of “bad” films, formerly indebted to the queer cultural practice of camp, have now been reified as a sub-cultural gesture of distinction and transgressive consumer taste. This dilution and popularization of camp reception depends on a triangulation of positions between the contemporary spectator, the sexploitation film’s imagined original audience, and the film itself, in which a notion of enlightenment and progress undergirds haughty derision and hale laughter. Yet *Viva* more delicately traverses this conundrum of retrospective spectatorship, asking at whose expense such pop camp laughter can take place. If there is pleasure given in recognition, there is also an affect of nagging discomfort present in the film. The film produces an unease from its juxtaposition of a fidelity to sexploitation’s generic codes and an infidelity that leads toward the miming of other models of spectacle and excess, drawn from Hollywood’s studio period. I would argue that Biller employs this discomfort as a politicized aesthetic strategy.²⁶

The opening sequence is a prime example of the kinds of discomfort and disjunction in generic recognition the film encourages. The viewer is introduced to Mark (Jared Sanford) and Sheila (Bridget Brno), Barbi’s neighbors, who are lolling by their sparkling blue pool in the early afternoon, their polyester costuming complementing the color-coordinated palette of yellow and white lawn chairs. Mark and Sheila, both wearing stiff wigs, dialog in a stilted style of overenunciation and double-entendre, joking that their whiskey and a copy of *Playboy* magazine are their version of coffee and a morning paper. As Sheila begins to page through the *Playboy*, sitting by the pool, she petulantly remarks that while the girls are pretty, none of them have a bust to match hers. Mark chimes in to agree, randily stating, “Yes, honey, you have grrreat tits!” in a leering tone that falls utterly flat yet, in its juxtaposition to the kinds of coy doublespeak of the time period, lays bare the libidinal motivations of the mimed genre. Barbi arrives, her red-belted mini-

dress sharply contrasting with Sheila's white-and-yellow ensemble. Her lines are delivered with deadening pauses, and a discomfiting self-conscious flitting of her eyelashes, as she relays that her visit is the product of "sheer boredom" because her husband, Rick, has abandoned her for an unannounced day of overtime at the office. The scene's sense of timing approximates sexploitation film's often turgid pacing, but also gives the viewer space to survey the rich *mise-en-scène*. Shot setups also mime the conventions of sexploitation, as medium long shots and stationary framing establish the social space of erotic ennui, its oppressive temporality. Barbi spies Sheila reading the *Playboy* and at first acts scandalized. Barbi shortly succumbs to a play of corporeal comparison, during which our lead heroines strip to matching yellow and red bikinis and begin to pose for Mark, who has a gadget camera in hand. Mark's leering, punctuated by an "Oh, boy!" and google-eyed stare, lurches into burlesque as he urgently snaps away while the women pose.

The speech uttered by often-amateur actors in 1960s sexploitation films, characterized by dramatic hyperboles, stuttering pauses, and sometimes inept delivery, is reconfigured in *Viva* into a set of historical referents, both cinematic and social, oscillating at once from the quotidian to the histrionic.²⁷ On the one hand, the stilted lines often spouted by Mark, Sheila, and Bar-



Performing historicity, histrionic, and quotidian, *Viva*. Photo still © Anna Biller. Photo by Steve Dietl

bi act as quotations or shorthand that condense a set of presumptions regarding historical performance that sits on the precipice between realist authenticity and amateurish excess. On the other hand, the content of what is said is perfectly pitched to congeal a stereotype of late 1960s social mores as they crept into the suburban middle-class milieu—the characters’ desires to belong, to be modern and contemporary in the consumer market of eroticized leisure. The film has a quality of uncanny pastiche, in which the reproduction of the horizon of hedonistic yet highly styled consumption of the period becomes a staging ground for employing the valences of the past as a space for fantasy. Richard Dyer has written regarding the affective potentialities of pastiche, in that “its inescapable historicity facilitates our feeling the sources of our feeling . . . [,] that sense of the presence of the past in pastiche is not just something cerebrally observed but felt.”²⁸ Aesthetic codes are materialized through the stuff, the visible surfaces of filmic space. Anna Biller’s cinema embodies such a charge of fusing affect in relation to the limits of historicity.

Biller culled some of the material for her dramatic scenarios from cartoons in *Playboy* and period advertisements for cigarettes, liquor, and other leisure products. Biller’s choice of this particular archive of print culture gives the film a feeling of recursive cultural referentiality. In one sequence drawn from the erotic cartoons of the men’s magazines, Biller manifests an affect of unease in the viewer through the combination of dramatic action and comedy. Barbi is seen in the office of her boss, Mr. Humphreys, where she sits on his desk to take dictation as the throaty-voiced older man circles around her. As Humphreys talks about the tasks of the day, there is a cut to a zoom shot of Barbi’s bosom, then a cut to another zoom of Barbi’s legs, both from his point of view. Humphreys begins to molest Barbi, exclaiming, “It isn’t the merger I want, it’s you Miss Smith!” There is a cut to a close-up of Barbi’s clothed torso, as the boss rips open her shirt and begins to gruffly maul her breasts, which are anchored in a highly architectonic white Playtex “Cross My Heart” bra. This close-up short-circuits any possible eroticism expected of this scene, since it disallows nudity but also the tease of an eroticized violation, as in the conventions



Biller directing and acting in one of *Viva's* rape scenes.

Photo still © Anna Biller. Photo by Steve Dietl

of the 1960s "roughie" film, a staple of the sexploitation arena that deployed scenarios of sexual violence combined with nudity. Instead, the "punchline" uttered by Humphreys as Barbi runs out, "But, Miss Smith, I wasn't done promoting you yet!" underlines the strategically failed comedy of the scene. In the scene's shift from tossed-off male fantasy to feminist reenactment, Biller allows for a disjunction between the historically blithe misogyny of the original cartoon. Biller's subjection of her character and of the viewer to the residual forms of "antiquated" gender conventions evokes a certain form of masochistic performative endurance that can be seen as co-extensive with traditions of feminist artistic practice, from Carolee Schneemann to Cindy Sherman.

Viva is conversant with some of the contemporary spectatorial fascinations with 1960s sexploitation films, through those privileged aspects of the "paracinematic" cultist lexicon, the diegetic details that point outward toward the extradiegetic social world. These details are inflected with a feminist sensibility, in which the utopian promise of the 1960s and early 1970s, rendered through the logic of consumerism, is embedded in a world of "dated" objects and bodies. Gertrud Koch, in her discussion of the cor-

poreal attractions of pornography in its historical contexts, notes that women's encounters with pornography need not amount to a project of negation and a reductive affect of disgust:

The fact that women react ambivalently to pornographic films, torn between fascination and disappointment, may not always be because of a prudish upbringing, which forbids an open view and leads to repulsion and a defensive attitude towards sexuality. It may still be possible for women, in spite of their criticism, to take a utopian view of Pornotopia. This may come to pass if they are able to recognize that utopian plenitude is not to be found in a phallogentric generalization, but rather in the details of a quivering world of objects; and if with their gaze, they manage to create, out of the shadow world, bodies of flesh and blood. Concrete criticism and reception of pornographic cinema, as demonstrated in interviews conducted with women . . . [,] indicate something more than merely women's insufficient understanding of the objective content of pornographic movies; the concrete approach also turns up a different kind of appropriation, one which is reflected in fragments.²⁹

Although Koch is referring to hard-core pornography, her insights regarding the utopian cast of a world of objects that the sexually explicit text constructs speaks rather strongly to Biller's remediation and deployment of the fabric of sexploitation's textuality, reconstructing out of its fragments a complete world of historical fantasy. Here the paracinematic practices of cult viewers link to what Roger Cardinal, in his treatise on the search for the Barthesian "obtuse meaning" in the edges of the film frame, identified as a "pausing over peripheral detail."³⁰ The appropriative aesthetic of *Viva* voraciously plunders and exploits the blurry border between sexploitation's mise-en-scène and the historical mise-en-scène of the 1960s and 1970s. The slippage between diegesis and extra-diegesis, between sexploitation as fictive text and sexploitation as document, that constitutes contemporary spectatorial engagements with the sexploitation film becomes the very terrain of *Viva*'s aesthetic and generic pleasures. The film activates a female gaze on the seemingly obsolete and depleted energies of both sexual liberationist discourse—which feminists have long

criticized for its androcentrism—and sexploitation's promises of covert pleasure. The fragments of the cult cinephile's spectatorial wanderings, crablike within the frame of a sexploitation film, looking for those signs of historical authenticity, of documentary facticity within a rickety fictionalized world, such as the fashions, decor, and banal objects of a past time, are here salvaged and reassembled by a feminist affective aesthetic and a form of intensive artisanal labor. Biller's mode of production filters cultist cinephilia and transforms its stakes toward feminist preoccupations, taking a particular attachment to forgotten film histories and forging out of it a materialist aesthetic practice.

The mode of artisanal labor redolent throughout the fabric of the film is a potent one. In addition to her role as director, lead actor, editor, and producer, Biller found, built, sewed, and designed all thirty-four sets, the myriad costumes for 150 actors, and the props herself. The attentiveness to the materiality of the *mise-en-scène* can be attributed in part to Biller's background as a painter and her art school education. In studying the lifestyle aesthetics of old *Playboy*, fashion and interior design books, and housekeeping magazines from the period, Biller keys the viewer in to the false economic plenitude and existentially empty consumption that undergirds suburban life. Aligned with the prioritization of male consumer culture, the male characters in *Viva* are often used to communicate the era's fusion of erotic utopianism and economic plenitude: during the barbecue Mark and Rick discuss at length the virtues of the best stereo speaker system, and Mark proudly sports the abrasive English Leather cologne, which Sheila has gotten him as a gift, as a badge of virility, stating that "the chicks really dig it." In one of the most stylized, candy-colored sequences, Barbi and Rick's attempt at reconciling their relationship is choreographed through a reenactment of a Winston cigarette advertisement, as Rick emerges from a racing car and stands in front of Barbi, commodified masculine iconicity come to life. Biller's attentiveness to these discourses of conspicuous consumption lays bare the ways that economic concerns, and particularly allegorical economies that bind sex to consumption, undergird the narrative logics of sexploitation cinema.

In addition to culling techniques of display from male consumer culture and its lionization of the bachelor lifestyle, Biller also uses techniques from women's magazines of the 1970s. A barbecue with the two couples early in the film is introduced through overhead shots that span the dining table. The shots yearningly linger over close-ups of hors d'oeuvres such as Swedish meatballs, deviled eggs, Jell-O, and fruit salad, some carefully pierced with toothpicks. Miming the production of domestic lifestyle in these publications, the close-up on the labors of Barbi is rendered a sign of her oppression and simultaneously a metatextual indulgence in the process of reconstruction, as if modeled on the precept of a recipe made from a vintage cookbook.



Period hors d'oeuvres, artisanal labor, *Viva*. Photo still

© Anna Biller. Photo by Karl Lohninger

Biller's vintage *mise-en-scène*, much like a creative redux of an old recipe, embodies a collector sensibility that indulges in a productive form of historical attachment. As her press materials for *Viva* indicate, the most direct pleasures and modes of recognition come from the material reconstruction of the period, in "the big lighting, the plethora of negligées, and the delirious assortment of Salvation Army ashtrays, lamps, fabrics, and bric-a-brac."³¹ This meticulous rearranging of the material world of the past turns the

film into a form of cinematic installation art, drawing attention to the labor of the construction of mise-en-scène as an artisanal product. The experience of watching the film is incontrovertibly intertwined with the constant recognition and pleasure taken in this creative work, made visible and tactile. In contrast to the relatively short shooting time of most sexploitation films of the 1960s and 1970s, Biller worked accumulating props and furniture for sets and scouring for costumes in thrift stores, and shot the film on weekends over the course of three years. Each set required elaborate construction and dismantling. It is perhaps this condition of production that also gives the film its extended sense of temporality, as a series of elaborate tableaux that recall dollhouse dioramas.



Thrift mod aesthetic, *Viva*. Photo still © Anna Biller.

Photo by Karl Lohninger

The sensation of a lived-in world is magnified by the film's thrifted sensibility and its manually refurbished world. The tactile mise-en-scène of *Viva*—its welter of shag rugs, low brocade couches, macramé pot holders, floral textiles, graphic wall art, and pastel chiffon nighties—give a cumulative, layered sense of cultural labor. This profilmic world of objects comes to us made and remade, lived in by others, found again and reinhabited.

Matthew Tinkcom, Joy Fuqua, and Amy Villarejo note that the thrifted object and its potentiality to indicate past use suggest that “tears, stains, outmodedness can teach us about the commodity’s trajectory through production and consumption.”³² In the interview that follows this essay, Biller discusses the appeal of the objects and artifacts she used to create the texture of the film:

This was a world of saturated Eastmancolor, beautiful women, masculine hairy men, heavily gender-related consumer products, Hammond organ and flute sound tracks, false eyelashes, Male Tan #5, blobby abstract artwork and furniture, flesh-toned non-underwire bras and filmy negligees, liquor and cigarettes, Euro-sexy accents, hair with height at the top, weird psychedelic patterns on everything, ashtrays on every table, olive green with purple, brown, yellow, orange, and flesh-pink as a standard color scheme, natural-breasted women in large panties, a world which somehow had feminist jargon, politics, and fashion mixed all up in it.³³

This museological span of objects has a striking resonance, as the paracinematic here is redirected toward the conditions of a feminist spectatorial sensibility. I want to pause on one item in Biller’s list, that of “natural-breasted women in large panties,” which gets buried in its equivalence with other elements of decor and graphics. The female body is sexploitation film’s most loaded carrier of meaning, and the comportment, clothing, and unclothing of these bodies provide the primary erotic charge of this mode of production. It has often been overlooked that the slow change in female body types is the product of the regime of the undergarment—girdles, corsets, brassieres—as well as regimens of beauty, fitness, surgery, and forms of labor. Yet the reading and perception of bodies in terms of their grounding in historicity has a huge role in vernacular criticisms and preferential tastes in varieties of historical erotica, especially the vintage porn market. Biller’s fetishistic focus on period costuming, particularly the quality and specificity of women’s undergarments, attends to the historicity of erotic imagery from this era, in terms of how the female body itself gets “dated” by its physicality or its conformance to particular body types.



Viva's undergarment fetishism. Photo still © Anna Biller.
Photo by Karl Lohninger

Yet the accoutrements of the body garner a frisson of period detail as well, in that particular styles of undergarments, like the bullet bra, or the black lace panties that so frequently appear in many sexploitation films, become themselves metonyms for the genre. Witness Lisa Petrucci, one of the few female reviewers, and co-owner of the primary sexploitation video distribution company Something Weird Video, in her delirium regarding Doris Wishman's *Sex Perils of Paulette* (US, 1965), a film that "contains more black bras and undies, stilettos and black eyeliner, than you can shake a stick at."³⁴ Biller resignifies these garments, commonly sites of male fetishistic desire, as a mark of her own cinematic reading practice and as the film's *metteur-en-scène*. Biller's cinematic pleasure in these ephemeral details is emboldened by the fact that she stars in the film as its primary erotic object, suggesting a desire to occupy the space of the amateur starlet's body in her period adornments.³⁵

Biller's recreation of a total world of objects creates an alternately uncanny and sublime sense of scale and composition, an effect that is also produced through the use of highly saturated color in the film. For example, in the scene in the hairdresser's



At the hairdresser's, *Viva*. Photo still © Anna Biller.

Photo by Mariel Lohninger

apartment, Barbi's costume—a red blouse and white skirt with white vinyl go-go boots—is positioned against a red, white, and blue color scheme in the decor. As Barbi sits to have her hair done, we see resting behind her an oversized red and blue painting of large lips with a lipstick tube placed in front of them, in the style of pop artist Tom Wesselmann. The hairstylist's neighbor enters, and his blue leisure pants and blue and red striped shirt painfully match the interior of the room, creating a sense of visual overload. In another scene, as Barbi and Rick are fighting over breakfast, a color palette of yellow (in the kitchen) and pastel blue (in Rick's leisure suit) and turquoise blue (in the walls of the dining area) is accented by yellow-toned paintings of flowers behind each of their heads and accentuates the developing rift between the couple, as each shot, in the shot-reverse-shot schema, recombines the proportions of the color palette. As Rick gets angry and stands up preparing to leave, he backs out into the orange-toned living room, as the threshold between the dining and living area escalates the shift from cool to warm color, from sky blue to rust orange, evoking the previous highlights in the bright yellow paintings on the wall above the table. Barbi's negligee in this scene is notably yellow and blue, fusing the tones of the scene's color palette.

Biller creates aesthetic tension through color and composition, since the eye must continually juggle and balance the graphic quality of all the elements, background, foreground, human figures, and ornaments as objects within the planes of the frame. This effects a flattening, in which the space of the filmic image becomes abstracted into more graphic compositions of color, line, shape, and texture—bodies become things among things, and figure and ground coalesce. This aesthetic approaches a painterly effect of abstraction, speaking to both Biller's artistic training as well as her unique intermedial weaving of texts. At times even Barbi's blue-green eyeshadow is used as a graphic element, complementing or drawing out the color dynamics in given scenes, often heightened by the use of close-ups. Biller further remarks that the

objects, colors, and textures of the sixties and seventies . . . created for me a world separate from the narrative. . . . [They] became the intense focus of the film. . . . When I gathered [them], I was trying to reproduce my own experience of looking at the movies and magazines. I felt astonishment, excitement, revulsion, pleasure, shock, and I wanted to give this to the audience.³⁶

Beyond its status as an aesthetic, the staging of the material archive of the 1960s and early 1970s as a diorama or an art installation, which Biller as director and star enters and inhabits, gives the film an overarching sense of time travel. This performs a type of spectatorial fantasy, enacting the desire to enter the remade frame of a film, taking the presumption of aesthetic immersion to another level by combining Biller's role as both author and actor. Biller makes her experience of retrospective spectatorship a model for the film viewer.

By privileging the material, the "quivering world of objects," and in the prioritization of the artifice of this world's construction, the film also creates an ideological equivalence between the human and the thing. All of the characters are in some sense stock types from the sexploitation universe: the hippie nudist musician; the crass, self-indulgently macho Mark; the epicene bohemian photographer Clyde; the Ken-doll husband Rick; and Barbi herself. Furthermore, almost all of the primary male characters wear rigid,

artificial-looking wigs, giving their performances a requisite stiffness and constriction. The resonance with dolls, themselves a form of anthropomorphized objects, is most strongly felt in the naming of Barbi as the female lead. There seems to be a competition if not a reversal between the woodenness of the characters, reduced to things, and the vivacity of the material mise-en-scène, brought to life. Biller renegotiates mediated commodity forms: sexploitation and its rickety conventions; the aesthetic frames and “dated” discourses of men’s magazines; women’s domestic culture; and 1960s advertising, interior design, and fashion. In turn she achieves a revivification of the banal, insignificant detail, configuring the historical object as a nexus of affect and fantasy.

Biller’s multiple roles as director, screenwriter, star, art director, and set and costume designer are further complicated by her mixed race, Japanese-American identity, and her own stated desire to put herself, as a minoritarian subject, into the film historical picture, as a creative practice of “rewriting history.”³⁷ Her self-positioning in relation to the historical past can be seen as operating as what in another context Elizabeth Freeman has called a form of “temporal drag,” in the “stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceed her own historical moment.”³⁸ Biller’s form of temporal drag attends to race—with Biller as Barbi enacting the gasping naïveté of the white girl next door. But another form of nonsynchronous drag, on the level of direction, is also visible. The pre-Stonewall sensibility of camp taste—in a film such as James Bidgood’s *Pink Narcissus* (US, 1971), for example, or even in the Kuchar brothers’ and Jack Smith’s devotional relationships to B-grade Hollywood glamour—becomes another vector for Biller’s aesthetic affinities. Biller’s stylistic preoccupations align with a historical form of camp as a defining feature of gay male cultural production, its indulgence in the sincere excesses of kitsch. However, *Viva* exceeds the implicit condescension of a retro-parodic text, instead taking the terms and conventions of sexploitation seriously, speaking through its political and aesthetic flaws, not in spite of them.

Viva’s predicament of positioning, in its reconstruction of a text as if, following Sontag, it was unintentionally camp, accounts

for the film's spotty critical reception; many critics want the film to be intentional camp so as to better make sense of it, or at least to better make sense of their own discomfort and desire for irony in a relatively unironic text. The film's staunchly sincere stance in its replication of sexploitation has considerably troubled even the most enthusiastic critics, raising concerns about the film's questionable irony and its promises of eroticism but its failure to deliver, as well as queries about the film's necessary length. For example, Manohla Dargis stated in the *New York Times*, "The depravity never becomes remotely depraved because Ms. Biller, despite her commitment to verisimilitude, maintains an ironic detachment throughout—because she's a Brechtian or a bad actress, or perhaps both,"³⁹ while Vadim Rizov at the *Village Voice* was more severe in his assessment, stating that he had tired of the film after thirty minutes: "[I had] gotten the joke—though Biller's re-creation is not only right-on but rigorous; the early shots of suburban Cali in particular are so perfectly framed as to suggest a weird structuralist goof. For fans of the work of Charles Busch and other like-minded spoofs only."⁴⁰ The tension between acknowledging the structural pretexts and conceptual armature of the film sits in an uneasy dynamic with the expectation of the particular pleasures the film as a perceived genre parody or sex film might offer. The liminal positioning of the film between an arthouse framework and a cultist frame has also made it illegible or somewhat opaque for audiences in either sphere. This problematic is also evident in the film's exhibition and distribution. Since the film's completion, it has circulated and screened widely among international and regional film festivals of various stripes: from large- and medium-sized international festivals, such as Rotterdam (2007), Melbourne (2007), Moscow (2007), and Torino (2007), to many specialty and underground film festivals, including New York Underground (2007) and Cinevegas (2008), as well as more academic and one-off art-house venues. Still, an attempt at a distribution deal for the film, with a one-week run at New York's independent theater Cinema Village in 2008, met with low box-office returns. The film made its way to DVD by 2009, released by the video label Cult Epics.⁴¹ For the very same reasons that *Viva* embodies an erotic temporality

that is anachronistic and out of a proper time, it has also troubled genre expectations, and has thus been relegated to the mercurial bracket of a cult marketplace and audience.

Conclusion

Although *Viva* so viscerally deploys the aesthetic charge of the 1960s and 1970s, the film has its own mode of internal anachronism that breaks with the conventions of sexploitation and departs into another historical genre, the Hollywood musical. The musical sequences serve ironically as modes of articulating characters' subjectivity as well as of providing the most sustained and excessive forms of visual spectacle, motives that are seemingly at odds. The musical numbers in a sense shift the fetish of erotic spectacle in the film across generic codes, but also serve as counterpoints to moments of more explicit seduction or sexual assault. The most climactic scene on the level of spectacle is the orgy scene, an openly citational homage to Radley Metzger's *Camille 2000* (US/Italy, 1969). The prison/Roman orgy motif in the original Metzger scene is overlaid with the musical performance of Barbi in her most fetishistically eroticized form, channeling Marlene Dietrich's "Hot Voodoo" number in Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (US, 1932). At this point in the narrative, following a string of disappointing or disturbing sexual encounters in which free love did not seem to equalize the erotic playing field, Barbi has escaped the bonds of married life and has shackled up with the mod photographer Clyde, with whom she has refused to have sex. The orgy scene functions as the convergence of all of the vectors of erotic interest in Barbi, who upon her entry into the sexual revolution has changed her name to Viva. Mark, sans Sheila, is at the party, as is the British theater producer who in a prior scene had raped Viva, along with Clyde, whose sexual frustration is at a boiling point. All of these characters express their unsatisfied desire for Viva as she states to one admirer, "I turn you on? I turn *everyone* on!" The roiling of sexual energies around Viva reaches its apotheosis through the musical number, as party guests cavort on beds and parade around in chained collars and silver lamé and togas.



Musical genre and sexploitation modes collide, *Viva*.

Photo still © Anna Biller. Photo by Steve Dietl

A group of dancers in “primitivist” African-inflected garb begin circulating on the stage around Viva in a tribal prelude as the music’s tempo shifts. Viva is adorned in a sequined gold costume with an elaborate fan-shaped gold headdress with a fringe that widely frames her face. Viva begins to sing a song (composed and sung by Biller) about budding desire, as the drummers beat their bongos. The song ends in a crescendo of drumming, with numerous close-up shots of Viva’s face as she slowly collapses and is taken on an opulent Egyptian mat to Clyde’s bedroom by a group of “slaves.” Clyde has tainted her drink with some pills and plans to forcibly have sex with her, and the rape-as-sex scene that follows draws again directly from Metzger, specifically the rack focus camellias that signify the orgasm of Camille in *Camille 2000*. Biller makes this scene her own by ending the orgasm and articulating the interiority of Viva through a psychedelic animation sequence that bridges the diegetic and extradiegetic through the image of a bitten apple—the apple being the object that Clyde had bitten into just prior to bedding down with the sedated Viva, and the perspective from which the rack focus quotation occurs. The song and the musical sequence is a place where Viva is most spectacularly given voice outside of the terms of those who desire her.

That Biller chooses to interject the motifs of the Hollywood musical into the generic framework of the sexploitation film seems peculiar, but it connects a configuration of old Hollywood excess with the revived world of late-1960s sexploitation, infusing the extravagances and glamour of the former into the latter. The anachronism of the musical seems a disruption of some of the “realist” tendencies of the film—particularly the quotidian ennui of the suburbia sections—but also posits an alternate utopian space, the stylization of grande-dame performance, within the context of the failed idealism of the sexual revolution as a frame. It was the queer surrealist film critic Parker Tyler who lamented the passing of the film diva and the arrival of the sex goddess in the mid-1960s, noting the end to an archly styled form of gender performance seen in the likes of Mae West and Greta Garbo, a form of self-making that spoke through the bars of film industrial restraint.⁴² In a world in which Viva/Barbi should gain liberation, she finds instead a series of rapes and forms of sexual coercion, even if expressed through a comic picaresque mode. Thus, a return to the form of the musical offers Viva momentary escape through performance. Ironically, the remote film historical past marked by the genre of the 1930s musical was a period even more defined by censorial limitations and prohibitions on eroticism.

The conclusion of the film sees Viva return to her staid domestic life as Barbi, attending dutifully again to the needs of her husband. That is, until the theater producer calls, stating that “everyone’s bored to death with nudity now” and offering her a role in an “old-fashioned” stage musical. The finale witnesses Barbi and Sheila singing in red sequined gowns directly to the camera, citing Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe’s “Two Little Girls from Little Rock” number in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1953), itself mediated by another intertext, that of Jacques Demy’s *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (France, 1967). The sexual revolution ends thus with a return to the fantasy of gendered performance of the 1950s, a counterintuitive stab against the presumption of liberation as progress. Biller’s fantasmatic extravagance creates an anti-teleological trajectory in which different film historical periods, in their images and imaginings of eroticism, intersect and overlap.

Biller's reconstruction of sexploitation film as a living artifact raises a number of questions regarding the ways that "dated sexuality" as a preferential sensibility narrates and makes sense of the film historical past. Biller's specifically female authorship and her mapping of her own mode of reception of the cinematic past, mediated through fragments, ultimately reproduces some of 1960s sexploitation's claims regarding the dangers of sexual liberation for women. At the same time, *Viva's* overt indulgence in the pleasures of the materials of the past, in the life-world and "spatial continuum" of the cinema, poses a more productive negotiation with historical fantasy. While sexploitation presumed a largely male audience, the plenitude of the images of the film provides contemporary female audiences an entry point into a counterhistorical sphere, a different horizon of cinematic experience.

Notes

I am grateful to many friends and colleagues who provided feedback and guidance in the writing of this article. Thanks to the audience of the Philadelphia Cinema and Media Studies Seminar, where I presented a version of this essay in May 2008, and for the sharp insights of my respondent Patricia White. Thanks also to Chris Cagle, Oliver Gaycken, Carla Marcantonio, Ellen Scott, Karl Schoonover, and Bob Rehak, who read the essay in various stages of its development. Special thanks must go to Anna Biller for generously sharing her work with me and for the ongoing conversation about her creative practice. The completion of this essay was supported by a University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Graduate School Research Committee Award.

1. For the definitive account of the classical exploitation film and an analysis of the conditions that allowed for the emergence of sexploitation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, see Eric Schaefer's formidable history *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
2. Linda Williams, epilogue to *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 280–316.

3. Jennifer Wicke, "Through a Gaze Darkly: Pornography's Academic Market," in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: BFI, 2004), 183.
4. I do not mean to suggest that gender is the dominant logic through which these cultural forms bear meaning, as there are certainly also pockets of these modes that address and engage with gay, lesbian, and queer sexual histories and forms of identification. Rather, I am pointing to the ways that the dominant gendered scripts, drawn from the archives of erotic and pornographic culture, get mobilized, and how these scripts are reflexively acknowledged, repeated with a difference, within phenomena such as vintage porn and neoburlesque.
5. One example of such reticence is Tania Modleski's delayed publication and stated reservations regarding her essay on female sexploitation auteur Doris Wishman. Tania Modleski, "Women's Cinema as Counterphobic Cinema: Doris Wishman, the Last Auteur," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 47–71. In the mid-1970s, within the developing critical contexts of feminist film criticism, critics also looked to instances of the possibility of exploitation films as a potential arena for women's filmmaking practice. One such example was the attention paid to the work of Stephanie Rothman. See Pam Cook, "Exploitation Films and Feminism," *Screen* 7, no. 2 (1976): 122–27.
6. See Moya Luckett, "Sexploitation as Feminine Territory: The Films of Doris Wishman," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Marc Jancovich, Antonio Lazaro Rebol, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 142–56; and Kristen Hatch, "The Sweeter the Kitten the Sharper the Claws: Russ Meyer's Bad Girls," in *Bad: Infamy, Evil, and Slime on Screen*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 143–55.
7. Pam Cook, "The Pleasures and Perils of Exploitation Films," *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 58.
8. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

9. For an analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s adult film market, and its confusion of boundaries between high-, middle-, and low-brow forms, as well as its varying levels of explicitness, see Justin Wyatt, "Selling Atrocious Sexual Behavior: Revising Sexualities in the Marketplace for Adult Film in the 1960s," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 105–32.
10. A number of reviews have drawn this comparison between Todd Haynes's counterfactual reconstruction of the melodramatic universe of Douglas Sirk in *Far from Heaven* to Biller's film. Among them: Vadim Rizov, "Viva: The *Far from Heaven* of Sexploitation (Except Not Subversive)," *Village Voice*, 4 April 2008, www.villagevoice.com/2008-04-29/film/viva/; Tim Cavanaugh, "Five Questions: Anna Biller Brings Free Sex Back to a Sex-Free Nation," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 2008, www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oev-fiveq24-2008jun24.0,7166449.story; Eric Henderson, "Viva," *Slant Magazine*, 2 May 2008, www.slantmagazine.com/film/film_review.asp?ID=3647.
11. Examples of films within the swinger sexploitation subcycle include *The Swap and How They Make It* (dir. Joe Sarno, US, 1966), *Suburban Roulette* (dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis, US, 1968), *For Single Swingers Only* (dir. Donald Davis, US, 1968), and *All the Loving Couples* (dir. Mack Bing, US, 1969).
12. Patricia White has substantially conceptualized the notion of "retrospectatorship" in respect to the difficulties in feminist film theory of conceiving of the lesbian spectator, a notion that I would argue can capaciously point to or intersect with the spectatorial possibilities suggested by retrospective modes of engagement with erotic film forms of the past. Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
13. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 30–31.
14. Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 24.
15. See Michelle Clifford and Bill Landis's *Sleazoid Express: A Mind Twisting Tour through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Fireside/Simon and Schuster, 2002) and Josh Alan

- Friedman's gonzo *Tales of Times Square* (Portland, OR: Feral House/Delacorte Press, 1986, 1993), as well as the Canadian comic strip/zine *Cinema Sewer*, written and illustrated by Robin Bougie.
16. Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 387.
 17. *White Slaves of Chinatown* (dir. Joseph Mawra, US, 1964), *Olga's House of Shame* (dir. Joseph Mawra, US, 1964), *Mme. Olga's Massage Parlor* (dir. Joseph Mawra, US, 1965).
 18. Richard Corliss, "Coming Attractions: Sexploitation Films of the 1940s–1960s in the Video Trailer Series *Twisted Sex*," *Film Comment* 33, no. 3 (1997): 21.
 19. Exploitation film historian Eric Schaefer has, in the context of a preservationist and archival perspective, also highlighted the documentary value of an otherwise culturally denigrated adult cinema, noting the significance of sexploitation's documentation of people and places that might otherwise be lost to film and cultural history. Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.
 20. I am drawing this mobilization of the document in relation to diegesis from Philip Rosen's theorization of the spectatorial processes that attend the historical film in classical Hollywood production. Sexploitation cinema's retrospective status facilitates a reversal of the process Rosen argues doubles over the layers of temporality resident in the profilmic universe, in the reconstruction of the past in the historical film. He writes, "Indeed to have narrative import, the film must convert its image from document to diegesis. This is a conversion from one time to another, from the past time of the camera's operation, to the temporal setting of a different past, that of the narrative; and both of these are addressed to the spectator in his or her own present. The conversion from document to diegesis is thus a process involving not just the temporality of the image, but of organizing the subject's relation to an image that represents not one but two past times." Philip Rosen, "Detail, Document and Diegesis in Mainstream Film," in Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 172.

21. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47–63.
22. For example, Biller's *A Visit from the Incubus* (US, 2001) combined the western, the 1970s Euro-horror film, and the musical in its tale of a young saloon singer plagued by nightly visits from a lascivious incubus.
23. Tom Brown, "Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*," *Screen* 49, no. 2 (2008): 157–78.
24. Elena Gorfinkel, "The Future of Anachronism: Todd Haynes and the Magnificent Andersons," in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2005), 153–68.
25. This motif of "Little Red Riding Hood" in a "sea of wolves" is drawn from Anna Biller's *Viva* press kit and the film's description. *Viva* Press Kit, 1, www.lifeofastar.com/press.html (accessed 7 February 2007.)
26. One viewer in a festival screening I attended, quoting a character in the Max Ophüls film *The Earrings of Madame de . . .* (France/Italy, 1953), suggested that *Viva* was "superficially superficial."
27. Lesley Stern presents a compelling reading of the relationship between the quotidian and the histrionic, and between inflation and deflation in the subjective economy of cinematic things and their "gestural modalities," in "Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 317–54.
28. Richard Dyer, *Pastiche: Knowing Imitation* (London: Routledge, 2007), 133.
29. Gertrud Koch, "The Body's Shadow Realm," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: BFI, 1993), 43.
30. Roger Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," *Framework*, nos. 30–31 (1986): 112–30.
31. *Viva*, film promotional website, www.lifeofastar.com/viva.html (accessed 4 February 2007).
32. Matthew Tinkcom, Joy Fuqua, and Amy Villarejo, "On Thrifting," in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins and Tara McPherson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 485.

33. Anna Biller, interview with the author, 12 February 2007; see pages 137–38, this issue.
34. Lisa Petrucci, *Sex Perils of Paulette* catalog review, www.somethingweird.com/cart.php?target=product&product_id=57389&substring=Sex+Perils+of+Paulette.
35. Moya Luckett, in her discussion of the 1960s sexploitation director Doris Wishman's cinematic style, suggests that Wishman's characteristic cutaways to seemingly random detail in her films operate as a deflection away from a male erotic look, as she states, "Wishman's shots of standard lamps, house plants, paintings, coffee tables and household ornaments appear to be arranged for a feminine gaze, producing a look that is often at odds with her ostensible goal, the presentation of naked female bodies for men." Luckett, "Sexploitation as Feminine Territory," 147. Biller's aesthetic may have some analogy to Wishman's directorial recalcitrance to reveal sexual spectacle, but it is considerably different in its use and integration of these decorative, "feminized" details into the grain and consistency of the film. Michael Bowen also discusses Wishman's cutaways and how they work on the spectator through a disjunctive "cubist configuration." Michael Bowen, "Embodiment and Realization: The Many Film Bodies of Doris Wishman," *Wide Angle* 19, no. 3 (1997): 74.
36. Anna Biller, interview with the author, 12 February 2007. For a more detailed version of this quotation, see pages 140, 141, this issue.
37. Biller noted in her interview that, ironically, as an Asian American she would probably have been most likely to find acting work only in sexploitation films in the 1960s, as that mode of production, in contrast to Hollywood, was one of the few places where one sees Asian women in lead roles, albeit in roles as clear "exotics." See page 143, this issue.
38. Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 727–44.
39. Manohla Dargis, "Swinging Suburbia and the Sensual City," *New York Times*, 2 May 2008, movies.nytimes.com/2008/05/02/movies/02viva.html.
40. Rizov, "Viva: The *Far from Heaven* of Sexploitation."

41. Cult Epics's catalog includes the films of Walerian Borowczyk, Tinto Brass, the films of Irving Klaw, Bettie Page shorts, and a re-release of Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (France, 1950).
42. Parker Tyler, "The Awful Fate of the Sex Goddess," in Tyler, *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera in the Film* (New York: Horizon Press, 1969).

Elena Gorfinkel is assistant professor of art history and film studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Her writing has appeared in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, *Cineaste*, *World Picture*, and in a number of edited collections. She is editor, with John David Rhodes, of *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and is writing a book on American sexploitation film of the 1960s.



Barbi, perusing soft-core, *Viva*. Photo still © Anna Biller.
Photo by C. Thomas Lewis