

PREVIEW

A TASTE OF FLESH

The US sexploitation flicks of the 60s were quick ways of turning a buck – and sometimes, too, funny, artful and audacious

By Elena Gorfinkel

Aside from the recognition bestowed on Russ Meyer and Radley Metzger, American sexploitation films and their makers for many years languished in a nether-zone. Neither as aesthetically daring as the contemporaneous underground films that experimented with queer sexuality (such as those of Andy Warhol, Jack Smith or Barbara Rubin), nor as modern as the erotically tinged international New Waves, sexploitation films occupy a peculiar place in an understanding of 1960s film culture. Sexploitation is essential to the history of 1960s film experience, but peripheral in its legitimacy as cinema in its own right, frequently discounted as bad art or failed porn.

In the 1960s, hundreds of sexploitation films were produced in the US on budgets averaging \$10,000-40,000, on quick production schedules, mainly by outfits on the East and West coasts. This cottage industry developed due to a variety of factors, including changing obscenity laws that ruled nudity no longer obscene, the impact of studio divestiture (after a 1948 Supreme

Court ruling forced studios to sell their interests in cinemas), and the subsequent availability of neighbourhood screens. The earliest entries were the innocuous 'nudie cuties', shot in full colour in Florida and California, Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959) being the first: hapless middle-aged men, royal schmucks who stumbled through creaky plots that emphasised the everyman's ability to see women in the nude through various gimmicks – x-ray vision, special goggles, psychological disorders, even see-through paint that renders walls invisible.

The variety shtick of the cartoonishly impotent voyeur gave way by 1963-4 to films that more explicitly dramatised sexual subjects, moving into darker genre territory – towards *noir*, action and melodrama, frequently in black and white. As the Production Code became obsolete and state censor board practices unconstitutional, sexploitation film pushed the envelope, aggressively leveraging sexual display within narratives that would justify it. The titles were viscid with innuendo: *Aroused*; *Skin Deep in Love*; *All Women are Bad*; *A Smell of Honey*; *A Swallow of Brine*; *Smoke and Flesh*; *The Lusting Hours*; *Sin in the City*; *She Should Have Stayed in Bed*. Their heady trailers blared promises of the not-meant-to-be-seen: degradation, vice, ruin. The bodies of their unknown starlets were malleable material for male fantasy, borrowing hooks and tropes from any source handy: 1930s vice films, pinups, men's

magazines like *Man's World* and *Gent*, pulp novels, sexological tracts. Most notably, they preoccupied themselves with the ritualised revelation of the denuded female body, and the implications of a female subject – a single, working girl or a straying wife – unglued from reproductive and filial demands. What they weren't: hardcore. Instead, sex filmmakers suggested sexual activity just off screen, with bare buttocks and breasts, gyrating dances, bedroom activity seen above the waist, groping and fondling – though simulated sex became inevitable in the late 1960s. Until the public exhibition of hardcore features in the early 1970s, sexploitation was the name of the game for screening sex in public.

The films were porous vehicles, absorbing the contradictory impulses that gave rise to the sexual revolution. Yet in this largely dystopian mode, sex was never 'free'. Films featured thematised sex work, detailing the travails of nude models, escorts, prostitutes, as well as the office worker or beleaguered job seeker, whose use-value frequently devolved into sexual currency, and treatments of 'deviant' practices,

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Peering into the nether-zone: C. Davis Smith's exploitation film *All My Men* (1966)

IMAGES COURTESY ELENA GORFINKEL

among them bisexuality, swinging, swapping, psychedelia. The films bear a surprising reflexivity: as if, to figure out how to justify new scenes of looking at exposed flesh, sexploitation producers documented the act of looking itself. Irv Berwick's *Strange Compulsion* (1964) is one such psychodrama: a young stalker tells his psychiatrist of his obsession with peeking at women unawares, the abject gawker an anxious mirror to the predominantly male film audience. The weirder *Electronic Lover* (Jesse Berger, 1966) gives a deranged peeper, ominously named 'Master', a proto-computer screen and remote video technology; he sends out his minion to broadcast back as he ogles women through windows, perched on fire-escapes.

Sexploitation's narrative formulae ranged from pseudo-documentary and sex-exposé – such as the Greenwich Village-set leering lesbian subculture faux-doc *Chained Girls* (1965) – to melodrama (*Agony of Love*, 1966), and from action films and *policiers* (*Aroused* and *Prostitutes Protective Society*, both 1966) to butch biker dramas (*She Mob*, 1968) and roughie-westerns (*Hot Spur*, 1968). Some sexploiteers also imported and repackaged European films for US distribution, creating synergies between American exploitation and the 'maturity' of European art cinemas. The Swedish-Danish co-production *I, a Woman* (Mac Ahlberg, 1965), released by Metzger's arthouse-minded Audubon Films, gave legitimacy to sexploitation and opened up the market to the 'couples' audience.

Crassness and cheapness may have been sexploitation's defining gambits, but the mode allowed artfulness to flower in unexpected places. The style of filmmaker Joe Sarno, who emulated the aesthetics of Bergman, attests to the impure commingling of art and sex cinemas in this period, and makes a compelling case for what talented filmmakers could do within the limitations of the form. His classic *Sin in the Suburbs* (1963) predates the prurience of Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), with its masked, robed swap parties and suburban *noir*, articulating the mundane ennui of middle-class wives, with a twist of maternal melodrama. The critic Andrew Sarris pronounced Sarno a jewel in the rough, lauding his formal preoccupations as the expression of a "charmingly naive Satanism" and praising his dense *mise en scène*.

Sarno's films prioritised female subjectivity, imbuing them with an affective realism often missing in his fellow directors' work. *The Love Merchant* (1966), which precedes *Indecent Proposal* by more than 25 years, anatomised both a bohemian milieu and a seamy system of sexual trade. Click, a rough sex-broker played by Warhol star Louis Waldon, and his artist girlfriend Bobbi introduce her strait-laced friend Peg to Kendall Harvey III, a rich playboy. The caddish Harvey sniffs out that Peg's husband Roger, an advertising executive, is hard-up for business and offers Peg a devil's bargain. The corrupting sociality of this mercantile erotic milieu is augmented by the contrast between the 'wild' and the 'square'. In her apartment bedecked with stock 'abstract expressionist' canvases, Bobbi remarks that a woman might need "protection" from a man in order to be able to live, work and make art,



Submission accomplished: Manuel Conde's *Nymphs (Anonymous)* (1968)

even if in exchange for a few "favours". Dutiful wife Peg is impelled by more conventional obligations to rescue her husband from financial ruin, and submits to Harvey's proposal.

Skin flicks in the 1960s provided obvious grist for the feminist critique of the male gaze that would arrive in the 1970s. But they also show that filmic sex is a machine to think with; they are repositories of accounts of female labour, treatises on male anxieties of insufficiency, and vernacular tracts on the relationships between sex and work, looking and consumption. In their preposterous staging of cultural paranoia regarding women's erotic agency, they are also delightfully strange, mordantly funny. In Manuel Conde's *Nymphs (Anonymous)* (1968), members of a proto-feminist secret society of nymphomaniacs subordinates the "feeble" male sex, demanding sexual submission. Male bodies are a resource that is farmed and traded, harvested for nude bartending and sexual servicing. *Nymphs* absurdly contemplates a potential feminist future. An enraged husband, abandoned by his wife, goes rogue, attacking the men his wife has slept with since she has joined the society, until he is captured and made a sex-slave himself.

One of the few female sexploitation directors, Doris Wishman created fascinating films that observed the codes of the genre, if only to undo them. *Indecent Desires* (1968) animated the very inexplicability of women's subjugation to an unseen male desire through a New York voodoo narrative. Zeb, a loner-degenerate, finds a doll and a ring in a trash can. He becomes obsessed with the doll, then sees a woman, Ann (Sharon Kent), who reminds him of it; he proceeds to fondle and maim the doll while stalking and observing Ann. She feels every strange grope of this supernatural rape and, not knowing its cause, thinks she's going mad. Wishman turns the psychic conditions of physical violation into a painfully visible, bewildering process. The story ends grimly, as do many Wishman films, the power of Zeb's projective, phantasmatic hold over Ann complete.

Women who worked behind the camera, such as Wishman and the cinematographer-filmmaker Roberta Findlay, were scarce. Producer Chelly Wilson, who ran Chellee Films and owned the Avon theatres, and Ava Leighton, Radley Metzger's collaborator and co-owner of Audubon Films, are equally significant figures. So were the actresses who became stars in this small field, such as Audrey Campbell and Marsha Jordan. The films trace the gestural and sartorial argot of being and living as a woman in the 1960s – the demands of social performance, the gaits and postures, the fashion and hairstyles that the era's femininity required. It is no wonder that female spectators of sexploitation films, among them the filmmaker Anna Biller (*The Love Witch*), fixate on the material details that furnish their quasi-fictional worlds. Her 2007 *Viva* is a testament to such feminist 'retrospectatorship', restaging the decor and milieu of sexploitation in its late phase.

Lately, the sex film is having a moment. David Simon and George Pelecanos's HBO show *The Deuce* is giving the quality-TV treatment to porno-chic, exploring the development of adult films and the sex industry in early 1970s Times Square. The era's films have also found a savvy audience, aided by new distributors such as the preservation-minded Vinegar Syndrome, Film Movement (both releasing recent restorations of Sarno films on DVD) and the pioneering Something Weird Video, which started it all in 1989, during the VHS era, and deserves credit for building a sexploitation revival among cult fans. Boutique micro-cinemas and arthouse venues run by younger cinephiles have yielded series such as the recent 'Erotic City' at the Quad cinema in New York City, as well as other retrospectives highlighting the tenacious work of sexploitation's makers. In the domain of cinephilia, the shrouded profile of the once lowly skin flick seems suddenly slightly sunnier. ☺

i **Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s**, by Elena Gorfinkel, is published by University of Minnesota Press on 15 October