

Preserving Pornographic Media: Response

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I've broken my response into a few short, somewhat stream of consciousness, paragraphs covering a variety of issues facing how institutional archives often approach preservation of sex films in their collections:

Separate but Equal?: During a late 70s interview, Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinematheque Francaise, noted that an American design school had reportedly amassed a large collection of sex films, due to how well these films inadvertently served as records of American interior design in the 1960s and 70s.

The statement was made by Langlois to illustrate that all forms of cinema had purpose and was worthy of saving. But behind this seemingly innocuous anecdote lies one of the most pervasively frustrating attitudes regarding the value of sex films in the archive: that unlike 'regular' movies, their significance is strictly as historical objects and utilitarian devices; they're divorced from cinema as art and culture.

Porn Archives: A few years ago, I was really keen to establish a proper 'porn archive' that would serve as a non-profit dedicated to the preservation of sex films. I still want to. This idea stemmed from my aggravation and frustration with the confused state of how many institutional archives (even existing 'porn archives' like Kinsey) assessed the cinematic qualities of their holdings, thus reducing the importance of preserving them. While most archives are underfunded, under-staffed, and house many more titles than they could ever hope to preserve even with proper resources, what frustrated me was not just their internal disinterest in considering them as worthy candidates for preservation, but their general refusal to allow interested parties material access so as to independently restore them. In some cases, these access restrictions extended even to viewing them on site. Blame it on bureaucratic policy, apparently.

Purpose & Pleasure: Someone who worked at the Harvard Film Archive told me that they had once stumbled upon an enema themed stag. It caused a lot of giggling. Then they put it away.

For the most part, archives, even 'porn archives,' don't know how to approach sex films. Are they pieces 'smut' that ought to be shielded from wide exposure? Quant artifacts from a more innocent time? Documents of sex practices enjoyed by the now likely geriatric or deceased? Heroic records of the sexual revolution? All of the above? Fear over making the 'wrong' decision as to how to classify them frequently results in no attention whatsoever.

Content is King: It's really hard to convince those who don't already agree, that sex films can have cinematic and artistic significance. Having a conversation about sex films in which the focus is on 'film' over 'sex' is likely to be met with a degree of cynicism with the argument frequently raised that focusing on anything other than the sexual content distorts their 'purpose.' However, when sex films are distilled to nothing more than documents of sex acts, the imperative to assess them through an aesthetic lens (and thus acknowledge their cinematic properties) is ignored. Thus, the urgency of preserving original negatives and best existing prints is rendered irrelevant, so long as the visual content itself remains accessible. This attitude is unique to sex films. Even other 'content' oriented types of films, including industrial and classroom films, and even home movies, have seen received extensive physical and digital preservation efforts undertaken by both public and private institutions.

Out of the Closets: "Film is art and art should be seen." – Terry LeGrand

We're in the midst of a gay sex history renaissance. All over the world, and in many major metropolitan areas, some kind of archive exists to collect documents and art related to LGBT history and representations. These archives have been among the most welcoming to sex films, although they too tend mostly to classify them as

'representations of sex and cultural history' rather than primarily as aesthetic works. It's also noteworthy that LGBT institutions like The Outfest Legacy Project have been among the few film-as-art centric organizations to actively include sex films within public programming and, demonstrate an interest (albeit minimal) in their physical and digital preservation. It's perhaps because sex films make up such a large part of the cinema created by pre-90s LGBT identifying artists that their work is impossible to overlook or diminish?