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## The Golden Age of Porn: Nostalgia and History in Cinema

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The mainstreaming of pornography is indebted to the success of feature-length hardcore films of the 1970s. Shot on 35 mm film, productions such as *Deep Throat* (1972), *Behind the Green Door* (1972), *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976) and *Debbie Does Dallas* (1978) were widely screened both in the USA and internationally. These films have since been established as classics (Buscombe 2004: 30) and milestones in both scholarly and popular porn historiographies. While some identify the so-called ‘golden age of porn’ through North American legislation and as ranging from 1957 to 1973 (Lane 2000: 22–3), it was in the 1970s and early 1980s that porn shifted towards the mainstream. In a trend titled by the *New York Times* as *porno chic*, pornography became fashionable, gained mainstream publicity and popularity (McNair 2002: 62–3; Schaefer 2004: 371; Wyatt 1999).

During the past decade, this golden age has been reminisced in films such as *People Vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Rated X* (2000), numerous documentaries – including the critically acclaimed *Inside Deep Throat* (2005) – and books.<sup>1</sup> This body of popular porn historiography depicts the decade as one of quality films with real stories, personal performers and talented directors, in contrast to the 1980s of video distribution, inflation of the porn industry, rise of AIDS and conservative backlash. With notable exceptions such as the French *Le pornographe* (2001) and the Spanish–Danish co-production *Torremolinos 73* (2003), European histories have not been reminisced to the same degree.

In what follows, we investigate what the 1970s as a decade and pornography as a genre and industry are made to stand for in American films reminiscing *porno chic* – how this golden age is constructed and for what ends it is remembered. Firstly, we argue that the 1970s are framed as an era of innocence, authenticity and struggle for freedom of speech while structuring out perspectives not fitting in the narrative. These selective framings are intimately tied to our second question concerning the role of nostalgia in films depicting the 1970s. Thirdly, we address the meaning of temporal distance in porn histories. Films produced some three



**Figure 2.1** A selection of DVD classics in a Finnish department store, 2007. Photograph by Susanna Paasonen

decades ago are categorized as classics in ways that further the selective styles of remembering and narrating porn histories. Shot on 35 mm film, as opposed to 8 mm film or video, these productions are identifiable through their producers, actors and directors whose biographies have been central material for films remembering the 1970s.

### Popular Porn Historiography

As diverse as the films *Boogie Nights*, *Rated X* or *Inside Deep Throat* may be, they share certain common traits as popular porn historiography. *Boogie Nights* depicts the rise and drug-inflicted fall of porn star Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg), inspired by the real-life character of John Holmes.<sup>2</sup> The biopic *Rated X* depicts the rise of the Mitchell brothers Jim and Artie, known as the creators of *Behind the Green Door*, and their fall due to drugs and alcohol. The documentary *Inside Deep Throat*, again, aims to cover the story of *Deep Throat* and its makers, the cultural impact and legacy of the film, as well as moral norms and censorship practices in the United States.

The films tell stories of male authors rising to fame and fortune while struggling for freedom of speech. These are stories of rise and fall: the rise of films, actors, producers and directors and their downfall caused by drugs, censorship or financial problems. From the film directors Gerard Damiano (of *Deep Throat*) and the Mitchell brothers to the porn stars Holmes and Harry Reems (of *Deep Throat*),

these are decidedly male tragedies of fun gone sour.<sup>3</sup> The rise and fall of the porn decade is depicted in metonymical – and decidedly gendered – terms through male erection: in *Boogie Nights*, Diggler loses his erection due to heavy use of cocaine and as Jim Mitchell of *Rated X* admits having been unable to ‘get it up’ with an eighteen-year-old stripper, the viewers realize that the end is nigh. Behind these tragic figures, female actors perform supporting roles as girlfriends, wives, mothers and born-to-be porn stars.

The foregrounding of straight male tragedies leaves little room for the kinds of stories recounted by Linda Lovelace, the star of *Deep Throat*, who has proven particularly problematic in terms of popular porn history. Lovelace (alias Boreman, Traynor, Marchiano), along with Marilyn Chambers of *Behind the Green Door*, was the first female porn performer to gain mainstream fame. She gave a face and name to porno chic and was widely interviewed as a spokesperson for free and casual sex. Following the extraordinary popularity of *Deep Throat*, Lovelace’s biography *Inside Linda Lovelace* (1974) detailed the joys of pornography for a broad readership. As Lovelace started disclosing her abusive relationship with husband and manager Chuck Traynor and how she was forced into a career in porn, this fitted ill with the figure of sexual liberation she was seen to present. With the aim of countering the story authored by her then husband, and cautioned by the publisher that a depressing story would not sell, she published *The Intimate Diary of Linda Lovelace* (1974), which balanced her figure of insatiable sexuality with the story of marital abuse and degradation. She has since published two radically grimmer autobiographies, *Ordeal* (2006/1980) and *Out of Bondage* (1986), and testified for the Reagan administration’s Meese Commission on the harms of pornography. Allying herself with the well-known antiporn feminists Gloria Steinem, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, Lovelace identified her career in pornography as abuse and even compared her films to rape. In her accounts, *Deep Throat*, the film elevated into the symbol of the golden age of porn, is an outcome and symbol of marital abuse.

Interestingly enough, the documentary film *Inside Deep Throat* largely dismisses Lovelace’s arguments and frames her as both gullible and misguided. The film frames 1970s’ feminist critiques of pornography through the lens of censorship and a reactionary turn toward moral conservatism. Rendering other possible feminist agendas and arguments invisible, the film sets the stage for *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner and former *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown to disclose their views on *Deep Throat* as a landmark of sexual revolution. The effacement of feminist argumentation is striking yet necessary in terms of the film’s elevation of *Deep Throat* into a symbol of free sex and free speech. The documentary evidently cannot risk the inclusion of perspectives complicating and questioning this line of argumentation.

The silencing of Lovelace and the tendency to simplify feminist perspectives is part and parcel of the dichotomous porn debate characteristic of the United States.

Focused on questions of freedom of speech versus censorship, this debate has, since the early 1980s, tended to efface complexities, ambiguities and diversities within pornography. Division for or against remains evident in North American studies of pornography and is also influential on an international scale. Meanwhile, their specific context seems easily forgotten. North American debates and political battle lines tell little of porn histories or productions elsewhere, yet the American history has, through numerous acts of retelling, come to stand for *the* history of pornography with its mythical golden age of the 1970s.

### Nostalgia and Loss

The 1970s have inspired a range of North American and European cultural texts since the 1990s, from the films *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), *54* (1998) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) to the television series *That '70s Show* (1998–2006), numerous film remakes, re-runs and Abba revivals. Retro-fictions have resulted in an assemblage of texts that frame the 1970s as a decade of excess in terms of fashion, drugs, hedonism and sex, sandwiched between the radical 1960s and the yuppie 1980s (Inness 2003: 3). The 1970s tend to be remembered through popular culture in a selective process also identified as the 'Abbafication' of history (Haslam 2005). Although cinematic fictions featuring fashion styles, disco beats, unprotected heterosex and casual drug use may suggest otherwise, the decade was one of significant social change during which the civil rights, gay rights and women's movements all had broad social impact. The neat packaging and labelling of different decades (as radical, yuppie or excessive) works to mask the diversity of cultural trends and forces at any given time. As each decade is made to represent and stand for certain things, they become fixed as symbols (Sickels 2002). All this involves as much forgetting as it does remembering.

Porn historiographies depict a decade of parties finally ending in the hangover of the 1980s. Characterized by the rise of AIDS, cocaine, violence, greed and conservatism of the Reagan era, the 1980s surface as the end of optimism in the films *Boogie Nights*, *Inside Deep Throat* and *Rated X*, and the end of an era is encapsulated in the phrase 'party is over' (Breedon and Carroll 2002: 102; Sickels 2002).<sup>4</sup> Depictions of the 1970s as a lost decade of fun, experimentation and innocence work to frame history in terms of decline – a golden age can, after all, only be constructed in relation to something less golden. Such stories of loss of 'simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity' are characteristic of nostalgia, as analysed by Brian S. Turner (1987: 151; Koivunen 2003: 66).<sup>5</sup> Rather than considering nostalgia as false pseudo-historicism while (nostalgically) longing for more truthful and authentic representations of history, we are interested in how porn histories envision the 1970s, the rising porn industry and its agents, and how they make use of nostalgia in the process. The films create nostalgic historiography

by situating the events in the past and by referring to actual people. Juxtaposed with the following decades, the 1970s function as a safe zone for addressing porn while maintaining distance to the more recent incarnations of the porn industry. Meanwhile, past fashions and styles provide the films with a groovy retro-gloss. The clothing and hairstyles of the 1970s signify temporal distance: they imply that whether good or bad, these are definitely days gone by.

Although the films discussed in this chapter are heavy in representations of loss, this is by no means the only framing for nostalgia towards the 1970s. In his discussion of the commodification of nostalgia in the United States, Paul Grainge (2000) distinguishes between nostalgia as a mood and a mode. Whereas nostalgic mood characterizes experiences of loss and longing, mode is a question of representation and style that does not necessitate emotional investment. Hence nostalgia has been disjoined from any specific temporal references in the past and 'cannot be explained through any master narrative of decline, longing, or loss' (Grainge 2000: 32). The proliferation of retro-aesthetics in contemporary media calls for a rethinking of nostalgia and representation as not automatically connected to sentiment, and the uses of nostalgia – from mood to mode and back – are certainly variable also in the fictions discussed in this chapter. *Boogie Nights*, for example, makes use of both. Future porn star Diggler's teenage room is filled with sports gear and film posters (pin-ups, Bruce Lee, Al Pacino in *Serpico*): the film binds together iconic products of popular culture with those of the emerging porn industry in the creation of a *boyish*, nerdy and ultimately sympathetic character. In addition to the boyish, porn performers are depicted as trendy. The first scenes of the film are located in a club booming with disco beats where the trendiest people work in the porn industry. These are examples of nostalgia as a mode whereas nostalgia as a mood is prevalent in the film's depiction of the expanding porn industry of the 1980s.

Porn historiography characterizes the 1970s as an era of sexual, and even artistic, exploration unhinged by AIDS, and of adult film-making undisturbed by video technology or the economical dictates of the porn industry. As Cindy Patton states, the 1970s were about the convergence of independent art film-makers and pornographers. The artistic avant-garde saw porn as a means to explicitly critique sexual mores, while pornographers saw the possibility of attracting liberal mainstream audiences through artful films (Patton 2000: 258; also Wyatt 1999). This convergence, depicted as one adventure and exploration, is central to the creation of the golden age. Journalist Peter Bart interviewed in *Inside Deep Throat* explains that 'for that brief moment porn was part of discovery, curiosity, change. Today, it's different.'

Today, films like *Behind the Green Door*, *Opening of Misty Beethoven* or *The Devil in Miss Jones* are references and material for cultural theory (Patton 2000), and valued in terms of artistry, extraordinariness of atmosphere and story content seldom seen today.<sup>6</sup> In DVD reviews, the ten-minute montage sequence of optically

printed and solarized cum shots of *The Green Door* is ironically compared to Leni Riefenstahl's bombastic aesthetics while *Misty Beethoven* is situated in the classical literary tradition as a parody of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1916). These reviews interpret the films as brainchildren of *auteurs*, visionary and uncompromising author-directors.<sup>7</sup> Auteurism and references to high culture support the films' cult status. According to Matt Hills (2002: 197), cult is marked by an interest in inappropriate or low cultural forms that draws its own highs and lows in the devalued detritus of popular culture. For Hills (2002: 131–4), media cult text is, paradoxically, both 'found' (consisting of textual qualities and properties) and 'created' (by the audience and media). The present cult status of the 1970s' porn films is partially created by young film critics and enthusiasts who maintain their *connoisseur* status through familiarity with the roots and classics of the genre. These ways of remembering have more to do with acknowledging (or even name dropping) than analysis: 1970s' films are often used as points of reference when attacking the hollowness of contemporary porn but more rarely investigated at any length themselves.

Viewing the porn films of the 1970s considered as the classics of the genre, differences in style and approach to the more recent films reminiscing their creation are evident. Rather than disco, their music scores feature progressive rock, blues and jazzy tones. Films like *Boogie Nights*, *Inside Deep Throat* and *Rated X* tell stories of personal struggle and loss whereas the films of the 1970s are rich in gags and comedy: in *Misty Beethoven*, airplane travel evokes questions such as 'Sex or No Sex seats?' while the plotline of the *Deep Throat* is famously about a young woman with a clitoris in her throat. In a contrary affective range, the opening scenes of *The Devil in Miss Jones* feature a middle-aged woman with black fingernails desperately masturbating in prison-like surroundings and a woman slitting her wrists in a bathtub. Such scenes may evoke repulsion of the kind lacking from contemporary mainstream pornography as well as the films reminiscing 1970s' porn. Films produced since the 1990s are selective in their aesthetic remembrance. While faithfully replicating the hairstyles and sideburns of the bygone decade, they do not do so with the hairy backs, armpits and crotches which abound in the productions of the 1970s. Their tragic stories mainly involve tanned and well-groomed people.

### Fixated on Film

In *Inside Deep Throat*, Gerard Damiano, the director of *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*, describes the effects of video production and distribution, accompanied by melancholic background music:

With the advent of the video camera it got to be so easy to shoot X-rated video that everybody could do it ... They were nothing. It was just one sex scene after another ...

I couldn't make that kind of film because there was no reason to ... It was over. You didn't need filmmakers any more.

Damiano is next seen walking down a white wooden pier, surrounded by swirling seagulls. The sky is cloudy and summer seems to be over as he raises his arms in a gesture of helpless surrender. Damiano is shown as a tragic character whose aspirations and visions were crushed by VHS – even if he continued making hardcore films well into the 1990s. American film critic Robert Ebert (1997) titles Damiano the best hardcore director who ‘went through a period of believing he could make art films about sex’. This comment is difficult to balance with Ebert's own zero-star rating of *Deep Throat*, as well as with Damiano's own oeuvre of well over forty films, including such less well-known works as *Enema Bandit* (1977) and *Young Girls in Tight Jeans* (1989).

The main tragic character of the documentary is nevertheless Harry Reems who faced trial for his performance in *Deep Throat*. An unwilling martyr of freedom of speech, Reems's desire to shift to mainstream film remained unfulfilled and he developed alcohol and drug addiction: ‘I lost my home. I lost my career. I lost my friends. And ended literally panhandling in the streets of Sunset Boulevard’, Reems recounts. *Inside Deep Throat* reiterates stories of loss: loss of personal career, loss of an art form and its unfulfilled possibilities. Damiano mourns the fall of art and craft for the hegemony of financial profit, and is certainly not alone in doing so. Author Normal Mailer encapsulates the shift as one ‘from art to money’. If the viewer is experiencing déjà vu, this may be due to strong similarities to *Boogie Nights* and its character of the producer Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds). Horner, like Damiano, has ambitions of creating ‘real’ feature films with hardcore action: films with a story, proper editing and performers who act. These artistic ambitions are crushed by the introduction of home video. Enabling high profits but limited by low image and sound quality, video represents a collapse in quality and ambition, and ultimately marks the end of the golden age of semi-amateurs, enthusiasm and experimentation. In other words, the ‘quality’ of 1970s' porn comes into being only at the very moment when it is seen as lost.

The popularity and critical acclaim of *Boogie Nights* has given it a status of a metanarrative concerning the shift from 1970s to the 1980s, from film to video and art to money (cf. Kleinhans 2006: 152). The juxtaposition of ‘art’ and ‘money’ as production motives obscures the fact that financial motives were hardly alien to porn productions during, or preceding, the so-called golden age: *Deep Throat* and *Green Door* are often celebrated as the most profitable films ever made in respect to their production costs. Furthermore, the end of the golden age actually signified the radical expansion of the industry. Video multiplied the sales of porn films (Sickels 2002: 55; Miller-Young in this volume) and the business has since merely increased its profitability in DVD and online distribution (Lane 2001).

The narrative of loss, as expressed in *Inside Deep Throat* and *Boogie Nights*, mainly makes sense in terms of 35 mm film as a medium. Cinema distribution is missed while narrative feature film is positioned as the formal norm and ideal for pornographic representation – even if the overwhelming majority of pornographic films produced during the past century have been episodic ones and far less concerned with narrative development than the display of sexual acts and genitalia. All in all, porn films consist of sexual scenes that are not necessarily tied together by narrative. The format of film – be this 8 mm, 16 mm or 35 mm – or the existence of narrative is by no means a guarantee of quality in pornography. Nevertheless, narrative seems to become a criterion for separating bad porn films from better ones, and the medium of film gains fetish status in the process. In the words of adult film-maker Ed Peroo, ‘Film had soul; video has nothing ... It flows like water, but film had a texture, a feeling, something you could grab onto and feel’ (in McNeil and Osborne 2005: 369; also Kleinhans 2006: 155).

Jack Horner wants to make ‘real films’ and resists cheap video productions. Damiano, venerated by his colleagues as the Bergman and Fellini of porn (McNeil and Osborne 2005: 53, 130–1), mourns the decline of film profession and emphasizes the centrality of authorial vision and control. These are explicitly stories of male auteurs: their ambitions cover more than financial profit; they find themselves in conflict with the rising porn industry; and their passion is first and foremost towards cinema construed as a lost object. Cinema figures similarly in European feature films remembering the avant-garde days of the 1970s. The French *Le pornographe* juxtaposes contemporary pornography with the artistic experiments of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Slow in tempo, it focuses on a veteran porn director Jacques Laurent – played by the French new wave icon Jean-Pierre Léaud – and his reflections on relationships, life, cinema and generational revolt. *Le pornographe* is saturated with nostalgia as a mood (sense of loss and bygone futures) but is void of representations of the 1970s (in Grainge’s terms, nostalgia as a mode). The Spanish *Torremolinos 73* operates with an inverted logic. Entirely embedded in beige colours and less trendy 1970s’ styles, the film is set in the last years of Franco’s fascist regime during which the couple Alfredo and Carmen Lopez (Javier Cámara and Candela Peña) produce ‘educational’ 8 mm sex films for the Scandinavian market. Learning cinematographic practice, Alfredo is inspired by Bergman and ultimately realizes an existentialist – and rather absurd – feature hardcore film in homage to the auteur. While the film frames the period as one of innocence and experimentation in terms of pornography, cinematic and sexual representation like other fictions discussed in this chapter, it is not depicted as any golden age worth longing for.

*Le pornographe* and *Torremolinos 73* tell stories of independent productions and aesthetic experimentation. However, unlike popular North American porn historiography, they are not concerned with the juxtaposition of the 1970s with the 1980s, and the era they address is partly a different creature altogether (consider,

for example, the differences between the late Falangist regime and the United States during the Watergate scandal). *Boogie Nights* depicts porn as a challenge to masculine performance, dividing men to those who 'can' and those who 'cannot' perform sexual acts in front of the camera. In these two European films, the main challenge lies in coping with the emotional blandness and banality of porn. Acting porn is easy – tolerating it is the difficult part.<sup>8</sup> While these films also make use of nostalgia, they cannot be conflated with the metanarrative recognizable in the films discussed above.

### The Workings of Time

*Deep Throat*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, *Behind the Green Door* and *Opening of Misty Beethoven* have been elevated into classics, landmarks in the American struggle for freedom of speech and experiments in a new kind of artful pornography. Temporal distance has helped to mark them apart from contemporary porn. Hence soon after the cinema premiere of *Inside Deep Throat* in Finland, *Deep Throat* DVDs were on sale at a local department store under the category of classics, in an eclectic selection also featuring Bing Crosby films and *Titanic*.

Porn from the 1970s has enjoyed an afterlife in video and DVD distribution, popular historiography and scholarly analyses of porn: these films are remembered. Studies of porn have drawn largely on theoretical and conceptual tools of film studies – including identification, desire, voyeurism, fetishism and a general interest in genre and narrative. Rather unsurprisingly, films, encompassing ones shot on video, have been staple objects of analysis (see Williams 2004a; Lehman 2006). While the success of VHS certainly explains some of this focus, the more recent transformations in the distribution of porn necessitate departure from both the dominance of films as objects of study and film studies as discipline. The focus on narrative both enables and necessitates a selective look at pornography (on films rather than still images; on certain kinds of films over others). It also seems to result in a general turn towards past pornographies, such as the canonized, pre-VHS and pre-AIDS classics of the 1970s.

The attraction of the 1970s is evident also in younger generations' interest in a time they have not personally experienced (Waldrep 2000). The story of a lost golden age is narrated not only by porn veterans, but also by people *born* in the 1970s, such as *Boogie Nights* writer and director Paul Thomas Anderson. The figure of the hedonistic, excessive, experimental and innocent decade has cross-generational appeal that is maintained through the stylized ways of reminiscing it. Historical distancing facilitates depictions of porn whereas the contemporary porn industry remains something of a taboo. It would be more difficult to imagine emotionally compelling drama featuring major stars and depicting the American porn industry of today.

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In the television documentary *Desperately Seeking Seka* (2002), former porn star Veronica Hart detaches the films of the golden age from markers of skill or quality and emphasizes later improvements in work safety, technical skill and professionalism. Like porn star Seka, the main subject of the documentary, Hart depicts the golden age as fun enough but a golden one only in inverted commas. Such questioning voices tend to be subdued in popular porn historiographies, as are women's stories in general. No fictions based on the lives of Linda Lovelace or Marilyn Chambers have been produced, although director Ron Howard has apparently acquired the rights to *Ordeal*. Films like *Boogie Nights* or *Rated X* envision a homosocial golden age of men, boys and brothers brought to screens by filmmakers of different generations. Porn is represented as 'guy stuff' inherited from the older generation, which is circulated, produced and consumed among – and culturally belongs to – heterosexual men. The homosocial framework does not accommodate the voices of either women or gay men. This is noteworthy since post-Stonewall metropolitan gay male cultures probably best encapsulated the sexual abundance and excess associated with the 1970s: according to AIDS activist Rodger McFarnale in the documentary film *Gay Sex in the 70s* (2005), gay life 'was a pornographic movie'.

Ways of reminiscing the 1970s work a domestication and de-politicization of both pornography and sex. Along with feminist voices, gay male cultures are effaced from view while white, American heterosexual men working in and developing the porn industry are left with the task of narrating the story of 'the wild decade'. Similar effacement has also taken place in the ways of remembering disco and its origins in black and gay urban cultures (Kooijman 2005). Domestication is accomplished by the display of sympathetic personalities, pop music and sideburns, 'bright images of Abba, purple flares over dangerously high platform shoes' (Graham, Kaloski, Neilson and Robertson 2003:7). Embellishing the pornographic imagery and avoiding scenes of actual porn, the films stress artistic ambition and vision while, on the other hand, depicting these as past concerns. Doing this, popular porn historiography both pays homage to 1970s' pornography and hides it from view.