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*Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material
Legacies of Adult Cinema* by David Church (review)

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Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 49, Number 2, Winter
2019, pp. 18-20 (Review)

FILM & HISTORY

Winter 2019

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

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David Church. *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016. 296 pages, \$27.85.

While going through a collection of sexploitation film fan magazines as part of my PhD dissertation research, I was flummoxed by a number of photo spreads supposedly taken on the sets of films I'd never heard of and couldn't find any information about. It wasn't until reading David Church's *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2016), that I realized these films had, in fact, been invented. Church explains that a few adult magazines of the 1960s and 70s would recycle production stills from different films (or use newly shot photographs), combining them with a phony synopsis for a film that never existed. In so doing, he argues, these magazines underscored the relationship between adult films and their paratextual framework: first, such pictorial features mirrored commonplace practices of the exploitation film industry, which would itself frequently re-use old footage as well as insert newly shot scenes in creating new product for release. But also, for contemporary collectors of vintage adult-film magazines—as well as for historians and researchers—these magazines' coverage of films that either are now lost or never existed in the first place also invokes an erotic sense of “tease,” of desire deferred, that is similar to the pleasures of pornographic films themselves.

Such insights about the particular desires stoked by vintage porn's “material legacies” (to quote the book's subtitle) are at the heart of *Disposable Passions*, which looks at the contemporary collecting, distribution, and appreciation of pre-1980s sex films. Of course, Church does not only look at paratextual items like fan magazines, but also examines the ways in which vintage porn's materiality—that is, imaginings or evidence of its physical existence as a film print—adds to its erotic value for contemporary fans. The book is thus well situated in recent scholarship around adult film, which seems to have growing interest in material cultures.

Church's analysis throughout the book rests on Linda Williams' argument (particularly in her 2008 book *Screening Sex*) that the essence of erotic cinema—and eroticism in general—is a tension between concealment and revelation, or ‘itch’ and ‘scratch’. This idea undergirds not only the form and function of sex films themselves, but also their history, as censorship laws and cultural standards shift and determine what can and cannot be shown on screen. This is, by now, not a particularly new concept—but what Church does in *Disposable Passions* is to apply the conceal/reveal thesis to several new areas of study, demonstrating this same dynamic at work in the enjoyment of vintage porn by contemporary fans; the content and editorial direction of 1960s sexploitation film magazines; the collecting and curation of vintage porn in archives; and the re-release of these films on home video. Part of what makes vintage porn appeal to its fans, Church argues, is that these films have largely been seen as ‘disposable passions’, and discarded, banned, neglected, or otherwise concealed from view; fans (and historians) thus have to work to ‘rediscover’ and reveal them.

Disposable Passions is in some ways a companion to Church's previous work *Grindhouse Nostalgia* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), which examines how exploitation films (primarily of the 1970s) have been reimagined by contemporary fans: what he calls “retrosploitation.” In both books, Church posits that as once-ephemeral, hard-to-find, low-culture films become more widely accessible via video and then DVD, nostalgia operates as a mechanism to regulate the connoisseurship of the fan culture around them. Most importantly, Church finds that nostalgia can fuel both ironic readings of older texts (an appreciation of a film's outmodedness, quaint sensibilities, or ‘badness’) and sincere appreciations of films that fans champion as having withstood the test of time and which still have the capacity to thrill and entertain. In other words, fans can use nostalgia to enjoy older exploitation films both *because of* and *in spite of* their age. In applying this to vintage porn, Church suggests that fans enjoy these films both as amusing artifacts and as masturbatory material (due to their pornographic content as well as the erotics of nostalgia itself). There is an unresolved tension here that Church

identifies in contemporary distributors' marketing of vintage porn, as well as fan discourse around it: on the one hand, vintage porn is portrayed as charmingly quaint, as a snapshot of a simpler time in which sex was still "natural" (i.e., women appear unshaven and without breast augmentation); on the other, there is a decided emphasis on the sex portrayed as being just as raunchy, kinky, and explicit as contemporary porn. Additionally, vintage porn is portrayed "not as a wholly innocent time, but as a time in which sex was still illicit and obscene The notion of a sexually innocent or conservative past is mobilized only insofar as to charge these images with a lingering, retrospectively framed air of the taboo" (39). Invoking Michel Foucault, Church points out how such discourse around vintage porn relies on an assumption that the past was more sexually repressed than the present—and that the delight of vintage porn stems in part from the revelation of the past's dirty secrets.

Church does not shy away from implicating himself in his study as a viewer, collector, or historian of sex films, and returns throughout the book to insightful self-reflections. This becomes most prominent (and fruitful) in his third chapter, which maps the conceal/reveal thesis onto the process of archival work and collecting. Here, he explores the erotic potential of discovery—what once was lost has now been found; what was neglected is now appreciated—for the archivist as well as the historian accessing archives. This thrill contained in the dynamic of lost/found also opens up additional pleasures of the potential films still undiscovered. That is, "the collector/historian cannot help being reminded of what curiosities still lie beyond his/her grasp ... adult cinema's underlying dialectic between concealment and revelation involves not only the bodies exhibited within the films, but also extends—in the mode of 'vintage' appreciation—to the concealment and revelation of the films themselves as they gradually disappear from and reemerge into the marketplace on home video and other popular means of archivization" (106). The strongest case study in this chapter emerges from Church's own work at the Kinsey Institute, where he was tasked with inspecting a large accession of 35mm film prints and deciding on which ones would be prioritized for cataloguing. In the process, they came across a print of a film previously thought lost: *The Orgy at Lil's Place* (1963), a sexploitation film well known for its particularly racy advertising campaign as well as its popularity (and notoriety) at the time of its release. However, Church later finds out about the existence of other prints "discovered" and held in other archives: "Thus, even the supposedly 'lost' film wasn't as lost as I had originally thought, calling into question my own fannishly egotistical fantasies of rediscovery and shepherdship (a common symptom within the archival community)" (123).

Church extends these observations on the fantasies and erotic potential of the archive to vintage porn preservation, restoration, and re-distribution as well, looking at the role of distributors in shaping "vintage pornoisseurship." Whereas the work of film distributors emerging in the early 1990s, such as Something Weird Video, emphasized *access* to previously unavailable films, and thus the *rarity* of their product, Church sees more recent companies such as Vinegar Syndrome as building subcultural capital around superior *quality*, both in terms of taste (e.g., promoting cults of auteurship around certain directors, encouraging the viewing of films as complete narrative works rather than a compilation of sex scenes) and in terms of preservation/restoration of the film print, now transferred to digital format. Church concludes the book with a discussion of the changes that may come in the discourse and fandom around vintage porn as an increasing number of these films are restored and brought from subcultural corners into more prominent venues—and, increasingly, into academic discourse.

A few of Church's theoretical threads are left dangling a bit short and loose, such as his attempt to weave in Laura Marks's concept of "haptic visuality" when examining the material degradation of old stag films. While this is a welcome intervention into an area of film phenomenology that tends to rely on auteur films and moving-image art for its case studies rather than popular and exploitation cinema, the argument feels underdeveloped. This is not to say that Church is off base with his observations, but more that they beg for further development elsewhere, rather than adding another

big-picture conceptual argument to an already complex and dense book. *Disposable Passions* is a book to read closely and thoroughly, and one that is useful not only for adult film scholars and historians but also for those interested in fan cultures and niche distribution networks.

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