



Pornographic Film and Video: Gay Male

by Joe A. Thomas

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Pornographic film and video have played an important role in gay male culture. Whereas heterosexual pornography has been accompanied by a serious stigma in the "straight" world, gay pornography has been characterized partly by the high esteem in which it is held in the gay male subculture.

As a group that is both defined by its sexual activity and rejected by the majority culture for it, gay men have often seen in pornography an all-too-rare positive image of gay sexuality. Similarly, they have found in the exaggerated sexuality and marginal artistry of porn a campy rejection of the hierarchies of the heterosexual majority.

As with straight pornography, gay male pornography can be divided into two categories, hardcore and softcore. Hardcore is the genre commonly associated with the term pornography. It includes explicit imagery of actual sexual activity to the point of climax, including visible penetration and ejaculation.

Softcore is a less explicit alternative, generally focusing on nude or nearly nude bodies in sexual or sensual situations, but without views of penetration or visible climax. The sex is nearly always simulated in softcore, and it is often filmed with an emphasis on romance or mood. As porn diva Gloria Leonard once humorously proclaimed, "The difference between pornography and erotica is lighting."

Because both the production and consumption of pornographic film and video are dependent on relatively high levels of technology, the genre's development has taken place primarily in the industrialized West. The existence of a large and economically advantaged gay community there is another important factor.

Thus, Western Europe and especially the United States have been the centers of gay male porn production and audiences, though in recent years South America and Eastern Europe have also figured as sources of pornography that is consumed mainly in the West.

As technology has spread, hardcore pornography has begun to be reported from such unexpected locations as India. However, the bulk of gay male film and video pornography continues to be made by and for white Western males.

Beginnings

While gay male pornography in literature and still images has a long history, gay male pornography in motion pictures really began in 1971 with the theatrical release of Wakefield Poole's *The Boys in the Sand*, a hardcore, ironic response to the groundbreaking play and film *The Boys in the Band*.

Before *The Boys in the Sand*, filmed images of same-sex activity were limited to a few examples in stag films (some dating to early in the twentieth century) and to the less narrative examples found in underground films of the 1960s such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963).

In both cases gay content had to be disguised or excused by some other aspect of the film. In the stags it was incidental to heterosexual activity, or involved a case of mistaken gender identity; in underground films the artistic content and context helped to justify the obvious same-sex activity.

The Boys in the Sand heralded a new era of openness and popularity in gay male pornography and introduced the first gay superstar, Casey Donovan. Grossing more than \$800,000 shortly after its release, the film's success helped create a new industry.

The production of gay pornographic films expanded during the 1970s, paralleling the simultaneous expansion of the straight porn industry following the huge success of *Deep Throat* in 1972-1973. Companies such as Jaguar and P.M. Productions began producing a stream of gay male hardcore features for release in a limited number of specialized gay porn theaters.

Simultaneously, short film "loops" also became common. These descendants of the old stag films were hardcore scenes (often silent) run on projectors as continuous loops in either adult bookstores or movie arcades for the entertainment of customers who dropped coins or tokens for a few minutes of viewing.

As the industry diversified during this period, it became more commercialized than previously. Gay male pornographic films lost their initial formal references to art films and their occasional accompanying aspirations to be something more than "just pornography." Increased explicitness gradually overwhelmed narrative and aesthetic content.

The Advent of Video

These theatrical films and loops, however, were soon to be replaced by a new medium: video. As prices of home VCRs fell during the 1980s, the video market became increasingly lucrative. Producers of both gay and straight products gradually began to shoot their movies directly on video, aiming squarely at the target of the home viewer.

As gay male pornography made this transition, the initial videos were collections of earlier loops, or theatrical releases transferred to video. By the mid-1980s, as the well-funded producers and distributors of straight pornography moved into the lucrative gay male market, features shot on video became standard; simultaneously, the old gay porn theaters disappeared, along with their straight counterparts.

A New Ideal of Male Beauty

The gay male pornography of the 1970s utilized a fairly wide variety of performers, from the beefy bodybuilders of Colt Studios, to the young jocks of Nova, to the variations on "Castro clones" seen in P.M. Productions. During the early 1980s, however, a new ideal of male beauty overwhelmingly dominated gay male videos. Inspired by the example of the famous Calvin Klein underwear ads, the new performers were sleek and smooth, and rarely looked older than 24.

The prolific French director Jean Daniel Cadinot nearly always used boyish models as his stars, but he frequently paired them with "butcher," often older partners, sometimes from "exotic" locations and backgrounds such as North Africa.

Many of the classic American pornographic videos of the mid-1980s exemplify the trend toward youthful models, but without the diversity seen in Cadinot's productions: director William Higgins's *Sailor in the Wild* (1983); Matt Sterling's *The Bigger the Better* (1984); and John Travis's *Powertool* (1986), for examples.

New superstars such as Jeff Stryker were often straight men in the business for the money, or "gay for pay" as those in the industry put it. Sexual roles in 1980s videos tended to be as tightly defined as the performers' musculature. The "top" held the insertor role in anal sex and often possessed bigger muscles

(and a larger penis) than the "bottom." Producers and distributors often played up the heterosexual identity of some star tops, making them seem more virile and desirable than the gay-identified bottoms.

Changes in the Rules

By the late 1980s, however, the unwritten rules of the early years of gay video began to bend, largely due to the entry of a new player: Kristen Bjorn. A former porn model himself, Bjorn turned to photography in the 1980s, and then to live-action videos. *Carnaval in Rio* (1989) was his first full-length hardcore feature after a series of videos with solo action only.

Bjorn's work is characterized by exotic settings, beautiful photography, ethnic diversity, and vastly improved production values (made possible partly by his unusually long and expansive shooting schedule). Whereas 1970s films regularly--though not frequently--featured people of color, 1980s videos were largely racially segregated.

Bjorn bucked the trend by having a veritable rainbow of ethnicities. His locales ranged from South America and the Caribbean, to Australia, Canada, and eventually eastern Europe. Bjorn threw down the gauntlet for the established video producers, who were compelled to deal with the popularity (and resulting profitability) of his stylish videos.

During the 1990s gay male pornographic productions began to experiment, at least partly in response to Bjorn's challenge. Among the most obvious changes was the increased diversity of ages and body types in gay male pornographic videos. Performers in their forties began to re-appear, as did body hair (exemplified by the 1990s star Zak Spears).

As the gay ideal of masculine beauty evolved in the 1990s, bulging bodybuilders began to be seen, along with the slimmer physiques of previous years. Simultaneously, the rigid definitions of sexual roles also began to relax as a number of this new, more diverse crowd of performers took both the top and bottom roles in videos, often within a single scene ("flip-flopping," as it was called in the industry).

While racial segregation largely remained the norm, a few companies followed Bjorn's lead in offering videos with ethnic diversity. In addition, a significant specialty market developed for all-black and all-Latino features; a number of companies such as La Mancha Productions focused on "blatino" performers, frequently mixed-race street youths from New York.

Still, one can exaggerate the diversity that developed. After all, Falcon Studios, with its bevy of well-scrubbed, All-American, corn-fed, butch young men, became the industry sales leader in the 1990s--a position it held into the next century.

Overseas production was another important development. Eastern Europe and South America became new centers of pornographic production. Attractive models were available for a fraction of the cost of American performers. Budapest became one of the new capitals of porn production, both gay and straight.

Twenty-first Century Pornography

As gay male pornography entered the twenty-first century, a number of new developments heralded further changes. The internet was a burgeoning new market that could be exploited by both established and new pornographers. It became a significant presence as numerous companies and individuals established sex-oriented websites, including interactive, live-action performances.

DVD technology improved and many companies began to re-release older products in this new format (and to release newer features in both VHS and DVD formats).

Entire niche markets developed for specialized tastes. Fetish videos involving spanking or fisting became available. So did products focusing on older models, various ethnicities, solo videos, and bondage and discipline, among many others. Softcore gained a greater presence through the work of companies such as Greenwood-Cooper and 10%.

Although for most performers pornography remained a brief sideline business in which they dabbled for only a couple of years, some such as Eric Evans, Jake Andrews, and Chip Daniels were able to maintain relatively long and stable careers in sex work, both in front of the camera and behind it.

For others video porn was used as advertising for the prostitution (or "escorting," as it was euphemistically known) that was their primary source of income. Performing as a stripper in nightclubs was another profitable job that could develop from a career in pornography.

Moreover, the gay porn world became its own subculture within a subculture, boasting its own awards shows, pantheon of stars and directors, and a strong and open connection to the gay culture that was both its market and its source of inspiration.

By 2000 gay male pornography was thoroughly integrated into gay life in a way that straight pornography has never been in the majority culture. Gay porn actors became cultural heroes, their images sometimes gracing giant billboards in gay ghettos in Houston and Los Angeles. They made public appearances at important social functions, and organized and attended high-profile fundraisers, especially for AIDS causes.

Today the gay subculture openly accepts--sometimes even revels in--pornography. Because gay sexual identity is already marked as "deviant" by the mainstream, it is hard for most gay men to see the enjoyment of pornography as marginalizing or problematic.

With the majority of gay men regarding pornography positively, the gay male community has not been polarized by the bitter debates over pornography that has sometimes divided lesbian communities.

Indeed, gay men at the turn into the twenty-first century at least in part use pornography in a way similar to the way earlier generations of gay men used a camp sensibility: as a means of asserting their identity by flouting and mocking the arbitrary standards of the majority.

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About the Author

Joe A. Thomas is Associate Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses primarily on issues of sexuality and representation, but also digresses into American

Pop Art and Italian Mannerism.