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Carter, Oliver, Tommy Gustafsson and Mariah Larsson (eds.). *Golden Ages? Media, Space and Transnationality*. *Porn Studies*, 9:1 (2022). ISSN: 2326-8743 (print); 2326-8751 (web). \$ 32.95.

This monographic issue of *Porn Studies* puts together works originating in two different—albeit interestingly compatible—projects, both focusing on the history of pornography. On the one hand, Oliver Carter’s British Academy-funded research project “The Transnational Trade in Hardcore Pornography between Britain, Scandinavia and the Netherlands,” which investigated the transnational trade of films and magazines originating from (and/or imported to) Britain in the 1960s and the 1970s. On the other, the symposium “Pornography in the Pre-digital Era: Distribution, Consumption, and the Law,” organized by Mariah Larsson and Tommy Gustafsson in 2019 and originated the research network “Porn Travels,” which focused on a new comparative approach to pornography before the advent of the Internet.

The resulting special issue is an ambitious work, which aims to investigate the history of the production and circulation of pornography in Europe through a variety of perspectives and methodologies. The common thread is constituted by the need to reconstruct the history of materials that are primarily inaccessible—because they are not deemed worthy of preservation by public institutions—and of marginal and often “invisible” production and distribution practices, as they occurred outside formalized industrial schemes. This is one of the most compelling aspects of this special issue. The study of film distribution and transnational circulation is a relatively new field, even outside porn studies, and any researcher investigating the history of this particular sector of the media industry, especially if his or her object of study is not the Hollywood film industry, must find a way to overcome the lack of dedicated records in institutional archives. Thus, each of the articles in this special issue proposes intriguing configurations of methodologies allowing researchers to investigate scarcely available materials or informal practices of production and dissemination: from the analysis of laws and/or trials (Carter; Gustafsson) to the cross checking of private collections, memorials, magazines and online databases (Maina and Zecca); from the analysis of the blind spots in the digitization of vintage material (Larsson) or the recreation of long lost consumption practices (Alilunas) to the analysis of the interaction between the alternative economy of pornography and the accepted/regular economy in 1960s Sweden (Arnberg).

In most of the articles, the analyses are conducted in-depth and lead to compelling results, although sometimes the historical reconstruction, especially when dealing with well-documented individual case studies, risks bordering on the descriptive if not the anecdotal, and the methodological approach devised is not fully implemented. For instance, I would have appreciated it if Carter’s article had effectively crosschecked information emerging from forensic documents and semi-structured interviews. In fact, the glossing over the latter that occurs in the final part of the essay, although justified by ethical concerns, does not allow the reader to understand how a methodology that has become relatively common in media industry studies can be employed in the study of such an informal production system.¹

A reading of all the articles in this issue reveals some extremely relevant points for a study of the sexualization process in 20th-century European media. Firstly, as Maina and Zecca point out with reference to Ortoleva, “the liberalization of pornography is to be considered as a long-term global path [...] that characterized the whole of the twentieth century in the USA and in most Western European countries (121).² But even if the stages of this path do not coincide chronologically from

¹ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

² Peppino Ortoleva, *Il secolo dei media. Riti, abitudini, mitologie* (Milano: il Saggiatore, 2009).

nation to nation—some ten years separate the legalization of pornography in Denmark from the unregulated (though tolerated) screening of hardcore films in Italian “red light” theaters—the trade flows have accounted for a general uniformity in the production and distribution models of pornographic material. The erotic turn in 1969 Denmark not only dramatically boosted the imports of Danish feature films in Britain (Thorsen), but also pushed British companies specialized in the clandestine production of pornographic film reels to move to Copenhagen in order to benefit from the possibility “to enhance their production process, using official film laboratories and industry-standard equipment” (89). Moreover, the purchase of Danish or Swedish photo shoots was also instrumental in the explosion of hardcore magazines in 1970s Italy, while the production of “pornified” versions of Italian softcore films was supported by distribution flows in France and West Germany (Maina and Zecca). This pattern shows how a transnational perspective is essential to grasp the eroticization of European cultures and the development of local industries and modes of consumption.

Secondly, these transnational flows appear responsible for a substantial homogenization in style and content, which blurs the provenience—and thus the national identity—of films clandestinely created and circulated through informal networks. In this respect, Gustafsson’s article suggestively emphasizes how the reception of pornographic shorts of often uncertain origin had been influenced by cultural bias originating in what the author calls “sexual geographies.” In fact, his analysis of three trials from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, shows how in front of short films devoid of any precise national trait, the audience, the press, the audience, and the censorship were inclined to attribute a national identity modeled on cultural stereotypes relating to French, Anglo-American, or Nazi German sexuality.

For the reader of *G/S/I*, the most relevant essay in the special issue will probably be the one co-authored by Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca. Not only because this contribution continues a discourse on the process of sexualization of the popular press already carried on by one of the authors (see Maina 2018 and 2019), but also because it comes out shortly after another contribution focusing on the birth of film pornography in Italy³. In fact, Tomaso Subini investigated how the censorship practices, introduced by the Catholic Church in the Italian parish cinema circuit, had formed the basis for the practices of manipulating copies of hardcore films⁴. In fact, parish cinemas had developed the habit of editing copies already screened by the censors (a formally illegal operation), by cutting potentially immoral scenes presenting implicating or even kisses. Likewise, even though Italian pornography was not regulated (but formally prohibited), the producers had devised a way of submitting a forged copy to the censorship commissions. The hard scenes had been replaced by harmless ones of the same length, in order to reintroduce the sex scenes upon theatrical release, resulting in a copy of exactly the same length as declared on the censorship visa. In a similar vein, Maina and Zecca reflect on a known, though under-examined, practice, namely the creation of pornographic inserts (often low-angle meat shots) shot with body doubles on the same sets after the principal photography, which was then edited into prints destined for consumption abroad. Analyzing these informal practices, carried out by what would have been the first wave of Italian hardcore directors (e.g. Aristide Massaccesi/Joe D’Amato), Maina and Zecca emphasize how the pornographic inserts “represented a sort of ‘experimental laboratory,’ in which directors, crews, and performers tested and perfected the new languages, techniques, and methods of the pornographic *mise-en-scène* (133).”

³ See Giovanna Maina, *Corpi che si sfogliano. Cinema, generi e sessualità su «Cinesex» (1969-1974)* (Pisa: ETS, 2018) and Id. *Play, Men! Un panorama della stampa italiana per adulti (1966-1975)* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2019).

⁴ Tomaso Subini, *La via italiana alla pornografia. Cattolicesimo, sessualità e cinema (1948-1986)* (Firenze: Le Monnier Università, 2021).

However, despite the particular interest of this latter essay for scholars dealing with issues relating to sexuality in Italian media, the variety of the methodologies employed, and the overall comparative approach make the whole special issue a convincing, and recommended, reading.

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