

# STAG: THE ILLICIT ORIGINS OF PORNOGRAPHIC FILM

[Curated by Kelsey S Brewer for the Museum of Sex, 2018](#)

## INTRODUCTION

From the early 1900s until the late 1960s, pornographic films were predominantly short, black-and-white, and anonymously produced—known as ‘stags.’ The first stag films appeared independently in the United States, France, Austria, Germany, Russia, Argentina, and North Africa between 1907 and 1919. From the 1910s through the early ‘30s, they often interlaced their depictions of sex with humor and narrative plots, subverting stories and morals from folklore for the sake of satire and sometimes social commentary. As this period came to a close, humor and plot declined, increasingly subordinated to the depiction of sexual activities. At the same time, the professional filmmakers responsible for some of the most famous early stags abandoned the industry to amateur producers. Amateur production would characterize the rest of the genre’s history. The technology used remained intentionally retrograde—almost all stag productions were silent and black-and-white, even as sound and color film became the norm in the rest of the industry. This stylistic device contributed to the films’ explicit allure, suggesting the reality of the sex acts being performed, as well as the underground and illicit nature of the pornographic film industry itself. Screenings of stag films, called smokers or stag parties, were clandestine events that attracted a specific audience. Typically middle-class, heteronormative, White, and male, these groups would gather together in American legion halls and fraternities—or brothels, especially outside of the United States—to watch pornographic films together. At these characteristically raucous events, audiences would drink and laugh together, tease and nudge each other knowingly, and jeer and cheer at the screen as the films’ protagonists pursued their conquests.

The films displayed here demonstrate many of the major aesthetic and thematic trends and transformations in the history of this early illicit film industry. However, in offering the stag genre for a contemporary audience’s consideration, recognition has also been given to films that shed light on the cultural and social norms of the stag era and, in some cases, offer exceptions to them. These films offer insight into the era’s construction of gender and sexuality, and its exclusion of perspectives and narratives that weren’t straight and White. It is for this new and inherently more diverse audience to determine for themselves what has or has not changed from this era to the present day.

## INNUENDO

The medium of film has been inseparable from pornographic instincts since its inception. Although hardcore stag films can be traced back as early as c. 1908, their subject matter and formal traits began their evolution much earlier, taking cues from folk art and pornographic imagery pre-dating the invention of film. Some of the most accomplished and best remembered early filmmakers in Europe and the United States made many suggestive films, including Thomas Edison (US), Georges Méliès (France), and Johann Schwarzer (Austria). Their moving-image adaptations of stories and other art forms fulfilled audiences’ desires for voyeurism and spectacle, providing windows onto intimate or risqué scenes of kissing, undressing, exotic dancing, and theatrical acts. Victorian ideas of sexual morality were still popular at the turn of the 20th century. Although these virtues and vices were widely discussed, strong social and sometimes legal deterrents guarded against the frank discussion of sexual practices, resulting in widespread ignorance, embarrassment, and fear. Thus, early films, in exposing audiences to suggestive content, also opened themselves to backlash. As the stag genre grew from this foundation, it embraced its necessarily clandestine nature, adding to its illicit appeal even as individuals and institutions, from the local police to the nascent Hollywood studio system, increasingly attempted to control sexual

content in film.

16:29 min.

*Autour d'un cabine (Around a Cabin)*, c. 1894, France

*Après le bal (After the Ball)*, 1897, France

*Fatima, Muscle Dancer*, 1896, United States

*The May Irwin Kiss*, 1896, United States

*The Kiss in the Tunnel*, 1899, England

*What Happened in the Tunnel*, 1903, United States

*The Gay Shoe Clerk*, 1903, United States

*Birth of the Pearl*, 1903, United States

*Da Eitle Stubenmädchen, (The Vain Chambermaid)*, 1908, Austria

*A L'Ecu d'Or ou la bonne auberge (At the Golden Inn)*, c. 1908, France

### AMERICAN MILESTONES

The oldest surviving American stag film, *A Free Ride*, can be dated to c. 1915, and many of the genre's recurrent traits can already be seen in its simple plot. The male character keeps most of his clothing on, and his genitalia is hardly seen—focus is kept on female nudity and genitalia. The recurrent male fantasy that women can be aroused at the mere sight of a penis is introduced here. The prominent inclusion of the car, which was widely recognized at the time as a threat to traditional morality, foreshadows the continued depiction of technological innovations throughout the ensuing decades. As the stag genre quickly matured, filmmakers continued to innovate new ways of portraying sex on film. By the early 1930s, most of stag's technical and thematic tropes had been established, and many groundbreaking films, including the first depiction of a condom on screen and the first pornographic cartoon, had been produced. Extreme close-ups of sexual intercourse, deemed the “meat shot” by historian Linda Williams, date back to the early 1920s. The depiction of the male orgasm, known as the “money shot,” emerged soon after, c. 1925, but never became a mainstay of stag films.

22:32 min.

*A Free Ride*, c. 1915, United States

*The Casting Couch*, c. 1924, United States

*Buried Treasure*, c. 1930, United States

*The Modern Gigolo*, c. 1934, United States

### SHARED FANTASIES

With the rise of stag films came the emergence of plot lines that are still synonymous with pornographic content today. Many plots centered around common jobs where interpersonal encounters could be erotically exploited. Salesmen, repairmen, doctors, and producers generally instigated the action, while women were often confined to the subservient characters of housewives, maids, and aspiring actresses. Stag films of the 1920s, often made by film professionals, had a penchant for plots about Hollywood, revealing the same self-reflective tendency that has endured in mainstream films. Producers made stags that depicted their experience. Therefore, the fantasies that stag audiences consumed often reflected the world that the films' producers and viewers shared, including their common socio-economic statuses, gender roles, and colloquialisms. These story lines, while clearly reflective of their intended audience's fantasies, surely also shaped their expectations of sex. Many plots promoted the idea that, with enough persistence, women would eventually give in and enjoy forced sexual encounters. Conversely, other films centered on the idea of an insatiable seductress—an idea that contrasts with the era's prevailing notion that women lacked libido, and admits men's desire to be desired.

19:55 min.

*Strictly Union*, c. 1919, United States

*The Radio Man*, c. 1931, United States

*Super Saleswoman*, c. 1947, United States

*The Dentist*, c. 1947, United States

*La Clinique en folie (A Clinic Gone Mad)*, c. 1940s, France

## FOLKLORIC INFLUENCE

During stag's "golden era" of the 1920s and early '30s, filmmakers drew on folklore for humorous stories and settings that they could embellish with erotic acts. In general, stag producers during this time were professionals on the fringe of the mainstream film industry, and their focus on story and technical craft resulted in films where sex was subservient to plot. In the United States, fables and tales of morality took center stage, most often used to convey warnings about the guiles of women. In other parts of the world, stags often took cues from mythology and fairy tales—characters might be reminiscent of nymphs, sirens, or satyrs, or pose nude like Greco-Roman statues. While in America women were presented as dangerous entities to be outwitted, elsewhere they were equated to fantastic beings—something to be put (even literally) on a pedestal. By the end of the 1930s, professional filmmakers had largely abandoned the production of stag films to amateurs. Plots dwindled down to mere excuses for subjects to take off their clothes and engage in intercourse, and much of stag's earlier inclusion of folklore was discarded, replaced by occasional references to technological innovations and pop-culture fashions.

19:53 min.

*Baden Verboten (Bathing Forbidden)*, 1906, Austria

*El Satario (The Devil)*, c. 1913, Argentina

*The Pick-Up*, c. 1923, United States

*Getting His Goat*, c. 1925, United States

*Modern Pirates*, c. 1933, United States

## VOYEURISM

The character of the voyeur is perhaps the most ubiquitous trope in the stag canon. In spite of the taboo nature of voyeuristic behavior, the theme's prevalence treats the desire to watch as a given—a viewpoint reinforced by the lasting success of the stag industry, and by the concurrent rise of mainstream cinema itself. The stag theater environment was in a sense its own unique invitation to voyeurism, wherein patrons would slip into legion halls, fraternities, or bordellos in order to peer at others' illicit actions through the projection screen. The "peeping toms" in stag films generally bore a direct resemblance to the men who watched them—white, middle-class, and ranging from early adulthood to middle age. These characters acted as stand-ins for the audience within the film's structure, allowing patrons to live vicariously as on-screen voyeur and off-screen viewer simultaneously. The homogeneity of character and audience, which was taken as a matter of course during the time of the films' productions, now offers insight into stag culture's characterization of the relatable protagonist and the objects of their gaze.

21:31 min.

*Par le trou de la serrure (Through the Keyhole)*, c. 1901, France

*Keyhole Portraits*, c. 1920s, United States

*Mr. Abbot Bitt at Convent*, c. 1925, France

*Wonders of the Unseen World*, 1927, United States

*The Aviator*, c. 1933, United States

*The Nun*, c. 1950, United States

## **KINKS & TABOO**

While stag film production was surging in the 1920s, the mainstream film industry was fighting to keep up with complex and constantly changing local censorship laws that made the widespread distribution of films a nearly impossible challenge. In an attempt to combat the situation, filmmakers came up with their own industry-wide censorship standards. The Motion Picture Production Code, commonly called the Hays Code, was first instituted in 1930, but wasn't effectively enforced until 1934. It forbade sexual content, as well as depictions of white slavery and prostitution, childbirth, and interracial relationships. This crackdown on immorality in film seemingly had no effect on stag production—if anything, the illegal nature of stag screenings, and the profanity of their content, likely increased in value due to the scarcity of explicit depictions of sex elsewhere, as well as their air of illicit intrigue. Similarly, though anti-vice laws forbade the marketing of sex toys, vibrators still found their way onto the market, advertised suggestively as health or beauty aids. Throughout the 1930s and '40s, stag films displayed increasingly diverse erotic acts, including BDSM, bondage, anal, and the use of varied sex toys and insertable objects.

18:56 min.

*La fessée à l'école (Spanking at School)*, c. 1925, France

*Swedish Massage*, c. 1934, United States

*The Love Affairs of Jane Winslow*, c. 1937, United States

*Busy Girl*, c. 1940, United States

*Madame et sa bonne (Madam and her Maid)*, c. 1940s, France

*Petit conte de Noël (A Little Christmas Tale)*, c. 1940s, France

## **RARE EXAMPLES**

Stag films depicting diversity in race and sexual orientation were rare. Throughout the stag era, sodomy was an imprisonable felony across the United States, and miscegenation laws prohibited marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations, and procreation between members of different racial groups. These laws reflected the dominant cultural norms of the era, and stag audiences were undoubtedly some of the main constituents and beneficiaries of that culture. Stag producers were often the exhibitors of their own films, giving them the opportunity to observe audience reactions to their work. If the audience seemed uncomfortable viewing a particular sex act—as they decidedly were when homosexual intercourse was displayed—the exhibitor would drop that film or cut the offending scene from it. Given the homogeneity of stag audiences and their tastes in sexual content, it is unsurprising that so few examples of homosexual and interracial stag films pre-dating the 1950s can be found today. Towards the 1960s, as 8mm film became more widely available, stags addressing these communities grew in number, but by today's standards the volume was still low. These rare surviving examples serve as testimony to the equal sexual desires of the suppressed communities they represent.

14:16 min.

*Piccolo Pete*, c. 1936, United States

*Inez*, c. 1940s, United States

*The Two-Timer*, c. 1945, United States

*Gay Men*, c. 1958, United States

## **FEMALE-DRIVEN FANTASIES**

In contrast to the overwhelming antipathy towards sexual interaction between men, depictions of sex acts between women were rampant in stag films. Far from advocating for same-sex relationships, however, these intimate scenes served to fuel the male fantasy of the sexually

ravenous woman, who would turn to her female companions for sexual gratification, but only in the absence of a man or male phallus. Although female characters in stag films were always the subject of attention, they were rarely the main character or the instigator of a film's action. What differentiates these few films is that in each, a female character is positioned as the protagonist and often instigates the action, whether with other women, men, or herself, in order to satisfy her sexual desire. In the absence of a male lead, these films seem to suggest that viewers identify with the women on screen, even as their overall tone remains decidedly voyeuristic. By the 1940s, women had begun to enter the workforce and won the right to vote, and Hollywood stars and plot lines had proven the appeal of audacious female characters. It could be that changing perceptions of women's role in society influenced the later stag era's conception of who could play the role of protagonist.

14:28 min.

*Ersatz seule (Substitute Alone)*, c. 1940s, France

*La Señora y La Criada (The Lady and the Maid)*, c. 1945, Cuba

*Esprit de famille (Family Spirit)*, c. 1948, France

### **LIBERATION & BONDAGE**

In the years following World War II, narrative elements in stags almost entirely disappeared, while pop cultural references (including war-related subjects like the atomic bomb and GI Joes) became increasingly common. The stag industry capitalized on the popularity of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield by creating films starring alluring lookalikes in compromising positions. Some reels of this era became well-known and loved, such as *Smart Aleck*, possibly the most popular stag made, which starred then 16-year old Candy Barr (Juanita Slusher). During the war, pin-up images of women became sex symbols - carried by soldiers and even painted on the sides of their aircraft for inspiration and luck. The iconography of the form was adapted to film in the early 1950s, resulting in an abundance of striptease and bondage fetish films. Their popularity reflected the changing culture and sexual tastes of the post-war era. Increasingly, US viewers of mainstream and illicit film alike were eager for more risqué content than Hollywood censorship allowed. In the 1960s, the sexploitation genre emerged on the fringe of mainstream film. The theme of male violence against women, combined with explicit sex appeal, formed the bedrock of the 'rougie' sub-genre. Doubtlessly, these films took inspiration from and in turn inspired the proliferation of stag films featuring women being tied up, raped, whipped, and denigrated.

22:51 min.

*The Atomic Jazzer*, c. 1946, United States

*Smart Aleck*, 1951, United States

*Irving Klaw - Bondage*, c. 1950s, United States

*Apple Knockers & The Coke*, c. 1960s, United States

*Humiliation*, c. 1966, England

### **THE EROTIC 'EXOTIC'**

Throughout the stag era, Western countries produced films depicting other, typically non-western cultures - rendering them and their people 'exotic.' Many focused on interracial sex, which had dual appeal for audience members - in the words of film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu, these films "offered double controversy and double titillation in an era of intense racial and sexual anxiety." In many cases, white actors performed non-western roles by donning costume elements meant to allude to their idea of a particular culture. In others, people of Asian, Hispanic, or African descent were differentiated through the performance of 'rituals' and suggestive dances. These

films gave White, Western audiences an erroneous but comforting idea of their own cultural and racial dominance, while misrepresenting and demeaning people with different identities. Simultaneously, however, many countries beyond the US and Europe were producing their own stag films, which took cues from their own cultures and pop references. As the stag era progressed, the number of countries making sexually explicit, single-reel films grew to include Cuba, Mexico, Japan, and Hong Kong, among others. Although small in number compared with the proliferation of American and European stags, these films provide an invaluable counterpoint to Western depictions fetishizing other cultures, and emphasize the universality of sex.

13:29 min.

*Arabian Shave*, c. 1930s, France

*Mexican Lovers*, c. 1950s, Mexico

*The Tea Party*, c. 1950s, Japan

*Bill Collector*, c. 1960s, Hong Kong