

“TIME TO SAY ‘YES’ TO SEX”: GENRE MIXING AND AESTHETIC REBELLION

IN FIVE MULTI MEDIA RESOURCE CENTER FILMS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: “Time to Say ‘Yes’ to Sex”: Genre Mixing and Aesthetic Rebellion in  
Five Multi Media Resource Center Films

In the 1960s to 1970s, an audacious group of Methodist clergymen redistributed erotic art films, while producing their own content in a similar style, with the goal of creating a progressive sexual education program. Looking at five such films, this thesis uses a cultural approach to genre theory to examine how the Multi Media Resource Center combined the genre-label of sexual education and aesthetics of art cinema to legitimize explicit representations of sex that depart from heteronormative sexual practices. This thesis explores how the films’ failure to fit into any one genre category, even as labels are forced upon them as an industrial practice, illuminates how cultural power was operating to regulate sex and sexuality.



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Dedicated to Mimi, Mom, & McKenzie

Let's hear it for the ladies

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## CHAPTER I

### TO BEGIN, I NEEDED A BED: INTRODUCTION

“To begin, I needed a bed and a place to photograph it” James Broughton  
(Broughton, 1993, p. 148)

In the late 1960s, an audacious group of young Methodist clergymen assembled in the basement of a San Francisco church to address a truly perplexing issue:

“cinematically speaking, the public display of our sex organs is in the wrong hands” (Britton & Dunlap, 2017; Vogel, 1982, p. 73). Led by Reverend Dr. Ted McIlvenna, the group curated existing erotic avant-garde and art film, while producing their own content in a similar style, with the goal of relaying the “meaningfulness of the real sexual acts in real time” in what they would later call “sexual cinéma vérité” or “pattern films” (Britton & Dunlap, 2017, p. 17; Simon, 2014). They bundled groups of films intentionally selected to range in genre and distributed them for the purposes of sexual education, overtly rebelling against the established paradigms of almost exclusively white, heterosexual, upper middle-class representations in sexual education film. Clearly rooted in the progressive ideals of the counter-culture movement and often indicative of concepts related to the idea of the “sexual revolution,” films distributed by McIlvenna’s San Francisco-based Multi-Media Resource Center (MMRC) frequently focused on underrepresented communities in sexual education such as same-sex, bisexual, interracial, and physically disabled couples with unambiguous attempts to acknowledge aspects of pleasure and desire through explicit depictions of sex.

In the late 1960s, McIlvenna founded the National Sex Forum (NSF) through the Glide Memorial United Methodist Church and Foundation in San Francisco and soon appointed Reverend Laird Sutton as the media director of the MMRC (Johnson, 2014;

Irvine, 2005; Shellenberger, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Together, the Methodist ministers produced original sexual education film and also collected/redistributed many art, experimental, and avant-garde films, which were often previously established as such through film festival circuits and recognized as such by film critics and scholars (Shellenberger, 2014; Vogel, 2005). These films were used as a visual component of sexual education via the NSF's Sexual Attitude Readjustment or Restructuring or Reassessment (SAR) program.<sup>2</sup> Even Sutton's original productions clearly borrow from the aesthetic modes of these re-contextualized films. The NSF became the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (IASHS) in 1976, which continues today as a for-profit institution offering "professional training in sexology" (About the School, 2017; Johnson, 2014, p. 267). Although contemporary iterations of the SAR program exist with significant differences in methods and applications from the original iterations (Britton & Dunlap, 2017, p. 6), the primary focus of this thesis is not on the SAR experience itself, but specifically on five films produced/distributed by the MMRC in the late 1960s to 1970s and currently located in the University of Oregon's Knight Library.

Borrowing from Jason Mittell's concepts of genre as fluid cultural categories (Mittell, 2001; 2004), the following chapters explore how the MMRC recognized and justified the intentions of specific films through culturally-constructed notions about genre, with the films themselves serving as a fascinating intersection between a multitude of genres (educational, avant-garde/art house/experimental, erotic, pornography, etc.).

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<sup>1</sup> Other filmmakers, such as Constance Beeson, contributed to MMRC productions (Shellenberger, 2014), but Sutton is credited as filmmaker for both of the MMRC-produced films I examine.

<sup>2</sup> While the name of the program has changed over the years, I reference it as the Sexual Attitude Restructuring Program, as it was known at the time of the distribution of the films on which I focus (Sexuality: Institutions, 1979).



While Mittell's cultural approach to genre theory was developed specifically to address television's multi-genre programming, I argue the bundling of MMRC and SAR films for distribution functions in a parallel genre-mixing, blending, and ambiguous manner, further complicating the situation by containing modes, aesthetic devices, and cues from multiple far-ranging genres (Mittell, 2004, p. x). This genre amalgam was then packaged and labeled as sexual education, how it is now often categorized in library catalogs and classifications.

Sexual education films have long influenced how we understand sex, sexuality, and gender expectations and identification. It's imperative to acknowledge that these films also affect how we perceive of issues of social class, race, ability, and sexual power. Analyzing films distributed by the MMRC can contribute to a larger understanding of how specific cultural moments influence how generations of Americans have been taught to understand the interlocking ideologies of sex, class, gender, and race. While the debate continues regarding how to best educate Americans about sex, sexual education film is an ideal medium for studying past approaches and what these approaches might say about a specific moment in history and its effects on more contemporary sexual education and more general cultural attitudes toward sex and sexuality.

In the following chapters, I use interdisciplinary media studies and cultural studies methods to explore what happens when the focus shifts from more utilitarian, pleasure-obscuring methods of sexual education to avant-garde, unapologetic displays of sex and sexuality that are often in direct conflict with the social norms of mainstream culture. My research applies a cultural approach to genre theory by way of textual analysis of five

16mm sexual education films distributed by the MMRC in the late 1960s through the 1970s. My approach is compatible with Mittell's emphasis on a balance of methods and his suggestion that while a genre analysis might begin with or include textual analysis or "an industrial practice, a historical shift, or an audience controversy," it should attempt to "account for how all these interact in tandem." However, I place specific emphasis on how examining these genre lines exposes how sex and sexuality is regulated culturally (Mittell, 2001, p. 12). With regard to sexual education film, a genre that is generally considered rote, dry, and static, this brief period of more progressive and nontraditional sexual education signifies the intersection of historical and cultural shifts that are directly related to the aesthetics of these films.

The five films were chosen for their representation of both the redistribution and recontextualization of previously distributed avant-garde/art film and in-house MMRC productions specifically intended for the SAR program and because of their availability in the University of Oregon Knight Library in their rare, original 16mm format.<sup>3</sup> James Broughton's *The Bed* (1968) and Gunvor Nelson's *Kirsa Nicholina* (1969) both serve as examples of films created and originally distributed by well-known artists and art cinema filmmakers, with Edd Dundas's *Masturbation: Men* (1979) as an example of a lesser-known piece by a local San Francisco activist and filmmaker, all redistributed by the MMRC.<sup>4</sup> *Free* (1970) and *The Erogenists* (1970) are films produced by the MMRC's

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<sup>3</sup> *The Squeeze Technique* (1971), *Margo* (1972), and *Rich and Judy* (1971) are listed in Knight Library catalogs, but were discovered missing, suggesting that at one point the University was in possession of a substantial bundle of SAR films.

<sup>4</sup> Edd Dundas and San Francisco-based Cinematherapy, Inc. were involved in a series of films concerned with sexuality, occasionally working with hardcore experimental director Wakefield Poole.

primary in-house filmmaker and media director, Laird Sutton.<sup>5</sup> As the films vary widely in content and context, each film is not exhaustively analyzed with regard to each genre. Instead, my analysis is distributed across the chapters and is primarily influenced by each film's alignment within the specific instances of the cultural construction of each genre. For example, *Kirsa Nicholina*, a film featuring home birth, serves as an appropriate counterpoint to traditional educational film unfocused on actual intercourse, and *The Bed* serves an example of well-known piece established in the avant-garde scene before redistribution. However, in comparison with the films including more frank representations of sex, neither film is as directly connected to my discussion of the pornography/erotica split. However, a central aspect of my analysis is looking beyond the individual films to also acknowledge the aforementioned intentionally genre-mixing MMRC film bundles.

Choosing to focus my analysis on 16mm film, which was an essential aspect of my research and analysis, contributed to some methodological challenges. Crafting a well-informed understanding of the films and obtaining usable stills (seen throughout my thesis) required multiple viewings, graciously facilitated by Elizabeth Peterson, Humanities Librarian and Curator of Moving Images. My decision to focus on the films in their original format, which sometimes involved film that was somewhat warped or damaged, involved Peterson operating the projector and overseeing any issue that might arise. In addition to the issues of access and scheduling that this approach created, another challenge was in finding an available and appropriately private space equipped for viewing the sexually explicit material.

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<sup>5</sup> While the years associated with the films differ slightly in various texts, I've chosen to use the year included in the actual film in reference to its creation.

To supplement the textual analysis of these five films, I also performed archival research, examining documentation related to the application of the SAR program as well as film catalogs and promotional material for SAR programming from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. However, it's important to note that this is not an overview of the entire catalog of MMRC-distributed films or the processes of the SAR program. Nor am I presenting a debate on the merit or effectiveness of the SAR program. Instead, this thesis argues for an understanding of the position of these five films in relation to culturally constructed ideas of genre and considers the implications of this position on the representations of sex and sexuality within the films.

Looking at the MMRC films as capable of complexly fitting, although never perfectly, into several genre categories concurrently depending on context and approach echoes Mittell's appeal to scholars to look beyond genre as static, easily defined categories, instead studying the "multiplicity of genres evoked in any instance" (Mittell, 2004, p. x). Focusing on the films' positions as culturally and historically constructed texts within culturally and historically constructed genres accomplishes a main objective of his approach to illuminate how "cultural power relations" have influenced how these films were distributed and received and furthermore contributed to how sex and sexuality is understood culturally (Mittell, 2004, p. xi). I argue that the way in which MMRC combined the genre-label of sexual education and aesthetics of avant-garde and art film in an attempt to legitimize explicit representations of sex that depart from heteronormative sexual practices and stereotypes illuminates how "cultural power relations" were operating.

Furthermore, studying the films of the MMRC, and specifically the few films

housed in the Knight Library at the University of Oregon, I'm able to borrow from Michel Foucault's bottom-up approach, as applied to genre by Mittell, wherein focusing on "micro-instances of generic discourses in historically specific moments," will reveal the "large-scale patterns and trajectories" of genre (Mittell, 2001, p. 10). Throughout the following chapters I draw further from Michel Foucault and interdisciplinary theorists and scholars such as Audre Lorde, Laura Mulvey, David Bordwell, Linda Williams, Eithne Johnson, and Eric Schaefer.

This thesis is organized into three primary chapters, with each chapter focusing on what I identify as a primary genre of the MMRC films: sexual education, pornography/erotica, and art/avant-garde film. In each chapter, I introduce ways in which the specific genre was culturally constructed. Additionally, I explore how the MMRC films fit imperfectly within genre categories, again drawing from specific examples from the five films. Thus, through Mittell's guiding principal of "decenter[ing] the text as the primary site of genre but not to the extent that we ignore texts completely," the elaborate, fluid nature of genre becomes apparent through the "complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (2001, p. 7-9).

While other scholars, and in some cases McIlvenna and Sutton themselves, have leaned into nontraditional genre labels for the MMRC-distributed films, such "sexperimental," "sexual cinéma vérité," "'erotologic' documentary," or "pattern" film, all of which demonstrate the films' unique position straddling genre lines (Johnson, 1999, p. 43; p. 240), this thesis is more concerned with the films' positions in relation to the cultural construction of primary genres that are evident specifically in the five films of interest. Using the aesthetics of art film and the label of sexual education to combat

destructive attitudes surrounding unambiguous depictions of desire and pleasure with the clear intent of arousal, McIlvenna and Sutton sometimes refer to their films as “pattern films” because of their depictions of patterns of sexual behavior, generally lacking in narrative structure surrounding the sex acts (Shellenberger, 2014; Simon, 2014). Creating this separate, more specific subgenre-label serves as an acknowledgment of how the films fail to fit comfortably into any one genre, even as labels are forced upon them as an industrial practice, and is simultaneously an attempt to avoid the controversial landscape and very real consequences of how genre is assigned to sexually explicit material.

Applying Mittell’s cultural approach to genre theory by studying the films distributed by the MMRC as a cross-section between erotica, pornography, educational, art, experimental and avant-garde film, demonstrates that these generic divisions are clearly marked by political and industrial motivations that are intimately tied to historical and cultural events and attitudes. For this reason, I introduce the principal chapters with an overview of the historical context necessary to understand the films and to provide an overview of the MMRC and its primary players (Mittell, 2004, p. xi). Understanding the development of the counterculture and the concept of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically in San Francisco, and their relationship to sexology and the SAR program is also fundamental to understanding the position of the five MMRC films in relation to genre.

## CHAPTER II

### MAKE LOVE, MAKE REVOLUTION: HISTORICAL/CULTURAL CONTEXT

“The more I make love, the more I make revolution” (declaration of the sexual revolution, quoted in Schaefer, 2002, p. 14)

“The new approach is a frontal assault on our American Janus-like idol of divine and dirty sex” (Francoeur, 1977, p. 33)

The counterculture of the late 1960s to the 1970s cannot be understood without acknowledging it as following the conservative cultural swing of the 1940s and 1950s, a time when the nuclear family was being explicitly elevated in popular culture and in politics as the “American ideal, a social formation promising both personal happiness and national defense against communism” (Skidmore, 2011, p. 273). In this Cold War period of nationalistic competition, performing traditional gender roles was framed as a means to “demonstrate the superiority of the nation’s institutions and values” (Hartmann, 1994, p. 86). The impetus of mass consumption was blended into culture, politics, and economy; any “gender and sexual deviancy” was construed as a threat to the social formations that constructed the American ideal consumer (white, middle class, heteronormative nuclear family situated in suburbs) and was thus “equated with political subversion” (Skidmore, 2011, p. 273). Similar to the prominence of June Cleaver-esque representations in narrative television and film of the time, there was also a notable lack of racial, sexual, or socioeconomic difference in sexual education films.

I stress the importance of understanding pervasive political and cultural attitudes toward sex and sexuality in the preceding years to underscore how dramatic and extreme the cultural shift in the 1960s was, while simultaneously being embroiled in the “hypocrisy... of the 1950s, when everybody was doing it but everybody was denying it”

(Irvine, 2005, p. 49). In post-world war America, the threat of punishment, social or legal, for sexual deviance was a real and persistent fear (Allyn, 2000, p. 6). In my examination of the genre of sexual education, I argue that this cultural climate clearly influenced the content and form of conventional sexual education film, as did the enormous cultural swing largely demonstrated by the sexual revolution and counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

The idea of the “sexual revolution” is intimately tied to the notion of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, both movements being heavily influenced by a complex amalgamation of overlapping social, cultural, political, and legislative factors including increased access to oral contraceptives, *Roe v. Wade*, the Stonewall Riots, Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, and the reboot and eventual failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, among others. Furthermore, a series of landmark obscenity trials including *Roth v. United States* (1957) and *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), addressed more thoroughly in a Chapter IV, contributed to the “sudden rise in popularity of erotic cinema” (Johnson, 1999; Pires, 2014; Schaefer, 2014a, p. 30). Such events produced a very particular cultural climate, which served as a “precursor to the feminist-identified ‘antipornography’ and ‘pro-sex’ presentations,” commonly known as the “sex wars” (Johnson, “Sexarama,” p. 267).

In *Make Love, Not War* (2000), David Allyn provides a nuanced conceptualization of the sexual revolution, which he defines as beginning in the early 1960s with the increased acceptance of young white women engaging in premarital sex and ending in the late 1970s when “opponents on both ends of the political spectrum waged a largely successful campaign against sexual permissiveness” (p. 5). Allyn



explains that throughout this time period the idea of the sexual revolution had varied and complex meanings for different groups at different times:

In the early sixties, the ‘sexual revolution’ was used to describe the suspected impact of the newly invented birth control pill on the behavior of white, middle-class, female college students. A few years later, the term was employed to describe the sweeping repudiation of literary censorship by the U.S. Supreme Court. It was borrowed to characterize developments in the scientific study of sexual behavior, most notably by Masters and Johnson. In the late sixties, the ‘sexual revolution’ was invoked to refer to the new candor in American culture, especially the sudden acceptance of nudity in film and on the stage. (Allyn, 2000, p. 4)

Allyn explains that the idea of the “sexual revolution” continued to evolve to include the “showings of hard-core sex films in first-run theaters,” open marriage, group sex, and other alternative expressions of sex and sexuality with “sexual education courses in schools and colleges... radically redesigned to replace euphemism and scare tactics with explicit visual aids and practical information” (2000, p. 5). In her 1999 dissertation *Sex Scenes and Naked Apes: Sexual-Technological Experimentation and the Sexual Revolution*, Eithne Johnson suggests that “the Sexual Revolution is not best understood as a transitory period in which the morals and behavior patterns of some – mostly younger—Americans participated” (p. 45), but should instead be understood as “an effect of the transdisciplinary shift into postmodernity” that “fundamentally altered the discourse of sex, which was now articulated as a unique medium of communication” (p. 45). This period also saw the abandonment of the Motion Picture Production Code,

contributing to “how entangled sexual liberation and popular entertainment became” by way of cultural events such as the famous underground erotic film productions and exhibitions by Andy Warhol and *Deep Throat* becoming “porno chic” prior to “President Nixon declar[ing] war on porn” (Pires, 2014, p. 7-8; Hoberman, 2014, p. 23).

By the early-to-mid 1970s, the effects of the counterculture and “sexual revolution” were apparent in the field of sexology as evidenced by the “vast proliferation of sex experts and sex clinics,” the formation of the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (IASHS) out of the National Sex Forum (NSF) in San Francisco, and with the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) adopting a more evident emphasis on sexual education and public health (Irvine, 2005, p. 71). Furthermore, the research of Alfred Kinsey “documented and verified the quantitative dimensions of sexual behavior” and “also tapped the public’s ambivalence about fluctuating sexual mores” with the publications of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) with cross-over appeal among popular audiences outside the field of sexual science (Irvine, 2005, p. 17). With best-selling sexual scientists such as Kinsey and Masters and Johnson (*Human Sexual Response* (1966) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970)) cited as examples of scientific approaches to sexology, the National Sex Forum, established in 1968 and largely pioneered by McIlvenna, fundamentally contradicted this trend of sexologists’ identification with the medical profession as indicated discursively and through symbolic gestures such as “white coats of authority” (Irvine, 2005, p. 60).

Central to analyzing the historical context in which the films were distributed by the Multi Media Resource Center is understanding the cultural position and approaches of

sexual science or sexology in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Disorders of Desire*, Janice Irvine identifies the 1930s through the mid-1960s as a specific period in which the sexual science and the field of sexology gained traction as it “sought cultural legitimacy” through a deliberate focus on biomedical research, something professionals in the field have continued to attempt to accomplish in the intervening time (2005, p. 2; p.15). This investment in cultural legitimacy is a common thread across the genres I analyze. In fact, the desire for cultural legitimacy is crucial to the MMRC films’ use of genre mixing.

Irvine describes the field of sexology as diverse and multidisciplinary, including but not limited to “scientists, pornographers, feminists, transvestites, therapists” (Irvine, 2005, p. 2). She provides an analysis of the layers of internal conflicts apparent in sexology “between sexual science and sexual politics” and between sects she acknowledges as “scientific” and “humanistic” sexologists, distinctions that directly inform the intent of films distributed by the MMRC (Irvine, 2005, p. 4; p. 75). A primary dividing line between the scientific and the humanistic sexologists is the issue of pleasure, “which was often obfuscated by the scientists,” and was also largely absent from sexual education films of the era (Irvine, 2005, p. 84). This focus on desire and pleasure largely grew out of twentieth century humanist principles, “which were set against religious fundamentalism and its resistance to evolutionary science” (Johnson, 1999, p. 242). Briefly tracing humanism and its relationship with the human potential movement, Eithne Johnson points to Foucault as “launch[ing] a critical perspective on humanism that continues to inform contemporary Western social theory,” specifically with his critique of “a disciplinary and normalizing bio-power articulated around a universalized human subject” (1999, p. 241-242).

An ordained Methodist minister with unambiguously progressive motives, McIlvenna's approach to sexology is explicitly rooted in emotional response, pleasure, and desire with the slogan "we believe that it is time to say 'yes' to sex," years before Audre Lorde famously observed that "we have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings" (qtd. in Irvine, 2005, p. 76; Lorde, 1978, n.p.).<sup>6</sup> Clearly established in the late 1960s era of counterculture, Irvine argues that "rebellion was not simply the province of the youth; certain professions were marked by disruption and internal dissent" (Irvine, 2005, p. 77). Paralleling my own argument regarding the implications of the aesthetic rebellion of these films as well as their more overt representations of sex, Irvine specifically addresses issues regarding the relationship between the NSF and the cultural movement: "the group I call humanistic sexologists simply comprised practitioners who adopted the philosophies and therapeutic innovations that were emerging from an amalgam of alternative traditions within the American counterculture" (Irvine, 2005, p. 77). Throughout this thesis, I focus on how this specific amalgam of time, place, and cultural attitude toward sex and access to knowledge about sex contributed to the MMRC films' relationship to the cultural construction of genre.

Understanding San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s as a specific setting of a major cultural confluence of radical approaches to sexuality, an increased visibility of pornography, the effects of a large population of countercultural participants, and the rise of avant-garde/art/underground film, and how these communities and ideas melted into each other, illuminates a similar process within the aesthetics, representation, and intention of the MMRC films (Cardullo, 2011, p. 15; Dixon & Foster, 2002; Schaefer &

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<sup>6</sup> This rhetoric of affirmation extends to publications such as McIlvenna's *The "Yes" Book of Sex for Men (You Can Last Longer): A Positive Action Plan for Control and Enjoyment of Your Sexuality* (1986).

Johnson, 2010). An overlap between the artists involved in the making of the films distributed by the MMRC and the progressive ideals presented within the films is demonstrated as “the avant-garde and Beat communities served as spaces for the expression of gay, bisexual, and transvestite sexualities” (Schaefer & Johnson, 2010, p. 192). James Broughton discusses the importance of time and place with regard to the making of *The Bed* (1968), an avant-garde film redistributed by the MMRC:

That year of 1967 had begun with the great psychedelic Be-In in Golden Gate Park launched by old friends Ginsberg, Snyder, and McClure, then progressed to the Summer of Love in Haight-Ashbury, and climaxed with San Francisco’s ascension to LSD capital of the world. The new approval of sensualists had caught up with my long-cherished desire to celebrate the flexible beauties of the body unclothed. How could I express this on film? (Broughton, 1993, p. 147-148)

Clearly, it’s significant that the National Sex Forum evolved from the original title of National Sex and Drug Forum (Eberwein, 1999).<sup>7</sup> Here, Broughton also illuminates the intersection of the paradigms of the counterculture, sexuality, and film, specifically occurring in San Francisco and a sense of a “new approval” of sexuality emerged. As San Francisco became the “epicenter of the nation’s countercultural and sexual revolution,” the darker side of the revolution, the fraught generational struggle and escalating “physical violence and repression,” has often been either ignored or exploited (Sides, 2009, p. 4; p. 7). In *Erotic City*, Josh Sides points to aspects of the sexual revolution that have been often overlooked:

Furthermore, the outcome of this bitter contest about sexual expressions in public

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<sup>7</sup> Both *Free* and *The Erogonists* credit the institution as the “national sex and drug forum.”

spaces—on streets, in parks, on newsstands, in bars, in nightclubs, and in steam baths—is the most enduring legacy of the sexual revolution in the United States. In few cities were these battles more pitched, and the outcomes more transformative, than in San Francisco. And San Francisco’s street-level battles over prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, nudism, transgenderism, “social diseases,” AIDS, and marriage have prefigured the nation’s for almost half a century. (Sides, 2009, p. 6)

It was in this cultural climate that Reverend McIlvenna joined the Glide Church, which had been floundering financially and recruited him for his deft fundraising abilities. Glide is located in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, an area known for “erotic entertainment and prostitution” as well as “overwhelming poverty and growing hopelessness” and a “location of a disproportionate number of the city’s rapes, beatings, and thefts” (Sides, 2009, p. 6; p. 98). McIlvenna, occasionally referred to as the “The Night Minister,” quickly became intimately involved in the community as he “reached out to [youth] by opening an interdenominational ‘coffee house ministry’ called Intersection for the Arts in the heart of the Tenderloin in 1965” and became “perhaps the most unusual and effective” advocate for gay rights in the Tenderloin (Sides, 2009, p. 99). His development of this organization also serves as evidence of McIlvenna’s longstanding interest in the arts, something clearly apparent in the aesthetic of the MMRC films.

McIlvenna soon created the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH), “a homophile group dedicated to promoting the integration of homosexuals into mainstream society” (Sides, 2009, p. 85-86). He was famously involved in a reverse sting operation

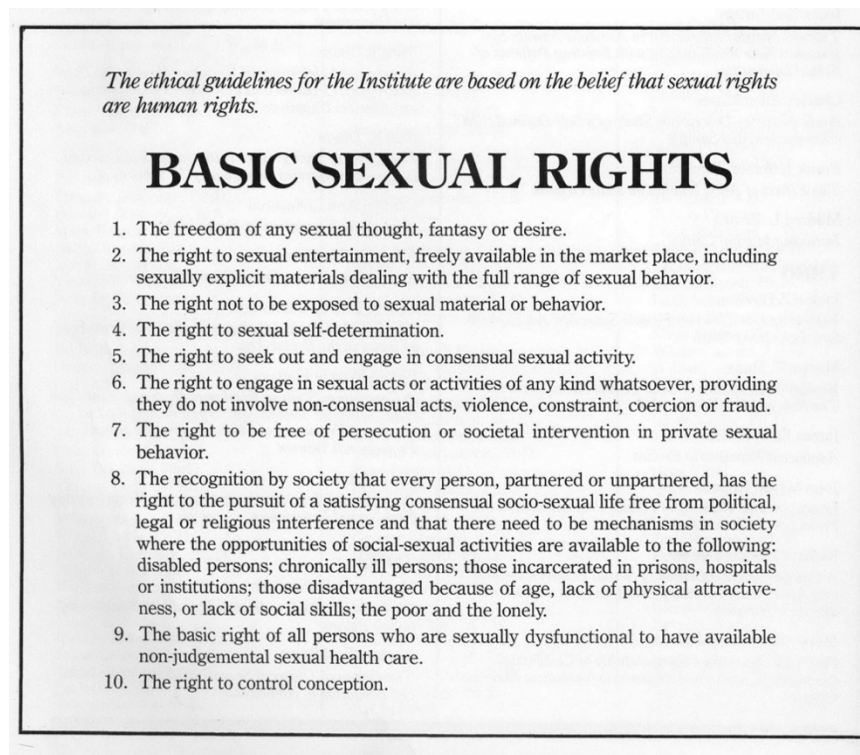
on New Year's Day in 1965, wherein the CRH obtained the proper permits for a costume ball but attendees were still "harassed by police," which garnered significant media attention and led to a lawsuit, making the event "a turning point in the San Francisco gay rights movement" (Stryker & Van Buskirk, 1996, p. 40; Sides, 2009). McIlvenna recruited Reverend Cecil Williams, who was active in the church's growth and connection to the counterculture, to join the church in the early 1960s (Sides, 2009). He can be seen on stage with protestors holding signs reiterating the rhetoric of humanness that will be a key point throughout the following chapters (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Glide Protests; Retrieved from: <https://glidesf.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/get-ready-for-november>

Aside from his fundraising prowess, McIlvenna has said the church brought him to San Francisco for another reason: to "change the homosexuals into heterosexuals," which McIlvenna recognized as something "you can't do," telling the Church that "they can't understand homosexuality without understanding human sexuality," something that would lead to the eventual schism in McIlvenna's relationship with the church

(McIlvenna quoted in Lattin, 2013, para. 15).<sup>8</sup> In this city predisposed to revolutionary thought and action, McIlvenna established organizations to advocate for tolerance and acceptance, something echoed in the MMRC films and also in the guidelines to the IASHS “basic sexual rights” (See Figure 2), which similarly reflects the rhetoric of humanistic sexology (Irvine, 2005). These rights echo Michael Warner’s explanation of the requirements of sexual autotomy including “more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them” (Warner, 1999, p. 7).



**Figure 2.** Basic Sexual Rights; Independent Study Course. Retrieved from: <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5zwxQ9>.

The MMRC films attempt to provide this “access to pleasures and possibilities” through their dedication to these basic sexual rights and through their attempts to teach

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<sup>8</sup> The American Psychiatric Association categorized homosexuality as a “mental disease” until 1973 (Campos, 2002, p. 50).



about sex by showing sex, something paradoxically lacking from conventional sexual education. Many of these sexual tenets are apparent in various SAR films, which soon grew from being available only to those in San Francisco to a much larger cross-country operation.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the official SAR program set in San Francisco and implemented in the “Awareness Room,” a room described as a rather informal viewing room, furnished with “fluffy pillows” (Irvine, p. 93), soft rugs, and a water bed (Johnson, 1999), McIlvenna and his associates would also distribute carefully curated bundles of 16mm MMRC films to colleges and other community centers (Francoeur, 1977, p. 37; Johnson, 2014, p. 274). These bundles could be packaged with various films of various genres, with the film marathon lasting a few hours up to nearly a week (Johnson, 2014, p. 274).

For instance, SAR programming required certain films to be selected to “lighten the mood,” with one such film being “Love Toad,” a short comedy involving sexually suggestive bean bags that was distributed, but not produced by the MMRC (Simon, 2014, para. 8; Irvine, 2005). When these films are shown individually or out of context, the idea that they might be labeled as sexual education can be perplexing, with many of the films risking being “considered obscene in other contexts” (Johnson, 2014, p. 273). Mittell briefly touches on the process of “regeneration,” a practice apparent in this bundling and distribution procedure, wherein texts change genre labels depending on context as an example of how genre is culturally constructed (Mittell, 2001, p. 6; 2004, p. 8; Neale, 1995). The films distributed by the MMRC and included in SAR programming are clear examples of this “regeneration” not only as avant-garde and art films were redistributed

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<sup>9</sup> Eithne Johnson references a 1977 SARguide’s estimate that ““30,000 persons have taken the SAR process courses either through the National Sex Forum or through other groups using the process”” (quoted in Johnson, 1999, p. 263).

through the MMRC as sexual education film, but also as the MMRC-produced films shift among genres depending on the specific bundle for the particular SAR audience. In other words, the reception of the films and their genre category is largely influenced by the context of their exhibition and their intertextual relationship to the other films of that particular SAR program.

Writing of his experience implementing the SAR program with college-age students at Fairleigh Dickinson University at Madison in “the middle of conservative New Jersey” for the prior five years (1977, p. 34), Robert Francoeur describes the necessity of an “evolution” of the program by way of altering the length of the film-marathon and curation of content over the years. The structure of the program in 1977 required nine hours on a Saturday, something he recognizes as a bit of a roadblock for implementation as college deans and administrators “might get very upset about a ‘sex film weekend’” (p. 37). Francoeur’s description of how he carefully curated the films for a successful SAR experience for his particular audience is worth examining in its entirety:

We start with sexual fantasies films, a sensuous orange being peeled and eaten, a fantasy on the bed as the focus of all human sexuality and life, a lighthearted campy film on nudity designed by college students, and other nonthreatening openers...The ‘Fuckarama’ or ‘Sexarama’ gets into the heart of the matter with a head-on confrontation: a short mood-breaker, hard-core parody by National Sex Forum is followed by four to six hard-core pornographic films shown simultaneously. Then we show two films from the EDCOA and the National Sex Forum which convey quite a different view; instead of the leering, ‘dirty sex,’ exploitative, depersonalized, and mechanical clanking of genitals... *real persons*

[emphasis added throughout] relate in a warm, *human* way. A minute-long mood breaker and another four, six, or eight pornographic films... are followed by two *human films* simultaneously, one hour in small groups to dig into feelings and attitudes, and lunch with a showing of erotic art from many cultures and ages with taped erotic music. (1977, p. 34)

The careful curation that Francoeur describes involves identifying genres and bundling them in a manner that will be successful with a certain audience, much like Mittell's argument regarding genre-mixing in television programming (Mittell, 2004, p. x). Not only does the SAR program curate bundles of films of ranging genres distributed by the MMRC, they place these films in opposition to commercial hardcore pornography, thereby contributing to the division between them.

Francoeur also emphasizes a clear division between the pornographic films and the films of the EDCOA, "an affiliate of Ormont Pharmaceuticals," and the NSF, but isn't clear what specifically about the films separates them (1977, p. 33). Francoeur continues to elaborate on the separation with pornography "portray[ing] women as the male's playthings, his toys, objects to be exploited and used for male pleasure. There is no relating, only narcissistic groin-gazing, only the mechanical, ejaculation-obsessed male seeking to penetrate as many orifices as possible," while the MMRC films appear "much more human—though equally explicit" (1977, p. 36).

Instead of addressing the aesthetic or precise differences in content or representation of the films that categorizes one representation as "dirty sex" and not the other, he focuses on his own intense attitude toward the division, which seems to allude to the division between human and machine. He repeatedly uses words such "human" and

“real persons” to describe the MMRC films, hinting at the idea that this is what gives them value and leading finally to his use of the phrase “human films” as a pseudo genre label. However, he fails to address exactly what aesthetics or ideological representations might create the distinction between genitals perceived to be “mechanically clanking” in hardcore porn from representations of a “warm, human way” in the NSF films. Eithne Johnson provides one possible explanation when describing how the SAR program would “identify these productions as ‘erotic,’ rendering them more socially acceptable,” a claim which alludes to aspects of the erotica/pornography split largely established in the obscenity trials in the 1960s and 1970s (Johnson, 2014, p. 277-278). This culturally-constructed genre distinction, something the MMRC films actively participated in, became overtly gendered with the “for men by men” aesthetics and cultural conception of commercial porn and put in opposition with the feminized erotic (Johnson, 2014, p. 277-278).

This convoluted, politically motivated, and morally loaded distinction between erotica and pornography is confronted in detail in a Chapter IV, after I tackle perhaps the most obvious of the genres applied to the MMRC films: sexual education. As indicated by the disclaimer at the end of *Free* and *The Erogenists*: “These materials created for educational and research purposes are produced by the multi-media resource center in cooperation with the national sex and drug forum.” In the following chapter, I offer a brief history of sexual education film to provide the groundwork necessary to understand how and why the MMRC films deviate dramatically from conventional sexual education film. Furthermore, I begin to address a larger goal of this project, exploring the relationship between genre, the MMRC films, and the regulation of sex and sexuality.

## CHAPTER III

### NEVER PLEASURE: SEXUAL EDUCATION FILM

“The birth of your child is generally hard” (*A Normal Birth*, 1951)  
“Pleasure is, not surprisingly, never mentioned” (Peterson & Aronson, 2014, p. 60)

To analyze how the films distributed by the Multi Media Resource Center in the 1960s and 1970s rebel against culturally constructed genre expectations, it is essential to understand how American sexual education films, strictly instructional or narrative, are intimately entwined with American history and culture (Eberwein, 1999; Heffernan, 2013; Schaefer, 1999). In this chapter, I reference existing analyses of conventional sexual education film to uncover how these films reflect the themes and attitudes embedded in the social and institutional expectations of the historical moment. To do so, I reference America’s longstanding history with obscenity law and censorship (Heffernan, 2013; Strassfeld, 2013), which contributed to expectations of appropriate exhibition contexts (Strassfeld, 2013), and directly influenced common conceptions of sexual education film aesthetics and form (Eberwein, 1999; Johnson, 1999). These factors, among others, created a complex web of specific genre delineations and expectations for sexual education film (Johnson, 1999; Schaefer, 1999; Strassfeld, 2013). In other words, it’s necessary to understand the rules surrounding sexual education films in order to identify how the films distributed by the MMRC broke them, both aesthetically and ideologically.

In his foundational book *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire*, Robert Eberwein acknowledges that access to sexual education materials in America has an extensive history of governmental intervention prior to film (1999). Kevin Heffernan

identifies this history as rooted in the Comstock Law (1873), which “made it a felony to import or send through the mails any sexual imagery, sexual accounts, or information on birth control and abortion, because of their perceived tendency to incite and corrupt” (2013, p. 239). This directly affected Americans’ access to sexual education material as “anatomy and medical textbooks were seized, restrained, and re-edited to comply” and serves as a foundational piece of legislation that contributed to America’s attitude toward the regulation of sex and sexuality through educational materials (Heffernan, 2013, p. 239).

This institutional attempt to control sex and sexuality extends to sexual education film as demonstrated in Eberwein’s outline of its fundamental phases, beginning with the often-exploitative approaches that primarily address the consequences of and methods of prevention of sexually transmitted infections presented to soldiers in both World Wars (1999). Eberwein describes these desire-regulating films as legitimizing fear-based tactics by way of an “appropriation of the medical gaze” during a time when medicine was “solidifying its power in American life and culture” (1999, p. 8). These films often follow a formula that ends with extreme punishment, exhibited through jarring visuals of infected genitals or morose tales of extreme shame, for those who deviate from the primary objective of maintaining “self-control and morality” (Eberwein, 1999, p. 23).<sup>10</sup> This aesthetic form foregrounding the physical and specifically medical aspects of sex became synonymous with a “war against venereal disease” waged through sexual

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<sup>10</sup> Eberwein points to *Damaged Goods* (1914), a now-lost narrative film in which the protagonist, George, contracts syphilis from a sex worker at his bachelor party and ignores his doctor’s warnings, as one of the earliest examples of the sexual education film framing sex as inherently dangerous, with the danger of sexually transmitted disease operating as the prominent threat (1999). A prime example of the representation of the consequences of extreme shame occurs in *Damaged Goods*: after the George’s baby is born with syphilis, the film ends with the suggestion that George commits suicide (Eberwein, 1999, p. 23).

education films (Moran, 2000, p. 23). The idea was that this war could be won by propagating fear through films such as *Street Corner* (1948) that feature close-ups of “the ravages of gonorrhea and syphilis on (mostly male) bodies and genitals” (Heffernan, 2013, p. 243). So while the objective may seem to be to reduce soldiers’ exposure to very real sexually transmitted infections and diseases, a more insidious intent and effect was the implementation of a homogenous culturally constructed morality.<sup>11</sup>

Eric Schaefer also addresses this medical gaze as evident in his exploration of the overlap between sexual education and exploitation film. This gaze was often signaled through the presence of a doctor, usually played by an actor, embedded in the film’s narrative, and through the use of intertitles, medical slides, and microscopic pictures of infection (Eberwein, 1999; Schaefer, 1999).<sup>12</sup> Schaefer goes on to say that sexually explicit films would “foreground their pedagogic elements and insulate them from censorship” (2014a, p. 29). Exploitation films “consistently asserted the superiority of motion pictures as a tool for *moral* [emphasis added] and clinical education for parents and for children old enough to gain admittance to see them” (Schaefer, 2012, p. 329). Heffernan similarly explains how aesthetic and narrative choices also served as a legitimizing factor for explicit film:

The ‘marriage manual’ or ‘white coater’ films (so named for the presence of the male figure of medical authority) successfully avoided prosecution by many state and local censor boards since the US Supreme Court’s 1966 decision in *Memoirs*

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Warner points out the connection between sexual education and this limiting and dangerous “moralism [that] so often targets not just sex but knowledge about sex” (Warner, 1999, p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> Schaefer provides an expansive examination of the intersection of sexual education and exploitation film, especially regarding sexual hygiene film, which often shares a blurred line with early sexual education film (1999; 2012; 2014b).

*v. Massachusetts* had ruled that in order for a work to be obscene and not subject to First Amendment protection the work taken as a whole much be ‘utterly without redeeming artistic, social, or educational value.’ (Heffernan, 2013, p. 243; quoting *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*)

Despite their linkages to medical and pharmaceutical entities, the MMRC films deviate dramatically from these standard methods of establishing medical clout through visual cues.<sup>13</sup> While a majority of films distributed by the MMRC feature “patterns” of sexual behavior, usually involving some combination of masturbation, intercourse, and orgasm, they also featured other reproductive events. *Kirsa Nicholina*, Gunvor Nelson’s avant-garde/experimental film that previously had “very limited distribution,” depicts a young woman’s home birth and was recontextualized as educational material and distributed by the MMRC (Vogel, 2005, p. 321). *Kirsa Nicholina* was not the only home-birth film in circulation in SAR workshops; a NSF pamphlet from 1979 describes the *Birth of Amanda*, a Laird Sutton original, as a “fond and intimate portrait of one of life’s intensest moments” as “Amanda enters the world naturally, at home” (National Sex Forum, 1979, p. 8). While there is a doctor present in *Kirsa Nicholina*, his presence is only apparent by way of interviews with Nelson. He blends into the home birth scene, never drawing attention away from the mother and lacks the stereotypical attention-grabbing, legitimizing white lab coat. As the film lacks dialogue and narration entirely, the doctor does not give direction verbally, but by guiding the father’s hands in

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<sup>13</sup> While the five MMRC films examined here lack these aesthetically utilitarian medical scare-tactics, interestingly, avant-garde artist, filmmaker, and poet James Broughton’s *The Bed* does have a “doctor of both medicine and divinity” played by Alan Watts (Broughton, 1993, p. 148). Watts is known as a major character in the counterculture and a “theorist” who “embraced Eastern philosophies or aimed for syntheses of Eastern and Western philosophies and practices” (Johnson, 1999, p. 248).



massaging the mother and guiding the baby into one of the more graphic shots of the film, a series of close-ups of the baby crowning (See Figure 3). This frames the figure(s) of authority in this process of birth as the sexual participants themselves.



**Figure 3.** Doctor & father's hands in *Kirsa Nicholina*

In *Kirsa Nicholina*, these nonverbal birthing practices are presented in conjunction with low-key acoustic guitar riffs accented with softly sung lyrics only prior to and immediately after the birth, with the father singing “Do I love my baby? Yes, I do.” The lack of verbal instruction as to what’s happening or why it’s happening encourages the assumption that the audience doesn’t need a guided voice through the process and emphasizes the naturalness of birth. It also downplays the pain, something antithetical to many traditional birth films (Strassfeld, 2013). There’s no screaming, crying, or clutching anyone’s hands so hard it breaks a bone, as often seen in birth scenes in entertainment film and television. There’s also no evident pain medication in what’s

been described as a “steady look at the feminine ritual of birth” and “perhaps the most explicit film of birth ever made outside medical circles” (Gill, 1977, p. 32).

In contrast, *A Normal Birth* (1951), a black and white hospital birth film distributed by Medical Arts Productions, another San Francisco-based organization, and also available in 16mm in UO’s Knight Library archives, contains some of the devices traditionally associated with sexual education film (male narrator, use of diagrams, etc.). Interestingly, the film also contains a graphic depiction of the actual birth scene, which is in contrast to many traditional birth films, in which “the woman in labor is almost completely covered with white sheets” (Strassfeld, 2013, p. 46). Because of this, *A Normal Birth* has a similar audience in age and development with the MMRC audience, usually college-age to adult, and is marked with a “use with discretion” warning in catalogs (Cannon, 1954, p. 67) *A Normal Birth* does not soften the aspect of pain as it begins with a statement, from the male narrator, warning the expectant mothers that “the birth of your child is generally hard” and suggests that “your doctor may introduce a desensitizing agent to make the birth easier for you.” The title alone, *A Normal Birth*, frames what the ideal is for a normal birth, while alluding to possibilities of an abnormal birth. According to this film, what’s normal is extreme pain mediated with numbing agents, episiotomies (See Figure 4 for animated diagram), and a few after-birth stitches.



**Figure 4:** A diagram is used to demonstrate an episiotomy in *A Normal Birth*

Another famous birth film, *The Birth of a Baby* (1938), serves as an example of the controversy that arose as a film defied American society's expectations of the movie theater experience by blurring genre lines and "provid[ing] serious educational content to general audiences while still entertaining them with a traditional narrative structure" (Strassfeld, 2013, p. 45).<sup>14</sup> While Strassfeld's primary focus is on the expectation of exhibition spaces, he notes a shift when "educational films [began] to incorporate more aspects of traditional movie entertainment into their sober educational framework" (p. 45). He points to a period in the early 1940s when there was a move "toward a marriage of entertainment and education" and as "story helped move the film beyond the

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<sup>14</sup> *Damaged Goods* was first given a theatrical release before being shown to soldiers as a means of sexual education, which Eberwein uses as an example of how the lines between sex hygiene and sexual education film were often blurred through shifting exhibition processes and as a starting point for examining the issues with using entertainment (narrative film) as an educational device (p. 8-10; Schaefer, 1999; Strassfeld, 2013).

traditional confines of educational cinema” (2013, p. 48; Orgeron, Orgeron, & Streible, 2011).

Strassfeld suggests that these narrative educational films often employ methods of classical Hollywood cinema that have been associated with naturalizing ideology such as continuity editing, conventional camera placement, and a compelling story arc “as the proverbial spoonful of sugar helping the medicine go down” (Bordwell et al., 1985; Strassfeld, 2013, p. 48). Within these narratives with obvious objectives of sexual socialization, there are subtler, seemingly naturalized elements of ideology that reveal themselves through analysis using methods of critical film theory. These approaches operate under the supposition “that conventions of film, video, and photographic representation are not neutral carriers of content. Rather, they are ideological forms that inflect content with particular meanings” (Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990, p. 3).

The fact that educational film has largely been overlooked for analysis through frameworks common in critical film theory suggests that conventional educational films’ often rote tone and unambiguous messages are unfit for productive ideological inquiry (Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990, p. 2). However, this perspective ignores numerous distinctions within educational film and ignores films, such as many of those distributed by the MMRC, that breach clinical analysis and borrow form and aesthetics from various genres. As overt processes of sexual socialization, analysis of the more indirect ideological implications of these sexual education films is often neglected (Eberwein, 1999, p. 8-9; Schaefer, 1999, p. 209-210). Eberwein argues:

Films and videos about sex have the effect of riveting attention on the visible manifestation of the body in a way that makes the operation of invisible ideology

all the more powerful. Because we are so caught up by the spectacle of the human form and its potential, we are less likely to attend to the context that provides the framework for rendering the workings of desire. (1999, p. 6)

The experience of watching these sexual education films, specifically those employing stylistic methods of classical Hollywood cinema, often encompasses “appeals to aesthetic sensibilities and activates socially constructed expectations of film, television, and photographic viewing” (Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990, p. 3). While narrative sexual education film may use forms audiences are likely accustomed to from experiences with entertainment film, the MMRC films often dramatically deviate from this intent. For example, these films, aside from the coopted art films’ previous lives before MMRC distribution, were not intended for theatrical release (Shellenberger, 2014) and oftentimes were simply short films uninterested in a compelling narrative arc beyond a depiction of sexual “patterns.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the films’ dramatic aesthetic deviations from classical Hollywood cinema, which are more thoroughly analyzed in the chapter addressing art cinema, are numerous: jump cuts, creative/jarring camera angles and use of sound, breaking the 180 degree rule, and dissolves abound.<sup>16</sup> So even as the films distributed by the MMRC clearly diverge from the style of classical Hollywood cinema, it’s imperative to study how “hidden curriculums” are also present in aesthetics of these films and in the explicit depictions of sexual engagement of underrepresented groups (Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990, p. 3).

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<sup>15</sup> Each of the five films clock in at twenty minutes or less, with Sutton’s films closer to ten minutes each.

<sup>16</sup> So whereas the films deviate from Bordwell’s conception of classical Hollywood cinema, they align with Bordwell’s conception of art cinema (as investigated in a later chapter).

Conventional sexual education film, while often lacking direct references to the physical processes of sex, “focus on the manifestations and effects of sexuality” with the goal of sexual socialization to influence people to behave in certain ways and to have certain attitudes that were thought to benefit the society at large (Eberwein, 1999, p. 134). Eberwein cites works of Michel Foucault as a theoretical framework for analyzing sexual education film, specifically his theories on controlling the technology of sex: “This system forms an ideological framework in which—depending on the historical moment—sexual desire is acknowledged, condemned, controlled, monitored, surveyed, encouraged, stimulated, and enabled by film and video” (Eberwein, 1999, p. 7). As Michel Foucault argues, sexuality is regulated by the state (with the physical body defined as the fundamental location of power politics) in order to maintain “docile bodies;” in the case of most traditional sexual education texts, film is clearly used as a tool of bodily regulation and power (Foucault, 1980). In his exploration of sex and sexuality’s relationship to power, Foucault examines the relationship between knowledge and power, often colloquially boiled down to a simple declaration that knowledge *is* power (Foucault, 1988; 1980). Foucault describes a reciprocity of power: power produces knowledge, but is also produced by knowledge. Conventional sexual education films are often an overt attempt at sexual socialization by capitalizing on social fears of exclusion in attempts to produce sexually “normal” adolescents. But in contradicting these processes, the MMRC films also inevitably socialize audiences with their own agendas and practices, such as drug-free home birth, which is framed as and linked to progressive ideals and aesthetics.

Sexual socialization and these processes of creating a homogenous sense of what is normal surrounding sex reveal themselves when examining formal and ideological elements inherent in genre construction. With scholars clearly grappling with the complicated distinctions between education, entertainment, and exploitation, it is significant that Eberwein often includes both sex hygiene films and more traditional sexual education films, narrative, instructional, etc. under essentially the same overarching educational genre label (Strassfeld, 2013; Schaefer, 1999). Maurice A. Bigelow's *Sex-Education*, originally published in 1916 and revised in 1936, attempts to define sexual education as a broader category than sex hygiene and as "includ[ing] all scientific, ethical, social, and religious instruction and influence which directly and indirectly may help young people prepare to solve for themselves the problems of sex that inevitably come in some form into the life of every normal human individual" (1936, p. 1). Even in Bigelow's definition that he self-designates as being broad and progressive, he clearly emphasizes the "inevitable" "problems" that exist for every "normal" person. He goes on to say that "sex-education cannot possibly do more than help the individual prepare to face the problems of life" (1936, p. 1).

Instead of focusing on the "problems" of sex, McIlvenna emphasizes the need for truth. In the foreword for a contemporary iteration of the SAR initiative (2017), McIlvenna describes the SAR program's conception by way of a truly interdisciplinary approach to sexual education beginning in the basement of the Glide Church in San Francisco:

There were 30 clergy, three media helpers from Winterland and the rock bands in the park from San Francisco, Laird Sutton, and me. We put it all together and

called it the first Fuckarama. A janitor came in to participate and reported to the head of the Glide Foundation, who contacted the local Methodist Bishop; they came to see me and asked what happened. I simply said it was sexual attitude restructuring. The Methodist Bishop said that I had better modify what I was doing otherwise I would not be preaching in any Methodist church, but he would leave me alone if I always told the *truth* [emphasis added] about sex. (Britton & Dunlap, 2017, p. xi)

Parallel to McIlvenna's involvement in the Methodist church, Eberwein acknowledges the "complex set of institutional linkages" between the government, medical institutions, and sexual education film, starting with the American Social Hygiene Association, and speculates about the influence of these linkages on the films themselves (1999, p. 21). Similarly, McIlvenna, in addition to his association with the Methodist church, was involved with various medical entities while making films, with early SAR films garnering criticism for their aforementioned involvement with Ormont Pharmaceuticals (Johnson, 1999, p. 304). McIlvenna is mentioned in a brief write-up about a short film titled "Five Clergymen Speak Out About Sex Values of Youth: An Interpretation of Changing Mores in Religion and Society" (1970) in a guide book intended to help teachers select sexual education films (Singer & Buskin, 1971, p. 88). While Singer and Buskin note that the film "unfortunately" lacks "quite enough controversy to make the film really engaging," a somewhat unexpected note for an educational film with clergymen addressing the "objections young people have to the hypocrisy of their elders," it also demonstrates how McIlvenna's then-unfettered attachment to the church during this period may have influenced the reception of the MMRC films (p. 88). As a



heterosexual, white, male Methodist minister, perhaps McIlvenna was profiting from the “tendency for wealth and power to accrue on the stigmaphobe side of the normals,” while simultaneously recognizing that “the more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal audience, the more success you are likely to have” (Warner, 1999, p. 44).

After waves of these films focusing on the physical risks involved in sex of the early-to-mid-twentieth century, there was a brief period of more progressive films that at times included aspects of pleasure and desire in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including “marriage manual films” (Eberwein, 1999; Schaefer, 1999). Eberwein points to a cultural awareness of highly publicized sex researchers such as Alfred Kinsey and William Masters and Virginia Johnson as having “the practical effect of separating sex from its pathological consequences” and positioning desire as no longer “constrained by the threats of disease” (Eberwein, 1999, p. 151). When discussing the development of sexual education films with a focus on desire, Eberwein writes:

In the 1920s through the 1940s sexual activity itself was discussed against a backdrop governed essentially by the regulation of desire. By the late 1960s the backdrop had become much more complex precisely because attention to achieving pleasure rather than to regulating desire had become the groundwork for discussions of sexuality. (1999, p. 152)

These films were mostly intended for adults, further distinguishing them from common understandings of sexual education as intended for adolescent audiences. While the audience members of some of the earliest institutional sexual education films were soldiers—adults or older adolescents—as the responsibility for sexual education shifted

largely to schools (Eberwein, 1999; Strassfeld, 2013), our understanding of the audience for sexual education films shifted to adolescents and children. Whereas much of the research surrounding sexual education focuses on pre-pubescent and adolescent viewers within primary school curriculum (Calderwood, 1965; Campos, 2002; Fine, 1988; Lesko, 2010; Moran, 2000; Peterson & Aronson, 2014), the brochures for the SAR program identified their audiences as largely young adult (often college-age) and adult audiences, including “physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sexologists, therapists, counselors, teachers, college professors, nurses, clergy, researchers, social workers, health educators, persons working in birth control centers, in family planning and as abortion counselors, and paraprofessionals and students in all the above areas. Many of these persons’ ‘significant others’ have also attended SAR” (Sexuality: Institutions, 1982, n.p.). So while the MMRC films were without question progressive in that they included aspects of pleasure, desire, and a focus on actual sex (as opposed to solely the potential consequences), this kind of depiction still seems to be framed as something inappropriate for younger adolescents.<sup>17</sup>

In *Teaching Sex*, Jeffrey Moran outlines the cultural construction of the idea of adolescence as a “modern invention” constructed as a means of control and repression of “young people who had reached puberty but were still too young to marry” (2000, p. 1; p. 15). Moran describes the development of the sexual hygiene movement through Dr. Prince A. Morrow’s focus “on the ways in which individual sexual behavior was inextricably linked with public issues;” the idea of adolescence became tied to “its role as

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Kendrick writes of the relationship between children/adolescents and material deemed inappropriate for them: “But in the discourse of ‘pornography,’ we are not dealing with real children... ‘the child’ is a rhetorical figure, which lives in the realm of discourse and nowhere else” (1996, p. 262).

a cause of, or solution to, broader social crises” (p. 24). In traditional sexual education, the expectation is that these sexually “normal” adolescents will avoid sexual and social deviance that disrupts the norm of mass consumption and consumer culture as aptly demonstrated through gender role-conforming nuclear families. These sexual education films were targeting adolescents with the specific hope that training these adolescents to respond to sex and social cues in a manner that is accepted as normal within the dominant frameworks of society would maintain the hegemonic power structures, perpetuating the status quo.<sup>18</sup> It is in direct defiance of these norms that McIlvenna and Sutton would create and contribute to the MMRC and the SAR program, by distancing themselves from not just the content of the films, but the formal conventions as well.

Specific devices have become synonymous with the conventional sexual education genre, such as the all-knowing male narrator, physical and specifically genital diagrams, the framing of the city as sexually threatening, and the trope of the film-within-the-film (Eberwein, 1999; Peterson & Aronson, 2014). *Human Growth*, a 1940s film intended for eleven to thirteen year-olds with “a legitimate claim as being the most important film of its kind” exemplifies such cues and is “one of the most widely viewed sex education films for children ever made” (Peterson & Aronson, 2014, p. 58; Eberwein, 1999). Regardless of the vastly different age of intended audience, style, and focus of *Human Growth* and the films of the MMRC, its massive distribution influenced what we expect from sexual education film: rote, clinical, set in a school environment, pleasure-effacing, avoiding actual sex acts entirely, and intended for adolescents. Often in such

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, some of these “vintage sexual education” films have been uploaded to YouTube and have thousands of views and fascinating discussion threads. For example, *How Much Affection?* (1957) currently has over 209,000 views and over 1,000 comments.

conventional sexual education film an unseen, masculine non-diegetic voice will guide the viewer through the tales of the perils of sex and sexuality. This method of narration tends to keep the viewer at a distance, occupying a space that prevents true identification with the characters (Eberwein, 1999; Ellsworth, 1990).

In contrast, the films distributed by the MMRC often entirely lack dialogue, instead containing music indicative of the counterculture movement (think sitar and acoustic guitar) and the diegetic sounds of sexual engagement, which might allow for a deeper identification with the audience. Edd Dundas's MMRC-distributed *Masturbation: Men* (1979) subverts the expectations of the male narrator in sexual education film with men providing voice-over narration, addressing their emotions and experiences surrounding masturbation, over images of themselves masturbating. In traditional sexual education film, the all-knowing male narrator is used as a device to impart scientific knowledge (Eberwein, 1999), whereas the men in *Masturbation: Men* are addressing their own individual emotional, subjective experiences. There are only the men's voices; the rhythmic flickering of the film fills the silence that might cause modern audiences to expect music. One man describes what arouses him as mostly "traditional things" such as the "physical perfection" of ballet dancers; another describes his first orgasm.<sup>19</sup> Conventional sexual education often avoids humor, perhaps with the concern it will delegitimize the educational material. In contrast, the anonymous narrators in *Masturbation: Men* joke about sex and sexuality, with one man describing feeling "very free to talk about masturbation if it's the subject at hand;" he pauses for a laugh before

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<sup>19</sup> Note his choice of the word "traditional" to signify conventional attitudes toward sexuality as heterosexual attraction to a conventionally attractive woman, something framed as allowed and acceptable as mainstream conceptions of sex and sexuality

continuing to claim he “feel[s] like an expert at it.” Furthermore, the film begins with a rather humorous long list of colloquialisms for masturbation, such as “ball off,” “bang the banjo,” and “paddle the pickle.”<sup>20</sup> This lighthearted approach to pleasure is consistent across all five MMRC films, and is often emphasized with broad smiles and playfulness.

Most of *Masturbation: Men* consists of the men masturbating in living rooms, bedrooms, or bathtubs, surrounded by stereotypical trappings of the counter-culture such as wall-covering tapestries.<sup>21</sup> As the abovementioned man shifts to talk about the pleasure of masturbation, he describes “thinking of meadows and trees,” and the scene shifts to an animated naked male, masturbating outdoors and surrounded by butterflies (See Figure 5). The slow tilt continues to reveal a fit, blonde mustachioed man with a half-hearted mullet gazing upward, still with the butterflies, as another man reflects on the times he’s masturbated in nature: “on the beach, in the forest, and in the woodlands.”

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<sup>20</sup> The film strip had fairly substantial damage to this portion, so the list was only able to be viewed with a light box and a magnifying glass.

<sup>21</sup> *Masturbation: Men* has also been referred to as *Masturbation, Men* and *Masturbation Men*.



**Figure 5.** Animation in *Masturbation: Men* (1979)

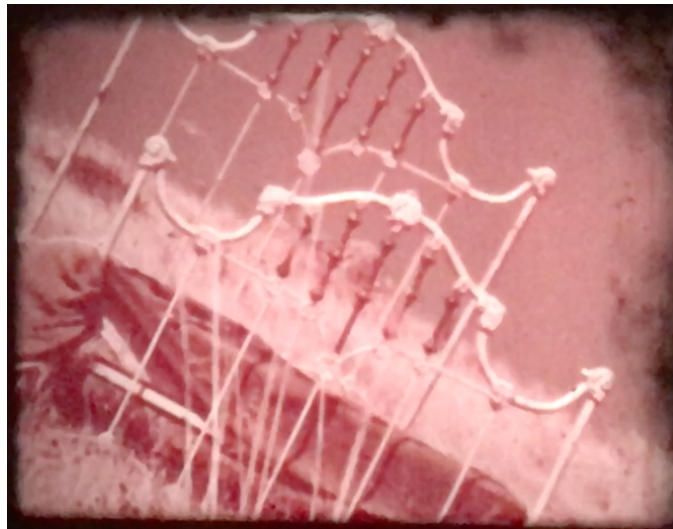
This very intentional accentuation on nature stands in conflict with classic narrative sexual education films. In films such as *Dance, Little Children* (1961) and *The End of the Road* (1918), disease and danger dwell in unregulated and unsupervised spaces outside the safety of the hegemony of the suburb: in spaces of the working-class and people of color. In postwar and Cold War America, suburbs operated as a marker of affluence and conformity; thus, a home in the suburbs broadcasts an individual's successful performance as an economically contributing American society and acts as a symbol of the homeowner's personal "buying power" (Cohen, 2003, p. 195). In *Dance, Little Children*, the syphilis outbreak is traced back to a teen named Hal, who takes a trip outside the fictional suburb of Oakdale. Unfortunately for Hal and many of the teens of Oakdale, "drag-racing is not the only amusement a city has to offer." While many working-class Americans were barred access from the suburbs simply because of the expensive nature of the homes in these communities, federal mortgage assistance organizations also practiced blatant and documented discrimination against ethnically

diverse and working-class citizens (Cohen, 2003, p. 202-204). Beyond being a threat to the teens, disease and sexual deviance are framed as a threat to the suburb, a primary icon of conformity and socioeconomic status.

The MMRC films contain a notable move out of the cities into nature, another symbolic gesture toward the “brave and innocent attempts of this counterculture to reintegrate man with nature” and a distinguishing feature from traditional sexual education (Vogel, 2005, p. 306). *Kirsa Nicholina* begins on a beach, certainly an intentional stylistic choice deviating from birth film norms, before cutting indoors for the actual birth sequence, which also features nature-adjacent aesthetics, such wood paneled walls and natural hues. In an overview of Nelson’s films, June Gill writes of how nature “provides a counterpoint to society, an uncontaminated sphere in which the individual can develop freely. Thus, when family life becomes too rigid, when traditions become oppressive, nature . . . provides a warmer, more intimate, less structured life-style” (Gill, 1977, p. 35). This “counterpoint to society,” characterized by bucolic settings, represents an escape from “oppressive” “traditions” echoes the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality’s (IASHS) concept that the “right to the pursuit of a satisfying consensual socio-sexual life free from political, legal or religious interference” (Basic Sexual Rights, 1983, n.p.). Nature functions as a setting wherein interference from these institutions is less imminent. Furthermore, nature connotes natural, which is precisely how the MMRC films attempted to frame various sex acts and processes. Sutton’s *Free* (1970), which has been described as “an African American couple having sex in a pastoral setting” (Schaefer & Johnson, 2010, p. 193), occurs entirely outside, with the couple even picking leaves from each other’s natural hairstyles. In the film, sound is used

to amplify the presence of nature: birds chirp unnaturally loudly over the somewhat overpowering rushing sound of water as the couple wanders leisurely looking for a place to spread their sex blanket.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the sound shifts to the MMRC's signature nondiegetic acoustic guitar riffs once the couple is fully undressed.

James Broughton's *The Bed*'s is entirely set around "an ornate bed, magically located in a meadow," literally merging indoor aesthetics (and a bed) with nature (Vogel, 2005, p. 208) (See Figure 6). Characters emerge from in and around trees, with various animals slithering or scampering in the bed. Framed beautifully with golden hour-esque backlight giving her hair an ethereal glow, a young woman kisses a spider (See Figure 7). The spider dances for a moment, its spindly legs also illuminated by the natural light streaming around it. The film presents many of the milestones of life in and around the bed, dedicating attention to aspects of birth, death, religion, drugs, boredom, and sex, seeming to suggest that all these aspects exist together comparably.



**Figure 6.** The bed propels itself across a field

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<sup>22</sup> Sound in *Free* is credited to Linda Cunning.





**Figure 7.** Nature infiltrates the bed in *The Bed*

Clearly, images such as the spider kissing woman and the animated butterfly-plastered masturbator, perhaps intended to symbolize transformation, are dramatic deviations from the aesthetic and formal elements of conventional sexual education film, but more significant is the unapologetic depiction of actual sex and sexualized acts, the focus on pleasure and desire, and the sense of community and love surrounding sex and sexuality. Partway through *Masturbation: Men*, a man describes his experience with masturbating: “And I don’t remember having any fear about what I was doing or shame or guilt. I don’t remember that. I’m not concerned morally, religiously, or medically, analytically. I think that’s a bunch of shit.” This absence of shame surrounding sex-adjacent acts is also apparent in a moment at the end of *Kirsa Nicholina*, when the focus shifts back from baby to mother, smiling and naked expect for a blanket draped across her shoulders, this casual posture makes her post-birth vagina fully visible (See Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Mother and friend in *Kirsa Nicholina*

In contrast to the aforementioned hospital birth films, the mother's blood is visible as it pools and spreads across the light colored sheets pillows. A woman in a cheerful pink, red, and gold dress, a stark contrast to hospital scrubs and gowns, rests her hand on the mother's stomach. Tender moments such as these have contributed to an emphasis of the MMRC film's "humanness" (Francoeur, 1977), which is largely lost in sexual education film after the 1970s. These instances of tenderness are examined more thoroughly in the following chapter as a means of describing the politically motivated division between pornography and erotica and this division's implications on representations and subsequently the regulation of sex and sexuality.

Michael Warner begins his book, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, with a description of how sex is regulated socially:

The culture has thousands of ways for people to govern the sex of others—and not just harmful or coercive sex, like rape, but the most personal dimensions of

pleasure, identity, and practice. We do this directly, through prohibition and regulation, and indirectly, by embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be. (Warner, 1999, p. 1)

So even while conventional sexual education has largely avoided depictions of actual sex, it still manages to frame heterosexual sex as though it were universal, thus contributing to expectations and regulation of sex. After a history of sexual education that obscures the act of sex and glosses over sexuality, the following chapter also seeks to explain how the MMRC films arguably blur the line between sexual education, erotica, and pornography to teach people about sex by showing sex and to demonstrate how “sexual shame is not just a fact of life; it is also political” (Warner, 1999, p. 3).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE “VISCERAL CLUTCH”: EROTICA/PORNOGRAPHY SPLIT

“These film producers are not always successful, but their attempt is sincere”  
(Francoeur, 1977, p. 36)

“... there is a fine line between coercion through shame and constraint  
through ignorance” (Warner, 1999, p. 12)

Jason Mittell’s argument that the “political can never be effaced from... generic processes” is an especially appropriate claim with regard to texts containing sexually explicit material (2001, p. 19). He uses the well-known incident of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart describing his approach to defining pornography with his famous “I know it when I see it” (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964) method to demonstrate how “genre practices emerge in a wide range of sites, including legal and policy decisions” (Mittell, 2004, p. 1).<sup>23</sup> In this chapter, I briefly investigate how a series of obscenity trials during 1960s and 1970s, including *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, directly contributed to the culturally-constructed necessity for defining sexually explicit visual material into politically influenced genre labels, with the distinction between erotica and pornography becoming a central point of consideration. Furthermore, I examine the Multi Media Resource Center (MMRC) films’ relationship with the culturally constructed and politically loaded division between erotica and pornography with acknowledgment of how this division became enmeshed in the feminist movement. Looking closely at the five films, these cultural influences become apparent in their form, exhibition, and the discourse that

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<sup>23</sup> This is included in Mittell’s overarching argument that genre has “palpable ‘real world’ impact” (Mittell, 2004, p. 1).

surrounds them, demonstrating the effect of the political on the aesthetic, genre construction, and regulation of sex and sexuality.

Prior to the more quotable moment in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, the *Roth v. United States* (1957) ruling's rather loose and community standards dependent definition of pornography "could be used to justify production of a wide range of sexually explicit materials of arguable literary, artistic, or scientific merit" (Johnson, 1999, p. 60).<sup>24</sup> Michael Warner identifies the social implications of such rulings: "since community standards set the definition of obscene, the law in this area—unlike the rest of First Amendment law—allows the majority to impose its will without Constitutional check" (Warner, 1999, p. 13). He goes on to argue that this repercussion enhances the relationship between the government and "the politics of shame [by] making sure that nothing challenging to the tastes of the majority will be allowed to circulate" (Warner, 1999, p. 13). Similarly recognizing the power inherent in definitions of "pornography" (quotation marks significant and his) in his examination of it as a "thought structure," Walter Kendrick directly references Justice Potter's famous quotable as the closest method to defining "pornography" (Kendrick, 1996, p. xiii). Eric Schaefer also addresses *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, more specifically noting that the Supreme Court's ruling that "material dealing with sex in a manner that advocates ideas, or that has literary, scientific, or artistic value or any other form of social importance, could not be held obscene" directly contributed to the divide between erotica/art and pornography, influencing the

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<sup>24</sup> Rulings such as this also contribute to Schaefer's observation that "from 1969 to 1972 the documentary form helped make hardcore 'safe' for those who made or watched pornography" (Schaefer, 2014a, p. 29). However, Schaefer addresses aspects of aesthetics in pornographic documentaries that could be "pedantic and stuffy," addressing the disconnect between the modes of these films and the cultural moment: "rel[ying] on experts... and grounded their discourse in authority when the sexual liberation movement had an anti-authoritarian impulse" (Schaefer, 2014a, p. 38).

idea that a significant narrative could serve as a “legitimizing function for pornographic films” (Schaefer, 2002, p. 14). It’s important to note that the Multi Media Resource Center films aren’t necessarily invested in a coherent, overarching narrative, and certainly not the feature-length narratives that Schaefer was addressing. Instead, the MMRC films rely on factors, specifically claiming its use of an aesthetic reminiscent of avant-garde and art film and the educational genre-label, as a means of legitimizing film that might be considered obscene otherwise.

This series of obscenity trials frames intention (arousal, education, etc.) as a significant factor in determining whether or not a film is obscene. This framework, when combined with questions of quality, has been instrumental in drawing distinctions between erotica and pornography, something that affects the films’ distribution, exhibition, and reception.<sup>25</sup> Peter Alilunas elaborates on the distinction between erotica and pornography as rooted in the culturally-constructed idea that “‘art,’ in order to be art, cannot simply arouse. It must do something more” (2016, p. 18). He identifies Supreme Court case *Miller v. California* (1973) as key to the connection of this “something more” to the perceived “value” of the material (2016, p. 212); to be consistent with the *Miller v. California* ruling, the purpose of the text cannot be to simply arouse if it is to be deemed valuable. This idea of the “something more” necessary to achieve value operates similarly to Schaefer’s aforementioned “legitimizing function” (Schaefer, 2002), something the MMRC films deliberately participated in to avoid ending up on the “wrong side” of the culturally-constructed genre distinction occurring between erotica/art and

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<sup>25</sup> Kendrick also alludes to these complex and meaningful distinctions, especially as specific vocabulary moves in and out of fashion (1996).

pornography, a division blatantly marked by cultural anxieties regarding sex and sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

If the intended purpose of the film is a distinguishing factor between pornography and erotica, the Sexual Attitude Restructuring program and MMRC films complicate this distinction with oftentimes unambiguous encouragement of arousal and unrelenting depictions of pleasure as discussants were encouraged to explore “which aspects of sexual behavior give them a ‘visceral clutch’” (Francoeur, 1977; Irvine, 2005, p. 93). As a film and discussion workshop in the 1970s, SAR’s principal objective was first to “arouse[s], bore[s], and excite[s]”, followed by intensive discussion of feelings, attitudes, and arousal (Francoeur, 1977, p. 33; Irvine, 2005). While the MMRC films muddle the argument that intent of arousal is a distinguishing factor between obscene texts and those with social value, the MMRC self-consciously defines the “something more” of their films by way of aesthetics borrowed from avant-garde and art film and the genre label of sexual education. Furthermore, a key aspect of the SAR program is extensive discussion with an emphasis on “exploring emotional response to sexual activities” (Irvine, 2005, p. 76). The explicit emphasis on feelings, emotions, and attitudes, which were inherently connected to the physical body, creates a clear deviation, both from clinical traditional sexual education and common conceptions of mainstream pornography.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> However, the merits of these efforts to express intention are debatable, as Kendrick points out, “any book or picture will give itself equally to all comers, and the author or painter, no matter how loudly he protests his good intentions, has no control over his work once he has made it public” (1996, p. 13).

<sup>27</sup> This is applicable both within the films (see analysis of *Masturbation: Men* in previous chapter) and the SAR program itself as it encourages group discussion.

Robert Francoeur also identifies the division between pornography and texts determined to have social value as not inherent in the content or aesthetics of the films, but as framed by the exhibition space and audiences. Addressing SAR programs implemented at universities outside of the San Francisco base, Francoeur emphasizes the importance of the SAR setting being noticeably different from a traditional classroom in an “informal, relaxing lounge or auditorium, with lots of fluffy pillows and a carpet” to encourage comfort with the films and discussion while still remaining a “legitimate educational setting” (1977, p. 33). He points to the presence of “friends, classmates... faculty” in the audience as “destroy[ing] any attempt to get into a more comfortable pornographic theater mentality” (Francoeur, 1977, p. 33-34). This is a nod to the growing anxieties of the time surrounded “the *publicness* of porn” as “bookstores, arcades, theaters, and related businesses grew rapidly and met heavy resistance in terms of police raids, zoning and obscenity laws, and community protests” (Alilunas, 2016, p. 21). These clear points of institutional intervention reveal pervasive cultural anxieties and attitudes toward sex and sexuality and directly influence such representations.

These anxieties put significant pressure on the exhibition spaces for MMRC films to seem adequately professional and educational, but also adequately comfortable and conducive to discussion (Francoeur, 1977). Francoeur relies on the notion that watching sexually explicit material with familiar people will alter an individual’s behavior and attitude toward the experience, while also contributing to the normalization of sex acts as “the individual can see that other people are equally turned on, upset, bored, or embarrassed” (1977, p. 34). In the available literature addressing implementation of the SAR program, specifically the film-marathons, there’s often an emphasis on the



“Awareness Room’s” shag carpeting, water beds, oversized pillows, beanbag chairs, and other time-specific, retro-nods to the 1970s (Francoeur, 1977; Irvine, 2005; Johnson, 2014). This serves to contextualize the program in a specific moment of the past with nostalgic and relatable signifiers that might invoke stereotypes of counterculture and sexual revolution as represented in popular culture (See Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** SAR room in 1977. From Johnson, 2014, p. 283.

Supporting Mittell’s argument for looking beyond the text while being careful not to ignore the text entirely, Johnson’s emphasis is principally on the context in which these films are exhibited with supplemental acknowledgment of a formal aspect of the

film.<sup>28</sup> Johnson explains how “the SAR was designed to teach its audiences how to distinguish between erotic and pornographic audiovisual materials” by showing hardcore commercial pornography in what was intended as a desensitization process before then showing MMRC-distributed films as a method of resensitization (2014, p. 275-277). The desensitization/resensitization process, a fundamental aspect of SAR programming at this time, implies a significant and immediately apparent distinction between the erotic and the pornographic that is easily recognized through the content and aesthetics of these films. That is to say a primary feature inherent in the structure of the program leaves no room for any amount of gray area or blurred boundaries between pornography and films distributed by the MMRC. However, Johnson’s quote complicates this idea by implying a need for the audience to be “taught” this distinction. The MMRC films rely on the erotica genre label, but much of their argument for its difference from pornography is based on genre-defining attributes that imply that there would be no need for the distinction to be taught. Here, the culturally-constructed division between erotica and pornography is apparent not only in the MMRC’s desire for the films to be understood as erotica and not pornography, but also in their method of screening the two genres back to back as a way of “teaching” the difference. With the effects of falling on the erotic side of the division including prospects for much more expansive opportunities in distribution and exhibition and an entirely different experience with audience reception, the culturally constructed incentive to be framed as erotic art is enormous. For example, filmmaker James Broughton addresses the obstacles nudity presented in creating *The Bed*:

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<sup>28</sup> Eithne Johnson’s chapter on the “Sexarama” in Eric Schaefer’s compilation *Sex Scenes* (2014) primarily focuses on the fascinating and elaborate exhibition practices of MMRC films in the official SAR setting in their “Awareness Room” in San Francisco (p. 274).

When it was finally edited I could not persuade any commercial laboratory to print it. From Eastman in Rochester to Consolidated in Los Angeles I received curt refusals: it was against official policy to print “frontal nudity.” Finally I located an illegal pornography outfit which printed much frontal nudity between midnight and dawn in the rear of a building on a back street in East Palo Alto. (1993, p. 149)

*The Bed* has no on-screen penetration and thus seemingly would have fewer obstacles in being understood as entirely separate from hardcore pornography. However, the necessity of teaching the distinction between MMRC films as erotic art and hardcore commercial pornography somewhat negates the argument that the films are strikingly and immediately recognizable as distinct and instead implies that the separation is more linked to industrial and cultural understandings of the content.

Further divorcing the MMRC films from conventional sexual education film and framing the division between erotica and pornography as cultural, Johnson points to Janice Irvine’s description of the humanistic sexologists’ material as “tend[ing] to be visually aesthetic rather than anatomically accurate,” with Johnson describing some material as likely to “have been considered obscene in other contexts” (Irvine, 2005, p. 83; Johnson, 2014, p. 273). The emphasis on aesthetics over accuracy complicates the films being categorized as sexual education, while emphasizing their art film style, perhaps as a means of legitimation. While Johnson’s primary focus is not the aesthetics of the films themselves, Johnson briefly describes the implications of Sutton and McIlvenna’s labels of “pattern films” or “sexual cinema vérité” in aesthetic terms (p. 279; 281). Beyond the division between pornography and erotica being based on the intent of

the films, Johnson quotes McIlvenna's take on the aesthetic distinction: "The porn cameras... focused in tight on tits, cocks, cunts, asses, and tongues... Human beings and their relationships were largely ignored" (2014, p. 278, as cited in Brecher, 1974, p. 50).

Here, McIlvenna is identifying particular aesthetic choices as pornographic and genre-defining, which he frames as antithetical to representations of "human beings and their relationships" before dissociating the MMRC films from these tropes and thus pornography as a genre. His connection between aesthetic choices contributing to either the objectification aligned with pornography or intimacy with erotica echoes Francoeur's rhetoric of humanness and has roots in feminist film theory and Linda Williams's conceptions of pornography in terms of aesthetics. Though primarily focused on narrative, feature length pornography in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, Linda Williams provides a framework for understanding pornography aesthetically and acknowledges that her guiding principle of "maximum visibility" has operated in different ways over time, including:

To privilege close-ups of body parts over other shots; to overlight easily obscured genitals; to select sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs; and, later, to create generic conventions, such as the variety of sexual 'numbers' or the externally ejaculating penis—so important to the 1970s feature-length manifestations of the genre. (1989, p. 49)

While including graphic depictions of "real" sex and penetration, both *Free* (1970) and *The Eroгенists* (1970) lack definite "meat shots" or, as Linda Williams defines it, "a close-up of penetration that shows that hard-core sexual activity is taking place" (1989, p. 72). Shooting these close-up inserts would undoubtedly disrupt

production, something antithetical to Sutton's production style as will be discussed further in the following chapter. Furthermore, films such as *Free* are shot entirely as day exteriors, in the middle of a field, creating significant logistical obstacles to "overlight[ing] genitals," which, in *Free*, are largely obscured by the sexual positioning. So though the MMRC films certainly do not shy away from moments of penetration, they lack the camerawork and editing that privileges the meat and money shots described by Williams, while also eschewing the methods of mainstream entertainment including elaborate choreography to obscure penetration (usually because its faked). The emphasis on true, real, and unfaked sex in pornography is clear as Williams provides an initial definition of the genre: "as the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers" (1989, p. 30).<sup>29</sup>

The connection between the emphasis on "unfaked" sexual acts and authenticity parallels McIlvenna's aforementioned undertaking to seek out the "truth" about sex. When writing on the distinction between 16mm simulation films and hardcore features, Eric Schaefer addresses aesthetics head-on noting that "the only difference...was the lack of camera angles or close-ups that validated penetration, be it genital, oral, or anal" (Schaefer, 2002, p. 17). Schaefer's choice of words regarding unambiguous aesthetics featuring close-ups that "validated penetration" is significant (Schaefer, 2002, p. 17). This "validation" implies a means of proving that something actually happened, something was real, implying authenticity. According to Williams, this sense of authenticity is often apparent in hard core as it is "the one film genre that always tries to

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<sup>29</sup> While Williams provides this succinct definition, she also acknowledges the "elusive" nature of pornography as a genre (1989, p. 9).

strip this mask away and see the visible ‘truth’ of sexual pleasure itself” (1989, p. 49-50). In Tanya Krzywinska’s “The Enigma of the Real: The Qualifications for Real Sex in Contemporary Art Cinema,” she briefly addresses editing, camera movement, and lighting to demonstrate the “illusion of unmediated realism” in “real” sex scenes (2005, p. 229). While Krzywinska is primarily focusing on “real” sex in art cinema, her arguments surrounding how “hard-core conventions provide a benchmark coding for ‘real’ sex” illuminates aspects of how aesthetics of “real” sex operate in the MMRC films (p. 230). Krzywinska notes the emphasis on the performance of sex, “with all other aspects in abeyance. There is no non-diegetic music and ambient close-miking is used to enhance the intimate presence and texture of the couple’s breathing and the sounds of skin moving across skin” in art film (p. 229). The MMRC straddles this line, while including unsimulated sex and art film aesthetics, the emphasis on diegetic sound is obscured in all five films, instead foregrounding the oceanic waves, sitars, acoustic guitars, inharmonious birds, and the like.

Identifying unambiguous, genre-defining aesthetic elements and avoiding or employing them in a strategic manner was another way the MMRC legitimized sexually explicit film.<sup>30</sup> Doing so creates an avenue by which to rationalize why a film is not pornography, thus avoiding the industrial limitations put on pornographic film: it might include scenes of actual sex and penetration, but it doesn’t *look* like pornography. According to Williams, another crucial aspect of pornography is the visibility of male orgasm, the aesthetic device of the “money shot,” and its development into “the sense of

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<sup>30</sup> Simultaneously moving away from Kendrick’s conception of “pornography” as “nam[ing] an argument, not a thing” (1996, p. 31).

an ending – for each heterosexual sex act represented” (1989, p. 93).<sup>31</sup> The MMRC films’ directive to depict nonnormative sex immediately complicates the function of “money shot.” Furthermore, Williams addresses the effects of the invisibility of female orgasm on aesthetics by pointing to how aural pleasure “may stand as the most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances” (1989, p. 123). Female pleasure in *The Eroгенists* is signified not by the diegetic sighs and moans, but by the swelling sound of crashing ocean waves as the sitar-esque strums fade (Williams, 1989, p. 122).<sup>32</sup> However, sound in this film does not function, as Williams argues, as means of “flout[ing] the realist function of anchoring body to image” as ocean waves are jarringly unrelated to the scene (p. 123). In *The Eroгенists*, the woman’s orgasm, while certainly connected to a “sense of ending” within the film, seems to be signified by a rather awkward half-standing, half-sitting naked embrace (See Figure 10). Certainly distinct from a money shot, the rather uncomfortable display lends a sense of authenticity to the act, serving as an example of Vogel’s argument that erotic films tend toward “combining uncensored realism with tenderness, humour, mishaps, and the inevitable non-erotic components of every real act of human love” (2005, p. 220).

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<sup>31</sup> “Money shot” is defined by Linda Williams as “external penile ejaculation” (1989, p. 73). Like Williams, I choose to use the phrase “money shot” “for its added connotation of reification and fetishization” (1989, p. 289).

<sup>32</sup> Music for *The Eroгенists* is credited to Larry Vogt.



**Figure 10.** Quite different from a "money shot"

The gendering of these zeniths of sexually explicit scenes relates to a crucial aspect of Williams's work as examining pornography in relation to female pleasure and its relationship to the male gaze. Laura Mulvey famously addresses the male gaze and fragmentation of women's bodies in film as a means of objectification in her landmark text, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).<sup>33</sup> However, the MMRC films frequently complicate Mulvey's analysis of the fetishistic connotations of the close-up by focusing tightly on indistinguishable flesh as opposed to sexualized body parts, such as Marlene Dietrich's legs (Mulvey's well-known example). For instance, in Laird Sutton productions such as *The Erogenists* and *Free*, extreme close-ups create confusion about whose body part, or even which body part, is featured. While these extreme close-ups are at times balanced with wide shots, the infrequency of establishing shots with the ordering

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<sup>33</sup> It's important to note that Mulvey was specifically analyzing classical Hollywood cinema, but her analysis has since been applied to many forms.



of close-ups contributes to the sense of confusion. In addition, the close-ups in *Free* and *The Erogenists* subvert the expectations of close-ups in pornography; instead of an emphasis on graphic and genre-defining close-ups such as “money shots,” viewers are more often treated to the frame filling with fleshy bits of elbow, knee, shoulders, or the like. The final shot of *The Erogenists*, for example, fades out on a fleshy bit of lower/outer thigh (See Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** The final shot of *The Erogenists* fades out on a fleshy bit of lower/outer thigh

Johnson references the MMRC films’ occasional “close ups of breasts or buttocks or medium shots of torsos and genital areas [that] might have struck some viewers as pornographic” in the context of the argument that these shots “made sense in relation to the NSF’s erotological practice” (1999, p. 297). However, this position ignores many other shots that also featured less traditionally objectified body parts. Additionally, the idea that viewers are conditioned to recognize some shots as especially pornographic implies a rather widespread, comprehensive understanding of how pornography functions aesthetically. However, close-ups on fleshy but less frequently fetishized body parts is

not consistent across all of the five films. Edd Dundas's *Masturbation: Men* features perhaps the most extreme example of fragmented bodies of the five films and is more consistent with expectations created by pornography with the camera's plentiful zooms to tight shots on various penises performing various "money shots."<sup>34</sup> Some scenes never feature the masturbator's faces, which feels antithetical to the purpose of the film: to positively depict a sexual behavior historically shamed.<sup>35</sup> However, this film reveals another method the creators may have used in attempt to distinguish the film from pornography; namely, the unique narration analyzed in the previous chapter (See Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Bathtub masturbator's face is never shown

Another potential distinction between pornography and erotica is pornography's "inherently transgressive status" as it "relishes all kinds of transgressive sexual behavior: stranger sex; group sex; lack of context; lack of familiarity of all kinds; often utter

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<sup>34</sup> This could also be connected to the films' later release date, 1979, as Williams argues "money shots" became more prevalent through the 1970s (1989).

<sup>35</sup> Michael Warner writes of masturbation's history as a sin as shame is constructed through "biblical authority" (Warner, 1999, p. 4).

disregard for ‘tenderness,’ either before or after the physical act; often very little interest in traditional relationships; and almost none in procreation” (Alilunas, 2016, p. 18-19). Similarly, a primary goal of the MMRC films was to have transgressive messages (different collections of films focus on group sex, male and female masturbation and orgasm, acts and items commonly conceived of as fetishes, and so on) to “normalize” sexual behaviors that have a history of being framed as abhorrent (Francoeur, 1977, p. 34; Irvine, 2005).<sup>36</sup> As Michael Warner reminds us, normative sexual behaviors are reinforced constantly, whereas the stakes of sexual representation for some might include being “beaten, murdered, jailed, or merely humiliated. They might be stigmatized as deviants or criminals” (Warner, 1999, p. 3). The absence of representation of transgressive sex is rooted in the “intent to shut down sexual variance,” which clearly influences cultural attitudes toward texts that depict nonnormative sex acts, such as MMRC films (Warner, 1999, p. 25). By showing tenderness side by side with these transgressive sex acts, the MMRC films attempt to combat the cultural processes which regulate sex and sexuality.

While the films analyzed for the purposes of this thesis lack significant narrative context surrounding the sex act, they often stress “tenderness” and loving sexual relationships in that “warm, human way” Francoeur mentioned, arguably unlike much pornography (1977, p. 34). With the definition of hardcore relying on the aesthetic, unabashed depiction of penetration, which some MMRC films contain, the presence of “tenderness” becomes a loaded quality. So while the films avoid a cohesive narrative,

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<sup>36</sup> As Linda Williams points out, during the “sex wars,” the emphasis again became what is or is not “normal,” with “the unfortunate result... [being] a strengthening of the idea of sexual norms altogether” (1989, p. 20).

thus not taking advantage of the trope of “connecting narrative to quality” as a point of legitimization, they do use “tenderness” as a means of separating the films from pornography (Alilunas, 2016, p. 19). Unambiguous acknowledgments of the framing of sex as a joyful experience are included in a brief write-up of *Free*, wherein “at the end of the film, they play together, enjoying themselves immensely” (See Figures 13 & 14) (Phillips, 1974, p. 326); the fact that this is so directly addressed in a short review suggests that it is not the expectation from an explicit film. This post-coital frolic, complete with laughing, hugging, and mild acrobatics, is just one measure the films take to present scenes of joy surrounding sex, distinguishing the films from both common conceptions of conventional sexual education and hardcore pornography.



**Figure 13.** Post-coital frolic featuring a lens flare



**Figure 14.** The camera lingers on sunlit post-coital smiles

Furthermore, a review of *Touching* (1971), an MMRC film featuring a paraplegic man, in *The American Journal of Nursing* illustrates the tendency to use educational value and loving, tender representations as a sort of legitimizing factor for the graphic depictions of sex and pleasure:

The film captures implicitly the lovingness of their relationship as simply, without narration, it shows them engaging uninhibitedly in sexual intimacy. Vaginal penetration is not shown but cunnilingus, fellatio, and touching are depicted graphically. The film has the potential for helping nurses or other professionals who work with physically disabled persons, as well as physically disabled persons themselves, understand ways of gratifying sexual needs. Its focus is on the human relationship—the joy of a relationship between a man and a woman. However, it could be considered controversial. But, no matter how graphic, how nonconventional, the message of what is possible or what may be possible for others regarding sexual expression cannot be denied. (Murphy, 1973, p. 1110)

The link between some sexually explicit films and humanness, tenderness, and intimacy within relationships, and the assumption that these aspects appeal especially to women, serves as an example of the complexly gendered distinction between erotica and pornography and how sexual education film could be aligned with one or the other. Eithne Johnson describes the roots of the gendering of erotica being intertwined with the NSF films:

By linking “eros”—love—with some sexually explicit products, such as those that were accepted into film festivals and classrooms, humanistic sexologists offered audiences a way to distinguish the erotic from the pornographic and soon the distinction would be made that women, in particular, preferred the former over the latter. (2014, p. 277)

While the height of the “sex wars” was well after the production of the MMRC films on which I focus, this erotica/pornography gendered split, so integral to understanding MMRC films (Johnson, 2014, p. 267), was a central debate as “antipornography politics surfaced as a volatile flashpoint in the women’s movement in the United States in the late 1970s” (Rubin, 2011, p. 255).<sup>37</sup> Gayle Rubin addresses the opinions some feminists’ had at the time regarding the fact that most producers of sexual education films are “heterosexual men whose attitudes toward women are similar to the heterosexual men who dominate the production of commercial porn” (2011, p. 264). She goes on to describe how her position on this similarity would lead her to “encourage more women to enter both fields as producers, writers, and directors,” but to some “antiporn activists,

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<sup>37</sup> For films claiming the erotic label and somewhat encouraging the gendered division between genres, nicknames for the SAR program, such as “Fuckarama” or “Sexarama,” don’t have the demure ring that might be associated with traditional femininity (Irvine, p. 93).

however, these similarities will be an excuse to include sex-education films in their general condemnation of pornography and to subject them to whatever legal penalties and liabilities result from antiporn campaigns” (Rubin, 2011, p. 264).

Thus, the MMRC’s intentionally blurred-lines and the deliberate processes of borrowing genre-specific tropes had put their relationship with sexual education film in a particularly complicated position. This illuminates the gravity of antipornography debates during the “sex wars” and what role culturally constructed understandings of genre played in them. Rubin, firm in her stance in the debate, describes it as “politically reprehensible and intellectually embarrassing to target pornography on the basis of inflammatory examples and manipulative rhetoric” (2011, p. 260). Rubin attempts to explicitly define pornography and erotica, a task she finds “difficult” and complexly situated between legislative and political definitions. While Audre Lorde’s conception of the erotic as an “assertion of the life-force of women” that “lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane” is a different and specific use of the term (1978, n.p.), it represents the roots of the division between the erotic and pornography and the alignment of the erotic with women. In Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” she writes:

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of *true* [emphasis added] feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (Lorde, 1978, n.p.)

This added revolutionary rhetoric surrounding the term “the erotic” and its explicit position as opposed to pornography clearly contributed to its cultural significance and the process of “politicizing the erotic” (Johnson, 1999, p. 61). Lorde expertly weaves the discourse of rebellion into the division as she states, “in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept the powerlessness” and “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (1978, n.p.). The division of pornography and erotica becoming enmeshed and embroiled in the feminist movement demonstrates the complex connection between social rebellion, genre formation, and the regulation of sex and sexuality.

Another facet of the MMRC films’ relationship to rebellion was rooted in the use of 16mm film itself. The MMRC films benefited from a connection between 16mm as a medium and a “discourse of revolution” as the “the lower budgets and ‘amateur’ aesthetics of the 16mm films inscribed them with more naturalism or ‘authenticity’” (Schaefer, 2002, p. 16). In “Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” Schaefer also addresses the technological, a medium-specific approach that Mittell encourages in examining genre, asserting that “the discourse of revolution— sexual and otherwise— was used to differentiate the new 16mm films from existing product” (2002, p. 4). He writes of “the increased sense of intimacy and spontaneity” associated with 16mm film and the “discourses of ‘naturalism’ attached to it” (2002, p. 8). The MMRC used the trope of “naturalism” to separate itself from pornography and make audience members more comfortable with screenings and discussions. This served as a significant strategy in shifting the influence and presence of power in sexuality (Francoeur, 1977).



In addition to the association of the 16mm film medium with youth and the counterculture, the early MMRC films also filmed young subjects exhibiting the aesthetic forms of rebellion that Schaefer briefly mentions, such as long, natural hair and unclipped body and pubic hair. The naturalism inherent in the medium, as Schaefer argues, was amplified by these aesthetics as well as the emphasis on nature and the outdoors addressed in the previous chapter. An endearing moment of confluence of nature, counterculture aesthetics (natural hair, including pubic), and “tenderness” occurs toward the end of *Free*, when the woman reaches to brush grass and nature debris from her lover’s natural hairstyle and he reciprocates the motion with her ample pubic hair (See Figure 15).<sup>38</sup> This gesture reads as a moment of loving playfulness, something scholars such as Vogel suggests distinguishes the MMRC films from pornography, demonstrating how distinctions between genres are constructed and revealing genre expectations for representations of sex.



**Figure 15.** An intimate relationship with nature

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<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on his natural hair could also be read as an explicit recognition of race, as the film is often framed as “sensitive to minority representation” (Schaefer & Johnson, 2010, p. 193). Of course, the intention of “normalizing” representations can have the unintended consequence of othering.

In this chapter, I have explored how the MMRC used a medium with a connection to the counterculture to distribute sexually explicit film, which they labeled as art and educational material. These films employed strategies of legitimization that emphasized and built upon a culturally-constructed boundary between erotica and pornography. In the following chapter, I expand on this issue of legitimization by analyzing how the films borrowed aesthetic tropes from a genre associated with rebellion and transgression, with the goal of redefining sex for a liberated era. Art film, often containing sexually explicit material and inextricably linked to erotica, has a longstanding relationship to pornography, as evidenced by Vogel: "...porno films present impossible fantasies of endless, seamless, perfect fuckings that have nothing in common with the eroticism of real life or art" (Vogel, 1982, p. 73).<sup>39</sup> In the following chapter, I will further investigate this connection between the authenticity of "real life" and "art" and the complex issues that arise when art film contains "real" sex.

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<sup>39</sup> Directly referencing the relationship between the conception of "erotica" and art, Kendrick argues "that word [erotica] lends... an air of respectability that aligns them, however falsely, with art" (1996, p. 243-244).

## CHAPTER V

### AT LEAST IT'S AUTHENTIC: ART FILM

“It’s a little too much but at least it’s authentic”

Gunvor Nelson (MacDonald, 1998, p. 188)

“Every artist is in revolt” James Broughton (1992, p. 6)

Along with producing their own content, Ted McIlvenna and Laird Sutton also redistributed films created by “well-known independents and even avant-garde artists” such as Barbara Hammer, James Broughton, and Gunvor Nelson (Shellenberger, 2014; Simon, 2014; Vogel, 1982, p. 73). These films, plucked from their original context of art film festival circuits, were recontextualized as sexual education film and shown during Sexual Attitude Restructuring (SAR) programs alongside Multi Media Resource Center (MMRC) original works. Parallel to my previous analysis of Eric Schaefer’s “legitimizing function” and Peter Alilunas’s “something more” with regard to the division between erotica/art and pornography (Schaefer, 2002, p. 14; Alilunas, 2016; p. 19), the intentional and very visual inclination to redistribute art films as sexual education (and to mimic art film form in their own productions) indicates another avenue that Sutton and McIlvenna were exploring to legitimize sexually graphic material. With this in mind, I use the contested scholarly understanding of art film as evidence of the cultural construction of the genre and as a means of understanding MMRC films as art film. Furthermore, I argue that the political leanings and transgressive purpose of much art/experimental/underground/avant-garde film is in direct conflict with the perception of sexual education as appropriately denying any such leanings in order to facilitate accurate and unbiased representations of sex and sexuality. Considering this, I also investigate art

cinema as a subversive form and how this fundamental difference further complicates the MMRC films' relationship within the genre of art cinema.<sup>40</sup>

Central to understanding MMRC films' relationship to art cinema is understanding the somewhat hazy and often disputed methods of examining and categorizing art cinema as either a "genre, mode of film practice, institution, historically defined mode of exhibition, or otherwise" (Frey, 2016, p. 8). Moreover, recognizing how scholars have used diverse methods to categorize art cinema supports my use of Jason Mittell's cultural approach to genre to question these categories.<sup>41</sup> Whether art film as a genre is understood as containing specific aesthetic elements (Bordwell, 1979), as an institution (Neale, 1981), as the antithesis of Hollywood (Dixon & Foster, 2002; Neale, 1981), or as a subversive tactic (Vogel, 2005), the idea that art film can be understood in such diffuse ways exposes genre as a slippery, amorphous cultural category. Simply labeling a film as either art, avant-garde, experimental, subversive, etc. has proven to be an "endless cause for debate" and has led scholars to create their own terms, such as "critical cinema" or "extreme cinema," in order to define the demarcations of the genre they wish to examine (MacDonald, 1998, p. 1). For example, there's the somewhat convoluted distinction between "art-house cinema," still a profit-seeking enterprise, and

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<sup>40</sup> Although the primary goal of Eithne Johnson's dissertation is examining the intersection of the sexual and technological at the heart of the sexual and communication revolutions, she recognizes the significance of the MMRC films' artistic aesthetics: "the NSF not only promoted the erotic aesthetics of experimental and underground films, but also sought to position its own film style in relation to erotic art" (Johnson, 1999, p. 239). Johnson ultimately argues the NSF films occupy a space more aligned with *cinéma vérité*, somewhat parallel to Schaefer's expansive examination of the intersections of sexual hygiene film, blue documentary, and pornography (Johnson, 1999; Schaefer, 2014a & b).

<sup>41</sup> Mittell briefly addresses a process of regeneration of texts "as cultural contexts shifted" as evidence that it is "problematic to look for generic definitions solely within the confines of the text" (2001, p. 6). However, Mittell references Rick Altman and Steve Neale's interpretations of genre reclassification; both scholars use examples of the process occurring over longer periods of time, certainly not at the whim of an organization of Methodist sexologists (Altman, 1999; Mittell, 2001, p. 6; 2004, p. 8; Neale, 1995).

avant-garde or art film, which is seen as focused on “more ethereal rewards of status and prestige,” implying the distinction among sub-genres lies in intent (Cardullo, 2011, p. 2).<sup>42</sup> These different understandings of art cinema reveal the ways in which genre is culturally constructed. Further, they demonstrate how political and industrial factors contribute to the entanglement of sexually explicit imagery with the regulation of sex and sexuality through genre construction.<sup>43</sup> In the midst of these genre and sub-genre label-disputes, I will be using the terms art film, art cinema, avant-garde, and/or experimental film in agreement with how scholars refer to them in the specific texts I reference and as I determine they are appropriate terms for each MMRC film.<sup>44</sup> I will be anchoring my analysis on two of the five MMRC films, Gunvor Nelson’s *Kirsa Nicholina* (1969) and James Broughton’s *The Bed* (1968), as their creators are recognized as established art filmmakers, and the films were originally distributed as art film.<sup>45</sup>

Despite being one of the most prominent methods of constructing and considering art cinema as a genre, David Bordwell’s more traditional, aesthetics-focused method, is not a particularly intertextual rumination. In “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film

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<sup>42</sup> It should be reiterated that buying or renting MMRC films could be a rather costly process. For example, *Touching* was selling for \$220 and renting for \$40 in 1973 (Murphy, 1973, p. 1110). Shellenberger notes that the student film *Love Toad* (1971), made for \$75, accumulated \$90,000 in ten years of royalties for the filmmaker (with him “splitting evenly the royalties from sales and rentals” with the MMRC) (2014, p. 94).

<sup>43</sup> The cultural construction of genre is also apparent in observations, such as Schaefer and Johnson’s: “Among critics, audiences, filmmakers, and censors, there was debate about how to categorize sexually explicit films, especially when they contained avant-garde or documentary elements. The term underground film served as a catchall, and a convenient way of avoiding the prickly semantic debates that pitted ‘erotic’ against ‘pornographic’” (Schaefer & Johnson, 2010, p. 192).

<sup>44</sup> The relationship between these sub-genres is also heavily blurred, as demonstrated by Broughton’s observation: “In the beginning we were called Experimental. Gradually we acquired other labels: Underground, Independent, New American, Alternative, Personal, Avant-Garde, Visionary. For my own work I prefer the term Poetic” (1992, p. 2).

<sup>45</sup> This is not intended to diminish the significance of the clear adoption of art aesthetics in Sutton’s productions.

Practice,” David Bordwell defines a rather rigid conception of art cinema by positioning it in opposition to modes of classical Hollywood cinema, such as a narrative structured around “cause-effect linkage of events,” and contrasting it with the major concerns of art cinema, which he defines as “realism and authorial expressivity” (Bordwell, 1979, p. 57).<sup>46</sup> In his examination of extreme cinema, Mattias Frey succinctly outlines Bordwell’s definition of art cinema, which I’ve included in-full to demonstrate the rigidity and specificity Bordwell provides:

These components have included: in the narration, a tenuous, loose linkage of cause and effect and ambiguous resolutions; location shooting; themes with contemporary social relevance; psychologically complex characters with opaque objectives; foregrounded stylistic devices which may range from documentary-style realism (including use of available lighting only) to idiosyncratic subjectivity (long takes or rapid montage, abrupt transitions, baroque lighting or soundscapes, freeze frames, and so on). (Frey, 2016, p. 216, summarizing Bordwell, 1979, p. 56-64)

While Bordwell’s conception of art film, with its clearly defined, check-list of criteria, is not the most beneficial or holistic method to tell the story of MMRC films, it does expose the nuanced gray areas that they occupy. For example, for the most part, the participants featured in MMRC films are not playing fictional characters. But with the clear and

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<sup>46</sup> Akin to Bordwell’s conception of the formal elements of art cinema, Gwendolyn Foster and Wheeler Dixon also regard art film as fitting into a more rigid, visual genre category (2002). Specifically addressing experimental film, they argue that art films’ “visual styling is unique and immediately recognizable” with each film being “one of a kind” (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 7). Like many scholars, Dixon and Foster immediately set experimental film in conflict with Hollywood film, specifically identifying Hollywood genres such “as the western, the musical, the horror film, the war film, and the like” as being fundamentally different from avant-garde film, which they argue “belong to no specific genre” (Bordwell, 1979; Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 7; Frey, 2016; Neale, 1981).

consistent emphasis on the “actors” being “ordinary people,” they can certainly be assumed to represent “realistic’ -- that is, psychologically complex-characters” (Bordwell, 1979, p. 57; National Sex Forum, 1979, p. 2).

However, the re-distributed art films often fall outside these parameters, which generally apply most appropriately to McIlvenna and Sutton’s “pattern” films. For instance, San Francisco area avant-garde artist, filmmaker and poet Broughton’s very visually and narratively experimental *The Bed* does contain actors, many of whom were San Francisco artists and counterculturalists cast in different roles: “Roger Somers played his saxophone as a naked Pan, Alan Watts portrayed a doctor of both medicine and divinity” (Broughton, 1993, p. 148) (See Figures 16 & 17).



**Figure 16.** Roger Somers featured as "a naked Pan"



**Figure 17.** Alan Watts dons the authoritative white coat

Furthermore, a 1979 National Sex Forum (NSF) pamphlet outlines how Sutton's production methods mimic documentary style realism, which Bordwell argues is relevant in an examination of art film:

Once sexual activity commences, no directions are given. Every effort is made to allow the individuals to feel at ease. The film is processed, and a rough print is made. The film is shown to the participants, and they decide whether their own experience is accurately expressed. The title and the music are chosen by the participants. (National Sex Forum, 1979, p. 2-3)<sup>47</sup>

The amount of power, control, and autonomy afforded to participants is emphasized as a method for setting the MMRC production practices apart from traditional conceptions and stereotypes regarding the actors' lack of agency in pornography and sometimes, unfortunately, in real-sex art film as well (Hess, 2017; Taormino, 2013). This technique of shooting, which reflects Bordwell's conception of art cinema as providing authenticity

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<sup>47</sup> This shooting style is also congruent with Johnson's analysis of the MMRC films as a form of sexual cinema vérité (1999).



through realism, inevitably affects the editing process and subsequently the aesthetics. As discussed in the previous chapter, the MMRC productions often lack many of the extreme close-up inserts and cutaways often associated with pornography. Similarly, this method of shooting, somewhat in line with documentary style, privileges the realism of long takes over sequence shooting that would require multiple takes of much of the action. While Sutton's films such as *Free* (1970) and *The Erogenists* (1970) do feature close-ups and medium shots, they are often the result of a zoom, suggesting that the action was not interrupted to get a closer shot (See Figures 18 & 19). Additionally, the aforementioned emphasis on nature, such as in *Free*, requires shooting day exteriors in which establishing and wide shots do not reveal any light flags or silks, etc., suggesting the filmmakers are using unmediated natural light, unconcerned (or perhaps wanting) lens flares or moments of overexposure. This is a moment in which stylistic choices influence how sex is represented and understood in the film, with the realism of the MMRC films suggesting what has been understood as a more authentic approach to understanding sex.



**Figure 18.** Beginning of zoom



**Figure 19.** End of zoom

In contrast to Bordwell’s suggestion that art film adheres to specific formal elements, other genre assessments more closely echo Mittell’s approach to genre as “cultural practice,” carefully acknowledging how genre is constructed inter-textually as it is “situated within larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations” (Mittell, 2001, p. 16-18). In *Theorizing Art Cinema*, David Andrews describes art cinema as a broader category that is “complex and always in flux,” which echoes Mittell’s approach to understanding genre as fluid, intertextual categories (2013, p. 2). Andrews also provides a perspective that questions the oversimplified conception of art film simply being whatever Hollywood film is not at any given time, instead providing a more complex, context- and discourse- driven definition of art cinema. He argues art cinema is outside the bounds of conventional genre; however, he is exercising a limited, traditional definition of genre, as evidenced when he leans on the absence of “consistent viewer effects” and states that art cinema does not have “anything akin to the frontier backdrop

of the western or the narrative-number structure of the musical,” which is antithetical to Mittell’s perspective of genre (Andrews, 2013, p. x).<sup>48</sup> Andrews instead argues that art cinema should be understood in the same terms as groupings such “mainstream” and “cult cinema” and states that “art cinema has no necessary-and-sufficient conventions at the formal level,” something in direct conflict with David Bordwell’s conceptions of art film and more in line with Mittell’s emphasis on a balance between textual and inter-textual analysis (Andrews, 2013, p. 2).<sup>49</sup> Further complicating art cinema’s position in relation to genre is its relationship to arguably reductive questions surrounding what constitutes “art.” There is an assumption that art cinema has to “appeal to the ‘universal’ values of culture and art” (Neale, 1981, p. 35). The fluid series of discourses involving artist, audience, market, culture, and so on parallels Mittell’s argument that genre is discourse-based, fluid and context-dependent and more generally relates Mittell’s argument that genre should be considered with regard to “larger systems of cultural hierarchies” (2001, p. 18). Andrews provides a brief overview of the complexities of how art cinema has historically fit into the larger culture of the American art scene beginning with explanations of “high-low divisions” to “art for art’s sake” movements and the use of “anticommercial rhetoric” to distinguish art from mainstream profit-making enterprises (Andrews, 2013, p. 5).

Akin to Andrews, Steve Neale’s understanding of art cinema as an institution

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<sup>48</sup> The viewer effects that he references include making “audiences laugh, cry, or become sexually aroused, as is expected of ‘body genres’ such as comedy, melodrama, and pornography, respectively” (Andrews, 2013, p. x). It can be assumed that Andrews is referencing Linda Williams’s conception of “body genres” (1991), which expands on Carol Clover’s analysis (1987).

<sup>49</sup> Andrews’s groupings function in a similar manner to genre as conceived through a more cultural approach; avoiding the term genre avoids the previously established ideas of how genre “should” be analyzed.

somewhat parallels Mittell's more holistic understanding of genre and highlights unique industrial qualities influencing how the MMRC films fit within the genre.<sup>50</sup> In "Art Cinema as Institution," Neale acknowledges the significance of aesthetics and "a stress on visual style" (1981, p. 13), but his perspective is much less aesthetics/form-based than Bordwell's argument:

Recognising that a socially progressive cinema is not simply a matter either of films or of new relations between form and content, but that it is also a matter of production practices, modes of distribution and exhibition, and new relations between films and their audiences (indeed, a new conception of 'audience' altogether), independent cinema in this country has begun decisively to struggle against commodity-based conceptions of cinema and the boundaries— political, aesthetic, ideological, economic— that such conceptions can constitute. (Neale, 1981, p. 38)<sup>51</sup>

Here, art films' "socially progressive" potential is presented as a defining feature as Neale addresses art cinema as an industry embedded in a matrix of discourses, similar to Mittell's method of examining genre as a discourse in flux. The MMRC films' unique position as occupying spaces within various genres is intimately tied to their similarly unique position as associated with a matrix of varying cultural institutions (born from an organization connected with the Methodist Church, in association with the National Sex Forum that developed into the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, and

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<sup>50</sup> However, Neale suggests that qualities of art films might be fluid over time, but consistently stand in defiance of the methods of Hollywood at any given time (1981, p. 14), a perspective that Andrews suggests might be an oversimplification.

<sup>51</sup> Neale's conception of art film as an institution is clearly echoed in Mittell's cultural approach to genre: "We need to look beyond the text as the locus for genre and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (Mittell, 2001, p. 7).

with films often produced/distributed specifically for Sexual Attitude Restructuring programs, itself a rather costly experience).<sup>52</sup> This complex matrix of institutions and industries, constantly changing identities for industrial and political reasons, undoubtedly affected the films' production, content, and style.

Both Andrews and Neale's distinct analyses of art film assist us in the method of looking at "genre history as a fluid and active process," which, in this case, reveals how the regulation of sex and sexuality was operating within the cultural construction of genre (Mittell, 2001, p. 10). The "commodity-based conception of cinema" to which Neale refers is intimately tied to the early history of film, as demonstrated in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915), "which ruled that cinema was a business, not an art or an act of speech that deserved free-speech protection" (Andrews, 2013, p. 7). This ruling fundamentally shaped how film was understood, allowed for censorship of commercial film, and eventually led Hollywood to impose the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 as a means of self-censorship (Andrews, 2013). The compliance of Hollywood filmmakers with The Code led to the importation of edgier foreign films that became a primary presence in the art film scene in America for decades (Andrews, 2013). It wasn't until the ratings system replaced The Code in 1968, and as auteur theory was being employed to legitimize film as an art form created by a singular artist, that American films became a more significant presence in the art scene (Andrews, 2013).<sup>53</sup> Neale, like Andrews, points to issues of censorship as a key factor in

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<sup>52</sup> A SAR pamphlet from the late 1970s states that "registration fee for each SAR is \$350 per person. This includes fruit, coffee or tea each morning, dinner the first evening and one other day, and a copy of the *SARguide for a Better Sex Live*. The fee does *not* cover cost of housing or meals not included above" (Sexuality: Institutions, 1979, n.p.).

<sup>53</sup> While The Code is directly addressing entertainment film, its sentiment echoes the expectations of the era that seems to have carried over into other genres, including sexual education film.

distinguishing art film from Hollywood cinema, but Neale points more specifically to the “‘explicit’ representation of sexuality and sexual activity in general and the female body in particular” (Neale, 1981, p. 31-32). Bordwell presents a similar argument wherein “the aesthetics and commerce of the art cinema often depend upon an eroticism that violates the production code of pre-1950 Hollywood” (Bordwell, 1979, p. 57).

A moment of the convergence of film and sexual regulation is apparent with Gunvor Nelson’s home birth film *Kirsa Nicholina*. Like sex, depictions of birth also have a restrictive history in American film, with an addendum of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 stating “scenes of actual childbirth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented” (Doherty, 1999, p. 363). *Kirsa Nicholina* begins in a dramatically unconventional manner for a birth film, with a sweeping wide, bird’s-eye pan across the ocean and onto a beach where three dogs bound across the sand toward a pregnant, fully nude woman relaxing on a colorful towel. After a bit of playfulness on the beach with her equally nude partner (See Figures 20 & 21),<sup>54</sup> we experience a jarring cut from the natural light of the beach to a rather low-key lit interior with the woman, wearing only a sweater and red socks, alternating between smiling and grimacing while breathing rhythmically on a bed (See Figure 22).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> This playfulness operates similarly to the post-coital frolic of *Free*, but clearly with an emphasis on the post in post-coital.

<sup>55</sup> Nelson is compared to Broughton, a “San Francisco filmmaker she admires,” because of their use of “highly crafted style to explore nature” (Gill, 1977, p. 28).



**Figure 20.** An unconventional beginning: mother, father, and dogs frolic



**Figure 21.** Mother and father dry each other



**Figure 22.** Mother alternates between smiling and grimacing while interacting with the father and others off screen

As acknowledged in the previous chapters, showing or implying sexual desire in a playful, joyous manner, as exemplified by the post-coital frolic and especially its relationship to pregnancy, is a notable deviation from conventional sexual education and art film (Eberwein, 1999; Vogel, 2005).<sup>56</sup>After a proliferation of black and white, cold, sterile hospital birth films, such as *A Normal Birth* (1951) and *The Birth of a Baby* (1938), the warmth of the wood paneled walls and muted hues of colorful quilts and pillows in *Kirsa Nicholina* is in direct defiance of intertextual expectations. In his landmark text, *Film as a Subversive Art* (original edition published in 1974), Amos Vogel focuses his analysis of *Kirsa Nicholina* on the woman, blonde and strikingly youthful, whose “body is seen at all times;” this, he argues, encourages the viewer to acknowledge her eroticism and the idea that “new life came from sexual desire” (2005, p. 259). There’s

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<sup>56</sup> Although the genres differ widely in how sex is represented onscreen, sex tends to be framed as a fairly serious venture in both sexual education and art film (Eberwein, 1999; Vogel, 2005).



no tugging of gowns or careful choreography to obscure the actual birth scene. The woman remains front and center, contributing to what Vogel describes as “a human (rather than a medical) experience” (p. 262).<sup>57</sup> Vogel describes *Kirsa Nicholina*, named after the child, as a “classic statement of counterculture sensibility,” with slow guitar music written and performed by the tan, longhaired soon-to-be father accompanying a boldly graphic depiction of a homebirth, a subversive practice in its own right (Vogel, 2005, p. 259; MacDonald, 1998).

So while avant-garde filmmakers may intentionally use sex, sexuality, or eroticism to distinguish their films from the Hollywood mainstream (Bordwell, 1979; Krzywinska, 2005; Neale, 1981), the MMRC films complicate the nature of this distinction by having an overarching objective of education, something very different from the compensation of “more ethereal rewards of status and prestige” of art film or profit-driven commercial film (Cardullo, 2011, p. 2). The MMRC was using art films’ ability to transgress expectations of not only film form and its ties with commercial industry but also “social, sexual, political and aesthetic boundaries” with the intent to educate (Dixon & Foster, 2002; Neale, 1981, p. 15; Vogel, 2005). In *Film as a Subversive Art*, Vogel documents films of “true iconoclasts and independents— feature, avant-garde or documentary filmmakers— who even under today’s bleak circumstances audaciously continue to ‘transgress’ (i.e. subvert) narrative modes, themes, structures, and the visual/aural conventions of mainstream cinema” (Vogel, 2005, p. 5).

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<sup>57</sup> Again, Vogel’s focus on the *humanness* of the depiction parallels Francoeur’s previously discussed preoccupation with humanness serving as a divergent quality between MMRC films and pornography and, furthermore, alluding to the division in sexology at the time as either science-based or humanistic (Irvine, 2005).

Here, Vogel's emphasis on "true" independents is intended to distinguish them from independent filmmakers who still have commercial interests. Beyond the transgression of "mainstream cinema" that Vogel addresses, the films of the MMRC also had an explicit interest in radically disrupting traditional conceptions of sex and sexuality. Film curator Herb Shellenberger, who was involved in a public screening of select MMRC films in Philadelphia in 2014 (Shellenberger, 2014; Simon, 2014), also touches on the implication of this recontextualization of art film:

I think that the most interesting part of this organization is not only that they produced their own low-budget, quick, very-interesting films, but that they took films by independent artists — and often pretty experimental films at that — and placed them in this context of sex education, sex therapy, which is kind of a utilitarian use for these films, and I can't really think of any other ways that that has been done before. (Simon, 2014, para. 10)

Shellenberger's emphasis on the novelty of art film having a more "utilitarian use" implies that the traditional purpose of an art film is aesthetic and that aesthetic purposes are not utilitarian. This perspective bypasses art cinema's historical involvement with activist movements where art films' transgressive aesthetics are deliberately used to subvert cultural norms (Vogel, 2005).

The MMRC films' unusual genre-straddling position illuminates the inverse relationship between the understanding of the intent of sexual education film as utilitarian and art film as aesthetic; this perspective reveals the stereotypes that evolve when over-focusing on limiting demarcations of genre and is especially interesting when considering

subversive art film and education film's overlap in medium-specificity.<sup>58</sup> The availability of handheld cameras and 16mm film, a medium that became relatively inexpensive and obtainable in the 1960s, began to be accessible for avant-garde filmmakers and political activists after historically being utilized primarily for educational material (Fuller & Salvioni, 2002; Schaefer, 2002). The accessibility, ease of use, ability to make films by yourself, and the embrace of amateur-aesthetics led to a connection between experimental film and the feminist movement, leading to feminist counter-cinema (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 13-14).<sup>59</sup>

Feminist filmmakers and activists such as Laura Mulvey and Barbara Hammer were vocal about their use of avant-garde cinema to proliferate their messages (Dixon & Foster, 2002).<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Nelson's films have often been associated with the feminist movement, a position the filmmaker herself denies (Gill, 1977, p. 28; Grilikhes & Williams, 1972). Nelson concedes that she "did see the need for rebellion in art, but not so much socially," directly acknowledging the subversive double-down (aesthetically and socially) of art film (MacDonald, 1998, p. 185). Nelson's attitude that "all tradition was there to be changed, rules were there to be broken" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 184), coupled with her examinations of "themes related to female identity and subjectivity" (Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p. 260), perhaps encouraged feminist activists to make rather grandiose

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<sup>58</sup> As Mittell argues, "we should also examine the specificities of the medium" (2001, p. 10).

<sup>59</sup> Gunvor Nelson, creator of *Kirsa Nicholina*, embraces this artistic independence afforded by 16mm as she recounts: "I always thought filmmaking was more of a group effort, more grandiose than was relevant for me... [independent filmmakers] showed me that I could make film as an individual artist" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 184).

<sup>60</sup> Mulvey famously proposes production of alternative cinema as a means to destroy beauty and disrupt the gaze by employing radical aesthetic choices. She views mainstream cinema as reproducing and rehashing the "formal preoccupations" and "the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it" and alternative cinema's potential to react "against these obsessions and assumptions" (1989, p. 15-16).

statements about Nelson's *Kristina Nicholina*: "For me, the scene symbolizes the whole Women's Movement in that we're giving birth to new selves, our new image, bringing it out of the womb of all of us in the same way" (Grilikhes & Williams, 1972, n.p.).

Contributing to this sense of feminist rebellion is the active participant position the mother takes in *Kirsa Nicholina*. She is always presented as lucid, interactive, and proactive during the birth, something again in direct contrast with aforementioned hospital birth films of the era, wherein the mother was often heavily medicated and the doctors were framed as the active agents of birth. *off our backs*, a radical feminist publication, describes the moment in *Kirsa Nicholina* when the mother guides her child out of the womb and onto her chest as a fundamental moment in "certainly the most revolutionary childbirth film (all others are male-made) ... where the woman, in a warm, supportive atmosphere is no longer the immobilized doll-on-table of hospital births" (Grilikhes & Williams, 1972, n.p.). In an interview in the late 1990s, Swedish to Californian filmmaker Nelson describes the making of *Kirsa Nicholina*:

A friend of this couple (she was Danish, he was American; they lived across from me in Muir Beach), a more-established industry filmmaker, was asked by the couple to do the film. He came to me and said, 'Can you do some shots on the beach for me because I have to be out of town; you can be second cameraman.' It's not in my vocabulary to be *second* cameraman! But I did those shots, and then one day, the father, David, came by and said, 'She's going to have the baby!' – it was two weeks early-- 'Can you shoot some film?' I drove to San Francisco, bought as much film as I could afford: five one-hundred-foot rolls. When I got

back, she was already on the bed and had been in labor for quite a while.

(MacDonald, 1998, p. 187)

The renegade-style, the urgency, and the limited resources are all visible in the final product and contribute to what Bordwell identifies as the fundamental principles of art film: “realism and authorial expressivity” (Bordwell, 1979, p. 57). Nelson’s aversion to the position of second cameraman is in conversation with the Hollywood mode of production with large crews of specialized labor (Cardullo, 2011); she is using the language of an artist who is accustomed to complete control over her craft. In line with Sutton’s shooting-style, Nelson also describes a process of providing her subjects with little-to-no direction or interference before or during the scene, with the mother choosing to wear bright red socks, which contrast with the light blue sheets in a manner Nelson wouldn’t choose, but isn’t willing to disrupt the natural scene to alter. Nelson also mentions being pleased that the couple “had a copy of Borges’s *Labyrinths* lying there,” something that would otherwise feel staged, as the camera lingers on the book multiple times in the short film, with the spine in clear view surrounded by candles, flowers, and knick-knacks (See Figure 23) (MacDonald, 1998, p. 188).



**Figure 23.** Curiously, what Nelson describes as "a copy of Borges's Labyrinths" appears to be "The Labyrinth"

Echoing Vogel's sentiment, MacDonald describes *Kirsa Nicholina* as "a quintessentially sixties film," but it seems that a large portion of what would qualify it as such was due to unintended consequences of lack of preparation or resources, perhaps further qualifying the film as a truly experimental, avant-garde piece (MacDonald, 1998, p. 183). For a portion of *Kirsa Nicholina*, there's a slight green tinting with infrequent green flashes, something MacDonald suggests was an intentional artistic choice as "the green is perfect for the idea of the Natural," but Nelson describes it as simply an unintentional and regrettable mistake "in the lab's chemicals, or the fault of the film stock" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 188). Gwendolyn Foster and Wheeler Dixon, in another gesture to the distinction between art film and Hollywood film, argue that art "filmmakers also disdained, for the most part, the Hollywood model of slick professionalism in lighting, acting, sets, costume design, and other physical production details," instead embracing the "rough, raw, and imperfect aspects of their films" (Dixon

& Foster, 2002, p. 3). This hands-off approach, echoing Sutton's own aforementioned production style, and emphasis on a lack of production design lends itself to a sense of authenticity of the space and the intimacy of the room, which included only the mother, father, doctor, his wife, "the woman who was helping her with breathing," and Nelson (MacDonald, 1998, p. 188).

Furthermore, Nelson describes the process of choosing a soundtrack in a similar hap-hazard, on-the-day manner: "The mother had some kind of electrical pad that disturbed my taping, so I couldn't use the sound I had recorded, and decided on the father's singing. It's a little too much but at least it's authentic" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 188). Nelson gets plenty of footage of the original sound source as the father picks up his guitar a number of times through the short film (See Figure 24). Here, Nelson is establishing the sound as diegetic, perhaps a sound-scene incongruent to audience expectations of a birth scene. This unexpected diegetic sound lends itself to the sense of authenticity of the scene even as the other diegetic birth-adjacent sounds are mitigated.



**Figure 24.** Nelson gets a series of tight shots of the father strumming the guitar as the mother is in earlier stages of the birth process

While *Kirsa Nicholina* is notable for its warmth and “humanness” (Vogel, 2005), its visual imperfections actually increase its credibility as a piece of art cinema as they contribute to a sense of authenticity in realism. Gwendolyn Foster and Wheeler Dixon use Canyon Cinema, an art film exhibitor and distributor established in San Francisco in the 1960s, as a reference point to describe the new renegade “raw, tactile ‘funk’” filmmaking occurring with experimental artists in the 1960s (2002, p. 6). Dixon and Foster describe how filmmakers’ “self-description as amateurs implied artistic integrity and was predicated on a self-definition in opposition to the commercial film industry” (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 17). The artist’s freedom lies in maintaining an aesthetic associated with the “amateur” as evidence that he or she isn’t beholden to the pressures of creating a return on the massive investments associated with large Hollywood productions, requiring oversight from multiple profit-driven factions that encourage a clearly defined genre to market to a specific audience. This “amateurish” aesthetic is embraced as a symbol of the liberated artist, capable of creating meaningful content in direct defiance with Hollywood’s tendency to go with the financial “sure bet” (oftentimes an established genre-film) as a means of securing profits to colossal investments. So while these art films might “resist categorization and do not fall within the confines of established genres” (when genre is defined in a traditional, rigid, form-based manner), Mittell’s cultural approach to genre serves a more appropriate method of studying these films by examining them intertextually (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 4; Mittell, 2001 & 2004).

This connection between imperfect and “amateurish aesthetics” as a means of connoting authenticity, something highly valued in art cinema, echoes McIlvenna’s



promise to seek out the “truth” of sex.<sup>61</sup> In seeking authenticity in representations of sex, MMRC films subvert not only cultural expectations of heteronormative sex, but also expectations within art film. In *The Bed*, the aforementioned actors, some of whom are prominent characters in the San Francisco counterculture scene, are often nude, something Vogel addresses in relation to the subversion of genre expectations: “While even avant-garde nudity seems to often betray an absence of joyful or uncomplicated sex, *The Bed* displays a smiling, polymorphously-perverse eroticism” indicative of the “American counterculture and its Zen-like acceptance of all sexes and possibilities as one” (2005, p. 208-209). Here, Vogel is acknowledging something that parallels my analysis of the post-coital frolic in *Free* and the pre-birth frolic in *Kirsa Nicholina*. This buoyant and joyful expression is markedly different from previous representations of sex in sexual education film, and as Vogel points out, also in art cinema (See Figure 25).



**Figure 25.** Although penetration doesn't occur on screen, the couple frolics nonetheless

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<sup>61</sup> Previously analyzed aspects of Sutton's *Free* and *The Erogenists* (lens flares, awkward shot length and framing) could also be understood as amateurish.



**Figure 26.** The position and combination of bed inhabitants changes



**Figure 27.** A focus on feet

Furthermore, Vogel's recognition of the "polymorphously-perverse eroticism" of *The Bed* clearly agrees with the MMRC's objective of showing a wide range of sexual proclivities. The film presents underrepresented erotic acts as occurring within a natural setting and alongside a narrative intended "to reveal as directly as possible [Broughton's] vision of the endless dance of human existence" (Broughton, 1992, p. 33), as if to frame

the sexualized acts equally as natural as the moments of life's copious moments of inertia and boredom. Caressing/aggressive kissing/naked straddling of bare feet and cowboy/horse-woman role play exist alongside scenes of relaxed games of catch and sharing snacks and puffs off a joint. Jump cuts, another aesthetic trope of art film, reveal various combinations of men and women casually snuggling in different positions (See Figures 26 & 27). Along with the counterculturalist actors, the other participants also often have markers of the previously discussed counterculture aesthetics. Eric Schaefer and Eithne Johnson point to the connection between sexual acceptance and the counterculture: "The avant-garde and Beat communities served as spaces for the expression of gay, bisexual, and transvestite sexualities" (2010, p. 192). The association of these communities and their aesthetics to sexual open-mindedness contributes to the films' subversive tactics as they use the aesthetic markers of the counterculture to connote progressive ideals.

The MMRC's redistribution of films containing explicit references to the counterculture, subversive elements, and even texts having been explicitly acknowledged as activist-oriented reiterates McIlvenna's rebellious approach to sexual education. However, as revolutionary as the tactics and expression may sound, Vogel points out that these art films had rather limited distribution; thus, "it is precisely because the American Establishment knows that these films are of no real danger to it that it allows their existence; in so far as they might become more dangerous, they are 'contained by 'democratic' devices too numerous to mention in detail such as tax harassment, fire laws, and legal interference" (Vogel, 2005, p. 318). As this thesis has demonstrated, the cultural construction of genre often exists in relation to such institutional involvement,

and the regulation of sex and sexuality in film becomes evident when examining these institutional points of intervention.

## CHAPTER VI

### USING MOVIES: CONCLUSION

“We’ve never used a movie in our lives” William H. Masters (as cited in Irvine, 2005, p. 94).

According to Eithne Johnson, the “sexual revolution was dead by 1984” (1999, p. 7). Specifically with regard to the city heralded as the center of the counterculture, Josh Sides argues that “ultimately, the AIDS crisis laid bare the savage inequalities plaguing San Francisco, many of which had been masked by the ‘good vibes’ of the sexual revolution” (Sides, 2009, p. 9).<sup>62</sup> Beyond contributing to the end of the sexual revolution, AIDS also had an enormous influence on sexual education. Beginning in the early 1980s, the American AIDS epidemic shifted sexual education rhetoric back toward risk management with an erasure of representations of desire or pleasure from sexual education films, where it continues as a point of contemporary contestation (Eberwein, 1999, p. 103).

Sexual education, entangled in issues of moralism, religious beliefs, and the muddy division between church and state has increasingly become politicized as a left or right issue (Baker, Smith, & Stoss, 2015). Following the sexual revolution and in tandem with the AIDS epidemic, conservatives went from “opposing sexual education completely to advocating for abstinence-focused content” in the 1980s (Baker et al., 2015, p. 238). President Obama’s proposed federal budget for 2017 cut all funding for largely unsuccessful abstinence-only sexual education programs in support of more comprehensive sexual education (Office of Management and Budget, 2016). This

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<sup>62</sup> Sides also is careful to note that the sexual revolution wasn’t actually over, but “continued under the leadership of lesbians and bisexual women” as they “created a second sexual revolution” (2009, p. 9).

juxtaposed with President Trump’s 2018 and 2019 proposed budgets, which support federal funding of abstinence-only sexual education, is evidence of a deep divide in attitudes toward sexual education in the United States and how quickly and dramatically the approach to sexual education can shift depending on which party occupies the office (Office of Management and Budget, 2017; 2018).

The increasing politicization of sexual education has not only influenced the content of sexual education film, and thus what and how Americans are learning about sex and sexuality, but also the contemporary understanding of sexual education as a genre of film. William H. Masters’s brazen quote “we’ve never used a movie in our lives” exposes the perception of film as an illegitimate or at least undesirable tool for learning about sex (as cited in Irvine, 2005, p. 94). Decades later, film is commonly used as utilitarian medium, but with the shift towards abstinence-only sexual education, the films’ content and aesthetics are antithetical to the films distributed by the Multi Media Resource Center (MMRC).

Looking at five distinct films distributed by the MMRC in the 1960s through the 1970s, this thesis has explored the situation of the films within three culturally constructed genres: sexual education, pornography/erotica, and art cinema. Considering each genre as a separate culturally constructed category, defined and organized by historical and cultural shifts exposes how the regulation of sex and sexuality functions in relation to the films. Simultaneously, I’ve argued that focusing too intently or exclusively on traditional or strict genre delineations obscures the unique position of these films as intentionally straddling genre lines. Finally, I have investigated how the deliberate construction of genre has influenced form and exposed the connectedness between genre

and content while also revealing how genre distinctions are often politically or institutionally motivated.

While my deliberate separation of the three primary genres into distinct chapters may have emphasized their differences, it's imperative to highlight that a primary point of exceptionality of these films is their position straddling and blurring the lines between these genres. James Broughton's *The Bed* (1968), Gunvor Nelson's *Kirsa Nicholina* (1969), Edd Dundas's *Masturbation: Men* (1979), and Laird Sutton's *Free* (1970) and *The Erogenists* (1970), a grouping of films that certainly range dramatically in content, were distributed (or redistributed) as sexual education while borrowing aesthetics from art film in attempts to legitimize their sexually explicit content. While it is unlikely that this particular grouping of films ever comprised a particular bundle of films used for a specific Sexual Attitude Restructuring Program (SAR), future research, depending on access, might include examining a full genre-mixing bundle of films curated and distributed specifically for a SAR program to highlight how genre functions within a particular curated bundle.

With an emphasis on sincerity, authenticity, and representations of "real" sex, the MMRC films attempted to present radically progressive understandings of sex and sexuality by legitimizing films that complicate genre distinctions. As Michael Warner points out, "although sex is public in this mass-mediatised culture to a degree that is probably without parallel in world history, it is also true that anyone who is associated with actual sex can be spectacularly demonized" (Warner, 1999, p. 23).<sup>63</sup> This complex

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<sup>63</sup> Kendrick points out how "America vacillates hysterically between controlling sexual images and letting them run free" demonstrating the country's "deep ambivalence about the power of representations" (1996, p. 242).

paradox became amplified with the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic. What information and how people are learning about sex and sexuality has been a long-held social, and now largely political, concern in American culture. If sexual education isn't provided in a formal setting, the concern becomes where people might be getting information about sex and sexuality. As the debate continues regarding the effectiveness of abstinence-only sexual education, the MMRC films serve as a useful reminder of an era when a few Methodist ministers created unique films with the belief that perhaps the best way to teach sex is to show sex.



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