

## **Investigating the Illicit**

### **The material traces of Britain's early trade in obscene 8mm films**

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#### **Abstract**

Before the year 2000, the sale of hardcore pornography in Britain was criminalised under the Obscene Publications Act 1959. Yet, from the 1950s onwards a thriving economy existed, illicitly producing and distributing such material, selling it under-the-counter of Soho's bookshops and through mail-order. This economy was underwritten by the Obscene Publications Squad, a corrupt arm of London's Metropolitan Police who enforced the Obscene Publications Act 1959 and issued informal licences to pornography entrepreneurs. During the early years of this economy, one of the most popular commodities was short 8mm films depicting hardcore sex; these were known in the trade as 'rollers'. All but forgotten in histories of British film and absent from British archives, rollers not only provide an insight into sexual representation during the permissive society of the 1960s, but the artefacts themselves serve as documents of illicit trade.

Drawing on my ongoing ethnohistorical research into Britain's illicit trade in hardcore pornography from 1960 to 2000, which includes primary interviews with those involved alongside extensive archival research, I take an object-based material culture approach to analyse a roller titled *Chez M. Pirgeon*. I reflect on my physical interaction with this film and consider how its material properties reveal more about how this illicit artefact was likely produced, distributed and consumed. I show how such an approach is productive when attempting to uncover pornography's clandestine origins, shedding further light on a largely undocumented obscene trade and hidden enterprise culture.

#### **Introduction**

Until the year 2000, it was a criminal offence to distribute hardcore pornography in Britain. Despite this, a thriving under-the-counter economy existed, producing and distributing a range of illicit materials via the bookshops of Soho and mail-order businesses, as well as exporting to Western Europe and North America. One of the most in-demand artefacts in the 1960s and early 1970s were hardcore pornographic 8mm films. These were known amongst the trade as 'rollers' because of how the reels 'rolled' when played through a projector. With their low production costs, entrepreneurs were willing to risk fines and possible imprisonment for high profits. Before 1972, this economy was underwritten by an alliance between the pornographers and the Metropolitan Police's Obscene Publications Squad. 'The Dirty Squad', as they were colloquially known, were as entrepreneurial as the pornographers. In the 1950s, they introduced an informal licensing system for pornography entrepreneurs, enabling them to do business and profit from their practices by taking regular bribes (Cox et

al. 1977; Tomkinson 1982). Because of this, much of the trade became concentrated to Soho, London.

Following a crackdown on the illicit trade in 1972 and the police corruption that surrounded it, the production and distribution of rollers in Britain increasingly dwindled, as imports from Scandinavia took over. Today, rollers serve as artefacts of this forgotten economy of media production that emerged in the permissive era of the 1960s, when discourses of sex and sexuality suddenly became prominent in British popular culture (Mort 2010). Many of these materials have been lost to time, ending up in landfill after being found in the loft of a dead relative or simply discarded as a piece of valueless ephemera. They predominately reside in personal collections and occasionally appear on auction sites such as *eBay*. Researching this once illicit enterprise is therefore challenging, with no formal archives to draw on; a common issue faced when studying pornography's history (Williams 1989; Dean et al. 2014). While informal online archives exist, such as *Vintage Erotica*, offering digital downloads of these orphaned films (Church 2016: 37), their remediation as digital files ignores their characteristics as physical material objects. Haptically engaging with the 8mm film itself can offer hints to their clandestine origins. For instance, markings on the film might indicate how they were developed and printed. Sometimes it is even possible to roughly locate and date a roller by identifying its film stock (Bolt-Wellens 2021). Furthermore, their packaging shows how they were distributed, sometimes containing handwritten prices. In this chapter, I draw on an object-based analysis of one specific roller titled *Chez M. Pirgeon* alongside ethnohistorical research to demonstrate how the material properties of British 8mm hardcore pornography reveal more about how these illicit artefacts were likely produced, distributed, and consumed. I show how such an approach is productive when attempting to uncover hidden enterprise cultures and the origins of clandestinely produced media materials.

## **Pornographic materials**

The concept of materiality ideally lends itself to studying the history of pornography. As Elena Gorfinkel (2019: 9) recognises, 'the texts and objects that go under the banner of adult film and media are continually inscribed by material processes: historically marked as obscene; subject to censorship, regulation, redistricting, zoning; proscribed by formats and obsolete platforms as well as drivers of new technological modes'. Particular interest has been placed on the textual distinctiveness of pornographic film. For instance, when discussing the bootleg histories of American home video, Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) notes how both hardcore and softcore pornography was regularly bootlegged and illicitly distributed amongst informal networks. He argues that traces of such illicit practices are apparent in the image of the bootlegged porn videos, as the degeneration of an analogue leaves its visual mark in varying ways and become evidence of video's 'inherent vice'. Therefore, such materials are easily identifiable due to these imperfections. Similarly, in his exploration of the remediation of vintage pornographic films, David Church (2016) posits that materiality plays a vital part in their enduring appeal. He shows how material processes inform how adult films move from initial release to concealment, are censored and preserved, but also how they eventually rediscovered via boutique home video releases.

Debates around porn's materiality extend to different forms of distribution. For example, in their analysis of two independent print magazines - a queer feminist porn

magazine named *Ménage à trois* from Finland and the ‘sexual curiosity’ magazine *Phile* from Toronto, Canada – Daniel Cardoso and Susanna Paasonen (2021) consider the significance of these physical artefacts in the context of the increasing immateriality of pornography following the digital turn. They believe that their materiality ‘helps to anchor and amplify their artistic value and potential while their ethos of production signifies their authenticity’ (13). By offering an alternative to the mainstream representation of pornography, *Ménage à trois* and *Phile*’s ‘materiality of printed, glossy, pages’ ascribe value to diverse sexualities and become key central to their economic survival.

Conversely, Helen Wickstead (2020: 1) gives attention to older examples of illicitly produced British pornographic magazines. Wickstead explores the ‘Soho Bible’ or ‘Soho Typescript’, which she describes as ‘handmade obscene books produced in the 1950s and 1960s’ that were distributed in Soho’s bookshops. Taking an archaeological and ethnographic material culture studies approach, Wickstead engages with a sample of Soho Bibles and considers how they were likely produced and circulated amongst Soho’s alternative economy of hardcore pornography. She notes how ‘material culture studies encourages specialists to pay attention to the idiosyncratic detail of individual examples, comparing these tiny clues with their knowledge of a corpus of objects’, noting how a series of pen markings on a number of Soho Bibles added valuable context. Alongside her analysis, Wickstead draws on semi-structured interviews to further understand their illicit origins, speaking with a distributor of Soho Bibles and someone involved in their production.

This chapter aims to build on such debates around pornography’s materiality by showing how engaging with one short illicitly produced hardcore film can provide a further understanding of how such materials were manufactured and distributed. It uses ethnohistorical research conducted over seven years. This comprises of 42 primary interviews with those involved in Britain’s alternative economy of hardcore pornography production from the 1960s to 2000s alongside archival research, including newspaper and magazine articles, legal documents and artefacts produced by pornographers. I draw on this here to contextualise my interaction with a film titled *Chez M. Pirgeon*, interrogating its material properties. I begin by recounting how this film came into my ownership via a collector, illustrating how rollers currently circulate and were once distributed. Through examination of the film, I then consider how it was likely processed and printed on to 8mm by its producer. Finally, I discuss digitising *Chez M. Pirgeon* and analyse the resulting digital file to reveal further evidence of its production. The chapter concludes by placing *Chez M. Pirgeon* alongside other rollers that were likely produced by the same filmmaker, as I consider how material approaches to historical pornographic artefacts might help reveal traces of clandestine trade.

### **A smell of illicitness**

The smell of damp permeated from the box housing a number of rollers. This odour was now all too familiar. It had come to be indexical of the places where these films were likely stored. Rather than being openly displayed on a bookshelf or in ideal archival conditions, the musty scent suggests that it had been hidden from view, somewhere discreet; possibly a draughty loft, a box in a garage, or even a garden shed. For me, damp sell had come to connote illicitness. I take each film out of the box. ‘Keith’, the seller of the film, warned me that they were not presented in their ‘original boxes’.<sup>1</sup> He described how this film was part of a bulk

purchase he made from a dealer who regularly attends film fairs, where 8mm, Super 8, 9.5mm and 16mm films are traded amongst collectors. According to 'Keith', rollers are not openly displayed at such events and are only usually available under-the-counter': '...the fella I bought these off usually has a plastic shopping bag full of these [rollers]. We call them "Westerns", so no one knows what they are. You never know what's in one of his bags, but that's part of the fun'. Considering that rollers were sold in such clandestine circumstances in the 1960s and 1970s, normally in the back rooms of Soho bookshops, it seems ironic that they continue to be exchanged covertly through such informal trading networks.

After viewing his recent purchases, 'Keith' had decided to sell some of them on. He prefers films that are complete, in good condition, boxed and appeal to him, particularly his nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s. On my second meeting with 'Keith', he recalled a screening of rollers at his factory workplace in the early 1970s, where his manager would project the films to the predominately male staff. Such informal showings were common throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with some dating back to the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> The moralistic British tabloid press termed them 'blue movie shows', and numerous articles report on the findings of investigative journalists who infiltrated these spaces and revealed their seedy ongoing. Thomas Waugh (Prick et al. 2001: 280) speaks of the 'homosocial' spaces where stag films - the American colloquial term for rollers - were shown. In a British context, these would be factories, public house, private dwellings and even the police station, as was revealed in an anti-corruption investigation into the Metropolitan Police's Obscene Publications Squad (Tomkinson 1982). Drawing on his own experience of participating in a group viewing of a stag film, Waugh (Prick et al. 2001: 280) mentions how spectators re-enacted 'some of the basic structural dynamics of the patriarchy, namely, the male exchange of women, in this case the exchange in fantasies and images of women'.

Evidently, the factory screening was a formative experience for 'Keith'. It seems that his collecting of rollers is a sort of nostalgic practice. He often remarks on the how dress and styles of the performers hark back to his younger years. Knowing that I was writing a book about rollers (Carter 2022), 'Keith' contacted me to see if I would be interested in buying his unwanted films. As Peter Alilunas (2016: 29) notes, scholars of adult film rely on costly collectors' networks to build their own corpus due to a lack of formal archives. The film I held in my hand - *Chez M. Pirgeon* - arrived with four others. On examination, all appeared to be examples of unbranded rollers. More often than not, these turn out to be orphaned films, having no indication of a producer or a distributor. Such rollers usually originate from the very early 1960s; a period when British pornographers began to make hardcore films, eventually producing 'the majority - and the best - of the foreign stag material available in the American commercial market' by the late 1960s (Knight and Alpert 1967: 186). This is reinforced by Joseph Slade (2000: 120), who observes that British producers 'outpaced' American stag makers at the start of the 1960s.

I take *Chez M. Pirgeon* out of its makeshift container and ponder how it might have been originally packaged. Was its box lost over the course of 60 years, or did it have no box or branding? If it was the latter, it is plausible that this film was produced in the early 1960s when rollers were released without branding to avoid associating them with a specific producer. As this was a criminal enterprise, outing oneself as a maker of hardcore pornography would have been unwise. Evan 'Big Jeff' Phillips is regarded as the first person to brand rollers, introducing the label 'Climax' - also known as Climax Films and Climax Original - in 1966. In a police interview, fellow roller maker Martin Granby explained the

impact Phillips' decision to brand had on the economy, changing the way pornographers chose to package their films:

At first, it was sufficient for me to just have the spool with the film on it, but very shortly after Jeff Phillips came on the scene, he was a very big-time operator, and he marketed his films in boxes with proper titles. I, of necessity, had to compete with him and box and title my films.<sup>3</sup>

Phillips opted for a more distinctive alternative. Rather than a generic cardboard box, either blank or with a photograph of a scene from the film glued to its front, Climax boxes had an orange and off-white colour scheme, with the branding at the top of the box. Underneath would be a photograph, with the title of film Letraset onto the print. More information about the film is printed below, with the text 'black and white' on the left-hand side and the format and length of the film on the right. When Phillips eventually issued films in colour, a green coloured box was introduced. The use of brightly coloured packaging was likely done to make Climax's rollers stand out amongst others in the backrooms of Soho's bookshops, making them distinctive and easily identifiable.

My intuition tells me that *Chez M. Pirgeon* is from the early 1960s and was released unbranded. Such films had small print runs - often no more than 50 - due to the difficulties of processing and printing. Therefore, it is remarkable that many of these films have survived. I question how this film might have travelled. Was it originally purchased from a Soho Bookshop or through mail-order? How did it end up in the carrier bag 'Keith' bought at the film fair? A piece of paper with the words '*Chez Madam*' is loose in the container, scribbled by 'Keith' to help him identify this unbranded roller. I take the film out of its scratched, plastic makeshift container, inspecting the reel for any obvious sign of damage or repair. I also smell the film to see if there is a scent of vinegar, which can signify chemical deterioration. This can spread to other films, so it is critical to determine whether the film is 'safe' to store. Fortunately, the only odour here is the all too familiar musty scent of illicitness. My attention now turns to physically examining the film to determine if there are indications of how it was processed and printed.

## Processing and printing

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1: *Chez M. Pirgeon*'s handwritten title card. Author's personal collection.

The Gallic sounding title *Chez M. Pirgeon* likely disguises its British origins, associating itself with France, which made many pornographic films (Tachou 2013) that were regularly smuggled into Britain. Like most rollers I have seen, *Chez M. Pirgeon* is around 200ft in length, black and white and printed on standard 8mm film. A once-popular small-gauge film format for amateur film making enthusiasts from 1932 onwards, 8mm film was also used to commercially release films for viewing in the home (McKee 1978: 105). I put on my white cotton gloves to touch the film, preventing any grease from my fingers marking the film. I have no formal training in handling film, acquiring skills along the way and being guided by experienced collectors and filmmakers. My white cloth-covered index finger and thumb take the end of the film and gently unravel the first few inches so that I can identify the film stock and see if any unique markings might offer further signs of its origin. The brand 'Ilford' - is clearly printed, meaning that the film stock was purchased from Ilford, a high-street

photography and film retailer. With a branch in Soho, Ilfords was often the favoured outlet for roller makers, such as Mike Freeman who confirms this in his self-published autobiography *I Pornographer*, as does Evan Phillips in a police interview following his arrest.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, *Chez M. Pigeon* was likely produced, or at least printed, in Britain.

Holding the film next to a light, I see a handwritten title card naming the film and observe that it is well worn, with each scratch, mark and line being a trace of previous screenings and possibly poor handling by its owners. Unlike digital film, analogue film degrades every time it is screened. An inexperienced handler, and a cheap projector, may add to the damage. It seems increasingly likely that the film was printed in the early 1960s using informal means. Commercial and amateur 8mm films were typically processed in film laboratories. With the distribution of hardcore pornography in Britain being prohibited under the Obscene Publications Act 1959, using formal film laboratories to process rollers was risky; an attentive lab technician might spot the naked bodies and inform the police. Many labs opened 24 hours, and some roller makers, like Evan Phillips, found an amenable technician who worked nights to process their films, paying extra money for the trouble. Others set up their own informal laboratories. In an interview, Mike Freeman recalled how he initially struggled to develop his 8mm films, unable to get the correct mixture of chemicals.<sup>5</sup>

Others sought the services of informal film laboratories known as ‘garage labs’. One early roller maker named ‘Derek’ told me how he used a garage lab in the back of a London shoe shop to process and print his films.<sup>6</sup> Here, a semi-professional device known as a Todd Tank developed the films. Working in a darkroom with safe lighting, the film - usually 16mm as most rollers were shot on this format then reduced to 8mm for distribution - would be wound onto a spiral drum sitting in a chemical bath. Rotating the drum, either by hand via the attached handle or an electric motor, the film dipped into the developing chemicals for a designated amount of time. After, the chemicals were replaced with water to rinse the film. If reversal film was being used, a hardening solution was required, followed by a water rinse. Then, it was time for bleaching solution, a further rinse and another exposure to white light. An additional run through developing fluid was necessary, followed by a rinse, fixing solution and a final six water rinses. While on the drum, the film would be left to dry before being wound and ready for printing. R.H Bomback (1956) states that this precise and lengthy process took at least sixty minutes, depending on the film’s length.

Such amateur techniques were not without fault and involved trial and error, with the developer having to learn from their mistakes to avoid repeating them. According to Bomback, the following faults were likely:

- Picture too light or too dark (development too long or too short)
- Yellow stain (bleaching not fully completed)
- Blisters or recirculation (solutions not at the right temperature)
- Bleaching too slow (incorrect solution)
- Streaky picture (drum rotation too slow)
- Drying spots (film not dried properly)
- Buckling of film (film stretched during processing or too much heat used to dry the film)
- Negative density wrong (film underexposed)

Faults like these are often present in the prints of some rollers, with the imperfections being transferred from the developed negative, revealing the types of processes used. For instance,

a decent quality print suggests a professionally processed roller. This is evident in later titles, implying that a professional processing machine may have been used, possibly via an ‘out of hours’ service at a formal film laboratory. Specialist shops and the classified sections of amateur film magazines, such as *8mm Magazine* and *Amateur Cinema World*, sold processing equipment like the Todd Tank Alternatively, they could be handmade, as instructions given in the 13 April 1961 issue of *Amateur Cine World* show.

After developing the negative, a contact printer was needed to duplicate the films. These could also be purchased through mail-order companies or be homemade. Another option was to buy a semi-professional device. In interview, Freeman told of how he imported two Uhler branded optical printers from the US, costing \$950 each; a considerable expense in the late 1960s. The Uhler enabled a contact print to be made from the camera negative, positive or inter-negative. The two films would be sandwiched together and ran through the device, the master printing onto the film. With most rollers being shot on 16mm and printed on 8mm for wider distribution, optical reduction was necessary. An Uhler type device was beneficial as it could optically reduce 16mm film to 8mm for printing or, as was more common, reduce 16mm to dual 8mm. This would then be split into single 8mm for distribution, saving money and accelerating the duplication process. Imperfect devices like the Uhler were convenient solutions to the limitations of processing and printing rollers. Retired film laboratory technician Brian Pritchard described them as ‘fast’, but they ‘did not give the finest quality’.<sup>7</sup> For example, it was not uncommon for the film to slip during the duplication process, creating an imperfect print. Pritchard pointed out that quality likely meant little to people producing rollers; they were more concerned about profit and supplying a demand for hardcore pornography. Like processing faults, printing errors can also be identified, especially when viewing rollers.

## **Digitising and viewing**

I am eager to view *Chez M. Pirgeon* to see whether it might give further indication of how it was made, but before I do, the film must be cleaned and inspected for damage. Film cleaning is a controversial subject amongst film enthusiasts. Posts on online fora recommend various solutions – some professional, some non-professional – through to suggesting that film should not be cleaned if the owner is too precious about causing further damage to the film. I have two approaches: using a clean cotton cloth with a minimal application of either de-ionised water – recommended by an archivist from the British Film Institute – or a professional solution sold by a film laboratory based in the Netherlands. The latter option is preferred as it evaporates quickly, shortening the drying time. I attach the film and an empty reel to the arms of an 8mm editor, holding the cotton cloth gently around the film and using the arms of the editor to wind it through. Every few feet, I stop and examine the cloth to check for any accumulated debris or grit that might scratch the film as it winds through. If the cloth is too dirty, I use a new section to avoid further dirt getting on the film. It is slow, careful work. As my gloved fingers hold the cloth against the film, I also attentively study it for any potential damage that could hinder the scanning process. For this, I rely heavily on the sense of touch, waiting to feel any imperfections, such as broken sprockets, edits, burns and breaks. I keep note of any damage so that it can be repaired, although I am conscious that any film physically cut out is gone forever, further reminding me of the precarity of this material. Fortunately, *Chez M. Pirgeon* is in surprisingly good condition for its age.

Now digitising can begin, using a basic high-definition film scanner. Scanning is preferential to viewing through a projector, as it places less stress on the film. Film scanners are specialist pieces of equipment, with semi-professional devices costing around £10,000. Domestic scanners such as mine are much cheaper but less reliable. However, they produce a compressed high-definition digital file where each frame can be closely examined. This is particularly helpful with rollers, as small details in the frame become detectable, presenting further clues. Wearing cotton gloves, I mount *Chez M. Pirgeon* onto the scanner. Once the scanner is turned on, I adjust the frame to capture the full image. Interestingly, the framing of each roller differs, perhaps further evidence of the inconsistencies in processing and printing. Scanning begins, taking approximately two hours for a 200-foot roller. Inconsistencies in the film can result in the scanner stalling, potentially damaging its motor. Therefore, the process has to be closely monitored. Fortunately, *Chez M. Pirgeon* scans smoothly with no stops and is automatically saved on the machine's storage card for transfer to a computer.

I load the scan into an editing programme and begin going through the digitised film. *Chez M. Pirgeon* opens with a handwritten title card. Early rollers tended to use such a technique before being replaced with title card systems by 1967, yet another indication of its era. The high-definition scan highlights the softness of the print, implying this may not have been duplicated from the negative, but a lower generation source. Because of this, it is difficult to make out the title of the film. The hard-written card appears to read '*Chez M. Pirgeon*'. I send a screenshot of the card to a native French speaker, who translates it as *Mr – or Mrs – Pirgeon's House*. The opening scenes of rollers regularly feature print damage, and this is evident in *Chez M. Pirgeon*. Scratches and other imperfections dance across the black and white picture, traces of previous owners running the film through a project. A long shot shows a brunette female sitting on a living room sofa. There also looks to be some chemical damage present in the source, as I could not see or feel any imperfections in the print I scanned. Might this be evidence of its clandestine roots and an error in processing, such as a blister resulting from an incorrect chemical solution or are they drying spots? The brunette female leaves the sofa and the living room to answer the front door.

<INSERT FIGURE 2>

Figure 2. *Chez M. Pirgeon's* processing errors? Author's personal collection.

A blonde female is at the door. In a medium shot, the blonde hands the brunette a card; they both study it. The film cuts to a close up of the blonde's smiling face, demonstrating that the filmmaker has, at least, some basic understanding of film technique. The camera pans to a close of the brunette, gesturing to the blonde to enter the house. It now cuts to the living room, with a medium shot of the blonde walking into the living room, looking around. The camera follows her as she removes her coat and sits next to the brunette. They begin to look at a series of Soho Postcards. Roller makers often took photographs during production. These would be printed and sold in packs of five as 'Soho Postcards' in Soho's bookshops. Enterprising producers extended their range of artefacts to make typescripts, known in the trade as 'Soho Bibles' (Wickstead 2020). The film cuts to a close up of the blonde examining them as she holds them for the camera to capture; the softness of the print makes it difficult to make out the content. However, it is clear that they are hardcore photographs. After giving back the photos to the brunette, the film cuts to a medium shot of both women standing up.



The brunette lifts up the blonde's skirt, revealing stockings, suspenders and underwear. The blonde twirls as the brunette inspects her, then leaves the room.

Shortly after, a male and another female wearing a headscarf enter the room. The male hands the brunette what appears to be a payment, which she places in her bra. After two awkward edits, the couple exit the living room, cutting again to a low angle shot of them walking up the stairs as the man gropes her behind. They kiss and embrace on the landing, and the film cuts back to a medium/long shot of the brunette sitting on the sofa, looking at the Soho Postcards. It cuts to a close up of her knees, where her hand seems to be teasing herself, then the camera pans to a close up of her face. Cutting to a medium/long shot, she answers the living room door to a different male and, again, they move to sit on the couch where he smokes while they look at Soho Postcards. At this point, I begin to wonder whether this is actually a roller, as there has been no 'action'. A 200-foot running timer equates to around 15 minutes at 18 frames per second. Because of this limited running time, roller producers usually had a brief, scene-setting exposition before introducing the sexual act. *Chez M. Pirgeon* differs.

The blonde re-enters the room, and the brunette introduces her to the new male. Once more, they sit on the sofa – the film begins to judder badly – and the brunette hands the male a cane. They stand up, and the male and blonde leave the lounge as the brunette directs them to a particular room. Again, the film cuts to a low angle shot, showing the man and the blonde walking up the stairs to the bedroom. As they arrive at the landing, there is another cut to a zoomed close-up of their smiling faces before cutting to a medium shot of them inside the room, kissing. Both briefly look to the camera, appearing to take instruction from the filmmaker. The camera watches them strip, focusing closely on the blonde's body. It cuts to them on the bed. She briefly masturbates him, then there are two awkwardly quick edits to close up of him giving her oral sex as they move to a 69 position, then another cut to a very brief shot of the man on his back with his legs in the air talking to the blonde. These poor edits might be indicative of an amateur or semi-professional producer. Another cut – the brunette enters the frame. Suddenly, a suited man quickly walks into shot. Might this be someone involved in the film's production? The brunette joins the couple, giving the man oral sex, and the film cuts to a close up to capture this moment. Abruptly, it cuts to a medium close up of the brunette undressing, and the middle-aged, bespectacled, suited man enters the frame from the left of the screen, operating what looks to be a Paillard Bolex 16mm camera.

<INSERT FIGURE 3>

Figure 3. The mysterious Paillard Bolex operator who makes an accidental appearance in *Chez M. Pirgeon*. Author's personal collection

Roller makers regularly used this camera. Mike Freeman preferred this device over others, as did Dutch pornographer Willem van Batenburg.<sup>8</sup> According to Barbara Turquier (2016: 156), the Swiss-made Paillard Bolex H16 appealed to 'filmmakers working outside mainstream cinema' who 'chose the Bolex for its robustness, reliability, relative inexpensiveness, and...for the range of aesthetic possibilities it allowed'. It offered many advantages over other cameras, being well made and reliable, light, usable in a range of filming conditions. A turret lens system gave three options that could be easily selected while filming. A drawback was that its hand-wound spring motor could only provide 30 seconds of

continuous filming before rewinding. Eventually, Bolex introduced a motor to eradicate this. The camera could only hold 50 or 100-feet of film, allowing four minutes to be captured. As most rollers used 400-feet of 16mm film, several reel changes were necessary. The Bolex and its operator appear in shot once again. A medium shot shows the brunette lightly caning the blonde woman's rear while she rides the male. The appearance of this mystery camera operator is significant as it suggests that this was a two-camera shoot. But why did the editor choose to leave this footage in and not discard it during editing? Was footage shot by this camera used in *Chez M. Pirgeon*, or was another film being made simultaneously? Still, the presence of this second camera operator suggests that roller makers were not lone operators.

After further close ups and medium shots of the performers having sex, the blonde introduces a British manufactured Pifco electric massager (McAlpine 2012: 150). Both females use it on their bodies. More close-ups and fast edits are used, but the image becomes difficult to make out due to sudden overblown contrast; perhaps another printing error? The obligatory cum shot is shown in close up, with the man ejaculating on the blonde's breasts. Then the massager is used by the blonde to stimulate her clitoris, followed by a medium shot of them laying on the bed. The two women have their legs in the air, while the man sitting in between them holds up a card showing the text 'FIN', and the film ends. Of the many rollers I have viewed, *Chez M. Pirgeon* is distinctive. It uses the tropes of hardcore pornography, such as close ups and the cum shot, yet it feels that the maker, or makers, of *Chez M. Pirgeon*, are seeking to achieve something akin to the cinematic form. This is evidenced by the innumerable edits and the unnecessarily long exposition, which is uncommon in rollers. On the one hand, it is a messy, disorganised film, but, on the other, it is an attempt to construct a narrative. The story is difficult to decipher, but the brunette is likely M. Pirgeon, the madam of a brothel. She recruits a blonde who has sex with a man; M. Pirgeon later joins. The purpose of the other couple is not clear, but they could be a previous visitor and another sex worker. Also significant is the appearance of Soho Postcards, suggesting that the maker of the film also produced these. This allowed such entrepreneurs to maximise the economic return from one shoot. Performers were usually hired for a set number of hours, therefore, producers looked to make the most of this time to increase their economic return, sometimes making more than one film.

Dating *Chez M. Pirgeon* is tricky. Film archivists can date certain film stocks, giving a rough estimate of when the film was distributed (Bolt-Wellens 2021). However, this may not be the same date as the film's production. Some rollers were reprinted later once initial stocks had been exhausted. Evan Phillips' label Climax is an example of this, re-releasing many of their older titles once he moved his enterprise from London to Denmark in 1969/1970 and had access to better facilities. It is also feasible to date a roller using clues obtained in the film. For instance, the dress and hairstyles of the performers, the interior design of the location and cars can offer hints. Items in the frame, such as record albums, newspapers and magazines, can also be identified via online search engines. I showed the film to Julian Marsh of the Erotic Film Society, who offered the following observation: 'I'm going off the decor - like my grandparents' council house as I remember it from the early to mid-1960s...Still got that post-war utility furniture and decoration rather than the advent of modern style, which takes a hold from 1963 or 1964, I think'.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that *Chez M. Pirgeon* is a very early example of a commercially produced British hardcore film originating from the early 1960s.

## Conclusion

<INSERT FIGURE 4>

Figure 4. Title cards from *Chez M. Pirgeon*, *Hotel Sexi*, *La Dolce Vita* and *Lavabora*.  
Author's personal collection

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how an object-based material culture approach can be beneficial when analysing illicit produced media, specifically an 8mm pornographic film titled *Chez M. Pirgeon*. With later branded rollers, it is possible to obtain a wider sample of their output to reach further conclusions on their clandestine births. However, it is trickier with unbranded rollers like *Chez M. Pirgeon* as it can be difficult to identify films from the same maker, and their scarcity makes them hard to obtain. With *Chez M. Pirgeon*, there was an element of serendipity, as I quickly realised that the title card of another roller in the same package – *Lavabora* – had the same style of handwriting and a similar European sounding title. *Lavabora* – Spanish for ‘sink’ – features two males and a female having group sex and is confined to one room. Compared with *Chez M. Pirgeon*, the camera is steadier, and the edits are smoother, but image is equally soft, hinting at similar processing. This time, there is no drawn-out exposition; the performers are already on a sofa, engaging in foreplay. Like *Chez M. Pirgeon*, one of the men ejaculates onto the breasts of the female, perhaps the director's preferred cum shot? *Lavabora* seems to be a later effort from the same maker, or makers, showing an evolution in skill and an attempt to make a tighter film.

By coincidence, I purchased another unbranded roller with a similar handwritten title card several months before. This happened to be in poor condition, having multiple repairs from previous owners, signifying that it was well used. Again, the same distinctive writing appears on a piece of paper stuck to the wall above a bed where a couple sleep. *Hotel Sexi* is more similar in style to *Lavabora*. It takes place in one location, possibly a bedroom in the same house where *Chez M. Pirgeon* was filmed and, like *Lavabora*, has no elaborate exposition. ‘Mrs Pirgeon’ appears as the third female, again evidencing the link between the two titles. Once more, the print is soft, possibly a result of poor duplication. The Pifco massager reappears, and, as with the other two films, the male ejaculates on the breasts of the female; evidently the maker's signature trope.

Weeks later, I obtained a roller with the title *La Dolce Vita* from eBay. The listing had several screenshots of the film, including the title card, which showed the now-familiar handwriting style. Evidently made by the same team as the other films discussed in this chapter, *La Dolce Vita* again features ‘M. Pirgeon’ and the blonde female from *Chez M. Pirgeon*. It has a similar sounding foreign title, but explicitly references the Italian movie *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini 1960), hinting to the early 1960s as a probable production date. The print has greater clarity than the previous titles, lacking softness and showing better contrast, implying improved printing. However, the print is mirrored, suggesting an error in the duplication process with the master being mounted incorrectly. A diagonal black line appears halfway through, revealing yet another mistake during developing or printing. The filmmakers again use one location – a living room – and there is no lengthy exposition. Immediately, five performers – three females and two males – are shown frolicking on a sofa, participating in an orgy. *La Dolce Vita* shows a shift to a cinema vérité style, although the edits are more careful than *Chez M. Pirgeon*, and the camera moves steadily and slowly.

Contrasting with the other three rollers, kinkier sex acts are shown. One of the female performers has her hands tied with rope, a strap-on dildo makes an appearance, the Pifco massager is again used, and another female performer urinates into a bowl. In a break in routine, two males ejaculate on the backs of the females rather than their breasts.

As Heather Waldroup (2020: 17) observes, artefacts from the past ‘tell us things if we are willing to listen (and look, and touch)’. My physical engagement with *Chez M. Pirgeon* and a brief consideration of *Hotel Sexi*, *La Dolce Vita* and *Lavabora* demonstrates how such orphaned films carry traces of their illicit past. Whether it be an odour, markings on the film or the content itself, an object-based, material culture approach can broaden our understanding of how such marginal media artefacts are produced, distributed and, though it has not been the primary focus of this chapter, received. However, as with Waldroup’s (2020) analysis of erotic photographs and Wickstead’s (2020) study of Soho Bibles, there are always ‘varying degrees of unknowing’ when attempting to decipher such materials, making them ‘intriguing puzzles’ (Waldroup 2020: 17). For instance, the question of who made these specific films remains unanswerable, although there are likely candidates.

*Hotel Sexi* and *La Dolce Vita* offer further clues to when these rollers were made. Both films were printed on ‘S Geveart Belgium’ stock. According to Camille Bolt-Wellens (2021), Geveart Belgium merged with the film company Agfa in 1964, becoming Agfa-Geveart. This indicates that S Geveart Belgium stock was pre-1964, making Julian Marsh’s estimate 1963-64 a reasonable one and firmly placing these in the unbranded period of rollers. Active pornographers during this period were Ivor Cook, Ken’ Skinny’ Taylor, Leonard Thorpe and ‘Derek’. ‘Derek’, a roller producer I briefly interviewed in 2019, claimed to have shot his films on 8mm rather than 16mm, meaning that he can be discounted. It is highly plausible that *Chez M. Pirgeon*, *Hotel Sexi*, *La Dolce Vita* and *Lavabora* are the work of an unknown filmmaker, someone who was part of a team and honing their craft, but having difficulty processing and printing their films. Yet, *Chez M. Pirgeon* also indicates that the filmmaker was producing Soho Postcards. The Kinsey Institute’s listing of *Lavabora* implies that they also made Soho Bibles, pointing towards a producer heavily involved in Soho’s alternative economy of hardcore pornography, creating a range of illicit commodities. This is consistent with Ivor Cook and Ken’ Skinny’ Taylor, who were known pornography entrepreneurs in the early 1960s.

While it may not be possible to determine who produced these rollers, I have attempted to show the value of taking an object-based material culture approach to study illicitly produced hardcore pornography. For Gorfinkel (2018: 152), ‘such close case studies can open out onto larger questions of the materiality of the film object and the film experience’, but also highlight how attention to illicit films is vital to understanding ‘cinema in its totality’. The challenge here is the lack of formal archives preserving rollers, particularly in Britain. The largest collection of rollers can be found at the Kinsey Institute in Indiana, USA, where at least 367 individual titles were donated by a private collector (Slade 1984: 161); the British Film Institute hold none. Through the Kinsey Institute’s catalogue, Di Lauro and Rabkin’s (1976) filmography, the *Adult Loop Database*<sup>10</sup>, access to private collections and my own attempt to construct an archive, I have identified over 1000 hardcore rollers made between the years of 1960 and 1980 in Britain (Carter 2022). I expect that there were more, but many will have been lost to time. Analysing a larger sample of these objects, particularly from their early, unbranded period, may tell us more about how these films were produced and circulated. Furthermore, examining other illicit pornographic materials from the same period,

such as Soho Bibles and Soho Postcards alongside rollers, might likely reveal how these commodities would inter-relate and crossover. Could specific styles or tropes present in these texts unearth more about their faceless producers? Without archives of these illicit materials, we will never know.

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<sup>1</sup> Various interviews with 'Keith' conducted on 12 September, 2019 and 18 January 2021.

<sup>2</sup> An article in the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* (8 August, 1937) speaks of 'illegal movie clubs' showing 'smuggled uncensored film'. It tells of how smugglers evade customs, and how audience of such show is made up of the 'curious' or 'perverts' who 'enjoy the disgusting entertainment'. They note how profitable these shows are and how the police are attempting to shut them down. Curiously, the article also alludes to the existence of 'secret studios' making pornographic films in England. It is difficult to determine the content of the films being shown in these 'secret cinemas', but the article highlights that this was a longstanding practice in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5809, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

<sup>4</sup> See The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5773, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

<sup>5</sup> All information relating to Mike Freeman is taken from interviews conducted between 3 and 6 April 2016, and the first volume of his autobiography (Freeman 2011).

<sup>6</sup> 'Derek', interviewed on the 22 February 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Pritchard, interviewed on 13 December 2019 and 14 April 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Willem van Batenburg, interviewed on 13 October 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Marsh, interviewed on 24 January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> <https://adultloopdb.nl/>