

**The Secret History:
Porn Archives, ‘Personal’ Collections and British Universities**

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This article represents some initial thoughts and personal experiences of working with a porn archive and emerges from a paper delivered at the *1984: Where Are We Now? Conference* at the University of Sunderland’s London campus, April 23–24, 2014. The article is also situated within the broader context of the so-called ‘archival turn’ and the publication, at the end of 2014, of Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky and David Squires’ edited collection *Porn Archives*. I want to talk very briefly about why archives of pornography might matter and the problems associated with these kinds of collections for institutions, for archivists and for scholarship, especially in British universities. In doing this I want to think about the kind of history, evidenced in cultural artefacts and practices, that is documented and preserved and the kind of history that is either forgotten, ignored or erased altogether and why that might be. I am not making any grand claims; instead I wish to alert readers to the existence of an important ‘personal’ collection of pornography and highlight some of the issues at stake in working with this kind of material. The complete absence of any institutionally hosted porn archives in the United Kingdom has only recently become a preoccupation for me and that is entirely down to circumstances. Recently, Sharif Mowlabocus, Oliver Carter and myself have acquired a sizeable personal collection that belonged to a deceased and now rather obscure figure from the UK anticensorship movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and we found ourselves trying to work out what to do with what we have found and, first and foremost, trying to find a secure home for a collection of sexual explicit materials. It has become apparent very quickly to me and my colleagues that an archive of this kind throws up all sorts of issues ranging from institutionalized concerns about the potential for adverse publicity to personal concerns about reputation and the legitimacy of the material for which we have become custodians. As Tim Dean cautions, ‘porn archives, ostensibly authorizing the legitimacy of the study of pornography, may simultaneously undermine the authority of the archive’ (2014, 5).

The collection we have acquired, and the conditions under which it was secured, also raise personal privacy issues that mean I will not name the individual collector in this paper. I am censoring myself here, primarily because of the uncertain status of the material we now possess and also because I am conscious that there may be sensitivities around disclosure in this case. Given that this is the porn archive of an anti-censorship campaigner, the irony of this decision is not lost on me.

The Collector

The owner of the archive was a successful and well-connected actor who worked on many of the major television shows of the 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1970s, directly in response to the activities of Mary Whitehouse and her *Viewers and Listeners Association*, he set up his own anti-censorship campaign group. Especially interested in questions of sexual freedom and access to pornography, he concocted innumerable stunts to attract media attention and engaged in a sustained letter-writing campaign to national newspapers, the BBC, MPs, members of the cabinet (including several Prime Ministers) and even the Royal Family, which continued to the end of his life. He carefully preserved all of his correspondence, press cuttings and minutes relating to his activities. In addition he was also a prodigious collector of theatrical ephemera, memorabilia, and of pornography, and had by his death amassed a sizeable personal archive of materials including all of the minutes and paperwork relating to his campaigning and almost every letter he ever wrote.

Most of the many papers relating to his campaigning work have been donated to a British university where they are now archived, and a second London university has a small collection of some of his pamphlets amongst their holdings. There exists then a formal archiving of the documents relating to this man's public activities and public life; his anti-censorship campaigning capturing and documenting an important moment in public life in the United Kingdom. In the process of archiving, inevitably decisions are made about the kind of material that is preserved and what is left behind. In short, the 'public' is preserved and (as in this case) the private is often lost or forgotten. The collection that I and my colleagues have acquired is exactly the sort that disappears from public view, not least because it was not meant for public consumption, and it is this precariousness that in many ways makes this material of value and so important to preserve.

The Collection

The heart of the collection consists of just over 1200 numbered VHS tapes of commercially available ‘mainstream’ gay porn. The majority of the tapes seem to have been collected during the early to late 1990s. In terms of the volume of material alone this is clearly a significant find and a major British collection of turn-of-the-century gay video porn. In many respects it constitutes something akin to a time capsule, recording a specific moment in the history of UK regulation around the distribution and possession of porn. This is porn collected in a pre-internet world in which a circuitous route had to be navigated to acquire this kind of material via the somewhat ‘grey’ economies of the Soho sex shop and mail-order companies based in Europe. More than just a sizeable volume of 1990s gay porn (as if that was not enough), the collection offers insights into collecting practices, the scope and nature of material that was available to porn consumers in the United Kingdom during this period, the format in which such material was acquired, and the formal and textual qualities of the texts themselves. At a personal level the collection is especially interesting to me not least because it was amassed at the same time as I began my own doctoral research into gay porn, and inevitably the collector was building up his archive using some of the same strategies that I had to deploy; buying porn ‘under the counter’ from sex shops, mail-order purchases with the attendant worry that videos might be seized en route, or visits to Amsterdam. Whilst the strategies may well have been similar, the resources available to each of us could not have been more different. Based on my own recollections of the costs involved for an impoverished research student conducting doctoral research into gay porn in a UK university (VHS tapes purchased via mail order tended to be between £20 and £25 each), this extensive collection must have been amassed by a man of some considerable means. The videos are not rarities, for the most part consisting of a wide range of releases from the key American and European production companies of the period. There is, however, one exception, a true collector’s item in the archive, and that is the Videx release *What a Gay Day* (Freeman 1979), a video that has been hyperbolically described by its director and notorious UK porn impresario Mike Freeman as the ‘first UK gay porn video’.

The VHS collection is accompanied by a meticulously maintained, hand-written

catalogue of the contents of the tapes. The catalogue provides details about video titles, directors and performers, aspect ratios, what appears to be a personal ratings system (based on stars awarded to preferred titles) and a coding system that provides instructions for the optimum television settings (contrast, colour, balance, and so on) for the best picture quality for each tape. Almost one-half of the tapes are catalogued in this way, which means that an equally large proportion of the collection is not. To complicate matters further, a proportion of material that is catalogued is missing. So we have a partially catalogued collection and a very large number of tapes for which, whilst numbered, their contents are as yet unknown.

As an archive of gay pornographic representation during this period, as a slice of social history, and as a documentation of a collecting practice, the collection is clearly of immense value. As Marcel Barriault (2009, 220) has suggested, porn is an important site of ‘documentary heritage’ for the gay community, and David Squires suggests that such an archive can begin to ‘provide a unique space in which we can begin to understand the material articulations and contestations that reorder how various social fields produce sexual knowledge’ (2014, 96).

Bonus Extras

In addition to the VHS collection we have discovered a much smaller cache (around 100) of commercially purchased Super 8 films dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. These are stag films, including loops from Colt and Falcon amongst others, in variable states of repair. Some of them appear to have never been viewed and some to have been viewed many times.

Although we had initially thought that the VHS collection was going to be the most fascinating part of the archive, I think we have all variously become intrigued by the sizeable additional collection of random, unlisted, Super 8 home movies from the 1960s and 1970s that we have uncovered. These films provide the most tantalizing and fleeting glimpses into the life of the collector, ranging from the conventional (even mundane) recording of friends’ weddings to rather more revealing films of friends rowing on the Serpentine or sunbathing, from amateur football matches to experiments with filming of the self in various states of dress (and undress). These short silent films, capturing memories of beautiful days and beautiful boys and

experiments with exhibitionism, offer up another and very much more intimate personal archive of fantasy and desire.

Conclusion

This collection constitutes a personal archive that has significant value for researchers in the field but it also poses a set of challenges both practical and ethical. Cataloguing, storing and making this material accessible to scholars are primary concerns. The sheer volume of material that we have uncovered means that it will take a considerable amount of time to create an accurate and complete catalogue of the contents of the archive. We are conscious that finding the resources and means to support this kind of work will not be easy. Ethically, the archive also presents a dilemma. This was a private collection amassed by a man who chose for very obvious reasons to keep it a secret. The question of consent and the need to respect and maintain the confidentiality of the collector even after his death looms large over the collection, and the extent to which it is appropriate to reveal his identity is a subject that has preoccupied all of us.

By accident as much as design we have acquired a major and important research resource and one that does not exist (as far as we know) in any university in the United Kingdom at present. There are of course major university archives of sexual representation elsewhere in the world that have been built up over time (notably the Kinsey Institute, Cornell's Human Sexuality Collection and Toronto's Sexual Representation Collection). There is therefore surely a case to be made for a British university holding an archive of sexual representation, especially one created by a man who devoted his time and energies to addressing issues around censorship of the sexually explicit in the United Kingdom?

The risk-averse culture of institutional politics, especially within higher education, in the United Kingdom means that material which might create the potential for adverse publicity is inevitably seen as a threat. Whilst our collective experience of talking about this collection has been that academics across a wide spectrum of British and European universities have responded with great interest and enthusiasm to the material and its potential, the extent to which a UK university will be prepared to publicly host the archive is less certain. As Linda Williams (2014) argued in the first

edition of Porn Studies, archives are essential for the establishment and development of any field of study and it is our hope that we will soon find a home for this important and all too rare research resource.

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