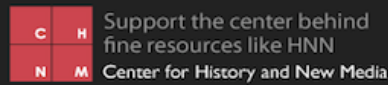


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Doug Ireland: Review of Jeffrey Escoffier's Bigger Than Life

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Why would a noted gay intellectual devote his time to a history of the queer porn industry? Because, as Jeffrey Escoffier demonstrates in his fascinating account of this billion dollar business, same-sex pornography has not only been a window on changing sexual styles and identities but has helped to shape them.

As Escoffier writes in "Bigger Than Life," just published, "The sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies would never have taken place without a series of extended legal and political battles over obscenity and pornography." Escoffier chronicles how a series of "struggles over free speech and the First Amendment that were also business ventures... helped to create a public space where it was permissible not only to discuss patterns of sexual behavior but also to portray sexuality honestly and bluntly in fiction, on the stage, and in movies."

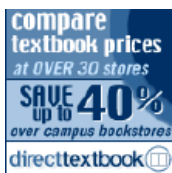
Escoffier has been both a product of that sexual revolution and a significant intellectual force within it. As the first president of Philadelphia's Gay Activists Alliance in 1970, he co-founded and edited The Gay Alternative, a pioneering journal of gay culture and politics and one of the skein of influential, early queer publications that helped mold and spread gay liberation's first wave. When he moved to San Francisco in 1977, he helped to found the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, and during the '80s he was the executive editor of Socialist Review, a smart, non-sectarian New Left journal, run by a San Francisco-based collective, that first brought to national prominence a raft of notable queer writers and artists like the historian Alan Berube (author of the groundbreaking "Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II"), the lesbian feminist Amber Hollibaugh (who went on to become senior strategist at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and is today a leading authority on the problems facing LGBT seniors), and Debra Chasnoff (the Academy Award-winning filmmaker of "It's Elementary" and other gay-themed documentaries).

Escoffier went on to found Out/Look, the national lesbian and gay quarterly, and while there he launched the OutWrite Lesbian and Gay Writers Conferences, held throughout the '90s, which were undoubtedly the largest gatherings of LGBT writers in history. Of his five previous books, his seminal 1998 work "American Homo: Community and Perversity" (University of California Press), which I regularly recommend to budding gay activists, remains an important theoretical work to this day.

Now, with "Bigger Than Life," Escoffier shows how "pornography created space for increased experimentation with a whole range of sexualities not organized around procreation and reproduction." For gays, film pornography contributed mightily to what the film critic Richard Dyer has labeled the "education of desire." We must not forget that until 1962, as Escoffier notes, "homosexual materials, even those without any sexual content, were considered obscene by

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definition. The emergence of gay hardcore films provided explicit representations of gay sexual behavior not otherwise available... and the availability of such images helped to affirm the nascent gay identity."

The precursors of hardcore gay films were the "beefcake" magazines and film loops pioneered from the late '40s on by the likes of Bob Mizer and his American Models Guild, whose photographs showed well-oiled muscular youths wearing discreet posing straps over their genitals in various homoerotic attitudes. (Thom Fitzgerald's 1999 docudrama "Beefcake," which airs regularly on the Here! cable TV network, brings wit to the story of Mizer and those not altogether innocent early days of male nudity.)

When Clark Pollak, the editor of the beefcake magazine Drum, was arrested on an obscenity charge in 1966 for having broken the code by publishing full frontal male nude photographs in a deliberate provocation, the American Civil Liberties Union took the case all the way to the US Supreme Court — which eventually ruled that the nude male body is not obscene. The world-famous photographer Robert Mapplethorpe drew his inspiration from beefcake photos.

In 1963, Kenneth Anger's homoerotic classic "Scorpio Rising," an homage to the macho rites of a motorcycle gang, and Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures," a campy transvestite extravaganza, inspired a young Andy Warhol to begin making sexually charged films like "Kiss," "Blowjob," "My Hustler," and eventually 1968's "Flesh," the first American film to feature full-frontal male nudity, starring former Mizer model Joe Dallasandro.

Well before the sexual revolution, the Supreme Court, in 1948, made another important contribution to the birth of gay film pornography, with a decision involving Paramount that forced the Hollywood studios to divest themselves of their theater chains. The fulgurant rise of television in the '50s emptied the movie houses of their customers, and many of those theaters remained open only by showing soft-porn hetero "sexploitation" films.

But it wasn't until the owners of the Park Theater in Los Angeles, Shan Sayles and Monroe Boehler, decided in 1968 that there was an untapped gay market that a commercial movie house began regularly showing films to appeal to male queers. The paucity of available material, largely strung-together loops produced by beefcake photographers and filmmakers, led Sayles and Boehler to launch their own production company, Signature Films, making Southern California the historic epicenter of the emerging gay porn industry.

The viewing public soon wearied of the soft-core Boehler-Sayles flix, like the vanilla romances directed by Pat Rocco, and since there were already some 400 movie houses around the country showing hetero hardcore porn by 1969, Signature Films made the move into gay hardcore. Boehler later split to form Jaguar Productions, which gave William Higgins, the legendary director of "surfer porn" featuring California blond boys, the chance to make his first hardcore film.

One night in 1970, Broadway theater director and choreographer Wakefield Poole, his boyfriend, and the composer and lyricist of the show they were all working on decided to visit the Park-Miller, the New York outpost of Sayles' chain of gay porn theaters. "Poole's companions reacted to the dreary, unerotic plot by laughing or falling asleep as the soundtrack blared an orchestrated rendition of 'June is Busting Out All Over' from the musical 'Carousel.'"

Poole — a former dancer with the Ballets Russes who'd choreographed Broadway musicals for the likes of Noel Coward, Marlene Dietrich, Liza Minnelli, and Stephen Sondheim — decided he could do better. The result was 1972's "Boys in the Sand," a tasteful gay hardcore film set in Fire Island and starring an unemployed Peekskill high school teacher, waiter, and part-time hustler, Cal Culver, who took the nom-de-porn Casey Donovan. Distributed nationally by Sayles' company, "Boys in the Sand" was previewed by Variety and became the first gay hardcore film permitted to advertise in the New York Times. Poole's film was a smash hit with critics and viewers, and stayed on Variety's list of the top 50 best-grossing films for three months, making Donovan the first gay porn superstar. His photo graced the cover of the closeted gay show biz magazine After Dark, thus landing him a role in a

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straight film by noted sexploitation director Radley Metzger.

That same year, Fred Halsted, the owner of a chain of wholesale nurseries who'd never seen a gay pornographic film, decided to make an "autobiographical" movie exploring his fascination with sadism and starring himself. Entitled "L.A. Plays Itself," Halsted's film introduced "fisting" to the American public as a form of sexual play, was a huge commercial and critical success, and was selected by New York's Museum of Modern Art for its permanent film collection.

The Poole and Halsted films ushered in the era of "porn chic" a full year before the hetero porn smash "Deep Throat" lent a new word to the political lexicon in the Watergate scandal.

By the 1980s, gay porn was big business. Chuck Holmes, the founder of Falcon Studios, made so much money from porn that he became a wealthy real estate mogul, a player in Democratic Party politics, and bought himself a seat on the board of the Human Rights Campaign. At his death from AIDS in 2000, his will turned over Falcon Studios and all its income to a foundation named after him which financed gay and political causes.

AIDS fueled a quantum leap in the profitability of hardcore gay porn, for, as Escoffier writes, "As the AIDS epidemic devastated the lives of gay men, more gay men were choosing to stay at home and watch pornography than go out to cruise for sex."

AIDS also generated controversy in the porn industry, especially about the use of condoms on-screen. Some argued that the illusion of bareback sex was necessary to keep customers satisfied and away from promiscuity. Others, including many HIV-positive gay porn stars like Al Parker and Mike Henson, insisted that pornography had a mission to eroticize condom use as an integral and necessary part of sexual play, and became crusaders for safe sex. Even AIDS-fighting groups like the Gay Men's Health Crisis made porn films to promote safe sex. By the '90s, Escoffier says, nearly all gay porn producers prescribed the use of condoms. The portion of Escoffier's book devoted to porn in the age of AIDS is gripping and insightful — and the list of porn stars who died of AIDS is quite long.

Today, Escoffier writes, "after slightly more than 40 years the gay porn industry is in the midst of a major transformation — it lives almost entirely in cyberspace." In recognition of this fact, Escoffier — in partnership with the Adult Entertainment Business Network, the world's largest supplier of adult video on demand — has set up a web site named after his book at biggerthanlife-thebook.com/, where one can purchase viewing time to see many of the classic porn films he writes about in his book.

When asked if he thought sex was dirty, Woody Allen famously quipped, "Yes, if it's done right!" Escoffier's definitive social history of gay porn on film and video is not only absorbing, entertaining, and gossipy, with just the right amount of dirt and dish, but analytical. "Bigger Than Life" is thus a valuable contribution to our understanding of changing sexual mores and gay porn's influence on them.

It's worth noting that a new survey out just this week shows that a majority of kids are now having sex by the age of 13. With gay porn today so widely accessible online to these kids, and with the rampantly urgent demand for bareback porn and proliferation of bareback gay videos, the gay porn industry needs to ask itself what kind of sexual practices it is teaching these young people exploring their sexuality. HIV infection rates are again surging, especially among the young, but safe sex messages, once so prevalent in gay porn videos, have all but disappeared. Isn't it time for the gay porn industry to bring them back?

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