

1 Panorams, Motels, and Pirates

The Origins of Adult Video

The whole videocassette business was basically founded by pirates and pornographers.

David F. Friedman, quoted in David Chute, “Wages of Sin, II,”
Film Comment (1986)

The point of a porno film is to turn you on, and a theater isn’t the best place for that. The ideal context is the home.

Al Goldstein, quoted in Tony Schwartz, “The TV Pornography Boom,”
New York Times (1981)

Historians often point to December 7, 1977, as the moment when the home video rental industry was born.¹ That day, in the *Los Angeles Times*, local entrepreneur George Atkinson placed an advertisement that might have seemed innocuous but would eventually shake the entertainment landscape. “VIDEO CASSETTE RENTALS,” the copy read, in bold all-capital letters (figure 6). “Betamax ½” or ¾” formats. Full Length, Color-Sound Features. Low Rental Cost! Call or write for free catalog.”² Atkinson’s action was groundbreaking in that he sensed a significant business opportunity to rent rather than sell videotapes to the home market; before that moment, no one else had made the leap.³ Atkinson thus invented the home video rental store, and, in less than two years, he grew that simple idea into forty-two affiliated locations, all with the straightforward and simple “Video Cassette Rentals” name on their doors. They rented the handful of then-available tapes for an exorbitant \$10 per day (plus either a \$50 annual or \$100 lifetime membership).⁴ In September 1979, he changed the name to Video Station and initiated a full-blown franchising strategy, eventually presiding over an empire of more than six hundred affiliated stores.⁵ When he died, on March 3, 2005, his lengthy obituary appeared nationwide, calling him a “pioneer in the movie video rental industry” and crediting him with creating an industry that, by that point, reached well beyond his own affiliates,



Figure 6. George Atkinson's simple—but monumentally important—advertisement for video rentals. *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1977, 8.

climbing past twenty-four thousand total video stores, 2.6 billion movie rentals per year, and \$8 billion in annual revenue.⁶

The Atkinson mythology paints a tidy teleological portrait emphasizing particular paradigms: a small-business owner with a creative, risky, and groundbreaking idea creates a new venture that explodes into popular and widespread success, eventually resulting in an industry that lives on far beyond the original concept. Atkinson's story, now cemented in a home video history that claims him as the "father" of video rental, reveals something beyond the impulse, however, to implant capitalist mythologies into stories of new technologies; it also reveals the cultural (and historiographic) desire to erase pornography from the origins of home video. No novice, Atkinson was already very familiar with both video and the *Los Angeles Times* advertising department, for it was there, starting in June 1975, that he advertised pornography on cassettes for rent to customers in Los Angeles. Thus he was an active part of an underground and questionably legal economy that laid the foundation for the transition of the adult film industry from celluloid to home video.

While it is historically accurate to say that adult video became available in late 1977 and that shot-on-video titles were produced as early as 1979, such definitions are appropriate only within a capitalist paradigm in which

an “official” and, indeed, legal marketplace determines the historical borders of a technology and accompanying economy. Here I shift that definition to confront a group of overlooked historical realities: pornography was available on a variety of cassette formats prior to 1977; adult films were a critical part of the formation of the home video rental industry; and, finally, many of the same people (such as Atkinson) who have been credited with building the mainstream home video industry were also veterans of the pornography trade. Ultimately, the history of home video is the history of adult video.

My focus in this chapter is the pre- and early history of adult video, during which the majority of the industry was still producing content on celluloid. The public space of the adult movie theater still dominated the mid-1970s, and theater owners were still seeing healthy profits at the end of the decade. In 1978, the Adult Film Association of America reported that 780 theaters played adult films to 2.5 million weekly attendees, bringing in \$450 million in ticket sales.⁷ The adult film business model in the 1970s mirrored that of mainstream Hollywood: production on celluloid and exhibition in large rooms on large screens in front of audiences admitted after buying tickets. Video decimated that model. The industry harnessed the technological capability of home video to alter its production, distribution, and exhibition practices and strategies in order to circumvent various regulatory efforts; ironically, the ways in which it did so reinforced and reproduced many of those same efforts even as it claimed to be upending them. Furthermore, as will become clear, technological steps forward were met with equal regulatory responses, always seeking to contain pleasure. This chapter traces the early history of the industry’s change, the slow period in which only a handful of people were willing to gamble (often illegally or on the margins of legality) on the new medium, and the gradual industrial turn toward recognizing video’s massive economic potential. Indeed, the move toward privacy was far less cultural than capitalist; while the industry certainly recognized the political power of taking its products away from public spaces, it was primarily interested in the economic boost that move could deliver. As is common in this history, the process started with a machine that initially had nothing to do with pornography.

PRIVACY IN PUBLIC: THE ROOTS OF ADULT VIDEO

On February 21, 1940, the Mills Novelty Company of Chicago, the nation’s largest manufacturer of slot machines, signed a deal with the Globe Production Company to form Soundies Distribution Corporation.⁸ Globe,

founded in 1939 by James Roosevelt (eldest son of President Franklin Roosevelt), would produce three-minute short musical films for a new machine, called the Panoram and manufactured by Mills, which would be leased to bars, cafés, and drugstores.⁹ The *New York Times* described the equipment: “The machine resembles a phonograph on a slot-machine principle, but it has in the front a screen on which the pictures will be projected.”¹⁰ Eight or nine 16mm films, printed in reverse for rear projection, were fitted onto a large reel and played continuously. Viewers had no choice in their selection, either watching the film the loop happened to be playing or waiting until their desired number came back around. “Soundies” were an overt attempt to supplant the highly profitable jukebox industry by upgrading its technology and including moving images along with music. The Panoram was hardly the only such machine on the market, but it was by far the most capitalized, publicized, and ready for mass production, and it quickly went out across the country, filling up various locales with short musical numbers by artists such as Spike Jones, Jimmy Dorsey, Louis Jordan, and Nat King Cole.¹¹

Even before it was officially unveiled on October 20, 1940, a bar owner in Hollywood, California, used a Panoram during an test exhibition to show adult material, proving Joseph Slade’s assertion that “whenever one person invents a technology, another person will invent a sexual use for it.”¹² A reporter invited to the exhibition, which took place in April 1940, described one film as a “strip tease number” and noted that it would be “unlikely that [it] would be given the Hays propriety seal.”¹³ Globe, the only producer of Soundies at the time, would not have made the film, so it is clear that the unnamed proprietor understood immediately that locally procured adult material had tremendous revenue potential. The problem was privacy: the Panoram, essentially a large television-like device, was available for anyone and everyone in the venue to see and enjoy rather than for the use of a single customer. The “strip tease number” was more like a public performance, with the screen supplanting the stage. While it was an example of mediated eroticism, it was hardly private.

That started to change by late 1943. George Ponser, a New Jersey-based regional distributor of novelty machines and Soundies, began selling conversion units in November that turned the Panoram into the “Solo-Vue,” allowing only the person inserting a coin to see the film (but still letting everyone within range hear the music).¹⁴ An advertisement by Ponser in *Billboard* graphically illustrates the capability of the Solo-Vue modification to bring a modicum of privacy to the otherwise public exhibition of erotic material on the Panoram; additionally, it underlines the gendered politics



ARCADE OWNERS!!!

HAVE YOU SEEN THE SENSATIONAL

SOLO-VUE?

Operators who visited the conference in Chicago were most favorably impressed with the highly successful conversion of Panoram to SOLO-VUE.

By this conversion . . . only the person who inserts the coin can see the picture . . . everyone present can hear the music. We have the assurance of Soundies Distributing Company regarding a practically unlimited supply of very intriguing film . . . especially designed and produced for SOLO-VUE . . . involving more than 1000 fascinating subjects.

PRICE ONLY \$495.00

$\frac{1}{3}$ Deposit, Balance C. O. D. or Sight Draft

Write for details . . . or visit our display room for demonstration.

GEORGE PONSER COMPANY

763 SOUTH 18TH STREET NEWARK, N. J.

Figure 7. George Ponser's Solo-Vue attachment to the Panoram: an early precursor to the privacy afforded later by home video. *Billboard*, November 27, 1943, 122.

surrounding sexual uses of the technology. In a drawing accompanying the copy, one man looks into the peephole now covering the Panoram screen while two other men stand by the machine (figure 7). One says, "Boy, that really must be something!" and the other laments, "Wish that guy would give me a chance."¹⁵ The tease in the ad of "something," coupled with the presence of men only, strongly suggests that the material on the screen must be sexually suggestive.¹⁶ Privacy, in the context of the advertisement, meant privacy for men to pursue sexual pleasure in an otherwise public space.

If Solo-Vue hinted at the Panoram's possibilities, the W.M. Nathanson company pushed the topic right out into the open. In January 1944, the company advertised its "Hollywood Peep Shows" conversion kit in *Billboard*, including a photograph of the finished product that illustrates its purpose.¹⁷ "For Art Students Only" reads the sign above the screen, which is partially blocked on each side by photographs of women posing in lingerie, leaving a small space through which to view the film. Even more

important, Nathanson offers an “ample supply of snappy films” to go with the kit, direct from “one of the largest companies in Hollywood.” What Ponser and Nathanson were actually selling, however, was neither groundbreaking nor new: the risqué peep-show loop had been a staple of the penny arcade since the 1890s, when enterprising parlor owners realized there was a great deal of money to be made in marketing sexually suggestive content on their Kinetoscopes and Mutoscopes, even when the actual content showed little more than women removing a few clothes and no actual nudity, let alone sex.¹⁸ Just like arcades at the turn of the century, converted Panorams offered films featuring women undressing and performing strip-teases or burlesque routines, certainly with more suggestive movements and less clothing than their predecessors did—but still no actual nudity. These modifications imply two otherwise silent conclusions: local Panoram operators surely had been modifying their own equipment prior to the introduction of mass-marketed conversions (thus suggesting a market), and there was plenty of adult material playing on the machines throughout the country to justify the need for such conversions.

Yet each advance toward making the public exhibition of erotic material more private brought with it a regulatory reaction rooted in the anxiety surrounding pleasure. The phenomenon of independently produced adult material on the Panoram had grown so large by April 1944 that the Soundies Distribution Corporation felt compelled to address it. General manager George Ulcigan, while outlining the company’s postwar strategy, noted: “Nothing will help the industry more than top pictures and, inversely, nothing can harm more than films that are bad technically or make use of off-color material.”¹⁹ He also claimed that all independent producers would have to adhere to a contract in which they agreed to abide by two conditions. First, they would have to follow the Motion Picture Production Code, the moral guidelines overseeing Hollywood film production that the studios had instituted as a form of self-regulation to avoid government interference.²⁰ Second, the producers would be required to gain approval from the local censorship boards then determining which films were suitable for public consumption. Both were hollow threats, given the independent production and distribution already occurring well outside the reach of official regulatory structures. Indeed, Soundies’ anxiety and efforts to control the content proved meaningless. By 1946, the B&B Novelty Company was blatantly advertising burlesque films for the Panoram in the pages of *Billboard*, another sign that the underground economy in such adult material was growing.²¹ What wasn’t booming, however, was the Soundies Distribution Corporation itself: beset from the

beginning by financial difficulties, the production of Soundies ended in late 1946, and the company stopped servicing the Panoram machines in 1947. But the machines had a robust, unplanned afterlife: by the early 1950s, the Panoram had become an adult film exhibition device.²²

That afterlife wasn't limited to content. In the early 1950s, an entrepreneur in Chicago hung curtains between peep-show machines, thus creating a further measure of privacy (and space for masturbation) that was surely replicated elsewhere.²³ Increased regulatory response to the changes was predictable and swift throughout the country. In 1950, police raided an arcade on Market Street in San Francisco, charging four people with "operating indecent peepshows." The police report stated that the films played on "a rebuilt type of the machine that Jimmy Roosevelt built," labeled "for art students only" and "no minors allowed." Reporters investigated and found 105 Panorams at five locations in San Francisco playing color films for a quarter; black-and-white films were a dime. Descriptions detail women performing various activities, all in a "complete state of undress." In some of these films, women perform stripteases, pose, undress, and brush their hair; in others, they "fish, practice archery, retire, get up, attend boarding school, roll dice, and take long walks."²⁴ The relatively tame, partially undressed routines of the past had given way to complete nudity, and there would be no going back.²⁵

The San Francisco raids were only the beginning. In 1952, Washington, D.C., police busted fourteen arcades; one employee was eventually found guilty of possessing indecent films with the intent to exhibit them.²⁶ Two years later, Seattle police arrested an operator for exhibiting indecent films on fifteen Panorams in his arcade.²⁷ In an underground economy not anxious for publicity, these police actions illuminate what was, by the 1950s, clearly a widespread and profitable industry based on a machine that had been completely repurposed. In the late 1950s, for example, Kirdy Stevens, who would later direct the monumentally successful theatrical feature *Taboo* (1980), opened a Panoram arcade on Main Street in Los Angeles and began showing his self-produced color nudie films.²⁸ Other Southern California producers included William H. Door, Joe Bonica, Vanity Films, and Standard Pictures Corporation, all of whom distributed to both the arcade and home markets. W. Merle Connell's Quality Studios even advertised films for the "peep or panorama."²⁹ With hardcore sex still relegated strictly to underground stag films, the public exhibition of adult material was, by the late 1950s, still very much about the display of female nudity rather than any type of sexual behavior, which was off-limits in the public space.³⁰

Change was happening quickly, however, and most visibly in the theater rather than the arcade. In mainstream public exhibition, the influx of nudist films such as *Garden of Eden* (1954, dir. Max Nosseck) had led to a great deal of public anxiety and tension surrounding the mediation of the female body. In 1957, the Court of Appeals of New York ruled, in *Excelsior v. Regents*, that nudity in and of itself (as shown in *Garden of Eden*) was not obscene.³¹ Capitalizing on the ruling, Russ Meyer released *The Immoral Mr. Teas* in 1959, a groundbreaking film that, as Eric Schaefer points out, did not justify the presentation of nudity through narrative, thus ending the classic exploitation era.³² More important, Meyer shifted the presentation of adult material from the space of the arcade to the space of the theater, which would eventually lead to the Golden Age just over a decade later.³³ But, I would argue, those particular changes in the proliferation, availability, tension, and legal action surrounding the presentation of female nudity onscreen must be regarded differently than the anxieties surrounding the Panorams of the 1940s and the rise of striptease, burlesque, and posing films across the bars, clubs, and pool halls of the United States. Those tensions, centering on the paradox of obtaining a measure of privacy within a public space, follow a different track than the model that would push for exhibition of pornography in a traditional theater setting, despite overlaps in production and distribution of content. It was the Panoram, not the theater, that most directly led to adult video. The modifications to the Panoram signaled the desire for the privacy that video would later bring, albeit with the challenge of enclosing the Panoram's screen within a public space.

The real turning point connecting the Panoram to adult video occurred in 1966, when New York jukebox distributor Martin Hodas stopped at a roadside gaming arcade south of Staten Island and watched a striptease film on a Panoram.³⁴ Hodas was already familiar with similar equipment, owning a few small machines that played cartoons or old Western movie clips, but he envisioned the combination of the Panoram and adult material on a grand scale throughout New York City. Hodas's idea was not unique; by the mid-1960s, machines playing similar content were already in operation in a group of arcades in Times Square as a minor novelty for tourists. The real challenge was to overcome the city's legal thickets, originally imposed in the 1950s, that prevented such machines and content from playing in the adult bookstores that populated 42nd Street.³⁵ Key to this expansion would be overcoming the hurdle of anxiety surrounding pleasure in public spaces; for Hodas, that meant constructing an efficient, sanctioned capitalist enterprise.

New York Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. and his administration had tolerated a limited number of the machines in Times Square but stringently kept them out of adult bookstores by threatening the few attempts to place them there with legal notices claiming a city license was required to exhibit films.³⁶ After John Lindsay's 1965 election, the limitations continued—and adult bookstore owners, wary of the costs and long odds, did not take the city to court after constant rejections of their license applications. Hodas, well aware of these difficulties, instructed his attorney, Charles Carreras, to find a way through the legal morass and either obtain licenses or locate loopholes. In mid-1967, Carreras broke through the bureaucratic wall, getting Hodas a letter from the chief of the Department of Licenses stating that no city license was required to “install in the New York City area a coin-operated machine that shows movies.”³⁷ Hodas wasted no time, immediately buying the entire inventory of loop films and twelve Panorams from the roadside arcade in New Jersey; afterward, however, most of the city's adult bookstore owners initially rejected Hodas's offer of a fifty-fifty split on all incoming revenues, with no lease payments, security deposits, or maintenance fees.³⁸ Hyman Cohen, of Carpel Books at 254 West 42nd Street, was the only exception, agreeing to take four of the machines and try the films.³⁹ Once again, there would be no turning back after this initial move forward. That would prove to be true in terms of content as well, which quickly escalated from simple portrayals of nudity to explicit sex.

By late 1967, Hodas had placed his remaining machines at two more bookstores; ordered thirty similar models from Urban Industries, a manufacturer in Louisville, Kentucky; opened an office on 42nd Street; and was depositing \$15,000 per day in quarters at a nearby Chemical Bank branch.⁴⁰ By summer 1969, there were more than four hundred machines in roughly fifty city locations, and that number surpassed one thousand in 1970—with Hodas in control of 350 of them, making him the single largest owner.⁴¹ By that point, he was no longer hiding his business interests. While most adult industry members had unlisted phone numbers, innocuous corporate names, and private, hidden offices, Hodas listed his phone number, put his own name and primary corporate name (East Coast Cinematics) on the directory in the lobby of his office building, and posted his other thirteen corporate business names on his door.⁴² He was confident enough to give a free-ranging interview to the *New York Times* that described his entire operation, including the “photo studio” at his office where customers could take photographs of models—a brazen front for prostitution.⁴³ His photograph even accompanied the story.

Hodas eventually bought leases, opened his own bookstores, and went into production on hardcore film loops such as *Flesh Party* and *Elevator Orgy*.

This decision stemmed from competition: by the early 1970s, approximately ten producer-distributors were in operation, mostly based in California and distributing loops across the country: Kiss, Pretty Girl, Color Climax, Stars of Sex, Collection, Playmate, Kama Sutra, Limited Edition, and Diamond Collection, along with Lasse Braun in Europe.⁴⁴ Many of these companies would later be early entrants into adult video, transferring these peep-show loops to videotape. While Hodas placed pornography into the public sphere on an unprecedented scale, others around the United States eventually joined him. Michael Thevis in Atlanta, Reuben Sturman in Ohio, Milton Luros and Robert DiBernardo in New York, and Harry Mohney in Michigan all built vast pornographic empires with similar operations and similar equipment—and also held similar ties to organized crime, with numerous prosecutions and convictions on various obscenity-related charges.⁴⁵

For Hodas and the other pornography entrepreneurs, the problem with the peep show was still one of privacy. The next logical step was to build walls around the machines, enclosing them completely. This idea gave rise to the peep-show “booth,” large enough for a person or two to have a small amount of privacy to view the film, played back on an 8mm or Super 8mm projector playing, like the Panoram, continuous loops.⁴⁶ Reuben Sturman created the peep-show booth in the late 1960s as part of his Automated Vending pornography empire, sensing correctly that customers wanted more privacy (primarily in order to masturbate) than the Panoram-style machine offered.⁴⁷

There was also the matter of giving the consumer more choice in viewing options, a solution that video finally provided. In January 1981, Richard Basciano, owner of the infamous Show World adult entertainment complex in New York, took the advice of technician Roger Kirschner and installed a bank of VCRs to run video feeds into the booths throughout the building. The system offered the choice of ten videos, controlled by a numbered keypad in each booth. Concerned the new technology would be confusing to customers, Basciano filmed an “instruction video” to run in the booths, featuring well-known performers Desiree Cousteau and Lisa DeLeeuw.⁴⁸ As Eric Schlosser notes, the peep show “turned what had been a communal experience into something quite different—a stag film for an audience of one. And before long they were filled with middle-class American men privately seeking a few moments of pleasure.”⁴⁹ The privacy of those moments, however, was (and continues to be) the source of much cultural and legal consternation.

This consternation hinged on a desire to discourage private pleasure by eliminating the booth’s capability for unregulated activities—the very

reason for its creation. In other words, even though sexual pleasure is typically considered a private act, its presence within an isolated space in a larger public area meant those pleasures were still, technically, occurring in public. The intense regulatory and policing efforts of the 1960s and 1970s regarding peep shows around the United States focused primarily on behavioral supervision. Lighting, occupancy, aisle width, and doors were all policed in order to monitor (and restrict) activity, and all these regulations point to an effort to discourage pleasure on the part of spectators, even as such pleasures played out on screens inside the booths.⁵⁰ As Amy Herzog notes, "Pornography's greatest threat to the social order . . . rests not in its representations, but in its public presence."⁵¹ An increase in suspicion surrounding behavior inside the peep-show booth was accompanied by legal gains in the standing of the home as a protected site of private pleasure, as outlined in the introduction. Given the rulings in cases such as *Stanley v. Georgia* and *United States v. 12 200-ft. Reels of Super 8mm. Film* and the regulatory tensions surrounding peep-show booths, the industry needed to find a way to diminish its public presence, even as it continued to make its products publicly available.

The barrier preventing the move of adult film out of public spaces was technological. Even though many of the same films available in adult bookstore peep-show machines were also available for home use by those who owned their own projectors (often available in the same stores and through mail order), the average person who wanted an occasional private encounter with pornography did not necessarily want to purchase the equipment—let alone the films. That would require going into adult bookstores to purchase them or the magazines in which advertisements for mail order appeared. As adult films became increasingly explicit—and desirable to consumers—the peep-show booth had to become less vulnerable to legal scrutiny. For the industry to take the next step toward modern, efficient capitalist enterprise, the peep show had to be moved away from the adult bookstore, with all its accompanying regulatory oversight. It needed to move into a space more like the home.

A NEW SPACE FOR EXHIBITION: HOTEL VIDEO

Much as the Panoram served as a transitional technology tied to public space, adult video would begin in spaces that were not quite public and not quite private: hotels. Film exhibition in hotels and motels is a crucial link in home video history.⁵² Not surprisingly, pornography once again lurked in the corners during the early years of the new practices, always threatening

to encroach on “respectable” space. When it did, those involved reinforced rather than resisted the heavily gendered paradigms outlined in the introduction. Pleasure, and particularly female pleasure, represented a threat even within the industrial paradigm that grew to serve it—and, as always, it brought predictable regulatory responses. Eventually, even the adult motels (distinctive from hotels) that unabashedly showed pornography participated in a matrix of regulatory strategies aiming to contain women’s pleasure, even as they offered new exhibition spaces. Such regulation was, as I will show, centered on the fear of prostitution; after all, the gender-skewed history of adult film exhibition on the Panoram, at peep shows, and in stag films hardly changed once the films were showed in motels. What was different was the *possibility* of privacy, and of reduced monitoring of what, exactly, was occurring behind the motels’ closed doors. It is these motels that serve as the critical link between the peep-show booth and home video, particularly for the ways in which they conceived and sold temporary privacy as a space for sexual pleasure.

Exhibition in hotels began in 1955 when the Sheraton hotel chain agreed to play a number of University of Notre Dame football games in certain locations on closed-circuit television systems, thus bypassing National Collegiate Athletic Association restrictions on televising college football games.⁵³ In mid-1956, the Hotel TV Broadcasting Corporation announced plans to offer closed-circuit service to two New York hotels featuring in-room programs for tourists, including movie trailers, sports news, dining suggestions, and other entertainment options.⁵⁴ Tension between the closed-circuit and television and film industries (always leery of ceding control of their content) prevented a larger move of expanded Hollywood content to hotels over the next decade, and the technology was limited to industrial use.⁵⁵

In June 1971, Computer Cinema, founded by Paul Von Schreiber and Paul Klein (former head of audience research at NBC), quietly began testing a pay-per-view closed-circuit system at the Gateway Downtowner Motor Inn in Newark, New Jersey. Trying out the Ampex 7500 one-inch system, the Sony U-Matic, a Panasonic half-inch player, and the CBS/EVR, the operation employed the machines “at a central point feeding motion pictures to each room through the hotel’s master antenna hookup on a midband channel (between 6 and 7) through a converter on top of the individual TV sets.”⁵⁶ The initial films included *Patton* (1970), *Barbarella* (1968), and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), at \$2.50 per viewing. Other chains, including Holiday Inn, Howard Johnson, and Hilton expressed interest, and Computer Cinema escalated its test project into a pilot operation.⁵⁷

While such activities might have alarmed Hollywood in the past, the results of these tests unveiled something of great importance that the studios had not expected: "A majority of the Computer Cinema viewers had not been to the movies (in a theater) the previous three months, and some reported that they hadn't gone to a film house in as long as five years."⁵⁸ It was immediately obvious that pay-per-view movies in hotels were reaching the "lost audience" that traditional exhibition strategies had been failing to capture, a discourse that would be seized upon by the industry.⁵⁹ Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), took notice and became a vocal proponent of the technology, noting that the average age of a pay-per-view purchaser was forty-two, while the average theatergoer was just over twenty years old.⁶⁰ Valenti was present, in fact, when Trans-World Productions, a subsidiary of Screen Gems (itself a subsidiary of Columbia Pictures), unveiled a rival operation at the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta in October 1971.⁶¹ Trans-World had been in the closed-circuit hotel business since 1968, offering convention broadcasts and tourist information, and, like Computer Cinema, it saw the opportunity to move into distribution.⁶² After the successful test at the Hyatt Regency, Trans-World installed the system in four other Atlanta hotels as well as in hotels in Las Vegas, Houston, and Toronto, and it scheduled installations in Honolulu, London, Los Angeles, Montreal, San Francisco, and Chicago, projecting that by the end of 1973 it would have systems in 160,000 rooms in 25 additional cities.⁶³ Hotel pay-per-view was an incredible success, opening up a vast new market for consumers who wanted to watch movies but not necessarily in the public space of the theater.

The same logic obviously applied on a much more significant scale with pornography. Given that hotel video technology was clearly capable of playing back any kind of content, it wasn't long before signs of anxiety seeped into the discourse. By the time Trans-World was ready to expand into various chains in Waikiki in late 1971, its spokesperson Garry Sherman had addressed the elephant in the room. Trans-World would not play X- or R-rated films, he told *Variety*, because children would be guests in the hotels.⁶⁴ By mid-1972, Computer Cinema, too, felt compelled to self-regulate its content. A *Los Angeles Times* article on the phenomenon concludes with a reassuring statement: "Right now, there is nothing to prevent the rawest X-rated films from being shown in thousands of hotel rooms except the 'Hotel's own taste and mine,' according to Computer Cinema's Paul Klein."⁶⁵ William Butters of Trans-World was equally adamant at the end of 1972: "Under no circumstances will X-rated movies be offered to subscribers," and the company's contracts with hotels prohibited adult

movies.⁶⁶ Such vociferous statements reveal, if anything, the inevitability that pornography would eventually make its way onto any new technology. Sherman, Klein, and Butters could not stop the march of adult content into hotel rooms any more than Ulcigan could with the Panoram. It was a matter of when, not if, adult films appeared there.

Given the desire (indeed, the necessity) of the two companies to court the Hollywood studios for content, it made sense for both to avoid adult material, which, in addition to being seen as culturally “unsavory,” was also an economic threat to mainstream films in the early 1970s. That threat became very real as early as 1973, when *The Devil in Miss Jones* ranked as the seventh-highest-grossing film of the year, right after the James Bond entry *Live & Let Die*. *Deep Throat* was the eleventh-highest grosser, just after *Deliverance*. Hollywood’s response was to incorporate many of the same adult-oriented elements, push softcore into the mainstream (with films such as *Emmanuelle* in 1974), and use the ratings system to coopt audiences looking for something different, all as a means to regain economic control.⁶⁷ Despite these efforts, there was plenty of adult film on the market, and a growing and curious audience for it.

Thus, those in the hotel video industry who were contemplating adding adult material were not without significant options, a reality already well understood by video technology manufacturers. By mid-1970, more than fifteen companies were trying to get a home video system to market, including the CBS EVR, the PlayTape/Avco Cartrivision, the Sony U-Matic, and the RCA SelectaVision.⁶⁸ These manufacturers were hunting for content—and didn’t exclude adult films. There were ample economic reasons for that inclusion; after all, feature-length adult films were gaining in popularity in theaters and making their producers and distributors considerable profits. Sherpax, for example, headed by Louis Sher, not only distributed groundbreaking adult films, but also played them in its Art Theatre Guild spaces—which totaled more than forty by the early 1970s.⁶⁹ Within two years, hardcore films migrated from peep shows and downtown theaters into what *Variety* called the “once-inaccessible class houses” throughout the outer boroughs of New York.⁷⁰

Sherpax’s films, distribution methods, and exhibition strategies broke new ground.⁷¹ *Censorship in Denmark* (a.k.a. *Pornography in Denmark: A New Approach*) and *A History of the Blue Movie*, both from 1970 and directed by Alex de Renzy, were among the first nationally exhibited adult films with hardcore footage, and *Mona* (1970, prod. Bill Osco; dirs. Michael Benveniste and Howard Ziehm) was the first hardcore narrative film to play in wide theatrical release. It was also the first hardcore film to enter

Variety's Top 50 box office list.⁷² Osco's Graffiti Production Corp. in Los Angeles (which made loops for peep-show booths and features distributed by Sherpix) expected to gross more than \$2 million in 1970, a figure that surely caught the attention of early video distributors.⁷³ Addison Verrill, writing in *Variety* in December 1970, describes the contentious and rapidly changing landscape: "In books of cinema history yet to be written, 1970 is sure to emerge as the year of the hardcore porno explosion, a time when every screen-sex barrier crumbled before the onslaught of technically slick pornography of the type now on view in at least 10 U.S. cities."⁷⁴ While Verrill was specifically referring to theatrical distribution, his words were similarly prescient for video.

By early 1971, sexploitation, softcore, and hardcore filmmakers and distributors such as Sherpix, Lee Hessel of Cambist Films, Ava Leighton and Radley Metzger of Audobon Films, and Russ Meyer were deluged with offers to license their material for video.⁷⁵ While they all publicly played down the offers, noting that they were for royalties only, Eve Meyer had, in fact, already made an historic deal with Optronics Libraries in December 1970 for video rights to twenty of Russ Meyer's films.⁷⁶ Optronics founder Irving Stimmler had been acquiring lesser-known films, public-domain materials, old serials, cartoons, archives of television programs, and other material—ultimately building a library of more than six thousand films and assembling a board of directors that included David Frost, David Wolper, and *New York Times* drama critic Clive Barnes. A *Time* magazine article from August 1970 describes Optronics as also having a catalogue of "sex films."⁷⁷ A *Wall Street Journal* reporter noted after the Meyer deal that "much gamier fare than Mr. Meyer's films will be seen on the home screen when—or if—the cartridge TV revolution strikes," clearly foreshadowing the inundation of hardcore material that would flood the market only a few years later.⁷⁸

Sherpix was next, brokering a deal with Cartrivision, the first of the new technologies to go to market. Debuting in June 1972 in Sears locations in Chicago, the ambitious system, a forerunner of the modern VCR, could record and play back television and offered an optional black-and-white camera for making home movies. The machine, however, was integrated with a television set and priced at an exorbitant \$1,595. Cartrivision also made an early attempt at home video rental—and the company had no problem including pornography in its rental program. Cartridge Rental Systems, Inc., a joint venture between Cartrivision and Columbia Pictures, included ten adult titles in its initial two hundred rental offerings.⁷⁹ Seven of the ten were Sherpix titles, including *Censorship in Denmark*, *A History*

of *the Blue Movie*, and *Mona*. Cartrivision recognized the potential of adult material on its player, with a company spokesperson calling the market for pornography on home video “gigantic” during an exhibition in late 1972.⁸⁰ However, the high price, recurring technological problems, and a mostly disinterested public doomed the company, and it had disappeared from the market by July 1973.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the technological tide had turned. Home video was inevitable—and adult films on video would be, too.

It was during this period of home video’s early growth that Sensory Devices, Inc., a subsidiary of Precision Sound Centers of Miami, Florida, finally broke the adult barrier in hotels. On February 29, 1972, the company placed its system into the Hotel Commodore in New York, offering mobile carts holding Zeiss-Ikon Panacolor magazine projectors capable of playing two-hour cartridges inserted into a combination projector-screen.⁸² Alongside the twenty-five films on offer, including *Airport* (1970) and *A Man Called Horse* (1970), was the complete Russ Meyer catalogue.⁸³ By July, the softcore adult titles (which had expanded beyond Meyer’s films) were by far the most requested. John R. Garside, the hotel’s general manager, offered some slight reassurance to those anxious about the films, saying, “The type of X films that we have are not the porn-house-type movies. In other words, they’re not these out-and-out skin flicks. They’re more the type that would play in, say, legitimate Broadway theaters.”⁸⁴ Garside’s words were, of course, mostly hollow, and an attempt to separate the hotel from “pornography” by invoking Broadway’s respectability and legitimacy. He was also attempting to regulate the potential for pleasure, if moving away incrementally from previous hardline stances that refused even to acknowledge its possibility. Meyer’s films were hardly “legitimate” in the sense Garside suggested, even if they were not hardcore, and the other softcore offerings (such as *Fuego*, the 1969 Argentinian melodrama featuring Isabel Sarli and plenty of nudity and simulated sex) were grindhouse and drive-in staples. The Hotel Commodore knew what it had: a product not offered by its competitors, and accompanying privacy, even if Garside seemed reluctant to admit it.

The Hotel Commodore’s decision was the beginning of the outrageously lucrative pay-per-view adult film industry in hotels. These early fits and starts led eventually to the creation of Spectradyme in the late 1970s, which blossomed (despite financial problems) in coming decades, along with its later rivals On Command and Lodgenet Enterprises. None of these companies had any problems offering adult material, even if they avoided openly acknowledging it as the core of their business. By 2000, adult films in hotels brought in close to \$200 million per year and had a presence in at least

40 percent of the hotel rooms in North America, with significant ownership stakes held (often quietly) by massive corporations such as AT&T, Time Warner, General Motors, EchoStar, Liberty Media, Marriott, Hilton, and News Corporation.⁸⁵ In hindsight, the worst possible business decision Trans-World and Computer Cinema could have made was to avoid adult material. For the groundbreaking Hotel Commodore, however, adult films were only a temporary experiment: by February 1973, the hotel switched to the Trans-World system, without adult films, a move that had been planned for some time.⁸⁶

This “official” history illustrates how Hollywood sensed a growing market for its products in a private setting that utilized video technologies, accompanied by growing tensions about content, but it also avoids uncovering the details of a different set of lodging spaces that might be even more historically important. The “respectable” hotel industry took a great deal of time to come to terms with pornography, terms that continue to include silence as a containment strategy. Back in Los Angeles, a group of cheap, inconspicuous adult motels used similar technologies to show hardcore adult films on video. These motels, and the service they provided, were the most important link between celluloid and videotape for the adult film industry.

ADULT MOTELS: HOME AWAY FROM HOME

In early 1971, a steel rooftop railing atop a hotel in Osaka, Japan, accidentally began transmitting the hotel’s closed-circuit signal—sending adult content into nearby homes and prompting police to issue a polite warning to innkeepers to make sure such accidents were not repeated. Osaka was home to a phenomenon of an estimated 500 “avec” or “love” hotels, designed for sexual encounters on hourly rates, and as their featured attraction offering “pink films,” a softcore genre unique to Japan.⁸⁷ *Time* magazine carried a story on the phenomenon in March, including details on how some of the hotels were offering cameras and video recorders for in-room use.⁸⁸ Among those who read the article was Don Leon, a lawyer representing a group of motel owners, who quickly seized on the idea as something that might work in Los Angeles.⁸⁹ He convinced the group to convert an AutoLodge at 930 West Olympic Boulevard, downtown near the convention center, into an “adult motel,” complete with water beds, fur bedspreads, mirrored ceilings, and closed-circuit adult films played on Sony U-Matic machines (figure 8).⁹⁰ Much as pornography had moved with technology



Figure 8. The AutoLodge Motel, 930 West Olympic Boulevard, Los Angeles, circa 1970, home to the first closed-circuit adult video system in the United States. Author's collection.

toward privacy via converted Panorams, it now moved with U-Matic machines into motels, an ideal space given their already illicit connotations.

That illicit status was apparent in the initial advertisements for the converted AutoLodge, which appeared in the summer of 1972—and the owners made no effort to hide their intentions. “More than just a COMFORTABLE LODGING—It’s a DELIGHTFULLY SENSUAL WAY TO UNWIND—MIRRORED LUXURY surrounds you on your own WATER BED as you watch X-RATED FILMS on your own Private CLOSED CIRCUIT TV!” (figure 9).⁹¹ Leon correctly sensed that the Japanese model solved the problems inherent to the tensions of public versus private pleasure by transferring the peep-show booth into a setting more akin to a temporary home. “Our basic concept,” he told the *Wall Street Journal*, “was to create an adult-oriented entertainment center where people could find a different kind of atmosphere than anywhere else.”⁹² The notion of “atmosphere” would play a key role in owners’ attempt to distance themselves from the product at the core of their business while simultaneously providing the potential for “something more” that offered at least a modicum of legal cover.

In the spring of 1973, the owners renamed the AutoLodge “the Experience,” and by that point it had been joined by others with the same basic business model, including the Hollywoodland, the Charles, and the

What have you done for YOU lately?

Take some time for yourself . . .

(You've earned it haven't you?)

. . . and **RELAX**

★ at the **AUTO LODGE** ★

930 W. OLYMPIC BLVD., L.A., CA.

749-1239

More than just a **COMFORTABLE LODGING** — It's a **DELIGHTFULLY SENSUAL WAY** to **UNWIND** — **MIRRORED LUXURY** surrounds you on your own **WATER BED** as you watch **X-RATED FILMS** on your own **Private CLOSED CIRCUIT TV!**

Offer limited to those 21 yrs. of age or over—and those not offended by sexually explicit motion pictures

**TAKE A FEW HOURS-OR
A FEW DAYS & ENJOY!**

INTRODUCTORY SPECIAL!

\$5 ~~OR~~ DISCOUNT WITH THIS AD
(OFFER EXPIRES SOON — TAKE ADVANTAGE)

Figure 9. An early advertisement for the AutoLodge, emphasizing the privacy provided by video technology. *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1972, CAL_44.

El Royale.⁹³ In fact, some motels had been advertising in earnest in the *Los Angeles Times* alongside adult movie theater listings as early as February 1973, beginning with the Western, in Van Nuys, and the Crest, in West Hollywood. The copy for their joint advertisement read: "Adult Movies in the privacy of your own room! In color on closed-circuit TV."⁹⁴ By summer the Starlite, the Aloha, the Kona, and the Encore had joined them, all with similar offerings. *Variety* ran a front-page story on the trend, briefly describing the Experience and noting that its parent company, Leisure Services Inc., had plans for six more locations and was also in the business of "production, distribution, and exhibition of theatrical films."⁹⁵ The *Los Angeles Times*, seeing the rapid growth of the market in its own ad pages, carried a lengthy examination in June, the first detailed report on the motels.⁹⁶ By that point, the total number of adult motels had reached eleven—and the predictable regulatory response was growing, too. Obscenity busts at the motels became a common event but had essentially no result, and they were certainly not effective in stopping the motels from operating. Leon noted that obscenity charges were typically reduced to "something like a \$5 fine."⁹⁷

Of much greater concern to authorities were questions of prostitution and, more generally, by-the-hour trysts. For owners, the obvious solution was to deflect that anxiety at any opportunity, even if only as a gesture. After all, among the primary purposes of the motels was the illicit pleasure of private sex, an often unspoken reality understood by everyone, especially those seeking transgressive pleasures and those seeking to contain them. Furthermore, as Nicola Simpson points out, the space itself was often the setting for what were called motel films just prior to this era: "This ultra-cheap film was usually produced by ordinary people and invariably featured a brief but explicit encounter in a nondescript room, often a small motel that presumably would not ask too many questions of its guests."⁹⁸ *Deep Throat*, the best-known (and most-played) adult film in both theaters and motels, was itself produced in part in just such a location.⁹⁹

Leon's strategies hinged primarily on fixing a particular discourse that downplayed these illicit possibilities and associations in favor of something more respectable. He frequently referred to his average customers as "committed couples" and argued that the whole purpose of the enterprise was to provide a safe, discreet, and pleasurable environment for married, middle-class heterosexuals. In a 1975 interview, he went so far as to note that while a marriage certificate was not *required* for booking a room at the Experience, it was nevertheless *preferred*.¹⁰⁰ In nearly every article on the motels, owners and managers stressed repeatedly that they were friendly, clean, and

safe environments aimed at middle-aged couples rather than people having affairs or seeking prostitutes.¹⁰¹ Such discursive strategies, obviously intended to minimize police attention and negative cultural associations, also performed the task of assigning respectability to the motels by emphasizing elements other than pleasure.¹⁰² By constructing a corporate structure with clear goals and desired customers, the motels attempted to shift away from the illicit connotations conveyed by their very reason for existence.

The task was necessary in part to make adult motels appear safe for female patrons: the crucial demographic—just as for theaters—that would ensure success. After all, the privacy afforded by the motel room was in stark contrast to the (often dangerous and unpredictable) public spaces of the peep booth or public theater. Female spectators who might be interested in adult material ran the risk of being mistaken for prostitutes by both other customers and police; there was also, simply put, the potential for unwelcome sexual advances or assaults by the primarily male customers in those spaces. It was crucial for adult motels to solve this problem, even if it meant rigidly regulating women's pleasures and behaviors.

This particular capability—the potential of a private space for women to watch adult films—is perhaps the key to understanding why adult motels historically served as the link between celluloid and home video, even if it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to find specific evidence for women using adult motels as exhibition (and pleasure) spaces.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, that potential and opportunity are critical to understanding the historical trajectory of image pornography's move from theaters to the home. While the eventual complete privacy offered by home video certainly benefited men, that privacy also carried radical potential for a safe and discreet viewing space for women, away from various dangers and cultural judgments. Thus the adult motels were the first real change in the movement of adult material toward privacy, turning the peep booth into something resembling a temporary home and using early versions of the technology that would later revolutionize the adult film industry. Motel owners certainly were aware of the importance of these possibilities. Albert Antiquo, owner of three motels, noted as much in mid-1973: "Some of [our customers], particularly the women, are curious now about adult movies and books. They hear about it all the time, and they'd like to see the real thing, just to satisfy their curiosity—only they're afraid a neighbor or someone else they know would see them if they went to a theater and that would embarrass them. So they come here."¹⁰⁴ Antiquo's comments encapsulate complicated discursive layers: they reveal the economic motivation for the motels; but,

however unintentionally, they also illustrate the community's need for just such spaces and protections. They also reveal the constant regulatory impulse to contain and limit pleasure always surging underneath the cultural surface, even by those most invested in the industry's practices.

Once again, the tensions circulating in the interstices between public and private pleasure come to the surface. If, as I have argued, pornography is often successfully contained by utilizing a particular level of public visibility rather than the invisibility of complete privacy, the adult motels existed in an odd, in-between space. Neither out in the open nor completely private, the adult motel was somehow both at once. Rather than thinking of these early adult motels as lodgings that happened to offer adult films, they might be better understood as simply bigger and more private peep-show booths, and thus as transitional spaces. Technology operates as the defining element in this paradigm: the adult motels primarily used Sony U-Matic players in their operations, the primary precursor to the Betamax player that would change the landscape, making them liminal technological spaces. Most important, by repeatedly stressing in interviews that their facilities were intended for middle-class married people, adult motel owners attempted to invoke capitalist and patriarchal ideologies in order to stave off the regulatory cultural impulses that had long sought to limit the sexual pleasures of both the lower classes and women in general—thus reinforcing the “natural order” that I discuss in the introduction. The cultural mythology surrounding such ideologies was simple to understand: if the patrons were middle class, one could assume they would be well educated and thus not susceptible to “inappropriate” sexual pleasures (or, at least in the imagination, arousal at all). Additionally, by being married, the women involved would be safely “respectable,” which is to say not prostitutes or, even more important, actively seeking their own sexual pleasure. In addition to stressing that this was their desired clientele, many interviews featured married couples who managed the motel locations, emphasized that single women were not allowed to rent rooms, and, in the case of the Aloha (located in Long Beach), pointed out that the motel even offered a wedding chapel on its premises, with the owner-manager licensed to marry patrons.¹⁰⁵ Circulating underneath all these messages was an intense effort to regulate pleasure within the narrow confines of a respectability marked by patriarchal control. Women's pleasures, even within the “safe” space of the adult motel, were intensely contained and monitored.

The zenith of these respectability strategies came in 1980. Pete and Norma Marino, owners of the Riviera motel in San Clemente, gave an interview to the *Los Angeles Times* tellingly titled, “A Nice Place for a

Family Affair," in which they sell everything *but* sexual arousal and pleasure as components of the business and all but ignore the adult films playing in the rooms. The couple notes, in fact, that their adult daughter (who runs the front desk) gave them the initial idea to convert the operation into an adult motel in order to raise profits. The reporter's description spells out the ways in which such owners labor to disconnect pleasure from the type of capitalist enterprise that would provide the cultural (and legal) security of "something more":

The Marino family looks about as much like sex motel operators as the Osmond family does. And that's what makes the Riviera so, well, unusual. There are no neon signs touting the X-rated movies shown on closed-circuit TV in the motel's 21 rooms. What little advertising the Riviera does is done discreetly and in small type in family-oriented publications. The typical Riviera patron is an over-40 couple celebrating an anniversary or birthday—not a swinging couple meeting for a secret tryst.¹⁰⁶

These types of discourses, in which pleasure is downplayed as much as possible, assisted the motels as they reached for respectability. Yet that respectability was possible only if women's behaviors were rigorously monitored and contained, placed into a strict set of cultural ideologies in which the fantasy of the "family" was paramount—a fantasy dependent on patriarchal structures deemphasizing sexual pleasure. Thus, the privacy afforded by adult motels re-created the "home" and all the familial, patriarchal space in which pleasure was a side effect of procreation, and where women had a very specific role. That was what was happening on the surface, at least. In reality, the temporary privacy afforded by the motels' closed doors meant all kinds of pleasures—including those depicted on their closed-circuit television screens—could be had (mostly) without restriction.

The judicial climate surrounding the era in which the adult motels sprouted lends particular resonance to the marketing strategies that positioned such locations as being like "home." After all, despite the advertising campaigns, adult motels were actually *not* like home—they were places for illicit sexual fantasies and pleasures, not least of which was watching the pornography that some might not want to consume at home or in public. The manufacture of this fantasy—this is the home you *wish* you had, and here you can temporarily (and safely) have it—also carried with it the possibility of legal protection. The landmark Supreme Court decision in *Miller v. California* in 1973 rocked the adult entertainment landscape just as adult motels were beginning to thrive. Repeating that obscenity was not protected by the First Amendment and offering a test for its determination, the

decision's most important aspect was its basing of that test on community, rather than national, standards.¹⁰⁷ Crucially, *Miller* continued the trend of focusing the judicial lens on *public* regulation of obscenity, rather than expanding regulation into the private spaces of the home. Such emphasis did not escape adult motel owners seeking protection from the types of prosecutions that were facing others in the adult industry. In fact, Leon, drawing on his experience in representing adult film producers and distributors, claimed "there'd be a pretty good legal case for showing films at the motels, since a room legally becomes your home for the duration of your stay."¹⁰⁸ What Leon and other motel owners were arguing for, in effect, was to remove the focus on the content and place it back on the space: as the court had already ruled in 1969's *Stanley v. Georgia*, adults had a right to privacy—even to obscenity—as long as it remained in the home.¹⁰⁹ Temporary or not, the privacy afforded by the motels was the same as the privacy of patrons' actual homes, at least according to Leon.

Privacy for what, exactly, remains a question for historians. What was the content in the adult motels? Who were the suppliers, and who performed in the films? What supply chain brought adult film into the motels? Reassembling this picture reveals an underground economy existing on questionably legal margins. The motels played a combination of stag films and loops, cheaply produced shorts, pirated copies of films then in general release in adult theaters, and, possibly, locally produced material made for the motels—all highly similar to the cheap "homemade videotapes" seen by Joseph Slade in the theaters in Times Square, described in the introduction to this book. A *Los Angeles Times* reporter described the offerings in 1975: "Some are bootlegged versions of today's porn classics such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Memories within Miss Aggie* (1974). Some are old, time-worn stag flicks. All are edited, not for taste, but because they must fit on a one-hour video cassette."¹¹⁰ Offerings at other motels were similarly eclectic. For example, the President Motel in Atlantic City, in late 1973, in addition to *Deep Throat*, offered six films: *Mother, Brother, and I* (1973), *Pledge Sister* (1973), *Diary of a Bed* (1972), *Teenage Love Goddess* (date unknown), *Mona Gets Her Gun* (date unknown), and *Wet, Wild, and Weird* (date unknown). The first three, "one-day wonders" produced quickly and cheaply, were all playing in low-rent theaters in Los Angeles at the same time that the motels showed them, while the latter three were probably quickie productions released first on 8mm or 16mm for the home/stag market and then transferred to videotape for sale to adult motel owners.¹¹¹ *Deep Throat*, a cultural phenomenon, was used by many adult motels as a draw.

Given the underground distribution landscape, motel owners were reluctant to talk about their supply chains. Leon, for example, told a reporter: "I don't even know what kind of films they have. We show whatever the market is. I don't know who supplies the market." Yet as a "knowledgeable source" explained to the same reporter, "the films are pirated copies of regular porn movies and are sold on the streets."¹¹² Leon's supposed ignorance was hardly plausible; after all, he was well versed in the sex film business. As he readily told the press, he had represented adult film industry members in his position as an attorney, but what he did not openly admit was his role as sexploitation film producer and distributor (through his own outfit, Leon Film Enterprises) of such titles as *The Outrageous Mechanical Love Machine* (1971), *Naked under Satin* (1970), and *The Very Friendly Neighbors* (1969).¹¹³ He had also served as chairman and CEO of the International Film Organization along with exploitation film veteran Mike Ripps, the company's president, releasing Albert Zugsmith's late-career sexploitation films *Two Roses and a Golden Rod* (1969, dir. Zugsmith) and *Fanny Hill* (1964, dirs. Zugsmith and Russ Meyer).¹¹⁴ Furthermore, he had taught a semester-long course at UCLA in 1967 called "Packaging and Legal Aspects of Theatrical and TV Films," probably stemming from his work in that area for veteran exploitation filmmaker Sidney Pink as vice president of Westside International Productions in the mid-1960s.¹¹⁵ For Leon to claim, as he did to a reporter in 1977, "I have no idea where the films come from," was laughable.¹¹⁶

PIRATES AND COPYRIGHTS

Clearly, an underground economy thrived in Los Angeles, circulating the stag films and quickie productions that were a fixture in adult bookstores and the back pages of magazines, and also pirating the films playing in adult theaters.¹¹⁷ This widespread, organized, and efficient bootlegging system shipped pirated prints (of both mainstream and adult films) around North America and the rest of the world. In February 1975, in just one prominent example, New York police arrested Sol Winkler, who was in possession of more than five hundred master copies of film prints, many of them adult titles, which he was transferring to video for sale to closed-circuit-equipped motels around the United States.¹¹⁸ Film piracy had plagued the motion picture industry since its inception, but the rise in postwar availability of 16mm projectors to the consumer market had led to a subsequent increase in interest in film collecting that blossomed in the 1960s and '70s.¹¹⁹ Well before the adult video industry was professionalized, bootleggers and adult

motel owners were transferring celluloid to video. With the renewed interest in copyright law in the early 1970s (beginning with the Sound Recording Amendment of 1971 and culminating in the Copyright Act in 1976), film studios and the MPAA, along with the FBI, began vigorously cracking down on pirates, eventually resulting in raids in 1974 and 1975 on collectors and dealers that recovered more than \$2 million in films and \$150 million in equipment. Additional raids in 1980 in eight U.S. cities led to 150 arrests and 60 convictions.¹²⁰ Adult motels represent an outgrowth of such technological capability, essentially creating an alternative exhibition space based on the availability of a commodity that was already on the margins of legality.

The question of whether adult films retained copyright protection in the first place was a legal gray area in the mid-1970s, when the motels began drawing attention. Los Angeles Police vice squad captain Jack Wilson acknowledged as much, saying that tapes in adult motels were “not always obtained legally” but added, “We really don’t care if they are pirated or not, since whoever is suffering these thefts is not reporting them.”¹²¹ On a practical level, the “suffering” faced by the involved companies could garner no legal relief. As the *Miller* case decided, obscenity had no First Amendment protection—which most assumed also meant no copyright protection. Given that definitions of obscenity were in tremendous flux after *Miller* and were based in local rather than national standards, most adult film producers were wary of seeking legal protection for the continual bootlegging that plagued the industry.¹²² For adult motel owners, the situation offered a unique, if hazy, sense of security.¹²³ They had some protection from copyright infringement even as they were under constant obscenity-related scrutiny.¹²⁴ In order to take the next steps toward capitalist legitimacy, the industry had to find ways to resolve the copyright question. After all, commodities must have value to be legitimate; copyright protects that value by acknowledging both its unique nature and its potential for a market. In 1979, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals finally recognized that whether an adult film was obscene was a separate issue from whether it had copyright protection, essentially granting that pornography was not only a creative expression, but also had value.¹²⁵

There was another method available to adult motel owners looking to avoid piracy, particularly after the gray areas were cleared up: making their own content. In 1973, the owner of three locations admitted that he had started production on his own line of videotapes after a “well-known pornographer” who stayed at his motel suggested the idea. In partnership with other, unnamed people, the owner produced more than fifty original tapes

by mid-1973 and had plans for fifty more. Describing some of the tapes as “sex instruction films,” complete with clinical narration, the owner noted of his clientele: “Some of our older guests have a lot of hang-ups about sex. Watching these films, in the privacy of their own room, with a bed right there to practice on, can help them overcome their problems.”¹²⁶ Such a strategy, however well meaning, was also designed to preempt judicial action by relying on “something more” than simple pleasure: given that laws required material to have “scientific value” in order to be free of obscenity, such clinical approaches were designed to withstand possible legal challenges. These videotapes, long-lost and forgotten, were some of the earliest commercial shot-on-video pornography in North America, and they illustrate the ways in which pleasure frequently must be justified in order to have value.¹²⁷

The mechanics of this underground economy connecting bootleggers to adult motel owners to spectators links this history back to George Atkinson. In order to identify the final pieces of this puzzle, it is crucial to examine what exactly Atkinson was doing in Los Angeles (and who he was doing it with) before the moment at which he became the “father” of modern home video rental in 1977. It is with Atkinson that the concerns of public versus private exhibition coalesced into an industrial solution seized by the adult film industry that eventually converted the private pleasures afforded by videotape into a highly successful commercial enterprise.

GEORGE ATKINSON AND “THE PRIVACY OF YOUR OWN HOME”

Born to a British father and Russian mother in Shanghai in 1935, George Atkinson spent two years in a Japanese prison camp during World War II before moving to Canada and then to Los Angeles.¹²⁸ After a decade-long effort to make it as an actor (which progressed as far as bit parts on television shows such as *Mannix* and *Burke’s Law*, along with extra work), Atkinson was, by 1975, living in the back of his storefront on Wilshire Boulevard in West Hollywood.¹²⁹ There he had been scraping together a living selling and renting various portable movie technologies since the late 1960s.¹³⁰ It was in roughly 1968 that he first encountered the Technicolor Instant Movie Projector, an ingenious, affordable device first released in 1962 and designed to play 8mm film on “Magi-Cartridges,” which allowed users to simply drop in the film and press a single button rather than tinkering with reels and sprockets.¹³¹ It was another feature that caught Atkinson’s attention, however: the projector allowed viewers to play back

the 4½-minute, 50-foot cartridges on a continuous loop. That capability, of course, mirrored the peep-show booth and its loop films. Atkinson clearly realized the potential to take the peep-show booth out of the adult bookstore and into more private spaces.

In James Lardner's two historical accounts of the birth of the home video industry, as well as Atkinson's own brief recollection, this discovery of the Technicolor projector led to a much differently phrased realization: older, public-domain films could be rented to the public for "parties."¹³² Atkinson, as Lardner describes it, also "sold the idea as a form of free entertainment to Howard Johnson, Holiday Inns, and Shakey's Pizza, among other clients," which typically showed Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin films on continuous loops.¹³³ Atkinson also installed the Sony U-Matic in Los Angeles bars after its release in 1971, using closed-circuit channels to play classic boxing matches on video.¹³⁴ In Lardner's account, Atkinson was a hard-working, creative salesman, but there was no mention of pornography.

In these various activities, Atkinson participated in the economy of film distribution outside of conventional, mainstream exhibition sites, joining others in that small but thriving public-domain industry. Blackhawk Films, Thunderbird Films, Cinema Concepts, Reel Images, and MalJack Films were just a few of the early distributors of public-domain material, making steady income renting and selling film prints to collectors, school, churches, and museums.¹³⁵ MalJack, for example, headed by Waleed and Malik Ali, operated in the Midwest and very successfully cornered the public-domain market before turning to video distribution and production in the 1980s with MPI Home Video. Like Atkinson, MalJack supplied Shakey's Pizza locations with the Laurel and Hardy and Chaplin films that the company relied upon as part of its nostalgic image.¹³⁶ Public-domain film distribution was a gray area that frequently blurred into piracy. The most famous example was Tom Dunnahoo, owner of Thunderbird Films, who began his career as a bootlegger; federal marshals raided his operation in 1971 and charged him with selling an illegal print of *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965). Eleven major Hollywood distributors subsequently sued him for copyright infringement, and he agreed to abide by a court order to stop selling pirated material. He turned instead to selling films that had fallen out of copyright, building a successful operation by the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, Dunnahoo, like other members of the underground film economy in the early 1970s, maintained his own lab to process duplicates from prints.¹³⁷ It is not surprising that Atkinson maintained links to such public-domain distributors during this period, given that they were the source of much of the available

material his business depended upon—and of facilities that could, potentially, create the valuable copies.

Left out of the histories of Atkinson's activities is that his business was also built on pornography. Well before his December 7, 1977, advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times*, the moment at which he became the "father" of home video rental, Atkinson was renting adult films to consumers in Southern California on cassette and circulating within the same underground economy as the pirates, public-domain operators, bar owners, and adult motel managers who were also intertwined tightly with adult film distribution and exhibition practices. Indeed, trace evidence from this era points squarely to Atkinson as an integral part of the supply chain providing adult films to nontheatrical exhibition spaces in Los Angeles. The Technicolor projector and Magi-Cartridges, the films provided to motels, and the U-Matic machines in bars were the cornerstones of an adult film business. Before 1977, Atkinson called his company Home Theater Systems, and it was located in the same six-hundred-square-foot storefront that would later rent out the first Hollywood films on VHS and Betamax tape in the United States.

Home Theater Systems began advertising in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 8, 1975 (figure 10). The first ad, located on the "adult movies/entertainment" page alongside adult movie theater listings, made the company's product offerings perfectly clear, and also clarified what its choice of the word *party* actually meant:

Revolutionary film cassettes are here! Now like never before enjoy adult entertainment in the privacy and comfort of your own home! With the simple push of a button, you can now have instant BIG SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT in your own LIVING ROOM. We RENT the entire show—Automatic Technicolor Projector, Large 5x5 ft. Screen, and a large variety of "X" Color Featurottes—all for a low price. Have an exciting Movie Party with your friends.¹³⁸

The advertisement's emphasis on both privacy and a rental system reveals the ingeniousness of Atkinson's business model. By 1975, well before moving on to Hollywood films, he knew there was significant audience interest in watching pornography in the home, rather than in theaters, motels, or peep booths, and in renting, rather than purchasing, the material. Atkinson figured out how to sell temporary privacy directly to the home space. Whereas adult motel owners used their business model (private rooms with closed-circuit television systems available for short-term rental) to expand the peep-show booth, Atkinson went one step further, dropping that booth into the most private (and legally protected) space possible: the home. Like

**REVOLUTIONARY FILM CASSETTES ARE HERE!
NOW LIKE NEVER BEFORE ENJOY
ADULT ENTERTAINMENT**
in the privacy and comfort of your own home!

With the simple push of a button, you can now have instant **BIG SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT** in your own **LIVING ROOM**. We **RENT** the entire show—Automatic Technicolor[®] Projector, Large 5 ft.x5 ft. Screen, and a large variety of "X" Color Featurettes—all for a low price. Have an exciting Movie Party with your friends.

For further information and reservations
Call or Write to

HOME THEATER SYSTEMS

**12011 Wilshire Blvd.
West Los Angeles, Ca. 90025
Phone—477-6516**

Figure 10. Before George Atkinson created home video rental, he rented out adult films in Los Angeles. Home Theater Systems advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1975, CAL_48.

the Panoram, the Technicolor projector could play anything—including pornography, a capability that Atkinson successfully utilized.

With only slight variations in the copy, graphics, and layout, Atkinson ran ads for Home Theater Systems in the *Los Angeles Times* in the adult entertainment section for the next eighteen months. By late summer 1975, Atkinson added a San Diego outlet—and was listing a price of \$25 for a twenty-four-hour rental of “hundreds of films” from “Denmark, Hollywood, and France.”¹³⁹ The San Diego outlet was gone within a month, replaced by a location in Orange County that would eventually be joined by a third in Santa Ana.¹⁴⁰ In June 1977, “Betamax tapes also available” was added to the standard copy, making Atkinson among the first people in the United States to offer adult films on the format.¹⁴¹ The material on the tapes, while not specified, was probably identical to what Atkinson was

offering on the Magi-Cartridges and what was being playing in area adult motels at the same time: loop and stag films and bootlegged versions of adult films then in general release.

The links between adult motel managers, bar owners, bootleggers, public-domain operators, and Atkinson are crucial for historians as they begin to unearth the transition of the adult film industry to videotape, as well as the prehistory of home video more generally. Atkinson was clearly an important figure in the Los Angeles adult economy. While the lines among the groups in that economy remain fuzzy, they nevertheless can be drawn: the adult motel owners obtained their films via a bootlegging underground frequently made up of the same people who were involved in the distribution of public-domain films; at the same moment, Atkinson was supplying public-domain films to area motels and restaurants. Furthermore, bars in Los Angeles—more of Atkinson's customers—were playing pirated adult films over closed-circuit channels during this period.¹⁴² Following these traces reveals him to be at the epicenter of the pre-home video era of semiprivate pornography distribution in Los Angeles.

The most important detail in this history is the *location* where Atkinson took his primary practices. While adult motels extended the privacy of the peep-show booth to the larger space of the rental room, Atkinson took the next logical step into the full privacy of the home, laying out the business model that he would follow to tremendous success only a few years later. What happened to Home Theater Systems, why Atkinson changed the business name to Video Cassette Rentals, and what, exactly, he had access to on videotape triggered the onset of home video rental—and laid the foundation for a modern, efficient, and organized adult video industry.

ADULT FILMS ON VIDEO: THE BEGINNING

On July 1, 1977, *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger announced that his paper would begin to limit the size and content of adult film advertisements. Pornographic films, Sulzberger claimed, “are as much a blight in print as the displays for pornographic films are a blight on our city streets.”¹⁴³ While not an outright ban, the guidelines limited content to the name of the film, the name and address of the theater, the hours of performance, and the label “adults only.” On August 23, Otis Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, inspired by that decision, *did* institute an outright ban on adult entertainment advertising. Chandler's rigidly moralistic accompanying statement blasted the adult film industry, ignored legal precedent (such as the *Miller* decision), and fed directly into a growing cultural belief that there was

something inherently “wrong” with pornography. “The truth is,” writes Chandler, “we have been dealing with an indefensible product, one with absolutely no redeeming values, and this phenomenon shows no sign of leaving the contemporary social scene.”¹⁴⁴ Marketing Director Vance Stickel, mindful of the \$3 million in annual advertising revenue brought in from adult entertainment, disagreed strongly with Chandler’s decision—but the publisher held firm. Eventually, a group of adult theater owners sued the newspaper for \$44 million, claiming violations of their First Amendment rights and that the newspapers had conspired with Hollywood studios to put adult theaters out of business, but their claims were denied.¹⁴⁵ Chandler had successfully evicted pornography from his corner of the “contemporary social scene,” an ideal example of private enterprise regulating pornography and pleasure.

The effect on the adult entertainment industry in Los Angeles should have been significant. After all, the decision immediately shut out adult motels, theaters, and Atkinson’s Home Theater Systems from their primary advertising space. The final Home Theater Systems advertisement ran on August 17, 1977, less than a week before Chandler’s decision.¹⁴⁶ What Chandler could not have predicted, however, was that the technology that would eventually change the industry was already lurking in the pages of *Los Angeles Times*. Just as Atkinson himself had advertised the availability of adult Betamax tapes in June 1977, others, too, were using the newspaper to market adult video. On January 20, 1977, an audio-video store in Los Angeles named Video Visions had advertised “adult video tapes for your Betamax,” and, by May 15, classified advertisements for adult tapes priced at \$69 began running regularly in the video section.¹⁴⁷

However, Chandler’s decision left Atkinson scrambling for something new. In the interval between the final Home Theater Systems advertisement on August 17 and the first Video Cassette Rentals advertisement on December 7, Atkinson learned about Andre Blay’s Magnetic Video, which had licensed fifty titles from 20th Century Fox, offering them for sale (not rent) to consumers in what was the first step toward a home video industry.¹⁴⁸ While gearing up for mass production of the tapes, to be distributed as part of the Video Club of America, Blay advertised the venture in the pages of *TV Guide* in late November 1977.¹⁴⁹ Among what was estimated to be two hundred thousand U.S. home video player owners, nine thousand people joined the Video Club of America, and many, many more learned about it.¹⁵⁰ One was Atkinson—who had a very different idea in mind than simply becoming a private collector.

With a \$3,000 investment from a high school classmate, and working with a local retailer willing to make the purchase (as it was under the \$8,000

wholesale minimum), Atkinson purchased two copies of each tape—one on Betamax and one on VHS.¹⁵¹ He put them on his store shelves, ran the December 7 advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times*, and put into motion what would become the home video rental industry.¹⁵² While no clear evidence exists, I would unhesitatingly argue that there were actually more than one hundred tapes in that first video rental store. Given Atkinson's history as a participant in the underground adult film economy in Los Angeles, his prior marketing of adult films on the Betamax format, and his knowledge of the market for adult material, it is very safe to assume that his early inventory also included pornography.¹⁵³ It may be impossible to determine exactly what made up that inventory, but reconstructing a clear picture of the content available on VHS and Betamax does not require speculation.

This early period, between 1976 and 1980, was a wild and somewhat disorganized era, made up initially of distributors searching for available catalogue titles to sell, not rent, on video—an important distinction that defines the early years of home video in general.¹⁵⁴ The process started with Joel Jacobson, an agent with the William Morris Agency who had operated Cinema Concepts with his wife as a side business out of their home in Connecticut since the 1960s. It was a small operation specializing in public-domain art film distribution to churches and schools. As home video began expanding, Jacobson added U-Matic and Betamax tapes to his inventory, and then, in 1976, realized there was a market for legitimately distributed adult material. In July 1976, Jacobson licensed exclusive video rights from Russ Meyer for five of his films: *Vixen!* (1968), *Cherry, Harry, & Racquel!* (1970), *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965), *Finders Keepers, Lovers Weepers!* (1968), and *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959). Jacobson gave Meyer a \$5,000 advance and 50 percent of the revenue for the deal.¹⁵⁵ Jacobson later added two films (with nonexclusive rights) from Radley Metzger, *The Lickerish Quartet* (1970) and *The Libertine* (1968, dir. Pasquale Festa Campanile), along with a French import, *Her and She and Him* (1970, dir. Max Pécas).¹⁵⁶ He started a new company, Home Cinema Service, to sell the films via mail order on U-Matic and Betamax tapes and began advertising in *Videography* magazine in October 1976.¹⁵⁷ Given Jacobson's sole position in the market, he priced the tapes at a staggering \$300 (but quickly dropped prices to \$229, then \$129, then \$89.95, and finally settled at \$59.95).¹⁵⁸ A graduate school roommate of Jacobson's passed the story to a friend at *Playboy*, which published a short item on the company in December 1976.¹⁵⁹ The first widespread public advertisement for adult video occurred when Cinema Concepts (in a partnership with distributor Valentine Productions) ran an advertisement in *Oui* magazine in July 1977.¹⁶⁰

Mark Slade, founder of Entertainment Video Releasing (EVR), was another pioneer. In October 1975, the former fashion photographer placed an ad in the *New York Times* seeking capital: "Investors sought for 500 motion pictures to be transferred to video disc for sale to the new upcoming mass consumer market."¹⁶¹ Though there is very little extant information on Slade, it seems clear that he was another of the public-domain operators, amassing a huge variety of non-Hollywood material for this venture.¹⁶² He was also one of the earliest distributors of adult video: beginning in March 1977, EVR began offering several dozen exclusively licensed hardcore films on U-Matic and Betamax formats, including *Sometime Sweet Susan* (1975, dir. Fred Donaldson) and *Teenage Cowgirls* (1973, dir. Ted Denver).¹⁶³ A year later, Slade spun off that portion of EVR into National Video Marketing, as well as the International Video Movie Club, to distribute adult material as part of the "Movies at Midnight" series, which by then included *Memories within Miss Aggie* (1974) and *Portrait* (1974), both directed by Gerard Damiano.¹⁶⁴

Other companies also entered the market around this time. In March 1977, Magnetic Communications of Oklahoma City sent flyers to three thousand industrial video equipment dealers, advertising twenty adult videos—which it began offering to the general public in June.¹⁶⁵ Astronics Tele-Cine debuted in late 1977, with U-Matic, Betamax, and VHS offerings, eventually including Alex de Renzy titles such as *Babyface* (1977) and *Pretty Peaches* (1978), and advertising in *Penthouse* and *Billboard* magazine.¹⁶⁶ Adult film producer and director Beau Buchanan started the International Home Video Club in spring 1978, aggressively taking out full-page advertisements in *Variety* and *Hustler* magazine to market a collection of adult titles, which included his own 1977 film *Captain Lust* and selections from the Mitchell Brothers such as *Behind the Green Door* (1972). He also offered mainstream material.¹⁶⁷ Buchanan, echoing Atkinson's Home Cinema Services strategy, trumpeted the potential of his products in advertisements: "X-Rated and other exciting movies in the privacy of your own home! Watch what you want when you want to watch it!"¹⁶⁸ The Mitchell Brothers, in addition to licensing their vast (and highly profitable) catalogue to others, formed their Film Group in mid-1978 to distribute their tapes, advertising widely in such places as *Penthouse* and *Home Video* magazines.¹⁶⁹ They even opened a video store at their famed O'Farrell Theater in San Francisco and began taping live sex shows in the Ultra Room, their live-performance space. Resulting titles included *Never a Tender Moment* (1979) and *Beyond De Sade* (1979), both featuring Marilyn Chambers, as well as *Honeysuckle Divine, Live!* (1979), featuring

the titular performer and her notorious stage act, in which she inserted objects into and ejected them from her vagina.¹⁷⁰ Freeway Video Enterprises, a spinoff of Freeway Films, founded in the 1960s by Armand Atamian, Lee Frost, and Bob Cresse, began marketing its well-known Golden Age productions, starring John Holmes and directed by Bob Chinn (known as the “Johnny Wadd” series), in early 1979.¹⁷¹

Many small distributors entered the scene in the late 1970s, and nearly all disappeared just as quickly as they had arrived. Between 1978 and 1979, for example, *Videography* magazine ran advertisements for Diverse Industries, Erotic Tape Company, Discotronics Films, Inc., Channel X Video, A-1 Video Services, Video Home Entertainment, Video Dimensions, Brentwood, and Hollywood Film Exchange, all of which quickly faded from the landscape.¹⁷² All these companies sold catalogue titles, profiting from the huge archive of adult material that distributors were happy to license. By April 1979, less than three years after Jacobson had tentatively entered the market with softcore films, *Playboy* magazine claimed that “just about every top-quality X-rated movie made in the past several years can be legitimately purchased over the counter” and that adult titles made up two-thirds of all available content on the new format.¹⁷³ The promise of Atkinson’s business model, which took the pleasures of the peep booth private, had finally come to fruition, albeit in a wild landscape lacking stabilization, long-term strategy, and shot-on-video content.

While these early distributors helped to establish the market, others solidified it and laid the foundation for the staggering success that followed. In the spring of 1977, Robert Sumner’s lease on the World Theater in New York, where he had premiered *Deep Throat* in 1972 to record crowds, was set to expire. As president of Mature Pictures in New York, he decided to make his library available on video, as well as licensing the films of the Mitchell Brothers, Alex de Renzy, and Radley Metzger. With a \$75,000 initial investment, Sumner began selling an inventory of thirty cassettes for \$110 each at the East World Theater, another location he managed.¹⁷⁴ His booth at a video convention in Manhattan in the summer of 1977 was the only one to offer actual films of any kind on cassettes, let alone adult material, and business grew so rapidly that he formed a separate company, Quality X, for the venture.¹⁷⁵ In October 1977, Quality X, the first major adult video distributor to offer hardcore material on video through such methods, began advertising in *Screw* magazine.¹⁷⁶ In the surest possible sign that adult video had value, Sumner also claimed to have developed a proprietary system that would prevent the pirating of his material, which he would duplicate himself rather than outsource.

Others in that group of significant early companies included TVX, founded by legendary exploitation producer Dave Friedman with Phillip Bernstene and former notorious pirate Curt Richter in 1975. The three would rapidly turn the company into one of the largest early distributors, boasting that they were the “first and largest manufacturer,” carrying an enormous inventory and supplying more than four hundred stores by 1979.¹⁷⁷ Friedman, like Sumner and others in this early period, recognized the potential of legitimizing the industry and moving it out of the bootlegging shadows. The 1979 TVX catalogue, in fact, stressed the link between legitimacy and quality: “TVX Features: The finest quality adult film video cassettes. Because of their immense popularity, TVX tapes are pirated. Why buy from these bootleggers? Why get ripped off by fly-by-night pirates who sell you 3rd, 4th, and 5th generation copies of TVX tapes?”¹⁷⁸ It was all part of a strategy (much like Sumner’s) to garner a larger, more legitimate market—which TVX captured, in part, by also distributing mainstream titles.

Friedman’s influence extended beyond Los Angeles. In July 1978, he convinced veteran adult film producer, distributor, and theater owner Arthur Morowitz (who, along with Howard Farber, had founded Distribpix in 1965) to sell TVX tapes in the lobby of one of his adult theaters in New York.¹⁷⁹ Morowitz later described the result: “After one week I sold seven cassettes and I was paid 50% each, so in a short time I made \$350 without doing anything. At that point I committed myself totally to video.”¹⁸⁰ That commitment turned into two of the earliest video stores in the United States, both called Sweetheart’s Home Video Center, located in the lobbies of New York’s World Theater and Manhattan Twin theater. By October 1978, Morowitz was advertising the stores in *Videography* magazine as having “the largest stock of adult rated video cassettes in New York,” carrying TVX tapes from Friedman, Quality-X tapes from Sumner, and his own line, called Video-X-Pix, which offered the Distribpix catalogue (figure 11). Prices were set at \$89.50 for Betamax and \$99.50 for VHS.¹⁸¹

By January 1979, Sweetheart’s was doing well enough that *Screw* publisher Al Goldstein even mentioned the stores in an interview (along with TVX), and Morowitz began making plans to expand the operation.¹⁸² That spring, he opened Video Shack in a small, five-hundred-square foot storefront, which carried all manner of mainstream and adult titles.¹⁸³ Shortly afterward, Morowitz moved to what would become his flagship store, a three-thousand-square-foot location on Broadway, eventually growing into a multistore chain and establishing him as a powerful player in the video rental industry, culminating in a decade-long stint as the president of the

**THE LARGEST STOCK
OF ADULT RATED
VIDEO CASSETTES
IN NEW YORK**



Sweetheart's Home Video Centers

2 Convenient Locations : Eastside-Westside

In the lobby of:

**THE THEATRE at
153 W. 49th St. N.Y.C.**

**THE THEATRE at
220 E. 59th St. N.Y.C.**

or telephone (212) 489-8156

We stock VIDEO - X - PIX, TVX, QUALITY X
in both Betamax and VHS formats.

ALL TITLES: Betamax \$89.50 VHS \$99.50 plus tax

These video cassettes are sold for home use only.

Figure 11. Arthur Morowitz, adult theater operator and founder of the Video Shack chain, also opened Sweetheart's Home Video Center, among the first adult video outlets in the United States. Advertisement, *Videography* (October 1978): 97.

Video Software Dealers Association.¹⁸⁴ This move, from theater lobbies to large, video-only stores, symbolizes what happened in the industry itself: the shift in both distribution and exhibition from celluloid to videotape.

Among the many veteran companies that assisted in establishing the adult video distribution marketplace and solidifying its business structures and practices were Arrow Video with Lou Peraino, Cal Vista International with Sidney Niekirk, Select/Essex with Joe and Jeff Steinman, VCX with Norm Arno, Adult Video Corporation (AVC) with Fred Hirsch, General Video with Reuben Sturman, Caballero Home Video and Swedish Erotica with Al and Noel Bloom, Video Taping Services (VTS) with Joe Donato, Video X Home Library with Andre De Anici, and Wonderful World of Video with Harry Mohny.¹⁸⁵ Russ Hampshire and Walter Gernert started Video Company of America (VCA) in 1978, building the company into a powerhouse committed to superior products, enlisting the best talent in front of and behind the camera, and investing in their own duplication facilities and in-house AVID editing systems before even major Hollywood studios had done so.¹⁸⁶ Hank Cartwright founded King of Video in 1979, which distributed the Eros line of adult videos, before creating Major Video, the first “superstore” concept, which was later directly copied by David Cook as the basis of Blockbuster Video, a history described in chapter 4.¹⁸⁷ These companies advertised at video trade shows as well as in their catalogues, which were universally a collection of Golden Age films and contemporary theatrical releases transferred to videotape.¹⁸⁸

The established adult film producers seemed hesitant to reconsider their products as being primarily *for* the new medium, preferring instead to worry about the gradually diminishing lines at the adult theaters as home video began to increase its market share.¹⁸⁹ Yet there was still plenty of economic incentive to stick with the traditional methods: in 1981, Friedman claimed that an “A-line” adult film would gross, on average, \$350,000 in theaters but only \$35,000 on video.¹⁹⁰ That was changing, however. Sumner’s Mature Pictures, in 1979, broke new ground when it released Gerard Damiano’s *People* and *Misbehavin’* simultaneously to theaters and on video, the first time such a strategy had been attempted.¹⁹¹ In 1981, VCX, which had previously distributed only the work of others, invested heavily in its first production, *High School Memories*, with acclaimed director Sam Weston (who used the pseudonym Anthony Spinelli) and established actors such as Annette Haven, Jamie Gillis, and John Leslie. The marketing campaign included full-page newspaper advertisements, and billboards featured a *videotape* image rather than the cast as background—signaling the industrial changes already well underway. As VCX marketing

director Saul Saget noted, “We didn’t really produce *High School Memories* for theaters. We’re into selling tapes.”¹⁹² Theatrical distribution still mattered, but *why* it mattered was changing; as David Chute pointed out in 1981, “The success of an explicit cassette seems still to be linked to the success of a movie in theaters.”¹⁹³ Such logic points to the shift toward recognizing the economic power of home video—but it also illustrates the cachet celluloid production and exhibition still seemed to have at this point in the transition for producers and audiences, who continued to associate the theater with “quality.” Producers, of course, used whatever tactics worked, which increasingly meant treating the theater as a launching pad.

That would prove especially true in 1981, when VCA released *Insatiable* (dir. Stu Segall, credited as Godfrey Daniels), a comeback film for Marilyn Chambers, who had ventured into mainstream films such as David Cronenberg’s *Rabid* (1977) after her success in the Mitchell Brothers’ *Behind the Green Door* (1972) and *Resurrection of Eve* (1973). *Insatiable* was a box-office success—earning a considerable \$2 million in theaters (despite playing only in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Denver)—but it exploded on video, selling twelve thousand copies at \$99.50 each on the first day of release. Eventually it went on to be the top-selling video (not just adult) of the year, and fans waited more than an hour at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January 1981 to see Chambers.¹⁹⁴ These tensions illustrate the industry’s position in 1981: still clinging to an older, and gradually failing, exhibition model but acknowledging where that model was headed. Already by that point, two companies were officially shooting directly on the new medium, foreshadowing what would eventually become an industry-wide change, and completing the journey of moving image pornography from the Panoram to the home.

FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE: “SHOT LIVE ON VIDEOTAPE”

The first deliberate effort to shoot directly on videotape as part of a corporate strategy occurred—somewhat surreptitiously—in the summer of 1978. David Jennings, a producer, camera operator, and director for Norm Arno at VCX, began his usual preparations for a series of loop productions. This time, however, Jennings planned to shoot simultaneously on Sony U-Matic video and 16mm film after recognizing the affordability of video equipment. The result was *Lights! Camera! Orgy!*, produced in late summer 1978 at Jennings’s apartment in Van Nuys. Afterward, Jennings and Joe Loveland, a musician and adult film enthusiast who frequently rented his home in Northern California to Jennings for loop productions, formed Love

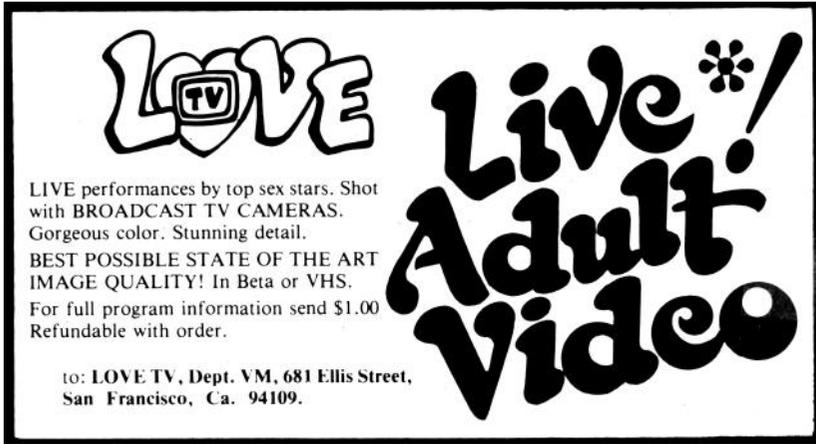


Figure 12. Love TV, pioneers in shooting directly on video, sought to allay fears about technical quality by emphasizing the “liveness” of the new medium. *Videography* (March 1979): 101.

Television Enterprises (later renamed LTV Enterprises), the first company designed from the ground up to produce and distribute adult videos.¹⁹⁵

By fall 1978, Jennings had completed three additional shot-on-video features, *The Perfect Gift*, *Teenage Playmates*, and *Bound*, all one hour long, on a budget of \$10,000 each. Advertisements began appearing in March 1979, listing the tapes at \$75 each, with news reports describing them as “shot . . . by industry pros who preferred that their names not be mentioned, according to [a] company spokesman who also preferred that his name not be mentioned.”¹⁹⁶ Jennings, sensing that video technology might make some viewers nervous, advertised the films as being “shot live on videotape,” thus attempting to make the tapes seem more “real” than celluloid productions. The company’s first advertisement, in fact, reads: “LIVE performances by top sex stars. Shot with BROADCAST TV CAMERAS. Gorgeous color. Stunning detail. BEST POSSIBLE STATE OF THE ART IMAGE QUALITY!” (figure 12).¹⁹⁷ The first review of the Love TV tapes commends just such elements:

They’ve brought the camera in close and held it there so you can see the action. Theatrical films transferred to tape often include many medium and long shots, which will appear satisfactorily on the theater screen but lose all detail when reduced to the size of the tube. Love works mainly with a few close-ups, leaving nothing to the imagination. It’s one of the big advantages of shooting specifically for video and Love makes the most of it.¹⁹⁸

Jennings's contribution to adult film history was significant: if, by summer 1978, video had already shown the industry the future of distribution and exhibition, Jennings demonstrated the medium's potential for production. But he wasn't the only one willing to gamble.

In December 1978, Sal Esposito, who had been distributing adult video out of Reseda, California, since late 1977, approached Maria and Carlos Tobalina, owners of Hollywood International Film Corporation of America, to license their catalogue. Unsure of a price, they asked Bill Margold, their public relations director, who suggested \$10,000 per title.¹⁹⁹ Esposito angrily declined, phoning Margold the next morning to complain. Margold suggested Esposito should just go into production directly on video rather than license celluloid for transfer. Much like Jennings, Margold thought the technology could be marketed as shooting "live on video," emphasizing the apparent "realness" that videotape provided. Margold had further suggestions: make the tapes in thirty-minute installments, modeled on television sitcoms, release one per week, and cast rising star Seka as the lead.²⁰⁰ Esposito agreed and, in late January 1979, along with director Daniel Symms (as David Summers), writer Maxine Hall (as Max Lyon), and performers Seka, Margold, and others, shot *Football Widow* and *Love Story* over a weekend, releasing them under the Scorpio label. They followed these with *High School Report Card* in March with the same crew and *Super-Ware Party* in July with Margold directing. In early 1980, Scorpio produced two more entries with Alan Colberg (as Rene Deneuve) directing: *Inside Hollywood: The Anne Dixon Story* and *Inside Hollywood: The John Barfield Story*, intended to be the first two of a six-part, unfinished "soap opera" series.²⁰¹

The Scorpio group sensed that Margold's narrative ideas might balance out the fear that video would decrease visual quality, and used them to court the respectability that might appeal to female viewers. Colberg (who used a female pseudonym in the films), in an interview on the set of the *Inside Hollywood* series, makes that appeal blatant and even invokes soap operas as a marker of quality rather than a deterrent:

[The series] is catered toward the demographics of a male and female relaxing in their living room. The story is really rather sophisticated. It's not designed for a male only, it doesn't degrade females in any way, it doesn't call them sluts or prostitutes, or put them in impossible situations that only a woman could be in. It takes a lot of the chauvinism out of it. And the minimum look we expect is equal to any prime time TV soap.²⁰²

This type of appeal became increasingly common and later formed the basis of Candida Royalle's strategies with Femme Productions, outlined in

chapter 3. While Margold's initial idea of modeling adult video on narratives, structures, and strategies familiar to television production carried through with Scorpio, his suggestion to release one per week did not; after the two *Inside Hollywood* productions, Scorpio folded.²⁰³

Even if they did not reach lasting financial success, Scorpio and Love TV radically altered the landscape of the adult film industry. These companies illustrated the new production and distribution methods that soon everyone would employ—but they also represented the complete alteration of a much bigger paradigm. If the anxiety surrounding pornography had always been rooted in tensions between public and private enactment of pleasure, then home video fully provided an escape for the industry into the safe space of the home. By 1978, *Variety* reported that 50 percent of all material available on videocassette was pornography.²⁰⁴ The adult industry demonstrated to Hollywood the potential profits in video—a role that some tried to obscure even as it was playing out. In 1979, for example, Bob Brewin, at the annual Consumer Electronics Show, admitted as much: “No one in a leadership position that promises to revolutionize home entertainment really wants to admit that the first stage of that revolution is to bring what used to be called pornography and is now dubbed ‘adult entertainment’ from the local theatre into the home.”²⁰⁵ On its journey from the Panoram through the peep-show booth and adult motel rooms and finally into the home, pornography transformed technologically, finally becoming a private mechanism for spectators, away from the regulations governing public space.

That transformation, however, came with new challenges. If the industry had long been obsessed with attaining respectability, typically through the mobilization of markers of quality, that attitude did not change with video, even if new technological capabilities ensured rapid production cycles and a glut of new material flooding the market. In the early 1980s, as the industry grew, it retreated somewhat into the shadows, unable to find a way to connect to larger audiences wary of its content and cultural associations. Going private didn't mean the industry wasn't public; there was still the matter of selling the products, after all. The industry struggled to find respectability. In 1981, David Chute noted that “industry spokesmen are nearly unanimous in the belief that only a significant improvement in the quality of the films themselves can ultimately snag a substantial number of new hardcore patrons.”²⁰⁶ The type of quality that industry members meant, of course, was deeply connected to the notion that adult film must do “something more” than simply produce pleasure. Even Atkinson, the

man who had, in many ways, initiated the entire enterprise, noted in 1986 that the cultural pressure on mainstream video stores to drop adult tapes might be somewhat justified: "It ain't exactly like defending D.H. Lawrence."²⁰⁷ This observation illustrates the ongoing tension regarding pleasures of the body versus pleasures of the mind, and ultimately suggests that adult video was somehow "lesser" a work than Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).

Atkinson had some reason to be worried, in the end. It eventually became plainly evident that some producers, most notably Mark Carriere, had abandoned all interest in anything but profit in their quest to feed video stores with product. Called the "Mack Sennett of adult entertainment" by the *Los Angeles Times*, Carriere gleefully ignored any semblance of artistry in favor of supervising multiple crews on single locations shooting as quickly as possible, or stringing together existing scenes in new permutations under new titles.²⁰⁸ In Carriere's view, quality was irrelevant. What mattered was quantity. In July 1989, for example, Carriere and his brother-in-law John Laolagi rented a YWCA building, the historic Clark Residence, in downtown Los Angeles for what they called a "pornathon." With four crews shooting simultaneously for four straight weeks, the result was forty-seven completed titles, a staggering output characteristic of Carriere's practices—and a snapshot, albeit extreme, of where the industry stood in the years following Jennings's experiments in his apartment.²⁰⁹

Well before that point, however, the industry had a ways to go before it could settle into a clear set of industrial practices. In order to build audiences (or at least try), parts of the adult industry labored in the early 1980s to reposition and align adult video with the "something more" that could ease tensions about simple pleasures being enough. Jeff Steinman, president of Essex Video, made such links clear in 1984: "Video has opened new doors and avenues by bringing a quality, adult-oriented product into the living room and the bedroom. It has meant more money and higher quality in X-rated productions. We're no longer selling just shock value. We're now presenting our product on a silver platter. Eroticism is the key to success in this business."²¹⁰ Such concerns with quality and respectability, marked by the impulse to create something erotic rather than pornographic, inevitably link back to efforts to contain pleasure—especially women's pleasure—for its own sake. Elliot Abelson, an attorney for various adult film distributors, made that connection perfectly clear in a 1981 interview: "We will see the audience change drastically, and the major influx will be women."²¹¹ For the adult video industry to take its next steps toward modern capitalist efficiency, that influx would need to be navigated carefully.

In the next chapter, I examine a discursive mechanism created to address these and other concerns related to quality: *Adult Video News (AVN)*, a publication designed as a fan newsletter but eventually growing into a trade journal. The quality and respectability strategies it employed forever changed the industry and brought new and lasting meaning to those terms—as well as reproducing and recirculating the same gendered anxieties and tensions surrounding them. Atkinson and others may have initiated the legitimization of the industry, but it would take a publication peripheral to the business to continue that process. If strategies to make pornography private defined, in many ways, the birth of the adult video industry, *AVN* looked for ways to make it public all over again.