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Part One: Popular Genres
Take an Easy Ride: Sexploitation in the 1970s

I. Q. Hunter

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives –

Philip Larkin, High Windows

‘From now on it’s going to be fanny, blow jobs, big tits and beer – that’s the kind of lifestyle I want.’

Dave (Johnny Vegas), Sex Lives of the Potato Men (2004)

Low-budget sex comedies, ‘permissive’ dramas, sex education films (known in the trade as ‘white-coaters’) and sexploitation documentaries sustained the British film industry in the 1970s. Unabashedly populist, they explode the assumption that the mainstream of British cinema means only literary adaptations and ‘miserablist’ social dramas. While the fly-by-night productions of leading 1970s sexploitationeers like Stanley Long and Derek Ford are still comparatively unknown, films like Come Play with Me (1976) and Confessions of a Window Cleaner (1974) ran for months or even years at Soho sex clubs and provincial theatres. The sexploitation industry collapsed in the early 1980s because of the arrival of video, tighter censorship, inflation and the end of the Eady Levy in 1985, but today the films offer valuable insights into the tastes, values and frustrated desires of ordinary filmgoers at a period of rapid social and moral change, when exploitation was one of the few thriving areas of indigenous cinema.

This essay provides a brief overview of the British sex film in the 1970s, a genre whose first historian, David McGillivray, described as having no redeeming features whatsoever. Indeed, not so long ago very little critical work existed on exploitation; perhaps the most overlooked stretch of the ‘lost continent’ of British cinema. Since the late 1990s, however, in addition to McGillivray’s insider account and the BBC 2 documentary adapted from it, there have been a number of useful overviews of British sex films, ranging from Ian Conrich’s synoptic discussion in the Journal of Popular British Cinema, Matthew Sweet’s journalistic account in Shepperton Babylon, Simon Sheridan’s two exhaustive books for FAB Press on Mary Millington and sexploitation, a handful of video reviews and pioneering interpretations of individual sexploitation films such as Queen Kong (1976), and, most impressive of all, Leon Hunt’s definitive British Low
At the same time, many previously obscure films (Zeta One [1969], Au Pair Girls [1972]) have emerged on DVD labels such as Jezebel and Medusa, while the ironic cult of the political errors and fashionable excesses of the 1970s (see, for example, Life on Mars [2006–2007]) has reclaimed, among others, Robin Askwith, the star of the Confessions films (1974–7), as an icon of unembarrassed Anglo-masculinity. In short, a field of study once wholly beneath contempt is now not only visible but reasonably well served by both academia and fandom, and rough agreement has emerged about British exploitation’s role in trickling down the ideology of ‘permissiveness’ from the elite and middle classes to suburbia and the working class.

As McGillivray and Conrich authoritatively demonstrate, the British exploitation film can be dated from 1957, when the first nudist films were released, to 1981, when production petered out with barrel-scraping efforts such as Emmanuelle in Soho. The term exploitation refers, in the general sense it has accrued since the 1950s, to low-budget films on sensational subjects, tailored to be appetising to specific audiences. But so-called ‘classical exploitation films’ during the studio era in the United States can be more tightly defined, being a distinctive mode of sub-B-movie production of independently made and distributed films on lurid topics banned by the Production Code. Films like Child Bride (1938), Reefer Madness (1936) and Mom and Dad (1947) were a tabloid mixture of voyeurism, mock-exposé and self-righteousness. Their salacious moralism was defined by the ‘square up’, a title crawl at the start of the film that announced the producers’ educational purpose in order to appease censors and legitimate the audience’s curiosity. Classical exploitation’s crudity and emphasis on spectacle over narrative coherence distanced them from the products of the classical Hollywood style. The result, as Eric Schaefer has remarked, is that classical exploitation is more like an alternative mode of film production than simply the ‘bad’ film-making it has come to represent:

The classical exploitation films made between 1920 and 1950 had a unique style that set them apart from movies produced by the major production companies such as MGM and Universal and even those of many of the minor companies such as Republic and Monogram. . . . We can chuckle at the incompetence of classical exploitation films, but it is important to understand these ‘problems’ as the product of a specific mode of production.6

Classical exploitation waned in the 1950s and ‘exploitation film’ became an all-purpose label for cheap sensational movies that were intensively promoted, distributed to a sectionalised market and produced in cycles and subgenres such as the nudist film and soft-core exploitation, which is usually dated from Russ Meyer’s ‘tits and ass’ extravaganza, The Immoral Mr Teas (1959).

British exploitation, similarly, began with cautious ‘A’-rated nudist films in the 1950s that posed as propaganda for naturism, and then diversified into subgenres that responded to social trends, changing audiences, the vagaries of censorship and the financial success of key films. The key subgenres, with their dates of maximum impact, were these:

- The naturist/nudist film (1958–63)
- Sexploitation documentaries (1963–71, peaking with four films in 1971)
- Sex education films (1969–71)
Permissive drama (1968–79; twenty-nine were produced in total in the 1970s)
Erotic horror (1970–6)

The development of these subgenres must be understood within the context of British film censorship, which until recently was the most stringent in Europe. Unlike in the United States, films could not be screened without the approval of what was then called the British Board of Film Censors; there was, for example, no equivalent to American classical exploitation’s traditions of ‘four walling’ (renting cinemas for one-off screenings of films made outside the Production Code). British sexploitation was constrained by censors who rigorously distinguished between ‘serious films’ and exploitation, and who disapproved of gratuitously arousing nudity and sex scenes.

Consequently, exploitation subgenres, such as sex comedies and documentary exposés, flourished in Britain long after the legalisation of hard-core had marginalised them in the USA and continental Europe. British sex films in the 1970s were either mildly titillating soft-core romps or, in the spirit of classical exploitation, disguised as something other than attempted pornography – as social realism, for example, or documentary reports on emerging subcultural trends. It is true that there was some small-scale British hard-core production in the 1970s that, thanks to police corruption and a loophole in the Obscene Publications Act, could be seen in licensed sex cinemas. But, in regard to domestic consumption, because the BBFC simply banned explicit material, British exploitation film-makers had to find ways to attract audiences with extremely mild fare.

The most popular solution to this enforced castration was the sex comedy, which combined simulated sex scenes with saucy humour in the tradition of the Carry On films. Titles such as Percy (1971), Confessions of a Sex Maniac (1974), Can You Keep It up for a Week? (1974), Peri- lope Pulls It Off (1974), I’m Not Feeling Myself Tonight (1975), Adventures of a Taxi Driver (1975) and, generally reckoned the high point of the cycle, Eskimo Nell (1974) have come to define the British contribution to erotic cinema – ‘ghastly British cinematic abominations’, as Julian Petley dubs them, ‘...the majority of which were neither sexy nor comic’. These films were in the music-hall, naughty postcard tradition of farcical low comedy – ‘a harder, cinematic version of Brian Rix losing his trousers at the Whitehall Theatre’, as one of exploitation’s key producers, Stanley Long, put it. Their unglamorous vulgarity is that of the ever-popular British take on the ‘real wives’ genre of pornography, which offers a proletarian (or, more pretentiously, Bahktinian) focus on the body’s low pleasures. In the sex comedies, as in soft-core magazines like Fiesta, there was, in Feona Attwood’s words,

a particular brand of carnival in which ordinary life becomes a fiesta because of the endless opportuni-
ties that can be filched from the routine of life for physical pleasure – for sex and laughs; a utopian and vulgar practice of everyday life.

The sex comedy played not so much on the audience’s fascination with sex as on its embarrassment about it, and lived up to the national stereotype of the British as a sniggeringly repressed people, who, to paraphrase George Mikes, had hot water bottles instead of sex lives. As Ian Connich has noted, ‘the British male’s sexual fantasies about the provinces are of the ordinary, recognisable and available woman and her libidinous neighbour.’

Key – indeed now iconic – films such as Confessions of a Window Cleaner record the farcical exploits of a working-class young man taking advantage of the new ‘permissive society’. Leon Hunt has traced how the discourse of ‘permissiveness’, which was articulated in 1970s sex comedies, embodied a consumerist attitude to sex typified and popularised to the working classes by the Sun newspaper under Rupert Murdoch’s ownership from 1969. Unlike the Carry Ons, which centred on the impossibility of sexual fulfilment, the sex comedies gazed yearningly at a male-centred paradisical world of instantly available ‘dolly birds’ and carefree serial copulation. The women were sex objects, the men permanently randy and the attitude to sex firmly consumerist – something you got whenever the opportunity arose. The Confessions comedies ‘celebrated the joys of laddish abandon and zipless, post-Pill hedonism’ and contrasted Robin Askwith’s proletarian dynamism with his customer’s pretence of bourgeois rectitude.
early 1970s, most sexploitation films were changing from cautionary tales of the effects of unrestrained pleasure-seeking to cautious condemnations of the effects of sexual repression. As permissiveness filtered down to the ordinary punter, they managed to reflect something of the liberated pleasures newly available to their working-class and suburban audiences.

The sex comedy crossed over from the niche of sexploitation to mainstream success among mixed audiences. This is not entirely surprising, since it mostly elaborated on the sexual themes of sitcoms of the period, such as *On the Buses* and *Mind Your Language* and their feature-film spin-offs, which Julian Upton has described as ‘the only domestic cinematic trend to see the decade through’.

But there were other important strands of sexploitation, such as the dramatic vice exposé film, which had first emerged in Britain in the late 1950s. While in the 1960s, films such as *The Yellow Teddybears* (1964) had explored sexual themes and youthful misdemeanours, the subgenre really took off in 1970 with films such as *Permissive* (1970) and *Groupie Girl* (1970) cashing in on the rock scene and its exploitable hangers-on such as groupies and drug addicts. Like counter-culture exploitation film in the USA (*The Trip* [1966], for example), these ‘permissive dramas’ offered snapshots of both changing mores and the pleasurably reprehensible behaviour of the liberated young.
After the success of *Emmanuelle* (1974), a few sex films, such as *Erotic Inferno* (1975), *Emily* (1976) and the De Sade adaptation *Cruel Passion* (1977), ignored the prevailing style of seedy realism and had pretensions to be glossy erotic dramas. Set in country houses, a fantasy space isolated from the everyday world, these films depicted obsessional fantasies being played out in a self-enclosed ‘pornotopia’ unhindered by law, social ties and middle-class restraint.16

The most popular subgenre, however, aside from the sex comedy, was the exploitation documentary, of which the most straightforward and apparently instructional version was the handful of British-made sex education films that began with *Love Variations* (1969) and *Love and Marriage* (1970). *Love Variations*, one of the first British films to show nudity in the UK, consisted entirely of alternating scenes of a ‘family doctor’ showing diagrams of sex positions and illustrative tableaux of posed figures faking coition in increasingly unlikely and back-breaking postures. The producers, of course, stressed their good intentions to the censors. The press book for *Love Variations* stated, a little disingenuously:

> The film does not seek to entertain – only to inform. The producers wish to point out that although the film is frank, comprehensive and explicit it will almost certainly prove unrewarding to those looking for titillation or sensation and will be of interest only to those motivated by a sincere desire to be informed.

The BBFC, indecisive about how to treat sex education films, accepted this but nevertheless at first rejected *Love Variations* on the splendidly perverse grounds that since the film was not entertaining it was unsuitable for cinemas, which were essentially places of entertainment. When finally released, *Love Variations* smashed house records at the Jacey Tatler cinema in London, taking £19,309 in the first three weeks and achieving seventy-one capacity houses out of eighty-five performances.17

The exploitation documentary emerged in the 1970s as a fascinatingly impure, hybrid and often haphazard style of realism, which voyeuristically depicted forbidden worlds of sexual pleasure and the interpenetration of subcultural, counter-cultural and suburban practices. Usually presented as drama-documentary exposés, they awkwardly combined a semi-documentary look at emerging sexual trends with moralistic disapproval and a campaigning condemnation of Victorian prudishness. This kind of reportage derived from the so-called ‘mondo film’, after an Italian film of 1962, *Mondo Cane* (‘a dog’s life’), which was a sarcastic journalistic compilation of exotic sights, startling incidents and staged curiosities from global locations. Its worldwide success led to numerous sequels and imitations, usually focusing on sexual material and mapping the emerging sexual counterculture. British efforts, beginning with Stanley Long and Arnold Lewis Miller’s *London in the Raw* (1964), *Our Incredible World* (1966) and *Primitive London* (1965), which combined footage of childbirth, striptease, hair transplants and intimations of a hidden subcultural London, were followed by films such as *Extremes* (1971), which reported on sensational aspects of the counterculture, and *The Pornbrokers* (1973), a semi-autobiographical documentary by the hard-core film-maker John Lindsay about the fledgling porn industry. Consisting mostly of vox pops, the film is partly a defence of porn (it ends with the voiceover declaring, 'In the final event
porn is rather like television. If you don’t like it you can simply turn off’) and partly, and more curiously, an indictment of its own audience as sad punters who embody typical male weakness – ‘Men are such suckers when they look at pretty birdies,’ Lindsay remarks, adding, ‘Men are nuts, they like to see this crap.’

*Naughty!,* a report on porn made by Stanley Long, typified both the exploitation documentary’s promiscuity of style and its ideological commitments. A political, albeit self-serving film, it took the side of the younger generation and the ‘average man in the street’ against the oppressions of the old order and appropriated the discourse of permissiveness in the name of popular sexual liberation. Like the sex comedies, *Naughty!* was enraged by Victorian values and what its press book describes as ‘structures imposed by moralising law-making sections of society’, and emphasised the difference between healthy permissiveness and the supposed hypocrisy and repression of the Victorian era out of which Britain was now emerging. Like the British horror film in the 1970s, exploitation films were addressed to audiences understood to be either sympathetic to, or at least tempted by, alternatives to repressive middle-class hypocrisy.18

While the sex comedies tracked working-class sexuality, the documentaries contrasted the boredom of suburban living with the promise of permissive sex. The penetration of a new sexual morality into ‘the sexual desert of suburbia’, as *Suburban Wives* (1971) called it, particularly agitated a remarkable series of sex documentaries made by Derek Ford and Stanley Long. These were vignette films in a variety of documentary techniques, whose multiple storylines, held together by sardonic voiceovers, worked through the impact of permissiveness on the suburban middle class and the proliferation of tempting new alternatives to married convention. The first of the series, *The Wife Swappers*, directed by Ford in 1969, was a cautionary tale that depicted swinging as ‘a game of increasing risk and diminishing returns’ even as it revelled in the opportunities for nudity. According to McGillivray, it cost only £16,000 but became one of the most successful British sex films ever made.19 It broke the daily house record at the 450-seat Cinephone movie house in its opening week with £3,72320 and was still consistently making nearly £1,500 in its twentieth week at the same cinema.21

*Suburban Wives* was followed by *Commuter Husbands* (1972), *Sex and the Other Woman* (1972) (about adultery), *On the Game* (1973) (prostitution) and *It Could Happen to You* (1975) (VD). Despite their often baffling confusions of style, tone and moral address, these films coherently articulated ideological positions that justify permissiveness as reviving the ‘natural man’ repressed by suburban life, and take for granted the battle of the sexes as an eternal state of affairs. ‘A woman is a completely different creature from the male,’ *Suburban Wives*’s voiceover wearily intones, while in *Commuter Husbands*, over a shot of a bowler-hatted gent, the narrator languidly declares, ‘At first sight the commuting man is a peaceful law-abiding creature, placidly accepting the dullness of his nine-to-five routine and the burden of his thirty-year mortgage’, but inside he ‘blazes into breathtaking fantasy’. *Commuter Husbands* is explicitly organised by a theory of man as a hunter, his natural self damped down by contemporary work, and consists of six stories told by a woman in order to support its pseudo-anthropological homage to Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape*: ‘MAN, when off the leash, reverting to his natural role as the HUNTER, a predator with an appetite not for food, but for a more tasty dish called WOMAN’, as the press sheet puts it.
The sexploitation documentary’s fragmented style, ideological commitment and fascination with spectacle harked back to the outmoded practices of classical exploitation, not least to what Schaefer describes as its challenge to classical Hollywood narrative:

Exploitation films relied on forbidden spectacle to differentiate themselves from classical Hollywood narrative films and conventional documentaries. As such, they were related to the cinematic tradition Tom Gunning has called ‘the cinema of attractions.’ The impulse to display spectacle was relied on almost exclusively in some exploitation films or served up in others in such a way as to disrupt the conventions expected in classical Hollywood cinema.22

This is perfectly demonstrated in *Take an Easy Ride*, a short programmer directed by Kenneth Rowles in 1976, whose chaos of documentary styles and indifference to narrative render it all but avant-garde. To tell its story of the dangers of hitchhiking, the film combines found footage, dramatisations, flashback reconstructions, allusions to multiple unrelated genres (from the rock film to the *giallo*) and as many exploitable topics as could be crammed into and stretched out to forty-four minutes: drugs, rape, threesomes, runaway youth and the abiding social problem of homicidal hitchhiking lesbians. Production strategies directly comparable to those Schaefer isolates in classical exploitation include ‘padding’ (interminable scenes of cars winding through country roads for no purpose other than to fill up the running time), ‘recycling’ (found footage that would turn up in numerous other films) and ‘the square up’, where the film is presented, with
an entirely straight face, as an exercise in public information. Therefore, Rowles’s insistence, having cut sections from two rape scenes and a threesome, that this film will give the opportunity for the public to see the dangers in hitchhiking and as this film will be viewed in the West End cinemas, where there will be a large proportion of young people, I expect it will be taken in a more serious light.

In retrospect, films like *Naughty!* or *Take an Easy Ride* sum up all the problems of the British sexploitation film in the 1970s, quite apart from the low-budget, impoverished acting and disorientating editing, which to fans of ‘paracinema’ scarcely count as flaws at all. Although the producers, with the exception of David Sullivan, who perpetrated *Come Play with Me*, appear not to have been anxious to move into hard-core production, the films were, to some extent, pathetic substitutes for the unavailable real thing. Doomed to euphemism, British sex films offered mild comic thrills and redundant instruction to punters eager for altogether juicier meat. Nevertheless, the style of British sexploitation continues, albeit in different contexts and guises. The square-up lives on, dedicated to convincing censors that sexual material is really educational, as with *The Lover’s Guide* video in 1991 and, more recently, the TV series *A Girl’s Guide to 21st Century Sex* (Five, 30 October–18 December 2006), in which, as in the whitecoater, jaw-droppingly explicit renditions of real sex were legitimised by the ‘educational’ context and, just as in classical exploitation, any excitement immediately deflated by thin-lipped warnings about venereal disease. The sex comedy format has also been revived, still harping on repression and hypocrisy, but now invigorated by the examples of *Viz* magazine’s reclamation of working-class bawdy, the continuing popularity of unreconstructed northern comics like Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown, and American gross-out comedies such as *American Pie* (1999). Cosily transgressive farces such as *Personal Services* (1987) and *Preaching to the Perverted* (1997), as well as critically despised bad-taste fests like *UFO* (1993), the underrated and revealing *Sex Lives of the Potato Men, Fat Slags* (both 2004) and *I Want Candy* (2007) draw on a populist style of British cinema generally thought best forgotten.

But perhaps the most direct link to 1970s exploitation, or rather the culmination of what those films promised but could never deliver, is the popular porn director Ben Dover (real name, Lindsay Honey). At once laddish chancer, disbelieving the sexual possibilities that come his way, and creepy groomer of a traditional cast of horny housewives and randy secretaries, Ben Dover, in video and DVD releases such as *Housewife Hussies* (2001) and *British Housewife Fantasies Volume 4* (2005), updates with grubby authenticity Robin Askwith’s working-class conspicuous sexual consumption. Whatever the aesthetic disaster of British exploitation – and only *Eskimo Nell* really qualifies as a first-rate movie – it embodied a distinctively British take on sex still relevant and commercial today.

I wish to thank the BBFC, the BFI Library and Steve Chibnall for their help in researching this essay.

Notes
2 *Come Play with Me* ran for four years at the Classic Moulin in Great Windmill Street, while *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* was the highest grossing British film of 1974. See Simon Sheridan, *Keeping the British End Up: Four Decades of Saucy Cinema* (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2001), p. 29.


8 Some films were made in alternative versions or had material added to spice them up for foreign markets; The Sex Thief (1973), for example, an entirely standard sex comedy, was released on the continent with hard-core inserts as A Handful of Diamonds. See Sheridan, Keeping the British End Up, pp. 25–6.


13 Hunt, British Low Culture.


15 Julian Upton, ‘Carry on Sitcom: The British Sitcom Spin-off Film 1968–80’, Bright Lights Film Journal, no. 35, January 2002 <www.brightlightsfilm.com/35/britishsitcoms1>. Hammer’s film of On the Buses, for example, was the most successful British film of the year (1971), grossing over £1 million in domestic rentals in the first six months of release.


18 'In the absence of detailed audience research, it is reasonable to assume that by cashing in on the permissive society, exploitation films helped to spread rumours of metropolitan licence to suburbia and the tantalised provinces. While middle-class sophisticates thrilled to *Blow-up* (1967) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1973), working-class and suburban “men-in-macs” encountered the sexual revolution in the shabby guise of *Au Pair Girls* (1972).’ Hunter, review, p. 169.

19 McGillivray, *Doing Rude Things*, p. 56. He puts the film’s success down to its appeal to couples. Ford said it was intended for audiences of about thirty-five years old, *Premiere*, no. 3.


22 Schaefer, ‘*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*’, p. 77.

23 Ibid., pp. 56–75.

24 Letter from Kenneth Rowles to Stephen Murphy dated 3 December 1973 in BBFC file for *Take an Easy Ride*. Sheridan, in *Keeping the British End Up*, suggests that the film was made in 1974 but the BBFC received a 16mm version of it for certification in November 1973. The film subsequently took two years to get passed, which might explain why it seems so out of date for 1976. The BBFC cut elements of a rape scene and pubic close-ups in 1973 and 1975, the examiner noting that the film ‘which supposedly shows the perils of hitch hiking becomes an exercise in “tongue-licking” sex in Reel 3’.


26 Moreover, as in the 1970s, films posing as art manage to smuggle into the 18 certificate category far more explicit material than is conventionally allowed in mere exploitation: *9 Songs* (2004) and *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005), for instance.
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