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Publication Date

2019-06-01



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NOTES

1. Lucas Hilderbrand, "Historical Fantasies: 1970s Gay Male Pornography in the Archives," in *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s*, ed. Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub (Amherst: University of Massachusetts

**HOMOREALIST UPLIFT:
JAGUAR PRODUCTIONS'
SYNTHESIS OF PRODUCTION
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POLITICS IN A LANDMARK
GAY FILM**

Finley Freibert

Largely forgotten today, Jaguar Productions' *The Experiment* (Gorton Hall, 1973) is possibly the first gay film to employ a camera crane. A coming-of-age narrative centered on a young gas station attendant named Billy Joe, this adult film's uplifting narrative – a working single father ultimately accepts his son's homosexuality – proves to be structurally analogous with the uplift aesthetic facilitated by the rental of a jib to add both spatial (crane shots) and economic (production value) lift to the film. In this essay, *The Experiment* is referred to as a "gay film" because there is a political stake in resisting the contemporary urge to bracket hardcore films like *The Experiment* out of the history of gay cinema. In fact, as Lucas Hilderbrand has argued, such films constituted the core of 1970s gay cinema when

- Press, 2016), 327–48.
2. For a representative review see Harold Fairbanks, "Teenagers Awake in 'Experiment,'" *Advocate*, February 28, 1973, 26. On patrons' affective response, see Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, *Sinema* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 195.
 3. A comprehensive literature review exceeds the scope of this essay. In sum, there is a disproportionate preference in academic literature for gay underground and experimental cinemas despite the fact that numerically gay adult films produced in this era rival the number of productions in all other gay associated genres. Despite important monographs on gay adult media by Thomas Waugh and Jeffrey Escoffier, this film category often goes unacknowledged in reference to the 1970s. This is evident, for instance, in the statement: "in the

considering both the massive number of hardcore gay films that were produced that decade and their widespread discussion in the gay press.¹ In Los Angeles specifically, films produced by and for gay men were predominantly adult films and the gay press celebrated these films as *the* liberation era gay cinema. In this Los Angeles milieu, there were numerous notable and prolific filmmakers including Tom DeSimone, Sal Grasso, Dimitri Svigelj and Joe Tiffenbach; however, Pat Rocco – a groundbreaking gay filmmaker and activist known for his romantic depictions of gay intimacy – is currently the only director to consistently receive retrospective screenings. During its initial release, reviews for *The Experiment* mainly discussed the film's pioneering enactment of a father's acceptance of his gay son, which reportedly brought many patrons to tears.² Mostly unremembered today because adult cinema remains a culturally delegitimised category, the film warrants revisiting for its intersectional race and class politics that were unprecedented for the time.³

The Experiment is significant as an early gay film with a Mexican–American protagonist, particularly when considering it was produced in southern California within social contexts where racism and anti-gay bigotry were locally specific, historically constituted and mutually intersecting oppressive forces. In southern California during this time, anti-gay sentiments were rampant and embroiled with Cold War-era bigotry against any deviations from the heteronormative nuclear family structure.⁴ The film's cultural backdrop was informed by divisive intersections of class and racial struggle within southern Californian labour unions that arose from nativist racism against Mexican–American organising, particularly the United Farm Workers' Delano grape strike.⁵ Additionally, during the production of *The Experiment*, racist moral panics were on the rise following investigations of a series of murders in northern California for which the suspect was a gay Chicano. These contexts informed gay press discussions of contemporaneous intersections of homophobia and anti-Chicano racism.⁶

The balance between uplift and struggle in *The Experiment* can be understood as a synthesis of earlier gay films, for example those made by Pat Rocco, that presented homosexuality through sentimental visions of romantic utopian space-claiming and a later grittier aesthetic influenced by Italian neorealism that Jeffrey Escoffier has dubbed "homorealism."⁷ These utopian and homorealist aesthetics are typically divergent in terms of location, with the utopian hinging towards staged and strategically chosen idyllic spaces and the homorealist primarily shot on location in urban locales. *The Experiment* idiosyncratically synthesises both of these aesthetics, for instance when it presents Billy's realisation that he is gay it initially

United States the gay and lesbian cinema that emerged in the 1970s

emphasized documentary and experimental work," B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

4. David K. Johnson has recently traced how postwar anti-gay sentiments in Southern California affected emergent gay media industries in *Buying Gay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 23–52.
5. For discussion of these divisions see Steve Rand, "Farm Strike Creates Split Inside the Labor Movement," *Los Angeles Free Press*, May 11, 1973, 12.
6. Noel Hernandez, "On Being Mexican and Gay," *Vector*, February 1973, 14–15.
7. On Rocco and space-claiming see Whitney Strub, "Mondo Rocco: Mapping Gay Los Angeles Sexual Geography in the Late-1960s Films of Pat Rocco," *Radical History*

emphasises his shame and anxiety rather than the unremarked acceptance reflected in Rocco classics like *Disneyland Discovery* (1968). Billy's sexuality is presented as a site of struggle in the classed and racialised context of blue-collar rurality. Reminiscent of Italian neorealism's focus on narratives of the marginalised (usually the working-class and sex workers), *The Experiment* transcodes a homorealist focus on social marginality by centralising a multiply minoritised working-class gay Mexican–American who struggles to survive in a small desert town. Primarily shot on location in the rural desert near Indio and Palm Springs, the film reflects a homorealist preference for location-based verisimilitude while jettisoning homorealist urban-centrism to focus on gay rurality, which was previously the domain of more exclusively utopic gay films.⁸

A close reading of the third substantive crane shot in *The Experiment* reveals the nuanced balance of homorealist and utopic presentations of working-class gay life. This shot condenses composition-in-depth and dynamic camera movement with the implication of a location shift to convey exuberant companionship in the sharing of a break from a laborious workday. The shot commences with a tightly framed composition that positions an open grill in midground tightly flanked by two adults and two conversing youths. The shot suggests a blue-collar lunch break, given the smoking grill. Billy Joe and his buddy Gary Lee emerge from a garage entry behind the quartet and the camera pans left and zooms out to keep the two centrally framed. The two weave through a succession of auto shop paraphernalia – inoperative cars, corroded steel drums and piles of car parts – revealed in the foreground by a full shot that pans right to follow the couple's stroll. With arms swinging merrily, Gary hops over a pile of debris, the two toss a case of beer back and forth, and the jib lifts to a moderately high angle as they scramble over a nearby fence. The uplifting of the camera as the two exit their workspace to enter a space of recreation provides a figurative match with the next sequence where the two playfully cavort across the dunes of a Coachella Valley desert. Working-class contestation of socioeconomic conditions further pervades the film as the two sneak into a wealthy Palm Springs property for an unauthorised pool tryst, lubricate their social exchanges via communal beer consumption and enact their first sexual experience in an austere shack. Socioeconomic class contestation is also allegorised near the film's conclusion when the only apparent antagonist is an affluent Los Angeles snob, appropriately named Rich.

The Experiment transformed 1970s gay-produced film by including extensive character development, employing a homorealist aesthetic and incorporating a camera crane uncharacteristic in such films. Beyond increasing the production value, these new methods made

Review 2012, no. 113 (2012): 13–34. Escoffier coined the term "homorealist" primarily in discussing New York-based gay cinema, see "Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 1 (2017): 88–113.

8. For the key analysis of *Song of the Loon* (1970) as an early radical depiction of gay rurality see Ryan Powell, "Nowhere Home: Radical Gay Rurality in *Song of the Loon*," *Little Joe* 1 (2010): 63–68.

for an accessible synthesis of gay politics with intersectional class politics through the figure of a young gay Mexican–American. Better remembered gay adult films from this era, such as *Boys in the Sand* (Wakefield Poole, 1971) and *L.A. Plays Itself* (Fred Halsted, 1972), typically employed non-standard styles, including discontinuity editing inspired by underground cinema and the New Hollywood, to reflect their oppositional approaches to representing homosexuality. Ironically, *The Experiment's* socially conscious and intersectional perspective largely adopted the standard techniques of classical Hollywood style in order to present its homorealist closet-shattering in an "uplifting," comprehensible and direct manner.