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Journal

Film Criticism, 42(2)

ISSN

2471-4364

Author

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Publication Date

2018-11-14

DOI

10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.203

Peer reviewed

Film Criticism is a peer-reviewed, online publication bringing together scholarship in the field of cinema and media studies since 1975.

Volume 42, No. 2

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From AIDS-era Queer Icon to Sanitized Nostalgic Property: The Cultural Histories of Bettie Page Merchandise Circulation

Finley Freibert

Volume 42, Issue 2: *Film and Merchandise*, November 2018

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.203>

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Abstract

The merchandising of Bettie Page since the mid-20th century has evinced her diverse cultural associations at a variety of historical moments. Yet from a contemporary standpoint, the historical narratives prompted in the licensing of her name and image flatten her past into a palatable emblem of 1950s pin-up culture. In this article, I interrogate the ways Page's image has been mobilized since the 1950s. I propose a cultural biography of Bettie Page attuned to her queer communitarian circulation in order to counter the nostalgic sanitation of her image since the 1990s.

In November of 2017, several media industry and gay press news outlets announced that Violet Chachki, drag performer and 2015 *RuPaul's Drag Race* season seven champion, would front an advertising campaign for a Bettie Page-inspired lingerie line by London-based brand Playful Promises. [1][#N1] The campaign featured photography by Anna Swiczeniuk, in which Chachki's poses, makeup, hairstyle, and apparel evoked a contemporary nostalgic view of Bettie Page's pin-up style. While the campaign was largely applauded, there was a degree of negative criticism in the form of cis chauvinist comments that usually misgendered Chachki, who self-identifies as genderqueer, and asserted that lingerie should be exclusively worn by cis women. [2][#N2] Playful Promises publicly denounced the negative commentary and posted a five-prong defense of their marketing decision on Twitter. In sum, this statement denounced the transphobic comments, criticized the gender disparities in pin-up fan communities, and suggested the productive use of drag for marketing a product culturally associated with hyper-femininity. [3][#N3] In a final polemic statement, the brand positioned the campaign and their decision to foreground "a non-binary model who is not a cis woman, shot by a woman, wearing lingerie created by women" as an all-out industrial assault on the male gaze. [4][#N4] The company's redress assigned a political value to their circulation of the Page brand through a queer figure and by extension framed the consumption of their Page-inspired merchandise as equivalent to a political act.

Since the resurgence of interest in Bettie Page in the 1990s, decontextualized nostalgia and generalizable alterity have become two primary facets of Page's star image that maintain her popularity across a variety of subcultures. Contemporary cultural trends position Bettie Page as an offbeat alternative to the nostalgic appreciation of 1950s pin-up culture. Page's dark hair, distinctive bangs, and often kitschy

apparel set her apart from more wholesome associations of popular blonde pin-ups, the Betty Grables and Marilyn Monroes. Yet the actual history of Page's past queer circulation and its regulation is all but forgotten in her contemporary mainstream commodification. The commodification of queer culture has a vast history: in the 1930s *Queen Christina* (1933) tie-in apparel traded on the distinctively gay camp sensibility that inspired Garbo's wardrobe, [5][#N5] during the brief surge of "bisexual chic" in the 1970s David Bowie's public self-identification as both gay and bisexual functioned to market his *Ziggy Stardust* album, and more recently, neoliberal capitalization on diversity abounds. As seen in the Chachki example, Page's property retains a relationship with queerness and sex-positivity, but that relation necessarily privileges self-expression over communitarian solidarity.

A critical cultural biography of Bettie Page would be cognizant of the proliferation of access to her persona that defined the queer circulation of her likeness in the 1980s and preceded the aggressive regulation of her image as a media property. This article aims to examine the circulation and merchandising of Bettie Page over the span of several decades. In doing so, it offers a bridge between material culture studies and star studies via an industrial micro-history of the pin-up photograph, a publicity photo repurposed as film merchandise. A broad temporal frame allows a historical and comparative lens for critically engaging with merchandising's tendency to occlude both histories of struggle and the ideological underpinnings of licensing practices. [6][#N6] In this article I recount and juxtapose the trajectories that Bettie Page's image has taken in three cultural moments from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Movie Stars without Movies: Irving Klaw, Bettie Page, and the Mid-century Pin-up Industry

During the World War II era, the merchandising of Hollywood film culture created pin-up culture and by extension produced the public persona of Bettie Page. [7][#N7] This seemingly simplistic observation has been largely understated in both academic and popular historiography of the midcentury pin-up industry. It is also significant because it underscores the formative contradiction of much of pin-up culture: there are "movie stars" without movies. Bettie Page was, for all intents and purposes, a "movie star" at least a decade before she appeared in a feature length motion picture because there was a shared functional origin and resulting cultural slippage between the categories of "movie star" and "pin-up." This slippage resulted dually from the proliferation of non-movie star pin-ups that substituted for a decrease in Hollywood pin-ups, and from the career transitions of successful pin-up models, such as Marilyn Monroe, into movie stars. [8][#N8] This observation is important to both star studies and studies of material culture since the pin-up was a publicity still refashioned, and eventually monetized, for fan consumption. The publicity photo was one of a variety of marketing techniques for singling out screen talent that, as star studies examining cinema's transitional-era have shown, facilitated the shift from a discourse on acting to an appreciation of individual stars. [9][#N9] From a material history perspective, industrial conditions sparked changes in the production and consumption of pin-ups by the 1940s as they became viable forms of film merchandise. The mid-century pin-up industry began as the still photo merchandising of stars. The commercialization of non-movie star pin-ups followed a wartime product shortage of "actual" movie star photographs. This product shortage was due to wartime cutbacks generally, studios underestimating the still's profit potential, and conservative public relations practices

that considered pin-ups too crass a form of commercial exploitation. [10][#N10] The reduction in movie star stills effectively created the market for non-movie star pin-ups.

In our contemporary cultural landscape, the name Irving Klaw has little resonance other than bifurcated associations that, on initial consideration, do not match up. For fans of pin-up culture, and Bettie Page fans specifically, Irving Klaw more or less means: the auteur behind Bettie Page's "dark side," namely the bondage photos and loops featuring Page. For fans of Hollywood film culture, and for film studies scholars who worked during the 1970s and 1980s, Irving Klaw was known as the founder and collector of a vast for-profit archive of Hollywood promotional materials, particularly film stills, known as Movie Star News.

A history of Irving Klaw's commercial operations links these two disparate associations, and reveals Klaw as a missing link between the mainstream Hollywood film industry and the seemingly marginal print and motion picture industries that commercially exploited sex. Movie Star News emerged out of the merchandising of Hollywood stardom in the late 1930s. In 1936, Irving Klaw opened a secondhand bookstore in Manhattan called Irving Klaw's Bookshop. [11][#N11] Specializing in magazine back issues, the store advertised in the classifieds sections of local newspapers. [12][#N12] Klaw's idea to sell individual photographs of movie stars came to him when he noticed youths, young women as the myth goes, attempting to cut clippings of movie star pictorials from his magazines. [13][#N13] The store soon shifted to focus on movie merchandising, primarily specializing in still photographs, but also stocking other forms of Hollywood memorabilia. Klaw's innovation was in realizing that the promotional still photograph could serve both as advertising for the attractions and commodities offered by the movie industry, and as a form of merchandise that promoted itself as a material means for fans to demonstrate their devotion to a star.

His operation soon made waves in the motion picture industry as he forged business ties with studios in order to acquire product, and he quickly became known as a crucial intermediary between the studios and picturegoers. By the early 1940s, Hollywood studios and industry reporters considered Klaw a definitive gauge of audience interests. In 1943, *Variety* devoted a front-page article to Klaw's operation, calling it "the largest mail order film still biz in the country." [14][#N14] Harry Rauch of the *Los Angeles Times* bestowed an even loftier international status on Klaw as the "world's busiest salesman of movie stills," and stated that the market information Klaw accumulated amounted to "a box-office barometer for Hollywood." [15][#N15] Famed Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper even used Klaw's sales numbers as fodder to stir up star controversies. [16][#N16]

Klaw's sales data, keen sense of fan enthusiasm, and his access to current film industry press materials contributed to the sense that Klaw had his hand on the pulse of Hollywood trends. One article contended that Klaw's ability to sense and track fan enthusiasm could assist in predicting potential star value of new talent. [17][#N17] Film industry analysts were not the only ones that saw market value in Klaw's materials. According to *New York Times* reporting, clothing manufacturers and department stores used Klaw's press materials to keep up with the latest fashion trends:

Department stores were flooded overnight with Hollywood duplicates whenever a New York premièred picture came out with a new design. The studios finally discovered that

some manufacturers were hurrying down to Klaw's to get photographs of Hollywood stars which they studied under a microscope to get the details of expensive filmland designing.

[18].[#N18]

Reports such as these underscore how embedded Irving Klaw was in larger schemas for merchandising motion picture fandom and culture.

While movie stars were central to his operation, fans frequently sent Klaw requests for stars in very specific scenarios or with certain attributes. By 1943, Klaw received requests for sexualized scenarios that reflected preferences divergent from normative heterosexuality. Some of his reported requests only subtly indicated same-sex sexual attraction. For instance, he received requests for male physique studies, a genre of photography popular among gay men. Klaw implied he had lesbian customers, noting ambiguously that navy nurses sought "the personal feminine touch they left behind" in their preference for pin-up photos of women. [19].[#N19] Klaw also received requests for more overtly sexual materials that deviated from notions of socially acceptable erotic display, including nude men, women bound in chains, women being tortured, and models portraying corpses. One *Variety* article underscored that Klaw kept such photos in a file segregated from his Hollywood stills, and attributed these requests to the uncultured and crass desires of "yokels." [20].[#N20] This emphasis in the industry press served to differentiate these requests from the more culturally sanctioned forms of motion picture merchandise consumption, and perhaps to distance such media from the mainstream film industry. Nonetheless, Klaw pursued this market, expanding his operation to shoot such stills in-house in order to meet demand. This new genre of photographs tailored to customers' sexual tastes effectively served as stills without films, recalling the way pin-ups generated movie stars without movies.

Bettie Page became a central figure for Klaw's operation in the 1950s. She posed for pin-up photos, performed in bondage scenarios, and appeared in two feature-length burlesque movies under Klaw's direction. Page had entered the modeling industry in the 1940s initially posing for amateur photographers who paid to shoot nearly nude models, and her pictures soon appeared in so-called "cheesecake" magazines that featured scantily clad women but no suggestion of sexual content. [21].[#N21]

By the early 1950s, both Bettie Page and Irving Klaw became the targets of local and national battles against the commercialization of sexual media. In 1952, police raided an outdoor nude photo shoot on a dairy farm in New York, and Page was charged with disorderly conduct. [22].[#N22] Soon after, Page appeared in Klaw's *Teaserama* (1955), a burlesque variety film, which was met with stringent municipal censorship in Lorain, Ohio, in 1955, where it was ruled obscene and ultimately condemned for destruction. [23].[#N23] Around the same time, Klaw hired Bettie Page for several bondage-themed posing sessions that were photographed and filmed for mail-order merchandise including stills, periodicals, and short film loops. In 1955, Klaw was subpoenaed by Senator Estes Kafauver to testify at Senate hearings investigating an assumed link between juvenile delinquency and pornography. Klaw was called to testify on May 31, 1955, and held in contempt for refusing to answer several questions. [24].[#N24] Bettie Page also came under fire during these investigations. The 1955 hearing featured a case in which a Boy Scout had been found dead, bound and hanging upside-down from a tree. The incident was compared to bondage photographs of Bettie Page in Klaw's publication *Cartoon and Model Parade*. [25].[#N25] The photograph and Boy Scout incident were then juxtaposed to a murder case involving two male lovers to imply a link

between bondage culture, homosexuality, and the death of children. A year later Philadelphia district attorney Victor Blanc discussed Bettie Page in his testimony on the distribution of obscene materials. Blanc presented publications to the hearing that were deemed so “perfectly vile” and “fantastically depraved in nature” that Senator Kefauver did not want them printed in the public record. [26].[#N26] However, Kefauver specifically emphasized the presence of Bettie Page in the publication as a damning point of reference since Page was by now widely associated with bondage photography. The overall implication in these analyses was that sadomasochistic media, like those involving Klaw and Page, were a threat to children, could lead them to become homosexuals, and could ultimately result in their death in sexual scenarios considered bizarre by heteronormative standards.

In the aftermath of the Senate Committee hearings several lawsuits ensued concerning the obscenity of Bettie Page images and the publications of Irving Klaw. While the federal court decision that involved Irving Klaw concluded relatively favorably for him, [27].[#N27] the span of all censorial pursuits against Klaw and Page evinced the persistent postwar regulation of “deviant” sexual depictions and their connotation with homosexuality. Such endeavors pivoted on the legal and cultural conflation of any form of non-normative sexuality with homosexuality. In the Cold War era, this conflation was reinforced by more rhetorically expansive euphemisms for homosexuality, such as “sexual perversion.” In that context, homosexuality was abjected via homophobic associations with social and, as in the logic of the Senate Hearings, actual death.

While the 1940s saw a motion picture merchandising explosion with Klaw at the center, the film industry press grew silent on all things Klaw by 1955 as a result of the negative publicity and explicit association with pornography. This silence also aligned with the parallel development of more refined pornographic media, namely *Playboy*, that positioned the sexualized consumption of Hollywood actresses like Marilyn Monroe within the respectable *Playboy* lifestyle. [28].[#N28] Bettie Page also receded into obscurity after the hearings. Although her image circulated in men’s magazines into the 1960s, the shift in sexual representation to hardcore depictions of sexual contact solidified Page’s cultural obsolescence by the 1970s.

Setting the Record Askew: Bettie Page Revival and the Politics of Queer Access in the 1980s and early 1990s

By 1980, Bettie Page had been all but forgotten as an icon of American sexual culture predating the “sexual revolution.” In the 1970s, both adult-oriented and popular press publications hardly mentioned Page, other than in passing as one of the pin-up stars of yesteryear. In 1977, a writer for the heterosexual men’s magazine *High Society* lamented that his colleagues did not recognize or even know of Bettie Page. [29].[#N29] On the other hand, a *Time* magazine article provided a brief coded reference to the “esoteric” queer circulation of Page within leather subcultures. [30].[#N30] While Page had been nearly forgotten by heterosexual cultural formations, for queer subcultures of the 1980s the reclamation of Bettie Page presented an avenue for identification and coalition building amongst separate identity-based factions.

In the 1980s the circulation of Bettie Page’s bondage photos and motion pictures served as a mediated reflection of queer coalitionary tendencies during the AIDS crisis. Whereas during the post-Stonewall

1970s, the movements for the liberation of non-normative sexual identities became increasingly fractured, the AIDS epidemic and the genocidal nonresponse of the federal government catalyzed activism and coalition building among queer women and men. The leather and BDSM communities specifically generated lines of support across gender and sexual differences that included bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians. [31][#N31] Within this context the circulation of Bettie Page imagery varied from the original print merchandise (pin-up photos and magazines) to VHS copies of her bondage loops and burlesque features. The propagation of Page memorabilia served a subcultural function and played an integral part in queer folks' shared media landscape. For instance, Susie Bright, sex educator and pioneering voice in the sex-positive lesbian community of the 1980s, recalled that her introduction to Page was facilitated through leathermen's communal sharing of VHS bootlegs:

I was first introduced to the radiance of Bettie Page in 1983, by the editors of a gay leathermen's magazine. They lent me a VHS bondage tape of Bettie modeling from the 1950s which was so insanely cute that I played it continuously during Thanksgiving dinner that year. It was the beginning of a devoted affair. [32][#N32]

Indeed, both leather and BDSM subcultures of the 1980s circulated Bettie Page memorabilia and traded in Page-inspired imagery to the extent that by 1990 regular Page-themed events were held at queer spaces across North America. In San Francisco, the Roxie Cinema hosted an annual "Betty Page Show and Party," and in Toronto the Betty Page Social Club held frequent leather and fetish theme nights, which were inclusive across the gender spectrum, at the famous gay nightclub Boots. [33][#N33]

PURGATORY

(pur-ga-tohr-ee)
n. 1. (in Roman Catholic Belief) a place or condition in which souls undergo purification by temporary punishment. 2. a place or condition of suffering.

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[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.203-00000001.jpg\]](#)

Figure 1: Clipping of an advertisement for a Betty Page Social Club event at Boots in *Extra!*, October 13, 1995, 33.

In 1998, the Penthouse Nite Club, a historic Vancouver establishment open since 1945, began hosting “Diva’s Den,” a lesbian burlesque event with a women-only policy, and the marketing for the event featured vintage photographs of Page. [34][#N34]

These specific subcultural circulations of Bettie Page’s image recall the AIDS-era practices of cult bootlegging and cinephilic mining of popular culture among gay men, which have been discussed by Lucas Hilderbrand and Roger Hallas, respectively. [35][#N35] However, because Page was a catalyst for inter-community interaction and because her image circulated on various media her queer cultural promulgation in the 1980s and early 1990s was not specific to any single medium or individual LGBTQ+ identity. The 1980s recovery of Page’s image among differing queer factions reflects the multiple ways she could be perceived as diverging from dominant heterosexual culture. For instance, whereas scarce innuendo comprised the minuscule lesbian content in movies of the 1950s, Page and Klaw’s contemporaneous all-female fetish scenarios could be retrospectively celebrated as unprecedented overt lesbian displays. On the other hand, in her kitsch “jungle girl” shoot for Bunny Yeager, Page exuded

tongue-in-cheek expressions and poses that could be appreciated via a gay camp sensibility as excessively outstripping their ostensible heterosexual function.

Page's queer reclamation served at least three subcultural functions relevant to the context of the 1980s AIDS epidemic. First, it provided a pre-AIDS historical antecedent that reflected the ongoing inclusion of both women and men in the formation and sustaining of queer counterpublics involving leather culture and sadomasochistic practices. As early as the 1950s, the public controversies and legal struggles around Bettie Page and Irving Klaw's bondage photographs underscored that non-normative sexualities incorporating sadomasochism had long been considered part of the umbrella category of "sexual deviancy" that also included homosexuality. Second, this reclamation provided a trajectory for generating a historically inflected radical consciousness to critique the homophobic and anti-BDSM ideologies of the 1980s. In the 1950s, obscenity law had provided a method for enacting this ideology through the disciplining of "sexual deviancy" as a public menace, particularly to children. In the 1970s, anti-sex work legal regimes justified and enabled the virulent policing of queer subcultures. [36][#N36] So too, the image and circulation of Bettie Page provided access to a cultural memory of the homophobic and anti-BDSM ideology that undergirded homophobic legal and social violence exacerbated by the emerging sex panics around the AIDS crisis. Finally, the queer reclamation of Page provided for a situated and critically engaged form of queer reception that countered the increasingly grim association with queer sex in the 1980s. As Susie Bright recalled, Page was "a little ray of sunshine in an otherwise bleak period." [37][#N37]

At this moment, Bettie Page also had a particular significance for trans communities of the 1980s, which related to her earlier work with Irving Klaw. [38][#N38] Historically and industrially, the circulation of Bettie Page's most notorious photos coincided with the publication of some of the earliest trans community publications. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, Irving Klaw produced and distributed photographs of Bettie Page in sadomasochistic scenarios and Klaw's Nutrix Company published the seven volume book series *Betty Page in Bondage* along with other photo books featuring Page. [39][#N39] Klaw's company also published several trans-oriented publications that had both erotic and communitarian components; for instance, the multivolume *Letters from Female Impersonators* provided space for readers of Klaw's earlier publications, such as *Femme Mimics* (1960) and *Female Impersonators on Parade* (1960), to send letters of response, submit amateur photos of themselves, and facilitate a communal sense of belonging. Readers of Nutrix's trans publications would have been aware of Bettie Page because Klaw cross-promoted his other products within each book and also specified if Page was featured in a book but not named in its title. [40][#N40]

In the 1980s, Kim Christy reclaimed this early relation between Bettie Page and nascent trans communities of the late 1950s. Christy was an important figure in the history of trans print and motion picture media who edited *F.M.I. (Female Mimics International)* and directed several adult films in the 1980s and 1990s. After a friend complemented her resemblance to Page, readers of *F.M.I.* lovingly referred to Christy as "the Betty Page of Female Mimics." [41][#N41] Christy embraced this association with Page in an editorial detailing her admiration for the model, and Christy's picture was accompanied by one of Page. [42][#N42] Through the distributor of one of *F.M.I.*'s sister magazines, *Exotique*, Christy subsequently published a three volume reprint of the 1950s issues of *Exotique* in collaboration with Taschen. Issues of *F.M.I.* included advertisements for this collection, and the promotion emphasized

that Bettie Page photos were prominently featured in the three volumes. [43][#N43]

Bettie Page was also circulated among lesbian and sex-positive feminist cultures of the 1980s. The lesbian erotic magazine *On Our Backs* included a pictorial of Susie Bright that lovingly spoofed the Klaw-Page bondage scenarios. [44][#N44] In 1989 San Francisco's Roxie Cinema hosted an erotic film program called "How to Read a Dirty Movie," curated by Bright, that incorporated Klaw loops alongside more contemporary erotica. Bright stated that the program was intended to encourage constructive dialogue about sex and pornography amongst a wide spectrum of sexual identities. [45][#N45] The sex-positive feminist embrace of Bettie Page in the 1980s would even be archived in Senate hearings. Echoing the child-protectionist ideology of the 1950s Kefauver Hearings, in 1984 Senator Strom Thurmond held subcommittee inquiries into the effects of pornography on women and children. During those hearings sex educator and adult film star Veronica Vera reflected on the significance of Page as a positive role model for Vera's consent and trust-based professional negotiations with media industry personnel. [46][#N46]

To be sure, the inter- and intra-identity group solidarities that formed within LGBTQ+ circles around the name and likeness of Bettie Page were not devoid of the circulation of capital. As many of the above examples indicate, her persona was promulgated in circumstances, often via grey economic relations, where monetary exchange was a primary imperative. Where Page's name or image was used to advertise events at cinemas, nightclubs, or bars, the objective from a business standpoint would have been to draw in as many customers as possible that would pay entrance fees or purchase food or drink. Besides monetary value, Page's queer iconicity in this moment also suggests that degrees of cultural capital were reflected in both the level of access to Page's image and the ability to reclaim it via a queer-inflected taste regime. In other words, to obtain media from the past, to perform the reclamation of a forgotten celebrity, and to re-disseminate her image within peer circles all would have required an elevated social status dependent on class-hierarchies. [47][#N47] Yet, capital's entanglements with forms of communal solidarity are not unique to the case of Bettie Page, and inform the majority of queer social formations around media from the late 1980s onward.

Bettie Page existed as a prominent figure in queer cultural production and circulation during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. That history is nearly erased from all contemporary accounts of Page, yet traces do occasionally emerge. For instance, in 2013 the Visual AIDS artist collective coordinated an exhibition that engaged New York University's archives. One portion of the exhibit featured correspondence between gay filmmaker and writer Joe Westmoreland and novelist/poet Dennis Cooper discussing the interface between AIDS activism and artistic practice during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly as Westmoreland became increasingly affected by AIDS-related illness in 1995. [48][#N48] This correspondence was accompanied by an archival flyer for a 1990s screening of Westmoreland's film *Betty Page: Setting the Record Straight* (1990), [49][#N49] a campy mockumentary on both Page's life and her queer following. This film was not only screened at LGBT film festivals in the 1990s, but was also reviewed and distributed through cult video magazines, alongside the rereleases of Page's 1950s movies, discussed in the next section, evincing the under-researched intersection of underground cult video cultures and queer cultural production that existed in the 1980s and 1990s. [50][#N50]



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.203-00000002.jpg]

Figure 2: Clipping of a promotional photo for *Betty Page: Setting the Record Straight in Dracula*, August 1992, 42.

Deviance Deracination and Identity Investment: The Nostalgic Repurposing of Bettie Page in the 1990s

The nostalgic reappraisal of Bettie Page crossed over to mainstream recognition in 1991 and soon after her cultural cache and associated merchandising skyrocketed. In the early 1990s, two events occurred that, on the one hand, facilitated the propulsion of Bettie Page to widespread popularity, and on the other, collided her cult subcultural resonance with a more conventional landscape of nostalgia for the 1950s.

The first event that propelled Page into the public eye was Walt Disney Studios' release of *The Rocketeer* (1991). Comic book artist, Dave Stevens, who created the Rocketeer character in 1982 and the subsequent comic book series, sold the motion picture rights to Disney in 1985. [51][#N51] According to Stevens, Disney's main interest was in the property's merchandising possibilities. [52][#N52] The comic book prominently featured a character based on Bettie Page, but Stevens selectively dissociated the character from Page because as he explained: "I don't own this likeness and I can't claim to own it because it's based ultimately on a real person." [53][#N53]

The studio distanced this character even further from recognizable resemblance to Bettie Page by renaming her Jenny, played by Jennifer Connelly, and omitting Page's signature forehead fringe. Given that *The Rocketeer* was marketed as a family film and associated with Disney, this further removal of links to Page recalls the Senate hearings' child protectionism that aimed to hinder the corrupting influence of queer Bettie in the 1950s. Yet despite the diminishment of the character's source material in the film itself, the critical commentary surrounding the film's release constantly brought up Bettie Page in a way that functioned to promote the film through a somewhat sensationalistic association with sexual content. Public radio movie commentator Elvis Mitchell explained that Jenny was "actually based on a model named Betty Page, who was quite famous for doing a number of nudie sort of things in the '40s and '50s." [54][#N54] Even Jennifer Connelly referenced the connection to Page, quipping of the character's sanitation: "They sent her to the dry cleaners." [55][#N55] Another effect of *The Rocketeer* coverage was its function as a history lesson for the general public in a manner that excised all of Page's associations with the Klaw bondage merchandise. Instead, Page was portrayed as a squeaky-clean emblem of 1950s pin-up culture. Although that reflected a large portion of her image circulation during her early career, it muted both the substantial public knowledge of her bondage photos in the 1950s and the queer preservation of Page's image in the 1980s, when she was absent from popular consciousness. The news coverage of *The Rocketeer* reveals that Bettie Page was not yet a contemporary household name synonymous with 1950s nostalgia. This coverage always qualified the movie's connection to Bettie Page with capsule descriptions of her that provided for a historical revision of Page as an emblem of postwar Americana. Though likely inadvertent, this generated a major public interest in Page that has continued into the contemporary moment.

A second event that popularized Page in the early 1990s was the rerelease of Page's burlesque features, Irving Klaw's *Varietease* (1954) and *Teaserama* (1955), on videocassette in 1993 by Something Weird Video. Press materials for the releases promoted the narrative that these features had long been considered nonextant. [56][#N56] While her burlesque acts in the films were relatively non-central and she was billed third on the original 1950s press materials, the advertising and cover art for the videocassettes emphasize Page's presence as the main attraction of these releases. [57][#N57]



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.203-00000003.jpg]

Figure 3: Box cover for Something Weird Video's *Varietease* videocassette.

While the release of the *Varietease* and *Teaserama* videocassettes made some headlines outside of cult movie subculture, a lawsuit concerning the video releases generated even more popular press coverage. The lawsuit originated from the artwork that the company used for promoting the releases. Something Weird held the distribution rights for the films themselves, re-cuts of the footage, and the original promotional materials for the film including all footage and photographic prints of Bettie Page. [58].[#N58] However, an artist was commissioned to draw new promotional illustrations of Page that foregrounded her presence in these movies. Page sued Something Weird, alleging that the distributor violated a California statute regarding the use of another's likeness in advertising materials and also the common law right of publicity. The federal court that decided the case ruled the distributor was within their First Amendment protections. [59].[#N59] At the time this case was considered a landmark in affirming video

distributor advertising rights. Yet, the legal commentary on the case was largely negative due to arguments that a celebrity's identity should ultimately be considered personal property, and that the property claim should be considered more important than the distributor's claim of "public interest" in the historical value of the films' recirculation. [60][#N60] The negative commentary on the case occludes the fact that Something Weird Video was and continues to be a significant institution of preservation addressing the ongoing crises that plague queer media archives. [61][#N61]

Our Betty? Towards a Queer Folk History of Bettie Page

With her name and likeness cast into the public eye once again, Page hired Curtis Management Group Worldwide (CMG) in 1993 to manage her name and image. [62][#N62] Up until 1995 nearly all media pertaining to Page had used the name "Betty Page," but following that year, in conjunction with the nostalgic rebranding that is now popularly associated with Page, her officially sanctioned name became "Bettie Page." That year marked an increase in Page nostalgia marketing; in April the "International Bettie Page Festival" was held in Los Angeles, and by November a Page biography was promoted for its authors' collaboration with Page. Soon after, the official website BettiePage.com went live. An inspection of available newspaper archives reveals that the widespread usage of "Bettie Page" surpassed "Betty Page" around 1997. [63][#N63] With these events in mind, it is conceivable that the respelling of Page's name was implemented to shift her newly licensable property away from associations with Page media, like the Something Weird films, that were not under the property's domain. Under the shifted name, the sustained popularity of Page into our current moment is likely attributable to two key components: nostalgia marketing and the ability of Page's image to embody multiple forms of alterity.

Bettie Page's revival in the early 1990s fit within larger marketing and cultural shifts towards recycling figures, commodities, and styles of the past. The nostalgia market surge in the 1990s is often attributed to the capitalization on aging baby boomers' sentimental reflections on the past, particularly due to this demographic's increasing amount of leisure time and disposable income. [64][#N64] Besides the strategic demographic targeting of baby boomers, this nostalgia boom has been accompanied by, and arguably facilitated by, technological shifts among various media formats that encouraged the recycling of past media within new contexts. In the last quarter of the 20th century the marketing of dead celebrities has increased alongside the aggressive commercial exploitation of dead celebrities' identities as intellectual property, and Bettie Page has been listed among the top earning dead celebrities for the past decade. [65][#N65] The majority of dead celebrities in this ranked list are musicians with album sales cited as a primary revenue source alongside other forms of tie-in merchandise. [66][#N66] While Page's revenue stream also stems from merchandising and licensing, she differs from these other dead celebrities in the diverse commodities through which her property travels, including boutique clothing stores, accessories, soaps, posters, and slot machines. Creative producers who have engaged with Page's image assert that it is distinctive and yet pliable enough to accommodate changing styles, a quality that allows for recurrent commercial repurposing. [67][#N67]

This pliability is apparent in the way Page has retrospectively become a generalized emblem of "the alternative," and perhaps this is the key to the continued success of her licensable property. Page's past underground distribution within marginalized sexual subcultures offered avenues of identification for queer folks subjected to homophobic abjection during the AIDS crisis. For musical subcultures inspired

by the 1950s, particularly punk fusions with rockabilly such as The Cramps, Page exemplifies the freewheeling and overtly sexual underbelly of a decade largely associated with puritanical conservatism. Additionally, aspects of her image that were not particularly marginal during her original popularity are recuperated for exemplifying alternatives to contemporary norms. In the 1990s during the reign of “heroin chic,” when emaciation became a normative ideal female form, Page was celebrated as the “the Queen of Curves,” despite the fact that in the 1950s her figure conformed to the dominant hourglass ideal. [68][#N68] Page currently circulates within body positive communities in which Page-inspired outfits, amateur pin-up photos, and selfies are popular. Successively, this proliferation has mobilized direct marketing of officially licensed Page products (e.g., branded plus-size lingerie and yoga mats) in terms of body positivity. [69][#N69] The assimilation of Page across a wide range of subcultural communities since the 1980s speaks to the standardization of her licensable property, which increasingly personifies a generic sense of alterity against hegemonic cultures.

Page’s brand retains a complex relationship to its queer past despite moves to mask that past since the early 1990s. Page’s queer sex-positive sensibility has been reflected across various media in the past two decades. Mary Harron’s biopic, *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005), had queer involvement both on and off-screen, and its release garnered substantial coverage in gay press outlets. Bettie Page’s look has recurrently been repurposed by cast members of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and in 2009 the show’s production company, World of Wonder, hosted a gallery show of Page-inspired work entitled “Bettie Page: Heaven Bound.” Apparent from these recent examples, the queer embrace of Page’s image persists, but often in contexts of competition (whether film festivals, reality shows, or the art market). In these contexts, the perfection of a retro-“Bettie” style reflects a neoliberal ethic where differential self-expression is prized over collective solidarity.

By tracing the popular and subcultural associations of Bettie Page across three different historical moments, we can begin to gather a queer cultural biography of Page. Such a biography reveals the political investments of regulating Page’s image across these different periods. In the 1950s, Page came to be socially abjected because of photographs that deviated from societal standards of sexuality. Queer folks of the 1980s reclaimed Page as an open-access and inter-community form of positive sexual expression during the AIDS-era when queer peoples, queer sex, and queer identities were consigned to the status of death by hegemonic homophobic ideology. Since the 1990s the rebranding of her image via generalized alterity and nostalgia for the 1950s has tended towards a sanitization of the complex history of social marginality that was forged in her past circulations in the 1950s and 1980s. Page’s image remains in a vexed relationship with queerness, at once registering sex-positivity while inducing entrepreneurial value.

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Notes

1. Steven Chan, “RuPaul’s Drag Race’s Violet Chachki Stars in Lingerie Campaign,” *Hollywood Reporter*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rupauls-drag-races-violet-chachki-stars-lingerie-campaign-1058887>.[♣] [\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. Daniel Reynolds, “America’s Next Drag Superstar Is 22, Genderqueer, and a Trans Activist,” *The Advocate*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2015/06/02/americas-next-drag-superstar-22-genderqueer-and-trans-activ>.[♣] [\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. @PlayfulPromises, Twitter Post, November 20, 2017, 5:03 a.m., <https://twitter.com/PlayfulPromises/status/932595355279118336>.[♣] [\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. Ibid.[♣] [\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
5. Jane Gaines, “The Queen Christina Tie-ups: Convergence of Show Window and Screen,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 35–60.[♣] [\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
6. Other merchandising studies have used a similar comparative lens productively in examining the industrial consequences of ideological shifts (for instance from artisanal to corporate licensing modes), see Avi Santo, “Batman versus The Green Hornet,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2 (2010): 63–85.[♣] [\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
7. Pin-up production and consumption practices existed at least since the mid-19th century, however, it was not until WWII that the term “pin-up” exploded into popular usage and became aggressively merchandised. For the canonical feminist history of pin-up culture see Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).[♣] [\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
8. The slippage is particularly prominent as the basis for a popular urban legend narrative wherein a young woman, enticed by the prospect of becoming a movie star, becomes a pin-up model. This narrative usually culminates with the woman’s embroilment in a pornography ring, and was recurrently mined by mid-century exploitation movies, for instance *Scum of the Earth* (1963).[♣] [\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
9. For a history of this shift see Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).[♣] [\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
10. This shortage is discussed in “Slash in Leg Art Cramps Buildup Of Film Starlets; Shortage of Stills,” *Variety*, February 9, 1944, 9.[♣] [\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
11. “Carole Landis Is Crowding Betty Grable as Pin-Up Girl,” *New York Post*, August 2, 1943, 31.[♣] [\[#N11-ptri\]](#)
12. For example, “Back-Number Magazines,” Irving Klaw’s Bookshop classified advertisement, *New York Times*, February 25, 1940, 92.[♣] [\[#N12-ptri\]](#)
13. Vernon Pope, “Pin-up King,” *Redbook*, August 1944, 21.[♣] [\[#N13-ptri\]](#)
14. Paul Secon, “Cheesecake Pix a Big Biz: Pin-Up Girls Always PFD,” *Variety*, July 7, 1943, 1.[♣] [\[#N14-ptri\]](#)
15. Harry Rauch, “Pin-Up Man,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1944, TWM-2.[♣] [\[#N15-ptri\]](#)
16. Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 26, 1943, 22.[♣] [\[#N16-ptri\]](#)
17. Specifically, Klaw’s fan-based knowledge could be mined since “the fans often spot star material long before movie moguls do. In addition, a ‘fan slump’ can break established favorites”; see “Poses

- in Black Satin Send Movie Actresses to Top,” *Endicott Daily Bulletin*, March 17, 1948, 16.
[#N17-ptri](#)
18. Morris Freedman, “Monarch of the Pin-Up Business,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1947, X5.
[#N18-ptri](#)
 19. Secon, “Cheesecake Pix a Big Biz,” 55.
[#N19-ptri](#)
 20. Ibid.
[#N20-ptri](#)
 21. Richard Foster, *The Real Bettie Page: The Truth about the Queen of the Pin-Ups* (New York: Citadel Press, 1997), 39-40.
[#N21-ptri](#)
 22. “Nude Models and Photogs Are Fined for Frolic in Pasture,” *Evening Star* (Peekskill, NY), August 11, 1952, 01.
[#N22-ptri](#)
 23. “‘Teaserama’ Print to Be Destroyed,” *Motion Picture Daily*, December 13, 1955, 6.
[#N23-ptri](#)
 24. “Senate Contempt Is Laid to 3 Here,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1955, 54.
[#N24-ptri](#)
 25. *Juvenile Delinquency (Obscene and Pornographic Materials): Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate*, 84th Congress. 225–26 (1955) (testimony of Clarence Grimm, Coral Gables, FL).
[#N25-ptri](#)
 26. *Juvenile Delinquency, Exploitation of Minors in Interstate Confidence Racket: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate*, 84th Congress. 138 (1956) (testimony of Victor Blanc, District Attorney of Philadelphia).
[#N26-ptri](#)
 27. *United States v. Klaw*, 350 F.2d 155 (2d Cir. 1965).
[#N27-ptri](#)
 28. Richard Dyer, “Monroe and Sexuality,” in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 17–63.
[#N28-ptri](#)
 29. Richard Merkin, “The Overdue Opening of Betty Page,” *High Society*, April 1977, 30-31.
[#N29-ptri](#)
 30. The article stated, “an esoteric cult has grown up around Leather Princess Bettie Page,” see “The Porno Plague,” *Time*, April 5, 1976, 58–63. For the pioneering work on gay male leather culture see Gayle Rubin, “The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990” (dissertation, University of Michigan, 1994).
[#N30-ptri](#)
 31. Steve Lenius, “Bisexuals and BDSM,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 1, no. 4 (2001): 75.
[#N31-ptri](#)
 32. Susie Bright, “Interview: The Bettie Page Story,” *Huffington Post*, May 6, 2006, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/susie-bright/interview-the-bettie-page_b_20492.html.
[#N32-ptri](#)
 33. “2nd Annual Betty Page Show & Party,” *Bay Area Reporter*, October 24, 1991, 45; Nancy Irwin, “Leatherlines: Firing Up the Action at Betty Page Social,” *Quota Magazine*, March 1993, 7.
[#N33-ptri](#)
 34. I thank Desirae Embree for sharing resources on this event with me, which include a flyer for Diva’s Den and Anna Friz, “Diva’s Den Offers a Strip for Her Eyes Only,” *Xtra! West*, May 28, 1998, 20, located in Folder 7, Loc 894-H-05, Am 1675-51. B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives, Vancouver, BC, Canada.
[#N34-ptri](#)
 35. Lucas Hilderbrand, “Grainy Days and Mondays: Superstar and Bootleg Aesthetics,” *Camera*

- Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 56–91; Roger Hallas, “AIDS and Gay Cinephilia,” *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 1 (2003): 85–126. [\[#N35-pt1\]](#)
36. A notable example of this was the police and FBI raid of the leather magazine *Drummer’s* “slave auction” benefit on April 10, 1976. [\[#N36-pt1\]](#)
37. Bright, “Interview: The Bettie Page Story.” [\[#N37-pt1\]](#)
38. I use the contemporary term “trans” as an umbrella term to encompass past identities and practices that are considered part of the genealogy of transgender and gender-variant identities. Historical terms, including “transvestite,” “female impersonator,” and “female mimic,” that are part of this genealogy have different and sometimes derogatory meanings in our contemporary moment. [\[#N38-pt1\]](#)
39. The *Betty Page in Bondage* series was originally published in 1960 and 1961. [\[#N39-pt1\]](#)
40. “All New Illustrated Photo Story Books!” Nutrix Co. advertisement, in *Letters from Female Impersonators* 5, (1962), 63. [\[#N40-pt1\]](#)
41. “Letters to the Editor,” *F.M.I.* 15, no. 1 (1985): 6–8. [\[#N41-pt1\]](#)
42. Kim Christy, “Editorial,” *F.M.I.* 14, no. 4 (1984): 3. [\[#N42-pt1\]](#)
43. Exotique Collection advertisement, *F.M.I.* 28, no. 6 (1999): 17. [\[#N43-pt1\]](#)
44. Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls*, 321–22. [\[#N44-pt1\]](#)
45. Steve Warren, “Susie Bright: Bright and Dirty,” *San Francisco Sentinel*, September 14, 1989, 20. [\[#N45-pt1\]](#)
46. *Effect of Pornography on Women and Children: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate*, 98th Congress. 322 (1984) (statement of Veronica Vera). [\[#N46-pt1\]](#)
47. This Bourdieu-esque point is inspired by the discussion of cult reclamation in Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 371–93. [\[#N47-pt1\]](#)
48. The 2013 exhibit is described in Marika Cifor, “‘Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me’: Activism, Affect and the Archives of HIV/AIDS” (dissertation, UCLA, 2017), 245–46. [\[#N48-pt1\]](#)
49. *Ibid.* [\[#N49-pt1\]](#)
50. Numerous cult cinema magazines covered Westmoreland’s film, including *Draculina*, *Psychotronic Video*, and *Shock Cinema*. [\[#N50-pt1\]](#)
51. Michael Carlson, “Obituaries: Dave Stevens: Illustrator Whose Love of Nostalgia Led Him to Create the Rocketeer,” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2008, 35. [\[#N51-pt1\]](#)
52. Stevens stated of Disney’s interest, “they took one look at it, and said ‘toys!’ So... that’s where we eventually made the deal,” see Jon B. Cooke, “Dave Stevens Interview: Of Hollywood and Heroes,” *Comic Book Artist*, no. 15 (November 2001): 12–33, <http://twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/15stevens.html>. [\[#N52-pt1\]](#)
53. *Ibid.* [\[#N53-pt1\]](#)
54. Scott Simon, “‘The Rocketeer’ a Comic Book Adventure,” *All Things Considered*, June 22, 1991, transcript, National Public Radio, Washington, D.C. [\[#N54-pt1\]](#)
55. Rob Salem, “Moviedom’s Skies Are Filled with Crime-Fighting Heroes,” *Toronto Star*, June 16,

- 1991, C2. [\[#N55-ptr1\]](#)
56. “The Lost Films of Betty Page!,” 1993 catalog insert, Something Weird Video Ads (1990 - 2014), *Critical Condition*, accessed April 22, 2018, http://www.critcononline.com/something_weird_ads_1990-2014.htm. [\[#N56-ptr1\]](#)
57. Ibid. [\[#N57-ptr1\]](#)
58. *Page v. Something Weird Video*, 960 F. Supp. 1438 (C.D. Cal. 1996). [\[#N58-ptr1\]](#)
59. Ibid. [\[#N59-ptr1\]](#)
60. Sean Elliott, “Something’s Weird in the State of California,” *The Notre Dame Law Review*. 72, no. 2 (1997): 593–619. [\[#N60-ptr1\]](#)
61. In sum, few non-profit archives have the capacity to gather, restore, and preserve motion picture media on the scale accomplished by Something Weird Video. They have been instrumental in maintaining the circulation of independent queer films from the gay liberation era, particularly since the bulk of those films are pornographic and often devalued by non-profit archives. [\[#N61-ptr1\]](#)
62. The CMG website prominently states “Original the Queen of Pinups. Client since 1993.” See “Bettie Page,” CMG Worldwide, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.cmgworldwide.com/bettie-page-2/>. [\[#N62-ptr1\]](#)
63. This is evident from search term hits on Newspapers.com, a website that archives historical newspapers. In 1997, “Bettie Page” has 234 hits and “Betty Page” at 121 hits. [\[#N63-ptr1\]](#)
64. Paul Grainge, “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America,” *Journal of American Culture* 23, no. 1 (2000): 30. [\[#N64-ptr1\]](#)
65. Page placed among the top ten in *Forbes* rankings from 2012 to 2016. She has also ranked among the top fifteen in other years. For a recent example see “Forbes Leader Board,” *Forbes*, November 8, 2016, 28–29. [\[#N65-ptr1\]](#)
66. Ibid. [\[#N66-ptr1\]](#)
67. See for example, Elizabeth Thurman, “Paging Bettie: Bettie Page Makes Its Initial Wholesale Offering,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, August 2007, 13. [\[#N67-ptr1\]](#)
68. Peter Feniak, “Please Remember Me as I Was,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, ON), April 18, 1998, C14. [\[#N68-ptr1\]](#)
69. For example, Playful Promises uses body positivity discourse to promote the plus-size inclusivity of its Bettie Page line. [\[#N69-ptr1\]](#)

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Print ISSN: 0163-5069 • Online ISSN: 2471-4364

