Assemblage, Constellation, Image: Reading Filmic Matter

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Films are, indisputably, objects. Archives are devoted to the painstaking and costly work of preserving and storing films, and countless reels have been lost to the ravages of chemical decay and physical neglect. Films are materially reproducible, duplicated into an ever-increasing array of analogue and digital formats. And yet debates about the ontological status of film tend toward generalities about the medium as a whole, often limiting their scope to the screened image rather than the physical mechanisms by which those images are stored and conveyed. And formal readings of individual titles rarely consider the nuanced distinctions between their competing, physical manifestations. One could easily imagine writing about the text *Rear Window* (1954) as a singular filmic object of study, for example, but it would be quite unusual to make reference to the streaming platform, file format, and model of video monitor used to conduct that study, to devote attention, in other words, to the specific material qualities of that particular *Rear Window* object.

In short, film's object status, in both colloquial discussions and in the field of film theory, is highly unstable and rife with contradictions. There are reels of film rusted into cans in deep storage that have never been and will likely never be projected. There are films whose celluloid incarnations have been destroyed that continue to circulate via video and digital duplicates. Other films no

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longer exist in any format but can be studied through their intertextual traces via scripts, production notes, stills, storyboards, press kits, reviews, advertisements, and accounts of spectators. Nearly all contemporary films exist only as digital files, edited, enhanced, rendered, and distributed as code but still prone to deterioration, file corruption, and format obsolescence. Production processes are equally marked by their material histories, manifest in the peculiarities of film stock, gauge, grain, pixel, and compression algorithm. The material status of each of these examples is distinct, yet in every case the works would be referred to as "films" by most audiences and scholars (although in the case of digital works, "film" might remain in scare quotes). If film is an object, then, it constitutes an object category with an enormous range of physical and virtual characteristics. This range expands exponentially when we further consider the vast theoretical complications attending the screened-image-as-object, or the diversity of approaches we might take to objects and forms as they are captured and mediated cinematically.

Volker Pantenburg points to three primary registers via which we might distinguish "cinematographic objects": "(1) objects in film; (2) objects of film; and (3) film as an object."[1] Yet while these registers are clearly mutually inflected, established discourses of film and media theory make it vexingly difficult to shift between them in a single study. Some scholarship, particularly in the field of video studies, has been exemplary in overcoming this challenge.[2] Yet as a whole, studies of filmic ontology have centered disproportionately on the status of the moving image as an ephemeral screened object, a privileged state or process through which object-images attain new material presence. While the case study that follows focuses much of its attention on films as physical objects, a larger set of unanswered questions motivates my query: Can film theory attend to the aesthetics and ontology of the image object while paying equal attention to the fragility of its individual manifestations and to the conditions of its production and reception? Can theories of spectatorship be reconciled with archival work on diverse reception practices? Can we historicize more explicitly the interventions and politics of various modes of film and media theory?

My thinking about the object status of film has been recently complicated by several archival encounters with a series of 16mm pornographic peep show loops produced in Seattle in the late 1960s: the Starlight films. Over the course of the past eight years, I have studied these films, viewing and projecting them in a wide variety of archival, academic, artistic, and domestic spaces, sometimes blindsided by serendipitous discoveries. Each encounter was

accompanied by a shift in knowledge regarding the historical resonances of these works, including information about their production and distribution and new insights into the machinations of the pornography industry. Most strikingly, the reception of these films and the meanings they generated varied enormously between settings; of course, my own personal readings came into play here, but these were often explicitly framed by broader institutional and social structures shaping that exhibition event (the missions of the archive, the precarious position of a gallery housed in a public university, the intimacy of a home screening) and resonant with the responses of fellow viewers. This relatively contained and admittedly idiosyncratic example of the Starlight peep show series offers insights into the circulations of film objects in general as well as into the significance of the material conditions of exhibition in generating meaning and cultural impact.

What follows, then, is a set of preliminary questions about approaches to films-as-objects at this particular moment in the history of film theory and in film's history as a technological medium. I begin with a short series of proposals that attempt to account for film's complex relationship to tangible matter, situated within a broader material and historical context. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Alfred North Whitehead, and Steven Shaviro, I argue that film theory needs to better account for the material objects and events that comprise the film experience rather than constraining its focus exclusively to the screened image. I then offer a case study of the Starlight peep show loop films framed as a series of cinematic encounters. My objective is to explore the ways in which film assemblages intersect with cultural and economic crosscurrents, accumulating divergent sets of meaning linked to their tangible manifestations, the environments in which they circulate, and the forces of change to which they are subjected. The matter of film, I would argue, extends beyond the corpus of a film object to include this broader constellation of material and ephemeral pressures.

Film-as-Assemblage: A Series of Proposals

1. Film is an assemblage of objects, images, sounds, agents, architectural spaces, geographic locations, and distribution networks transected by forces of capital and power. The composition and trajectory of this assemblage shift as it moves between historical, social, and technological milieus. The aesthetics of a particular film clearly matter; these images and sounds exist in an already

complex relationship to the profilmic (or imaginary) material they gesture toward. Yet our understanding of these images is impoverished when they are viewed in isolation.

My thinking here is a loose improvisation on Whitehead (read alongside Shaviro): the matter or stuff of film, its tangible objectness, is also, simultaneously, a series of processes, "occasions," and temporal transformations.[3] These processes include the various events that comprise the film's evolving life cycle (e.g., the conditions of production and the film's numerous material afterlives). An even broader network of external processes and events might come to bear on the film at certain points in its travels, changing the makeup and trajectory of the assemblage as a whole (e.g., a neglected 1960s documentary on race relations in Chicago is rediscovered and shared by anti–police brutality activists in 2015, and 1950s educational films find a niche fan base on an Internet archive). These processes and events may not always take a concrete form, but they are nevertheless deeply impacted by forces that we could call material and that have material repercussions (e.g., patterns of global trade, legacies of colonialism, the commodification of affect). The film assemblage is not static; it brings its material history to bear in each instance of its life cycle, but it is also subject to change as it encounters new forces and material conditions.

2. Film is most often experienced as an event. When we speak about a film, we typically refer to a viewing situation, the film as it appears when screened. Nevertheless, the ephemeral, contingent, and durational nature of the exhibition event makes it perhaps the most undertheorized aspect of film culture. That experience has been generalized into the schematics of the film apparatus, individualized in phenomenological accounts, and surveyed through reception studies; each of these approaches has brought significant insights to the field, and each has also been hampered by limitations. As the circulation of media texts expands to an increasing number of formats and interfaces, the specificity of the exhibition event demands more sustained and rigorous theoretical attention.[4]

3. In approaching an evolving audiovisual assemblage and its various sites of exhibition, the fields of film and media studies benefit from a diversity of methodological and disciplinary approaches. It seems pressing to assert the advantages of tackling cinematic problems through cross-methodological experimentation at a moment when film studies is becoming increasingly specialized into distinct subfields (often positioned at odds with one another). As the domains of new media and the digital humanities gain traction, the insights that film scholars bring to new audiovisual culture aren't

always recognized (or, frankly, welcomed). Foregrounding adaptive and collaborative models for research on media assemblages, drawing on decades of diverse approaches to film, might help to ensure that film scholarship is not marginalized as an outmoded study of a dead form.

For example, we might ask how historical work on labor and industry structures could be brought into dialogue with figural analyses of cinematic bodies when studying a specific media work, such as a digital film that is distributed both theatrically and online. A juxtaposition such as this forces us to look at the aesthetic forms generated by this particular film in the context of a broader political economy in addition to the constellation of meanings it accumulates as it circulates between networked platforms. Cross-methodological approaches require a plastic understanding of the material status of film and audiovisual media.

4. Despite the advantages of cross-methodological work on film, new developments in film theory are often marked by a staunch rejection of existing work in the field. This is a rhetorical strategy that makes perfect sense when scholars need to differentiate their ideas from those that came before them. In the best cases, the debates sparked by these challenges push the field in new directions, drawing attention to neglected facets of film culture. At the same time, remaining mindful of the political economy of academia, the pressure on scholars to establish new disciplinary terrain with increased velocity can erect false boundaries and marginalize branches of scholarship in counterproductive ways.

I am particularly concerned about the ways in which certain strands of new materialist work on film and media, especially those that strive to avoid human-centric correlationalism, engage in ontological projects that abstract objects from history and the social and, in the process, relegate work on gender, race, and sexuality to the disparaged category of "identity politics." Certainly this is not a tendency that has manifested itself across the board. But it is a trend that is marked enough to warrant caution, and the "ontological turn" has in fact generated considerable criticism in this regard.[5]

With deepest respect for the insights and innovations being wrought on this philosophical front, I would advocate for materialist work in film and media that accounts for the profoundly material ways in which racism, sexism, homophobia, and other oppressive inequities manifest themselves onscreen and offscreen, within and beyond the human sphere.[6] The film object is a product of, and circulates within, a system shaped by power and capital. Film images play a critical role in establishing the value of bodies as

image commodities. Labor, within the film and media industries, is structured according to entrenched hierarchies of race, class, and gender. The manufacturing and disposal of media technology is even more starkly marked by the histories of colonialism and global trade, with a disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities and freighted by enormous environmental repercussions.[7] These material concerns are at the core of any meaningful understanding of film as an object.

5. Critical work on film needs to remain attuned to the contemporaneous "presents" embodied by the film object, which include the present of the space/time captured by the image object, the unfolding temporality evoked within the film, and the present of the space/time in which it is apprehended. The concepts that emerge through acts of critical reading must in turn be understood in relation to the material phenomena that they respond to (the filmic texts they read) while at the same time recognizing their distinct historical situatedness (their status as ideas, generated under conditions distinct from those of the phenomena being studied).

The notion of the constellation, as developed by Walter Benjamin, might suggest a productive strategy for reading such complexes. While material phenomena, for Benjamin, dictate the trajectories and forms of the ideas, concepts, and readings to which they give rise, they nevertheless retain a separate empirical existence. "The idea," he writes, "thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. . . . Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars."[8] Constellations are interpretive images, disparate points of light rendered legible through the creation of a figure that leaps to view. The figure of the constellation discloses new sets of relations, relations that are inevitably tinged by the conditions of the moments in which they emerge. At the same time, the empirical particularities of each individual point of light remains intact, distinct from the constellation itself.[9]

Acts of critical interpretation, then, are sparked by an encounter with material phenomena and in particular by the nonlinear linkage between points or fragments of the past juxtaposed into new states of mutual influence. These connections burst forth in the form of an image that becomes visible precisely because the conditions of the present render them possible:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation

> of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.[10]

The role of the theorist/thinker/spectator in this model is a critical one, apprehending and activating juxtapositions between fragmentary elements, in the interests of the present. As Anthony Auerbach suggests, Benjamin's deployment of the constellation "triangulates the position of the materialist historian and tests his or her ability to grasp—in the present—a fleeting (dialectical) image as a signal of revolutionary potential or mundane redemption; to seize the moment invariably missed."[11]

This is a model that strikes me as particularly attuned to film's unique status as object and image, as document of the past and oneiric projection of the future, as present that can be continuously replayed, marked by disintegration. The interpretive constellation thrives on these contradictory and coterminous states, allowing for a certain empirical constancy alongside the generation of change and the new.

No single study could fulfill the objectives I have outlined here, hence my interest in approaches that are collaborative and complementary. The case study of the Starlight loops below is offered not as a model but instead as a preliminary mapping of a discrete set of objects and events that might open into new methodological experiments. I will note here Eugenie Brinkema's warning, in *The Forms of the Affects,* that the affective turn in film theory can devolve into a solipsistic performance on the part of the theorist, who breathlessly recounts her "tremulous pleasures and shudderings" before the screen.[12] With such dangers in mind, I would nevertheless staunchly advocate for the centrality of spectatorship to film theory, albeit a spectatorship that is historically and materially grounded. The spectator, in such a formulation, figures at once as an object constituting one facet of a filmic assemblage, as a product that emerges from the material conditions of the filmic encounter, and new constellations of images, objects, and ideas in each act of reading.

What follows is an attempt to map a concrete set of encounters with one set of films, reading both the material remains and the generative responses that these events engendered.

Material Encounters: Following the Starlight Loops

I began researching the history of 16mm pornographic peep show loops unintentionally, led to them through the trail of discarded

Figure 1. A crowd peeps into a converted Panoram machine in an amusement arcade, circa 1952. Photo courtesy of Bruce Hamilton.

film technologies that allowed the peep industry to develop. Many of the striptease films that appeared in film arcades in the mid-1960s were designed to be projected in repurposed Panoram film jukeboxes; these jukeboxes were initially created to display Soundies musical shorts in the 1940s, but when the Soundies Distributing Corporation collapsed in 1947, the abandoned machines were converted to show more prurient films to individual viewers (Figure 1).[13] Independent entrepreneurs created burlesque films that could be screened in these machines, printing them reversed so they could be shown using the Panoram's mirrored rear projection system and incorporating slug frames that would stop the projector and demand the deposit of another coin. Because peep arcade films were distributed via regional, unregulated, and sometimes marginally legal networks, prints of these films were rarely archived or catalogued, and those that still exist have often been recut or reprinted and repackaged for alternative means of sale after 16mm peep booths fell out of favor in the early 1970s. Many of these early striptease films were then sold for home use and now circulate alongside other 16mm burlesque and hard-core stag films and later 8mm hard-core loops that were featured in peep arcades and sold for the home market simultaneously. It can be nearly impossible

to determine whether or not a film was shot to be shown in a peep arcade unless you find a print that is accompanied by arcade distribution information or contains telltale markings: slug frames and titles that are reversed from left to right.

As I sifted through 16mm loops from private collectors, eBay sales, the Kinsey Archive, and vintage erotica DVDs, one particular series of films surfaced repeatedly. These loops were immediately recognizable, even when found alongside other similar works from the same era (the 1960s and early 1970s). In many cases, the loops contained reversed Starlight title cards and numbers and slug frames with a glass statue of a nude Venus figure (there was clear evidence, then, that these films were created specifically for the Panoram peep machines) (Figures 2 and 3). A large number of these films were being sold on eBay and were purchased by collectors dedicated to the series; many of these loops were packaged with their original distribution cards and eight- by ten-inch black and white portraits of their featured models, presumably to be used as marquee cards on the fronts of Panoram booths.

Even when these loops were not labeled as Starlights, they could be spotted by their vibrant color and relatively high production values. The series was shot primarily on Ektachrome stock, and the films retained their saturation far better than other loops from that era. In terms of art direction, the Starlights used brightly colored textiles, wallpaper, draperies, fur pillows, and rugs, often filing the frame with patterns and textures that were contrasted by the skin of the performers. The handheld cinematography was markedly better than that of the standard porn loop, with thoughtful framing, impressive use of natural light, and a penchant for backlighting. Most strikingly, the films featured a distinctively direct and intimate visual rapport with the actresses. The camera tended to graze the actresses' bodies in close proximity, punctuating this roaming gaze with static extreme close-ups. Relative to other peep loops, the performances of the actresses in these loops appeared to be relaxed and playful, and the loops commonly included moments of humor (an extended extreme close-up of an actress curling her tongue, the repeated appearance of a boa constrictor with whom the actresses interact with varying degrees of comfort).

I will fully confess to being seduced by the unexpected beauty of these loops and by their structural and formal consistency. The intimacy of their address corresponds with the interface of the peep machine in a way that early stag loops and later multipurpose hardcore films did not. Regional censorship regulations in the 1960s tended to limit peep loop content to solo-girl or pseudolesbian performances. While the intended audience for the product was

Figure 2. Reverse title card from Starlight BBP 512. Film directed by Richard Kornbacher, 1970. Print and still courtesy of Albert Steg.

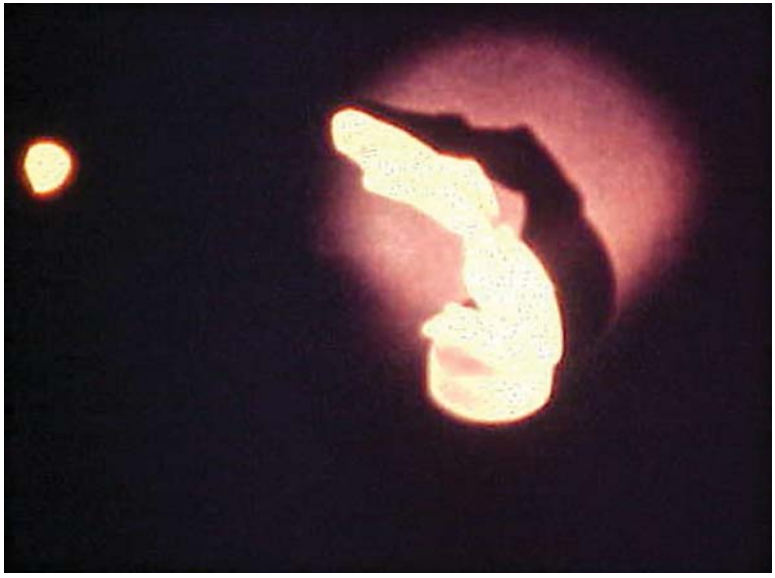

Figure 3. Venus slug frame from Starlight BBP 512. Film directed by Richard Kornbacher, 1970. Print and still courtesy of Albert Steg.

almost certainly heterosexual men (arcades in fact often barred female customers entry), the fluid one-on-one address of the lush cinematography and the lack of a teleological endpoint (the money shot) opens these loops to a wider range of uses and readings, particularly when the films circulate in new historical and geographical contexts. As I have written about elsewhere, the arcades were significant sites for gay male cruising in the 1960s, providing a forum for public sexual encounters that did not necessarily coincide with the presumed orientation of the film content.[14]

I will note that I am hardly the only viewer to have this reaction to these films. The Starlight loops have a small but dedicated fan base among collectors and consumers of retro porn. Survey even a few eBay auctions of Starlight loops and you will see a familiar coterie of sellers and bidders. Many of the loops in circulation originated from large sales of the films from the distribution company Something Weird Video, which came into possession of an enormous stockpile of the films in a warehouse in Seattle. The company now distributes collections of Starlights and other vintage loops on DVD and for digital download and then sells unused or duplicate loops through eBay auctions. Archivist and orphan film historian Albert Steg has one of the most impressive collections of Starlights, which he has copiously documented (I am indebted to him for first introducing me to these films).

The initial stages of my research involved contacting archives and private collectors to ask to view their works. As few archives catalog or advertise their erotic holdings, I had much greater success in reaching private collectors, although this mode of research resulted in some strange and unorthodox viewing experiences. In visits initiated via semianonymous eBay handles, I would find myself soliciting friends to accompany me to the living rooms of strangers to look at their porn stashes projected on a wall. These encounters were in some ways analogous to any archival research, in which caches of stuff become grounds for personalized scavenger hunts: sometimes disappointing, sometimes marked by the thrill of finding the object sought, and sometimes sites of unexpected finds. Yet there was something obviously unique about the experience of viewing sexually explicit material as an academic researcher in an unfamiliar domestic space with a stranger, in a context where all persons present strain to perform a response to the screened material counter to that which the text is designed to elicit. In each instance the coincidence of these filmic objects and these particular configurations of people is hardly accidental; factors include aftermarkets for orphaned films on DVD and auction sites, the technology that facilitates those independent sellers,

the emergence of pornography studies as an academic field in the wake of 1980s and 1990s feminist clashes on the subject, growing interest in nontheatrical film formats as objects of study and collectible works, and a generation of consumers (and researchers) steeped in nostalgia for 1960s and 1970s culture, particularly the aestheticized, predominantly white, safely soft-core version that films such as the Starlights embody.

The pornography industry lends itself to anachronistic encounters. Shadowing "legitimate" mainstream industries, pornographic commerce often relies on underground financing, alternative modes of distribution, and the parasitic recycling of technologies and narratives. Pornographic media will often experience multiple lives as older titles fall out of circulation and then gain new currency in marketplaces for vintage and retro porn. Fetishes for old technology and kitsch aesthetics, tastes that are themselves structured by a displaced eroticism of capital, inscribe new sets of meaning on the works they feed from and direct them into new channels of exchange. This shadow economy in some ways burlesques the structures of mainstream commerce, perversely amplifying its traffic in affect and corporeal goods. Research in this realm unearths narratives that aren't usually recorded in mainstream histories of film or even in official accounts of pornographic traffic. "Can I tell you a secret?" asks the antique dealer who showed me a retrofitted Panoram before sharing the file box of nude photographs he shot and sold at his own adult bookstore in the 1970s. A whole host of acquaintances have unsolicitedly shared stories about their personal visits to the arcades and the technologies and experiences they found there. These stories matter—their intimacy fleshes out an underwritten media history and shifts our understanding of how and where these films were shown and what they meant to those who used them.

Pornographic films have strange afterlives. In the basement of the Kinsey archive, I pored over video transfers of films that might have been peep loops (without access to the cans, labels, and leaders, identification becomes even more difficult). In the institutional space of the archive, the loops resonate differently. The small monitor, the dulled saturation of the transfers, the traffic of archivists and researchers, and the overwhelming number of tapes mute the films' impact, even when I encounter a loop that resembles a Starlight. My interest is momentarily piqued by an actress who makes romantic overtures to a potted rubber tree. Hours later I'm startled by a familiar-looking face; there is an actress who resembles one of the predominant stars of the Starlights. The film begins as a standard striptease but is interrupted by the active presence of the

cameraman. The loop is silent, but we can see the woman talking and laughing; the cameraman's hand reaches down to caress her cheek. The exchange progresses to a POV depiction of a blow job ("the absent one," at last, is at least partially visible). This is a level of explicitness I've never seen in a loop from this era. I press the archivist for more details, but he is forbidden by confidentiality restrictions from revealing any information about the source of this reel. I leave feeling stunned and frustrated, put in proximity to an object/event only to be denied the information I need to understand it.[15]

Several years later in 2008, I sent a very similar blow job reel, this one a bona fide Starlight borrowed from a private collection, to a film lab to be transferred. This loop would be digitally projected in an installation/exhibition I was curating at the James Gallery at the CUNY Graduate Center. The installation paired Starlight loops and marquee cards with older burlesque reels and a range of films and photographs by artists who engaged with peep-like aesthetics (including Andy Warhol, Jean Genet, Martha Colburn, Peggy Ahwesh, Matthias Müller, Lisa Kerezi, and Alvin Baltrop). The works were installed in a grid designed by Pierre Huyghe punctured with holes, some only large enough to peer through, others that served as passageways that visitors had to crawl over and walk through as they navigated the maze. Along the way, visitors also encountered texts drawn from newspaper accounts, theoretical texts, and court cases, providing a broader history of the arcades. The design of the architecture was such that visitors were repeatedly surprised by the juxtaposition of materials and hyperconscious of their own visibility to others as they responded to these works.

As we were preparing the materials for the final install, I received a phone call from the owner of the film lab. Although I had been clear that the works I was sending him contained adult material, he refused to proceed with the transfer after receiving a complaint from one of his workers. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I have to protect the feminists on my staff from these films." I was floored by the cognitive disconnect; while it is no doubt coincidental that I was eight months pregnant during this particular event, at that moment my response to being hailed as a danger to feminists was measurably heightened. And this was just the first warning that all my academic labor on peep show loops to that point had done little to prepare me for the visceral, vehement response that the exhibition would cause.

One of my primary objectives in making this research public and visible in this exhibition was to actualize, and perhaps even to test, the tensions between public and private, agency and control, that I had been writing about but always from a remove, through

conjecture, in protected isolation. I wanted to see what would happen if these elements were concretized, put into dialogue, and opened to public engagement. I wanted to look at these films in a new context, to encourage viewers to really watch them, to trace formal similarities between pornography and contemporaneous experimental film. And in many instances this did happen. In others it did not. The films I expected to cause the largest uproar based on their difficult content (e.g., bestiality) received no mention. Instead, it was the very idea of pornography itself that caused a violent negative reaction for many visitors (Figure 4). In the confines of contemporary feminist media studies, the porn wars of the 1980s and 1990s seemed utterly exhausted, something I wanted to avoid at all costs, theoretically dead on arrival. This was not the case on the ground, as the visitors' book in the gallery filled up with cross-commentary, and supporters (e.g., a female security guard) and critics (e.g., a former Women Against Pornography organizer from the university's administration office) surfaced from unexpected places. My thinking about pornography, feminism, and these specific works changed dramatically in the process. In particular, I became acutely aware how difficult it was to actually *see* the loops, as they seemed to become increasingly illegible the more publicly they were displayed.

Then in 2015, I found myself in a storage unit in Seattle confronted by an enormous stockpile of film cans, photographs, and paper files. I had been contacted by the daughter of a filmmaker who had read some of my research posted online and was seeking advice about potential archival homes for her father's collection. Richard Kornbacher, who passed away in 2010, was a filmmaker employed by Boeing and KIRO TV who produced a number of documentaries on the political subjects that motivated him, including race relations, poverty, and environmental issues. He was also a prolific peep show film producer who shot hundreds of loops in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, Kornbacher was in close contact with one of the founding trustees of what was to become the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. He screened and promoted several of his educational films about sexuality at the institute, and there is voluminous correspondence regarding collaborative projects and acquisitions with academics who encountered his work there. Kornbacher approached his pornographic and nonpornographic works with equal attention to aesthetics and craft and even combined his interests in an unfinished hybrid work, a feature-length hard-core film that addressed (albeit not in a sustained way) the dangers of oil shipping in the waterways of the Pacific Northwest.

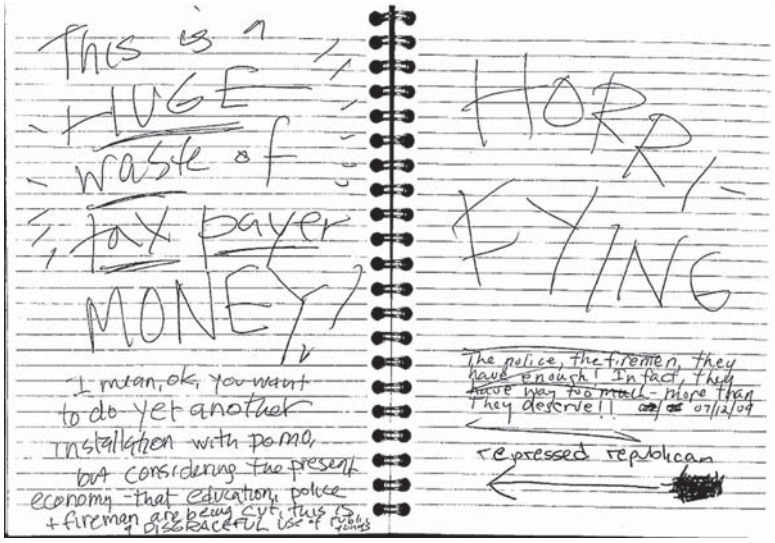

Figure 4. Viewer debates as played out in the guest notebook for the exhibition, *Peeps,* curated by the author and featuring Starlight films. The James Gallery, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY, 2008.

Kornbacher's daughter and son-in-law are both archaeologists, and they had done an enormous amount of work researching and organizing the collection. Neither had heard of the Starlight series, however, so I was not certain if I would find the works I was looking for prior to my arrival. Within minutes of looking at the material, it became clear that I had found the source of the series: Kornbacher was the sole producer of nearly all of the films currently circulating under the Starlight label between 1965 and 1976, the films that have held the greatest currency with collectors and fans. Although he began to save his camera originals and self-distribute works in 1968, after he realized how poorly he was being compensated for his labor, most of his loops had been processed by the owner of a network of arcades. The raw footage was edited by a dedicated team of editors (apparently a group of middle-aged women), spliced with titles and slug frames, and distributed to arcades around the country. Kornbacher was paid $200 for each reel, and he paid the models $50. He was not privy to figures for the actual profits from the arcades, but based on rough industry-wide estimates, they were undoubtedly disproportionate to his wages.[16]

The same film reels that had generated very different sets of meanings in other viewing contexts functioned here as rather

Figure 5. Promotional stills from Starlight film S-15/D-297, 1968. Courtesy of the Richard Kornbacher Collection. Photo by Tara Mateik.

bizarre home movies when watched with Kornbacher's daughter. The richly detailed textiles and patterns that define the loops' aesthetic acquired new backstories ("that's Dad's bedroom wallpaper, that's my window seat cushion"). In certain instances, such as with the steel-gray curtain that provided the backdrop for every marquee card photo, the same visual scenarios would recur in family photographs. Props and scenarios were similarly recast when read in relation to their scenes of production: "that's Ralph, our pet snake"; "there's Ralph again"; or, from me, "I hope that's not your teddy bear." I learned that the actresses from the loops were sometimes acquaintances of the family or guests at their home. Over the years, Kornbacher's wives and girlfriends worked to catalog and label his films and business records; handwriting on file folders and film cans marks a romantic timeline in script (Figure 5).

Obviously this is a personal history that would never be apparent to a typical arcade goer. But I would argue that when access to this type of production narrative can be gained, it, too, matters. The production history of these loops challenges stereotypical notions about the pornography industry: for example, that peep show loops were produced in relative anonymity by exploitative male producers who had no interest in issues of aesthetics or politics; who resisted meaningful, continued relationships with their performers; and who conducted this work in strict isolation

from their family life. Moreover, this history points to rich connections between the divergent personal and political interests of a filmmaker that would be lost if the objects he produced were separated and stored (or destroyed, as is often the case with pornographic materials) based on their content. Moreover, the objects and stuff convey valuable meaning that would also disappear should the content alone be preserved as a digital file. The paper ephemera that accompanied these films (model releases, marquee card photographs, notated distribution contact lists, shipping receipts) furnish a history of immeasurable value. Through these material traces, we can begin to map the economic pressures that led university students, pink-collar workers, and film directors to this type of labor, the marketing and market for certain types of eroticized bodies, the hierarchies of distribution that exploited performer and producer alike, and the geographic traffic in these films, including detailed information about regional regulations limiting the depiction of sexual content in film.

Given the highly unusual production and research histories documented here, not to mention the explicit content of the films themselves, this case study could be dismissed as too eccentric to offer insights on broader theories of cinema. The empirical "stuff" that comprises this narrative would typically be siphoned off as historical artifact or a fascinating anecdote. But I would counter that the ability to trace the circulation of this limited series through vastly distinct cultural milieus indicates in a microcosmic way the complex interactions of matter (outmoded technologies, celluloid film reels) and material forces (capital-driven shifts in affective labor, urban rezoning, censorship, later cycles of nostalgia and academic fashion) at work at any given moment in a film's ongoing life cycle. All the human actors participating here, too, are driven by interests that are at once personal and structured by their encounters with this material as well as the more ephemeral events that shape their lives. The coincidence of internal and external forces and the unanticipated relocations of the assemblage are at least as interesting as the films themselves. But the fact that this particular series was saved was not an accident; Kornbacher's insistence on the importance and value of his work as a filmmaker is palpable in the films themselves, as is further evidenced in the labor of his family to preserve these films and in the ongoing interest of collectors, distributers, and researchers.

If Whitehead is correct, then all events are situational, specific, and unique. These are in fact the conditions under which we encounter media, and while they may not be as unorthodox as the events surrounding the Starlight series, each media event is

similarly contingent. Analysis cannot stop at this level of specificity, obviously, or little could be meaningfully gained. But neither can we ignore the fact that the unique event is in many ways the essential experience of that thing we call film. The continuity of filmic form across various iterations is what allows us to speak about films as texts, to articulate shared meanings across individual filmic encounters. But this continuity remains in many ways fragile and illusory, subject to the transformations in film's technological, material, and environmental hosts. To remain attuned to the tangible specificities, the enduring forms, and the ephemeral virtualities at work in film assemblages requires flexible and adaptive methodologies, methodologies that can engage with specificities, with matter, in dialogue with the ephemeral, the durational, the transitory.

Notes

1. Volker Pantenburg, "The Cinematographic State of Things," in *Cinematographic Objects: Things and Operations,* edited by Volker Pantenburg (Berlin: August Verlag, 2015), 13.

2. Key examples include Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Sean Cubitt, *The Practice of Light: Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Dartmouth, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2006); Hito Steyerl, "A Thing Like You and Me," *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/; Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video, 1976–1986* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

3. I am drawing here from Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* corrected edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), and Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). I'm struck by the resonances between Whitehead's formulation of the entity that exists as both object and process and Brian Price's formulation of "project" as both noun and verb: a "two-in-one" status that is not a dualism but rather a linking between the backward-leaning history of objects and the forward-leaning movement toward futurity and change (see Brian Price, "The Displacement Project," in this issue).

4. Caetlin Benson-Allott's work on VHS and shifts in spectatorship, for example, makes compelling links between industrial and technological developments and new aesthetic modes of cinematic address. See Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens* (2013).

5. Jord/ana Rosenberg has presented one of the most thorough and cutting critiques of these developments in "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014), https://muse.jhu.edu/

article/546470. A number of conferences and special journal issues have grappled with the politics of feminist new materialism; a useful overview of these debates is presented in Peta Hinton and Iris van der Tuin, eds., *Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism,* special issue of *Women: A Cultural Review* 25, no. 1 (2014).

6. A wealth of work has been generated in these areas, including Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See also the collaborative research project Liquid Blackness, coordinated by Alessandra Raengo at Georgia State University and available at liquidblackness.com.

7. Along these lines, Nicole Shukin performs a brilliant reading of the development of early cinema in relation to the rendering of animals to produce the gelatin used on celluloid filmstrips and the visual spectacle of slaughterhouse tourism popularized in the late nineteenth century. See Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in a Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller write extensively about the environmental and economic impact of the film and media industries, ranging, for example, from work on the international monopolies on silver and camphor used to create film stock to the devastation of local fishing communities caused by the chlorination and movie walls used during the shooting of Fox Studio's *Titanic* (1997). Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

8. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* translated by John Osbourne (London: Verso, 1998), 34.

9. As Graeme Gilloch describes the phenomena, "the constellation involves a fleeting but irrevocable shift in the perception of phenomena which preserves their individual integrity and their mutuality." Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 71.

10. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 462 (N2a,3).

11. Anthony Auerbach, "Imagine No Metaphors: The Dialectical Image of Walter Benjamin," *Image [&] Narrative* 18 (2007), http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/auerbach.htm.

12. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 31–32.

13. For a more sustained discussion of the evolution of the peep show arcades, see Amy Herzog, "In the Flesh: Space and Embodiment in the Pornographic Peep Show Arcade," *Velvet Light Trap* 62 (Fall 2008): 29–43, and Herzog, "Fetish Machines: Peep Shows, Co-optation and Technological Adaptation," in *Adaptation Theories,* edited by Jillian Saint Jacques, 45–89 (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2011).

14. See Herzog, "In the Flesh," and Herzog, "Fetish Machines."

15. While I did not realize it at the time, Linda Williams had encountered this same reel prior to my visit and described it in similar terms in a talk at the Orphan Film Symposium, "Porn Films in the Kinsey Collection and Elsewhere," University of South Carolina, March 2006.

16. The 1970 report of the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography found that peep booths were the primary revenue stream for adult retail outlets at that time. U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography,* Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 101–2.