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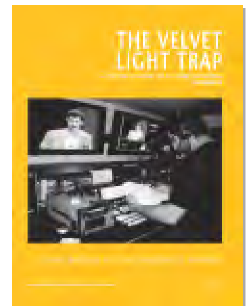
Amy Herzog



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AMY HERZOG

In the Flesh: Space and Embodiment in the Pornographic Peep Show Arcade

ithin cluttered media landscapes, littered with an infinite variety of screens, the pornographic peep show arcade is a singular and ubiquitous format. Clustered in tenderloin districts in virtually every metropolitan area, peep show "movie machines" can also be found in suburban porn shops and the truck-stop adult markets that skirt highways throughout rural North America. Peep show arcades provide a motion-picture viewing experience unlike any other contemporary medium, one in which the distinction between public and private is inverted on a number of different registers. The filmed body on-screen lays bare its most private attributes, yet it does so in a self-conscious, formulaic, and exhibitionist manner. The apparatus of the peep show subjects the body of the patron to a highly individualized and intimate mode of address, compelling in return an active and equally intimate corporeal response. At the same time, this exchange takes place in public, with the patron's own body rendered visible as it circulates through the arcade (to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the architecture of the venue and the booths). The peep show's voyeuristic, personalized viewing mechanism presents a further historical anomaly, its coin-operated interface and selection of exotic novelties harking back to the earliest Kinetoscope parlors. Despite this unusual and somewhat anachronistic exhibition format, peep arcades have provided a consistent revenue stream for the adult film industry. Peeps are historically one of the most profitable outlets for adult retail businesses, and they have survived the seismic shift from film to video with relatively few changes in their basic design.

Given the prevalence of peep arcades in both urban and rural areas, their historical longevity, and their unique mode of exhibition, it seems strange that the format has not received more critical attention. In the 1970s several studies were conducted on the sociology of adult bookstores and peep shows, providing thick, if at times suspect, descriptions of these spaces (see Karp; Kornblum; McNamara; Nawy; Sundholm). More recently, a number of scholars have pointed to the political and social significance of porn theaters and arcades, particularly in relation to queer culture and the policing of public sex (see Berlant and Warner; Cante and Restivo; Capino; Champagne; Chauncey; Warner). Yet the peep show arcade has remained relatively marginalized within the larger field of porn studies, and the content of peep show films is almost never discussed.[1]

This lack of attention may be a result of the inherent difficulties involved in the study of peep show films. As is the case with the pornography industry in general, peep show producers and distributors were unlikely to maintain archival records, particularly when their businesses existed on the margins of legal acceptability. Because peep machines brought in large quantities of small, hard change, it was easy for owners to mask the precise amount of revenue earned. Peep parlors would rarely advertise themselves, and the films shown in the machines were short and often regionally produced. It is thus nearly impossible to estimate the size and structure of the peep industry, and there are few printed advertisements or reviews to provide a sense of the content of films in different regions or at different historical moments. The ephemeral status of the format makes it equally challenging to determine which films might or might not have been run in the arcades. While a number of producers created films expressly for use in peep machines, these loops might later be sold over (or under) the counter after they were removed from circulation, often being edited or reprinted in the process. Loops produced for home use would also be loaded into peep machines in bookstores as a means of marketing those films to patrons. For a contemporary researcher searching

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through private collections or uncataloged caches within film archives there are few clues as to where a loop might have originated or whether it was ever shown in a peep machine.

The difficulties associated with studying the peep show might also result from the highly situated status of the format. Peep arcades are social spaces defined by their apparatus and architecture, their physical placement within a community, and the various regulations, enforcement policies, and mores at play in their geographical locale. While these are factors that must be considered with any pornographic material (or any media format, for that matter), issues of architecture and space literally define the peep show as a medium. Despite the pervasiveness of the peep show format, there are significant regional and historical distinctions in terms of design, display, film gauge, placement, degrees of privacy, and film content. These factors make it incredibly difficult to discuss the nature of peep shows with any degree of empirical accuracy.

Yet peep shows remain an important phenomenon to discuss, particularly in terms of theorizing the intersections of cinema and space. Peep show arcades have generated fierce debates about public decency and zoning and have been subject to much legislation. Peep shows also have a strong hold on the cultural imagination. Images of neon peep show signage remain one of the most efficient means of signifying urban decadence, especially that associated with the late 1960s and 1970s. As literature on the diverse social dynamics of "sex districts" has indicated, commercial venues such as adult bookstores, theaters, and arcades are traversed by a broad cross-section of users and are of tremendous social and political importance to various marginalized communities for whom such districts provide public visibility and relative freedom of movement.

This paper will explore questions of spatiality in the pornographic peep show, focusing on the widespread establishment of the adult arcades in the mid-1960s through the early 1970s. Space will be considered from a number of perspectives: in terms of the evolution of the spatial dynamics of the apparatus, in terms of the regulation of the social and cultural space of the arcade, and in terms of the performative spaces engendered by a series of 16 mm loops from this era. Within the arcade numerous cinematic and physical bodies are rendered open to display, enacting a vexed and often self-conscious web of exhibitionism, surveillance, and social exchange. These exchanges are rarely complete, however, and on every register are marked by inconsistency, disruption, distraction, and disavowal. An examination of the range of contradictory accounts of the peep show arcade provided by sociologists, entrepreneurs, journalists, and the courts in this era reveals a great deal about the complexity of the peep arcade as a public space. Even the most reticent of these accounts acknowledge that the 1960s peep arcade was a site inclusive of a range of sexual practices (albeit not inclusive of many practices geared toward female customers or of media created by female producers). The fluidity of this atmosphere, however, stands in contrast to the highly politicized manner in which arcades were monitored and regulated. And the film loops, too, especially those created exclusively for peep machines, bear marks of tension and contradiction, particularly as registered in their performances and in their unique mode of address. If we are to make sense, as Vivian Sobchack insists, of "the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility," the peep show arcade seems an ideal venue for doing so (*Carnal Thoughts* 59).

Given the dearth of information available on the pornographic peep show industry, it might be helpful to outline my methodology at the outset. Descriptions of peep show machines and the layout of arcades have been compiled from direct interviews with arcade owners and employees, interviews published in trade books on the pornography industry, sociological studies from the era (including those compiled in the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography reports), accounts published in newspaper articles, and data included in local and federal court decisions. Access to 16 mm films, stills, and distribution cards from the Starlight Film Series was provided by Albert Steg, an archivist and ephemeral film collector. Additional Starlight loops are available on home video; Something Weird Video includes a large number of Starlights in their vintage erotica compilations. I viewed collections of uncataloged loops at the Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction in Bloomington, Indiana, and at the Museum of Sex in New York, and I consulted the extensive vertical files at the Kinsey covering the porn industry during this period.

My findings are nascent and reveal, more than any conclusive answers, the tremendous lack of reliable information regarding peep shows. Nevertheless, several central questions emerged during the course of this research that I wish to explore here. The peep arcade is an anomalous space within the realm of porn studies precisely because of the manner in which public and private become enfolded. Peep shows are social environments, sites of exchange

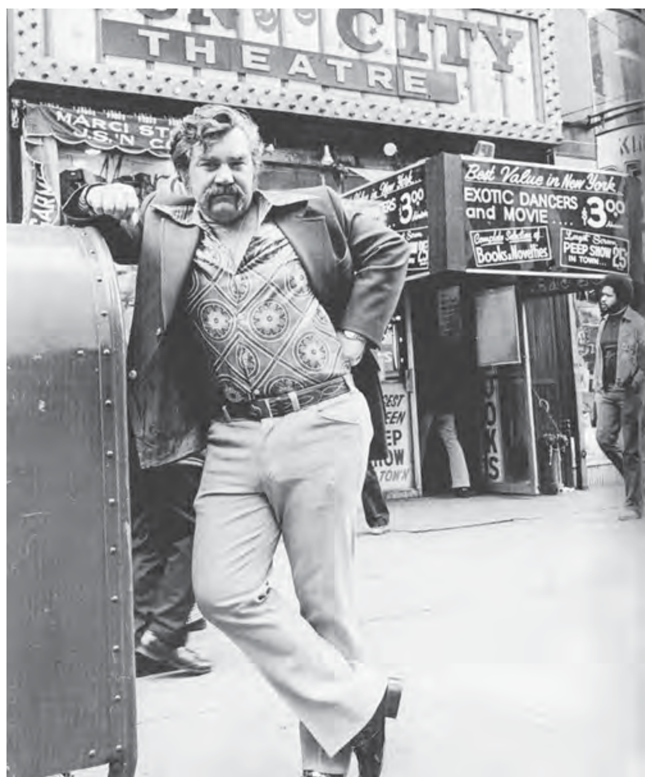

Figure 1. Martin Hodas, "King of the Peeps." Photo: J. Michael Dombrowski, *Newsday*, 1974. Reprinted in Bianco.

Figure 2. Panoram "Soundies" Jukebox. *Look* magazine, 19 Nov. 1940.

between on-screen performers and cameras, between spectators and texts, and, in certain instances, between spectators in the arcade. Moreover, the systems of surveillance and regulation that attempt to police these exchanges indicate the degree to which peep arcades pose a threat to privatized, normative notions of sexuality. In the sections that follow I outline the ways in which public and private are subverted within these diverse registers. My hope is that these preliminary gestures might generate further research into spatiality and peep show culture.

A Brief History of the Arcade, 1966–1970

The rise of the modern-day peep arcade in the 1960s is subject to much mythologization. Coin-operated motion-picture "peep" machines were hardly a new invention at that time, with Kinetoscope and Mutoscope parlors dating back to the late nineteenth century. Early peep machines frequently flirted with salacious material (or at least with salacious-sounding titles); this trend increased exponentially as technologies lost their novelty and migrated to down-market amusement arcades catering to "sporting" crowds (see Nasaw 130–34). Periodic references to peep-related obscenity cases and the appearance of vintage loops in private collections suggest that pornographic motion-picture peep machines have enjoyed a fairly continuous presence on the North American entertainment landscape.[2] What changed in the 1960s, however, was the scale and ambition of the peep industry and its visible intrusion into the public sphere.

There are several regional accounts of the "invention" of the 1960s peep show booths that share a similar narrative, one centered on entrepreneurial recycling. In 1967 Martin Hodas, the "King of the Peeps," installed his first set of coin-operated film machines in Carpel Books at 259 West 42nd St. (Bianco 162–63) (figure 1). Hodas had been working in the jukebox and coin-op amusement industry, installing and servicing machines. In an arcade in New Jersey in 1966 he encountered a large Panoram

film jukebox machine that had been outfitted to show "girlie" striptease loops.[3] Panorams were launched in the early 1940s by the Mills Novelty Company to show three-minute "Soundies" musical performances. The Panoram consisted of a large wooden cabinet and a ground-glass screen on which the film was rear projected, maximizing visibility of the musical shorts in the restaurants and bars in which the machines were installed (figure 2). This presented an obvious problem for peep purveyors, who needed to convert the machines for individual customers. The glass screens were replaced with a binocular viewer that looked onto the reflected image, and the remainder of the opening was either partially or fully boarded over (figure 3). Despite the musical origins of the format, the peep loops were silent, and the machines contained no curtains or doors, such that the body of the user remained fully visible to the outside (paradoxically, unlike the body of the performer on film).

Hodas clearly did not invent this technology, as Panorams had been converted in this manner since the demise of the Soundies enterprise in the late 1940s. Other forms of peep machines existed in numerous amusement arcades throughout the country, and references to police raids on arcades with "obscene" peep shows date to at least the early 1950s.[4] A description of a 1950s arcade refers to a front room, with pool tables and "machines of skill"; a central counter for magazines, cigarettes, and change; and a back room with a large number of Panoram-style peep machines (*State v. Silverman*). While this model of the divided storefront with segregated peep area and a highly visible change counter remained the norm, Hodas's primary innovation was the relocation of peep machines from amusement arcades into adult-themed bookstores in large quantities and in a number of locations in a concentrated area. According to Anthony Bianco, adult bookstore owners had been pressured by the police department to obtain licenses to show films, which they had avoided rather than opening their businesses to additional scrutiny. Hodas hired a lawyer, who discovered that licenses for coin-operated movie machines were not required, and Hodas began to install Panorams in the backs of adult bookstores around Times Square. By 1968 he was reportedly depositing $15,000 in quarters in the bank per day (Bianco 162–64). His business soon expanded to film production, and he switched from the bulky 16 mm machines to 8 mm and to privatized booths with hard-core films by the 1970s. He was constantly dogged with charges of involvement with organized crime (charges he vehemently denies), and his involvement in the industry declined after he was convicted of tax evasion in 1975.

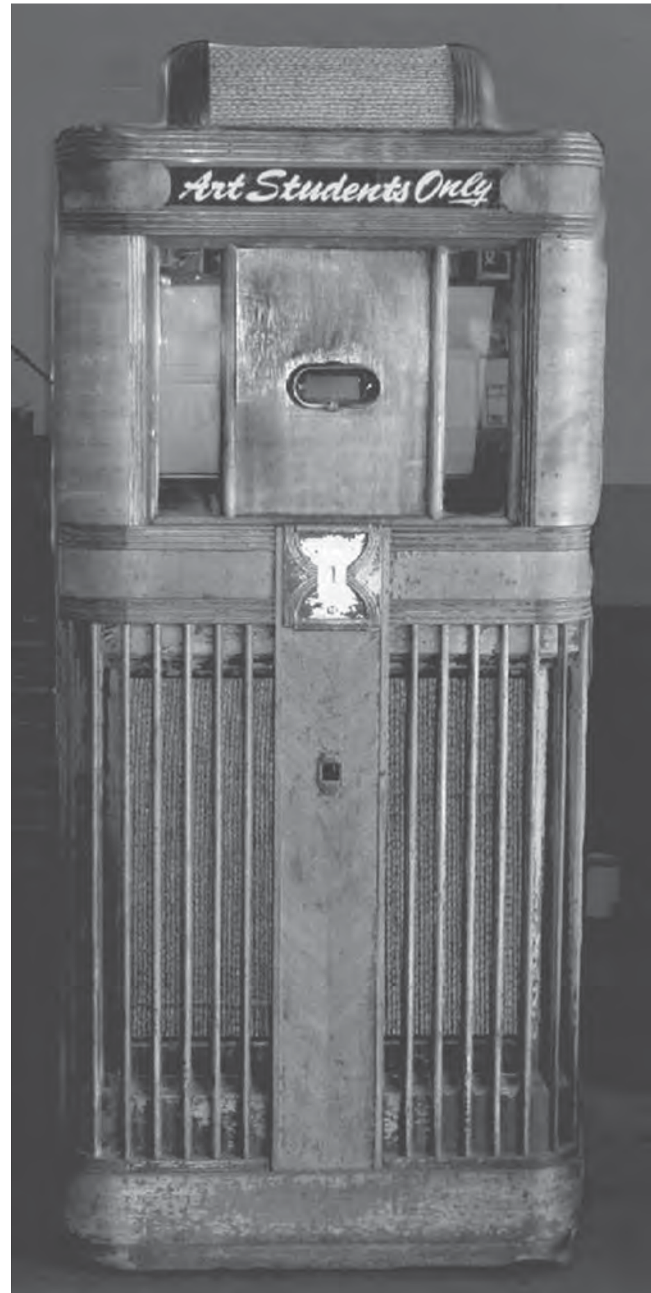

Figure 3. Panoram converted for peep show use. Image courtesy of Betty and Paul Nusbaum.

Other entrepreneurs began large-scale peep show operations across the country. In Atlanta Michael Thevis built a massive multimedia porn empire largely funded by the distribution of peep show machines, reportedly developing his machines based on children's cartoon booths

designed by Nat Bailen.[5] Reuben Sturman is credited with mass marketing the privatized peep booth through his Cleveland-based company, Automated Vending. According to one of his former employees, the booths were constructed out of plywood and paneling, with a closing door. Each booth contained a screen and two to four 8 mm or Super8 projectors triggered by a circuit board when a user selected a button for a particular film. The projectors operated via electrical circuitry, and, rather than working via a continuous loop, they would stop, advance, and rewind the films automatically (McNeil and Osbourne 104–10). Such innovations in privacy and selectability held an obvious appeal for most users. Sturman's operations spread throughout the United States and Canada, later including partnerships in Europe, and separate corporations under his supervision controlled the production of films and the collecting of change. The 1986 report of the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography stated that Sturman was "widely believed to be the largest distributor of pornography in the world" (pt. 4, chap. 4, sec. 5; see also McNeil and Osbourne 104–10; Schlosser 128-32).

According to the 1970 report of the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, peep show booths were primarily 8 mm and offered viewers three to four minutes of a reel for each quarter deposited, although 16 mm machines were equally common in the 1960s, and the amount of time allotted per quarter was often closer to two minutes. The films, the report notes, "usually depict fully nude females exposing their genitals, and many depict sexual foreplay between couples," both male–female and female–female (1:101–2). A 1970 study of porn outlets in San Francisco similarly found that the arcades "tend to limit their assortment of film to the less graphic, single girl, 'beaver' variety. In cases where two persons are shown, their sex play is more suggestive than actual" (Nawy 149).[6] Both studies noted that women were not permitted to enter the arcades at any of the venues observed. The report's conclusion, that the peeps "exceed the return from sales of books and magazines," providing the primary profits for these establishments, echoes numerous statements by law enforcement officials and bookshop owners. Peeps were to a large degree funding the operations of the adult retail industry.

Descriptions of arcades from this period seem to indicate that the industry was highly decentralized. Arcades seem to have been designed in an ad hoc manner, some utilizing rear-projection machines of varying gauges and others booths with projectors and screens. Despite these inconsistencies, several patterns emerge from the existent accounts of peep arcades, and it may be possible to point toward general trends in the evolution of arcade architecture.

Peep show arcades are frequently located in darkened sections in the backs of bookstores, coin-operated amusement centers, and, in later years, adult movie theaters. Warrens of booths are laid out in a manner that allows users to circulate with a degree of privacy and autonomy while at the same time providing mechanisms for surveillance by arcade employees. In 1973 Charles A. Sundholm described a San Francisco arcade consisting of a brightly lit front section containing pinball machines and other nonpornographic amusements and a darker section containing a "labyrinth" of 8 mm machines. A hexagon-shaped cashier desk separated the two sections, with mirrors that allowed employees to monitor the passageways between sections and machines. The bodies of the viewers in these arcades were fully visible as they peeped at films through slots (suggesting a Panoram-like viewing mechanism), although wooden panels on the sides of the booths could be adjusted to shield the viewer's face from those standing next to him. Machines closest to the front of the arcade were more visible and cost ten cents per view, while the more private booths near the rear of the store charged a quarter. A red light on the top of each machine indicated that it was in use, providing cashiers with "an index of legitimate occupancy and appropriate involvement on the part of patrons" (Sundholm 86–88). Although different machines made use of curtains or other privatizing measures, this general layout seems consistent in descriptions from this era.

Throughout the 1970s, while antiquated machines persisted in some locations, the general trend was toward privatization as Panoram-style machines were replaced with fully enclosed booths with closing doors. 16 mm projectors were gradually replaced by 8 mm and Super8 models, which were upgraded to video as that technology became available. The film loops, too, evolved into hardcore territory, some with mininarratives and others catering to various fetish audiences. The line between peep loop and home-use films grew increasingly blurred as producers attempted to maximize their distribution and profits. The decentralized nature of the industry, however, meant that many different types of peep machines existed concurrently and that local regulations would restrict content

inconsistently. The evolution of the peeps was not entirely linear, then, and the few user reviews of peep arcades in print oscillate between praise for novel material that had slipped past censors and frustration with the endless repetition of the same ("what isn't bland is very ancient . . . arcades are showing the same old junk from 1964").[7]

A Cinema of Distraction

The roots of the motion-picture peeping machine, of course, extend far beyond the 1960s. This larger history is particularly significant to an understanding of the peep show's modus operandi. The arcade booths of the mid-twentieth century share much in common with Tom Gunning's descriptions of the nineteenth-century cinema of attractions: the spectator here "does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity, and its fulfillment" (121). In the peep loops the filmed body is highly aware that it is being watched. It addresses the camera directly, enacting an intimate corporeal performance for an individual viewer. The association I draw between pornography and the cinema of attractions is not a new one, yet the interface of the coin-op film machine manifests this legacy in a highly specific manner. The body of the viewer, too, is explicitly acknowledged by the apparatus of the booth, machines in public foyers that seduce passersby with the promise of the curious and the new. The public display of the viewer's own body would almost surely generate sensations of self-consciousness that would discourage complete spectatorial absorption. And, much like early cinematic shorts, the pornographic peep show loops provide a "succession of thrills . . . potentially limited only by viewer exhaustion" (Gunning 122).

As is the case with most visual technologies, motion-picture peep machines such as Mutoscopes and Kinetoscopes drew upon scandalous subject matter almost from their inception. Earlier technologies such as the stereoscope had successfully married the shape of the device to the presentation of prurient content. Like these devices, peep machines moved beyond the mere content of photographic representation to incorporate into the design of the apparatus an active and physical engagement with the viewer. The act of peeping necessitates a degree of visual disengagement with one's immediate surroundings, assuming a pose that allows for an ocular encounter with a space (either real or representational) accessible through some threshold. This disengagement is hardly passive or involuntary, as the peeper actively peeps in the hopes of experiencing sensation and pleasure, whether or not the material viewed is prurient or not. The space viewed and the actions of bodies potentially performing within that space may ostensibly trigger a corporeal response in the viewer. Yet the eye must work, navigating and exploring the viewed scene to extract perceptions that the brain and nervous system answer to and amplify. Peeping apparatuses are designed to heighten such exchanges, utilizing perspective, depth of field, and framing in addition to content to provide the viewer with a sensational, sensuous encounter.

The link between the evolutions of visual technology and the eroticized gaze is well documented (see, e.g., Crary; Williams, *Hard Core*). I would like to stress this point, however, in relation to the specificity of peep show technology. Devices such as the stereoscope and the Mutoscope create a pleasurable illusion that is enacted within the body of the viewer (the synthesis of two photographic images into a perceived three-dimensional space, the animation of a series of still photographs into the perception of continuous motion). Such processes, of course, are at the heart of the cinematic apparatus in general, yet the early peep machines tended to draw attention to the machinations of the illusion rather than masking the means of production in an immersive cinematic space (Crary 127–36). In the peep show the act of peeping takes place simultaneously inside and outside the body, inviting a corporeal collision between spectator and text.

The diegetic spaces of peep show loops do vary considerably, particularly as quasi-narrative hard-core loops began to appear in the 1970s. The earlier striptease films, however, make use of an extreme economy of means to construct a space of sexual encounter. Certain more sophisticated loops utilized first-person perspective to encourage the viewer to identify with the cameraperson (it is perhaps fair to presume a male camera operator in most instances). Here the performer engages with the camera/cameraperson directly through eye contact, gesture, and posture. The settings are domestic, frequently limited to a single room, with a limited number of props. On-screen performers are typically positioned on couches or beds, flirtatiously removing their clothing in a performative display that resists readings of sadistic voyeurism. The camerawork is intimate and close, roaming up and down the performer's body, paying copious attention to textures and fabrics, lingerie, skin, eyelashes, lips, breasts, and, in the more explicit loops,

genitalia. Ideally, these tactile images coincide with the viewer's own affective bodily experiences. This modality verges on what Laura Marks refers to as a haptic vision, where the distance between viewer and object is collapsed and the eye is "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (162). Porn loops, unlike the intercultural experimental videos that Marks links with haptic vision, resist falling into pure abstraction and are clearly marked by commodification and objectification; this is indeed their fundamental modus operandi. Yet I would argue that the intense focus on surface and texture in certain loops, while by no means removed from a sexual economy that fetishizes the female body, shifts the dynamic from one of optical mastery toward an intersubjective, visceral exchange. Peep show loops are deeply compromised, but the bodily response that the films evoke might, for some viewers, be described as a "concomitant loss of self, in the presence of the other" (Marks 192–93).

Yet this encounter is not experienced unproblematically, and while the peep machine invites a certain interpenetration of space, it is not fully successful in delivering it. Vivian Sobchack has argued that every cinematic encounter is marked by a limit, an "echo focus" whereby viewers recognize the technological mediation of their experience (e.g., the limits of the frame or of perspective), thus preventing complete spectatorial absorption (*Address* 177–86). Awareness of such limits tends to remain relatively unobtrusive during most film events, as the "unnatural" effects of the camera and the projector are experienced by viewers as "a primarily transparent extension of an embodied perceptive act" (186). The limits of the peep machine are so great, however, that they at times overshadow or intrude upon the world of the screen. The peep show patron may try, perhaps desperately, to achieve an immersive, embodied experience through the apparatus. Yet absorption is thwarted at every turn by the quality of the image, by the distractions of the lights, sounds, and smells of the arcade, and by the constant movements of other bodies outside the booth. Inevitably, the experience will be cut short by the machine itself, violently severing the visual flow to demand the insertion of another quarter.

These intrusions are multifold and somewhat distinct from disruptive effects in other cinematic formats. Some of these disruptions are intentional and are built into the structure of the machine. Primary among these, of course, is the coin-operated interface that is the raison d'être of the peep machine. Even in avant-garde or structuralist films that aim to demystify the transparency of the apparatus, the actual flow of the projector is rarely interfered with unless there is accidental equipment failure. The coin-op interface does precisely this, yet the goal is hardly one of Brechtian detachment. The objective, rather, is a temporary jolt that will elicit the desire to pay more to reenter the space of the film.

And within the films themselves one encounters further disruptions. Low budgets and shoddy cinematography result in numerous unintentional intrusions whereby the means of production are made painfully obvious. In the case of striptease films with a solo performer, the viewer experiences a self-reflexive cinematic mode that aspires to relative transparency (such that one might experience, through the mediation of the camera, the film body as viscerally present). Yet the limits of the frame and of the medium remain absolute. As Jean-Pierre Oudart might argue, the cameraperson in the peep show loop functions as a disconcerting, unidentifiable controlling presence, an "absent one" who, in this instance, is not repressed via the introduction of a character to whom we can attribute the gaze. Just as the coin-op mechanism of the booth simultaneously promises and thwarts spectatorial control, the structure of space within the film is ambiguous and unresolved. The viewer is confronted by the insurmountable gulf between his (again I presume most peep users are male) body and the world of the film, particularly within the charged social atmosphere of the peep arcade.

In considering the phenomenology of the arcade, we should not assume that all viewers wished to fully disengage from the space of the present, particularly those who were cruising for more fully embodied sexual encounters. Nor should we assume that the tension between filmed and real worlds within the booth was experienced as pure frustration; given the continued popularity of the arcades, it seems more likely that this tension may evoke certain pleasures of its own. The body of the viewer hovers in a suspended existence between the body of the film and the space of the arcade, hyperfocused (at least in the case of certain viewers) on the tactility of the flesh on the screen as well as on the sensations of his own flesh. He is also conscious of the synaesthetic realm around him and the constant possibility of intrusion (either welcome or unwelcome) of this space of the booth by other patrons, by management or vice cops, or by the machine itself. The peeps, indeed, seem to revel in a contradictory, in-between space that on every register is governed more by disruption,

surveillance, chance, and displacement (what we might call a masochistic mode) than by visual erotic mastery. If peep shows aim to be voyeuristic, they typically fail in achieving that state, offering the aspiration of ocular embodiment with only the partial fulfillment of that promise.

Peep Spectatorship and the Legislation of Privacy

Peep show arcades are thus porous sites where the delineation between viewer and text is subverted and the site of performance is extended into the space of consumption. The peep show is in fact one of the few areas within cinema culture where the activities of spectators receive greater attention than the content of the films. A number of sociological studies on adult bookstores were conducted in the early 1970s that provide detailed descriptions of spectator practices within the arcade. These reports, however, tend to stress the lack of social contact between patrons and attempts by patrons to manage self-presentation by "privatizing" the body. The anxiety about contact appears to stem, according to these studies, from a fear of being identified as well as a fear of being implicated in unsanctioned sexual activity. Visible public masturbation would be one such activity, the studies suggest, as well as anxiety about being identified as gay or of being propositioned for a sexual encounter. The studies are less explicit about other potential anxieties: of being *caught* participating in sexual encounters with other men or even of experiencing arousal when viewing male bodies.

That these anxieties exist says something about the range of activities and media that were readily available in adult stores.[8] Every study, without exception, noted that both male–female and all-male pornography was offered for consumption along with a range of more specialized fetish subgenres. The adult bookshop offered a virtual supermarket of preferences and perversities. The gradual privatization of peep booths increased opportunities for the consumption of loops to coincide with live sexual experiences. Peep arcades were obvious locales for cruising, and enclosed booths contained "glory holes" for exchanges between patrons. What booth one stood in front of was an indication of what one was into, and the process of selection appears to have been made with the explicit understanding that one's performance was being observed and that, in effect, one's body was on display as one of the many options another might desire.

Several sociologists from the era register this zone of indeterminacy as a threat that many patrons warded off with defensive measures, closing off the self so as to discourage contact. When observing open peep machines, they described viewers' bodies as striving to appear as motionless and disengaged from the present surroundings as possible. One report by Sundholm describes a setting of near paranoiac avoidance, where customers strive for anonymity at all costs. Such readings, as José Capino has pointed out, problematically paint the adult bookstore as a zone of anonymity with no recognition that anonymity might be a guise by which patrons seeking encounters evade detection by those who might prosecute or judge them. Other studies approached the homosociality of the arcades with more subtlety (see Karp; Kornblum), and more recent work on peep arcades has analyzed the "dramaturgy" of exchanges that take place in the arcade with recognition of the complex motivations various types of patrons might have in "privatizing" their behavior (particularly those turning, or soliciting, tricks) (McNamara 57–66).

Peep arcades, with their wide selection of sexual offerings, are polymorphic sites that viewers can, potentially, appropriate for their own unsanctioned performances, including masturbation as well as activities performed with other arcadegoers. In both cases the patron subverts the role of passive spectator to partake in sexual acts that are deemed doubly perverse in their nonprocreative nature and in their public staging. I would argue that peep show regulations aim not to legislate content but to restrict or even eradicate spaces for public sex. This is an objective that can be mapped throughout wider legislation regarding pornography. While the motivation for this push toward privacy is not explicitly stated, I would suggest that it is rooted in homophobia in particular and in a more general anxiety regarding nonnormative sexual practices. If the peep show can be seen as a potential locus of intersubjective exchange, arcade regulations seem keen on inhibiting that potential.

And it is the social space provided by the peep show arcade that has generated the most animosity toward the format, far more than the content of any particular film that was shown there. Even though law enforcement officials would seize select film reels during raids, it seems clear that the motivation for such raids had little to do with objections to individual titles and more to do with impeding the operations of the arcades in general. As adult theaters,

bookstores, and arcades proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s, outlets were subject to numerous criminal investigations, most often hinging on the possession and sale of obscene materials. One can read within the voluminous obscenity cases from this time period a complex dynamic. Sexually explicit material was increasingly granted protection under the First Amendment, while thresholds of social permissiveness were simultaneously expanding. Perhaps in response to this shift, anxiety regarding the consumption of pornography in public spaces led to a legislative push toward the privatization of sexuality. Shifts in allowable content, then, seem to be closely related to the movement of pornography out of the public sphere.

Of particular import here is the 1969 case of *Stanley v. Georgia*. The case stemmed from an investigation on illegal gambling during which the police obtained a warrant to search Robert Stanley's home for records of bookmaking activities. Officers discovered a film collection during the search; they deemed the works to be pornographic and arrested Stanley for the possession of obscene materials.

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Stanley, yet in doing so it did not appeal to the most obvious avenue—protections against illegal search and seizure (Tuchman 2273–74). Instead, the majority decision focused on the issue of freedom of *thought* and the rights of the individual against the interference of the state in the circulation of knowledge, ideas, or beliefs "regardless of their social worth." This right was inseparable, the court found, from "the right to be free, except in very limited circumstances, from unwanted governmental intrusions into one's privacy" (*Stanley v. Georgia*).

Despite the rather progressive implications this decision might have had for future obscenity cases, later decisions interpreted *Stanley* in an extremely narrow manner. The privacy protections offered by this precedent were consistently limited to the physical space of the home. In other words, one was free to utilize obscene materials within the home, but interactions with the identical products elsewhere were subject to prosecution.[9]

Pornography's greatest threat to the social order, these interpretations would imply, rests not in its representations but in its public presence. Shifting definitions of privacy resulted in a number of contradictory rulings on the status of peep shows, in each instance, however, with the goal of restricting any sexual activity that might occur there (see, e.g., *Department of Housing v. Ellwest*; *Sanza v. Maryland*). For example, at least one peep show operator argued, unsuccessfully, that the *Stanley* decision should protect the viewing of explicit materials in arcades, as the booths provided for private consumption. The court ruled that arcades were by definition public, commercial spaces fundamentally distinct from the "castle" of one's home (*Star v. Preller*). Despite the contradictory definitions of public and private cited in similar cases, the focus in each instance is a prohibition against the peep arcade as a communal sexual space. Peep show regulations, which typically concern lighting, the width of aisles, occupancy per square foot, and mechanisms of supervision, confirm that the policing of public sex is a primary concern (see *Antonello v. San Diego*; National Obscenity Law Center).

Popular histories of pornography or of adult districts such as 42nd Street tend to describe the decline of the peep booth as the inevitable result of technological advancement, and it is true that videotapes and DVDs have made it easy to build an immense home library of high-budget pornography. At the same time, the state-sanctioned move toward privatization was clearly guided by other factors as well; at the very least, obscenity cases in the wake of *Stanley* provided a significant incentive for the adult industry to shift to a home-based model of porn consumption. The performance of the body in the peep arcade takes place in a highly politicized context. It is thus critical to read the legal marginalization of "vice centers" with deep suspicion. If we are to speak of the peep arcade as a space of disruption and distraction, the intrusions of the state into the culture of public sex are potent forces to take into account.

Skin Deep: Solo Girls and Split Beavers

In the case *Kaplan v. United States* (1971) the District of Columbia Court of Appeals included, for consideration, an appendix detailing the content of a peep show reel that had been deemed "sexually morbid, grossly perverse, and bizarre, without any artistic or scientific purpose or justification":

> This film depicts a young female stripping absolutely naked, then brazenly and shamelessly displaying her breasts as well as her genitalia. . . . The sceneric [*sic*] background is meager and is designed in such a fashion as not to distract nor to interfere with the viewer's concentrated attention focused upon the camera's long shots, close-up shots and very-close-up shots of the female participant's genitalia and astronomically large breasts. The female filmed simulates passion; and by her body movements, gyrations and undulations coupled with a banana, used as a phallic symbol and being larger than normally displayed for

> sale in the neighborhood food markets, suggests to the viewer that she is . . . most willing to engage in sex play culminating with sexual intercourse. The apparent highlight of this film footage is a close-in view of the female performer's vaginal area and with the aid of a banana used as a replica of the male sex organ in an erect state, she suggests to the viewer rather graphically the act of sexual intercourse. The film concludes with the woman peeling and devouring the banana—the gist of which is intended to be illustrative of the performer's desire to participate in osculatory relations with the private parts of a male. (*Kaplan v. United States*)

I find several aspects of this description striking (beyond the rousing descriptions of breasts and banana). As this account suggests, readings of peep loops often refer to the camera's "close-in" attention to the anatomy and gyrating movements of performers; sensationalism and novelty, then, manifested in edits and camerawork, are markers of obscenity. Other respondents, however, are just as likely to stress generic monotony and single-mindedness as evidence of indisputable prurience. The *People v. Culbertson* decision, for example, found that "the sheer volume and duration of the exhibits . . . has dulled our ability to relate the identity of any particular performer. The atmosphere and the flavor of the performances in each case however are unmistakably the same." While I do not share in the aesthetic or political conclusions of these courts, I do find a certain tension between variation and monotony to be core to the peep show aesthetic. The apparatus, adorned in many cases with marquee cards and provocative titles, promises stimulation and the shock of the new, while the products themselves may fail to deliver. It is also true that repetitive viewing of large numbers of peeps can result in a desensitized ennui. And the structure of the peeps emphasizes repetition and postponement over a teleological climax; much like a phone sex operator, the most financially successful loops are those that tease their patrons into lingering just a little longer.

Even more so than the feature-length porn flick or the stag, peep loops are nonlinear by design, in particular, the soft-core loops from the 1960s. Richard Dyer has argued that arcade loops contain a strong narrative component and that even when one encounters a loop midway through, it is easy to discern where one is within the narrative (a product of the simplicity and codification of the genre); moreover, viewers are anxious to temporally reposition the film's (and, ostensibly, their own) climax as an endpoint (27–29). I would agree that most peep show films do have a clear structure and that in the case of later hard-core peeps both heterosexual and gay loops have a narrative trajectory that typically concludes with a visible ejaculation. Yet many of the earliest hard-core loops were extremely low budget affairs, shot with a palpable lack of directorial control. As a result, in numerous loops the roll of film runs out before male performers climax, or they climax midway through, such that the rest of the reel is comprised of oral sex, female masturbation, digital manipulation, or other activities less geared toward a visual telos. In loops with solo performers, both male and female, there are even fewer shreds of narrative structure. Even in the case of male performers who do masturbate to a visual cum shot, these climaxes often occur several times throughout the reel, displacing the centrality of the orgasm as a finale and coupling it with the tactile display of the male body as an object of desire.

And tactility, I would argue, is one of the most essential aesthetic qualities of peep show films. Exemplary in this regard is a series of 16 mm silent loops, Starlight Films, that were exclusively produced and distributed for peep machines.[10] The earliest film I have encountered in the series was from 1956 and the latest from 1972, although I am uncertain if the company produced films beyond these dates. Most are printed on Anscochrome film and have retained a stunningly saturated color. The films are flipped from left to right, indicating that they were shown in Panoram-style rear-projection booths.[11] Each loop is silent and approximately ten to twelve minutes in total length, interspersed with notched slug frames that would stop the projector, displaying the image of a nude Venus-like statue (figure 4). These reels typically feature either individual women stripping and posing for the camera

Figure 4. "Venus" statue slug frame from a Starlight film. Courtesy A. Steg.

or two women engaging in soft-core lesbian groping sessions.[12] The loops all seem to take place in intimate, colorfully decorated interiors. The examples that I've seen seem to feature predominantly white actresses, with a smaller number of black, Asian, and Latina performers, although their ages, sizes, and appearances do vary significantly.

I would argue, following Thomas Waugh's analysis of classic American stag films, that peep show films are remarkable in their relentless failure to make visible "the unknowable 'truth' of sex" (128). Waugh points to the homosociality of the stag film experience, demonstrated both in the exhibition space and as represented on-screen. The peep arcade can be read as a homosocial space, and certain peep show films, particularly later hard-core loops, exhibit on-screen homosocial interactions identical to those that Waugh describes. Yet the female striptease films that dominated the peep machines prior to the 1970s operate via an entirely different modality, one that includes more than a few flashes of the female subjectivity that, according to Waugh, rarely surfaces within the stags (129). Given the very limited presence of women within the space of the film arcade, this subjectivity manifests itself primarily within the on-screen performances, performances that seem to resist anonymous objectification through a direct visual engagement with the camera—and, by extension, the camera operator and viewer.[13]

Some of the loops did contain a loose narrative. In Starlight 138 a young woman is enjoying a cigarette, a scotch, and *Photoplay* magazine when her roommate arrives home, visibly drunk (figure 5). The roommate collapses on the couch while recounting her evening but dissolves into giggles when she discovers her panties are in her pocketbook. Her friend helps her get ready for bed, and, inevitably, one thing leads to another. There are several moments of dissonance that prevent this performance from slipping entirely into the realm of cliché. Most notably, the drunken roommate is either a phenomenal actress or is really quite drunk, for by the time the couple make it to the bedroom, she has passed out, and much of the interaction involves rolling her limp body around on the bedspread. Her friend's legs part at one point to reveal a dangling tampon string. The loop closes as well with a genuinely affectionate exchange that transcends typical pornographic pseudolesbianism.

Stormy is perhaps more typical in its nonnarrative structure, yet it is also interspersed with disruptive elements (figure 6). We see a woman slip out of her dress in a living

Figure 5. Starlight 138 (ca. 1963). Courtesy A. Steg.

Figure 6. *Stormy* (1958). Courtesy A. Steg.

room upholstered in gray tweed. She begins to play with a red hula-hoop—rather badly—and after a few minutes takes off her panties, leaving on her Lucite heels. She lolls about, flirting with the camera, although after about eight minutes is running short of material. She throws several questioning looks at the camera before biting the hoop (which in fact looks much goofier in motion than it does in stills). She begins to jump through the hoop as if it were a jump rope until she hits herself in the head and starts laughing. As the camera follows her we see a kidney-shaped coffee table and a record player behind her along with a collection of record albums, indicating that the space is not an anonymous motel room.

In many of the Starlights I find myself drawn to similar minutiae (a tiny bruise on an actress's hip, a broken fingernail) and in particular to the décor—the textures of the drapery and upholstery and walls. For this viewer, the mise-en-scène is anything but "meager," as the *Kaplan* ruling suggested. Much has been said about the sleazy, bare settings for porn loops—I find this not to be the case here, as there are numerous artifacts (loaded bookshelves, toiletries, textiles, and knickknacks) that make these seem like lived-in spaces. But there is also a decided lack of "naturalness," in the sense that we are clearly watching someone perform (rather than watching a document of an unmediated act), and there is no corporeal, climactic "real" event (as there would be, ostensibly, in a hard-core or all-male reel) that might absorb our or the performers' full attention (see Hillyer 54–56). For me, as the movements of the performers begin to blur into banal repetition, it is in fact within the décor that I locate certain moments of intimacy or even of intrusion: Where are we? Whose room is this? The interior private space of the room has been laid bare and in many ways feels more legible than the exposed interiors of the bodies on display.

The question of agency and exploitation is an obvious one here, vexed by the lack of reliable information regarding the production of these films. There is no doubt the female body is offered up as an object for male consumption, a focus that is apparent in the staging, cinematography, and direction. Yet the inadequacy of that direction breaks down during the course of the loops, and the actress is left, it seems in many instances, to perform what she *imagines* to be an idealized display. Her own gaze directly engages with both the camera and the off-screen cameraperson, enacting a complex and seemingly self-conscious interchange of intimacy, control, and vulnerability.

Figure 7. Starlight 425 (ca. 1970) and Starlight 428 (ca. 1971). Courtesy A. Steg.

The most direct point of reference I can make here is to Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*, films in which subjects were asked to sit still in front of a camera for the duration of a three-minute roll of film, their gaze confronting the viewer, who slowly observes the performance as it disintegrates before the unblinking camera. Peeps, at least of the direct-address Starlight variety, seem to enact a similar encounter (figure 7). They exist at arm's length and invoke a self-conscious exchange that registers in both the viewer's body and that of the performer as she actively struggles to sustain her performance in the absence of a guiding directorial force.

It is important to acknowledge that my perspective on peep loop aesthetics is limited by the fact that I am not the target audience for the format. It is quite likely that the typical peep show patron would not pay such detailed attention to décor or textile patterns. As John Champagne has argued, some peep show customers might not watch the films at all. Nor are these loops typical of the manner in which peep loops subsequently evolved, with later examples more closely echoing the stagings of hard-core production numbers. Yet I find these early loops to be haunting and indicative of the peep show's inclination to create fetish objects. References to Panoram-style peep machines repeatedly made two comparisons: they looked like either refrigerators or coffins. This analogy is illuminating, I believe, and speaks to the modality of the peep loop. Within it there is a marked attempt to capture and reanimate a corporeal experience, an uncapturable moment; the results are at once poignant and perverse.

Conclusion

The peep arcade presents a highly anomalous media terrain. On each of the registers I have touched on (the legal, the textual, the space of the exhibition) I have been struck by a series of reversals and inversions stemming from the indeterminacy of space as well as of time. The past (filmic and technological) is reanimated, while the body remains rooted in the present. Interior spaces, both corporeal and domestic, are opened to view, while the exterior realm of the public foyer is enveloped within the enclosed space of the booth. Just as the filmed bodies exist in a suspended yet politically charged space between exposure and intimacy, the bodies in the arcade enact a self-conscious performance that is at once personal and socially contingent. Moreover, the structural and accidental glitches within the machinery threaten to disrupt the illusory act of peeping at the same time that they add to the pleasure of the schizophrenic experience.

My readings of 1960s peep loops are perhaps colored by the nostalgia that invariably accompanies antiquated technologies—an experience that might not be applicable to contemporaneous audiences. At the same time I would argue that there is something profoundly strange about the spaces in which early coin-op film machines were positioned and utilized. The peep machine makes visceral the incommensurate contradictions between here and there, then and now, seeing and knowing, perceiving and acting, exposing, to return to Tom Gunning, "the hollow centre of the cinematic illusion" (129). The impact of

the peep machine is often one of disruption and failure, yet that failure is actively registered within the body of the viewer. Moreover, the viewer's body, in turn, engages a multisensorial, multispatial cohabitation that extends beyond an involuntary response and that is irreducible to a mere voyeuristic fascination with the image. The peep show's illusion may be hollow, yet its experience is deeply embodied, with far-reaching social and political implications, presenting cinema scholars with a provocative, if elusive, field of inquiry.

Notes

I am greatly indebted to those who generously assisted with this research, in particular Albert Steg, B. J. Woodman at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, and Elizabeth Mariko Murray at the Museum of Sex.

1. Richard Dyer provides a welcome reading of several all-male loops in "Male Gay Porn."

2. Despite the lack of archival data, evidence of pre-1960s peep machines is ample. See note 4 for information on 1950s obscenity cases related to peep machines. Vintage loops and machines are frequently posted on eBay.com. It is difficult to verify whether the distribution of films for peep machines overlapped with that of stag loops during this era, although the early peep loops I have encountered tend to be less explicit than stags. This is clearly an area that demands further research.

3. This story is recounted in Anthony Bianco's *Ghosts of 42nd Street* (160–62), and Hodas confirmed the narrative in a telephone conversation (4 March 2007). Bianco calls the machines "Panasonics," and Hodas referred to them as "Panoramics," yet their physical descriptions of the devices matches precisely that of the Soundies Panoram. The widespread conversion of Panoram jukeboxes into peep show machines is evidenced by the number of existent machines that have peep viewers installed (some with peep loops still loaded on the projector) and was confirmed by conversations with several Soundies Panoram experts. Many thanks to Hodas and Larry Fisher for their assistance with this research.

4. A 1952 *Washington Post* article reports on the conviction of a peep show arcade employee on charges of possessing indecent films with the intent to exhibit them. This was part of a raid on fourteen arcades in the Washington, D.C., area ("'Peep Show' Change Man"). In 1954 a Seattle arcade operator was arrested for showing "obscene" films in fifteen "Pan-o-ram" machines (*State v. Silverman*).

5. Thevis is a fascinating figure who began in the newsstand business and was the producer behind *Pendulum* magazine. He was convicted of arson (the warehouse of Nat Bailen's movie machine company mysteriously burned down) and for both direct and indirect involvement in the murder of several business associates. See the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986), pt. 4, chap. 4.

6. The Nawy study is, in fact, cited in the 1970 report of the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography and may provide, in part, the basis for the report's assessment of arcade films.

7. See the review from *Artisex*. Markers of this uneven evolution persist today. References to Panorams exist in contemporary peep regulations, and at least one peep show film arcade exists on Granville Street in Vancouver (see Otis). An overview of key court cases and current peep show regulations (both for video and live performance booths) can be found in the report "Construction of Open Booth Ordinances" issued by the National Obscenity Law Center, affiliated with the antipornography group Morality in the Media.

8. The studies I have encountered from this era focused exclusively on stores that offered both male–female and all-male materials. I have not located any published accounts of all-male arcades from the 1960s or 1970s, although it seems plausible that such arcades would have evolved concurrently with all-male bookstores and theaters. See Capino, who includes a discussion of 1970s all-male theaters with arcades of booths as well as a cogent reading of these same sociological studies. See Champagne on contemporary video arcades.

9. For example, the courts in *U.S. v. 12 200-foot Reels of Super8 Film* (1973) found that travelers transporting materials to be used privately were still guilty of trafficking in obscenity, as the materials were found outside the home.

10. I am much indebted to Albert Steg for sharing his impeccably documented collection of Starlight films with me and to Mike Vraney of Something Weird Video. According to Vraney, the company was based in Seattle (as is further evidenced by the distribution slips that accompanied many of the reels).

11. This was confirmed by Mike Vraney and Lisa Petrucci of Something Weird Video.

12. I have not encountered any hard-core activity in the Starlights, although later films in the series did include male participants, some with visible erections, and in certain cases appear to depict nonsimulated intercourse (although, in the works I have viewed, without any shots of actual penetration).

13. The presence of women within the arcades was greatly limited during this era (and, indeed, still is today); rare references to female patrons, who were explicitly barred from many peep venues in the 1960s, are limited to descriptions of curious interlopers accompanied by male companions or prostitutes utilizing booths for transactions (see, e.g., Kornblum; Nawy). I have yet to locate any references to female producers of peep films or of arcade loops produced for female audiences.

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