Bacchanale (John Amero and Len Amero, 1970)

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**ABSTRACT**

*Bacchanale* (1970), an early American hardcore feature film, shows the genre taking shape at the dawn of the 1970s, but also reflects the queer influences of the gay brothers who made it, John and Lem Amero. This article uses *Bacchanale* as a window into both the pornographic careers of the Ameros and also the generally overlooked influence of queer filmmakers on the development of hetero hardcore cinema.

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**Introduction**

Over a quarter-century into the development of Porn Studies as a formal scholarly field, gay and straight pornography are generally framed through parallel but distinct genealogies, reaching from stag films to the ‘porno chic’ of *Deep Throat* (Damiano 1972) or *Boys in the Sand* (Poole 1971) and other iconic titles, and then into shared declension narratives of video, AIDS, and a lost Golden Age. This has played out through separate bodies of scholarship as well: Linda Williams on the one side, Tom Waugh on the other, and so on. Lost in this overly clean organization of sexuality is the central role queer filmmakers have played in developing ostensibly straight smut. From zero-budget auteurs Zachary Strong and Zebedy Colt, to the classy classicism of Chuck Vincent, and later the slick, dream-like eroticism of Michael Zen, queer and gay directors have helped produce normative heterosexuality through their hardcore efforts – often with under-recognized twists.¹

This article takes as a test case of this dynamic the early hardcore feature *Bacchanale* (Amero and Amero 1970), by brothers John and Lem Amero. Overshadowed by such approximate contemporaries as *Mona* (Benveniste and Ziehm 1970) and *Tomatoes* (Robert 1970) at the dawn of the hardcore feature, *Bacchanale* reflected the art-house-by-way-of-grindhouse aesthetic of the Ameros and their frequent collaborators Michael and Roberta Findlay. With its penetration shots plainly added as inserted afterthoughts, *Bacchanale* embedded the transitional moment of the early 1970s in its very *mise-en-scène*. But more importantly, its casual homoeroticism captured an emerging form not yet bound by generic convention. Like Walt Davis’ (1970) *Widow Blue*, *Bacchanale* revelled in a liminal queer sexuality that found recurring expression throughout the Ameros’ films, from a candid urinal-cruising scene in *The Lusting Hours* (Amero and Amero 1967b) through a knowing set piece in a gay bar in *Blonde Ambition* (Amero and Amero 1981). Fascinating unto itself as an ambitious, surrealistic art-porn experiment, *Bacchanale* also...
thus provides a window into the queer impulses that shaped and informed ‘straight’ hardcore. This article situates it in the larger filmic project of John and Lem Amero, gay brothers whose sexploitation and hardcore films challenged the stability of both straight and gay genres from the mid-1960s into the early 1980s. *Bacchanale* and the Amero brothers’ other films continuously insist on the porous boundaries between straight and queer.

**Queering sexploitation: the Ameros and the path to hardcore**

Originally from New England, the ambitious young John Amero found work first at CBS and then in the new ABC film department of the early 1960s, working as an editor. Immersed in New York City’s rich cinematic culture, he also took film courses at NYU, where his own student film explored the city more adventurously than many of his peers. After managing to sell that film’s footage, Amero made the leap to low-budget feature production, drawing on his friends Roberta and Michael Findlay and also his slightly reluctant brother Lem. The result, shot in 1963 and released in 1964, was *Body of a Female* (Amero and Findlay 1964), a sordid white-slavery tale at the forefront of a new, increasingly explicit sexploitation film movement.2

Lost today, the film did well enough to ensure both the Ameros and the Findlays further work. Its poster hinted at queer affinities, promising to explore ‘the bizarre, twilight world of abnormal sexual behavior’ – apparently heterosexual on-screen, and yet cloaked in the terms of gay and lesbian pulp fiction from the era, subtly reflecting how the marginal cinemas of Times Square grindhouse theatres served as places of liminal sexualities both on-screen and in the aisles.

Shooting their second feature, *Diary of a Swinger* (Amero and Amero 1967a), in Boston in late 1966, John Amero told the trade press *Boxoffice*: ‘Hollywood technicians and creative people are getting older and older. They’re losing touch with the younger generation’ (*Boxoffice* 1966). The resulting film both embodied and queerly mocked the emerging sexploitation genre. Following Jean (played by ‘Joanna Cunningham’, a pseudonym for

![Figure 1. Homoerotic desire within otherwise hetero hardcore in *Bacchanale* (1970).](image)
Diary depicted a dismal view of gendered violence, as Jean’s world is defined through rape, coercion, and exploitation – which, in typical sexploitation manner, plays as both critique and alibi to justify wallowing in such scenes. Yet in its final moments, Diary offers a remarkably sneering take on the psychological discourse that had run through mid-century Hollywood film such as Alfred Hitchcock’s (1960) Psycho and into many a grindhouse effort. When Jean’s sordid tale culminates in a breakdown and suicide attempt, she sees a psychiatrist, who suggests she still has hope of living ‘a good, useful life, perhaps someday with a husband and children’. Turning then to speak directly into the camera, the doctor provides a facile analysis of her absent mother, over-investment in her father, and a ‘world in which she was only a thing to be used, not loved … if Jean hadn’t tried killing herself, she probably would have given up men forever, or gone into a woman’s arms for love and affection’. As the doctor drones on – ‘thank god we caught her in time’ – the Ameros cut to Jean arriving at home, to greet, indeed, a lesbian lover. The film ends with them laughing at the shrink, with a freeze frame as they move in to a kiss.

Diary of a Swinger plays lesbianism for titillation, and perhaps laughter. Yet only a few years before it, lesbian pulp novels had regularly reasserted heterosexuality or queer tragedy at their conclusions, and in the year of its release (1967) the US Supreme Court upheld a ruling that homosexuality was a form of psychopathy, reflecting a widespread psychiatric consensus of its pathological status (Keller 2005; Stein 2005). In this context, the Ameros presented a subversively queer vision that scorned dominant psychiatric practices and hetero pro-natalism, instead framing lesbian relations as a site of comfort and sustenance away from the cruelties of patriarchy.

Their next film, The Lusting Hours (Amero and Amero 1967b), again injected queer imagery into the ostensibly heterosexual world of sexploitation, this time in the form of public-restroom male cruising footage, shot surreptitiously (or at least framed as such) through a vent and set at New York City’s Port Authority. The Lusting Hours itself was a pseudo-documentary cobbled together from Body of a Female footage and, apparently, remnants of an unfinished film titled The Girl on Nightmare Island. Its various sections detailed female prostitution and nude modelling, but then suddenly swerved into male hustling, following a pick-up in the Port Authority restroom and, later, the hustler being flogged by a transsexual.

How these disruptions of the normative heterosexuality that governed most sexploitation films played to the largely male audiences of the grindhouse theatres remains difficult to document. Amero brothers’ films received few reviews (although Boxoffice [1967] did note ‘Rose Conti, as the lesbian with whom Miss Cunningham finally finds a degree of happiness’, in a brief but positive capsule review of Diary of a Swinger), and as of this writing three of their first five films remain lost. Others, in a style not unusual to the era, were announced in the trade press without ever seeming to reach completion (Variety 1968a, 1968b).

The Ameros were not the only sexploitation filmmakers to queer the genre. Harry Kerwin, for instance, in his Florida-shot films Strange Rampage (Kerwin 1967) and My Third Wife, George (Kerwin 1968) repeatedly destabilized hetero-prurience as well. The latter film ends with a gender-bending marriage in the vein of Some Like It Hot (Wilder 1959), played for something of a shock/laughter effect, but Strange Rampage featured a scene of casual intimacy between a white and a black man on a couch, played
without overt comment. Yet few sexploitation films delivered as sharp a critique of psychiatric anti-gay dogma as *Diary*, and few as substantive a depiction of same-sex (although in keeping with hustler credo, not gay) male sexuality as *The Lusting Hours*. Indeed, given collaborator Michael Findlay’s almost complete ignorance about homosexuality during the shoot of *Body of a Female*, where according to John Amero he failed to understand his own close friends as gay, we might reasonably speculate an Amero influence on the queer twist ending of Findlay’s (1969) own *Ultimate Degenerate* (on which the Ameros worked in the crew, part of a reciprocal trade-off that often saw them and the Findlays assisting one another’s projects), in which, following a sex show turned massacre, mastermind Spencer’s girlfriend Helen, with whom he has talked by telephone throughout the film, is revealed as a young man, who asks in an exaggerated voice ‘how did you get rid of all those horrible girls?’ It’s a high-camp moment worthy of Warhol or the Kuchars, buried at the end of a heterosexual frenzy, whose conditions of possibility presumably emanated out of the distinct marginality of the genre.

**Hardcore Bacchanalia**

As the Ameros worked on the film that was to become *Bacchanale*, they envisioned another softcore effort. Their real goal was to move into colour film for the first time, but with a $15,000 budget only snippets could be shot on Eastman colour stock; much of the rest, they would simply monochromatically tint. As John later recounted, only upon wrapping up the shoot did a friend alert him to the newly opened *Mona* playing in Times Square. Seeing it, ‘I immediately knew that if hardcore sex was going to be the new norm, nobody would pay for imitation’. Rapidly, the brothers returned to shoot more pure sex footage with married loop performers Tina and Jason Russell, and their friend Herb Streicher, soon to be better known as Harry Reems, their faces largely avoided to better integrate the footage into already-shot softcore scenes. To fit this footage in and keep a requisite short running time of 70 minutes, the Ameros also had to cut other existing scenes. The patchwork result arrived in the summer of 1970 (Amero with Hall 2014).

The opening passage of *Bacchanale* sets a dream-like tone, with a spectral Uta Erickson rising from sleep and almost immediately observing a couple copulating nearby. As the visual tint shifts from grey to blue, she displays agony at the sexual sights, walking out onto an apartment fire escape shot from below to highlight the disorienting geometrical designs. The film cuts briefly to full colour, and then suddenly drops Erickson at a rollicking party, where she looks into a coffin and speaks: ‘let me in’.

The effect is one of mid-century experimental film, with the psychosexual angst of a Harrington or Deren, filtered through the nascent hardcore genre. Erickson winds up naked in a cemetery, and is cut into later hardcore scenes through fairly unconvincing but not inept inserts, although any tension between the film’s dual impulses of Stygian descent and explicit sex is effaced by the overall surrealism. Frequent shifts in tone and image allow the Ameros to meet the not-yet-formalized generic conventions of hardcore without great disruption to their aesthetic aims.

As Erickson moves from the cemetery, back to the party (where she administers a handjob to a man in a coffin, while hearing the voice of her absent mother decrying
‘wicked and unnatural’ activities between her and her brother), and ultimately into a sort of libidinal hell staffed by muscle-bound men carrying a mistress with a whip, *Bacchanale* finally climaxes with the return of Erickson’s lost brother Gordon, who walks in wearing a military helmet. ‘Gordon, was it sick, what we did’, she asks. ‘That was a long time ago, it doesn’t matter anymore’, he responds, before fading back out. A twist ending unmask[s] a recurring stranger, revealing it as Erickson herself. In ghostly form, she returns to bed.

From macabre Poe-like unmaskings of the self, to incestuous sibling desire and eroti-cized death drives from the Tennessee Williams playbook, through the decadent closing section that invokes Fellini’s (*1969*) *Satyricon* (as well as *Juliet of the Spirits* [Fellini *1965*], an avowed favourite of Lem’s), the Ameros saturated *Bacchanale* with allusive (or, perhaps, derivative) referentiality. Yet woven throughout this early hardcore feature was also a distinctly gay sensibility that manifested in numerous ways. Some were minor flourishes: the Kucharesque set design of hell, the loincloth-clad men there wrestling at their mistress’s behest, who shook loose from Fellini and instead invoked the physique films that Bob Mizer had distributed by mail-order from the Athletic Model Guild. In one scene, as Erickson returns to the ongoing party naked after her foray into the cemetery, she is greeted by two gay men offering stereotypically queeny quips about her potential impact on the fashion industry; as she walks through a room with them, one warns the other about nudity’s impact: ‘Good grief, Timothy, I’d be teasing hair, and you’d still be clipping those ditzy poodles in Passaic’, truly ‘a calamity!’

If the camp humour could still be read as coming at the gay men’s expense, less smoothly reconcilable with hetero-oriented desire was the sexual climax of *Bacchanale* in hell. As the men wrestle, their clothes come off, and the mistress flogs their nude bodies before anally penetrating one with the whip handle. When Erickson and the mistress undertake a lesbian sex scene – easily absorbed into the hetero-male menu of spectatorial pleasures – two men in a cage also begin to have sex (Figure 1). In an era where the default category of otherwise-unmarked erotic materials was heterosexuality, this made for a striking queer rupture. While the film offered plentiful views of Erickson’s unclad body, these instances of counter-eroticism, as well as an equally luxurious attention to the nude actor Stanley Kamel in the graveyard scene, refused to privilege heteronormative desires.

*Variety* took note. While calling the film merely ‘okay’ in its July 1970 review header (*Variety* 1970), the magazine noted the ‘hetero-homo sexploitation elements’ and credited the Ameros with ‘for once giving equal time to all the basic human sexual possibilities’ (a line they immediately highlighted on a banner at the Circus Cinema where it screened). *Bacchanale* played well; by early 1972 it was still taking in ‘a crisp $17,500’ despite cold weather on a double-bill in Chicago (*Variety* 1972a). Nonetheless, the Ameros followed it with some sexual retrenchment, in the 1972 hetero hardcore comedy *Dynamite* (Amero and Amero 1972b; ‘largely unsuccessful’ but with ‘some groin grind potential’, according to *Variety* 1972b) and the R-rated comedy spy thriller *Checkmate* (Amero and Amero 1972a) – later retitled *Pepper*, and a ‘dim, unthrilling thriller’ to the same magazine (*Variety* 1973b) – the next year. Critic Addison Verrill added the Ameros to the emerging ‘hardcore pantheon’ alongside Alex de Renzy, Wakefield Poole, and Gerard Damiano in early 1973, but other critical engagement with their work remained sparse. John managed a theatre off Times Square that showed softcore films at the start of that year,
but later in 1973 he was arrested for screening hardcore at the World Theater (see Variety 1973a; Independent Film Journal 1973, 4).

During this period, the generic conventions of hardcore settled into a fairly stable form, with most of the iconic films that would serve as stand-ins for the genre seeing release – Deep Throat (Damiano 1972), Behind the Green Door (Mitchell and Mitchell 1972), The Devil in Miss Jones (Damiano 1973), and The Opening of Misty Beethoven (Metzger 1976), most prominently. By the time the Ameros returned to filmmaking in 1975, distinct tiers had developed, ranging from the lavish classical-Hollywood style of Radley Metzger to the ‘one-day wonders’ of Shaun Costello. Their Every Inch a Lady (Amero and Amero 1975) occupied the middle ground: witty, well crafted, shot on multiple sets of exterior locations, and acted by a relatively extensive, and talented, cast, but visibly budget-strained.5

Apparently a remake of their earlier softcore Corporate Queen (Amero and Amero 1969), Every Inch featured upwardly mobile Crystal Laverne (Darby Lloyd Rains) building a sexual-service empire with her Deviation, Inc., before fending off betrayal and attempted murder by her new partner, played by Harry Reems. With a number of sexual set pieces from New York mainstays Andrea True, Kim Pope, Marc Stevens, and others, Every Inch fulfilled the generic requirements of explicit sexual variety, money shots, and other prevailing tropes. Yet once more the Ameros subverted the genre from within, refusing submission to a smooth, uncontested heterosexuality.

In one unique, standalone scene, Joe Blow, a character played by Mr. Infinity, was introduced simply to perform his signature trick of autofellatio, while penetrating himself with a cucumber, at the end of which actor Kurt Mann declares ‘that’s entertainment!’ But if that scene could once more be chalked up to simple non-diegetic tangential perversity, the Harry Reems character, Chino, powerfully destabilized Every Inch in more deep-seated ways. Introduced as a hustler with male and female lovers and clients, Chino brings a casual sexual fluidity to the film. Even after taking him as a lover, Crystal still sends him out cruising in Central Park to recruit a new man for Deviation, and the Ameros show Reems approaching a man on a bench. More graphic, however, is an unusual sex scene in which Rains and Reems perform for a client played by Jamie Gillis. While Gillis initially watches the two and masturbates, he also hands a set of anal beads to Rains, who inserts them in Reems’ ass. As Reems comes, Gillis reaches and pulls the beads out, before himself having sex with Rains. In due turn, as Gillis comes, Reems returns the favour, inserting a carrot into Gillis’ own ass.

While later queer theorists following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) would locate a deconstructive queerness in the interstices of heterosexuality, a decade before Between Men the Ameros anticipated its basic argument, deploying Rains as a protective conduit to secure the heterosexualization of what was, literally, a sex act between men. Indeed, the shaky foundations of hardcore heterosexuality manifest in both the on-screen same-sex action and the circumstances of production, with two gay men shooting a straight porn film with the openly bisexual Gillis (who appeared in both straight and gay films, and figured in one of the most prominent queer-hetero moments of the field– a gay blowjob in Gerard Damiano’s [1975] Story of Joanna) and Harry Reems, who even as one of the more conventionally heterosexual male performers of the era repeatedly expressed an interest in gay eroticism, calling it ‘too bad’ there was not more male homosexuality in straight porn in his autobiography (Reems 1975, 50), adding that fear of actually enjoying it and ‘a masculinity hangup’ were among the reasons he had not
experienced sex with men. ‘If a man came to me with a sincere need to have sex’, he added, ‘I would satisfy him – a man that I loved, of course’ (1975, 185).

The later gay hardcore films that John Amero co-directed with Michael Findlay and sometimes Lem are perhaps most notable for their adventurous guerrilla location shooting around New York City, from the sights and sounds of the city’s most famous gay thoroughfare in *Christopher Street Blues* (Amero and Findlay 1977) to a gay pride rally and an inventive sex scene on the Brooklyn Bridge in *Killing Me Softly* (Amero and Amero 1979a). Yet even these films, often shot on discernibly microscopic budgets, help blur hardcore genealogy, from the central role of straight filmmakers such as Findlay and cinematographer Larry Revene, to the unexpected heterosexual sex scene in *Navy Blue* (Amero and Amero 1979b), which does for gay porn what earlier scenes had done for straight in *Bacchanale* and *Every Inch a Lady*.6 By the time of *Blonde Ambition* (Amero and Amero 1981, but shot a few years earlier), the Amero brothers’ return to hetero-hardcore and a well-received screwball sex comedy, the climactic scene set in a gay leather bar and populated by numerous leathermen played as a knowing wink to their years spent injecting queer content into nominally heterosexual erotica.

By the 1980s, lines of sexuality would increasingly rigidify in American porn production, with bisexuality carved out as a niche market but straight and gay porn maintaining clear boundaries – despite, of course, the continued co-optation of lesbian sex into a male-oriented heterosexuality, and the boundary-crossing of such performers as Peter North/Matt Ramsey, knowledge of which provided some viewers with a special pleasure.7 Surrealism would persist, but refracted through the MTV aesthetic of the Dark Brothers rather than the queer/art-house inspirations of the Ameros. Ultimately, *Bacchanale* would go largely overlooked – left out of the canon formed by such early sources as Robert Rimmer’s (1986) *X-Rated Videotape Guide* and Jim Holliday’s (1986) porn almanac *Only the Best* – until its rediscovery by a later generation of viewers linked through online communities.8

Recuperating *Bacchanale* for this emergent porn canon means recognizing the ways gay and queer culture workers helped construct heterosexuality, as an always already failed enterprise and one built on knowing queer winks and pleasures. It highlights the rich and varied work of the two brothers, who later also worked on the production team of gay director Chuck Vincent for his lengthy stream of softcore R-rated comedies and thrillers in the 1980s (like Vincent, Lem Amero died from AIDS-related complications in 1989; John Amero’s promised autobiography is apparently forthcoming). Using *Bacchanale* as a window into the highly unstable sexuality of early hardcore encourages us, hopefully, to push further into this analysis, in ways that Porn Studies scholars have yet to do, such as the trans bodies on display and integrated into the sexual frenzies of such straight films as *Hard Soap, Hard Soap* (Chinn 1977) or *Soft Places* (Lease 1978). As hardcore pioneers with *Bacchanale*, the Ameros laid the groundwork for an altogether queerer genealogy of hetero-smut than we have yet devised.

Notes

1. For one rare example of such an analysis, see Gerli (2004). Gerli offers a provocative analysis of Vincent’s queer vision, but one grounded in a limited and not necessarily representative sample of Vincent’s prodigious body of work. See also Strub (2017).
2. This biographical information comes from the extraordinarily rich episode of *The Rialto Report* (2013) podcast.
3. See *Variety* (1965) and Scott (n.d.). Thanks to Finley Freibert for calling my attention to this.
4. On male hustlers of the era, see Reay (2010).
5. *Variety* (1975) disagreed, however, calling the film ‘dumbly plotted and a bore’, with ‘lackluster’ script and direction.
7. For one such viewer, see the bootlegger chronicled in Strub (2015).
8. After legally dubious grey-market distribution by such companies as Alpha Blue Archives, *Bacchanale* finally received a more proper DVD release from VCX’s Cal Vista Classic in 2008, although it awaits the kind of restored treatment afforded by such distribution units as Vinegar Syndrome and Distribpix.

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