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Inge Ivarson and the quality porn film

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a few points often brought up in relation to a ‘golden age of porn’, namely the issue of quality and of art versus money. Using the example of Inge Ivarson, a film producer in Sweden who, from the late 1960s and on, was a prolific producer of sexually explicit films, the article argues that his production of literary adaptations, directed by Mac Ahlberg, can be seen as a kind of quality porn.

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Golden age: a period of time, sometimes imaginary, when everyone was happy, or when a particular art, business, etc. was very successful. (Cambridge online dictionary)

Introduction

The construction of the 1970s as a ‘golden age of pornography’ or ‘porno chic era’ has been both discussed and criticized, for instance as nostalgic, romanticizing ‘male authors rising to fame and fortune while struggling for freedom of speech’ (Paasonen and Saarenmaa 2007, 24), or reductive, focusing only on a few classics of a porn canon (Bronstein and Strub 2016). It is also, quite clearly, a concept that focuses on a US context and on a certain number of famous American pornographic films. The way popular imagination, with the help of filmmakers, writers, distributors and curators, constructs the pornography of an ‘olden’ time – regardless of whether this time is the 1920s or the 1970s – also has a tendency to focus on the quaint, the funny, the perceived innocence of monochrome, silent films or handlebar moustaches and hairy crotches (see Williams 2012).

However, the concept of a ‘golden age’ may still be useful, because although the phrase conjures up a mass of ideas about something lost which was greater and better than what exists today (a time ‘when everyone was happy’) and therefore risks being more imaginary than correct, it does capture that there was something particular about the approximate time period of the 1970s. In Sweden, which is the focus for this article, it would be around 1968–1976, maybe 1977. This is a time when pornography

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is decriminalized, in 1971, but also a time when the Swedish economy enters into its first more problematic phase since the end of World War II with the international oil crisis in 1974 as one significant event. Furthermore, it is a time in which, on the one hand, fully explicit and graphic pornography is available in sex stores and sex clubs, first mainly in printed form but also, and increasingly, in moving image form (Arnberg 2010; Larsson 2017), and on the other, Swedish producers make and regular movie theatres show a wave of less graphic sex films. One significant characteristic of these years, furthermore, is that sexual entertainment is on display and available in a public space (Larsson 2017).

Using Inge Ivarson, film producer, as an example, I will address some of the points highlighted in discussions of the 'golden age' concept, namely notions of art versus money and of quality. As Susanna Paasonen and Laura Saarenmaa (2007) point out in their chapter on 'The Golden Age of Porn: Nostalgia and History in Cinema', the nostalgic American popular narrative of 1970s porn in films like *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. 1997), *Rated X* (Emilio Estevez, dir. 2000) and *Inside Deep Throat* (Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, dirs. 2005) constructs a juxtaposition between art and money, with money taking over as the main incentive with the advent of video (Paasonen and Saarenmaa 2007, 29). Furthermore, there is a notion of quality which is connected to sexual exploration, sexual freedom and freedom of expression, as well as the 35-mm, narrative film format. Although some of Ivarson's films do explore themes of sexual freedom, I would instead, in this article, like to define quality in a more pragmatic way that relates it to skill and craftsmanship. To this end, I take the French 'tradition of quality' as my point of departure. The case of Inge Ivarson simultaneously reinforces the concept of a golden age, with his well-produced narrative 35-mm films which are 'classics' of the Swedish 1970s sex films, and brings it into question, nuancing a facile or superficial understanding of this time period. By using Ivarson as an example of 'quality porn' production, I wish to question the simple assumption that commercial interests negate artistic ambition.

Background

One of the most – if not the most – productive producers of sex films in Sweden, Ivarson's life and career spans a large part of the domestic film history, beginning to work in the industry in the 1940s and continuing into the 2000s. Ivarson was born in 1917, in the small town of Borås, at the time a centre for the textile industry in Sweden. Likely his family, who were in the ready-made market, was wealthy, but Ivarson had to drop out of his university studies at Handelshögskolan in Göteborg to take care of the family business when his father died. In the early 1940s, he came to Stockholm and began to work within the film industry. He produced a handful of comedies, as well as a prestigious Selma Lagerlöf adaptation, *The Marsh Croft Girl* (*Tösen från Stormyrtorpet*, Edgren, dir. 1947). In the 1950s, due to problems within Swedish film production, he turned to distribution and distributed, among several other films, *Whisky Galore!* (Alexander Mackendrick, dir. 1949) and *For a Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, dir. 1964), before he returned to production, making popular, low-brow comedies in the 1960s. As Swedish film censorship was liberalized after the debated decisions on *The Silence* (Ingmar Bergman, dir. 1963) and *491* (Vilgot Sjöman, dir. 1964), he teamed up with director Torgny Wickman to make the sex educational *From the Language of Love* (1969) and its sequels and several other

sexually explicit films – comedies, social-problem films and one horror film. These were among the most popular Swedish films at the time. Although the classic masterpieces of the 1960s are, in the national art cinema institution, the films of Bo Widerberg, Ingmar Bergman, Jan Troell and, to some extent, Mai Zetterling, none of these can really compete with Ivarson in audience numbers.

In the 1970s, as pornography had been decriminalized in 1971, Ivarson moved into more explicit and eventually hardcore fare. Nonetheless, the films he produced with Mac Ahlberg (*I, a Woman*, 1965) as director stand out, even in a Swedish 1970s production which consisted of, in the words of one film historian, ‘one-fifth more or less advanced pornography’ (Furhammar 2003, 328–329). ‘Advanced’ in this quote should not read as positive – rather, the film historian used it as both descriptive, referring to its explicitness, and derogatory, as in ‘advanced sex games’.

However, the Ahlberg/Ivarson productions were advanced, in a cinematic and film industrial sense, utilizing Ivarson’s producing and distribution skills as well as Ahlberg’s craftsmanship as a director (Ahlberg would later move to the USA and pursue a career as a cinematographer). Most notably, all four were based on literary originals. *Flossie* (1974) was based on an anonymously written (actually credited to Charles Algernon Swinburne in the edition likely used for the adaptation) novella called *Flossie – A Venus of Fifteen* (1966), originally published in the early nineteenth century. The other three authors had more prominence: Marquis de Sade, Guy de Maupassant and Daniel Defoe.

Inspiration and adaptation

In an interview in 2010, Ivarson claimed that the inspiration for these films came from the Danish sex comedies, a claim that seems very likely in the light of the Danish films’ success in Sweden. *Bedroom Mazurka* (John Hilbard, dir. 1970), for instance, screened in Swedish theatres for three years and was called ‘giggle porn’ by Swedish reviewers. The Danish sex comedies align with a particular kind of ‘folksy’ comedy, the ‘folkekomedie’ or folk comedy, and contained softcore and later hardcore scenes, usually with non-pornographic actors playing the main roles and sex performers (live-show artists) playing or acting as body doubles in hardcore sex scenes (Thorsen 2014, 291–292). They have been called ‘innocent porn for everyone’ (Wallenberg 2005 as quoted in Thorsen 2014), providing a kind of social permission for audiences to enjoy explicitness without having to see themselves as porn consumers. This balancing act, finding the compromise between the degree of explicitness and justifiable reasons to see a film, could work for a few years into the 1970s (see Arnberg and Larsson 2014).

Although *Flossie*, *Justine and Juliette* (1975), *Bel Ami* (1976) and *Molly* (1977) contained comedic and humorous moments, they were not comedies per se. They were also never as successful in Sweden as the Danish sex comedies were, and not as successful as Ivarson’s previous collaborations with Torgny Wickman, in particular the *Language of Love* series (1969–1973). Being based on literary originals, however, lent them a certain kind of respectability, and added to that, they were well produced.

They were also constructed with export in mind, utilizing both the idea of Sweden as a ‘sexy nation’ (Schaefer 2014) with Marie Forså/Maria Lynn at the centre and stars from abroad (most notably, in *Justine and Juliette* and *Bel Ami*, Harry Reems, who was being prosecuted for his participation in *Deep Throat* and likely found the exile to Sweden a healthy

respite from the hostility of the USA; see Heffernan 2016). Consequently, they ‘transcended the national as an autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force’ (Hedling and Larsson 2009, 277), aiming for export and transnational audiences. As Kevin Heffernan has demonstrated, however, dependent on domestic developments in, among other places, the USA, they were not as successful abroad as they might have been had they been released only a year or two earlier (Heffernan 2016). The relatively low degree of explicitness and the use of body doubles for hardcore inserts had become obsolete.

A concept of quality porn

Within the concept of a golden age of pornography lies an idea of the quality of the films produced. In nostalgic accounts of the golden age, the exchange of 35-mm film for video is seen as a decrease in quality of the films. Nevertheless, as Susanna Paasonen and Laura Saarenmaa correctly point out, neither film format nor narrative is ‘a guarantee of quality in pornography’ (2007, 30). Rather, one could argue that contemporary porn clips on streaming sites much more efficiently provide an experience of becoming aroused and finding sexual release, a quality that is socially found dubious but that may be highly relevant to the individual looking for precisely that experience.

However, without falling into the trap of romanticizing 35-mm film or narrative, without trying to pinpoint what quality in pornography actually entails, and with a little inspiration from French cinema history’s ‘tradition of quality’, it can be argued, objectively, that the Ivarson/Ahlberg films are a kind of quality (porn) films.

This hinges on a construction of both film and pornography as first and foremost commercial businesses. As, again, Paasonen and Saarenmaa note: ‘The juxtaposition of “art” and “money” as production motives obscures the fact that financial motives were hardly alien to porn productions during, or preceding, the so-called golden age’ (2007, 29). The economic aspect of filmmaking as well as pornography production is a vital and integral part of what these two practices are. Placing art against money in either/or categories is a faulty logic which misrepresents both of these businesses and makes them impossible, or at the least, very difficult, to understand. This applies to the non-pornographic film industry as well, where commercial, popular genre cinema which is financially dependent on viewers often is contrasted to the art and festival circuit where many, if not most, films are dependent on subsidies or grants which in their turn are dependent on critical acclaim and awards. However, as film critics and scholars have argued, being commercial does not exclude being artistic and vice versa (cf., for example, Wood 1989; Bordwell 2000).

At the same time, the monetary side of pornography is one of the reasons it is such a disparaged genre. In a review of the sex education film *More from the Language of Love* (1970) – directed by Torgny Wickman and produced by Inge Ivarson – the journalist complains:

Why doesn’t he come out and say it? I make fuck films to make money. A fuck film about heterosexuals, a fuck film about homosexuals, a fuck film about disabled people, a fuck film about retired people, fuck film about Copenhagen’s porn clubs and sex masseurs. Instead he hides behind some kind of pedagogical curtains and gets eleven water combed experts who supplant the images by sitting and nodding and sucking on their pipes and talk a

whole lot of brisk and well-meaning crap. [...] The films of entrepreneur Ivarsson [*sic*] are supposedly 'freeing people from their anxieties'. Honestly: The only thing they are freeing them from is their money. (Schildt 1970; cf. Björklund 2012)

But it seems kind of hypocritical to cast suspicion on a film producer for wanting to make money, when obviously they – like most others in the film business – do. What makes Ivarsson suspect in this journalist's (and many others') eyes is that he is a film producer who wants to make money from a film about sex.

However, before the late 1960s, Ivarsson produced several – around 20 – films which were not about sex. In addition, he is not known as a freedom of speech proponent like Berth Milton of the magazine *Private* or pornography filmmaker Lasse Braun, nor as a proponent for sexual exploration and sexual freedom like Torgny Wickman. On the contrary, he comes across as a professional business man who cared a lot for the work he did but also, of course, wanted to make money from it.

The care can be seen in his approach to film production. Like the French (non-pornographic) 'tradition of quality' – films produced in France between the end of World War II and the beginning of the French New Wave in the late 1950s – the Ivarsson/Ahlberg productions relied on literary adaptations, an ensemble of stars and a skilful craftsman as director. They were 35-mm films, which does carry a quality connotation that has nothing to do with the relation to VHS but to the cheaper 16-mm format.

Conclusion

The case of Inge Ivarsson illustrates how issues such as art, quality and financial interests can, in fact, be important to the understanding of both a national version of the golden age of pornography and to the concept of a golden age in general. The popular conception that money, or financial greed, would compromise art comes across as short-sighted considering that film producing, especially during this time before video and before the digital revolution, was expensive, even for relatively low budget sex films. In Sweden, at this time, Ivarsson stands out as someone who produced films, without support from the Swedish Film Institute, that made money at the box office, and who could, at least for a while, straddle the line between the socially unacceptably pornographic and what was sexually explicit and alluring yet socially acceptable. His films are also an example of how quality can be measured in craftsmanship within a particular genre.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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