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Expanding Trans Cinema through the Tranny Fest Collection

Overwhelmingly, popular and scholarly discourse on trans cinema has focused on feature films that receive theatrical distribution. The Tranny Fest Collection held by the GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives in San Francisco reveals a far wider variety of trans-made media from the late 1990s through the early 2000s that has been left out of the public's conception of trans cinema.¹ One significant segment of this body of work is trans-made pornography and films with significant erotic content. It is imperative that these works be studied and included in scholarship on trans cinema. However, the Tranny Fest Collection faces major challenges to access and preservation. Though many archives are faced by limited resources and sustainability issues, LGBT community archives are particularly impacted by these concerns. Funding is often unstable or minimal at the best of times, which significantly impacts archivists' ability to preserve or provide access to collections.² All of the Tranny Fest Collection's audiovisual works are stored on magnetic media and face a slew of rights complications, which significantly

1 The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival was originally known as Tranny Fest from its inaugural year until 2010. As the festival's archival collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in 2006, the collection's title reflects the original name. I acknowledge that *tranny* is a slur used against people of trans experience and that the term has been reclaimed by some trans and gender-diverse people. Indeed, Christopher Lee and Alex Austin intended to reclaim the term when they chose it for their festival title. My intent when referring to the festival as Tranny Fest is to honor the original name of the festival and collection.

2 Brittany Bennett Parris, "Creating, Reconstructing, and Protecting Historical Narratives: Archives and the LGBT Community," *Current Studies in Librarianship* 29, no. 1/2 (2005): 16–17.

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impact the availability of the works to a larger audience in both the near and long term. These challenges make it particularly difficult to include the collection's audiovisual works in the study and teaching of trans cinema.

For too long, scholarly and critical discourse on trans film has revolved around films directed by cis filmmakers that received a theatrical release. There are numerous book chapters and articles dedicated to *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005), and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) alone. Feature-length trans films directed by cis filmmakers, such as *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), and *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, Sebastián Lelio, 2017), continue to receive critical acclaim, whereas films made by trans filmmakers at comparable scales, such as *Drunktown's Finest* (Sydney Freeland, 2014), *A Kid Like Jake* (Silas Howard, 2018), or *Adam* (Rhys Ernst, 2019), are routinely ignored and under-distributed. As Laura Horak has observed, until recently, scholarly work on trans cinema concentrated on films directed by cis filmmakers almost exclusively.³ Privileging cis-made film about trans subjects is a problem in and of itself, but it is also problematic that films by trans artists produced or distributed by alternative means receive very little critical and scholarly attention. This has a disproportionate impact on trans filmmakers in Canada and the United States, who produce documentaries, short films, experimental films, and erotic films at higher rates than fictional films.

The first trans film festival in the United States, Tranny Fest was established in 1997 by filmmaker and activist Christopher Lee and arts and entertainment lawyer Alex Austin. The year 1997 also saw the inauguration of the International Transgender Film and Video Festival in the United Kingdom and the trans arts festival Counting Past 2 in Canada.⁴ Tranny Fest did not remain the sole trans film festival in the United States for long, however. While the 1980s and 1990s presented a boom for film festivals of all types, the late 1990s were particularly generative for trans festivals.⁵ The rapid expansion of trans film festivals in the late 1990s through the late 2010s demonstrates not only that gender-diverse filmmakers were creating moving image works but that there were enough of them to warrant their own exhibition venues. As the Tranny Fest Collection evinces, the early years of Tranny Fest demonstrated the frenzy of trans filmmaking at the turn of the twenty-first century and pointed to the absence of those films from academic and popular criticism.

3 Laura Horak, "Representing Ourselves into Existence: The Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Work of Transgender Film Festivals in the 1990s," in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, ed. Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

4 Horak.

5 Tranny Fest, Counting Past 2, and the International Transgender Film and Video Festival [London] had their inaugural festivals in 1997. The Netherlands Transgender Film Festival, later called TranScreen: Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival, was founded in 2000. A slew of festivals followed, including the Gender Reel Festival, Translations: Seattle Transgender Film Festival, Divergenti Festival Internazionale di Cinema Trans, Kiel Transgender Film Festival, Sydney Transgender International Film Festival, TransFormations: Trans Film Festival Berlin, Trans Fest Stockholm, and Tilde: Melbourne Trans and Gender Diverse Film Festival.



Figure 1. VHS tapes from the Tranny Fest Collection at GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, California. Photo by author.

The films exhibited at Tranny Fest took many forms. One common theme was short and feature-length documentaries about trans people, such as *Gendernauts* (Monika Treut, 1999), *Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place* (Kathryn Xian and Brent Anbe, 2001), and *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman, 2005). These were typically expository or participatory documentaries that either explored the lives of one or more trans, intersex, Two-Spirit, or gender-diverse person(s) or contextualized a historical trans or gender-diverse person or event. The topics covered often explored intersectional histories and

expressed a more nuanced perspective on trans existence. For example, in *"I Would Never Have Known": A Conversation with Peter Dunnigan* (Mirha-Soleil Ross, 1997), Dunnigan speaks about his past substance abuse issues in addition to his experience coming out as a trans man, while *Ke Kulana He Mahu* explores the effects of colonization on the mähū and contemporary drag culture in Honolulu.

Also common at Tranny Fest were short experimental films. For example, *Straightboy Lessons* (Raymond Rea, 1999) pairs blue-toned images of action figures and cars with recordings of the director's cis coworker giving him advice on "straightboy" topics. In *Junk Box Warrior* (Preeti AK Mistry, 2002), Marcus Rene Van laments the struggle of navigating a racist and transphobic society via slam poetry over black-and-white images of Van facing street harassment. Only a small percentage of the films at Tranny Fest were fiction films, most likely because they were more expensive to produce than other genre forms.

One aspect of Tranny Fest that made it particularly emblematic of its era in trans cinema is that it exhibited erotic and pornographic works alongside fiction, documentary, and experimental works. Incorporating pornographic and erotic images, storylines, and aesthetics was a common trend in trans filmmaking of the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, Tranny Fest co-founder Christopher Lee blended fiction and porn with his films *Alley of the Tranny Boys* (1998) and *Sex Flesh in Blood* (1999). *Madame Lauraine's Transsexual Touch* (Mirha-Soleil Ross, Monica Forrester, Viviane Namaste, 2001) is an educational-pornographic film aimed at encouraging safe sex practices among trans sex workers and their clients, while *Faggot/Cholo* (Lynne Chan, 1997) is described by its director as a "personal homage to gay porno faggot imagery."⁶ While many of the fiction, experimental, and documentary films exhibited at Tranny Fest were comparable to mainstream festival fare in their form and sexual content, the screening of films with some pornographic elements, as well as explicit pornography, was quite distinct.

As trans studies scholar Eliza Steinbock has observed, trans porn allows performers and filmmakers to operate outside of cisgender sexual logics and "represent identities of desire heretofore elided by the medical gaze."⁷ Through the use of erotic imagery, filmmakers communicated a radical acceptance, normalization, and celebration of trans bodies outside of the medical model. The popularity of pornographic work at Tranny Fest speaks to the power of the erotic image for trans filmmakers, particularly as a reclamation of sexual power, gratification, and desirability. Tranny Fest often included a separate program block for erotic and pornographic works, evincing that trans filmmakers were creating erotic content at a high enough rate to warrant their own programming.⁸ These blocks often had tongue-in-cheek titles, such as "'PAY AT THE PUMP' Trannyporn XXX and more . . ." (1998) or "'Jack-Off-Lantern' Tranny Porn and More . . ." (1999). The inclusion of these program

6 Tranny Fest Program, 1998, 2006-26, carton 2, folder 12-14, Tranny Fest Collection, GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, San Francisco, California.

7 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 64.

8 Tranny Fest Programs, 1997-2003, 2006-26, carton 2, folder 12-14, Tranny Fest Collection, GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, San Francisco, California.

blocks indicates the integral nature of pornography created by and for trans and gender-diverse people to both the festival and trans viewers.

Despite the popularity of sexual imagery in the Tranny Fest filmmakers' oeuvres in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was representative of the general trends in trans filmmaking in Canada and the United States, these elements failed to cross over into theatrical feature films on trans subjects. This is particularly true for cis filmmakers, who perhaps failed to grasp the sexual practices and politics of trans and gender-diverse people. Theatrically released films often sanitize or completely eliminate queer and trans sex, primarily to make the work more palatable to cisgender and heterosexual audiences. Trans studies scholar C  el M. Keegan notes this trend in relation to *Stonewall* (Roland Emmerich, 2015), wherein a white, sexless (though not asexual), gay character is inserted into the historical narrative to "assuage heterosexual and homonormative viewers alike with a feeling of 'safety' . . . [and] transfer political imagination upward, away from poor people, trans people and people of colour."⁹ While hardcore porn distributors are less likely to restrain trans sexuality, they still consistently fail to include certain kinds of trans people or accurately represent their experiences.¹⁰ As a result, the erotic imagery and explicit pornography exhibited at Tranny Fest represents a stark departure in the representation of trans sexualities compared to theatrically released cinema or hardcore pornography.

The Tranny Fest Collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in 2006 by Christopher Lee, Alex Austin, and Elise Hurwitz. The collection is made up of three cartons of graphic and textual records and four cartons of videotapes. The 169 tapes in the collection are screeners of films shown at the festival and some that were submitted but rejected.¹¹ Magnetic tape formats such as VHS and U-matic were extremely popular among the Tranny Fest filmmakers due to their ease of use, availability, and affordability. However, due to the format's instability, the vast majority of magnetic tapes are approaching their end of life, which places the tapes in the Tranny Fest Collection in a precarious position.

Due to their instability and associated expense, audiovisual collections are a consistent challenge for mixed material archives, and most archival graduate programs have limited training in audiovisual preservation. As a result, magnetic tape collections often languish to the point of degradation. Because of the economic marginalization of trans filmmakers, most trans audiovisual collections in North America are stored exclusively on tape, which places trans media from the 1990s and 2000s at serious risk. Unfortunately, the Tranny Fest Collection is also encumbered by copyright restrictions and questionable legal ownership. The GLBT Historical Society does not have a deed of gift for the collection, and nearly all the

9 C  el M. Keegan, "History, Disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema," *Social Alternatives* 35, no. 3 (2016): 54.

10 See Eliza Steinbock, "Representing Trans Sexualities," in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood with Brian McNair (London: Routledge, 2018), 30.

11 Magnus Berg, "A Collection under Construction: Trans-versing Access with the Tranny Fest Collection" (master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2018), 28–29.

audiovisual records have third party rights interests, which precludes mass digitization or duplication.¹²

Film archives and film scholarship have a reciprocal relationship, and the significance of that relationship has a direct impact on the availability of both trans and erotic film. As film archivist and scholar Jan-Christopher Horak argues, the priorities of the early film historians affected preservation priorities, such that “[a]ll those film forms that existed outside this established canon of film art were simply ignored as not germane to the subject under study, which simultaneously labeled them as not worthy of preservation.”¹³ Archivists take potential research interest into consideration when appraising an aggregation for acquisition, which in the past has led to certain forms and subject areas being excluded from major archives. The sidelining of trans film as a niche research interest thus effectively sidelined their acquisition; as a result, only a small number of trans audiovisual collections exist in repositories.¹⁴ Pornographic content, in particular, has historically been under-collected by archival repositories despite its historical, informational, and aesthetic value.¹⁵ As Marcel Barriault argues, the more recent shift in the study of pornographic works resulted in an increase in the availability of relevant archival records.¹⁶

But just as scholars are reliant on archivists to provide them with records for research, archivists are similarly reliant on scholars and researchers to justify acquisitions and their continued existence. As such, renewed interest in the work of trans filmmakers is likely to result in increased acquisition and preservation of relevant archival aggregations. Weighing the significance or value of records and record creators lies at the core of archival appraisal.¹⁷ The Tranny Fest Collection is highly significant as (1) a record of the festival that curated and presented the initial boom of trans filmmaking in the 1990s; (2) a collection of films of multiple genres and lengths made by notable trans filmmakers and public figures, including Mirha-Soleil Ross, Boyd Kodak, Jordy Jones, Aiyana Maracle, Ivan E. Coyote, Susan Stryker, Texas Tomboy, James Diamond, and Shawna Virago; and (3) a collection of films that demonstrate the artistic and aesthetic merit of pornography and erotic elements in trans film. Despite the significance of the collection and the wide

12 Berg, 38–54.

13 Jan-Christopher Horak, “Constructing History: Archives, Film Programming, and Preservation,” *Journal of Film Preservation* 102 (2020): 31.

14 Some archival aggregations of note are the Tranny Fest Collection, Texas Tomboy Collection, and Screaming Queens Collection at the GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, the Mirha-Soleil Ross fonds at the ArQuives, and Aiyana Maracle’s fonds at the University of Victoria’s Transgender Archives. While an artificial collection, the Outfest UCLA Legacy Project at the UCLA Film & Television Archive holds a number of important trans audiovisual works. A fonds is an archival aggregation that has been organically created by an individual, family, or organization. An artificial collection is an archival aggregation that has been actively collected or curated from disparate sources.

15 See Peter Alilunas and Dan Erdman, “The Adult Film History Project,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 1 (2018): 153; and Marcel Barriault, “Hard to Dismiss: The Archival Value of Gay Male Erotica and Pornography,” *Archivaria* 68 (2009): 222.

16 Barriault, “Hard to Dismiss,” 229.

17 Barbara L. Craig, *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice* (Munich: K. G. Sauer, 2004), 163–164.

variety of trans film it contains, however, it has been almost wholly ignored by scholars in favor of theatrically released, cis-made films. An expanded view of trans cinema is necessary to justify the continued acquisition of similar collections by archival repositories, ensure that they can be taught and contextualized alongside their contemporaries, and address the erasure of these works and their forms from both the media landscape and, ultimately, the historical record.

As of late, inclusion for trans people within media cultures has been focused shallowly on a handful of trans subjects and performers while still failing to express the complexity of trans existence or sexual practices. The erasure of works that deal explicitly with these subjects, particularly those made by trans people, ultimately have a wider impact on how transness is understood by the dominant culture. As institutions dedicated toward education and cultural memory, both the academy and archives have a responsibility to address these erasures and ensure that trans media, trans creators, and trans sexualities are effectively represented.

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