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From *Splendor in the Grass* to Sexploitation:
The Sex Revolution of the 1960s in American Cinema

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I don't need a man to make it happen
I get off being free
I don't need a man to make me feel good
I get off doing my thing
I don't need a ring around my finger
To make me feel complete
So, let me break it down
I can get off when you ain't around, oh!
– Nicole Scherzinger, “I Don’t Need A Man”

I bump to the thump of the beat and Nicole Scherzinger’s voice as I watch my older cousins get ready in the mirror, unaware of the crude, yet empowering lyrics I sing along to as I stare at their manicured reflections, brushing on MAC powders and adjusting their Playboy necklaces. It is 2008, the ideologies of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s have manifested into the lyrics of the Pussycat Dolls; I am six years old.

Whether or not I knew it then, I was being indoctrinated with the ideologies of second wave feminism popularized in the 1960s and 70s, in which women’s orgasms were politicized and women were encouraged to “get off being free.” The Pussycat Dolls would not exist without the idea of equating female empowerment with sexual liberation. Through the years, learning about sexual and gender politics would be a subject of empowerment in the attempt to make sense of not only the cultural landscape that I was born into, but also an act of reclaiming and knowing the effects of sexual trauma and violence against women. Additionally, the recent leak of the possible decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 makes second wave feminism, whose efforts focused much on the reproductive rights of women and contributed to the ruling in favor of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, and the discussion surrounding women’s bodies all the more relevant. Growing up in the age of the internet has also made me aware of the constant production of gendered images and depictions of gender and sexuality, as well as my consumption of the ideas promoted within them. In studying depictions of women’s sexual

liberation (or lack thereof) in film through the 1960s and focusing particularly on “the long 1968,” extending between 1965 and 1972,¹ I hope to elucidate how these representations reflect the changing attitudes towards sex at the time as well as their impact on today’s depictions of women’s sexuality in cinema.

The long 1968 marked a turning point in American cinema for a number of reasons. In her essay, “Medium Uncool: Women Shoot Back; Feminism, Film and 1968 — A Curious Documentary,” Rabinowitz suggests that this is attributed to Hollywood’s response to studio monopolies, the rise of television, the shift in perspectives in filmmaking as a collective and political activity, and “celebrating the counter-culture.”² Other factors, such as the lifting of the Hays Production Code in 1968, enabled films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1971) and Jane Fonda’s work in *Barbarella* (1968) to explore social taboos. Furthermore, numerous films made in this time, notably *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) reflect the complicated relationship between women’s sexual liberation of the 1960s and its representation in popular culture. Many works of the long 1968 worked to both support and disempower women through the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, which, while not the first, was during a time of great political and social unrest. The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s was catalyzed by urbanization, the fight for women’s right to vote in the early twentieth century, the popularity of psychoanalysis in mainstream culture, sex education, and the Pill.³ This new form of female contraceptive allowed women the freedom to have sex for pleasure without the worry of pregnancy. It also contradicted widespread values of domesticity and family life in the 1940s

¹ Paula Rabinowitz. “Medium Uncool: Women Shoot Back; Feminism, Film and 1968 — A Curious Documentary.” *Science & Society* 65, 74.

² Rabinowitz, “Medium Uncool,” 75.

³ Eric Schaefer, “Sex Seen: 1968 and the Rise of ‘Public Sex,’” *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*. Duke University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jj09>, 2.

and 1950s. Of course sex has always pervaded the culture and the 1950s were no different; in fact, during this time the increase of “illigimate” births and, accordingly, premarital sex becomes a threat to patriarchal society.⁴In his seminal account and guide to main subjects of contention during the sixties, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Theodore Roszak states, “Sex out of marriage...meant risk-free promiscuity and possibly women out of control.”⁵The fifties serve as a sexually silenced prologue to the 1960s. However, the sixties marked the reopening of discussion about sex in the media as well as using sex as a medium to make other social commentary.

Elia Kazan’s Academy Award winning *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) reflects the rise of youth culture as well as the collective angst and gradually opening conversation about sex and women’s sexuality. Bud (Warren Beatty) and Deanie (Natalie Wood) play sexually oppressed teenagers in the midwest. They are representative of “younger members of the very bourgeois elite whose interests the military-industrial complex purported to serve [in postscarcity America],” as Roszak characterizes in comprising restless, youthful middle-class America.⁶ While Bud is encouraged by his father to seek out sex from other, less respectable girls, Deanie’s mother concerns herself wildly with her virginity. Through depicting Bud pressuring Deanie to have sex with him and her ultimately channeling a promiscuous persona as an attempt to keep Bud from looking elsewhere for sexual satisfaction, the narrative suggests that Deanie does not want to have to sex according to her own will. She is also contrasted with Bud’s flapper-like sister, Ginny, who is used to express a negative image of sexually liberated women. Ginny’s character, unlike Deanie, is emotionally unstable, enjoys partying, and is rumored to have had an

⁴ Schaefer, “Sex Seen: 1968 and the Rise of ‘Public Sex,’” 3.

⁵ Theodore Roszak. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, xxiv. ⁶ Roszak,

abortion. When Deanie gets sent to a mental institution following a breakdown, the conversation shifts to her gaining independence from her parents, who ironically pay for her to be in the institution, through her time away from them and focusing on her mental health.

This reference to psychoanalysis is reminiscent of the psychoanalysis of Freud, Jung, and Kinsey, which also opened up conversations about sexuality that factored into the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. Roszak explains this— “What Dr. Spock did for children, Dr. Kinsey did for the parents...Censorship was vanishing and sexual shame, always among the main levers of social control, was rapidly going out of style.”⁷ Dr. Kinsey, a sexologist, was among the first to film sex for “educational” purposes. His were among the first instances of depicting sex on film for academic and domestic usefulness, introducing mature discussion about sex as a natural facet to one’s humanity.⁸ The distribution of these films, in addition to films using sexuality to explore other topics in foreign and art cinema allowed for the shifting belief in sexuality from sinful to normal. In fact, by 1973, the aesthetic of “porno-chic” had been introduced into the mainstream by Ralph Blumenthal in the *New York Times*.⁹

This shift in depictions of sexuality came to a climax in 1968, the year in which the Hays Production Code was lifted. However, before this transpired, *Bonnie and Clyde* would be released in 1967, testing the limits with the Production Code. The sex and violence of *Bonnie and Clyde* were used as subversive material as a means of rebelling against political systems and hierarchies. Rabinowitz offers the idea that “the graphic violence of Arthur Penn’s film came to

⁷ Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, xxii.

⁸ Linda Williams, “Make Love, Not War: Jane Fonda Comes Home (1968–1978)” *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*. Duke University Press, 2014.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jj09>, 41.

⁹ Ralph Blumenthal, “‘Hard-Core’ Grows Fashionable-and Very Profitable.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, January 21, 1973.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/01/21/archives/pornochic-hardcore-grows-fashionableand-very-profitable.html>.

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be seen as a touchstone for the New Left...*Bonnie and Clyde* retrofitted America's past, showing how the body counts racking on the nightly news were not aberrations but aspects of United States history"¹⁰ Through its depictions of violence and fashion statements, as Rabinowitz suggests, the movie makes political and social commentary in the time of its release during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. The film characterizes Bonnie, Faye Dunnaway, as sexually forward and dominant in contrast to her possibly asexual and/or sexually ambiguous counterpart,¹¹ Clyde, played by Warren Beatty. Clyde's sexual ambiguity, suggested by his disinterest in sex, at least with women, may have also been put in to showcase Bonnie's sexual forwardness and reverse traditional gendered reactions to sexual pressures. Nonetheless, *Bonnie and Clyde*'s experimentation with sexual allusion may have been afforded only by its ability to show audiences graphic violence.¹² As evident in *Bonnie and Clyde*, sex and violence were intrinsically connected.

The slogan "Make love, not war" pervaded the media in response to the seemingly futile deaths taking place during the Vietnam War. In his book *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History*, Allyn claims that the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s "proposed sex as a weapon. To get naked in public was a moral act."¹³ Sex was politicized and was being used to make a statement, though not always conducted to produce life, the reproductive nature of the act symbolically combatted death. Another slogan, "Women say yes to men who say no!" used women's sexuality as a means to persuade men to resist being recruited

¹⁰ Paula Rabinowitz. "Medium Uncool," 84.

¹¹ David Thomson, *Sleeping with Strangers: How the Movies Shaped Desire*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 12.

¹² Christie Milliken, "Rate it X? Hollywood Cinema and the End of the Production Code" *Sex*

Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution. Duke University Press, 2014.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jj09>, 41.

¹³David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2001, 19.

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or drafted into the army.¹⁴ Other institutions based in San Francisco, such as Sutter Cinema, Jefferson Poland's Psychedelic Venus Church, and the Sexual Freedom League, "would politically work toward the common goal of sexual freedom, promoting 'sex without sexism,' interracial relationships, mutual orgasms, bisexuality, and other related ideas."¹⁵ Such structures fighting for sexual freedom also fought for gender equality. The idea that gender equality correlated with sexual freedom agreed with ideas of second-wave feminism; in the aforementioned films, this independence was presented through sexuality rather than as an overtly political agenda.¹⁶

Accordingly, Jane Fonda's work in *Barbarella* (1968), produced post-Production Code, politicizes the female orgasm. In *Barbarella*, the first film to show a woman coming to climax without it being induced by a man, Fonda plays a heroine in outer space and is characterized by Young as "the liberal sexual subject." Young claims that the liberal sexual subject is "a subject for whom sexual pleasure has been... expressive—of the liberal and republican principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity."¹⁷ In the movie, *Barbarella* enters the "Excessive machine" and orgasms multiple times; her autonomous pleasure is sustainable and self-sufficient. This scene, read in the context of second-wave feminism is representative of female independence beyond the sexual as a result of *Barbarella*'s clitoral orgasm, and thus an explicit depiction of a movement far bigger than the *Barbarella*'s enjoyment of her sexuality. Focus on women's sexual emancipation included the reclamation of the clitoris; Young describes the clitoral orgasm as "freed from intercourse, from any necessary role in reproduction, and eleven more radically,

¹⁴Williams, "Make Love, Not War," 55.

¹⁵ Joseph Lam Duong, “San Francisco and the Politics of Hard Core,” *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*. Duke University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jj09>, 300. ¹⁶ Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*. Duke University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smv77>, 26.

¹⁷ Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*, 22.

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from hetero-relationality in general.”¹⁸ The feminist response and praise of the clitoral orgasm may be in response to Freud’s belief in clitoral orgasms as a regressive pleasure and the only “valid” orgasms for adult women to have must be through penetration.

Barbarella, boldly second-wave feminist, is undeniably a part of the exploitation film cycle (sexploitation, blaxploitation, etc.), though also being termed a “women’s picture” by critics, further associating it with the feminist agenda.¹⁹ Nonetheless, exploitation, art film, and horror have used sex as a means to discuss other topics concerning racial identity, gender identity, class, and sexual orientation. The rise of these films, many a part of the underground in the 1960s in which many well-known directors such as Andy Warhol, produced their work, gave way to more transgressive, controversial, and explicit depictions of sex.

Of course, it may be contended that commercial cinema, while able to take more liberties when using sex to make social and political commentary post-Production Code, was simply repackaging traditional gender roles and subliminally reinforcing domestic life.²⁰ Fonda’s role in *Barbarella* as a sexy heroine, popularized as a common female archetype, such as femme fatales and manic pixie dream girls, in 70s television that could be argued was a part of the taming of feminism, an attempt to make it more palatable to male audiences. Similarly, the punishment of sexually liberated female characters in *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), in which the female lead pursues careers in entertainment, including softcore pornography, and ultimately become addicted to barbiturates, reinforces the danger of sexual liberation linked with urbanization in the film’s New York setting. Thus, *Barbarella* and *Valley of the Dolls*, in addition to other films of

the long 1968, may be a part of what Fortsch describes as a regression of values in media

¹⁸ Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*, 44.

¹⁹ Williams, "Make Love, Not War," 73.

²⁰ Stephen Farber, "A Film That Forgets To Be Fun." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 1, 1971.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/01/archives/a-film-that-forgets-sex-can-be-fun-.html>.

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representation immediately after progress has been made in women's rights: "no sooner had women staked out for themselves a measure of political, personal and sexual freedom then they found it couped to their detriment by those exploiting female sexuality for public commercial and private psychological gains."²¹ Moreover, other films reflect the Sexual Revolution's

inability, at least in American cinema at the time, to fully manifest its freedoms. For instance, in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), two married couples decide to resolve the jealousy and sexual tension among them by having a foursome, yet in the end they cannot go through with it.

This scene symbolically leaves the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s unresolved, with more talk than walk, and its sexual liberation seemingly a façade for the exploitation of female sexuality.

Nevertheless, the Sexual Revolution as it was depicted in films during the long 1968 transformed

American Cinema. Open discussions about sexual liberation and empowering depictions of autonomous female pleasure, with extended meaning and significance beyond bodily pleasure, promoted women's rights in addition to a sex-positive culture. This kind of positive visual commentary and communication has also aided in sex education. Moreover, while there may have been Puritanical ideas encoded into seemingly sexually liberated movies, the cinema of the long 1968 allowed sex to push the envelope of American Cinema, which has now become more subversive than ever. Both disempowering and empowering depictions of female sexuality in film are important to film history as well as its reflection of various feminist movements and it is important to recognize the power that the media has in reshaping and representing the current

cultural zeitgeist. In current filmmaking practices, feminist perspectives offered by female directors are of much value, though female directors generally gain less recognition and acclaim.

However, with the rise of female directors taking the narrative into their

²¹ Jacqueline Foertsch, "Cautionary Tales from the Sexual Revolution: Freedom Gained and Lost in 1970s Novels, Films, and Memoirs." *Journal of American Culture* (Malden, Mass.) 40, no. 3 (2017): 217.

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own hands, one can hope to see more realistic and complex depictions of female sexuality through a sex-positive lens as well as contextualize these depictions within the current wave of intersectional feminism.

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