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# THE ABC OF PORN CINEMA

Nova Cinema - MIMA

**Exhibition «The ABC of Porn Cinema», part of «Double Bill» in MIMA museum, Brussels, from 26/06/2021 to 09/01/2022**

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Thanks: **Patrick Adam, Chloé Andries, Muriel Andrin, Charlotte Beaupère, Bernard Beets, Isabel Biver, Pieter Buekers, Kevin Burger, Daniël Byltereyst, Philippe Capart, Antoine Chambre, Marie-Eve Cosemans, Philippe Debroe, Jörg Delvaux, Quentin de Meyer, Benwa Eugène, Lucius Fhyleomerrras, Laetitia Gau, Gabriela González Rondón, Laurent Govaerts, Dominik Guth, Gérald Hanotiaux, Estefania Huygen, Leon Janssens, Nicolas Lahaye, Romain Lecoq, Caroline Lemaire, Kathleen Lotze, Sandra Marinelli, Julian Marsh, Noémie Martin, Guillaume Maupin, Robert Mawet, Lara Meersseman, Raphaël Ory, Jimmy Pantera, Jacques Paulus, Stéphanie Petitjean, Alice Riou, Melanie Tamm, Anne Sudan, Susie, Tullia Teucci, Huub Van der Steld, Karel Vanhaesebrouck, Raymond Van Turnhout, Bruno Verbrugge, Eva Vermeylen, Gilles Vranckx, Cinémathèque royale de Belgique, Offscreen / Marcel usw, Filmfabriek, Etablissements d'en face, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Plaizier.be and the whole Nova team!**



[www.nova-cinema.org/abc](http://www.nova-cinema.org/abc)



[www.mimamuseum.eu/double-bill](http://www.mimamuseum.eu/double-bill)

# NOVA CINEMA

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Nova Cinema, located at 3 rue d'Arenberg in the centre of Brussels, is an unconventional movie theatre. Managed collectively by a team of volunteers since 1997, its two hundred seat room with balcony and friendly foyer-bar are the physical grounds for an off-kilter film program. Usually the result of in-depth research and built around thematic modules, the Nova's programming ethos favours independent films that are not distributed in Belgium, whether they be documentary, fiction or experimental, old or new, amateur or with larger budgetary means.

The link between the Nova and cult or marginal cinema has been present since its conception. Today, it is mainly with the yearly Offscreen festival, co-organised with the Marcel association, that atypical B, Z or X films are presented. The Nova programmers know how difficult it is to screen forgotten, marginalised, denigrated, or even lost films, and it can be just as challenging to reformulate a parallel history of cinema. Over the years, the Nova team has naturally begun collecting rare film reels while also turning its attention towards archives in danger of disappearing. After all, it's perfectly plausible that a 35mm print forgotten in a Brussels cellar for decades could be the last trace of a particular film, or that a bundle in a dumpster could contain a missing piece in the historic puzzle of a local cinema story.

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Pornography represents 27% of video streaming on the Internet, with an audience that is 80% male. Its influence on each individual is relative, but its societal role in constructing cultural representations of sexuality is significant and undeniable. While today's pornographic films are created and formatted for rapid online consumption, they were once proficient in borrowing the narrative and aesthetic codes of feature films and were historically shown in movie theatres. Though formerly a part of public spaces, pornographic films today have been relegated exclusively to the private sphere while cities have progressively rid themselves of their overt circulation.

In 2013, the ABC, Brussels' last old-school adult cinema still showing 35mm films, was shut

down. Its archive, meticulously built over the forty years of its existence, was salvaged by Cinema Nova, allowing the veil of a bygone era devoured by the digital revolution to be lifted.

The exhibition «The ABC of Porn Cinema» spans four decades of activity by the aforementioned theatre, and in doing so recalls the world that surrounded it. Through numerous documents, posters, hand-painted billboards, engraved press plates and censored photos retrieved from the ABC, plus an accompanying art installation, an obscure part of our culture destined to be buried in the annals of history can once again be rediscovered and reappraised. Indeed, these historical archives are exceptional and unique, unafraid to indulge in humour or to drum up reflection and controversy.

# THE ABC ARCHIVES

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Though countless rumours circulated around the ABC Cinema before its closing, one of them was particularly intriguing to the Nova Cinema collective: that there existed, within the confines of the building housing the ABC theatre, an enormous collection of films amassed over its forty years of activity. After contacting the manager a few months following the final screening, the Nova team discovered that the premises were effectively full of thousands of reels, piled up in every corner from the cellar to the attic. But there was more: besides the film stock, there was an enormous archive of material and documentation. The building had become the headquarters of the five companies that had been overseen by the manager from the late 1940s until 2013, with everything ending up transferred to the premises. These companies shared the administration of a small Belgian pornographic empire via a film distribution network and several theatres all over the

country. The distributor held at least dozens of promotional photos, some posters, and various documents for every single title in the collection. As for the ABC Cinema itself, everything appeared to have been preserved from its inception in 1972. Nova Cinema succeeded in concluding an agreement with the owner to purchase the entire film collection of the ABC, with the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique agreeing to house the voluminous reels in repositories specifically built for the conservation of film. A colossal undertaking to move the paper and film archives subsequently took place over the span of several weeks.

Parallel to the rescue of the archives, members of the Nova and other close structures launched a movement to preserve the theatre as well. The Cineact Foundation was created in the wake of this effort, launching an urgent campaign to rouse support for an institution in danger of

disappearing and attempting to preserve its use by starting a new cultural project within its walls. Despite widespread support, a successful fund-raising bid to rent the building, and an initial agreement to proceed with the project, the whole enterprise was nipped in the bud when the owner died and the building was sold. Promises made by local authorities ended up being baseless and quickly discarded. The building, which was purchased by a private developer, was hastily demolished as the Cineact Foundation was

still battling in court to assert its right as a tenant. Ultimately, the case was lost. Today, eight years after the closing of the ABC, the building remains empty and awaiting transformation. A sad and regrettably common ending, one that effectively closed off the opportunity to preserve one of the last small cinemas in the city. Thankfully, we can take solace and joy in the fact that traces of its existence were able to be successfully preserved and, finally, presented to the public today.



# BRUSSELS AND ITS CINEMAS



In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the massive sanitary project of covering the Senne river effected a profound change in the city. Following the Haussmannian model, large boulevards were laid out over the old river bed. While the success of the district's expected gentrification was moderate, the new main roads attracted a diverse community and became a popular place to go out. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous emblems attracted visitors from the suburbs and it was along these arteries that many theatres and cinemas began to be erected, particularly around the Boulevard du Nord (currently Boulevard Adolphe Max). Prestigious cinemas rubbed shoulders with smaller working-class movie houses, and the whole Brussels saw its number of theatres multiply to over 120 by the 1960s.

The spread of television presented a considerable threat to the prevalence of cinemas, which adapted using different strategies. Some of them attempted to reinforce and diversify their offer by multiplying the number of screens, often by merging neighbouring theatres or by dividing large spaces into smaller rooms. Others tried to attract spectators with technical innovations that promised immersive and exciting viewing experiences (such as widescreen technology, 3-D, surround sound, and comfortable seating spaces) or by working towards a cinema that was more specialised (news, cartoons) or sensationalist (westerns, horror, and, ultimately, sexy exploitation films). Theatres would pass from owner to owner, frequently changing names and styles. Concurrently, the downtown area began to gradually deteriorate.

rate: the generalisation of car-centric living and the suburbanisation of the middle classes deepened the cultural impoverishment of the city.

From 1970 onwards, the Brussels cinematographic landscape was all but decimated, with many small cinemas closing. Salvation came for some through reconversion towards an increasingly more daring program, at the cost of total marginalisation. The arrival of pornography represented a new and unexpected windfall, as these films could not be seen anywhere else other than the silver screen.

The general decline of film theatres continued in the 1980s and culminated in the 1990s when the multiplex model took precedence. Besides the corporate complexes, only a dozen cinemas still operate in Brussels. Entertainment culture continues its decline and, despite the perseverance of a handful of cultural actors, the prime cultural outlet of the city centre is shopping. For several decades, gentrification has been taking place, sparking many attempts to revive the city centre but rarely with the local population at the heart of the project, and focusing instead on tourism and events rather than attempting a true cultural revival.



## CINEMA IN 35MM

When we talk about the history of cinema in theatres, we are essentially referring to the projection of 35mm film: kilometres of film that is 35mm wide and runs at 24 frames per second on a projector, a principle that has remained unchanged from the early days of cinema to the advent of digital film in the early 21st

century. Analogue film can, under adequate conditions, be preserved for hundreds of years. But more often than not, the copies exploited in theatres have wound up deteriorating due to being badly projected, manipulated, and stored.

Despite the near-total eradication of the entire film distribution chain due to forced digitisation in the past ten years, some people continue trying to maintain

photochemical cinema active, or at least preserve it in order to safeguard a century of culture. The valorisation of works in their original format and the preservation of technical knowledge are crucial within the history of cinema, not to mention the fact that what the industry considers minor or uninteresting films may never be digitised and will probably not survive the changes brought upon by technology.

# THE ABC OF PORN CINEMA



Summer 2013. Behind the decrepit facade of the adult cinema ABC on boulevard Adolphe Max, now closed forever, lay forty years of archives: over 3,000 film reels, dozens of cubic meters of posters, countless documents and photos. A valuable collection that would help understand and preserve a little-known local history whose ramifications went from Ostend to Tyrol via New York. The ABC archives unveil a Belgian galaxy of pornographic cinema.

In spite of itself, this treasure trove offers a glimpse into a world that has disappeared but is not as distant as it seems. The collection and the history it contains exert a powerful fascination and arouse a form of nostalgia. The artisanal aesthetics of bygone

times and the iconography from the so-called «golden age» of pornography in particular can abate critical readings. A step back is nevertheless necessary to contemplate the archive, which is marked by the hegemony of a heteronormative, sexist and often violent white male gaze. By presenting a small subjective selection of the ABC archives, we are only scratching the surface of its history, but we are also holding up a mirror to contemporary questions about the city, cinema and, of course, pornography.

It goes without saying that admittance to the exhibition is reserved to a well-informed public.

# THE ABC CINEMA AND GEORGE SCOTT'S CINEMATOGRAPHIC GALAXY



The ABC cinema is part of a broad history, comprising those of Brussels' cinemas, of exploitation cinema at large, of censorship and the repression of the sex trade, and of George Scott's small cinematographic empire.

Scott, of Polish and American origin, led an impressive career of more than 60 years in the management of

movie theatres and the distribution of erotic and pornographic films in the Kingdom. In 1948, having just gotten married and freshly settled in Brussels, Scott and his wife took over the management of the American, a cinema on rue du Pont-Neuf. The Paris, on 62 boulevard Adolphe Max, followed two years later. Scott, as a precursor and a provocateur, quickly marked the identity of both cinemas.



The Paris became known for its daring films and adventurous programming, and the American was already in the crosshairs of the Justice Department in 1950 for its «light films». As exploitation cinema continued to push boundaries, the reputation of Scott's cinemas did not improve, to the great delight of certain movie-goers in search of new experiences. By the end of the 1960s, Scott's screenings were bordering on pornography, and he was sued more than once for indecent breach of moral standards.

The ambitious entrepreneur was also active in film distribution through his various companies. As a distributor, he acquired the rights to hundreds of films in Belgium and Luxembourg from international producers and retailers - films that he was obviously eager to distribute throughout his own network of theatres at very little cost!

In the early 1970s, Scott set out to conquer the Belgian pornographic market, this time accompanied by his two children and his sidekick Paul Van Ex. The scorching little family business founded Atlantic, a new company dedicated solely to the distribution of films. After acquiring the Ciné Plaza in Antwerp, they set out to open new cinemas, going against the trend of theatre closures. This process marked the beginning of the ABC network, with the Brussels ABC opening at the end of 1972 at just a stone's throw from the Paris, at 147-149 boulevard Adolphe Max. One year later, the Liège ABC moved into the former Century cinema, located opposite the Guil-

lemains train station. In 1974, the network was further expanded with the Ghent ABC. In Brussels, Scott was then managing three theatres within a radius of less than 150m - his very own «Cinerotic triangle»! Sex shops, peep shows, strip clubs and prostitution were integral parts of the neighbourhood. The cinemas themselves would gradually come to be known as gay hook up spots where sexual services, paid or not, were able to take place.

All of these theatres operated according to the same formula: two films were shown each week and would run continuously from noon to midnight, following the model of the permanent show. One could enter at any time, and no specific sessions were announced; for the price of a ticket, one could stay warm all day. ABC's programming was in vogue in the 1970s and 1980s, but the arrival of VHS and the ever-present threat of censorship affected pornographic theatres in particular. Still, Scott's business model allowed him to hold on. As early as 1981, he set up the concept of "ciné-spectacles" to keep his audience loyal, with stripteases taking place between the films.

In 1985, the American cinema and the ABC in Liège closed, but the businessman had taken over a new theatre in Ostend in the meantime, operating under the same formula as the others. He continued to coordinate the circulation of his films and dancers within his network, but eventually things fell apart. Scott sold his theatres to other cinema operators, with the exception of the ABC in Brus-



sels where he transferred all the film prints of Atlantic in 1993 after the company was also liquidated. The Paris reopened under new management in 1992, completely transformed and showing only films on video. The clientele of these theatres became increasingly marginalised.



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## COMPANIES MANAGED BY GEORGE SCOTT

From the 1950s onwards, George Scott managed the Studios Américains and the Compagnie Européenne de Cinéma (C.E.C.) through which he managed his theatres and imported films. In the early 1970s, he managed three additional companies: Cine Plaza N.V., Association Belge de Cinéma (A.B.C.) and Atlantic Films.

His distribution and exhibition activities were divided between these companies which operated parallel to each other. Atlantic Films was the only one dedicated solely to the distribution of films throughout Belgium, acting as an intermediary for the rental of films for which the rights had actually been acquired by the other companies.

The Brussels ABC outpost remained the final witness of the ABC network's golden era: it managed to escape the havoc that brought down most of the small cinemas of its ilk, and would continue to defy time and its upheavals until 2013.



*Register for films distributed by the Compagnie Européenne de Cinéma (C.E.C.) and Studios Américains, listing the screenings in different theatres around the country, most of them being «conventional» theatres which would occasionally show erotic films.*

## FANTASIES OF GEORGE

George Scott sounds like a fictional character's name, and the man has led a life worthy of a novel, of which his time in Brussels would be just a part. To discover more about him, have a look at the series of articles from the magazine Médor:

[www.medor.coop/georgescott](http://www.medor.coop/georgescott)

## DISTRIBUTION

A film distributor is the intermediary between the production of a film and its theatrical release. The distributor buys the rights to show a film from the producer for a specific territory and duration. Theatres rent the films by the week or by the screening and receive the film reels from the distributor as well as posters and photos for their window displays. Everything is returned once the screenings are done. An exhibitor does not own the material directly and pays a fee for each screening. The ABC cinema was full of thousands of reels and m3 of posters because Mr. Scott owned all this material as a distributor. It is precisely because of having this material at hand that the ABC was able to operate for so long.

# FILM CENSORSHIP IN BELGIUM

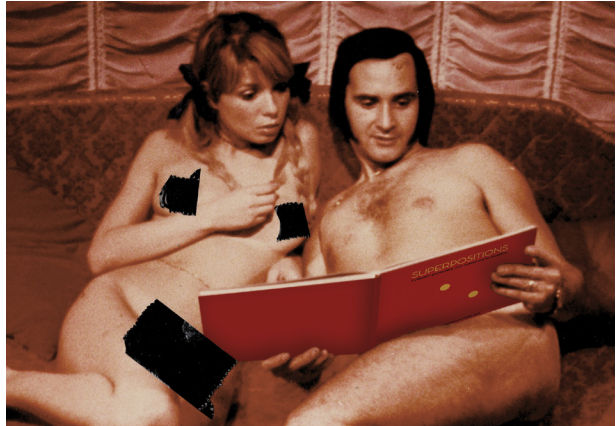


In Belgium, the Constitution guarantees the absence of censorship, yet as early as 1920 the regulation of cinematic content was established under the pretence of protection of the youth. Films can be shown freely but are forbidden to children under 16 by default. To obtain the «child admittance» certificate, films must be submitted to the Control Commission, which ensures that current moral standards, authority, and other values of note are respected. It frequently recommends that cuts or changes be applied to films. In practice, the exclusion of the family audience bracket represents a massive loss of income for distributors, which forces them to engage with censorship. It was only in 2020 that this policy was replaced by a more flexible recommendation system organised by age group and content.

Theoretically speaking, in cinemas forbidden to minors there should be no limit to the broadcasting of films intended for an exclusively adult audience. However, courts were keeping a watchful eye over the matter and would not hesitate to invoke the very subjective notions of public morality and outrage against public decency. Following complaints, and at the instigation of the Public Prosecutor's Office on the basis of reports from the Vice Squad, a magistrate could indeed consider that a film exceeded the limits and hinder its distribution. The copy of the film, the equivalent of the «murder weapon», could be seized; those responsible could face heavy penalties, including imprisonment. In a country where clerical influence remains strong, these risks were very real. Censorship could be particularly malicious considering there were no clear rules about what could

and could not be shown, and repression was constantly fluctuating. A game of self-censorship took hold, forcing distributors and exhibitors to preemptively cut films themselves and to continually defy the prudishness of inspectors and prosecutors. The impositions of censorship also

affected the promotion of the films through exploitation photos, paintings and posters that were displayed in the windows, and ad inserts that were placed in the newspapers. All the material that could be publicised, and that is presented here in the exhibition, flirted with the forbidden.



## FILM CENSORSHIP

Scenes that could lead to the exhibitor being sued for showing indecent images had to be cut out from 35mm copies, therefore distributors had to clean up the films beforehand. In some cases, the distributor authorized the exhibitor to cut the film himself and adapt it to local sensibilities. Generally speaking, he would prepare the copies according to their destination. For the light films of the 1960s and 70s, it sometimes sufficed to shorten a shot here and there, but for «real porn» it was possible to shrink 90 minutes into less than an hour! An uncut version of the film was sometimes slipped into the package by the distributor for the organization of «special» screenings that authorities wilfully ignored.

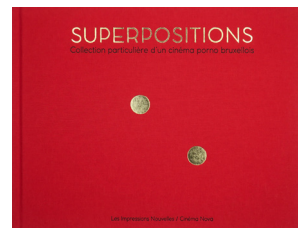
In any case, ambiguity reigned when it came to the details of what was to be censored. Apparently, in the 1970s, public prosecutors and vice inspectors gave some indications or even saw the pre-screenings alongside the exhibitors. In the 1980s, on the other hand, pornographers had to rely on their own judgement and face sanctions in case of an impromptu visit from the police if the limits were exceeded. This game ended towards the end of the 1980s when censorship clearly appeared obsolete in view of the potential presence of uncensored hardcore material in all homes, via VCR or paid TV.

## SUPERPOSITIONS

*Collection particulière d'un cinéma porno bruxellois*

<http://superpositions.nova-cinema.org>

Collection of censored lobby cards from Belgian pornographic cinemas selected from the ABC archives. The book reveals the singular, comical, and colourful practices of concealment and highlighting of the forbidden parts, turning the censorship system on its head.



## THE FILMS ON SHOW



George Scott's long career coincided with the major stages in the evolution of erotic cinema. When he started at the end of the 1940s, early exploitation films were already oriented towards slightly sexual themes while often hiding behind a moralising or educational pretext. Eroticisation took a crescendo during the 1950s and 1960s with a mounting tolerance for soft nudity and films focusing on titillating social trends under the guise of documentary purposes. Genre films and popular comedies regularly incorporated touches of «lightness». Scott's American and Paris theatres still offered a relatively varied program that never strayed far from exploitation, offering the occasional novelty that delighted some of the more intrepid moviegoers.

At the turn of the 1970s, the erotic register clearly took over as the advent of sexploitation came to the fore. Sex scenes were present in these films, though still relatively modest and always «simulated». The ABC opened at the end of 1972, which ended up becoming an emblematic year as it was the year of the consecration of «porno chic». Films like «Deep Throat» began to be screened in the mainstream circuits of certain countries, though Belgium would have to wait: Brussels was not New York. At the ABC, only relatively soft films were still shown, films that were sometimes on the fringe of conventional cinema but always with an erotic twist. Alongside moralistic films and sexy comedies mainly of German provenance, Scott's American connections could be clearly felt. He

imported via Atlantic Films the great titles of the New York and Hollywood scenes, some of which went on to become classics. Scandinavian cinema, with its sulphurous reputation, also enriched his catalogue. French films were somewhat less present and were mostly distributed among competing networks.

At the end of the 1980s, Atlantic was handling nearly a thousand titles. At a certain point, it became the biggest distributor of pornographic films in Belgium. However, pornographic cinema was completely turned upside down during this decade. Some people supposed that it would gradually be assimilated into mainstream cinema and obtain better production means, but with the switch to video it was precisely the opposite that happened. The market for cassettes grew to such an extent that production was accelerated while investments were reduced. Video technology replaced 35mm and films started to look less and less like «cinema». Quality standards decreased but profits exploded, with «hard» and specialised content becoming the main stand-outs. The so-called «golden age» of porn cinema (roughly between 1969 and 1984) was over.

In the ensuing decades, the Internet completely rid porn of its cinematographic coating and instigated a return to the minimalist and functional porn championed by the reels of the early 20th century and the old «loops», which were sketches viewable in cabins before sex made it on the big screen. Porn's brief cinematographic

parenthesis was finally closed. Atlantic ceased its activities at the beginning of the 1990s, like many other distributors of films of all kinds. Still, its vast catalogue of physical films continued feeding the Brussels ABC for 20 years, with the theatre sometimes showing more recent films that were rented from foreign distributors.

When contemplating the full catalogue of Atlantic Films, it is clear that there is not the slightest deviation from the archetypal pornography of the time, aimed at a heterosexual and predominantly white male clientele. Unfortunate exceptions were made in the case of a few films presenting «different» sexual practices in the form of deviant curiosities. One can clearly sense the basic tendencies of this kind of pornography, which amplifies fantasies and stereotypes that are allowed to exist within the context of a society with phallocratic and racist tendencies: male domination and cult of virility, trivialisation of rape and violence towards women, fascination for young and exotic bodies, male fetishisation of lesbianism, etc. In spite of the existence from the 1960s onward of alternative pornographic currents, of multiple movements of reflection and protest, and of the fact that the ABC became a place frequented in good part by a gay clientele, a change of program was never a priority there.

The films of this era had the merit of pushing boundaries, exploring new possibilities in a pleasurable way, and provoking necessary debate. But in view of this collection, it is difficult to adhere to a certain nostalgic con-

struction of the «golden age» of porn cinema beyond an appreciation of genre films. The historical and aesthetic distancing, and the simplistic opposition to the more contemporary banalities, have reinforced the myth of a free and joyful vintage cinema, provocative but progressive, a bit cheap but nevertheless ambitious – even downright «artistic»! Some examples have been edified as cult films and are now falsely considered emblematic. But the overall vision on this vast archive allows a more critical and nuanced look on production in a global way, which is not so far removed – at least in what it conveys – from what we find in pornography today.

## SELECTED CASES

### FACTS: KOPENHAGEN SEX-REPORT

(Werner M. Lenz, DE, 1973)

This West-German film, which was shown throughout the ABC network under the names «Copenhagen Sex Report», «Faits», «Les vérités», «French Positions», «Love-Show in Copenhagen», «Outrages» and «Extase en groupe», illustrates both the exploitation of Denmark's reputation as provider of outlandish spectacles and the kind of films that aim to report in a «truthful» and «factual» manner the practices of a particular population, in this case the Danes. The emphasis was on sensationalism and particularly on the sex shows that could be seen in some Copenhagen clubs. Before the live erotic shows arrived to the Belgian cinema scene they could be discovered on the big screen, presented



«as if you were there». This serves also as a reminder that eroticism was often inserted into cinema through the depiction of cabaret or light variety shows: the camera took on the role of the front-row spectator, and the distance introduced by the theatre's setting allowed for more than what could have been shown frontally. Already in 1950, George Scott programmed «Hollywood Burlesque» at the American. This film, which presented strip shows on stage, earned him a lawsuit for showing images contrary to public decency. The film was seized by the police, as was its publicity. Scott was condemned to pay a fine of 500 Belgian francs and received a suspended sentence of 15 days in prison.



## RAPPORTPIGEN (Knud Leif Thomsen, DK, 1974)



## THRILLER - EN GRYM FILM / A CRUEL PICTURE (Bo Arne Vibenius, SE, 1973)

These two Scandinavian films are emblematic of the ambiguous programming by exploitation cinemas at the beginning of the 1970s, as well as of the notion of eroticism in this particular context. They both show a sordid reality that can hardly be described as «sexy»: a woman is raped, maimed, drugged, prostituted, traumatized, seeking revenge in «Thriller» and in «Rapportpigen» a young woman who innocently posed for glamour photos quickly falls prey to scorn and harassment, with dramatic consequences.

Still, since these films show nudity (even explicit pornography in the

case of the uncensored version of «Thriller») and deal in one way or another with a subject related to sex, they are shown in theatres such as the ones in the ABC network. Indeed, these theatres could exploit their sultry side, while on the other hand more conventional cinemas would not take the risk of venturing into this field. The discomfort stemming from these films is heightened by the obvious intention of eroticizing them.



«Rapportpigen» made its entrance into the ABC network as «Le sexe tout nu», «Danish Porno Magazine», «La revue danoise 75», «Hot and Naked», «Haar kerelsalbum» and «Les baiseuses». As for «Thriller», it was known as, among others, «La vengeance du sexe», «De perverse

wraak», «Alibi pour un viol», «La Suédoise» and «Bêtes à plaisir» (a widely used title given to many of the films shown in the ABC network).

## DEADLY WEAPONS (Doris Wishman, US, 1974)



This now-cult Doris Wishman film was shown numerous times in the theatres of the ABC network. Traces of its screening history in the 1970s show that it came out in 1974 in Liège under the name «Les plus gros seins du monde». This title, translated into Dutch as «De grootste borsten der wereld» was also used for its 1975 Ghent release. In between these showings, it played at the Brussels ABC in 1974 as «Mamelles Story». It passed through Liège in 1976, this time named «Les mamelles fantasques», at the Paris in 1978 and 1980 as «Les seins canons», then «Les tétons qui tuent» and back to Liège in 1979 as «Les seins de glace». In 1981, «Les seins qui tuent» was shown at the Brussels ABC and, in 1988, «Les seins vont au paradis».

## SCHULMÄDCHEN-REPORT. 6. TEIL (Ernst Hofbauer, DE, 1973)



If there is an emblematic example of sexploitation films riffing on the pseudo-documentary genre, it would be the «Schulmädchen-Report» saga (known internationally as «Schoolgirls Report»). Originating in 1970, it ran to 13 episodes shot in the span of 10 years. The phenomenal success of the first episode launched the fashion for «report» films, a particularly fruitful genre in Germany. Curious movie-goers could, through these films, see what housewives do while their husbands are at work, the intimate details of the lives of nurses or widows, and what happens in ski resorts or in the backseats of cabs. Contrary to «Mondo» films, which also use a supposedly documentarian style

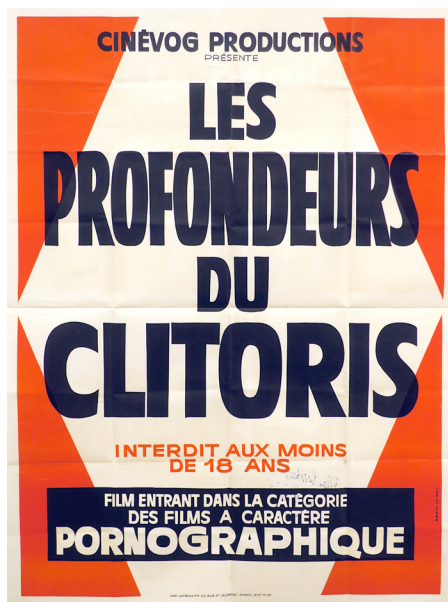


but present cultural curiosities and shocking practices, these films offer a peek beneath the veil of banality in order to discover something to fantasize about. The «Schulmädchen-Report» films are all about the sexuality of teenage girls and, under the pretence of a social investigation of their practices, provide the audience with something to ogle. Staged sketches are intertwined with real street interviews, which can be rather comical. The first episode still quite successfully blurred the lines between fiction and reality, but once the franchise was established the films made little effort to appear realistic and the sequels went on to be pure and basic exploitation.

The ABC network screened all the episodes of the series. The sixth instalment was presented, between 1975 and 1988, under the follow-

ing titles: «La haute école du sexe», «La haute école de l'amour», «Eros Fiesta», «Schoolmeisjesrapport», «Ma première partouze», «De jonge neuksters», «Les filles faciles», «Jeunes filles faciles», «Perveres ingénues», «La foire aux pucelles», as well as «Jarretelles roses et bas noirs» (just as, in another city, another film came out known as «Jarretelles roses et slip noir»). In 1976, the film was screened in Liège as «Le dortoir des pucelles», while in Brussels Scott programmed the fourth episode of the series under that same name. The following year, «Le dortoir des pucelles» was on the Liège billboard again, but this time it was the 5th film of the saga! The screening of the film at the American in the fall of 1975, where it was known as «Les filles ne pensent qu'à ça», was followed by feminist protests of which a photographic record remains.





## TYPOGRAPHICAL POSTERS

In France, the so-called «X» law of 1975 set a number of constraints for pornographic cinema and its distribution. Rather than establishing open censorship, the French approach sought to contain the phenomenon through financial repression and a limitation of its «propagation» in the country's cinemas. Therefore only specialized theatres labelled as X could show

films classified as such, and visually explicit advertising was henceforth forbidden. French posters evolved towards a very particular style: with text being the only possible hook, film titles became more and more racy. Graphic designers put the titles forward and sometimes made use of vague evocative forms which were always very stylized. In the end, the limitations created by the law stimulated graphic creativity, and these posters have since become cult.

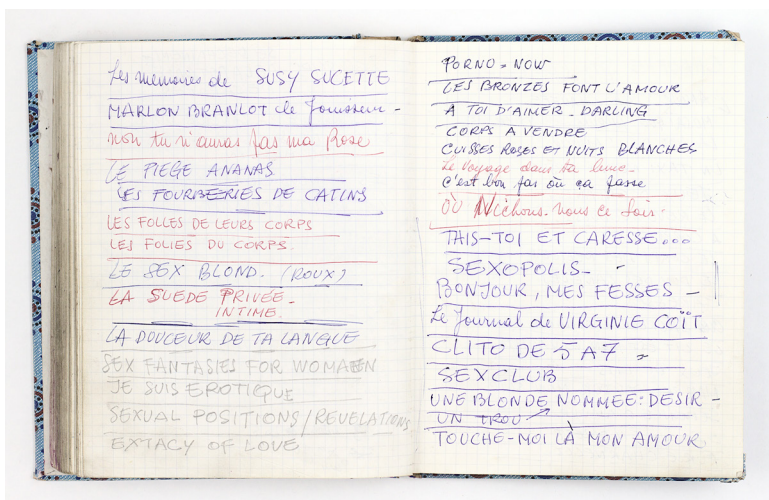


## TYROLEAN HUMOUR

Humour was a fundamental element in the erotic and pornographic cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only does humour come from primary instincts that could be compared to sexual instincts, but it also served as an excuse to present clunky pornography which still needed to find ways to justify itself. Comedy can also, just like sex, serve as a commercial subterfuge to attract spectators and seem to work independently from the quality of the film. It also helped to relax an audience confronted, with some degree of embarrassment, to these new type of images. Furthermore, humour also served as a mitigating factor when the eyes of the law would judge a film for its licentious content, as its humorous dimension allowed it to claim more innocent intentions.

Germany is one country that stands out brilliantly in terms of low-brow erotic comedies. While American, Italian or French films also provided their share of noteworthy examples, German sex comedies are particularly striking, offering different sub-genres such as the Bavarian «Lederhosenfilms» and their Tyrolean cousins. German erotic cinema exploded at the end of the 1960s and was exported throughout Europe: the country also became a platform for the distribution of erotic films from other horizons, and the ABC network was flooded with them. This explains why many of the films in the collection are dubbed in German and why others, which arrived through a secondary Swiss export network, bear its trademark: the famous trilingual subtitles which covered nearly half the screen.

# NOTEBOOKS



**Notebooks outlining the creation of the promotional posters and slogans for the films on the bill, as well as various announcements.**

The notes are probably mostly by Paul Van Ex, George Scott's perennial associate and manager of the theatres in the ABC network. They were intended for the painter and poster artist Ray (Raymond Elseviers) who, probably with the help of assistants, produced most of the posters and letterpress cards made to measure for Scott's theatres.

These notebooks, in addition to unveiling the «poetic» inventiveness of the writer, give precious insight into the programming of the theatres of the

ABC network. Like a Rosetta stone of pornography in Belgium, they allow the identification of films by effectively matching the original titles with those being used by various cinemas. These titles were invented on the spot and are not referenced anywhere else. Furthermore, they were changed for each different screening or when they were shown in a new theatre in order to pass them off as new films and attract the same audience. The credits appearing on many of the posters produced for the network were also completely made up, adding a new layer of anonymity to actors who were already working under a pseudonym most of the time.





## PRESS PLATES



### Press plates used for the printing of ads for the cinemas and their programmes in newspapers

*Anonymous artists-artisans*

*Prints : Lucius Fhyleomerras*

These engraved plates, generally in metal, are used for newspaper prints using a photo-engraving technique. The illustrations usually come in two types: the «lines», which are simple and stylized tracings, and the «similis»,

which render a photo through rasters and halftones.

The creation of these plates was an art in itself. The economy of cinema at the time allowed theatres and distributors to regularly manufacture plates of this kind for limited use, just as it allowed the «calicotist» painters to make a living by making grandiose custom-made canvases for cinema fronts - an ephemeral art form of which few traces are left.







Custom-made paintings made for the display of the American in 1979 («Une chatte en chaleur») and 1980 («Pénétration»)



# PAINTED POSTERS

**Posters painted for the ABC network by Studio Ray  
(Raymond Elseviers and his assistants)**

*Restauration : Book & Paper - [www.bookandpaper.be](http://www.bookandpaper.be)*

## PÉNÉTRATION

**(All About Gloria Leonard, Gloria Leonard & Joe Sarno, US, 1978)**

The film «All About Gloria Leonard» was released in 1980 at the American under the title «Pénétration» and credited to an imaginary director. Many other films had already been released in the ABC network using this title or a variation of it in the plural form. Over the span of several months, the film was shown at the Paris, in Liège and at the ABC under the name of «Double pénétration» before its release at the American. It was also shown in Ghent shortly afterwards, where it was announced as «Gloria is goed voor u». The title of the poster presented here was recycled in 1981 for an unrelated release at the American: «Mädchen, die am Wege liegen». That year in Ghent, «Gloria, een teef in drift» was presented. In 1982, the film was screened at the Paris under the title «Caresses perverses». One year later, the people of Ghent rediscovered «Perverse Gloria», just as the people of Liège watched «Soirées intimes» and the people of Brussels «Anges pervers». The following year, «Gloria is Good for You» appeared at the Brussels ABC while in 1985 it was time for «Soumission perverse». In July 1987, the question was «Qui couche avec Gloria

Leonard ?» at the ABC. The film finally made it back to the billboards of the Paris in 1986 under the catchphrase «Putain de gonzesses».

## UNE CHATTE EN CHALEUR

**(Inside Jennifer Welles, Jennifer Welles & Joe Sarno, US, 1977)**

After appearing for the first time at the American, in Liège, and at the Brussels ABC in 1978 as «Le portrait d'une catin», the film became «Jennifer in Sexland» upon its screening in Ghent. In 1979, it was screened in Liège and at the American as «Une chatte en chaleur», right after it passed through the Paris titled «Jennifer en folie». In 1981 it was as «Orgasmes et soupirs» that the American presented it, while it was «Pour les caresses de Jenny» at the Paris. The movie was screened there once more in 1983 as «Excès de perversité» before returning to the American under the guise of «Portrait d'une pute». In 1984, Liège movie-goers were able to contemplate «Fantasmes aphrodisiaques» while those at the ABC saw «Sex for Two» and the Ghent buffs (re)discovered «Blondjes met smaak». «Erotic Paradise» returned the following year to the ABC bill, while in 1986 the Paris screened «Sex Academy 69» before it was taken back to the ABC as «Frénesies amoureuses».

## **CATINS À ROULETTES** **(Rollerbabies, Carter Stevens,** **US, 1976)**

Carter Stevens' film was released on the ABC network in 1978 as «Love recto-verso» at the American, «L'amour recto-verso» in Liège, «Wellustige verleidsters» in Ghent, and «Chattes en feu» at the ABC (the same week that another film bearing an identical name was shown in Liège). In 1979, the film returned to Brussels at the Paris under the name «Sweet Orgies» and then went to Liège, this time as «La roulette du sexe». In 1980 it was shown in Ghent as «Liefde op wieltjes», at the Brussels ABC as «Sexy Week-End» and, finally, at the American dressed up as «Catins à roulettes». It appeared again at the Paris in 1982 under the title «Gourmandes minettes» and again in 1983 at the ABC, which was promising «Sexy Babies». In 1984, «Baby Love» was announced at the Paris. The year 1985 was smudged by a dreadful lack of imagination as the film was screened in Liège bearing the second-hand title «J'ai envie» and at the ABC in Brussels under the name it already bore for its previous time at the Paris: «Baby Love».

## **J'AI ENVIE...** **(Erotiki teleti, Omiros Efstratiadis,** **GR, 1979)**

The poster was probably made for the 1979 release at the American of the Greek film «Erotiki teleti» (international title: «The Ceremony»). All the names on the poster were made-up.

The film was shown in Liège the following year, entitled «Fontaines du sens», then re-titled in 1981 «Le jouet et la jouissance» and finally in 1982 «Les minettes». The people of Brussels saw it again at the Paris theatre in 1983 under the code name «Rêves pervers» then at the ABC with a title marking a clearer entrance into the new decade: «Salopes en vadrouille». The inhabitants of Ghent discovered «Liefdesceremonie» in 1983 before the copy returned to the American for sessions of «Plaisirs en privé» and an «Erotic Circus» in 1984. In Liège that same year it was shown once again to celebrate «La saison des amours». The film returned to Ghent in 1985 as «Het huis der manziekte vrouwen» before becoming «Furie érotique» at the Brussels ABC. The trail ends in 1986 with a «Love Cocktail» at the same theatre.

The title «J'ai envie...» recycled the one given to the film «Suburban Wives» by Derek Ford when it was released at the American in 1975. It was also the name given to the film «She Wants It» upon its 1978 Brussels release, as well as to «Ob Dirndl oder Lederhose» when it was shown in Liège the same year, and to the film «Maid in Sweden» in Liège in 1981. «Rollerbabies» also bore the title in 1985.

An attentive historian will endeavour not to confuse it with the various films projected throughout the network under the names «Je meurs d'envie», «Oui j'ai envie» or «J'ai toujours envie»...



Custom-made paintings made for the display of the American in 1977 («Quoi de neuf au Danemark») and 1980 («Catins à Roulettes» and «J'ai envie»)

## QUOI DE NEUF AU DANEMARK ?

### (Wilde Knospen, reifen Kirchen)

This intriguing film, whose «original» German title is not referenced anywhere in the history of cinema, is probably the 1974 Danish film «Vilde pornolyster» (known internationally as «The Blue Balloon») in its German-distributed version. Bent Tømming produced but not directed it, and the other credited names appear to be fictional. Once again, the concept of the promotional poster was overridden by the ABC: titles were akin to slogans in their interchangea-

bility, fake credits relegated the films to an imaginary plane, and the illustrations that were made without the artists having even seen the films are fantasized visions of what they could contain. In any case, this feature film was shown in the ABC as «Danemark, mon amour» in 1977, several weeks before its screening at the American bearing the title that can be seen on the poster. The following year it was shown in Liège under the name «Nuits danoises» and in Ghent as «Wilde liefde». It was viewable once again in 1980 at the Brussels ABC as «Le jardin des amours volées» and the year after as «À nous les petites danoises».

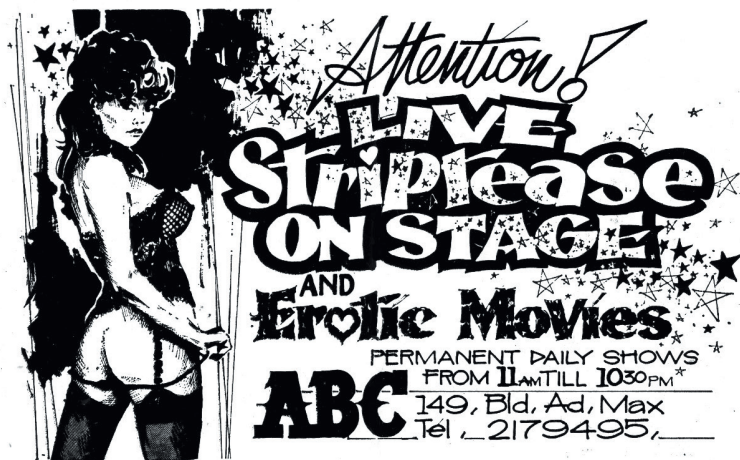
## RAYMOND ELSEVIERS (1914-1999)

Raymond Elseviers, known for his poster works as «Ray», was one of the «big names» of a profession often characterized by anonymity. Originally from Kampenhout in the Flemish Brabant, he had a triple career as a painter, poster artist and «calicotiste» for many cinemas in Brussels. He was the go-to painter for the Belgian posters of Warner Bros. films in the 1960s and created more than 200 posters of various styles, where his impressionist artistic touch and his choice of colours was instantly recognizable. His film posters are still considered

iconic by collectors today. He also worked as a «calicotiste», painting large format canvases inspired by visuals from the film or by the digressions of his imagination for the windows and entrances of certain cinemas. He worked for the largest (the Métropole on rue Neuve) as well as the more obscure theatres (the ABC). As opposed to posters made for print, custom-made paintings for theatres were rarely signed. They were made to disappear as soon as the film was no longer on the bill. Dozens, if not hundreds, of Ray's paintings have disappeared, either thrown away, destroyed, recycled or forgotten in a damp cellar such as the one in the ABC theatre.

Elseviers had been working for George Scott since at least the opening of the ABC in 1972 and made most of the paintings and typography for the ABC network, contributing closely to the visual identity of these theatres. In addition to their professional relationship, it appears that he was close to Scott and was a board member of several of his companies in the 1980s.

## CINÉMA-SPECTACLE



In the early 1980s, the video recorder market in Belgium was soaring. Its success had a clear impact on the attendance of erotic movie theatres: uncensored pornographic films could now be watched in complete privacy, while porn theatres were still paradoxically unable to show «hard» films in full. Adult cinemas were forced to reinvent themselves or face annihilation. Many began to offer other «attractions»: within the ABC network, as early as 1981, the focus was on striptease performances between films.

These «shows» were then put forward, with international artists appearing on the bill and their names in bold lettering on the windows. Applications

came from all over the world and many dancers, sometimes accompanied for duet numbers, passed through Belgium to perform. Scott made sure to have them tour all his cinemas in order to make their booking profitable. Great erotic variety shows were organised and different formulas experimented with: personalised dances to fulfil personal fantasies, coupling the 1986 World Cup broadcasts with stripping stints during half-time, and so on. Over the years, however, the prestige of these productions diminished. The stage shows remained an important attraction for many spectators, but they became more anonymous, and acts were no longer highlighted between two films but scheduled at fixed times,



interrupting the screening in the middle of the plot - something that, interestingly enough, did not seem to bother the spectators.

While the formula was successful, it also brought trouble to the ABC cinema and ultimately led to its downfall. Indeed, since the 1990s, the Brussels municipal authorities began apply-

ing a heavy tax on so-called «charm shows». Scott considered it excessive and contested it until the end, seeing it as a form of «masked censorship». As pressure from the tax authorities mounted, the shows continued at the ABC until the last day when, crippled by debt, it was forced to declare bankruptcy.





# BALCONY



## INSTALLATION BY GOGOLPLEX

[www.gogolplex.be](http://www.gogolplex.be)



When at the cinema, if the viewing experience is successful, the spectator is plunged into another world and the room itself is forgotten. At the ABC, however, even in the depths of darkness, films had its work cut out for them to maintain its viewers' attention. Its particular microcosm, with its idiosyncratic stench, constant movement, elusive codes, mediocre technical capacities, muffled sounds, regular interruptions, and the perception of a sometimes gloomy reality made for endless factors which could destabilise the uninitiated spectator.

The creation of the artists' collective Gogolplex is an attempt to restore the atmosphere of the movie theatre as it was reported in testimonies, offering the visitor to take a seat on the balcony. A rather unusual experience, even for the former customers of the ABC, since the balcony was cordoned off as it made audience control all but impossible...

z.j.v.o.: Raphaël Cruyl, 39-41 Quai du Hainaut 1080 Molenbeek Brussels Belgium

**39-41 QUAI DU HAINAUT 1080 MOLENBEEK BRUSSELS BELGIUM**

## EXHIBITION

# THE ABC OF PORN CINEMA

[illegible]