Elena Gorfinkel, Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0017-5. Paperback, 311 pages.

Elena Gorfinkel’s new study examines a far-reaching assortment of sexploitation film from the 1960s and provides insight into the wider discourses in the processes of viewing these texts. It considers broader socio-cultural debate, censorship, the developments of film submission and the social effects into which these films operate – topics which will elicit interest among a broad academic readership.

Gorfinkel writes compellingly and entertainingly in a book which presents an absorbing and original contribution to knowledge in the eld, complementing and furthering the work undertaken by David James in *Allegories of Cinema: American Cinema in the 1960s and Juan Suarez in Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960s[[1]](#footnote-1)*. Gorfinkel, who previously co-edited *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image[[2]](#footnote-2)*, divides this new book on American sexploitation cinema into four sections, on censorship, spectacle, consumption and film reception, respectively. Each category covers a vast number of films from the period, many of which have not been afforded much scholarly analysis previously, such as Paul Rapp’s The Curious Female (1969). Together these examples create a comprehensive investigation into the topic where a common thread is the narrativising of sex through ‘transparent plots, pretexts, and generic gimmicks’ (7).

The book deals methodically with the concepts implicit in the economies of looking, deftly broaching debates surrounding spectatorship and particularly, in chapter 4, exploring ‘cultural discourses surrounding watching simulated sex in the public space’ (197), dominated by notions of male desire. Gorfinkel proposes that the sub-genre of sexploitation cinema itself ‘imagined the experience of women as they contended with the possibility of erotic and economic autonomy’ (153). Gorfinkel’s work does not shy away from socio-political dimensions, exploring ways in which changing social attitudes and adjustments to legislation modified ways of perceiving these ‘taboo’ subjects. While she provides detailed examinations of a large number of these under-explored productions, she also focuses on the films’ conditions of reception. As she states: ‘The objective of this book has been to account for the culture that produced these films and the culture these films in turn gave rise to’ (155).

One outstanding case study treats Barry Mahon’s 1965 film, Censored. Gorfinkel suggests that this piece of sexploitation cinema gestures towards a more morally righteous stance ‘defecting to the film audience and giving them the role of adjudicators of offensive material […] while simultaneously endorsing the rights of free expression’ (31). Later case studies are equally as illuminating, such as the exploration of Russ Meyer’s *The Immoral Mr Teas* (1959) and the aforementioned *The Curious Female*. The analysis of these works is combined with an effective use of images and plates, which include some obscure posters, advertisements and consumer reports.

Throughout the book the author gives thought to the implications, ramifications and reflections of the 1960s ‘sexual revolution’ on the screen-scape of sexploitation. In particular, Gorfinkel addresses the position of female sexuality and the figures of womanhood in relation to patriarchal institutions, exploring discourses surrounding gender identities and the nature of ‘women’s experience in American film Music in ‘Minor’ National Cinemas 67 life’ (154). The author lands on a particularly salient point when she posits that these sexploitation films speak to ‘an alternate understanding of the 1960s, one that counters the optimism of a rosy liberationism with a spoiled cynicism and pervasive anxiety about the newly public status of sex and the changing nature of gender identities’ (250).

Accessible, informative and well-articulated, this contribution illuminates a great deal of wider concerns and disciplines, from gender studies, film history and industrial practices, to studies of spectatorship and audience studies. Gorfinkel’s book is sure to become a valuable text for undergraduates, postgraduates and academics alike.

1. David James, Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989; Juan Suarez, Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960s, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elena Gornkel and John David Rhodes, Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)