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“What does flesh become?”

—Thomas Waugh, from *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writing on Queer Cinema*

The spectre of Barbara Hammer haunts this paper. As I watch and re-watch *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), I take notes cloaked by her recent death in 2019. I watch for the queers, like myself, who mourned her death as voyeurs of her work, and I find myself replaying the same scenes in *Nitrate Kisses* over and over. Here is one of them: two bodies move on screen, grainy and out-of-focus, filmed on black-and-white 16mm film. Limbs rise, entangle. Arms, legs, fingers, and lips move fluidly. At times it is impossible to identify what body parts the camera lingers on, angling curiously, unobtrusively, around the twisting figures on the carpet. Skin is magnified and expands to fill entire shots. Pores become something whole. Shadows from the window blinds rib the two bodies with bars of darkness. Sunlight glistens on saliva and wet hands.

Nitrate Kisses unfolds in three phases. Each phase features a queer couple having sex aligned with voice-over interviews and archival materials (photographs, letters, and other ephemera) detailing a particular historical trauma. Phase I sees an elderly lesbian couple having slow, gentle sex on a sunlight-dappled carpet; the movement of their bodies is interspersed with photographs of an unidentified building in ruins and lesbian pulp fiction book covers. This phase highlights the general erasure of lesbian relationships from the sanitised, hegemonic historical record. Phase II of the film shows two gay men having

playful, spirited sex while the voice-over features interviews with different gay men outlining the impact of the Motion Picture Production Code on gay male life. Later in the phase, men share personal stories of loss experienced during the AIDS crisis. Phase III features two young, punk women (leather dykes) engaging in BDSM sex, as voice-over narratives and photographs piece together the stories of queer women who were purposefully disappeared from greater historical narratives of life experiences in Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. In each phase, archival materials frame the erotic encounters, providing a means of sensing, feeling and witnessing pain.

Observing the sex scenes in Hammer's experimental documentary compels me to argue that queer sex can become an archival practice of both remembering and processing violence and death. Indeed, the limits of our corporeal boundaries can be tested and re-drawn through the various acts of queer sex in *Nitrate Kisses*, reconfiguring past traumas and pain for queer people. Hammer must employ the erotic body as an archive because she is working in the absence of conventional archives to transmit knowledge about queer loss, trauma, and death across generations.¹ I argue that *Nitrate Kisses* thus employs the erotic body to achieve three main objectives: (1) to reinscribe the past in the present, specifically within and upon the flesh of her performers; (2) to make visible lesbians and gay men previously disappeared from the historical record via mass death and purposeful archival erasure; and (3) to bring queer apparitions – ghostly figures, figures representative of the past – to bear upon present-day bodies via physical touch. In this sense, Hammer presents a deeply embodied, sensorial archival practice of remembering and subverting historical trauma and loss. Each of Hammer's objectives is tied to her overarching directorial ambition to re-imagine and construct an archive in which pleasure and pain exist on a

continuum connecting past and present. Each phase of sex in the film develops from bodies moving intimately with historical loss and trauma – as if trauma itself were an entity. Ghostly sex indeed.

While sex in Hammer’s film is not an antidote to queer death and cannot make up loss of life, I argue that the scenes of queer sex in Hammer’s film break open generative spaces in which the physical body mediates historical traumas, introducing new forms of desire and a unique kind of queer futurity. Hammer deploys the body mid-intercourse as a canvas to project the most affecting depths of suffering, transmuted through physical touch and expression of pleasure. The body in *Nitrate Kisses* becomes a cypher for past historical pain. Sex becomes a method of remembering historical injustices and making them visible for the viewer to bear witness to trauma that has shaped queer cultural memory. In *Nitrate Kisses*, the body is not a stable object, perhaps not even a “body” at all; rather, it becomes representative of a “figure for relations between bodies past and present.”²

In my analysis of queer bodies and sex in *Nitrate Kisses*, I engage historian Elizabeth Freeman’s methodological *erotohistoriography*, which understands the body as a tool to write the “lost” or the past into the present. For Freeman, erotic pleasure is a means of understanding and knowing – a form of “historical consciousness intimately involved with corporeal sensations.”³ In *Nitrate Kisses*, the past is inscribed upon the moving bodies as they have sex. Thus, paradoxically, *death* is inscribed or imprinted upon the living in the moment of copulation, and upon and through their pleasure.

My analysis of trauma as unfolding and transforming through the act of sex is critical because it reads queer sex directly against narratives depicting queer desire ending in death.

As Heather Love maintains, “the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of sexual and gender deviants.”⁴ The depiction of lesbian love as tragic, isolated, and concluding in death is widely reflected in historical cinematic representations of lesbian life. Such notorious films include *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), which concludes with an attempted suicide on part of a queerly coded schoolgirl, and *The Children’s Hour* (1961), in which a similarly coded protagonist hangs herself. In this essay, I use a framework of erotics which positions the pleasuring/pleasured queer body against its antithesis: the murdered, tortured or vanished queer body. Mid “procreation” or “reproduction,” the bodies in *Nitrate Kisses* promise a kind of queer futurity – if not biological or genetic, a powerfully symbolic form of futurity. According to my method of analysis, then, mass queer historical death or erasure is neither overlooked nor shied away from, nor does it play a starring role in consuming the bodies at the heart of this research.

I will begin by briefly summarising sex and the body as both relate to the tradition of queer-feminist experimental film before reviewing the theorisation of queer historicity, trauma, and the body. I then complete a three-part analysis of each phase of *Nitrate Kisses*, examining how traumatic memory is inscribed upon and through the bodies having sex and how accompanying pain is re-worked by the physical, sexual body, giving way to new forms of queer desire and pleasure and invoking a queer-feminist archival practice. Lastly, I open my analysis up more broadly to consider how erotic physical touch and the body’s materiality engender differing forms of experiential, embodied archival knowledge.

The Influence of Queer-feminist Experimental Film

Hammer's oeuvre stems from a lineage of feminist experimental cinema ushered in by the sexual revolution in the early 1960s, and includes films produced by Yvonne Rainer and Chantal Akerman, to name only a couple of notable directors. Linda Williams aptly defines feminist and lesbian films produced during this porno-chic era as "hard-core art."⁵ Williams' analysis of these films reveals their slippery positioning between pornographic cinema and avant-garde artistic film. Representations of the erotic female body thus dominated feminist experimental film, much to the chagrin of the second-wave feminist anti-pornography movement, vigilantly spurred on by lesbian feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon.⁶ But for Hammer and her sex-positive corollaries, the explicit female body was *clay*, "palpable, malleable...the raw material" of their films.⁷ As Ara Osterweil argues, experimental cinema constructed flesh as "an endlessly variable substance that could come unbound...through shattering encounters with desire, sex, pain, birth and death".⁸ Graphic sexual depictions of the female body were the "primary artistic tool[s]" of feminist auteurs.⁹ Their bodies were political weapons, "battleground[s]" where, as Waugh explains, queer bodies "squeeze[ed] every drop of pleasure and pain" from structures of censorship and control.¹⁰ We see this reconceptualisation of the body and of flesh in *Nitrate Kisses*, introducing and expanding possibilities for not only what a body is, but what it can *do*.

Theorizing Queer Historicity, Trauma, and the Body

"For groups constituted by historical injury," argues Heather Love, "the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it."¹¹ For Love, looking *backwards* into

the past is necessary to guarantee the future survival of queer women. Queer history, she asserts, centres around a “politics of the past” – the shared, embodied myths and feelings that Love argues are constructed via the long-term effects of past traumas and homophobia: suffering, escapism, regret, shame, melancholia, and failure.¹² The lesbian in history, Love argues, is always turning back to the past, nostalgic, mired in unresolved loss, grief, and mourning and obsessed with “wounded attachments.”¹³ Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich understands the perceived queer attachment to trauma as an “archive of feelings,” driven by an urgent compulsion to “never forget” the pain and loss of the past.¹⁴ But unlike Love and Cvetkovich, Freeman approaches queer historicity not through a focus on loss, injury, separation, displacements or “negative and negating forms of bodily experience” (what she terms as “queer melancholia theory”), but rather a focus on queer *pleasure* as “encountering, witnessing, and transforming history.”¹⁵ Contrasting Love and Cvetkovich’s preoccupation with trauma, Freeman’s erotohistoriography is:

...distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to erect, figure, or perform that encounter.¹⁶

For Freeman, the body may pleasure “itself with the past,” figuring a much different relationship between history and the queer body than imagined by Love or Cvetkovich.¹⁷ In this relationship, *history* pleasures the body rather than troubling it. While Hammer seizes Love’s challenge for queers to engage the past without suffering bodily or psychic destruction, she does so following Freeman’s edicts. I intervene here to propose that Hammer’s work synthesises these two contrasting theoretical schools of thought. She

acknowledges the necessity for queers to turn to the past, to honour the urge to “never forget,” but she is wary of becoming mired in loss and pain. In *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer overlays the present with the past – suffusing her bodies with pastness, with the trauma of her performers’ queer ancestors – but the act of sex, the eroticism of their bodies, *works* the pain, the pastness, the loss and trauma.

What Flesh (and Sex) Become

I turn here to Phase I of *Nitrate Kisses*, which explores how lesbian existence is largely rendered invisible throughout history. Phase I pinpoints certain, sharp moments of grief: an unnamed, unseen narrator tells the story of American author Willa Cather, whose memorial scholars visit from around the world while routinely failing to mention her lesbianism in their research. Another anonymous speaker discloses the burden of invisibility, who describes the closeted lifestyle of Cather and her partner: “they developed an attitude of extreme discretion, and before her death they burned all of [their] letters.” Scenes of abandoned homes and empty fields play slowly, then begin to speed up frenetically. Another anonymous speaker cuts in: “lesbians disappear first of all because we are women, women disappear,” she says. “They disappear because they are deviant, because it’s still shameful.” These statements, and the weight of the pain expressed in them, bleed over and through the bodies of two women embracing on a bed. The viewer watches an intimate, slow sex scene unfold. Other painful narratives are confessed as the physical intimacy between the two women progresses: stories of violent raids on lesbian pubs by gangs of policemen, of the difficulty of coming into lesbian consciousness, and descriptions of lesbian women losing gay male friends during the AIDS crisis. While we are not privy to the faces or even names of the speakers, including the blurred-out, pixelated

faces of women dancing together at lesbian socials that play intermittently, we are given lingering, intense shots of a woman's face contorted in pleasure as she receives cunnilingus. The pain and grief of the speakers, in this sense, is transposed onto and through the woman receiving pleasure – indeed it *becomes* her pleasure.



Figure 1: Two women make love on a sunlight dappled carpet in Phase I of *Nitrate Kisses*. Courtesy of the Hammer Estate and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

At the same time as we hear a speaker recollect being called a “dirty lesbian” and “dyke,” we see the women having sex smile and laugh. The erased life existences of queer women emerge, channelled into an intersubjective, liminal space broken open by sexual contact, constructed by both pleasure and the pain of recollection. Those made invisible become, I argue, the *most* visible as they burgeon uncontrollably from the two women's bodies as grins, moans, laughter, and other expressions of physical pleasure. Here we can consider Nick Davis' conceptualisation of desire and pleasure as mutable, “passing through and

forcing changes within subjects rather than belonging to them as static [and] innate.”¹⁸ Davis, theorising a Deleuzian model of queer cinema, argues that desire and pleasure do not “settle into any one arrangement but concern flows and frictions across and within them all.”¹⁹ We can apply Davis’ ideas to Phase I of *Nitrate Kisses*. We see desire and pleasure work expansively, in nebulous, fluid, and interconnected ways between the two women’s bodies as both forces are sutured to past traumas. The desire and pleasure of the two women play, as queer theorist Margrit Shildrick states, “across points of connection between disparate surfaces or entities.”²⁰ In the case of *Nitrate Kisses*, these points of connection are made between the grieving bodies of the ghostly narrators reliving painful memories and the pleased/pleasuring bodies of the two women having sex.

Similarly, in Phase II of *Nitrate Kisses*, the institutionalisation of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1933 and the AIDS crisis beginning in the 1980s are featured as two historical events whose accompanying cultural memories steeped in pain and trauma are productively worked through the act of a gay male couple having sex. Here, the AIDS crisis is explored or portrayed as an equally destructive force of queer eradication akin to the metaphorical extinction of gay men from cinema via the Code. As in Phase I of the film, voice-over narratives in Phase II are shared by nameless, anonymous speakers as the couple continues to have sex – except in this case, the narratives depict losses attributed to the AIDS epidemic. One speaker explains how he and a partner lost fourteen close friends in a single year. “It was relentless,” he says.

While the AIDS crisis section of Phase II directly mirrors the structure of Phase I, Hammer’s exploration of the Code’s incapacitating effect on queer bodies is stylistically

different. As one of the men poises, about to enter his partner, a textual scroll-up of the Code is superimposed across the couple, beginning with Section II, “SEX.” The Code continues to scroll over the bodies having sex, who are ironically engaging in the very acts prohibited by the Code, including what the Code terms “illicit sex,” “scenes of passion,” “excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces,” and the most marked delineation of Section II of the Code, the fourth component, which states: “sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden.”

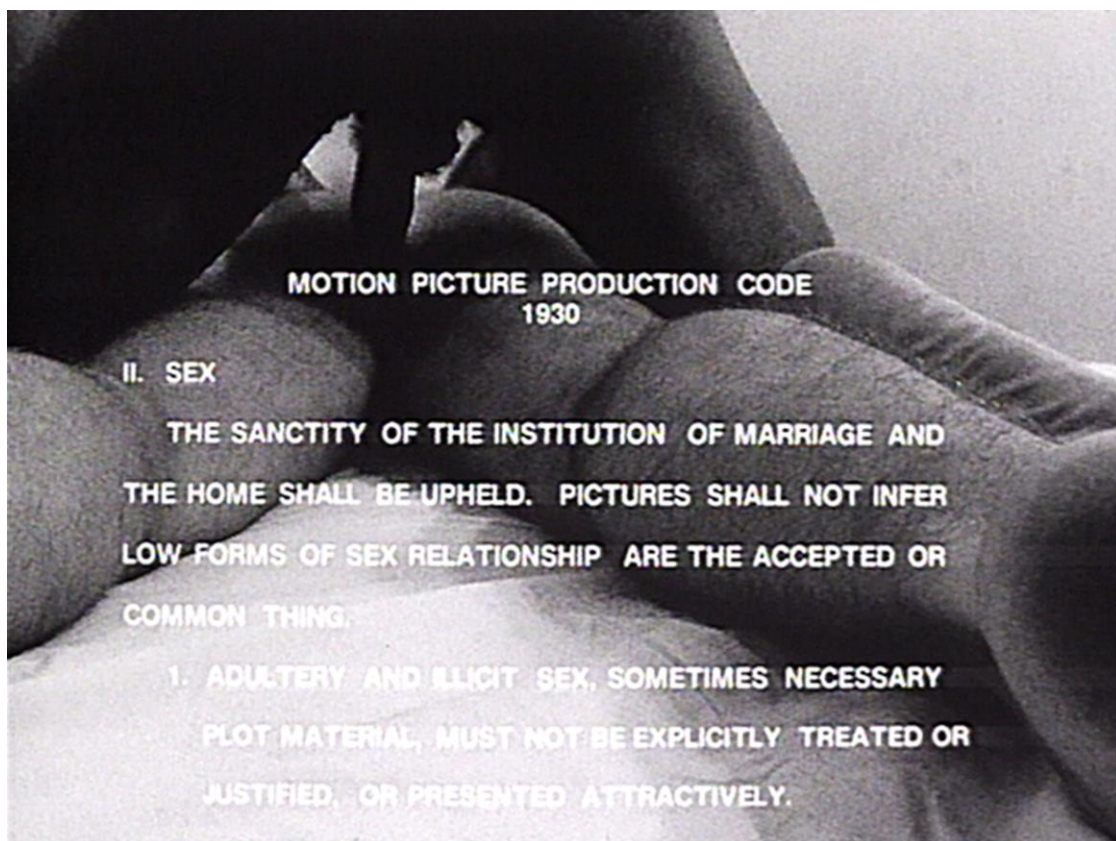


Figure 2: In Phase II, the Code scrolls over two men, one poised to enter his partner. Courtesy of the Hammer Estate and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

The Code led to the production of films that centred around queer death as the pinnacle tension – *Rebecca* (1940) is a strong example, in which a queerly coded protagonist, Mrs. Danvers, meets an untimely death at the film’s conclusion.²¹ We might read this as a

suggestion that queerness could not acceptably be presented as a liveable experience – it had to be put to death, so to speak. Ultimately, the Code reflected the powerful arm of the Catholic church during the 1930s.²² The Code attempted to reach into the bedrooms of Americans by officially controlling and censoring *on-screen* sex.

In contrast to Phase I, the prohibition of queer existence is physically imprinted upon and through the flesh of the two gay men having sex as the body becomes a site of inscription for pain. Here, we can build on Osterweil's thesis on flesh in experimental film as an "endlessly variable substance" by invoking Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of flesh – what Laura Mulvey and Martine Beugnet interpret to be a form of "embodied consciousness."²³ As the men frolic on the bed, their flesh, scrolled over with the words of the Code, becomes imbued with embodied consciousness. Their moving limbs become animated, enlivened with a specific purpose – to rebel against the Code: sex-as-rebellion, perversion-as-rebellion. Shots from the silent film *Lot in Sodom* (1933) are also interspersed with these sex scenes, which further subverts the deeply "moral" nature of the Code. Nothing short of Christian propaganda, *Lot in Sodom* conveyed the punishment of, among other various other sins, homosexuality. Because the male actors featured in the film were dressed in garish costumes, were heavily made-up, and their physical movements exaggerated, the effect is campy and queer. As one of the men giving a voice-over interview in *Nitrate Kisses* ironically explains: "you are supposed to learn a lesson in the telling of a moral tale, but ... the telling of the lesson ... becomes very seductive."

The bodies of queer men in Phase II can thus be read along a continuum: the same bodies in *Lot in Sodom* that signify eventual queer death and intended to instil fear and disgust in

male viewers could have provoked feelings of attraction or arousal in others. Desire and sexuality seem to “decompose and recompose according to different encounters.”²⁴ Both desire and sexuality are evoked not only through the couple having sex in Hammer’s film but also for the actors in *Lot in Sodom* and their supposedly condemned viewers. Desire and pleasure are thus presented in Phase II as polymorphous, metamorphosing as “conjoining and detaching particles, series and peaks, virtualities and intensities of desire.”²⁵ As the couple’s flesh moves in an embodied consciousness, their flesh marked by the eradicating words of the Code, desire and pleasure unfold in what Shildrick terms a “fluid indeterminacy.”²⁶ Connections are continuously drawn between the couple having sex according to what Davis asserts are “highly eroticized unions, breakdowns, hostilities, reunions, ecstasies, surfeits, and losses.”²⁷

Phase III of *Nitrate Kisses* is markedly different from Phase I and II because, while the structure of this phase is similar to the first two, the lesbian couple filmed having sex are two leather dykes engaging in BDSM sexual play. This scene is interrupted by shots of concentration camp ruins, broken windows, gravestones and bunkers, and details the experiences of lesbian women under the Third Reich. Playing over the sex scene and shots of architectural deterioration is a song by queer German singer Claire Waldo, whose mechanical, forceful chorus repeats, “Oh, don’t ask why, oh don’t ask why, I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must die.” The practice of BDSM embraces pain as a form of sexual and erotic pleasure. As Timo Airaksinen explains, when BDSM practitioners welcome and indeed urge on feelings of pain and enact gestures of “violence,” the very meanings of *pain* and *violence* are reconfigured, altering their ability to wound.²⁸

BDSM sex presents us with the most cohesive, integrated representation of pain and pleasure in *Nitrate Kisses* – violence transmuted into pure desire and sexual bliss felt on part of the leather dykes. Phase III explores what might be considered a “sex-violence-body nexus.”²⁹ BDSM practices here interrogate the idea of wounding-as-pleasure, focusing on an “erotics of wounding”³⁰ and injury deeply invested in consensual, enthusiastic participation.



Figure 3: Leather dykes display BDSM sexual practices in Phase III of *Nitrate Kisses*. Courtesy of the Hammer Estate and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

In this section of the film, shots of mass graves, the narrative of a woman speaking about recognising a fellow lesbian while held in Ravensbrück, rows of empty chairs, Waldo’s cryptic lyrics and the ever-present ruins are read *into* the pain harnessed and deployed as power and pleasure in the BDSM sexual practices between the leather dykes. Thus, the

“wounds” or injuries that the women inflict upon each other may best be understood as a process – part of the *process* of attempting to transform historical pain and trauma through sex. *To wound* in this case might be considered something sacred, rather than horrific, a transformative ritual of sorts.³¹ Thus, through the practices of BDSM, the two leather dykes “mobilize erotic pleasure in... events normally experienced as tragic, violent and traumatic.”³² This ability to wield pain effectively leads to a “multiplication of potentialities of the female body” in its capacity to experience and express pleasure and desire.³³

Instead of disconnecting or distancing themselves from the past, the queer bodies in Phase III of *Nitrate Kisses* refuse psychic destruction and instead caress it knowingly. Hélène Cixous remarks on the fear of recalling painful memories, stating, “we are always afraid of seeing ourselves suffer. It is like when we have an open wound: We are terribly afraid of looking at it...and at the same time we are perhaps the only one person capable of looking at it.”³⁴ Perhaps the only way to bear witness to such traumatic historical truth without succumbing to it – perhaps the most strategic way to examine the wound – is to mediate pain with pleasure, to make from pain, or make pain itself, something beautiful and sublime. We may be able to watch trauma unfold on and through the performers’ bodies without wounding ourselves so deeply in the process. And we may be more aptly primed to receive the images and statements from voice-over interviews that allow us to apprehend a much broader, encompassing scope of pain.

Archival Materiality and Physical Touch

In each of the three phases of *Nitrate Kisses* a singular hand guides the viewer from scene to scene, calling attention to particular, fine details: a hand slowly twisting the knob on a dilapidated door to admit the viewer into the darkness of an abandoned house; a hand tracing a woman's silhouette on a photograph; a hand feeling the grooved words engraved on a tombstone; a wet hand fucking; a hand pointing to a 1909 bill established in Germany that officially criminalised lesbianism.³⁵ This is a spectral hand, upon first appearance seemingly disembodied and free-floating, associated with no particular voice or entity in the film, and it seems to extend outwards from the viewer's own body, positioning the viewer as holding the camera, entering into ruins, remembering, or having sex.

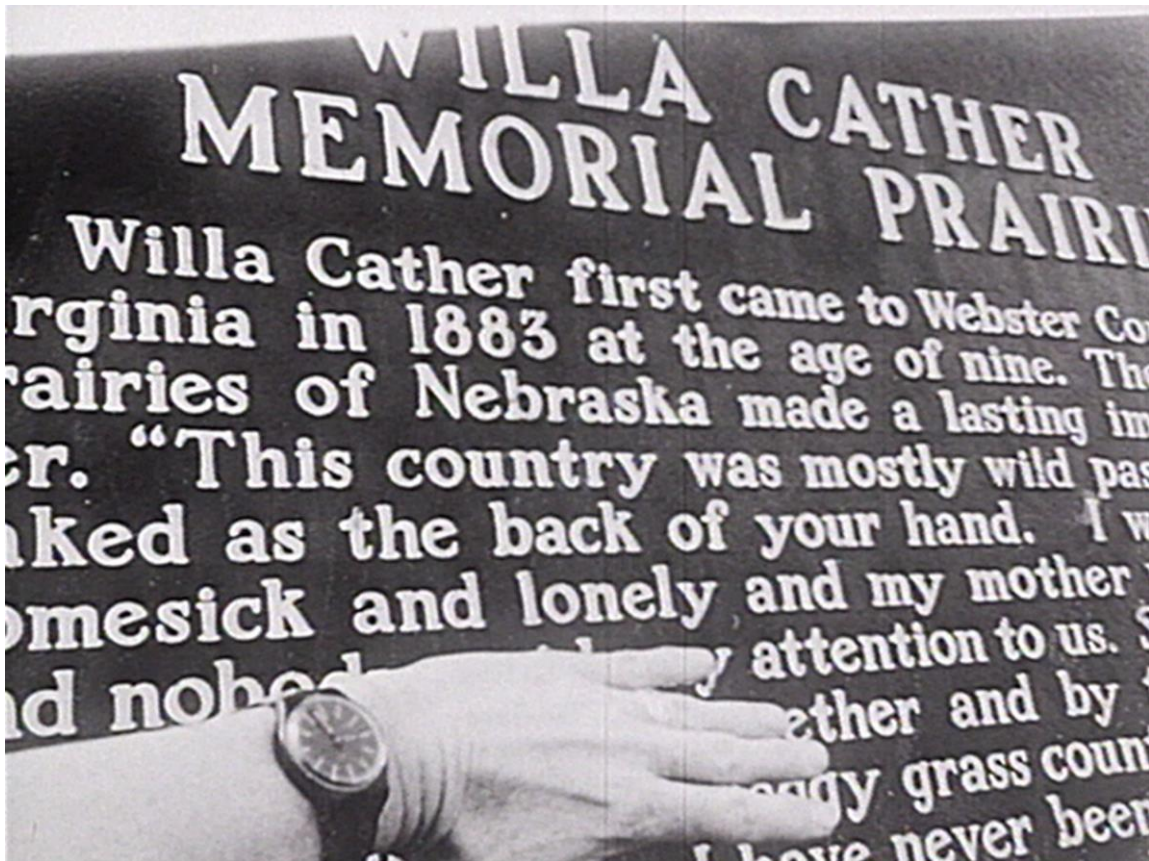


Figure 4: A hand gently caresses the Willa Cather memorial. Courtesy of the Hammer Estate and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

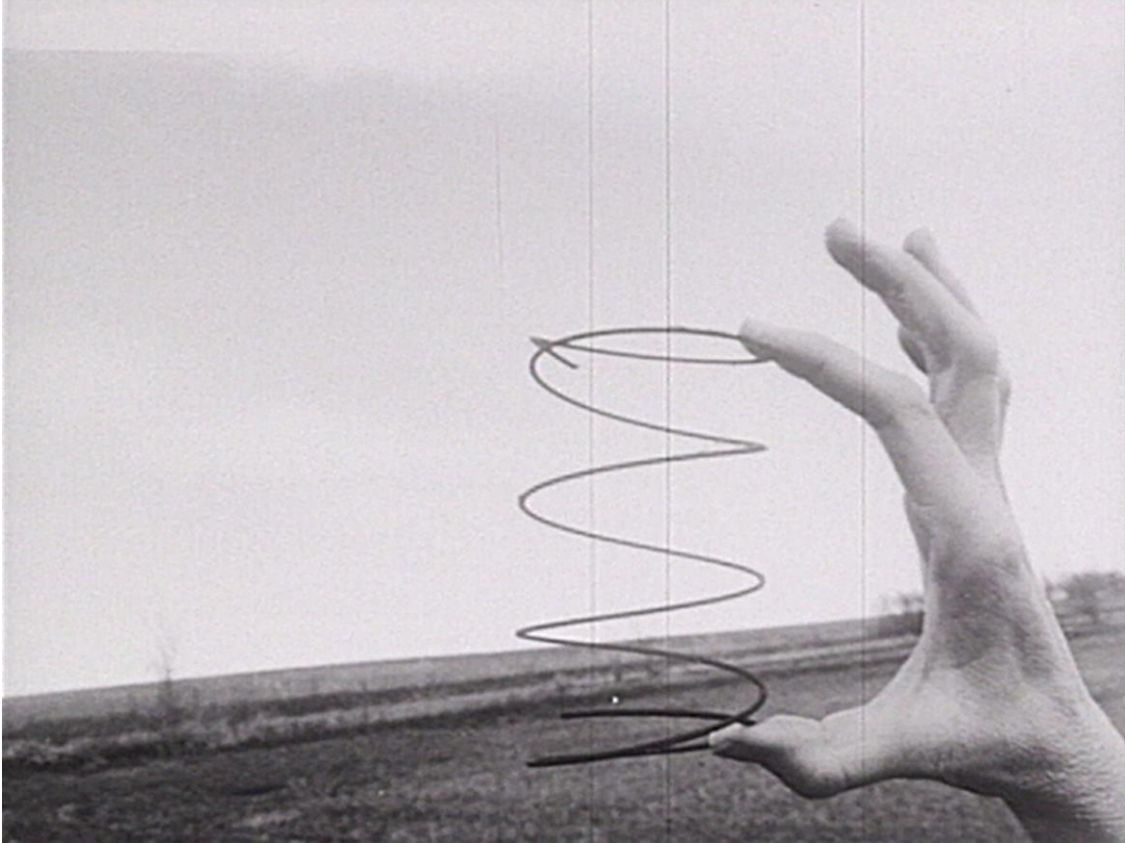


Figure 5: Another hand toys with a spring. Courtesy of the Hammer Estate and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

The hand is possessed by the materiality of the archival objects it encounters – the physical sensations produced by touching and interacting with these objects. To look is not enough. The hand, the archivist’s body, must get closer. As Alexandra Juhasz explains, feminist film demonstrates a need for the past, for history, to be “alive, instructive, interactive.”³⁶ We might conceive of the involved hand as symbolically refuting the traditional objective relationship normally constructed between documentary subjects and filmmakers. We might also think of Hammer’s involved hand as contesting the classic “separation between artist and art object.”³⁷

Hammer's embodied participation in the film means that her use of the camera also actively works against the "filmmaker-as-fly-on-the-wall-theory" often deployed in documentary film.³⁸ Instead, as Osterweil explains, Hammer approaches her subjects with great intimacy, merging "emotional transparency with corporeal closeness."³⁹ As Hammer wonders, "the problem for me is how to take the camera to bed without objectifying the erotic experience, how to make the camera a sexual additive."⁴⁰ Thus, even in shots where Hammer's hand is not featured interacting with archival objects, the viewer is aware of her *holding* the camera – filming becomes a tactile and visceral act. Hammer uses the camera as an extension of her own physicality, as if another participatory body in the sex scenes.

Anna Cooper Albright asks: "how is one touched by history?"⁴¹ I ask: *how might one touch history?* For Hammer, "making up" lost history is a material, embodied and physical archival process. The body and its capacity for physical touch (here exemplified by the ever-inquisitive, probing finger and embodied camera) convey a means of generating and processing knowledge through "bodiedness." The body, in this case, is a "site of consciousness and cognition ... involv[ed] in the recovery and reenactment of memory."⁴² It is physical touch – the touch of a finger on a photograph, for example – that becomes a conduit for accessing archival knowledge, and for unlocking what exists *below* the photograph, what cannot be felt merely by looking. Physical touch is critical to Hammer's archival project because, as Ivo Van Hove claims, "the body makes us remember."⁴³ Bill Bissell and Linda Haviland argue that knowledge can be accessed or even generated via bodily physical states and actions. Visceral physical interaction may therefore generate historical knowledge. Perhaps put most bluntly by Freeman, archival materiality and the necessity of physical touch reveal that "history is a hole to penetrate, but not with the usual

instruments. That Sapphic finger.”⁴⁴ Indeed, erotohistoriography espouses that mere physical contact with historical materials may provoke pleasurable bodily responses “that are themselves a form of understanding.”⁴⁵ I point here to Julie R. Enszer’s investigation of lesbian poet Minnie Bruce Pratt’s personal materials stored at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Harvard University). Enszer describes finding, much to her surprise, Pratt’s vibrator:

After carefully folding and rewrapping the batik outfit, I unfurl the acid-free paper that wraps Minnie Bruce Pratt’s vibrator. It is light. Lighter than any vibrator I have ever held. I realize there are no batteries in it. It is big. Bigger than any vibrator I have ever owned. It is cream. It is plastic. It is ridged. Idly, I unscrew the base, where the batteries belong. I gently run my hands along the hard plastic. I want to smell it. I look around. No one is looking at me here in the archives. No one seems to care that I have found this intimate object of pleasure.⁴⁶

Enszer emphasises the significance of corporeal pleasure as a fundamental component of lesbian-feminist epistemology. We can read the pleasure conjured by the physical touch of archival materials as a significant element of practice for Hammer’s lesbian-feminist archival methodology. For Hammer, lesbian sexuality is a means of feeling through and understanding the past experiences of queers before her. The touch of the finger to a photograph, or to engraved words on a tombstone, demonstrates a tactile exchange between the physical body and material objects. In this case, the literal finger representing the archivist becomes a boundary or conduit through which historical knowledge transmits by osmosis. Physical interaction with archival materials, as demonstrated by Enszer, precipitates a change within the body of the probing researcher or archivist. Enszer is surprised by the weight of Pratt’s vibrator, its ridged sides. Her experience is far from voyeuristic; rather, holding Pratt’s vibrator plunges Enszer immediately into Pratt’s

psychic territory. In this sense, pleasure-as-knowledge aroused by physical touch in the archive is a transformative force.

We might relate Enszer's experience in the Schlesinger Library to Hammer's "Sapphic finger." Enszer draws continuous parallels between her own life experiences and Pratt's. Various physical aspects of the vibrator trigger Enszer's memories of her experiences with a vibrator. In *Nitrate Kisses*, the hand touching various artefacts – whether it be the photographs, text, or objects – seems to touch past, touch *beyond*, the bare surface it encounters, puncturing into the pastness of the artifacts themselves. Here I am reminded of Freeman's metaphor of history as a "hole to penetrate." At one point in Phase III, for instance, Hammer's finger (or metaphorically, our hand as archivist/viewer) seems to point at a photograph of Willa Cather dressed and passing successfully as a man. But rather than merely point to Cather, I interpret the finger as trailing gently over Cather's heart. The finger does not carry out a cold, informative act of pointing-as-exposure ("see that this body is Willa Cather dressed as a man"); instead, it seems to strain for a connection to Cather available only through intimate physical touch with Cather's body via the medium of the photograph.

Physical touch as exemplified by Enszer and Hammer gestures to what Lucus Hilderbrand terms "cross-temporal queer contact."⁴⁷ This contact can be understood as the multitude of connections between present and past queer people that expose "recurring desires in the past and ... fantasies of queer pasts, communities and even asynchronies and anachronisms across generations and eras."⁴⁸ Such cross-historical touch indicates, as Freeman argues, a "queer becoming-collective-across time."⁴⁹ This is a kind of becoming that does not adhere

to temporal, spatial, or physical boundaries. As Freeman explains, some bodies register “on their very surface the co-presence of several historically contingent events, social movements and/or collective pleasures.”⁵⁰ The bodies featured in Hammer’s films are confluences of queer experiences and identities. Queerness, specifically lesbian sexuality, can be understood as unfolding in an interconnected, intersubjective process. Hammer’s physical touch as archivist/filmmaker reaches through to Willa Cather’s 1930’s stoic, repressed butchness, and that same archival queer desire intertwines with Enszer’s meticulous, surprising study of Pratt’s vibrator, held in the palm of her hand, years later. In this sense, the “disembodied” Sapphic finger introduces not only physical touch but paradoxically, a fluid *apparitional* touch to *Nitrate Kisses* – a touch that seems to connect moments in queer history, striving to create “new types of collective experience.”⁵¹ It serves as the site for political action: at one moment Hammer/the viewer is connected to Cather, at another moment they may be connected, in some psychic way, to lesbians tortured during the Holocaust by, as exemplified in another part of Phase III, the hand touching a German bill or reference book defining the term “lesbian.” The Sapphic finger (Hammer’s ever-present hand) is uncanny, seeming to intrude upon scenes without warning, a manifestation of the viewer’s own desire to reach out and touch Cather, the graves, the pain of others. It feels for us, energetically operating according to its own force of life.

Bodily Decay and Filmic Ephemerality

The materiality of the body in *Nitrate Kisses* marks it as “an ephemeral field site.”⁵² The body, of course, persists only as long as a human life span, if it does not first fall peril to one of the forms of death – symbolic or otherwise – detailed in any of the three phases of

Hammer's film (erasure of historical existence, a biological epidemic such as AIDS, or genocide, in the case of the Holocaust). In drawing attention to the ephemeral, material nature of the body, Hammer reminds us that film, particularly nitrate film, is also subject to inevitable decay through the process of nitrate acetate degradation.⁵³ Nitrate, like the delicate biochemistry of the human body, has a highly unstable chemical composition. Just as the body ages and deteriorates, so too does film. Gerda Cammaer explains that only twenty percent of the films produced in the 1920s still exist. We are reminded that, like the lost films, queer bodies are lost, rendered invisible, and may slip into gaps in history. The bodies of Holocaust survivors or loved ones of AIDS victims, and their narratives, like nitrate film, are hurtling towards full disappearance. In this sense, Hammer's repetitive, sustained shots of ruins, scraps of photographs, and even voice-overs given in overlapping, chaotic fragments become ominous. They point to what has *been left* of queer life when the historical record is sanitised, and reflect the narratives of the silenced, those made absent who are not privy to the luxury of "traditional, seamless, narrativized historiography."⁵⁴ Perhaps the title of the film, then, gestures to the fleeting, queer "kisses" – highly unstable in and of themselves, true kisses of nitrate – made across time, made between the archivist and the deceased, between historical bodies and the ever probing Sapphic Finger.

Conclusion: "it is necessary to be touched"

Nitrate Kisses facilitates a "polymorphous desire to touch and open up."⁵⁵ That is, physical touch in the film becomes conflated with other bodily senses, including vision and sight. Hammer explains:

When I had my experience coming out in 1970, I touched a woman's body for the first time when we made love. All the corpuscles on my skin were highly charged by touching a body similar to my own. I think that my sense of sight is connected to my sense of touch.⁵⁶

I think here of the Code scrolled over the intertwined, writhing bodies of the gay men or the deep, throaty voiced refrain of Claire Waldo's "I tell you we must die" echoing out and over the leather dykes as they strike each other. Like Hammer's polymorphous, archival touch, Williams explains that sex no longer "takes place at a single moment in a single event," rather it may unfold across different temporalities and bodies.⁵⁷ The different forms of pleasure, desire, and sex that ripple through *Nitrate Kisses* elucidate the contrasting modes or practices of survival adopted by queer people in the face of death or erasure. Touch, though, is dangerous, or perhaps, what *prompts* touch is dangerous. The sex scenes in Hammer's film, toeing the line of pornographic cinema, are driven by tension, a fear even, that "we may be ineluctably drawn to touch [the] images, to touch ourselves, or to touch others."⁵⁸ But as Hammer asserts conclusively, "it is necessary to be touched."⁵⁹ Physical touch and sex in *Nitrate Kisses* does not undo the past loss of queer life. Yet, sex, eroticism and physical touch, framed in *Nitrate Kisses* through the use of archival materials, are able to grow a cross-temporal queer figure capable of surviving into the future. It is through Hammer's subversive archival practices that the bodies in *Nitrate Kisses* – the elderly lesbian couple, the gay male couple, and the leather dykes – stand as incarnations of this figure of queer futurity, something or someone that secures queer survival by combatting loss, trauma, and pain with pleasure.

Notes

¹ Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin

Books, 2014) 3.

² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) 116.

³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 96.

⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 1.

⁵ Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 259.

⁶ Chuck Kleinhans, "Barbara Hammer: Lyrics and History" in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 168.

⁷ Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) 239.

⁸ Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-garde Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014) 14.

⁹ Ara Osterweil and David Baumfleck, "Emergent Bodies: Human, All Too Human, Post Human" in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds: Critical Essays on the Plastinated Cadavers of Gunther Von Hagens*, ed. by T. Christine Jespersen, Alicita Rodríguez, and Joseph Starr (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009) 190.

¹⁰ Waugh, *The Fruit Machine*, 144.

¹¹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 1.

¹² Love, *Feeling Backward*, 21.

¹³ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 42.

¹⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 110. September 6th 2021, DOI:10.1215/02705346-17-1_49-107.

¹⁵ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 58.

¹⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 96.

¹⁷ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 56.

¹⁸ Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 190.

¹⁹ Davis, *The Desiring-Image*, 25.

²⁰ Margrit Shildrick, "Prosthetic Performativity: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities" in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 127.

²¹ Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 36.

²² Tanya Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) 84.

²³ Laura Mulvey and Martine Beugnet, "Corporeality, Transgressive Cinema: A Feminist Perspective" in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015) 190.

²⁴ Teresa Rizzo, *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2012) 52.

²⁵ Davis, *The Desiring-Image*, 17.

²⁶ Shildrick, "Prosthetic Performativity," 121.

²⁷ Davis, *The Desiring-Image*, 12.

²⁸ Timo Airaksinen "The Language of Pain: A Philosophical Study of BDSM" *SAGE* 8, no. 2 (2018): 1. September 9th 2021, DOI:215824401877173.

²⁹ Vivien Burr and Jeff Hearn, *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 2.

³⁰ Burr and Hearn, *Sex, Violence and the Body*, 2

³¹ Greg Youmans, "Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 27 no. 3 (2012):

105. September 7th 2021. DOI:10.1215/02705346-1727473.

³² Anthony McCosker, “Transformations of Pain: Erotic Encounters with Crash,” in *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding*, ed. by Vivien Burr and Jeff Hearn, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 104.

³³ Chrysanthi Nigianni, “Butterfly Kiss: The Contagious Kiss of Becoming-Lesbian,” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 169.

³⁴ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 2005) 29.

³⁵ Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) 200.

³⁶ Alexandra Juhasz, “Bad Girls Come and Go, but a Lying Girl Can Never Be Fenced in” in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. by Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 96.

³⁷ Osterweil and Baumfleck, “Emergent Bodies,” 241.

³⁸ Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 13.

³⁹ Ara Osterweil, “A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer’s X-Ray Vision,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2010): 193. September 16th 2021, DOI:10.1080/10894160903196533.

⁴⁰ Jacquelyn Zita, “The Films of Barbara Hammer: Counter-currencies of a Lesbian Iconography” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 24 (1981): 15. September 7th 2021. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC24-25folder/BarbaraHammerZita.html>

⁴¹ Anna Cooper Albright, “Touching History” in *Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, ed. by Bill Bissell and Linda Haviland (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) 73.

⁴² Bill Bissell and Linda Haviland, *Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) 6.

⁴³ Ivo Van Hove, “The Body Makes You Remember” In *Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, ed. by Bill Bissell and Linda Haviland (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) 72.

⁴⁴ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 109.

⁴⁵ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 105.

⁴⁶ Julie Enszer, “Feverishly Lesbian-Feminist: Archival Objects and Queer Desires” in *Out of the Closet, into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, ed. by Amy Stone and Jamie Cantrell (Paw Prints, 2016)166.

⁴⁷ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Sex Out of Sync: *Christmas on Earth’s* and *Couch’s* Queer Sound Tracks,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 28, no. 2 (2013): 45. September 9th 2021, DOI:10.1215/02705346-2209916.

⁴⁸ Hilderbrand, “Sex Out of Sync,” 1.

⁴⁹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 123.

⁵⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 123.

⁵¹ Osterweil, “A Body is Not a Metaphor,” 190.

⁵² Tomie Hahn, “Stalking Embodied Knowledge—Then What?” in *Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, ed. by Bill Bissell and Linda Haviland (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) 34.

⁵³ Gerda Cammaer, “Canadian Cinema, Ephemeral Cinema” in *Cinephemera: Archives, Ephemeral Cinema, and New Screen Histories in Canada*, ed. by Zoë Druick and Gerda Cammaer (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014) 289.

⁵⁴ Diane Waldman and Janet Walker. *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 21.

⁵⁵ Hilderbrand, “Sex Out of Sync,” 53.

⁵⁶ John David Rhodes, "This Was Not Cinema: Judgment, Action, and Barbara Hammer," *Film Criticism* 39, no.1(2015): 115.

⁵⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010) 262.

⁵⁸ Kelly Dennis, *Art/porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* (Oxford: Berg, 2009) 3.

⁵⁹ Rhodes, "This Was Not Cinema," 120.

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Filmography

Barbara Hammer, *Nitrate Kisses*, directed by Barbara Hammer (1990; New York City, USA: 1992), film (DVD).

Lot in Sodom, directed by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber (1993; USA: 1993), film.

Mädchen in Uniform, directed by Leontine Sagan (1931; Germany: 1931), film

The Children's Hour, directed by William Wyler (1961; USA: 1961), film.

Rebecca, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1940; USA: 1940), film.

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