

## **Review: Rob King, *Man of Taste: The Erotic Cinema of Radley Metzger***

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***Man of Taste: The Erotic Cinema of Radley Metzger***

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By Rob King

Columbia University Press, 2025

Reviewed by Zoe Rogan

Radley Metzger's film career has typically been sectioned off into his softcore cinema under his own name and the hardcore pornography he made under the pseudonym Henry Paris. In his study of Metzger's work, Rob King untangles the dichotomy between the two, present not only in Metzger's own career but also in past scholarship on the erotic versus the pornographic. How and why do sexually themed films get slotted into the discrete categories of erotic and pornographic? Why is value assigned to one over the other? Where do assumptions of taste fit into these hierarchical categories? As the title appropriately suggests, *Man of Taste* questions taste: when does the erotic become pornographic and the tasteful become tasteless? Looking at how Metzger's career was in the past divided between hardcore and softcore and how that still figures into the present with festival retrospectives and fans looking to reclaim his work, King provides a fruitful argument against these divisions and how the notion of taste is harmful to analysis of pornography.

Radley Metzger's work has received recent reappraisal, including boutique remastered DVD releases of *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976), *Score* (1973), and *Camille 2000* (1969), and retrospectives showcasing both his hardcore and softcore work, though rarely together. This critical reappraisal and legitimation of his career as artistically valuable is, as King acknowledges, also the environment his own book is coming out of, but he attempts to complicate and interrogate this rehabilitation of Metzger's career as a serious artist, making his book far more nuanced than usual fare surrounding Metzger's critical renaissance.

In *Man of Taste*, King traces Metzger's career from its beginnings cutting trailers in the 1950s to establishing Audubon Films, producing softcore sexploitation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Audubon also produced the Henry Paris hardcore hits, though through production companies under different names. King also adequately defines his terms, enhancing readability for those new to Metzger and the debates of pornography studies. He cites both seminal pornography scholars, such as Constance Penley, Steven Marcus and Linda Williams, and current scholars like Elena Gorfinkel and Whitney Strub.

King convincingly argues for the abandoning of the dichotomy between Metzger and Paris in current analysis of Metzger's body of work in the section on *The Image* (1975), Metzger's adaptation of Catherine Robbe-Grillet's pseudonymous classic BDSM novel. *The Image* is a notable exception to Metzger's mid-70s work as it was not released under the Henry Paris moniker but instead under his real name. King accomplishes the dual tasks of interrogating Metzger's use of the pseudonym and destabilising the dichotomy between hardcore and softcore. King uses Gerard Genette's concept of "dionymity" that comes out of the inextricable nature of the real name ("patronym") and the pseudonym: "the underlying idea is that the multiple pseudonym is to some small degree...the true nature of the single pseudonym and the state it naturally inclines toward." [1] *The Image* is under Radley Metzger's real name, but is adapted from a pseudonymous book, itself an example of dionymity that reveals the sexual interests of the author even as she remained anonymous. Metzger's adaptation occupies a space between hardcore and softcore (having scenes of unsimulated oral sex and urination) and is sandwiched between all of his most important hardcore work under the Paris name. King is right to highlight the film's in-betweenness: it is in between hardcore and softcore, in between Metzger and Paris, and in between pseudonym and patronym. King delves "into the enigma of Metzger's orthonymity in *The Image*" (137)

and demonstrates that it not only serves as the perfect destabiliser of the hardcore/softcore divide but also reveals the dionym: the combined artist of Metzger and Paris.

Less convincing is when King addresses the later hardcore films of Metzger and his representations of women in the chapter on the pornotopia. King claims, based on a threesome scene in *Barbara Broadcast* (1977) featuring two women and one man, that Metzger decentres masculinity because the women's pleasure is the focal point of the scene, unlike typical straight hardcore scenes of the era. King is not necessarily alone in his assessment. Feminist auteur filmmaker Anna Biller describes Metzger's softcore films as "a world that paid attention to the female as a beautiful self-willed being, that was about her fantasies more than the men's fantasies." [2] King does mention, albeit briefly, Metzger's misogyny in his personal life and critiques how the threesome scene is directly followed by a scene where actress Constance Money was violated on screen by costar Jamie Gillis. An acknowledgement feels inadequate, especially because, when crediting Metzger for centring female pleasure, King does not rebut the potential counter argument that the women of Metzger's films are centred for the pleasure of a presumed male audience. Perhaps a further interrogation of the place of gender in Metzger's films or even a more tempered approach to Metzger's portrayal of female desire, more akin to Biller, who notes that in Metzger's films the women are "equally a sex object to be gazed at, and a narcissistic object of identification" [3], would have made this section stronger.

The book also falters in its scope and focus. King certainly has an ambitious project here, and while each chapter is intriguing and engaging in its own right, they cover a wide breadth, from ontology to dionymity and pornotopia, along with Metzger's auteurism, the constructed

concept of good and bad taste, and the hardcore/softcore divide. In trying to cover so many different angles of Metzger's career, King is unable to go further in depth on the book's ultimate thesis on dismantling reductive concepts of taste and the erotic/pornographic divide. The final chapter, on the ending of Metzger's career and his critical reappraisal before his death in 2017, is significantly shorter than the previous chapters and engages far less with the historical context Metzger was working in. Perhaps this is because Metzger was far less successful in the 1990s compared to the late 1960s and 1970s, but it renders the book somewhat uneven.

Though the book is overly ambitious in its aims, *Man of Taste* is still a welcome addition to pornographic studies, focusing on a director whose work has been touted as some of the most "tasteful" in the golden age of pornography, but has been overlooked by scholars. In questioning the concept of taste and dismantling the dichotomies of Metzger's hardcore and softcore work, King adds more to the discourse beyond a simple history of Metzger, making way for further dialogue to work outside of the tasteful/tasteless binary.

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## Notes

[1] Gerard Genette, "The Name of the Author," in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51.

[2] Elena Gorfinkel, "Unlikely Genres: An Interview with Anna Biller," *Camera Obscura* 26, (no. 3) (2011): 138.

[3] Ibid, 137.