

Private Dining Room
Quaint
Have Dealer, Quaint
Retiring of the Bride, Quaint
Pinho Kiss, Quaint
The Tub Scene, Quaint
The Harem's Favorite, Quaint
First in Time, Quaint

RUSSELL SHEAFFER

SMUT &

SANDWICHES



The Stud Farm. Nos. 1, 2, 3, 60 feet.
50 feet and 60 feet respectively.
Quaint
The Stud Farm. Nos. 1, 2, 3, 60 feet.
50 feet and 60 feet respectively. These
pictures especially Nos. 1 and 2, will
not permit a comparison to there are
stories for a full-length picture a
man here and there and is undoubtedly
in a beautiful style
Stud Pony, Quaint, 28 feet.

A HISTORY *of* STAG FILM

75 feet.
65 feet.
125 feet.
65 feet.
55 feet.
60 feet.
65 feet.

SMUT
SANDWICHES &

BUY

SMUT SANDWICHES &

A HISTORY *of* STAG FILM ||| Russell Sheaffer

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Duke University Press Durham and London 2027

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Ihsan Taylor

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Typeset in Portrait, Sweet Gothic, and Bodoni by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sheaffer, Russell author

Title: Smut and sandwiches : a history of stag film / Russell Sheaffer.

Other titles: History of stag film

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2027. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026025700 (print)

LCCN 2026025701 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478039525 paperback

ISBN 9781478034582 hardcover

ISBN 9781478063148 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Pornographic films—History and criticism | Erotic films—History and criticism | Sex in motion pictures

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.S45 S5285 2027 (print) |

LCC PN1995.9.S45 (ebook) | DDC 791.43/6538—dc23/eng/20260904

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026025700>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026025701>

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Cover art: Detail of advertisement for *The Woman and the Beast* (1917); listing of “club films,” Lubin Manufacturing Company catalog, 1903. Texture and background courtesy Adobe Stock/Matthieu Tuffet and svetolk.

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
INTRODUCTION: Are You an Elk?	I
Moving Pictures and the History of the “Smoking Concert”	
1 Mapping a Malleable Term: The Shifting Language of “Stag Film”	17
2 Orgies, Beer, and Sandwiches: The Case of the Kensington “Stag”	31
INTERLUDE: On “Useful Cinema”	57
3 From Selling Smut to Regulating Vice: Vigilance Reform and the Business of “Stag Film”	61
4 Archiving “Stag” and Researching Sex: Individual Donors and the Legacy of the Kinsey Institute	83
5 Films for Education and Pleasure: <i>Playboy’s</i> “History of Sex in Cinema”	101
CODA: Frontiers of Sexuality and the Archive	113
Acknowledgments	121
Notes	125
Bibliography	145
Index	151

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PREFACE

Sitting in a dark theater at the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2010, I saw my first stag film. I was enrolled in Dan Streible's Curating seminar at New York University, where graduate students acted as cocurators for the seventh Orphan Film Symposium. The biennial event focuses on a bountiful range of neglected content, from DIY animated films to works that have fallen out of copyright, but my interest was particularly piqued by an altogether different kind of movie: a ten-minute, single-reel, sexually explicit, 16 mm film called *The Janitor*, from the Kinsey Institute's Historical Stag Collection.

While I could not have predicted it at the time, two specific facets of that screening were particularly formative for this book. The film and its history fascinated me, of course; *The Janitor* is a short, sexually explicit, text-heavy, black-and-white film from the 1920s that follows the story of a woman who welcomes the building janitor into her room. With thirty-three picture-based shots and thirty-one intertitles in roughly ten minutes, *The Janitor* boasts nearly as many cards featuring text as shots of its characters. Cards that read everything from "THE FURTHER UP YOU GO THE BETTER THE SCENERY" to "GO EASY DON'T HURT ME" to "ALL RIGHT" seemed to oscillate somewhere between a lewd joke and a nearly counterintuitive use of text. I was especially intrigued, though, by the reaction of the crowd at Orphans. Although the room was full of historiographical luminaries, experts in a range of neglected and understudied media, this collection of scholars, archivists, and artists were obviously struggling with how to interpret these early hard-core images.

With *The Janitor* lingering in my mind, I arranged a weeklong research trip to the Kinsey Institute at the end of my master's coursework at NYU. Because the Kinsey Institute has one of the largest collections of these films with a publicly searchable catalog, I hoped that I might be able to put *The Janitor* in con-

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text. In that week, I watched every film in the Kinsey Institute's collection that the institute understood to have been produced through 1939. While watching these films, I saw an incredible range of subject matter, of filmmakers repurposing material, of title card use, and—of course—of sex. As a collection, these films seemed to speak to the breadth of the “stag film.”

My next research stop was the Chicago Film Archives, where I spent two days with the Stephen Waters Collection, then described as a “collection of thirty-four 16mm ‘stag’ films.”¹ It was here that I hit my first roadblock: While these “stag films” contained bodies on display—films of dance, burlesque, and underwater performance—none of these films included or hinted at hard-core content. Wasn't that the baseline of what a “stag film” was? At that time, I chalked up the collection as an anomaly. Writing now, though, it is clear that my time at the Chicago Film Archives signaled a shift in my thinking about “stag.” The more I researched, the less clear the bounds of “stag” became. Ultimately, my time in our collective archives prompted myriad questions I didn't expect about language, about archives, about how we come to define the bounds of genres, and about why and how we tend to segment off sex from all the other interconnected parts of our lives.

As a queer kid growing up in the 1990s, my peers seemed to know something about me that I didn't yet know about myself. My difference, in most cases, became vocalized in my classmates' application of the term *gay*—a word in their mouths meant to demean. Truly not understanding the intended implications as a nine-year-old, I found myself—as I am sure so many other young queer kids have—nose-deep in a series of dictionaries and encyclopedias. Using overachieving as a shield, my fourth-grade self wrote an etymological presentation on the word. Certain pieces of language clearly held secrets and power over me, and I wanted to wrestle with them until I felt safe again. As I finish this book, more confident in my own body now than I was then, embracing the in-between I have always felt instead of being shamed for it, I am struck by the similarity in my approach. At its core, this book comes from a place of confusion, of not being able to see the way others have seen, of taking power over language and understanding the very real-world implications of it by diving headfirst into the minutiae.

I am particularly conscious of the fact that I am writing at a historical moment in which pseudofascist regimes have been actively working to patrol the boundaries of language—and especially the languages of gender, sexuality, and history. In our current contentious time, the “stag film” provides a historical model by which to examine the way that linguistic shifts impact the conceptual bounds of a referent over the course of a century. Whenever we find our-

selves at a cultural moment in which the powers that be seek to wed certain bodies (trans, queer, refugee, immigrant, or otherwise) to abjection, that language deserves closer examination. Etymology can be a radical tool against authoritarianism. As Ludwig Wittgenstein knew, “What belongs to a language game is a whole culture” and, I would add, the very safety of our skin.² I hope that this text provides us with a new portal by which to understand the culture in which we find ourselves.

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INTRODUCTION

*Are You an Elk? Moving Pictures and
the History of the “Smoking Concert”*

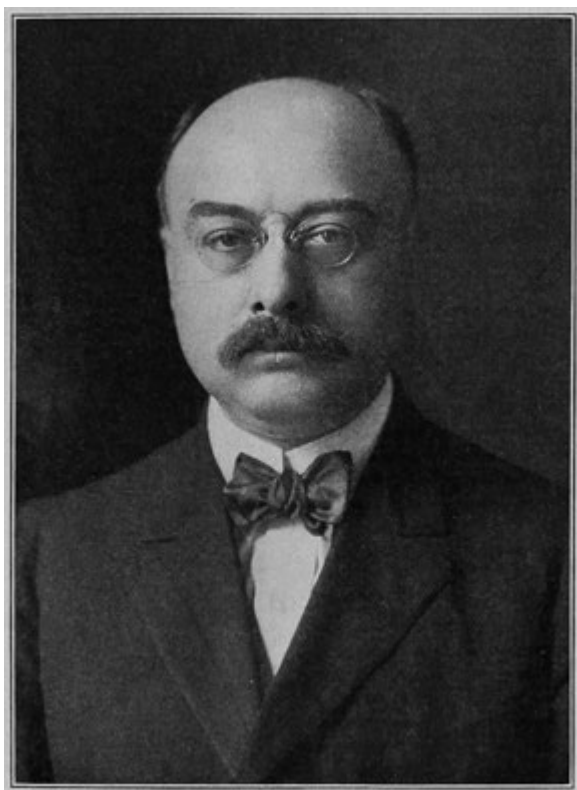
With his wife and young daughter “sojourning in Southern California” for weeks in 1911, George Kleine found himself desperately in need of a break from “the monotonous solitude” of his Chicago homelife. Hoping to cure his loneliness, Kleine invited fifteen of his closest friends to a Saturday afternoon “stag fest” at his Hampden Court residence. The guest list was a who’s who of early cinema pioneers, including William Selig (owner of the Selig Polyscope Company, one of the first movie production companies ever established), Robert Lieber (owner of the Circle Theatre in Indianapolis, which is now home to the symphony orchestra), Jack Hardin (of the Thomas Edison Company), K. W. Linn (of the European film distributor Pathé Frères), and film critic James S. McQuade (who documented the evening’s festivities for the weekly *Film Index*).¹

The son of an optician, Kleine had grown up in New York City before moving to Chicago in 1893 to continue in the family tradition. Within three years, Kleine had pivoted toward a new kind of optical technology—moving pictures—and his business blossomed. He gained quick renown as a movie distributor, first working with Thomas Edison before beginning to import pres-

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FIGURE I.1. George
Kleine's portrait
as published in
Motography on
February 10, 1917.



tigious European films to the United States for distribution in the Midwest and Northeast. At the time Kleine began his career in the movies, Chicago was still a very young city. The population had grown exponentially in the nineteenth century, from only 200 in 1832 to 503,185 in 1880 and 1.7 million in 1900.² It was in this boom that Kleine—like so many prospectors in burgeoning entertainment industries—was making his fortune.

Kleine may have started his “stag fest” looking for “gentle” comfort among colleagues, but things devolved quickly. First up that evening was the “great American game of the West”: a badger fight. The group descended into the basement, where Selig’s “bull pup ‘Jerry’” was set to battle a captive badger housed in a steel-wire cage. Gathered around the two animals, the men counted to three and then ripped open the badger’s cage. To everyone’s surprise, the fight referee’s “muscular” right arm “gave a mighty jerk that brought the animal clear across the floor space, causing it to strike its head with a crush-

ing force against heavy deal boards.” The crowd erupted in celebration while the tail was cut from the kill—the evening’s “trophy.”

Kleine then escorted the group to his attic, where a makeshift moving picture theater offered “a treat . . . in the exhibition of pictures, the films of which had been made when reels were only 80 to 100 feet in length.” These films were meant “to show the great advancement made in the production and technique of the films of to-day,” which—at this “stag”—featured “‘beauts’ in more respects than one.” As the group descended once more to the main floor of Kleine’s home, the night continued with ribald “high jinks” over dinner. The men ate and drank “in close communion for several hours” before finally singing “Jolly Good Fellow” as the first guest of the evening headed home to Indianapolis.³

An early motion picture trailblazer who often imported films from the French company Pathé, Kleine may well have been importing more than just prestigious fare. Alongside its films with high cultural value, Pathé’s 1903 sales catalog also lists “Films for Smoking Concerts,” with titles including *Eastern Slave Market*, *The Bride’s First Night*, *The Tub*, and a *Birth of Venus* reel. Were these the “beauts” these men gathered to witness? While very few listings in the catalog feature more detail than a film’s title and length, these attributes encouraged the mail-order customer to expect titillation. The Pennsylvania-based Lubin Manufacturing Company’s own 1903 catalog takes this one step further by advertising its films with nearly identical titles as “very spicy.”

The link between films known as “stag films” and “spicy” content is certainly in accord with the way the term *stag film* has been employed since at least the 1940s: to describe early, primitive, hard-core films screened by groups of men. Received wisdom often assumes an ontological link between the “stag film” and the sexually explicit, as well as the centrality of films themselves to the screening event. This book, however, argues that the etymological evolution of the term *stag film* unsettles these two central assumptions about what a “stag film” was.⁴ Like many descriptions of such events in early twentieth-century periodicals, McQuade’s description of Kleine’s stag—even when penned for a film magazine—only mentions the presence of movies briefly. The films were not the draw in this case; far more energy is spent describing the grotesque violence of the badger fight and the experience of communion between men, leaving the film screening itself as a mere blip on the evening’s program. When one of the attendees (Jack Hardin) died seven years later, James McQuade once again wrote about Kleine’s 1911 stag, remembering it not for the films but for Hardin’s “gifts as a mirth-raiser at the famous stag dinner.”⁵ Mc-

Scenes for Smoking Concerts				
Code-Word	No.	TITLES OF THE SUBJECTS	FEET	£ s. d.
<i>Allah</i>	361	The bride's first night	80	2 0 0
<i>Corveau</i>	575	The Ladies Tailor	65	1 12 6
<i>Cendre</i>	508	The Bride's Awakening	50	1 5 0
<i>Gabon</i>	801	Chrysis' Awakening Chrysis awakes in an atmosphere of oriental perfumes, and as she rises languidly from her couch, a negress attends respectfully to her wants.	65	1 12 6
<i>Galant</i>	802	Birth of Venus	50	1 5 0
<i>Gant</i>	803	The judgment of Phryne	65	1 12 6
<i>Garde</i>	804	Eastern slave Market A crowd of young white girls are standing in an oasis in the desert before the critical gaze of some slave dealers, waiting to be bought. As the purcha- sers arrive, the slaves pass before them to be accep- ted or refused, when the sale is over the dealers exchange the usual salutations.	65	1 12 6
<i>Gené</i>	808	Caught in the act (Reproduction of the famous painting by Garnier.)	50	1 5 0
<i>Genie</i>	809	The prostitute's bath	65	1 12 6

FIGURE 1.2. Pathé Frères advertises “Scenes for Smoking Concerts” in a catalog from 1903.

Quade’s descriptions of the night wed a range of pleasures in ways that makes teasing them apart both impossible and misguided.

We might ask: Aren’t covert notes like those about “beauts” enough for us to infer that something explicit was shown on the screen? Many histories of “stag film” have made this inference, but at the risk of sounding pedantic and gullible, I would argue that, no, this is not enough evidence to assume pornog-

CLUB FILMS.			
Disrobing Scene, <i>Query.</i>	60 feet.	Two Warm Girls, <i>Quern.</i>	65 feet.
Good Reason for Divorce, <i>Quack.</i>	50 feet.	Home From His Club, <i>Quest.</i>	75 feet.
Birth of Venus, <i>Quacker.</i>	50 feet.	Space does not permit a description of these subjects. Suffice it to say that they will be star attractions at any stag show. Very spicy.	
In the Wrong Room, <i>Quadrant.</i>	75 feet.		
Private Dining Room, <i>Quadrat.</i>	75 feet.	The Stud Farm. Nos. 1, 2, 3, 60 feet, 50 feet and 60 feet respectively. <i>Quay. Queen. Queer.</i>	
Slave Dealer, <i>Quack.</i>	65 feet.		
Retiring of the Bride, <i>Quaff.</i>	125 feet.	The Stud Farm, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 60 feet, 50 feet and 50 feet respectively. These pictures, especially Nos. 1 and 3, will not permit a description as they are merely for club shows. No. 2 shows a mare feeding her colt, and is undoubtedly a beautiful subject.	
Sapho Kiss, <i>Quail.</i>	65 feet.		
The Tub Scene, <i>Quaint.</i>	55 feet.		
The Harem's Favorite, <i>Quart.</i>	60 feet.		
Just in Time, <i>Quash.</i>	65 feet.	Stud Pony, <i>Quick.</i>	28 feet.

FIGURE 1.3. The Lubin Manufacturing Company advertises “Club Films” in a catalog from 1903.

raphy was present. Much of the rhetoric around and advertising for “stag films” in the first decades of the twentieth century highlighted the pleasures to be had at a stag and hinted at the titillation that the films would provide, but pleasure and titillation do not necessarily equate to hard-core content. Furthermore, an assumption about what these events *probably* screened was exactly the fodder for conservative vice reformers in the 1920s, activists who perceived “stag films” to be contributing to the “social ills” of white middle- and upper-class men who made up the audience at parties like Kleine’s. While McQuade’s fleeting description of the “beauts” on screen may be callous, it is far from evidence of the pornographic. To collapse the two is to continue to work in the legacy of 1920s vice reform; focusing on the sex we assume was on-screen at these events has led us toward a unilateral memory of what these events were. Rather than being the main draw for these events, stag films were often one component of a much larger feast of amusements, with context far outweighing the wide variety of cinematic content they employed. These were complex tableaux that blended digestive, social, and visual pleasures, often under the guise of providing a break from domestic malaise.

As I argue throughout this book, because of the peripheral nature of the “films” to the “stags,” the term *stag film* described an incredibly wide range of moving pictures in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was not until vice reformers began making a business of advocating against “obscene” material in the 1920s that clear generic lines began to form around a previously amorphous cinematic formation. As the twentieth century progressed and *stag film* became increasingly associated with obscenity and vice, assumptions about the race and class of those who made, distributed, and consumed those films also shifted, more clearly implicating lower-class people and people of color. By the time the term was employed by scholars and historians in the late 1960s, we had a unilateral memory of a genre that began to take shape only in the wake of vigilance organizations’ cries for regulation in previous decades. The history of the “stag film,” then, is the story of an ironic transformation in which the “obscene” films that conservative activists purported to be combating became the only facet of these events that was remembered. The discursive history of that transformation is the story of this book.

Highbrow Drag: Importing the “Smoking Concert”

To begin to re-center the event of the stag, we have to go back to the European concept of the “smoking concert,” a Victorian-era event from which the idea of the American “stag” emerged. Translating the French version of Pathé’s early twentieth-century film catalogs and comparing them to the extant English versions, Valentine Robert notes that

in the [French] Pathé Catalogue, the [*Birth of Venus*] film appears in a series called *scènes grivoises d’un caractère piquant*, literally meaning “saucy scenes with a hot quality.” In addition to this title, a warning advises exhibitors to “exclude children from the exhibition of these pictures.” . . . The detailed descriptions of these films then systematically refer to undressed bodies: “barely dressed”; “half dressed”; “dressed with a negligee”; “undressed”; “unclothed”; or “entirely naked.” . . . It is somewhat different in English. The series title is simply translated as “Scenes for Smoking Concerts” in the London catalog. It could seem chaster than the “hot” and “saucy” original title, but “Smoking Concert” implies explicit conditions of reception: for men only.⁶

Predating the invention of cinema, smoking concerts (often referred to simply as “smokers”) became popular in Europe during the Victorian era, where men would gather in large single-sex groups to smoke, drink, and engage in com-

munal merriment. Because the social mores of the time made women's smoking unacceptable, the name *smoking concerts* functioned as shorthand, allowing men to gather in gender-segregated groups without having to explicitly name them as such. By the late 1880s, one of the primary locations of such events was on university campuses, where "young men could relax and enjoy an evening of light entertainment while having a chance to smoke their pipe or cigarettes over a glass of something with their friends."⁷

At the University of Oxford, both the Lincoln College and the Brasenose College archivists have written about their institutions' histories of hosting smoking concerts. In the 1890s, printed programs for smoking concerts hosted at Lincoln College framed the night's entertainment as highbrow, composed entirely of vocal, piano, and orchestral musical performances. While music also dominated the smoking concerts at Brasenose College, accounts of those events prove that they were far from respectable. Remembering his experience at Oxford as both a student and, later, a dean, G. B. Grundy found these events downright vulgar. While "the title [smoking concert] suggests innocent amusement," Grundy explains in his autobiography, "these concerts meant great disorder in colleges. . . . At the first concert at [Brasenose College] the star performer was a Christ Church man who did nigger business and was notorious for the introduction of risky elements into his patter. . . . At the concert next year . . . the star performer on that occasion was Paul Rubens of University College, later well known in light comedy in London. He sang a song with the refrain, 'She was fat; she was fat, she was awful, awful fat.'"⁸ The concerts' reliance on comedy and sketch entertainment that Grundy describes is reflected in the Lincoln College archive as well. "By March 1912," explains that college's archivist, "these events in College seem to have taken a bawdier tone."⁹ "Bawdy," in this case, stands in for a litany of offenses—shocking racism and misogyny most obviously—under the guise of "comedy."

While a few Black students were admitted to Oxford starting in the 1870s, the first woman did not graduate from that institution until 1920.¹⁰ Without female students on campus, Grundy also remembers (in trans- and homophobic horror) the "fancy-dress dances where . . . men dressed up in women's costumes."¹¹ While these cross-dressing dances were quickly squashed by the administration, the smoking concerts were allowed to continue—albeit with increasing hostility between the student organizers and administrators—until they ceased in the shadow of World War II.¹² By creating an explicitly homosocial environment on campus at their smokers, these men were able to actively craft a version of their surroundings that differed from their lived reality off campus. This fantasy of a homosocial reality, punctuated by the same-sex

dances and smokers, allowed men to imagine a world for themselves that embraced the sartorial accoutrements of gender difference while simultaneously reveling in apparent gender segregation.

Having moved from London to New York, comedic entertainer Charles Algernon Sidney Vivian helped import the English tradition of the smoking concert to the United States at about the same time that Oxford was hosting its own. Originally calling themselves the “Jolly Corks,” Vivian and a group of men in the entertainment industry developed ways of circumventing the “blue laws” of the nineteenth century, which required bars to close on Sundays, by partaking in a “stock of beer laid in the night before.”¹³ After one of the founders of the Corks died, leaving a wife and child behind, the group formalized themselves as the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, an organization whose “social activities and benefit performances” could keep the celebration alive in the name of fundraising for women and children.¹⁴

While the Elks’ own institutional history celebrates the image of the elk as “a peaceful animal” that “will rise in defense of its own in the face of a threat,” the public face of the Elks was anything but “noble.” A history of Lodge 1895 written by its members from Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, describes the initiation routine for new members: “Early candidates found that a physician’s certificate of examination was necessary as a part of the joining process, and the male prospect had to be in top condition to even be considered. Then, once the candidate had met that criteria and was in the Lodge room, he was blindfolded, and instead of dimmed lights and beautiful words, he was subjected to much horseplay.” The Elks ritual book, *Lodge 1895* explains, highlights the “trickery” to be played on new recruits, “with members agreeing with the Exalted Ruler’s declaration that the candidates be ‘shaved.’ Once this decision was made, a ‘City Barber’ appeared to the blindfolded candidates whereupon, with a dull file simulating a straight razor, he literally scraped the faces of the men to ‘shave’ them.” The ritual book then goes on to explain “a few other jokes . . . such as ‘walking on broken glass,’ actually egg shells, and it even mentioned how to end the ‘horseplay’ session with real guns, loaded with blanks, being fired off behind the now-weary and very confused new members.”¹⁵ While “horseplay” seems like an insincere framing of the very real psychic damage described in these initiations, the fraternal lodge purported to provide men saddled by domestic commitments with an escape from social and personal responsibility. G. B. Grundy’s history of Oxford and the Elks’ own institutional history paint an image of an event sometimes called a “stag night” and other times a “smoker” or “smoking concert,” in which men came together in pursuit of rowdy communion.



FIGURE 1.4. Postcards for the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (popularly known as the “Elks lodge”) in the 1910s often featured images of grotesquely drunk men.

As its public reputation grew, the space of the lodge remained a site of mystery for women, who were barred from joining the Elks.¹⁶ While some women decried the “immorality” of fraternal organizations, others advocated for the virtues of these same organizations. These virtues, of course, were not the funds raised for widows and orphans but the advantages of a husband who avoids the “monotonous existence” of the home. For these outspoken pundits, an approach to marital relationships that encouraged men to blow off steam with other men provided its own advantages. In one such op-ed from 1917, Laura Jean Libbey writes that men who “work hard during the day . . . should have the relaxation and pleasure” of attending the fraternal club “at least two evenings a week.” “Instead of bitterly assailing him for the time he spends at his club,” writes Libbey, “a wise wife will encourage her husband to keep up his association with his fellow-men as a diversion.”¹⁷

Within a decade of the invention of moving pictures, Pathé’s advertisements for “Films for Smoking Concerts” were speaking to exactly this demographic: men gathered on a night off from the domestic realm in bawdy bliss. While Oxford’s early twentieth-century “smoking concerts” never appear to have included moving pictures, popular images of alcohol and cigars quickly met with reports of live vaudeville performances and titillating moving pic-

tures at American Elks lodges. As membership boomed, the Elks and other similar fraternal lodges were often reported to have held smoking concerts in ornate venues nestled inside the lodge itself.

But Pathé's short, single-reel films weren't the only moving pictures featured at smokers in the first decades of the twentieth century. Much like Oxford, Harvard University also held similar smokers on its Massachusetts campus. The student newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, ran at least forty-eight announcements for "smokers" thrown between 1913 and 1936. At these events, movies played an increasingly major role, often programmed alongside orchestral or vocal musical performances before they replaced those entertainments entirely.¹⁸ Although smokers at Elks lodges were often reported to include moving pictures, they remained shrouded in mystery, and film titles were never published. This was not the case at Harvard, one of the only locations to have published its film programs publicly.¹⁹

The first such announcement at Harvard was published on May 19, 1915, when three Charlie Chaplin films served as the draw for the sophomore class's last smoker of the year. When courses resumed after the summer break that year, the appearance of moving pictures at these events dramatically increased. The first sophomore smoker of the fall semester included the Boston premieres of Lois Weber's feature film *Hypocrites* (1915) and Charlie Chaplin's short film *A Woman* (1915).²⁰ In subsequent articles, the *Crimson* continuously advertised mainstream cinematic fare as the entertainment for these events, with frequent screenings of Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mack Sennett films.²¹

There is no evidence that these film titles were a cover for something more salacious. However, more often than not, the films chosen for these events fell into cinematic categories that film scholar Linda Williams has described as working to "both portray and affect the sensational body." For Williams, "body genres" include horror, melodrama, and pornography—particularly "low" cultural forms that Harvard's smokers avoided—alongside thrillers, musicals, and comedies, which are not necessarily considered "gross" in the same way.²² Each of these genres, as Williams explains, is designed to provide an excess of affect. It is this intended affective overflow that bridged the short reels sold by Pathé and the feature films programmed at Harvard's smokers.

While thousands of newspaper articles featured stories of "stags" and "smokers" at white fraternal halls and universities, the same proliferation did not occur with regard to events held by the Prince Hall Freemasons or other fraternal groups of color. Instead, when these groups were covered in the white press at all during this period, it was often to highlight disagreements between com-

peting orders of Black masons. This is not to say that these groups were not engaged in similar activities, but the ability to celebrate the rowdy form of community a smoker or stag entailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was—at least according to mainstream newspaper—a white privilege.

By 1924, one year after men of color were allowed to begin living in on-campus dorms at Harvard (albeit racially segregated ones), references to movies at the university's smokers began to dwindle in the face of Prohibition and vice concerns. By 1926, movie screenings were becoming less frequent at these events. Between 1927 and 1936, when films were shown at all, they were most often of Harvard football matches. Not inconsequently, the last advertisement for a male-only smoker at Harvard was published in 1936, the same year the first female student was admitted to the university's prestigious medical school. This trajectory, as we will see throughout this book, is representative of the larger-scale shifts in "stag film" in the United States.

What's in an Archive? Destabilizing a History of "Stag" Scholarship

While George Kleine's "stag fest," Oxford's and Harvard's "smoking concerts," and the Elks lodge "smokers" suggest that early twentieth-century stag films were moving images that were intended to be exhibited as a part of gender-segregated events for men only, film studies scholars of the last three decades have taken this relatively broad framework for what might constitute a "stag film" and have built on it via two central assumptions: (1) that in describing the salacious and titillating films screened at these events—and the arousal those films caused—individuals implied that these films featured images of un-simulated sex acts, that is, pornography; and (2) that "stag films" are thereby situated temporally in a chronological trajectory that leads to the hard-core feature film, having been produced and distributed in the early to mid-twentieth century, before the theatrical porn boom of the 1970s. In scholarly histories, "stag films" have thus been defined as early, primitive pornographic films and as films that contain "an explicit sexual narrative, produced and distributed, usually commercially, to clandestine nontheatrical male audiences," in spaces like brothels or smokers, "between 1908 and 1970, principally in Europe and the Americas."²³ These assumptions about what a "stag film" was are directly rooted in the first published history of "stag film": part 17 of Arthur Knight and Hollis Alpert's "History of Sex in Cinema" series for *Playboy* in 1967.

While scholars and enthusiasts have generally agreed on what a "stag film" is for the last sixty years, many have also written about the woes of research-

ing the genre. As exploitation film scholar Jack Stevenson explains, “Film historians . . . are . . . hobbled by the almost total lack of accurate documentation available and are forced to bloat their texts with speculation and plot synopsis of films that have no plots.”²⁴ It is worth noting, though, that many of the films described in this book’s first pages are, in fact, preserved in archives with robust documentation. For example, the UCLA Film and Television Archive alone houses four 16 mm prints of Charlie Chaplin’s *A Woman*, with additional 16 mm prints of the same film housed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Harvard Film Archive, and the New York Public Library, although it is not labeled as a “stag film” in any of those archives.²⁵ The problem here is that these works have been separated from the history of “stag films,” despite evidence that they were screened at stags, because they do not fit within our previously preconceived notions of what that cinematic formation contains.

Although Stevenson’s note voices frustration both at a lack of documentation and the scholarly responses to that lack, I do believe that many scholars of early twentieth-century American stag films have used the methodological approach of close reading to meaningful ends in their own texts. To my mind, this way of approaching these films has allowed film scholars including Linda Williams, Thomas Waugh, Constance Penley, and Dan Erdman to historicize and analyze the proposed genre of “stag film” as it pertains to larger histories of pornography, representation, and desire. These projects have proved to be both productive and insightful, shifting our understanding of sex in cinema but at the expense of understanding that lineage to include a wider gamut of moving images. When we understand the same term to have referenced hardcore films alongside boxing films (as I describe in this book’s first chapter), films about runaway horses (as I describe in chapter 2), and films by icons like Charlie Chaplin (as were screened at Harvard’s smokers), we’re forced to grapple with the way that sex intermingled with nearly all other forms of early cinema.

To rework our historiographic tool kit for “stag film,” I employ a methodological approach in this book that film scholar Richard Dyer once disapprovingly described to me as “film studies without films.” This methodology asks us what we can learn about our objects of study from the contextual information beyond the object itself. It is just as invested, if not more so, in the historical material that collects around our objects of study as it is in the objects themselves; it loves ephemera and rolls around in detritus; it understands an object of study and the language we use to describe it as—above all else—messy. This is especially the case when our subjects are so veiled by the discursive ambiguity that was central to the puritan logic of early twentieth-century vice reform movements.

I have always interpreted Dyer's quip as a kind of historiographical chide, but I do find this idea of "film studies without films" particularly attractive and useful when questioning some of our core assumptions about moving images. If one of the fundamental issues in thinking about stag films is that we constantly find ourselves circling back to the sexually explicit images we assume they contain, perhaps moving away from images and toward a discursive history will help us broaden our scope. If a part of the challenge has been avoiding generalizations that accompany the sensational nature of sex on film, I suggest that we spend time focusing on the archival minutiae. Forcing myself to break with these engrained methodological pathways, I have made a conscious decision not to close-read a single film in this book.²⁶

While this move away from the images themselves is a methodological break from most prior studies of stag film, and while I do believe that scholarly definitions have been problematically monolithic, I do not believe that prior understandings and definitions of *stag film* are particularly incorrect. Frankly, I do not believe that there is one single correct definition to offer. Prior notions may be emblematic of a specific kind of stag film, but they are not encyclopedic. Much of the challenge in understanding the bounds of the term has been an archival one rooted in ahistorical use.

Discussing the importance of the Archive for historians, Carolyn Steedman notes that writing history is "an odd way of being in the world, and a type of activity that has given rise to a particular form of writing, whose practitioners believe to be about what *is not* as much as what has been found; a form of writing which celebrates the constraints on it, constraints which—so it is said—are made by the documents themselves: what they forbid you to write, the permission they offer."²⁷ In terms of "stag film," when documents are not accessible, when they are not a part of the archives to which one has access, then certain avenues of historical work are reasonably foreclosed. When production records have *not* been accessible, when written documents have appeared to be nonexistent, and when primary documents that employ the term only further muddle our ability to clearly map its conceptual bounds, then the kind of history that the Archive has given us "permission" to write is understandably linked to the films to which historians have had access—namely, the Historical Stag Collection of the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, which has one of the only publicly advertised collections of "stag films" (all of which are sexually explicit).

Positioning the "stag film" as a cinematic formation deeply engaged with questions of taste, propriety, and morality, this book provides a history that follows the trajectory of the term itself. I have striven to allow the written word—and Archives of it—to help illuminate the cluster of meanings that are

decipherable only when we read from and listen to those who used the term in specific case studies at distinct, culturally charged moments. To that end, this book breaks with prior histories of stag film in that I do not understand the history of “stag film” to be the history of pornography. While these terms are certainly bound up together by the mid-twentieth century and while some stag films were certainly sexually explicit in cinema’s early years, understanding the history of one to lead toward or to have been engulfed by the other is a problematic teleological narrative and antithetical starting point. Instead, the language of “stag” provides a portal by which to examine the way that concerns about morality, propriety, and taste end up completely reframing the way we conceptualize a given genre over time.

Structure and Methodology

The shifting definitions of *stag film* that occur over the course of this book are positioned in ways that are simultaneously synchronic and diachronic. This book, therefore, argues for *both* what the term *stag film* meant at any one time and what it meant over a period. Each chapter works to understand the term’s meaning at a specific historical moment, but each chapter also analyzes how the term was changing over that very same period. As a whole, then, this book presents a diachronic examination of the term *stag film*, embracing the gamut of materials encountered under and problematizing notions of the stability of that term.

To do this, each chapter provides deeply specific case studies, reveling in the detail that each historical narrative allows. While I have worked to pull in examples from a wide range of print resources, these sources are admittedly limited in regional scope. In the first decades of the moving picture’s existence, the bulk of film production companies and trade publications were in New York, New Jersey, and—as the luminaries at George Kleine’s “stag fest” suggest—Chicago. The move to Hollywood did not begin until Universal left New Jersey for California in 1916. Many of cinema’s early industry folk had gravitated toward the rapidly booming city of Chicago, which had also been a hub for traveling vaudeville performers in the years before cinema’s emergence. In the 1920s and 1930s, once the move to Hollywood had taken hold, many of the country’s vice reformers—individuals who worked to bring particular attention to the “cancer” of stag films—were also located in the Midwest. For this reason, the bulk of the narratives in this book are also rooted in and around Chicago.

As this introduction has begun to explain, “stags” and “smokers” encompassed a wide range of potential entertainments. To map the cluster of terms

used to describe the films screened at these events, the first chapter examines the way the term *stag film* trafficked in newsprint during the early twentieth century. Focusing on the highly controversial Johnson-Jeffries boxing film from 1910 alongside uses of the term *stag film* in early twentieth-century want advertisements, this chapter draws heavily from American periodicals that have become accessible and searchable via online databases like ProQuest and the Lantern Media History Project. In so doing, this chapter demonstrates the ways that newly accessible archival evidence impacts the potential breadth of material and experiences that must be considered when thinking about the “stag film.” Where later chapters root themselves in individual case studies, this first takes a broader discursive view as a starting point for our re-understanding of “stag film.”

Chapter 2 examines the space of the stag film screening in the first decade of the 1900s, continuing to explore the ways that (homo)sociality was crucial to the experience. Focusing on a series of articles from 1908 about a raided stag in Chicago’s Kensington neighborhood, this chapter analyzes the particularities of newspaper reporting on these events, including those regarding the kinds of publics that were invited to stag film screenings and the locations of such screenings. This chapter addresses the ways in which objects such as food and drink influenced the way that people conceptualized the moving images they were consuming in the space of the stag. Ultimately, chapter 2 works to illuminate histories of homosocial space loaded with masculine insecurity.

The interlude serves as a short methodological interstitial, arguing that the framework of “useful cinema” is a particularly productive lens by which to encounter the Archive of “stag film.” While not previously applied to this cinematic formation, recent historiographic projects that have fallen under the rubric of “useful cinema” have illuminated narratives of individuals who made their living by working with films far off Hollywood’s path early in the twentieth century.

Chapter 3 highlights a shifting understanding of the term *stag* over the course of the 1910s and 1920s. Focusing on the want advertisements of the Central Feature Film Supply Company and the anti-vice campaigns of Philip Yarrow, this chapter argues that each employed the term *stag* as a form of advertising fodder in the polarized political landscape of Chicago. The vice reform work that took place during this period deeply impacted the way that newspapers, police, exhibitors, and individuals conceptualized the “stag film,” beginning to limit uses of the term to exclusively sexually explicit moving images by the end of the 1930s.

Chapter 4 focuses on narratives of stag film exhibition that are illuminated by the collection of the Kinsey Institute, an institution that was established in

the late 1940s at Indiana University. This chapter specifically focuses on the history of Anderson Aldridge and T. Nasser, two competing stag film exhibitors in small Indiana towns who donated sizable amounts of materials to the Kinsey Institute's Historical Stag Collection, which also received donations from the Chicago Police Department. Where earlier chapters point to the ways that *stag film* was a malleable term until the late 1930s, this chapter charts the ways that the term *stag film* became much more concretely defined and finite.

Chapter 5 focuses on a 1967 *Playboy* article written by Hollis Alpert and Arthur Knight, which marked the first published history of “stag film.” Researched at the Kinsey Institute and with interviews from institute staff members, part 17 of Alpert and Knight’s “History of Sex in Cinema” series has played a considerable role in the way that film scholars and historians have conceptualized the “stag film.” Often employed as both a primary and secondary source, Alpert and Knight’s article served to finally solidify the definition of *stag film* in the way that the term has come to be understood today. The authors understand authorial intent to be fundamental to the “stag film,” positioning “stag” as rooted in the realm of sexual fantasy and not in “education.”

The coda then jumps forward in time, arguing that a historical view of the “stag film” allows a counternarrative to recent claims that online porn encourages hard-core content to dangerously mingle with other forms of moving images for the first time in our history. A history of “stag film” shows us that this is not the case; stag film screenings mixed sexually explicit and celibate content long before our current internet age. As such, this book moves from understanding *stag film* as a fluid term—one that included moving images of “beauts” alongside Charlie Chaplin films—to one that understands it as Thomas Waugh has described: as a group of films that contained “an explicit sexual narrative, produced and distributed, usually commercially, to clandestine nontheatrical male audiences.”²⁸

DUKE

PREFACE

- 1 “All Collections,” Chicago Film Archives, accessed January 20, 2014, <https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/cfa/collectionsList/index>. As of May 29, 2025, the collection is now described as a “collection of thirty-four 16mm ‘physique’ or erotic films.”
- 2 Smythies et al., *Wittgenstein*, 8.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 James S. McQuade, “That Record-Breaking Stag Fest,” Chicago Letter, *Film Index*, March 11, 1911, 8.
- 2 “Early Chicago, 1833–1871: A Selection of Documents from the Illinois State Archives,” Office of the Illinois Secretary of State, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/teaching_packages/early_chicago/doc23.html; “Chicago in the 1890s,” University of Chicago Library, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/collections/maps/chic1890/>.
- 3 McQuade, “That Record-Breaking Stag Fest.”
- 4 To foreground the instability of the “stag film,” I have intentionally and repeatedly placed the terms *stag* and *stag film* in quotation marks when referencing a specific product, when the term is being referenced as an idea, or when referencing a specific collection. When referencing *stag film* as the term itself, I have placed in italics.
- 5 James S. McQuade, “The Passing of John Hardin,” *Moving Picture World*, July 6, 1918, 48.
- 6 Robert, “Nudity in Early Cinema,” 158.
- 7 “‘Booking for Smoking Concerts Now’: A Very Brief History of This Controversial Entertainment,” Lincoln College, University of Oxford (blog), accessed January 15, 2025, <https://lincoln.ox.ac.uk/blog/smoking-concerts> (archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20260116084524/lincoln.ox.ac.uk/blog/smoking-concerts>).
- 8 Grundy, *Fifty-Five Years at Oxford*, 52.

- 9 ““Booking for Smoking Concerts Now.””
- 10 Although women were able to take undergraduate exams at Oxford in the late 1800s, Annie Rogers was the first woman to be awarded a degree from that institution, in 1920.
- 11 Grundy, *Fifty-Five Years at Oxford*, 53.
- 12 After the war, these events were rebranded as simply “concerts” with esteemed speakers (including J. R. R. Tolkien in 1946). ““Booking for Smoking Concerts Now.””
- 13 Nichols, *History of the Order of the Elks*, 12.
- 14 “Our History,” Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.elks.org/who/ourHistory.cfm>.
- 15 “History of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks,” Pompton Lakes, NJ 1895, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.elks.org/lodges/LodgePages.cfm?LodgeNumber=1895&ID=9303>.
- 16 The Elks continued to forbid women from joining their organization until 1995.
- 17 Laura Jean Libbey, “Heart Topic Talks,” *Los Angeles Evening Express*, June 20, 1917, 11.
- 18 In 1915, the newspaper ran a survey to ask students whether they preferred beer or soft drinks at these events. The students were split, and the organizers decided to continue offering both. The paper also asked whether students preferred “vaudeville” performances or “moving pictures.” The consensus was far clearer: Students preferred movies. “1918 Vote on Beer Divided: 527 Men Responded to Postal Cards Regarding Class Smokers,” *Harvard Crimson* (Cambridge, MA), April 27, 1915.
- 19 While articles in the *Crimson* published between 1913 and 1915 usually avoid listing specific film titles—save for some films of the football and cross-country teams—those published after 1915 often listed titles directly.
- 20 That evening’s program also included “two reels of the Pathe [sic] Weekly . . . and some ‘Animated Cartoons.’” “Sophomores Will Hold First Smoker of Year: Eight Reels of Films and Usual Refreshments Will Be Provided for 1918 Festivity,” *Harvard Crimson*, December 8, 1915.
- 21 The full list of titles from the *Harvard Crimson*’s articles includes *Shanghai* (Charlie Chaplin, 1915), *Green Stockings* (Wilfrid North, 1916), *The Combat* (Ralph Ince, 1916), *Luke and the Mermaids* (Hal Roach, 1916), *Manhattan Madness* (Allan Dwan, 1916), *Don’t Change Your Husband* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1919), *The Life Line* (Maurice Tourneur, 1919), and *The Egg-Crate Wallop* (Jerome Storm, 1919). The list also includes numerous Mack Sennett and Keystone comedies including: *The Summer Girl* (Edward F. Cline, 1918), *He Comes Up Smiling* (director and date unknown), *A Lady’s Tailor* (Ray Grey, 1919), *Salome vs. Shenandoah* (Ray Grey, 1919), *Up in Al’s Room* (director and date unknown), *She Sat by the Seaside* (likely the film *She Sighed by the Seaside*, directed by Erle C. Kenton in 1921), *Made in the Cellar* (director and date unknown), and *Haystacks and Steeples* (Clarence G. Badger, 1916). The entertainments also included frequent “boob” and *Mutt and Jeff* animated cartoons.
- 22 Williams, “Film Bodies,” 4.
- 23 Williams, *Hard Core*, 60; Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 309.

- 24 Stevenson, *Fleshpot*, 8.
- 25 These archives all listed at least one print of Chaplin's *A Woman* in their film collection catalogs as of June 2025. Many of these same archives also house sexually explicit material, although those films are frequently excluded from published catalogs and finding aids at those archives. Catalog entry for "A woman / written and directed by Charles Chaplin," UCLA Film and Television Archive, accessed June 8, 2025, https://search.library.ucla.edu/permalink/01UCS_LAL/17p22dp/alma991762153506533; catalog entry for "A woman," School of the Art Institute of Chicago, accessed June 8, 2025, https://i-share-sai.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CARLI_SAI/cu7pb1/alma994448611005886; catalog entry for "A woman," Harvard Film Archive, accessed June 8, 2025, <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990134739000203941/catalog>; catalog entry for "A Woman," New York Public Library Research Catalog, accessed June 8, 2025, <https://www.nypl.org/research/research-catalog/bib/b17664070>.
- 26 This investment in written, primary sources is informed by the approach used by Gregory A. Waller in his monograph *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896–1930* as well as by a growing roster of scholars working to write the history of itinerant filmmakers and exhibitors. By focusing on business history in his text, Waller shifts the focus from the audience (though audience plays a key role) to the practices and desires of those operating the motion picture shows in question. This method, as Waller explains, relies on "approaching the social history of a city like Lexington [Kentucky] in terms of how commercial entertainment was promoted, consumed, and reacted to locally" (257). Waller is interested in using written documents and business history, both of which are useful tools when thinking about the way that "stag films" were marketed and consumed. While the films themselves may not illuminate modes of consumption—it is often impossible to obtain information about screening conditions, for example, from watching a print of a given film—written documents, newspaper editorials, and other business documents (when they can be found) do.
- 27 Steedman, *Dust*, xi.
- 28 Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 309.

1. MAPPING A MALLEABLE TERM

- 1 *Moving Picture News*, April 1, 1911, 19.
- 2 *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, March 4, 1919, 8.
- 3 Streible, *Fight Pictures*.
- 4 Streible, *Fight Pictures*, 160.
- 5 Streible, *Fight Pictures*, 9. See also Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*.
- 6 Orbach, "The Johnson-Jeffries Fight 100 Years Thence," 300.
- 7 Orbach, "The Johnson-Jeffries Fight 100 Years Thence," 272.
- 8 "Picture Men Are Hit Hard," *Fergus County Democrat* (Lewistown, MT), July 6, 1910, 6.
- 9 "Picture Agents to Take Issue into Courts," *Wilkes-Barre (PA) Times Leader*, July 7, 1910, 2.