

Journal of Popular Film and Television >

Volume 46, 2018 - [Issue 2](#)

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“More than Rutting Bodies”: Cambist Films, Quality Independents, and the “Lost” Films of George A. Romero

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Pages 82-94 | Published online: 06 Sep 2018

🗨️ Cite this article 🔗 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2017.1423018>



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Abstract:

This article traces the industrial development of sexploitation production-distribution company Cambist Films, revealing its vital importance to a historiographical understanding of American independent film. Exploring Cambist's navigation across divergent marketplaces in the 1960s and 1970s uncovers a rare intersection between conflicting cultural institutions, including arthouse cinema, adult media, and so-called “quality” independent film. This investigation includes close scrutiny of the company's collaborations with filmmaker George A. Romero, particularly the romantic drama *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), a film long considered lost and thus overlooked in analysis of the independent sector.

Keywords::

Notes

1. By the end of the decade, mainstream exhibitors became more open to screening adult films, with Loew's singled out by MPAA head Jack Valenti for showing the soft-core Danish film *Without a Stitch* (Dir. Annelise Meineche, 1968). As Jon Lewis writes, "the message was clear: even the biggest and best theatres were willing to book soft-core titles as long as the money was right" (168).
2. Jacqueline Pinkowitz's "Down South" also gives a thorough overview of the exploitation sector.
3. The US Supreme Court overturned the decision one year later.
4. As Otis H. Stephens, Jr., and John M. Scheb III have noted, this definition was ambiguous at best, since the Supreme Court "could never reach an agreement on what constitutes a prurient interest. The term 'redeeming social importance' also failed to generate consensus. A majority of the Court, in the years immediately following Roth, could not even agree on whether 'community' referred to the nation as a whole or to individual states or localities" (160). Put more succinctly, theatre owner James S. Maurer called the obscenity law "filthy with vagueness" ("Pennsylvanians").
5. *The Crazies* was in accord with an increase in screen violence during this period. J. David Slocum cites the end of the production code, audience fragmentation, and the "familiar social markers" of the war in Vietnam, racial conflicts, and political assassinations as causalities for this development (16-17; 20).
6. Intriguingly, quality was still a part of Cambist's agenda. As a review of *The Swedish Minx* in *National Screw* stated, "the budget was \$350,000, but more important than the sum was the care taken with the film. There are no short cuts in setting, technical expertise, eroticism or plot. There is also an added ingredient, which puts *The Swedish Minx* high in its class—humor. And, as a blue-film expert said, 'Humor in porn films makes them palatable for the middle class; they can laugh as they get turned on, and so excuse their voyeurism'" (*The Swedish Minx* 85).

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Tom Fallows

Tom Fallows is a postgraduate researcher in the Department of English and Film at the University of Exeter. He has written on the subject of regional film production, cult stardom, and genre from a media industries perspective and is currently exploring an intersection between the American independent, cult, and authorship. He has taught extensively on film history and form and is co-author of George A. Romero (The Pocket Essential series, Oldcastle Books, 2009).

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