

- divorce trial) and enlist its citation of Nijinsky to shape Valentin's gay image. Rambova appeared in the other unpublished photographs, suggesting that her participation was designed to act as a visual citation of and homage to Nijinsky's stage partner, Ida Rubenstein: see Michael Moon's recuperation of Rubenstein's and Nijinsky's public personas and their lesbian and gay dimensions in "Flaming Closets," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 19–30.
58. Terry Castle, *Noel Coward & Raddlyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 27.
59. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 159.

DIALOGUE

"Use/Abuse/Everyone/Everything": A Dialogue on *LA Plays Itself*

Benjamin Halligan and Laura Wilson

LA Plays Itself (US, 1972), made by Fred Halsted (1941–1989) across a three-year period, consists largely of two lengthy sequences: a male couple engaging in oral and anal sex and mutual masturbation in a sunny woodland setting, and a male couple engaging in ritualistic BDSM/"leathersex" practices in darkened rooms. Street scenes and scenes of public cruising, along with montages of a sometimes tangential association to the action, also feature. Bar one instance, the couples do not speak, but occasional stretches of sometimes inaudible "found sound" are deployed extra-diegetically: conversations between males, often of a sexual nature.

At present the film is rarely seen since it remains mostly unavailable. It could also be said to be unsettled too: the print we viewed seems to miss or slightly curtail a sequence (the fisting that closes the film), and earlier versions of the film seem to have featured in gay porn compilations. Yet *LA Plays Itself* has been hailed as seminal in terms of gay hardcore pornography, and William Jones (2011) and Cindy Patton (2014) have both written books on Halsted and his times.

Halsted's two subsequent films, *Sex Garage* (US, 1972) and *Sextool* (US, 1975), have sometimes been taken as the second and third parts of a gay hardcore pornographic trilogy. Prints of all three films are held in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA).

Benjamin Halligan: *LA Plays Itself* is mysterious and yet mythical: it could almost be said to be an unearthed artefact from an earlier civilization. Patrick Moore, in his

history of radical gay sexuality, goes as far as to claim that "... these images simply did not exist before Halsted," and places the film, in his project of "reclaiming the abandoned history of radical gay sexuality," as a central access to those fondly remembered but long-gone, times.⁷ A sense of how *déclassé* and perhaps even unwelcome the development of a nominal pornography of queer sexuality was at the time can be derived from the programmes of the Amsterdam Wet Dream film festivals of November 1970 and October 1971. These programmes catered to tastes in underage sex and bestiality, but virtually nothing featured that was straight-forwardly gay or queer.⁸

Laura Wilson: Yet, in spite of a number of detractors of the genre, *LA Plays Itself* belonged to an era not only of unprecedented (and unrepeated) triumph for hardcore pornography (Escoffier notes that *Deep Throat* [Gerald Damiano, US, 1972] made more at the box office than many contemporary mainstream Hollywood features) but also an era of different aesthetics. *LA Plays Itself* pays little or no debt to pornographic tropes, arguably because there were, as yet, few if any to speak of.⁹

It also formed part of what many call a sexual revolution, a time where sexual expression was less taboo, freer (but not entirely, of course) from the limits placed upon it by legalities, cultural bashfulness and prejudice. This was a time where the leading entertainment trade magazine, *Variety*, previewed gay porn for the first time (as with Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand* [US], released in 1971, just a few months prior to *LA Plays Itself*). However, the significance of commercial arthouse success for *LA Plays Itself* and one of Halsted's subsequent films, *Sex Game*, should not be overstated, especially for, as you say, an unwelcome genre. A number of mainstream theaters refused to show Halsted's follow-up film, *Sextool*, due to its BDSM content, which is not, unlike *LA Plays Itself*, limited to a small portion of the film. Further, when MoMA screened Halsted's films, protestors campaigning outside passed around flyers decrying the BDSM subject matter as "expressions of anti-homosexuality."¹⁰

BH: Similar protests would occur years later, as Cindy Patton notes: "Halsted was openly castigated for his ongoing project of creating a dark sexual habitat during the first years of the AIDS epidemic, when the S/M subculture was scapegoated as a vector of disease. . . ."¹¹ *LA Plays Itself* certainly isn't like the gay pornography after it, and there's much in it that is, at first, jarringly odd, or makes little sense. The narrative is elliptical or perhaps just chaotic, and the film offers both cliché and avant-garde techniques.

LW: The film is undoubtedly centered on and surrounded by juxtapositions, from its critical and commercial reception, to its iconography and structure that both invites and resists a dualistic reading. These fascinating moments of contradiction drew me into this dialogue and, indeed, lead us toward our understanding of what we consider the film's radical sexual-philosophical position. It is a film that celebrates naked bodies for being naked bodies, and expresses a freedom to enjoy sex with abandoned pleasure, represented not only through the lush greenery of the mise-en-scène, but also, simply, in the joyous smile of one of the lovers. *LA Plays Itself* achieves a form of eroticism defined by sensuality and tactility, not only between the lovers (or fuckers, as seems more apt for the second sequence) but between them and Los Angeles also. What makes *LA Plays Itself* so alluring, for me, is the lack of significance placed on the orgasm over and above the physical journey and exploration two people embark on when engaging in sex—what is important is not the destination, but how we get there.

BH: It is the radical import of this sense of pleasure that I would like to explore with you in this dialogue. And the first consideration is the way the film represents a decisive break with the previous incursions of gay men into cinema, which had been a matter of unpleasure, and even wretchedness: narratives of runaways, blackmail, outings, suicide, and forever skulking around less salubrious parts of the city. Or, even in the case of the actual underground circulation of hardcore gay pornography, the frisson of fear: the danger of arrest, prosecution, public disgrace. I think that Halsted deserves attention since, crucially, *LA Plays Itself* seems to speak of a certain historical moment, and a certain place, that leaves such unpleasure and wretchedness far behind. And, unlike *Boys in the Sand*, this isn't exclusively a matter of dream-like fantasies but is grounded in an emergent subculture characterized in a way that we could now term queer-normative.

LW: By queer-normative, are you referring to the simultaneous breaking and affirmation of artistic and social boundaries, which is certainly apt for Halsted's debut?

BH: That would be the process of the normalization of queerness, on the screen. But in talking about pornography, we have a certain surplus value too: we are able to look to questions of representation (a standard debate in film studies) as well as find actual "evidence" in the film. The nature of the fucking in this "fuck film" (as they were once called) is affective and existential, and so generates its own design for living.

LW: Queer-normative also indicates the space *LA Plays Itself* inhabited, somewhere between and across alternative and mainstream cinema.

Halsted's films, in particular *LA Plays Itself*, are rare examples of pornography that encompass a great variety of perspectives of, and approaches towards, the genre. Escoffier notes that "[p]ornography can reinforce the crudest stereotypes of sex roles, standards of beauty, or power dynamics, or it can contribute to the education of desire. It can be a fantasy machine or a form of discourse about sex—or it can be all these things at the same time."⁶

BH: Escoffier is astute about the educational aspect: there is a "do it yourself" element to the first half of *LA Plays Itself*: how to cruise, what to do (gestures rather than words, but a few vague words, too), what to expect, positions to adopt, durations and repetitions that are possible.

LW: This "do it yourself" element carries on through into Halsted's writing in his own pornographic magazine: *Package*. In one article, he describes the various meanings of different belt buckles (for example, a solid metal studded belt acts as a "warning" for others as they "know the marks this fucker makes").⁷

BH: And indeed the unbuckling of the belt anticipates the spanking and strangling that is soon to be administered. In the context of the roughness of some of the sex in *LA Plays Itself*, such a "warning" seems appropriate.

LW: Halsted goes so far as to list each item of clothing like a uniform, and accompanies this with an annotated photograph of a man dressed in Halsted's approved attire, complete with a subtext of what this will cost you.⁸

Yet, contrasting the (perhaps illusory) sense of realism that Halsted's didactic approach (to both his films and his writing) inspires, *LA Plays Itself's* cinematography is strikingly stylized. Flowers, insects, and bulldozers are superimposed over the sexual coupling. Frequent cut-aways to unexplained shots of butterflies pinned against boards create a sense that there is a lack of interest in the sex itself, or, perhaps more accurately, the assumed objective of sex, i.e., to orgasm.

BH: So the apogee of the imagery, as it were, is not necessary, "money shots" and the like? It's not coded that way.

LW: Exactly. Compare, for example, the scene in *Taxi Zum Klo* [Frank Ripplloh, DE, 1980] where Frank attends a school faculty member's birthday party—as social gatherings go, something with less of a sexual nature can scarcely be imagined—which is intercut with brief shots of a sex orgy. Frank Ripplloh thereby

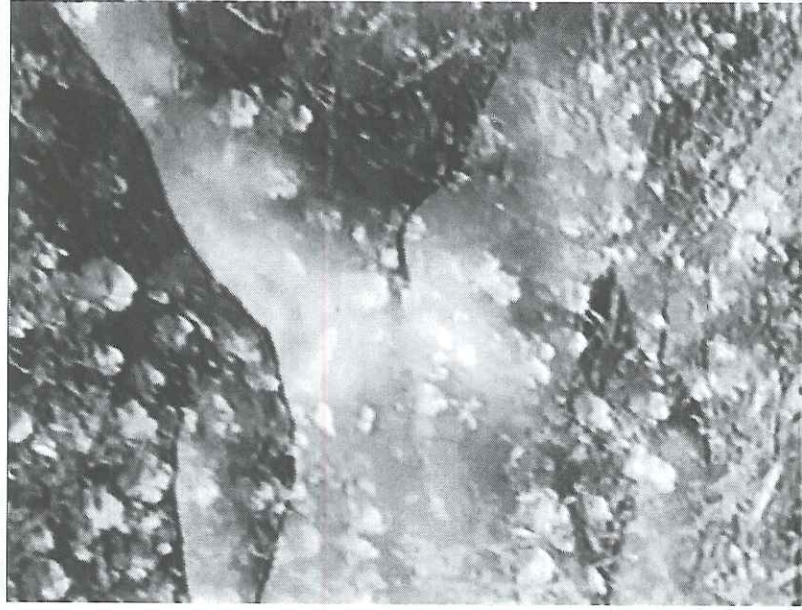


Figure 1. Flowers, insects and bulldozers are super-imposed over the sexual coupling.

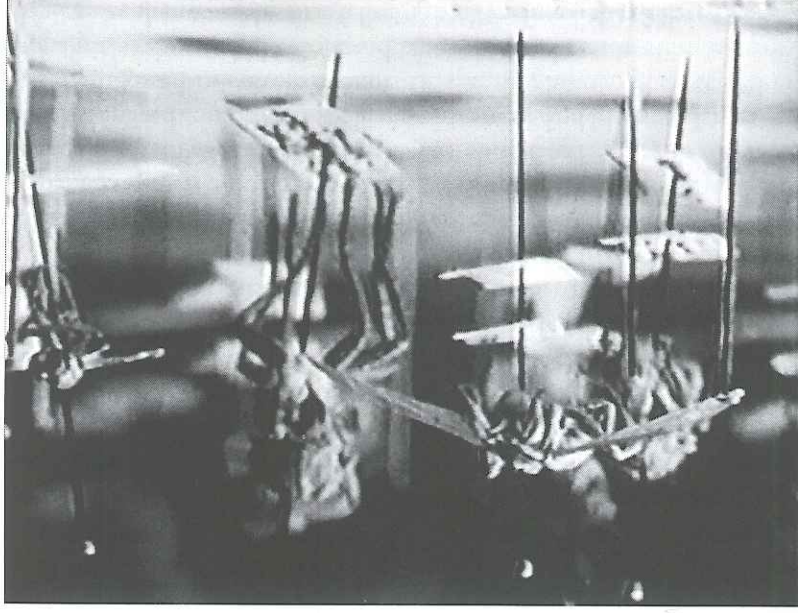


Figure 2. Those insects seen in nature during the first half of the film are seen again in their mortuary: pinned to boards in glass cabinets.

kept state than the commune-dwellers/music festival denizens of 1968. And yet they are certainly not (yet) groomed in the manner of males in the first few years of the 1970s, as moving to a domestication of hippie fashions and hairstyles, as with Yves Saint Laurent's designs and models. In short: not quite *Woodstock* [US, Michael Wadleigh, 1970] but not yet *The Brady Bunch* or sporting the "clone" look. It is a film that is just one step away from 1968 and the counterculture, and yet at enough of a distance from 1968 that it is emboldened to assemble a new counterculture of its own.

The extra-diegetic dialogue heard in voiceover prior to this first sex sequence adds another level to the interaction: a conversation between two unseen people (and which may well be an actual rather than scripted conversation) about an influx of New Yorkers to LA. The suggestion is clear: that the dark-haired cruiser is one such visitor, now availing himself of the particularity of LA open-air gay sex. In this, New York is presented, or idealized, as sophisticated, proactive, dominating; LA as of a nymph-like innocence, passive and content to go along with the desires of the other. This is true of questions of sex (here, at least) and perhaps lifestyles at the time too; Moore quotes an observation on a New York sensibility ("... an extremely complex, busy life, in which sex was as intense as one's work...") as in opposition to a San Francisco sensibility ("... one's sexual life here was the defining, central occupation... They'd fuck all day long, and were stoned all the time, and no one ever seemed to work..."). The difference is comparable to our LA/NY dichotomy.

But there is also a countervailing dynamic here, rather than an adherence to the clichés: LA, rather than New York, was then denoted and conceptualized as the city of our tomorrow—a future shock vision of the high-tech existence awaiting the rest of North America, and then the Western world. In contrast, New York seemed entirely late capitalist: intractable inner-city problems, collapsing social infrastructure and decrepit housing, the wastelands and abandoned warehouse of deindustrialization, and, in its gang cultures, a return to the lawlessness of the previous century. Perhaps it is a case that New York is born again in LA? LA as a return to the Garden of Eden for "fallen" New Yorkers?

LW: Representations of LA and New York also go some way to create gender dynamics in this film. The blonde man, the Angelino, is an interesting figure as it is partly through him that queer sex is mythologized. His relationship with natural landscapes (meaning here a lack of human mediation through technology) is presented as timeless. The film does not explicitly address or explain why he is frolicking naked in the countryside, or how he came to be there (and frolicking is certainly the word for it, as he aimlessly clambers over rocks and playfully splashes water onto foliage), and through this comes the suggestion that he has always

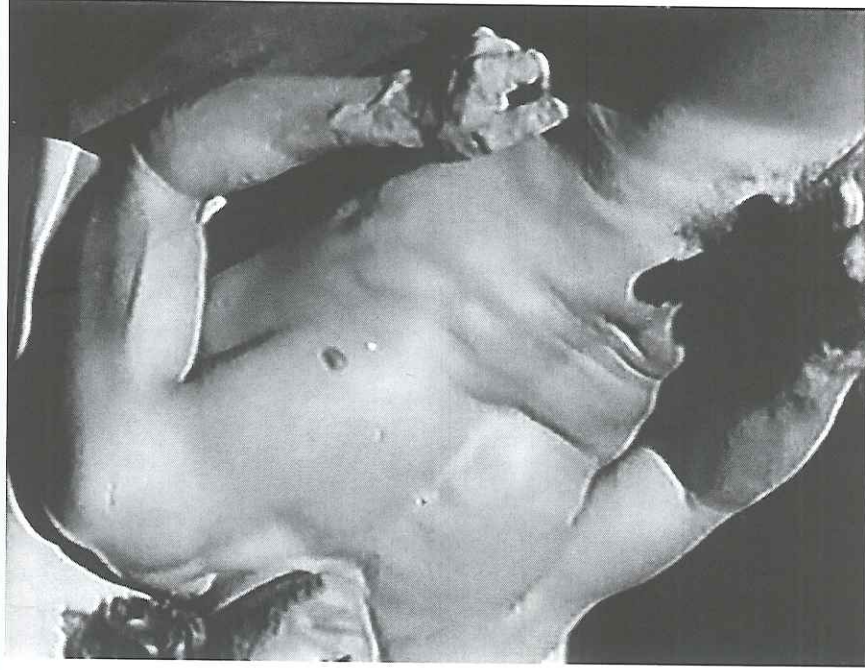


Figure 3. Money shots are not the apogee of the imagery: the one orgasm shown is performed in isolation.

inserts the type of sexual imagery generally expected of pornography, whereas Halsted repeatedly moves away.

BH: So idealization, rather than stereotyping, seems to be a more useful line of discussion here. The most idealized figure seems to be the man found naked and bathing in the countryside (in fact, the Malibu hills) for the first half of *LA Plays Itself*...

LW:... and it is this man that I mentioned earlier, who smiles with abandon while being penetrated...

BH:... his honeyed complexion, brilliant white teeth and long, golden hair mark him as a sun-kissed LA surfer rather than a former hippie. He is found in the open, naked, and among the flora and fauna. He is a "creature" himself, of LA, and welcomes the visitor by first fellating him (before being fellated in return) and first receiving the stranger's penis into his anus. The characters seem still to be hippies but beardless and in a slightly better

Figure 4. The Angeleno's relationship with natural landscapes (meaning here a lack of human mediation through technology) is presented as timeless.



been there and always will be. This connects him to the figure of the nymph, and reclaims a well-known heterosexual fantasy (or anxiety) of a man coming across a beautiful, naked, and seductive woman by a stream or in a wood, for a queer narrative.

BH: As with Waterhouse's painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* [1896]: both temptation and danger in the late Victorian imagination. The woodland is a temporary autonomous zone for secret erotic interactions, with multiple naked Eves, and yet far from help and civilization should anything go wrong.

LW: Yet to align this figure with "mother nature" would be to reaffirm dichotomies (i.e., woman/nature, man/culture) this film subtly disrupts. Whereas the Angeleno's naked body, with genitalia on show, might code him as male (there is little sense of objectification or gratuity in his lack of clothing), some of his actions during sex place him in the female position in terms of heterosexual pornographic conventions (facial expressions of pleasure are rare, but when they do occur, it is his face that is shown). Similarly obscure, the New Yorker, who is more significantly

coded as male through his attire, becomes stripped of masculine significations as he undresses (blue denim, brown suede jacket, and leather boots). Further, extreme close-ups often obscure who is doing what to whom, rendering an analysis of gendered sex positions meaningless. Thereby, as the first half of *LA Plays Itself* unfolds, it undoes any hierarchical ordering and pushes against the placing of preconceived notions of masculinity onto queer sex. Through a state of undress, these men are neither wholly masculine nor feminine. In this way, *LA Plays Itself* presents queer sex as other to heteronormative gendered constructions, although it should be noted that the male body has historically been unbundled by a "debt to nature" (in that female bodies are considered so through their difference to the male).

BH: That disruption also comes in the way that the camera meanders and seems, surprisingly, concerned with urban change, in addition to the flora and fauna: the bulldozing of nature; and the shabby condition of Hollywood Boulevard (as we move to the second half of the film), with its proliferation of sex shops, porn cinemas, and strip joints; and the hustlers spied on the street and awaiting business in apartments.

LW: Halsted's fairly unique approach to pornography perhaps stems from the director's fluid stance towards love and sexuality. In a posthumously published interview, Halsted describes his desire to dominate others sexually, a trait he considers to stem from his own childhood experiences of sexual abuse—he was raped by his stepfather at the age of eight and, while he claims he was not repulsed by it, he could neither understand nor accept it.¹⁰ While he professes to be unable to "get along sexually" with anyone who does not want to be dominated, he also reflects on his first homosexual relationship that was, in his words, "flowers and poetry." While one wonders the extent to which Halsted's comments during interviews may be trusted (it has been noted he enjoyed "playing" with reporters, making things up on the spot), it is interesting that, in both interview and film, Halsted is creating a very definite imagining of queer sexuality that is defined by a dichotomy, yet neither fragmented because of this nor in any way contradicted.

BH: Where would you say is this imagining of queer sexuality?

LW: Sexuality in *LA Plays Itself* exists in meadows and in cramped cupboards, through tender kisses and fist-fucking. Neither concept is particularly vilified nor celebrated, nor does either cancel the other out—both exist alongside one another and are interchangeable in terms of narrative structure. Certain aspects of the film encourage us to think beyond the stark juxtapositions of each sequence, as do

his—somewhat dramatic—statements to reporters, *LA Plays Itself* can be seen as an expression of Halsted's views on sexuality and thereby bolsters the claims for the film as "art" and, from a retrospective point of view, places it apart from many conventions that pornography would later establish.

BH: That transition, from "flowers and poetry" to domination, structures *LA Plays Itself*. Halsted isn't just returning to nature: that would be somewhat escapist, even reactionary. In the film's latter half, two characters (in fact, Halsted himself and his partner Joey Vale) engage in BDSM practices in a darkened room. So the sunlit idyll is balanced by the inferno.

LW: Indeed. Halsted's philosophy of love and sexuality is played out across the two halves of *LA Plays Itself*, creating what might seem at first glance to be a rather clunky and clichéd juxtaposition of nonhuman nature (insects, flowers, screams) and sex mediated by capitalism and "alternative" practices (peepshows, BDSM). However, to limit the analysis of this film to such a reading would be to reduce complex desires into easy-to-digest categories of sex and sexuality. There are moments in the film that strain against a dualistic reading that the structure arguably prescribes. Rather than juxtaposing the rural and the urban, therefore, these elements destabilize a moral hierarchy, as does the presence of a US Navy tattoo.

BH: The New Yorker sports "USN" and "Never Again," around what appears to be a cartoon devil, on his right arm. This was and remains a tattoo indicating a discharge from the US Navy. In this respect, and in terms of the man's seeming age and the time of the film's making, it could only be surmised that he had served in, or been drafted into, the conflict in Southeast Asia. The Navy, of course, has its own particular place in gay history, but now—with the "vet" repatriated—he makes love not war. The tattoo turns the gay sex into a radical peace symbol, and suggests the gay sex as a positive therapy for post-conflict distress, perhaps healthier than drugs and alcohol and a range of activities associated with "drop-ping out."

LW: The naval tattoo is a moment where the film complicates the dualistic and juxtapositional readings made possible through the narrative structure. It is at once a symbol of violence and peace, of scarification and beauty, of pain and art. Although these concepts can be read against one another, this tattoo invites us to consider their interrelatedness and, by extension, the potential fluidity of "naturalistic" sex propagated by rural settings and "darker" desires, presented through BDSM. Notions of naturalism and "dark desires" are here used tentatively



Figure 5. A brief cutaway shot during the BDSM sequence in *LA Plays Itself* shows a semi-obscured newspaper headline, suggesting a serial killer on the prowl.

and loosely, not to place moral judgments or essentialisms onto sex and sexuality, but instead to highlight how the film works against potentially knee-jerk and reductive analyses by presenting a nuanced and ambiguous image.

BH: But Halsted does seem to want to shock, and redoubles his efforts for *Sextool*, so that the more violent BDSM here is almost comical. Seemingly consent, at one point, results in the consensee being punched, having his underwear torn off, and a beer bottle smashed over his head, prior to a lashing with a leather belt, after which the consensee is doused in the top's piss, who only pauses twice during this process to masturbate himself to climax. Dissonant electronic music indicates that what is seen is not meant to be taken or experienced as enjoyable but pleasure through pain. And danger is seemingly ever-present: "I wouldn't be caught dead [with one "girl" seen at a party] or I'd be found dead," comments one character. A brief cutaway shot during the BDSM sequence in *LA Plays Itself* shows a semi-obscured newspaper headline, suggesting a serial killer on the prowl. And those insects seen in nature during the first half of the film are seen again in their mortuary: pinned to boards in glass cabinets.

LW: Further, as already stated, *LA Plays Itself* was originally intended to be shown with the BDSM scene first, and ending with the woodland scene. In an interview with Jones, a self-professed ex-lover of Halsted's credits himself for the change in sequence, something he suggests is representative of his own nihilistic view of his sexuality.¹² Whether this is true or not is not as important as its implications—were the film played with the woodland scene coming second, the overly-blatant, clichéd, and reductive reading of an idyllic queer scene disrupted and subverted by a loss of innocence (represented by excavating machinery and rope bondage) would become somewhat redundant.

BH: Like you, I want to find an enriching continuum in these two sequences, not a juxtaposition, so that the "dark" second half can be read as being as utopic as the "sunny" first. Recalling comments made above about the marginality of gays on film at this time, the utopic impulse comes in the lack of companionship for the characters (no arrests, no heartbreak, no public disgrace) and the bracing confidence of their couplings. There's no fumbling, no roundabout talks, no awkward discovery. Rather, the performers just get on with it, with expertise and at times acrobatic sophistication. And there's no "psychology" through characterization, to disrupt or waylay or vamp this intercourse. As a narrative trope of "gays and film," Dyer argues that this tendency to protagonists' back stories weakens the constituency: "... the setting up of the individual gays over against the stereotypes, makes it very difficult to think of there being solidarity, sisterhood or brotherhood, collective identity and action..."¹³

In Halsted's world, this queer desire-driven scene is the new frontier of freedom, and it is to be first found at the outskirts of LA (the film opens with a shot of a road sign: "LA City Limit - Population 2,535,700," adding some data to the film's opening title) and then at the very heart of LA (the sequences around Hollywood Boulevard) and is there for the taking.

And in these sequences, that seem to have been filmed in the midday sun, there's no suggestion of the potentially alienating interiors of gay clubs such as The Anvil and The Mineshaft, with their piss pigs, scar rooms, glory holes, and first-fucking. When that comes, in the second half of *LA Plays Itself*, it could then be taken as an example of what else could occur for those bold enough to push on: "further reading," as it were.

And, while the film seems to arise from various subcultural practices and groups that could be said to be not so distanced from "actual" artistic circles, the concerns of *LA Plays Itself* seem very disconnected from the Los Angeles performance art scene of that time. For Phelan, gay and queer matters were considered through the vectors of early identity politics (and so profoundly about characterization), and so drag and constructions of masculinity (and so on) seem



Figure 6. *LA Plays Itself* copyright image.



Figure 7. The film opens with a shot of a road sign: "LA City Limit - Population 2,535,700," adding some data to the film's opening title.

to have been to the fore. If anything, Halsted is absolutely affirming, in his quasi-reportage, rather than deconstructing and questioning. The radically progressive nature of *LA Plays Itself* comes in the unfettered expressions of freedoms, and its reportage of free bodies at play functions as evidence for the defense.

LW: "Freedom" does appear to epitomize the first half of the film, while the cinematography of this section also destabilizes the setting historically and geographically. Rock formations and fossils create a narrative of the earth while landscape shots, sounds of mandolins and flutes, and mist on mountains are reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa, well-known for presenting seasons and natural scenery as plot elements. The overriding sense taken from the choice of location and its presentation is that this could be anywhere at any time. That two men meet and make love in this setting displaces queer sexualities from cultural and historical trappings; in other words, queer sex is timeless and outside of cultural prescription (perhaps this is the kind of poetry Halsted refers to, captured on-screen).

BH: It is a poetic impulse that was particular to 1968, too: a bucolic Bacchanalia. Perhaps this existed more in the fevered imagination of the straights than as a historical reality: the supposed orgasmic pastimes of their teenage sons and daughters. We see it corrupting Peter Sellers' straight lawyer in *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas* [Hy Averbach, US, 1968] once he stumbles across Venice Beach, mid-midlife crisis. When [Michelangelo Antonioni] rendered his open-air hippy love-in, for *Zabriskie Point* [US, 1970], or Ira Cohen, for *The Invasion of Thunderbolt Pagoda* [US, 1968], they are also "poetic" in the way you describe: freed from specifics, and so timeless and, in these cases, hallucinogenic in the sense that what is seen may be an (LSD-induced) dream.

"Freedom" in this case verifies the historical importance of *LA Plays Itself*: the film is a year zero, a beginning afresh. Our couple are freed to begin again, and to reinvent the world. In these ways, Halsted actually ought to be considered alongside his contemporaries then busy remaking North American film: the "movie brats" of New Hollywood.

But let's not forget that this is a fictional film and, like much pornography, deals in fantasy, projection, or wish fulfillment: the *actualité* of these radical sexual positions remained perilous across the decade. The 1979 essay film Guy Hocquenghem made with Lionel Soukaz, *Race d'Esp* [FR], begins with a description of a near gay-bashing, directed against the unseen narrator, and immediately defines its subject in relation to such violence (psychological and actual) and resultant social ostracism. Perhaps *LA Plays Itself* can be taken as the antidote to this societal illness, in which case it is the very setting, Los Angeles, that becomes

doubly important: the zone of the future in which illnesses (violent homophobia) will be cured and eradicated.

LW: In spite of such a free-spirited atmosphere created by shots of nature in the first half, we all of course know exactly where it is shot, if only for the name of the film. The choice of shooting in LA also has connotations outside of its place in queer history and culture as well as the, as you put it, "future shock vision." Topographically, Los Angeles is a diverse city, home to an assortment of habitats that result in a rich, indigenous nature and microclimates, while also being vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis. The city itself extends across the extremities presented in the film: rich, harmonious nature alongside destructive and volatile natural disasters becomes sex in the midday sun, amongst insects, and aligned with rope-torture in attic rooms and cupboards.

BH: As cited in Moore, of San Francisco: "[t]hey'd fuck all day long, and were stoned all the time, and no one ever seemed to work."¹³ The city becomes synonymous with leisure, which means geared to pleasure, which means sex, but this spirit of an all-encompassing pleasure extends to, or engulfs, work too. Clint Eastwood's renegade detective in *Dirty Harry* [Don Siegel, US, 1971] discovers this, in respect of San Francisco: he is cruised while pursuing a suspect through a park at night, jokes about intervening in a rape (shooting a suspect wielding a butcher knife and a hard-on¹⁴), and his investigations at times seem an excuse to get closer to the erotic undercurrents of the city, particularly in the scene in which locals set upon him for voyeurism.

But Halsted seems to want more than an LA backdrop, as the film's title suggests. LA is acting the role of LA, nurturing a new microclimate of a queer habitat,¹⁵ but LA isn't just the setting. LA seems to be part of what is being fucked, too: Halsted's performers don't seem content just to deal with penetration and intimacy between themselves. The phallus also explores (and is set against) the surroundings. One's prompted to mistrust the title, *LA Plays (with) Itself*, as if the whole area was little more than a spermatorrhoea. Halsted's next film, *Sex Garage*, often shown in conjunction with *LA Plays Itself* and so taken as the third act of that film, literally achieves this expanded intercourse in a moment of motorcycle fucking: the insertion of an erect penis into the "anus" of an exhaust pipe, and also ejaculation onto its "ass" (the saddle).

Larry Kramer, in his divisive 1978 novel *Faggots*, a picaresque, New York-set queer epic, also eroticized the very geographical setting, offering a kind of aroused personification of the cityscape: "Ah, the streets, the streets, let us pause for an Ode to The Streets, Gay Ghetto, homo away from home, the hierarchy and ritual of The Streets, incessant, insinuating, impossible *Streets* [...] speak of them

singularly in the plural, like sheep, Kleenex, Jell-o, blending, coalescing, oozing, all into one, all for us¹⁵ The streets entice and tease, as well as being a stage for (pick-up) performances and the locale of promise and potential. Without the setting, there would be no sex.

Halsted, philosophically, begins from this point: a ragline of his unsuccessful attempt at commercially calibrated hardcore queer porn, *Sextool*, was "use/abuse/everyone/everything," which Halsted offers as the very definition of the term "sextool."¹⁶ In the world of BDSM, "use" and "abuse" are desired practices and rituals rather than carrying negative connotations. "Everyone" can refer to all those unknown young men seen on the streets, as Kramer also understands, as generating cultures of cruising and anonymous bath house encounters. And "everything" refers to the entirety of the world as encountered (LA, New York . . . wherever)—through, then, a vector of absolute eroticism. Halsted proposes the spectrum of pleasure as remaking life.

While this isn't really a challenge or an "issue" for the first half of the film, such a philosophical position is tested in the pain that is erotically inflicted in the second half of the film, as well as the flow of negative images that are disconnected, in narrative terms, from pornographic images.

LW: Human mediation of nature comes into play towards the end of the first half of *LA Plays Itself*. The camera eventually zooms out and pans to reveal evidence of human habitation—cable lines and a flag, symbolic of marking territory. It is at this point that the film seems to take on a darker tone: the previously idyllic nature becomes predatory as a lizard slowly prowls towards the camera. The music on the soundtrack becomes deeper, more ominous. What was once a beautifully poetic sexual tryst (if only for its Eden-like setting) is now obscured by the superimposition of a tractor plowing the earth.

It is tempting, perhaps, to read this sudden shift of tone as complementary to the second half, where peepshows on the Boulevard are as prolific as flowers in the hills, where civilization's contribution to sex is defined through capitalism, and the film ends with a man trapped in a closet. All this might seamlessly symbolize the "trappings" of modern life, and suitably lament the ways technology and progress have impinged on a more innocent relationship with nature, where sex was a mutual exploration of bodies rather than a one-sided and violent violation. Yet, to what extent can these two halves actually be considered as separate?

BH: One moment of superimposition seems to suggest that the erect penis, just as it "plows" into the ass of the recipient, is also simultaneously plowing into the earth, as if it were a bulldozer blade. In this, the penis bridges two otherwise seemingly disconnected halves of the film: the kind of connection that you're identifying.

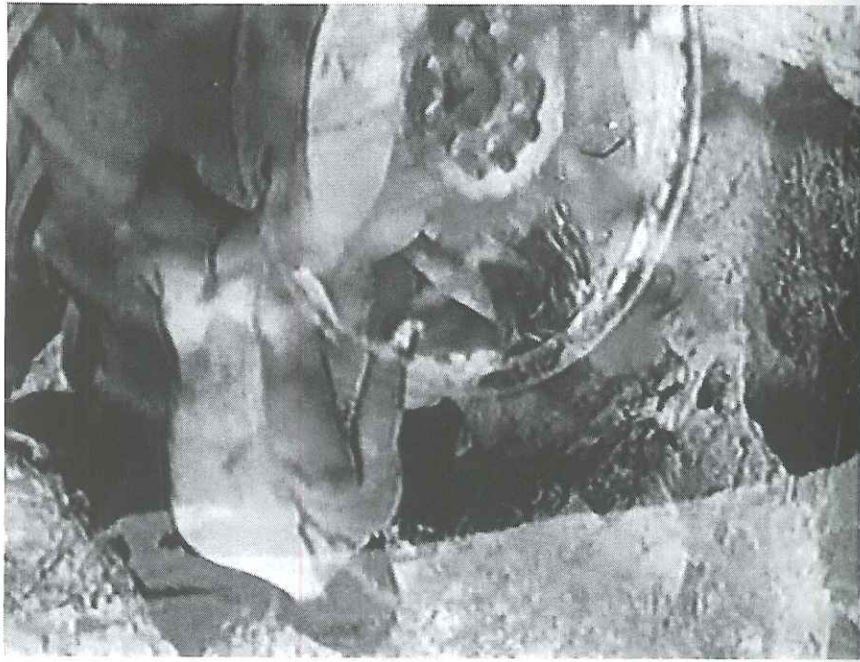


Figure 8. One moment of superimposition seems to suggest that the erect penis, just as it "ploughs" into the ass of the recipient, is also simultaneously ploughing into the earth.

LW: And in just the same associative way, the crawling lizard is recalled later in the film by a man crawling up a flight of stairs, and the clientele of peepshows that litter the urban streets recall the behavior of insects, moving from one plant to another.

BH: So we have two ecologies of sex, then: a "control" experiment, "natural" and out in the open, against the man-made re-creation, mapping the desires and couplings onto the urban environment and its murky interiors, and finding a very different set of practices result. Halsted perhaps evidences swam intelligence at work: insect and hustlers on the same lines of flight, flowers and anuses, both awaiting penetration.

LW: Again, this film speaks to Halsted's own claimed sexual identities as it undermines and complicates a number of concepts popularly and easily thought of as mutually exclusive: insects, civilization, flowers, technology, the history of the earth as told through rocks, fossils, rope-torture, and fist-fucking.

BH: In the film's second "movement," we encounter a queer iconography that is a lot more familiar (not least from the illustrations of Tom of Finland) and associated with leathersex. This subculture, or intimations of it, would come to figure substantially in popular culture by the end of the 1970s and turn of the 1980s: the visibility of bath house cultures, the Village People in the charts, and even *Magnum, P.I.* [CBS, US, 1980–1988] on television, Kramer's *Faggots*, and as a subject that vexed Frank Zapata for *Sheik Kervan*.¹⁷ It found expression in the New German Cinema, as well as the Hollywood film *Cruising* [William Friedkin, US/DE, 1980].

In aesthetic terms, we now go from the LA sun to darkened interiors, moving from the world of the visible (and so aesthetic judgments: who is or isn't attractive) to the invisible (and so biological impulses: orifices and extrusions). Hocquenghem talks of just such a preference for the dark in that it abstracts and intensifies sex: "[t]oilet spasms are like banking transactions: a flow of cum running in the shadows, as disincarnate as money, checks of cum behind the grate of a bank teller window."¹⁸ So one can only really engage in full and free sexual activity when the lights are out, and vision (and concomitant judgment) doesn't get in the way; in *obscurus veritas*, as it were.

LW: There are two shots in the second half of the film where the camera looks down on a man undoing his belt buckle. The first is in close up, and the high angle is only slight. For the second, the camera has pulled out, revealing the man's position at the bottom of the flight of stairs, and the high angle is far more pronounced. This is interesting as it pits subversive and dominance against one another.

BH: A reversal of the classic roles of top/bottom.

LW: A man unbuckling his belt has dominant connotations: in an "equal" (in terms of power relations) cinematic representation of sex, characters often help each other take off their clothes. This action serves a dual purpose—maintaining an aura of passion and keeping each other on an equal footing in terms of power dynamics. A man undoing his own belt buckle features prominently in rape scenes; through association, therefore, this image takes on another meaning. However, the positioning of the camera undermines such dominance, at least in terms of an objective film analysis. Subjectively, for this writer, the act of unbuckling a belt is too strongly connected with a trauma that places the subject of the act in a threatening position, and the object in a threatened one—the camera position is unable to undermine the sense of menace this act recalls.

BH: I think we are in the territory of lines being drawn—and I say this not as a



Figure 9. The crawling lizard is recalled later in the film by a man crawling up a flight of stairs.

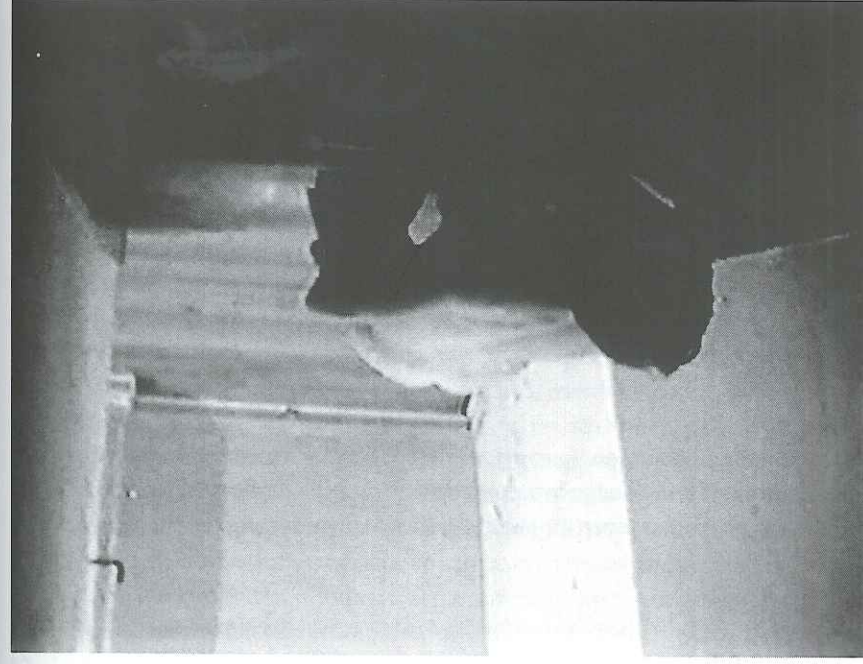


Figure 10. The parallel shot of a man crawling.

Figure 1. A man unbuckling his belt has dominant connotations: in an "equal" (in terms of power relations) cinematic representation of sex, characters often help each other take off their clothes.



subjective judgment but in terms of social history. *LA Plays Itself*, along with *Sex Garage*, culminates in a fisting. Fisting featured too in Halsted's *Sextool*, but somewhat incidentally (as, for example, just one of many acts Joey Yale enjoys at the hands of the surrounding leathermen). And while the latter two were unstimulated, the fisting in *LA Plays Itself* was part-real, part-stimulated (and needing a double).¹⁹

LW: I couldn't always read the sex as being consensual or that they were up for it. Some parts I understood as torture and, as such, found it rather uncomfortable. But again I think this comes from a different understanding of, and relationship with, sex and desire.

BH: It would seem that fisting was a kind of litmus test for queer cultures of the time. Paul Golding recalls fisting fondly, and in nostalgic and quasi-religious terms: an act that renders the fstee as lovingly subservient before the master. His seemingly autobiographical novel, *The Abomination*, opens with a fisting in a nightclub, where the fstee, "the self-appointed, self-evident victim, the sacrificial beast" with "sprayed legs, which dangle lifelessly" is in "a place of high pleasure,

his own mid-heaven." The "sewage" which emerges with the withdrawn fist is "the perfect exchange of elemental mainly everything, a sort of life-force, communion."²⁰ For Kramer, on the other hand, fisting is overwhelming dangerous ("I heard they had twenty deaths last year from holes in the stomach at St. Vincent's in the Village alone") and renders the fstee as potentially a fatal victim of psychotic impulses on the part of the often unknown fister ("... do you know that I now have absolute control of your life? Do you know that? Do you realize that with a squidge of my fingers I could rip out your insides? I could kill you. It would look like an accident. I'd go free").²¹ This anticipates the debate around *Cruising* which, despite its relatively bold immersion in the queer leathersex subculture, eventually levels a hysterically homophobic and moralistic condemnation of that culture: serial killers and queers are to be found rubbing shoulders at these "extremes" of human behavior, and the film even suggests that such behavioral traits engender an overlapping of the two.²²

In terms of Halsted's defying of the expectations of porn films: those near-absent money shots cannot function as the climax or point of narrative closure. Instead, they seem to offer the gateway to other forms of sexual practices that are best understood, and viewed, as intensities of feeling after or "beyond" the biological mechanism of the orgasm. After all, these practices were often facilitated and enhanced by a variety of recreational drugs, so that their pleasures only really compute in terms of an *a priori* alteration of consciousness.

LW: The idea that *LA Plays Itself* does not fully capitalize on erotic content brings up questions of how we might define eroticism and pornography. The film undermines the mastery of the gaze set up at the beginning. At first, the nymph-like Angelino is observed in a similar way that birds and insects in nature are monitored; in this way, a humanist view of other species is displaced onto queer men. Yet bodies are later abstracted during their sexual encounters, thereby interrupting an understanding of the sex act through the image and instead creating an understanding through tactility. On top of this, throughout the film, faces are cut out of the frame. This undoubtedly creates a sense of deindividuation, while at the same time creating alternative notions of individuation. Bodies may be (mis)recognized and identities defined by torsos, backsides, and genitalia, rather than the more conventional face.

LW: Why?

BH: At this juncture, the radical import of this approach—in the film's flunking of the demands of pornography—becomes apparent. I am relieved that we have found ourselves at this point.

BH: Since part of the challenge of dealing with such a film from this time is that anything oppositional seems to take on a heightened importance, deservedly so or otherwise. The material is effectively the Ministry of Information for the besieged "forces of faggotry" (as Truscott described the Gay Power defenders of the Stonewall Inn in 1969).²² And I don't want to suggest that explicit hardcore queer imagery in itself is somehow automatically at the vanguard of the post-1968 sexual revolution. Thus *Boys in the Sand* is deeply conventional: the men are typically beautiful, the sex is expectably erotic and mutually hedonistic, the narratives are intact (and flesh out clichés: beach pick-ups, a workman with a tool belt, sex in a swimming pool), the gaze at Casey Donovan is rewarded with nudity, arousal, and endless intercourse. And the film is terribly well made.

In this we have an intimation of the coming entrée into the mainstream for hardcore queer porn, and an indication of the way in which industries of exploitation can absorb and depoliticize material, no matter how problematic that material may once have seemed to the status quo. Pier Paolo Pasolini, in his soaring denunciation of the films he himself made in his *Trilogia della vita* (1971–1974)—"I am terrified to say it . . ."; "I now hate the bodies and the sex organs . . ."—articulates this conundrum.²³ The impossibility of a radical import for free sexual expression comes from the ways in which "[. . .] the progressive struggle for democratization of expression and for sexual liberation has been brutally superseded and cancelled out by the decision of consumerist power to grant a tolerance as vast as it is false."²⁴

Halsted, in his anti-narrative techniques, in his self-consciously presented "dark" BDSM, and in the flows of piss and even blood, as well as semen, goes some way to resist assimilation. As of now, the resistance seems to have been successful—the measure of which is Halsted's continued semi-obscure. That expanded notion and practice of LA 1970s queer pleasure, to "use/abuse/everyone/everything," seems to offer a hope for outmaneuvering the coordinates of false tolerance.

Benjamin Halligan is the director of Postgraduate Research Studies for the College of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Salford. His publications include *Michael Reeves* (Manchester UP); *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics* (Ashgate); *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music* (Bloombsbury); *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetic and Politics of Noise* (Continuum) and *The Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop* (Routledge). Forthcoming are *Desires for Reality: Radicalism and Revolution in Western European Film* (Bergahn) and *The Arena Concert: Music, Media and Mass Entertainment* (Bloombsbury).

Laura Wilson recently completed her PhD at the University of Manchester. Her publications include "Race, the Other and Resident Evil" (*Ethnicity and Race in Changing World*, October, 2012) and "Physical Spectatorship: Noise and Rape in Irreversible" in *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetic and Politics of Noise. Spectatorship, Embodiment and Physicality in the Contemporary Mutation* Film is scheduled for publication September 2015 by Palgrave Macmillan.

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