

festival review

Hump! 2018

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The HUMP! film festival seeks to create a theatrical venue for amateur pornography that empowers participants, fosters a sense of community, and creates an inclusive and safe space. In an era where handheld devices can access and create sexual images with ease, and where those images can be shared with the world on extensive web platforms, consensually and not, HUMP! strives “to change the way America sees—and makes and shares—porn” (HUMP! Film Festival, n.d.).

This year marks the fourteenth annual HUMP! festival. The festival began as a local event in Seattle and Portland, promoted by the local alternative newspaper *The Stranger* and its editorial director and sex advice columnist Dan Savage. Films featured in HUMP! are exclusively amateur productions and generally cater to a diversity of different kinks and sexual orientations. The curation of the festival also clearly seeks to include a diversity of bodies and identities. Perhaps the most definitive aspect of HUMP! is the way it controls the exhibition and circulation of its moving images. The festival’s strict set of rules and norms are laid out by a master of ceremonies at the beginning of every screening. The first rule: although audiences are encouraged to react genuinely with shock and laughter, they are expected to be respectful and to bear in mind that the filmmakers and performers may be in the theater. The second rule: absolutely no photography or cellphones are

allowed. These films are designed only to be shown at the festival, and the workers and performers use pseudonyms in order to maintain control over their identities. This protects people involved from being discriminated against if an image were to fall into the hands of an employer or family member, for example. This rule also means that HUMP! does not function as a promotional platform or “industrial node” the way many other film festivals do (Iordanova 2015). The films featured in the festival are unlikely to launch any careers given that they are un-credited and cannot be seen outside of the festival. Unlike the Toronto, Berlin, or Busan International Film Festivals, HUMP! provides no opportunities for producers to network and arrange funding or distribution deals.

HUMP! can be positioned within a long genealogy of amateur porn film practices stretching back as least as far as the “stag films” of the early 20th century, which were produced and distributed through illicit networks due to the presence local laws and censorship (Williams 1999, 60-1). HUMP! can also be positioned within DIY histories that include John Water’s cinema of transgression work and the Queercore and Outpunk movements, which grew out of the grass-roots venues, publications, and record labels of the 1980s and 90s west coast DIY hardcore punk scene (Spencer 2005, 239-243). DIY movements such as these sought to make media themselves in order to build alterna-

tives to commercial media and thus avoid the many perceived problems entailed with the entanglement of capital and culture. Following this logic, HUMP! sought from its inception to provide an alternative to the porn industry.

DIY media has changed dramatically since the first HUMP! though, transforming from an often anti-capitalist and anarchist grass-roots movement into the tech-centric discourses of “web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2006), “produsage” (Burns 2008) and “prosumption” (Ritzer et al. 2010). Making your own media has turned from being a radical political act to being the lifeblood of some of the world’s largest media companies, with users supplying free content for media “platforms” (Gillespie 2010). Porn has changed similarly, with video platforms topping web traffic rankings. For example, according to Alexa.com Montreal-based video platform PornHub saw twenty-eight billion visits last year, making it the twenty-ninth most visited website in the world. HUMP! is noteworthy for the way it resists these trends. While the festival does rely on amateur labour for its content, its rules have continued to empower participants, giving them control over the circulation of their images. These rules have also controlled the exhibition context, keeping it positive and community-oriented. HUMP! stands as an example that DIY media practices have not been fully subsumed into Silicon Valley neoliberalism.

This is not to say the festival has not changed over time. Although the rules of HUMP! have generally stayed the same since its inception, participants in this year’s festival certainly submit their work with a different set of expectations than those who participated fourteen years ago. While the original festival was limited to screenings in two cities, creating a sense of community between filmmakers and viewers, contributors today submit their films knowing that after the festival concludes in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco, they will be seen internationally with dozens more screenings in a review tour across the U.S. and Canada (the review will come to Montreal in May 2019). The festival does, to a certain extent, risk becoming a victim of its own success with this tour. Wider circulation may make it more difficult to control the conditions of exhibition that are meant to empower participants and create a positive and inclusive space. Performers have to accept that their work will be seen far beyond their local sex-posi-

tive community, and audiences in these cities have no sense that filmmakers or performers are from their community or that they might even be in the theatre.

Films screened at this year’s festivals varied greatly. Some, like *The Wheel of Fortune* or *Extreme Wild Fuck...*, feature large casts with high production values that clearly required substantial time investment from skilled workers. Others, like *Taskmaster*, were the product of a single individual’s efforts. While films like *Paint Party* render bodies through rhythm and colour, to the point that the viewer cannot identify what they are seeing, others examples like *Home for Lunch* track closer to the explicit aesthetics of conventional porn. A few selections feature no explicit nudity or sex acts whatsoever. *My Cathartic Release*, for example, is an animated short where a woman describes getting over a traumatic experience through sadomasochism. This film renders the narrator’s interior experience abstractly through animation. Jury prize-winner *Porn Yesterday* similarly features no nudity or sex. Rather, the film consists of a series of interviews with different people talking about their first encounters with sex through magazines and television. The film thus implicitly reflects on how sexuality takes shape in a saturated media landscape, while also noting the dissonance between people’s innate desire and the types of sexual images they had access to. These examples are in the minority however. The vast majority of films at HUMP! feature graphic and detailed depictions of sex.

There are two modalities of graphic content at the festival. Some films follow in John Waters’ tradition of shocking, excessive, grotesque attacks on pop culture mores, while others promote acceptance and identification with non-normative sexualities. This latter form confronts the viewer with the performer’s sexuality unapologetically with pride and confidence. The effect of this is deeply humanising. The idea is to make the viewer squirm a little, but ultimately to foster better understanding and shared experience. The theatrical setting enhances this frank confrontational effect. Everyone watches everything, even if it makes them uncomfortable. These two modalities have similar ends. They both combat ideologies that function to marginalize and oppress non-normative sexualities. Yet they go about this in very different ways.

The presence of these two modalities has the potential to create some confusion. In certain

films frankness is pushed to comically exaggerated levels. Are these films supposed to be humanizing or comically abject? This is particularly the case where performers do not seem to be enacting their own kink. *Whatever Floats Your Goat* (a lesbian barnyard burlesque that defies description) and *Troughman* (a semi-biographic musical about an infamous character in the Australian bar scene) are both examples of this. These are both clearly comedies, but to a certain extent the joke is the extremeness of the non-normative sex acts being depicted.

This is not to say that any of the films featured in HUMP! are prejudiced or regressive. Within their very sex-positive context they should be interpreted as facetious and irreverent. They evoke enjoyment rather than true disgust. They are cheeky, in other words. This cheekiness is fundamental to HUMP! in many ways. For example, one of the challenges put to filmmakers for this year's festival was to integrate jumper cables, Jenga, and Justin Trudeau into their films, to inevitably comedic effect. But this brings us back to why HUMP!'s rules, which control the circulation of images and the behaviour of audiences, are so important. Outside of the context of the festival, some of the films could be easily misconstrued or misused. If these films were on an online video platform, it would be easy for them to elicit a reaction far from sex-positivity and acceptance. This is a good example of why HUMP!'s ever-growing review exhibition circuit pose certain challenges for its future. The organizers will need to monitor these subtle trends as the festival continues to grow to keep it faithful to its very worthy goals.

The HUMP! Touring Festival will screen in Montreal on May 23rd, 2019. <https://humpfilmfest.com/>

References

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