



The University of Nottingham
School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies
MRes Film and Television Studies Thesis

**Stripping on Screen: An Exploration of Female Exploitation in Paul
Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995).**

Candidate ID: 14329207

Word Count: 24, 692

Abstract

This research explores female exploitation which surrounds Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995) concerning the film's pre-production, production, marketing methods, initial critical reception and two distinct revivals. It is proposed that *Showgirls* is an evolving film which requires continual reassessment in the ever-changing socio-political feminist landscape. The levels of female exploitation present throughout the film's production history and receptions has developed throughout history as feminist discourse shifts towards the mainstreaming of 'sex-positive' third-wave feminism. The film's pre-production and production are compared to classic sexploitation films in the casting and treatment of young female actresses. Clear links are drawn between sexploitation films with the casting of Berkley and the treatment of Ravera within filming intimate scenes. The advertisement materials and marketing methods hinge on female sexualisation of the film's actresses which create a potentially exploitative blurring of distinction between the actresses and their characters. The initial critical reception of *Showgirls* in 1995 carries heavy misogynistic undertones which shame Berkley for her ownership of sexualisation. The camp cult midnight movie revival of *Showgirls* is dependent on the film's engagement with female exploitation. Three critical aspects of camp cult midnight movies, camp tones, depictions of failure and transgression are all reliant on female exploitation by the film. The 'feminist revival' of *Showgirls* is proposed as a second-wave revival which celebrates the 'pro-sex' fourth-wave feminist attitudes and critiques of female exploitation within media industries found within the film's narrative. This study updates and expands the sparse academic material concerning *Showgirls*. Future research should address how developing socio-political climates regarding sex work, stripping and feminism had impacted the film and its receptions. This study provides an in-depth analysis of *Showgirls* from a feminist perspective attentive to female exploitation in cinema.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Literature Review</i>	1
<i>The Sexualisation of Women: Feminist Debates.....</i>	1
<i>Film Pre-production and Production</i>	2
<i>Advertisement and Marketing</i>	3
<i>Initial Reception</i>	5
<i>Cult Revival and Repositioning</i>	6
Chapter 1. ‘Leave Your Inhibitions at the Door’: Pre-production and Production	10
<i>The First NC-17 Rated Blockbuster</i>	10
<i>Mainstream Sexploitation</i>	12
<i>Casting of Berkley</i>	14
<i>A Sacrificial Lamb: The Case of Gina Ravera</i>	16
Chapter 2. Selling Sex: Marketing and Promotion Strategies	21
<i>NC-17 Rating Rebranding</i>	21
<i>Sex Sells: Traditional Marketing</i>	23
<i>Pornification: Innovative Marketing</i>	32
Chapter 3. ‘An Open-Mouthed Sex Doll’: Initial Reception	41
<i>‘You’re a Whore Darlin’’: 1995 Critical Attacks on Berkley</i>	41
Chapter 4. ‘Resurrection After Crucifixion’: The Revivals of Showgirls	45
<i>Part 1: Camp Cult Midnight Movie</i>	45
<i>Camp Tones.....</i>	49
<i>Depictions of Failure</i>	59

<i>Transgression</i>	63
<i>Part 2: Fourth-Wave Feminist Revival</i>	67
<i>Critique on Female Exploitation</i>	70
<i>Feminist Ownership of Exploitation, Sexualisation and Sensuality</i>	79
Exploitation Surrounding Showgirls: Final Thoughts	84
<i>Research Objectives</i>	84
<i>Recommendations</i>	85
<i>Contributions to Knowledge</i>	86
Bibliography	87
<i>Filmography</i>	93
<i>Figures</i>	93

**Stripping on Screen: An Exploration of Female Exploitation in Paul Verhoeven's
Showgirls (1995).**

Showgirls (Verhoeven, 1995) follows Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) as she navigates the underground adult entertainment dance industry of Las Vegas. Hailed as the first mainstream sexploitation film, and the first widely released NC-17 rated film in history, *Showgirls* hinges on presenting extreme female sexualisation and excess female nudity. Female exploitation is at the heart of Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995). The exploitation of women permeates through the film's pre-production, production, marketing, critical receptions and two revivals. The levels, extremities and intricacies of female exploitation in *Showgirls* is continually developing as the socio-political landscape regarding female sexualisation and contemporary feminism evolves.

Literature Review

The Sexualisation of Women: Feminist Debates

To gain a thorough understanding of female exploitation in and around *Showgirls*, feminist debates addressing the sexualisation and exploitation of women must be considered. Gill (2012) has written extensively regarding the sexualisation of women. Gill describes 'sexualisation culture' in media as 'the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses' (2012: 483). Growing 'sexualisation culture' in media is highlighted by many scholars across the field. Smith (2017) outlines two major camps concerning female sexualisation in contemporary culture which has created a 'feminist

struggle' (2017: 293). On one side, commentators such as Dines and Long (2011) discuss the 'pornification' of contemporary society. They argue that sexualisation of women in media 'perpetuates myths of women's unconditional sexual availability and object status'. Dines and Long believe that this impedes social equality for women. By contrast, third-wave feminists view female sexualisation as a core aspect of post-feminist ideologies which are rooted in self-ownership and empowerment (Gill, 2007; Jackson; Vares, 2011). Feminists adopting this viewpoint can be understood as 'libertarian feminists'. Ann Ferguson (1984) labels 'libertarian feminists' as feminists who support any sort of consensual sexuality that brings the participants pleasure, including the sexualisation of themselves (1984: 107). Whilst this approach has been labelled in several different ways, third wave, 'libertarian', contemporary and fourth-wave feminists unify in their advocacy of female pleasure and sexuality. Adopting a more positive attitude towards female sexualisation compared to prior feminist waves, third-wave and fourth-wave feminism firmly believes that sexuality is a form of female power (Choi et al, 2016: 827; Gill; Arthus, 2006; Krolokke; Sorensen, 2006; Holt; Cameron, 2010). Since discourse surrounding *Showgirls* spans several decades, feminist viewpoints have shifted and altered accordingly. However, current academic work surrounding the film fails to adequately apply these shifts in feminist stances in relation to perceived female exploitation within the film.

Film Pre-Production and Production

Scholarly discourse surrounding *Showgirls* is severely lacking regarding its pre-production and production. As the first NC-17 blockbuster film, a detailed exploration of *Showgirls*' pre-production and production will significantly enhance academic literature surrounding censorship in cinema and the impacts and logistics of shooting intimate scenes. According to Bucher (2018), there is a plethora of academic literature surrounding the effects of watching

sex and female nudity on screen, but little exploring how it is produced. Bucher states how to effectively shoot nude scenes logistically but does not explore the practice in relation to a case study. The industrial practices and treatment of nude actresses and actors should be academically researched. However, this is an extremely difficult subject matter to research due to the privacy and confidentiality of such events. The Screen Actors Guild publish their nudity clauses put in place to protect performers in sexual or nude acts. Protocols such as closed sets, intimate scene riders and continuing consent throughout production are required for any signatory film (SAG-AFTRA, 2022). Despite this, there is sparse academic material assessing or evaluating SAG's nudity protocols. However, in recent years, several scholars have been prompted to thoroughly explore the roles and importance of intimacy coordination on set (Cobb; Horeck: 2018; Sorensen, 2021). These reports have been prompted by what Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck (2018) call the 'post-Weinstein' era following the #MeToo movement. Recent research addresses the logistics of filming and coordinating sex, nude and physically intimate scenes. However, this research remains relatively sparse for a valuable aspect of industrial film practices.

Advertisement and Marketing

Creating a unique marketing strategy, *Showgirls* proved that NC-17 films, with the controversial subject matter of female stripping, could be successfully advertised to wider audiences. As the first NC-17 blockbuster film to receive a wide release, *Showgirls* needed to follow a unique marketing strategy as censorship of the film's content made many traditional forms of advertising unavailable (Scheers, 1997). Various scholars outline the barriers which industry professionals of the time assumed *Showgirls* would face (Sandler, 2001; Scheers, 1997). Sandler has written extensively regarding Hollywood's history with making and advertising X-rated movies. His article 'The Naked Truth: "Showgirls" and the Fate of the

X/NC-17 Rating' (2001) extensively details *Showgirls*' place in the history of the NC-17 rating system alongside marketing strategies used to promote the film. Sandler navigates the history of rebranding the lowbrow X-rating into NC-17 due to the stigma surrounding X-rated films and connotations with pornography. In 1990, the NC-17 rating replaced the X-rating with hopes that this would shake negative connotations of adult content. Sandler's article explores how *Showgirls*' mainstream release was considered hopeful to the NC-17 rating; potentially proving that NC-17 rated films could be economically viable. The article breaks down innovative marketing strategies employed by the film such as releasing a home video trailer, launching a website and publicity stunts pulled by actors within television interviews. Sandler's work is invaluable when researching the marketing of *Showgirls*. Aside from Sandler, there are relatively few researchers providing a breakdown of *Showgirls*' promotional strategies despite the film being a landmark in promoting adult content to the mainstream. The marketing moves most referenced in scholarship include the 8-minute home video rental trailer and Berkley's lap dancing stunt in David Letterman's late-night show (Scheers, 1997; Veenstra, 2002). It is likely that researchers are drawn to these specific promotional strategies due to the brashness and unapologetically publicly erotic nature of both exploits. However, these promotional stunts are rarely expanded upon or analysed. Additionally, many other marketing moves such as the poster design, trailer editing, and uniquely designed website are overlooked. Despite Sandler's dexterous analysis of *Showgirls*' marketing there is a significant gap in the wider literature.

Whilst Sandler successfully analyses the effectiveness of *Showgirls*' promotional strategies, there is little textual analysis of the promotional materials. The marketing strategies used by MGM/UA to promote the female stripper sensationalism within *Showgirls* lean on techniques used by classic sexploitation films and X-rated pornography. Schaefer (2003), one of the

leading scholars in sexploitation cinema, states that *Showgirls* is ‘undoubtedly’ a sexploitation film. Whilst Schaefer’s work is seminal in laying the groundwork surrounding broader sexploitation cinema, he rarely delves into the marketing of the genre. However, Gorfinkel (2012) has published substantial scholarship surrounding female nudity within sexploitation films in relation to film promotion. Analysing her work, clear links can be established between sexploitation films and *Showgirls*’ promotional material. Within her article ‘The Body’s Failed Labour: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema’, Gorfinkel establishes how female nudity is the central component of sexploitation cinema’s box office success as a promotional lure. Despite Gorfinkel’s work centring around classic American sexploitation cinema of the mid-1960’s, her analysis and conclusions can be reassessed in relation to *Showgirls*. The focus on female nudity can be directly applied to *Showgirls*’ promotional material, which links directly to its female stripping narrative. The film was marketed on the promise of sexual nudity as a form of sexploitation from young actress Berkley. Building on this, promotional materials draw inspiration from and evoke connections with X-rated pornography. There has been limited research exploring the clear links between pornography and film’s publicity stunts such as the explicit video rental trailer and the online website featuring nude stills from the film. It will be valuable to delve into the influence of and the impact which pornography, sexploitation films and the overarching topic of female stripping lent to *Showgirls*’ advertisement and marketing.

Initial Reception

Academic material surrounding the initial reception of *Showgirls* overwhelmingly covers the slandering and victimisation of Berkley following the initial release of the film. Most scholarly discourse surrounding this topic paints Berkley as the helpless victim of Verhoeven and screen-writer Ezsterhas’ defective direction. Lippit (2003) states that Berkley was

unfairly at the centre of the film's 'critical devastation'. In defence of Berkley, most texts pin the blame on Verhoeven and Eszterhas (Noriega, 2003). Popular academic discourse claim that *Showgirls* ruined Berkley's career on the silver screen. Many draw connections between Berkley's failing career and the film's failure (Burch, 2003). A prominent discourse of the time centred around Berkley being chosen 'for what she would show' rather than acting talent (Berardinelli, 1995). Examples of this include Berkley being described within initial film reviews as 'a shiny new toy' (Maslin, 1995) in the *New York Times*, and leaving 'very little' to '[give] the audience at least a peek at' (Berardinelli, 1995). Noreiga (2003) suggests that audiences did not make the distinction between Berkley and her stripper character Nomi; allowing disdain for the character to bleed across. There is a gap in academic literature drawing connections between misogynistic discourses surrounding female sexuality and *Showgirls*' initial reception.

Cult Revival and Repositioning

Most academic content surrounding *Showgirls* centres around its cult revival and repositioning (Mathijs; Mendik, 2008; Sandler, 2001; Salvato, 2006). *Showgirls* found a distinct fanbase after being repositioned as high camp on the midnight movie circuit. There is a plethora of scholarly material regarding cult audiences, midnight movie screenings and camp cinema which often draws on *Showgirls* as an example. *Showgirls* is an example of 'naïve camp', as distinguished by Susan Sontag (2008). 'Naïve camp' is defined by works attempting to create something serious but are recoded by audiences as camp. Often these works contain extravagance, passion and ambition, hence lend themselves to camp readings. Sontag argues that time plays an important role in the formation of 'naïve camp'. She explains that time provides audiences with the distance to reassess a text and appreciate it as camp. Sontag provides an insightful eye over the idea of 'naïve camp' which can be utilised

to help understand the repositioning of *Showgirls*. Many scholars explore the idea of *Showgirls* drawing in camp audiences. Mathijs and Mendik (2008) describe *Showgirls* as a ‘cover up’ cult film hiding homosexual tendencies within its content which is dug up and celebrated by camp audiences. Midnight movie screenings are a staple of camp cult cinema, championing flamboyant films, audiences and providing a space for countercultural collectives to exercise ritualistic fan behaviours (Mathijs; Sexton, 2011). Various authors have explored how *Showgirls* has been repositioned as camp by both the studio and audiences. Sandler (2001) explains that following its failure as a straight film, but finding success as ‘naïve camp’, MGM/UA relaunched *Showgirls* as high camp into theatres. Leaning into traditional ritualistic midnight movie traditions, such as audience participation, the studio hired drag performers to hand out scripts cueing audience participation for certain lines and encouraged audiences to lap dance, gyrate and thrust at pinnacle moments. Verhoeven was not consulted on the release, however despite confessing that ‘this kind of ritualistic cult popularity isn’t what [he] intended’ it was ‘like the resurrection after crucifixion’. Nick Salvato (2006) explores the term ‘tramping’ as the concept of queer parody in the hands of viewers rather than the studio. Salvato makes specific reference to homosexual writer and performance artist David Schmander’s ‘annotated screenings’ of *Showgirls*. Schmander’s shows provided a camp commentary of the film for a live audience. Late night screenings of the film re-labelled as ‘Showgirls: The Best Movie’ is another camp event highlighted by Salvato. His analysis of the event explores how the film screening incorporated camp sensibilities through stripper poles being placed around the venue, ‘gay anthems’ played overhead, and the event being hosted by a local drag queen.

In 2003, ‘Film Quarterly’ published a ‘Round Table’ of academic discussions surrounding *Showgirls*. Numerous leading scholars in the cult film field, such as Schaefer and Sconce lent

their angles on the film. Schaefer explores the film regarding sexploitation cinema and Sconce recalls how multiple viewings of *Showgirls* dramatically develops analytical readings. Despite this round table including a variety of scholars discussing the film regarding its cult status, the discussions are extremely short and lack elaboration. Whilst this journal article provides discussions surrounding public perceptions of the film and its recoding through camp readings, the arguments fail to provide distinctive viewpoints. Schaefer's contribution is a standout piece due to its individual outlook, alongside Lippit's comparison between *Showgirls* and 'pornodramas'. However, many arguments put forth by researchers lack an original stance. For example, Noriega, Osterweil and Williams all discuss the camp recoding of the film, an important but not revolutionary discussion. As outlined, there is ample academic material surrounding the camp repositioning of *Showgirls* which can be pulled from when analysing the film's revival. Whilst many texts explore how *Showgirls* was repositioned as camp cult cinema, there is little research regarding why. Often literature suggests that *Showgirls* is only repurposed as a cult classic due to its extravagance and 'so-bad-its-good' content. However, the film's intrinsic ties with female exploitation should be considered as a major factor. Mathijs and Sexton (2011) outline that camp, failure and transgressive topics lend themselves to cult cinema followings. Hence, greater research analysing how *Showgirls*' varying levels of female exploitation relates and resonates with cult audiences will shine a unique light on the heavily researched area.

No academic work currently explores the second-wave revival of *Showgirls* which celebrates female ownership of sexualisation from a fourth-wave feminist standpoint. Several journalists (Montgomery, 2020; Evelyn, 2020) have called attention to a shift in appreciation of *Showgirls* as a feminist text propelled by cultural shifts in the 'post-Weinstein era' of media.

However, the formation of this second-wave revival is yet to be considered in the academic field.

Chapter 1

'Leave Your Inhibitions at the Door': Pre-production and Production

Despite *Showgirls* being the first widely released NC-17 rated film, little to no research has been conducted surrounding the pre-production and production of the film. This is likely due to the film's pre-production and production being difficult to research with sparse evidence documenting the process. However, critically analysing media coverage of production of the time alongside interviews with the cast and crew will help to build an understanding of the pre-production and production of *Showgirls*. This is critical in evaluating female exploitation in the film. As the first mainstream sexploitation film, *Showgirls* provides a complex case study for feminist scholars. Debates surrounding female exploitation within *Showgirls*' pre-production and production are made evident from comparisons between the film and its sexploitation predecessors. The casting of Berkley raises questions regarding the exploitation of young actresses when compared to castings of young actresses in 'classic' sexploitation films. Additionally, actress Ravera has made allegations against director Verhoeven regarding the mistreatment and poor intimacy coordination on set during production.

The First NC-17 Rated Blockbuster

The NC-17 rating was created in 1990 by the MPAA as a softer, more conformist alternate of the X-rating. Over several years, the X-rating had built a strong association with deeply explicit content. In the public mind, X-rated content was synonymous with pornography and exploitation films (Scheers, 1997: 267). The X-rating was an issue for Hollywood films featuring adult content. Whilst the lower R-rating allowed those under 17 to consume violent, nude and sexual content under the accompaniment of a parent or guardian, the X-rating restricted under 17's from watching its content. The MPAA marked brutal, explicit or sadistic

violence, nudity and sexual content as X-rated. The X-rating was intended as protecting under 17's from exposure of potentially harmful material (Vaughn, 2006: 64).

As the X-rating was untrademarked, pornographic films began to heavily use the X-rating label as promotion without official ratings from the MPAA. Quickly, during the 1970s pornography claimed the X-rating as a label of extreme smut. Many pornography publishers adopted using double-X or triple-X as an unofficial certificate, suggesting their work as more extreme than the official X-rating (Talbird, 2009: 170). Due to the X-rating certificate becoming so vastly shrouded in associations with vulgar erotica, the certificate label had become harmful to the reception of all X-rated films regardless of their content. Many theatres and advertisers refused to be associated with any X-rated products (Vaughn, 2006: 67). This was an issue for the economic interests of the film industry. As Maltby (1995) argues, the film industry maximises its economic profits by appealing to mass audiences through family-friendly content within mainstream films. Sandler notes that the 'general view' within the film industry was that 'while nobody quite knows what draws an X-rating, it is something to avoid' (2001: 72). Hence, in 1990 the X-rating was rebranded to NC-17. Distancing itself from its predecessors' soiled reputation, the NC-17 rating was intended as a fresh start for Hollywood films featuring adult content. The MPAA ensured to trademark the NC-17 rating with hopes of preventing the adult film industry from soiling its fresh reputation (Vaughn, 2006: 208).

Showgirls holds its place in history as the first widely released NC-17 rated film (Weinraub, 1995: 3). The film was a unique and risky proposal for film studios. Producing a large budget NC-17 rated film would instantly diminish a large proportion of potential viewers and profit. However, in the mid-90's, director Verhoeven and writer Eszterhas had produced a string of profitable mainstream films. Their most recent release, *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992), had

grossed \$350 million dollars at the US domestic box-office (Simkin, 2013: 79). Hence, as Sandler states, Verhoeven felt he had 'earned the right' to demand final cut on a controversially rated film (2001: 77). Verhoeven has outlined the pre-production process, stating that he was not willing to adjust *Showgirls* to reach a more 'respectable' R-rating. Whilst making *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven recalls 'going back to the MPAA 300 times' and continuously editing down the film to fit into the R-rating standards demanded by the production studio. Pitching *Showgirls*, Verhoeven was no longer willing to adjust the film to adhere to industry standards (Sandler, 2001: 77). After several pitches to various studios, *Showgirls* was purchased by MGM/UA. Uniquely, MGM/UA was the only MPAA member not publicly owned, hence, this gave the production company a degree of freedom to distribute controversial material. The studio had not had a recent box-office hit and believed that an NC-17 rated film would generate substantial controversy and profit. MGM/UA agreed to contractually hand over the final cut of *Showgirls* to Verhoeven. This disrupted years of standardized Hollywood practices by releasing NC-17 rated adult content as a mainstream blockbuster film (Sandler, 2001: 77).

Mainstream Sexploitation

Despite the newly formed NC-17 rating attempting to distance itself from negative connotations of pornography, *Showgirls* was seemingly always envisioned as a form of exploitation. Sexploitation films are historically synonymous with pornography as a branch of exploitation film focusing on depicting sexual transgressions through plots which function to present maximum nudity and sexual content (Gorfinkel, 2017: 7). Since its release, *Showgirls* has been hailed, and scorned, by many as a sexploitation film. The design and essence of *Showgirls* takes familiar tropes and fundamental characteristics of sexploitation films. Excess sexualized female nudity, exaggeration and stereotypes are all found within

Showgirls. Additionally, the film incorporates the longstanding sexploitation trope of a woman who moves to the big city and falls into the world of sex work (Gorfinkel, 2017: 155). Influential exploitation film scholar Eric Shaefer states that *Showgirls* is ‘undoubtedly’ a form of sexploitation (2003: 42). Alongside thematic similarities, *Showgirls* also mirrors ‘classic’ sexploitation films due to its contextual positioning within the entertainment industry and censorship laws. Exploitation films exist on the margins of Hollywood. They capitalise on taboo subjects such as sex, drugs and disease (Mathijs; Mendik, 2011:7), which mainstream cinema could not do due to the restrictive PCA (Production Code Administration) setting the precedent for ‘harmless entertainment’ within Hollywood (Maltby, 1995). Sexploitation as a sub-genre is discussed extensively by Elena Gorfinkel within her book *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960’s* (2017). Providing a detailed historical framework, Gorfinkel pinpoints a spike in sexploitation films in the late 1950s as a result of relaxed censorship laws. In 1957, the New York State Board of Appeals ruled that nudity in film was acceptable in and of itself. This resulted in an influx of sexploitation films the following decade (2017: 7). This somewhat mirrors *Showgirls*’ pre-production. The 1950-60s sexploitation boom was a result of relaxed censorship rules, and *Showgirls* was a result of the newly formed NC-17 rating providing the industry hope that explicit adult content could be widely accepted into mainstream cinema. Both 1960s sexploitation films and *Showgirls* sprung from a shift in film industry and censorship rulings regarding the depiction of adult content on film.

Defining *Showgirls* as a sexploitation film immediately raises questions regarding its treatment of female characters, actresses and cultural standing regarding female exploitation. By nature, and by name, sexploitation films hinge on the exploitation of, typically, female nudity and sexuality. Sexploitation films have provided complex issues for feminists since

the genre's inception since they are generally produced by men for the male market (Cook, 1976: 123). This holds true in the case of *Showgirls*. There is some debate between whom the film was conceived for, however, it was undoubtedly marketed towards a heterosexual male audience. The sexploitation genre is difficult to approach from a critical feminist perspective since it is largely dependent on how the viewer approaches the text. Mask (2009) outlines the two contrasting dominant ways of approaching female sexploitation films: a misogynistic take, and a critical reading. Since sexploitation films often reinforce pro-masculinist and anti-feminist fantasies they can be understood as fuelling misogynistic logic that women deserve sexual mistreatment. However, sexploitation films can conversely be understood as a critique of heterosexual masculinity and female objectification (2009: 72, 78). These two contradicting readings exhibit that sexploitation films, and by extension *Showgirls*, cannot be understood as purely feminist or anti-feminist. Both arguments have been made for, and against, the creation of *Showgirls*. On the one hand, the film is understood as an exploitative film; with its male creators exploiting their female actresses and encouraging the sexual mistreatment of women (Dines; Long, 2011). Alternatively, on the other hand, the film has also been understood as a critique on female exploitation, specifically within the entertainment industry (Montgomery, 2020; Rose, 2020; Evelyn, 2020). Evaluating the decision to produce a mainstream sexploitation film and its relationship with female exploitation is inherently complex. For a well-rounded, thorough, exploration of female exploitation within *Showgirls* it is critical to approach the film from all angles.

Casting of Berkley

Elizabeth Berkley stars in *Showgirls* as the stripper-turned-showgirl character Nomi Malone. At the age of 22, *Showgirls* was a make-or-break role for the actress as her debut on the silver screen. Prior to *Showgirls*, Berkley was most renowned for her performance as teenager Jesse

St James on the family-friendly sitcom *Saved By the Bell* (NBC, 1989-1993). Berkley's dramatic shift in acting roles, from innocent child star to deviant stripper, was the topic of popular discourse during pre-production of *Showgirls*. It can be argued that Berkley was exploited by the creators of *Showgirls* due to her young age and inexperience in the industry. Connections can be made between Berkley's casting and the traditional casting of 'classic' sexploitation films. Gorfinkel (2012) extensively explores the potential issues with classical sexploitation cinema casting during the 1960s. In their article 'Body's Failed Labour: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema', Gorfinkel states that sexploitation producers would hire female casts with little acting experience. Gorfinkel addresses that due to these actresses being amateurs wanting to gain a foothold into the acting profession, they would often work for very little. Actresses were generally paid between \$50 - \$150 per day for a weekly shoot. The budgets for sexploitation films typically landed around \$10,000 - \$40,000 (2012: 84). It can be argued that this exploitative tactic of hiring amateur actresses was applied by the producers of *Showgirls*. Whilst Berkley had acted on television, she was by no means a household name. As her first role in a feature length film, similarly to actresses of sexploitation cinema, the film was a chance for her 'big break'. It is also important to consider the power dynamics between Verhoeven, Eszterhas and Berkley. The director and writer were highly successful, critically acclaimed and well established within the industry. Hence, this generated additional pressure to comply with the direction and instruction she was given on the film. Reflecting sexploitation actresses, Berkley was paid relatively little for her work. The film had a relatively modest \$40 million budget (Sandler, 2001: 77) but Berkley was only paid \$100,000 for her starring role. Berkley's acting fee was 5% of Verhoeven's reduced directing fee (Noriega, 2003: 38). Considering the strong connections between Berkley and sexploitation actresses, it can be argued that she was exploited, so some degree, by the film's production.

A Sacrificial Lamb: The Case of Gina Ravera

Despite theories of exploitation regarding her casting, evidence suggests that Berkley felt comfortable and had a positive experience on set. In multiple interviews, ranging from 1995 to 2020, Berkley has expressed what a positive environment shooting the film was (Luaine, 1995; Romano, 2015; Okwodu, 2020). However, despite a seemingly positive experience on set from Berkley, this did not apply for the wider cast. Actress Gina Ravera criticised Verhoeven in 2020 for a lack of health, safety and ethical intimacy co-ordination within *Showgirls*. Ravera portrayed Nomi's kind-hearted friend Molly. Molly is arguably the only honest and 'pure' character within the film. Ravera was one of the only female actresses within the film not required to perform nude. However, she starred in the film's most infamous, controversial, and brutal scene. In a pivotal scene, which will be narratively and thematically explored in greater detail in the following chapters, Molly is violently gang raped.

Sexually violent scenes are commonplace within the sexploitation film genre. However, as Schaefer discusses within his article 'The Problem with Sexploitation Movies', it is difficult to research the logistics and ethical care surrounding shooting such scenes. Typically, sexploitation films were disposable and disreputable, produced by companies which 'came and went' leaving little, to no, records (2012: 150 – 515). One aspect which Schaefer, and many other scholars addressing sexploitation films, typically overlook is the power dynamics between the films' creators and, often, young female stars. Gorfinkel addresses that sexploitation films often cast young actresses, nude models and/or sex workers for sexually explicit scenes. As discussed, the majority of sexploitation actresses were unknown names in the film industry with limited prior acting experience who were working to gain a foothold in

the industry (2012: 84). Hence, there were extremely unbalanced power-dynamics present within the sexploitation industry. Actresses put in potentially harmful or exploitative situations were not given a voice, or possibly feared questioning the actions of those in a drastically higher position who had vast influence on their career trajectory.

However, in recent history, movements such as #MeToo have assisted in bringing to light power abuse and misconduct within the entertainment industry. In what Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck call a 'post-Weinstein era', since 2017 there has been substantial scrutiny in screen industries regarding how sex, nudity and physical intimacy are scripted, acted and directed (2018). In recent years there has been renewed attention granted to historical cases of cast and crew mistreatment.

Despite distancing herself from the film following its release, Ravera addressed the controversial rape scene in 2020. Around this time, following 2017's spike in the #MeToo movement, numerous actors within the film industry were coming fourth with accusations of misconduct and mistreatment. Describing her character as a 'sacrificial lamb', Ravera reported filming the rape scene as a 'deeply unpleasant' nine-hour ordeal. According to Ravera, Verhoeven was extremely driven to create a realistic depiction of rape which resulted in him becoming 'very exuberant' in directing her male co-stars. This exuberance resulted in Ravera being physically violated whilst shooting the scene. The actress stated that she was unaware and not prepared for the mental and physical brutality of the scene. Vastly unprepared and unaware that the scene would involve physical stuns, Ravera remarks that the punch to her face made contact and 'went too far' resulting in her jaw becoming injured. She also gained multiple bruises across her body, particularly on her wrists from being held down. The actress revealed emotional trauma that filming the scene caused, remarking 'when you do a scene like that, your body doesn't know it's not real'. The only time Ravera reported

watching the film was at its initial premiere. She left during the rape scene ‘not [wanting] to see that for any reason’ (Alter, 2020).

Ravera’s experience filming the rape scene demonstrates the dangers of filming intimate scenes without appropriate handling or an intimacy coordinator. Following the 2017 #MeToo movement, in 2018 it became the industry standard and expectation for all television and film productions within the US to hire an intimacy coordinator. As Sorensen thoroughly details, intimacy coordinators choreograph and supervise scenes including sex, nudity and physical intimacy to ensure the safety, dignity and wellbeing of all cast and crew members (2021: 5). However, filmed in 1995, *Showgirls* did not have an intimacy coordinator. In a recent interview, Verhoeven stated that he has never employed intimacy coordinators. Instead, the director opts for three-to-four people on set. The few on set include himself, the director of photography, the assistant director and the script supervisor. Addressing the logistics of shooting intimate scenes, Verhoeven states that ‘[he] did [this] on *Basic Instinct*, *Black Book* (Verhoeven, 2006), *Showgirls* ... [they] always did [this]’ (MacNab, 2021). Disregarding the importance of a trained intimacy coordinator suggests little concern for those in potentially vulnerable positions during filming intimate scenes. Ravera’s interview highlights the crucial requirement for intimacy coordinators within the industry. Her accusations heavily suggest that she was not sufficiently prepared for the intensity, specific actions or brutality of the scene. Describing Verhoeven’s directing as ‘very exuberant’ implies that the director potentially acted beyond the script with little concern or consideration of the repercussions of his actions. The role of an intimacy coordinator is to avoid such experiences by creating a comfortable and professional environment whereby all practices and actions are transparent and rehearsed in advance (Sorensen, 2021: 5). Ravera’s experience on *Showgirls* provides a

case study of the mental and physical harm which can occur due to poor management of shooting intimate scenes without an intimacy coordinator.

In addition, Verhoeven exemplifies a resistance to change industry practices and embrace the demand for intimacy coordinators. Despite the vast shift in industrial practice and accusations made against him, to this day, Verhoeven refuses to hire intimacy coordinators. Recently speaking on his latest release, *Benedetta* (Verhoeven, 2021), the director stated that it would be ‘ridiculous’ to have intimacy coordinators on set; being unsure of what ‘[they] could add’. Verhoeven claimed that the actors themselves took on the roles of intimacy coordinators (MacNab, 2021). This belief exhibits a clear disregard for societal and industry demands for a reconsidered approach to shooting intimate scenes. In addition, several accusations regarding female exploitation and inappropriate handling of female actresses have been made against the director over his career. The most prominent example includes Sharon Stone accusing Verhoeven of ‘tricking’ her into shooting the infamous crossing her legs scene in *Basic Instinct* without underwear. Within her 2021 memoir, ‘The Beauty of Living Twice’, Stone claimed that the director asked her to remove her underwear as it was ‘reflecting the light poorly’ on camera, promising that no frontal nudity would be visible in the final cut of the film. Defending himself against this accusation, Verhoeven stated that ‘[his] memory is radically different from Sharon’s’. Stone stated that she would have benefited from an intimacy coordinator on set during the filming of such scenes (Neale, 2021). As a working director today, Verhoeven’s unwavering approach to shooting and directing intimate scenes demonstrates a stubborn attitude which persists within some aspects of the film industry.

As the first widely released sexploitation film, *Showgirls* shares thematic and industrial links with classic sexploitation which branches across into the potential exploitation of young

actresses. The casting of Berkley and treatment of Ravera on set both indicate mistreatment of young actresses in vulnerable positions within the industry.

Chapter 2

Selling Sex: Marketing and Promotion Strategies

Female sexualisation is at the forefront of all marketing material and promotional strategies for *Showgirls*. The levels of exploitation present within *Showgirls*' marketing depends upon personal positions within the feminist struggle concerning female sexualization within contemporary culture. Various marketing materials for *Showgirls* will be critically analysed from both viewpoints to gain a well-rounded understanding of the degrees of female exploitation at play.

NC-17 Rating Rebranding

Showgirls is a unique landmark in the history of film marketing. As the first NC-17 blockbuster film to receive a wide release, *Showgirls* needed to follow a unique marketing strategy as censorship of the film's content made many traditional forms of advertising unavailable (Scheers, 1997). Reservations surrounding the success of the film's advertising are rooted in Maltby's (1995) argument that the PCA set the precedence for 'harmless entertainment' within Hollywood. Various scholars outline the barriers which industry professionals of the time assumed *Showgirls* would face. Due to adult content and nudity within the film, it was commonly believed that television stations and newspapers would limit or refuse to advertise NC-17 rated content (Sandler, 2001: 78-80; Scheers, 1997: 270). In 1995, Executive President of Entertainment Data Inc, Phil Garfinkel, stated that the controversial NC-17 rating limited the options available for marketing. This was the case for the past 13 motion pictures which had been awarded the NC-17 certificate at this date. Gorfinkel states that television networks would limit NC-17 rated content promotional material to late-night hours and newspapers can, and had, refused to run advertisements for

NC-17 rated content (Puig, 1995b). The first newspaper to refuse advertisement of NC-17 rated films was *The Birmingham News*, which rejected promotions of the first NC-17 film *Henry and June* (Kaufman, 1990). The paper stated that they would refuse any future NC-17 rated film. The newspaper's marketing director believed that the NC-17 rating was 'not that far removed from X' and in an editorial, the newspaper firmly stated that 'smut was still smut' (Rohter, 1990). Hence, as one of the first NC-17 rated films, *Showgirls* faced limitations and pushback from traditional platforms. The marketing of *Showgirls* needed to employ innovative strategies to successfully promote the film beyond traditional Hollywood film marketing methods (Puig, 1995c). Like all Hollywood films, *Showgirls* was produced to reap profit from large audiences. However, since the NC-17 rating automatically excluded a large percentage of audiences, it was pivotal that the promotion of *Showgirls* successfully drew in a large adult audience (Sandler, 2001: 78). To recoup lost audiences, the promotional strategy of *Showgirls* was innovative, engaging and striking. As the first of its kind, there was no pre-established tried and tested promotional strategy for a mainstream NC-17 rated film. Hence, *Showgirls*' marketing materials encompassed a combination of traditional and innovative promotional methods.

Sandler has written extensively regarding Hollywood's history with making and advertising X-rated movies. His article 'The Naked Truth: "Showgirls" and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating' (2001) extensively details *Showgirls*' place in the history of the NC-17 rating system alongside marketing strategies used to promote the film. Sandler's work is the most extensive discussion of *Showgirls*' marketing to date. However, whilst his article delves into the history of the rating system in detail, a thorough textual analysis of the films' marketing materials is lacking. Analysing the promotional marketing material of *Showgirls* across a variety of sectors reveals clear links between the marketing of *Showgirls* and extreme mainstream

sexualisation of young women. *Showgirls*' marketing exemplifies what academics have termed as the 'pornification' of contemporary society (Dines; Long: 2011).

Showgirls' marketing methods can be divided into two categories: traditional marketing, and innovative marketing. Traditional marketing of *Showgirls* includes promotional posters, trailers and interviews with the cast and crew across various platforms. Innovative marketing methods of *Showgirls* notably includes the home video rental trailer and official *Showgirls* website.

Sex Sells: Traditional Marketing

As standard with most Hollywood mainstream films, *Showgirls* marketed itself through posters, trailers and interviews with the cast and crew. As the first NC-17 rated mainstream film, *Showgirls* tested the boundaries which mainstream film marketing could cross. Many industry professionals of the time believed that the film was unmarketable. Popular discourse was of the assumption that mainstream marketers would reject promoting adult rated content. However, contrary to popular expectations, marketing materials of *Showgirls* were accepted by the majority of distributors (Sandler, 2001: 78).

Many were of the assumption that American television stations would not advertise X-rated, or NC-17 rated content. However, this was a common misconception since the four major television broadcasters operated on a case-by-case basis regarding adult content advertisement slots. The only major television station to refuse advertising *Showgirls*' trailer was NBC. In the US, the trailer aired on all other major television stations past 10pm. Despite NBC refusing to host the trailer on their main channel, the station did grant access to their owned affiliates to air the trailer of their own accord (Sandler, 2001: 78). For theatrical release, the film's marketing team created various edits of the trailer designed for specific

audiences. As is common with most adult rated films, a red-band and green-band trailer were commissioned for theatrical release. The green-band trailer allowed the film to be promoted to all audiences within theatres regardless of age. The green-band trailer excluded explicit dialogue and imagery but nonetheless leant into the film's NC-17 rating. Two theatrical green-band trailers were released to wider audiences, a teaser trailer followed by an official trailer. The 30 second 'family friendly' teaser trailer leant heavily into public controversies surrounding the film and its NC-17 rating. The teaser promised 'a movie event so erotic ... so controversial ... that we can't show you a thing ... not even the title'. Unconventionally not revealing the title was a tongue and cheek nod to the censorship of the films' material. This also plays into the 'buzz' surrounding the film. Viewers are encouraged to uncover the mystery and create discourse surrounding what film is being advertised. Playing into the idea that the films' content is too sexual to be shown, the teaser does not show any video footage. The only visual imagery from the film is three still images of Berkley scantily dressed licking the stripper pole. This places an immediate core focus on explicit female stripping as central to the film and its NC-17 rating. Ironically, this goes against what the NC-17 rating was initially designed for. Rather than rebranding the NC-17 rating away from pornographic, erotic imagery *Showgirls* labelled it highly erotic with pornographic features within its first 30 second teaser trailer.

The consequent trailers follow suit. All trailers for *Showgirls* hinge on extreme eroticism as their selling points. The official green-band and red-band trailer promoting *Showgirls* both follow identical narratives. The trailers are extremely similar, following similar structures, voice overs and a cross-over of clips used to promote the film. Both trailers advertise a highly erotic, deviant, and seductive film. The only difference between the trailers is female nudity and an additional 30 seconds afforded to the red-band cut. Both trailers include identical

voice overs and text cards but vary slightly in their selected scenes. Whilst the majority of shots remain identical, the red-band trailer features shots including topless nudity from several actresses which are absent within the green-band trailer. Comparing the trailers side-by-side reveals distinct differences in the levels of sexualisation and nudity during the same voice over shots (Figures 1-2). The additional 30 seconds stitched onto the end of the trailer



Figure 1: Verhoeven (1995). Showgirls' green-band trailer with a modest shot of Gershon [trailer still]



Figure 2: Verhoeven (1995). Showgirls' red-band trailer, same moment but a nude reveal shot of Gershon [trailer still]

delves deeper into the NC-17 rated content with intensified erotic imagery, particularly featuring scenes set within the Cheetah Club. The theatrical trailers hinge on erotic imagery whilst also creating a blurring of distinction between the actresses and their characters. Several self-referential lines are included within both trailers. Notably Gina Gershon, as her character Cristal, says to Berkley's Nomi 'we take the cash, we cash the cheque, we show them what they want to see'. This line relates to the characters and their actresses equally. Whereas Cristal and Nomi strip on stage as entertainment, Gershon and Berkley strip on film as entertainment. The self-referential quality to this poignant line puts film viewers in the shoes of the Cheetah Club and Stardust Hotel show clientele. It suggests that the actresses will show anything and everything for audience members.

Evidently, 'pornification' and extreme erotic imagery of female characters is paramount to the trailers' marketing methods. The trailers also hinge on self-referentially addressing

controversies surrounding the film's NC-17 rating and blur the boundaries between nude performances from its female actresses and the characters they portray.

Similarly, *Showgirls*' poster centres wholly around female nudity and the objectification of Berkley. The poster for *Showgirls* predominantly features Berkley's nude middle torso and cascading leg stepping out from a strategically placed black robe (Figure 3). All focus is

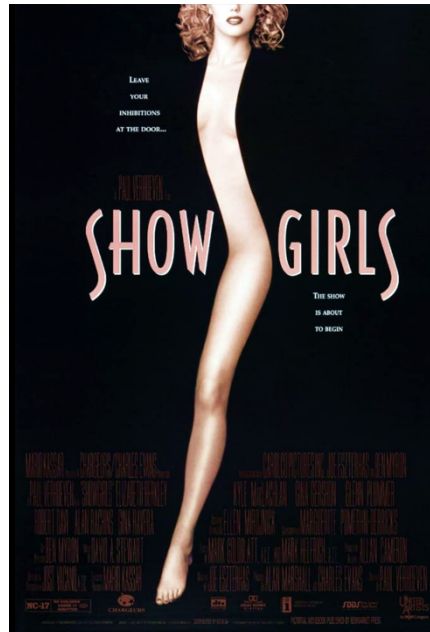


Figure 3: MGM/UA (1995). The tactfully tasteful official poster for *Showgirls* [promotional poster]

placed upon Berkley's body within this poster. This is emphasised by half of her face being cut out of frame to only reveal her painted lips. Cutting Berkley's full face from the poster places full emphasis on her body and transforms the actress into a faceless object. The objectification of Berkley is reinforced by her name not being included within the poster. Unlike the majority of films, *Showgirls* does not promote its lead actors' names within its poster. The only name advertised within the poster is director Verhoeven. The poster design carefully walks the line between revealing and suggestive. Whilst no full-frontal nudity is explicitly exhibited, Berkley's nude body is teased as emerging from under her robe out of the darkness. This directly places female stripping and strip tease as central to the film. The black robe within the poster creates negative space which swamps the majority of the image.

The dark black creates high contrast within the composition of the poster which creates two core focuses: Berkley's body and the film's title. The film's title is presented in a nude, dusky pink which reflects Berkley's skin tone. Again, this colour palette brings the films' focus back to the nude female body. *Showgirls'* minimalistic poster places core emphasis on the nude body and objectification of Berkley. It suggests that these factors are pivotal to the film, its values and narrative.

Despite its controversial subject matter, *Showgirls'* poster was accepted by many advertisement slots and companies. Film posters are an example of intrusive outdoor advertising. As a form of advertising, viewers are not complicit in choosing to engage with a film poster placed in a public space (Rosewarne, 2009: 9). Hence, *Showgirls'* poster is heavily suggestive rather than explicit in order to be publicly exhibited. Aside from a few large newspaper publications, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Sun Times* and the *New York Times*, refusing to print *showgirls'* promotional poster based on its advertisement of inappropriate content, the majority of advertisers deemed the poster suitable. The poster design carefully walks the line between revealing and suggestive, hence, most companies accepted the advertisement as inoffensive. The poster was plastered across America on outdoor banners, airplanes, taxi panels, bus shelters and in large print over Times Square and Venice Beach (Sandler, 2001: 80). *Showgirls'* film poster is a perfect example of how to successfully promote NC-17 rated content to mainstream audiences in print.

Various interviews across multiple media platforms reveal how the narrative focus on female stripping influenced the promotion of *Showgirls*, relationships between the creators and studio and the exploitation of Berkley. It is custom for major mainstream released films to promote and market themselves via interviews with the cast and crew. Often, top-billed cast will be interviewed by magazines, newspapers, radio stations and television shows. *Showgirls*

was no exception. Despite its NC-17 rating, the film was promoted by its cast and crew across a variety of media platforms. In some cases, interviews were conducted by publishers who refused other forms of marketing by the film. For example, whilst the *New York Times* refused to print *Showgirls*' poster as advertisement, the newspaper conducted an interview with the films' creatives. An area not yet explored by scholars are the various magazine and newspaper interviews with the cast and crew of *Showgirls*. These interviews exhibit how the film was marketed, alongside unique relations between the cast and crew regarding the film. In February 1995, the *New York Times* published an on-set interview with director Verhoeven, writer Esterhaus and co-producer of the film, Frank Marshall. This interview concerns itself predominantly with the notorious NC-17 film rating. It uses the controversial rating as an avenue to market the film. The article claims that the NC-17 rating 'guaranteed' many theatres would not show the film, and many publications would not advertise it (Grimes, 1995: 1). Despite this not being the case, the mystique and allure surrounding watching a presumed inaccessible NC-17 rated film is a major marketing tactic. Within the interview, Verhoeven is championed for his visionary erotic directing style and boundary pushing of the adult rating. However, the director claims that he is 'not a crusader' simply 'too amoral to care' about confining to a lower rating. Verhoeven's response paints himself, and the film, as transgressive, unfiltered, and potentially corrupt. It suggests to readers that *Showgirls* will be an uncensored erotic thrill. The article advertises *Showgirls* as a film in which 'nearly all of the female characters' spend their time on camera fully nude (Grimes, 1995: 20). Again, the marketing of the film pivots back around to sexualised female nudity. Uniquely, co-producer of the film, Marshall, goes against the marketing grain when questioned about the NC-17 rating. Marshall states that the film will not necessarily gain an NC-17 rating. Whilst there is copious nudity, Marshall reveals that the film does not contain a great deal of sex or violence. Eszterhas immediately shuts down this claim, commenting that

the lap dance scenes ‘look like an NC-17 to [him]’ (Grimes, 1995: 20). This brief moment provides an insight into the relations between creatives and the studio production regarding the advertisement of *Showgirls*. Whilst creatives of the film, such as Verhoeven and Eszterhas, relentlessly marketed *Showgirls* as adult rated hardcore erotic sensationalism, the film’s co-producer was less inclined to push this discourse. Reading this exchange at face-value, this may be due to studio producers fearing that an NC-17 rated label would damage sales. Additionally, there may be a greater level of self-awareness from studio producers regarding the film’s sexuality and a desire to manage expectations from audiences. With few actual sex scenes within the film, *Showgirls*’ highly erotic marketing and emphasis on its NC-17 rating ran the danger of mismarketing itself and disappointing audiences. However, critically reading this exchange, it could be conceived as a marketing ploy to create the image of a controversial turbulent relationship between the film’s creatives and studio. Either way, this interview with the New York Times demonstrates *Showgirls*’ marketing as hinging on the formidable NC-17 rating as a result of extreme female eroticism.

One of the most prolific interviews in the marketing of *Showgirls* was Berkley’s appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS, 1993-2015). Notably, Berkley performed a lap dance on Letterman in front of the large studio audience. Many scholars who address the marketing of *Showgirls* mention this interview in passing as an example of the heavily sexual marketing employed by the film (Sandler, 2001: 82; Nayman, 2014; Rosewarne, 2019). However, alongside providing an example of erotic marketing, this interview questions the depiction, reception, and treatment of Berkley within the marketing campaign. As one of America’s most watched television shows, *The Late Show with David Letterman* aired on CBS at prime time. As America’s second most watched late-night show, Letterman’s show averaged 4.7 million viewers in 1995 (Molla; Leightner; Tovar, 2015). Hence, his show

contributed to, and demonstrates, the mainstream public discourse and perceptions surrounding *Showgirls* and Berkley. Berkley's Letterman interview is fixated purely on her nudity and sexual transgressions within the film. Berkley is objectified from her introduction, with Letterman stating, 'I hope she makes a nice entrance – really looking forward to it'. Despite being dressed extremely moderately, with a knee length skirt and reserved jumper, as Berkley walks on stage she is met with wolf-whistles from across the audience as the in-house band plays a cover of 'I Touch Myself' by the Divinyls. Berkley is immediately established by the show as a sexual object before she has even sat down. Within the interview, despite Berkley's best efforts to revert conversation to the film's narrative, interview questions circle around to her nudity within the film. Less than one minute into the interview, unprovoked, Letterman bluntly asks 'are you naked in this movie?'. This question elicits cheers throughout the studio audience. Letterman also asks Berkley if her family have seen *Showgirls*, questioning if she is concerned about her parents watching the film. Asking these questions reinforces the belief that female stripping and nudity is shameful. It also draws attention to Berkley's young age and positions her nudity within the film as transgressive. Objectification of Berkley is continued throughout. Her words are often twisted by Letterman to revert to her sexual nudity. For example, Letterman asks around the details and logistics of shooting nude scenes for a large crew of, in his words, 'sloppy fat guys'. This comedic, but significant, description of the crew paints the production of *Showgirls* in viewers' mind as sleazy and low brow. However, Berkley praises the production crew for making her feel comfortable and at ease during her nude scenes. She innocently proclaims that she was 'appreciated by the crew'. This poor choice of words is immediately twisted by the host and played for laughs regarding the objectification of Berkley on set. The interview concludes with a clearly pre-planned publicity stunt whereby Berkley lap dances on Letterman. The stunt begins with Berkley placing her hand on Letterman's knee and asking

him if he has ever been lap danced before. She describes lap dancing as ‘about seduction and power’ whereby ‘a woman is paid to seduce and turn a man on’. Due to censorship of the show, the lap dance in question is extremely tame. Berkley simply sits on Letterman’s knee and gently grinds up and down for a mere second (Figures 4-5). Almost immediately,



Figure 4: CBS (1995). Berkley channels Nomi by offering to give Letterman a lap dance as she stokes his knee [TV still]



Figure 5: CBS (1995). Lap dancing live on the Late Show, there is barely a distinction between Berkley and Nomi [TV still]

Letterman screams ‘that’s enough right there!’, playing the part of an over aroused client.

There are interesting dynamics at play within this interview between Berkley, Letterman, and the character of Nomi. Within the question-and-answer section of the interview Letterman, and his show, are in complete control. Berkley is repeatedly objectified through a tunnel vision focus on her nudity. However, power-dynamics switch once the interview shifts into the lap dance segment. As an orchestrated stunt, Berkley adopts the character of Nomi. Suddenly, the actress is in great control; completely navigating the direction of the interview. Berkley, acting as Nomi, utilises stripper and seduction tactics such as gently touching their ‘client’ to initiate physical contact. Additionally, Berkley’s description of lap dancing describes the act as providing women power over men being seduced. The blurring of distinction between Berkley and Nomi within this interview result in a lack of awareness between the actress and character. It blurs the lines between Berkley acting as a female stripper, and Berkley providing sexual eroticism for the film. This is reinforced by Berkley’s description of lap dances consisting of women being paid to sexually arouse men. Her lap dance definition applies to how she was advertised, as an actress, regarding the film.

Evidently, ‘pornification’ and extreme female sexualisation are at the root and center of *Showgirls*’ traditional advertisements. Trailers, posters and interviews for the film all hinge on predominantly Berkley’s nude body and sexual portrayal of a stripper. Levels of exploitation present within these marketing materials depends vastly on personal positionings within the contemporary ‘feminist struggle’ regarding female sexualisation.

Pornification: Innovative Marketing

Alongside traditional marketing methods, *Showgirls* employed innovative marketing techniques which saw the ‘pornification’ of visual content, its media platform and consumption. Due to the NC-17 rating creating barriers for the majority of the films’ material to many mainstream advertisement avenues, MGM/UA released their raunchiest advertisement materials via a home video rental trailer and online website. As an uncommon marketing strategy these innovative forms of promotion drew mass inspiration from the film’s subject matter of female stripping and its connotations with pornography. Utilising popular sites for pornography distribution, the home video trailer and online website heavily encouraged the private consumption of its content which hinged on sexual stimulation from voyeurism of the nude female body.

Showgirls’ home video rental trailer incorporates large elements of pornography distribution and consumption. The home video trailer’s distribution method encouraged private consumption and created essential media coverage and discourse surrounding the film. On September 11th, 1995, MGM/UA released their most provocative marketing footage of *Showgirls* within a home video rental trailer. Only 250, 000 copies of the video were produced and released to video rental stores 11 days prior to the films’ premiere. The video

trailer was available for home rental free-of-charge for anyone over the age of 18. The majority of major retail outlets, aside from Blockbuster video, stocked the trailer across America (Sandler, 2001: 78). Mike Caruso, a spokesman for Blockbuster, stated that they did not stock the trailer as it was considered ‘unacceptable material for public consumption’ (Holmstrom, 1995). Despite this, the home video trailer was a resounding success. Many stores requested additional orders after the high demand for the trailer. Video stores, such as Tower Video on Sunset Boulevard, reported a high-demand and excitable anticipation for the video trailers days before its release. The store sold-out of the video trailers its first day in store. One week following the home video trailers’ release, David Bishop, the Vice-President of MGM/UA Home Video division, reported that 130 additional video companies requested to stock the trailer. It was estimated that one week following its release, over 3 million consumers viewed the trailer (Puig, 1995). The distribution method of this trailer unequivocally draws connotations with home video pornography. In the mid 1990’s the majority of homes owned at least one video cassette player. Home video was the most popular form of pornography video consumption during this time. Home video pornography was a large business with an estimated 20% of typical video stores’ sales from adult films in the US. Video cassettes provided the perfect site for pornography production and distribution due to their low expense and ease of replication (Kleinhans, 2006: 157, 159). Hence, *Showgirls* releasing an NC-17 rated home video trailer draws immediate connotations with pornographic films. An executive from a rival studio hailed the video trailer a ‘brilliant move’. Within a *Los Angeles Times* article, the unnamed executive stated that ‘whether the customer picks up the tape or not, it holds the veneer of something special ... something that might be a little nasty’ (Puig, 1995b). This statement pinpoints the success of *Showgirls*’ video trailers. Simply releasing and distributing the trailer as a VHS vastly implies that the material is extreme to pornographic measures; being unsuitable for mainstream public

platforms. Its video cassette format informs consumers that the content within its tape is only suitable for private viewing at home. As a piece of home entertainment, reflecting properties and intentions of pornographic videos, *Showgirls*' home video trailer allows and encourages, viewers to consume, enjoy and engage with the content in various ways. Unlike traditional trailers distributed within theatres or broadcast on live television, the VHS trailer provides viewers with greater control and navigation. Viewers could pause, rewind, and replay the video at will. This facilitated using *Showgirls*' home video trailer as a piece of pornographic material for self-pleasure if the viewer desired. The video trailer successfully created public discourse which fed into an all-important 'buzz' sought out by films' marketing teams prior to release. The home video trailer generated interest, intrigue, and debate upon its release. The limited number of copies put the trailer in high demand which increased desirability for renting the video. Additionally, various conservative social groups protested the distribution of the video in mainstream stores. Morality in Media, a New York based media watchdog group, labelled the promotion 'brazen' and demanded that citizens should not be forced to face the 'crass effort to thrust sleaze and pornography of Las Vegas strip bars into local communities' (Puig, 1995). Despite backlash from several organisations, there were no official protests or repercussions for MGM/UA. Instead, the conservative retaliation seemingly benefitted *Showgirls*' promotion by creating greater media attention and providing free advertising.

The video trailer footage is undoubtedly the most sexually explicit content released within the film's marketing. The majority of *Showgirls* can be described as highly erotic, however scenes of gratuitous nudity and overt sexual acts veer into pornography. As anticipated, the trailer utilises many of the most pornographic scenes within *Showgirls*. Centring around female stripping and presenting its material in a pornographic light, the trailer heavily

features strip tease numbers from the Cheetah Club, nude performances at the Stardust Hotel and several lap dances throughout the film. The home video opens with multiple screens establishing that viewers must be aged 18 or above and repeatedly states that the video is for private home exhibition only (Figures 6-7). This immediately reinforces the mature nature of

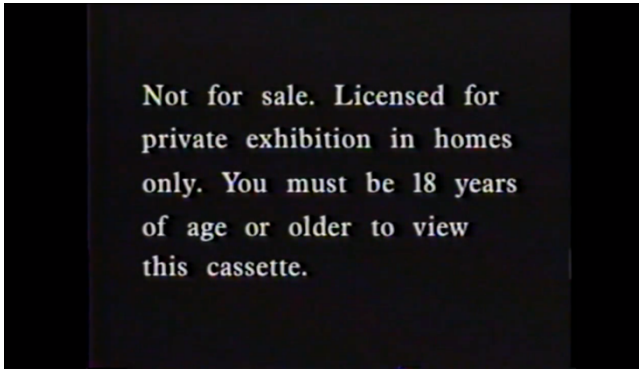


Figure 6: MGM/UA (1995). Words of caution, emphasising the adult nature and private use of the home-video trailer [video trailer still]

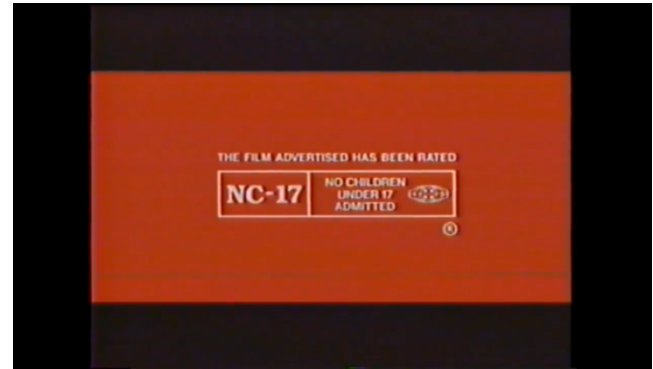


Figure 7: MGM/UA (1995). The NC-17 rating official notice [video trailer still]

the video and builds expectations for elicit adult content. The trailer is then afforded an introduction featuring the racy, high-energy techno music from the initial theatrical teaser trailer alongside a voice-over accompanying behind the scenes clips from shooting the film. The dramatic voice-over, typical of trailers from the time, stresses the ‘controversial’ nature of the film. It promises the following material to contain ‘6 minutes of the most erotic footage you will ever see’. This is accompanied by Verhoeven on set, hands on directing Berkley through sensual floorwork with her male dance partner. Interestingly, this scene acts as one of the most genuinely erotic materials produced by the film. Unlike the majority of *Showgirls*’ erotic scenes, which were relentlessly criticised upon release for their aggressive nature and uneroticism, the behind-the-scenes material is slow, intimate and feels genuine. Berkley’s nudity is implied by her loose, thin gown that teases the boundaries of full-frontal

nudity (Figure 8). The choreography between Berkley and her partner is sensual, seductive and their connection feels authentic (Figure 9).

Following the enticing opening, the trailer begins its 6-minute film preview. The preview differs from traditional film trailers by its timely runtime, unique pacing, and lack of disruption between clips. These elements position the film preview in-line with traditional pornography films opposed to standard film trailers. The trailer presents various uninterrupted scenes of female eroticism opposed to promoting the films' narrative. Whilst the teaser trailer outlines the majority of the film's plot, showing brief clips of major plot details in chronological order, these clips are fast-paced, direct and choppily edited. At several moments the narrative exploration is paused for prolonged scenes of lap dances, strip teases, and nude dance numbers unedited from the final film. This pacing places vast emphasis on the sexual voyeurism of female nudity opposed to the film's narrative. The unique pacing of the teaser trailer conforms with typical structures of pornography films opposed to film trailers. Often, adult films will place little time or emphasis on narrative and dedicate greater time to erotic imagery. *Showgirls*' home video trailer provides similar affordances to recreate experiences of watching a pornography film. Several scenes of extreme sexual nudity are lifted directly from the theatrical cut of the film with no editing. The trailer ensures that there is no disruption within erotic clips for viewers. Unlike standard



Figure 8: MGM/UA (1995). Verhoeven on set physically directing Berkley in an erotic Stardust dance number [video trailer still]



Figure 9: MGM/UA (1995). Genuine eroticism within the behind-the-scenes shots of shooting between Berkley and her dance partner [video trailer still]



Figure 10: Verhoeven (1995). *Extreme acts of sexual behaviours within the home-video trailer* [video trailer still]



Figure 11: Verhoeven (1995). *Looking straight down the lens of the camera, Berkley directs her performance directly at viewers at home* [video trailer still]



Figure 12: Verhoeven (1995). *Giving a show for viewers, James presents Berkley's breasts* [video trailer still]



Figure 13: Verhoeven (1995). *Giving a show for viewers, James presents Berkley's breasts* [video trailer still]

film trailers, the home video trailer has no voice-overs or text-cards within its film preview.

This creates complete immersion for viewers regarding the erotic imagery on screen.

Prolonged erotic scenes include Nomi's introductory strip dance number at the Cheetah and both of her lap dances with Zack and James. These scenes function to showcase Berkley's nudity and sex appeal. They are all scenes whereby Berkley, as Nomi, is stripping for men and/or men undressing her. Opposed to the authentic behind-the-scenes sensual shots used within the trailers' introduction, these scenes appear extremely choreographed for the camera.

Nomi strips, touches, and caresses herself looking almost directly down the camera lens (Figures 10-11) and James strips off her top in a manner which is intended as pleasuring viewers rather than himself (Figures 12-13). The eroticism is extremely aggressive and appears spurious in its design to sexually arouse viewers opposed to presenting seductive, intimate, and authentic acts between two characters. The emphasis on sexual voyeurism of

female nudity within the home video trailer demonstrates *Showgirls*' marketing hinging on the pornographic presentation of female sexuality.

Alongside the home-video rental trailer, MGM/UA also released an online website to promote the film. This online website adopted similar tactics as the home-video trailer by presenting itself as a platform for the most pornographic materials featured in the film. By 1995, the consumption of online media was gaining popularity and the internet was becoming a site for photographic pornography distribution and consumption (Attwood, 2010: 5-6; Paasonen, 2019: 1-2). Despite *Showgirls*' promotional website no longer being available, and no public archives accessible Sandler (2001) outlines its properties within his work. According to Sandler, the website comprised of nude stills of actresses within the film, 'interactive' text chats with the dancers and a link to the Playboy website. Like the home-video trailer, the online website encouraged private home viewing of its content. The website platform provides interactivity and self-navigation of its content. The website also allowed for explicit material to be easily accessed by those under the age of 18. The only barrier between underaged users and accessing the website was click box to confirm they are over 18. Whilst in theory this created a barrier to underaged users, in reality, the explicit content found on the website was widely available to all internet users regardless of age. The content of the website was based around promoting *Showgirls* in a pornographic manner. The nude stills of actresses and the link to Playboy both acted as a form of online porn consumption. The link to Playboy coincided with Berkley's feature within the October 1995 issue. Within the print issue of the magazine, Berkley's feature included full page photographs of her as Nomi in the Cheetah Club setting. The connection with Playboy indicate that *Showgirls*' promotion was targeting the same heterosexual male demographic as the pornographic magazine. The most unique feature of the website is the 'interactive' text chats with

performers. Whilst the specifics of this feature are unclear, 'interactive' engagement with dancers creates personal user engagement and suggests that the website was attempting to emulate the functions of sex work establishments to some degree. These features emulated various forms of sex work, from interacting with dancers at strip clubs or sex workers online. The 'interactive' text chats functioned to blur the distinctions between viewers of the website and clientele within the film.

Previously discussed arguments regarding female exploitation of sexual content apply to the methods of home-video trailer and online website. Depending on personal outlook, the sexualisation of actresses within *Showgirls*' marketing materials can be viewed as misogynistic and exploitative or an empowering element of third and fourth-wave feminist sensibilities. However, the creation of the home-video trailer and website evokes greater discussion surrounding the blurring of boundaries between Berkley, and other actresses within the film, as actresses or erotic entertainers. Whilst the blurring of boundaries between Berkley and Nomi is present within all forms of marketing for the film, it is particularly critical within the home-video trailer and website. The creation of the innovative marketing platforms questions the role which Berkley is playing as an actress and her autonomy in how she is presented. On multiple occasions, Berkley has expressed how enamoured she was with the script and the character of Nomi (Luaine, 1995; Romano, 2015; Okwodu, 2020). Since Berkley sought out the script, this suggests that she was comfortable and consenting to how she would be portrayed as an actress by the film. However, the home-video trailer and website eradicate any narrative context behind the erotic scenes. This removes Berkley's choice to be presented in a specific manner. The marketing presents Berkley, alongside her fellow cast, as pornographic stars by removing any narrative material. This is especially evident within the prolonged home-video trailer. Perceptions of the actresses as pornographic

entertainers is supported by the private platforms actively encouraging viewers to consume and use the material as pornographic material. The pornification of these marketing materials and its actresses could be considered exploitative. The editing of specific scenes and encouragement to engage with out of context sexual content in pornographic behaviours takes advantage of young women who chose to present themselves sexually for the creation of a specific vision by blurring the lines between actress and a sex work entertainer.

Marketing and promotional materials for *Showgirls* all hinged solely on erotic objectification of the film's female actresses. Viewer reception and feminist stances of these materials depends entirely on personal positionings within the feminist struggle around contemporary female sexualisation. All marketing materials blur the boundaries of distinction between the actresses and their characters. This raises questions regarding the roles and potential exploitation of the actresses as actors, sex workers, or both.

Chapter 3

'An Open-Mouthed Sex Doll': Initial Reception

Showgirls was released in the US on 22nd September 1995 to scathing critical reviews. Much of the blame was pinned onto Berkley, with discourse and criticism surrounding the film carrying heavy misogynistic tones. The film failed to live up to its successful marketing campaign and was slammed by critics and audiences. The film only earned \$8.1 million in its first theatrical week. Due to negative word-of-mouth, this dropped 60% in its second week for a box-office total of \$3.7 million. Failing to deliver on expectations, *Showgirls* was heavily criticised for its incompetence of performances, dullness of narrative, disturbing gang-rape of Molly, laughter-inducing dialogue, only one 'real' sex scene and heavily unerotic sexual imagery (Sandler, 2001: 81).

The majority of scholarly discourse surrounding *Showgirls*' initial reception hinges around the victimisation of Berkley. Lippit (2003) states that Berkley was unfairly at the centre of the film's 'critical devastation' (2003: 33-34). Academic discourse typically frames Verhoeven and Eszterhas as exploitative in their treatment, and misguided direction, of Berkley (Noreiga, 2003: 36). However, scholars frequently overlook the misogynistic undertones rooted within the majority of critical reviews in 1995. Analysing critical reviews published following *Showgirls*' release will highlight the double-standard found between critics accusing the film and its creators of inappropriate female sexualisation whilst simultaneously sexualising and objectifying Berkley themselves.

'You're a Whore Darlin'': 1995 Critical Attacks on Berkley

Berkley served as one of the focal points of the film's critical devastation. Scholars frequently discuss how Berkley was critically shunned for her melodramatic performance

(Sandler, 2001: 82; Lippit, 2003: 34). However, few have discussed the misogynistic undertones which are woven into critiques of Berkley within *Showgirls*. Writing for the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin described Berkley as having the ‘open mouthed, vacant-eyed look of an inflatable party doll’ (Maslin, 1995). This derogatory description reduces Berkley to nothing more than an inanimate sex object. Describing Berkley as ‘open mouthed’ with ‘vacant eyes’ gives the impression that she is brainless and empty-headed. The comparison to an ‘open mouthed’ sex doll directly implies that Berkley was objectified, exploited and used for sexual pleasure. This comparison also objectifies Berkley, stating that she was an object with no consciousness or personal control over her body. Within Maslin’s review, she does not comment directly on Berkley’s acting performance, choosing to instead berate and compare her to a sex toy. Misogynistic critiques of Berkley continue in various other reviews. Critic James Berardinelli states that ‘[Berkley] was obviously chosen more for what she would show than for acting ability’. He continues with ‘there’s very little Berkley hasn’t given the audience at least a peek at’. Berardinelli’s review is riddled with judgmental comments towards Berkley’s nude performance within the film. His outlook suggests that women presenting themselves in sexual or nude manners strips them of dignity. Ironically, Berardinelli later accused the film as being ‘a cold, misogynistic motion picture’. This demonstrates a lack of awareness of the blatant misogynistic comments and assumptions made earlier within the review. Berardinelli’s review suggests extreme hypocritical ignorance within mainstream public discourse surrounding the exploitative treatment of Berkley. Many were accusing the film of exploitative, misogynistic acts whilst simultaneously providing misogynistic critiques of Berkley.

Critical and public perceptions of Berkley can be applied directly to mainstream perceptions of sex workers and organisations of the time. As discussed, the film’s marketing actively

aimed to blur the distinctions between Berkey and Nomi. In effect, Berkley's role, and public perception, as an actress blurred with those of sex workers. This resulted in critical reviews applying pre-conceived notions regarding sex work to Berkley's performance. In 1995, mainstream feminism adopted a more conservative approach which typically did not support the heavy sexualization of women as empowerment (Evelyn, 2020). Whilst feminism has evolved and adopted 'pro-sex' approaches which celebrate the affordances which embracing sexuality grants women, in 1995, the celebration of sexuality was less accepted.

Conservative 1990s feminism against female sexualisation is apparent within David M Boje's (2001) exploration of power relations between sex workers and organisations within Las Vegas. Boje provides an example of a destructive feminist reading which puts the female body under male control (2001: 203). This reading acts as an example of mainstream feminist ideas prevalent and active during the release of *Showgirls*. Boje states that female sex workers pay 'a dear price', losing their human subjectivity in favour of body objectification. He believes that when an individuals' entire work life is reduced to body-object spectacle, 'there is damage to self-respect and self-esteem' (2001: 201-203). This viewpoint is extremely reflective of derogatory comments made towards Berkley following *Showgirls'* initial release.

Boje also comments that the 'rags to riches' narrative often told in literature based on sex work has shaped the realities of the sex work industry. He expresses that the 'myth of easy money' is used as a lure to entice women into sex work (2001: 202). Again, this viewpoint is reflective of criticisms of Berkley following the film's release. Compared to her other co-stars, such as Gershon, Berkley was heavily berated for her nude performance within the film with many implicating that Berkley aimed to utilise her sexuality to propel her early career. This is likely due to Berkley being younger and of little acclaim compared to co-stars such as

Gershon. Following the film's release, it was reported by 'industry insiders' that Berkley was difficult to work with, demanding, and '[wanted] to get to the top too fast' (Puig, 1995). Whether this rings true or not, the existence of this discourse propels the idea of Berkley being willing to perform nude in order to climb the Hollywood ladder. Berkley is often compared to Sharon Stone, who was propelled into stardom by Verhoeven and Eszterhas for her starring role in their previous endeavour, *Basic Instinct*. The most notorious scene within *Basic Instinct* is Stone crossing her legs without wearing underwear. Hence, popular discourse of the time was that Berkley wished to follow Stone's career path by equally starring in a controversial Verhoeven-Eszterhas picture. There are misogynistic tones rooted in the trope, and the condemnation of women utilising their sexuality for personal gain. Scholarly work typically paints broad brush strokes which paint Verhoeven and Eszterhas as the exploitative victimisers of Berkley. However, the vicious attacks from critics regarding Berkley choosing to sexualise her own body is critically overlooked within academic discourse. These ideologies are a product of conservative feminism within the 1990s. Within recent interviews, Berkley expresses that she holds no issues with the production of *Showgirls*. She states that the initial reception of the film 'came out of a culture much more comfortable with misogyny than the current climate' (Buis, 2021). Reevaluating the initial reception, Berkley labelled some journalists as 'unacceptable' in their critique on her body and how shocking it was that 'journalists were allowed to humiliate a young women and dissect [her] body parts instead of reviewing [her] work' (Okwodu, 2020). According to recent interviews, the most harmful experience of working on *Showgirls* for Berkley was the misogynistic attacks following the film's release.

Chapter 4

‘Resurrection After the Crucifixion’: The Revivals of *Showgirls*

Following its overwhelmingly negative initial reception, *Showgirls* has found success, admiration, and appreciation through two waves of revival. The film has enjoyed a camp cult midnight movie revival, followed by a feminist revival in recent years. Both revivals of *Showgirls* resulted from repositioning of the text. These repositionings are firmly rooted in, and heavily influenced by, the film’s unique handling of female exploitation. The camp cult midnight movie revival is built on overexaggerated female sexualisation and exploitation encouraging camp tones, several levels of failure and transgression being at the centre of the film. However, the recent feminist revival of *Showgirls* repositions the text as a critique on female exploitation within the media industry whilst championing its female ownership of sexuality as empowering in the contemporary feminist landscape.

Part 1: Camp Cult Midnight Movie

As explored, following its initial release *Showgirls* was critically condemned by audiences and critics. The film drastically underperformed at the box-office and was met with scathing reviews. However, *Showgirls* managed to find an afterlife on the midnight movie circuit as a camp cult film (Osterweil, 2003: 38; Noriega, 2003: 36). Connecting with countercultural audiences, *Showgirls* was redefined, reshaped, and repositioned as high camp. Camp cult films are a sub-genre of cult films which typically hinge on exaggerated, melodramatic aspects which encourage camp readings of the film and ritualistic social practices surrounding it. As a sub-genre, camp cult films are notoriously difficult to define textually. Camp cult films differ vastly within genres, subject matters, and narratives. However, camp

cult films are unified and understood as a site for social practice whereby countercultural types unite in ritualistic behaviours (Mathijs; Sexton, 2011: 86-87).

Despite its box-office failure, *Showgirls* was a hit on the home-video market. The film accumulated over 250,000 pre-orders in North America alone, significantly higher than the average film with the same box-office take (Sandler, 2001: 83). *Showgirls* generated over \$100 million from video rentals and became one of MGM/UA's top 20 all-time best-selling home-video releases. The production company were aware of 'trendy twenty-somethings ... throwing *Showgirls* parties, laughing sardonically at the implausibly poor screenplay and shrieking with horror at the aerobic sexual encounters' (Klein, 1999: 79). Camp is defined as comedic in its artificial, over-the-top and extravagant properties (Mendenhall, 2019: 191). The film had become a prime example of 'naïve camp'. Susan Sontag distinguished the term 'naïve camp' in her seminal essay 'Notes on Camp' (2008). 'Naïve camp' is defined by works which attempt to create something serious which are recoded by audiences as camp. Often these works contain extravagance, passion and ambition which lend themselves to a camp readings.

With a growing cult following of audiences sardonically enjoying the failures of *Showgirls*, it soon became a staple on the midnight movie circuit as high camp. Cult camp midnight movies are strongly associated with homosexual, queer and transgressive audiences. It would be an overgeneralisation to label all midnight movie fans as homosexuals. Sontag (2008) has been critiqued for opening up the definition of camp beyond associations with homosexuals (Miller in Cleto, 1999: 351). However, Mendenhall defends Sontag; arguing that people from all genders and sexual varieties can cultivate a 'camp taste' or 'camp vision' (2019: 193). This being said, there is an undeniably strong camp gay audience for *Showgirls* (Hunter, 2000: 189). This is evidenced through late night screenings of the film creating

quintessentially queer spaces featuring drag queens, gay comedians and ‘readings’ of the film. A suitable labelling of viewers/fans of *Showgirls* as a camp cult midnight movie will be ‘countercultural types’. This phrase encompasses all genders, sexualities and individuals who relate with, and are drawn to, the camp qualities of *Showgirls*.

Whilst mainstream audiences rejected *Showgirls*, countercultural types of camp tendencies repositioned and accepted the film. In 1999, homosexual comedian David Schmader consolidated *Showgirls* into the late-night camp cult midnight movie scene with his ‘annotated screenings’ of the film. Schmader’s screenings were a resounding success with his mocking yet affectionate live commentary of the film (Salvato, 2006: 637). Other notable examples of *Showgirls*’ midnight movie success are the performative screenings ‘Showgirls: The Best Movie Ever Made! Ever!’. Running in LA’s Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre the show had a weekly slot every Thursday night in 2006. The show was a late-night screening and commentary of *Showgirls* which comedically delved into the film’s questionable portrayals of female characters, racial minorities and sex work. The show was constructed as a high camp experience. Lipton documents experiencing the show as ‘camp [being] in the air’ by ‘normative gender roles [being] instantly contested and challenged’. ‘Showgirls: The Best Movie Ever Made! Ever!’ (2019) recontextualised not only the film text, but the environment in which it is consumed. With stripper poles in front of the screen but iconic gay anthems playing overhead, Lipton describes entering the theatre as being ‘transported to the Cheetah Club’s gay brother establishment’ (2019: 119-120). The show twists the traditionally heterosexual male setting of a strip club into a queer space (Salvato, 2006: 644).

The success of *Showgirls* on the midnight movie circuit prompted a rebranded relaunch of the film on DVD by MGM/UA. The 2004 ‘VIP Edition’ DVD of *Showgirls* rebranded the film as a self-proclaimed ‘camp classic’. The relaunch embraced the camp elements of its midnight

movie screenings by encouraging audience participation with the film. Included within the DVD were shot glasses, drinking games, and a nude poster of Berkley alongside blindfolds and pasties for a game of ‘pin the pasties on the showgirl’ (Bovberg, 2004). As an influential figure of the midnight movie revival of *Showgirls*, Schmader features on the DVD extras by providing a commentary of the film titled ‘The Greatest Movie Ever Made’. This exhibits the production company embracing the cult camp following of *Showgirls* and monetising off its newfound audience. However, notably, Verhoeven and Eszterhas were not consulted on the rebranding and re-release. Whilst they have not expressed outright distaste for the rebranding of *Showgirls* as camp, the director and writer have been vocal in this not being their creative intentions. Verhoeven has stated that ‘this kind of ritualistic cult popularity isn’t what I intended, but it’s like resurrection after crucifixion’.

The history of *Showgirls* on the midnight movie circuit as a camp classic has been explored thoroughly by scholars such as Sandler (2001), Salvato (2006) and Osterweil (2003). However, there is a gap in academic literature regarding how the film’s relationship with female exploitation has impacted its revival. This gap in academic literature may exist due to *Showgirls* being a relatively under researched film and academics being heavily focussed on the camp afterlife and participatory nature of the film’s midnight movie screenings. Often the narrative and narrative themes of *Showgirls* are overlooked when considering it as a midnight movie. However, as evidenced throughout this study, *Showgirls* is swamped in complex, controversial and conflicting depictions of female exploitation on varying levels. Mathijs and Mendik (2008) highlight three elements which are pivotal to cult readings of films: camp tones, depictions of failure and transgression. These three elements intrinsically tie into *Showgirls*’ strong focus on female exploitation within its narrative and industrial

history. Hence, female exploitation has directly encouraged the camp repositioning of *Showgirls*.

Camp Tones

Over exaggeration of female exploitation resulted in a camp recoding of *Showgirls* which encouraged a comedic reading of the film and resulted in potentially dark and uncomfortable scenes becoming easily digestible for camp cult audiences. Female exploitation is over exaggerated to a camp extent within *Showgirls* through the excess of female nudity and the overly crass depictions of female sexuality. In the context of cult films, camp is commonly defined as exaggeration and melodrama to the extreme which creates a comedic reading of the text (Soulstein, 2019: 69). Scenes such as the extravagant dance numbers at the Stardust Hotel and Nomi's 'casually' revealing outfits example the camp depiction of female sexualisation across the film.

All dance numbers set within the Stardust Hotel are high camp. The scenes are aggressive in their choreography, nudity and sexualisation of women. The Stardust Hotel dance numbers all centre around revealing the nudity of female dancers in dramatic ways. The distinct themes of each dance range from an eruptive volcanic scene, Greek gods and goddesses in the clouds, and a BDSM biker heavy metal fantasy. Whilst all dance numbers differ vastly thematically, they all relish in their loud and garish approach to female eroticism. Women aggressively strip, or are stripped, of their clothing in a theatrical fashion. All Stardust Hotel dance numbers are set to booming orchestral music which swells and flourishes as instances of female nudity are presented to the viewer. The scenes are extravagant in every aspect, from the excessive costumes to the elaborate stage designs with pyrotechnics, smoke machines and thematic stage props. Whilst every dance number consists of male and female

performers dancing erotically, the choreography and directorial vision always remains focused on female objectification and sexualisation. The male dancers act as a tool in which

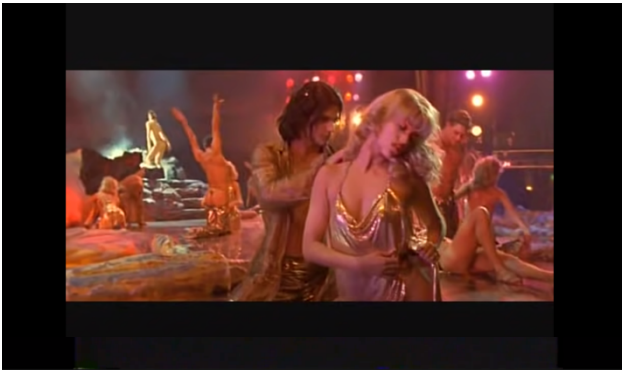


Figure 14: Verhoeven (1995). Left in the background, the male dancers' only role is to strip the women on stage [film still]



Figure 15: Verhoeven (1995). Left in the background, the male dancers' only role is to strip the women on stage [film still]

to sexualise their female counterparts. Their role in the choreographies is centred around undressing their female dance partners, admiring their bodies and hailing the nude female form above all else (Figures 14-15). Unlike female dancers, the camera does not linger on nude male dancers and the male dancers are not objectified to the extent of female dancers. Additionally, narratively it is heavily suggested through dialogue that the male dancers are homosexual. This removes the male dancers as a sexual object for heterosexual women and firmly positions the Stardust Hotel shows as directed towards heterosexual males. The extreme focus on female nudity, extravagant set designs and overdramatic, aggressive choreography create dance numbers which present female exploitation as garish, brash, and above all else, camp.

Similarly to the heavily choreographed dance numbers, the 'casual' nudity and female objectification within *Showgirls* equally reads as overdramatised and camp. 10 minutes into the films' runtime, during a scene set in the dressing room of the Stardust Hotel, the film is granted its first instance of topless female nudity. During the hustle of preparing to start the dance show, the camera pans to a topless female dancer as her show manager shouts, 'you're naked!' at her. By verbally calling attention to the nudity of the woman in a blunt manner, the



Figure 16: Verhoeven (1995). Excess nudity, one of the Stardust dancers shouting in the dressing room about her 'smiling snatch' [film still]

film commands viewers to focus their attention on female nudity. Waving a broken garment around, the topless dancer continues to express that 'you're going to see a smiling snatch if you don't fix this g-string' (Figure 16). The crass nature and vulgarity of this statement draws additional attention to the sexualisation of the female dancer. It invokes imagery from viewers of the dancer stripped down to full-frontal nudity and encourages sexual objectification. Naturally, topless nudity is commonplace within the backstage setting of a dressing room. However, rather than presenting its nudity as customary, *Showgirls* intentionally draws excessive attention to nudity on screen which results in its presentation of nude female characters as melodramatic, inauthentic, and camp.

Another example of camp objectification of women within *Showgirls* is Nomi's 'casual' outfits. Throughout the film, Nomi is repeatedly dressed in tight, revealing, and hyper-sexualised outfits designed to erotically exaggerate her femininity. The over-exaggeration of Nomi's outfits is particularly present within her 'casual' attire outside of the Cheetah Club or Stardust Hotel. In addition to her stripper and showgirl costumes, Nomi's outfits are extremely sexualised during occasions which do not demand her to be viewed in a sexual manner. One prominent scene of Nomi's 'casual' attire being overly sexualised to a camp extent is her shopping trip with Molly. During this scene Nomi is dressed in high cut shorts and a lace purple tied crop top with a bright pink bra peeking out from above (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Verhoeven (1995). Pornification of every outfit, Berkley's costume and the shot composition draw all attention to her breast [film still]



Figure 18: Verhoeven (1995). By comparison, reverse shots of Ravera do not objectify her body [film still]



Figure 19: Verhoeven (1995). Campily skipping down the street, Berkley's actions and costume draw viewers' attention to her breasts [film still]



Figure 20: Verhoeven (1995). Campily skipping down the street, Berkley's actions and costume draw viewers' attention to her breasts [film still]

Viewers' attention is strongly drawn to Nomi's breasts within this scene. The outfit, Berkley's acting and shot compositions all draw attention to the character's cleavage. The bright pink bra screams for attention with its contrasting bold colour. Following down from the bra, viewers' focus is drawn down Nomi's cleavage by her long pendant which creates a clear intent for eyelines. The revealing nature of this outfit is intensified by the edge of Nomi's areola peeping out from her bra towards the end of the scene (Figure 17). The intentional wardrobe 'malfunction' is undeniably implemented to tantalise viewers and draw further attention to Nomi's breasts. Alongside the outfit, the physical direction given to Berkley draws greater attention to her cleavage. Opening the scene, rather than walking down the street calmly, Molly and Nomi giddily skip and bounce along the sidewalk arm in arm. Wearing a low-cut top with a push up bra, these movements naturally draw attention to Nomi's breasts as they move up and down (Figure 19-20). There is no narrative reason for

Molly and Nomi to walk along the street with such vigour. Hence, this scene reads as extremely camp with the sole intention of drawing obvious attention to Nomi's breasts. The shot construction and composition of this scene also draws excessive attention to Nomi's body. Whilst Nomi talks with Molly, the film employs a traditional shot-reverse-shot set up. However, the shot compositions clearly sexualises Nomi over Molly. Whereas Molly is shot from the shoulders up, Nomi is shot from her chest and upwards (Figures 17-18). Shots centring on Molly are close-up shots which focus viewers' attention solely on Molly's face. However, shots centring on Nomi are framed from further away to capture her chest in shot. The contrast between how both characters are shot amplifies the over exaggeration of Nomi's objectification and sexualisation. Backstage scenes within the Stardust Hotel and Nomi's 'casual' outfits both exhibit the un-subtle methods in which 'casual' female sexualisation is exhibited which results in camp recoding of the film.

Showgirls' portrayal of female exploitation as high camp is also evident within the depiction of female characters and their relationships with each other. Relationships between female characters are built on camp exaggerated female stereotypes and sexualisation from the male gaze. There are two key female relationships within *Showgirls*, the friendship between Nomi and Molly, and the rivalry between Nomi and Cristal. Whilst both relationships with Nomi differ vastly, they both hinge on amplified female stereotypes with sexual undertones.

Nomi and Molly present the purest form of friendship within the film. They provide the only relationship within *Showgirls* which is not transactional for personal gain. However, Nomi and Molly's friendship appears as camp, inauthentic and comical due to their relationship being built on shallow conversations pivoting around typical feminine activities and interests. Conversations and interactions between Nomi and Molly overwhelmingly focus on nails,

clothes, and their sex lives. This is noted by Schmader within his acclaimed annotated screenings of *Showgirls*, the comedian ironically gushes over the 'keen insight' into the nature of female friendship. He summarises female relationships and the dialogue they are granted as consisting of 'fingernails, fajitas and fucking' (Salvato, 2006: 644-645). By continuously returning to clichéd stereotypes, Nomi and Molly's friendship is presented as extremely superficial. The focus on nails, clothes, and sex amplifies the sexual objectification of women. Nomi and Molly's friendship serves to draw attention to women's physical appearances. It suggests that women's primary source of bonding, and main concern, is how they can improve their image. Additionally, their bonding over heterosexual sex suggests that women predominantly bond over their sexual interactions with men. By rooting Nomi and Molly's friendship in their physical appearances and sex lives, *Showgirls* exploits women as sexual objects.

Additionally, there are shallow erotic lesbian undertones implied within Nomi and Molly's friendship which enforces the women as sexual objects under a male gaze. The film's dialogue, direction and shot compositions suggest during several instances that there are romantic and sexual traces within their relationship despite this never coming to fruition. This is initially suggested when Nomi teasingly asks if Molly is hitting on her following Molly's invitation to offer Nomi a place to stay. Rather than being played as a friendly joke, the direction of this scene hints towards genuine flirtation. With both women sat across a table from one another, a slow, seductive, and romantic score plays as Nomi slowly leans forward, smirking as she asks, 'are you hitting on me?'. The slow, seductive, and soft direction of this scene purposefully leaves Nomi and Molly's relationship open to viewers' interpretations. As an early interaction between the pair, it creates indications that there will be a romantic entanglement further down the line. However, whilst there are no outright confessions of

sexual attraction between the two, the film continues to flirt with a sexual relationship between Nomi and Molly. During several scenes, the score seductively swells whilst the camera lingers on longing looks between the two. Other instances include repeated flirtatious and playful physical interactions. For example, the first scene Nomi and Molly share following their initial meeting begins with Molly immediately stripping down to her underwear. Molly continues the scene half-dressed in her bra. During the scene, Verhoeven makes the directorial decision to have Nomi clamber over the half-dressed Molly in-order to retrieve the television remote. The scene continues with additional moments filled with physical erotic undertones such as the women physically tussling and giddily arguing. Berkley and Ravera were clearly instructed to act in extremely physical, touchy, and suggestive manners towards each other. Their physical interactions and body language intentionally suggest romantic and sexual undertones between the women despite a romantic plot never surfacing. Hence, the implied sexual attraction between Nomi and Molly can be coded as camp and a crude attempt by the filmmakers to include lesbian eroticism for voyeuristic heterosexual male viewers.

Shallow, voyeuristic lesbian eroticism is continued to a greater extent within Nomi and Cristal's relationship. The basis of Nomi and Cristal's relationship is a competitive rivalry built on physical attraction and heavy flirtation. Nomi and Cristal's relationship reads as extremely camp through the over-dramatization of Cristal's voyeurism towards Nomi. Their relationship resides around Cristal's voyeuristic sexual attraction to Nomi. This is prevalent within all scenes they share but most prominent during Nomi's dancing at the Cheetah. Watching Nomi strip at the Cheetah, opposed to the crowd of male clientele who clap and cheer at her performance, Cristal seductively, calmly, and closely watches Nomi on stage (Figure 21-22). Cristal's voyeurism is amplified when she offers Nomi \$500 to watch her

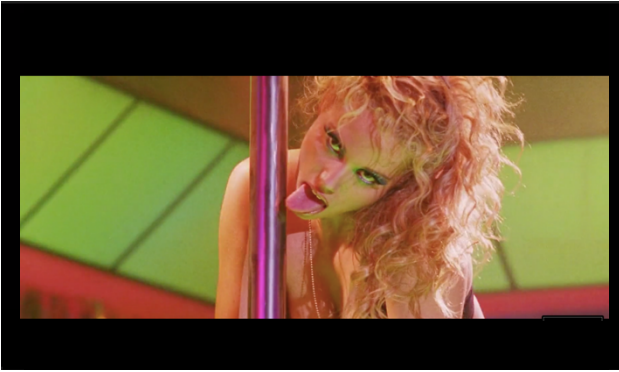


Figure 21: Verhoeven (1995). Cristal seductively gazes on at Nomi with unbreaking eye-contact [film still]



Figure 22: Verhoeven (1995). Cristal seductively gazes on at Nomi with unbreaking eye-contact [film still]

give Zack a lap dance. The following lap dance scene reads as extremely camp due to the overdramatization and exaggeration of Cristal's voyeurism and Nomi's dancing. As explored, the sexual nature of *Showgirls*, was dramatically panned by audiences as unerotic. Often, critics will refer to this lap dance scene as an example of failed eroticism within the film (Rose, 2020). Nomi's movements are aggressive, extravagant, and lacked the high levels of seduction which viewers anticipated following the successful marketing campaign. Comedic camp tones are created through the contrast in Cristal's response to Nomi's dancing opposed to audiences. Whereas audiences universally read Nomi's lap dance as severely unerotic, Cristal watches on with lust and arousal. Licking her lips, grinding on the sofa, stroking and opening her own legs, Cristal voyeuristically uses Nomi's lap dance on Zack as a form of eroticism (Figures 23-24). However, due to the disconnect between Cristal's voyeuristic



Figure 23: Verhoeven (1995). Making eyes, Cristal voyeuristically watches on, enjoying Nomi's lap dance for Zack [film still]



Figure 24: Verhoeven (1995). Making eyes, Cristal voyeuristically watches on, enjoying Nomi's lap dance for Zack [film still]

experiences and the audiences', this scene can be read as inauthentic, over exaggerated, and comedic.

Showgirls is littered with female objectification, exaggerated exploitation of the female body and shallow female relationships which read as camp. The Stardust Hotel dance numbers and 'casual' nudity within everyday circumstances present female objectification and nudity to an extremity which can be recoded and understood as camp. Additionally, the female friendships explored all hinge on exaggerated female stereotypes and voyeuristic lesbian eroticism. A camp reading of *Showgirls* draws critical attention to its exaggeration of the male gaze. The over dramatization of female nudity and sexuality calls attention to obvious attempts by the filmmakers to sexualise their female characters. These crass, glaring methods read as comedically camp. Extreme objectification of the female body makes viewers hyper-aware that the film was written and directed by male filmmakers. This is emphasised by the ignorant depictions of female friendships which are built on exaggerated stereotypes and lesbian eroticism. The lesbian eroticism exemplified within Nomi's relationships with Molly and Cristal lack emotional substance. They are based predominantly on physical attraction with little to no exploration of emotional connections. Hence, the sexual relationships between female characters presents itself as exploitation of female homosexuality to satisfy the male gaze.

Presenting exaggerated female exploitation to the extremities that it can be recoded as high camp allows viewers to watch and engage with *Showgirls* comfortably through the lens of comedy. The comedically camp portrayal of exploitative female sexualisation twists the potentially degrading and uncomfortable subject matter into laughable comedy. Camp exaggeration transcends female exploitation beyond the realms of reality.

The comedic camp repositioning of the extreme female exploitation within *Showgirls* lends itself to midnight movie screenings, audience participatory culture and ritualistic behaviours. The participatory nature of camp midnight movie screenings hinges on comedically camp tones lending themselves to audience reactions. Depictions of female exploitation could be extremely disturbing, however, its overdramatic depiction within *Showgirls* allows audiences to engage with the content playfully due to its absurd and unrealistic portrayal. This comedic reading is rooted in the quotable melodramatic dialogue and physical comedy which the film presents. One essential common thread across camp midnight movies is their quotability. A quotable film will encourage repeat viewings, allow for group participation, and assist in establishing a film as a camp midnight movie. The melodramatic dialogue within *Showgirls* has proved to be remarkably quotable. The majority of the quotable lines within *Showgirls* are memorable due to their obscenity in relation to female exploitation. Commonly quoted lines such as ‘it must be weird not to have someone cum on you’, and ‘Thrust it! Thrust it! Thrust it!’ are all derogatory lines spoken to Nomi throughout the film. Additionally, *Showgirls* is littered with instances of extreme physicality which have been adopted as comical by camp cult midnight movie goers. The aforementioned ‘Thrust it!’ scene and Nomi’s commonly labelled ‘fish flop’ lap dance and sex scene are prime examples of the film’s physical comedy. During midnight movie screenings, audiences are encouraged to comedically gyrate, thrust and lap dance during these moments within the film. Often audience members are encouraged and cued by hosts, scripts, or each other to participate in the activities. MGM/UA created scripts for the audiences of early midnight movie screenings of *Showgirls*. These scripts cued audience members to shout along lines and encouraged them to act in specific ways during the screening (Sandler, 2001: 85). Actively encouraging audiences to engage with the film in specific ways promotes ritualistic behaviours forming amongst audiences. Ritualistic behaviours are pivotal to camp cult films developing

successful midnight movie audiences and fanbases. Hence, *Showgirls*' inclusion of camp quotable lines and instances of extreme physicality depicting exaggerated female exploitation were paramount to its successful revival on the midnight movie circuit.

Depictions of Failure

Depictions of failure is another key aspect of camp cult midnight movies which is extremely prevalent within *Showgirls*. Female exploitation across the film is fundamental in shaping how failure is present within the film textually, and across its production and reception.

Showgirls' initial reception is the most apparent example of the film as a failure. As previously explored, upon release, the film drastically failed critically and financially. The initial failure of *Showgirls* is often credited to the film's failure at eroticising and connecting with its target demographic. Rather than appealing to heterosexual males as erotic imagery, intended scenes of eroticism were heavily criticized as being unerotic. As established, *Showgirls*' scenes of eroticism have been recoded as comedic camp melodrama by countercultural audiences. Camp cult midnight movie audiences have a history of acquiring and repositioning failures into successes. The majority of camp cult midnight movies were mainstream failures upon initial release. Living on the fringes of society, countercultural audiences are more accepting of content rejected by the mainstream. Whereas *Showgirls* failed at connecting with mainstream audiences, countercultural viewers welcomed and relished the failures which *Showgirls* provided. Turning failed eroticism into camp comedy, camp cult midnight movie audiences gave *Showgirls* a second life.

Caught up in *Showgirls*' failures, Berkley faced the most detrimental levels of failure as a result of her starring role in the film. The severe backlash against Berkley is heavily

documented across media outlets at the time and retrospective scholarship surrounding the film. Following the film's initial failure, many critical viewers directed the blame onto Berkley. Being heavily criticised for her acting and nudity within the film, Berkley was dropped by her acting agent and did not return to cinema for almost a decade (Sconce, 2003: 44). As previously discussed, it is commonly believed by many scholars that Berkley was exploited on several levels by the filmmakers of the film. The failure which encompassed Berkley and her initial involvement with *Showgirls* is, in part, a result of female exploitation within the entertainment industry. Berkley's acting career was presumed a failure due to the film and its creators failing her as an actress. However, the destructive failure circling Berkley was a driving force in the repositioning of *Showgirls* as a camp cult midnight movie.

Countercultural viewers frequently adopt and reclaim that which has been disregarded and shunned by mainstream society. Hence, following the failure of the film and Berkley's career, camp cult midnight movie audiences embraced Berkley, and her character Nomi. Jeffrey McHale, director and writer of the *Showgirls* documentary *You Don't Nomi* (2020), stated that due to the film, and Berkley, being mocked on release there was a subconscious trigger within queer mentalities that protested 'you don't want this, so we'll take it in' (Levine, 2020). This mentality could result from relatability in the out-casting of Berkley. Similarly to countercultural audiences, Berkley found herself on the outskirts of mainstream acceptance. However, being accepted by countercultural audiences of camp cult films, midnight movie screenings provided a place of reform and refuge for *Showgirls* and Berkley. Camp cult midnight movie screenings have historically existed as a space for the countercultural community to thrive and indulge in alternative practices. Midnight movie screenings provide community, belonging and acceptance for its audiences. Midnight movie screenings of *Showgirls* grant fans of the film's camp qualities a space to celebrate the film.

The screenings have also provided acceptance, admiration and acclaim for Berkley. Rather than being berated and shunned, Berkley is praised and adored by camp cult midnight movie fans for her portrayal as Nomi in *Showgirls*.

Following the initial release of *Showgirls*, for several years Berkley refused to comment on the film within interviews. Despite the actress distancing herself from the film, she made a surprise guest appearance in 2015 at the film's 20th anniversary midnight movie screening at the Cinespia theatre in Los Angeles. Berkley made a particularly heart-warming and emotional speech to the 4,000 midnight movie attendees. Her speech centred around thanking the audience for 'giving [her] strength and confidence' after the initial reception of the film was 'more painful than anything you could ever imagine'. Thanking the audience for giving her the gift of watching the film with them, Berkley praises the crowd for making the film what it is. Alongside providing solace for herself, Berkley brings light to the positive impacts which *Showgirls* has on its camp cult midnight movie viewers. She wishes that the film has brought 'comfort, joy and incredible memories with friends' to its viewers. The focus on the importance of *Showgirls* as a communal experience pinpoints the quintessence of community being at the heart of midnight movie screenings. In addition, Berkley embraces the camp reframing and frequently draws affectionate comparisons between Nomi and herself.

Opening her speech, Berkley addresses the audience as 'darlin'', a commonly quoted saying from the film, and asks an audience member if she can 'do [their] nails sometime'. This immediately exhibits her acceptance of the film's camp repositioning and demonstrates an understanding of how its fans engage with the content. During her speech, Berkley makes substantial connections between Nomi and herself. She describes her younger self as acting like Nomi would; describing how she sought out, fought for and did 'everything Nomi would do' to get her hands on the initial script. Berkley concludes her speech by re-enacting one of



Figure 25: *toofab* (2015). Goddess hands! Berkley recreates her infamous move from *Showgirls* at the 20th anniversary screening [YouTube video]



Figure 26: *Verhoeven* (1995). Now a cult audience favourite, the original 'goddess hands' scene [film still]

Nomi's frequently mimicked hand gestures, termed 'goddess hands', for the crowd (Figure 25-26). By drawing blatant comparisons between the character and herself, Berkley appears as accepting and holding admiration for Nomi. This greatly contrasts comparisons made between Berkley and Nomi by scathing critical reviews in 1995. Rather than being compared to Nomi for her ignorant naivety and nudity, Berkley has shifted her own narrative to draw her own comparisons between the strength and determination of the character she played and herself. Berkley's attendance and speech at the screening demonstrates a therapeutic acceptance of the film, her character and the camp afterlife of *Showgirls*. There is a blatant love and appreciation between Berkley and the audience. Throughout her speech, Berkley repeatedly expresses her admiration for those who have accepted the film, whilst the 4,000 audience members shower her in continuous applause, cheers and shouts of affection. Describing her chance to attend a screening with an appreciative audience as a 'magical full circle moment', Berkley summarises the unique qualities which repositioning failures provides to camp cult midnight movies. The exploitation and objectification of women's bodies in *Showgirls*, as well as the misogynistic critical backlash against Berkley, have both been transformed by countercultural audiences. The failures of *Showgirls* have been reshaped, repositioned and revaluated by its after-life as a midnight movie.

Transgression

Transgression is another common factor found within camp cult midnight movies which is prevalent with *Showgirls*. The varying levels and instances of female exploitation within *Showgirls* encourage transgression within the film's narrative. Transgression is defined as breaking moral or legal laws. Hence, the subject matter of female stripping and the exploitative nature of female nudity and sexuality prevalent within *Showgirls* is intrinsically transgressive. Whilst transgression is commonplace within camp cult midnight movies, the transgression within this sub-genre requires a level of camp comedy and improbability to allow comedic readings of the text. *Showgirls* provides examples of successful transgression within camp cult midnight movies and unsuccessful transgression within camp cult midnight movies. The majority of the film effectively presents its transgressions surrounding female exploitation as camp, comical and easily digestible. However, during Molly's rape scene, *Showgirls* veers its tone into indigestible, traumatic and gratuitous depictions of female exploitation which cannot be repositioned as camp.

Depicting transgressional and taboo subjects, acts and tones is a common staple of many camp cult midnight movies. Connecting with countercultural audiences, the exploration of transgressional topics is often appealing to viewers who entertain interests in the unlawful (Mathijs; Sexton, 2011: 97-99). Camp cult midnight movies provide audiences with opportunities to explore potentially offensive topics under the umbrella of comedy. Camp portrayals of transgressional elements result in scenes of transgression being playful and digestible. With female exploitation at the centre of the film's transgressional elements, *Showgirls* forefronts transgression through its standing as an NC-17 rated mainstream film, the casting of Berkley and narrative subject matters surrounding sex work, nudity and the treatment of female performers in the entertainment industry. Havis pinpoints the 'moral

shock' which transgression creates amongst viewers as vital to the importance of transgression within cult films (2008: 52). Whilst Havis writes regarding general cult films, their findings can be applied to camp cult midnight movies. Early within *Showgirls*' pre-production, moral shock was the intention of filmmakers. Interviews with Verhoeven and Eszterhas heavily imply that the intention of *Showgirls* was to provoke a moral outcry and shock mainstream viewers (Grimes, 1995). Intent on achieving the taboo NC-17 rating, interviews exhibit their determination to cause moral controversy and make cinema history with their film. The intention for moral shock is amplified by the casting of Berkley. Berkley was a young actress, only known by mainstream audiences for her wholesome role in *Saved by the Bell*. Her shift from sweet and innocent teenage actress to sultry and dangerous adult performer was strategically designed to generate mainstream 'buzz' through shock value at the films' transgressions.

Showgirls also depicts transgressions through the film's narrative content and stylistic decisions. The subject matter of female stripping, nudity and sex work is inherently transgressive. Centring *Showgirls* around these transgressive subject matters encouraged the film's camp cult midnight movie revival. Female stripping and general sex work is historically considered an immoral and disreputable job by many. The legalities surrounding stripping as a form of sex work is heavily debated. There are ample debates surrounding criminalisation/decriminalisation of sex work within public discourse (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1996; Troutner and Collett, 2011; Bradley, 2018; Bolough; Bolough, 1996). Focusing its narrative on female stripping, *Showgirls* encourages debates from viewers regarding sex work and its moral and/or legal transgressions. The film also encourages a transgressive reading through its excessive use of female nudity. Ample female nudity within the film creates transgressive aesthetics through the extremities of typically censored graphic material.

Conventionally, female nudity is restricted in mainstream media and general society. Hence, the extreme levels of female nudity within *Showgirls* is transgressive in its overwhelming and unapologetic presence. Transgressive elements within *Showgirls* such as the film's narrative focuses, and female nudity encourage audiences to question the moral standings of the film. However, these transgressions are incorporated with significant camp tones. As explored, the camp tones afforded to the depictions of female exploitation provide comical relief to potentially distressing and heavy subjects matters.

However, despite the majority of *Showgirls* providing camp, comical depictions of transgressive female exploitation, Molly's rape scene reads as pure transgression. This scene is arguably the only moment within *Showgirls* incapable of being levitated by camp comedy. Making its mark within the final act of the film, Molly's rape scene is often cut from camp cult midnight movie screenings due to its gruesome, realistic and disturbing depiction of female exploitation through extreme sexual violence. Molly's rape scene is the most visceral and distressing scene within *Showgirls*. Viewers are forced to helplessly watch as Molly, the purest and most benevolent character within the film, is aggressively physically and sexually abused by multiple men. Molly's attackers are depraved in their treatment of her, punching, licking and biting her throughout. The scene is shot to create intense uneasiness. The camera lingers with the intent to cause discomfort for viewers (Figure 27). Following the attack



Figure 27: Verhoeven (1995). A tonal shift to uncomfortable transgression during Molly's violent and aggressive rape scene [film still]

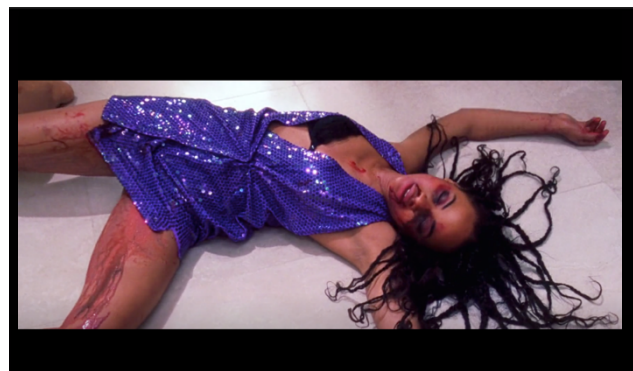


Figure 28: Verhoeven (1995). Following her attack, Molly collapses battered, bruised and bleeding. [film still]

scene, the film cuts to Molly stumbling into a room full of people and collapsing on the floor. Her clothes are ripped from her, she is bruised, battered and a large trail of blood runs down from between her legs (Figure 28). Drenched in brutality, this scene reflects the horrors of female exploitation through violation of the female body.

Whereas other instances of transgressional female exploitation within *Showgirls* are lightened by camp comedy which makes the scenes digestible for viewers and fitting for midnight movie screenings, Molly's rape scene takes depictions of female exploitation beyond camp. This scene is darkened by knowledge that Molly's actress, Ravera, felt physically and emotionally abused on set. Chapter 1 explored these allegations of mistreatment made by Ravera against Verhoeven. The horrific and graphic depiction of female rape alongside Ravera's experience on set deems the scene as disturbingly transgressive and unsuitable for camp cult midnight movie screenings. Many camp cult midnight movie events, such as Schmader's renowned annotated screenings, tactfully remove Molly's rape scene from showings. The scene is deemed too extreme and tonally unfitting for the light-hearted tone of camp cult midnight movie screenings. In 2020, a camp screening of *Showgirls* was planned as part of The BFI's annual LGBTQ+ Flare festival. The event was cancelled due to the 2020 global pandemic, however, organisers confirmed that the screening would exclude Molly's rape scene due to its tonal disparity with the event. Organisers stated that they would not ignore the scene's existence but direct their drag queen host to contextualise the scene and explain why it does not have a place at the event (Montgomery, 2020). This raises questions regarding the validity of *Showgirls* as a camp comedic collective experience and whether it is valid to modify a film to adhere to audience dispositions. Addressing the infamous rape scene, Ravera stated that whilst 'people want to just call it camp ... there's too much darkness in it to avoid all that weight' (Alter, 2020). Unable to look past or brush over

Molly's rape scene, Ravera does not position or celebrate *Showgirls* as a camp film. Expunging the scene denies the film of a true reading and potentially discredits Ravera's evidently traumatic experience. Whilst Molly's rape scene is unpleasant to watch, and unable to be recoded as camp, it is integral to *Showgirls*. Ignoring the pivotal scene changes the tone of the film and ignores critiques regarding the film's depictions and use of female exploitation.

Part 2: Fourth-Wave Feminist Revival

Following its initial revival on the camp cult midnight movie circuit, *Showgirls* has enjoyed a second revival amongst fourth-wave feminists. In recent years, despite female exploitation being at the core of the film, a fourth-wave feminist revival has repositioned and re-evaluated *Showgirls* as a feminist text. Feminist appraisal and repositioning of the film centres around *Showgirls*' critiques of female exploitation at the hands of men within the entertainment industry and female ownership of exploitation and sexuality as a form of empowerment. The recent revival is evident from a plethora of online discourse surrounding the film reassessing it as a feminist text rampantly appearing across the internet since 2020. Examples of these texts include Evelyn's 'Showgirls' and the Panopticon of Patriarchy' (2020), Rose's 'The naked truth about Showgirls: the 90s flop is a misunderstood gem' (2020) and Montgomery's 'How Showgirls exposed the rot of our misogynistic culture' (2020). These are merely a handful of texts which evidence a feminist revival of *Showgirls* forming in 2020. Fourth-wave feminism overlaps and adopts third-wave feminist standpoints concerning the female ownership and celebration of self-sexualisation. Fourth-wave feminists partake in online activism across digital platforms (Pruchniewska, 2016: 738) which has assisted in creation of the feminist revival of *Showgirls*.

The fourth-wave feminist revival of *Showgirls* can be pinpointed to 2020 due to the release of the documentary *You Don't Nomi* alongside *Showgirls* being available worldwide across various streaming service platforms during the 2020 global pandemic. The second revival of *Showgirls* was encouraged by the film being thrust into public attention by Jeffrey McHale's documentary *You Don't Nomi*. The documentary affectionately yet critically explores the ways in which *Showgirls* amassed a camp cult following. Whilst the documentary does not delve deeply into feminist readings of the film, it acted as a catalyst to encourage feminist discussions and a reframing of the film. The release of *You Don't Nomi* rejuvenated discussions surrounding *Showgirls* into public discourse. Whereas its cult camp midnight movie afterlife kept the film relevant for countercultural audiences, *You Don't Nomi* assisted in reintroducing or introducing the film to a larger viewership. The release of *You Don't Nomi* was accompanied by a mass of marketing surrounding the documentary. The director, McHale, gave several interviews prior to the documentary's release delving into the cult camp afterlife and appreciation which *Showgirls* has received. Several interviews with the cast of *Showgirls* also appeared around 2020. Whilst these interviews do not appear officially linked with the documentary, the revived interest in the film can be believed as the rationale behind revisiting the cast for interviews. Notably, Molly's actress Ravera gave her first interview addressing the film since its release in September 2020 (Alter, 2020). MacLachlan and Berkley also discussed the film during interviews in 2020 (McMahon, 2020; Okwodu, 2020). The release of *You Don't Nomi* alongside direct and indirect marketing across several interviews encouraged the reassessment of *Showgirls* in 2020.

The accessibility to watch *Showgirls* alongside *You Don't Nomi* on various streaming service platforms in 2020 also encouraged the film's second revival. Digitalisation of media consumption in the digital era has democratized cult properties for wider audiences (Hills,

2015). The availability of *Showgirls* worldwide on various video consumption platforms during 2020 encouraged its feminist revival by making the consumption of the film easily accessible. During 2020, *Showgirls* was available to stream on HBO Max in the US. Sites such as Amazon Prime Video and iTunes also made the film easily accessible to buy or rent digitally worldwide (Kleinmann, 2020). The 2020 global pandemic had an unprecedented impact on film consumption online. In 2020, video on demand consumption increased by an average of 74% in the US (Nielsen, 2020). The increased use of online video consumption made it more probable for viewers to engage with *Showgirls*. The director of *You Don't Nomi* attributed partial success of the documentary to this 'crazy climate' of film consumption 'creating a whole new audience for the documentary' (Frishberg, 2020). Believing that the timing could not have been better, McHale discussed the global pandemic creating a new wave of *Showgirls* 'virgins' watching the film for the first time in quarantine (Frishberg, 2020). The new wave of *Showgirls*' viewers was amplified by the release of *You Don't Nomi* straight to streaming services. Following its debuts across several US and European film festivals in 2019, *You Don't Nomi's* intended theatrical release was interchanged for a digital release in 2020 due to the global pandemic. The documentary released online in June 2020, available in the US and worldwide on Amazon Prime Video and Apple's iTunes store (Bradshaw, 2020; Kleinmann, 2020). As an independent film, this granted *You Don't Nomi* greater opportunities to reach out and captivate a larger audience. McHale expressed that there was great demand for the documentary following lockdown restrictions, stating that 'right from the first two weeks when the lockdown started [he] got so many messages on social' requesting that *You Don't Nomi* was made available online. The accessibility of *Showgirls* and its documentary *You Don't Nomi* on online streaming and video-on-demand platforms helped *Showgirls* to generate and establish newfound viewers in the digital age.

Critique of Female Exploitation

The feminist revival of *Showgirls* hinges on repositioning and reassessing the film as a feminist text through its spotlighting of female exploitation within the entertainment industry. Some debate that the film can be understood as feminist through its textual heavy critiques of all male characters. It is argued that the film intentionally critiques and calls attention to sexual female exploitation within the entertainment industry. In Montgomery's 2020 article, published to the BBC, he argues that 'within the current climate' the predominant way of viewing *Showgirls* may be as a 'straight reading' which holds a mirror up to the 'rancid, unchecked, misogyny within the entertainment industry and beyond' (2020).

The 2020 feminist revival of *Showgirls* transpired due to an increased awareness of women's rights and mistreatment within the entertainment industry. The widespread demonstration of female exploitation by male characters within *Showgirls* represents the overwhelming volume of female exploitation across sprawling areas of the entertainment industry. The feminist revival of *Showgirls* places increased focus on this representation due to female exploitation being a wider discussed and critiqued issue over recent years. The 2017 #MeToo movement shone a bright light on extreme exploitative behaviours within workplaces towards women. Whilst the movement encapsulates all industries, allegations against media mogul Harvey Weinstein in October 2017 opened the floodgates for widespread public discourse surrounding sex discrimination in the workplace (Nodeland; Craig, 2021: 850; Duramy, 2019: 217). Over 100 cases have since been made against Weinstein from former employees, actresses and models accusing him of sexual harassment, rape, intimidation and attempts at settlement (Franssen, 2020). In what Wexler describes as 'a modern day reckoning with sexist behaviour' (2019: 47; 51) the #MeToo movement was intended as unveiling the pervasiveness of female exploitation and encouraging victims to speak up (Duramy, 2019:

217-218). Whilst the #MeToo movement began over ten years prior, focused on the discrimination faced by black women, the phrase picked up mainstream steam following the vast accounts against Weinstein (Garcia, 2017; Lesley, 2019: 47; 51). Described as ‘a watershed moment in contemporary feminism’, the movement sparked widespread outrage and discussions surrounding the mistreatment of women within working environments (Jaffe, 2018: 80). Female exploitation within the entertainment industry has historically been prevalent and can be dated as early back as the 1920’s with Fatty Arbuckle (Franssen, 2020: 257). However, the #MeToo movement assisted in encouraging discussions and change revolving around these persistent issues. Following the Weinstein case, multiple media personalities with acclaimed public images were targeted by the #MeToo movement. Prominent examples include, but are not limited to, actor Kevin Spacey, and NBC television personality Matt Lauer both being accused of multiple accounts of sexual harassment (Nodeland; Craig, 2021: 852). Studies have demonstrated consequential cultural shifts in public awareness and understandings of sexual misconduct in the workplace since #MeToo. Nodeland and Craig demonstrated that the #MeToo movement made people more aware of sexual harassment which resulted in public perceptions shifting towards a demand for harsher legal punishments for offenders (2021: 858).

Due to discussions and discourse surrounding abusive male power being more prevalent in 2020 compared to 1995, this encouraged a reassessment of *Showgirls* from a fourth-wave feminist stance. With discussions surrounding #MeToo prominent in 2020, the critical depictions within the film of men abusing positional power over females presented itself with greater clarity opposed to the film’s initial release. Multiple articles, debates and think-pieces supporting *Showgirls* as a piece of feminist cinema were published in 2020. As explored in Chapter 3, in 1995, prominent discourse labelled the film as misogynistic for featuring excess

female nudity. However, few critically assessed how the film's narrative critiqued misogyny within the entertainment industry. The feminist revival of *Showgirls* draws attention to the metatextuality of the film critiquing female exploitation. Within the film, all male characters are exploitative of female characters. Al, Zack, Phil, James and Andrew all unapologetically exploit various female characters for financial gain, to propel their careers, or for unconsented sexual satisfaction. The male characters within *Showgirls* are reflective of exploitative male figures within the entertainment industry, the likes of whom have been brought to public attention through the #MeToo movement. Throughout the film, one of Nomi's dominant driving forces is breaking free of her life as a stripper in pursuit of acclaim and respect as a professional dancer. Despite beliefs that this will grant her greater respect, Nomi finds equal, if not greater levels of female exploitation as a showgirl opposed to stripper. This reflects unavoidable female exploitation within the entertainment industry, regardless of the opulence, glamour, or presumed acclaim of the employer.

Whilst working at the Stardust, Nomi and her fellow strippers are exploited by their employer Al for their bodies, sensuality and sexual services. The depiction of Al draws clear comparisons to men exhibiting inappropriate sexual conduct within the workplace. The stripper profession is often believed to be an extremely exploitative business. This is represented within the film throughout various instances at the Cheetah Club. The most exploitative aspects of the Cheetah Club are alluded to during one of the new girls' introductions. While introducing Hope, the new girl, strip club owner Al initially appears supportive, welcoming and respectful to his female employee. Al reassures Hope that whilst she can touch the men, 'they can't touch you'. This is a common house rule regulated across strip clubs to ensure dancers' safety and protection (Price-Glynn, 2010: 56-57). However, Al's tone shifts when he continues to explain that whilst officially the men are not allowed to

touch or interact with the dancers inappropriately, the club will turn a blind eye if ‘he gives you a big tip’. This can be generalised to reflect attitudes in the wider entertainment industry regarding warping ethical boundaries for financial profit. Al’s discussion with Hope ends with an extremely exploitative statement. Walking out of the room, Al directly states to her, ‘If you want to last longer than a week, you’ll give me a blow job. First, I get you used to the money, then I make you swallow’. The camera cuts to Hope’s horrified face as she asks the girls, ‘was he serious?’. It is unclear to Hope, and viewers, the sincerity of Al’s statement. The actor who plays Al, Robert Davi, delivers the line completely straight. Additionally, aside from Hope, the camera does not cut to any of the other employees. Undoubtedly, their responses would provide insights into the sincerity of his statement. The filmmakers intentionally leave this line open ended. It uniquely reflects murky exploitation which occurs within strip clubs. Whilst there are rules set in place for dancers’ protection to avoid harmful exploitation, often there are instances and reports of these rules being broken and bent (Price-Glynn, 2010: 56-57). If this line is to be taken seriously, it suggests that Al routinely takes advantage of his female employees for sexual favours. Gaining leverage on them by jeopardizing their stable income if they do not comply with his demands. It also suggests that his demands intensify as the dancers’ income, and their dependence on it, increases.

Al’s treatment of his female employees can be seen as a reflection of the wider entertainment industry, specifically the mistreatment and abuse of young females. Al’s treatment of Hope is uncomfortably reflective of mistreatment that have come to light because of the #MeToo movement. Countless victims recounted how their employers of threatening their job security if they did not comply with sexual conducts. For example, in one of the most prolific cases in the entertainment industry, Weinstein was accused of propelling or jeopardizing actresses’ careers depending on their reactions to his sexual advancements. A large proportion of the

accusations against Weinstein were from actresses or aspiring actresses with a desire to work within the entertainment industry. One of the early allegations of rape was from an aspiring actress Lucia Shaller, who accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct following a casting meeting (Nichols, 2019). The #MeToo movement also uncovered Weinstein's history of blacklisting actresses who rejected his sexual advances. Examples include Mira Sorvino and Ashley Judd, whom were both falsely discredited by the Weinstein company for various Hollywood roles (BBC, 2022). The comparisons between AI and Weinstein is prevalent through their disrespect, treatment and exploitation of female employees through their abusive use of power.

Despite catching her 'big break' as a showgirl at the Stardust Hotel, Nomi does not escape from being mistreated within the entertainment industry. Since, in Nomi's eyes, working at the opulent Stardust Hotel is deemed as an upgrade from the seedy Cheetah Club, exploitation at the Stardust demonstrates that seemingly reputable and glamorous establishments can be equally exploitative. This can be seen as an example of female exploitation being prevalent within the elite Hollywood circle. Throughout the film, male employees of the Stardust, Zack, Phil and Tony, all take advantage of Nomi's naivety and desire to become a 'big time' dancer for personal gain. The exploitation faced by Nomi at the Stardust is demonstrated predominantly through her relationship with Zack. Entertainment director of the hotel, Zack, is initially presented as the sole male employee within the Stardust to genuinely care about Nomi. Early within the film, Zack is the only character to correct her on the pronunciation of 'Versace'. Rather than ridiculing her, Zack is demonstrated as guiding Nomi along, supporting her career and showing kindness to the young dancer. However, this shifts during the book convention fiasco. The hotel's manager, Phil, offers Nomi \$1,000 to work at an annual book convention. He promises that all she will have to do

is 'wear [her] costumes and [her] smile' while having pictures taken. At the event, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a set up constructed by hotel management to sexually take advantage of Nomi and the other female dancer working the job. Introducing Nomi to a 'high roller' businessman for the hotel, Phil reveals his plans for the group to go for dinner, followed by 'making music' at his place. The girls are looked up and down like pieces of meat by the men. Clearly pressured, one girl agrees to the plan. However, horrified by the sexual expectations thrust upon them, Nomi exclaims 'not me!' and barges past the men out of the room. This scene is played as extremely casual by all but Nomi, suggesting a high level of normalisation for those in the entertainment industry regarding female exploitation. It is not presumed by the hotel management as an unreasonable request for the dancers to sexually exploit themselves for company profit. The scene also alludes to other female dancers being routinely put in the same situation. Molly attempts to warn Nomi about taking the job; knowing girls who did it before and 'didn't like it'. The knowledge of repeated instances of extreme female exploitation with no repercussions or change on behalf of the company mirror persistent cases of female exploitation within the entertainment industry.

The following scene centres around Nomi informing Zack of the inappropriate exploitative events. As entertainment director, Zack reflects those in authoritative positions within the entertainment industry. Upon hearing the events, Zack appears appalled, concerned and extremely apologetic to Nomi. He demands that Phil apologise to Nomi, which satisfies her in feeling successful in refusing to be taken advantage of. However, it is shortly revealed that Zack is completely disingenuous towards Nomi and her concerns. Once alone, Zack immediately calls Phil, laughing, joking and calling him a 'dumb fuck'. This scenario is reflective of female exploitation within the entertainment industry. Zack's treatment of Nomi suggests that despite female performers occasionally feeling fought for, they are always

exploited to some degree. It shines a mirror on the unprecedented cases of male superiors abusing their power against female subordinates for personal gain whilst also highlighting unity and unethical comradeship between men in their treatment of women. Duramy describes this male comradeship as a form of 'bro culture' which is persistent within many industries. Following Weinstein's initial accusations, there was an onslaught of reports of 'bro culture' across the US and worldwide. Various reports described workplace environments whereby 'harassing and abusive behaviours in the name of male bonding' was conventional (2019: 224). The 'bro culture' and 'boys will be boys' mentality is blatant between Zack and Phil. They represent the corrupt and toxic male-controlled environments which are being challenged by the #MeToo movement.

Outside of her employers, Nomi is equally exploited personally by her presumed love interest in the film. James is initially introduced as Nomi's love interest; he appears kind, considerate and genuinely enthralled by Nomi's dance potential. Within his initial scenes, James offers to teach Nomi how to dance, and then bails her out of jail after she was arrested for starting a fight. Despite James appearing as the 'good guy' of the film, before long, he joins his fellow male characters in exploiting multiple female characters throughout the film. Despite frequenting the Cheetah, James holds a very strong anti sex work attitude. He tells Nomi that her work 'ain't right' because '[she's] got too much talent for it to be right'. Degrading her work and scorning Nomi for how she chooses to make money, James clearly views her stripping as dirty and immoral. However, despite being disgusted by her profession, James claims that he has written a song inspired by Nomi and convinces her to dance with him at a performance. When questioned by Nomi on how well he knows her to write a song about her, he admits to only knowing that she is a private dancer. The scene continues with Nomi and James dancing with each other, escalating to Nomi giving James a lap dance whereby he

proceeds to attempt to seduce her. However, she refuses, claiming that she is on her period and makes a swift exit. The following night, after landing a spot in the Stardust show, Nomi excitedly rushes to celebrate with James. Upon telling him her career changing news, his immediate response is to be concerned with himself. He selfishly exacerbates ‘Oh man! What about the number I wrote for you?’. This immediately reveals James’ true self-serving intentions. Rather than offering to teach Nomi to dance as an act of kindness, his offer was out of pure self-interest. He does not care for, or encourage her dancing, unless it is in his own best interests. James’ credibility further plummets when it is revealed that following his romantic evening with Nomi, in which she refused to sleep with him, the subsequent evening James seduces the new girl at the Cheetah, Hope. James uses the same lines on Hope as he did Nomi. He tells Hope that no one can dance like her, and that his song was written for her. James’ behaviours demonstrate that he will happily disrespect, use and deceive women for personal gain. This treatment of women is a further example of male characters within *Showgirls* exploiting female characters within the entertainment industry. James’ case illustrates derogatory behaviours existing at the lower end of the entertainment industry in independent circles alongside corporate environments.

A significant factor of the #MeToo movement was focusing on giving a voice to and providing emotional healing for the survivors of sexual misconduct and exploitation (Lesley, 2019: 51). However, Molly concludes the film as a sexual assault survivor with little, to no, closure or redemption. Additionally, her attacker, does not suffer any damage to his public image or career following his attack. Molly’s attacker, Andrew Carver, represents those within positions of high power who abuse and exploit women but face little repercussions. Throughout the film, Carver is established as a celebrity of high acclaim and fame. His reputation is alluded to by Molly’s frequent ‘fan-girling’, his poster being plastered on her

walls, his music being played on the radio numerous times and Zack bragging about his friendship with Carver. As previously explored, Molly's rape scene is harrowingly violent, graphic and relentless. Following the brutal rape scene, the film cuts to Molly in a hospital bed, battered, bruised and unconscious with a broken nose and vaginal tears. Zack refuses to allow Nomi to call the police, threatening to expose the incriminating information he holds on her if she does. Callously, Zack justifies allowing Carver to 'get away with' raping Molly by explaining to Nomi that 'he's part of the team'. Again, this amplifies Zack's 'bro culture' behaviour. The connotations of being part of a 'team' suggests a mutually beneficial relationship. In this case, Zack is protecting Carver's reputation and career in exchange for Andrew performing at the Stardust in the future. Whilst there is a degree of comradeship, above all else, Zack is benefitting his own career by protecting Carver. Zack alludes to offering Molly a cash settlement. 'I'll make sure [Carver] gives [Molly] enough money, she can have a dress shop', Zack casually remarks to Nomi. Again, this uncomfortably mirrors tactics employed by abusers within the entertainment industry in attempts to conceal immoral acts. For example, in 2017 it was reported that Weinstein had reached at least 8 settlements to silence his victims (Duramy, 2019: 220). *Showgirls* attempts to serve 'justice' to Carver and 'revenge' for Molly by Nomi aggressively 'kicking the shit out of him'. Despite the satisfying beating which Carver receives from Nomi, his career remains seemingly unscathed. The film concludes without any character making a public accusation against him. This is unfortunately representative of realistic rape cases. In 2018, it was reported by the US department of justice that 80% of rape and sexual assault cases are not reported (Morgan; Kena, 2018). Reflecting the realities of many cases within the entertainment industry, Carver's reputation and career remained untarnished due to the protection afforded by his money, success and leverage within the industry. By contrast, Molly is left a shell of her former self at the end of the film. She is physically and mentally beaten. Post #MeToo, the

conclusions for Molly and Carver carry greater weight. The #MeToo movement uncovered and drew mass attention to the magnitude of female exploitation and sexual abuse which has gone unchallenged within the entertainment industry. The movement brought attention to historic cases which were concealed by those involved. For example, Weinstein was accused on multiple cases of sexual harassment, including rape, which spanned from the 1970's to the mid 2000's. These instances were covered up by settlements and fear from the victims for decades. Weinstein was eventually outed in 2017, and recently convicted to 23 years in prison for rape and sexual assault (Franssen, 2020: 257). However, his reputation and wider public image remained unscathed for decades. Carver acts as a reflection of Weinstein, his actions, and his escape from punishment.

The #MeToo movement was a cultural shift in awareness of female exploitation within the entertainment industry. *Showgirls*' fourth-wave feminist revival reassesses the film from this newfound outlook. This reassessment was encouraged by the greater awareness of sexual assault and harassment faced by females within the entertainment industry. As explored, the depictions of male characters are uncomfortably similar to countless accusations made against figures such as Weinstein. Often, *Showgirls* is disregarded as a 'camp comedy' with no substance. The narrative messages within the film are frequently overlooked. However, woven in between camp dialogue and gratuitous nudity lies a harsh commentary on the exploitation of women rife within the entertainment industry, as true in 1995 as it is today.

Feminist Ownership of Exploitation, Sexuality and Sensuality

Showgirls' feminist revival can also be attributed to an increase in fourth-wave feminists digitalising feminist activism and championing their own sexuality alongside increased support in favour of sex worker rights (Pruchniewska, 2016: 738). In recent years, there has

been a spike in contemporary feminists adopting ownership of their own sexuality and sensuality. This argument claims that females who choose to sexualise themselves are placing the power of exploitation in their own hands and avoiding exploitation from others. Over several decades, feminist literature has explored, supported and questioned this ideology. Ann Ferguson (1984) describes 'libertarian feminists' as feminists who support any sort of consensual sexuality that brings the participants pleasure (1984: 107). Ferguson's sphere of consensual sexuality is inclusive of sexualisation of the self. Various scholars have stated how third-wave feminists have embraced women's sexuality in unprecedented ways. Third-wave feminism is described as advocating desire and pleasure as a natural part of femininity which should not be discouraged. This stance is more open and positive towards women's sexuality than previous feminist waves due to the belief that sexuality is a means of female power (Choi et al, 2016: 827; Gill; Arthus, 2006; Krolokke; Sorensen, 2006; Holt; Cameron, 2010). Fourth-wave feminism builds on the ideas of third-wave feminism and applies them to online activism across digital platforms. Through the democratisation of online platforms, fourth-wave feminism has resulted in an escalation of feminist activism (Pruchniewska, 2016: 738).

The feminist revival of *Showgirls* can be understood as blossoming out of a surge in sex-positive fourth-wave feminism. fourth-wave feminist readings adopt similar viewpoints of owning, controlling and embracing sexuality as nude performers within the film. This can be applied narratively to female strippers and showgirls, but also meta-textually regarding actress' performing nude. This harkens back to the common thread within this study which calls attention to the blurring of distinctions between Berkley and Nomi. Evelyn states that '*Showgirls* dares to ask what counts as sex work' by blurring the boundaries within the narrative and metatextuality of the film (2020). Both the nude characters, and their actors

playing them, are using sexuality within the film as a source of power and control. Reading the film from a fourth-wave feminist approach opposes voyeuristic masculine readings which is often a dominant straight reading of the film. Whereas a masculine voyeuristic reading degrades female nudity, a fourth-wave feminist reading grants power and places control in the hands of nude performers.

Approaching *Showgirls*' female characters from a fourth-wave feminism angle grants the nude performers power through their unreserved and unapologetic female sexuality. Cristal is the greatest example of a character embodying this viewpoint. Fully embracing and utilising her femininity, Cristal champions how she uses her body to gain power over those around her. During her dinner scene with Nomi, Cristal proudly calls them both 'whores', explaining that they 'cash the cheque and show them what they want to see'. The delivery of this line is proud, seductive and unashamed suggesting that Cristal revels in her work. The reclamation of the typical misogynistic slur 'whore' exemplifies how Cristal regains power through her sexuality. By repurposing the term 'whore' into a title to be proud of, Cristal is not allowing herself, or the women she works with, to be humiliated or ashamed by derogatory views around sexuality. 'Whore' has been widely used as a derogatory term to describe the presumed copious sexual activity of individuals. Whilst the term is not exclusive to women, the 'whore' stigma attaches itself more viciously to females. Radical feminist scholar Carol Queen suggests that the hostile 'whore' term is applied predominantly to women due to 'sexually emancipated women [being] threatening and despised' in society (1997: 132). However, in recent history there has been a surge in fourth-wave feminists reclaiming the term 'whore' as empowering. There are countless accounts and memoirs from sex workers and women in general which detail the empowering aspects of embracing the term 'whore' without shame. These accounts unify in celebrating the freedom which allowing oneself to

become sexually liberated provides (Fabian, 1997; Brooks, 1997). This sex-positive fourth-wave feminist viewpoint is strongly exhibited by Cristal within *Showgirls*. Since these ideals have become more accepted since the film's release, this has encouraged *Showgirls*' second-wave revival from sex-positive fourth-wave feminist viewers.

Alongside assessing the films' characters, the sex-positive fourth-wave feminist revival of *Showgirls* can also be applied to reassess the film's female actresses, particularly Berkley. As extensively covered across all previous chapters, there was an indisputable blurring of boundaries between Berkley and Nomi which underpins the entire film. Permeating across the film's production, marketing and reception, there are strong connections between the actress and character on multiple levels. This begins at pre-production with the casting of Berkley as a young, up-and-coming actress, to her 2015 speech at *Showgirls*' 20th anniversary whereby Berkley directly compares herself to Nomi. Throughout the film, unlike Cristal, Nomi repeatedly proclaims that she is not a 'whore'. She actively appears to despise the word. The term is used by the majority of male characters within the film as a slur against Nomi. This mirrors the onslaught of derogatory reviews and criticisms which Berkley faced following the film's release. Considering that viewers lacked distinction between Berkley and Nomi, it can be theorised that Nomi's distaste and shame around being called a 'whore' fed into the public shaming of Berkley. The actress described the aftermath of *Showgirls* as 'humiliating' with anything related to the film losing its appeal (Setooden, 2013).

Specifically describing the experience as 'humiliating' suggests a level of shame on Berkley's behalf concerning the film. By contrast, typically Gershon is attacked less violently for her involvement with *Showgirls* compared to Berkley. Gershon is commended for 'having fun' with the character and possessing a level of self-awareness lacked by Berkley (Weiss, 2020). It is possible that Gershon's character, Cristal, assisted in the acceptance of Gershon

from audiences. Since Cristal is written as a sex-positive, self-assured character, this bled across into Gershon's public image. Compared to Berkley, Gershon was not critiqued for her melodramatic acting or nudity.

In recent years, due to a vast increase in sex-positive fourth wave feminism, Berkley's appearance within *Showgirls* has been reassessed. Rather than being shamed, like her character encourages, Berkley has been praised for her exhibition of sexuality and nudity. Whilst the camp cult revival provided Berkley with fans appreciative of her work for its camp qualities, the feminist revival provided Berkley with fans who celebrated Berkley and Nomi for their ownership of their sexuality. The second-wave revival assisted in eradicating shame concerning the overtly sexual performance by Berkley. As Evelyn states, *Showgirls* was spawned from a culture which punished female sexuality and confined it to the margins (2020). However, in recent years, as mainstream views surrounding female sexuality have been challenged, *Showgirls* has been reassessed.

The two distinct revivals of *Showgirls* exhibit how the film has evolved and connected with audiences since its release. Whilst the camp cult midnight movie revival hinges on a satirical camp reading of the film, the feminist revival applies a straight feminist reading to the film's text. Whilst both revivals approach the film from different angles, they both centre around dissecting and understanding *Showgirls*' relationship with female exploitation.

Exploitation Surrounding *Showgirls*: Final Thoughts

Research Objectives

Showgirls is an ever-changing artifact in the continually evolving socio-political feminist landscape. The film and its industrial history have proved itself to be challenging for commentators to dissect, understand and label regarding its relationship with female exploitation. Director of the documentary *You Don't Nomi*, McHale states that *Showgirls* sits in a 'grey space' occupying the middle-ground between 'good' and 'evil'. McHale believes that 'we're still talking about [*Showgirls*] because we haven't figured it out yet' (Hasted, 2020). McHale's beliefs ring true throughout this assessment of the film. From the film's pre-production to its recent feminist revival, it has sparked debate and controversy surrounding its treatment of female exploitation.

The pre-production and production of *Showgirls* calls into question the treatment of young female actresses in a mainstream sexploitation film. The similarities between Berkley's casting and the casting of young amateur sexploitation actresses raises issues regarding her vulnerability, agreeability and unfair treatment as the film's starring role. The accusations made against Verhoeven by Ravera also reveal a physical and emotional mistreatment of young actresses within intimate scenes. This account acts as an example of the importance of handling intimate scenes with clarity and care on behalf of the filmmakers.

The marketing and promotion of *Showgirls* is deeply rooted in the 'pornification' of its female actresses. All female actresses, but predominantly Berkley, are heavily sexualised and objectified by the film's marketing strategies. Combining traditional methods, such as posters, trailers and interviews, alongside invocative methods, such as the home-video trailer and website, *Showgirls'* marketing blurs the distinctions between actresses and characters. In

what becomes a significant trend, the blurring of boundaries between actress and character evolves to question the levels of autonomy which the actresses held over the presentation of their work. Arguably, the actresses were exploited into performing as sex workers within the promotion of *Showgirls*.

Initial critical reception of *Showgirls* was deeply rooted in a conservative feminist approach to sexualisation. The blurring of distinction between Berkley and Nomi created by the film's marketing resulted in misogynistic beliefs towards sex workers carrying across into the condemnation of Berkley.

The camp cult midnight movie revival and the feminist revival of *Showgirls* both exhibit the film's powers of resonating with different viewpoints. They demonstrate how the film, and its relationship with female exploitation, has been recontextualised and reassessed over the developing socio-political landscape. The camp cult midnight movie revival finds value in the camp exaggeration of female exploitation and opens the film up to ritualistic admiration from countercultural audiences. The feminist revival highlights the development of feminism within contemporary culture. It champions ownership of female sexuality and hails the film as critiquing female exploitation within the media industry in a 'post Weinstein' era.

Recommendations

This study tackles female exploitation as a broad term. However, future research should address *Showgirls'* female exploitation and feminist stances regarding specifically sex work and female stripping. As sex work and female stripping is central to the narrative of *Showgirls* it will be beneficial to analyse how the narrative on female stripping has influenced the film's levels of female exploitation throughout the production, text, reception and revivals. This would be particularly critical when approaching the initial reception of the

film opposed to its feminist revival. Academic research could assess pro-sex work activism alongside the feminist revival for a greater understanding of female ownership of sexuality.

Contributions to Knowledge

Despite its historic place in film history as the first mainstream NC-17 rated film, and the first mainstream exploitation film, *Showgirls* and its relationship with female exploitation have been critically under researched. A few scholars (Sandler, 2001; Salvato, 2006) provide in-depth, balanced, discourse and arguments surrounding the film. However, despite female exploitation being at the front and centre of the film, it is rarely expanded upon within academic works. In addition, the majority of existing literature pre-dates the 2020 feminist revival which has provided an entirely new stance, reconceptualization and understanding of the film. This study explores *Showgirls* from a unique angle, with the complexities of female exploitation at the forefront.

Bibliography

- Alter, Ethan (2020). ‘‘Showgirls’ at 25: Star Gina Ravera discusses the cult movie’s most controversial scene’, *Yahoo Movies UK*. [online]. Available: https://uk.style.yahoo.com/showgirls-gina-ravera-controversial-scene-130337799.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAANiRYPhUJ9HzUgorpMaoc8o3wTE4c0lhGEam5pUQmObSxh1cspX-RaHtBDEsQK34FkPbImKsNg6h-gujn-vdMdq7E7AyR_t6xcG0nhaMVxaVP6WBmwCf6r4sRRiN6Ee0RKR9EoNzCQH-XjROQ2ytQ6wZnH3QvbovQsO1TX-HE8JL [Accessed: 6th August 2022]
- Austin, Bruce A (1981). ‘Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: The Rocky Horror Picture Show’, *Journal of Communication*. 31(2): pp. 43 – 54
- Berardinelli, James (1995). ‘Showgirls: a Movie Review’, *Reel Views*. [online]. Available: <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/showgirls> [Accessed: 15th Jan 2022]
- Booth, Paul (2010). *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Bolough, Bonnie; Bolough, Vern (1996). ‘Female Prostitution: Current Research and Changing Interpretations’, *Annual Review of Sex Research*. 7(1): pp. 158 – 180
- Bovberg, Jason (2004). ‘Showgirls V.I.P. Edition: Limited Edition Boxset’, *DVD Talk*. [online]. Available: <https://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/11536/showgirls-vip-edition-limited-edition-boxset/> [Accessed: 20th August 2022]
- Bradshaw, Peter (2020). ‘You Don’t Nomi – the curious allure of Showgirls’, *The Guardian*. [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/11/you-dont-nomi-porn-showgirls-paul-verhoeven-documentary> [Accessed: 8th August 2022]
- Bradley, Mindy (2008). ‘Stripping in the New Millennium: Thinking about Trends in Exotic Dance and Dancers’ Lives’, *Sociology Compass*. 2(2): pp. 503 – 518
- Brooks, Sibhan (1997). ‘Dancing Towards Freedom’, in Nagle, Jill (ed.) *Whores and Other Feminists*. London: Routledge.
- Bucher, John (2018). *A Best Practice Guide to Sex and Storytelling: Filming Scenes with Sex and Nudity*. London: Routledge.
- Burch, Noel (2003). ‘Embarrassing Showgirls’, *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 35 – 36
- Busis, Hillary (2021). ‘If The Versace Fits: Elizabeth Berkley Lauren on Revisiting Showgirls for Saved By the Bell’, *Vanity Fair*. [online] Available: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/11/elizabeth-berkley-lauren-on-revisiting-showgirls-for-saved-by-the-bell> [Accessed: September 11th 2022]
- Choi, Hoojoon et al. (2016) ‘Do feminists still respond negatively to female nudity in advertising? Investigating the influence of feminist attitudes on reactions to sexual appeals’, *International Journal of Advertising*. 35(5): pp. 823 – 845
- Cleto, Fabio (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Cobb, Shelley; Horeck, Tanya (2018). ‘Post Weinstein: gendered power and harassment in the media industries’. *Feminist Media Studies*. 18(3): pp. 489 – 491
- Comte, Jacqueline (2014). ‘Decriminalisation of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research’, *Sexuality and Culture*. 18: pp. 196 – 217
- Cook, Pam (1976). ‘Film Culture: ‘Exploitation’ films and feminism’, *Screen*. 17(2): pp. 122-127
- Cunningham, Scott; Kendall, Todd (2011). ‘Prostitution 2.0: The changing face of sex work’, *Journal of Urban Economics*. 69(3): pp. 273 – 287
- Dewey, Susan (2011). *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*. London: University of California Press.

- Dines, Gail; Julia, Long (2011). 'Moral Panic? No. We are resisting the pornification of women', *The Guardian*. [online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/01/feminists-pornification-of-women> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Dodds, Sherril (1997). 'Dance and Erotica: The Construction of the Female Stripper', in Thomas, Helen (ed.) *Dance in the City*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duramy, Benedetta Faedi (2019). '#MeToo and the Pursuit of Women's International Human Rights', *University of San Francisco Law Review*. 54(1): pp. 215 – 268
- Ebert, Roger (1995). 'Reviews: Showgirls', *Roger Ebert*. [online]. Available: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/showgirls-1995> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Eller, Claudia (1995). 'Eszterhas deal nets \$2 million', *Variety*. [online]. Available: <https://variety.com/1992/film/news/eszterhas-deal-nets-2-million-100386/> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Evelyn, Christie (2020). "'Showgirls' and the Panopticon of Patriarchy", *Screen Queens*. [online]. Available: <https://screen-queens.com/2020/08/05/showgirls-and-the-panopticon-of-patriarchy/> [Accessed: 17th August 2022]
- Fabian, Cosi (1997). 'The Holy Whore: A Woman's Gateway to Power', in Nagle, Jill (ed.) *Whores and Other Feminists*. London: Routledge.
- Ferguson, Ann (1984). 'Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists', *Signs*. 10(1): pp. 106 – 112
- Forsyth, Craig; Deshotels, Tina (1996). 'A deviant process: The sojourn of the stripper', *Sociological Spectrum*. 18(1): pp. 77 – 92
- Franssen, Gaston (2020). 'Celebrity in the #MeToo Era', *Celebrity Studies*. 11: pp. 257 – 259
- Frishberg, Hannah (2019). "'Showgirls' makes a comeback nearly 25 years after it flopped", *New York Post*. [online]. Available: <https://nypost.com/2019/04/04/showgirls-makes-a-comeback-nearly-25-years-after-it-flopped/> [Accessed: 6th August 2022]
- Garcia, Sandra. E (2017). 'The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags', *The New York Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html> [Accessed: 6th August 2022]
- Gill, Rosalind; Arthurs, Jane (2006). 'Editors' Introduction: New Femininities', *Feminist Media Studies*. 6(4): pp. 443 – 451
- Gorfinkel, Elena (2012). 'The Body's Failed Labour: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*. 53(1): pp. 79-98.
- Grant, Barry Keith (1991). 'Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film', in Telotte, J.P. (ed.) *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Grimes, William (1995). 'In the Wings: A Film with Few Clothes and No Regrets', *The New York Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/12/movies/film-in-the-wings-a-film-with-few-clothes-and-no-regrets.html> [Accessed: 17th June 2022]
- Hasted, Nick (2020). 'The 25-year cult of Showgirls: 'A trash masterpiece and a masterpiece of shit at once'', *iNews*. [online]. Available: <https://inews.co.uk/culture/film/showgirls-film-elizabeth-berkley-you-dont-nomi-documentary-cult-452945> [Accessed: 17th June 2022]
- Hallas, Roger (2009). *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image*. United States: Duke University Press.
- Hills, Matt (2015). 'Cult cinema and the 'mainstreaming' discourse of technological change: revisiting subcultural capital in liquid modernity', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 13(1): pp. 100 – 121

- Handy, Bruce (2017). 'What I've Learnt: Kyle MacLachlan', *Esquire*. [online]. Available: <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a54532/kyle-maclachlan-what-ive-learned/> [Accessed: 17th June 2022]
- Hart, Kylo-Patrick (2000). *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoberman, J; Rosenbaum, Jonathan (1983). *Midnight Movies*. New York: De Capo Press.
- Holmstrom, David (1995). 'Showgirls': Does New Film Peddle Pornography?', *The Christian Science Monitor*. [online]. Available: <https://www.csmonitor.com/1995/0922/22015.html> [Accessed: 22nd February 2023]
- Holt, Douglas; Cameron, Douglas (2010). *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, I.Q. (2000). 'Beaver Las Vegas! A Fan-Boy's Defense of *Showgirls*', in Mendik, Xavier; Harper, Graeme (ed.) *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*. Surrey: FAB Press.
- Hunter, I.Q. (2008). 'Cult Cinema: A Critical Symposium'. *Cineaste*. 34(1):pp. 43 - 50
- Jackson, Sue (2018). 'Young feminists, feminism and digital media', *Feminism and Psychology*. 28(1): pp. 32 – 49
- Jaffe, Sarah (2018). 'The Collective Power of #MeToo', *Dissent*. 65(2): 80 – 87
- Jenkins, Henry (2012). *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jones, Angela (2015). 'Sex Work in a Digital Era', *Sociology Compass*. 9(7): pp. 558 – 570
- Keller, Jessalynn Marie (2012). 'Virtual Feminists', *Information, Communication & Society*. 15(3): pp. 429 – 447
- Klein, Naomi (1999). *No Logo: Taking Aim at Brand Bullies*. New York: Pan Books Limited.
- Kleinmann, James (2020). 'Exclusive Interview: Showgirls doc You Don't Nomi filmmaker Jeffrey McHale "it's absurd, it's vulgar, it's beautiful, it's offensive – there are a lot of layers that queer people respond to"', *The Queer Review*. [online] Available: <https://thequeerreview.com/2020/06/08/exclusive-interview-showgirls-documentary-you-dont-nomi-filmmaker-jeffrey-mchale/> [Accessed: 2nd September 2022]
- Kleinhans, Chuck (2006). 'The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis', in Lehman, Peter (ed.) *Pornography: Film and Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Krolokke, Charlotte; Sorensen, Anne Scott (2006). *Gender Communication Theories: From Silence to Performance*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Linden, Henrik; Linden Sara (2017). *Fans and Fan Cultures: Tourism, Consumerism and Social Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lipton, Mark (2019). 'Queer at Camp: A Selected Assemblage of Resistance and Hope', in Kidd, Kenneth; Mason, Derritt (ed.). *Queer as Camp: Essays on Summer, Style and Sexuality*. New York: Fordam University Press.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta (2003). 'Half-star: Showgirls and Sexbombs', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 33 – 34
- Luaine, Lee (1995). 'Actress Bares All in 'Showgirls': Berkley's debut keeps 'em talking 21-year-old performs the sexiest manouvers since Rita Hayworth', *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. [online]. Available: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/260275703/abstract/7E34AFD873354696PQ/1?accountid=8018> [Accessed: 31st August 2022]
- MacNab, Geoffrey (2021). 'Paul Verhoeven on making 'Benedetta', intimacy coordinators, and his 'Bel Ami' and Jesus projects', *Screen Daily*. [online]. Available: <https://www.screendaily.com/features/paul-verhoeven-on-making-benedetta->

- [intimacy-coordinators-and-his-bel-ami-and-jesus-projects/5161577.article](#) [Accessed: 31st August 2022]
- Martin, Nina (2007). 'Porn Empowerment: Negotiating Sex Work and Third Wave Feminism', *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice*. 31(2): pp. 31 – 41
- Maltby, Richard (1995). *Hollywood Cinema*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mask, Mia (2009). *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Maslin, Janet (1995). '\$40 Million Worth of Voyeurism', *The New York Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/22/movies/film-review.html> [Accessed: 15th January 2022]
- Mathijs, Earnest; Sexton, Jamie (2011). *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mathijs, Ernest; Mendik, Xavier (2008). *The Cult Film Reader*. New York: Open University Press.
- McMahon, James (2020). 'Kyle MacLachlan: 'I don't understand all of Twin Peaks'', *The Guardian*. [online] Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/mar/14/kyle-maclachlan-this-much-i-know-twin-peaks-dale-cooper-david-lynch-showgirls> [Accessed: 13th September 2022]
- McNutt, John G (2018). *Technology, Activism, and Social Justice in a Digital Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Menderhall, Julia (2019). 'Cult Cinema and Camp', in Mathijs, Ernest; Sexton, Jamie (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Molla, Rani; Lightner, Renee; Tovar, Carlos (2015). 'As Colbert Ascends 'The Late Show' Throne, a Look Back at Late Night TV Show Ratings'. *The Wall Street Journal*. [online]. Available: <http://graphics.wsj.com/late-night-tv-show-ratings-and-hosts/> [Accessed: 9th Feb 2023]
- Montgomery, Hugh (2020). 'How Showgirls exposed the rot of our misogynistic culture', *BBC*. [online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200714-how-showgirls-told-the-truth-about-americas-foul-misogyny> [Accessed: 9th Feb 2023]
- Morgan, Rachel. E; Kena, Grace (2018). 'Criminal Victimization, 2016: Revisited', *U.S. Department of Justice*. [online]. Available: <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv16.pdf> [Accessed: 6th August 2022]
- Moulton, Carter (2020). 'Midnight Movies' in, Mathijs, Ernest; Sexton, Jamie (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Nayman, Adam (2014). *Showgirls: It Doesn't Suck*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Neale, Matthew (2021). "'Basic Instinct' director Paul Verhoeven denies tricking Sharon Stone into leg-crossing scene', *NME*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nme.com/news/film/basic-instinct-director-paul-verhoeven-denies-tricking-sharon-stone-into-leg-crossing-scene-2989016> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Nichols, Mackenzie (2019). 'Harvey Weinstein Accuser Lusia Evans Breaks Silence After D.A. Dropped Charges', *Variety*. [online]. Available: <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/harvey-weinstein-lucia-evans-breaks-silence-1203340104/> [Accessed: 10th August 2022]
- Nielsen (2020). 'Going Swimmingly: Streaming Continues to Grow Among Consumers', *Nielsen*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2020/streaming-video-aug-2020-milestone/> [Accessed: 30th August 2022]
- Nodland, Brooke; Craig, Jessica (2019). 'Preceptions of Legal and Extralegal Punishments for Sexual Harassment in the 'MeToo' Era', *Deviant Behaviour*. 42(7): pp. 850 – 861

- Noriega, Chon (2003). 'A Whisper of Satire', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 32 – 46.
- Okwodu, Janelle (2020). 'Elizabeth Berkley Lauren on Saved By the Bell's Reboot, Showgirls' Renaissance, and Her Mission to Help Teen Girls', *Vogue*. [online]. Available: <https://www.vogue.com/article/elizabeth-berkley-lauren-saved-by-the-bell-interview> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Osterweil, Ara (2003). 'A Fan's Notes on Camp, or How to Stop Worrying & Learn to Love Showgirls', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 38 – 40
- Paasonen, Susanna (2019). 'Online Pornography' in Brugger, Niels; Milligan, Ian; Ankerson, Megan (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*. London: SAGE.
- Parent, Colette; Bruckert, Chris (2013). 'The Current Debate on Sex Work', in Parent, Colette; Bruckert, Chris; Corriveau, Patrice; Mensah, Maria Nengeh; Toupin, Louise (ed.) *Sex Work: Rethinking the Job, Respecting the Workers*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Pastore, Judith Laurence (1993). *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Pruchniewska, Urszula Maria (2016). 'Working across difference in the digital era: riding the waves to feminist solidarity', *Feminist Media Studies*. 16(4): pp. 737 – 741
- Price-Glynn, Kim (2010). *Strip Club: Gender, Power, and Sex Work*. New York: New York University Press.
- Puig, Claudia (1995). 'The Showgirls' Net: Bad Reviews, Agent Woes, \$100,000: Movies: Elizabeth Berkley is catching the heat, but director Paul Verhoeven accepts some of the blame.'. *Los Angeles Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-10-11-ca-55870-story.html> [Accessed: 27th May 2022]
- Puig, Claudia (1995b). 'Showgirls and NC-17: Grin and Bare It: Movies: MGM/UA uses the controversial rating to its marketing advantage with free vidoes, provocative billboards and other promotional teases'. *Los Angeles Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2024436914/fulltextPDF/EA119EF36F8D4297P/Q/15?accountid=8018> [Accessed: 20th June 2022]
- Puig, Claudia (1995c). 'MGM Embraces NC-17 Rating for 'Showgirls': Movies: the studio plans to open the film in 1,000 theatres, a record for an NC-17 work'. *Los Angeles Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-07-21-ca-26181-story.html> [Accessed: 1st February 2023]
- Queen, Carol (1997). 'Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma', in Nagle, Jill (ed.) *Whores and Other Feminists*. London: Routledge.
- Rohter, Larry (1990). 'Resistance To NC-17 Rating Develops', *The New York Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/13/movies/resistance-to-nc-17-rating-develops.html> [Accessed: 4th July 2022]
- Romano, Nick (2015). 'How Elizabetha Berkley Actually Feels About Showgirls', *Cinema Blend*. Available: <https://www.cinemablend.com/new/How-Elizabeth-Berkley-Actually-Feels-About-Showgirls-72287.html> [Accessed: 20th June 2022]
- Rose, Steve (2020). 'The naked truth about Showgirls: the 90s flop is a misunderstood gem', *The Guardian*. [online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jun/08/showgirls-the-90s-flop-is-a-misunderstood-gem-goddess-the-fall-and-rise-of-showgirls-you-dont-nomi> [Accessed: 9th Feb 2023]
- Rosewarne, Lauren (2009). *Sex in Public: Women, Outdoor Advertising and Public Policy*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Rosewarne, Lauren (2019). 'Sexing the Remake: The Sexy, Less Sexy, Queer, and Not-So Screen Do-Overs', *Sex and Sexuality in Modern Screen Remakes*. Pp. 149 – 267

- SAG-AFTRA (2022). 'Quick Guide for Scenes Involving Nudity and Stimulated Sex', *SAG-AFTRA*. [online]. Available: <https://www.sagaftra.org/contracts-industry-resources/workplace-harassment-prevention/intimacy-coordinator-resources/quick> [Accessed: 15th Jan 2022]
- Salvato, Nick (2006). 'Tramp Sensibility and the Afterlife of "Showgirls"', *Theatre Journal*. 58(4): pp. 633 – 684
- Sandler, Kevin S (2001). 'The Naked Truth: "Showgirls" and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating'. *Cinema Journal*. 40(3): pp. 69 – 93.
- Schaefer, Eric (2003). 'Showgirls and the Limits of Sexploitation', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 42 – 43
- Schaefer, Eric (2012). 'The Problem with Sexploitation Movies', *Illuminance*. 24(3): pp. 148 – 152
- Scheers, Rob van (1997). *Paul Verhoeven*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Schuster, Julia (2017). 'Invisible Feminists? Social media and young women's political participation', *Political Science*. 65(1): pp. 8 – 24
- Sconce, Jeffrey (2003). 'I Have Grown Weary of Your Tiresome Cinema', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 44 – 45
- Sconce, Jeffrey (1995). 'Trashing the Academy: taste, excess and an emerging politics of cinematic style', *Screen*. 36(4): pp. 371 - 393
- Shamir, Hila (2019). 'Feminist Approaches to the Regulation of Sex Work: Patterns in Transnational Governance Feminist Law Making', *Cornell International Law Journal*. 52(1): pp. 177 – 233
- Simkin, Stevie (2013). *Basic Instinct*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sontag, Susan (2008). 'Notes on 'Camp'', in Mathijs, Ernest; Mendik, Xavier (ed.) *The Cult Film Reader*. New York: Open University Press.
- Soulstein, Seth (2019). 'Cult Comedy Cinema and the Cultic Comic Mode' in Mathijs, Ernest; Sexton, Jamie (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Spivey, Sue (2005). 'Distancing and Solidarity as Resistance to Sexual Objectification in a Nude Dancing Bar', *Deviant Behaviour*. 26(5): pp. 417 – 437
- Talbird, John (2009). 'Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media by Stephen Vaughn. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2006', *Quarterly Review of Film and Television*. 26(2): pp. 169 – 173
- Troutner, Mary; Collett, Jessica (2011). 'Students Who Strip: The Benefits of Alternate Identities for Managing Stigma', *Symbolic Interaction*. 33(2): pp. 257 – 279
- Udovitch, Mim (1998). 'Tarantino and Juliette', in Peary, Gerald (ed.) *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Vaughn, Stephen (2006). *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Veenstra, Michelle (2002). *Nothing More to See: The role of "Showgirls" in the destruction of the erotic female nude*. Michigan: Michigan State University.
- Waller, Gregory (1991). 'Midnight Movies, 1080 – 1985: A Market Study', in Telotte, J.P. (ed.) *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Weiss, Max (2020). 'Movie review: You Don't Nomi', *Baltimore*. [online]. Available: <https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/artsentertainment/movie-review-you-dont-nomi/> [Accessed: 15th Sept 2022]
- Wexler, Lesley; Robbennolt, Jennifer K; Murphy, Coleen (2019). '#MeToo, Time's Up and Theories of Justice', *University of Illinois Law Review*. 2019(1): pp. 45 – 110

- Weinraub, Bernard (1995). 'First Major Film with an NC-17 Rating Is Embraced by the Studio'. *The New York Times*. [online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/21/movies/first-major-film-with-an-nc-17-rating-is-embraced-by-the-studio.html> [Accessed: 1st Feb 2023]
- Williams, Linda (2003). 'Showgirls & Sex Acts', *Film Quarterly*. 56(3): pp. 40 – 41

Filmography

- Basic Instinct*. (1992). [film] Directed by P. Verhoeven. USA; France: Carolco Pictures; Canal+.
- Bendetta*. (2021). [film] Directed by P. Verhoeven. France; Belgium; Netherlands: SBS Productions; Pathe; France 2 Cinema.
- Black Book* (2006). [film] Directed by P. Verhoeven. Netherlands; Germany; United Kingdom; Belgium: Fu Works.
- Henry and June*. (1990). [film] Directed by P. Kaufman. USA; France: Universal Pictures; Walrus and Associates.
- Saved by the Bell*. (1989-1993). NBC, 20th August 1989.
- Showgirls*. (1995). [film] Directed by P. Verhoeven. USA; France: MGM/UA.
- The Late Show with David Letterman*. (1993-2015). CBS, 30th August 1993.
- You Don't Nomi*. (2020). [film] Directed by J. McHale. USA: RLJE Films.

Figures

- Figure 1. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Green Band Trailer*. [trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izVUiA4njJo&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=7
- Figure 2. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Red Band Trailer*. [trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAvd8Xhn6iY&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=3&t=1s
- Figure 3. MGM/UA. 1995. *Showgirls*. [poster] Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114436/mediaviewer/rm3869495808/?ref=tt_ov_i
- Figure 4. CBS. 1995. *The Late Show with David Letterman*. [TV still] Available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5wyga9>
- Figure 5. CBS. 1995. *The Late Show with David Letterman*. [TV still] Available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5wyga9>
- Figure 6. MGM/UA. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 7. MGM/UA. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 8. MGM/UA. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 9. MGM/UA. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s

- Figure 10. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 11. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 12. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 13. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995. *Showgirls Home-video Rental Trailer*. [Video trailer still] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-YU21gO3r8&list=PL2Mi-Bz8wmKDr_DaYoOkZKn8BVknFoprl&index=9&t=420s
- Figure 14. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 15. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 16. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 17. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 18. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 19. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 20. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 21. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 22. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 23. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 24. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2
- Figure 25. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2

Figure 26. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at:
https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2

Figure 27. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at:
https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2

Figure 28. Verhoeven, Paul. 1995 *Showgirls*. [Film still] Available at:
https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B01N25IXQW/ref=atv_yv_hom_8_c_unk_c_1_2