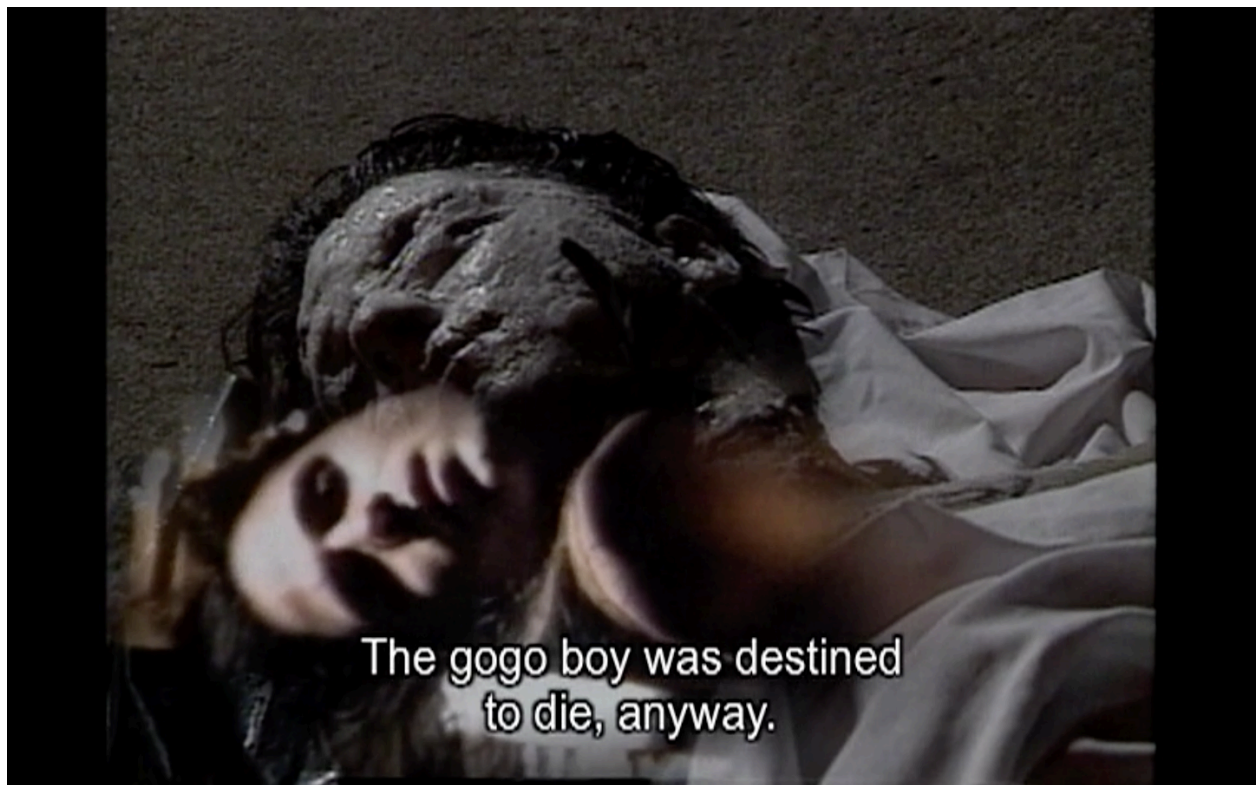


Bedroom Paradis

Queer video artists continue to create under censorship - reflecting on a posthumous retrospective of Marc Paradis



Marc Paradis, un désir d'ogre, still from *Réminiscences carnivores* (1989),
Vidéographe collection

by Jamie Ross

‘Torturous and strange’

I opened Marc Paradis’ videos where I saw most art this year: in bed. We wriggled in underneath the covers and pressed play. Marc casts neon outlines of cock onto my bedroom wall in slow motion.

Vidéographe’s retrospective online exhibition *An Ogre’s Desire* and suite of essays and biographical ephemera is a perfect dose of nostalgia and erotic intrigue, dedicated to the star of 80s gay video in Quebec who passed away in the summer of 2019. Marc’s world is a Club Med gay cruise of melodrama with blowing silk curtains as white as the speedo-clad twink dramatically making out in slow motion on a pier. Disembodied voices vie for your attention with borrowed poetry, wrestling it with loud flute solos, piano solos, and a libretto.

A highlight of his œuvre is *Voyage de l’ogre*, in which young men from the countryside describe their histories with sex work in Montreal. It’s composed of tender, candid portraits of men who struggle with sexuality and self-confidence (followed, predictably, by scenes where they piss their underwear, show us their cocks, and before we advance the tape, we are treated to John Wayne Gacy references, and liturgical singing in Latin).

In the mid-1980s, at the height of Canada’s war on porn, as the zenith of the AIDS crisis cemented serious fault lines of paranoia around gay sex, Marc’s responded by declaring his own war: on subtlety, with a hard cock as his weapon.¹

The defiance is morose in tone, but I would argue definitely pleasurable, at least in its tenacity. And it earned Marc a name for himself. Sure enough, two of Marc’s videos were quietly cut from a group show at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 1991. Vidéographe, his distributor, was one of the institutions that came to Marc’s defence, mailing vitriol to the curators.²

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1. Canada had come terribly close to passing Bill C-54 in 1987, which would ban all sexually explicit imagery in all mediums: print, film, and magnetic video tape with highly subjective and vague exceptions for artistic representations of sexuality. The fourth attempt in the 1980s of instituting one of the harshest legal frameworks censoring pornography was not passed.
 2. Defining Pornography: An Analysis of Bill C-54 Kathleen E. Mahoney, McGill Law Journal Vol. 33:3 (1988)
 3. When the videos were not reinstated, he and the other video artists withdrew their work in protest. Well into the 1990s, the Canada’s censors were so notorious that even Madonna’s SEX book arrived at its pre-review at the “Prohibition Importations Directorate” in Ottawa with armed guard, Time Warner having also retained the services of one of the most prestigious law firms in Canada to ensure it would not be censored. The Case Against Canada Customs Fuller, Janine. “The Case Against Canada Customs” in Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada (Cleis Press, 1995): 28

Abundantly legible in Marc's work is the degree of support offered by Vidéographe, from creation, diffusion, through to this generous, deserved post-humous send-off. When it emerged out of the NFB's social justice documentary program Challenge for Change-Société Nouvelle³ (1967-80) as Canada's first art centre dedicated to video, democratizing image making was critical to its mission. To elevate outsider and working-class stories,



women's image practices, Vidéographe gave non-artists training, equipment, and screening opportunities in downtown Montreal. It was the heart of a vibrant video scene.

At its heyday in the '80s, four nights a week, Vidéographe's video bar would fill with a community of friends and lovers drinking beer together, watching each others' tapes,

spilling into the Plateau loft where artists would show rough new experimental tapes, as Marc's collaborator Luc Bourdon speaks of fondly in his essay *Mon ami, Paradis* commissioned by Vidéographe. When Marc and his friends travelled across the country in 1985, they made video with their homologues of course, Anglophone Canada's Queer video legends Paul Wong, John Greyson et Collin Campbell. AIDS claimed Colin, gentrification claimed the Plateau lofts. The Vidéographe video-bar is long-shuttered.

3. The Indian Film Crew emerged from this NFB program, responsible for the legendary 1969 film *You are on Indian Land*, narrating Canada's border belligerence in the Mohawk community Akwesasne. Mackenzie, Scott. "Le Mouton noir: Vidéographe and the Legacy of Société nouvelle" in Michael Baker, Thomas Waugh and Erza Winston, eds. *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010): 136-148.

An anti-viral porn theatre

When I saw another dear friend had had his art Instagram account deleted without warning, I called to see how he was holding up. For Diego Stickar, friendship is also at the heart of the lush, sensitive erotic images set in motion by a ribald crew of moving image artists in Buenos Aires. For lots of the friends that star in his pieces, performing, acting, and fucking for the camera is something new, and most of them reach out to the artists to offer to participate. After 11 years making Queer moving images, he's tired of platforms suddenly deleting his accounts.



For now, he's opted to host his videos on the London-based porn subscription platform Onlyfans, where, for a sizeable cut, they trade in a promise not to censor any consensual sexual content. The platform itself is now trying to court non-explicit visual artists for hosting - a *salon des refusés* from the other platforms. "It's not ideal," Diego shrugs, but it keeps the lights on in his studio, and until he can find a better way to share his images virally, he'll stick around. This winter, watching his queer erotic film that documents communities of loving and fucking and of *touching*, has given me so much life that it at times is almost an ache to observe scenes so warm and horny.

The censors removing image creators' today are different than those in the 1980s. Instagram introduced sweeping new terms of service on December 20 2020, a few months after Black influencer and model Nyome Nicholas-Williams' challenged the platform for deleting portraiture on fat people's and Black people's accounts in a discriminatory way. Months later, the social media giant doubled down, introducing puritanical "community" guidelines protecting their right to ban users for the suggestion of sex, sex education,

mention of sex work, links to platforms like OnlyFans and potentially even the sexualized use of fruit emoji — all at their discretion. Love it or leave it.

Not only are Silicon Valley's companies less sensitive to the holy ethics of artistic freedom as the curators of the Musée des beaux-arts du Québec, they're not as accessible for complaint — it's algorithmic programs after all that scan photographs for banned content, taught by users who report what they feel is inappropriate. A tyranny of the majority, and denunciation campaigns against Queer and Trans users have led to algorithms that recognize transgressive content along certain racial, gender and sexual lines.

The non-commercial art ecosystem has been adapting to the new place of online video. In 2010, Vidéographe launched an online streaming platform for its archive and collection, on which Paradis' elegant online retrospective of films and publications is housed. VUCAVU, Video Out, and VTape followed suit, offering similar services that curators, distributors and festival programmers can view. While they are beautiful tools for professional filmmakers who apply to have their work distributed in film festivals, the crisp, plain interfaces epitomize the safe, and the anti-viral. They're built without sharing in mind. You have to fill out lengthy applications and pass a programming jury to upload your work. Canadian video freaks share our more immediate, unpolished work elsewhere, free from the "community standards" robocops, but without the benefit of audiences looking for Queer art.

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'Don't be deep, be hot'

Many Canadian artists are struggling under today's censors. Toronto-based performance artist Mikiki, who recently lost their online body of performance art documentation to Vimeo's censors declares that their "queerness is acceptable when it is sanitized, when it has assimilated, when it is not offensive. We need to create spaces that hold the standards of our communities as paramount, instead of trying to apologize our way back into the norm." According to Mikiki, an artist-generated media hosting platform could really help protect Canadian image practices. Yet the dozen artist-run institutions that serve to distribute Canadian video art to small festivals – those institutions that could easily create a platform for video art without censorship, the ones that supported Paradis in the '80s when his sexually explicit art was censored, are mostly absent from the conversation.

In 2012, Toronto-based artist-run centre Trinity Square Video stood up to defend the creation of sexually explicit video practices explicitly, and they faced a backlash. TSV was blasted in the mainstream media for hosting a workshop on porn production for media artists. "[Porn] is something that's pretty mainstream," said former Executive Director

Roy Mitchell, on the phone from northern Ontario. “Creating porn ourselves really reveals different relationships to power. So let’s talk about those things. Let’s not hide them between the closed door and our computer screen.” The two-day workshop focused on the ethics and good-practices integral to making good, empowering porn.

Conservative politicians publically questioned the artist-run centre’s core operating funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and tried to turn the two-day workshop into a scandal. While the DIY porn workshop carried on, rarely since has an artist-run centre presented work around the thematics of pornography, and a tacit disinterest around Queer contemporary art video deemed explicit continues, subconsciously disciplining its would-be creators that inevitably opt for the internet as an exhibition space.

Especially for sexual minority artists, frank and creative reflections of our lives that include our bodies and our sexuality are deeply meaningful reflections of our life-worlds in their full trashy, communal, unpolished and ecstatic glory and grime. I hope to see the day when the artists booted from the



online porn platforms we are forced to use might find the kind of supportive home among the institutions that have lifted Marc’s star so rightfully into the firmament of Canadian video art. His constellation can be The Ogre or the Gogo-boy.

Le gogo-boy était destiné à mourir, intones Marc’s narrator. And this gogo boy, and his boy drift off, underwear lit by flickering laptop *lueur*, dreaming of summer.