

## Erotica

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From HBO's early days as a nascent satellite channel to its current status as the most profitable network in television history, the one form of programming that has seemingly fulfilled the promise inherent in the network's popular branding campaign, "It's Not TV, It's HBO," is erotica. As a subscription channel, HBO has taken advantage of its ability to show nudity and sexual situations without fear of censorship. Initially airing uncut R-rated Hollywood movies but quickly offering spicier fare, the network has routinely banked on sexually oriented programming as an inexpensive yet enormously popular form of programming that contributes to the brand's distinctiveness. Through its erotic offerings, HBO has indeed supplied content that cannot be found on network television.

Yet in many ways, its erotic fare—from early usage of soft-core "B" movie imports to the more recent reliance on sex-centered documentary specials and reality series—is very much TV. Although critics want to point to HBO's erotica as a crass form of titillation, exploitation, sensationalism, or outright pornography that panders to its subscriber base, a cursory look across television programming suggests that HBO has no monopoly in these regards (see, for instance, Fox's *The Howard Stern Show* [1987–], MTV's *Undressed* [1999–2002], *Flavor of Love* [VHL, 2006], the FX network, music videos, *Real TV* [1997–2001], or the soundtrack to the poorly scrambled Playboy Channel appearing on an empty cable channel near you). Although HBO can be more overt in its use of language or displays of nudity than other channels, the forms of erotic programming it has offered over the last thirty years are perhaps best seen as a fun-house mirror, reflecting what has also appeared elsewhere on television.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for instance, the airing of soft-core imports such as *Emmanuelle* (1974) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1981) positioned the network somewhere between the edited R-rated movies shown on superstations TBS and WGN and the overt pornographic material shown on the competing subscription network, the Playboy Channel.<sup>1</sup> As the network began changing its emphasis from movie channel to original programmer in the early 1990s, it shifted these movies—originally packaged as "HBO After Dark"—to Cinemax. In the process, the move earned HBO's sister network the popular moniker "Skinemax." When reality television began finding its footing in an expanded cable TV universe in the early 1990s with shows such as *Cops* (1989–) and *The Real World* (1992–), HBO offered its own reality specials in the form of *Real Sex* (1990–) and *Taxicab Confessions* (1995–), resulting in two of the network's longest running series.

The success of uncut feature films on HBO and its subscription-only competitors, as well as the popularity of such material on home video, had paved the way for the social acceptance of sexual programming as televisual fare.<sup>2</sup> Finally, when unscripted reality programming consumed network television at the turn of the century with the likes of *Big Brother* (2000–) and *Temptation Island* (2001–3), HBO took voyeurism one step further with its more bona fide peek into locations of naughtiness—*G-String Diaries* (2000; a strip club) and *Cathouse: The Series* (2005; a brothel).<sup>3</sup> In short, although HBO is widely known for its erotic fare, this programming has never been too far removed from other television offerings. Network executives position the programming as normal and "respectable" material that "curious" viewers can enjoy (or at worst, put up with). Like other television programming, then, it is fit for the living room (though probably after the kids are ushered off to bed).

Or at least that has been the philosophy of the person most singularly responsible for producing HBO's erotic programming over the last twenty years—Sheila Nevins, president of HBO documentary and family programming.<sup>4</sup> As the network transformed itself from a movie channel to an original programmer, it was Nevins who financed and executive produced erotic documentaries (as detailed in this volume in the overview of part 4 and in chapter 15). Beginning with *Real Sex* in 1990, Nevins has provided a stream of erotic documentary program-

ming that has included *Taxicab Confessions*, *Sex Bytes* (1997–), *String Dinars*, *Cathouse* (2002), *Cathouse 2: Back in the Saddle* (2003), *Cathouse: The Series*, *Pornucopia: Going Down in the Valley* (2004), *Thinking XXX* (2004), *Shock Video* (1993–), *Hookers at the Point* (2002), and *The Sex Inspectors* (2004). “When HBO started,” she notes, “R-rated movies were the reason people watched HBO. So I thought, why can’t there be R-rated reality?”<sup>5</sup> She also justified this move toward sexual programming as one of the network’s distinctive markers of original programming by noting, “At HBO we knew we could push [the] limits of comedy. There was no reason not to push the form of ‘reality’ [as] far as we could, into a certain kind of sexual explicitness that was legitimate and safe and funny.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet Nevins vehemently resists charges by critics that her inclusion of sex in the spectrum of reality programming amounts to exploitation or pandering to audiences. “It seems very false to say we have a license to do this, and that’s why we do it. We do it with grace, with taste, with dignity.”<sup>7</sup> For Nevins, portrayals of sex are not a “dirty” endeavor. “I don’t think we’ve ever been vulgar in our programming,” she contends, “other than maybe when we’re showing man’s inhumanity to man [in the more serious documentaries the network airs]. We may have been energetic when it came to depicting sex, but not in a way that was ever harmful.”<sup>8</sup> Showing sex provides a balance to HBO’s documentary programming because life itself, she argues, requires balance. “I’m Chekhovian. I believe it’s dark and rainy outside almost all the time and that sex is a big laugh and we’re too serious about what’s fun and we’re not honest enough about what’s sad.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, she notes that “I have respect for people who take a freer attitude toward life, who enjoy sex, who laugh, who aren’t cerebral. . . . There’s a balance going on. We’re all divided somewhere between our brains and our groins.”<sup>10</sup>

That balance, though, is as much about business as it is a view of life. HBO’s profane programming also provides a balance with those documentary offerings that are more serious and profound. “I watch 10 hours of someone taking drugs or something like that, I need to watch ‘Taxicab Confessions,’” she says. “This is a business, and it’s successful as long as we have a balance. As long as that balance works, I’ll do the sex stuff.” But she also quickly adds the second important reason for balance: “It’s money-efficient.”<sup>11</sup> The efficiencies come into play because

shows such as *Real Sex* and *Taxicab Confessions* are often cheaper to produce (averaging \$500,000 per one-hour episode) than some of the more serious documentaries (which can cost as much as \$1.5 million per hour), yet tend to garner much higher ratings than the program that win awards. Spike Lee’s documentary about the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, *4 Little Girls*, for instance, brought 874,000 viewers during its premiere in February 1998, while *Shock Video 2* garnered 1.45 million viewers and *Real Sex 19* was seen by 2 million people during the same month.<sup>12</sup> Erotic fare is inexpensive to produce, requires no promotion, and appears in a late night time slot. Nevertheless, it can garner stronger ratings than some of the network’s more expensive dramatic and comedic series (*Pornucopia*, for instance, averaged 1.6 million viewers per episode, whereas *Entourage* [2004] garnered 1.3 million in 2005).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it is this imbalance between cost and popularity that also contributes to Nevins’s emphasis on providing distinctive programming that viewers believe is worth paying for and that can’t be found anywhere else on television. As she notes, “Extremes are interesting. Extremes are what my audience paying for.”<sup>14</sup>

But HBO’s erotic offerings, as a special genre of documentary, also assist in the network’s efforts to craft its “look” or special appeal. Nevins admits that “there’s an HBO spin, though I can’t define it.” Instead, erotica meets her informal test for what should constitute HBO programming. “I ask, ‘Could I see this on free TV? Is it something unexpected? Is there something surprising? Does it have legs?’”<sup>15</sup> Erotica, of course, fits the bill nicely with its unexpected subject matter, which surprises viewers with “activities” that are openly portrayed on HBO but only alluded to elsewhere on television. Furthermore, such programming “has legs.” In industry lingo, erotic programming is “evergreen.” It never gets old and can be repeated in numerous venues without seeming dated, while always drawing big audience numbers.<sup>16</sup> In short, erotic programming fits within the network’s mandate, which has led Nevins to take chances and experiment with this form of programming.

Such experimentation began in 1990 with the program *Real Sex*. Each program is shot as an individual, stand-alone documentary that shown numerous times throughout the year (with three new releases per year). Produced and directed by Patti Kaplan, a former professor of a

