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## Daniela Zahlner's witty burlesque offers a queer, camp reimagining of early erotic cinema

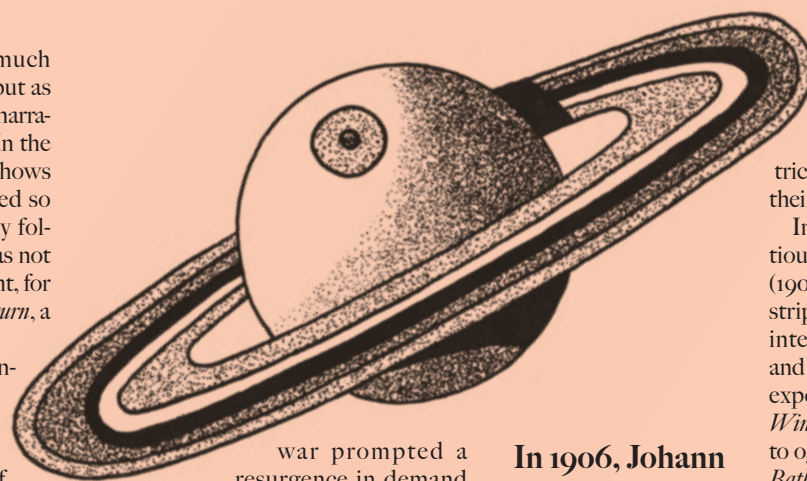
The history of pornography is much longer than the history of cinema, but as soon as the latter emerged, the two narratives became intimately entwined. In the pre-cinema landscape, erotic peepshows and magic lantern slides had proved so popular that the flickers inevitably followed suit. What happened next was not always so straightforward. Or straight, for that matter, as explored in *Saturn Return*, a new film by Daniela Zahlner.

The term 'Herrenabend', for a men-only screening, was coined by one Josef Stiller of Vienna, Austria. Not for the purpose you're thinking of – the gender division was a way of circumventing the 1903 ban on showing the surgical films of Eugène-Louis Doyen, which included naked female cadavers on the slab.

I can only apologise if that paragraph had a disappointing finish. Nevertheless, the *Herrenabende*, which grew to include erotic films imported from say, Paris, became a sensation in the city. And so, in 1906, Viennese photographer Johann Schwarzer established the Saturn-Film company to satisfy the growing demand for spicy films. The films shot in his rooftop studio exploited every conceivable situation for (live, healthy) female nudity – typically lake-bathing, the artist's studio or contrived orientalist fantasies – but stopped short of intercourse. As the adverts boasted, Schwarzer's *Filme Pikante* "avoid tasteless subjects in favour of beauty". In fact, they are as witty as they are elegant. The improbability of the exposed flesh and its chaste appreciation becomes not just a thrill but a shared joke, one that might loosen other inhibitions.

The voyeurs of Vienna, and beyond, applauded. However, the business was threatened first by piracy (to fight this, the Saturn star logo becomes increasingly prominent in the set dressing as the years pass) and then by censorship. The police closed down Saturn-Film and destroyed most of the back catalogue, in 1911. Schwarzer failed to get a foothold in the mainstream film business and later died for his country in World War I.

Another paragraph that finishes on a downer. It is scant consolation that the



war prompted a resurgence in demand for erotic films, with screenings for frontline troops. Though there is a happy ending for the films themselves. Recently restored by Film Archiv Austria, the surviving Saturn films are available on DVD, a frisky foundation to the nation's illustrious cinematic heritage. In celebration, let's step back a moment into the *Herrenabende* of the 1900s. No need to ask permission – historians are now sure that despite the 'for men only' advertising, women were often present at these screenings. And why the devil not? One film, at least, was shown at a fairground.

We can only speculate as to the enjoyment female audiences derived from screenings of *Diana Bathing* (1906) or *A Funny Story at the Window* (1908), much as we can only imagine whether they, or their gentlemen companions, were all as heterosexual as Schwarzer's scenarios assume – which consistently place a male voyeur in the frame. Like us, Saturn's audience may have been used to stronger, more diverse fare, and far from prudish. Stag films distributed by brothels were far more explicit, and it was a complaint about a gay film featuring two "monks" that prompted the crackdown by the police in the first place – a film not distributed by Saturn at all.

Artist/filmmaker Zahlner has let her imagination run riot on these questions. *Saturn Return* is a queer, camp burlesque on the Schwarzer canon that ramps up the humour of the originals and contorts those heterosexual assumptions into something much richer – and more risqué. Her models, often tattooed,

pierced and unconventional in their gender presentation, cavort through renditions of the Saturn scenarios. It is an exercise in that old trick: imagining the audience, or at least their desires, naked.

In *Saturn Return*, two men giggle infectiously as they perform *The Family Doctor* (1908), but with both medic and patient stripped to the waist, and the bourgeois interior backdrop daubed in neon pink and green paint. Female buttocks are duly exposed in a riff on *A Funny Story at the Window*, but with no male visitor present to ogle them. The shallow water in *Diana Bathing* and even shallower gravel in *The Sand Bath* (1906) render clichés of eroticism ridiculous. Zahlner's restaging of *The Sculptor's Dream* (1907) is the most audacious. In the (Freudian) original an artist's naked sculpture of the Three Graces comes to life while he sleeps. In Zahlner's female-only take, three bodybuilders flex and change poses at the silent command of a chic butch voyeur – the scale of the power dynamic is abruptly levelled. Throughout, those Saturn logos take on a life of their own, as models parade in nothing but giant inflatable stars to frame their proudly exposed skin.

It was a stroke of luck for me that Zahlner's film happened to be playing at the gorgeous Metro KinoKulturHaus in Vienna, a venue dating back to the 1890s, when I was in town. I saw the film with friends who were, like me, attending the Domitor conference for the study of early cinema, in a break between papers and our evening screenings.

Zahlner should by rights have been invited to keynote the conference – in my unscholarly opinion. Her wickedly enjoyable film illustrates half a dozen or more of our discussions about the persistence of the early film aesthetic and the breadth of silent cinema audiences – both then and now. She proves, with verve, that it is always worth looking more closely at the films our ancestors clamoured to view.

Visit [danielazahlner.com](http://danielazahlner.com) for more about the artist

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