

210-5

Babylon Rides High-Tech Wave

By Sean Paige

The adult-entertainment industry is flooding the airwaves, cyberspace and the video stores with pornographic material. Has this led to a coarsening of American society?



The billboard towers over Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard, featuring some of the biggest hips, lips, breasts and hair in the adult-film business. An advertisement for Vivid Video ("Video That Goes All the Way"), featuring the stable of pouty sex sirens that made it one of the nation's premier marketers of pornography, the wall of writhing torsos on Sunset also serves as an in-your-face announcement of the sex industry's coming of age. The era of the plain brown wrapper is over, and porn is just another pillar of the declining pop culture.

The signposts of a sexual revolution storming the ramparts of respectability are all around. Less than a mile

A new image? *Makers of the film Boogie Nights attempted to put a human face on workers in the sex industry.*

from the Vivid billboard stands the gleaming glass headquarters of Flynt Publications, the house built by the sexual exploitation and raunch of *Hustler* magazine. Although in more wholesome times it was considered shocking, today the tasteless Flynt journal finds itself struggling to keep up with the explosion of graphic material available to average Americans through the VCR, telephone, cable television and the Internet. Nearby, the House of Hefner also is trying to keep pace with an escalating market for porn, showing explicit videos on its

own cable channel to supplant the sagging demand for the pastel, airbrushed pictorials that *Playboy* made famous but which today seem, well, almost Victorian.

Workshops on sex toys, bondage and pedophilia art now are taught at respected colleges, reports State University of New York trustee Candace de Russy in a recent issue of *Women's Quarterly*. And California State University-Northridge last month hosted a World Pornography Conference at which 750 sociologists, lawyers, porn producers and actors heard Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union, deliver a rousing keynote address, "In Defense of Pornography." And coming soon to a tony Manhattan address is the Museum of Sex, or Mosex, a project backed by "pro-man" lesbian feminist and author Camille Paglia and the sometimes conservative columnist Arianna Huffington. Mosex reportedly will showcase highbrow erotica; take an academic, "interdisciplinary approach" to discussions of dildos; host a fund-raising film festival called Pornotopia, showing X-rated classics; and even house a café serving "aphrodisiac-oriented food."

A sex industry once relegated to America's back alleys is making a bid for acceptability on main street, finding avenues of approach in the mass media and new technologies. Switching on a personal computer, a child may find unsolicited e-mail invitations to visit one of the tens of thousands of porn sites crowding cyberspace. Turning on the car radio, one encounters shock-jock Howard Stern prompting a dominatrix to explain the fine art of caning, boot worship, psychodrama and long-nail torture. The corner video store stocks a variety of sex films from soft porn to hard core, which also can be found on cable TV or accessed in the finest hotels. Even the formerly stodgy news shows offer little respite from the barrage of sexual imagery and talk saturated with details about presidential fluids spilled in the Oval Office.

While many Americans recoil at these invasions and polls indicate that most support the anti-porn efforts of such groups as Enough Is Enough, Morality in Media and the American Family Association, a good many evidently do not mind — or welcome the porn. After all, someone out there is exploring the porn planets of cyberspace. And the 697 million X-rated movie rentals last year (up from 75 million in 1985) accounted for most of the \$4.2 billion Americans spent on

adult video sales or rentals. Demand for new and more titillating porn is such that the industry's 75 or 85 major production companies churned out nearly 8,000 new titles last year — roughly 150 each week — according to *Adult Video News*, or AVN. In all, Americans spend an estimated \$10 billion annually on pornographic videos, peep shows, adult cable and cybersex.

"What's happening is that the majority of Americans are recognizing that certain leaders have been lying to them about the effects of watching people having sex," claims AVN features editor Mark Kernes, explaining today's "more liberal climate" toward X-rated materials. "At this point, most adult Americans have seen hard core and haven't gone out and become child molesters or rapists."

Bill Margold, in addition to being an advocate for the industry through the Free Speech Coalition, also runs a support service for porn performers in crisis and a club for fans of X-rated video. A proponent of the pressure-cooker argument about social uses of pornography, he says X-rated materials are beneficial, providing "masturbatory catharsis for the masses."

Enough Is Enough spokeswoman Shyla Welch strongly disagrees, arguing that the accessibility of porn on the Internet is whetting appetites that wouldn't ordinarily be there, and that its use by males, particularly adolescents, can severely warp perceptions and expectations about sex, with women suffering the demeaning consequences.

Although fond of saying that "no one ever died from an overdose of pornography," Margold readily admits that some people in the porn business have become seriously ill from it. The industry has testing procedures for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, for its roughly 400 professional performers, and the use of condoms in X-rated films is up. But the community was shaken this spring by the news that five current actors, four women and a man, tested HIV positive. Margold says "less than 10" other porn performers have tested HIV positive (including industry legend John Holmes, who died of AIDS in 1988 while serving prison time for murder). According to Margold, the latest cases simply mean that "recess is over in the playpen of the damned."

Perhaps because of its outlaw allure, mainline Hollywood seems beguiled by the oddly parallel universe of porn studios, producers, agents and stars in the nearby San

Fernando Valley and has flirted with the sex business in recent films such as *Striptease*, *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and *Boogie Nights*.

Chronicling the ups and downs of a porn star in the 1970s, *Boogie Nights* director Paul Thomas Anderson "pushed the envelope as far as we could" to make the film as realistic as possible (including casting adult-film star Nina Hartley in a cameo role) while trying to put a human face on the industry. "One of the most widely held misconceptions about the porn industry is that it's pure evil and the people who work in it aren't human beings," Anderson told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Porn chic also is evident on the small screen. Former sex star Ginger

Kids of the radical-chic crowd of the 1960s and 1970s have had unparalleled access to porn and may have inherited a more casual attitude toward it.

Lynn sporadically has found roles on prime-time TV, former underage sex star Traci Lords has appeared on both the *Profiler* and *Melrose Place* and porn stars have put in cameos on two programs produced by Chris Carter, *The X-Files* and *Millennium*. Humorous and hip references to porn frequently are insinuated into sitcom scripts or plotlines.

A search of the databases of the Media Research Center, a conservative watchdog group whose Parent's Television Council monitors the content of television fare, turned up more than two dozen plotlines touching on pornography in prime-time entertainment during the last two seasons. One example: When discussing porn on the Internet, a character on the Fox animated series *King of the Hill* says, "Just point, click, click, they got naked chicks. It's real easy, man."

Although some older Americans may remember a time when viewing pornography was a furtive activity, the radical-chic crowd of the 1960s and 1970s regarded porn as part of their rebellion against establishment "hang-

ups." Their children, coming of age in the era of the personal computer and VCR, have had unparalleled access to pornography and may have inherited a more casual attitude toward it. To *Boogie Nights* director Anderson, who provided cast members with a set of "porn's greatest hits" and took them to porn shoots as part of their preparation before filming, so-called adult films were just another fact of adolescent life.

So much so that manufacturers of several lines of hip clothing for youths now are using porn stars in their advertisements, and sources in the industry say that at least two clothing companies and one maker of sunglasses pay porn producers to incorporate their products into sex films.

Aside from societal factors, there are other plausible explanations for the porn explosion, observers say, including the notable reluctance of Janet Reno's Justice Department to prosecute any but the most egregious cases of child pornography. In contrast to the 1980s, when the Justice Department under Presidents Reagan and Bush aggressively pursued pornographers, "there haven't been any major obscenity prosecutions since Clinton took office," boasts Kernes of *Adult Video News*.

The average annual number of federal obscenity prosecutions fell from 58 between 1987 and 1992 to 24 between 1993 and 1996, and in that time the Clinton Justice Department consistently rejected more than three-quarters of the obscenity cases referred to it by other agencies. "At the same time that you have an explosion in the distribution of porn because of the Internet, you have a Clinton administration almost totally backing off," says Patrick Truman, who served as chief of the Justice Department's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section between 1989 and 1992.

The laws are there to take on the industry, Truman tells *Insight*, but today "half of what [his old section does now] is deadbeat-dad cases" and "what you have is a top-to-bottom indifference to obscenity in the country," effectively giving a green light to increasingly brazen pornographers.

But what the Justice Department does now largely is beside the point, porn-industry spokesman Margold points out. "They could have gotten us at the beginning, but the saturation of adult material is overwhelming," he says. "How can you take a tidal wave and reverse it? Do you think any obscenity law in the world is a big-enough sponge to absorb it?" ●