

# A comment on *Boogie Nights*

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Having read a few of the almost unanimously positive reviews by critics, I am convinced that *Boogie Nights* (written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson) is a movie the mainstream media was able to praise only to the extent that they either misunderstood it or refused to seriously analyze it.

The movie's trailers present it with the glossy, innocuous package of a sort of retro homage to the 1970s: perhaps mildly controversial due to its subject (the sex, the drugs, the circus of futility and degradation that was the porno film industry of the late 1970s), but with enough allusions of moralistic outrage to pacify the more puritanical factions of the critics. As a narrow, voyeuristic peek into the pitiful absurdities of such a world, the movie would represent just another glitzy and useless work to which the audiences are sadly becoming accustomed. This is the *Boogie Nights* the critics were ready to praise: part *Pulp Fiction* in its stylistic elements, in its strident, vain violence, part *Casino* in its chronicle of the decline of the nobler days of an industry narrated through the tragic life of its characters.

While it retains certain nihilistic edges, I believe instead that *Boogie Nights* is a powerful and ambitious movie that deals with a number of important questions. Far from remaining bound to the literal confines of its story, the film can in fact be read as a broad critique of a society in which human relations seem to flow only through the rubbing of genitalia. The depth and power of its investigation into the process of construction of self-worth and identity in a capitalist society, and the way in which psychologically damaged individuals relate, or fail to relate to each other, endow *Boogie Nights* with both artistic merit and social insight.

When Jack Horner, the porno movie director played by Burt Reynolds, first meets the would-be star actor, small talk quickly and naturally leads to the apparently established convention of asking just which type of sexual favor he was expecting, as identified by its price. The quality of human interaction in the movie does not at all improve after this scene. Characters do not develop as fully credible men and women. This, however, does not compromise the film. On the contrary, effectively integrated with other artistic

elements, such a quality creates and spurs instead valuable insights, as it encourages the viewer to reflect upon the kind of cultural values that are fostered in contemporary society.

The subject of pornography naturally leads toward these considerations. Pornography is the commodification of sexual relations; a more modern, sanitized, impersonal, and therefore more peculiarly bourgeois form of prostitution. Instead of accepting the moralistic posturing of the defenders of the status quo, one must consider the possibility that, far from being a perverse deviation from the dominant values of a capitalist society, pornography might in fact be the most logical and limpid translation of bourgeois values into the sexual sphere. *Boogie Nights* decisively points in that direction. Acts and relations that are natural and spontaneous are turned into commodities to be purchased and sold.

The movie inspires the viewer to even broader reflections than those regarding sexuality.

'Everybody is blessed with one special thing', remarks Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg), referring to the size of his penis before his career as a porno star even begins. Indeed, the movie establishes early on just what kind of special things become valued and marketable. In spite of a documentary depicting him as a Renaissance man of sorts, it is clear that the main character is able to find acceptance, financial remuneration, and even some semblance of dignity only to the extent that he employs, and even identifies with his penis. Rollergirl (Heather Graham), a young porno actress who refuses to take off her skates even during sex, drops out of school after being mockingly reminded of her only valuable talents by a peer in the middle of an exam. Buck Swope (Don Cheadle), the amusing African American porno actor and stereo salesman, fails to close a sale for his insistence on playing his favorite Country and Western tunes as he demonstrates the acoustic marvels of an 8-track to a potential customer. He too, does not fit the hip and ethnic role assigned to him.

These human beings are therefore pressured to remain monodimensional and to market only the most degrading of their talents. 'Diggler's success can only grow and grow and grow', reads one of the glowing reviews of the young porno

star. But if in such a field of employment human worth is directly measured by sexual prowess, one must ask whether similar mechanisms are also at work in other realms of society. Is it not true, to be more explicit, that the way in which Dirk Diggler is allowed to make a living is only the most obvious expression of other, more subtle, but no less obscene and demeaning forms of prostitution that constitute the whole of socioeconomic relations in a capitalist society? *Boogie Nights* leads to this conclusion by following the shorter, more literal path. Other films, such as *Glengarry Glenross*, arrive at it through more arduous, and perhaps more rewarding trails.

One of the weakest parts of the movie is the scene of a divorce hearing between the porno star Amber, a mother figure of sorts, and her ex-husband. Here the connection between what is present overtly in the porno industry and covertly in the rest of society could have been made more tangible. The ex-husband, eager to pontificate about Amber's moral failings, is depicted visually as an unhappy and wretched figure in his own right. But even a few, quick incursions into his life could have more effectively reinforced a connection that is present in the movie in an implied form.

A New Year's party for 1980 marks the major transition in the film. The camera lingers on the sign burying the 70s and welcoming the 80s. An historical element is introduced as even more ruthless economic imperatives affect the industry. Its future becomes videotapes and amateurs rather than film and actors. In an effort to cut costs, these new standards are imposed by the producers on Jack, who vainly attempts to resist by defending the artistic merit of the old ways. In a field where most artistic considerations are obliterated a priori, the same familiar mechanisms still operate to vanquish all residue of genuine and valuable expression. So even Jack, shameless speculator of human flesh and copulation, paradoxically has room to complain about the degrading aspects of market logic.

Suddenly, the idyllic and naïve illusions of peace and love of the 60s and 70s are gone. Pathological human relations turn into overtly violent and destructive ones. Starting with a murder and suicide at the party, the film begins a crescendo of brutality. *Boogie Nights* does indulge in the same violent paroxysm that has come to characterize contemporary cinema ( *Pulp Fiction*, *LA Confidential*). In one scene, the newlywed Buck Swope stops to buy doughnuts for his pregnant wife. Impeccably dressed in a white tuxedo, after carefully choosing which doughnuts to purchase, he is caught in the middle of a robbery. Within a few seconds, the robber, an armed vigilante-type customer, and the cashier, are all dead; the splattered brain of the latter now adorning Buck's face and dress. The only one alive, Buck notices the

bag full of money left on the floor, grabs it, and runs away after a few moments of reflection.

However reminiscent of the cinematic calamities inflicted upon us by Tarantino and his epigones, the scene, along with the rest of the film, actually works. The movie does not express vain fascination with violence and utterly perverse human relations that remain unexplained and inexplicable. Its esthetic element does not constitute the central pillar of the movie, as in *Pulp Fiction*. *Boogie Nights* shocks the viewer not with its stubborn refusal to explain the brutality it depicts, but by skillfully stripping the existing social relations to their naked, obscene core.

An even more intense scene featuring a rip-off drug sale to a psychotic, wealthy addict who was just as intoxicated by assorted narcotics as he was by bad rock and roll, concludes the crescendo of violence without, unfortunately, adding much to the movie. This scene is engaging and in many ways remarkable, but it is essentially a thrilling rollercoaster ride that returns the viewer right to the point he started. Having spent tremendous energy for such a meager output, *Boogie Nights* recovers by concluding in a somber and appropriate way as all the characters meekly return to the comfortably devastating social niches that were assigned to them.

Buck, having found the money to open his own business, forgoes his Country and Western inclinations to star in a pathetic and hilarious Hip-Hop TV commercial to promote his store. The Hispanic porn actor wannabe and club owner opens the joint of his dreams only to find out that his name was misspelled on the huge neon sign. Amber stands in front of the mirror and is complimented by Jack for being 'the foxiest bitch in the whole world.' And in front of the mirror, in the very last scene, we also find Dirk, preparing for a movie after a long hiatus. Everyone is ultimately forced to find fragments of dignity and self-worth in that 'special something they were blessed with', even as their humanity is grotesquely flattened and deformed. This is by no means a happy ending, even for such a gloomy film. Dirk comforts himself and his dangling organ, by now completely identified as one and the same, with the reminder that he is a big shining star.



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