

## “That’s So Fun”<sup>1</sup>

### Selling Pornography for Men to Women in *The Girls Next Door*

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#### Pornification

This chapter focuses on the hit U.S. TV show, *The Girls Next Door* (GND),<sup>2</sup> a “reality” series following the lives of three women—Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt, and Kendra Wilkinson—who, until 2008, lived at the Playboy mansion as Hugh Hefner’s “girlfriends.”<sup>3</sup> GND has been phenomenally successful for *E!*: In 2007, it was the cable channel’s most watched show, with women making up 70% of the audience (Kaplan, 2007). According to Lisa Berger, *E!’s* executive vice president of programming and development, women’s embrace of the show was something of a surprise: “I thought that [female viewers] were going to hate these women” (Kaplan, 2007). Counter to Berger, I want to argue that GND very deliberately courts a female audience—and, specifically, a *young* female audience—but that to do so involves a marginalization of Playboy’s *raison d’être*, euphemistically encapsulated in *Playboy* magazine’s strap line: “entertainment for men.” How “entertainment for men” is transformed into a hit TV show for women and girls is the main concern of this chapter.

However, I want to begin by placing this analysis in a broader context. To note that the boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream have become increasingly blurred in recent years is hardly news: This has been a theme in academic and popular commentary for some time now. And this process has been given a variety of labels: porno-chic, pornification, pornographication. What is of most significance for this chapter, however, is the way that these labels can be used to bring together a series of quite disparate processes. Specifically, such labels are often taken to encompass *both* the increasing availability of porn—hard and soft core—and shifting mainstream conventions around the representation, pervasiveness, and public visibility of sexual practices and products. If what you are interested in is the sexualization of the public sphere, there is a certain logic in bringing these processes together. But it is important not to collapse one into the other (as many pro-porn writers do), as they typically involve very different patterns of production and consumption.

To give just one example, it is not uncommon to see the increased availability of hardcore porn discussed alongside the wider merchandising of sex toys or the popularity of pole dance exercise classes.<sup>4</sup> Vibrators and audiovisual pornography may both be products sold with the promise of sexual arousal, but that is where the similarity ends: One activity depends on the use of the bodies of *other* human beings for your sexual arousal; the other does not. Similarly, while fitness DVDs and classes focusing on striptease and pole dancing are clearly influenced by the commercial sex industry—indeed, there is a *GND* workout DVD—these activities align their female consumers with the “objects” to be bought (the porn performer, stripper, lapdancer) and not with the buyer of commercial sex. The casual equation of these activities makes commercial sex appear less misogynistic by suggesting that women are also consumers of sex. This conveniently sidesteps that what is being sold to women is often a way of working on *their own* bodies, rather than sexual access to the bodies of others.

This failure to recognize the important difference in what is being sold to women and men in this process of pornification means that female sexual desire is too often reduced to a willingness to sexually objectify oneself (Levy, 2005). Some women clearly do make choices about their involvement in pornography and other forms of commercial sex, and these choices are not immaterial (Whisnant, 2004). However, an individual’s choice does not disrupt the realities of the sex industry (of which *Playboy*, my focus in this chapter, is a part). It remains an industry built on providing straight men with sexual access to a wide array of women for profit, independent of the women’s own sexual pleasure. That some women—including those portrayed in *GND*—may have something to gain in this scenario (in terms, for instance, of wealth, opportunities, and recognition) does not negate this fundamental inequality.

Yet, the porn consumer is often invisible in contemporary accounts. Too often, women

(performers) are pitted against women (feminist critics), meaning that a political analysis of the industry is reduced to little more than a catfight in which one group is “mean” to the other. As we will see, this is a device used in *GND*, but it is by no means unique to this show: Being “judged” (by other women and also by some men) is portrayed as the most damaging aspect of women’s involvement in prostitution and pornography in a range of contemporary film and television texts. This is consistent with the framing of commercial sex as a narrative about women that cuts across mainstream representations of the subject in many genres and, indeed, has become so commonsensical that it is virtually unquestioned (Boyle, 2008, in press-a, in press-b; McLaughlin, 1993). Prostitution = prostitute; pornography = porn star; sex work = sex worker: Whatever political position commentators take on the issue, the equation of commercial sex with the women bought and sold within it naturalizes male demand, suggesting it is inevitable, lacking in complexity, and not worthy of investigation.

This is, then, the context in which *GND* emerged, a context in which pornography was more available than ever before and widely referenced in the codes and conventions of popular culture. At the same time, the discourse around pornography and pornification had diverted attention away from the specificities of pornographic production and consumption practices to make pornography seem more women-friendly. In the remainder of this chapter, I will try to unpack *how* *GND* has been so successful in making porn for men palatable to a female audience, securing their buy-in to the *Playboy* brand and its worldview.

### Playing at Porn With *The Girls Next Door*

Despite Berger’s apparent surprise about *The Girls Next Door*’s female appeal,

Playboy merchandising has long targeted women and girls. The brand has also achieved a degree of mainstream visibility in fictions aimed at women, including *Sex and the City* (“Sex and Another City,” 3.14) and, more recently, *The House Bunny*, a teen comedy in which a former resident of the Playboy mansion transforms the lives and bodies of a sorority house on the brink of closure by performing a series of makeovers and throwing some great parties.<sup>5</sup> What these representations share is an emphasis on fashion, appearance, and relationships between women, and this is also central to *GND*.

*GND* centers on the three “girls”—Holly, Bridget, and Kendra—with Hefner a key, but peripheral, figure. While it is assumed that the “girls” will be unknown to viewers—at least at the beginning (the first episode is entitled “Meet the Girls”)—Hefner needs no introduction. The show’s original opening credits illustrate this nicely and point to many of the other arguments I want to develop in this chapter.

Each woman is introduced in turn, using short cartoonish segments in which they appear as bobble-headed figures, their enlarged heads making them both comic and childlike in appearance (reminiscent of figures like Hello Kitty).<sup>6</sup> The introductions to each of the women caricature their personalities and interests while also providing a mini-narrative of transformation: a before (-Hefner) and after (-Hefner). Before, Holly was a small-town cheerleader in an unremarkable, generic locale; after she is the lady of the house, dressed in a sequined gown and positioned in a room with a chandelier, roll-top bath, and decadent furnishings. Before, Bridget was a bookish, albeit cheeky, student; after she is the girlish girlfriend, her books incorporated into a pink, glittery room that would be many a young girl’s fantasy space. Before, Kendra was a tomboy; after, she retains her sports interests but is now surrounded by expensive gadgetry in a room of her own that is both spacious and chaotic.

Hefner, in contrast, is assumed to be familiar to the audience, and in the credit sequence, his role is both to bring the women together (up until he appears they are only shown separately) and to establish a wider context of luxury: while the women are associated with personalized spaces, the whole mansion with its servants, gardens, birds, and exotic animals is his domain. Moreover, in contrast to the women—who all have name tags appearing on screen during the credits—Hefner is not introduced by name: He just *is*. In this brief sequence, then, it is established that it is the women who are the objects of scrutiny but that they are, to use Gail Dines’s (2009) phrase, “childified” women, dependent on a wealthy, benevolent patriarch. It is also notable that there is nothing obviously “pornographic” about the credit sequence: It could be the opening for any family-orientated reality series.

In the first season in particular, there is an awareness that Hefner’s living arrangements may incite critique, but it is the *women* who have to answer the criticisms. In a short interview included in the Season 1 DVD, Holly notes, with exasperation,

People want to ask you the same questions. “Do you really sleep with him? How many girls live there? How much do you get paid? Or how did you get this job?” And I’m like, “It’s not a job, fuck off.” . . . I don’t want to be asked a million stupid questions. . . . People think I’m just some gold-digger who’s here because I wanna be a Playmate or something and they always want to know, “Oh what are you going to do after, when are you leaving, how much do you get paid.” And I’m just like, “God, my whole life revolves around Hef and this” and it’s so irritating to be asked a question like that because, you know, these people don’t know me.<sup>7</sup>

At various points, all three women make frustrated reference to these questions (or others like them) and perceptions that they

are sluts or gold-diggers. But as Hefner himself is *never* interviewed, it is the *women's* behavior that is under scrutiny here too (why do they do it? how could they?) in more or less explicit ways.

Other accounts of life at the Playboy mansion offer some opportunity to consider Hefner's behavior: St. James (2009), for instance, describes how Hefner determines where, when, and how sex takes place, as well as setting a series of rules that his "girlfriends" must live by (which include a ban on dating other men and a 9 p.m. curfew). She also describes Hefner's financial control over his "girlfriends," encapsulated in the weekly "allowance" they receive. Most of this goes unremarked in *GND*. The show is purposefully opaque about the women's sexual relationships with Hefner. He may be an icon, a role model for male viewers, but he is never portrayed through the women's eyes as *sexually* desirable. This allows the show to sidestep Hefner's controlling behavior because not only do the women consent to it, but their apparent lack of sexual desire makes this a nonissue. When the women are asked questions on this topic, they insist on their right to privacy, and those asking the questions are made to seem rude, invasive, and driven by prurient interest.

This is perhaps most obvious in the episode "Pll Take Manhattan" (1.12), in which the women go to New York with Hefner to do publicity for their forthcoming *Playboy* pictorial, including a television interview with veteran journalist Barbara Walters. Walters's interview is not shown but is described by the women, who emphasize how inappropriate and rude the questioning was, describing Walters herself as "mean." The women talk about feeling set up by Walters's interview and not being allowed to speak on screen, side-stepping—in the process—the actual questions asked by Walters and the answers to them. By so resolutely focusing on Holly, Bridget, and Kendra and having them embody the Playboy brand, the show ensures that any criticism of the show, or of Playboy,

becomes a criticism of the three women. Given their infantilization, this comes across as a form of bullying.

So how is it that these three women embody Playboy within the show? Most obviously, the women's wardrobes are dominated by Playboy brand gear (jewelry, vests, T-shirts, sweatshirts, bags), and the women are often shot against a backdrop of Playboy merchandise: From chairs to a pinball machine, cushions to bottled water, the bunny is everywhere. The use of the women's bedrooms as a backdrop for many interview segments enhances the sense that we are being given a privileged insight into their thoughts and feelings. That the Playboy bunny is so seamlessly integrated into these personal spaces is a comment on its unremarkable ubiquity in the wider culture as well as in the show. But this also resonates with arguments that a domestication of pornography accompanies its address to women, and the domestic dramas of the show reinforce this sense that we are "at home" with Playboy (Juffer, 1998).

More insidiously, in *GND*, Playboy is embedded in a childlike culture. This can be seen in the opening credits where the women's childified alter egos are imagined as cheerleader, student, and tomboy, before being relocated to the mansion where they are placed within a bedroom culture. Like the young female audience watching the show, the "girls" live in their bedrooms, where they gossip with each other, plan parties, and confess to the camera. Bridget, the oldest of the three, is particularly "childified": In her room, Playboy bunnies sit next to Hello Kitty, Mr. Potato Head, and numerous teddies, and in interviews, she speaks in a slightly breathless, girlish voice with infectious excitement, lots of giggling, and occasional tears. Indeed, "That was so *fun*" is Bridget's most frequent assessment of the photo shoots, shopping trips, parties, events, and excursions that make up their lives.

Pornography is just one more thing "girls" like to play at. And it's something all girls in *GND* want a shot at. Virtually all the

women in the show are potential, current, or past Playmates or Hefner girlfriends, and it's a real family affair with second-generation Playmates, mother/daughter fans, and the women's own female family members making regular appearances. Most disturbing of all, however, in the fifth season episode, "Third Time's The Charming," the 2-year old daughter of a former Playmate is introduced with the on-screen caption "Future Playmate." It's not just that the women are childified playmates, then, but that girl children are porn stars in waiting.

For the adult women, much of their lives center on dressing up, having hair and makeup done, and finding the right costume for an activity or themed party. There is an obvious childishness to this, but the emphasis on appearance and transformation clearly resonates with women's culture more generally: The women are shown shopping for themselves and others, getting ready at salons and in their bedrooms, and endlessly looking in mirrors.

In the first season, Bridget's younger sister, Anastasia, is given a makeover for the midsummer party at the mansion. To anyone familiar with makeover shows, the framing of Anastasia's makeover will be instantly recognizable. Having looked on enviously from the sidelines as the women shot their *Playboy* pictorial in the previous episode ("Just Shoot Me," 1.07), the makeover allows Anastasia to briefly become the narrative and visual center. It is discursively framed as a process of self-realization and empowerment ("I feel so much better about myself," she says). During the emotional final "reveal," as Anastasia descends the mansion staircase in soft-focus slow motion to rapturous applause, it is the reactions of the "girls" and Anastasia's mother that are privileged both in real time and in retrospective interview segments. Dressing up (or down) in *GND* is primarily undertaken for an audience of *other women*.

This emphasis on appearance is apparent even in episodes where it is not the narrative focus. In a typical episode, the three

central characters wear between 8 and 14 different outfits each. This is particularly striking when you consider that many episodes are supposedly confined to one day. Holly, Bridget, and Kendra routinely comment on their own and other women's appearances both on screen and in their DVD commentaries. The vast majority of this commentary is complimentary, and the community of women in *GND* is imagined as a largely supportive, friendly one. As the example of Anastasia's makeover suggests, there is an inclusive tone to this: With a bit of work, some shopping, and the right girlfriends, any young girl can be this kind of beautiful. No special skills are required: Indeed, the women's *lack* of knowledge and experience are (along with dyed blonde hair and large breasts) their defining characteristics. Paradoxically, this both speaks to their current wealth (they don't need to be able to cook, tidy up, or drive, as there are always other people to do it for them)<sup>8</sup> and their more "lowly" backgrounds (Hefner expands their horizons, and they experience many things for the first time with him).

However, despite Hefner's wealth and the opulence of the women's lifestyle, their own consumption practices—particularly in the early seasons—are decidedly accessible and replicable. Yes, within the show, the *Playboy* goods are embedded within a world that is out of the reach of the average viewer, but the goods themselves are affordable, everyday. The women's entry into the exclusive world is, initially at least, dependent on Hefner: When they travel with Hefner, they travel in a private jet, stay in opulent hotel suites, and visit expensive and exclusive restaurants and clubs. When left to their own devices, they buy tacky gifts in souvenir shops and roadside diners and give "novelty" gifts to each other and the Playmates. When he holds parties, Hollywood actors, sportsmen, and TV stars show up; when the girls hold parties, they involve store-bought decorations, homemade costumes, and a guest list of Playmates. The women domesticate and feminize the *Playboy* brand, but they also

glamorize its mass marketing, placing Playboy-branded goods in a luxury context where they are celebrated and enjoyed by women. The women's back stories (revisited at various points) emphasize their small-town roots, and in the interview segments, they reiterate their gratitude to Hefner for the opportunities he has given them. Their lifestyle is Hefner's gift, and he is shown to be a very generous man: Part of the appeal of the series might well be that the women's lifestyle is made to seem accessible.

This is also where the show's allusions to other reality formats are important. I have already referred to makeover shows, but there are also connections with "talent" or other "search" formats. Playboy is always on the lookout for new "girls." The fifth season search for the 55th Anniversary Playmate (which takes up four episodes) clearly references shows like *American Idol* (2002– ) as the celebrity judge (Holly) takes her show on the road, with open auditions in four cities where hopefuls try out for the magazine. The first two episodes ("Girl Crazy" Parts 1 & 2) recall early season episodes in other talent shows: They are inundated with applicants, many of whom are made to appear comically deluded about their potential. As on other "talent" shows, we are invited to look at and judge the contestants along with the celebrity judge and, perhaps, to imagine whether we could do better (the auditions are, after all, open to any woman). Although it is a man who takes the photographs and shoots the video at the auditions, we are never shown his reactions: Instead, cutaways to Holly and Bridget cue our responses to the auditioning women, while underlining the distance between actual and aspiring playmates. The second two episodes ("Pleading the 55th" Parts 1 & 2) involve the chosen few performing for the camera as the hopefuls are narrowed from thousands, to six, then three, and, finally, the announcement of the winner is met with obligatory tears, hugs, and gushing proclamations of dreams coming true. This is Playboy's version of the

American Dream, and while fulfilling that dream is Hefner's gift, the search—the process of *looking at* and *judging* nude women—is Holly's.

The 55th anniversary episodes are not, however, unusual in making the gaze at *Playboy's* pages and models a female one. Throughout the show's five seasons, the women repeatedly look at and comment upon their own and other women's nude spreads for the magazine. In the second episode ("New Girls in Town"), the women attend a party for Playmate-of-the-year and talk to the camera about their own dreams of Playboy stardom. For Holly, this dream is presented as a validation of her relationship with Hefner; for Bridget, as a long-term dream that she dates to seeing beautiful women in her father's *Playboy* at the age of 4; and for Kendra, it is a motivation to "stay healthy." Pornography is thus framed as fulfilling *women's* and *girls'* aspirations related to love, family, beauty, and health. My concern here is not whether this is true or even whether this is a desirable aspiration but rather that this renders the demand side of the equation, as well as its gendered dynamic, invisible. In *GND*, pornography exists because women want to be in it and, to a lesser extent, because they want to look at it.

Indeed, it is *women* who repeatedly look at and comment on the pictorials within the show: Holly, Bridget, and Kendra are often present at photo shoots, offering encouragement to their Playmate friends; models look at their own pictorials with nervous excitement; and Playboy centerfolds are the everyday art adorning the walls of the mansion, including in the girls' more private spaces. When Holly, Bridget, and Kendra are themselves in front of the camera for the first time, Anastasia is on the sidelines, and it is her admiring and envious gaze that directs the viewer's. From Season 3 onwards, the female gaze is formalized as Holly takes on a role as a photo editor. While Hefner retains ultimate control—and the "drama" hinges on Holly's anxiety as to whether he will approve

of her choices (e.g., “My Bare Lady,” 3.04)—his distance from the set means that his gaze is not determining. As he is rarely present at the photo shoots,<sup>9</sup> he is distanced from the construction of the image, reinforcing the sense that these are expressions of female subjectivity. Unsurprisingly, the women comment on beauty and never on the masturbatory potential of the image. In short, there is no sense that the *Playboy* images included in *GND* are produced for men, or that they speak to a male fantasy of female sexual availability. The show feminizes and naturalizes the pornographic gaze: This isn’t male fantasy; it’s a celebration of women at their most beautiful.

## Conclusion

As this discussion of *The Girls Next Door* suggests, contemporary popular culture privileges certain frameworks for understanding pornography at the expense of others. Disappointingly, much recent academic work, while offering useful insights into aspects of pornography, has nevertheless adopted some of these frameworks fairly uncritically: for instance, by assuming that we can analyze pornography by analyzing the women within it or by conflating commercial sex with sex. *GND* exploits this context by focusing on the three women who live with Hugh Hefner and positioning the pornography that his empire is built upon relative to their lives and as the object of their gaze. In seeking to appeal to a core female audience, the show disguises the fundamental nature of Playboy (the magazine and the brand) as a form of *sexual* “entertainment for men” and, rather, fosters the illusion that pornography exists because women want to be in it.

One of the benefits of analyzing pornography through its televisual representation in this way (see also Boyle, 2008, in press-a, in press-b) is that it allows us to move away from debates about individual women and their choices to consider, instead, the

generic qualities of these stories and how they, collectively, function to legitimate the industry. In short, I am not concerned here with whether Holly, Bridget, and Kendra are telling the truth—or even a truth—about their lives at the Playboy mansion in this show (although their glossy account is significantly different from Izabella St. James [2009], as I have indicated). Rather, my concern is with how the show promotes a particular version of the Playboy brand to women and how, in doing so, it largely ignores the sex (commercial and otherwise) that lies at the heart of the enterprise. Although clearly approved as a celebratory account of Playboy life, this unwittingly gets at one central element of the feminist critique of commercial pornography: It has nothing to say about women’s sexual desires but everything to say about men’s fantasies of power and control. The women are there because of Hefner, for Hefner, and subordinate their own desires to his. That *E!* has been so successful in selling this vision to women is a damning indictment of our contemporary culture and the way women are encouraged to see and value themselves within it.

## Notes

1. “That’s so fun” is one of Bridget’s favorite phrases both in the show and on the DVD commentaries.

2. European title: *The Girls of the Playboy Mansion*.

3. Holly, Bridget, and Kendra all split with Hefner after the fifth season. The sixth season introduced Hefner’s new girlfriends: Crystal Harris (age 23) and twins Karissa and Kristina Shannon (age 19). This chapter focuses on the show’s first five seasons.

4. See, for example, McNair (2002), Williams (2004, p. 12), and Smith (2007, p. 167).

5. The consumer guidance provided on the UK DVD for *The House Bunny* is revealing: It was given a 12-certificate due to “one use of strong language and moderate sex references.”

[In the British rating system for home media products, this indicates material not suitable for children under age 12. Ed.] That a comedy about Playboy should contain only *moderate* sex references speaks volumes about the ways in which young women are being invited to buy into a sanitized brand that has nothing to say about their own sexualities and desires but rather emphasizes their need to be *seen* as desirable (the film's tagline is "The student body is about to get a makeover.").

6. Unsurprisingly, bobble-headed figurines of the women are among the show's merchandising tie-ins.

7. "All About the Girls": Season 1 DVD Special Features (Region 2).

8. This is, of course, the premise of another successful reality series: Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie's *The Simple Life* (2003–2007). Hilton herself makes a number of appearances in *GND* and, indeed, her own media stardom is largely indebted to a sex tape: a trajectory followed by another *E!* reality star and *Playboy* Playmate, Kim Kardashian.

9. In the episode "Go West, Young Girl" (4.08), Hefner makes his first visit to Playboy Studio West in 15 years.

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