The Bachelor gave a proud soliloquy on the yards of white silk she'd already purchased for her wedding gown; another spoke about wanting to find her "Prince Charming" so she could "feel like a real woman."

The reality TV universe is a place that seems strangely untouched by any significant cultural event of the twentieth century, least of all the feminist movement. Even NBC's smash *The Apprentice*, a show that supposedly hinges on the financial acumen and professional cunning of America's future business leaders as assessed by Donald Trump, culminated its first season in a thonged flurry of exhibitionism when four of the show's female cast members appeared in their underwear in the May 2004 issue of *FHM*. For free. As Trump put it to Larry King, they "did this for nothing. Perhaps that's why they didn't win the contest."

• Between 1992 and 2004, breast augmentation procedures in this country went from 32,607 a year to 264,041 a year—that's an increase of more than 700 percent. "The younger girls think that beauty is raised cheeks, a higher brow, big breasts and fuller lips—you know Pam Anderson," Dr. Terry Dubrow told the *New York Times*. Dubrow was one of the two plastic surgeons responsible for the gory, cookie-cutter makeovers on *The Swan*, a reality series launched on Fox in 2004 in which average-looking women were surgically, cosmetically, and sartorially redone to look

average in a shinier, pornier way—the brunettes became blondes, the breasts became bigger, the clothes got tighter and sparklier, and all the teeth became implausibly white.

Local newspapers like *LA Weekly* carry page after page of ads for surgeons who specialize in "vaginoplasty" or "vaginal rejuvenation." That is: cosmetic operations to alter the labia and vulva so they look more like the genitals one sees in *Playboy* or porn. The surgeries are not intended to enhance sexual pleasure. They are designed exclusively to render a vagina "attractive." The Society of Gynecologic Surgeons has warned that vaginoplasties can cause painful scarring and nerve damage that impede sexual function (i.e., make the vulva painfully hypersensitive or numb), but nevertheless the demand for these procedures is increasing. On plasticsurgerybeverlyhills.net it says "plastic surgery of the vulva has become quite popular over the past 5–8 years," and is "being considered by women of all ages." They caution that large labia "can give a ragged appearance" to the female nether regions if they aren't "corrected."

• The spring 2004 fashion shows oozed so much smut they prompted Barneys Creative Director Simon Doonan to write in his *New York Observer* column, "The hetero porno antics which dominated the first few days of Fashion Week were a mystery to us attendees . . . we poofters and fashion chicks, when confronted with all this Bada Bing muff culture, can

only stare at each other like terrified gerbils trapped in the headlights." The designer Jeremy Scott decorated his show (which he called "Sexybition") with pole dancers and the actress Lisa Marie, who was dressed as a dungeon sex slave and appeared to be having either an extended orgasm or an epileptic seizure onstage. Likewise, the Pierrot knitwear show was set up like a mock porno shoot with the designer, Pierre Carrilero, playing the director and the models rolling around in various familiar porn tableaux (black man/white woman, three-way, etc.). Designer Betsey Johnson's tagline was "Guys Love B.J.," and to enhance her message Johnson's models wore labels like "Fluffer" down the runway. (A fluffer is a person on a porn set whose job is to keep the male performer's penis erect.)

• Elton John, a knighted performer known for queenie costumes, giant wigs, and of late, treacly compositions for animated Disney movies, set his stage for a series of gigs in Las Vegas in the spring of 2004 with a pair of enormous inflatable breasts in front of a massive LED screen on which he played a film of Pamela Anderson spinning around a pole. The huge shows were held at the 4,100-capacity Colosseum at Caesars Palace. Despite his popularity with royalty, children, and gay men, John's concert had the look and feel of a very large Hooters club.

• In publishing, recent years have seen a spate

of X-rated books—none of which have been sheepishly tucked away in the Erotica section behind the Kama Sutra. *XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits,* a collection of photos by the prominent photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, came out in October 2004 with accompanying essays by big-name writers like Gore Vidal and Salman Rushdie. The portraits were sold at the famous Mary Boone Gallery in New York City. At the opening of the show, I asked Greenfield-Sanders—whose former subjects have included Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Senator Hillary Clinton, and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—why he chose to move from politicians to porn stars. "Because porn has become so much more a part of our culture," he said.

Pamela Anderson's autobiographical novel, *Star,* which came with a nude pinup of the author on the reverse side of the book jacket, stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for two weeks in the summer of 2004. Back when hooker-turned-writer Tracy Quan's *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* came out in 2001, you could find it prominently displayed at Barnes & Noble, right next to *Harry Potter.* Quan shared a "Meet the Author" event in Washington, D.C., with Chief Justice William Rehnquist. As she put it to the *New York Times,* "If that's not being part of the Establishment, I don't know what is."

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This is our establishment, these are our role models, this is high fashion and low culture, this is athletics and politics, this is television and publishing and pop music and medicine and—good news!—being a part of it makes you a strong, powerful woman. Because we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual, and because the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment, we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot throughout our entire culture.

This comes from an article that ran in the *Washington Post* . . . not exactly a fringe publication:

> Who hasn't dreamed of doing a fireman spin around a stripper pole? Because over-the-knee boots are an uptown girl's way of getting down. Because Carmen Electra—star of a new striptease-for-exercise DVD series—is eager to teach America's women how to play a "naughty secretary." Because Madonna pole-dances in a magazine and Kate Moss pole-dances in a video and Pamela Anderson once talked of quitting acting to strip during Kid Rock's concerts. Because Oprah recently learned how to do a stripper walk. Because stripping will tone your abs or heal your soul . . . Because it's hot and men like it. Because it's powerful; forget the men. All this is why everybody wants to be a stripper. It's

Is all this powerful? And if so, why?

> why these days the stripper pole—which you can buy cheap online and install in your den—seems to run like a steel beam of sleaze through the American psyche. With stripper-chic, as with so many advances in popular culture, the nation owes a great debt to Los Angeles.

One wonders how we will ever be able to repay Los Angeles for this powerful, soul-healing advance. "Everybody" wants in on this; "who hasn't dreamed" of it? We skipped over the part where we just accept and respect that *some* women like to seem exhibitionistic and lickerish, and decided instead that *everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars.

Not so long ago, the revelation that a woman in the public eye had appeared in any kind of pornography would have destroyed her image. Think of Vanessa Williams, crowned the first black Miss America in 1983, and how quickly she was dethroned after her nude photos surfaced in *Penthouse*. Later she made a comeback as a singer, but the point is that then, being exposed in porn was something you needed to come back from. Now, being in porn is itself the comeback.

You may remember that Paris Hilton was but a blonde teenager with a taste for table-dancing and a reported $28 million inheritance with her name on it when she and former boyfriend Rick Solomon made a video of themselves having sex. Coincidentally or

not, the tape got out and became a staple on Internet porn sites a few years later, right before Hilton's reality series, *The Simple Life,* debuted on Fox in December 2003. In September 2004 a second tape of Hilton having sex, this time with Nick Carter, a former member of the band Backstreet Boys, and Jason Shaw, a Tommy Hilfiger model, started making the rounds. The point, though, is not what she did, but what *we* did with it. The net result of these adventures in amateur pornography was that Paris Hilton became one of the most recognizable and marketable female celebrities in the country. Since the advent of the sex tapes, Hilton has become famous enough to warrant a slew of endorsement deals . . . there is a Paris Hilton jewelry line (belly-button rings feature prominently); a perfume; a string of nightclubs called Club Paris set to open in New York, Atlanta, Madrid, Miami, Las Vegas, London, and Paris; and a modeling contract for Guess jeans that has landed Hilton all over the pages of *Vogue, Lucky,* and *Vanity Fair.* Her book, *Confessions of an Heiress,* was a best-seller in the summer of 2004. Her debut CD—the first single is entitled "Screwed"—is forthcoming. And at the close of 2004, Barbara Walters interviewed the heiress as part of her annual special on the ten "most fascinating people" of the year. Paris Hilton isn't some disgraced exile of our society. On the contrary, she is our mascot.

This may seem confusing considering the "swing to the right" this country has taken, but raunch culture transcends elections. The values people vote for are not necessarily the same values they live by. No region of the United States has a higher divorce rate than the Bible Belt. (The divorce rate in these southern states is roughly fifty percent above the national average.) In fact, eight of the ten states that lead in national divorce are red, whereas the state with the lowest divorce rate in the country is deep blue Massachusetts. Even if people consider themselves conservative or vote Republican, their political ideals may be just that: a reflection of the way they *wish* things were in America, rather than a product of the way they actually experience it.

This is apparent in entertainment as well. During the month that sanctity-of-marriage–touting George W. Bush was elected to his second term in the White House, the second-highest-rated show on television was ABC's *Desperate Housewives,* a cleavage-heavy drama featuring a married woman who sleeps with her teenage gardener. In the conservative greater Atlanta market, for instance, where nearly 58 percent of voters cast their ballot for Bush, *Desperate Housewives* was the number one show. *Playboy* is likewise far more popular in conservative Wyoming than in liberal New York.

If the rise of raunch seems counterintuitive because we hear so much about being in a conservative moment, it actually makes perfect sense when we think about it. Raunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial. By going to

strip clubs and flashing on spring break and ogling our Olympians in *Playboy*, it's not as though we are embracing something liberal—this isn't Free Love. Raunch culture isn't about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It's about endlessly reiterating one particular—and particularly commercial—shorthand for sexiness.

There is a disconnect between sexiness or hotness and sex itself. As Paris Hilton, the breathing embodiment of our current, prurient, collective fixations—blondeness, hotness, richness, anti-intellectualism—told *Rolling Stone* reporter Vanessa Grigoriadis, "my boyfriends always tell me I'm not sexual. Sexy, but not sexual." Any fourteen-year-old who has downloaded her sex tapes can tell you that Hilton looks excited when she is posing for the camera, bored when she is engaged in actual sex. (In one tape, Hilton took a cell phone call during intercourse.) She is the perfect sexual celebrity for this moment, because our interest is in the appearance of sexiness, not the existence of sexual pleasure. (Before Paris Hilton we had Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson to drool over: two shiny, waxy blondes who used to tell us over and over again that sex was something they sang about, not something they actually engaged in.)

Sex appeal has become a synecdoche for all appeal: People refer to a new restaurant or job as "sexy" when they mean hip or powerful. A U.S. Army general was quoted in *The New Yorker* regarding an air

raid on the Taliban as saying "it was sexy stuff," for instance; the *New York Times* ran a piece on the energy industry subheadlined "After Enron, Deregulation Is Looking Less Sexy." For something to be noteworthy it must be "sexy." Sexiness is no longer just about being arousing or alluring, it's about being worthwhile.

Passion isn't the point. The glossy, overheated thumping of sexuality in our culture is less about connection than consumption. Hotness has become our cultural currency, and a lot of people spend a lot of time and a lot of regular, green currency trying to acquire it. Hotness is not the same thing as beauty, which has been valued throughout history. Hot can mean popular. Hot can mean talked about. But when it pertains to women, hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable. The literal job criteria for our role models, the stars of the sex industry.

And so sex work is frequently and specifically referenced by the style or speech or creative output of women in general. Consider the oeuvre of pop singer Christina Aguilera, who titled her 2003 album *Stripped* (the tour was sold out and pulled in $32 million), mud-wrestled in a humping fashion in her video *Dirrty*, and likes to wear assless chaps. "She's a wonderful role model," Aguilera's mother proclaimed on a VH1 special about her daughter, "trying to change society so that a woman can do whatever men do."

It is true that women are catching up with men

in the historically masculine department of sexual opportunism; trying to get the best and the most for ourselves in that arena as we are everywhere else. But it's not true that men parade around in their skivvies as a means to attaining power, at least not men in mainstream heterosexual American culture—they don't have to. Jay Leno sits floppy faced and chunky in a loose suit behind his desk, confident that he is the king of late night. When Katie Couric guest-hosted the *Tonight Show* in May 2003, she wore a low-cut dress and felt the need to emphasize her breasts by pointing at them and proclaiming "these are actually real!" Lest the leg men in the house feel understimulated, Couric also had guys with power tools cut a hole in Leno's desk so that the program could be a more complete peep show—a Google search for "Katie Couric legs" provides links to dozens of porn sites with her calves in close-up, in case you missed it. Even America's morning TV sweetheart, a woman who interviews heads of state and is the highest paid *person* in television news—outearning Ted Koppel, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Mike Wallace, and her cohost Matt Lauer with her $65 million contract—has to dabble in exhibitionism to feel as though she's really made it today.

Couric later commented that she wanted to show America her "fun" side on the *Tonight Show*, but in truth she was exposing more than being fun, or even being sexual. Really what she was showing was that she was open to a certain sort of attention—

which is something that we specifically require if we are going to think of a woman as hot. Hotness doesn't just *yield* approval. Proof that a woman actively *seeks* approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place.

For women, and only for women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome. When Leno did his stint at Couric's post on the *Today Show*, he remained fully clothed. While Janet Jackson introduced Americans to her right nipple at the notorious 2004 Super Bowl half-time show, Justin Timberlake's wardrobe managed not to malfunction. Not one male Olympian has found it necessary to show us his penis in the pages of a magazine. Proving that you are hot, worthy of lust, and—necessarily—that you seek to provoke lust is still exclusively women's work. It is not enough to be successful, rich, and accomplished: Even women like Couric and Jackson and world-champion swimmer Haley Clark, women at the pinnacle of their fields, feel compelled to display their solicitude. As that girl gone wild put it, this has become "like a reflex."

This is not a situation foisted upon women. Because of the feminist movement, women today have staggeringly different opportunities and expectations than our mothers did. We have attained a de-

gree of hard-won (and still threatened) freedom in our personal lives. We are gradually penetrating the highest levels of the work force. We get to go to college and play sports and be secretary of state. But to look around, you'd think all any of us want to do is rip off our clothes and shake it.

Some version of a sexy, scantily clad temptress has been around through the ages, and there has always been a demand for smut. But this was once a guilty pleasure on the margins—on the almost entirely male margins. For a trend to penetrate political life, the music industry, art, fashion, and taste the way raunch culture has, it must be thoroughly mainstream, and half that mainstream is female. Both men and women alike seem to have developed a taste for kitschy, slutty stereotypes of female sexuality resurrected from an era not quite gone by. We don't even think about it anymore, we just expect to see women flashing and stripping and groaning everywhere we look.

If men have been appreciating the village belly dancer or the Champagne Room lap dancer for sexual gratification and titillation over the years, we have to wonder what women are getting out of this now. Why would a straight woman want to see another woman in fewer clothes spin around a pole? Why would she want to be on that pole herself? Partly, because women in America don't want to be excluded from anything anymore: not the board meeting or the cigar that follows it or, lately, even the

trip to the strip club that follows that. What we want is to be where it's at, and currently that's a pretty trashy place.

It no longer makes sense to blame men. Mia Leist and plenty of other women are behind the scenes, not just in front of the cameras, making decisions, making money, and hollering "We want boobs." Playboy is a case in point. Playboy's image has everything to do with its pajama-clad, septuagenarian, babe-magnet founder, Hugh Hefner, and the surreal world of celebrities, multiple "girlfriends," and nonstop bikini parties he's set up around himself. But in actuality, Playboy is a company largely run by women. Hefner's daughter Christie is the chairman and CEO of Playboy Enterprises. The CFO is a middle-aged mother named Linda Havard. The Playboy Foundation (which has supported the ERA and abortion rights, among other progressive causes) is run by Cleo Wilson, an African-American former civil rights activist. A woman named Marilyn Grabowski produces more than half the magazine's photo features.

The company, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2003, is valued at $465 million; their brand and bunny are ubiquitous; they recently and successfully moved into the televised soft-core porn market; *Playboy* remains the world's top-selling men's magazine, with a paid circulation of just over three million in the United States and some fifteen million readers across the globe. And, after twenty years in remission, the first of many new Playboy Clubs is set

to open at the Palms Casino in Las Vegas in 2006. Like the original swinging sixties Playboy Clubs, the new ones will be staffed by "hostesses" dressed in strapless bathing suit–like uniforms topped off with rabbit ears, shirt cuffs, and bunny tails—the same conceit that prompted Gloria Steinem to go undercover at a Playboy Club in Manhattan for two weeks in 1963 to write her famous article "A Bunny's Tale," in which she seared the women's working conditions and pronounced the club's atmosphere generally conducive to exploitation and misogyny. (Steinem's assessment was refuted, much less famously, by former bunny Kathryn Leigh Scott in a book called *The Bunny Years*. Scott, who worked alongside Steinem in Manhattan, recollected the Playboy Club chiefly as a pleasant place where she made a lot of money.) Playboy closed the last of the original clubs in 1986 because they were no longer profitable, but now with the country's reinvigorated interest in all things bimbo, Playboy has determined, probably correctly, that the time is again right to offer Americans cocktails served by women dressed as stuffed animals.

Christie Hefner is a founder of two women's groups: Emily's List, which raises money to support pro-choice, female Democratic political candidates, and the Committee of 200, an organization of female executives and business owners who provide mentoring programs and scholarships to young women and girls. I wanted to find out how she reconciled the work she does for women's advancement with her job

as head of a company that uses women as decorative inducements to masturbate, so I went to visit her in Chicago during the city's green, rainy spring.

There was no hint of debauchery in the lobby at 680 North Lake Shore Drive, the building that houses Playboy Enterprises. The floor was a giant chessboard of cool marble, and an understated stainless steel sign spelled out the company's name. (No bunny.) But when I stepped on the elevator, I knew I was in the right place. A tall, rock-hard woman in jeans and heels with a long, silky ponytail and a motherlode of cleavage got on with her friend, who looked more garden-variety blonde human female. The hot one applied another layer of lip gloss, licked her white teeth, and then bared them. "How do I look?" she asked. Her friend scrutinized her with great concentration and then pulled the zipper of her tight terry cloth top down an inch from the midpoint to the base of her cleavage. She stepped back, surveyed her work, and nodded. "I think that's more what you want to say."

On the fifteenth floor, a blonde receptionist was sitting in front of a glass case that housed two weird, white, rabbit-headed mannequins. "Are you all here for the fiftieth?" she asked, smiling. She meant: Were we going to audition to be Playmates in the fiftieth-anniversary issue of the magazine? The one of us who obviously *was* followed the receptionist back into the belly of the building. "She works for a German pharmaceutical company called BrainLAB," her