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Yale Sex Week Glosses Over Porn's Dark Side

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You know an industry has become mainstream when its representatives are invited to address the elite institutions of higher learning.

Next Saturday, as part of the student-run program Sex Week at Yale, pornographer Steve Hirsch, founder and owner of leading porn studio Vivid Productions, will be at Yale University to talk about — what else? — his role in mainstreaming the porn industry. And indeed, pornographers like Hirsch, who represent the up-market chic end of the industry, did more than most pornographers to make the industry the multibillion-dollar-a-year business it is today.

By showcasing Vivid, Yale is accepting, even promoting, the media-generated sugar-coated image of the porn industry as glamorous, fun and cool. This image has been made popular by Howard Stern, documentaries on E! Entertainment and celebrity magazines such as People.

The Vivid Girls are the elite of the porn industry, women who earn a decent, if short-lived livelihood, and are somewhat protected from the much larger world of more violent and body-punishing hard-core movies called "gonzo" by the industry. The (mainly white) Vivid Girls are the respectable face of the porn industry; their job is to make porn look like a wholesome route to stardom; they act as a recruitment tool for a mass production sweatshop industry that needs to keep replenishing its supply of female bodies.

One of the highlights of Sex Week is the contest "Who Looks Most Like a Vivid Girl," to be judged by two of the women on contract to Vivid. Women go to college for many reasons, but for most, it is to get an education and position themselves for a professional career.

I dare say that few if any women at Yale are aspiring for a career in the porn industry, as they are going to have a range of options open to them, thanks to their Ivy League degree.

Those women who do go into porn are mostly women from underprivileged backgrounds who, facing a life of minimum wage

labor, see porn as a way out of anonymous economic drudgery. And why not? The only image they ever get of porn is one that highlights the lucky few who actually make real money and get to mix with a few B-list celebrities. What they don't get to see are the thousands and thousands of women who start in porn and end up, within a short time, working the brothels of Nevada for a pittance, or having to deal with substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.

The real story of porn, one which looks nothing like the chic media image, will be well hidden next week at Yale. The student organizers have invited mainly representatives from the porn industry and their supporters, with the only voice of opposition being XXX Church pastor Craig Gross.

Missing are the voices of women who have left the industry after being brutalized and exploited, for whom a college education, let alone at an Ivy, is unaffordable and almost unimaginable.

Also missing is the anti-pornography feminist voice, which sees pornography as sexist, violent and harmful to women. After 30 years of researching the industry, the business practices of the pornographers, and the effects on women and men, we anti-porn feminists are "disappeared" from the debate.

Two years ago I spoke on a pornography panel at Yale Law School. Of the six people invited, I was the only speaker to criticize the porn industry, with the others either being pornographers, or bar one, so pro-porn, they might as well have been industry representatives. After the panel, some students came up to me to express their disgust with the way the panel had been organized, and how they felt cheated out of a thoughtful dialogue.

Now, just a couple of years later there is no attempt by the organizers of Sex Week to even pay lip service to a feminist critique; one more sign of just how acceptable and mainstream porn has become at Yale, and in our culture.

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