

# King of the creeps

Review: Helen Redmond

Porn king Hugh Hefner is a persecuted champion for equal rights, a new film says. Not exactly the first--or last--description that comes to mind, argues Helen Redmond.

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THE NEW documentary about Hugh Hefner titled, Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel is a stunningly one-sided, sympathetic portrait of the porn baron that sidesteps the fact that his entire publishing empire was built on the sexual objectification and degradation of women.

It is rubbish.

The press has almost unanimously and uncritically praised the documentary, with film critic Roger Ebert calling Hefner "A generous gentleman who likes to get laid." Film director George Lucas compares himself to Hefner explaining they're both in the business of creating "fantasies." Star Wars and Sex Wars, who knew?

Director Brigitte Berman's film provides one cringe-inducing, "WTF" moment after another. The cringing kicks off when Hefner croaks, "I wasn't getting hugged at home." That, we are supposed to believe, is why he went into the pornography business. Hugs? Really? It wasn't the sex, power and profits?



Hugh Hefner (Glenn Francis)

Berman would have us thank Hefner for starting and finishing the sexual revolution in the U.S. And in case you didn't know, "Hef" also played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and the fight for birth control and to legalize abortion.

Curiously, though, Hefner has nothing to say about the movement for gay rights. For Berman, Hefner's activism against the various oppressions of the 1950s and '60s is his true legacy. More rubbish. Hefner doesn't even deserve a footnote in the struggles of the 1960s.

Berman's attempt to convince us that Hef had an impact on the civil rights movement is insulting. As if Playboy Penthouse bacchanalias full of affluent, white posers, trust fund dilettantes and passive Playboy bunnies listening to Sammy Davis Jr. sing contributed anything to the movement for civil rights.

How about the students that sat in at lunch counters and were attacked, the women domestic workers who walked to work for a year during the Montgomery bus boycott? Not so much for Berman.

In the film, Hefner comes off as a misunderstood and persecuted champion for equal rights, a tastemaker ahead of his time, unfairly vilified by sexually repressed, Bible-thumping, evolution-denying whack jobs like Pat Boone and man-hating feminists like Susan Brownmiller.

Boone and Brownmiller offer the only criticism of Hefner in the film. In Berman's interview with Brownmiller, she doesn't offer a convincing analysis of Hefner's still acceptable misogyny and male chauvinism. She chalks up Hef's success to him simply being "clever."

The most satisfying moment, though, is Brownmiller in a television clip from The Dick Cavett Show. She confronts a smug, pipe-smoking Hefner and declares that being a Playboy bunny is humiliating--not liberating. She challenges him to wear rabbit ears and a cottontail to the shouts and applause of the live studio audience.

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TO MAKE a documentary about Hugh Hefner--indisputably the world's most famous pornographer and unrepentant chauvinist--and omit his enormously influential role in negatively shaping ideas about female sexuality is sophistry. Berman's documentary is an attempt to "get beyond the bunny," but there is no getting beyond the bunny because the bunny made the man.

Hefner's success was built on the exploitation of women's nude bodies for the pleasure of men. Every aspect of Playboy, Inc. was consciously designed as "Entertainment for Men." Hefner was one of the first capitalists to commodify women's sexuality for mass consumption (by men). The profits from selling pornography made him a millionaire.

Hefner branded one of the most profitable and ubiquitous symbols of women's oppression: The Playboy rabbit head. Asked why he chose the rabbit, Hefner replied:

The rabbit, the bunny, in America has a sexual meaning and I chose it because it's a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping--sexy. First, it smells you, then it escapes, then it comes back, and you feel like caressing it, playing with it. A girl resembles a bunny...

Consider the kind of girl that we made popular: the Playmate of the month. She is never sophisticated, a girl you cannot really have. She is a young, healthy, simple girl--the girl next door...we are not interested in the mysterious, difficult woman, the femme fatale who wears elegant underwear with lace and she is sad and somehow mentally filthy.

The Playboy girl has no lace, no underwear, she is naked, well washed with soap and water and she is happy.

Think about those words the next time you see a man or a woman wearing a T-shirt or pendant embossed with the Playboy rabbit head.

The film goes back to the halcyon days of the Playboy clubs. But Berman doesn't tell us what it was like for women to work as Playboy bunnies. For that chapter in Hefner's life, one has to read Gloria

Steinem's article, "I Was a Playboy Bunny," in her book *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. The hiring process included having bust and waist measurements taken, a blood test for sexually transmitted diseases and a pelvic exam.

Regularly groped, grabbed by the cottontail and propositioned by customers, pressure was put on bunnies to sell more liquor, cigarettes, Polaroid photos and rabbit head products. Management took out half of all the women's tips that were charged. Black women workers were called "chocolate bunnies."

The Playboy clubs are the progenitor of the popular restaurant chains Hooters and the Tilted Kilt. The all-female wait staff at both restaurants is the modern equivalent of Playboy bunnies. Hooters girls are scantily clad in high-cut, tight orange shorts, suntan hose and low-cut tank tops. Smiling is mandatory.

At the Tilted Kilt, the servers bare even more flesh. Women wear mini-tartan kilts that expose thigh and the entire midriff. Patches of tartan bra peek out from form-fitting, white sweaters.

Amazingly, some people argue that a half-naked woman serving drinks and food to fully clothed customers is a symbol of "female sexual empowerment." But turn that around. Imagine a restaurant chain called "Cocks," with a man serving cocktails and chicken wings wearing only a tartan thong two sizes too small. Humiliating? Degrading?

Those who argue that these restaurants, *Girls Gone Wild* videos, or pole dancing, strip-teasing porn stars are expressions of sexist exploitation, not female empowerment, are dismissed or indicted as prudes, puritanical and anti-sex. It's either a bikini or a burqa.

Berman's documentary needs to be seen as part of the backlash against women that has succeeded in portraying the sexual objectification of women as sexual liberation. Books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* document how women have lost ground in the fight for economic equality and reproductive rights. Sexual liberation is now celebrated and measured by how much flesh women can flaunt.

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PLAYBOY MAGAZINE promotes a punishing, narrow standard of female beauty pejoratively called "tits on sticks." This body type doesn't exist in nature and is only obtained by extreme dieting, exercise, drugs and surgical breast augmentation.

Hef's fondness for young, thin blonds with super-sized breasts has never waned. This is Hefner's true legacy and perhaps the two things he can take credit for: creating generations of body dysmorphic women and keeping plastic surgeons busy and rich.

Equally as destructive is the Playboy philosophy that promotes sex as sport--that men "get" sex from women or women "give it up" to them. The more sex men get from women, the more of a man they are.

Hefner's branded concept of human sexuality teaches a woman that, in order to attract a man, she has to use her sexuality. Women get caught in a double bind of being expected to look like a sex object without then being treated as a sex object. Sex is reduced to connecting body parts and disconnected from the human brain--from emotions, thoughts and feelings.

Hefner's Playboy philosophy takes everything about human sexuality, its complexity, sensuality and gender-bending beauty and puts it through a meat grinder. What comes out the other end is profits for him and an alienated and distorted sexuality for women and men.

Hefner currently stars in the reality TV show *The Girls Next Door*, but this is another chapter of Hefner's life completely left out of Berman's documentary. The reality show is set in the Playboy mansion in Los Angeles. It's the successor to *Penthouse After Dark*, with the jiggling, female flesh of Hefner's numerous live-in girlfriends on display.

In each episode, we see the pajama-wearing, Viagra-fueled geriatric rutting of the 84-year-old Hefner. It is vomitous.

Hefner picks his girlfriends by looking at photos, pointing to them and shouting out to assistants, "Her, I want her!" His girlfriends are poorly paid prostitutes. Kendra Wilkinson, a former lover, reported that she was paid \$1,000 a week, a pittance for a professional pimp like Hefner whose personal wealth is estimated to be over \$50 million.

Kendra admitted, "I hate putting my hand out, but we couldn't have jobs other than getting appearance fees...Hef was kind of like my best friend but a Sugar Daddy at the same time."

Toward the end of the film, the shrunken, adult-diapered Hefner, in a scene that is now *de rigueur*, is surrounded by a coterie of young women whose silicone-implanted breasts are so large and contiguous they dwarf him. He says "It's the laughter of young women that keeps me young."

As the credits roll, Tony Bennett croons the lyrics "You Can't Love Them All." Hefner didn't try to love them all. He tried to fuck them all. And he still is.