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Pleasure

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Pleasure

Abstract

This is a film review of *Pleasure* (2021), directed by Ninja Thyberg.

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Author Notes

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Pleasure (2021), dir. Ninja Thyberg

Sundance is no stranger to topics such as the pornography industry (for example, the 2015 documentary *Hot Girls Wanted*). *Pleasure*, however, is a fictional film which is an expansion of a 2014 short film by Thyberg. It centers around “Bella Cherry,” a young Swedish girl who comes to America to enter the porn industry.

The film is exceptionally graphic and jarring, and contains full nudity and consensual and non-consensual sex. I suggest anyone with any form of sexual assault trauma should not view this film. The film also has many actors from the adult entertainment industry.

Bella Cherry enters into the adult film industry, seemingly, because she likes sex. She quickly learns that being an adult film actress is not about her pleasure. Still, she is ambitious and wants to do well in her new career, and finds out what she must do to get the best agents and gigs. Bella is also naïve, but headstrong, a dangerous combination. When she encounters a husband and wife production team who shoot soft BDSM and more female-centered consent/non-consent

pornography, she seems to have a day of pleasure. Anticipating that this is the norm for the industry, she quickly gets her agent to sign her up for other “rough sex” gigs. It is challenging for me to comment on this aspect of the film, as I do not believe in victim blaming, and I certainly believe that many women are exploited in pornography and enter sessions where they do not know what to expect because they are intentionally kept in the dark. Regardless, Bella goes to a filming session where she is repeatedly violated, and coerced to perform.

Point of view, or gonzo porn, where the male subject holds the camera has been a common staple in the porn industry for some time. Used because of the accessibility of recording equipment, or to replicate amateur pornography, or perhaps because, as a male porn enthusiast once told me “men are not very interesting to look at and it allows me to focus on the woman” (thereby inserting the viewer in the scene).

Perhaps in a brilliant directing choice, the assault scene has a gonzo porn quality, but not only do we see the male point of view, but also Bella’s as she is being repeatedly assaulted. This was easily, for me, the most sickening scene I have ever seen in a film, and I am no stranger to horror, documentaries, and difficult topics.

Bella leaves this set and vomits on her way home. She confronts her agent who suggests it was a miscommunication, as she said she would do rough sex scenes, and he asks her if she viewed the website links of the production companies’ other films that he sent her. Bella doesn’t accept his victim blaming, and instead fires him. She then decides to pursue getting A-listed with a new intensity, one of the reasons she did rough sex scenes to begin with.

In order to get the attention of the top agent, she knows she must perform certain acts. Although she is no longer represented by an agent, and therefore can’t get paid (as it is done through companies) she decides to film an interracial male-female-male threesome, still one of the

more “extreme” forms in the pornography industry. This time she requests her old driver, also an adult film actor, to perform with, undoubtedly for the familiarity aspect. After this film, she gets representation with the highest agency, where she routinely still spars with its top female performer. Together, they star in a girl/girl film, however, due to the other woman’s fighting with her, Bella becomes dominant and aggressive and extremely forceful with her. Eventually, the cinematography replicates that of her assault scene. Later, she tells the girl she is sorry, and she responds: “What For?” At this point, Bella gets out of their shared car and walks away, the implication being that she is potentially leaving the industry.

Human sexuality is extremely complicated, and while perhaps Bella felt exploited or that she was exploiting others, it does not mean that other women felt exploited. In the film, her friend won’t perform with a man she doesn’t like because of the way he treats her off set. While she is viewed as problematic, she does have her own agency. Likewise, Bella’s costar in her final film may not have felt victimized, despite Bella’s feeling that she was victimizing her.

One could view the film as a coming of age film, and that is the genre it most closely resembles. But, this film left me feeling sickened and annoyed, and I felt the assault scenes were overly graphic and long—and I have seen films that addressed assault without sensationalizing it. I also feel that the arc of the story, “I’ve been abused and now I am an abuser, that’s the industry,” was overly simplistic.