

filming white, middle-class girls gone crazy!

The disc jockey first announced the camera crew's arrival with a concert promoter's flair: "Let's give it up for *Girls Gone Crazy!*" A wave of screams and a few random boos ensued. Quickly and steadily, the fans flocked to the back of the bar, where three of the crewmembers, all men in referee outfits, coolly stood by. Fraternity brothers shouted in their faces, "You have the best job, man!" Women who approached the crew, eager to purchase pink trucker hats with the company's logo, were rebuffed. "You have to earn it," a tousled blonde cameraman teased them. This was an invitation to flash their breasts on tape for hats. Most of the women left on that note, huffing, "No way," or "You have got to be kidding," but a few did not. Two tipsy females grinned as they offered to kiss each other for caps. The cameraman, Sunny, acquiesced with a begrudging yet flirtatious sigh, "OK. But you have to do it to the count of ten."

As the video spotlight opened on the pair and the counting began, the crowd grew and the cheers grew louder. Embracing but angled toward the camera, the women French kissed with wide open mouths and visible tongues. By the time Sunny got to ten, the room exploded in applause. Afterwards, it seemed like a fair exchange. The pleased women donned their prizes, and the crew now had choice footage for a "Mardi Gras 2005" videotape.

Except, in this case, Sunny had never turned the camera on.

Knowing my motives for being there, he explained to me, "This is for them," pointing to the row of applauding college men. "We're recruiting. Someone here will see us doing this and want to join."

A soft-core reality videographer, Sunny was one of the legions of men who descended on New Orleans every year, regardless of hurricanes, to record women doing sexy things in public places. Contract cameramen fanned throughout the city's nightclubs and infamous French Quarter streets in search of women, preferably young and nubile, who would flash their breasts and butts, and kiss their girlfriends in exchange for beads or branded clothing.

As incredible as it might seem to the outsider, Sunny's company was having trouble recruiting the "right type of

guy" to shoot these videos—a dilemma that resonated for me only after two years of observing the soft-core reality video scene. Although my academic colleagues seem interested in the half-naked women in front of the cameras, I was more intrigued by the men behind the cameras. I knew that what they did was more laborious than fun, involving masculine performances that seduced women on camera and made men off-camera jealous. What I did not know until this night was how exclusive this labor pool was—a select group of men chosen less for their skills than for the kinds of public performances they could give for others. The sociology of media typically places cameramen "below the line" that separates creative producers in the industrial hierarchy from technical or trade workers. As technical workers, camera operators are supposed to be invisible, making movie magic behind the scenes, rather than creating a show for the watching crowds. Soft-core reality video, however, merges production work with creative performance and marketing.

To begin with, video companies seek a group of skilled professionals to make an amateur video good enough to be broadcast on television infomercials and bring hits to the companies' Web sites. Everyone on Sunny's crew of eight had experience in video production, and most had attended prestigious film schools. They spent twelve hours each evening on their feet setting up scenes of impromptu nudity. Poor lighting and raucous settings made it hard to focus on the quick motions and garbled sounds of flashers. Getting a decent shot required veterans to unlearn their production techniques. Sunny's crewmate, Tony, told me he was working on his shots. "After four years of school, I had to work on wobbling my camera just slightly to get the right amateur look."

More troubling still were the physical and emotional conditions of the job. Sunny was on his feet all night, chatting up potential video participants just to capture ten seconds of decent footage. A few women flirted with him, but mostly guys rushed him and gushed, "I f—kin' love you guys! How do I get this job?" In the cool voice of someone who knew he was envied, he responded to them aloofly. "They ask the same things every night," he confided to me,

bored with the predictability of the questions. Meanwhile he had no time or inclination to join the party surrounding him. "You're here to work," he told me flatly. "Most guys don't last a week." By the end of the night, one of his drunken teammates had already received a pink slip.

Those who survived each night of routine flattery and bacchanal temptations learned to market to their company's video brand largely by marketing themselves. In the bars, clubs, and on the street, they cut through crowds in their coordinated company outfits and struck poses for public display when the disc jockeys announced their presence. Once again, the hypervisibility of the "below the line" media producers was just as important as the media content itself. Not only did their creative performances help attract potential content-makers, they also branded the producers as representatives of the ideal male recruits they sought and the consumers they targeted.

In the competitive and corporate world of soft-core, each company strives to recruit crews that model a range of desirable, or perhaps emulatable, masculinities. Sunny thought he had passed the job interview because, unlike his suited competition, he dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt. He further explained that everyone in his crew was hand-picked for their appearance and attitude. The result looked to me like a Benetton advertisement for global youth culture, complete with an Asian-American grommit; a buff, dark-skinned, African-American athlete; a light-skinned African American with exotic dreadlocks; a clean-cut Latino; and a large, Anglo football-player type. I chose the name Sunny for my informant to remind me of his messy mop and California beach-boy garb. When I told him of my proposed pseudonym, he agreed, noting, "People say I look like a surfer but I'm really from Philly." Nevertheless, Sunny acted the front-stage role, displaying his urban hipness and occasionally posturing in the street in front of the bar.

All of these men's qualities—their skills, their schooling, their looks, and their performances—pointed to the desired class sensibilities of the ideal soft-core cameraman recruit. Before they could be hired, Sunny and his cohort had to know already how to discriminate by class. The rowdy dive bar we were in that night was a popular hangout for elite college kids. On any given night, the clientele was guaranteed to be overwhelmingly well-off and white, two characteristics that had attracted the video company to the location for the past few years. Here was their target male consumer and female labor market.

Inside, Sunny explained how he identified women whom he thought would please his company and its targeted male consumer. "See those girls over there?" He nodded toward a pair of Anglo twenty-somethings, both in what I saw as nondescript blue jeans and jackets. "See that one has Manolos, so she comes from money. But the other one is posing. She's got like some fake-ass boots that look like they could be Uggs but probably aren't. I would definitely like to get the first one on tape."

"So why don't you?"

"Well, girls like that probably have a daddy that's a lawyer so we avoid them," he responded without hesitation. Sunny wanted to shoot the one that looked richer, but he would settle for the other one. Just then, the "poser" approached us.

"What do I have to do to get a hat?" She leaned into Sunny seductively. He tacked.

"Uh, how about kissing your friend?"

"She doesn't want to be on tape."

Sunny looked at me as if to confirm his suspicions. He tacked again.

"Well, how about showing your breasts then?"

"Well, I want two hats. One for me and my friend."

"OK."

As Sunny stepped back and set up the camera, the ten or so men milling about us turned and began to press in. I moved to the side to avoid getting crushed and to pay attention to Sunny's camera work. He turned the spotlight on the female subject. Adjusting it on her body, he shouted, "Go for it!" She did. Turning her body three-quarters of the way toward Sunny, she bravely stuck out one boot, defiantly jutted out a hip, pulled down her neck collar, and exposed a pierced breast. Sunny prolonged the moment with the light as more potential male consumers and workers swarmed and cheered the spectacle. Seconds later, he awarded her two pastel pink hats. "Woooo!" she shouted triumphantly. "I did it!" She darted back through the crowd. Later, she and the supposedly "high-class" friend Sunny coveted were wearing the hats—free advertising for the video company and an insinuation to everyone in the bar that perhaps they would appear in the next video.

But they do not. Again, the red light on Sunny's camera never went on.

"Like I said, we're recruiting."

Vicki Mayer is writing a book on television production communities.

A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers. -Robert Quillen

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