

## Boogie Nights (1997)

"This is the film that I want them to remember me by."

### Major Credits:

direction and screenplay: Paul Thomas Anderson

cast: Mark Wahlberg (Eddie Adams/Dirk Diggler); Burt Reynolds (Jack Horner); Julianne Moore (Amber Waves); Heather Graham (Rollergirl); Don Cheadle (Buck Swope); Luis Guzman (Maurice T. Rodriguez); William H. Macy (Little Bill); Philip Seymour Hofman (Scotty); John C. Reilly (Reed Rothchild); Robert Ridgely (the Colonel)

### Background:

This is the second feature film for 27 year old screenwriter/director Paul Thomas Anderson, whose first film, *Hard Eight*, was also concerned with a degraded sub-culture (gambling) and its closed world of alternative family relationships. *Boogie Nights* marks something of a comeback for its two leading men, Burt Reynolds (who had recently declared bankruptcy after a succession of low-grossing films, bad investments, and a messy divorce from Lonnie Anderson) and Mark Wahlberg (who was regarded as a washed-up rapper and former underwear model).

### Cinematic Style:

*Boogie Nights* employs a dazzling array of cinematic techniques--extended panning shots, wipes that form split screen images, iris shot, slow zooms, slow motion, zip pans, dissolves--all of which contribute to the film's fast pace (though it runs more than 150 minutes) and hipness. These visual pyrotechnics are also related to the compulsive exhibitionism that defines the pornography industry.

1. film-within-film--As part of the self-reflexive nature of *Boogie Nights*, we witness several different film genres in their crudest form: porn movie (*Spanish Pantalones*), action feature (starring Brock Landers and Chest Rockwell), documentary (biopic of Dirk Diggler), video verité (*On the Lookout*).

2. sound track--The historical moment is captured by the outlandish clothing and continual disco music. Often the lyrics provide ironic commentary, as in Melanie's recording of "Brand New Key" as Rollergirl initiates Eddie into the pleasures of his new career on Jack's couch. The firecrackers in the climactic drug deal provide a great example of diegetic sound punctuating the action and sustaining an almost unbearable suspense.

3. intertextuality--Anderson has acknowledged the influence of such diverse films as *Nashville*, *Goodfellas*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Nashville*, *Something Wild*, and *Sunrise*, to which he might have added more immediate sources like *Raging Bull* (dressing table mirror scenes), *Pulp Fiction* (drug dealing/pop music culture), *The Player* (self-reflexivity and large cast), and *The Crying Game* (the money shot).

4. dialogue--The screenplay's hipness derives from its complex irony and pastiche of popular culture references. Two examples will serve: Eddie's self-reassuring "Everyone is blessed with one special thing," and Jack's "We're going to make film history right here on video tape."

5. cross-cutting--The film's climax involves cross-cutting between the drug deal and the limo, both scenes culminating in violence that escalates further in the doughnut shop.

**Question for Discussion:**

1. How does a film that is *about* the pornography industry manage not to *be* pornographic itself? Beyond qualifying for a R-rating (rather than NC-17), what distinguishes *Boogie Nights* from the standards of the industry it examines? And what is the film's attitude toward sex?

2. The characters of the film vacillate between two polarities of American culture, capitalism and idealism. Thus, Jack Horner is both an exploitative entrepreneur and a would-be *auteur*; similarly, Dirk acts according to his own model of a movie star (arranging his clothes closet according to color and "designer") and yet insists that his movies have saved "thousands" of marriages. Does *Boogie Nights* offer a consistent commentary on the ideology of the American Dream? Is its own postmodernist pose of ironic distantiation best understood as a style that enables the filmmaker to put forth a serious critique of American values?

3. Like several other films of the 1990s, *Boogie Nights* focuses on an alternative to the dysfunctional family that has exiled Eddie Adams. And like earlier classics such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, it tends to obscure the vices of its characters by representing them as members of a loving family. Amber, for example, is described by Jack as "a mother to all who need love." Is the film guilty (as those films were accused) of sentimentalizing the degraded lives it portrays?