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The Parallel Universe
By Larry Sultan

The cast and crew of a porn film have gathered in the front yard of a ranch house, a few blocks from where I went to high school in the San Fernando Valley. Women in six-inch heels sink into the lawn; men push around lights and cameras, anxious about losing the light. They are preparing to film a scene in which four blond housewives in a convertible are pursued and overtaken by two men in an appliance-repair van. The neighbors have all come out to water their lawns and witness the scene, and in the late evening light it feels as if Fellini has come to make an updated version of "Amarcord."

The house was rented for the two or three days that it takes to make a porn film. It is common for adult-film companies to shoot on location in tract houses in the heart of the valley -- the homes of dentists and attorneys and day traders whose photographs and mementoes can be seen in the backgrounds of these films, and whose decorating tastes give the films their particular "look."

Why has the valley become the porn capital of the world? The main reason, of course, is the proximity to the other Hollywood, the equipment and crews and ranks of aspiring or disillusioned actors. But I've always felt that there is something else at work, which has to do with the role the suburbs play as the blank screen upon which we project our desires. In this house, which for a couple of days is transformed from the home of the mundane to the home of the erotic, everything is changed. Lazy afternoons are interrupted not by noisy children but by the uncontrollable desires of delivery boys, baby sitters, coeds and cops. They crowd into the master bedrooms and spill out onto the kitchen floors and onto the patios and into the pools that look just like our neighbors' pools, like our pool.