



## Pornographic Film and Video: Lesbian

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Pornography has always sparked a great deal of controversy among lesbians. Traditionally rejected by lesbian feminists as an inherently male institution both violent and misogynistic, pornography has nonetheless been openly embraced by a faction of pro-sex lesbians (and so-called "do-me feminists") for the past two decades.

At the same time, there remains to this day a decided dearth of authentic lesbian pornographic film--which only emerged in the mid-1980s in the first place.

It is easy enough to find numerous woman-on-woman scenes in the majority of heterosexual pornographic films, of course; but these representations of all-female sexuality are generally so inaccurate, and so clearly geared toward a straight male audience, that very few could truly be considered lesbian.

The differences between lesbian-made and male-produced movies are easy to recognize: most pornographic films made by and for lesbians are, first and foremost, non-commercial, often with amateur actors and makeshift sets.

These films feature women of different sizes, shapes, colors, and gender identities--butches, stone butches, femmes, androgynes, etc. Many of these lesbians have short nails, short hair, and modifications such as tattoos and body or facial piercings.

In contrast, most "lesbian" scenes in straight pornography feature stereotypical male-fantasy women with surgical enhancements, uniformly thin bodies, and long hair and nails. Despite the identification of many commercial porn actresses as bisexual or polysexual, there is never a butch in sight in these movies

It was not until 1985 that the first pornographic film made entirely by and for lesbians appeared, well over a decade after the first gay male pornographic films emerged. The then brand new technology of video facilitated the making of two short films, *Private Pleasures* and *Shadows*, which were released together on one tape.

These movies were the brainchild of Fatale Video, founded by Nan Kinney and Debi Sundahl--the same duo who launched *On Our Backs*, the first sex magazine created for lesbians by lesbians, in 1984.

Fatale went on to release other lesbian-made porn videos such as *Hungry Hearts* (1989); the infamous *Suburban Dykes* (1991), which starred Nina Hartley, a well-known, openly bisexual commercial porn actress; *Bathroom Sluts* (1991); and the instructional video *How to Female Ejaculate* (1992), among others.

### **Gay Male Porn vs. Lesbian Porn**

In a culture that has long fostered the open expression of male sexuality while discouraging overt female sexuality and aggression, it comes as no surprise that pornography has historically been created by and for

men, both gay and straight.

In addition, the longstanding "sex wars" between pro- and anti-porn feminist camps also contributed to the scarcity of dyke-made porn. The sex wars, fought ferociously through the 1980s and made public by groups such as Women Against Pornography, have not yet ceased. In contrast, a loud outcry over pornography in the gay male community--or among straight men, for that matter--has yet to surface.

It is interesting to note, then, the disparity between the politics of gay male pornography and that of lesbian pornography. For example, gay male porn has long consisted of a huge number of films and magazines, and gay porn theaters were at one time commonplace. In terms of sheer quantity, there is simply no parallel in lesbian culture.

One reason for this is the economic situation of lesbians, who are in general a less economically prosperous group than gay men. Fronting the money to produce pornography has proven a challenge--especially when the lesbian market for explicit material remains tiny in comparison to the market for gay male or straight porn.

Very few lesbian sex magazines are published in the United States (*On Our Backs* being the only one with which most lesbian readers are familiar). Moreover, the small number of lesbian videos that do exist tend to embody political statements and emphasize issues such as diversity, safe sex, and varied expressions of sexual identity, which sometimes results in a less than truly titillating film for many viewers.

Interestingly enough, many lesbians regularly watch and appreciate gay male pornography, presumably because, among its other merits, it entails neither an overwhelming focus on political correctness nor the distracting and often disturbing heterosexual power dynamics found in straight porn.

Gay porn and lesbian porn have something important in common, however: they serve as positive, accurate representations of queer sexuality--a rare depiction in our society. As pro-sex lesbians and feminists point out, sexual material made by women and intended for a lesbian audience can be tremendously life-affirming in a world still permeated with heterosexism and lesbian exploitation.

### **Politically Correct Smut**

Something of a lesbian film phenomenon, the safe-sex video gained popularity among lesbians in the early 1990s. Movies such as *Well Sexy Women* (The Unconscious Collective, 1992), *Safe Is Desire* (Debi Sundahl, 1993), and the compilation film *She's Safe!* (1993) have been marketed as both self-help tapes *and* as pornography.

Such videos make it acceptable for lesbians to watch smut because it has a greater social purpose: it teaches lesbians about AIDS prevention rather than simply displaying activity between women that could be deemed exploitative (or co-opted by watchers of commercial straight porn).

Perhaps this focus on safety in women's sex videos can be attributed in part to the fact that the majority of HIV/AIDS research has not focused on woman-to-woman sexual activity and transmission thereby.

In fact, little medical research into lesbian sexual practices has been done at all--somehow, the fact that lesbians really do have sex with each other, and in many different ways, has escaped the attention of many in the mainstream medical establishment.

However, the idea that women require videotaped instructions to figure out the proper use of latex gloves or dams lessens the credibility of these movies as educational materials--and may strike some viewers as downright silly.

Educational/erotic films for lesbians that do not stress latex include sex guru Annie Sprinkle's 28-minute "pornumentary" *Linda, Les, and Annie* (1989), which recounts Sprinkle's experiences with Les, a female-to-male transsexual lover who used to be a butch lesbian. The video, while perhaps not technically lesbian pornography, still proves of interest to sexually adventurous dykes.

Meanwhile, House of Chicks, a tiny lesbian production company, has produced a series of instructional videos such as *The Magic of Female Ejaculation* (1992) and *How to Find Your Goddess Spot* (1995). These are relatively small-scale projects, but have become easily available through the technology of the internet.

### **Recent Developments**

Although Fatale did not release any new films between 1993 and 2000, several other lesbian pornographic videos, aside from safe-sex instructionals, surfaced in the 1990s.

The "San Francisco Lesbians" movies, an extensive series of "real lesbian" sex videos, became available through mainstream channels, starting with *San Francisco Lesbians #1* in 1992 and continuing through an eighth installment in 1998.

Maria Beatty, with her company Bleu Productions, made numerous lesbian-themed S&M and fetish films, such as *The Boiler Room* (1998), *Doctor's Orders* (1998), and *Les Vampyres* (2000). However, while Beatty's films are highly artistic, they have a commercial bent that seems to appeal more widely to a heterosexual audience than to a lesbian one.

Christopher Lee's male-to-female transsexual porn film *Alley of the Tranny Boys* (1998) has proved to be of interest to many lesbians. In 1999, a Canadian lesbian pornographic film called *Classy Cunts*, made by Live Peach Productions, was screened to extremely limited audiences in Montreal. Unfortunately, this film, like some other very small-budget, wholly independent short films, is difficult to obtain.

The biggest breakthrough in the indie-porn industry came in 2000 with the release of SIR Video's full-length tape *Hard Love/How to Fuck in High Heels*. Several years earlier, SIR had co-produced two films in the "Bend Over Boyfriend" series--which focused on unconventional heterosexual sex--with Fatale Video. But their 2000 release was something very new in dyke pornography.

The two films--one a narrative about a broken-up butch/femme couple who still cannot resist each other, the other a "mockumentary" based on a spoken-word piece by one of SIR's founders--won rave reviews among lesbian audiences for both their authenticity and their genuinely sexy content.

Unlike any other by-and-for-lesbians pornographic film, and despite the fact that it featured explicit depictions of butch sexuality, the video actually made enough of a crossover into the mainstream to win a 2001 AVN (Adult Video News) Award--the porn Oscar--for Best All-Girl Feature.

Jackie Strano and Shar Rednour, the couple who formed SIR, also write, direct, and star in the films. *Sugar High Glitter City*, SIR's 2001 release, is described by its creators as featuring "a fabulously diverse cast and multiple dyke sexualities"; it seems that even the hottest dyke videos still have politics somewhere in mind, which is only to be expected in an industry that has traditionally either ignored or exploited lesbians.

### **Conclusion**

Despite continuing debates over pornography within the feminist and lesbian communities, lesbian indie-porn companies have emerged to enjoy considerable success. SIR envisions creating a lesbian porn empire, and in 2001 Fatale Video--which is also launching an erotic book imprint--released a collection of shorts entitled *Afterschool Special*.

Groups such as Feminists for Free Expression and Feminists Against Censorship continue to fight for the right of women to make and watch pornography. It seems that more than ever, lesbians are seizing that right.

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