

Director Sadie Benning depicts young lesbian sexuality (Photographia Studios; courtesy of Women Make Movies)



DEPICTING DESIRE

What makes an image sexually exciting? Is desire representable? How can a film or video get beyond a sexual script and harness its meaning? Unlike sexual acts, emotions cannot be captured iconically. In this section I analyze two works whose strategies for representing lesbian desire, although very different, *present* absence. The first strategy, common in mainstream media, is to expose the repercussions of repressed desire.

In *Damned If You Don't* (1987) Su Friedrich appropriates text from Judith C. Brown's 1986 book *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, and subtext from the 1946 film *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), to contextualize and inspire a contemporary lesbian-nun seduction story. *Black Narcissus* relates the story of an order of nuns who relocate to a convent in the Himalayan mountains. The film has only one Western male character, Mr. Dean (David Farrar), the local agent who furnishes their supplies; otherwise, the nuns are secluded from Western male influence. (The film assumes race-specific sexual desire). Opportunities for sexual temptation would seem to be severely limited, but as the women garden or walk along the

mountains surrounding the convent, nature swirls around them. The wind moans with emotions that make them uneasy (or perhaps calls to an uneasiness already within them). As the Sister Superior (Deborah Kerr) says near the film's end when deciding that the order will leave in defeat, "I couldn't stop the wind from blowing and the air from being as clear as crystal, and I couldn't hide the mountains." Not even she has been untouched by the voice of nature.

Two women feature prominently, one saintly, the other sexual. While the first, a young and newly assigned Sister Superior (Sister Clodagh), suppresses her feelings for Mr. Dean, the second, Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron), abandons the convent to pursue him. She now wears a red dress and sways her hips when she walks. Mr. Dean, of course, desires the pure woman but honors her religious vocation. Sister Ruth's sexual advances only increase his desire for Sister Clodagh.

The pivotal scene occurs when Sister Clodagh finds Sister Ruth locked in her room wearing the red dress. The two women face off, armed with their respective weapons—a bible for Sister Clodagh and a lipstick and mirror for Sister Ruth. Outside, rain beats furiously against the convent's walls. On the inside walls, a weak light from a candle battles against the darkness. While her white habit saves her from the engulfing darkness, Sister Clodagh nevertheless casts the same dark shadows as does Sister Ruth. Desire permeates the room and presses in on the women. Desperation ricochets from one to the other. They are the same.

Damned If You Don't begins by summarizing the predictable story of *Black Narcissus* using stereotypical good nun, bad nun, the gardener, the cheerful one, and the man as character identifications. Woven throughout the tape is a contemporary story: a young lesbian desires a quiet, pale, beautiful young nun. The question is whether or not this nun is good or bad. Does she care for pleasure? Friedrich arranges, via diegetic and extradiegetic images of sea animals, for nature to swirl around this nun also. Another of the film's components undercuts the assumed asexuality of nuns; it is the story of a Renaissance nun who has sexual relations with both her bridegroom Jesus and, through him, another nun. The account is written by the other nun, whose genitals "were forcibly kissed." Until recently, history has conveniently covered over the existence of lesbian nuns. But sexuality is what fuels mainstream film. *Black Narcissus* obscures this ever so ostentatiously. Friedrich uses an image of impending sexual explosion from *Black Narcissus* as well as Judith Brown's recovery of religious passion to expose a contemporary nun's desire and to incite desire in viewers. *Damned If You Don't* ends with a sex scene.

As long as a film does not explicitly depict sexual activity, viewers can fill in missing elements of the script with their preferences and assump-



The barely repressed sexuality between ex-Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron, left) and Mother Superior (Deborah Kerr) in *BLACK NARCISSUS* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946) is appropriated for lesbian seduction in Su Friedrich's 1987 film *DAMNED IF YOU DON'T* (Publicity still for *BLACK NARCISSUS* courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art; production still for *DAMNED IF YOU DON'T* courtesy of Women Make Movies)



tions. The absence of particular sexual activities accommodates differing desires. It also can be limiting. More explicit imagery of lesbian sexuality, of course, confronts the presumption of lesbian asexuality more blatantly. It has the potential to expand the knowledge, fantasies, and practices of both lesbians and nonlesbians. Although my primary concern here is lesbian audiences, a disapproving heterosexual audience always lurks nearby. It is a sideward gaze that we feel watching us as we watch. In a homophobic society, it is not surprising that we experience this gaze as consequential, unidirectional, and inhibiting—even during lesbian-only screenings. In a society where homosexuals are disempowered, their concern about what heterosexuals (could) think of them is logical. On the other hand, homosexuals can also seize opportunity in the heterosexual gaze; we can rebut voyeurism with aggressive exhibitionism.

Although either can be watched in the privacy of a home, the public viewing situation for lesbian porn contrasts drastically with that for heterosexual porn. Whereas heterosexual men remain isolated from each other in an adult theater, lesbian porn was first screened (that is, marketed) in “community” settings such as feminist bookstores, lesbian bars, and gay and lesbian film festivals where discussion was assumed. In the 1980s lesbian porn was a community news event, and its audience was immediately social. Unlike their surreptitious heterosexual counterparts, lesbians rejected polite silence and respectful distance in favor of heated criticism and considered debate. Never before having a “porn of their own,” many lesbians were unfamiliar and unsympathetic toward porn conventions. Many were also surprised and disturbed by the variety of lesbian sexual practices portrayed. Politics and erotics coexisted in the social audience’s agenda for these representations.

Claiming the lesbian “community” as its rightful audience, the lesbian porn industry broke through the private-public split only to be met head-on by identity politics. Viewers looked for a visual representation of themselves, often prioritizing reality-checking over fantasy experience. Although pornography’s generic otherworldliness encourages fantasy, its privileged verisimilitude implies realism. Certain characters, especially exaggerated femmes, were criticized (perhaps by *ki-kis*) for not looking like “lesbians.” Various sexual acts (for example, penetration and “air-fucking”) were admonished as inherently or symbolically heterosexual. The iconography of mainstream porn (certain fetish objects, phallic symbols, and so forth) was rejected outright by some viewers. After all, for many in the audience, the producer’s auteur status depended on a unique lesbian vision that assumed lesbian specificity rather than heterosexual conventions. Even lesbian porn produced specifically for a lesbian audience cast a wider beam than many women had experienced before.