



Hammer, Barbara (b. 1939)

by Gary Morris

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Barbara Hammer has created over 80 experimental shorts, videos, and features to date. She is the most prolific lesbian feminist filmmaker in the history of cinema.

Hammer was born in Hollywood on May 15, 1939. She did not formally study film; she was educated in psychology, art, and English literature at UCLA and San Francisco State University.

Hammer combined some of her early activist and aesthetic interests as a teacher at Marin County Juvenile Hall, but in 1967--at the age of 28--she shot her first film, *Schizy*, about her own coming-out process. This template proved to be a durable one; most of Hammer's work is both personal and political. She uses cinema to inspire viewers to "leave the theater with fresh perceptions and emboldened to take active and political stances for social change in a global environment."

The formerly heterosexual Hammer, who divorced her husband a year after *Schizy*, has worked exclusively in experimental, nonlinear forms as a means of overcoming the patriarchal bias in conventional filmmaking and its attendant processes of marketing and distribution.

Hammer's radical stance triggered a controversy early in her career. For the debut of her sexually explicit 1974 short *Dyketactics*, generally cited as the first film celebrating lesbian love to be made by a lesbian, she had her audiences choose, in her words, "whether they preferred to have the event mixed or women only." This was construed in some quarters, incorrectly according to Hammer, as a separatist political strategy rather than, as she says, simply "a respect for the audience with a wish to empower them."

Hammer's desire to reach larger audiences soon led her into a more inclusive, often lyrical approach. She has cited pioneering feminist auteur Maya Deren as an influence in this transformation, particularly Deren's dreamlike *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

Hammer's "goddess" films, such as *Women's Rites* (1974) and *Sappho* (1978), are typical of this stage of her work. These films intermingle erotic imagery with a sense of fantasy to create a lesbian cinema that avoids the objectifying male gaze. Also during the 1970s the director continued her explorations of female sexuality in works such as *Multiple Orgasm* (1977).

Hammer can be said to have constructed, in what she has called her "alternative autobiographies," an alternative lesbian gaze. She is most often her own subject, from this early period with works like *I Was/I Am* (1973), where she appears in both motorcycle drag and a gown, to the later, more ambitious films such as *Tender Fictions* (1995), whose goal is to reassert the presence of the lesbian in cinema.

Tender Fictions typifies Hammer's sometimes dazzling formalism, and like much of her work, it demands, and rewards, a close reading. The film is built from a vast array of raw materials: scratchy home movies; snapshots; voiceovers from academic texts; interviews; skewed television programs; interviews with family and friends and a string of ex-girlfriends.



Barbara Hammer.
Courtesy
barbarahammerfilms.com.

The film is fearless in probing its author-subject. In a sequence on the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on lesbians, she recalls rejecting her dying mother's plea that she climb in bed with her: "That's incest--I can't!"

Hammer's most famous work is probably *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), like *Tender Fictions* a striking attempt to restore a lost queer history, this time by intermingling images of lesbian and gay male lovemaking with aural and visual collages of concentration camps, the Hollywood Hays Code that banned "perversion," and snippets from what is often regarded as the first queer film made in the United States, *Lot in Sodom* (1933) by James Watson and Melville Weber.

Part of the importance of *Nitrate Kisses* is in its double breakthrough in showing not only lesbians, but mature lesbians, making love.

Recent works such as *History Lessons* (2000) effectively mine some of the same areas. They wittily weave clips from Hollywood melodramas, high school sex education pictures, excerpts from newsreels and nudist films into a sweeping canvas of the history of queer sexuality and identity.

Hammer is both a filmmaker and a theorist (see, for example, her important essay "The Politics of Abstraction" in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*), but while her films have political and theoretical underpinnings, they are also among the most thoughtful and unabashed celebrations of queer life.

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Gary Morris is the editor and publisher of *Bright Lights Film Journal*, now online as [brightlightsfilm.com](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com). Author of *Roger Corman*, he writes on film regularly for the *Bay Area Reporter* and the *San Francisco Weekly*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.