

Out In Focus

“Out In Focus” is an online program of short films from SAW Video’s Mediatheque archive that feature LGBTQ subjects and voices. These aesthetically diverse videos utilize a range of genres and techniques: experimental and narrative short filmmaking, musical comedy, autobiography, poetic documentary, and fantasy. Produced between 1996 and 2002, these five films are representative of the intersection between LGBTQ history, community, and creativity and SAW Video’s rich history of innovative video art. Their themes include visibility and self-representation, camaraderie and loneliness, domesticity and desire, and the navigation of space, public and private.

Just as many of the featured artists reference and draw upon their own deeply personal experiences within the content of these videos, my own curatorial standpoint in relation to this program is quite personal: my approach is both that of an art historian interested in representation and the moving image, and also that of a young gay woman - these video works exist as archival documents of a community that is also my own.

Luc Desjardins originally described *Tapette!!!* (2002) as “a paradoxical and poetic look at manifestations of a non-traditional sexuality within a traditional French-Canadian family.” The title references a homophobic pejorative, levied as an insult, as the emphatic exclamation marks suggest, or, potentially, reclaimed by its target. This experimental video deals with the destabilization of gender norms, and features drag as a private exploration within a rigidly traditional domestic environment. The drag queen at the centre of the place, portrayed by Desjardins, is a messy, mournful figure - a deliberately unpolished representation which taps into primal emotions. The artist has revealed that the video, one of the first he shot, was very personal and tied to his own coming-out experience - something he describes as “long, beautiful, and angst-ridden”.

The beginning of the video, which features the family members of the central character in their home, is a fluid sequence of composed moving images set to music. When the drag queen enters the frame, a new song begins, but the playback of this track is repeatedly interrupted, and the accompanying sequences are fractured. The repeated starts and stops of the song are perhaps suggestive of numerous incomplete attempts to share one’s identity with family. In one shot, the subject begins to write on a blank sheet of paper before crumpling it in frustration. In another, they raise a camera to take a photo, facing the videocamera’s lens as though it were a mirror - a private act of self-representation and self-definition. *Tapette!!!* presents the concept of “coming out” as a drawn-out process which is fraught and fallible. The video ends with a series of cuts that remove the drag queen’s wig, clothing, etc., leaving the figure sitting on the family couch in a state of vulnerability. The final shot is of the father on the same couch, smoking and impassively facing the camera. What is said between the two remains unheard and unrepresented.

Brothers (1998), directed by Anne Golden, is a silent short film which presents a stylized day-in-the-life of a pair of butch lesbians. The unspecified relationship between these two figures - whether they are a couple or siblings (literally or figuratively) - is of lesser importance than the sheer strength of the bond exhibited in their companionship. The Brothers are joined by their shared - indeed, unified - experiences and their proud ownership of their sexual identities and gender presentations.

The video is structured by the Brothers’ daily routine, what Golden calls a “prescribed sleep-work-play existence”. The clothing which makes up a part of their gender presentation plays a prominent role. A different uniform corresponds with each section of their day - paisley button-down pyjamas as they rise from their shared bed, denim and flannel with caps over their shaved heads for their walk to work, and, finally, dapper tailored suits, complete with ruffled tuxedo shirts and bow ties, which they wear to take an evening stroll in their neighbourhood. It is in these final costumes that they encounter a group of women in chic black dresses and high heels

Out In Focus

- credited as "Pretty Ladies". The women turn their heads as the Brothers appear and wave as they walk by, their gazes ones of full of admiration and perhaps desire. In the video's final shot, the Brothers take a puff from their cigars and finally break from the stoicism that has characterized their expressions throughout the video, meeting the camera's gaze with wide and joyful smiles. *Brothers* resists the cultural tendency to treat gender-nonconforming gay women as interchangeable by taking pride in the camaraderie between butch lesbians, turning comparability and shared experience into something to playfully celebrate.

In *Pieces of Her Become You* (1996), the everyday rituals of domestic routine provide a rich backdrop for artist Marika Jemma to explore the dynamics of a lesbian relationship. In contrast to the stylized synchronicity of *Brothers*, Jemma's chosen format is that of a documentary, with first-person voice-over narration from both partners providing perspective and anecdotes accompanying colour footage of the couple in their home.

The video is also interspersed with spoken-word poetry pieces about cultural invisibility, homophobia, and asserting bodily autonomy after trauma. Contrasting with the warmth and realism of the documentary footage, the staged, lyrical sequences which accompany the poetry are in black-and-white, as are incorporated newspaper clippings and old photographs. The poetry piece from which the title is derived, which is featured near the beginning and again at the end of the film, speaks to the intense intertwining in all aspects of life experienced by this lesbian couple.

Pieces of Her Become You finds romance in the rhythmic chopping of vegetables and a kiss between female partners in their shared kitchen. But while domestic cohabitation is presented with tenderness, all is not blissful: both the narration and the spoken-word pieces frankly discuss the various challenges that beset, in Jemma's words, the "formation, dynamics, and longevity of lesbian relationships". At one point, one of the subjects discusses internalized homophobia and how that force, as well as the constant possibility of external prejudice, impacts her relationship with her partner and her navigation of the outside world. In another section of the film, the two women recount their experiences of coming out, and how it has altered their internal relationships to their individual identities as well as the perception of their relationship within the workplace. The film's nuanced examination of the issues - some unique, some universal, some internal, some external - that impact this particular couple speaks to and honours the complexity of interpersonal relationships.

The Toilet Suite (1999), a video by Carl Stewart, takes place entirely in a public washroom - the central character waits within a stall as a series of men drift in and out, transcending the banality of his setting with rousing a-capella renditions of show tunes, jazz standards, and disco classics that speak to his emotional state. As he sings, coloured lights and disco balls transform the confined space of the washroom stall. The performance of the songs - a blend of wry satire and wide-eyed sincerity - capture the longing - both physical and emotional - that might undercut anonymous physical encounters.

In one memorable sequence, the man in the stall croons Cole Porter's "All of You" into a realistic dildo that's subbed in for a microphone as well as a human body part, a comedic moment that's candid and crass, but also tender. As he sings, two other men kiss passionately against the sink before exiting this public space together. The artist describes the video as being, at its essence, "a film about the search for love": *The Toilet Suite* explores gay male experiences, including and especially those that heterosexual society stereotypes and tries to necessitate as impersonal and exclusively physical, within an unabashedly romantic paradigm.

Lesbian Fairytale (2001), by Kerry Campbell, uses an all-women cast to subvert the rigidly gendered boundaries of much traditional storytelling while playfully utilizing the archetypal imagery and narrative arc of a classic fairytale. The video uses green screen techniques and AfterEffects to create its fantasy environment. The original description of the video describes its

Out In Focus

cast as “participating in a fairytale” together - this statement, along with the DIY aesthetic of the costuming and sets, could perhaps be considered to frame the film’s events as allegorical - as fantasy often tends to be. The final scene of the film is of particular importance. The “prince” and victorious hero at the centre of the narrative is a young butch lesbian, and the “princess” is a black femme. The embrace and kiss that they share in the video’s final moments is deliberate, sweet, and quintessentially romantic, while existing outside the heteronormativity of classic cinematic imagery.

The scope of representations provided by this brief program are necessarily limited - the program is sourced from the selection of videos already archived within the Mediatheque, and represents work produced by SAW Video’s membership during a period of about five years around the turn of the millennium. While these videos certainly do not reflect the full spectrum of LGBTQ identity and experience, their importance lies within their existence both as works of art and as historical documents. “Out In Focus” provides a retrospective glimpse into independent Canadian contributions to queer cinema, and serves as a celebration of the diversity of identities and experiences of this organization’s membership throughout the years.

Talia Golland was the 2017 Summer Programming Assistant at SAW Video.