

# The heterosexualization of lesbianism essay sample

[Health & Medicine](#), [Sex](#)



In her article, Tricia Jenkins considers many modern American movies, specifically those aimed at teens, (American Pie, Wild Things Cruel Intentions, and Not Another Teen Movie, among others) and asks two main questions about them. The first question is concerned with whether or not the recent influx of lesbianism in the movies named serves to promote homosexual relationships (especially between women) in a positive light, therefore contributing to the societal acceptance of such relationships, or if the creators of these movies are merely capitalizing on the heterosexual male fantasy of seeing two women together. The second question asks why these lesbian sex scenes are specifically aimed toward teenagers rather than a more generalized population.

After considering these questions, Jenkins concludes that these movies “undoubtedly promote a heterosexualized view of female homosexuality” but that we should accept this lesser good in favor of the more positive fact that “these movies are helping to bring a new and relatively positive type of lesbian visibility to mainstream cinema.” This paper will agree with Jenkins on her first point, but will disagree on her second and argue that this type of lesbian visibility is producing a heterosexualized homosexuality which allows people to remain bigoted in their own lives by accepting homosexuality as long as it is on their own heterosexual terms. This in turn works to the detriment of most homosexuals because they are far from the ideal of the “luscious lesbian” portrayed in these movies and in fact justifies and promotes another kind of discrimination in the bigoted – heterosexual mind.

In today's modern American culture, it is not hard to find movies and television portraying lesbianism as "hot." This portrayal is not coming from just a few small outlets, but is coming from the major movie companies and television production studios. The girl-on-girl relations in these movies are almost exclusively between two women that are what Jenkins calls "luscious lesbians." These are differentiated from more authentic lesbians in that the women are meant to appeal to heterosexual males and are therefore desirable to that group of viewers. These "luscious lesbians" are comfortable engaging in homosexual practices, but always in the context of being heterosexual. For example, you will see two women practice kissing one another so as to make themselves better kissers for males, or as in *American Pie 2*, you have two heterosexual women pretending to be lesbians to teach the male characters in the story a lesson. This is contrasted to many other films in which the depiction of lesbians is more authentic.

Such films, generally foreign or independent films, portray a more realistic view of lesbians, rarely catering to a heterosexual male fantasy, in which the women do not fit the "luscious lesbian" stereotype. This sets mainstream American films apart from foreign or independently produced films. But why would mainstream films do this? Jenkins explains this dichotomy between the two films by suggesting that mainstream American films are uncomfortable with the idea of authentic lesbianism because of the negative consequences it may have at the box office and so are willing to produce a more palatable version of lesbianism, i. e., the heterosexualized lesbianism, in order to make the film successful. For the most part, I believe this is true.

It is a fact that unless the two women are deemed attractive by a masculine heterosexual standard, the film in question will not ever make much money. Such was the case in the 1960s when, to make films more palatable to a mainstream audience, the film companies would portray African Americans as “ whiter” than they actually were in reality. The fair-skinned African American had a much better chance at making a living as an actor because of the mainstream cinemas fear of offending the sensibilities of its viewers.

Jenkins also believes the cause of the influx in heterosexualized lesbianism in American teen cinema is the result of the differences in taste of the teens of today compared to those of the 70s and 80s. Many of today’s teen movies fit the “ anything-goes” category and are different from the relatively more conservative movies of the 80s such as *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*. This change in taste can be attributed to the marketing strategies of advertisers in the modern media which uses images of sexualized women to appeal to the modern teen. This sexualized model is then built upon by the creators of teen movies by using these sexualized women in the role of “ lesbian” to appeal to both the males, who are automatically attracted to the women, and to females, who see that type of woman as a model of desirability.

Jenkins makes many strong points in the article, and backs up her claims very well. Many of us are uncomfortable with the fact that what we may find desirable may be the direct result of what we are told to find desirable. We like to think that we are in control of our own thoughts and feelings and we determine, by ourselves, what we think is beautiful, or good, or any number

of attributes. Especially at the teenage years, when rebelliousness is at its most powerful, many teens will do anything but listen to authority figures and will find comfort in things which, if they looked more deeply into it, were marketed to them to make them feel comfortable and not alone in this rebellious stage of life. But the thinking never goes that deep in the average teenage brain, and as a result they become susceptible to more subtle forms of authority such as advertising and the commercialization of the things they are told to enjoy.

When the idea of mandatory school uniforms are brought up in today's high schools, the immediate response from the majority of the students is disgust and defiance toward the idea. They believe themselves to be expressing their individuality through the freedom to choose which clothes they want to wear. They feel that they are able to define who they are through their clothing and various accessories. But what is interesting is that one can walk through the halls of any large school in our country and tell by the clothes that a person is wearing which "group" or "clique" (s)he may belong to. You may see a group of students with bleach-blond hair, a group with dyed-black hair, groups wearing all black, and groups wearing the latest fashion advertised by Old Navy. What in effect has happened is that the students have chosen uniforms for themselves. Or, to be more accurate, these teens have had uniforms chosen for them by the marketers of these clothes. If "Bill" wants to fit into this group and hang out with these people that do these things, then he must wear these certain types of clothes, clothes marketed to kids of this type. You are generally not going to see large groups of kids all

wearing Abercrombie clothes hanging out with kids wearing all black clothes complete with chains, piercings, and make-up. What they think defines them as an individual has already been picked out by someone else and advertised as “cool.”

In the same way, lesbianism is only accepted in its “luscious” form because that is the form which has been decided upon as acceptable. The idea of the “butch” lesbian is not very appealing to the modern heterosexual male and if there was a teen movie that involved itself with a more authentic lesbianism, it would not be nearly as popular as those other teen movies already discussed. As Jenkins describes, the trick for the makers of these movies is to portray the characters as likeable. In this way, they can generate more income for the movie. The women in these movies are most always portrayed as likeable characters. In some movies, they are conniving and clever and most always get away with it as in *Wild Things*, in others they are portrayed as cute, giggly, and perky, or in movies such as *Cruel Intentions*, they are portrayed as innocent and naive. In this way, the movie producers shut out the stereotypical angry, feminist, butch-type, and market the stereotypical heterosexual-lesbian for a more mainstream audience.

In her conclusion, Jenkins says that we should not write off these movies as “incapable of producing positive effects for homosexual women.” She believes these movies to be bringing a “positive type of lesbian visibility to mainstream cinema.” Although it is hard to disagree with this statement, I think it needs to be speculated upon whether or not, in the long run, this is a good thing. It seems that when there is a large group of people daily

discriminating against another, it does not do good to throw yet another stereotype into the mix. When the essence of a person is only accepted through stereotypical representation of the dominate group, it leads to further separation between the people looking for acceptance.

The lesbians portrayed in these teen movies do not represent the significant population of authentic lesbians in our culture. In these movies, you actually do not have lesbianism as a lifestyle, but as a sexual act. The women in these movies are not portrayed as true lesbians, but only as heterosexual women performing homosexual acts. This keeps the focus of homosexuality on sex rather than the lifestyle lived and the love felt between homosexual couples. These movies provide a vehicle for transmitting the assumption that people are gay only for sexual reasons. Simply because the act of lesbianism is performed throughout these movies does not in any way provide positive significance to the homosexual lifestyle. These movies are fantasy geared toward heterosexual men. Simply because the majority of Americans are uncomfortable with homosexuality is not an excuse to deny that it exists.

#### Works Cited

Jenkins, Tricia. "' Potential Lesbians at Two O'Clock": The Heterosexualization of Lesbianism in the Recent Teen Film." *Journal of Popular Culture* Feb 2005: 491-504.