

The L Word Lesbian chic revisited

by [Judith Franco](#)

La série télé L Word nous présente de faux "modèles" lesbiens, jeunes, minces, féminines, sexy et ayant une belle carrière, qui attirent les spectateurs hétéros ou les gays curieux. En outre, le lesbianisme est catégorisé et limité au point de vue de l'activité sexuelle ou du mode de vie. L Word évite soigneusement les histoires individuelles et collectives qui offrirraient une signification sociale et politique du lesbianisme.

Despite The L Word's entertainment value and director Rose Troche's efforts to avoid the worst pitfalls of voyeurism, the series proves that the mainstreaming of lesbianism inevitably implies a heterosexualization in terms of visual representation and narrative. Not surprisingly, the cast of The L Word consists of glamourous heterosexual actresses only (including Jennifer Beals and Pam Grier) who are promoted as "eye-catching", "hot" and "sexy" in the glossy marketing material while eagerly asserting their real-life commitment to the heterosexual contract. As art critic, writer and lesbian activist Laura Cottingham notes : "One of the features of contemporary 'lesbian chic' is to keep the lesbian exclusively fictionalized ; that is, to disallow any steady appearance of actual lesbians, of lesbianism as self-contained, stable, steadily lived and culturally incorporate" (1). Indeed, The L Word presents us with fake - young, thin, feminine, gorgeous and professionally successful - lesbian "models" who appeal to heterosexual and gay-curious spectators. Furthermore, lesbianism is categorized and contained in terms of sexual activity and lifestyle.

Collective and individual histories which inform the social and political meaning of lesbian identity are carefully avoided in The L Word, reducing lesbianism to a glamourous and sexy lifestyle that can even be adopted by men according to the latest plotline that shows the bisexual Alice having an affair with a lesbian-identified male. Another plotline that caters shamelessly to a male audience focuses on the couple Bette and Tina who are so desperate to start a family that they end up seducing a young stud for a threesome, in search of good sperm. The traditional lesbophobic wife-stealing theme also rears its head in a plotline that shows the straight fiction writer Jenny who is about to be married, being seduced by a predatory European dyke with an unidentifiable foreign accent. Since the female characters lack depth and psychological complexity, they come across as caricatures or worse, as psychopaths, leaving the spectator to empathize with the wholesome, traumatized boyfriend who catches Jenny "in the act".

According to the makers of The L Word heterosexualization was on their agenda in the first place in order to ensure the show's continuation but they promise to take more "risks" in the second season by introducing more diverse, "dykey" characters. So far, real lesbians remain as invisible as ever on television and it doesn't look as if The L Word will make a difference.

Even if media inclusion does constitute an important form of social recognition, the question how lesbians exist in the media must still be asked. The current revival of “lesbian chic”, as it has been labelled in mainstream publications since the 90s, is less an enunciation of lesbian cultural power than a commodification of lesbianism which marginalizes us at best, and at worst, threatens to set back whatever political advances lesbians are attempting or have secured.

(1) *Laura Cottingham ; Lesbians are so Chic...that we are not really lesbians at all. Cassell, London and New York, 1996.*