

Who's the top ?

by [Sophie Mayer](#)

Jennie Livingston's first film was the highest-grossing American independent film of the 1990s. *Paris is Burning*, a documentary about Harlem drag queens, made more than *Reservoir Dogs* and *Slacker* put together. Take that, boys ! Since 1994, Livingston has been working on a feature film called *Who's The Top ?*, a lesbian SM musical comedy that premiered in London as a 30 minute short this winter.

- **SM** *You describe Who's the Top ? on your website (<http://whosthetop.org>) as "Woody Allen's younger dyke sister goes to the s/m dungeon...with musical numbers." I'd love to have been in the room for that pitch ! How did it go ?*

- **JL** They laughed. They loved the phrase. Then they turned it down.

- **SM** *It's pretty out there. Where did the idea for the film come from ?*



- **JL** All the representations I'd seen of "fringe" sexuality equated gayness or kink with deviance and murder. That was a tired old cliché, and I wanted to challenge the cliché by including the inherent goofiness about sex. I wrote the script in 1992-4. And it was very much of the moment.

- **SM** *What started you thinking about this in '92 ?*

- **JL** I was at a bar in San Francisco with the late Kathy Acker, and this woman named Terry did the most amazing strip-tease, from high femme feathers and flounces right down to the piercing through the centre of her forehead. Kathy turned to me and said, "Are you going to make a movie about this ?" She meant the whole world of radical sex-crazed gender-bending San Francisco freaky dykes who were re-inventing sex and music and performance around a sense of female power and agency. It was right out of gay male culture from the 70s, but the grrrlish version of the 1990s. She said, "Look, all these subcultures come and go, and when they're there you think they'll always be there. But then they're gone."

- **SM** *Paris Is Burning* was also about a fleeting moment before a subculture got vacuumed up by the entertainment industry, and 15 years later, it's really fresh because of that. Why do you think it's lasted so well ?

- **JL** I always felt the people in the film were incredibly charismatic, talented, and wise, and the subculture of the ball world had so much to say about the lives and the values of mainstream Americans. So I was surprised and delighted that audiences and critics agreed. I also think there was a lot of recognition. People who live surrounded by an oppressive media culture can relate to a story about a group of people struggling with, and in a way triumphing over, those pressures. Le dernier film de Jennie Livingston 'Who's the Top', comédie musicale lesbienne SM sur lequel elle travaille depuis 1994 vient de sortir sur les écrans londoniens cet hiver. L'occasion d'une rencontre avec la réalisatrice.

[At a screening in Missouri this year], one youngish tranny guy from Chicago got up and said how much the film meant to him. He thanked me. Hearing that the film still touches people is thrilling.

- **SM** *Does New York still have that queer energy and culture going on ?*

- **JL** When I got to NYC [in the 80s] we were activists about AIDS. I came out and of age in a very politicized queer world. Now people are activists about the government and the war. But the way things come together is cool : I went to a phone party just before the last election where people were phoning states where the races were close. And at the end of the party, this queerish male and female dance group did a strip-tease. Who doesn't want to see a group of fit youngsters take off their red, white and blue skivvies, all in the interest of giving the Republicans the boot ?

- **SM** *I can imagine you'd be pretty persuasive on the phone. Your films have a real love of language and talking. Why so many words ?*

- **JL** The main character Alixe (Marin Hinkle) in *Top* ? is a geeky intellectual. We've seen that character in a man, like Guido in *8 ½*. But a woman who's thoughtful, funny – and sexual – is not a familiar movie character. As to *Paris*, I picked a group of people who like to talk, and who have a lot to say, and who liked the idea of others having access to their particular wisdom and world views. The film I'm making now, *Earth Camp One*, is a personal documentary about grief and loss. It's a very writing- intensive film, so I'm experimenting with how many words I can get away with while also knowing that I need to leave space for the viewer to gather his/her own thoughts and feelings.

- **SM** *It's great to hear that you have another film in the pipeline. Are you working on anything else right now ?*

- **JL** My other project, *The Room in the Mountain*, is a dramatic screenplay I wrote, set in 1989 in East Berlin and New York, which I researched in the 90s living in Berlin. Some East German artists and

writers go on a cultural exchange to New York. It's about artists in two very different political systems, and by extension how all of us are made (or broken) by these systems. But of course we create the structures that confine us, and we are charged with either re-inventing them, or at the very least with re-inventing ourselves.

- **SM** *Paris is all about reinvention, too, and in Top ?, Alixe has this wild SM adventure and reinvents herself – in both cases, through fantasy.*

- **JL** I think both films are about following fantasies, or listening to inner voices. It's mysterious, the way our desires, known or unknown, find their way to the surface. I've followed my own lights, and have found that the difficulty of doing that, in my chosen field, is that even if I have what I feel is a fantastic idea that'll make a powerful film, if I can't convince someone to give me the money to make the film, it remains just an idea.

- **SM** *Are there other ways you could express those ideas ? Why has film remained so important to you, when it's such a struggle ?*

- **JL** I actually believe that film is a terrifically powerful medium, and that our ability to care about any number of important political and personal issues can be stimulated and activated when complex, intelligent work comes to life. I don't mean just "for a good cause", I mean work that doesn't always have the answers, but that asks the questions in ways that allow us to appreciate what's mysterious, as well as to imagine what's possible