

# The Aesthetics and Ethics of Sexiness

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In a recent paper Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin (2017) present a feminist critique of sexiness and point to two problems in particular. The first is that women are considered sexy in accordance with an *externally dictated* conception of sexiness. If a woman wishes to be sexy she will need to conform to the standards laid out by men. The second problem is that women are considered sexy in accordance with an *unduly narrow* conception of sexiness, one that focuses predominantly on the body and thus equates sexiness with objecthood. As a result, large portions of the female population are excluded from being considered sexy. This is especially felt by elderly and disabled women who systematically fall short of the current standards of sexiness.

Giving up on sexiness altogether is not an option, however. According to L&I, that would mean giving up on a basic element of selfhood. Instead, they suggest that we redefine sexiness in such a way that it makes room for women, and men, as sexy subjects rather than as mere sex objects. A person is appropriately called sexy, they propose, if that person has a magnificent body infused with sexual subjectivity. L&I use the term ‘magnificence’ to refer to the ‘nowhere-else-but-here-ness’ of a body that we can learn to admire. Admittedly, this remains rather vague. But the purpose of introducing the term is clear: they want us to resist imposing pre-existing standards on bodies and instead to take bodies on their own terms – thus making possible the aesthetic appreciation of the sexual particularity of a wide variety of body types. But this is only half the story. The second thing we should do is ensure that our judgments of sexiness take into account not just bodies, but embodied *subjects*. The proper target of such a judgment is always a body infused with an

authentic sexual expression, that is, a sexual expression that really comes from the person herself rather than originating in or aiming at some external ideal. Evidence of such authenticity will be found in the person's confidence, comfort, and sense of improvisation, whereas discomfort, insecurity, and a strict adherence to norms as rules will indicate a lack of genuineness in sexual expression.

So, instead of thinking that a woman is sexy if men experience her as sexually attractive, it should be the other way around: if a woman is sexy (because she has a magnificent body infused with sexual subjectivity), then men should try to experience her as sexually attractive. With the revised notion of sexiness comes an "ethical imperative" to make our desires match our judgments – something we can help bring about through what L&I call an "aesthetic practice." For sexiness is an aesthetic property and just as we can and should always seek to broaden our aesthetic horizons, we can and should broaden the horizons of what and who we find sexy, primarily by increasing exposure to a diversity of bodies and decreasing exposure to "perfect" sex symbols. The result of this, L&I argue, will be that the twofold problem disappears. Women will no longer be considered sexy in accordance with an externally dictated or unduly narrow conception of sexiness.

L&I's diagnosis raises questions. Take the claim that women are considered sexy in accordance with an externally dictated conception of sexiness. Does this only affect women? Isn't it the case that a man's desire to be sexy is ultimately a desire for qualities that women find attractive and hence should we not say that it is mostly women who determine what counts as sexy for a man? If so, then we are no longer to treat this a purely feminist concern. Of course, it could be thought that the real problem lies with *the sort of qualities* that men find sexually attractive, which brings us to the second part of L&I's diagnosis. According to L&I, women are considered sexy in accordance with an all too narrow conception of sexiness. If you don't have long legs, glossy hair, smooth skin, full lips, firm breasts you do not count as sexy. Now, while it is easy to find some confirmation of this thesis – just google "sexy women" and see which images come up – one may query again whether this is an exclusively feminist issue. What happens if one does an Internet search for "sexy men"? Going by the pictures that Google brings up, an equally narrow ideal of male

sexiness emerges. A reply could be that women are able to find men sexy even if they don't have a stereotypically sexy body. This is true. But then again, men might say the same thing. Men do not reserve their sexual interest for those few supermodels who have a body like Elle -- The Body -- Macpherson. The much maligned male gaze tends to be far more indiscriminate.

A distinction that is largely ignored by L&I is that between 'appearing sexy to someone' and 'being generally considered sexy' (or, from the viewer's perspective, between 'finding someone sexy' and 'judging someone to be sexy'). You may know that someone is generally regarded as sexy and yet you may not find her sexy yourself. Conversely, you may find someone very sexy and at the same time acknowledge that they are not generally considered sexy. Now, L&I's revised notion of sexiness will make it possible for, say, elderly and disabled women to be generally regarded as sexy. However, being so regarded is arguably not the main concern of these specific groups. After all, most of us are not generally considered sexy in the way that Angelina Jolie or Scarlett Johansson are and most of us are not inclined to see this as a grave injustice. The real issue for elderly and disabled women, and the reason why they may feel marginalized compared to not just A-list actresses but to the average woman in the street, is (a) that their *sexuality* is all too often ignored, i.e. they are not perceived as people with sexual needs and desires and with a sexual identity that deserves respect and acknowledgement, and (b) that they will less frequently *appear sexy* to people they encounter (which is different from being generally considered sexy). Although this is linked to the fact that their sexuality is often ignored to begin with, it constitutes a separate wrong. For here the issue is not so much that a crucial aspect of selfhood is denied, but rather that they are systematically missing out on a valuable experience, namely the experience of being wanted or being the target of someone's sexual interest. And in so far as finding someone sexy is regarded as prelude to, and for some even a prerequisite for, a romantic relationship, they run an increased risk of losing out on another valuable good, romantic love.

All this is of course also true for elderly and disabled *men*. So, what are the problems that *women in particular* face? These are best revealed when we ask two

further questions. First, how to appear sexy in present-day society if one does not have a stereotypically sexy body? The answer will differ greatly depending on whether you are a man or a woman. Personality traits like assertiveness, self-assurance, authority, independence, boldness, and ambition are often cited as contributing to a man's sex-appeal, whereas this is less so for women. The same behavior that makes a man seem persuasive, ambitious, self-assured, in a woman is often seen as pushy, selfish, bossy and so as not particularly attractive. Besides personality traits there are (what Aristotle called) 'external goods', such as power and wealth, which may help to make a man sexy. Again, this seems less often and less decisive a contributing factor for women. Physical prowess and dexterity are also markers of sexiness for men, but not necessarily for women (women who run or throw a ball in clumsy way – 'like a girl' -- are frequently perceived as cute because of it). These differences between men and women are far from innocuous. The traits and properties listed above are all associated with specific heteronormative gender roles in a society that still bears the marks of a long history of gender inequality. Men used to occupy almost all positions of power and authority, whereas women were excluded from those positions. Men were active in the world, while women were tied to the home and dependent in a myriad of ways on their husbands or male family members. To accept and promote these traits and properties as markers of sexiness is an effective mechanism for entrenching this gender inequality (see Eaton, 'A Sensible Anti-Porn Feminism').

Second, how *important* is it to appear sexy? Even in modern and 'enlightened' Western societies, women are socialized to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons. This is probably the most objectionable difference between the genders. And here I take a view that is diametrically opposed to that of L&I. L&I basically agree that sexiness is essential to someone's value as a person. That is why they suggest a revised notion according to which everyone could in principle be considered sexy. By contrast, I would want to emphasize that sexiness is not essential to a woman's value as a person, just as it is not essential to a man's value. Granted, it can be valuable and desirable to at least *appear sexy* to some people on

some occasions. But this does not mean that sexiness as such should be seen as indispensable for one's self-esteem or the esteem of others.

So what is to be done? For L&I, considering someone sexy should be a matter of making the correct judgment: you ask yourself whether the person under consideration has a magnificent body infused with sexual subjectivity and this then is followed by an ethical imperative: you have to make your feelings and desires match your judgment. So, in suggesting a way forward L&I mainly place emphasis on the individual responsibility that every one of us has in making a correct assessment and doing the right thing. One can, however, have serious doubts about the feasibility of such a proposal. Feelings of sexual attraction often go against our better judgment and are very hard to steer or control. We typically do not choose who we fall in or out of lust with. Biology plays an important part in this, naturally, but is by no means the only factor in play. One's upbringing and education, as well as the images and stories one is confronted with on a daily basis, in advertising, in the media, in the arts, in the many forms of entertainment: all of this has a tremendous influence. It is these culturally specific and ultimately changeable processes of socialization that I think should be the main focus of any attempt to address contemporary issues with sexiness.

While there is not enough scope to investigate these factors in detail here, I do want to briefly discuss one area of representation that has had a huge impact on what and who we find sexy: pornography. By eroticizing certain actions, bodily features, personality traits, pornography not only reflects but also helps to shape what and who we find sexy. If that is so, it is reasonable to assume that pornography is partly responsible for what has gone wrong with the standards of sexiness in our society. But it also follows that pornography, given its potential impact on our sexual likes and dislikes, can become part of the solution. And here I'm thinking specifically of what I call 'radical egalitarian pornography,' i.e. pornography that is premised on the full equality between sexual partners, that does not eroticize any acts of violence, humiliation, or objectification, that militates against the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and complicates dominant representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, disability, age, body type, in such a way that exposure to this kind of

pornography will no longer have a detrimental impact on our responses of sexual attraction but, on the contrary, might help to bring them in line with our ideas of (gender) equality. Recent examples include *Phone Fuck* (Ingrid Ryberg, 2009), *Gingers* (Antonio Da Silva, 2013), and *When We Are Together We Can Be Everywhere* (Marit Östberg, 2015).

I see two natural allies of this type radical egalitarian pornography: art and the Internet. Firstly, some anti-porn feminists consider the Internet a great threat because it has made the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography so much easier, which has opened the door to the deplorable ‘pornification’ of culture and of sex. Yet, if you take into account the great variety of pornographies out there and in particular the positively subversive potential of radical egalitarian pornography it becomes clear that this is a one-sided view. Take the group of people that L&I have rightly drawn attention to as being marginalized under the current sexiness regime: disabled and elderly people. While their sexuality is still all too often ignored in the everyday world this is not the case in the world of (radical egalitarian) pornography. There is porn made by and featuring elderly and disabled men and women and thanks to Internet (and internet communities) this is now easily and globally accessible. Another problem they face in contemporary society is that they will less frequently appear sexy to other people – no doubt due in part to the fact that they rarely feature as sex symbols in the mainstream media. Again, radical egalitarian internet pornography can help to counterbalance this.

Secondly, art. More often than not, pornography and art are thought of as fundamentally incompatible. If the latter tries to educate our taste, mainstream pornography merely panders to people’s tastes. Hence its formulaic and conformist character: story lines and role plays that have proven effective are repeated over and over again, sex always proceeds along the same well-trodden path (from oral sex to various forms of penetration culminating in the obligatory ‘money shot’), any real deviation from the heterosexual norm is taboo lest it might be offensive to some consumers’ tastes. However, things are different with radical egalitarian pornography. Because works of this kind set out to challenge the existing sexiness regime and its underlying prejudices, and because their aim is precisely to expand

and educate viewers' sexual tastes, they are compelled to seek out innovative and thought-provoking ways of representing (the role of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, age, body type in) sex and sexiness. A case in point is *Skin.Like.Sun* (2010; Jennifer Lyon Bell and Murielle Scherre), a stylish pornographic documentary about a real-life couple filmed in real-time so as to convey the unscripted progression of a genuine sexual encounter. Or *One Night Stand* (2006; Emilie Jouvett), a collection of five vignettes exploring a variety of sex acts, body types, gender expressions in a dark underground lesbian and queer club, filmed in situ with a hand held camera and with a raw DIY punk aesthetic as a result. It is their radical egalitarian agenda that motivated these film makers to experiment with both content and form in such a way that their creations have at least as much in common with art films than with mainstream commercial porn films. And while they may not be able to compete with the latter in production value, they far exceed their mainstream counterparts in cognitive value, originality, and general artistic quality. This easy confluence of radical egalitarian and artistic ambitions is only to be encouraged. For one thing, achieving art status would grant these films prestige and a special sort of authority that would help to undermine the influence and authority that inegalitarian porn still has in matters of sex. Moreover, it will help to pave the way for an open discussion of such works in the public domain and for a proper art critical analysis of this specific genre. The fact that there is no public porn criticism – in the way that there is film criticism or art criticism – is no doubt one of the reasons why prejudice and misinformation can so easily spread and thrive here.