

Sadie Benning

b. 1973, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

by Melissa Rigney

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[filmography](#) [bibliography](#) [web resources](#)

Sadie Benning began making videos at age sixteen when her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning, gave her a pixelvision camcorder for Christmas. The Pixelvision is a small, hand-held, black and white video-camera marketed for children by Fisher-Price in the late 1980s. The Pixelvision failed on the general market for the same reason it has been a hit with experimental filmmakers: grainy images, tinny sound, and a box frame. Benning's videos can be described in a variety of ways, including autobiography, ethnography, personal films, diary-films, and stories of coming-out. Thematically, her films consistently condemn homophobia, racism, and sexism while concerning themselves with the perspective of young people and women.

Benning demonstrated an early ability to manipulate images and create sustained narratives. She culls from a wide variety of sources including television, magazines, newspapers and popular culture. Her recent work reflects many of the same themes she explored early on, yet also displays an increased ability and maturity as a filmmaker. Recent films include *The Judy Spots* (1995), which aired on MTV, and *Flat is Beautiful* (1998). Her work continues to attract attention and is regularly screened at film festivals worldwide.

Her intensely personal and autobiographical videos document the dreams, desires, fears, and fantasies of a teenage lesbian in the process of defining self, sexuality, and identity. They delineate the social and sexual straitjacket that girls are expected to conform to, while working out strategies of transgression and rebellion in an effort to create an identity space beyond the boundaries of heterosexuality and gender conformity.

Combining defiance with a childlike innocence and vulnerability, Benning responds to a world that simultaneously ridicules and frightens her by retreating into the relative, but ultimately temporary, safety of her bedroom and a form of self-imposed



exile. Ultimately, the reality of violence cannot be escaped or ignored and Benning is forced to confront her own vulnerability in a world that is often openly hostile and threatening to women and lesbians. The ridicule and alienation she encounters at school derive from her androgynous gender expression and her lesbian sexuality. However, she is quick to note that conformity to the rules of heterosexuality and the gender system, which are expressed most visibly for her by the image of the “good white girl”, is a representation that does little to provide any measure of protection for women in society.



The Judy Spots

A devastating film about lost innocence, random violence, and child abuse, *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) begins with an intensely personal account of her own victimization at the hands of Ricky, a neighborhood bully. Confronted daily with her own experiences of violence, and with sensationalized headlines in the newspapers that detail child abuse, molestation, mass murder and random accidents she quickly recognizes that no one is immune to violence and tragedy: “I was in my Dad's Chevy truck when I watched a station wagon full of people flip over and blow up. Tragedy, that can happen to anyone.” Fighting back against the neighbourhood bully does little to calm her fears or her overwhelming sense of powerlessness because, as she ultimately recognises, Ricky is just one small part of a larger social problem that has no cure. The opening scenes document the ways in which violence touches Benning's own life directly, from the police car drawing up to her neighbour's house and the sounds of police sirens wailing in the background while she stands in her backyard, to the narrated details of her own victimization: “We got off the school bus and his hands were tangled in my hair, it hurt, and I watched clumps of my hair fall to the ground and blow away.” Although she is helpless to defend herself from her tormentor she refrains from directly blaming Ricky for his actions, realizing that the bully is also a victim at the hands of his parents who are “older and meaner.”

At the core of *A Place Called Lovely* is the depiction of childhood as a battleground and a fight to stay safe. The school bus, the playground and the neighborhood become the setting for childhood violence, played against a background of adult violence, police sirens wailing and the cries of children. Children's voices and laughter are inextricably mixed with the wailing sirens. Ricky, as an abused child, takes out his fears, frustrations, and emotions on smaller and weaker children, just as his parents take out their anger and frustration upon him. Expressions of love are confused with abuse and violence. In a child's voice, but with adult words, Ricky screams “I love you. I love you. I wanna kiss you. Goddamn it you fucker I wanna be alone”, mimicking a confusing and violent adult world.

Ricky's abuse has turned him into an abuser. Benning's response, when she is older and stronger, is to beat Ricky until he cries. Who is the victim and who is the abuser? The cycles of violence ultimately implicates everyone, until innocence is just a word with no meaning and no reality, allowing Benning to dismiss her grandmother's ineffectual advice that “only bad things happen to bad people, so don't hang around them.” This version of America, Benning suggests, is both a myth and a dream. The reality of growing up in America is marked by the knowledge that “evil is common,” tragedy can happen to

anyone, and victims turn into abusers. She rejects the image of the good white girl not only because it is an American myth, but also because trying to emulate this myth contributes to the continued disempowerment of young girls and women. Recognizing that empowerment is found in self-definition rather than in strict conformity to social standards and prevailing definitions of womanhood, Benning, rather than merely reversing the binary of good/bad, subverts it by demonstrating that conventional definitions of womanhood are designed to prevent women from exploring the possibilities of their own identity and self-empowerment. More importantly, the “bad girl” plunders masculine icons of power and rebellion for her own use, thus allowing her to assume a freedom that crosses boundaries of gender and sexuality.

Girlpower (1992) opens with a restatement of the themes of violence and disempowerment found in *A Place Called Lovely*. The only hope of escape from a world both “brutal and needy” is found in the realm of the imagination where teenage girls can, at last, make their own rules: “I built my own world inside my head. I had imaginary friends, make believe love. I travelled to far away places and did as I pleased. I fought the law and, of course, made my own rules.”

Growing up, Benning's early childhood play and fantasy involve imitation of teenage male heroes she saw in magazines and on television: “When I was a kid I took my shirt off imagining I was just as sexy and powerful as when Matt Dillon did it for the centerfold of *Teenbeat* magazine.” These early fantasies involve the direct imitation of male coded behaviour, placing Benning in the role of the active rescuer rather than the passively rescued: “I rode my big wheel down the street pretending I was Erik Estrada riding on my motorcycle to save the life of some girl who desperately needed to be rescued.”

Benning's childhood fantasies reverse the conventional images and play of young girls who are encouraged to dream of rescue by the handsome prince. These fantasies extend beyond role reversal and appropriation when she also includes her emulation of female rock stars including Joan Jett, Debbie Harry of Blondie, and the Go-Go's, early media icons of powerful, independent women. The images of women in popular culture began to change in the 1980s, providing teenage girls with figures of their own, rather than those independently appropriated from male images of power and autonomy.

After exploring her response to both male and female images of power, Benning turns the camera on herself in order to answer the question “what's inside of me?” What she finds is an intense anger directed at a world that renders her isolated, alienated, and invisible. Her initial reaction is to withdraw into herself and into a world that is of her own making, free from the loneliness that she is confronted with at home, at school, and within her own family. She establishes her own space of belonging, rejecting the world that is offered to her and that insists on her invisibility and, more frighteningly, her eventual eradication. Using appropriated footage of an interview with a leader of the American Nazi Party who prefers to “gas queers” more than anyone else, Benning vividly expresses the source of her alienation from American society, a source that goes far deeper than mere teenage anxiety and rebellion. She attempts to resolve her frustration with the sense of powerlessness she feels in the face of the overwhelming attempt by Western culture to obliterate and deny her identity as a woman and as a lesbian through a defiance that she renders in a series of

inter-titles: “Fuck you man” and “Hear me or Die” and through the active creation of her own heroes rather than those culled from television or magazines glorifying male power and privilege. Benning depends upon her own imagination and a belief in self: “I wondered how I would survive, how I would escape, and where I would go? In my imagination I travelled the world. I was as powerful as a bullet. I survived because I created my own heroes. Nobody needed to know I was somebody because it was my secret.” Girl power has its source from within and must be sustained by the imagination. It is Benning's secret weapon in a cultural war that seeks to destroy young women by rendering them hapless and helpless in a world bent on random violence and terror.



Jollies

While *A Place Called Lovely* and *Girlpower* concentrate primarily upon Benning's developing sense of self in the world, her isolation, and the growth of individual sources of power and resistance in a culture hostile to women and children, *Jollies*, *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, and *Me and Rubyfruit* (all 1990) focus on Benning's sexuality. *If Every Girl Had a Diary* is a meditative video diary. Stripped of music and intertitles, and with very little movement, Benning chooses to directly address the camera with a sustained narrative and close

confidential style rendering her video into diary form. Employing stark close-up images of her face with a tone of voice that is both confrontational yet contemplative, she announces wryly “last week I almost laughed.”

With the laying claim to her lesbian identity and sexuality comes the concomitant need to have that identity made visible and validated by society in general. Benning not only needs to make her identity as a lesbian visible to the world in general, in order to provide validation of that identity, but wants this visibility to produce respect rather than the attendant punishment that her sexuality often entails: “It's only been a year ago that I crawled the walls. You know, I've been waiting for that day to come when I could walk the streets and people would look at me and say that's a DYKE. And if they didn't like it they'd fall into the center of the earth and deal with themselves. Maybe they'd return but they'd respect me.” Her video diary records her fears, loneliness, and frustration and the sense that her individuality is lost and rendered invisible amongst the din and the crowd of “800 million faces” each absorbed with their own affairs and worries: “All of us concerned about what concerns us, and we're talking and listening, exchanging glances. And me, I'm numb, I've got a headache. I can imagine a million places I'd rather be.” Yet, ultimately, this sense of disconnection and loneliness that she feels in the middle of a crowd gives her room to explore her identity on her own terms and the opportunity to know herself for who she is and not who she is with: “I guess to be alone is to know yourself for you and not who you are with, and I like that.”

The theme of lesbian identity is further explored in *Me and Rubyfruit* with an examination of how heterosexual norms and laws impact her romantic relationships with other girls. Edited in camera with hastily scrawled intertitles, *Me and Rubyfruit* begins with a question the narrator poses to her friend Leota: “Leota, you thought about getting married?” This question turns into a marriage proposal but Leota is quick to answer that “girls can't get

married.” The narrator challenges this “rule” by telling Leota that “if we wanna get married we can; it doesn't matter what anyone says.” She goes on to link “breaking rules” with the power that money and fame can confer: “Nobody dares tell someone famous what to do. Now ain't that better than sitting around with an apron on?” Life, art, and celebrity converge when Benning says “we'll kiss like they do in the movies and then we'll be engaged.” Although she is quick to declare the unspoken rule that girls can't marry girls as “dumb”, she also realizes that kissing Leota must be kept a secret: “Leota and I went off by ourselves each day after school. Somehow we knew enough not to go kissing in front of everyone, so we went into the woods and kissed until it was time to go home.” The messages they pick up from society tell them, at an early age, that what they feel must be hidden, that it is somehow wrong and against a set of “rules” that make no sense to their individual lives, but which they are powerless to defy, especially in public. In a 1993 interview Benning discusses the influence of mass media upon her sexuality and her self-image: “I don't see my images on TV (and) that means I'm not valuable. That means my sexuality doesn't sell beer. Even if you're straight, the representation of women and minorities is just completely warped and constructed to entertain and oppress you” (1). In a brief sequence of shots the camera lingers on mainstream images of women and heterosexual sex found in magazines and on television. There are no images that depict her feelings for Leota, and the knowledge that they are somehow 'different' sends the girls into the woods, maintaining the silence and invisibility that surrounds their emerging sexuality.

Expanding many of the themes found in *Me and Rubyfruit, Jollies* is a history of Benning's childhood and teenage sexual experiences. Intensely personal and revealing, *Jollies* details Benning's early sexual experiences and experimentation with both boys and girls until, eventually losing her virginity to a girl, she embraces her coming-out and her queer identity. Benning takes us through typical pre-teen and adolescent experiences as she attempts to sort through and understand both her feelings and her sexuality. She is quick to note that although her feelings are perfectly normal for any adolescent, it is the object of her affections that makes her not only different but, as she will soon come to realize, invisible in the larger culture that expends its time, energy, and advertising on heterosexual love.

Jollies opens with a tale of first love: “Like most people I had a crush. It started in 1978 when I was in Kindergarten. They were twins and I was a tomboy.” This tale of first love begins ordinarily enough but concludes, not only with her confession of a crush on twin girls, but also with the identification of herself as a tomboy. She goes on to narrate her experimentation with boys, but the language she uses and the scenes she depicts have a sense of the grotesque and the unnatural, as in her description of an experience she had with a boy when she was just twelve: “So I got naked with this guy. He was my boyfriend. We were in a room full of birds. I was twelve and he was sixteen. So he got up, I got dressed, and he jacked off in the bathroom.” It is after this experience, Benning notes, that she starts kissing girls. In this somewhat roundabout way she demonstrates the naturalness of her feelings for girls, defending against charges that what she feels for girls is somehow unnatural or abnormal, and a charge many lesbians face when they first come out. Narrating her experiences to a background of asynchronous sounds and information including the local weather report and daytime soap operas, the mundane conditions further highlight her own sense of difference from social norms, yet also provides

contextualisation for her emerging queer identity. That while she may feel different, strange, and out of touch, the world responds by continuing to turn on its own oblivious and self-absorbed axis.

It Wasn't Love (1992) expresses a playfulness and composure that is not found in other videos dealing with similar issues, including *Jollies* and *Girlpower*. This video appears to offer the promise of a freedom and rebellion that embraces both love and romance without the fear of being labelled different and the alienation and isolation that often accompany this labelling. Love is associated with danger and rebellion, opening up possibilities of adventure and self-discovery while reversing the ending of the traditional heterosexual romance that concludes with the submersion of the heroine's identity beneath the all-encompassing categories of wife and mother.



It Wasn't Love

It Wasn't Love centers on the narrator's construction of a series of imaginative roles and scenarios that enable her to act out her rebellion and defiance while reflecting her desire for autonomy, respect, and power. The opening shots of Benning and friend combine some of the major themes of this piece. The relationship between the two girls, their direct and defiant stares at the camera, coupled with the enclosed sense of space create an image of female autonomy and power. There is an imaginative envisioning of what it is like to have individual power and autonomy, a power that commands respect and awe in the onlooker. The narration and intertitles describe the ultimate teenage fantasy road-trip: a female version of Bonnie and Clyde in love, in trouble, and unstoppable. With dreams of freedom, a life of crime, and the glamour of Hollywood, the film depicts the ultimate wish list of the lesbian bad girl whose life is not only constrained by school and parents, but also by the fear of a world that cannot tolerate her difference. In recreating media images of what it means to be both powerful and “cool”, Benning also reveals the frustration of her position as a teenage lesbian growing up in Middle America. Yet it is her imagination that ultimately frees her, allowing her to act out various roles including a tattooed biker; a heavily made-up femme fatale; a pool-playing, cigar smoking, male hood; and the androgynous lesbian bad girl with a crush.

This work ends on a far more positive note than many of her other films especially in terms of gaining access to an inner sense of power and autonomy rather than continuing to rely on media images and her imagination. According to Benning, “the most revolutionary thing is to just love yourself and love what you do. You can't do anything more than that” [\(2\)](#).

Collectively, these videos highlight the lack of positive and empowering images available in the wider culture for both women and lesbians to identify with. Her work seeks to subvert the dominant image in society of the passive white girl who waits to be rescued in favour of the outlaw bad girl who lives by her own rules. The bad girl, however, is often only an imaginative figure, someone Benning can escape into when the pressures of the

world push down too hard. She develops her tough girl image primarily through the colonization of male iconography. Rendering herself butch, femme, androgynous, but always lesbian, Benning as bad girl is on a mission to command respect and make her presence known. Her videos, which privilege the visibility of female power and lesbian sexuality, create a visual diary of a girl who dreams of breaking all the rules.

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Endnotes:

1. Linda Yablonsky, "Sadie Benning", *Bomb*, 44, Spring 1993, pp. 18–20. ▲
2. Ibid. ▲

Filmography

Aerobicide (1998) video clip for Julie Ruin, 4 min.

Flat is Beautiful (1998) 50 min.

German Song (1995) 5 min.

The Judy Spots (1995) 11 min.

Girlpower (1992) 15 min.

It Wasn't Love (1992) 20 min.

A Place Called Lovely (1991) 14 min.

If Every Girl Had A Diary (1990) 6 min.

Jollies (1990) 11 min.

Me and Rubyfruit (1990) 6 min.

Living Inside (1989) 6 min.

A New Year (1989) 6 min.



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Bibliography

Chris Holmlund, "When Autobiography Meet Ethnography and Girl Meets Girl: The 'Dyke Docs' of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich" in Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (eds), *Between the Sheets, In the Streets*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 127–143.

Johnny Ray Huston, "Where the Art Is. Sadie Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* Redefines an Old Phrase: The Home Movie", *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, January 27, 1999, <http://www.sfbg.com/AandE/33/17/lead.html>

Gary Morris, "Behind the Mask: Sadie Benning's Pixel Pleasures", *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 24, April 1999, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/24/benning.html>

Linda Yablonsky, "Sadie Benning", *Bomb*, 44, Spring 1993, pp. 18–20.



Web Resources

[Bright Lights Film Journal](#)

A short piece on Benning and her early work.

[Sadie Benning Bibliography](#)

Several online links here. Though some don't work.

[Sadie Page](#)

A site dedicated to Sadie that includes links to resources on/offline.

[Video Data Bank](#)

Clips of Benning's work can be found here. Her videos can be purchased here too.

[Filmwinter](#)

Videography with short synopses.

[New Media](#)

Clips of Benning's work can be viewed here. Just click on the letter "B".

[The Film Journal](#)

A piece on Benning.



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