



# The Divine Decadence of Fetish Noir

Special Feature by Ernest Greene

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## Some Enigmatic Words From Kink-Vid Auteur Maria Beatty

A decade before there was a genre called alt-porn, Maria Beatty was already legendary among hip kinksters and underground film enthusiasts. Her electrifying video debut, *The Black Glove* (1996), seemed set in an alternative universe from the over-lit San Fernando Valley locations where conventional porn, much less so-called "bondage videos," clumsily attempted to portray sophisticated sexual variations their makers had never experienced, much less understood. The subtle black-and-white videography, the careful attention to the details of rubber hoods, steel clamps and stiletto heels, the precisely rendered rituals of domination and submission all reflected a consciousness far advanced beyond the relentless mediocrity that assaulted viewers searching for any suggestion of authentic perversity. And then there was the presence of the artist herself, daringly revealed in ecstatic submission, huge eyes and not-quite-innocent face reflecting the seductive mystery of a powerful mind inside a body longing for surrender.

In the years since, Beatty has drawn on the NYC scene for

inspiration in over a dozen titles whose daring approach to the conventions of naughty schoolgirls, debauched doctors, vampire Dominas and tickling tarts has flouted one supposedly unbreakable genre rule after another. Fisting, watersports, penetration with bondage, knife play and other forbidden delights have slipped past potential sensors under a veil of visual artistry that confounds ready classification, as does Beatty herself. Recognized beyond the narrow confines of porn, her film and video works have been shown at the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the New Museum, Channel 13 (PBS NY), Spanish, French and Italian TV and various other museums, galleries and international film festivals. Living in Paris now, she graciously consented to share her thoughts with TABOO readers in a brief interview that reveals much while preserving the fundamental enigma of this most challenging creative mind.

**HT:** Would you care to tell us a bit about your background and what drew you to picture-making in such an unusual area of specialty?

**MB:** I was born in Caracas, Venezuela, grew up in New York City and am presently based in Paris, France. I never had any formal training in film. I guess you would say it's an innate talent, a gift. What I try to do with this gift is interpret situations and relationships through fantasy with a specific visionary touch to it. Aesthetic, elegant, intelligent, sensual and erotically charged with velvety dark, it is the best medium for me to express my imaginary universe. It fulfills my inner core, the darker side of my desires and sexuality stimulates my imagination.

**HT:** When did you first encounter the BDSM world?

**MB:** I started out as a filmmaker and accidentally (a good accident!) got into the BDSM scene in 1990. A friend of mine frequented S/M clubs, and one night she invited me along. S/M has a lot to do with the psychological voyage which opens up to the practitioners. The physicality of it, for me, is a lot more powerful than the physicality of straight sex. The power of sensory stimulation. The brain for me is a very powerful tool and aids the body as a most potent sex organ. That is why I have chosen S/M—not only because it is an art form, but a sophisticated sexual form too. The power of the imagination, the transformation of pain into pleasure, the use of psychological tension between individuals are all elements used to increase the desire in my films. I like to dive into the fantasy world of imaginary perversions.

**HT:** How did you get into making video?

**MB:** I started investigating the possibility of making money in video so that I would be able to support my film work. I was in the midst of producing and directing a documentary film about female performers (political, social and sexual) and happened to meet many sex workers along the way. It seemed like a natural progression. After that first public sexual experience, I found S/M a fun way to enter a more luxurious existence. It all happened by chance, and it was the monetary situation that brought me into the professional arena. Since 1990, I've produced, directed, edited and distributed over 30 fetish/S/M short-, medium- and feature-length films. Although I've starred in a handful of these productions, I'm more inspired to stay behind the camera.

**HT:** Stylistically, there seems to be more than a hint of Weimar Berlin to your pictures, moments that could have come from a film by Lang or Murnau.

**MB:** Weimar Berlin fits me like a long, black, tight, leather glove. It was a period of depravity, kink sexual frenzy and liberation, of exploitive sexuality. I love it as an era of archetypal

lesbian chic and elegant degeneracy, sexual androgyny (the birth of the *garçonne*, or boy-woman) and a lust for sexual experimentation of every kind. While it lasted, it was the quintessential sex holiday with style and a decadent sophistication. Voila!

**HT:** There is an unmistakable lesbian sensibility to your work, and yet it enjoys great popularity with straight BDSM audiences. How would you explain that?

**MB:** It's true that men love lesbian fantasies and the lesbian imagination, and they are the ones who really invest in my work. I do try to touch a diverse public and not segregate and put limits on myself. I also present my works in male gay venues, since they appreciate the aesthetics and beauty of my films. The market seems to touch people of all persuasions. I'm interested in all combinations and images and space left for the imagination. Especially in film, you have more options to work with in terms of erotic aesthetics—the illusions of



space, texture, lighting and post-production tools. I love the thought of any audience—gay, straight, male, female, public or private—being turned on by my films and performances. I am an exhibitionist and also take a voyeuristic delight in my own work!

**HT:** You've never made any secret of your submissive predispositions. What would you like us to know about the submissive perspective and how the experience differs from popular stereotypes?

**MB:** I am a very private person and do few public performances. I put my primary focus, my time and emotional energy into my films. Part of me is an exhibitionist, but at the same time there is a need to keep it very intimate and sacred. Submissive fantasies about the human body being rendered helpless and restrained, dominated and sensually punished make me feel sexy and strong. I say fantasies because it's the illusion of being owned and submitting that I find fascinating. For me, that is in fact what it really is, an illusion. Did it happen, or was it

just in my imagination? I also have an incredible mental capacity to transform pain into pleasure. One can not be taught how to be a submissive. I think it emerges naturally and soaks the individual like a talent or desire. The submissive is not always naked in my films. Often I feel that wearing little cotton panties can be much more provocative and submissively charged than total nudity. The most submissive people can be totally covered and suffocating in latex or in a plastic bag. It's more about power and playing with the imagination that takes the experience further. Nudity isn't necessarily the maximum of submission.

**HT:** Do you have a particular artistic mission related to BDSM?

**MB:** The common theme in my films encompasses lesbian sexuality focusing mainly on S/M because it is my sexual preference. In my films I create sequences of cinematic suspense by presenting a pursuer and a pursued, the dialectic of seduction and desire, the beautiful object of desire as the pursued. I try to show people that S/M is a very sophisticated way of expressing sexuality and that it is also an art form. Look at the works of Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton, Luis Bunuel, Jean Genet and Pier Pasolini. These are incredible visionaries who have transformed S/M imagery into art. Their works are beautiful, elegant, sophisticated, intelligent, erotic, perverse and classical. Through them, we can enter the theater of the unknown. The ability to express my experiences through art is a great gift. I feel very privileged to have the venue of my films in order to show people the beauty of S/M lovemaking.

**HT:** What do you like and/or dislike about commercial portrayals of BDSM sexuality onscreen?

**MB:** Most mainstream pornographers are not using the power of the imagination, and, when they do, it is so cliché and predictable! My films offer viewers a different way of understanding the intricate field of S/M practices, performances and psychology. My films are aesthetic products, rather than stroke films. I think the reason that bad stroke films are produced is strictly for commercial purposes without any heart and soul to them. The potency of sexual imagery and act has been diluted into a banal marketing tool seducing the public into buying. I am not interested in commerce, but see film as a way of expressing my sexuality and fantasies. It is important for me to stay independent, apart from the mainstream porn industry, thus keeping my aesthetic line and connoisseur public. I don't want to corrupt myself by losing my perspective and my fantasies. I focus on the hypnotic power of imagery, keeping dialogue to a minimum. The intensity of the characters is



emphasized with shadow effects, imperceptible, hazy illumination and close-ups: a clenched fist, a tight jaw, a nervous twitch, a teardrop, the texture of a wrinkle. These elements arouse emotions in the viewer that give weight and depth to the drama. I don't desire to create a classical narrative structure such as a romantic comedy like *Secretary* or a social drama like *La Maitresse*. My universe is driven by bizarre psychodramas, living inside the dream world and psyche of the characters. I try to dive past reality into the nether regions of the mind, assisted by atmospheric sound design and an exaggerated perspective of images. There is an obvious tone, dynamic, emotion, rhythm and sound design. Each film has its own flow and balance.

**HT:** From the very beginning, you've defied

many of the conventions of BDSM video-making, including unwritten prohibitions against showing bondage with penetration and other taboos. Did you set out to defy convention deliberately, or did this just come about organically as a result of your own vision?

**MB:** It is the responsibility of the artist to break taboos and thereby make them visible. I try sometimes to play with traditional images of the dominatrix covered and the submissive undressed, as in the strict S/M code. I like to twist this and make the submissive the voyeur catching various angles and glimpses of the dominatrix's flesh. It's an exciting game of voyeurism and exhibitionism that takes this desire to another mental level. In mainstream attempts at BDSM porn, the imaginary illusions of the submissive are absent. It often seems

like the submissive is there against his or her own will and going through the motions as scripted and instructed. There is a visible lack of spontaneity, emotion and feelings, as if we're being shown a cautionary tale on why we shouldn't want to experience submission rather than why we would want to. I love reinventing, twisting and bending submission to my will. Playing with clichés, I prefer not to accept the commonly defined roles or common locations or common tools. I try to reinvent these things and not focus on what is expected or supposed to be.

**HT:** Have you ever run into any problems, legal or otherwise, for going against "the rules"?

**MB:** I'm violently opposed to any censoring of my thoughts and works. To censor my fantasies, my desires, my emotions, myself, my subconscious, would underestimate myself as a filmmaker. This is one of the reasons why filmmaking is cathartic and liberating for me. As an artist, the responsibility you have to yourself is total freedom. The process of my films seems very natural, straightforward and obvious as they take shape. I don't impose. If it happens organically and works, then I leave it to complement the whole. At times it goes further than the "unwritten prohibitions" would seem to permit. An artist is meant to be extreme.

**HT:** Where to from here? What projects do you have in mind for the future?

**MB:** My first feature film, *Boy in a Bathtub*, is also my first film with a concrete storyline, including dialogue and seasoned actors. Shot splendidly as "erotic noir," this queer drama imagines a universe where genders are switched and the barriers between love and dependency are blurred. In Paris, circa 1920, a courtesan, turning 40, falls madly in love with a cherubic young man 20 years her junior. She keeps him locked up inside her flat, satisfying her dark desires. He becomes her child, her double, her wife and her sexual toy. This film is currently touring the film-festival circuit and will then be



released on PPV, DVD and VOD internationally in late 2007. At present, I'm in development with my second feature, an arthouse film with a strong narrative structure unifying sexual fantasies and deep psychology, which will focus on lesbian thematics and will be hauntingly disturbing and beautiful. I can't reveal more about it for now. I have to keep the rest as a surprise. And...watch for my new series of kinky queer/lesbian BDSM/fetish medium-length films just recently shot in downtown Los Angeles. Starring Michelle Aston, Dylan Ryan, London and Amber Rayne, they'll be released on DVD and VOD mid-2007.

## THE FILMS OF MARIA BEATTY

- Boy in a Bathtub* (2006)
- Mask of Innocence* (2006)
- Silken Sleeves* (2005)
- Ecstasy in Berlin, 1926* (2004)
- Lust* (2002)
- The Seven Deadly Sins* (2002)
- Tight Security* (2001)
- Waterworld* (2001)
- The Sassy Schoolgirl, Part II* (2000)
- Leda and the Swan: Nailed* (1999)
- The Sassy Schoolgirl, Part I* (1998)
- The Boiler Room* (1998)
- Box of Laughter, Part I: Dueling Pages* (1998)
- Box of Laughter, Part II: Converted to Tickling* (1998)
- Mistress Tara's Finishing School, or The Sassy Schoolgirl* (1998)
- Let the Punishment Fit the Child* (1997)
- The Black Glove* (1997)
- Doctor's Orders* (1995)
- The Elegant Spanking* (1995)
- Sluts & Goddesses Video Workshop* (1992)

