

# Basic Vs. Deep

by Bee Bell

(thanks to Chris for the idea!)

*Skin deep*, a movie made by Canadian director Midi Onodera, appeared at the S.F. queer film festival on June 11th. It had premiered in New York the previous week. [also in London before that—ed.] Apparently, queers on both coast—including a lot of transgendered people have been very critical of the movie, seeing it as a kind of FTM version of *Basic Instinct*. I think *Skin deep* is much, much better than that, and here's why.

First, in case you missed the whole phenomenon, *Basic Instinct* was a big early '90s Hollywood thriller starring Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone in a plot that involved a crazed bisexual woman psycho killer offing a series of husbands with her trusty icepick. Queer Nation in L.A. protested the movie throughout its filming, and later many QN chapters picketed *Basic Instinct* at theatres around the country. Their reasoning: Hollywood does NOT need to make more millions off the tradition of depicting queers as psychotic and dangerous. I could get with that program, so I didn't see the movie during its first run.

Here are some of my favorite things that happened during that time: one Queer Nation affinity group, Catherine Did It, would secretly plaster Los Angeles movie theatres with broadsides that gave away the ending of the film. Presto no one wanted to see it. And at a Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAC!) meeting in New York, some dyke stood up during a *Basic Instinct* discussion and said, "I don't get it. It's a movie about a queer woman who kills off a bunch of straight white men, right? What's the problem?"

I finally saw the flick, and I would say there are three main problems with it. It's bad. A lousy movie. Dumb plot, lame ass dialogue, etc. But nothing could be as bad as (2) Michael Douglas. Sharon Stone throws over a big beautiful butch dyke (the other murder suspect) for

that ugly Douglas: unthinkable bad taste. And (3) Queer Nation made a good point. *Basic Instinct* fit right in with a happy Hollywood tradition of making money from thrashing queers. Hollywood will never do that again without meeting resistance, and *Basic Instinct* will always be remembered for the intense political reaction that it drew.

*Skin deep* suffers neither from (1) nor from (2). And I would argue that it avoids (3) in that, although it's not a movie about FTMs, *Skin* portrays one in an honest, mostly useful way. *Instinct's* plot depends on queers, and does so in a stupid, evil way. So what is *Skin deep* about? It's about a Japanese Canadian film director making a sexy SM picture involving tattooing. It's about this character's dyke life, friends, and lovers, and about her getting of a clue about the people around her. One of these people is Chris, a young person born female and passing as male without benefit of hormones or surgery, who lives in a tiny town and has never met a fellow FTM. Alex, the director, summons Chris to the big city to work on her film after he answers her advertisement for someone who is turned on by getting tattooed. His job is to tell her what this kind of turn on feels like so she can convey the sensation to her actors. Understandably, once Chris arrives at the chaotic scene of the filming he does not know exactly where his own role starts and where it ends (sound familiar?). Alex, overwhelmed by the hellish details of making an independent film, ends up asking Chris to take on little duties here and there, takes him dancing, and otherwise confuses the guy while also messing up every other relationship in her life.

Chris, lonely, pained, and stimulated by Alex's intensity, falls for her. And okay, Chris is kind of a crazed stalker; but he is far from being the chick with the ice pick in *Basic Instinct*. The only violence Chris ever does is to himself. And *Skin deep* spells out Chris's motivations for obsessing over the protagonist with a truthful, heart wrenching clarity: he's been subjected to the

humiliation of living in a girl body, he's been harassed, beaten, and sexually ridiculed, and he's got a teenage style crush on this beautiful, older woman who has carelessly flirted with him. So? The worst thing Chris does in the whole movie is to clean up the apartment of somebody who likes it messy. Granted, that's pretty scary and invasive, but it ain't murder. And, also unlike your usual Hollywood psycho-queer, Chris gets stronger and more self-aware by the end of the movie.

*Skin deep* sorts through a lot of tough ideas besides gender: race, class, sex, and art all get examined in a way I found very true-life and attention-grabbing. We get to see the main character's confusions as a woman of Japanese descent, speaking none of the language but wanting to work with a Japanese master of tattoo artistry who continues the work of her own grandfather—while she lives in this very different world of funky urban Canadian dykes and queens. Alex struggles with Montana, her African-Canadian lover who is also the assistant on the film, and refuses to put up with the second-class treatment that she gets in more ways than one. All of us live in a world where race impacts human relationships and impedes economic and professional progress. This movie would make points worth seeing—even if it had no gender-bending characters.

There are disappointments. Yeah, I would like to see a happy FTM, with his shit together, sauntering through this movie to slap Chris on the back and help him through it. The many drag queens in the film are great, but their strength and solidarity make for a lopsided contrast with Chris's self-denial and isolation. And I wish the film had more information for the under informed or isolated FTM. Except for this last complaint, though, even in its harsh unevenness the film reflects the reality of FTM life: drag queens are more ubiquitous than kings, and confident, out FTMs are not found on every street corner yet either—especially in rural Canada, where Chris came from. So I recommend checking out this film, especially for its hauntingly dead-on pictures of the tortures and revelations that life reserves for us.