



January 2023

Sexual Healing

Johan Roeland

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, j.h.roeland@vu.nl

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Disability Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Roeland, Johan (2023) "Sexual Healing," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 45.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/45>

This Slamdance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Sexual Healing

Abstract

This is a film review of *Sexual Healing* (2022) directed by Elsbeth Fraanje.

Keywords

Disability, Sexuality

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Sexual Healing (2022), dir. Elsbeth Fraanje

A Disabled Woman in Search of Intimacy

The first scene: A middle-aged spastic woman in a wheelchair who is painting a reversed red heart and the words ‘(No)body fuck [sic] me’ in black. The second scene: The same woman now lying on her bed, while she waits for her caretaker who will help her into her wheelchair and move her naked body into the bathroom to be washed. The woman tells us: “Somebody once said that intimacy and sex make you more whole as a person. I’m curious about who I would be if that part in my life was sorted. From a very young age, touch is purely functional to me. That’s an altogether different kind of touch from an intimate one.”

In *Sexual Healing*, the Dutch filmmaker Elsbeth Fraanje, known for the Dutch Academy Award winning documentary *Snelwegkerk (Highway Confessions)*, portrays Evelien, a 56-year-old disabled woman who starts exploring her own body and her own sexuality: a journey she has never taken before, partly due to her personal aversion of

her own body and partly due to the stigma that is still attached to sexuality and disability. We follow Evelien into a lingerie store in which she tries on beautifully colored bras (“All of a sudden I have a woman’s body!”). Later on, we follow her into a sex shop, where Evelien tries to find a sex toy for clitoral stimulation. She laughs out loud because of the many creative and funny sex toys the shop owner shows her. The viewer also watches Evelien as she contacts a sex caretaker. In her first conversation with him, she shares her discomforts and worries about sexual contact.

Sexual Healing shows a personal, authentic and intimate portrait of a disabled woman who explores her own sexuality. This intimacy is achieved through a protagonist who lets people into her personal life and who shares her struggles in a very open and vulnerable way. The intimacy is also created by Fraanje’s cinematographic approach; Fraanje often chooses lengthy close-up shots of Evelien’s face and body. She also includes a number of close-ups of the animals in Evelien’s life—a dog, two birds, a little horse—and her close contact with these animals. Her hand touches the animal’s skin. She cuddles with the dog and the horse. These are powerful images that show the deep relation Evelien has with these animals, but they also emphasize the lack of intimate human contact in Evelien’s life.

The end of the documentary offers the most intimate moment: a beautiful close-up shot of Evelien’s naked body, hands touching her body, water flowing down her skin. The viewer comes close but it never feels voyeuristic, due to the gentle way the camera moves across the body (Fraanje refers to the camerawork as ‘caressing’ instead of registering the body). Here we witness a touch that is not functional anymore, rather erotic and intimate: a touch that brings healing in Evelien’s life, in the sense of becoming whole.

It is probably not only Evelien's life where such a transformation occurs. This particular heterosexual, able-bodied, male reviewer experienced a similar change while watching the movie. While I initially struggled with discomfort towards the naked disabled body as shown in the documentary (which is undoubtedly the product of a culture that values particular regimes of beauty and attractiveness, primarily related to specific abled bodies), I slowly began to see and appreciate the beauty of this woman. This is healing in another sense: a transformation of our own broken perceptions of beauty.