

CROSSDRESSING CINEMA: AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSGENDER  
REPRESENTATION IN FILM

A Dissertation

by

JEREMY RUSSELL MILLER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: Communication

CROSSDRESSING CINEMA: AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSGENDER  
REPRESENTATION IN FILM

A Dissertation

by

JEREMY RUSSELL MILLER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved by:

Co-Chairs of Committee,	Josh Heuman
	Aisha Durham
Committee Members,	Kristan Poirot
	Terence Hoagwood
Head of Department,	James A. Aune

August 2012

Major Subject: Communication

## ABSTRACT

Crossdressing Cinema: An Analysis of Transgender

Representation in Film. (August 2012)

Jeremy Russell Miller, B.A., University of Arkansas;

M.A., University of Arkansas

Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee: Dr. Joshua Heuman  
Dr. Aisha Durham

Transgender representations generally distance the transgender characters from the audience as objects of ridicule, fear, and sympathy. This distancing is accomplished through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. In this dissertation, I analyze representations of transgender individuals in popular film comedies, thrillers, and independent dramas. Through a textual analysis of 24 films, I argue that the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films work to prevent identification or connection between the transgender characters and the audience. The purpose of this distancing is to privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters over their transgender identities.

This dissertation is grounded in a cultural studies approach to representation as constitutive and constraining and a positional approach to gender that views gender identity as a position taken in a specific social context. Contributions are made to the fields of communication, film studies, and gender studies through the methodological approach to textual analysis of categories of films over individual case studies and the idea that individuals can be positioned in identities they do not actively claim for

themselves. This dissertation also makes a significant contribution to conceptions of the gaze through the development of three transgender gazes that focus on the ways the characters are visually constructed rather than the viewpoints taken by audience members. In the end, transgender representations work to support heteronormativity by constructing the transgender characters in specific ways to prevent audience members from developing deeper connections with them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first want to thank Dr. Josh Heuman and Dr. Aisha Durham for their service as co-chairs of my committee. Your feedback was invaluable in making this project the best it could be. I also want to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Terence Hoagwood, Dr. Kristan Poirot, and Dr. Jennifer Jones-Barbour, for all of their support.

I want to especially thank my friends Sara Rowe, Brittany Collins, and Chris Silver. Thank you, Sara, for providing a space in your home and your life both for writing and for unwinding while watching *Glee*. Brittany, it has been an honor sharing an office with you for the past two years and also for putting up with my frequent need to vent. And Chris, I wish I could have spent more time with you in person these past few years, but our long phone conversations provided a nice break from my focus on this project. All three of you are invaluable friends who I feel privileged to have in my life.

I also want to thank my other friends, Luke Lockhart, Brad Serber, Sammy Roberts Perez Stanford, Sammy Grimes, Joe Carr, Amanda Martinez, Andrea Schweikhard Robison, Cheryl Lozano-Whitten, Masha Sukovic, Vandy Ramadurai, Betsy McCann, Joëlle Cruz, Shelly Blair, Donathan Brown, Anirban Mukhopadhyay, Xi Cui, Trijya Singh, Marrisa Doshi, Lea Hernandez, Isaac Holyoak, Brynn Fitzpatrick, Dan De Leon, Zoe Hess Carney, Rachel Rashe Reed, Rachel Romero, Jeremy Rogerson, Kevin Cosgriff-Hernandez, and Rachael Hernandez, and faculty members, Srivi Ramasubramanian, Patrick Burkart, Antonio La Pastina, J. Kevin Barge, Jennifer Mease, Rebecca Gill, Tom Frentz, Frank Scheide, and Eric Rothenbuhler, who supported me throughout my graduate career.

And finally, I want to thank my family for their support and inspiration throughout this project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Problem: Conceptions of Transgender Communicated through Filmic Representations .....	3
Research Questions .....	5
Theoretical Foundations .....	7
Literature Review .....	33
Methodology .....	36
Transgender Representations in Context.....	40
Conclusion.....	44
II. TRANSGENDER AS FARCE.....	47
Literature Review .....	50
Analysis.....	56
Conclusion.....	104
III. TRANSGENDER AS KILLER SURPRISE.....	107
Literature Review .....	111
Analysis.....	120
Conclusion.....	160
IV. TRANSGENDER AS LIVED EXPERIENCE.....	162
Literature Review .....	166
Analysis.....	173
Conclusion.....	227

V. CONCLUSION .....	230
Theoretical and Methodological Implications.....	231
Suggestions for Improving Transgender Representations .....	245
Conclusion.....	257
NOTES .....	262
REFERENCES .....	272



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In an iconic scene from the film *Tootsie* (1982), Dustin Hoffman as Michael Dorsey walks down a crowded New York City street dressed for the first time as his transgender alter ego Dorothy Michaels. The audience has not seen Michael as Dorothy until this very moment; the last shot before the cut to this scene is of Michael sitting in his agent's office. How does the audience know how to react to this scene? How do we know to laugh rather than to cry, get angry, be afraid, feel sympathetic, or any of a number of other emotions? What can understanding how we respond to a scene like this tell us about the messages about transgender individuals sent through this and other transgender representations?

These are just a few of the questions I seek to answer in *Crossdressing Cinema*. Cinematic representations of transgender people are built on specific narrative conventions and visual codes. Through a poststructuralist textual analysis combined with a cultural studies approach to representation, I analyze the narrative conventions and visual codes used to construct transgender representations across 24 popular films grouped into three separate categories. Taking a broad view of transgender representations reveals that a distance exists between the transgender characters and audience members rooted in the lack of legitimacy attributed to transgender identities by heteronormative society. I also extend theoretical discussions about gender

---

This dissertation follows the style of *Women's Studies in Communication*.

representations through an exploration of three different gazes directed at transgender characters. I adopt these theoretical and methodological approaches in order to place transgender representations within the larger scholarship on representations of marginalized groups.

This project is significant because it seeks to contextualize representation within this particular contemporary moment in which we experience an increase in transgender visibility in popular film and at the same time, news media report an increase in violence directed at persons because of their gender and sexual identities (Broverman; Cole; Gast; Higgins; Lyons; Mukhopadhyay). A recent report on transgender discrimination by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that 63% of the 6,456 transgender participants had faced major forms of discrimination (8). Jaime Grant, Lisa Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody Herman, and Mara Keisling add:

It is part of social and legal convention in the United States to discriminate against, ridicule, and abuse transgender people within foundational institutions such as the family, schools, the workplace and health care settings, every day. Instead of recognizing that the moral failure lies in society's unwillingness to embrace different gender identities and expressions, society blames transgender and gender non-conforming people for bringing the discrimination and violence on themselves. (8)

Additionally, since 2000, 440 individuals around the world have been identified as being killed because they were transgender (St. Pierre). This is the milieu in which transgender representations are produced and consumed.

Legitimacy lies at the intersection between material reality and our symbolic world. Material reality often serves as the basis for representation while representation

can also have an impact on material reality. A lack of legitimacy attributed to the identities of members of marginalized groups results in representations that do not reflect the full range of the material realities of those groups. Richard Dyer argues that “how social groups are treated in cultural representations is part and parcel of how they are treated in life” (1). While exploring how transgender subjectivity is constructed through representation, the material reality of transgender embodiment should not be ignored. In terms of the connections between transgender representations and material bodies, Jodi Kauffman argues for a consideration of “a representation that at once deconstructs discourses of heteronormativity that confine transbodies, desires, and lives while simultaneously honor[ing] the individual, embodied human” (113). In an attempt to navigate this relationship, I am interested in analyzing how different categories of transgender representation send particular messages about transgender individuals within a particular social context of heteronormativity.

### **The Problem: Conceptions of Transgender Identity Communicated through Filmic Representations**

The impetus for this research comes from my personal experience of the impact of transgender representations on my developing transgender identity. Not only did I have to overcome the messages I received from film and other media as I struggled to understand who I am as a transgender woman but as I began to more openly express my transgender identity, I often encountered attitudes and opinions, both positive and negative, that seemed to be shaped more by popular film and media than by interactions with actual transgender individuals. For example, I am occasionally asked about what

led me to become a transgender person, such as a traumatic event in my past, implying that my identity is somehow the product of external motivations. With external motivations figuring prominently in transgender representations, particularly transgender farces, the decoding of these moments in film could be applied by audience members to the lives of transgender individuals. Given how transgender people might be influenced by filmic representations, I seek to understand how messages about transgender individuals and identities are being communicated through film.

This project seeks to extend previous research on transgender film by scholars including Rebecca Bell-Metereau, John Phillips, Marjorie Garber, and Joelle Ruby Ryan by examining how these films, taken together, can create particular representations of transgender identity and through those representations, communicate messages about what it means to be transgender. This project contributes to film studies by combining a cultural studies approach to representation with the analysis of popular films, to gender and sexuality studies by continuing the investigation of how popular film and other media influence our understanding of what it means to be differently gendered/sexed, and communication by developing the notion that films can be studied as a body of text, instead of as individual texts, to communicate messages to an audience. By examining transgender representations in film, this research expands our understanding of how marginalized groups are represented across a range of texts and the way a body of text can communicate particular ideas about a marginalized group.

## Research Questions

Four research questions guide this project:

- (1) What are the representations of transgender individuals in popular film?
- (2) How are visual codes used to construct transgender identity?
- (3) How are narrative conventions used to construct transgender identity?
- (4) How does an interpretive researcher who identifies as a transgender woman make sense of transgender representation?

My analysis of transgender representations in film is an interpretive analysis that integrates my lived experience as a transgender woman. I am not only interested in describing the types of representations that exist in popular film across different categories, I am also interested in describing how I make meaning from the representations that I analyze. It is important to remember that transgender people are also audience members. Through my own experiences as a transgender woman and my reading of the film texts, I seek to not only understand the images of transgender individuals created by the films for non-transgender audience members but also the self-images created for transgender audience members.

To accomplish this goal, I combine a scholar-critic approach grounded in theory with an activist-advocacy approach that argues for the legitimacy of transgender identities within a heteronormative social context. Arguing for the legitimacy of transgender identities structures my approach to transgender representations; legitimacy is the starting point for my analysis rather than separating real from false transgender identities. I approach the transgender identities of the characters as positions claimed

through lived experiences. All of the characters may not actively claim transgender identities, but their experiences in the films offer them some insight into the experiences of transgender individuals, though heteronormative pressures may prevent them from fully embracing these identities. Just as my own lived experiences shape my understanding of what it means to be transgender, the constructions of the characters in transgender representations are analyzed through this positional approach.

In analyzing the representation of transgender people, Marjorie Garber argues that “the tendency on the part of many critics has been to look *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser” and ultimately to “elide and erase – or to *appropriate* the transvestite for particular political and critical aims” (9). I see this project in conversation with other work on transgender representation in film by scholars (Bell-Metereau; J. Phillips; Ryan; Serano; Straayer) who take up Garber’s challenge. This project adds to this conversation by looking across films for the narrative conventions and visual codes that combine to form different categories of representation which have potential impacts on the lives of transgender people.

In this chapter, I start with a review of the theoretical foundations of this project in representation, gender theory, and film theory. This theoretical discussion is followed by a review of literature on analyses of transgender representations in film, which focuses on transgender representations in general; literature reviews of particular films can be found in their respective chapter. The literature review is followed by discussions of the methodology I employ in this project and of transgender representations within the

context of previous transgender performances. Finally, I end with a discussion of the chapter layout of this project.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

In this project, I use conceptual frameworks and theories of representation, gender theory, and film theory. These theories combine to shape my understanding of the ways transgender characters are constructed through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. In the following section, I address the ways these frameworks and theories guide this project.

#### **Representation**

Representation is first constitutive of the events that surround us (Hall “Work” 25-26; Webb 11). Representation does not create events, they do exist outside of their representation, but because events cannot signify on their own and must be “*made intelligible*” (Hall, “Culture” 343), our understanding of events happens through the frame of representation. Events are framed in a particular way and given a particular meaning depending on how they are represented. Annette Kuhn adds that “[a]ll representations are coded: they do not merely reflect a world outside the bounds of the text, but mediate external discourses, as it were rewriting and reconstructing them” (48). For example, if a transgender person is attacked and beaten, the way the event is represented shapes how it is understood by the society as a whole. If the representation focuses on the transgender individual’s presence in a gender segregated space, such as a restroom or a changing room, it is supporting the attack by arguing that the transgender individual is at fault for deviating from heteronormative standards for gendered

behavior. If, instead, the representation focuses on the transgender individual's attempt to eat dinner or purchase clothing in peace before suddenly being attacked, it is supporting the individual by arguing that she or he should be free to express her or his gender without the threat of violence. The event still occurred, but the way it is represented impacts our understanding of the event. Representation is constitutive because of the way it influences our understanding of events and individuals.

The constitutive nature of representation shapes the way I approach filmic representations of transgender individuals in this project. I argue that repeatedly representing transgender people as comical buffoons or deceitful liars not only impacts an audience's expectations of how transgender people should act in film but also expectations of the actions and motivations of transgender people in real life. This manner of representation could lead to transgender people being seen as worthy of ridicule or as untrustworthy individuals who are always hiding something.

Representations also provide scripts to guide our symbolic interactions. People who have little contact with transgender individuals often gain familiarity through film and other mass media texts that teach them how to treat and interact with transgender people. Furthermore, film and media texts provide scripts that transgender people also adopt and adapt. One of the first exposures I had to a transgender identity as a child was through films, specifically *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), which depicted transgender identity as the result of external motivations. I spent many years wishing and hoping for something external to happen to me, like winning a contest or finding a magic lamp, that would allow me to be the transgender woman that I knew I was, anything other than embracing



my identity and coming out to my family. It was only through recognizing the impact of representations in such films on my own understanding of transgender identity that I was able to fully express my identity as a transgender woman.

Beyond constituting our understanding and impressions of events and people, representation is also constraining (Heath, "Questions" 115). Representation orders events; it is impossible to perceive and understand everything so representation provides the impression of "coherence" and "unity" (115). No representation is ever completely accurate; something is always obscured to make the whole seem more intelligible. For example, a transgender woman choosing not to tell a potential romantic partner about her transgender identity on a first date is often offered as evidence of the deceitfulness of transgender people. This representation ignores the possibility that the woman chose to wait before coming out to her date in order to protect herself; she may have feared the possibility of a verbal or physical attack, itself a constraining representation of her date.

As an example of the constraining nature of representation in film, Julia Serano (35) and Kay Siebler (330) argue that the representation of transgender people in film and other media is constrained by its focus on feminine transgender women, such as Bree Osbourne's preference for wearing pink in *Transamerica* (2005). Serano argues that, based on representations in the media, "most people believe that all trans women are on a quest to make ourselves as pretty, pink, and passive as possible" (35). Siebler argues that media represent transgender people as variously "unbalanced freaks" or surgically or hormonally modifying their bodies to appear "'normal,' as happy, healthy and well-adjusted" (330). Siebler goes on to argue for moving beyond these two modes

of representation to include more queer representations of people who are comfortable identifying outside of the heteronormative, binary gender system (342). While I support the work of Serano and Siebler in critiquing the reinforcement of the sex/gender system through the representation of feminine transgender women, I hope through my own work to find a way of accomplishing this goal without risking alienating these women in the process.

The broad range of research about minority stereotypes, which includes transgender representations, provides another example of constraining representation. Communication scholars John Downing and Charles Husband argue that the term representation is “mostly used either to signal presence or absence of people of color from media, or constructive vs unconstructive portrayal” (43). The use of stereotypes, the belief that members of a group all exhibit certain positive or negative traits, is one of these unconstructive portrayals. Film historian Donald Bogle argues that the stereotypes of African Americans in film were meant “to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority” (4). Sociologist Herman Gray identifies three discursive practices that structure contemporary media representations of African Americans: “assimilationist (invisibility), pluralist (separate but equal), and multiculturalist (diversity)” (“Watching” 84). These three practices demonstrate the varying ways marginalized groups are represented in relation to the dominant group in a society. Discussions about racial representations in film and television are important to my research because they make clear that gender identity is just one of the many ways that individuals can be

represented; this project draws on the larger body of research on representations of marginalized groups.

Extending earlier discussions about minoritized representations, communication scholar Larry Gross argues that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people remain particularly vulnerable to stereotyping because as “self-identified” minorities, LGBT people may lack adequate information about their identities in their immediate social environment and are forced to rely more on mass media for information (12-17). The constraining nature of stereotypes limits the information available to individuals as they come to understand their identity. Gross, Gray, and Bogle point to the productive aspects of representation as well as the constraints by examining the ways stereotypes can limit how people see members of certain groups and affect how members of those groups see themselves.

Transgender representations are constitutive of transgender identity for both a general audience unfamiliar with transgender people and for a transgender audience working to understand their identities. They can also be constraining, revealing only certain aspects of transgender identity while ignoring others. A goal of this project is to identify the constitutive and constraining nature of transgender representations in film and the potential messages these representations communicate about transgender identities and individuals.

### *Difference*

Scholars exploring minority representations argue for images and stories that are as complex as our everyday lives. Damaging stereotypes present a homogeneous view

of a marginalized group. Black lesbian feminist scholar and activist Audre Lorde argues that we have all been programmed to respond to difference either by ignoring, copying, or destroying it (281). She argues that “our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality” (286). Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall distinguishes between difference that “makes a radical and unbridgeable separation” and difference which “is positional, conditional and conjectural” (“New Ethnicities” 162). A positional approach to difference resists essentializing the differences between individuals and groups and considers the contextual forces that lead to difference. For example, education policy trying to address low standardized test scores among minority students without considering the impact of socioeconomic status, class, and other factors would not be a positional approach to difference. In arguing for a retheorizing of difference, scholars like Lorde and Hall recognize representation as a tendency to present a consistent, homogenous whole. Only through an awareness of difference can the power that comes from marginalizing others be removed.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to Hall and Lorde, communication scholars Victoria DeFrancisco and Catherine Palczewski argue, in their study of gender and communication, that it is important to be aware of the differences in people’s gender identities while also identifying similarities in the binary categories of man and woman (21). Dismantling these binary oppositions is, according to feminist literary scholar Sneja Gunew, “facilitated by the proliferation of differences” (1). In his elaboration of a “new cultural politics of difference,” critical race scholar Cornel West describes the difference between this new politics of difference and previous criticism of marginalization as

“how and what constitutes difference, the weight and gravity it is given in representation” (19). Lest difference be viewed as somehow essential, scholar of African American literature Michael Awkward argues that “[l]ocation within a geography of difference” is not determined by essential characteristics but offers “strategies of racial, gendered, class, and sexual performance” that “can be accepted or rejected, in part or in full” (6). An analysis of transgender representations is helped by an awareness of the different experiences and circumstances of the characters in the films under study by making it clear that difference can be just as important and informative as similarity. Since this project focuses on the legitimacy of transgender identities, difference is addressed through the various experiences of being transgender for the characters in these films rather than arguing for different conceptions of what it means to be transgender. A character in a transgender farce whose adoption of a transgender identity is prompted by external circumstances and a character in a transgender drama who makes an active claim to a transgender identity represent different experiences of being transgender as analyzed in this project rather than separating the characters according to illegitimate and legitimate conceptions of transgender identity.

Herman Gray argues that in contemporary media, “the primary emphasis” is no longer on “integrative functions aimed at producing a coherent one-dimensional narrative of homogeneity” (“Cultural” 110). The focus instead is on “the management of difference through incorporation or even its regulation through recognition” (110). Transgender representations fit within Gray’s argument as part of the management of

difference; transgender characters are not incorporated into heteronormative systems of representation but these representations do present a variety of experiences of being transgender. Instead of a homogeneous narrative, Gray argues that “indeterminacy and diversity are the persistent social and cultural realities that structure and economically distinguish contemporary global media” (110). A space has been opened up in contemporary media, including film, for explorations of difference, and this project takes up difference by not viewing transgender as a homogeneous identity category.

Transgender identity is accepted as legitimate in this project but no one way of being transgender is necessarily privileged over any other, with criticism of the transgender characters focusing on their positions within heteronormative society rather than on their transgender identities. The selected films depict transgender persons across race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. Drawing from communication, queer, and cultural studies scholars, the project identifies ruptures across and within social categories, such as gender. These ruptures provide a fuller picture of the ways transgender people are represented in film.

### *Distance*

While a space for difference may exist in the contemporary media environment, audience members may still find representations of difference problematic, particularly representations of marginalized groups with whom the audience members have little or no direct personal contact. I argue that transgender representations produce distancing effects between the transgender characters and the audience because of this lack of ability to identify with the characters. Identification becomes tenuous when the

representation is so far removed from its referent, as literary theorist Edward Said argues in his landmark analysis of Western perceptions of the Orient.

The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as “the Orient.” (21)

Since representations themselves have no necessary connection to their subject, it is not surprising that audience members may not feel a connection with the representations.

Identification is the process by which audience members connect with characters on screen. Jonathan Cohen defines identification as “adopting the identity and perspective of a character,” and argues that identification is both “a process that consists of increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character” and, key to my analysis in this project, “a response to textual features that are intended to provoke identification” (251). While film theorist Christian Metz positions identification with characters as, at best, a tertiary identification for audience members behind identification with their own looks and identification with the camera (696-699), I adopt Cohen’s definition for this project as an entry point into understanding the distancing of transgender characters from audience members. I argue in this project that the narrative conventions and visual codes of the film texts support the distancing of the characters from the audience. This distancing effect is rooted in a lack of legitimacy ascribed to the transgender identities of the characters. The narrative conventions and visual codes of the films do not help

audience members look past the perceived differences between themselves and the transgender characters.

Is identification with the characters in transgender representations impossible?<sup>2</sup>

No. Many audience members may be able to identify with the characters and may even be outraged by the ways the characters are presented on screen. They may even feel that there is nothing problematic about the representations while still strongly identifying with the transgender characters. Distancing occurs when films are constructed in such a way that does not encourage an emotional connection between the characters and audience members. Analyzing the narrative conventions and visual codes helps to determine if the messages encoded into the film texts would help or hinder this connection. The messages encoded into the films are analyzed from an approach to representation as constitutive and constraining of our understanding of the lives of transgender individuals.

Distancing is the overarching message encoded into the representations of transgender characters in film. The narrative conventions and visual codes of each category of transgender representation work to support the distancing effects.

Distancing serves to structure my analysis in this project, with the results of my analysis in each chapter being tied back to the specific type of distancing (ridicule, fear, or pity) present in each category of representation and to the distancing effects as a whole. In order to focus on the specific type of distancing found in each category, I generally avoid extended discussions of instances of other types of distancing. This is not intended to give the impression that only examples of the identified form of distancing



can be found in each category. Nothing could be further from the truth! It is relatively easy to find examples of comedic characters being presented in fear-inducing ways or more frightening characters evoking feelings of sympathy. While such examples can be found and are discussed where they function as significant ruptures, I focus in this project on the most prominent form of distancing in each category in order to maintain the clear structure of my argument about the distancing effects of transgender representations. Understanding gender as positions taken within a heteronormative society helps us to understand how representations work to distance transgender characters from audience members.

### **Gender Theory**

My approach to gender in this project is rooted in the concept of positionality, which views an individual based on a range of identities in a particular context, while taking into account the material realities of the bodies of transgender characters. From this perspective, I am particularly critical of heteronormativity for privileging a particular approach to gender at the exclusion of all others. Finally, I use transgender theory to consider the place of transgender individuals in a heteronormative society.

#### *Positionality*

In order to understand gender in a way that keeps the importance of difference in mind, I view gender through the lens of positionality (Alcoff 349-355). Positionality is a theory of identity that focuses on the connections between people created through gender, class, race, and sexual orientation and is similar to standpoint in its focus on connections between marginalized individuals in a society. Gender identity is

understood as “relative to a constantly shifting context” (349). Positionality considers the intersectional identities of individuals across a range of identity variables (Crenshaw 1242-1245). Individuals can look for the qualities that unite them with others while keeping in mind the important differences between them as well. Positionality allows for a non-essentialist conception of gender that is not based on inherent qualities of an individual but on physical, social, and economic realities in their lives. For example, a transgender woman’s decision to dress femininely could be essentialized to all transgender women having a need to prove their femaleness through the way they dress, ignoring the external forces, such as workplace norms, and personal choices that make up a particular woman’s position. Positionality problematizes heteronormativity by resisting any identity claims based on essential biological characteristics.

Positionality is important for examining characters in popular film because it enables a consideration of the gender identities of the characters as positions taken during the events portrayed in the films instead of searching for clues to their essential gender identities. Positionality moves beyond searching for the true or real identity of a character and looks instead at the physical, social, and economic conditions that make up her or his position. A positional approach to gender accepts all of the elements that make up an individual’s identity at face value without searching for an essential element that underlies and explains everything. Many of the characters under examination would not identify as transgender but that does not mean being transgender does not make up part of their position at certain points in the narratives of the films in which they are featured. I adopt the umbrella definition of transgender in this project, defined by Susan

Stryker as “movement away from an initially assigned gender position” (19), which includes everything from temporary crossdressing to seeking permanent bodily change through hormone treatment and surgery. This umbrella definition is broad enough to encompass both self-identified transgender characters, such as Bree from *Transamerica* or Dil from *The Crying Game* (1992), to characters who are only engaging in transgender behavior to escape a temporary situation, such as Joe and Jerry from *Some Like it Hot* (1959) or Malcolm from *Big Momma’s House* (2000). Rather than imposing a transgender identity on the characters, I make use of a broad definition of transgender identity to allow for the analysis of characters that communicate important ideas of what it means to be transgender to both general and transgender audiences in spite of the fact that the characters never personally identify as transgender.

This attention to characters who do not actively claim transgender identities is an extension of positionality that considers the ways individuals are positioned by others. Positionality is mainly concerned with the variety of identities claimed by individuals, but not all of the identity positions an individual finds herself or himself in are ones that she or he actively claims. Instead, the individual is positioned in these identities as a result of her or his actions, personality, present circumstances, or a host of other factors. Even if an individual does not actively claim a position, this does not change the fact that she or he can communicate important messages about that identity position; while characters like Joe, Jerry, and Malcolm do not actively claim transgender identities, this does not mean their experiences have nothing to say about what it means to be transgender. Considering the identities individuals are positioned in as well as the ones

they actively claim extends positionality by recognizing that how others view an individual is often as important as how she or he views herself or himself.

I also extend the concept of positionality through its use as an approach to interpreting the actions of the transgender characters. Rather than focus on the inner, essential qualities of a character that help us to understand the motivations behind her or his behavior, positionality views behavior as non-essential and the product of an individual's gender, race, class, and sexual orientation within a particular social context. Positionality allows for a new perspective on character behavior in film that focuses more on shared meaning created within a specific context rather than trying to uncover the inner truth guiding a character's actions. The use of positionality as a framework for understanding character behavior offers a unique perspective to the study of film, and the use of the concept to analyze film also extends the concept of positionality.

While the focus of my research is the transgender identities presented by characters in popular film, my position as a transgender woman also plays an important role in my analysis. Having been aware of my identity as a transgender individual from a young age, I have never truly experienced the world in a non-transgender (cisgender) way. As I struggled to understand who I was as a transgender person and even disidentified with being transgender, I often turned to popular film and media for support and escape. My identity as a transgender woman gives me unique insight into the topic of transgender representations in film, but it may also lead me to critique the characters or situations in the films in ways that differ from the analysis made by a non-transgender scholar. Other aspects of my position as a White, American graduate student from a

middle-class background may impact my awareness of race, class, and culture-based issues affecting the positions of the characters. As I try to use the insights available to me as a transgender woman, I also seek to be aware of the possible limitations from other aspects of my position.

I define positionality as any identities an individual actively claims or into which she or he is positioned by others. These identities might last throughout a lifetime or may be the product of particular circumstances. An individual's position(s) is not the result of any inherent qualities but is the product of social acceptance or denial of the identity claims she or he makes or the social perception of the individual according to the position to which she or he is assigned. Therefore, when I refer to characters in this project as transgender or heteronormative (or according to any other identity category), I am not arguing that there are any qualities inherent in the characters that lead to their positions or that these positions are essentially opposed but that the characters are currently occupying these positions as a result of their active identity claims or social perceptions.

This approach to gender connects with my approach to characters as constructed, which I discuss later, by viewing the identities of the characters as socially constructed. Nothing about the characters is essentialized, even self-identification is simply an active claim that must be verified by others. The aim of this approach is to avoid setting up identities in binary oppositions. By always remaining vigilant of the shifting identity positions of individuals, positionality allows for a consideration of the characters as presented on screen without the need to determine essential qualities that shape their

identities and motivations. The approach to gender I use in this project also takes into account the material realities of the characters' bodies.

*Material realities of transgender bodies*

Positionality includes not only an individual's gender identity but also her or his material body; the claims to a gender spectrum made by transgender activists, scholars, and individuals are often problematized through reference to this material reality (e.g. Raymond 133-134; Nicki 154; Greer). In contrast, gender theorist Judith Butler points out that the acts of an individual(s) are constitutive of gender. Gender is constituted through the repeated acts of individuals, not any essentials of biology. While gender is constituted through these repeated acts, it "is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity" ("Performative Acts" 427). Heteronormativity regulates the accepted norms of gendered behavior, curtailing the potential freedom of gender.

Butler's formulation problematizes the claims of the dominant heterosexual constructions of real and legitimate expressions of gender. Even the choices available to individuals for performing gender are constrained from the beginning; the very assumption of gender "is *compelled* by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality" (Butler, "Bodies that Matter" 12). Julia Serano views the difficulty cisgender people have in understanding the need for transgender people to express their identities as stemming from the lack of awareness cisgender people have of their own gender identities (77-78). It is easy for cisgender people to view transgender identity as a choice or lifestyle because they are often unable to recognize their own gender identities or the ways these identities are constituted through repeated actions. As the constitutive

and constraining nature of representation demonstrates, when transgender people are presented as exceptions or aberrations from the naturalness of not being transgender, then the view of gender is constrained into only one of two options for non-transgender people and creates the view that this is the natural way things should be. Anything else is an exception.

A conception of gender as performative views the material body as socially constructed. Just as real events exist outside of their representations while also being shaped by them, a social constructionist view of the material body “means that our bodies are always shaped by the social world in which we are inescapably situated” (Salamon 76).

To claim that the body is socially constructed is not to claim that it is not real, that it is not made of flesh, or that its materiality is insignificant. To claim that sex is a social construct is not to claim that it is irrelevant, or invariant, or incapable of being embodied or reworked. To claim that our experiences of our sexed and gendered bodies are socially constructed is not to claim that our experiences are fictive, or inessential, or less important than our theorizing about sexed and gendered bodies. (Salamon 76)

Following Butler, feminist literary scholar Bernice Hausman calls attention to the fact that an individual’s sex is just as much a construction, constituted from information in the material world, as any other part of an individual’s identity (208). Based on the views of Salamon and Hausman on the constructedness of the sexed body, the material body should be seen as an important part of an individual’s position but not as an overriding force that disrupts any other positional claims that make up an individual’s identity. An individual’s transgender identity should not be denied simply as a result of the sex she or he was identified with at birth.

### *Heteronormativity*

In a clear contrast to positional claims about gender identity, heteronormativity seeks to punish anyone who deviates from the binary gender norm. Heteronormativity refers to the normalizing of heterosexuality as the assumed, “default” status of individuals (Warner 16).<sup>3</sup> Stevi Jackson argues that heteronormativity “pivots on the privileging of heterosexuality through its normalization” and “can only be understood through attention to what it governs, gender and sexuality, and how each of these is interwoven with the institutionalization, meaning and practice of heterosexuality” (109-110). While this gender system has negative effects for everyone because it limits how we perform, interact with, and express our identities, transgender activist Kate Bornstein argues that it is still transgender individuals who receive the fullest brunt of negative attention (241).

In this project, I approach heteronormativity as a system. Combined with other dominant systems in society, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and whiteness, heteronormativity shapes our experience of the social world that surrounds us. Gender is a primary concern of heteronormativity because heteronormativity’s exclusive promotion of heterosexuality requires a clearly defined gender binary. Transgender identity as a system, not necessarily transgender individuals themselves, is troubling to heteronormativity through its problematizing of the binary gender system. Heteronormativity as a system seeks to marginalize and repress transgender individuals because of the perceived threat to heteronormativity posed by transgender identity.



Since heteronormativity functions as a system, all individuals exist within it and have their identity expressions shaped by it, even transgender individuals. Individuals support heteronormativity to varying degrees through their actions. Transgender individuals may, actively or unconsciously, support heteronormativity. Likewise, heterosexual, cisgender individuals may actively work against heteronormativity. Because heteronormativity is a system, individual actions may variously support or contest heteronormativity. Gender and transgender theory reveal the ways that transgender people are represented as deviant in the view of gender constructed through the system of heteronormativity. Understanding how and why transgender identity is seen as subordinate is an important part of my analysis of the ways characters in film resist and embrace a heteronormative identity.

*Transgender identity in a heteronormative society*

Discussions of transgender identity and the material body within a heteronormative society often lead to a consideration of the problems created by the binary sex/gender system (Rubin 28). Transgender identity is both used and challenged to dismantle the binary gender system. In her analysis of the ways transgender is defined in both the transgender and popular press, sociologist Laurel Westbrook found that transgender people seek to expand the possibilities of gender expression without necessarily destroying the concept of gender entirely (50-51). Transgender people are trying to expand “the number of acceptable ways of being gendered” (51), rather than doing away with the idea of gender itself. Expanding the possibilities usually takes the form of viewing gender as a continuum or spectrum rather than as two fixed and distinct

categories. I argue that this view of gender has already begun the process of dismantling the binary gender system by opening it up to a wider range of possible expressions rather than expecting every individual to fit in one, and only one, of two categories. This view of gender embraces the umbrella concept I discussed earlier that allows for a range of positions rather than searching for essential distinctions between groups.

Society remains fascinated with trying to fit transgender individuals into one of the two binary gender categories or, as Gordene MacKenzie puts it, reducing “individual behavior to penises and vaginas” (13). Because the genitals of an individual are supposed to reveal aspects of their character or behavior, transgender individuals will continue to be reduced to the presence or absence of particular organs. While genital-defined categories remain important to discussions of gender in our society, many personal transgender narratives cannot be reduced to positions on polar ends of a continuum. “Terms like journey, path, crossing, passage, returning, becoming, and outing are reiterated tropes in the autobiographical accounts of sex change” (Gherovici 36). Narratives surrounding transgender identity focus on the process of becoming, not necessarily on an end goal. Transgender theorist and artist Sandy Stone challenges transgender people to embrace what she terms the intertextual nature of their identities.

[T]he genre of visible transsexuals must grow by recruiting members from the class of invisible ones, from those who have disappeared into their “plausible histories.” The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that *constitutes* success, is to “pass.” Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a “natural” member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture. One and the same with passing is effacement of the prior gender role, or the construction of a plausible history. Considering that most transsexuals choose reassignment in their third or fourth decade, this means erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience. It is my contention that this process, in which both the transsexual and the medicolegal/psychological

establishment are complicit, forecloses the possibility of a life grounded in the *intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body. (231)

As Julia Serano notes (36-37), much of the attention directed toward transgender women in particular is devoted to their ability or inability to live up to traditional notions of femininity. Stone argues that to accomplish this, a transgender person must sacrifice a significant portion of her or his personal life history. She seeks to change the discussion surrounding transgender identity by removing the stigma attached to the gender history of the individual. By refusing to hide the realities of their gender history, the power would be removed from those who would use gender history to shame transgender people into denying who they are. The way the films in this study deal with this issue reveals much about how they represent transgender identity. The characters in the transgender dramas I discuss in Chapter 4 come closest to the *intertextual* possibilities discussed by Stone. If transgender identity was actively claimed in transgender farces (Chapter 2) and thrillers (Chapter 3) rather than kept hidden, the entire dynamics of the representations would change from the humor and shock drawn from the revelation of a character's transgender identity to considerations of the place of that character's transgender identity within the larger heteronormative society. Just as gender theory assists individuals in understanding the ways gender is constructed in a heteronormative society through their gender identities and material bodies, film theory assists audiences in making meaning from the information presented on screen.

## Film Theory

Film theory guides my analysis of the narrative conventions and visual codes used in transgender representations and serves as an approach that connects an understanding of representation as constitutive with an understanding of how audience members make meaning from the messages encoded in films. Cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner argues that “[f]ilm is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself” (3). Representation in film helps us understand how our society views particular groups of people. “The film’s meaning is not simply a property of its particular arrangement of elements; its meaning is produced in relation to an audience, not independently” (144). Coupling film theory with textual analysis, I describe how narrative conventions and visual codes encode messages into films to be decoded by audience members.

In this project, I analyze transgender representations in film as constructed meanings that are encoded into the texts to be decoded by audience members. Stuart Hall defines encoding as “selecting the codes which assign meaning to events” while decoding assigns meaning to the message that may or may not agree with the intended meaning that was encoded into the message (“Culture” 343-344). In contrast, David Bordwell argues that meaning in film is made by the audience through the “*construction* of meaning out of textual cues . . . The perceiver is not a passive receiver of data but an active mobilizer of structures and processes (either ‘hard-wired’ or learned) which enable her to search for information relevant to the task and data at hand” (“Making Meaning” 3). Hall and Bordwell differ in their locations of meaning in film. Hall

argues that encoding and decoding happen parallel to and independent of each other while Bordwell places meaning in the film text to be uncovered by audience members using textual cues. From an encoding/decoding perspective, however, meaning is created by audience members from the information available in the film text but may differ greatly from the meaning encoded into the text by the director or performers. The meaning decoded by the audience from the information available to them is not inferior to the “preferred reading” encoded into a text (Hall, “Culture” 344). Meaning, in this view, is a dialogue between audience member and text; the audience member brings certain cultural knowledge to the experience of the text and makes use of specific material within the text to construct a new meaning. Using Hall’s encoding/decoding model allows for the analysis of texts for certain messages regarding transgender representations while recognizing that audience members’ decodings may differ greatly from my own decoding of those messages.

Many film theorists (Braudy 35; Thompson 8-11; Bordwell “Poetics” 63-65) discuss the constructed nature of film reality and viewing. While audiences decode certain messages from material presented in a film, film also guides the construction of meaning in particular ways. Laura Mulvey’s concept of the gaze addresses the ways film guides the audience to look at characters in particular ways. Mulvey argues that there are two ways of looking at women in film: voyeurism and fetishism. The male character controls the gaze and either gains pleasure from the act of looking or from the object being looked at. Film viewing in itself is often equated with voyeurism; fetishistic looking often involves the reduction of female characters to individual body

parts (“Visual” 8-14). Mulvey is not making an absolute claim for how audiences view films, but her arguments about the ways films are constructed to privilege certain viewing positions is useful to my project.

Despite criticism of the gaze (Silverman 265-266; Modleski 723-724; Kaplan 312), Mulvey is mainly concerned with “the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the ‘masculinsation’ of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live moviegoer” (“Afterthoughts” 29). Adding another layer to our understanding of the way the gaze functions, J. Jack Halberstam develops the concept of the “transgender gaze” (“Transgender Gaze” 294). Halberstam argues that the transgender gaze works by either forcing the audience to “rewind” the narrative of the film to make sense of the newly revealed transgender identity of a character, by allowing the audience to “look *with* the transgender character,” or by constructing a gaze that does not directly reference either the male or female gazes (“In a Queer Time” 78-79). Halberstam further develops Mulvey’s concept of the gaze by taking into a more developed account those characters and audience members who do not fit easily into the categories of male and female.

I extend the discussions of the gaze by Mulvey and Halberstam by identifying three transgender gazes: trans-misogynistic, transphobic, and trans-pathetic. Trans-misogyny is “[w]hen a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity” (Serano 14). An example of the trans-misogynistic gaze is the shot focusing Joe and Jerry’s legs as they walk along the train platform dressed as women for the first time in *Some Like it*

*Hot*. Transphobia is “an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms” (12). Transgender activist and legal scholar Dean Spade argues that transphobia functions through three forms of power: situating the individual within a perpetrator/victim relationship, disciplining the individual according to societal norms of behavior, and exclusion or inclusion from broad population management programs designed to benefit society (102-115). It is primarily perpetrator/victim and disciplinary power at work in the transphobic gaze; an example of the transphobic gaze would be the image of Norman Bates dressed as Mother with his knife raised high above his head in the fruit cellar of their house toward the end of *Psycho*. A trans-pathetic gaze is one that directs the audience to feel sympathy for the transgender characters for all of the effort they put into deviating from heteronormative standards; an example of the trans-pathetic gaze is the headless image of Bree as she gets dressed at the beginning of *Transamerica*.

The transgender gaze serves as a structuring element in this project because it is important to understand how transgender characters are being looked at and how they are looking at others. The approach to the gaze I argue for in this section marks a departure from literature on the gaze from thinking of the gaze as possessed by a certain individual, the male gaze, for example, as possessed primarily by men, to the gaze as the perspective through which a character is viewed; a transphobic gaze, for example, is a gaze that presents characters in a transphobic manner rather than a gaze that is adopted by transphobic individuals. This new approach to the gaze focuses more on the ways the

characters are presented visually than on understanding the individuals who are viewing the characters.

I do not intend for distance and the three transgender gazes to appear to be a one-to-one match, with the trans-misogynistic gaze conveniently appearing in transgender farces and so on. In order to accomplish the larger goal of this project in examining the ways transgender characters are distanced in filmic representations, I necessarily focus on the primary gaze in each category, but this does not mean that there is only one gaze present in the films. For example, the films *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Big Momma's House* feature scenes of the disguises of the main characters being revealed when their latex masks begin peeling off of their faces. These scenes might rightfully be considered examples of the transphobic gaze, with Daniel's daughter Natalie in *Mrs. Doubtfire* bursting into tears at the sight of her father's face peering out from beneath the face of her nanny, but that does not change the fact that the primary gaze in these films and other transgender farces is trans-misogynistic. In order to maintain the clarity of my argument, I avoid lengthy discussions of these deviations. Further consideration of these ruptures is an important project for future research.

In this overview of the theoretical framework guiding this project, I have discussed the theories I use and my extensions of them. I approach representation as constitutive and constraining, and I extend it by arguing for distancing effects between the transgender characters and the audience. Positionality guides my approach to gender by arguing that gender identity is not biologically essential but based on the social location of an individual in terms of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and a number



of other relevant identities. I add to the concept by arguing that individuals can be positioned by others, opening up a space to analyze characters who do not actively claim a transgender identity. Finally, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model guides my approach to meaning making by audience members, and the gaze, based on the work of Laura Mulvey and J. Jack Halberstam, guides my understanding of the ways the audience's understanding of the visual codes can be directed through the use of certain compositional techniques in film. I extend conceptualizations of the gaze by arguing for three transgender gazes being employed in transgender representations: trans-misogynistic, transphobic, and trans-pathetic. This theoretical framework guides my general approach to transgender representations in film. This project also builds on previous scholarly literature on transgender representations.

### **Literature Review**

Judith Butler argues that many transgender films deflect the homosexual possibilities in their narratives by "produc[ing] and contain[ing] the homosexual excess of any given drag performance" ("Bodies that Matter" 126). The films Butler analyzes, primarily transgender comedies, privilege a heteronormative gender identity and thus would work to avoid any implications of non-heteronormative gender identities or sexual orientations. Marjorie Garber argues that transgender representations in film generally consists of "progress narratives" in which individuals choose to crossdress in order to avoid or escape economic or other external circumstances (69-70). This type of representation for Chris Straayer "offers spectators a momentary, vicarious trespassing of society's accepted boundaries of gender and sexual behavior" while remaining

confident “in the orderly demarcations reconstituted by the films’ endings” (42-43). Rebecca Bell-Metereau supports Straayer’s analysis by arguing that the films “allow us to enter into forbidden worlds of the imagination” (237). The narrative convention of external factors leading to the temporary adoption of a transgender identity is primarily seen in transgender farces, with the characters in transgender dramas actively claiming their transgender identities and the transgender identities of characters in transgender thrillers being located in an internal instability. As the category of transgender representations most obviously committed to the maintenance of heteronormative standards, it is not surprising that transgender farces position transgender identity as temporary.

John Phillips supports Garber’s idea of transgender representations as “progress narratives” but argues that the result of these narratives is crossdressing as a “necessary deception” (53). Whether it is heteronormative characters who only take up transgender identities under extreme circumstances or characters who actively claim a transgender identity withholding that identity from others, the actions of the characters are necessary to exist in a heteronormative society. Julia Serano argues that variations of this form of deception are at the root of her two main archetypes of transgender representation: the pathetic and deceptive transsexual (36). Pathetic transsexuals are unable to deceive others about their gender identity, even though they may want to, while deceptive transsexuals are not seen as successful in passing but rather as “‘fake’ women, and their ‘secret’ trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of ‘truth’” (37). In this configuration, transgender characters are either mocked for failing to live up to

heteronormative standards of appearance or punished for their success at meeting those standards. Annette Kuhn argues that transgender representations “go no further than to hint at a possibility that is ultimately closed off in the revelation of the body beneath the clothes” (56-57). For Kuhn, any opportunity the films may have at subverting heteronormative standards is undermined through reference to an essentialized gender identity. I am interested in going a step beyond Kuhn to understand why heteronormativity needs to present the characters in an essentialized manner.

Understanding the need to close off the transgender identities of the characters, particularly through visual references to their genitals, can tell us much about the ways heteronormativity works to police its own borders of gender identity and expression.

Finally, Joelle Ryan argues that, despite recent shifts in representation, “the *majority* of images of trans people repeatedly downplays the social, cultural and political implications of trans people’s lives and focus instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal details” (18). Transgender representations generally do not consider the implications of the narratives beyond the humor or shock decoded by heteronormative audiences. The possibility that these representations could impact the lives of transgender individuals is usually not considered.

Much of the scholarly work on transgender representations has been done by scholars in English, film studies, women’s and gender studies, and cultural studies. Consideration of transgender representations is just beginning to be developed in the field of communication. Along with the readings of individual films to be discussed in their respective chapters, Alex Evans analyzes *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the*

*Desert* (1994) and *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) within the context of the reception of Hollywood films by gay audiences (41-49), Jennifer Reed analyzes the transition of a character on the TV series *The L Word* (2004-2009) (176-178), and Brenda Cooper and Edward Pease analyze the representation of a transsexual woman on the TV series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) (310-311). While scholarly attention given to transgender representations in communication may currently be rather low, the emphasis on messages that is one of the hallmarks of the field brings a new perspective to the subject of transgender representations in film and media.

The scholarly literature on transgender representations focuses on the failures of these representations to challenge heteronormativity, the motivations behind the transgender identities of the characters, and the positioning of transgender identity as deceptive. I place this project in conversation with this body of literature as I consider each of these issues in turn in my analysis. I extend this literature by analyzing groups of films, which can reveal information about the social perception of transgender individuals not available in a close analysis of individual texts. The methodology I use to analyze the film texts is discussed in the next section.

### **Methodology**

In this qualitative research study, I conduct readings of the narrative conventions and visual codes of 24 films featuring representations of transgender characters. The films selected for analysis serve as a representative sample of the three preliminary types of transgender representations (farces, thrillers, and dramas) I have identified. Literary historian Franco Moretti calls the analysis of groups of texts “distant reading,” which he

argues constitutes “*a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection” (1). While I do not engage in the analysis of hundreds, if not thousands, of texts as Moretti does, I agree with his argument that taking a wider view of a group of texts can reveal information about the texts not available through the detailed analysis of individual works. The detailed reading of individual texts is still a highly valuable form of analysis, but it is not the goal of the current project.

Textual analysis through distant reading is not the only method available for examining the topic of transgender representations in film. Content analysis would allow for a numerical understanding of the instances of certain visual codes and narrative conventions that make up transgender representations. Qualitative interviews or surveys could be conducted with audience members to determine the range of different interpretations of the representations of transgender people in film and the reception these representations receive. While these methods deal with important aspects of the issue of transgender representations, textual analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how the visual codes and narrative conventions work together to construct transgender representations that goes beyond just the number of instances of these elements or the reception of these elements by individual audience members. Textual analysis best addresses the issue of messages about transgender people created through filmic representations by assisting me in recognizing the messages encoded into the texts and the possible ways those messages could be decoded.

To analyze the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films under study, I use an approach to textual analysis guided by the work of Alan McKee. McKee’s

poststructuralist approach to textual analysis “seeks to understand the ways in which . . . forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal” (17). Instead of arguing for the researcher’s superior skill at reading a text (Hermes 86), poststructuralist textual analysis considers the texts and their reception within specific social contexts.

In this analysis, I classify transgender characters as characters who engage in extended dressing and/or living as a member of the gender they were not assigned at birth, regardless of whether the characters would self-identify as transgender. Narrative conventions consist of the unfolding of story elements relative to similar film texts, including everything from significant plot events to the dialogue and interactions between characters. Examples of narrative conventions include a character deciding to crossdress in order to win a school contest, a character bloodily getting revenge on her earlier attackers, or a character taking a classmate’s place in a school play in order to kiss the boy she likes.

Visual codes are divided among the three gazes and consist primarily of *mise-en-scène*. I am concerned with what the audience sees on screen and how the characters are presented, including costuming, facial expressions, and body movements. Reference to camera movements, such as a slow tilt up a character’s body from feet to head, transitions, such as cuts between scenes, and camera positioning, such as an overhead shot of a couple in bed together, are used when necessary to understand how the characters are visually presented to the audience. The focus of my analysis of visual codes is on the information presented on screen rather than on the ways the camera is

manipulated to capture that information. Narrative is discussed when necessary to place the visual information in context. Ruptures of the narrative conventions and visual codes consist of any deviance from the standard pattern in a group of similar films.

References to the audience in this project are directed to an implied audience that I evoke for stylistic purposes. Lacking extensive data on the audiences for these films, I can do nothing more than speculate on the decodings of the films under analysis by individual audience members. Janet Staiger argues that the “more [she] stud[ies] spectators, the more perverse [she] find[s] them to operate, relative to what academics claim are the real or appropriate moviegoing behaviors” (24). I try to keep Staiger’s observations in mind in my analysis of the possible decodings of particular scenes, though I may fall short of the goal of always keeping the diversity of audience interpretations in mind. Possible decodings are offered as a way of explanation but should not be interpreted as offering explanations of how individual audience members have or will interpret these films.

Finally, a word on character. Roberta Pearson argues that confusion exists for many readers and audience members between characters as “semiotic constructs” and as “real-seeming human beings” (40). This slippage occurs because writers and directors “model their characters on their culture’s conceptions of people, making them person-like” (41). Trying to determine the underlying motivations of a character’s actions is futile since the characters are always constructed. “[I]n practice, actions and psychological traits are two sides of the same character; traits motivate actions and actions connote traits” (41). Since the characters in transgender representations are the

primary focus of this project, I use Pearson's view of characters as constructed to understand the ways narrative conventions and visual codes work to build the characters rather than viewing them as motivated by interests and desires independent of the films.

Textual analysis provides an interpretive approach to understanding the meaning making process guiding the interpretation of transgender representations. Textual analysis is useful to the interdisciplinary fields of communication, cultural studies, and film studies by showing how individual elements of a text can work together to communicate ideas about a marginalized group to a wide audience. Recognizing the way narrative conventions and visual codes work together furthers our understanding of how media texts construct representations of marginalized groups. In the next section, I place transgender representations in film within the larger historical context of transgender performance.

### **Transgender Representations in Context**

While conceptions of gender can be as constructed as any representation, performance in film functions at a higher level of construction. The history of transgender performance serves as a foundational context for the performances seen in film. Transgender performance can be characterized as the cross-cultural theatrical tradition of performers appearing in roles different from the sex they were assigned at birth (Ferris 9-14). In any analysis of transgender representations in film, it is important to recognize that transgender performance is not new or particular to film but happens within the context of male and female impersonation and cross-gender theatrical performance. John Phillips (32-35) and Kirk Ormand (1), for example, date the history



of transgender performance back to the myths and plays of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Many historians trace transgender performance back to the Shakespearean theatre and other theatrical traditions, such as kabuki. Theatre historian Jean Howard argues that the performance of female roles by male actors was part of larger gender and class tensions and an anti-theatricality movement in Renaissance England. In a society where what people were allowed to wear signaled their social standing and gender, theatrical performers were often accused of deceitfulness for daring to dress above their station or as a gender different from their own (435). Julia Serano (36-38) and John Phillips (52-56) argue that this charge of deceitfulness is also often leveled against transgender performance in contemporary film.

In his history of female impersonation, Roger Baker distinguishes between two forms of impersonation: “real” and “false” disguise (14-15). Real disguise is when the male actor portraying a woman is thought to be a woman by the audience and the other actors on stage while false disguise is when there is no attempt to hide the gender of the performer. For Baker’s purposes, “only ‘real disguise’ can properly be called ‘female impersonation’” which “disappeared from the English stage in the late seventeenth century when actresses were finally accepted on the boards” (15). It is important to keep in mind that Baker is solely discussing theatrical performance before extending his arguments about false disguise to the embodied identities of transgender individuals, but a message of quality of performance seems implicit in Baker’s statement: the “disciplined and antique art” (15) of true female impersonation is not achievable anymore and disappeared with the rise of the modern concept of drag, which Laurence

Senelick dates to the 1860s (85-86). Discussions of drag – disguise, deceit, and impersonation – connect transgender representations with historical and contemporary understandings of transgender performance.

Although Baker and others identify the constructed nature of gender performance, an unaddressed issue in Baker's distinction between real and false disguise is that audiences must recognize the performer as male for the performance to be seen as female impersonation. Even in the Shakespearean theater that Baker deems superior to modern drag, audiences must have had some knowledge that the performer was male. Crossdressing on the Renaissance stage functions for Tracey Sedinger as a "failure of representation" in which there is a breakdown between what the audience sees when looking at the crossdressed performer and their perception of the actual sex/gender of the performer (64). The performance of the female role and the male sex of the performer cannot be separated. In kabuki, Katherine Mezur argues that the male "body beneath" the kimono is an essential aspect of *onnagata* (female impersonator) performance and is inseparable for spectators from the role being played (8-9). Transgender performance throughout history has conflated issues of the perceived gender of the role and the perceived gender of the performer. As transgender identity continues to become more visible, it will no longer be enough to try to distinguish a performer's real identity, defined according to biological sex, from the gender they are performing.

Modern transgender performance is most widely known through drag. Feminist scholars Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp define drag queens as "gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women's bodies" ("Chicks with Dicks")

115). This definition distinguishes drag as a specific subset of transgender performance, even though not all drag queens would identify as transgender. Transgender performance includes drag but not all such performance is specifically drag, an important distinction to keep in mind moving forward in this project. Rupp and Taylor trace the origins of modern drag to the “all-male school theatrical, the circus, and minstrel shows” of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries (“Drag Queens” 182).

In the same way that transgender performance was a well known aspect of the stage, transgender performance was also not unusual during the early days of film. The silent film era allowed for positive explorations of crossdressing because of “the emphasis on purely visual entertainment, the relative lack of censorship, and the ludic quality of a newborn art form” (Bell-Metereau 25). The trend toward self-censorship in the film industry, in order to prevent governmental regulation, was codified in the Production Code of 1934 and to avoid any hint of sexual perversion, “female impersonators who were young, convincing, or who obviously relished such imitations became increasingly rare” (39).

Transgender performance in the theater and early days of cinema serves as a reminder of the importance of context. While occasionally discussing films of the silent and early studio eras, this project mainly focuses on fictional, narrative films since 1950. Films from a wide range of genres and a number of different countries are also included. The focus of this project is mainly on male-to-female transgender performance, but female-to-male performance will be covered to a small degree as well. Victoria Flanagan argues that male-to-female and female-to-male transgender performances mean different

things in our society. Female-to-male performances “playfully expos[e] the redundancies of two polarized gender identities” (23) while male-to-female performances prefer “to use it as a means through which to reinforce oppositional gender relations” (134). These general observations about the functions of transgender performance are kept in mind during my analysis of the films under study.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed my approach to the textual analysis of transgender representations in film, addressed concerns about textual analysis as a method for studying representations, and pointed to the ways theories of representation, gender, and film inform my analysis of transgender representations in 24 popular films. Drawing from Stuart Hall’s approach to representation, Linda Alcoff’s concept of positionality, and Laura Mulvey’s concept of the gaze, this project analyzes how representations of transgender people in popular film are constructed through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. This research furthers our understanding of how similar visual and narrative elements can be used across a number of films to communicate particular messages about transgender individuals. By examining transgender representations in film, this research contributes to our understanding of how visual codes and narrative conventions can work together to construct representations of marginalized groups.

In Chapter 2, I examine transgender representations as a source of humor. These films generally involve some form of external motivation that leads to the main characters crossdressing or adopting a transgender identity. Transgender individuals are

seen as figures to be laughed at in these films. Visually, the characters are subject to a trans-misogynistic gaze. Films analyzed in this chapter include *The All-American Co-Ed* (1941), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), *Just One of the Guys* (1985), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Big Momma's House* (2000), *100 Girls* (2000), and *Sorority Boys* (2002).

Chapter 3 focuses on characters whose transgender identities disrupt the normal social environment of those around them. The transgender characters are portrayed as unstable killers, and their transgender identities are a surprise to either the other characters in the film, the audience, or both. A transphobic gaze is used to visually position the characters in these films as objects of fear and disgust. Films analyzed include *Psycho* (1960), *Myra Breckenridge* (1970), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), *The Crying Game* (1992), *The Last Seduction* (1994), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), *Peacock* (2010), and *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* (2010).

The films in Chapter 4 deal with issues of representation that show transgender identity as lived and embodied. In these films, the characters make active claims to transgender identities and defend those claims against constraints from heteronormativity. The trans-pathetic gaze positions these characters as objects of sympathy for all the difficulties they endure in their attempts to live their lives as the genders with which they identify. Films in this chapter include *Different for Girls* (1996), *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), *Transamerica* (2005), and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005).

Finally, Chapter 5 considers the theoretical and methodological contributions of this project. I then make three suggestions for how to improve transgender representations based on my findings. These suggestions are intended to be the beginning of a conversation rather than the last word on the subject.

This project contributes to scholarship on representation and transgender identity by taking an interdisciplinary approach to examine filmic representations of transgender individuals through a combination of theories in cultural studies, film studies, and gender and sexuality studies. I also argue in this project that visual codes and narrative conventions can function across a body of texts, rather than in just individual texts, to communicate messages about marginalized groups. On a more practical side, this research helps audiences be more aware of how the ways certain groups are perceived can be impacted through the viewing of a number of texts. Through this project, I hope to help audiences be more critical of the ways members of their own or other groups are represented in film and other media.

## CHAPTER II

### TRANSGENDER AS FARCE

Comedy is the most popular and well known form of representation of transgender individuals in film. Films like *Some Like It Hot*, *Tootsie*, and *Victor/Victoria* have not only become award-winning cinema classics but have also been successful at the box office. *Some Like It Hot* grossed \$25 million and won one Oscar out of six nominations, *Tootsie* grossed \$117 million and won one Oscar out of ten nominations, and *Victor/Victoria* grossed \$28 million and won one Oscar out of seven nominations. Even a critically panned film like *Big Momma's House* grossed \$117 million and spawned two sequels. Hollywood rakes in money as audiences laugh at images of a man in a dress or a woman wearing a tuxedo.

While these films have been successful, transgender farces use that successful humor to distance the transgender characters as objects of ridicule. John Phillips argues that crossdressing in film represents the needs of comedy and society to have a subject to ridicule (51-52). He dismisses any transgressive readings of these films, *Some Like It Hot* in particular, because the effect of comedy is to not take the actions of the characters seriously (58-59). "Comedy thus helps to ridicule and hence domesticate a transvestism that might otherwise prove threatening" (81). The domestication of transgender identity is accomplished through not only the ridiculing of the transgender identities of the characters but also through the privileging of their heteronormative identities. The films construct the heteronormative identities of the characters as the ones the audience should identify with while their transgender identities are the subjects of laughter.

Humor has clear rhetorical functions in making arguments about how the audience should respond to the characters, and an aspect of the humor in these comedies is farce. Mark Graves and F. Bruce Engel highlight the major elements of farce. “In farce, humor often results from mistaken identity, disguise, and other improbable situations” (30). The implied wackiness of farce hides a specific constraining representation: the actions of the characters are never taken seriously because of the lighthearted tone of farce. The separation created through the lack of seriousness attributed to the actions of the characters positions the transgender characters as the objects of the humor rather than as active participants in the humor. As Albert Bermel argues, in farce, “we laugh *at* the characters, never with them” (54).

Laughing at or with someone implies a particular relationship between the audience and the characters. John Meyer identifies four potential effects of humor based on that relationship: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation (317-318). Humor works through the audience recognizing similarities with the characters, encountering new situations through the characters’ experiences, disciplining the characters for violating society’s norms, or ridiculing the characters for diverging from the dominant society. Whether humor comes from similarity or difference, it is ultimately used to reinforce conformity to social norms (327-328). The humor in transgender farces is usually the result of the enforcement and differentiation effects; audience members laugh because they are happy to see a character facing difficulty while crossdressed or because the experiences of the characters while crossdressed are so distant from audience members’ own lives that mocking the characters is acceptable.



Humor based in difference is often used to assuage audience fears; what is feared “must be made fun of to exorcise the fear,” with laughter providing a way of “asserting power over terrible threats” (Douglas 65).

The humor in transgender farces is, of course, not solely derived from the transgender identities of the characters. Audience members may laugh at Tony Curtis’ impression of Cary Grant in *Some Like It Hot* or the bumbling private detective’s hand being smashed by a door while he tries to spy on Victoria in *Victor/Victoria*. Even humor involving transgender characters is not always the result of their transgender identities; Robin Williams’ fake breasts catching on fire in *Mrs. Doubtfire* comes from a slapstick tradition the actor is well known for rather than functioning as a specific comment on transgender women’s bodies. The goal of this chapter is not to argue that all of the humor in transgender farces comes from the transgender identities of the characters but to argue that the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes supports a representation of the transgender characters as objects of ridicule.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways transgender farces use specific narrative conventions and visual codes to communicate specific messages about transgender individuals. I begin with a review of scholarly literature on representations in transgender farces. I then analyze the following films: *The All-American Co-Ed* (1941),<sup>1</sup> *Some Like it Hot* (1959),<sup>2</sup> *Tootsie* (1982),<sup>3</sup> *Victor/Victoria* (1982),<sup>4</sup> *Just One of the Guys* (1985),<sup>5</sup> *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993),<sup>6</sup> *Big Momma’s House* (2000),<sup>7</sup> *100 Girls* (2000),<sup>8</sup> and *Sorority Boys* (2002).<sup>9</sup> The films’ narrative conventions (a crisis requiring crossdressing, challenges to and reassertion of heteronormativity, heteronormative rivals, and lessons

learned) and the visual codes of the trans-misogynistic gaze (a successful transformation, the object and possessor of the gaze, and the big reveal) distance the transgender characters from the audience by privileging the heteronormative identities of the characters, thus opening up their transgender identities to ridicule. The scholarly literature on transgender farces also focuses on the different ways the films support and create spaces for heteronormativity.

### **Literature Review**

Feminist critiques of transgender comedies focus on the way the films reinforce heteronormativity. Judith Butler singles out *Victor/Victoria*, *Tootsie*, and *Some Like It Hot* as examples of “forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself” (“Bodies” 126). Transgender comedies “are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness” (126). Audience members must continue to differentiate themselves, to use Meyers’ term, in order to maintain clear heteronormative gender identities. These films assist in the work of maintaining a heteronormative gender identity by providing clear examples of individuals who privilege their own heteronormative gender identities over any alternatives.

Scholars including Patricia Hill Collins and Susan Douglas rightfully point out that the privileging of heteronormativity in these films is often constructed at the expense of women, particularly African American women. Collins argues that the drag performances of actors like Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry contribute to negative images of African-American women (125), and Douglas adds that the power

of “the overweight, jive-talkin’, verbally aggressive black matriarch” is “way scary, ridiculous, and played for laughs – by men” (152). The work of Butler, Collins, and Douglas, in pointing out the ways the privileging of heteronormativity in these films generally comes at the expense of more marginalized groups, serves as a template for the analysis I conduct in this chapter. Instead of excusing transgender farces as being nothing more than harmless humor, I seek to continue to the work of feminist critics by demonstrating how transgender individuals are further marginalized by the messages communicated in transgender farces.

Daniel Lieberfeld and Judith Sanders argue that transgender comedies also privilege heteronormativity by reinforcing the gender binary through the assertion that the characters have one “natural” gender (130). A man returning to living as a man at the end of a film after spending time dressing as a woman is usually presented as a return to the character’s true gender. Lieberfeld and Sanders’ argument that the films position the initial gender identity of the characters as their true gender supports my contention that the films privilege heteronormative over transgender identities. While the endings of the films hint at a possible progressive identity for the characters through the lessons learned during their time spent crossdressing, these lessons are applied to the characters’ heteronormative identities while their transgender identities are discarded. Some characters even fall into a degenerative hypermasculinity, particularly in *Sorority Boys*, to compensate for their time spent as women by adopting a position at the extreme other end of the gender spectrum rather than expressing a true gender identity. While one

reaction may be framed as more positive than the other, both are still clear assertions of the return to a true gender, as Lieberfeld and Sanders argue.

Other scholars argue that this gender tension is unnecessary because the characters never fully abandon their heteronormative identities. Using *Tootsie* as an example, Frank Tomasulo argues that Michael Dorsey is able to masquerade as a woman while still enjoying the benefits of male privilege (5). Marjorie Garber identifies a moment of this privilege in Dorothy's speeches against her perceived harassment, which are "less a response to the oppression of women than an instinctive situational male reaction to being treated like a woman" (6). While the characters may make clear assertions of their heteronormative identities at the end of the films, Tomasulo and Garber are correct in pointing out that the characters never fully cede their claims to their heteronormative identities or the privileges that go with them. They adopt transgender identities only temporarily and treat these identities as insubstantial items to be discarded as quickly as possible.

Another recurring theme in the literature focuses on the rationalizations made to preserve the heteronormative identities of the characters in the face of the adoption of transgender identities. Marjorie Garber argues that transgender representations are examples of a "progress narrative" (69), which she sees as a "phenomenon of rationalization" to explain away transgender identity and deny it as a legitimate experience (8). The key element of the progress narrative is that the characters "are said to embrace transvestism unwillingly" as an "instrumental strategy" (70). During the time spent crossdressing, the character's heterosexual desires remain unfulfilled "so that

it becomes necessary for him or her to unmask” by discarding his or her transgender identity in favor of a heteronormative identity (70). Society’s view of transgender identity as illegitimate requires the creation of a narrative to explain why an individual would engage in such behavior. While transgender behavior is explained away as being an unwilling activity engaged in for instrumental reasons, a character’s enjoyment of crossdressing is often betrayed by their actions, usually the amount of time and money spent on clothes, makeup, and the process of dressing (8). These moments of rupture are quickly closed off by heteronormativity, either through the characters own actions or the actions of others. Joe shaming Jerry for falling in love with Osgood in *Some Like it Hot* is a clear example of the closing off of a rupture in heteronormativity.

Chris Straayer argues that transgender farces, which he labels “temporary transvestite film[s]” (42), can challenge gender fixity (43), most notably through a bisexual kiss that occurs between a transgender character and a member of the opposite or same sex (54). Audience members are forced to make convoluted twists in logic to maintain the heteronormative identities of the characters when what is seen on screen is either two women or two men kissing. The bisexual kiss opens up readings of the films that subvert the preferred heteronormative readings of the characters’ actions. Likewise, Daniel Lieberfeld and Judith Sanders argue that images of spilling and overflow (champagne bottles, machine guns, milk) in *Some Like It Hot* serve as metaphors for the potential transgression of societal norms in transgender farces (130). While the potential for subverting heteronormativity exists in these films, Victoria Flanagan argues that, ultimately, “[m]ale cross-dressing films replicate the general cultural construction of

male cross-dressing as an amusing joke” (174). While the films may contain the potential for challenging the binary gender system, I agree with Flanagan that the narrative conventions and visual codes in transgender farces reinforce heteronormativity through the reduction of the transgender identities of the characters to objects of ridicule.

In order to support the project of privileging heteronormative identities over transgender identities, transgender farces must create spaces in which the deviations from heteronormativity can be contained. A number of scholars argue that these spaces are created in the films through the metaphor of dreams. Bert Cardullo argues that the crossdressing in *Some Like It Hot* serves the creation of a liminal, dream world (197). Within this world, the dreams and desires of the characters are revealed (198-201). Through crossdressing, the characters are able to address issues they are unable to deal with in their normal lives. Marjorie Garber argues that crossdressing in film is read by audiences as socially acceptable “so long as it occupies a liminal space and a temporary time period” (70). Joe must remind Jerry in *Some Like It Hot* that, in spite of his dreams of wealth and security, he cannot marry Osgood because they are both men. Jerry is trying to extend his crossdressing beyond the limited space and time that audiences find acceptable so Joe must bring him back down to Earth.

Within this limited space and time, Maria Martinez argues that, although *Some Like It Hot* ultimately supports patriarchy (145-149), moments of rupture exist that reveal that society is not as homogeneous as it seems. A temporary dream world is created for the characters in which these ruptures take place, but it is ultimately erased by the film (150-151). One instance of this dream world is the previously mentioned

example of Jerry wanting to marry Osgood and another is Sugar's enjoyment of her lesbian kiss with Joe disguised as Josephine (149-150), which are also clear examples of Straayer's bisexual relationships. While *Some Like It Hot* goes to great pains to elide moments like these, and other films seek to minimize the impact of similar moments in their narratives, the constraining forces of heteronormativity cannot completely eliminate the potentially subversive readings made available through these moments.

The settings of many transgender farces support viewing the crossdressing of the characters as a liminal escape from reality, whether it be sunny Florida (J. Phillips 60-61), Paris in the 1930s (Wood 238), or any other number of unusual locations (from a sorority house to an older Southern woman's home) that take the characters outside of their everyday existence. While in these dream worlds of luxury and frivolity, the characters are free to experiment with new identities. All dreams must come to an end, though, and heteronormativity must be restored. The wigs and makeup are removed and the crossdressed character returns to her or his true identity. As the characters exit the dream world, non-normative identities are shown to be "ludicrous or dangerous" while normative identities are "mature, stable, and fulfilling" (Lieberfeld and Sanders 135).

While in a liminal, dreamlike space, the characters are free to experiment with transgender identities without risking damage to their claims to heteronormative identities. Liminality is a space and time that is "betwixt and between" (Turner 95), meant to mitigate any possible harm to heteronormativity. While some queer theorists have argued that liminality can offer a space for gender fluidity (Rosenfeld 214-215), others have argued that liminality serves primarily as a transitional stage in transgender

identity development (Wilson 435-436), and it may even invert the move toward social integration that makes up the liminal rites of passage described by Victor Turner (Lacroix and Westerfelhaus 13). By removing the characters from their normal lives, transgender farces privilege heteronormativity by presenting transgender identity as temporary and existing outside of the norm. The characters may be free to experiment with more fluid gender identities while in this liminal space, but they emerge to fully return to their heteronormative identities and once fully reestablished, all interest in their transgender identities disappears. By leaving their transgender identities in this liminal space, the films miss an opportunity to send a message about the inclusion of transgender individuals in society.

In my analysis, I build on the attention given in the scholarly literature on transgender farces to the ways the films reinforce heteronormativity. I extend this focus on heteronormativity by arguing that it is privileged in the films through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. Transgender farces do not just privilege heteronormativity by supporting the binary gender system or containing transgender identity in liminal spaces. The films construct the characters in particular ways that privilege their heteronormative identities at the expense of their transgender identities. This privileging of heteronormativity flows through the ways the films are constructed both narratively and visually.

### **Analysis**

Through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes, the representations in transgender farces support the overall work of transgender



representation to distance the transgender characters from the audience by positioning them as the objects of laughter and ridicule. Narrative conventions include a crisis requiring crossdressing, challenges to and reassertion of heteronormativity, heteronormative rivals, and lessons learned from the experience. Visual codes of the trans-misogynistic gaze include a successful transformation, the object and possessor of the gaze, and the big reveal. The conventions and codes of these films work together to privilege heteronormative identities over transgender identities.

### **Narrative Conventions**

The narratives of these films may seem to be aiming only for laughs but through the use of specific conventions, messages are sent to the audience that clearly privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters over their transgender identities. At various moments throughout the films, the heteronormative identities of the characters are given greater weight and importance than their temporarily adopted transgender identities. These moments range from the characters leaving their normal lives in face of a crisis by adopting transgender identities to regularly discarding those identities in order to pursue a heteronormative romance. At the end of these narratives, the characters are portrayed as having learned important lessons and grown as individuals through their experiences, but their transgender identities are cast aside as inconsequential, just part of their personal growth.

#### *Crisis requiring crossdressing*

The characters in transgender farces never choose to crossdress unless prompted by an external crisis. Chris Straayer argues that “the necessity for disguise is the genre’s

most fundamental narrative element” (44). The crisis that leads a character to crossdress is never an internal identity crisis but is always external, including everything from a desperate search for employment to trying to find an unknown one-night stand. Each character in the nine films under analysis must face her or his unique crisis. These characters would not choose to crossdress and protest mightily when questioned about it, a feature that distinguishes them from characters in other transgender films.

The crises faced by the characters in transgender farces are structured around economic privilege: those with low economic privilege are desperate enough to crossdress while those with high levels of economic privilege have the freedom to crossdress. The economic privilege of the characters is rooted in heteronormativity. Part and parcel with heteronormativity’s privileging of heterosexual romance and the nuclear family is the conception of the family as middle class, with the steady job and suburban home that accompanies traditional family values. The assumption being made by these films in constructing their narratives is that the majority of the audience is middle class and has neither experienced the economic desperation that might lead to crossdressing as a remedy nor the extravagant wealth and leisure that might lead to crossdressing as a solution to simple problems. In an example of Meyer’s differentiation function, the narratives are constructed to allow the audience to laugh at the characters’ actions and decisions while never feeling that their own values are threatened since their experiences, particularly economically, are so different from those of the characters on screen.

Joe and Jerry in *Some Like It Hot*, Victoria in *Victor/Victoria*, Michael Dorsey in *Tootsie*, and Daniel in *Mrs. Doubtfire* all choose to crossdress when faced with unemployment. Unemployment, another form of marginalization, creates a liminal space that allows for the subversion of gender norms. The employment status of all five characters is tenuous at best at the beginning of each film. Joe and Jerry are performing in a speakeasy that is raided by the police. While they manage to escape the raid, demonstrating their ingenuity when faced with danger, they do not get paid for the speakeasy gig and are desperate to obtain other work. Daniel has a job doing the voices for multiple characters in a children's cartoon but loses it after arguing with the director. Michael is seen auditioning for a number of jobs and doing anything he can to make ends meet, from waiting tables to teaching acting. As he tells his students, "There's no excuse for not working." Victoria is also auditioning for a job singing in a nightclub, but she is told that her operatically-trained voice is not right for the venue. In protest, she shatters the manager's glass by hitting a high note, a flourish that later becomes a signature of her performances as the female impersonator Victor. Adopting a transgender identity in these films is presented as a last recourse for the economically desperate. Because the characters adopt their transgender identities in moments of desperation, they can discard those identities in favor of heteronormative identities when their situations improve. The lack of doubt the characters have that their situations will improve is further evidence of their heteronormative privilege.

The crises faced by Michael and Victoria are directly related to their inability to find employment as performers. Victoria's search for a job is visually represented by a

long tracking shot of her walking home from the failed audition. She stops at a restaurant and looks longingly through the window as a man eats a pastry, a close up of the pastry making clear her desire, before she faints from hunger. Michael's willingness to do anything to get a job is seen in the opening scenes of the film during which he uses makeup to change his appearance to fit the requirements of the role for which he is auditioning. When told by a director that they are "looking for somebody different," Michael responds, "I can be different!" It is finally up to his agent, George, to inform Michael that no one in New York will hire him, which Michael takes as a challenge. Beyond his own pride and self-sufficiency, Michael is also trying to raise \$8000 to help his roommate Jeff produce a play he has written. Helping Jeff provides an immediate necessity for Michael to find work and also provides a finite amount of money he is trying to earn; Michael is not looking to support himself with this job for an extended period of time, which is why he is so upset when he is offered a one-year contract as Dorothy. His situation has improved by the time he is offered the contract so he is ready to discard his identity as Dorothy and reassert his heteronormativity.

For Joe, Jerry, and Daniel, their crises are only tangentially related to their professions, but the marginality offered by unemployment frees them up to adopt a transgender identity. Joe and Jerry are on the way to a new gig when they witness the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Now faced with death, Joe decides that he and Jerry should take jobs playing sax and bass, respectively, in a girl's band that he had been opposed to earlier. Getting out of Chicago and staying alive trumps Joe's aversion to dressing as a woman, which Rebecca Bell-Metereau deems "cross-dressing as a

necessary survival mechanism” (64). Daniel’s crisis begins when his wife asks for a divorce. After quitting his most recent job, Daniel throws a wild party to celebrate his son Chris’ twelfth birthday. It is the final straw for his wife Miranda, and she asks for a divorce. The judge grants Miranda full custody of their three children and gives Daniel three months to find a steady job and provide a suitable home for the children. Wanting to be with his children eventually leads Daniel to adopt the role of Mrs. Doubtfire. Daniel uses crossdressing to rectify the curtailing of his heteronormative privileges to a large house, a wife, and children.

Crossdressing by those with low economic privilege is presented as a final act of desperation in order to improve their situations. For those characters with higher economic privilege, crossdressing is presented as an almost fantastical solution to mundane problems. Wealth and steady jobs give these characters the freedom to explore nontraditional solutions to the crises they face. Terri in *Just One of the Guys*, Bob Sheppard in *All-American Co-Ed*, and the characters in *Sorority Boys*, particularly Dave, all come from wealthy families. Terri’s family’s wealth is evidenced by the enormous size of the house she lives in and the fact that her parents go away for a two week vacation, leaving her and her brother home alone and giving Terri the freedom to crossdress. When she fails to win a newspaper competition at her high school, she questions why her article was not selected, and her journalism teacher says that while it was well written, it was not outstanding. Infuriated, Terri asks, “Why? Because a pretty girl can’t possibly have a brain?” She later complains to her brother Buddy about not being taken seriously because she’s cute, “Sometimes I just wish I were a guy.” Terri

decides to attend another school in town disguised as a boy, and Buddy says that this “[m]akes perfect sense. You got a problem, you get in drag.” Buddy’s sarcastic comment reveals the ludicrousness of Terri’s plan; she feels so entitled to the newspaper internship that she goes to the extreme measure of crossdressing to ensure that it is hers.

The Zeta fraternity brothers at *The All-American Co-Ed’s* Quinceton feel their masculine privilege is insulted by the president of the all-girls school Mar Brynn’s description of them as privileged ruffians and seek payback by sending one of their fraternity brothers to win a scholarship contest put on by the school. Bob Sheppard is chosen to go to Mar Brynn because of his headlining role in the frat’s drag show; he is opposed to dressing up as a woman, crossdressing being only acceptable when contained within the approved space of the drag show, but as a fellow Zeta puts it to him, “It should be right up your alley.” Bob is sent to Mar Brynn in order to reassert the privilege his fraternity brothers feel has been unwarrantedly called into question. Rather than feeling insulted by being labeled as privileged, it is this very label the fraternity seeks to defend.

Adam, Dave, and Doofer in *Sorority Boys* are more concerned with maintaining their reputations and positions of power. As the three most popular members in their fraternity, Kappa Omicron Kappa (KOK), Adam, Dave, and Doofer host the wildest parties and have their pick of women to sleep with. To get them out of the fraternity for disrespecting his authority, Spencer, the president, steals money intended for a major social event (the KOKtail Cruise) the three were in charge of and accuses them of embezzlement. They plan to sneak back into fraternity house to get a tape of Spencer

stealing the money, which was recorded on a camera Adam had hidden in a speaker to tape himself having sex. They decide to disguise themselves as women to sneak into a frat party because, as Adam says, “all that’s getting in’s tits.” Dave is doubly desperate to clear his name because the KOKtail Cruise is his opportunity to make the business connections, through his wealthy father, to ensure his continued life of privilege.

While Matt’s economic privilege is not as clear as that of Terri, Bob, and Dave, the fact that he is able to devote his time at college to finding the girl he had sex with in a dorm elevator during a power outage indicates a certain level of privilege. The jobs he takes on to gain access to the women’s dorm, including pretending to be a maintenance man to repair a series of problems he creates such as releasing mice in the dorm, are clearly not ones he needs for the money. He needs to sneak around in trying to find his mystery girl because they never shared their names, though he is convinced that she is the love of his life. While presented as a hopeless romantic in the film, Matt is an example of the “enlightened sexism” described by Susan Douglas (9-13); he argues frequently in the film that the physical beauty of women gives them power over men but through his actions, he shows that women are still just a prize to be won. Crossdressing is one of the many strategies he uses to find out more information about the woman he loves, and his privilege gives him the free time and physical means to accomplish his schemes.

Malcolm in *Big Momma’s House* is privileged through a high-paying, steady job that gives him the means to crossdress. Malcolm is an FBI agent trying to catch an escaped criminal named Lester. He and his partner are tracking Lester’s former

girlfriend Sherry, who has left town, in hopes that she will lead them to him. Their only lead in finding her is her grandmother, Big Momma, who leaves her home to help a friend in the hospital. Sherry calls Big Momma about stopping by, and Malcolm decides to impersonate Big Momma so they do not lose her. While Malcolm later decides to maintain his Big Momma disguise in order to get closer to Sherry, who he is falling in love with, the initial crisis that leads him to crossdress is the hope of getting information from Sherry about Lester.

Issues of heteronormative privilege are raised by Malcolm's partner early in the film when he questions Malcolm's decision to continue taking on the risky deep cover assignments that give him the skills to impersonate Big Momma rather than settling down and getting married. Malcolm's desire at the beginning of the film for money and the continuation of his carefree life without connections is inconsistent with the values of heteronormativity. The time Malcolm spends as Big Momma is as much about him learning to value the benefits of heteronormativity through his connection to Sherry and her son Trent as it is about catching an escaped convict. In order for heteronormative identities to be privileged over transgender identities, the values of heteronormativity must be shared by all of the characters.

The crisis requiring crossdressing found in each of these films communicates the idea that transgender identity is the product of external factors. This is problematic for transgender individuals because the search for an external reason is often extended to their own gender identities. A young transgender woman may search desperately for an external cause to explain her initially confusing feelings or a transgender man may be



asked what caused him to become transgender after coming out to family or friends. The distancing of transgender characters produced by transgender representations is supported by the external nature of the crisis that leads to crossdressing; audience members can reassure themselves that they would respond differently when faced with similar situations. Instead of helping audience members identify with the characters by attributing the actions of the characters to the desperateness of their situations, the external nature of the crisis can be decoded by audience members as justification for the ridiculous choices the characters make in response to their situations.

The crisis also positions the adoption of a transgender identity as a viable option only for those at the polar ends of economic privilege. Only the economically desperate or the economically well off would consider crossdressing as an appropriate solution to their problems; middle class individuals, in contrast, are too busy working and raising their families to ever consider crossdressing. This message is particularly dangerous for economically disadvantaged transgender individuals whose plight can be ignored because of the connections to their transgender identities; either their economic disadvantage is a product of their transgender identities or their transgender identities are viewed as an attempt to improve their situations. Situating crossdressing within the economic privilege of the characters distances them from the audience through a lack of shared experiences; the audience is assumed to not share a connection with the characters either in gender identity or economic terms and so would not be expected to identify with them. The only connection the audience is expected to find with the characters is their striving for the privileges of a heteronormative identity so the

audience is expected to identify with this identity of the characters. While crossdressing may offer a temporary solution to the crises faced by the characters, it also calls into question their heteronormative identities so they must find ways to reassert these identities.

#### *Challenges to and reassertion of heteronormativity*

The distance created in transgender farces between the transgender characters and the audience is a product of humor encoded into the transgender identities of the characters. This distance creates problems of identification for audience members in these films because the transgender characters are also the protagonists. The transgender positions of the characters challenge the system of heteronormativity, but the characters find other ways of reasserting their own heteronormativity. Feeling distanced from a character's transgender alter ego, the audience may be motivated to identify with the masculine or feminine heteronormative identity of a character. An audience member may laugh at Michael in *Tootsie* while he is dressed as Dorothy while also rooting for him to end up with Julie in his heteronormative identity. The challenges to heteronormativity are overcome through the privileging of the heteronormative identities of the characters.

One way the films privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters is by demonstrating the difficulty the male characters have mastering feminine attire, particularly footwear. Michael stumbles as he walks down the street for his audition as Dorothy, and Jerry stumbles as he and Joe walk along the train platform to join the girl's band. Daniel complains bitterly upon returning home after his interview as Mrs.

Doubtfire; “If I find the misogynistic bastard who invented heels, I’ll kill him.” Jerry also raises questions about how easily women walk in heels. “How do they walk in these things, huh? How do they keep their balance?” Joe responds, “Must be the way the weight is distributed.” Jerry ultimately comes to an essentialist conclusion about the difference between men and women after watching Sugar sashay down the platform; “I tell you it’s a whole different sex!”

Poor performance makes clear the disinterest these characters have in successfully adopting identities as women, even though the risks of being found out are often great. Examples of poor performance beyond problems walking in heels range from simple mistakes, such as Matt sitting spread-legged on the stairs after his first attempt at crossdressing with his friend Wendy or Malcolm’s skirt being stuck in his underwear after quickly getting dressed as Big Momma, to being asked to perform unfamiliar tasks, such as Bob doing a poor job fixing a fellow female student’s hair or Dave doing a bad job painting sorority president Leah’s toes, to more egregious errors, such as Adam, Dave and Doofer stuffing everything from grapefruit to stuffed animals in their bras to simulate breasts. Doofer provides an example of a character who is initially proud of his performance, putting on lipstick, until he realizes the error he has made, opening his mouth to reveal red-stained teeth. Poor performance positions the transgender identities of the characters as artificial since they do not have equal difficulty in their performances of masculinity. The heteronormative identities of the characters are protected as the audience is invited to laugh at the ridiculous antics of the characters’ transgender alter egos.

The characters also engage in actions in public that would be perceived as unfeminine. Michael pulls his panties out of his crotch while walking down the street as Dorothy, Daniel adjusts himself as Mrs. Doubtfire while waiting to cross at a crosswalk, and both characters adjust their stockings in public. While walking to class, Adam is checked out by a male student. In response, he grabs his crotch and yells at the guy, “Suck my dick!” While this combination of feminine appearance and masculine actions could open up a space for gender fluidity, the clearer message is that the characters’ heteronormative identities cannot be contained by the trappings of femininity.

Poor performance of masculinity by Terri and Victoria is also constructed through their inability to contain their heteronormative identities, demonstrated in their cases not through the bodily actions of characters like Michael and Daniel but through their knowledge of subjects unknown to and unappreciated by heteronormative men. Terri nearly gives herself away through her knowledge of female fashion. While playing the role of the supportive friend, she goads her friend Rick, who she has a crush on, to tell her who he likes, and he points out a girl in a red sweater. Terri notices her “cute shoes,” which leaves Rick baffled. Her knowledge of fashion also almost gives her away on her second day of class when she offers advice to another girl about using an eraser to replace a lost back to an earring. The girl looks at her funny until she explains that she has sisters. Greg, the girl’s boyfriend, is upset that she was talking to another boy, but she defends the conversation as innocent, “He knew how to fix my earring,” to which Greg responds, “That’s cause he’s a little tulip.” It is interesting to note that one of the few attacks on a heteronormative form of knowledge, a woman knowing how to

fix a piece of jewelry, comes as a result of Terri's poor performance of masculinity.

While the characters' heteronormative identities in general may be privileged, the films also demonstrate a privileging of masculine interests and behaviors over their feminine counterparts.

This privileging of masculine interests is clearly seen in Victoria's relationship with King Marchand. Victoria's love of opera, while serving as an example of her poor performance of masculinity, also allows King to model the heteronormative masculine response to more feminine interests. While she is moved to tears by a performance of *The Mikado*, he is bored to tears. Even when he is with the woman he loves, King is unable to overcome his masculine privilege and enjoy himself. After Victoria tosses a rose to him at the end of a performance as Victor, a quick cut shows the two of them at a boxing match, which King is enjoying until Victoria passes out after being splattered with blood. The most bothersome moment for King is when the two go dancing together at a gay club, a veritable sea of similarly tuxedo-clad men. King is so bothered by the experience that after sending Victoria home alone, he heads to a working class bar and starts a fight. Robin Wood argues that King "can permit himself" the enjoyment of being with Victoria in public "only under cover of an overt display of masculinity (violence, aggression)" (242). While Victoria's crying, fainting, and dancing may privilege her heteronormative feminine identity over her transgender identity, this sequence also privileges King's masculine identity through the lauding of his traditionally masculine interests over Victoria's more feminine interests. It is not enough that Victoria enjoys the opera and hates boxing as a means of privileging her

heteronormative identity; the message encoded into this sequence is that no truly masculine man would ever be interested in these activities either. Victoria's transgender identity not only prevents the audience from identifying with her as Victor but also bothers King because of the impression of homosexuality it communicates. While the film may be supportive of homosexuality in other instances, King's homophobic reactions to being in public with Victoria are part of the reason she returns to her heteronormative identity at the end of the film rather than continuing to perform as Victor as she initially plans.

Though they may not recognize the ways their heteronormative identities are being challenged, the poor gender performances of the characters demonstrate their lack of interest in fully adopting their transgender identities. Adam is one of the few characters to openly discuss the danger to heteronormativity posed by the amount of time he, Dave, and Doofer are spending as women. As the three give each other makeup tips and outfit suggestions, Adam brings a sudden halt to the conversation.

Do you know what this could do to us? We're not supposed to know about makeup or periods or self-esteem issues. We're not supposed to see behind the curtain.

Learning too much about what it means to be a woman or actually enjoying it is seen by Adam as a clear threat to their masculinity and the heteronormative status quo.

A second way transgender farces privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters is the quickness with which they discard their transgender disguises. Matt only spends brief periods of time dressed as a woman while searching for his mystery girl, Malcolm repeatedly switches between himself and Big Momma in order to get

closer to Sherry, and Bob readopts his masculine identity mere moments after arriving at Mar Brynn. Home is a safe space to drop their disguises for Terri, Michael, and Daniel, who also never dresses as his feminine alter ego while working at a television production company, at least until Mrs. Doubtfire gets her own show at the end of the film.

Allowing the characters to spend extended periods of time not in their transgender disguises helps the audience identify with their heteronormative identities rather than their transgender identities.

Dave and Joe are the two characters who take the biggest risks in order to ditch their disguises. After walking to campus as a woman, Dave uses a janitor's closet to change into male attire. He enrolls in a Women's Studies class as the only man in order to sit next to Leah and to get to know her better; the professor even recognizes his ulterior motives for joining the class by telling him "I think you're in the wrong place." Not only does Dave risk giving himself away to Leah, who lives in the sorority house with him, but also risks harassment by his former fraternity brothers should they run into him on campus.

Joe faces an even bigger threat, death, should his identity be discovered, but the allure of Sugar Kane is too much for him and he quickly adopts a second disguise as impotent millionaire Junior in order to seduce her. Like the others, Joe frequently switches back and forth between his disguises and nearly gets caught. As he rushes to his rendezvous with Sugar on Osgood's yacht, Joe nearly forgets to take off the earrings he was wearing while performing in the girl's band, snatching them off of his ears at the last second. This constant switching between identities not only creates the potential for

comic mishap but also makes clear the ultimate heteronormative element in these films, heterosexual romance.

Having shown the characters to be uncommitted to their transgender identities through poor gender performances and the frequent discarding of those identities, the final way the narratives privilege heteronormativity is through the heterosexual romances featured in the films. Though the characters may adopt their transgender identities to escape a crisis, what they usually get out of the experience is a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Nearly all of the characters are involved in some sort of romance in these films; Joe falls for Sugar, Bob for Virginia, Victoria for King, Michael for Julie, Terri for Rick, Malcolm for Sherry, Dave for Leah, and Matt for Patty. Daniel is the lone exception; having already been married and fathered children, he is more interested in reclaiming the rewards of heteronormativity that are rightfully his than in starting a new relationship. The clearly heterosexual romances the characters are engaged in are intended to assuage any fears the audience might have about the characters because of their adoption of transgender identities; audience members are not distanced further from the characters through same-sex romances on top of crossdressing.

The heterosexual attraction between the characters is evident almost instantly. Bob quickly falls for Virginia after arriving at Mar Brynn, kicking himself for requesting a single room because of a sore throat when he finds out she would have been his roommate. Malcolm is as instantly attracted to Sherry as Bob is to Virginia. When she first arrives at Big Momma's house, Malcolm is so stunned that he breaks character as



Big Momma to comment on her beauty; “Damn, you fine!” When she looks at him quizzically, he quickly responds, “Big Momma could never forget that ass.” Malcolm’s break in character reassures the audience that underneath the fat suit and latex mask he is still a heterosexual man, unable to resist commenting on a woman’s body even at the risk of blowing his cover. Dave’s attraction to Leah is solidified after they take a shower together. Lest there be any doubt about his attraction, Leah drops her washcloth and it catches on Dave’s erect penis. He quickly exits the shower without even washing or drying off, his attraction to Leah abundantly clear.

Like Dave sharing a shower with Leah, many of the characters make use of their transgender personas to help in their romantic conquests. Terri takes the opportunity to check out her friend Rick as he gets out of the shower after P.E. class; he passes muster better than the bully Greg. Malcolm and Dave use their transgender personas to spark interest in and quell any anxiety about their male selves. Michael even tries to make use of the intimate knowledge about Julie’s, another actress on the soap opera that he falls in love with, preferences in men he gained through his friendship with her as Dorothy to hit on her at a party, which earns him a drink tossed in his face.

The use of their transgender identities to further their heterosexual romances can occasionally backfire so the characters must make appeals to heteronormativity to tamper any confusion the objects of their affection might have in their own sexual orientations. Michael complicates his potential relationship with Julie by kissing her as Dorothy. Julie freaks out, assuming that Dorothy is a lesbian because she perceives her to be a woman, and backs away from Michael as he tries to explain that her attraction to

Dorothy is “a good impulse” because it is ultimately heterosexual. Dave, as his alter ego Daisy, shares a kiss with Leah. He is sleeping over in her room when Leah says, “I feel so comfortable with you, like I could tell you anything.” They start making out, but Dave breaks it off to hide his erection, leaving Leah to question Daisy’s feelings for her. The privileging of the characters’ heteronormative identities is intended to rectify any possible confusion that may result from the attraction the characters feel for each other; as ultimately heterosexual, the relationships are approved of by the films while any lingering same sex attractions are discarded along with the characters’ transgender identities.

Adam and Jerry are part of relationships that provide the clearest alternatives to heteronormativity, but their heteronormative identities are privileged as they try to ignore the implications of their attractions. Before getting kicked out of the fraternity, Adam was the resident player who the audience sees waking up with two women after the frat party that opens the film. Jimmy, a younger frat member who Adam advised to set his sights lower if he wanted to “raise his points,” takes over Adam’s role, and bedroom, after he leaves. After his initial failure to retrieve the videotape that would exonerate them, Adam agrees to go on a date with Jimmy in order to try again. They slip each other roofies as the date begins, and Adam must violently resist Jimmy’s advances, even throwing him out of a window only to have him jump right back in through another window. Jimmy finally succumbs to the roofies, and Adam gets the tape only to drop it into a box of porn as he succumbs to the roofies himself. As he

wakes up the next morning, Adam must force himself not to ponder if anything more happened with Jimmy.

Jerry's experience with a non-heteronormative relationship is more positive compared with Adam's. While Joe tries to seduce Sugar, Jerry becomes "one of the girls," hosting a party in his sleeping compartment on the train and joining the girls for a swim in the ocean. After arriving at the Florida resort where the band will be playing, Jerry as Daphne acquires an ardent admirer in the form of eccentric millionaire Osgood. Joe returns one morning after spending the night with Sugar to find Jerry on his bed still dressed as Daphne, shaking maracas and humming a tango tune. Jerry is on cloud nine because Osgood has proposed, but Joe is quick to bring him back to Earth by reminding him that two men cannot get married. Jerry's own motives come into question; he talks about marrying Osgood for his money then getting a quick annulment, but his initial happiness, concern for Osgood's feelings when he has to break the relationship off, and anger at Joe for giving his engagement bracelet to Sugar show that Jerry's feelings for Osgood are not quite so clear cut. Osgood's classic reply to Jerry revealing that they cannot marry because he is a man, "Nobody's perfect," also hints that, to some, a fluid gender identity may not dissuade them from romance.

Non-heteronormative romances are treated in these films as either sexual assault or late-night fantasies. These alternative relationships are not treated with the same level of respect or attention as is received by the heteronormative relationships. Most of the heteronormative relationships end with a kiss that confirms the continuance of the relationships while the non-heteronormative relationships come no closer than

frustrating “what if” scenarios. The transgender identities of the characters may challenge heteronormativity, but transgender farces do nothing to entertain this challenge, working instead to solidify the heteronormative identities of the characters as sites of identification for the audience. This effort to privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters makes the heteronormative rivals they encounter appear redundant.

### *Heteronormative rivals*

The heteronormative rivals faced by each of the characters may seem redundant when compared with the privileging of the characters’ heteronormative identities, but these rivals are generally positioned in opposition to the characters’ transgender identities as a way of further privileging the characters’ heteronormative identities. The rivals are positioned as the villains of the films, usually either initiating or intensifying the crises that led to the characters crossdressing in the first place. Lieberfeld and Sanders call these characters “norm enforcers” to the gender transgressions of the other characters (131). Their role is to enforce the standards of heteronormativity but since the heteronormative identities of the characters have been positioned as sites of identification for the audience, the norm enforcers must play the role of the villain by harassing the transgender characters for daring to violate the standards of heteronormativity. These norm enforcers perform an important role in privileging the heteronormative identities of the characters by providing a clear distinction from the heteronormative gender performances the audience should support and those they should not.

Violence is the method of choice for most norm enforcers. Spats and the other gangsters in *Some Like it Hot* represent an over-the-top masculinity hidden behind a façade of gentility. They drink milk in a speakeasy to avoid getting arrested by the police while also having a man shot for spilling a drink on their shoes. Joe is the other norm enforcer in *Some Like It Hot*. Joe's quick discarding of his disguise as Josephine to pursue Sugar as the millionaire Junior situates Joe as being committed to his heteronormative identity more than Jerry, who quickly becomes "one of the girls." After Joe creates the identity of Junior on the beach to hit on Sugar, Jerry brings Sugar back to their hotel room, hoping to catch Joe still in his Junior disguise. Joe quickly hides himself in a bubble bath in full clothes with only his face showing. After Sugar leaves, Joe emerges from the bath dripping wet and, using his taller stature, physically intimidates Jerry by grabbing him by the neck and lifting him off the ground for threatening to tell Sugar the truth. Joe clearly establishes himself as the dominant male between the two and positions his masculine pursuit of a woman as superior to Jerry's concern for her feelings. As the only transgender character to take on the role of norm enforcer, Joe's violence is expected to be excused by the audience as a defense of his heteronormative identity, which would be in jeopardy if Jerry told Sugar the truth. Since some audience members may be turned off by an act of physical intimidation eerily similar to the kind practiced by Spats and the other gangsters, Joe quickly abandons the role of norm enforcer and focuses instead on asserting his heteronormative identity by seducing Sugar rather than intimidating Jerry.

Violence is also the dominant method employed by the members of the Tri Pi sorority in *Sorority Boys* in their roles as norm enforcers. The Tri Pis are a rare example of female norm enforcers in a male-to-female transgender film. Clear norm enforcers for femininity are rare for male-to-female transgender characters; they are usually disciplined for their failure to live up to masculine standards rather than feminine ones. The most egregious use of violence by the Tri Pis comes during a powderpuff football game between their sorority and Delta Omicron Gamma (DOG), the sorority Adam, Dave, and Doofer have become members of. The Tri Pis make it clear that Adam, Dave, and Doofer are not performing femininity correctly. One Tri Pi says to Adam as he plays quarterback “Get your eyes off my tits, rugmuncher,” positioning him as a lesbian for failing to perform femininity correctly rather than interpreting his ogling of her body as a sign of his heteronormativity. The Tri Pis are also very violent players, employing a number of elbows, punches, and kicks to try to win the game. The crowd cheers after the announcer says that Dave could be injured badly by the Tri Pis but boos when Adam tries to retaliate in kind. Adam is frustrated at being physically outperformed by a group of women because physicality is usually a marker of a heteronormatively masculine identity. While not supported by the crowd at the football game, who still see him as a woman, Adam’s actions are encoded for the audience as an assertion of his heteronormative identity.

Other violent norm enforcers include Greg in *Just One of the Guys*, Sal in *Victor/Victoria*, Lester in *Big Momma’s House*, Crick in *100 Girls*, and rival Greek members in *The All-American Co-Ed* and *Sorority Boys*, but violence is not the only

behavior available to norm enforcers. Other norm enforcers try to present themselves as the paragons of heteronormativity but since the audience has most likely identified with the main characters, their actions come across as arrogant and pompous instead. Kevin, Terri's wealthy, college boyfriend, places his masculine sexual desires ahead of any of Terri's concerns. His lack of concern for her feelings crystallizes after she stands him up on a date. Though she spent hours getting made up in a tight, white dress for their date, she has to quickly change back into her transgender alter ego when Sandy, a girl who has a crush on her, comes over to her house. After getting rid of Sandy, Kevin arrives to find Terri in sweats. He makes his disappointment in her abundantly clear, saying

You know, a long time ago, I knew this girl named Terri, she wore dresses and makeup. She was hot. Then one day she disappeared. You know where she went?

Kevin's purpose may be to chide Terri for failing to live up to heteronormative standards, but he comes across as a jerk to audience members who have seen everything she has done to try to live up to his expectations. By privileging his own heteronormative identity, Kevin fails to recognize that Terri is doing everything she can to keep her heteronormative identity dominant. Kevin's inability to understand Terri leads her to choose Rick over him at the end of the film.

Stu Dunmire in *Mrs. Doubtfire* is positioned as a clearly masculine but less objectionable norm enforcer. Stu is a very handsome and successful businessman who hires Daniel's ex-wife Miranda as the interior designer for his newly purchased mansion. Daniel is threatened by Stu's intrusion on his rightful claim to his wife and children so although he may not be actively pursuing Miranda, Daniel uses his position as Mrs.

Doubtfire to try to dissuade Miranda from pursuing a relationship with Stu. Daniel's distaste for Stu becomes clear when Mrs. Doubtfire accompanies the family on a trip to a local pool. Daniel heads immediately to the bar as the others swim, grumbling under his breath, "I'll just sit here and watch you move in on my family." When he overhears Stu talking about Miranda and calling him a loser, Daniel pegs Stu in the back of the head with a lime as he walks away from the bar then feigns innocence when Stu turns around to look for the culprit. Daniel frames his dislike for Stu as concern for his children, but he clearly finds Stu's alpha male personality threatening after having to take on the role of an elderly woman. Daniel's challenge to the norm enforcer almost goes too far when Stu nearly chokes on a shrimp covered in pepper, which he is allergic to, that Daniel had added to his dish. It is only through the obscured vision of a bitter ex-husband and children desperate for their parents to get back together for Stu to be seen as a villain. Daniel attacks Stu as a threat to his heteronormative identity but fighting for his family is the clearest sign of a heteronormative identity that may have been questioned after his childish antics and slovenly living throughout most of the film.

Other norm enforcers who make appeals based on gender performance appear in *Just One of the Guys* and *Victor/Victoria*. Debra is the most attractive girl in school and the object of Rick's affection. Terri is occasionally jealous of her for getting to wear cute clothes and shoes and attracting the attention of Rick while Terri must continue to perform her role of Rick's supportive male friend. Debra reminds the audience that by adopting a transgender position, another, more obviously heteronormative person can swoop in and steal the person you are attracted to from under your nose. Norma tries to



play the role of norm enforcer but fails miserably. She vamps it up like Marilyn Monroe to attract the attention of King Marchand, but he only has eyes for Victoria. In their one sex scene together, King is unable to perform sexually because he is distracted by thoughts of Victoria. While the more obviously feminine of the two, Norma is unable to hold King's attention and runs off to Chicago to tell the other norm enforcer in the film, Sal, about King's violation of the norms of heteronormative society.

Ultimately, norm enforcers are exaggerations meant to make the heteronormative identities of the transgender characters seem natural by comparison. The exaggerated performance of the norm enforcers is intended to make the heteronormative identities of the characters appear to be the most reasonable gender performances in the films. The norm enforcers function as counterbalances to the transgender identities of the characters but through their attacks on the characters, they increase the identification with the characters by audience members who see their attacks as unwarranted. The norm enforcers may appear to be redundant at first glance since the films already privilege heteronormative identities, but they play an important role in increasing the audience's identification with the characters through exaggerated contrast. Though the characters have discarded their transgender identities numerous times throughout the films, even risking attack by their heteronormative rivals, they reach a point where they must leave the liminal space of transgender identity and return with lessons learned about being a better member of heteronormative society.

*Lessons learned*

At the end of each film, the characters have made positive changes in their lives. Many have entered into relationships with the people they love. Almost all have learned something about the struggles of the opposite sex. “Crossing genders, in other words, enables one to view oneself critically from the perspective of the other, and teach all involved that bodies matter less than feelings” (J. Phillips 64). While self-improvement is all well and good, the lessons are applied to the characters’ heteronormative identities while their transgender identities are discarded for good. Few attempts are made to incorporate their transgender identities as they return to their heteronormative lives.

The endings of the films are marked by returns. The characters clearly leave the liminal space of transgender identity and return to the heteronormative lives they left behind. Joe and Jerry ride across the waves in Osgood’s boat with the Florida resort clearly in the background. Malcolm returns to his duties as an FBI agent by arresting Lester. Adam, Dave, Doofer, and Bob all return to their fraternity houses. Miranda tells her kids that they have a new nanny and opens the door to reveal Daniel standing on the front steps. The endings of the films function as closure for the transgender identities of the characters. The happy endings are meant only for the heteronormative identities of the characters so their transgender identities must be left behind.

Love is the most common happy ending in transgender farces. Joe ends up with Sugar, Dave with Leah, Bob with Virginia, Victoria with King, Terri with Rick, Malcolm with Sherry, Matt with Patty, and Michael with Julie, though these new relationships are not without complications. Sherry tells Malcolm, “You went through

all this trouble trying to catch me in a lie but you were the one being dishonest.” Malcolm responds, “That was fake but what I feel for you is real,” and they seal their new relationship with a kiss. Dave tries to mend things with Leah by giving a speech about how meeting her changed his life to which she asks, “Whose life?” Leah later tells Dave, “I feel like I lost my best friend,” in losing Daisy, but they end up making out anyway in order to wrap up the film with a happy ending. Rick clearly delineates heteronormative roles before entering into a relationship with Terri. When she tries to make plans for their date, he says, “I’m the guy here. Let me just try this.” She then offers him a ride in her car and he responds, “As long as I get to drive.” The message seems to be that if there is a true connection, all is forgiven, even if one partner spent time dressing as the opposite sex. The transgender identities of the characters remain in their liminal spaces and do not come back to haunt the characters in their heteronormative lives.

Personal achievement also comes from time spent in a transgender alter ego. Terri’s journalism teacher apologizes for misjudging her when she turns in her article “I Was a Teenage Boy.” Adam is named the new president of KOK and makes sure that KOK and DOG socialize together more. As one of the few characters to try to incorporate his transgender identity into his heteronormative life, Daniel becomes the host of a successful kid’s TV show as Mrs. Doubtfire. He makes it clear, though, that this is just a performance; after taping an episode, he walks off set, still dressed as Mrs. Doubtfire, high-fives a crew member and is enthusiastically patted on the back by the station owner for the success of the show.

Matt is presented as a character who has gained a newfound understanding of the struggles women endure from his experiences but this new knowledge serves to build up his heteronormative identity rather than serving as an example of true understanding of the experiences of others. In an earlier encounter while Matt was crossdressed, Crick, the norm enforcer in the film, tried to sexually assault him, but he bit off a piece of Crick's tongue to prevent Crick from kissing him. Matt later decides to take the piece of tongue to the police as proof of the assault and inspires other girls in the dorm to also report their assaults by Crick. While this act is presented as a positive lesson Matt learns from his experiences, the message seems to be that men can perform as women better than women can; if only other women would bite off a part of their attacker's body when being assaulted, then maybe fewer assaults would happen or at least the police would have an easier time identifying the attacker. Matt's lack of true understanding of his experiences is illustrated in his speech during the last day of a Women's Studies class. Matt equates feminism with other -isms (racism, classism, sexism, etc) and argues that all -isms are just groups fighting each other. He then declares himself a humanist who accepts all people, to the cheers of support from his female classmates. Feminism is visually equated with propaganda in this scene; the feminist professor of the class is shown in Nazi garb as bombs explode around her, signaling the end of a dying regime. Matt positions himself as the possessor of expert knowledge, superior to those from whose experiences he supposedly learned important life lessons. Matt uses his experiences to build up his own heteronormative identity rather than trying to connect with others.

Most transgender farces show the improvement in the lives of the characters without direct reference to their transgender identities. *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* are the only films to feature explicit statements about how living as a woman made the male characters better. Michael tells Julie, “I was a better man with you as a woman than I ever was with a woman as a man . . . I just gotta learn to do it without the dress.” Miranda tells Daniel that Mrs. Doubtfire “brought out the best in you.” Even though the adoption of transgender identities has clearly helped the characters improve their lives, everything positive from their new relationships to their new jobs comes as the result of their transgender identities, the positive influences of their transgender identities are generally swept under the rug along with these discarded identities. Having constructed the narratives to privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters, suddenly acknowledging the positive benefits of their transgender identities would call the other events of the films into question. The positive effects of their transgender identities must be diminished or else risk calling their heteronormative identities into question.

The narrative conventions of transgender farces privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters by establishing clearly external motivations for adopting transgender identities, positioning their transgender identities as inauthentic through poor performance and frequent discarding, positioning their heteronormative identities as natural through heteronormative romances and the exaggerated contrast of heteronormative rivals, and attributing the lessons learned from the experiences to their heteronormative identities. The transgender identities of the characters are distanced from the audience by the characters taking these identities less than seriously. The

visual codes of transgender farces continue the pattern of depicting the transgender identities of the characters in a less than serious fashion.

### **Visual Codes: The Trans-Misogynistic Gaze**

The visual codes of transgender farces distance the transgender characters from the audience through the use of the trans-misogynistic gaze. Trans-misogyny involves a transgender individual not only being objectified for her or his appearance but also for failing to perform femininity or masculinity according heteronormative standards. Much of the visual humor in these films comes from framing shots and scenes as if the male gaze is in operation as it objectifies a woman then once it has been made clear that the object of the gaze is transgender, mocking the character for failing to live up to heteronormative standards of beauty. The trans-misogynistic gaze distances the transgender characters from the audience through this combination of objectification and ridicule. As with the narrative conventions, the visual codes privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters through the lack of attention to their transformations, the situating of the characters as objects and possessors of the gaze, and the final big reveal of the characters' transgender identities.

### *Successful transformation*

The successful transformation of the characters into their transgender alter egos is key to the narratives of the films. If the other characters do not believe the transformations, then the characters' plans will be all for naught. The successful transformation generally works only within the diegesis of the films; the audience is given too much information, whether it is hearing the characters devise their plans or

seeing them don their disguises, to believe that a character has transformed into a man or woman. The transformations in these films work to distance the audience from the characters by reminding them that what they are seeing on screen are disguises rather than allowing them to identify with the characters as the men or women they appear to be as the other characters in the films are able to do. The transformations, therefore, are constructed in such a way to only be successful within the diegesis of the films and not for the audience. The heteronormative identities of the characters are preserved through the clear disconnect with their transgender identities. Particular visual techniques are used to ensure that the transgender identities of the characters are not presented to the audience without clearly establishing the primacy of their heteronormative identities.

The privileging of the characters' heteronormative identities is evident in the frequent use of quick cuts between scenes before and after the transformations. The cut uses the technique of montage to help the audience make the connection between the man or woman they were watching in the previous scene and the woman or man who appears on the screen now. The heteronormative identities of the characters are presented first before their transgender alter egos are ever seen. *Some Like It Hot*, *Tootsie*, *The All-American Co-Ed*, *Just One of the Guys*, and *Sorority Boys* all use this technique to signal a transformation. After Joe gets off the phone accepting the job in the girl's band, there is a quick cut to him and Jerry walking down a train platform dressed as women. Likewise, in probably the most well-known example of this technique, after Michael has been told that no one will hire him by his agent, there is a quick cut to Michael dressed as a woman walking down the streets of New York. While

a sequence in which Michael applies his makeup to become Dorothy occurs later in the film, the initial transformation remains in the realm of fantasy. The use of the quick cut represents a general lack of interest in the process of transgender transformation and a desire to surprise the audience into laughter upon seeing either the man they just saw on screen now wearing a dress and heels or the woman they just saw now with slicked back hair and wearing a suit.

*Just One of the Guys* features two such cuts. After complaining to her brother Buddy about how difficult it is to be taken seriously as a girl, there is a cut to Buddy answering the front door to find Terri standing there with a baseball cap on her head, wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. She asks for herself, and Buddy does not initially recognize her. He makes the ridiculousness of her disguise clear when he asks, “Who do you think you are, Tootsie? . . . Yentl?” The second cut happens after Buddy gives Terri lessons on how to act like a guy followed by a dapperly-dressed Terri arriving at her new school. Her transformation is more drastic this time, a haircut and new clothes that are obviously not Buddy’s, and continues the trend of a lack of attention to the actual transformation.

A related visual technique is the reaction shot used in *Sorority Boys* and *Big Momma’s House*. The reaction shot consists of the characters on screen reacting to a transformation before the audience has seen it for themselves. To confirm their innocence, Adam, Dave, and Doofer decide to sneak into a frat party dressed as women. After they decide on this plan, there is a cut to a frat guy opening the door with a smile on his face then giving them a disgusted look and saying “Geez, ass!” Only after this



comment does the audience see the guys' transformations for themselves. After a sequence showing Malcolm and his partner preparing the latex mask and other body parts for his Big Momma disguise, the camera switches to Malcolm's point of view as he goes to welcome Sherry and her son Trent. Only after they say hello to Big Momma does the audience see the completed transformation. The reaction shot is intended to model the appropriate reaction for the audience. The surprised and disgusted reactions in these examples send the message to the audience that they should find the transgender alter egos of the characters ridiculous, whether audience members actually feel that way or not, and laugh accordingly.

The two films that do show extended initial transformation scenes continue the trend of privileging the heteronormative identities of the characters. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, there is a cut from Daniel showing up at his brother's house asking to be made a woman to a series of outrageous parodies of femininity. Daniel treats the transformation process as a standup comedy routine and creates entire personalities and backstories for these women, based on Barbara Streisand and a stereotypical Jewish mother, mainly for the entertainment of his brother and the audience since none of these women match the alter ego he created during his phone interview with Miranda. There is a final cut and Mrs. Doubtfire is seen for the first time. The transformation process for Daniel is meant to serve his own amusement rather than accomplishing the goal of reuniting with his children.

Matt's transformation in *100 Girls* skirts the line between showing the process of transformation and saving the finished result for a big reveal. Matt's friend Wendy helps

him to shave his legs, put on a bra, and apply makeup, all of which cause him pain. He focuses during the entire process on his own discomfort and treats every article of clothing as either a torture device or as ridiculous, criticizing his skirt as “easy access” and women in general for the number of hours they spend picking out a pair of shoes. When he sees himself in the mirror, however, he is thoroughly pleased with his appearance, calling himself a “Foxy lady!” Though the audience has seen him going through the stages of the transformation, the first time audience members see his full transformation is when he looks at himself in the mirror. The audience is invited to appreciate the results of the transformation along with Matt and since he has been appropriately critical of the process, he can appreciate his appearance with no risk to his heteronormativity.

The lack of attention given to the process of transformation for the characters helps to preserve the privilege given to their heteronormative identities. Since the transformations happen during a quick cut between scenes, they can be treated as almost magical, the result of some external power, rather than seeing the characters struggle to pull a pair of pantyhose up their legs, close the clasps of a bra, or experiment with the correct way to apply lipstick, all of which might undermine their heteronormative identities. The characters may have to don transgender disguises, but they are not going to concern themselves with the details of completing their transformations. When the process is seen, it is treated as a joke or as close to torture. Even then, the final transformations are saved for a big reveal. Daniel may joke around with his brother and

Matt may play around with women's clothing, but both of these sequences avoid the details of the characters' transformations.

Even when adopting transgender identities, the heteronormative identities of the characters must be privileged, which is accomplished visually through a lack of attention to the process of transformation. This lack of attention sends the message that the characters' transgender identities should be treated with a similar lack of attention; the heteronormative identities of the characters are what matters while their transgender identities are more insubstantial. Their transgender identities appear as if by magic and disappear just as quickly. Once they have donned their transgender disguises, the characters now become objects and possessors of the gaze.

#### *Objects and possessors of the gaze*

Crossdressed characters in transgender farces problematize the standard workings of the heteronormative male gaze. While they maintain their heteronormative identities, their transgender identities make it difficult for audience members to fully adopt their point of view. This dual identity allows these characters to be both objects and possessors of the gaze. For the characters in transgender farces, their "positions as subjects or objects of the gaze constructs their gender" (Lieberfeld and Sanders 131).

The trans-misogynistic gaze is most evident in the scenes where the characters are the object of the gaze as their transformations are revealed. As is often the case with women in film, the characters are revealed via a tilt or camera movement that begins at the characters' feet and moves slowly up their bodies before reaching their faces. *Some Like It Hot*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Just One of the Guys*, *Sorority Boys*, *The*

*All-American Co-Ed*, and *100 Girls* all contain variations on this visual representation of the characters, positioning them as objects to be looked at. As Joe and Jerry walk along the train platform dressed as women for the first time, the audience is invited to stare at their legs in the same way that Joe leered at the legs of the dancing girls at the speakeasy. The opening of *The All-American Co-Ed* focuses on the sexy legs of a chorus line until the camera pulls back to reveal the male identities of the owners of those legs. After Michael's transformation, we look at him as he walks along the sidewalk toward the camera; this is someone the audience is supposed to look *at*, not identify with. Having identified with Michael's heteronormative identity, the audience is now directed to view his transgender identity as an object of ridicule. Matt also becomes subject to his roommate Rod's objectifying gaze as Rod tries to look up Matt's skirt then imagines him naked. This use of the gaze privileges the heteronormative identities of the characters by subjecting them to a voyeuristic gaze that encodes humor into their transgender identities through a substituting of the expected objects of the male gaze, attractive women, with transgender women. The message communicated through this use of a voyeuristic gaze is that transgender women's bodies are not intended to be sources of pleasure for anyone.

The characters are also subject to a fetishistic gaze as their bodies are reduced to their individual parts. Along with Joe and Jerry's aforementioned legs, the extended makeover scenes in *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* feature extreme close-ups of Michael's and Daniel's bodies, particularly their lips, eyes, and legs, as they apply makeup and get dressed. *The All-American Co-Ed* and *Sorority Boys* also feature similar scenes. This

focus on individual body parts rather than the characters as a whole communicates the message that transgender identities are nothing more than the sum of their parts. The heteronormative identities of the characters are generally not presented in this way,<sup>10</sup> the one rupture being the scene that opens *Tootsie* in which Michael is seen applying makeup to make himself look like an older man, to ensure that they are seen as complete individuals rather than as disembodied body parts.

The positioning of the characters as the objects of the voyeuristic and fetishistic categories of the trans-misogynistic gaze, and the gaze in general, is part of a larger construction of the gaze in these films as clearly one in which men gaze at women. As Joe and Jerry play at the speakeasy, Joe openly leers at the dancing girls, forgetting even to play his sax. Stu, the rich alpha male to Daniel's sloppy loser, openly stares at Miranda while she tries to explain her decorating ideas for his newly purchased mansion. As a norm enforcer, Stu's employment of the gaze is intended to make Daniel look better by comparison for caring more about his children than ogling women.

The KOK fraternity house in *Sorority Boys* is a den of the male gaze. During the frat party that opens the film, Leah hands out flyers protesting the frat's treatment of women. Her positioning in the film as a feminist shrew is visually represented by her appearance: her hair is in a ponytail and she is wearing glasses and an unbuttoned long-sleeved shirt. Another visual comment on a woman failing to live up to traditional standards of beauty can be found in *100 Girls*. Matt and his roommate Rod decide to take a Women's Studies course. The professor of the course is introduced via a shot of her long, ungroomed armpit hair. As she questions the reason why the two young men

signed up for her class, she is visually represented in a dominatrix-style SS uniform out to “teach you boys a lesson.” Not only does she not follow standard beauty practices, but she is visually framed as militant toward those who would question her authority. Women who do not conform to heteronormative standards of beauty are positioned as undesirable, the KOK fraternity even throws a net over them and tosses them out of their parties, and as subject to constant policing of their behavior by heteronormative characters. Since the transgender identities of the characters are treated as objects in a similar way, the message of conformity to heteronormative standards is made clear.

Adam is repeatedly subjected to a trans-misogynistic gaze as he walks to campus. A guy honks his car horn at Adam while his friend yells “Fat ass, DOG girl!” and throws a drink at him. Adam gets pissed and says to the other members of the sorority, “Why do you let them treat you like this? You can’t be a bunch of pussies you’re whole lives!” While Adam places the blame for street harassment on women for their failure to take action, the other sorority members write off his anger to hormones, with one member saying to the others “Whoa, PMS!” as Adam storms off and trips on the stairs. The guy in the car returns later, yelling “Fat City! Clear the way for Buttzilla!” This comment gets to Adam as he checks his butt out in the mirror after getting back to his room and uses a Thighmaster to exercise. Adam’s concern about his appearance is a product of his inability to be perceived with the heteronormative privilege to which he is accustomed. He is not used to people laughing at him or harassing him because of his appearance; in fact, he is used to being the one who harasses others.

Adam is often treated as the least attractive member of the group, often because he is the one who tries the hardest to live up to traditional standards of beauty. Adam is the one who spends the most time getting ready each day, but he is also usually the target of the male gaze. Doofer seems to be given a pass for not even trying, though he is upset after being ignored by the staff at a department store makeup counter while trying to pick out the right makeup for the KOKtail cruise, while Dave is presented as the most conventionally attractive. A moment of he and Adam exiting a building is illustrative of the different treatment they receive. A random man holds the door open for Dave but lets it slam in Adam's face, even though Adam is seen running toward the door asking the man to hold it open. Dave does not face the same negative consequences of the gaze as Adam because of his more conventional attractiveness and because he is more likely to discard his transgender identity when in public. The message is that if transgender women are unable to achieve a certain level of heteronormative attractiveness then they should not be seen in public. By presenting the transgender identities of the characters as failing to meet the standards of conventional attractiveness, their heteronormative identities are privileged by not being disparaged in the same way. The critique of the characters' appearances is rooted in the films' subversion of the male gaze that frames the characters in the same objectifying manner that attractive women are usually subject to in order to highlight their failures to live up to heteronormative standards. The visual code of replicating the male gaze is so frequently used not only because it provides a cheap laugh but because of the clear

privileging of the heteronormative identities of the characters it achieves through its messages about the reception of transgender individuals.

The heteronormative identities of the characters are also privileged through the manner in which they possess the gaze. As heteronormative individuals, they may be uncomfortable with and unaccustomed to being the object of the gaze but this does not prevent them from possessing the gaze and objectifying other women. Malcolm cannot help but gawk at Sherry in her lingerie when she takes off her sweater after spilling jam on it. He also stares at her butt as she reaches for something on a high shelf in the cupboard. Joe and Jerry both stare at Sugar Kane's butt as she sashays past them on the way to the train and her legs when they catch her sneaking booze in the women's restroom; Jerry also openly ogles the girls in the band as they undress on their first night on the train. During his audition for a soap opera, Michael as Dorothy lowers his glasses to stare at the butt of Julie as she walks away after helping him pick up some papers he dropped. The lowering of the glasses makes it clear that he is staring at her; Michael has no trouble seeing through the glasses so the action is meant to highlight the direction of his gaze. All of these moments happen while the characters are disguised as their transgender alter egos and so would be unusual actions for the heterosexual women they are positioned as. Yet again, a visual code is used to privilege the characters' heteronormative identities which cannot be contained in the presence of an attractive woman. This objectification of women might be seen as justification for the treatment of the characters discussed previously except for the fact that the films' privileging of



heteronormativity approves of this behavior. The characters' objectifying gazes help support the very standards of beauty they are criticized for failing to live up to.

Even a costume can reveal how attractive women are objectified in transgender farces. The final musical number in *The All-American Co-Ed* is about how lonely farm girls are when the farmers go off to war. The farm girls are dressed in short skirts while the farmers are wearing satin overalls but to ensure that the girls playing the farmers are still seen as attractive, one pants leg is long while the other is short in order to not completely hide their sexy legs. In this scene, Bob is originally supposed to perform as one of the farm girls as his alter ego Bobbie but once his identity is revealed to Virginia, he switches costumes with another girl in order to dress more masculinely, or at least as masculine as one can be in satin overalls. Bob's new costume, though, is the only farmer costume with two full pants legs since no one is interested in seeing Bob's sexy legs. While the women in the film are objectified by the gaze, Bob's heteronormative identity is privileged down to the costume he wears. Through the visual codes in transgender farces, heteronormativity is defined as the objectification of attractive women and the criticism of less attractive women for failing to conform to the same standards of beauty. The sharp divide between attractiveness and unattractiveness structures the entire approach in these films to who should be looked at and how they should be looked at.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the experiences of Terri and Victoria as objects of the gaze further support its construction as heteronormative. Both are able to escape the gaze as their transgender alter egos but since their heteronormative identities are as women, they

become the object of it again when reasserting those identities. The opening scene of *Just One of the Guys* is a camera movement up Terri's body as she sleeps in nothing but her bra and panties, and a lot of attention is given to her appearance when she is getting dressed in a tight, white dress for her date with Greg. Every opportunity is taken to objectify Terri in the few moments she is not seen in her transgender alter ego in the film. Victoria's female body also marks her as an object of the gaze. King, unable to stop thinking about Victoria, sneaks into her hotel room while she prepares for a bath. He watches her undress and get into the bath, with the camera focused on the lascivious grin on his face, and sneaks back out undetected.<sup>12</sup> Given their objectification by the gaze, it comes as no surprise that Terri and Victoria spend the most time as their transgender alter egos and are least likely to discard these identities in public. Their objectification in these fleeting moments when they are not seen as their transgender alter egos is a stark reminder that heteronormative privilege does not mean the same thing for women as it does for men.

In order to privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters, their transgender identities are belittled and mocked as objects of the gaze while their heteronormative identities are positioned as sites of power and control as possessors of the gaze. The message communicated is that transgender individuals, particularly transgender women, are not worth looking at through the ridicule they are subjected to by framing them in a style similar to the one used for more heteronormatively attractive women. The intended joke is the apparent ridiculousness of a male-bodied individual visually presented in a similar way as an attractive woman. The power located in the

heteronormative identities of the characters transcends the limits of those identities, allowing them to objectify others as their transgender alter egos. This visual code not only calls into question any lessons the characters may have learned but also problematizes the identities of transgender individuals in the real world when they enter gender-segregated spaces. By raising the specter of the objectifying gaze, this visual code raises the possibility that a transgender woman is in a changing room to spy on other women rather than to try on clothing or that a transgender man is in a men's restroom to look at other men's penises. The visual privileging of the characters' heteronormative identities comes at the cost of real harm to transgender individuals.

Being unaccustomed to the objectifying gaze, it is not surprising that the characters' are quick to discard their transgender identities. The final discarding of these identities is accomplished visually through a big reveal.

#### *The big reveal*

Once ready to exit the liminal spaces of their transgender identities, the characters must discard these identities for a final time. The final abandoning of these identities is not done in private but in a big public reveal meant to confirm the heteronormative identities of the characters for any who might have questioned them. The motivations for these reveals may be self-serving or somewhat altruistic, but the ultimate goal is to forcefully reassert the heteronormative identities of the characters. While images of the characters in the process of transformation are generally avoided in these films, images of the characters in a transitional identity that blurs their transgender and heteronormative identities are intended to privilege their heteronormative identities

by framing the scenes as an inability to contain their heteronormative identities within their transgender identities any longer. By removing their wigs, the characters definitively assert their heteronormativity.

The removal of a wig or mask is the most common form of big reveal for male-to-female crossdressers in transgender farces, making the argument that the hair and face are stronger signifiers of femininity than other aspects of a transgender woman's body. Bob's wig falls off after he walks under a tree during preparations for the film's final musical number, and Joe takes his off after Sugar follows him to Osgood's boat while he is being chased by mobsters. Upon confirming their heteronormative identities, Virginia and Sugar fall instantly in love with Bob and Joe, respectively, needing no further information than this visual proof. Jerry removes his wig on Osgood's boat as a last desperate attempt to convince Osgood, who has fallen madly in love with him, that they cannot get married. The image of Jerry with his short hair and masculine features in a dress is not enough to dissuade Osgood, opening up the potential for a non-heteronormative relationship, but Jerry's big reveal sends the message that he is no longer interested in pursuing any kind of relationship with Osgood. The ambiguous ending of the film has left many critics to ponder the possibilities for Jerry and Osgood after the screen fades to black, but the definitive manner in which Jerry removes his wig and asserts his heteronormative identity implies that there is no future together for them.

Dave's big reveal is in service to the woman he has fallen in love with. During the KOKtail Cruise, a group of KOK alumni, led by Dave's father, decide Leah should be removed from the party using the fraternity's dogcatcher routine. Since the party

takes place on a boat, this means throwing Leah overboard, but Dave steps forward dressed in a lavender party dress and heels to stop them. The other men pay no attention to him until he tells them to stop in his masculine voice and, very dramatically, removes his wig. His father is suddenly able to recognize Dave, as if his transgender alter ego is some kind of superhero disguise, and the other alumni cease attempting to throw Leah overboard. Having been ignored as his transgender alter ego, Dave removes his wig and reasserts his heteronormativity. Even wearing a dress is not enough to undermine the privilege associated with his heteronormative identity. Though his actions may be for Leah's benefit, they are also a clear assertion of his heteronormativity; unaccustomed to being ignored when making demands, Dave discovers that what is hindering him is the trappings of his transgender disguise. Removing his wig restores the heteronormative privilege he feels entitled to.

Michael's big reveal is more self-serving. Looking for a way out of the one-year contract he has been offered as Dorothy, he decides to reveal his identity during a live broadcast of the soap opera Dorothy has become the star of. After delivering a dramatic speech involving long lost twins and other typical soap opera fare, he removes his wig and reveals his identity on live television. His ulterior motive, convincing Julie that her attraction to him is okay, initially backfires as she angrily knees him in the crotch but as I have discussed before, she changes her mind by the end of the film. Michael experiences the greatest success of his acting career as Dorothy, but he chooses to give that all up by revealing his heteronormative identity. The heteronormative identities of

the characters must be privileged over their transgender identities no matter what financial or emotional costs may result from that decision.

Daniel and Malcolm also suffer initial emotional costs after the big reveals of their heteronormative identities, particularly for the young children who have come to care for their transgender alter egos. Both Daniel and Malcolm's reveals involve the removal of a face mask rather than a wig. Daniel's plan to sabotage Stu's dinner with Miranda and his children by slipping pepper into his dish backfires when Stud starts to choke. Daniel, as Mrs. Doubtfire, comes rushing to the rescue and while performing the Heimlich maneuver successfully on Stu, his latex mask begins to peel off, revealing his identity to Miranda and the rest of his family. Particularly heartbroken is his youngest daughter Natalie who, unlike Daniel's other children, did not know about Daniel's disguise; she begins to cry upon seeing her father's face peeking out from under Mrs. Doubtfire's. Equally upset are Sherry and her son Trent after Malcolm's mask begins to peel off during a fight with the escaped convict Lester. Both had grown to trust not only Big Momma but also Malcolm, who had interacted with them after discarding his transgender alter ego. Like Natalie for her father, the trust they had placed in him is shattered. While it may be a key component of the characters reasserting their heteronormative identities, the big reveal does not come without its costs.

Dramatic wig removals are not an option for Terri or Victoria after they both made the greatest visual sign of their commitment to their transgender identities of any characters in transgender farces through cutting their hair. Regardless of their inability to accomplish their big reveals through wig removal, the characters still need to reassert

their heteronormative identities. Terri accomplishes this goal by exposing her breasts. After Kevin has outed her to Rick and the rest of her classmates at prom, Terri is desperate to find a way to convince Rick that she is a woman and that she loves him so she rips open her tuxedo shirt and exposes her bare breasts. This visual presentation of a female secondary sex trait convinces Rick of her heteronormative identity better than her words ever could.

Victoria's reassertion of her heteronormative identity is more subtle than Terri's. After beginning a relationship with King, Victoria is initially determined to continue performing as the female impersonator Victor but when a rival nightclub owner brings the police to arrest her for fraud, she is compelled to give up her role to Toddy. Having readopted her heteronormative identity, she joins King in the audience to watch Toddy perform a comic spoof of one of her songs. The divide between watching Victoria watch Toddy perform a satire of her transgender alter ego is the subtle reveal of her heteronormative identity. It is fitting that Victoria's reveal happens in such a low-key way since removing her wig to reveal her transgender identity to thunderous applause became the visual signature of her performances as Victor. The fact that Victoria and Terri have to resort to such unique ways of revealing their heteronormativity sends the message that there is more disguise for a feminine alter ego than for a masculine one. The male-to-female transgender characters have a number of components to their disguises that could be removed to reveal their identities, but the female-to-male characters must either reveal intimate body parts or don the trappings of feminine

disguise themselves. In these films, asserting feminine heteronormative privilege is much more complex than its masculine counterpart.

The big reveal is the final visual confirmation of the heteronormative identities of the characters. The fact that these reveals often involve very dramatic actions, such as wig removals or exposing breasts, sends the message that the heteronormative identities of the characters were very much at risk of being subsumed by their transgender identities. Bold and decisive action is needed to make their heteronormative identities crystal clear to any who might have doubts.

Like the narrative conventions of transgender farces, the visual codes of the trans-misogynistic revolve around privileging the heteronormative identities of the characters. The transformation process is given little attention, the characters feel uncomfortable when they become the objects of the gaze while also possessing the gaze to objectify others, and they must reveal their heteronormative identities in a dramatic final flourish that leaves no doubt to those around them of the truth of their identities. Their transgender identities are either ignored or mocked for failing to live up to heteronormative standards of beauty only to be discarded when no longer needed. Ultimately, the transgender identities of the characters are laughed at while their heteronormative identities are privileged.

### **Conclusion**

The narrative conventions of transgender farces work to distance the audience from the transgender identities of the characters while privileging the characters' heteronormative identities as potential sites of identification. The crisis that leads to



crossdressing can be decoded as an overreaction to the situations faced by the characters while the crossdressing itself also serves to distance the characters from the audience. The heteronormative identities of the characters are offered to the audience as sites of identification through the difficulties the characters have crossdressing and their blossoming heterosexual romances. The extreme lengths that the heteronormative rivals of the characters go to in their roles as norm enforcers also position the heteronormative identities of the characters as more attractive sites of identification, further distancing their transgender identities even as sympathetic feelings are evoked in the audience. In the end, the characters even distance themselves from their transgender identities by abandoning them in favor of clearly heteronormative identities, usually sealed with a kiss.

The visual codes of the trans-misogynistic gaze also work to distance the audience from the transgender characters. The characters' transformations are never successful for the audience because they have access to enough insider information to know that the characters are crossdressing but are not able to see enough of the process of the transformations to connect with the effort the characters put into their transformations. The audience is also directed to look at the transgender characters by the trans-misogynistic gaze unless the characters are engaged in heteronormative activities, thus creating a visual separation between the characters and the audience. Other transgender films, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Transamerica* (2005), may be able to do a better job creating a visual connection between the transgender characters and the audience, but the trans-misogynistic gaze may so shape the audience's way of

looking at transgender characters that it becomes hard to overcome no matter how seriously the characters are treated.

The distance produced by transgender farces has potential negative impacts on the lives of transgender individuals. The crisis requiring crossdressing gives the impression that transgender identity is the product of external factors, such as childhood trauma or perverse desires, rather than as a legitimate gender identity. With such a focus in these films on identification through heteronormative activities, a transgender individual may face chastisement for any behavior that lies outside of the norm while being constantly reminded of any previous actions or activities that could be perceived as heteronormative, such as dating a member of the opposite sex or watching football. Transgender people are also positioned in these films as people to be looked *at*, encouraging even total strangers to openly stare at any transgender people they encounter. Finally, the endings of these films, in which the characters abandon their transgender alter egos, give the impression that transgender identity is temporary and will eventually end, often leading family and friends to hold out hope that the transgender people in their lives will abandon their transgender identities as well. Given the popularity of transgender farces, transgender people have a lot of work to do to overcome the distance created for the important people in their lives.

## CHAPTER III

## TRANSGENDER AS KILLER SURPRISE

An image of the transgender individual that is almost as well known as the comic image of a man struggling to walk down the street in heels is of a transgender character with knife raised high, ready to plunge it into the unsuspecting body of a, usually female, victim. Most memorable from the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), similar images can be found in such films as *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Sleepaway Camp* (1983). This image alone may be a limited form of transgender representation, but it is connected to larger forms of representation through the emotions of fear and disgust. The fear felt by audience members upon seeing Norman Bates as Mother throw open the shower curtain to stab an unsuspecting Marion Crane to death comes not just from the shock of an unexpected event occurring but also from the reconsideration of the events that preceded the shower scene that the audience must engage in to make sense of what they have just seen. Further reconsideration of the events must be done later when it is revealed that Norman is Mother. J. Jack Halberstam argues that this rethinking of a film after the revealing of a transgender character's identity forms one variation of the transgender gaze that can be adopted by the audience (78-79).

This reconsideration is necessary because unlike in transgender farces, the audience for transgender thrillers generally does not know about the transgender identities of the characters until the moment of revelation. While transgender farces are constructed to privilege the heteronormative identities of the characters over their transgender identities, the transgender identities of the characters in transgender thrillers

are withheld in order to construct an image of the transgender characters as objects of disgust and fear. Fear and disgust are associated with the revelation of the characters' transgender identities because the audience must now reconsider the identities of characters who are initially constructed as heteronormative. This reconsideration of the characters' identities links these scenes to such scenes as Fergus' vomit-filled reaction to seeing Dil's penis for the first time in *The Crying Game* (1992) and a lawyer fainting upon seeing up Myra's skirt toward the end of *Myra Breckenridge* (1970). While the films may differ considerably in tone, the characters are constructed to prompt similar reactions from the audience.

Julia Serano classifies characters such as these as deceptive transsexuals whose ability to pass as women successfully provokes fear in audience members, particularly men. Because of their ability to pass as women, deceptive transsexuals “generally act as unexpected plot twists, or play the role of sexual predators who fool innocent straight guys into falling for other ‘men’” (36). Jody Norton argues that transgender women remain uncanny in Western culture because their identities and existences are terrifying for men; while a transgender woman may have been identified at one point as a biological male, her “gender is irrefragably feminine” (145). Transgender individuals exist in a space of being familiar and unfamiliar at the same time to heteronormativity. Accusations of deception extend from this familiar unfamiliarity and are an important aspect of the construction of the characters. The fear and disgust attached to these characters' transgender identities are constructed through the obscuring of these identities; if the characters were only open about their identities, the argument goes, they

would not receive the same negative receptions. Because the characters are presented as actively hiding their transgender identities from others, they must be trying to deceive others. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the complex ways in which the characters in transgender thrillers are constructed as objects of fear.

The fear of transgender characters is built up in these films through the genre tropes of the suspense thriller, the success or failure of which is “determined by their ability to create and sustain tension” (Graves and Engle 193). The suspense genre “presupposes a *threat*, building tension with its promise that something hideous will occur, and there is no escape” (Sipos 5). While scholars like James Kendrick (5) and R. Barton Palmer (16) argue that suspense thrillers ultimately confirm audience suspicions, Altan Loker argues that the suspense in these films is the result of the audience’s guilt felt as the result of “conflicting wishes related to a story event that has morally acceptable and unacceptable components that are inseparable from each other” (24). Having chosen to go see a suspense thriller, the audience secretly wishes to see the characters killed or terrorized but feels guilty because of the morally unacceptable nature of this wish. It is not the audience’s conscious suspicions of the killer’s identity that produces the tension that is experienced as suspense but the audience’s unconscious wish for there to be a killer. Given the surprise expressed by many audience members at the revelation that a character is transgender, Loker’s argument that suspense is the result of guilt helps to explain the fear felt by audience members upon encountering a transgender character. The audience may have wished for the characters to face danger

and death but feeling guilty about this wish, they direct their fear at the transgender character, distancing the character from the audience.

Suspense is what unites such disparate films as *Psycho*, *Sleepaway Camp*, *Myra Breckenridge*, and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994). *Myra Breckenridge* may be a campy celebration of non-heteronormative identities and *Ace Ventura* may be a wacky screwball comedy, but the constructions of the transgender characters in these films share important similarities to those found in more obvious thrillers like *Psycho* or *Dressed to Kill*. My argument is rooted more in specific genre tropes of the suspense thriller, such as the delayed revelation of the killer and the building sense of dread after a series of gruesome murders, than in arguing that each of the films should be classified as belonging to the same genre. The manner in which the transgender identities of the characters are constructed exhibit interesting similarities across a number of films that vary greatly in terms of tone and overall style. My analysis focuses on these connections and the messages they communicate about transgender individuals.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways transgender characters are distanced from the audience as objects of fear. After a review of relevant scholarly literature, I conduct a textual analysis of the following films: *Psycho* (1960),<sup>1</sup> *Myra Breckenridge* (1970),<sup>2</sup> *Dressed to Kill* (1980),<sup>3</sup> *Sleepaway Camp* (1983),<sup>4</sup> *The Crying Game* (1992),<sup>5</sup> *The Last Seduction* (1994),<sup>6</sup> *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994),<sup>7</sup> *Peacock* (2010),<sup>8</sup> and *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* (2010).<sup>9</sup> The films are analyzed in terms of narrative conventions (positioned as outsiders by heteronormative society, kill or threaten the repressive agents of heteronormativity, and efforts at containment) and the visual codes of the transphobic

gaze (delayed revelation of the characters' transgender identities, forceful unmasking, and looks of fear and disgust).

### **Literature Review**

Marjorie Garber argues that transgender thrillers represent societal anxieties over the most visible example of the questioning of gender essentialism (102). Transgender identity is seen as the root cause of the anxiety, rather than the inflexibility of heteronormativity, marking it in these films as “a site of cultural anxiety so profound that it manifests itself in psychosis” (115). The anxieties over transgender identity can apparently only be assuaged by locating it in psychosis, which John Phillips calls “the dark underside of the progress narratives” of transgender farces (85). The progress narrative as seen in transgender farces is about the characters traveling through the liminal space of transgender identity to be reincorporated into heteronormative society. Transgender thrillers, on the other hand, present the possibility of unassimilatable transgender characters who cannot be fully incorporated into heteronormative society and may not even desire to be part of heteronormativity. Scholars locate this tension between the transgender characters and heteronormative society in the difficulty members of the audience have in identifying with the characters. The characters' psychoses and their gender transgressions are identified as arguments made by the films for why the characters should be distanced from the audience as objects of fear.

Scholars point out the many ways transgender thrillers, particularly *Psycho*, violated the expectations of the audience.<sup>10</sup> William Indick argues that while the film was not the first psycho-thriller, it broke many of the previously established rules of the

genre (32), primarily by killing the main character less than halfway through the film. Communication scholar James Kendrick argues that by breaking these rules, *Psycho* “helped to pave the way for future films by initiating audiences into a new narrative structure, one for which they had previously not been primed” (6). The film created new associative pathways for audience members that changed what they expected from film thrillers (8-9); instead of assuming that the main character would be safe throughout the film, the audience learned that anyone was fair game when facing a psychotic killer. While the narrative conventions and visual codes of transgender thrillers were initially surprising to audiences, my analysis demonstrates how they solidified into a distinct category of transgender representation.

The changes in the narrative structure initiated by *Psycho* resulted in difficulties of identification for audience members, especially following the shower murder of Marion Crane. The sudden death of Marion, R. Barton Palmer argues, violates the audience’s reading of the film as a melodrama about a woman who commits a crime in pursuit of love (13). While frequent comments are made on the surprising nature of the shower scene, David Thomson argues that the scene builds on the voyeuristic tensions in the first part of the film (22), tensions that are established in the opening scene of Marion and Sam’s hotel rendezvous and carried through to the shower scene by moments like Marion’s boss seeing her in her car as she heads out of town with the stolen money and the steely gaze of the highway patrolman after finding Marion asleep in her car by the side of the road (Wilshire 134). Built on these voyeuristic tensions, the shower scene is



“both stunningly unexpected and a logical release of the pressures built up in the long, sustained overture. Orgasm at last” (Thomson 53).

Through the construction of a voyeuristic gaze that focuses exclusively on Marion, the audience’s identification is with her but at the conclusion of the shower scene, she lies dead on the tile floor of the bathroom. With the audience’s identification with Marion broken off by the shower murder, Robin Wood (146) and William Indick (32) argue that audience members are now forced to identify with Norman since he is the only major character remaining in the film. This identification becomes problematic later in the film because not only is Norman revealed to be the killer, he is also revealed to be a transgender individual. Kendall Phillips argues that the audience struggles to identify with Norman because the “real function of the second half of *Psycho* is to pick up the pieces of our shattered expectations and reveal to us just how dramatically wrong we were” (79). Rather than working to find out the truth, Phillips argues that all the audience can do is recognize how little they understood what was happening in the film. Phillips’ account of the processing of the revelations in the second half of *Psycho* provides an example of Halberstam’s rewinding of films featuring transgender characters (78-79). My analysis focuses on the ways transgender characters like Norman are distanced from audience identification long before the revelation of their transgender identities. This revelation is shocking confirmation of a suspicious tension that is built up in the films through the narrative conventions and visual codes. The characters are positioned as somehow removed from heteronormative society even though audience members may not know exactly why until the moment of revelation.

The distancing of the characters from the audience is furthered through the connection between their transgender identities and their psychoses.<sup>11</sup> Robert Genter argues that by the time *Psycho* was released, “the image of the psychopath had already infiltrated the American imagination, an image that linked concerns over national security to lingering worries over political behaviour and deviant sexuality” (135). In locating Norman’s madness in killing his mother, which resulted in the development of a maternal superego, “Hitchcock drew upon a larger discussion in the early Cold War about the fragility of mother-child relations” (151-153). The psychoses of the characters are connected to their transgender identities and vice versa. It is often difficult in these films to determine which precedes the other. In the application of this diagnosis of psychosis, scholars argue for different triggers for the characters’ psychotic rages. Paul Gordon argues, contrary to the popular belief that Norman murders Marion because of his attraction to her, that Norman actually kills Marion as the “result of an anal-compulsive need to repress his sexual desires” (130), an explanation that is also offered in the film *Dressed to Kill* for Bobbie’s murder of Kate Miller. It is not his attraction to Marion and the fact that he cannot have her that drives Norman to kill her but his shame and anger at his attraction to her or, as Gordon argues, to his mother which, to deal with, Norman must, “like Oedipus, go blind – if not literally, then figuratively through madness” (139). Raymond Bellour argues that the film contrasts Norman’s psychosis and Marion’s neurosis (346-347), which Robin Wood labels “compulsive” and “psychotic” behavior, respectively (145), as a way of understanding Marion’s drive to steal the money in order to create a happy life with Sam and Norman’s drive to kill her

because of his unwanted attraction. While not all critics agree with the psychosis explanation of Norman's behavior, David Thomson in particular argues that the psychological explanation ruins the suspense and labels it Hitchcock's big joke in the film (86-90), most critics accept the representation of the psychopath in Norman Bates. The film, and transgender thrillers in general, constructs Norman as a character the audience should fear because of his psychosis, and his psychosis is so connected to his transgender identity as Mother that the fear is also connected to this identity. I argue that the two, representations of transgender identity and psychosis, are so connected in these films that the emotions attributed by the audience to one are also attributed to the other. Scholarly analysis of gender representations in these films helps to make this connection clearer.

Steven Hyler notes that women in a number of psycho-thrillers are portrayed as "seductress[es] . . . nymphomaniac[s] of mythic proportions" (33), providing possible justification for their brutal murders. Ronald Librach argues that the death of Kate Miller in *Dressed to Kill*, like the death of Marion in *Psycho*, can be viewed as moralistic punishment for her actions (167; see also Williams 94). In trying to explain the seemingly random nature of the murders in these thrillers, many of the films fall back on the sexual behavior of the female victims. Linda Williams points out, though, that in these films, women are presented not just as the victims but also the monsters committing the crimes (96). It is generally the female side of the killers that commits the murders (94), with the emotional instability of women offered as evidence of their violent potential. In order to balance the image of women as helpless victims, women

are also represented as unbalanced murderers, a trend that would continue in such films as *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

Williams argues that “although the body of the attacker might appear to be male, it is really the woman in this man who kills” (95). This is an example of a convention in the films and in scholarly analysis of them to treat the male and female sides of a character’s identity as separate and distinct. It is also a continuation of the treatment of the characters’ transgender identities as nothing more than a manifestation of their psychoses. Rebecca Bell-Metereau argues that in *Dressed to Kill*, “the supposedly feminine disguise and psyche seem to be the scapegoat for essentially masculine misogynist impulses” (188; see Flanagan 200 for a similar discussion of Lt. Lois Einhorn from *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*). In order to fully understand the ways these films are constructing the transgender identities of the characters through a heteronormative perspective, I argue for an approach that takes the characters as complete individuals rather than as separate personalities in constant conflict. This perspective offers insight into how these characters are constructed differently for existing outside of heteronormativity rather than treating their actions as the result of individual deficiencies.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of gender, scholars examine the ways the transgender identities of the characters support the heteronormative gender binary, particularly in the case of Dil from *The Crying Game*.<sup>13</sup> Scholars are divided along essentialist and performative interpretations of Dil’s identity. Kristin Handler argues that aspects of Dil’s identity, along with the identities of Jody and Jude, are essentialized, with Fergus as the only

character allowed the possibility of change during the course of the film (41). At issue for Handler is Dil's identification as a woman, rather than problematizing the gender binary by adopting an androgynous or genderqueer identity. "For Dil to identify, rather than to masquerade, as a woman implicitly affirms the grip of sexual difference on *subjectivity*, even while the relationship of sexual difference to the *body* is denaturalized" (35). For Handler, the subject positions of man and woman are essentialized in the film so Dil's claim to an identity as a woman, rather than a feminine performance of gender, is an essential identity claim. Leighton Grist goes a step further than Handler, essentializing Dil not based on her subject position as a woman but on her biological development as male. Being born male allows Dil, Grist argues, to exercise "residual masculine aggression" in shooting Jude (20-21). In contrast, Jude, the aggressive, phallic woman, is killed for her subversion of patriarchy (20-21). Based on this argument, Jude would seem to be the more transgressive character by behaving in a manner outside of what is expected of a woman; Dil merely performs according to the societal expectations of both genders, submissive in her performance of femininity but able to draw on masculine anger and violence when needed. Jack Boozer argues, in contrast, that this assertiveness is an important element of her move from a submissive form of femininity to achieve a more assertive, balanced femininity after being forced to enter the world of Fergus' politics (174-175).

Although *The Crying Game* provides no real validation of women characters per se, there is a validation of a hypothetically balanced femininity, albeit in the guise of the male transsexual . . . In Dil's forced evolution from apolitical masochism to active self-determination, she does not change her claim to femininity but she does change the form it takes. (175)

These analyses of Dil are based in arguments about the essential qualities of the character's identity either in terms of subject position or biology. While I agree that some aspects of Dil's gender identity position are problematic, particularly her submissiveness to men, I am more interested in the ways she and the other transgender characters respond to being positioned outside of heteronormativity rather than if their identity positions support a binary system of gender. Viewing their identities as positioned outside of heteronormativity opens up a new perspective on the actions of the characters and the ways their identities are constructed in relationship with the audience than is available to analyses more interested in passing judgment on their gender performances.

Other scholars base their analyses in a performative approach to gender that comes closer to the positional approach I use in this project. John Phillips argues, in contrast to Grist, that Dil's ability to be as violent as any other character in the film demonstrates how the film resists essentialist classifications (124); instead of being violent because she was born male or submissive because she identifies as a woman, Dil is able to act how she chooses because an individual's behavior is not defined by their sex or gender. Christopher Lockett argues that it is interesting that the scorpion and frog story that Jody tells early in the films is based on essential identities because "the film proceeds to highlight performative rather than innate identities" (297). Rather than reading the actions of the characters based on essential identities, Lockett reads the actions of Dil and the other characters as the product of their performance of gender, even if that performance could be interpreted as reinforcing gender binaries.

Although I agree with Nicola Evans' assessment that the film is built, in many ways, on the "theme of performance as truth" (207), I argue that the performative interpretations of Phillips and Lockett and the positional approach I use in my analysis come closer to understanding the ways the characters are constructed in these films. While Dil's submissiveness can be viewed as an expression of an essential femininity that supports the gender binary, it can also be viewed as a position Dil takes in a space filled with aggressive men that she begins to reject toward the end of the film. By viewing the identities of the characters as positions they take or are positioned in, no identity is seen as permanent and no identity is seen as inherently superior to any other. A positional perspective is helpful to understanding the ways the transgender characters are constructed by narrative conventions and visual codes in relation to heteronormativity.

Scholarship on transgender thrillers focuses on psychosis as an explanation for the violent behavior of the characters and the problematic aspects of their gender identity positions. In my analysis, I move beyond the concern with the individual psychology and behavior of the characters to consider the ways they are constructed as objects of fear through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. While the psychological assessment of the characters' actions has been a prominent feature of the scholarship on transgender thrillers, I argue that the positioning of the characters outside of heteronormativity and their reactions to that positioning are alternative explanations for their actions.<sup>14</sup> In this approach, the transgender identities of the characters are accepted as legitimate identity positions rather than as manifestations of psychosis. This

perspective is especially important for analyzing transgender thrillers because while it would be easy to distance myself from these films by saying that they are not true representations of transgender individuals, in essence delegitimizing the transgender identities on screen, accepting the identities and positions of all of the characters under analysis can reveal more than trying to simply distinguish between good and bad representations.

### **Analysis**

Through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes, the representations in transgender thrillers distance the transgender characters from the audience by positioning them as the objects of fear and disgust. Narrative conventions include the characters being positioned as outsiders by heteronormative society, the characters killing or threatening the repressive agents of heteronormativity, and efforts at containment of the characters' transgender identities. Visual codes of the transphobic gaze include the delayed revelation of the characters' transgender identities, the forceful unmasking of their identities, and looks of fear and disgust in reaction to their identities. These conventions and codes work together to position the transgender identities of the characters as a threat to heteronormative society.

### **Narrative Conventions**

The narratives of transgender thrillers may seem to aim for cheap thrills or scares, but the use of specific conventions sends messages to the audience that the transgender identities of the characters are the sources of their fear. In a variety of ways throughout these films, the characters' transgender identities are positioned as a threat to



heteronormativity. The characters are initially positioned outside of heteronormative society and then strike back at the repressive agents of heteronormativity when they are either punished for their deviance from heteronormative standards or forced to reenter heteronormative society. The films end with efforts at containment; these efforts, however, are not aimed at problematizing the violent portrayals of the transgender characters in the films but at assuring heteronormative audience members that the transgender characters are no longer a threat.

*Positioned as outsiders by heteronormative society*

The characters in transgender thrillers are positioned as outsiders by heteronormative society. Their outsider status is constructed through physical or interpersonal isolation and separation from society as a whole. Some characters seem to revel in their isolation, such as Norman's frequent assertions of how happy he is all alone taking care of the hotel and his mother, while others seek to overcome their isolation through connections with other characters, such as Dil flirting with Fergus through the intermediary of Col the bartender. Whether it is Norman changing the sheets in an empty Bates Hotel, Angela in *Sleepaway Camp* being ostracized by the other campers, or Lt. Lois Einhorn being labeled a tough boss who has trouble getting along with her fellow officers in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, the characters are all portrayed as having difficulty fitting into society or within certain groups. The transgender characters do not choose lives of isolation but are positioned as outsiders by a heteronormative society that does not accept those who deviate from its standards.

Forming a separate community is one way the transgender characters seek to deal with their outsider status. Norman Bates and John from *Peacock* are isolated from the rest of society by their living situations. Norman tells Sam when he comes to the Bates Motel while searching for Marion

This place happens to be my only world. I grew up in that house up there. I had a very happy childhood. My mother and I were more than happy.

Norman is justifying his decision to remain alone at the Bates Motel; as his only world, he would not even know where to begin in trying to start over in a new place. He does not even seem interested in going anywhere else, though his isolation and loneliness are betrayed in such lines to Marion as “A hobby’s supposed to pass the time, not fill it.”

Norman’s reluctance to leave the motel is rooted to his attachment to his mother. John has a similar attachment to his own deceased mother, which is offered as explanation for his decision to continue living in the same house where she died. Even in his job as a file clerk at a local bank, he works in a tiny office in the basement and is pressured by his boss to do more than his fair share of work. The isolation of Norman and John is offered as both a product and cause of their transgender identities.

While Norman and John become physically isolated from the world around them after the loss of their mothers, other transgender characters face interpersonal isolation rather than physical isolation. Angela is labeled as an outsider as soon as she arrives at summer camp with her cousin Ricky. Shy and quiet, lacking the hyperactive energy of the other children at the camp, the first impression of Angela by Meg, her counselor, upon her arrival at the bunk they will be sharing in for the entire summer is to say sarcastically, “Looks like we got a real winner here.” From that moment, Angela is

positioned as separate from the other girls in the bunk. When Angela refuses to eat her dinner the first night, Ronnie, one of the camp leaders, takes her to the kitchen to find her something else to eat. Meg views this as special treatment, saying to Ronnie, “Startin’ to spoil the little brat already.” In describing Angela as a “little brat,” Meg makes it clear that she sees Angela as receiving special treatment through behavior that differs from that of the other campers and intensifies her efforts to make Angela feel isolated from the other children around her.

Like Angela, *Dressed to Kill* presents Bobbie as isolated from society. While Dr. Elliot appears to be a successful and respected psychiatrist, Bobbie is positioned as an outsider, stalking women through the grimy streets of New York in black sunglasses and a black trench coat. She spends her time observing Liz Blake, the only witness to her murder of Kate Miller, through binoculars while Dr. Elliot continues his work undeterred. In her phone messages to Dr. Elliot, Bobbie identifies the source of her isolation as the refusal of Dr. Elliot and other psychiatrists to approve the sex reassignment surgery she desires. Bobbie’s inability to complete her transition is her self-identified cause of her outsider status and the murderous actions she takes to remedy her situation.

Angela and Bobbie are positioned as victims of the bullying and lack of understanding of those around them. Trish in *The Last Seduction* and Dil in *The Crying Game* are positioned as outsiders by the people they love or loved in the past. Trish is only seen in fleeting glimpses but has a major impact on the plot of the film. Mike, her ex-husband, is repeatedly asked by his friends why he returned to the small town of

Beston, New York after leaving for the big city of Buffalo. All he will say about Trish is that marrying her was “a mistake.” Mike is afraid to discuss the specifics of his relationship with Trish, fearing the negative reactions he will receive from others. He would rather isolate her from himself and his friends than risk being isolated from heteronormative society for having a relationship with a transgender woman.

Jody is just as oblique about the specific nature of his relationship with Dil when discussing her with Fergus. He denies even finding Jude attractive, saying “I didn’t even fancy her . . . She’s not my type . . . Now *she’s* my type,” as he shows Fergus a picture of himself with Dil he keeps in his wallet.

Fergus: She’d be anybody’s type.

Jody: Don’t you think of her, you fucker . . . She’s mine. Anyway, she wouldn’t suit you . . . Absolutely not.

Fergus: She your wife?

Jody: I guess you could say that.

Jody is hesitant to openly discuss Dil’s identity or his relationship with her, exhibiting an element of shame or uncertainty about the reactions of others. He tries to warn Fergus away from pursuing a relationship with Dil, which is what eventually happens, but he never clearly states Dil’s transgender identity, either out of his own discomfort or his fear of the reactions he will receive from his Irish captors. This unwillingness to openly discuss the transgender identity of their partners or former partners by Mike and Jody positions Trish and Dil as outsiders who are not spoken of in the same way as those engaged in what are perceived to be more normal relationships.

While characters like Angela and Trish are positioned as outsiders by others, Myra Breckenridge in *Myra Breckenridge* and Lois Einhorn in *Ace Ventura* position

themselves as outsiders through their attitudes and interactions with others. The other cops at the station are intimidated by Lt. Einhorn, who is less than impressed with Ace's shenanigans. Ace exclaims upon first seeing Einhorn, "Holy testicle Tuesday!" a comment on the way the male cops feel instinctively protective of their genitals in Einhorn's presence and a prescient remark given the way Einhorn's transgender identity is revealed later in the film. Einhorn is positioned as a ball buster who makes the men she works with uncomfortable through her unfeminine use of her power and authority. The one opportunity she has to bond with her fellow officers is in her dislike of Ace. At the crime scene of a Miami Dolphins employee who seemingly committed suicide, Ace is talking to a dog when Einhorn comes in. She takes one look at Ace and asks, "Who let Dr. Doolittle in?" This joke at Ace's expense elicits hearty laughter from the other cops on the scene, one of the few times Einhorn is positioned on similar ground with the other cops who work for her. Though making fun of Ace endears her a little to her fellow officers, it marks her as an outsider for audience members. While Ace's eccentric behavior would typically mark him as an outsider as well, and he is positioned that way in the film in contrast to the authority figures of the police, the audience has already seen the humorous and actually insightful method to Ace's madness. To the audience, Ace seems to be the only one making progress on the case to find the kidnapped Dolphins mascot Snowflake while Einhorn and the other cops only serve to stand in his way. And while poking fun at Ace might get a few chuckles from the other cops, Einhorn is still positioned as the cold, heartless ice queen that women are expected to become when occupying positions of authority, completely isolated from the rest of the police force.

Myra Breckenridge sets herself as apart from the rest of society in a voiceover monologue that occurs soon after her sex reassignment surgery.

I am Myra Breckenridge, whom no man will ever possess. The new woman whose astonishing history started with a surgeon's scalpel and will end who knows where . . . Just as Eve was born from Adam's rib, so Myron died to give birth to Myra. Did Myron take his own life, you will ask? Yes and no is my answer. Beyond that, my lips are sealed. Let it suffice for me to say that Myron is with me and that I am the fulfillment of all his dreams. Who is Myra Breckenridge? What is she? Myra Breckenridge is a dish and don't you ever forget it, you motherfuckers.

By referring to herself as “the new woman,” Myra positions herself outside of dominant society, a position she feels grants her superiority over others. Her goal is “the destruction of the American male in all its particulars,” and she goes to Hollywood to get money from her uncle, former movie star and owner of an acting school Buck Loner, to achieve her goals. Myra accepts a job teaching at Buck's school while she waits to collect her money, but her behavior and manner of dress mark her as different from the other students and teachers. Myra bases her personality and fashion sense on the movie stars of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly Marlene Dietrich, and attempts to teach etiquette and elocution to students who have more in common with Beatniks and hippies. Even in a space of outsiders, Myra is seen as different and is quickly labeled by Buck as “weird;” his solution to making her fit in is sex with him which would “straighten her up” because “God knows she wants it.” Buck's misogynistic view that sex would make Myra fall in line is part of the male culture Myra is seeking to destroy, though as I discuss later, her methods do not differ much from what Buck proposes.

The transgender women in *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* share Myra's view that being transgender makes them different, maybe even better, than other members of

society, though this view is framed more in terms of empowerment than annihilation. Creating a sense of community is a common practice among transgender people and members of other marginalized groups to help alleviate the stress of being ostracized by the dominant society. As the women drink together at a club, Tipper proposes a toast.

Let's see. Female qualities and characteristics, male genitalia, straight male mentality, Black girl attitude . . . um . . . celebrity fashion sense, warrior façade, matriarch disposition and unparalleled exquisiteness. Isn't it obvious? We're the solution!

While there are obvious echoes of Myra's declaration of herself as the "new woman," Tipper's toast is framed in a spirit of empowerment, building up the positive aspects of being a transgender woman, rather than a spirit of annihilation, seeking to tear down those identified as oppressing them. Tipper's toast is intended to highlight the bond between the group of transgender women, and it is only this bond that helps a few of them survive the savage beating they soon suffer.

Whether they are isolated by physical separation from the rest of society, the bullying of others, or their own attitudes and actions, all of the characters in transgender thrillers are positioned in some way as outsiders from heteronormative society. Positioning the characters as outsiders performs an important narrative function in these films. As Halberstam discusses (78-79) and Peter Chumo also notes (249), audience members often reconsider the events of a transgender thriller in light of the revelation toward the end that a character is transgender. By positioning the transgender characters as outsiders, the audience is not as shocked when their transgender identities are revealed. The characters are constructed to highlight their differences, whether it is Norman's physical isolation in a frequently vacant motel, Angela's interpersonal

isolation as a quiet loner, or Myra's declared isolation as an agent set on destroying patriarchy, and discovering their transgender identities just confirms any lingering suspicions on the part of the audience. The aim of heteronormativity positioning the characters as outside of the standards of society is to protect itself from the perceived threat of those who deviate from its standards. Heteronormativity refuses to recognize the legitimacy of any individuals who refuse to conform and must separate those who do from the rest of society. Positioning the characters as outsiders maintains the distancing of the characters as objects of fear and disgust rather than raising questions about the treatment they receive from others. The focus remains on the individual identities of the characters rather than larger concerns about the narrative constructions of the characters' transgender identities. After being positioned as outsiders, the transgender characters encounter repressive agents of heteronormativity and strike back with a vengeance.

*Kill or threaten the repressive agents of heteronormativity*

The targets of the often gruesome violence in transgender thrillers are the repressive agents of heteronormativity. These characters either seek to make the transgender characters conform once again to heteronormative standards or punish them for their deviance. The films argue that the violent actions of the characters are located in the intersections of their transgender identities and psychoses; the individual transgender characters are completely at fault while their victims are completely innocent. My reading of their actions focuses instead on the interactions between the characters and heteronormative society. Having accepted their positioning as outsiders, the characters are enraged by the individuals who intrude on their spaces and try to force



them to conform once again to heteronormative standards. This focus on the murders as reactions against heteronormativity is not intended to excuse the violent actions of the characters but to provide a fuller picture of why certain characters are chosen as the targets of these violent actions. Focusing solely on the actions of the individual characters ignores the role played by the dominant system of gender behavior in determining who is deviant and who is not. The violence actions of the characters could be avoided if they were either fully accepted by society or left to their own devices. Since neither happens in transgender thrillers, I am interested in why the characters choose violence and why certain characters are the targets and victims of violence rather than in laying the blame on the individual identities of the characters.

*Psycho* features probably the most famous killing in this group of films.

Mother's murder of Marion Crane in the shower has been studied in great detail, but Marion is not Mother's only victim in the film, as she also kills the private detective Arbogast when he comes upstairs to investigate the Bates home and is intent on killing Lila Crane in the fruit cellar until Sam stops her. *Dressed to Kill* is structured in parallel to *Psycho* with Kate Miller's murder in the elevator coming fairly early in the film while the rest of the film deals with Bobbie trying to contain the aftermath of the initial murder.

Mother's murder of Arbogast and Bobbie's stalking and attacking of Liz Blake demonstrate the ways the murders are the result of an explosion of rage rather than cold calculation; the murders are not meticulously planned to account for all contingencies and the resulting aftermath must be contained by the characters. Robin Wood argues

that the shower murder in *Psycho* is “primarily a sexual act, a violent substitute for the rape that Norman dare not carry out” (148). Norman assumes that his mother would be jealous of any sexual attraction on his part, just as he is jealous of her, and so whenever he feels attracted to a woman, his Mother personality must eliminate her. Norman is content to spend his days tending to the Bates Motel and his mother but when Marion stops there on that fateful rainy night, his desire for her disrupts the isolated world he had created and he lashes out violently. Arbogast, Sam, and Lila also become targets for continuing to pressure Norman about his murder of Marion. They do not arouse his desire but are reminders of the way Marion aroused him. As each begins to intrude further into his world, with Arbogast venturing up to Mother’s room and Sam and Lila searching the house for her and finding her corpse in the fruit cellar, Norman decides they must each be dealt with so he can return to his peaceful existence prior to their intrusions.

A similar explanation is offered for Bobbie’s murder of Kate Miller. A psychiatrist argues at the end of the film that Elliot’s attraction to another woman functioned as Bobbie’s “red alert.” “Elliot’s penis became erect, and Bobbie took control, trying to kill anyone that made Elliot masculinely sexual.” Bobbie is not a manifestation of Elliot’s mother but is in many ways even more jealously vengeful since she would prefer to be aroused in a feminine manner and is disgusted at the physical evidence of her body’s maleness. Dr. Elliot’s desire for Kate and its attendant sexual arousal is an unwelcome reminder to Bobbie of efforts to force her to conform to

heteronormative standards by denying her request for sex reassignment surgery so she murders Kate for intruding on her private domain.

The murders in *Sleepaway Camp* are both more gruesome and vindictive than those in *Psycho* or *Dressed to Kill*. As discussed earlier, Angela does not talk much and is bullied for being different. She does not say a word until thirty minutes into the film when she talks to Ricky's friend Paul after he is nice to her. She continues to talk almost exclusively to Paul and Ricky, completely ignoring the frequent taunts by Meg and Judy. While Angela's inability to talk is interpreted by many of the characters as the result of some form of mental handicap, she keeps score of who mistreats her and exacts her revenge in a series of brutal murders, ranging from dumping an industrial-sized pot of boiling water on a cook who tried to sexually assault her to dropping a hornet's nest in the bathroom stall in which she has locked the ringleader of a group of boys who hit her with water balloons. Her murder of Meg makes an allusion to *Psycho* with Meg showering alone in an abandoned bunk. The expectation is that Angela will fling the shower curtain open but, instead, she stabs Meg in the back through the partition between the shower stalls. Angela saves her most gruesome murder for Paul, who she is initially friendly with but with whom she becomes upset after he tries to make a move on her and then is caught kissing Judy during a game of capture the flag. Angela asks Paul to meet her on the beach by the lake for a late night rendezvous. When two of the camp counselors find her later, she seems to be cradling Paul's head on her lap while singing to him but when she stands up, Paul's decapitated head falls to the ground.

Instead of the sexual repression of Norman and Bobbie, Angela directs her anger toward those who have mistreated her. Judy's taunts are upsetting enough to Angela, hitting fairly close to her transgender identity, that she saves Judy for next to last among her victims, killing her just before Paul.

Hey, Angela? How come you never take showers when the rest of us do? Oh, I know what it is. You haven't reached puberty yet. Is that it? I bet you don't even have your period!

This is a representative example of the kind of bullying Judy subjects Angela to. Angela saves Paul for last because he was initially nice to her but later betrayed her when she did not act the way he wanted but kills Judy next to last for her frequent bullying.

*Sleepaway Camp* offers an example of an extreme response to the type of abuse many transgender people are forced to endure on an almost daily basis. The taunting and bullying Angela endures is rooted in her refusal to conform to the norms of the camp; she does not act like the other kids and is tormented for it. Her violent attacks on the other campers are motivated by the demands that she conform to the norms and the bullying she receives for her failure to comply. The only characters to survive her violent rampage, Susie, Ronnie, and Ricky, are the only ones who do not pressure her to conform.

Depicting this extreme response to heteronormative demands of conformity is the stated goal of the film *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*. After surviving an attack by Bubbles' ex-boyfriend Boner and two of his associates that killed two of their friends, Bubbles, Pinky, and Rachel go for secret martial arts training in the woods to prepare for their revenge. They set an elaborate trap for Boner and his friends in which Bubbles

appears to be home alone unprotected. Boner antagonizes her with a knife before knocking her out and tying her up. In typical B-movie villain fashion, he offers her a series of contrived deaths to be chosen through playing cards rather than just killing her. Bubbles escapes and with the help of Pinky and Rachel, gets the drop on Boner and the others. The three men awaken to find their butts greasy; Boner exclaims, “You bitches *raped* us?!” clearly expressing one of the transphobic fears many men hold toward transgender women. Bubbles and her friends did not rape them but, instead, inserted opened switchblades and a loaded gun into their butts, set to go off should the three move around too much, thus mocking the elaborately gory schemes typical of grindhouse villains.

An extended fight sequence ensues with the women suffering a number of stab wounds but managing to kill Boner’s friends Nacho and Chuy by slitting his throat and stabbing him in the head with a gigantic knife, respectively. Boner manages to get the gun out of his butt and holds it to Bubbles’ head, but the women are able to wrestle it away from him. Held at gunpoint by Bubbles, Boner has time for one last grandiose speech.

She won’t do it. She can’t. It just ain’t in her nature. I mean, look at her. Such a pretty little thing. So insecure. The kinda gal that only feels worthy when you’re with a guy like me. The kinda guy that treats you like *shit*. The kinda guy that’ll lie to her. Be rude, self-centered cause that’s all you think that you deserve. In some strange way, you’re attached to me. You can’t kill me. If you coulda, you’d already done it. If I were you, I woulda killed me a long-ass time ago! In some strange way, I just don’t think you want to. Do you?

This speech is meant to antagonize Bubbles by pointing out the ways she normally conforms to the expectations of a particular kind of heterosexual romance, but it is

ultimately ineffective as Bubbles shoots him three times, and Pinky and Rachel finish him off by throwing knives in his chest and mouth before Bubbles delivers the finishing blow.

The film positions itself as an exploitation-style fantasy of transgender women getting revenge on those who frequently abuse and mistreat them, both physically and verbally. While some may feel a sense of satisfaction from this kind of fantasy, violence does not put an end to the pressures to conform to heteronormativity. While Bubbles and her friends may have gotten revenge on a few agents of heteronormativity who killed their friends, violence ultimately causes more problems for transgender individuals. Pinky recognizes the problematic nature of responding to violence with violence when she asks, “Do you know what the difference is between us and them?” Bubbles and Rachel just shake their heads, and Pinky starts laughing and exclaims, “Me either!,” to which Rachel adds, “Cause we killed ‘em!” A revenge fantasy may feel empowering but in the end, it is still violence, the same violence that prompts the revenge fantasy in the first place.

The murders in *The Crying Game* and *Peacock* are more acts of desperation than crimes of passion or revenge. When Dil ties Fergus to her bed with pantyhose and threatens him with his gun, becoming what Kristen Handler labels the “hysteric queen” (38), then shoots Jude, it seems to be the actions of a woman who is frustrated by the events swirling around her involving the IRA and Jody’s death. As a repressive agent of heteronormativity, Jude not only ended Dil’s relationship with Jody but also seeks to end Dil’s relationship with Fergus by forcing him to rejoin the IRA. The pressure to

conform placed on Dil comes in the form of the removal from her life of those she loves. Emma's killing of the man John hires to remove the train car that is attracting all the undue attention to their home is a desperate act to hold on to her newfound freedom. She kills the man by taking him to her motel room, bashing him in the head with a shovel, dressing him in John's clothes, and setting the room on fire. Through this, she is able to convince everyone that John is dead. Not only has she removed any need to be John anymore, she has also prevented the removal of her one point of access to the world outside her home. Had the train car been removed, all of the attention on Emma's house and her connection with planning the political rally set to take place in her backyard would have gone away. John and Emma would have then returned to their daily routine for the rest of their lives. By killing the man hired to remove the train car and staging John's death, Emma removes the pressures to conform from her life and frees herself up to be herself. While these murders may lack the rage found in other transgender thrillers, they reinforce the point that the reasoning behind a target of violence can be found in the pressures to conform placed on the transgender characters.

Where Dil and Emma's actions are desperate and in the moment, Myra's sexual assault of an acting student named Rusty is the height of premeditation. Sex is often identified in *Myra Breckenridge* as a tool to ensure that people fall in line with the standards of heteronormative society. Buck says of Myra, "Bitch! I shoulda put it to her when she first came in. Throved her on her back and give 'er the ole Buck Loner Special right there on the rug. Goddamn smart mouth broad." Sex is apparently all that Myra needs to become an obedient woman. Her student Rusty also believes that sex

defines what it means to be a man, saying that “a man should ball chicks” in response to Myra’s question about how a man should act.

Myra comes to see Rusty as the epitome of heteronormative masculinity and decides to use sex herself as a tool to break Rusty of his heteronormative beliefs rather than to reinforce them. She invites Rusty to her office for special lessons and on the pretense of giving him a physical, tells him to strip and then straps him down on a surgical table, saying “All you men have a lot to learn and I’ve taken it upon myself to teach you.” She then straps on a large dildo, the size of which makes Rusty exclaim “Oh my God, Jesus, you’ll kill me!” and then proceeds to rape him. Myra becomes a parody of the ways progressive ideas about sexuality and gender can be just as dangerous as heteronormative ones when force is used to achieve them. The pressures to conform for Myra come from heteronormative society as a whole, with Rusty functioning as the most obvious repressive agent of that society. Myra sees forcing Rusty to conform to her views on gender as the first step in her destruction of heteronormative masculinity.

The one rupture in this convention is that Trish, the transgender character in *The Last Seduction*, does not kill or threaten anyone. Instead, the mere thought of seeing her again is enough to convince another character to agree to kill someone. Bridget has convinced Mike that she has been travelling around the country killing cheating husbands and collecting generous rewards from their grateful spouses, and she wants her lover Mike to kill someone, actually her husband who she stole money from, to prove his commitment to her. He initially balks at the idea but reconsiders after receiving a letter from Trish, actually sent by Bridget, saying that she is moving to Boston to be close to



him. Mike is so afraid of anyone finding out that he married a transgender woman, thus calling into question his heteronormative identity, that he agrees to the murder on the condition that they never return to Boston. Though Mike is not able in the end to go through with the murder, Bridget is able to use the specter of Trish to frame Mike for the murder that she commits.

The gruesome murders committed by the transgender characters in these films are a response to the pressures to conform to heteronormative standards placed on them. The targets of violence in these films are repressive agents of heteronormativity who seek to force the characters to conform, either by arousing unwanted desires, taunting and bullying them for failing to conform, or removing the ones they love. While the violence of the characters is not excused by these pressures to conform, analyzing the targets of the violence in this way rather than through the actions of the individual characters provides a new perspective on the most extreme reactions to heteronormativity in any transgender representations. Recognizing the threat that has been constructed around the transgender identities of the characters, transgender thrillers try to contain the threat in order to assuage the fears of heteronormative audience members.

#### *Efforts at containment*

Transgender thrillers seek to contain the threat constructed around the transgender identities of the characters in order to protect the dominant status of heteronormativity. Since the transgender characters are seen violently attacking agents of heteronormativity, the films must find ways to show that heteronormativity is still in

control. Most efforts at containment come at the end of the films but in *Sleepaway Camp*, the containment effort comes at the very beginning of the film. The film begins with a series of shots of an abandoned summer camp while a notice from the sheriff is posted on the front gate that the camp is closed and for sale. Despite the rampage that Angela is about to embark on, the audience can rest easy knowing that everything is taken care of in the end, though not without requiring the entire camp to be shut down.

John Phillips argues that the narratives of transgender thrillers are often “at pains to disassociate” themselves “from a negative representation of transgender” individuals (85). I argue, in contrast, that what the films are concerned with is the perception of the transgender characters as a continued threat to heteronormativity. The psychiatrist segments at the end of *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill* are another example of the attempts by these films to explain how the characters are now well under the control of heteronormative society. The psychiatrist in *Psycho* assures Lila, Sam, and the police officers that Norman is not transgender.

A man who dresses in women’s clothing in order to achieve a sexual change or satisfaction is a transvestite. But in Norman’s case, he was simply doing everything possible to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive! And when reality came too close, when danger or desire threatened that illusion, he dressed up.

The psychiatrist in *Dressed to Kill* confirms that Bobbie is a transsexual but still places the source of her murderous rage in Dr. Elliot’s refusal to go through with sex reassignment surgery. “The sex change operation was to resolve a conflict. But as much as Bobbie tried to get it, Elliot blocked it. So Bobbie got even.” These two films make

explicit the claim made in the scholarly research discussed earlier that the transgender identities of Norman and Bobbie are connected to their psychoses.

Other transgender thrillers are less explicit in their efforts to contain the threat of the transgender characters. *The Crying Game* and *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* give the impression that everything has returned to normal. Dil comes to visit Fergus in prison after he took the fall for her in the killing of Jude with her hair long again and having re-adopted a clearly feminine style of dress, ditching the cricket uniform Fergus forced her to wear, while Bubbles, Pinky, and Rachel strut into a club dressed to the nines as if they do not have a care in the world. The transgender characters continue to exist and live their lives but they are no longer killing others as they were last seen doing in the scenes before the cuts to these scenes of containment.

Emma in *Peacock* seeks to return things to how they were before but is unable to. While initially thrilled with her newfound independence, on the day of the rally, Emma is nowhere to be found. Instead of being part of the rally outside, Emma is inside the house taking care of Maggie's son Jake, even posing him for a picture in the dining room. When she realizes the pose is the exact one John's mother posed him in, seen in the black and white picture at the beginning of the film, she suddenly realizes her actions have begun to mirror those of John's mother. She gives Maggie the money she had intended to use to adopt Jake and tells them to leave the house and town immediately. She even expresses regret about John's death, telling Maggie that he "shouldn't be dead" and that she blames herself for leaving the house. She resigns herself to never leaving the house again, locking the doors and closing all of the curtains. The final image is of

Emma watching the world pass by from her living room window. Emma is now safely contained within the confines of her home, never to leave again.

*Myra Breckenridge* does not just contain Myra's transgender identity but erases it completely. After failing to seduce Rusty's girlfriend Mary Ann, which would have completed her victory over patriarchal masculinity, Myra walks down a street in downtown Hollywood while Myron drives by in her car. He sees her and circles around to hit her, sending her flying through the air. He gets out of the car and joins a group of people who have gathered around her body only to discover that it is his body lying on the ground instead. At this moment, the film, which has been in color the entire time, switches to black and white. An older man, presumably Uncle Buck, walks through a hospital ward to find Myron lying in bed with his head dressed from a wound. Myron suddenly wakes up and grabs his chest, exclaiming "Where are my tits? Where are my tits?" His transgender identity may still be intact, but his physical transformation has been erased; a picture of Myra on a magazine cover suggests that the black and white sequence is the real world and the preceding story was nothing but a dream, the film having been a bit of transgender wish fulfillment on Myron's part by fulfilling his desire to be an incredibly beautiful woman and put the kind of men who mistreated him in their place. Male members of the audience, however, can heave a sigh of relief, confident that any fears that a beautiful transsexual woman might want to destroy their masculinity have been contained.

Two ruptures in this convention reveal the lack of interest in and difficulty faced in containing the threat presented by the transgender characters. In *Ace Ventura*, the

film makes no effort to contain the image of the transgender character as a deranged individual that should disgust the audience. Instead, the film is content with showering its masculine hero with the accolades he has earned. Ace is able to get Dan Marino, who was kidnapped by Einhorn along with Snowflake, back to the stadium in time to play in the second half of the Super Bowl and, of course, gets a kiss from the girl. Victoria Flanagan argues that while the film concludes “by strengthening and confirming Ace’s gender identity in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, Einhorn is simultaneously disempowered and dispossessed of her gender identity” (203). For good measure, Ace engages in some final fisticuffs with the opposing team’s mascot after the mascot prevents Ace from catching a rare pigeon he has been chasing throughout the film. Heteronormative masculinity is reaffirmed, the transgender woman has been humiliated and arrested, and all is right with the world. The ending of the film works to confirm Ace’s heteronormative identity, after repeatedly portraying him as goofy and eccentric, because having Einhorn arrested by a heteronormative character, rather than a goofy outsider, better contains the threat of her transgender identity.

The ending of *Dressed to Kill* presents a rupture that suggests that it may be impossible to contain the disturbed transgender killer. After the psychiatrist’s explanation of Bobbie’s condition and a discussion between Liz and Peter, Kate Miller’s son, at a restaurant about what it means to be transsexual, everything seems to be returning to normal until Bobbie escapes from the mental institution in which she is being held by killing a nurse who comes to check on her. In a mirroring of the opening scene of the film in which Kate has an erotic dream in which she is choked by a man in

the shower, Liz is showering in the same shower when she sees someone standing just outside the open door wearing a pair of white, patent leather shoes. She tries to get to the medicine cabinet and get a razor out to defend herself but when she opens the door, a hand comes out and slices her throat. At this moment, Liz wakes up screaming, and Peter comes to comfort her from her nightmare. While Bobbie's escape may have only been a dream, the film, like many other horror films, wants to leave the audience thinking about a dangerous killer rather than a peaceful world. A rupture of this nature undoes much of the work of containment done earlier in the film through the psychiatrist's discussion of Bobbie's transgender identity and in other films by reminding the audience for a final time of the threat posed to heteronormative society by the transgender identities of the characters.

The presence of efforts at containment in transgender thrillers is evidence that the films recognize the power of the threat constructed around the transgender identities of the characters. Like transgender farces, transgender thrillers assume that the majority of the audience is heteronormative. The efforts at containment work to contain the threat built up through the other narrative conventions. The transgender characters are presented in these films as violent, unstable individuals, and it might be easy for audience members to decode the messages of the films as applying to transgender individuals in general. Rather than ending the films by arguing that the transgender characters are not as dangerous as presented, transgender thrillers instead communicate the message through the efforts at containment that the transgender characters are well under control by heteronormative society. It is not just the violent tendencies of the

transgender characters that are under control but their transgender identities entirely. Heteronormativity may be challenged most directly through the violent actions of the characters in these films, but it emerges unscathed. Audience members can leave the theater rest assured that any individuals who deviate from heteronormativity's standards will likewise be contained. The visual codes of transgender thrillers only serve to reinforce this message.

### **Visual Codes: The Transphobic Gaze**

The visual codes of the transphobic gaze work to distance the transgender characters as objects of fear and disgust. Transphobia is the fear of transgender people simply because they are transgender. Transphobia is expressed in the anger people have at discovering that a partner, friend, or family member is transgender or the physical or verbal attacks on transgender people by random strangers. The transphobic gaze works to visually construct the characters as objects of this fear through the delayed reaction of the characters' transgender identities in order to make the revelation more of a shocking surprise, the forceful unmasking of the characters' identities as a way of showing their reluctance to having their identities revealed, and the modeling of looks of fear and disgust to the revelation of the characters' transgender identities. These visual codes, along with the narrative conventions, construct the transgender characters as threats to heteronormative society that must be contained. A more sympathetic portrayal of the transgender characters might move some audience members to have compassion for them so very particular visual codes are employed to avoid this problem, starting with the delayed revelation of the characters' transgender identities.

*Delayed revelation of the characters' transgender identities*

In keeping with the horror and thriller tradition of waiting until the end of the film to reveal the identity of the killer, the revelation of the transgender identities of the characters are delayed until the end of transgender thrillers. Since it is only at the end of a film that a character's transgender identity is revealed, the audience must "rewind" the events of the film in order to understand them in light of this new information (Halberstam, "In a Queer Time" 78-79). The transgender identities of the characters are never fully developed in the narratives of the films but are saved for the end as a shocking twist for the audience. A psychiatrist may appear on screen to explain that Bobbie is transsexual, but this information is offered only to help the audience understand the surprise twist rather than as an exploration of Bobbie's identity as a transgender woman. Because the narratives of transgender thrillers want to avoid discussing the transgender identities of the characters, it is up to the visuals of these films to ensure that the big reveal is delayed until later in the film while providing the visual cues necessary so that the twist ending will make sense for audience members who mentally rewind the films later.

One visual code used to delay the reveal is providing the audience with a limited view of the transgender character, which is used in *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *The Last Seduction*. In *Psycho*, Mother is seen a total of seven times before she is revealed to be Norman, including in the upstairs window of the Bates home, in shadow during the shower murder, from an overhead angle while killing Arbogast, and as a corpse in the fruit cellar. Bobbie in *Dressed to Kill* is also seen a number of times



but always wearing black sunglasses and a black trench coat that make it difficult for the other characters to distinguish her features. Trish in *The Last Seduction* is only seen from a distance as Bridget talks to her in Buffalo and at the doorway of a dark apartment when Mike flashes back to the time he spent with her. Limiting the amount of visual information available to the audience preserves the revelations of the characters' identities for later in the films.

*Sleepaway Camp* uses a series of point of view shots to obscure the identity of the killer. Many of the murders are viewed from the killer's point of view, with the audience watching as Angela pours boiling water on Artie the cook, locks a boy in a bathroom stall before dropping a hornet's nest in with him, and sneaks into the bunk where Meg is showering alone to stab her in the back. The point of view shot always cut away to reveal the aftermath of the murder; the film may want to obscure the identity of the killer but not the gruesomeness of her murders. A recurring device associated with the use of the point of view shot is the victims only referring to the killer as "you," demonstrating knowledge of who the killer is but not giving away Angela's identity to the audience. After the audience gets its first real look at the killer as she comes to kill Judy in a dark bunk, the point of view shot is used again and is combined with Judy never saying Angela's name to make the audience doubt their certainty about the identity of the killer.

The second visual code is the exact opposite of the first, clearly showing the transgender characters to the audience but withholding the information that they are transgender and is used primarily in *The Crying Game* and *Ace Ventura*. Dil and Lois

Einhorn are attractive women who the audience has no reason to suspect are transgender. The strategy in this code is to hide the transgender characters in plain sight. Transgender scholar Julia Serano labels this code the “deceptive transsexual” (36) because of the feelings of many audience members, and society in general, that transgender women are being deceptive should they ever choose to keep their gender identities to themselves. The initial visual presentations of Dil and Einhorn make the argument that transgender characters should be free to live as they please and even occupy positions of power, in Einhorn’s case, but the overly negative reactions to the revealing of their transgender identities sends the message to the audience that being transgender is not normal, no matter how attractive an individual may be.<sup>16</sup>

The transgender women in *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* and Myra Breckenridge would seem to clearly belong in the second visual code, but these two films represent a rupture in this code by the fact that the narrative makes their transgender identities explicit fairly early in the films. While in the real world the characters would clearly fit in Serano’s deceptive transsexual category, their transgender identities are never in doubt for audience members. A more major rupture of this code can be found in *Peacock*. As the film begins, the audience sees Emma going about her daily chores, doing the laundry and making breakfast, when she heads upstairs and sits down at a vanity in the bedroom. Emma is then clearly seen taking off her makeup, wig, and dress and changing into John’s clothes, leaving no doubt of her transgender identity. Rather than hinging on the big reveal of a character’s transgender identity, the film reveals Emma’s identity in the first five minutes and becomes, instead, an exploration of

how the character deals with no one else knowing that she is transgender. The message sent by the film could almost be positive if it were not for the fact that its exploration of transgender identity is built on the fact that Emma and John are distinct split personalities.

By delaying the revealing of the transgender identities of the characters, transgender thrillers send the message that an individual's transgender identity is only interesting when it is being revealed and that no one is interested in how someone came to understand their transgender identity or how it continues to impact her or his life. Making the transgender identities of the characters something that the audience catches only furtive glimpses of before the big reveal or is made to seem implausible by the physical attractiveness of the characters send the message that transgender people are deceptive either for keeping their identities hidden entirely or choosing not to tell others about it.

The delayed revelation of the characters' transgender identities supports the distancing of the characters from the audience as objects of fear and disgust because the audience is offered no other way to view the characters. By generally delaying the revelation of the characters' transgender identities until the very end, the films communicate the message that the characters' identities are intended to be shocking, even more shocking than the gruesome murders they commit since the audience sees frequent visual reference to them. If the narratives made more frequent and direct reference to the transgender identities of the characters, the revelations of these identities would lose their shocking impact. Instead, the narratives and visuals work together to

present the transgender identities of the characters as shocking. Because heteronormativity treats any gender identity existing outside of it as a deviation, any deviant identities must continue to be surprising to those occupying positions as members of heteronormative society. The delayed revelation of the transgender identities of the characters ensures that the transgender characters continue to be viewed this way. Once the transgender identities of the characters are revealed, it is made clear visually that these revelations are not by choice.

*Forceful unmasking*

In contrast to the characters in transgender farces who gleefully discard their transgender identities as soon as possible, the characters in transgender thrillers do not want their transgender identities to be revealed so when they are revealed, it is usually done through force and against their wills. The motivations behind this reluctance differ for each character; Norman wants to resist shattering the illusion that his mother is still alive while Dil does not think that her transgender identity is a secret so feels no inclination to disclose it. When combined with the fact that most of the characters are killers, this reluctance sends the message that the characters are being willfully deceitful, hiding part of who they are because they know that the rest of society will not approve.

While the transgender identity of a character may be discussed narratively at the end of a film, the actual revelation of that identity is usually done visually. There are no scenes of the non-transgender characters discussing their off-screen discovery of a character's transgender identity. No, that discovery is always shown on screen and, most famously with *The Crying Game*, is often one of the main draws of a transgender

thriller. The forceful unmasking of a transgender character generally comes at the climax or end of a film as she or he is about to kill or is threatening to kill another character. Norman as Mother comes running into the fruit cellar with his knife raised, ready to kill Lila, when Sam tackles him from behind and wrestles him to the ground, knocking off his wig. Bobbie is sneaking up behind Liz ready to kill her with a razor blade when the policewoman who had been watching Liz shoots Bobbie through the window, knocking off her wig and revealing her to be Dr. Elliott. Angela's unmasking comes at the end of her murder spree when the two camp counselors who were nice to her find her naked on the beach cradling Paul's head in her lap. When she stands up, Paul's decapitated head falls to the ground, and she turns to face them, hissing, knife raised, and covered in blood. The camera pulls back to reveal her penis, and Ronnie, the male counselor, exclaims "How can it be? God, she's a boy!" William Rothman writes of the unmasking of Norman that we "cannot say whether Norman struggles to keep from being stripped of his costume or to be freed from it" (329). Had these moments of visual unmasking not occurred, the characters would have continued on with their lives as they had been. The visual unmasking of the characters ensures that their transgender identities cannot be explained away.

The forceful unmasking of the transgender identities of these characters are all done visually; the audience sees a character's wig coming off or her or his penis. No one holds Norman as Mother at gunpoint and demands that he identify himself, allowing Norman to calmly explain the situation. Instead, he is wrestled to the ground and his wig is ripped off. Even a less violent unmasking like the one in *Myra Breckenridge* is

still accomplished visually. Though Myra's transgender identity is well known to the audience, it is not known to the other characters in the film. Buck brings in two of his lawyers to refute Myra's claim to part of Buck's estate by virtue of being Myron's wife. When it becomes clear that Myra will be unable to talk her way out of the situation, she declares herself to be Myron Breckenridge and stands up on Buck's desk so he and the lawyers can look up her skirt and confirm her claim. All that is seen on screen is a medium shot of the lower half of Myra's body, cut off at the waist, while Buck and one of his lawyers lean back in their chairs to look up her raised skirt, a big grin on the lawyer's face. The scene then cuts to another shot of the other lawyer cocking his head to the side in order to look up Myra's spread legs, through which the camera shoots. Numerous shots fill this scene of Myra's legs cut off at the waist, and she is usually shot from behind so even in full body shots her face is not seen, reducing her identity to nothing but her genitals. Even in the more verbal arena of a legal proceeding, visual proof is still required of a characters' transgender identity.

Dil's unmasking comes not in a moment of violence but in one of intimacy. After Dil returns from the bathroom after making out with Fergus, Fergus begins to remove her robe as the camera moves down her body from her face to her flat chest before stopping at her penis, at which point the music that had been playing in the background stops as well. Dil's reaction to Fergus' surprise, "You did know, didn't you?," reveals her belief that disclosing her transgender identity was unnecessary since she assumed everyone, Fergus included, already knew about it. Fergus' reaction to the unmasking, to be discussed in the next section, is a clear example of the reason many

transgender people choose to keep their gender identity a secret except for close friends and family.

The most forceful unmasking of a transgender characters is found in *Ace Ventura*. Ace tracks Einhorn to a marina in Miami where she is keeping quarterback Dan Marino and the Miami Dolphins mascot Snowflake hostage. The two begin to fight and when a number of cops show up, Einhorn yells for them to shoot Ace, who she plans to frame for the kidnappings. Ace counters by asserting that Einhorn is actually Ray Finkle and to prove it, he precedes to strip her in front of everyone with every exposed body part shot in a tight close up. He first grabs her by the hair and tries to yank her supposed wig off only to find that her hair is very real. He then asks if a “real woman” would be “missing these,” and rips open her blouse to reveal a very real pair of breasts. At this point, even Ace’s friends are beginning to doubt him as shown by the exasperated glances they share with each other. In a last ditch effort, Ace rips off her skirt, exclaiming “I doubt he could find the time in his busy schedule to get rid of big ole Mr. Kanesh!” He appears at first to be wrong on this point as well since Einhorn shows no visible evidence of a penis. A visibly shaken and humiliated Einhorn stands nearly naked in front of the members of her force until Marino gives Ace a hint. He then grabs Einhorn by the shoulders and spins her around, exclaiming “But if I am mistaken, if the lieutenant is indeed a woman as she claims to be, then, my friend, she is suffering from the worst case of hemorrhoids I have ever seen!” Einhorn’s tucked back penis and testicles are now clearly visible to the other cops and the audience, providing incontrovertible proof that Einhorn is a transgender woman. While the scene plays out

initially as a humiliation of Ace because of his hubris, it ends with him having confidently caught a criminal while Einhorn has been publicly violated. Einhorn could have been taken in for questioning with her dignity intact, but her position of power required a visual confirmation of her transgender identity that could only be accomplished through having a man forcefully rip her clothes off and pull her by the hair.

As with the delayed revelation, the rupture of this visual code can be found in *Peacock*. As discussed in the previous section, the audience sees Emma change into John's clothes in the first five minutes of the film so they already know that Emma is a transgender woman. This initial knowledge on the part of the audience is generally followed by an unmasking for the other characters, as in *Myra Breckenridge*, but this never happens in *Peacock*. No other characters ever find out that Emma and John are the same person. The neighbors who find Emma after the train derails do not recognize her as John and the sheriff, who often checks up on John ever since his mother died, does not recognize Emma as John either. Even Maggie, when she comes to ask John for money, does not recognize Emma when she comes downstairs even though she had been talking with John just a few minutes earlier. When John is assumed to be dead in the motel room fire, no one ever questions it, and Emma locks herself in her house at the end of the film never to leave again. While an element of deceit is present, Emma could confess that she is John and remove her wig at the end of the film; the fact that she chooses not to do this sends the message that it is at least possible for transgender people to be accepted but only if they erase their past.



The visual unmasking of transgender characters is important for the maintenance of heteronormative control. The forceful manner with which the identities of the transgender characters are revealed is evidence of this need to maintain control; the shocking twist built through the revelation of the characters' transgender identities is not constructed to leave the audience guessing but to provide definitive proof. The fact that the unmasking is visual supports this need for proof. If the audience only learned about the characters' transgender identities through the narrative without ever seeing the proof for themselves, certain members of the audience could choose to disbelieve this information and decode the films in an alternative way. Heteronormative control depends on few variations from the preferred reading in the decodings of audience members so visual proof is offered that is more difficult to read against.

Heteronormativity demonstrates its control by not allowing the characters to keep their identities a secret. The forcefulness of the unmasking of the transgender characters' identities can be seen as a counterpoint to the violence the characters enact against the agents of heteronormativity; if the characters respond to heteronormativity through acts of violence then heteronormativity responds by using force to reveal the characters' transgender identities. This exchange of force does nothing to disrupt the status quo; heteronormativity remains in control and the transgender characters are exposed and violated. The violent actions of the transgender characters do not excuse the forceful unmasking of their identities, but the message communicated in these films is that no change comes from the use of force. If transgender individuals seek to change heteronormative society, violence does not seem to be the answer. After the characters'

transgender identities have been forcefully unmasked, the films model the appropriate heteronormative response to their identities.

*Looks of fear and disgust*

Just as the trans-misogynistic gaze positions the transgender characters in transgender farces as objects of ridicule for attempting and failing to dress as the opposite sex, the transphobic gaze positions the transgender characters in transgender thrillers as objects of fear or disgust for the deceit that is implied in their transgender identities. By not actively claiming and disclosing their transgender identities, the films argue that the characters open themselves up to forceful unmasking as a result of heteronormative society's fear of those who deviate from the standards of gender behavior. Transgender thrillers visually direct this fear toward the transgender characters through the images and reactions that surround the forceful unmasking of the transgender characters' identities discussed in the previous section.

Clear images of transgender characters as objects of fear abound in transgender thrillers. These films make use of the visual conventions of the horror and thriller genres to present the transgender characters as individuals audience members are supposed to fear. Norman Bates as Mother running into the fruit cellar dressed in a wig and housecoat over his clothes, a maniacal grin on his face, and a carving knife held high, ready to stab Lila Crane to death, is the classic image of fear in the transphobic gaze. As scholars have noted (Indick 32; Wood 146), audience members may have tried to identify with Norman after Marion is killed, but this identification is shattered as soon as Norman enters the fruit cellar. The Norman seen in the fruit cellar is not a lonely young

man who the audience wants to try to understand but an image of pure fear that continues to resonate to this day. I know for myself this is an image that has been burned into my memory. Often when I enter a room, this image flashes in my mind along with the attendant fear that others are seeing me the way audiences view Norman Bates. The transphobia encoded into images of the transgender characters as monstrous killers raises concerns that audiences may internalize this transphobia and view transgender people they encounter in their lives with a similar fear.

*Dressed to Kill* contains similar images of looks of fear including the elevator door opening for Kate Miller to reveal Bobbie waiting for her with a straight razor at the ready, Bobbie sneaking up behind Liz in Elliot's office with the razor raised to strike before she is shot, and the image in Liz's nightmare of Bobbie staring straight into the camera, reminiscent of Mother's unbroken stare at the end of *Psycho*, as she unzips the uniform of a nurse she has just strangled to death. Outside of *Psycho*, the most striking image of fear in transgender thrillers occurs at the end of *Sleepaway Camp* when Ronnie and Susie, two of the camp counselors, discover Angela on the beach where she has killed Paul. She stands up covered in blood, her hair and eyes wild, making a hissing noise, with her bloody knife at the ready. Susie screams and covers her eyes, but Ronnie's gaze keeps alternating between Angela's face and her penis. It is clear from his gaze that he is just as terrified of the fact that Angela has a penis as he is that she has killed Paul and a number of other people at the camp. What is visually terrifying about Norman, Bobbie, and Angela is not just that they are killers, but that they are *transgender* killers. Transgender identity becomes, in this sense, just another movie

monster costume, with wigs, dresses, and makeup taking the place of the masks of Jason and Michael Myers or the clawed glove of Freddy Krueger.

The other prominent emotion that is produced by the transphobic gaze is disgust. The prime example of this visual code is found in *The Crying Game*. After the camera moves down Dil's nude body revealing her penis, Fergus slaps her hand away when she tries to touch him and says, "It's, just, I feel sick." He pushes her down on the bed, bloodying her nose, as he runs to the bathroom and throws up. She comments on the way he pushed her down, "It's alright, Jimmy. I can take it. Just not on the face," and he slams the door to the bathroom so he cannot hear her anymore. The scene is shot with Dil in the foreground barely covering her chest with her hands and robe and Fergus in the background throwing up in the bathroom sink. Dil is placed in the foreground to remind the audience of the reason Fergus is throwing up. After he finishes being sick, he comes out of the bathroom and says "I'm sorry" before leaving without saying another word. Visually, the image of Fergus throwing up in the bathroom sink has come to define the way heteronormative men are expected to react upon learning that a woman they are attracted to is transgender.

*Ace Ventura* parodies the scene from *The Crying Game* twice in another example of disgust in transgender thrillers. In the longer of the two sequences, Ace discovers that Lois Einhorn is Ray Finkle when the fur of one of his dogs lies on Finkle's photo in such a way to make it appear that he has long hair. It does not take Ace long to make the connection; "Finkle is Einhorn! Einhorn is Finkle! Einhorn is a man! Oh my God, Einhorn is a man!" Ace is grossed out at having been aggressively kissed by Einhorn

earlier in the film, and he rushes to the bathroom, like Fergus, to try to deal with this new knowledge. While Fergus just threw up in the sink, Ace's reaction is more over the top, consisting of him brushing his teeth, pouring a whole tube of toothpaste down his mouth, using a plunger on his lips, burning the clothes he had on (even though they were not the clothes he was wearing when Einhorn kissed him), and ending with him sobbing in the shower. The reference to *The Crying Game* is repeated at the end of the film when Ace reveals Einhorn's penis and all of the cops spit on the ground. To ensure that no one misses the reference, the song "The Crying Game," which Dil sings at the bar but is not the song that plays during the big reveal as is frequently claimed, plays during both scenes. While the scenes in *Ace Ventura* may be parodies of *The Crying Game*, and could be read as parodies of Fergus' overreaction, the length of the first scene in particular, implies that Fergus was not wrong to be disgusted upon the revelation of Dil's transgender identity. Instead, he did not go far enough in expressing his disgust. The message from both films is clear: audience members should be disgusted by transgender bodies.

*Myra Breckenridge* provides another example of a similar visual reaction to the revealing of a character's transgender identity. After Myra declares herself to be Myron, she stands up on Buck's desk in a short pink skirt so that Buck and his lawyers can confirm her claim. One of the lawyers takes one look up her skirt and faints. The audience never gets to see up Myra's skirt and is left to speculate on what could have been so disgusting that it would cause a grown man to faint. The narrative conventions and visual codes of the transgender thriller would suggest that he sees a penis on what he

has believed up to this point to be a female body, but the film begins with Myron having sex reassignment surgery in which his penis would have been turned into a vagina. It is possible that seeing a vagina on what had purportedly been a male body was enough to make the lawyer faint. All I can say for sure is that something about Myra's transgender body was disgusting and disturbing enough to make a man faint. The image of the lawyer's eyes rolling back and seeing him fall to the floor is of a kind with the images seen in *The Crying Game* and *Ace Ventura*.

Finally, the transphobic gaze gains some of its power by working in conjunction with a trans-misogynistic gaze. *Ace Ventura*, *Myra Breckenridge*, and *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* feature numerous shots of the breasts and legs of the transgender characters and multiple camera moves up and down their bodies. *The Crying Game* features an extended long shot of Dil walking across a rugby field to the hoots and hollers of construction workers. An extended tracking shot at the beginning of *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* focuses on Bubbles' legs as she walks down the street in heels and a short skirt; her face is not seen until she gets to the dressing room of the club where she performs. Lois Einhorn is introduced via a camera movement from her feet to her face as she exits an elevator into the squad room of the police station. It is important for transgender thrillers to visually establish the transgender characters as attractive so the same techniques that are used to make a woman in a film into a sex object are used in this case. If heteronormative men did not find the characters attractive, there would be no need for them to be disgusted upon finding out that the characters are transgender. This is a key element of transphobia, not just the fear of transgender people as different

but the fear that an individual may find a transgender person attractive. For heteronormative men, this is tantamount to being attracted to another man, an attraction that cannot be tolerated in the system of heteronormativity.

The transphobic gaze demonstrates for heteronormative people how to react once a transgender person's identity has been revealed. The camera movement down Dil's body is the clearest example of the combination of the transphobic and trans-misogynistic gazes. The camera begins to move down Dil's body, and the audience expects to see the usual pleasurable sights of the female body but instead finds a flat chest and a penis. The use of the techniques of trans-misogyny work to undermine the audience's expectations. Fergus' actions, though, end up modeling a transphobic response to the situation, missing a chance to undermine trans-misogyny and transphobia by having him react in a supportive manner. Heteronormative standards of gender are supported by the inability of Fergus, Ace, and others to accept the transgender identities of their partners.

The three visual codes of the transphobic gaze work together to distance the transgender characters from the audience, preventing the audience from identifying with any of the transgender characters. Catching only brief glimpses of the transgender identities of the characters prevents any understanding of their embodied experiences while showing only transphobic reactions to the revelations of their identities allows the audience to feel justified in their feelings of fear and disgust toward the characters and, by extension, transgender people in general. Visually representing transgender people only as horrifying monsters or attractive deceivers prevents the audience from viewing

transgender identity as legitimate. There is much more to transgender individuals than just a visual shock resulting from seeing a transgender woman's penis.

### **Conclusion**

The narrative conventions of transgender thrillers work to distance the audience from the characters by presenting them as disturbed outsiders who kill anyone who tries to force them to conform to heteronormativity's standards. Portraying transgender characters as outsiders prevents the audience from viewing their transgender identities as legitimate gender positions but, instead, as manifestations of undesirable traits that require them to be separated from society. While the films try to contain the threat to heteronormative society posed by transgender characters through experts offering limited information on transgender identity or explaining the events away as a dream, the efforts are in vain as the transgender characters are clearly represented as dangerous individuals more than willing to kill anyone who may try to interfere with their plans or reveal their identities.

The visual codes of the transphobic gaze also work to distance the audience from the transgender characters by limiting the information available to audience members about the transgender characters and modeling heteronormative reactions to them. The delayed revelation of the transgender identities of the characters supports the narrative disinterest in the embodied experiences of the characters and positions the transgender identities of the characters as a shocking surprise rather than as legitimate gender positions. The forceful unmasking of the transgender characters demonstrates heteronormativity's control over the gender identities of those who deviate from its



standards while the looks of fear and disgust by characters upon the revelations of the transgender identities of the characters model the appropriate heteronormative reaction to transgender individuals.

The messages communicated by transgender thrillers present transgender people as dangerous outsiders audience members are justified in being afraid of or disgusted by. Some people may find positives in the representation of transgender people as dangerous rather than as victims, but I do not think the image of a transgender woman covered in blood and clutching a knife can be considered positive in any way. Problematic connections are made in these films between transgender identity, mental illness, and violence while limited narrative or visual information is made available to audiences to form their own opinions. The limited information about the embodied experiences of the characters in transgender thrillers supports heteronormativity while not providing audience members with an understanding of why the characters are opposed to heteronormativity. More information would not excuse the violent actions of the characters in transgender thrillers, but it might assist audience members to better understand the reasons the characters react the way they do when others try to force them to conform to the standards of heteronormative society.

## CHAPTER IV

## TRANSGENDER AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

The final image of the transgender individual focuses on characters who actively claim transgender identities, rather than being forced to adopt transgender identities as a result of external forces or having their identities constructed as a threat through their violent actions. The focus of such films as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Transamerica* (2005) is on the experiences of transgender characters living in a world that is often less than accepting of their identities. The intimate portraits of transgender life presented in these films may imply a higher level of audience identification with the characters than that found in previous chapters, but I argue that these films still produce a distancing effect by evoking the audience's sympathy rather than empathy for the characters. In her historical review of the development of the terms sympathy and empathy, Karen Gerdes argues that modern uses of sympathy involve being aware of the pain or suffering another person is going through while empathy involves feeling and knowing what the other person feels (237). In simpler terms, Tania Singer and Claus Lamm distinguish the two terms as "feeling for" versus "feeling with" (84). C. Daniel Batson et al. argue that feelings of empathy on the part of audience members lead to more positive attitudes toward marginalized groups (116-117).

I argue that the films in this chapter situate the audience in a position of sympathy, rather than empathy, for the characters; audience members feel *for* the characters, recognizing the difficulty of the situations the characters experience, while remaining unable to feel *with* the characters, not only because of a lack of personal

understanding of what the characters are experiencing but also because the films are unwilling to convey the level of intimate knowledge necessary to connect with the characters at a deeper level. Through my analysis of the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films under study, I analyze how the films distance the audience from the characters through feelings of sympathy. Transgender representations take an important step forward in transgender dramas by presenting the characters as objects of sympathy rather than objects of ridicule or fear, but it is important to recognize that sympathy does not equal unconditional acceptance of the characters' transgender identities. Because the films resist the kinds of intimate knowledge that would allow for deeper connections with the characters – not least of which in their tendencies toward an ironic or detached indie sensibility – the characters remain at a distance from the audience. Audience members may feel sorry for the characters but as the characters are constructed by the films, they are unable to fully bridge the gap that separates them.

The distancing of the audience through a sympathetic connection with the characters in these films is supported through the stylistic norms of the genre of independent drama to which they belong.<sup>1</sup> Michael Newman argues that one of the conventions of independent film is “dramas and comedies that tell stories about fairly ordinary people in recognizable places and situations” (87). The films in this chapter fit this focus on ordinary people and situations; though I argue that some of the situations are more contrived than would be expected of the genre, the distancing of the audience from the characters is a product of a particular mode of realism. Many indie films are presented as if they are merely capturing events as they would happen in the real world.

Emanuel Levy argues that indie film “has been more innovative in subject matter than in style” and that “[d]espite offbeat characterizations, most indies lack unusual stories, experimental pacing, fractured narratives, or kinetic editing, to mention a few radical devices” (55). Much of contemporary indie drama is typified by an almost clinical documentary style of representation, in contrast to the hyperkinetic style of most big budget Hollywood fare, that leads to a detached connection with the characters on the screen, with a strong trend in indie film toward “the creation of a greater impression of reality or authenticity than is associated with the glossier style typical of the Hollywood mainstream” (King 107). While it may be true that indie drama emphasizes “character over plot” (Newman 89-90), contemporary indie drama as a genre relies on unusual characters and situations to spark audience interest rather than a style of narrative and visual representation that helps the audience connect with these characters.

Geoff King argues that one of the few stylistic flourishes present in indie film is the use of form to create “*expressive*” effects “designed to create effects other than those of an ersatz documentary-realist nature” (119). The main motivation for using expressive effects is to present a “*subjective* realism that seeks to create an impression of individual experience, as it might seem from the inside, as opposed to an impression of events seen more objectively” (123). Examples of the use of expressive effects in transgender dramas include the flights of fancy to the Barbie-like world of Pam in *Ma Vie in Rose* (1997) and Brandon’s disembodied experience in *Boys Don’t Cry* in which he watches John and Tom forcibly expose his genitals and force his girlfriend Lana to look at them. These moments allow audience members access to the perspectives of the

transgender characters in ways that are not possible through the typical stylistic choices made in indie dramas.

In terms of the audience for indie films, John Berra argues that the audience seeks out indie films because these films satisfy certain needs and identifies the audience as one that “possesses/seeks: (1) Cultural hopefulness; (2) Narrative enthusiasm; (3) Individual assertiveness; [and] (4) Urban life expectation[s]” (195). Berra’s analysis of the audience for indie films “suggest[s] an audience that is far removed from the lives depicted in American independent cinema . . . the audience for American independent cinema is more stable, comfortable with its position in the overarching social-economy, fixed in specific roles” (198). Indie film brings attention for many people to characters and situations that are less than familiar to them and while this provides exposure to a wider community for transgender people and other marginalized groups, the audience comes from a position that is already distanced from the lives of the characters shown on screen and is only distanced further by the narrative and visual representations in these films. Though indie films may claim to reflect the unvarnished truth of the characters’ situations, they are still playing to an audience generally unfamiliar with the lived experiences presented on screen in ways that tend toward exoticization. When combined with the trend in many indie films toward ironic detachment, the characters are presented to the audience as the distanced Other.

In this chapter, I examine the distancing of transgender individuals through sympathetic narrative and visual messages. After a review of relevant scholarly literature, I conduct a textual analysis of the following films: *Different for Girls* (1996),<sup>2</sup>

*Ma Vie en Rose* (1997),<sup>3</sup> *Boys Don't Cry* (1999),<sup>4</sup> *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003),<sup>5</sup> *Transamerica* (2005),<sup>6</sup> and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005).<sup>7</sup> The films are analyzed in terms of narrative conventions (constraints on gender identity, proving gender identity through actions, and repressive actions of heteronormativity) and the visual codes of the transpathetic gaze (attention to dressing, reminders of the body, and sympathetic recognition).

### **Literature Review**

As I have in previous chapters, I begin by accepting the legitimacy of the characters' transgender identities; this is inherently easier, but no less important, in this chapter since the characters actively claim transgender identities rather than being forced into or hiding their identities. By first accepting the legitimacy of the characters' transgender identities, I am free to examine attempts by the films to undermine these identities as a way of supporting a heteronormative view of gender identities. I demonstrate this in my analysis through the variety of ways the films narratively and visually decide to represent these characters. Rather than arguing that a character's gender performance subverts or supports heteronormativity, I am instead interested in the ways the narratives are constructed and the visual choices that are made in transgender dramas to lead the audience to decode the films in certain ways. As Julia Serano argues about Bree in *Transamerica*, there are moments in the film where she can be said to be “‘doing female’ rather badly” (42). These moments can be interpreted as Bree's conservative gender performance, struggling to fit into a narrow definition of femininity, or decisions in the film to focus on moments of Bree stumbling in her heels in order to show her as struggling. The distinction between these two positions may

seem to be marginal but through my analytic focus on the narrative and visual choices made in the filmic representations of these characters, I demonstrate the difference in the impression of the characters and their lived experiences when their actions are considered through the lens of representation rather than as gender performances based on individual decisions and actions.

In support of my argument that the transgender characters are constructed in specific ways that distance them from the audience, research on transgender dramas focuses primarily on whether the films problematize or reinforce dominant heteronormative conceptions of gender. Some scholars argue that the representations of the characters in the films provide a glimpse, however brief, of an active challenge to heteronormativity while other scholars argue that the films ultimately reinforce the dominant hierarchical gender system. In this section, I break down both sides of this discussion and its implications for decoding films that portray the lives of characters who actively claim transgender identities.

Brenda Cooper reads the narrative of *Boys Don't Cry* as subversive and “liberatory” in which “the privileged subjectivities of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are dismantled, while female masculinity and gender fluidity are privileged and normalized” (49). Heteronormativity is challenged in the film through problematizing traditional masculinity. First, committing acts of violence is positioned as a male privilege which John and Tom exercise in their raping and killing of Brandon, clearly placing the blame for Brandon’s death with the heteronormative system rather than focusing on Brandon’s actions (51-53). Second, Brandon performs two different

styles of masculinity: machismo when around other men and a “shy sensitivity” when around Lana and the other women he is attracted to, thus expanding the possibilities of masculinity (53-54). Cooper argues that the result of this problematizing of traditional masculinity is a queer, fluid performance of gender and sexuality that is privileged through Lana’s decision to stay with Brandon even while ignoring hints from others about his sex and after later finding out for herself (55-57).

In contrast to Cooper, Annabelle Willox argues that the film “closes off the possibility of any gender ambiguity” for Brandon Teena “in the face of the ‘truth’ of his body” (421). Willox contends “that this ‘truth’ is constantly underscored, albeit (possibly) unintentionally, throughout the film, and therefore the possibility of reading the celluloid Brandon as a trans man is foreclosed” (421). Rather than allowing for a queer, fluid gender performance, the film closes off such readings, preventing the audience from decoding the film that way, through early scenes of Brandon binding his breasts and packing his crotch to give the appearance of a penis (420-421). While Cooper focuses on the film’s construction of Brandon through his performance of gender, Willox focuses instead on the frequent visual references made to his body. The argument I make in my analysis lies somewhere in between these two positions; both the construction of Brandon’s identity through his actions and the visual references to his material body support heteronormativity by offering both up to the audience’s sympathies as evidence of the struggles he endures to deviate from heteronormative standards. One mode of presentation is not more progressive than the other. Both



function in the film and other transgender dramas to maintain heteronormativity's place of dominance in the sex/gender system.

John Sloop argues that a discourse emerges from the film and journalistic reports surrounding Brandon Teena's murder that positions his "body and behavior as simultaneously familiar and alien, and, in this way, the overall representation reifies heteronormativity" ("Disciplining the Transgender" 170). Where Cooper saw a narrative that subverts heteronormativity, Sloop sees a discourse that strengthens heteronormativity through a narrative of deception and an unwillingness or inability to accept Brandon's identity as legitimate but instead "search[es] for the reason, whether chemical or psychological, for the anomaly that left Brandon to live outside the realm of normal behavior" ("Disciplining Gender" 78). The audience should feel sorry for Brandon for whatever has led him to his current position in life but should also be reminded of heteronormativity's dominance by presenting Brandon as deceptive and deviant.

For J. Jack Halberstam, the film shows initial promise in its ability to challenge heteronormativity; he argues that, visually, spectators are forced "to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's gaze, a transgender gaze" ("Transgender Gaze" 294). By adopting Brandon's gaze, the audience is able to connect with him, but I argue that this gaze remains a sympathetic feeling sorry for Brandon rather than a true empathetic connection with him. The transgender gaze is not sustained throughout the entire film as the director, Kimberly Peirce, ultimately abandons it during Brandon's sexual encounter with Lana toward the end, a move which Willox argues is framed, visually and through

dialogue, in a way that supports lesbian readings of Brandon's identity (420-421). For Halberstam, this abandonment of the transgender gaze "opens up a set of questions about the inevitability and dominance of both the male/female and the hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema" ("Transgender Gaze" 294). Heteronormative society remains uncomfortable with those individuals whose gender and sexuality are indistinct or do not match up with expectations. A film like *Boys Don't Cry* "simultaneously generates sympathy for the gender-confused Brandon (whom the narrative turns into a tragic victim) while reassuring the audience that their own sex/gender identities remain intact" (J. Phillips 146). Adopting a more traditional gaze, even one that looks at a queer couple, allows space for the audience to feel sorry for Brandon but remain confident in the certainty that the issues plaguing his life will not affect their own.

The depiction of Brandon Teena's life and death in *Boys Don't Cry* raises the issue of the struggle to construct a transgender individual's life to fit heteronormative conventions. Scholars of transgender dramas also argue that the lives of transgender people produce inherent difficulties in narrative representation. Michael Schiavi argues of Ludovic, the main character of *Ma Vie in Rose*, that her "most salient traits court narrative elimination rather than inclusion" (1). Ludovic, and, by extension, other transgender characters, is too different from the audience and the other characters in the film to fit into the typical narratives of discovery and coming of age, becoming, not long into the film, "less a character proper than an object of masculine remediation and psychiatric evaluation" (10). I disagree with Schiavi's argument that Ludovic becomes nothing more than a bystander in her own story. Through my analysis of the film and

other transgender dramas, I show how Ludovic remains at the center of the film's narrative as the focal point of heteronormativity's reprisals. Ludovic remains defiantly active in her claim to a transgender identity, but the distancing of her from the audience as an object of sympathy may create the impression that her role in the narrative is diminished. She is not just the object of the projections of the heteronormative characters in the film but continues to stand up to them in her unwavering assertion of her gender identity.<sup>8</sup>

The end of *Ma Vie en Rose* works to define the narrative as one of family bonding and togetherness. While Ludovic “remains [her] own uncategorizable self” (Schiavi 12), Nick Rees-Roberts argues that the ending, in which the family accepts Ludovic after her mother hits her at a birthday party, is a “rushed attempt” to wrap up the story in a satisfying conclusion (293). This ending ignores the abusive treatment Ludovic has suffered at the hands of her family and other heteronormative members of her community by presenting her family as finally accepting her transgender identity. Kate Ince, however, argues that the family's acceptance of Ludovic “is actually a *rejection* dressed up as acceptance of [her] difference” (95). By resorting to the tolerance of Ludovic's differences and individualist concepts of personal freedom, the family avoids any real acceptance of Ludovic's transgender identity (95). The family is comfortable in feeling sorry for everything Ludovic has suffered at their hands but is not interested in a deeper understanding of her. While Ludovic's family feeling sorry for her is an improvement on her either abandoning her identity at the end of the film or efforts being made to contain the threat presented by her identity, she is still kept at a distance

from her family and, by extension, the audience. The narrative construction of the character allows the audience to get only so close to Ludovic while not allowing for a deeper connection with her.

Distinguishing them from the characters in transgender farces and thrillers, the characters in transgender dramas are united in their active claims to transgender identities. Charlotte Nunes praises Kitten in *Breakfast on Pluto* for being “especially valiant in her persistent and brazen expression of her female identity” in the face of heteronormative constraints and violence (927), and Andrew Osmond praises Hana from *Tokyo Godfathers* by pointing out that she is “securer in [her] identity than practically any of [director Satoshi] Kon’s other protagonists” (70). Discussions of Bree from *Transamerica* focus mainly on the way her identity has been constructed to support heteronormativity. Julia Serano argues that the opening scene in the film is “clearly designed to establish that Bree’s female identity is artificial and imitative, and to reduce her transition to the mere pursuit of feminine finery” and that moments throughout the film, such as Bree constantly reapplying her makeup and stumbling in her heels, are designed to “portray Bree as ‘doing female’ rather badly” (42). Sharon Cowan adds that “Bree does not want to live as a trans person, continually calling into question our safe, comfortable categories of male/female” (108). The film “takes what might be seen as the more conservative, assimilationist, and less radical stance towards sex/gender” (109). Bree’s transgender identity is never in question for the audience, but the narrative of the film positions her as more interested in blending in with heteronormative society than in actively challenging it. Though she may be more interested in being part of

heteronormative society than the other characters in this chapter, the narrative conventions and visual codes still distance her from the audience by evoking feelings of sympathy for the effort she goes through as a transgender woman just to fit in.

The scholarship on transgender dramas focuses on the ways the transgender characters are constructed through the films and other discourses. My analysis continues this discussion through an analysis of the specific narrative conventions and visual codes used to construct the characters' identities in relation to heteronormative standards. I argue that the ways the characters are presented narratively and visually distance them from the audience by prompting feelings of sympathy for the struggles the characters go through to find their places in society while preventing a deeper empathetic connection with the characters through an understanding and acceptance of them. The sympathy felt by audience members for the characters in transgender dramas is an important step forward in transgender representations but a deeper connection with the characters is still lacking.

### **Analysis**

In contrast to previous chapters, the characters in transgender dramas actively claim a transgender identity rather than being forced into or hiding their identities. Instead of focusing on the discovery or revelation of a character's transgender identity, the films make particular narrative and visual arguments about the gender identities of the characters in a heteronormative society. The narrative conventions of transgender dramas include constraints on gender identity, proving gender identity through actions, and repressive actions of heteronormativity. The visual codes of the trans-pathetic gaze

include attention to dressing, reminders of the body, and sympathetic recognition by others. The narrative conventions and visual codes work together to portray the struggles the characters endure in a heteronormative society while distancing the audience from the characters through feelings of sympathy for their plights.

### **Narrative Conventions**

The narrative conventions of transgender dramas construct the characters as struggling to find a place in society which their transgender identities make difficult. By constructing the characters lives as a struggle, the films present the characters' identities as continually challenged by heteronormative standards of gender. The characters must then decide how to respond, only prompting further challenges. After an initial claim to a transgender identity is made, the characters face constraints on their identities by those around them, primarily family and friends. These constraints are the first expression of a lack of acceptance of the characters' transgender identities. The characters respond to these constraints by trying to prove their gender identities through their actions, as if all that prevented their acceptance by others is definitive proof of their claims. So far, the characters are not that different from the characters in transgender farces and thrillers; the characters occupy specific gender positions and make claims to certain identities that are either accepted or rejected by heteronormative society. What differentiates the characters in transgender dramas and leads to the feelings of sympathy from the audience is the harsh, often violent, reprisals the characters suffer for refusing to conform to heteronormative standards. The characters do not want to discard their transgender identities or violently strike back at repressive heteronormativity so their

struggles evoke feelings of sympathy rather than ridicule or fear. Though the characters are positioned outside of heteronormative society and, therefore, distanced from the assumed heteronormative audience, transgender dramas come closest to a connection between the characters and the audience through the feelings of sympathy for the struggles of the characters in the face of repressive actions.

### *Constraints on gender identity*

Constraints on gender identity in transgender dramas include words and actions directed at transgender characters for the purpose of correcting their (perceived) deviant behavior or expressing disapproval about their behavior. Constraints, for my purposes, stop short of physical or verbal attacks to punish transgender characters for disregarding heteronormative rules of behavior and are meant more as a corrective to that behavior before heteronormative violence, to be discussed in the third part of this section, becomes necessary. One example of a constraint on gender identity can be found in the following statements directed at Brandon Teena by his cousin Lonny at the beginning of *Boys Don't Cry*. After Brandon finishes getting dressed for a night of picking up women at a skating rink, Lonny says, "If you was a guy, I might even wanna fuck you!" With just a subtle turn of phrase, "*if* you were a guy," Lonny makes it clear that he does not accept Brandon's gender identity. Though he makes no attempts to forcefully change Brandon's behavior, Lonny clearly refuses to acknowledge Brandon's masculine gender identity as legitimate. Later in the film, Brandon runs back to Lonny's trailer with a group of men, angry that he had sex with one of their sisters, chasing after him. Brandon seems bewildered by why the other men are so upset, and Lonny suggests that the

problem stems from Brandon's misunderstanding of an issue of sexual orientation as one of gender identity.

Lonny: You are not a boy! That is what went wrong!

Brandon: Tell them that. They say that I'm the best boyfriend they ever had.

Brandon's argument is based on his view that as a man, there should be no issue with him sleeping with women, but Lonny still refuses to accept Brandon's gender identity.

Lonny: Why don't you just admit that you're a dyke?!

Brandon: Because I'm not a dyke.

Brandon's refusal to accept or abide by the constraints Lonny places on his gender identity leads to Lonny kicking him out for attracting trouble.

Constraints like these from close friends and family are fairly common in transgender dramas. Not all of the constraints on gender identity are as direct as those directed at Brandon by Lonny. Constraints can include a casual remark, such as Gin calling his friend Hana "faggot" and "queen" repeatedly throughout *Tokyo Godfathers*, or a slip-up in a moment of anger, such as Paul yelling Kim's former male name, "Karl!" in an attempt to stop her from leaving the pub they are having dinner at in *Different for Girls*. Paul's use of Kim's male name, even in a moment of anger, is a sign that he does not completely accept her transgender identity while Gin's more casual use of labels like faggot demonstrate an uneasiness with Hana's gender identity and an attempt to relate to her as a gay man rather than a transgender women.<sup>9</sup> After Gin calls her faggot while they wait in line at a Christmas soup kitchen, Hana argues that she is "a mistake made by God. In my heart, I am a woman" to which Gin counters "Women can have children." Gin often makes reference to biology to bring attention to Hana's



transgender body, saying later, as Hana frantically searches for milk to feed the abandoned baby Kiyoko, “You can’t get milk from an old queen’s tits no matter how hard you think!” The implications of Gin’s references to Hana’s body, particularly as they relate to the care of Kiyoko, are that a transgender woman is biologically incapable of being a good mother or caring for a child, no matter how hard she might try. Another example of the problematizing of transgender identities through biology can be found in Bree’s dinner with her parents in *Transamerica*. When Bree states that her argumentativeness with her family is the result of her hormone cycles, her mother angrily responds “You don’t have cycles!” Bree retorts, “Hormones are hormones. Yours and mine just happen to come in a little purple pill.” Constraints on gender identity in transgender dramas not only try to limit the behaviors of transgender people but also point out the limitations inherent in their own bodies.

Looks, nasty remarks, and questions are other forms of constraints on gender identity experienced by the characters in transgender dramas. Throughout her trip from New York to Los Angeles with her son Toby, Bree is constantly aware of the looks she receives from others, particularly as groups of men watch her filling up with gas in West Virginia and Kentucky. Bree’s consciousness of their presence stems from a fear of being read while performing a typically masculine action, filling up with gas, in a masculine space, the gas station.

The constraints on transgender women entering traditionally masculine spaces are also felt by Kim upon entering the masculine space of the police station. After Paul is arrested for exposing himself in public and Kim is arrested along with him for arguing

with the police, they are brought to the station for booking. Kim is told that she may have to share a cell with another person and when she asks who, the officer replies, “It’s the great unknown. Kinda like yourself,” making it clear that she should not expect fair or equal treatment. The officer’s comment informs Kim that, even though she has lived as a woman for a number of years and completed sex reassignment surgery, her transgender identity and gender expression are treated as a mystery rather than as legitimate. It is no surprise that Kim flees to the relative safety of her sister’s house after the ordeal rather than testify on Paul’s behalf.

While Kim is read by the booking officer at a police station, Bree’s parents barely recognize her when she arrives at their house looking for help. Her father opens the door and asks “Can I help you, young lady?” to which Bree responds simply “Dad, it’s me.” Her mother gasps and slams the door in her face, leaving Bree to bang on the door until her mother opens it again and says “Get in here before the neighbors see you.” It is clear that Bree’s father barely recognizes her, calling into question her mother’s concern about her being recognized by the neighbors and the negative implications this apparently will have for her parents. As Bree makes a sandwich, her father says, “We’re gonna need more time with that. We both love you . . .” before her mother interrupts.

Bree’s mother: But we don’t respect you! I’ll never understand why you’re doing this to me.

Bree: I’m not doing anything to you. I’m gender dysphoric. It’s a genetic condition.

Bree’s mother: Don’t try to blame your father and me for this.

Bree’s mother makes it clear that she does not accept Bree’s transgender identity. Even Bree’s attempt at offering an explanation is met with the accusation that she is trying to

blame her parents for her situation. The refusal to recognize her transgender identity is an attempt to shame her into conforming to heteronormative standards.

While the constraints discussed so far are very real, the most direct pressure to conform to heteronormative standards is placed on transgender children, particularly Ludovic. Seven-year-old Ludovic Fabre's dependence on her parents prevents her from just leaving, as Kitten does in *Breakfast on Pluto*, when up against the constraints on her gender identity. As the youngest character in this project, Ludovic faces the most direct control on her gender identity and expression. Ludovic faces constraints from her parents from the very beginning of the film when she comes out of the house at her family's housewarming party in a pink princess dress, heels, and makeup. Her mother takes her in to change and as she wipes the lipstick from Ludovic's lips tells her, "You're seven, Ludo. Too old to dress up as a girl even if you think it's funny." Ludovic's mother tries to play the entire incident off as a joke, an extension of her husband referring to Ludovic as a "joker" to their guests, but the message is clear that this behavior will no longer be tolerated, implying that it has been tolerated for a while. Ludovic's father is more direct; he asks Ludovic why she was dressed the way she was, "I wanted to be pretty" Ludovic replies, to which her father responds with a clear, "Never again."

Ludovic faces a number of different constraints on her gender identity. While her mother is initially the more supportive parent, having read in *Marie Claire* magazine that it is natural for children to take seven years to search for their identity (which is conveniently Ludovic's current age), she soon becomes exasperated. After Ludovic tells

her grandmother that she wants to marry her neighbor Jerome, her mother tells her, “You know, Ludo, boys don’t marry other boys.” Ludovic sighs and rolls her eyes, saying “I know that!” Her mother seems content until Ludovic says she will be a girl when she marries Jerome; her mother then loses her cool.

Mother: Cut it out! You’re a boy, and you’ll be a boy all your life! You’re so stubborn! Just like your mother.

She then smiles at Ludovic and is able to coax a smile out of her in response, but her message of disapproval has been sent loud and clear.

Ludovic also faces constraints at school. She is made fun of by the other students for bringing Pam and Ben dolls, the film’s equivalents to Barbie and Ken, for show and tell, with one boy exclaiming, “He plays with dollies!” The teacher tries to smooth over the situation by saying that Ludovic and Sophie, another student who brought a Pam doll, would make a good couple and that Ludovic wants to be like Ben, moving on despite Ludovic shaking her head no. Later at school, Jerome, the boy Ludovic has a crush on, asks to sit anywhere but next to Ludovic; the teacher agrees but asks why and Jerome answers, “Otherwise, I’ll go to Hell,” a message he received from his conservative Christian parents. Ludovic is crushed and at recess, she runs crying to her sister Zoe, begging her to promise that she will not go to Hell, which Zoe does while hugging Ludovic. Zoe also brings biology into the constraints on Ludovic’s gender identity.

Zoe: We learned in biology what makes boys and girls. XY, you’re a boy. XX, you’re a girl. It’s like playing poker. Get it?

Ludovic: Doesn’t God decide?

Zoe: Of course He does.

Rather than accepting Zoe's explanation, Ludovic imagines God holding a list with her name on it, "Ludovic Fabre – *fille*." God tosses two X chromosomes and a Y down the Fabre's chimney, but one of the Xs bounces off and falls into the trash. Ludovic then exclaims, "I know what happened to my X." Through her active imagination, Ludovic is able to avoid Zoe's constraint and devise her own explanation for her transgender identity.

Though Ludovic refuses to compromise on her claim of a transgender identity, she does express regret to her grandmother at the tension that exists between herself and her parents.

Ludovic: They say I refuse to change, and I only bring them trouble.

Grandmother: They have a point.

Ludovic: I don't want to change but I do want them to love me.

Grandmother: They do but they still think they know what's best for you.

Ludovic: It's not best for me!

Bree also expresses a similar sentiment to her son Toby while sitting by her parent's pool. "I wish just once they'd look at me and see me. That's all. Really see me." In response to the constraints on their gender identities faced by transgender individuals both in film and in real life, transgender individuals often respond with a sincere desire to be recognized for who they are. This lack of recognition, an inability to or lack of desire to understand what it means to be a transgender person, is offered by Ludovic and Bree as an explanation for the tension and struggle they experience when dealing with their families and others in their lives.

All of the examples discussed so far could be overheard while walking down a street, but *Transamerica* provides an example of the way the narrative construction

works as a constraint on the character's gender identity. After receiving a call from her newly discovered son from a juvenile detention center in New York, Bree goes to see her therapist to make the final preparations for her sex reassignment surgery. Bree has an appointment the following week for her surgery and tells the therapist that nothing will stop her from checking into the hospital, even her son's problems. The therapist responds, "Bree, this is a part of your body that cannot be discarded. I don't want you to go through this metamorphosis only to find out you're still incomplete." The therapist then refuses to sign the paperwork for Bree's surgery until she deals with her son. Bree is desperate and begins to panic because the hospital where she is having her surgery is booked a year in advance and with just a week to go before her appointment, she will have to wait another year if she misses it.

The therapist's refusal to approve Bree's surgery is an unnecessary constraint intended to set up the main action of the film: Bree going to New York, bailing her son Toby out, and the two of them driving back to Los Angeles. While it is an effective set up for a film, it is a blatant disregard on the part of the therapist for her patient's wellbeing. Making her signature conditional puts an undue psychological burden on Bree, causing her an unnecessary amount of stress right before major surgery. It is also a decision that fails to take into account the economic realities of Bree's life; given the exorbitant out-of-pocket costs of sex reassignment surgery and the fact that Bree earns a living as a dishwasher at a Mexican restaurant and as a telemarketer, flying from Los Angeles to New York and then driving back with a teenager puts undue strain on Bree's finances. This decision is couched in concern for Bree, wanting to ensure that she does

not feel “incomplete” after her surgery, but serves only the film and is not an accurate representation of concern for a transgender patient. There is no reason Bree could not have gone to help her son after recovering from her surgery but apparently that would not have made for as interesting of a plot.

*Transamerica* also features an important rupture in the constraints on gender identity when Bree constrains the gender identities of a group of transgender people she meets in Dallas. After being read by a young girl at a restaurant in Arkansas, Bree complains to her therapist about her problems with Toby so her therapist connects her with a transgender woman in Dallas who is willing to open up her home to them. Upon arriving, Bree is a little put off that her host and a group of transgender women and men, who are there to plan a “Gender Pride” cruise, are passing around pictures of one member’s “new vagina.” Bree says to her host, “Margaret [the therapist] said you were stealth,” meaning she does not tell people she is a transgender woman. Her host replies, “I am in public, but this *is* the privacy of my own home.”

Bree is uncomfortable with the openness and frank sexuality of the women at the party and sits away from the group. When she tells Toby they have to leave, Toby replies, “Why do you have to be so uptight? It’s a party.” Bree is out of her element, having spent the last few years trying to hide her transgender identity rather than celebrate it. Later that evening, Toby goes looking for Bree and startles her as she comes out of the bathroom in her underwear. After putting on a robe, she apologizes to Toby for “those ersatz women,” defining the term as “phony. Something pretending to be something it’s not.” Toby’s reply to Bree’s constraining of the gender identities of

the other women is “I thought they were nice.” While Bree faces a number of her own constraints, from her parents belittling her to her therapist requiring her to travel across the country before signing her paperwork, she demonstrates how transgender people can be as constraining of each other as anyone. Being a transgender individual does not free anyone from the pressures to conform to heteronormativity.

Constraints on gender identity are heteronormativity’s first line of defense against those who would claim an identity outside of its purview. By trying to curtail behavior that is seen as undesirable, constraints work to change behavior before more drastic actions become necessary. In the face of these constraints, characters in transgender dramas work to prove their transgender identity through their actions.

*Proving gender identity through actions*

Lacking constant voiceovers of their internal monologues, the characters in transgender dramas must demonstrate their gender identities, both to the other characters in the films and to the audience, through their actions. While this reliance on action to prove gender identity represents a limitation in film technology, the narratives of the films also provide the characters with numerous situations in which to prove their gender identities. These actions are attempts by the transgender characters to find a place within heteronormative society. Having had their identities constrained by others and fearing reprisals should they continue to act outside of heteronormative standards, transgender characters seek to prove they belong in a society often hostile to their claimed identities. While the actions and behaviors of the transgender characters are often used to justify



constraining their identities, the response by these characters is to work to prove their identities as definitively as possible.

Hana provides an example through her adoption of the mother role when she, Gin, and Miyuki find a baby abandoned in a garbage pile. Hana is clearly enjoying feeding Kiyoko a bottle the next morning but when Gin and Miyuki return to take the baby to the police, Hana has run off with her. They track Hana's footprints through the snow and find her crouching with the baby in a parking lot. Hana has no sympathy for parents who would abandon their child, especially on a cold, snowy night, so when Gin tries to argue that a baby is better off with her or his parents, Hana responds, "Not necessarily. Sometimes a foster mother's better." Having never known her real mother, Hana is more open to the idea of a child being raised by a surrogate than either Gin or Miyuki. Gin eventually convinces Hana that their situation is less than ideal for raising a child, "How can someone homeless raise a child?," so their mission changes from taking Kiyoko to the police to tracking down the parents who abandoned her. Hana never hesitates in her mission to protect Kiyoko, running all over the streets of Tokyo, commandeering a cab for a high speed chase when she discovers that the woman who abandoned Kiyoko is not her real mother but stole her from the hospital, and even jumping off the roof of a skyscraper to save the baby. Gin is more realistic, "We're homeless bums, not action-movie heroes!," but Hana will not be deterred. Her willingness to do whatever it takes to protect those in her makeshift family, landing herself in the hospital on more than one occasion, would make anyone proud to call Hana "mother," regardless of her gender identity.

Brandon's actions are more about finding his place in an often hostile world than within an adopted family. Brandon learns his lesson after being chased back to Lonny's trailer by a group of angry men and when he makes a new group of friends, he does whatever it takes to perform traditional masculinity in order to be accepted, regardless of the danger. While out drinking one night, Brandon agrees to be pulled around a field by a pickup truck while holding on to a rope as a test of courage. Lana, who Brandon is smitten with at first sight, questions his need to prove himself with such risky behavior.

Brandon: I've been bored my whole life.

Lana: Yeah? Is that why you let John tie you to the back of a truck and drag you around like a dog?

Brandon: No. I just thought that's what guys do around here.

Brandon attributes his behavior to boredom which must be relieved through risky actions, but Lana offers him a way out by questioning his use of John as a measuring stick for what it means to be a man. Brandon soon becomes disillusioned with John and focuses on proving his gender identity by wooing Lana.

Brandon is not shy in his performance of gender and clearly wants to be seen by others and to have them validate his performance of masculinity. Bree's actions at the beginning of *Transamerica* express a desire to *not* be seen. As she waits at a bus stop to go to an appointment with a psychiatrist, she tries to avoid letting people see her face by standing apart from them and turning her head whenever they look in her direction. She also crouches down and stoops her shoulders in an attempt to make herself appear shorter than the man standing next to her. Transgender people are often represented in film as overly flamboyant attention seekers, particularly in the comedies discussed in Chapter 2, but Bree's actions are an example of her attempt to prove her gender to others

by fitting in and not standing out. Ludovic, in contrast, is constantly seeking the approval of her gender performance from others, particularly Jerome. One day at school as she and Jerome wash their hands after using the restroom, she offers her ability to urinate while sitting down as proof of her girlhood, an action which Jerome points out is not impossible for boys; Ludovic then declares herself a “girlboy” merely waiting for God to deliver her missing X chromosome. For Ludovic, she already is a girl and is waiting for nothing more than the outward confirmation of her inner feelings, an experience common for many transsexual individuals. She asks Jerome if he will like her once she has received her missing X.

Ludovic: But God’ll fix it. He’ll send me my X, and we can get married, okay?  
 Jerome: It depends on what kind of girl you are.

Jerome confirms the importance of actions in establishing gender. It is not enough for Ludovic to physically become female. Instead, the deciding factor for Jerome is how she acts as a girl, on what kind of girl she will be. While he will later give in to his parent’s conservative beliefs and reject Ludovic, it is surprising to hear Jerome making such a positional and performative argument based on Ludovic’s identity as an individual rather than on any essentialist notions of attraction and behavior.

While the behavior of the transgender characters may be questioned or essentialized, one of the clearest ways the characters try to demonstrate their claimed gender identities is through their romantic relationships. Kim and Paul flirt with each other while dancing together in his apartment after going to a rock club, and Kim is encouraged enough by the connection between them to ask Paul to come up to her place for a cup of coffee after he takes her home. He turns down the offer, but she is not ready

to give up yet so she leans in to kiss him. He backs away, offering his hand to shake instead.

Paul: I am straight, you know?

Kim: So am I.

At this point, Paul is unable to separate Kim's gender identity from his memories of the boy he went to school with, though he will later overcome his hang ups as he falls in love with Kim.

Kim actively pursues Paul as a way of demonstrating her claim to womanhood, though it remains taboo in some circles of Western society for women to initiate relationships, which might also have been a turn off for Paul. Brandon does not face this issue in his relationship with Lana since, as a man, he would be expected to initiate a relationship and so has more initial success than Kim has with Paul. After returning from a court date in Lincoln, Nebraska, Brandon watches Lana as she takes a smoke break at the factory where she works and even takes Polaroid pictures of her, an action that Lana treats as creepy when John watches her later in the film but treats as charming when Brandon does it. Brandon's romantic gesture is successful, and he and Lana make out on a hill near the factory. During this initial romantic encounter, Brandon takes Lana's bra off and performs oral sex on her, which she enjoys immensely, but does not perform any of the typical actions associated with the usual masculine demand for sexual satisfaction. Brandon's greater interest in Lana's happiness offers a view of masculinity that differs from the heteronormative standard but is still accepted as masculine by others. Brandon's alternative masculinity may explain why he successfully pursues

multiple women in the film while more overtly masculine characters like John and Tom are shunned.

The chastest relationship in this chapter, between Ludovic and Jerome, also provides the clearest example of the lengths to which a character in a transgender drama will go to show her or his love for another character. Beyond telling her grandmother that she will marry Jerome in the future, Ludovic also has two opportunities to show her love for him through her actions. The first comes while she plays with Jerome at his house. She sneaks into the very feminine room of Jerome's sister who has "gone away," which Ludovic is too young to recognize as a euphemism that the sister has died, and finding a pink dress in the sister's closet, decides to put it on and have a pretend wedding with Jerome as the groom. All is going smoothly until Jerome's mom catches them just as they are about to kiss, which causes her to faint. Ludovic's second opportunity also involves trying to kiss Jerome. At school, Ludovic is dissatisfied with her role as a dwarf in her class' production of "Snow White" so she decides to lock Sophie, who is playing Snow White, in the restroom and take her place on stage in time to be kissed by Jerome, who is playing Prince Charming. Jerome recognizes Ludovic as he bends down to kiss her, and he freezes and backs away, pulling off the veil and headband covering Ludovic's face and revealing her to everyone. Ludovic is too young at seven years old for any relationship that would go beyond a kiss, but she tries to replicate the experiences that she hopes to have in the future with Jerome or a man like him. Though her fantasies are fairly conservative, getting married and being kissed by a prince, the

attraction that they seek to fulfill brings as much negative attention, if not more, to her than her claim to a feminine gender identity.

Those who disapprove of the actions of the transgender characters, and the gender identities they express, also make claims to heteronormative gender identities through their own actions. These actions can be as simple as Ludovic's father yelling at the entire family during dinner after finding out about Ludovic's pretend wedding with Jerome then going out in the backyard and doing pull-ups in the garden. The physical exertion is not only a way to release anger but also a typically masculine action; Ludovic's father is demonstrating to her the way a man should act. Paul must also reassert his claim to masculinity after he gets turned on by Kim's flirtatious description of her physical transformation while undergoing hormone treatment and sex reassignment surgery during dinner at her apartment. When he heads for the door rather than admit his attraction, Kim responds, "Now you know what it's like to be confused about your cock." The two begin to argue, and Paul unzips his pants and pulls out his penis as a demonstration of society's obsession with it. Being arrested for public indecency, for Paul, just proves his point. Paul gets in a shouting match and exposes himself to prove his masculinity after feeling that it was called into question because of his attraction to Kim. Heteronormative gender identities must be clearly established in the face of transgender identities, particularly transgender identities that arouse desires that are also seen as outside the norm.

The actions of Paul and Ludovic's father are centered on asserting and building up their own personal masculine identities. The actions of John and Tom in their rape of

Brandon seek to assert their own masculinity by diminishing Brandon's. After forcefully exposing Brandon's transgender identity, John and Tom wait for him outside Lana's house, forcing him into their car and taking him to an abandoned meat-packing plant. Brandon begs them not to do anything after John tells him to take his shirt off, and John responds, "You know you brought this on yourself," before punching him twice in the mouth and shoving him in the backseat of the car.

After Brandon is raped by John, Tom then rips Brandon's clothes off, pushes him on the trunk of the car, and rapes him for a second time. After Tom finishes, John punches Brandon again as the two celebrate, leaving Brandon curled up naked in the fetal position. Brandon asks to be taken home, and John tells him to keep their "little secret."

Tom: Cause if you don't, we'll have to silence you permanently.

Brandon: Yeah, of course. This is all my fault, I know.

Brandon is able to escape out of a window at John's house while they think he is taking a shower. He goes to Lana's house but when Lana's mom sees him, she says, "I don't want *it* in my house." Lana convinces Brandon to go to the police to report the rape, who prove to be less than helpful.

Officer: Why do you run around with *guys* bein' you're a girl yourself? Why do you go around kissin' every girl?

Brandon: I don't know what this has to do with what happened last night.

Officer: Cause I'm tryin' to get some answers so I can know exactly what the fuck's goin' on.

Like John and Tom, the officer asserts that because he is a transgender man, Brandon brought the attack on himself. Through his assertion that Brandon brought the rape on himself, the officer implicitly supports John and Tom's heteronormative actions. Rape

is often implicitly supported, through the blaming of victims, ignoring of cases, and less than thorough follow up on accusations, because it is seen as an assertion of heteronormative masculinity, which includes the, often forceful, sexual domination of women as one of its central tenets.

John and Tom rape Brandon to diminish his masculinity and assert the dominance of their own. Brandon cannot be a masculine individual because a truly masculine individual would never allow himself to be raped. Likewise, John and Tom are truly masculine because of the ease with which they are able to rape Brandon. It is important for John and Tom's claims to a masculine identity that their rape of Brandon was preceded by their forceful exposure of his transgender identity. By exposing Brandon's transgender identity, John and Tom are able to view him, and force their friends to view him as well, as a woman instead of as a man, thus preventing their rape from calling into question their own masculinity through raping a man. The implications of Lana's refusal to look at Brandon's exposed genitals will be discussed in a later section.

The assertions of heteronormativity by John, Tom, Paul, and Ludovic's father are all in response to being challenged by the transgender identity of another character. Ludovic's father is disturbed that she is transgender and fantasizing about marrying Jerome, Paul is disturbed by his physical attraction to Kim, and John and Tom are disturbed by the women in their lives being attracted to Brandon. When challenged, heteronormative masculinity in these films responds through actions, ranging from pull-ups to public exposure to rape, that reassert its dominance and control. Even a



seemingly benign action as Ludovic's father doing pull-ups sends a clear message that heteronormative masculinity is expressed physically and those who challenge it should expect to be the target of that physicality.

Transgender characters seek to prove their gender identities through actions as a way of pushing back against those who would deny the legitimacy of their identities. These actions face their own pushback as heteronormativity seeks to reassert its dominance, often through repressive physical force. When the transgender characters do not get the message and conform to heteronormative standards, they become the objects of even more repressive actions.

#### *Repressive actions of heteronormativity*

After enduring constraints placed on their gender identities and, in response, trying to provide proof of their identities through their actions, the characters in transgender dramas now face the full force of the heteronormative drive to repress their identities for deviating from the norm. I have chosen to separate these instances from the examples discussed above involving Ludovic's father, Paul, John, and Tom because while their actions in the previous section were about reasserting their masculinity when confronted with a transgender individual, the examples discussed in this section involve direct action to repress the gender identities of the transgender characters and to punish them for deviating from the norms set by heteronormativity. The repressive actions discussed in this section include verbal abuse, intimidation, physical violence, and murder. It is worth noting that Brandon Teena's murder at the hands of John and Tom, the discussion of which ends this section, is the only major death of a transgender

character that occurs in any of the films under analysis.<sup>10</sup> Even with the monstrous portrayals of such characters as Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Angela in *Sleepaway Camp* or the near-death experiences of such comedic characters as Joe and Jerry in *Some Like it Hot* or Malcolm in *Big Momma's House*, the characters survive until the end of the films, the former to return in later sequels and the latter because the danger is meant for laughs, not fear. Not so for Brandon Teena. While the representations of transgender characters in transgender dramas is generally more accepting of being transgender as a legitimate identity, Brandon's murder sends the message that this acceptance may make the characters in transgender dramas more of a threat to heteronormativity than the frivolous and frightening representations seen in previous chapters.

A clear example of a social group turning against a transgender character can be found in *Ma Vie en Rose*. After Ludovic takes Sophie's place as Snow White in the school play in an attempt to kiss Jerome, the Fabres exit the auditorium to find the entire audience, including all of their neighbors, waiting for them. No sound is heard, except for crying children, as the adults stare disapprovingly at the family as they make their way to their car. What had been discussed before in joking or hushed tones is now treated openly with grave importance. The town has made it clear that they stand united in their disapproval of Ludovic's behavior and her family for tolerating it. Not only does this disapproval weigh heavily on Ludovic's young shoulders, it also begins to tear her family apart.

Another source of the repressive actions directed at transgender characters is the recurring theme throughout this project of transgender characters as liars. John is very direct in his accusations of Brandon. After learning from Candace that Brandon was put in a women's cell after being arrested for forging checks, John goes to Lana's house and tells her mom, "He's got her brainwashed. That's what they do." Not only is lying the only way that Brandon could have possibly convinced Lana to go out with him, it is also not just a personality flaw of Brandon's but part and parcel with being transgender. John rifles through Brandon's belongings searching for some form of proof and after finding a book on gender identity disorder, he tosses it aside, exclaiming "Get this sick shit away from me!"

Lana and Brandon return home, and she gets mad at John for going through Brandon's belongings. When John locks the front door behind Brandon, Lana realizes what is going on and tries to warn Brandon, saying "Brandon, turn around and walk out that door, right now. This is a nuthouse!" Brandon is slow to heed the warning so John has his opportunity to confront Brandon directly. "You've been spouting nothing but lies from the minute you came into town." Lana's mother then accuses Brandon of exposing Lana to the idea of being attracted to someone like him.

Lana's mom: I can't believe I invited you into my home, and you exposed my daughter to your sickness.

John: You know, Lana, if you are a lesbian, you just need to tell me.

Brandon: It's not Lana, it's me.

Brandon does not shy away from taking the full brunt of their accusations, hoping to spare Lana their wrath. This noble act is lost on John, and he decides to stop beating around the bush and confronts Brandon with the main thrust of his accusations.

John: You fucking pervert. Are you a girl or are you not? Are you a girl or are you not?!

John, not surprisingly, essentializes Brandon's identity, reducing the complexity of gender identity formation and performance to a simple yes or no question. For John, the question of if Brandon has lied or not can be solved with a simple analysis of his genitalia because, as Tom says, there is "a real easy way to solve this problem."

Lying has been one of the central accusations leveled against transgender characters in all of the films analyzed in this project. Transgender characters are accused of lying for claiming a gender identity that differs from the standards imposed by heteronormativity. Even if the gender performance of the character falls within these norms, she or he is accused of deceit and experiences the distrust and disgust that others direct toward those whose gender identities do not match the gender she or he was assigned at birth. After seeing Bree's penis while she urinates on the side of the road, Toby outs her to a roadside vendor who tells him to obey his mother. As she follows him back to the car, Toby yells, "You're a fucking lying freak!" He goes on the offensive when she tries to share her reasons for withholding the information from him.

Toby: Whaddaya want outta me?

Bree: Just because a person doesn't go blabbing her entire biological history when she meets someone doesn't make her a liar.

Toby: Why didn't you just tell me the truth?

Bree: So you could humiliate me in public even sooner?

Toby: You knew all about me!

Bree expresses a real fear of many transgender individuals, that the information they share about their gender identities will be used to attack them rather than used to understand them better. To their accusers, Bree and Brandon are liars for not openly

sharing their gender identity; they are seen as withholding the information for nefarious purposes rather than for self-preservation. The solution would seem to be for the transgender characters to never withhold their gender identities, but even a character like Ludovic, who is open nearly to a fault, faces heteronormative repression for not conforming to society's standards.

Ludovic is the victim of both direct and indirect repression. Ludovic's father comes home drunk one night after his boss, Jerome's father, fires him as an indirect way of punishing Ludovic for her gender transgressions and her family for tolerating her behavior.

Ludovic: Is it my fault?

Ludovic's father: No. People are shit.

Ludovic's mother, though, is not as sympathetic to Ludovic's feelings and saying she is tired of all of the hypocrisy, turns to Ludovic and says, "Yes, it's all your fault! Everything!," before storming upstairs. Ludovic is also the victim of direct repression when a group of twenty parents sign a petition demanding that Ludovic be removed from school. The principal caves, saying that Ludovic's "behaviors" and "tastes" are "too eccentric" for the school. Her mother again directs all of her anger at Ludovic, complaining about the hour-long bus ride Ludovic must now take to get to school since she has been banned from the neighborhood carpool.

This form of repression, catcalls, snide remarks, firing people, etc., is meant to have devastating effects on individuals but is not intended to be noticed by those who are not the direct targets of it. When the transgender characters still refuse to conform to societal standards, the verbal and physical repression becomes more violent to the

individual and visible to the rest of the community. After Ludovic's father is fired, her parents wake up one morning to find that someone has written the message "Bent Boys Out," a slang term for a gay man in France, on their garage door. In response, Ludovic's mother angrily grabs her, drags her into the kitchen, and shaves her head. After she finishes shaving Ludovic's head, her eyes dart frantically back and forth over Ludovic's face, desperately searching for the boy she wants Ludovic to be. She then refuses to allow Ludovic's father to take her to school, walking her to the bus stop in full view of the neighbors in an attempt to send the message that she has forced Ludovic to conform. Making Ludovic walk to the bus stop is a response meant to be seen by the entire neighborhood, just as the graffiti's disapproving message was meant to be seen by all. Ludovic's mother ensures that her repressive action is just as visible as the one to which she responds.

While Ludovic's mother is forceful in shaving her head, she is not yet violent in her repression of Ludovic. Ludovic is first the victim of violence when the boys on her soccer team gang up on her in the locker room after a game. The bullies begin by calling her "fancy-pants" and questioning why she never takes off her shirt in front of them. One bully then says, of her penis, "Do we pull it off? Make you a real girl?" Jerome leaves as the bullying begins, and the youngest of Ludovic's brothers wants to help when the soccer team begins beating her up but her oldest brother stops him. Ludovic then runs away from home in response to being beaten up and abandoned by her siblings. The entire family starts looking for her but in a blatant disregard for her child's wellbeing, her mother goes to the garage to have a secret smoke instead of searching.

While in the garage, she discovers Ludovic in the freezer clutching a crucifix. Ludovic's obvious attempt at suicide in response to the constant bullying and harassment is downplayed as a joke, her "freezer trick," by her father as a way of ignoring the repressive heteronormative behavior their entire family has engaged in and supported. Ludovic's family conveniently ignores their own role in repressing her. Unfortunately, this will not be the last act of repression that Ludovic must endure at their hands.

In the most forceful examples of the repressive actions directed at the characters' transgender identities, they face physical attacks meant to disabuse them of their claimed gender identities or, failing that, permanently and fatally end their subverting of heteronormativity. These attacks are not intended to subtly curb an individual's behavior but are the unleashing of rage against individuals who can never be understood or accepted. After returning to Ireland from London with her pregnant friend Charlie, Kitten moves in to the local Catholic parish with her father, the priest in charge of the parish. A group of elderly women complain to the bishop about the priest letting a transgender woman and a Black woman pregnant out of wedlock live with him, but the bishop turns them away. On the night of Christmas Eve, a Molotov cocktail is thrown through the window of the parish residence. The three are able to escape, but the cathedral burns down. While issues of religion and race are also at play in the bombing, part of the motivation for the attack is Kitten's open expression of her transgender identity. If the priest had responded to Kitten and Charlie according to the standards of heteronormativity by turning them away, his parish might have been saved, but the two women might not have been as lucky. The bombing was not meant as a corrective

action but a last resort to punish Kitten and the others for openly refusing to conform to society's standards.

Ludovic also suffers a rage-induced act of physical violence. After the Fabre family moves to a smaller house in a new city for her father's new job, Ludovic's mother stops her as she runs outside to play with her siblings to remind her that "it's not our fault we're here." It is clear that Ludovic's mother has drilled it into her head that her transgender identity is the cause of all of her family's problems. When Ludovic is invited to her new friend Christine's birthday costume party, she dutifully attends dressed as a musketeer. The tomboyish Christine, who is dressed as a princess, likes Ludovic's costume better and demands that she trade. In contrast to her first appearance at the housewarming party, Ludovic refuses to trade, but Christine is able to force her to switch costumes. Ludovic's mother sees Christine wearing the musketeer costume and goes looking for Ludovic. She tries to run away but her mother catches her.

Ludovic's mother: I warned you! You're bent on ruining our lives! Give us a break! She then grabs Ludovic and begins to violently shake her and slap her in the face multiple times. She only stops hitting Ludovic when the other mothers at the party physically restrain her, yelling "Stop it! You'll kill him. Calm down!" While it may not seem as deadly as Molotov cocktails and gunshots, being hit by a parent, particularly for something she or he did not do, can be traumatizing for a young child, and a visibly shaken Ludovic can do nothing in response but run away.

While the murderous intent is there in these attacks, Kitten and Ludovic manage to survive. Brandon is not as fortunate. After threatening Lana's mother with a gun for



information on Brandon's whereabouts, John and Tom head to Candace's to get their revenge on Brandon for going to the police about the rape. Tom asks John, "Think they'd recognize her if we chopped off her head and her hands?" Lana goes to Candace's house as well and tries to stop John. She tells Brandon that the two of them can still leave and go to Lincoln together, but John shoots Brandon in the head, dropping his gun after firing. Tom picks up the gun and shoots Candace in the chest, with her baby at her feet, and then turns the gun on Lana, but John grabs him at the last second, causing him to miss. Tom then grabs Brandon's lifeless body as it slumps against the wall and stabs him in the gut with a knife. Lana screams and pulls Tom off of Brandon. John tries to get Lana to go with them, but she refuses. He fires one last shot in Brandon's direction as the two run out the door of Candace's house. Brandon pays the ultimate price for daring to go against heteronormative standards for gender identity and expression. Though the other characters endure their own share of repressive verbal and physical attacks, their stories continue at the end of the films while Brandon's does not.

The repressive actions directed at the transgender characters evoke feelings of sympathy from the audience. After seeing Ludovic being hit by her mother and Brandon being shot by John, the audience feels sorry for the characters for everything they have endured even though the characters still refuse to conform to heteronormative standards. The direct acts of violence the characters suffer are presented as a step beyond mere disapproval of the characters' transgender identities. Just as transgender thrillers evoke feelings of fear at the violent actions of the characters, transgender dramas open up the possibility that this level of violence could be seen by audience members as an extreme

response to the pressures to conform to heteronormativity, though the characters' transgender identities prevent the audience from fully connecting with them. They may feel sorry for the struggles the characters go through and may not want them to be violently attacked, but their transgender identities still exist outside of heteronormative standards and cannot be fully embraced.

The ending of *Ma Vie en Rose* provides a model for this sympathetic distance. Ludovic runs away after being hit by her mother and after getting the full story from Christine, her mother follows after her. Her mother climbs up onto a billboard for the "Pam's World" TV show Ludovic loves and hallucinates/dreams that Ludovic goes to join Pam in her Technicolor world so as to not ruin their lives anymore. When her mother tries to follow, she falls through the ground, her anger and intolerance not accepted in Pam's world. When she comes to, she finds Ludovic safe and sound with the rest of the family, still wearing Christine's torn princess dress. Ludovic asks if she should take the dress off.

Ludovic's father: Do whatever feels best.

Ludovic's mother: Whatever happens, you'll always be my child. Our child. I've tended to forget it lately but not anymore.

This is a complete change of position on the part of Ludovic's parents and gives the film a nice happy ending as Ludovic runs off to play with the other children.

Ludovic's parents adopt an attitude of distanced sympathy in response to her transgender identity. They have recognized the danger of their repressive actions and offer Ludovic space to express her identity but fall short of completely embracing her. Her mother's last statement that "whatever happens" Ludovic will always be their child

shows that she still holds out some hope that Ludovic will ultimately conform to heteronormative standards. She does not say that she accepts Ludovic for who she is, even her father just tells her to “do whatever feels best,” or even call her “my daughter.” Either of those would have been a clear indication of acceptance of Ludovic’s transgender identity. Instead, her parents feel sorry for everything she has been through and will no longer actively try to stop her from expressing her transgender identity, but their sympathy implies a lack of full acceptance of her and a hope that she will ultimately conform to heteronormative standards. The reaction of Ludovic’s parents is constructed as a model for the audience’s own distanced sympathy, feeling sorry for what has happened to the characters but still not fully accepting their transgender identities. An anecdote from a colleague may help to illustrate this point. When she taught *Boys Don’t Cry* in a Gender Studies class, a student said that Brandon should not have been murdered but just should have gone to jail. When pressed to identify what crime Brandon had committed, the student could not come up with a single one but still strongly felt that jail was appropriate. The student felt sympathy for Brandon but still was not comfortable with his transgender identity, seeing it in many ways as comparable to a crime. It is important that transgender dramas open up the possibility for audiences to fear the actions of heteronormative society, but overcoming the distance between the transgender characters and the audience remains an important step that no transgender representations have yet accomplished.

The narrative conventions of transgender dramas encode a sympathetic view of transgender individuals based on the struggles they endure. The visual codes continue

this sympathetic project by situating the daily lives of the characters as objects to be looked at. The positive aspects of sympathy are emphasized through the way the characters are looked at by others, but this is not enough to completely bridge the distance between the characters and the audience.

### **Visual Codes: The Trans-pathetic gaze**

The visual codes of the trans-pathetic gaze work to distance the transgender characters as objects of sympathy and pity. The trans-pathetic gaze visually presents the characters as individuals the audience should feel sorry for rather than connect with. An attention to the characters getting dressed highlights the amount of effort the characters put into their appearance. This visual code is connected with the narrative focus on the struggles of the characters against the constraints and repressions of heteronormativity in order to show that their daily lives are consumed with their efforts to express their transgender identities. The films also make frequent visual reference to the material bodies of the characters as a reminder of essentialist conceptions of gender that would deny their transgender identities. Finally, the characters are viewed with sympathy by important people in their lives. These sympathetic looks provide a basic recognition of the characters' transgender identities that open up the possibility of modeling positive responses to transgender characters and visually presenting them as the equals of heteronormative characters.

#### *Attention to dressing*

Transgender dramas share an interest with other media, particularly news media, with the processes transgender people go through when getting dressed. Julia Serano

argues that film and other media “tend not to be satisfied with merely showing trans women wearing feminine clothes and makeup. Rather, it is their intent to capture trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman’s femaleness is an artificial mask or costume” (41). Getting dressed is not a general feature found in popular film, usually found only in comedic moments when a character rushes to get ready for an appointment she or he is late for or dramatic moments as a character nervously prepares for an important first date or job interview. The audience generally only sees characters looking their best, with no consideration of the time and effort it took for them to look that good.

For characters in transgender dramas, a lot of visual attention is given to the process and effort they go through to get dressed every day. The characters are seen applying makeup, shaving, putting on various undergarments, and looking at their reflections in the mirror to check the results. In contrast, the characters in transgender farces and thrillers are rarely seen going through the process of dressing in order to maintain the comedic impact of their initial transformations and the mystery of their identities, respectively. The message sent by this attention to dressing for characters in transgender dramas is that these characters are the most threatening to the stability of heteronormativity and must be somehow exposed; if audiences just look closely enough at the amount of effort a transgender character must go through to be perceived as the gender she or he claims, then the character will appear pitiful and worthy of sympathy rather than respect and acceptance. More information, in this case, does not lead to

greater levels of respect but a trans-pathetic gaze that feels sorry for the transgender characters for everything they put themselves through to go against the gender identity they were assigned at birth. More information might be useful in transgender farces and thrillers to better understand the characters' transgender identities since they either privilege their heteronormative identities or hide their transgender identities for a shocking revelation, but more information only functions to expose the characters in transgender dramas as somehow less than who they appear to be.

Transgender dramas frequently feature extended sequences of characters dressing and putting on makeup. *Transamerica* begins with a close up of Bree following along with a video of a woman demonstrating vocal delivery by putting her fingers down her throat to learn about mouth movement. Bree's face is never clearly seen as she practices speaking or as she goes about the rest of her morning routine. Wearing a pink robe, she pulls a pair of white stocking up her legs, pulls on a pair of white shapewear, puts a pair of breastforms in her bra to supplement her own breasts, and tucks back her penis. Throughout this routine, the camera focuses on her legs, breasts, and crotch, never showing her face or a full view of her body. This reduction of Bree to her body parts, while also trans-misogynistic, emphasizes the effort and equipment that constitutes her appearance. She is not a woman getting dressed but a pair of legs in white stockings, a penis tucked and constrained with shapewear, and a pair of breasts supplemented by silicone breastforms. As discussed in Chapter 2, the trans-misogynistic gaze highlights the transgender identities of the characters by focusing on the individual parts of their bodies in a parody of the sex appeal and desirability of the female body while the trans-

pathetic gaze frames Bree as a sympathetic figure the audience should feel sorry for because of the effort she has to expend to be comfortable in her everyday life, implying that all of the parts the audience has seen do not completely add up to a woman.

After putting on her undergarments, Bree puts on a pink suit and begins applying her makeup. While hints of Bree's face can be seen in the mirror as she applies foundation, eyeliner, mascara, and blush, the focus remains on the makeup, and it is only as she applies her lipstick that the audience finally sees Bree's face in focus. She looks at herself in the mirror, having completed her daily routine, and smiles wanly. This smile signals that Bree has the same opinion of herself, disappointment with the fact that she will never fully be the woman she wants to be, that the trans-pathetic gaze has directed the audience to have of her. Her wan smile communicates the message that despite the great lengths she has just gone through to be who she is, she is not completely satisfied with the results.

This scene clearly demonstrates the different decodings possible of any scene or film, and the widely differing messages communicated based on the decoding. It is entirely possible to decode the previous scene in an empathetic way, based on a shared experience with Bree of the difficulty and dissatisfaction in adopting a position as a woman. Her wan smile that concludes the scene would not communicate dissatisfaction with her transgender body but the exhaustion inherent in the performance of femininity in a misogynistic society. I argue that the contextual information in this scene, such as the transgender voice tape Bree follows along with at the beginning and her actions at the bus stop after getting dressed, constrain this empathetic reading, but this scene

remains an important reminder for this entire project of the different decodings that are possible.

This pattern of attention to the process of dressing for a transgender character through the use of close-ups of individual body parts is used to similar effect in *Ma Vie en Rose*. As the Fabres prepare for their housewarming party, the camera tilts up to an upstairs bedroom window where Ludovic's hands, again not her entire body, are seen playing with a Pam doll. She is wearing a pair of red heels that are obviously too big for her, her mother having complained to her father earlier about not being able to find her red heels, and a pink dress. As Ludovic puts on lipstick in a mirror, her brown hair is seen in the shot but not her face and as she puts on a pair of earrings, only the back of her head is shown. As their neighbors begin to arrive, a shot focuses on the white shoes that Ludovic's mother is wearing, emphasizing again that the red heels Ludovic has on were not given to her with her mother's permission. Ludovic's father begins introducing the family, and the audience sees Ludovic's feet coming down the stairs in the red heels; Ludovic stumbles on her way down, as a result of the shoes being too big and her inexperience wearing them. As her father calls for her sister Zoe, Ludovic walks through the screen door into the backyard, and the audience sees her face for the first time.

The focus on Ludovic's individual body parts without seeing her face is intended to have a similar effect as the scenes of Bree dressing in *Transamerica*. Unlike Bree, though, Ludovic is portrayed as sympathetic more for her naiveté regarding heteronormative gender roles than for merely the effort that goes into her getting dressed



and doing her makeup. The neighbors clap at first, thinking she is Zoe, then stop clapping and look at each other in confusion after finding out she is Ludovic. The reactions of the adults in this situation give the audience a clue into how to decode seeing Ludovic in a dress. Ludovic should be viewed with sympathy as a child who does not know or understand that she should not wear a dress, heels, earrings, and lipstick. Like Bree, she should be pitied for her failure to fit into heteronormative society.

These two extended sequences of transgender characters dressing are supplemented by shorter scenes, including Kim checking her makeup while waiting for Paul and Brandon wrapping his breasts with an Ace bandage while staying at Candace's house, and by scenes of the characters turning to others for help, such as Kitten deciding to dress more conservatively to go see her mother, seeing Margaret Thatcher on television, and then cutting to Kitten riding up the escalator in a train station in full Thatcher garb: tasteful makeup, a black and white polka dot skirt suit, matching hat, gloves, brooch, and even a pearl necklace. The attention to dressing in transgender dramas focuses audience attention on getting dressed as a process for transgender characters. Audience sympathy is evoked through the lengthy process that transgender characters go through in getting dressed. Heteronormative individuals are positioned as making easy choices in getting dressed compared to the process that transgender individuals must go through. The audience is distanced from the characters for all of the attention they pay to something that comes naturally for heteronormative individuals.

The audience is also distanced from the transgender characters through the frequent visual reminders of the characters' bodies.

### *Reminders of the body*

Frequent visual attention is given in transgender dramas to the bodies of the characters. Having spent a significant amount of time on the characters getting dressed, the films remind the audience of the aspects of their anatomy that the characters are attempting to hide. It is not enough that the characters claim a transgender identity or that the narratives position them as transgender. Transgender dramas must confirm the transgender identities of the characters by presenting undeniable visual proof of their bodies' subverting of heteronormativity by showing incongruous pairings of body parts such as a woman's penis or a man's breasts. The characters are distanced from the audience through these visual reminders that their bodies exist outside of the norm.

The first visual reminder of Brandon's body in *Boys Don't Cry* actually concerns his menstrual cycle rather than his genitals or breasts. Brandon's pained expression as he inserts the tampon into his vagina makes clear his dislike and dissatisfaction in having to use a tampon; he then hides the wrapper under his mattress, continuing the pattern of Brandon hiding any evidence of tampon use that began at the convenience store when he stole them rather than have Lana find out he needs to use them. The scene is shot in a medium close up that focuses attention on Brandon's face while cutting him off at the waist, thus not showing his vagina. The framing of this scene focuses on the pain and displeasure Brandon experiences as a result of his material body rather than on the visual presentation of his body. Despite the focus on his face instead of his vagina, Brandon's

tampon use is meant to reinforce the material reality of his body. Though he may claim a masculine gender position, he is unable to escape the need to use tampons to absorb the monthly flow of menstrual fluid. The purpose of showing him using a tampon is to subtly undermine his masculine gender identity. Some people still have difficulty separating gender and biological sex so the incongruity of a man using a tampon does not make sense. A similar situation would be seeing a woman going to her doctor to be checked for prostate cancer. In cases like these, gender is usually essentialized in terms of biological sex so a man like Brandon who needs to use a tampon is seen as a woman pretending to be a man. It could be argued that visually presenting a man who needs to use tampons could serve to break down heteronormative conceptions of gendered behavior but given the social context in which this visual representation exists, I argue that these scenes are intended to confirm an essentialized understanding of Brandon's identity. In spite of his claims to a masculine identity, he is seen by heteronormative society as really just a woman.

While Brandon provides a clear example of the way reminders of the body of a transgender character can be presented visually without reference to genitals, the visual presentation of genitals and other secondary sex characteristics is the primary way in which transgender dramas remind the audience of the bodies of the transgender characters. In the opening scene of *Different for Girls*, it is the clear lack of genitals that is most striking. A teenage Kim stands naked in a locker room shower, her legs crossed to keep her penis tucked back. She looks down at her body, clearly relishing its apparent femaleness. The scene uses a full shot of Kim's body in order to capture her flat chest

and tucked penis in one image in order to highlight its incongruity. A series of tighter shots would not have allowed the audience to have as full an understanding of Kim's body. This use of the full shot to frame Kim's body is repeated when she allows Paul to see her naked toward the end of the film.

While a young Kim is pleased with her feminine appearance, Bree and Brandon express dissatisfaction with their bodies, centering on their genitals and breasts. After her visit with a psychiatrist to be approved for sex reassignment surgery, Bree checks out her reflection in a mirror before going to bed. She is mostly satisfied except for the bulge under her nightgown, which she tries to tuck back. This scene, like Kim's, uses a full shot to focus attention on the apparent contradiction of Bree's feminine body and penis. After becoming dissatisfied with the still present bulge, she straightens a picture on her wall before getting in bed. While a seemingly innocuous action, straightening the picture reveals a need for Bree to have everything in her life in its right place, including her body. This small moment reveals a wealth of information about how Bree interacts with and sees her place in the world. Brandon also expresses dissatisfaction while looking at his reflection in a mirror. After getting out of the shower at Candace's house, Brandon comes back into his room and catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror with a towel wrapped around his chest in a very feminine manner. While it may be a practical way to cover his body, having a towel wrapped around his chest once again draws attention to the femaleness of Brandon's body by focusing on his breasts. I argue that less attention would have been drawn to Brandon's breasts had he come into the room naked or with a towel around his waist because of the femininity of the action of

wrapping a towel around his chest. In this shot, Brandon is presented not only as a person with a female body but also as a person who is inherently feminine, only pretending to be a man.

Other than the violent exposure of Brandon's genitals discussed earlier, Bree is the only other character whose genitals are seen by others. While driving across the New Mexico desert at night with Toby, Bree stops by the side of the road to use the restroom. She is startled by a coyote howling and jumps up from her crouched position, exposing her penis. Her penis, though, is much too large and developed for a woman who has been undergoing hormone treatment and is days away from sex reassignment surgery. Hormone replacement therapy generally reduces the size of the penis and testicles, but Bree's are more in line with an individual who has never undergone hormone treatment. The unrealistic size of Bree's penis for someone about to undergo sex reassignment surgery not only makes it easier for the audience to see her penis and for Toby to see her penis in the car's rearview mirror but also implicitly supports the mistaken notion that a transsexual woman's penis is fully developed at the time of surgery and then either turned inside out to create a vagina or, more commonly thought, cut off. While the dialogue of the film tries to provide a more accurate description of sex reassignment surgery, the image of Bree's penis sends the message that she is really a man who is going through a lot of effort to look like a woman.

Since her penis was shown during her road trip with Toby, Bree's vagina must also been seen in order to visually confirm the success of her sex reassignment surgery. As she recovers from her surgery in the hospital, Bree feels her crotch and when her

therapist asks how she feels, she says, “I feel like a Medieval heretic impaled on a very large stake. With splinters.” Though her vagina is not seen in this scene, the joy and pleasure on Bree’s face as she feels her crotch signals that the surgery was a success. Later, Bree is at home taking a bath and her vagina is clearly seen. As she relaxes in the tub, she lifts her waist and crotch out of the water so her vagina is visible in a close up. Lifting her body out of the water in this way is a purposeful decision to unequivocally show Bree’s vagina. While this decision could work to downplay concerns that a transsexual woman’s vagina would be deformed or in some way not real, it once again reduces a transgender woman to her genitals.

The multiple exposures of Bree’s genitals reveal how transgender characters are often reduced to their genitals or other physical traits. This reflects the concern of transgender people in general that they are being judged based on their physical appearance rather than as individuals. Focusing on the genitals, breasts, or other physical characteristics of transgender characters reinforces the heteronormative belief that any mismatch between gender and the body is undesirable. The visual reminders of the material bodies of the characters also help assuage any fears on the part of heteronormative individuals who can do away with any concerns that they might be transgender since they do not feel any disconnect between their gender and their physical bodies. Ultimately, this reinforces the essentialist notion that gender and biological sex are one and the same, thus distancing the transgender characters from the audience for claiming identities that exist outside this norm. While facing reminders of their material

bodies, the characters in transgender dramas also receive sympathetic recognition of their gender identities from others.

*Sympathetic recognition*

J. Jack Halberstam argues that *Boys Don't Cry* “establishes the legitimacy and durability of Brandon’s gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his death by murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only provisionally, Brandon’s gaze, a transgender look” (“In a Queer Time” 86). His argument is based on the out of body experience Brandon has while John and Tom are stripping his clothes off of him in the bathroom to expose his genitals and the brief moment of peace that Brandon and Lana share in her bedroom before going to confront the others. I argue, instead, that even in these scenes, the gaze is more complicated than simply revealing “the ideological content of the male and female gazes” by placing audience members in the position of a transgender character (86). The gaze in transgender dramas, as I have argued throughout this discussion of visual codes, is a trans-pathetic one. Instead of encouraging audience members to identify with the transgender characters, the trans-pathetic gaze evokes sympathy for the struggles the characters must endure to live as the gender they claim. Sympathy may be a more positive feeling than the ridicule and fear discussed in previous chapters, but it still distances the audience from the characters by encoding messages of feeling sorry for the characters rather than helping the audience truly understand what the characters are going through.

Halberstam is on the right track when discussing Brandon’s return to Lincoln to deal with a court summons. Before leaving, Brandon kisses Lana a couple of times, and

she licks her lips as she watches him go. Halberstam argues that the film “makes the transgender subject dependent upon the recognition of a woman” (“Transgender Gaze” 296). I also argue that the transgender characters in transgender dramas are dependent on the recognition of other characters. While enduring constraints on their gender identities, repressive heteronormative actions, and essentialist reminders of their bodies, the one source of positive recognition the characters receive comes from individual characters who are able to accept the gender identities they claim. This acceptance is initially based on feelings of sympathy, feeling sorry for the characters for all they have had to endure, but it does, in certain circumstances, develop into a deeper understanding. While this recognition is unable to completely span the distance created through the other narrative conventions and visual codes, the recognition of the legitimacy of the transgender characters’ identities models a possible positive response to transgender individuals for audience members.

Another example from *Boys Don’t Cry* involves Brandon’s trip to Dallas with Lana and her friends. While in their hotel room, Lana tells her friends Candace and Kate about being with Brandon. In a flashback, Brandon is seen taking off his pants and penetrating her with the dildo seen earlier in his bag, definitively answering the question of how Brandon and Lana had sex. The scene then switches to a point of view shot from Lana’s perspective as she looks down Brandon’s shirt and sees a close up of his bound cleavage. She does not immediately say anything but is freaked out enough that they stop. The scene then cuts to a close up shot of Lana’s hand as she reaches for Brandon’s pants and then stops as the scene cuts again to a shot of her looking at his face. Though



initially turned off by the material reality of Brandon's body, Lana sympathizes with Brandon and chooses to look at him as the man she is attracted to rather than someone whose material body could problematize that attraction.

Hana and Bree receive sympathetic reactions from their found and biological families, respectively. After being kidnapped, Miyuki has a dream about stabbing her father, the event that led to her running away from home. In her dream, though, Miyuki's parents are replaced by Hana and Gin. Hana cradles Kiyoko in her arms, and she and Gin welcome Miyuki home and invite her to sit down to dinner. The dream is an interesting visual melding of Miyuki's life with her parents and with Hana and Gin. Miyuki is dressed in her school uniform, as she was when she stabbed her father, but the house changes from the comfortable middle-class home she grew up in to a home that more resembles where she lives with Hana and Gin as the room fills with garbage and the walls turn to cardboard. Gin is dressed as he has been throughout the film, but Hana is dressed more like a typical housewife in a yellow and brown dress over a black shirt instead of the bundles of rags she has worn so far. This dream is the first indication that Miyuki feels a connection to Hana and Gin that goes beyond her dependence on them for survival on the streets of Tokyo, a change that is also reflected in her switch from "Uncle Bag" to "Miss Hana" when referring to Hana. This feeling of connection deepens throughout the film and comes pouring out when Hana talks about her role in reuniting Gin and Miyuki with their families.

The only member of Bree's family to show her any sympathy is her sister Sydney, who exclaims "Holy shit!" upon seeing Bree for the first time. Unlike Bree's

mother who either wants to kick her out or refuses to even look at her, Sydney attempts to actually look at Bree as the person she is rather than the person she wanted or expected her to be. A medium shot frames the sisters as Sydney looks at Bree for the first time in a number of years.

This is so bizarre. I can still see Stanley in you, but it's like you put yourself through a wringer and got rid of all the boy pulp.

The two women are also framed by the large mirror in their mother's bathroom, visually connecting them and helping them span the years of separation. Sydney's willingness to actually look at Bree and try to see her for who she really is, even if tempered by sympathy for how she has been treated by their parents, is an important gesture of recognition and acceptance that any transgender individual would value.

Hana experiences a similar feeling of pleasure upon returning to the Angel Tower drag club where she used to work. Hana is hesitant about returning to the club since she left after throwing a table at a customer, but she knows that she needs to find a place out of the cold for her, Miyuki, and especially Kiyoko. When she knocks, a short, older woman who Hana calls Mother, a term frequently used in anime to refer to the female proprietor of a club, opens the door. Mother stands in the doorway all made up for the night and just stares at Hana, who, in a reverse shot, begins to nervously look at the ground under the intense scrutiny. The scene then cuts to a full shot as Mother begins to cry and leaps into Hana's arms, so happy at her return that she cannot contain it, and Hana begins to cry as well. Having exchanged looks of surprise and hesitation, the two women are framed in one shot to show their reconnection.

For Kitten, it is not meeting an old acquaintance that matters to her but finding a new one, her mother. After getting dressed appropriately conservatively as discussed earlier, Kitten rides the train out to the suburbs to meet her mother. Outside of the house she meets a boy named Patrick, the name she was given at birth but has since discarded, who chats with her a moment then takes her to meet his mother. The audience does not initially see her mother's face; the camera follows her down the stairs as she makes her way to the front door to meet Kitten with the focus on her small bubble curls that numerous characters have made reference to throughout the film. When she gets to the front door, the camera still behind her, and introduces herself to Kitten, Kitten immediately faints. It is only after Kitten wakes up on her mother's couch after fainting that the audience is able to see her mother's face for the first time; a reverse shot is used to connect the shot of Kitten waking up on the couch to the woman sitting across from her. In this instance, it is Kitten who is sympathetic to her mother, never telling her mother her true identity but pretending to be an employee of the phone company conducting a survey. Kitten does not wish to upset the new life her mother has built for herself in London and contents herself with merely getting to see her mother, sacrificing her own wishes for her mother's happiness.

Kitten's decision is based on her love for her mother, and it is love, of a more romantic nature, that motivates many of the looks of sympathetic recognition in transgender dramas. After Brandon is arrested for check fraud, he is placed in a women's cell. As Brandon and Lana talk through the bars of the cell in a series of close up when Lana comes to visit him, he tries to explain that he is a hermaphrodite and was

put in a women's cell for that reason. Lana responds, "Shut up! It's your business. Look, I don't care if you're half-monkey or half-ape, I'm getting you outta here."

Lana's frequent refusal to question Brandon's gender identity, as numerous others do, is an important act of recognition of the legitimacy of his identity. The tensions between Brandon's identity and his material body are nicely encapsulated as he and Lana run down a hallway in the jail after she bails him out. On the left side of the hallway as they run toward the open door is a row of orange jumpsuit clad male prisoners while on the wall is a sign with an arrow pointing to the left that reads "Ladies' Room." Brandon and Lana are framed in the light of the open doorway while the question is raised about whether Brandon belongs in the line with the men or in the restroom with other women. Lana's sympathetic recognition of Brandon's identity is not enough to overcome heteronormative society's demand for clear, straightforward answers.

Sympathetic recognition from another person helps Bree and Toby out of a financial predicament when their car is stolen. They make their way to a diner where Bree meets Calvin. Calvin not only offers to pay for their food but also gives them a place to stay for the night and a ride to Bree's parent's house in Phoenix. It is apparent fairly quickly that Calvin sees more in Bree than just sympathy for her situation. At his house that night, he serenades Bree on the back porch with his rendition of "Beautiful Dreamer." The next day, they stop for lunch on the way to Phoenix. While eating in the bed of Calvin's pickup truck, Bree says she needs to go to the restroom, and Calvin helps her down. As Calvin and Toby talk in the back of the truck, Bree can be seen in a long shot walking into the brush in a very feminine manner with her hands held high

above her chest, her hips swaying back and forth, and taking very short, careful steps; Bree is going to be certain a second mishap while going to the restroom does not happen on this trip! This image of Bree is contrasted with the conversation in the foreground of the shot taking place between Calvin and Toby as Toby tries to hint that Bree has been less than truthful with Calvin.

Toby: Dude, there's things about her she's not telling you.

Calvin: Well, every woman has a right to a little mystery, *dude*.

Toby: You know she's a Jesus freak? She's probably waiting to convert you.

Calvin: She can convert me anytime she wants to.

Like Lana, Calvin is not swayed by those who would try to force him to see the person he cares for in a negative light. He also displays the easiest, most unconditional acceptance of a transgender character seen in any of the films in this project. Calvin serves as a model of the positive acceptance that is possible not just for transgender characters but for transgender people in general.

When transgender characters do not receive the recognition from others they desire, they often turn inward to private fantasies that allow them to provide their own sympathetic recognition. Miyuki asks Hana multiple times if she loves Gin and though Hana always denies having feelings for him, her actions prove otherwise. When she hears that a homeless man has died in a nearby park, Hana sprints down the street in a panic fearing that it is Gin. When Gin struggles to apologize to his daughter for abandoning her and her mother, Hana gets so angry at him that she chews him out in front of his daughter then storms out of the building. Miyuki is confused by Hana's actions, fearing that she has ruined her chances with Gin, and in response, Hana compares herself to the blue devil in the story of "The Weeping Red Devil." Hana's

story is visually presented in the style of a Japanese scroll painting with Hana playing the role of the blue devil and Gin as the red devil. In the story, the red devil is upset because he is shunned by humans, and his friend the blue devil concocts a plan to win their favor: the blue devil will attack the human's village only to be stopped by the red devil who will then be celebrated as a hero by the humans. The only downside to this plan is that the blue devil has to leave lest the humans learn the truth of the plan. Hana uses the story as a metaphor for her earlier interaction with Gin and his daughter, saying that she lashed out at Gin to make him look better to his daughter in comparison. Through this story, Hana attempts to create her own sympathetic recognition by positioning herself as a noble figure who sacrifices her own happiness for the happiness of her friends. Miyuki does not let Hana off the hook so easily, pointing out that, as the blue devil, she will have to leave the group and go off on her own while they reunite with their families.

Miyuki: But that means you leave. Where will you go?

Hana: It's best for everyone when they're with their family. Soon we'll find Kiyoko's mother.

Miyuki: And then what? You don't have a real family!

In trying to manufacture her own sympathetic recognition, Hana discovers the heartfelt connections she has with Miyuki and everyone else in her life.

Ludovic also uses fantasy to create a world in which she is accepted by others. Ludovic's numerous fantasies in the film revolve around Pam and the magical world she inhabits. After her pretend wedding with Jerome turns disastrous, Ludovic imagines Pam showing up and flying her away from her troubles. She even looks down and in a long shot, sees herself, no longer in the pink dress she is still wearing while flying but in

shorts and a flannel shirt, being dragged back home by her mother. The use of a long shot in this scene communicates the distance Ludovic feels between her identity as a girl and the everyday world she inhabits. Ludovic's fantasies generally function as an escape from the problems of the world around her. Her most significant fantasy in terms of sympathetic recognition comes after finding out that her family will be moving away in order for her father to start a new job. After a cut from her family's living room, Ludovic finds herself in Pam's world wearing a white dress, white gloves, and a white veil, wearing the earrings she wore at the housewarming party, as voices from outside yell "The bride! The bride!" After opening the door, she finds her family waiting for her with faces beaming. Waiting for her at the end of a long pink carpet is her groom, Jerome, in a white tuxedo. The entire neighborhood is there to watch the two of them get married, and the fantasy ends with everyone present doing a dance from the "Pam's World" TV series that Ludovic loves so much. In this fantasy, Ludovic is creating a world that she believes is no longer possible because of the anger of her family and her neighbors. Since they are unable to accept her for who she is, Ludovic imagines a world in which they do. The film once again reinforces the distance between her desires and the real world with a cut to a "For Sale" sign being hammered into her family's front yard. Ludovic's fantasies are not enough to allow her to completely escape the heteronormative world in which she lives.

While Ludovic uses fantasy to escape the generally less than accepting world around her, Brandon uses fantasy to escape a particularly traumatic event. While having his clothes ripped off and his genitals exposed by John and Tom in the bathroom of

Lana's house, the scene freezes and a spotlight shines on Brandon as he faces the camera. In the doorway of the bathroom, a second Brandon walks up behind the people gathered to watch his genitals being exposed. This other Brandon is still dressed, in contrast to the indignity Brandon is enduring in the bathroom, and does nothing but return Brandon's gaze; the other Brandon does not say a word and does nothing but stare back at Brandon through a series of reverse shots. In this moment, Brandon is sympathizing with himself. The threats of violence that have followed him throughout the film have come to fruition and like the others peering in through the bathroom doorway, Brandon feels sorry for himself. He cannot empathize with himself because he does not understand how he ended up in the position he is in. The other Brandon is able to maintain his masculine dignity by standing apart from the situation and feeling sorry for everything Brandon has to endure. When the other Brandon leaves and the scene unfreezes, Brandon's confidence and self-image are shattered and all he can do is try to survive John and Tom's constant assaults.

Moving out of the realm of fantasy, Paul decides to focus on the reality of Kim's body rather than any ill-conceived notions that may exist in his head. After Kim testifies on Paul's behalf and the charges against him are dropped, the two go back to her place to celebrate. Paul asks Kim if he can see how her body has changed, to see "[w]hat all the fuss is about."

Paul: I'd like to *see* everything more clearly. Could I?

Kim: No one else has ever asked.

Though many people talk about the bodies of individuals like Kim, few are actually interested in dealing with her actual, physical body. They move to Kim's bedroom, and



she slowly unbuttons her blouse. After taking off her bra, she stands with her back to Paul and says, "It's funny, I went to all this trouble and I can't even bring myself to turn around." She then turns to face him, and all the audience can initially see is her back as Paul looks her up and down. The camera then does a reverse shot of Kim from the front, her breasts bare, as she removes her skirt and panties and stands completely naked in front of Paul. Emblematic of sympathetic recognition, Kim's disrobing after the reverse shot is filmed as one long shot without the typical close ups of her individual body parts or a camera movement up her body from her feet to head. This is not a big reveal meant to shock the audience but an intimate moment Kim shares with someone she cares deeply about.

After Kim finishes undressing, Paul slowly approaches her, saying, "You said your mind could never accept your body before. Well, I don't want to struggle with it either." He then reaches out his hand and first takes her hand before pulling her into an embrace and kissing her. The pair then moves to the bed, and Kim quickly moves on top. While Paul expresses some initial surprise, "It fits. It bloody fits," he shows no sign of regretting his decision. The scene then cuts to a tracking shot of their clothes strewn about the floor and the disheveled sheets and bedspread then to an overhead shot of the couple lying naked on their backs in post-coital pleasure with Kim's head laying on Paul's chest and his arm wrapped around her, a shot familiar to audience members from numerous romantic pairings throughout film history. The shot composition of this scene reinforces not only Paul's recognition of Kim as a woman and as a person worthy of respect but also argues that this couple is no different than any other couple seen in

film. By treating the couple the same as any other couple, the film sends the message that transgender people are no different than anyone else and are just as deserving of love and life. All of this is communicated through the visuals in contrast to the heteronormative messages often communicated through the narratives of transgender dramas.

Finally, an errant piece of clothing in *Ma Vie en Rose* leaves the audience with hope that people will ultimately be able to overcome the heteronormative pressures weighing down on them and offer the transgender individuals in their lives the recognition they deserve. As the Fabres drive away to their new home, their neighbors stand on their lawns to watch disapprovingly as they go. The pink princess dress that Ludovic wore to the housewarming party comes loose from the luggage strapped to the roof of their car. The dress is isolated in a medium close up against a bright blue sky as it floats through the air before landing at Jerome's feet. Jerome can do nothing but stare at the dress, implying that there might be more to his initial sympathetic recognition of Ludovic, before his father comes and kicks the dress away. While the forces of heteronormativity may still be in control for now, Jerome's fixation on the dress and longing stare as Ludovic's car recedes into the distance send a message of hope that sometime in the future, Jerome might be able to accept Ludovic for who she is or at least not treat any other transgender people he meets as poorly as he treated her.

While the trans-pathetic gaze may initially support heteronormativity through the attention to dressing and reminders of the body, sympathetic recognition of the transgender characters by others opens up the possibility of real acceptance. While the

initial attention given to the characters may be motivated by sympathy for their struggles, which would keep the audience at a distance, some characters, particularly Calvin and Paul, are able to overcome any misgivings on their part to reach a point of complete acceptance of the transgender people in their lives. The mise-en-scène and shot choices discussed in this section support this modeling of positive acceptance by treating the characters as equals to any other characters in film, heteronormative or not. This visual equating of transgender people and non-transgender people may be the best way to counteract the heteronormative messages communicated through the narratives of the films.

### **Conclusion**

The narrative conventions of transgender dramas work to distance the audience from the characters by subjecting them to the pressures of heteronormativity. Their gender identities are constrained in a number of ways and in response, the transgender characters try to prove the reality of their identities through their actions, supporting an essentialist view of gender. When these efforts are not enough to make the characters conform, heteronormative characters respond by trying to repress the gender identities and expressions of the transgender characters, often through violent actions.

The visual codes primarily support this heteronormative project to pressure the characters to conform by questioning their claimed identities. The inordinate amount of attention given to the characters getting dressed reduces the characters' gender expressions to clothes and makeup while the reminders of the characters' bodies bring attention to the disconnect between their gender expressions and material bodies. Only

in the sympathetic recognition of other characters do the transgender characters find any hope of acceptance. Though based in a sympathetic feeling for the characters rather than an empathetic understanding of what the characters are going through, the recognition of the characters by others presents the characters as equals who are worthy of love and respect. Though some of the characters may have to create fantasy worlds in order to receive this recognition, this is the closest any characters get to true acceptance of their transgender identities in any of the films under study.

One final point about the reactions of the transgender characters to the lack of acceptance they face. Transgender dramas are filled with images of freedom. At the beginning of *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon drives down the road alone in a car and as he passes another car, his eyes light up as he looks back at it in his rearview mirror. Brandon experiences a sense of freedom in his car that he is unable to find in the rest of his life. The film ends with Lana driving down a road alone, possibly to Memphis as she discussed with Brandon, escaping the repressive environment that killed the man she loves. When Kitten decides to leave Ireland and go to London to search for her mother, her bright yellow umbrella stands out against a sea of black umbrellas; she even moves across the shot from left to right, going against the crowd around her. After jumping over the railing of a skyscraper to save a falling Kiyoko, Hana grabs onto a banner in hopes of breaking her fall. The banner rips and just as she and Kiyoko about to slam into the pavement, a gust of wind rushes through the city. As they float down to the ground, a ray of sunlight hits Hana and a look of pure joy spreads across her face, not only relief at being alive but also amazement at the magic of life. Finally, at the end of

*Ma Vie en Rose*, Pam flies across the screen and sprinkles some pixie dust over the scene, providing some hope that all the magic is not gone from Ludovic's life.

Hopefully, her fantasies in the future will be positive rather than an escape from an abusive home life. I highlight these images of freedom to show that even in the face of heteronormative pressure, the transgender characters still dream of a better, more accepting life.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In the last three chapters, I have discussed transgender representations in transgender farces, thrillers, and dramas. Transgender representations work generally to position the transgender identities of the characters as separate from heteronormative society, leading to a distancing of the characters from audience members. The characters privilege their heteronormative identities over their transgender identities, hide their transgender identities in isolation from the rest of society, and struggle through the everyday process of claiming their identities. The transgender identity positions adopted and claimed by the characters are presented as distinct from heteronormative identities.

The positioning of the characters is constructed through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. As Roberta Pearson argues about the relationship between characters' actions and traits (41), the characters are constructed mainly through their actions, such as discarding their transgender identities or taking an extended amount of time to get dressed. These actions are intended to reveal important information about what it means to deviate from heteronormative standards. Constructing the characters through their actions allows the audience to learn about the characters in a way that is familiar from the collected experience of film viewing while also supporting the argument that the characters' transgender identities are less natural than heteronormative identities.

The characters are also visually constructed to support this separation between their transgender identities and heteronormative society. The visual codes of the three transgender gazes range between sharing too little information, thus preventing the audience from seeing how the characters' transgender identities differ from their initial heteronormative identities, to presenting too much information, thus directing the audience to focus on the characters' identities as a process of building an outward appearance rather than as legitimate identities. Transgender farces and thrillers reserve visual information of the transgender characters for dramatic revelations while transgender dramas focus on extended sequences of the characters dressing. Together with the focus on the characters' actions, the visual attention given to the characters allows room for audience members to separate their identities from the ways they understand their own identity construction.

The findings of this project have particular theoretical and methodological implications for cultural studies, gender theory, film theory, and communication. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of this project before offering some suggestions for improving transgender representations based on the findings. While the theoretical framing and methodological construction of the project presented certain challenges, the results point to possible new directions for research on media representations of marginalized groups.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Implications**

My analysis of transgender representations in film was grounded in a cultural studies conception of representation and a positional approach to gender. Through these

lenses, I approached the representations of transgender individuals as constitutive and constrained, as constructed through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes to present the transgender characters in a particular limiting manner. The transgender identities of the characters were also constructed through their positions in particular social contexts; the characters were also positioned in particular identities, both by other characters in the films and by the audience, thus allowing me to discuss characters who do not actively claim transgender identities. The audience's processing of these representations was understood through Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as possible decodings of the messages encoded into the films. My analysis, therefore, represents just one possible decoding of those messages.

The cultural studies approach to representation and a positional approach to gender shaped the way I came to understand the transgender characters as constructed through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes. This project built on this theoretical foundation through the analysis of transgender representations in a particular social context of increased media representations of and continuing violence toward transgender individuals. This project extended theories of representation, film, and gender through distancing, the approach to the audience, considerations of power and gender representations, made important methodological contributions to the use of the gaze, and argued for the analysis of categories of texts rather than individual case studies.



## **Distancing**

Distancing is the strategy used to Other or marginalize transgender characters within the films under study and transgender individuals in society by extension. The distancing of the transgender characters from the audience is accomplished through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes to deny an emotional investment or identification with the characters by audience members. The transgender characters are generally distanced from the audience by contrasting them with heteronormative standards of gender. The characters are presented as objects of ridicule by privileging their heteronormative identities over their transgender identities, as objects of fear by constructing them as threats to violently attack heteronormative society, and as objects of sympathy by presenting their lives as struggles to actively claim their transgender identities in the face of violent repressive actions. The narrative conventions and visual codes of these films construct transgender identity in ways that prevent audience identification with the characters. The transgender identities of the characters are either discarded at the first available opportunity in order to better focus on the characters' heteronormative identities, hidden until the last moments in order to create a shocking revelation, or shown to be the result of a tremendous amount of effort and suffering. Because of the prominence of the characters in the majority of the films analyzed, audience members may be able to look beyond these issues in order to identify with the characters, but the ways the characters are constructed does not invite this identification.

The transgender identities of the characters are frequently delegitimized in transgender films in contrast to heteronormative identities. The transgender characters

are critiqued by heteronormativity for their poor performance of gender and their focus on outward appearance. The characters are also positioned as separate from heteronormative society whether that is physical isolation of being forced to leave their homes and go to a new place, even somewhere as nice as a resort in Florida, or the interpersonal isolation of not being accepted by others, through such acts as being bullied at summer camp. Finally, the transgender identities of the characters are presented as problems to be overcome rather than as legitimate identities; whether the characters actively claim a transgender identity or are positioned in that identity by external forces, their transgender identities are presented as the root cause of all of the difficulties they must endure. All of these issues represent an interest in highlighting clear distinctions between the transgender characters and heteronormative society. Making such clear distinctions supports the project of distancing the characters from the audience by arguing that they are impossible to overcome and that no true connection with the characters is possible.

The example of Michael Dorsey from *Tootsie* is used to illustrate this distancing effect. Michael's decision to adopt a transgender identity is based in his inability to find work as an actor, distancing him from the audience not only for his transgender identity but also for his lack of economic privilege. After adopting the transgender identity of Dorothy Michaels, Michael's transgender identity is made problematic through poor performance of gender, such as when he physically tosses a man out of a taxi after a long day of shopping as Dorothy, while his heteronormative identity is privileged in his romantic pursuit of Julie. To pursue her successfully, Michael frequently discards his

transgender identity despite the fact that Dorothy brings him more success and acclaim than he has ever had as an actor. Even with everything he learns through the experience, confessing to Julie that he was a better man as a woman with her than he ever was as a man, he discards his transgender identity for a final time in a dramatic reveal involving removing his wig on live television. By failing to treat Michael's transgender identity with the same respect given to his heteronormative identity and having him frequently discard his transgender identity as an obstacle to a successful romance, the film does not allow the audience to make a connection with the character's transgender identity. The character's own privileging of his heteronormative identity is reflected in the film's construction of Michael as a character. By working to keep Michael at a safe distance from his transgender identity, the film also works to keep the audience at a safe distance as well. The distancing of the transgender characters from the audience is not only built on the constructions of the characters through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes but also through a particular view of the audience.

### **Audience**

Filmic representations of transgender individuals are constructed with a primarily heteronormative audience in mind. This is the main reason the heteronormative identities of the characters are privileged throughout the films. Film, in general, seeks to reflect the interests and concerns of the audience so if the audience is viewed as primarily heteronormative, transgender representations are constructed to appeal to this dominant audience. In trying to target these films to the widest audience possible, the producers assume that a heteronormative audience will find transgender characters to be

shocking or disgusting and in trying to reach this audience, the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films are constructed in such a way that the transgender characters are seen as, at worst, a threat or, at the very least, a novelty. Trying to accurately represent the lived experiences of transgender individuals for a transgender audience is, at best, a secondary concern.

The main assumption underlying the view of the audience as predominantly heteronormative is that heteronormative individuals are unable to connect to or identify with transgender characters, thus leading to the distancing of the characters from the audience. The narrative and visual elements of film in general work to move the audience to connect with the characters on screen. The constant repetition of this feeling of identification is one reason millions of Americans continue to flock to movie theaters each week. Because the assumption is that members of a heteronormative society are incapable of identifying with transgender characters, the narrative conventions and visual codes in transgender films work to keep the characters at a distance from the audience. The audience watches the events in these films from a perspective far removed from the experiences of the characters on screen; they may laugh at the characters, scream in fear of them, or even feel sorry for them, but the message encoded into transgender films is that audience members will never see themselves as the characters.

The overarching assumption is that every member of the audience will react this way, viewing transgender characters as deviant and failing to identify with them. While this assumption may not be true, many audience members may identify with the

transgender characters and may get angry about the way these characters are represented, the basic assumption about how a heteronormative audience perceives transgender characters shapes the entire narrative and visual structures of transgender films. Future research examining the audience for transgender representations from a reception studies perspective could help better understand the actual audience rather than the assumed audience. A reception studies perspective would help determine if a heteronormative audience is the audience the films are actually reaching and if members of the audience actually decode the films according to the filmmakers' assumptions.

A deeper understanding of the audience for transgender representations is important, but it is equally important to remember the ways each of our decodings are based on our own interpretations from identity positions that are embodied, specific, and historically situated. No matter the assumptions about who makes up an audience, each individual member brings her or his own experiences to her or his viewing of a film. My analysis of transgender representations in film is grounded in my identity as a transgender woman. My focus on distance comes from my own feelings of distance from the characters. As transgender characters, I should feel a connection to them, but I often do not. This project has helped me understand the ways the films are constructed to prevent that connection. Having experienced various forms of marginalization in my own life has also made me sensitive to the ways the characters are marginalized from others in the films. Heteronormativity works to build itself up by putting other characters down. Pushing for a place for transgender individuals in heteronormative society is not necessarily the solution; finding ways to dismantle heteronormative

privilege would be a solution that would benefit everyone, not just transgender individuals, but my experiences of marginalization have taught me that marginalization is more about the dominant group trying to stay in control than any actions on the part of the marginalized. Finally, my lived experience as a transgender woman makes me more critical of the ways transgender representations focus on transgender identity as nothing more than outward appearance and behavior. The experience of being transgender should be given the attention it deserves, rather than being glossed over in a quick cut between scenes, but there is more to being transgender than the amount of time it takes me to get dressed in the morning.

My transgender identity influences all aspects of my analysis, but my analysis should not be dismissed because of my transgender identity. My experiences as a transgender woman give me unique insights into transgender representations, but these insights are grounded in the content of the films. My analysis is one particular decoding that is situated in a particular social and historical context. Rather than making assumptions about the audience, we would do better to remember the variety of decodings that are possible. The marginalization of transgender individuals through transgender representations also touches on important issues of power.

### **Power**

Marginalization is about the maintenance of power and control. To ensure that one group remains in power, in this case heteronormative society, another group must be marginalized, transgender individuals. Transgender individuals are marginalized mainly on account of their gender identities. Heteronormativity constructs a sex/gender system

of binary, mutually exclusive genders. Transgender individuals are marginalized for their perceived crossing or existing in between the two polar gender positions.

Transgender identities raise the possibility of a continuum of gender identities not defined in binary terms, which calls the entire system of heteronormativity into question. In order to retain its power, heteronormativity responds by marginalizing transgender individuals as deviant. A binary system is again established between real (heteronormative) and false (transgender) gender identities. Since its entire system is based on the idea of only two genders, heteronormativity must marginalize transgender individuals to remain in power.

Representations are complicit in this maintenance of power. Representations can either support or subvert the dominant system, and transgender representations generally work to support heteronormativity. The transgender identities of the characters are problematized through a number of narrative conventions and visual codes that show these identities as somehow less real or desirable than heteronormative identities. The transgender identities of the characters are regularly discarded or equated with violent actions while the heteronormative identities of the characters help them end up with the ones they love. Any chance to challenge the binary gender system is undermined at every turn, such as the squelching of any hints of same-sex attraction, and the films further the marginalization of transgender individuals by delegitimizing their identities based on this system. This discussion of power and marginalization leads to important implications for gender theory.

## Gender Theory

This project has three important implications for gender theory. First, Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative plays out in the films under the constraints of heteronormativity. As constructed characters, the actions of the transgender characters necessarily form the basis upon which their genders are determined. What is interesting is the ways the films use performance to define the transgender identities of the characters while failing to interrogate their heteronormative identities. The transgender identities of the characters are defined through their actions, Jerry is inherently heteronormative because he cannot walk in heels while Bree actively claims a transgender identity position through the expert way in which she gets dressed, but the heteronormative identities of the characters are not scrutinized in the same ways. For example, *Sorority Boys* fails to acknowledge the ways Adam, Dave, and Doofer's sex-obsessed personalities are a performance of a particular kind of masculinity. The only concession the film makes is that the characters start hitting on the less attractive women of the DOG sorority rather than actually raising questions about their performance of gender. The films argue that gender is performative only for transgender individuals, which fits well within Butler's argument that the sex/gender system prevents people from recognizing the ways their own genders are performative.

Second, this analysis extends positionality by arguing that individuals can be positioned in certain identities by others even if they do not or would not claim those identities for themselves. Many characters in the films under analysis, particularly the transgender farces, would not claim transgender identities, but their adoption of those



identities under specific circumstances positions them as transgender. The reactions of the characters to being positioned in transgender identities reveal the discomfort inherent in heteronormativity to gender as a continuum. For example, the characters in transgender farces regularly discard their transgender identities as an assertion of their heteronormativity. Their discomfort with being positioned as transgender is so intense that they must assert their heteronormativity even at the risk to their own lives. The notion that individuals can be positioned in identities they do not actively claim brings an important new perspective to the interactions between dominant and marginalized groups.

Finally, this project conducted preliminary research into the intersections between transgender identities and other identity categories. The main intersection explored in this project was between transgender identities and class. I argued, primarily in Chapter 2, that varying levels of economic privilege opened up opportunities to adopt or claim transgender identities. Lower levels of economic privilege might make an individual desperate enough to adopt a transgender identity while higher levels of economic privilege offer an individual the freedom to claim a transgender identity. Future research on transgender representations should analyze the intersections, primarily between race and transgender identity, in more detail. Along with the theoretical implications discussed so far, this project also has methodological implications beginning with conceptions of the gaze.

## **The Gaze**

This project extends earlier conceptions of the gaze by Laura Mulvey and J. Jack Halberstam through the development of three transgender gazes: trans-misogynistic, transphobic, and trans-pathetic. The primary contribution made by developing these transgender gazes is the idea that the gaze can be a method of presenting visual information in film without being connected to an identity position. The gaze has primarily been conceptualized as the construction of visual information in film that privileges a particular mode of viewing. The male gaze argues that films are constructed to look at characters, primarily women, from a heteronormative male point of view. Halberstam views the gaze in this manner; his transgender gaze is about the audience adopting a gaze that exists outside of the gender binary. I argue that the transgender gazes developed in this project present the characters in particular ways without necessarily leading to the audience adopting a transgender perspective. A transgender way of looking is not being constructed in these films. My conception of the gaze is more interested in the ways the films are visually constructed to present the characters in particular ways rather than in the perspectives adopted by audience members while viewing a film. Audience members do not have to feel trans-misogynistic or transphobic for the gaze to be presenting the characters in those ways. The conception of the gaze offered through the three transgender gazes is concerned with the ways the characters are constructed visually in the films rather than if a particular viewing perspective is privileged over others.

This conception of the gaze offers film studies a new perspective for analyzing the visual information presented in film. One of the main criticisms of Mulvey's conception of the gaze revolves around those individuals whose identities do not match the heteronormative male perspective she argues is privileged by the visual construction of film. My conception of the gaze argues that films can be constructed from the perspective of a particular gaze regardless of the gazes adopted by audience members. The focus remains on the visual information presented in the films rather than on the perspectives of the audience. My use of categories over case studies is another important methodological consideration for film studies.

### **Categories over Cases**

This project makes a strong argument for analyzing categories of films over individual case studies. The categories I have developed in this project are obviously not the first examples of the analysis of groupings of films with certain unifying elements, with genre and auteur analysis being the most obvious. Rick Altman argues that though "genre-ness is thought to reside in a particular complex of topic and structure . . . , the genre itself is typically thought of as a corpus of films (24). Genre analysis is concerned with an examination of this corpus and the relations of between the films within the corpus (for further definition of genre analysis, see also Langford 5; Neale 220-229; Moine87-88; and Braudy 108-114). Likewise, auteur theory makes use of the director as the structuring element for understanding a group of related texts (Sarris 452-454). This project builds on these traditions by arguing for an analysis that uses transgender representations to find connections between texts.

My understanding of transgender representations is shaped by the connections between films rather than on the detailed analysis of individual films. The same insights into transgender representations may not have been possible without seeing the repeated use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes across a number of films. For example, recognizing that the violent acts in transgender thrillers were directed at heteronormative individuals came only after viewing numerous gruesome murders. What may have appeared to be an isolated, if interesting, incident in a case study developed into a narrative convention when viewed across a number of films.

Future research could apply this approach to the representations of other marginalized groups and to the analysis of film in general. The keys to this method of analysis are that it is non-chronological and that the films are analyzed in conjunction with each other rather than as a series of case studies. The historical, social, and production contexts are important for understanding how these films are produced and consumed. In arguing for a non-chronological approach to analysis, I am highlighting this project's focus on the decoding of the transgender representations in the films under analysis from the current social context. Outside of this context, my analysis may lack resonance with readers. My analysis is grounded in a particular context, as is any other. A consideration of the contexts in which these films were produced and consumed is an important project for future research but is not a focus of the current project.

This approach could reveal interesting insights into heavily studied areas of film that are not possible through individual case studies. The main limitation of this

approach is the lack of detail that is possible in close textual analysis. For this reason in particular, this method should not replace case studies entirely.

In the next section, I discuss three suggestions for improving transgender representations that neither fundamentally alter how popular film functions or remove what makes film popular in the first place. Film does not have to be reduced to a series of PowerPoint slides or bang people over the head with a message of acceptance to improve the representations of transgender people. These suggestions are intended to be an introduction to what I hope will be a fruitful discussion.

### **Suggestions for Improving Transgender Representations**

These suggestions are made within the context of previous research and activism on the subject of representation. Herman Gray argues that media make “difference and distinction (rather than incorporation and homogeneity) the basis of profitability” and that this “cultural logic, which of necessity acknowledges and seeks to exploit difference,” “promotes the unstable, fragmentary, and momentary nature of cultural identities made in and through representation” (“Cultural Moves” 113). Film and other media have embraced a diversity of representations only as far as they are profitable; thinking back to the earlier discussion of the audience, it is not surprising that the producers of the films approach transgender representations through a heteronormative audience since this is presently the most profitable. Aniko Bodroghkozy, in her discussion of the representations of the Civil Rights Movement on the television show *East Side/West Side* (1963-1964), argues that audience members often feel more comfortable with media representations than with the marginalized groups they present.

“Fictional representations may have felt less threatening, less confrontational, and less immediate in their effects” (270). The continued popularity of transgender representations may be partially explained through this distanced approach to difference; it is more comfortable for audiences to watch a man wearing a dress on screen than to interact with an actual transgender person. Larry Gross argues that marginalized groups have to accept the dominant group’s rules in order to be represented at all.

The great American bargain offered to successive minorities continues to be: assimilate, but on our terms. By all means, add your flavoring to the national stew, but keep it subtle enough not to threaten the dominance of white, middle-class, Christian, hetero-normativity. We welcome any style that can be repackaged and sold to other markets . . . but we do insist on inspecting all goods at the border and we reserve the right to demonize and marginalize those who refuse to play by our rules. (262)

Part of the limits placed on any representations is the pressure to cater to the demands of the dominant groups in society. The following suggestions are offered with these limitations on representations in mind.

### **Increasing the Number of Transgender Actors and Executives**

My first suggestion is an institutional one, a suggestion made by such advocacy groups as the NAACP and GLAAD (“Media Diversity”; “Entertainment Media”). By increasing the number of transgender actors in films and executives in boardrooms, the chances increase that a transgender voice will help to shape transgender representations. Kathryn Montgomery, in her analysis of the relationship between advocacy groups and television networks, found that the “most effective groups were those whose strategies were compatible with the network TV system, and whose strategies were fashioned with a keen awareness of how that system functioned” (217). Keeping in mind Gray’s

argument that the entertainment media are only interested in difference in terms of profitability, this suggestion acknowledges the structure of media institutional production in order to increase the number and accuracy of transgender representations rather than arguing for a determined break with the system.

In her discussion of the difficulties transgender individuals and groups face in gaining access to the media, Viviane Namaste argues that “in an institutional sense, non-transsexual individuals have the first and final word on the matter” (45). The only film analyzed in this project to include transgender actors is *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* and none of the directors identify as transgender. It has primarily been non-transgender individuals in control of creating transgender representations. Artist and activist Jack Tomas, in his discussion of the misrepresentation of transgender and Hispanic individuals in the 2012 ABC comedy *Work It*, argues that it is not enough to bring in members of marginalized groups only in creative roles, such as actors and directors, but they must also fill executive positions if any significant progress is to be made in improving representations. The businessmen and women making financial decisions play just as great a role, if not greater, in shaping what appears on screen. Increasing the number of transgender voices in the boardroom is just as important as increasing the number of transgender faces on screen.

*Work It* provides a useful example of the importance of a transgender presence at the executive level. In an article on *Entertainment Weekly*'s website, Lynette Rice discusses the reaction by the head of ABC about the uproar from the transgender community over the show. “ABC Entertainment Chief Paul Lee told reporters last week

that he didn't understand the response from the advocacy groups. He has said in the past that, as a Brit, he appreciates the cheeky humor that comes with cross-dressing comedies like the Dustin Hoffman movie *Tootsie*." Since transgender representations generally support heteronormativity, it is not surprising that a prominent executive would not understand why a show like *Work It* would upset transgender people. What Lee would argue was all in good fun is seen as a serious misrepresentation of the everyday lives of millions of transgender individuals. Having a transgender voice in the boardroom might have ensured that a show like *Work It* never saw the light of day.

Transgender individuals have made greater inroads into the world of acting, Laverne Cox argues that "more films are being written and produced with transgender characters and that there is a willingness to hire trans actors to play these roles," but transgender actors still face an uphill struggle. A few transgender actors have appeared in film and television, including Divine in a number of Jon Waters' films, Lady Chablis in Clint Eastwood's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), and Candis Cayne as Carmelita Rainer in *Dirty Sexy Money* (2007-2009), but most transgender actors have often been relegated to supporting parts while the most prominent transgender roles are played by non-transgender actors. When able to secure acting roles, transgender actors still face varying levels of acceptance. William Keck discusses the casting of transgender actress Jamie Clayton as a pre-op transgender woman in HBO's *Hung* (2009-2011), in which Thomas Jane plays a male prostitute named Ray.

When Thomas first got wind of Ray's new adventures, "the idea of kissing a man was not a comfortable one for him, but he did great," says creator Colette Burson, who is exploring the possibility of making Kyla Ray's full-time



girlfriend in Season 4. “They had to kiss for hours. After his initial shyness, she became a woman for him.” (14)

Clayton was not a woman initially for Jane but had to become one through their interactions.

Any insecurities Tom had disappeared when he arrived on set. “I asked, ‘So where’s the guy?’ and was told, ‘That’s her!’” he told me at the 2011 Saturn awards. “There was this beautiful girl who blew me away.” (14)

Jane’s calculated reference to Clayton as “the guy” is illustrative of the perceptions that transgender actors, and transgender individuals in general, must overcome. This perception is part of the reason non-transgender actors are usually cast in transgender roles.

Increasing the number of transgender creative personnel, including actors, writers, and directors, and executives will increase the number of transgender voices speaking up for improved representations of transgender people, but this alone will not improve transgender representations (and given the difficulty with which many marginalized groups have had breaking into the upper echelons of the entertainment industry, will probably be a long time in coming). The number of transgender voices does not matter if the products being discussed maintain a heteronormative view of transgender identity. With transgender individuals in positions of power, narratives could be repositioned to center transgender experiences rather than distancing them.

### **Humor Found *in* Characters Rather than Directed *at* Them**

Transgender characters feature prominently in a number of film narratives but as I have shown in this project, the events of the narratives generally happen *to* the characters rather than presenting the characters as active subjects taking control of their

situations. Whether it is Joe and Jerry having to join a girl's band and travel to Florida or else risk being killed by mobsters or it is Bree having to travel across the country because of an ultimatum from her therapist, the characters are generally not in control of the events swirling around them. This communicates a lack of agency on the part of transgender individuals, and a second suggestion for improving transgender representations is to make transgender characters more active participants in their own narratives. It is the difference between having things happen *to* the characters rather than because of their own actions. I use comedy to illustrate this point but this principle applies to dramas, thrillers, and any other film genre.

Comedy is one of the trickiest genres for members of any marginalized group; no one wants to see members of their group being made fun of for who they are. One of the keys to respectful comedy is to locate the humor in the experiences of the characters rather than directing it at the characters for some perceived deviation from social norms. An example of how not to be respectful is the implicit transphobia running through the television series *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present), particularly the character of Ted Mosby. Ted is presented in the series as the hopeless romantic searching for the woman of his dreams, but one of his biggest fears seems to be falling in love with a woman only to discover that she is transgender. In season 6, Ted dates a woman named Zoe whom he meets outside an abandoned hotel that is about to be torn down. Because of the seedy neighborhood where he meets her, one of the first questions Ted asks Zoe is if she is a drag queen since he would not be interested in a relationship with her if she were. In the current season, Ted goes on a date with a woman after they both agree not

to look up any information about each other online. As the date progresses, Ted grows increasingly nervous about the potentially horrible secrets this woman might have. His worst fear, that he will go into the men's restroom and she will walk in behind him, step up to the urinal, pull up her dress, and begin to urinate, finally prompts him to look her up on his phone, revealing her big secret to be her amazing accomplishments. Ted may be entitled to his choice of romantic partners and to not date transgender women. The problem is that the show never balances Ted's irrational fears of transgender people with any alternative representations. Instead, the show portrays transgender women as romantic bogeymen rather than as real individuals looking for love.

*How I Met Your Mother*, like *Friends* and numerous other shows before it, is an ensemble comedy focusing on a group of friends living in New York City. In his examination of gay and lesbian representations on television, Ron Becker argues that many TV series, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), featuring gay characters in the early 2000s "put straight men in the heterosexual closet and helped them establish a progressive straight male identity forged from the anxieties of straight guilt rather than the anxieties of homosexual panic" (224). Transgender representations could be improved through a similar positioning of concerns within heteronormativity rather than on the marginalization of transgender individuals. There is no reason that a transgender individual could not be part of a film or TV ensemble. Having a transgender individual in that position would present her or him as equal to the other characters and would open up humor about the character's experiences because she or he would not be merely a sight gag or one-off character that

the audience has no chance to connect with. For example, our scene opens on an apartment in New York as our transgender character, a transgender woman named Brenda, wakes up only to realize that she has only fifteen minutes to get ready for her first day at her new job. She scrambles out of bed and starts flinging clothes around the room searching for something to wear. The scene cuts to her roommate, a man named Joel, sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper as sounds of Brenda getting ready are heard coming out of the bathroom. Finally, Brenda comes into the living room, nicely dressed in a suit if a little frazzled, and asks Joel, “How do I look?” He walks up to her and says, “Good, except for this,” and pulls the forgotten waxing strip from above her upper lip. The scene cuts to an exterior shot of the apartment building as Brenda’s high-pitched scream rings through the air.

Unlike the transphobic sight gag in *How I Met Your Mother*, a show featuring a character like Brenda would be able to find humor in the transgender experience, such as the effort transgender people put into their appearance signified by the waxing strip. A transphobic way of doing the same scene would involve Brenda coming out of the bathroom with a full mustache or an obvious bulge in her skirt, as if transgender individuals are not aware of these issues and do nothing to deal with them. Finding humor in the experiences of a transgender individual also does not mean treating the transgender characters with kid gloves. If Brenda confessed her love to Joel, he would have every right to consider if he wants to date her and even to turn her down, just as he would with any other woman. The transphobic choice would be for him to laugh and say “I don’t date dudes, dude!” This would not only fail to acknowledge Brenda’s

identity as a woman but would deny the relationship the two have shared as friends and roommates throughout the show. Improving transgender representations does not involve putting transgender people on a pedestal where they can never be touched but starting from a place of respect for their identities.

If Joel turned down Brenda, a simple way to show that he still respects her and thinks of her as a woman would be to have him stand up for her. After turning Brenda down, Joel goes to their regular bar and sees Brenda but decides to keep his distance because of the awkwardness between them. As he drinks his beer, he overhears Brenda talking to a group of men. One of the men says “I don’t date dudes, dude!” and the entire group begins to laugh in her face. Joel then walks up to them, says “Not cool, *dude*,” and dumps his beer on the guy’s head before grabbing Brenda’s hand as they run out of the bar. Joel would not have to change his decision about having a relationship with Brenda in order to show that he still respects and cares for her. In an ensemble comedy, much of the humor and audience connection comes from the love and support between a group of friends. Including a transgender individual as an equal would demonstrate to the audience that transgender people in general are deserving of the same love and support. Centering transgender characters within the action they are a part of is an important suggestion but another important way to improve transgender representations is to remove the exclusive focus on the transgender identities of the characters.

### **Recognizing the Multiple Aspects of a Transgender Individual's Identity Position**

When a transgender character is featured prominently in a film, the narrative generally revolves around their transgender identity and what it means to be transgender. While this has been and will continue to be an important project in raising awareness about the experiences of transgender people, it also sends the message that the only interesting thing about a transgender individual is that she or he is transgender. It is time for films to feature transgender characters in a way that acknowledges that there is more to their lives than just being transgender.

In most heteronormative films, the gender identities and sexual orientations of the characters are not the focus. A police drama is not about the police officers as heterosexual men and women who also happen to solve crimes. Even in a romance the focus is on the relationship between the characters, not the fact that they are heterosexual. In films featuring transgender characters, everything about the characters is secondary to their transgender identities. Joe and Jerry are musicians only so they can escape to Florida, Robert is a psychologist only so his attraction to Kate Miller will enrage Bobbie, and Brandon is never seen at work, though he is wearing coveralls when he is arrested for check fraud. An individual's occupation does not define him or her, but it is telling that the transgender characters are only seen at work in order to move the plot in a direction toward the characters' gender identities. Even in their other relationships, the gender identities of the characters are placed in the forefront; there is a notable difference between the way Bree is presented as a transgender woman traveling with her son rather than presenting her as a parent traveling with her son who also

happens to be transgender. It is the second way of thinking about the characters that I am suggesting.

For example, if a romantic drama wanted to feature a transgender woman as part of its central couple, it could turn the focus away from the transgender identity of the character by focusing on the developing relationship between the couple. This is not about hiding the transgender identity of the character; her identity is important but it does not have to be the whole focus of the film. A woman agonizing over when to tell her partner about her gender identity or her partner searching her or his feelings to determine how she or he feels about dating a transgender person is not the same as focusing on the transgender character's gender identity. If the climactic moment of your supposed romance is a character telling her or his partner about her or his gender identity instead of the two characters confessing their love for each other, then you are doing it wrong.

Another example would be a legal drama featuring a post-op transsexual woman as a district attorney. Her gender identity would be well known to her colleagues but the focus would remain on the cases she and her team take on. She would probably have to endure trans-misogynistic comments and tactics from her legal opponents but the focus would again remain on her success in the courtroom. Films like these would not shy away from the transgender identities and experiences of their characters but would also do what they can to expand the audience's ideas of what it means to be transgender. A third example would be an action film featuring a pre-op transsexual character as a secret agent or assassin. She or he would go on missions in order to earn the money

needed for sex reassignment surgery so her or his transgender identity would provide motivation for the plot but the focus would be on the action scenes, just like any action film. Again, the point is not to downplay or obscure the transgender identity of the characters but to show transgender characters doing things that do not relate directly to their gender identities.

Reality TV provides a few examples of this suggestion in action. Competition programs have been a dominant force in reality TV over the past decade, and transgender individuals have been featured in a number of programs. VH1's *TRANSform Me* (2010) featured three transgender women, Laverne Cox, Jamie Clayton, and Nina Poon, conducting fashion makeovers on other women in the vein of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007). Isis King was a contestant on The CW's *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present) and proved popular enough that she participated in a recent all star season. Logo's *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) is a fashion competition hosted by drag celebrity RuPaul and featuring drag queen contestants. Also airing on Logo, *Transamerican Love Story* (2008) was a dating competition in the style of *The Bachelor* featuring transsexual artist Calpernia Adams choosing from eight men who were aware of her gender identity, removing the shock value. These series are notable for prominently featuring transgender participants but keeping the focus on the goals of the series, whether it is fashion or dating. It would not be inconceivable to have a transgender individual participate on such competitions as Bravo's *Top Chef* (2006-present) or CBS' *The Amazing Race* (2001-present) with little or no objection from audience members.



This suggestion is an important step in showing how transgender individuals are a part of the fabric of everyday life. The goal here is not to ignore the transgender identities of individuals, in a transgender equivalent to colorblindness, but to simply acknowledge that transgender individuals should not be defined solely by their transgender identities. We are teachers, chefs, cashiers, and engineers. We are sisters, brothers, friends, lovers, and neighbors. As long as the focus of transgender representations remains solely fixed on the gender identities of transgender individuals and not the fact that they are people with friends, families, and jobs then heteronormative society will continue to define transgender individuals by their deviations from the norm rather than trying to relate to them as people.

All of these suggestions are just that, suggestions, meant to start a discussion about how to improve transgender representations. These suggestions are not the be all end all of improving transgender representations, and they all have their own flaws, as will probably be pointed out by future critics of this project. My hope is that they will spur discussion about how to improve transgender representations rather than continuing to focus solely on what is wrong with transgender representations.

### **Conclusion**

What stands out to me as I survey this entire project is the importance of legitimacy in the representations of marginalized groups. The problems I have discussed in these chapters could be solved if the transgender identities of the characters were merely treated as legitimate. No character would be ridiculed, feared, or pitied simply for being transgender if the films treated their identities as legitimate. Heteronormative

characters, particularly white males, are generally not treated as objects because the legitimacy of their identities is never questioned. Audience members would find it odd if the same techniques used to hold the identities of transgender characters up to heteronormative scrutiny were also used on heteronormative characters since their identities are never in question. Until transgender characters are able to appear on screen with the same degree of self-assurance as their heteronormative counterparts, the legitimacy of their identities will remain in doubt.

Legitimacy is the main connection I see between this project and research on the representations of other marginalized groups. To delegitimize the identities of a marginalized group is to say they have no place in society. The distancing effects I have discussed throughout this project are rooted in the delegitimization of the characters' identities; it is hard to identify with a character if she or he is not seen as an equal. Whether it is in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or immigration status, accepting and embracing the legitimacy of every individual is the first step in improving representations. All of the problems with representations stem from this lack of legitimacy and all of the solutions flow from taking this first step. The main failing of heteronormativity is not that it tries to impose its standards on all others but that it fails to even recognize possible alternatives. Many individuals and groups have sought to separate themselves entirely from heteronormative society for this very reason. By forcing the issue of legitimacy, this flaw in heteronormativity can be exposed and true conversation can begin.

This project is far from the last word on transgender representations, nor should it be. This project has a number of limitations that open up space for future research. First, by choosing to focus on representations across groups of films, the high level of detail possible through close textual analysis became impossible. A detailed analysis of each individual text included in this project might reveal more about the functioning of the narrative conventions and visual codes in an individual text.

Second, notable works of transgender representation, including *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and Tyler Perry's Madea films (2005-2011), were not included in this project. Some of these films share connections and could be developed into new categories of transgender representation. *To Wong Foo* and *Hedwig* share the narrative convention of transgender characters entering a hostile place and making it more welcoming. Tyler Perry's films would be interesting to analyze along with other films, such as *Hairspray* (1988, 2007) and *Jack and Jill* (2011), in which the actor is meant to be seen by the audience as a member of the biological sex they are presenting. Numerous other films, such as *Charley's Aunt* (1941), *Just Like a Woman* (1992), and *She's the Man* (2006), could be analyzed in order to confirm or refute the narrative conventions and visual codes I argue for in this project.

Third, I was unable to include foreign films and other visual media to the degree I would have liked. Transgender representations are prominent in the film traditions of Japan, China, Spain, India, and numerous other countries. Each national cinema is deserving of its own analysis. Transgender representations also figure prominently in

the history of television, including such shows and characters as *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983), *Bosom Buddies* (1980-1982), *Zoe on All My Children* from 2006-2007, *Degrassi* (2001-Present), and the recently cancelled *Work It* (2012). Transgender representations also feature prominently in Japanese anime and manga, including such TV series as *Ranma ½* (1989-1992), *Otoboku* (2006), and *Princess Princess* (2006). My research plans include an analysis of transgender representations in anime and manga in the near future.

Finally, I made use of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model in order to understand the messages encoded into the films using certain narrative conventions and visual codes to be decoded by audience members to communicate certain messages about transgender individuals. This method was useful for accomplishing the goal for this project of analyzing the messages about transgender people contained in popular films, but it did not allow me to make any claims about how audience members would actually decode these messages beyond my own decodings. A thorough analysis of the ways audiences process the messages sent by these films would be a useful addition to the research on transgender representations. This analysis could be conducted through quantitative surveys in order to understand how large numbers of people respond to transgender representations in general or through qualitative questionnaires after film screenings to better understand how audiences process the messages in particular films. This type of in-depth audience analysis is necessary before any claims can be made about the ways audiences respond to these films.

Returning to the *Tootsie* example I opened this project with, the audience knows how to respond to Michael appearing on screen as he walks down a crowded New York

street as Dorothy for the first time because of the narrative conventions and visual codes of the film and other films like it. Because Michael's transformation happens off screen as the film cuts between his agent's office and the street scene, the audience knows his transformation is not to be taken seriously. He is not stalking the streets looking to kill an innocent woman or he would not be seen as clearly. His transformation is also not the result of years of effort to live as a woman or else more of her process of getting dressed would have been seen. Analyzing the narrative conventions and visual codes used across a number of films helps us better understand the messages communicated through film about transgender individuals. By better understanding the techniques through which these messages are communicated, hopefully audience members will begin to demand improved representations of transgender people.

## NOTES

**Chapter 1 – Introduction**

<sup>1</sup> Difference has been studied in a wide variety of contexts including Yemeni communities in Britain (Seddon 563-564), secular Muslim women in France (Fernando 388-389), the works of Toni Morrison (Khayati 313), young Asian women's femininity in Australia (Matthews 215-216), Western colonial discourse in cinema (Shohat 669-670), Latina representation in film and media (Valdivia 4-5), and discussions between Americans with differing political views (Ellis 728-731), to name but a few.

<sup>2</sup> Communication scholar Celeste Fisher's analysis of audience responses to urban youth films provides an example of how audience identification influences perceptions of characters in films. She found that, in the case of her African American participants, the films "seemed to encourage participants to use their own experiences and background to make meaning" (80-81). In the case of her study, she analyzed responses of members of a marginalized group to filmic representations of their own group. It would be interesting in future research to see if a similar reaction was seen among transgender individuals viewing transgender representations.

<sup>3</sup> Heteronormativity has been examined in a variety of contexts, including gay and lesbian individuals' legal challenges to laws preventing them from marrying (Johnson 350), romantic relationships in children's films (Martin and Kazyak 318), the construction of sexual identity on the reality dating show *Playing It Straight* (2004) (Tropiano, 61), queer representations on television (Porfido 167-168), young people's discussions of media representations of lesbians (Jackson and Gilbertson 209), the

construction of heteronormative identities through discourse for Greek youth (Archakis and Lampropoulou 322), and antigay violence in the Netherlands (Buijs, Hekma and Duyvendak 635), to name just a few.

## **Chapter 2 – Transgender as Farce**

<sup>1</sup> A college fraternity member, Bob Sheppard, impersonates a female beauty contestant at a rival school in order to get revenge for his fraternity being ridiculed.

<sup>2</sup> Two jazz musicians, Joe and Jerry, disguise themselves as women in order to join an all-girl band to escape gangsters after witnessing the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

<sup>3</sup> Struggling actor Michael Dorsey lands a job on a soap opera as Dorothy Michaels.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria, an out-of-work singer, is convinced by her new friend Toddy to disguise herself as a female impersonator named Victor.

<sup>5</sup> A high school girl named Terri disguises herself as a boy in order to win an internship at the local newspaper but complications arise when she falls for a classmate.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel, a recently unemployed voice actor, disguises himself as an elderly nanny in order to be close to his children after his wife Miranda divorces him.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm is an FBI agent who goes undercover as Big Momma in hopes of catching an escaped convict.

<sup>8</sup> Matt, a college student, searches for the girl he had sex with in a dorm elevator during a power outage.

<sup>9</sup> Three fraternity brothers, Adam, Dave, and Doofer, disguise themselves as women in order to clear their names of the embezzlement charges that led to them getting kicked out of their fraternity.

<sup>10</sup> The purpose of this scene, as with the scene that opens *Big Momma's House* in which Malcolm disguises himself as an older Korean man in order to bust a dog fighting ring, is to establish Michael's skill with makeup as a way of explaining how he is able to complete his transformation into Dorothy on his own. Matt in *100 Girls* and Daniel in *Mrs. Doubtfire* are also seen receiving help from a female friend and a brother, respectively. These more contemporary references to the help the characters receive or the skill they are shown to have is an attempt to address the questions audience members may have about how purportedly heteronormative men would know how to dress as women. Despite these references to the help of others, the actual process of transformation is still generally not shown.

<sup>11</sup> Even the cultural icon Michael becomes as Dorothy in *Tootsie* is based more on what he says than how he looks. When Michael auditions for the soap opera role as Dorothy, the producer decides to do a screen test. She tells the cameraman "I'd like to make her look a little more attractive. How far can you pull back?" to which the cameraman replies, "How do you feel about Cleveland?" The message is clear that Dorothy is not a very attractive woman. What he says is something he can control while defining his popularity in terms of his appearance might undermine his heteronormative identity.

<sup>12</sup> An alternative reading of this scene is possible, though, with King's line, "I don't care if you are a man," to Victoria right before he kisses her as they hide in the snow from the police. This line and King's actions are generally read as him being confident of her true identity since he had already confirmed her sex while watching her from the closet. The alternative reading would take King's line literally, he really does not care, since the



audience never had the visual confirmation of what King saw in the bathroom, only his lascivious grin, which could be read as pleasure in Victoria's body regardless of sex. I tend to support the dominant reading but this alternative decoding of the scene is possible.

### **Chapter 3 – Transgender as Killer Surprise**

<sup>1</sup> Norman Bates welcomes Marion Crane to the Bates Motel, but Mother ensures that she will not be checking out.

<sup>2</sup> Myra Breckenridge, played by Raquel Welch, is a post-op transsexual woman who comes to Hollywood seeking revenge against patriarchal society.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Miller is murdered in an elevator by a woman in a black trench coat and sunglasses. The woman, Bobbie, then sets her sights on Liz Blake, the only witness.

<sup>4</sup> Angela, a quiet girl who keeps to herself, goes on a murderous rampage at her summer camp.

<sup>5</sup> Fergus, a former member of the IRA, comes to London in search of Dil, the girlfriend of the man he was ordered to execute, and ends up falling in love with her.

<sup>6</sup> Bridget, a New Yorker on the run after stealing money from her husband, ends up in the small town of Beston where she meets Mike, who she seduces in order to convince him to help her murder her husband.

<sup>7</sup> When Snowflake, the live animal mascot of the Miami Dolphins football team, is kidnapped, pet detective Ace Venture is called in to investigate. His unusual methods and wacky hijinks uncover a case that goes much deeper than a kidnapped dolphin.

<sup>8</sup> John and Emma's quiet life is disrupted after a train car's derailment in their backyard brings unwanted attention from their neighbors.

<sup>9</sup> Five transgender women are brutally beaten by a group of men. The three survivors, Bubbles, Rachel, and Pinky, train in the martial arts in order to get revenge for their murdered friends, Emma and Tipper.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on transgender thrillers is dominated by the analysis of two films: *Psycho* and *The Crying Game*. While these films are my primary focus in the literature review, I want to point out, however, that this review focuses on the films in terms of transgender representations rather than providing a general review of literature, which is beyond the scope of this project especially given that *Psycho* is one of the most analyzed films in history.

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Kondo argues that *Psycho* is part of a prominent trend of portraying people with mental illness as violent killers (250). Like transgender people, this type of representation distances those with mental illness from the rest of society who fear their potentially violent behavior. Also like transgender representations, these filmic representations are one of the few ways many people encounter mental illness (250). Critics often neglect to consider the very real implications these representations may have on the lives of those living with mental illness.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Williams has harsh words for the transgender identity of the killer in *Dressed to Kill*.

While supposedly about Bobbie's desire to castrate her male half, what the film actually shows is not this mutilation but another: the slow motion slashing of Kate's body as substitute for the castration Bobbie cannot yet perform on Elliot. In this light, Bobbie's vengeance on Kate can be viewed not as the act of a

jealous woman eliminating her rival, but as acting out the *male* fantasy that woman is castrated, mutilated . . . The problem, in other words, is that she is not castrated; the fantasy solution of the male psychopath and the film itself is symbolically to prove that she is. (97)

Her argument implies that Bobbie strikes out at Kate because of unsatisfied male desires, completely negating Bobbie's transgender identity while also positioning it as the source of her rage.

<sup>13</sup> The difficulties scholars encounter in their own conceptions of gender are evident in the ways they are often at pains to classify Dil as a character. She is variously called a "man who cross-dresses as a woman" (Evans 199), a "gay male transvestite, at home in golden sequins" (Giles 63), a "woman who is false" (Chumo 249), and a "man who appears to be, and identifies as, a woman" (Handler 31). John Phillips notes that Dil is "extremely feminine in both appearance and behavior" but that she "does not manifest any of the anatomical characteristics of a male-to-female transsexual" (120). I simply refer to Dil as a transgender woman based on the positional approach I use in this project and the umbrella definition of transgender discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> The narrative convention of the psychological approach to the characters' transgender identities makes use of specific elements, including split personalities (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Peacock*, and *Myra Breckenridge*), the overbearing mother figure (*Psycho*, *Peacock*, and *Sleepaway Camp*), childhood or adult trauma (*Peacock*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Ace Ventura*), and physical weakness (*The Crying Game* and *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*).

<sup>15</sup> A filmmaker trying to truly surprise an audience with a character's transgender identity would have to work to make the character seem as included in the society or

group as any other character while not taking it to such an extreme that a character's seemingly bland normality could be interpreted as a form of outsidership or isolation, *American Beauty* (1999) as an example of ordinariness hiding a deep dysfunctionality. This balance is so difficult to obtain that most films cannot help but give away the fact that the audience should be suspicious of certain characters.

<sup>16</sup> The box office success of *The Crying Game*, earning over \$62 million in its initial U.S. release, suggests that transgender identity is still enough of a taboo to tantalize large numbers of people, but it is still a taboo that people are supposed to be disgusted by, which is often the thrill of these kinds of films.

#### **Chapter 4 – Transgender as Lived Experience**

<sup>1</sup> By independent, I am not referring to the mode of the production of the films as outside of the dominant corporate studio system, with most of these films having been produced and/or distributed by companies well within this system, but, instead, to a stylistic form that most audience members associate with the label independent. Yannis Tzioumakis defines the view of independent film held by the “majority of people with a basic knowledge of American cinema” as “low-budget projects made by (mostly) young filmmakers with a strong personal vision away from the influence and pressures of the few major conglomerates that control tightly the American film industry” (1). Though, of course, there are a wide range of films that fall under the indie label, independent film in this sense is typified by a more personalized form of narrative construction and character development rather than the product of particular non-corporate business arrangements, with “away from” in Tzioumakis’ definition encompassing both

production by companies outside of the dominant Hollywood studios and also more freedom within those studios.

<sup>2</sup> Two friends from high school, Paul and Kim, reconnect in London after a number of years apart. Paul is surprised to find that Kim, who he knew as Karl, has undergone sex reassignment surgery, but his initial shock eventually turns into love.

<sup>3</sup> A seven year old transgender girl named Ludovic Fabre refuses to hide the fact that she is a girl and faces repressive actions from her family and her neighbors.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the true story of Brandon Teena, the film tells the story of a young transgender man who moves to Falls City, Nebraska, makes friends, falls in love, and then is raped and murdered for refusing to conform to gender norms.

<sup>5</sup> On Christmas Eve in Tokyo, three homeless people, Hana, Gin, and Miyuki, find a baby abandoned in the garbage, who they name Kiyoko, and must search all over the metropolis to find her parents.

<sup>6</sup> A transgender woman named Bree Osbourne must travel across the country from New York to Los Angeles with her newly discovered teenage son Toby. She is in a race against time because she has less than a week to make the trip or risk missing her appointment for sex reassignment surgery.

<sup>7</sup> Kitten Braden is a young transgender woman living in Ireland during the Troubles. After a friend is killed by an IRA car bomb, she travels to London in search of her mother but must endure a series of trials involving sex work, the police, and terrorists.

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Nadeau also points out part of the narrative difficulty Ludovic faces as a character is that her story does not even fit into the socially accepted story of “coming

out” for LGBT people but is instead a “coming *in*” (138). “There is no tension here about ‘discovering’ sexuality, since Ludo is not discovering anything” (138). Ludovic has always known she is a girl and is merely waiting for her outer self to match her inner truth, removing even a self-discovery narrative from the story.

<sup>9</sup> I use female pronouns in reference to Hana throughout this chapter in contrast with the norms of scholarly research on *Tokyo Godfathers*. Part of treating the transgender identities of the characters as legitimate means accepting the identities claimed by the characters even if their identities are not accepted by everyone. This is the reason I referred to the characters in Chapter 2 using male pronouns throughout rather than using male pronouns for their male personas and female pronouns for their female personas, even though the female personas were believed to be women by other characters in the films. I extend the same consideration in this chapter to Ludovic from *Ma Vie en Rose* and Kitten from *Breakfast on Pluto*.

<sup>10</sup> While two transgender women, Emma Grashun and Tipper Sommore, do die in the first half of *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*, their deaths are more meant as a setup to the violent revenge meted out by their friends in the second half of the film than the serious reflection on the violence directed toward transgender people that Brandon’s death is intended to be. Also, the transgender characters in Chapter 3 obviously kill other people but with this statement, I am focused more on the deaths of transgender characters than the deaths perpetrated by them.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusion**

<sup>1</sup> Women, as the extensive literature on the gaze has demonstrated, are often treated as objects in film which I argue demonstrates a certain questioning of the legitimacy of their identities in relation to men. The conservative attacks on abortion rights and access to contraception currently raging in the states and Washington, D.C. in 2012 are also examples of this questioning of the legitimacy of women's identities.

## REFERENCES

- Alcoff, Linda. "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 330-355.
- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Archakis, Argiris, and Sofia Lampropoulou. "Talking Different Heterosexualities: The Permissive, the Normative and the Moralistic Perspective – Evidence from Greek Youth Storytelling." *Discourse & Society* 20.3 (2009): 307-326.
- Armstrong, Jennifer. "Gay Teens on TV." *Entertainment Weekly* 28 Jan. 2011: 34-41.
- Awkward, Michael. *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Backus, Margot Gayle and James Doan. "Riverine Crossings: Gender, Identity and the Reconstruction of National Mythic Narrative in *The Crying Game*." *Cultural Studies* 15.1 (2001): 173-191.
- Baker, Roger. *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Batson, C. Daniel, Marina P. Polycarpou, Eddie Harmon-Jones, Heidi J. Imhoff, Erin C. Mitchener, Lori L. Bednar, Tricia R. Klein, and Lori Highberger. "Empathy and Attitudes: Can Feelings for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Improve Feelings Toward the Group?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72.1 (1997): 105-118.



- Becker, Ron. *Gay TV and Straight America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- Bell-Metereau, Rebecca. *Hollywood Androgyny*. 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Bellour, Raymond. "Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion." *A Hitchcock Reader*. 2nd ed. Eds. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 341-360.
- Bermel, Albert. *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Berra, John. *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production*. Chicago: Intellect Books, 2008.
- Bodroghkozy, Aniko. "Negotiating Civil Rights in Prime Time: A Production and Reception History of CBS's *East Side/West Side*." *Television & New Media* 4.3 (2003): 257-282.
- Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 4th ed. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Boozer Jr., Jack. "Bending Phallic Patriarchy in 'The Crying Game.'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22.4 (1995): 172-179.
- Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Bordwell, David. *Poetics of Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

- Bornstein, Kate. "Gender Terror, Gender Rage." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 236-243.
- Braudy, Leo. *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976.
- Broverman, Neal. "School Official Wants Gays Dead." *The Advocate.com*. The Advocate, 26 Oct. 2010. Web. 17 Jan. 2011.
- Buijs, Laurens, Gert Hekma, and Jan Willem Duyvendak. "'As Long as They Keep Away from Me': The Paradox of Antigay Violence in a Gay-Friendly Country." *Sexualities* 14.6 (2011): 632-652.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. New York: Routledge, 2010. 419-430.
- Cardullo, Bert. "The Dream Structure of *Some Like It Hot*." *Etudes Anglaises* 48.2 (1995): 193-197.
- Chumo II, Peter N. "*The Crying Game*, Hitchcockian Romance, and the Quest for Identity." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23.4 (1995): 247-253.
- Clarke, Steve. "Chloe Sevigny to Topline 'Hit and Miss.'" *Variety.com*. 10 Jun. 2011. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.

- Cohen, Jonathan. "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters." *Mass Communication & Society* 4.3 (2001): 245-264.
- Cole, Jonathan. "BREAKING NEWS: Transwoman Assaulted at Kohl's Department Store in Jackson, TN." *TEP's Grand Divisions: News and Comments on TN Politics*. Tennessee Equality Project, 2 Dec. 2010. Web. 19 Jan. 2011.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Cooper, Brenda. "Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity: Reclaiming a Life & Dismantling the Politics of Normative Heterosexuality." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.1 (2002): 44-63.
- Cooper, Brenda, and Edward C. Pease. "'Don't Want No Short People 'Round Here': Confronting Heterosexism's Intolerance Through Comic and Disruptive Narratives in *Ally McBeal*." *Western Journal of Communication* 66.3 (2002): 300-318.
- Cowan, Sharon. "'We Walk Among You': Trans Identity Politics Goes to the Movies." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 21.1 (2009): 91-117.
- Cox, Laverne. "Acting While Trans: A Look Back at 2011 for Transgender Actors in the Media." *The Huffington Post*. Arianna Huffington. 23 Dec. 2011. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.

- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991). 1241-1299.
- DeFrancisco, Victoria Pruin and Catherine Helen Palczewski. *Communicating Gender Diversity: A Critical Approach*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2007.
- Derry, Charles. *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Classics, 1988.
- Douglas, Susan J. *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010.
- Downing, John and Charles Husband. "Research on Racism, Ethnicity and Media." *Representing "Race": Racisms, Ethnicities and Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005. 25-59.
- Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Ellis, Carolyn. "At Home with 'Real Americans': Communicating Across the Urban/Rural and Black/White Divides in the 2008 Presidential Election." *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies* 9.6 (2009): 721-733.
- "Entertainment Media." *GLAAD.org*. n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Evans, Alex. "How Homo can Hollywood be?: Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo to Brokeback Mountain*." *Journal of Film and Video* 61.4 (2009): 41-54.

- Evans, Nicola. "Games of Hide and Seek: Race, Gender and Drag in *The Crying Game* and *The Birdcage*." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18 (1998): 199-216.
- Fernando, Mayanthi L. "Exceptional Citizens: Secular Muslim Women and the Politics of Difference in France." *Social Anthropology* 17.4 (2009): 379-392.
- Ferris, Leslie. "Introduction: Current Crossings." *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross Dressing*. Ed. Leslie Ferris. New York: Routledge, 1993. 1-19.
- Fisher, Celeste A. *Black on Black: Urban Youth Films and the Multicultural Audience*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006.
- Flanagan, Victoria. *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Gast, Phil. "DMV Employee Resigns Over Letter Condemning Customer to Hell." *CNN.com*. CNN, 16 Dec. 2010. Web. 19 Jan. 2011.
- Genter, Robert. "'We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes': Alfred Hitchcock, American Psychoanalysis, and the Construction of the Cold War Psychopath." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 40.2 (2010): 133-162.
- Gerdes, Karen E. "Empathy, Sympathy, and Pity: 21st-Century Definitions and Implications for Practice and Research." *Journal of Social Science Research* 37 (2011): 230-241.
- Gherovici, Patricia. *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

- Giles, Jane. *The Crying Game*. London: British Film Institute, 1997.
- Gordon, Paul. *Dial "M" for Mother: A Freudian Hitchcock*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.
- Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011.
- Graves, Mark A. and F. Bruce Engle. *Blockbusters: A Reference Guide to Film Genres*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006.
- Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness."* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Gray, Herman. *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Gross, Larry. *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Greer, Germaine. "Caster Semenya Sex Row: What Makes a Woman?" *Guardian.co.uk*. *The Guardian*. 20 Aug. 2009. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.
- Grist, Leighton. "'It's Only a Piece of Meat': Gender Ambiguity, Sexuality, and Politics in *The Crying Game* and *M. Butterfly*." *Cinema Journal* 42.4 (2003): 3-28.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Feminism and the Politics of Irreducible Differences: Multiculturalism/Ethnicity/Race." *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*. Eds. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1993. 1-19.

- Halberstam, Judith. "The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*." *Screen* 42.3 (2001): 294-298.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Hall, Stuart. "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect.'" *Mass Communication and Society*. Eds. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979. 315-348.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage, 1997. 13-64.
- Handler, Kristin. "Sexing *The Crying Game*: Difference, Identity, Ethics." *Film Quarterly* 47.3 (1994): 31-42.
- Hausman, Bernice L. "Virtual Sex, Real Gender: Body and Identity in Transgender Discourse." *Virtual Gender: Fantasies of Subjectivity and Embodiment*. Eds. Mary Ann O'Farrell and Lynne Vallone. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999. 190-216.
- Heath, Stephen. *Questions of Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981.
- Hermes, Joke. "Masculinity and the Merits of Textual Analysis as Part of an Audience Study." *Re-reading Popular Culture*. Joke Hermes. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 79-95.
- Higgins, Gareth. "Tyler Clementi's Death: We're All Part of the Problem." *The Huffington Post*. Arianna Huffington, 7 Oct. 2010. Web. 17 Jan. 2011.

- Howard, Jean E. "Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4 (1988): 418-440.
- Hyler, Steven H. "Stigma Continues in Hollywood." *Psychiatric Times* 1 Jun. 2003: 33-34.
- Ince, Kate. "Queering the Family? Fantasy and the Performance of Sexuality and Gay Relations in French Cinema 1995-2000." *Studies in French Cinema* 2.2 (2002): 90-97.
- Indick, William. *Psycho Thrillers: Cinematic Explorations of the Mysteries of the Mind*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006.
- Itzkoff, Dave. "Trailer to Change for Transgender Film." *The New York Times* 31 Mar. 2010 late ed.: C2.
- Jackson, Stevi. "Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity." *Feminist Theory* 7.1 (2006): 105-121.
- Jackson, Sue, and Tamsyn Gilbertson. "'Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk about Representations of Lesbianism." *Sexualities* 12.2 (2009): 199-224.
- Johnson, Paul. "Challenging the Heteronormativity of Marriage: The Role of Judicial Interpretation and Authority." *Social & Legal Studies* 20.3 (2011): 349-367.
- Jones, Malcolm. "The Mother of All Horror Films." *Newsweek* 18 Jan. 2010: 58-61.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Is the Gaze Male?" *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. Eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983. 309-327.
- Kaufmann, Jodi. "Trans-representation." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16.2 (2010): 104-115.



- Keck, William. "Hung Takes a Transgender Turn." *TV Guide* 11-17 Jul. 2011: 14.
- Kendrick, James. "Disturbing New Pathways: *Psycho* and the Priming of the Audience." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38.1 (2010): 2-9.
- Khayati, Abdellatif. "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative." *African American Review* 33.2 (1999): 313-324.
- King, Geoff. *American Independent Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Kondo, Naomi. "Mental Illness in Film." *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 31.3 (2008): 250-252.
- Lacroix, Celeste and Robert Westerfelhaus. "From the Closet to the Loft: Liminal License and Socio-Sexual Separation in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*." *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 6.1 (2005): 11-19.
- Langford, Barry. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Levy, Emanuel. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Librach, Ronald. "Sex, Lies, and Audiotape: Politics and Heuristics in *Dressed to Kill* and *Blow Out*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26.3 (1998): 166-177.
- Lieberfeld, Daniel and Judith Sanders. "Keeping the Characters Straight: Comedy and Identity in *Some Like It Hot*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26.3 (1998): 128-135.

- Lockett, Christopher. "Terror and Rebirth: *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, from Yeats to *The Crying Game*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33.4 (2005): 290-305.
- Loker, Altan. *Film and Suspense*. 2nd ed. Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2005.
- Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990. 281-287.
- Lyons, Margaret. "GLAAD Slams 'SNL' Sketch for Being Transphobic." *PopWatch*. Entertainment Weekly, 1 Feb. 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.
- MacKenzie, Gordene Olga. *Transgender Nation*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994.
- Martin, Karin A., and Emily Kazyak. "Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness in Children's G-Rated Films." *Gender & Society* 23.3 (2009): 315-336.
- Martinez, Maria Jesús. "Some Like It Hot: The Blurring of Gender Limits in a Film of the Fifties." *BELLS: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 9 (1998): 143-152.
- Matthews, Julie. "An Ambiguous Juncture: Racism and the Formation of Asian Femininity." *Australian Feminist Studies* 17.38 (2002): 207-219.
- McKee, Alan. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003.
- "Media Diversity Projects." *NAACP.org*. n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.

- Metz, Christian. "Identification, Mirror." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 7th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 723-735.
- Meyer, John C. "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." *Communication Theory* 10.3 (2000): 310-331.
- Mezur, Katherine. *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- Modleski, Tania. "The Master's Dollhouse: *Rear Window*." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 7th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 723-735.
- Moine, Raphaëlle. *Cinema Genre*. Trans. Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Montgomery, Kathryn C. *Target: Prime Time: Advocacy Groups and the Struggle Over Entertainment Television*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. New York: Verso, 2007.
- Morris III, Charles E. "Pink Herring & the Fourth persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.2 (2002): 228-244.
- Mukhopadhyay, Samhita. "A Trans Woman Found Dead in DC: What is Causing this Increase in Violence?" *Feministing*. 12 Sep. 2011. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

- Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)." *Visual and Other Pleasures*.  
Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Nadeau, Chantal. "Life with Pinky Dots." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 137-144.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Newman, Michael Z. *Indie: An American Film Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Nicki, A. "Women's Spaces are not Trans Spaces: Maintaining Boundaries of Respect." *Trans/Forming Feminisms: Trans/Feminist Voices Speak Out*. Ed. Krista Scott-Dixon. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006. 154-160.
- Norton, Jody. "'Brian Says You're a Girl, But I Think You're a Sissy Boy': Cultural Origins of Transphobia." *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity* 2.2 (1997): 139-164.
- Nunes, Charlotte. "In the Name of National Security: Torture and Imperialist Ideology in Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* and Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31.4 (2009): 916-933.
- Ormand, Kirk. "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag." *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003): 1-28.
- Osmond, Andrew. *Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2009.

- Palmer, R. Barton. "The Metafictional Hitchcock: The Experience of Viewing and the Viewing of Experience in *Rear Window* and *Psycho*." *Cinema Journal* 25.2 (1986): 4-19.
- Pearson, Roberta. "Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character." *Reading CSI: Crime TV Under the Microscope*. Ed. Michael Allen. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007. 39-56.
- Phillips, John. *Transgender on Screen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005.
- Porfido, Giovanni. "Queering the Small Screen: Homosexuality and Televisual Citizenship in Spectacular Societies." *Sexualities* 12.2 (2009): 161-179.
- Raymond, Janice G. "Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 131-143.
- Reed, Jennifer. "Reading Gender Politics on *The L Word*: The Moira/Max Transitions." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37.4 (2009): 169-178.
- Rees-Roberts, Nick. "La Confusion des Genres: Transsexuality, Effeminacy and Gay Identity in France." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7.3 (2004): 281-300.
- Rice, Lynette. "ABC Fires Polarizing Comedy 'Work It.'" *EW.com*. 14 Jan. 2012. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.

- Rosenfeld, Kathryn. "Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other." *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3/4 (2002): 201-219.
- Rothman, William. *Hitchcock – The Murderous Gaze*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 27-62.
- Rupp, Leila J. and Verta Taylor. *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Ryan, Joelle Ruby. *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*. Diss. Bowling Green State University, 2009. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2009.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1979. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 7th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 451-454.
- Schiavi, Michael R. "A 'Girlboy's' Own Story: Non-Masculine Narrativity in *Ma Vie en Rose*." *College Literature* 31.3 (2004): 1-26.
- Seddon, Mohammad Siddique. "Constructing Identities of 'Difference' and 'Resistance': The Politics of Being Muslim and British." *Social Semiotics* 20.5 (2010): 557-571.

- Sedinger, Tracey. “‘If Sight and Shape be True:’ The Epistemology of Crossdressing on the London Stage.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.1 (1997): 63-79.
- Senelick, Laurence. “Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage.” *Crossing the Stage: Controversies in Cross-Dressing*. Ed. Leslie Ferris. New York: Routledge, 1993. 80-95.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.
- Shohat, Ella. “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema.” *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000. 669-696.
- Siebler, Kay. “Transqueer Representations and How We Educate.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7 (2010): 320-345.
- Singer, Tania, and Claus Lamm. “The Social Neuroscience of Empathy.” *The Year in Cognitive Neuroscience 2009: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1156 (2009): 81-96.
- Sipos, Thomas M. *Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010.
- Sloop, John. “Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation, and Normativity.” *Western Journal of Communication* 64.2 (2000): 165-189.
- Sloop, John M. *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

- Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011.
- St. Pierre, Ethan. "Statistics and Other Info." *TransgenderDOR.org*. International Transgender Day of Remembrance, 26 Nov. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
- Staiger, Janet. *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Stone, Sandy. "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 221-235.
- Straayer, Chris. *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.
- Tang, Jean. "No Laughing Matter – Margaret Cho Sounds Off on Political Correctness, Asians in the Media, and Defying her Parents." *JADE Magazine – A Fresh Perspective for Asian Women*. Jade Magazine, Sep-Oct 2002. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Taylor, Verta and Leila J. Rupp. "Chicks with Dicks, Men in Dresses: What it Means to be a Drag Queen." *Journal of Homosexuality* 46.3/4 (2004): 113-133.
- Thomas, Paul. "Her Fine Soft Flesh." *Film Quarterly* 63.4 (2010): 86-87.
- Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.



- Thomson, David. *The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.
- Tomas, Jack. "ABC Cancels 'Work It', But This Kind of Thing will Happen Again." *Tú Vez*. n.d. Web. 12 Mar. 2012.
- Tomasulo, Frank P. "Masculine/Feminine: The 'New Masculinity' in *Tootsie* (1982)." *Velvet Light Trap* 38 (1996): 4-13.
- Tropiano, Stephen. "Playing It Straight: Reality Dating Shows and the Construction of Heterosexuality." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37.2 (2009): 60-69.
- Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 1995.
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- Valdivia, Angharad N. *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood: And Other Essay on Media Culture*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17.
- Webb, Jen. *Understanding Representation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.
- West, Cornel. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990. 19-36.

- Westbrook, Laurel. "Becoming Knowably Gendered: The Production of Transgender Possibilities and Constraints in the Mass and Alternative Press from 1990-2005 in the United States." *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*. Eds. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger. New York: Routledge, 2010. 43-63.
- Williams, Linda. "When the Woman Looks." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984. 83-99.
- Willox, Annabelle. "Branding Teena: (Mis)Representations in the Media." *Sexualities* 6.3-4 (2003): 407-425.
- Wilshire, Peter. "Alfred Hitchcock's PSYCHO and 'The Art of Pure Cinema.'" *Screen Education* 54 (2009): 131-136.
- Wilson, Mandy. "'I am the Prince of Pain, for I am a Princess of the Brain': Liminal Transgender Identities, Narratives and the Elimination of Ambiguities." *Sexualities* 5.4 (2002): 425-448.
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.