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# Imagining Possibilities

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## Trans Representations in Mainstream Film

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
The University of Auckland, 2011

## Abstract

Trans representations have been a part of film since its inception, and this project is an investigation of the ways that audiences have been encouraged to imagine trans identities and experiences and understand trans issues. Because of the enduring and widespread popularity of these films, and the power and influence of the medium itself, it is important to understand what they enable for mainstream audiences as well as the role they play in cultural discourses about heteronormativity. The ways that the films construct trans narratives and characters tends to be closely tied to the genre they are intended to be part of, and they are understood according to these conventions. This project therefore uses genre analysis to examine mainstream trans representation, in conjunction with the developments in politics and academic discourses that have shaped contemporary understandings of trans stories.

The project covers the four genres that dominate in mainstream trans films: comedy, horror, melodrama, and musicals. Each genre is dealt with in a separate chapter, but the links and intersections between them are explored as well. The chapters consider the particular influences, conventions, constraints, and innovations specific to each genre, through close reading of a few key texts, as a way of tracing the shifts that have occurred and the conventions that have endured, and offers suggestions as to why and how these elements survive or transform.

Through tracing these developments, this project identifies the ways in which trans representations in popular film have played a role in developing and maintaining the trans visibility in mainstream society, and contributed to cultural discourses and understandings of trans issues. Despite the problems and stereotypes inherent in many of these films, they prevent trans identities from being erased or ignored. The films open up gaps in the heteronormative monolith, which can be ever be fully resealed, and which provide a space for other possibilities to be imagined.

For my parents, who are extraordinary, and who have supported me, inspired me, and loved me, through everything. Thank you.

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# Chapter 1:

## Introduction

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My intention in this project is to explore the ways in which gender transgression has been imagined and deployed in mainstream cinema, and how traditional Western limitations, conceptions and experiences of gender can be breached in popular film. Popular films have provided an array of depictions of non-normative genders, some undeniably more conservative than others, which raise questions about the possibilities, conventions, and constraints around representing gender variance through film, in terms of both structure and style. My aim is not to offer definitive value judgements regarding the subversive merit of these representations, but rather to contemplate the significance of trans visibility in provoking (re)considerations of hegemonic ideas regarding sex, gender and sexuality. This is motivated partly by an interest in the powerful role of the media in the production and reproduction of cultural knowledge and as a site for negotiating normative boundaries. It is partly a result of my desire to explore the limitations and potential of film as a medium for representing gender beyond the binary and exclusive categories to which it has traditionally been bound. Lastly, because gender variance has proved to be a recurring preoccupation since film's inception, this project is a contemplation of the enduring popularity of gender transgressive films among mainstream audiences in heteronormative Western cultures.

Although there has been a notable increase in scholarship and activism around gender, sex and sexuality in a variety of disciplines and movements, there is also an unprecedented degree of mediation and mediasation of contemporary society. As a result, for the average person, both trans and non-trans, the media has arguably become the primary, privileged source of knowledge regarding their own gender identities and those of others. It is more readily available than the expertise of doctors, academics and trans people; furthermore, it is likely that even those individuals with specialised scientific knowledge or personal experience of gender variance will be affected by media representations of it. The cultural influence of cinema as a part of this media apparatus, particularly given the wide distribution

of mainstream films, cannot be overlooked as a critical component in the (re)production of cultural knowledge.

With mainstream audiences so well-trained in gender attribution according to the binary rules of man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine - an instant ascription based on appearance - the possibility of embodying an unfamiliar or uncategorisable gender identity in a visual medium is intriguing. Films are a powerful part of the cultural apparatus; they are discursive constructions with socially and historically specific conventions for organising and producing particular forms of knowledge and ways of understanding, as well as expressing ethical or political commitments. To portray gender variance most efficiently on film usually requires a visible transgression of the traditional characteristics of gender on some level, which will at the very least cause hesitation in the familiar taxonomic dichotomy of gender attribution, but which also has the potential to impact the overall stability of the heteronormative paradigm. This is my point of investigation in this project. Films can depict gender transgressions in a variety of ways: sartorial, physical, behavioural, psychological, spiritual, sexual, and/or intellectual. My enquiry therefore necessitates a term that encompasses these various representations within one conceptual framework.

## **I. Terminology**

The term ‘transgender’ began to be used in the late 1970s as a way for people to describe themselves if they identified as neither transsexuals nor transvestites, but as somewhere in between, or as in transition (Gressgard, 2010, p. 539). During the 1990s, beginning with the 1992 publication of Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, transgender evolved into a collective term to refer to anyone who does not identify with their assigned gender, including transsexuals and transvestites, as well as a range of other gender identities (Susan Stryker, 2006, p. 4). The term still tends to dominate discussions of identities outside the normative gender binary, but it is not uncontested: “Transgender is a term whose exact meaning is still in dispute, and I consider that a very healthy sign. The most widely accepted definition is that transgender includes everything not covered by our culture's narrow terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Stone, 1999). However, as David Valentine points out, despite the usefulness of the term for political activism and for

fostering communities, some people do not self-identify as transgendered, either because it is too fuzzy a category, or because they feel it elides crucial differences among those contained within it (2007, p. 4). Recently it has come to be associated more specifically with *gender* variance, rather than functioning as an umbrella term, and the term ‘trans’ has become a popular alternative.

‘Trans’ is an intellectual and political concept, one that has becoming increasingly used to describe the contemporary social experiences of those living outside proscriptive and prescriptive gender attribution. Some self-identified trans people use it to refuse any reference to a biologically defined sex; some use it as an affirmation of their modified embodiment; some use it to describe the disjuncture between sexed body and gendered identity; some are happy with their sexed bodies but deny any permanent and definitive correlation between sex and gender identity and expression. This truncated form is intended to convey a more open-ended understanding and connotations of crossing, transition and transformation that are not tied to, and which do not privilege, gender. Despite the name of the book, in the foreword to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Stephen Whittle uses trans as the collective category, differentiating between transgender and transsexual people contained within it (2006, p. xi). In their introduction to a special issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Stryker, Currah and Moore argue for the term ‘trans-’ as preferable to ‘trans’, using the hyphen to emphasise a lack of fixity and avoid the reductive implications of trans as a singular unified category (2008, p. 11). The hyphen is also intended to indicate the potential intersections of transgender with other significant axes of difference, such as race, class, locality, nationality and temporality (ibid). I am interested in how sex, gender and sexuality interact with these other elements, as well as with each other, but I do not feel that the hyphen is definitive or essential in this regard. In addition, despite the objections and concerns of Stryker, Currah and Moore, ‘trans-’ has not entered into widespread use, in part perhaps because it is somewhat unwieldy to use. In consequence, I will generally use the abbreviation/prefix ‘trans’ to serve as an inclusive term for discussing multiple forms of sex, gender, and sexual variance.

The use of a collective category functions as an expedient form of discursive shorthand, but there are significant differences among those it groups together, and I will distinguish the

various sub-groups where specificity is necessary (and possible) or relevant to the discussion. Trans most broadly refers to anyone who identifies themselves differently from the sex or gender assigned to them. Those who *do* identify with their attribution are sometimes termed ‘cissexual’ or ‘cisgendered’ in an attempt to denaturalise assumptions about sex and gender normativity. A trans person might be “a butch or a camp, a transgender or a transsexual, an MTF or FTM or a cross-dresser” (Whittle, 2006, p. xi), or trans might refer to intersex people, “transvestites... drag queens, drag kings, tranny bois and other gender queer individuals” (Doan, 2010, p. 636). Attempting to define any of these terms is a somewhat contentious endeavour, firstly because they do not have universally accepted, fixed meanings, and secondly because, as Jacob Hale has pointed out, “Definitional boundary marking always creates some exclusions and often captures some who do not identify under the defined category term” (1998, p. 333). The definitions I am employing are not meant to disregard or dispute diversity, nor the right to self-identification. Nonetheless, linguistic precision is an analytical obligation, and thus it seems necessary to provide an explanation of the sense in which I will use these terms.

Societies invariably differentiate clothes according to gender, and vice versa, and ‘cross-dressing’ refers to anyone who wears clothes and accessories not traditionally seen as belonging to their assigned gender. This can be for a variety of reasons, including preference, comfort, pleasure, disguise, and practicality, and ‘cross-dresser’ is often considered a less sexualised term than ‘transvestite’. Cross-dressing is the most common depiction of gender transgression in popular film, relying as it does on external and easily changeable visual markers. ‘Drag’ is (usually) part-time cross-dressing undertaken for entertainment purposes and makes use of exaggeratedly feminine or masculine stereotypes, sometimes with a parodic political intention. A key aspect of drag is the tendency of drag performers to enact a number of gender interpretations, none of which the performer necessarily identifies with. Drag queens are also referred to as ‘female impersonators’, although female impersonation more specifically suggests performing an impression of a particular celebrity, rather than of femininity in general. A ‘transvestite’ is someone who is driven by an internal urge (as opposed to an external contingency) to dress in clothing not associated with their gender. It is a term that has its roots in psychoanalytic theory, which conceptualises it as a type of fetish. As a result, there is a continuing assumption that transvestism is sexually motivated, and it remains listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric

Association (DSM) as a form of paraphilia (albeit a non-harmful one). This has motivated the introduction of alternate terminology for self-identification 'Cross-dresser' is often preferred as being less pejorative, but it is also less specific, as it does not distinguish the motivation behind the activity. In discussing the depictions of cross-dressing in film, however, it is often useful to differentiate between external and internal motivations in order to understand function and effect.

'Transsexual' refers to a person who alters their body, predominantly through hormones or surgery in order to align their psychic and somatic identities. This term is sometimes further refined into 'pre-op', 'post-op' and 'non-op' transsexuals, although this positioning of surgical status as definitive marginalises those who cannot access or do not want sex reassignment surgery. 'Transgender', when used as a specific rather than umbrella term, refers to people who dis-identify with their assigned gender and so live full or part time as the gender they do identify with. The terms 'trans man' and 'trans woman' are used commonly in relation to both transgender and transsexual individuals, as are the terms 'mtf' (male-to-female) and 'ftm' (female-to-male), despite some attempts to apply them exclusively to transsexuals. This may include aspects of gender presentation, behaviour, and role, but not a wish to alter their bodies. An 'androgynous' is someone who appears or behaves as neither male nor female, either as a mix of the two or as a refusal of both. 'Butch' connotes not only masculine gender expression, but also a lesbian sexual identity, in the same way that 'sissy' connotes both feminine expression and gayness – in a positive way when used as self-identification, and in a negative way when applied to others as an insult. 'Genderqueer' and 'gender outlaw' predominantly describe someone who rejects the categories and conventions of the heteronormative binary entirely, or refuses to permanently inhabit a fixed gender. 'Genderfuck' is an overtly political expression of genderqueer identity intended to visibly and flamboyantly disrupt and denaturalise conventional understandings of gender. Overtly disjunctive gender cues are mobilised in a deliberately unintelligible way and are used to obstruct the traditional processes of binary gender attribution, and provoke reflections about

gender assumptions. ‘Trans’ is the term I have chosen to use as the best way of describing this heteroglossia of gender variance, dissonance and transgression.<sup>1</sup>

Trans theorists have highlighted concerns around issues of essentialism versus constructivism in the etiology of gender, but since all film characters are deliberately constructed, the focus of my discussion inevitably shifts to the nature of the construction and the kinds of identities that are produced. Applying trans terms, including trans itself, to film characters is arguably less problematic than imposing them on real people, as they are intended here to serve a descriptive rather than a prescriptive function. Their use in this context is not intended to conflate trans people in the real world with the fictional characters of the diegesis, but rather to examine the ways in which these concepts about gender variant identities have been manifested in and appropriated by popular film. Some of the examples of gender disruption which I will be discussing may seem either too reactionary, too caricatured, or too flippant to be described as trans or as transgender, especially those depictions that are detached from or oblivious to the reality of trans experiences. However, I have deliberately chosen to focus on films that are not documentary narratives of trans identities. Rather my selections are filmic imaginings of them, and therefore not necessarily grounded in or even aware of the real-life challenges and consequences of defying heteronormative regulation. There is crucial work being done by trans theorists and activists around these issues, but the fictional representations of trans stories within mainstream film warrants consideration as a related but independent subject.

Conceptualisations of trans identities and experiences have been shaped within the broader public imagination largely through the mass media. Sociologists Richard Ekins and Dave King suggest that “to lay members of society, it becomes probable that knowledge of cross-dressing and sex-changing is framed less and less by the medical literature and more and more by the mass media” (1997, p. 3). Mass media such as film, however, are neither static nor uniform. They offer a multitude of varied and varying (often contradictory) ideas, yet these cultural sites of contestation tend to be seen as homogeneous and disconnected from the

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<sup>1</sup> Occasionally I will use the term transness for grammatical reasons, where the meaning of the sentence would otherwise be lost or incomplete. In these cases, transness is used to refer to the experiences and identities of trans persons, not to some abstract list of attributes.

more traditional forms of political activism. Judith Butler has argued for the crucial and complex role of the media in relation to systems of dominance, in which the media is a 'domain of representation' that provides opportunities for both recuperation and resistance:

The media is... neither monolithic, nor does it act only and always to domesticate. Sometimes it ends up producing images that it has no control over. This kind of unpredictable effect can emerge right out of the middle of a conservative media without an awareness that it is happening... The politics of aesthetic representation has an extremely important place. (Butler interviewed in Osborne & Segal, 1994, p. 8)

The potential for unintended and unpredictable effects to materialise from the centre of hegemonic media suggests that mainstream film, as one of the most dominant domains of representation, deserves careful consideration. The inadvertent slippages in normative coherence are valuable. Furthermore, the ways in which spectators are encouraged to engage with trans characters should be regarded as an independent, although related, issue from the explicit ideological agenda of the film as expressed through the narrative structure and even the use of formulaic genre conventions. Popular films that overtly occupy this middle ground may still offer unexpected opportunities to escape or resist normative categories through the interstitial spaces that they produce but cannot necessarily control.

The multiformity of human experience is one of the central principles underlying both the escapist appeal of film and postmodern conceptualisations of gender. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes in her first axiom in *Epistemology of the Closet*, "people are different from each other" (1990, p. 22). The multiple social positionings of each individual creates networks of connections with others, but the vagaries within and across heterogeneous social categories render every person and their experiences distinct to some degree from those around them. Our ability to understand different people, and to comprehend the differences themselves, within our everyday lives is constrained by practicalities – of space, time, race, class, gender, language, nationality, and a range of other factors. The medium of film thus serves a crucial purpose in enabling us to gain access to other lives, places and times, whether extant or imaginary. The framing of these mediated engagements in turn strongly influences the perspectives, knowledge and understanding that we accrue through them, and the sheer quantity of media has a cumulative function that will tend to privilege engagement with those texts which reiterate recognised ideas and meet our expectations by following hegemonic conventions. However, mediated meaning can never be fixed or monolithic, and every text

has the potential to shift understandings and attitudes towards others, whether intentionally or not, and to affect and effect identification with others.

Sedgwick's axiomatic assertion that we are different people recognises of course that we are not only diverse from one another, but multiform within our own selves as well. Individual identity is evolutionary and contingent; it is never utterly fixed, but exhibits some degree of reaction to a multitude of constantly shifting factors. As Osgood so astutely points out at the end of *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959), in response to his fiancée's revelation that she is a man, "nobody's perfect." This ostensibly casual assertion conveys dual implications about the nature of identity. Nobody can ever be perfect, a self-evident truth in the sense of perfect as conforming absolutely to an ideal self, in which a person's identity would be fit exactly and satisfy all ontological requirements, without flaws or defects. On another level, Osgood's observation can be understood as the same as Sedgwick's, that no identity is ever perfect, in the sense of being complete and finished, fully determined. The processes of filmic engagement with the identities of others intersect with and potentially influence these fluctuations in identities and the self-perception of those identities. Through its representations of both normative and non-normative identities, film can consequently be seen as a provocative site of identificatory influences on dialogues, definitions, and discourses around sex, gender and sexual variance.

## II. Screening Trans

Trans performances, particularly drag and cross-dressing, have been an integral part of theatrical entertainment for thousands of years. This background tradition has had a marked effect on the way in which ideas around gender disruption have generally been manifested in mainstream film, and could well be considered as influential as the politics of the particular socio-historical contexts from which films emerge. This theatrical grounding is perhaps most evident in the overwhelmingly prevalent depictions of cross-dressing and drag. In *Ladies or Gentlemen*, a documentary about trans depictions in Hollywood films, the narrator (RuPaul) contextualises the phenomenon in relation to this theatrical background:

The roots of drag dressing can be traced back to 550 BC when the ancient Greeks began putting on some of the first theatrical productions. Since women were excluded from many aspects of public life, all the female roles had to be played by men...[and]

the same was true during the Shakespearean era...Over the centuries the cross-dressing tradition was carried on by many theatrical troupes, so it was only a matter of time before movies followed suit – or more accurately, dress. (Burns, 2008)

Vaudeville in particular proved a rich resource for early film producers. Brett Abrams points out that “in 1916, two of the top motion picture studios in Hollywood, Paramount and Mack Sennett, reached into the ranks of vaudeville’s female impersonators and gave contracts to its biggest sensations” (2008, p. 18). Indeed, Abrams asserts that “female impersonators became one of the first groups of proven performers from another entertainment field to receive contracts and star in motion pictures” (ibid.). The migration of gender-crossing to the cinema has produced a similarly resonant convergence between performance and medium, despite the altered (separated) relationship between performer and spectator from that of live performance. Unlike theatre, however, film offers a variety of visual techniques and tricks for manipulating performance, including special effects, editing and the calculated control of spectatorial perspective. Film also has a temporal advantage over theatre, in that the five hours of make-up it sometimes takes to achieve a convincing gender transformation, which would be impractical within the context of live theatre, is feasible within the lengthy shooting periods in film-making. On the other hand, the camera provides a degree of closeness not available to a theatre audience that necessitates a far more detailed construction to produce a convincingly gendered appearance on screen.

The notion of the screen is central to film materially, as a medium of exhibition, and conceptually, in that it simultaneously evokes the complex relationship between films and their subject matter. This is arguably most applicable to the representation of sex, gender and sexuality, with significant implications for the depiction of trans identities and experiences. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark use the multi-layered concept of the screen to describe the complexities around depictions of masculinity:

[The screen is] the multiple pun that captures the considerable force of the male in Hollywood cinema: the apparatus puts him on screen, it hides him behind a screen, it uses him as a screen for its ideological agenda, and it screens out socially unacceptable and heterogeneous cultural constructions of masculinity. (1993, p. 3)

The term screening, which is not only polysemic but also contradictory, applies equally to the complex and conflicted approaches to representing transness. Screening, as both concealing and revealing, points to the ubiquitous presence of normative genders, along with an

acknowledgement of the way in which the processes of heteronormative hegemony are naturalised to the point of invisibility. Representations of non-normative genders are carefully scrutinised within the Hollywood industry to assess their suitability and often omitted as a result. Mainstream films have predominantly provided a protective shelter for idealised heteronormativity, keeping it safely separated from the destabilising threat of gender and sexual variance. In addition to these meanings that Cohan and Hark have distinguished, it is worth considering the screen as the material point of contact between the film text and the audience onto which images and imaginary worlds are projected. The screen is the only visible part of the representational apparatus, a surface that audiences cannot penetrate, and which always exists at a safely removed distance. As a result, spectators are denied any actual access to the imaginary pleasures being presented, but are also offered some protection from any potentially threatening subject matter. This aspect of screening arguably has a beneficial effect on mainstream audience engagement with trans representations, as it works to defuse the threat presented by psychopathic trans deviants in horror films, and perhaps more importantly, to facilitate identification with the imagined experiences of non-normative gender as it is performed in other genres.

A key facet of spectatorial identification and engagement with trans characters is the use of stars. Stars who play trans characters, especially those with widely publicised off-screen lives, offer a degree of reassuring familiarity while simultaneously providing entertainment value through the novel contrast between their persona and their performance. The audience appeal of a celebrity in drag is demonstrated by the sheer number of celebrities who have engaged in trans performance. In the documentary *Ladies or Gentlemen* (Burns, 2008), film critic Michael Musto contends that you can “name any movie star and chances are they’ve dressed up in drag - Dustin Hoffman, Sean Connery, Rod Steiger, Frank Sinatra, Kurt Russell, Johnny Depp... the sight of a man in drag has always been a good punchline.” A star can create a sense of safety around the gender transgression, because the star emphasises still further for the audience that the disruption is purely imaginary. On the other hand, it is possible to view the role of the star not as a disavowal of transgression, but as enabling transgression to a greater degree. Stars can arguably push harder against boundaries of normativity and experiment more extensively with transness exactly because audiences trust them, and in a sense transgression sneaks in under their star aura. Trans-sex casting, in which an actor plays a gender role not normatively aligned with their sex, is an interesting example

of this star value. When an unknown actor is cast against their sex, it is possible that the audience will not be aware of it and will therefore have no impact on their response to the film. By contrast, when a star is cast against sex, such as Cate Blanchett playing Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There* (Haynes, 2007), it offers another level of engagement with the identity of both the character and the star and requires an elevated degree of suspension of disbelief for the audience.

Audiences tend to willingly suspend their disbelief for the duration of a film and accept what they see, but that depends on what they are shown. In many of the cross-dressing comedies, such as *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993), audiences are consistently reminded not to believe in the gender disguise, although they should be persuaded that other characters within the diegesis find the disguise believable. A privileged view of recurring gestural slips serve as small reminders to the audience of the underlying 'truth' (as defined within the dominant matrix of culturally intelligible gender identities) of the sex and sexuality beneath the surface. A male protagonist in these diegetic situations is usually visibly uncomfortable in the gender disguise, which serves to reaffirm his 'essential' masculinity. At the same time, that disguise will paradoxically act as a hindrance to the heterosexual coupling that is considered a definitive part of successful resolution. The unmasking that is required to finally achieve this union justifies the audiences' disbelief in the gendered surface, affirming their faith in the 'truth' of the sex beneath it as part of the recuperation of transgression and the re-establishment of normative cultural values that usually concludes this type of gender-disguise comedy.

These forms of ideological inscription in the narratives and characters of mainstream film emphasise the importance of films as sites of cultural production, negotiation and reproduction, and illustrate their importance in discussions of normative and non-normative gender identities. Even in the most apparently conservative films, there are gaps, fractures, slippages, interstitial spaces that enable other forms of knowledge, ideology, discourse, and that allow for non-normative possibilities, not just regulatory repression. Mainstream trans films can be seen as examples of the sites of disruption that Susan Stryker identifies as a key focus of transgender studies, which include

anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood. (Susan Stryker, 2006, p. 3)

She goes on to argue that transgender studies “calls attention to ‘transgender effects’, those deconstructive moments when foreground and background seem to flip and reverse, and the spectacle of an unexpected gender phenomenon illuminates the production of gender normativity in a startling new way” (ibid., p. 13). Mainstream films can thus raise questions about other alternatives for embodied experience and interaction, and suggest unexpected possibilities for new forms of pleasure and new configurations of power.

Film can act as a litmus test for the prevailing political mood, and in the case of gender politics, should be considered in terms of the degree to which they attempt to foreclose questions about, and recuperate fractures in, heteronormative understandings of gender variance. Films pose questions around difference and sameness in terms of gendered acts, identities and experiences, but these questions around gender variance are often inextricably linked with, or more usually conflated with, questions around sexuality. For example, mainstream films include a recurring preoccupation with the way that sexualised encounters with other characters, which would be heterosexual, become homosexual when a character has changed or disguised their gender. There is a similar fascination with the manner in which an encounter that is ostensibly heterosexual because of the surface gender, becomes homosexual because of the ‘true’ sex beneath it. Chris Straayer uses the term ‘bivalent kiss’ to describe the co-existence of actual and implied sexuality in physical contact that occurs within these moments of ambiguity (1996, p. 54). This concern with the boundaries of sexuality and the differences between heterosexual and gay encounters is related to the long-standing tendency in mainstream film to use non-normative gender to signify homosexuality, epitomised by ‘the sissy’ character which Vito Russo extensively catalogued and analysed (1981). David Ansen’s review of *The Birdcage* (Nichols, 1997) encapsulates this interweaving of gender and sexual variance:

*The Birdcage* should confirm the property's foolproof commercial appeal, which has little to do with sex and everything to do with the seemingly irresistible spectacle of men in dresses. From the brilliant "Some Like It Hot" to the laborious "To Wong Foo

Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar," Hollywood has embraced cross-dressing as the safest way to pitch gayness to a mass audience. Drag queens are the cinema's favorite naughty pets, harmless if not quite housebroken... What's striking about "The Birdcage" is how little it's changed in 18 years... Nichols carefully follows the classical-farce footprints of the original... Babyboomers Armand and Albert behave in the queenly, asexual style of an older generation of gay men. Of course we know the real reason for this: two men kissing is a box-office no-no. (1996)

A few films use this equation of gender variance and gayness in order to emphasise a non-specific humanity underlying these different identities; many use it as an effective form of shorthand in characterisation; and a great many use it deliberately in an attempt to assert the otherness of non-normative identities and justify normative ones. While the conflation of gender and sexuality is highly problematic in terms of increasing understanding of trans people, even the most conservative resolutions still serve to defamiliarise, if not clarify, heteronormative dominance to some degree.

Film's potential for negotiating subjectivity, ideology, discourse, embodiment and desire, for creating possibilities beyond our own experience is circumscribed to some extent by the limitations and bias of the medium itself. Representations of identity inevitably foreground appearance because of the visual focus of the medium. This is not to say that film reduces identity to nothing but appearance. In fact, film-makers have employed various techniques to circumvent this visual emphasis, such as the use of subjective point-of-view cinematography that precludes the possibility of observing the character's external appearance except through mirror shots. Another technique is to emphasise the psychological over the physical through narratorial subjectivity, for example, voice-overs that explicate the motivations, feelings and thoughts of character that would not otherwise be accessible to audiences. This problematic relationship between the presentational and the ontological dimensions is exacerbated in films, which emphasise identity through the visual, by the way in which cinematographic aesthetics often fragment the body. This stresses particular somatic points and cues of recognition, and certain physical indicators which are seen as inherently gendered become hyper-valent metonyms for gender identity.

As with any ideological facet of film, the socio-historical and political context from which it emerges is highly significant. For many years the representation of trans subjects and

characters was controlled as much, if not more, by political regulation than by the nature of the medium itself. The films that were made before the introduction of the Production Code, especially the comedies, exhibit a playful fascination with gender-crossing and experimentation. The ultra-conservative moral repression enacted by the Production Code put an end to the more risqué of these depictions, as the boundaries of both gender and sexual propriety were rigorously policed. In his discussion of nonconformist gender and sexual representations, Abrams contends that “the supporters of censorship saw these [illicit] images as vulgar and disgusting. They believed that the people who saw these images, particularly the young and simple-minded, would have their morals corrupted” (2008, p. 6). The films from that era correspondingly reflect a much narrower scope of trans representation, in which mtf trans characters were primarily portrayed in a comedic and entirely desexualised fashion as dowdy old matrons, although ftm trans characters enjoyed a greater level of acceptability, in films such as *First a Girl* (Saville, 1935), *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor, 1936), and *Calamity Jane* (D. Butler, 1953). The social changes resulting from widespread industrialisation, and its attendant urbanisation, and the upheavals effected by two world wars had profound effects on traditional gender roles and behaviour. In addition, substantial increases in immigration resulted in an intermingling of varied cultural conventions regarding gender normativity that “created a muddle of the appropriate behaviours for men and women... [which] spurred the need to create new definitions for appropriate male and female behaviour” (Abrams, 2008, p. 8). Film, along with other forms of mass media, became a key site for the definition and affirmation of normative boundaries for gender and sexuality, yet at the same time offered opportunities to vicariously escape those very constraints.

The restrictive control over images of gender variance under The Production Code came to an explosive end with the release of *Some Like It Hot* in 1959 and *Psycho* in 1960. Since then, despite the persistence of generically specific conventions around trans representation, there has been a gradually increasing degree of diversification, epitomised by recent films such as *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005) and *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005). These films enjoyed mainstream release, and as a result the trans representations that they contain were able to reach a wide audience. Mainstream film – that is, those films usually produced by studios according to the dominant Hollywood style of narrative filmmaking, and enjoying widespread commercial distribution - have far greater reach and influence than the

independent trans films that have increasingly been produced in recent years. The popular films with trans content provide another arena for engagement with heteronormativity, one that is largely separate from academic trans theory and trans activism. The deviation from the dominant heteronormative discourse and the ludic engagement with gender transgression is significant, even when temporary, because it foregrounds the issue in a new arena.

It is not credible to suggest that films exert unchallenged ideological control over audiences. Instead, films need to be analysed in terms of how they conceive of audiences, and the ways that they embody and encourage particular ideological positions through narrative and visual cues. “The ideology of the film does not take the form of direct statements and reflections on the culture. It lies in the narrative structure and discourses employed - the images, myths, conventions, and visual styles” (Turner, 2006, p. 152). Mainstream cinema is of particular interest in this regard because its general trend towards transparency, effacing its method of construction, suggests an attempt to naturalise the embedded ideologies through familiar narrative and visual conventions. The ideal spectator conceived by a text is not the same as the actual audience, but in attempting to discern the hegemonic processes at work in mainstream films my analysis is focused on textual analysis, not empirical audience research. Audiences may accept the intended meaning of a film, but they are also capable of negotiated or oppositional readings, since the films themselves are inevitably polysemic to some degree. It is also not useful to suggest that real audiences are homogeneous, passive or consistent, instead my interest is in how films imagine and address spectators, and in the imaginative possibilities that are initiated for spectators, not in trying to assess the responses of actual audiences. The processes of audience identification are of critical importance in all of the films discussed in the thesis. The purposes and methods of that identification vary dramatically, from detached observation to intimate empathy, but considering them is essential to understanding the films in terms of their popularity, cultural and ideological qualities, and their level of transgression in relation to the destabilisation and interrogation of traditional taxonomies. Analysis of popular trans films needs to pay attention to the processes of identification as they are constructed through framing, mise-en-scene and editing, how they are sustained, as well as the ideological implications of those identifications.

The popular films discussed in this project are engaged in the cultural production of gender conventions, but also stand as cultural artefacts that represent shifts within those conventions. While there are a range of articles dealing with specific films, there are very few books that have the phenomenon of trans representations in popular film as their central focus. Homer Dickens' *What a Drag* (1982) is a compilation of hundreds of stills from films depicting "that great old movie tradition – dressing up in drag." It is a photographic collection, not an analysis, but it is significant as an historical archive and as a text that demonstrates the scale and persistence of gender-bending in popular film. Jean-Louis Ginibre's *Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-Dressing in the Movies* (2005) is a similarly archival work, but one that also contains some analysis. Ginibre categorises his extensive collection according to a variety of criteria, including historical period, genre, star and character. In the same model as *The Celluloid Closet*, the book also served as the source for the 2008 documentary *Ladies or Gentlemen* (Burns, 2008). *Hollywood Androgyny*, Rebecca Bell-Metereau's extensive historical survey originally published in 1985 and updated in 1993, was the first book to offer a sustained analysis of gender-bending in popular film. Her definition of gender-bending is extremely broad, and includes not only examples of what would now be considered transness, but of any film in which a character exhibited a form of behaviour not conventionally associated with their gender. The book predates the rise of trans theory, but offers interesting insight into the appeal of gender-bending, as the essence of Bell-Metereau's argument is that the oneiric nature of film allows for the playing out of issues often considered deviant at a safe distance, by "reworking old stereotypes in a filmic exploration of repressed desires and suppressed anxieties...through vicarious role-playing that is seldom allowed in the course of daily life" (1993, p. ix). This idea of 'vicarious role-playing' is a persuasive explanation that has been taken up by other theorists, and one that I have used in my consideration of the enduring popular appeal of trans representations.

Three other books that address filmic manifestations of gender variance engage more explicitly with trans theory. Perhaps the most influential work, and certainly the most widely cited and debated, is Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992). Although it deals with transvestism in general, Garber addresses a substantial portion of the book to filmic transvestism. Garber theorises it as demonstrative of, and in fact exemplifying, the 'category crisis' that challenges the binary conception of gender, a position which has been criticised

by trans theorists as an exploitative appropriation and reification of trans identity. Stella Bruzzi devotes two chapters of her book *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (1997) to sartorial gender-bending. One chapter deals with ‘comedy and cross-dressing’ and the other with ‘the erotic strategies of androgyny’. As the title of the book implies, Bruzzi’s work focuses on the function of costume in representing and understanding trans identities in popular film. Chris Straayer’s work on alternative representations of sex and gender in film, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientation in Film and Video* (1996), contains one chapter that deals with mainstream film, ‘Redressing the “Natural”: The Temporary Transvestite Film’. In it Straayer provides an analysis of cross-dressing and body-switching comedies, but includes a discussion of trans-sex casting. In all of these works, there is a dominant focus on the comedies, which is likely a reflection of their prevalence and popularity, but also of the clearly identifiable conventions that have developed the cross-dressed comedy into a recognised sub-genre.

In 1994, the British sociologist Richard Ekins produced a fragmentary outline for an analysis of the representation of “cross-dressing and sex-changing in the movies.” Although he seems never to have taken it any further, the work demonstrates a methodological framework that reflects previous writing on the subject and anticipates an approach that is evident in subsequent analyses. In line with his other work on transgender (1996; 1997, 2006), Ekins employs the term ‘male-femaling’ instead of transgender. Despite Ekins and King’s persistent use of the term, it has not been taken up anywhere else as an alternative to transgender, perhaps because it is so unwieldy, but more likely because of its explicit focus only on mtf gender-crossing. The exclusionary bias of the term is reflected in the subject matter of Ekins’ outline, which he developed from the qualitative analysis of “several thousand of male femaling sequences in several hundreds of movies” (1994). This considerable research led him to identify four basic processes in these thousands of sequences through which male-femaling is represented in Hollywood film – medicalising, ghettoising, humourising, and personalising – as well as one additional process discernible in rebellious avant-garde films (*ibid.*). He uses *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) to exemplify the idea of representing male femaling as a medical problem that falls under the domain of the psychiatrist. Although he only provides a very brief discussion of the film, his heavily weighted focus on the psychiatrist seems to produce a very narrow point of entry through which to access the narrative and the character of Norman, and implies that the psychiatrist’s explanation offers a satisfying resolution.

Ekins' concept of ghettoising refers to the representation of male femalers as small, isolated communities, minorities separated from mainstream society, but nonetheless eradicated in the end in order to restore the normative order. The section on humourising primarily offers a review of *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959), but Ekins raises a key issue in understanding depictions of trans characters in popular film: "Stigmatised as male femaling may be, off-screen, how does it come about that it provides the basis for a highly successful commercial film?" (1994). He suggests that humour is the answer, but his question applies equally to *Psycho*, and humourising therefore seems a somewhat incomplete explanation. Ekins identifies the importance of the spectators' and actors' awareness of the overtly masculine heterosexuality that underlies the performance of male femaling and is the source of the humour. He concludes by picking up on Bell-Metereau's idea of 'vicarious role-playing', suggesting that the primary appeal of the film lies in its transformation of a "private, prurient fantasy... into public humourised 'screened reality'" that erases any potential pain involved in male femaling (ibid.). In contrast, personalising highlights the painful experience of successfully becoming a woman. Ekins' final section is on eulogising, a form of representation that celebrates and integrates male femalers, for example Holly Woodlawn in Andy Warhol's films. Ekins' schematic suggests that this unapologetic form of representation only exists outside of Hollywood film, in radical and perverse cinema, which seems rather like another form of ghettoising, and the term 'eulogising' seems to me to have rather unfortunate connotations of death. Overall, Ekins' analytical outline could be seen as a product of its particular socio-historical context, in its somewhat narrow perception of the processes of representation, although Ekins' continued exclusion of transmen from his work suggests that his approach has not broadened in the intervening years.

John Phillips has offered the most comprehensive analysis of trans representations in his book *Transgender on Screen* (2006). He offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the trans characters broken down according to genre, and includes a chapter on 'Shemale Internet Pornography'. Although Phillips covers many of the films discussed in this thesis, and utilises a similar separation of films according to genre, my work differs from his in two ways. Firstly, I am not viewing these films through the lens of psychoanalysis, and secondly Phillips demonstrates an inclination to offer a definitive and polarised assessment of the films

as either subversive or not, and dismisses all except some of the ‘Drama Queens and Macho Men’ as not subversive. While psychoanalytic theory has had an indisputable influence on film, feminist, queer and trans theory, and thus inevitably appears at certain points in this thesis, I have chosen not to use it as a theoretical framework for this project for several reasons.

Most obviously, there seems more value in investigating other ways of approaching and understanding mainstream trans film than in revisiting Phillips’ psychoanalytic approach. Psychoanalysis has occupied a dominant yet controversial position in relation to trans identities. For many years it drove the pathologisation of all non-normative genders and sexualities, privileging a medical conceptualisation of them as abnormalities requiring treatment. Although this may no longer be the prevailing psychoanalytic attitude, this history of authoritarian reification of trans people is not forgotten, nor have its stigmatising effects. For example, Catherine Millot’s Lacanian analysis of transsexuality, *Horsexe* (1983), continues to influence psychoanalytic theorising on the subject. Millot’s controversial conclusion is that sex reassignment surgery

merely exchange[s] one lie for another. In their requirement of truth, said Lacan, transsexuals are the victims of error. They confuse the organ with the signifier. Their passion and their folly consists in believing that, by ridding themselves of the organ, they can also rid themselves of the signifier which, because it sexuates them, also divides them. (1983, p. 143)

This approach provides a useful example for why many trans theorists have sought to interrogate and problematise the role of psychoanalytic theory and practice in relation to trans identity. Whittle and Stryker point out, for example, that the

perceived dilemma of the psychoanalyst treating the transsexual patient reveals a profound struggle. Whose sense of meaning and reality, the analyst’s or the analysand’s should have the power to actualise itself? The analyst, situating himself or herself as the voice of cultural authority, insists that the transsexual’s body should mean what culture says it is supposed to mean; the transsexual insists that his or her body means differently, and wants the body to acquire a social and cultural meaning that corresponds with a subjectively held gender identity. It is this impasse that creates such antipathy toward psychoanalysis on the part of so many transgender people. (2006, p. 94)

Psychoanalytic approaches have been also been criticised for, and defended against, their supposed abstraction at the expense of considered engagement with embodiment, their

inherent heteropatriarchal bias, and their affording the phallus a privileged centrality. As a result, psychoanalytic theory still occupies a controversial and ambiguous position in feminist, queer, and trans studies that militates against its use in this project. As Phillips (2006) demonstrates, a psychoanalytic approach runs the risk of reducing all trans representations as expressions of castration anxiety, an Oedipal complex, or fetishistic disavowals.

Rather than seeking to offer psychoanalytic diagnoses for the characters and making definitive judgements about the surface ideology of the films that either idealise or censure those characters, I am interested in investigating the interstitial spaces they invoke, the cracks that they open and fail to entirely reseal, and in the usefulness of trans visibility per se in popular film, irrespective of its explicit political agenda. Addressing these questions to popular film also begs the question of how gender variance is made palatable for mainstream audiences, and to what extent the stereotypes and conventions that they employ are a part of this. Andy Willis argues that popular films are hegemonic cultural products, and as such

have to address the interests and aspirations of their target audiences, even if a particular film may seek to contain those interests and aspirations within specific terms. As a result, popular films will always attempt to resolve contradictory ideologies, rather than simply to promote a specific ideological position. (1995, p. 180-1).

Attempts to assign these films to a specific ideological position as either positive or negative rest on what Elayne Tobin describes as an unrealistic and unproductive “desire for a politically perfect subject of filmic representation... [that] clearly sets serious limits upon political thought” (in Champagne, 1997, para. 70). The extent to which films engage with issues of identity and negotiate, contest and interrogate heteronormative ideology should not be ignored or considered invalid where those films make use of stereotypes, negative images, or formulaic resolutions. Texts are not monolithic, and their polysemic and multi-modal nature suggests that an either/or judgement about their political value will overlook the subversive critiques that textual slippages, gaps, and contradictions potentially reveal.

Brett Abrams' book, *Hollywood Bohemians: Transgressive Sexuality and the Selling of the Movieland Dream* (2008), calls for a re-evaluation of the dominant view of Hollywood's attitude to gender and sexual nonconformists that posits the Hollywood approach as one of repressive normativity. While acknowledging that many media images represented early twentieth-century bohemians in a negative manner, by punishing transgression and rewarding culturally condoned behaviour, Abrams argues that Hollywood also "presented figures who successfully suggested to audience members that crossing lines was not fatal or harmful" (2008, p. 7). By depicting complex characters, not just simplistic stereotypes, some films presented transgression as exciting and pleasurable, thereby undermining the rigidity of the heteronormative framework. Abrams' book is an interesting reminder that while Hollywood is often complicit in perpetuating sex and gender normativity, it is also perceived as a realm of fantasy and wild possibility not subject to the same mundane rules of everyday existence (ibid., p. 10). The 'Hollywood dream factory' of wealth, glamour and celebrity also offers audiences opportunities to enjoy "culture's marginalia... [which] provides an explanation for why so many religious and other groups opposed the movie industry then and today... [why] they appalled some groups of audiences, but appealed to many more, and they kept everyone watching and talking" (ibid., p.10-11). Abrams discusses a range of media forms and transgressive behaviours under the term 'Bohemian', and only considers the 1920s and 30s, but my project shares a critical interest with his: to consider what Hollywood enables, not just what it forbids, and to consider the intrinsic value of audiences' indulgence in and of transgressions of heteronormativity.

The central distinction of my project from other work in the area is that it is not meant to be a value judgement of whether the films are subversive or not, damaging or not, but about ways that the idea of gender transgression is kept visible in all of these cases, and used to provoke audiences on some level and in some way to see gender as prescriptive, not just descriptive. This resonates in some ways with Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis', in that my argument is that the films inevitably draw attention to that which they attempt to control and contain. They are a surface of emergence that functions as an incitement to discourse, a space in which the dominant group can investigate those which it deems 'other', but even the most

conservative films simultaneously enable reverse discourses.<sup>2</sup> As Foucault argues, power is not simply repressive but always productive as well:

In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power; one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. Now I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one which has been curiously widespread. If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119)

“Where there is power, there is resistance,”(Foucault, 1976, p. 95) and the point is perhaps not so much whether we are agreeing or disagreeing with the dominant paradigm of power, but that we are talking about it, and in what ways:

The central issue, then [...], is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions. whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse." (Foucault, 1980, p. 11).

These films attempt to ‘know’ non-normative identities in a variety of ways, but they cannot control the effects of that ‘knowledge’ or the boundary disruptions that they employ.

Furthermore, while the genre of a trans film will affect the ways in which the film itself engages with the issues, it is significant that trans issues appear in every genre, from slasher horror films such as *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980), to animated children’s films such as *Mulan* (Cook & Bancroft, 1998).

### III. Genre

The prevalence and persistence of gender-variant cultural motifs<sup>3</sup> in a variety of social and historical contexts is evidence of a fundamental fascination with heteronormative boundaries

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<sup>2</sup> One could argue that the more conservative the film, the more likely it is to generate counter-discourse, as evidenced, for example, by the public protests against *The Silence of the Lambs* (Weinraub, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> As distinct from ‘factual’ biographies and personal narratives of real-life people

and with the possibilities and implications of a non-polarised gender experience. In 'Rethinking Genre', Christine Gledhill observes that "boundaries serve not only to separate and contain but also constitute meeting points... Desire is generated at the boundaries, stimulating border crossings as well as provoking cultural anxieties. This is particularly the case where social identities... are shifting" (2000, p. 237). Cinematic trans motifs reflect preoccupations that construct *imagined* forms of experimentation with, as well as disruption, affirmation or resolution of the traditional gender binary. These cultural expressions of gender variance in film create modern social rituals in which preoccupations, fears and desires can be worked out. Barry Keith Grant argues that "genre films are... mass mediated equivalents to... myth that address both topical issues arising at particular historical moments and more universal questions" (2007, p. 2). The construction of meaning is produced in the shifting network of relationships among films, audiences and film-makers, with socio-historical contexts shaping particular discursive formations in film which speak to and about the contemporary zeitgeist. An analysis of transgender representations in popular film thus invites an investigation of these dialogic relationships as well as the formal, visual, narrative, and ideological framing of the texts themselves. A genre analysis provides a useful framework for mapping intertextual relationships and shifts. Because genres are co-determined by texts, producers and audiences, genre analysis offers a way of understanding both the construction of the text and its concomitant conceptualisation of the audience – imagining an audience and encouraging the audience to imagine in return.

Genre is deeply enmeshed within the cinematic tradition, as a tool of production, a marketing technique, a familiar code for audience expectations and understandings, and as a critical approach. It is a ubiquitous and enduring aspect of film production and consumption, a de facto organisational system for audiences. This makes it a valuable tool in any investigation of audiences, but it has the equally critical value of providing a framework for understanding the relationship between producer, text and spectator within particular socio-historical and ideological contexts, and as importantly, for understanding the relationship among sets of film texts. Many of the recurring motifs and conventions of trans films are recognisable or intelligible because of their intertextual connections to other films within a genre. Due to the mutable and slippery nature of genres themselves, the concept of genre is paradoxical as well as pragmatic. The application of genre theory is inherently fraught with difficulties and potential pitfalls, as outlined below, which have been explored and debated in depth by a

number of film theorists. However, a critical awareness of these weaknesses makes many of them surmountable, allowing the strengths of genre criticism to be productively utilised.

One of the primary advantages of genre criticism is that it functions on textual, contextual, and intertextual levels: it facilitates the textual analysis of specific films, allows films to be historically situated within particular socio-political climates, and emphasises the consideration of films in relation to other similar texts, rather than in isolation. The intertextuality of film texts is a crucial tool for understanding the ways in which they make meaning, function as part of cultural networks, and encourage particular responses from spectators. The knowledge and expectations of spectators, acquired through familiarity with other texts, offer insight into the recurring textual conventions, ideological processes and hegemonic frameworks at stake in popular genre films. As such, these films can offer a perspective on the construction, dissemination, consolidation or disruption of cultural myths, interests and anxieties of a particular historical moment, enacted through particular structural formations. That is not to say there is some exact correlation between film and dominant values, with films as neat, unproblematic and uncritical reflections of a monolithic social truth. Gledhill suggests that “genres provide fictional worlds as sites for symbolic actions, but the combination of generic and cultural verisimilitude ensures a fluidity not only between the boundaries that divide one genre from another but also between fictional and social imaginaries” (2000, p. 240). The relationship between film and cultural or political positions is complex and heterogeneous; it is inescapably dependent on spectatorial engagement and responses, and accommodates a variety of attitudes to the dominant ideology, from the overtly affirmative to the surreptitiously rebellious to the fiercely oppositional, and many other negotiations in between.

One of the dangers of genre theory is to reduce generic formulations to taxonomies with neat ideological equations. It is a tendency often evident in discussions of trans films, particularly comedies and horrors, but it is an homogenising approach that overlooks or erases the crucial differences that occur among and within genres. The exact details of a film’s obedience to or departure from perceived generic conventions offer an extremely useful tool for assessing its ideological assumptions and attempted spectatorial positioning. Furthermore, specific genres

differ in their style, construction, purposes, audiences, and in the types of pleasure and appeal that they offer to spectators.

General taxonomies used for defining film genres tend to follow the categories established through the industrial specialisation of the Hollywood Studio era, and unsurprisingly are still most evident in mainstream Hollywood films. Alan Williams seeks to expand this understanding of genre by arguing that ‘genre films’ have been almost exclusively understood in terms of narrative film, but that the actual genre categories should be “narrative film, experimental/avant-garde film, and documentary” (cited in Neale, 2007, p. 263). This tripartite division seems more of a delineation of general film categories, rather than an invocation of *genre* in its more precise form, but this broader conceptualisation is an effective way of delineating the focus of my project. I will only be investigating one of these categories, narrative film, although I will be considering four specific genres within it. It seems useful and necessary to highlight the distinction between fiction and non-fiction films, as they evince different understandings of purpose and construction for audiences – that non-fiction films serve overtly educational purposes and are meant to convey some ‘truth’ about the world, whereas fiction films are designed to be primarily entertaining and therefore allowed a certain amount of license with ‘truth’. The distinction is not unequivocal, as non-fiction films often rely on the techniques and structures of narrative entertainment, and fiction films regularly utilise recognisable real-life source material and often evince didactic agendas. Nonetheless, the partition effectively frames popular understandings and expectations around a film’s form and purpose.

Within mainstream fiction films, the distinctions between genres are still inevitably a contrivance that relies on perceived commonalities or difference. From an industrial perspective there is usefulness in a prescriptive approach that anticipates audience response based on a predetermined set of determining genre criteria, but the concept of genres is, for the most part, the result of descriptive, retrospective analysis that can identify certain commonalities and repetitions across a body of films. My genre groupings consider these recurrences in form and purpose, as well as crucial divergences, to explore their relation to contemporary ideological formations. As Annette Kuhn argues in her analysis of science

fiction films, “perhaps more interesting, and probably more important, than what a genre *is* is the question, in cultural terms, of what it *does* – its ‘cultural instrumentality’ (1990, p. 1). It is possible to trace the basic preoccupations of a society through the consistencies and changes in its generic formulae. For example, in the last decade some of the well-established conventions of cross-dressing comedies have been altered through the sudden proliferation of black cross-dressing protagonists in films such as *Big Momma’s House* (Gosnell, 2002) and its sequels, Tyler Perry’s ‘Madea’ films (2006), and *White Chicks* (Wayans, 2004). The generic conventions these films retain can be seen to reflect an on-going preoccupation with gender normativity, while the variations can be read as indicating either a new interest in the intersection of race and gender or an attempt to focus attention on this convergence. This idea of intentionality in genre is epitomised by Carolyn Miller’s argument that genres actually function as a type of social action. She contends that any “sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse, but on the action it is used to accomplish” (1994, p. 24). The more varied a society becomes, the greater the variety of social actions it will require/produce, and Miller therefore suggests that “the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends on the complexity and diversity of society” (ibid., p. 36). The rise in generic offshoots reflects increasingly complex understandings of gender identity, particularly as it relates to other ontological components such as race and class, as does the looser adherence to the common conventions of established generic formulae.

There is an inherent paradox in genre analysis, in that it is necessary first to group films in order to find the common conventions, but these same requisite characteristics are necessary in order to assign films to a group. Barry Keith Grant suggests that the solution to this problem is to rely on what Andrew Tudor calls a “common cultural consensus” (Grant, 2007, p. 22). Following this lead, I will be dealing with films that fall into the generally accepted categories of comedy, horror, drama and musical, bearing in mind that the generic differences among these films are as important as their similarities, and that the various characteristics used for determining genre are “not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combinations and functions which are distinctive” (Neale, 1980, p. 22). Some genres are more malleable, with broader and less clearly defining characteristics than others: for example, drama is decidedly more difficult to designate than horror. However, this

indistinctness of drama as a genre category is arguably what enables the more varied and overtly transgressive depictions produced in these films, that the ambiguity around conventions is exploited to represent the imprecision of heteronormative borders. The postmodern tendency towards genre hybridity means that the boundaries between genres are increasingly blurred. Nevertheless, I consider genre to be a key factor in understanding the intended audience responses to trans characters, such as laughter, sympathy or fear. The commercial dimension of genre is also a significant consideration, since it is logical that filmmakers will follow a particular formula more closely if it is proving popular/profitable, attempting to reproduce those elements that seem to resonate most strongly with audiences. Genre films bring into relief the ideological assumptions and values of both producers and audiences, through their engagement with hegemonic formulations.

Conventional Hollywood narratives tend to arrange generic conventions in sets of binary oppositions to represent “competing ideological positions” (Turner, 2006, p. 133). In his account of this interrelation between narrative and ideology, Grant suggests that “the extent to which a genre film achieves narrative closure is an important factor in reading political implications” (2007, p. 16). The hermeneutic nature of the traditional narrative structure, with plots constructed around central conflicts, drives films towards a climactic resolution of these oppositions.

The text is a kind of battleground for competing and often contradictory positions. Of course, this competition usually results in a victory for the culture's dominant positions, but not without leaving cracks or divisions through which we can see the consensualizing work of ideology exposed. Through such cracks, ideological analysis provides the point of entry to an understanding of the film's formal process of construction. (ibid, 147)

Robert Altman argues that these oppositions are recurrently framed through the “dual-focus narrative” in which the central diegetic action is connected to heterosexual romance, and the closed resolution of conflict is inextricably linked with the consummation of the couple, what Raymond Bellour describes as the ‘telos’ of Hollywood narrative (in Stam, 1992a: 53). The collision of gender disruption and related sexual encounters with this heteronormativity inherent in Hollywood narrative structures creates an ideologically illustrative site of contest, where the gender binary is re-established through the heterosexual couple. A refusal of this heterosexual imperative likewise has subversive implications for a film's attitude towards

heteronormativity; but equally crucial are the persistent and revealing cracks that exist even when the dominant heteronormative paradigm triumphs.

Films work out subtle differences within and between genres, despite the use of conventions and stereotypes that have come to be associated with particular genres, for example, the wise, big-hearted drag queen, the macho flirt, and the eccentric granny that feature in cross-dressing comedies. One of the genres that I have not included in this project is action films, which regularly feature episodes of cross-dressing, but these tend to be very brief sequences within the films, a carefully placed comic ploy to balance the tension of the main action. These instances of gender transgression usually occur in films featuring two male protagonists<sup>4</sup> who are partnered in what Sedgwick would describe as a 'homosocial' relationship (1985). The cross-dressing interlude functions as a tacit acknowledgement of the potential for audiences to interpret the relationship as homosexual. It simultaneously attempts to foreclose that *sexual* possibility by fabricating a moment of *gender*-bending that affirms the heteronormativity of the character by emphasising his discomfort with femininity, and his aggressive resistance to any sexual interaction with another man. One film, however, stands out among the action films in the degree and manner in which it employs this technique - *The Boondock Saints* (Duffy, 1999).

As in many cop movies, *The Boondock Saints* makes use of cross-dressing as an undercover ploy. In this case an FBI agent, Paul Smecker (Willem Dafoe), dresses as a female sex worker in order to gain entrance to the house of a mafia don. It is his only hope of saving the two vigilantes (Sean Patrick Flannery and Norman Reedus), whose violent campaign for justice he has come to sympathise with. In contrast to the other action films in which this convention is utilised, Smecker is actually depicted engaging in sexual contact with another man. Geno (Joe Pingue), the Mafioso who opens the door, is persuaded by means of an explicit open-mouthed kiss, which will likely be read as a gay moment despite Smecker's feminine appearance.

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<sup>4</sup> The two *Charlie's Angels* films are a notable exception (McG, 2000, 2003).



Figure 1. Agent Smecker (Willem DaFoe) and Geno (Joe Pingue) in *The Boondock Saints* (Duffy, 1999)

The audience is already privy to the fact that Smecker is both gay and homophobic, having seen him in bed with his lover, and the film uses this knowledge to fulfil the suggestion of homosexuality that other action films only hint at. Smecker's sex is revealed through the common convention of accidental dewigging, but far from being punished or disempowered, he responds by shooting and killing the Mafioso towering over him. Geno's sexual frustration provides a somewhat plausible explanation for his overlooking the fact that Willem Dafoe is entirely unconvincing as a woman, despite his wig, clothes and make-up. The evident power of the kiss is enough to override any doubts about the perceived sexual value of Smecker in this scene. Smecker has already established his superior skills over the other police officers, and there aren't any doubts about his sexuality, leaving him in the unusual position of being a male authority figure whose particular type of masculinity will not be undermined by fulfilling the sexual suggestion implicit in the gender disguise.

Analysing films through genre illustrates the crucial distinction between the available conventions (iconographic, narrative and structural) that are repeated, and those elements which are altered. Even in films which contain stock elements, their specific arrangement in individual films can reconfigure the ideological themes, and vice versa. Film is an arena where dominant ideologies are negotiated, critiqued and reproduced, and different genres tend to engage with different values, attitudes and preoccupations of those ideologies. In framing non-normative positions horror films, for example, focus on the dangers of

‘abnormality’, whereas comedies tend to explore the enjoyment and excitement elicited by the ‘unexpected’. The form of genre films is therefore inextricably interwoven with the films’ purposes, as they shift in relation to ideological changes.

#### **IV. Typical Trans Tales**

The effects of the trans political and intellectual movements have filtered through to the cinematic imagination, impacting both the construction of trans depictions and audiences’ responses to them. Spectators inevitably interpret transgender representations differently, but are likely guided by the type of engagement encouraged by the text. Murray Smith (1995), in his analysis of spectatorial identification, emphasises imagining as a way of understanding shifting modes of engagement with characters and stories, and the significance of point of view in narrative films. Filmic representations predispose spectators towards particular responses that occur on varying levels of emotional and psychological intimacy, building from the initial recognition of certain character traits and narrative tropes to sympathetic alignment, and ultimately empathetic allegiance. Smith points out that films will rarely sustain only one level of engagement for their duration, instead producing multifaceted modes of identification (1999, p. 415). When there is a lack of certainty over character or narrative, identification is likely to be more tentative and temporary, and Smith points out the crucial difference between “imagining that something occurs... and imagining experiencing that occurrence from the inside” (1999, p. 413). These different levels of engagement have particular significance in relation to non-normative identities: “In order to understand how minorities feel about being discriminated against, one should imagine not just instances of discrimination but instances of discrimination against oneself; one should imagine *experiencing* discrimination” (Walton cited in Smith, 1997: 426). This is the value of imagining when it does occur in films, even temporarily. Imagining that there are transgender people is clearly not the same as imagining *being* a transgender person.

Textual cues will guide audience responses to gender variance, but these cues generally depend on recognisable discursive formulations to be intelligible and mainstream representations of gender variance. Through their sociological research, Ekins and King identified three archetypal narratives for conceptualising gender variance – the transsexual,

the transvestite, and the transgender (2006, p. i). Various, often conflicting, theoretical and political discourses around trans identities (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2) have permeated popular cultural awareness, producing these three dominant and widely recognisable tropes of gender variance that are reproduced in mainstream films. The psycho-medical understanding of transsexuality that the sexologists developed in the 1950s and 1960s produced one of the archetypal narratives that came to dominate discussions of gender identity during the second half of the twentieth century and influence socio-political responses to non-normative sex-gender identities and experiences. These scientific trends converged with the media sensation surrounding Christine Jorgensen in America and Roberta Cowell in England in the 1950s to produce what sociologists Richard Ekins and Dave King refer to as “the modern tale of the transsexual” (2006, p. i). In 1952, Christine Jorgensen, an American ex-soldier, became the first widely publicised recipient of sex reassignment surgery, turning her into an instant celebrity.



Figure 2. Examples of the media frenzy surrounding Christine Jorgensen in December, 1952 (“Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty” in Stevens, 2008)

Roberta Cowell, who had been a pilot during World War II, was Britain’s first person to undergo SRS, documented in an autobiography that made her the sensationalist focus of the tabloid media. The frenzied media obsession with these two transsexual pioneers was fuelled at least in part by their backgrounds in the highly masculinised arena of military service, but primarily by the shocking novelty of the idea that physical sex was not an unalterable absolute and that any man would choose to have his penis cut off. The stories of Cowell and

Jorgensen, framed in terms of being ‘women trapped in men’s bodies’, have served as the narrative template for transsexual identity.

The second prevailing narrative model, which Ekins and King identify as “the story of the male heterosexual transvestite,” is epitomised by the work of Virginia Prince (2006, p. i.). Prince was a key innovator in the development of cross-dressing social and support networks in the United States, including the publication of *Transvestia* magazine, launched in 1960 for heterosexual cross-dressers (King & R. Ekins, 2000). Prince is recognised as introducing the term ‘transgenderist’ in order to definitively separate full-time transvestites from transsexuals in terms of their lack of interest in surgery, and to emphasise their staunch heterosexuality (Feinberg, 1997, p. x; King & R. Ekins, 2000). Prince’s story is prototypical of the transvestite narrative, a social rather than a medical discourse that frames gender variance as a lifestyle choice rather than a perversion or a disease. The most noticeable impact of this narrative model when translated into film is the resolute insistence on heterosexuality that accompanies most transvestite narratives, whether the cross-dressing is for pleasure and comfort or is a necessary disguise temporarily adopted under compelling circumstances.

*Glen or Glenda* (E. D. Wood, 1953), also known as *I Changed My Sex*, is a cult classic rather than mainstream cinema, but it provides an interesting insight into the fictional trans film not only because of the autobiographical input of Edward Wood<sup>5</sup>, himself an anoraphile transvestite, but also because it makes use of both of these first two narrative models. The stories are presented from the perspective of a psychiatrist by the name of Dr Alton, who recounts the tales of two gender variant patients. One is a transsexual, Alan/Anne, who is described as a pseudo-hermaphrodite and who is deliberately and overtly contrasted with the transvestite, Glen/Glenda. On one level the film is a passionate plea for acceptance and greater understanding of cross-dressers, assuring audiences of their normality and defusing the threat perceived in non-normative behaviour by emphasising Glen’s overt and constant masculinity, and by offering bland explanations about the comfort of women’s clothes. As Alton explains while Glenda is shown window-shopping and relaxing at home,

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<sup>5</sup> The autobiographical dimension of *Glen or Glenda* is the subject of Tim Burton’s biopic *Ed Wood* (1994).

Give this man satin undies, a dress, a sweater and a skirt, or even the lounging outfit he has on and he's the happiest individual in the world. He can work better, think better, he can play better and he can be more of a credit to his community and his government because he is happy.

The film begins (after a bizarre introduction by the Puppet Master, played by Bela Lugosi) with the discovery of Anne's body after she has committed suicide in order to escape constant persecution and police harassment. The scene is accompanied by Anne's voice-over explaining to the audience her desire to find peace. The detective investigating the suicide, not having the benefit of this privileged insight, seeks the advice of Dr Alton in an attempt to prevent further tragedies and Alton uses the contrasting stories of Anne and Glen/Glenda to enlighten him, framed within supposedly medical scientific discourse.

Alton begins with the analogy of airplanes to argue that human beings, who can fly despite being born without wings, have accepted the idea of scientific intervention in many areas but are still unable to accept sex change as part of these developments.



Figure 3. Newspaper headline from *Glen or Glenda* (E. D. Wood, 1953)

Wood's fabricated newspaper headline clearly imitates those about Christine Jorgensen, and the film was designed to cash in on the publicity surrounding her, although Jorgensen refused to be involved with the film<sup>6</sup> (Joanne Meyerowitz, 2004, p. 89). Despite this sympathetic

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<sup>6</sup> Christine Jorgensen gave her permission for a Hollywood film to be made from her auto biography – *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (Rapper, 1970). She later “confessed her disappointment that the producers hadn’t

opening, the film's ultimate message is that transvestites are normal, that they are not deviant like 'pseudo-hermaphrodites' because they are not homosexuals. Alton repeatedly emphasises the point that "Glen is not a homosexual. Glen is a transvestite, but he is *not* a homosexual. Transvestism is the term given by medical science to those persons who desperately wish to wear the clothing of the opposite sex, yet whose sex life in all instances remains quite normal." This insistent disavowal of homosexuality is unsurprising considering the homophobic attitudes of 1950s McCarthyite America, and Glen finds happiness through the institutionalised heterosexuality of marriage to Barbara, his understanding fiancée. As Alton happily concludes, "Time passes. Soon, due to a happily married life, the remembrance of the psychiatric treatments, and Barbara's love and understanding, Glenda begins to disappear forever from Glen. Glen has found his mother, his little sister, his wife, and his Glenda all in one lovely package. Thus Glen's case has a happy conclusion." Despite the opening text exhorting audiences to "JUDGE YE NOT," through its comparison of the two trans narratives, *Glen or Glenda* ultimately casts its own judgement about transsexuality as means to promoting acceptance and allaying fears of transvestism.

The third trans narrative, 'the transgender tale', is a more recent manifestation. Ekins and King deliberately use the term 'gender-blending' in an effort to overcome the medicalization and limitations of the dimorphic transvestite/transsexual differentiation epitomised in *Glen or Glenda*, and to reflect the emergence of this third narrative – that of 'transgendering' (2006, p. ii). This model grew from within trans communities, and moved beyond the typology of the transvestite and transsexual narratives to focus on processes, diversity and the possibilities of living between or beyond genders (2006, p. ii). In these stories the trans characters have moved, in most cases, to the centre of the plots, although the increased visibility of trans identities does not necessarily involve celebration, normalisation, or even approbation. The dramatic films featuring trans characters are often based (however loosely) on real-life stories, and are a way of bringing trans lives into the public sphere through the 'transgender narrative'. This narrative model is a result and reflection of the major political mobilisation, community-building, and burgeoning of academic interest in trans identities and

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cast Sondra Locke as herself, and has instead given the role to a man. She knew perfectly well that her male existence had been awkward and inappropriate... By starring an actress, the film could have communicated the artificiality of George Jorgensen's maleness" (Gagne, 2006, p. 56). The insistence on a male actor suggests the producers themselves still perceived Christine as somehow essentially male.

issues from the 1990s onwards, and their impact on popular understandings and public discourses.

Representations of trans characters in mainstream cinema are increasingly used to expose the assumptions and perceptions underpinning gender attribution, particularly the strong reliance on genitals as the ultimate signifier and the conflation of gender assignment and identity with sexuality in the normalisation of gender codes. This has inevitably raised questions about whether this use of the trans figure, as a cinematically contained demonstration of transgression, is exploitative and objectifying, harmful or beneficial in terms of trans lives and politics. As a form of cultural mediation, the mainstream 'transgender narrative' becomes entangled with issues around self-representation, the importance of point-of-view, and the structuring of response through the re-presentation of 'fact' that discursively produces transgender identity

## **V. Structure**

Does anyone remember a time in America when men were men, women were women, and the children could tell the difference? In case you haven't noticed, the entertainment industry and the educational establishment have teamed up in the last few years to try their best at destroying traditional sex roles. (Grady, 2008)

This project is an investigation of the ways that gender variance has been imagined and represented by considering trans films as components of broader genre frameworks, and as actually constituting recognisable sub-genres in the case of the comedies and horrors. Cinematic trans fictions are engagements with the boundaries and effects of gender normativity, and the possibilities of transgression. They are forms of cultural discourse that should be considered against the background of the academic and political discourses that have constructed, critiqued and resisted the concept of heteronormative ideology. In consequence, I will initiate the analysis of the films themselves with two chapters that explore these theoretical and political developments, and their influence on contemporary understandings of gender, sex and sexuality.

Chapter 2, the first background chapter, deals with the relevant theoretical and political developments and debates that have contributed to or shaped modern understandings of gender and sexual identities and issues. I will look at sexology, anthropology, feminism, and sexuality in order to trace the development of terms, concepts, discourses and narratives around normativity and how it is regulated. Chapter 3 deals with the shifts and developments that occurred through gay rights movements, queer theory, intersectionality, and trans theory, the move towards interdisciplinarity, and the development of counter-normative modes of resistance. The increasing variety of mainstream trans representations can be interpreted as a result of the growing influence of these developments on popular perceptions and attitudes towards non-normative gender and sexual identities.

The analysis of the film texts themselves is divided into four chapters according to genre, which look at the cinematic imaginings of trans identity and experience through the generic frameworks of comedy, horror, drama, and musical, and how these affect the construction and representation of subjectivity. The construction of the subject according to and within generic conventions is the primary focus, although generic conventions are admittedly malleable and shifting. The way that trans is imagined, and the representation of subjectivity, is different in each genre, but the overarching question is how these films function as cultural artefacts in relation to dominant sex, gender and sexual norms. For each section I will use two or three primary films for my analysis, ones that appear best to represent the type of imagining being discussed in that chapter. Others that fall under the same type will be referred to in passing where necessary, for example where they deviate from the model, or introduce a notable addition/change to established conventions.

The cross-dressing comedies of Chapter 4 are narratives of circumstantial gender transgression, using it as a plot device, a novelty, a punchline. They depend on recognisable category boundaries and usually emphasise a return to the heteronormative status quo, diffusing the threat of transgression and attempting to contain it neatly through the narrative resolution. These films present constant reminders that the gender-crossing is merely a façade, a conceit to which the audience are privy, and the focus is on alternate gender performance more than on alternate gender identities. While the films depict gender crossings, there are nonetheless usually only two gender options put forward, and they seem

to have very stereotypical traits to go with them. This genre, the most common in mainstream trans films, is predominantly characterised by mtf cross-dressing, and this is part of the motivation for my focus on *Some Like It Hot* in this chapter. It is evident that for Hollywood a man in lipstick is a great deal funnier than a woman in a moustache, which raises critical questions around social power and gender hierarchies. *Some Like It Hot* is an illustrative example because in many ways it is prototypical of the cross-dressing comedy sub-genre, but at the same time offers an unusual level of resistance to heteronormative reinstatement.

The horror films that are the focus of Chapter 5 all feature characters whose gender transgressions cause fear, shock, and/or disgust in the other characters, and are intended to elicit the same response from the audience. Deviation from the gender norms is perceived as deviance, and the transgressor is inevitably punished violently (often killed) to eliminate the threat. The trans characters are represented as mentally disturbed killers, whose violence is always traced back to their gender deviancy. Breaking the rules of the gender binary becomes overtly equated with criminal violation, and these films represent the least opportunity for negotiated or oppositional interpretations. These characters are clearly in a dangerous rebellion against heteronormative integrity, and consequently portrayed as psychopaths unable to accede to the 'natural' order; they are imprisoned in their psychosis, and death becomes the only way to purge them from the hegemonic social order. These films do not seriously investigate issues of gender identity, but instead explore the extreme consequences for denying the taxonomic imperative of the dominant social hierarchy. They provide a revealing glimpse into the transphobic panic around gender transgression.

In contrast, the films in Chapter 6 all take the issue of gender identity seriously, and it becomes an explicit focus of the narrative, rather than just serving as a plot device. The characters are meant to engage our sympathy, or even admiration, and the films attempt to represent the suffering and prejudice experienced by those who transgress or exist outside the gender binary. They engage with the boundaries of sex, gender and sexuality, and the impact of heteronormative regulation. Most of the films that are based on actual people or events fall into this category, although the bulk of the dramatic films are fictional, using the narrative as a vehicle for exploring the pain, frustration, and pleasures of non-normative gender identities. The relationship between gender and desire is a crucial aspect of these films, and the

complexity of desire, both for and of the gender transgressor, is often presented as a dominant contributor to the suffering of the characters. These are predominantly dystopian images of isolation and rejection, with characters suffering discrimination and often abuse. They may raise awareness of relevant trans issues and seriously attempt to elicit empathy, but they have not tended to offer positive celebrations of gender transgression, instead depicting it for the most part as a source of intense pain and sadness. The most recent films in this group have, however, begun to introduce a degree of positivity and humour in the way that they imagine trans subjectivity.

The focus in chapter 7 is on musical films that play with gender boundaries in moments of enthusiastic disruption and excess, and those that flow right over the boundaries into an exuberant expression of gender and sexual variety. They offer glimpses of worlds where gender is a malleable construct, freed from binaristic limitations primarily through a deliberate deployment of music. Through musical performance, transgression is actively and consciously produced, and presented as a desirable alternative to heteronormativity. The trans characters in these films are not presented as perfect beings, but as having fully embraced the possibility of anti-normative disruption. Music opens up a new space of signification, whether it is operating in parallel or contrapuntal fashion in relation to the narrative and visuals. These characters represent alterity and transgression as positive, although not necessarily unproblematic, and successfully engage with their desires in direct defiance of normative expectations around sex, gender and sexuality.

## Chapter 2:

# Constructing Discourses of Normativity

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To investigate gender variance raises several key questions, ones that do not have simple answers but which are inextricably entangled with understandings of and attitudes to trans identities. What is sex? What is gender? Is it useful and/or necessary to distinguish between sex and gender? How is sexuality related to sex and gender? These vigorously contested questions have played a central role in feminist, sexological, lesbian, gay, queer, and trans studies, but there is no definitive ‘right’ answer, and I do not pretend to have some neat solution. Instead I am interested in tracking these debates and developments to extract what seems most useful to engaging with trans issues and ideas as they are cinematically mediated, and with popular/mainstream understandings and imaginings of what these concepts mean. The dominant beliefs regarding sex, gender and sexuality have been shaped by certain key theoretical, political and historical developments. These views generate and reflect particular constraints and prejudices, which gender-bending films foreground and inevitably defamiliarise to some degree.

There is a common need, a deeply entrenched taxonomic impulse, to sort people into familiar categories in order to guide social responses and behaviour, and yet paradoxically these categories become and remain familiar precisely through such sorting. As Sigmund Freud notably observed, “Male or female is the first differentiation that you make when you meet another human being, and you are used to making that distinction with unhesitating certainty” (1933, p. 149). Nonetheless, he goes on to argue that “what constitutes masculinity and femininity is an unknown element which it is beyond the power of anatomy to grasp”. These sex and gender categorisations and their correlative assumptions tend to govern social interactions, in conjunction with similar presumptive assessments regarding sexuality, race, class, age and ethnicity. Rights and recognition are based on such categories, as are exclusion, discrimination and persecution. To resist or disrupt the male-female binary is generally considered suspicious or implausible, in the same way as not knowing in which

country you were born or how many fingers you have; sex is predominantly still seen as an established natal detail and a biological certainty with a correctly corresponding gender and an appropriate sexuality.

As a result of influential work by feminists, anthropologists and sexologists, the Western ideology that is currently predominant regarding men and women is that sex is biological and gender is its expected and co-extensive socio-cultural manifestation. This includes the behaviour, dress, role and mannerisms perceived as masculine or feminine according to agreed and recognisable conventions. In this paradigm, sex is embedded as essential and incontestable, while gender follows inevitably from sex, which naturally determines sexual orientation, all in the service of heterosexual reproduction. Critical opponents, particularly feminists and queer theorists, have striven to challenge this model of sex/gender/sexual identity as an ideological construction underpinned by a patriarchal agenda. Nonetheless, the prevailing belief is still in a basic division between those who have penises (male⇒masculine) and those who don't (female⇒feminine), and in 'normal' (procreative) sexuality as a complementary relationship involving one of each. Concepts of male and female are constructed as opposite, with humans defined more through difference than through similarity. Most crucially, this opposition shapes a political landscape in which the unequal values ascribed to those dichotomous elements effectively produce and legitimate restrictive and oppressive hierarchies.

Complying with hetero-male-masculinity - in other words, 'being a straight man' – still confers the most social and institutional power, while conforming to the female-feminine role still tends to confer less power.<sup>1</sup> In actuality there is a range of masculinities and femininities, some hegemonic and others marginalised, but to reject the basic dichotomous paradigm in any way, for example being gay or transgender, incurs not only diminished power but often violent retribution in defence of the heteronormative order. The penis (or lack thereof) is central to the binary distinction, despite the fact that it is not visible in most social situations. Particular markers of gesture, dress, behaviour, voice and self-presentation, are recognised as

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<sup>1</sup> This hierarchy becomes increasingly complicated the more it intersects with the other social categories of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, and disability. The significance and implications of these convergences will be discussed in more detail below.

valid and generally reliable attribution criteria in the service of the penis/vagina organisational dichotomy. Discrepancies and disjunctures within the markers are seen as cause for suspicion, producing predominantly negative reactions that range from bewilderment and discomfort to hatred and rage.

Once having taken on the bodily, emotional and cognitive patterns which give substance to the dominance/subordination forms of gender relations, it is difficult for individuals to imagine any alternative to that social structure. In turn, the apparent facticity of two opposing genders renders those behaviours, thoughts and emotions which are involved in stepping outside the dominant (male) and subordinate (female) patterns appear as incompetence, even immorality. (Davies, 2002, p. 289)

The suspicion of anything which is different is strongly in evidence in popular films through the construction of gender variants as monstrous within the horror genre, as farcical in the comedies, and as outsiders in the drama films. The prejudice against and punishment of these characters seems indicative of the persistent insecurity about non-hegemonic gender and sexual identities that results in tragically frequent attacks on trans people in real life.

In seeking to interrogate and/or destabilise naturalised hetero-hegemonic assumptions, sexologists, anthropologists and Second Wave feminists were for many years the main agents of prising open the previously unchallenged fusion between biology and behaviour, in order to establish a theoretical separation between sex, gender and sexuality. For sexologists this was a way of assessing gender variant patients, for anthropologists a way of explaining gender differences among various cultures and historical contexts, and for feminists a key political strategy for dismantling the determinist foundations of discriminatory patriarchal structures. In more recent years, the debates and theories have been taken up and extended in queer and trans discourses.

Robert Stoller, an American psychiatrist specialising in the medical treatment of transsexuals, and John Money, a leading sexologist, were the first to introduce and advocate the term 'gender' in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Money suggests in a retrospective analysis of the term that it was difficult "to transplant the term, *gender*, from language science to sexual science and have its

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<sup>2</sup> Bernice Hausman (1995) controversially claimed that the emergence of the term 'gender' out of this particular historical context indicates that the concept was specifically designed to justify transsexual surgeries.

new usage accepted. At first it sounded funny and idiomatically unfamiliar” (1985, p. 71). Stoller likewise appropriated the (then) apolitical term ‘gender’ from linguistics as a less complicated descriptor for ‘sex-role’ that could function to explain the body/identity discrepancies of transsexuality. He used it to describe the “behaviour, feelings, thoughts, and fantasies that are related to the sexes and yet do not have primarily biological connotations” (1968, p. vii). He argued that gender identity is learned through a cultural process, albeit with contributory biological forces, which is determined by society but “funnelled” through each mother’s “idiosyncratic version of society’s attitudes” (ibid.). Within this framework there were only two sexes (male and female) and only two corresponding genders (masculine and feminine). According to this model, any failure to fully adopt the cultural conventions that are so dominant and pervasive was traced by Stoller to the mother, the primary link between the child and society, rather than to possible flaws and fissures within the binary system itself. The deviations from this dichotomous schema were isolated as psychopathologies or physiological abnormalities requiring medical intervention. I will return below to the medical discourse around transsexuality that came to dominate, but it is noteworthy that the term gender is now as complicated and politicised as ‘sex-role’ ever was, suggesting that any attempt to pin down the personal and political complexity of gender with a single term is always going to be doomed.

## **I. Sexology**

Who has the power to characterize, classify, and name the more uncommon forms of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in humans—and should they hold this power?  
(Dreger & Vasey, 2007, p. 479)

The dominance of scientific and medical discourses and practices in Western society since the Enlightenment afforded the science of sexology a privileged epistemological position in theorising transgender phenomena, and ensured its widespread influence over everyday understandings of gender and sexual variance. The deployment of ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’ to support particular interpretations provides persuasive arguments which are not usually contested by lay people, in much the same way that religious dogma was virtually impregnable by those outside the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. While religious views continue to play a role in debates (and sometimes diatribes) around gender and sexual

identity<sup>3</sup>, the role of science, and the legacy of sexology in particular, has been strongly in evidence. Prevailing institutional and social attitudes to non-normative genders and sexualities during the early twentieth century largely shifted away from a view of these phenomena as ‘sins’ towards seeing them as ‘diseases’, and then ‘disorders’ as a result of the work of a small number of influential sexologists. Many of the terms and concepts which these medical theorists developed are still in use; the debates around sex, gender and sexuality which their work instigated persist, and their movements for sexual reforms have continued to grow in both momentum and diversity.

Sexology was established as a scientific discipline primarily through the work of certain key German theorists in the late 1800s, mostly medical doctors from a range of specialties, who began to develop theories about human sexuality based on their extensive clinical research and sometimes their own personal experience. Iwan Bloch, Albert Eulenburg, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld ensured that Germany became the centre of the ‘new’ science of sexology in the period up until World War II (Matte, 2005; Meyenburg & Sigusch, 1977). There was an existing interest in issues of gender and sexual variance in Germany dating back to the beginning of the 1800s (Johnson, 2005); when coupled with a prevalent strand of existential philosophy, this created fertile ground for a new discipline which theorised the disposition and meaning of gender and sexuality. “Sexology was to propound two powerful ideas: that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are innate structures in all forms of life, including human beings, and that heterosexuality is the teleological necessary and highest form of sexual evolution” (Herdt, 28). Nonetheless it should be noted that most of the early theorists of this ‘scientific’ discipline were as concerned with legal and social reform regarding attitudes towards sexual and gender alterity as they were with scientific theories, explanations and taxonomy.

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<sup>3</sup> The continued attempts by some right-wing Christians to ‘cure’ sexual and gender variance using Conversion Therapy is a more extreme example of the homophobia that persists in some religious communities. Although many religious groups accept and support gay and trans people, some outspoken anti-gay campaigners continue use religion to justify and promote homophobic and transphobic discourses. American pastor Scott Lively, president of Defend the Family and Abiding Truth Ministries, is a prominent current example of this approach. He lobbies for the criminalisation of homosexuality, describing it as “very fast-growing social cancer that will destroy the family foundations of your society,” and in July 2010 claimed that “open homosexuals are distinct from everybody else, men and women, in being exceptionally brutal and savage... They [don’t] have the restraint that a normal man has” (“Gay Reichs,” 2010).

The idea of sexology was defined most effectively by German dermatologist Iwan Bloch, who, “feeling that theorizing about sexuality from a strictly medical perspective was too narrow... proposed the new study of *Sexualwissenschaft* (Sexual Science, or “Sexology”), which would incorporate anthropological and historical data into understanding the variety of sexualities” (Matte, 2005, p. 257). This multi-disciplinary approach continues to permeate queer, trans and feminist studies; however the conceptual roots of the various strands of sexology can be traced predominantly to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, whose extensive writing on alternative sexualities in the 1860s and 1870s generated interest and debate regarding both sexuality and gender identity. Ulrichs is also described as “the grandfather of gay liberation,” having campaigned vocally against anti-homosexuality laws (Feinberg, 1997, p. 96). He published twelve volumes detailing his own theories around gender identities and sexual orientations, which are significant primarily for his position that these are inborn, unchangeable products of nature rather than nurture. The nature versus nurture debates that flourished within the field at that time continue today, used as ammunition by a variety of groups, from gay and trans activists to homophobic reactionaries. Through correspondence with von Krafft-Ebing, Ulrichs also forged an enduring connection between “the subject of same-sex attraction and gender ambiguity [and] the newly emerging field of psychiatry” (Matte, 2005, p. 255) that went on to dominate the theorisation of sex, gender and sexuality. In the influential work of von Krafft-Ebing, trans identities began to be pathologised, deemed in need of medical treatment, and the process of assessment for and control over treatment became (and largely remains) the province of the psycho-sciences.

In 1877, Richard von Krafft-Ebing published his landmark study, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a work which had a profound influence on social and legal attitudes to and understandings of alternative sexualities. In it von Krafft-Ebing identified and categorised a wide range of sexual behaviours, inaugurating terms such as ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’. Despite its scientific credentials, the study maintains a strongly prescriptive and idealistic emphasis on the moral superiority of procreative heterosexuality. “Krafft-Ebing (sic) also sought to define a rational taxonomy of sexuality in general, and his major contribution to Sexology’s theoretical background was his extensive case histories” (ibid., p. 256). In his extensive text, von Krafft-Ebing identified gender variance as a form of misdirected sexual desire (termed

*paraesthesia*), specifically addressed as a part of his discussion of homosexuality<sup>4</sup> entitled “Homo-Sexual Feeling as an Abnormal Congenital Manifestation” (1886, p. 668). The underlying premise for the study is that all sexual desire and activity should ideally be in the service of procreation, and that any form of sexual behaviour that deviates from this moral purpose is a disease.

The propagation of the human race is not left to mere accident or the caprices of the individual, but is guaranteed by the hidden laws of nature which are enforced by a mighty, irresistible impulse... Man puts himself at once on a level with the beast if he seeks to gratify lust alone, but he elevates his superior position when by curbing the animal desire he combines with the sexual functions ideas of morality, of the sublime, and the beautiful. (p. 14)

Von Krafft-Ebing offers accounts of individuals who would now be considered transvestites or transsexuals, most famous among them the detailed case study of Count Sandor, a young female aristocrat who dressed, lived and married as a man. Von Krafft-Ebing categorised this as a form of psychosis which he termed “*metamorphosis sexualis paranoica*” in his study, but which would be renamed transsexuality by later sexologists.

By including and analysing gender variance, and more particularly by placing it in the section on homosexuality, von Krafft-Ebing’s work epitomises two concepts regarding trans identity that achieved and have sustained dominance. Firstly, being “largely restricted to the formal medical model in which he practised” (Matte, 2005, p. 256), von Krafft-Ebing pathologised trans behaviour as psychotic and unnatural, contributing to a scientific discourse that has dominantly categorised all trans people as diseased and has sought to ‘treat’ or ‘cure’ them.<sup>5</sup> This pseudo-medical moral position has spilled over from sexology into a range of popular discourses that have contributed to the continued misunderstanding, marginalisation and mistreatment of trans people. Secondly, his choice of categorisation is demonstrative of the persistent conflation of gender variance with homosexuality and vice versa, constructing them as interchangeable sides of the same coin. This is still noticeable in many mainstream media representations where, for example, male homosexuality is signalled by ‘feminine’ or ‘sissy’ behaviour, and effeminacy is used as an index for homosexuality. Developments in

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<sup>4</sup> Because of the pejorative connotations of the term ‘homosexuality’, I will use it either to reflect the terminology of a particular author, or intentionally to signify that a particular discursive or ideological position endorses those negative beliefs. This second usage is in line with Vito Russo’s deployment of it in his influential assertion that “There have never been lesbians or gay men in Hollywood. Only homosexuals” (1981, p. 246).

<sup>5</sup> I am referring here to the use of ‘treatments’ such as electro-shock therapy, psycho-pharmaceuticals and aversion therapy, not to sex reassignment surgery.

the field of sexology that have occurred in the intervening hundred and thirty years have had remarkably little impact on this reductive view of gender and sexuality, or on the persistent popular perception of both non-normative genders and sexualities as immoral and/or pathological.

German theorists and activists continued to dominate the field of sexology until the Second World War, and they fashioned a taxonomic framework and lexicon regarding sexuality and gender that has profoundly influenced not only trans theory, but also trans politics, activism and social reform. Magnus Hirschfeld was one of the most influential of these early German sexologists in terms of determining the path of modern trans theory.

Hirschfeld's motto '*per scientiam ad justiam*' ('through science to justice') reflected his firm belief that science could provide the opportunity for fair treatment of all... He was less interested in developing theories than in effecting legal and social reform, an endeavor to which he would contribute greatly. (ibid., p. 257)

A gay, Jewish socialist, he was a leading activist who founded the world's first formal gay rights and sexual reform organisation in 1897, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. He was also a pioneering sexological doctor who established the *Journal of Sexology* and the world's first Institute of Sexology in Berlin in 1919 (Feinberg, 1997, p. 95).<sup>6</sup> These separate but related endeavours - gay activism and medical research on gender variance - reflect Hirschfeld's most significant contribution to the field: an effective distinction between gender expression and sexual orientation.

Hirschfeld introduced the term 'transvestite' in 1910 deliberately to separate gender and sexuality from each other, identifying the complexity of gender variance as a distinct "phenomenon that cannot be reduced to homosexuality, fetishism, or some form of psychopathology" (Whittle, 2006, p. 28). Like Ulrichs, Hirschfeld considered sexual and gender diversity to be a product of nature, an essential and permanent facet of identity:

Even if there is an internal or external influencing, inhibiting, and encouraging will, access to education, practice, and suggestion – and of course even control has its boundaries – sexual individuality as such with respect to body and mind is inborn... It

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<sup>6</sup> Adolf Hitler described Hirschfeld as "the most dangerous man in Germany" and the Nazis burned his Institute to the ground, destroying his extensive research collection (Whittle, 2006, p. 28).

is formed in advance by nature and is dormant in the individual long before it is awakened, forces its way into awareness, and develops. (Hirschfeld, 2006, p. 37)

In keeping with this belief, Hirschfeld did not try to ‘cure’ or ‘rehabilitate’ trans people, but endeavoured instead to improve the quality of their lives through campaigning for social change, raising awareness, and through sympathetic treatment of trans patients. The first documented genital reassignment surgeries were performed at his Berlin Institute (Whittle, 2006, p. 28). Despite these efforts, Hirschfeld’s progressive approach seems to have less impact on popular understandings of gender and sexual variance than the pathologising and more reductive sexological discourses. A century after the publication of *The Transvestites*, his theory of a spectrum of identity, manifesting a natural range of “sexual intermediaries” (p. 35) between the hypothetical ‘pure’ poles of male and female, has largely failed to displace the hegemonic paradigm of gender and sexuality as dichotomous.

The continuation of this dominant model is in part a result of a number of possibly well-intentioned but highly conservative sexologists’ treatment of and writing about trans patients. David O. Cauldwell for example, in a 1949 article entitled “Psychopathia Transexualis,” unequivocally categorises ‘transsexuality’ (sic) as a disease, linking it to congenital disorders, dysfunctional upbringings and criminal tendencies:

Among both sexes are individuals who wish to be members of the sex to which they *do not properly belong*. Their condition usually arises from a poor hereditary background and a highly unfavourable childhood environment... When an individual fails to mature according to his (or her) proper biological and sexological status, such an individual is *psychologically (mentally) deficient*. The psychological condition is in reality the *disease*. (Cauldwell, 2006, pp. 40-41)

The politics of ‘scientific’ treatises such as these have had an enduring effect on clinical protocols that seek primarily to ‘cure’ or ‘rehabilitate’ trans individuals. They have also had a discernible impact on general attitudes towards trans people in society and popular culture, assisted at times by condemnatory religious doctrines that demonise and/or pathologise gender and sexual variance.

After World War II, the dominant locus for sexological theory and research shifted to the United States, where John Money and Robert Stoller were working, as were Alfred Kinsey, Richard Green and Harry Benjamin. Theories and terminology around gender and sexual

identity became increasingly more detailed through the work of these researchers (although not necessarily more open-minded). Harry Benjamin popularised the term ‘transsexual’ through his 1966 work, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. He has been described as the “Father of Transsexualism,” a result of his promotion of the term ‘transsexual’ as more precise and distinct than Hirschfeld’s ‘transvestite’, which he critiqued as only identifying one symptom and conflating two fundamentally different conditions (R. Green, 2009, p. 613). Benjamin recognised the comparable split between soma and psyche in both conditions, but argued that “in transvestism the sex organs are sources of pleasure; in transsexualism they are sources of disgust” (2006, p. 46). This clear separation that Benjamin inaugurated has continued to be a dominant organising principle in subsequent cultural and academic conceptions and medical treatment policies, as has Benjamin’s correlative position that transvestism is a socio-sexual problem, not requiring the medical management that transsexuality does.

Robert Stoller was also doing pioneering work in the field at this time, making key contributions through his introduction of the term gender and his development of the idea of ‘gender identity’, rather than the all-encompassing category of ‘sex’ that had been in use. He identified ‘gender identity’ as a core sense of maleness or femaleness determined by a combination of biological and hormonal factors, environmental and psychological influences, and sex assignment at birth. In *Sex and Gender* Stoller agreed with the use of ‘sex’ for the biological component parts, but argued that this left “tremendous areas of behavior, feelings, thoughts, and fantasies that are related to the sexes and yet do not have primarily biological connotations. It is for some of these psychological phenomena that the term *gender* will be used” (1968, p. vii). Stoller attempted to promote sympathetic treatment of trans patients, but his writings have fallen from prominence, mainly as a result of his focus on the primacy of the penis and his attribution of transsexuality to a dysfunctional maternal relationship. These assertions have drawn strong criticism, but Stoller is still significant for the profound importance of his sex/gender distinction for feminist and trans theory and its impact on popular perceptions.

In contrast to Stoller’s conception of an innate gender identity, John Money used the same distinction between sex and gender to underpin his theory that gender can be socially

engineered, that it is not necessarily innate. It was a position from which he approached the treatment of intersex infants and patients with gender identity disorder<sup>7</sup>, and which he most famously argued for using the case of John/Joan (David Reimer). John was a biological male who, on the advice of doctors, was reassigned female as an infant after a circumcision accident to his penis. Money's claim that Joan was successfully raised as a girl, regardless of birth sex, has had a widespread impact on the treatment of intersex infants (Whittle, 2006, p. 183). However, in light of the later revelation of the profound failure of the attempted reassignment, which permanently tainted Money's reputation and work, the case is now being used to re-evaluate gender development theory, revise intersex treatment protocols, and raise awareness (J. Butler, 2001, p. 625). It is a striking example of the fallibility of science, and the manipulability of the 'facts' regarding sex and gender that are deployed in the name of science.

Ironically, considering the immense power he wielded in the treatment of trans patients, Money claimed that a gender role "belongs to the person who inhabits it and lives in it everyday, indefinitely" (Money, 1985, p. 74). In his writing he offered a more elaborate theory, beyond the sex-gender split, regarding what he calls 'gender-identity/role'(G-I/R), dividing it into three dimensions:

- 1). Sex-derivative, as in urinary posture, or hormone-governed muscular build; 2) sex-adjunctive, as in the extension of women's breast-feeding to overall food preparation, or men's territorial roaming to truck-driving; and 3) sex-arbitrary, as in cosmetic and grooming styles. (ibid)

As a way of assessing gender, Money's method of categorisation seems to privilege appearance and social behaviour over psychological or existential considerations, emphasising the 'role' rather than the 'identity' indicated in his terminology. His examples of gender manifestation provide a noticeably conservative model of the social stereotyping, but interestingly they are the very same issues habitually raised in mainstream gender-bending films. The urinary stance is portrayed as definitive; characters struggle with exclusively gendered professions and domestic duties, and the stress of adapting to unfamiliar cosmetic

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<sup>7</sup> The term Money used to describe "a condition in which there is discordancy, either partial or complete, between the natal sex of the external genitalia, on the one hand, and the gender coding of the brain, on the other hand... The disorder is characterized phenomenologically by an unrelenting and often desperate or monomaniacal fixation on being a member of the non-natal sex" (Money, 1994, p. 175).

and sartorial practices is used to illustrate the absurdity of disrupting the ‘appropriate’ alignment of sex and gender.

With the proliferation of descriptions and discussions of sexual practice and identity in popular culture, politics and academic discourses, the dominance of sexology has waned. As sexologist Leonore Tiefer observed in 1994, “We are losing control of our subject matter... Serious reform is in order or we are finished as the premiere researchers of anything remotely resembling what sexuality has become in real people’s lived lives” (1994, p. 363). Sexology does indeed appear ill-equipped to maintain its authority in the face of the widespread commodification and mediasation of sex, which have extended it beyond the realm of scientific inquiry into social, political and economic arenas. The clinical detachment and abstruse scientific concepts that previously legitimated sexology as a science have come to be seen as paternalistic flaws, and it no longer seems valid to theorise sex, gender and sexuality in isolation from the complexity of their broader cultural frameworks.

## **II. Anthropology**

Conceptualising the sex/gender separation from an anthropological perspective, Margaret Mead’s pioneering work on ‘sex-roles’ in New Guinea “presupposed that the two sexes were fixed, but that qualities attributed to each varied, along with the tasks allotted to them... and was widely drawn upon to demonstrate the cultural malleability of gender and thus illustrate its disconnection from biological sex” (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 7). While Mead’s distinction between physical sex and social ‘sex-role’ functions was highly influential, she depended on the idea of the biological binary of male/female as an unchallenged absolute, the constant against which she positioned the cultural variability of sex roles. Her use of the term ‘sex roles’ points to the idea of biological sex as the unshakeable foundation on which masculine and feminine behaviour are constructed, and while she argues that sex does not ‘naturally’ produce sex role, the term ensures that the social remains shackled to the biological. The term ‘sex-role’ is even more problematic when ‘sex’ is also used to refer to erotic activity, in that it fails to distinguish between gender and sexuality, precluding the

possibility of investigating sexuality as a related but distinct issue not necessarily determined by sex or gender.

Through their work mapping cultural patterns, anthropologists are ideally positioned to investigate gender as a *cultural* norm and the social forces that shape it. The variations in gender that exist among different cultures have provided (and still do) compelling evidence for the idea of gender conventions as learned rather than natural or inevitable. The crux of Margaret Mead's studies has been continued and developed by other anthropologists, and persists in contemporary scholarship in the discipline. Cultural alternatives in understandings of gender are used to shed light on Western conceptualisations, discourses and habits, and particular attention is given to those societies which exhibit non-binary gender customs. Charlotte Suthrell (2004), for example, analyses the "material culture" of clothes as an expression of identity in a comparison of British mtf transvestites<sup>8</sup> with the Hijras of India, Native American 'Two-Spirits', and Brazilian travestis as a way of critiquing the oppressive rigidity of dichotomised gender doctrines in the UK. She argues for clothes as significantly unusual cultural artefacts because they "allow us to play – temporarily or permanently – with identity and self-image" (2004, p. 2). This idea of play is one that is strongly in evidence in the gender-bending comedy films, offering an apparently innocuous means of engaging with culturally mandated gender boundaries, a passport to forbidden worlds.

Gilbert Herdt's 1993 collection of social histories and anthropological studies, *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, epitomises the countervailing model which has become prevalent in recent anthropological scholarship on gender. It covers most of the standard touchstones for comparative critiques of the binary gender system – Polynesian *fa'afafine*, Native American Two-Spirits<sup>9</sup>, Indian *Hijras*, and New Guinean *kwolu-aatmwol*.<sup>10</sup> The Brazilian travesty, Tahitian *mahu* and Thai *kathoey* are

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<sup>8</sup> Suthrell explicitly asserts that ftm gender-crossing is socially acceptable, that it is only mtf crossing that is disparaged (2004, p. 9). She offers no evidence to support this claim, and her disregard for the discrimination suffered by trans men seems to devolve from the rather narrow interpretation that it is permissible for women to wear trousers.

<sup>9</sup> In Will Roscoe's chapter on 'Two-Spirits' in Herdt's book he refers to them as 'berdache'. However, this colonial description, with its inaccurate homogenisation and pejorative associations, has been rejected by those it purports to describe and so I have chosen not to use it.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Sabrina Ramet's collection *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures* (1996) and Blackwood and Wieringa's *Female Desires* (1999)

the most noticeable absences from this prototypical catalogue designed to undercut the Western presumption of a natural and inevitable gender dichotomy. Herdt's anthology is also noteworthy for its insistence on the separation between sex, gender and sexuality, in explicit opposition to their conflation and contemporaneous pathologisation during the nineteenth century. "Under the influence of new historical forces and psychocultural conditions, especially the rise of state formations, a belief in one sex became ideologically marked... a strong ideology of sexual dimorphism had emerged alongside the categories of same-sex desire" (Herdt, 1996, p. 14). This has more recently resulted in an investigation not only of the ontology of gender ideologies, but also of the epistemology of understanding gender cultures through an interrogation of the systems of classification and analytical approaches that have come to be taken for granted in popular discourses.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. Feminism**

Feminist anthropologists in the 1970s focused their investigations on gendered social organisation and kinship structures as the cornerstones of patriarchy by identifying pivotal divisions and oppositions within the social hierarchy. For example, in a collection of essays entitled *Woman, Culture, and Society* (1974), Michelle Rosaldo argued for the significance of the gendered division between public and domestic, with the relegation of women to the less-valued domestic sphere as a key factor in their oppression; Sherry B. Ortner pointed to the association of women with nature in the hierarchical opposition between nature and culture. These social divisions underpin the 'sexual division of labour' that naturalises assigned 'sex-roles', in particular women's responsibility for mothering, which keeps women bound to the domestic sphere. Anxiety about the inherent discrimination of these gendered social arrangements has reappeared in trans theory and political activism, and curiosity about them has filtered through to popular culture – demonstrated through certain recurring concerns in gender-crossing films. What happens when a man disguised as a woman gains access to the domestic realm, or a cross-dressed woman enters the public arena? Does wearing a dress turn a father into a mother, and does it make you a better or worse parent? These issues manifest themselves sometimes as fantasies of accessing the unknown/forbidden, often as a cause for

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Barrie Thorne attests to his motivating discovery as a sociologist that "a skew toward the most visible and dominant – and a silencing and marginalization of others – can be found in much of the research on gender relations among children and youth" (2002, p. 293).

amusing misadventures, and occasionally as an earnest consideration of power, prejudice and responsibility.

Several influential Second Wave feminists took up the sex/gender distinction as a way of highlighting the hierarchical aspect of gender relations, particularly in domestic and labour spheres, exposing male dominance as a ubiquitous and institutionalised hegemonic construction rather than an inevitable and unalterable natural state. Ann Oakley (1972) was an early pioneer of the use of the term ‘gender’ (rather than ‘sex-role’) in feminist theory, adopting the term from Stoller and Money. The aim of this emerging strand of feminism was to achieve a “genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (Rubin, 2006, p. 204). The conventional patriarchal distinction between the personal and the political that preserved women’s relegation to the domestic sphere was dismantled by feminist theorists such as Ann Oakley, Gayle Rubin, Michèle Barrett (1980), Christine Delphy (1993) and Adrienne Rich (1980) in order to expose the power relations at work within the supposedly private arenas of sex, gender and sexuality. Family and labour arrangements, gender and sexual regulation, and the control and abuse of women’s bodies were foregrounded and interrogated as structures of patriarchal oppression. The work of the Second Wave feminists brought about major reforms to women’s rights in social and institutional arenas, notably in terms of reproduction, violence against women, and domestic and economic conditions. The dismantling of the idea of ‘Woman’ as defined and socially learned according to her body’s reproductive capacity began to be analysed in relation to in the framework of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ that was at the centre of most of these issues, impacting as they did career opportunities, domestic situations, violence, and on sexual expression and repression. However, the concept of sex itself as a natural and unequivocal biological fact which underpinned many of these discussions remained largely uncontested.

When sex is uncritically accepted and then used as the sole and incontrovertible criterion of defining Woman as an identity category, there is a risk of homogenisation and exclusion, whether intentional or not. As Diane Crowder has pointed out regarding second-wave feminism, “At the time, almost nobody was talking about postmodernism; it appeared self-evident that women formed a socially oppressed group” (2007, p. 489). Nonetheless,

conceptualising ‘Woman’ as the basis for a distinct group can produce a monolithic category that subsumes other aspects of identity and discounts the significance of intra-group differences. At the same time, if the category is emphatically delineated on the basis of one narrow biological concept, inclusion may be too rigidly regulated. The insistence on biological birth sex as invariant and definitive, by radical separatists for example, has sometimes resulted in prejudice against transwomen. Mtf feminist Julia Serano coined the term ‘trans-misogyny’ to describe this particular form of discrimination (2007, p. 14), which first gained widespread attention at the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference in 1973 (Stryker, 2008b, p. 102). In her keynote address, Robin Morgan called for the expulsion of Beth Elliott, a transwoman helping to organise the conference, denouncing “him [sic] as an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer—with the mentality of a rapist” (cited in Bettcher, 2009). This incident caused divisive and heated debates among feminists, as most objected to the rejection of transwomen as a matter of principle. The exclusionary attitude was famously expounded in Janice Raymond’s anti-transsexual polemic, *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), which included an attack on Sandy Stone for “daring to present herself as a woman and to work as a sound engineer at Olivia Records, a women-only feminist music collective” (Stryker & Whittle, 2006: 221). The 1991 publication of Sandy Stone’s detailed response to Raymond, ‘The *Empire* Strikes Back: A (post)transsexual manifesto’, was to become a key moment in the rise of transgender studies.

Raymond’s attack on transsexuals rests in large part on her critique of the “patriarchal medical model” that she perceives to be complicit in the attempts of transsexual women to “deceive” and “possess women in a bodily sense” (2006, p. 131). Her critique reflects a general lack of awareness regarding transsexuality, including the battles that had to be fought against prevailing medical attitudes to make SRS available at all. However, it also illustrates the power of the dimorphic biological paradigm that persists within some feminist approaches, ones which depend on the idea that the sex component of identity exists outside of/prior to discourse.<sup>12</sup> A comparable mind-set is noticeable in many of the gender-bending films, in the common responses to the revelation of a character’s ‘true’ sex: rage at being

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<sup>12</sup> More recently demonstrated by the continuing exclusion of transwomen from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, as exposed through the protests of Transsexual Menace, and in the case of the Vancouver Rape Relief Society’s refusal to allow Kimberly Nixon, an mtf transsexual, to work as a counsellor because of her presumed inability to understand women’s oppression.

‘deceived’, indignation over the perceived invasion of privileged spaces and the presumption of affinity, and disgusted or mocking dismissal of trans subjectivity.

The focus on gender inequality in Second Wave feminism and its foundations in a biological sex dichotomy meant that women’s bodies featured strongly in discussions of violence and reproductive control, but the basic assumption of binary sex as a certainty tended to remain intact and men’s and trans bodies were rarely discussed. However, ‘sexual difference’ feminists engaged with the institutionalised difference of gender by exploring the potential value of the Otherness of femininity for subverting logocentric masculine language and accentuating plurality. By moving the issue of difference from the realm of physical biology onto a metaphysical level, these theorists resisted the phallocentrism of writing and philosophy. However, despite the epistemological and discursive influence of theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, the degree of abstraction in their work has been critiqued as too dissociated from political and material realities. Similar arguments have resurfaced in trans writing in response to the apparent intellectualisation of queer and trans theories. The overlap between these critiques is perhaps not surprising when considering one central strand in the development of queer theory – the path that runs from Irigaray and Kristeva to Judith Butler. Some of the perceived shortcomings in Irigaray’s theories seem to have been transposed to Butler’s work, which has attracted similar accusations of inaccessibility and alienation from political and material realities in her work and more broadly in the queer theory which has drawn on her ideas.<sup>13</sup> However, the pervasive impact of Butler’s work on gender and queer theory, as discussed in more detail below, has not been diminished by these criticisms, not least because of her radical repositioning of sex as discursive concept rather than biological certainty.

#### **IV. Sex**

Ever since the field of biology emerged in the United States and Europe at the start of the nineteenth century, it has been bound up in debates over sexual, racial, and national politics. And as our social viewpoints have shifted, so has the science of the body (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 7).

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Nancy Fraser (1995), Jay Prosser (1998) and Jackson & Scott (2002).

The reconceptualization and analysis of anatomical sex as being discursively produced rather than an incontrovertible and timeless truth centres noticeably on 1990, which saw the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Both of these studies, Butler's philosophical argument and Laqueur's historical analysis, pivot on the same transformational concept, that sex is a mutable ideological construction contingent on cultural and historical context. "Sex, like being human, is contextual. Attempts to isolate it from its discursive, socially determined milieu are... doomed to failure" (Laqueur, 1990, p. 16). However, that is not to say that sex is in any way illusory or easily escapable. In similar ways to gender, the modern model of sex is motivated by powerful heteronormative and patriarchal interests. The dominant contemporary belief in an anatomical dichotomy between male and female that stresses genital primacy reflects the associated social hierarchies of gender and sexuality that it has been used to justify. The concept of 'natural' sex as an objective category has increasingly come under scrutiny in the last twenty years, a recognition that "one of the problems created by the distinction between sex and gender was that it left biological 'sex' untheorised, treated simply as a given" (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 15). Construing sex as the pre-existent foundation for the 'logic' of heteronormativity has effectively concealed its means of production, but it has become increasingly apparent that both the idea of 'natural' sex and its current 'two-model' manifestation need to be critically contested.<sup>14</sup>

As a way of challenging taken-for-granted notions about sex, Laqueur undertakes a comparison of different historical periods to reveal the contextually contingent construction of sex, in much the same way that anthropologists have used cultural comparisons. In situating his work, Laqueur contends that his intention is to:

Show on the basis of historical evidence that almost everything one wants to say about sex – however sex is understood – already has in it a claim about gender. Sex, in both the one-sex and the two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power. (1990, p. 11)

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<sup>14</sup> This need has become apparent within particular academic and political quarters, but is by no means universal. Popular attachment to the idea of two opposite sexes as an easily verifiable fact of nature also persists, as illustrated by a common reaction to the 2009 controversy around Caster Semenya's eligibility to compete in women's athletics: bewilderment around why sex-testing was any more complex than checking for a penis. Fausto-Sterling (2000) describes how the Olympics have long been a site of conflict regarding sex-eligibility to indicate how flawed and oppressive the binary system is. Athletes used to have to strip in front of officials, and bring certificates of sex authentication. Although sex-testing is no longer compulsory, the IOC can still insist on a basic chromosomal test in 'suspicious' cases.

Beyond the contextual analysis, raising awareness that there are/have been other ways of understanding sex is useful in itself, particularly when it is free of value judgements about the relative merits of those systems of knowledge. Laqueur uses this approach to argue for the successive prominence of two main sex paradigms: the 'one-sex model' that dominated until the time of the Enlightenment, and the modern 'two-sex model' (1990, p. 8). The 'one-sex model' focussed on sameness rather than difference between males and females, positing women as merely inverted (and lesser) versions of men: the clitoris as a foreskin, the vagina as an inside-out penis. Women are clearly no less discriminated against under this model, using as it does the male as originating (and superior) point of reference. The 'two-sex model' reinterpreted the body in terms of oppositionality, constructing male and female as mutually exclusive categories.

Significantly, Laqueur does not argue that scientific developments determined these interpretive changes, but instead that medical science was deployed as a tool to provide plausible explanations for changing social concepts (*ibid.*, p. 16). Laqueur situates the transition between the two models of sex as occurring during the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the epistemological focus shifted to the individual, and shows how these changes in conceptions about sex impacted notions of gender. For example, the shift from a belief that the female body required orgasm for conception to the idea that only the male orgasm was necessary initiated and then validated the idea of women as passive (Laqueur, 1990, p. 3). The two-sex model has now had a significant period of time in which to become naturalised as common sense and for people to forget that was ever an alternative way of understanding sex. This unawareness authenticates the persistent invocation of biology used to justify sex, gender and sexual hierarchies.

Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (1992, 2000) brings to bear a similarly comparative approach in her work, which analyses historical divergences in the social construction of technical knowledge regarding sex, gender, sexuality and race. Using her expertise in biology within a feminist framework, Fausto-Sterling historicizes scientific and medical epistemologies, including genetic, hormonal and psychobiological research, to challenge the positivist approach to sex and trace origins and support her conclusion that "biology is politics by other

means”<sup>15</sup> (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 255). In line with Butler, she contests the idea that bodies can ever be neutral, that the ‘raw material’ of the human body is always subject to interpretation and socialisation. “Raw materials are never enough. They must be provided with a set of meanings... Without a human social setting the clay could not be moulded into recognizable psychic form.” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 23). Because they are always socially and historically situated, the positivist discourses around sex and gender have embedded biases which shape both the production of knowledge and its reception. Fausto-Sterling’s critique is based in part on her analysis of the often dubious methodologies of scientific inquiry, in the ways research foci are identified and framed, but also in the disregard for negative data. “We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender — not science — can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place” (ibid., p.3). Ultimately the inherent ideological bias and differential management of research findings that Fausto-Sterling identifies indicate that definitive scientific conclusions about sex and gender are not dependable ‘truths’, they are instead reflections of the ideological framework in which they are produced.

The recourse to biology as definitive for sex and determinist for gender invariably centres on the genitals as paramount, particularly the presence or absence of a penis.

The genital area counts for only one percent of the surface area of the body. But – 1 percent or not – genitals carry an enormous amount of cultural weight in the meanings that are attached to them, and I would argue that they constitute nearly 100 percent of what we, as both cultural members and as producers of cultural knowledge, come to understand and assume about the body’s sex and gender. (Valentine & Wilchins, 1997, p. 215)

This is ostensibly because of their associated procreative functions, both active and implied. This ensures that they remain the conclusive foundation for sex attribution outside of the reproductive phase as well, for example infants or post-menopausal women, who are still socially required to be located on one side of the genital binary or the other. Paradoxically, this crucial aspect of anatomy is not usually visible in everyday situations, represented instead by metonymic signifiers such as body hair and musculature. These recognised

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<sup>15</sup> This is paraphrased from the title of a 1986 article by Donna Haraway, ‘Primateology Is Politics by Other Means’ (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 379).

physical markers are assumed to allude to a particular genital identity, and work in conjunction with gender-specific cultural markers such as clothing and mannerisms. Some, such as clothes are intended precisely for the purpose of covering the genitals, while at the same time they are used to proclaim gender. Bronwyn Davies argues that “positioning oneself as male or female is not just a conceptual process. It is also a *physical* process... The most obvious, and apparently superficial, form of bodily practice that distinguishes male from female is dress and hairstyle” (2002, p. 284). These gendered markers are used to construe both sex and gender, and are taken as indicative of the presence or absence of a penis, which remains the definitive factor in sex differentiation and attribution and the subsequent assessment of the appropriateness of the gender that is read. The imagined genital sex is determined through observable gendered criteria on the presumption that they accurately reflect the biological genitals and can therefore be treated as synonymous. In 1967 Harold Garfinkel suggested that these metonymic markers function as “cultural genitals,” a term taken up in 1978 by psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in their landmark study of gender attribution processes.

‘Cultural genitals’ is a useful concept to apply to the process at work in gender-crossing films where the climax depends on invoking anatomy to reveal the ‘true sex’ underneath the gendered exterior. The medium itself accentuates the use of visual gender markers, where they are consciously manipulated to produce the intended reading, and many of them are centralised as critical components of successful ‘passing’ for a character. Some of them can be easily altered, such as hair, while others have to be simulated through padding or strapping, but they are depicted as essential to achieving the desired gender reading. The least visible factor is also the hardest to replicate, and is also read as the most reliable – the genitals. The social convention of covering the genitals in public is reproduced in the conventional approach to nudity by the mainstream film industry. The explicit depiction of genitals is rare and consequently used for intense dramatic effect, as in *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992). It is entirely absent in the comedies. As a result the standard climactic convention (the ‘genital truth’ about the cross-gendered character being revealed to the other characters) can only ever be implied and the films rely on spectators imagining genitals without seeing them. Even when the narrative is overtly referring to anatomical ‘truth’, it is still only the ‘cultural genitals’ which are displayed. Thus the outer gender appearance is peeled back to ‘expose’ a sex which is actually just another version of gender. Furthermore,

this indirect representation paradoxically depends on gender cues such as voice, clothing and mannerisms, while the central premise of the plot is that those markers are unreliable and can be manipulated.

The cues and markers identified by Kessler and McKenna in their study illustrate the overlapping and often synonymous understandings of sex and gender, for many of the indicators are changeable external elements rather than anatomical constants. Indeed the social and the anatomical are so deeply entwined that Kessler and McKenna themselves use the term gender to refer to both in order to reflect this. The various cues are combined to provide a coherent interpretation of gender based on the presumption of normative genital-gender alignment (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 145). Their study was devised to test four hypotheses regarding attribution processes that emerged from their preliminary research.

(1) Gender attribution processes are based on information whose meaning is socially shared... and certain information (biological and physical) is seen as more important than other information (role behaviour). (2) Once a gender attribution is made, almost anything can be filtered through it and made sense of. (3) Gender attribution is essentially genital attribution. If you 'know' the genital then you know the gender. (4) In some way, knowledge about penises may give people more information than knowledge about vaginas. (ibid)

Their formal study made use of a set of transparent overlays, each depicting a physical property or article of clothing, which could be used in a variety of combinations. The physical characteristics they chose are the ones most commonly associated with a specific gender – “long hair, short hair, wide hips, narrow hips, breasts or a flat chest, body hair or no body hair, and a penis or a vagina” (ibid).

A key finding of Kessler and McKenna's study was the statistical evidence proving the primacy of the penis. “The presence of a penis is, in and of itself, a powerful enough cue to elicit a gender attribution with almost complete (96 percent) agreement. The presence of a vagina, however, does not have this same power” (ibid., p. 151). The combined value of all of the other secondary and tertiary (behavioural) gender cues cannot outweigh the significance of the penis. It is the pivotal identifier which directs the interpretation of the other cues. The vagina is not accorded this same definitive power, at least partly because it is not seen as a presence, but rather as an absence. In response to these findings, Kessler and McKenna

formulated their influential argument that gender attribution is not an objective evaluation but involves socially learned processes that emerge with embedded prejudices out of particular cultural contexts (ibid. p. 157). Gender attribution requires that the presenter and interpreter have a shared knowledge of the socially recognised gender signs, as well as of the rules for decoding those signs in relation to deeper cultural formations.

Social structure is not free from the individuals who make it up... structures must always be recognised as constraining individual and social action... These are not simply an external constraint... they provide the conceptual framework, the psychic patterns, the emotions through which individuals position themselves as male or female and through which they privately experience themselves in relation to the social world. As well, they provide the vehicle through which others will recognise that positioning as legitimate, as meaningful, as providing the right to claim personhood. (Davies, 2002, p. 283)

Kessler and McKenna's conclusion from their psychological study was the same one Laqueur came to twelve years later in his historical analysis: "Biological, psychological, and social differences do not lead to our seeing two genders. Our seeing of two genders leads to the 'discovery' of biological, psychological, and social differences" (1978, p. 163). These studies demonstrate that androcentric genital/gender attribution needs to be analysed as a function of the hierarchized heteronormative dichotomy that depreciates women and refuses to recognise non-normative sexes, genders and sexualities.

As a result of the conceptual developments introduced through these works, during the last twenty years there have been sustained critiques of the concept of the human body as neutral or natural. However, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) is still widely regarded as the most significant and influential engagement with sex as a biological given.<sup>16</sup> In her preface to the 1999 edition, Butler reiterates her intention to disrupt the uncontested understanding of sex which underpins the "pervasive heterosexual assumption" and idealises "certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion" (1999, p. viii). *Gender Trouble* deconstructs the modes of thought and discursive practices that circumscribe the possibilities of gender, including feminist discourses, and the normativisation of anatomical sex as "seemingly fixed" (p. 8). Employing a post-structuralist

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<sup>16</sup> For example, every foundation text on sex, gender, sexuality, queer or trans theory makes reference to Butler, but the same cannot be said of Laqueur, Fausto-Sterling, or Kessler and McKenna. This is due at least in part to the wide acceptance and applicability of Butler's work across a range of disciplines.

approach that draws on Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Monique Wittig<sup>17</sup>, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Butler begins by problematising the popular feminist idea of ‘woman’ as a unified and homogeneous category and argues instead for a multiplicity of possible subject formations beyond what was generally considered in Second Wave feminism. Moving beyond the usual feminist critique of gender in terms of patriarchal power relations, Butler problematises the sex/gender split invoked in the dominant feminist discourse, arguing that

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as female one. (1990, p. 9)

Yet, as Butler points out, culture refuses such discrepancies between sex and gender, and unquestioned assumptions about ‘biological’ sex therefore limit understandings of gender. It is not possible to break sex free from gender; they are co-extensive social constructions.

“Sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is compelled. (Butler, 1993b, p. 1-2)

Butler goes on to argue that there are “possibilities for rematerialization” precisely because of the instabilities and incompleteness of this process (ibid.). This approach was at odds with feminist theorising that took femaleness for granted and reserved/revered female bodies as belonging to women, attacking patriarchal and heterosexist oppression but not questioning the underlying binary itself. Feminist theories had revolved around what *kind* of a woman a female becomes without contesting the underlying male/female dichotomy, the methods and context of its construction, or the assumptions that afforded birth females the exclusive right to become women. While acknowledging the anti-essentialist aims underpinning the invocation of the sex/gender split in feminism, Butler interrogates the construction of *both* sides of the division and their ontological, epistemological and political implications.

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<sup>17</sup> The influence of Wittig’s attitude to gender is particularly evident in Butler’s work. As described by Robyn Wiegman, Wittig “sought to destroy compulsory meaning by refusing the logics and limits of ‘women’ and gender altogether” (2007, p. 509).

## V. Sexuality

A great deal depends... on the fostering of our ability to arrive at understandings of sexuality that will respect a certain irreducibility in it to the terms and relations of gender. (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 19)

In her 1984 essay, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', Gayle Rubin theorised 'the sex/gender system' from a different angle - as the organising principle of reproductive sexual relations. This shift in focus contributed significantly to foregrounding the question of sexuality in feminist, gay, and later, queer and trans theory. The feminist sex wars were still raging in 1984, and Rubin's reputation as a 'pro-sex' activist, her focus on sexual subcultures, and the inclusion of transsexuality in her analysis, produced strong opposition from mainstream "schools of feminism [which had] established hierarchies that placed their own perspective above all others and claimed the power to judge and condemn everything else as morally suspect" (Stryker, 2010, p. 82). Nonetheless, her work was pivotal in stimulating critiques of heterosexuality that exposed it as a culturally privileged construct, emerging from and validating patriarchal authority. Breaking gender loose from biological determinism enabled analyses not only of the oppressive regulation of gender itself, but of the socio-sexual hierarchy that privileges normative masculinity via the married heterosexual couple at the centre of the nuclear family. Discussions of sexuality encompass a complex mix of issues regarding the erotic feelings, experiences, preferences and expressions of individuals, as well as the social organisation and cultural attitudes of broader sexual groupings. Human sexuality has been argued to be an agential site of pleasure just as strenuously as it has been prescriptively defended as the preserve of procreation. Sexual practices and choices have been vehemently contested in political and institutional arenas in relation to a range of topics, from masturbation to military service, masochism to marriage and reproductive rights.<sup>18</sup>

The people who engage in heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive relationships that comply with/construct the sex dichotomy exist within what Gayle Rubin described as "the

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<sup>18</sup> The heated debates around marriage rights in the United States flared up again in February 2011, after Barack Obama's administration withdrew its support of the Defense of Marriage Act. The ensuing outrage among social conservatives was an exemplary demonstration of the continued belief that there is only one acceptable manifestation of sexuality: the sanctified heterosexuality of traditional marriage. For example, see 'Obama Fails to Defend Traditional Marriage' (LeClaire, 2011).

charmed circle” (1984: 318). Any deviation from the dominant heteronormative<sup>19</sup> paradigm is a step away from the charmed circle, and consequently a step away from the affirmation, protection and opportunities provided to those within the circle – socially, politically and institutionally. To live outside the circle brings censure, alienation and often violent discrimination. “If we live in an age of moral and cultural uncertainty... then fundamentalist affirmation of the truth of the gendered body, heterosexual sex, the horrors of perversity, and the sanctity of faith can seem an appealing antidote. That does not make it right or valid” (Weeks, 2008, p. 30). This ideology of reproductive, monogamous heteronormativity is reflected and ritually re-inscribed through mainstream media such as film and television. These cultural expressions predominantly reinforce the heteronormative status quo; most of the mainstream comedy films replicate this ‘charmed circle’ on a narrative level with their use of sexual stereotypes, by illustrating the negative consequences for deviations from the norm, and through an emphasis on the redemptive value of heterosexual coupling as the culminating narrative achievement. Resolution of the conflict produced by gender disruption and the recuperation of transgressive characters ensures that the boundary of the circle - between sanction and censure – is persistently shored up and rendered intelligible, both socially and cinematically. The naturalised divisions, oppositions and hierarchies of the sex, gender, and sexual categories which are usually invisible or taken for granted, nonetheless become visible for audiences, even if only temporarily.

Michel Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality played a crucial role in establishing sexuality as a distinct area of inquiry outside of sexological science, and continues to be a major influence in modern theorisations about sexuality. His detailed historical investigation of sexuality focussed on the ways it is produced through discourse in an attempt to disrupt its essentialist status, analogous in many ways to the contemporaneous critiques of gender as biologically determined. Regimes of power and knowledge construct sexuality in various ways in particular historical contexts but frame it as a monovalent truth, an innate and timeless attribute, and use its existence to justify the very systems of power that produce it. Foucault identifies the importance of the contextually specific *cultural* areas through which discourse appears, referring to them as “surfaces of emergence [that] are not the same for

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<sup>19</sup> Although the term ‘heteronormative’ was only introduced in 1991 by Michael Warner in “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” it is derived in part from Rubin’s sex/gender theory so it seems fair to apply it retrospectively to her ideas.

different societies, at different periods, and in different forms of discourse” (1972, p. 45). In considering film as one of the modern surfaces of emergence for sexual discourse, it could be seen to illustrate one of Foucault’s ideas regarding what he terms the ‘repressive hypothesis’ - that repression inevitably draws attention to that which it prohibits. Even the most conservative gender-bending films could then be seen to be highlighting gender alterity through their very refusal to condone or sustain it, as their insistent return to a heteronormative status and ‘incitement to discourse’ regarding gender and sexuality simultaneously enable and provoke counter-discourses.

The historical perspective on sexuality provided by theorists like Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks (1989), create an avenue for analysing and denaturalising the construction of modern sexualities by providing points of comparison with different sexual discourses.

Weeks drew from his training in both sociology and history to articulate a framework for gay history that would come to be labelled “the social construction of sex.” Social construction was little more than the application of ordinary social science tools to sexuality and gender. What seemed so radical was in many respects a conventional set of approaches to an unconventional and highly stigmatized set of subject areas. (Rubin, 2010, p. 18)

But it is not without its pitfalls. Jeffrey Weeks (2008) himself has observed that there are three potential traps into which sexual history scholars commonly fall, and which effectively limit the diversity and potential of sexuality studies. The first is the assumption that the transformation of sexual ideology from conservative to progressive is “automatic or inevitable,” a position that sees changes as inherently positive but overlooks the cost and conflict entailed in achieving those changes. In contrast, the second trap is the tendency of social conservatives to see all changes in sexual culture as a “decline from a state of grace” while nostalgically yearning for an earlier time which is perceived as simpler, safer and purer but which has never actually existed. It is nonetheless a useful weapon for denouncing non-normative sexual identities and practices by holding them responsible for a myriad of modern social ills. The third trap is to focus exclusively on what has *not changed*, on the inequalities that continue, and so forget or devalue what has been achieved. The extensive commodification and mediation of the erotic has intensified these interpretive dangers, most noticeably perhaps with regard to the moral panics around sexual explicitness and ‘deviancy’ in the media that are characteristic of the second position outlined by Weeks.

In looking at mainstream gender-bending films, it is equally important to be mindful of these pitfalls, so as not to assume that all changes to representations of gender and sexuality are necessarily positive and painless progress, any more than they should be interpreted as signs of social decay and debility. Weeks also provides a valuable reminder that even if the regimes of patriarchal and heterosexist power persist, the minor transformations do matter: “The continuists want to stress the recalcitrance of hidden structures, but in so doing forget the power of agency and the macroscopic impact of subtle changes in individual lives that make up the unfinished revolutions of our time” (Weeks, 2008, p. 31). The cumulative power of small changes has, over time, resulted in very different filmic representations of gender and sexuality. A retrospective view can consequently encourage recognition of those changes, but at the same time also highlight the value of continuing to fight gender and sexual oppression, however small the victories might seem. An appreciation of the positive changes need not diminish the significance of the power relations that remain in place or invalidate the attention given to those aspects that still deserve critique and political opposition.

Despite the rise in awareness regarding sexual diversity and mobilisation around and recognition of rights for sexual minorities - some more than others - they are still predominantly categorised and regarded *as minorities*, rather than as equally valid sexual alternatives. The heterosexual model remains the dominant sexual ideology against which everyone is measured and judged. As an influential site of cultural re/production, films are engaged with the discursive production of heterosexual hegemony in diverse ways, from explicit collaboration to resolute dissidence. In his critique of films as ideological items that function as one of the” instruments of oppression” sustaining heterosexual dominance, Richard Dyer contends that even

where gayness occurs in films, it does so *as part of* dominant ideology. It is not there to express itself, but rather to express something about sexuality in general *as understood by heterosexuals*. Gayness is used to define the parameters of normality, to suggest the thrill and/or terror of decadence, to embody neurotic sexuality, or to perform various artistic-ideological functions that in the end assert the superiority of heterosexuality. (1978, p. 16)

This implication of heterosexual superiority extends far beyond the relatively small portion of films which portray gayness; it is a pervasive if often unnoticed presence in mainstream films

that has repercussions for a range of related issues beyond sexuality itself. Social or filmic emphasis on marriage, in conjunction with a persistent view of marriage as a heterosexual prerogative, generally serves to reiterate normative views not only of sexual identity and practice, but also of its naturalised corollaries – procreation and kinship – which become subject to the same constraints and prejudices.

Heterosexuality continues to be the prevailing prototype, naturalised and normalised through a range of institutional and social frameworks. This heterocentric hegemony is fundamentally bound to the doctrine of dichotomous sexes with ‘correct’ gender behaviours. As a result, variation in any component of the heteronormative alignment tends to be seen as a concomitant threat to the other elements. Defensive heterosexist attitudes consequently also exhibit an alarming combination of homophobia and sexism, summarised effectively by Lee J. Grady in his 2008 article condemning ‘androgeny’ [sic]:

Once men have rejected marriage, the door is then opened for the onslaught of homosexuality... What we need desperately in America today is a public policy which honors the clear differences between male and female; which places marriage in an honorable and economically desirable position, which offers protection and security to the housewife; and which encourages home child care. ... We cannot allow maleness and femaleness to drift together into a vague, unisexual zone of neutrality. We cannot allow monogamous marriage to become just one of several legally accepted lifestyles... Returning to pro-family policies will not be easy. It will require real men to stand up in the public arena to challenge the anti-gender activists. It will demand real women to defend the paramount role of traditional motherhood. But we cannot sit idly by while the social scientists plan America's sexual suicide” (Grady, 2008).

This is admittedly an extreme example of heteronormative fundamentalism, but it explicitly demonstrates a key feature of heterosexuality as an institutionalised ideology: its meaning is contingent on the ability to classify a person’s sex and gender definitively, and that of their sexual partner(s). Heterosexuality is constructed essentially according to the presumed genital and perceived gender oppositeness of participants rather than through erotic acts themselves.

Predicating sexuality on the dichotomous sex model inevitably produces another reductive schema, in which a variety of sexual behaviours, emotions, object choices, preferences and identities are all subsumed within three basic categories – same-sex orientation, opposite-sex

orientation, and an amalgam of the first two (bisexuality).<sup>20</sup> However, while all three categories may be *acknowledged* in contemporary Western cultures, heterosexuality is still the only one that enjoys wholesale social acceptance and institutional protection. This model of sexual taxonomy is primarily a dichotomisation of homosexual and heterosexual, which commonly results in bisexuality being lost in the middle, if not totally disregarded.<sup>21</sup> The two-sex model does not allow for the existence of any other categories, linguistically or conceptually, and consequently queer and trans sexualities are either relegated to the discourses of criminality and pathology or ignored entirely. When gender-bending films engage with questions around sexuality, as they inevitably do, they depict the confusion that arises from trying to use the conventional categories that align sex, gender and sexuality to classify erotic interactions with trans characters. In *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999a), Brandon strenuously objects to accusations that he is a 'dyke', since he defines his sexuality in relation to his gender identity, not his genitals. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994) mocks the idea that Tick/Mitzi - professional drag queen, married to a woman, father of her son, waltzing in the outback with gay man - can be, or wants to be, fitted neatly into one of the conventional sexual categories. The genre of a film tends to determine whether the uncertainty over sexuality is manifested as laughter, anger, suffering, or (rarely) understanding that it is the categories themselves that are flawed.

The prevailing model of dichotomous sexual classification currently refers to and emphasises categories of identity more than erotic practices. If 'gay' and 'straight' describe modes of being that exceed sexual behaviour, neither are they defined exclusively by specific sex acts. For example, single or occasional same-sex sexual encounters are not necessarily equated with *being* gay, although they do tend to generate uncertainty in a heteronormative society that prefers identities to be clearly labelled and differentiated. Within this framework, same-sex erotic activities can at times be ignored/ rationalised/ exempted if they do not appear to

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<sup>20</sup> The two notable exceptions to this reductive approach are pornography and the psychosciences. The commercial viability of pornography depends on recognising and catering to a far broader understanding of sexuality. The psychosciences, on the other hand, acknowledges sexual complexity but regard all non-normative sexual variations as pathologies (paraphilias). One of the crucial achievements of the gay rights movement in the United States was getting homosexuality removed from the list of sexual pathologies in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

<sup>21</sup> The subordinate position accorded to bisexuality within LGBTQ scholarship and activism has been criticised by theorists such as Stacy Young (2004), Elizabeth Armstrong (1995), and in the illustratively named article 'Your Fence Is Sitting on Me' (Kaplan, 1995).

correspond with an overall *identity* that is perceived or self-identified as heterosexual<sup>22</sup>, provided that the ‘correct’ gender role is maintained and the ‘appropriate’ position of submission or dominance. In the same way, a non-conventional gender identity/role will invariably be equated with being gay; butch women and effeminate men are assumed to be gay, regardless of what type of sex they have, or with whom. Within this modern paradigm, the sexual activities themselves are labelled as gay or straight purely on the basis of the relative sex-identities of the participants. As with the ‘two-sex model’, this identitarian understanding of sexuality has come to be seen as natural and ahistorical, rather than as a discursive construction. Sexuality theorists such as Foucault have attempted to denaturalise this understanding of sexuality through historical comparisons that expose the shift in focus away from *what* people do onto *who* they do it with. Foucault identifies this conceptual change with the invention of the term ‘homosexuality’ in the Nineteenth Century, a term that had not been necessary when society regulated sexual behaviour rather than sexual identity:

Sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage... Homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized... less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault, 1976, p. 43)

Earlier laws proscribed and punished all sexual activities deemed ‘unnatural’, understood to mean any form of non-procreative sex, including oral sex, anal sex and bestiality. As opposed to categorising and legislating against specific sexual groups, sodomy laws criminalised these particular sexual acts, not interpreting them as indicative of a particular sexual identity. In the dominant contemporary model, however, a sexual act such as fellatio is not perceived as gay in itself, usually only when it takes place between two males.

After the ‘invention’ of homosexuality in the Nineteenth Century, the understanding of sexual identity became increasingly inextricable from gender in the Twentieth Century. Heteronormativity dictated that a heterosexual man possess the ‘correct’ amount and type of

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in young adults gay sexual encounters are often dismissed as ‘a phase’ or ‘experimentation’, and even having regular gay sexual activity is occasionally rationalised as being a result of deprivation in ‘extreme’ conditions such as prison or war.

masculinity, in keeping with his dominant social position. The homosexual figure was pathologised as having insufficient or improper masculinity, and as excessively feminine and disempowered in consequence, incapable of performing a man's requisite procreative role in patrilineal society. 'Unnatural' sexual acts came to be seen as 'symptoms' of this sexual disease as sexological theories came to prominence. However, sexual acts were interpreted in relation to comprehensive gender performance/ identity, and often evaluated in terms of the power dynamic between the sexual partners. For example,

In a 1951 book Donald Webster Cory cites the report of a U.S. sailor who believed that "the stranger who performed fellatio" was "homosexual," but not the man on whom it was performed. "The performer was a 'fairy'. The compliant sailor, not." Gender identity was still the crucial marker. (Sinfield, 2004, p. 269)

Sinfield uses the term 'gender identity' to highlight the perception that the self-identified sexuality of the sailor remains unaffected by the sexual act because of the gendered power dynamic. In contemporary society, there is a stronger emphasis on the anatomical sex of the participants. The concepts of 'same-sex' and 'opposite-sex' can only be maintained through the anatomical 'truth' of genitals. This is partly because shifts away from rigidly differentiated gender appearances mean that gender attribution is less certain. A recognisably feminine gender presentation would not outweigh the presence of a penis in the homosexual/heterosexual binary. In contemporary Western societies, heteronormativity depends on and reproduces the strict alignment of sex, gender *and* sexual object choice, which requires stable dichotomous categories in order to be intelligible.

When the normative alignment is disrupted in some way, it is commonly perceived as a threat to the hegemonic order, and to the social power and privilege that it confers. Attempts to defuse or eliminate the threat take a variety of forms, from repressive legislation to cultural containment. Sexual stereotypes provide a powerful ideological weapon for validating institutionalised and cultural discrimination, a means of marginalising alternative sexualities which the gender-bending films engage with in various ways. They utilise a range of intersecting stereotypes to make meaning on both narrative and ideological levels, to expose, accept or affirm normativity by contrasting it with variance. Whether the stereotypes are exploited and reiterated or, more occasionally, challenged, films serve to crystallise and document particular social conceptions about identity. Nonetheless, even in the films where an array of discriminatory stereotypes are deployed, there are inevitably fissures and gaps in

and around the text, as with any ideological construction, which enable negotiated or oppositional readings that resist the hegemonic heteronormative order.

The inter-relations between the various components of heteronormativity have resulted not only in particular combinations of stereotypes, but also in the transposition of stereotypes from one ideological axis to another, as when films use stereotypically 'feminine' behaviour and mannerisms to signify 'homosexuality'. The influential historical analyses of Parker Tyler (1972), Richard Dyer (1978) and Vito Russo (1981) that catalogued the stock collection of gay stereotypes employed in Hollywood films all pointed to 'the sissy' as the most dominant caricature. 'The sissy' stereotype characterises all gay men as effeminate, and is exploited as a useful form of shorthand, both for narrative expediency and for side-stepping censorship constraints. Many films exploit the dominant social belief that sex and gender are interchangeable, that because heteronormativity mandates that only women should have sex with men, it enables the syllogistic equation of wanting to have sex with a man with wanting to be a woman. Through this false logic, sexuality can be represented by gender, and homosexual becomes synonymous with effeminate. Many mainstream films reinforce this stereotype both by representing homosexuality through effeminacy, and by assuming that effeminacy will effectively signify homosexuality.

The same heteronormative 'logic' is also applied to lesbianism, rendering it synonymous with mannish, and using mannish costume, behaviour, and especially ambition, to signify lesbianism. However, representations of lesbianism are complicated in a way that representations of homosexuality are not, through the erotic stereotype of lesbians as the object of heterosexual male fantasy. In terms of gender, these two lesbian stereotypes are diametrically opposed. The 'mannish lesbian' is depicted as sexually unattractive (to men), both physically and in her supposed desire for the power and privileges of men. This is strongly contrasted with the stereotype of the 'sexy lesbian', who epitomises Western heterosexual standards of feminine beauty, and who is non-threatening because she is constructed as an object of male pleasure rather than a danger to patriarchal power. Depictions of female gender-crossing are rarer in mainstream films, the majority of which depict males transgressing the gender boundary. This may be unsurprising, in that it echoes the dominant focus on male homosexuality that is evident in a number of discourses, such as

sexology. However, the ideological implications of this marginalisation warrant consideration, since it reveals the disproportionate significance attached to the male-man-heterosexual alignment and emphasises its central role in maintaining the heteronormative patriarchal paradigm.

Gender and sexuality are intertwined so thoroughly in this system that they are considered inseparable, if not actually synonymous. As with gender, sexuality, despite its extraordinary myriad of manifestations, is also generally understood and reductively defined in terms of 'nature', with sexual identities restricted and condemned when they fall outside the moral norms of any given society. As Jackson and Scott observe, "Gender and sexuality are, of course, empirically related: sexuality is gendered in fundamental ways and gender divisions sustain, and are sustained by, normative heterosexuality" (2002, p. 20). Yet in order to understand both gender and sexual oppression, and their correlation, a theoretical distinction must be drawn between them. As one way of deconstructing the tightly woven interconnections between gender and sexuality, Chrys Ingraham developed the concept of 'the heterosexual imaginary'.

Althusser (1971) argues that the imaginary is that image or representation of reality which masks the historical and material conditions of life. The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organising institution. (1994, p. 203)

It is a theory that draws attention to the cultural practices through which heterosexuality is normativised, and denaturalises the institution of heterosexuality in order to reveal the power relations that shape its construction. Concepts such as the heterosexual imaginary and compulsory heterosexuality have been increasingly deployed to critique naturalised sexual hierarchies, as theorists from a range of disciplines have come to recognise that is vital to consider sexuality as an independent category, without denying its powerful role in the construction and maintenance of gender norms.

# CHAPTER 3

## BEYOND HETERONORMATIVITY

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According to Susan Stryker, “the word ‘transgender’ itself... took on its current meaning in 1992” following the publication of Sandy Stone’s ‘(Post)Transsexual Manifesto’ in 1991 (2006). It became an umbrella term that included transsexual, transgender, and transvestite people, as well as other non-normative gender identities (ibid., p. 4). Interestingly 1992 was the same year in which the trans rights group Press for Change was founded, and that Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* was released. Rita Felski identified this increased interest in transgender issues as being connected to the impending millennial rollover that produced a retrospective and prospective ontological reflexivity (2006). Patrick Califia suggests that “several factors combined in the mid-nineties to produce a change in the tone of transgender activism and its agenda,” such as widespread mobilisation against the pathologisation of trans people by the medical establishment, and the increasing visibility of trans people, which was partly the result of resistance to passing or ‘going stealth’ (2003, p. 223). The publication of *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler, and *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, both in 1990, suggest that this was a moment where an epistemological shift occurred in the established academic disciplines, producing theoretical developments that would have far-reaching implications for the queering of paradigms of sex, gender and sexuality.

### **I. Lesbian and Gay Rights Movements**

Developments in the theorisation of sexuality have been intricately wrapped up with the more public discourses of gay and lesbian political activism. Campaigns for gay and lesbian rights have had a higher profile in popular discourses than academic critiques of heterosexism and homophobia, and have filtered more rapidly into mainstream awareness of non-normative sexualities. The modern gay rights movement is understood as a struggle for rights recognition that emerged from the 1960s, contemporaneous with the rise of feminism and Black Power and their increasingly visible campaigns for racial and gender equality. These liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s achieved unprecedented visibility in part

because of the more public forms of activism that they employed – street marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts and picket lines. The gay rights movement that began in the 1960s forced homosexuality out of medical discourse and into the public space, constructing social and political discourses through alliances that enabled and were enabled by the new self-identification of gay.

The coalitions that formed created a sense of solidarity that provided increased visibility and a more powerful voice to marginalised sexual groups. The struggle for rights and recognition was not new, but the existing homophile movements had maintained a low profile.

The predominant lesbian and gay organizations, the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, focused primarily on self-help issues and did not launch political challenges. Instead, homophile activists tried to persuade psychological and religious authorities (and themselves) that homosexuality is neither a sickness nor a sin, in the hope that these professionals would then advocate for tolerance on behalf of homosexuals. (Bernstein, 2002, p. 541)

The homophile groups deliberately emphasised love over sex as part of their efforts to gain increased social acceptance by focussing on their shared humanity rather than their private sexual preferences. In striving for integration into mainstream society, they actively discouraged behaviour that reinforced the stereotypes of homosexuals as flamboyantly effeminate, indiscreet and promiscuous. The more radical liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s were critical of this assimilationist approach, choosing instead to celebrate diversity and visibility. Similarly to many feminist groups of this time, gay activists rejected assimilationist approaches in favour of liberation and even separatism, but it is a political disagreement that continues to play out in debates over gay rights, and has resurfaced particularly in relation to trans inclusion in gay rights campaigns.

The more revolutionary approach of Gay Liberation politics was centred on the idea of gay pride, actively increasing the profile of sexual minorities through public protests and by encouraging coming out. By choosing to identify themselves as gay rather than homosexual, people not only challenged the pathologising medical discourse by constructing a positive identity category, but also produced and emphasised a sense of gay culture and community. The dominant historical narrative represents the Stonewall riots in New York as the inciting moment for the mobilisation of the gay liberation movement, although there had been

increasing political resistance to institutionalised discrimination throughout the 1960s, such as the 1966 Compton Cafeteria riots in San Francisco (S. Stryker, 2008a). The rebellion of the drag queens, trans people, lesbians and gay men against police harassment and brutality that took place at Stonewall nevertheless serves a definitive function in the history of gay activism, as the pivotal point in terms of rallying community support, forging alliances and establishing organisations. Stonewall provides a mythic image of rebellion, the defining moment in which marginalised and bullied members of a sexual minority chose to resist.

The inclusive revolutionary zeal of Gay Liberation evolved into the more formalised approach of reformist civil rights movements. They sought to use official channels to achieve protection, and were “committed to working within the existing political system... [not] to deconstruct identity categories or to challenge stigma but only to gain rights and narrow protection from harm” (Bernstein, 2002, p. 549). Using a minority rights approach modelled on the black civil rights movement, gay rights organisations lobbied for recognition on a similar basis to the pre-1960s homophile movements, that gay people are the same as straight people in every way except their private sexual practices. In their effort to achieve minority influence, the reformist movements distanced themselves from those who were overtly transgressive, such as butch lesbians and drag queens, and rejected trans people as damaging to their cause of being accepted as ‘normal’ in mainstream society. As with contemporaneous feminist movements, the idea of a cohesive group was a strategic political tactic, but was equally fraught with the discriminatory effects of homogenisation. The resulting homonormativity, defined predominantly by gay, middle-class, white men, left a range of variant gender and sexual identities excluded and ignored by gay organisations as well as mainstream society and heteronormative institutions.

Mainstream resistance to campaigns for gay rights cemented homonormativity as an assimilationist strategy, creating “what political scholar Benedict Anderson described as ‘an imagined community,’ a community defined not by physical space and boundaries or the actual physical contact among its members but by the mental image of affinity” (Fejes, 2011, p. 215). In response a number of splinter groups began to emerge, in order to represent the interests and identities of those not acknowledged within the heteronormative-homonormative binary. Dominant gay and lesbian rights organisations became increasingly

tied to identity politics, establishing themselves as clearly defined minority groups, and driven by their own particular interests. Critics of identity politics argue that this approach perpetuates marginalisation, that full integration can never be achieved unless the system itself is changed (ibid). More radical LGBT activists have chosen to distance themselves from this political approach, rejecting the idea of being assimilated into the system where they will always be in the minority, instead opposing the system itself and its social construction of identity categories. The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s, and the attendant backlash against non-normative sexualities overshadowed many of the internal debates, necessitating new coalitions and activist strategies both to save lives and resist the vituperative stereotyping of, primarily, gay and bisexual men. The AIDS crisis accelerated resistance to the narrowness of the older gay rights movements, and the rise of more inclusive political approaches. These political shifts are again reflected through changes in language – the recuperation of ‘queer’ as unifying and affirming self-designation, and the evolution of increasingly inclusive acronyms, such as LGBTQ, to reflect a spectrum of human sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

The aims and tactics of gay and lesbian activism have changed according to broader socio-historical shifts, but have maintained a central focus on legal recognition and social acceptance. The legal agenda that initially focussed on removing institutionalised discrimination expanded to include achieving equal rights, and then to enacting official protection against discrimination. Cultural goals have emphasised raising awareness, increasing visibility, and developing frameworks through which to analyse and counteract homophobia. The anti-homophobic aims of gay and lesbian politics have begun to be reflected in some of the filmic representations of sexual and gender variance. Social scientists such as Dorothy Riddle have identified varying levels of tolerance towards non-normative identities, ranging from the fear and repulsion of overt homo-/transphobia, through heterosexism, to entirely positive nurturance (2007). Trans films, as expressions of cultural beliefs and anxieties, correspondingly reflect the same range of attitudes. In Riddle’s conceptualisation, tolerance and acceptance are also typed as negative because of the implied power dynamic of viewing sexual variance as something ‘other’ that needs to be accepted or

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<sup>1</sup> QUILTBAG is the most recent acronym, one which is increasingly popular, especially in online communities. It is seen to have more positive connotations, the idea of bag as inclusive but malleable, of quilt as comforting, and of many equally valued parts making a whole. For example, the ‘LGBT Club’ on the teenage site ‘The Cave of Dragonflies’ recently renamed themselves the ‘QUILTBAG Club’ (Queer/Questioning, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans, Bisexual, Asexual/Allies, and Gay/Genderqueer).

tolerated. It seems evident when considering the most extreme negative level (repulsion) in relation to mainstream horror and drama films that it can be broken down further into more specific responses: fear, anger, contempt and disgust. The other negative levels also apply to the levels of awkwardness experienced in the comedies in response to a trans character. While mainstream films have tended to exhibit negative attitudes towards sexual and gender variance, positive attitudes have begun to appear in popular texts. *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) is a high-profile filmic example that attempts to encode an attitude of appreciation; that is, beyond an acknowledgement that being transsexual in a judgemental heteronormative society takes great strength, the film celebrates diversity, and actively tries to combat transphobia. The attitudes that are embedded within films about gender variance can be seen as expressions both of particular, contextually specific social attitudes, and of the attitudes the imagined audience are presumed to have, not only in terms of gender and sexuality, but in relation to race and class as well.

## **II. Heterogeneous Identities**

The hegemonic sex-gender-sexuality model revolves around the naturalised ‘truth’ of heteronormativity at its centre, but more than that it is primarily *white male middle-class* heterosexuality that is normativised. The particular ways in which sexual ideology and other social belief systems interact, and the resulting configurations and experiences of power, have become increasingly pivotal in the critiques of heteronormativity. The interrelation of manifold axes of identity produces social patterns of dominance and oppression that are multidimensional. White male middle-class heteronormativity has been justified, defined and maintained through a nexus of derogatory stereotypes that have been formed at and depend on the intersections among sexuality, gender, race and class. For example, when sexual prejudice converges with patriarchal and bourgeois discrimination, it produces compound stereotypes with sexist/classist labels, such as the promiscuous lower-class tart, the sexually passive middle-class wife, and the seductively dangerous venal vamp/ whore. The intersections of gender, sexuality and class produce a particular ideological system, in which all people do not experience oppression in equal and identical ways. Both economic disempowerment and class stereotypes play a key role in producing and maintaining hierarchised gender roles. Ideas of the housewife, the nuclear family, and the separation of private and public realms are rooted in the ascendant middle class produced through Western

industrialisation. The interdependence of patriarchy and capitalism is considered critical to understanding heteronormativity

The resistance to white, middle-class normativity has not only been directed at patriarchy. Feminists of other races, ethnicities and nationalities and economic backgrounds became increasingly critical of the white, Western, middle-class interests of second-wave feminist theory and politics. These critiques converged with developments in postcolonialism, postmodernism and Marxist theory to mount an effective challenge to the homogeneity of the dominant feminist paradigm. New versions of feminism emerged that acknowledged diversity of identity and experience, and analysed the interconnections among axes of oppression. A similar process occurred in identitarian gay and lesbian rights movements. For example, Crenshaw argued that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite - that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences” (1991, p. 1).<sup>2</sup> The work of diversity theorists has subverted the universalising conceptions of women and gay, and the assumptions that gender and sexual categories are uniform, rather than lived and experienced in a variety of ways. Third-wave feminisms have exposed the irony of second-wave feminism’s resistance to biological essentialism as the root of patriarchy, since second-wave feminism was itself centred on the unified concept of ‘Woman’, a category which, by definition, was determined solely through biological sex. This homogeneous grouping was initially an effective political strategy in mobilising for women’s rights in general, but one which became increasingly unsustainable because of its obliviousness to the diverse needs and experiences of women who are not white, Western or middle-class, and more recently, transwomen who are not automatically considered members of the group from birth.

Intersectional<sup>3</sup> approaches have demonstrated the necessity of examining the dimension of race in shaping systems and experiences of heteronormative oppression. In their writings on black sexuality, bell hooks (1992, 1996), and Patricia Hill Collins (2005), have offered

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<sup>2</sup> This could just as easily be applied to the debates around identity politics and homogenising categories that have resurfaced in trans scholarship and activism, which has attracted the same accusations of white, middle-class bias.

<sup>3</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term ‘intersectionality’ to describe the interaction between race and gender in shaping the experiences of black women (2003).

detailed critiques of how racism and sexism combine to consign black female sexuality to the stereotype of the exoticised black Venus . The rapacious threat of the hypersexualised black man, the ‘buck’, is a stereotype that is also discussed by Collins in *Black Sexual Politics*, and satirically described by Donald Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* as a “bestial superstud” with a frenzied “lust for white flesh” (1974, p. 16). The perceived disjuncture between the stereotypes of black and white sexuality emerges from and reproduces the assumption of fixed and racialised genders, in which *white* sexuality is seen as prototypical. For practical and ideological reasons, various axes of identity are not all accorded equal significance or attention, in either hegemonic or dissident discourses. Systems of oppression emphasise different aspects of identity according to contextual requirements, and resistance movements necessitate the negotiation of competing tensions and loyalties. Michele Wallace argues that “the significance of black women as a distinct category is routinely erased by the way in which the Women’s Movement and the Black Movement choose to set their goals and recollect their histories... [In 1978] You weren’t supposed to talk about racial oppression and women’s oppression at the same time” (1999, p. xvii). Feminists of colour challenged the homogenising white bias of second-wave feminism and, in conjunction with the rising influence of post-colonialism and post-structuralism, instigated the shift to multiple subjectivities of third-wave feminism.

However, it was not only the bias *within* feminism that had to be contested, but the bias *against* it. Feminists of colour struggled against the perception within particular cultural discourses and race rights movements that feminism is a white interest. Gary Lemons goes so far as to suggest that “the single most virulent critique of black women in feminist movements has come with the perception by some black men that ‘feminism’ itself is a racist ideology solely fixed in a man-hating ideology ultimately leading to the castration and ‘feminisation’ of black men” (1998, p. 275). However, even when the value of feminism was acknowledged, issues of gender were still often considered to be secondary or entirely unrelated to struggles against racism. It was considered impractical and/or inadvisable to divide the focus and resources of resistance, suggesting that a side had to be chosen according to a perceived hierarchy of oppression. Recognition of the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and of multiple subjectivities has produced significant shifts in politics and theories of resistance, but the hierarchical tensions are still evident because of “the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of

social life and categories of analysis” (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). A comprehensive understanding of heteronormative discourses requires awareness of the multiple axes of identity, as well as the relative prominence of particular axes within specific contexts.

### III. Queer Theory

Queer theory is an articulating principle functioning in, across, between, and among various social domains and political experiences, and it is therefore consciously provisional and dynamic, strategic and mobilizing, rather than prescriptive or doctrinal. As such, it neither displaces nor makes redundant notions of gay, bisexual, or lesbian experience, but instead queries the field of identity politics into which these notions necessarily intervene, precisely by challenging what Phillip Brian Harper calls the "identic fixity" on which that politics is predicated. (Harper, McClintock, Muñoz, & Rosen, 1997, p. 1)

Queer theory has not always avoided the recurring traps of normativising middle-class whiteness, but its intended inclusivity, fluidity, and reluctance to fix identity have predisposed it towards an intersectional approach. Queer theory and politics have sought to integrate the various critiques of sex, gender and sexual normativity within a multicultural framework strongly influenced by the approaches of Foucault and Butler. The term itself is intended to be non-binary, non-gender-specific and non-traditional, enabling resistance to normativity without recourse to essentialist identity politics: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (Halperin, 1997, p. 62). The reappropriation of a nominal homophobic slur as a descriptive umbrella term for a range of non-normative identities was an act of resistance against heteronormative power that has rapidly achieved widespread, but not universal, cultural acceptance: "Queer is now embraced by many as a term that proudly flouts its deviance from the norm, its ability to interfere with and to thwart established social, political and philosophical conventions which privilege heterosexuality" (Carlin & DiGrazia, 2004, p. 1). The broad and relatively unfixed nature of the term, centred on the "complex and mobile" relations between gender and sexuality that was initially a source of confusion and concern has proved to be one of its greatest strengths (Jagose & Kulick, 2004, p. 2), as has queer theory's multidisciplinary appeal that results from the interaction of a number of discourses. Queer theory effectively engages with the issues around sex, gender and sexuality in a way that individual theories could not. As Joanne

Meyerowitz points out, “While feminism itself has changed substantially... it nonetheless remains, by definition (and for good political reason) centrally concerned with social justice for women... Neither feminism nor gay liberation (especially in their 1970s and 1980s identity-based forms) provided sufficient theory for queer accounts of sexuality or of gender” (2010, p. 101). Queer theory’s anti-normative<sup>4</sup> core enables critiques of homonormativity as well as heteronormativity, particularly in cases where identity politics produce prescriptive and discriminatory doctrines.

In *Gender Trouble*, one of the foundational texts in queer theory, Judith Butler constructs an integrated argument regarding the butch/femme subculture that contests its denunciation by some feminists as a politically unprincipled imitation of the inequitable heterosexual power dynamic.

The widely cited point that *Gender Trouble* made was the following: that categories like butch and femme were not copies of a more originary heterosexuality, but the showed how the so-called originals, men and women within the heterosexual frame, are similarly constructed, performatively established. So the ostensible copy is not explained through reference to an origin, but the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy. Through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized. But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or claim the place of symbolic necessity, and they do this by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established. (Butler, 2004, p. 209)

By repositioning butch/femme subculture as an anti-normative challenge to the intelligibility of naturalised gender and sexual norms, Butler reframes it as a demonstration of "the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (1990, p. 31). In so doing, she contests both feminist bias and heteronormativity, and introduces the highly influential concept of performativity to gender and queer studies. Butler uses it to challenge the underlying idea of categories as pre-existing or independent from their cultural configuration:

If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that post-pones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically

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<sup>4</sup> “When I say ‘normativity’, what I really mean is the terror of the normative: in its most benign form it appears as a bullying insistence toward obedience to social law and hierarchy, and in its most lethal form it carries the punishment of death for resistance to them” (Villarejo, 2005, p. 69).

relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement. (ibid.)

Butler uses an extension of the deconstructive method to address the multiplicity that is hidden in the constructed cultural idea of sex. She argues that multiple components make up the unified concept of sex – gonads, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, morphology – that are hidden behind the basic binary. Bodies are more than the sum of the various anatomical elements; they are physical realities, but queer theory exposes them as social and historical constructions as well.

One of Butler's most influential arguments is that the naturalised coherence of sex, gender and sexuality masks how these identities are "signifying practices" that are culturally constituted through reiterative performances (145). These identities are constructed through the repetition of stylised and involuntary acts, which are strongly regulated by society:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (198)

The constant performance of gender is what constructs gender – there is no underlying 'truth' to which it refers; it is instead an assemblage of acts through which the subject is constructed within socially accepted frameworks of intelligibility. This involuntary and continual process of citational practice that brings gender into being is what Butler refers to as performativity. Performativity has been mistakenly read as synonymous with performance by some critics of Butler's work, but the concept of performance differs most significantly in that it entails a conscious and finite presentation, and Butler emphasises gender performativity as both involuntary and perpetual. To elucidate this distinction, Butler focuses on drag performance as a way of revealing the limits *and* requirements of the naturalised conventions of gender performativity that underpin heteronormative discourses. In 'Critically Queer' she argues that

what is 'performed' in drag is, of course, *the sign* of gender, a sign which is not the same as the body it figures, but which cannot be read without it... The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders...but rather with the exposure of the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals. (1993a, p. 26)

The sexed body is also constructed through the repetition of discursive and regulatory processes that categorise and differentiate a multiplicity of somatic elements into apparently coherent and natural binaries.<sup>5</sup> Butler wishes to reconsider the body, not as “a ‘being’, but as a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (189). The concept of bodies as regulated surfaces is one that has had significant influence on trans theories advocating for the recognition and protection of trans bodies, and trans films seeking to explore how variable those boundaries are. Such films stand in stark contrast to those comedies and horrors that test gender, but still present (and depend on) dichotomously sexed bodies as indisputable and immutable and which function as ultimate and inviolable proof of identity. Trans films provide a revealing point of intersection between gender performance and performativity, with gender-variant characters effectively exposing through performance the citational conventions of performativity.

Despite the theoretical persuasiveness of Butler’s argument, the foundational role it has played in queer studies in general, and queer theory in particular, has inevitably elicited critiques from writers who cannot avoid engaging with her work. Jackson and Scott, for example, claim that “Butler does not consider social structures. Hence she does not address the question of *why* gender is hierarchical... She fails to ask *how* it is possible to sustain it in everyday interaction” (2002, p. 20). This criticism understandably reflects their disciplinary interest in social structure over language, but doesn’t engage with the fundamental inter-relationships between social structures and discursive construction that Butler’s work emphasises. Some of the most vocal critiques of Butler’s work come from trans theorists, who engage with her work in great detail, and also embrace many aspects of it. Namaste (2000) and Prosser (1998) object to Butler’s theory as undermining the ‘realness’ of gender in the lives of trans people and disregarding the importance of gender fixity for some transsexuals. Namaste is particularly critical of Butler’s non-contextual discussion of drag, which she considers to be an artificial suspension of drag from the realities of everyday life. Prosser is

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<sup>5</sup> Butler’s ideas regarding the cultural construction of both sex and gender produce an interesting point of convergence with certain strands of anthropology; in particular there is a resonance with the arguments put forward by ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel in his 1967 case study of ‘Agnes’, an mtf transsexual. Agnes’ passing rendered visible the achievement of sex that is usually invisible, highlighting how sex is accomplished, not given, and gender is always a combination of performance and interpretation; they are both managed constructions, which is usually not acknowledged in the naturalised sexual binary (Garfinkel, 2006).

also particularly critical of Butler's discussion of Venus Xtravaganza in 'Gender is Burning' (1993b), accusing Butler of allegorising her to justify a theoretical position instead of engaging with the realities of her life and death. However, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* are works of philosophy, not ethnographic anthropology, and the enduring significance of *Gender Trouble* in particular lies partly in the fact that it has relevance in so many disciplines, that it can intersect with ethnographic concerns at all.

In response to these critiques, Butler's later work therefore expands to consider both doing and undoing gender. *Undoing Gender* (2004) is an appeal to imagine other forms of gender, as well as a consideration of how gender variance undoes personhood in the eyes of the dominant. Gender variance is unintelligible to the dominant groups, and consequently not only oppressed but rendered entirely invisible:

To be called a copy, to be called unreal, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that. To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject, but to be unreal is something else again. To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human. (ibid., p. 30)

Butler uses this idea to explain why transphobic violence is not recognised, is in fact sometimes "inflicted by the very states that should be offering such subjects protection from violence" (ibid.). It is an argument that Butler applies to *Boys Don't Cry* in order to illustrate the violent consequences of cultural illegibility, but it is also an important consideration in terms of mainstream film representations of fictional trans characters: that even negative or misguided portrayals prevent invisibility by acknowledging possibility.

The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has also had a powerful influence on queer conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, primarily *Epistemology of the Closet*, her queer critique of the inequitable impact of the homo/heterosexual definitions central to modern society (1990). Sedgwick attempts to denaturalise the complacent understanding of sexuality according to object choice by focussing on the multiplicity of ways in which sexuality is experienced and valued, arguing that "sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren't

well-described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all” (ibid., p. 23). By offering a decentred perspective, Sedgwick’s analysis encourages the development of an anti-homophobic theory for understanding the silencing and erasure, and also the necessity, of homosexuals in Western culture, as well as the intersections between sex, gender and sexuality that are enabled by the homo/heterosexual definition. The ‘closet’ that Sedgwick identifies as definitive in the Western literary canon is analogous in many ways to the position of gayness in Hollywood film that Vito Russo describes in *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), enacting similar suppression, punishment or ridicule of non-normative identities, yet at the same time maintaining their constant presence as part of the organising system of heteronormativity as defined through difference. Sedgwick presents her anti-homophobic project as fundamental to understanding all forms of sexuality in modern Western culture, emphasising the importance of queerness for understanding the shifting and multiple nature of identities.

Sedgwick’s ground-breaking argument in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) emphasises that we should not underestimate the importance and significance of the homosocial and the homoerotic, that we all need to be alert to queerness. This is an idea that has clear applicability when transposed from literature to film, and applied for example, to the relationship between Joe and Jerry in *Some Like It Hot*, or between Michael and Jeff in *Tootsie*. The conjunction of these homosocial relationships with the cross-dressing plot element overdetermines the queer moment in heteronormative apparatus. All mainstream trans films embrace, to some degree, Sedgwick’s first axiom in *Epistemology of the Closet*, that people are different (1990, p. 22). These films depend on the presence of difference, whether temporary or sustained, celebrated or condemned, in order to have narrative meaning. This recognition of ontological multiplicity between and within people is as crucial in a filmic context as it is within the literary one that Sedgwick analyses. Critical emphasis on normativity and hegemonic constancy within these films often results in a failure to recognise the presence of difference, and Sedgwick’s assertion that “if taken seriously as pure *difference*... the things that can differentiate people... [retain] the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of available thinking” (1990, p. 25). This concept of ‘unaccounted-for potential’ resonates strongly with the focus of this project, as does the implied appeal in Sedgwick’s work to celebrate the liminal and the interstitial.

Sedgwick's influence on queer theory more broadly can be traced to the observations and warnings about normativity contained in her work, such as her insistence that gender and sexuality be treated independently, but with an open mind to the possible intersections between them, and her argument that nature/nurture debates are self-defeating. For Sedgwick, the assumptions inherent in either of these positions are problematic and potentially dangerous because of their lack of plurality, as are the implications of both the 'minoritising' and 'universalising' positions pursued in gay and lesbian politics. These arguments, like Butler's, are reflected in the determined inclusivity of subsequent queer theories. Sedgwick's approach also converges with Butler's in her emphasis on constative versus performative utterances, as respectively describing something already in existence and bringing something into existence. Sedgwick argues that categorising is not useful, instead advocating analysis of the performative effects of speech acts. Jerry's repeated assertion of gender identity in *Some Like It Hot* – "I'm a girl, I'm a girl" then later "I'm a boy, I'm a boy" – can be seen to corroborate this argument about the significance of the performative utterance, which appears independently in both Butler's and Sedgwick's work, and which has become a consistent tenet of queer theory.

As queer theory and politics have become conceptually coherent, however, they have been interpreted as too stable or too theoretical by more radical sexual and gender dissidents, who choose to identify themselves as operating beyond the perceived stability of mainstream queer theory. Genderfuck, for example, is a conscious use of gender performance explicitly intended to manipulate and destabilise the conventions of heteronormativity. It acts to expose and deliberately disrupt the naturalised insistence and dependence on gender as culturally intelligible that Butler identified, extending theory into practice. By refusing acceptable gender intelligibility, the group allegiances of identity politics, and stable and coherent identity categories and roles, genderfuck mocks the very concept of sex, gender and sexual categories:

Better to acknowledge patriarchy and undermine from within, gently erode, recognize discrepancies, play with the roles, the language and the symbols, and let the play itself rob them of their terrifying power... We are defined not by who we are but by what we do. This is effectively a politics of performance. It neither fixes nor denies specific

sexual and gendered identifications but accomplishes something else. (LeMasters, cited in Reich, 1992, p. 112)

This form of activism deliberately exposes sex, gender and sexual identities not only as performative (enacting gender), but as performance (acting gender). “The question fueling this investigation of genderfuck is: ‘What is the difference between a woman with a strap-on and a man?’” (Reich, 1992, p. 117). It is a question that forces apart the connections between anatomy, gender and sexuality as definable categories. The denial of stable identity is in itself a critique of the lack of alternative language with which to critique dominant social discourses:

Genderfuck could be said to be the effect of unstable signifying practices in a libidinal economy of multiple sexualities. The production of a recognizable genderfuck paradigm, effected by camp ‘realness’, alters the contextual process of signification by foregrounding the gap between sex and gender and producing different models of interpretation through different writing/reading practices. Genderfuck, as mimetic, subversive performance, simultaneously traverses the phallic economy and exceeds it. (ibid., p.125)

This disruptive mimesis is perhaps easier to effect through visual signification that can operate outside of language, where slippages and gaps can be shown that defy heteronormative attempts to name and categorise identities through recognised and accepted labels.

The twenty years that have passed since the inauguration of queer studies have seen such a proliferation of writing in the area that several scholars have begun to question the continued viability of queer as conceptual framework. Queer is seen on the one hand to have stagnated and solidified, and on the other hand, as having revealed its self-defeating nature, inherent in its lack of specificity. A *GLQ* issue in 2005 was dedicated to the question, “What’s queer about queer studies now?” (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005a). David Ruffolo (2009) has gone so far as to posit a post-queer politics, in which he advocates a move away from queer as an identity to queering as process. This is based on an idea of mutability that has been a part of the concept of queer since its inception:

Queer theory has played an important role in developing understandings of subjectivity that focus on its multiplicities and fractures: subjectivity in this sense is seen as ever-changing rather than fixed, and thus as flexibly deployed towards particular ends in everyday interactions. The purpose of such theorising is in part to demonstrate how particular (sexual) identities achieve hegemony, and how others are

positioned as deviant. Queer theory also questions sexual and gendered categories themselves, and interrogates how they are involved in maintaining hierarchical relations. (Riggs, 2006, para. 14)

Although there appear to be some questions about whether it is still in effect, there is no doubt that it needs to be. In looking at gender-variant film, it seems less useful merely to catalogue the characters by assigning particular identity labels to them than to examine the processes through which sex, gender, and sexuality are queered, and the queering of representations themselves provides a much more dynamic understanding of the shifting engagements with stable normative categories.

#### **IV. Trans Studies**

If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favour sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim. (Susan Stryker, 2004, p. 212)

'Transsexual' is used at times to acknowledge deliberate resistance to particular universalising positions in trans theory and politics. This includes, for example, objections to the assumption that trans should be/is always a rejection of gender fixity and stable categories, or that trans is by default synonymous with transgression. The continued intersections and debates in sexological, anthropological, feminist and queer theory have helped to shape contemporary trans theory, politics and narratives, enabling a range of developments within the area, but at the same time unintentionally bequeathing many of their own flaws, restrictions and disputes. For example, as Susan Stryker points out, "Sex-positive, protoqueer feminism sometimes made the mistake of regarding transgender merely as an erotic practice rather than as something potentially more expansive, as an expression of self or a mode of embodiment that could not be reduced simply to sexuality any more than *woman* could" (2010, p. 82). The emergence of collective trans politics in the early 1990s revolved primarily around the struggle for recognition within not only heteronormative social groups, but within the feminist, gay, queer and race discourses that opposed it. Trans people were (and are) often seen as a threat to the stability or political aims of established identitarian groups. A broad coalition was a key strategy in this struggle, along with continuous efforts to reverse the invisibility of trans people. The range of identities, experiences and interests that fall under the trans umbrella mean that there are many

disagreements within trans theory and politics as well. The anti-normative approaches of some transgender theorists comes into direct conflict with transsexual approaches that value and relate to normative social discourses. The relative newness of trans studies has limited its impact on the mainstream, but it is increasingly evident that the process of diffusion has begun, with some highly publicised trans figures appearing in popular culture. Despite the recent emergence of trans studies as a relatively coherent discipline, a diverse academic groundwork has been laid down over a much longer time in which trans activists have engaged with the various discourses discussed above.

Trans theory and politics experienced a surge of activity in the wake of Sandy Stone's article taking a stand against feminist transphobia (2006). Stone's direct response to Janice Raymond's diatribe against transsexuals was a founding moment in the development of trans theory. She takes a critical view of the medical insistence on compliance with binary gender stereotypes in order to be granted the right to sex reassignment surgery, and has endeavoured to create an independent discursive space for transsexual subjectivities and cultures. One of the most controversial aspects of Stone's position is her call for transsexuals not to pass in order to create awareness and increase political visibility, with a longer view of attaining gender transcendence, not just enabling gender transgression. The perceived political need for visibility is clearly incompatible with the desire to pass in mainstream society, highlighting the multiplicity of identities and intentions contained within trans as a collective category. As with other political and theoretical movements, trans studies has been challenged to recognise heterogeneity resulting from varied intersections of gender and sexuality with race, class and ethnicity. Gloria Anzaldua has engaged with the intersection of race and gender variance, developing the concept of the borderland, which exposes the conflicting dimensions of consciousness experienced by border-dwellers caught between competing discourses. She has explored ways of using her awareness of this multiplicitous, fragmented self to create the possibility of resistance, by refusing to choose between dominant discourses, but instead combining the non-hegemonic elements of each.

In addition to the ontological multiplicity evinced by some trans theorists, trans studies itself is characterised by a range of methodological approaches that reflect its varied discursive and disciplinary influences. Leslie Feinberg (1997), for example, following in the tradition of

Foucault, Weeks, and Laqueur, has historicised transgender by tracing the continuing presence of trans people throughout history, as a way of both encouraging trans visibility and acknowledging the central role trans people have played in a range of movements for social change. Kate Bornstein (1994) has also emphasised the importance of visibility in her work, although she has a contemporary, performance-based focus. In contrast, Jay Prosser (1998) has defended the desire of some transsexuals to assimilate into mainstream society, and resists the insistence on using transsexual lives as allegorical evidence of the constructedness of sex and gender. He works to validate the aspirations of those people who want to achieve a fixed and stable identity rather than embrace fluidity and resistance, an approach similar in some ways to Judith Halberstam's transgender critique of the postmodern privileging of unfixed identities, although Halberstam allows for a degree of mutability, since she claims that no gender identity can ever be static (2005b). Prosser's specific focus on the somatic materiality of transsexual experiences limits the applicability of his argument to transgender identities in a broader sense, especially those who celebrate fluidity, or who have no interest in surgical transformation. However, his emphasis on the importance of autobiographical narratives, which he defends against accusations of being surgery justifications, has been taken up and adapted by other theorists in ways that do not set the expression of subjectivity in opposition to queer performativity. The significance of his argument is illustrated by the lack of autobiographical trans narratives in mainstream film.

Judith Halberstam argues for a broader understanding of trans embodiment, including reclaiming masculinity from straight white men, as well as for ways of queering time, space and representation. Halberstam's conceptualisation of 'female masculinity' came under heavy criticism in the 'ftm/butch border wars' (to use Halberstam and Hale's term). The 'true' identity of Brandon Teena also became a major point of conflict in this area with both transgender and lesbian activists attempting to claim 'ownership' of the murder victim. Hale (1998) provided a detailed discussion of ftm assumptions about butches – that as a form of masculinity it is inauthentic and superficial, easily divested, "like a jacket or a strap-on dildo" (p. 326). This is in contrast to the supposedly 'genuine' ftm masculinity that expresses an 'inner' identity (ibid.). Hale draws a critical distinction between identifying *with* and identifying *as*, arguing that "the butch/ftm border wars are contestations built on ftm and lesbian 'frontier fears' about consolidating identity, creating safe spaces and communities, policing (containing and regulating, claiming and disowning) oppressive or excessive

masculinities – all downwind from the rotting carcasses of purity discourses” (p. 331). The backlash against Halberstam’s ‘F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity’ suggests resistance to the existence of a multitude of interstitial identities that Halberstam posited, identities which are illegible within the dominant gender and sexual paradigms. Halberstam’s and Prosser’s approaches exemplify the oppositional positions of the ‘border wars’, with one side mounting a challenge to the assumption that transsexuality is superior to the gender play of transgender.

## V. Passing and Visibility

The 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. (Stone, 2006, p. 231)

The fight for women’s liberation had profound repercussions for gender and sexual identity, in epistemological and political arenas, even if there was often an underlying presumption of an inherent biological dichotomy. In seeking to free sex from gender, the feminist movement fought to ensure that the biological opposition could no longer function as a valid justification for patriarchal oppression which denied women their rights through their bodies. Ironically, as Prosser has pointed out, many trans people who wish to pass in mainstream society are now striving to reinstate the privacy of the personal, rejecting the tendency by feminist and queer theorists to theorise and appropriate trans individuals as transgressive exemplars for their liberationist arguments against heteronormative essentialism.<sup>6</sup> The concept of passing is a heavily loaded one, not least because it has been adopted from race debates, and hence has inherited some of the negative connotations, such as complicity with the oppressor, and self-serving interest in accessing the advantages of the dominant group.

However, the advantage of passing as way of escaping oppression and persecution is also acknowledged by pro-visibility theorists such as Prosser (1998), Stone (2006) and Jamison Green (2006), and the debates around passing elicit a range of responses from within the trans

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Hale (1998) and Jay Prosser (1998) in particular are outspoken critics of these theoretical approaches.

community.<sup>7</sup> Schlossberg points out that “because an accurate reading of the queer body can, in many social and political contexts, result in obviously terrible consequences (even unto death), passing becomes a form of passive resistance, one that protects the gay subject from hostile interpretations” (2001, p. 3). The reality of this danger is demonstrated explicitly in the case of Brandon Teena, the subject of *Boys Don’t Cry*, who was safe when successfully passing as a man, but who was threatened, assaulted, and finally murdered when his trans identity became known. At the same time, the dominant groups in terms of race, sex, gender, and sexuality rigorously guard access to and defend their privileged position: “As power and prestige are at stake, societies may go to some lengths to survey and control social transitions between these liminal positions” (Herdt, 1996, p. 60). Corporeal intelligibility is strictly regulated as a way of defending these positions, and passing has become a pivotal point of conflict and anxiety within trans theory and politics because of the challenge it presents to the normative boundaries. In order to achieve cultural, legal and institutional changes, trans people have to be a visible and vocal force. Ironically, this is in direct opposition to the aspirations of many trans people to avoid attention and blend in to mainstream society, as an affirmation of their identities as they perceive them, and as a necessary survival strategy in a violently homophobic society. On the one hand the increasing visibility of non-normative identities “normalises the presence of alternative identities and significantly alters understanding and environment for young people coming out” but it “has also resulted in larger, more conservative, more vehement backlash” (Sender, 2006). Green describes this complicated matrix of benefits and risks as “the visibility dilemma” (2006). It is the paradox in which trans people pass to avoid violence and to reflect their convictions about their own identities, but at the same time they can only gain officially recognised rights and protection from violence by first making themselves visible. In consequence, the requirement for transgender to be visible as a political strategy has become a faultline between and within trans and queer studies.

The issue of visibility and its relation to power, knowledge, and identity stand at the centre of the passing debates, and are a central consideration of this project. As has become clear through these debates, being visible is neither simple nor uncontested: it “is a complex

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the forum discussion ‘Is passing really such a bad word?’ on Strap-on.org (“Is Passing Really Such a Bad Word?” 2008).

system of permission and prohibitions, of presence and absence” (Gordon, 1996, p. 15). In her introduction to an anthology on passing in relation to race, gender and religious identities, Linda Schlossberg argues that

Theories and practices of identity and subject formation in Western culture are largely structured around a logic of visibility, whether in the service of science (Victorian physiognomy), psychoanalysis (Lacan’s mirror stage), or philosophy (Foucault’s reading of the Panopticon). At the most basic level, we are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty... Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits around which identity categories are established and maintained – even as it may seem to result in the disappearance or denial of a range of ‘minoritized’ or queer identities. (2001, p. 1)

How one is visible, why, and in what context are of critical importance, since visibility can be an incitement to surveillance, discipline, and voyeurism as well as route to knowledge and acknowledgement. As such, visibility within a culture of heteronormative dominance is often required by dominant groups and institutions as a means to “locate and define bodies so as to regulate (and perhaps punish) them” (Casper & Moore, 2009, p. 3). The queer refusal to present an intelligible sexual or gender identity is intended to resist this authoritarian control, while the queer call for visibility is intended to challenge the authority that exerts this control and refuses rights and recognition for identities that it cannot define.

The concomitant processes and effects of *invisibility* are therefore also crucial in these debates. Who is invisible and whose images are missing from mainstream culture reveals a great deal about the values and prejudices of that society. Just as there are hazards relating to visibility, there are “interconnections between invisibility, vulnerability, risk, and power” (Casper & Moore, 2009, p. 16). In their analysis of bodies that are “invisible, that have disappeared, or whose absence is unaccounted for and not remarked on in popular culture,” Casper and Moore argue that all bodies are not created equal, and as a result the ones that are not valued or that are feared are erased or obscured (*ibid.*, p. 3). At the same time, some bodies are over-exposed and “assigned political value at the expense of others” (p. 14). Cultural texts are consequently dominated by the bodies that are valued most, those of white heterosexual men. As a result of this dominance, they are the identities that retain their privileges and remain normative, what Peggy Phelan (1993) describes as ‘unmarked’. Another critical effect of invisibility is that the concealment of those bodies that are socially

unacceptable or illegible creates and maintains “a constant state of fear without evidence... [because] these bodies assume a monstrous quality” (p. 184). Schlossberg likewise argues that the danger of having an identity that is invisible or unreadable is that it “leads, in the cultural imagination, to paranoid fantasies” (2001, p. 2). The horror films discussed in Chapter 5 could be seen as expressions of these fantasies, as attempts to make the ‘monster’ visible, but within the safely contained cinematic space.

The complexities and tensions of visibility and invisibility clearly resonate strongly with filmic representations of gender variance. Convincing and intelligible gender presentation in heteronormative cultures involves concealing the processes of gender construction, processes that trans films necessarily render visible in order to make gender variance an explicit element of the narrative. The economic dimension of gender construction is seldom addressed in trans films, in which the cost and availability of accessories such as clothes, wigs and make-up are rarely an obstacle, or even a consideration. Furthermore, as Skeggs points out, “To construct a sense of autonomy through clothing a particular form of consumer knowledge is required” (2004, p. 314). This has profound implications for those striving to construct the dominant or most-empowered model of femininity, which is usually constructed as particularly middle-class. The efforts of characters within the gender-bending films usually glide over many of the details of producing a gender presentation that is entirely convincing, and thus invisible. In actuality, very few of the cross-dressing disguises are intended to be undetectable to the audience, only to other characters within the diegesis. When films do represent the cultural and consumer knowledge required to construct an intelligible gender, it is invariably in an attempt to emphasise the profound and exclusive differences between the systems of expertise that men and women possess.

As a political strategy, genderqueer, and its more aggressive counterpart genderfuck, can be considered as directly opposing invisibility and highlighting performative construction in similar ways to trans films. Genderqueer presentation deliberately constructs itself as unintelligible within mainstream binary paradigms: “Genderqueers disrupt the binary gender system in the visual realm by challenging spectators’ expectations about their appearance” (Coffman, 2010, p. 22). The term deliberately highlights gender and underplays sexuality in an attempt to disrupt categorical readings of gender, and prevent the consequent assumptions

regarding sex and sexuality. The films that employ cross-sex casting can generally be seen as genderqueer in their similarly intentional destabilisation of heteronormative binary alignment. The element of visual performability that is presented as intrinsic to transgender identity necessitates an analysis of the construction of images in cinematic representations. The advantages and disadvantages of proclaiming gender identity through images have been a source of debate in transgender politics, particularly in relation to the politics of 'passing' (Stone, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Whittle, 2000). The concepts of performance and image take on added meaning when gender-crossing and film converge, and the issues around gender attribution are highlighted through the construction of the text.

To foreground the issue of gender-crossing in the narrative, the transgender character has to be visible, convincing but not too convincing, to ensure both awareness and immersion for the audience. While awareness is the first step, it means little in itself; what is crucial is the level and type of engagement with that character. The presence of a transgender central character is not automatically transgressive, and what is critical is the films' contestation of normative binary sex and gender categories, on more than a surface level; otherwise, the films inevitably end up reinforcing those categories as natural binaries. The representation of the challenges and processes of transgender identity, along with the resolution offered, determine the extent to which the films destabilise or reinforce the gender status quo, and how successfully they engage with issues of identity beyond the level of the surface. What are the mechanisms employed in film to portray alternative gender identities beyond what can be externally represented, and what does that suggest about how gender is socially produced and interpreted? How successfully can a trans identity be represented on screen without it falling back onto recognised biological, behavioural and social codes for 'man' and 'woman'?

# CHAPTER 4:

## COMEDY

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The gender-crossing comedy films are not concerned with the realities of trans experiences, but they nonetheless invoke and effectively expose a number of socially constructed boundaries, and the difficulties of negotiating across and around them. Most of the comedies reaffirm these boundaries, primarily through their narrative return to the heteronormative status quo, often encoded with sexism and homophobia. The failure to reject conservative gender norms, or worse the re-inscription of those norms, has resulted in critical censure among many feminist, queer and trans theorists, often well-deserved. However, to reject these films outright as a result of their overall conservatism is to risk falling into the continuist trap that Jeffrey Weeks identifies and forget “the macroscopic impact of subtle changes... that makes up the unfinished revolutions of our time” (2008, p. 31). It is notable that the characters are always improved in some way by their transgressive gender experiences, and the popularity of these transformative narratives should not be disregarded. They clearly resonate with a fascination or fantasy around gender variability that is widespread among mainstream audiences, and is fulfilled by indulging in an imaginative exploration of gender categories. Regardless of the attitude exhibited towards heteronormative conventions by the narrative, these films play a crucial role in rendering boundaries visible and defamiliarising naturalized assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality.

Trans comedies function as a form of sanctioned disruption of the normative order, revealing slippages in the dominant cultural discourse by examining its logic and effects. This disruptive ambiguity is a key element of the act of transgression, which “involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories” (Jervis, 1999 p.4). Under the aegis of humour, these films explore the rules and limits of gender intelligibility, for example, by foregrounding assumptions about the clothing, accessories, demeanour, and gestures deemed appropriate for men and women within a naturalised gender binary. By exposing and unsettling hegemonic heteronormative beliefs, they can produce what Garber describes as a ‘category crisis’ in received wisdom, “disrupting

and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (1992, p. 16). Garber explains the ‘category crisis’ as “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border-crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another,” which impacts not only gender, but other social categories, such as race, class, and religion (ibid). The trans comedies engage, to varying degrees, in a complication of the categories and hierarchy of gender, introducing ambiguity, revelling in the interstitial spaces that they create, and highlighting the permeability of constructed and constricting gender conventions. As these temporary, ritualised rebellions occur within the conventional cultural medium of mainstream film, it is perhaps inevitable that they attempt to re-establish the status quo. In this regard the narrative resolution is often an important, even over-determined gesture, but disruption cannot necessarily be so neatly contained. It is valuable to consider these comedic transgressions not only as temporarily disrupting the dominant social order, but also revealing its very existence, and it may be difficult to re-cover the boundaries once they have been made visible in such a popular cultural form.

When the American Film Institute released its list of the hundred funniest films ever made, the top two places were both held by gender-bending comedies – *Some Like it Hot* in first place, and *Tootsie* in second place (“American Film Institute,” 2011).<sup>1</sup> This is a striking illustration of the enduring influence of these two films as the generic templates for trans comedy films, but also indicates the immense popular appeal of gender transgression as a comedic device. Trans comedies exploit heteronormative assumptions and conventions to create humour through sex/gender disjuncture and sexual misdirection, and can therefore be interpreted as providing a carnivalesque inversion of gender hierarchies and access to socially taboo experiences and pleasures. Carnavalesque is a concept primarily derived from Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, which provided “the broad development of the ‘carnavalesque’ into a potent, populist, critical inversion of *all* official words and hierarchies” (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p.7). It is an artistic mode in which the transgression and subversive celebration

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<sup>1</sup> *Mrs Doubtfire* also featured at number 67 and *Victor/Victoria* at number 76. Several key gender-bending films appeared on the other AFI lists: *Some Like it Hot* was number 14 on the overall list of ‘100 Greatest Films’, with *Psycho* at 18, *Tootsie* at 62, and *The Silence of the Lambs* at 65; the final line of *Some Like it Hot* was the 48<sup>th</sup> best quote. Norman Bates was second on the list of top villains, beaten only by Hannibal Lecter (with Clarice Starling was at number 6 on the lists of heroes), but *Psycho* held the top position as the most thrilling film of all time (“American Film Institute,” 2011).

of Medieval carnivals, centred on ritual spectacle, laughter, and the grotesque body, have survived. Stallybrass and White identify the carnivalesque as a resilient, populist, and subversive celebration of the elements of society that are marginalised or suppressed, a literary expression of the social practice of carnival:

On the one hand carnival was a specific calendrical ritual: carnival proper, for instance, occurred around February each year... On the other hand carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century. (ibid., p. 15)

In Bakhtin's analysis, he argues that "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (1984, p. 10). Although Bakhtin's work is concerned almost exclusively with class hierarchies, his description could equally be seen as applying to heteronormative hierarchies identified by feminist and queer theorists, such as Gayle Rubin's 'charmed circle'.

Carnavalesque also offers a useful point of intersection between social practice and artistic form, and the "carnival becomes the literary 'carnavalesque' through a partial subordination to an ordering discourse" (Hall, 1985, p. 128). In the case of trans films as carnivalesque, the ordering discourse is most noticeable in the well-established and recognised genre conventions that structure and attempt to contain these representations. As genre texts produced predominantly by mainstream Hollywood, these structured subversions have tended to be denigrated as essentially conservative texts that use temporary transgression as a means of re-establishing heteronormative authority. This bears a marked similarity to critiques levelled at the carnivalesque and, as Stallybrass and White have observed, the "most politically thoughtful commentators wonder... whether the 'licensed release' of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes" (1986, p. 13). However, they argue decisively that "it actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves false essentialising of carnivalesque transgression." (ibid., p. 14). This argument applies equally well to prevailing critiques of mainstream trans films as licensed complicity, as they reveal a similar tendency to make definitive judgements that rely on reading the films as ideologically monovalent and monolithic. Yet, as Julian Wolfreys argues,

carnival is both transgressive *and* authorized, it is both critical of social order and complicit with it... [but] the ambiguity of the carnivalesque renders a single reading of it undecidable... We must comprehend carnival not as a form of universal political response to conditions of political oppression and containment, but instead as an ongoing strategic interruption in social norms, in ideological containment, and in corporeal order and propriety” (2002, p. 28-29).

Using a similar approach to understand trans films allows for an investigation of the multiple ways in which they can construct and deconstruct meaning, and both contain and fail to contain transgression.

Gender constraints, like all systems of social power, place pressure upon those who are subject to them, and the ubiquity of heteronormative regulation means that no-one is exempt from that pressure. Humour, particularly the temporary chaotic revelry of the carnivalesque, has long served as a way to relieve the strain of normative conformity and it is unsurprising that this social ‘safety valve’ should have found its way into the popular cultural medium of film. The temporary and contained escape that film can offer makes it well-suited to the expression of the carnivalesque impulse. In so doing, film functions in many instances to facilitate the preservation of the dominant ideologies regarding sex, gender and sexuality, but at the same time exposes cracks in the ideological surface. Any depiction of the non-normative necessarily and inevitably also reveals the boundaries and values of normativity. Marcel Detienne suggests that “to discover the complete horizon of a society’s symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, its deviants” (in Stallybrass & White, p. 19). In addition, as Chris Jenks points out, “the nature of the social reaction [to transgression] reveals the common symbols and shared taboos” (2003, p. 20). Mainstream trans films can therefore be read as a way of making not only marginalised identities visible, but also the social values and structures that render them marginal to begin with. The licenced subversion used in carnivalesque comedy can function to expose (and mock) the naturalized conventions and constraints of heteronormativity and provide the opportunity to imagine transgressive alternatives.

In looking at the trans comedies, it is crucial to consider the socio-political assumptions that underpin the idea that gender-crossing is humorous, and to acknowledge the dangers of representing gender variance as a joke. Patriarchal power relations afford men and cissexuals

privileged social, financial and legal status, and while the trans horror films depict the dangerous monstrosity of deviating from the norm, the trans comedies imply the absurdity of men abandoning their privileged position, and ridiculousness of women trying to access that privilege. The relative dominance of male-to-female crossing in the comedies suggests that this form is still considered more humorous than female-to-male. This can be interpreted as both a defence of patriarchal power, by mocking any disruption of it, and as an indication that the gender conventions for men are narrower and more rigid, and that any breach is therefore that much more noticeable. Clothing, as a highly visible site of gender presentation, exemplifies the regulation of gender; while a female in full drag is still considered unusual, it is considered far more acceptable in Western society for a woman to wear pants than for a man to wear a dress. It is seen as understandable that a woman might attempt to access the privileges afforded to men, but as ludicrous that any man would choose to give them up. However, to reduce trans comedies to a question of trousers and dresses would be a misleading oversimplification.

Comedic imaginings of trans identities and experiences, as the most dominant generic form, have produced two recognizably idiosyncratic sub-genres, commonly known as ‘cross-dressing comedy’ and ‘body-switching’.<sup>2</sup> These comedies employ an established set of iconographic, thematic, and narrative conventions, almost always concluding with an overt affirmation of heteronormativity. In cross-dressing comedies, the gender transgression is usually represented as resulting from circumstantial necessity rather than from a sense of dissonant identity, a common plot device that Marjorie Garber (1992) describes as ‘the progress narrative’ and Chris Straayer (1996) as ‘the temporary transvestite film’. As Annette Kuhn points out, “sexual disguise must usually be accounted for” (Kuhn, 1985, p. 57). Garber explains the “progress narrative” as one in which the gender disguise is permitted only out of absolute necessity and only as long as the need or threat persists (1992, p. 8). Garber uses the terms ‘transvestite’ and ‘cross-dresser’ almost interchangeably in her work, aside from observing that “members of the TV-TS community... do [not] particularly like the word ‘transvestite’, which seems to imply a compulsive disorder; they prefer ‘cross-dresser’, which suggests a choice of lifestyle” (Garber, 1992: 4). Despite her recognition of this choice, and simultaneously of the necessity inherent in the ‘progress’ narrative, she does not employ

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<sup>2</sup> IMDB, for example, uses these designations, with *Some Like It Hot* ranked highest according to user rating on their cross-dressing list (“Best ‘Cross Dressing’ Movies,” 2011).

different terms to distinguish between the two. This may be because in her argument, both manifestations of gender disruption function as powerful indices of the ‘category crisis’, arguing for

the extraordinary power of transvestism to disrupt, expose, and challenge, putting in question the very notion of the ‘original’ and of stable identity... of cross-dressing as an index, precisely of many different kinds of ‘category crisis’... The binarism male/female... is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism. (ibid., p. 17)

This theoretical position privileges the apparent political effect of disruption, but consequently seems to lasso together all forms of transvestism and cross-dressing, both real and fictional, in the service of that challenge to binaristic categories. It is this perceived appropriation of ‘transvestism’ as a transgressive trope that has been vocally critiqued by trans theorists such as Jay Prosser (1998).

Chris Straayer describes this same narrative device of gender inversion in response to unavoidable pressures set up by the narrative as “temporary transvestism,” but makes an important distinction between the transvestite operation of the disguise within the plot, and its extradiegetic cross-dressed operation for the audience who are well aware of the disguise (Straayer, 1996: 47). Straayer recognises, as does Garber, that the transvestism is only considered acceptable because of the narrative framework in which it is presented. Within these narratives, there tend to be different motivations for male and for female characters. The female characters usually cross the gender boundary to enable agency and/or access to jobs, legal and social status, and protection from abusive or undesirable men. The male characters usually cross in a desperate attempt to hide from something (most commonly the law, dangerous criminals, or shrewish wives), as a consequence of public disgrace that has caused them to be ostracized from their ‘rightful’ male position, or as a cunning ploy to trap the villain. The gender-crossed woman has usually adopted a tomboy-ish appearance, exemplified relatively early on by Katherine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor, 1936). The gender-crossed male has manifested either as a coy coquette (even when played by a conventionally masculine actor like Roscoe Arbuckle), or more commonly as a frumpy matron. This caricature was epitomised by the eponymous character of *Charley’s Aunt* (Mayo, 1941), an enduringly popular cross-dressing comedy that was remade “about 20 times starting with a 1925 silent film version” (Ginibre, 2005, p. 12), and persists in films such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993).

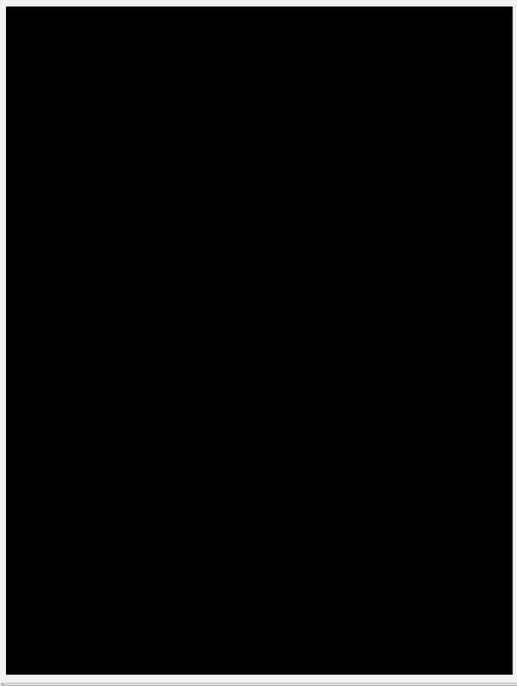


Figure 4. *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor, 1936)

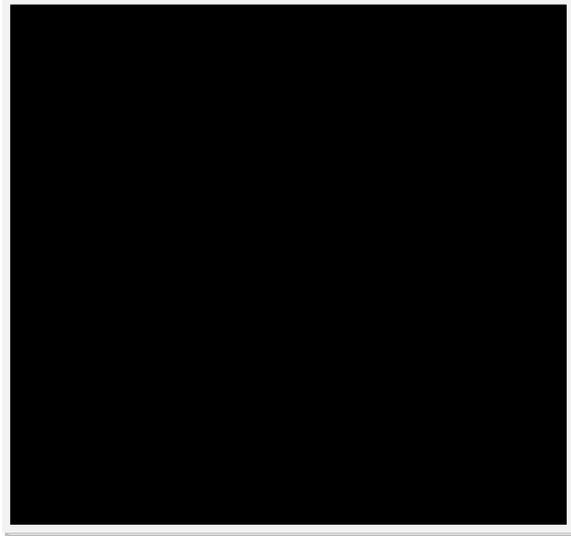


Figure 5. *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, 1998)



Figure 6. *A Woman* (Chaplin, 1915)



Figure 7. *Coney Island* (Arbuckle, 1917)

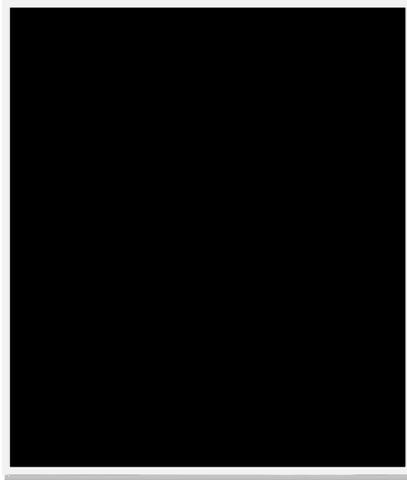


Figure 8. *Sorority Boys* (Wolodarsky, 2002)

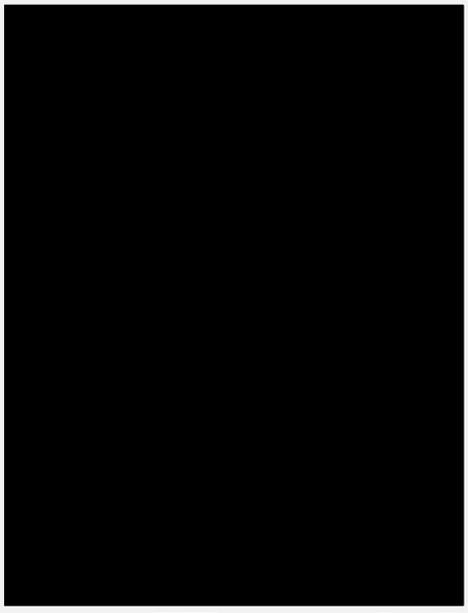


Figure 9. *Charley's Aunt* (Mayo, 1941)

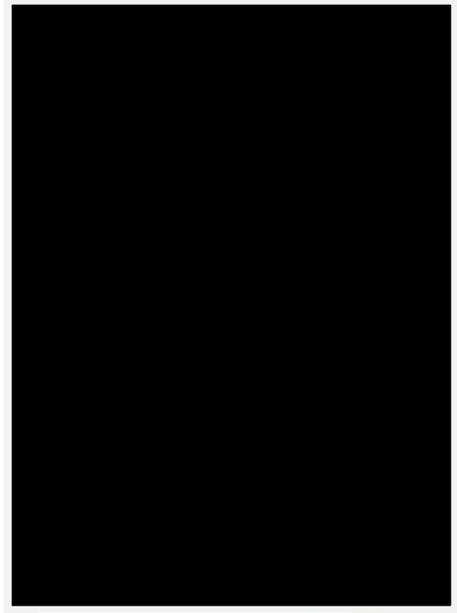


Figure 10. *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993)

The matronly character is generally considered less threatening because of her lack of sexuality, in contrast with the younger coquettes depicted in films such as *Some Like It Hot*, illustrating why the film was considered so ‘uncomfortable’ by some contemporary critics. The desexualisation of cross-dressed characters was most strongly enforced under the Motion Picture Production Code, during which time any eroticism was erased from mtf performances, particularly in mainstream Hollywood films. Bell-Metereau observes that “female impersonators who were young, convincing, or who obviously relished such imitations became increasingly rare... Works that did present female impersonation could only offer the blandest varieties of matronly characters” (Bell-Metereau, 1993, p. 39). After twenty five years under the restrictions of the Code, *Some Like It Hot* revived some of the

risqué flirtation of certain silent films, such as Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman* (1915), where the Tramp cross-dresses, making a strikingly attractive woman, to avoid discovery by his new girlfriend's angry father. Nonetheless, all of these cross-dressing comedies, eroticised or not, invariably end with the revelation – forced or voluntary – of the protagonist's 'true' sex, a return to the 'natural' heteronormative position, and often with a heterosexual coupling that underscores the 'proper' gender identity of that character.

The less common comedic manifestation is the body-swap comedy, in which a fantasy transformation enables a (usually prejudiced) character to see how the other half lives and thereby gain enlightenment, and invariably true love. The cause of the transformation is magical or supernatural in order to overcome the practical obstacles to instantly and completely inhabiting another sex. One of the earliest examples, *A Florida Enchantment* (Drew, 1914), uses the device of a magic seed; in *Turnabout* (Roach, 1940) the switch is effected by a magic statue, a narrative contrivance that is still operative decades later in *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (Hurran, 2008); in *Goodbye Charlie* (Minnelli, 1964), *All of Me* (Reiner, 1984), and *Switch* (Edwards, 1991), the protagonist dies and returns in a body of the opposite sex. It is a narrative strategy that is used more broadly to enact imaginings of alternate lifestyles not normally accessible because of age, race, gender or class. These fantasy films are designed to indulge the desire for inaccessible experiences and to teach an appreciation of the life one has, as well as sympathy for the struggles of those whose lives seem so attractive from the outside. The male/female body swap films allow audiences to imagine the experience not just of pretending to be another sex, but of actually being another sex, and experiencing a body represented as utterly alien. The conventions and codes of these comedies rely heavily on dichotomized stereotypes regarding sex, gender, and sexuality in order to elicit humour. Standard jokes revolve around horror at the sudden presence/absence of a penis, the difficulties of fulfilling bodily functions with unfamiliar equipment, and (for men) the lascivious pleasure of having unrestricted visual and tactile access to the forbidden pleasures of a female body. These films provide a non-threatening and temporary excursion into the fantasy of 'what if?', a glimpse across the binary boundaries so strongly regulated by heteronormative societies.

In the strongly visual medium of cinema, visual signifiers inevitably occupy a central position in determining identity, and these consequently take on additional significance in the cross-dressing comedy. Wigs, dresses, lipstick and heels have all come automatically to signify femininity within the cross-dressing comedy, no matter how unconvincing the assemblage may be; for example, Henri (Cary Grant) in *I Was A Male War Bride* (Hawks, 1949) is entirely unconvincing, yet the presence of a skirt and a horsehair wig is enough to persuade the audience that the other characters within the narrative world would be fooled. The dominance of the visual element in cinema necessitates these symbolic exterior attributes for representing gender disruption, and the trans comedies depend on these surface signifiers for both their narrative meaning and their humour. The physical process of transforming a masculine appearance into a feminine one therefore tends to occupy a critical place in trans comedies. Chaplin's 1915 film, *A Woman*, is a typical example of the transparency of the transformation process as he struggles into a skirt, stuffs a pin cushion up the front of his jacket, and then shaves his moustache. It is a convention of the genre that still occurs in films such as *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *To Wong Foo* (Kidron, 1995) and *Big Momma's House* (Gosnell, 2000).

Despite the dominance of visual cues in creating and maintaining trans identities, the role of the aural also plays a crucial role in the performance of gender. A voice that matches the gender expectations set up through appearance will serve to reinforce the intelligibility of the cross-dressed character, as is the case with Mrs Doubtfire, and with Josephine in *Some Like It Hot*. The importance of voice in this instance is evidenced by the fact that Billy Wilder had used well-known voice artist Paul Freer to dub Josephine's voice when Tony Curtis was unable to achieve a consistent and credible feminine vocal performance (IMDB). Jack Lemmon provides a comedically exaggerated voice for Daphne, indicative of the differing representations of femininity the two characters are intended to provide, as discussed in more detail below. In some films, the persuasively feminine voice deployed by a cross-dressed character will function to unify the disparate or unconvincing visual markers into a credible female identity. In other cases, the voice is as unconvincing for the audience (but not the other characters) as Henri's cross-dressed appearance in *I Was A Male War Bride*. In several films, however, the voice works in opposition to the visual cues, in order to remind the audience of the 'real sex' underneath the gendered exterior and to create humour through the disjuncture between voice and appearance. *Tootsie* makes use of this comedic device when

Michael, dressed as Dorothy, drops the high-pitched Southern accent he uses for Dorothy and reverts to his own gravelly tones to persuade his agent of his identity. The revelation of the 'true' identity of the character that is effected through the public removal of the wig (for cross-dressed men) or the revelation of the breasts (for cross-dressed women) is usually accompanied by a return to the vocal register considered normal for that character's sex.

The cross-dressing comedy has been around for as long as film, yet other than the incorporation of vocal performance, it has changed remarkably little since Chaplin donned a dress in *A Woman* to escape the wrath of his beloved's father, and ended up kissing him before being ceremoniously dewigged to reveal his 'true' sex. The focus on clothes, mirrors, wigs and exaggerated mannerisms are still invariably present, as are the pseudo-homosexual moments that result from mistaken identity, and the restoration of an intelligible heteronormative status quo. The popularity of the genre has fluctuated according to the socio-historical context, but the continued dominance of binary sex, gender, and sexuality paradigms means that the interest in the unknown 'other sex' persists. The conventions congealed most noticeably with the extraordinary success of *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982). The cross-dressing character, Michael, is a performer driven by circumstance to adopt a feminine persona. He faces sartorial and make-up dilemmas, but is entirely successful at passing with everyone within the diegesis. He is so successful, in fact, that his true love, Julie, mistakes him for a lesbian when he tries to kiss her, and Julie's father is convinced enough that Dorothy is 'real' that he proposes to her. Michael learns valuable life lessons during his time in another gender, and when he reveals his 'true' self on live television<sup>3</sup>, he can return to his life as an enlightened, and therefore better, man. Dustin Hoffman is in no way convincing as a woman, nor is he meant to be, just enough to make the narrative believable when approached with a willing spectatorial suspension of disbelief. If the audience forgets that they are actually watching a man, the comedy disappears almost entirely, and the physical interaction between Dorothy and Julie is concomitantly transformed from pseudo-lesbianism into actual lesbianism, a potentially discomfoting experience for audiences expecting a light-hearted laugh about how different men and women are.

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<sup>3</sup> The absurdity of this moment of revelation during a live soap opera broadcast was parodied in *Soapdish* (M. Hoffman, 1991).

There has been very little variation on this formula over the decades, although it has become more common for the character's disguise to be removed by accident, as a way of precipitating the climax of the film. Considerations of the anatomical differences have become slightly more explicit, with that ultimate marker of sex segregation – the bathroom – appearing more often and in more graphic detail.<sup>4</sup> The repeated depiction of the bathroom as the definitive site of difference serves to emphasise the anatomical foundation of the heteronormative binary, since PG and family comedies cannot depict the genitals to which they are referring. The bathroom, in terms of choice and stereotypical stance, becomes the 'cultural genitals' that are understood to signal their anatomical referent. Genital difference has been a recurring preoccupation in the body-switching comedies as well, although it is addressed (albeit not exhibited) more directly through a stock scenario in which the woman finds herself in possession of a penis, and a man has to deal with the absence of his. The genitals themselves remain concealed in the trans comedies, yet are simultaneously ever-present through the substituted references to 'cultural genitals' that provide the basis for some of the most common jokes.

One major shift that is apparent in cross-dressing comedy is the emergence of films that depict the intersection of race and gender-crossing.<sup>5</sup> *Big Momma's House* (Gosnell, 2002), *Juwanna Mann* (Vaughan, 2002), *The Nutty Professor* (Shadyac, 1996), *Norbit* (Robbins, 2007), the *Madea* franchise (Perry, 2006), and *White Chicks* (Wayans, 2004) have deployed famous black male actors in cross-dressing roles in what had predominantly been a white sub-genre.<sup>6</sup> Most of them present the trans character as an amalgamation of the dowdy matron stereotype of cross-dressing comedy with the stock 'mammy' character, an appropriation of a racist stereotype analysed in detail by Donald Bogle (1974), and epitomised by Martin Lawrence's 'Big Momma' character:

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<sup>4</sup> This is an interesting area in which a filmic convention of the imagined experiences of gender-crossing converges with a very real problem – that of the public bathroom. Petra Doan, for example, has offered a critical discussion of this issue in 'The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces – reflections from beyond the gender dichotomy' (2010). The male/female separation of public bathrooms creates a serious obstacle for those who see themselves differently from the way society does, or as between or outside these two rigid options. The website 'Safe2Pee' has been designed specifically to address this problem, offering a directory of gender-neutral bathrooms (Bathroom Liberation Front, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> These films have performed exceptionally well at the box office, holding 11 of the top 20 places in terms of total gross earnings. This is radically disproportionate in relation to the number of trans comedies that feature black protagonists. See Appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> The relative success of Wesley Snipes in drag in *To Wong Foo* (Kidron, 2003) does little to counter the overall white bias of the film, and is thus not considered part of this group.

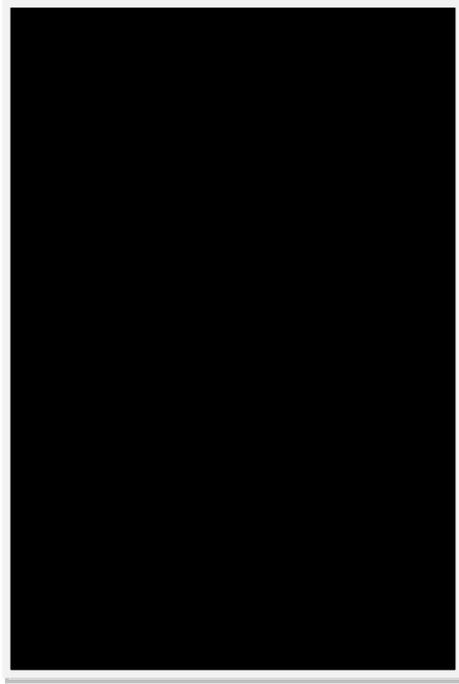


Figure 11. *Big Momma's House* (Gosnell, 2002)

Historically speaking, *Boy! What a Girl* (Leonard, 1945) was the only example of a black cross-dressing comedy until *The Associate* (Petrie, 1986). This latter film stands out as the exception to both the white dominance and the male-to-female dominance of the genre, with Whoopi Goldberg crossing not only gender but race and class as well when she adopts the persona of a white business tycoon (Fig. 12).

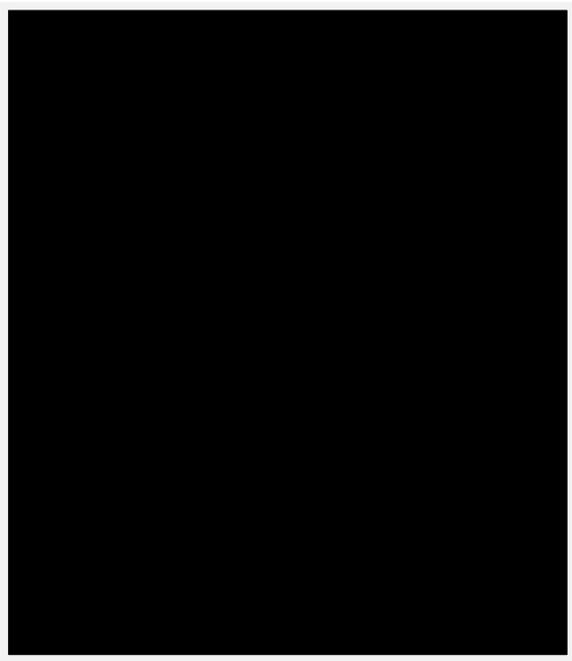


Figure 12. Whoopi Goldberg

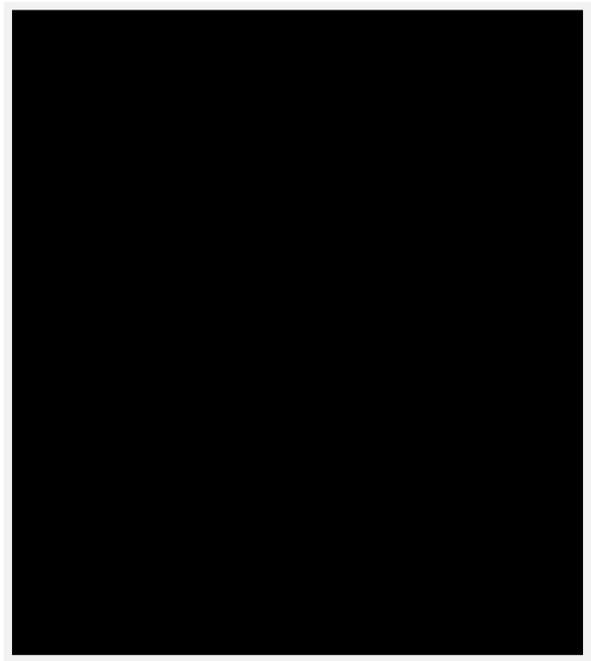


Figure 13. Marlon and Shawn Wayans

The early 2000s saw a sudden emergence of black men cross-dressing, culminating in the cross-race, cross-class, cross-dressing *White Chicks*, in which Marlon and Shawn Wayans play police officers who go undercover as two spoiled white heiresses (Fig. 13). While they learn to appreciate shopping and how uncomfortable women's fashion can be, the ultimate lesson for the characters is that there is nothing better than being a black man. The film functions as a powerful affirmation of black masculinity, and at the same time suggests a shift in the perceived stability of black manhood, which is deemed strong enough to withstand the temporary assumption of both whiteness and womanhood. Cross-dressing comedies have long functioned as indicators of the powerful stability of white masculinity, but the comparative newness of black male cross-dressing indicates that black masculinity has only recently begun to reach the necessary level of stability.

The cross-dressing comedies constitute a genre in their own right, or at least a recognised sub-genre of comedy. As is necessary for generic constitution, there are specific “expectations, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and groups or corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all” (Neale, 2000, p. 3). The pivotal position *Some Like It Hot* occupies, historically and structurally, in the cross-dressing comedy corpus has profound significance for understanding the specific conventions that are manifested or disrupted. It offers an opportunity to make an argument for cross-dressed comedy as a distinct genre, since it highlights the conventions of cross-dressing comedy, established over several decades through films representing the cross-dressed image, as they are defined and defied through *Some Like It Hot*. This is not an attempt to conjure a genre out of a single film, but rather a recognition that there are numerous comedies that feature cross-dressing, and that these films share certain conventions; the evocation and subsequent affirmation or rejection of these conventions in *Some Like It Hot* may suggest a typical structure and illustrate the ways in which this film defies convention. On the surface, the cross-dressing comedies have conventionally functioned as affirmations of masculine and feminine gender roles, and the importance of those roles within the heterosexual framework evoked by the use of romantic coupling to resolve a film. The film that is arguably most famous in the cross-dressing comedy sub-genre, *Some Like It Hot*, is also the one that most overtly refuses this heterosexual convention, at the same time that it accedes to it. *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982), on the other hand, overtly embraces the return to the heteronormative. As the two most successful comedies on AFI's list, these films offer an interesting point of comparison through which to

analyse the differing ways in which relatively fixed genre conventions can be deployed, with noticeably different effects.

### **I. *Some Like It Hot***

There is a clear division in the writings about Billy Wilder's 1959 cross-dressing musical comedy, *Some Like It Hot*, with theorists and critics firmly placed in one of two camps. Either the film is categorised, and criticized, as a typical cross-dressing farce with the inevitable return to the heterosexual status quo predicated on an indissoluble gender binary; or it is read as a visionary and ebullient transgression of heteronormative gender categories. While a range of justifications are provided for both interpretations, for the most part there is a tendency to see only those examples from the film that fit with the chosen interpretation, and to focus on the ending of the film as providing definitive proof. What these generally divergent discussions of the film share, however, is an implicit acknowledgement that *Some Like It Hot* stands out from other cross-dressing comedies, attested to by the academic attention it continues to receive in a variety of film discourses, including auteurism, genre theory, queer theory and feminist theory. It also enjoys an undiminished popular appeal. While most other cross-dressing comedies fade rapidly from public memory, *Some Like It Hot*'s story of two musicians on the run from the mob in the 1920s is remarkably well-known considering that it is almost fifty years old. Several factors have contributed to the sustained interest in the film: the sexual innuendos are still risqué even by today's standards, the jokes are still funny, and the quality of direction and performance is still greatly admired.<sup>7</sup> The most intriguing factor, in relation to this discussion, is the power of the film's ending still to surprise and perplex viewers.

The category disruptions at work in the film make it inevitably difficult to choose terms with which to describe the characters. Despite performing on stage as women, Joe/Josephine and Jerry/Daphne are not drag queens. They adopt feminine attire out of necessity, as the only way to avoid being 'eliminated' by Spats and his mobsters after witnessing the Valentine's Day Massacre. This use of cross-dressing is a functional device with clear narrative

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<sup>7</sup> These reasons behind *Some Like It Hot*'s continuing popular appeal are well-illustrated in the message boards and user comments for the film on IMDB.

motivation, a circumstantial gender illusion that is carefully dissociated - at least, initially - from any suggestion of an internal trans identification. Jerry and Joe do not turn into Daphne and Josephine by choice, which differentiates them from cross-dressers or transvestites in the conventional sense of these terms as designating a sense of gendered self. Nonetheless, as male characters in women's clothes, they are literally cross-dressers, transgressing the accepted sartorial protocols of gender. More importantly, audiences recognise them as such, through the familiar conventions of cross-dressing comedy.

Despite the originating reasons for their enforced adoption of feminine appearances, Joe and Jerry are not portrayed in the typical way, as merely enduring their gender disguises; Joe takes his performance as Josephine very seriously, and Jerry enthusiastically embraces his new persona as Daphne, becoming increasingly committed to his cross-dressed identity. Josephine and Daphne are both able to 'pass' within the diegetic world, to such a degree that Daphne elicits a marriage proposal from a self-confessed womanizer. Nevertheless, when the threat of death by tommy gun has been neutralized, both characters 'out' themselves, albeit with substantially different consequences. However convincing Daphne and Josephine may have been within the diegesis, the audience has not forgotten their initial identities, and their continued disguises are diegetically justified by the reappearance of the mob. The dramatic irony in the spectators' awareness of their original identities, and the compulsive reasons for their gender disguise, functions in conjunction with their believability within the diegesis to evoke humour and transform a period gangster film into a comedy.

The mise-en-scene in the opening scene of the film is not that of a conventional comedy. Rather it establishes the dark, masculine underworld of Chicago in the 1920s – the wet, dark streets, the tension of the car chase, tommy guns and coffins, mobsters and cops. These images situate *Some Like It Hot* clearly in the genre of the gangster film, a classification reinforced by the appearance of George Raft in one of his “most memorable gangster roles” (McCarty, 2004, p. 146). This is just one of several categories that Wilder will disrupt; by the end the film will have become a multi-layered illustration of category crises at work. The setting is also noteworthy in that the cold, dark streets of Chicago are starkly contrasted with the sunny wonderland of Florida. More importantly, the journey that the characters undergo in their identity transformation is mirrored, as in so many other cross-dressing films, by a

physical journey. The physical journey creates a liminal space where the transition from one identity to another is facilitated by a physical departure from the ‘old’ life of the character and an adventure into something new, transporting and transgressing at the same time.

The historical setting of the film is highly significant, allowing for many narrative parallels to be drawn between Prohibition, “the film’s encompassing metaphor,” and gender transgression (Lieberfeld & Sanders, 1998, p. 130). As Lieberfeld and Sanders argue, “Prohibition serves to make transgression commonplace, privileging gratification and necessitating pretense, blurring the lines between normality and deviance for ‘ordinary citizens’” (Lieberfeld & Sanders, 1998, p. 130). The criminalisation of alcohol, something that many Western adults now take for granted as a social right, functions as an interesting illustration of how easily an activity of pleasure and personal choice can be subsumed under institutionalised morality. In addition, the historical setting provides crucial reassurance to the potentially transphobic viewer, by creating a safe distance from the site of transgression. As co-writer I.A.L. Diamond points out, “when everybody’s dress looks eccentric, somebody in drag looks no more peculiar than anyone else” (in Sikov, 1998: 409). From a technical point of view, it provides a useful justification for filming in black and white, which serves to hide many of the flaws in the feminine disguises of the two protagonists, making Daphne and Josephine look more passable than they would have done in colour. The success of this aesthetic choice becomes apparent when black and white stills are compared to colour photographs from the set:



Figure 14. Josephine and Daphne



Figure 15. Sugar and Daphne

Daphne and Josephine's ability to pass diegetically is crucial because, as Bell-Metereau points out,

What distinguishes *Hot* from the British and American products of the previous twenty odd years, however, is the fact that Lemmon and Curtis (in particular) make rather attractive women who are obviously young and available. This peculiar situation of having male characters with feminine appeal offers a singular threat to heterosexual male audience members, but the theme has nevertheless struck a responsive chord (1993, p. 64).

To have young and relatively attractive cross-dressed protagonists re-introduces an element of sexualisation into the cross-dressing comedy, after its noticeable absence under the Production Code.

Stella Bruzzi (1997) identifies the desexualisation of 'the transvestite' as the defining difference between 'cross-dressing' and 'androgyny' as disparate manifestations of transvestism in film. She argues that "whereas in cinema cross-dressing is used to desexualise the transvestite and deflect the potential subversiveness of the image through comedy, androgyny sexualises the transvestite by increasing the eroticism of their ambiguous image" (ibid., p. 147). Bruzzi privileges androgyny<sup>8</sup> as the only genuine form of transgression, although she singles out *Some Like It Hot* as a rarity among cross-dressing comedies for its awareness of its own "potential deviancy" and exultant "perversity" (ibid., p. 158). Unlike Bell-Metereau she does not link this to, or recognize, the sexual element in *Some Like It Hot*,

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<sup>8</sup> Bruzzi frames this argument through analyses of six primary films, positioning the 'cross-dressing' of *Glen or Glenda*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in opposition to the 'androgyny' of *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *The Crying Game* and *Orlando*.

despite the obvious pleasure that Daphne begins to take in her flirtation with Osgood. Lieberfeld and Sanders argue that Daphne and Josephine are only attractive to “odd little buffoons” (1998, p. 130), but while their suitors may not be conventional Hollywood heartthrobs, it seems noteworthy that these “brand new girls” are convincingly attractive to a number of men within the diegesis. This sexual appeal adds a different dimension to the transvestite genre, creating another level of transgression in terms of a testing of boundaries, by introducing implied homosexual encounters. It is the category crisis at work again.

The sexualisation of the two cross-dressed protagonists that has sometimes been ignored or misread by critics is explicitly indicated by the very first shot of them in their feminine disguises. It is juxtaposed almost immediately with the hyper-eroticised revelation of Sugar Cane (Marilyn Monroe), and the framing of Monroe has often drawn attention away from the crucial framing of Josephine and Daphne:



Figure 16. Sugar Cane (Marilyn Monroe)

Lieberfeld and Sanders, for example, identify this shot of Monroe as a perfect example of Laura Mulvey’s argument about the “fragmentation” of female characters by the camera and

how the gaze “feminizes its object” (1998, p. 134). John Phillips also refers to this scene as a key moment in the signification of consistent heterosexuality:

From beginning to end, the norms of heterosexuality and gender fixity are constantly re-emphasised and sustained, principally by the pursuit, initially by Jerry and then by Joe, of the delectable Sugar to whom they are instantly and powerfully attracted. ‘It’s like Jell-O on springs!’ an enraptured Jerry tells Joe as the two men gaze lustfully at Sugar’s hip-swaying and bottom-wiggling movements for the first time. (2006, p. 61)

Because the shot of Monroe’s undulating bottom fits so well into Mulvey’s tripartite schema of the voyeuristic gaze – camera, character, spectator – these critics read Joe and Jerry as fulfilling this conventional masculine role. As Sugar hurries past, the camera leaves her to linger on the expressions of Joe/Josephine and Jerry/Daphne as they gaze after her, after which there is a cut to a point-of-view shot of Sugar’s backside, as she is suddenly startled by a well-aimed blast of steam. However, the shots of and dialogue between Daphne and Josephine suggest that the gaze is not actually so straightforwardly heterocentric.

The scene opens with a medium long shot of two pairs of legs in heels and skirts. While Wilder and/or Lang (the cinematographer) is very effectively reproducing the fragmentary shot identified by Mulvey sixteen years later, it is both a self-aware joke that may fool the unsuspecting viewer into looking with desire at these legs, and a way of persuading the viewer used to these cinematographic conventions to accept these two characters as women. While the audience is aware in the rest of the film that Josephine and Daphne are males, they need to believe that others within the diegesis could be fooled and at this introductory shot both strikingly denies privileged spectator knowledge and provides compelling proof of their believability.



Figure 17. Daphne and Josephine

Their identity is soon revealed to the audience, as Jerry stumbles in his heels. The film then offers a mocking comment on the way the audience's gaze has been manipulated with Jerry complaining that he "feels so naked. Like everybody's looking at me." To which Joe replies, "With those legs? Are you crazy?" Jerry/ Daphne's awkwardness makes it hard to view him/her as an erotic spectacle, but Josephine is already executing a passable feminine performance. This deliberate and self-aware use of a cinematographic convention makes it almost impossible to view the same shot of Monroe as straightforward reinforcement of the patriarchal cinematic process described by Mulvey. It should instead be read as a confirmation of Wilder's desire to play with conventional iconography, and as again opening up the potential sexualisation of the male-to-female cross-dresser.

What is also noteworthy about the first shot of Josephine and Daphne at the train station is that we don't see any of the physical process of transformation such as the shaving of legs, applying of make-up or donning of wigs. In most cross-dressing comedies this process is carefully displayed so that we can never forget that the characters are actually male underneath, as was the case with the German precursor to *Some Like It Hot*, *Fanfare der*

*Liebe* (Hoffman, 1951). “As I.A.L. Diamond later recalled, *Fanfaren das* (sic) *Liebe* was ‘heavy-handed and Germanic. There was a lot of shaving of chests and trying on of wigs’” (Sikov, 1998: 409). *Some Like It Hot*, on the other hand, through this narrative ellipsis, offers an almost magical transformation that makes it easier for us to believe in the masquerade, largely because it appears to be so effortless: “Wilder called this the power of omission” (Chandler, 2002: 219). The only indicator of the process of transition, Jerry’s initial awkwardness in heels and discomfort in her ‘drafty’ dress, rapidly disappear as soon as she introduces herself to Sweet Sue, the band leader, and decides in the moment that he opens his mouth to become Daphne rather than Geraldine as originally intended. The choice of name suggests that Daphne is more than Jerry in a feminine disguise, but an entirely separate personality. As Charles Taylor points out in his review of the film,

When he first enters in drag, all he can do is complain about how drafty his dress is and how tough it is to walk in heels. By the end of the movie he's so comfortable in heels that he wears them without thinking, giving himself away. But his transition starts long before then. Jerry introduces himself as "Daphne," instead of the agreed-upon "Geraldine." And there's a crestfallen look on his face when Sugar tells him that she envies him being "so flat-chested" (2002).

Joe and Jerry engage in different forms of deception: while Joe uses his disguises as dissimulation, to hide his real identity from Sugar and the mob, Jerry fabricates a convincing new personality, a simulation that becomes as believable as his original identity, as illustrated by ‘her’ exuberant delight in ‘her’ engagement.

Although Joe’s transformation is less comprehensive than Jerry’s, both characters find the feminine world a welcoming alternative to the violent mob world from which they have just escaped. Bell-Metereau argues that,

*Hot* sets up two realms – the frightening, masculine underworld of the city, and the comforting, feminine refuge of the all-girl band – and it is clear that any sane person would choose the latter (1993: 56).

But this interpretation unfortunately serves to reinforce a very conventional gender dichotomy, one which the film itself refuses to accept. At the end of the film, the two couples escape from both worlds, sailing off into an undetermined and undefined future on Osgood’s luxury yacht. It is the ending which has perhaps provoked the most debate regarding the transgressiveness of the film. Some critics, such as Lieberfeld and Sanders and Phillips, see the ending as a reconstitution of the gender and sexual status quo through the heterosexual

coupling of Joe and Sugar, and the relationship between Osgood and Daphne as nothing more than a doomed joke, reading Osgood's famous last line, "Well, nobody's perfect" as entirely flippant. These critics point to the castration anxiety evident in Jerry's horror at the idea of being 'altered' as justification for this reading. Other critics see the ending as open-ended, as "replete with possibility" (Bell-Metereau, 1993: 59) and as a rare instance where "perversity wins over legitimacy" (Bruzzi, 1997: 158), although Straayer acknowledges that despite ending with gender transgression, the film also "provide(s) the requisite heterosexual closure through other characters" (1996: 419).

Significantly, in terms of the identity politics of the film, while Joe clearly demonstrates his heterosexual desire for Sugar, Daphne's initial response is portrayed as envious admiration rather than the lust that he later displays in the bunk scene. The look on Joe's face is contemplative and highly focused – suggesting that his devious pursuit of Sugar is sparked at this very first moment. The difference in the way Joe and Jerry gaze after Sugar is highlighted by the use of a medium two-shot that enables a direct comparison of their responses through their facial expressions. Jerry's fascination is reinforced by his next lines, "Look at that! Look at how she moves! It's just like Jell-O on springs. Must have some sort of built-in motor or something. I tell ya it's a whole different sex!" This initial desire to understand the way in which the mysterious Other works, is quickly abandoned as Jerry's exuberant alter ego, Daphne, makes her first appearance. Daphne cannot emulate the hyper-femininity of Sugar, so doesn't try, but seems to revel in being a confident, extroverted woman, a marked shift from Jerry's diffident acquiescence to Joe's whims.

The moment where the protagonists board the train marks a crucial turning point in the identity of Jerry and the point of divergence between him and Josephine. While Joe switches identities several times throughout the rest of the film, the spectator sees Jerry as Daphne for almost the rest of the film. These differing approaches to cross-dressing are signalled by the wigs Joe and Jerry have chosen. Their agent, Poliakoff, has explained to Joe and Jerry that you have to be blonde to be part of the band and Daphne's blond wig suggests that she will be more fully integrated into the band than Josephine in her brunette wig. The importance of names is also made clear in this scene where Jerry, who has exhibited some initial resistance to the female disguise, despite it being his idea, decides to embrace it with flamboyant

enthusiasm by choosing the name Daphne instead of Geraldine. It is a moment of self-revelation that seems to take him by surprise as much as it does Joe. It suggests that Jerry is not going to be merely a man in a dress, which is what Joe is, however convincingly. While Jerry's heterosexuality is initially affirmed by his delight in all the 'butter and sugar', his heterosexual attentions diminish with noticeable rapidity as he revels in being one of the girls, so that by the time they reach Florida and the physical journey is complete, so it seems is his identity transformation, and he makes only a brief protest against their continued masquerade, before submitting once again to Joe's dominance. Joe, on the other hand, makes his heterosexual interest in Sugar clear to the audience throughout the film. He uses Josephine to elicit useful seduction information, which he then utilises by exchanging his gender disguise for a class disguise, indicated through both his clothes and his Cary Grant-inspired manner of speaking. He adopts the persona of Junior, heir to the Shell Oil fortune, in order to exploit Sugar's desire to escape her working-class life but inadvertently develops genuine feelings for her in the midst of his manipulation and lies. Ironically for a 1950s mainstream comedy, Daphne and Osgood's queer relationship seems much more sincere in comparison.

In the predominantly conservative United States of the 1950s, the public response to this shift was marked by both enthusiasm and revulsion. "Upon its original release, Kansas banned the film from being shown in the state, explaining that cross-dressing was 'too disturbing for Kansans'" (IMDB, 2008). Even in 1967, Judith Christ was disturbed by the humorous treatment of gender disguise, observing in a moralistic condemnation of the film that

It is in *Some Like It Hot*, made in 1959, that the smut starts to show... you start to notice that for every raucous and/or ribald masquerade joke there is another that involves a transvestite leer, a homosexual 'in' joke or a perverse gag. Here is the prurience, the perversion, the sexual sickness that is obsessing the characters and plots of our films. (in Bell-Metereau, 1993, p. 24)

This suggests that the transgressive nature of gender disguise had the useful effect of bringing into sharp relief the exact location and nature of normalized gender and sexual categories of the time. Questioning these established categories serves both to test their durability and to announce the existence of alternative identities. *The New York Times* review in 1959 was far more open-minded: "Who gets whom is not particularly important," although A.H. Weiler does allow that some viewers might "question the taste of a few of the lines, situations and

prolonged masquerade” (1959). It is interesting that he perceives the audience as more likely to question the sustained masquerade than to worry about who gets whom. It suggests that everything within the progress narrative is indeed excusable, as long as there is regular relief for the audience from the apparently uncomfortable sight of a man in a dress.

The genre blending of the film evidently concerned some reviewers as much, if not more, than the gender bending. The *Sight and Sound* review, while aware of the potentially provocative nature of the film’s sexual transgression, seems primarily concerned by the “painfully accurate re-creations of gangland slaughter” rendering the film’s “opportunities for offence... considerable” (Dyer, 1959). Dyer responds positively to Lemmon’s “extravagant” performance, although he finds Curtis “a shade too real for comfort” (ibid). It would seem that Daphne escapes judgement, and therefore heteronormative resistance, because her boisterous representation of femininity fails to arouse the reviewer sexually, with her “husky squeaks and girlish dormitory confidences” (ibid.). In another generally positive response, the *Variety* reviewer states, “On this plot skeleton, Wilder has put the flesh of farce. He has done this so deftly that the ridiculous somehow appears possible, and the shocking turns into laughter” (*Variety*, 1959). This response illustrates the power of the cross-dressing comedy to violate normative boundaries in a way that is perceived to be non-threatening but still leaves the viewer with an awareness that transgression has occurred. “But the momentum of this madcap comedy is such that it just keeps rolling along, a gay romp that knows just when to draw back before crossing the line to the vulgar” (ibid). The *Monthly Film Bulletin* similarly identifies the dangerous balancing act of the film as “how to be funny as well as vulgar” (1959). To stray too far in either direction would render the film either unacceptable to mainstream audiences, or too generically bland to elicit any critical appreciation.

This contemporary perception of the film’s vulgarity was probably prompted in part by the trailer for the film, which foregrounds Monroe as its star, and emphasizes the film as a comedy. But it also showcases the violence and highlights the sexual nature of the comedy, with plenty of attention focused on Monroe’s breasts, claiming “You’ve never laughed more at sex, or a picture about it,” featuring Monroe and “her bosom companions.” Monroe’s costumes are clearly designed to highlight her sexuality; they are extremely revealing, a fact the trailer makes the most of in exploiting Monroe’s status as a sexual icon. While the

‘vulgarity’ may be inconsequential for audiences today, the transgressive elements of the film have endured: Osgood’s response to Daphne’s revelation, his acceptance of Jerry’s biology as well as Daphne’s personality still has the power to surprise an audience well-versed in representations of the desexualised cross-dresser.

These visible disruptions and moments of comedy and moral anxiety are emphasised when they are situated in the physical spaces that are traditionally both the most rigidly gender-regulated and the most taboo in mainstream representations, such as bathrooms. Jerry heads automatically for the men’s room on the train and is forcefully pulled back by Joe, detaching one of his fake breasts in the process. On entering the taboo space of the women’s toilet, both are awestruck and delighted by the visual feast that awaits them behind the curtain – Sugar Cane (Marilyn Monroe) displaying her beautifully stockinged thigh. Jerry compares this sudden, unlimited access to the forbidden to childhood fantasies of unlimited indulgence:

Jerry:           When I was a kid, I used to have a dream -  
                      I was locked up in this pastry shop overnight -  
                      with all kinds of goodies around - jelly rolls  
                      and mocha éclairs and sponge cake and  
                      Boston cream pie and cherry tarts...  
Joe:               Listen, stupe - no butter and no pastry.  
                      We're on a diet!

Jerry, previously the more reluctant cross-dresser, is inspired to commit to his Daphne identity as he sees the hidden erotic spectacles that become available to him as Daphne, spectacles in which he is shown gleefully indulging at band practice, and at bed time, in a sustained close-up of his face, as he observes the rest of the band members undressing. But his lack of involvement or directed interest in any other woman suggests that his apparent desire for Sugar is less predatory and will be less persistent than Joe’s.

The bed is another locus of humorous anxiety in the cross-dressing comedy, where the threat of being found out is far greater. In *Some Like It Hot* the berths on the train, like the ladies’ room, are curtained, reinforcing the narrative motifs of hidden and compartmentalised identities. When Sugar, in a flimsy black negligee, climbs into bed with Daphne (Fig. 13), the sexual tension increases, as does the narrative tension, heightened as it is by the risk of discovery. This tension seems to increase the more lascivious Jerry gets, yet as he gets

drunker and less inhibited, his own attempts to persuade himself, “I’m a girl, I’m a girl, I’m a girl” appear to be working. The viewer likewise is becoming increasingly engaged with Daphne, who moves further away from Jerry the further the train gets from Chicago. The physical distance that separates the characters from their original location mirrors the increasing distance between the identities of Jerry and Daphne. One scene was fortuitously cut from the film after the preview screening – one in which Daphne climbs into Sugar’s bed and confesses her ‘true’ identity, symbolically removing her wig according to the generic conventions, only to find herself in bed with Joe, who has switched with Sugar (Lally, 1996, p. 291). The feeling of the film, and particularly the audience’s understanding of and empathy with Daphne, would be structurally damaged by a premature de-wigging scene. Part of the reason that the film is so engaging is the commitment that Jerry demonstrates to the Daphne persona, presenting an unusually enthusiastic engagement with gender transgression. The humour and surprise of the famous ending are effected largely through the sustained and immersive coherence of Daphne’s character, setting the film apart from its more formulaic genre relations.

The comedic concept of cross-dressed men that lies at the centre of *Some Like It Hot* is not original in itself, and several contemporary critics found the central gag of men in dresses too hackneyed: “an ancient gag” (in Weiler, 1959, p. 16), “a small joke milked like a dairy” (Variety Staff, 1959). But Osgood’s final words after Daphne admits she is a man, “Well, nobody’s perfect,” provide a highly original punch-line. This ending explicitly refuses a neat resolution of the confusion created by the cross-dressing, leaving the characters and the audience literally ‘at sea’. As Wartenberg points out,

The pair in the stern appears to be lesbian, the one in the bow heterosexual... the former couple seems *unlikely*, transgressive of the social norm specifying that romantic couples must be composed of a man and a woman. The situation... is really the opposite of what it seems. (Wartenberg, 1999: 1)

However, the dual-gendered identity of the cross-dressed protagonists makes a clear categorisation of sexuality difficult. Joe and Jerry have just escaped frantic chase by the mob, Sugar having been publicly kissed by ‘Josephine’ has seen through all of Joe’s disguises and followed him anyway, and Osgood is happily reunited with Daphne, his intended bride. With the sun setting in the background, the two couples ride off in Osgood’s motor boat, with

Osgood and Daphne in front, and Josephine and Sugar taking the back seat, literally and symbolically, as the final shot of the film belongs solely to Osgood and Daphne/Jerry.

Setting this scene in a small boat creates a physically constraining environment that is paradoxically part of an escape into the enormous space of the open sea. The narrative tension resolved, the need for disguise falls away, and Josephine and Daphne are free to reveal themselves as Joe and Jerry to Sugar and Osgood respectively. Sugar predictably forgives Joe, and they disappear from view in a passionate embrace, re-establishing a stable heterosexual status quo. Joe ‘de-wigs’ in a selfless attempt to dissuade Sugar from committing herself to another “no goodnick” saxophone player. The de-wigging process is a key convention of cross-dressing comedies, and can in itself define the character of that representation. Those films where the characters choose to reveal themselves, as opposed to being forcefully exposed, present a more positive and subjective form of cross-dressing. It is notable that neither Sugar nor Osgood are shocked when Josephine and Daphne remove their wigs and drop their vocal registers, Sugar because she already knows, and Osgood because Daphne/Jerry’s biology genuinely makes no difference. Both couples remain visually united in medium two-shots that reinforce their status as couples. Interestingly it is Jerry and Joe who have shared most of the other two-shots in the film; in one instance, in Poliakoff’s office, they are even holding hands. They are the couple who get the least, if any, attention in discussions of the ending, and yet it is significant that their strong relationship, coded primarily within the buddy motif, has survived all of the tests and distractions that have been thrown at it. There is never any suggestion that they will part, even when they both find other partners, but attention is diverted from this coupling by the comedy and romance of the other two couplings.

The heterosexual coupling which marks the closure of category disruptions in most cross-dressing comedies, in this case is the coupling of two screen idols, Curtis and Monroe, a very reassuring antidote for a transphobic viewer to any previous deviancy in the film. It does affirm both stable binary gender roles and heterosexuality, although both have learned non-typical traits during the course of the narrative (Joe has learned consideration and sincerity, and Sugar has learned self-assertiveness), and despite the fact that they have engaged in a seemingly lesbian kiss. But they are not the main focus of the final scene; they function as a

very effective distraction. Osgood and Jerry are of more interest, both because they get the final screen time and because they provide the transgressiveness of the ending. Daphne voluntarily removes her wig, rather than being exposed and humiliated, but keeps the earrings and make-up. While offering several double-coded excuses for why she can't marry Osgood, none of which he accepts, at no point does she say that she doesn't *want* to. Daphne has listed all of her reasons for wanting to marry Osgood and none of them have been invalidated. Jerry's resistance to being 'altered' need not be read as a complete rejection of the idea of keeping the personality of Daphne and her relationship with Osgood, but rather as careful distinction between a transvestite and a transsexual identity.

That Jerry/Daphne could wish to remain male, while still dressing/acting as a woman in an implied heterosexual but actually homosexual relationship, seems to be too sophisticated a concept for most critics, who appear to want a definitive answer. It is the presentation of this category-defying identity, and Osgood's total acceptance of it, that sets *Some Like It Hot* apart from other films in the temporary cross-dressing comedy genre. Daphne's revelation does not have the expected effect of shocking or angering Osgood into rejection, nor of exciting or delighting him. He is entirely unfazed, but the reason for this and its implications are left to the interpretation of the viewer. Every other aspect of the narrative may have been normatively resolved, categorized and explained, yet this unusual couple is distanced from that resolution, quite clearly bound together by their physical environment but left in an open condition that deliberately resists categorisation or explanation.

The unusual nature of the final scene between Daphne/Jerry and Osgood is illustrated by its difference from the ending of its German predecessor, *Fanfaren der Liebe* (K. Hoffman, 1951).<sup>9</sup> Although *Some Like It Hot* is not a direct remake of this film, Wilder and Diamond "based [it] on *Fanfaren der Liebe* (sic)...though neither was especially fond of that film. They liked its basic premise" (Sikov, 1998, p. 109).

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<sup>9</sup> *Fanfaren der Liebe* is a remake of an earlier French film, *Fanfare d'Amour* (Pottier, 1935), which further illustrates the unoriginality of the narrative concept.



Figure 18. *Fanfare der Liebe* (K. Hoffman, 1951)

In writing the screenplay for *Some Like It Hot*, they chose to use only the cross-dressing section of the plot of the German film, which included two other disguises initially adopted by the protagonists, Hans and Peter - gypsy impersonations and the use of blackface (ibid.). In the earlier German version, the male protagonists both end up in heterosexual couples with female members of the band, and the original contains no version of the Osgood/Daphne relationship. In fact Joe's equivalent character ends up coupled with the leader of the band (Ginibre, 2005, p. 12). In contrast, the open-ended nature of Osgood's final statement presents the viewer with a truism, but without any attempt to control the 'truth' that each spectator can choose to construct from it.

The ending of *Some Like It Hot* differs not only from the films that preceded it. In a recent successor of *Some Like It Hot*, *Connie and Carla* (Lembeck, 2004), the two protagonists are singers on the run from gangsters after they witness a shooting in a Chicago garage. In this film, however, they are females who hide out by cross-dressing as male drag queens, revealing indebtedness also to *Victor/Victoria* (Edwards, 1982). The resolution of *Connie and Carla* places both of the protagonists back into tidy heterosexual couples. Having been forced to reveal themselves on stage, by flashing their breasts, after the mobsters track them down, both are given the conventional happy ending of a heterosexual union, superficially resolving any confusion generated during their stint as drag queens. The normativity of the resolution is somewhat undermined by taking place on stage in a drag club, with Connie and Carla

surrounded by drag queens and Debbie Reynolds, giving a camp cameo performance. Despite the similarities in plot, *Some Like It Hot* stands apart from these other films in that, at the end, it most overtly refuses a complete reinstatement of the status quo, and actively resists a closed, monovalent interpretation despite the conventional coupling of Sugar and Joe.

The stereotypical heterosexual coupling is undoubtedly important, as a reassurance and as that which allows the lack of containment in Osgood and Daphne's relationship by keeping it hidden in plain view. It is not, however, the image with which we are left at the end of the film. Instead we are left with the smiling face of Osgood, and finally the nonplussed face of Daphne/Jerry, in make-up and earrings and a woman's coat but without the wig. The bewilderment could be read as suggesting that Jerry is flummoxed as to how he will escape his commitment to Osgood, or that he is pleasantly surprised at his fiancé's open-mindedness. But more important than the precise meaning of Jerry/Daphne's bewilderment is the mere presence of that bewilderment at all. The conventions of the typical cross-dressing comedy require that all possible confusion is neatly resolved and contained by the end of the film. *Some Like It Hot* allows the confusion to continue, and thereby allows each viewer to interpret the final scene in their own way, and to their own satisfaction. As the screen fades to black on Daphne/Jerry's nonplussed face, the disruptions of gender and sexual boundaries remain unresolved with regard to these two characters, making any *definitive* categorization impossible regarding their identities, or the nature of their relationship. This is perhaps the most significant facet of the film's popularity, that each viewer can construct the ending as happy regardless of their own particular ideology and preferences.

## **II. *Tootsie***

While *Tootsie* is generally regarded as the most obvious descendant of *Some Like It Hot*, in terms of both popularity and its use of the conventions of the cross-dressing comedy genre, it presents fewer transgressive moments, and makes a more concerted effort to contain them. Second only to *Mrs. Doubtfire* at the box office in terms of the financial success of trans films<sup>10</sup>, *Tootsie* remains one of the most famous, and most popular of the cross-dressing comedies. Inevitably, the single cross-dressing protagonist does not provide the same

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 1

potential for queering that the dual protagonists can in *Some Like It Hot*, and Michael/Dorothy more closely matches Joe/Josephine's characterization than Jerry/Daphne's, never embracing womanhood and internalizing the role in the way that Jerry/Daphne does: Michael never forgets that he is a man, consistently resists the advances of other men in the film, and successfully achieves heterosexual coupling at the end. *Tootsie* tells the story of Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman), a talented but unsuccessful actor, serial womanizer, and dedicated acting coach, who can no longer find work because of his aggressive attitude. After coaching his friend Sandy (Terri Garr) for a part on a daytime soap opera, Michael decides to dress as a woman, adopts the name Dorothy Michaels, and tries for the role himself. Dorothy's assertiveness wins over the producers, and Michael rapidly rises to fame as Dorothy, becoming a mentor and confidante to the other actresses on the show, and a feminist role model for women all over America. Inevitably Michael falls in love with his co-star, Julie (Jessica Lange), while resisting the advances of both her father, Les, and a lecherous co-star, the aptly named John van Horn. Dorothy eventually reveals that she is Michael through deliberate dewigging during a live broadcast, and after a period of disgrace, develops an acting career and a heterosexual relationship with Julie.

The film opens with a close-up that tracks over the paraphernalia associated with performance, including make-up, costumes, and a wig, and then introduces Michael through the standardized extreme close-up in the mirror. Michael is meticulously applying make-up, although no context is offered at this point, and gradually takes shape through a series of fragmentary images of parts of his face in the mirror, intercut with shots of him teaching an acting class. The mirror has become a standardized motif in trans films as a useful signifier of the importance of appearance, but also of the idea of doubling that gender variance is imagined to present – male/masculine and female/feminine somehow contained within a single person. These opening shots emphasise Michael's skill at disguising his appearance, although the resulting disguise in this instance is a man with a moustache, not a woman. The implication is nonetheless set up, through these opening shots, that 'woman' is merely another role in Michael's repertoire.

Jeff: It is just for the money, isn't it? Not so you can wear these little outfits?  
Michael: It happens to be one of the greatest acting challenges an actor can have.

*Tootsie* deploys the common backstage setting as an expedient means of explaining Michael's facility with make-up, costuming and performance. This narrative device simultaneously implies that gender is a role, a conscious performance, dependent on the ability to manipulate appearance, as actors are better able to recognize than most people.

In contrast to the opening, the transformation of Michael into Dorothy is not shown. After Michael's agent informs him, "you're too much trouble. No-one will hire you," Michael decides, in his desperation, to land an acting job, to disguise himself as a woman. The film cuts straight to a shot of 'Dorothy' walking down a busy street, already fully transformed.



Figure 19. Dorothy Michaels

The first shot of Dorothy presents her as invisible to those around 'her', as presenting successfully intelligible gender. The audience's attention is directed towards her through framing, not because she looks unconvincing. On the contrary, this shot establishes the apparent believability of the disguise, enabling the audience to accept that the other characters will be convinced by it and accept Dorothy as the woman she appears to be. At the same time, the audience is made privy to the fact that this is actually Michael through the conjunction of this shot with the previous one of Michael, and through the emphasis that camera places on Dorothy, singling her out from those around her. Later in the film, the audience is shown the process of transformation through a montage of Michael shaving his

legs, plucking his eyebrows, applying make-up, a wig and false nails, although this does not include any hint of how Michael constructs/conceals the critical physical elements of breasts and genitals. The film presents the typical comedic combination of erasure of the processes of disguise, and constant reminders to the audience. In one scene, for example, Julie queries the heaviness of Dorothy's make-up, to which she responds, "I have a little moustache problem... probably just too many male hormones," yet Dorothy manages to maintain her disguise easily even when sharing a room, and a bed, with Julie later in the film. As with other cross-dressing comedies, it is vital that the audience maintain a balance between a privileged awareness of the 'truth' and a belief in the diegetic success of the disguise for the humour to work.

Despite their initial reluctance, the producers of the show give Dorothy the part, and she is thus granted access to the hidden world of women, including the actresses' dressing room, the kitchen, and the child's nursery. While those within the diegesis accept Dorothy, the audience is constantly reminded of the genital 'truth' of Michael beneath the disguise of Dorothy. When Dorothy's co-star April (Geena Davis) happily chatters away in her underwear, the audience is made aware of Dorothy's comedic struggle to conceal the physical arousal Michael is experiencing as heterosexual reflex. Dorothy's privileged view of other women also includes increasing insight into the sexist way they are treated by men. Dorothy's experiences of objectification, patriarchal discrimination, and sexual harassment, meekly accepted by the other women, enlighten her and galvanise her supposedly feminist instincts. Several of the film's jokes are built on the incongruity of a man finding himself in these situations, and even when Dorothy's is sexually assaulted by van Horn, it is presented humorously. Dorothy informs him that she doesn't want "emotional involvement," to which he responds, "Then I'll take straight sex" before he forcefully embraces her:



Figure 20. Dorothy and John van Horn

Dorothy clammers over furniture in her attempts to prevent van Horn's advances, which are threatening more because they risk exposing Dorothy as Michael than because of the potential violation. In order to maintain her disguise, Dorothy cannot resist too aggressively, and is only 'saved' by the timely entry of her roommate, Jeff. He is clearly amused by Michael/Dorothy's predicament, and his mocking comment on the situation – "you slut" – cues the audience to the humour of the sexual ambiguity of the situation.

*Tootsie* makes extensive use of the disjuncture between sexual appearance and reality. Michael's heterosexual desire for his co-star Julie appears homosexual when expressed by Dorothy, and the ostensibly heterosexual courtship between Dorothy and Les, Julie's father, is read as homosexual by audiences aware of the 'genital truth' of the characters. The humour of these sexual misrecognitions depends on a homosexual/heterosexual binary, but they nonetheless queer that neat opposition by combining both within the same moment. The male characters who desire Dorothy may be mocked for their naiveté, but the sexual confusion nevertheless introduces decidedly queer moments. This queerness is limited by the pointedly chaste nature of these encounters, which depend on suggested desire rather than explicit contact. Les emphasises this during his reconciliation with Michael near the end of the film, when he points out that "the only reason you're still living is because I never kissed you." Both Les and Julie forgive Michael's deception in response to his explanation of his cross-

dressing as a circumstantial necessity, and his affirmation of his heterosexuality. These assertions serve both to sanction the temporary gender transgression and to reassert the heteronormative status quo, re-establishing the familiar boundaries between men and women, gay and straight.

The heterosexual coupling between Michael and Julie that concludes the film offers reassurance that normality has been restored, and that the ‘hurtful deception’ of the gender transgression has been worthwhile for enabling it. Michael’s experiences as Dorothy have ostensibly made him worthy of Julie’s love:

Michael: I was a better man with you, as a woman, than I ever was with a woman, as a man. I just gotta learn how to do it without the dress. At this point in our relationship there might be an advantage to my wearing pants.

Heterosexual coupling is presented as the ‘happy ending’, the telos of the narrative, but it is made explicitly clear in this moment that successful heterosexuality depends on normative gender roles and appearances. Michael has learned to be humble, and to treat women as people and as equals, by recognizing the feminine within himself, but the value of these lessons is only fully in evidence when Michael returns to his ‘proper’ gender and assimilates his experiences as Dorothy with his masculine identity.

Despite its popular appeal, *Tootsie* provoked strong reactions, from feminist critics in particular, for its maintenance of phallogentrism beneath a pseudo-feminist façade. *Tootsie* displays a political attitude that clearly marks it as product of the 1980s, laced as it is with both sexism and homophobia, and overtly conservative ideas about gender. It reflects the conservative backlash against the political gains and aims of the feminist and LGBT movements of the 1960s and 70s. In a departure from the conventions of the genre, Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) adopts a female disguise, not to evade danger, but to gain a job. This had traditionally been a narrative motivation for women to cross, rather than men, and as such carries the implication that it is men who are now disempowered in the realm of employment. The consequences of second-wave feminism have apparently left men disadvantaged, desperate enough to cross-dress to obtain a job. When Michael, as Dorothy, succeeds in landing the sought-after part on the daytime soap opera, she rises quickly to

fame, in large part because of her obvious difference from her pretty, vapid co-stars. She becomes a national icon, in much the way that the movie itself has, proving that she is the best person for the job, even though she's actually a man. She teaches the women of America to be strong, something they evidently need a man to do, while at the same time the character implies that any ambitious and successful woman is really a man underneath.

Marjorie Garber argues that the subtext of the film "is that men are better than women. A man dressed as a woman can beat out 'real women' for the part" and endorses Elaine Showalter's assertion that "the implication is that women must be taught by men how to win their rights" (1992, p. 6). Yet Garber also suggests that there is an inherent value in the way that *Tootsie* foregrounds cross-dressing because of the success and benefits that it produces for Michael (ibid., p. 9). She further argues that the exclusive "either-or spirit of a certain critical response to *Tootsie*... has been accompanied by a certain tendency towards dismissiveness" (ibid.). Vito Russo illustrates Garber's point in his description of the film as a "timid rehash of *Some Like It Hot*... pretend[ing] to have something to say about sex roles" (1981, p. 323), but Marie Keller suggests that "what gets missed is that that character is neither man nor woman. He's having the experience of a cross-dresser, an experience that is different than his experience as a male, and different than the experience that a woman would have" (in Burns, 2008). These multiple and contradictory responses to the film suggest that, whatever its political shortcomings, it is an effective site of emergence for debates around gender, sexuality and representation. Its value arguably lies more with its effective foregrounding of these issues than with any particular ideology that it is representing.

The cross-dressing films may have earned many of the criticisms directed at them, but stereotypically passive, vapid female characters and an explicit reassertion of heteronormativity at the end cannot entirely foreclose the critical gaps that they have opened up. These queer interstices have value in their implication that gender is just one way of expressing different facets of the same personality, and that the performance of a character such as Dorothy or Daphne brings her into existence: the performance functions performatively. The existence of these 'new' characters makes trans visible, and even when the boundaries of gender are re-asserted at the end, they seem less rigid and more permeable. The presentation of cross-dressing as a self-serving deception does not entirely undermine its

usefulness in making the boundaries of gender and sexuality visible and potentially traversable. The films encourage, to varying degrees, the idea that identity is flexible by enabling the fantasy of potential transformation, if only vicariously and/or temporarily.



Figure 21. "Nobody's Perfect"

# Chapter 5:

## Horror

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When I was going up the stair  
I met a man who wasn't there  
He wasn't there again today  
I wish I wish he'd go away.  
*Identity* - (Mangold, 2003)

The configuration of trans representations in film is intimately connected to the genre in which they are constructed. Film comedies featuring trans characters provide a scenario for laughter by exploiting scenarios of misrecognition and disjuncture or by representing those characters as absurd and exaggerated stereotypes. Gender variance is constructed as an inversion of the natural order, one that is entertaining and non-threatening provided that it is presented as both necessary and temporary in terms of the narrative, and as facilitating positive consequences for the main characters that allow a return to the accepted gender status quo. The horror genre recodes this seemingly harmless figure of fun as a perversion rather than an inversion, a dangerous consequence of society's most deviant behaviour. This chapter will examine the construction of the trans figure as a depraved monster enacting disruptive and murderous violence, while the punishment, imprisonment or death of the monster is consequently presented as the inevitable and judicious means of re-establishing the rule of law *and* a heteronormative social hierarchy. The landmark appearance in 1960 of the trans serial killer in the character of Norman Bates marks a major shift in the horror genre, one that is influenced by certain cinematic antecedents and by contemporary social conditions. Musto argues that "*Psycho* became the prototype for the 'drag-queen-as-evil-murderer' motif. You still see it to this day" (in Burns, 2008). This murderous trans figure has persistently resurfaced despite continuing shifts both in the genre and in concurrent social preoccupations. The violence enacted by the trans character in a horror film stands as a warning against deviation from the hegemonic codes of gender, sex and family. Trans itself is thus concomitantly encoded as horrific, as a monstrous and psychopathic perversion inextricably linked with violent death, and usually with insanity. The criminalisation of transgender figures positions them as profoundly dangerous freaks, something to be feared, despised and dismissed.

Before 1960, the horror movie genre was predicated on the idea of an external threat: a fantastic monster, an outsider whose difference from ordinary people was strongly and clearly marked through appearance and behaviour. Andrew Tudor identifies 1960 as the year in which the horror threat moves from the external world of the historically or geographically remote or the supernatural to within the human psyche, with the release of *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960). The monster shifts from being a clearly identifiable Other outside of the accepted boundaries of humanity to an integral facet of that humanity, the monolithic identity of which can no longer be taken for granted. The monster is no longer distant and removed, temporally and spatially, but a contemporary phenomenon lurking within the modern psyche. This “internality also finds expression in the growing use of contemporary and prosaic everyday settings... belonging within our familiar physical and social world” (Tudor, 2002, p. 108). The new monster combines this familiarity with the otherness of earlier monsters. The iconic horror figures of previous decades, such as Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, Mr Hyde, the Werewolf, or the Mummy, display a primarily physical monstrosity with a supernatural origin that is beyond their control. They are clearly identifiable through visual clues in costume, make-up and performance, but, as this chapter will argue, the new form of monster is much more difficult to identify.

The concept of a traditional horror genre is, however, notoriously challenging to define. Peter Hutchings (2004) offers a detailed account of the slippery generic entity known as horror, and indeed of the difficulties inherent in generic classification in general. Part of this generic indeterminacy derives from the multiple early influences on the emergence of the horror film in the 1930s, such as gothic literature and theatrical crime thrillers (ibid., p. 10-13). Over the next three decades horror ‘franchises’ developed, such as Dracula and Frankenstein<sup>1</sup>, in which the monsters represented commercially successful brands that ‘belonged’ to specific studios, particularly Universal and Hammer Studios (ibid., p. 16). The commodification of the monster is repeated with the rising popularity of serial killer films, particularly slasher horrors such as *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>* (Cunningham, 1980) with their continuing proliferation of sequels. The sequels stemming from these profitable

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Rafter calls Norman the “most famous descendant” of Frankenstein’s monster, who is also “drawn to blondes, but impulsively murders them” (2006, p. 96).

character ‘franchises’ of classic horror contribute to an understanding of the development of the genre, in terms of the variations and innovations that were produced to maximise commercial returns, as well as the institutionalisation of particular generic features. But as Hutchings points out, this provides only a limited view, as other studios and indeed other countries were also producing horror films (ibid., p. 25). Intriguingly, these cycles also clearly indicate a strong attachment to the monster on the part of the audience; the monster becomes a type of anti-hero, provoking not only morbid fascination with alterity, but also perverse sympathy with the hunted outsider.

Despite inconsistencies in iconography, setting and structure, certain trends are apparent in these earlier films. The settings are historically or geographically removed from their sites of production in the United States of the 1930s and 1940s. The restrictive darkness of the Victorian era dominates in the most popular of these early horrors, and few are set in the United States. The setting of *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) in nineteenth-century Transylvania and England, for example, creates a safe distance from which American audiences can observe the monstrous Other, and contemplate the boundaries of humanity. These boundaries are blurred even in these earlier films, as the liminal monsters are either part-human (such as Frankenstein’s monster) or ex-human (such as *Dracula* or the Mummy). The monster is generally either the unnatural product of mad scientists such as Dr Frankenstein or Dr Jekyll, or threatening supernatural beings, for example vampires, werewolves, zombies and mummies. These monsters are still blatantly Other, often foreign, and easily visually identifiable through their costumes (*Dracula*’s cape, the Mummy’s bandages), special effects make-up (werewolves, Frankenstein’s monster), and performance (the glazed plodding of zombies). These earlier horrors are characterised by closed endings in which the destruction of the monster is usually a requirement (temporarily in those films meant for sequels), signalling a return to the natural order, and a re-establishment of the boundaries of humanity.

Although several generic conventions are established through the early horror cycles, including a somewhat restricted conception of monstrosity, Hutchings stresses the need for sensitivity to the differing cinematic treatments of and attitudes to these various Others:

Monsters abound in horror, and to a certain extent the history of horror cinema is also a history of monsters. But it does mean that in order to grasp what is distinctive about the horror genre, it is helpful to have some sense of what the function of the monstrous is within it. (ibid., p. 34)

The early monsters are seen as interstitial creatures, disrupting the boundaries of accepted natural and social categories: “our impure monsters... are un-natural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it... They are threats to common knowledge” (N. Carroll, 1990, p. 34). The most common of these disruptions is of the boundary between living and dead – zombies, vampires, and Frankenstein’s monster. But the subtext of this violation can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, in terms of anxieties around race, class, gender or repressed fears and desires.

The forms and meanings of monsters are multiple: the monster is difference made flesh... Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual’ (Cohen, 1996b, p. xi).

These perceived anxieties in the films are inevitably connected to the contemporaneous social preoccupations, which implies the significance of the social context of production for films dealing specifically with transgender serial killers, which foreground anxieties around gender identity.

The ‘new’ monster, the serial killer, possesses a psychological monstrosity that resides behind an entirely ordinary façade which is terrifying in its very invisibility and produced, in popular construction, by human cruelty and perversion. Simpson suggests that “the legendary dimensions of serial killers are thus ensured by their social invisibility, which imparts to them by proxy a pseudo-supernatural, shape-shifting ability carried over from the vampire and werewolf tales of previous generations” (2000, p. 6). From a different perspective, this banal surface brings into question the boundaries of humanness in a similar way to the earlier monsters, but it presents a far greater threat through its origins in the human world rather than the supernatural, lacking the reassuring distance of these earlier tales. The serial killer confronts society with the extreme manifestation of its own darkness, and places the killer in its midst with no discernible means of differentiating the killer from anyone else. The mystery around this identity effectively merges the traditional horror genre with structural and stylistic elements of the thriller genre, producing a new type of film concerned with

psychopathic serial killers. The intentional repetition of the murderous act and the pleasure derived from it help to position the serial killer as monstrous in a way that profit or passion-driven murderers are not. The combination of the monster with psychological mystery and suspense effectively institutes the thriller-horror fusion that occurs in 1960.

Approaching the issue of generic definition through historical periodisation, as do horror theorists such as Tudor (2002), William Schoell (1988) and Hutchings (2004), is one of the most useful possibilities for investigating horror, offering as it does the potential to connect films with their socio-historical contexts. Although not directly concerned with the advent of the transgendered monster in horror, all of these theorists nevertheless point to 1960 as a watershed moment in the evolution of the genre from classic to modern.

The advent of *Psycho* in 1960 is generally regarded as a turning point, as the beginning of something new: as the film which located horror firmly and influentially within the modern psyche, the modern world, modern relationships, and the modern (dysfunctional) family... as the film which marked a definitive rapprochement between the horror film and the psychological thriller and which helped inspire the slasher, stalker and serial killer film. (Neale, 2000, p. 96)

The psychological thriller was an established genre associated primarily with Hitchcock's previous work, for example, *Rebecca* (1940) and *Rear Window* (1954). *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943), *Gaslight* (Cukor, 1944) and *Laura* (Preminger, 1944) probably mark the emergence of this sub-genre most noticeably, although there is clear overlap between psychological thrillers and film noir. The thrill derives primarily from a psychological threat or conflict, rather than a physical one, and the genre plays with the line between perception and reality. The contribution of thriller elements to horror centres mainly on the psyche as a focus of fear and fascination, but extends the thrill into terrified revulsion. The modern setting of *Psycho* removes the horror experience from its remote location and resituates it in an overtly recognisable contemporary place and time, thereby erasing any previous sense of safe distance. The specificity of the contemporary setting provides an experience of immersion, but also situates the film in terms of certain industrial and social issues relating to its context of production. The shifting moral attitudes and liminal potential of the new decade are reflected in the film: *Psycho* displays a marked increase over previous mainstream horror films in the representation of sex and violence, as well as forging a link between them, thereby institutionalising the sex-violence dynamic in subsequent serial killer and slasher

horror. The film also introduces the idea of gender identity as potentially unstable, which is negatively linked to a murderous psychopathy, as will be discussed later in the chapter. The more direct approach to issues of sex, gender and violence creates the space in which the character of Norman Bates can emerge, bringing forward the sexual dimension of his victims, and allowing for a preliminary engagement with the sex and gender issues of the serial killer, as the figure emerges in popular culture.

A comparison with Hitchcock's 1930 film *Murder!*, particularly germane because it also features a cross-dressed murderer, Handel Fane, illustrates the substantial shift in the levels of explicitness and the modes of engagement with the elements of sex, gender identity, and violence. This shift is partly attributable to the differences in genre and narrative structure (*Murder!* is a conventional thriller), but primarily to the difference between their socio-historical contexts. Fane only commits one murder, not for pleasure but out of the perceived necessity of avoiding the revelation of his mixed race identity. It is the motive of a desperate individual that elicits a more sympathetic response than does Norman's monstrous homicidal psychopathy. Fane does not qualify as a serial killer; indeed he predates the term and the popular fascination with the concept by several decades. The actual murder which he commits is not portrayed visually, restricting the representation to the street where the crime occurs, and the screams that erupt in its aftermath. As befits a 1930 film, the violence is implied, left to the imagination of the viewer.

The elements of gender and sexual deviation are similarly subtle, but are nevertheless carefully contained by Fane's suicide after he confesses to the murder. Fane cross-dresses as part of his stage and circus performance, and he uses his female costume to evade detection when fleeing the crime scene. Significantly, cross-dressing is not presented as an integral part of the homicidal impulse, but primarily as a plot device to maintain the mystery around the killer's identity and it is not directly addressed by any of the characters or presented as a problem in itself. On the surface Fane's motive for murder appears to be related to the issue of his race, but his effeminate performance and cross-dressing can readily be interpreted as a socially acceptable way of representing his alternative sexuality. Richard Allen praises *Murder!* As one of Hitchcock's "most complex and humane portrayals of non-normative sexual identity in his work and his most articulate exploration of the oppressive nature of the

gender system that labels deviation from the heterosexual norm degenerate” (2005, p. 123). The monstrously calm madness that Norman presents at the end of *Psycho* is coded as substantially less tragic than Fane’s very public suicide at the end of *Murder!* The psychiatrist’s description of Norman’s descent into insanity clarifies Norman’s Otherness, in contrast to Sir John’s brief explanation of the desperate need for social acceptance that drove Fane to commit murder. The socio-historical context of *Murder!* makes the foregrounding of sex and gender issues an impossibility, resulting in an extremely subtle treatment of both violence and sex, but the social mores also ensure a very unsubtle reassertion of the institutionalised heterosexuality through the marriage of Sir John and Diana, who are granted access to the happy ending that is explicitly denied to Fane. In the final scene, their chaste kiss as husband and wife confirms the containment of any sexual or gender disruption suggested in the film.

## I. *Psycho*

In contrast to this socially sanctioned heterosexual display, the opening scene of *Psycho* offers the spectator a pointedly voyeuristic view of the heterosexual relationship between Marion Crane and Sam Loomis, unmarried and in bed together. This foregrounding of previously taboo sexual material illustrates the social shift that has occurred regarding the portrayal of sexuality, while simultaneously asserting a dominant framework of heteronormativity. The scene immediately establishes Marion as a sexual being, and as the central object of the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze. This voyeurism is more fully explored in the build-up to the shower scene at the Bates Motel, and in the shower scene itself. In the lingering shots of Marion undressing, rather than offering the objective point of view of the opening scene, a shifting and increasingly complicit point of view is created. The spectator initially occupies an objective position in watching Norman spy on Marion, but becomes aligned with Norman through the masked peephole shot that subjectively presents Norman’s point of view, foreshadowing the shift in spectatorial identification with character that occurs after Marion’s murder. Marion’s established heterosexuality implies by association heterosexual masculinity in Norman’s actions, which are illicit but not yet deviant. In retrospect Norman’s gaze seems to have been that of a predator contemplating his prey (like the stuffed raptors which surround him) rather than a lonely young man contemplating the object of his sexual desire, but the suspense of the narrative and the shock of the climax

depend on the construction of Norman as consistently masculine. The psychiatrist in the film explains Norman's behaviour within a framework of conventional heteronormative masculinity, "(To Lila) When Norman met your sister, he was touched by her... and aroused by her. He wanted her. And this set off his 'jealous mother' and ... 'mother killed the girl'." It appears that Norman experiences the expected male heterosexual response to Marion, which provides the trigger for 'Mother's' appearance and psychotic actions, igniting as it does the conflict between Norman's dissociated personalities. This interpretation of Norman and Mother's behaviour reinforces an ideology in which 'normal' heterosexual masculinity is under threat from the domineering mother, in which masculinity itself is at stake and femininity is the instrument of violence. The trans monster is held up as a cautionary object lesson of this pernicious process at work. Norman's voyeurism, with its heteronormative foundation, comes to seem harmless in comparison.

In the shower sequence at the Bates Motel the spectator is deliberately positioned as a voyeur, engaging in the exact same behaviour as Norman, whose monstrosity is not yet apparent. In addition to gazing unwittingly at the monster, the spectator shares the monster's gaze, and this effectively destroys any sense of separation that the spectator may have previously enjoyed from the monsters in classic horror. As the monster's victim, Marion's vulnerability is emphasised by her nakedness. The extent of this vulnerability becomes immediately apparent when 'Mother' enters the bathroom and murders Marion, establishing a link between nudity and violence (if not yet sex and violence). Marion's murder in the shower is a scene of monstrous brutality that is viscerally conveyed through the editing and soundtrack rather than graphic violence. The shocking death of the central character so early in the film, along with the sustained depiction of violent death in a previously taboo environment, clearly signal a rupture from the conventions of the traditional horror genre. This opens a space in which the manifestation of a new monster can occur: the serial killer.

The sharp departure from classic horror conventions elicited strong reactions in the contemporary popular press. William Schoell's book *Stay out of the Shower* (1988) provides an invaluable collection of excerpts from contemporary reviews of *Psycho* from both Britain and the United States. One unidentified critic describes the film as "more miserable than the most miserable peepshow I have ever seen, and far more awful and suggestive than any

pornographic film I have ever seen” (in Schoell, 1985, p. 12). This comment raises two issues with regard to the film’s reception in 1960. Firstly, this critic compares *Psycho* not to the conventional films of the classic horror genre, but to pornography, suggesting an uncomfortable awareness of the film’s rupture of the boundaries of the genre. Secondly, but perhaps more importantly, this review highlights the degree to which the film crossed the taken-for-granted moral boundaries of mainstream film, and the source of the outrage seems to be the sexualised nature of the film rather than its violence. However, a critic from the *London Observer* describes the stabbing of Marion Crane as “one of the most disgusting murders in all screen history. It takes place in the bathroom and involves a great deal of swabbing of the tiles and flushings of the lavatory” (ibid., p. 15). The first onscreen appearance of a flushing toilet seems as much a cause for alarm as the murder, and interestingly the review makes no mention whatsoever of the murderer. In contemporary reviews of the film, there is no sense of *Psycho* as a work of great social or cinematic significance. Instead there is a combination of narrative criticism, technical admiration, and moral discomfort. *Sight and Sound*’s review patronisingly describes the story as “the sheerest rubbish... which will disconcert only the infinitely credulous” (P.H., 1960). Although Peter Dyer dismissively refers to *Psycho* as “a very minor work,” he insightfully suggests that “the audience is fooled, for the simple reason that there is something horribly and persistently compulsive on the other side of the coin” (1960). Although he offers no further explanation of what the horrible ‘something’ is, the continued reappearance of this particular monster, the transgender psycho-killer, in later films has proven to be a persistent compulsion of the horror genre.

The gender confusion of Norman’s dissociated personalities, which exaggerates and reinforces the deviant nature of this monstrous figure, is not yet revealed. The shocking explosion of violence is apparently perpetrated by Mrs Bates, and becomes linked to Norman through his protective devotion to his ‘ill’ mother. When her preserved corpse and the murder of Mrs Bates and her second husband are revealed, Norman’s filial devotion is recoded as psychopathic possessiveness and jealous rage, suggesting the possibility of incest and even necrophilia. As Norman himself admits, “A son is a poor substitute for a lover.” But this statement could be read as either an acknowledgement of the unrequited nature of Norman’s feelings for his mother, or as an acknowledgement of his failure to fulfil her. Either of these interpretations clearly illustrates the liminal territory that Hitchcock sought to traverse with

regard to gender roles and sexuality at work within the mother-son relationship of the dysfunctional family that produced the deviant killer.

The decline of the studios and the weakening of the Production Code enabled Hitchcock to reach new levels of explicitness and explore these previously taboo topics, among which James Naremore identifies “[i]ncest, latent homosexuality, voyeurism [and] necrophilia” (in Doty, 2000, p. 166). The issue of homosexuality, latent or blatant, in *Psycho* has been vehemently debated, with John Hepworth, for example, vilifying Hitchcock as “a supreme fag baiter... [with a] recurring fascination with crazy killer faggots” (1995, pp. 188, 191). Robin Wood on the other hand argues that the perception of Norman as gay “rest[s] on little except popular (and generally discredited) heterosexist mythology: one is probably gay if one shows traces of effeminacy, had a close relationship with one’s mother, or hates and murders women” (1995, p. 197). These debates around Norman’s sexuality tend to sideline or subsume the issue of the cross-dressing itself into broader discussions around homosexuality and homophobia in Hitchcock, interrogating the idea of a gay killer rather than the more primary issue of the cross-dressed killer. Alexander Doty establishes a middle ground by proposing the word ‘queer’ as more appropriate for Norman than ‘gay’ (2000, p. 156). This allows a critical separation between Norman’s transness and his debatable sexuality. Norman’s trans identity, signified through his cross-dressing, is depicted as an integral element of his monstrosity – he kills only when dressed as ‘Mother’. This cross-dressing element also allows the psychological dimension of his monstrosity to be visually represented; the invisible is again made visible. Like the werewolf’s fur and fangs, the house dress and wig which Norman dons allow the audience to identify him and categorise him as a monster, while still enacting the move from the supernatural to the prosaic modern world. The revelation of the identity of the monster is facilitated by these external indicators of internal monstrosity. The serial killer and trans identity are the contemporary components whose twinning produces an aggregate monstrosity, one which results in the violent display of psychopathic deviance that inaugurates the arrival of the new monster.

*Psycho* set in place new horror codes, incorporating elements from the psychological thriller to create a highly popular thriller/horror hybrid, at the centre of which is the brutal ‘psycho-killer’, a killer whose monstrosity is constructed as the murderous expression of a damaged

and/or evil psyche. These are monsters who can blend in with the everyday social world, but whose psychopathy separates them from hegemonic moral conventions. Unlike the supernatural and unnatural monsters of earlier horror who are entirely fictional creations, the serial killer exists in real life (Hutchings, 2004, p. 48). While the filmic versions are clearly fictionalised and influenced by popular culture, this connection to real life adds a different dimension of fear. They share the same human appearance and employ the same codes of public presentation as everyone else. Without the fangs or bolt through the neck that marked the supernatural monsters as threatening Other, the task of identifying the monster becomes much more difficult. This contributes greatly to the building of suspense in a psycho-killer horror film. The identity of the killer in *Psycho* is not revealed until the climax of the film, when Lila discovers the mummified corpse of Mrs Bates in the fruit cellar, and Norman attacks her, dressed in his mother's clothes. Unlike Boris Karloff's Mummy, this corpse has no supernatural powers and can only come back from the dead indirectly. Rather than being an otherworldly materialisation, 'Mother' exists only as a warped reflection of Norman's disturbed mind, an imaginary version of Mrs Bates that he constructs. Norman and 'Mother's' aetiology in the sensationalised reports of Ed Gein, the 1950s Wisconsin serial killer on whom Robert Bloch's source novel is based, asserts the 'authenticity' of Norman's threatening monstrosity. These 'factual' origins confirm the dangers of maternal domination and the association between trans identification and the murderous psychopath, while simultaneously reminding the audience of ubiquitous and invisible presence of psychopathic killers.

*Psycho* is concerned with the 'crisis of identity' within these killers which Jancovich identifies as one of the main types of horror narrative (1992, p. 112). In the trans-psycho sub-genre this crisis is centred on gender identity and disruption. Norman's crisis appears to be resolved at the end of film, as he loses the "struggle between rationality and madness" (Rafter, 2006, p. 97). Norman's identity has been entirely taken over by the 'Mother' half of his mind, subsuming Norman's rational side in the impulsive madness of 'Mother'. The final shot of Norman/Mother presents him/her as content, having finally achieved a form of identity stasis through the erasure of the competing personality by 'Mother'. Throughout the film Norman has shifted back and forth between the two personalities of his dissociative identity disorder. It is an instability of self that is categorised as a split personality in terms of the film's psychology, which reflects the burgeoning popular interest of the 1950s in the idea

of a fragmented psyche containing more than one distinct personality. The debates around the existence of this psychiatric condition<sup>2</sup> continue; as ‘split personality’ shifted to ‘multiple personality’, and most recently to ‘dissociative identity disorder’ it continues to feature as a plot device in a range of films. Lack of clinical evidence for the condition has not impeded the adoption of the concept into popular culture, and consequently into film, bringing with it a key legal controversy of the condition: is the ‘host’ responsible for the actions of its other personalities? Nicole Rafter for example argues that Norman cannot be held fully responsible for the murders, based on an interpretation of him as mentally ill rather than evil (2006, p. 96). The ritual containment or execution of the trans-killers provides a material answer to the question of responsibility within the context of the narrative. Dissociative identity disorder offers a convenient explanation for gender instability, particularly the co-existence of masculine and feminine identities in one person. The effect of this plot device is to categorise gender deviation as a form of insanity, enacting a reductive marginalisation of gender variance through the containment of the psycho-killer.

There is a crucial point of convergence in the aetiology of both the serial killer and dissociative identity disorder: sustained and severe child abuse (Fox & Levin, 2005; Lewis, 1998; Seltzer, 1998). It is an explanation that is common in the trans-psycho-killer sub-genre, and is clearly influenced by the theories of early psychologists and sexologists such as Robert Stoller that attribute sexual and gender variance to inadequate, inappropriate or excessive mothers. *Psycho* reconfigures the childhood abuse as trauma caused by the death of Norman’s father at a young age, but more significantly identifies the dysfunctional relationship that subsequently develops with his clinging, domineering mother. This dangerous maternal figure is set up as the cause of Norman’s gender deviance and his psychopathy, in which the feminine threatens and ultimately subsumes the masculine. The characterisation of the maternal figure in *Psycho*, in the psychiatrist’s explanation in particular, clearly references the masculine paranoia encapsulated in Philip Wylie’s theory of ‘momism’, in which the dominant and smothering mother emasculates her son and prevents the differentiation between self and other (Cuordileone, 2005, p. 130). Sullivan succinctly describes America in the 1950s as “rife with fear about homosexuality, overbearing mothers

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Dorothy Otnow Lewis (1998) on her transition from sceptic to believer in MPD as a result of her work with serial killers, and Ian Hacking (1995), who charts the debates, but eschews a definitive position in favour of an analysis of the philosophical and cultural significance of the concept.

and male effeminacy” (2000, p. 5). The misogynist ideology underpinning this reactionary trend of 1950s America reveals a desire for stable and conservative family and gender dynamics that seems justified in light of the psychopathic violence of Norman, the trans mummy’s boy. The issue of identity crisis in *Psycho* can be seen as a reflection of broader social concerns with Otherness, particularly gender and sexual difference. Trans-killer films have continued to be made, and have been successful, which strongly implies that the social paranoia around gender disruption has not abated. This in turn suggests that Hitchcock’s film has been canonised and endlessly dissected not only because of its technical and structural skill, but also because it has identified an area of acute social insecurity: that of gender and sexual identity.

The category disruption represented through early horror monsters that could be explained away by common sense as fantastic and impossible has been transformed into a direct disruption of basic aspects of human identity, such as gender, that focuses on areas of our similarity to the monster as much as differences from it. This has resulted in fundamental changes to structure and style, the most obvious of which is the shift from an external threat to an internal one, but with this comes mystery about the identity of the killer, the search for that killer, and the climactic revelation of his ‘true’ identity. While the narrative of *Psycho* deliberately identifies Mother as the killer in the shower scene, through the use of the wig and dress as markers of gender and age, she is a shadowy entity.



Figure 22. Mother

The process of transformation by which Norman becomes Mother, putting on the wig and dress, is never shown, enabling the continued implication that they are two separate people. This is crucial in generating shock at the climax of the film when the murderer is revealed to be Norman, a shock that is amplified by the apparent deviance of his cross-dressed Mother personality. The shock of his gender deviance, what Sullivan describes as the “revelation of the ‘truth of the body’,” potentially eclipses the murderous actions with which it is linked (2000, p. 1). The audience is expecting a murderer; they are not expecting a transgender apparition, and Norman’s unanticipated appearance implies trans behaviour is both furtive and shocking.

A key element in the orchestrated deception that veils the transgendered identity of the killer is the use of sound, to distract the viewer with music, emphasise the brutality of Marion’s stabbing, and to construct ‘Mother’ more convincingly through the use of voice. Hitchcock (1930) had already successfully employed the misdirecting effect of the off-screen voice in *Murder!* to persuade the audience that the killer was a woman. In *Psycho*, Mother’s voice arguing with Norman about Marion and later about the fruit cellar offer the most compelling evidence that she exists as an independent character, and furthermore that she is a distinctly unpleasant person.<sup>3</sup> Only Lila’s discovery of the corpse can make the viewer question the source of that voice and that discovery is followed by the major revelation of the film: Norman is Mother is the killer. Mother’s voice is also crucial to our understanding of Norman’s madness in the final shot of him incarcerated in the courthouse. Norman has regained his ‘normal’ appearance; the external signifiers of dress and wig have been removed.

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<sup>3</sup> *Dressed to Kill* later utilises voice in a similar way to persuade the audience that Bobbi exists as a separate and threatening character, through the messages that Bobbi leaves on Dr Elliott’s answering machine.



Figure 23. Norman and Mother

Our understanding of his deviant psychosis depends almost entirely on the voice-over that illustrates the Mother's complete dominance over the host body, with a brief superimposition of Mother's skull onto Norman's face. The contrast between sound and image, which is effectively a contrast between Norman's feminine gender and male sex, clearly equates trans identity with insanity. The killings end with Norman's imprisonment, but the lingering horror seems to lie in the uncontrollability of his gender confusion.

The incomplete containment of the monstrous threat that this final shot of Norman presents partially unravels the resolution provided by Sam's subjugation of Norman/Mother. The attack on Lila in the basement is so rapid there is barely time to process the killer's identity, but as soon as Sam arrests his/her movement the spectator is free to focus on the killer. Norman is fully revealed, against his will, during his struggle with Sam, in which his dress is torn open to expose his masculine clothes underneath and his wig is knocked off. 'Mother' must be subdued so as not to kill Lila, but the process of subjugation is a ritualised degradation that is presented as the justified consequence of Norman's gender instability.



Figure. 24 Norman's de-wigging

The amorality of this particular character as a killer is inextricably linked to his deviation from accepted codes of gender behaviour and dress, and the revelation of the murderer's identity is therefore simultaneous with the forced removal of the costume signifiers of that deviation. This 'dewigging' serves to resolve the mystery of the killer's identity and simultaneously to humiliate Norman as punishment for his deviance.

While *Psycho* marks the starting point of the serial killer genre, and its descendants - slasher and splatter horror, it is also the blueprint for the conspicuous and pivotal sub-genre that could be described as 'trans-psycho-killer horror'. In this sub-genre "murderous rage is queered, and queerness becomes the signifier for psychotic violence" (Sullivan, 2000, p. 6). It is a genre that embodies fear of difference, lack of understanding around gender variance and the concomitant instability of traditional gender categories. Any deviation from the established heteronormative gender binary is pejoratively reconstituted as macabre deviance in these films and then ritually punished to reaffirm the safety of the community.

The impact of *Psycho* on horror films in general after 1960 is pervasive, in terms of structure, cinematography, iconography, and editing, but particularly with regard to serial killer horror. "It is *Psycho* that sets one influential pattern for representing the serial killer, namely the

serial killer as psychological case study” (Hutchings, 2004, p. 49). I would argue that *Psycho*’s influence extends further than the ‘serial killer as psychological case study’ pattern, in that it establishes a number of other significant recurring patterns in serial killer horror. The dangerous isolation produced by the separation of city and country, and the sinister mansion on the hill above the Bates motel are clear descendants of horror’s Gothic roots, not original to *Psycho*, yet they transition effectively from classic to modern serial killer horror. However, the distinctive elements that Hitchcock introduces recur most explicitly in films that replicate his specific version of the new monster: the cross-dressed killer. Certain elements attain particular significance in the trans-killer sub-genre, such as the cellar as the hidden lair of the furtive transgendered killer, the ritualised dewigging of this killer, and the idea of causative childhood trauma as outlined by the ubiquitous psychiatrist feature prominently in subsequent films.

Crucial to *Psycho* and to the films that follow in this particular sub-genre is the presence of this psychiatrist, often replaced in more recent serial killer films by the psychological profiler. The psychiatrists in trans-killer horror use popular psychology to offer reassuring explanations for the deviant behaviour of the killer, but they cannot cure, or even necessarily succeed in rationalising the monstrosity of the trans-psycho. The narratives present treatment of such diseased monstrosity as impossible and indeed unfulfilling; containment or death is the only desirable solution. As the detective in *Identity* vehemently asserts, “The families of the victims don’t want him medicated... they want the monster dead.” The line between illness and evil becomes difficult to distinguish. Childhood trauma and dissociative identity disorder are the most common explanations offered for both transgender and homicidal tendencies, and are presented as pivotal to the filmic psychopathology of the monster in the trans-psycho-killer film. This generally superficial answer to where these killers come from, to what produces this level of deviation from accepted and safe cultural norms of identity, provides a rationalisation for monstrosity but simultaneously suggests that social conditions have produced and will continue to produce such monsters.

## II. *Psycho*'s Descendants

In mainstream cinema there have been several direct descendants of Hitchcock's film, films dealing with trans characters that have captured public and critical attention: *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 2004), *Color of Night* (Rush, 1994), *Psycho* (Van Sant, 1998), *Cherry Falls* (Wright, 2000), and *Identity* (Mangold, 2003). There are a number of films in the twenty year gap between *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill* that display some of the elements of Hitchcock's original, starting with William Castle's *Homicidal* in 1961, but many of them are B-movies that had little impact and have fallen into obscurity. As such they are not within the scope of this discussion, although they attest to the sustained cinematic fascination with the trans-psycho-killer. Most of the mainstream descendants of *Psycho* offer a simplistic representation of the killer as having transgender dissociated identity disorder, although *The Silence of the Lambs* presents the killer as a frustrated transsexual, and *Color of Night* presents a character whose trans identity is an elaborate red herring. These films have been both praised and vilified for their perceived misogyny, and/or homophobia, but not comparatively assessed in terms of their representation of alternative gender identities in relation to the establishment and repetition of, and departure from, specific conventions for a psycho-killer genre. Within the generic conventions there are slight differences in the ideological approach to trans identity, but the construction of trans as monstrous or grotesque is consistent. Political debates around these films have however focussed almost exclusively on negative gender stereotyping and homophobia, rather than on the specific issue of transness. The narrative justification, representation and revelation of trans identity in these films are subsumed into these more general discourses, but the engagement with trans identity in the trans-psycho horror films occurs within a very specific arrangement of tropes that originates with *Psycho*. These tropes instigate a specific understanding of gender deviation and disruption as monstrous. The representations of trans identity, which are inextricably linked to dissociative identity disorder and serial killing, are coded in these films as pathologically violent deviancy.

The two primary requirements for the films in this sub-genre are that they feature serial killers, and that those killers have a trans identity. Although the phenomenon of multiple murder has a long history, the term 'serial killer' was only coined in the mid-1970s (Seltzer, 1998, p. 16). To meet the definition of serial killer, the murderer must kill at least three

victims, on separate occasions, and there must be a cooling-off period between the murders (Fox & Levin, 2005, p. 17). The single desperate killing by Handel Fane in *Murder!* thus excludes him from this category. The public fascination with serial killers is intricately tied to the idea of the ‘boy-next-door’ and to the idea of a killer without conscience that will not stop of his own volition. These characteristics epitomise the terror that the prosaic and compulsive monster in modern horror manifests. All of the transgender psycho-killer films deal with multiple murders that cease only when the killer is incarcerated or executed, and all of them exhibit similar conventions and motifs. The suspense that is created in the hunt for the killers appears to put these films within the thriller category, but the graphic violence and deviancy from dominant social values exhibited by the killers push them into the horror genre. In particular, the recurring use of knives as the weapon of choice creates a visceral violence that prioritises gratification over efficiency. In presenting the trans figure as a serial killer within a horror paradigm, a concrete connection is established between gender divergence and monstrosity, the source of which lies in the narrative in incurable mental disease, and in the social context within an anxiety around normative gender identity.

John Phillips (2006) refers to the concept of castration anxiety to explain the gender politics at work in the transgender killer films. The women are threatening because of their sexual desirability to “young men with cheap, erotic minds!” as ‘Mother’ puts it, and are therefore punished with violent symbolic ‘penetration’ by killers who have substituted knives for penises, and death for sex. It is certainly noteworthy that in all of the trans-psycho films, death is a very bloody affair created through the close contact of stabbing/slashing with blades. In *Dressed to Kill* the weapon is a cutthroat razor rather than a knife, and it is coded as distinctly masculine, while a knife could be seen as either a domestic (coded as feminine) or a hunting (coded as masculine) tool. Nonetheless, all of the blade murders require direct and intimate contact between the murderer and the victim, contact that could easily be read as sexual. Blades also create the opportunity for the visually effective appearance of blood, far more aesthetically horrifying than death by poisoning (mentioned in *Psycho* as the way in which Norman killed his mother and her lover) or strangulation (which features in *Dressed to Kill* and *Color of Night*). Apart from the phallic nature of the blades themselves, the stabbing action itself is a perverse version of sexual penetration, an extremely violent moment of intimacy. The connection between the knife and the penis reinforces the connection between sex and death and serves to remind the viewer of the physicality of both the killer and the

victim. The fact that the killer is a feminine alter<sup>4</sup> in almost all of these films complicates the sexual dimension, the heterosexual desire of the male host is subsumed by the violent trans alter who finds satisfaction in savagery rather than sex, and in punishing the object of desire. This serves to reiterate the connection being made between psychopathy and transness, and the threat that it poses to normative gender and sexuality.

The psychiatrist plays a key role in the understanding of transgender within the trans-killer films. *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Color of Night*, and *Identity* all feature psychiatrists who rationalise the killer for the audience and raise the question of “whether to convict the body or the mind” (Dr Mallick in *Identity*). The ubiquitous presence of this figure is complicated in *The Silence of the Lambs* where the psychiatrist is also a serial killer, and in *Dressed to Kill*<sup>5</sup>, where the psychiatrist turns out to be the killer. Both of these films consequently feature additional psychiatrists who can continue the process of rationalisation. This recurring character provides an explanation for the monster that conflates trans behaviour with a damaged and twisted psyche. The gender disruption that occurs is pathologised, an illness that cannot be controlled rather than a conscious choice. To choose an alternative gender identity becomes the equivalent of choosing madness. In several of these films the blame for this diseased mind is laid by the psychiatrist at the feet of a domineering or abusive mother, who, in the absence of a stabilising father figure, derails the ‘normal’ heteronormative gender development of her son. In *Psycho*, *Cherry Falls* and *Identity* the domineering/abusive mother is the villain that produces the monster.<sup>6</sup> This warped figure of femininity produces equally warped feminine alters in her damaged offspring. A man in a dress is no longer humorous, he is an external manifestation of the monstrous consequences of the disruption of stable and conventional binary gender categories that function within the nuclear family of traditional ideology.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘alter’, which is short for alternate personality, rather than ‘alter ego’ as indicated by Deborah Haddock (2001, p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> Brian de Palma revisited the character of the trans-psycho/psychiatrist in *Raising Cain* in 1992, with the doctor and his female alter, played by John Lithgow (who had previously played a trans character in *The World According to Garp* (Hill, 1982)).

<sup>6</sup> Neil Jordan’s *In Dreams* (1999) could also be considered part of this group of films, as it features a serial killer whose psychopathology is traced back to an abusive mother, and who dresses up as his mother on occasion. However, these episodes are rare and the film is more concerned with the woman whose daughter he murdered, and it is therefore not included in this discussion.

The idea of childhood trauma, particularly at the hands of a mother, combined with an absent father, is a recurrent theme in these cross-dressing horror/thrillers. The source of this trope lies in both scholarly writing and popular culture, and the implication is that the absence of a functional nuclear family will produce violent monstrosity. As Hannibal Lecter explains to Clarice Starling, she will find Buffalo Bill by looking for “severe childhood disturbance associated with violence. Our Billy wasn’t born a criminal, he was made one through years of systematic abuse” (*The Silence of The Lambs*). Norman Bates loses his father at age five, after which his mother becomes a particularly “clinging and demanding woman” (*Psycho*). In *Color of Night* the Dexter children are orphaned at a young age, leaving them at the mercy of a callous social service system and sexually abusive psychiatrists. In *Cherry Falls* Leonard Marliston, conceived during the gang rape of his mother, has suffered an abusive childhood at the hands of his bitter, ostracised mother, and Malcolm Rivers (*Identity*) is confined and then abandoned by his prostitute mother. Only Dr Elliott in *Dressed to Kill* is not provided with an abusive childhood as a justification for his deviancy. But the childhood abuse that is described in the other films is provided as the rationale for the murderous urges, and concomitantly for the eruption of transgender identities.

The development of trans identities and homicidal behaviour is shown in trans-psycho horror to occur when the psyche of the killer fractures in defence against childhood trauma and alternate identities begin to appear. The idea of more than one personality inhabiting the same body has persistently fascinated audiences since Robert Louis Stevenson published *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1886, as it has troubled the medical community since Jean-Martin Charcot identified and photographed the first case of multiple personality in 1885 (Hacking, 1995: 5). These origins illustrate the dyadic construction in subsequent fiction of the multiple personality as both unnatural monstrosity and mental illness. The currency of the concept in popular culture increased with its migration to film in *The Three Faces of Eve* (Johnson, 1957) and has continued into more recent films such as *Primal Fear* (Hoblit, 1996) and *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999). The characters in these films all have alters of the same gender, but in the trans-psycho horror film the personalities are specifically configured as being of different genders, presented in itself as horrifying deviance. The idea of monstrosity is strongly connected to the bigendered nature of the component identities and the conflict between them is a key catalyst in the eruption of psychotic violence.

The trans-psycho-killer films are primarily predicated on a pop psychology concept of a split personality disorder, and later multiple personality disorder, presenting the disease as an explicatory link between transgender and homicidal insanity. *Psycho*'s Norman Bates adopts the personality of his mother after he murders her, desperate to assuage his guilt and loneliness, and eventually surrenders his own personality entirely to hers, which he has always perceived as dominant. Dr Elliott is waging an internal war in *Dressed to Kill* between Bobbi, who is his feminine personality and wants sex reassignment surgery, and Robert who is masculine and rebels strongly against the 'castration' that would be effected by the surgery. In *Color of Night*, Rose assumes the personality of her dead younger brother when forced to by her older brother through rape and violence. She then develops a third personality, Bonnie, who is fearless and willing to defy Dale's sadistic control, and Rose's sense of familial responsibility. Similarly to Norman Bates, Leonard Marliston in *Cherry Falls* has developed a homicidal personality that he dresses to look exactly like his mother, and who acts out revenge on her behalf. *The Silence of the Lambs* is the only film in this group that does not posit dissociative identity disorder as part of the killer's psychopathy. James Gumb sees himself as a transsexual, conscious of a conflict between his body and his sense of identity, but it is single identity. The dissociated identities of the other killers are competing for dominance in an internal struggle which plays out as a gender conflict. The feminine alters of male hosts are presented as unnatural in their breach of the heteronormative alignment of sex and gender, predicating a binary gender ideology and pathologising any departure from it.

The suspense elements of the narratives of the trans-psycho films depend on the presence of the transgendered alternate identities remaining hidden until the killer is revealed. Basements and cellars feature repeatedly in the films as the site of concealment in which the transgender identity is seen to belong. The subterranean darkness of these places conveys a sense of furtive shamefulness on transgender, suggesting that it has no place in the conventional household or society. Žižek frames the basement in psychoanalytic terms as representing Norman's Id, a place of repression and lack of differentiation from the mother (in Fiennes, 2006), but even a surface reading of the basement reveals its shadowy and clandestine quality that becomes associated with the transgender identity. Lila discovers the 'truth' of Norman's body after she encounters Mrs Bates' desiccated corpse in the fruit cellar where Norman has

hidden her. In *Dressed to Kill* Dr Elliott's office is below ground level, a place of descent and concealment, threatening for potential victims and a safe hiding place for the killer. *Cherry Falls* makes use of two separate but connected basements. The first is the basement of Lorelee Sherman's house in West Virginia where the sheriff discovers a cot and chains that illustrate the presence of a child, as well as the cruel treatment that the child was apparently subjected to. The second basement is the one in Leonard Marliston's house to which he takes his captives, Brent and Jody Marken, in order to torture and kill them, and the place in which he can effect his transformation from Leonard to Lorelee. Whenever the trans identity escapes from this dark place of concealment, there are violent consequences for the unsuspecting public.

*The Silence of the Lambs* elaborates most extensively on the idea of the basement as a sort of representation of the sub-conscious of the killer, and dwelling place of gender deviation. The spectator has seen Jamie Gumb in his habitat, the cellar, several times without being able to clearly identify the location. The suspense of this film lies not in the identity of the killer, but in whether Clarice will find him in time to save Catherine. In this aspect, as with the absence of dissociative identity disorder, this film deviates from *Psycho*'s generic blueprint. Clarice's descent into the basement is a descent into Gumb's diseased mind; her desperate search through Gumb's basement reveals not the 'truth' of his body, but the 'truth' of his mind, and the immediate proximity of the space where he expresses his transsexual aspirations to the area in which he commits his psychopathic violence. As Clarice descends into Gumb's underground lair, she moves from light into shadow, creating a sense of menacing suspense which is enhanced by the soundtrack dominated by her heavy breathing and the muffled shouts of Catherine and barking of Precious, Gumb's poodle. The spectator discovers the basement, through tracking shots depicting Clarice's point of view, as a physical representation of the key facts of Gumb's character. The spectator is already aware of Gumb's compulsive interest in moths, sewing and kidnapping, and each of these 'hobbies' has a dedicated geographical space in the basement, which are distinct but physically and symbolically interconnected. The restricted point of view, and rapid editing in this sequence make it difficult to distinguish one space from the next, and thus conceptually to separate transsexuality from psychotic brutality. The 'transsexual' space is Gumb's sewing room, which is decorated with colour and feminine clothes and mannequins, the centrepiece of which is the dressmaker's dummy dressed in Gumb's half-finished 'woman suit', made from

the skins of his victims, complete with pubic hair and one breast. This suit dispels any of the potential domestic normalcy of the sewing room, as do the soft porn Polaroids tacked to the wall that Clarice passes on her way out.

The next room Clarice enters is the Gothic-style room where Catherine Martin is held captive in an old well, an area which connects the 'transsexual' space to the dissection room which represents Gumb's monstrous psychopathology. The carefully orchestrated mise-en-scene of the room is devoid of colour, and the shadowy low-key lighting creates a frightening place with no sign of humanity, but a terrifying sense of unseen danger. It is where Gumb keeps his victims while starving them to create loose skin for his sewing project; it is his storage room. Clarice shuts the doors to try and effect a separation of this space, to contain Gumb's psychopathic violence. The sense of terror builds with every room in which she fails to find him, but in her goal of unearthing him she has to move into the next space, the moth room, where Gumb lovingly raises his death head moths. Again a potentially non-threatening environment is transformed by the low-key lighting and the central position in the mise-en-scene of a stainless steel dissection table, as well as by the ominous flapping sound of moth wings. Lastly, and with no established sense of order to the screen space, Clarice discovers the basement bathroom, where Mrs Lippman's corpse sits rotting in a bath, before the basement is plunged suddenly into darkness. The subsequent shot switches to Gumb's subjective and voyeuristic point of view through his night vision goggles, bathing everything in green light. The reverse shot of Gumb presents him as monstrous; the extremely low-key blue lighting shows only his shoulders and the outline of his goggles which give his face an unnatural and menacing distortion. Clarice becomes the prey as Gumb stalks her through the basement, but he also reaches out to touch her, his hand hovering chillingly close to her face, suggesting both predation and desire. Gumb's underground world is a reflection of his damaged mind, a place where everyday objects have become perverse props in his macabre fantasy of transformation. It is a place where he thinks he is safe, where he can be himself and indulge his hobbies, but Clarice manages to breach his lair, a reflection of her insight into his psyche, an understanding provided by Hannibal Lecter. Once Clarice has breached Gumb's physical hideaway, and thus his psyche, she acquires a measure of control over him that enables her to kill him, an act of violence necessary to save both herself and Catherine Martin. The volley of shots that Clarice fires at Gumb has the dual effect of killing the

monster and breaking the window, bringing sunlight into the dark basement, symbolically conquering his psychopathic deviance.

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Jamie Gumb's psychopathic monstrosity manifestly includes his transsexuality, whether genuine or imagined. Gumb sees sexual reassignment as a solution to his self-loathing, rather than an aspect of it. As Lecter points out, he "has tried to be many things," but he clearly sees sex reassignment as the ultimate solution to his misery; it is something that, in terms of Lecter's diagnosis, he chooses as a result of his psychopathy, not something inherent in it. Most of the villains enact their violence through their female personas, but Gumb kidnaps Catherine Martin as a male, and only constructs a feminine persona once during the film. In this scene Gumb carefully applies make-up, jewellery and a wig that is actually the scalp of one of his victims, and then tucks his penis and parades in front of a mirror.



Figure 25. Buffalo Bill

It is a scene that has been widely criticised for its deliberate construction of the transsexual as a figure of revulsion. Sullivan argues that "Bill's effeminacy marks him as grotesquely murderous" (2000, p. 1) but the link between his posturing and his violence is less explicit than in the other films, as this is scene in which Gumb performs only for himself and does not actually commit any violence. The intercutting between Gumb transforming himself and Catherine desperately trying to capture Precious clearly suggests a link between the two

expressions of his psychopathy but when Clarice hunts and kills Gumb at the climax of the film, it is as himself, not as the ‘butterfly’ which the spectator observes in the earlier scene.

In all of the films except *The Silence of the Lambs*, the identity of the trans character is hidden as part of the suspense. The viewer is not explicitly shown the process of that transforms the mild-mannered man into the cross-dressed psychopathic transgender alter. This effectively promotes the illusion that the killer is a woman, and creates a double shock when the killer is revealed. An exception to this convention occurs in *Cherry Falls*, where the process of transformation is shown, but only after the identity of the killer has been revealed. The transformation occurs on a surface level – make-up, a wig, and a dress – and is entirely unconvincing in light of Leonard’s muscularity, but serves to visibly manifest the transgender psychopathy of the killer:



Figure 26. Leonard/Loralee

Leonard’s transformation is unusual in that the revelation of the killer usually only occurs at the point of capture. Interestingly, like Gumb, Leonard is killed rather than captured, suggesting that the process of transformation that both have performed has exaggerated the level of monstrosity and consequently necessitating a more severe punishment. Gumb’s transformation is presented in great detail; it is more than make-up, a wig and a dress. His application of lipstick focuses the viewer on his mouth as he asks, “Would you fuck me?” and emphasises his disturbing voice and manner of speaking. His wig is a human scalp, and

instead of a dress, he wears a colourful kimono-like gown, spread behind him like the wings of the moths with which he identifies, and showing him, full frontal, with his genitals carefully tucked between his legs. Clothes are not enough of a conversion for Gumb, he needs a physical alteration, and the viewer never sees him take on the surface disguise of a wig and dress. When he is killed by Clarice, there is no unveiling, or dewigging, as there is in the other films. While Gumb the serial killer has been successfully defeated by Clarice, he does not suffer the humiliation that is conventionally enacted on the other psycho-killers through the dewigging process as punishment for gender deviancy.

In *Psycho*, Norman is fully revealed, against his will, as both gender variant and killer during his struggle with Sam, in which his dress is torn open to expose his masculine clothes underneath and his wig is knocked off. It is the climactic moment of the film, when the monstrosity upon which the suspense has been built is exposed in a horrifying revelation that links Mrs Bates' gruesome corpse with Norman's homicidal psychopathy and his trans alter identity. The shocking exposition does not distinguish between the repulsiveness of these three elements, and indeed, in revealing them at the same time effectively equates them. The dewigging of Norman serves two significant functions, the first of which is that it provides the answer to the murder mystery. This is crucial to the narrative resolution of the film, but the second function, equally important, operates on an ideological level. The dewigging process in which Norman is subdued by Sam is a process of ritual humiliation that disempowers the transgender figure and reasserts the dominance of heteronormative masculinity. Joseph Stefano's original screenplay encompasses key elements of this ideological process in his description of the scene

And Lila's scream is joined by another scream, *a more dreadful, horrifying scream* which comes from the door behind her.

NORMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

(screaming)

Ayeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee Am Norma  
Bates!

Lila turns.

NORMAN

His face is contorted. He wears *a wild wig, a mockery of a woman's hair*. He is dressed in a high-neck dress which is similar to that worn by the corpse of his mother. His hand is raised high, poised to strike at Lila. There is a long

breadknife in it.

LILA

Close on her face. She is dumb-struck. Her eyes are screaming.

BACK TO NORMAN

As he is about to start forward, a man's hand reaches in from the doorway behind, grabs Norman's wrist. Sam comes through the door, still holding tight to the wrist, pulling back the arm and at the same time throwing himself at Norman, *football tackle style*.

(Stefano, 1959, my italics)

Norman's trans identity is clearly designed as monstrously aberrant, with his 'wild wig' and 'dreadful, horrifying scream' and Sam's highly conventional masculinity is highlighted by the description of his action as in terms of a 'football tackle'. The revelation of the killer becomes a ritual of humiliation which works to re-establish the 'natural' (contrasted with the 'unnatural' monster) heteronormative status quo.

The dewigging ritual becomes one of the dominant features of the trans-psycho killer genre. Robert Elliot is similarly exposed in *Dressed to Kill* when he is revealed as the killer and a gender deviant. He is shot by the policewoman, and his wig is knocked off when he falls to the floor, where he lies sobbing and defeated.



Figure 27. Robert/Bobbi

It is significant that the agent of humiliation has been rewritten as a woman, and a representative of the law. The transgender monster is defeated by a ‘real’ woman in an act that decisively resolves the “fundamental dialectic of disorder and control” (Rafter, 2006, p. 102). It is unclear which parts of the final scenes of *Dressed to Kill* are part of Liz’s dream, and which aren’t, but it appears that Bobbi/Robert is institutionalised, not killed, and that his transgender psychopathy survives as he kills a nurse and dons her uniform in order to escape and continue killing. The punishment of death meted out to the monsters of classic horror has not yet been transferred to the psychopath of modern horror, suggesting that the monster still hovers on the side of disease rather than evil. There is however a very obvious implication that the trans psychopath cannot be cured; the monstrosity is irreversible.

In *Color of Night* the narrative question over the identity of the killer leads deliberately to Rose/Richie, exploiting the idea of the trans character as homicidal, particularly towards objects of sexual desire. When Bill finds Richie, he is nailed to a chair, beaten and bleeding in Dale’s warehouse. Richie is gently dewigged by Bill in his attempt to make contact with the Rose personality in a process that implies that dissociated identities are entirely dependent on superficial appearance. As soon as Bill removes the wig and glasses from Richie, Rose begins to re-emerge.



Figure 28. Richie



Figure 29. Rose

The resolution of the film involves Bill saving Rose and killing Dale, the actual killer. The heterosexual coupling at the end strongly suggests that having eliminated the homicidal monster, the source of trauma in Rose’s life, Bill can cure Rose of her dissociative identity disorder, and Richie of his desire for a sex change. His display of masculine dominance in

response to Rose's feminine helplessness, his love and desire for her as a woman, and his skill as a psychoanalyst are presented as potent enough to eliminate her trans 'pathology'. The changes from the conventions of the other trans-psycho films are largely attributable to the inversion of the host/alter construction. This is the only film in the group in which the host is female, and the alter masculine, and the monstrosity of the gender deviation is presented as far less horrifying than the male host/feminine alter configuration, an effect that demonstrates the same patriarchal imbalance of power at work in the mtf and ftm comedies. Rose does not need to be killed or institutionalised; the threat can be eliminated by recuperating her into a heteronormative relationship with conservative gender power dynamics.

Gus van Sant's 1998 supposedly shot-for-shot remake of *Psycho* evinces some key differences from the original. The peephole scene actively shows that Norman is masturbating through the movement of his head, the heavy panting, and the subsequent rebuckling of his belt. Norman's obvious heterosexuality, reinforced by Lila's discovery of soft porn in his bedroom, offers a corrective response to the accusations of homophobia directed at the original. Another critical difference between the two versions lies in the removal of some of the dialogue from the explicatory scene with the psychiatrist, including his description of his own role in explaining Norman's behaviour, the references to the other young women Norman/Mother has killed, and most significantly the section on transvestism. Sam no longer asks, in a tone of revulsion, "Why was he... dressed like that?" Consequently Dr Richmond no longer needs to deny Norman's transvestism, instead giving only the description of the cheap wig and dress as part of Norman's attempt to be his mother. The changes in the dialogue are largely attributable to changes in popular understanding of trans identities and dissociative identity disorder. Van Sant chooses to avoid directly addressing the question of exactly what kind of monster Norman is, presumably to avoid explicitly pathologising transness.

The monstrosity of Norman's trans psychopathology is however still clearly conveyed in the dewigging scene. The changes which van Sant has introduced do little to counteract the construction of monstrosity and its subsequent humiliation and subjugation. As Lila enters the cellar, she turns on the light, reducing the sense of the cellar as a site of furtive secrecy. It

is clean and well-lit, and Mrs Bates is seated before an aviary of twittering birds, but these changes lose their significance with the discovery of Mrs Bates. She is still a corpse, albeit with flowing blonde hair this time, and she is rendered even more repulsive by the spider that crawls out of her mouth. The basement is still the site of concealed monstrosity that is revealed with the entrance of Mother. In this version there is no ‘dreadful, horrifying scream’ of “Ayyyyy am Norma Bates.” Mother advances silently on Lila, wearing a white flowered silk gown, but with the “wild wig, a mockery of woman’s hair” still in place. The football tackle has been replaced with a longer and more violent struggle between Sam and Mother, and Lila is the one who finally subdues Mother with a vicious kick to the head. Sam’s masculinity is no longer dominant, and Lila’s femininity is no longer helpless, but the de-wigging itself remains the same. Mother’s wig is knocked off in the struggle, and the gown torn open, exposing the ‘truth’ and enacting the ritual humiliation.



Figure 30. Norman is de-wigged again

The penultimate shot is a close-up of the fallen wig, that carries a significantly different meaning than a shot of the knife, for example, would have. It is a shot that is present in the original, but it occurs in the midst of the struggle, rather than afterwards. The wig as a symbol of Norman/Mother’s monstrosity focuses more on the transgender aspect of the horror than the homicidal one.

*Cherry Falls*, released forty years after the original *Psycho* shows the influence of the self-reflexive comedy that was introduced to horror in the 1990s in movies such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996). It displays an awareness of its horror antecedents such as *Psycho*, and the conventions of trans-psycho-killer genre, as well as the critical responses to it. Carol Clover's "final girl" is in evidence (1992), as well as an ironic inversion of the conventional sexual morals of the slasher genre. In this film the teenagers are killed if they *don't* have sex. The good guy, the sheriff, turns out to be a rapist, but Jody's mother, the alcoholic, turns out to be a decent person. The film contains a dewigging scene, but the transgender and homicidal aspects of monstrosity are revealed separately in an earlier scene. The dewigging is an ironic postscript that acknowledges the importance of the ritual of humiliation. The identity of the killer is known, the process that transforms him into 'Loralee' has been revealed, and the monster has been graphically impaled on a wooden balustrade. The dewigging in this film is solely for the purpose of humiliation. The wig miraculously stays in place during Leonard/Loralee's fall onto the palings which kill him, but it is then removed by teenagers from the 'Pop Your Cherry Party' as a sign of their victory over the killer. The death of the killer is not enough within the conventions of the sub-genre: humiliation of the transgender monster is mandatory.

The first film to break with several key conventions of trans-psycho-killer horror is *Identity*. It uses a motel very similar to the one in *Psycho* as the setting (and a shower curtain in one of the murders), consciously and overtly situating itself in relation to *Psycho*. The requisite psychiatrist is given an expanded role in explaining the conventional tropes of dissociative identity disorder and causative child abuse by the mother in the absence of the father, although with the belief that he can actually cure Malcolm Rivers of his psychopathy. The film differs in critical areas from its predecessors, in the narrative construction and processes of identification at work. Malcolm Rivers is revealed as a psychopathic killer during the opening credits, but his role in the central murder mystery is unclear until more than an hour into the film, when it becomes clear that all of the characters in the motel strand of the narrative are actually Malcolm's multiple identities. In introducing these identities as independent characters, the film has encouraged spectator identification with them and a belief in their existence within the diegetic world. The result is that when Edward (John Cusack) is revealed to himself and to the audience as one of Malcolm's personalities the effect is shocking but not repulsive. The spectator is encouraged to feel sympathy for

Malcolm, and for Edward, as he sacrifices himself so that the host can avoid execution and so that only Paris, the likeable ex-hooker, remains from the range of Malcolm's identities. The narrative takes place almost entirely within Malcolm's mind, and the various personalities, both masculine and feminine, are played by separate actors. Malcolm never externally manifests his personalities, and the version of dewigging is consequently altered substantially. When Dr Mallick shows Edward his reflection in a mirror, he sees Malcolm and is visibly distraught at the discrepancy between his sense of identity and his appearance. It is a scene of pathos rather than horror and humiliation, encouraging sympathy for the monster. The presence of feminine alters is presented as equally likely as masculine ones, and the conflict among the identities themselves, and between the identities and the host, do not run along gender lines. The twist at the end reveals the identity and continued existence of the killer personality within Malcolm, little Timmy, who kills Malcolm's last feminine alter with a weeding fork. The male/masculine alignment of host and alter is re-established, but so is the psychopathic monstrosity of the killer as he murders his psychiatrist and escapes custody, presumably to continue his homicidal rampage.

The trans-psycho killer films manifest Eve Sedgwick's idea that we are all different people quite literally, and there is no doubt that they are extremely negative portrayals of trans identities and behaviour. The link that the films establish between gender variance and deviance is clearly problematic, as is the pleasure that is offered through the ritual punishment and humiliation of the killer. Some of these films have caused outrage in LGBTQ communities and sparked protests as a result of their negative portrayals of trans characters as psychopathic deviants.<sup>7</sup> As a result, these films have (unintentionally) had an impact on real-world trans politics by stimulating counter-discourse, debate and activism. The connection of these protests with high-profile Hollywood films is likely to garner mainstream media coverage for trans campaigns, but this is poor recompense for the demeaning representation of trans characters as deviant psychopaths.

It is also possible to interpret these trans-psycho-killers as grotesque rather than monstrous, and therefore as fulfilling a similarly carnivalesque function of contained disruption and

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the protests against *The Silence of the Lambs* at the Academy Awards in 1992 (Weinraub, 1992).

transgression as the comedies, but through an inverse mode. While the comedies emphasise humour through the grotesque and downplay its fearful dimension, the reverse is true in the horror films, “for the abnormal may be funny... and on the other hand it may be fearsome or disgusting” (Thomson, 1972, p. 24). These films mark both trans identities and homicidal violence as abnormal, as horrifying deviations from accepted social norms and structures, but as Geoffrey Harpham points out, “The plain assumption of the grotesque is that the rules of order have collapsed; for this reason it is strongest in eras of upheaval or crisis, when old beliefs in old orders are threatened or crumbling” (1976, p. 466). In his analysis of the grotesque, Philip Thomson argues that “the shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the [viewer] up short, jolt him out of his accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (ibid., p. 58). This particular deployment of the grotesque figure could therefore be seen as a strategy of subversion, a disturbing exposure of the boundaries enforced by heteronormativity. These boundaries are cultural, but are often expressed spatially, through the separation of levels and the identification of the monster as subterranean (as discussed above). Indeed the etymology of the word grotesque, as described by Geoffrey Harpham, is from “*grottesche* – of or pertaining to underground caves.... *Grotesque*, then, gathers into itself suggestions of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy” (2007, p. 31-32). This seems particularly apt when one considers the prevalence of cellars and basements in these films, and how supposedly ‘base’ desires that are associated explicitly with both basements and debasement are enacted through the dewigging and punishment of the ‘monsters’.

These films tend to construct the trans characters as initially sympathetic, and this combination of sympathy and horror/disgust follows directly from the literary tradition of the grotesque. The disjuncture between these conflicting responses is intended to produce unease in the spectator, specifically regarding the dependability of familiar and reassuring boundaries. Geoffrey Harpham argues that the grotesque “implies that an object either occupies multiple categories or that it falls between categories... It accommodates the things that are left over when the categories of language are exhausted; it is a defense against silence when other words have failed” (2007, p. 3). In addition, Harpham maintains that

No definition of the grotesque can depend solely upon formal properties, for the elements of understanding and perception, and the factors of prejudice, assumptions, and expectations play such a crucial role in creating the *sense* of the grotesque. It is our interpretation of the form that matters, the degree to which we perceive the

principle of unity that binds together the antagonistic parts. The perception of the grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression. (Ibid., p. 17)

Harpham identifies prejudice and assumptions as the underlying basis for perceiving characters as grotesque, and his emphasis on progressionality provides a significant point of convergence with some of the central tenets of queer theory. Stella Butter addresses this connection directly, suggesting that “the grotesque... function as an effective means to heighten the awareness of the gendered classification schemes that structure the fabric of our reality and fortify the normative gender roles within patriarchal society” (2007, p. 337). This awareness results from the anxiety produced by what Butter refers to as “a proliferation of transgressions” (ibid. , p. 340). The familiar structures and boundaries of gender and sexual identity are unnervingly exposed and transgressed in these films, yet the transgressors are represented as caricatured deviants who are ritualistically punished. As a result, these films can be seen both to alleviate unease about what is hidden, and at the same time to provoke unease about the fragile illusions that heteronormative boundaries are shown to be.

# Chapter 6:

## Melodrama

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In comedies and horror films, the trans character exists primarily as a function of the narrative, to elicit either laughter or fear and repulsion. Neither of these genres engages with the experience of a sustained and deliberated trans identity or its implications beyond generic functionality. Several of the films which do directly and sympathetically engage with the concept of gender ambiguity, through characters who identify themselves as trans, fall broadly within the genre of melodrama, which is typified by heightened emotional engagement, an emphasis on character and personal relationships, and moments of crisis or suffering. However, the diversity of these films prevents a formulaic consistency along generic lines, as is to be expected when trans protagonists are portrayed as unique and complex subjects developed beyond merely functional devices which serve the plot. Rather than recurring codes and conventions, these films share a serious and sustained contemplation of gender alterity, cultural visibility, and the consequences of prescriptive binary gender and sexual taxonomies. *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992) emerged as the rapid expansion in trans studies began and *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999a) in the midst of significant political mobilisation and trans activism at the end of the twentieth century. *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005) signal some of the shifts in cultural awareness and perceptions that have occurred with, and through, these endeavours. In exploring gender possibilities outside of the heteronormative gender binary, all of these films raise questions around gender, sex and sexuality, their ontological function, and the taken-for-grantedness of their traditional construction and connection.

The exploration of trans identity within these films occurs primarily through personal interaction rather than action, allowing for the development of the idea of the trans character as a sexualised and erotic individual. Desire is not the comic side-effect of mistaken identity that it is in cross-dressed comedies, but a sexual confrontation with unconventional gender formations that is predicated on misunderstood rather than mistaken identity. Dil and Brandon's trans identities are tested in various ways in the films, but they emerge as

something permanent and fundamental. These two films deliberately engage with accepted constructions of gender, but a trans subjectivity is introduced that is conspicuously absent in trans comedies and horror films. This more serious-minded engagement with trans identity sees the emergence of a transgender narrative framework to contest the dominance of the traditional transvestite and transsexual binary model. The construction of this subjectivity becomes a critical issue within this framework, particularly in terms of the cinematic processes of identification/ alignment (Smith, 1999) that are invoked in the audiences imagined by these films. Rather than just imagining that a trans character exists, spectators are increasingly encouraged to imagine *being* that character (ibid. 143). Through emotional and psychological intimacy and by sharing a trans character's point of view, these films attempt to create empathetic allegiance.

### I. *The Crying Game*

*The Crying Game* was the first serious film with a central trans character to enjoy mainstream box office success<sup>1</sup>. It tells the story of Fergus, an IRA terrorist, and charts his unusual relationship with a kidnapped British soldier, Jody, and later with Jody's girlfriend, Dil. The death of Jody and the surprise revelation that Dil is transgendered are the two catalytic moments in Fergus' own process of transformation. The previous absence of mainstream films dealing seriously with transgender identity served to reinforce the apparent shock of the 'secret' of the film (Dil's trans identity), which first shifts the focus of the film from political drama to individual identity and desire, and finally provides the grounds for the collision between the two. The bifurcated plot of the film reflects this dual focus, and further ensures the shock value of Dil's 'secret' by initially directing spectatorial attention to race and nationalist politics, rather than gender, through the plot's focus on the black prisoner of Irish Republican Army terrorists. Publicity campaigns around the film were constructed around the protection of this twist, and *The Crying Game* became known as 'the film with a secret'<sup>2</sup>, although as Judith Halberstam points out, "The secrecy constructs a mainstream audience for the film and ignores more knowing audiences" (2005b, p. 80). This secret was guarded by

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<sup>1</sup> It also remains the highest grossing trans drama to date, earning over \$62 million, and is the only drama to make it into the top 20 in the overall trans rankings. It is only in 17<sup>th</sup> place, surpassed financially by some musical and horror films, but predominantly by comedies. See Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> As Jane Giles points out, "*The Crying Game* caught the imagination of the American media, fuelled by a brilliant marketing campaign by US distributors Miramax, who (pre-emptively) billed it as 'the movie everyone's talking about, but no-one's giving away its secrets'" (1997, p. 9). The use of 'secrets' in the plural suggests a recognition that the film is about more than just the surprise revelation of a penis.

both viewers and reviewers as something fundamentally shocking, and essential to experiencing the film ‘properly’, yet the shock value of the film is a clear reflection of its social and historical context of production.

It is notable that the term ‘transgender’ was coined in 1992, the same year the film was released, marking an interesting convergence between the academic and social visibility of transgender politics and popular culture. As Neil Jordan himself points out, audiences’ awareness of gender ambiguity has shifted since then, perhaps as a result, at least in part, of *The Crying Game*, which has cemented the concept into popular culture:

At the time, the whole thing about the secret of the film, the fact that Jaye Davidson played a woman who turned out to be a man seemed to be such a shock to audiences, but watching the movie again, I don’t know how people didn’t see it... Why did nobody ever think of constructing a drama that, you know, involved a love affair between a man and a woman who turns out to be a man? It seems kind of a classic theme in a way... In retrospect it seems so obvious that she is a transvestite... I can’t work out whether our familiarity with these facts has changed since the movie came out or actually people just didn’t notice because they were engrossed in the story. (2006)

The film has been the focus of extensive critical debates around gender, desire, race and nationalism, but the idea of ‘engrossing’ the spectator has not been central to most of these discussions. In introducing the concept of gender ambiguity the film brought down upon itself an enormous burden of expectation and critical attention, but many of these critiques have been driven by political agendas that have side-lined the processes of spectatorial positioning and alignment at work in the film in favour of fixing a specific interpretation of the film. Carole Zucker is a notable exception to this trend in her insistence on an aesthetic and performance-based analysis rather than a political one (2008). The film could not possibly have fulfilled all the expectations placed upon it, and could be seen to fail politically in a number of ways, but it is nonetheless an historically crucial text in terms of its deliberate engagement with the ontological question of gender identity, at a time when there was no such engagement in mainstream film.

The first part of the film details the developing relationship between Fergus, a white<sup>3</sup> male (ostensibly straight) IRA terrorist, and Jody, his black, male, British soldier captive, in the days leading up to Jody's death. The shot/reverse shot editing and confined setting and muted colours of the mise-en-scene serve to focus the spectator on the personal interaction between Jody and Fergus, and the unexpected bond that is established between them. Initially the relationship is constructed as oppositional – black versus white, British versus Irish, soldier versus terrorist, captive versus captor – but the developing bond between them increasingly foregrounds their commonalities, as men, as sports lovers, as ethical beings with 'simple' tastes and a shared sense of humour. Kristin Handler describes this relationship as “a markedly homoerotic bond,” a detailed interpretation based in part on the forced intimacy of the scene in which Fergus handles the captive Jody's penis while helping him urinate, a reading which (unintentionally) reinforces the centrality of the penis as signifier (1994, p. 33). The potential homoeroticism of these early scenes could be seen to preface the issues of transgender identity and desire that occur in the latter part of the film, but it may be (particularly if viewed in the historical context of the film's release) too subtle to be considered the dominant reading of this male friendship. The urination scene is nonetheless significant in setting up audience expectations that penises will remain off-screen, another step toward increasing the shock value of Dil's 'secret'. The scene also marks a distinct shift in the relationship between Fergus and Jody, which is reflected in the immediate change in cinematography and lighting.

The interaction between Jody and Fergus, until this point, consists primarily of shot/reverse shots in medium close-up, which serves to emphasise the conflict between the two characters. During the awkward handling of Jody's penis by Fergus, Jody prophetically and ambiguously observes that “It's amazing how these small details take on such importance, isn't it?” and soon after that “It's only a piece of meat,” comments that Fergus and the audience will only later come to fully appreciate. The men's shared laughter around whose 'pleasure' it was breaks the tension of this experience, and there is a markedly different framing of them when they return to the greenhouse. Jordan places them in a mobile two-shot infused with soft blue

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<sup>3</sup> Fergus is presented as white through his contrast with Jody's explicitly discussed blackness. However, there are degrees of whiteness, as becomes clear in the face of the hegemonic British whiteness that Fergus faces in London. As Richard Dyer points out, “some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics” (2003, p. 27).

back-lighting. It suggests a closer bond between the two characters, but also invokes a cinematic style more commonly associated with scenes of heterosexual romance.



Figure 31. Jody and Fergus

In terms of the processes of spectatorial alignment at work in the film, the implied romance is not as important as the shared centrality of the characters. The audience needs to be equally invested in Fergus and Jody in order to maximise the shock experienced at Jody's sudden death, and to ensure alignment with Fergus after this event. The unexpected death of a central character early in the film is reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and has a similar effect of aligning the audience with a character in a way that produces unforeseen consequences. In *Psycho* the audience has no option but to shift their alignment to Norman after Marion's murder; in *The Crying Game* Jody's death leaves the spectator similarly dependent on Fergus and his point of view.

The homoerotic clues, such as the lighting and linguistic subtext, also need to be subtle enough to enable the audience's continued belief in Fergus and Jody's heterosexuality, which is implicitly necessary if the revelation of Dil's penis is to be a shock later in the film. The heterosexuality of the characters is apparently reinforced by their common sexual interest in Jude, Fergus' IRA colleague and lover, and the 'honey trap' that has led to Jody's capture. They exhibit a similar shared admiration of Dil's photograph, with Fergus' (ironic) comment, "She'd be anybody's type." Here again, the use of a canted shot as Fergus removes the photograph of Dil from Jody's wallet could function as a cinematographic signal to the

viewer that things are not quite as they seem, but is likely too subtle to be recognised except in retrospect. From this point until Jody's death, the shots become increasingly tight as the tension of the two characters trapped by circumstance increases, and their final excursion into the woods seems initially like a release as the camera returns to the tracking long shots of the opening scene of the carnival. Despite his role as captor, Fergus continues to follow where Jody leads him, making his journey to London in search of Dil seem like a natural continuation of this interaction. Yet the structure of the plot carefully separates the Irish and British sections of the film, partly to explore the nationalist binary, partly to emphasise the sudden vacuum created in the narrative by the putative hero's death, but also to mark the collapse of Fergus' sense of purpose and identity.

After Jody's death, a traumatised and guilt-stricken Fergus escapes to London where he tracks down Jody's 'wife', Dil, and becomes increasingly fascinated by her and involved in her life. The rest of the film chronicles Fergus' path to redemption through his complicated feelings for Dil, even after the revelation of "the film's vigorously promoted and initially well-kept secret" that Dil has a penis (Handler, 1994, p. 31). The death of Jody has left the spectator totally aligned with Fergus, a process of identification that is constantly reiterated by the presentation of characters and events from his point of view, particularly his interactions with Dil. The implications of this spectatorial identification become obvious when Fergus sees Dil's penis. In sharing Fergus' point of view, and in therefore theoretically identifying with his desire for Dil, the audience supposedly experience the shock that he does at the sight of the penis on the apparently feminine object of previously heterosexual desire. This effect relies on perspectival allegiance with Fergus, and assumed heteronormativity on the part of the audience. As Jordan himself comments, "the other thing that struck me watching it is how an audience were fooled, because when I watched the movie again I was quite pleased to realise that as a director I didn't tell any lies in the film, I didn't manipulate the realities to actually fool people" (2006). Dil has never denied her transgender identity; she has not needed to because Fergus has never considered the possibility of slippage between gender and sex. Clues are provided in the film (such as those offered by Col, the barman at The Metro Bar), but they are deliberately subtle, especially if considered in comparison to the familiar and obvious slips orchestrated in cross-dressed comedies that serve as a reminder of the disjuncture between cross-gendered disguise and supposedly 'true' sex. If the spectators have successfully identified with Fergus, and consequently with his desire for Dil, then they

are intended to share his shock at the sight of a penis, provided the ‘twist’ of the film has not been revealed.

The initial success of *The Crying Game* was perceived to be entirely dependent on ‘the big secret’ remaining a secret, suggesting that the value of cinematic representation of transgender identity rested on its success as a shock tactic. While this is reminiscent of the ‘dewigging’ of the monsters in the psycho-trans-killer films, Dil is rejected but not executed nor contained, nor is her revelatory moment forced upon her. She calmly and willingly allows Fergus (and the spectator) to gaze upon her naked body, while her eyes remain closed. If ideologically normative spectators have been successfully led into believing Dil to be a ‘natural’ woman before the ‘twist’, and especially if they enjoyed a degree of pleasure during Dil and Fergus’ passionate kiss and the fellatio<sup>4</sup> that occurred the night before, they should theoretically experience the same sense of surprise and confusion as Fergus. They should also be led to question their assumptions about the meaning of gender and heterosexual desire, as the camera, following Fergus’ gaze, pans slowly down Dil’s hairless body and flat chest to reveal her penis.



Figure 32. Dil and Fergus

Dil is clearly constructed as a sexual object in this shot, an assemblage of physical signifiers, but one that does not fit the traditional processes of gender attribution and sexual desire in

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<sup>4</sup> The fellatio takes place under the watchful eye of a photograph of Jody, and just before the moment of Fergus’ climax, the camera cuts away to Fergus’ recurring soft-focus fantasy of Jody unleashing his googly. Those familiar with cricket will recognise this delivery as deliberately deceptive, a reflection of the way Jody misdirects Fergus about Dill, intentionally wrong-footing him.

accordance with perceived physical sex. Kate Bornstein offers an imagined version of Fergus inner dialogue at this moment:

‘I’m really turned on by this woman, and that’s how it should be – I’m male and I’m heterosexual.’ Then, as Dil disrobes, that inner voice might protest, ‘Wait! She’s got a penis! She’s a man!’ And then the real awful truth may reveal itself like this: ‘Wait, I’m still attracted to this person, this man! But only women and faggots go for men – does that mean I’m a woman? Does that mean I’m a homosexual?’ (2006, p. 237)

This confusion works both to enhance the drama of the film and to encourage spectatorial reflection on these questions, however briefly, in that moment of dislocation. In a move reminiscent of *Psycho*, Neil Jordan and producer Stephen Woolley therefore implored critics not to reveal the twist. “UK critics had been grumpy about the press embargo on Dil’s sex, but their counterparts in the US gleefully competed to see who could write the longest article that gave the least away” (Giles, 1997, p. 47). It is clear how this marketing ploy worked initially, but the film’s publicity continued to exploit this after the secret was no longer a secret, especially after Davidson had been nominated for the Best Supporting *Actor* Oscar. The box-office success of the film continued, suggesting that the audience’s interest in gender-crossing had the potential to extend beyond its novelty value, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea of trans identity as something ‘secret’ that will inevitably be revealed. The recurring centrality and popularity of cinematic moments of revelation also point to a spectatorial fascination with the assumed genital ‘truth’ which underlies gender disruption.

Until the moment of revelation, the film does not present itself as concerned with gender issues as much as it is with race and Irish nationalism<sup>5</sup>, but from that point on its humanist concern with the idea of salvation and a sense of self for Fergus becomes inextricably linked with Dil and her unconventional and ambiguous identity. Fergus’ initial reaction to Dil is one of violent rejection and revulsion, leaving Dil as the spurned object of curiosity and disgust, which has the potential to reinforce the idea of gender variance as deviance, particularly in the case of a strong spectatorial alignment with Fergus. Bornstein offers a more positive interpretation of this scene: “I don’t think *The Crying Game* is saying it’s a good thing to throw up when you find out someone’s transgendered; I think the movie is brilliantly

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<sup>5</sup> One could argue that the first part of the film is investigating the relationship between masculinity and violence, with Jude represented as more violent than Fergus, a characterisation that has been critiqued as misogynist by critics such as Handler (1994) and Ayers (1997).

showing us that it's a common response" (2006, p. 237). This positive perception of the film's attempt to engage sympathetically with trans identity and expose transphobic tendencies, even while objectifying the trans character, is supported by the fact that this pivotal moment occurs well before the end of the film, the remainder of which charts Fergus and Dil's continuing relationship. Dil's gender presentation has not changed; she looks, talks, and acts as she did; her gender identity is fixed (at least until Fergus disrupts it in his attempts to protect her from his ruthless IRA compatriots).

It is Fergus whose identity is in flux. Jody's death has already stripped him of his sense of belonging within the Nationalist cause, and in London he denies his name (becoming Jimmy) and his nationality (claiming to be Scottish), and comes to occupy a disempowered new social position as a denigrated foreigner. With the revelation of Dil's penis, Fergus has to re-evaluate his assumptions about gender, sexuality, and desire, and the spectator's alignment with him may encourage the normative audience to do the same. Fergus has to abandon traditional concepts regarding impermeable identity categories in order to redeem himself through a love which disrupts the conventional boundaries of race, sex and nationality. The moral that the film apparently presents is that in learning to see others as human beings rather than a collection of dichotomous labels, Fergus discovers his own humanity, although not without cost. Jody and Jude are both sacrificed to catalyse Fergus' transformation, and Dil in particular is largely reduced to a means by which Fergus can assuage his guilt and access his humanity. Consequently, the gender disruption in the film ultimately says more about Fergus and his transformation than it does about Dil.

Dil is the means through which *The Crying Game* engages with the idea of trans identity. She has been interpreted variously as a non-op or pre-op transsexual or, most often, a gay transvestite, but who primarily focalises the category disruption of the film in which "even the category of category itself is being stretched and revealed as layers of possible meaning rather than fixed boundaries" (Bell-Metereau, 1993, p. 284). Dil's sense of self is fixed within herself, but it is an identity that cannot be pinned down from the outside using traditional dichotomous classifications, particularly not heteronormative ones that assume a natural linear connection between genitals, gender and desire. On the surface, the narrative investigates the unlikely relationship between a white male heterosexual IRA terrorist and a

biracial transgender/gay transvestite British soldier's widow, but the interaction between the two characters renders these classifications increasingly specious and unnecessary. The film destabilises not only the conventional binaries of gender and sexuality, but also of race and Irish nationalist politics in what Giles describes as "triple-taboo subject matter" of the plot (1997, p. 8). From one perspective this disruption of multiple categories has the positive effect of positioning gender as only one part of the shifting and complex fabric of identity.

Gender is not presented as the definitive component of identity or love, but rather as part of a network of ontological elements, including race and nationality, which resist binary classification. A problematic side-effect of this is the implied connection between issues of gender and race and violence, potentially creating a negative (through violence) and marginalising (through race) perception of trans identity as something that exists outside of a safe white heteronormative world constructed around clear essentialising binaries. The film introduces the idea of essentialism early on when Jody tells Fergus the fable of the scorpion and the frog, which Fergus repeats to Dil when she visits him in prison in the final scene of the film. The story illustrates the inevitability of the scorpion's killing the frog that is carrying him across the river, drowning them both because it is 'in his nature'. The fable suggests that identity is essential and immutable, something beyond conscious intention or control, beyond even the interest in self-preservation. The film itself endeavours to prove that identities are more complex. The scorpion (Fergus) can and should change its violent nature to avoid self-destruction, but the trusting and altruistic frog (Dil) does not need to change its nature; it only needs scorpions to stop mistreating it. It is simultaneously an anti-transphobic message of tolerance and an intimation that identity can shift away from the conformist constraints of binary categories, which would consequently diminish in significance.

From the film's humanist perspective, Fergus has learned to see people as individuals rather than categories. However, it is unclear how much his own identity has actually changed, except that he has learned to give rather than take (Jody's interpretation of the moral of the scorpion fable). While Dil's appearance temporarily changes, her identity and nature do not, except in the moment where she 'takes' her revenge on Jude for Jody's death. She is far less convincing at presenting masculinity when disguised as a man in Jody's cricket whites than she is at performing femininity in her sparkled gold dress on stage at The Metro. In the

closing scene in the prison visiting room, Fergus repeats the fable of the scorpion and the frog to a charmed Dil as Lyle Lovett advocates ‘standing by your man’ on the soundtrack. Fergus and Dil are exploring identity positions and relationship boundaries they are comfortable with on either side of the glass barrier. They can now see each other very clearly but are nonetheless still rigidly separated, which echoes the problems of classifying their continuing relationship. They do still have a relationship, although it is clearly not a stereotypical Hollywood heterosexual coupling. It is a conclusion that resists the easy triteness of a happy ending, while simultaneously resisting tragic hopelessness, leaving the spectator with a continued sympathetic allegiance to these characters, and the space to construct their own interpretation of the relationship.



Figure 33. ‘The scorpion and the frog’

The framing of the shots in the final scene returns to the motif of windows and mirrors that have connected and contained Fergus and Dil since their first meeting in the hair salon, and which recur in *The Metro*, Dil’s apartment, and even at Fergus’ job on a construction site. It is a motif that connects them to each other, particularly visually, while simultaneously keeping a barrier between them that prevents a direct look, creating a notable contrast with Fergus’ very direct look at Dil’s penis. A further function of the mirrors and windows (particularly within the Cinemascope ratio of the film) is that they allow for the combined presence of both characters within the frame.

The interaction between Fergus and Dil is filmed primarily in two-shots, in contrast to the shot/reverse shots primarily used for scenes with Dil and Jody. The persistent inclusion of both characters within the frame produces a constant sense of closeness between them, even in scenes of conflict such as Fergus' vomiting in the bathroom while Dil bleeds in the foreground. The final scene continues the use of two-shots across the glass to open and close the scene, but unusually employs shot/reverse shots in between. The medium close-up shots present Dil as a complete and independent person, while the reverse shots of Fergus through the glass serve to superimpose Dil's reflection over Fergus' face, suggesting that he cannot separate his identity from her. The more dominant position that this framing affords to Dil, despite her role as the dutiful 'wife', partially counterbalances the multiple criticisms of the film as reinscribing heteronormative gender relations that sees the trans character marginalised by the reassertion of the patriarchal white male subject position.

Despite the affirming potential of the ending, there is also a marginalisation of trans identity *The Crying Game*, effected primarily through the structure of the narrative, which centralises Fergus and presents his restricted point of view. The white male perspective retains its privileged position, which in part undermines the category disruption at work in the rest of the film. For the most part the film foregrounds the trans character of Dil in a highly sympathetic way (with the possible exception of the penis revelation scene) but is not actually engaging first-hand with the constitution of that identity. The narrative offers no context for Dil beyond Fergus, little sense of the lived experience of her trans identity; she emerges in the film as if from a vacuum to redeem Fergus. On the other hand, it is likely that contriving a back-story for Dil would serve merely to rationalise her gender diversity for ideologically normative spectators by offering reassuringly neat explanations<sup>6</sup> instead of the seductive air of mystery that Jordan constructs around her. Dil is an enigma to Fergus and to the audience, but she clearly has a strong sense of her own identity. That sense of self is harshly tested when Fergus' terrorist past threatens her and Fergus protects her by cutting off her hair and dressing her in men's clothes, but the forced external masculinisation, although deeply traumatising, has no ontological effect. Dil is able to separate this surface appearance of

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<sup>6</sup> What Judith Halberstam's describes as "the project of rationalisation" at work in many trans narratives made by non-trans people (2005, p. 54).

masculinity from her sense of identity as a woman. However, the centrality of Fergus' perspective precludes any sustained engagement with Dil's psychological and emotional state or experiences. While this construction preserves the apparent coherence of Dil's identity, it also isolates her and maintains her as an unknowable Other.

The absence of privileged spectator knowledge regarding Dil's trans identity is a very effective means of exposing heteronormative assumptions about gender and genitals. The 'secret' sets up the revelation of her biological sex as a shock, but isn't necessary in terms of telling the story of an ex-terrorist seeking out a soldier's widow. Fergus' horrified reaction is focused on the presence of Dil's penis, which contradicts every assumption he, and the average mainstream spectator, had made about Dil's identity<sup>7</sup>. The unexpected appearance of a penis so calmly revealed by Dil illustrates its apparent inconsequence in terms of Dil's own sense of her gender identity – something she dismisses as “Details, baby, details” - but simultaneously exposes the cultural centrality of the penis through its climactic revelation, highlighting phallogentric visibility as a defining and incontrovertible marker of sexual and gender identity. Dil 'passes' successfully enough as a woman that her femaleness is not questioned by Fergus within the diegesis, nor by the mainstream spectator, but the 'passing' has to be disrupted, the trans identity made visible, for there to be a narrative twist or an overt engagement with the trans character. 'Passing' has to be sacrificed in favour of visibility in order for the audience to recognise the trans character and for the film to be able to convey its message. It is a cinematic analogy to the argument of trans activists such as Sandy Stone about the importance of *not* passing if political gains are to be made, the 'visibility dilemma' described by Jamison Green. The last part of *The Crying Game* traces Fergus' increasing acceptance of Dil as a person, without needing the security of traditional categorisation, but that redemptive process would be substantially different without the deliberate exhibition of Dil's trans identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Jordan admits to a similar assumption about Jaye Davidson's masculinity as an automatic indicator of the *presence* of a penis: “And we came to the moment at which, ah, Jaye had to take his clothes off. Jaye came out for that scene wearing the bathrobe that I'd chosen but also a pair of satin pink underpants. And I thought ‘Oh my God!’ I suddenly got this terrible feeling. I said, ‘I've cast this boy, I'm halfway through this film, and I've never asked to see his penis.’ [Laughs]” (2006).

Despite the tragic elements at work in the film, the narrative offers a somewhat optimistic resolution. Fergus has redeemed himself by taking responsibility for the murder Dil committed, and although he is in prison, their relationship endures – even if only on a ‘safe’ platonic level that does not overtly threaten the heterosexual status quo. The trans character is granted a happy ending of sorts – she is not in prison, is free to be herself, and is not rejected outright by the man she loves. Bell-Metereau suggests that “in the tradition of *Some Like it Hot*, this open vehicle offers no predictions for the future of the odd couple but an acceptance of alternate ways of being” (1993, p. 287). Clearly Dil and Fergus have an emotional bond, even if they are not exactly a couple in the traditional way, but there is a sense of possibility in their acceptance of one another. The fact that Fergus is in prison allows the film to sidestep neatly around the issue of sexuality that is raised with the revelation of Dil’s penis – a sexual relationship is not a possibility and therefore need not be an issue (for the moment). The resolution is nonetheless reassuring in its presentation of Dil as independent, confident, and free to be herself. It offers a future for the trans character that is markedly less tragic than that portrayed in *Boys Don’t Cry*.

## II. *Boys Don’t Cry*

*The Crying Game* and *Boys Don’t Cry* share several narrative concerns, engaging with ideas around the struggles for acceptance by trans characters, who display a strong awareness of and confidence in their own specific senses of self. Both films explore the sexual dimensions of romantic entanglements, and contemplate that particular point of convergence between transgendered individuals and complacent heteronormativity. However, there are several crucial differences which need to be highlighted. Firstly, while *The Crying Game* deals with a transwoman, *Boys Don’t Cry* is centred on a transman, and this discussion of these two films is in no way meant to conflate these two very different identities. Secondly, these two films employ a range of intertextual influences, and while the ‘Romeo and Juliet’ style of romantic melodrama is evident in both, the films also display significantly different generic sources – for example, the political thriller conventions of *The Crying Game*, and the Western and science fiction influences in *Boys Don’t Cry*. These differing generic roots clearly impact the narrative structures and imagery employed in the films, but the most profound differences are attributable to *Boys Don’t Cry*’s primary identification as a true-crime drama.<sup>8</sup> It could

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<sup>8</sup> The film’s tagline was, “A true story about finding the courage to be yourself.”

therefore also be seen to as generically related to ftm biopics from *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian, 1933) to *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Greenwald, 1993), but it differs significantly in the contemporary rather than historical nature of its subject matter.

*The Crying Game* compels critical attention through its unprecedented foregrounding of a trans character in a mainstream drama. *Boys Don't Cry* commands similarly high-profile attention in part because of its acknowledged basis in real-life events, allowing for a point of convergence between a real-world trans experience and the interpretive description through cinematic appropriation, via mainstream media coverage. The rape and murder of Brandon Teena<sup>9</sup> in 1993, and the controversy that it incited, caused a media storm, which John Sloop (2000) has analysed in extensive detail. He highlights the consistent dominance of heteronormative binary rhetoric in the reports and debates about Brandon's murder, and identifies four recurring discursive practices which serve to ideologically discipline Brandon: framing Brandon's story as a narrative of deception, reifying the physicality of Brandon's body, positing his transgenderism as a caused abnormality, and describing Brandon as either a hermaphrodite or a pre-op transsexual in an attempt to restore a traditional genitalia/gender alignment (ibid., p.169). Sloop argues through his persuasive analysis that "while cases of gender ambiguity obviously have the potential to cause 'gender trouble' and disrupt bigender normativity... the 'loosening of gender binarisms' is a potential that often goes unrealised for audiences" (ibid., p.168).<sup>10</sup> Through the ideological disciplining enacted by mainstream media, "we learn that in the end no one can fool the gender binary system" (ibid., p. 170). In *Boys Don't Cry* Kimberley Peirce has created a film that seems intended to stand as a testimonial against this disciplining process identified by Sloop, as her narrative and characterisations deliberately distance Brandon from these heteronormative media discourses that circulated after his death.

Upon viewing *Boys Don't Cry*, especially with the publicity around Hilary Swank's Oscar for Best Actress, many film-goers would have been aware to some extent of the people and

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<sup>9</sup> I will refer to Brandon Teena and use masculine pronouns in keeping with the prevailing consensus regarding his self-identification, unless I am quoting.

<sup>10</sup> An example which illustrates Sloop's point is this User Comment from IMDB: "Shame on the Academy for giving Oscars to this "True (?) to life" one sided tale which refuses to ACCEPT the RIGHTS of HETEROSEXUALS to not get RAPED by HOMOS" (ali6969uk, 2005).

events on which this true-crime film is based. Brandon Teena was a 21 year-old transman, who was raped and murdered by two men, supposedly his friends, in a small town in Nebraska when they discovered that Brandon was biologically female. Audience knowledge of these events would have been mediated through mainstream news coverage, which was primarily engaged in processes of sensationalisation (to exploit a public fascination with perceived gender deviance) and rationalisation (to simultaneously reaffirm heteronormative binary stability). *Boys Don't Cry* is an attempt to evoke a sympathetic personality to counter the one-dimensional stereotype to which Brandon had been reduced. The film charts the last weeks of Brandon's life through an exploration of the relationships he forms in Falls City, presented as a search for acceptance and belonging. The end result of this quest can never be in doubt for an audience aware that Brandon Teena was raped and murdered in 1993, and the trajectory of the film is always towards tragic destruction, in contrast to the hope of the transformative resolution achieved in *The Crying Game*.

The sense of despair that haunts the film is partly a consequence of the inevitability of Brandon's death, but it is as much a result of the presentation of small-town America as a bleak place of frustration and disempowerment. Much of the action takes place at night, in grey industrial settings or drab and lower-class domestic settings, and the intersections of gender with race and nationalism that were at work in *The Crying Game* have been replaced with class and space. The rarely glimpsed areas of the surrounding landscape seem isolating rather than potentially liberatory. All of the characters are presented as trapped in this depressing environment by oppressive social factors, most commonly class. They cannot afford to escape. The women seem bound to cycles of menial jobs, drinking and motherhood; the men to cycles of prison, drinking, sex and brawling. Brandon's exuberance is starkly contrasted with this portrait of stagnant working-class misery as presented by Peirce, and the contests around gender and sexuality are played out against this backdrop but not in direct connection to it. The film chooses to foreground gender over class, unfortunately letting slide the opportunity to engage with intersections between trans struggles and class issues, or transphobic white masculinity and class.

More disturbing than the lack of direct engagement with class issues is the total elimination of race issues in the transformation of actual events into cinematic narrative. There was a

third murder victim of John Lotter and Tom Nissen, a young black man named Philip DeVine, who Peirce has entirely erased from her story. This strips Lotter and Nissen's murderous bigotry of its racist dimension, supposedly to maintain the film's focus on gender rather than race. However, this isolation of gender from other intersecting social factors is an oversimplification that allows the violent masculinity exhibited by Lotter and Nissen to seem more an issue of personal jealousy of Brandon's popularity with women than the product of a web of political and economic factors. It makes it easy for the audience to condemn the killers without having to interrogate the social conditions which produced them, or look too closely at themselves as participants in those societies.

Peirce's primary intention in the film is to focus on the story of the last few weeks of life and tragic death of Brandon Teena, "to tell the tale as a tragic love story," and to show the person behind the media storm (in Ansen, 1999, p. 85). In choosing to limit the scope of the narrative time frame to the last weeks of Brandon's life, Peirce is clearly resisting what Judith Halberstam calls "the project of rationalisation" that is common in cultural narrativisation of trans lives (2005b, p. 55). There are no scenes of Brandon's childhood to offer convenient explanations for his gender disruption or sexual orientation, such as the suggestions of sexual abuse that proliferate in the mainstream news accounts. Brandon's masculinity and attraction to girls are presented without needing an explicatory 'cause' in an effort to contain and normalise him for the mainstream viewer. Furthermore, he is never shown performing femininity or struggling to figure out his identity. The spectator is only shown Brandon after he has transformed himself, and his sense of self-identity is strongly iterated from the outset. Although he introduces himself as 'Billy' to his date at the roller rink in Lincoln and he is 'Brandon' when he chooses a fresh start in Falls City, he never presents himself as 'Teena'. His choice of name clearly signals and publicly claims a masculine trans identity, emphasising his certainty regarding his gender and rejection of his assigned birth gender, as well as correlatively denying a lesbian identity. As he tells Candace when she mentions wanting to change her name, "Sometimes that helps. I'm Brandon."

The film opens with time-lapse shots of a highway at night, blurred headlights, cars and dust effectively suspended in time and space. The anchoring images in these opening minutes are close-ups of Brandon's smiling eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror as he drives, which

serve to centralise his character, emphasise his dislocation, and prioritise his gaze within a framework of energetic mobility. The dreamlike temporal and spatial suspension of these opening shots dissipates as the camera descends into a trailer park, and then cuts to Brandon in his cousin Lonny's trailer, getting ready for a date as 'Billy'. His hair is freshly cut; he is dressed in jeans and a cowboy shirt and hat, devoid of any signifiers of traditional femininity in appearance or gesture. A medium long shot of Brandon and Lonny reflected next to each other in the mirror emphasises the similarity in their apparent masculinity, even as Brandon removes the socks from his jeans and repacks his crotch. This produces an immediate and simultaneous awareness of Brandon's masculinity and his lack of a penis, an absence that structures him as biologically female within the traditional phallogentric sex binary. The shot emphasises Brandon's disruption of the traditional sex (as biology)/gender alignment without recourse to an overt process of transformation. In refusing to show Brandon in a 'before-and-after' dichotomy, Peirce portrays a cohesive identity whose foil will be the ignorant intolerance of the other characters, rather than a conflict within Brandon himself.

The presentation of Brandon's female masculinity as a coherent identity, rather than a disguise, also serves to undercut the deception narratives that dominated reports about Brandon in the news. His masculine appearance and behaviour is not depicted as a lie perpetrated in order to exploit naïve teenage girls sexually and financially, but an expression of a sense of self, the external manifestation of a core gender and sexual identity. Newspapers foregrounded Brandon's 'criminality' (credit card theft, cheque forgery, gender 'fraud') in an effort to relegate him to a criminal underclass safely distant from 'normal' law-abiding citizens, and at times to produce an implicit revenge logic for his murder<sup>11</sup> (Sloop, 2000, p. 171). Peirce, in opposition to these deception narratives, underplays Brandon's breaches of the law<sup>12</sup>, and posits the legal system as a threatening monolith that marginalises and endangers the trans individual through its uncompromising gender attribution. The institutional intolerance of gender disruption is ultimately played out through Brandon's experiences with the police, as discussed further below, and the film emphasises the

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<sup>11</sup> Margo Jefferson's review uncritically transposes this logic on to the film: "For what the movie makes implacably real is the fury the men feel at being fooled" (2000, p. E2).

<sup>12</sup> This tactic is not necessarily successful. In his review of the film for *Newsweek*, David Ansen asserts that "Peirce doesn't shy away from Brandon's sociopathic side – he stole cars, used stolen credit cards, all in the service of his fantasy life" (1999, p. 85).

culpability of the legal system in Brandon's death through their failure to acknowledge his rights and apprehend his rapists before they killed him.

The inability of the legal system to accommodate Brandon's trans identity is one of the ways in which the film problematises the taxonomic imperative regarding gender and sexuality that is predicated on a 'true' biology, constructed in terms of genitalia as the natural determinants of a binary heterosexual gender system. This desire to prescribe gender identity according to genital identification is enacted on a personal level by John Lotter and Tom Nissen after Candace has revealed Brandon's birth sex, and they have found the dildo and "Sexual Identity Crisis" pamphlet in their search of Brandon's backpack. The bathroom scene which follows is paradoxically both traumatic in the ruthless degradation that Brandon suffers, and affirming in that Brandon's sense of self prevails, as does Lana's recognition of that self. This duality is enabled by the splitting of Brandon that allows him to look back at himself, whereby Brandon is both naked, trapped spectacle, and clothed, detached spectator. The 'alternate' Brandon has removed himself from the physical and psychological assault being enacted by Tom and John in their search for the 'truth'. Judith Halberstam has identified a divided, transgender gaze in this crucial moment when the bathroom scene slows down to create an "'out-of-body' and out-of-time experience... [in which] the clothed Brandon is the one who was rescued by Lana's refusal to look; he is the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder; he is the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of spectacle. And the naked Brandon is the one who will suffer, endure, and finally expire" (2005, p. 88).



Figure 34. Brandon as victim



Figure 35. Brandon as survivor

Rebecca Hanrahan has described Brandon in this stripping scene as a “Christ-like figure [who] transcends his body” (2005, p. 84). Curiously, in the director’s description of filming this scene she shows no awareness of this transcendent element produced by the alternative vision. According to Peirce,

The hardest thing was the stripping scene, because it was in wide shot, which meant everyone was in the room together. It was claustrophobic – Pete Sarsgaard, who played John Lotter, was throwing up between takes. I'd lived with this person [Brandon] for so long and here was the destruction of their spirit. (in Leigh, 2000, p. 19)

The scene is an indisputably horrifying violation of Brandon's physical self, but it is also a critical articulation of the schism that exists in the sex/gender/sexuality linear binary. While John and Tom are forcefully revealing the 'truth' of Brandon's body by positing the lack of a penis as definitive of his femaleness/womanhood/lesbianism, Brandon's escape from his body fractures the prescriptive relationship by allowing a distance between the psyche and the soma. Brandon's traumatised female body can consequently co-exist with his masculine identity and desire for Lana.

The film does not deny the materiality of the body as a component of a lived gender identity: Brandon is seen carefully binding his breasts, proudly 'packing' his jeans, grimacing as he inserts a tampon. It is significant that Brandon's relationship with his body is not presented as aberrant; the aberration occurs when John and Tom seize control over Brandon's body and subject it to a violent hetero-masculine assault in an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between Brandon's body and his sense of identity. The stripping and rape are attempts to reinscribe a linear binary based on genitals, and rules of penetration. The rape enacts a belief in the exclusive right of male hetero-masculinity to penetration, and in the penetrable body as feminised. The structure of the rape sequence employs flashbacks through cross-cutting between the sexual violence taking place outside a deserted factory at night, and institutional abuse being carried out at the police station on the following day. The interview with the sheriff is justifiably positioned by this structural alignment as a second betrayal and psychological rape. The structure sustains the suturing of the spectator to Brandon by privileging his perspective in the flashbacks, and by re-invoking outraged sympathy during the police interview.

What the assault of Brandon produces is a scathing indictment of *male* masculinity as violent, arrogant and bigoted, confused and insecure, emphasised by the comparison with Brandon's

female masculinity<sup>13</sup> as gentle and respectful, confident and coherent in his interactions with women. Tom and John's insistence on the penis as determinant of identity illustrates their insecurity as they attempt, through the rape in particular, to appropriate the perceived power of the penis as a way of 'legitimizing' their own masculinity as a self-evident and exclusive category. Brandon's self-constructed masculinity poses a threat to that category for John and Tom, both because of the sense of inferiority produced by Brandon's greater appeal to women, and because it raises the possibility of a manhood not predicated on violence and patriarchal privilege. As lower-class ex-cons, John and Tom's access to social power rests heavily on their masculinity (and their whiteness, as discussed above). Brandon presents a challenge to their version of masculinity, the only one they can conceive of, and their vicious retaliation to this challenge exposes their dangerous insecurity. That insecurity is initially alleviated by Brandon's flattering attempts to win John and Tom's approval by emulating their behaviour. Brandon's public performance of masculinity incorporates stereotypically macho activities, such as driving fast, tailgate-surfing, brawling in bars, and claiming to have fathered children to prove his virility. However, these moments of over-eager effort to fit in and be accepted by other men are strongly contrasted by the gentle masculinity that Brandon expresses with women, particularly Lana, which is presented as an unpretentious, unforced expression of his 'core' self.

Unfortunately, Peirce seems unable to sustain the anti-binary ideological framework (which refuses genitals-equals-gender essentialism) that she presents through Brandon's female masculinity, and several of the scenes after the rapes present a return to conventional categories that undermine the progressive gender politics that characterise the first part of the film. After the explosive violence of the rapes, Peirce reconfigures the character of Brandon by focusing on his female biology and history, rather than his trans masculine identity. Following Peirce's cue, Myra Hird sees the rape as John's attempt to force Brandon to be female, but argues in addition that the response of the female characters to Brandon after the rape "is somewhat less predictable, but highly revealing nonetheless. Brandon only receives their sympathy when he is read as female" (2001, p. 437). This interpretation essentially situates victimhood and sympathy as solely within the realm of femaleness, which is highly problematic, but at the same time indicates a spectatorial awareness of the process of

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<sup>13</sup> A concept elucidated by Judith Halberstam in her book of the same name (1998a).

feminisation that is being enacted on Brandon in the final scenes of the film through characterisation, dialogue and visual cues.

This political shift away from female masculinity is signalled overtly during the scene in which Brandon showers at Candace's house after his release from hospital. The spectator is shown a body in pain, eliciting sympathy for the pain on an affective level but simultaneously foregrounding the body as the site of meaning. Brandon's nudity reminds the spectator of the inescapable physicality that lies beneath the masculine identity that he had expressed through behaviour, speech, clothing and naming. As the spectator has already been made explicitly aware of the violent damage done to Brandon by John and Tom, the purpose of this scene seems to be to reacquaint Brandon, and the spectator, with his female anatomy. By removing all visual *gender* markers, Peirce pushes the spectator to read Brandon on the basis of external biological cues. Pierce carefully avoids the somatic parts which are most overtly sexed, the breasts and genitals, but the close-up of Brandon's rounded hips and hairless legs and buttocks clearly codes this body as feminine according to the prevailing conventions of sex attribution. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's analysis of prevailing understandings of anatomical features as gender cues demonstrated the propensity of their participants to identify both rounded hips and an absence of body hair both as female cues (1978, p. 145). It seems particularly unlikely that Brandon would have shaved legs, given the care that he has been depicted as taking with his appearance.

Brandon is not presented as a transman in this scene, for while his body clearly bears the marks of battle, there is no longer any visible gender marker to contest the 'truth' being offered through the body:



Figure 36. The shower scene

The close-up shots of Brandon's hands wandering over his naked body are intercut with close-ups of photographs being burned in a fire, destroying the visual record of Brandon's trans history. The first photographs show Brandon with various girls, erasing that sexual/romantic history as they burn; the second lot are photos of John; the third parallel shot shows a photograph of Lana and Brandon together. Brandon rescues this one from the fire, and then later burns a photo of him on his own. These shots of the fire and the shower symbolically suggest a rejection by Brandon of his Falls City experiences and masculine identity, but not of his feelings for Lana.

One key component of this process of feminisation and symbolic erasure of Brandon's masculinity is that Brandon's desire for Lana is reconfigured as unambiguously lesbian. This is in direct contradiction to Brandon's heated denials of lesbianism earlier in the film when confronted by his cousin:

Brandon: I don't know what went wrong.  
Lonny: You are not a boy. That is what went wrong. You are not a boy.  
Brandon: Tell them that. They say I'm the best boyfriend they ever had.  
Lonny: Do you want your mother to lock you up again? Is that it? Is that what you want?  
Brandon: No.  
Lonny: Then why don't you just admit that you're a dyke?

Brandon:           Because I'm not a dyke.

The most striking example of the dissonant revision of sexuality executed by Peirce is the final love scene that occurs between Lana and Brandon in the abandoned barn. Brandon begins to cry when he sees Lana, and as she comforts him, she strokes his hair and tells him, "You're so pretty." Pretty is an adjective that is strongly coded as feminine in contemporary Western society, and Peirce's choice of this particular word glaringly highlights both physical appearance and femininity. The comment also echoes dialogue from the first sexual encounter between Lana and Brandon, when he calls Lana "so pretty" as he lays her down. In that scene Lana, on the other hand, very deliberately uses the word 'handsome'. After they have had sex, and Lana has glimpsed Brandon's bound breasts, a series of close-ups shows her feeling Brandon's crotch, glancing at his chest, and then examining his jaw and eyebrows as she carefully strokes his face. After realising the implications of this assessment, she tells him, "You're so handsome." Her choice of the masculine coded adjective in this earlier scene draws attention to the conscious decision she makes to identify Brandon as a man, just as her later choice of the feminine-coded adjective signals that she now sees Brandon as a woman. This shift is reiterated in her final words to Brandon before John shoots him, where Lana addresses him as 'Teena'.

Lana has clearly been aware of Brandon's female biology since the inception of their physical relationship. The first love scene pointedly includes the cutaway from Lana's eyes to a close-up of Brandon's cleavage. Their second love scene, in the car after Brandon is released from jail, takes place in the context of their recent discussion as to why Brandon is in the women's cell. He has explained himself to Lana as a hermaphrodite, to which Lana responds, "Shut up. It's your business. I don't care if you're half monkey or half-ape." When John and Lana challenge Brandon as to his 'true' identity, Lana assures Brandon that she doesn't need to see his genitals, that she knows he's "a guy." In the stripping scene in the bathroom Lana refuses to look, and insistently continues to refer to Brandon as 'he'. But in spite of all of this, after Brandon is raped by John and Tom, Peirce constructs an overtly lesbian love scene between Brandon and Lana that is uncomfortably jarring. As Annabelle Willox points out, the scene is "particularly noteworthy as it is a dramatic insertion by the director, rather than a recreation of actual events, indicating that it guides the viewer's reading" toward an explicitly lesbian encoding (2003, p. 418). In addition to calling Brandon "pretty," Lana starts undressing

Brandon and then says, “I don’t know if I’m gonna know how to do it.” This concern clearly indicates that Lana considers this sexual encounter to be different from their previous ones, that she no longer sees it as having familiar heterosexual sex with a man.

The power balance between Brandon and Lana is also shown to have shifted – it is now Lana who is the sexual initiator and Brandon who is naked – in strong contrast to the earlier scenes which explicitly detailed Lana’s submissiveness. The sexual encounter itself is then elided through a dissolve to their post-coital embrace. This elision could be seen as leaving Brandon’s sexuality open to interpretation, as argued by Brenda Cooper for example (2002, p. 56). However, the very fact that the depiction of the sex is absent marks this encounter as different from the other sex scenes, and in conjunction with the dialogue effectively forecloses the possibility of other readings by returning the viewer to what Willox describes as “the relative safety of a lesbian reading” (2003, p. 419). Brandon, prescriptively recoded as lesbian, is still outside the heteronormative framework, but has been neatly contained within a recognisable lesbian sexuality and separated from his acknowledged masculine identity.

This final love scene has attracted strong criticism both for its betrayal of the transgender identity which characterised the film until that point, and for its insensitivity. For Halberstam this scene “extend[s] the violence enacted on Brandon’s body by John and Tom since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*” and she raises the crucial question of why “Brandon would want to have sex within hours of a rape” (2005, p. 89-90). Jennifer Esposito is even more scathing about Peirce’s insensitivity in scripting this scene: “Not only does this scene trivialize the brutality of the rape, sodomy and beating Brandon experienced, it also works to display Brandon to the viewers through the eyes of his rapists/murderers. Brandon is not a boy. Brandon is a dyke after all” (2003, p. 237). The construction of the final love scene as lesbian encounter between two biological women completely reverses the heterosexual identity Peirce had constructed for Brandon in relation to his coherent trans identity of female masculinity, not butch lesbianism. Peirce offers a disjunctive humanist justification for this scene, explaining that “when Tom and John raped Brandon, they shattered his male identity. No longer able to be either Brandon or Teena, he was thrown back on the resources of his imagination. He had to move on to a deeper, truer sense of himself” (1999b, p. 48). There is a very disturbing implication in this that the consistent

identity Brandon had previously presented, his trans identity, was the affectation covering his ‘true’ lesbianism, and that being a transman is either unsustainable or invalid.

This unfortunate unravelling of the political trans impetus of the film is balanced to a small degree by the recentralising of Brandon’s voice at the end of the film. After his murder there is a brief interlude presenting a point-of-view shot of driving through the placid countryside, a gaze from a car window, but the subject of this gaze is never identified. It is possible to read this scene as picking up the promise of the split view in the bathroom scene, that the gaze belongs to Brandon’s indestructible and spirited trans identity, as he reads his last letter to Lana in voice-over: “I’ll be makin’ a trip out on the highway... Love always and forever, Brandon.” The film closes with Lana driving – finally escaping Falls City, smiling to herself, but the final word, ‘Brandon’, spoken in his own voice, reinforces his own chosen identifier for himself.

*Boys Don’t Cry* marks the midpoint of the cycle of provocative filmic representations of trans identity that begins in 1992, the year that the term transgender began to circulate with its current meaning in activist and political arenas. The developmental shifts of this cinematic cycle can be traced from the revelatory shock of *The Crying Game*, which introduces the trans character, to the expositional tragedy of *Boys Don’t Cry* seven years later, which centralises the trans character and highlights the potentially fatal consequences of trans identity. In 2005, seven years after *Boys Don’t Cry*, two films marked the next innovation in the dramatic cycle, introducing humour to temper the tragedy and brutality of narratives featuring trans characters as their central protagonists.<sup>14</sup> *Breakfast on Pluto* and *Transamerica* have several conventions in common with the earlier films, but also share certain innovations with each other. Both films are styled as adventure quests in which the respective trans heroines, Kitten and Bree, search for love and understanding, but primarily these films are about searching for family. The move towards humour is not a melodramatic adoption of the ‘circumstantial necessity’ formula or caricatures found in cross-dressing comedy, but instead

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<sup>14</sup> *Soldier’s Girl* (Pierson, 2002) is a made-for-television film that, similarly to *Boys Don’t Cry*, portrays a dramatised version of real-life events, in this case the murder of an American soldier, Barry Winchell, as a result of his love affair with a trans nightclub performer, Calpernia Addams. Although not a cinematic release, this film fits within the developmental phase in drama represented by *Boys Don’t Cry*, through its analogous attempt to document the violent consequences of homophobic ignorance.

suggests a developing understanding among filmmakers of transgender as a complex issue, in which comedy and tragedy can co-exist, and encouraging the same sympathetic awareness in the audience.

### III. *Transamerica*

The trans protagonists of the 2005 films *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* are both clearly marked as different through their gender variant identities, but at the same time they are deliberately constructed as being ‘just like everybody else’ in their desire for family and acceptance. The use of humour is a strategic move in this attempt at normalising alterity, transforming the trans character from an *object* of amusement or melancholic casualty of heteronormativity into a complex individual. The humour comes from wit instead of farce, based on the trans protagonist’s observations of the world around them, which encourages the audience to align their perspective with that of the protagonist. In refusing to represent gender variance through caricature, victimhood, or monstrosity these films promote greater emotional engagement with and acceptance of the trans characters. *Transamerica* reinforces this bid for sympathy by striving to ‘educate’ its perceived audience by illustrating the medical, social, legal and anthropological details of transsexuality from a personalised perspective. It is significant that most of this information comes directly from Bree as the protagonist, foregrounding her subjectivity and experience of transitioning. This approach evidently appealed to some viewers, illustrated by Nicole Gagne’s response to the film, which she describes in her review as “a rare accomplishment in American cinema – an entertaining and enjoyable film that treats its queer characters with affection and honesty” (2006, p. 56).

The film’s attempts to create empathy and raise awareness about trans issues was not as well-received by other viewers. The political and ethical heterogeneity of mainstream audiences will inevitably result in divergent reactions. It is apparent that for more conservative viewers, despite the humour, the film’s forthright approach and use of personalisation had the opposite effect to that intended, producing alienation rather than affection. In their review, the Christian Film and Television Commission categorise *Transamerica*

as the sleazy kind of material that nearly all of the homosexual movement's movies seem to contain. Movies like *Transamerica* ultimately show why homosexuality, cross dressing and transsexuality are evil and perverted, but many viewers will be too stupid, deceived and apathetic to notice [that] sex change operations don't make a lick of sense... Jesus, of course, specializes in clearing away the cobwebs and confusion. (2005)

This type of defensive response to well-intentioned attempts to edify audiences not only shows the level of transphobia and ignorance that persists in certain moral discourses. It also suggests that the clear-cut comedies are more palatable and still needed to maintain trans visibility with right-wing audiences because of the sense of safety their containment strategies provide. Not all mainstream spectators are ready to confront the intimate details of Bree's trans existence, but the mainly positive response to *Transamerica* indicates there is also an increasing market for films that contest heteronormativity and celebrate trans lives. Carolyn Kraus contends that "it is no coincidence that such movies as *Transamerica*... that offer relatively complex and realistic transsexual characters – appeared at a time when Western cultures were moving toward a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality" (2009, p. 18).

*Transamerica* takes viewers inside the private life of Bree Osborne (Felicity Huffman), a pre-operative transsexual, whose isolated but determined progression towards sex reassignment surgery is disrupted by the unexpected appearance of her teenage son, Toby (Kevin Zegers).<sup>15</sup> Bree is at the final stage in the arduous process of acquiring permission for genital surgery from the medical establishment when the son she has never met phones her from a New York jail. Her unwillingness to get involved with or even acknowledge Toby results in approval for the surgery being withheld by her psychiatrist, Margaret:

Bree: I got a call last night from a juvenile inmate of the New York prison system. He claimed to be Stanley's son.  
Margaret: No third person.  
Bree: My son.

Margaret responds to Bree's rejection of Toby by informing her that "this is a part of your body that cannot be discarded," and leaves her no option but to go to New York to rescue Toby, who turns to be a streetwise panhandler, the antithesis of Bree's prudish and controlled character. Posing as a Christian missionary, Bree bails Toby out and he persuades her to take

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Zegers followed this role with another trans film a year later, *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (Hurrin, 2008), in which he plays a high school football star who switches bodies with the brainy girl next door.

him to Los Angeles so that he can pursue his dream of working in the adult film business. Their journey together is a geographical journey that mirrors their individual emotional journeys, as well as their developing relationship with each other. It is also intended as a journey of understanding for the audience, as the narrative device of the new relationship provides a rationale for the gradual discovery and explanation of the complexities and challenges of living, and passing, as a transwoman.

The established generic conventions of the road movie are clearly in evidence in the depiction of this journey, including numerous car scenes, wide landscape shots, small towns and the interstitial spaces between them. Linda Williams argues that the subject of transsexuality lends itself to the road movie format because “the genre is particularly well-suited to indulging individualist self-discovery, a pioneerism of the mind as well as of the landscape” (2006, p. 42). The settings of *Transamerica* are the typical landscapes of American road movies, but also provide the necessary backdrop for Bree’s social interactions. The characters she encounters in the big cities of New York and Los Angeles are predictably tolerant, while the townsfolk of Middle America are conveniently constructed as mildly transphobic, in need of sensitisation, but not dangerous. Zacharek describes it as the film’s “need to believe in the small-mindedness of Middle America” (2005, p. 1). These transphobes can be successfully persuaded to accept Bree, providing the conflict necessary to the narrative, but without venturing into the dark violence of *Boys Don’t Cry*. The exceptions to these prejudiced townsfolk are characters the film also identifies as outsiders: Arletty, Toby’s African American neighbour; Calvin, a Native American ex-con they meet in a diner; and the transgender guests at the “first meeting of the Gender Pride President’s Day Weekend Caribbean Cruise Planning Committee.” All those who fall outside white heteronormativity are portrayed somewhat idealistically as automatically open-minded, but by replicating an insider/outsider opposition Tucker unintentionally risks reinscribing the exclusionary borders of this dominant social group.

Despite the film’s ultimate appearance as an attempt to edify audiences about trans issues, Tucker’s primary ambition was to make an adventure-quest film focussing on this idea of the outsider: “I’ve always been drawn to outsider characters: the misunderstood, the rejected, the misfits of the world.” (2006, p. x) The trans dimension was evidently incidental, introduced

right at the end of the script development because of Tucker's perception of trans people as epitomising his definition of outsiders. "The final element clicked into place when a woman I know sat me down one evening and told me that what was under her skirt wasn't what I thought was under her skirt" (ibid.). The ancillary nature of the trans subject matter is reinforced by Huffman's explicit denial that it is an 'issues movie' (Tucker & Huffman, 2005). On the one hand this potentially reduces transsexuality to a plot device, in the exploitative manner of the most formulaic comedies, and cements the notion of transsexuals as misfits. But from a more positive perspective, it serves to incorporate trans people into the mainstream American cultural myth of the road movie, affording them equal heroic status with the other independent, and often admired, outsiders that populate the genre. As Linda Williams points out, *Transamerica* "affectionately delivers some familiar standards [of the road movie]" primarily the classic trope of the misfit traversing Middle America (2006, p. 42). By making transsexuality *an* issue, rather than *the* issue, the film reflects an advance in the cultural recognition of transgender identity. For an audience oblivious to trans issues, the generic conventions are comfortingly familiar.

The film's opening scenes emphasise the confinement and routine of Bree's life, setting up an emphatic contrast to the scenes of open space and disarray that are to follow. At the beginning of the film Bree is only a week away from her SRS, which will complete her physical transition, having transformed herself as much as she can on her own, but her emotional development is presented as far less advanced than her external transformation. Her conviction that following the rules and achieving this last step, the removal of her penis, will make her happy and complete is overtly contested by the obvious emptiness of her life in the opening scene, where she is alone in her small house practicing voice exercises. The very first shots in the film are from an instructional video for transwomen, with Andrea James, a real life transwoman, demonstrating how to achieve a convincing feminine voice. This cuts to the first shot of Bree, which follows the common convention of introducing the trans protagonist through an extreme close-up in a mirror. The juxtaposition of Bree with Andrea through the editing serves several functions. Firstly, because Felicity Huffman would be known to most audiences as Lynette from *Desperate Housewives*, it seeks to authenticate her in this role by closely aligning her with a real-life transwoman. Secondly, it demonstrates Bree's commitment to passing by showing the effort she puts into her gender presentation, as well as emphasising the necessity of a convincing voice to pass successfully. Lastly, her exact

replication of Andrea's actions establishes how dutifully she follows the rules, in this particular instance the rules for creating a culturally intelligible feminine gender.

The ensuing montage of Bree getting ready to go out and trying to blend in once she's in public, further elucidates the work that she, and by implication other trans people, puts into her appearance. The shots draw attention to specific gender markers, including underwear, clothing, make-up, hair, accessories, posture, and walking by separating each one out. The montage also includes visual cues to emphasise Bree's transsexuality, such as shaping foundation garments and the tucking of her genitals. In combination, these shots reveal the performativity of gender that is usually taken for granted, but also make it very clear for the audience that Bree is a transwoman. The montage itself is intercut with shots of Bree in a doctor's office, and her dialogue with the doctor runs over all of the shots, providing a crash course in the challenges and constraints faced by trans people. Bree's conversation with the doctor (partly serving to emphasise the importance of surgery for transsexuals and partly to set up Bree's emotional journey) makes clear her conviction that her happiness is inextricably linked to the removal of her penis, rather than to interpersonal relationships. The combination of instructive content, political message, narrative set-up, establishment of character, and humour that are condensed into this single, brief conversation mark the film as noticeably different from previous trans films:

Doctor: Do you consider yourself a happy person?  
Bree: Yes. No. I mean, I will be.  
Doctor: Miss Osborne, there's no such thing as a right or wrong answer in this office.  
Bree: Yes, I'm a very happy person.  
Doctor: How can I help you if you won't be honest with me?  
Bree: You can sign that consent form. Please.  
Doctor: The American Psychiatric Association categorizes gender Dysphoria as a very serious mental disorder.  
Bree: After my operation not even a gynaecologist will be able to detect anything out of the ordinary about my body. Don't you find it odd that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?  
Doctor: How do you feel about your penis?  
Bree: It disgusts me. I don't even like looking at it.  
Doctor: What about friends?  
Bree: They don't like it either.  
Doctor: I mean, do you have the support of friends?  
Bree: I'm very close to my therapist.  
Doctor: And your family?  
Bree: My family is dead.

The cinematography sets her up as an extremely isolated figure, particularly during the interview with the doctor. The shot/reverse shot editing used in the conversation, in combination with dialogue, creates an adversarial relationship between Bree and the doctor. She is filmed in a medium close-up that emphasises her isolation, using a handheld camera that creates a slight shakiness that suggests her nervousness and vulnerability in this situation. Because of the absence of any establishing shot to set up her and the doctor in relation to one another, they are very explicitly kept separate, and other than the dialogue, there is nothing to suggest that they are even in the same room. Bree's aversion to her penis is reiterated in the next sequence, which shows her getting ready for bed. She takes her pills dressed in a satin nightdress that reveals the bulge of her genitals. Examining herself in the mirror, emphasising the significance of the visible image in gender, her frustration at this last disjunctive flaw is evident, and she tucks her genitals away, creating a more coherent profile. Since no-one else is around, it is made quite clear that Bree's desire for SRS is for herself, and about her sense of self and her relationship with her body:



Figure 37 . Bree and her concealed penis

The opening also sets up a central idea that is developed throughout the film: the association of Bree with other marginalised and minority groups. She lives in an Hispanic neighbourhood, evidenced by the demographic of the other people at the bus stop, and she works in a “Latin Caribbean-Mexican seafood restaurant.” The film uses this connection that is established between Bree and immigrant communities to frame trans identity through the concept of immigration and its co-extensive relation to the issue of borders and the policing of those borders. The concept of borderlands has been applied within queer and trans theory as a conceptualising non-normative experiences and tensions,<sup>16</sup> but as Scherr observes, “On a discursive level this borderland subjectivity positions Bree as a kind of queer subject, when in fact she thinks of her sex change as the last step towards coming into the woman she has always been” (2008, p. 4). Similarly, Sharon Cowan argues that Bree “does not want a liminal life on the frontier - on the threshold between genders. Bree most definitely is reaching for recognition of her womanhood” (2009, p. 107). On the other hand, the metaphor of borderlands can be seen as somewhat more effective as a way of framing the temporary dislocation that Bree experiences during her transition, and which is echoed through the road movie format of the film. For Bree, the interstitial spaces are predominantly places of danger and uncertainty, in terms of geography and gender, but the film suggests that they are places that she needs to cross to get back to where she belongs, and furthermore that she will find unexpected moments of validation and pleasure.

The connection between Bree and ethnic minorities is intended not only as a reference to the idea of borders, but is meant to create an analogy between gender and race or ethnicity. Bree chooses to live in neighbourhood where she is just another outsider to the dominant culture of white heteronormativity, and has an affinity with its inhabitants that suggests a shared experience of discrimination and alienation from that culture. Bree has deliberately distanced herself from her middle-class, white, suburban upbringing where her transsexuality is derided and rejected. This intolerant attitude is epitomised by her mother, Elizabeth, who flatly refuses to acknowledge Bree as a woman, calling her Stanley and grabbing her crotch to check she still has her penis. This intolerance is strongly contrasted with the way she is treated by the other ‘outsiders’ in the film, who accept her on her own terms. Scherr suggests that these intersections in identity politics produce “the message is that to be transsexual and

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<sup>16</sup> Most notably by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands – La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999), David Valentine (2007), Judith Halberstam (1998b) and by C. Jacob Hale in his article on the debates about Brandon Teena, which he situates in the ‘butch/fem borderlands’ (1998).

white is *like* being racially other... Tucker is linking blackness and transsexuality along the axes of non-normativity and visibility” (2008, p. 3). This connection is made most overtly through the idea of passing that relates to both gender and racial identities. At a cafe in Arkansas, a young black girl, after studying Bree for some time, asks whether she is “a girl or a boy.” Her ability to ‘read’ Bree indicates a profound understanding of the relationship between otherness and visibility that stems from her experience as a black person in a white society in the same way that Bree’s self-consciousness about her appearance results from her experiences as a transwoman in a strictly regulated heteronormative society.

As in the other trans films, Bree’s gender variance must be known to the audience, but unlike most other films, the audience is not expected to believe that Bree is convincing to the other characters in the diegesis. Indeed, her attempts to be convincing are a central part of the narrative. It is meant to be plausible that Bree passes with some characters, but not others, although Rachel Thompson argues that the way the filmmakers have constructed Bree’s appearance is both entirely unconvincing and inaccurate (2009). She is only a week away from her genital surgery, and has already undergone a string of transformative surgeries, such as a tracheal shave and hundreds of hours of electrolysis. It is highly implausible that a transsexual this far along in their transition, who takes passing so seriously, would still be so ‘un-stealth’. As Zacharek points out, the awful make-up job on Huffman is what most strongly undermines her performance, arguing that she is “most believable in the scenes in which she wears no make-up at all” (2005: 2). Bree is represented as determined to pass, and uses a very stereotyped conception of femininity to achieve that goal. She follows carefully constructed rituals, such as her voice training, to maximise the coherence of her gender presentation. She is horrified to discover herself in the midst of a gathering of trans people where she may be outed by association.

This party features cameo performances by a number of trans people, including Calpernia Addams, Melissa Sklarz, David Harrison and Bianca Leigh, who plays the host, Ellen. Duncan Tucker deliberately includes these real-life trans people, along with the initial appearance by Andrea James, in an effort to legitimate the film and its protagonist and present its trans credentials, although Tucker himself describes these cameos as an important

presence in the film that “show[s] audiences a glimpse of the variety of the transsexual experience” (2006, p. 99). It also reflects an earnest effort to create an accurate representation. In preparing for her role as Bree, Felicity Huffman consulted with Danae Doyle, “who teaches transgender women how to behave like women” (Tucker, 2006: 133). Further to this instructive value, however, is an apparent desire to avoid any suggestion of exploitation of trans people by an outsider, and to make the film appealing to trans as well as non-trans spectators. However, Tucker’s conceptualisation of transsexuality shows no awareness of the political debates around visibility and passing, and this narrow view of transsexual experience has been condemned by some trans critics. Rachel Thompson objects to Bree’s assimilationist attitude, arguing that “living stealth is old-school thinking, a stereotype that is behind the curve. More and more, trans people are living a blended life - known as trans people to many non-trans people... Bree may be typical of a person transitioning 30 or more years ago - but not today,” although she does concede that the film does “more good than harm” to the trans cause (2009, p. 2). Despite Bree’s strong desire to pass that Thompson objects to, the film itself seems also to offer a critique of passing, although for entirely different reasons.

Bree’s isolation is directly linked to her attempt to live stealth, which she believes, at the start of the film, to require severing herself completely from her family. Over the course of the narrative, however, she realises that simply passing will not bring her happiness, culminating in the moment where she breaks down in grief after her surgery. She has finally achieved her goal, but instead of feeling fulfilled, she is overwhelmed by grief and remorse over the loss of her son. *Transamerica* rejects the traditional ideology of the nuclear family that is central to heteronormative culture, but asserts the critical importance of parent/child relationships. The fraught relationship between Bree and her parents and the pivotal relationship that is developing between Bree and Toby are portrayed as intrinsic to Bree’s sense of self, and are used to argue against a universalising and prescriptive parenting model, lobbying instead for the unique nature of each relationship. The narrative focuses foremost on Bree’s learning to be a parent, and within this construction her male to female transition is represented as secondary to, and dependent on, this relationship. Thus the strongest message in a fairly didactic film is that everyone needs personal relationships, especially people adjusting to major life changes. Tucker emphasises family as the focus of the film, rather than the

political issues, asserting that “*Transamerica* is subversive insofar as the main character is a transsexual woman, yet the film is not about transsexuality” (2006, p. 131). The implication is that audiences will accept a narrative about a transgender figure without seeing it as the only issue. A substantial component of this acceptance is the situating of Bree in family relationships that normalise the trans figure for a mainstream audience – she is humanised as somebody’s parent, sibling, child.

The film imagines an audience willing to accept difference and capable of empathy with a gender-variant character. Yet Bree’s transsexuality is continually brought to the audience’s attention, never letting them “forget that it’s a non-mainstream story about a non-mainstream subject, when ideally, it should simply be a story about a person” (Zacharek, 2005, p. 1). The most explicit indicator of Bree’s trans status, as with *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don’t Cry*, is the image of her exposed genitals. The audience observes Bree’s naked penis for the first time as she urinates by the side of the road:



Figure 38. Bree and her exposed penis

This is the moment where Toby discovers the ‘truth’ about Bree as he sees this same image in the rear-view mirror, offering a narrative justification for this exposure. The audience is led to

view this as the most definitive marker through Toby's reaction to this sight. However, if they are also tempted to sympathise with his shock and subsequent rejection of Bree, the film quickly reasserts an empathy with Bree through her evident pain in the face of Toby's cruelty the next day when he calls her a "fucking lying freak."

This moment of crisis reflects the inconsistencies the film displays as a whole. It strives to normalise the trans protagonist and present her as a person just like anyone else, but repeatedly marks her abnormality and difference in moments such as this. It emphasises her powerful desire to pass, but repeatedly refuses to allow it through what Tucker calls "her vestigial masculinity" (2006, p. viii). The audience is encouraged to accept her goals, but the film implicitly criticises these goals as Bree learns that family is more important than passing or surgery. The ending attempts to reconcile these contradictions and affirm its message of tolerance by showing Bree as fully transitioned and reunited with her son, no longer required to choose which is more important. The final shot, through the window, is of Bree and Toby sitting together on the couch and having a beer. When Toby is unable to twist the cap of his bottle, Bree opens it for him. It is a gesture of physical strength that the 'borderland' Bree would not have considered appropriate to her idealised form of femininity. The transitioned Bree is clearly now more comfortable with and confident in her womanhood, and is free to be a parent to Toby. This resolution is problematic if read as a comparison of pre-op and post-op transsexuals, but this is clearly not the intended message. Interpreting Bree's contentment at the point of narrative closure as signalling the end of her journey would likely be undercut by the theme song, 'Travelling On', which Dolly Parton sings over the final shot.

Whatever its flaws, *Transamerica* clearly marks a new approach in mainstream trans melodrama. It advocates tolerance and understanding and explicitly challenges heteronormativity, but also provides a happy ending. It is not the standard heterosexual coupling that constitutes a happy ending in most Hollywood films, instead reconfiguring the traditional couple as a post-op mtf transsexual drinking with her porn star son. Overall, the film imagines trans possibility in a more affirming way and with an unprecedented level of detail, and reflects and constructs an audience that is more aware and more open to that possibility.

#### IV. Re-Imagining

“If I wasn’t a transvestite terrorist, would you marry me?”

- Kitten, *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005)

A number of intersections have occurred in dramatic trans films that are located within the loosening boundaries of the genre, but these intertextual relationships are particularly revealing when they occur through actors and directors revisiting and reworking trans subject matter. Most notable of these is Neil Jordan, whose film *Breakfast on Pluto* was released in the same year as *Transamerica* and has a similar focus on a trans protagonist’s search for family. However, the tones of the films differ markedly, as do the trans characters that each film imagines. Jordan’s protagonist, Kitten, is the antithesis of Bree in everything from her<sup>17</sup> fashion to her moral code, and is also markedly different from Dil in *The Crying Game* in terms of both her narrative agency and her attitude within the diegesis. Jordan’s return to the idea of trans identity results in a more contemplative film that overtly celebrates its protagonist. While *Breakfast on Pluto* is Jordan’s first overtly trans film since *The Crying Game*, as Carol Zucker points out, “Jordan has never shied away from material about the homoerotic – transvestites, transsexuals, bisexuals and even straight people appear with regularity in his films” (2008, p. 7).<sup>18</sup> Despite some thematic similarities, there are significant differences between *The Crying Game* and *Breakfast on Pluto* that suggest a cultural shift in both the director’s and the audiences’ approach to trans characters. *Breakfast on Pluto* is set amidst the political strife and glam rock fashions of the 1970s and tells the somewhat whimsical story of Patrick/Kitten Brady, an Irish orphan who journeys to London in search of her mother. In the course of her quest she adopts and adapts to a variety of roles, including musician’s girlfriend, dancing Womble, magician’s assistant, prostitute, and stripper. Despite discrimination, rejection, and abuse at the hands of her foster family, the IRA, and the British police, her sense of self is unwavering. Yet Kitten is profoundly apolitical; “Indeed his very passivity is his *only* political statement, a blithe nonchalance in the face of hatred and disgust

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<sup>17</sup> In most writing about this films, Kitten is referred to as ‘he’. However, I will refer to Kitten using feminine pronouns because it is how Kitten refers to herself in the voice-over, and how the character, originally called Pussy, refers to herself in the source novel (McCabe, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> This homoeroticism is evident even in his most mainstream Hollywood film, *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), in Louis’ (Brad Pitt) relationship with Lestat (Tom Cruise), as well as with Santiago (Stephen Rea) and Armand (Antonio Banderas).

directed at him... for being a sexual anomaly in a combat zone where taking sides is mandatory” (Gray, 2005, p. 59). Whenever reality becomes too harsh, she retreats into her imagination, refusing to acknowledge her oppressors and thereby denying them any power over her mind, if not her body.

In contrast to Jordan’s first film, the trans character, Kitten (Cillian Murphy), is now at the centre of the narrative, and the story is narrated in the first person. Kitten is “the eyes and ears and truth for the audience” (Moloney, 2005). Kitten’s relates her life story, divided into chapters, beginning with the her abandonment as a baby, but later including her imagined version of her conception during an illicit sexual encounter between a Catholic priest and his housekeeper. The film opens with an adult Kitten pushing a baby stroller down a London street, and it is to the baby that Kitten is retrospectively relating her life story. Her experiences are therefore filtered through her adult consciousness and are shaped by a combination of her mature perspective and self-awareness, but also humour and fantasy, such as the talking birds that offer a social commentary on events. This style of narration refuses to draw a line between ‘reality’ and the imaginary, and offers the audience no choice but to accept Kitten’s own perception of herself. The opening shots of the film depict this adult Kitten as the glamorous housewife and mother that she has always aspired to be:



Figure 39. Kitten Brady

Her irreverent attitude is established by her first words, in response to the construction worker who propositions her as she walks by:

Why yes of course, boys. I'll leave the front door open and you can all troop in and give me a jab. Not up to it, then? You innocent, shovel-wielding, horny-handed sons of the native sod. [To the baby] Not many people are, munchkin. Not many people can take the tale of Patrick Braden, a.k.a Saint Kitten, who strutted the catwalks, face lit by a halo of flashbulbs as "Oh!" she shrieked. "I told you, from my best side, darlings."

These opening words demonstrate not only Kitten's self-sufficient indifference to how others see her, but also her lyrical reinvention of her past to erase the brutality and replace it with the glamour of the movie stars she admires so much. Throughout the film, Kitten insistently refuses to allow others to control her story or determine who she is.

The romanticised story that she recounts to the baby, and the audience, is often at odds with the discrimination and pain that is being depicted, as she retreats into her imaginary world as a survival strategy. The audience is left to decipher for themselves what to believe through a negotiation of Kitten's narration and the visuals, but aware all the while that these are representations of Kitten's reminiscences. The chapter headings that break up the film repeatedly draw the viewer's attention back to this autobiographical conceit, to Kitten's framing of her past. However, the consistency of Kitten's world view and her coherent sense of self encourage the audience not only to accept her version of events, but to strongly identify with her, particularly in those moments when the harsh reality of terrorism and transphobia threaten the poetic whimsy of Kitten's optimistic worldview. In his 'Behind the Scenes' interview, Jordan describes the film as "a balance of comedy and – not tragedy, but... grotesquerie. Brutality. Comedy and brutality." The brutality and politics of *Breakfast on Pluto* are similar in many ways to *The Crying Game*, but the addition of humour through such a flamboyant and resilient heroine as Kitten, creates a substantially different filmic experience and type of engagement with the possibilities for trans identity.

The IRA politics are secondary to the perspective and experiences of Kitten as she tries to find a family and a place to belong. Kitten is a romantic, like Dil, and wanders from one relationship to the next, and although she doesn't find her true love, she does find a surrogate family, complete with new baby. However, the romantic and whimsical tone of the film does

not prevent Jordan from engaging directly with the prejudice and dangers Kitten faces in her daily life as a trans person. She is repeatedly punished by her foster mother when caught cross-dressing, is attacked and almost killed by a serial killer, and is persecuted by the police, both for her Irishness and her gender variance. Yet, she is quite capable of saving herself from these situations through her charm and resourcefulness. Jordan's reworking of the trans figure presents a presumably more accepting audience with a more complex character and constructs a film that invites allegiance with the trans subject, rather than exterior contemplation of the trans figure as shocking enigma.

This intertextual network is extended in another direction with Cillian Murphy's return to a trans role in *Peacock* (Lander, 2010). Murphy plays John Skillpa, in a story that echoes *Psycho* in many ways, and although the trailer suggests it might be a horror, the film itself is a measured psychological drama about a tragically damaged individual. The film opens with a young woman preparing breakfast and hanging out the laundry in a small town in the 1960s. When she is finished her chores, Emma goes upstairs and removes her wig and dress to reveal John.



Figure 40. John Skillpa



Figure 41. Emma Skillpa

The revelation of the trans character at the opening of the film is unusual, as is the fact that it occurs in private, but it sets up the audience understanding of John as having two personalities, one a man and one a woman. Emma is the alter, and remains hidden in the house and yard, until a train crashes through the back fence, and the town sees her and assumes she is John's wife.

As the story develops, it is made clear that the dissociative identity disorder is a result of the abuse that John suffered at the hands of his mother, and that the Emma alter emerged after his mother's death. Unlike Norman Bates, however, John appears to have an alter that is kind and generous. As Emma ventures out more and more, displaying the social skills that John overtly lacks, she becomes less willing to cede the shared body to John, and eventually murders a trucker and fakes John's death. However, the film is a psychological drama, rather than a horror, and the murder is neither gory nor prolonged, and is presented as an act of desperation. The central question is not who the killer is, but how the conflicting desires of John and Emma will be resolved. In the end, the film returns Emma to her isolation, although this time self-imposed as she has slowly come to realise the extent of her mental illness. It is nonetheless an interesting reworking of both the DID Norman Bates character through the narrative, and of Kitten Brady, through Murphy's performance, that creates a new way of looking at the previous films as interconnected with this one.

These interconnections between the trans drama films create a network of re-iteration and recollection that emphasises the relationship of those involved in the films to the characters they play. The intertextual bonds that are created sustain the visibility of the trans characters outside of the diegesis, and beyond the singular moment of representation. The trans characters flow over the containing boundaries of the texts themselves, and become more and more firmly entrenched within the cultural imagination, by repeatedly returning audiences' attention to the them, and the trans experiences they have imagined through them. In addition to affirming the position of the characters, and maintaining their visibility, the return of particular actors and directors takes trans themes beyond the boundaries of the text, as something that exists independently of the texts themselves. The level of emotional engagement and empathy that these dramatic films are constructed to elicit from audiences requires direct and unflinching imaginings that include the pain, but increasingly include the celebrations as well.

# Chapter 7:

## Musicals

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The preceding chapters have focused largely on the visual and narrative elements of trans film, but music also functions as a potent filmic element that directs the responses of the audience to trans characters and conveys political nuances in the subtext of certain films. Other elements of the soundscape, such as voice, function overtly in directing spectatorial perceptions of character: for example, Daphne's high-pitched giggle in *Some Like It Hot*, the sinister presence of Mother's voice in *Psycho*, and the husky tones of Bree in *Transamerica*. Music, however, can work more subtly, encouraging a particular emotional response rather than a cognitive understanding of character in terms of gender categories. While the use of music is a common feature of film, the particular use of music in relation to certain transgender characters requires closer examination as it is this subliminal aspect which can most subversively disrupt the heteronormative status quo, and encourage empathy with and affection for those trans characters. Films which in other ways may appear to reinscribe gender categories can open a transgressive space of disruption and exuberance through the use of music, whether through non-diegetic soundtrack or through diegetic performance. Four films which employ this approach, to varying degrees of success, are *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994), *Hairspray* (Waters, 1988), and its remake (Shankman, 2007). There are significant differences among these films, having been created in highly varied socio-historical contexts, but none of them were mainstream releases, except for Shankman's *Hairspray*. The other three are usually perceived as cult films, suggesting an inherent resistance to filmic and political conventions. They have all achieved a high level of visibility as a result of a combination of gender disruption, comedy and music that situates them as a type of camp musical.

The representation of trans characters in the camp musical incorporates elements of narrative, spectacle and music. The use of music in this construction is crucial not only in terms of genre, but also of aural function. The filmic role of sound in general has predominantly been

analysed in relation to technology, to the construction of narrative meaning, or to its psychoanalytic processes with regard to the audience. It is the conjunction of these psychic and narrative aspects of sound, particularly the function of music, which is significant for this discussion of transgender representation. The more specific theory around the structure and function of the musical form as a genre also provides a useful framework for analysing the camp musical. Theorists such as Claudia Gorbman (1987) have claimed sound as an area of film neglected by both audiences and theorists because of the dominance of visual elements, as is evident in the basic idea of a ‘spectator’ or ‘viewer’ watching a film<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore the soundtrack, or soundscape, which comprises dialogue, sound effects and music, is often seen as subordinate to the requirements of the narrative, but simultaneously as something supplemental to narrative, with music offering something “far more emotional, seductive and mysterious than simple ‘communication’” (Donnelly, 2005, p. 94). Sound provides an omnidirectional immediacy to the distant two-dimensional visual cinema experience. “While vision creates a ‘there’, locating an object in space separate from (though obviously in relation to) one’s own subject position, sound creates a ‘here’” (Stilwell, 2001, p. 173). Sound can convey historical or geographical setting, provide narrative commentary, and create atmosphere, mood and emotional intensity. However, music holds particularly strong affective power within the filmic soundscape.

In explaining the role of music, Gorbman offers a useful distinction between the various semiotic codes of music – the purely musical, the cultural and the cinematic (1989, p. 2). The cultural associations of musical style work to create meaning on another level from the melodic or structural functions and conventions of music within film; for example, the nostalgic use of glam rock in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* evokes a theatrical and sexually subversive style of music from the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the semiotic, Gorbman points to the ability of music to slip between the various narrative levels – the audience is as willing to accept diegetic music as they are to accept non-diegetic or meta-diegetic music (ibid., p. 4). Through these shifting modes, music provides continuity across shots and scenes, constructing coherence and unity. But beyond this hermeneutic purpose, Gorbman argues that music “functions to lull the spectator into being an *untroublesome* (less critical,

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<sup>1</sup> Anahid Kassabian employs the term ‘perceiver’ in place of these usual terms, as acknowledgement of both sound and visuals, and in recognition of the active nature of engaging with film (2001: 173).

<sup>2</sup> As depicted in *Velvet Goldmine* (Haynes, 1999).

less wary) *viewing subject*” (ibid., p58). Gorbman’s pivotal *Unheard Melodies* went some way towards framing a critical aural discourse, although Gorbman’s argument around audiences’ lack of conscious aural awareness works against her own premise regarding the centrality of sound in film. Music is not ‘unheard’ even if it is processed differently from the visual aspects of film in the minds of the audience. As Robin Stilwell observes, “music is not really unheard: it is merely not apprehended with the same semantic precision as dialogue or even sound effects” (2001, p. 169). Gorbman does identify music as *affectively* significant: “Music lessens defences against the fantasy structures to which narrative provides access. It increases the spectator’s susceptibility to suggestion” (1989, p. 5). She goes on to argue that “the bath of affect in which music immerses the spectator is like... the hypnotist’s voice, in that it rounds off the sharp edges, masks contradictions, and lessens spatial and temporal discontinuities with its own melodic and harmonic continuity” (1989, p. 5). In constructing this approach, Gorbman draws on the psychoanalytical theories of Julia Kristeva and Guy Rosolato to support her description of music as a force of mediation, continuity and meaning for the aural subject through conscious and unconscious engagement with film.

Gorbman suggests that “the audience can (and does) slip in and out of ‘spectacle’ and ‘narrative identification’ music fairly readily” (ibid., p.68). This differentiation is contingent on Gorbman’s distinction between two different types of engagement – that of the audience with the film (anchorage), and that of the individual filmgoer with the audience as a whole (bonding). The emotions and desires elicited by the music are also less likely to be subject to regulatory critique than the narrative events occurring on a rational level. From a psychoanalytical perspective, sound has been generally theorised as providing a direct link to the Unconscious, bypassing the regulatory functions of the Superego. “Probably because sound in film exists largely in a liminal (even subliminal) position, it can have an uncanny effect on the audience – uncanny in that the ‘spectator’ is usually less able to recognise and articulate that effect than a visual one” (Stilwell, 2001, p. 182). Aural stimulation offers uncensored access to the primal fantasies of the individual, recalling the “sonic envelope” of pre-natal existence, the pre-verbal world of fantasy which exists before individuation from the mother and entry into the rational law of the Symbolic (ibid.). In this return to the irrational pre-Symbolic realm, music “relaxes the censor and has a hypnotic effect,” and “it causes a temporary, benign regression, transporting the subject back to the pleasurable realm of early phantasies” (Gorbman, 1987: 61). This lack of regulation renders the “bath of affect”

all the more potent, particularly when those fantasies which are evoked are conventionally taboo, as in the case of filmic expressions of transgender identity and desire.

From a cultural perspective, music plays a crucial role in rituals of group identity and bonding, from church hymns to national anthems to rock and roll. Film music can bond the members of the audience as successfully as it can unify the disparate elements of the film text. Music can reiterate social divisions, or it can bridge or blur those divisions, creating alternate identifications and affiliations. Analysis of these cultural aspects of musical codes necessitates consideration of the socio-historical context of production. For example, *Rocky Horror* needs to be considered in relation to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, as well as in relation to the shifts and developments in the rock music scene. The cultural and commercial valency of the music in terms of both style and connotation will inevitably shift over time, but will nevertheless reflect the historical and ideological influences and affiliations shaping the moment of production. This is even more likely where film-makers employ existing songs, as they have an independent genesis and meanings which predate the narrative contexts to which they are attached, as is the case in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

Pre-existing popular songs in a compiled soundtrack pose “formal difficulties because of [their] structural unity and integrity” that supposedly renders them ill-suited to the requirements of narrative rhythm and continuity in film (Reay, 2004, p. 38). Such songs also potentially carry strong personal and cultural connotations, “associational baggage” that can distract from or disrupt the construction of meaning in the film narrative. In distinguishing between the “assimilating identifications” of composed scores and the “affiliating identifications” of compiled scores, Kassabian acknowledges the “immediate threat of history” that such songs bring (2001, pp. 2-3). Lyrics pose a further problem, both in their reintroduction of verbal codes and in their representational content. “Songs require narrative to cede to spectacle, for it seems that lyrics and action compete for attention” (Gorbman, 1987, p. 20). However, in Pauline Reay’s more positive interpretation, these songs can bring “an enhanced level of intertextuality to the soundtrack” (2004, p. 40). Even if the verbal content of the songs is in conflict with the lyrical and/or the visual elements, this does not necessarily inhibit the production of meaning. Such competing discourses would produce

more complex and multilateral processes of signification, even more so when combined with visual components such as dance. In fact, this could well work against the idea of a monolithic prescribed meaning in a filmic text, and allow greater potential for textual negotiation on the part of the audience members.

The various issues outlined above regarding the functions of music in film acquire a particular significance in relation to the film musical. These issues have been incorporated into genre theory regarding the musical, and been developed in conjunction with narrative, structural, visual, thematic, political and reception analysis. *Genre: The Musical* (1981), a collection of essays edited by Rick Altman, marked a new direction in the analysis of the musical as a complex formal and socio-political construction, recuperating it from the marginal position as merely escapist entertainment to which it had previously been relegated. Richard Dyer's highly influential essay "Entertainment and Utopia" (originally published in 1977) engages directly with the idea of escapism, offering an oppositional interpretation of musicals as complex engagements with patriarchal-capitalist ideology which "stress... cultural and historical specificity" (1981, p. 19). He argues that the musical presents "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised. It thus works at the level of sensibility... [using] representational and non-representational signs" (ibid. p.20). Through this sensibility temporary solutions are offered to specific social problems. The purpose of the musical is the resolution of conflict between the narrative and the musical numbers, and between the representational and the non-representational, which reflect social conflicts. Dyer distinguishes between dystopian musicals which foreground the conflict through clearly separating the narrative and the musical numbers, those which attempt to integrate them, and those which "try to dissolve the distinction between narrative and numbers, thus implying that the world of the narrative is also [already] utopian" (ibid. p. 26). Dyer categorises the social problems represented through narrative as "scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation and fragmentation" with corresponding utopian solutions through musical numbers: "abundance, energy, intensity, transparency and community" (ibid.). However, the neat resolution to social problems that Dyer identifies as inherent in the classical Hollywood musical becomes less stable as the conventions of the genre shift in the 1960s and 1970s.

Rick Altman identifies the Hollywood musical as a problem-solving genre, addressing conflicts which replicate the essentialist sexual binary (1989, p. 19). Masculinity and femininity function as the foundation for a dual-focus narrative structure, which presents paired segments, oppositions which parallel the central male and female protagonists (ibid.). These oppositions reflect a basic sexual duality and are resolved through heterosexual marriage (ibid., p. 26). The musical's love plot supports one of three types of cultural plot which are conveyed through three subgenres. The fairy tale musical, based in the fantasy of another place, restores order to an "imaginary Kingdom" by restoring order to the couple (ibid., p. 126). The show musical, a fantasy of being in another body, creates the couple in parallel to the creation of art. The folk musical, a fantasy of another time, unifies the community through the integration of "two disparate individuals into a single couple" (ibid.). Altman is careful to point out the fluid and "promiscuous" nature of these subgenres, but emphasises the centrality of fantasy and "each subgenre's ability to stimulate the fulfilment of our most unfulfillable desires" (ibid., p. 127). Notably, underlying the classical Hollywood musical as described by Altman is an apparently ubiquitous assumption of an audience fantasy of heterosexual coupling as both desirable and redemptive. The function of many musical numbers as sexual play disguised for family audiences is commonly accepted, and is analysed in detail by Rick Altman, but straight readings presume it to be a representation of purely heterosexual desire.

Martin Sutton also identifies the inherent conflict within the musical as "essentially a genre that concerns itself with the romantic/rogue imagination, and its daily battle with a restraining, 'realist', social order" (1981, p. 190). He employs the psychoanalytic approach that correlates plot with the Superego and musical numbers with the Id, with the Superego as triumphant, and argues that "the musical finally turns its wayward dreamers into conformists. The plot overtakes the numbers, and the protagonists achieve only an apparent victory" (195). In this conceptualisation of the musical as oppositional, any escape from the controlling forces of society or the Superego cannot be maintained. However, the elemental modal differences between the narrative and the musical numbers which most theorists stress could instead be read as essentially precluding such rational containment – somewhat like trying to force a round musical peg into a square narrative hole. Steven Cohan argues specifically that integrated musical numbers can "exceed their plot functions, often appearing to set up a parallel universe of pure spectacle" (2002, p. 9). Rational narrative resolution for the

characters will not automatically eliminate the affective impact of the musical numbers on audiences. In other words, an orthodox heterosexual coupling will not necessarily contain the unregulated emotions and desires unleashed through the music.

Jim Collins identifies three formal particularities of the genre's engagement of audiences. His essay stresses the importance of "I/You pronoun structure" of the lyrics and the use of direct address as "indicative of a desire to establish a certain intimacy and rapport with the spectator" (1989, p. 137). The inclusion of a diegetic audience for the musical numbers works to facilitate this mode of address (ibid., p. 139). The "glorification of dance," which showcases the talent of the performers, and the "sexual power of the dance" create metaphors for romance and sex that correlate personal success with performative creativity (ibid., pp. 140-143). Jane Feuer offers a more extensive investigation of these techniques in *The Hollywood Musical* (1993), arguing that they function to bridge the gap between folk art and mass art, while self-referentially affirming the value of the genre itself through the validation of 'genuine' and spontaneous talent. Feuer argues for "the integrative effect of musical performance," departing from the absolutist approach of theorists like Dyer and suggesting synthesis rather than conquest (ibid., p. 35). The integrative function extends to the audience through the acknowledgement of the audience by the performers and the inclusion of diegetic audiences, producing an illusion of immediacy and involvement reminiscent of live theatre (ibid., p. 38). This myth of the audience works in conjunction with the myths of spontaneity and integration to construct self-reflexive musicals which ritually reaffirm the importance of performance.

The self-reflexivity and the emphasis on performance that characterise musicals also create an interesting point of convergence with camp. Jack Babuscio, writing in 1977, the same historical context which produced *Rocky Horror*, identifies the four basic features of camp as "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor" (2004, p. 20). The awareness of incongruity that underlies both the ironic and humorous aspects of camp has made classical Hollywood musicals, with their fantastical insertion of musical numbers into film narratives, particularly open to camp interpretation. More significantly for this project, camp has been deployed as a deliberate creative strategy in some musicals. Scott Long argues that "the camp object can be created deliberately, by an artist anxious to violate boundaries between the serious and the

absurd” (1993, p. 80). He reiterates that camp had a political function, claiming that “It is the camp figure who will give rise to the shock, the man who *represents* camp: who strikes a camp attitude... In his very comedy he takes on the burdens of society’s contradictions” (ibid., p. 90). The politics of camp are grounded in its rejection of the normative and the serious, showcasing instead the pleasure of the non-normative. Esther Newton suggests that camp “is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity” (1993, p. 45), but the subversive politics of camp are appealingly packaged in humour and outrageousness. Camp’s roots in what Babuscio refers to as the ‘gay sensibility’ ensure that a serious political consciousness underlies the laughter which is deployed as armour against homophobic persecution. A camp consciousness of the incongruity inherent in the form of musicals, combined with the humour and theatricality of camp performance, can work to reconfigure the heterosexist binary formula of the genre. The camp musical is not a subgenre, but rather a strategy of deliberate and critical disruption.

Brett Farmer (2004) offers a queer engagement with the musical that revisits and subverts several of the genre theory positions outlined above. “The most effective strategy for any proposed practice of queer negotiation would be to refuse and undermine the musical’s push towards closure. If the musical is structured to build up to a final, all-embracing moment of heterosexual union as utopian ideal, then a disruption of its linear trajectory toward closure would, perforce, also disrupt its textual path to heterosexual utopianization” (p. 78). This strategic refusal is enacted through locating and expanding moments of disruptive excess in the musical, “a privileged genre of excess” which “constructs a multileveled system of textual enunciation unique in mainstream film” (ibid., p. 79-80). The “unusual discursive pluralism” which Farmer identifies creates moments of excess that “signal an anarchic disruption” of linear narrative form (ibid.). This narrative disruption likewise subverts the heterosexual trajectory of the text, providing immediate pleasure in place of the distant prospect of romantic resolution (ibid.). The pleasure of the musical number lies in voyeuristic fantasy and in the varied formations of desire made possible within the space created by the disruption of heterosexual linearity, what Farmer refers to as “a de-oedipalized framework of perverse desire” (ibid.). A queer reading of the musical numbers as disguised sexual play recognises the libidinal spaces that are opened up in the narrative by a musical ‘break’.

The prevalence of overt gender play points to a level of self-reflexive awareness regarding the disruptive potential of the genre. Farmer identifies the “widespread use of cross-dressing... the seemingly ubiquitous musical figure of the androgynous female performer in male tuxedo... brash butchness... the long line of sissy boys... and the [more recent] explicit celebrations of transvestism” as examples of “gender transgression [which] all point to a profound current of sexual subversion at play in the musical number” (ibid., p. 82). The subversion is produced partly through the music itself, which “may signify a transgressive realm of feminine *jouissance* – in which maternal incantation triumphs over paternal logocentrism” (ibid., p. 84). In the camp musical, ‘paternal’ can be understood to represent heteronormative regulation, often at odds with the versions of masculinity or maleness being enacted through performances which suggest an increasingly critical self-reflexivity around gender in musicals like *Priscilla*.

### **I. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show***

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is one of the earliest and most overt examples of the deployment of this camp musical strategy. It has provided an enduring model for the camp musicals that have followed, such as *Priscilla* and *Hairspray*. It introduces concepts which have become recognisable conventions, for example, the spectacular celebration of non-normative gender performance and the satirical disruption of heterosexual ideology. Most importantly, these camp strategies are deployed through the use of music as a unifying affective force and conduit for transgressive fantasies. *Rocky Horror* is a comic and self-aware homage to horror and science fiction films, but it is the conventions of the musical which dominate the structure of the film and which best convey the hedonistic gender disruption which is the central focus of the film. However, it is not just conventions of gender and sexuality which are disrupted, as the film enthusiastically breaks taboos around incest, cannibalism, vivisection and the creation of life.

*Rocky Horror* opens with a pair of disembodied blood-red lips against a black screen singing “Science Fiction/Double Feature,” a tribute to the B-movie canon of science fiction and horror films of the 1950s. This homage foregrounds some of the film’s generic roots and at the same time consciously establishes *Rocky Horror* as a part of this tradition. The first scene,

a small town wedding, introduces two of the protagonists, Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, epitomising wholesome hetero-romantic chastity. Inspired by their friends' wedding, they become engaged and decide to visit the teacher in whose class they met, suggesting an alignment between the institution of monogamous marriage and educational institutions. The narrator (The Criminologist) then appears, providing an ominous introduction to the 'horror' story that is about to unfold. A flat tyre in the middle of a thunderstorm leads them to seek help at an isolated castle, a setting deliberately removed from the watchful regulation of mainstream society. Here they meet Riff-Raff (a Handyman), his sister/lover Magenta (a Domestic), Columbia (a Groupie), and a group of Transylvanian "unconventional conventionalists" in the middle of a party. The host, Dr Frank-N-Furter, introduces himself through song as an alien, a "sweet transvestite from Transexual Transylvania," an immediate and explicit rejection of reductive heteronormative taxonomy. Frank takes Brad and Janet, stripped to their underwear, to his scientific laboratory where he unveils Rocky, the muscled boy-toy he has created as a sexual plaything. In an ironic reworking of Frankenstein's monster, Rocky is overtly desirable rather than monstrous. Frank then kills Eddie, a biker who has lost half his brain to Frank's new creation, and who seems to have been both Frank and Columbia's lover. Having dispensed with Eddie, Frank consummates his marriage to Rocky in a highly camp mockery of traditional wedding elements, such as carrying the 'bride' over the threshold. In a further rejection of monogamous conventions, Frank goes straight on to seducing Janet, then Brad, before Janet seduces Rocky. Their teacher, Dr Scott, arrives and they all have dinner together, with Eddie as the main course and Frank gleeful at their unwitting cannibalism. After a burlesque floor show featuring Rocky, Janet, Columbia, Brad and Frank, a balletic orgy takes place in the swimming pool. It is interrupted by Riff Raff, who kills Frank, Rocky and Columbia before he and Magenta blast the castle/spaceship back to Transylvania, ejecting Janet, Brad and Dr Scott back into the dark night.

Upon its release in 1975 the press panned the film as "'tasteless', 'pointless', 'plotless' and 'ill-conceived' (Weinstock, 2007, p. 108). It is noteworthy that this press criticism of the film exhibits a logocentric refusal to engage with the film as a camp musical, in which the affective and transgressive value of the music *is* the point, and the plot is merely an expedient device for linking the musical numbers. The perception of the film as 'tasteless' and 'ill-conceived' likewise suggests disapproval of the film's refusal to play by the conventionally accepted rules of genre, narrative or heteronormative ideology. *The Rocky Horror Show*

stage musical from which the film was adapted had been popular in London and Los Angeles, but failed utterly on Broadway, suggesting that the localised appreciation of the show was dependent on an understanding of and appreciation for the very particular socio-historical moment and the cultural and musical influences that produced *Rocky Horror* (Michaels & Evans, 2002). The consequences of the social protests of the 1960s are evident in the film's rebellious approach to gender, sexuality and institutional authority, but "*Rocky Horror* isn't just the summation of postwar youth culture; it's also the harbinger of mainstream camp" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum, 1991, p. 20). The parodic intertextuality presumes an audience with some knowledge of classic Hollywood horror films such as *King Kong*, and 1950s sci-fi B-movies such as *Flash Gordon*. As Babuscio observes, "The horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to camp interpretation... those [films] which make the most of... outrageous and 'unacceptable' sentiments... coping with pressures to conform... the masking of 'abnormality'... [and] personal rebellion against enforced restrictions" (1993, p. 23). Perhaps most importantly, the film requires a familiarity with musical conventions and history (such as Esther Williams films) as well as an appreciation of the style and the aesthetics of glam rock, the film's main musical influence.

The glam (or glitter) rock subculture which flourished briefly in the early 1970s was characterised by exaggerated performances of flamboyant sexual subversion that pushed the boundaries of mainstream gender conventions. "Glitter capitalized on the confirmed bisexuality of its musicians... Passing between the heterosexual and homosexual spheres became glamorous" (Marchetti, 1982, p. 164). The construction of theatrical stage personas with elaborate make-up, hair and costumes, such as David Bowie's 'Ziggy Stardust', showcase the escapist fantasies inherent in glam rock, promising refuge from sexually repressive social institutions. This 'style revolution' "genuinely links many members of the gay community with the glitter subculture. Camp provides the aesthetic grounds on which the two groups meet" (ibid., p. 169). Indeed, glam rock "placed star image and fashion on an equal footing with the music itself" (Cornell, 2008, p. 35). However, the glamorous extravagance of this self-expression easily slips into "self-indulgence, dandyism... and 'decadent' self-destruction" (Marchetti, 1982, p. 166). These negative elements are evident in *Rocky Horror*, but Cornell argues that it is "the espousal of excess, showmanship, and ironic nostalgia embraced by glam rock [which] made it... the logical choice for the musical numbers in *Rocky Horror*" (2008, p. 37). These glam rock principles of excessive

theatricality and subversive fantasy are most explicitly portrayed in the construction and performance of Dr Frank-N-Furter, played by Tim Curry as an outrageous, sexy, camp hedonist. He functions as the gravitational centre, an anti-hero/spiritual leader whose style and narrative agency dominate the trajectory of the film.

However, it is evident from the opening of the film that the narrative of *Rocky Horror* is unlikely to subscribe to the conventions of linear logic, focussing exclusively on the music instead. No material context or explanation is offered for the blood-red lips which sing the opening musical number of the film, but they serve to draw attention to the primacy of the singing voice, as well as to the significance of the oral. Vampiric sexiness seems to be their *raison d'être* as they dissolve suggestively onto a shot of a church steeple, contrasting and combining the taboo with the sacred. The chronology of certain events within the castle reinforces the disnarrative tendencies suggested by the film's opening. The characters retire to bed after the unveiling of Rocky, *after* which they reconvene for a dinner party, and are later assembled by Frank for the floor show, even though the party guests have long since disappeared. The linearity is further undermined by the narrator, whose commentary periodically breaks into the narrative, with a purportedly minatory agenda. He is significant in terms of his retrospective relationship to Brad and Janet's story: he clearly has intimate experience of Transylvanian culture, and although he has returned to a conventional social role as a professorial criminologist, he has not been fully recuperated back into normative behaviour, evident in his susceptibility to "The Time Warp." He enjoys third-person omniscience in relation to events in the castle, for which the main source seems to be a Denton police file. Despite this privileged knowledge he offers no further explication of Janet and Brad's fate after they are thrown from the castle, which destabilises his regulatory role and his reliability as a narrator.

The scenes featuring the criminologist consistently make use of direct address, a technique common in musicals, employed to create a sense of privileged immediacy during musical numbers. The technique contributes to the rupture of the sealed filmic world, recognising the presence of the audience and fabricating engagement with the imagined viewer. However, the line between the meta-diegetic commentary of the narrator and the diegetic world is also ruptured during the performance of the musical number, "The Time Warp." The film cuts

between the diegetic performance of the musical number at the Transylvanian castle and the criminologist in his office. He persists in his didactic role, explaining the dance moves with the aid of the chart, but he is clearly not a detached observer. The exuberant energy of the song affects him as strongly as it does the party-goers and by the end of the number he is dancing on his desk, faithfully performing the moves dictated through the lyrics. It is highly significant that the criminologist can actually hear the song, as this explicitly indicates the ability of the music to flow across the conventional borders of different narrative levels. But the criminologist does not just hear the music; he enthusiastically participates in the contagiously exuberant physical performance, displaying a familiarity with the Transylvanian culture and a willingness to embrace it. The “step to the right” can clearly not overpower the “jump to the left,” to a transformative dimension of hedonistic energy and fantasy. The criminologist illustrates Riff Raff’s assertion that “nothing can ever be the same.” The transformation may be ameliorated, as attested by the criminologist’s continuing tendency towards a position of normative authority, but it cannot be entirely undone.

*Rocky Horror* illustrates this process of transformation in action through Brad and Janet after they unwittingly stumble into the Transylvanian domain under Frank-N-Furter’s charismatic control. At the beginning of the film Brad and Janet epitomise conservative and conventional heteronormativity, described by the narrator as “two young, ordinary, *healthy* kids.” They are clearly constructed to represent the basic sexual binary underlying the dual focus narrative which Altman identifies in the Hollywood musical, but the problem-solving heterosexual pairing which provides resolution in the conventional musical is itself problematised in *Rocky Horror*. Brad and Janet’s engagement is the point of departure rather than the destination and film sets out to interrogate the normality, the perceived inevitability, and the desirability of institutionalised heterosexual monogamy in relation to sexual desire. “Rather heavy-handed visual signs reinforce the conception of marriage not as a celebration of love but as the fulfilment of rigid social norms” (Aviram, 1992, p. 187). The engagement takes place in a graveyard, and when Brad and Janet return the church it is being seamlessly transformed from a wedding to a funeral setting, reinforcing the equation of marriage with death, or at least a very close connection between them. Brad and Janet are noticeably oblivious to these highly meaningful surroundings, as they both unquestioningly accept marriage as the next inevitable step. They spout romantic clichés and family values to each other as the sanctioned alternative to any expression of desire.

The narrator emphatically describes Brad and Janet as 'healthy' not only to assert heteronormativity, but to foreshadow that they are about to be infected by Frank's highly contagious exuberant erotomania. Janet represents an easily recognisable stereotype of femininity; she is chaste, demure and submissive, a virgin whose ultimate dream is of becoming a Mrs. She epitomises conservative femininity, a femininity mocked by the 'pink is for girls' bedroom which she occupies in the castle. Her chaste conservatism is quickly revealed as a flimsy veneer by Frank when he seduces her, liberating Janet's desire and assertiveness through his hedonistic energy.

Janet: I'm engaged to Brad just the same as Betty Monroe was to Ralph Hapschatt. But Frank's kisses overwhelmed me with an ecstasy I've never dreamt of before. Hot, burning kisses.

Janet enthusiastically transforms from repressed virgin to unbridled sex maniac without any boundaries to her desire, illustrated through the contrast between the lyrics in the musical numbers "Dammit Janet" and "Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me." After her experience with Frank, Janet's attitude has changed from 'Now we're engaged and I'm so glad/That you met Mom and you know Dad' to 'I've got an itch to scratch... I wanna be dirty/Thrill me, chill me, fulfil me'. "Dammit Janet" is a simple but bouncy duet that evokes a more old-fashioned repetitive style of rock 'n roll suited to the awkwardly naïve sentiments being expressed. In contrast, "Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me" has more complex rhythm that slowly builds a frenzy of excitement as Janet seduces Rocky, and during intercourse with the 'monster' engages in a pansexual fantasy in which she visualises not only Rocky, but also Frank, Brad, Magenta, Riff Raff and Columbia. Janet rejects the structured heteronormative categories of monogamy and gender-appropriate expression of desire in favour of disruptive libidinal excess. Her liberating sexual climax is inextricably linked to the energetic exuberance of the music, which transfers the excitement, and hence the fantasy, to the audience.

Brad represents the corresponding masculine stereotype at the beginning of the film. He is uptight, repressed and sexist, a version of masculinity ironically epitomised by his blue bedroom in the castle. However, Frank's seduction of Brad is an exact repetition of the sex scene between Frank and Janet, which destroys notions of gender and gendered sexuality. Frank uses the same trick on Brad, disguising himself unconvincingly as Janet by merely

donning a wig, but reinforced by his exact imitation of Janet's voice, as he had imitated Brad's earlier. The construction of the disguise points strongly to the power of sound over image. The dialogue between Janet and Frank is replicated exactly in the scene between Brad and Frank, with the same result and the same desire despite gender difference, highlighting the artificiality of gender and its irrelevance to sexual pleasure. Brad abandons his repressed, heterosexual persona and responds enthusiastically to Frank's anarchic libido. Brad moves from being a buttoned-down conservative to wearing high heels and make-up, immersing himself in the pool orgy near the end of the film. However, Brad's version of masculinity is strongly contrasted with the type of masculinity epitomised by Rocky. Where Brad is scrawny and domineering, Rocky is muscular and meek, but Rocky is a scientific creation designed by Frank. Rocky's masculinity is entirely artificial and implies that any gender is merely a construction, the product of a fantasy. This is further evident in Frank's transformation of Brad and Janet to fit his fantasy. Brad and Janet become "wild, untamed things," infected or converted by Frank to celebrate lust, perverse desire and the explosion of heteronormative constraints.

Brad, Janet, Rocky and Columbia are all in the same outfits as Frank for the chorus line of the floor show towards the end of the film (white-face make-up, corsets, boas, fishnets and high heels), after they have been literally and libidinally 'unfrozen' by Frank. It is hard to distinguish between the characters visually. They are no longer superficially identified through traditional sexual or gender categories, but are instead individuated because of their confessional solo verses in "Rose Tint My World."

Rocky: Now the only thing I've come to trust  
Is an orgasmic rush of lust  
Brad: I feel sexy  
What's come over me?  
Woo! Here it comes again  
Janet: I feel released  
Bad times deceased  
My confidence has increased

The conventional boundaries and congealed stereotypes have been ruptured, as is blatantly apparent in this moment of spectacular musical excess. Even Dr Scott joins in, waving his fishnets and high heels from his wheelchair. Although he tries to resist the thrill of abandoning traditional morals and heteronormative categories, he nonetheless illustrates the

camp potential that exists even in highly repressed conformists. Brad, Janet, Columbia and Rocky have converted fully to Frank's beliefs in exuberant erotomania. The 'gospel' of Frank is epitomised by the next musical number, "Don't Dream It, Be It" in which Frank preaches erotic abandon:

Give yourself over to absolute pleasure  
Swim in the warm sins of the flesh  
Erotic nightmares beyond any measure  
And sensual daydreams to treasure forever.

Frank is a charismatic 'spiritual' leader who preaches "absolute pleasure" and celebrates trans and pansexual identity. The orgiastic celebration only ends because Riff Raff murders Frank and evicts Brad, Janet and Dr Scott from the castle. Having been entirely seduced by Frank's hedonistic and transgressive dogma, their involuntary departure seems to be a relegation to abject loneliness rather than a lucky escape. The final scene shows Brad and Janet in a place that is bleak and empty without Frank, whose magnetic performance has dominated the film from his very first moment onscreen.

The opening shot of Frank is a celebration of glam style and dramatic theatricality as he descends into view in an elevator cage, beginning with his tapping foot in four-inch rhinestone heels, moving up his stockinged legs and his satin-caped body, to his elaborately made-up face. It is a shot of pure spectacle that suspends the narrative and carefully controls the spectator's focus in a camp mockery of the classic gendered gaze. Frank immediately destabilises gender signifiers through his appearance and his introductory words, which he sings rather than speaks in "Sweet Transvestite," a musical number of spectacular disruption in which his words and movements are punctuated by forceful electric guitar and drum beats.

Frank: Don't get strung out by the way I look  
Don't judge a book by its cover  
I'm not much of a man by the light of day  
But by night I'm one hell of a lover  
I'm just a sweet transvestite  
From Transexual (sic) Transylvania

He problematises distinct categories such as transvestite and transsexual, claiming to be both and altering their meaning. Transexual is a distant planet, and Frank an alien, a humorous acknowledgement of homophobic marginalisation of trans people, but also a convenient narrative ploy that removes him from the rules and requirements of human society. He flaunts

an image of a sexy and unconstrained eroticism through the music and his glam rock style. Frank is a 1970s Dionysus celebrating ecstasy and indulgence, and an embodiment of desire rather than gender or sexuality, in pursuit of absolute pleasure. Amittai Aviram traces the parallels between Frank and Dionysus in detail, including the significance of Dionysus' role as the god of music, with music in this case "conceived not as perfect order and control... but more as magical power... and intoxicant" (1992, p. 184). Another key similarity with Frank is the resurrection of Dionysus by his followers after his death, although there are numerous other examples of martyred death and resurrection in religion and cultural myth. Richard O'Brien, the creator of the show, had been involved with productions of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Rocky Horror* shows the influence of these musical social commentaries, not least through the demise of the central protagonist at the end. Frank is a Christ-like parody who is reborn through re-viewing, imitation and performance by a community of disciples both inside and outside of the film.

These disciples constitute an audience phenomenon with regard to *Rocky Horror*, and they have arguably received the most extensive critical attention of any aspect of the film<sup>3</sup>. Audience devotion to the film has ensured consistent cinematic screenings for more than thirty years, and an entire participatory cult has grown up around these screenings. Jeffrey Weinstock's discussion of *Rocky* audiences covers the generally unique elements of the film's established reception rituals (2007). The audience takes on a performative role complete with props and costumes, a 'script' of comments shouted out by the audience during the film, deflowering rituals for *Rocky Horror* 'virgins' and the regular presence of a floorshow, whereby a shadow cast act out the film in front of the screen. The repetitive viewing practices that characterise *Rocky Horror* effectively construct communities of faithful followers who can re-immense themselves and participate in the cult through ritual and affiliation, in what Mark Siegel describes as "a mutant form of organized religion" (1980, p. 306). The audience's anchorage in the film is accompanied by an equally important affiliation with other audience members, as "the audience members interact as much with each other as they do with the characters and action on screen" (Austin, 1981, p. 46). Like the film, the reception rituals around *Rocky Horror* tend to mock Brad and Janet's strait-laced

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in *Reading Rocky Horror*, the largest section of the book is devoted to analyses of audiences and reception practices in a variety of articles by Jeffrey Weinstock, Heather and Matthew Levy, Michael Chemers, Nicole Seymour, Liz Locke and Kristina Watkins-Mormino (Weinstock, 2008).

naiveté and venerate Frank's hedonistic ideology and his outrageous style in a camp celebration. As Aviram argues, "The disseminative Dionysian power to release, disrupt, seduce and sway is, unfortunately for Frank, not limited to the personality who locally represents it" (1992, p. 189) Through repetitive, participatory viewing and re-listening, audiences consistently refuse Frank's death and ensure that his 'gospel' survives and is spread no matter how many times he dies on screen.

Frank's death has been read by many critics as a rejection of his extreme lifestyle and an affirmation of heterosexual binary of the classic musical. The ending supposedly reasserts the status quo and destroys the deviant, but the traditional heterosexual coupling as resolution is absent except in perverse and satirised forms. Magenta and Riff Raff are the dominant couple at the end of the film, but they are incestuous aliens and their outfits explicitly exempt them from the role of moral guardians. A garter and stockings are deliberately revealed by Riff Raff's skimpy silver space suit. Brad and Janet are no longer representative of the happy heterosexual union; they have both been permanently changed and are crawling in the dust at the close of the film rather than being conveniently restored to 'normal' society. Marriage is no longer a resolution. It has been satirised throughout the film, through comments such as "She's a good little cook", through the wedding/funeral juxtaposition, and the marriage of Frank and Rocky. The usual resolution of the musical film is explicitly rejected as the narrative impetus of musicals towards a romantic union is not fulfilled in *Rocky Horror*, and indeed cannot be fulfilled due to the inherently anti-normative character of camp that pervades this film.

Death seems like ultimate containment/resolution from a rational perspective in terms of linear narrative, but Frank's death scene is parody not tragedy, filled with camp irony.



Figure 42. Frank-n-Furter and Rocky

The low-angle shot of Rocky carrying Frank's body up the RKO tower is clearly parodic, showing Frank and Rocky's corseted bottoms, evoking laughter rather than tears during their ascension.



Figure 43. Frank-n-Furter and Rocky, rear view

Beyond this clear visual clue to the film's approach to Frank's death, the songs outbalance his death as a narrative event, being more affective and memorable in content and style.

By “lessen[ing] defences” music makes audiences more susceptible to Frank’s infectious beliefs. The songs, and the fantasies they convey, continue and expand beyond the hermetic seal of the film, and the audience, knowing Frank will rise again at the next screening, keep his transgressive doctrine alive between screenings through the music. The infection has spread; removing the cause in the narrative cannot remove the symptoms of libidinal liberation. Brad, Janet, the Criminologist, and the audience are infected, producing a new community created by the music, which ruptures the boundaries and continues after the “resolution.” The filmic narrative cannot contain the camp excess and exuberance unleashed through the music.

## II. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

*Rocky Horror*’s pervasive influence is apparent not only in its enduring cult popularity, but in camp musicals that have been made subsequently. The combination of musical numbers with the anti-normative politics, satire and outrageous performances that characterises *Rocky Horror* as camp is still relatively uncommon. It seems to be a format that is difficult to replicate successfully, probably most evident in the failed follow-up to *Rocky Horror* itself, *Shock Treatment* (Sharman, 1981). One of the most successful films in this regard is the Australian film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994), with a seductive amalgamation of outrageous costumes and drag musical performances, comedy and unconventional gender and sexual politics. However, like *Rocky Horror*, *Priscilla* has received substantial negative attention from critics while enjoying widespread public popularity. The film has been the subject of some heated critical debates in academic and social arenas since its release in 1994, centring on the perceived negativity of its representation of gender, race, and indigeneity in relation to (or often in the absence of) its queer politics.

*Priscilla* is the story of a trio of trans characters who embark on a road trip across the Australian Outback to perform their musical drag act. Anthony/Tick (‘Mitzi’) is a disillusioned drag artist working at a club in Sydney whose life is disrupted by a phone call summoning him to Alice Springs. He persuades his friend Bernadette, a transsexual who has recently lost her husband, to accompany him, as well as another performer from the club,

Adam ('Felicia'). They set off across the outback in an old bus christened Priscilla that Adam manipulates his mother into buying for him, by suggesting that "a trip to the Outback would help me get over this little phase I'm going through." Their journey across Australia brings them into contact with a range of characters, thereby exploring issues of identity, tolerance, homophobia, romance and friendship. When it is revealed that Tick's ex-wife and son are in Alice Springs, the film begins to delve into issues of fatherhood, family and marriage and their implications for those who choose to reject normative categories. Unlike *Rocky Horror*, *Priscilla* offers a happy ending, but one in which the resolution is still a rejection of the normative status quo required by conventional musicals. Instead the film offers a camp affirmation of alternative structures of family and romance through humour and music ranging from Abba to opera.

The film's representation of queerness has been applauded as a liberatory celebration and denigrated as a reactionary caricature. A purely surface reading of the narrative reinforces the transsexual Bernadette's pithy summary of the plot – "Just what this country needs, a cock in a frock on a rock."



Figure 44. A cock in a frock on a rock

These concepts of cock, frock, and rock are all metonymic, mocking the traditional assumptions about the fundamental role of phallogentrism, heteronormative sexuality, gender

binaries and gender appearance in identity. However this is a misleadingly reductive description of the identity politics at play in this film. The multiple signification processes of *Priscilla* require a more integrated analysis in order to effectively assess the film's success in subverting heteronormative patriarchal gender and sexual identities, and in offering instead identitarian mutability. An analysis of the camp quality of the film, its visual composition and, crucially, its use of music suggests that it is ultimately a film which presents a subversive trans construction that functions beyond the traditional heteronormative gender and sexuality binaries and encourages in its perceived audience an open-ended approach to gender politics through musical exuberance in the same way as *Rocky Horror*.

*Priscilla's* resistance to genre categorisation suggests, as does *Rocky Horror*, an intrinsic disregard for conventional taxonomic propensities and discourses, and employs structural genre-blending to reinforce the thematic gender-bending – it is a musical-comedy-road movie-drama-romance featuring trans drag queens with varied and sometimes confused sexual identities. The heterogeneous formal properties of the film parallel the “category crisis” evinced by the film's gender and sexual ideology (Garber, 1992, p. 16). Anthony and Adam could be read as gay drag queens, but their enthusiastic assumption of both traditionally feminine and masculine clothes and/or make-up offstage can be seen to refute this categorical specificity. In contrast to Joe and Jerry, the cross-dressing musicians hiding from the mafia in *Some Like It Hot*, for example, Tick and Adam are not forced into frocks by circumstances, as a means to an end, but instead choose to express facets of their identities in this way, and not only when they are on stage. Bernadette's transsexuality problematises conservative notions of sexuality, and Anthony deliberately resists such categorizations.

**Bernadette:** We've only recently discovered that young Anthony here, bats for both teams.  
**Mitzi:** I do not!  
**Felicia:** Oh, so we're straight?  
**Mitzi:** No.  
**Felicia:** Oh, we're not. So we're a donut puncher, after all?  
**Mitzi:** No.  
**Felicia:** Then what the fuck are we?  
**Mitzi:** I don't fuckin' know.

Similarly, to present maleness metonymically as ‘a cock’, a common occurrence in phallogocentric cultures, is to deny *Priscilla's* endemic rejection of phallic power (the penis literally goes down the drain), and the refusal of the penis as the foundation of masculine

identity. ‘Cock’ is an essentialising devolution into a physiological genital sex binary that effaces somatic gender variance, gender construction, and gender performance, and prohibits both alternatives and transformation of gender identity. As Stella Bruzzi points out in her discussion of the film as anti-misogynistic, “This is not a film overtly concerned with the preservation of the penis or heterosexism, nor is it a text tied to a preoccupation of fixed gender identities” (1997, p. 166). *Priscilla* in fact explores the heterogeneous complexity of masculine identity through friendship, romance, fatherhood, marriage, and public and private performativity. Therefore “a cock in a frock on a rock” must be read with the wry, self-reflexive camp humour with which Bernadette expresses it, conscious of how she and her companions will inevitably be perceived by the members of the conservative Outback communities.

The protagonists implicitly deny an unassailable correlation between masculinity and ‘the cock’. Bernadette’s abilities to swear, fight dirty and drink copiously, traditionally masculine characteristics, are not diminished by the fact that as a post-operative transsexual she no longer possesses a penis<sup>4</sup>. Adam’s penis provides him with none of these capabilities. Both characters choose to displace the penis – literally, through surgery, in Bernadette’s case, and figuratively, through fetish objects, in Adam’s case, most notably through the big lavender bus. Stoller argues that transvestism eroticises the hidden penis, paradoxically reinforcing its primacy through the incongruity between the body and the clothes, which reinforces the ‘real’ sex of the person (in Bruzzi, 1997, p. 162). Some critics have argued that this reinforcement is more powerful in *Priscilla* because of the audience’s awareness of the straight male actors underneath the frocks. But from a camp perspective, the flamboyance of the sartorial performance mocks normative perceptions of ‘appropriateness’ through deliberate exaggeration. The flip-flop dress that Tick dons exemplifies this consciously camp agenda. Anyone would look incongruous in that dress, regardless of the anatomy underneath.

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<sup>4</sup> In Bernadette’s own words, she has had “the chop.”



Figure 45. Excess and frivolity

The excess and frivolity of these outrageously incongruent outfits deliberately work to defer and diffuse phallic preoccupation. A consideration of the casting in relation to the intended effect on mainstream audiences suggests that trans representations could be ameliorated through the use of recognizably straight men rather than encouraging the automatic dismissal of their gender deviation<sup>5</sup>. The perceived safety of straight actors may inhibit their ability to pass for the audience but it simultaneously encourages and enables the gender experiments with which they are engaged through the film.

The conservative inhabitants of the small towns that the protagonists encounter make little effort to understand or accept them as trans individuals, a prejudice based primarily on appearance which mandates a general rejection of all non-normative behaviour. During the visit to Broken Hill, Bernadette's appearance is distinctly unremarkable, conservatively feminine even, compared with Mitzi's flip-flop dress and Felicia's turquoise corset and wig, yet the three are equally dismissed by the locals. The townspeople's vehement rejection of perceived deviance is absolute – "AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME!" They equate all gender disruption with homosexuality, and homosexuality with disease. The pathos of this scene is an integral part of the political facet of the film's camp agenda, an acknowledgement of the

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<sup>5</sup> As can be argued with the casting of Felicity Huffman, "that nice lady from *Desperate Housewives*" in *Transamerica*.

pervasive homophobia that trans people have to endure, countered by the protagonists through even more exaggerated flamboyance, humour and music.

The transphobia of the townspeople that reduces the elaborate intricacies of trans identities to the derogatory term 'Aids fuckers' also sets up the film as an educational vehicle about the complexity of identity. The film deliberately displays the importance not only of sartorial props, but the mannerisms, gestures, vocalisation and behaviour which produce an integrated construction of passable gender identity. Bernadette's daily performance of femininity is entirely different from the masquerade of her drag performance. The drag identity is a mask that Bernadette can remove at will, whereas her transsexual femininity is a permanent manifestation of identity, which she believes expresses her sense of self better than her original biology did. Tick and Adam have fluid gender identities; Adam transmutes easily into Felicia, and Tick into Mitzi. Moreover, their onstage drag performances are as spectacularly excessive as Bernadette's, and far more complex than the mere donning of a frock. This excess is partly the hyperbole inherent in the camp musical genre, and partly deliberate provocation, a characteristic also evident in Adam's everyday interactions with society (such as his drug-fuelled excursion in full drag in Coober Pedy, where he is saved once again from the right-wing locals by Bernadette's pugilistic prowess). There are elements of humour here, but it is not a circus spectacle of clowns; nor is it, as some critics have suggested, a stereotype of the freakishness of homosexuals, meant to reassure the average homophobe (McKee, 2005, p. 21). Instead it is an excess which deliberately distances the characters from the hegemonic order, opening up an area for gender playfulness through a refusal to acknowledge the prescribed binaries of the prescriptive sex binary.

The idea of distance is played out through the physical journey of the protagonists through the Outback. The desert landscape is crucially the site of the ontological development of these characters, in true road movie fashion, and which *Transamerica* borrows heavily from. Tick, Bernadette and Adam are on a physical and simultaneously metaphysical journey, and the Outback provides vital obstacles that contribute to their personal transformations. Crucial to this process of transformation is the interstitial quality of the desert, a place where the precepts and conventions of heteronormativity do not apply. Without the censure of the hegemonic society, alternative and syncretic identities are free to flourish. In contrast to the

freedom of the desert are the menacingly oppressive small towns, filled with stereotypical homophobes. *Priscilla* displays the conventional stylistic and narrative codes of the road movie – the misfits on the road, the long shots showcasing the landscape, the tracking shots of the vehicle in motion, the overcoming of obstacles, and the celebration of freedom. Yet the film far exceeds the conventions of the road movie: the musical numbers, the comedy, and the spectacular excess, and above all else, the subversive and varied representations of gender and sexual identity. It is also a fundamental shift from the generic conventions that the protagonists are neither punished nor recuperated, but return to their ‘deviant’ lifestyles with newfound self-confidence.

The subversive representations of the film extend beyond the purely narrative function of the text. The varied signification processes are partly those inherent in the musical genre, such as the convergence of dialogue, music, and dance in a performative dialectic, but *Priscilla* is far from a conventional Hollywood musical. Most simply, the musical is a film which contains musical performance with a diegetic source. Altman identifies the dual focus of the musical narrative, based primarily upon a sexual binarism, as a conflict that is resolved by the end of the film through a heterosexual union (1987). Clearly this basic sexual dichotomy doesn’t exist within the narrative of *Priscilla*, yet the redemptive nature of the musical survives this displacement: the problems of the protagonists – fatherhood, loneliness, and identity crises – are all resolved by the ABBA finale at the end of the film. However, the resolution blatantly rejects the heteronormativity of the conventional musical in favour of a spectacular queer celebration.

The combination of the structural, the linguistic, the visual, and the aural at work within the musical allows for multiple levels of engagement. For example, the scene in which the protagonists encounter the Aborigines is a useful scene for exploring this. Having broken down on a back road in the Outback, and having been unsuccessful in finding assistance, Tick, Adam, and Bernadette decided to practice their routine. They turn around during this impromptu rehearsal and encounter Alan, an Aboriginal man, who invites them to his camp. There is virtually no verbal conversation throughout the scene, only the blues song being performed when they arrive, and then their spectacular lip-synched performance of “I Will

Survive,” blended with ‘live’ didgeridoo accompaniment and chanting. The Aborigines, who initially seem suspicious, quickly accept the performance and respond with warm enthusiasm.

Brett Farmer’s analysis of the disruptive function of the musical, which details the importance of discursive pluralism in enabling textual negotiation, is useful here (2004). The use of music changes the dynamics of the scene entirely, not least because of the alteration in the mode of address which has the ‘singers’ directly addressing the camera, and hence the audience, breaking the illusion of a self-contained diegetic world. Music offers an alternative mode of engagement. The musical number is a disruption of the cause-and-effect progression of the conventional logocentric narrative precisely because music can exceed the realm of structured and dispassionate rationalism, most often theorised through reference to psychoanalytic concept of the realm of the Symbolic. This is the domain of patriarchal law that privileges language and rigid binary classifications. Music, conversely, belongs in the province of the Imaginary, or as Kristeva designates it, the Semiotic (in Farmer, 2004, p. 84). The deregulated access to fantasy and the affective power of music encourages an emotional rather than logocentric response to the “I Will Survive” scene. This allows for recognition of the musical creation of a community, producing communication on an emotional level, however temporarily.

The interaction between the queens and the Aborigines is predominantly effected through music rather than dialogue. The queens’ appreciation of the blues song being played when they first arrive at the Aborigine camp is reciprocated by the Aborigines’ appreciation of Gloria Gaynor’s disco classic, “I Will Survive,” and the song is adapted to represent both groups through the inclusion of the didgeridoo and non-verbal chanting. The crucial aspect of the aural realm is that it can exist outside the taxonomic imperative that is grounded in the patriarchal linguistic ordinance. This lack of labelled categories enables a space of freedom from traditional gender, sexual and racial prescriptions. Consequently, music opens up a space where an almost anarchic disruption of sexual and gender categories is possible – what could be perceived as presenting a transgender utopia. Transgender identity in this context is not a departure from sexual or gendered characteristics, but instead a rejection of the reductive restrictions of normative definitions. Because of the absence of disjunctive binary categorisation, this utopian space can also be seen to disregard other social designations such

as race, age and class. Thus critics such as Tincknell and Chambers (2002) are not mistaken in identifying the Utopian character of the “I Will Survive” scene, but it is in no way the arbitrary or unmotivated moment that they perceive it to be. It is a carefully constructed reminder of the existence of alternative modes of perception and constitution. The structural criticisms of the scene are centred on the implausibility of the scene in terms of narrative logic, and the lack of character development, especially through the absence of conventional explicatory dialogue. However, while these critics examine the genres of music used in the scene, they do not explore the function of the music itself, and the subversive potential of its performance.

Tincknell and Chambers are not alone in their objections, but other critics have focussed on Indigenous politics rather than the narrative validity of the scene. Pamela Robertson (1997), for example, describes it as problematically positioning the Aborigines as universal signifiers of blackness, spiritually bonded with their natural environment, solely in order to meet the needs of the main (white) characters.<sup>6</sup> However, as Alan McKee has pointed out, these critics are not concerned with how the film may be or has been read, but with absolutes that make the “simple, ontological, statement: the film simply *is* racist and sexist” (2000, p. 7). Marlon Riggs (2006) offers a more nuanced analysis of the Indigenous and queer politics of the film, using it as a case study in his discussion of the intersection of sexuality and indigeneity in a postcolonial context, and as a way of interrogating the unearned privileges of the white queer position. He describes the film as a “site where representations of white queers may be seen to generate a relatively narrow version of queer politics” and he seeks “to problematise the assumption that white queers are only and always oppressed, and that being queer places one outside of enacting oppression against others” (ibid. para. 4). The film becomes a useful tool in illustrating Riggs’ argument about the white-centeredness of mainstream queer theory that sees itself as (nominally) unracialised and ungendered, since “only white people... can afford to see their race as unmarked, as an irrelevant or subordinate category of analysis” (Barnard, 2004, p. 3). Riggs suggests that the scene where the queens are rescued by Alan and taken to the Aboriginal camp is “to some degree appropriative: it reads Indigenous experience through white queer experience” (2006, para. 25), but argues firstly that

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<sup>6</sup> The supposedly neat alignment of marginalised identities resurfaces ten years later in another cultural context in *Transamerica*.

the white queers *are being seen*, but not on their terms. Second, the Indigenous people who watch the performance largely engage on their terms — we are left unsure as to what their laughter at the performance signifies, and we are shown that their reception of the performance suggests a particular Indigenous reading of white queer.

This reading of the scene reflects the usefulness of moving beyond a reductive positive/negative schema for assessing the political engagements of the scene, and the film in general, and considering the Aboriginal characters as agents rather than merely props. The scene constructs a point of intersection between two groups that have traditionally been marginalised or erased by the dominant cultural discourse in Australia. Rather than attempting to equate racial and sexual discrimination, and thus implying that a person can only be black *or* queer, or that those two subject positions are interchangeable, the scene points to the benefits of reciprocal relations and of finding common ground.

Objections to the film have, however, not been limited to discussions of the representation of Aboriginal people, but of Asian, female, and even the gay characters themselves. The film has been denounced as a sexist, racist, and homophobic text that depends on a variety of negative stereotypes and caricatured characters, such as Cynthia, Shirl, and Marion.<sup>7</sup> As Ann-Marie Cook points out, the wide-ranging political foci of these critiques can be seen to “refute the allegation that some characters were singled out for ridicule while others were exempted from it. In fact, where it comes to vulgar humour and stereotypical representations, the film is an equal opportunity offender” (2009, p. 6). The critiques are selective, and as such reflective of their own bias more than the film’s, largely because the writers are mostly not concerned with how the film may be or has been *read*, but with an absolute account of the film with a “simple, ontological, statement: the film simply *is* racist and sexist” (McKee, 2000, p. 7). McKee’s point is that

in order to do ‘politics’, we must always, it seems, retain certainty: about what is good and bad in culture, what is good and bad in representation... [but] the attempts by critical writing to label *Priscilla* as ‘racist’ or ‘misogynistic’ or ‘homophobic’ are sacrificing too much of our understanding of the polysemic nature of texts in order to gain their ‘political’ leverage. (ibid.)

McKee and Cook have both offered detailed and well-substantiated refutations of these critiques of the film that centre on the idea that film is polysemic and that one should not “presume that the depiction of stereotypes connotes endorsement or that films can only

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Barber (1997), Brooks (1999), and Robertson (1997)

engage meaningfully with identity issues by resorting to positive images” (Cook, 2009, p. 6). Instead, Cook argues, “the narrative progression of *Priscilla* encourages viewers to perceive its cruel, crude humour as part of a camp critique of bigotry rather than an endorsement of it” (p. 12). The film uses raunchy and often brutal humour to engage with and generate debate about racism, sexism and homophobia, but is also a reminder of the pitfalls of idealising or homogenising trans identities, or of leaving the gendered and racialised assumptions of queer politics unquestioned.

The final scene of the film, Mitzi and Felicia’s performance of the ABBA song ‘Mama Mia’ is a site of similarly pluralistic signification. Reading it most simply, the scene shows us that they have returned safely to Sydney and that Tick is succeeding in his role as father. A closer analysis that includes an acknowledgement of the function of music uncovers a far more complex meaning. The previously derisive crowd is now comfortingly enthusiastic, reinforcing the idea that social acceptance is predicated on self-knowledge and self-acceptance, but more importantly we are presented with the consummation of Tick and Adam’s relationship in a way that is subtle enough not to offend the average homophobic viewer. They are on stage together, both in drag, performing a carefully choreographed routine of which the climactic moment is when they look into each other’s eyes (shot in medium close-up) and mouth the words, “My, my, how can I resist you?”



Figure 46. “How Can I Resist You?”

Read in the context of the subversive function of music the meaning of this moment becomes clear - it is a queering of the heterosexual coupling in the classic musical that signals the resolution of the conflicts set up within the film. In this film a heterosexual coupling would not resolve the conflicts; the queer one affirms the journey Tick and Adam have been on, the progress they have made towards being comfortable with who they are. Stella Bruzzi describes this as case where “Perversity wins over legitimacy” (1997, p. 158). This final musical moment realizes the subversive potential of the film by refusing heteronormative resolution. The protagonists have attained their individual ideals by incorporating and balancing their pasts, their selves, and their personal relationships in a way that re-imagines the boundaries of gender without sacrificing sexuality.

### III. *Hairspray* and its Remake

I liked drag queens that made people nervous. I'm against family-friendly drag queens...I like being an outlaw. (Waters in Burns, 2008)

The most recent addition to camp musical films is Adam Shankman's 2007 screen adaptation of the Broadway musical *Hairspray*, itself an adaptation of the original John Waters film (1988). Unlike *Rocky Horror*, *Priscilla*, and the original version, this latest reincarnation of *Hairspray* was made specifically for mainstream audiences, and as a result has had its more outrageously camp elements stripped away to ensure mass marketability. The processes of recuperation evident in this film suggest that camp has not yet completely gained the mainstream acceptability anticipated by Hoberman and Rosenbaum in the wake of *Rocky Horror*. However, it also suggests that camp has managed to retain its political foundation and that there is still a need for the political work that camp does. The original Waters film is a camp icon of cult film, but the remake sacrifices the more disruptive elements of camp satire and entirely reconfigures the musical profile of the film in order to ensure its palatability to mainstream audiences.

The original *Hairspray* tells the story of Tracy Turnblad, a chubby Baltimore teenager, who remains at the centre of the film's narrative in the remake. Despite being overweight, Tracy becomes a regular on the Corny Collins show, infuriating the show's reigning queen, Amber Von Tussle, and stealing her boyfriend, Link Larkin. Tracy is hired as a model for the Hefty

Hideaway clothing store, and her hairdo grows with her confidence. When a teacher brands her hairstyle as a "hair-don't," Tracy is sent to a special education class, to which the school tends to relegate black students in a thinly disguised attempt to maintain segregation. Tracy, unlike most of the people around her, is entirely unprejudiced and quickly makes friends with Seaweed based on a shared passion for the latest music and dance moves, particularly those marginalised by mainstream white culture. Her new friends introduce Tracy to Motormouth Maybelle, host of the monthly "Negro Day" on *The Corny Collins Show* and teach Tracy, her friend Penny, and Link the 'cool' dance moves. Penny falls instantly for Seaweed, who is Motormouth Maybelle's son, and the success of this interracial relationship further emphasises the anti-racist moral politics of the film. Tracy uses her newfound fame and popularity to champion racial integration, but a parodic race riot results in Tracy's arrest (in the remake the riot is replaced by a pathos-laden candlelight march). After the governor pardons her, Tracy shows up at the Miss Auto Show competition, wins the crown and integrates the show, although in the remake it is Lil' Inez, Seaweed's younger sister, who wins the Miss Hairspray pageant.

John Waters made his film in 1988, for a budget of only \$2 million. It is a partly autobiographical homage to the invisible presence of black musicians in the mainstream media of Waters' teenage years (L. Yaeger, 2007). It was shot in Baltimore, ensuring the film would feature Waters' signature style: 'the Baltimore aesthetic'. Waters used some of his regular acting troupe, the Dreamlanders, made up of his friends such as Mink Stole, and most importantly his recurring leading lady, Divine. There are no A-list movie stars, although for the first time in a Waters film some recognizable faces appear in cameos - Sonny Bono, Ruth Brown, Jerry Stiller and Debbie Harry. This marks a shift towards mainstream appeal in Waters' work, as does the fact that this is his first 'studio' film, made for New Line Cinema. Despite these steps away from a 'pure' B movie mode of production, the film retains a strong counter-cultural pedigree. The love of bad taste that applied to Waters' earlier work, or of being "beyond taste" as Michael Dare would have it, has been reduced to moments of mild revulsion, but it is still there (1988).

The mise-en-scene, especially performance and costume, carry some signs of the excess that characterized his earlier work. The camp aesthetic is central in the original film, but it is

perhaps ultimately the director himself, and his previous work – *Multiple Maniacs*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*, *Polyester* - that allow the film to be seen as a camp B movie. Waters is notorious as the ‘Pope of Trash’, ‘Prince of Puke’, ‘Sultan of Sleaze’, ‘Baron of Bad Taste’. Waters’ stated authorial intent is deliberately paradoxical: “It’s actually a satire of message movies, but I pitched it as a real one” claims Waters, and yet he also asserts, “I pride myself on the fact that my work has no socially redeeming value” (ibid.) However, the trans politics, embodied primarily through Divine’s performance as Tracy’s mother, give it significant value as an example of anti-normativity appealing to mainstream audiences. For Benschhoff and Griffin the film “exposes and satirises the shallowness of the American Dream” (2004, p. 9). However, the social critique is unconventional in its construction. “There’s certainly something a bit twisted about redoing a 60s style film with an unattractive fat girl in the lead” (Dare, 1988). This use of the unusual in combination with camp politics, satire and aesthetics defines the original film, and music is used to reinforce these elements.

Music is one element that shows a marked shift between the original and the remake. The songs in Waters’ version were sourced from the historical period in which the film is set, carrying with them what Kassabian described as “the immediate threat of history” (2001, p. 3). In this case, the affiliations that the pre-recorded songs brought with them and their cultural connotations worked to evoke political instability and cultural upheaval that marked the 1960s. The songs in the remake have no such ‘associational baggage’, as they are musical numbers that were written for the Broadway show. Lynn Yaeger claims that “sadly, a lot of [Waters’] caca-covered righteous indignation is lost in the current film – partly because this version features the boppy Broadway score instead of the powerful 60s music Waters employs” (2007). Apart from the loss of connection with the socio-historical that occurs through the replacement of the music in the remake, it also erases the black artists featured in the original whose work marked its countercultural valency. The source text – via Broadway – is overtly referenced, but the remake, by supplanting the original songs, loses one of the “essential elements” of the original (Verevis, 2006).

Adam Shankman’s 2007 remake was also made for New Line Cinema but with a much larger budget of \$75 million and, in contrast to Waters’ low-budget Baltimore aesthetic, was shot

with the high production values reminiscent of 1940s MGM musicals using several A-list stars. Waters' trash influence is reduced to a brief cameo as a flasher who Tracy passes on her way to school, and the satire of the original has been converted into conventional comedy. The nostalgic joke has been lost and the visual, aesthetic and musical styles have been updated (Benson-Allott, 2009). Moral issues, however, remain as critical in the remake as they were in the original film, as they are in the films of John Waters in general: "All my movies are very moral. The underdog always wins" (1990). The morals of the original film are inextricably entwined with questions of taste, explored through satire and a camp aesthetic. The remake of *Hairspray* clearly touts itself as a remake of the original, via the 2002 Broadway musical, demonstrated most obviously by use of the same title, but while it retains the values of the original, it ignores, whether wilfully or accidentally, the queer politics, producing instead a more sanitized version of nostalgia. Family values still centre the film, and there is a particular focus on racial tolerance and the rejection of the Western beauty myth, but the camp gender disruption that characterises musicals such as *Rocky Horror* and *Priscilla* is overshadowed rather than foregrounded. In part, this is a result of the film's lessened 'awareness of incongruity' that Babuscio identifies as a defining feature of camp as a political strategy, and in part it can be attributed to the Broadway musical that stand between Shankman's and Waters' versions. However, the most obvious source of the diminished campness of the film is the appearance of John Travolta in Divine's original role as Edna Turnblad, epitomising the 'family friendly drag queen' that Waters objects to.

The two films contrast notably in their depictions of Edna, with the original featuring a drag queen from underground cinema (Divine), and the remake starring a mainstream celebrity in a fat suit and a dress (John Travolta). Travolta's presence in the film clearly increases its marketability, but his intertextual meaning in mainstream culture is markedly removed from camp politics. "If you think about my past, it's been 30 years of playing a macho leading man, so when I was offered it, I said: "Why? Why me? What have I done to deserve that you think I should do this?" (indieLONDON, 2007). Divine (Glenn Milstead), on the other hand, had a well-established sub-cultural reputation as a drag queen, with an on and offscreen persona sustained over many years. It was, however, not the glamorised drag persona stereotypically associated with nightclub performers, but rather one characterised by the grotesque and bizarre: "No-one can call me a drag queen looking like this" (S. Yaeger, 1998).

The initial overweight frumpiness that is foregrounded in the first shots of Divine playing Edna is a major departure from the excessive costuming and make-up of Waters' early films, such as *Pink Flamingos*, and even after her make-over, she is far from glamorous. But while Divine may not always convince as a woman, there is no clear sense of maleness underneath either. She created a space outside of the traditional gender binary, and loosened its assumed relation to sex.

John Travolta on the other hand, is noticeably still John Travolta, albeit in a dress with elaborate prosthetics, and far more attractive than Divine's version of Edna. According to Bell-Metereau "John Travolta hesitated in taking on the role in *Hairspray*. He waited for fourteen months before he finally decided to take the role of a large woman and he had some stipulations about that role. He wanted to look attractive" (in Burns, 2008). The audience is unlikely to forget that it really is a 'real' man underneath, and at the same time his familiarity and celebrity render him entirely non-threatening and enable the mainstream appeal of his trans-sex performance.<sup>8</sup> Travolta could be seen as an example of what Chris Straayer calls 'transsex casting', in which the character is never restored to conventional gender coding within film, and she offers Divine in as an example of this practice (1996, p. 74 -78). Transsex casting can require the transgender performance to work both within the diegesis for the other characters, and for the audience outside the diegesis, but Travolta cannot function in this way outside the diegesis. The focus therefore shifts to the degree that he passes within the diegesis, despite his claim that "once you get into it, you forget it's me" (indieLONDON, 2007). To pass effectively, behaviour, gestures and secondary sex markers need to be both pervasive and persuasive, but Travolta's performance is a somewhat caricatured version of these markers. There are three possible viewer positions in relation to transsex casting: the spectator may learn of it only after viewing the film, may realize during the film, or may already have this knowledge beforehand. With Travolta's fame, only the third position is possible for most audiences of Shankman's film. On the other hand, mainstream audiences of Waters' original film may recognise Divine's transsex casting before, during or after the film, and according to Divine, "I play a woman and a lot of people

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'trans-sex casting' can be seen to apply here, as the trans performance is not part of the diegesis, as is the case with other films such as Linda Hunt in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Weir, 1982) David Carradine in *Sonny Boy* (R. M. Carroll, 1990), all three protagonists of *Girls will be Girls* (Day, 2004), and Cate Blanchett in *I'm Not There* (Haynes, 2007)

believe I am a woman” (S. Yaeger, 1998). Travolta and Divine thus present two markedly divergent examples of trans visibility.

Nonetheless, in contrast with Divine’s performance in the original film, Travolta appears more as an unintentional parody than an anti-normative camp rebel. Despite public fascination with Travolta in a dress, it is a performance that was widely rejected by critics. Lynn Yaeger “was creeped out by John Travolta, whose face had been rendered almost unrecognizable by prosthetics and who speaks in a mannered squeak last heard emanating from Dustin Hoffman’s character in *Tootsie*” (2007). Kate Stables suggests that “Travolta’s cuddly drag act owes more to Mrs Doubtfire than Divine’s loveably freakish original portrayal. When he twirls girlishly around the backyard with Christopher Walken’s uxorious Wilbur Turnblad... he and his indulgent audience are revelling in a mainstream masquerade, without the slightest tinge of transgression” (2007). Travolta’s performance suggests that drag queens are not necessarily subversive. Divine showcases her transgressive excess, evoking her claim in *Female Trouble* that “the world of a heterosexual is a sick and boring life!” (Waters, 1974) . Travolta, on the other hand has explicitly denied any anti-normative elements in the film: “There’s nothing gay in this movie... I’m not playing a gay man” (in Walls, 2007).

A comparison of the first shots of Edna in the original film and the remake exemplify the differences in the two performances. The opening shot of Divine as Edna focuses on her hands as she irons, highlighting what she is doing, her dreary but hard-working job as a laundress, and subsequent shots then pull back to show her very drab appearance.



Figure 47. Edna's hands



Figure 48. Edna Turnblad

In contrast, the first shots of Travolta focus on the 'good job' done with the special effects make-up required for Travolta to 'pass' within the diegesis. The low angle shot of Edna's feet create a strong sense of something of huge spectacular significance arriving, and the subsequent long shot reveals the same overweight housewife, but this time with carefully styled hair and perfect make-up:



Figure 49. Edna's legs



Figure 50. Edna Turnblad

The two portrayals of Edna both highlight the importance of mannerisms and gestures, and of voice in constructing a feminine persona, but Travolta produces a parody of feminine stereotypes, while Divine invents a whole new version of femininity. Travolta could bring a strong camp presence to the film, based on his well-known performances in films like *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, his dance talent presumably the reason behind his casting. However, the irony and humour that Babuscio identifies as central to camp are entirely absent, as is its necessary political edge.



Figure 51. The final dance

The final dance scene is designed to showcase Travolta's dancing and singing talents, even more impressive in an extensive prosthetic fat suit, but this moment of theatricality and excess cannot entirely compensate for the lack of irony which would give it a camp edge.

Audience knowledge of the 'truth' about Edna being Travolta in a fat-suit is different from the audience knowing the 'truth' of Divine's queer persona. In choosing a famously straight man rather than a drag queen to play Edna, Shankman chose to retain the gender variance but without any apparent understanding of the anti-normative gender politics at work in Divine's performance. Travolta himself rejected the frumpy aesthetic, choosing supposedly sexually appealing curves rather than what he described as a 'Hitchcock in a dress' look (indieLONDON, 2007). Nonetheless, there are significant moments of heteronormative disruption in the film. Shankman adds marital problems between Edna and Wilbur to the plot, strife which is precipitated by Velma's attempted seduction of Wilbur, and Velma's failure suggests John Travolta in a fat-suit and dress is desirable, even more so than Michelle Pfeiffer's Velma, as is often the case in cross-dressing comedies. Unlike the progress narratives of these comedies, Travolta's caricatured feminine persona is not subject to the conventional de-wigging and reconstitutive ending, and while the audience may well have enough extra-diegetic knowledge of Travolta that they cannot overlook the 'true' sex underneath, they are also unlikely to forget the trans image of John Travolta as woman.

Audience knowledge and expectations regarding Divine are likely to be scant in mainstream audiences, but cult film audiences would have an intertextually informed knowledge of Divine's anti-normative excess. Familiarity with Divine's perverse sex scenes and taboo-breaking moments in earlier films, such as eating dog faeces in *Pink Flamingos*, or fantasising about Jesus while performing anal sex with a rosary in *Multiple Maniacs*, creates an audience expectation around Divine that is markedly different from that around Travolta. Waters, in directing these perverse and excessive performances, "wanted him to be the Godzilla of drag queens and other drag queens to run in tears," what Pat Moran describes as a "drag terrorist" (in S. Yaeger, 1998). The effectiveness of Divine's camp performance in *Hairspray* is well-illustrated by the contrast with her straight performance as Arvin Hodgepile, the station manager; Divine is far more magnetic as Edna than as Arvin, who seems very dull in comparison.

The casting of Divine queers the working-class nuclear family, whereas in the remake, any implied homosexuality in the relationship between Travolta and Walken's characters is deliberately effaced by manifesting their marriage through romantic love rather than sexual desire. The resolution of the film also emphasises the heterosexual union between Tracy and Link that is typical to conventional musicals. "In our notionally liberal but increasingly homophobic culture, the only frisson comes from the shocking sight of leanly handsome teen heart-throb Link enthusiastically smooching with tubby Tracy. In a world where fat is the new black, that really is a fairytale ending" (Stables, 2007, p. 58). Shankman's film modernizes the look of the musical, but returns to MGM-style staging of the musical numbers and to the traditional heterosexual coupling for resolution. However, as with the cross-dressing comedies, the heterosexual coupling offers reassurance through the overt re-establishment of the status quo, and in so doing, allows the trans performance, which the film foregrounds in the final exuberant musical number.

The musical trans films are characterised in general by this exuberance, and all of them offer a trans spectacle of disruptive excess to some degree. While Shankman's film, and Travolta's performance in it, are problematic in many ways, they nonetheless encourage spectators to

revel in the trans performance. The concessions the film makes in terms of camp provide it with a widespread and more mainstream palatability than the other films. The use of music adds an important dimension to the mainstream experience of trans characters, in that it extends the cinematic presence beyond visibility, using the music to engage audiences. The aural and visual levels combine in the musical spectacles to maximise audiences' engagement with and enjoyment of the musical trans fantasy.

# Chapter 8:

## Conclusion

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Whether frightening or funny, male, female, or something deliciously in-between, it seems obvious that gender-bending films will always be around to challenge our notions of sexuality and sexual identity. (RuPaul in Burns, 2008)

The films discussed in this project are prominent cultural artefacts that illustrate particular social, political, and historical moments in systems of gender praxis through the ways in which they imagine trans identities and experiences. They are popular films, with mainstream audiences, which nonetheless offer unexpected openings within and departures from heteronormative routines. The enduring presence of trans characters and narratives in these films attests to a deep-seated interest in exploring the possibilities and limitations of stepping outside the lines of the dominant sex/gender/sexual paradigm. In itself this interest challenges the supposed homogeneity of the hegemonic gender paradigm. For most audiences, gender variance is largely foreign to their own experience, but the box office demonstrates that they still delight in the carnivalesque release from normative regulations. These films reveal naturalised gender boundaries and the ways culture requires them to be observed, but they are also a persistent reminder that boundaries are permeable. They predominantly provide escapism for spectators, an ‘imagine if’ fiction, but for some spectators, these films will resonate with an aspect of their own identity or experience. They can make spectators aware of the prescriptions and assumptions of the heteronormative binary, but also of other possibilities, other ways of living within or without that binary, and of life between and beyond its polarised terms. Crucially, these interstitial spaces can be vicariously traversed in safety: alternate genders can be explored, along with the problems and advantages perceived to be attached to those genders.

The popularity of mainstream trans films with audiences does not reduce the negative responses they often receive from critics, and can in fact actively contribute to their censure. The traps that Jeffrey Weeks (2008) has outlined in relation to sexuality studies are evident in many of these critical responses, creating analogously limited views of the diversity and potential of trans films. Firstly, it is tempting to assume that developments in the

representational domain are inevitable and progressive, but the different approaches to recuperating transgression that are apparent in, for example, *Some Like It Hot* in 1959 and *Tootsie* in 1982 make it clear that alterations will not necessarily be for the better; *Tootsie* attempts a far greater degree of containment than does its generic antecedent. The second trap is the moral condemnation of these films as ‘deviant’ indicators of social decay, a condemnation that is based in nostalgia for a mythical time of gender stability, and that is most evident in the moral panics of conservative detractors. Such critiques reveal the potential of these films to provoke anxiety, and suggest that mainstream representations are less conformist than they appear to the left-wing critics who condemn them on the grounds of wanting something more subversive. It is telling that the representations that are denounced as too disturbing by the right are simultaneously rejected as hegemonic tools by the left, but it is also perhaps why they appeal to so broad an audience.

The wide range of critical responses to *Mrs. Doubtfire*, by far the most successful trans film at the box office, illustrates the reactionary trap and should stand as a reminder of the disruptive significance of the purportedly normative trans imaginings of mainstream films. While trans critics have disparaged the film for its overt affirmation of gender and sexual stereotypes and “silly clichés” (Freeman, 2003), religious reviewers have condemned the same material as a “dangerous” promotion of gender-bending and homosexuality, “push[ing] Middle America further toward the acceptance of cross-dressing” (Willis, 2001). The influential Movieguide of the Christian Film and Television Commission rated the film as -2 on their acceptability scale<sup>1</sup>, advising “extreme caution” because “‘drag’ and a homosexual lifestyle [are] portrayed as natural... [in a] somewhat funny movie if you enjoy transvestite jokes, sexual innuendo, foul language” and are prepared to disregard the admonitions of the Bible against cross-dressing (1993). These widely divergent responses to the film illustrate the disruptive capacity that inheres even in the most mainstream of trans films – and, combined with their evident popularity, provide a compelling argument against dismissing or disregarding them as straightforward mechanisms of heteronormative reinscription.

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<sup>1</sup> The highest score is +4 (‘exemplary’) and the lowest score is -4 (‘abhorrent’). *Transamerica*, in a review entitled “Why transsexualism is evil and misguided,” received a -4 rating and “Hohoho, MM, Abab” labels, which stand for “very strong homosexual worldview, strong immorality, [and] anti-biblical content” (Christian Film and Television Guide, 2005).

The overt normativity that frames cinematic gender transgressions has of course prompted criticism from many trans activists and theorists. The problematic use of stereotyped characters and formulaic narratives and motifs has led many of these critics into Weeks' third trap of concentrating exclusively on what has *not changed*, on the persistent prejudices and inequalities, and the normative continuity. However, many of these films show that while paradigms of patriarchal and heterosexist power remain intact, the minor transformations do matter, as do the fractures, slippages and gaps that these films produce. The historical view enabled by genre analysis reveals the cumulative and continuing power of these disruptive moments as much as it reveals the entrenched ideologies that still deserve critique and political opposition. Avoiding the continuist trap includes a recognition of the primary value of making normative gender boundaries and their variant possibilities visible, and keeping them visible. Denaturalising and defamiliarising these boundaries is crucial to the struggle against transphobia and heterosexism and for wider recognition and appreciation of trans people. On the core level of achieving conspicuousness, even the most derogatory of depictions reveal the regulatory conditions of the gender binary and play a part in preventing the erasure, through invisibility, of gender variance. This broader functionality should not be overlooked when analysing the particular inaccuracies, political problems and degree of heteronormative authority in trans film fictions.

A corollary of the continuist trap that Weeks identifies is the tendency to consider all popular trans films, particularly within the comedy and horror genres, as homogeneous and monolithic. However, closer examination of the films in a particular group reveals the significant differences that occur between films, as well as the disruptive fissures that exist within films. The recognisable iconographic, narrative and structural generic conventions that are available are not uniformly repeated, and even films which reproduce stock elements can effect pivotal ideological adjustments through their specific arrangement. Alterations and innovations occur within genres, often in conjunction with social and political shifts, demonstrating the complex interaction between text and context. Film operates as a site of affirmation, contestation and negotiation of dominant ideologies, and different genres and their varied constituents evince different values, understandings and preoccupations regarding those ideologies, which range from bewilderment in the face of the sartorial divide (in the

comedies) to attempts to prevent transphobic violence (in the dramas). Even if one genre were to present a concrete and circumscribed conception of trans identity that is stable or knowable, the variation across genres that offer varied and often conflicting representations would provide a queer destabilisation of assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality.

The films of any one genre do not depict a uniform attitude towards heteronormativity, and there are crucial variations in the degree to which they attempt to recuperate gender transgression in order to comply with heterosexual reinstatement. Overtly subversive films deliberately refuse recuperation, but those that appear to resubmit to heteronormative regulations on some level nonetheless reveal cracks in the ideological surface. They open up interstitial spaces within the binary paradigm that cannot necessarily be resealed and definitely cannot be erased. The more conservative films may emphasise the dangerous consequences of gender variance, but at the same time they ironically provide definitive evidence that transgression is possible and the most forceful triumph of heteronormativity cannot erase all traces of that potential. For this reason, the prevailing tendency to categorise these films as either positive or negative limits understanding of their political value, through “the fallacious notions that positive images are the only acceptable way to represent marginalised groups; that positive images are the only means by which a film can engage meaningfully with diversity issues and that the mere *depiction* of a negative stereotype automatically constitutes an *endorsement* of it” (Cook, 2009, p. 20). Even predominantly pejorative representation should be seen as making a contribution to the exposure of and engagement with heteronormative boundaries and requirements.

By stepping over normative boundaries, trans films raise questions about the nature and stability of social power and gender hierarchies. The divergent effects intended by the mobilisation of gender variance echo these questions on the level of genre. That a trans protagonist can be funny, shocking, tragic or joyous depending on the function and narrative positioning of that character points to the complicated feelings encompassed within mainstream audiences’ fascination with gender transgression. The disproportionately high ratio of mtf protagonists also indicates that there is a patriarchal dimension to these preoccupations, partly because on an industrial level it reflects the dominance of male directors in Hollywood, but also because on an ideological level it indicates a critical interest

in the ways that male privilege functions and is sustained. The perceived disempowerment in mtf transgression can be shaped as threatening, revealing the connection between transphobic panic and the loss of patriarchal power. When that transgression is fashioned as comedy, films reveal and utilise an associated curiosity around the rules of gender regulation and the ways in which they underpin patriarchy. Underlying both generic models, as well as the other two genres discussed in this project, are questions about the stability of patriarchal heteronormativity and the modes in which its boundaries are maintained, whether those questions stem from a desire to strengthen, explore or eradicate such boundaries, depending on the ethical and political commitments of each film.

By foregrounding these questions and concerns, trans films offer an incitement to discourse, and function as a source of knowledge, but also enable (and sometimes even promote) counter-discourses. The ubiquity, accessibility and extensive reach of mainstream films, as with other dominant forms of mass media, have established them as a particularly powerful authority, undoubtedly setting them in a position of privilege over other sources, including medical, academic and activist discourses for the average spectator. These films may in fact be the only source of knowledge about trans identities and issues for many people, apart from other mass media platforms such as talk shows, which Joshua Gamson calls the “prime purveyors of public visibility of sex and gender non-conformity” (1998, p. 200). Most of the mainstream trans films do not attempt or purport to be documentary, and the information that they provide to viewers varies enormously in terms of accuracy, bias and relevance with regard to real world experiences and identities of trans people. Much of the knowledge is undoubtedly far less useful than it could be were the focus less firmly on entertainment and the financial imperative to cater to audiences’ expectations and understandings. On the other hand, the popularity of these films would inevitably suffer if these films were perceived as overtly didactic rather than diverting and the visibility they provide and the possibilities they demonstrate would be diminished. Perhaps filmmakers will find ways to introduce more nuanced and insightful trans representations through the established generic models that audiences recognise and respond to.

Apart from the ideological and generic factors which shape trans representations, the medium itself involves specific constraints and opportunities for representing gender variance. The

visual nature of film as a representational apparatus inevitably encodes transgression primarily in the image, although sound (primarily the voice and music) plays a crucial role. The medium utilises the exterior elements of gender presentation such as clothing, hair, body shape, expressions and gestures to create legible transgression, persuasive trans figures, and deliberately unintelligible appearances. As Casper and Moore observe,

from a very young age, human beings are trained to visually process and meticulously read bodies – our own and others – for social cues about love, beauty, status and identity. Bodies are socially constructed within social orders, including patterns of dominance and submission along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, age and physical normativity... As such, the visualized body is powerfully symbolic in a multitude of ways and across often quite-contested domains

The mainstream trans films discussed in this project represent one of those contested domains of gender intelligibility. The extratextual spectator knowledge about the celebrity personas of some actors affects the level of intelligibility and type of symbolism, as well as the degree to which the transgression is enacted. Audiences that would ordinarily be discomforted at the romantic depiction of two men dancing together are far more accepting when it is Christopher Walken and John Travolta in a fat suit and a dress in *Hairspray*. Even transphobic spectators are likely to feel affection rather than fear or disgust when watching Martin Lawrence waddle about as Big Momma in *Big Momma's House*. While many critics have argued that this knowledge of the 'true' sex and sexuality of the star neutralises any subversive potential in the trans performance, these gender-crossing celebrities also play a crucial part in overcoming the unfamiliarity and unease around gender transgression and making it acceptable to mainstream audiences. This tolerance may be strongly or exclusively tied to the specific celebrity in that particular filmic moment, but the potential is also there for knock-on or incremental effects: if hypermasculine action heroes like Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes are comfortable being drag queens in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, it is possible that at least some spectators will see drag in a more positive light. The scattered history and recent upsurge in the number of black film stars playing trans characters offers an intriguing area of intersection between race, gender and sexuality. This is a useful subject for analysis in its own right, one that unfortunately exceeded the limits of this project, but which I intend to develop in future research.

The disconnectedness of Hollywood from the realities of everyday life is frequently cause for criticism, but it is also one of its strongest advantages. This is because, as Cook points out,

“virtual worlds have the capacity to deal with actual issues without being confined to the same constraints as the real world” (2010, p. 19). Hollywood’s reputation as the ‘dream factory’ places it in an ideal position to explore possibilities, expose and disregard boundaries, and grant vicarious access to alternate experiences, periods and moments, both factual and imaginary. While Hollywood films often collaborate in the perpetuation and validation of normative ideologies, they are also a space of ludic freedom, not subject to the same rules or bound by the same practicalities as real life. The construction of a convincing trans appearance, while subject to intense examination through the intimacy of the camera, is also enabled through the benefits of a large budget, extensive preparation time, and dedicated teams of hair, make-up, prosthetic, and wardrobe specialists. Lighting, soft focus and editing can be manipulated to conceal any slips or impediments to passing, or likewise engineered deliberately to achieve an unintelligible gender. As techniques and technologies have evolved, expectations regarding the believability of a trans character’s appearance have escalated, culminating most recently in the vaunted race and gender-crossing disguises of Marlon and Shawn Wayans in *White Chicks*. It is no longer sufficient for a woman simply to don a tuxedo and a moustache, or for a man a dress and wig. Increasing spectatorial awareness of the complex network of physical, behavioural and sartorial cues that produce a coherent gender presentation necessitate more elaborate constructions of gender to produce credible trans depictions. This is undoubtedly linked as well to real world shifts in the conventions of gender presentation, including hairstyles, clothing and adornment.

In screening gender variance, mainstream films both conceal and reveal the constructedness of gender, contained within the safety and the impenetrability of the screen itself. In order to be effective the gender transgression must be visible on some level but the process of construction is rarely demystified entirely. Films usually reveal only as much of this process as they need to for the narrative to make sense and for the jokes, shocks or pathos to be effective. Nonetheless, they create awareness of this construction process and the possibility of altering or subverting it, conceivably undermining to some extent the sense of certainty with which spectators make dichotomous gender attributions. As is the case in real life, the genitals, perceived as the ultimate and infallible indicator of sex-gender, are not usually available for assessment, rarely being depicted explicitly in mainstreams films. Other physical markers and cues in clothing, mannerisms, and behaviour that are traditionally recognised as gendered therefore function as cultural genitals, buttressed by privileged

narrative and extratextual information, to expose the gap in the normative binary alignment of sex-gender. At the same time, some of the films attempt to reassert an innate connection through trans characters' struggles to adapt to gendered professions and domestic duties, as well as master mysterious cosmetic and sartorial practices. The ambiguity resulting from these concurrent processes produces ideological fissures that are unlikely to be resealed.

Central to popular trans films are the characters themselves, and the ways that audiences are encouraged to engage with and respond to them. They embody the possibilities of gender variance that these films portray, and they make manifest the processes of transgression. The degree of allegiance and empathy spectators feel for a trans character will affect their reactions to gender variance, in conjunction with the generic and narrative cues laid down by the film. If audiences are able to imagine being a particular character, the film may converge with the work of political activists to raise awareness around trans issues and increase respect for trans people in real life. It is unlikely many of the popular trans films will produce such straightforward improvements, but they may still operate gradually and incrementally to normalise gender variance. The dramas and musical films are most likely to succeed in this regard, because of the level of empathy they encourage and/or the amount of pleasure they provide. However, even when spectators are laughing at comic protagonists or flinching from the psychopathic ones, the trans characters still effectively transform gender variance from an abstract or unknown concept into a visible persona, a plausible possibility.

As discussed in Chapter 3, visibility is a highly contentious issue. Visibility carries both risks and benefits, and the context and purpose of visibility are both highly significant. It can lead to physical danger, as well as to stereotyping and demeaning or derogatory assumptions and generalisations. On the other hand, it can raise awareness and understanding, validate and recuperate erased or marginalised identities. In the same way that these trans films allow mainstream audiences to experience gender transgression vicariously, they allow trans people a kind of vicarious visibility that is distinct from their level of visibility/invisibility in real life. Invisibility can be a tool for refusing society's insistence on legible gender when deployed from a queer position, but more often invisibility has been an instrument of oppression in the hands of the dominant group. By choosing who gets to be visible and who does not, the dominant social group maintains its normativity and privileges. Making non-

normative identities invisible, refusing to recognise them, is a key tool in oppression and the denial of rights. Choosing to be invisible is substantially different from being forced to be invisible, just as being marked as Other differs from choosing to mark oneself as Other.

Trying to suggest that there is a neat and unified answer to these tensions regarding visibility would be antithetical to queer tenets of processuality and destabilisation. The films can be most useful when not seen in absolute terms as positive or negative, but instead function as a middle ground that keeps opening questions about naturalised and invisible heteropatriarchal normativity. As such they allow, not a magic universal solution or a quick fix, but rather incremental shifts in understanding and attitude. They also negotiate the contested political ground of visibility by allowing trans identities to be visible on a cultural level without requiring it on a personal level. Finally, the varying forms which that cultural visibility takes across genres ensure that the range of possible identities remains open.

The varied elements and operations of identity that are present in popular trans films signal their potential contribution to making gender variance visible, comprehensible, and familiar to mainstream audiences. It is tempting to focus only on the stereotypes that are depicted and the normative ideologies that are replicated in many of these films, but it is important to consider what Hollywood enables, not just what it prohibits. The enduring popularity and extensive reach of these films, and the persistent presence of trans narratives highlight the need to investigate rather than dismiss these films and the ways in which they structure and (re)produce knowledge. As John Waters points out,

Cross-dressing has been around in movies because it's been around in real life for a hundred years. It's always been used for humour. It's always been used for obsession. It's always been used to frighten people. And it's always made some people feel endeared about the people that do it. (in Burns, 2008)

Waters' point about the appeal of these characters, regardless of genre, implies that there is positive potential even in the films where the protagonist is the object of laughter and/ or curiosity and gender variance is appropriated for its narrative value.

Most of these Hollywood genre films invoke heteronormative stereotypes and attempt some degree of recuperation and containment on a narrative level, in their effort to reassert heteronormativity, or at least to appear to be doing so. However, even when the carnivalesque moments of subversion and ludic exuberance are temporary, there is an intrinsic value in mainstream audiences' indulgence in and of gender transgression in film. Simply to assess

these films as either positive or negative ignores the complexity and unpredictability of both the texts themselves and audiences' responses to them. They play a pivotal role in the cultural production and circulation of meaning, and if audiences were only interested in seeing heteronormativity celebrated, there would be no reason for films to introduce the possibility of transgression. These films do pander to popular tastes by indulging the widespread fascination with gender variance and the limits of intelligibility, providing a form of sanctioned disruption and exploration of liminality. In the process they expose the naturalised beliefs around sex, gender and sexuality, and defamiliarise the assumptions that underpin the intelligibility of gender, whether intentionally or not. Popular trans films are not simply instruments of regulatory repression, but sites of ideological negotiation that can never completely reseal the fractures they expose, or control the possibilities that they enable audiences to imagine.

## Appendix 1:

# Total Gross Earnings for Trans Films\*

\*Where data is available

Rank	Film	Year	United States	Worldwide
1	<i>Mrs Doubtfire</i>	1993	\$219,195,243	\$441,286,195
2	<i>Tootsie</i>	1982	\$177,200,000	N/A
3	<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>	1991	\$130,742,922	\$272,742,922
4	<i>The Nutty Professor</i>	1996	\$128,814,019	\$273,961,019
5	<i>The Birdcage</i>	1996	\$124,060,553	\$185,260,553
6	<i>The Nutty Professor II</i>	2000	\$123,309,890	\$166,339,890
7	<i>Mulan</i>	1998	\$120,618,403	\$304,320,254
8	<i>Hairspray</i>	2007	\$118,871,849	\$202,548,575
9	<i>Big Momma's House</i>	2000	\$117,559,438	\$173,959,438
10	<i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i>	1975	\$112,892,319	N/A
11	<i>Shakespeare in Love</i>	1998	\$100,241,322	\$289,317,794
12	<i>Norbit</i>	2007	\$95,323,496	\$159,313,561
13	<i>Madea Goes to Jail</i>	2009	\$90,485,233	N/A
14	<i>White Chicks</i>	2004	\$70,831,760	\$113,086,475
15	<i>Big Momma's House 2</i>	2006	\$70,165,972	\$138,259,062
16	<i>Madea's Family Reunion</i>	2006	\$63,257,940	\$63,308,879
17	<i>The Crying Game</i>	1992	\$62,548,947	N/A
18	<i>I Can Do Bad All by Myself</i>	2009	\$51,697,449	N/A
19	<i>Psycho</i>	1960	\$50,000,000	N/A
20	<i>Madea's Big, Happy Family</i>	2011	\$42,906,332	N/A
21	<i>Meet the Browns</i>	2008	\$41,939,392	N/A
22	<i>Yentl</i>	1983	\$40,218,899	N/A
23	<i>Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son</i>	2011	\$37,346,471	\$80,441,006
24	<i>Junior</i>	1994	\$36,763,355	\$108,431,355
25	<i>To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar</i>	1995	\$36,474,193	\$47,774,193
26	<i>All of Me</i>	1984	\$36,403,064	N/A
27	<i>The Hot Chick</i>	2002	\$35,081,594	\$54,639,553
28	<i>She's the Man</i>	2006	\$33,741,133	\$57,194,667
29	<i>Dressed to Kill</i>	1980	\$31,899,000	N/A
30	<i>Victor/Victoria</i>	1982	\$28,215,453	N/A
31	<i>Midnight in the Garden of Good &amp; Evil</i>	1997	\$25,105,255	N/A
32	<i>Some Like it Hot</i>	1959	\$25,000,000	N/A
33	<i>Psycho</i>	1998	\$21,456,130	\$37,141,130
34	<i>Raising Cain</i>	1992	\$21,370,057	\$37,170,057
35	<i>Prelude to a Kiss</i>	1992	\$20,006,730	\$22,697,691

36	<i>Color of Night</i>	1994	\$19,726,050	N/A
37	<i>Kevin and Perry Go Large</i>	2000	\$16,450,422	N/A
38	<i>Switch</i>	1991	\$15,545,943	N/A
39	<i>Ladybugs</i>	1992	\$14,796,494	N/A
40	<i>Juwanna Mann</i>	2002	\$13,670,733	\$13,802,599
41	<i>The Associate</i>	1996	\$12,844,057	N/A
42	<i>Boys Don't Cry</i>	1999	\$11,540,607	N/A
43	<i>Just One of the Guys</i>	1985	\$11,528,900	N/A
44	<i>The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert</i>	1994	\$11,220,670	N/A
45	<i>Nuns on the Run</i>	1990	\$10,959,015	N/A
46	<i>The Year of Living Dangerously</i>	1982	\$10,278,575	N/A
47	<i>Sorority Boys</i>	2002	\$10,200,032	\$12,517,488
48	<i>Transamerica</i>	2005	\$9,015,303	\$15,151,744
49	<i>Connie and Carla</i>	2004	\$8,085,771	\$11,341,016
50	<i>Taking Woodstock</i>	2009	\$7,443,000	\$9,975,737
51	<i>Zerophilia</i>	2005	\$7,013,000	N/A
52	<i>Hairspray</i>	1988	\$6,671,108	N/A
53	<i>Ed Wood</i>	1994	\$5,887,457	\$6,671,108
54	<i>Orlando</i>	1993	\$5,319,445	N/A
55	<i>Torch Song Trilogy</i>	1998	\$4,865,997	N/A
56	<i>Flawless</i>	1999	\$4,488,529	N/A
57	<i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i>	2001	\$3,067,312	\$3,664,200
58	<i>Myra Breckinridge</i>	1970	\$3,000,000	N/A
59	<i>Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde</i>	1995	\$2,763,020	N/A
60	<i>Kinky Boots</i>	2006	\$1,822,428	\$9,950,133
61	<i>M. Butterfly</i>	1993	\$1,498,795	N/A
62	<i>Cherry Falls</i>	2000	\$1,336,998	N/A
63	<i>Velvet Goldmine</i>	1998	\$1,053,788	N/A
64	<i>Breakfast on Pluto</i>	2005	\$828,699	\$3,942,254
65	<i>The Ballad of Little Jo</i>	1993	\$543,091	N/A
66	<i>The Triumph of Love</i>	2002	\$447,267	N/A
67	<i>Different for Girls</i>	1997	\$300,645	N/A
68	<i>Willy/Milly</i>	1986	\$277,405	N/A
69	<i>Girls Will Be Girls</i>	2003	\$147,235	N/A
70	<i>The Adventures of Sebastian Cole</i>	1998	\$100,041	N/A
71	<i>All the Queen's Men</i>	2002	\$23,662	N/A
72	<i>It's a Boy Girl Thing</i>	2006	\$848	\$7,385,586
	<b>Total</b>		<b>\$2,774,071,356</b>	

Sources: ("Comedy - Body Switch Movies at the Box Office - Box Office Mojo," 2011; "Cross Dressing / Gender Bending Movies at the Box Office - Box Office Mojo," 2011)

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