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Transgender Representation in Mainstream Film: Tropes and Stereotypes from the 1990s to Today

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Introduction

When discussing transgender representation there is a lot of difficulty in ascertaining what exactly is and is not “representation”. Due to the long history of queer people living on the margins, away from traditional art creation and scholarship, a lot of mainstream work containing queer topics or themes was made without or with very few contributions from queer people themselves. Therefore, it often included inaccuracies and stereotypes based on cisgender and heterosexual assumptions, or very heavily coded language, whether visual or otherwise, in the effort to avoid censorship. Transgender themes could then be seen as any theme that has to do with transgressing gender norms, alternate forms of gender expression and gender exploration. While these elements are not necessarily unique to transgender people, in media they can often be a shorthand filmmakers employ to signify a queer experience.

In this thesis, I will be basing my assessments not only on how and what a piece of media intends to represent but also on what possible effects it has on the community. Films such as *Psycho* (1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming sections of this thesis, explicitly contend with the idea that they represent transgender people. However, the visual and narrative framing of their respective villains follows many conventions and stereotypes associated with gender-variant people, and therefore those depictions become synonymous with them. Because of this, they are relevant, and often necessary, in discussing the way transgender people are depicted on the silver screen.

Transgender themes can be expressed in films through both form and content. Many hints and clues can be shown through the placement and movement of the camera, or the music choice a filmmaker makes. However, I will be mainly focusing on the content of films, such as the characterisation of characters or the storyline the narrative focuses on. I will be using those analyses to recognise and discuss the narrative tropes that are employed when representing transgender people. When relevant though, close readings of scenes will be included to strengthen an argument and highlight the visuality of film as a medium.

The discussion of tropes and stereotypes will be based on Stuart Hall’s work in the field of the representation of marginalised people in the wider culture. The understanding of

representation as the manifestation of societal powers will be crucial in understanding those depictions within their larger societal context and the effects they may have both on the audiences who consume them, and the communities depicted. The topic of representation has become a very important one in recent times and I hope that with this thesis I will be able to contribute something to the conversation. This topic is not in any way new, and so I will be drawing from the works of writers such as Julia Serano and Jack Halberstam to strengthen my analysis of tropes and stereotypes applied to transgender people in popular film, and hopefully highlight some trends and similarities in those depictions.

I believe that this topic, and others adjacent to it are becoming even more important in a political climate that is increasingly hostile to queer ways of life. In a world where transgender people are increasingly seen as a threat to other groups and even civilisation itself, this discussion could help us understand where some of these ideas may be coming from thus suggest how we can combat them.

Early Understandings of Queer People

The history of transgender representation in media is necessarily linked to the history of our understanding of transgender issues themselves. Over the years, the vocabulary and social attitudes around trans issues have shifted, and this has been in some ways reflected in cinema. Words like transvestite and transsexual, are now used much less and can be considered offensive to some, however, only a few decades ago, they routinely appeared in media that touched on the topic of transgender people.

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the representation of transgender people in more recent popular cinema, it is important to look at films of the past that serve as ancestors to those explored later in this thesis. While gender diversity has been present in many different cultures throughout time, due to the dominance of Western countries within the mainstream world cinema, this discussion will be mainly limited to films and understandings of gender present in dominant cultures in Europe and North America.

Transgender-adjacent themes can be found even back in the early days of cinema in the form of cross-dressing. While nowadays we make distinctions between people who dress in

gender nonconforming ways and transgender people, in the early 20th century, this distinction was not widespread. Transgender people were often lumped into the same category as cross-dressers and same-gender attracted people, and all those categories were often understood as being the same. Some of those ideas are reflected in the writings of contemporary theorists and philosophers. For example, the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger (1880-1903) saw homosexuals as men who physically approximated women and women who physically approximated men (Meyerowitz 24-25). The German lawyer and writer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs also thought of himself and other gay men as a “female soul[s] enclosed within a male body” (Stryker 52-53).

Due to this, a lot of early queer representation in film exists in the intersection of cross-dressing, gay and trans representation. It would be impossible to untangle them from one another, so in those early movies, I will be mainly focusing on the transgender interpretations of these codes, however, this does not mean that it is the only or even the most relevant interpretation. In later sections, we will explore more explicit representations of transgender people, however, it is important to remember that even these early depictions may have an impact on the films that come later.

Silent Film

In the era of silent movies, cross-dressing seems to mainly appear in comedies and was used as a joke with little queer subtext. Men dressing in women’s clothing could be used for a quick laugh with little explanation needed, due to the rigid gender roles of the time. In *A Woman* (1915), Charlie Chaplin shaves off his moustache and dons a dress and other stereotypically feminine clothing of the time, eliciting immediate laughter from another character, and later making two male characters express interest in him. However, aside from this, Charlie Chaplin’s character is very much explicitly cisgender and heterosexual, showing romantic interest in women and only cross-dressing as a means of disguise. This is an early trope that will continue appearing in the history of transgender-coded cinema – the cross-dressing in crisis (Miller 56).

However, there are other ways cross-dressing is employed too. A magical seed which has the power to transform a man into a woman and vice versa is featured in *A Florida Enchantment*

(1914). Once a seed is consumed by the protagonist Lillian Travers, she is transformed into a man, which in the film is expressed through cross-dressing, and is accepted into society as a man. The same does not happen when a man eats the seed and transforms into a woman though. He is met with hostility and is finally chased off a pier into a river (Russo 13). In this early depiction, we can already see the different attitudes that will later arise around transmasculinity and transfemininity. Male-to-female cross-dressing is ridiculous and frowned upon, while female-to-male cross-dressing seems much more accepted and sometimes even seen as attractive. Some actresses of the era, such as Marlene Dietrich, became famous for their masculine and androgynous depictions of femme fatales (Bell-Metereau 18), with no counterpart for male actors.

Before the Hays Code

After the silent movie era, we see cross-dressing or gender non-conformity continue to be used for comedy, but also for narrative purposes or as a spectacle for the audience. In *Queen Christina* (1933) for example, the titular Christina is initially portrayed as masculine. The narrative portrays this as a benefit, as she is shown to be a good ruler who listens to all her subjects and not only the rich and powerful. However, as the film progresses, her masculinity is criticised more and more. Christina is repeatedly asked to fulfil her role as a woman, to get married to her cousin Prince Charles and produce an heir, but repeatedly waves it away, refusing to get married at all. When she is confronted by two men from her court trying to convince her to carry out her imagined duty, she professes that she “long[s] to escape [her] destiny” and that she will “die a bachelor” rather than an old maid.

This theme could not only be seen as that of a woman trying to break the role that she was forced into, but also that of a transmasculine person, trying to escape the confines of a gender that they do not feel they belong in. However, the narrative does not maintain this framing, instead opting for a different direction. When Christina leaves the castle at a later point in the film, she is mistaken for a man on multiple occasions and becomes close with Antonio, a Spanish envoy, under this pretence. After Antonio finds out that she is actually a woman and they spend a night in the same bed, the two become interested in each other.

Upon returning to the castle Christina prepares for her reunification with Antonio and here we see a large shift in her presentation. Instead of the trousers and simple shirt that she had been wearing up to this point in the film, she is dressed in an opulent dress and wears jewellery. The treasurer Magnus, who had shown interest in Christina before, even explicitly comments on this. After this point in the film, Christina almost exclusively wears dresses and robes and the narrative focus of the story turns to Christina's romance with Antonio, and her attempts to balance her own desires and her royal duties. It seems that her love for this man has "cured" her of her gender non-conformity, and while she still refuses to marry Prince Charles, it is no longer because she does not want to get married at all, but because she wants to marry a different man. This aspect of the story could be read as a tale of assimilation, the conversion of a rebellious transmasculine person into a woman who better fits into a traditional role.

In the end, Christina abdicates the throne and Antonio dies in a duel right before they are set to sail away together, so she tragically loses everything that she had been fighting for. This could be interpreted as punishment for trying to go against her "destiny" and trying to find her own happiness instead of fulfilling her given role. Overall, this film could be seen as employing some sort of conversion trope, in which gender nonconforming behaviour is corrected through adhesion to cisgender and heteronormative norms, and a person is punished for breaking them, thus portraying gender non-conformity as an undesirable trait.

Arrival of the Hays Code

In 1930 the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) announced the establishment of a Motion Picture Production Code, limiting what films were allowed to show on screen. However, this was often ignored until 1934 when a Catholic group called the National Legion of Decency took matters into their own hands and among other activities threatened boycotts of Hollywood films (*The Celluloid Closet* 00:14:59-15:24). The Production Code Association was then established the same year and its Production Code nicknamed the Hays Code after the MPPDA president Will Hays, started being enforced in July of that year, effectively banning any explicit queer representation in films coming from major studios in the United States. In the late 1930s, as the Second World War erupted in

Europe, US films seemed to promote traditional values of masculinity more aggressively than before (Malone, xxxi). Queer or queer-coded characters were either villains or somehow antisocial or mentally ill and ended up dead or otherwise punished or reformed due to the requirements of the Hays Code (Dawson 185). This conversion or punishment trope played a role in *Queen Christina* as discussed previously, however, it reached its peak during the time of the Hays Code.

Filmmakers who wanted to include queerness in a positive or neutral light in their films had to use even more covert ways of signifying it. Stereotypes or elements that only a queer audience would be able to pick out were employed during this time to avoid censorship but even still, many had to be altered or cut. Due to the limitations that filmmakers had, it seems that the depictions of cross-dressing and gender exploration became even less common, opting instead to focus on gay and lesbian experiences. Transgender-coded characters start appearing later again as the Hays Code is slowly relaxed.

However, before moving on to the next section, it is important to highlight the contribution that the Hays Code had on a specific trope – that of the queer person as a villain, such as in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) (*The Celluloid Closet* 00:16:47-57). This trope will become important later with the emergence of the cross-dressing killer in horror films.

Weimar Era German Queer Film

In Europe, specifically in Germany, the blooming queer society of the interwar period brought along a number of films with queer themes. Alice A. Kuzniar in the introduction to her book *The Queer German Cinema* states that German cinema since the Weimar era has played a crucial role in queer film, exploring topics of same-gender love and gender exploration while avoiding many of the harmful and negative stereotypes around queer people(1). Films such as *Hamlet* (1921) and *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933) portrayed the, at the time, very popular depictions of cross-dressing and androgyny(Kuzniar 1-2), treating them with seriousness and weight, instead of using them for comedy or narrative purposes to be “corrected” in the conclusion as we have seen in contemporary films from North America.

For example, in *Girls in Uniform* (1931), Manuela, an all-girls boarding school student falls in love with her teacher, Miss von Bernburg. As part of a school play, she dresses in masculine clothing for her role as the main male character. The passion in the delivery of her lines seems to echo her feelings for the young teacher and thus cross-dressing and stage performance become part of the exploration of lesbian themes that the film focuses on (Dawson 187). It is also in this stage attire, and with the help of some alcohol, that she feels emboldened to profess her love in front of the whole student body. Cross-dressing and gender exploration are only one facet of the queer themes found in the film and thus add to the nuance, instead of, for example, only relying on them for comedy. They are treated with seriousness as part of the human experience, instead of some deviousness as we more commonly see on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Of course, much of this was halted in 1933 with the Nazi party coming to power and later with the Second World War, and a resurgence was only seen in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of New German Cinema (Dawson 187). However, Weimar-era German cinema still formed a crucial basis for the queer film that followed it as well as presenting an interesting counterpart to the kind of representation that I spoke of in the previous sections.

Relaxing of the Hays Code

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the Hays Code was amended and eventually relaxed, allowing for more explicit queer representations on screen. At that time, multiple films which challenged the norms that formed the basis of the Hays Code were released and found success despite being somewhat scandalous for their time. Two of them are relevant for our discussion of transgender representation and I would like to shortly explore them here.

Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho*, released in 1960, has become one of the most well-known horror films and has had a big impact on the horror film genre as a whole. It also features as its main villain Norman Bates, a man who cross-dresses when he murders. The trope of the cross-dressing murderer was not invented for this film and seems to have appeared in fiction literature before its release, however, it was undoubtedly the reason for its popularisation in film (Abbott 171). *Psycho* may as well have been the originator of anxieties around trans women in bathrooms and changing rooms, as Norman Bates kills his first victim while she is

showering. In the film's text, he is explicitly stated as not being transgender and instead being mentally ill, however, the connection between cross-dressing or gender non-conformity, mental illness and violence became solidified in the minds of many, during the time of the film's release and afterwards.

Horror film is usually understood as somehow symbolising the social ills or anxieties of its time (Elliott-Smith 1) and *Psycho* seems to reflect contemporary anxieties around gender norms and mental illness, but this in turn results in them also being highlighted to the audience. Through the trope of the cross-dressing murderer, the stereotype of transgender people as dangerous and/or mentally ill is spread which could have in multiple ways contributed to the marginalisation of said group. However, focusing on the anxieties of its time also resulted in great success and thus we see the reproduction of the trope in many films following the release of *Psycho*, such as *Homicidal* (1961) or *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and of course, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which will be the subject of the first chapter.

On the other hand, *Some Like It Hot* (1959) is a comedy featuring two men who cross-dress as women. As mentioned earlier in relation to cross-dressing in silent films, this film is an example of the cross-dressing in crisis trope where the two main characters must cross-dress to find some work as musicians and pay off their debts and expenses. The narrative gives not only one but two reasons for this action – one, they are running away from the mob after witnessing an execution and two, one of the few work opportunities available is in a women's band in a different state, which allows them to both change identities and put some distance between them and the mob. This way the cross-dressing is prompted by an external crisis which allows the characters to maintain a cisgender “true” identity while assuming a temporary transgender one (Miller 56).

While the cross-dressing is obviously used for comedic effect, *Some Like It Hot* also to some degree introduced themes of gender fluidity to the society of the 1950s, which still had very rigid gender roles (Eldridge 2). One of the two main characters, Jerry who becomes Daphne, seems to enjoy being a woman and excitedly joins the other women in chatting and playing games and he even gets engaged to a male suitor. On a few occasions, he seems to forget about his male persona completely and fully embodies the role of Daphne (Jesús Martínez 148-149). And so, while the film seems to focus mainly on the heterosexual love story

between two other characters and heavily reinforces patriarchal gender roles, it also offers some gender variance through the medium of cross-dressing.

The 1970s and 1980s

Explicit representations of transgender characters increase in the 70s and 80s, however, they often still contain inaccuracies or stereotypes. During this time, we see many films with transgender themes rely on previously established tropes. *Dressed to Kill* (1980) presents as its main villain a psychologist who dresses as a woman to kill the women he's attracted to. He is explained by the narrative to have a "male" and "female" side that are opposed to one another and is committed to a mental health institution at the end of the film. In *Tootsie* (1982), similarly to *Some Like It Hot*, we follow a male character who dresses as a woman in order to find work. This film also ends with the cross-dressing main character ending up in a heterosexual relationship with a woman.

Deviating from the two is 1975's *Dog Day Afternoon*. This film depicts the real-life story of a bank robbery gone wrong in New York in 1972. The film focuses on the event itself and the ensuing media storm, however, at one point it is revealed that the motivation behind the robbery was to get money for the main character's partner's gender-affirming surgery. As this is only a minor part of the story, the transgender character appears for only a few minutes, but we can still notice that the character's transness and desire to transition are treated with seriousness and not pathologized like in other films. Nevertheless, the trans woman character is still mostly portrayed as a man as she is referred to with he/him pronouns and her relationship is labelled homosexual.

In general, transgender people became less taboo in mainstream US cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, however, many of the same harmful tropes and stereotypes from previous films are still employed and the understanding of transgender people and their identities is still limited.

In Europe, after the Second World War, films touching on queer and gender-related topics start releasing in the 1950s and continue in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in different parts of the continent. Arguably, these changes seem to happen due to societal shifts, which allowed

for more open discussions of those topics, both in social life and in media. We can see this with films such as *In a Year with 13 Moons* (1978) and *My Dearest Senorita* (1972). However, none of these films seemed to reach the popularity and mass appeal that some of their Hollywood counterparts did. Due to the less centralised nature of European cinema compared with Hollywood, it is difficult to shortly summarise and generalise the state of its transgender, and in general queer representation throughout those decades, but overall, European queer film, and trans film with it, starts asserting itself on the global level later, in the 2000s and beyond.

Conclusion

Representations of trans themes and people can be found as far as in the early days of film and have been steadily changing and evolving over the decades while still maintaining a basis of tropes and stereotypes that they draw from. Early on, we saw the medium of cross-dressing used for the sake of comedy with the cross-dressing in crisis trope. Gender nonconforming behaviour was shown as something to correct and punish in films such as *Queen Christina* and this became even more prevalent with the introduction of the Hays Code in the United States. More courageous films could be found in Germany around the same time, but much of this was halted by the rise to power of the Nazi Party.

In the 1950s and 60s, and further on into the 70s and 80s, we see some destigmatisation of transgender themes, both in cinema and in society. However, many films still employ the same tropes, often limiting transgender representation to a few inaccurate and harmful stereotypes.

Heading into the 1990s, we have some understanding of the social and cultural context around transgender people, however, this period of time and onward will mark a great shift in queer activism. The films that will be discussed in the following chapters will concern much more explicit depictions of transgender people, rather than only cross-dressing or gender non-conformity.

In the upcoming chapters, I will analyse three films, one from 1991, one from 1999 and one from 2015, focusing on the ways they choose to represent transgender people in their

respective narratives and the social attitudes they express. First, I will have a look at *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) which employs the cross-dressing murderer trope during a time in which the topic of transgender people was still a strange and scary mystery. I will continue with focusing on *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) which depicts a real-life story of the murder of transgender man with the intention to raise awareness about queer hate crimes. In the third chapter, I will analyse *The Danish Girl* (2015) which found widespread success at a time when transgender visibility was becoming mainstream. In the conclusion, I will also shortly talk about the most recent film on this list, *Lady Ballers* (2023), in the hopes of bringing this discussion into the current day and political climate. Overall, I hope to be able to engage with the tropes and ways of representation that they employ, situating them into their historical context and observing how they each contributed and set the tone in the field of transgender representation.

Chapter 1: *The Silence of the Lambs*

The Silence of the Lambs, released in 1991 and directed by Jonathan Demme is a gripping crime horror which follows FBI Academy student Clarice Sterling (played by Jodie Foster) in her hunt for serial killer Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine). She is aided in her efforts by jailed psychiatrist Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), who guides her through a series of cryptic clues. This film is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed horror films of all time and its inclusion of a cross-dressing, gender-ambiguous villain followed in the footsteps of other films that had previously employed the trope.

As I have laid out in the introduction, up until the release of this film, there had been very few mainstream films with explicit transgender representation, as transgender themes were mostly being expressed in covert and coded ways, such as through cross-dressing and gender nonconforming behaviour. *The Silence of the Lambs*, though it claimed its main villain was not genuinely trans, was one of the first and biggest films to use the word transsexual and discuss matters of gender transition and surgery.

In this chapter, I aim to explore *The Silence of the Lambs* and how its transgender-coded villain became a paradigm for transgender representation and stigma of the 1990s and since. First, I will analyse the theme of gender in the film, and the gender dynamics that it presents. Second, I will look at the context of the discredited theory of autogynephilia and how its influence can be found in the portrayal of the character of Buffalo Bill. Finally, I will explore the topic of representation and stereotyping using Stuart Hall’s theories in order to reflect on the film’s interaction with real-life transgender people. Overall, I want to explore the film itself and its context in the hopes of understanding the state of transgender representation in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s.

***The Silence of the Lambs* and Gender**

Clarice Starling, as the protagonist of a popular horror film, breaks many stereotypes of the genre and of her time. She is assertive and capable, has a traditionally “masculine” job and most importantly, she does not end up dead at the end of the film. The discussion of gender seems to be central to the film, with many scenes of Clarice navigating her life as a woman in

general, and as a woman in a male-dominated field. The villain, Buffalo Bill, is also part of this conversation, as an ambiguously gendered, gender-role-breaking serial killer, whose horror comes more so from the implied queerness than the killing itself. Finally, the third main character of the film, psychiatrist and cannibal Hannibal Lecter, is traditionally masculine, though disempowered as he is held in a cell for the majority of the film. These three characters and their opposition to each other and the world around them form the basis of the film's discussion of gender.

Christina H. Hodel in *The Filleting of Gender and Sexuality in The Silence of the Lambs* proposes a reading in which Clarice Starling is a masculinised woman, in opposition to Buffalo Bill, the effeminate male killer who she is hunting down (160). This, according to Hodel, is the focus of the critique of gender in the film, presenting a kind of "gender inversion". Traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" traits are switched in these two characters, and while this serves as horror in Buffalo Bill's character due to anxieties around gender non-conformity, it bolsters Clarice as a capable hero. Hannibal Lecter is then the stereotypical male figure, who, nevertheless yields to Clarice in some ways and allows her to be the hero who gets the villain (Hodel 160). In this reading, gender is read through each character's individual traits and roles within the story itself. However, I would like to propose a more metaphorical reading.

In this alternate reading, the individual traits of the characters are not as important as the roles they play within society. Clarice Starling is a woman in a male-dominated field, but more importantly a woman under patriarchy. While she is traditionally "masculine" in some traits and earns the respect of a few male characters, she ultimately has a traditional gender presentation and does not challenge the position that she is in under patriarchy (Phillips 40-41). For example, her being a woman is exploited by Jack Crawford when he is trying to get rid of the sheriff in one scene when he pretends that talking about sex crimes in front of her would be improper. She has to rely on men to give her power, as when she is only allowed access to Lecter through Jack Crawford, or more crucially when she is given information by Lecter to hunt down Buffalo Bill. Overall, she is an agent of patriarchy and does not seek to disrupt it.

Her counterpart, Hannibal Lecter, is also traditionally gendered, but masculine and at many points in the film, we can see him exerting his patriarchal power over Clarice, even despite

him being contained in a cell. Some have suggested that he is an alternate type of man because unlike most of the other male characters, he does not disrespect and belittle her for being a woman and even helps her in achieving her goal (ContraPoints 00:55:23-33). I believe this reading is inaccurate though as while he is not outwardly as cruel to her as other male characters are, he is still a vicious murderer who plays with her mind and even demands that she share very personal things with him.

As an example, this can be seen in a scene after the halfway point in the film. Here Clarice and Hannibal have become familiar with each other and Hannibal has given enough clues to Clarice for her to realise that she needs his advice to capture the killer. Hannibal was recently transported to Memphis as he seemed like he could help in saving Senator Ruth Martin's daughter who is being kept by Buffalo Bill. Clarice sneaks into the room where he is being held in a small cell with books and furniture, which is relatively luxurious compared to his previous cell. Clarice approaches him and confronts him with the fact that he gave the investigators false information and asks for the truth. He only makes allusions, speaking in vague and philosophical terms, similar to how he has spoken in previous scenes. Finally, he says that Buffalo Bill "covets" and makes comments about coveting and Clarice feeling "eyes moving over [her] body". Visibly uncomfortable, she wants to move on but Hannibal refuses to share anything unless she does first, a "quid-pro-quo" system that he had employed earlier in the film. Even though he is the one behind bars, it seems like he has the upper hand, and despite her pleas, he cannot be convinced otherwise.

He starts asking about a memory from her childhood, one that was brought up earlier, and she, answering his questions in an effort to appease him, tells him of the slaughtering of lambs that she witnessed which resulted in her running away from home. This scene is shot in a simple shot-reverse-shot manner, focusing only on Clarice and Hannibal head-on, but this simplicity helps reveal the dynamic between the two characters. Hannibal is staring straight ahead, unblinking, asking questions one after another in a monotone voice - he is the one in control. On the other hand, Clarice is initially hesitant, casting her glance away from Hannibal/the camera. As the questions continue, she seems to enter a sort of haze, looking into the distance and answering without thinking and with clear distress in her voice and facial expressions. In this stage, the camera zooms in and the bars of the cell that were visible until now disappear, symbolising the power imbalance inverting and definitively

putting Hannibal in power (see figures 1 and 2). Towards the end of the scene, Clarice starts telling the story without needing to be prompted.



Figures 1 and 2: Camera zoom on Hannibal Lecter's (Anthony Hopkins) face that makes the cell bars slowly disappear

After sharing this experience, Hannibal does not give Clarice Buffalo Bill's real name and as she is being taken away by the investigators, he offers her the case file. She frees herself for a moment and runs back to take it. As she grabs the case file, Hannibal holds it and caresses Clarice's finger, violating even the physical separation that the cell was supposed to provide.

Hodel describes this scene and others similar to it as "psychological rape" (166) which seems like a good comparison. This aspect of Hannibal Lecter's character plays into my interpretation in which he personifies the patriarchy. Outwardly intelligent, polite, and put-together but in reality wicked, cruel and criminal, he represents the multifaceted and covert effects that patriarchy has on our society. Early in the film, Hannibal defines himself in opposition to Miggs, another man jailed in the asylum who throws his come at Clarice. He tells her that he would not behave like that towards her, offers leads in her hunt for Buffalo Bill and in the end drives Miggs to suicide, earning Clarice's trust in a twisted way. For the rest of the film, Clarice tolerates Hannibal's manipulation and "psychological rape" and even seeks him out for advice when she is unable to continue her investigation. She willingly exposes herself to this psychological abuse, the patriarchy's abuse, to reach her goal.

In relation to Clarice, Hannibal is metaphorically also the force that drives people to hate and commit violence against gender "deviants". While seeking out his help, Clarice often offers alternate explanations for Buffalo Bill's criminal behaviour. We can see this in an early scene between Clarice and Hannibal in which the jailed psychiatrist shares his diagnosis of Buffalo Bill, and Clarice retorts with her knowledge of the crime rates of transgender people, which are very low. Hannibal then sows doubt in Clarice and tells her that Buffalo Bill is not a "real transsexual", but a fake one who can then be a deranged serial killer. In the end, she is convinced and starts following the clues based on Hannibal's advice.

The gender-deviant Buffalo Bill then presents a mediating figure in this dynamic between Clarice and Hannibal, deviating from traditional patriarchal gender expressions and being the catalyst for the story. Due to his lack of presence and agency in the narrative, he is less of a character and more of an idea, the object of patriarchal scorn and violence. He is seen very rarely, and he is mostly defined by Clarice and Hannibal's discussions about him. He never has the chance to share his side of the story and his perspective, and this is by design. He is the "other" that traditional expressions of gender are defined in opposition to. For example, Clarice and Hannibal's genders can be framed in this way – Clarice is a real woman, not a

“pretend” one and Lecter is a real man, not an effeminate one. This misunderstood and oppressed “other” is one of the main sources of horror in the film, and in portraying him so, the anxieties around queerness and gender non-conformity are strengthened. He is finally killed, and punished for his transgressions and the gender balance is thus seemingly restored.

In summary, the patriarchy, personified by Hannibal Lecter, feeds information to Clarice, the subject of patriarchy, who, despite her better knowledge gets convinced of Buffalo Bill’s depravity. Buffalo Bill here personifies the queer and gender-diverse people, whose assumed evil is highlighted by making Buffalo Bill a serial killer who kidnaps and skins his victims because of his gender deviance. Clarice, following Hannibal’s information as an agent of the patriarchy, finds Buffalo Bill and kills him.

The Legacy of Autogynephilia and Buffalo Bill

The Silence of the Lambs is important to highlight for its influence on the wider public’s attitudes towards trans issues even while stating in its text that it does not represent real transgender people. While not mentioning it explicitly, the way Buffalo Bill is presented in *The Silence of the Lambs* seems to be inspired by the theory of autogynephilia by Ray Blanchard. This theory, shared in multiple essays in the 1980s and 1990s, suggests that some trans women transition because of a fetishisation of femininity and female identity. While discredited, this theory had some effect on the way transfeminine people were seen at the time and even today.

Most notably, these ideas can be seen reflected in the notorious “Goodbye Horses” scene, in which Buffalo Bill performs his feminine persona while dancing and singing to the song “Goodbye Horses” by Q Lazzarus. Overlaid with shots of his hostage attempting to escape, it starts off by focusing on the details Buffalo Bill’s body, the disembodied hands holding a make-up palette and brush, a pierced nipple, lips being painted and saying “I’d fuck me so hard.” Finally, the shot changes and we can see most of Buffalo Bill, naked except for a robe, wearing make-up and a wig seemingly made from one of his previous victims’ scalp. He sings and dances to the song in front of a camera until, outside of the shot, tucking his penis

between his legs. Then he backs up and poses for the camera, showing off his body in its entirety (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) showing off in front of the camera

His showing off his body on camera and talking about how attractive he finds himself seem to suggest that his interest in “being a woman” is strongly sexual, much like what Ray Blanchard suggested. The way the scene is structured seems optimised for strong emotions, mainly disgust and fear. Constantly switching back to the gruelling situation of the hostage evokes anxiety and terror and keeps the audience in a feeling of unease. This scene in particular is one which seemed to have been incredibly memorable for audiences.

The Silence of the Lambs also reflects some of the medical standards of its time. Through Hannibal Lecter's denial of Buffalo Bill's transgender identity, we can see how the cisgender doctors' opinions were the most valued and transgender people were not listened to. Back in those days doctors often only approved transition for those stereotypically masculine or feminine, strictly heterosexual or who they personally found attractive. Cisgender and heteronormative norms were forced upon transgender people wishing to transition and many people had to pretend to be someone they were not in order to get approved for their desired transition means (Truitt). Moreover, Lecter also shares that Buffalo Bill must have been denied transition due to a history of mental illness and abuse, which he sees as correct

since he perceives those same mental issues as making him “not a real transsexual”. The fact that Buffalo Bill then went on to become a murderer strongly suggests that Lecter is supposed to be right. In reality, transgender people have often been denied transition due to psychological problems as well, another example of the medical gatekeeping put in the way of transgender people seeking transition.

Another idea that seems to stem if not from the theory of autogynephilia then from adjacent anti-trans personalities and theories of the time in the film, is that trans people, specifically trans women are a danger to cisgender women or that they seek to replace them (Evans 28). The film expresses this through Buffalo Bill’s murders, but also through the fact that he skins his victims and then makes a “woman suit” out of them for himself. He quite literally kills the women to take their place. Additionally, this could be seen as an expression of contemporary anti-trans author Janice Raymond’s idea that trans women commit acts of sexual violence against cisgender women simply by existing (Truitt).

Overall, *The Silence of the Lambs* presents a very pathologized approach to transgender identity, seemingly borrowing from multiple theories of the time which saw transgender people as fetishists, mentally ill or both. The danger that Buffalo Bill poses in the film goes hand in hand with his gender deviancy and mental illness which is solidified into a trope.

Representation and Stereotyping

The question of whether *The Silence of the Lambs* is a film with transgender representation is quite complex in and of itself. In the strictest sense, in representing a transgender person, the answer would be no – as said by Hannibal Lecter, Buffalo Bill is not “actually” transgender, and the film expresses this idea in multiple different ways, pointing to Bill’s expression of gender as fetishisation and means of escape, rather than a genuine sense of his own identity. In my proposed reading in the first section of this chapter, Buffalo Bill is the metaphorical representation of queer and gender-diverse people under patriarchy. However, even in a more general reading, the visual language employed in representing Buffalo Bill is very clearly meant to be queer-coded, including make-up, nipple piercings and the like. While not intended as a genuine representation of transgender people, Buffalo Bill is the

warped image of gender deviancy that the patriarchy condemns, one that is not only disgusting in its transgression but, according to the film, also dangerous and deadly.

According to Stuart Hall, stereotyping occurs within an imbalance of power and is directed at the subjugated group in the dynamic (“Spectacle of the ‘Other’” 258). It is an expression of power in a cultural and symbolic sense and helps maintain the status quo of the power imbalance (Hall, “Spectacle of the ‘Other’” 259). By depicting a murderous queer-coded villain, *The Silence of the Lambs* contributes to the subjugation of queer people, even without intending to do so. Thus, the film is important to discuss as it contributes to the real-life conditions of transgender people as well as tropes and stereotypes about them.

The main trope that can be found in *The Silence of the Lambs* is the trope of the queer villain, or more precisely, the cross-dressing murderer. This trope was shortly discussed in the introduction, where some of its roots can be seemingly found in US cinema during the Hays Code, which limited depictions of queerness to a few options, one of them as a villain. It was then further narrowed into its cross-dressing version in 1950s pulp fiction and popularised and brought to film by *Psycho* in the 1960s (Abbott 171). The popularity of the trope can be evidenced by its appearance in many other pieces of media before and since *The Silence of the Lambs*.

This trope draws its power from the depiction of the “other”, the image of a deviant gender presentation or body. The “other” is the enemy of the cisnormative system and those who benefit from it and thus invokes fear in many audiences (Miller 88-89). For this reason, the “other” must be contained at the end of the story, restoring the cisnormative balance and appeasing the spectators’ anxieties (Miller 89).

In the real world, this often results in transgender people, mainly trans women, being also seen as this dangerous “other”. Lucy J. Miller in *Distancing Representation in Transgender Film: Identification, Affect, and the Audience* writes about her own experience as a transgender woman in a public bathroom, where her presence was seen as a danger and security was called (108). Events like these, not uncommon among transgender people, seem to at least to some degree stem from this kind of framing and the perpetuation of these tropes risks to only make matters worse. As Lucy J. Miller writes: “The messages

communicated by transgender horror films present transgender people as dangerous outsiders whom audience members are justified in fearing" (109).

To a lesser degree, the film also engages in fetishisation. Stuart Hall defines fetishisation as a way of representing the "other" that both maintains an object's taboo status while also allowing for it to be looked at ("Spectacle of the 'Other'" 268). Since Buffalo Bill does not appear on screen very often we do not see much of this fetishisation, however, when he does, we can see this framing such as in the aforementioned "Goodbye Horses" scene, which is intended to both evoke fear and disgust while also allowing the audience to observe Buffalo Bill's body in great detail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Silence of the Lambs* in the early 1990s has not yet reached the level of explicit transgender representation that we will see in upcoming chapters, however, its usage of visual language, tropes and stereotypes adds onto the existing canon of transgender-coded characters in film.

Through the film's discussion of gender, we have explored the dynamics shown between the patriarchy, personified in Hannibal Lecter, the female agent of the patriarchy that is Clarice Sterling, and the gender-deviant Buffalo Bill who is punished for his transgressions. Next, I focused on the theory of autogynephilia and other transphobic standards of the time which seemingly had some effect on the way that Buffalo Bill and the topic of transgender issues were portrayed. Finally, I reflected on Stuart Hall's theories of stereotypes and representations in order to understand the origin of tropes and stereotypes and media, which then allowed me to highlight the tropes found in the film and the effect they may have on our society.

The Silence of the Lambs is a film seemingly deeply entrenched in its time. Many of the ideas about transgender people found in it have long been discredited or corrected and watching it now truly feels like seeing a window into the past. Many today would not even call it "trans representation". However, due to its massive success and pop-culture relevance, it is important to trace the route that transgender representation has taken since its release. In

the upcoming chapters, we will continue onward while occasionally stopping to reflect back on this film and what it did in its time.

Chapter 2: *Boys Don't Cry*

Boys Don't Cry is a 1999 film directed by Kimberly Price. It tells the real-life story of a transgender man who was killed in 1993 in a transphobic hate crime. Independently produced, but nevertheless finding mainstream success, it follows in the footsteps of other queer films that made waves in the film festival scene in the early 1990s. This movement, dubbed the New Queer Cinema, which included influential films such as *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *Poison* (1991), helped elevate films discussing gay and lesbian issues out of obscurity (Aaron, "An Introduction" 3). *Boys Don't Cry* on the other hand draws attention to the similarly marginalised transgender people and at the same time highlights the harrowing reality of queer hate crimes.

Compared to *The Silence of The Lambs*, *Boys Don't Cry* is a film with explicit and intentional representation of a trans person. The film also attempts to take a sympathetic approach to the topic of trans people, framing Brandon's story as tragic and Brandon himself as simply trying to live his life as his authentic self. In this sense, it, and other films of its time, such as those belonging to New Queer Cinema, reflects the changing attitudes around queer issues and trans people specifically, of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In this chapter, I want to explore *Boys Don't Cry's* ways of representing a transgender person and also reflect on the changes in general attitudes that preceded and followed the release of the film. In the first part, I want to look at how the main character's masculine identity is portrayed and that is used in showing him as relatable to a cisgender audience. Next, I want to explore the main trope that the movie employs, that being one of the transgender victim, and the theme of deception, and what effect they may have on the attitudes towards transgender people. Finally, I want to have a look behind the scenes, focusing on the making of the film and the choices that were made in matters such as casting and which parts of the true story would be omitted. I aim to at times contrast *Boys Don't Cry* with the previously analysed *The Silence of the Lambs* in order to highlight the evolving strategies of representation and changing attitudes in society while not forgetting the tropes that it too employed.

Patriarchal Masculinity and Cisgender Relatability

The first half of the movie seeks to establish the main character Brandon Teena (Hillary Swank) as a struggling but relatable person in the eyes of the audience. The particularities of his life and transgender identity are mentioned and the spectator can infer what is going on, but they initially are not openly discussed, and this allows cisgender audiences to see themselves in his other struggles, such as small-town life, finding romantic interests and fitting in with a new crowd. While his existence “before”, as a “girl” is discussed later in the film, it is never shown and so the audience can only see Brandon as he himself probably wanted to be seen (Boyform 4:04-17). Thus, the film avoids the spectacle of the “transgender transformation” which is a trope present in many films about trans people (this will be discussed further in Chapter 3). This is a much more sympathetic framing than the previously discussed *The Silence of the Lambs* employed in relation to Buffalo Bill, who not only had his identity denied by a cisgender psychologist, but was also shown both in his masculine expression and his feminine persona, the latter of which was supposed to evoke fear and disgust rather than sympathy.

A further rapport is established between the cisgender audience and Brandon Teena due to the fictional Brandon’s willingness to reproduce patriarchal gender roles and stereotypes. In the first moments of the film he gets a haircut, dresses in traditionally masculine clothing and goes on a date with a woman at a skating ring. Only a few minutes later he gets into a bar fight, as Candace (Alicia Goranson), a woman he was interested in is bothered by a different man. The beginning of the film is filled with these traditional expressions of masculinity, seemingly working to define Brandon as a “real man” in contrast to earlier scenes in which his cousin referred to him as a lesbian. While audiences might have already figured out that Brandon was trans, the first half of the film tries to establish Brandon as “just like any other man”. This is one way the film approaches representing transgender identity and it is a more compassionate one than we saw in *The Silence of The Lambs*, where Buffalo Bill was characterised by his “otherness” and the cisgender characters’ genders were defined in opposition to his.

So, in *Boys Don’t Cry* the transgender person is depicted as being almost the same as a cisgender person, with fundamentally the same views on topics such as gender roles or sexuality. Cisgender audiences may be comforted by the idea that someone with a non-

traditional gender experience still wants to uphold the same norms. And while this is a great way to build sympathy in an audience unfamiliar with a minority group, it is based on a simplification or even a fabrication. Transgender people's experience of gender is often different from cisgender people and their position allows them a distinct and often more critical opinion of gender and sexuality norms in society. However, this film chooses to omit that in favour of establishing relatability with a cisgender audience and in that it succeeds. This choice may have been made due to the film's explicit activist message, which seeks to educate the public on queer hate crimes. For that end, it is arguably more important for the audience to find the subject of the film sympathetic, rather than for the representation to be accurate and nuanced.

However, another aspect of the representation of transgender people in *Boys Don't Cry* is deception. As Brandon wakes up at Candace's place the day after the bar fight, we find out that he had already lied about breaking up with a fiancée and over the course of his conversation with Candace he makes up another lie, this time about having a child. It is implied that he makes up these lies in order to obstruct his past and to better "pass" as a man. These lies play a central role in the story once Brandon is revealed as a trans man to the rest of the cast. "Finding the truth" becomes the excuse that the characters use to assault Brandon and "check" his genitals. This will be explored in more detail in the upcoming section on the victimhood trope. However, it seems that the film portrays Brandon's identity as authentic but also deceptive, creating a strange paradox.

According to the filmmakers, his life as it is shown in the film has been reconstructed based on the recounting of those who knew him, and while that is a very respectful way of honouring him, it ultimately leads to a portrayal devoid of the complexities of Brandon's inner world. We do not hear about his opinions on his own gender unless he is trying to justify it to other characters, which leads to a somewhat cisgender-centric framing.

Victimhood Trope and Deception

After having established Brandon Teena and his environment, the second half of the movie focuses on Brandon's assault and murder. In this part, the trope that the film relies on becomes clear – the trope of the transgender victim.

In *The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres* Traci B. Abbott writes about the trope of the trans victim in crime and horror films and series. Through analysing crime TV shows Abbott explores how trans victimisation is portrayed as inherently tied to the victim's trans identity and stemming from it (200). This way, even if the story's focus is on the victim's suffering and the violence is seemingly being condemned, the narrative ultimately serves to "validate transphobic intentions and frame gender difference as ultimately incompatible with hetero- and cisnormative society" (Abbott 200). As Abbott writes, this approach also leads to the marginalised person in question being blamed for their own suffering and victimisation more so than a non-marginalised counterpart (197).

The same could be said about *Boys Don't Cry* to some extent. The reactions of the characters, ranging from questioning him to violently assaulting and murdering him, are framed as somewhat "understandable" when Brandon's identity is revealed. These reactions stem from two different factors – the first of course being the fact that Brandon is a queer person which the film clearly states is disgusting and punishable by itself in the eyes of some of the other characters. However, as I have spoken about in the previous section, Brandon constructed a lot of his identity through deception. When the other characters find out that he is transgender, their anger seems to be in some way also motivated by their being deceived.

In the scene where he is confronted by his friends, all characters aside from Lana (Chloë Sevigny), Brandon's lover join in by questioning him and exposing the lies he told in order to cover up his identity. The situation almost turns violent when Brandon refuses to answer whether he is "a girl or not" and Tom, one of the two cisgender men in the situation suggests that there is an "easy way to solve this problem", implying they want to check Brandon's genitals. John, the other cisgender man, who in the film showed a past of being violent and having anger issues, tells Brandon that he should kill him for "lying to Lana". This way the situation seems to be framed around "finding the truth" and indirectly blames Brandon for lying. In the scene's culmination, Brandon is dragged into the bathroom and stripped by the two cis male characters and his genitals are exposed for all to see. Now everyone in the scene can see "the truth".

As Julianne Pidduck points out, the film frames it so that the audience experiences this assault and specifically the following rape scene from the victim's point of view and thus

feels sympathy for him (101) and recognises the perpetrators as in the wrong. However, as other characters repeatedly blame Brandon, whether directly or indirectly, for both lying and being transgender, some of the responsibility is seemingly transferred onto the victim as well.

Other than potentially blaming transgender people for their own marginalisation and inherently tying victimisation to transgender people's marginalised status, the victimhood trope also can lead to transgender people being perceived as needing to be saved by external forces (Marshall 55). Especially trans men are often framed as "being deceived" or "confused", and attempts are made to "talk them out" of their transgender identity for fear of their safety. Anecdotally, some transmasculine people have claimed that watching the film has made their family members less supportive towards their identity, out of fear of them being victimised too.

Deception is a topic that often pops up in discussions about transgender people as they are often seen as "lying" about their gender assigned at birth. It is also, as previously discussed, a major theme in *Boys Don't Cry* and thus allows us to discuss another trope – the trope of transgender people as deceivers. Julia Serano explores the trope of the "deceptive" trans woman in her book *Whipping Girl*, analysing how films somewhat contemporary to *Boys Don't Cry* such as *The Crying Game* (1992) use the character of a passing transgender woman as a shocking revelation or plot twist (36-37). Accompanied by other characters' disgusted reactions to such a reveal, this kind of plot frames transgender people and bodies as inherently deceptive and the final "outing" as a moment of "truth" (Serano 37). While the approach to Brandon's transgender identity is much different and is not exploited for a shocking moment, the theme of deception seems to play a similar role in somewhat showing his entire identity as a lie.

Stuart Hall writes about how in the early 19th century, the anti-slavery movement sought to eliminate the stereotype of black people as "savage" by replacing it with the stereotype of black people's "eternal goodness" ("Spectacle of the 'Other'" 249-250). While this may at first seem like a positive shift, not only was stereotyping, i.e. the simplification and reduction to a few fixed characteristics, still occurring (Hall, "Spectacle of the 'Other'" 249) but it was based on the same underlying assumptions about black people as primitive, unintelligent and simple (Hall, "Spectacle of the 'Other'" 245). I would like to suggest that a similar shift

has happened between *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Boys Don't Cry*. The shift from victimiser to victim seeks to paint transgender people in a more sympathetic light, however, both stereotypes stem from the same reduction – the understanding of transgender people as deceivers.

This stereotype undermines transgender people's feelings and experiences and places an ulterior motive behind their decisions to live as a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth. Transgender women are often accused of pretending to be transgender in order to prey on women in bathrooms and changing rooms. The "transgender panic defence" is a legal strategy that attempts to get more lenient sentences for perpetrators of hate crimes against transgender people, citing that the victim's transgender identity somehow contributed to the crime being committed, lessening the perpetrator's responsibility ("LGBTQ+ "Panic" Defence"). Presenting transgender people as liars and deceivers can quite literally put transgender people's lives in danger and thus the stereotype should be opposed whenever possible.

Choices Made During the Making

There are a few other elements that also seem relevant in the discussion of the representation of a transgender person in *Boys Don't Cry*. First, I would like to address the topic of casting cisgender actors in transgender roles.

While there were trans men considered for the role of Brandon Teena, a cisgender actress, Hillary Swank, was ultimately cast (Bushman). According to the director, the writing process included numerous interviews with transgender people as well as butch lesbians and Swank spent a lot of time preparing for the role by presenting as male. This speaks to the effort put in to include the wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences of queer people and not only write from one point of view (Basoli). However, as some have pointed out before, such as actor JJ Hawkins, the decision to cast a cis woman ultimately led to complicated outside perspectives as Hillary Swank appeared at the Academy Awards in feminine clothing and accepted the award for Best Lead Actress. JJ Hawkins highlights how seeing a woman play a transmasculine role in *Boys Don't Cry* may lead some audiences to see transmasculine people as also "women playing male roles" (Bendix). The casting of cisgender and

heterosexual actors in gay and trans roles has long been a source of controversy, with one side highlighting the lack of opportunities that queer actors face in mainstream media and the other claiming that some specific actors were simply more suited for their respective roles. However, I would argue that what should also be taken into account is how these cisgender actors will represent transgender people beyond those films, as JJ Hawkins pointed out.

Another element of Brandon's representation that I want to discuss is that while to our knowledge he was indeed a trans man, the film occasionally portrays him as a lesbian instead. This is seen towards the end of the film, after his assault but before he is murdered. Following his rape, while he is hiding out at Candace's shed, Lana comes to visit him and the way the two characters interact seems different from previous scenes in the film. Instead of calling Brandon handsome as she has before, Lana calls him pretty. She asks him about his life before, wanting to know if he was a "girl-girl" like her. This seems strange of her to ask as she has previously never talked about him in any other way than as a man, even when his identity was being questioned by others. Even as he would try to explain himself to her, she would assert that she did not need to know. This seems to indicate a certain shift in what Jack Halberstam calls the "transgender gaze" ("Transgender Gaze" 294). Up until now, *Boys Don't Cry* presented Brandon through his own eyes, as a transgender man, denying the assertions of other characters that he is a girl or a lesbian. Lana also contributed to this gaze by accepting his identity and not questioning it or perceiving him as deceptive. Visually, the film follows this too, we do not see the parts of Brandon's body that he hides until they are forcefully revealed and before his rape, he only has sex with Lana fully clothed and asking not to be touched (see figure 4).



Figure 4: Earlier sex scene in which Brandon (Hillary Swank, top) refuses to undress



Figure 5: Final sex scene in which Brandon (Hillary Swank, left) willingly undresses

However, when the characters start being intimate together in this later scene, Brandon seems no longer uncomfortable with showing his body, takes off all his clothes, and does not protest when Lana touches him (figure 5). Lana at one point utters that she is unsure of how to have sex with him now, something Halberstam interprets as having sex with him as a

woman rather than a man ("Transgender Gaze" 297). Although implicitly, this scene seems to suggest that Brandon has been transformed after being raped and is now a lesbian. Halberstam reveals that the director Kimberly Price spoke in an interview about the assault as having led him to become truly himself, however, this seems to imply that he is in reality a lesbian woman ("Transgender Gaze" 297). This seems to very strongly invalidate Brandon's identity, and potentially also the identities of other transgender men. Moreover, Jack Halberstam has suggested that with this framing, Brandon's murder at the end of the film becomes motivated by homophobia rather than transphobia ("Transgender Gaze" 298), obscuring the transphobic oppression that transgender people face.

Lastly, it is important to note that this film does not attempt to present all aspects of the real-life story as accurately as possible. For example, the real-life Brandon seemingly only used other names and did not call himself Brandon Teena at any point, however, this was the name that much of the press used and so it became associated with him. While adapting true events, filmmakers are often faced with making choices that might help the film but obstruct reality. The most important here is the omission of another victim who was killed on the night of Brandon's murder, a black man named Phillip DeVine. Jennifer Devere Brody suggests that this choice helped in highlighting queerness as an oppressed position while avoiding the topic of race (93). While exploring this topic in depth is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that the filmmakers chose to erase a black person's involvement in the story to focus on the white queer person and thus avoiding and simplifying the topic of intersectionality and oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Boys Don't Cry* is a great example of one of the first genuine representations of transgender people, and a transgender man at that, which found success in the mainstream. The film's activist message helped raise awareness around queer hate crimes and paved the way for many more explicit representations of transgender people.

In this chapter, I have tried to explore the ways in which Brandon's identity as a trans man is portrayed in the film, with how his traditionally masculine presentation and behaviour are meant to create a sense of kinship with the cisgender audience and present him as trying to

live his life in an authentic way. I have also focused on the theme of deception, which Brandon employs to construct his identity and hide the fact that he is transgender. In the following section, I have reflected on the trope of the transgender victim which, while building sympathy in the eyes of the audience also ties transgender identity to victimhood in a way that may contribute to transphobic oppression. I also took my analysis of the theme of deception further and delved into it as a basis for a few stereotypes about transgender people and the harm they may cause. Finally, I have shortly addressed the topic of cisgender actors playing transgender roles, the few ways in which the film frames Brandon as a lesbian instead of a trans man and the erasure of a black man who also lost his life in the same event, all of which are important topics themselves.

Overall, *Boys Don't Cry* fits in with the rest of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s with its activist lean and mainstream success despite its independent production. The movement, with *Boys Don't Cry* as one of its most successful examples introduced Hollywood to the existence of a queer audience and the appeal that queer films can have in the mainstream (Aaron, "An Introduction" 8-9). On the other hand, New Queer Cinema is criticised for its focus on only certain kinds of stories, most often about white, cisgender, middle-class gay men, which further hid those who do not fit those categories (Aaron, "New Queer Spectator" 198).

Chapter 3: *The Danish Girl*

The Danish Girl came out in 2015 to great critical and commercial success, following the famous “Transgender Tipping Point” Time cover with Laverne Cox in 2014. The mid-2010s were a time of increased visibility of trans people in the West and optimism around the progress of transgender acceptance and rights. *The Danish Girl* fit right into this climate, exploring and adapting transgender issues and bringing them to a cisgender audience. Directed by Tom Hooper, who has also directed critically acclaimed films such as *The King’s Speech* (2010) and *Les Misérables* (2012), it has a very strong aesthetic and emotional value and is therefore quite appealing to audiences.

The Danish Girl follows Danish painter Einar Wegener, as he, together with his wife, Gerda Wegener, explores his identity and decides to transition to live as a woman. As a period drama based on the true story of transgender woman Lili Elbe who was one of the first to undergo gender-affirming surgery, it helped popularise the fact of transgender people existing all throughout history rather than only being present in modern times (Richardson and Smith 43).

In this chapter, I want to explore *The Danish Girl* as a paradigm for transgender representation in the 2010s. In the first part, I will explore how transness is presented in the narrative of the film, including Lili’s identity and her interactions with the outside world. In the second part, I will focus on the trope that the film falls into, which is the trope of transgender people as a spectacle. After analysing these two aspects I want to compare them to *Transamerica*, also a film about a trans woman that came out 10 years earlier, in the hopes of highlighting the evolution that happened in that decade. Finally, I want to dedicate a section to briefly discussing the differences in representation between transmasculine and transfeminine people, using the films that I have already mentioned in this thesis. This will hopefully add more nuance to the discussion of transgender representation and allow us to reflect on the evolution of depictions of transgender people up until the 2010s.

Gender Performativity and Acceptance

Similarly to *Boys Don't Cry*, the relatability of transgender people to a cisgender audience is created through gender performativity. The main character Einar, who later transitions into Lili (both played by Eddie Redmayne), finds out about his desire to occasionally, and later full-time, present as a woman and spends the film exploring this discovery. Along this journey we often see Lili mimicking the gender performativity of cisgender women, from the clothing and make-up to movement and gestures. We see her struggle with this performance and with her identity as a woman, which may be relatable to many cisgender women in the audience as well. This way Lili is framed as “any other woman”, wishing to fulfil the traditional role of a woman, except for the fact that she was assigned male at birth and lived as a man. This is underlined by Lili's desire to become a mother later in the film, though her anatomy does not allow her to become pregnant, a struggle that many cisgender women share. This works in tandem with other elements of the film to create a relatable, honest but not too foreign idea of the experiences of transgender people for the cisgender audience to consume.

In another parallel to *Boys Don't Cry*, the transgender character seems all too happy to reproduce patriarchal gender roles, even to the point of being anti-feminist. Pre-transition Lili was a painter, but she stops painting once she starts living full-time as a woman. When asked about this by her partner Gerda (Alicia Vikander), she says that she “want[s] to be a woman, not a painter”. Gerda retorts that people can be both and Lili struggles to reply. The conversation then goes off topic and the conflict is never resolved but this short remark seems to betray something about Lili's beliefs about women's role in society. Gerda is a slightly feminist character in the film, as she pushes back on and breaks the boundaries of gendered expectations, for example by persevering in making her art despite being criticised for it. Lili is gently suggested, but never outwardly stated, to be less progressive.

Compared with previous representations of transgender people, however, *The Danish Girl* aims at having a more nuanced view of transphobia and non-acceptance of trans people. The closest people around Lily become accepting of her after some initial questions and time spent adjusting. Gerda, Lili's wife and her most important relationship in the film is portrayed as being at times unsupportive due to her own issues, for example, feeling as if she is losing her husband and her being worried about Lili's health as she is planning to

undergo a risky surgery later in the film. This makes Gerda into a layered character with many different and sometimes contradictory opinions and wants, instead of a one-dimensional transphobe caricature that can be seen in other films. However, this occasionally slips into framing the choice to transition as a selfish one, due to Gerda perceiving Lili's transition as taking her husband Einar away.

The systemic transphobia found in contemporary society is also acknowledged through numerous scenes in which Lili goes to doctors and psychiatrists for help, only for them to try to lock her up or perform questionable "treatments". She gets lucky in finding a supportive doctor who is willing to listen to her and support her in her view of herself, instead of labelling her as mentally ill, but this happens only after many bad experiences and at a point where she almost lost all faith in the medical system.

The film seems to want to express that it is due to the kindness of people around her that Lili is able to live and be happy as herself, at least before her untimely end. And that seems to be the main message of the film – guiding people to treat transgender people with kindness, love and support.

Feminisation and Spectacle

While the message and overall attitude of the film are well-meaning, we must delve into other aspects of *The Danish Girl's* representation of a transgender person, namely the tropes and stereotypes that it employs. We have already established that the overall narrative is supportive, however, it seems that the appeal of the movie does not come only from a well-made film and compelling story. It also comes from the subject matter itself – the spectacle of a trans person.

In her book *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano talks about the fascination that there seemingly is around "feminisation" concerning transfeminine people (41). Trans women characters are often portrayed "in the act" of dressing up, putting on make-up and doing voice training, and in those scenes, the performance of gender is highlighted, however, often only in relation to the transgender character and not the cisgender ones. Moments in which transfeminine characters "fail" at this performance are also often included, such as stumbling in heels or

wearing bad make-up (Serano 42). Altogether, it may make audiences think that trans women are only “pretending to be women” or “acting out femininity” and in addition are not very successful at it (Serano 44).

The Danish Girl includes some similar moments, as it is mainly focused on Einar’s transition into Lili and the necessary feminisation that comes with it. In preparation for Einar’s first full transformation into Lili, he is led by Gerda in learning to express femininity – he wears make-up and tries applying it himself, he is taught how to walk and what mannerisms to mimic and obtains a wig and clothes. However, the framing here seems a little different than the mocking approach other films have according to Julia Serano. Here, this journey is instead shown as one of learning, in which two lovers explore and have fun together. The “feminisation” is still on full display, however the ridiculing tone is missing. To better illustrate this point, I will compare *The Danish Girl* to the 2005 film *Transamerica* in the next section of this chapter.

From this example, and others similar to it, it seems that the film employs the trope of the trans person as a spectacle, without making it into a comedy or horror, and instead the object of fascination. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, fetishisation according to Stuart Hall is a strategy of representing that both disavows its object while also allowing for it to be looked at (“Spectacle of the ‘Other’” 268). We saw this in the few scenes with Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* that showed him in ways that elicited fear of disgust in the audience but also a sort of fascination. In *The Danish Girl* though, only the fascination seems to be left. While Lili is a complex character with many flaws, she is not meant to be feared or shunned, she is only meant to be watched. This brings Lili as a transgender woman to a similar position to one many cisgender women in film occupy – as the object of the male gaze, though amplified by her transfemininity.

The feminisation trope, as I will refer to it from here on out, can according to Serano also be manifested by the fascination with “before” and “after” photos of transfeminine people (44-45). *The Danish Girl* also satisfies this curiosity by including Lili’s life “before” as Einar, her transformation, and her life “after”. If Lili were only presented as her female self, similarly to how Brandon is presented in *Boys Don’t Cry*, and the film was instead fully focused on other aspects of her life, the film would have been less sensational and arguably less popular. It is

in part seeing Eddie Redmayne transform into a beautiful woman which draws people to the film.

However, we see that sensationalism is intentional, as it is amplified by some scenes which seemingly go for spectacle over any other function. For example, in a scene early on in the film as Lili is figuring out her identity, she steals Gerda's new nightgown and wears it under her formal clothes at an event. When they return home at night and are preparing for bed, a naked Gerda begins to disrobe Einar/Lili. She finds the nightgown and while she seems a bit surprised at first, she quickly incorporates it into the intimate moment. The scene is very tactile and sensual, with the silky texture of the gown and the touches of the lovers being shot in close focus, along with the many expressions ranging from hesitant and anxious to pleased. The gentle music and soft lighting of a night scene underline the feeling of intimacy and privacy. Due to these elements, the scene comes off as almost voyeuristic, with the fragile moment of exploration of one's gender and sexuality being put on display for all to see. As a queer person myself, it feels violating to have this experience of transgressing gender norms in the privacy of a lover's embrace instead of broadcasted to be gawked at and dissected.

Another scene that could fit into this is a strange parallel to Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*. A distressed Einar/Lili goes to the theatre and stands in front of a full-body mirror. He takes most of his clothes off and looks at himself naked. Then he takes off his underwear and tucks his penis between his legs, just like Buffalo Bill in the "Goodbye Horses" scene (see figure 6). This similarity is quite uncomfortable as it was supposed to evoke fear and/or disgust in *The Silence of the Lambs*, and here seems to work more for shock value and the spectacle of transgender bodies. And once again the scene seems to focus on a private and emotional moment.

So while the film's narrative approaches Lili figuring out her identity with compassion, the visual language often reminds the audience that she is "other" for being transgender, and satisfies the curiosity that often arises around transgender people and their bodies by showing her most intimate and vulnerable moments.



Figure 6: Einar/Lili (Eddie Redmayne) naked and tucking in front of a full-body mirror

As a potential consequence of the transgender as a spectacle trope, we see the trend of media and especially film and TV, containing transgender characters only when the story is about them being transgender. There are very few mainstream films that contain a transgender character and do not wholly focus on transition, or on being the victim or perpetrator of a crime due to being transgender. Moreover, by satisfying the curiosity of the cisgender public as *The Danish Girl* does, it arguably somewhat promotes asking invasive and inappropriate questions to real-life transgender people. While cisgender people can become more familiar with the experience of transitioning through this film, this knowledge can mean that the same kind of transparency is expected of people in the real world. Being asked strange questions about one's genitals or sex life is unfortunately an experience that many transgender people share.

Moreover, as Julia Serano points out, films that portray trans women as hyperfeminine, such as *The Danish Girl* and *Transamerica*, do not necessarily reflect the real-life values of those same women and are instead the reflection of filmmakers' sexualisation of women and femininity (45). This may lead to audiences having expectations of what trans women look like in the real world, which may differ from reality.

The Danish Girl* in comparison to *Transamerica

Transamerica is a road movie released in 2005 featuring a transgender woman as the main character. Of a different genre and preceding *The Danish Girl* by 10 years it has some similar but also differing attitudes and strategies in depicting a transgender woman. I would argue that both of those movies to some degree rely on the spectacle trope for their representation but they go about it in different ways. In *Transamerica*, the spectacle of a transgender person helps characterise the main character, Bree's personality and how her transness will play into the events of the movie. The tone is sometimes genuine and sometimes mocking and invalidating, with characters calling her "actually a man" on occasion. On the other hand, as I have talked about in the previous section, *The Danish Girl* presents Lili as neither comedic nor scary, but still as the "other" and allows the audience to watch her throughout her "transformation".

Transamerica opens with a transfeminine voice training video. Immediately we are thrust into the life of our trans woman main character Bree (played by Felicity Huffman). We watch her dress all in pink, put on make-up and go to an appointment for her surgery. The feminisation trope is inescapable right from the fact, and as the film goes on, it becomes clear that the tone is much different from *The Danish Girl*. The spectacle reaches beyond private moments of dressing up and into Bree's environment. The way that she dresses is notably different from other female characters in the film, with many elaborate and often pastel-coloured pieces of clothing. She is also often seen adjusting her clothing and hair overall being overly concerned about her appearance. This makes her come off as fake, and uncomfortably so. Julia Serano also points out that Bree occasionally stumbles in her high heels and that her foundation develops a sheen from transpiration at some points in the film, as can be seen in figure 7 (42). All of these elements together seem to suggest that it was the filmmakers' intention to make Bree seem as contrived as possible as if hiding a "real, masculine" Bree underneath. She is performing femininity, and failing at it (Serano 42). Moreover, the tone of the film makes it clear that we are supposed to laugh at this depiction and find it transgressive, rather than endearing or sympathetic.



Figure 7: *Transamerica's* Bree (Felicity Huffman) with sweat visible on her face



Figure 8: *The Danish Girl's* Lili (Eddie Redmayne) and her flawless femininity

On the other hand, Lili in *The Danish Girl* is portrayed with a much kinder tone. We also see her put on clothes and make-up but it seems to be instead framed as whimsical gender exploration. When Lili stumbles in heels, she is practising in her own home and laughs at her own clumsiness. Her hair and make-up are always perfect (figure 8) and she seems to find

more confidence in presenting feminine the more time goes on, instead of being always anxious and on edge. Though, it needs to be pointed out that this perception is constructed, the same way that it is constructed in *Transamerica*. Lili's make-up stays perfect even as she cries because that is what women seemingly do – they keep themselves as presentable as possible. On the other hand, Bree's failure being highlighted by bad make-up is the other side of that coin – she is not a real woman because she fails at keeping her femininity intact. Thus, both films participate in defining femininity and womanhood, however by either applying or denying such a label to their main characters.

However, comparing these two films also points out the shifting attitudes as well as the different intent with which these films were created. In *Transamerica*, the transness of the main character is a source of humour as well as the instigating elements for its plot. Bree is fake and her transness is to some degree as well. In *The Danish Girl*, transness is a fact of a character's life and the main focus of the film itself. She is, in the eyes of the film, a real woman because of her successful reproduction of femininity and we are not supposed to laugh at her but admire her. *The Danish Girl* also seems to be moving away from the perception of transgender people as deceivers, previously discussed in relation to *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Boys Don't Cry*. While Lili's gender is constructed through femininity, it is not framed as disingenuous or built on lies, but instead a sincere part of her identity.

Transfemininity and Transmasculinity

In the previous chapters, I have kept the discussion of how transmasculine and transfeminine representations differ from one another to a minimum. I believe that now, with three case studies and chapters worth of exploration, we can finally tackle this important issue. In the introduction, I have already mentioned that there have been some differences in the representations of cross-dressing, as transmasculine and transfeminine depictions bring up different emotions and ideas in the minds of audiences. In the early days of film, transfeminine cross-dressing was most often comedic, based on the patriarchal ideas of femininity as inferior and therefore men dressing up as women being ridiculous. Transmasculine cross-dressing, or feminine androgyny on the other hand, was treated much

more seriously, and in many ways was seen as alluring and attractive. With later films, tropes of cross-dressing in crisis or the cross-dressing killer became popular, which almost exclusively portrayed men dressing up as women, with very few transmasculine counterparts. Transmasculine portrayals of cross-dressing due to being less common seemingly did not develop as many strong stereotypes.

Similar attitudes can then be seen in more explicit representations of transmasculinity and transfemininity. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Buffalo Bill's gender variance was a big source of horror in *The Silence of the Lambs*, and that gender variance was transfeminine – a man was dressing up as a woman. Furthermore, it portrayed Buffalo Bill as dangerous and predatory, a framing that is more often applied to trans women over trans men. On the other hand, as we have seen in Chapter 2, *Boys Don't Cry* does not seem to employ any transmasculine-specific tropes, except for denying Brandon's transmasculinity in framing him as a lesbian towards the end of the film. The other two tropes that I mentioned in relation to that film, the trope of the transgender victim and the transgender person as deceptive, are applied to both transfeminine and transmasculine people. Patrick Califia-Rice writes about the different attitudes in *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*. He says: "[A man who wants to become a woman'] is scandalous, [a woman who wants to become a man'] is taken for granted" (178). This seems to come from the traditional values placed upon gender in Western society, in which men and masculinity are at the top of the binary gender hierarchy, and women and femininity are at the bottom. A woman trying to "reach" a higher position in the hierarchy by dressing as or becoming a man is in this framing seen as understandable, though frowned upon due to the feminine gender role she is seen as being supposed to fill. On the other hand, a man willingly dressing feminine or becoming a woman goes against this perceived hierarchy as logically no one should want to become or approximate the "lesser" gender. This often results in trans women being hyper-visible and made into a spectacle, with trans men being much less visible, to the point of being invisible. According to Julia Serano, trans men cannot be sensationalised the same way trans women are without bringing masculinity itself into question (46).

These differences have been quite clear in the films discussed so far, even with the more recent examples used in this chapter. In *Transamerica*, the main character is framed as fake and "performing femininity" badly, which is often used for comedy. Even in *The Danish Girl*,

which seemingly avoided many of the stereotypes found in earlier films, the transfeminine main character is sensationalised and made into a spectacle for the audience, something that we have not seen in, for example, *Boys Don't Cry*.

That is not to say there are no issues in the field of transmasculine representation. While a lack of widespread representation in film does result in less prevalent and harmful stereotypes, the lack of visibility leads to trans men often being erased or misunderstood. As Halberstam highlights in *Female Masculinity*, seeing real-life or media representations of trans men helps people become more aware of transmasculine-specific issues, as well as correct their misconceptions about the group (157-158).

Importantly, there are even fewer representations of nonbinary or other gender variant people on the trans spectrum. Addressing this disparity should definitely be a concern in future representations of transgender people, in order to equalise the level of visibility and understanding.

Conclusion

The Danish Girl could be considered one of the most successful mainstream films depicting an explicitly transgender person. Its release led many people to hear about the existence of transgender people for the first time, and its sympathetic framing directed audiences to treat transgender people with kindness and understanding.

In the first part of this chapter, I have highlighted the general themes and attitudes that have been employed in representing a transgender character, namely Lili's gender performativity but also the nuance added by presenting the struggles that Lili's partner Gerda goes through during her transition and the systemic transphobia found in the medical field at the time. In the second part, I have reflected on the sensationalist tone that the film takes in relation to Lili by watching her go through her transition and the invasions of privacy the film has no trouble portraying with the goal of satisfying curiosity. In the third part, I have compared *The Danish Girl* to a film released 10 years earlier, *Transamerica*, and have analysed the differences and similarities between the two portrayals, hopefully clarifying the shifts in public perception that happened between the two films, as well as the similar underlying

idea that both portrayals are based upon. Finally, in the last part, I have briefly brought up the differences between transmasculine and transfeminine representations, a crucial topic when talking about transgender representation as a whole. I have highlighted the increased visibility that trans women have over trans men and how that leads to more hostile portrayals and attitudes in real life. On the other hand, the invisibility of trans men also can lead to a misunderstanding, or even outright erasure, of transmasculine identities.

The Danish Girl had successfully avoided a number of harmful tropes and stereotypes about transgender people, and transgender women specifically, however, its sensationalising approach still built the main character Lili's identity on the patriarchal understanding of femininity and marked her as "other" for her transness. While the film and the other cultural events of the mid-2010s "Transgender Tipping Point" had great effects on transgender visibility and the advancement of trans rights, it still helped spread potentially harmful ideas about transgender people and transition.

Conclusion: Gender, Politics and *Lady Ballers*

With the help of three paradigm films from three different decades, I have explored the evolving representation of transgender people in mainstream film between the 1990s and today. In the introduction, I set the stage by briefly describing the forms of transgender representation found in films from the 1910s to the 1990s. As transgender people were not often pictured explicitly during that period, I highlighted cross-dressing as a means of expressing gender variance and exploration. Even before representing transgender people directly, these depictions may have contributed to stereotypes and tropes assigned to the community.

In the first chapter, I discussed *The Silence of the Lambs* and the usage of the trope of the cross-dressing killer. I have reflected on how the attitudes and theories of its time seem to have been reflected in the film's portrayal of Buffalo Bill, namely the now-debunked theory of autogynephilia and the medical gatekeeping of transition. I have also pointed out that with the inclusion of a transgender-coded character who is meant to be feared and perceived as disgusting, those same emotions can be or become tied to transgender people. In the second chapter, which focused on the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, I have highlighted its activist mission and the impact it had on the popularisation of queer topics in film as part of New Queer Cinema, while also criticising the use of the transgender victim trope and the theme of deception to characterise its main character Brandon. In the third and final chapter, I have chosen to analyse the most recent film of the three, *The Danish Girl*, a film which followed in the footsteps of films like *Boys Don't Cry* and reached mainstream critical and commercial success. It became part of a cultural moment dubbed the "Transgender Tipping Point" which catapulted transgender people and issues into the mainstream. Out of the three films, this last one seems to focus the most on portraying transgender people as relatable, but complex human beings worthy of understanding and love, even while slipping into some tropes of its own. The sequence of these three films has indicated a general trend towards more considerate and careful representations of transgender people between the 1990s and today, accompanied by greater understanding and acceptance of the community.

After looking extensively at the past, in this concluding part of the thesis, I would like to instead have a look at the present and what might be awaiting us in the future. I would like

to use a recent example of a film touching on today's discussions around trans people that made waves on social media. *Lady Ballers* (2023), released exclusively on the streaming service of the right-wing US media company *The Daily Wire*, is a comedy which seeks to weigh in on the "transgender sports" debate. While the film is not mainstream or popular in the traditional sense, it might help us better understand the situation that we currently find ourselves in, with the internet and independent media gaining more and more influence on the global stage.

Directed by *The Daily Wire*'s co-CEO Jeremy Boreing and starring a number of right-wing and conservative US figures, the film's political intentions are hard to deny, and the film's content only supports that. Devoid of any sincere discussion on the inclusion of transgender people in sports, it instead focuses on cisgender men pretending to be transgender women in order to gain an advantage, a popular modern talking point. As I have mentioned in the introduction to this film, while *Lady Ballers* does not contain genuine representations of transgender people, its focus on transgender topics has real-life ramifications and contributes to the topic no matter the inaccuracy. Moreover, I would like to highlight a different way of approaching this film that might help us in analysing other media of this kind.

***Lady Ballers* and Oppositional Reading**

Lady Ballers tell the story of basketball coach Robert who, in the past, was successful in leading his team of high school basketball players to victory. Now, years later, still working as a coach but much less successful, he tries to become a "winner" again by convincing his old team to pretend to be trans women in order to dominate women's basketball and other sports. The group make it all the way to the final qualifying match for the amateur section of the "Global Games" before realising their actions were wrong and giving up on their deception.

With the ideological stances fully on display, it is difficult to view the film as anything more than what it is at face value – an almost propagandistic piece, intended to above all spread a certain point of view. It has no intention to represent transgender people in good faith and is mainly concerned with framing gender as a proxy issue to a host of right-wing sentiments

and grievances. It may seem that above all, it helps highlight the current moment in time in relation to the attitudes around transgender people and the polarised politics found in many aspects of everyday life.

However, there is another way that we can engage with this film. In *Encoding/Decoding*, Stuart Hall discusses the complexity of interpreting a piece of media and its message. He identifies different codes that have been used to encode meaning by the creator and then to be decoded on the side of the audience (Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” 136). The dominant code, for example, is one which operates within the dominant or hegemonic position in society (“Encoding/Decoding” 136). For *Lady Ballers*, this would probably mean engaging with its message the way that the creators intended it, recognising the conservative talking points and identifying a few tropes that have been common in representing transgender people in the past. If we briefly engage with the film in this way, we may observe the return of the deceiver trope and the conversion storyline, which together frame trans people as deceivers with ulterior motives for their transition, and position as the “happy end” a situation in which all characters return to their cisgender identities and patriarchal ways of gender expression.

However, Stuart Hall proposes other ways to decode media too. He identifies two more potential codes – the negotiated code, which incorporates elements from a dominant reading, while also offering resistance to it, and an oppositional code (“Encoding/Decoding” 137-138). This last code allows for a fully different reading from the dominant one, which recognises the hegemonic forces at work and challenges them by opposing them.

I would like to offer an oppositional reading of *Lady Ballers* which not only rejects its mocking and demeaning attitude towards transgender people but positions the film as having a progressive view of gender itself. This would in turn challenge the strictly conservative lean that the film, and the issues discussed, have.

Lady Ballers is a film full of cross-dressing. While it attempts to leverage it for comedy, as we have seen in many other films in the past, we have also seen cross-dressing employed as a means of exploring gender and questioning rigid gender roles, such as in *Some Like It Hot*. *Lady Ballers* is more than willing to show their main male characters dressing and behaving in what is seen as stereotypically feminine ways. One of them, Alex, who was previously in

Robert's high-school basketball team, is seen working in a drag café in the modern day. He and Robert are reunited as Robert is hired there as well and neither of the men seems too hesitant to cross-dress. Alex even wears his "work clothes" in public which ends with him being mistaken for a trans woman at a sports event, which then sends the entire plot into motion. However, Alex and Robert are not the only ones. After some initial outrage, a motivational speech from the coach and some explanations on the topic of gender, the rest of the team also quite quickly agrees to pose as trans women.

They even let Robert's 8-year-old daughter Winnie give a presentation on the complexities of gender identity, something it is implied that she learned at school. The group listens intently and even takes notes as the little girl explains that medical transition or gender dysphoria are not needed in order for someone to identify as trans, that gender is fluid and can change and that women can have beards. Some of the players even get excited after finding out that they can be a man and a woman at different times. This moment seems to jumpstart some of the players' gender exploration journey. Felix, who starts going by Shelix, starts documenting his experiences online, in a clear parallel to real-life trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney. He wears dresses and make-up and seems to enjoy presenting that way, even though he ends up reverting to his masculine self at the end of the film. More importantly, Alex seems to make a realisation about himself towards the end of the film due to this experience and tells his coach that he is indeed a trans woman, something which is swiftly denied by the reactionary coach. It seems that for some characters this journey, which started with deception, ended in genuine expressions of gender exploration and queerness.

Additionally, the society in *Lady Ballers* seems to behave differently towards trans people than it does in reality. In this borderline utopian version of our world, trans women are almost universally loved and respected, no matter their gender presentation or level of transition. Immediately after their first match, the Lady Ballers team gathers a massive amount of fans and the players start receiving offers for sponsorships and other opportunities. And while pushback to and criticism of the team's actions are sometimes shown and voiced, they are never acted on and are very easily dismissed. None of the Lady Ballers ever receive transphobic hate online or are excluded because of their gender. Even when they "detransition", there are seemingly no repercussions, and everyone goes back to their lives as normal.

In this sense, the main character Robert is the villain of the story, exploiting this hyper-progressive society's pure views on gender for his own gain and upon some reflection deciding to reinforce rigid gender roles rather than open his mind. By going against the intended reading, we can transform the conservative anti-hero into a villain exploiting an almost utopian version of society in which transgender people are not only not oppressed, but seemingly most catered to. This way, rather than being a critique of a hyper-progressive world in the eyes of conservatives, the film can become a critique of a reactionary worldview that limits the variety of expressions and oppresses those who stray from that norm. Moreover, this oppositional reading highlights the rampant defying of traditional gender roles that the film employs, even while trying to reinforce those same roles. The film tries to verbally assert its views, however, the visual of most of the main characters in drag works strongly against it.

An oppositional reading such as the one I have proposed can help in challenging the power that these kinds of media are trying to assert. By taking seriously what is meant as satire, we can take back control and defy the way that they want to affect the world.

Gender and Current Politics

In the current day, "gender" has become a big political topic, morphing into a proxy issue for a host of other, mainly reactionary topics, that has positioned trans people at the centre of the most recent moral panic. As Judith Butler writes in their recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, right-wing movements employ this tactic in which people's fears and anxieties are bundled under one word or phrase, which they then rally behind as the most important political issue (8). Gender, which only a few decades prior had been a simple word describing gender identity and societal topics tied to it, such as women's and LGBTQ+ rights, is now framed as a threat to children, the family and even civilisation itself (Butler 6).

This moral panic comes with a host of legislative and literal attacks on transgender and gender-variant people. The number of bills targeting trans people in the United States has gone from 79 in 2020, to more than 400 in the first half of 2023 alone (Butler 106). We are targeted in areas of healthcare, education and even public life, such as with bathroom bills that limit access based on gender assigned at birth and not gender identity.

This backlash is somewhat reminiscent of the situation in the US in the 1930s. The Hays Code was introduced to censor Hollywood films that had become too outrageous for some reactionary groups. While censorship of the Hays Code kind has not yet reached the mainstream film industry today, we can already see some similar forms of it at work in the form of book bans. It is important to note though that not only books about LGBTQ+ topics are targeted, but also for example books about race or the Holocaust (Butler 110). This highlights that while trans people and queer people more generally are bearing the brunt of this attack, they are not the only intended targets.

We have seen a lot more polarization in the domain of politics in the last few decades, potentially to some degree due to the presence of the internet and social media, which promotes the spread of alternate sources of information and media. For this reason, I also thought it would be important to talk about *Lady Ballers* in this chapter, as while the film is not mainstream or popular in the traditional sense, it highlights the power the internet has. Released exclusively on *The Daily Wire's* streaming platform DailyWire+, it nonetheless gained traction online and became somewhat notorious. When asking my friends, many of which are queer too, most of them had heard of the film and its plot and attitude, despite only hearing from it on social media or through word of mouth.

Right-wing companies like *The Daily Wire* have been working on growing alternate media sources, focused on right-wing opinions and issues for some time now. They may be today's version of the Hays Code, where dissatisfied reactionary audiences turn their attention towards media that specifically caters to their views. Such a shift could bring even greater polarisation and divide and spell even further repercussions in the domains of politics and social life.

It is difficult to pinpoint the cause or even the beginning point of this backlash. The topic of LGBTQ+ rights has been opposed by right-wing groups for as long as it has been a source of public concern, so this development is certainly not coming out of nowhere. However, something especially relevant to this thesis must be considered, and that is the role of representation and visibility. In *One from the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling* Morgan M. Page shares that through her work in trans history, she has become convinced that visibility might cause more harm than good (142-143). She has noticed that instead of seeing a linear progression which improves trans people's lives over time due to visibility and

better understanding, there seem to be cycles (Page 143). These cycles follow periods of increased visibility, with periods of greater pushback and danger to the lives of trans people. We may now be in the midst of the opposition phase one of those cycles, which might have started in the mid-2010s with the “Transgender Tipping Point” and media such as *The Danish Girl*, and has grown more powerful and vicious in the last decade. And though the situation is dire, we must not forget that things can get better and we can all be free one day.

Conclusion

Focusing my thesis on the representation of transgender people in film seemed very relevant in today’s political climate. While the way that media affects public perception is a complex topic with many nuances, I hope I have been able to present some salient examples that show the effects that films have had on our society, both positive and negative. This is incredibly important now, as films like *Lady Ballers* could signify this new anti-gender shift in direction reaching the level of mainstream media, a development that could put even more lives of transgender people, and queer people in general, in danger.

There seems to be an assumption that increased visibility will automatically bring greater acceptance for a marginalised group, as we have seen with the “Transgender Tipping Point”. And while there inarguably has been a shift during that time and since, the drawbacks of such visibility are more often downplayed in the mainstream. As I have highlighted previously, it has been observed that periods of greater visibility are also accompanied by greater pushback, such as we see today, however, such a pattern could also be seen in the US in the 1970s (Lewis 60).

Moreover, focusing representation on only certain kinds of marginalised people can further isolate others (Berberick 124). The three paradigm films that I have analysed are all concerned with white, binary trans people who seek a traditional transition and gender expression. This may also mean that the mainstream understanding of a transgender person includes all those traits and thus obscures those who differ, or who are at the intersection of other marginalised identities. Also important to note is the fact that while visibility and representation might help in some areas, they cannot materially help those transgender

people who are homeless, live in poverty, do not have access to medical care and otherwise struggle in their daily lives.

Of course, representation is not all bad either. In focusing on mainstream and popular film I have necessarily omitted large parts of the diversity, creativity and innovation that can be found in independent, or underground, film. Such films made by and starring transgender people of all different identities and walks of life have offered alternative ways of representing transgender people, avoiding many harmful tropes and stereotypes and bringing new ideas and ways of seeing the world. However, many of these works will stay in obscurity and will not have the impact needed to challenge mainstream versions of representation.

So, what can we do to improve transgender representation? First, and most importantly, we must interrogate the motivations behind these representations. What stories are we trying to tell, and what impacts may those have? Are we applying reductionist or harmful stereotypes that may contribute to trans people's marginalisation? For this reason, including those who are directly impacted by those representations is necessary. But more importantly, it should be more than just inclusion.

In my opinion, the best version of trans representation can only be made with the contribution of trans people in multiple areas of its creation. Transgender actors showing what actual trans people look like, transgender costume designers and filmmakers making sure we are not singled out by our looks, and transgender writers and directors having power over the story and themes. Representation fully in the hands of trans people, with a focus on embracing trans people of colour, disabled trans people and stories from beyond the global north, is the most impactful way that we can challenge the narratives that have been made about us, without us. It is only by working as a community that we can reach liberation, not only in film and media but also in our lives and societies.

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