

Why are filmmakers so fixated on women's penises?

An analysis of the recurrent focus on the genitalia of transgender women in film.

KELLYN BOTHA | 2136707

MASTER OF ARTS IN FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES

RESEARCH DISSERTATION



University of the Witwatersrand School of Arts

Degree and personal details

Name: Kellyn Botha

Person Number: 2136707

Supervisor: Dr Nduka Mntambo

Degree: Master of Arts by Research

Title: Why are filmmakers so fixated on women's penises? – An analysis of the recurrent focus on the genitalia of transgender women in film.

Ethics Clearance Number: H19/10/03

Word Count (excl. Cover pages, abstract, acknowledgements, table of contents, and bibliography): 20 474

A research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Film and Television Studies in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

School of Arts

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Students

I Kellyn Botha, (person number: 2136707) am a student registered for MA by Research in the year 2019.

I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.
- I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.
- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.
- I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature: _____



Date: 21 October 2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all the friends, family and colleagues who supported me with their time, finances, feedback and encouragement throughout the creation of this piece. I acknowledge also the many researchers and activists who paved the way before me. Special thanks must go to my editor and friend, Kate Jennings, for her deletion of many a superfluous comma.

Abstract

Transgender women have long been misrepresented in cinema through the recurring use of representational signs which have bolstered stereotypes within the audiences who consume said cinema. The most notable of these signs is the penis, with transfeminine characters who speak openly about their genitalia, and desire to surgically remove their penises, framed as “pathetic” and comedic. Meanwhile, those who do not willingly reveal the presence of their penises, and especially those who use them, are framed as “deceptive” and often face some form of retribution by the end of the narrative.

This study broadly contextualises the history of transgender cinema, analysing the ways in which the genitalia of trans women are referenced in three films released between 1970 and 2020, namely *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boy Meets Girl* (2014). The deconstruction of these films and critique of some existing analyses of them demonstrates a clear trend toward more holistic and sensitive representations of trans women over time, from agents of violence and abject horror, to complex human beings with diverse character traits. Also revealed, however, is that, regardless of the changes in trans representation, the penis – or genitalia, broadly – remains a recurring theme. The growth in trans activism and social acceptance of trans people, then, has not yet been able to dislodge the notion of the transgender body as an inherently sexual object, with strong ties to themes of transmedicalism, abjection, and social degradation still associated with such bodies.

Contents

Cover

Degree details and submission forms

Abstract and acknowledgments

Contents

1 – Introduction	1
1.1 – Writer background	1
1.2 – Research topic background	1
1.3 – Literature review	4
1.4 – Methodology	6
1.5 – Theoretical framework	7
2 – A brief history of transgender identities in society and cinema	15
2.1 – Ancient and diverse cultural interpretations of gender	15
2.2 – The criminalisation of trans bodies	16
2.3 – Progress and backlash	17
3 – An analysis of representations of trans women’s genitalia in film	21
3.1 – <i>Myra Breckinridge</i> (1970)	21
3.2 – <i>The Crying Game</i> (1992)	26
3.3 – <i>Boy Meets Girl</i> (2014)	32
4 – Where to from here?	38
4.1 – Applying media theory to reality	38
4.2 – A way forward for a trans media-maker	41
5 – Conclusion	42
References	44

Why are filmmakers so fixated on women's penises?

An analysis of the recurrent focus on the genitalia of transgender women in film.

1 – Introduction

1.1 – Writer background

Writing about intercultural cinema, Marks (2000: 10) states: “Questions of form cannot be separated from the political conditions in which these works were produced”.

Marks' statement holds true for all forms of media, including this dissertation. The questions raised, arguments made, and the very language used in this research are indelibly tied to both the social landscape of their time and the identity of the researcher. Thus, for the sake of context and transparency, I must acknowledge my own positionality as the author.

I am a transgender woman, living in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the time of writing. I graduated with a Bachelor of Journalism from Rhodes University in 2016, and worked in the communications departments of a number of LGBTI+¹ advocacy organisations.

Given my gender identity and work as an activist, the question of how trans women are represented in film is perhaps more personal than it is objectively academic. I have therefore opted to write in the first-person in order to avoid a false sense of detachment to the subject matter. However, all academic rigour and ethical guidelines have been followed in constructing this text to ensure the robustness of my arguments.

I hope that the specific framing I bring to the issue will in its own way add to the existing body of knowledge on the subject and contribute to the emancipation of transgender and gender-diverse persons everywhere. If this work gives just one filmmaker pause for thought before they tell transgender stories, I will consider it a success.

1.2 – Research topic background

Trans issues are more than an intellectual debate in academia: the topic is a major preoccupation in ‘Western’² culture (Phillips, 2006: 1), with few film critics fully examining cinema's recurrent demonisation of trans people despite their diversity and vulnerability (Phillips, 2006: 86). It is this very lack of diversity in representations of trans people which I

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and other identities. Throughout this piece I will focus on transgender (or trans), identities.

² Defining the ‘West’ is near-impossible and beyond the scope of this work. For my purposes I am using ‘West’ and ‘Western’ to mean the Anglophone ‘Global North’ countries which disproportionately influence modern global culture.

take issue with, and which has led me to critique these films specifically through their attitude towards the feminine penis, due to the pervasiveness and repetitiveness of representations of trans women's genitalia.

Transfeminine persons often experience a phenomenon called gender dysphoria, and many thus desire or work actively towards the goal of removing the penis from their bodies through the act of gender affirming surgery. However, many trans women and transfeminine³ persons do not experience dysphoria in this way and have no desire for surgery. Still more, despite dealing with gender dysphoria, do not define themselves by their penises (Bettcher, 2014: 388-389). In short, trans people are people and assuming they all necessarily despise their bodies is an overly broad generalisation. To only see trans women's lives as filled with pathological body-hate, violence and drama is to overlook the numerous ways in which we exist, and can be portrayed in film and other media. By fixating on the existence of a penis where one is not commonly expected to exist, and conflating anatomy with identity, trans bodies, rather than personhood, continually take centre-stage.

Why then, given this diversity, do we see so many 'mainstream' films featuring transgender characters filled with imagery, references, or entire narrative arcs relating to their genitals? Why is a trans woman's penis the central focus of her story in film when the vaginas of cisgender⁴ women and the penises of cisgender men are non-issues (Lehman, 2001: 148-149), except in pornography and certain explicit comedies?

This fixation can perhaps be attributed to a pre-existing misapprehension in the societies which consume and produce such media, of transgender identity being innately linked to genitalia. This obsession may also stem from the widespread belief that transgender women medically transition/express their innate gender identity as some sort of fetish or as a means of conning heterosexual men into sexual relations. The fetishistic view is largely linked to the now-controversial diagnosis of 'autogynephilia'⁵ (Wynn, 2018). Proposed by medical theorists such as Dr Ray Blanchard, this theory is largely discredited today (Moser, 2010: 790-809). The other view – that of the 'predatory' trans person is still evident in public debates surrounding trans women's rights to access public bathrooms. These debates are also present in depictions of transgender women in film (Moser, 2010: 790-809). Both theories presume that medically transitioning from one gender-expression to another is somehow innately linked to sex, with the penis, the Freudian symbol of sexual and physical power, causing anxiety and fear in the public's perception of what would otherwise be considered mere sexual organs (Serano, 2007: 35-52).

Representations of trans women in film have historically played off this hyper-sexualisation and the threat that women with 'male' genitalia pose to the perceived natural order by representing trans women as antagonists.

³ Given that not all feminine persons with trans identities consider themselves women, I will on occasion use this word in place of 'trans woman'.

⁴ Non-transgender, also referred to as 'cis'.

⁵ The belief that trans women somehow turn inward their sexual attraction to other women, and thus transition to 'get off' on themselves (Moser, 2010: 790-809).

When the ‘other’ is depicted in film as existing outside of the stereotypes which other them, those in power who consume such images feel affronted and threatened by the need to re-evaluate their conceptions of marginalised groups (Thorn, 2018). This need arises from the fact that, over time, marginalised people, tired of being shown images of themselves with which they do not identify, demand recognition for who they are. Eventually those in power must either suppress or accept these demands (Thorn, 2018). It seems that the growing impact of trans-rights activism has led to the latter as there is a clear trend towards more nuanced representations of trans women in recent films. Despite this apparent shift towards greater acceptance of trans identities (Hines, 2007: 1-14) and an increase in trans characters represented in film (Phillips, 2006: 165-166), there has not been any real change in the prominence of the penis in these narratives.

My research intends to analyse and problematise the ways in which the penis is used to cinematically represent transgender women and trans identities. I do so against the backdrop of ever-changing historical and social contexts which have influenced the films I analyse. My aim is to demonstrate that, despite the recent shift toward more nuanced portrayals of trans characters (Halberstam, 2018: 92), the penis remains a notable recurring trope in representations of trans women in film.

1.2.1 – A note on language

It is important to note that language, especially in terms of identity, is ever-changing. Language used to refer to, and used by, LGBTI+ people seemingly fluctuates more than most. Many of the theorists I cite use words such as “transsexual”, that are becoming obsolete for their inaccuracy or exclusionary and offensive connotations. Linguistic shifts now favour the terms ‘trans’ and ‘transgender’ (Phillips, 2006: 11). I will therefore use these terms, except when quoting others, while realising that my own terminology may itself be similarly dismissed in the future.

1.2.2 – Relevance to South Africa

As South African universities strive towards a “decolonised” syllabus, this focus only on ‘Western’ cinema may seem regressive. However, our globalised worldview is still heavily influenced by ‘Western’ powers. As such, it would be naïve to claim that ‘Western’ films are irrelevant in the South African context. Aside from tabloid newspapers, television news and a handful of documentaries, fictional cinematic representations of trans people are scarce. Thus, most South African cinemagoers are exposed to trans people and characters through ‘Western’ media.

Black African trans women face disproportionate violence in South Africa – a result of the pervasiveness of colonial systems of racial and sexual oppression and control in its collective culture (Swarr, 2012: 183-206). Although there are no exact statistics, a large number of transgender and other LGBTI+ persons have died violently in South Africa over the last five

years, many of whom were known personally to me or my peers. Thus, to better understand how such brutality is affected by or affects trans representation is, I believe, immensely valuable.

1.3 – Literature review

In conducting a literature review for this research topic, three ‘traditional’ search-sources were utilised: JSTOR, Google Scholar and the University of the Witwatersrand library website. The search was not limited to these, and many of the sources referenced throughout this work come from a year of collating research.

There is a wealth of research on transgender genitalia, but much of this is of a medical nature and looks primarily at surgical methodologies or the psychological impact of gender-affirming care, while others focus broadly on transgender identity and access to public spaces. Research into transgender representation in film is less abundant and largely deals with broader issues of representation in documentary or pornographic settings. While some of this work aligns with my thesis, it rarely covers the specificities of cinematic representations of trans women’s genitalia. In a review of the titles found in online and library searches on the topic, I found few texts which explicitly deal with the questions in this dissertation, although there were a number which were broadly relevant or contained chapters that touched on the subject at hand.

Crossdressing Cinema: An Analysis of Transgender Representation in Film (Miller, 2012) contains a broad set of analyses of 24 films of disparate genres representing trans characters. The text deliberately takes a “broad view of transgender representations” in order to show that the inherent distance between trans characters and the cisgender audiences that consume these films is due to a “lack of legitimacy attributed to transgender identities”. The text makes multiple references to the representations of the penis, most notably in films such as *Myra Breckinridge* and *The Crying Game*, two of the three films I will be analysing closely. However, given its broadness, I feel my focus on the penis and the framing of these film analyses in an historical context is a justified expansion of existing theories.

Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film (Straube, 2014), offers a hopeful look into trans cinema by analysing scenes of dreaming, singing, dancing and other forms of expression which trans characters may utilise, to critically re-read these films as optimistic and affirmative re-imaginings of trans embodiment in otherwise problematic cinema. The text limits its references to the penis, or genitalia more broadly, to descriptions of the events unfolding within the films it analyses. Overall, it offers an interesting alternative to negative critiques of problems in portrayals of trans persons in film, but it does not answer the specific questions of representation I raise here.

Jack Halberstam’s *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018), likewise does not deal with the specific issues at hand in this text, but remains valuable in offering assessments of transmasculine representations which are beyond the scope of this project, as

well as broadly outlining trans identities and history from the perspective of a trans academic writer (for those seeking further reading) in an often humorous and accessible manner. Vitally, Halberstam's writings on trans cinema affirm my own findings that representations of trans persons have become more sensitive in recent decades.

Gender and the Transsexual Body in Transamerica (Jensen, 2018) offers a broad overview of the way the trans protagonist's body, mannerisms and dress-sense are portrayed in the comedy road-trip film *Transamerica* (2005). While this film is not part of my analysis, some of Jensen's work – particularly on the genital dysphoria of Bree, the protagonist of the film, and her desire to distance herself from her penis in order to be perceived as a 'real' woman has some useful applications to this research.

Perhaps the most recent mainstream publication on this topic is *Transgender Cinema* (Bell-Metereau, 2019), which came into publication at around the same time that I first conceptualised my research topic. It appears to be a broad reading of the history of trans cinema; a chronological summary of films featuring trans characters rather than an in-depth analysis. As such I have opted to not include this work in my dissertation in favour of disparate works and theories which can be better applied to my research. I will not outline most of these texts here due partly to their number and partly to the fact that many make only minor, though valuable, contributions to my work.

I will, however, mention three sources which have been of immense value to me in forming my theories on the representations of, and cultural stigmas around, transgender genitalia.

The first is *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Kristeva, 1980; 1982), which outlines some of the potential psychological reasons for abjection – the visceral horror and disgust of confronting the grotesque – and the innate physical responses that accompany it, such as vomiting, defecating, or loathing an item of food (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 2-3). The rotting corpse is another object of abjection⁶, one which shows that the state of otherness is not so impossible or alien to our own realities. Although Kristeva's work is not strictly about trans persons, her theory proposes a useful understanding of why the transgender penis is so reviled.

Another work of value is Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007). This book – equal parts autobiography, philosophical manifesto and academic text⁷ – looks at the many ways that “fear, contempt, and dismissiveness toward femininity shape society's attitudes towards trans women, as well as gender and sexuality as a whole.”

Lastly, another source which has influenced my philosophy is *ContraPoints*. This is a YouTube channel created and hosted by Natalie Wynn, a trans woman who left her academic background in philosophy to create digital content aimed at de-radicalising right-wing extremists. Throughout my research I will make limited references to her videos – and the

⁶ This is not, per Kristeva, purely because of the connotation of disease the corpse may carry. Rather it causes abjection by forcing us to acknowledge that our bodies are the same as that of a corpse and that the division between life and death is uncomfortably permeable (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 2-4).

⁷ The book also had an impact in the early years of my coming to terms with my trans identity.

online content of others such as Oliver Thorn's *Philosophy Tube* – as I feel it is a novel way of adding modern, easily accessible voices to my research.



Screenshot of Natalie Wynn in character for her *ContraPoints* video entitled "Gender Critical" (2019).

Historically, it has been difficult for marginalised groups to access the technology or capital to make films or speak to wider audiences on the issues which affect them. The democratising influence of the Internet has allowed transgender persons to create insightful and rigorous content outside of the traditionally exclusionary space of academia. In short, while academics (with the notable exception of the likes of Serano and Halberstam) are still debating why trans people are trans, online content creators such as Wynn are countering the outdated arguments around gender identity with a combination of personal insights, clear articulation, and a unique sense of humour.

1.4 – Methodology

I will conduct an analysis of visual and narrative representations of trans women's genitalia against differing historical backdrops, assessing a select cross-section of three 'mainstream'⁸ feature-films: *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boy Meets Girl* (2014).

Interestingly, and certainly not deliberately, the films I have chosen each have an actor of a different identity playing the trans role. In *Myra Breckinridge*, Myra is played by the cisgender

⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation I define 'mainstream' as feature-length films produced commercially for public consumption, as opposed to media created for art exhibitions or academic research.

woman Raquel Welch, while Dil in *The Crying Game* is played by the cisgender man Jaye Davidson, and *Boy Meets Girl*'s Ricky is played by the trans woman Michelle Hendley⁹.

While all these films are from the Anglophone 'West' (i.e. North America and Europe), due to the historical impact and ongoing widespread penetration of British and American values and culture, it does not make sense to isolate 'Western' works as not being relevant to the local context in which I write. These films and the attitudes they espouse are largely pervasive.

I will be deconstructing these films through a loose Derridean lens as film is not "something that must be analysed and deciphered in order to deliver forth its meaning but something that means in itself". As Marks (2000: 145-146) argues, semiotic analysis, while valuable, cannot fully take into account the cinematic experience and what it may mean to audiences whether transgender or cisgender.

My in-depth analysis specifically starts in the 1970s with *Myra Breckinridge* as few mainstream films prior to this depicted trans persons. The other two films were released at roughly two-decade intervals. This selection is due not only to the limited length and scope of this text, but also to demonstrate a clear increase in visibility of, and sensitivity towards, trans persons in cinema (Hines, 2007: 1-14), which seems to have kicked off in the 1990s as "mainstream cinema parted ways with the tendency to represent transgender people as mad, bad, and dangerous" (Halberstam, 2018: 92). Despite this trend toward positive and nuanced representations, I will attempt to demonstrate through the my analyses of the selected films that the focus on trans women's genitalia has remained virtually unchanged over the years. Admittedly a cross-section of three films out of half a century of cinema is not enough to definitively prove a trend, however. While I do attempt to remedy this by making reference to other films as well that fit the pattern I have noticed, there are few theories in the field of humanities, I think, which do not have their fair share of counter-examples, and so this text perhaps best not taken as gospel truth, but rather one possible interpretation within the existing literature.

Finally, after assessing these films' representations of trans women and their genitalia, and outlining their place in the broader history of trans cinema, I will posit potential ideas for a way forward from this status quo, drawing on theories of representation for other marginalised groups and autoethnographic cinema. In doing so I will outline my idea of the best path toward enlightened, nuanced and emancipatory trans cinema.

1.5 – Theoretical framework

I will position this project at the intersection of three theoretical fields upon which I expand below – namely gender, society and media. The theorists on whom I will be relying do not all necessarily hold the same ideas. My intent in using them is not to build an impregnable wall of mutual agreement on this topic, which would perhaps make my ideas easier to defend, but to

⁹ It is often a critique of filmic representations of trans women that they are played by cis men, so perhaps this happenstance will allow me to make my points about representations of the penis without getting caught up in the actual identities of the actors.

take what is useful and sensible from each and construct a new paradigm for understanding transgender cinema.

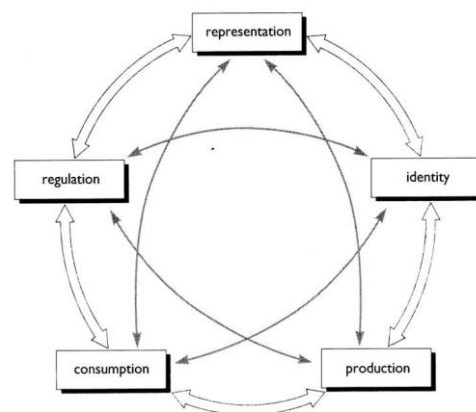
I have dedicated a subsection of this chapter to outlining my theoretical framework for gender identity in order to properly highlight that content. For my understanding of society and media, then, I will rely on theorists like Michel Foucault, as well as Jacques Derrida to a more limited extent.

Foucault writes that, from the eighteenth century to the present, power over the subject has decentralised from the state, or sovereign, to society. Historically, bodies that were seen to have committed crimes against the King were tortured and executed publicly in order to reinforce the power and vengeance of the King (Foucault, 1975: 3-7). Today, bodies that deviate from the norms of society, such as transgender persons, are disciplined in order to be rehabilitated as productive members of society (Bosworth, 2012: 12). Today, ‘deviant’ behaviour is corrected through disciplinary punishment – such as coercion to hormone therapy and surgery in the case of transgender bodies (Bosworth, 2012: 12-14).

Foucault argues that, since the 18th century, sex – and thus sexual behaviour – has become a matter of public interest through the study of population statistics. Sex is increasingly an object of knowledge production with medicine, psychiatry and criminal justice drawing on and scientifically studying the sexual confessions of the average person (Foucault, 1975: 149-150; 170-185). Interest in sex as public entertainment has also increased, making it less a private matter than a public one. The sensation and otherness of transgender sex and sexuality faces particularly intense scrutiny.

Bosworth (2012: 14) agrees with this sentiment, observing that psychology’s foundation is intimately linked the dissemination of these discipline-oriented ideas of sex and gender in society. He adds that, as his arguments regarding gender, sexuality and the psychiatrisation of trans identities show, psychology constructs and marginalises the behaviour of deviant modern bodies so as to police their delinquency against societal norms.

Derrida’s legacy relating to contemporary transgender discourse links to his work on ‘deconstruction’ which has been used in the past to deconstruct the idea of womanhood and is equally applicable to transgender identities and the existing gender order (Draz, 2017: 91-98). However, in terms of my work I place more value on deconstruction as an act rather than a tool (Prasad, 2007) that allows for a looser, more varied system of cinematic interpretation. Film, after all, cannot be grasped “solely by an intellectual act” as it evokes much more in all who consume it (Marks, 2000: 145). This is especially so for myself as a trans woman who must contend with personal dehumanisation and objectification while analysing this content. It does not matter what intentions each filmmaker may have had, as it is impossible for media-makers to fully imbue meaning into their work because meaning is dependent on context (Hall, 1997: 24-26). Thus, given my



The 'circuit of culture' which defines the interactions between media and society (Hall, 1997).

experience as a trans woman who has had to contend with objectification and dehumanisation in media, I will doubtless find meanings and truths in these works that the filmmaker may not have intended, but which nevertheless impact on their film's context.

This impact is made evident when considering Hall's conception of culture and how cultural practices interact with media representation. The concept of culture itself is rather nebulous, as is the concept of the 'West'. Thus, what forms a unitary culture is the degree to which members of a particular group have shared meanings for given signs and the practices around said signs (Hall, 1997: 1-2). The way in which these shared meanings are formed are visually exemplified by the 'circuit of culture', developed by Hall and several other semioticians, which highlights the interplay between production, consumption, regulation, representation and identity¹⁰. Thus, inasmuch as the identities of marginalised groups can influence media production and representation, it is those very representations which affect the consumers of the media and the identities of those being represented (Hall, 1997: 1).

An admittedly limited study conducted at the University of Arizona in 2012 seems to confirm Hall's theory in the real world in terms of transgender representation. The study found that increased exposure to news excerpts and documentaries resulted in a marked increase in knowledge of, and sensitivity toward, transgender issues in participants (Rehma & Walters, 2012: 336-348).

So, while there is no such thing as a single transphobic culture, given that per Hall culture is an inherently nebulous concept, it seems that at a general level at least, a culture of transphobia is shared by many of the filmmakers whose works I examine given the shared meanings for given signs (transgender bodies) seen throughout cinema. This culture extends to their target audiences, as filmmakers must rely on the same tropes being near-consistently interpreted to relate their narratives to the public.

Hall's work, and my understanding of the impact of film on audiences, is supplemented by Nichols, despite the fact that he does not seem to take into account the lived realities of marginalised groups and how representation affects them. Nichols (1981: 2) writes that the status quo of media representation "must be desired by those it recruits: no society could long survive if it had to constantly force its members from cradle to grave to assume their places within its relations of communication and exchange". This, to me, rings false, given that many marginalised groups historically have had very limited resources and means to challenge the media's status quo or produce their own content (Marks, 2000: 3). Power dynamics play an important role in representation, and a power imbalance can often influence representation to a degree that cannot be countered (Hall, 1997: 259).

Nevertheless, some of Nichols' theories are useful. This includes his ideas on why ostensibly fictional representations can influence the prejudices of audiences who know that they are viewing fictional narratives.

¹⁰ Any given object or sign in a culture is tied inexorably to these five processes, each of which influences every other. Consumption of a product is directly linked to its production, for example (Hall, 1997: 1).

Nichols (1982: 11-12) writes that “perception depends on coding the world into iconic signs that can *re-present* it within our mind”. However, we seem to subconsciously believe that it is the world itself we hold in our mind rather than a coded version of it. Nichols is not saying that audiences cannot differentiate between media representation and reality, but rather that the signs and symbols we view have power. Given the sea of content in which we find ourselves, our view of what is real has become so conditioned as to virtually replace reality (Phillips, 2006: 166-167). Our conscious minds may understand that what we see is fictional, but our subconscious absorbs and learns from what it sees. If what it sees are countless depictions of transgender women as hyper-sexual, dangerous and defined by their genitalia then that is how the mind begins to define them generally.

Such depictions of trans women are not incidental. ‘Difference’ is a way of understanding the world and our part in it. Many societies throughout history have tended toward defining things in opposition to that which they are not (Hall, 1997: 234-237). However, this tends to lead to an obsession with otherness and the ‘other’. We cannot seem to escape the need for binary thinking – up/down, man/woman, black/white, cis/trans. In defining a concept we often describe it in opposition to that which it is not. But as Derrida points out, few neutral binaries exist and one pole often dominates, or even subsumes, the other within itself (Hall, 1997: 235).

This tendency toward magnifying one part of an imagined binary over another is reflected in cinematic depictions of marginalised groups, as those existing within more privileged positions in society rely on differentiation between themselves and the ‘other’ as a means to easily understand the characters’ fictional identities (Hall, 1997: 257). This stereotyping, wherein diverse subjects of the same categorisation become defined by a few key features, is in many cases a vital part of language construction when representing complex subjects or ideas in media such as film, which requires simpler signifiers than text (Hall, 1997: 257). Even ‘progressive’ trans cinema relies on stereotypes and gender normativity (Phillips, 2006: 165-166), partly due to the ubiquity of these stereotypes as a shorthand for what it means to be a trans woman in a globalised culture.

But what is trans cinema, or a trans woman, for that matter?

1.5.1 – A framework for gender and identity

I will not dedicate any great deal of this work to explaining the reasons for the existence of transgender people or justifying the diverse sets of choices relating to their bodies that they may make. Nor will I counter decades-old, discredited arguments about whether or not transgender people are mentally ill, whether they can be ‘cured’ by means of ‘conversion therapy’ or physical violence¹¹, or whether indeed trans people are a legitimate class of human.

Often arguments against the validity of trans identities make no attempt to speak the language of those in favour of trans validity. To say that I am transgender and a woman is an ontological statement which many anti-trans – or, more euphemistically, ‘gender-critical’ – claims try to

¹¹ They cannot. ‘Conversion’ methodologies have been widely discredited as ineffective and harmful (Mendos et al, 2020: 49-51; 115-126).

counter with epistemological questioning (Thorn, 2018). Trans people are constantly asked to prove the means by which they know themselves to be transgender. Engaging with such questions is a fruitless task because, unless someone is transgender, there is always a limit to their knowledge of transgender identities and experiences (Thorn, 2018).

Besides, it would be disingenuous to claim any understanding of why trans people exist given that even within trans circles there are ongoing debates between those who argue for gender-determinism and those who argue for gender-performatism. The first claims that gender is an innate, immutable part of the brain, while the latter believes that gender is “performed”¹² (Thorn, 2018). Foucault states that all of gender and sexuality – thus including trans persons’ identities – are social constructs which function as a means of controlling societies (Phillips, 2006: 27).

Regardless of the core reasons for trans peoples’ existence, many trans theorists these days take the stance that trans women are women irrespective of their anatomy: if a trans woman has a penis it exists “not in isolation, but as part of her female body”. A trans woman’s penis is not a male body part but is “feminine because it’s on a woman” (Wynn, 2018).

A transgender person then is essentially one who is assigned a specific gender at birth – most commonly this is based on the infant’s genitalia – who later comes to identify with a different gender. Trans women are generally assigned male at birth but eventually come to identify as women. (Thorn, 2018).¹³

Trans people often, but not always, experience a sense of body-dysphoria which is best described as psychological and emotional unease at having a body which does not outwardly express their internal identity. As a result, many trans women seek medical interventions such as hormone-replacement therapy (HRT), facial-feminisation surgery, orchiectomy, vaginoplasty¹⁴, laser hair removal and breast-augmentation (Serano 2007: 41-42). However, the cost of these treatments preclude many trans women, who are already statistically more likely to be economically marginalised due to employment discrimination and other factors, from accessing them, while others for personal reasons may not seek such interventions at all (Bettcher, 2014: 388-389).

Trans people are also not necessarily straight (Wynn, 2019). There is a widespread presumption that trans women are romantically and sexually attracted to men, a notion which stems from the belief medically transitioning is an inherently sexual act performed by gay men suffering from internalised homophobia (Wynn, 2018). In reality, transgender sexualities are just as diverse as their cisgender counterparts.

¹² Gender-performatism thus holds that trans women are women in the sense that they live – ‘perform’ – as women.

¹³ Numerous transmasculine, nonbinary, gender-fluid and genderless identities are also gaining increased recognition (Bosworth, 2012: 8), but continue to have only a fraction of the filmic representation of trans women (Serano 2007: 46).

¹⁴ Ochiectomy refers to the removal of the testes while vaginoplasty refers to the surgical construction of a vagina. I refer to these and other procedures broadly as ‘gender affirming surgery’, though alternative terms exist.

This assumption about the sexuality of trans women is one of the primary reasons for the longevity of the ‘predatory trans woman’ trope which is often seen in cinema, most notably described in Serano’s archetype of the “deceptive transsexual”, and its inverse, and the “pathetic transsexual” (Serano 2007: 41-43).

Serano posits that many aspects of the social stigmatisation of trans women stem from their rejection of masculine power and authority, and conscious public embrace of femininity. I have some reservations about this, given that transgender men and non-binary persons also face stigma and violence for their trans identities. The fact that transfeminine persons disproportionately face violence from family, partners and members of the public, however, may be because femininity is viewed as an easier, weaker target¹⁵. Nevertheless, Serano is an important theorist as she speaks widely on a number of issues facing trans women, including the stigmas they encounter and their representation in the media.

Serano posits that trans women in film and other media who successfully embody femininity and femaleness, who ‘pass’ in other words, are overwhelmingly depicted as dangerous, criminal, and sexually predatory: they are considered ‘deceptive’ as they are not immediately recognised as trans and (supposedly) use this to ultimately attain their nefarious goals. More often than not they are revealed to be deceptive and receive some form of narrative retribution (Serano 2007: 36-39). The ‘pathetic’ trans woman on the other hand is more often played for comedic effect – her masculine features are emphasised, so that she fails to ‘pass’ as a woman, and is either unsuccessful in behaving in a feminine manner or overdoes it to the point of parody. The pathetic trans woman is rarely punished for existing as her depiction does not pose a threat to the socially accepted division of the genders (Serano 2007: 36-39).

While a degree of ‘campness’ which can be found in ‘pathetic’ trans depictions can in certain spaces be considered subversive, this is often limited in order to pass as a form of socially acceptable entertainment (Davy, 2005: 241). Meanwhile, more ‘realistic’ figures who are not as easily noticed by their looks and behaviour, which do not embody femininity as a parody of womanhood but rather because it is natural to them, are feared as the abject and often met with violence or repulsion. This is likely also why violence against trans women in the real world remains so pervasive.

In her work on abjection Kristeva (1980; 1982: 4) observes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”. The apparent lack of division between the male and female sides of the imagined gender binary and the resultant concept of a woman with a penis (which the audience is unable to process) is thus a prime cause for abjection. If objects and ideas are signified through signs, then abjection is the primal reaction to language’s inability to provide an adequate sign for something (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 11-12), and from this erupts internal tension which may externalise itself through reactions such as vomiting, or violence.

¹⁵ This, incidentally, is also one of the many reasons why womanhood in general is stigmatised whereas manhood is not.

Films and their narrative structures generally provide order and closure. Audiences come to understand the world they are viewing through the signs given (Nichols, 1981: 79). This is what makes the reveal of a trans woman's penis so shocking: the expected order of things is upended, resulting in abjection. The existence of trans persons who live completely unnoticed as the 'opposite' sex to the one they were assigned at birth has the potential to challenge this order and the conventional assumption that gender differences arise straightforwardly from our chromosomes and genitals. This can wreak havoc on presupposed concepts such as woman and man, or homosexual and heterosexual. These terms lose their apparently settled meaning when a person's assigned sex and lived sex are different. Thus, in order to reaffirm the existing gender-order many transgender images and experiences are presented in the media in a way that "reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes" (Serano 2007: 36) often punishing those who stray from those stereotypes – hearkening back to those public executions of old which sought to deter 'deviant' behaviours (Foucault, 1975: 3-7).

The 'deceptive' trans character is often punished in this way. In *Myra Breckinridge* she is hit by a car for getting too cocky; in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) she is sent to prison for her numerous crimes after being publicly unclothed; in *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006) she is murdered by the man she has sex with as he fails to process the implications the act may have for his sexuality. The list goes on.

There comes a point in many of these films where the trans character is forced to reveal herself before they are met with retribution, violence or social exclusion. This unveiling reaffirms the "truth and restores the power of the masculine" (Phillips, 2006: 12). Meanwhile, those who have interacted with her, usually men, react with disgust, often vomiting (Serano, 2007: 35-52). This is a clear example of abjection, where heterosexual men, upon learning that the object of their desire is similar to themselves, struggle to make sense of their realities (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 56-89; 157-173). The uncovering of the penis reinforces the idea that trans women are actually men in disguise as the presumption in cinema is that what is hidden is the truth, and that revealing the hidden declares that all prior knowledge is false (Phillips, 2006: 24). The belief that trans women and their genitalia are inherently male "creates a great deal of anxiety for homophobic men who may become intensely disturbed at finding themselves fascinated by it or deriving pleasure from looking at it" (Lehman, 2001: 150).

Serano focuses primarily on the extent to which her 'deceptive' and 'pathetic' archetypes emulate femininity, eschewing the Freudian view that the 'deceptive' trans woman's "dangerous nature is symbolised by the presence of a hidden penis" while the pathetic trans woman's harmlessness is due to a lack thereof. "A less phallic interpretation is that the very act of 'passing' makes any trans woman who can do so into a deceiver" (Serano 2007: 40). However, Serano (2007: 45) adds that "when audiences watch scenes of trans women putting on skirts and makeup [...] they are witnessing TV, film and news producers' obsessions with all objects commonly associated with female sexuality". The objectification and sexualisation of women in film – trans and cis alike – indelibly ties the acting out of femininity to ideas of sex and the body. For trans women this inevitably leads to questions of their genitalia. Rarely do we see representations of trans women where their genitalia aren't a focal point.

I posit, then, that while Serano's theory on the scapegoating of femininity is largely valid, we can see a clear correlation between the 'pathetic' and 'deceptive' archetypes and how they are portrayed in relation to the penis. Time and again trans women who opt to retain their penises, concealing or using them rather than undergoing numerous surgeries, are viewed as deceptive, often criminal and morally compromised. By contrast, those who have undergone or wish to eventually have "the surgery", are generally treated with greater sympathy or are considered less dangerous. Perhaps the Freudian association with the phallus as an object of power suggests that to conceal it is to conceal your 'weapon', while to openly acknowledge it or seek its removal equates to, literally, castrating one's power, thereby removing oneself as a threat to cisgender male dominance.

Such male dominance means also that male nudity is rare in film outside of pornography, and when a penis is shown it is usually strong, representing power. Small penises are hardly shown and men with small penises are often mocked as not being 'true men' (Lehman, 2001: 148-149). However, cinema largely respects men's bodies as belonging to people and they are thus infrequently shown entirely naked. Women's bodies, meanwhile, are viewed as sexual spaces resulting in their nude bodies being depicted more often on screen. Paradoxically, then, those deceptive trans women who, through images of the penis, films tell us to be obviously 'male', are treated similarly to cis women characters – as mere bodies to be viewed.

Kristeva's views on the media's treatment of cis women and cis men clearly parallel Serano's 'deceptive/pathetic' dichotomy. Such binary portrayals have existed in literature from as early as the 1920s which saw the division between the sexual woman who is punished, and the prude who is not. Similarly, many teenage horror films kill off the sexually active girl early on, while allowing the non-sexual 'good girl' to survive after she attains a phallic power by obtaining weapons and taking action against the antagonist. This demonstrates that women may have a phallus if it is separated from sexual pleasure. However, if this power is used for pleasure, or against those not seen as monsters themselves, the girl herself becomes a monster (Williams, 2007: 30) In the case of cis women the phallus is symbolic, but in the case of many trans women it is not. Yet in both instances women who use the penis for pleasure find themselves framed as grotesque for their appropriation of maleness and are subsequently punished (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 169).

1.5.2 – A note on Freud

Despite referencing the Freudian notion of the phallus as a site of power and sex, I share Serano's aversion to Freudian theories. I believe that Freud has much to answer for, given contemporary understandings of diverse gender-identities, sexualities and lived experiences. Foucault, writing on psychoanalysis and psychiatry, posits that these two disciplines are largely responsible for the harmful idea that "sexual irregularity belongs in the realm of chimeras", that all individuals have a true, immutable sex and that this sex partly or wholly determines our sexual and emotional behaviour (Phillips, 2006: 20-21). It can thus be argued that Freud's theories of sex development have contributed towards the sexualisation of trans identity and genitalia.

However, despite the contestation of Freud's work (Hall, 1997: 237), it has nevertheless influenced understandings of sex and sexuality in academia and society generally (Webster, 2005: 23). It is therefore impossible for me to entirely avoid Freudian ideology when it has likely influenced the films I will examine. Furthermore, his work has formed a baseline presumption for some of the theorists I do cite, including Nichols, Young, Phillips and Kristeva. While I will not make further use of Freudian frameworks, readers would do well to understand his influence on transgender representation.

2 - A brief history of transgender identities in society and cinema

2.1 – Ancient and diverse cultural interpretations of gender

In Sumerian mythology, Enki the Creator made from the dirt under his nails Asushunamir, a being who simultaneously male and female¹⁶. Asushunamir had to enter the underworld to save Inanna, Goddess of Fertility and War from Erishkigal, Queen of Hell. Inanna had been trapped in the underworld after attempting to rescue her husband. In her absence the world decayed as all reproduction halted. Using their beauty and talents to seduce Erishkigal, Asushunamir successfully saves Inanna. However, when Erishkigal realises she has been tricked, she unleashes an irreversible curse: *“The food of the gutter shall thou eat! The water of the sewer shall be your drink! In the shadows you shall abide, despised and hated by even your own!”* (Connor, 1993).

Clearly then the idea of transgender identities (and their ongoing marginalisation) has long existed in societal narratives and can be seen in countless cultures around the globe (Phillips, 2006: 2; 30). Modern trans cinema is simply the latest iteration of these stories.

Diverse understandings of sex, gender and gender roles remain largely unacknowledged by many historians (Weismantel, 2013). Contemporary examples of gender diversity, including the Hijra in



Cuneiform inscription of Inanna's descent into Hell: one of the earliest written stories featuring gender-diverse characters (British Museum).

¹⁶ In some variations Asushunamir is represented by two androgynous “demons” (Mark, 2011).

India, Fa'afafine in the Pacific and Two-Spirit in some indigenous North American cultures, upend the male/female binary of 'Western' societies and show that gender diversity is not a new concept.

Despite these examples, the European colonial project virtually exterminated the many varied ways of perceiving gender in other cultures, supplanting local knowledge with the medical science of the Enlightenment.

2.2 – The criminalisation of trans bodies

The shift during the Enlightenment from religious to scientific and humanistic worldviews caused an increased interest in studying, observing and categorising that which was considered outside the norm of European society, including the 'other'.

It was not only those with outward differences from Europeans who were subject to this scrutiny. As systems of scientific inquiry expanded and became intertwined with systems of power and coercion, sex and sexuality were increasingly used as a means of social domination. Foucault argues that, since the 18th century, sex and sexual behaviour has increasingly become an "object of knowledge and truth production". The medical, psychiatric and legal fields all drew on the sexual confessions of 'ordinary' people to better situate themselves in opposition to freer sexual behaviour, framing it as harmful and thus justifying increased monitoring of, and control over, public and private behaviour (Foucault, 1975: 149-150; 170-185).

The advent of psychology appears to be closely linked to the spread of these disciplinary elements, in particular the structural and institutional practices that marginalise and control "delinquent" behaviours and bodies. A relic of this period is the ongoing medicalisation and psychiatrisation of transgender bodies and identities (Bosworth, 2012: 14) which remains a topic largely of scientific debate, rather than being universally socially accepted.

Historically sex, and by extension the proscribed social roles gendered bodies were expected to fulfil, exited the private sphere and became a public right. The more powerful in society succeeded in coercing the 'other' into public silence by encouraging conformity. As these practices became institutionalised and legal frameworks evolved to accommodate this shifting culture many 'delinquent' behaviours were criminalised, supposedly to maintain order and social cohesion.

This right to gaze upon the 'other' peaked in 19th century 'freakshows' in which the 'other' shifted from the "embodiment of wonder to the embodiment of error" (Thomson, 1996: 13). The most famous example of this is possibly Saartjie Baartman, taken from her homeland¹⁷ and displayed in public and scientific circles where her body – especially her sexual organs – were examined to fulfil fetishistic and racist fantasies of Africans as hyper-sexual beings. Her body supposedly proved the difference between African and European anatomies which reinforced

¹⁷ This would later become part of South Africa.

the idea that the former had evolved to better facilitate ‘abnormal’ sexual practices (Hall, 1997: 264-268).

I believe that there are some parallels between the fetishisation and hyper-sexualisation of black bodies and the ways in which trans persons are currently cinematically portrayed. For example, the trope of black men as violent sexual predators/rapists is evident in early films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915)¹⁸. Any ‘other’ with a phallus, then, whether a black man or trans woman, is seen as a threat to the

social order. However, although there are parallels between the historical and contemporary abuses of both black and trans bodies, the risk of downplaying the trauma of one group in order to legitimise the struggles of the other prohibits me from drawing direct comparisons. The documentary feature, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), which incidentally saw release toward the end of my writing of this text, offers valuable insight from black transgender activists, actors and filmmakers about the intersections of race and gender which I cannot not accurately capture myself.

‘Freakshows’ and early feature-films were perhaps more explicit than modern cinema in their prejudices, but as a precursor to modern entertainment they normalised ‘Western’ and colonial social power dynamics (Thomson, 1996: 16-17). ‘Western’ popular culture remains heavily normative today as well, continuing in its own way to demonise deviations of sexual behaviour or gender expression (Phillips, 2006: 115). Cinema often reflects the anxieties of its time, often presenting them metaphorically, subtly reinforcing them in the minds of the audience (Phillips, 2006: 86). Thus, the tropes employed in othering and sexualising ‘delinquent’ bodies may have become less overt with time, but are not entirely left behind.

2.3 – Progress and backlash

The 20th century saw many established systems of power disrupted by various civil rights movements, shifting social trends and new philosophical and scientific ideas. Generally speaking, the century ended with increased social and legal equality for women and people of colour; decolonisation; and greater levels of acceptance for LGBTI+ people.



Poster from one of P.T. Barnum's famed 'freakshow' circuses, featuring 'The Bearded Lady' on stage as a "human curiosity" (Barnum & Bailey, 1898).

¹⁸ Interestingly, *Birth of a Nation*'s Director, D.W. Griffith, while oft noted as the father of feature-length cinema and an ardent white-supremacist, can also be "credited" with one of history's first cinematic portrayals of a gender non-conforming body – the villainous eunuch in 1914's *Judith of Bethulia* (Feder, 2020)

Psychological and medical research on transgender identity and human sexuality was already under way in Germany as early as the 1920s and 1930s. At the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Science) run by Dr Magnus Hirschfeld, differences between gender identity and sexual orientation were documented, queer people were offered a safe space to live, and early forms of gender affirming medical care were employed (Bauer, 2017: 84-86). Media interest surrounding the institute's work and residents – although not always positive – also increased (Bauer, 2017: 26; 86; 107).

Much of this research was unfortunately lost to Nazism's book burnings and systematic extermination of 'undesirable' groups. However, some of the Institute's work survived in libraries across the world and some researchers fled to America. These remaining fragments of Hirschfeld's work later formed the foundations for contemporary understandings of transgender psychology and medical care in America and worldwide.



German officials scour LGBT-themed publications, confiscated from Hirschfeld's Institute to be burned (1933).

Around this time, the American media published a number of high-profile articles regarding transgender people, most notably that of former US soldier and transgender woman, Christine Jorgensen, who travelled to Denmark in the 1950s to undergo gender affirming surgery. The *Daily News* released a front-page story at the time titled 'Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty,' leading to a nationwide furore over Jorgensen's case (Terry, 2012: 6). The article was an early example of the mainstream media's focus on gender-essentialism and transmedicalism which asserts that trans women are only women after surgery.



'Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth', the first of many media flurries to surround Jorgensen (Daily News, 1952)

Jorgensen's story broke at a time when long-held notions of sex and gender-roles were being questioned. In post-war America, men coming home from war found themselves having to redefine their masculinity in civilian spaces, while women who had assisted

in the war effort posed a threat to the patriarchal status quo, and were largely forced back into domesticity. Jorgensen epitomised these tensions, as her own identity questioned long-held beliefs about the rigidity of gender and the gendered roles people were expected to take on (Terry, 2012: 2). Her life and identity remained in the media spotlight, with some outlets calling for her gender identity to be ‘fixed’ through brain surgery and others treating her as something of a celebrity (Terry, 2012: 20-23). Jorgensen’s story also inspired Hollywood filmmakers in search of new projects, including Ed Wood’s film *Glen or Glenda* (1953) which is loosely based on Wood’s own cross-dressing and Jorgenson’s story (Tunc & Prescott, 2003: 16).

Generally, however, there were few stories featuring transgender characters. It is possible that the Motion Picture Production Code – or Hays Code – played a role in this silencing. The Code, implemented by major Hollywood studios from the 1930s to 1960s, was a form of self-censorship by Hollywood (Brook, 2014). It forbade most explicit references to sex, inter-racial relationships, and homosexuality, stating that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin” (Brook, 2014).

As the Hays Code died out with the collapse of the studio system that controlled much of Hollywood, filmmakers and actors began experimenting; pushing society’s boundaries in ways previously denied to them. This ‘New Wave’ Hollywood brought sex and gore to a new kind of mainstream audience, one which increasingly believed in ‘free love’ and civil rights for black, female and LGBTI+ people. As the old order gave way to a new one, the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new group of reactionaries both in society and cinema. It is in this context that I will examine Michael Sarne’s *Myra Breckinridge* in the next chapter.

Despite the changes in film production, past understandings of what it means to be transgender remained unchanged, including the transmedicalist belief that a penis equated to being male regardless of identity. Maleness could only be rescinded by surgical alteration to the penis – and sometimes not even then. Hollywood cannot be blamed for this lack of understanding of trans identities since so-called ‘experts’ in the field had published very little in the way of new findings since the work of Hirschfeld and his colleagues in the 1930s. The first edition of *Abnormal Psychology: An Experimental Approach* by Gerald Davidson and John Neal (1974), for example, made only limited mention of transgender identities beyond stating that trans people “may suffer from a thought disorder, a classic symptom of psychosis”. The pair added: “They do not think logically, insisting vehemently that they are really women in spite of the fact that they appear to be normal males”, and considered gender affirming surgery and HRT to be a “drastic step” (Davidson & Neale, 1974: 274).

The book’s third edition, published roughly a decade later, adopted a slightly more nuanced take, stating that “research concerning whether transsexuals are psychotic has provided conflicting findings,” (Davidson & Neale, 1982: 343). It still suggested, however, that “behavioural treatment” was a viable alternative to surgical intervention in shifting patients’ gender identities (Davidson & Neale, 1982: 347). These ideas were still being repeated verbatim ten years later in the sixth edition (Davidson & Neale, 1994: 332-338), a trend that continued into the early 2000s in other medical texts mentioning transgender psychology,

including Carson, Butcher and Mineka (2000), and Barlow and Durand (2001). These later writings include little or no new research.

Phillips (2006: 165-166) notes that some scholars claim that the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, and the pornography it engendered, explains the rise in more sensitive representations of trans women in film. Trans porn, for example, normalises the existence of trans women in roles of power, using their penises for pleasure rather than openly despising their bodies (Phillips, 2006: 165-166). Phillips argues that pornography is more progressive in its depiction of sexual relations than mainstream media, which, although positive, concerns me because of its ability to condition viewers to see trans women in a predominantly sexualised context.

I believe it is more likely that these changes can be attributed to the increased influence of transgender activism and advocacy which has gained traction since the 1990s and late 2000s (Beemyn, 2014: 27-39). ‘Western’ transgender activism in the 1990s focused primarily on responding to incidences of violence, and saw the creation of ever more societies, spaces and events aimed at celebrating trans lives and memorialising those who were killed in hate crimes (Beemyn, 2014: 31-33). By the 2000s this predominantly American style of activism had spread to other parts of the globe and transgender activism now increasingly deals with diverse, intersectional topics such as race, poverty, healthcare, legislative reform, and inclusion within the rest of the ‘LGB’ community (Beemyn, 2014: 38-41). What began as a broad call for safety from violence has evolved in many places into targeted strategies to address specific issues, including media representations of the trans community.

There has been a simultaneous media tendency “to treat transgender [people] seriously and portray [them] in sympathetic colours” (Phillips, 2006: 115) as evidenced by such films as *The Crying Game*, *Transamerica* (2005) and *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006) – although it must be noted that all of these films adhere to the outdated belief that the penis belies a character’s ‘true maleness’. The number of individual instances of trans representation has also increased, with The Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation’s (GLAAD) 2019 figures showing the largest number of LGBTI+ characters in American television in 15 years (Townsend, et al, 2019). Trans cinematic representation also seems to have increased outside the Anglophone ‘West’, with trans characters featured in *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) in Japan and *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017) in Chile being prime examples. Indeed, *Una Mujer Fantástica* gained international success and actress Daniela Vega became the first trans woman to present an award at the Oscars (Gonzales, 2018).

A further global increase in transgender narratives in audio-visual media can likely be attributed to the creation of online platforms, such as YouTube, which allow for the democratisation of media-production. Trans people who may have otherwise struggled to access the capital required to tell their stories are now free to create their own content.

The effects of this increased public representation are yet to be fully felt, however. Trans people globally may have more legal protections and liberties, (Beemyn, 201: 39), but, as in 1930s Germany, this increased visibility comes with an increased backlash. Worldwide, anti-trans legislation, rhetoric and violence permeates all levels of society (Wynn, 2019).

It is difficult to get a detailed sense of the trends in trans media representation (Phillips, 2006: 49) due perhaps to the subjective nature of film and the sheer number of individual depictions of trans people in film. However, this brief history of trans representation in the media will help contextualise the film analyses in the next chapter. Through these films I hope to make clear that, despite positive growth, the trope of the transgender penis and its associated transphobic ideologies continues to be perpetuated in modern cinema.

3 – An analysis of representations of trans women’s genitalia in film

3.1 – *Myra Breckinridge*

As mentioned previously, *Myra Breckinridge*, a film by Michael Sarne, was released during Hollywood’s transition to freer storytelling. The film, which was panned by critics and viewers alike (Rabin, 2007), carries with it an undisguised fear at the loss of ‘traditional masculinity’ and the growing power and presence of women in society and, to a lesser degree, LGBTI+ persons whom it refers to simply as “fags”. The film also seemingly makes strong statements about the degradation of ‘quality’ cinema in favour of what its characters term “pornography”, “smut” and “filth”. Sarne also appears to criticise these very characters – representatives of 1960s high society America – for secretly desiring the sexuality and depravity they publicly despise.



Promotional poster for *Myra Breckinridge* (1970).

Myra Breckinridge follows the story of the eponymous Myra, née Myron, a transgender woman on a mission to “realign the sexes”, seeking “the destruction of the American male in all its particulars” (*Myra Breckinridge*: 1970). To achieve this, Myra infiltrates her uncle’s drama school. Since her uncle, Buck Loner, only knows her as his nephew Myron, Myra pretends to be Myron’s widow come to claim her share of the inheritance. Buck, suspicious of her motives, offers Myra a teaching position while he searches for a loophole that will allow him to keep the property.

While teaching, Myra becomes obsessed with a young couple, Mary Ann and Rusty, whom she identifies as unintelligent, easy targets. Myra sees the couple as representative of America’s

sexual and societal norms as Mary Ann is only at the school to be with Rusty whom she will one day marry, while Rusty represents the last vestiges of ‘traditional masculinity’ in Hollywood. She lures Rusty to her office and rapes him with a strap-on dildo and plans to seduce Mary Ann to further destroy Rusty’s sense of manhood.

However, before her plan is complete, Myra is forced to reveal herself as Myron, Uncle Buck’s former nephew, when private investigators discover there was no evidence of Myron’s death. She climbs onto Uncle Buck’s desk and declares proudly: “Your fag nephew became your niece two years ago in Copenhagen and is now free as a bird and happy in being the most extraordinary woman in the world!” It is then implied that she reveals her intact testes to the shock of the men present.

Despite the revelation, Uncle Buck has no legal recourse and Myra continues her escapades. Mary Ann is finally seduced by Myra, but confesses that, although she enjoys Myra’s presence, she would prefer it if Myra was a man. Shortly afterwards Myra is run over by a car driven by Myron who feels she is getting too ambitious. Myron then awakes to find that it was all a dream as highlighted by a Wizard of Oz-esque black and white scene in a hospital bed.

The film is highly intertextual beyond this, and uses clips from a number of films from Hollywood’s ‘Golden Age’ to “crassly comment upon, abnegate, and heighten [its] constellated weirdnesses” (Campbell, 2018). It is a film which works to heavily criticise the film industry and ‘moral degradation’ of the time, although it is difficult to precisely discern the ideological leanings of either the story or of Sarne himself.

Gore Vidal’s novel of the same name is, by contrast, clearly meant as a jab at some of the more radical feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including Valerie Solanas’ Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) Manifesto. In this manifesto, Solanas outlines the specific social ills for which she holds men responsible (Solanas, 1967: 2-11). She argues that the only way to save society is to kill all men not directly affiliated with SCUM or who are “working diligently to eliminate themselves” (Solanas, 1967: 14). Solanas writes that, rather than women having penis-envy “men have pussy envy”. She argues that when a man learns to accept his passivity and define himself as a woman by being castrated, he “then achieves a continuous diffuse sexual feeling from ‘being a woman’. Screwing is, for a man, a defence against his desire to be female” (Solanas, 1967: 2). It is easy to understand why male authors and filmmakers, taking umbrage at such a radical stance, may have sought to lampoon it.

Vidal’s novel is also an indictment of the sort of people who are represented by Myra’s character; as a pseudo-intellectual taking advantage of the frivolity of Hollywood (Boyette, 1971: 231-232). His critiques of 1960s cinema and society are clearer and rely less on shock and bedroom humour to make their points than does Sarne’s film adaptation. The rape scene, comedic in the film, takes on the style of psychological thriller in the book. Vidal also replaces Myra’s supposedly intact testes¹⁹ with more realistic surgical scars. Importantly, the endings of book and film are very different. In Vidal’s novel, Myron reverts to a male identity despite

¹⁹ Retaining testes but not the penis is unlikely to occur in gender affirming surgical procedures given that they produce testosterone and thus ‘work against’ feminising medical transition.

having to live without a penis. In Sarne's film masculinity and maleness are protected by revealing Myra to be a mere fever-dream, not an actual trans woman.

Misrepresenting transition

The opening scene of the film has Myron on a surgeon's table, legs splayed in the air. The location is not that of a hospital, but rather a metallic room with an audience to the side, apparently waiting to observe the coming procedure. A woman in the background appears to play with a whip, adding to the sense of the surreal. The doctor enters to applause and confirms that Myron wants the surgery. "You realise, once we cut it off it won't grow back. It isn't hair or fingernails or toenails you know?", he says.

An offended Myron tells the doctor to proceed as "Myra is waiting". After preparing an array of butcher's knives, carving knives and other sharp kitchen items, the doctor picks up a scalpel and, with one smooth motion, performs the procedure.



Screenshot of the surgeon, holding a kitchen knife, prior to the operation in the opening scenes of *Myra Breckinridge* (1970).

The implication of the film is that the operation is occurring in Denmark, the country in which Christine Jorgensen underwent part of her real-world medical transition. The film mocks this act by making the surgery seem both barbaric and trivial, given how quickly it was performed and the tools the doctor had at hand. Denmark was at the forefront of these surgeries at the time, but I would argue that *Myra Breckinridge* does not just satirise Hollywood but also constitutes a direct response to the anxiety society experienced in light of the Jorgensen case. In the film, Dr Randolph Montag, a New York-based Dental-Psychiatrist and Myra's confidante, is portrayed as sleepy and distracted, rather than as someone at the pinnacle of medical professionalism²⁰. Viewed in this light, Sarne's film becomes purely reactionary: it ridicules the work of trans-friendly medical professionals as well as trans identities, and reveals society's deep-seated fear of the destruction of imagined gender difference.

²⁰ He is, I think, a direct parallel to Dr Harry Benjamin, an endocrinologist who met Jorgensen as his first transgender patient the same year that he enrolled in the Manhattan Medical and Dental School (Rudacille, 2006: 74). Dr Benjamin was of German-Jewish origin, as is the name Montag (Ancestry.com, 2013).

While the surreal nature of the operation can be understood as part of Myron's car crash induced delirium it more likely serves to highlight the director's view that gender affirming surgeries are absurd. This argument is borne out by the fact that the rest of Myron's dream, although filled with surreal moments, does not share the same surrealist atmosphere as the opening scenes. Instead the settings in which characters behave unnaturally – offices, lecture halls, bedrooms – maintain the familiarity of 1960s America. Only the operating theatre toys with our expectations. The inclusion of kitchen knives and other tools unrelated to surgery is not only meant to be humorous, but also implies that this kind of surgery is tantamount to mutilation and butchery.

Myra, a femme fatale

According to Serano's theory on the dichotomous representations of transgender women Myra undoubtedly falls into the classification of the 'deceptive' trans woman. She checks the necessary categories, successfully embodying femininity and the beauty standards of her time. She thus poses a double threat to society by gleefully transgressing the boundary between genders, and by plotting to destroy 'traditional masculinity'.

Indeed, on three occasions in the film cutaway footage of a nuclear explosion is used to signify Myra's total destruction of the status quo. First, when she introduces herself as a new woman created by the doctor's blade; second, when Uncle Buck realises she is after his money; and third when Rusty, the literal stand-in for masculine identity, is raped.

But, if Myra is a typical 'deceptive' trans woman who undermines the natural order, her character seems to contradict my addition to Serano's theory, namely the way in which such a character relates to her penis. I have argued that the majority of deceptive trans characters conceal their penises and have little to no qualms about using them. Myra, however, has her penis removed, complicating this argument.



Myra raping Rusty on a clinic bed to destroy his masculinity in *Myra Breckinridge* (1970).

The issue is resolved by turning to Kristeva's work which explains that the penis does not literally have to *be* a penis (1980; 1982: 169). Just as the penis can represent phallic sexual

power, so too can phallic sexual power represent the penis. Myra retains much of the power and dominance usually associated with the phallus, and thus retains her ‘deceptive’ status.

This is especially true during Rusty’s rape when Myra uses a strap-on dildo – a physical object deliberately meant to resemble the penis – to mount him and anally rape him in order to destroy his masculinity. This comes after Rusty states that “guys should ball chicks”. Myra reverses the expected gender-roles and shows no dissatisfaction at having to use a prosthetic penis.

Interestingly, while Sarne’s film portrays female nudity, depictions of the penis are largely absent. This is likely because the penis is viewed as taboo (Lehman, 2001: 148-149) and that the masculine body is privileged as human in ways the feminine body is not. Audiences are shown Rusty’s bare buttocks to indicate the violation that is about to take place, but the majority of the rape scene and its build-up is shot above the waist providing Rusty some protection from the indignity of being raped by a trans woman while cinema-going voyeurs look on. As one of the only X-Rated films to come out that year (Campbell, 2018), *Myra Breckinridge* pushed the boundaries of what was allowed at the time, but notably shied away from visual depictions of male nudity and a female with a strap-on penis.

When Myra eventually does reveal her identity to Uncle Buck, Sarne attempts to instil a sense of abjection in the male characters present despite Myra’s lack of a penis. When Myra removes her underwear to reveal herself, one of the private investigators faints immediately at the sight. A more composed Uncle Buck simply states “and that’s the ball game”, a phrase normally used in baseball to indicate the end of a match – in this case the end of his battle with Myra. However, here it is also used to allude to the likelihood that Myra has retained her testes which are the signifiers of her supposed ‘maleness’ now that she has no penis. Furthermore, the retention of the testes is used to induce an abject response – fainting – by unexpectedly revealing the ‘male’ parts.²¹ It may be that Sarne was ignorant of the details of medical transition when filming *Myra Breckinridge*, but I find it more likely, given the film’s reactionary context, that he wanted to add shock value without losing the film’s surgical element. Such a choice shows us that the testes form a key part of our collective mental image of ‘male’ genitals. Therefore, even if the penis has been removed, as long as the testes remain they can be used to signify a ‘deceptive’ trans woman.

Myron vs Myra

Throughout this analysis, I have referred to Myron and Myra as two separate characters due to the way the film frames trans identity. It was necessary to follow this practice in order to maintain clarity when referring to the film’s narrative. Despite being one character, Myra and Myron both seek dominance over their single shared body throughout the film. Appearing on screen almost interchangeably and, at times, simultaneously. The film’s switching between Myron and Myra represents the duality – the masculine and the feminine – present in the

²¹ The testes make a natural replacement for the penis as a symbol of innate ‘maleness’ due to their proximity in terms of placement and function.

character. It also reinforces the historical pathologisation of trans people either as delusional, or as suffering from a form of split-personality disorder (Campbell, 2018) or schizophrenia (Boyette, 1971: 230). However, were Myra Breckinridge a real person there would be no Myron and Myra side by side and no Myron “turning into” Myra after surgery – there would only be Myra.

The film’s implication is that, in the end, Myron, the cisgender male, wins the battle against the transgressive Myra. This is suggested by Myra’s apparent regret at transitioning when Mary Ann reveals her feelings for her, and Myra’s subsequent realisation that she cannot give Mary Ann what she wants – a sexual partner with a penis. The car accident at the end of the film results in Myron waking up in hospital to find it was all a dream and that he was never Myra to begin with. The events of the entire film are revealed as pure imagination, taking place in the comatose Myron’s dreams. Given that he has no breasts or vagina he is once again framed as male, and Mary Ann is in fact a nurse caring for him in the hospital. Myron’s actual desires remain vague, but it is suggested that the possibly homosexual Myron, who has developed feelings for this nurse, can move on as a heterosexual man, having left Myra behind him. This plays into the historic conflation of trans women with gay men (Wynn, 2018), and the homophobic belief that non-straight sexual orientations can somehow be ‘cured’.

3.2 – *The Crying Game*

Trans representation in the media continued throughout the 20th century as decreasing production costs allowed experimental or controversial stories to be told more easily. It was around this time that theorists such as Halberstam have identified a noticeable shift toward a more humane representation of trans bodies on screen (2018: 92). Queer identities were also the focus of continued feminist and LGBTI+ activism. Combined with narratives on the supposed links between HIV/AIDS and queer lifestyles, these factors pushed queer identity further towards the mainstream and portrayed it more sympathetically. (Phillips, 2006: 115). One example of this, *The Crying Game*, brings together issues of nationality, race, gender and sexuality.



Poster from the release of *The Crying Game* (1992).

While the film is often referenced for its trans narrative, its racial and social elements are usually overlooked in most reviews in favour of the characters’ interpersonal relationships and the film’s ‘big reveal’ scene (Phillips, 2006: 118-119). I unfortunately follow that trend, but it is worth noting that when the film featured what was then one of the few explicit images of a penis outside of pornographic films it was of a black trans female character’s genitals – three kinds of otherness rolled into one (Young, 1995: 142).

The Crying Game takes place during The Troubles²² and follows Fergus, an IRA militant, during his interactions with Dil and a British soldier named Jody who was posted to Northern Ireland. From the beginning, the film lays out its key theme: things are not always as they seem.

We meet Jody in the film's opening scenes at an Irish fairground, flirting with a woman named Jude who is later revealed as a republican militant tasked with seducing and entrapping Jody (Phillips, 2006: 116-117). Jody is assaulted and kidnapped by two of Jude's comrades. Held hostage at a rebel safehouse, he is told that he will be killed unless the British release one of the rebels' captured leaders. In the interim he is guarded by Fergus and the two form an unlikely friendship. Because Jody is considered a flight-risk he cannot be uncuffed meaning Fergus must feed him and – reluctantly – handle Jody's penis so that he can urinate.

Jody fears for his life and asks Fergus, in the event of his death, to go to London and tell Dil that he was thinking of her. Shortly afterwards the IRA's deadline for the return of their leader expires and Fergus must shoot his new friend. Jody escapes, knowing Fergus will not shoot him in the back, but is hit by a British armoured vehicle sent to rescue him and exterminate the militants. Fergus then escapes and begins a new life in London as Jimmy.

In London, Fergus eventually decides to meet Dil, tracking her to the hair salon where she works and then to The Metro, a bar where she sometimes sings. Slowly the pair bonds, although Jimmy, née Fergus, does not reveal his ties to Jody, whom Dil is still mourning. As their intimacy grows, Dil lets Fergus run his hands over her body, but stops him at her waist, choosing to fellate²³ him instead. As their relationship progresses, so does their sexual intimacy until Dil finally removes her clothing, revealing her penis.

A shocked Fergus instinctively hits Dil and rushes to the bathroom to throw up. As he vomits and wretches, Dil stands outside, saying repeatedly that she thought he knew about her identity as anyone frequenting The Metro would. Fergus leaves hurriedly, but later apologises to her. The two make up, but Fergus remains uncomfortable around Dil, especially when she makes sexual advances or uses terms of endearment.

Eventually Fergus' comrades find him and demand that he assassinate a London judge to prove his loyalty and avoid execution for desertion. They make clear that they know about his relationship with Dil, though we cannot tell if they know she is trans.

To keep Dil safe, Fergus cuts her hair and dresses her in Jody's old clothes, disguising her as a boy. But Dil, distraught that Fergus is leaving her without explaining why, gets drunk and overdoses on medication. Fergus confesses his part in Jody's death and promises to stay with her to ensure she survives the night. The next morning Dil ties Fergus up, demanding that he promise to stay with her and do what she wants. This prevents him from killing the judge which causes the death of a comrade who took his place. Jude therefore visits Dil, looking for

²² The Troubles refers to attempts by rebel groups in Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join the Irish Republic. It was marked by civil unrest and armed conflict.

²³ The act of oral sex.

revenge, but Dil shoots her, facing down the woman who entrapped Jody. Fergus tells Dil to run and takes the blame for the shooting. Dil visits him in prison as the film ends.

Jody as Dil's herald

Many articles on *The Crying Game* have focused on the film's potential homoerotic undertones, from Fergus and Jody's relationship to Fergus' repeated dreams of Jody throughout the film and, finally, Fergus' decision to sacrifice himself for Dil despite the previous revelation of her penis. This analysis seems like a reach, however, as it ignores Dil's womanhood and Fergus' discomfort at her genitalia. Instead Fergus' simultaneous attraction to Dil and his intimacy with Jody is indicative of the permeability of boundaries and borders – both interpersonal and geopolitical – rather than an inference of homoeroticism (Phillips, 2006: 121).

Although it has been suggested that Dil is a replacement for the deceased Jody – whose traditionally feminine name surely serves as a hint to the film's upending of gender expectations – I would argue that Jody really serves as an early stand-in for Dil. The fact that Fergus must handle his penis, despite his reservations, prepares Fergus to later accept Dil for who she is, penis included, an act that would have previously been unimaginable.

Fergus' initial reluctance to handle Jody's penis is underscored by Jody's plea for help: "Come on, it's just a piece of meat! It's got no major diseases!" he yells. This scene serves two purposes. First, it serves as an exposition for Fergus' conservatism around the topic of genitalia and, secondly, it foreshadows the later revelation of Dil's penis. This foreshadowing is only evident in hindsight, however, as the film works, perhaps deliberately, to misdirect the audience.

Of course, the contexts in which Fergus interacts with Jody and Dil's respective genitalia differ. While Fergus is willing to interact with Jody's penis – the penis of a man and fellow combatant – for the sake of practicality, he struggles to accept the presence of a penis on a woman for whom he once felt sexual attraction. If a penis were "just a piece of meat" as Jody says, then it should not affect Fergus' relationship with Dil, or his acceptance of Dil's identity. To Jody the penis is just a piece of meat. For Fergus and the audience, it is much more.

The reveal

The revelation of Dil's penis is perhaps one of the most analysed scenes in trans cinema. As such I don't believe there is much to add to the conversation and will say comparatively little here.

It is difficult now to think of just how surprising this must have been for audiences in 1992. In fact, the audience, perhaps deliberately, is led to believe that they will not be confronted by the image of a penis in the film. The fact that the film constantly references penises prior to the reveal without ever actually showing one served to reassure audiences that the organ would not

be shown. This suggestion heightens the shock in both the audience and the protagonist at the sudden appearance of Dil's penis, and accounts for the scene's memorability even today (Lehman, 2001: 151).



Screenshot of Fergus, moments before fleeing to the bathroom to vomit, unable to comprehend Dil's penis in *The Crying Game* (1992).

The reveal itself is a prime example of abjection. Fergus hits Dil, leaving her bleeding slightly in his rush to the bathroom. He vomits into her sink to 'cleanse' himself of the 'unclean' act in which he was an unwitting participant, while Dil is left to apologise and explain herself.

Vomiting, along with urinating or defecating, is a common example of an abject response as it symbolises the body attempting to expel impurity (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 53-54). However, Kristeva also notes that urine, puss and other forms of excrement are themselves abject because they remind us of our own impurities. People often wretch at the sight of vomit or the smell of faeces as they experience abjection when faced with those substances (Kristeva, 1980; 1982: 2-3). Given that vomiting is abject but is also perceived as Fergus' natural response to Dil's penis, it is interesting that the film does not fixate on vomit as disgusting. This suggests there are different levels of abjection in which the feminine penis trumps bodily fluids due to the perception of its acute 'otherness'.

Dil's penis is shown to be hairless and flaccid, perhaps even effeminate, which may help in decreasing its phallic nature. Lehman (2001: 149) argues that Dil's penis would be better suited to his category of the "melodramatic penis" as it does not manifest sexual energy or physical power, but is also not framed as pitiable or laughable. Furthermore, the skewed camera angles used for the reveal and Fergus' vomiting seem to Lehman classic examples of melodrama. Such cinematic techniques exist almost solely in latter representations of trans women as objects which are not innately malicious but can be used to elicit drama and tension in both the characters and audience.

Dil is clearly situated within the framework of the 'deceptive' trans woman: she deceives Fergus, albeit unintentionally, and faces punishment for it when Fergus hits her and when she is forced to hide her feminine identity (Serano, 2007: 36, 39). However, by many standards Dil gets off lightly. She visits Fergus in prison at the end of the film and something akin to a 'happily ever after' is implied. This is in stark contrast to *Myra Breckinridge*'s killing-off of

the trans woman, and shows a progression in cinematic representations of such characters. The ‘deceptive’ trans woman trope is not entirely abandoned, but it is softened.

Not much has been written on the link between Dil’s reveal and the other patrons of The Metro bar. Throughout the film we see a number of shots portraying The Metro’s other patrons in the background, generally as little more than set dressing. After Fergus learns that Dil has a penis these characters are briefly shown to be of a queerer nature than previously supposed. Most of the feminine-presenting patrons suddenly seem to be wearing wigs, while at least one has visible facial hair beneath her makeup. Where they once formed an inconspicuous backdrop, they are now foregrounded, towering over Fergus as he makes his way through the bar in bewilderment. This explains why Dil assumed Fergus knew her real sexual identity. Dil’s penis, beyond shocking and sickening Fergus, is also the catalyst for the expansion of his world. The Irish rebel, who spent years keeping his head down to survive now looks up, having been confronted with a feminine penis, to realise that he has actually always been surrounded by such persons. Fergus’ attraction to Dil’s outward presentation initially blinds him, but as he removes her clothes his – and the audience’s – proverbial blindfold is lifted.

Is Dil trans?

Scholars have long debated whether Dil is transgender or a cross-dresser (Young, 1995: 138-139). Dil never explicitly identifies herself as transgender, nor does she correct Fergus when he says she is not a woman. Given these circumstances, it could be unfair to label her. Phillips, however, seems to approach the subject rather naively, expressing confusion over the fact that Dil does not behave like a “typical male-to-female transsexual”²⁴, and at the fact that she does not exhibit the anatomy he would expect of a trans woman (2006: 120). Phillips cites her flat chest and penis as cause for doubting her transness because gender affirming surgeries were already available in the United Kingdom at the time. He therefore claims that “the unavailability of the means cannot explain this omission in the film” (2006: 120). Aside from the fact that not all trans women opt for surgery, Phillips overlooks the fact that, although surgery was available, they were costly and were not covered by Britain’s National Health Service until 1999 (McNab, 1999: 1). It is unlikely that Dil – a hairdresser, part-time cabaret artist and possible sex worker – would have been able to afford the surgery even if she did want it – a point the film does not touch on.

Phillips is not the only author who fails to engage with the potential personhood Dil brings to the film, engaging with her as a symbol rather than a trans woman. Young, for example, writes that Dil’s image as both feminine and phallic helps negate the “disturbing notion of sexual difference” and softens the Freudian castration anxiety of audiences (1995: 142). Yet that very phallus is touted by scholars as a classic example of trans-oriented abjection. In a society where trans women are disproportionately raped, assaulted and murdered (Wynn, 2019) for being both feminine and phallic, it is hard to understand what softening Young may be talking about.

²⁴ He does not define what he means by “typical”.

Cinema after *The Crying Game*

The Crying Game had a ripple effect on trans representation in cinema, inspiring more sensitive depictions of trans women. Films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), *Transamerica* and *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* demonstrate a clear shift towards greater sensitivity for transgender characters throughout the 1990s and mid-2000s. However, they also continued to employ various overused tropes, with many relying heavily on genitalia to do the work of social commentary or easy comedy.

In *Transamerica* Bree, a trans woman and the film's protagonist, is invalidated through the broad motif of the penis. This is achieved through multiple references to, and gags about, genitalia throughout the film. The film also has Bree imply that she will only be a woman after surgery. Bree desires to distance herself from her penis in order to be perceived as a 'real' woman as opposed to other trans women whom she labels "ersatz" or "fake" (Jensen, 2018: 1-6).

I would argue then that *The Crying Game* did not result in the reframing of mainstream transgender depictions, rather softening the edges of the stereotypes.

The Crying Game is undoubtedly the direct inspiration for at least one film, however (Serano, 2007; 37). In the Jim Carrey comedy, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, Dil's penis-reveal is mockingly recreated with even greater abjection for humorous effect. After the eponymous detective, Ace Ventura, realises that Police Chief Lois Einhorn is actually a wanted criminal in disguise, he exposes her – literally – to the entire police force by ripping off her clothing. Failing at first to prove Einhorn's 'true' identity by ripping off her hair, which he thought was a wig, and her breasts, which he thought were flat, Ventura turns Einhorn around to reveal a penis tucked backwards between her legs, bulging beneath her underwear. As with Fergus, the revelation of Einhorn's identity causes an abject response in Ventura, although his comes before the public reveal when he tries to 'cleanse' his face with a toilet plunger, burns his clothes and cries in the shower when he learns that Lois, whom he had previously kissed, "is a man".



Screenshot of Ace Ventura forcibly stripping Lois Einhorn in front of the police to prove her trans identity in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994).

The police force, having all had intimate relations with Einhorn, begin to violently vomit as the penis reveals the 'truth' in ways that other physical features, such as breasts and long hair, apparently could not. Meanwhile, *The Crying Game*'s theme song plays in the background. Einhorn, the literal 'deceptive' trans woman, is shown to be a sexual predator, a thief and a murderer by the revelation of the one physical feature that symbolises 'maleness' more than any other.

The Leslie Nielson comedy *The Naked Gun 33 1/3* (1994) has a similar, though less drawn out moment, when Nielson sits on a bed waiting for a woman to undress for him. Her shadow is cast on the wall for us to see while still safely removed from explicit view. As she undresses, her shadow is revealed to have a large, prominent penis. Nielson’s facial expression turns to one of horror.



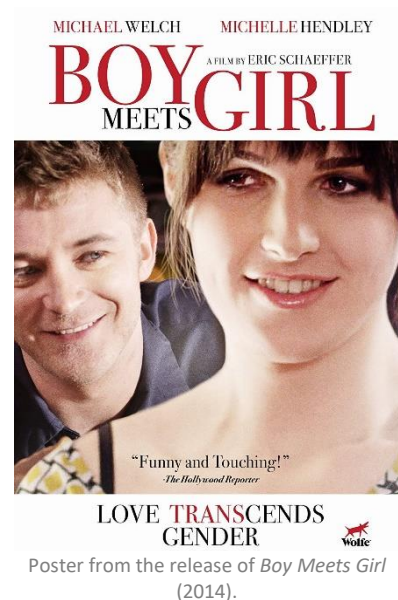
Screenshot of the (in)famous scene in *The Naked Gun 33 1/3* (1994).

As late as *The Hangover Part 2* (2011), we see this kind of scene played out with the group of male protagonists speaking to a Thai character named Kimmy who says “it’s called Bangkok, sweetie. There’s a reason they don’t call it Bangcunt.” She then turns around to reveal her penis causing the group to gasp, fall off their chairs, and try to flee the room in shock.

3.3 – *Boy Meets Girl*

As we can see, the number of trans-focused films has increased over the years with the 2010s seeing particularly large growth. Transgender characters are also being treated less like shock or comedic figures and more as actual people with their own complexities and experiences. Some of the more internationally recognised of these films are *The Danish Girl* (2015), *Una Mujer Fantástica*, *Tangerine* (2015) and *Girl* (2018), all of which have focused on some of the difficulties facing trans people in their respective societies. While I do have personal and ideological concerns about these films, they show an overall positive shift in how trans women are portrayed on screen.

I have chosen to focus on *Boy Meets Girl*, however, as it has been paid less attention than some of its better-known counterparts. Even in academic circles the film has gone relatively unnoticed.



Poster from the release of *Boy Meets Girl* (2014).

The film differs radically from both *Myra Breckinridge* and *The Crying Game* in a number of ways. It is one of the few mainstream feature films to explore bisexuality in trans women. While Myra seemed to exhibit bisexual tendencies, these were arguably in service of a larger goal (Penn, 2015: 142-143). Secondly, Ricky, the protagonist of *Boy Meets Girl*, has close friends and a loving family who seem to have avoided the emotional turmoil so often linked to stories of trans people (Penn, 2015: 142-143). By contrast, Myra is close to nobody but her alter-ego and actively seeks to undermine her only known family member. Dil, meanwhile, has a range of lovers, some of whom she is closer to than others, but her only non-sexual relationships seem to be with her colleagues and The Metro’s bartender.

The film also attempts to normalise trans women in society by focusing on a trans woman who can hold her own in her community rather than being constantly victimised by those around her (Beemyn, 2015: 145). Ricky is even framed as a legitimate love-interest in a film which is an otherwise traditional romantic drama. It is also a product of its time in that technology is foregrounded as a means for trans people to tell their own stories to a wider audience²⁵.

It is not, however, a film for or by trans people. Many trans people, myself included, enjoy its ‘soft’ subject matter and normalisation of trans identities, but it nevertheless appears to aim at educating its audience about trans issues by presenting them with pockets of exposition in an otherwise unassuming romance narrative (Martin & Shlasko, 2015). As a result, the film does not provide a relatable story in which trans people can recognise themselves, but rather gives a non-transgender audience an updated, modernised view of the ‘other’.

Boy Meets Girl begins with a young Ricky on a pre-recorded video message displaying cards on which she has written to tell the audience of her many secrets. This cuts to present-day Ricky, grown up and working in a coffee shop in her Kentucky hometown where she has lived all her life with Robby, her best friend. Ricky’s love-life up to this point has been lack-lustre because “men want dick but are afraid of it”. On Robby’s advice she thus decides to try dating women instead. She and Robby meet Francesca, the daughter of a local conservative politician and who is engaged to David, a transphobic US Marine currently stationed in Afghanistan. Initially hesitant about Francesca, Ricky and Robby eventually befriend her. Francesca is curious but unbothered by Ricky’s transgender identity.

Ricky, an avid fashion-designer with hopes of attending a New York fashion school, showcases her design work on a video-blog with the help of her brother, Sam. Francesca collaborates on one of the videos and afterwards she and Ricky kiss. Ricky does not want to damage Francesca’s impending marriage and Francesca, embarrassed at herself, runs off. They maintain their friendship, however, and eventually have sex.

Throughout her relationship with Francesca Ricky confides in Robby, repeatedly asking him for advice on how best to use her penis during sex with a cis woman. Robby obliges, but feels awkward having these discussions.

When David returns home, he is furious to discover Francesca has been spending time with Ricky despite his disgust for transgender people. He continuously uses slurs against Ricky and compares her to the ‘terrorists’ he fought in Afghanistan. David forces Francesca to tell her conservative parents about Ricky’s trans identity. Although they defend Francesca’s right to choose who she spends time with, her mother tracks down Ricky and encourages her to end their relationship.

Ricky and Francesca break up, and David confronts Ricky, pushing her to the ground and demanding to know if she and Francesca had sex. It is then revealed to the audience that he actually slept with her as well when they were younger, the implication being that David’s anger and transphobia stem from his fear of being found out and having his masculine image

²⁵ Michelle Hendley who plays the role of Ricky was herself a YouTube vlogger prior to being cast in *Boy Meets Girl*.

tarnished. David and Francesca reconcile through their shared experiences with Ricky, but Robby argues with Ricky over her apparent indifference to the break-up. He yells at her, saying she is “not a real anything”, and realising her best friend has secretly never seen her as a woman, Ricky flees. Sam shows Robby the video of the young Ricky talking about her secrets, revealing that Ricky has suicidal ideation, causing Robby to rush after her in fear that she may hurt herself.

Robby finds Ricky at a nearby lake and tells her that he didn't mean anything he'd said earlier. He confesses to being jealous of Francesca because he is actually in love with Ricky. Ricky leaves the water to reveal her naked body and the two embrace. Ricky then admits that the fashion school rejected her, but she is happy to give up her dream now that she has found love with him. However, Robby galvanises Francesca and David into reaching out to YouTube celebrity, Daily Grace, asking her to promote Ricky's clothes. This leads to people across the country donating money to Ricky, allowing her and Robby to leave for New York. Before leaving, Ricky asks Sam to upload the video she made when she was younger, which ends positively by telling viewers: “You are perfect in every way”.

A progressive film with a regressive ideology

For all its positive representations of trans people, *Boy Meets Girl* exhibits some troubling ideas about gender.

An example of this can be found in the film's first fifteen minutes when an ignorant but well-intentioned Francesca asks Ricky if she likes having a penis. Ricky replies that she does but wishes she had been “born a genetic girl” and plans on “getting the full surgery someday”. While some trans women may speak like this, Francesca's question is the first of many moments throughout the film which suggest that Ricky's genetics and genitals prevent her from being fully female.

Ricky's conversations with Robby are also unusual given that his worldview seems to discredit his friend's gender identity (Martin & Shlasko, 2015). When Ricky asks him for advice on how she should have sex with Francesca, he ends the conversation by telling her to “get in there and let nature take over. I mean you know, even though you're a hot chick and everything, the other part of you has millions of years of DNA slamming down on you, instinctively letting you know how and where to stick it and what the fuck to do with it, and afterwards you'll make your own assessment of it.” This again suggests that Ricky's genetics trump her gender identity.

Robby also speaks about his definitions of “straight sex” versus “gay sex” at length. According to him, intercourse involving a penis entering a vagina is always ‘straight’, while a penis penetrating the anus of another person with a penis is ‘gay’ regardless of the gender identities at play. Ricky teases Robby about having had an approximation of same-sex intercourse when he admits to having enjoyed it when an ex-girlfriend stuck her fingers in his anus. Robby claims the two acts are not comparable because, as Ricky summarises, “the material that the phallus is made of [and] the sex of the person administering the phallus” determine whether or

not the act is ‘gay’. I view Ricky’s willingness to humour Robby’s theories as unusual for a trans woman who is sure of her own womanhood. It serves to legitimise these theories to the audience by having a trans woman in a ‘trans-positive’ film give them this amount of space.

Unrelated to the topic of genitalia, Sam asks Ricky if he is weird for wanting to play with toy soldiers rather than dolls. She allays his concerns, telling him he can play with any toy he likes. This is an overtly positive message, showing boys should not be constrained by rigid notions of masculinity and can choose what toys to play with – a freedom seemingly more associated with boisterous little girls. However, given that it is framed to show Sam’s anxiety about being too masculine in comparison to his older sister, and that the subject does not affect the narrative, it seems that the scene was deliberately shoehorned in to suggest that exposure to transgender people confuses children.

On abjection and a little girl’s penis

Before expanding on the notion that the trans penis is a sight of sexual attraction in *Boy Meets Girl*, I want to take note of a moment where it comes closest to being abject in the film.

During a flashback scene, we are shown a young Ricky in a princess costume, trick-or-treating with other children. An adult man in a coat comes up to the group and calls to Ricky: “Hey princess! Trick or treat?” The man then opens his coat, exposing himself to the children who run away. Ricky remains, raising her skirt to reveal her own penis: “Trick!” she says in response. The man freezes in confusion, until he realises a police officer is chasing him, at which point he, too, runs away.



Screenshot of a young Ricky lifting her skirt to reveal her genitals in response to a paedophile doing the same in *Boy Meets Girl* (2014).

Ricky is portrayed as very young here, though already dressing and identifying as a girl. The scene does not sexualise Ricky overtly, but the film does place this underage girl in a dangerous sex-related situation and allows her to expose her genitals for humorous effect.

To my mind it is another sign that trans women's genitalia are often seen as a more powerful driver of a narrative than their personalities or humanity. Even when the character being represented is so young, the fixation on genitalia remains.

Transphobia as a sign of sexual attraction

Toward the start of the film, a humorous line by Ricky essentially puts forward the film's central thesis that "men want dick but are afraid of it."

This is not dissimilar to the arguments made by Wynn and others on the nature of violence against trans women. Wynn (2019) states that there are many men willing to have relationships with trans women. However, they believe that being attracted to, or sexually intimate with, a trans woman is 'gay' and that being gay is inferior to being straight. As a result, few men are willing to openly admit to their attraction.

Yet in *Boy Meets Girl* this transphobia is framed as if it were no different from a young boy punching a girl in school because he likes her and doesn't know how to express himself. In Robby in particular, it is played as cute and folksy. At the end of the film Robby declares his love for Ricky, revealing that his failure to admit this previously is the underlying cause of their argument. His casual transphobia throughout the film likely stems from his fear of admitting, even to himself, his feelings for Ricky.

In order to legitimise Robby as a good person and Ricky's friend, his transphobic ideology must be downplayed. Enter David. While people like David do exist, the stark contrast between his overt transphobia and the nuance given to the film's other characters causes David to appear as a caricature of a transphobe.

David chastises Francesca for spending time with Ricky, saying that if Francesca keeps defending her then he is going to throw up. This is not necessarily a reference to *The Crying Game*, but it is another example of vomiting being seen as a natural response to the presence of transgender people. David misgenders Ricky continuously and calls her "tranny", "shemale" and "it". This verbal degradation of a trans woman happens on a scale neither *The Crying Game* nor slur-heavy *Myra Breckinridge* employ (Martin & Shlasko, 2015).

Again, this abuse of Ricky stems from a man's inability to admit his sexual attraction to her. We discover that David had sex with Ricky years ago and is concerned that she may have told Francesca about it. He is afraid of being judged as 'gay' and of his masculine image being questioned because of his attraction to a trans woman with a penis. He therefore lashes out violently at Ricky, the perceived threat to his manhood, in order to bolster his own self-image (Martin & Shlasko, 2015).

David eventually tells Francesca that he and Ricky "did everything there is to do". He further admits that it was not just sexual experimentation on his part, as he had feelings for Ricky. "Most of all I just liked her, and wanted to be as close to her as possible," he says.

David's behaviour proves that *Boy Meets Girl* successfully portrays the idea that abjection and eroticism compete when transgender women are represented. This results in tension for

characters and audience members who find themselves gazing upon the body of the ‘other’ (Phillips, 2006: 17). Homophobic men on and off screen are disturbed at finding themselves deriving pleasure from a penis which is not their own, causing them to lash out in order to reaffirm their masculinity (Lehman, 2001: 150).

This is an interesting take on the relationship between men and trans women, one which shows a shift in trans cinema. *Myra Breckinridge*, *The Crying Game* and *Boy Meets Girl* all deal with questions of sex, but there is a clear progression from outright deception and rape, to a suppression of the truth until the moment of sex, to the male characters knowingly entering into sexual relations with a trans woman. This indicates a societal move from justifying men’s fears of trans women to framing these fears as deriving from men themselves. This latter framing requires men to take responsibility for processing their fears and anxieties healthily.

That said, inflating David’s transphobia to soften Robby’s, along with the overarching message that anti-trans sentiment is a result of being secretly attracted to trans people, is reductive. The film’s failure to acknowledge that even ‘mild’ transphobia is still transphobia suggests to its audience that their own biases may not need re-evaluation (Thorn, 2018). By having the antagonist be as extremely transphobic as David, the audience is not given a true depiction of the scope of harmful, anti-trans rhetoric.

Hard and soft: The perceived duality of trans women

Throughout the film, Ricky is represented as existing between the realms of male and female. Nowhere is this more explicit than when she and Francesca have sex. While the film does not show their intercourse, Francesca says during foreplay that Ricky is “soft” like a girl, but also “hard” like a boy as she runs her hand over Ricky’s crotch. In fact, it is Ricky who first adds the “boy” descriptor to herself in that scene.

This scene perpetuates the idea that the penis is inherently masculine and tied to maleness, allowing Ricky to normalise this notion by expressing it herself. David does something similar when he describes Ricky as “a man below but a girl up top”, but the bedroom scene with Francesca is framed as consensual and intimate. Ricky, as a trans woman, may choose to describe herself in this way, but the underlying idea that a penis is linked to maleness is the same as David’s. In doing so, the film signals to its audience that seeing trans women as at least partially male is not incorrect.

The film does also attempt to provide some accuracy in describing the traits of a feminised penis. When in bed with Francesca, Ricky explains that “nothing comes out anymore”, thereby allaying Francesca’s fears regarding pregnancy. Sterility and a reduction in semen production are real-world side effects of being on testosterone blockers and oestrogen. Many trans women lose the ability to have erections entirely, but Ricky’s exposition on the qualities of her penis ends there. Oestrogen does alter the penis in terms of both size, texture and level of erogenous stimulation (Wynn, 2018), so much so that “hard” may actually not be an accurate descriptor of Ricky’s anatomy at all.

We eventually see Ricky's penis in act three, when she steps out of the lake, naked, to embrace Robby. Much like *The Crying Game* it is unexpected because up until that point there is absolutely no nudity in the film, but given the context of the scene with Robby, and the frankness with which her penis has been discussed throughout the film, there is no real sense of abjection among the characters. The film has provided both them and the audience with enough time to get to know Ricky that by this point she is no longer completely 'other'. However, the lack of nudity until this point makes it difficult to explain the film's decision to show a naked Ricky now, other than just wanting to show the audience a feminine penis. Given the history of sexualising the transfeminine body and fetishising transfeminine genitalia, the romantic and emotional climax of the film is undercut (Martin & Shlasko, 2015).



Screenshot of Ricky leaving the water, naked, to embrace Robby after their fight in *Boy Meets Girl* (2014).

It is at least a more honest and sensitive depiction of a trans woman's penis than previously seen. The presence of the penis is somewhat downplayed by not foregrounding it in the shot. It is small and hairless on Ricky's feminised body, but also small on screen with Ricky in the distance. It might be best considered as an example of Lehman's (2001:149) "melodramatic penis" as it is not used as a reference to phallic or sexual power, nor is it pitied. I would argue, however, that it is not even melodramatic as it is portrayed simply as a part of Ricky's body and elicits little in the way of a dramatic reaction in this scene.

It still exists in the context of sex here, and has been discussed in the context of sex throughout the film which may give it a degree of phallic power, but overall Ricky's penis is dealt with more sensitively than in either *Myra Breckinridge* or *The Crying Game*.

4 – Where to from here?

4.1 – Applying media theory to reality

"A central question posed by documentary film is what to do with people. Documentary films inform us about historical situations or events and usually depict individuals who are actively involved in those situations or events. How should they be depicted?" (Nichols, 1981: 237).

While Nichols was first and foremost a documentary-man, I do wonder why he limits this question to documentary studies given his broader work in other forms of film, and particularly given that as a semiotician he believed that media could only ever be representational, never reaching the level of reality itself.

We ask how to ethically portray the ‘real’ people in documentaries because we understand that documentaries are constructed representations which may affect the people they depict. Why should representing a marginalised group in a fictitious narrative be any different? *The Gwen Araujo Story* and *The Danish Girl* are both biopics, inspired by historical figures and events. Do their depictions have no consequence in the real world? What of those films and stories which are entirely fictitious? Per Nichols, the mind cannot so easily differentiate between real and imagined people on screen anyway (Nichols, 1981: 11-12). In short, when we ask what to do with people, we ought to apply this broadly. It is not enough to shrug off the patterns of representation in the films I have analysed as mere stories.

How then to better represent trans women in film? Indeed, how to represent the diverse trans identities that exist alongside trans women?

Recognising that there is more to being trans than dysphoria and our genitalia is a start. Recognising that we are people with diverse personalities, experiences and traits who exist alongside everyone else in the real world would also go a long way to getting filmmakers to experiment with new story and character ideas.

Recognition, however, is not enough it would seem. To counter negative portrayals of marginalised groups with positive ones gives audiences a better understanding of the diversity within that group, but it does nothing to eradicate the entrenched stereotypes already in use (Hall, 1997: 271-272). As Hall (1997: 272) writes, “to reverse a stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it”.

Countering an overly feminine trans woman stereotype, for example, could be seen as portraying trans women as aggressive and mannish. Trying to avoid masculinity altogether comes across as a camp impersonation of womanhood, which has long ago stopped being an automatically subversive act (Davy, 2005: 241). To show a trans woman as just an average person, however, with a balance of both feminine and masculine qualities, may not necessarily work either given that visual media often require clear and easily identifiable signifiers for audiences to interpret.

Hall thus suggests an alternative, which is to contest forms of misrepresentation from within. Rather than avoiding the stereotypes and fetishisms we face as trans women, we can use the tools of cinema to heighten them to levels of absurdity, thereby forcing the audience to grapple with the strangeness of its own gaze. Rather than hiding the body and all that is sexual, one ought perhaps to embrace it, own it, and in so doing redefine it (Hall, 1997: 274-275).

Boy Meets Girl does this to an extent by confronting discussions of sex and genitalia, while framing those topics in an educational, sensitive light. Perhaps the best contemporary example, however, is Natalie Wynn’s YouTube channel, *ContraPoints*. Wynn plays up the transness of her characters with striking costumes and makeup, and numerous references and jokes around the topic of sex. Most famously, perhaps, she implied that fellatio is akin to wine-tasting by

noting the ways in which the feminine penis has a different “mouthfeel” to the masculine (Wynn, 2018). “Why is nobody talking about the mouthfeel?” is now quite a widely shared joke among some members of the trans community.

That said, I am not entirely inclined to side with Hall here, as his method relies on the fact that the meanings of signs are not fixed. This can benefit marginalised groups, but it also carries the possibility that the meanings imbued by trans people into their own media can be misconstrued by their audiences. If a marginalised person can use slurs against themselves as a joke, the rationale might go, then clearly there is no harm in others doing the same. To have marginalised people embrace their misrepresentations could just as easily normalise them as it could redefine them (Martin & Shlasko, 2015).

Beyond this, Hall’s theory presupposes that marginalised groups have the power to meaningfully take control of the sites of production of mainstream media. Institutionalised prejudice, such as transphobia, “prevents many artists from ever gaining the recognition and funding to continue to produce their short films and videos, let alone feature-length works” (Marks, 2000: 3). Thus, in order to truly transform the way trans people are represented in film, it is vital to apply both recognition and redistribution (Thorn, 2018).

As long as transgender people exist as a marginalised identity, at higher risk of poverty, physical violence, work discrimination and medical gatekeeping (Martin & Shlasko, 2015) then a handful of films a year that depict us positively will not be enough (Thorn, 2018). Material change is needed in order to uplift the economic, medical and social prospects of trans people (Martin & Shlasko, 2015) in basically every country before we are likely to be seen as ‘normal’, productive members of society. And until we are seen as such, it will be easy for films to portray us as the ‘other’, as sexual objects that evoke both arousal and terror. Cinema has always captured the phobias of its society and time (Phillips, 2006: 86). I have already outlined how *Myra Breckinridge* is a key example of this in the aftermath of World War 2 and Christine Jorgensen’s public transition. Until trans identity is normalised and no longer part of the public zeitgeist, filmic representations will be slow to change.

Doubtless, film does affect social perceptions – each part of the ‘circuit of culture’ affects all others (Hall, 1997: 1). But I do not feel it was an increase in positive media representation which led specifically to any great measure of transgender mainstreaming. Rather it was trans activists becoming more vocal after decades of misrepresentation which led, incrementally, to these changes.

The increasing levels of backlash against filmmakers who cast cisgender men to play transgender women, and cisgender women to play transgender men is, I believe, evidence thereof. *The Crying Game* cast a cis man to play Dil, and I have found little in terms of complaints in media and film reviews by trans people at the time. *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) did, however, receive vocal and widespread backlash from the online trans community in opinion pieces and op-eds (Hawkins, 2013; Freiss, 2014) with actor Jared Leto even being heckled at public gatherings for taking on the role of a trans woman in the film (Beaumont-Thomas, 2014). The film went ahead with production, however, and won multiple Academy Awards, a Golden Globe, and was even nominated for the “Outstanding Film” award by GLAAD (IMDb, 2014). By 2018, however, Scarlett Johansson pulled out of a production

which would cast her as a transgender man due to the backlash she and the filmmakers faced (Lee, 2018). Such reactions show that the growing power of transgender advocacy does indeed affect cinema, more strongly perhaps than cinema has raised awareness for transgender advocacy.

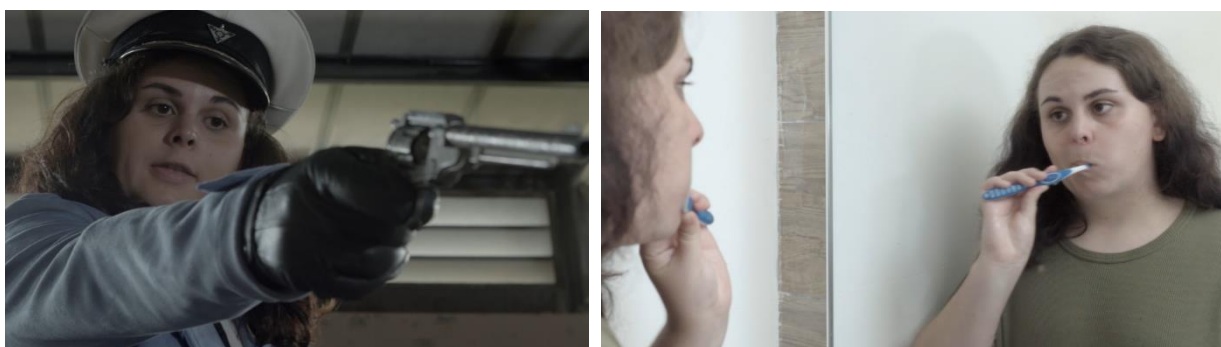
4.2 – A way forward for a trans media-maker

Having worked in communications and advocacy outside of academia, questions of representation of trans persons are ones with which I have grappled constantly. However, most of the media productions I have worked on thus far have been short profiles and the documentation of real people, rather than fictional narratives. The sensitivity that I attempt to maintain for those real-world subjects, however, must be brought to more fictionalised and cinematic representations of trans bodies, per my previous critique of Nichols.

How then to adapt what I have said in this text to the screen, beyond the simple and obvious solution of not making references to transfeminine genitalia?

As part of my research I attempted to do just that through the creation of a short film, *Everyday Onslaught* (2020). Given my background in documentary and journalistic video production, I opted for an experimental approach to the otherwise cinematic project by blending actuality with surreal, fictional moments. Referencing reality is in my view a key way for filmmakers to avoid the pitfalls of generalisation and stereotyping. Thus, through *Everyday Onslaught* I attempted to demonstrate not only that one can tell a nuanced and unexpected transgender story without it having to be a documentary, but also that the line between fact and fiction in media is, in fact, unclear.

I had felt it was important to embody the ideals of empowering trans persons to tell their own stories, so I opted to take the notion of self-representation to its logical conclusion and portray myself, with the assistance of a small crew. *Everyday Onslaught*, then, is a film about my own anxieties as a trans woman wanting to live a quiet life out of the public eye, and the internal conflict that thus emerges from my life as an activist and media-practitioner. I critique my own desires to be considered “normal”, and the efficacy of advocacy-driven media which does not always feel impactful, but which always runs the risk of being invasive and appropriative.



Screenshot of my radical and violent self-representation (left) and my mundane everyday self (right) in *Everyday Onslaught* (2020).



Screenshot of my alter-egos facing off in a form of Socratic dialogue in *Everyday Onslaught* (2020).

Much as *Myra Breckinridge* places Myra and Myron side by side in opposition to each other, the film pits two versions of myself – one timid and happy to live a boring life; the other radical and ready to topple the status quo – against one another.

Which side of me wins out is left deliberately vague in the film. Indeed, figuring out who I am is a long-term project which will doubtless continue after the publication of this text. But in seeking to tell a truthful and creative story, constrained only by the rule that I should not reference genitalia, I feel I have come across a valuable tool. The use of film to work through one's own anxieties and traumas, and to represent that which one can scarcely put into words, is something I now strongly feel requires further investigation.



Screenshot of myself as the film crew, with the camera turned back onto me to represent both my role as a media-maker recording the traumas of other trans persons, but also the fact that the film itself is my story told from my perspective. *Everyday Onslaught* (2020).

5 – Conclusion

Over the past fifty years, trans cinema has evolved dramatically, as has the world which influences it. We have seen the shift from a time in which LGBTI+ identities were essentially criminalised (Beemyn, 2014: 5-23) to a present in which significant progress has been made in

favour of transgender recognition and protection in many countries (Chiam, et al, 2017: 3-11). We have witnessed the growth of the ‘deceptive’ trans woman character in film, watching as she developed from the embodiment of chaos and social discord, to being a legitimate and fully nuanced love-interest with her own goals, hobbies and personal flaws.

Myra Breckinridge shows Myra as little more than a bogeyman (or bogeywoman?) of her time, embodying post-war America’s fears that femininity was about to violently upset the status quo. Dil was also a threat to presumed normality, but on a more personal level. While still a site of abjection and eroticism (Phillips, 2006: 17), *The Crying Game* does not pose an existential threat to society as a whole. The film does justify our disgust at Dil’s body, however, while reminding us that she is also a person. Later, Ricky in *Boy Meets Girl* is presented as a fully fleshed-out woman in a world that is more aware of trans individuals in society. She dreams of being a fashion designer and having a loving boyfriend, essentially living a life recognisable to many young girls in the ‘West’.

Is this perfect? Far from it. Multiple issues continue to plague every example of trans representation I have yet come across, and chief among them is the repetitive trope of the female penis. From *Myra Breckinridge* in 1970, to *The Crying Game* in 1992, to *Boy Meets Girl* in 2014 and the many films between them, we see time and again that trans women in cinema are defined by their genitalia. Those who seek surgery are framed as ‘pathetic’ – unable to fit into a feminine mould – while those who succeed in embodying femininity or prefer to retain and disguise their genitalia, are framed as ‘deceptive’ and dangerous. The former group is routinely mocked, while the latter is punished. While some films have found new ways of portraying trans women, I have yet to find a feature-length film that steers entirely clear of making the penis a character trait in and of itself.

This is not likely to change until the effects of meaningful social inclusion are extended to fictional media representations of trans women. Real acceptance is built on understanding (Wynn, 2019). It is not enough to merely tolerate the existence of trans people or expect them to applaud media representations which misrepresent them. We are real people with a long history of oppression, who continue to be dangerously misrepresented in the media. Unless society understands trans women, the media will itself fail to understand us, and so dangerous ideas will persist.

It is therefore necessary to empower transgender people to tell their own stories and represent themselves. This is not a call for cisgender filmmakers to cease all representations of transgender identity forthwith, but an acknowledgement that the existing system of media production has historically prevented many queer, black, female and disabled “artists from ever gaining the recognition and funding” required to meaningfully impact the world of media production (Marks, 2000: 3). When the overwhelming bulk of trans representation which mainstream filmmakers have to draw on comes from other mainstream filmmakers who have unavoidably limited understandings of trans identity, we will inevitably continue to reproduce the same tropes and stereotypes *ad nauseam*.

References

- Ancestry.com, 2013. *Montag Family History*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.ancestry.com/name-origin?surname=montag>
[Accessed 3 February 2020].
- Barlow, D. & Durand, V., 2001. *Abnormal Psychology: Media Edition*. 2nd ed. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Bauer, H., 2017. *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death and Modern Queer Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Beaumont-Thomas, B., 2014. *Jared Leto heckled for 'trans-misogyny' in Dallas Buyers Club*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/feb/05/jared-letto-heckled-trans-misogyny-dallas-buyers-club>
[Accessed 13 February 2020].
- Beemyn, G., 2014. *Transgender History in the United States*. [Online]
Available at:
https://www.umass.edu/stonewall/sites/default/files/Infoforandabout/transpeople/genny_beemyn_transgender_history_in_the_united_states.pdf
[Accessed 2 November 2019].
- Beemyn, G., 2015. What's in a Name or an Identity? A Review of Boy Meets Girl. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 15(1), pp. 145-146.
- Bell-Metereau, R., 2019. *Transgender Cinema (Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture)*. 1st ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bettcher, T., 2014. Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39(2), pp. 383-406.
- Bosworth, J., 2014. The construction of transitioning in popular websites aimed at transsexuals and significant others, family, friends and allies of transgendered persons (SOFFAs). [Online]
Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f96f/81eba65ccbc4a22a675910cf5079009351f.pdf>
[Accessed 22 February 2019].
- Boyette, P., 1971. "MYRA BRECKINRIDGE" AND IMITATIVE FORM. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17(2), pp. 229-238.
- Brook, M., 2014. *The Hays Code*. [Online]
Available at: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/592022/>
[Accessed 22 1 2020].
- Campbell, A., 2018. *Myra Breckinridge Was an Agent of Doom for the American Male*. [Online]
Available at: https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/9kmbqe/the-politics-of-myra-breckinridge
[Accessed 12 October 2019].
- Carson, C., Butcher, J. & Mineka, S., 2000. *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*. 11th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Chiam, Z., Duffy, S. & González Gil, M., 2017. *Trans Legal Mapping Report: Recognition before the law*. ILGA World. [Online]
Available at: https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_Trans_Legal_Mapping_Report_2017_ENG.pdf
[Accessed 16 February 2020].
- Connor, R., 1993. *Blossom of Bone - Reclaiming the Connections Between Homoeroticism and the Sacred*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Davidson, G. & Neale, J., 1974. *Abnormal Psychology: An Experimental Approach*. 1st ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.
- Davidson, G. & Neale, J., 1982. *Abnormal Psychology: An Experimental Approach*. 3rd ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.
- Davidson, G. & Neale, J., 1994. *Abnormal Psychology: An Experimental Approach*. 6th ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.
- Davy, K., 2005. Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp. In: J. Reinelt & J. Roach, eds. *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 231-244.
- Draz, M., 2017. On Gender Neutrality: Derrida and Transfeminism in Conversation. *State University of New York Press*, 7(1), pp. 91-98.
- Foucault, M., (1975) 1995. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freiss, S., 2014. *Don't Applaud Jared Leto's Transgender 'Mammy'*. [Online]
Available at: <https://time.com/10650/dont-applaud-jared-letos-transgender-mammy/>
[Accessed 13 February 2020].
- Feder, S., 2020. *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Field of Vision Productions
- Gonzales, S. history, D. V. b. f. o. t. p. i. O., 2018. [Online]
Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/04/entertainment/daniela-vega-first-trans-presenter-oscar/index.html>
[Accessed 5 February 2020].
- Halberstam, J., 2018. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Hall, S., 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Thousand Oaks.
- Hawkins, C., 2013. *'Dallas Buyers Club' Fails Trans Actors*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.mic.com/articles/72749/dallas-buyers-club-fails-trans-actors>
[Accessed 13 February 2020].
- IMDb, 2014. *Dallas Buyers Club: Awards*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0790636/awards>
[Accessed 13 February 2020].
- Jensen, A., 2018. Gender and the transsexual body in Transamerica. *Literator - Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies*, pp. 1-6.
- Kristeva, J., (1980) 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. English Translation ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lee, B., 2018. *Scarlett Johansson drops out of trans role after backlash*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/13/scarlett-johansson-exits-trans-role-rub-and-tug>
[Accessed 13 February 2020].
- Lehman, P., 2001. Crying over the Melodramatic Penis: Melodrama and Male Nudity in Films of the 90s. In: P. Lehman, ed. *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 25-41.
- Mark, J., 2011. *Inanna's Descent: A Sumerian Tale of Injustice*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.ancient.eu/article/215/inannas-descent-a-sumerian-tale-of-injustice/>
[Accessed 20 January 2020].
- Marks, L., 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. 1st ed. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

- Martin, G. & Shlasko, D., 2015. *Boy Meets Girl: Another Film That's Not For Us*. [Online] Available at: <http://feministing.com/2015/06/18/boy-meets-girl-another-film-thats-not-for-us/> [Accessed 22 December 2019].
- McNab, C., 1999. *Appeals Court: N-W Lancashire Health Authority v A, D and G*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.pfc.org.uk/caselaw/Appeals%20Court%20judgment%20in%20the%20case%20of%20North%20West%20Lancashire%20Health%20Authority%20v%20A,%20D%20and%20G.pdf> [Accessed 12 December 2019].
- Mendos, L., Belén Araque, L. & López de la Peña, E., 2020. *Curbing deception - A world survey of legal restrictions of so-called 'conversion therapies'*. ILGA World. [Online] Available at: https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_World_Curbing_Deception_world_survey_legal_restrictions_conversion_therapy.pdf [Accessed 5 March 2020].
- Miller, J., 2012. *Crossdressing Cinema: An Analysis of Transgender Representation in Film*, College Station: Texas A&M University.
- Moser, C., 2010. Blanchard's Autogynephilia Theory: A Critique. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57(6), pp. 790-809.
- Nichols, B., 1981. *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. 1st ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Penn, D., 2015. Ground-Breaking Film Explores Bisexuality Through a Transgender Woman's Eyes. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 15(1), pp. 142-144.
- Phillips, J., 2006. *Transgender On Screen*. 1st ed. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prasad, J., 2007. *Derrida: The Father of Deconstruction*. [Online] Available at: <https://newderrida.wordpress.com/> [Accessed 13 May 2019].
- Rabin, N., 2007. *My Year Of Flops Case File #19: Myra Breckinridge*. [Online] Available at: <https://film.avclub.com/my-year-of-flops-case-file-19-myra-breckinridge-1798211033> [Accessed 21 April 2019].
- Rehma, K. & Walters, A., 2012. Avenue T: using film as entrée in teaching about transgender. *Sex Education*, 3(13), pp. 336-348.
- Rudacille, D., 2006. *The Riddle of Gender: Science, Activism and Transgender Rights*. 2nd ed. New York: Anchor Books.
- Serano, J., 2007. Skirt-chasers: Why the media depicts the trans revolution in lipstick and heels. In: *Whipping Girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Berkeley : Seal Press, pp. 35-52.
- Solanas, V., 1967. *S.C.U.M. Manifesto (Society For Cutting Up Men)*. [Online] Available at: http://kunsthallezurich.ch/sites/default/files/scum_manifesto.pdf [Accessed 13 January 2020].
- Straube, W., 2014. *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film*, Linköping: Linköping Studies in Arts and Science.
- Swarr, A., 2012. *Sex in Transition: Remaking Gender and Race in South Africa*. 1st ed. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Terry, E., 2012. *Christine Jorgensen and the Media: Identity Politics in the Early 1950s* Press, Las Vegas: University of Nevada.

Thomson, R., 1996. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. 1st ed. New York: New York University Press.

Thorn, O., 2018. *Intro to Hegel (& Progressive Politics)*. [Online]
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgNt1C72B_4&t=
[Accessed 1 February 2020].

Thorn, O., 2018. *Transphobia: An Analysis*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCxqdhZkxCo&t=1271s>
[Accessed 31 January 2020].

Townsend, M., Deerwater, R., Adams, N. & Trasandes, M., 2019. *Where We Are On TV: 2019-2020*. [Online]
Available at:
<https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%20WHERE%20WE%20ARE%20ON%20TV%202019%2020.pdf>
[Accessed 9 November 2019].

Tunc, T. & Prescott, N., 2003. Glen or Glenda: Psychiatry, Sexuality, and the Silver Screen. *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 31 July.

Weismantel, M., 2013. Towards a Transgender Archaeology: A Queer Rampage Through Prehistory. In: S. Stryker & A. Aizura, eds. *Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York: Routledge, pp. 319 - 323.

Williams, L., 2007. Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. In: J. Codell, ed. *Genre, Gender, Race, and World Cinema: AN Anthology*. 1 ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 23 - 37.

Wynn, N., 2018. *Autogynephilia*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6czRFLs5JQo>
[Accessed 5 June 2019].

Wynn, N., 2018. *Tiffany Tumbles*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1dJ8whOM8E&t=>
[Accessed 17 June 2019].

Wynn, N., 2019. *Are Traps Gay?* [Online]
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbBzhqJK3bg>
[Accessed 31 March 2019].

Young, L., 1995. "Nothing Is As It Seems": Re-Viewing The Crying Game. In: *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 137 - 146.