

The Transgender Representation through a Cisnormative Gaze

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Abstract

This essay is a reflective analysis of transgender representation in mainstream cinema. Acknowledging that majority of trans* portrayal in movies is based on negative stereotypes, the essay seeks to incorporate relatively less violent representations of transgender persons. Based on the narratives highlighted in the Netflix documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), the essay seeks to look at the impact of misrepresentation of trans characters on trans individuals in reality. It also attempts to problematise this misrepresentation on the basis of trans characters being played by cisgender actors. And lastly, the essay relies upon theorisations of gender to transcend the current understanding of representation; of seeking to move beyond a mere performance of transness while also highlighting the performativity of gender in a larger context, in order to be able to challenge several normativities.

Keywords: representation, cinema, transgender, performativity

Introduction

Cinema reflects culture and also propagates existing biases, which has largely to do with the politics of representation. With movies being consumed by society at large, depiction of characters in certain ways has myriad influences on different groups.

The essay is a reflective analysis of transgender representation in mainstream cinema. The fact that trans*¹representation has often been misguided in terms of depicting trans* characters as violent

¹ The term trans* (trans asterisk or trans star) is an umbrella term for non-normative gender identities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “originally used to include explicitly both transsexual and transgender, or

and deviant, is well researched (Kane 2012; Koch-Rein, Yekani, and Verlinden 2020; Reitz 2017). I seek to move beyond this to incorporate relatively less violent representations of trans* individuals in cinema, wherein trans* characters are not shown to be criminals and “othered”. To complicate this, I will look at successful movies in Hollywood like *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and *The Danish Girl* (2015). This analysis will be based on trans* narratives that were highlighted in the Netflix documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020). The documentary, directed and produced by Sam Feder, focuses on how trans representation in mainstream cinema has impacted transgender individuals and their stories.

The essay is divided into three main parts. The first part attempts to look critically at the dominant form of representation of trans characters in mainstream cinema and how that impacts trans* persons and their lives. The next part looks at some better cases of representation but attempts to problematise it by highlighting the implications of cisgender appropriation of trans* characters and what it entails in terms of opportunities at the ground level. Lastly, the essay brings in Judith Butler² and the idea of gender performativity to further complicate the understanding of the boundaries of gender, and places Butler’s theorisation of the same within the debate on trans* representation in cinema.

Transgender Characters as Figures of Comic and/or Violence

It has been a practice in cinema to represent, or rather “showcase”, transgender persons as figures of comedy; the character’s transness becomes a source of humour. This exists along with the tendency to depict them as violent. An often-sighted depiction of such transphobia is *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). A psychological thriller, it seems to grossly misuse trans* narrative in order to create a sense of vulgar thrill. This negative stereotyping in films and television casts trans* women as antagonists, who are villains primarily due to their “trans-ness” (Reitz 2017). The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), which is a non-governmental media monitoring organisation funded by queer folx in media in USA, created a list of 102 episodes of TV shows featuring transgender characters between 2002 and 2012. Out of these, 54 percent of episodes had negative representation of trans* characters at the time of airing (Kane 2012). Several popular

(now usually) to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as gender-fluid, agender, etc., alongside transsexual and transgender”. The essay uses the term “trans*” when signifying a larger umbrella of identities, and trans when talking of particular identities.

² Butler, in a 1988 essay titled “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, theorises the idea of gender performativity, which implies that the so-called reality of gender is sustained only to the extent that it is performed by a sexed identity.

movies follow this “trend” and often portray the main antagonist as a trans* woman. Hence, feminisation of the character offers the villainous plot (Reitz 2017).

Such representation creates an environment where cisgender individuals respond to transgender individuals with fear. Beyond this, it has a direct negative impact on trans* individuals themselves. *Disclosure* highlights the moral dilemma that many trans* individuals go through due to such depiction. Laverne Cox of *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), states in *Disclosure* (2020), “The ways in which trans people have been represented on-screen have suggested that we’re not real; that we’re mentally ill; that we don’t exist”. In the same documentary, Tiq Milan, writer and media-maker, said, “The more we are seen, the more we are violated.” Since the impact of cinema is huge, such misrepresentation results in internalisation by trans* individuals of their gender identities as a problem in itself.

Transgender Characters as Victims

When trans* characters are not shown as perpetrators of violence, they are the ones who have violence inflicted upon them. Both ways, agency and the complexities of trans* characters, just like any other character, are ignored. As per the aforementioned study by GLAAD, in 40 per cent of the 102 episodes that were listed, trans* women were subjected to extreme violence (Kane 2012). This may depict the kind of violence that trans* individuals have to face given their gender identity. But it also creates a sense of extreme fear among trans* individuals for being themselves. Nick Adams, who is GLAAD’s director of trans* media and representation, and also appeared in *Disclosure*, said that most of the times, when growing up, trans* individuals are not parts of families where other trans* people are around, so eventually, there is a shift to the media to understand experiences and feelings, to get an answer to the question: Who are like us?

But when representation is based exclusively on atrocity, it results in further alienation. For actor Brian Smith, *Boys Don’t Cry*,³ a movie that went all the way to the Oscars, was “terrifying”. It is a film that tells the story of Brandon Teena, a young trans man in Nebraska who was murdered along with two others in 1993. This was the first time that a trans* character was not portrayed as a

³ *Boys Don’t Cry* was the first mainstream film in Hollywood to be centred upon the life of a trans man. It is based on the life of Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old trans man from Nebraska who was murdered in 1993 by two cisgender men owing to hate crimes against transgender persons. The film also touches upon Brandon’s relationship with his girlfriend, Lana Tisdell but seems to be focussed on Brandon’s attempts at being accepted for his identity and the violence he faces due to the same. Despite being one of the first movies that focused upon a trans character without villainising them, it has been criticised for being more about explicit portrayal of Brandon’s death than his life.

criminal or comically (Rigney 2003). But Laverne Cox said that after watching the movie, she felt like she was going to die. Such representation becomes a warning of what can happen if trans* people come out (Rigney 2003). It instils fear of the possibility of being violated if they “choose” to be themselves. And this portrayal does nothing to depict the structural problems that cause such direct forms of violence. The problem is not in talking about violence, but rather how this discourse takes place. One problem is that only stories of loss of agency are the ones being told over and over again. As Tiq Milan pointed out, there was a complete erasure of black representation in *Boys Don't Cry*. It failed to talk about Philip DeVine who was also murdered that night in 1993 and was an ally to Brandon. For Tiq, invisibilisation of a black character also meant an erasure of queer Black folx. In his words, “[This is] taking away representation and saying that I cannot exist.”

Another critique that *Boys Don't Cry*, along with *The Danish Girl*,⁴ has received is portrayal of a transgender character by a cisgender actor. *The Danish Girl*, which also won an Oscar, is loosely inspired by the lives of Danish artists Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener. It shows the way in which the two artists navigate the journey of Lili Elbe as one of the first persons to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Both movies were applauded for their “bold” representation and talented acting. Hilary Swank, who played Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, and Eddie Redmayne, who played Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl*, progressed tremendously in their acting careers with the two respective roles. The problem here is not visible on the surface but needs to be unravelled.

The Problem of Transgender Representation by Cisgender Actors

According to a study conducted by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, transgender persons (in USA) did much worse in aspects of their lives that affect their economic well-being (Carpenter, Eppink, and Gonzales 2020). In another study by National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in USA, it was found that more than one in four transgender persons lose their jobs due to discrimination. Discrimination is experienced at a higher rate by transgender persons of colour (NCTE 2020). In situations of stark inequalities, if Hollywood wants to make a difference, it is difficult to understand why transgender actors are not given roles, while roles representing

⁴ *The Danish Girl* is based on the lives of Danish artists Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener. The movie journeys through Lili's transition and the ways in which it is navigated by both Lili and Gerda. Touching slightly upon the issue of sexuality, the movie portrays Lili's relation with her gender. After having consulted several “experts” about the same, Lili becomes the first recipient of sex reassignment surgery in the 1920s. However, given the complications that arise from the surgery, the movie ends with Lili's death. While the movie is applauded for its performances and the portrayal of the transition of Lili Elbe, it has been criticised for giving undue attention to the changes in Gerda's life and the marriage between Lili and Gerda as Lili's transitions.

transgender persons are given to cisgender actors. According to a report by *IndieWire* in 2019, despite the so-called progress, Hollywood's most famous trans* actors continue to struggle to find jobs (Dry 2019). Additionally, the report states that landing a role does not end the problem. Many trans* actors feel conflicted about speaking up against problematic points in their own dialogues (Dry 2019). Despite increased opportunities, the playing field is not at par and decision-making is in the hands of cisgender individuals.

Another noteworthy point brought out in *Disclosure* is the “performativity” of transness by cisgender actors. In the documentary, according to actor and writer, Jen Richards, “Having cis men play trans women is a direct link to the violence against trans women”. Paraphrasing further, such representation is part of the reason why cis men also murder trans* women, which arises out of the fear that other men will think that they are gay for having been with trans* women. Transphobia, combined with homophobia, becomes a source of brutal violence. Richards then states that the men, due to whose judgement other men end up murdering trans* women, know trans* women only from media, and the people who are playing trans* women are the (cis) men that they know. This issue does not arise when a trans* woman is played by a trans* woman. “When you see these women off screen still as women, it completely deflates this idea that they’re somehow men in disguise; the transness of it doesn’t have to be played”, says Richards. However, when someone like Eddie Redmayne plays a trans* woman, no matter how brilliant of a performance that is, the only thing that remains remarkable of such performance is transness and how convincingly he portrays it. Many a times, this reduces the character to a mere performance of femininity and hence, transness, rather than, as Richards goes on to state in *Disclosure*, “a whole person of whom transness is one aspect”. After the movie is complete, the actor continues to live with cis privilege having appropriated the trans* struggle.

The Danish Girl is also criticised on the grounds of exploiting the trans experience in order to highlight the crisis that cisgender people go through as a result of a closed one coming out as trans* (Trota 2014). This is with regards to the character of Gerda, played by Alicia Vikander, whose emotional and social struggles of losing her “husband” provided the viewpoint through which we saw Lili’s story.

While Brandon’s character in *Boys Don’t Cry* may not have been used as a plot device in a similar manner, the cis gaze dominates the screenplay. It is true that Hilary Swank believes that if the movie was made in contemporary times, the role would have been played by a trans* actor. She also stated

in an interview to *IndieWire* that while there are several steps needed to be taken to further the inclusivity of all identities in Hollywood, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has revised its standards to include diverse talents both off and, on the screen, (Lattanzio 2020). However, while such changes have taken place here and there, a structural transformation, whether underway or not, is precarious. Movies continue to depict trans* characters in age-old stereotypical roles.

Moving away from Hollywood and into the genre of independent cinema, is *A Good Man* (2020), a French-Belgian drama, which first premiered at the Deauville Film Festival in September and was also screened at the Cannes Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. Based on true events, it depicts the story of Benjamin, a trans man, in the midst of transition, choosing to undergo pregnancy. While many critics have praised the film for its empathetic approach, it has received backlash for portrayal of the trans character by a cis actor, Noemie Merlant. In her defence, the director, Marie Castille Mention-Schaar, said that due to lack of trans* actors in France, she decided to cast a cis actor. Quite interestingly, she went back to Hilary Swank's "strong depiction" of the trans experience in *Boys Don't Cry* to further her point. She also stated that her movie included a trans actor, Jonas Ben Ahmed, playing a cis role. However, the role played by Ahmed was secondary and the arguments given by the director were rejected by trans film critic Danielle Solzman (Fuster 2020).

There are two points regarding representation that emerge. First is the lack of accessibility of trans* actors to be found by casting directors, instead of lack of their numbers in the industry. Solzman herself stated that the problem is in the lack of accessibility provided to trans* actors to reach out and to be reached out by others. This leads to the second point, which is the lack of trans masculine representation within the already lacking trans* representation (Wickman 2003). The problem exacerbates with the almost absence of trans embodiments in feature films that are explicitly neither female nor male identified (Straube 2014).

This (mis)representation brings us to the problem of the antithetical conundrum pointed out by Judith Butler. Butler states that transgender characters are continuing to struggle to be recognised as gendered people. However, to be recognised solely as a gendered person in a cisnormative structure could push one into a binary of sex. Acknowledging the lived realities of transgender persons, Butler states that transgender characters are "allowed" to shift from one category to another but not transgress boundaries in a way that would disrupt the essentialist construction of sex. The notions of essentialism in characters conceals the performativity of gender, as a whole,

that takes place in our real lives (Butler 2006). Butler's point is to move beyond seeking inclusion that may disturb, albeit within bounds, the status quo but does not transform the same. The inclusion of trans characters that fit a cisgender idea of transness may not do much to subvert the cis gaze in itself (Mocarski et al. 2019).

Here, I bring into focus the demands by Actors' Equity Association, a union representing US actors and stage managers in theatre. According to Equity, it is not easy for trans* actors to build a career out of scarce trans*-specific roles for which they might be sought. In a 2019 guide published by the association, entitled as "Guidelines for Entertainment Professionals Working with LGBT+ Performers",⁵ it was noted that "the fact that [a performer] is trans may be completely invisible in the role, but it powerfully represents diversity in the industry." Hence, it calls for more casting directors to hire transgender performers to play non-trans characters (Perraudin 2019). This situation may solve the conundrum that Butler points out, moving beyond the performativity of transness but also not concealing the very performativity of gender. However, at present, the cisnormative gaze constantly decides the kind of representation that trans* characters get. These issues intersect with problems of race, religion, and class to create junctures of invisibilisation.

Conclusion

The politics of representation plays a vital role in shaping mind sets and societies. The cycle of misrepresentation has started to be intercepted. But there are several more steps to be taken. From trans masculine and trans feminine experiences, realities of individuals at every point of the gender spectrum are required to be narrated. Representation is about taking up one's deserved space and more often than not, it continues to oscillate between cisgender heterosexual men and women from the viewpoint of the male gaze. Queering the politics of representation has often been associated with bringing about structural change, with dismantling heteronormativity that dominates much of queer representation as well. Only when the framework that defines the practice of film-making, in all its aspects, changes can we expect the problems at the deep ends of the structure to vanish. This, however, requires several demands, struggles and measures. One of the first steps in doing so is no doubt true representation of marginalised identities.

⁵ Available from: https://www.equity.org.uk/media/3465/equity_lgbt-casting-guide.pdf [Accessed: 2nd August 2021].

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