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Nikki Reitz

Grand Valley State University, reitznic@mail.gvsu.edu

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## The Representation of Trans Women in Film and Television

by Nikki Reitz

Everyday Americans see reflections of themselves through their televisions and on the movie screen. They identify with characters they see, or they model themselves on those characters. Behavior, fashion sense, and morality can be used to shape an individual who sees someone like them in media. This reflection, however, has a downside. For many Americans, their daily life is filled with people who look and act just like them. We often find ourselves living in bubbles filled with people with similar world views. Television and movies are the only exposure to different individuals many Americans will receive. Negative stereotypes can directly impact the judgement of one group of people on another. These negative stereotypes can lead to people supporting policies that negatively impacts those that are associated with those stereotypes. For transgender women, the way they are represented on the screen is especially negative and thus damaging to their fight for equal treatment.

Film and television often casts trans women as villains. GLAAD is a non-government media monitoring organization that is funded by LGBT people in media. Since 2012, they have catalogued 102 episodes of television featuring transgender characters. Out of those episodes, 21% of them featured a trans woman as a villain (GLAAD). Multiple popular movies follow suit where the main antagonist is a trans woman. *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik), released in 1983, features a killer that is a trans woman who spends most the movie passing as a cisgender woman. At the end of the film, the character is seen naked on a beach holding the murder weapon. It is then revealed that the character was assigned male at birth. *The Silence of the Lambs*' (Jonathan Demme, 1991) main antagonist, Buffalo Bill, is a serial killer who kidnaps women, skins them, and then wears their skin. Although it is not explicitly stated that

Buffalo Bill identifies as being a woman, he is seen dressing up, applying makeup, and then tucking his genitals between his legs. He feminizes himself while also being a deranged character.

In our society, it is considered acceptable to be masculine, but to give up that masculinity and present as being feminine is a sign of deviance or some form of mental disorder. This is because of the gender binary that we force on ourselves. Throughout history, many cultures have acknowledged the existence of more than two genders. By acknowledging only two genders, males can exert themselves over their female counterparts, thus creating a gender that is denigrated. The gender binary system reinforces the patriarchal status quo and keeps power in the hands of those who already have it while making it difficult for those who do not have power to attain it.

Trans women are seen by our society as giving up their masculinity, and therefore power, to become feminine. Media creators have taken this concept and adopted it for their productions, making trans women villains – deranged individuals who are violent and dangerous. This way of thinking has given way to negative policy regarding trans women. In March of 2016, North Carolina passed the “An Act to Provide for Single-sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations” bill, also known as House Bill 2. This law requires that employees of the state government use the restroom that corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth. This law makes it illegal for a trans woman, who is an employee of the government of North Carolina, to use the women’s restroom and requires them to use the men’s restroom.

Furthermore, this law was passed under the guise of protecting women and children from trans women who are sex offenders (Borrello). In the United States, only 0.3% of adults identify as transgender according to The Williams Institute. This statistic includes both trans women and trans men. With trans women making up such a small percentage of the population, most people will never meet a

trans woman in their lives. The only exposure they have to trans women is through movies and television. Movies and television say that trans women are dangerous people who act violently towards others. Thus, House Bill 2 was passed with no regard to the fact that there has never been a reported incident of a trans woman assaulting anyone in a restroom (Steinmetz). Trans men do not face this kind of discrimination due to their male privilege.

Something even more problematic is, according to the aforementioned study done by GLAAD, that in 40% of the catalogued episodes trans women were the victims of extreme violence, with police procedural shows being the worst offenders by far. Shows such as *Law & Order* (1990-2010), *CSI* (2000-2015), *NCIS* (2003-), and *The Closer* (2005-2012) often depict trans women as being sexually assaulted or murdered. These shows also depict the terrible treatment trans women face by the police investigating their cases. Often the police will misgender trans women using he/him pronouns instead of she/her. They will “deadname” trans women, which is using the name they were given at birth instead of the new name they take at transition. They will also harass trans women by calling them derogatory terms (Trotta). This behavior in scripted shows and films tells the audience that it is okay to treat trans women like this. It reinforces negative stereotypes about trans women and makes it seem like it is acceptable to treat trans women in the same manner.

Trans women are disproportionately murdered at alarming rates. The Human Rights Campaign estimates that trans women who engage in sexual intercourse with men have a 1 in 12 chance of being murdered. For trans women of color, that estimate jumps to 1 in 4. Trans women also experience more workplace and peer discrimination. The lack of support from communities combined with discrimination leads to 49% of trans women attempting suicide at least once. Of those that attempt suicide, half succeed (Human Rights Campaign).

In addition, Hollywood reinforces the idea that trans women are not really women by casting cisgender men in the roles of trans women. Jeffrey Tambor is the star of Hulu's *Transparent* (2014-), Eddie Redmayne plays Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), and Jared Leto plays Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013). Cisgender men cannot accurately depict the experience of trans women. It is impossible to understand gender dysphoria without experiencing it for one's self. By casting cis men in these roles, Hollywood takes work away from trans actresses. Trans women often face discrimination when seeking employment, leaving many to be underemployed and living in poverty (Kellaway).



Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl*.

Furthermore, Hollywood also creates films that exploit the trans experience to highlight the crisis that coming out as trans inflicts on the cis people around them. In this way, trans characters are often used as plot devices for cis characters (Trota). *The Danish Girl* spends more time with the character Gerda, played by Alicia Vikander, and her struggle to accept that her partner Lili is trans. The film ignores the emotional and social struggles that Lili faces and instead focuses on

Gerda's feeling of loss over her 'husband.' The audience is expected to sympathize with Gerda, and, inevitably, expected to see Lili as the reason for her pain and suffering.

Likewise, *Dallas Buyers Club* is a film marketed as a true story, yet the whole narrative is a work of fiction. The character Ron Woodruff, played by Matthew McConaughey, is portrayed as being heterosexual and extremely bigoted toward the LGBT community. In reality, Ron Woodruff was bisexual, and not at all homophobic. However, his heroism in the film is based on him overcoming his

bigotry. In the film, Rayon is a trans woman who befriends Ron. Rayon is an entirely fictional character. Steve Friess of *Time* magazine sums up Leto's performance as such, "there are no stereotypes about transgender women that Leto's concoction does not tap. She's an exaggerated, trivialized version of how men who pretend to be women — as opposed to those who feel at their core they are women — behave."

There are several movies that are trumpeted as being positive examples of trans representation, but they too are problematic. Sophia Burset is a trans character on the hit Netflix show *Orange is the*

*New Black* (2013-). Sophia is played by trans actress Laverne Cox. Sophia is both a criminal and a victim, falling into the two most common tropes trans characters are cast as. She is a victim of a hate crime and subsequently subjugated to institutionalized discrimination. *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015) is also hailed as a positive example of trans representation, but it too falls into common tropes. The main character Sin-Dee,



Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black*.

played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez, is

portrayed as irrational and mentally unstable, which are common misconceptions about trans women (Trota). *Boy Meets Girl* (Eric Schaeffer, 2014) is a positive film starring Michelle Hendley, a trans actress. The film is sex positive, breaks negative stereotypes about trans women, and even seeks to normalize the bodies of trans women. However, in its attempt to do so, it ultimately objectifies

Hendley's character's body and reinforces the idea that all trans women want to be desired by cisgender men (Trotta).

Trans is only an adjective that describes one aspect of transgender people. By reducing trans people to just their trans-ness, the humanity of their characters is never revealed. Their hopes and dreams, the real struggles they face, and how they deal with the overall situation of the plot become lost opportunities. Their stories need to revolve around the plot and not the fact that they are trans. When producers of television and film begin casting trans actresses and actors to portray the trans experience, they will, in turn, slow the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of trans people. By better representing trans women in media, public opinion of trans women will change positively and their quality of life can greatly improve. Trans women that consume television and film will finally be able to join the rest of Americans by seeing themselves reflected on the screen. This can give them hope for better times, encourage them to press through their struggles, and have positive role models to look up to. By seeing positive examples of trans women they, too, can become stronger women. After all, if you can't see it, you can't be it.

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