

oppositionally. This may be a learned habit, shared with other groups marginalized from or 'misrepresented' in dominant forms of culture (hooks 1992), but it does not explain why many heterosexuals, who might be seen as not very marginal, also prefer the connoted to the denoted. If there is a specifically subcultural investment in oppositional reading practices, how does this transfer to artifacts with subcultural conditions of production?

In this light, the mixed response to the introduction of fashion into new lesbian and gay lifestyle magazines needs to be situated in relation to other visuals in gay-produced culture, to dominant images of lesbians and gays and to changing dominant images of femininity and masculinity, as well as to the increasingly problematic relationship of style to identity for lesbian subcultures. When identity can no longer be decoded from appearance, fashion is both a newly available playground and a danger zone of irrecognizability.

Note

- 1 Murray Healy, conference presentation at Postmodern Times, City University, July 1995.

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THE TRANSGENDER GAZE IN *BOYS DON'T CRY*

IN HER STYLISH ADAPTION of the true life story of Brandon Teena, the director Kimberley Peirce very self-consciously constructs what can only be called a 'transgender gaze.' *Boys Don't Cry* establishes the legitimacy and the durability of Brandon's gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his death by murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's gaze, a transgender gaze.¹ The transgender gaze in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes and it disarms, temporarily, the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre. Brandon's gaze, obviously, dies with him in the film's brutal conclusion but Peirce, perhaps prematurely, abandons the transgender gaze in the final intimate encounter between Lana and Brandon. Peirce's inability to sustain a transgender gaze opens up a set of questions about the inevitability and dominance of both the male/female and the hetero-homo binary in narrative cinema.

One remarkable scene, about half-way through the film, clearly foregrounds the power of the transgender gaze and makes it most visible precisely where and when it is most threatened. In a scary and nerve-wracking sequence of events, Brandon finds himself cornered at Lana's house.

John and Tom have forced Candace to tell them that Brandon has been charged by the police with writing bad checks and that he has been imprisoned as a woman. John and Tom now hunt Brandon, like hounds after a fox, and then they begin a long and excruciating interrogation of Brandon's gender identity. Lana protects Brandon at first by saying that she will examine him and determine whether he is a man or a woman. Lana and Brandon enter Lana's bedroom, where Lana refuses to look as Brandon unbuckles his pants telling him: 'Don't . . . I know you're a guy.' As they sit on the bed together, the camera now follows Lana's gaze out into the night sky, a utopian vision of an elsewhere into which she and Brandon long to escape. The camera cuts back abruptly to 'reality' and a still two-shot of Brandon

in profile and Lana behind him. As they discuss their next move, the camera draws back slowly and makes a seamless transition to place them in the living room in front of the posse of bullies. This quiet interlude in Lana's bedroom establishes the female gaze, Lana's gaze, as a willingness to see what is not there (a condition of all fantasy) but also as a refusal to privilege the literal over the figurative (Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation). The female gaze, in this scene, makes possible an alternative vision of time, space and embodiment: time slows down while the couple linger in the sanctuary of Lana's private world, her bedroom; the bedroom itself becomes an otherworldly space framed by the big night sky and containing the perverse vision of a girl and her queer boy lover; and the body of Brandon is preserved as male, for now, by Lana's refusal to dismantle its fragile power with the scrutinizing gaze of science and 'truth.' That Lana's room morphs seamlessly into the living room at the end of this scene, alerts the viewer to the possibility that an alternative vision will subtend and undermine the chilling enforcement of normativity that follows.

Back in the living room – the primary domestic space of the family – events take an abrupt turn towards the tragic. Brandon is shoved now into the bathroom, a hyper-real space of sexual difference, and he is violently depantsed by John and Tom, and then restrained by John while Tom roughly examines his crotch. The brutality of John and Tom's action here is clearly identified as a violent mode of looking and the film identifies the male gaze with that form of knowledge which resides in the literal. The brutality of the male gaze, however, is more complicated than simply a castrating force; John and Tom not only want to see the site of Brandon's castration, more importantly they need Lana to see it. Lana kneels in front of Brandon, confirming the scene's resemblance to a crucifixion tableau, and refuses to raise her eyes, declining, again, to look at Brandon's unveiling.

At the point when Lana's 'family' and 'friends' assert their heteronormative will most forcefully upon Brandon's resistant body, however, Brandon rescues himself for a moment by regaining the alternative vision which he and Lana shared moments earlier in her bedroom. A slow-motion sequence interrupts the fast and furious quasi-medical scrutiny of Brandon's body, and shots from Brandon's point of view reveal him to be in the grips of an 'out of body' experience. Light shines on Brandon from above and his anguished face peers out into the crowd of onlookers who have gathered at the bathroom door. The crowd now includes a fully clothed Brandon, a double, who returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon impassively. In this shot/reverse-shot sequence between the castrated Brandon and the transgender Brandon, the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked. The clothed Brandon is the Brandon who was rescued by Lana's refusal to look; he is the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder; he is the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle. And the naked Brandon is the Brandon who will suffer, endure but finally expire.

Kaja Silverman has called attention to cinematic suture as 'the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack.'² Here in *Boys Don't Cry*, the inadequacy of the subject's position has been presented as a



Figure 57.1 Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena, with Chloe Sevigny as Lana, in *Boys Don't Cry* (Courtesy of the Kobal Collection)

precondition of the narrative and so this scene of the split transgender subject, which would ordinarily expose 'the inadequacy of the subject's position,' actually works to highlight the *sufficiency* of the transgender subject. So, if usually the shot/reverse-shot both secures and destabilizes the spectator's sense of self, now the shot/reverse-shot involving the two Brandons serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability and to confirm Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated.

Not only does *Boys Don't Cry* create a transgender subject position which is fortified from the traditional operations of the gaze and conventional modes of gendering but it also makes the transgender subject dependent upon the recognition of a woman. In other words, Brandon can be Brandon because Lana is willing to see him as he sees himself (clothed, male, vulnerable, lacking, strong, passionate), and she is willing to avert her gaze when his manhood is in question. With Brandon occupying the position in the romance which is usually allotted to the male hero and the male gaze, the dynamics of looking and gendered being are permanently altered. If usually it is the female body that registers lack and insufficiency and powerlessness, in *Boys*, it is Brandon who represents the general condition of incompleteness, crisis and lack, and it is Lana who represents the fantasy of wholeness, knowledge and pleasure. Lana can be naked without trauma while Brandon cannot; she can access physical pleasure in a way that he cannot, but he is depicted as mobile and self-confident in a way that she is not. Exclusion and privilege cannot be assigned neatly to the couple on the basis of gender hierarchies or class hierarchies; power, rather, is shared between the two subjects and she agrees to misrecognize him as male while he sees through her social alienation and unhappiness and recognizes her as beautiful, desirable and special.

By deploying the transgender gaze and joining it to an empowered female gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*, director Kimberly Peirce, for most of the film, keeps the viewer trained upon the seriousness of Brandon's masculinity, the authenticity of his presentation as opposed to its elements of masquerade. But abruptly, towards the end of the film, Peirce suddenly and catastrophically divests her character of his transgender gaze and converts it to a lesbian and therefore female gaze. In a strange scene which follows the brutal rape of Brandon by John and Tom, Lana comes to Brandon as he lies sleeping in a shed outside of Candace's house. In many ways the encounter between the two that follows seems to extend the violence enacted upon Brandon's body by John and Tom since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*. Lana, contrary to her previous commitment to his masculinity, seems to see him as female and she calls him 'pretty' and asks him what he was like as a girl. Brandon confesses to Lana that he has been untruthful about many things in his past and his confession sets up the expectation that he will now appear before Lana as his 'true' self. Truth here becomes sutured to nakedness as Lana disrobes Brandon tentatively saying that she may not know 'how to do this.' 'This' seems to refer to having sex with Brandon as a woman. They both agree that his whole journey to manhood has been pretty weird and then they move to make love. While earlier Peirce created quite graphic depictions of sex between Brandon and Lana, now the action is hidden by a Hollywood dissolve as if to suggest that the couple are now making love as opposed to having sex.

The scene raises a number of logical and practical questions about the representation of the relationship between Brandon and Lana: First, why would Brandon want to have sex within hours of a rape? Second, how does the film pull back from its previous commitment to his masculinity here by allowing his femaleness to become legible and significant to Lana's desire? Third, in what ways does this scene play against the earlier more 'plastic' sex scenes in which Brandon used a dildo and wouldn't allow Lana to touch him? And, fourth, how does this scene unravel the complexities of the transgender gaze as they have been assembled in earlier scenes between Brandon and Lana?

When asked in an interview about this scene, Peirce reverts to a very tired humanist narrative to explain this extraordinary scene and she says that after the rape, Brandon could not be either Brandon Teena or Teena Brandon and so he becomes truly 'himself' and in that scene 'receives love' for the first time as a human being.³ Peirce claims that Lana herself told her about this encounter and therefore it was true to life. In the context of the film however, which has made no such commitment to authenticity, the scene ties Brandon's humanity to a particular form of naked embodiment that in the end requires him to be a woman.

Ultimately, in *Boys Don't Cry*, the double vision of the transgender subject gives way to the universal vision of humanism; the transgender man and his lover become lesbians and the murder seems to be simply the outcome of a vicious homophobic rage. Given the failure of nerve that leads Peirce to conclude her film with a humanist scene of love conquers all, it is no surprise that she also sacrificed the racial complexity of the narrative by erasing the story of the other victim who died alongside Brandon and Lisa Lambert. Philip DeVine, a disabled African American man has in general received only scant treatment in media accounts of the case, despite the connections of at least one of the murderers to a white supremacist group.⁴

Now, in the feature film, the death of DeVine has been rendered completely irrelevant to the narrative that has been privileged. Peirce claimed that this subplot would have complicated her film and made the plot too cumbersome – but race is a narrative trajectory that is absolutely central to the meaning of the Brandon Teena murder. DeVine was dating Lana Tisdale's sister Leslie and had a fight with her the night he showed up at Lisa Lambert's house in Humboldt County. His death was neither accidental nor an afterthought; his connection to Leslie Tisdale could be read as a similarly outrageous threat to the supremacy and privilege of white manhood that the murderers Lotter and Nissen rose to defend. By taking DeVine out of the narrative and by not even mentioning him in the original dedication of the film ('To Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert'),⁵ the film-maker sacrifices the hard facts of racial hatred and transphobia to a streamlined humanist romance: Peirce, in other words, reduces the complexity of the murderous act even as she sacrifices the complexity of Brandon's identity.

The murders, in the end, are shown to be the result of a kind of homosexual panic and Brandon is offered up as an 'everyman' hero who makes a claim on the audience's sympathies, first by pulling off a credible masculinity but then by seeming to step out of his carefully maintained manhood to appear before judge and jury in the naked flesh as female. By reneging on the film's earlier commitment to the transgender gaze and by ignoring altogether the possibility of exposing the whiteness of the male gaze, *Boys* falls far short of the alternative vision that was articulated so powerfully and shared so beautifully by Brandon and Lana in Lana's bedroom.

Notes

- 1 Patricia White has argued that the gaze in *Boys* is Lana's all along. I think in the first two-thirds of the film, the gaze is shared between Lana and Brandon but I agree with White that the film's ending transfers the gaze from Brandon's to Lana's with some unpredictable consequences. See White, 'Girls Still Cry,' *Screen* (Vol. unknown, No. unknown) 122–8.
- 2 Kaja Silverman, 'Suture' in *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 236.
- 3 Interview with Terry Gross on Fresh Air, PBS Radio.
- 4 See Aphrodite Jones, *All S/he Wanted* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), 154.
- 5 In the review copy of the film I saw, *Boys* was dedicated 'To Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert.' This dedication seems to have been removed later on, possibly because it so overtly referenced the erasure of Philip DeVine.