

Free case study on the gender binary in boys dont cry

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The 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce, tells the story of transgendered man Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank, in an Oscar-winning performance), who was born Teena Brandon, a woman. In his attempts to ingratiate himself with his male friends and pursue a relationship with a girl named Lana (Chloe Sevigny), his anatomical differences are discovered, and he is raped and murdered by those same male friends. The film examines the concepts of homosexuality, transgender issues, and identity in a way that few major studio films typically do. However, *Boys Don't Cry* presents a remarkably gender-binary worldview for its subject matter, as Brandon (and the film) refuses to accept the possibility of a transgender or intersex view of his sexuality, preferring to paint him as a straight male in a crossdressing woman's body. In this paper, the film will be evaluated based on concepts of feminist theory, queer theory and more, all in an attempt to demonstrate the failings of the film to present a true account of Brandon Teena's life and death for the sake, in parts, of straightforward lesbian eroticism.

Fausto-Sterling notes that gender is an incredibly ambiguous concept, and that intersexuality stems from social and cultural ideas of being male or female (2009). Brandon's journey, despite being mostly that of discovering one's transgenderism and seeking the freedom to interact as a masculine male, demonstrates different viewpoints of masculinity, especially when compared with John. Near the beginning of the film, Brandon gets into a bar fight, where he is then bailed out by John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard). This scene demonstrates a masculine drive to fight, cementing Brandon's desire to act and behave as a man, especially one stereotypical of small-town Nebraska. This is a particularly fascinating drama found in the film, as the

film at least mildly explores the concept of the social construction of gender, in which our concepts of man and woman are shaped by our culture (Lorber, 2009).

Instead of advocating for the truth of Brandon Teena's transgender identity, as something in between man and woman, the film and Peirce effectively show Brandon's identity as strictly a crossdressing lesbian; this furthers the gender binary and downplays any alternative viewpoints. In the first scene with Brandon, he has his gay friend cut his hair short to look like a man, and he dresses himself, complete with sock in the pants to simulate a penis. The friend even says, " So you're a boynow what?" This is all done to give the appearance of him being a man, so that he can go on his first date with a woman at a roller rink. The scene is filmed in a very surreal style, with a three shot sequence reminiscent of the transition to Oz in The Wizard of Oz. This was meant to showcase the transition between womanhood to manhood, effectively downplaying any other sort of identity. Brandon in the film goes from woman to man; there is no other identity considered by either him or the rest of the characters in the film - he is not bisexual, either, having fully committed to being in love with strictly women and not both sexes; this sexuality as either a lesbian or a heterosexual man in a woman's body is merely taken as a given for her (Baumgardner 197).

Transvestitism is portrayed as a bit of a spectacle; from a metafictional standpoint, Brandon calls far more attention to himself as a crossdressing woman than is intended in the attempt to 'fit in' with the boys, which is exactly the kind of 'brave, challenging' spectacle that provided Hilary Swank with the Oscar for Best Actress. The spectator (the audience of the film) is

always aware of Brandon's transvestitism, making it all the more sensationalist, as well as providing a substantial source of tension and suspense within the spectator. The audience recognizes the ticking clock nature of Brandon's disguise, knowing it is just a matter of time before he is found out. This paints transvestitism and transgendered people as spectacles, adding to the 'freakshow' nature of Brandon's experience. The primary problem with the presentation of Brandon's transgendered nature in the film is that, with few exceptions, Brandon's character is presented merely as a crossdressing lesbian woman who impersonates a man in order to have sex with women. Brandon identifies as male, but does so without acknowledging his biological femaleness. Therefore, there is little to identify Brandon as someone who lives 'between' genders, but instead has picked a heteronormative picture of male sexuality with the burden of having a female body. This identity does fluctuate, however; there are scenes when, after Lana learns that Brandon is biologically female, he asserts that he is a hermaphrodite, who will be getting a sex change soon. Other than that, a few cursory mentions about saving money for the procedures are given, without it having much bearing on the character. This results in a very minimized, whitewashed portrayal of a transsexual man in favor of emphasizing, for filmmaking purposes, the illicit eroticism of lesbianism. This flagrant criticism of heteronormativity is present in unique ways. First, the idyllic heartland of America is challenged in the film's setting, small-town Nebraska. This area provides many images of the American Dream; peaceful country roads, good old boys living the simple life, and so on. It is meant to be the core of America, and yet it presents a constricting, oppressive world

for Brandon. Due to its conservative atmosphere, and the family values that make her feminine masculinity so abhorrent, the idea of people like Brandon - genderqueer or transgenders - threatens their 'wholesome' way of life. As Rosenberg notes, society often places certain pressure on individuals to be either male or female, depending on their biological gender (2009). However, the behavior of John, Tom and most other characters in the film reveals them as petty, bigoted and small-thinking individuals who want nothing beyond the county lines of their small town. The protagonists, Brandon and Lana, hope to go around to greater climes, Brandon hoping to manage Lana in a career as a karaoke singer.

Secondly, Brandon's own female masculinity is supported, as is his gender fluidity, by the healthy, accepting relationship he develops with Lana. Even after she suspects and knows that Brandon is a biological female, she still plans to have a life with him - she reacts to his attempt at an explanation with 'Shut up. That's your business. I don't care if you're half monkey or half ape.'" By presenting such a supportive character in Lana, Brandon's own issues with gender identity are somewhat validated, as he is not the only one who agrees that he is, where it truly counts, a man.

Throughout the film, Brandon's impersonation of a male is often portrayed as a trick in order to date women, adding to the thought that Brandon may just be a lesbian woman who is forced to cross-dress in order to have female relationships with women who would otherwise not consider a relationship with a woman. The aforementioned scene where his gay friend dresses Brandon up and cuts his hair plays like the setup to a prank, complete with the friend attempting to get Brandon to back out at the last minute. This

plays out as if Brandon knows he is a woman, but wishes to date a girl in a small, conservative town, and so is willing to play the part of a man to do so. This is furthered most dramatically by the presentation of Brandon's body as female, and its subsequent exhibition as such. Brandon gets his period, and Lana views his cleavage, which tie sex characteristics to gender, at least in the minds of the other characters in the film. During both the love scenes with Lana and the rape scene with John and Tom, Brandon is nude, with his chest tape removed to reveal his breasts; John and Tom both penetrate Brandon vaginally, engaging in heterosexual rape. Not only is the rape itself traumatic for its own reasons, it is doubly traumatic for Brandon as a reminder of his biological femaleness; Brandon spends most of the movie passing as a man, wishing he was a man, that having this unfortunate reminder to the contrary is a tremendous trauma. Brandon's body and identity are both raped at that point, as Brandon's transgendered viewpoint is horrifyingly challenged by the gender binary that the Tom and John characters force upon him (that Brandon is a woman), and they 'teach' her that he is meant to have sex with a man, no matter how much he hates it, consent or no consent.

Boys Don't Cry is not a true transgender film; instead, it is a crossdressing film. This makes Brandon effectively a transvestite, instead of a transgendered. The 'otherness' of Brandon is not between different types of people, but merely Brandon and the rest of the film's characters. Brandon's transgenderism is painted in the film as straightforward lesbianism.

Brandon's body is presented as a 'true' woman, and so there is no genderqueer ambiguity anymore; it supports a gender binary of male OR

female, nothing in between. Brandon's existence challenges typical notions of heteronormality and masculinity, as well as the idyllic nature of the American heartland, where genderqueer individuals are not welcome.

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