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TOWARDS TRANS CINEMA

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This chapter takes up the designation of trans cinema as a provocation to think cinema's multiple components, including film texts, screen media, and spectators, from a trans perspective. Trans is a prefixal term for a range of non-binary and non-conforming gender identities, but it can also be affixed to man and woman (i.e. trans man) to signify the experience, past or present, of a transitional state of sexed being. Gender variance in cinema dates to the first films, and continues in popularity across screen media from television, to the Internet, to film industries, be they independent, Hollywood, or Bollywood. Since the late 1990s, a growing number of trans-specialized film festivals from Amsterdam to Beirut, Bologna, London, Los Angeles, Munich, Seattle, Sydney, Toronto, and Quito showcase national trans cinemas from around the world.

In fact, the history of trans cinema is so rich and varied it is remarkable how little sustained attention trans-focused moving images have garnered from feminist film theorists or genre specialists. To date, only one monograph has been published dedicated to Transgender on Screen (Phillips 2006), and this from within a mainly psychoanalytic and postmodern framework. Reviewed in Screen with the conclusion that it “offers such negative representations, a lack of complexity of thinking and a poor understanding of trans subjectivities,” its singular presence makes the paucity of scholarly work that much more evident (Stewart 2008: 114).

In this chapter I find it imperative to begin by charting the possibilities for recovering films and cinematic concepts that speak of trans before it reached today’s horizon of intelligibility, largely under the banner of transgender. Namely, in the silent era of film, “transformation” and “cross-dressing” on-screen emerged when sexological accounts were first debating the terminology and diagnostic criteria for transvestism and transsexualism. Laura Horak (2016) challenges us to rethink cross-dressing in transitional cinema through earlier respectable cultural forms in which cross-dressing did not carry the stigma of deviance it has today. I offer that Laura Mulvey’s (1981) under-utilized concept of “trans-sex identification” for female spectatorship is an important (mis)recognition of transgender phenomena. Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s (2005) development of “the transgender look” for films that challenge the binary ordering of gender and sexuality in order to affirm a trans identity and trans as desirable follows as a more recent intervention.
Thereafter the chapter will survey the field of research explicitly conducted on trans cinema in order to demonstrate the many in-roads that have been made into conceptualizing trans as different from, though overlapping with, queer and third cinemas. The “New Trans Cinema” and “Trans New Wave” all build on feminist, postcolonial, and queer film criticism to assert significant groupings of films, contemporary directors, and types of spectatorship. These explicitly canonizing gestures reclaim territory for trans cinema; they constructively move on from critiquing the inadequate stereotyping of trans characters largely written by, directed by, and played by cisgender (non-transgender) people.

Throughout, I signal the future of trans for cinema studies by highlighting how trans film has interacted with other kinds of cinemas. The analytical lens of trans offers complex understandings of gender that will enrich theorizing characters and narratives on-screen, as well as the aesthetic and affective experience of viewers. I am guided by Helen Hok-Sze Leung’s short keyword entry on “Film” (2014) included in TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly’s first issue, which summarizes the important dimensions to consider when researching trans cinema. Does trans film feature self-identified trans characters, or ones that a viewer might recognize as trans; should it be made by or starring trans people regardless of content; must it be meant for a trans audience, have a trans aesthetic, or be open to trans interpretations (2014: 86)? She notes that “when and why a film is talked about as a ‘trans film’ tells us a lot about the current state of representational politics and community reception as well as trends and directions in film criticism” (ibid.). The presence of this chapter titled “Towards trans cinema” in a book dedicated to cinema and gender itself suggests within cinema studies a newfound inclusion of gender variance that is not subsumed under sexuality or deviance. As we move towards a greater understanding of all that the moniker trans cinema can teach us, let us begin by looking at its early incarnations.

Silent, but not unseen: trans cinema before the “talkies”

Cinema exploits our tried and true fascination with the human body’s potential to transform. From the beginning of motion pictures, the cinematographic “fantastic views” of Méliès at the turn of the twentieth century feature the use of a stop-substitution trick shot to change a man into a woman. In early American silent film culture, Laura Horak (2016) details the evolution of cross-dressing women appearing in a range of genres, set in contrast to the low-brow comedic styling of cross-dressed men. At the heart of cinema’s birth and experimental development of form are trans cinema aesthetics and preoccupations. Whether refurbishing the before and after photograph into an instantaneous substitution, or rendering theatrical cross-dressing acts into the pleasures of a sustained “illusion,” the sensibility of trans-ness underpins the cinematic. Though these representations are more closely aligned with curiosity for the body’s mutability than trans persons that we might recognize today, they do demonstrate the longitudinal resilience of gender nonconformity and its celebration on-screen.

Playing the impresario in most all of his films, Méliès swapped a magic wand for scissors. “Méliès was one of the first to think of the cinema in terms of cuts!” exclaims Gaudreault, who points to the often overlooked stigmata of the numerous cuts found through all of Méliès’ films, hidden in the upper corner where the glue sutures together two distinct successive moments that comprise the trick effect (1987: 118). Even closer to the surgical slice and splice creative thinking, though, was how, along with developing his achievements in editing, Méliès developed a penchant for demonstrating an instant sex-change on film. Both the fast cut and gender transformation are birthed in the origin story of his
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“discovery” of the stop-camera technique. It occurred one day through a happy accident when he was filming at the Place de l'Opéra around October–November 1896, less than a half year after he began filmmaking. He claims that,

the camera I used in the early days (a primitive thing in which the film tore or frequently caught and refused to advance) jammed and produced an unexpected result; a minute was needed to disengage the film and to make the camera work again. During this minute, the passers-by, a horse trolley and other vehicles had, of course, changed positions. In projecting the strip, rejoined [ressoudée: glued back together] at the point of the break, I suddenly saw a Madeleine-Bastille horse trolley change into a hearse and men become women.

(Méliès and Liebman 1984 [1929]: 30; additional translation from Gaudreault 2007: 171)

While Gaudreault analyzes this excerpt to show Méliès rightly belongs to the history of editing, the quick change of men becoming women was perhaps more than just a lucky metamorphosis; it precipitated in cinematic aesthetics the avant-garde of surgical and hormonal science of sex transformation by at least a decade.

This first substitution or stop-camera trick, Méliès says, sent him into a frenzy of experimentation: “Two days later, I produced the first metamorphoses of men into women and the first sudden disappearances. … one trick led to another” (1984: 30). Méliès was able to produce more than 500 films in the years 1896–1913. Wanda Strauven assesses that in his intact oeuvre of around 170 films at least a dozen focus on the transformation of a man into a woman, or a woman into a man, and sometimes with multiple changes (2014: 295). For example, in L’Illusionniste fin de siècle (A Turn of the Century Illusionist, 1899), Méliès jumps from a table and becomes his costumed assistant, who gets on the table and in turn transforms back into Méliès as she jumps to the floor.

Many more films employ examples of cross-gender dressing that flirt with the taboos instituted by then recent dress reform laws that prohibited one from appearing “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (Stryker 2008: 31–2). Audiences of La Tentation de saint Antoine (The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1898), though, could safely witness the scandal of a crucified Christ transforming into a scantily clad woman or, in Nouvelles luttes extravagantes (The Fat and the Lean Wrestling Match, 1900), watch two women in fine dress suddenly become two burly boxers. Strauven contends that these charingue filmique (filmic surgery) scenes follow the logic of smoke and mirror transformation magic, but also science fiction (2014: 296). Indeed, Méliès appears often as the stock character of the mad scientist, most famously in Le Voyage dans la Lune (A Trip to the Moon, 1902), signifying the excitement and dis-ease many felt with scientific progress.

Laura Horak’s study of early American moving pictures shows, through archival research, that since approximately 1908 cross-dressed women were a regular presence “in everything from ‘temporary transvestite’ comedies, to thrillers, melodramas, and sentimental children’s stories” (2016: 1). Her monograph Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934 counters the assumption that since dressing in the clothes of the opposite gender was illegal in many places in the US, female masculinity was stigmatized and taboo. While much on-screen male-to-female cross-dressing occurred in “low” comedy, the representation of women in suits, cowboy outfits, and the like were established modes of genteel cultural forms, such as theater, opera, and literature, and of cinema’s cultural cousins of vaudeville and music hall. Hence, the cultural interaction
between these media and institutions was more selective and strategic: positively valued cross-dressed female types, namely young, white, and attractive, were appropriated to “uplift” the film industry.

In addition to addressing audiences with familiar types, Horak contends that different generic tricks were developed to exploit “gender surprise” moments, incorporating reports of gender masqueraders and the mythologies of the American West in which physically fit white American women interact with rugged landscapes (2016: 2–4). The examples of “standard sex farce” between 1908 and 1919 predate the widespread sexological culture in which mannishness was read as lesbian, or even as transsexual. Therefore, once these ideas took hold around 1920, cross-dressing women in pictures was rarely a lighthearted “switch,” such as that seen in A Florida Enchantment (Vitagraph, 1914), and instead came to demonstrate a serious attempt at European sophistication by referencing deviant sexual identities. The transition to cinema as a proper media institution that ushered in the “Golden Age” of Hollywood relied on silent screen stars like Edith Storey, Vivian Martin, and Betty Hart taking great pride and pleasure in cross-dressed acts, a pleasure which has now been silenced in cinema’s cultural memory.

The seemingly trans affirmative roles, however, have little in common with today’s largely normalized route of physical transition involving hormones and surgeries to alleviate the experience of gender dysphoria. Nevertheless, cinema and visual culture more broadly, seem to have paved the way for larger conceptual shifts with regard to interpreting sexual indeterminacy. The early cinematographic play with transformation and transvestism indicates that long before Christine Jorgenson attained her highly mediated international celebrity for having a “sex-change” in the early 1950s, the visual field was peppered with sex-change type narratives as well as morphing imagery.

**Trans-sex identification and the transgender look**

Filmic editing enables actual body morphing and cross-dressing externally on-screen, but feminist spectatorship theory has also argued that psychic identification renders an internal transformation through visual and affective alignment (see also Silverman 1996). Written into the foundational texts of feminist film criticism addressing the Golden Age of American cinema is the problem of on-screen cross-identified characters as well as off-screen cross-sex identifications experienced by female-assigned spectators often framed as a scene of “masquerade” (see also Doane 1982). In a surprisingly direct way Laura Mulvey’s essay “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun (1946)” (1981), considers the female spectator as a psychically cross-dressing woman. She seems unaware, though, of borrowing one of the earliest descriptions of transvestism from Magnus Hirschfeld’s 1910 book The Transvestites, where he suggests the desire to live and be perceived as another sex is akin to psychic transvestism. Though her psychoanalysis is rooted in a fixed sex identity and misunderstands transvestism, it has the potential to offer a trans affirmative understanding of trans-sex identification in which sex is an unsettled marker. After examining the implications of this strain of feminist theorizing, I discuss how Halberstam’s reading of “the transgender look” in the film Boys Don’t Cry (1999) is key to dismantling the inevitability and dominance of the male/female and hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema theories.

In her groundbreaking “Visual Pleasure” essay, Mulvey starts from the fascination we all have with narrative moving pictures, and how our cinematic experience is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination at work within the individual psyche and the social
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formations that have molded the masculine ideal subject. The mirror stage establishes a pleasurable looking mechanism, even if based on misrecognition, whereas the castration complex dredges up anxiety around sexual difference in the male. Mulvey concludes, “Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content” (1975: 19). The same type of voyeuristic pleasure in looking is very complicated for women, but her description of the “trans-sex identification” solution in the “Afterthoughts” essay (1981) is less uncommon, she claims, than one might think.

When watching a certain genre of Hollywood narrative films, the female spectator can either identify with the male gaze or, with the object of the gaze, namely the woman being looked at. Mulvey argues that women oscillate back and forth between identification with the man (active role) and identification with the woman as object (passive role). From a classical psychoanalytic point of view, a woman’s “male identification” is a fact for young girls, which Freud terms a “regressive” phallic phase for the girl/woman who identifies with her father and makes her mother a love object. A woman’s identification with masculinity is something temporary, something that the girl must get over on her way to fulfilling her “real” role as a heterosexual woman. Mulvey suggests that cinema is full of examples in which female characters may temporarily forgo becoming a wife and mother, enjoying instead a career, childlessness, and overt masculine or tomboy identifications. Usually these women, potentially coded as lesbian or even transgender men, have until the end of the movie to accept their normative role—often because they become overcome with true heterosexual love. This ending gives closure to the subject who is finally inserted into the symbolic order, giving the viewer the feeling that “order has been restored.”

In discussing Duel in the Sun’s rebellious woman character, Pearl, Mulvey finds evidence of her ambivalence towards being a real woman: on the one hand she wants to adapt to the symbolic order through a heterosexual union, but on the other hand, she also feels attracted to enacting masculine behavior like riding and fighting. In turn, Pearl offers an ambivalent pleasure to female spectators: the fantasy of a “male life,” which ultimately becomes “defused” into conventional gender roles. Mulvey describes films that revolve around the desire for masculine pleasures, action, and agency as a questionable viewing pleasure at best for women. Why? Apparently their split pleasures risk destabilizing sexual difference.

Of this pleasure in relating to the hero and his control over the diegetic world, Mulvey suggests the female spectator must secretly enjoy it; acknowledging this pleasure would interrupt its “spell of fascination” (1981: 29). The sense of being caught in the act amounts to a paralyzing shame felt on the occasion of gender non-conforming or male cross-identification. In her elaboration of Freudian theories of pre-oedipal active femininity for the spectator, Mulvey can only see a conflict ensuing from this “trans-sex identification,” a restless shifting around in “borrowed transvestite clothes” (ibid. 33) that merely suspends the facticity of sexual difference. Mulvey’s problematic assumption here is that the Imaginary is already overwritten by the Symbolic, foreclosing trans identification and queer desire experienced on-screen and off. Though the films themselves are highly restrictive in how one can access viewing pleasure, the presumption of a spectator’s shame at adopting a queer or trans position in the film text can no longer hold. Why not make that masculinity your own, and properly account for female masculinity that is not a “failed” version of straight femininity?

Halberstam’s analysis of slasher flics in Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (1995), of reception and butch stereotyping in Female Masculinity (1998), and of various “transgender looks” in In a Queer Time and Place (2005), seeks to repair the assumption in much feminist film theory of a heterosexual, feminine and non-transgender
female spectator. Following the groundbreaking work of Chris Straayer in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* (1996) on how “temporary transvestite” films uphold normative sexual systems, Halberstam (2005) interrogates what happens in films when the trans narrative is not temporary. Often films typecast transgender characters but avoid the transgender gaze, that is, a way of looking within the film that sees a trans man or trans woman as they see themselves with enduring gender identities, even when a “reveal” (Seid 2014: 176) occurs that shows a differently sexed body. Halberstam directs us to examine how adjustments to the classic Hollywood technique of the shot/reverse shot—which establishes relations within the film and sutures spectators into position—becomes key to the dismantling of sex/gender stability within the cinematic grammar of a film (2005: 86).

Taking the Oscar winning feature *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) by Kimberley Pierce as an example of the “transgender look,” Halberstam examines how it constructs a legitimate and durable gender by forcing spectators to adopt, if only provisionally, Brandon’s gaze. Based on the true-life story of Brandon Teena, a young female-bodied person living in Nebraska as a man and dating Lana, the film’s love scenes are crucial to maintaining Brandon’s gender identity. During the film (and his life), Brandon is forcibly stripped, raped, and killed, cinematically comprising a series of increasingly horrific reveals. Halberstam analyzes how the sex scenes shot from Lana’s point of view return during these other visual interrogations to override what the violators “see.” Additionally, Brandon holds onto this alternate vision of his body/identity and appears as a clothed double, returning a confirming gaze to his stripped, split self. Halberstam concludes,

> Not only does *Boys Don’t Cry* create a position for the transgender subject that is fortified from the traditional operations of the gaze and conventional modes of gendering but it also makes the transgender subject dependent on the recognition of a woman.

(2005: 89)

This development within feminist film theory “opens the door to a nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body—a mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body” (ibid. 92). Individual films nonetheless must take up the challenge of this new kind of portrayal.

**Trans cinema: queer film’s evil twin?**

While feminist film theory raises the question of a trans character and viewing positions, queer film criticism historically has foregrounded the analysis of a transsexual person’s portrayal in terms of sexual subversion. Leung (2014) explains the sibling rivalry between trans and queer cinema criticism resonates with Stryker’s description of trans studies being the “evil twin” to queer theory (2004: 212). “Films that feature gender variance have always had a significant place in queer cinema,” she writes, “but considerations of trans issues have tended to be subsumed under the focus on sexuality” (2014: 86). I submit that the nomination of a New Queer Cinema (NQC), by B. Ruby Rich (1992) and others, has worked to partially hide and partially build on the success of an independent trans cinema. Like queer cinema, which responded to the AIDS crisis and flourished with the advent of more accessible film production technologies, an increasing number of trans-created audio-visual works appeared in the mid-1980s and 1990s. First editions of transgender film festivals in Montreal (1997) and London (1999) sought to showcase the urgent and higher quality
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film and video works that developed out of this period. Though perhaps trans cinema gained greater attention later than films labeled queer, film scholars should be pressed to excavate trans films from under queer analysis. This involves de-subjugating trans forms of knowledge, and evaluating a film according to its place in the genealogy of trans cultural production.

Akkadia Ford (2015) has suggested the term “transliteracy” could be used to refer to literacy across media platforms, and to literacy of gender diverse lives represented in cinema. To produce new readings it is necessary that scholars invest in familiarizing themselves with transgender studies tenets such as, “considering the embodied experience of the [trans] speaking subject” to be an essential component to the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed (Stryker 2006: 12). By centering the trans speaking subject in films, we can ask about how they are given presence through voice and body (Heath 1981), what kind of agency they are allowed within the plot, and whether they have their own narrative arc. Trans cinema studies can also learn from the film criticism that developed around the NQC to assess the historical specificity of attitudes towards gender and sexuality expressed in filmic form.

B. Ruby Rich’s assessment that “1992 has been a watershed year for independent gay and lesbian film and video” (2013 [1992]: 16) places the NQC into a moment of great momentum. NQC was hardly a coherent set of aesthetic strategies seen across films released in 1990–3; Rich described the films as “irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive ... they’re full of pleasure” (ibid. 18). Rather, Michele Aaron (2004) offers that it was defined by an attitude of defiance demonstrated towards history, death, formal conventions, and towards compulsory heterosexual culture or homonormativity.

This brings me to consider why in 1992 something queer was seen not just flickering on the horizon, but pulsating orange and hot. Why was it not also the year for popular yet radical trans film and video? For example, Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) referred to Jenny Livingston’s film Paris is Burning (1990), producing one of the first theorizations of transgender experience as gender nonconformity, rather than as a kind of sexual deviance. It set trans apart from lesbian, gay, and bisexual politics about sexual practices, and more into relation with butch–femme theories about practices of gender presentation and perception. Created during the AIDS crisis, Paris displays an artistic urgency to create, to document, and to cherish while also allowing for complex and cogent trans protagonists (of color!) to take up space on screen (even if framed by an exploitative white lesbian gaze, as accused, cf. bell hooks 1992).

Yet, Paris is not typically included in lists of the major NQC films; even the broadest overviews are clearly marked by gay and lesbian preoccupations. What would the story of NQC look like if instead of Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven), being an example of a key filmic text released in 1992, we looked at The Crying Game’s (Neil Jordan) cultural trajectory, in which transgender figures are associated with dangerous illusion, and revolting abjection? Given Michele Aaron’s claim in the introduction to the NQC reader that in the early 1990s “the queer figure par excellence was the transsexual” (2004: 6), one has to wonder whether the trans characters on screen were (mis)recognized as only queer. It did not help that behind the camera there was a persistent lack of (openly) trans directors representing their own perspectives.

Where the 1990s could have seen an under-siege and partially destroyed community coming together, instead we ended up with an LGB that added a fake T, to use a phrase from Dean Spade (2004: 53). The marginalization and evacuation of lived trans experience in the context of activism and cultural production was occurring no less in the film culture and
festival circuit than in community spaces, as well as in the academy (see also Prosser 1998, Namaste 2000). Unsurprisingly, reductions of “trans” to liminality or betweenness is a renewable queer trope for subversion, returning in popular, and even so-called radical, films as a plot device. For example, implied trans women are represented as psychotic (The Silence of the Lambs [Jonathan Demme, 1991]), murdered (Dressed to Kill [Brian De Palma, 1980]), or prostitutes (Dallas Buyers Club, Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013), whereas transmen often appear as confused lesbians or as traumatized by their feminine bodies (e.g. Salmonberries [Percy Adlon, 1991]; Yitzhak in Heideg and the Angry Inch [John Cameron Mitchell, 2001]).

Joelle Ruby Ryan’s dissertation Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media (2009) catalogs the most prevalent trans stereotypes in film and television, particularly from 1980–2005, during the heyday of queer filmmaking. She contends that the “transgender monster” is often depicted in B-movies and horror films as a dangerous perpetrator to cement fear of gender-transgressive others, who in reality are themselves frequently murdered in hate crimes. Though friendlier, the “transgender mammy” appears to exist in order to fix the problems of gender normative people, thus becoming reduced to an outwardly fabulous yet servile subjectivity. Most common in mainstream films and television, however, is the “transgender deceiver,” who is not trans but someone who passes as another gender in order to (selfishly) obtain someone or something they want. All these stereotypes circulate within mass media across platforms and genres, from news reports of murders, to the reception of reality television like I Am Cait (2015–), to independent cinemas like Tickled Off Trannies with Knives (Israel Luna 2010) and the Gendercator (Catherine Crouch 2007), and mainstream films like Predestination (Michael and Peter Spierig 2014). In the following and final section therefore, I will discuss the revolutionary cinema that defies these stereotyping plotlines.

Contemporary sex, love, and alliances: Trans New Wave

Tristan Taormino’s Village Voice article “The New Wave of Trans Cinema” (2008) refers to films by trans directors featuring trans-identified actors that are breaking boundaries in the pornographic genre. More broadly, Trans New Wave offers new visions of sex, love, and intimate alliances. Both Nicole Richter’s coinage of “New Trans Cinema” (2013) and Ford’s “Trans New Wave” (2015) stress the portrayal of fictional love relationships and non-fictional graphic sex in films that tell different kinds of stories. Operating outside the studio system, with a low budget and without recognition by major award-granting bodies, these films receive far less attention than titles such as The Danish Girl (Tom Hooper 2015), or the Amazon series Transparent (2014–). Ryan’s research (2009) charts the emergence of a revolutionary figure, especially in a new wave of trans documentaries, such as Toilet Training: Law and Order (In the Bathroom) (Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2003) and Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria (Susan Stryker, Victor Silverman, 2005), whereas Wilke Straube’s dissertation (2014) stresses the “utopian” potential of mainstream fictional trans films like Breakfast on Pluto (Neil Jordan, 2005) in that they offer “exit scapes” from normative culture for the trans character and spectator alike.

In terms of a new wave, four films released between 2011 and 2013 strike me as important diagnostic texts of our trans age in cinema. Jules Rosskam’s Thick Relations (2012) and Negar Azarbayjani’s AynHEAYE Rooboeroo (Facing Mirrors, 2011) both take the question of being in alliance with others as their starting point. Through narrative strategies, the characters are shown to activate a deep and moving affective identification across identities. In Facing
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Mirrors, a young Iranian trans man fleeing home to avoid an arranged marriage ends up in the taxi of a young mother who is driving to pay off her husband's debt. They harbor each other's secrets, though companionship is far from simple given their difference in class, religious belief, and gender identity. Eventually, they come to see each other's hardship as equally unjust. The cast and director do not come out of queer or trans communities, but successfully set trans issues against the backdrop of tensions around Iranian social norms. We become privy to how compassionate alliances can be forged between what might appear to be incompatible identities.

Thick Relations is so much a creature of Chicago's thriving queer and trans scene that Rosskam classifies it as part documentary. The script was written during workshops with participating friends/actors, who were invited to create characters that were their ideal selves, however contradictory or difficult. The blending of these “real characters” into a narrative results in a vaguely coordinated plot of romantic tropes, daily life, and chosen family. The flow of the film takes place across a non-normative logic of kinship in which central characters express love to various relations, with all the ensuing beautiful confusion of who is together with whom and in what gender configurations. The thickness comes from having sex, certainly, but also from singing together, swimming, drinking, talking, eating—in short, from time spent sharing affection.

The other films also rethink the documentary form by employing a mixture of visual styles in order to track the self as it is creatively invented. Both Like Rats Leaving a Sinking Ship (Vika Kirchenbauer, 2012) and Pygmaiones (She Male Snails, Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2012) are filmic texts that seek to do justice to one's own perception of being trans without employing the typical format of documentary confessing. Like Rats takes aim at the culture of transparency through garnering opacity, a concept Vika borrows from the postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant, who writes against the colonialist's desire for intelligibility and purity. The film offers a contrary visual style to appearing transparent to the state, law, and psychiatry. Like Rats makes a plea for gender opacity by layering grainy super-8 images with imaginary family films. These images are overlaid with audio of Vika reading psychiatric assessments of her “incalculably transsexual” condition and memories captured in possibly fictitious journal entries. Where Vika's transgender embodiment emerges at the intersections of social, familial, and psychic fantasy, She Male Snails posits imaginary conversations between two main characters silently sitting in a bathtub shaving and caressing each other. The other main images come from flashbacks of an unidentified youth and a snail's eye view of the woods held together by the implied filmmaker’s voiceover narration. The documentation of transfeminine artist Eli Leven is associational; it departs from a clear narrative to try to do justice to Eli's dreamy inner world, and uncertain feeling of being in the outer world.

When taken together, these films translate traits from NQC into trans cinematic grammars. Firstly, they demonstrate an attitude of defiance towards formal conventions of genre, building on a long tradition of queer cinema that challenges the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, or the documentation of life from creative intervention into life itself. Given the importance of biographical narrative and life documentation to the regulation of trans life, however, these films seem less interested in subversive acts of defiance than in a restructuring of intimacy and political alliance.

In the coming years it will be exciting to see how filmmakers such as Silas Howard grow into larger creative roles, since he is the first openly trans man to direct a television series (Transparent, season 2, 2015, and season 3, 2016). Since transitioning and publicly declaring her identity as a trans woman, Lana Wachowskis enormous power as a Hollywood director, along with her along with her creative co-director and recently transitioned sister Lilly, is the

**Stars in our eyes: trans by any other name**

This chapter has sought to bring trans cinema into conversation with early film history, feminist film theory, queer film criticism, and American and transnational film cultures, and to point to the influential presence of trans auteurs. Far more research could be conducted on the many inflections of trans across cultures as well as the various fan communities and subcultures that cross-pollinate with gender diverse communities. For example, on the relation of punk culture to trans image-making, film and video artists such as Hans Scheirl (Steinbock 2013) and Vaginal Creme Davis have had an incredible influence on music, fine art, and performance. Even within more mainstream film cultures, historical scholarship might consider the singularity of early trans directors, like Ed Wood Jr., the self-identified transvestite who made the delirious “Glen or Glenda” (1953) in a period of post-war conservatism. Recently, Stryker has presented widely on her in-progress experimental documentary *Christine in the Cutting Room* that re-defines Christine Jorgensen as a filmmaker in the atomic age, an “image-maker” professionally and personally. Finally, the writings of Leung (2006, 2009, 2014) acknowledge many hit films featuring trans protagonists out of Thailand (*Beautiful Boxer* [Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2004]), Japan (*Funeral Parade of Roses* [Toshio Matsumoto, 1969]), and Hong Kong (*Portland Street Blues* [Raymond Yip, 1998]), demonstrating that Asian cultural productions deserve more than a comparison with Western cinemas—instead, they should be considered as innovating their own traditions of transformative practices.

Much like queer was quick to become a captured radical impulse converted into a capitalistic niche market, trans focused film and television often finds itself shunted into a pretty package or a gory spectacle. The trans narrative of becoming yourself, of being true and authentic, is easily co-opted into neo-liberal fantasies of individualism and choice. The commercialization and whitewashing of trans stories erase trans struggles for justice. Self-determination only takes place in the face of, and despite medicalization, sexualization, and continued social stigma. In thinking towards a trans cinema, the best practices of filmmaking would offer alternatives to overproduced films like *Stonewall* (Roland Emmerich, 2015), which flopped and was critically dismissed for ignoring its historical trans of color protagonists. In comparison, there is a groundswell of excitement around *Happy Birthday, Marshall!* (forthcoming 2016) that foregrounds Marsha P. Johnson and her trans sisters of color in 1960s–70s New York as the true revolutionaries of the Stonewall rebellion. The dreamy, utopian, and fully political vision of Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel’s film suggests that trans cinema has the potential to challenge more than gender in its form and content.

**Related topics**

Maureen Turim, “Experimental women filmmakers”
Belinda Smalls, “The documentary: female subjectivity and the problem of realism”
Amy Borden, “Queer or LGBTQ+: on the question of inclusivity in queer cinema studies”
Debra Zimmerman, “Film as activism and transformative praxis: Women Make Movies”
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