

Global Cinema CW1

How Has the Advent of Digital Media Influenced Transgender Representation?

Abstract

The ways in which we consume media has changed drastically in the 21st century, with the advent of the digital age blurring the lines between creator and viewer. Audiences now have the opportunity to have their voices heard by creators, and, in the same breath, creators have much more reach towards their audiences with social media and streaming platforms. For the transgender community, the saturation of media discussing transgender topics has seen a sharp increase in the wake of this. Media outlets are chock-full of polarising stories of transgender people being dangerous or victims, and this impacts on how the average reader perceives transgender people (Faye, 2021). With this, there has been a rise in demand for authentic trans stories to be told and voices to be heard. While an increase in representation could be viewed as a push for good change to the average viewer, the media being produced rarely challenges structural hegemonies. Similar to Aristotle's (2008) theory on catharsis, Berlant (2011) describes the concept of cruel optimism. She suggested that optimism is defined as a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us, so cruel optimism is when the thing that satisfies that promise becomes the obstacle to achieving said promise. It is the maintaining of an optimistic attachment to something that is problematic. The digital age has pushed trans topics to the forefront of media discussions, and different people have different desires for conflicting change. The media being produced has to navigate the narrow path that is asking for them to represent trans experiences without challenging the structural hegemony with which they operate. With diversity and representation, films become marketable towards people who want change but risky for those who refuse it. Because of this, media is often filtered through a cisgender gaze akin to Mulvey's (1975) theories on how media is produced from the perspective of a male gaze. Audiences will be presented with a transgender character who struggles in life, they will process this struggle, the media will resolve this struggle in a way to reassure its viewers, and the audience would have felt progressive without ever having confronted structural issues. These representations promise political dialogue but often use the cisgender gaze to only mimic progression. Essentially what reassures audiences of progress only exacerbates the problem. To best analyse this, I will be engaging with three films produced in this digital age, *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015), *Girl* (Dhont, 2018), and *I Saw The TV Glow* (Schoenbrun, 2024), to explore how each film engages with the cisgender gaze and the concept of cruel optimism. Each film attempts to navigate the nuanced divide between pressure for representation and the structural hegemonies they sit within that is ever present in the digital age.

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Conference Paper

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Introduction

The advent of the digital age has shifted the way in which we consume media. No longer is there a linear process from production to consumption. Thanks to media platforms such as social media or streaming services, the gap between producer and audience has shrunk significantly, giving audiences more agency in the production process. Paired with the rise in online visibility, there has been a significant demand for on screen transgender representation. So how has this increase in demand changed the way filmmakers and audiences present transgender identities? In this essay, I hope to evaluate the impact that the digital age has had on the representation of trans characters. I will explore 3 films, *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015), *Girl* (Dhont, 2018), and *I Saw The TV Glow* (Schoenbrun, 2024), and evaluate how they interact with the cisgender gaze and Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism.

Cis Gaze Methodology

In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Natural Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975) explored the concept of cinema having a gaze. She expanded upon what Sigmund Freud suggested, that male attraction is built up from a scopophilic desire for women, by exploring how film makers produced an objectifying gaze of women to satisfy their male audiences. Within the male gaze, as she described it, Mulvey highlighted 3 looks: scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishistic scopophilia. What is most prudent to understand for this essay is the concept of fetishistic scopophilia, or that the objectification and sexualisation of women in cinema is designed to alleviate the threat posed by women's lack of penis. Essentially, the film objectifies the woman to accommodate for the castration anxiety she produces in a male audience. While this is only one aspect of Mulvey's theory, it can be extended to a cisgender gaze. If the simple absence of a penis is enough to produce anxiety in its audience, then it could be argued that a narrative surrounding the removal of a penis, whether symbolically or literally, would only reproduce and/or amplify a similar anxiety. Therefore, the film must accommodate for this anxiety in a similar fashion, by objectifying its transgender characters. Similar to how a woman's agency is punished because of her perceived threat to masculinity, so, too, is a trans person's agency punished for their perceived threat to cis-normativity.

There are many ways in which a film can accommodate for the cisgender gaze and alleviate this anxiety. The body, for example, and its transformation is often the focus of a lot of trans narratives. Julia Serano (2007) highlighted 2 ways in which the trans body is used to objectify its characters; the pathetic transsexual, and the deceptive transsexual. The deceptive transsexual trope is where a character's ability to pass as their affirmed gender is seen as an act of deception. The pathetic transsexual trope is where a character's inability to pass as their affirmed gender is viewed as comedically desperate. Serano also notes that the presentation of a phallus in both tropes is subverted, where the deceptive transsexual's penis is present despite her perceived femininity, the pathetic transsexual's penis is not. These both stand to reassure the audience of the character's "true" gender by making a spectacle out of the nature of that character's body in comparison to their identity.

To this, it is also important to note the role that visibility plays in on screen representation. The cisgender gaze is not for transgender people, regardless of its intended sympathy or empathy. As Stryker and Bettcher wrote when describing the pathologization of transgender narratives in media "this transnormative narrative is designed for consumption by nontrans people in order to facilitate their understanding of trans people, to set their expectations of them, and to structure interactions with them" (2016:203). These films utilise an audience's anxieties surrounding trans people to produce a normative ideal. She theorises that these stories produce the impression on a cisgender audience that, without having met a trans individual, they know everything about trans people. This reassurance attempts to neutralize the desire for them to research independently from the media they already consume, and acts to erase what Stryker described as "lived temporalities" (2016:203).

Cruel Optimism Methodology

Despite its age, Aristotle's (2008) definition of tragedy in *Poetics* could prove to be incredibly useful in applying the aforementioned reassurance of cisgender audiences to the attempted erasure of the lived temporalities of trans people. In defining tragedy, Aristotle wrote that tragedy is the imitation of a serious, complete, or grand action to elicit an emotional response from its audience. He also states that these imitations serve as a purgation, or catharsis, of these emotions in its audience. Essentially, the audience has no desire to experience these emotions outside of theatre because of these imitations. While this could be applied to the cisgender gaze, it is important to note the ongoing debate as to the accuracy of Aristotle's theory. Golden (1973) suggests that a more accurate reading of catharsis is as an epistemological process through which an audience can intellectually process these agonising imitations and come to a more enlightened perspective on human vulnerability and fate. What is important to take from this theory is, regardless of whether they purge or process these emotions, the audience walks away satisfied and feeling a sense of closure.

To ground this into a modern framework, Lauren Berlant (2011) offers an alternative perspective to this in her book *Cruel Optimism*. Where optimistic attachment is a promise or desire that gives you a sense of purpose, cruel optimism is, as Berlant puts, where the object of desire becomes the obstacle to your flourishing. In her book, Berlant analyzes cases where girls who attempt to lose weight with restrictive diets only exacerbate their body image issues and create problems with their relationship to food, ultimately providing a hindrance in the path to self improvement. Using this, we could argue a framework by which media creators can maintain a normative outlook on trans people using these representations. They first must produce that sense of catharsis in their audience. This can be through the use of tragic trans narratives that frame their bodies as incorrect, akin to Serano's (2007) examples, though it has to be a believable narrative for cisgender expectations. They must then provide a solution to these intense and distressing emotions. The solution could be shown on screen or simply implied. Once done, this could give the audience the space to feel as though they have emotionally processed the lives of trans people based on a faulty premise.

Using this framework, we can, now, better understand Stryker and Bettcher's (2016) work, and how visibility interacts with the cisgender gaze. These narratives are designed to produce a legible identity of transgender people that cisgender audiences can understand and relate to without posing a threat to the cultural erasure of trans identities. Stryker, herself, put "Their multiple and contradictory statuses of visibility and erasure, of presence and absence, are intimately related to the operations of social power that create norms, impart consequence to difference, and construct the space of a dominant culture" (2006:15).

Digital Media

“With the aid of the Internet, the loftiest dream for television is being realized: an odd brand of interactivity. Television began as a one-way street winding from producers to consumers, but that street is now becoming two-way. A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (TV and a computer) can belong to a community.” (Jenkins, 2006:245)

Henry Jenkins, here, is quoting the New York Times's Marshall Sella in a discussion about the relationship between the corporate and the consumer in media production. With the launch of the household computer and the invention of the world wide web, the media industry began to see some serious structural changes. As mentioned, a significant change was in the distance between audience and producer. As Jenkins described, we saw a rise in both top-down corporate processes and bottom-up consumer processes. Where media companies could expand their reach across easily accessible streaming platforms that can extend their reach to niche consumers, audiences could organize through different devices and applications to foster control over the production process. Because of this, expectations for media shifted to a more interactive type of engagement. The example Jenkins gave was a case where a photoshop edit of Bert, of Bert and Ernie, standing next to Osama Bin-Ladin made headlines and sparked international protests. The creators behind *Sesame Street* had threatened to take legal action against CNN for publishing the image in coverage of the protests. That one small photoshop sparked international controversy. Thanks to the internet, media companies can be impacted by the actions of their target consumers. Because of this, the audience has the power to participate.

With the digital age paving new passages through which audiences can influence the media they consume, it is important to understand how this impacts on the media companies being influenced. Historically, one way in which audience participation has been utilised in media is through corporate activism. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012:15) points to an ad campaign from the Dove make up company as a prime example of how companies reframe political activism as a marketing campaign. They, essentially, told their customers to protest the beauty standards set by the beauty industry by engaging with their company. They told people to take political action through consumer behaviour. This type of engagement was only heightened by the dawn of the digital age, with brands wanting to formulate an emotional connection with their audiences to gain a capitalist hegemony. She states that the contemporary era has “revised the consumer citizen as a specific kind of activist” and has harnessed “political ideals such as “freedom” and “empowerment” as motivating factors in establishing hegemonic dominance” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:46). When applied to transgender cinema, this idea is incredibly important paired with the idea of cruel optimism. Companies can foster an image of political discourse and encourage a type of engagement from their audiences that involves consumeristic engagement without structural change to their corporate hegemony.

This would account for the increase in trans narratives around the turn of the digital age. With an increase in trans visibility in online spaces, demand for visibility only increased (Cavalcante, 2018). This increase in visibility, however, did little to positively impact on the trans community. Cavalcante (2018:64) pointed to the lack of representation of trans people of colour, trans men, non-binary individuals, gender non-conformity, and working class

individuals as an example of how these narratives cater for a cisgender audience's comfortability. These narratives are often about feminine white trans women looking to transition from one gender to another.

The Danish Girl

The Danish Girl (Hooper, 2015) is a biographic film that centres on the life of Lili Elbe and her journey of self discovery and medical transition. To summarise the story, Einar Wegener, a Danish artist, discovers her true self as a woman after being hit on by a homosexual man. Through her relationship with him, she soon discovers that she isn't a man, but a woman named Lili Elbe. With the support of her wife, she seeks medical help looking to alleviate the significant distress she experiences while hiding her true self. Eventually she meets Dr Kurt Warnerkros who promises to fix her, offering 2 surgeries, the removal of her penis and the construction of a vagina, which would eventually kill her. This story is based on the real Lili Ilse Elvenes. The film produced a lot of controversy, namely for its choice to cast Eddie Redmayne, a cisgender man, to play Lili in the film (Ølholm, 2023:184). This problem is only indicative of the border issues that the film faces when attempting to create a sympathetic narrative; it's a story for the cisgender gaze.

To begin evaluating the film's relationship with the cisgender gaze, let's look at the balance between historical accuracy and dramatisation. The film is based on the fictionalized biographic book of the same name, but Hooper stated he wanted to bring some realism back to the story. Despite this, as he acknowledged himself, there aren't all that many accurate or provable accounts on Lili's (Panos, 2016). What is likely is that some of the events in the film have no recorded historical account prior to David Ebershoff's (2000) fictionalized novel published in 2000. For example, the character Henrik Sandahl, the man with whom Lili has an affair with, doesn't seem to be mentioned in the 1933 adaptation of Lili's personal diaries, letters, and manuscripts *Man Into Woman* (Hoyer, 1933). This affair, alongside the identity crises Lili experiences, placed strain on her and her wife, Gerta Wegener's, relationship that is also absent from *Man Into Woman*. Changes like this are dramatic, and help tell a narrative for an audience rather than a historical record. The narrative and story become digestible for cisgender audiences who expect to see marital tension and expect Lili to be in love with a man upon discovering herself. The film suggests her relationship with Gerter, while complex, is a product of Einar, and as Lili changes then so should her attractions.

The film consistently uses the sensory incongruence between Lili's mind and body to explore her identity. She discovered her desire for women's clothes through feel, sexuality, and as a muse. Her journey begins when modeling for a painting for her wife in women's shoes and holding a woman's dress. She explores the sensation of women's clothing on her skin. Another big point to look for is the paintings of Lili that Gerta does. She paints her as a woman with female anatomy, almost to suggest that Lili's true self is hidden behind her masculinity. Then there is the discovery of her identity through an affair. The thing that stumps her relationship with Sandahl is the fact that he views her as a man. Her body is consistently seen as a restraint for Lili and her relationships. It even takes it to the extent where a simple kiss from Sandahl causes her nose to bleed. When she acts according to her body her mind struggles, and when she acts according to her mind her body struggles. When it comes to her death, the film frames it as tragic, but also as, in part, her fault. Despite Gerta's advice, she refuses to let herself rest any longer between surgeries and goes into her second one still weak from her first. She finally begins to feel confident and happy in her femininity, only for her body to, once again, hold her back.

This, as it stands, is the base for catharsis. The film sets up a conflict, the incongruence between mind and body. This conflict is one that cisgender audiences might relate to or understand, but still frames her identity through the lens of transition. Then it poses a solution, the correction of her body. Lili suffers because of her body, and, though she may have died, is seen as happy upon undergoing medical transition. It's tragic but ethically closed ended. The film offers its audience to process this and come to conclusions on trans identities. Through the cisgender gaze, the film is able to reach a broad audience and signal to them progress through the presentation of a transgender character so as to gain interaction. Similar to the case with Bert and Osama Bin-Laden referenced earlier (Jenkins, 2006), this film asked for audiences to commercially engage with its media as an act of political activism. The film attempts to reassure its cisgender audience and signal progress without challenging cultural hegemonies, and I argue is a prime example of cruel optimism.

Girl

Similar to *The Danish Girl*, *Girl* (Dhont, 2018) is a biographical film following a trans woman exploring her identity and navigating the world of medical gender affirming care. We follow Lara, a 15-year-old trans girl with aspirations of becoming a ballerina. Fearing her sex will impede on her abilities in her prestigious ballet school, we watch as she tries to keep up with the other girls her age, navigate the transition between puberty suppressants and hormone replacement therapy, and attempt to receive a cross sex genital reassignment surgery. This, too, is loosely based on the real life story of dancer Nora Monsecour. While she has praised the film as an accurate representation of her struggles, the film was heavily criticised for its choice to cast a cisgender actor and its voyeuristic portrait of trans identities. One critic from Vanity Fair wrote “Trans identity, in this movie, isn’t really an identity. It’s something closer to pristine dance form: you have to work for it. You have to put yourself through hell” (2019).

This voyeurism mainly stems from the film's treatment of Lara's body, with long and drawn out shots of her staring at her penis or chest in shame and sequences of bodily punishment in an attempt to hide her physical differences from other girls. At one point in the film, her father walks in on her applying tape to tuck her penis. He tells her that they talked about the dangers that can cause. Despite this warning, she continues to tuck with tape rather than the specialised underwear her father had bought her. The film suggests that because of her transness Lara continues to punish her body. As a dancer, she begins to damage her feet to the point where she winds up collapsing due to pain, pain she only experienced because she was never taught to dance young because she was seen as a boy. When it comes to the medical field, they continue to warn her of the danger that can come from the actions she takes when dancing, and even warn her that her dancing might prevent her eligibility for genital reassignment surgery.

Because of this, the focus of the film shifts from a story of a transgender woman trying to make it as a dancer and becomes a film about a character whose trans identity continues to hinder her. The film ends on an ambiguous note after Lara attempts to sever her penis with a set of kitchen shears. When recounting this to The Hollywood Reporter, Nora wrote

“We made a film with some hard, honest scenes. Scenes that might be disturbing to watch, but that are crucial to show. I do not want to sugarcoat my experiences or hide away my darkest thoughts. I shouldn’t have to — they are real and not uncommon in the trans community. Though my story does not include this final event, it’s a thought that lingered in my mind every day.” (Kilday, 2018)

She describes it as an honest scene in which many trans people have experienced, at the very least, thoughts of doing, however was not actually something she did herself. This moment may have been intended to represent a real struggle that lots of trans people experience, it still follows a pattern of pathologisation of transness in cinema. The film manifests a tragic connection between Lara's body and her mind, allowing a cisgender audience to connect with her, then posits the solution by showing the effect of restriction from the solution. As with *The Danish Girl*, the audience is offered the space to process a restrictive and reductive view on transness that may impact on how they view or perceive trans people (Bettcher and Stryker, 2016), ultimately becoming the obstacle in the perceived progressive nature of the film.

I Saw The TV Glow

In contrast to the previous 2 films, *I Saw The TV Glow* (Schoenbrun, 2024) is a film made by a non-binary director that resists the cisgender gaze and refuses to follow the problems evident in the prior examples. We follow Owen as he rediscovers a show he enjoyed as a child with a classmate who went missing. Upon her return into his life, she tells him that the show, *The Pink Opaque*, is real and the world he lives in was a prison designed by the evil Mr. Melancholy while his true self, the hero of the show named Isabelle, slowly dies. He rejects her offer to save him and continues the rest of his life in this prison as his body deteriorates. Unlike other films about trans identities, this film doesn't technically have a trans character in it. Owens' experience is often interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the experience of the stress disorder gender dysphoria. While the film was well received by many, it remained a divisive film among general audiences. The majority of critics described the film as sluggish or monotone.

When Maddy, Owen's friend, returns, she tells him a story about how she escaped the prison. She tells him she buried herself overnight and woke up free, and offers to do the same for him, taking him to 2 graves she dug in their former school's football field. In context with the movie, escape is a good thing. Isabell is dying, having been buried by Mr. Melancholy, yet the image of 2 graves, accompanied by the return of a childhood friend most presumed dead, is an incredibly scary image to behold. While the world Owen lives in is nothing perfect, the film set it up as comfortable using visuals and plot. The shot of him lying on his mothers lap in the car as warm yellow streetlamps pass through the moving car, or the nostalgic feeling of gathering around a TV set and waiting for your favourite show to turn on. The film makes no attempt to imply that Owen is happy, but that he is comfortable. And when posed with the threat of the real world, whether its the hollow graves or the use of electric sparks to connote to the real world, Owen chooses comfort. The next day, there is only one grave left on the field, as it is implied that Maddy escaped again. This decision leads to the tragic ending of an older decaying Owen working at the same place he had been at for the past 20 years screaming for help to a room that pays him no attention, and he is left to apologise to them for his behaviour. That same comfort we were introduced to becomes horror.

This film actively rejects providing for a cisgender gaze. It paints nuance, makes no reference to the concept of transitioning, and even subverts the deceptive transsexual trope by having Owen be the one deceived by the world around him. Instead of intellectualising the process of transitioning and cementing said intellectualism with catharsis, it shows you the emotional effects of rejection of your own identity and poses no real solution. Owens' options are to decay or literally bury himself. This divisive nature of the film's reception could very well be explained by Schoenbrun's refusal to provide catharsis and trans legibility to its cisgender audience, and its refusal to make a spectacle of trans identities.

Conclusion

“He’s Not Only in the Wrong Body . . . He’s in the Wrong Job” (Faye, 2021:2). This was the title of an article published by the Daily Mail talking about the primary school teacher, Lucy Meadows, who had come out as trans in a newsletter over the 2012 Christmas holiday. It was articles like these that led to her death in the early months of the next year. I wanted to talk about this as a reminder as to why good representation is needed. Narratives that aim to dehumanize trans people have real world consequences. Perhaps the quote above is of a much more extreme prejudicial branch than the films evaluated, but it sticks out from the same tree. As evaluated in this essay, companies will attempt to produce the image of progressivism without challenging the structural issues that trans people face. While audiences celebrate the perceived progress they have made supporting and engaging with films such as *Girl* or *The Danish Girl*, people like Lucy Meadows suffer in silence. This is why it is important to have films that challenge cisgender audiences, reject catharsis, and refuse to be the obstacle in the way of progress. Films like *I Saw The TV Glow* could pose a genuine threat to this structural juggernaut.

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