

The Look, Interrupted: How Cinema Looks At Trans Women's Bodies

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Published July 20, 2015 | Updated June 26, 2018

https://www.transadvocate.com/the-look-interrupted-how-cinema-looks-at-trans-womens-bodies_n_15301.htm

Abstract

In the 2013 film Adult World, when cisgender protagonist Amy is cleaning the bathroom, she peers through a glory hole in the stall to see Rubia, a transgender woman, using the urinal. The sequence is constructed around Amy's point-of-view: Whatever the filmmakers' intentions, this is an excellent encapsulation of the cisgender gaze in cinema: a [...]

Article



In the 2013 film *Adult World*, when cisgender protagonist Amy is cleaning the bathroom, she peers through a glory hole in the stall to see Rubia, a transgender woman, using the urinal. The sequence is constructed around Amy's point-of-view:

[Figure] Adult World

Whatever the filmmakers' intentions, this is an excellent encapsulation of the cisgender gaze in cinema: a cisgender person viewing a transgender person without their consent, with little regard for their humanity. The reverse of the hole even bears a great resemblance to a large eye, one that allows for surreptitious, boundary-violating observation of an Other.

Later in the film, Amy asks Rubia, “do you ever feel invisible?” Rubia replies matter-of-factly, “no, not really”, and it’s not a surprising answer. The paradox is that while trans women still a very invisible population (society ignores the needs and even the mere existence of trans people, although that is beginning to change, thankfully), trans women are also hyper-visible in a lot of ways. Trans people’s difference makes them visible -- and by extension vulnerable -- to the workings of various systems, agencies and institutions. But trans women, in particular, are also hyper-visible in another way: as objects of the look, and it is that is this concept -- how society literally looks at trans women --that I want to begin to explore here through to cinema.

Laura Mulvey famously wrote that traditionally, “with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact”, “women [...] can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”¹ (italics hers). If that is true, then trans women in their role in dominant visual discourses can be said to connote to-be-defined-ness. The non-consensual definition of trans women as less-than-real women -- and less-than-real people -- lies at the core of the gaze imposed on trans women. Trans women and other gender variant people are not merely visual objects to be looked at, but their gender variance -- transfemininity most of all -- is a source of reevaluation and a site of meaning creation beyond the mere erotic. Although the issue is frequently a pull between the attractive and the repulsive -- framed as a question of whether or not she is a valid source of attraction to heterosexual (cisgender) men -- trans women’s bodies are a site of discourse on something much more fundamental. Where Mulvey hypothesized that women “tended to bring the story to a stop and capture the spectator’s gaze in excess”², trans bodies interrupt the spectator’s look similarly, although with an entirely different effect: with a perceived incongruity in socially constructed understandings of sex and gender. That interruption, when materialized in cinema, turns her into something beyond the object of the look: the object of the (symbolic) touch, a form of nonconsensual redefinition which designates trans women as, above all, the Other, a canvas on which the rules of gender are carved.

Put another way, the movies have different ways of looking (literally) at trans women than cis women. My aim here is to begin an exploration of the ways in which film, through its visual language, marginalizes the transgender population by engaging in -- and thus perpetuating -- certain processes of misgendering, Other-ing, and cissexist lines of thought. And while I do not mean to suggest that the trans experience is universal (intersections like race, class, and sexuality will all create fundamentally different experiences), the manner in which cinema specifically looks at the bodies of those who fall outside cisgender norms -- at least the manner discussed here -- cuts across other factors.

The opening sequence of *Transamerica* introduces the audience to trans woman Bree, the film’s main character. This introduction takes the form of a series of close up shots (17 in total) of her morning routine, shots that isolate parts of her body and which culminate in our first unobstructed views, of her face (shot 18) and then of her whole body (shot 19). Julia Serano describes this sequence as “clearly designed to establish that Bree’s female identity is artificial and imitative, and to reduce her transition to the mere pursuit of feminine finery”³. This is true, but to an even greater extent than Serano argues. Because this is our first view of Bree, the effect is not just that her femaleness is deemed artificial, but her whole person. She is assembled, not by the medical establishment as in so many anti-trans arguments (although moments after this scene we will hear Bree describe her various surgical and medical transition procedures systematically, mirroring the visual language used here), but by the cinematic apparatus, a process that resembles, not insignificantly, the process undertaken when

cisgender actors portray transgender characters. This piecemeal construction of transfeminine characters is not without cinematic precedents -- in films like *Beautiful Boxer* (2004), *Flawless* (1999), *Ma Vie En Rose* (1997) and *And Justice For All* (1979) -- but *Transamerica* takes it to a whole new level, turning Bree into a cinematic Frankenstein's monster.

[Figure] One of the shots of Bree (Felicity Huffman) in Transamerica's opening sequence

A shot of Bree near the film's end counterpoints the first sequence: Bree is seen fully naked, in a shot wide enough to encompass almost her whole body; now that her body no longer features a perceived incongruity, the camera's gaze can proceed uninterrupted. The dissected, fractured nature of her body in the initial sequence gives way to full bodily possession once Bree finally fits into the binary conception of womanhood, and with that, her genitals become the site of discourse on gender.

[Figure] Bree in a shot following her bottom surgery.

It's no coincidence that Bree's outing to her son -- one of the film's major turns -- is when he accidentally sees her penis. It is often the visual reveal of the character's genitals that outs trans women in films not just to other characters but sometimes to the audience as well. The mere sight of the genitals is a form of visual communication. Even when the reveal is to characters and not the audience (i.e. when the audience already knows a female character is trans), it's still visual information we are meant to comprehend much as the characters do. For example, in *Transamerica*, even though we already know well enough that Bree is trans, her outing to her son is done in such a way that we can understand his reaction to what he sees with identical visual cues. In other words, we don't need to keep watching the film to know what it means for him to catch a glimpse of her penis.

This use of the penis is not entirely surprising. Formal conventions hold that filmmakers should show, rather than tell; that is, to convey information as quickly and simply as possible, preferably using visual information rather than, say, dialogue. The genitals (a trans woman's penis, specifically), then, become an easy form of visual communication that undoubtedly appeals to filmmakers. The problem is that turning trans women's bodies -- specifically, a single part of their bodies -- into a vehicle for information is a form of dehumanization.

[Figure] Marybeth (Kerry Washington) is outed to the audience by her penis, in Life Is Hot In Cracktown (2009).

This phallogentric view of trans women is not a unique phenomenon, nor is it restricted to visual discourses. It would probably be easier to list all the fiction that doesn't point to the presence or lack of a penis as criteria for gender, often suggesting that bottom surgery is how trans women "become" "real" women. At its heart, this is how we are seen by others, how the masses view us, and this is relevant every time a gaze is interrupted by the incongruity defined in genital terms. When gender is defined by genitals, then the presence of incongruity -- of something that doesn't fit that definition -- interrupts understanding and forces reevaluation, especially when a character otherwise seems to fit into binary gender norms, as we will soon see. And although this genital discourse is not the only interesting and noteworthy feature of the ways that cinema looks at trans women, it is one of the most directly related to cinema's regulation of social norms.

In *Ways Of Seeing*, John Berger writes of the role of nakedness in the act of sex:

"nakedness acts as a confirmation and provokes a very strong sense of relief. She is a woman like any

other: he is a man like any other: we are overwhelmed by the marvelous simplicity of the familiar sexual mechanism.”⁴

Berger leaves unspoken his assumption that this is always going to be the case when two people see each other naked for the first time. Present between the lines of the text, though, is the converse of that scenario: what happens when she is not “a woman like any other”.

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) features perhaps the most famous trans reveal in cinematic history. Dil, a trans woman played by actor Jaye Davidson, is revealed as trans about halfway through the movie, as she and her cis male lover Fergus are about to consummate their attractions. This is a reveal both to the character of Fergus and to the audience, who up to this point, is not meant to realize that Dil is trans. What's important about Davidson/Dil being read as a cisgender woman is that the film needs the audience to expect something very specific when she and Fergus have sex so that the twist that forms the core of the film will have the full effect.

[Figure] The reveal of Dil as trans

Back to Berger:

“The focus of perception shifts from eyes, mouth, shoulders, hands [...] to the sexual parts [...] the other is reduced or elevated, whichever you prefer, to their primary sexual category: male or female.”⁵

This is precisely what happens visually in *The Crying Game*: the camera pans from Dil's face to her genitals, and what Berger calls her “primary sexual category” (in actuality, her genitals, and all the cisnormative assumptions that accompany them) is pushed to the forefront. In other words, her penis comes to represent her as not-a-real-woman. Berger's repeated references to “relief” at the visual exchange of two lovers is engaged -- consciously or not, knowingly or not -- by Jordan, as he presents a situation where this “relief” is not present because one of the lovers does not conform to cisgender norms. If the opposite of relief is distress, then that word seems apt to describe Fergus's response.

Non-visual language is a powerful signifier here, too. The score comes to an abrupt halt at the sight of Dil's penis, signifying the shock that the audience is supposed to feel. The score stops because the sex that it was accompanying stops. The reveal has a ripple effect on the film, changing things in both directions: it affects the course of the narrative moving forward, as well as causing a reevaluation of the events prior to the reveal. It is interruption at its most monumental, from a narrative perspective, at least.

Vito Russo, in his groundbreaking study of homosexuality in movies, *The Celluloid Closet*, describes revelations of queer characters' sexualities thusly:

On the American screen, the discovery of a character's homosexuality came most often as the shock of seeing the familiar suddenly turn alien, a ploy of classic horror films, like studying a pretty picture and watching it turn into a grinning skull. Revelation scenes abounded.⁶

The same goes for the revelation of trans status. In fact, I can't think of a better phrase than “the shock of seeing the familiar suddenly turn alien” to describe the reaction to a trans reveal, cinematic or otherwise, a reaction exemplified by Fergus, the narrative, and the apparatus itself in *The Crying Game*. The highly visual revelation of Dil's trans status is meant to do exactly what Russo describes:

turn the familiar alien, interrupt understanding, force reevaluation. By pointing up Dil's lack of gender congruence in such a way, the film makes her into an Other.

[Figure] The Hangover Part II pulls a Crying Game, utilizing both genital discourse and "the shock of seeing the familiar suddenly turn alien". The physical reaction of two of the guys is an exaggeration of reactions like Fergus's

Cult slasher flick Sleepaway Camp is an intersection of revelations: the trans outing and what Russo alludes to as "a ploy of classic horror films" (literally, in this case), the moment in which something benign is revealed to be something frightening, alongside the slasher convention of revealing the killer. Angela Baker (Felissa Rose) is revealed as the killer and as trans in the same breath. The two revelations are irrevocably intertwined by a single shot, in which she appears naked, holding a bloody knife. Angela being trans serves to punch up the horror of learning that she is the killer. It serves to make her more monstrous. As Russo might say, less familiar and more alien.

[Figure] Angela, in the final moments of the film

Sleepaway Camp is a case where visual juxtaposition within a single frame -- the knife and Angela's penis -- combine to form a third meaning, albeit a very familiar one: the myth of the dangerous, murderous, predatory trans woman. The same principle drives one of the most iconic scenes of the last thirty years of cinema: Buffalo Bill's dance in The Silence Of The Lambs.

Buffalo Bill is probably the most famous example of the "trans killer" trope. A serial killer who kidnaps women to make a "woman suit" from their skin, Bill exemplifies some of the culture's deepest and most nonsensical fears about the transfeminine. In our most famous view of Bill, he makes himself up (in close-ups reminiscent of the Transamerica opening) before filming himself dancing. This scene is cross-cut with a scene of his captive, attempting to escape from the pit in his basement. In case the connection wasn't clear already, the film draws a line visually between transfemininity unleashed and "real" womanhood held captive. The film suggests that the two cannot coexist in harmony, that it is a zero-sum game. The scene shows us nothing we don't already know, but it shows us something we'd only previously been told, bringing veiled references to Buffalo Bill's transsexuality into the frame.

[Figure] Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) films himself in The Silence Of The Lambs (1991)

In this case, the visuals are reversed: we are meant to be discomforted by Bill's tuck, his lack of a penis, just as by the presence of Angela's penis. It relates specifically to other aspects of gendered appearance: because Angela and Dil otherwise appear normatively female, it is the presence of a penis that shocks, while it is Bill's typically masculine appearance that makes his lack of a penis shocking and sensational. In both cases, it speaks to the coding of trans bodies as shocking and unnerving, but the contrast points up the fact that in this context the penis in-and-of-itself is meaningless. Only in relation to a full, gendered body can its visual appearance have that particular type of meaning.

The images shown above are exceptional examples, in that they provide inordinately perfect loci of analysis to the visual phenomena that pervade cultural narratives about trans people and bodies. There is no film with a reveal quite like The Crying Game, no trans killer presented so visually as Buffalo Bill, but the ideas and ideologies present in the images discussed are not atypical. Cinema is speaking with its own language that which exists in myriad other forms and discourses.

[Figure] Stripping Einhorn (Sean Young) down in Ace Ventura: Pet Detective (1994).

At the close of *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), the titular detective lays out the solution to a mystery to a large audience. Stripping the mystery down to the truth, in this case, means he must also strip down stealth trans woman Lois Einhorn both figuratively and literally. As if performing the inverse of the *Transamerica* opening, Ventura systematically strips Einhorn down, desperate to find a flaw in her feminine façade, the incongruity that will prove him right, that will prove that “she’s a man”. He finds it in the form of her penis. This scene is another potent encapsulation of the cinema looking at trans women, exposing them, reducing them to their genitalia. Ventura functions much as the cinema apparatus, the scrutinizing gaze that speaks Other-ness without words. When movies look at trans women’s bodies, they are looking for (and finding) signifiers of Other-ness. The cinema exposes trans women’s bodies in order to stake out the limits of what bodies and genders are considered worthy and acceptable. In interrupting the spectator’s look, the cinema is concretizing and documenting a broader social phenomenon: how we look at and perceive a visible difference.

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Suggested citation

groothuis. "The Look, Interrupted: How Cinema Looks At Trans Women's Bodies." *TransAdvocate*, July 20, 2015.
https://www.transadvocate.com/the-look-interrupted-how-cinema-looks-at-trans-womens-bodies_n_15301.htm