

The Rayon Effect: What Cisgender Actors Bring To Transgender Characters

By groothuis

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Abstract

Just in case you've been living under a rock, 2013 saw the release of Dallas Buyers Club, co-starring Jared Leto as a transgender woman named Rayon. Rayon is a rare entry into cinematic transgender canon, and she has sparked a firestorm of debate around trans representation in fiction. Beyond the criticism of the content of [...]

Article

Just in case you've been living under a rock, 2013 saw the release of Dallas Buyers Club, co-starring Jared Leto as a transgender woman named Rayon. Rayon is a rare entry into cinematic transgender canon, and she has sparked a firestorm of debate around trans representation in fiction. Beyond the criticism of the content of the film has been criticism of the mere casting of Jared Leto, because he's a cisgender man. In the grand scheme of things, this isn't about Dallas Buyers Club or Jared Leto, although the film and its star provide a convenient locus of conversation, so it's worth taking the time to unpack exactly what subtext and meaning Leto brought to the role, and by extension, what any cisgender actor brings to a transgender role, irrespective of the content of the film. This meaning is largely twofold: invisibility and artifice, two of the pillars of transgender oppression.

Criticism of Jared Leto reached a zenith of directness when audience members called out the actor at an awards ceremony (an event grossly mischaracterized by the media as "heckling"). This is how the actor defended himself:

"Because I'm a man, I don't deserve to play that part? So you would hold a role against someone who happened to be gay or lesbian -- they can't play a straight part?" ... "Then you make sure that people that are gay, people that aren't straight, people like the Rayons of the world, would never have the opportunity to turn the tables and explore parts that aren't central to who they are."

Even though Leto mostly just evokes a false equivalency between trans and gay people, we can safely infer he means to extend the argument to cis and trans people ("Rayons of the world" seems to be how Leto refers to trans folks). What are the implications of his comments? Well, he's suggesting that if one group doesn't have cultural and social permission to portray another group in fiction, then the converse would be true. It isn't a surprising thing to hear him say. The argument has a nice mathematical logic to it, and Leto frames himself as a hero, and his detractors as villains: I'm playing a transgender person so that trans people have the ability to play a wider range of characters; in fact, you're the ones who are transphobic for bringing this up.

The problem with this argument is that the logic doesn't hold up unless you strip the parts of the equation of their real-world contexts. The converse is not automatically true because trans people and cis people are treated very differently by the world. This is not a case of two groups with equal societal standing, it is a case of one group that is marginalized, oppressed, and mostly invisible in mainstream culture. Trans stories need to be safeguarded from potential mistreatment by actors not connected to the material, but the same is certainly not true of roles that aren't defined by trans status.

The way Leto frames his argument (that false equivalency) feeds into trans erasure by perpetuating the lack of distinction between gay and trans. By lumping the two together, he places specific trans experiences and realities under the shadow of cisgender gay people, where they can safely be ignored. Meanwhile, his presence at publicity events and awards shows allows for the further invisibility of the people on whose backs Leto has earned accolades. When Leto shows up, on-screen and off, he's aiding the idea that trans folks aren't real.

Cis people are represented in every facet of media and culture and society, while trans people are erased from most conversations. So when the opportunity arises to depict a trans person, it's important that we showcase that trans people are real, that trans people are living, breathing human beings and not just exotic novelties that only exist in the imagination. I want people to see beyond a cinematically constructed entity to a real person behind that character. It is especially important that trans youth have "possibility models" like Laverne Cox, rather than Jared Leto, who has been called out not just for the content of the film but for his public remarks and appearances, described by one writer as "the cisgender man's version of 'no homo'".

But Jared Leto's casting isn't just aiding trans invisibility. It actively props up negative stereotypes about trans people, trans women in particular. Jos Truitt wrote at Feministing after Leto's Golden Globe win that "the narrative around this movie, the fact that a man in drag is playing a trans woman, perpetuates the stereotype that we are men in drag." What's key to note is the difference between the narrative within the film and the narrative around the film. The film cannot be divorced from the context in which it was created, and that context is an extension of that cisnormative framework of trans identities as artificial variations on one's assigned sex.

We live in a cisnormative society; that is, one which sees cisgender people as the default, and transgender people as an exception to that rule. No one has to come out as cisgender, and no one self-identifies as cisgender unless making a conscious effort against cisnormativity and cisgender assumption. Transgender people are not just seen as a variation or deviation, but we're seen as an alteration of a cisgender state. When people suggest that transition-related medical care is "cosmetic", they suggest that trans identities are simply artificial layers on a (cisgender) starting point. When people suggest that a trans person is "born a [man or woman]", they suggest that we began our lives in a cisgender framework. Trans folks struggle against the misconception that our identities are alterations of a more "natural" state of being, as though at our core, on some fundamental level, we are always and forever the sex we were assigned at birth.

When a man steps into makeup to become a trans woman, he embodies this mainstream trans narrative: a transformation process that amounts to nothing more than an artificial layer on the canvas of their own identified sex and gender. One positive Dallas Buyers Club review called Rayon "a man in search of

artificial femininity”. This is exactly the kind of stereotype that trans women work tirelessly to overcome, and it’s incredibly disheartening to see this trope reified by a work of art that simultaneously claims to be a work of advocacy on our behalf. I don’t think that this sentiment was created out of thin air by the presence of Leto; no, I think it’s more likely that Leto’s presence affirmed existing prejudices in the author about trans women and transfemininity, prejudices which made their way into the perception of the character. Those prejudices, which run against the authenticity of trans people’s lived identities, are upheld and perpetuated by the presence of a character whose cinematic gender identity is artificial.

When a man takes on the role of a transgender woman, or vice versa, a chance for visibility is lost, and they make sure that their voice is louder than ours, and that trans folks will only exist as elaborate fictions, collections of artifice whose identities are as flimsy as a layer of makeup and a particular outfit. That’s what actors like Jared Leto bring to transgender roles.

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