

Addressing Transphobia With *Boys Don't Cry*

Kimberly Peirce created the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) in order to rectify the transphobic media coverage of Brandon Teena's murder in 1993. After his death, newspapers reports recounted the murder of a woman who had deceived a small town into thinking that she was a man. "The coverage was focused exclusively on on the spectacle of a girl passing as a boy, without any understanding of why a girl would want to pass," Peirce explains (quoted in Cooper, 45). The posthumous headlines such as "Death of a Deceiver" reaffirmed the sanctity of America's heartland while perpetuating the stereotype of transgender people as evil and deceitful (keep in mind the word "transgender" was not used). Peirce aimed to retell Brandon's story the right way - the way the press failed to do in the wake of his murder.

Boys Don't Cry went on to receive praise from the film world. Grossing over 12 billion dollars, the film won 47 awards including an Oscar for Best Actress, launching Hilary Swank who played Brandon Teena into stardom (IMDB). Despite its great success, one must ask if the film accomplished Peirce's goal of reclaiming Brandon's murder. The texts of Brenda Cooper, Linda Dittmar, and Melissa Rigney open a dialogue to examine how *Boys Don't Cry* addresses transphobia. *Boys Don't Cry* problematizes the heteromasculine ideal by exposing systematized transphobia in social, political, and interpersonal spheres of small-town America. The film does not quite normalize trans identities, but successfully rattles the heteronormative foundation for non-queer audiences.

In response to the idealized portraits of a law-abiding farming community painted in the media after Brandon's death, Peirce shows how the utopia of America's heartland is not true for everyone. Ex-cons, broken families, barren land, mothers dancing sexually with their sons, bar fights, and

alcoholism expose Falls City as a place where people are “desperate to leave but fear they never will” (Cooper, 50). Brandon’s roommate in Lincoln, Nebraska is perplexed to hear that Brandon enjoys the small town, foreshadowing that they hang queer people in towns like Falls City.

Peirce uses both dialogue and visuals to reveal the truths of romanticized small-town American life (Dittmar, 147). In their first encounter, Lana tells Brandon of her desire to leave Falls City. Long shots of empty land are countered by cramped footage of tight interior space with desolate decor, Lana’s living room for example, which work to “derail” presupposed knowledge of idealized small town spaces (Dittmar, 149). Limited economic opportunities available to those in Falls City, such as working at the spinach factory, deflate the American dream of social mobility. Cooper explains that by “debunking the myth of the all-American heartland,” Peirce undermines the heteronormative assumptions of the “wholesome nuclear family unit” (50).

Exposing the realities of Americana is the first step in destabilizing “normal.” The second step is to reveal holes in social systems and supports. When Brandon goes to police after his rape, he is greeted by bigotry in uniform, or what Dittmar calls “the politics of fear and hate” (147). For example, the officer asks Brandon why he is hanging out with boys if he is a girl, and forces Brandon to say “my vagina” when asked where he was penetrated during the rape. This painful dialogue alternates with Brandon’s rape scene, making the point that both are forms of a violation of rights.

This narrative further exposes the hypocrisy of American hometown values, which historically places the law on a pedestal as a system of honesty and integrity. The audience must bear witness to the “systemic ignorance” expressed by the police officer, as his refusal to immediately arrest Brandon’s rapists results in the ultimate hate crime, Brandon Teena’s murder (Dittmar, 159). By depicting the lack

of systematic support for Brandon, a non-LGBTQ audience is forced to understand his experience (Cooper, 58).

Upon dismantling assumptions of political and social support, Peirce reveals the interpersonal cruelty of masculine hegemony through Brandon's interactions with John Letter (played by Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brandon Sexton). Brandon has nearly perfected the "performance of codes of masculinity" by the time he arrives in Falls City (Dittmar, 157). Audiences, as they begin to identify with Brandon, cannot deny an uneasy gut feeling as Brandon "ventures into male territory with the potential threat of violence hanging over his head (Cooper quoting Halbertsam, 51). Meanwhile, Brandon finds liberty in his first fully judgement-free experience in the male world, the blissful time before anyone in Falls City questions his gender identity.

Once it is revealed that Brandon, whose sex is female, has transgressed gender boundaries, Nissen and Letter correct the social order using violence - their "natural birthright" as heterosexual cisgendered men (Cooper quoting Anderson, 52). In a display of heteromale privilege, Nissen and Letter rape and eventually kill Brandon to take revenge on the trespasser of their "masculine domain" (Cooper, 52). Rigney explains that the female body is a site subject to public scrutiny and control (184). In a sense, Nissen and Letter are acting as social regulators by taming Brandon's body back into its culturally expected form - female.

This narrative criticizes normalized transphobia: the prioritization of gender boundaries over humanity, and the appropriation of violence against those who challenge social norms. Nissen and Letter, representatives of the heteromale norm, view Brandon as less than human because of his gender transgression. Audiences, in sympathy for Brandon, feel the pain of Nissen and Letter's violent acts, thus "making heterosexuality - instead of transgressive sexuality - appear strange" (Cooper, 53).

Cooper explains that Peirce uses what is called the “queer approach” to captivate the heterosexual spectator by making normalized concepts, such as heteromasculine aggression in *Boys Don’t Cry*, seem aberrant. The goal is to destabilize heteronormativity by going against the grain (Cooper quoting Erhart, 48).

To this point, Peirce has made successful, poignant commentary against internalized social, political, and interpersonal transphobia by dismantling the myth of America’s heartland and problematizing heteromascularity. Peirce targets these messages to non-queer audiences, who are otherwise living within the context of systematized transphobia. However, Cooper and Dittmar exaggerate their praise for *Boys Don’t Cry*’s accomplishment of centering queer. In fact, Cooper, Dittmar, and Rigney do not agree on the significance of Brandon’s gender identity. Cooper calls *Boys Don’t Cry* a liberatory text for trans males, while Rigney argues that Brandon cannot pass as male, and instead settles on a butch lesbian identity (Rigney, 187). The lack of agreement amongst scholars signifies that Brandon’s gender expression remains ambiguous. Peirce successfully raises the question of gender identity versus sex, but does not necessarily make the leap to normalizing transgender people.

For example, in the language itself, Cooper and Rigney immediately set up the contradiction of “female masculinity” versus “male masculinity.” Cooper quotes Judith Halberstam in stating that ““suppression of female masculinity allows for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability”” (45). The use of the the word “female” to modify masculinity is inherently based within the gender binary. In such, this academic discourse does not break past the heteronormative mold.

Secondly, the entire concept of trans male in *Boys Don’t Cry* is appropriated by a female actress, Hilary Swank. Audiences may suspend their disbelief to feel sympathy (possibly for the first time) for a trans male, but after the film is over they know that they are relating to a cisgendered female

playing a trans male. This is emphasized by the fact that Hilary Swank went on to win an Oscar for best *female* actress, reaffirming to non-queer audiences that they were in fact watching a female, a female who was very convincing at playing a trans male. Furthermore, post-*Boys Don't Cry* Hilary Swank poses for a sexy magazine photoshoot, confirming her cisgendered femininity, and disassociating herself from any remaining gender ambiguity.

Casting a cis-female as Brandon Teena may have been a political decision in order to garner widespread screening. Perhaps audiences in 1999 were not prepared for a trans male in a lead role. (*Would he have receive the Oscar for best male or best female actor?*) Additionally, Peirce likely did not intend to end transphobia with this film. Cooper cautions that increased media visibility does not always benefit a group of marginalized people. She refers to Bonnie J. Dow, who explains that representation can be harmfully mistaken for social change. Using the reference of the *Cosby* show, Cooper explains that visibility of black families on television did not mean the end of racism in real life (46).

In conclusion, Peirce successfully shakes the heteronormative foundation below the feet of a non-LGBTQ audience. *Boys Don't Cry* is a “political challenge to hetero-patriarchy” (Dittmar, 157) that opens up a transgressive space in mainstream culture (Rigney, 181). However, unlike what Cooper proclaims, *Boys Don't Cry* is not a liberatory text. Brandon may have felt moments of liberty as a newcomer to Falls City, but ultimately he could not escape the hegemony of heteromascularity. He was not freed, and neither are the trans viewers of *Boys Don't Cry*. Trans violence is still rampant 15 years after the release of *Boys Don't Cry* and 25 years after the murder of Brandon Teena. However, awareness is the first step to resolving social inequalities. By bringing an award-winning film to large-scale heterosexual audiences, Peirce unmistakably makes strides towards reducing transphobia.

Works Cited

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