

Subversion of the Transgender Gaze Through Cisnormativity

By Debra Beight

ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes Halberstam's interpretation of the transgender gaze as it applies to the character portrayal of Brandon Teena in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. An oppositional approach examines the idea of a cisgender gaze that compromises the subjectivity of not only the character of Brandon but extending to dismissiveness towards trans identity as a whole. Dissecting the reveal scene from the film highlights Halberstam's process of the transgender gaze and allows for a focus on cisgender interpretation and demands that illustrate cisnormative expectations on trans bodies and behaviors. Connecting these demands is the concept of abjection as described by feminist-philosopher Julia Kristeva, and how this liminal placement further erodes Brandon's subjectivity in the eyes of a cisgender audience.

The Transgender Look by J. Jack Halberstam (2005) examines visual representations of gender ambiguity in motion pictures and coins the term, transgender gaze, as a reinterpretation of Laura Mulvey's male gaze. In Mulvey's (1989) male gaze paradigm, women are either the fetishized object of male observation or they appropriate the active desire of the masculine subject who is doing the observing. Halberstam (2005) dissects the transgender movie portrayal of Brandon Teena from *Boys Don't Cry*; the idea in this film is that a transgender gaze allows the audience to follow a specific narrative, the traditional male gaze and the female appropriation of it to establish points of identification, and yet replaces these with a gaze that permits a queer perspective. While the film is about presenting the tragic rape and murder of the transman

Brandon, it does provide moments where the audience takes on Brandon's gaze and reads an ambiguity as both male and female (Halberstam, 2005). Although Halberstam defines the male, female and transgender gaze elements of the film *Boys Don't Cry*, the unsettling notion of a cisgender gaze, one that demands explanation and verification in order to establish identity in terms and concepts that are acceptable to non-trans individuals is the concentration of this paper. This cisgender gaze feeds into cisnormative thinking in ways where even resistance is co-opted and cishnorms are given priority in narratives meant to honor trans lives.

Halberstam (2005) denotes the transgender identity in film as a paradox due to both "visibility and temporality" (p. 77). Visibility is affected in that there is the ever present precariousness of passing while under the constant threat of exposure. This paradox is highlighted during the film's revealing bathroom scene; the antagonists John and Tom, who suspect that Brandon is not really a male, drag him into the bathroom and forcibly remove his pants to see biological confirmation of Brandon's body (Kolodner, Vachon, & Peirce, 1999). Visibility and temporality converge when the exposure of Brandon's physical identity occurs in the present even though the audience has already accepted Brandon as male, accepted him as passing throughout the initial narrative, making this their past and now the audience has to prepare for what is to come next in this unmasked future where Brandon's new visibility is equated with danger and harm. During this scene, Brandon's agency is being taken in this moment and we, the audience, suddenly switch to his point of view as he begins an out of body experience. He stares at the crowd of onlookers standing at the bathroom door and sees, "a fully clothed Brandon, a double, who returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 88). This back and forth sequence between the stripped and castrated Brandon and the fully realized transgender one, highlights "the transgender gaze as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places at the same time"

(Halberstam, 2005, p. 88). The female Brandon seeing the male Brandon. This double view of transgender and its gaze, destabilizes the spectator's sense of self and gender stability. It's a non-fetishized way of seeing that looks with instead of looks at the trans body, at least, according to Halberstam's interpretation.

In this scene Brandon is stripped from the waist down and a cisgender gaze is claimed by not only the perpetrators John and Tom, but by the audience as well with instance of looking and demanding a view of Brandon's vagina. While Halberstam presents the queer perspective of the transgender gaze being served in this scene, the insidious nature of the cisgender gaze that demands to look and reveal what Brandon really is, is also present. Although there has been a temporality in the audience's experience with Brandon through the film, the audience has accepted to this point that Brandon is male even with the clues to the contrary, it is this demand to see biological proof that the audience insists upon to fully understand his experience and the results of his rape and murder. The subjectivity of Brandon is abandoned for the visual confirmation that this is really a female we have been looking at and it is a female that will be raped and killed in the remainder of the film. We are excused from seeing Brandon as male any longer and we are able to truly pity Brandon's experience and violent end because now we understand that it happening to a female body, and now it is inexcusable. This is how violent and intrusive a cisgender gaze can objectify Brandon's corporality into a narrative that eases and assuages non-trans guilt at the resulting tragedy of his death.

This cisgender gaze also presents itself in the contrasting structures of John's and Tom's presentation of masculinity against the masculine performance of Brandon. Each performance, John's, Tom's, and Brandon's, reinforce cisgender expectations and further buttress the effects of a cisgender gaze. John and Tom are portrayed as hyper-masculine, aggressive, brutish and simplistic caricatures of male dominance. They meet all expectations of the

cisgender gaze in that the audience needs confirmation of their villainy through their rough behavior, crude humor and language and constant reaffirmation of their actions that promote female subjugation. Brandon by contrast is presented as performing a type of chivalrous masculinity, decidedly less assertive and raw than John and Tom, but still following a normative thread in how gentlemen are expected to act (Hird, 2001). This is evident in his manner of dress, hairstyle, language and behaviors. It meets the demanding nature of the cisgender gaze because it confirms for the audience that Brandon is as male as he can possible be in his presentation. The act of transgressing feminine norms locks Brandon into masculine norms that serve to categorize him for public acceptability and accountability. It is the lack of ambiguity that propels the cisgender gaze and allows it to define expectations of both subjectivity and objectification.

Cisgender individuals, even those who consider themselves allies, align with ideas of identity politics and establish themselves as either/or. This binary of cisgender or non-cisgender or transgender or non-transgender creates an opposition that doesn't bridge the gaps of difference, rather it enhances and underlines difference. It creates an other and a means with which to dis-identify as much as a means to identify with an individual or group of individuals. In the case of Brandon in the film, the audience is privy to his struggles and accomplishments in passing for male, his performance of male is rewarded by the acceptance and non-questioning of his existence. The audience views Brandon as devoid of affect because his actions are seen as only mimicry and imitation; we are permitted to join Brandon in his performance by sitting back and knowingly understand that this is the female actress Hillary Swank and she is doing a great job tricking us into believing that she is pretending to be a boy and we allow her to fool us because deep down we know better. This privilege of playing this game is at the heart of cishnormative existence because for us it is a game and for trans individuals it is, literally, in most cases life or death.

Even when we are presented with the horrific death of Brandon, we are excused from real empathy because we had the advantage of a cisgender gaze, seeing the 'real' Brandon, the physical body that was really female. Our empathy is engaged for this poor woman being raped and killed because she was found out rather than the rape and murder of a young man that was assumed to be not normal, a threat to a cisgender way of life and a failure of gender performance trickery where his death was incumbent upon his failings and not those of our society's.

A function of the cisgender gaze and its relation to cishnormativity is apparent in what Julia Kristeva defines as abjection. The basis of cultural norms with respect to fixed differentials between the subject and the object is also dependent on the abject, that which is not an object yet not completely other to the subject (Kristeva, 1982). A cisgender gaze sees the murkiness in the boundaries between the transgender individual and struggles to find an understandable placement. Objectification of Brandon's body is not a comfortable vantage point in that there is a knowing of what violence is about to be placed upon it. Brandon's subjectivity is too foreign a concept for the cis individual and so the act of abjection takes its place. There is a proximity to the subject, the gaze sees the humanity of the individual and resists harm inflicted upon it, but the familiarity in its strangeness, the inability to identify outside of the physical presentation of forms is what pushes the audience closer to seeing Brandon as almost an object to be studied (Kristeva, 1982). Inside this liminal existence, at the heart of cishnorms is the abject nature of trans identity. It disturbs identity itself, the systems, and orders in place and is not cognizant of borders, positions and rules (Kristeva, 1982). Subjectivity, objectivity collapse in on themselves in an abjective response that permits the audience distance while still insisting on explanation.

The demands of normality push the audience away from seeing Brandon as whole, in and of himself, without the reveal, without the confirmation, without the instance

on passing for our own comfort. The audience is immersed in a disingenuous semblance of empathy because in the end we just want to see and know how to classify Brandon. How different would the story have been, how would the film's reception be shaped if the reveal scene was constructed in a way in which the audience was not privy to Brandon's anatomy? Halberstam's transgender gaze would have remained a vision for the trans community rather than something that was assimilated for the benefit of cisgender consumption. The look that is divided within itself is still a place of preservation for Brandon's subjectivity, a place where he is permitted to look out and see himself reflected in his past and his future regardless of the demands the audience imposes on him.

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