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**A View of the Hallway:
Spectatorship and the Transgender Character**

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By

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Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

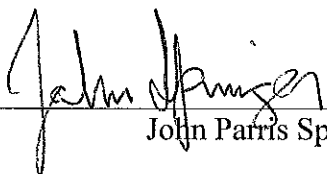
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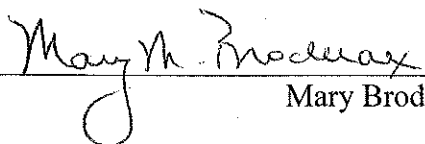
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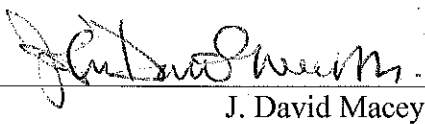
A THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THESIS v

A View of the Hallway: Spectatorship and the Transgender Character. 1

CHAPTER 1 A Theoretical Introduction to Sex, Gender and Spectatorship 2

CHAPTER 2 Camping at *The Birdcage*: Parody, Irony and the Spectator 31

CHAPTER 3 “I’m my own man, so to speak”: Gender Performance, Utopia and
Voyeuristic Pleasure in Blake Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria*. 56

CHAPTER 4 Rewriting Oedipus: Transsexuality, Parent/Child Relations and
Spectatorship in *Transamerica*. 77

CHAPTER 5 “I seen him in the full flesh”: Reexamining the Gaze in *Boys Don’t
Cry*. 98

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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This thesis aims to reevaluate theories of the spectatorial gaze in light of films that feature transgender characters. Such theories, in particular those of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Teresa de Lauretis, rely on strict sex and gender binaries to explain the pleasure that comes from watching films. However, transgender characters disrupt such binaries and allow for new ways of seeing. Using feminist theories of sex and gender, most notably Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, queer theory and feminist theories of spectatorship, this thesis explores the effects of the transgender character on film spectators by providing close readings of *The Birdcage*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Transamerica*, and *Boys Don't Cry*.

The Birdcage explores the key tension between the reification and subversion of stereotypes inherent in drag performance, and Armand and Albert's gender performances allow for a spectatorial position that is individualized rather than determined by the sex and gender of the spectator. Although *Victor/Victoria* contains elements of gender transgression through its exposure of gender as a performance and its disruption of the spectatorial gaze, King and Victoria's relationship undermines the radical potential of the film by reinscribing Victoria as a vulnerable, submissive woman. By foregrounding the spectatorial gaze and reworking the Oedipal scenario, *Transamerica* ultimately argues that the borders of male/female, masculine/feminine, and mother/father are false dichotomies. Finally, although Lana's understanding of and relationship with/to Brandon's body fluctuates throughout the film, *Boys Don't Cry* ultimately preserves the complexity of the transgender body through Lana's gaze. Such findings call for further investigation of the effect of atypically-gendered characters on film spectatorship.

A View of the Hallway: Spectatorship and the Transgender Character

“There’s a lovely saying that one door closes and another door opens but it’s hell in the hallway. . . That’s something I think a lot about. Being trans, you’re in the hallway. . . But if you stay in the hallway, which I believe is much more freeing because you’re not bound by either side, it’s infinitely harder because you’re not bound by either side but you’re not belonging to either side.

The hallway is a wonderful place.”

–Brandon, a male-to-female transgender person¹

¹ Davidmann, Sara, "Beyond Borders: Lived Experiences of Atypically Gendered Transsexual People," *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, Ed. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger (New York, NY: Routledge 2010) 196.

Chapter One

A Theoretical Introduction to Sex, Gender, and Spectatorship

Sex and Gender: A Brief Overview

Gender studies as we know it today is a young intellectual project, and only in the past one hundred years or so have we had a discourse with which to speak critically about perhaps the most common markers of human identity: sex and gender. The history of the terms and the debates that surround those histories are complex and cannot adequately be addressed in such a short space as I am providing them here. This chapter, however, attempts to lay out the theoretical framework on which I will build my analyses of the films in the following chapters. I begin with a brief history of feminist theory's distinction between sex and gender that spawned gender studies, leading to Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performance. Butler's theory transitions seamlessly into a discussion of critical readings of drag performance and cross-dressing, the central theme of both *The Birdcage* and *Victor/Victoria*. I will discuss the potential of drag both to foreground the performative aspects of gender and to reinforce stereotypes of femininity. I will then explore the more complex and contentious world of transsexuals and transgender people. I will discuss the heated debates within the GLBT community about these two categories, which inform my analyses of *Transamerica* and *Boys Don't Cry*.

These categories of sex, gender, drag and transgender are not easy to define, nor do they describe clearly delineated behaviors or beliefs. Perhaps quite obviously, these marginal categories that theorists have created to describe people who force us to question the established categories of male and female, masculine and feminine, do not adequately contain them. In *The Birdcage*, for example, Albert is a stage drag performer

but also expresses feminine characteristics in his clothing and behavior in his personal life. What is he, then? A homosexual drag queen? A cross-dresser? A transperson? And what of Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry*? He self-identifies as a boy and has been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, but only once mentions sexual reassignment surgery and discounts it due to his economic status. Is he transgender or a pre-operative transsexual? It is nearly impossible to say as there is often little ideological consensus about gender identity among those within these prescribed categories, and the categories themselves can be essentializing and may fail to account for the range of identities that they purport to contain. As such, I will attempt to define the categories as best as possible, sketching general features that are both followed and undermined by the characters in the films.

The reformulation of the definition of “gender” was and continues to be central to modern debates about sex, sexuality and identity. As Linda Nicholson points out in her brief overview of the history of gender, “prior to the late 1960s, English language-speakers [most commonly] used the word ‘gender’ to refer to the understanding of certain words as masculine or feminine.”² Gender was a linguistic term that described characteristics of words, not characteristics of human beings. However, feminists appropriated the term and made a distinction between sex and gender as separate criteria that differentiated men and women. Sex came to describe “the biological” distinction used to describe physical differences between males and females, while gender referred to “the social” distinction between masculinity and femininity that describes differing

² Nicholson, Linda, “Gender,” *Companion to Feminist Philosophy*. Ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2000) 289.

modes of conduct that are imposed upon the sexes by societal norms.³ By separating the biological from the social, feminists and, later, gender theorists, were able to argue that behaviors and abilities ascribed to the sexes were not natural but socially constructed, thus providing a way to begin to break free from oppressive, heteronormative patriarchal expectations.

The social constructionist theory of sex and gender was first articulated in Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir famously asserted, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one."⁴ This was the first time feminist theory addressed the idea that there was a distinction between the natural (the way one is born) and the social (the way one comes to act or *be* a certain way). Beauvoir goes on to say that the body, or biological sex, "is not enough to define [a] woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society."⁵ She asserts that perceived reality is merely a social construct, and gender is part of this "reality."

Later feminist theorists such as Kate Millet pushed Beauvoir's ideas further, affirming feminism's adoption of gender as social construct. Millet asserts that men and women become gendered beings because their "life experiences" render them subjects of two entirely different "cultures."⁶ She goes on to say, "Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of

³ Nicholson 289.

⁴ Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex*, Trans. H. M. Parshley (Penguin Publishing 1972) Web. <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/index.htm>>

⁵ Beauvoir.

⁶ Millet, Kate, *Sexual Politics* (Doubleday 1970) 31.

temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression.”⁷ In other words, women “become” feminine and men “become” masculine because, as they grow up, society attaches significance to their sexed bodies, and their physical anatomy elicits specific societal expectations about behavior. Society’s differing expectations for and treatment of men and women render them members of different cultures, which results in the development of masculine or feminine gendered identities.

Nancy Chodorow continues in this social constructionist vein but argues from a psychoanalytic perspective, narrowing the focus of the theory to a child’s relationship with his or her parents. In our society, parenting is primarily the job of the mother. All children, male and female, “have a sense of oneness with” the mother as newborns, and “a child’s earliest experience...is usually of identity with and attachment to a single mother” because of her active role in their lives.⁸ However, this “oneness” with the mother must eventually fade as the child grows and develops “an individuated sense of self” and, as Millet would argue, the way in which the child develops this sense of self is based on his or her sex and the associated gender identity assigned at birth.⁹ Chodorow argues that mothers are “more likely to identify with a daughter than with a son,” and this identification is reciprocated; girls see that they are like their mothers just as mothers see that their daughters are like them.¹⁰ Because the mother behaves as though she and her daughter are alike, the daughter believes she is like her mother and mimics her behavior and temperament. However, male children have a different experience. A mother sees her son as different and separate from herself, “emphasizing his masculinity in opposition

⁷ Millet 31.

⁸ Chodorow, Nancy, “Family Structure and Feminine Personality,” *Feminism in the Study of Religion: a reader*, Ed. Darlene M. Juschka (New York: Continuum 2001) 46.

⁹ Chodorow 46.

¹⁰ Chodorow 47.

to herself and...pushing him to assume, or acquiescing in his assumption of, a sexually toned male-role relation to her.”¹¹ For a daughter, the sense of identification continues as she grows older and develops her gender identity because the mother is female and, presumably, “feminine.” But a son develops his gender identity in terms of differentiation from the mother. Unconsciously, he sees that he is not (physically) like the mother and must separate his identity from her because he is not female so his identity cannot be feminine.

Although the social constructionist theory revolutionized modern feminist thinking, not all feminist theorists agree that it is accurate or helpful in articulating women’s lived experiences. Sally Haslanger argues that, if one thinks “there is no reality independent of our practices or of our language and that ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are only fictions employed by the dominant to mask their power,” women and other marginalized figures are rendered powerless in the fight against patriarchy and oppression because it is impossible to fight something that is not real.¹² She seeks to distinguish between the belief that the world is socially constructed and the belief that the way we *see* the world is socially constructed. Haslanger writes, “It may well be that our point of view on the world is always socially conditioned; but there is no reason to conclude that the world we have a point of view on is likewise socially conditioned.”¹³ We believe gender is not “real” because it is not natural but rather a product of social expectations, but this does not mean that gender does not exist. In the ways in which it affects the daily lives of women living in patriarchal societies, it is very real. By arguing that gender is purely a social construct that exists only in our minds, we paradoxically render it untouchable. As

¹¹ Chodorow 47.

¹² Haslanger, Sally, "Ontology and Social Construction," *Philosophical Topics* 22.2 (Fall, 1995) 96.

¹³ Haslanger 119.

Haslanger notes, “a change in my thinking, *by itself*, cannot make my body, my friends, or my neighborhood go out of existence...To bring about change in the world, you have to do more than just think about it.”¹⁴ Although Haslanger agrees that gender is not biologically determined, she believes that feminist theory needs to acknowledge the reality of gender and its tangible effects in the “real” world.

Additionally, some feminist theorists find fault with the social constructionist theory because, ironically, it is essentializing. When theorists like Millet argue that women exist in one culture while men exist in another, she implies that all women have shared experiences that force them into the same or similar types of femininity. The experiences of an upper-class white woman would, however, be vastly different from the experiences of a lower-income Hispanic woman. The “culture” of the female/femininity glosses over the many distinctions within those categories and creates a false impression of homogeneity. Many contemporary feminist theorists are concerned with issues within the feminist community that have largely been ignored because of the perception that experience is shared across lines of class and/or ethnicity based on shared sex and/or gender. Linda Nicholson argues that we cannot view women as having fully shared experiences, but neither can we believe that they have nothing in common. Instead “we can see [the male/female] as encompassing a complex web of distinctions evidencing threads of overlap within a field of discontinuities” and can create a theory of gender that addresses the differing experiences of women across culture.¹⁵

These seemingly conflicting views of gender are reconciled by Judith Butler’s theory of gender. Butler begins her discussion of social constructionism at its genesis by

¹⁴ Haslanger 96.

¹⁵ Nicholson 297.

examining Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, investigating concepts that will ground her later work in *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*. She states that, by arguing "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," Beauvoir is privileging sex and the body, identifying them as primary and thus natural. However, Butler asks, "how are we to find the body that preexists cultural interpretations?"¹⁶ She argues that the body is always already culturally constructed because sex is itself a gendered category organized on the basis of culturally-conditioned perceptions of masculine and feminine physical characteristics. Because our cultures choose to group humans based on sexual characteristics, we are always already gendered; there is no preexisting body that we can view outside of the gender binary. Butler thus exposes Beauvoir's view of social construction as one of paradox and false hope. By denaturalizing gender and casting it as something that one *becomes*, as the social force through which women are culturally disenfranchised, Beauvoir implies that gender is not a given but a fluid condition – one that we choose to embody – opening up a space for to challenge the culture of patriarchal oppression. Butler, anticipating ideas she discusses in *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*, argues that "one chooses ones gender, but one does not choose it from a distance."¹⁷ Social viability requires "an unambiguous gender affinity;" thus "it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms."¹⁸ If there is life outside of normative gender, if we can choose to become a different gender, we fall outside of social expectations and are thus rendered a non-existent Other.

¹⁶ Butler, Judith, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault," *The Judith Butler Reader*, Ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 23.

¹⁷ Butler 26.

¹⁸ Butler 27.

Butler examines these ideas more fully in *Gender Trouble*. She repeats her earlier ideas with more clarity, arguing that it makes “no sense...to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category.”¹⁹ In other words, the description of our bodies as “male” or “female” is based upon notions of how masculinity and femininity present themselves physically, which Butler calls our gendered appearance. Saying that sex is natural and gender is cultural situates sex as “prediscursive,” and “the binary frame for sex is effectively secured” because we ignore the fact that our ideas of sex are based upon our ideas of gender.²⁰ According to Butler, the distinction between sex and gender ultimately reifies the power of both categories. As an alternative, she proposes a reformulation of gender that avoids conceiving of sex as prediscursive, and she does this by examining “how and where...the construction of gender takes place.”²¹

She elaborates her ideas concerning the construction of gender in a later article, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” In this article, Butler explains gender as “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”²² Performance is the key to Butler’s view of gender, and she defines performance as “the stylized repetition of acts through time.”²³ Our gendered selves are socially constructed not only because of our divergent life experiences, as Millet proposes; our divergent life experiences, rather, are socially constructed by the different performances we must enact because of societal

¹⁹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990) 10.

²⁰ *Gender Trouble* 10.

²¹ *Gender Trouble* 11.

²² Butler, Judith, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (Dec., 1998): 520.

²³ "Performative" 520.

expectations. Furthermore, as Nancy Chodorow claims, we learn these performances by seeing other members of our culture, such as our parents, perform gender roles and embody gendered identities. In other words, societal expectations of men and women coerce their respective masculine and feminine performances. Furthermore, because men must perform masculinity and women must perform femininity, these different acts produce different life experiences. Because societal expectations both create and reflect normative gender performances, gender conceals its genesis and is thus naturalized.

Butler confronts not only the construction of gender but also the social construction of the body in *Gender Trouble* and “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” an article published the same year. She argues not only that there is no prediscursive sex, but that the body itself exists and is intelligible only through language. It is constructed through a “discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body [for] the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies.”²⁴ These boundaries, however, are permeable because our bodies are not closed systems. We have orifices where the boundaries of our bodies break down, clouding the lines between self and Other. Butler alleges that improper uses of the body that foreground the permeability of these boundaries, such as homosexual relations among men, panic society not only because they expose the vulnerability of the body but because they show the vulnerability and instability of hegemonic society itself. These sexual practices “effectively reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines.”²⁵ Fearing the loss of perceived

²⁴ *Gender Trouble* 180.

²⁵ *Gender Trouble* 181.

stability of the subject and of the body, society devalues these reinscriptions as taboo and insists that bodies that engage in these abnormal practices are not bodies at all.

Butler continues by speaking more specifically about the construction of the body as sexed. Because we are separated into categories of male or female according to the appearance of our sexual organs, we are classified by reproductive capabilities. Men and women are then expected to pair off and reproduce, resulting in what Butler and other feminist theorists call compulsory heterosexuality. In this manner, sex itself emerges as a performance mandated by heterosexual norms, and “the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance.”²⁶ Thus, humans are “disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex.”²⁷ Butler claims that the key to “expos[ing] the causal lines as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications” is to foreground the performative aspect of both sex and gender.²⁸ The main site of this exposure and resultant decoupling of sex and gender can be found in the lived experiences of transpeople.

As we delve into the theory and practice of transgender, we come across slippery terms that are often difficult to define adequately. The term transgender has two meanings. The first of these definitions is used to describe a range of identities and behaviors that undermine traditional heteronormative conceptions of sex and gender. Among these are drag/cross-dressing, transsexuality and transgender. In the following

²⁶ Butler, Judith, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *The Judith Butler Reader*, Ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 134-5.

²⁷ "Imitation" 134-5.

²⁸ "Imitation" 135.

sections I describe the definitions, functions and implications of each of these subcategories, focusing on their displacement of sex and gender.

Drag: Foregrounding Gender as Performative

In its strictest definition, drag performance is the enactment of a gender that is incongruous with one's anatomical sex in order to entertain an audience. We see this both in *The Birdcage*, when Albert performs as Starina, and in the multiple performances in *Victor/Victoria*. The performance of the typical drag queen involves a man performing as a woman, dressing and behaving in an often grotesquely exaggerated feminine manner with heavy makeup, perfectly coiffed hair and extremely feminine clothing such as ball gowns. Although women also perform as drag kings, miming and performing masculinity, my discussion will restrict itself to drag queens, as male performance in drag is more relevant to the films I analyze. According to performance theorist Jill Dolan, stage performances such as drag bring people together “to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements” by modeling “new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other.”²⁹ In other words, drag performance can provide a new template for conceptualizing and enacting sex and gender.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler is one of the first to identify drag as a site for the potential redefinition of gender roles because of its exposure of gender as a performed role. She explains that drag is “a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is

²⁹ Dolan, Jill, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative’,” *Theatre Journal*, 53.3 (2001) 455.

constituted.”³⁰ Drag performers “reverse and displace [the] originating aims” of compulsory gender performance, undermining the supposed “uniformity of the subject” by performing the typically incongruous male sex and feminine gender.³¹ These incongruent performances, which Butler calls instances of “disobedience,” generate a “refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity...subtly call[ing] into question the legitimacy of the command.”³² In other words, drag performers expose that “all gender is like drag” and effectively destabilize the perceived naturalness of both sex and gender.³³

Many other critics have examined the function and effects of drag performance, expanding on Butler’s work. Most agree that drag performance has positive effects both on the audience and the performers themselves. For example, in his study of drag, Keith McNeal describes the benefits of drag performance for its mostly gay audience and performers, arguing that drag is a “ritually sanctioned performance genre in which gay men can safely gather to watch, explore, and participate in symbolic transformations of gender ambivalence in the psychocultural arena of the show.”³⁴ For McNeal, drag performance is cathartic and releases tension for the gay community because it provides a space in which “the ‘femininity’ attributed to gay men is not stigmatized and shamed but asserts control, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world.”³⁵ In other words, drag performance inverts the binary of masculine/feminine and allows the gay community to reclaim power by rebelling against the heteronormative culture assigns them to the

³⁰ Butler, Judith, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of “sex”* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993) 125.

³¹ *Bodies* 123, 122.

³² *Bodies* 122.

³³ *Bodies* 125.

³⁴ McNeal, Keith E, “Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance,” *Ethos*, 27.3 (1999) 346.

³⁵ McNeal 346-7.

marginalize category of the feminine and, in the process, coming together and forming a community. Indeed, McNeal asserts that “drag is a subculturally constituted defense (Kaplan 1991; Obeyesekere 1990a; Spiro 1961, 1994a) in which gay men vicariously and ambivalently participate in the gendered drama presupposed by the hetero-normative model of gender and sexuality.”³⁶ Thus, drag allows for a simultaneous participation in and critique of heteronormative definitions of sex and gender.

In her case study, Eve Shapiro comes to similar conclusions and supports Dolan’s contention that these performances can be transformational, not only for the audience but for the performers as well. Shapiro asserts that “drag performances cannot be understood without viewing drag as a gendered process, in which the performance itself...often transforms the gender identity and politics of the drag performer.”³⁷ In other words, drag is a special kind of performance that is often purposefully ideologically motivated, and that motivation make the minds not only of the audience but also of the performers receptive to more open ideas of gender. She contends, “drag is not simply an expression of performers' preformed oppositional gender politics or preexisting counterhegemonic gender identities.”³⁸ The performance is more complex than that; “the process of participating in drag communities may also function as a form of consciousness and a site of transformation for performers.”³⁹ She goes on to interview many drag performers, all of whom describe the liberation they feel as a result of their performances. They say that “participating in [drag] opened up a previously unavailable space to question gender” and

³⁶ McNeal 347.

³⁷ Shapiro, Eve, “Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities” *Gender and Society*, 21.2 (2007):

³⁸ Shapiro 251.

³⁹ Shapiro 251.

showed them that “gender identity [is] socially constructed and mutable.”⁴⁰ McNeal’s and Shapiro’s studies show that drag, through its performance of exaggerated gender stereotypes in a communal setting, fulfills societal needs in the lives of gay men and allows them to question and reconstitute gender roles. As Butler contends, drag has the power to help people break out of stultifying definitions of sex and gender.

There are, however, also problematic aspects of gender performance. In her pioneering study, Judith Butler acknowledges that drag is controversial and contentious, explaining that drag performers enact traditional, mainstream, heterosexual femininity. As such, their performances have the potential not to question but rather to reify traditional gender roles, making them more fixed than ever before by acknowledging and cementing, through their performance of specific traits, an essentialized conception of women. In her study of drag culture, Roberta Mock concludes that drag performance reifies the dominant ideology because the audience often “laugh[s] at, rather than with” the performer and the role being performed by the drag artist.⁴¹ The laughter is authorized by the audience’s (and performer’s) knowledge that the role is not the performer’s “true” identity. In this manner, the “performance may act as a 'safety valve'- ultimately, a disincentive towards change in the social sphere and the recuperation of absent authority.”⁴² In other words, the performance is not transformative but merely a spectacle that reaffirms the social norms that are only apparently transgressed. The audience sees the drag performer as a joke rather than as subversive, affirming rather than interrogating gender roles. McNeal also questions the transformative power of drag.

⁴⁰ Shapiro 260.

⁴¹ Mock, Roberta, “Heteroqueer Ladies: Some Performative Transactions between Gay Men and Heterosexual Women,” *Feminist Review*, 75 (2003) 30.

⁴² Mock 30.

While he admits that “drag's marginal play problematizes cultural categories,” which allows us to appreciate its parody and subversion as an ‘art of resistance,’” he warns that we “should not confuse ritualized catharsis with resistance or subversion.”⁴³ Although drag performance shows that gender is performative by parodying it, drag does not necessarily push back against gender stereotypes. These three major aspects of drag performance – its ability to cause the audience to question gender, its transformative power over the performer, and its potential to reify traditional gender norms through the performance of stereotypical femininity – take center stage *The Birdcage* and *Victor/Victoria*.

Transsexual and Transgender Identities: Embodied Performance

Another complex site at which normative sex and gender binaries break down is in the lived experiences of transpeople. Transpeople, even more than drag performers, show the inadequacy of the sex and gender categories available to us. People who are transgender, as Butler explains, are “at the limits of intelligibility” and display sex and gender characteristics outside of the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine.⁴⁴ Because the continuum among transpeople cannot be crudely broken down without substituting one set of oversimplified categories for another, I will attempt to discuss in detail a range of experiences of transsexuals and transgendered people.

Transsexuals are people who identify more strongly with different sex and gender categories from those they are given at birth. This often results in the feeling that one is in the “wrong body,” and these individuals often seek stable placement into the opposite

⁴³ McNeal 348.

⁴⁴ Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge. 2004) 58.

sex and gender.⁴⁵ As a result of this discomfort in their bodies, transsexuals often seek sexual reassignment surgery, commonly referred to as SRS, in which doctors surgically remove the penis and construct a vagina or vice versa. The sense of disconnection between interiority (personality, behaviors, traits, feelings, etc.) and exteriority (the body) is a defining feature of transsexuality. As transgender theorist Christopher Shelley explains, transsexuals often cling strongly to “their sense of, or desire for, *embodied integrity*” and seek to feel that their bodies outwardly express the way they feel about and see themselves, and they often wish to “disappear into the world to live straight lives” after their surgeries.⁴⁶ Even though transsexuals are a serious threat to heteronormative views on sex and gender because they expose the fact that biological sex is not always an indicator of gender identity, many are “more motivated to maintain the gender binary than to blur it” and are “happy to remain within binary gender and sexuality norms.”⁴⁷ The result, from an ideological perspective, is a paradox: a deep subversion of the stability of sex and gender in an attempt to acquire and maintain a stable sex and gender.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler examines the concept of stability in relation to transsexuals. In order for a psychologist or psychiatrist to approve SRS for someone, the individual must be diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, or GID. The diagnosis, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), requires that one display “persistent discomfort” with one’s sex, which “establish[es] that gender is a relatively permanent phenomenon” in the eyes of the American Psychiatric

⁴⁵ Davidmann, Sara, "Beyond Borders: Lived Experiences of Atypically Gendered Transsexual People," *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, Ed. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010) 191.

⁴⁶ Shelley, Christopher A, *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc, 2008) 20, 194.

⁴⁷ Shelley 20, Sanger 265.

Association.⁴⁸ Butler identifies the diagnosis as problematic for several reasons. She explains that, while “the diagnosis continues to be valued because it facilitates an economically feasible way of transitioning,” it also “continues to pathologize as a mental disorder what ought to be understood instead as one among many possibilities of determining one’s gender for oneself.”⁴⁹ A diagnosis is required for medical insurance companies to pay for SRS, but that diagnosis requires at least a tacit admission that one is mentally ill. Additionally, in accordance with her theory of gender as performative, Butler and many other gender theorists reject the view that gender identity is permanent, and Butler contends that there could be reasons other than “persistent discomfort” with one’s anatomy that cause one to consider SRS, such as the realization that there are other life choices available as a result of a shift in ideological perspective.⁵⁰ Furthermore, those who desire SRS must “[learn] how to present [them]sel[ves] in a discourse that is not [theirs]” and “conform to the language of the diagnosis.”⁵¹ In other words, even if one does not perfectly fit the symptomology of GID, one must work the system, speaking and behaving as though he or she indeed qualifies for a diagnosis. As a result of this paradoxical relation to the stability of sex and gender, transsexuality is a site at which we can examine the construction and embodiment of gender and the ways in which the binary categories of male/female and masculine/feminine are reified and challenged. The complex relationship transsexuals have with sex and gender will inform my later examinations of *Transamerica* and *Boys Don’t Cry*.

⁴⁸ *Undoing* 81.

⁴⁹ *Undoing* 76.

⁵⁰ *Undoing* 95.

⁵¹ *Undoing* 91, 93.

Unlike transsexuals, who tend towards a desire to stay within the binary framework, transgendered people often consciously work against the binary. For various reasons, both economic and ideological, those who are transgendered often choose not to have a full sexual reassignment surgery. Some will elect to make changes to their bodies, such as the addition or removal of breasts or the consumption of testosterone or estrogen, but they may not opt for genital surgery. As a result, many transgendered bodies do not adhere to normative definitions of sex, as they combine anatomical characteristics both male and female. This may be a deliberate decision on the part of transgendered people who “consciously [work] to challenge [binary gender and sexuality norms] through negotiation within their intimate partnerships, and through their dealings with medicine, the law and social others.”⁵² Just as their bodies are amalgamations of male and female, their personalities, behaviors and modes of dress also tend to resist rigid categorization. Some choose to live as one gender, but others choose androgyny or switch their gender presentation from day to day. Many transgender people purposefully buck the norm in order to try to open a space that is neither rigidly male nor female nor masculine nor feminine, working as “activists” who revel in and “privilege the crossing and fluidity of queer.”⁵³ This gray area, the non-space between male and female and masculine and feminine, will play a key role in my later analyses.

Examinations of transgender identities and sexualities have led theorists to desire more open, inclusive definitions of what those terms mean. Critics such as Gayle Salamon, channeling Merleau-Ponty, argue for a conceptualization of sexuality and the body that does not rely on supposedly stable, fixed criteria such as genitalia. Instead

⁵² Sanger 265.

⁵³ Shelley 20.

Salamon argues that love, desire and sexuality create embodiment and that we are “brought into being by desire or love...only becom[ing] bound to [an]other through ‘desire or love,’ and through that relation of desire or love the other comes to exist for me as a thing or being.”⁵⁴ No pre-existing body determines relations among people; instead, our desire and love for others creates our selves as we know them. These notions give rise to an individualized account of gender, sex and sexuality by explaining “that phenomenological experiences of the body and the subject are individual rather than categorical,” and Salamon continues by asserting “neither sexual embodiment nor situatedness nor expression can be predicted by membership in any particular category of gender or sex.”⁵⁵ Salamon goes beyond disconnecting sex and gender to explode those categories altogether by explaining that, just as love and desire are individualized, just as those experiences change from person to person, so too do sex and gender identities shift depending on the situation.

Gender in Film: Theories of the Spectatorial Gaze

Since the publication of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” in 1975, much of film theory concerning gender has focused on the concept of the gaze. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Mulvey explains that our pleasure in watching

⁵⁴ Salamon, Gayle, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2010) 46.

⁵⁵ Salamon 39.

films emanates from our “scopophilia,” or pleasure in looking.⁵⁶ For Freud, scopophilia was associated with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.”⁵⁷ This active, controlling gaze is that of the male, the “maker of meaning,” and is directed onto the female figure, “the bearer of meaning.”⁵⁸ Because the audience watches the film but the characters on screen cannot look back, films have a voyeuristic appeal as the audience feel as though they are “looking in on a private world.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the spectator, regardless of sex, assumes the position of the male, the controller of the gaze, taking the action on screen as its object. In addition to its voyeuristic appeal, the cinema also appeals to the spectator’s narcissistic identification with the subject on screen. In this way, the act of watching films reenacts the mirror phase in which a child sees and recognizes his or her own image in the mirror. This recognition, or misrecognition, as the child [mis]takes the image for the self, is integral to the construction of the subject, just as the “cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals” and sources of identification for audiences.⁶⁰

Mulvey continues by discussing the female figure in particular and its construction in the cinema. She explains that the female figure is fetishized. In order to assuage castration anxiety, the source of that anxiety, the woman’s body, becomes the fetish, the stand-in phallus. The glamorous Hollywood starlet is thus continually “displayed as sexual object,” generating pleasure by “play[ing] to and signif[ying] male

⁵⁶ Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, Ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011) 717.

⁵⁷ “Visual” 717.

⁵⁸ “Visual” 716.

⁵⁹ “Visual” 718.

⁶⁰ “Visual” 718.

desire.”⁶¹ Thus “cinema builds the way [the female] is to be looked at into the spectacle itself,” and that spectacle is two-fold: she is both an “erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and [an] erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium.”⁶² As in the case of the voyeuristic gaze, fetishization is a distinctly male practice as only the male experiences castration anxiety. As a result, all audience members are required to see as a man and to identify with the male gaze of the characters within the film in order to experience pleasure.

Since the publication of Mulvey’s article, feminist theorists have sought to extend and revise her argument. Much of the discussion has centered on the conundrum of the female spectator. Given the rigid boundaries of spectatorship Mulvey describes, the female spectator is disavowed and has, literally, no point of view available to her. In attempting to define and work out the problem of the female spectator, critics such as Mary Ann Doane have explained that the female is “too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma” to achieve the distance required for scopophilia because “she *is* the image.”⁶³ This lack of distance between self and image results in an “overidentification with the image,” an “inability to fetishize,” which inhibits the erotic quality of the look Mulvey describes.⁶⁴ Consequently, there is “a blockage at the level of theory;” the female spectator does not theoretically exist, or exists far too problematically.⁶⁵ As Teresa de Lauretis notes, in Mulvey’s conception of the gaze female spectators are only allowed “the position of the mythical obstacle, monster or landscape” that the male

⁶¹ “Visual” 716, 719.

⁶² “Visual” 719.

⁶³ Doane, Mary Ann, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed, Ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 760, 761.

⁶⁴ “Masquerade” 764.

⁶⁵ Doane, Mary Ann, *The desire to desire* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 7.

character must overcome.⁶⁶ “How,” she asks, “can the female spectator be entertained as the subject of the very movement that places her as its object, that makes her the figure of its own closure?”⁶⁷ There is no place for an active female spectator in Mulvey’s conceptualization of spectatorship because she is not a subject; she is a blind, passive object of the gaze, just like the film itself.

Despite these obstacles and “blockages” in conceptualization, feminist critics have labored to discover and describe the female spectator. Mary Ann Doane explains the basic conclusion that theorists have drawn: when experiencing a film, “the female spectator has basically two modes of entry: a narcissistic identification with the female figure as spectacle and a ‘transvestite’ identification with the active male hero in his mastery.”⁶⁸ In other words, the female spectator can passively identify with the female on screen, masochistically deriving pleasure in her vicarious objectification, or she can identify with the prescribed spectatorial position, that of the male gaze that identifies with the male hero. Here the theories of transgender and the gaze meet: the majority of theorists conceptualize this “slippage” or “oscillation” or “alternation” between gendered subject positions in the same terms as those used to describe transgendered people. Doane uses the metaphors of the “transvestite,” the use of gender as a “masquerade,” and the “hermaphrodite.”⁶⁹ Mulvey, in a reexamination of her earlier ideas, speaks of the female spectator’s tendency toward “trans-sex identification” and “oscillations in sexual

⁶⁶ De Lauretis Teresa, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 141.

⁶⁷ De Lauretis 141.

⁶⁸ *Desire* 19.

⁶⁹ “Masquerade” 766, *Desire* 19.

identity.”⁷⁰ Like cross-dressers, atypically-sexed peoples and conscious gender performers, the female spectator cannot unproblematically adhere to the feminine side of the binary. Teresa de Lauretis describes the female spectator as “alternati[ng]” between masculinity and femininity, emphasizing the instability of gender by explaining that the terms “do not refer so much to qualities or states of being inherent in a person” but “to positions which [one] occupies in relation to desire. They are terms of identification.”⁷¹ Utilizing language that recalls Salamon’s discussion of individualized gender, sex and sexuality, de Lauretis emphasizes the role of the female spectator’s subject position in calling rigid binary categories into question.

As a result of the problematics of theorizing the female spectator, critics have called for a different kind of cinema, one that could dislocate the modes of pleasure that rely on the objectification and disenfranchisement of the woman. Mulvey calls for a less immersive cinema that disrupts traditional narrativity and continuity editing in order to disrupt the voyeuristic and scopophilic appeal of film, with which she experimented in the film *Riddles of the Sphinx*. E. Ann Kaplan argues for a similar dismantling of traditional narrative cinema, recommending that feminist filmmakers “forc[e] our gaze to dwell on the images by slowing down or stopping the projection that creates patriarchal voyeurism [so that] we may be able to provide a ‘reading against the grain’ that will give us information about our positioning as spectators.”⁷²

More recently critics such as de Lauretis suggest that that “the most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is not anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the

⁷⁰ Mulvey, Laura, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*” *Visual and Other Pleasures*. (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1989) 33, 37.

⁷¹ De Lauretis 142.

⁷² Kaplan, E. Ann, *Women and Film* (Cornwall, UK: TJ International Ltd. 1983) 32.

opposite.”⁷³ She argues instead that “it is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it, the contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus.”⁷⁴ In other words, these films seek to reflect on screen the problematic position of the female spectator, reveling in the contradictions and gender duplicity that define that position. Doane suggests that films should show the constructed, “fantastic, literally *incredible*” gestural nature of traditional femininity.⁷⁵ She calls for a demonstration of excesses of femininity that shows “that these are poses, postures, tropes – in short, that we are being subjected to a discourse on femininity” that works to make those enactments strange and unfamiliar.⁷⁶ Such a film would create “a slippage” between “true” femininity and the femininity that is being “mime[d],” encouraging a recognition of all gender as performative.⁷⁷

Because the binary categories of masculinity and femininity cannot easily contain the female spectator, critics such as Gilles Deleuze and Gaylyn Studlar have argued, on the other hand, for a masochistic theory of film spectatorship. Rather than relying as Mulvey does on the Oedipal stage as principally formative in our development of pleasure in looking, these critics argue for a pre-Oedipal, pre-genital conception of a masochistic spectator. According to Studlar, a major problem with Mulvey’s argument is her failure to account for “the powerful maternal image that is viewed as a complex, pleasurable ‘screen memory’ by both male and female spectators, even in the patriarchal

⁷³ De Lauretis 157.

⁷⁴ De Lauretis 157.

⁷⁵ *Desire* 180.

⁷⁶ *Desire* 181.

⁷⁷ *Desire* 181.

society.”⁷⁸ By invoking the pre-genital infantile stage in which the infant is helpless and submissive to the female, Studlar is able to theorize the spectator outside of the binaries of male/masculine and female/feminine. Not only should the female be theorized outside of her relation to castration, Studlar argues, but we should also recognize that it could be possible for the male gaze to identify “with the female (even as an ideal ego) or. . .with the ‘feminized’ masculine character.”⁷⁹ According to this theory, spectatorship is not bound by the rigid binaries of sex and gender, which likewise fail to contain the transgender person. Studlar explains that, “among the most important aspects of the release of repressed material” that come to the surface as the spectator experiences extragenital masochistic pleasure while viewing a film “are the pleasures of re-experiencing the primary identification with the mother and the pleasurable possibilities of gender mobility through identification.”⁸⁰ In other words, this theory of pre-genital/masochistic pleasure in spectatorship not only allows the female spectator to slip between the cracks of masculinity and femininity, but it also explains that the male spectator can do so as well. Just as transgender theory forces a reexamination of traditional theories of gender and sexuality, the masochistic theory of the spectator allows for the questioning of these same categories.

But how is the spectatorial position further complicated if the subject on screen, like the transgender person, also cannot unproblematically be contained within the gender binary? In her analysis of Rudolph Valentino, Miriam Hansen examines how the figure of the effeminate man affects notions of the gaze. Valentino films call for a reevaluation

⁷⁸ Studlar, Gaylyn, “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed, Ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 782.

⁷⁹ Studlar 789.

⁸⁰ Studlar 788.

of traditional theories of the gaze because Valentino plays both the role of the active male hero and that of the sexualized, fetishized spectacle. It is important to note that an integral part of Valentino's star persona was his racialized appearance; he was consistently depicted as an erotic, foreign Other. Although race is important to Hansen's analysis, in the films I analyze, I focus on gender and do not enter into discussions of race. For the sake of clarity and brevity, I will focus on Valentino's effeminacy and forego a synopsis of her arguments about his foreignness. Hansen first explains the position of the female spectator, asserting that "the notion of ambivalence is crucial to the theory of female spectatorship, precisely because the cinema, while enforcing patriarchal hierarchies in its organization of the look, also offers women an institutional opportunity to violate the taboo on female scopophilia."⁸¹ Women were allowed to experience pleasure in looking, a pleasure traditionally available only to men, as they watched films, and the cinema therefore emerges as an important arena for reexamining gender taboos associated with dynamics of power and the gaze.

Hansen expands upon the notion of the female spectator as transvestite, explaining that the metaphor "suggests that female spectatorship involves dimensions of self-reflexivity and role-playing, rather than simply an opposition of active and passive."⁸² Because the female spectator does not have a subject position that can be easily defined as either masculine or feminine, her experience calls those binary categories into question. Hansen asserts that this ambiguity has powerful implications for the spectator as "the perceptual performance of sexual mobility anticipates, on a playful, fictional level, the possibility of social arrangements not founded upon a hierarchically

⁸¹ Hansen, Miriam, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 277.

⁸² Hansen 250.

fixed sexual identity.”⁸³ This potential is realized in films that feature Valentino because the instability of the gender positioning of the female is mirrored in the on-screen character’s sexual ambivalence.

Hansen explains that while the plots of Valentino’s films and his star persona positioned him as a strong male hero, Valentino’s stylishness and effeminacy undercut his masculinity. He was extraordinarily popular with and adored by female fans, and, in an attempt to court female viewers, his body was often sexualized and placed on display. In this manner, Valentino played the part of the female spectacle, the erotic object of the active female gaze. Reversing the binary further, Valentino actively made himself a spectacle with his penchant for “sumptuous fashion” which “channel[ed] masculine exhibitionism into professional display behavior, scopophilia, or identification with woman-as-spectacle.”⁸⁴ Hansen, however, asserts that the Valentino figure did more than simply cause a reversal of the binary: “a male erotic object [is] a figure of overdetermination, an unstable composite figure that connotes ‘the simultaneous presence of two positionalities of desire’ (Teresa de Lauretis) and thus calls into question the very possibility of polarity rather than simply reversing its terms.”⁸⁵ Valentino’s ambiguous sexual and gender identity, like the duality of the female spectator, encourages a questioning of binary categories.

Hansen concludes that, in Valentino films, “the emphasis on costumes and disguises, on rituals of dressing and undressing, undermines the voyeuristic structure of spectatorship, in that it implicitly acknowledges the spectator as part of the scenario.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Hansen 250.

⁸⁴ Hansen 259.

⁸⁵ Hansen 252.

⁸⁶ Hansen 282.

Valentino's conscious "to-be-looked-at-ness," to borrow Mulvey's term, does not allow the spectator to feel as though he or she is secretly watching; Valentino knows he is watched and performs for the spectator. Hansen continues, saying, "Thus the film advances an identification with the gaze itself, not with source or object but with the gaze as an erotic medium."⁸⁷ Traditional theories of the gaze cannot account for this phenomenon because the audience is acutely aware of the fact that they are viewing a performance. Theories of gender performance and the gaze again intersect. Just as Butler argues that the explicit performativity of gender in drag may undermine notions that gender identity is innate and unproblematically corresponds to sex, Hansen shows that the explicit performativity in Valentino films disrupt the power of the gaze. Furthermore, she asserts that these instances of performativity "are foregrounded as aspects of a theatricality that encompasses both performer and viewer, which may mean something different depending on the viewers' gender and sexual orientation."⁸⁸ Just as Studlar argues for individualized accounts of gender and sexuality that could resist rigid categorization, Hansen argues for individualized accounts of spectatorship that cannot "be reduced, a priori, to its symbolic content within a phallic economy of signification," opening the possibility of a theory of spectatorship that is extragenital and not wholly dependent on sex but rather examines the variability of historically and socially specific audiences.⁸⁹

Hansen contends, however, that Valentino's films attempt to portray him as a man's man and place him in the position, albeit spectacularized, of the male hero. What if both the narrative and the sexual/gender identity of the subject on screen are

⁸⁷ Hansen 280.

⁸⁸ Hansen 252.

⁸⁹ Hansen 252.

ambiguous? What if the narrative does not rely on implicit questioning of gender but explicitly interrogates sex and gender categories within the plot? As critics such as Mulvey and Kaplan argue, narrative is a powerful force that reflects and constructs hierarchies of sexual power through the spectator's immersion in the narrative and identification with characters. In the films discussed in the following chapters, the "oscillating" sex and gender of the character on screen reflect the oscillation of the spectator, with excesses of both feminine and masculine performance highlighting the constructed nature of gender as well as of the act of gazing at this performance; at the same time, the content of the films subjects traditional heteronormative theories of sex and gender to rigorous questioning.

Chapter Two

Camping at *The Birdcage*: Parody, Irony and the Spectator

Mike Nichols' 1996 comedy, *The Birdcage*, explores the relationship of a gay couple, Armand (Robin Williams) and Albert (Nathan Lane), who are the owner and star of a drag club in South Beach, Florida. Adapted from the French musical and film, *La Cage aux Folles*, *The Birdcage* centers on the upheaval in Armand and Albert's lives when their son, Val (Dan Futterman), announces his engagement to the daughter of an ultra-conservative Senator. Through Albert's highly feminine behavior and he and Armand's preparations to meet their future in-laws, the film foregrounds the performativity of gender. Furthermore, Albert's use of camp both in his drag performances and his personal life allow for an ironic reading of his behavior that renders feminine stereotypes ludicrous. However, some audiences may not read Albert's actions as ironic, and thus his behavior may reify oppressive feminine stereotypes. As such, the film explores the key tension inherent in drag performance and allows for a spectatorial position that is individualized rather than determined by the sex and gender of the spectator.

Perhaps most basically, the film exposes gender as performative through Albert's drag performances. As discussed in detail in the first chapter, drag has the potential to destabilize normative conceptions of sex and gender by exposing that all gender is like drag – not natural, but a set of behaviors one performs – through a male's successful feminine performance. Albert is the star performer of *The Birdcage*, the drag club Armand owns, and his performances as Starina, his drag alter ego, portray the opulence and exaggeration that can be so subversive in drag performance. At the beginning of the

film we see Albert preparing to go onstage as Starina, and his physical appearance falls halfway between masculine and feminine. He wears a feminine silk dressing gown and is heavily made up, wearing thick eyeliner, large false lashes, and heavy blush and contouring makeup. Although his facial features are fairly masculine, the makeup and clothing successfully feminize him. However, he has not yet donned his wig, and his short hair is covered by a small net and tape in preparation. Similarly, he needs to shave, and light stubble covers his upper lip and chin. When it is time for him to get ready for his performance, he sits in front of the lighted mirror of his vanity wearing his dressing gown and full makeup and exaggeratedly lengthens his upper lip, rolling over it with an electric razor. The sight problematizes the spectator's relationship with Albert in light of traditional theories of spectatorship such as that of Laura Mulvey. Although the audience knows Albert is biologically male, his homosexuality and feminized appearance render both identification and objectification difficult if not impossible for the male spectator. Either position would threaten his heterosexuality as he would either identify with a gay man or sexualize one. The female spectator's position is similarly contentious as any cross-identification with the male spectator's position or masochistic pleasure in Albert's objectification relies on the male spectator's ability to relate unproblematically to the male character on screen.

However, as we will see in the case of *Victor/Victoria* as well, it is possible that the female spectator could see her indeterminate, oscillating subject position reflected in Albert's indeterminate appearance. Traditional notions of female spectatorship often utilize metaphors of shifting, alternating modes of access to pleasure in watching film. Albert's simultaneously feminine and masculine appearance could, as Doane suggested

feminist cinema should do, reflect the female spectator's position by showing that gender is just a "pose, posture, [or] trope."⁹⁰ In this manner, the female spectator could identify with Albert while seeing that gender is performative, opening up a more fluid space for exploring identity.

However, as Roberta Mock points out in her analysis of transvestism, drag can also reify negative stereotypes by making gender performance laughable. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mock contends that the audience often "laugh[s] at, rather than with" the drag performer.⁹¹ This distinction between laughing at and laughing with the performer relies on matters of identification. Either the spectator identifies with the drag queen and his intentionally ironic deployment of gender stereotypes and laughs along with the performer, joining him in the subversion of normative sex and gender binaries as they are rendered ridiculous; or the spectator does not identify with the performer, and thus the drag queen himself becomes the object of ridicule rather than the identity he parodically dons. As was the case with sexed/gendered spectatorship, the incongruous sex and gender of the performer complicates and problematizes the audience's ability to identify with the performer. For Mock, when the audience laughs at the drag queen, the performance acts as a "'safety valve'-ultimately, a disincentive towards change in the social sphere and the recuperation of absent authority."⁹² As Albert, Nathan Lane plays this scene for laughs by overemphasizing the shaving bit. If, as discussed above, the spectator is unable to identify with Albert, his male body and feminine behavior and appearance are portrayed as a joke, not as subversive questioning of the naturalness of

⁹⁰ Doane, Mary Ann, *The desire to desire* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 181.

⁹¹ Mock, Roberta, "Hetero queer Ladies: Some Performative Transactions between Gay Men and Heterosexual Women," *Feminist Review*, 75 (2003) 30.

⁹² Mock 30.

gender. This tension remains throughout the film: the use of drag and Albert's excessive femininity as a source of humor against the potentially subversive foregrounding of gender performativity. I will discuss this dichotomy more fully in my later examination of the camp aspects of drag performance.

During Albert's first performance as Starina, we see his feminine appearance on full display. He descends a backlit staircase onto the stage, his outline showcasing an elaborate hat with veiling and a sumptuous gown. As he steps into the spotlight, we see his heavily made-up face surrounded by sparkling netting that is attached to a large leopard hat. He is wearing leopard print gloves and a fluffy leopard muff, and his flowing black gown sparkles with jewels. His nose slightly in the air and a serene smile on his face, he looks the part of an aristocratic older woman. His over-the-top clothing is characteristic of the excessiveness of drag performance and reflects a heightened version of normative femininity. As described in detail above, such overt performance of a gender different from his sex renders traditional theories of spectatorship moot. However, as did Nathan Lane's acting in the shaving scene, Albert's drag act similarly plays his gender performance for laughs. He announces to the audience that he just got back from safari in Africa where he "picked up a new muff," motioning to his leopard accessory. However, the audience laughs uproariously, catching the double entendre as "muff" is a common euphemism for a vagina. The joke's humor comes from the fact that Albert's sex and his gendered appearance do not match up. The audience knows that Albert does not have a vagina, and his ironic assertion that he "picked up a muff" plays on the fact that sex is not something one can so easily acquire. To underscore his male sex, a leopard tail springs out of the muff as he speaks to the audience. The phallic nature

of the tail reifies his maleness; although he can perform femininity with the help of the muff, the tail reminds us he is not actually a woman. Thus the joke makes fun of his drag performance, potentially making his incongruous feminine gender and male body ridiculous rather than subversive.

Using Mock's analysis of the potential lack of subversion present in drag performance, one could argue that Albert merely reifies dominant views and stereotypes about women, turning his gender performance into a joke. For some audiences, that is probably the case, because drag performance relies on the parody and irony associated with camp. As Katrin Horn explains it in her analysis of camp and gender performativity, "Defined by wit, by an awareness of the performativity of the everyday life or 'the natural' and by an estimation of the aesthetically appealing over the morally right, camp offered a mode for rejecting middle-class values."⁹³ Particularly among drag queens and the gay community, camp was deployed to reject dominant sex and gender roles. However, camp relies upon irony to make its point. Drag performance presents normative femininity in such a way as to reject its naturalness and thereby its power as an oppressive stereotype. Therefore, drag's explicit message is the reification of gender norms, and that reification can engender humor through the performer's exaggerated femininity and over-the-top appearance and actions. However, the ironic meaning camp produces is a subversion of those norms. As Linda Hutcheon points out, camp's meaning "happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen."⁹⁴ Therefore, there is no essential meaning inherent in the text which the audience passively receives; rather, the audience actively participates in the meaning-

⁹³ Horn, Katrin, "Camping with the Stars: Queer Performativity, Pop Intertextuality, and Camp in the Pop Art of Lady Gaga," *Copas* 11 (2010): 5.

⁹⁴ Hutcheon, Linda, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994): 12.

making process, a process which here relies on the understanding of drag's parody as a subversive device rather than mere humor.

Hutcheon goes on to say, "The said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter; and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally 'interact'...to create the real 'ironic' meaning."⁹⁵ For the audience to understand the meaning the parody of drag creates, to decode the message as ironic, they must be "in" on the joke and understand that the performance is intentionally exaggerated, often for the purpose of rejecting hegemonic values. Thus Albert's campy performances can be read in two ways, depending upon the audience: as reifying the dominant ideology by making gender performativity a "safety valve" of a joke or as mobilizing the humor of his exaggerated performance in order to ironically reflect on the performative nature of all femininity. The goal of this chapter, and of this thesis as a whole, is to understand the spectator's complex relationship and identification with atypically-gendered characters. However, the parody of camp and drag performance renders impossible a unified spectatorial position, as the spectator's experiences depend upon their individual gender politics. Therefore the film disrupts traditional theories of spectatorship by making available multiple spectatorial positions that are not dependent upon the sex or gender of the spectator, mirroring Gayle Salamon's description of acategorical desire as discussed in the previous chapter: the notion that "phenomenological experiences of the body and the subject are individual rather than categorical."⁹⁶ In order to analyze fully the ironic meanings created by the text, from now on this chapter will explore these two main spectatorial positions produced by the film – the spectator who is unaware of or unable to

⁹⁵ Hutcheon 12.

⁹⁶ Salamon, Gayle, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010) 39.

read critically the ironic meanings produced by Albert's camp and laughs at him and the spectator who understands the subversive meaning and laughs with him.

The film goes on to show that Albert's campy performance of normative femininity extends past the stage to rehearsals and into his personal life. Shortly after the drag show, Albert is rehearsing for a new number with a young, attractive male dancer while Armand supervises. The scene begins with a close up of a strappy silver high-heeled shoe, then pans up to show legs clad in black tights, a loud printed blouse tied at the waist, and a bright pink top. We then see that this femininely-dressed character is Albert, who is holding a sparkly golden microphone and lightly fluttering his hands to the music. As such, Albert does not just perform femininity during his drag performance; he appears and behaves in a feminine manner even without an audience present to enjoy his performance. However, he is not wearing full makeup or a wig, so he is not "stealth;" that is, he is not seeking to pass as a natural woman but rather incorporates feminine looks and behavior into his overall male appearance. The effect is similar to that of the aforementioned scene in which a fully made-up Albert shaves his face and chest. The incongruent images foreground the unnaturalness and performativity of gender.

Although it is obvious that Albert is biologically male, he comfortably wears feminine clothing and employs feminine body language. However, as with the shaving scene, his performance reads as humorous. His outfit and accessories can be read as parodically feminine with the strappy heels, tights, pink blouse and sparkly microphone. Similarly, his hand gestures are silly and clearly not meant to be taken seriously; they are over-exaggerated and fairly ridiculous. If the spectator reads the scene at face value, Albert's appearance is ridiculous and funny; his stereotypically feminine clothing and behavior

look silly, and he reifies negative feminine stereotypes as the audience laughs at him. However, for a spectator who is sensitive to his parodic performance, the butt of the joke is stereotypical femininity rather than Albert himself. For this spectator, Albert's action calls into question, as Doane terms it, "the initial mime" of femininity and encourages a reevaluation of gender norms.⁹⁷

Additionally, in this scene Albert displays a great deal of self-awareness about his performance. He is incensed by the unprofessionalism of the young man, in particular the fact that he is chewing gum during rehearsal. Unable to control himself any longer, Albert yells, "I saw that," referring to the young man's gum chewing, and then says wearily, "Well, this is impossible. Either I'm an artist or I'm just some cheap drag queen playing it straight so he can get laughs." In addition to containing the hyperbole and drama associated with the diva archetype, this statement speaks directly to the theoretical issues surrounding drag performance as discussed in the first chapter and above. Albert puts forth the two possible interpretations of his drag performance: that of an artist who creates ironic meaning or "some cheap drag queen" who is the object of laughter. The notion of the drag queen as an artist with noble goals invokes the subversive potential Butler describes drag performance can accomplish by encouraging ironic meaning through parody, encouraging the audience to recognize that "all gender is like drag."⁹⁸ The successful performance of heterosexuality could, as Doane suggested, show that femininity is but a "pose, posture, [or] trope," and "render void the initial mime" by exposing all femininity as a performative gesture.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Doane 181.

⁹⁸ Butler, Judith, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993) 125.

⁹⁹ Doane 181.

However, the cheap drag queen exploits the humor of the situation – that of a man pretending to be a woman – making gender performance and the false heterosexuality that performance displays into a joke. Interestingly, Albert declares that the young male dancer would be the one to “get laughs,” not Albert. The young man would be the one who was, from the audience’s perspective, fooled by Albert’s gender performance and mistakenly pursuing a man who is dressed as a woman. We see that Albert understands the conundrum of drag performance and the audience’s possible misinterpretation of it if they miss the irony. Instead of exposing all gender and indeed sexuality as performative, the audience’s laughter at the young man would reify the importance of biological sex through his accidental homosexual attraction to Albert’s Starina. Albert’s statement foregrounds the very spectatorial issue the text raises, alerting the audience to other possible interpretations of the scene they are witnessing. But with this line, Albert places the pressure on himself rather than on the audience. Even if he is a “cheap drag queen playing it straight [to get] laughs,” the audience’s reading of his gender performance as intentionally campy and parodic can still render him subversive. The film’s self-awareness thus encourages an ironic reading of the text as it consciously works out the very issues it raises, pushing the audience to examine beyond the surface of Albert’s performance to the complex meanings it creates.

Albert continues to act the diva during the rehearsal, complaining that Armand always asks so much of him from his performances and screaming in the young dancer’s face when he blows a bubble while Albert is singing. But the strongest showing of his highly dramatic, campy performance of negative heterosexual female stereotypes comes when he is neither performing on stage nor rehearsing. As the film opens, Armand learns

that Albert's Starina, his headline performer, refuses to go on. The scene cuts to Albert's dressing room, where he is lying on a chaise lounge with a pink blanket covering his head while he speaks to their houseboy, Agador. "No, Agador," Albert says. "Victoria Page will not dance the dance of the red shoes tonight or any other night... Victoria Page is dead... Do you know how she died? Alone, weeping for her lover." His elevated diction and syntax contribute to the highly dramatic quality of his declaration, and his actions and words play to multiple feminine stereotypes. The first is, of course, that of the diva who refuses to perform. The line references Michael Powell's film, *The Red Shoes* (1948). Albert's invocation of this film, and particularly the ending in which Victoria (Moira Shearer) melodramatically leaps from a balcony onto the train tracks and dies rather than perform with a broken heart, exposes his performance of the feminine stereotype of emotional oversensitivity, particularly to matters of romantic love. Furthermore, he is lying on a chaise lounge or fainting couch, a piece of furniture commonly associated with women, covering himself with a pink blanket; he is literally cloaked in the most stereotypically feminine color.

For the spectator who does not see the irony of Albert's performance and sees him as "just some cheap drag queen," his behavior reifies several of the more negative aspects associated with traditional femininity. Those norms are not questioned but rather embodied and reproduced, making him and his incongruous sex and exaggerated gender into a joke. However, his over-the-top, hyperfeminine behavior utilizes the irony and parody of camp. His male sex throws into greater relief the femininity of his actions, which are already extreme, foregrounding the performativity of gender through his melodramatic and obviously mimetic behavior. He plays the part of the dramatic diva,

performing the tropes of the disgruntled performer and love-starved star. For the spectator who is, as Hutcheon put it, in on the joke, Albert's actions produce an ironic meaning. The ridiculousness of his actions does not render him the butt of the joke as it does for spectators who do not read the performance as ironic; rather the butt of the joke is "the initial mime," or the femininity he is exaggeratedly reproducing. Thus the ironic meaning questions and subverts stereotypical femininity, encouraging the audience to reflect upon the constructed nature of gender norms.

As Albert continues to bemoan his loss of Armand's love, Armand stalks up the stairs, screaming Albert's name and heading for the door into his dressing room. Albert screams and jumps from his chaise lounge, revealing that he wears a flowery, silken dressing gown. He rushes to the door and slams it shut, pulling a chair in front of it and wailing, "I don't want him to see me! I'm hideous!" Eventually Armand muscled his way through the door and Albert screams, running to hide himself behind a curtain printed with large pink feathers. He shrieks, "Don't look at me! I'm fat and hideous!" Agador tries to console him, telling him his unhappiness will pass, and Albert replies, "I'm in such pain; it'll never pass." Albert again portrays negative feminine stereotypes through his emotional, irrational responses. He fixates on his appearance, calling himself fat and hideous multiple times throughout the scene, and refuses to listen to reason and gain control of his emotions. He is unhinged and childish, enacting the stereotype that women are hysterical, emotionally-driven, vain creatures set in opposition to the logical, reasonable male. As Armand tells him he must do the show because the audience is waiting, Albert's demeanor changes. He haughtily struts to the chaise lounge, declaring, "That's all I am to you: a meal ticket. Never mind about my feelings. Never mind about

my suffering. It's all about your show," and asks Armand for a palimony agreement. His capriciousness reflects the stereotype that women are volatile and constantly changing their minds; only moments ago he was bemoaning his failing relationship, but now he demands a divorce due to a perceived personal slight. Again, the audience may read his irrational behavior as playing to and reifying stereotypical femininity, reinforcing the masculine/feminine binary rather than calling it into question by making himself and his gender performance the butt of the joke. But for the spectator who reads the exchange ironically, although the "said" meaning reifies gender stereotypes, the "unsaid" meaning calls those stereotypes into question by virtue of their exaggerated absurdity, encouraging a recognition of all gender as performative.

Albert then explicitly places his and Armand's relationship in terms of a traditional heterosexual partnership. Armand replies to Albert's rants with resigned sarcasm, and Albert hisses, "Don't use that tone with me – that sarcastic, contemptuous tone that says you know everything because you're a man and I know nothing because I'm a woman." Just as with his line in the rehearsal scene in which he identifies the tension within drag performance, this statement is densely packed with meaning. Albert speaks directly to the stereotype which this scene is exploring – that men are rational beings whereas women are ignorant and illogical. However, just as in the rehearsal, Albert's behavior confirms the stereotype. Later in the scene we learn that Albert is upset because he believes Armand is cheating on him with another man, which turns out to be untrue. However, at this point, the spectator is unaware of Albert's suspicions, so his behavior seems utterly inappropriate and nonsensical. Armand is calm and controlled whereas Albert seems, as Agador describes him, "crazy." Again, his behavior plays into

the very stereotype against which he argues. However, such self-reflexivity reflects the conscious parody and campiness of Albert's performance. Even though Albert is not performing for a diegetic audience, the film spectator has the opportunity to read the scene as ironic; in such a reading, Albert's ludicrous behavior makes fun of feminine stereotypes through his heightened deployment of gendered behavior and his over-the-top reactions. Such exaggeration played for humor can, when read as subversive parody, deprive feminine stereotypes of their currency by rendering them ridiculous.

Additionally, he calls himself not feminine but a woman. The implications of such a statement are unclear. Throughout the film Albert behaves and dresses in a feminine manner, but his hair is cropped short and he does not wear makeup. His identity is difficult to categorize, and, as the previous chapter explored, categories of transgender identity are slippery. Albert never self-identifies, so we are unsure if he sees himself as a feminine homosexual man or as transgender. It seems as though his statement is referring to their roles in their relationship; Armand plays the masculine role and Albert the feminine.

Although the scene undoubtedly reinforces stereotypes, it also foregrounds them, drawing the spectator's attention. Albert's exaggerated femininity certainly exposes gender as performative, a message which is heightened by the fact that Albert is obviously biologically male. The scene is thus contradictory, just as are Albert's identity and the audience's potential readings of the scene. It resists categorization as wholly subversive or wholly in service to the dominant ideology. It is, like drag, simultaneously both, and seemingly self-consciously so as it plays to the very sexism Albert identifies. As a result, the scene, and indeed the film as a whole, provides for an individualized

spectatorial position that is not defined by sex or gender but rather by each spectator's interpretation of the text. This individualized position allows spectators to break out of oppressive roles by experiencing a world of campy, gendered play in which common stereotypes are rendered ridiculous and gender is explicitly and ironically performed.

Soon after this scene we discover that Armand's mystery man was actually Val, his twenty-year-old son from a brief heterosexual tryst during college whom he and Albert raised together. Val has returned home from school to tell his parents that he is engaged to Barbara (Calista Flockhart), the daughter of right-wing Senator Kevin Keeley (Gene Hackman). After one of Keeley's colleagues dies embroiled in a sex scandal, the Keeleys decide to seek refuge from the hounding media by visiting Val's parents in South Beach. However, Barbara and Val have whitewashed his colorful family: their Jewish surname, Goldman, becomes Coleman; instead of the owners of a drag club, Armand is a cultural attaché to Greece; all mention of Armand's homosexuality has been removed; and the flamboyantly feminine Albert is not in the picture at all. Val frantically tells Armand that he must get rid of Albert before the Keeleys' arrival and find a woman to pretend to be his mother.

However, Albert discovers their plan and flees from the house, predictably and melodramatically heartbroken. Armand follows him, and Albert wails and cries over the incident, nearly fainting (or at least pretending to faint) so that Armand must hold him up and half-carry him into a local café. At the table, Albert continues to moan and swoon as Armand makes him a cold compress. Albert's overly exaggerated feminine performance again reproduces negative stereotypes about women; he is overly emotional and dramatic, sensitive to the point of fainting, and in desperate need of Armand to care for him and

calm him down. He acts like a child, completely overtaken by his feelings and incapable of rational thought. However, once Armand begins to pamper him, showering him with the attention he so craves, he immediately calms and comes up with a plan to reinsert himself into the meeting with the Keeleys. He suggests he could masquerade as Uncle Al, to which Armand replies that a gay uncle is little better than a gay parent. Albert declares, "I can play it straight" as he daintily lifts his water glass to take a sip, his pinky held aloft. Armand scoffs, "Oh, please. Look at you!" For Albert, femininity is his default behavior, whether from natural inclination or long-term repetition. His performance has become naturalized even though it is, from the dominant ideological perspective, incongruous with his biological sex. This scene again foregrounds the performativity of gender, encouraging the spectator to question the stability of gendered behavior and providing a structuring feminine background against which his forthcoming education in masculine performance can stand out.

Butler posited that drag performance could expose that all gender is like drag, and her theory is reflected here in the most clearly subversive sequence of the film.¹⁰⁰ Armand pauses and looks at Albert, reconsidering his declaration that Albert's ability to pass as masculine and heterosexual was impossible. He says, "You're a great performer. I'm a great director," and vows to help Albert perform masculinity. Armand explicitly marks Albert's normatively "natural" gender as performative, a behavior that must be taught and learned, foregrounding its social construction, and the rest of the scene involves Albert's indoctrination into the ways of men. First, Armand teaches him how to eat like a man. Albert demonstrates how he puts mustard on to bread, delicately dipping his spoon into the dish and spreading it lightly. "No!" Armand says, grabbing a knife and

¹⁰⁰ Butler 125.

dunking it sloppily into the mustard and slapping it haphazardly onto his bread. “Men smear,” he declares, and encourages Albert to practice this stereotypically masculine act. The scene foregrounds the expectations associated with gender; Albert’s light, feminine behavior is directly contrasted with Armand’s aggressive, masculine behavior. Albert attempts to smear the mustard with his knife but collapses into a trembling, wailing mess when he mistakenly stabs through the bread and ruins it. Armand calms him down, saying, “The important thing to remember is not to go to pieces. React like a man: calmly.” For the third time, the film’s dialogue self-consciously speaks directly to the stereotypes the characters perform. Armand, the more masculine partner, is consistently calm and rational whereas the feminine Albert is consistently melodramatic and emotional. This scene openly marks those behaviors as performative rather than natural, mutable rather than fixed. Albert accepts Armand’s direction, stating, “You’re right. There’s no reason to get hysterical,” again setting up the binary opposition between masculine/reason and feminine/hysteria. He vows to perform masculine rationality and suppress his emotional, feminine performance.

Such explicit foregrounding of the performativity of gender draws the spectator’s focus as we watch Albert learn behaviors that the dominant ideology holds should come naturally to him. Just as Albert performs exaggerated, parodic femininity, so Armand teaches him equally exaggerated masculinity, further exposing that gendered behavior is learned behavior. Armand’s next lesson is how to walk like a man. Albert demonstrates his feminine walk, taking small steps and swaying his hips with his hands held daintily out to his sides. Armand tells him to imitate John Wayne’s distinctive masculine swagger because, as he says, “If anyone was a man” it was the Duke. As Armand directs

Albert to mimic the quintessential man's man, the scene "renders void the initial mime," thus calling into question naturalized masculinity and exposing even John Wayne's behavior as performative.¹⁰¹ Albert's hobbling, lopsided mimicry further exposes the ridiculous nature of Wayne's exaggerated masculinity. When he returns to the table for an assessment of his walk, Armand declares, whether sarcastically or truthfully, "It was perfect. I just never realized John Wayne walked that way." Regardless of whether he was serious or not, the statement implies that not only Albert's attempt at masculinity but also Wayne's masculinity is a learned, practiced behavior rather than natural. In contrast to earlier scenes in which spectators had to intuit Albert's gender performance as parodic and ironic, this scene explicitly marks gendered behavior as a performed set of behaviors that must be perfected over time. Here the ironic meaning is spelled out clearly for the spectator; Albert is play-acting at masculinity, and the audience knows he knows he is pretending and they experience his work to perfect masculinity with him. Such identification with the process of learning gender encourages the spectator more strongly than ever to laugh with Albert rather than at him as he stumbles through the motions, urging an ironic reading.

Next, Armand teaches Albert the proper ways to greet and speak as a man and chooses sports as their stereotypically male topic of conversation. Albert walks up to Armand, holds his hand out flat and squeals girlishly, "How about those Dolphins?" Armand criticizes his overly feminine performance and instructs him to hold his hand out sideways with a tight wrist – "I'm shaking it, not kissing it" – and then lowers his voice to a gruff, masculine bark and complains loudly about the Miami Dolphins' failure in their last game. Armand, the more masculine of the two, still must change his demeanor

¹⁰¹ Doane 181.

and perform to be read as a heterosexual male. Just as Albert performs exaggerated, stereotypical femininity, so Armand embodies stereotypical masculinity; he moves and speaks harshly, ranting about sports. The scene categorizes a successful gender performance as one that adheres to narrow gender stereotypes. Armand, however, is at a disadvantage as Albert's teacher because he is gay. According to heteronormative standards, Armand's gay masculinity is inadequate and he, too, must consciously perform behavior that is outside of his normal comfort zone. Indeed, his lack of knowledge about proper heterosexual masculinity explicitly comes into play. Albert replies to his complaint about the Dolphins by saying, "How do you think I feel? Betrayed, bewildered..." He trails off and looks questioningly at Armand. "Wrong response?" Armand stares back blankly and says, "I'm not sure." This exchange highlights the difficulty and nuance associated with even the broad strokes of stereotypical gender performance. The behaviors are so precise that even the slightest mistake can show the artifice in the action, exposing how rigid and limiting such categories are. Armand and Albert's difficulty foregrounds for the spectator not only the artificiality of gender but also how constricting those roles are.

The scene ends by showing the effects of stereotypical masculinity pushed too far. Albert mistakenly bumps into a man who is seated near them. The man turns around, annoyed, and says, "Take it easy." Albert apologizes profusely until Armand struts up, mimicking John Wayne, and says, "You take it easy, pilgrim." He casts a knowing look at Albert, who recognizes that Armand will be demonstrating an example of masculine behavior. Armand is rude to the man, refusing to acknowledge Albert's error, and the man looks up at him and says, "Why are you being such a prick?" This line demonstrates

the first crack in such aggressive masculinity. The seated man is not obviously homosexual, and from his tone of voice, clothing and appearance we can assume he is what society deems a “normal” man; that is, he is white and heterosexual. However, Armand’s masculine performance reads as foreign and confusing to him. He expects men to behave politely rather than attacking with little to no provocation. Such a discrepancy reflects what Kenneth MacKinnon describes as the difference between hegemonic masculinity and ideal masculinity. Ideal masculinity embodies stereotypical “cultural ideals” of masculinity, such as aggression, pride, violence, etc., whereas hegemonic masculinity reflects the “actual personalities of the majority of men,” which MacKinnon says “may show little correspondence with the cultural ideals.”¹⁰² Ideal masculinity, such as Armand reproduces, is thus an overexaggeration and does not blend in with normal, everyday masculinity even as it is held up as the quintessential model. Just as Albert’s feminine performances reflected on the ludicrous nature of stereotypical femininity, so does this scene expose ideal masculinity as untenable in real life. This exaggerated example again further exposes gendered behavior as ridiculous by virtue of its parody.

Ultimately Albert fails to perform masculinity adequately and eventually slips back into a role with which he is much more comfortable: that of the doting housewife and mother. Near the beginning of the film when Armand tells Albert that Val has come home and is sleeping in his room, Albert peeks in Val’s room quietly. Then, noticing that Val has left his clothes all over the floor, he walks in and picks them up to take to the

¹⁰² MacKinnon, Kenneth, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Mass Media* (London: Arnold, 2003) 9.

laundry, shaking his head and smiling. The next day Albert irons Val's clothes after he's washed them and, when Armand tells him that Val is engaged, he weeps over a scrapbook of Val's childhood photographs. These scenes categorize Albert as consciously fulfilling the normative mothering role. He takes care of Val, performing the domestic task of tidying his room and washing his clothes even though Val is certainly old enough to do so on his own. Indeed, in a scene in which Barbara tells her conservative father about Val's mother (leaving out, of course, the fact that Albert is male), Keeley declares it is "refreshing" that she is a housewife. Such behavior is explicitly classified as conservative through Keeley's approval. Furthermore, Albert's highly emotional and nostalgic reaction to the news that Val is engaged as he cries over old photographs is typically feminine and stands in stark contrast to Armand's reaction. Armand forbade Val to get married, declaring he was far too young, but then relented when he saw that Val was very much in love with Barbara. Albert, who does not play the role of head of the household, does not have this power over Val and passively and emotionally reminisces rather than taking action to prevent his marriage. His actions, particularly when contrasted with Armand's, show that Albert's stereotypically feminine behavior extends to his role as mother to Val. By performing this mothering role, Albert reifies the notion that mothers should take care of their children by performing domestic tasks, but are passive when contrasted with the father's dominance over the child's behavior.

The film goes on to reconfigure motherhood as a distinctly performative role rather than a natural one through Albert's campy actions. As previously discussed, when the Keeleys decide to visit Val's family in South Beach, Val and Armand need a mother

for their charade. They contact Val's birth mother, Katherine (Christina Baranski), whom Val has never met, and she agrees to play the part of the mother. When Armand goes to meet with her, she explains that she has not been involved in Val's life because she is not very maternal. Armand tells her not to worry because "Albert's practically a breast." This line explicitly foregrounds the performative aspects of motherhood and inverts expectations about natural maternal instinct. Although Katherine gave birth to Val, she had no desire to act as his mother. The dominant ideology holds that mothering is natural; when a woman gives birth, she automatically bonds with and desires to care for her child. However, Katherine does not experience this instant bond and is happy to let Armand and Albert parent him. Albert was, as previously discussed, happy to take on the role of mother. Armand's humorous description of him as "practically a breast" not only shows how adept Albert is at performing motherhood but also conflates the natural, i.e. the body of the mother, with the social construct, i.e. the role of the mother. Even though Albert does not have breasts and did not birth or feed Val, he embodies the behavior associated with the nurturing mother.

However, this subversion of the dominant paradigm of male/father and female/mother will displease the conservative Keeleys, who an essentialized view of sex and gender. Even though Katherine has never met Val, she must act like his mother in order to conform to societal expectations as exemplified by the Keeleys. As a result, this scene directly calls into question those expectations, for it is clear that Albert is truly Val's mother, problematizing notions of natural femininity and motherhood. By contrast, Katherine, Val's "natural" mother, is the one who will have to perform consciously outside of her comfort zone and pretend to be maternal. Thus the film categorizes the

Keeleys' reliance on sex as the marker of gendered behavior such as motherhood as misguided by foregrounding the performativity of mothering.

Unfortunately, en route to Armand's house for dinner with the Keeleys, Katherine gets stuck in traffic, and Val and Armand awkwardly entertain the Keeleys alone. However, Albert soon emerges dressed in a pink dress suit with pearls and a blonde wig, ready to play the role of Val's mother. The spectator is aware that "Mrs. Coleman" is Albert; he is not particularly convincing as a woman. Therefore, the spectator cannot suture his or her gaze to that of Sen. and Mrs. Keeley, who believe that Albert is female. Through this lack of identification, the scene foregrounds the performativity of gender and expectations. The Keeleys do not see that Mrs. Coleman is male because Albert's behavior successfully conforms to their standards of conservative heterosexual femininity, and, according to the dominant ideology to which they hold, such femininity is natural. Indeed, when Sen. Keeley discovers that Mrs. Coleman is actually Albert near the end of the film, he is confused and disbelieving, and his wife has to explain that Albert is male before he understands. For Sen. Keeley, such a feminine performance from a male is inconceivable, so for the spectator, the Keeleys reactions to Mrs. Coleman contain ironic humor through their subversion of gender binaries. As such, the Keeleys are the ones the audience laughs at, undermining the conservative ideology on which their ridiculous misunderstanding is based. Furthermore, the inability to identify with the characters that react to Mrs. Coleman as a woman prevents any tendency to objectify or fetishize her, and the ironic distance that Albert's exaggerated performance creates undermines the stereotypes he performs rather than reifying them.

Although the spectator cannot identify with the Keeleys, he or she can identify with Armand, Val and Barbara who know that Mrs. Coleman is Albert in drag. Throughout the meal they are terrified that Albert will make a mistake and reveal that he is biologically male; thus, the spectator's identification with their gaze further foregrounds the performativity of gender and the dire consequences of an inadequate performance. If Albert fails here, the Keeleys likely will not agree to let their daughter marry Val. The stakes are high, which emphasizes that, although gender performance is unnatural, it is nonetheless real in that it has serious material consequences. The spectator's knowledgeability about Albert's sex and consequent identification with Armand, Val and Barbara creates tension and a hyperawareness of gender performativity. However, Armand, Val and Barbara need not be worried; the Keeleys, and in particular Sen. Keeley, are very taken by Mrs. Coleman. Her conservative beliefs impress them. She agrees with Sen. Keeley about the importance of prayer in the classroom, unwittingly agrees with Rush Limbaugh about the scandal in which Sen. Keeley is embroiled, and declares that she "pities the woman who is too busy to stay home and take care of her man." Even Barbara forgets that Albert is male, saying, "He sounds so much like a mother."

However, Albert's professed views on conservative issues are highly exaggerated and continue to produce the parodic irony associated with camp performance. Sen. Keeley brings up the fact that some pro-lifers think that, in order to stop abortions, the doctors who perform them should be killed. Mrs. Coleman disagrees, declaring the doctors are only doing their jobs and instead suggests that the mothers be killed. She recognizes that the fetus will die as well but says, "It's going to be aborted anyway, so

why not let it go down with the ship?” This position is obviously extreme and encourages murder, the very act that pushes most people to adopt a pro-life position. But Sen. Keeley is not appalled; on the contrary he tells Val that his mother is a passionate woman and he loves her. As discussed earlier in this chapter and in the previous one, one of the key features of drag and camp is its exaggeration, which in turn calls into question the veracity and naturalness of the “original” which it purports to mime. Here, Albert’s performance not only calls into question femininity but other conservative ideological beliefs. His exaggeratedly conservative positions are ridiculous but are also considered and seemingly accepted by Sen. Keeley. As such, his actions render conservatism as a whole ludicrous. The dinner scene not only encourages the spectator to question the naturalness of gender but also the whole of conservative dominant ideology. Albert’s performance does not reify those dominant beliefs but rather undermines them by virtue of his exaggeration.

The performance falls apart when Katherine shows up to play the part of Val’s mother. Sen. Keeley is confused and angrily asks, “How many mothers does Val have?” Then Val stands up for Albert for the first time. Throughout the film he was in favor of hiding Albert away from the Keeleys. But now he walks up to Albert and removes his wig, saying, “Just one. This is my mother.” Sen. Keeley is horrified when he realizes Albert is male, but Albert replies, “Nothing’s changed. It’s still me.” Here we see clearly how much Sen. Keeley’s conservative beliefs, which have been rendered ridiculous throughout this sequence, prize sex over performed gender. He will not accept Albert as Val’s mother because he is male and did not give birth to Val. But the scene goes on to cement Albert’s role as mother; Armand introduces Katherine as “the lady

who had Val,” not as his mother; her role in his life ended when she gave birth, and Albert took over. Katherine is proud of Val and Albert, telling Albert, “You did a good job.” Consequently, the scene explicitly foregrounds the importance of performed gender over sex, effectively subverting Keeley’s conservative beliefs.

Overall the film successfully highlights the performativity of gender, undercutting beliefs that gender is natural. Through the use of parody and irony, the camp aspects of the film allow for multiple readings. These differing readings are the result of the audience’s personal beliefs, not their sex or gender, and thus the film encourages a way of seeing that is outside such rigid binaries. Furthermore, the ultimate butt of the film’s joke is the Keeleys and their ultra-conservative beliefs. At the end of the film, the Keeleys must escape a mob of journalists by dressing as drag queens, subverting even their own ideology by embodying the very thing they fear and hate. As such, the film closes by highlighting the utility of fluid gender and sexuality, subverting normative beliefs about sex and gender.

Chapter Three

“I’m my own man, so to speak”: Gender Performance, Utopia and Voyeuristic Pleasure
in Blake Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria*

Blake Edwards’ 1982 musical comedy *Victor/Victoria* tells the story of Victoria (Julie Andrews), an out-of-work singer living in Paris during the 1930s. She meets Toddy (Robert Preston), a male performer in a similar situation, and they strike up a friendship. Toddy comes up with a plan to increase both their fortunes – Victoria will pretend to be Victor, a female impersonator, and become the toast of Paris. She succeeds, but the appearance of the handsome King Marchand (James Garner) complicates her life. Victoria then has to negotiate the tension between her lives as Victor and Victoria as well as her growing romantic interest in King. Through its generic categorization as a musical and its use of drag performance, the film serves as a utopia of alternatives for audiences. Furthermore, the many instances of drag performance provide ample ground for an examination of the ways in which traditional theories of the gaze falter when confronted with atypically-gendered characters and yield fertile ground for exploring new ways of seeing. Victoria’s romantic relationship, however, is problematic, and King’s insistence on rigidly-defined gender and sex categories undermines the potentially liberating message of the film. Although *Victor/Victoria* contains elements of gender transgression through its exposure of gender as a performance and its disruption of the spectatorial gaze, King and Victoria’s relationship undermines the radical potential of the film by reinscribing Victoria as a vulnerable, submissive woman.

Film critic Richard Dyer explains the musical’s effect on audiences by claiming that films paradoxically ““give the people what they want”” while simultaneously

“defin[ing] those wants.”¹⁰³ He posits that people, particularly people in marginalized groups, experience specific social liabilities such as the lack of community, transparency, intensity and energy in their lives.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, he claims that Hollywood films not only reify the dominant ideology, reflecting back the beliefs of our culture in order to present the viewer with a pleasantly realistic diegetic world; they also seek in some ways to subvert our ordinary lives, presenting us with a “utopian” version of a seemingly realistic life that is full of “alternatives, hopes, [and] wishes.”¹⁰⁵ In “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” Jill Dolan expands upon Dyer’s thesis. She echoes his discussion of film’s potential to provide alternatives, saying, “Audiences are compelled to gather with others” because of their desire to see “moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, audiences seek a communal environment where they can view a “perfect world,” an idealized, utopian version of the real world in which their social lacks are met. In some cases, the alternatives presented and potential utopias often do not only exist within the text but also affect the way in which the viewer perceives the film. In the case of *Victor/Victoria* and the other films discussed in this thesis, the non-normative genders of those on stage and screen force both the diegetic viewer and the extra-diegetic viewer to reevaluate traditional patterns of viewership. As discussed in the first chapter, films that prominently feature gender performances problematize and often negate traditional theories of the gaze. The alternatives presented in the film are

¹⁰³ Dyer 468.

¹⁰⁴ Dyer 473.

¹⁰⁵ Dyer 468.

¹⁰⁶ Dolan, Jill. “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” *Theatre Journal*, 53.3 (2001): 455, Print.

conveyed not only in the film's content but also in the ways they encourage the audience to reexamine gender through their reworkings of the gaze.

Reflecting on the transformative potential of the alternatives presented in the films, Dolan contends that the goal may not be only to live in an imaginary world for a few hours but to discover “new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other.”¹⁰⁷ People, particularly those in marginalized groups, not only want to experience these alternatives while watching a performance but desire to learn to experience the utopian alternatives to their marginal existences in their everyday lives. Dyer has already argued that entertainment helps to define our desires, and most media theorists agree that one of the ways in which we internalize social codes is through watching movies. Transgressive and subversive entertainment such as drag may help to redefine those codes and desires for the audience. In order to accomplish this task, Dolan argues “a culture has to move farther and farther away from the real into a kind of performative, in which the utterance... inspires perhaps other more local ‘doings’ that sketch out the potential in those feignings.”¹⁰⁸ The performance, then, must be so extreme, so exaggerated, that a more moderate form of the performance could be enacted in everyday life. However, Dyer explains that, because the entertainment films also must be successful with mainstream audiences, they must, however problematically, agree with patriarchal capitalist ideology.¹⁰⁹ And so films, particularly musicals and, in this case, particularly *Victor/Victoria*, are simultaneously and complexly full of ironies. And so films, particularly musicals and, in this case, particularly *Victor/Victoria*, are simultaneously and complexly full of ironies. They fulfill desires that they elicit while both transgressing

¹⁰⁷ Dolan 455.

¹⁰⁸ Dolan 477.

¹⁰⁹ Dyer 468.

and reifying the dominant ideology of our culture. The tensions between alternatives and norms are also perceptible in the ways in which the films encourage a reexamination of the spectatorial gaze, as the traditional male gaze presented in Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" regains control over the film's alternative, potentially liberating points of view.

Thus these three areas – the musical, spectatorship, and drag performance – share similar tensions between the conservative and the transgressive, and *Victor/Victoria* provides an excellent instance in which to examine their interplay. Despite many moments in which gender is subverted and rigorously questioned, *Victor/Victoria* ultimately allows heteronormativity to prevail. Because it is a musical that centers on drag performance, its transgressive potential as well as the problems described above abound in the film. We first see the main characters, Toddy and Victoria, experiencing marginalized existences. Toddy, a gay nightclub singer, loses both his job and his lover in the first scenes of the film. Victoria, a single woman, is a singer who cannot find work and is hungry to the point of starvation. Neither are members of the dominant social group – heterosexual white males – and the film emphasizes their dire and disenfranchised situations. After fainting with hunger, Victoria decides to dine and dash at a fancy restaurant. There she meets Toddy and, after sharing a luxurious meal together, they cause a ruckus and flee the scene. From the very beginning we see the negative situation Dyer describes those in marginalized groups often experience. Both Toddy and Victoria are characterized by extreme lack – they lack energy and abundance, lethargically moving through the paces of their impoverished lives, and experience their existences largely alone. Then they find one another, creating a sense of community, and

immediately the utopian fantasy begins both for the characters and the audience.

Victoria, unable to pay her rent, moves in with Toddy, and he comes up with a plan to pull them both out of their misery and into a life of wealth. Victoria will masquerade as Count Victor Grazinski, a female impersonator from Eastern Europe, and Toddy will pretend to be his lover. Victoria nervously agrees, gets a job at a drag club and begins practicing for her first performance. During rehearsal, she learns her choreography from a man, swaying her hips and going through the motions stumblingly as he performs them effortlessly. This scene is the first to question the naturalness of gender. Victoria, a female, learns how to “pass” as a female from a man. As Mock posits in her study of drag culture, true femininity seems no longer to exist; all that exists is a mimicry, i.e. Victoria, a woman, learning how to be feminine from a man.¹¹⁰ As the male choreographer so easily performs the feminine choreography while Victoria struggles to learn it, we see the first intimation that all gender may in fact be a performance.

The excessive, parodic femininity often associated with drag abounds in Victoria’s first performance. She wears a sparkling headdress covered in diamonds, and her dress and jewelry are also accented with the jewels. She is dressed in a sumptuous, flowing black gown, and energetic dancers surround her throughout the performance. Just as Doane suggests feminist cinema should do, the excessive femininity of the drag performances shows that enactments of gender “are poses, postures, tropes” and thereby creates an awareness in the viewer “that we are being subjected to a discourse on femininity” that works to make those enactments strange and unfamiliar.¹¹¹ In this way,

¹¹⁰ Mock, Roberta, “Hetero queer Ladies: Some Performative Transactions between Gay Men and Heterosexual Women,” *Feminist Review*, 75 (2003) 29, Print.

¹¹¹ Doane, Mary Ann, *The desire to desire* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 181, Print.

drag performance mirrors Doane's goal for feminist cinema because it creates "a slippage" between "true" femininity and the femininity that is being "mime[d]," encouraging recognition that all gender is not innate but constructed.¹¹²

Just before this scene we are introduced to King Marchand, a gangster and nightclub owner from Chicago who is coming to see the show. Shots of Victoria's performance are intercut with King's reactions. He is obviously mesmerized by Victoria, as his gaze never leaves her, and his mouth hangs slightly agape. As Mulvey explains in "Visual Pleasure," Victoria is the fetishized object of the gaze, and, as the spectator, King controls her through his sexual objectification of her; the beginning of this scene inscribes as the norm the active male gaze that looks upon the passive female spectacle. King's girlfriend, Norma (Lesley Ann Warren), pouts throughout the performance, visibly irritated by King's arousal. Both King and Norma are shocked when, at the end of the performance, Victoria removes her headdress and reveals that she is a man. She bows as we see King's shocked and horrified face. Norma looks at him, surprised, and then jumps out of her seat, cheering and clapping. Victoria's destabilization of gender through her drag performance undercuts King's power as the possessor of the gaze. The traditional paradigm of the gaze relies on heterosexual roles – the man is the aggressor who looks while the woman is the passive object that receives the look. But when King comes to believe Victoria is male, he loses his power because his sexual interest threatens his heterosexuality. He is horrified to think he is attracted to a man and therefore, by extension, is feminine and no longer qualified to hold the position of power. Conversely, Norma is relieved because, knowing King's dependence upon his heterosexual masculinity, she no longer must compete for his affection.

¹¹² *Desire* 181.

The subversion is incomplete for the viewer of the film, however, because we know Victoria is a woman. As Arthur Nolletti, Jr. points out in his discussion of *Victor/Victoria*, only the audience within the film believes the lie because “Julie Andrews fails to convince as a man.”¹¹³ So, although King fears that his masculinity has been threatened, the spectator knows it has not been. This tension between the simultaneous subversion and maintenance of the heterosexual paradigm occurs throughout the film due to the spectator’s inability to identify fully with many of the characters’ gazes. In another of Victoria’s performances, “The Shady Dame from Seville,” Victoria plays a seductive Spanish girl who tempts and teases a stage full of male back-up dancers. Her clothing again reflects the opulence of the utopian fantasy of both the musical and drag. Her dress is full and ruffled, and her hair, makeup and choreography reflect the exaggerated femininity associated with drag performance. For the diegetic viewer, the scene both reifies and undermines gender roles and the heterosexual paradigm. Ostensibly the audience in the film sees a woman parading around, reveling in her role as the sexualized object of lust of a group of men. However, their belief that Victoria is a man who is convincingly playing a woman problematizes that view, undercutting the notion that gender is a natural extension of sex.

As such, traditional spectacle/spectator relations cannot apply to the diegetic viewers. Heterosexual male viewers cannot unproblematically fetishize Victoria because they think she is actually a man, and any sexualization of her body would threaten their heterosexuality as it did King’s. The female viewer also cannot fit into traditional theories of spectatorship because she cannot identify with Victoria’s status as fetishized

¹¹³ Nolletti, Arthur, Jr. “Gay Trappings and Straight Truths: A Study of Blake Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria*,” *Film Criticism*, 6.3 (1982): 49, Print.

object nor can she assume the place of the male spectator and sexualize Victoria. It is possible, however, that the female spectator could identify with Victoria's alternation and incongruence. Because theories of female spectatorship often invoke the rhetoric of the transvestite, Victoria's oscillating gender performance reflects the female spectator's alternating or oscillating subject position and the problematics of theorizing such an indeterminate and elusive identity. By both foregrounding the performativity of gender and reflecting the indeterminate and shifting nature of the female spectator, the film's emphasis on drag calls for a reexamination of theories of spectatorship and subverts the monolithic power of sex and gender; in other words, to echo Dyer and Dolan's discussions of the role of entertainment, the film provides an alternative to the rigid binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine that place women, homosexuals and other atypically-gendered people at such a disadvantage. The film's spectator, however, knows that Victoria is a female, so to a certain extent the subversive power of the performance is mitigated.

But the spectator of the film does see Victoria in a drag performance; the performance is just not on stage. She dons male clothing throughout the film in order to maintain her identity as Count Victor. King continues to doubt that she is actually male, refusing to believe that he could be attracted to a man. One night, Toddy, King, Victor/ia and their friend, Andre, go out to dinner, and eventually King and Victor/ia are left alone. Deepening her voice, Victoria performs the part of Victor, conversing comfortably and equally with King. King flirts with him/her, saying flirtatiously, "You light up when you smile." Victor/ia looks surprised and, maintaining his/her composure, says, "That's a funny thing to say, one man to another." For the diegetic viewer, the flirtation is

subversive. Believing Victor/ia to be a man, the viewer would see sexual chemistry in a gay couple, undermining the heterosexual norm. But the spectator knows Victor/ia is a woman, which dilutes the subversive power of the scene. In an attempt to reassure himself that he is correct in his assumption that Victor is female, King asks Victor if he would like to smoke a cigar, a traditionally masculine object and unquestionably a phallic symbol. Victor nervously agrees but, after a few puffs, sputters and coughs, dousing the cigar in a glass of water smirkingly proffered by King. Satisfied with Victor's failure of this test, King feels more secure in his masculinity.

The most subversive performance in the film, however, does not come from Victoria. After their dinner date, King, Victor/ia, Toddy and Andre go to Chez Lui, the gay-friendly nightclub where Toddy once performed. Before they arrive, a group of four men come onto the stage. Two of the men are dressed as women, albeit unconvincingly, with all the opulence and exaggeration associated with drag – their makeup is extremely heavy, their hair short but meticulously curled, and their dresses sparkling and feminine. The other two men, although dressed in the same way, wear masks that look identical to the faces of the “women” played by the other two men. The four sashay out, swaying their hips to the music. Then suddenly the music changes from a swanky, seductive tune to a quicker piece. They turn around, and we see that the men wearing the masks were facing backwards and on the front they are dressed and made up as men, wearing tuxedos and sporting mustaches. The backs of the other two men are dressed as men as well but sport male masks on the backs of their heads. Their dance for the male section is much stiffer and less feminine; they keep their backs straight, jumping up and down almost as if to a march. The message, while not subtle, is subversive and compelling. Although all

the performers are physiologically male, this performance demonstrates that gender is a performative mask. Because half of the masks are female while half are male, we see that, regardless of sex, both genders are ways of appearing and behaving. The performance parodies these masks we call gender, and the exaggeratedly masculine and feminine appearances and dances of the drag queens highlight the roles and rules that we assign to the arbitrary category of gender.

The dancers then pair off and dance as couples. Sometimes the couples are heterosexual, and the spectator can see what appear to be one man and one woman dancing together. However, when their position on stage changes, or if the camera moves, we see an apparently homosexual couple of either two men or two women. Their sex and gender oscillations align with feminist theories of the female spectator as alternating between masculine and feminine subject positions. The notion of positionality is integral to an understanding of gender as performative; as de Lauretis explains, gender categories “do not refer so much to qualities or states of being inherent in a person” but “to positions which [one] occupies in relation to desire. They are terms of identification.”¹¹⁴ Once again, the drag performance mirrors the subject position of the female spectator. The performance highlights the shifting of perspective because a change in the position from which one gazes at the dancers creates a different reading not only of the dancer (as male/masculine or female/feminine) but also on the coupling of the dancers (as heterosexual or homosexual). This fluidity sends a powerful ideological message of an alternative and more liberating view of gender. Our perception of people as either masculine or feminine is not a given but depends upon external factors that

¹¹⁴ De Lauretis Teresa, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 142.

condition us to view people a certain way. Only because we have conceptions of sex and gender are we able to identify (or, in the case of drag, to be uncomfortably unable to identify) people as members of these categories. As the changing perspectives/positionalities in this scene show, these categories can be destabilized and shifted.

Luckily for King, however, the film goes on to undermine the subversive potential described above. Both Norma's nightclub performance and King's relationship with Victoria reinscribe heterosexuality as the norm and reify traditional gender roles by placing the woman as the object of the male gaze. Near the middle of the film, Norma returns to Chicago, fed up with King's coldness toward her. She gets a job singing and dancing at a nightclub, and her performance, although it contains the utopian elements that Dyer describes, creates a utopia of normative heterosexual male desire rather than a utopia of alternative gender performances. For her act, Norma dresses as the ideal sexualized woman. Her thin but curvaceous form is clad in a frilly pink dress that exposes her cleavage, and she wears pink gloves and heavy makeup. Her dance is full of pelvic thrusts, which she often does in the faces of the men in the audience, whose reaction shots are the epitome of what Mulvey describes as the "controlling and curious gaze" (717). They look her body up and down, objectifying and fetishizing every inch of her. In one particularly poignant shot, a man with a giant cigar in his mouth stares at her unblinkingly. This not-so-subtle sexual image confirms the arousing effect Norma has on her male audience.

As the performance continues, we discover that Norma's skirt is attached to strings above the stage, and it blows up three times, exposing her underwear. Finally the strings

pull off her skirt, and she is left in pink lingerie with frills and bows on the crotch. The men cheer loudly, obviously gratified that their imaginations no longer have to work quite so hard, and other scantily clad women come out to join her. At one point during the performance they all turn around and bend over, grasping their buttocks and exposing their crotches, which are barely concealed by their tiny costumes. Such a display indicates that they are consciously performing the role of sexual object.

This scene does contain some aspects that feminist critics could identify as subversive. The hyperbolic sexuality and femininity that Norma conveys are certainly examples of excess, an attribute that Doane contends can upend traditional spectatorial relations by exposing the “performative, gestural nature of femininity.”¹¹⁵ Particularly when compared to the drag performances in the film, Norma’s excessiveness is thrown into greater relief – she is just as heavily made-up and ornately dressed as any drag queen we see, which again implies to the diegetic viewer and the film spectator that all gender, even gender that corresponds to one’s sex, is a performance, a “pose, posture, [or] trope.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the many reaction shots of the aroused male spectators create a hyper-awareness of the gaze. As the spectator watches the diegetic viewers gaze at Norma, we see them objectify and fetishize her. Miriam Hansen points out in *Babel and Babylon* that awareness of scopophilia can undermine the voyeuristic appeal of films and produce an acknowledgment of “the gaze as an erotic medium.”¹¹⁷

In this scene, however, the spectator and the diegetic viewer sit in the same spectatorial position. We cannot identify with the viewers of Victoria’s performances

¹¹⁵ *Desire* 34, 181.

¹¹⁶ *Desire* 181.

¹¹⁷ Hansen, Miriam, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1991) 280.

because we know she is a woman; we occupy a different subject position from that of the spectators in the film. But here our gaze matches the gaze of those in the film. Despite the awareness of gender as a performance and the strong, explicit presence of the gaze as an erotic force, this scene positions the male spectator to join the men in the film in fetishizing Norma while positioning the female spectator to either “cross dress” and join the men in sexualizing Norma or masochistically identify with her objectification. In this regard, Norma’s performance is the antithesis of the drag performance at Chez Lui. It raises no questions of gender roles or sexuality. Norma is, as her name suggests, as normatively feminine as possible both in appearance and action. She positions herself as the sexual spectacle for the leering men in the audience, and the binary of male/female is upheld with heterosexual men in the dominant position and women as the submissive objects of desire.

Victoria’s relationship with King also undermines much of the film’s gender questioning and eventually reinscribes Victoria as a submissive, obedient would-be wife. She finds herself attracted to King, and her frustration at her inability to act upon that attraction because she is supposed to be Victor is the only major difficulty she has with her new, gender-bending life. King doubts that Victoria is actually a man and goes to great lengths to prove she is female. In one of the best-known scenes of the film, King sneaks into Victoria’s hotel room to hide in the bathroom and discover her true sex. From the beginning of the sequence, the spectator is cued to identify with King’s voyeurism. We consistently view the action through doorways, playing the role of voyeur as we watch King make his way into Victoria’s room to spy on her. When King finally enters her room, the camera is in the darkened bathroom, and the spectator sees

him through the lighted doorway. His bodyguard, Squash, sees him through the window from his room, and King looks over at him and waves. Because King has the power to return Squash's gaze instead of acting as the passive recipient of it, we see that he is not the true object of our voyeurism. Victoria and Toddy enter the room, and King scrambles to hide. We get the same view of Victoria from the doorway as we did of King, emphasizing that she has replaced him as the object of our voyeurism. Like King, the spectator will clandestinely survey Victoria.

King hides in a linen closet in the bathroom, and Victoria enters to undress and bathe. The rest of the scene oscillates between King's point of view and his reaction shots. From King's point of view we see Victoria slowly undressing, the closet doors blocking out about one third of the frame. These POV shots are intercut with shots of King straining to catch a glimpse of Victoria's nude body. However, we do not see these shots from Victoria's point of view. The camera is not in place of the bathtub but further out in the middle of the room. In this scene of total invasion of privacy, we never see from Victoria's point of view – that of a victim of sexual violation; instead the camera's placements encourage the spectator to adopt the position of voyeur. The two points of view available are those of King watching Victoria and the camera watching King watch Victoria. Our pleasure in looking consequently comes from this double voyeurism. This scene also marks the first time in the film that the spectator's gaze unproblematically identifies with King's gaze. Throughout much of the film the spectator has been unable to identify with the diegetic viewer due to the diegetic viewer's lack of awareness that Victoria is actually a female. Consequently, most point-of-view shots, particularly those of King watching Victoria's performances, have not placed the spectator in King's

position; while he is concerned that his attraction to Victoria threatens his heterosexuality, the spectator knows that it does not. In this bathroom scene, however, the spectator is positioned to see as King sees and to watch voyeuristically as Victoria undresses. Unlike previous scenes, which undermined traditional theories of the gaze and spectatorial identification, this scene places the spectator squarely in the masculine position of voyeur.

At one point, when Victoria is nearly undressed, she sits down out of King's view. We see his reaction, and he is visibly irritated, furrowing his brow and trying to lean out just a little farther so he can see her. Our available points of view encourage us to empathize with his frustration and anticipate the final revelation of her body, but the spectator does not see Victoria nude. She stands up and pulls off her shirt, but all we and King can see is her back. Then the scene cuts back to King, and we hear her step into the bathtub. As she moans and slides down into the water, King smiles, satisfied, and closes the door. The juxtaposition of Victoria's moan with King's smile underscores his sexual satisfaction with his discovery. Not only has he confirmed his masculinity and, by extension, his heterosexuality, but he has received sexual gratification from seeing Victoria nude. By seeing her exposed, castrated body, he has reaffirmed his dominance as a man over her lack. The scene is disturbing, and Victoria never discovers King's actions, nor does he suffer any consequences. The truly troublesome aspect of the sequence, however, is the spectator's identification with King. After wonderful scenes of gender transgression and subversion, the spectator is encouraged, as Mulvey says, to assume the position of the male spectator and objectify Victoria. This scene, like Norma's performance, reinscribes dominant, heterosexual masculinity as the position of

power and places the woman in the position of the submissive object of the gaze.

Soon after this scene, King and Victoria narrowly escape arrest after a brawl breaks out at Chez Lui. They run outside and around the corner to hide from the police. Out of breath, they stare at each other for a moment; then King says, "I don't care if you are a man," and kisses Victoria. She pulls back and says, "But I'm not a man." King replies, "I still don't care," and kisses her again. Presumably, this scene means to show the spectator that King has grown by attempting to overcome his heterosexual anxiety. This exchange, however, contains no subversion; on the contrary, it insults Victoria and the viewer. King, safe in the knowledge that the kiss will be heterosexual, transgresses no boundaries and does not grow as a character through his final admission of love for Victoria. He merely pretends at such personal growth, lying to Victoria and taking advantage of her ignorance of his invasion of her privacy. The scene encourages the spectator to think more highly of King and to create the illusion that he is now more open-minded, but the spectator knows he knows Victoria's true sex, and no other characters that are unaware that Victoria is a woman are present. If another character spotted King and Victoria kissing, the spectator might believe that King had grown and no longer cared if people thought he was sexually attracted to a man; but in this scene King and Victoria are deliberately avoiding the gaze of other characters by hiding from the police, so the scene presents another triumph of dominant heteronormative values.

In his analysis of the film, Arthur Noletti, Jr. contends that King does in fact undergo a change in his attitudes about gender and sex by the end of the film. He posits that, although "King never really feels completely at ease with the knowledge that the world is far from straight," he eventually "see[s] that rigidly defined sex roles are

inherently absurd” and “becomes less preoccupied with stereotypes.”¹¹⁸ As the action of the film winds to a close, however, King seems no more open-minded than he was before his interactions with Victoria and Toddy. Nowhere is this clearer than in the bedroom scene. King and Victoria have just consummated their relationship, only to be discovered by Squash, who is unaware that Victoria is not a man. King runs out after Squash to explain, but before he can, Squash admits his own homosexuality. A visibly shaken King walks back into the bedroom and sits with his back to Victoria and the camera.

They then have a long, complex conversation in which Victoria confronts King’s small-mindedness. When she talks about the difficulties they will face due to the fact that she is “a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman,” King says, “You can stop pretending.” “And do what?” she asks. “Be yourself.” Victoria looks perplexed. “And what is that?” “What do you mean?” King asks, still complacent in his supposedly stable identity as a heterosexual man. He continues, “You’re a woman in love with a man,” setting up their relationship as a simple one that falls into the dominant heterosexual paradigm. “But you didn’t finish,” she says. “A woman in love with a man pretending to be a man...” He interrupts her hotly, saying, “I said you can stop pretending!” Like the drag performance at *Chez Lui*, Victoria acknowledges that all gender is performative. She sees no difference between her life as Victor and his life as King. However, King interrupts her subversion of his masculinity, labeling her performance “pretend.”

Victoria continues, saying, “But you see, I don’t think I want to. I’m a big star now; I’m a success.” “Oh, that,” King says dismissively, not acknowledging her successful career. “And something more than that,” Victoria says thoughtfully. “I find it

¹¹⁸ Noletti 44-5.

all really fascinating. I mean, there are things available to me as a man that I could never have as a woman. I'm emancipated...my own man, so to speak." Here, Victoria addresses the gender gap and realizes that, although she is still herself, society allows her more freedom because of her perceived maleness. King scoffs at her remarks, and she replies that it is important for him to understand her point if they are to have a future together. "Would it be fair," she asks, "for me to ask you to give up your job?" "It would be ridiculous," King replies. Victoria nods and says, "But you expect me to give up mine." "There's a difference, for Christ's sake!" King cries defensively. Victoria smiles sadly and says, "Yes, but there shouldn't be." Even when Victoria forces King to recognize and admit the double standard he holds for men and women as well as his adherence to gender roles, he refuses to see her point of view. Their body language and clothing in the scene reflect their attitudes toward the subject. Victoria sits on the bed in a man's white shirt, her body open to the camera and her face very visible. In contrast, throughout the scene King sits with his back both to Victoria and the camera, and we never see more than half of his face or the back of his black suit jacket. Victoria's light clothing and visibility reflect her open mind and freedom, whereas King's dark clothing and closed-off body language reveal his refusal to change his mind.

In this scene, the issue goes unresolved. Norma returns to Paris with one of King's fellow Chicago mobsters in tow, determined to see him ruined for the shame he caused her. To save him, Victoria admits to Norma that she is a woman, and the police find out that she has been scamming crowds by masquerading as a female impersonator. They invade the backstage of the nightclub but leave empty-handed, saying there was a man in her dressing room. The sequence then cuts to Victoria entering the lounge of the

nightclub clad in a flowing black evening gown that shows off her cleavage for the first time in the film. Her hair is pulled back and her makeup is light, and her appearance contains none of the exaggerated femininity of her drag performance. Instead of questioning gender by enacting an excess of femininity as she did in her drag performances, she now makes herself beautiful and sensual. She no longer transgresses gender boundaries; she has become a “normal” woman, and her gender matches her sex. She wordlessly walks over and sits next to King. He tries to question her, but she puts her finger to her lips, silencing him as the performance begins.

The curtain pulls back and the dancers twirl out of the way to reveal Toddy clad in Victoria’s “Shady Dame of Seville” dress, fan in hand. The audience laughs immediately, and Toddy laughingly struggles his way through the routine. The song does not fit in his vocal range, and his scratchy baritone is not convincingly feminine in the least. He struggles with the gown, tripping over it multiple times, and throughout the performance it slips further and further off his shoulder, revealing increasing amounts of hairy chest. His choreography is stiff; unable to capture the feminine flow Victoria created, he breaks the fan in two when he tries to flip it seductively. Shots of his performance are intercut with the audience laughing uproariously. Their laughter here stands in stark contrast to the reaction shots of an aroused King during Victoria’s initial performance, as well as to the reactions of the men in the audience of Norma’s performance. In this scene, drag becomes the non-transgressive parody McNeal and Mock described. Toddy is in no way convincing as a woman, and his failure to perform femininity reifies the belief that gender is tied to sex. Toddy cannot perform as a woman because he is a man. In fact, the only truly convincing female impersonator we see in the

film is *Victoria*. As Mock said, the audience “laugh[s] at, rather than with” Toddy.¹¹⁹ He is not in on the joke; he is the joke, as is the notion that gender identity is mutable and fluid.

Furthermore, this scene marks *Victoria*’s obedience to King. Even though circumstances beyond her control forced her to quit, she gives up her career as Victor and accepts her life as a woman. Moreover, she does not speak for the remainder of the film, which reinscribes her as a powerless female spectator rather than a problematic object of the gaze that encourages a questioning of traditional roles. She sits placidly next to King, silently mouthing the words along with Toddy. This shift from spectacle of excess to silenced female spectator coupled with her traditionally feminine appearance repositions her into her normative place in society – a submissive, silent, obedient would-be wife. She has given up her transgressive, “emancipated” existence as *Victor/ia* and has lost the power that existence afforded her. During her performances, she problematized normative conceptions of gender. Now, having abandoned that performance, she has lost her ability to speak. She instead bows to the ideology she once transgressed and accepts her place next to King.

The drag performances in *Victor/Victoria* present a set of proposed alternatives for how to be and how to be with each other. For marginalized audience members, both those in the film and outside of the film, these scenes provide hope for a utopia in which, because of the destabilization of sex and gender categories, they might not have to experience isolation and ostracization. For heterosexual audience members, the film provides a way out of rigid binary categories, allowing for a more fluid and liberating

¹¹⁹ Mock 30.

conception of identity. The power dynamics between spectator and spectacle also provide alternatives for theorizing the spectatorial gaze; the shifting, indeterminate nature of Victor/ia's sex and gender as well as the gender performances of the other drag queens undermine and problematize traditional theories of the gaze, allowing for alternative theories that rely on gender fluidity rather than rigidity. The film, however, ultimately redefines drag not as a set of alternatives but as a joke and reconfigures Victoria as a passive female spectator, replacing heterosexual masculinity to its position of power and relegating women to their places as the object of desire and the submissive partner. The film, which has such transgressive potential due to its inclusion of both the musical genre and drag, ultimately gives into the dominant ideology, and its alternatives fall flat.

Chapter Four

Rewriting Oedipus: Transsexuality, Parent/Child Relations and Spectatorship in

Transamerica

Since the 1960s, the road film genre has provided iconic images of Americana. From Peter Fonda sailing down the highway in *Easy Rider* to Bonnie and Clyde racing from their crimes, road films connote the American ideals of autonomy, freedom, and a search for identity. Road films have been a primarily masculine genre; the themes of independence, aggression and control have painted American identity in stereotypically masculine terms. Since the 1990s, however, a new subgenre has emerged: the queer road film. One such example is Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica* (2005), which relates the story of Bree, a male-to-female transsexual in the days leading up to and immediately following her sexual reassignment surgery. Excited and relieved to receive the surgery after a long wait, Bree is shocked to get a call from a New York City jail on behalf of a young man who claims to be her son. The young man, Toby, is the result of a one-night tryst that Bree had in college before she began her life as a woman. Her therapist grows concerned that Bree's realization of Toby's existence could have a psychologically damaging effect on her, particularly at this critical juncture in her life. Before the therapist agrees to sign off on the surgery, she insists that Bree travel to New York City to meet her son. Bree does so, and the bulk of the film focuses on Bree and Toby's cross-country road trip from New York back to her home in California.

As Shari Roberts explains, the road film genre partially developed from and shares many characteristics with the Western. In both the Western and the road film, a (usually male) protagonist escapes from civilization and social responsibility to find

freedom and his true identity on the frontier or the open road, respectively.¹²⁰ Roberts explains that Westerns became and remain popular “in part because of Americans who desire to re-create a revitalized, and particularly masculinist, national identity through popular culture. The road genre furthers this cultural function.”¹²¹ Just as Westerns feature often-solitary male figures abandoning society in favor of the West, many road films explore the journey of a male hitting the road in search of “freedom for life and art, and freedom from restrictive traditions, mores, and social norms.”¹²² Roberts discusses several films that cross between the genres to explicate their similarities, such as Clint Eastwood’s films, *Honkytonk Man* (1982) in which Red travels to Nashville for an audition, and *A Perfect World* (1993) in which Butch escapes from prison and heads for Alaska to outrun the law.¹²³ As these examples illustrate, both Westerns and road films emphasize masculine independence and freedom from restrictive societal bounds as core traits of American identity.

More recently road films have incorporated female and queer characters. With its emphasis on escaping from rigid social roles and rules, the road film has clear implications for women and homosexuals. Under patriarchy, women and gay men are disenfranchised and made other; this has also held true in road films, which, as David Laderman says, tend to contain “conservative subtexual attitudes regarding race and gender.”¹²⁴ As Roberts notes, women in early road films such as Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or Terrence Malick’s *Badlands* (1973) tend to be sidekicks, riding in

¹²⁰ Roberts, Shari, “Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road” *The Road Movie Book*, Ed. Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1997) 45-6, 51.

¹²¹ Roberts 47.

¹²² Roberts 51.

¹²³ Roberts 53.

¹²⁴ Laderman, David, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 22.

the passenger seat while the man takes the wheel, and/or erotic interests, always “bound up in the limitations of a male-oriented and -dominated fantasy.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, as Robert Lang points out, “buddy” road movies featuring two male characters, from David Butler’s *Road to Morocco* (1942) to John Hughes’ *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987), nearly always feature a scene in which homosexual interest is raised and then quickly negated.¹²⁶ But in recent years female and queer characters have become increasingly prominent in road films. Movies such as Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and Stephan Elliot’s *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) have revised the genre to offer feminist and queer indictments of society. Indeed, Lang contends that, because the road movie derives from a desire to capture American culture and identity, “we might say that the *queer* road movie has emerged as a development in the culture and psychoanalytic crisis of gender.”¹²⁷ The road film genre has thus been redefined as our modern concept of gender and sexual identity grows and is problematized by people who do not fit the heteronormative standard.

With the concept of the road film as an undercurrent to further discussion, this chapter explores the ways in which Bree’s journey typifies and diverges from the usual norm of the road film. Road films tend to concern themselves with the crossing of borders; in seeking to leave restrictive social norms behind, the protagonist transgresses social boundaries, finding an individualized space where he or she can control his or her situation. Bree’s stance on border crossing, however, is ambivalent. By default her

¹²⁵ Roberts 62.

¹²⁶ Lang, Robert, “My Own Private Idaho and the New Queer Road Movies,” *The Road Movie Book*, Ed. Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1997) 334.

¹²⁷ Lang 343.

transsexual body crosses the border between male and female, leaving her well outside the social norm. But she expresses a strong desire to fall within that norm, to be a proper woman, and her road trip mimics her paradoxical situation. Bree's border crossing also encourages the spectator to look outside of societal norms. By foregrounding the spectatorial gaze and reworking the Oedipal scenario, the film ultimately argues that the borders of male/female, masculine/feminine, and mother/father are false dichotomies.

As discussed in the first chapter, traditional theories of spectatorship have their basis in Oedipal conceptions of desire. The son resolves his desire for the mother through his realization of her sexual difference, which in turn results in his castration anxiety. In order to mitigate this anxiety, the male fetishizes the woman, sexualizing her form and turning her into a phallic object. We have seen how films that feature cross-dressers and drag queens undermine theories of spectatorship because those theories rely on rigid gender binaries based squarely on sexual difference. Drag performance, however, blurs the lines between male and female and masculine and feminine, so those theories break down. *Transamerica* also questions the gaze, but it goes beyond treating the symptoms of the Oedipal conflict and attacks the conflict itself. By problematizing not only gendered theories of the gaze but also the Oedipal root of gendered visual power relations, *Transamerica* invites new ways of perceiving and understanding what it means to be human.

Perhaps most basically, *Transamerica* disrupts traditional theories of film spectatorship by presenting an atypically-gendered and, in this case, -sexed, main character. According to Miriam Hansen, one of the ways in which film can disrupt the theorized gaze, and in particular the male spectatorial gaze, is by evoking hyper-

awareness of the gaze coupled with an overt emphasis on the performativity of femininity. Bree aims to be “stealth,” which means she attempts to pass as a woman in public and is not open about her transsexuality. Much of the film examines Bree’s attempts to perfect her performance of femininity and her anxiety at the prospect of being “read,” or discovered as a transsexual. The opening shot of the film is not of Bree but rather of an instructional video about feminizing one’s voice that Bree is watching. The first shot of Bree is the first of many shots in which she is reflected in a mirror. She gazes at her open mouth, checking the shape of her throat in a pink-framed, hand-held mirror as she intones, “Ahh,” in her most feminine manner. We see only her perfectly manicured pink fingernail and her lipsticked mouth. From the beginning, the viewer realizes that, for Bree, femininity does not come naturally; she must practice and control others’ view of her as a woman by mimicking, as Doane terms it, the “initial mime.”

The scene continues with a montage of Bree’s preparations for the day, which include putting on pantyhose, body-shaping underwear and a pink dress suit, painting her nails, fixing her hair, and applying blush and lipstick. The scene is, as Rebecca Scherr noted, “an almost classic study of gender performativity” that highlights the unnaturalness of femininity by exposing how much work is involved in looking like a woman.¹²⁸ Bree offers an exaggerated, almost-parodic model of femininity – everything she has, from her lipstick to her mirror, is pink, emphasizing her desperation to appear feminine. We are, as Doane anticipates, “subjected to a discourse on femininity”; all of her actions are typical of society’s expectation for women’s appearances.¹²⁹ She is

¹²⁸ Scherr, Rebecca, “(Not) queering ‘white vision’ in *Far From Heaven* and *Transamerica*,” *Jump Cut*, 50 (2007) 9.

¹²⁹ Doane, Mary Ann, *The desire to desire* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987) 181.

carefully made up, manicured and coiffed and is wearing an already-archaic stereotype of feminine clothing. The montage, however, includes one action most women do not have to perform when getting ready in the morning. While putting on her underwear, Bree pauses to tuck her penis. The viewer realizes that, despite her appearance, Bree is not biologically female. The contrast between her highly feminine appearance and her anatomical sex highlights the performativity of gendered appearance and problematizes the spectator's relationship to her; because Bree looks like a woman but the spectator knows she is anatomically male, the spectator cannot easily gaze at or identify with her as either a man or a woman. As a result, both male and female spectators experience the "slippage" or "oscillation" often ascribed to female spectators, sliding through the cracks within the rigid binaries of sex and gender.

Before Bree leaves the house, as she does in nearly every scene that precedes her entrance into the public world, she double-checks her appearance in the mirror. Her self-reflexivity and awareness of herself as an object of the gaze heightens the spectator's awareness of his or her own voyeurism; even if Bree does not know the film viewer is watching her, she knows those in the diegetic world are watching her closely. This foregrounding of the gaze and, in particular, Bree's awareness of herself as an object of the gaze, coupled with the spectator's knowledge that Bree is not anatomically a woman problematizes traditional theories of spectatorship. The male gaze cannot function because objectifying and/or fetishizing Bree threatens the male spectator's heterosexuality. Likewise, female spectators cannot cross-identify with the male spectator's objectification of Bree nor can they masochistically identify with her status as object. Critics Peter Caster and Allison Andrew, however, argue the opposite. They

contend that Bree's "constant effort to conform to conventional femininity is the subject of the film, and she is thus the object of the audience's gaze, looked at rather than looking in a longstanding convention of female representation famously critiqued by Laura Mulvey"¹³⁰ For Caster and Andrew, the fact that the audience knows Bree is biologically male negates the problematize "transgender gaze" explored by Judith Halberstam in her analysis of *The Crying Game* and leaves traditional film spectatorship fully intact; according to Halberstam the spectator's lack of knowledge that a character is transgender produces a transgender gaze by encouraging unwitting spectatorial identification with a transgender character. I would argue, however, that *Transamerica's* forthrightness in communicating to the spectator that Bree is anatomically male problematizes the spectator's gaze just as much as does a surprise revelation, in a film such as in *The Crying Game*. Because we know Bree is male and our society values sex over gender as a person's defining trait, she cannot unproblematically be, as Caster and Andrew argue, the object of the gaze. The spectator's relationship with her is more complex. The spectator's knowledge that Bree is transsexual foregrounds the performativity of gender. Unable to suture his or her gaze to the gazes of other characters in the film who do not possess this knowledge, the spectator identifies with Bree and her determination to perform femininity convincingly rather than seeing her as a sexualized object of the gaze.

As Bree leaves her home, the spectator's awareness of her fear of the gaze increases. Dressed head-to-toe in pink, she wears large sunglasses and a floppy hat to hide her face. When she walks by her neighbors, she tips her head so that the brim of her hat occludes her face. When a man smiles kindly at her at the bus stop, she again ducks

¹³⁰ Caster, Peter and Allison Andrew, "Transgender Nation: Crossing Borders and Queering Space in 'Transamerica,'" *English Language Notes*, 45 (2007) 137.

so that her face is obscured. In the subsequent scene at the doctor's office, she explains that she tries to "blend in" and "keep a low profile." For Bree, going unnoticed means avoiding too close a gaze. Her face, although heavily made up, is still rather masculine. Despite her concerted efforts to perform femininity adequately, if one looks too closely and critically, her performance can be read as just that – a performance. As in the case of the characters in the other films discussed in this study, Bree's biological sex does not correlate to her gendered performance. When the dominant ideology holds that sex and gender are naturally connected, such incongruence can be dangerous; later in the film we meet Bree's parents and see firsthand the intolerance she must deal with because of her transsexuality.

Until her surgery near the movie's end, the film continues to foreground the power of the gaze by emphasizing Bree's fear of being "read." While stopped at a café on her way back to Los Angeles, Bree's fears are realized. A little girl turns in her seat and stares at Bree. A medium close-up shot of the girl's quizzical expression, her head cocked to one side, is followed by the question Bree and many stealth transpeople dread: "Are you a boy or a girl?" A look of horror crosses Bree's face as the girl's mother scolds her. The scene then cuts to a close-up of Bree's tear-streaked face at a pay phone. She calls her therapist, wailing, "A little girl just read me!" Her extreme distress at the girl's discovery belies her personal conservatism. Throughout the film, Bree attempts to be a prim and proper "real" woman at all times. In an early scene, Bree is at home telemarketing. As she dials the number, she practices her feminine voice and identifies herself as a woman on the phone. Even in an anonymous situation in the privacy of her own home, Bree wants to be a "true" woman. This scene contrasts with a later scene in

which she and Toby stay at the home of a transgendered woman who is a mutual friend of her therapist. As Bree and Toby enter, she is shocked to find a transgendered support group meeting. When Bree nervously tells Mary Ellen she thought she was stealth, Mary Ellen replies, "I am in public, but this is the privacy of my home." For Mary Ellen and the other transpeople at the meeting, the stealth performance can lapse when among close, accepting friends. Bree, however, is determined to maintain her femininity even when away from the judgmental public gaze.

Transamerica not only foregrounds the performativity of gender and the power of the gaze; it presents multiple gazes at Bree, multiple points of view on her body, that allow the spectator varying levels of identification that reflect a growing awareness of Bree's reality. The first point of view we see is that of the medical gaze. Bree is nearing the date of her surgery and must obtain all the necessary signatures from medical professionals in order to go through with the procedure. The scene in which Bree hides from her neighbors' gazes overlaps seamlessly with the scene at the doctor's office. We transition from the unknowing gazes of those on the street to the knowledgeable gaze of the doctor who, like the spectator, knows that Bree is a transsexual. He asks, "Are you a happy person?" "Yes," Bree replies. "I mean, no. I mean, I will be." The doctor looks over his glasses at her and assures her that there are "no right answers in this office." He proceeds to explain that gender dysmorphic disorder, with which one must be diagnosed in order to receive sexual reassignment surgery, is "a very serious mental disorder." The doctor's point of view, then, presents the scientific opinion on transsexuality – Bree is sick. The scene brilliantly illustrates the difficulties Judith Butler discusses in *Undoing*

Gender. Bree must “conform to the language of the diagnosis” of gender dysmorphic disorder.¹³¹

Although the doctor tells her there are no right answers, that is a lie, and Bree knows it. She flounders, changing her answer to his question, trying to give the response that will ensure his signature. In response to his reminder that gender dysmorphia is a serious mental disorder, Bree replies, “Don’t you find it odd that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?” This sarcastic statement makes it clear that Bree is unconvinced that her condition constitutes mental illness. This is the conundrum Butler describes: Bree must maneuver so that the doctor will diagnose her with a disorder that she does not believe she has and that many people find offensive. Bree’s statement is the final line of scene; she gets the last word. The medical gaze is one with which the audience could possibly identify. Unlike many other characters in the film, the doctor knows that Bree is transsexual just as the viewer does. Furthermore, his point of view is one of authority; his is the accepted scientific opinion on transsexuals. But Bree answers back, defying this medical view, and the rest of the film continues to establish Bree as someone who is neither crazy nor mentally ill.

Additionally, Bree’s road journey, which mirrors her experience with the medical gaze, contradicts the traditional queer road film paradigm. When Bree tells her therapist about the phone call from Toby, her therapist insists she travel to see him. As noted above, the therapist is concerned that Bree’s discovery of her son will harm her mental health and refuses to sign off on the surgery unless Bree agrees to visit him. In his analysis of queer road films, Lang asserts that, “The symbolism of ‘the road’ as the freedom from constraints...has a correspondence, first of all, in the gay affirmation of

¹³¹ Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge. 2004) 93.

sexuality: of sexuality as a celebration of the body and the senses.”¹³² For Bree, however, the road trip is a necessity, not a chosen escape. Characters in road films cross societal boundaries and experience liberation outside of normative constraints, but this road trip is forced upon Bree by the medical community, as is her diagnosis of gender dysmorphic disorder: she must again conform to the medical language, fulfilling her therapist’s request in order to receive her surgery. She is uncomfortable with her body and with Toby, a reminder of her abnormal sexuality and physicality as he is the result of sex she had when she was Stanley; her discomfort with the road trip reflects her discomfort with her border crossing. She grudgingly agrees to travel to New York and eventually brings Toby home with her.

As Bree embarks on her road trip with Toby, the film provides another, more traditional gaze – the male gaze. She stops at a gas station in a rural town, filling up the car with her back to the building. On the porch stand a group of men who stare at her. She turns to go inside and pay and is visibly uncomfortable with their attention. As always, she ducks her head and hurries past them, eager to escape their gaze. As she walks past them and into the building, several turn their heads to watch her walk away. To the men, Bree’s cosmopolitan appearance stands in stark contrast to their rural surroundings; indeed, the men are dressed in stereotypically rural clothing such as overalls. To them, Bree reads as an urban woman. Unlike in the scene in the diner, Bree’s performance presumably passes here. Although it takes a different form, this gaze holds just as much power in this scene as in the diner scene. The men are dominant, and their presence poses a potential threat. The scene contains a subtextual threat of heterosexual rape as she is a woman alone in a remote area with several men, and/or their discovery of

¹³² Lang 332.

her transsexuality could be dire indeed. Rural middle America is known for its homophobia and bigotry, and instances of violence against atypically gendered people often occur in such settings; Brandon Teena's rape and murder, which will be discussed in my analysis of Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), is one such example. Bree ducks to avoid them, hiding from their gaze. But just as with King's initial fetishization of Victoria in *Victor/Victoria*, the viewer cannot identify with the men on screen. This scene consequently foregrounds both the act of looking and the performativity of gender. Because the spectator knows Bree is transsexual and a main focus of the film is on her atypical sexuality, our awareness of others' gazes at her is heightened. Furthermore, the spectator's inability to identify unproblematically with the men's gaze increases the spectator's awareness that the men are looking at her. Unable to see Bree as the men do, the spectator is less likely to be swept up in the narrative, as Mulvey argues is often the case, and to ignore their gaze. Such awareness of a usually unconscious and unnoticed act disrupts the monolithic power of the gaze. The fact that the men read her as female underscores the fact that gender does not necessarily follow naturally from sex. Her performance works, and the spectator gets a glimpse into traditional male/female relations.

In the final third of the film, we are presented with another view of Bree. Penniless and without a vehicle, Bree grudgingly visits her family to ask for money in order to make it home in time for her surgery. She knocks, and her parents answer the door. Her father does not recognize her, so she says quietly, "It's me, Dad." Her mother gasps in horror and slams the door. Bree knocks again, and her mother rushes her in, saying, "Get in before the neighbors see you!" As Bree talks to her parents, it becomes

clear why she told the doctor in an earlier scene that her family was dead. Her mother is controlling, disrespectful and disapproving of Bree and her sexuality. This initial encounter not only reflects the often emotionally painful experiences of transsexuals but also the power of the gaze. Bree's mother shuts the door on Bree, concealing her from sight. Seeing her "son" living as a woman is unbearable because she subscribes to the belief that gender follows from sex. Bree's image is painful because it challenges that belief and, as her mother says, she "can't even look at [her]."

The tension between Bree and her mother continues throughout her visit. When they go out to eat, her mother stands behind her chair and stares pointedly at Bree. Steaming, Bree reluctantly pulls out her mother's chair. Her mother simply cannot accept that Bree is a woman and insists upon forcing traditional male gender roles on her. After an uncomfortable dinner, Bree comes home and expresses her feelings to Toby. "I wish just once they'd look at me and see me," she says. "Just once. Really see me." Bree here redefines what it means to see someone. She does not want her parents to look at her and see her physical body that, until after her surgery, will not coincide with her gender. Instead she wants them to see the person she is emotionally and mentally; in short, she wants them to see Bree, not Stanley. She privileges the gender she performs over the sex with which she was born, inverting the binary by making gender the defining term. However, Bree's family cannot leave Stanley behind. Although her mother apparently becomes more comfortable with Bree over time, hugging and comforting her when Toby runs away, the tension remains. As Lang points out, "The queer road movie protagonist's specific dissatisfaction with home and family invariable has to do with the fact that the traditional family is a heterosexual/patriarchal structure which does not

acknowledge (his) desire... he has no place in the traditional family.”¹³³ Bree’s family cannot accept her desire to be a woman because it does not fit into their narrow, conservative, traditional family. The film makes it clear that Bree abandoned them because of their refusal to accept her new lifestyle. Once again Bree leaves her family for of the solitary road, where she is free to express herself away from their restrictive social mores.

Bree may not change the way her mother sees her. The spectator who has followed Bree throughout her journey, however, has seen the real her. We have watched her struggle with her discomfort with her transsexuality as well as with her new status as mother/father to Toby. Whereas Bree’s mother can’t look at her, the spectator has been seeing her for over an hour and learning about the uncomfortable realities of life as a transsexual person. In short, the spectator has come to identify with Bree. In contradiction to Mulvey’s claim that the female character blocks and impedes the flow of the narrative, Bree is our active protagonist, and the spectator experiences the story through her eyes. Bree not only disrupts traditional theories of the gaze but also Mulvey’s narrow conception of woman's role in the narrative. Her mother’s view of her as an unnatural freak comes off as intolerant and offensive; however, this view is the likely result of the first view the spectator was presented – the scientific view that sees Bree as mentally ill. The medical perspective holds that sex should follow naturally from gender. Bree’s gender is feminine, and she wants her body to match the way she feels, but the scientific community pathologizes this desire, and Bree must receive the diagnosis of gender dysmorphic disorder in order to qualify for sexual reassignment surgery. The

¹³³ Lang 334.

medical community holds the same view of Bree that her mother does, although less openly and rudely so: she is a freak.

As demonstrated above, *Transamerica* successfully problematizes gendered theories of the gaze both by emphasizing gender performativity and self-consciously foregrounding the power of looking. But rather than only dealing with the symptoms of gender, the film deals with the root – the Oedipal conflict. Traditional theories of spectatorship rely on strict sex and gender binaries and the Oedipal conflict. When children are born, they experience oneness with their mother. This sense of connectedness is broken during the mirror stage when the child realizes that he or she is a distinct person separate from the mother. Male children experience another break when they discover that the mother does not have a penis. Terrified of castration, the male seeks to mitigate his discomfort by fetishizing women. He begins to identify with the father and feels that he must compete with the father for the mother's attention. As the male child grows, his desire for the mother is replaced with a desire for other women, but the tendency to fetishize remains. The Oedipal scenario relies on strict sexual and gender norms of male/masculine and female/feminine as well as on an assumed heterosexuality, and theories of spectatorship that use the Oedipal conflict as their basis rely on those norms as well. As we have seen, Bree's transsexuality disrupts "normal" spectatorship. Because *Transamerica* deals with an atypically-gendered mother/father and her/his son, the disruption is even deeper.

Most of the elements of the Oedipal conflict are present but decentered in *Transamerica*. Bree is deeply uncomfortable with the fact that she has a son because he serves as a reminder of her life as Stanley. Uncertain how to handle Toby, she does not

tell him that she is transsexual nor that she is his father; instead she pretends to be a woman from a church sent to help young people in trouble. She eventually agrees to drive him to California with her, and early on in their trip, he tries to seduce her. While she is in the bathroom, he lays seductively on the bed in nothing but a small pair of underwear. The camera pulls in tight on his face and keeps the rest of his body in frame. He looks down and adjusts himself so he will look his best for Bree when she comes back into the room. Toby sexualizes himself, becoming the object of the gaze both for Bree and for the spectator. The camera shoots him from the same direction from which Bree will enter, so the spectator identifies with Bree's gaze. Toby is thus objectified in a way that Bree never is, and throughout the film we learn that he feels the only thing he is good for is sex. This scene inverts the binary, and the male becomes the sexualized object whose purpose is merely to provide sexual pleasure to others. However, this scene goes further than inverting the binary, questioning and categorizing as unhealthy the position of sexual object. Toby is consistently presented as a damaged young man, particularly when it comes to sexuality. In this scene and several others, Toby positions himself as a sexual object and seems to feel sex is the only contribution he can make – from repeatedly coming on to Bree to turning tricks for money, Toby is an unstable, broken boy due to his limited self-understanding as sexual object. *Transamerica* does not merely supplant male for female as sexual object. It instead shows the dangerous consequences of such an unhealthy subject position.

In addition to destabilizing the binary and presenting a male as the object of both Bree and the spectator's gaze, this scene also invokes the Oedipal conflict. Just like Oedipus in the Greek myth, Toby is unaware that the woman he is seducing is his parent. Like all

of the other aspects of the Oedipal complex presented in the narrative, however, this one is inverted. Although Bree is biologically Toby's father, her life as a man is over and she instead refers to herself as his mother. In this scene, Toby is unknowingly seducing his mother, just as in the Oedipus myth, but she is actually his father. Furthermore, we later learn that Toby's stepfather frequently sexually abused him. Toby left his home for New York City in order to escape his stepfather, and the film implies that such abuse is responsible for Toby's unhealthy relationship towards sex, as he has learned from his stepfather that he is a tool for the pleasure of others. So not only does Toby make sexual advances to Bree, his mother/father, he has been forced into repeated sexual contact with the man who assumed the role of his father. The film not only inverts the traditional notion of the female object of the gaze by sexualizing Toby and casting him as sex object, but it also complicates the Oedipal foundation of traditional theories of the gaze. Toby's discovery that Bree is biologically male further complicates the Oedipal conflict. One night on a long stretch of highway, Bree has to urinate. She reluctantly pulls over to the side of the road and squats down. Throughout their rural jaunts she has been frightened of encountering snakes and looks around nervously. She hears a strange noise and stands up, afraid a snake is drawing near. As she stands, a car comes up the highway behind her. Toby, who is still in the car, adjusts the rearview mirror. He looks into it and sees Bree holding her penis and urinating, silhouetted against the other car's headlights. He is shocked but says nothing when Bree reenters the car. The scene presents a parallel to the male child's discovery that the mother is without a penis and the resultant castration anxiety. However, here the male child is horrified to discover that his "mother" (although he does not yet know she is his parent) *has* a penis. Ironically, it is

Bree's quest to become a female that results in Toby's discovery. She tells him while in the car that her hormone therapy is a diuretic, so one reason she needs to relieve herself is the medication she takes for her sex change. If she were not transitioning into a woman, Toby might never have discovered that she is not already biologically female.

Additionally, she stands up because she is frightened of snakes. Not only is such a fear stereotypically feminine, but the snake is a common phallic symbol. She stands and exposes her penis because she is afraid of a metaphorical penis. Such irony reflects the complexity of the transsexual body, underscoring the notion that traditional binary patterns of thinking cannot theorize the transgender subject.

The mechanism of Toby's discovery is complex and provocative. His gaze is indirect – he sees only Bree's reflection – and it is unclear whether or not he is actually attempting to look at her, the approaching car, or is merely adjusting the mirror. This is one of the many times that we see Bree's reflection; throughout the film she is continually checking her hair and makeup to ensure that she appears as feminine and beautiful as possible, to make certain her gendered performance is complete. Here, in yet another reversal, her reflection in the eyes of another exposes her femininity as a performance. Because the “mother” is revealed to possess a phallus, Toby finds himself in complex, untheorized territory. Traditional theories of spectatorship are almost wholly reliant on the Oedipal conflict and the gendered binaries and power relations it produces. There is no way with the tools at our disposal to explain Toby's indirect, probably unintentional gaze. He is visibly shaken by his discovery, but Freud's descriptions of the male child's emotional state at the sight of his mother's genitals as deployed by Mulvey in her analysis of spectatorship does not apply in this case. Toby's lack of castration anxiety renders

fetishization unnecessary, just as Bree's transsexuality problematizes fetishization for the spectator. In the film as a whole, and in this scene in particular, the spectator escapes from the oppressive regimes that govern most forms of film spectatorship. Because *Transamerica* redefines what it means to "see" as looking at one's gender presentation rather than his or her anatomical sex, the film allows for an individualized gaze determined by the gender politics of each spectator.¹³⁴

Although Toby is angry, the root of his anger is not Bree's transsexuality but rather her lack of transparency. The next day, the two stop at a roadside souvenir stand. Toby is upset and behaving poorly, and Bree tells him to control himself. The male proprietor of the stand tells him to listen to his mother, and he responds, "She's not my mother! She's not anybody's mother! She's got a dick! She's a fucking lying freak!" The man looks at Bree and flips his sunglasses down over his eyes in an interesting commentary on spectatorship and the transsexual. He first saw Bree as a woman, and gazed at her accordingly. Now that he knows she is transsexual, however, he seeks to hide evidence of his gaze. As they return to the car, Toby explains that he is not upset that Bree has a penis but rather that she was not honest with him. Wounded, he says, "You knew all about me." Throughout the film, Toby has been very open with his own atypical sexuality. He has been arrested in New York City for prostitution; when he and Bree first meet, he wants to go to California with her so he can star in gay pornography; he attempts to seduce Bree several times, even after he learns she is transsexual; and his step-father sexually abused him. What makes Bree a "freak" to Toby is that she was not honest with him. Her conservatism and her determination to be stealth at all times rather than her status as a transsexual renders her unnatural in his opinion.

¹³⁴ Caster, et al 137.

Late in the film the final piece of the Oedipal puzzle falls into place as Bree finally tells Toby she is his father. While they are staying at her parents' house, he comes into her bedroom and once again attempts to seduce her. He disrobes and says, "I think you're sexy, Bree. It's like I see you," and he then kisses her. He presents himself as that which she desires most: someone who thinks she is attractive and who accepts her for who she is. In stark contrast to the way her parents "see" her, looking at her physical body and seeing someone who is a freak, he sees and is attracted to who she is as a person. Again, the male child is expressing love and desire for the mother. Bree, however, disrupts the Oedipal play by admitting that she was his father, Stanley. Toby is stunned and angry, fleeing the house after striking Bree. He is presumably upset that she lied again as he has already accepted her transsexuality. Just as when he discovered she had a penis, he is hurt by her lack of honesty, not scandalized by her body. Earlier in the film Bree described the openly transsexual women they stayed with as "ersatz," or "something pretending to be something it's not." However, ultimately Toby finds Bree to be ersatz as a result of her denial of Stanley.

Overall, by foregrounding the realities of transgendered life, disrupting the traditionally gendered gaze, and transforming the Oedipal conflict, *Transamerica* allows the spectator a way out of sex and gender binaries. As Judith Butler explains in *Undoing Gender*, transpeople are "at the limits of intelligibility;" they inhabit the fringe of what mainstream society deems human.¹³⁵ However, the film goes to great lengths to present Bree as she wishes her parents could see her – not as a freak, not as someone who is mentally ill, but as a human. In the end, Bree has her surgery and is pleased with her new body, but she is heartbroken by her loss of Toby. Immediately following her surgery, she

¹³⁵ Butler 58.

breaks down and weeps, much to the surprise of her therapist. “I thought you said this would be the happiest day of your life!” the therapist exclaims. But Bree has realized that what has arguably held her back throughout the film – her conservatism, her desperation to perfect her performance of femininity down to her anatomy, her fear of discovery – has prevented her from making connections with others. As Gayle Salamon explains, Bree discovers that her sense of self comes not only from her body but from loving and desiring others.¹³⁶ Toby eventually comes to visit her and they continue to develop the untraditional parent-child bond they established over the course of their relationship. Although Bree has no place in a traditional family, she and Toby have crossed borders of sex, sexuality, and the Oedipal scenario together and are able to form a new, queer family, breaking free of the heteronormative mold. Just as desire is unique and cannot easily be categorized, so we come to see Bree not just as a transsexual but as a person, and her journey across sex and gender boundaries mirrors that of the spectator. By encouraging the spectator to slip through the cracks between sex and gender, the film allows for an individualized gaze at Bree that is not based upon rigid binaries.

¹³⁶ Salamon, Gayle, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) 46.

Chapter Five

“I seen him in the full flesh”: Reexamining the Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*

The transgender body is a place of contention and debate. Outside of sex and gender binaries, it emerges as a site at which one can examine the way those binaries are formed and performed. Kimberly Pierce's film, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), is a fictionalized account of the life and murder of Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank), a transgender young man. Brandon befriends a group of young people and lives with them for a few weeks in Falls City, Nebraska. Among them is Lana Tisdell (Chloë Sevigny), with whom Brandon has a romantic relationship. Eventually two of Lana's friends, John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brandon Sexton III), discover that Brandon is biologically female and rape and murder him. The film won critical acclaim, and Hilary Swank nabbed an Oscar for her portrayal of Brandon. However, recent critics have questioned whether or not Pierce adequately conveys Brandon's story. Analyses of the film have tended to focus on the ways in which Brandon's transgender identity affects the spectatorial and the ways in which various characters within the film see him. Because the film focuses so heavily on Brandon's gender performance, which for most of the film remains unknown to the other characters, the spectator cannot suture his or her gaze to those other characters. As a consequence, the film foregrounds the power of the gaze and the danger of an inadequate performance. Of particular interest is Lana's gaze. Through an examination of Brandon's gender performance as well as pivotal interactions between Lana and Brandon, this essay argues that, although her understanding of and relationship with/to Brandon's body fluctuates throughout the film, *Boys Don't Cry* ultimately preserves the complexity of the transgender body through Lana's gaze.

Much like *Transamerica*, *Boys Don't Cry* focuses on the transgender main character's gendered performance and desire to avoid discovery. Much like the first scene from *Transamerica* in which we see Bree get dressed, Brandon also affects his masculine performance physically by suppressing his female body in order to pass as male. We first see Brandon in the trailer where he is living with his friend, Lonny. Lonny is cutting Brandon's hair, and Brandon instructs him to cut it shorter. When Lonny replies it is short enough, Brandon stands and fixes his hair in the mirror, saying softly, "Wow," and smiling at his reflection. He is wearing a plaid men's shirt and men's jeans and, with his new masculine haircut, very successfully passes as a man. However, Lonny gazes at Brandon's crotch and reports that his fake bulge, which he has created from a pair of socks, is "frightening" and "looks like a deformity." Much like Bree's gender performance, Brandon must not only manipulate his hair and clothing; he must also manipulate the appearance of his genitals. Whereas Bree tucked her penis, Brandon creates a fake one. Brandon hurriedly removes and rearranges the socks, eager to look as realistically male as possible.

Brandon's manipulations of his body continue and are again highlighted about halfway through the film. While staying with his new friend, Candace (Alicia Goranson), we see him emerge from the shower and enter his bedroom. His towel is wrapped around his upper body, hiding his breasts, and he pulls out a tampon and surreptitiously inserts it. This is not the first time we have seen Brandon struggle with menstruation; earlier in his stay with Candace, his period began, and he had to wash out his clothing in the bathroom sink to remove the blood. He then had to secretly search for and eventually steal pads from a local store in order to maintain his masculine performance. Such emphasis on

menstruation highlights the difficulty of the life of a pre-operative transsexual, if that is indeed how we can characterize Brandon, who, several times throughout the film, despairs about the high cost of sexual reassignment surgery. Although he can make his body appear masculine through his mode of dress, he is still biologically female, and that fact is eventually Brandon's undoing. After he has inserted the tampon, he hides the wrapper under the mattress, a choice that will later prove to be a mistake. He then straps down his breasts with an Ace bandage and dresses in men's clothes. He again puts a pair of socks in his underwear to create a bulge, checking in the mirror to make sure it looks realistic, all the while mugging at his reflection and smiling at what he sees. Overall it is clear from his mannerisms that he is pleased with the way he looks and is getting more and more comfortable appearing and behaving as a man.

Brandon's performance is not relegated to his physical appearance; he also behaves masculinely throughout the film. In the commentary on the film's DVD release, director Kimberly Pierce stated that she was very impressed with the way Brandon treated women, and his sense of chivalry is reflected in his interactions with the women in his life.¹³⁷ Early in the film, Brandon goes on a date with a young woman at a skating rink. When they leave, he walks her home and kisses her goodnight, saying, "I'm going to stand right here until you're safe inside." He then waits and watches until she enters her home before he leaves, overjoyed with his successful date. He repeats this action later, walking a drunk Lana home to make sure she arrives safely. Such respectful acts reflect the particular type of masculine performance Brandon affects. His brand of masculinity stands in stark contrast to the more brutish masculinity of other male characters in the film such as John Lotter. In one scene, John barges into Lana's room

¹³⁷ *Boys Don't Cry*, dir. Kimberly Pierce, perf. Hilary Swank, DVD, Fox Searchlight, 2005.

unannounced while she is fixing her hair and sits on her bed, despite her verbal indication that she is uncomfortable with his rude entrance and continued presence. Brandon, on the other hand, is kind and generous, treating women with admiration rather than a desire to dominate. The young women Brandon encounters respond well to such good will; his first date smiles gratefully at him when he announces his intentions to watch until she gets inside and gazes back at him lovingly as she walks away. Indeed, he tells Lonny that all the girls he has dated say he's "the best boyfriend they've ever had." As such, one key to Brandon's masculine performance is his protective, doting, chivalrous manner with women.

In addition to his chivalry, Brandon also acts tough and macho in order to prove his masculinity and fit in with John and his friend, Tom Nissen. His first masculine display comes when he meets Candace at a bar. After flirting with her for a few moments, Brandon vacates his bar stool next to her to go buy her some cigarettes. When he does, a large man takes his seat and begins to talk to Candace. She is visibly uncomfortable, says the seat is taken and asks him to leave. He refuses, and Brandon returns to the bar. "Excuse me," he says. "Why don't you leave the lady alone? I don't want any trouble here." In keeping with his chivalrous attitude toward women, Brandon assumes the masculine role of the protector, coming to Candace's aid to fend off this man's unwanted advances. The man stands up, scoffs at Brandon's thinly veiled threat and calls him a "fag" as he shoves him back. Brandon strikes back, and they scuffle until the some other bar patrons, including John, break up the fight. Brandon strains at John's hold, desperate to continue his battle. John, Candace and Brandon escape as the entire bar erupts in fisticuffs and end up in an alleyway as the police arrive. Candace and John

then examine Brandon's face and inform him that he has a black eye. Brandon smiles and examines his reflection proudly in a window. Such an injury is physical proof that he was involved in a fight and aids in his masculine performance; he is delighted to have been involved in such a manly altercation and proud to have the black eye as evidence.

After the bar brawl, he goes home with John and Candace, and his adventure in Falls City begins. One night, he goes with John, Tom, Candace and Lana to a field where a group of people are "bumper skiing." They have tied a rope to the back of a truck and stand on the bumper as the vehicle speeds and turns, and the "skier" attempts to hold on. John jokingly pressures Brandon into taking part in the activity, warning everyone that Brandon is a "prize fighter" from Lincoln and laughingly saying that he is "tough, very tough." John's reference to Brandon's failed masculine display at the bar brawl in Lincoln propels him to bumper ski, which he does several times, each time falling painfully to the ground. Later Lana asks him why he did such a stupid thing, and he replies, "I just thought that's what guys do around here." Brandon openly wants to fit in with the other men in Falls City, and by bumper skiing he believes he is not only making up for his failure to win the bar fight but also behaving the way the other local men act. Both reasons reflect his desire to improve his masculine performance in order to pass as a man in Falls City.

For Brandon, the need to pass is paramount because the consequences of detection are dire. Early in the film, the brother of one of the girls Brandon has been dating discovers Brandon is biologically female. A mob of men chase Brandon home, yelling homophobic slurs and threatening to kill him. This scene, which foreshadows the end of the film when Brandon is discovered as female yet again, shows the dangerous

consequences of a failed gender performance and the necessity to keep his sex hidden. In keeping with the theme of avoiding detection, much of the cinematography of the film is very dark, and most of the action takes place at night. Brandon is often shown in dark settings such as bars or nightclubs, his face half hidden in the shadow. His first sexual encounter with Lana is in a dark field in Falls City, and he is able to hide the fact that he is using a dildo through careful body positioning and his dark surroundings. Just as Bree in *Transamerica* hid her face with large hats and sunglasses, much of the film shows Brandon in the dark, the low light helping to hide any femaleness he may have been unable to suppress.

Conversely, the light is a place of discovery, or at least the fear of discovery. One scene in particular highlights the fear associated with too close a gaze. One morning Brandon, Lana and John are in Lana's bright kitchen with her mother. Brandon is explaining his (manufactured) family history and says that his sister is a model out in Hollywood. Lana's mom then commands, "Come over here closer where I can see you." She is sitting next to a large, bright window and continues, "Let me look at you in the light." Brandon is visibly shaken and walks slowly over to Lana's mom. She takes his face in her hands and turns it towards the light as Brandon stands stiffly and uncomfortably next to her. She closely examines his face for a few moments, but his performance passes; Lana's mom declares he is very handsome and that she has no trouble believing his sister is a model. But much like Bree's discomfort with prolonged looks, this tense moment highlights the fear of detection transsexuals face and serves to categorize the daytime as a place of vulnerability and possible discovery.

Indeed, Brandon's performance unravels because of several pivotal scenes that take place during the day. After Brandon has been staying with her for a few weeks, Candace discovers Brandon has been forging checks in her name. Concerned and angry, she searches his room for evidence of further wrongdoing. She lifts the mattress and finds the tampon wrapper he hid. She picks it up with a troubled look on her face and continues her search, next finding his jeans stained with menstrual blood. Her confusion turns to horror as she sifts through the trash and finds a court summons for Teena Brandon, and she drops to her knees on the floor and weeps, wailing, "No!" Candace's tearful reaction underscores the deep-seated heteronormativity of American culture, and in particular rural American culture. In contrast to Toby's reaction in *Transamerica* in which he was principally angry at Bree not for her transsexuality but for the fact that she hid it, subsequent scenes make it clear that Brandon's transgender lifestyle is the cause of Candace and the rest of the group's ire. John and Tom openly mock Brandon's "gender identity crisis" and refer to him as a "dyke" once they discover he is biologically female. Therefore, Candace's discovery sets Brandon's downfall in motion and highlights the group's discomfort with and intolerance for transsexuality.

When Candace makes her discovery, Brandon is locked in jail. He has a significant criminal past, and it finally catches up with him in Falls City. When he goes to pay a traffic fine, the police discover his identification is false and he is really Teena Brandon. He failed to appear in court on a previous charge so there is a warrant out for his arrest, and he is taken into custody and jailed. Lana finds out and goes to visit him during the day, only to discover he is in the women's cell. She asks what is going on and he replies nervously that he is a hermaphrodite. The camera pulls in tight on Lana as she

closes her eyes at the news. Brandon falters, saying, “Brandon’s not quite a he. Brandon’s more like a...” Lana cuts him off, saying, “Shut up. It’s your business. Look, I don’t care if you’re half monkey or half ape, I’m getting you out of here,” and reaches up to hold his hand through the bars. Lana’s reaction stands in stark contrast to Candace’s behavior. Although she is visibly surprised, closing her eyes as she processes the information, she is not horrified. Instead she accepts him and allows him his privacy. She does not make him admit that he is female; instead she allows him to preserve his maleness, telling him to shut up before he can say it. For Lana, Brandon’s identity and sexuality are a private, personal matter, and she cares for him regardless of his categorization.

Indeed, in addition to the emphasis on Brandon’s gender performance and the complexity of the transgender body, the film focuses heavily on Lana’s perception of Brandon and develops her female gaze as a site of ambiguity. The first scene that examines the power of Lana’s gaze is her first sex scene with Brandon. Brandon convinces Lana to leave work early, and they talk and make love in a field near a body of water. Lana is unaware that Brandon is not biologically male, and he makes love to her using a dildo. While they are having sex, Lana looks up at Brandon and sees down his shirt. From her point of view, the spectator sees Brandon’s bound breasts with a bit of cleavage showing. At this point, the scene cuts abruptly away to a shot of Lana in her bedroom with two female friends who question her about the sexual encounter. She stares blankly up at the ceiling, avoiding their questions. The quick cut away to a silent Lana intimates that perhaps Lana knew all was not as it seemed with Brandon, and her continued actions both in the sex scene and the intercut scene in her bedroom support

such a reading. After Lana climaxes, Brandon sits her up and asks twice, “Are you okay?” Lana breathes heavily and looks around, disoriented. Finally she replies, “Yeah. I mean, I don’t know.” She then reaches over to feel Brandon’s penis and her gaze flutters over his chest. She goes on to examine his jawline, chin, and eyebrows – all parts of the face that tend to separate masculine features from feminine features – and concludes, “You’re so handsome.” Despite her apparent doubts and unease, it seems as though Brandon’s gender performance passes inspection.

However, the sequence then cuts back to the bedroom scene with her friends where she says, “And then we took off our clothes and went swimming.” However, the spectator does not see this happen and can assume that it did not or Lana would have seen Brandon nude and known he was not biologically male. Such a lie implies that Lana’s doubts lingered even after her examination of Brandon’s phallus and face. Anxious to convince herself and her friends that Brandon’s body matched his gender performance, she pretends she has seen him fully nude. Her evasiveness continues as her friend asks her point blank, “Did you do it?” Lana replies, “What do ya think?” then squeals and jumps out of bed. She never fully admits to having sex with Brandon, allowing her friends to fill in the blanks. As Patricia White explains, “If we credit her with ‘knowing’ about Brandon’s gender performance, we might understand why she leaves the question’s presumptive ‘yes’ answer unspoken.”¹³⁸ According to her friends’ and quite probably her own definition of “doing it,” if Lana suspects that Brandon might not be biologically male, their transgender encounter would not fit into the heteronormative parameters of sex. By asking, “What do ya think?” she allows their imaginative assumptions to answer their own question, just as her fantasy allows her to accept Brandon’s maleness despite

¹³⁸ White, Patricia, “The *Boys Don’t Cry* Debate: Girls still cry,” *Screen* 42.2 (2001) 220.

evidence to the contrary. This scene sets up Lana's gaze, the female gaze, as one that does not have to see to believe, eschewing the traditional emphasis on genitalia as the indicator of one's "true" sex.

Lana's gaze continues to be defined throughout the film as one that sees not the physical body but rather accepts Brandon's gender performance. Lana's friends and family, including Brandon's eventual murderers, John and Tom, suspect Brandon has lied about his sex after he is arrested and his name appears in the police blotter as Teena Brandon. They violently accost Brandon in Lana's home, demanding that he strip and prove he is really a man. Lana rushes in to help him, asking John and Tom to trust her to see Brandon naked and report back to them. Shaken, Lana and Brandon go into her bedroom. Brandon starts to unbutton his pants and stammeringly tries to explain his situation, but Lana says, "Button up your pants; you're not showing me anything. Think about it. I know you're a guy." This scene echoes the previous scene in Lana's bedroom where she and her friends discuss her sexual encounter with Brandon. Again, she ultimately leaves the question unanswered, instead allowing the presumed answer to remain only in their minds. Just as she responds, "What do ya think?" to her friends' pressing questions about her actions with Brandon, so she commands Brandon to "think about" how she knows he must be male rather than show her. As Judith Halberstam explains, this further defines Lana's female gaze "as a willingness to see what is not there (a condition of all fantasy) but also a refusal to privilege the literal over the figurative (Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation)."¹³⁹ Just as she did in the jail scene in which she cut Brandon off before he could admit that he was female, she again

¹³⁹ Halberstam, Judith, "The *Boys Don't Cry* Debate: The transgender gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*," *Screen* 42.3 (2001) 295.

allows the “fantasy” of Brandon’s gender performance to outweigh his physical body, preserving his maleness through her refusal to adopt “the scrutinizing gaze of science and ‘truth.’”¹⁴⁰

Brandon continues to try to justify himself, telling her of his “birth defect.” Lana brushes him off, replying, “I have weird stuff, too. Don’t be scared.” This statement normalizes Brandon’s transgenderism. She empathizes with him, explaining that she has issues that make her unique as well. Rather than allowing his attempted admission of his “true” sex, which she may already suspect, to throw her, she classifies it as one of the many different types of physical and emotional abnormalities that all people have. Brandon then sits on the bed next to her and asks, “So what are you gonna tell them?” She answers, “I’m gonna tell them what they wanna hear. I’m gonna tell them what I know is true.” Again, Lana’s gaze is based upon the “fantasy” of Brandon’s gender performance rather than his anatomical sex. She averts her gaze away from his body, refusing to look at him, and accepts what she “thinks” and “knows” to be true based upon her interactions with Brandon. Furthermore, she plans to share that fantasy with John and Tom, hoping that they, too, will be willing to rely not on their sight but upon their belief as she tells them “what they wanna hear.”

Brandon and Lana then exit the safe confines of her bedroom where the female gaze reigned, reentering the dangerous space of the living room. Lana tells John, Tom, and the rest of her friends and family, “I seen him in the full flesh. I seen it. I know he’s a man.” Again, she lies to preserve Brandon’s performance just as she lied to her friends, padding her story of their lovemaking with the detail that they swam together. But here her lie explicitly marks his flesh as male as she claims to have seen “it,” which is

¹⁴⁰ Halberstam 295.

presumably his penis. Unwilling to castrate him, she takes again what she “thinks” and “knows” and allows his flesh to mirror it. Rather than traditional sex/gender binaries in which the performed gender is expected to follow the biologically given sex, Lana reverses the polarity. She allows his performance to mark his body as male rather than allowing his body to mark his gender performance as incongruous.

However, Lana’s family and friends are not as trusting as she had hoped. Her mother slams Brandon against the wall, demanding to know the truth. John and Tom then decide to do as they had originally wished and strip Brandon. They drag him into the bathroom, holding him against the wall with his hands above his head and pull his pants down. Brandon shouts for them to stop and covers then closes his eyes as they undress him. He attempts to shut off his own gaze, his own knowledge of his biological sex and attendant castration. John and Tom are unsurprised but disgusted when they find Brandon to be female. Thus the film, as Halberstam notes, “identifies the male gaze with that form of knowledge which resides in the literal.”¹⁴¹ The male gaze is that of science, reason and biological fact. Unlike Lana’s gaze, which holds to fantasy and forces Brandon’s body to conform in her mind to his gendered performance, the violent male gaze sees that Brandon’s gender performance does not coincide with his biological sex, and the men are outraged.

They call Lana into the bathroom and yell for her to look at Brandon. She, like Brandon, covers and closes her eyes, unwilling to castrate him by adopting the male gaze. The men force her to kneel before Brandon and open her eyes. As Tom holds her face in front of Brandon’s crotch, the action momentarily stills as Brandon, nude from the waist down and helpless, looks out into the hallway and sees a fully-clothed Brandon staring

¹⁴¹ Halberstam 295.

back. As Halberstam explains, "...this shot/reverse-shot involving the two Brandons now serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability and also to confirm Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated."¹⁴² Such a split reflects the transgender gaze, "a look divided within itself," and here acknowledges both Brandon's female-sexed body and his masculine gender performance.¹⁴³ Lana's female gaze seems to adopt such a divided look as well, for even as Tom holds her face before Brandon's vagina, she screams, "Leave *him* alone!" (emphasis added). Although she is forced to look upon Brandon's naked body as the men try to force her to adopt their male gaze, she refuses, retaining her female gaze which accepts Brandon's gender performance as "truth." Lana adopts the transgender gaze, looking at the castrated Brandon before her but seeing, in her mind's eye, the masculine Brandon who gazes back at them from the hallway.

After Brandon is castrated and humiliated, John and Tom take him out into the country and brutally rape him. They return to town and Brandon escapes, hiding in a shed. Lana comes and finds him huddled and shaking on a couch, beginning undoubtedly the most controversial scene for feminist and queer critics. She joins him on the couch and looks at him, touching his face. "You're so pretty," she concludes, revising her earlier declaration that he was "so handsome." She then asks, "What were you like before all this? Were you like me, like a girl girl?" Brandon replies, "I guess, like a long time ago. And then I was just like a boy girl." They kiss, and Lana stammers, "I don't know if I'm gonna know how to do..." Brandon reassures her, and the camera fades as they begin to make love.

¹⁴² Halberstam 296.

¹⁴³ Halberstam 296.

The scene is undeniably problematic, and it is no surprise that it has caused dissension and anger amongst critics. It is illogical and even offensive to assume that Brandon would wish to make love so soon after the brutal bathroom scene and his subsequent double rape. Many rape victims struggle for years to regain a healthy, normal sex life, and the assumption that Brandon is easily able to have sex with Lana so soon is ludicrous. While the scene could be read as a recovery of sex, a recoloring of the act as beautiful rather than horrific, its timing is disturbing. Moreover, many critics find fault with what they see as Brandon's being "humanistically recovered by the script into a love that not-so-humanistically refuses the masculine gender he has struggled to become."¹⁴⁴ Halberstam in particular claims that the film reduces its transgender message by reconfiguring Brandon as a woman:

In many ways the encounter that follows seems to extend the violence enacted upon Brandon's body by John and Tom, since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*. Lana, contrary to her previous commitment to his masculinity, seems to see him as a female, calling him 'pretty' and asking him what he was like as a girl. . . 'Truth' here becomes sutured to nakedness. . . [The film] pulls back from its commitment to [Brandon's] masculinity here by allowing his femaleness to become legible and significant to Lana's desire.¹⁴⁵

Halberstam reads Lana's curious probing about Brandon's past as Teena as well as her declaration that he is pretty rather than handsome as her acceptance of his femaleness. Such a reading of the scene is valid. Lana's description of Brandon as "pretty" reconfigures him as at least somewhat feminine in direct contrast to her earlier

¹⁴⁴ Henderson, Lisa, "The *Boys Don't Cry* Debate: The class character of *Boys Don't Cry*," *Screen* 42.3 (2001) 301.

¹⁴⁵ Halberstam 297.

assertion of his masculinity when she calls him handsome after their first sexual encounter. However, all other references to his femaleness and/or femininity are in the past tense; she acknowledges that he was female and possibly feminine “before all this,” with “this” presumably referring to his transgender life as a man and inquires, “Were you like me?” While the “pretty” comment risks the negation of Brandon’s masculinity, her questions about his *past* as a girl show an acknowledgment that things have changed and he is no longer like her, which is to say female. Therefore, her recognition of his past femininity and current female genitalia does not necessarily negate his masculinity; rather it reflects the complex nature of the transgender body.

However, in keeping with a reading that sees Brandon reconfigured as female, Brandon and Lana’s relationship changes as well. Indeed, Henderson argues that Lana’s comment, “I don’t know if I’m gonna know how to...” cements the lesbian nature of their relationship, saying:

It is her first declaration of sexual inexperience (despite earlier love scenes), and thus becomes a self-conscious reference to the specifically lesbian sex Lana has never had but is about to, with Brandon as a girl. Maddeningly, the scene affirms what Brandon’s rapists had imposed. . . - that Brandon is female.¹⁴⁶

Both Halberstam and Henderson claim that the film not only disavows Brandon’s masculinity by reconfiguring him as feminine, but that it also replaces his transgender sexual relationship with Lana with a less controversial lesbian relationship. Henderson points specifically to Lana’s trepidation at pleasuring Brandon as the film’s acknowledgment of his femaleness, echoing Halberstam’s analysis that the film loses

¹⁴⁶ Halberstam 300.

some of its transgressive grit by “allowing [Brandon’s] femaleness to become legible and significant to Lana’s desire.”¹⁴⁷

However, such an interpretation ignores the complexity of the transgender subject. Lana is not necessarily nervous to interact sexually with Brandon, as Halberstam says, “*as if he were a woman.*”¹⁴⁸ Lana is expressing her trepidation and inexperience pleasuring female genitalia; such a fact does not necessarily mean that she is ignoring his masculine gender, as Henderson claims, but only that she is acknowledging that Brandon has a vagina.¹⁴⁹ As previously stated, all references Lana makes to Brandon’s lived experiences as a female and his femininity are in the past tense, and she recognizes that his feminine gender performance has been replaced by masculinity (i.e. “Were you a girl girl. . . before all this?”). In keep with her reading of this sexual encounter as lesbian, Henderson goes on to argue that:

[Brandon] finally becomes a transitional body made violently accountable to a gender binarism which permits no alternative embodiment or subjectivity, demanding instead that both one’s body and claims about one’s self conform to (born) male masculinity or (born) female femininity, and to heterosexuality as their normative counterpart.¹⁵⁰

In other words, Henderson argues that Lana’s acceptance of Brandon’s female genitalia forces her to see him as feminine; but this is unclear from Lana’s words and actions, and to ignore the continued transgender aspects of their sexual relationship is ironically, as Henderson said, to make Brandon “accountable to a gender binarism which permits no

¹⁴⁷ Halberstam 297.

¹⁴⁸ Halberstam 297.

¹⁴⁹ Henderson 300.

¹⁵⁰ Henderson 300.

alternative embodiment.” Lana has openly acknowledged Brandon’s transgenderism where before she perhaps only suspected it; such recognition does not necessarily replace her female gaze with that of the male gaze, insistent on biological fact as truth. It does not, in other words, create a lesbian relationship but rather a more explicitly transgender sexual encounter.

Brenda Cooper presents a similar reading of the scene, concluding, “the film’s narratives make it possible to read Lana’s behavior as more ambiguous” than Halberstam and Henderson claim “and, ultimately, as far more liberatory. . . The ambiguity of Lana’s attraction to Brandon as a man on one hand, and her acknowledgment and acceptance of his biological sex on the other hand, subvert heteroideology and its inherent oppression of sexual difference.”¹⁵¹ Notably, in contrast to the previous sex scene between Lana and Brandon in which Brandon used the dildo, the spectator is not privy to this sexual encounter. As they begin to kiss on the couch, the camera pans up and fades out. Therefore, the only sex scene the spectator sees in full is between Brandon “as a man” and Lana; the fade-out prevents their relationship from being explicitly rendered lesbian. Furthermore, through Lana’s recognition of Brandon’s female genitalia, Brandon can now receive pleasure from sex in a way he could not previously. Metaphorically, just as in the bathroom scene, there are two Brandons. There is the castrated Brandon, his lack of a phallus made visible now through sex with Lana, and there is the masculine Brandon, his gender performance intact. Lana seems to embrace both Brandons at once. As a result of her acknowledgment of Brandon’s female body but not her disavowal of

¹⁵¹ Cooper, Brenda, “*Boys Don’t Cry* and Female Masculinity: Reclaiming a Life & Dismantling the Politics of Normative Heterosexuality,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.1 (2002) 56.

his masculine gender, as well as the spectator's lack of access to their final sexual encounter, their relationship remains complex and transgender.

Overall, the film encourages the spectator to eschew the traditional male gaze in favor of more open female and transgender gazes. Brandon's masculine appearance and behavior highlights the performativity of gender as well as the power of the gaze. There are serious consequences for a failed performance, and because the other characters do not know Brandon is transgender during most of the film, the spectator's awareness of Brandon's performativity and his need to avoid detection are heightened. Furthermore, through Lana's eyes, the spectator comes to view Brandon as a complex transgender man. Although the final sex scene between Brandon and Lana is problematic, it does not serve to undermine the film's message about transgender embodiment and the validity of Brandon's gender performance. It does not replace Lana's female gaze with the male gaze, which insists upon the unalienable "truth" of biological sex, rendering Brandon female. Rather it reflects the complexity of Brandon's situation and serves to meld the two Brandons – the castrated Brandon and the masculine Brandon – into one.

The Birdcage, *Victor/Victoria*, *Transamerica*, and *Boys Don't Cry* allow the spectator a way out of strictly gendered spectatorial positions. The presence of atypically-gendered characters, be they drag queens, pseudo-drag queens, transgender or transsexual people, disrupts the spectators' ability to identify with, fetishize or objectify the main characters unproblematically. Through its use of camp and parody, *The Birdcage* foregrounds the performative nature of gender and renders it and conservative, hegemonic ideology ludicrous. The many drag performances in *Victor/Victoria* similarly

expose gender as a set of tropes and behaviors rather than as natural, but the film ultimately allows the male gaze to reign. Bree and Toby's relationship in *Transamerica* goes beyond disrupting gendered theories of spectatorship by disrupting the very Oedipal base of those theories. And *Boys Don't Cry* preserves the power of the female and transgender gazes, allowing the spectator to see the complexity of the transgender body. Overall these films allow for individualized gazes that are not dependent upon the sex or gender of the spectator but rather on each spectator as an individual.