

DeMilio, Kara

Boys Don't Cry Film Analysis

“The first problem of the media is posed by what does not get translated, or even published in the dominant political languages.” (Jacques Derrida)

Boys Don't Cry is an award winning biopic that tells the story of Brandon Teena who was tragically raped and murdered outside of Falls City, Nebraska on December 31, 1993. *Boys Don't Cry* was directed by Kimberly Pierce who became interested in Brandon after reading about his murder while she was a graduate student at Columbia University. Pierce did extensive research on Brandon's life and spent almost five years writing the screenplay for the film (*PopMatters*, 2014). Much of the film is dark and gloomy. The lack of color makes the city seem dull and lifeless. Pierce's use of harsh artificial light signifies the severe realities of the Midwest, America's heartland. In the dark open spaces, the characters in this film seem isolated. The time-lapse transition shots of open land in conjunction with the small interior spaces of the homes serve to disorient the viewer. It is upon this backdrop that feelings of isolation, frustration, alienation, and “abjection” propel two individuals to perpetuate an extreme act of violence and hatred against Brandon Teena (Dittmar, 146).

Written postmortem, this film and its portrayal of Brandon offer a subversive depiction of the objective cultural gaze and construction of Brandon's identity. I have included the above quote by Derrida because it highlights an important fact, which served as a catalyst for and drive behind Pierce's creation of this film; Gender and sexual nonconformists are rarely made visible to the public through the media and when they are it is rarely a positive portrayal. Thus, they remain largely misunderstood, a fact which is exposed in this film.

This film serves to highlight the relationship between knowledge, power, and violence. I think that Pierce created this film not only to raise public awareness about trans phobia and violence against trans people, but also as a platform to challenge dominant and oppressive constructions of gender and sexuality. Pierce wants viewers to think critically about the ways in which knowledge is created, who constructs this knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge influences social relations of domination and resistance. Only through the creation of new knowledge can we hope to power social change.

The opening scene of the film serves to both orient the viewer and to set the mood of the film. We are introduced to the film with Brandon's eyes looking back at us in a rearview mirror. He is looking directly at the viewer, inviting us to come along for the ride. We are invited into his world and as a result, we as viewers are forced to question our own taken for granted assumptions about gender. Brandon's gaze represents the first type of gaze that is constructed in this film. *Boys Don't Cry* enables viewers to see the "Brandon Teena story" from Brandon's perspective. Since the media coverage and creation of both the documentary and Hollywood film were created postmortem, they were inherently limited in that Brandon was unable to speak for himself. What sets this film apart from other accounts is that Pierce did extensive research into Brandon's life and tried to let him shine through the film. Instead of creating an account where mainstream media or Brandon's peers (in the case of the documentary) speak for and about him, Pierce tried to create a film that showcased his life as he dictated it.

Right from the start of the film, Brandon makes it clear that he is male. Viewers are first introduced to Brandon and his cousin who says to Brandon, "You are not a

boy!..... why don't you admit that you're a dyke?”. Brandon replies, “Because I'm not a dyke”. Brandon is a male and that is how we are to see him for the remainder of the film. This film is centered around transgendered subjectivity which is particularly important since most dominant media coverage did not respect Brandon’s personal identity. Media coverage was printed postmortem which made it impossible for Brandon’s voice to be heard. He became an object to be spoken for and about.

As viewers, we are also forced to question how the politics of visibility and media representations influence the creation of knowledge or truths about trans people. As viewers, we are able to assume a multiplicity of gazes including the cultural gaze, the counter cultural gaze and the transgendered subjective gaze. We see Brandon through the eyes of his peers and the law, a perspective that constitutes the cultural gaze. The cultural gaze is reflected in subsequent media coverage and discussion about Brandon’s rape and murder. If we consider the media coverage of Brandon’s death, we begin to see a pattern emerge. Newspaper headlines read “Death of a deceiver”, “Deadly Deception: Teena Brandon’s Double Life May Have Led to a Triple Murder”, and “Cross-Dresser Killed Two Weeks After Town Learned Her True Identity”. These draw from the dominant ideologies and narrow visual lexicons which help to create and perpetuate trans phobia.

Pierce works to debunk these myths. Instead of constructing Brandon’s death as an inevitable consequence of his “deception” and “double life”, the film positions the risk of violence faced by trans people as a consequence of the ideological limitations of gender binaries. These binaries are built upon the assumption that gender is intrinsically linked to biological sex. Thus people who transgress these binaries become a threat to the natural order of things. Brandon was a threat both to the law and to the masculinity of

Lotter and Nissan. I saw the violence perpetrated by Lotter and Nissan as a corrective rape serving to reify the gender binary and reinforce the gender hierarchy where hegemonic masculinity reigns supreme. “As Brandon’s assailants would have it, the girl ‘Teena’ was beaten, raped, and murdered because she passed as a man” (Dittmar 146). Rigney notes that “female masculinity poses both a literal and metaphoric threat to male masculinity and the sex/gender binary” (Rigney 183). (I disagree with her usage of this term “female masculinity” since Brandon clearly articulates that he is a male, but her point remains effective nonetheless). In other words, those who are deemed eligible to reap the benefits of male privilege must have the correct anatomy to accompany this privilege.

“At stake here are queer modes of being our society sees as ranging from sinful and criminal to repellent, taboo, and ‘sick’ ” (Dittmar, 146). Legal and mental institutions are key in shaping and informing ideas about gender. Their internal actors often work to reify the gender binary and police gender expression. Brandon is forced to pay for his gender transgressions first through his sexual assault and corrective rape by Lotter and Nissan and then through his symbolic re-rape by the law—an organ of the government which has no protections in place for people like Brandon.

The interrogation performed by Sheriff Laux after Brandon’s assault and rape showcases the fact that the gender binary can have significant legal consequences. The interrogation was not only invasive and offensive, but can also be viewed as a re-rape. Laux asks Brandon, “Doesn’t it kinda get your attention somehow that he wouldn’t just put his hand in your pants and just play with you a little bit?”. Instead of a substantive analysis of the situation (asking pertinent questions in regards to Brandon’s assault and

rape), Sherriff Laux is preoccupied with his sexual anatomy and getting Brandon to acknowledge that he is in fact female. In doing so, Brandon faces the legal shredding of his identity and moves from the realm of victim to that of the accused.

In determining legal sex, legal institutions often reduce a person's identity to their body parts (Penis=male and Vagina=female). It involves both class and sex discrimination and not only violates Brandon's individual right to privacy, but his bodily integrity as well. This process of being sexed by the state is also problematic because it works under the assumption that there are only two sexes, but words like sex, male, and female in the everyday sense have no place for transsexuals. For transsexual and intersex people, physical characteristics of sex and gender identity may conflict. This is affirmed when John Lotter pulls down Brandon's pants and exclaims "Ugh, what are you!". This binary does not only make people uncomfortable when an individual does not fit neatly into either category. Our biological bodies do not always adhere to this rigid sexual binary, thus it doesn't make sense that the state and legal system remain so preoccupied with maintaining that there are only two sexes.

In order to counter this cultural gaze, Pierce centers the film on the love story of Lana and Brandon. We see Brandon through the eyes of Lana-Brandon's intimate partner who is unwilling to concede to this cultural gaze (even against the protests of her friends and family). Much of the close ups in this film focus on Lana's facial expressions in relation to her interactions with Brandon. The camera often pans in on her face in response to key moments in the film. One key moment in the film was the transition between Lana and Brandon's first sexual encounter and her retelling of this event to her friends in her bedroom. The film alternates back and forth between these scenes several

times as Lana recounts her intimate experience with Brandon. The camera zooms in on Lana's face as she notices Brandon's cleavage while making love to him and then cuts to a close up of her face as she reflects on this moment in her bedroom. The camera registers her surprise in the former and then ambivalence that transforms into a smile in the latter.

Lana and Brandon share several intimate scenes together. They are usually similarly positioned in the frame (both sitting, both standing etc.) and there is usually a central horizontal or vertical dividing of the frame giving each character an equal portion of the frame. This fosters a feeling of closeness and egalitarianism between the couple and further highlights the disruptive and invasive nature of their peers as they probe into the specifics of Brandon and Lana's relationship and Brandon's identity (the characteristics of his physical anatomy).

After watching this film, it becomes clear that in order to eradicate the injustices faced by transgender individuals, we need to reexamine our rigid gender and sexual binaries. Our culture is devoted to this idea that there are two and only two sexes and two and only two genders, which is just not the case. These ideas are outdated and limiting for marginalized individuals who do not conform to these standards. As stated by Riki Wilchins in her book "Queer Theory, Gender Theory", "Binaries are like the black holes of knowledge. Nothing ever gets out. And nothing new can get in." (Wilchins, 41). It is also imperative that we make gender a rights issue. In doing so, individuals like Brandon are given "permission to be all that they are, regardless of whether other people consider them gender-acceptable" (Wilchins, 19).

Works Cited

1. "Interview with Kim Peirce: *Boys Don't Cry*." *PopMatters*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.popmatters.com/feature/interview-kimberly-peirce/>>.
2. Dittmar, Linda. "Performing Gender in *Boys Don't Cry*," in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 145-62.
3. Chapter 9, "Brandon Goes to Hollywood: *Boys Don't Cry* and the Transgender Body in Film," by Melissa Rigney, originally appeared in *Film Criticism* 28,2 (2003-2004).
4. Wilchins, Riki Anne. *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*. Los Angeles, CA: Alyson, 2004. Print.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.640 Screen Women: Body Narratives in Popular American Film
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.