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Transgender and transsexual people's sexuality in the media

Karine Espineira

A longstanding concern voiced by trans groups and their most public figures is to 'change the image of trans in society' – a concern expanded since the 2000s by a wish to 'change the image of trans in the media'.¹

For decades, as a means to protect themselves from being incorporated into cabaret, prostitution or pornography by the media, people self-identifying as transsexual have forbidden themselves any form of sexuality.² As for people who recognize themselves as transgender, they only experienced media coverage, confessional [*confidentielle*] and contentious, later. If transsexuals seem to have succeeded in shedding their sexuality, transgender people saw themselves dispossessed of their gender and loaded with sexuality; something which seems to have partially rendered invisible their critiques of the gender order, of binaries and of sexism. Media paradigms have had an impact in the field, creating confusion, division and competition.

In order to shed light on the interrelated processes of over-sexualisation and desexualisation of trans identities, the findings of a participant observation carried out between 2008 and 2012 (focussed on trans identity organizations and cooperatives) and analyses of two audiovisual archives will be drawn upon.³

Trans modes of naming and identification

In the French context, the prefix 'trans' has been associated with the suffix 'identity' since the 2000s, having been associated in an international context with sexuality (transsexuality) since the 1950s and with gender (transgender) since the 1970s. Thus the term 'trans identity' [*transidentité*] is an umbrella term under which transsexual and transgender people as well as alternative trans identities recognize themselves. It coexists with the prefixes trans or trans* [*trans*], the use of these abbreviations marking the reversal [*retourne-ment*] of stigma.⁴ These terms and prefixes, products of community circles and trans identity militancy, are now public knowledge thanks to the increasing mediatization of trans lifestyles since the 1970s.

The public is probably less familiar with the identity positions that can be mapped through acronyms and their run-offs. The acronym MtF means *male to female*, translated into French as '*homme vers femme*' (and not '*mâle vers*

femelle). FtM means *female to male* (*femme vers homme*). With the politicisation of parts of the trans identity community, the acronyms have been reformulated: for instance, Ft* or FtX (more rarely in the sense Mt*) underline that the gender arrived at or headed for is considered *unknown* or *undetermined*, the asterisk or the X registering a refusal of assignment.⁵ The politics of transgender are made readable and intelligible by the use of these terminologies and graphics, a use unknown and ignored, however, by the media.

The birth of the trans phenomenon as a reality and as a social issue has been accompanied in the media by questions concerning the identity, gender and sexuality of trans people. But transsexuals reject the terms that define them because they judge them inadequately: they are directed towards sexuality and not to identity. The term 'transsexual' for example was rejected by Christine Jorgensen – named as the first transsexual operated on in history on the 1 December 1952 by the *New York Daily News*: 'Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty'.⁶ With Jorgensen it was the story of a first *sex change* which was picked up on by the media worldwide, as happened especially in relation to the famous event of her disembarking from a plane in 1953 in New York, during which her heterosexuality was extensively foregrounded.⁷ Almost thirty years later, on the 19 October 1979 in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jorgensen identified as transgender, a term which seemed more suited to describe her journey.

In 1982, in the continuing spirit of distinguishing identity from sexuality, she illustrated her point: 'Sexuality is who you sleep with but gender is who you are'.⁸ People who are identified as, or who self-identify as, transsexual often try to foreground this distinction in the media and have done so since the first televised discussions and the first gross simplifications [*vulgarisations*] by representatives of the medical establishment.⁹ Despite this, the varied, overlapping interest for trans people's sexuality can be read through the presumption/injunction of heterosexuality and abundant speculation about the sex lives of people who have not had surgery.

Trans sexuality as grasped by French television

In the social and media imaginary, two principal categories of trans identity are defined oppositionally. The first has been called *transsexual*; in the general media since the mid-1970s it has been presented as coupled with an appeal for tolerance and acceptance. The second was called *transvestite* [*travestie*] in the French context until the term transgender became known. Television addressed this topic broadly by way of the angle of male prostitution linked to Marseille's underworld, before discussing 'trans prostitution' in the Bois de Boulogne area of Paris in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰

The sexuality of trans people is a subject television tackles more or less directly. It is usually portrayed as heterosexual. Confusion and incomprehension is created when it is not. This can be observed with Ludwig Trovato

on the show *Ça se discute* [*That's debatable*], whose portrayal contrasts with the more concordant [*consensuel*] depiction of Stéphanie who appeared on the same programme.¹¹ Ludwig, who self-defines as Ft*, speaks liberally of sexual freedom whereas Stéphanie gives guarantees of her heterosexuality.¹² She waits with her boyfriend for her sex reassignment surgery so she can fully live out this aspect of her loving relationship. A few days away from this important step, as a token of good manners, the conversation dictates an 'acceptance of asexuality'. It seems obligatory while the gender order has not been re-established. Are Stéphanie and her partner able to acknowledge having a sexuality? Must they be above suspicion? Transsexualism seems to marginalise sexuality.¹³ The pledges to normality insisted upon by medical protocols and reformulated by the media are many and have been elevated to moral guarantees. Asexuality is a defence as it does not give rise to suspicions either of an uncontrolled sexuality or of homosexuality. The desexualizing of identity is also true of passing [*laissez-passer*].

Another example is provided by one of the episodes of the series *Tribunal*, which showcases the ruling regarding an application for civil status by Jacqueline.¹⁴ This person had known a life path similar to autobiographical narratives such as that of Maud Marin.¹⁵ The broadcast is well-documented and illustrates quite faithfully the atmosphere surrounding requests to change civil status. The judge calls Jacqueline's partner to the stand: 'You know that genetically this is a man? [...] How can you love this thing?' The partner is asked to recognize that she is 'a man' and not who she says she is (a woman) – which makes a homosexual of him. This kind of moral punishment is familiar to trans people. Should we therefore be surprised by the defensive strategies which are put in place?

In the category 'appealing ambiguity' [*charme de l'ambiguïté*], the trans media personage is above all a woman whose hyperfemininity and sex appeal is extolled which is why shows are interested in all kinds of licentiousness.¹⁶ This woman is said to be 'more womanly than women' and leaves the jury out [*laisserait planer le doute*] on her crotch. Are we speaking of a transvestite or of a transgender person from the cabaret, prostitution, or the world of sexual profligacy? Trans sexuality is also fantasised and/or staged through pornographic imagery. This places 'shemales' centre stage in productions that digital media now recycle as 'vintage' in peer-to-peer file exchange fora on the Internet.¹⁷ It should be noted that *shemale* is a pejorative term used to describe a person taking hormones (oestrogen etc.) but who has not had genital surgery. It is used to refer not only to prostitutes but also actresses and models in films and magazines produced by the porn industry. The term is all the more offensive when applied to a transsexual person (presumed to have had surgery), it equates – especially in the Anglo-Saxon context – with an accusation of prostitution. As a study of the peak mediatizing of the Bois de Boulogne in the period 1988-1992 illustrates, prostitution is one of the themes by which trans sexuality has been apprehended [*saisie*], through a mixture of voyeurism and fantasy, of censure and prejudice.¹⁸

Finally, like film productions, the realm of Internet pornography with its amateur and professional *tubes*, provides other representations.¹⁹ *TGirl Sex* which plays on established motivations of trans women [*la femme trans*] who have not had surgery, is clearly a distinct genre, 'unrefined and stereotyped', in which the trans woman finds herself reduced to a *tranny* or *transsexual*, be she *babysitter*, *cheerleader*, *prostitute* or *escort*, or a *young Asian tranny*, a *ladyboy*.²⁰ She is hunter/prey, active/passive, even dominatrix. The *tranny* or the *Tgirl* is not satisfied with simply being a multicultural sexual figure, she also combines and mixes transgender and transsexual figures. Pornographic productions like those that 'mock genre/gender [*genre*] conventions',²¹ trans *post-porno* that is 'endowed with a political content', that resists, are to be found in other channels in the productions of Morty Diamond, Tobi Hill-Meyer or Buck Angel which break with porn focussed on trans people that is made for consumption by a non-trans audience.²² If mainstream pornography hypersexualizes trans people, pornography produced and distributed by trans people introduces a gender confusion which should not be understood solely in terms of trouble but also appreciated as a rupture with biological determinism.

Overlapping processes linked to sexuality and gender

Through providing transgender people with a paraphilia or even an autogynephilia, the sexualizing of trans existence seems highly pronounced.²³ By contrast, the treatment of transsexuals gives rise to a 'consensual focus on gender'²⁴ that involves proving an often archetypal femininity or masculinity.²⁵ As in her everyday life, the woman labelled as transsexual has had to be, and must still be, a moral person on the media stage. For the media, her *quest for identity* is a *social fact*. Sex reassignment is permitted on the condition that there is total adhesion to the binary system of the gender. For her part, the transgender woman is hypersexualised through pornographic imagery and an association with prostitution. It is a process of de-gendering through focussing on a sexuality considered deviant.

The desexualizing and hypersexualizing mechanisms of media and social representations of trans people come close to life testimony coupled with medical and psychiatric diagnoses. The primacy of gender is pleaded for in relation to transsexuals: the sex (the genitalia) becomes a construct to repair an 'error of nature'. The individual seems to have to be desexualized to be accepted and seen as gendered. To characterise transgender people or transvestites, by contrast, commentary [*les commentaires*] give assumed pre-eminence to 'sex' in the sense of sexuality and not social gender: sexual practices have primacy over lived gender such that people are, for example, relegated to the status of 'false women'.

Two social and media representations of trans people seem to co-exist but they do not possess the same value. The process of over-gendering [*surgenration*] and desexualizing makes the transsexual person morally more

acceptable while the hypersexualizing and ‘de-gendering’ of the transgender person restricts them to the margins. Media representations therefore seem to let social sanctions relating to ‘overcoming gender’ [*franchissement de genre*] flourish.

Translated by Nicholas Chare

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Notes

¹ [Translator’s note] First published as “La sexualité des sujets transgenres et transsexuels saisie par les médias,” in *Hermès: La Revue* 69 (2014):105-109. I am grateful to Ersy Contougouris and Nicole Tremblay for their advice at different stages during the translation of this article.

² In medical and media discourses, transsexual and transgender people are distinguished by the fact the former have recourse to sex reassignment surgery whereas the latter do not express the need nor the desire for it.

³ The two audio-visual archives comprise of 886 documents in the archives of the *Institut national de l’audiovisuel* (INA) covering the period 1946-2010 and of *documentaries and related materials*, compiled subjectively, made up of about a 100, mainly foreign, productions.

⁴ The re-appropriation by a person or group of a term or insult that is used to refer to them without their consent. Re-appropriation results in a transformation of sense, because the person who utters it is not the same as the one who previously used it. [Translator’s note] The term translated in the main body of the text as “reversal” is *retournement* which is frequently used in francophone discussions of Judith Butler’s work and is linked to the idea of re-appropriation as it is examined in, for example, *Bodies that Matter*, 223-242.

⁵ See the account given by Vincent He-Say in the documentary *L’Ordre des mots* [*Binding Words*] (Dirs. Cynthia Arra & Mélissa Arra, France, 2007).

⁶ Ben White, “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty,” 1; 3.

⁷ See Meyerowitz, “Transforming Sex.” See also Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*.

⁸ Cited in Anonymous, “News from California: Transgender,” A-10.

⁹ See, for example, “La transsexualité [Transsexualité],” *Aujourd’hui Magazine*, Antenne 2, 27/09/1977; “Les transsexuels [Transsexuels],” *Aujourd’hui madame*, Antenne 2, 19/06/1980; “Plateau René Küss [René Küss Panel],” *JTNuit*, Antenne 2, 29/06/1982; “D’un sexe à l’autre, elle ou lui ? [From one sex to the other, she or he?],” *Les dossiers de l’écran*, Antenne 2, 15/12/1987. [Translator’s Note] Antenne 2 (A2) was a French television channel and the aforementioned are all programmes that were broadcast by it. René Küss, who is the subject of a panel discussion for one of these programmes, was a pioneering surgeon. For a discussion of Küss in relation to sex reassignment surgery see Arnaud Allesandrin’s article “Du ‘transsexualisme’ à la ‘dysporie de genre’.

¹⁰ See, for instance, “Prostitués [Prostitutes],” *C’est à dire*, Antenne 2, 25/02/1976; “De quoi avons-nous peur ? [What are we afraid of?],” *Vendredi*, FR3, 17/06/1977; “Pour une dose d’enfer [For a dose of hell],” *Les mercredis de l’information*, TF1, 09/06/1982. [Translator’s note] TF1 (Télévision française 1) and FR3 (France 3) were both French television channels.

¹¹ “Sexualité: comment assume-t-on son ambiguïté ? [Sexuality: How does one accept its ambiguity?],” *Ça se discute*, France 2, 20/10/2004. [Translator’s note] France 2 is a French television channel. It directly replaced Antenne 2 (A2).

¹² See also Trovato’s self-portrait in *Ludwig* (Dir. Ludwig Trovato, France, 2007).

¹³ Hérault, “Usages de la sexualité dans la clinique du transsexualisme.”

¹⁴ “Transsexuel [Transsexual],” *Tribunal*, TF1, 07/11/1989.

¹⁵ Maud Marin, *Le saut de l’ange*, 1987.

¹⁶ See the four-part documentary series *Sex in the World* (Dir. Raphaëlle Bénisty, France, 2009), the six-part documentary series *Sex in the World's Cities 1* (Dir. Marc Jappain, France, 2010), and the four-part documentary series *Sex in the World's Cities 2* (Dir. Marc Jappain, France, 2011). The topic of trans is taken up in a number of these parts.

¹⁷ This Anglophone term, a compound, can also be written as *she-male*. Etymologically, in nineteenth-century vernacular, the word referred to an aggressive woman who behaved like a man.

¹⁸ Espineira, "La médiatisation des politiques transgenres."

¹⁹ Perea, "Les sites pornographiques par le menu."

²⁰ Dubois, "La cohérence visuelle et formelle des tubes pornographiques."

²¹ Boucher, "Le cri de la hyène," 16.

²² Borghi, "Post-Porn," 29.

²³ Paraphilia refers to sexual practices labelled as deviant whereas autogynephilia refers to the sexual arousal experienced by a man fantasizing of himself as a woman. For a discussion of autogynephilia see Blanchard, "The Concept of Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male Gender Dysphoria"

²⁴ Hérault, "Usages de la sexualité dans la clinique du transsexualisme," 281.

²⁵ See Thomas, "La controverse trans".

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