

The transgender gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*

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In her stylish adaptation of the true-life story of Brandon Teena, director Kimberly Peirce very self-consciously constructs what can only be called a 'transgender gaze'. *Boys Don't Cry* establishes the legitimacy and durability of Brandon's gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's gaze, a transgender gaze.¹ The transgender gaze in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes and it temporarily disarms the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre. Brandon's gaze obviously dies with him in the film's brutal conclusion but Peirce, perhaps prematurely, abandons the transgender gaze in the final intimate encounter between Lana and Brandon. Peirce's inability to sustain a transgender gaze opens up a set of questions about the inevitability and dominance of both the male/female and the hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema.

One remarkable scene, about halfway through the film, clearly foregrounds the power of the transgender gaze and makes it most visible precisely when and where it is most threatened. In a scary and nerve-racking sequence of events, Brandon finds himself cornered at Lana's house. John and Tom have forced Candace to tell them that Brandon has been charged by the police with writing bad cheques and that he has been imprisoned as a woman. John and Tom

1 Patricia White has argued that the gaze in *Boys* is Lana's all along. I think in the first two thirds of the film the gaze is shared between Lana and Brandon but I agree with White that the film's ending transfers the gaze from Brandon to Lana with some unpredictable consequences. See Patricia White, 'Girls still cry', *Screen* vol. 42, no. 2 (2001), pp. 122–8.

now hunt Brandon, like hounds after a fox, and then begin a long and excruciating interrogation of Brandon's gender identity. Lana at first protects Brandon, saying that she will examine him and determine whether he is a man or a woman. Lana and Brandon enter Lana's bedroom, where Lana refuses to look as Brandon unbuckles his trousers telling him: 'Don't . . . I know you're a guy'. As they sit on the bed together, the camera now follows Lana's gaze out into the night sky, a utopian vision of an elsewhere to which she and Brandon long to escape. The camera cuts back abruptly to 'reality' and a still two-shot of Brandon in profile with Lana behind. As they discuss their next move, the camera slowly draws back, and in a seamless transition places them in the living room in front of the posse of bullies. This quiet interlude in Lana's bedroom establishes the female gaze, Lana's gaze, as a willingness to see what is not there (a condition of all fantasy) but also as a refusal to privilege the literal over the figurative (Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation). The female gaze, in this scene, makes possible an alternative vision of time, space and embodiment. Time slows down while the couple linger in the sanctuary of Lana's private world, her bedroom, the bedroom itself becomes an otherworldly space framed by the big night sky and containing the perverse vision of a girl and her queer boy lover. The body of Brandon is preserved as male, for now, by Lana's refusal to dismantle its fragile power with the scrutinizing gaze of science and 'truth'. That Lana's room morphs seamlessly into the living room at the end of this scene, alerts the viewer to the possibility that an alternative vision will undermine the chilling enforcement of normativity that follows.

Back in the living room – the primary domestic space of the family – events take an abrupt turn towards the tragic. Brandon is now shoved into the bathroom, a hyperreal space of sexual difference, and is violently stripped by John and Tom, and then restrained by John while Tom roughly examines his crotch. The brutality of their action here is clearly identified as a violent mode of looking, and the film identifies the male gaze with that form of knowledge which resides in the literal. The brutality of the male gaze, however, is more complicated than a castrating force. John and Tom not only want to see the site of Brandon's castration, more importantly they need Lana to see it. Lana kneels in front of Brandon, confirming the scene's resemblance to a crucifixion tableau, and refuses to raise her eyes, declining once more to look at Brandon's unveiling.

However, at the point when Lana's 'family' and 'friends' assert their heteronormativity will most forcefully upon Brandon's resistant body, Brandon rescues himself briefly by regaining the alternative vision which he and Lana shared moments earlier in her bedroom. A slow-motion sequence interrupts the fast and furious quasi-medical scrutiny of Brandon's body, and shots from Brandon's point of view

reveal him to be in the grips of an 'out of body' experience. Light shines on him from above, and his anguished face peers out at the crowd of onlookers who have gathered in the bathroom doorway. The crowd now includes a fully-clothed Brandon, a double, who impassively returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon. In this shot/reverse-shot sequence between the castrated and the transgender Brandons, the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from (at least) two places at the once: one clothed and one naked. The clothed Brandon is the Brandon rescued by Lana's refusal to look, the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder, the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines temporarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle. The naked Brandon is the Brandon who will suffer, endure, but finally expire.

Kaja Silverman has called attention to cinematic suture as 'the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack'.² In *Boys*, the inadequacy of the subject's position has been presented as a precondition of the narrative, so this scene of the split transgender subject, which would ordinarily expose 'the inadequacy of the subject's position', actually works to highlight the *sufficiency* of the transgender subject. Thus, if the shot/reverse-shot both usually secures and destabilizes the spectator's sense of self, 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.

Not only does *Boys* create a transgender subject position which is fortified by the traditional operations of the gaze and conventional modes of gendering, it also makes the transgender subject dependent upon the recognition of a woman. In other words, Brandon can be Brandon because Lana is willing to see him as he sees himself (clothed, male, vulnerable, lacking, strong, passionate), and to avert her gaze when his manhood is in question. With Brandon occupying the position in the romance which is usually allotted to the male hero and the male gaze, the dynamics of looking and gendered being are permanently altered. If usually it is the female body that registers lack, insufficiency and powerlessness, in *Boys* it is Brandon who represents the general condition of incompleteness, crisis and lack, and it is Lana who represents the fantasy of wholeness, knowledge and pleasure. Lana can be naked without trauma while Brandon cannot and can access physical pleasure in a way that he cannot; but he is depicted as mobile and self-confident in a way that she is not. Exclusion and privilege cannot be assigned neatly to the couple on the basis of gender hierarchies or class hierarchies, power is instead shared between the two subjects, and she agrees to misrecognize him as male while he sees through her

2 Kaja Silverman, *Suture in The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 236.

social alienation and unhappiness to recognize her as beautiful, desirable and special

By deploying the transgender gaze and joining it to an empowered female gaze in *Boys*, Peirce, for most of the film, keeps the viewer trained upon the seriousness of Brandon's masculinity, the authenticity of his presentation as opposed to its elements of masquerade. But abruptly, towards the end of the film, Peirce suddenly and catastrophically divests her character of his transgender gaze and converts it to a lesbian and therefore female gaze. In a strange scene, which follows the brutal rape of Brandon by John and Tom, Lana comes to Brandon as he lies sleeping in a shed outside Candace's house. 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 female, calling him 'pretty' and asking him what he was like as a girl. Brandon confesses to Lana that he has been untruthful about many things in his past and his confession sets up the expectation that he will now appear before Lana as his 'true' self. 'Truth' here becomes sutured to nakedness, as Lana tentatively disrobes Brandon saying that she may not 'know how to do this'. 'This' seems to refer to having sex with Brandon as a woman. They both agree that his whole journey to manhood has been pretty weird and then they move to make love. While earlier Peirce created quite graphic depictions of sex between Brandon and Lana, now the action is hidden by a Hollywood-style dissolve as if to suggest that the couple are now making love as opposed to having sex.

The scene raises a number of logical and practical questions about the representation of the relationship between Brandon and Lana. First, why would Brandon want to have sex within hours of a rape? Second, how does the film pull back from its previous commitment to his masculinity here by allowing his femaleness to become legible and significant to Lana's desire? Third, in what ways does this scene play against the earlier more 'plastic' sex scenes in which Brandon used a dildo and wouldn't allow Lana to touch him? And, fourth, how does this scene unravel the complexities of the transgender gaze as they have been assembled in earlier scenes between Brandon and Lana?

When asked about this in an interview, Peirce reverts to a very tired humanist narrative to explain this extraordinary scene, saying that after the rape, Brandon could be *neither* Brandon *Teena* *nor* Teena Brandon, and thus becomes truly 'himself' and 'receives love' for the first time as a human being.³ Peirce claims that Lana herself told her about this encounter and therefore it was true to life. In the context of the film, however, which has made no such commitment to authenticity, the scene ties Brandon's humanity to a particular

3 Interview with Terry Gross on Fresh Air, PBS Radio, 15 March 2000

form of naked embodiment that eventually requires him to be a woman

Ultimately in *Boys*, the double vision of the transgender subject gives way to the universal vision of humanism, the transgender man and his lover become lesbians and the murder seems instead to be the outcome of vicious homophobic rage. Given the failure of nerve that leads Peirce to conclude her film with a humanist scene where love conquers all, it is no surprise that she also sacrificed the racial complexity of the narrative by erasing the story of the other victim who died alongside Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert. Philip DeVine, a disabled African-American man, has received scant coverage in media accounts of the case, despite the connections of at least one of the murderers to a white supremacist group.⁴ Now, in the feature film, the death of DeVine has been rendered completely irrelevant to the narrative. Peirce claimed that this subplot would have complicated her film and made it too cumbersome – but race is a narrative trajectory that is absolutely central to the meaning of the Brandon Teena murder. DeVine was dating Lana's sister Leslie, and had a fight with her on the night he appeared at Lisa's house in Humboldt county. His death was neither accidental nor an afterthought, his connection to Leslie could be read as a similarly outrageous threat to the supremacy and privilege of white manhood that the murderers rose to defend. By removing DeVine from the narrative and by not even mentioning him in the original dedication of the film ('To Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert'),⁵ the filmmaker sacrifices the hard facts of racial hatred and transphobia to a streamlined humanist romance. Peirce, in other words, reduces the complexity of the murderous act just as she sacrifices the complexity of Brandon's identity.

The murders, in the end, are shown to be the result of a kind of homosexual panic. Brandon is offered up as an 'everyman' hero who makes a claim on the audience's sympathies first by pulling off a credible masculinity, but then by seeming to step out of his carefully maintained manhood to appear before judge and jury in the naked flesh as female. By reneging on its earlier commitment to the transgender gaze and ignoring altogether the possibility of exposing the whiteness of the male gaze, *Boys* falls far short of the alternative vision that was articulated so powerfully and shared so beautifully by Brandon and Lana in Lana's bedroom.

4 See Aphrodite Jones *All S/he Wanted* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996) p. 154

5 In the review copy of the film I saw, *Boys* was dedicated 'To Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert'. This dedication seems to have been removed later, possibly because it so obviously pointed up the erasure of Philip DeVine.