

Laura Horak

Tracing the History of Trans and Gender Variant Filmmakers

Abstract

Most writing on transgender cinema focuses on representations *of* trans people, rather than works made *by* trans people. This article surveys the history of trans and gender variant people creating audiovisual media from the beginning of cinema through today. From the professional gender impersonators of the stage who crossed into film during the medium's first decades to self-identified transvestite and transsexual filmmakers, like Ed Wood and Christine Jorgensen of the mid-twentieth century, to the enormous upsurge in trans filmmaking of the 1990s, this article explores the rich and complex history of trans and gender variant filmmaking. It also considers the untraceable gender variant filmmakers who worked in film and television without their gender history becoming known and those who made home movies that have been lost to history.

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”¹ Viviane Namaste begins her foundational essay on transsexual access to the media with this quote from Karl Marx. Namaste described the many obstacles to transsexual self-representation in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, new technologies have enabled hundreds of thousands of trans people to create and circulate amateur videos on YouTube.² However, representations of trans people made by and for cisgender people still dominate mainstream media. The many films and videos made by trans and gender variant people over the years are often forgotten, even by LGBT film festivals, activists, academics, and media makers. As trans filmmaker Sam Feder pointed out in a recent interview: “time and time again, the media experiences historic amnesia...In their rush to present themselves as doing something new, they remove from view a rich legacy and history of trans people in the media.”³

Most writing on transgender cinema focuses on representations *of* trans people, rather than works made *by* trans people.⁴ Earlier generations of scholarship about cross-dressing, drag, and trans representation in cinema analyzed gender crossing as psychosexual metaphor or expression of postmodern theory and sometimes even reiterated transphobic assumptions.⁵ This type of work has been roundly critiqued by trans scholars.⁶ In contrast, José Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, Eliza Steinbock, Susan Stryker, and Cael M.

Keegan have importantly analyzed the work of particular trans and gender variant filmmakers, focusing primarily on the 1990s and 2000s.⁷ More recently, Keegan and others have investigated trans experiences of spectatorship and articulated a concept of “trans aesthetics” that exceeds identity categories.⁸ Trans filmmakers have also begun to theorize their own and others’ work.⁹ Scholars have also investigated trans multimedia production, in the form of zines, Tumblr blogs, photography, and interactive digital media.¹⁰ However, there has not yet been a sustained effort to investigate trans and gender variant people’s multifarious engagements with audiovisual technology over the past century.

From the silent era to today, the opportunities for trans and gender variant people to make films has shifted in relation to new technologies, the changing structure of film and media industries, and broader social and political changes. The kinds of identity categories available to people has also shifted significantly. Films and videos have played a role in these changes. While many assume that trans and gender variant media making only goes back a few years or decades, I will show that gender variant people have been making audiovisual media for the last hundred years.

To unearth this forgotten history, we should be open to a wide range of gender practices and identities from earlier periods, before the popularization of terms like *trans* and *gender variant*.¹¹ As K. J. Rawson, director of the Digital

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Transgender Archive (DTA) and editor of the *TSQ* issue on “Archives and Archiving,” has written, “we must always be mindful of how we are imposing an identity category onto pasts in which that identity is anachronistic and onto places where that identity is foreign.”¹² Similar to the DTA, I use *trans* and *gender variant* as “a point of departure,” an imperfect but “expansive and inclusive” framework for gathering materials.¹³ I use *trans* as an umbrella term to include transsexual, transgender, transvestite, and anyone else who finds this term meaningful.¹⁴ I also include work by butches, faeries, sissies, drag queens, drag kings, *travestis*, intersex people, and professional gender impersonators. I use *gender variant* as an umbrella term for these various identities rather than *gender nonconforming* because the former appears more often in pre-1990s material and because it does not imply an anti-normative stance. Thus, I include filmmakers with very different identities in this survey, while attending to the particular terms and concepts they may have used for themselves.

In order to trace this history, we should also conceptualize media authorship more broadly than we have. Most of the time, making films and videos is a collaborative endeavour. Despite the many creative contributions of writers, cinematographers, producers, editors, actors, and others, we too often credit films to the director alone. This habit fundamentally misrepresents the filmmaking process, as film scholars Berys Gaut and C. Paul Sellors have argued.¹⁵ If we want to trace a history of trans and gender variant people’s audiovisual creativity, we should look for them both in and beyond the director’s chair. For example, subjects who are represented in documentary films co-author those films to a certain extent, as do actors in fiction films, even if their control is limited. I take an expansive approach to film and video authorship, while at the same time paying attention to potential imbalances of power in the production process.

I hope that this article will lay the groundwork for new research on the rich and varied history of trans and gender variant audiovisual media making. My focus here is on the United States, with forays into Western Europe, the UK, and Canada. Gender variant media-making in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America has been woefully understudied in English-language scholarship.¹⁶

Cinema’s First Decades

It seems a striking coincidence that cinema and sexual inversion were popularized around the very same time. In the late nineteenth century, inventors experimented with the projection of moving photographic images, culminating in a series of public events in Berlin, Paris, and New York in 1895 that established the new medium of moving pictures. Also during the late nineteenth century, a new breed of scientists called “sexologists” struggled to theorize the vast diversity of sexual and gender expression and practice they encountered in their clinical work. One of the most popular concepts they generated was “sexual inversion,” a phenomenon in which individuals displayed a variety of physical and psychological attributes associated with the “opposite” gender. German sexologist Carl von Westphal described “inversion of the sexual instinct” in an 1869 article.¹⁷ The concept was propelled into English-language popular culture in 1897 via the book *Sexual Inversion* by British sexologist Havelock Ellis and British author (and self-identified homosexual) John Addington Symonds.¹⁸ Thirteen years later, in 1910, German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term *die transvestiten*, or transvestite, for the “erotic urge to cross-dress.”¹⁹ During this period, one of the key attractions of the new technology of cinema was displaying the human body.²⁰ Scholars have recently begun to explore how cinema, as a new technological, social,



L: Germaine Dulac (ca. 1935?). Rights reserved. Collection Cinémathèque française.

R: Female impersonator Julian Eltinge. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

and aesthetic formation, elaborated new concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity.²¹

We can also, however, ask how invert, transvestite, and others were involved in this new medium during its early years. In Germany, *Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years*, the 1907 autobiography of Karl Martha Baer, an intersex German-Jewish individual who was raised female and transitioned to male, inspired a film in 1919.²² Beyond granting permission for use of his book, Baer likely had little to do with the film. While I have not yet discovered an early filmmaker who publically identified as one of the new sexological terms, one who falls into the net of gender variance is Germaine Dulac, a prolific French director, writer, and producer who wore masculine-styled clothing and had a series of female lovers who were instrumental in her film work.²³ Dulac made thirty films between 1915 and 1936, ranging from surrealist avant-garde films to commercial features and newsreels. Her “masculine attire and habits...were noted by her contemporaries,” observes her biographer Tami Williams, and cross-dressing was a repeated motif in her work.²⁴ While Williams reads this cross-dressing as queer, it can simultaneously be read as gender variant, in resonance with Dulac’s own gendered embodiment.²⁵

Our picture of gender variant filmmaking also expands if we include films made to promote the star personae of professional female and male impersonators from the stage. In the United States, performers like Gilbert Saroni, Elsie Janis, Julian Eltinge, and Kitty Doner worked as gender impersonators in vaudeville and each appeared in a series of films based on their established stage personae.²⁶ While these performers likely did not identify as inverted or transvestite, I argue that they belong in our genealogy. In their working life, they daily enacted genders at odds with their assigned sex. Saroni and Eltinge, in particular, were promoted almost exclusively in their female personae. While they did not direct the films they appeared in, the films were created in order to promote the stage personae they had authored over many years, and as stars they likely had significant influence over the films.

Between 1901 and 1903, Saroni played his celebrated old maid character in a series of short comedies for the Edison Manufacturing Company

and Lubin Company.²⁷ He even appeared as himself in a short film called *Gilbert Saroni Preparing for His Act* (Lubin, 1903). Publicity bulletins for the films always named Saroni, even during this time when most film performers were anonymous. The bulletin for *The Old Maid's Lament* (1903), for example, told exhibitors: “Gilbert Saroni [sic], the well-known female impersonator is here shown relating to the audience what troubles the old maids are heir to.”²⁸ A few years later, Elsie Janis, who played boys and other roles on stage, played cross-dressing female characters in four films released between 1915 and 1919.²⁹ In one, *The Caprices of Kitty* (1915), her character attends a cross-dressing stage performance by “Elsie Janis” (whom she also played) which inspires the character to disguise herself as a boy. At the end of the silent era, male impersonator Kitty Doner sang in two lost Vitaphone sound shorts.³⁰

The most famous of all American gender impersonators was Julian Eltinge. He was one of the most popular vaudeville performers in the early 20th century and even started a magazine in which he gave fashion and beauty tips to his female fans.³¹ He starred in seven films between 1915 and 1931.³² Mostly, he played male characters who disguise themselves as a woman for one reason or another. Unlike most male-to-female cross-dressing in the movies, his female impersonations were extremely convincing. However, as Sharon Ullman has shown, Eltinge aggressively promoted a masculine image for himself off-stage.³³ When an enterprising girl reporter interviews Eltinge in *How Molly Malone Made Good* (1915), she finds him in a white button-down shirt and necktie, working on his car. When he sees her, he throws down his hammer and takes a broad, manly stance. Thus, Eltinge took pains to assert his fundamental masculinity even as he become wealthy due to the skill of his feminine presentation.

Rawson proposes that we consider “transgender as practice rather than an identity category” when investigating the past.³⁴ This expansive approach allows us to trace a genealogy of gender variant filmmaking all the way back to the silent era.

Under the Radar: Stealth Workers and Home Movies

Unfortunately, we will never know about the vast majority of gender variant people who worked

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in cinema. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, countless individuals lived as genders at odds with the sex assigned them at birth.³⁵ Only occasionally was this disjuncture revealed and written up—usually when someone was treated by a doctor, sent to jail, inspected by immigration officials, or prepared for burial. Some, like Oregon doctor Alan Hart, latched on to new sexological categories, but others did not.³⁶ Men assigned female at birth and women assigned male at birth worked in many different professions, so it seems quite likely that some also worked in the nascent film industry. We could imagine company owners, producers, writers, directors, actors, exhibitors, distributors, cinema owners, and musical accompanists.

However, since most people lived and died without the media discovering the disjuncture between their assigned sex and lived gender, we will probably never know about them. So far, the only potential example I have found from the earliest decades of cinema is Edna “Billy” Foster, a child actor who played boy roles in at least fourteen short films directed by D.W. Griffith.³⁷ In one tantalizing 1915 interview, Foster declared: “They always give me boy parts and I like them better than just being a girl. They got a series of boy pictures ready and asked me what named I wanted to have in them and I said ‘Billy.’ So the series was named ‘The Adventures of Billy’ and I’ve been called ‘Billy’ ever since that by everybody.”³⁸ While many girls played boy roles and claimed a tomboy identity at this time, Foster’s insistence on playing almost exclusively boy roles and Biograph’s promotion of Foster under the name “Billy” was unusual. Shortly after the interview, Foster disappears from the record. What did the future have in store for young Billy? Even though we will likely never know about people working in the film industry who lived as genders at odds with their assigned sex, we should not assume that they did not exist. These anonymous workers may be the most numerous gender variant film workers until recent decades.

From the 1920s onward, home movies also offered trans and gender variant people a way to document their lives, mark important events, capture their travels, and strengthen kinship networks. Amateur movie cameras and projectors became available to consumers in the 1920s and became progressively cheaper and more accessible.



Edna “Billy” Foster and D.W. Griffith (left, sitting) in *The Adventures of Billy* (1911). Frame enlargement. Silent Era image collection.

Some archives, like the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco and the UCLA/Outfest Legacy Project in Los Angeles, collect LGBT home movies, though they have identified only a few made by trans and gender variant people.³⁹ Some documentary filmmakers have incorporated trans home movies into their films, such as *100% Woman* (2004) and *100% Human (100% menneske)* (2005). *Reel in the Closet* (2015) includes footage from a 1951–52 travel film shot by Christine Jorgensen, the “ex-GI” turned “Blonde Beauty,” who became a global media sensation in the early 1950s and popularized the term “transsexual.”⁴⁰

Trans home movies are important precursors to the hundreds of thousands of trans-made videos that have been uploaded to YouTube since the site’s launch in 2005. Video diaries were first popularized in 1993 by BBC’s Video Nation program, and we can imagine that trans people took up the call to record their lives as well. In 2002, three years before the launch of YouTube, a Norwegian trans woman, Monica Voilås Myklebust, used her DV camera to make video diaries before, during, and after her gender affirmation surgery. Like today’s YouTube vlogs, Myklebust often speaks directly to the camera from the privacy of her room or bed, describing her hopes and fears; she also takes the camera with her to a holiday dinner with her family and to the hospital when she undergoes her gender affirmation surgery. We only know about these videos because Myklebust worked with Norwegian filmmakers Jan Dalchow and Trond Winterkjær to use the videos in the feature-length documentary *100% Human*

(*100% menneske*, 2005). After the launch of YouTube in 2005, trans amateur video production took off exponentially, as Tobias Raun has shown.⁴¹ These videos vary widely in their content, from weekly diaries to autobiographical narratives, explanations of terms, “how to” videos, and commentary, but they are usually shot with a webcam, in a private space, in the format of a “talking head.” As I have written elsewhere, the form and content of these videos generate an impression of authenticity and intimacy, and the videos’ aggregation on YouTube create a sense of collectivity.⁴² Today YouTube hosts at least 700,000 trans videos.⁴³

Despite the number of home movies likely made by trans and gender variant people since the 1920s, most of the films have decayed or been thrown away or are sitting in closets, attics, and garages awaiting this fate. While I hope that initiatives like the Digital Transgender Archive and Home Movie Day will bring more trans home movies to light, we will probably never see the vast majority of the films that were made.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, as Allyson Nadia Field argues in her study of early African-American filmmaking, the fact that we cannot view lost films does not diminish their historical significance. We should not limit our inquiries to the “winners” of history.⁴⁵ While trans amateur videos made after 2005 are now hyper-abundant due to YouTube, pre-2005 trans home movies remain hard to find. One also wonders if the many trans videos on YouTube will still be accessible in ten or twenty or one hundred years. Neither YouTube nor the people who upload videos promise to preserve these videos over the long run, and the company could someday go out of business, taking all its content with it.

Classical Hollywood Cinema

Even during the height of the Hollywood studio system, which lasted from the 1930s through the 1960s, some gender variant people managed to make work and even build careers in the film industry. Working for the major studios, the masculine-styled lesbian director Dorothy Arzner directed 20 feature films between 1927 and 1943. In the exploitation market, Ed Wood, a self-identified transvestite, directed at least eight feature films between 1947 and 1978. This included *Glen or Glenda*, an exploitation film inspired by Christine Jorgensen’s story, in which Wood himself

plays a likeable transvestite who is contrasted to a Jorgensen-like character. The producer had asked Jorgensen for the rights to her story, but she flatly refused.⁴⁶ Virginia Prince, transvestite activist and founder of the magazine *Transvestia*, consulted on the film and reportedly helped fund it.⁴⁷ Jorgensen herself, in addition to promoting herself like a film star, was drawn to filmmaking, as Susan Stryker and Joanne Meyerowitz have shown.⁴⁸ She shot a travel film in Denmark in 1952, starred in an Indonesian film in 1962, consulted on *The Christine Jorgensen Story* in 1970, and wrote treatments and scripts for several films that were unfortunately never made. Around this same time, British composer Angela Morley scored 16 films between 1952 and 1977, including *The Little Prince* (1974) and *Watership Down* (1977). Her compositions won three Emmy Awards and were nominated for two Academy Awards and a BAFTA. Despite the restrictions of the classical Hollywood era, some people, like Arzner and Morley, achieved considerable success within the system, while others, like Wood, achieved success outside of it.

During this same time, the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF) used audiovisual media in their advocacy. EEF was founded by trans philanthropist Reed Erickson in 1964. It single-handedly funded most of the scientific research, conferences, and publications on transexuality in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, as they advertised in one of their pamphlets, the EEF “assist[ed] and participat[ed] in press, radio, and television coverage of transexualism” and offered



Edward D. Wood as the protagonist of *Glen or Glenda* (1953). From the Cinefantastique magazine records of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

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“presentations with audio-visual aids...at colleges, hospitals, medical schools, and at meetings of law enforcement agencies.”⁴⁹ The organization also apparently funded the production of a documentary film in New York.⁵⁰

Underground and Counterculture Filmmaking

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a boom in trans and gender variant filmmaking, connected to the expanding underground film scene and the counterculture. In 1967, drag queen impresario Flawless Sabrina approached Andy Warhol to help her make a documentary about the national drag competitions she put on. Warhol connected her with financiers and Hollywood producers and *The Queen* premiered at Cannes the next year.⁵¹ While *The Queen* presented glamour drag, Baltimore filmmaker John Waters showcased the outrageous campy drag of performer Divine in a series of films beginning with the low-budget, 8mm film *Roman Candles* (1966). Divine worked with Waters throughout her life, achieving her biggest successes with *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Polyester* (1981) in the decades to come.

Back in New York, Warhol superstars Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn starred in three films directed by Paul Morrissey: *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), and *Women in Revolt* (1971). The films were rough, sometimes campy, and often improvised. Of these films, Richard Dyer has observed: “So here were these perverts, who were always anyway the unspoken part of Hollywood’s history, now openly in the movies and putting on the very put-ons of glamour and sexuality that Hollywood had been peddling for so long.”⁵² Around this same time in San Francisco, genderfuck drag troupe The Cockettes staged a series of performances and shot three films documenting and elaborating on these performances: *Tricia’s Wedding* (1971), *Luminous Procuress* (1971), and *Elevator Girls in Bondage* (1972). Separately from all this, Austrian multimedia artist Ashley Hans Scheirl began making Super8 films while studying at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 1979. Since then, she has created 54 short films and two avant-garde psychedelic sci-fi features, *Flaming Ears (Rote Ohren fetzen durch Asche)*, 1992) and *Dandy Dust* (1998).

Composer Wendy Carlos helped Robert Moog develop the Moog synthesizer and popularized the instrument with her 1968 album *Switched-On Bach*. The album went platinum and won three Grammys. Carlos went on to compose and arrange electronic scores for *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Shining* (1980), *TRON* (1982), and *Woundings* (1998). She came out as trans in an interview published in *Playboy* magazine in 1979.⁵³ Apart from Carlos, trans and gender variant performers mostly found a home in underground and avant-garde film scenes in the 1960s and 1970s.

New Public Attention

Though there was an explosion of films about cross-dressing created by cisgender teams in the 1980s, fewer trans and gender variant people seem to have broken into filmmaking during this period. Cis-made films rendered cross-dressing and transsexuality the subject of humor or horror in films like *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor Victoria* (1982), *Yentl* (1983), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), *All of Me* (1984), and *Just One of the Guys* (1985). At the same time, underground artists like Scheirl and Divine continued to make new work. They were joined by prolific intersex “terrorist drag” artist Vaginal Davis. In addition to making music, organizing and performing drag shows, and making zines, Davis began making videos and cable access shows in the 1980s, starting with *Fertile’s Last Dance* (1987).⁵⁴ Davis has since written and directed at least 21 more videos and appeared in many more. She also posts sardonic reviews of Hollywood films on her website.⁵⁵

Trans people were able to speak for themselves in documentaries such as *Paradise is Not For Sale (Paradiset er eike til salg)*, Denmark, 1984) and *What Sex Am I?* (1985). In England, trans documentary filmmaker Kristiene Clarke made *Sex Change - Shock! Horror! Probe* (1988) for Channel Four, billed as the first documentary about transsexuality made by a transsexual director and producer.⁵⁶ She has since directed more than 20 documentaries and TV series on subjects ranging from masturbation to HIV. While trans and gender variant people received increased media attention in the 1980s, work made by these artists had little space in the mainstream.

Trans Filmmaking Takes Off: The 1990s to Today

The 1990s witnessed a new politicization and proliferation of the trans community, as well as newly affordable and accessible digital recording and editing technologies. As Scheirl, Davis, and Clarke continued to make work, many other filmmakers, who were also often musicians, photographers, and artists, began prolific careers. This included, in the United States, Venus de Mars, Texas Tomboy, Christopher Lee, Del LaGrace Volcano, and Jenni Olson; in Canada, Pendra Wilson, Mirha-Soleil Ross, and James Diamond; and in India, Rituparno Ghosh.⁵⁷ The Wachowskis also made their first feature film during this period—the lesbian neo noir *Bound* (1996).⁵⁸

The first transgender film festivals were launched in the fall of 1997 in Toronto, London, and San Francisco, each independently of each other. In Toronto, Mirha-Soleil Ross and Xanthra McRay, frustrated that the local lesbian and gay film festival rejected their film *Gender Troublemakers* and instead programmed an evening of gender bending films by cisgender filmmakers, launched Counting Past 2: Performance-Film-Video-Spoken Word with Transsexual Nerve!⁵⁹ The one-day festival was committed to showing exclusively work by transgender and transsexual artists and involving artists who didn't have the resources to make film and therefore included dance, music, and spoken word performances.

In London, in October, the First International Transgender Film & Video Festival showcased a broader swathe of films and aimed for a wider public. It was organized by activist Zachary I. Nataf and filmmaker Annette Kennerley. It ran over five days in a “posh” Centre for Artists' Film, Video, and New Media and “sold approximately 2,5000 tickets to 20 programs,” according to festival attendee Susan Stryker.⁶⁰ Documentaries dominated, with a “judicious sprinkling” of experimental films and some features by cisgender creative teams. There was a focus on international offerings, including, in Stryker's words, “Southeast Asian gay cross dressers, a female to male transsexual teenager from suburban England, Dominican hermaphrodites, female Japanese sex workers who act as men for straight women clients, theatrical female impersonators

in New York City, drag king rock-and-roll cover bands.”⁶¹

In San Francisco, filmmaker Christopher Lee and producer/arts attorney Alison Austin organized Tranny Fest: Transgender and Transgenre Cinema, advertised as a “finger-snapping, groin-bumping, tear jerking, heartwarming, gut-busting mix of experimental, documentary, dramatic, and pornographic films.”⁶² The festival focused on experimental shorts, many by local artists (as well as one by Mirha-Soleil Ross). It celebrated, as Stryker put it, “gender's post-identitarian possibilities.”⁶³ These three innovative festivals boosted audiences for the new work that was being created and inspired more trans people to pick up cameras.

Since 2000, the amount of audio-visual media being made by trans and gender variant people has expanded rapidly and begun to circulate on a much wider scale. As discussed, YouTube enabled trans and gender variant people to create and circulate audio-visual media on a mass scale for the first time. Filmmakers who started in previous decades continued to make work in the 2000s, now joined by Silas Howard and Harry Dodge with queer buddy film *By Hook or By Crook* (2001), Morty Diamond with the subversive porn films *TrannyFags* (2003) and *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (2007), prolific producer/porn star Buck Angel with *Buck's Beaver* (2004), and Sam Berliner with the short comedy *Genderbusters* (2010).⁶⁴ Canadian Métis intersex Two-Spirit filmmaker Alec Butler made the *Misadventures of PussyBoy* trilogy in 2006.⁶⁵ Many important documentary filmmakers began their career in the 2000s, including Sam Feder with *Boy I Am* (2006, co-directed with Julie Hollar), Jules Rosskam with *transparent* (2006), Kimberly Reed with *Prodigal Sons* (2008), and Kortney Ryan Ziegler with *Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen* (2008).⁶⁶ In Thailand, director Tanwarin Sukkhapisit made her first film in 2008 and has since become a mainstream commercial director.⁶⁷ In Sweden, genderqueer writer and director Ester Martin Bergsmark created the critically acclaimed experimental feature films *She Male Snails* (*Pojktanten*, 2012) and *Something Must Break* (*Nånting måste gå sönder*, 2014).⁶⁸ Since 1997, transgender film festivals have been founded in Australia, Germany, India, Italy, and the Netherlands.⁶⁹ In the United States, there are

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now trans festivals in Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and the Gender Reel Festival organizes a network of events in Portland, Oakland, Long Beach, Minneapolis, Omaha, Kenosha, Houston, Durham, New York City, and Philadelphia.⁷⁰ Every year countless new films by trans and gender variant people are made.

In the last few years, there have been two major developments. The first is the explosion of trans-made web series. These include: *Falling in Love...with Chris and Greg* (2008–2013), *True Trans* (2014), *Her Story* (2015), *This Is Me* (2015), *Eden's Garden* (2015), *CRAVE* (2015), *Brothers* (2015), and *We've Been Around* (2016). Unlike the many trans-made videos on YouTube, these web series are mostly scripted sitcoms or short, polished documentaries. Some are sponsored by media companies, and others are produced independently on a low budget.⁷¹ These series provide audiences with some of the diversity and richness that is missing from mainstream media representation of trans people but in familiar generic formats. For example, *Eden's Garden* follows a group of Black trans male friends in the Bronx, while *Falling in Love* and *Her Story* explore some of the complexities of erotic relationships between trans and cis gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Additionally, the series could function as calling cards for filmmakers hoping to break into the industry. For example, Canadian web sitcom *The Switch* (2016) was planned as a web series in 2014 and then picked up by OutTV.

The second major development is the involvement of out trans people in mainstream television production. Most famous are the Wachowskis, who have recently expanded from films and video games to online television with the Netflix show *Sense8*, which features their first out trans protagonist, played by trans actor Jamie Clayton.⁷² Filmmakers Rhys Ernst and Zackary Drucker profiled some of the many trans actors, producers, and writers now working in television in their “Trans in Hollywood” feature article for *Out* magazine.⁷³ One of the forces behind this shift was the “transfirmative” action policy adopted by *Transparent*. After many criticized the lack of trans involvement in the creation of the show, cisgender lesbian showrunner Jill Soloway vowed to hire trans people at all levels of the show's production.⁷⁴ Since that point, over 25 trans people have worked on the

series, including Ernst, Drucker, and Silas Howard. Sometimes these two trends—the explosion of trans web series and entrance of trans people into the industry—dovetail. *Transparent* inspired the spin-off documentary web series *This is Me* and Focus Features, the distributor of *The Danish Girl*, supported the production of the short documentary series *We've Been Around*.

Mainstream institutions are also starting to recognize trans-made work: *This is Me* and *Her Story* were both nominated for Emmys, in 2015 and 2016, respectively. While the dominant modes of trans film and video production have long been experimental films, shorts, and documentaries, some of today's trans videos are more stylistically mainstream and some trans filmmakers are getting jobs in the industry. While Shawna Virago, director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival, recently told me that she's sorry to see trans filmmakers increasingly trade the punk/DIY aesthetics of early festival submissions for mainstream aesthetics and ambitions, these recent shifts enable trans filmmakers to choose whether their vision is best realized in an experimental or commercial mode.

Conclusion

The ultimate argument of this article is that trans and gender variant filmmaking has a history. Not only has audio-visual media always *represented* gender variant people, but gender variant people have always had a place behind the camera, in ways both traceable and untraceable. Some of the works made by trans and gender variant people helped shape what gender and sexuality has meant, and some take up the call to speak back to mainstream media and imagine other ways for gender variant people to be, desire, and organize. Other works are indistinguishable from those made by cisgender people. I don't posit any kind of trans “sensibility” detectable in these works. Instead, I gather these works together to see what we find. While this article sketches out a rough history, I am currently in the process of creating an online, collaborative research portal devoted to trans and gender variant filmmakers. The goal of this research portal will be for scholars, curators, archivists, activists, and filmmakers to work together to discover what other

films and filmmakers we can find and to make sure that these films circulate and are being preserved for the future. With this article, I extend an invitation

to new paths of research for anyone who'd like to travel them with me. What more can we find? And what can we do with it?

Laura Horak is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Carleton University, with a cross-appointment in Women's & Gender Studies. She is author of *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934* (Rutgers University Press, 2016) and co-editor of *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (Indiana University Press, 2014), which won the Society of Cinema & Media Studies Award for Best Edited Collection. She is currently building an online collaborative database of trans and gender variant filmmakers—please email her at laura.horak@carleton.ca if you'd like to participate in the project.

Notes

- 1 Viviane Namaste, "Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access to the Media," in *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2005), 41.
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