Screen Shot

Screening Non-Binary and Trans Bodies

Introduction

Visibility and Screen Politics after the Transgender Tipping Point

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Invisibility is indivisible from visibility; for [those who are] transgender this is not simply a philosophical conundrum—it can be the difference between life and death.

Lana Wachowski (2012)

This past decade has witnessed not only an increase in trans and non-binary visibility in screen cultures, but also a growing social awareness concerning the increase in violence against trans and non-binary people. While trans and non-binary people have become more recognized and visible in Western society, at the same time they have also been scrutinized with growing intensity.

This visibility, as cultural scholar Eric Stanley (2017) argues, is a political instrument and far from only a liberating one. It brings with it the dangers of recognizability, for instance, in the becoming known of an otherwise less exposed yet attacked body. Especially at a time when alt-right movements are increasing their influence on global politics, feminist and LGBT rights are experiencing a backlash, and the extraordinary dangers this brings for gender-nonconforming and/or racially diverse communities globally are undisputed. It is in this context, under these political circumstances, where minimum rights and partial safety for some have been achieved, that the question arises of how much benefit trans visibility has for the trans community itself—at least for those few countries where rights have or had been marginally established.

While writing the editorial for this issue, I was living (and still am) in Sweden, a country that is, despite its extensive history of forced sterilization of racialized indigenous people and trans people, fairly advanced in its support for trans and non-binary people legally as well as medically. Yet, as shown in other European countries as well as the United States, such progressive steps can easily be withdrawn. Is it safe to trust in political progress and believe in

the possibility of an increasingly trans-affirmative society? And is this inclusion so often not also coupled with nationalist pinkwashing, which easily folds itself into the continued marginalization of trans people, especially those with less or no access to healthcare, with less transparent and recognizable trans narratives, or without citizenship?

It is certainly an important task to consider the homonormative, nationalist norms embedded in the romanticized ideal of trans and queer visibility. It might be time to abandon mainstream visibility politics, to follow the argument of the editors of the anthology *Trap Door* (Gossett et al. 2017), and instead turn toward community-based structures, subcultural politics, and the radicality of alternative image politics. This idea of trans actualization outside of mainstream recognition is far from new; it has been embedded in radical queerfeminist and transfeminist politics from its first steps, and further developed through a range of theoretical concepts such as Zack Blas and Nicholas de Villiers' queer opacity, Jack Halberstam's queer darkness, Eva Hayward's notion of trans negativity, and José Muñoz's queer escape. In addition, Dean Spade's (BCRW 2013) *Impossibility Now* manifesto suggests a trans radical critique of and a queer attitude toward normative acceptance. He advocates a leaning away from the search for mainstream acknowledgment and the formation of a mode of alternative realms, spaces where those that are rendered impossible by normative means can flourish.

Visibility clearly is not an easy topic to address, and it is even harder to evaluate its political usefulness. While being tied to the dangerous aspects of the "singular story" of trans narratives, violence, and recognizability, as much as visually also to the cinematic tropes of spectacularization and exploitation, trans visibility is also incredibly valuable, particularly for those who see themselves and their own experiences represented on their laptop screens or in the cinema, for instance. Seeing a trans person in a film or a documentary for the first time is for many a moment when a whole new register of possibility unfolds and where a life and identity become imaginable. Visibility is then not only a repressive element tied to mainstream appropriation, but also a dynamic that creates a vision of an otherwise ungraspable life. Lana Wachowski (2012), as quoted in the epigraph above, discusses this complex tension between becoming visible, avoiding visibility, as well as needing to be visible for others, and, as it is impossible to answer, leaves it unresolved. However, she also stresses that this question is not only a theoretical one, but one that can make the difference between life and death. In this editorial, I want to address these different aspects of visibility, its shortcomings as a political concept, as well as its importance and value. The articles assembled in this "Screen Shot" section relate strongly to these questions.

While screen representations of gender nonconforming bodies have gained precedence in recent decades, this shift is nowhere more tangible than in the presence of non-binary and trans characters in series formats on platforms such

as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO. It could even be said that including non-binary and trans characters has become a fashionable choice. But this is less the case, however, when it comes to casting trans and non-binary actors in the trans roles. When I first thought of compiling this special section, I had it in mind to focus it entirely on non-binary screen aspects, for example casting, the production ethics of films and series, art work, curatorial practices, and other forms of screen representation of non-binary bodies. Trans bodies have already been quite widely discussed in relation to their media and film visibility, while non-binary positions and their specificity have not yet really been the central subject of discussion. Without giving any specific political value to either being trans or being non-binary, which are often also overlapping experiences, I was intrigued by the idea to choose non-binary bodies as a specific focus. I was hoping it would allow me to trace specific questions of visibility and visibility in their relation to the non-binary body. The invisibility of this position, which is often a dilemma for non-binary people, was not only an interesting topic to me but also one through which I could discuss representational questions that relate to my own identity as non-binary. I began to identify as non-binary in 2013, shortly after I came across the term for the first time in an interview given by the Canadian musician and artist Rae Spoon. At that point, I had been working and writing about trans representation and alternative imaginaries in trans cinema for a while, a process that led up to the publication of my thesis in 2014 (Straube 2014). By taking up this special section, I wanted to shift the optics toward an identity that was really an underdiscussed topic in screen debates.

When writing the call for papers for this special section in November 2018, Taylor Mason (played by Asia Kate Dillon) in *Billions* (Brian Koppelman, David Levien, and Andrew Ross Sorkin, 2016–) had just made a strong impact with their pronoun statement in the second season of the series, in which Taylor introduces themselves to their new employer by stating: “Hi, I am Taylor Mason, my pronouns are they/them/theirs.” This scene went viral, and in the subsequent media debates and interviews with Asia Kate Dillon it was enhanced by the effect the script had on Asia’s own identity and their moment of self-realization when reading their role described as “female, non-binary.” As they said in interviews, this description captured for them an essence of their identity, for which they previously had no words or means of comprehending (ABC News 2019). Non-binary characters—and even actors—have become increasingly present in recent years in different series, including the exceptional *Pose* (Steven Canals, Brad Falchuk, Ryan Murphy, 2018–) and *Work in Progress* (Tim Mason and Abby McEnany, 2019–).

However, after announcing the call for papers, most article suggestions addressed a broader spectrum of gender-nonconforming identities than solely non-binary representations. This was interesting, as it showed how non-binary characters and other representations are not an easy topic to address in rela-

tion to media representations, especially in the context of a dominant visual regime that relies on visibility. Being non-binary is mostly not a visible position. If non-binary people do become visible, their identity is framed through androgyny. In real life, however, non-binary as a spectrum includes but also exceeds conventional ideas of androgyny. In most non-binary people's lives, being seen and/or perceived as non-binary most often depends on the verbal positioning of themselves, or, when it comes to visual representation, needs to be scripted into scenes where, for instance, non-binary pronouns are used or requested. Yet if this positioning is missing, the potential for non-binary characters' visibility is conceivably limited, or endless, as a plethora of queer as well as seemingly nonqueer characters could be read through that lens. Since the abstracts submitted were wonderful, I shifted the section's focus to a wider idea of transing positions that is embedded in a conceptual application of trans as defined by a moving "away from" one's birth-assigned gender (Enke 2012).

Visibility and the Transgender Tipping Point

As stated above, visibility is an ongoing phenomenon for trans representations. In terms of series formats and cinema productions, a remarkable shift has taken place since the earlier, mostly highly offensive representations of trans characters in films such as *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998) and *Ace Ventura* (Tom Shadyac, 1994), the highly problematic trans character in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013), and the less exploitative but nonetheless problematic trans characters in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), and *Three Generations* (Gaby Dellal, 2015). These last four films all had cis actors in their trans roles, and stand in stark contrast to representations that have been produced with a trans-affirmative approach, such as *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, 2013–2019), *Sense 8* (J. Michael Straczynski, Lana Wachowski, and Lilly Wachowski, 2015–2018), *Pose*, *Mrs. Fletcher* (Tom Perrotta, 2019–), *The L Word: Generation Q* (Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, and Kathy Greenberg, 2019–), *The OA* (Zal Batmanglij and Brit Marling, 2016–2019), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, 2018–), and *Work in Progress*. Many of these series have changed what has been seen as impossible until recently, namely the casting of great trans and non-binary actors in trans roles as well as the casting of great trans and non-binary actors in cis roles.

While television series are increasingly implementing trans characters, cinema screens are slightly lagging behind, especially in the past few years. However, exceptional feature films have also entered cinematic formats, such as the Australian film *52 Tuesdays* (Sophie Hyde, 2013) with a non-binary actor playing a trans masculine father, the Canadian film *Laurence Anyways* (Xavier Dolan, 2012), and the exceptional Swedish production *Something Must Break* (2014) by non-binary filmmaker Ester Martin Bergsmark, for which

transfeminine actress Saga Becker received the Swedish award for Best Actress for her role as Ellie/Sebastian. In general, many of these wonderful films, as well as the series mentioned above, were produced based on trans-informed ethical parameters—aiming for trans-inclusion at all levels of production—a self-affirmative and community-embedded practice of scripting and producing, and set practice and casting that aim to minimize trans marginalization.

Apart from these excellent cinema productions of the past decade, I find myself often turning toward the small screen. In the era of “Netflix and chill,” it does indeed appear to be the laptop screen where new forms of trans visibility claim space. These formats give hope that trans audiences may finally get to actually “relax” while watching their favorite series, instead of anxiously anticipating the often brutal exploitation of trans tropes, the naked body shots, the arc of lingering violence, stigmatization, objectification, and stereotypical narratives. In recent productions, such as *The OA* and *Work in Progress*, the trans character no longer requires an “exit scape,” as the other characters are allies rather than enemies and, without questioning or undermining the trans identity of their fellow character, follow the brief on pronouns and name changes. Exit scapes, as I have written about (Straube 2014), are a necessary tool for trans and non-binary viewers of many trans films and series in which an ongoing stream of constraining and violent scenes make watching almost impossible. To find exit scapes in films then enables moments of escape, but also feelings of hope and glimpses of worlds to come. As I have argued, exit scapes “provide a world-making spirit in their temporary escapes from normative appellation.” They are an entry strategy into a film or a series, a possibility to become with it and focus on “the futurities, the utopian and joyful moments that open up in the trans imaginaries of the exit scapes” (2014: 56). Interestingly, many new productions have begun to adapt to trans and non-binary audiences and tell their stories differently, seemingly less steeped in cisheteronormative violence.

At the end of last year, we witnessed the return of trans visibility, and in particular trans masculinity, on screens. *The L Word* (Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, Kathy Greenberg, 2004–2009) is making a comeback in the form of *The L Word: Generation Q*, which is now running on HBO. A great deal has been said about the reboot’s explicit attempts to make amends for the original series’ problematic take on trans masculinity through Max Sweeney. Max, played by the queer lesbian non-trans actress Daniela Sea, embodied in his role many of the offensive notions of trans masculinity. In the words of the trans filmmaker Rhys Ernst: “Max in 2006 was a really good example of cis [writers] telling a trans narrative with no trans people involved, point blank” (Burns 2019). While the two trans male characters in the new *L Word’s Generation Q*, actually played by trans actors Leo Sheng and Brian Michael Smith, received mainly positive attention, what has been interesting in the online discussions following the reboot is the critique aimed at the lack of transfeminine char-

acters in the series. However, transfeminine actors were included in the cast: Jamie Clayton and Sophie Giannamore played characters who could be read as either trans or cis as they have no further positioning in the script. As a result, the representational dynamics are complicated—while there are no “out” trans women in the revival of *L Word*, the two transfeminine actresses Jamie Clayton and Sophie Giannamore play significant side roles. For a long time, trans activists have demanded that trans actors should be cast in roles on the wider gender spectrum; they should be cast in trans roles as much as any other roles. So, while this is a win, it is also a loss at the same time. It is a battle concerning the right forms of visibility and the demand for outness. While both actors in this case, Jamie Clayton and Sophia Giannamore, are out as trans offscreen, their implicit transness in the series, or potential cisness, leaves a gap for the potential of transfeminine visibility and especially for trans lesbian visibility, which is often underrepresented. As pointed out by film scholar Cael M. Keegan (2018), cultural visibility has always been different for trans women and trans men. The trans male characters in *L Word: Generation Q* have received appreciation, especially as they are rare representations of non-white trans masculinity onscreen. They help to broaden what is visible of the trans community, but also immediately reproduce other normativities, such as norms of ablebodiedness, beauty, and class. The near absence of non-white trans characters remains one of the most problematic aspects of screen representational politics to this day.

Another series running on HBO, *Work in Progress*, offers an interesting input to trans and non-binary representation in how it captures a spectrum of masculinity in the relationship between the young, queer trans man Chris (played by non-binary actor Theo Germaine) and the twenty-years-older butch Abby (played by butch lesbian and comedian Abby McEnany). Co-written by transfeminine director and writer Lilly Wachowski and Abby McEnany herself, and based on McEnany’s life, the series offers a nuanced depiction of a spectrum of masculine gender identities set in a much more realistic setting, contesting the glossy elite reality of *L Word*. Even though *Work in Progress* is a great example of a radicalized representation, most series still centralize predominantly white characters and continue to “isolate” the trans character among other cis characters, such as in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *The OA*. The series *Pose* is a fantastic example of how this might be slowly changing and how cultural spaces for alternative productions and diverse and intersecting positions between class, race, gender, and sexuality are emerging. *Pose*, featuring New York City’s Latinx and African-American LGBTIQ 1980s ballroom scene, coproduced by, among others, Janet Mock and Our Lady J, consists of a cast of mainly trans and non-binary actors, including MJ Rodriguez, Indya Moore, Dominique Jackson, and Angelica Ross.

Trans visibility, culminating, for instance, in the 2014 *Time* magazine cover of Laverne Cox, titled “The Transgender Tipping Point,” has been life-changing

for many. It provides role models in a society that considers trans and non-binary people, as Dean Spade points out, to be “impossible,” nonexistent, and irrelevant (BCRW 2013). As mentioned above, however, visibility and screen presence also come with a downside of cultural appropriation, growing transparency, simplified categorization, and the violence of having become known. As the much-quoted work by Stanley (2017) shows, in the height of trans visibility we also witness a peak in anti-trans violence and peaking murder rates, which in the US context but also beyond particularly targets trans women of color. The often reiterated so-called “transgender tipping point” is thus scarily not only a step into the cultural spotlight with its beauty of visibility and its promise of recognition, but also a step in a direction in which many lives, more than ever before, may be threatened and possibly taken.

The questions of visibility and screen representation have been captured in very different and intriguing forms by the contributors to this issue. In the article titled “Toxic Representation and the Politics of Care for Antiracist Queer and Trans History” by Jess Dorrance, the author discusses the archival archeology in the 2012 video installation *Toxic* by the artist team Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. Dorrance’s article traces in two different readings the different possibilities of interpreting and situating the artwork depending on its temporal and thus political context. She addresses the first reading as one sustained by the temporal context of the early 2010s, as situated in anti-homocisnormative queer politics. Her second reading deals with the importance of shifted visibilities, the politics of transparency, and governmental knowing of the trans subject, as well as the dangers of bodily visibility. She links this to the artistic archive gathered in the film installation *Toxic* through the concept of queer/trans messiness. Martin Ponti’s article, titled “*Los Roldán* and the Inclusion of Travesti Narratives: Representations of Gender-Nonconforming Identities in Argentinian *Telenovelas*,” engages with queer/trans/non-binary bodies onscreen by critically reading the Argentinian soap opera *Los Roldán* (Telefe, 2004–2005). In particular, the role of the series’ main star, the self-identified travesti celebrity Florencia de la V, is central to reading the political potential as well as the visual problematic of the representation of gender nonconformity in this *telenovela*. The third contribution, by Lara Bochmann and Erin Hampson, “Anxious Breath: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Non-binary Queerness, Vulnerability, and Recognition in *Step Out*,” explores visibility and recognition through the short film project *Step Out* (2018), a project the authors had been working on together in order to discuss the questions of outness, outdooriness, and the potential threat to their trans and non-binary selves. In the article, as well as in the film, they draw attention to the potential of violence and misrecognition.

This section came into existence when I started drafting the call for papers in November 2018. Originally, the scope had been set out for four peer-reviewed articles. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, life changes, and stress-related

illness, some of the accepted authors were unable to finish their articles. I am extremely grateful to those who tried, beyond the call of duty, to make it work—and to those who managed to finalize the now-published versions of their articles.

I would like to thank the authors, Jess, Martin, Lara and Erin, for their hard work and their patience with the revisions. I am most grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for the time they spent on commenting on the texts, including those that did not make it into the “Screen Shot” section. And I want to thank the editor Mani Saravanan for the extremely reliable and prompt correspondence, as well as editor Brian Bergen-Aurand for his enthusiasm in our conversations and the encouraging emails throughout these months of production.

I am most thankful for the work of the peer reviewers for this section. Without their feedback, the two peer-reviewed articles and the two articles that were withdrawn would not have gotten the wise and encouraging comments they received. This work, done without compensation, and always on top of an already crammed schedule, was completed under great pressure. At a time when it is increasingly challenging to find peer reviewers for journal issues, as academia has become more and more precarious as well as competitive, people are unable to accommodate additional tasks such as reviewing. I am more than grateful to those who managed; I know most of them worked under extreme conditions, partly unemployed and affected by stress in various ways. I am not only grateful, but truly humbled by their ability to take the time to read and formulate careful comments. I also thank my partner and trans studies scholar Luca Tainio for our shared discussions (and shared appreciation of streamed series), which have helped to shape this editorial.

Not only is academic work becoming increasingly hard to maintain, but political circumstances also affect each and every one of us. The world is not only ecologically collapsing, and toppling under the global pandemic that truly highlights the convergences of gender, sexuality, chronic illness, age, poverty, and race in an even more horrifying light, but it is also a world that is shifting politically toward ultra-right rhetorics. Hungary has banned and evicted one of Europe’s largest gender studies departments and with it its home, the Central European University in Budapest (now in Vienna); a right-wing Brazilian president was elected last year, and has been wreaking havoc ecologically as well as politically; the United States, Russia, and so many other countries are abolishing human rights, minimizing safety, and dropping their gloves when it comes to gender minorities, racialized and queer populations, and even basic women’s rights. This special section, compiled under these conditions and in the wake of all this, has become much smaller than planned, but the conditions have been taxing—as they will be in the future. They have been almost impossible. This impossibility is also all that is left to hang onto—a continuation; a search

for a better situation, more sustainable and livable imaginaries, and politics of resistance that can help to challenge these conditions politically, ecologically, and academically everywhere. Here is to hoping that there is enough strength left to imagine a different reality.

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