



## Transsexuality in Film

by Carolyn Kraus

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Representations of transsexuality in films fall along a spectrum from freak-show sexploitation, to dramatic and documentary depictions of the struggles of transsexuals, and, finally, to the metaphorical use of transsexuality in exploring borders, not only sexual borders but also racial, religious, and political ones as well.

### The Transsexual as Joke

Whereas transvestites have been depicted in film since the silent era, transsexuals (people who have undergone sex-change surgery or who choose to live as the opposite gender) entered the movies only in the early 1950s. The earliest celluloid glimpses of transsexuality appeared shortly after news of George/Christine Jorgensen's 1952 sex-change surgery shocked and mesmerized the world with headlines such as "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty," "Christine, by George!" and "Thousands in U.S. Don't Know Their True Sex."

The first movie attempting to capitalize on the story came from Ed Wood, a quirky filmmaker who was once named the "World's Worst Director." Wood's *Glen or Glenda (I Changed My Sex)* (1953) tells two stories, one about a transvestite, one about a transsexual. Ex-Dracula Bela Lugosi lurks between scenes delivering screwball pleas for tolerance: "Vat are little boys made ov? Ees eet puppy dog tails? Beeg fat snails? Or maybe brassieres!"

The result is pure camp, although Wood, a cross-dresser himself, flashed an intended moral across the screen in the film's opening frames: "Judge Ye Not!"

The filming of *Glen or Glenda* is depicted in Tim Burton's 1994 film biography *Ed Wood*. Wood's entourage includes a pre-operative transsexual, Bunny Breckenridge, played for laughs by Bill Murray.

Bunny belongs to a cinematic convention--the transsexual as joke, a sleazy, decades-long parade that includes Bunny's namesake, Myron/Myra in Michael Sarne's *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), based on Gore Vidal's novel. Raquel Welch's Myra is a busty man-hating transsexual who moves to Hollywood to destroy The American Male by using men in the same ways men typically use women.

Mole McHenry in John Waters' *Desperate Living* (1979) provides another transsexual parody. Hoping to please her curvy blonde girlfriend, Mole hijacks a surgeon, demands a sex-change, and returns with a penis. When her lover rejects it, Mole cuts off the salami-like appendage and feeds it to a German Shepherd.

Sometimes the transsexual caricature is more poignantly drawn, as with The Lady Chablis, a gutsy drag artist on pre-operative hormones in Clint Eastwood's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), based on John Berndt's book; or John Lithgow's Roberta in George Roy Hill's *The World According to Garp* (1982), based on John Irving's novel.

Roberta, a muscle-bound Amazon in a dress, dispenses friendship and wisdom but also reveals her former

life with one of the film's biggest laugh lines: "I was a tight end with the Philadelphia Eagles."

Critics felt that Terence Stamp stole the show in Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) with his tragicomic portrait of the aging showgirl Bernadette. Bernadette's mournful, brave face is etched with the loss and rejection that has pervaded her transsexual experience as she confides to her two transvestite companions: "My parents never spoke to me again after I had the chop."

### **The Transsexual as Psychopathic Killer**

Films have also asked what happens to the person who is denied "the chop." According to thrillers from Roy Ward Baker's low-budget horror film *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971) to Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), that person becomes a psychopathic killer. *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* stars a transsexual madman in fog-bound Victorian London, extracting hormones from freshly-killed women.

Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980) features Michael Caine as mad psychiatrist Dr. Elliot, denied surgery and locked in a life-or-death struggle with the female trapped inside him. When a woman arouses the doctor, his female alter ego slashes her to death with a razor.

This character prefigures Buffalo Bill, the serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs*. Also denied sex-change surgery, "Billy" settles for flaying, tanning and stitching together the skins of size 14 women. "He's making himself a woman's suit," the rookie FBI agent played by Jodie Foster explains, "out of real women."

Most of the whodunits and comedies that exploit transsexuality for its shock value also provide sober, if uninformed, "informational" segments delivered by a designated expert. A doctor solemnly recounts how his patient was "cured" by sex-change surgery in *Glen or Glenda*.

In *Dressed to Kill* a detective fields questions about the homicidal psychiatrist, explaining that Dr. Elliot was "a transsexual, about to take the final step, but his male side couldn't let him do it. . . . All they want to do is get their sex changed."

"How do they do that?"

"Penectomy."

"What's that?"

"Well, you know, when they take your penis and slice it down the middle."

### **True Stories of Transsexuals**

Not until the late 1990s, with small budget films such as Richard Spence's *Different for Girls* (1996), do we get reliable information about transsexuality delivered by insiders in drama. But almost a decade earlier, first-person accounts had already begun to appear in a number of documentaries that tell of the heavy price paid by transsexuals: the physical pain and financial drain of surgery, the loss of jobs, the incomprehension and rejection by family and friends.

For example, Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), a documentary about the elaborate drag and voguing balls of gay Harlem, includes extensive interviews with a transsexual prostitute who was murdered shortly after the filming.

John Paul Davidson's *Boys from Brazil* (1993) captures the bittersweet lives of Rio de Janeiro's "travesti," prostitutes who live their lives as women, taking hormones and injecting silicone into their breasts, buttocks, and hips.

Kate Davis's *Southern Comfort* (2001) follows the final year in the life of Robert Eads, a 52-year-old

transsexual from the back hills of Georgia, who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer after having lived as a man for many years.

True stories of transsexuals have also been dramatized, including Irving Rapper's *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (1970) and a made-for television biography, Anthony Page's *Second Serve* (1986), the life of male-surgeon-turned-women's-pro-tennis player Renee Richards.

Kimberly Peirce's acclaimed *Boys Don't Cry* (2000) is based on the life of Brandon Teena, formerly Teena Brandon, who moved to a small Nebraska town to live as a man. Perhaps it is telling that, in this rare depiction of a female-to-male transsexual, Brandon meets one of the most brutal ends in cinematic memory. He is brutally raped and murdered when revelations of his biological sex threaten the masculinity of his young male acquaintances.

### **Original Dramas**

A few low-budget original dramas explore transsexuality with something other than the freakish curiosity of the thrillers and farces. John Dexter's *I Want What I Want* (1971), released the year after Christine Jorgensen's autobiography appeared, is a transsexual coming-of-age story. The film portrays a young person's painful development from a secret cross-dresser named Roy to a transsexual woman named Wendy, who falls in love with an abusive man.

The celluloid heir to Roy/Wendy's journey is Karl/Kim in *Different for Girls*, but Kim's story has a happier ending as she refuses to be rejected or abused. Kim began life as Karl, an effeminate man whose only defender from schoolyard taunts was Prentice.

When the two friends run into each other as adults, four years after Kim's sex-change, Kim is a prim, defensive greeting card writer who hides from the world, while Prentice is a volatile, immature bike messenger. As their relationship blossoms, Kim learns to enjoy life, and Prentice's acceptance of Kim as a woman prompts his own growing up.

Additional films in which transsexuals are depicted as touchstones for other people's journeys toward tolerance and maturity include Tod Williams' *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (1998), in which a young man moves to New York to live with his stepfather Hank, now Henrietta, and the two develop a positive relationship.

Armistead Maupin's two-part *Tales of the City* (1994, 1997), based on his series of novels and directed by Pierre Gang, depicts a group of San Francisco bohemians presided over by Olympia Dukakis' Mrs. Madrigal, a pot-smoking, transsexual landlady who serves as an unlikely mentor to her young tenants.

Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) portrays the reunion of a group of friends in a small Texas town that leads to a sharing of their most painful secrets, including transsexualism.

Joel Schumacher's *Flawless* (1999) features Robert De Niro as a homophobic security cop who turns reluctantly to the pre-operative transsexual next door for singing lessons as part of his therapy in recovering from a stroke.

In contrast to these stories of growth, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1979) is a relentlessly pessimistic tale that evokes the continued suppression of difference in Fassbinder's post-war Germany. The film chronicles five days leading to the suicide of Elvira Weishaupt, born Erwin.

Erwin had fallen in love with a man who said, offhandedly, "Too bad you're not a girl." After having a sex change, Elvira was rejected. Now she wanders through the slaughterhouse where Erwin once worked,

recounting her history amid meat-hooked corpses of cattle that rain blood onto the floor.

### **The Transsexual as Metaphor**

Unlike the dramas of Fassbinder and others, where such issues as essentialism and intolerance arise from narratives of transsexualism, Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993)--based on a novel by Virginia Woolf--features, rather than a clinical case, a more metaphoric transsexual character.

After two centuries of adventures--romance, war, a princely inheritance--ageless Orlando goes to sleep as a man, then wakes, lets down a cascade of red hair, and looks in the mirror. "Same person," she says. "No difference at all. Just different sex."

Characters speak parables linking gender and ownership, as Orlando's personal journey spans four centuries and parallels the decline of the British Empire.

Liberation finally comes for Orlando when, as the parent of a young child, s/he no longer owns or is owned. And, as the child runs through a field of daisies, Orlando admits to no control over what it will do or be. In short, Orlando's transsexual experience has created a sexual escapee, "no longer trapped by destiny."

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) folds the tale of transsexuality into other kinds of stories in order to raise still broader questions, not only about gender but also about racial, religious, and political identities.

This artfully-constructed film begins with a carnival scene by a bridge, evoking its preoccupation with borders and crossings. When Jody, a British soldier in occupied Ireland, is captured at the carnival and held hostage by the IRA, he points to the irony of his position as a black man representing a racist country. Before he is killed, Jody asks one of his captors, Fergus, to look after his girlfriend.

Deserting the IRA, Fergus crosses political, racial, and sexual borders to fall in love with Jody's girl Dil, a beautiful light-skinned black woman who turns out to be anatomically male.

Dil "fools" not only heterosexual Fergus but also the audience as well. She seems to be a blend of races and genders, confounding mainstream clarities, throwing all political, racial, and sexual identities in the film into doubt. Eventually, Dil kills one of Jody's former captors, and Fergus winds up in prison for the murder.

"Dil is Jody's revenge," writes critic Judith Halberstam. "Dil is the snare that awaits all literal readings of bodies, sexes, races, nationalities."

Reductive and literal readings of transsexualism have led to five decades of films preoccupied with "the chop." *The Crying Game* illustrates, perhaps more than any other exception, that cinematic exploitation of transsexuals as jokes or shock devices ignores a subject rich in human and symbolic complexity.

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