

Toward a Transgender Critique of Media Representation

Shifts in media production and consumption along with the emergence of digital technologies have facilitated quantitative increases and (per some critics) qualitative improvements in transgender representation across print media, film, and television.¹ The biggest influence on trans media representation has come via social media and other platforms for sharing user-generated content, which now provide the lion's share of trans media representations. Unlike those of newspapers, studio films, and broadcast television, however, social media representations are not produced by members of the cisgender majority, for members of the cis majority; they are overwhelmingly trans produced. As such, to critique these digital media representations is not to critique regimes of representational power or the machinations of hegemonic media systems. Rather, it is to critique how transgender people choose to represent themselves and the identities they hold.

Studies of trans media thus far have tended to employ perspectives from feminist theory and queer theory to analyze transgender representation.²

1 See, for example, TJ Billard, "Writing in the Margins: Mainstream News Media Representations of Transgenderism," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 4193–4218; Jamie C. Capuzza and Leland G. Spencer, "Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series," *Communication Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2017): 214–230; and Jackson Taylor McLaren, Susan Bryant, and Brian Brown, "'See Me! Recognize Me!': An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation," *Communication Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2021): 172–191.

2 See Mia Fischer, "Queer and Feminist Approaches to Transgender Media Studies,"

Thomas J Billard and Eriqie Zhang, "Toward a Transgender Critique of Media Representation," *JCMS* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 194–199.

However, doing so has posed analytic problems for the burgeoning field of trans media studies. To articulate these problems, we draw on C  el M. Keegan’s analysis of trans studies’ position vis-  -vis women’s and queer studies, as well as TJ Billard’s extensions of that analysis in the specific domain of trans media studies.³ By no means do we assume either feminist theory or queer theory to be monolithic in their approaches; rather, we endeavor to describe the central tendencies of these broad interdisciplines as they exist in their institutionalized forms. Moreover, we draw from sociology of culture frameworks to propose a mode of transgender representational critique that attends to the specificities of trans identity and experience rather than evaluating representation in terms of “good” or “bad.”

Feminist approaches to media studies often maintain a model whereby men dominate women and patriarchy works through media narratives to maintain male dominance.⁴ Misogynist representations are “bad” and those that oppose it are “good.”⁵ Trans media representations challenge this thinking by disrupting the hierarchy of domination that feminist theory posits. Where does the trans man fall in the hierarchy of patriarchal domination? Does he now dominate women by virtue of his transition? Where does the trans woman fall? Is she now dominated by men, or—as trans-exclusionary radical feminists have argued—does she dominate “real” (i.e., cis) women by virtue of the sex she was assigned at birth?⁶ Where does the nonbinary person fall, whose existence challenges the binary required for this hierarchical understanding of power?

While much feminist theory is invested in a model of binaristic sexual subordination, queer theory is invested in deconstructing the binary gender system as a means of “unravel[ing] heteronormativity.”⁷ Queer theorists often interpret transness either as “some ‘ultimate form’ of queerness that manifests literally the metaphor of gender transgression” or as an anti-queer impulse toward binary conformity.⁸ From a queer theoretical perspective,

in *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research*, ed. Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 93–107.

- 3 C  el M. Keegan, “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans* about Queer Studies Now?,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 384–397; and TJ Billard et al., “Rethinking (and Rethorizing) Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion,” *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 4494–4507.
- 4 Black, intersectional, queer, and trans feminisms make necessary interventions, complicating the model of male-female domination that we have overly simplified here for the sake of brevity. For more thorough critiques of white, cisgender, and heteronormative feminisms, see, for example, Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–465; Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15–27; and Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016).
- 5 See, for a more thorough critique of this tendency, Charlotte Brunson, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 110–116.
- 6 See, for a basic introduction, Ben Vincent, Sonja Erikainen, and Ruth Pearce, eds., “TERF Wars: Feminism and the Fight for Transgender Futures,” special issue, *Sociological Review Monographs* 68, no. 4 (2020).
- 7 Keegan, “Getting Disciplined,” 387.
- 8 Billard et al., “Transgender Media Representation,” 4500.

then, transgender representations should be evaluated as “bad” to the extent they uphold the validity of binary gender identity and “good” to the extent they disrupt the binary gender system.⁹ Trans identity disrupts this theoretical model, as trans people variously identify with and against a binary gender system in a complex field of valid identities.¹⁰ Accordingly, transgender media representations cannot be simply read through the queer political fantasy of counter-normativity.

Beyond their theoretical limitations, both approaches also present methodological shortcomings: feminist and queer theories claim to offer a “more rigorous excavation of subjectivities” than sociological accounts, but they have tended to do so via analyses that superimpose the anti-patriarchal and antinormative political investments of the theorist onto the objectified trans figure.¹¹ Put differently, these theorists project their own universalized interests onto the trans figures whose identities they claim to excavate. Consider, for instance, two competing readings of the film *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) by Black feminist theorist bell hooks and queer theorist Judith Butler. For her part, hooks reads the representations of trans women in *Paris* as “bad” because they uphold the subordination of Black women by normalizing aspiration to “a sexist idealization of white womanhood.”¹² Alternatively, Butler reads the trans women in *Paris*—and specifically Venus Xtravaganza, a trans Latina woman whose murder the film documents—as failing to execute the subversive power of drag; because they desired to transform their sexed bodies into congruence with their gender identities, they reinscribed, rather than subverted, the “heterosexual matrix” that maintains normative alignments of sex and gender.¹³ Yet neither reading attends fully to the material realities of trans of color life or the subjective experiences of gender as lived by the trans women in the film. When queer and feminist theorists read trans media representations as “good” or “bad” based on their amenability to a counter-subordination or anti-normativity paradigm, trans subjectivities become a means to an end in furthering queer and feminist investments.¹⁴ Where is the trans subject in such approaches?

Thus, we find ourselves in need of different theoretical models for and methodological approaches to the analysis of transgender media representations—ones specific to trans subjectivity—to overcome the limitations of feminist and queer approaches. We turn to the sociology of culture to assist in this endeavor. Sociologists of culture take up as their

9 For a more thorough critique of this tendency, see Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 22.

10 See Serano, *Whipping Girl*.

11 Adam Isaiah Green, “Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies,” *Sociological Theory* 25, no. 1 (2007): 26, 29.

12 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 147.

13 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 127.

14 While the debate between hooks and Butler is perhaps outdated at this point, we consider it to be a foundational example rather than one that is representative of all feminist or queer theoretical readings of media representation. See, for example, Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013), which explores how this debate has structured the film’s reception.

central concern the processes of action and interaction that shape both the expression and interpretation of publicly shared codes.¹⁵ At the heart of the sociology of culture is the dichotomy between collectively shared understandings and individual acts of expression and interpretation. Cultural codes and their attendant norms of representation are neither static structures passively received and mindlessly replicated by individuals nor infinitely fluid signifiers that can be made to mean anything. Instead, cultural codes offer “a multiform repertoire of meanings to frame and reframe experience in open-ended ways”—so long as that repertoire is shared among those in communication with one another.¹⁶ The reportorial quality of cultural codes becomes especially clear when we focus on particular interacting groups, such as members of a subculture, members of a civic association, or publics formed around shared media. These groups develop “group styles,” or specific and patterned ways of using collective representations to represent particular meanings within the group’s shared culture.¹⁷ The task for sociologists of culture, then, is to understand “how people use collective representations to make meaning together in everyday life.”¹⁸ Sociologists of culture achieve this task by drawing on the field’s long tradition in symbolic interactionism, employing ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviewing, to directly observe “on the ground” processes of meaning-making.

Wendy Griswold offers perhaps the most holistic methodological approach to the sociology of culture.¹⁹ She identifies four “actions” that any complete analysis of a “cultural object”—that is, “an expression of social meanings that is tangible or can be put into words”—must account for.²⁰ They include *intention*, or the creative agent’s purpose in producing or using the cultural object; *reception*, or the interpretation, impact, and endurance of the cultural object over time and space; *comprehension*, or the interpretation of a cultural object in terms of what is already known or understood and its classification into an identifiable genre; and *explanation*, or the drawing of connections between the cultural object’s characteristics and the wider social world that it reflects, paying attention to how those connections are mediated by intention and reception. In using this approach, sociologists of culture attend to both the subjective experiences of producers and consumers of cultural objects *and* the broader sociocultural contexts in which those objects are produced and consumed.²¹

15 See Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman, “Culture in Interaction,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108 (2003): 735–794; Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273–286; and Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

16 Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 40.

17 Eliasoph and Lichterman, “Culture in Interaction,” 737.

18 Eliasoph and Lichterman, 736.

19 Wendy Griswold, “A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture,” *Sociological Methodology* 17 (1987): 1–35.

20 Griswold, 4.

21 Film historians and many cultural studies scholars pay similar attention to contexts of production and reception. In contrast to these scholars, however, sociologists of culture place a greater emphasis on deep *ethnographic engagement* with *contemporary* production and reception (as do reception studies scholars informed by sociology’s ethnographic focus).

How, then, does the sociology of culture open up the possibility of new transgender modes of representational critique? First, it provides a necessary focus on both the interactional *and* the structural processes of collective meaning-making. In attending to the repertoires of cultural codes that help structure and facilitate social meaning-making and the way those codes are filtered in different settings to produce contingent meanings, the sociology of culture further allows scholars to investigate dynamics pertaining to race, ethnicity, and other lines of social inequality.²² Using this approach allows trans media studies to move beyond generalized categories of “good” or “bad,” understanding media instead as embedded within complex communicative processes that collectively produce meaning through social interaction among group members. To revisit *Paris Is Burning*, our perspective would intervene to focus on the repertoire of meanings the trans women mobilize within their group setting, which is understood to consist of fellow members of their interacting group. Where Butler (over)reads Venus Xtravaganza’s gender vis-à-vis white queer culture’s repertoire of drag—through which lens her gender represents a failure of performative subversion—our perspective attends to the meaning of her claims and performances not in analytic isolation but within *her own subcultural context*. Butler is not part of the interacting group in which the meaning of Xtravaganza’s gender is made, and Butler fails to excavate the meanings created by that group using their own group style. Instead, she reads trans women into *her own* group style and the repertoires of meaning in her own cultural contexts. But doing so does not benefit or enrich our understanding of transgender subjectivities. The approach we advocate does.

Second, the sociology of culture orients us toward *empirical engagement with and observation of* the social processes that develop cultural structures, focusing particularly on intent, behavior, and impact. This methodological reorientation entails a necessary *political* reorientation, leaving behind the troubling tendency in feminist and queer theory to use transgender subjects as analytic objects through which to read gender-based subordination and gender counter-normativity, respectively. This new orientation is particularly important given the digital media environment we identified earlier, in which trans media representations are increasingly produced by trans people for both cis and trans audiences. In this context, we cannot presume that trans media representations simply transmit majoritarian ideologies about minoritarian subjects. Ethnographic methods better allow us to understand trans individuals as active agents in both producing and making meaning of media. From this perspective, trans representations are not analyzed as “good” or “bad,” “normative” or “resistant.” Rather, they are analyzed as (1) intentional acts of symbolic communication, which are (2) received and interpreted by audiences who (3) comprehend those acts in the context of their existing, culturally informed classification schema and which can be (4) explained by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which those acts and interpretations occur.

22 For an in-depth discussion of how cultural sociology attends to these dynamics, see Michèle Lamont, “Meaning-Making in Cultural Sociology: Broadening Our Agenda,” *Contemporary Sociology* 29, no. 4 (2000): 602–607.

This analytical model must attend to the localized meanings produced by interacting groups' shared repertoires of cultural codes. It might, therefore, lead scholars of trans media to ask the following:

1. How do trans media producers represent their identities to their audiences? How do they negotiate their transness while working in media industries?
2. How do trans audiences receive and interpret messages about trans identities from commercial and social media? How do cis audiences?
3. How do trans audiences then comprehend these messages given their repertoire of cultural codes? How do cis audiences?
4. Finally, how do we explain the breadth of trans media representations within broader sociocultural and political contexts?

As we have explicated here, such questions require that we develop analytical tools that allow us to get at the specificity of trans identities and experiences, moving beyond the theoretical frameworks provided by feminist and queer theory and the limitations their political projects place on trans possibility. This should move us toward distinctly transgender modes of representational critique.

TJ Billard (they/them) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at Northwestern University and executive director of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies. They are a political communication scholar whose research spans communication, political sociology, and transgender studies.

Eriqie Zhang (they/she) is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication at Northwestern University. Their research focuses on the beauty cultures of transgender women and queer people of color, paying close attention to the work of transfeminine beauty vloggers.