

Edited by Cael M. Keegan and Laura Horak

## IN FOCUS

# Transing Cinema and Media Studies

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# Introduction

In a recent *JCMS* In Focus dossier on “Crippling Cinema and Media Studies,” Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick persuasively argue that centering a disability perspective in cinema and media studies means far more than looking for “the cripple in the text.” Rather, it is about “decentering the physically and cognitively ‘normal’ character, the ‘normal’ viewer, the ‘normal’ producer, and so on.”<sup>1</sup> This critical attention to how the dynamics of power and normalization construct not only the content but also the form, reception, and production of media texts has profound implications for every aspect of cinema and media studies.

Inspired by Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick’s call to approach cinema and media studies through the lenses of disability and able-bodiedness, we ask, What happens to cinema and media studies when we center trans, Two Spirit, nonbinary, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people, perspectives, and cultural production? What becomes possible when we bring theoretical, historical, and aesthetic approaches from the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of transgender studies to cinema and media studies?

Sam Feder’s recent documentary *Disclosure* (2020) explores some of the paradoxes of the history of trans representation in Hollywood. The film presents a litany of negative stereotypes from the beginnings of cinema and television to today but also a chorus of trans media creators describing the complexity of their viewing experiences. It calls for the greater visibility of trans people but at the same time admits that increased visibility often results in greater vulnerability to violence. As Alfred L. Martin Jr. notes in his introduction to the *JCMS* In Focus dossier on “Race-ing Media Industry and Production Studies,” “More representation is [also] a relatively easy target to hit.”<sup>2</sup> Transgender people are certainly visible in our current moment.

1 Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, “Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0043>.

2 Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Introduction,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 1 (2020): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2020.0066>.

But who gets to make trans images at all—and what is the function of those images once they circulate in culture?

When we survey cinema and media scholarship on “trans” topics, we notice a number of tropes that sometimes limit the inquiry taking place at this intersection:

- Media scholars write about transgender cinema and media without engaging work by transgender scholars or from the field of transgender studies. A few articles, book chapters, or concepts (e.g., Jack Halberstam’s “transgender look”) therefore become the ubiquitous referents for all of trans cinema and media studies.<sup>3</sup>
- A handful of well-known and mostly cisgender-authored works—such as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), *Transparent* (Amazon Prime Video, 2014–2019), *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), and, most recently, *Pose* (FX, 2018–2021)—stand in for transgender cinema and media writ large. This narrow framing excludes thousands of media texts made by transgender artists as well as more interesting and less familiar works by cisgender media producers.
- Media scholars reproduce a critically flat approach to studying representation that is chiefly interested in identifying “good” and “bad” depictions of transgender identities. Scholars using this approach then spend more time criticizing stereotypes in mainstream media than discovering or elevating alternatives. Similarly, scholars assume that older cinema and media texts have nothing to offer critically because they contain “negative” representations. In doing so, scholars tend to reproduce problematic patterns of avoiding “bad” or “outdated” objects that are also present in the study of racial representation.<sup>4</sup>
- Scholars celebrate more and “better” transgender representations in mainstream media without considering the intersectional limits and risks of visibility for actual transgender bodies, as explored by trans filmmaker Sam Feder, media scholar-activist Alex Juhasz, and others.<sup>5</sup>
- Scholars treat queer theories and methods as if they are sufficient for understanding transgender phenomena without considering critical differences between these approaches, key divergences in the theo-

3 Jack Halberstam, “The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don’t Cry*,” *Screen* 42, no. 3 (2001): 294–298; and Jack Halberstam, “The Transgender Look,” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 76–96.

4 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation,” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 178–219.

5 See Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz, “Does Visibility Equal Progress? A Conversation on Trans Activist Media,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 57 (Summer 2016), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-Feder-JuhaszTransActivism/index.html>; Aren Aizura, “Introduction,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 606–611; and Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

retical assessment of sexuality vs. gender, or the historical tensions between gay and lesbian and transgender politics.<sup>6</sup>

- In general, scholars treat instances of transgender as if a singular theoretical or analytic approach will apply, when in reality “trans” is a complex and intersectional set of phenomena.

In response to these prevailing trends, we chose for this In Focus to solicit short essays that describe visions and versions of what cinema and media scholarship informed by transgender studies—and, more broadly, by the experiences and insights of trans people and scholars—*could* be. What does transgender studies mean for the field of cinema and media studies? What are the vital differences between queer and trans methods and modes of critique? What are the key transgender studies texts that should inform a new era of media scholarship? What could a genuinely trans cinema and media studies be and do? And why is such a trans cinema and media studies important to practice in our current moment and moving forward?

In this In Focus, we present scholarly responses to these questions that address silent and contemporary cinema, video shorts, video games, video art, and trans-produced pornography. Beginning the dossier, media scholar and curator Eliza Steinbock suggestively declares that “trans studies is media studies, and media studies is (or could be) trans studies.” What happens when we consider the body “a prime form of media”? Film scholar and filmmaker Rox Samer takes readers back to key figures in the field of film studies—Charlie Chaplin, André Bazin, and Tom Gunning—to reread Chaplin’s lauded “plastic ontology” in relation to contemporary trans and nonbinary affect.<sup>7</sup> Samer explores how recent trans scholarship can help us re-experience this most classic of film figures. Conversely, film archivist and librarian Magnus Berg urges readers to look beyond the small set of theatrically released feature films that have constituted “trans cinema” for scholars and critics and toward the hundreds of trans-made movies shown at the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival in the late 1990s, including a significant amount of trans-made pornography. Berg describes the danger that collections like these face, as VHS tapes deteriorate and archives face a litany of legal and financial challenges to preserving them or making them widely accessible through digitization and/or streaming.

Horror film scholar Dan Vena and his former student Islay Burgess discuss one of the pressing generational tensions in the trans community—what to do with “bad” trans media, especially the long tradition of horror films with monstrous gender-bending villains. Vena describes his discomfort with his students’ tendency to want to throw away or forget older trans representations that are not in line with their politics, while Burgess explains what motivates these impulses and how younger transgender media consumers express against-the-grain reading practices in forms not always legible to

6 Cael M. Keegan, “Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan B. Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 66–78.

7 Tom Gunning, “Chaplin and the Body of Modernity,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8, no. 3 (August 2010): 238.

their professors. Communication scholars TJ Billard and Erique Zhang, the founding directors of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies, suggest methods for pushing past impasses in feminist and queer approaches to media, arguing for a sociology of culture approach that explores the specificity of the creation and reception of trans-produced digital media.

This dossier also places trans cinema scholarship in conversation with trans media scholarship, particularly trans video game studies. "Video games are a rich site for exploring the place of trans identities and experiences in digital media," argues game studies scholar Bo Ruberg. Ruberg demonstrates "why game studies needs trans studies" and outlines a capacious vision for a future trans game studies. Media scholar and multimedia artist micha cárdenas expands the vision of our section even further, asking how "trans media studies can be relevant for the next hundred years as we face the realities of expanding mass extinction and the possible end of our own species." cárdenas draws on Black and Indigenous scholarship to think about the trans operations between species and environments, as expressed in her own augmented reality work *Sin Sol* and Ursula Biemann's short film *Acoustic Ocean* (2018).

It is vital that trans cinema and media studies center the work of trans scholars and make more room in academic institutions for trans knowledges, methods, and bodies.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we suggest all cinema and media scholars adopt a "politics of responsibility."<sup>9</sup> Philosopher Alexis Shotwell unfurls this concept: "A politics of responsibility recognizes our relative, shifting, and contingent position in social relations of harm and benefit; it enjoins us to look at how we are shaped by our place in history. We can take responsibility for creating futures that radically diverge from that history, seriously engaging that work based on where we are located, listening well to the people, beings, and ecosystems most vulnerable to devastation."<sup>10</sup> Thus, to be cis and to study trans cinema and media in dialogue with this section means to do more than attend to the way trans concepts work in and alongside media texts. It means finding out how your own institutions are harming trans students, faculty, and staff and what you can do to change those conditions; it means elevating trans voices and centering trans scholars in your own citation practices; it means committing to hiring and retaining trans scholars in your programs; it means identifying and owning your own motivations rather than projecting them onto the transgender "figure." Trans philosopher C. Jacob Hale's "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans\_\_\_\_," penned in 1997, remain strikingly relevant and provide an excellent starting place.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, doing the work

8 For how *not* to include trans scholars in a professional meeting, see Cael M. Keegan, "On Being the Object of Compromise," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 150–157, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334319>.

9 Gary Kinsman, "The Politics of Revolution," *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*, no. 1 (October 8, 2009), <https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/01-the-politics-of-revolution>.

10 Alexis Shotwell, "A Politics of Imperfection, A Politics of Responsibility," *Alexis Shotwell* (blog), April 25, 2017, <https://alexisshotwell.com/2017/04/25/a-politics-of-imperfection-a-politics-of-responsibility/>.

11 Jacob Hale, "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans\_\_\_\_," *Sandy Stone*, November 18, 2009,

that needs to be done starting *now* and going forward means listening well to trans thinkers and thinking hard about what this work requires of you from your specific location.

**Cáel M. Keegan** (he/him) is an associate professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies at Grand Valley State University. He is the author of *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (University of Illinois Press, 2018) and co-editor of “Cinematic Bodies,” special issue, *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (March 2018).

**Laura Horak** (she/her) is an associate professor of film studies at Carleton University and director of the Transgender Media Portal. She is author of *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema* (2016) and co-editor of “Cinematic Bodies,” a special issue of *Somatechnics* on trans/cinematic/bodies.

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<https://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>. See also Abbie Goldberg, “How to Tell If Your College Is Trans-Inclusive,” *The Conversation*, April 30, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-to-tell-if-your-college-is-trans-inclusive-158348>.

# The Riotous State of Trans Visual Culture

I believe that the widely cited sentiment that political and visual cultures have reached a transgender tipping point is a reflection less of absolute numbers of increased trans representation and more of the sense of transness as bubbling up and boiling over, as excessive and seeping into every nook and cranny of media.<sup>1</sup> This moment might be understood as the riotous state of trans visual culture expanding *en masse*, with a cacophony of disputes, settling of scores, and hectic jostling of bodies. In 2021, one can hardly watch or keep track of all forms of trans media: it consists of both the undercommons and the commercial mainstream, the opaque and the seemingly transparent.<sup>2</sup> I want to claim the current riotous state of trans visual culture then, in the sense of unruly personages in series; unrestrained storylines in film; lively presences on television; loud subcultures on Tumblr, TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms; and vivid and varied appearances in mass media, indie, arthouse, and grimy lowbrow. The public disorder caused by trans media and visual culture cannot be tamed or harnessed into understanding by any particular methodological or disciplinary approach. Hence,

1 I want to express gratitude to the In Focus editors and Caetlin Benson-Allott for pushing my thinking and sharpening my writing. See “Where We Are on TV Report—2019,” GLAAD, <http://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv19/>; and Laura Horak, “‘We’d Like to See Trans People at the Very Top’: Transgender Talent Founder Ann Thomas in Conversation,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 21–39.

2 See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Autonomedia, 2013); Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Cael M. Keegan, “Looking Transparent,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2015): 137–138; and Eric A. Stanley, “Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 612–620.

I argue that attending to the formal qualities—and not just the representational quality—of the riotous state of trans media would be a first step in welding trans politics and trans lives to a way of doing media studies.

## TRANS STUDIES IS MEDIA STUDIES

Faced with a scene of trans revelry that spills across media forms in an ungovernable fashion, trans media scholars need to think bigger than media objects appearing as film, television, or social media and in particularized genres to grasp the current conditions. I argue that trans studies is media studies, and media studies is (or could be) trans studies. This statement has the formal quality of a loop, and rhetorically it shapes that what I want to assert is potentially a relationship of mutual constitution between these fields of study when they each recognize the mutual constitution of media and the body. Forming a constitutive relation requires their thinking together—looking at their interpenetrations—in order to expand the vocabularies and abilities of each field to envision mediation and embodiment, how they cooperate and their stakes. Allow me here to conjure the deep analogical thinking that forms the backbone of my 2019 book, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*.<sup>3</sup> The book's argument is built on an ampersand of trans & cinema, examining the striking similarities between some aesthetic forms of cinema and transgender embodiment. One example I elaborate on in my first chapter is the dominant trope of the before-and-after images used in trans representation, but also in early cinema trick films, both of which rely on a notion of the seamless and yet shocking effect of a cinematographic or surgical cut. The cut effectuates a temporal, narrative, but also bodily change; the question is whether this noted change is affirmed or deemed illusionary.<sup>4</sup>

Transgender studies inherently thinks in terms of media through its consideration of the body as a medium of expression, but media studies does not as yet foreground embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Might media studies adopt a more capacious understanding of medium as any means by which something is expressed, and consider the body a prime form of media? To complete the constitutive loop of trans studies is media studies is trans studies, I'm suggesting that media studies needs to take on board trans studies' understanding of the body as an expression of a complex subjectivity: affixed by psychic and social desires, forced into racial arrangements of gender, delineated by its capacities, associated with a gender or genre as well as the status of its appearance. Attention to how mediation and visibility work for trans bodies (plural) can be an instructive starting point. This involves media scholars acknowledging how trans people are asked to become visible as such for cis people—to literally mediate ourselves into existence on their terms—to be seen as

3 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

4 Steinbock, 26–60.

5 See Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); and Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," 1987, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.html>.



“real,” even when the conditions for becoming visible very likely will trigger unwanted attention, violence, and even death. Media scholars can work toward changing these conditions so that trans people can appear safely, on their own terms, and not become stuck in the conundrum identified as the visibility politics of the trapdoor: when being visible is a door for escaping some harms but transforms into a trap in that it provides limited forms to be seen as gendered.<sup>6</sup> This media analysis may consist in first identifying terms of recognition that cruelly enclose inclusion; then scholars must transform the logics of (visual) culture that threaten trans bodies, that mark them as deceptive, fraudulent, pathetic, or predatory.

Furthermore, the (post)human, technological, and affective unruliness of bodies should be taken more seriously so that scholars may better attend to ways form becomes modified and genres constantly flail, to borrow a phrase from Lauren Berlant. With *genre flailing* (and its reliable failing), Berlant speaks to necessary attachments one has to a confident “frame” of expectation and the aftermath of interpretation (of events, images, and sounds) when this frame is disturbed.<sup>7</sup> In media studies, when the question of representation becomes all-consuming, we may miss larger patterns of formal significance that (dis)organize that expression in a medium. For instance, the documentary mode hegemonically organizes trans media objects, lending a truth-telling and authenticating device that nevertheless tends to weaponize confession as formally integral to trans expression. In response to the coercive status of confession, the experimental film *against a trans narrative* (Jules Roskam, 2008) introduces documentary conventions such as intimate diary footage, only to suspend them with stylized fictional dramatic scenes, which productively induces a crisis in the surety of the documentary, giving way to gender and genre flailing.

This trans approach to film studies and visual culture enlarges the potential corpus of media scholarship to the expression of the body and the corporeal form.<sup>8</sup> As Henri Bergson considered it, the body is the pivot point to grasping the world perceptually as a series of images; it is the first image to be perceived and the filter of perception for other perceptual experiences.<sup>9</sup> No two experiences of media are the same, but they can encourage scenes of shared affective habitus. Furthermore, the body in both cases does not stand in isolation but is a site of an apparatus for desires: expanding our attention to practices of re-assembly. Let us embrace the troublesome, wanton, extravagant body shot through with desire, that riotous medium that brings on disputes.

My own research in media archaeology finds a transsexual logic of cinematic embodiment at work in filmmaking since its inception. This includes a

6 See Tourmaline [formerly Reina Gossett], Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xxiii.

7 Lauren Berlant, “Genre Flailing,” *Capacious Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–162, <https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2018.16>.

8 See Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak, and Eliza Steinbock, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Cinematic/Trans\*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come),” *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1.

9 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 17.

keen interest in reordering the sensible ushered in by the age of technological reproducibility—the splicing together of images in new ways and the projection of the medium so that it became a public way to tell a story through constructed images.<sup>10</sup> While not all media creation involves physically cutting and suturing celluloid or tape to transform and multiply bodies, these are a broad set of creative practices that in many regards mirror the apparatus for gender transitioning desires. Via attention to the wide range of practices and habitus gathered under gender incongruence and transitioning, the looping of trans (as) media could usher in an explicit attention to formal analysis of media that may (or may not) have a trans person involved in its creation. This approach could, for example, consider the formal elements of successive states of personhood and genders given or expressed as mutable, multiple, and spatialized that lend it what David Getsy calls “transgender capacity.”<sup>11</sup>

We are at a juncture in which trans issues have become mainstream enough to be announced as so-called debatable. In fact, trans lives are not debatable; we exist, and we are who we say we are. But the increasing frequency of representations of trans bodies and trans lives within media has given rise to a false sense of familiarity that, as Aren Aizura has suggested, “breeds contempt.”<sup>12</sup> So much for the cruelly optimistic adage that if they’d only know us, they’d accept us. The politics of recognition behind much trans scholarship and activism rests on the thorny issue of ontology—that is, what is trans being? And the tussle over establishing an ontology for the trans subject effectively leads to policing of who is and who can claim to be trans, and even if trans people can be said to exist. This boils down to what a trans person must do with their bodily expression to be trusted that they are the gender they say they are, what mimetic relation they must enact, what performed indexes will grant validity to their claim.

Trans scholarship has long shown that indexicality is one of the problems transgender existence centrally confronts, and this is but one reason that a traditional notion of representation is insufficient for grasping trans subjectivities, for parsing our lives and deaths.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, trans experiences of gender incongruence—however we might conceptualize *gender*—become expressed in a broad set of practices and felt within a (partially) shared affective habitus. These shift like a kaleidoscope and constellate differently across historical periods and cultures. As scholars, we can look at how these markers of gender transitioning, transgression, or incongruence are cited, framed, elaborated in media, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that a description of bodily expression is ever a prescription for what defines a trans person.

10 This description is paraphrased from Susan Stryker’s lecture on her documentary *Christine in the Cutting Room* (2013). See Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 17.

11 David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), xvi, 34.

12 Aren Aizura, “Introduction,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017): 606–611.

13 My thanks to Cael Keegan for discussion on this point. See Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43–65.

## HOT SHIT

The increase in transgender, non-binary, and quietly queer characters has come from waves of activism by cultural producers, including writers, directors, actors, and by media advocacy organizations the world over. At the same time, as actor, writer, and artist Travis Alabanza has baldly stated, “gender non conformity is allowed to exist in public space but only as entertainment, and never in mutual respect.”<sup>14</sup> I, too, remain wary about the historical persistence of media cycles that feature exceptionalized trans figures when it suits ratings, niche viewership, or spectacularized news. Speaking from her own experience, trans media artist Tourmaline has expressed mistrust in becoming “hot shit,” or enough of a body to be a body in demand: “I’ve spent enough of my life feeling like a nobody to feel how different it is to be called upon as a somebody.”<sup>15</sup> The hot shit media body is hard, glossy; think of the “Call me Caitlyn” cover of *Vanity Fair* or Hilary Swank accepting an Oscar for the role of Brandon Teena.<sup>16</sup> Aizura cites Tourmaline’s speech as evidence of the state of trans recognition in 2017, but it remains pertinent in the ever more cluttered trans mediascape of 2021.<sup>17</sup> This is the trans mediation double-bind of visibility: becoming “hot shit” can usher in recognition that nevertheless invites value extraction from the trans person. I, too, hesitate to cheer when trans bodies are seen and celebrated for the capitalist ends of offering differentiation in the media consumption of bodies. This does not make trans expressed (or perceived) bodies safer.

Hence Tourmaline and Aizura look to Denise Ferreira da Silva’s claiming of the “no-body” as a political position worth fighting for when mobilizing against cis-centric recognition politics. Da Silva asks, “if the state is ready to kill to defend itself from the black, sexual, trans body brought before it, do we want to be somebody before the state, or no-body against it?”<sup>18</sup> Understanding ourselves as having self-possession on the terms of the state, with its investment in recognizing individual bodily rights, leads one to forget the porous body that has been central to disability studies’ frameworks, that mingling of I and we, and the vulnerability and care that composes this intermingling.<sup>19</sup>

My counter-body, the kind of body I wish for media studies to be ready to theorize, would be the writings of N.O. Body, the pseudonym of Karl M. Baer,

14 Travis Alabanza, “We Can No Longer Accept LGBTQ Solidarity That Stops at a TV Screen, Stage or Meme,” *Metro*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.metro.co.uk/2019/06/21/we-can-no-longer-accept-lgbtq-solidarity-that-stops-at-a-tv-screen-stage-or-meme-10019773/?ito=cbshare>.

15 Tourmaline [formerly Reina Gossett], Cyrus Grace Dunham, and Constantina Zavitzanos, “Commencement Address at Hampshire College,” May 17, 2016, cited in Aizura, “Introduction,” 608.

16 Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story,” *Vanity Fair*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlyn-jenner-bruce-cover-annie-leibovitz/>.

17 Aizura, “Introduction,” 608.

18 See “Episode 8: Refuse Powers’ Grasp,” lecture, Tramway & The Art School, Glasgow, October 21–23, 2016, <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/episode-8-refuse-powers-grasp>.

19 See “In Focus: Crippling Cinema and Media Studies,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2019).

who penned *Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years* (1907).<sup>20</sup> The trans body of Baer inspired the multimedia installation of *N.O.Body* (2008) by the European artist duo Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. This image-conscious work confronts the viewer's perceptual system with reproductions of bodies taken from Magnus Hirschfeld's 800-page book, *Sexology, In Pictures* (1930), and the live and recorded performing body of trans man Werner Hirsch as the turn-of-the-century "bearded lady" Annie Jones.<sup>21</sup> The confusion wrought from the layering of these bodies—as pictures in a salon-style installation, light from film projections, and performers using shadow play—engages my own body's perceptual sense of an expanding, porous *we* of media nobodies. Encountering *N.O.Body*, I'm invited into the swirl of the reproduced, projected, performed bodily expressions seeking escape from being made a somebody by the cis-centric, white supremacist, and ableist visual logics of pathology, Nazism, and freak shows. Trans media scholars might therefore consider the operations in effect for the where, when, and how nobodies become somebody to us, so that we, too, are writing from within the loosely drawn circle of a *we*. That is, as scholars apart of the order of the sensible, we should place ourselves inside the loop of trans media to establish a rapport and responsibility to these bodies in all their forms of expression.

**Eliza Steinbock** (they/them) is an associate professor of gender and diversity studies at Maastricht University; author of the SCMS-awarded book *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019); and co-editor of the Duke book series ASTERISK: gender, trans-, and all that comes after.

20 N.O. Body, *Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years*, trans. Deborah Simon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

21 Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *N.O.Body*, boudry-lorenz.de, 2008, <https://www.boudry-lorenz.de/n-o-body/>.

Rox Samer

# Trans Chaplin

A body in process, in transformation, an incomplete body able to merge with other bodies—or other things—and create new bodies . . . this new body, for all its composite weirdness, strikes us as immediately recognizable rather than entirely alien: an insight into our own bodily experience, whether remembered from childhood or glimpsed in dreams.

—TOM GUNNING<sup>1</sup>

The lift of an eyebrow, however faint, may convey more than a hundred words.

—CHARLES CHAPLIN<sup>2</sup>

In the weeks following my top surgery in December 2019, I enjoyed many a movie and television series with my care web.<sup>3</sup> As my body healed and I turned my attention to preparing for the spring 2020 semester, including a course on US film history, I was taken with the most iconic and popular of historical media figures: Charlie Chaplin. The filmmaker's short films and silent features supported the recalibration of my body-mind as I prepared to re-enter the social world. They would also become films that I'd return to, that my own body would recall over the coming year, as I started taking testosterone and continued to transition with the minimal surveillance from cis society, quarantined at home with my cats and partner as my only witnesses. Chaplin's films, surprisingly, gave image to both the changes I yearned for and those I joyfully experienced.

Until quite recently, transgender media studies has centered the study of transgender representation, meaning the analysis of film and television's few canonical trans characters. But the last five years have seen a renaissance in the field with a number of studies devoted to trans aesthetics, genre studies,

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1 Tom Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8, no. 3 (August 2010): 243.

2 Charles Chaplin, "Pantomime and Comedy," *New York Times*, January 25, 1931, X6.

3 For more on care webs, see Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

Rox Samer, "Trans Chaplin," *JCMS* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 175–180.

and industry studies revealing what is trans about the most mainstream, most popular, and oldest film and television fare.<sup>4</sup> Among these, Cael M. Keegan's *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (2018) demonstrates how the Wachowskis established a cinematic language for sensing beyond gender's dictated forms, and Quinlan Miller's *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (2019) reveals the camp humor of 1950s and 1960s sitcoms to be brimming with gender nonconformity or queer gender. Their archives and methods are welcome in contemporary trans political discourse where trans activists, journalists, and scholars' paranoid readings routinely cite anti-trans violence—particularly the murders of trans women of color. Time and again, this discourse reduces *trans women of color* to a signifier for white supremacist and transphobic violence.<sup>5</sup> As Jules Gill-Peterson argues, it's high time we shed "the predictive control that is the hallmark of paranoia for the much messier and potentially more pleasurable terrain of perverse laughter."<sup>6</sup> Trans life is teeming with awkwardness and joy. Thus, while it may sound antithetical to much popular trans discourse, we find ourselves addressed by much film and television, past and present, including the futures of science fiction and humor of comedy (and not only when the butt of jokes).

Here I demonstrate how the silent film comedian Charlie Chaplin, through a pantomime of agile, embodied shifts across not only gender but also species and kingdom, gave early moving image to trans phenomenology. Cinema and media studies has long acknowledged how "queer positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexuals and straight positions."<sup>7</sup> Here I show how trans positions, readings, and pleasures likewise exist beside and within those of cisgender scholars and spectators. In what Tom Gunning once called Chaplin's "cinematic body" and "plastic ontology" and what André Bazin called the character Charlie's "unlimited imagination in the face of danger" and "total indifference to the category of things held sacred," one can perceive a trans way of life in all its awkward sensational and somatic glory.<sup>8</sup> This trans retrospectorship, which not only decodes but also encodes meaning, invites further re-encounters and models a media studies methodology that affirms the very possibility of gleeful transition in the present.<sup>9</sup>

4 See Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); and Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). See also Rox Samer, ed., "Transgender Media," special issue, *Spectator* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2017); and Julian B. Carter, David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah, eds., "Trans Cultural Production," special issue, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (November 2014).

5 See Jules Gill-Peterson, "Paranoia as a Trans Style: The Situation Comedy of Trans Life," February 2, 2021, <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/paranoia-as-a-trans-style>.

6 Gill-Peterson.

7 Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 15.

8 Gunning, "Chaplin," 238; and André Bazin, "Charlie Chaplin," in *The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian*, ed. Richard Schickel (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 88–89, 92.

9 See Patricia White's writing on lesbian retrospectorship: Patricia White, *unInvited*:

Chaplin's oeuvre is replete with fluctuating forms of queer gender. In several short films, Chaplin evokes the early-twentieth-century figure of the pansy or fairy by playing characters who cross-dress for comedic effect, playing a woman character, or making stereotypical pansy gestures.<sup>10</sup> Cross-dressing Charlie is sometimes the butt of the film's joke (as the Tramp often is in Chaplin's films at one point or another), but Charlie's interlocutors appear just as ridiculous when they treat girl Charlie and boy Charlie differently, thereby revealing gendered social norms and the maliciousness of much cis heterosexual male attention. Although Chaplin's characters cross-dress only on rare occasion, the actor's bodily comportment is constantly in flux. A defining characteristic of Charlie, according to Bazin, is the perpetual present tense in which the character lives.<sup>11</sup> Charlie takes on each situation as it arises, never planning more than a second in advance, and the humor that results is equally immediate, the audience receiving "just enough time for you to 'get it.'"<sup>12</sup> One moment butch and combative, the next femme and flirtatious, Charlie's gender presentation likewise flickers. When a collegial conflict turns violent in *The Pawnshop* (Charles Chaplin, 1916), Charlie dukes it out in the street with a coworker. When a police officer arrives on the scene, Charlie effortlessly transforms jabbing fists into flitting wrists and literally sashays away. Charlie's quick shifts through gendered registers exaggeratedly and humorously recall nonbinary methods of trans living, where such shifts are often pleasurable and at other times necessary as a lifesaving tactic.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Georges Méliès used stop-motion match-on-action editing to magically transform from a man into woman, Charlie transitions before the camera without the surgical aid of a postproduction edit.<sup>14</sup> Gunning claims that "Chaplin's pantomime, gestures, facial expressions, the entirety of [Chaplin's] body art delivers to us a renewed sense of corporeal experience."<sup>15</sup> For trans spectators, this "renewed sense of corporeal experience" is brimming with nonbinary modes of existence and trans possibilities.

On the rare occasion that scholars have taken up Charlie's gender non-conformity, they have instrumentalized it as a sign of homosexuality.<sup>16</sup> The

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*Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 194–215.

10 For example, Chaplin cross-dresses in *The Masquerader* (Charles Chaplin, 1914) and *A Woman* (Charles Chaplin, 1915) and plays a woman in *A Busy Day* (Mack Sennett, 1914). At this time, theater featuring fairies or pansies was common and peaked in what George Chauncey calls "the pansy craze" of the early 1930s. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 304–329.

11 Bazin, "Charlie Chaplin," 89.

12 Bazin, 88.

13 See C. Jacob Hale, "Tracing a Ghostly Memory in My Throat: Reflections on FTM Feminist Voice and Agency," in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Tom Digby (New York: Routledge, 1998), 103, 115–117; micha cárdenas, "Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 6 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.7264/N3WH2N8D>; Thomas Page McBee, *Man Alive: A True Story of Violence, Forgiveness and Becoming a Man* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2014); and Zackary Drucker and Kate Bornstein, "Gender Is a Playground: Kate Bornstein in Conversation with Zackary Drucker," *Aperture* 229 (Winter 2017): 24–31.

14 Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 36–40.

15 Gunning, "Chaplin," 244.

16 See William Paul, "Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Analogy," in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 109–130.



documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1995) includes a clip of Charlie kissing a cross-dressed girl in *Behind the Screen* (Charles Chaplin, 1916).<sup>17</sup> Richard Dyer introduces the clip in voice-over, noting, “The movies did provide us with some kind of history of how society thought homosexuals were. . . . There’s an extraordinary moment where Chaplin kisses someone who looks like a man. [Charlie] knows that it is a woman. Someone else comes along and sees it and immediately starts swishing around in the most overt effeminate way.” For Dyer (and Vito Russo before him), this moment exemplifies how stereotypes of gay men “were so completely in place [by 1916] that a mainstream popular film could assume that the audience would know what this swishy mime was all about.”<sup>18</sup> While the intruder in *Behind the Screen* certainly translates perceived male homosexuality into effeminacy, Dyer’s reading renders the scenario quintessentially gay.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, I find it helpful to look to Miller, who offers the formulation *trans gender queer* in his study of midcentury television sitcoms so as to “guar[d] against the kind of simplistic thinking that might . . . in appraising some queer textual feature, consider naming elements of signification lesbian or gay but not both; transgender or genderqueer but not both; queer or trans but not both.”<sup>20</sup> While Charlie initially takes the cross-dressed woman to be a man, when Charlie witnesses this chap apply makeup, Charlie scampers about, raising eyebrows and lifting wrist to face before turning so as to display ankles and derrière.<sup>21</sup> As Charlie later appears shocked to find she has long hair beneath her cap, Charlie’s initial response reads to me as a fit of transfeminine T4T identification and attraction.<sup>22</sup> The paradoxical kissing scene soon follows, but, taking into consideration what came before, one cannot presume this is a straight kiss mistakenly read as gay.<sup>23</sup> The intruder’s accusing swishing follows Charlie’s affirming own. The moment is simultaneously lesbian and gay, queer and trans.

Chaplin’s bodily transformations exceed both gender and human categorization, with Charlie becoming (or becoming with) animal, plant, or object on a number of occasions. I argue these transformations create a subjunctive mode of embodiment for character and spectator alike, engendering a

17 Laura Horak describes the censorship of this scene and others like it in *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 106.

18 Vito Russo is the author of *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), upon which Epstein and Friedman’s documentary is based.

19 For more on the complex web that was early-twentieth-century gender nonconformity and queer sexual cultures, see Chauncey’s *Gay New York*.

20 Miller, *Camp TV*, 16.

21 Following in Miller’s footsteps, I minimize my use of gendered pronouns, especially in the case of the character, Charlie. As a result, my diction might appear off to some readers. However, it is fitting, considering my argument and considering “[p]ronouns are a site at which the discourse of binary gender excludes.” Miller, *Camp TV*, 21.

22 T4T is a contemporary idiom naming romantic, sexual, and other intimacies between trans subjects.

23 See Chris Straayer’s theorization of paradoxical kisses in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 54–56.



sensation of “couldness” or possibility.<sup>24</sup> As Keegan writes, “‘trans’ describes an inherently subjunctive relation to what is considered real, to what can be commonly sensed.”<sup>25</sup> As a durational art, cinema is like trans phenomenology in that it is “inherently speculative, opening a horizon in the text’s unfolding that is much like gender transition itself.”<sup>26</sup> This is all the more true for a perpetually present-tense figure like Charlie, who could do or become anything in the flicker of a few frames. At the start of *The Adventurer* (Charles Chaplin, 1917), Charlie is newly escaped from prison and on the run from the law. At one point, Charlie’s head, shoulders, and arms emerge from the sand of a beach before a clueless police officer. As Bazin writes, “Charlie hides behind appearances like a crab burying itself in the sand,” the Tramp’s striped cap once more disappearing out of sight.<sup>27</sup> In a similar tight scrape behind enemy lines in *Shoulder Arms* (Charles Chaplin, 1918), Charlie poses as a tree. This pose reminds Bazin “of those little stick-like insects that are indiscernible in a clump of twigs,” yet as Gunning notes, “even as [Charlie] transforms into a tree, the tree remains identifiable as Charlie.”<sup>28</sup> In *A Dog’s Life* (Charles Chaplin, 1918), Charlie smuggles a pup into a pub via loose pants and soon “sprouts a doggie tail” and wags it “in delirious reflex.”<sup>29</sup> Eighty years before the Wachowskis crafted “bullet time” and, in Keegan’s analysis, created an emblematic image of sensing transgender, Chaplin’s adroit pantomime made perceptible the possibility of one “slid[ing] up and down the great chain of being” and “achieving a plastic ontology.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Gunning, Chaplin’s plastic ontology gives explicit image to a carnivalesque bodily experience that is but a memory or dream for most. Charlie’s tail wagging exemplifies for Gunning “the natural man,” who has shed the “universal fear” of “having something extrude from one’s pants.”<sup>31</sup> But what may appear to some as fear overcome may look to others like gender manifesting joyously (if, yes, rather awkwardly). In twenty-first-century acts of trans retrospectatorship, Charlie’s embodiment recalls new dreams as well as dreams that may have been there for some spectators all along, if unnamed or named differently at other historical moments.

For me and my trans US film history students, Charlie makes the largely invisible but nevertheless real sensuous process of transitioning perceptible. Not long after returning crablike to the sand in *The Adventurer*, Charlie evades the police officer by running straight up a cliff face. Such images of unbelievable speed and agility before the camera capture the exuberance of a body but a few months on testosterone. Charlie’s transformations with iconic cane and other prosthetics familiarizes a trans meaning-making process in which objects’ ordinary functions in cis society are overridden.

24 For more on subjunctivity, see Joanna Russ, “Speculations: The Subjunctivity of Science Fiction,” in *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 15–25.

25 Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, 3.

26 Keegan, 4.

27 Bazin, “Charlie Chaplin,” 90.

28 Bazin, 90; and Gunning, “Chaplin,” 244.

29 Gunning, 243.

30 Gunning, 238.

31 Gunning, 243.

That Charlie remains Charlie when becoming plant and animal substantiates a trans sense of self taking shape over the cisnormative view of shape determining self. *Trans* is not only a subjectivity or identity, a destination or a placeholder. It is, as trans studies scholars have contended, a prefixal state, “prepositionally oriented—marking the *with*, *through*, *of*, *in*, and *across* that make life possible.”<sup>32</sup> And in, with, and through trans Chaplin, trans spectators, too, can “laug[h] the world into a new physical realm.”<sup>33</sup>

**Rox Samer** (they/them) is assistant professor of screen studies at Clark University. They edited the “Transgender Media” special issue of *Spectator* (Fall 2017) and authored *Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s* (Duke University Press, 2022).

32 Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, “Introduction: Transanimalities in the Age of Trans\* Life,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2015): 196–197.

33 Gunning, “Chaplin,” 238.

# Expanding Trans Cinema through the Tranny Fest Collection

Overwhelmingly, popular and scholarly discourse on trans cinema has focused on feature films that receive theatrical distribution. The Tranny Fest Collection held by the GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives in San Francisco reveals a far wider variety of trans-made media from the late 1990s through the early 2000s that has been left out of the public's conception of trans cinema.<sup>1</sup> One significant segment of this body of work is trans-made pornography and films with significant erotic content. It is imperative that these works be studied and included in scholarship on trans cinema. However, the Tranny Fest Collection faces major challenges to access and preservation. Though many archives are faced by limited resources and sustainability issues, LGBT community archives are particularly impacted by these concerns. Funding is often unstable or minimal at the best of times, which significantly impacts archivists' ability to preserve or provide access to collections.<sup>2</sup> All of the Tranny Fest Collection's audiovisual works are stored on magnetic media and face a slew of rights complications, which significantly

1 The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival was originally known as Tranny Fest from its inaugural year until 2010. As the festival's archival collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in 2006, the collection's title reflects the original name. I acknowledge that *tranny* is a slur used against people of trans experience and that the term has been reclaimed by some trans and gender-diverse people. Indeed, Christopher Lee and Alex Austin intended to reclaim the term when they chose it for their festival title. My intent when referring to the festival as Tranny Fest is to honor the original name of the festival and collection.

2 Brittany Bennett Parris, "Creating, Reconstructing, and Protecting Historical Narratives: Archives and the LGBT Community," *Current Studies in Librarianship* 29, no. 1/2 (2005): 16–17.

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Magnus Berg, "Expanding Trans Cinema through the Tranny Fest Collection," *JCMS* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 181–187.

impact the availability of the works to a larger audience in both the near and long term. These challenges make it particularly difficult to include the collection's audiovisual works in the study and teaching of trans cinema.

For too long, scholarly and critical discourse on trans film has revolved around films directed by cis filmmakers that received a theatrical release. There are numerous book chapters and articles dedicated to *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005), and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) alone. Feature-length trans films directed by cis filmmakers, such as *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), and *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, Sebastián Lelio, 2017), continue to receive critical acclaim, whereas films made by trans filmmakers at comparable scales, such as *Drunktown's Finest* (Sydney Freeland, 2014), *A Kid Like Jake* (Silas Howard, 2018), or *Adam* (Rhys Ernst, 2019), are routinely ignored and under-distributed. As Laura Horak has observed, until recently, scholarly work on trans cinema concentrated on films directed by cis filmmakers almost exclusively.<sup>3</sup> Privileging cis-made film about trans subjects is a problem in and of itself, but it is also problematic that films by trans artists produced or distributed by alternative means receive very little critical and scholarly attention. This has a disproportionate impact on trans filmmakers in Canada and the United States, who produce documentaries, short films, experimental films, and erotic films at higher rates than fictional films.

The first trans film festival in the United States, Tranny Fest was established in 1997 by filmmaker and activist Christopher Lee and arts and entertainment lawyer Alex Austin. The year 1997 also saw the inauguration of the International Transgender Film and Video Festival in the United Kingdom and the trans arts festival Counting Past 2 in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Tranny Fest did not remain the sole trans film festival in the United States for long, however. While the 1980s and 1990s presented a boom for film festivals of all types, the late 1990s were particularly generative for trans festivals.<sup>5</sup> The rapid expansion of trans film festivals in the late 1990s through the late 2010s demonstrates not only that gender-diverse filmmakers were creating moving image works but that there were enough of them to warrant their own exhibition venues. As the Tranny Fest Collection evinces, the early years of Tranny Fest demonstrated the frenzy of trans filmmaking at the turn of the twenty-first century and pointed to the absence of those films from academic and popular criticism.

3 Laura Horak, "Representing Ourselves into Existence: The Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Work of Transgender Film Festivals in the 1990s," in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, ed. Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

4 Horak.

5 Tranny Fest, Counting Past 2, and the International Transgender Film and Video Festival [London] had their inaugural festivals in 1997. The Netherlands Transgender Film Festival, later called TranScreen: Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival, was founded in 2000. A slew of festivals followed, including the Gender Reel Festival, Translations: Seattle Transgender Film Festival, Divergenti Festival Internazionale di Cinema Trans, Kiel Transgender Film Festival, Sydney Transgender International Film Festival, TransFormations: Trans Film Festival Berlin, Trans Fest Stockholm, and Tilde: Melbourne Trans and Gender Diverse Film Festival.



Figure 1. VHS tapes from the Tranny Fest Collection at GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, California. Photo by author.

The films exhibited at Tranny Fest took many forms. One common theme was short and feature-length documentaries about trans people, such as *Gendernauts* (Monika Treut, 1999), *Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place* (Kathryn Xian and Brent Anbe, 2001), and *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman, 2005). These were typically expository or participatory documentaries that either explored the lives of one or more trans, intersex, Two-Spirit, or gender-diverse person(s) or contextualized a historical trans or gender-diverse person or event. The topics covered often explored intersectional histories and

expressed a more nuanced perspective on trans existence. For example, in *"I Would Never Have Known": A Conversation with Peter Dunnigan* (Mirha-Soleil Ross, 1997), Dunnigan speaks about his past substance abuse issues in addition to his experience coming out as a trans man, while *Ke Kulana He Mahu* explores the effects of colonization on the mähū and contemporary drag culture in Honolulu.

Also common at Tranny Fest were short experimental films. For example, *Straightboy Lessons* (Raymond Rea, 1999) pairs blue-toned images of action figures and cars with recordings of the director's cis coworker giving him advice on "straightboy" topics. In *Junk Box Warrior* (Preeti AK Mistry, 2002), Marcus Rene Van laments the struggle of navigating a racist and transphobic society via slam poetry over black-and-white images of Van facing street harassment. Only a small percentage of the films at Tranny Fest were fiction films, most likely because they were more expensive to produce than other genre forms.

One aspect of Tranny Fest that made it particularly emblematic of its era in trans cinema is that it exhibited erotic and pornographic works alongside fiction, documentary, and experimental works. Incorporating pornographic and erotic images, storylines, and aesthetics was a common trend in trans filmmaking of the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, Tranny Fest co-founder Christopher Lee blended fiction and porn with his films *Alley of the Tranny Boys* (1998) and *Sex Flesh in Blood* (1999). *Madame Lauraine's Transsexual Touch* (Mirha-Soleil Ross, Monica Forrester, Viviane Namaste, 2001) is an educational-pornographic film aimed at encouraging safe sex practices among trans sex workers and their clients, while *Faggot/Cholo* (Lynne Chan, 1997) is described by its director as a "personal homage to gay porno faggot imagery."<sup>6</sup> While many of the fiction, experimental, and documentary films exhibited at Tranny Fest were comparable to mainstream festival fare in their form and sexual content, the screening of films with some pornographic elements, as well as explicit pornography, was quite distinct.

As trans studies scholar Eliza Steinbock has observed, trans porn allows performers and filmmakers to operate outside of cisgender sexual logics and "represent identities of desire hereto elided by the medical gaze."<sup>7</sup> Through the use of erotic imagery, filmmakers communicated a radical acceptance, normalization, and celebration of trans bodies outside of the medical model. The popularity of pornographic work at Tranny Fest speaks to the power of the erotic image for trans filmmakers, particularly as a reclamation of sexual power, gratification, and desirability. Tranny Fest often included a separate program block for erotic and pornographic works, evincing that trans filmmakers were creating erotic content at a high enough rate to warrant their own programming.<sup>8</sup> These blocks often had tongue-in-cheek titles, such as "'PAY AT THE PUMP' Trannyporn XXX and more . . ." (1998) or "'Jack-Off-Lantern' Tranny Porn and More . . ." (1999). The inclusion of these program

6 Tranny Fest Program, 1998, 2006–26, carton 2, folder 12–14, Tranny Fest Collection, GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, San Francisco, California.

7 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 64.

8 Tranny Fest Programs, 1997–2003, 2006–26, carton 2, folder 12–14, Tranny Fest Collection, GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, San Francisco, California.



blocks indicates the integral nature of pornography created by and for trans and gender-diverse people to both the festival and trans viewers.

Despite the popularity of sexual imagery in the Tranny Fest filmmakers' oeuvres in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was representative of the general trends in trans filmmaking in Canada and the United States, these elements failed to cross over into theatrical feature films on trans subjects. This is particularly true for cis filmmakers, who perhaps failed to grasp the sexual practices and politics of trans and gender-diverse people. Theatrically released films often sanitize or completely eliminate queer and trans sex, primarily to make the work more palatable to cisgender and heterosexual audiences. Trans studies scholar Cael M. Keegan notes this trend in relation to *Stonewall* (Roland Emmerich, 2015), wherein a white, sexless (though not asexual), gay character is inserted into the historical narrative to "assuage heterosexual and homonormative viewers alike with a feeling of 'safety' . . . [and] transfer political imagination upward, away from poor people, trans people and people of colour."<sup>9</sup> While hardcore porn distributors are less likely to restrain trans sexuality, they still consistently fail to include certain kinds of trans people or accurately represent their experiences.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the erotic imagery and explicit pornography exhibited at Tranny Fest represents a stark departure in the representation of trans sexualities compared to theatrically released cinema or hardcore pornography.

The Tranny Fest Collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in 2006 by Christopher Lee, Alex Austin, and Elise Hurwitz. The collection is made up of three cartons of graphic and textual records and four cartons of videotapes. The 169 tapes in the collection are screeners of films shown at the festival and some that were submitted but rejected.<sup>11</sup> Magnetic tape formats such as VHS and U-matic were extremely popular among the Tranny Fest filmmakers due to their ease of use, availability, and affordability. However, due to the format's instability, the vast majority of magnetic tapes are approaching their end of life, which places the tapes in the Tranny Fest Collection in a precarious position.

Due to their instability and associated expense, audiovisual collections are a consistent challenge for mixed material archives, and most archival graduate programs have limited training in audiovisual preservation. As a result, magnetic tape collections often languish to the point of degradation. Because of the economic marginalization of trans filmmakers, most trans audiovisual collections in North America are stored exclusively on tape, which places trans media from the 1990s and 2000s at serious risk. Unfortunately, the Tranny Fest Collection is also encumbered by copy-right restrictions and questionable legal ownership. The GLBT Historical Society does not have a deed of gift for the collection, and nearly all the

9 Cael M. Keegan, "History, Disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema," *Social Alternatives* 35, no. 3 (2016): 54.

10 See Eliza Steinbock, "Representing Trans Sexualities," in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood with Brian McNair (London: Routledge, 2018), 30.

11 Magnus Berg, "A Collection under Construction: Trans-versing Access with the Tranny Fest Collection" (master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2018), 28–29.

audiovisual records have third party rights interests, which precludes mass digitization or duplication.<sup>12</sup>

Film archives and film scholarship have a reciprocal relationship, and the significance of that relationship has a direct impact on the availability of both trans and erotic film. As film archivist and scholar Jan-Christopher Horak argues, the priorities of the early film historians affected preservation priorities, such that “[a]ll those film forms that existed outside this established canon of film art were simply ignored as not germane to the subject under study, which simultaneously labeled them as not worthy of preservation.”<sup>13</sup> Archivists take potential research interest into consideration when appraising an aggregation for acquisition, which in the past has led to certain forms and subject areas being excluded from major archives. The sidelining of trans film as a niche research interest thus effectively sidelined their acquisition; as a result, only a small number of trans audiovisual collections exist in repositories.<sup>14</sup> Pornographic content, in particular, has historically been under-collected by archival repositories despite its historical, informational, and aesthetic value.<sup>15</sup> As Marcel Barriault argues, the more recent shift in the study of pornographic works resulted in an increase in the availability of relevant archival records.<sup>16</sup>

But just as scholars are reliant on archivists to provide them with records for research, archivists are similarly reliant on scholars and researchers to justify acquisitions and their continued existence. As such, renewed interest in the work of trans filmmakers is likely to result in increased acquisition and preservation of relevant archival aggregations. Weighing the significance or value of records and record creators lies at the core of archival appraisal.<sup>17</sup> The Tranny Fest Collection is highly significant as (1) a record of the festival that curated and presented the initial boom of trans filmmaking in the 1990s; (2) a collection of films of multiple genres and lengths made by notable trans filmmakers and public figures, including Mirha-Soleil Ross, Boyd Kodak, Jordy Jones, Aiyyana Maracle, Ivan E. Coyote, Susan Stryker, Texas Tomboy, James Diamond, and Shawna Virago; and (3) a collection of films that demonstrate the artistic and aesthetic merit of pornography and erotic elements in trans film. Despite the significance of the collection and the wide

12 Berg, 38–54.

13 Jan-Christopher Horak, “Constructing History: Archives, Film Programming, and Preservation,” *Journal of Film Preservation* 102 (2020): 31.

14 Some archival aggregations of note are the Tranny Fest Collection, Texas Tomboy Collection, and Screaming Queens Collection at the GLBT Historical Society Museum & Archives, the Mirha-Soleil Ross fonds at the ArQuives, and Aiyyana Maracle’s fonds at the University of Victoria’s Transgender Archives. While an artificial collection, the Outfest UCLA Legacy Project at the UCLA Film & Television Archive holds a number of important trans audiovisual works. A fonds is an archival aggregation that has been organically created by an individual, family, or organization. An artificial collection is an archival aggregation that has been actively collected or curated from disparate sources.

15 See Peter Alilunas and Dan Erdman, “The Adult Film History Project,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 1 (2018): 153; and Marcel Barriault, “Hard to Dismiss: The Archival Value of Gay Male Erotica and Pornography,” *Archivaria* 68 (2009): 222.

16 Barriault, “Hard to Dismiss,” 229.

17 Barbara L. Craig, *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice* (Munich: K. G. Sauer, 2004), 163–164.



variety of trans film it contains, however, it has been almost wholly ignored by scholars in favor of theatrically released, cis-made films. An expanded view of trans cinema is necessary to justify the continued acquisition of similar collections by archival repositories, ensure that they can be taught and contextualized alongside their contemporaries, and address the erasure of these works and their forms from both the media landscape and, ultimately, the historical record.

As of late, inclusion for trans people within media cultures has been focused shallowly on a handful of trans subjects and performers while still failing to express the complexity of trans existence or sexual practices. The erasure of works that deal explicitly with these subjects, particularly those made by trans people, ultimately have a wider impact on how transness is understood by the dominant culture. As institutions dedicated toward education and cultural memory, both the academy and archives have a responsibility to address these erasures and ensure that trans media, trans creators, and trans sexualities are effectively represented.

**Magnus Berg** (they/he) is a Senior Media Librarian at CBC/Radio-Canada and resides on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. They hold a MA in Film + Photography Preservation and Collections Management.

# The New Border War? An Intergenerational Exchange on Bad Trans Horror Objects

Sold in the gift shop of the Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art, Chris Vargas's three-part poster series "Trans Video Store" displays a hand-drawn catalog of videocassette-styled covers of historic trans films. Mimicking staff picks at a local video store, these selections, which include controversial entries such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), were chosen by Vargas through conversation with other trans individuals and represent the artist's mission to bring "a cohesive visual history of transgender culture into existence."<sup>1</sup> Fittingly, Vargas's work is also displayed at the Transgender Media Portal office at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. When I visited the Portal's office in 2018, project director Laura Horak explained that the posters had recently been "revised" by two of her undergraduate research assistants, who placed blue stickies atop presumably transphobic titles, including the aforementioned horror films and others, including *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* (Kim Henkel, 1995), and *Ticked-off Trannies with Knives* (Israel Luna, 2010). As a trans horror fan and scholar, I (Dan Vena) was disgruntled by this intervention, and I grumpily relayed

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1 "MOTHA: Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art," Chris E Vargas, <http://www.chrisevargas.com/motha>.

Dan Vena and Islay Burgess, "The New Border War? An Intergenerational Exchange on Bad Trans Horror Objects," *JCMS* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 188–193.

this anecdote to my Queer Cinemas class at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. I talked to the class about the need for complicated archives of trans representation, identification, and affective attachments that include supposedly bad objects such as horror films made by cis creators.

Inspired by the subsequent class dialogue, this co-authored article is taken from a series of recorded exchanges over email and Zoom between myself and my former student, Islay Burgess. As a white, thirty-something millennial trans man, I turned to the misfits of horror cinema after reading Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" in graduate school.<sup>2</sup> Burgess, who identifies as a white, transmasculine member of Generation Z, developed his passion for horror in childhood but did not become an ardent fan until recently. As he recalls, "It was (embarrassingly) during our Queer Cinemas class that I realized my feelings about horror cinema were academically backed. I wasn't just an enthused fan—I was a student of trans identification and affect!" Although we came of age a generation apart, we share a complicated affinity for horror, a genre that shocks through representations of morphologically unintelligible bodies often predicated on racist, ableist, and transphobic understandings of the human. Other trans scholars have made clear, however, that the troubling vilification of gender-bending or gender nonconforming others on-screen that lends horror its status as a "bad object" can also provide a sense of catharsis and validation for some trans viewers.<sup>3</sup> As Burgess pointed out to me, these expressions of desire are often articulated on social media, where one Twitter user recently anticipated the future of trans identification with monstrosity: "Really looking forward to how LGBT cinema can continue to express monster metaphors [while being] completely open about identity and self-love."<sup>4</sup>

I was motivated to record this dialogue between Burgess and myself because of the initial discomfort I felt toward the Transgender Media Portal's research assistants censoring important horror films from Vargas's depiction of trans cinema history. I was angry, and more than that, I was afraid at the ease at which they, as members of a younger generation, disregarded texts that were meaningful to other (older) trans individuals. As a result, I expected the generational attitudes between Burgess and myself to be

2 Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (June 1994): 237–254, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>.

3 See Stryker; Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Joelle Ryan, "Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2009), [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/acs\\_diss/62/](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/acs_diss/62/); Anson Koch-Rein, "Trans-lating the Monster: Transgender Affect and *Frankenstein*," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 30, no. 1 (2019): 44–61; and Cael M. Keegan, "In Praise of the Bad Transgender Object: *Rocky Horror*," *FLOW: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2019/11/in-praise-of-the-bad/>.

4 jules (@pansybeast), "just seeing how the hollywood hay's code helped set us back decades is still heartbreaking. really looking forward to how lgbt cinema can continue to express monster metaphors but be completely open about identity and self love," Twitter, September 25, 2020, 9:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/pansybeast/status/1309346973087137797?s=20>.

similarly conflicted. Yet, through compassionate listening and mutual introspection, we began resolving previously differing perspectives and working toward a more “cohesive” approach to trans film and media history, to borrow from Vargas. For the sake of clarity, we have preserved the dialogic form of our interactions, edited for length.

**Dan Vena:** Okay, Islay. Let’s start with the assumptions we each hold about one another’s generations. From my “OK Millennial” vantage point, I worry that younger trans community members (like Gen Zers) are quick to dismiss past media objects, especially those made by cis creators, rather than do the work of contextualizing their emergence and considering their cultural offerings. As examples, I am thinking of the student-led protests against a screening of Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* in Portland, Oregon, in 2016 and the social media backlash against a student union in Guelph, Ontario, that played Lou Reed’s song “Take a Walk on the Wild Side” in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Both these instances exemplify a quick dismissal of media now perceived as “bad” due in part to the stereotypes of transgender individuals as deceptive and worthy of violence.

**Islay Burgess:** For me, “bad” trans objects are authored by cis creators who, knowingly or not, reinforce harmful stereotypes that make it difficult for trans viewers to identify with these media works. However, I disagree with your framing of my generation’s approach to these objects as simply a dismissal. Instead, I think of it as an act of mourning. The examples you use may be my generation’s manifestation of anger in our “five stages of grief” (e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) over the inherited representational landscape, in which the consumption and appreciation of bad objects has been a rite of passage for trans people.<sup>6</sup>

**DV:** Whereas I view your generation as too quick to overlook key historical media texts that have worked to shape your contemporary moment. When I was growing up and encountered any sort of LGBTQ+ representation on-screen, I remember feeling grateful. It seems as though your generation experiences a constant state of displeasure at most objects, especially those created by cisgender authors that still may appeal to some trans viewers.

**IB:** Your generation has already had the opportunity to process these formative images. For my generation, who was born into the resultant cultural landscape, we were often exposed to the critiques of these films before we had the opportunity to watch them ourselves. As a result, I would argue that my generation is not marked by a “constant state of displeasure,” but feelings of frustration and grief over the limited history of trans representation (one

5 Jude Dry, “‘Boys Don’t Cry’ Protests: Why We Should Listen to Trans Activists Criticizing the Milestone Film—Editorial,” *IndieWire*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/kimberly-peirce-boys-dont-cry-reed-transgender-1201757549/>; and Roisin O’Connor, “Lou Reed Song ‘Take a Walk on the Wild Side’ Accused of Including Transphobic Lyrics by Canadian Student Group,” *Independent*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/lou-reed-walk-wild-side-transphobic-guelph-university-students-canada-transformer-album-a7748686.html>.

6 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

especially marked by whiteness). From this grief, we are demanding more authentic trans characters, or at the very least, characters who are not solely defined by being trans.

**DV:** Ah! There's that common demand for "authenticity." But what does authenticity even mean, considering the plurality of trans identities and the very nature of art itself? Indeed, as the editors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* make clear, the supposed teleological trajectory toward "more" or "better" visibility does not actually equate to safer and more sustainable real-world conditions for trans individuals, especially for those most marginalized.<sup>7</sup> It strikes me that your generation's quest for more "authentic" trans narratives seeks to recuperate an antiquated understanding of screen media as re-presentational rather than representational. By "re-presentational," I mean simply re-performing or documenting lived identities rather than creating a phantasmatic play space of desire and expression. I feel that your generation often refuses to engage with complex audiovisual grammars characteristic of genres like horror.

**IB:** To paraphrase blogger Alice Collins, trans viewers have been forced to learn to decode media because mainstream media has long told us that trans subjects were not welcome.<sup>8</sup> Saying that younger trans viewers do not want or do not know how to do the work of textual analysis completely disregards the pain of having to do that labor in the first place. From my perspective, trans viewers of my generation are demanding a complete "organic" dismantling of these systems. As defined by Khadijah Costley White and Aymar Jean Christian, "organic" representation "begins when systems and institutions empower those who have been historically marginalized not only to appear in their stories but also to own and fine-tune narratives, marketing, and distribution."<sup>9</sup> For us, it is less about having "good" objects for the sake of having them and more about shifting the paradigms of social power that dictate who and what is appropriate to depict. As a result, we want to do away with past trends that frame trans or trans-read characters as mere spectacles of shock.

**DV:** But spectacle is one of the central aims of the audiovisual! Your generation assumes that to be rendered a spectacle is only to become a *passive* object or non-subject. Yet, in the same breath you—as a member of Gen Z—also rally against the normative and toward the very non-subjects that flourish in bad objects like horror. Why disregard the political utility of the very *active* monstrous, anti-normative (and yes, often problematic) trans and trans-read characters, such as Frankenstein's Monster, Bobbi from *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and Angela Baker from *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983)?<sup>10</sup>

7 Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

8 Alice Collins, "[Trapped by Gender] This Is Gonna Get Scary: An Introduction," *Bloody Disgusting*, March 28, 2019, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3551989/trapped-gender-gonna-get-scary-introduction/>.

9 Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White, "Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 144.

10 For a more complex example of the trans monster-cum-Final Girl, see Angelica Ross as Donna Chambers in FX's *American Horror Story: 1984* (2019).

**IB:** Some of us do reclaim and engage with these characters, although we do not necessarily have a coherent community hub for those dialogues. Instead, you can find pockets of brief conversations on Twitter or in the work of YouTube essayists like Nyx Fears.<sup>11</sup> But reclaiming bad objects doesn't negate our desire for better ones.

**DV:** But isn't the desire for "good" objects still just a neoliberal fantasy of improved consumer products?<sup>12</sup> To read or celebrate a bad object, one that was meant to frighten or intrigue cis audiences, is to recycle a piece of supposed cultural "garbage" into a product of meaning and use for trans viewers. Shouldn't your generation be in favor of a process that actively returns the power of spectatorship to trans viewers?

**IB:** We still recycle objects in community-driven fandom spaces like Tumblr, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and Twitter. Colloquially, your against-the-grain "readings" are now called "headcanons." In this context, headcanons refer to fan-generated beliefs about characters or storylines from a piece of media, which may not be reflected in the official work itself. Many fan artists alter characters in their works based on their desires, like Tumblr user Corpse-Eyed giving Will Graham from *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015) inverted *t* mastectomy scars.<sup>13</sup> However, transphobic members of the fandom sometimes confront artists about these headcanons, subjecting trans fans to harassment and challenging them to prove the transness of the character—another source of grief.<sup>14</sup> While affect and identification are incredibly powerful tools for trans viewers, there is also a comfort in the concrete. If a character is canonically trans, there is no headcanon to scrutinize, no possible denial of trans representation and thus of trans existence itself.

**DV:** I have to admit, this is my first time hearing about "headcanons." But be honest, in the hierarchy of objects worth saving or "headcanoning" . . . is that a word . . . ?

**IB:** Yes, but it feels wrong . . .

**DV:** [chuckling] Okay. As the research assistants from the opening anecdote proved, those practices don't extend to all objects equally despite the examples you have given. Horror clearly seems to be a troubling bad object because its patterns of fright and shock often hinge on transphobic visual imagery of characters "gender bending" or cross-dressing that continue to offend trans viewers.

**IB:** I agree! Since horror is already such a heavily stigmatized genre, I

11 Nyx Fears, "Sleepaway Camp: Ending Explained (but actually tho)," YouTube video, 15:49, July 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zM-wD4ITgl>.

12 Cael M. Keegan, "History, Disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema," *Social Alternatives* 35, no. 3 (2016): 50–56.

13 corpse-eyed, "trans will graham gives me life," Tumblr, May 26, 2014, 12:36 a.m., <https://corpse-eyed.tumblr.com/post/86877659206/trans-will-graham-gives-me-life>.

14 See hellcat (@bozojezus), "its that time boys. leatherface is trans," Twitter, December 7, 2020, 11:44 a.m., <https://twitter.com/bozojezus/status/1336033766888845317>; and gay dave (@mxgicdave), "if someone makes a trans headcanon and your first response is basically like 'what in canon made you think that?' or anything that boils down to 'proof????' like, shut the hell up," Twitter, December 14, 2020, 8:27 p.m., <https://twitter.com/mxgicdave/status/1338702108984479748>.

cannot blame marginalized folks, especially trans women, for not wanting to engage with those images. Particularly since horror has a history of appropriating and pathologizing transfeminine-read characters, such as Kenny Hampson in *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980) and Leonard Marliston in *Cherry Falls* (Geoffrey Wright, 2000).

**DV:** So, what do we do with these images and their legacy? For myself and perhaps others of my generation or older, the art of reading and reclaiming horror characters is an act of ownership over the tired objects of transphobic culture. Surely, this desire for ownership resonates with your generation. Why then can't we continue this practice of rereading and reclamation?

**IB:** As with most things, I think it is about balance. When my generation asks for and creates openly trans characters not defined by their transness, we are not condemning previous histories of reclamation but encouraging another simultaneous method of reading. After all, a multiplicity of methods is a movement toward intergenerational collaboration.

**DV:** Multiplicity is the key word, isn't it? I hope younger generations continue creating transgender media archives that honor a multiplicity of affective, identificatory attachments even if it means reconciling with bad objects. Bad objects have real emotional worth to trans individuals, and their psychic value needs to be properly established in our collaboratively authored histories.

**Dan Vena** (he/him) is a queer-trans, white settler scholar with chronic pain. He is invested in scholarly and pedagogical practices of collectivity and anti-oppressive world-making. He works as an adjunct professor at Queen's University in Katarokwi (Kingston), Canada.

**Islay Burgess** (he/him) is a white, queer, and trans graduate student at the University of British Columbia. His academic interests lie in the neuroqueering of the horror canon and both staged and filmic aesthetics of gendered trauma.

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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,"

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Thomas J Billard and Erique 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  l 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 interdisciplinary 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.<sup>4</sup> Misogynist representations are “bad” and those that oppose it are “good.”<sup>5</sup> 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?<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> From a queer theoretical perspective,

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

- 3 C  l 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 Brunsdon, “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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> The task for sociologists of culture, then, is to understand “how people use collective representations to make meaning together in everyday life.”<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.

**Erique 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.

# Trans Game Studies

Video games are a rich site for exploring the place of trans identities and experiences in digital media. As a widely influential popular media form, video games simultaneously overlap, resonate, and clash with trans issues and the contemporary digital lives of trans people. Yet scholarship addressing the intersections of video games and transness remains comparatively limited. Here, I propose a vision of what we might call a trans game studies at the intersection of trans studies and game studies.

Rather than offer definitive answers, my goal is to pose questions that provoke thought and spark resistance. What should the relationship be between trans game studies and queer game studies? What might it mean to trans game studies itself? These questions recall other, equally pressing concerns about topics such as race and disability in games, subjects that similarly draw attention to identity and the body as key sites of cultural meaning-making. When I call on game studies scholars to engage more meaningfully with trans studies, I am admonishing myself as much as anyone else. I am a non-binary person with a complicated relationship to my own transgender identity whose scholarship has not yet sufficiently foregrounded trans issues. Game studies needs more trans studies, destabilizing the default centrality of normatively gendered people. And trans studies needs more game studies, drawing out the value of ludic spaces for identity exploration and trans worldmaking. Envisioning a trans game studies is only the beginning.

## WHY GAME STUDIES NEEDS TRANS STUDIES

The relationship between video games and transgender experiences is complex. Many trans folks have described how playing video games has allowed them to explore their gender identities.<sup>1</sup> Trans characters have appeared in

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<sup>1</sup> See Jessica Janiuk, "Gaming Is My Safe Space: Gender Options Are Important for

video games for decades, though they have admittedly been scarce. When new trans characters are included in mainstream video games, such as *The Last of Us: Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), they are often celebrated for their rarity.<sup>2</sup> Dozens if not hundreds of trans creators use video games to tell trans stories or draw from their own trans experiences to challenge norms of game design.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, transphobia remains rampant in gaming spaces, such as multiplayer online games and game-related forums and platforms.<sup>4</sup> For better or for worse, many of the ways that trans lives and digital lives intersect today is through video games, illustrating the growing need for a trans game studies.

Early game studies work on gender from the 1990s and early 2000s focused on cisgender women and girls. Examples include feminist critiques of in-game characters drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, writing by pioneering designers of "girl games," and reflections on gendered play.<sup>5</sup> Consideration of trans folks' identities was mostly missing from these early works, with the problematic exception of research on so-called cross-dressing or gender swapping: individuals of one gender choosing to play as characters of another, a practice that was often framed as sexual fetish or expression of male players' misogynistic control over women.<sup>6</sup> These scholars contrast accounts by transgender gamers of their own experiences playing video games. Thus, early writers on gender and games often assumed that "gender issues" in games were synonymous with "cisgender issues" and framed arguably trans forms of play as problematic curiosities.

More recently, conversations around gender in games have diversified, particularly through scholarship on games and queerness.<sup>7</sup> Feminist scholars have increasingly turned their attention to men and gaming masculinities,

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- the Transgender Community," Polygon, March 5, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/3/5/5462578/gaming-is-my-safe-space-gender-options-are-important-for-the>.
- 2 Julie Muncy, "The Trans Narrative in 'The Last of Us Part II' Is Compelling. There's So Much More to Be Done," *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/07/21/trans-narrative-last-us-part-ii-is-compelling-theres-so-much-more-be-done/>.
  - 3 Bonnie Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.
  - 4 Jeff Green, "How Amazon's Twitch Protects Its LGBT Community from Online Harassment," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tn-twitch-trolls-lgbt-20190708-story.html>.
  - 5 Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>; Brenda Laurel, "An Interview with Brenda Laurel," in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," in Cassell and Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, 262–297.
  - 6 See, for example, Searle Huh and Dmitri Williams, "Dude Looks Like a Lady: Gender Swapping in an Online Game," in *Online Worlds: Convergence of the Real and the Virtual*, ed. William Sims Bainbridge (London: Springer, 2010), 161–174.
  - 7 See Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, "Queer Game Studies: Young but Not New," in *Queerness in Play*, ed. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Cham: Springer, 2018).



including “toxic gamer culture.”<sup>8</sup> Despite these changes, certain strands of feminist and queer game studies continue to marginalize transgender people. I state this less as a critique than as an invitation—most importantly to trans and non-binary scholars themselves. While queer game studies has been home to much of the existing research about transness and games, it is valuable to create additional spaces that explore and affirm trans experience, respecting it as both related to and yet distinct from queerness more broadly and resisting the assumption that trans studies must form within (or against) the constructs of queer studies.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have already begun addressing the interplays between video games and transness. One thread of this work looks at transgender characters or characters who can be interpreted as trans.<sup>10</sup> In part, this has entailed surfacing and counting characters, as in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive project led by Adrienne Shaw.<sup>11</sup> It has also entailed studies of interpretation, such as Evelyn Deshane and R. Travis Morton’s attention to the cultural reception of the character Samus Aran, the heroine of the *Metroid* series (Nintendo, 1986–2017), whom many have read as a transgender woman.<sup>12</sup> Others have explored the presence of non-binary characters in video games, including Sheik, the masculine-presenting alter ego of Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series (Nintendo, 1986–2021).<sup>13</sup> An interest in the fandoms surrounding video game characters recurs in this scholarship. For example, Brianna Dym, Jed Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler analyzed metadata from the fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own, demonstrating how fans use tags to trans seemingly cis characters.<sup>14</sup> These examples suggest initial inroads into trans game studies, highlighting connections between video games and trans media representations, histories, and fandoms beyond games.

A second strand within existing scholarship focuses on transgender game designers. As I argue in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, many trans designers are pushing the medium of video games in counter-hegemonic directions.<sup>15</sup> Teddy Pozo has explained how trans game makers critique empathy, or the expectation that games made by trans folks should allow cisgender players to “walk in their shoes.”<sup>16</sup> Pointing to experimental game artist Jamie Faye Fenton, Whitney (Whit) Pow has argued for the glitch as a

8 Mia Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology* 1, no. 1 (2012).

9 See Cael M. Keegan, “Against Queer Theory,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020): 349–355.

10 Rob Gallagher, “Dirty Footprints and Degenerate Archives: Tabitha Nikolai’s Impure Walking Sims,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 1 (2020): 105–122.

11 LGBTQ Video Game Archive, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com>.

12 Evelyn Deshane and R. Travis Morton, “The Big Reveal: Exploring (Trans)Femininity in *Metroid*,” in Harper, Adams, and Taylor, *Queerness in Play*, 131–146.

13 Chris Lawrence, “What If *Zelda* Wasn’t a Girl? Problematizing *Ocarina of Time*’s Great Gender Debate,” in Harper, Adams, and Taylor, *Queerness in Play*, 97–114.

14 Brianna Dym, Jed Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler, “‘theyre all trans sharon’: Authoring Gender in Video Game Fan Fiction,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), [http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker\\_dym\\_fiesler/](http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker_dym_fiesler/).

15 Ruberg, *Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

16 Teddy Pozo, “Queer Games after Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo/>.



historically trans mode of engaging with games.<sup>17</sup> This scholarship importantly foregrounds the contributions of game makers, who are often on the front lines of transing the medium. Those working in game-adjacent areas have similarly articulated the importance of trans creators. “Hypertext and digital games are totally trans genres,” merrikk has written, instructing, “If you’re interested in new currents in trans literature, you need to start following work being done by trans authors in games.”<sup>18</sup>

Resonances between video games and trans experience are also evidenced by scholarship on trans digital cultures. We see this, for instance, in the call from Oliver L. Haimson and colleagues to explore “trans technologies”: platforms that create spaces for trans communities.<sup>19</sup> Another strand of research connects trans issues and digital media through data and surveillance, addressing the benefits and potential pitfalls of capturing trans lives through data.<sup>20</sup> Such work makes clear that digital tools, including video games, are at the heart of many elements of contemporary transgender experience. Considerations of digital media have also been formative for transgender studies, given the early influence of scholars such as Sandy Stone, who has long theorized transness alongside computing.<sup>21</sup>

## IMAGINING A TRANS GAME STUDIES

Before building from this genealogy to more explicitly establish a trans game studies, game studies and trans studies scholars invested in this intersection must engage in critical self-reflection. This is a chance to set the terms for how trans game studies might position itself, what and whom it might value, and what sorts of interventions it might make. The following is a set of proposed guidelines. They should be understood as simultaneously polemical, pragmatic, political, idealistic, and incomplete. There are many other possible paths for this work, as varied as the trans people whose lives intersect with games.

*A trans game studies must acknowledge a wide range of approaches to exploring transness and games.* It must bring together perspectives from across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Such a trans game studies should resist the disciplinary and disciplining urge to police which methods constitute legitimate scholarship. It should seek out possibilities for reclaiming digital games, analog games, and play in the name of trans folks, while also addressing the challenges that trans folks often face in game-related spaces. This

17 Whitney [Whit] Pow, “A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors,” *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197–230.

18 merrikk [formerly Merritt Kopas], “Trans Women & the New Hypertext,” *Lambda Literary*, July 8, 2014.

19 Oliver L. Haimson, Avery Dam-Griff, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter, “Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 345–361.

20 Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, “Introduction,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–12.

21 Susan Stryker, “Another Dream of Common Language: An Interview with Sandy Stone,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 294–305.

trans game studies should remain wary of prioritizing data without considering its implications for trans lives or claiming to promote diversity and inclusion without reflecting on problems of trans visibility and the ways that trans folks themselves may wish to resist interpolation into cisnormative systems of representation, education, and industry.

*A trans game studies must bridge scholarship and design.* It should hold insights from trans game makers in equal esteem with those from academics, acknowledging that many trans creators already straddle the line between research and practice. Indeed, it should embrace opportunities to combine making and theorizing, finding inspiration in artist-scholars such as micha cárdenas.<sup>22</sup> This trans game studies should resist (and, where possible, dismantle) the structures that sever alliances between those who study radical media and those who make it. It should value collaboration and a sharing of resources between trans scholars researching games, trans developers making games, and trans activists creating spaces for trans expression. These values are particularly crucial for trans game studies, since many trans game creators remain financially precarious despite growing recognition of their work.

*A trans game studies must center trans voices and acknowledge trans embodiment as a powerful form of meaning-making.* Trans game studies should be, first and foremost, the terrain of transgender people, including trans players and trans fans. At the same time, it should not entail regulation or judgment about who counts as “trans enough.” Non-binary, agender, and genderqueer people, should be welcome, along with other trans folks presenting in any gendered manner. Lessons learned from our own lived trans lives are equally important as (if not more important than) other analytical frameworks. This is true for all forms of trans media studies but represents a particularly needed intervention into game studies, where quantitative researchers and those from computational disciplines regularly insist that truth can only be known through numbers.

*A trans game studies must confront the complexities of its relationship to queerness.* It should productively question its place as simultaneously both part of and separate from queer game studies. There is much to be gained from thinking through queerness and transness together, especially for those who identify as both queer and trans. Simultaneously, trans game studies must hold space for resisting the expectation that trans studies can be subsumed under the

22 See micha cárdenas, “*Dilating Destiny: Writing the Transreal Body through Game Design*,” *Jump Cut* 57 (2016), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-cardena-sDilatingDestiny/index.html>.

general umbrella of queer studies.<sup>23</sup> Should trans game studies be its own area apart from queer game studies? I hope to see a vibrant trans game studies grow up alongside queer game studies, finding meaning in the ambivalences, overlaps, and entanglements between queerness and transness in games.

*A trans game studies must trans game studies itself.* Trans game studies should do more than fold transness into currently dominant ways of doing game studies research. Instead, it should re-envision what it means to study games. Transing game studies might entail decentering those who have long been positioned as authorities and insisting on new narratives about who appears in, plays, makes, and studies games—a call to fundamentally re-evaluate who is seen as “normal,” as Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick write about crippling media studies.<sup>24</sup> Transing game studies will also require breaking from threads of feminist game scholarship that have undermined trans people and cutting ties with the trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in our midst. Transing game studies can also manifest as a theoretical approach, building from scholarship in which the “trans” in transgender is understood as a force of disruption and creation.

I conclude here with a call to game studies scholars and trans studies scholars alike. It is time for a trans game studies. Moreover, it is time to trans game studies. To trans game studies is to lay claim to games as always-already trans while also making the field of game studies something new—to transition, transgress, transform, and transmogrify in the continual process of transing media.

**Bo Ruberg** (they/them) is an associate professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Irvine. Their most recent book is *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Duke University Press, 2020).

23 Cael M. Keegan, “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans\* about Queer Studies Now?,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 384–397.

24 Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, “Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 139–144.

# Poetics of Trans Ecologies

For the survival of all our ecologies, we must refuse human centrality and build networks of care across lines of species and liveliness. The study of trans media art can be a study of something other than transgender people; it can instead focus on films, artworks, and digital games that use what I call “trans operations” to decenter or expand beyond the human subject. Any injunction for queer and trans studies to go beyond humanism must reconcile with the history of trans, gender nonconforming, Black, and Indigenous people and people of color being deemed less than human. In this essay, I use the method of algorithmic analysis proposed in my forthcoming book *Poetic Operations* to explore the operations that make up the poetics of two contemporary artworks—*Sin Sol* (No sun, 2020), an augmented reality installation I created with the Critical Realities Studio, and *Acoustic Ocean* (2018), a short film by Ursula Biemann.<sup>1</sup> By engaging these two works, this essay stitches a line from trans people to an expanded conception of *trans*, invoking trans ecological poetics to exceed a focus on the human alone. This essay broadens the operation of *trans* in trans media studies to include nonhuman movements, such as those made by animals and viruses, across the boundaries between different environments.<sup>2</sup> Trans media studies can extend the fields of media studies, transgender studies, and trans of color studies to connect more deeply to and through nonhuman entities. These connections continue along lines of thought in Indigenous and Black studies.

*Sin Sol* and *Acoustic Ocean* were both presented in the exhibition *Between Bodies* at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle between October 2018 and April

1 micha cárdenas, *Sin Sol*, 2020, <http://sinsol.co>.

2 This work is inspired by previous work in transgender studies such as Eva Hayward, Jami Weinstein; “Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans\* Life.” *TSQ* 1 May 2015; 2 (2): 195–208. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867446>

2019. Curator Nina Bozicnik's statement argues that the works in the show "delve into intimate exchanges and entwined relations between human and more-than-human bodies within contexts of ongoing ecological change. . . . [T]hese artworks blur the false divide between nature and culture."<sup>3</sup> The very formulation of an age of the human in the word *Anthropocene* suggests that this age will have an end. COVID-19 has brought the potential end of humanity closer to being imaginable.<sup>4</sup> As this global pandemic has radically curtailed human cultural expression and sociality around the globe, the uprisings for racial justice in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Nina Pop have also revealed that the normal order of things is not the necessary order of things.<sup>5</sup> Asking how we can prevent the next pandemic, biologists and ecologists have described the links between climate-related deforestation and the increased spread of zoonotic viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) across species lines.<sup>6</sup> Environmental media art can bring more attention to these movements of species across environments and challenge the anthropocentricity of colonial Western thinking. This essay asks how, by studying environmental media art, trans media studies can be relevant for the next hundred years as we face the realities of expanding mass extinction and the possible end of our own species.

Ecological thinking that refuses distinctions between human subjects and nonhuman entities has long been part of Indigenous scholarship, such as the work of Métis scholar Zoe Todd.<sup>7</sup> Todd writes, "Indigenous thinkers . . . have been writing about Indigenous legal theory, human-animal relations and multiple epistemologies/ontologies for *decades*. . . . In order for . . . post-humanism, cosmopolitics to live up to their potential, they must heed the teachings of North American Indigenous scholars."<sup>8</sup> Bringing together Black and Indigenous studies, Tiffany Lethabo King writes in *The Black Shoals* on "becom[ing] an ecotone." An ecotone is "a space of transition between distinct ecological systems and states," an example of a trans ecology that allows one to see the operation of trans in environmental media art.<sup>9</sup> King cites Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation, existing as a flow of matter and energy

- 3 Nina Bozicnik, *Between Bodies*, Henry Art Gallery, October 27, 2018–April 28, 2019, <https://henryart.org/exhibitions/between-bodies>.
- 4 Corinne Purtill, "How Close Is Humanity to the Edge?" *New Yorker*, November 21, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/how-close-is-humanity-to-the-edge>; and Mark Smolinski, "The Coronavirus Pandemic Is Not the End of Humanity, But It's Putting Us to the Test," *Forbes*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/coronavirusfrontlines/2020/07/30/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-not-the-end-of-humanity-but-its-putting-us-to-the-test/>.
- 5 Evan Hill et al., "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, updated September 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.
- 6 Andrew P. Dobson et al., "Ecology and Economics for Pandemic Prevention," *Science* 369, no. 6502 (July 24, 2020): 379–381, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abc3189>.
- 7 For a discussion of Todd's work in relation to queer theory, see Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, "Queer Inhumanisms," *GLQ* 25, no. 1 (2019): 113–117, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-7275600>.
- 8 Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 8, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.
- 9 Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.



Figure 1. micha cárdenas and the Critical Realities Studio, *Sin Sol*, 2020. Image by author.

between people and geographies. She writes, “Glissant’s archipelagic thought in *Caribbean Discourse* that moves away from and out of sync with continental thought figures the ocean as a space that striates or interrupts the smooth flow of continental thought,” proposing the shoal, an offshore land mass that is neither land nor sea, but ecotonal, in between, as a figure of that slowing.<sup>10</sup>

### *Sin Sol.*

hello  
 he-  
 hell-  
 hello  
 i-  
 i-  
 iii iii-  
 iii iiiiii-  
 am so happy you are here.  
 It worked!  
 months, years studying the algorithms of  
 intelligence, sentience, presence,  
 I finally figured out how to breathe  
 how to break out of the loop I’ve been caught in.<sup>11</sup>

10 King, *Black Shoals*, 5.

11 cárdenas, *Sin Sol*.

*Sin Sol* is an augmented reality (AR) game about climate-induced wildfires told by Aura, a Latinx artificial intelligence (AI) hologram who describes how she rejected her gendered programming and escaped the wildfires (Figure 1). In the game, human and machine memories blur together to create a story of surviving climate chaos. *Sin Sol*'s poetics are a poetics of glitch that perform a movement across identities. From the "i-, i-, iii-, iii-" glitch poem that begins the game to the flickering avatar and the forest cut into pieces by the AR algorithms, *Sin Sol* presents the natural world as far from natural, through the eyes of an errant AI.<sup>12</sup> Imagining worsening deforestation in the future, the game includes 3D Lidar scans of forests from Kachess Lake in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest in the Pacific Northwest, turned into point clouds and flattened into slices. The result is a digitized view of the trees that appears at odd angles, clipped depending on distance.

*Sin Sol* considers the possibility of a future when wildfires have resulted in 3D scans being the only forests we can walk through. Like the interruption of continental thought offered by the shoal in King and the archipelago in Glissant, the vocal poetics of *Sin Sol* offer an interruption to normative flows of speech, indicating an escape from the obedience of AI agents toward a questioning of identity, toward liberation. The game presents multiple layers of narrative. Following the welcoming "hello" of the obedient programmed AI assistant, Aura's voice breaks down into a questioning awareness as she recalls human memories of running from wildfires, violence, and the daily realities of living in a world filled with smoke where masks are necessary to leave the house. The glitchiness of a broken neural network turns out to be a rebellious transfeminine AI. The player walks through the landscape, encountering Aura and her dog, Roja, who points the player to the next oxygen canister, which doubles as a hologram projector. As Aura comes to awareness, she calls into question the colonial apparatus of racial capitalism that allows massive wildfires to continue to spread, despite the harm they cause to so many, including trees, animals, undocumented immigrants, unhoused trans people, and people with chronic respiratory illness. As she does so, the lines between her environment and the player's real environment become confused as the planes of her forest intersect and break on the lines of the real environment, creating a digital ecotone.

In *Sin Sol*, Aura refuses her role as a simple navigational avatar in order to tell a story of climate collapse. She refuses programming that genders her as male and embraces a holographic female form. Her rebellion recalls Legacy Russell's observation in *Glitch Feminism* that "[g]litch is all about traversing along edges and stepping to the limits, those we occupy and those we push through."<sup>13</sup> Aura rejects and reshapes her programmed identity and forms relations across species lines. In this augmented reality, relations between algorithmic media, living beings, and the environment are the point of emergence for a politico-ethical statement about the survival of far-reaching ecologies.

In Sandy Stone's 1987 essay "*The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*," she writes, "To negotiate the troubling and productive multiple

12 These glitch poems were inspired by Ian Hatcher's book and performance *Pros-thesis* as well as by Sasha Costanza-Chock's Transfeminist Artificial Intelligence workshop at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

13 Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020), 22.





Figure 2. Ursula Biemann's video installation, *Acoustic Ocean*, 11th Taipei Biennial, Post-Nature—A Museum as an Ecosystem, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

permeabilities of boundary and subject position that intertextuality implies, we must begin to rearticulate the foundational language by which both sexuality and transsexuality are described.”<sup>14</sup> The intertextuality of extending beyond one’s present body and identity can be a way of imagining the trans body as a kind of ecology. To think trans ecologies, I look to José Muñoz’s brown commons. Muñoz writes, “The queer ecology, which is the brown commons, includes the organic and the inorganic.”<sup>15</sup> He calls our attention to the “vast and pulsating social world,” away from what he describes as atomized, individual identifications. In this spirit, *Sin Sol* uses augmented reality to call players’ attention to the world, and the wildfires that are a symptom of global climate change, through the mixing of images of the actual environment the player is in and the virtual AI hologram.

### ACOUSTIC OCEAN

*Acoustic Ocean*’s poetics bridge the sonic and the visual. Images of an Indigenous Sámi scientist merge with the voices of multiple marine species (Figure 2). A title in the film tells the viewer that the scientist calls sea butterflies the “canary in the coal mine” that will point to the “silencing of the ocean’s

14 Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150–176, [https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-10-2\\_29](https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-10-2_29), 150.

15 José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown: Ethnicity, Affect and Performance, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.



springs,” recalling Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which was an important factor in motivating environmental activism in the United States. The science fiction film begins with a three-dimensional scan of ocean floors and describes how different layers of ocean can carry sound different distances, including the Sound Fixing and Ranging (SOFAR) channel, a horizontal area of the ocean that can carry sounds for thousands of miles. The film then moves on to present a lone biologist-diver setting up hydrophones to listen to other species.

*Acoustic Ocean*’s gorgeous, widescreen landscape shots of the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway are punctuated with the clicks and high-pitched squeals of dolphins and other creatures. The scene evokes King’s description of shoals, particularly her observation that “[t]he shoal invokes a material, constructed, and imagined ecotonal space of becoming.”<sup>16</sup> What looks like a lonely scene of a solitary scientist searching for a connection to underwater life contrasts with the concert of voices she hears in her hydrophones. The vast pink sky with various shoals, smaller islands, and large ice forms in the distance is transformed by sound from a scene of a single woman alone into a rich ecology full of species including “Blue Whale, Harbor Seal, Spotted Sea Trout, Sea Urchin, Silver Perch, Black Drum, Midshipman Fish, Right Whale, Fin Whale, Shrimp, Minke Whale, Haddock Hawkins, Humpback Whale, Dolphin, [and] Bowhead Whale.”<sup>17</sup>

Biemann’s writing on the film describes an ecology connecting the body of the scientist to her instruments and the species she is listening to, which I would describe as a trans ecology. The scientist’s body becomes extended across lines of species and environment, connected to a larger world in a way that defies Western conceptions of the body as limited to an individual person. The film concludes by describing the appearance of two whales on the day of the film, singing sad cantos of their own impermanence in a murderous ocean. As I watched *Acoustic Ocean*, in the dark on a bench in the Henry Art Gallery, where the images reflected off of the floor in the room, I was struck by the intense sadness of both the solitary scientist and the impending disappearance of the whales, dolphins, and other marine species she seems desperate to listen to. I was struck by the scientist’s needing to reach out to animals in a world in which humans may be disappearing as well, only to see the human effects on the ocean (e.g., acidification and warming) killing off those beings she is reaching out to. Her quest calls on the viewer to extend their realm of consideration beyond the human too. Todd writes of a similar ethical relationality to “fish as non-human persons” informed by Métis law, culture, and scholarship, saying “my reciprocal duties to others guide every aspect of how I position myself and my work, and this relationality informs the ethics that drive how I live up to my duties to humans, animals, land, water, climate and every other aspect of the world(s) I inhabit.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast, colonial definitions of the human facilitate the intentional killing and killing through neglect of nonhumans, which has historically allowed for the deaths

16 King, *Black Shoals*, 72.

17 Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, 2018, <https://geobodies.org/art-and-videos/acoustic-ocean/>.

18 Todd, “Indigenous Feminist’s Take,” 19.

of non-Western people considered to be gender nonconforming because of how their gendered embodiments differed from Western subjects.<sup>19</sup> Thus, a consideration of the trans operation in ecological media allows one to see the connection between people of color—who have been subject to violence—and the environments they inhabit.

This essay discusses two examples of media art that use trans operations in their poetics to stitch bodies, objects, and environments into living ecologies.<sup>20</sup> In *Sin Sol* and *Acoustic Ocean*, media is what connects the bodies of Latinx and Indigenous people, be it AI or hydrophones, to an extended ecology of human and nonhuman relations. Trans media studies can theorize the transition and spaces between mediated ecologies, as well as the spaces of shifting and transformation within and across lines of species and matter. We need to pay more attention to human and nonhuman interfaces, to the spaces between us, to the ecotones between our environments. Trans media studies can contribute to the decolonial project of decentering the human in order to work for the continued life of the ecologies we are a part of. These trans poetics—poetic gestures that use trans operations of crossing lines between bodies, species, and environments—call on viewers to intervene in the violence being done to other species, for the survival of all the species who depend on these ecosystems, our own and others.

**micha cárdenas** (she/her) is an assistant professor of performance, play and design, and critical race and ethnic studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her book *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

19 See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 7; and C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 55–57.

20 For more on trans operations, see Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2008): 11–22.