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List of illustrations:

Figure 1, Ginsberg, H (2019) *still alive* [photographic print]. Available at: <https://www.hhobbess.com/transgender-pictures> (Accessed: 8 April 2024)

Figure 2, Glazzard, J (2022-ongoing) *Camp Trans* [series of photographic prints] Available at: <https://www.jesseglazzard.com/camp-trans> (Accessed 30 April 2024)

Figure 3 - Karowska, M (2023) *Fanfic* [film] Available on Netflix. (Accessed 2 May 2024)

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This dissertation proposal aims to explore the links between three chosen keywords, images, and thinkers, to form a question around which the independent research project in Year Three will be based. All of theoretical and visual works referenced are researched by and with queer or transgender people in mind - Jamison Green and Natalie Wynn (transgender, theory) relate to Hobbes Ginsberg (transgender, photography), Leslie Feinberg (community, theory) and Jesse Glazzard (community, photography), Breikks (cinema, theory), Marta Karwowska (cinema, visual) and Alice Oseman (cinema, visual).

Throughout this proposal, the term transgender aims to include binary and nonbinary transgender identities, at times under the umbrella term *trans*, *queer* or *gender diverse*.

Chapter 1: **Transgender**

The definition of the adjective transgender relates to a person whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned at the time of birth (Oxford, 2024). In the 2021 census across England and Wales, out of 45.7 million responses, only 262,000 stated that they did not identify with assigned sex at birth, which is to say 0,5% of the surveyed population. (ONS, 2023). In the UK, two out of three people think the trans population faces discrimination, (Ipsos, 2023), yet the support for gender affirming care is one of the lowest among developed countries. The policing of what transgender people can and cannot access, from toilets to medical care, has become a highly debated topic amongst various political circles in recent times, often at the expense of excluding actual transgender people from the conversation that is, at the root, about them. Cisgender people, that is people whose feelings of gender identity match the sex assigned at birth, feel particularly entitled to decide how transgender individuals are supposed to present and live, by which they often mean 'away from the rest of society' (Wynn, 2023). With this in mind, the first question was 'How do transgender people live authentically?'

In his book titled *Becoming a Visible Man* (2005), Jamison Green speaks on coming to terms with his identity as a transgender man, his subsequent social and medical transition, and the struggles of what it meant to be one of the few publicly open transgender men in the 1980s. The themes of hardship and shame are often mentioned throughout, just like in a vast majority of other texts that I have read - transgender people are made to fear rejection from society at large, to fear economical disadvantage, to fear violence and discrimination, all of which prevent them from living life to the fullest. Alongside fear, feelings of shame and guilt are also prevalent - of not being a good child, friend or lover (Wynn, 2020). Shame is a difficult feeling, an obvious result of pressure and shaming. Natalie Wynn, known for the YouTube channel ContraPoints, speaks of her own shame as a trans woman and a lesbian in a video essay *Shame* - and equates it to a poisoned fruit. In various far-right media, conservatives invalidate trans existence by attributing it to mental illness and insanity, this is the poison that feeds poison within, and it's meant to isolate a person, to turn them against themselves in an act of punishment for a shameful existence. To live authentically is to live without shame, therefore, how does one overcome shame?

The answer to this question appears not only in Green's book, but throughout the whole of transgender body of work - that it exists to begin with. Under societal pressures forcing trans people to hide on the fringes of society, existing as trans is already an act of protest (Kibria, 2023) against what society deems 'normal'. To overcome this shame of otherness is to live and tell the story, truthfully. No human life is flawless, nor is it inherently flawed. It just *is*.

Such a notion is also the basis of Hobbes Ginsberg photographic series *still alive*. Documenting her gender transition allowed Ginsberg to gaze inward and re-adjust the outward self to fit the inner self, which is to say - live in truth. Throughout this series of photographs, the audience is looking at bright, visually appealing images that Ginsberg describes as 'ideas of grandeur' and challenges them by creating a character that just *is* - no ornate jewelry, no expensive clothes to 'aid' in making a body of a transgender person digestable. Ginsberg subverts the glam, the vivid, in order to portray her true self.



Fig 1, *still alive* (2019)

Ginsberg also described her search for stability and understanding her own identity and means of survival. She also plays on the idea of a selfie - candid portrayal of the self - and how being honest in self-documentation helps others to relate to her practice. Sharing truth can often be empowering as we are allowed to lower our own guard and throw away constraints of what is deemed appropriate and worth sharing.

Having thought about this, another concept came to light - the importance of building community amongst transgender people. Despite the frequent ostratisation and forceful seclusion of trans individuals, it's only natural for humans to seek the reassurance and closeness of other, similar people. There is strength in numbers, after all. Then, how does a transgender person function in the LGBTQ community?

Chapter 2: Community

If there is anything I have learned from working with so many other queer and trans artists it is this: we form each other when we imagine together. (Max Yeshaye Brumberg-Kraus, Theyology, Myopoetics for Queer/Trans Liberation 2023)

Among a minority ostracised from society for simply existing, a sense of community is essential for survival. Nobody can understand each other better than those who have been judged on the basis of their gender identity. Many LGBTQ+ people throughout history have been rejected from their own families, oftentimes resulting in parental violence, homelessness; trans people have been stalked and

disadvantaged on the basis of being trans, sometimes in seemingly leftist spaces such as universities (Stonewall, 2018). Finding community again serves as a cure for loneliness, but can it help realise inner strength through the testimonies of others?

Queer people innovate the structures of family, friendship and love (Weston, 1991) due to the failures of a traditional, patriarchal family model, and reintroduce the model of found family instead. Such is also the case in *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg, a pivotal text that helps us understand the social intricacies of gender identity, sexuality, and the importance of community. The main character, Jess, a working class masculine presenting lesbian, ostracised by her biological family, finds solace among other queer people she meets throughout her life. Her involvement in activism amplifies the significance of found family beyond individual relationships, fostering cultural and political resilience against systemic oppression of all LGBTQ+ people. The book describes harsh realities of what queer people often struggle with - violence, poverty, homelessness and ill health, but in a more positive light, in the end illuminating the profound importance of found family as a source of survival, affirmation, and collective strength.

While it is worth noting that *Stone Butch Blues* is not directly describing a transgender individual, it is still a valuable text to consider when debating trans rights. This book often comes up as a reference in informal discussions about binary and nonbinary genders. A binary gender can be understood as one of two on the rigid spectrum - either masculine or feminine, and is often linked to social presentation of a person, whereas nonbinary can be understood as 'in-between' or outside of the masculine-feminine spectrum entirely (LGBT Foundation, 2023). This

further aids in understanding how complex binary and nonbinary identities are, but also illustrates how easy it is for some cisgender people to misinterpret these concepts and contribute to both direct and indirect discrimination of transgender people. Then, if the cisgendered, heterosexual population tends to misinterpret queer existence, how can queer people learn what is right for them?

An interesting way of answering this might be by looking at Jesse Glazzard's photographic projects. In an interview with the British Journal of Photography, Glazzard does mention that greater visibility of transgender individuals comes with greater danger, but it is also for that reason why it is worth telling the stories of transgender lives. For Glazzard consent is crucial. Queer people should have the biggest power when it comes to which parts of them become visible, dictating what is right and wrong in conversations about them. Logically, some will choose to not disclose any information, but instead of pressuring them, the society at large should consider the importance of the word 'no'.

Glazzard shares that most of his photography is private, and works that do reach the eyes of the public, do so with consent of photographed individuals. The author himself is a trans man who values community and care over having a large archive of public works, which aids in creating an intimate connection with the viewer. With this in mind, another question becomes relevant - should trans people leave the security of their own community for the sake of representation? How should this be done?



Fig 2 *Camp Trans* (2022-ongoing)

Cinema

In the current political climate, the media shapes people's opinions, from simple matters like recycling to which party to vote for, and even artistic media such as cinema are no exception. As a form of entertainment, more people turn to online streaming sites in their free time, such as Netflix, BBC or Amazon, and it is easier than ever before to come across trans representation in film. Despite the ease of access, it is also true that not all representations are made equal, with the possibility of creating harmful stereotypes, as oftentimes cisgender writers are in charge of writing the script without consulting their transgender peers, and cisgender actors playing transgender characters. All of this leads to lack of authentic representation of

transgender and queer individuals (Mocarski et al, 2013) due to cisgender people dictating the rules and taking up space dedicated for transgender people.

The concept of the 'cisgender gaze' is further researched in Serena Breikks's doctoral thesis, and serves as an opposition to Jack Halberstam's theory of 'transgender gaze'. Where Halberstam research suggests to look *at* a trans person, Breikks offers to look *with*, which can also be understood as 'putting oneself in the shoes of others. The conscious viewer should be analytic of what is shown on the screen, but also empathetic to the issues portrayed. Lack of understanding should no longer be an excuse with the amount of easily accessible media contextualising queer existence, however said media should always be produced with queer people in mind, or better yet, by queer people themselves.

Two recent pieces of cinema come to mind when discussing inclusion of transgender actors to play a transgender character - a 2023 Polish film *Fanfic* directed by Marta Karwowska and 2022 British TV series *Heartstopper* directed by Alice Oseman. Despite the different tones of said media, they share a common theme, which is casting of trans actors for the roles of trans characters. In *Fanfic*, the main role of Tosiek is played by a nonbinary actor Alin Szewczyk. For Szewczyk, it is important to normalise appearances of trans people in cinema, to show similarities and not differences, and themes of authenticity both in their personal lives, and the life of Tosiek. In *Heartstopper*, the viewer watches as Elle, played by a trans actress Yasmin Finney, finds love and acceptance among peers in her school. A common ground for both is positivity - and hope for normalisation of the trans existence in everyday life.



Fig 3 - *Fanfic* (2023)



Figure 4 - *Heartstopper* (2022)

Conclusion

Exploring the chosen keywords proved reliable connections between one another. My working proposal question would be: **What makes for an honest representation of transgender people in artistic photography?** with possible subquestions to be taken into consideration when working on the final project, such as: How does one tell their story truthfully?, Where are the lines between artistic expression and realism? Are trans people responsible for educating cisgendered people, if so, then how do we do it?, How can trans people ensure their place among cisgender peers?. The concepts I wish to explore are: the fringe of society, dichotomy of visibility/invisibility, acceptance, stigma, partnership, friendship, found family, grief, body, binary and nonbinary genders.

During the final dissertation project, I also wish to research the impact and representation of transgender existence in art, especially in the right-leaning Eastern Europe, as I hope my personal connection and insight could give a new angle on this discussion.

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