

Question 5: From the Lens-Based Image Making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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The Damaging Representation of Transgenderism within Entertainment and Cinema.

Media and consumption of media is one of the most powerful tools of the zeitgeist, influencing how we think, speak and act it seems that general media is the puppet master of our influential brains. General media comes in many alternative forms, whether that be archaic forms such as the newspaper and radio or its more current cousins such as Cinema, Television, Youtube and other forms of social media ; they all have sway over our thought processes. With such power over the people, mistakes and damaging representations can be life changing for certain groups. It becomes abundantly clear that media is a double edged sword, an organism that can positively change a persons ideology but can also stir hatred if wrongly executed. This damaging sharpness of the medias blade can be even more detrimental when its target doesn't have a powerful enough voice in the mainstream to defend itself. The representation of transgenderism within media and especially in entertainment has been a damaging one. Constituted as deceitful, manipulative or outright murderous, transgenderism has been misrepresented in one of the most damaging ways in history.

One of the earliest exposures to the idea of transgenderism and transgender people is Hitchcock's cult classic Psycho released in 1960. The story follows the classic 'whodunnit' narrative and creates huge amounts of tension and suspense, something that earned Hitchcock's auteur status. The story eventually culminates to the revelation that Norman Bates was the elusive



murderer behind the iconic shower scene but it doesn't end there. Bates has been disguised as his mother when conducting his murderous tirades, explained in the latter portion of the film by Bates' psychiatrist the audience learns that he is mentally ill and that his incessant need to portray himself as a woman is the main cause of his mental illness. This damaging and careless representation of transgenderism is amplified by the zeitgeist the film was released in. The 1960s

was a time in which electroshock therapy was a popular form of treatment for many mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, 'lesbianism', 'sexual deviance' and gender dysphoria. As well as being released at a time in which the ideas of the queer world were shunned from the mainstream and made a criminal offence, this on screen representation of a transgender person would have been a first for many people. This murderous portrayal isn't helped by the certitude that their first victim was a helpless, blonde white woman. Someone who had to be protected from the horrors of the world, from the horrors of men dressing as women. This ideological narrative that the white woman needs to be protected from the atrocities of the real world has been a popular and polarising one. Leading to real life consequences for innocent people who don't fit the cis, white mainstream most famously the story of Emmett Till. Till, a child from Mississippi was brutally beaten and lynched at the age of 14 after being accused of 'offending' a white woman. While Till's story stems from the aggressive racism of the 1950's its relevance to the protection of the white women is apparent to the mis-portrayal and transphobia transgender people face. This need to protect the white woman was extremely prevalent at this time as the film's release was only 5 years after the brutal murder of Emmet Till.

However Bates' first victim is more than just a pretty white woman that needs to be protected. Marion Crane's powerful and sexual nature, communicated through Hitchcock's gaze, is something that threatens Bates' very fibre of being in his descent into cross-dressing. This intimidation can be inferred as jealousy of Crane and her beauty that eventually leads to her death. "A galaxy of signifiers" (Barthes, 1997). As expressed by Barthe, all objects have signifiers, this can also be relevant in the realisation of Bates' jealousy in the film. The ideology that no person gender assigned male at birth can embody or present themselves as a complete woman is a transphobic narrative that has been perpetuated for the majority of the discussion around transgenderism. This narrative is again perpetuated in the film through Norman Bates' jealousy of Crane's effortless beauty whether this ideology was intentional or not. Furthermore, Hitchcock's obsession with type casting his female leads as pretty, white, blonde, blue eyed women is buried deep in misogyny. Creating the ideal woman not only in public opinion but also within consumed media, Hitchcock's undeniable influence in his prime and his legacy has greatly nuanced and sustained the perception of the ideal woman. With this, Hitchcock's representation of the

transgender brain, need to protect the white woman and misogynistic standards of female beauty has created one of the most alienating and inaccessible films for minority groups.

Moving on 20 years later, another cult classic was released in 1980, *Dressed to Kill*. A much more vibrant, explicit and gore filled film promised a contemporary re-visit to the classical murder-thriller genre that turned out to be rather retrograde. Filled with the voyeuristic misogyny of the male gaze and its eventual revelation that the antagonist is a man dressing as a woman, the film falls flat in creating an interesting narrative. Directed by De Palma, the film features a reoccurring



motif of duality. Featuring two blonde women, one of which is murdered, two gloves, two shower scenes that rival Hitchcock's and an array of split screens that consistently foreshadows its big twist. De Palma takes heavy inspiration from Hitchcock and his work and this is evident in his film.

Taking the framework of

Psycho's narrative, De Palma creates an alternative story. With such similarity to Hitchcock's film, is it any surprise that the film also carries the same transphobic and misogynistic ideology of its predecessor? Again it is the white, blonde woman that is murdered. Damsel and in distress, this need to protect is amplified in the film. Not only damaging to the marginalised group that plays the role of the antagonist but also to the white woman. Constantly portrayed as someone who needs help and is unable to fend for themselves coupled up with the narrative of the film that perceives its female leads as sexually aggressive creates a conflicting idea of innocence in their perception of the world and maturity in their sexual desires. Could this be the so called 'perfect woman'? It is also intriguing that the antagonists of both *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill* are 'disguised' as blonde women. "Specifically, she says, some cisgender people have a fear of being 'tricked'." (Kelsey-Sugg, 2018) This narrative that supports the idea that these deranged murderers can impersonate women, the so called 'perfect women' is terrifying to its cisgender audience. The

ungodly juxtaposition that the person who needs protecting the most can be the very evil you are protecting them from is horrifying. This reoccurring narrative of deceit and trickery is extremely damaging to transgender people. The spectator again learns of the murderer's condition through a doctor, much like Hitchcock's Psycho. This lack lustre explanation of transgenderism that comes from medical professionals ,even if they are characters, creates a reliable narrator that feeds the audience harmful and damaging ideas of transgender people. This film, released at the beginning of the AIDs epidemic which affected the queer community in an immense way added to the hysteria and fear of the queer world that lead to so many queer people dying unnecessary deaths. "Even more than race or gender, sexual 'sensitivity' is an elusive and often subversive subject" (Reilly, 2018, pg.9). It becomes apparent that maybe the omission of believable and compelling trans people may be due to the stigma attached to them ,in part due to films like these. It seems that it's easier to misrepresent and villanise those not included in the mainstream rather than create and campaign for a platform for these people. Even after 20 years of the release of Psycho, representation of transgender people had not changed and Dressed to Kill's untimely release further amplified the stagnant progression of queer tolerance.

Another 11 years later the commercial and critical smash hit The Silence of the Lambs directed by Jonathan Demme and released in 1991 had another kick at the murderous transgender person sub genre of horror. The film was a win for women as it expertly portrays the inner workings of institutional workplace sexism experienced by all women and projected onto Jodie Foster's character. It challenges the male gaze "she faces Lecter's appraising stare; Buffalo Bill hunts her using night vision goggles.



Starling returns their gaze with her piercing blue stare." (Griffin, 2019). This subversive and standout film earned 5 oscars sweeping in its prime categories of Best Picture as well as Best Actor and Actress in a leading role. An all round win for the minority. Apart from its gruesome

depiction of LGBTQ+ people, in particularly Transgender people. Yet again, the demented killer is someone who seeks to be female. This time however their way of means are the most explicit seen in cinema. Buffalo Bill's main goal in his murderous rampages is to create the female body with the skin dismembered from his victims, to embody the very being of women. This horrific depiction of the 'transgender brain' is incredibly damaging. Released at the end of the peak of the AIDs epidemic, the tolerance for queer people was not yet making its way into the mainstream. It seems again the explanation for the antagonist's twisted brain is linked to his need to become a woman, his need to transition. This explanation coming from the other antagonist, Hannibal Lector a once respected psychiatrist turned cannibal we are again informed by a medical professional on Bill's horrifying condition. However, unlike its cousins before it, the film gives a small point of defence for "transvestites" suggesting that not all of them are terrifying deranged murders and that most are "passive" people. This insufficient defence of transgender people is forgotten almost instantly as the audience is thrown into a gruesome scene with our transgender killer contradicting and dismantling its previous point. This murderous portrayal of transgender people is even more damaging than its predecessors, with its critical and commercial success in the mainstream and without any film making establishments challenging its transphobic ideology, the film was able to be ingested by masses of audience members influencing their ideology of trans and other queer people. Another nail in the coffin of the progression of education around the queer community.



A further 27 years later and one of the first compelling and insightful representations of the queer world ,in particularly transgender people, is catapulted onto our screens. Pose, released in 2018 and written by Ryan Murphy, the 2 season long episodic series explores queer sub-culture during the rise and peak of the AIDs epidemic in the 80s. Featuring transgender actors and transgender people of colour, this is one of the first times the trans community has been represented accurately

and compassionately. Touching upon subjects of gender and body dysphoria, rejection from family, the AIDs epidemic and the importance of queer marriage Murphy's creation brings the queer underworld into the mainstream and into the cisgender living room. 60 years after Hitchcock's damaging representation of the transgender narrative and inspired stories that perpetuated this ideology, the cisgender mainstream is given an accurate depiction.

Unapologetically queer Pose isn't shy in exposing the everyday homophobia and transphobia the queer world endured in the 80s as well as today exposing the distressing and damaging stereotypes not only found in the cisgender mainstream but also within the queer world upheld by white gay men. Creating stories and entertainment media like Pose is pivotal in the understanding and tolerance of the queer community. "a vehicle to explore the effects of the plague on one group of artists in a way that hopefully will speak to all survivors of this crisis" (Reilly, 2018, pg.180). While this quote in context discusses the almost therapeutic aspect of an artists exhibition, its relevance in this case is absolute. Using media ,especially entertainment, as a "vehicle" to discuss the effects of homophobia, transphobia and the devastating ramifications of AIDs on the queer world allows for empathetic representations and an understanding that is held at mass. Televising stories found in Pose allows for thousands of those willingly or unwillingly ignorant to the lives of queer people to be exposed to the struggles of queerness as well as its beauty. Portraying the vibrant, colourful and accepting culture of queerness accurately and sensibly grants easy access to those unfamiliar with queerness.

In conclusion, media is one of the most powerful tools in the disposal of our society and when executed incorrectly the outcome can be devastating. This can be seen in the films discussed earlier that successfully perpetuated harmful and damaging stereotypes of transgender people and stunted the progression and inclusion of trans people into the mainstream. These stereotypes while negatively impactful, are not irreversible. With new shows such as Pose and others, the dismantling of damaging stereotypes has begun and while this may be a slow process the queer world is hopeful that with the support of the media , something that has been proportionately against queerness, opinions will start to change. Using more aggressive and mainstream forms of representation, queerness may eventually be a subject of tolerance rather than a subject of harmful tropes.

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