



[Mis]Representation of Transgender Women in Films

For many years, people have been producing films about trans women, or featuring trans women. Representations of trans women are seen in films of varying quality and popularity.

However, the ways trans women are represented are often *misrepresentations*: they are not accurate, realistic, or empowering, and are often one dimensional, stigmatising, and actively harmful.

There are films which use trans women as the butt of jokes, to shock or inspire fear, for pity, 'for edginess' and sex appeal, to sell a fantasy. Some films seek to be socially conscious and represent trans experiences and lives in ways that create more acceptance and positivity. However, more often than not, these films show stereotypical misrepresentations, which cause more confusion and well-intentioned harm with their more subtle transmisogynist undertones. [7][8][9]

This pamphlet touches on some of the ways in which trans women are misrepresented in film.

The cis perspective

Due to systemic discrimination, trans people do not often end up in the director's chair on large movie sets. The movies that get made about trans women are made by cis people, from their perspective, and with cis audiences in mind. There are always going to be things about other people's experiences that people miss out on experiencing and fully understanding, which isn't to say that cis people can't make great films about trans people but that films made by trans women about the lives of trans women offer very different and important perspectives. [8][9]

The joke

Many films with trans women in them feature a trans woman in one or two scenes, as a throwaway joke; the punchline of which is often based on clichés discussed here. It is incredibly common for all parts of trans women's lives to be treated as fodder for comedy, from laughing at the violence that trans women experience, to inaccurate jokes about genitals. This not only directly disrespects trans women's right to be taken seriously as human beings, but also objectifies and dehumanises trans women by reducing their existence to a joke.

The murderer

The cliché of a murderous crossdresser features in many popular horror movies, and while trans women are not crossdressers, films often conflate and confuse the two. Trans women are portrayed as deceptive, sexually deviant, and dangerous. This feeds



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fear and violence toward trans women. [5]

Only the transition

In contrast to those types of stories, the other most common story is the transition narrative.

There is nothing inherently wrong with writing a story about transition, but there is more to a trans woman's life than her transition. Showing trans characters who have no depth beyond their transition, or showing stories that centre on that transition, make it hard to show trans women who live rich, rewarding, and challenging lives, both before and after transition. [6][8][9]

The beautiful death

Many 'positive' stories about trans women end with their death. This cliché aims to show the struggles that trans women deal with for the full breadth of their lives. However, when many stories about trans women end with their death, it not only tells trans women that they will live lives of struggle and inevitably die tragically, but it also often moves the narrative from being about trans women and their own lived reality, to being about the ways that cis people deal with the deaths of those women. [4][7][9]

Violence and rape as plot devices

Portraying and speaking about the systematic violence, street harassment, sexual and physical violence that trans women face is important. But often, in an attempt to show this, movies gloss over the full context and extent of the violence. Rather than offering insight into violence as part of trans women's everyday lives in small and large ways, the physical beating or rape of a trans woman is dramatised for consumption in a scene created for shock value, which offers no analysis of the deep societal roots of that violence, or the emotional effects on the lives of trans women. [8][9]

Misgendering

Trans women are women, and should be addressed as such.

Portrayal of the struggle of being misgendered is sometimes appropriate for the story being told, but often it is shown in gratuitous ways, or the misgendering is not corrected by the narrative. [4][10]

The scripts of many "progressive," popular and current movies about trans women refer to those women as 'he' throughout, rather than the appropriate 'she.' When the script itself does not respect trans women at the most basic level, it is not a film which respects trans women at all. [7]

Fetishisation/sexualisation

Trans women are sexualised on screen in similar ways to cis women - the camera will



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linger on their bodies and their clothes, the script will call for them to be shown in a sexualised way, they will be defined by their relationships. This is common to misogyny; but trans women face a further type of sexualisation. Trans women's gender is often portrayed as being overly sexual, with sensual imagery or sexualised film techniques being employed while trans women engage in common parts of femininity – everyday details which would not be shown if cis women were engaging in them - such as getting dressed, putting on makeup, using the bathroom. This even extends to sexualised closeups of trans women's genitalia. [6][7]

In many cases, even trans women's "desire to be women" is sexualised, which feeds directly into the idea that trans women are dressing up for sexual kicks; a narrative which has been used to target trans women with violence and legal discrimination for decades. [7][10]

The Crazy

Trans women are often portrayed in "positive films" as being mentally unstable, and while many people do suffer from mental illness/lack of access to support, and portrayal of that is important and valuable, most trans narratives do not portray mental health accurately. Mental health issues are portrayed as stemming from people being trans, or causing people to be trans. This is an inaccurate and damaging portrayal of both mental health, and being trans. [5][10]

The pathetic/pitiable trans

Often, films about trans women will focus intently on their supposed 'failure' to be women in a normative fashion. The focus on trans women's makeup and dress is often done in order to highlight ways in which they differ from cis women. This also goes beyond trans women's gender presentation and often focusses on their bodies in ways that highlight how they are different from cis women. Very often, this is framed as a 'failure' and the viewer is encouraged to feel pity.

A trans woman's womanhood is just as much womanhood as a cis woman's, however the portrayal of trans women's "difference" as being sad and pitiable is based on essentialist ideas of gender and presentation, which imply that there is a 'right way' to be a woman - and that trans women do not fit into that. [6][10]

Men in dresses

Many people mistakenly think of trans women as being men who want to wear dresses. This common stereotype is supported when men, wearing dresses, are cast to play trans women. This stereotype leads directly to discrimination. [1][2][3]

The cis people who portray trans women often perform exaggerated stereotypes of femininity based on other stereotypical portrayals of trans women. This is also harmful. [6][10]



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Cis actors being cast in roles as trans women also feeds into employment discrimination. There are thousands of trans women who are incredibly capable actors, who would love to act on the big screen. When not enough effort is put into finding them, and when people of other genders are chosen over them, it simply keeps the sexist status quo. [1]

Not the real story

The full history of trans issues and trans community is rich, beautiful and important. But when supposedly historical stories are delivered in the same ways, hitting the same notes, and ending the same way, the details which get cut out of these stories are the important details.

Trans women have been telling their stories hundreds of years and writing down their experiences for decades, however, their stories are presented in limiting ways - crammed into small pre-defined boxes which at times actively erase and contradict the real history. It is essential that these histories be honoured and that the complexity, the humanity, and the very lives of trans women are recognised, affirmed, and valued. [6][7][8]

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