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Sex in the Spotlight: Applying Butlerian Gender Theory to the Transgendered Woman in Global Popular Culture

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Sex in the Spotlight:
Applying Butlerian Gender Theory to the Transgendered Woman in Global Popular Culture

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Following the increased acceptance of transgendered women across the globe, the question arises as to what defines a person's gender. In many forms of popular media, this question is being explored, through movies and public personae. Transgendered women are presented in a variety of roles and situations, along various stages of the gender spectrum. According to gender theoretician Judith Butler, the true gender of a person can be measured by their adherence to gender performativity, the solidified gender identity created by repeated, culturally gendered actions. Is performativity enough, with or without an altered physiology, to create a woman, though? By examining the various ways in which transgendered women are presented by cisgendered, or non-transgendered, individuals and the ways transgendered women present themselves, there appears to be a divide between a hazy no from cisgendered individuals and a firm yes from transgendered individuals themselves.
One is not born a woman, one becomes one.

-Simone de Beauvoir

In the entertainment industry, the concept that bigger is better has led to an overly parodied and derided status for many topics. One of the topics originally used almost exclusively for comedy or situational purposed was the transgendered person. In past movies such as *Some Like It Hot* (O’Connor) or *La Cage aux Folles* (Freeman), later remade in America as *The Birdcage*, the crossdressing man is used as a launch pad for situational farcical situations. This trend continued, distorting and deriding the concept as public opinion called for higher stakes and larger twists, until many media resorted to presenting transgender women as nothing more than a punch line to a joke, such as in the movie *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and episodes of the television show *Friends* (Addams).

In this same period, however, there has been a growing undercurrent of support and desire to understand the inner thoughts and lifestyles of transmen and transwomen. Even in the early days of silent film, movies such as *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (I don’t want to be a man) were produced showing transgender characters as intelligent and unique ("Ich möchte kein Mann sein (1918."). This small spark has grown over the past century, allowing for the explosive popularity of drag shows, transgender entertainers, and movies with transgender characters as central to the plot.

With the explosion of feminism since World
War II and the rise of second-wave feminism, gender theory has also expanded. Although early writers had their own theories about gender and sex, few were flattering, including Sigmund Freud’s hypothesis that women were merely men deformed by their lack of a penis (Freud, 770). With the publication of works such as Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex”, feminist and gender theory has been developed into a more refined concept of what it means to be man or woman (de Beauvoir, 249).

The question then rises as to where a transgender woman stands on the gender spectrum. With the many competing gender theories, a transgender woman could range anywhere from being solely male to solely female to some alternate sex and gender altogether. Choosing one theory is difficult, but if popularity should serve as a guide, then Judith Butler’s theories are the ones to use. Although she is reviled as often as she is revered, Butler has spent the last twenty years publishing works on gender theory, drawing from the works of others in her field.

If Beauvoir’s quote is true, then what does it take for someone born genetically male to truly become a woman? Is this even possible? With the explosion of exposure for the transgendered woman in popular culture and the corresponding exploration of her role, it is certain there will be some hint in these new works. From the hyper-feminization of the average drag queen to the melodrama of a blockbuster movie, these transwomen are all setting out to show both what they are and are not made of.

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One of the most difficult aspects of the concept of transgender is to understand just how broad the term is. While some may choose to attempt to restrict the concepts encompassed by the word, transgender is often used as an umbrella term to cover all people who are differently or ambiguously gendered when compared with the view of heteronormativity—the reinforcement
that human beings are born to be either male or female, each given its own gendered role in life. The word ‘transgender’ itself originally gained popularity in the mid-1970s by Virginia Prince, who studied transvestites and cross-dressers, as a term to include not only those who sought an exterior alteration to their sex, but also those who felt an interior dissonance with their gender and sexual identity (Docter, 52).

What, then, is included in this blanketing term of transgender? First and foremost would be transsexuals, individuals who have undergone sex reassignment surgery, either from female to male (FTM) or male to female (MTF). The process of the surgery generally varies from person to person, based on the work needed. Female to male transsexuals will generally undergo solely a mastectomy, often referred to as top surgery, to remove the enlarged female breasts. There are additional procedures, such as a phalloplasty, which can result in the construction of a penis, but these are not as common, due to the varying degrees of its success. Male to female transsexuals undergo a more standard set of surgeries, including a vaginoplasty and breast augmentation, followed by possible facial feminization surgery (Lawrence).

Also generally included as transgender are transvestites and the number of categories contained within. Transvestism by definition simply implies a person of one sex wearing clothes traditionally associated with the opposite sex. Since the word has been coined in the early twentieth century by Magnus Hirschfeld, transvestism has developed a connotation implying either a sexual fetish or a gender dysphoria leading an individual to wear these particular articles of clothing, although this usage is currently virtually nonexistent (Hirschfeld, 6). The term cross-dressing entered modern usage as a minor protest against this connotation by men and women who generally identified with their birth sex and took interest in wearing the opposite
Hazy Talauati, a Samoan fa’afafine

sex's clothing out of a general interest in the opposite sex, leading to a desire to imitate but not become the opposite sex (Rudd, 32). When done solely for the purpose of entertainment, these people are called either male and female impersonators or drag kings and queens.

Beyond this point, it is debated what remaining forms of gender belong in the category of transgender, with most falling into the highly ambiguous category of the third gender. This category is an unofficial repository for virtually all sex or gender identities that fall outside the realm of heteronormativity (Herdt, 72). One reason for this category's large size is that gender is interpreted in many unique forms due to regional cultural values. For example, in Samoa, in a family with too many male children, the parents may choose to raise one of the sons as a daughter in order to complete domestic work. These boys, known as fa’afafine, are traditionally heterosexual and choose only to live their lives as transvestites due to their parents' wishes ("Charting the Pacific").

Although these categories vary widely based on the distance each individual finds his or her exterior from the interior state or the desired exterior state, they are nearly all covered under the condition called gender identity disorder, with the possible exclusion of cross-dressing as a sexual fetish. While most clinically verified cases of this disorder have been confirmed to exist from birth, it is not uncommon for these feelings to take any number of directions over the course of a persons life, from manifestation in adulthood to strengthening over time. There are various subcategories for the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, ranging from transsexualism...
to transvestism to a childhood gender identity disorder. These classifications have received great criticism for attempting to categorize the concept of transgender in the same category as other neurological diseases such as autism. Instead, the disorder contains a very specific biological component, namely the human body itself, raising the question of whether it is the body that does not match the mind or the mind that does not match the body (Vitale).

Similarly to other sexual and gender minorities outside the realm of heteronormativity, people have often thought to perform conversion therapy as a "cure" for transgender tendency in thought or action. These treatments, like treatments for homosexuality, have been decried by the medical community as often cruel and wholly ineffective. If there were a "cure" for gender identity disorder, the greatest consensus would name that cure to be the transformation of the physical body to match the interior perception of the self. As stated in the film Transamerica, "Don't you find it strange that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?" With the transition provided by gender reassignment surgery, the condition of gender identity disorder itself is also largely alleviated, with transgendered individuals often wholly identifying as their chosen gender.

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Bursting onto the feminist scene in 1990 with her book Gender Trouble, Judith Butler gives an alternative view of gender than from that of a psychiatrist. Rather than enter into the realm of gender theory with preconceptions and expectations, Butler urges the reader to do away with such, urging a revolution of sorts. By causing "gender trouble", or a destabilization of these basic assumptions a person has about the binary gender system, the view that there are two and only two distinct genders, people will then be able to enter into healthy debate about both the definitions of gender and how those definitions are assigned (Butler, 42).
One of the most important reasons Butler claims it is so easy to trouble the gender categories is because of her development of the concept of gender performativity. Gender performativity holds that all actions contain some specific, culturally-assigned gendered meaning. For example, in America domestic work is often considered to be a female activity while heavier, physical labor is considered to be a male activity. By performing and internalizing the specific meanings of these actions, a person’s own sense of gender would follow (Butler, 63).

Gender performance is based on Jacques Derrida’s theory of iterability, which states that any action, in order to be comprehensible, must be repeatable (Derrida, 52). According to Butler, these actions will become natural and ingrained in an individual following enough repetitions. This only holds true in the instance that the individual is receptive to the gendered context within which the action is framed, however. In direct contrast with gender performativity, gender performance is the process of enacting these same gendered actions both for the specific purpose of using the gendered meaning as a tool or a sign and without the individual internalizing the gendered meaning of the action (Butler, 81).

The realm of transgender holds multiple examples that perfectly illustrate the difference between the two concepts. Gender performance, as the word performance would imply, is similar to a role enacted in a play. Much like a drag queen that dresses in women’s clothing and exaggeratedly mimes female actions but removes the wig and dress and resumes a male life after each showing, gender performance maintains a distinct distance between the meaning of the action and the individual’s self-concept of gender. Gender performativity, however, is the specific instance of the internal self-concept of gender and the external gendered actions matching. In contrast to the drag queen, gender performativity is like a man who, regardless of
the status of his genitalia, performs feminine actions, lives life as a female, and internalizes a female self-concept of gender.

The question then rises whether a transgendered individual is capable of actually reaching gender performativity. By definition, this entails the internalization of the gendered actions the individual is committing. In effect, this also involves the individual managing to fully come to terms and end his or her association with his or her past gender, much like closing one book and opening the next in the series. Rather than attempting to answer this question directly, as it varies wildly on a case by case basis, it seems more prudent, instead, to discover what others think is the answer to this question. By exploring Butler’s theory in its application to films purporting to present a realistic view of the transgendered woman’s life, it is possible to extract the answer that each film would give to this question.

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“This is the voice I want to use.” With this line from a vocal training video, Transamerica begins. Released in 2005 to critical acclaim and numerous awards nominations, from the Independent Awards to the Academy Awards, this film is one of the most recent examples of Hollywood’s attempts to dive into the mind of a transgendered woman and see what surfaces. Transamerica is an excellent example not only of the exterior issues raised by a transition to a transgendered lifestyle, but also the interior struggle between the past, male life being left behind and the new, female life beginning (Transamerica).
Transamerica is fairly unique in its setup, with an actress playing the role of Sabrina, known as Bree to her friends and Stanley to her parents, rather than a man in drag. Although several theatrical productions and films such as William Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, or What You Will and Blake Edwards’ Victor/Victoria have dealt with female characters pretending to be men posing as women, this concept has almost exclusively been used in comedic situations contained fully within the works themselves. In this film, the fact that the role is played by an actress is, naturally, unmentioned, yet important in the broader message.

The search for an actress to portray Bree was important for director Duncan Tucker, as he was searching for a woman who would not be scared to become the character for a period of time. Although neither transgendered nor particularly knowledgeable about the subject, Felicity Huffman was selected for the role due to both her acting talents and her candor for the script. Huffman devoted herself fully to the project, attending transgendered conventions, meeting lifestyle coaches for transgendered women, and training with vocal coaches for transgendered people. This training ensured a realistic, non-exploitative performance of Bree that could draw from the actions of numerous transgendered women, rather than simply imitating a single woman or drawing from stereotypes. Huffman even had a handful of transgendered women sit with her and discuss the script line by line to affirm the lines and actions were all something they as transgendered women found both appropriate and realistic (Shapiro).

Many movies about transgender issues begin at the very beginning and work their way towards a moment where the main character can finally come to terms with the changes inherent in his or her new life. Transamerica turns this idea upside down and begins with Bree already living her new life, fully transitioned and waiting for her final operation in less than two weeks. With an actress portraying Bree, there is no confusion that the character is so close to being a
woman that the resemblance is uncanny. Instead, the twist in this scenario is that the character is, instead, forced to deal with unexpected consequences from the past in the form of a son Bree never knew she had.

Having already undergone extensive surgeries from electrolysis to facial feminization surgery to a jaw recontouring, Bree has been able to pass as a woman for a significant period of time. Although she uses the phrase “living stealth” as a negative concept intending to minimize her masculinity, Bree manages to use this status to begin her life as a woman well before her final sex reassignment surgery. In this way, Bree fits the framework of gender performativity very neatly, as she carries out certain tasks every day that she assumes carry a high degree of femininity.

Color schemes and visual gender cues are present throughout this film, such as Bree’s pastel or floral print dresses or the fact that nearly everything in her home is the color pink. Not only Bree’s belongings, but also her behavior and manner of speech is constructed to be as feminine as possible. It is at this point that Bree’s performativity is merely reduced to gender performance, as she consciously attempts to reaffirm her own femininity by referring to the restroom as the ladies room or going off on a tangent about matrilineal kinship systems at first opportunity.

It should be noted that Bree not only wants to avoid a lack of femininity, but also hyperfeminization. Following her trip home and revealing the state of her transition to her parents, Bree is shown picking out an outfit as her sister, Sydney, walks in. Bree picks up an outfit covered in a garish design and grimaces, while Sydney picks up a pink gauze gown covered in tulle. After viewing both gowns, Bree says to her sister, “I am a transsexual, not a transvestite,” in effect telling Sydney that even though she may not have been born genetically
female, that does not mean she cannot do everything in her power to construct what she considers to be a proper female persona.

Although it is natural for Bree to display this conscious effort to appear and behave as she believes a woman ought, she does so in a manner destructive to her overall transitional process. As Bree’s therapist tells her, it is vital that she resolve all issues pertaining to her life as Stanley, so that she may transition without regret. By this point in her process, however, Bree is merely ready to be finished with her surgery, as shown by her absolute disgust with her penis, one of the few absolute reminders of her masculine background.

Nearly everywhere Bree turns, however, she finds reminders of her past, either directly or inadvertently. The most important one in the context of the film is a son Bree fathered while having what she recalls as a “tragic lesbian affair” during her time in college. Although Bree recalls it as a lesbian affair, she was still wholly male during the time of this encounter, either demonstrating Bree's willingness to gloss over her own memories with hopeful thinking or existing as a sign of just how far back in time Bree embraced her female identity.

After having her psychiatric consent forms for her surgery revoked until she can resolve the inevitable upcoming issues with her newfound son, Toby, Bree decides to pay his bail in New York and attempt to remove him quickly from the picture. Instead, Bree is forced by her psychiatrist to find closure with him, leading her on a cross country trip as she drives Toby back to California with her, attempting to drop him off every step of the way. Throughout the trip, even before leaving New York, Bree is forced to deal with many situations in which she is faced with the phallocentrism, or inherently masculine language, of words in everyday conversations.

One of the earliest examples is Toby’s frequent usage of the word “dude” in conversations with her. Due to Bree's disgust with her own past, she chooses to tell Toby she is
a missionary worker rather than reveal her true relation to him. Believing both her story and that she is fully woman, he continues to nonchalantly say “dude” and uses several words and phrases incorrectly while speaking with her. Bree not only takes insult at the masculine connotation of the words he carelessly throws about but also insists on constantly correcting his grammar or word choice, in accordance with the prim and proper image she has cultivated for herself in an attempt to doff any vestiges of burly, masculine traits. Another example of this inherent trend towards the masculine in speech is when Bree is told a cup of coffee is strong enough to “put hair on her chest,” eliciting a concerned response rather than the intended chuckle.

Along with the masculinity of language, Bree must also face the overwhelming assumption by random strangers that she is Toby’s mother. In a direct parallel with the Biblical story of Jesus’ denial by Peter, Bree is referred to as Toby’s mother three times to varying degrees of response. To the first, in a diner almost immediately after setting off on their trip, Bree responds, “I am not his mother,” out of a desire to hide her true identity from Toby. To the second, by the owner of a specialty Native American shop immediately after Toby sees Bree’s penis while she is peeing behind the car, Toby responds, “She is not my mother,” both out of shock at Bree’s secret and anger at having been lied to. To the third, in a restaurant to a waitress, Bree’s mother replies, “She is not his mother,” out of embarrassment at Bree’s new gender.

Following Toby’s flight after discovering the truth about Bree, however, she is immediately able to find the strength to accept and claim her past as her

Kevin Zegers and Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica*
When asked by a policewoman what her relation to Toby is, Bree is able to firmly respond, “I am his father.” When taken in context of a line she said earlier in the film, that a father is someone who raises, clothes, feeds, and shelters a child from harm, Bree has fulfilled her own definition of what it meant to be a father over the course of their trip together.

Although it is several months before Bree sees Toby again, this realization stays with her that just because she doesn't want to be a man doesn't mean that she can't be a parent. However, due to her admittance that she is Toby's father, this is not necessarily a positive change. Toby comes to visit Bree at the end of the movie, and the visit is a relatively positive experience for both. What is distinctly missing, however, is any attempt by Bree to apply some sort of feminine word to the relationship between the two of them. Rather than ever attempt to call herself Toby's mother or anything similar, Bree simply lets it stand within herself that she is his father. With her own conviction that she was always meant to be woman, this seems very peculiar that she never attempts to integrate such an important aspect of her past into her present gender and lifestyle.

Regardless of any premonitions the ending of the film holds for Bree, however, *Transamerica* is an excellent example of the acclimatization towards minorities in popular culture. While Bree is the main character of this film, it is not a transgender film as such, but rather a film about family relations and values which happens to have a transgender mother. Much in the same vein as the transgender mother from the wildly popular Japanese novel *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto, the film does not attempt to campaign for itself or victimize its characters, but rather presents a real human being with real problems and real fears (Yoshimoto). This very closely echoes the inner feelings revealed by Bree, that her innermost being is the average woman, wanting nothing more than to be respected as such.
Although the theme of gender issues in adults is becoming relatively well-covered in today's media, the issue of children's gender and sexual identities is relatively new territory outside of writers such as Dr. Spock. In the Belgian film *Ma Vie en Rose* (My life in pink), director Alain Berliner gives the audience a chance to look inside the mind of a little boy, Ludovic Fabre, who is undergoing just such a struggle. Rather than focus exclusively on Ludovic’s issues, however, the film presents itself as a modern fable, showing the effects on his family and community and the struggle they all must go through to reach their own happy ending (*Ma Vie en Rose*).

Rather than attempt to present the issues raised as alien to the viewer, *Ma Vie en Rose* instead focuses on various problems contained in different family settings. One family features a husband and wife who are discomfortingly comfortable with making sexual advances on one another in public. Another family contains a wife who feels herself inferior to other women and incapable of holding her husband’s interest. For the Fabres, this so-called problem is contained in their son, 7-year-old Ludovic, or Ludo as they call him. Ludo is convinced that he is meant to be a girl and nothing his parents or anyone else says can change this. From the audience’s first glimpse of Ludovic, in which he comes to his family’s housewarming party in his sister’s princess dress, the family struggles to deal with both Ludovic’s gender identity and its effect on the rest of the community.

Continuing this idea that Ludovic’s
struggle in his own gender identity is something more commonplace than originally thought, the characters also have very simple reactions at first. To his father, Pierre, this is something the mother should take care of. To his mother, Hannah, this is just a phase. Rather than consult experts or go to family therapy, she relies on mass consumer culture, namely an article in the magazine, *Marie Claire*, which states that children will outgrow this phase, given time. In all cases, the parents dismiss the issue, leaving Ludovic to his own devices.

As a result, Ludovic develops his own concept of what it means for him to be a girl based on what he sees in media and pop culture. His most prevalent role model for the ideal woman is Pam, a fictional Barbie-like doll, often seen in her television show, *Le Monde de Pam* (The World of Pam). Much like Barbie, Pam is presented as a woman with an ideal body living in an ideal town with the ideal boyfriend, Ben. Combined with the information his grandmother, Elisabeth, gives him—that he can simply close his eyes and imagine “the world is as I want it”—this leads Ludovic into several idealized dream-like situations that he is soon unable to separate from real-world events.

In many of these situations, Ludovic imagines himself dressed in clothes much like Pam would wear, marrying his classmate, Jerome. This eventually becomes part of Ludo’s real life plans, as he tells anyone who will listen that he plans to marry Jerome, always adding the stipulation that this will occur after he becomes a girl. Jerome does not necessarily object to this turn of events, adding his own stipulation that it all depends on what kind of a girl Ludovic becomes. It is interesting that, at first, the people who hear this think Ludovic is homosexual and attempt to explain it away saying that boys cannot marry boys. It is only after a number of weeks pass that they realize what he is truly saying and begin to take action against it.
The first action taken by Hannah and Pierre is simply to tell Ludovic very firmly he is a boy. When this changes nothing, they take him to a therapist who they hope will change his mind as if it were a disease that could be cured. In an attempt to please his parents, Ludovic plays along, imitating what he sees his brothers do or what he sees men on television do. Ludovic puts his dolls away and begins to pay attention to phrases such as “now there’s a real man”, when applied to celebrities or television personalities. This is a clear example of Butler’s concept of gender performance, as Ludovic actively seeks out actions that would be considered masculine in an attempt to pretend to be masculine himself. After attempting to kiss a girl, Sophie, and being subsequently rebuffed when she tells him she doesn’t kiss girls, however, Ludo falls even further into his dream world.

At a school production of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Ludovic locks Sophie, who is playing Snow White, in the restroom and assumes her place in the final scene to surprise Jerome, who is playing Prince Charming. It is at this point that the tension elevates to its highest point in the film, causing several characters to undergo a drastic change in both the way they view Ludovic’s behavior and the way they treat Ludovic himself.

Pierre, who initially reacted to the situation with anger, is forced to come to terms with why he takes such offense to the idea that his son is having gender confusion. After yelling at the therapist and nearly becoming violent with Ludovic before Hannah stops him, Pierre realizes that anger will not cause Ludovic to change his mind. Instead, Pierre begins to defend Ludovic and, although still anxious for a resolution, stops blaming him for other family problems, such as the loss of Pierre’s job.

Hannah, on the other hand, reacts drastically, based on her desire to exude a sense of normalcy for her family. Originally, Hannah would laugh off Ludovic’s behavior in hopes that it
would go away with time, making some light joke to ease the tension. At this point, however, she becomes on edge as her family is no longer perceived as normal. She begins yelling at Ludovic and blaming him for the family’s misfortunes, eventually reaching the point of becoming violent with him.

Several other characters offer their opinions at this point, both in favor and against Ludovic. Albert, Pierre’s boss, tells Pierre that he gives Hannah too much control over the children, blaming the issues on the female influences in Ludovic’s life. Elisabeth tells Hannah she should just let Ludovic live out his fantasy, not completely taking him seriously, but also not discounting his desire to be a girl. As many students in Ludovic’s class begin teasing him, his teacher urges several pleas for understanding and acceptance as they all search for their own identities.

In this same period, Ludovic is attempting to understand what makes him a boy instead of a girl. Fully convinced he is meant to be a girl, it seems logical to him that he should be able to fix whatever is preventing him from being one. While crying in bed, his sister enters and comforts him. Rather than telling him he’s a boy, however, she simply tells him she doesn’t know and shows him her notes from Biology class, in which they have been discussing genetics. Discovering that the only thing he needs to be female is a pair of XX chromosomes instead of XY, Ludovic is convinced that God made a mistake when he was born and forgot his second X chromosome.

After another swift, dreamlike series of events in which Ludovic moves in with The Fabre family in *Ma Vie en Rose*...
Elisabeth, Pierre gets a new job and the family moves to a new home. Ludovic decides to move with them and meets a new child Chris, originally thinking Chris is a boy. After Chris’s mother calls out the name “Christine” and Chris runs away, Ludovic realizes he has found a kindred spirit. Christine’s mother invites Ludovic to her birthday party, a costume party. While at the party, Christine forces Ludovic to trade his swashbuckler costume for her princess costume, leading Hannah into violence, screaming at Ludovic and slapping him. Christine explains what happened, and Hannah goes running off after Ludovic, realizing that his happiness is more important than anything else to her.

Although the movie ends on a note of positivity and happiness, there is no true closure for Ludovic. His family may be outwardly accepting of his realization that he is a girl, but it is only because he is following the final advice the therapist gave him, that it is better for him to hide this part of himself until he is able to fully express it. At this point he is no longer putting on his sister’s dresses or applying his mother’s makeup, so they no longer have reason to be uncomfortable with an intangible part of his identity.

Beyond his family, Ludovic has still not managed to obtain understanding or even acceptance from the rest of his community and peers. Having already reached a level of gender performativity through fully internalizing himself as female, it is, at best, uncomfortable for Ludovic to return to a point where he is unable to express his gender as he understands it to be. Although his parents and siblings are no longer openly hostile to Ludovic for his gender expression, neither do they understand or feel compassion for Ludovic’s current state. While Ludovic views hiding his identity and presenting himself as a boy to be a gender performance, his parents and community view his female self-concept as a performance in the same manner. The movie ends on a positive note, with the doll, Pam, flying above the city and winking at the
camera, yet it gives no true closure to Ludovic’s issues and will inevitably lead to either inner torment or further outbursts of his desire to express his desired gender identity.

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In contrasting these films with the cases of several real transgendered women in the entertainment field, however, it becomes immediately apparent that these plots only tell part of the story. Rather than simply becoming mired in the issues being transgendered raises, many transwomen are able to overcome the feeling of discord these movies would suggest remain with them. Two figures in particular represent this transformation particularly well and present a good contrast to the stories of Bree and Ludovic.

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One of the greatest cases of a transgendered individual finding success on a nearly global scale is that of Dana International, Israeli singer, model, and television personality. Overcoming great religious pressure from Orthodox leaders in Israel, Dana International has represented the country in multiple international singing competitions and has released cds across the world for nearly fifteen years. Although she has toned down her appearance in recent years, she was originally well known for outlandish costumes and toying with gender roles in her music videos and public performances.

Having always understood herself to be female at heart, Dana International, born Yaron Cohen, began work as a drag queen following graduation from compulsory education. After debuting with the song “My Name is Not Sa’ida”, a cover of the Whitney Houston song “My Name is Not Susan”, Dana underwent sexual reassignment surgery and had her name officially changed to Sharon Cohen. Since Dana is of Yemenite origin, she has great skill in speaking Arabic as well as Hebrew and English. Because of this, she has recorded in these three
languages, as well as many others, leading her early material to be widely distributed, often through underground means (Armbrust).

These early tapes caused problems on a large scale throughout Egypt, as they quickly were passed around and copied by students. Many articles were published decrying Dana International throughout large segments of the Arabic-speaking world, with varying degree of focus on either her transsexuality, her national origin, or the topics of her songs themselves. Due to the strained history between Israel and Egypt, a figure such as Dana International entering the country, singing sexually explicit lyrics was seen as a public assault on the values of the youth (Armbrust).

This controversy slowly died down, and Dana continued releasing albums, eventually making a bid at representing Israel in the Eurovision Song Contest. This is a competition among all countries in the European Broadcasting Union, wherein each country is represented by an artist and song picked either by popular vote or national council. This contest was founded in the year 1956, and as it has increased in popularity, it has become more and more common for the songs to be performed in English, so as to appeal to a wider audience. In 1998 Dana represented Israel, winning by a very narrow margin. The most remarkable aspect of Dana’s victory is that 1998 was the first year in which the votes were made by the general public rather than voting boards, displaying a great degree of acceptance and support for Dana, regardless or perhaps because of her transsexuality (“Eurovision Song Contest”).
Perhaps it is because of her background as a drag queen before her transition, but Dana’s earlier works feature a great amount of gender-bending and hypersexuality that create an interesting emphasis between Dana’s desire to present herself as a woman in light of her surgeries. For example, in the music video for “Cinque Milla”, released in 1996, Dana juxtaposes scenes of walking on a runway like a supermodel with those of riding a giant banana as if it were a rocking horse. Combined with extremely explicit lyrics, such as, “I have a party at my house/I’ll serve bananas, potatoes, and some cock,” Dana shows the viewer that she is now a woman with female desires, but does so in a way that goes over the top in the way a drag queen would.

In recent years, Dana has chosen to market herself in a much more demure manner, choosing to focus on her music and a more refined message instead of her transgendered persona. Featured in the video for “Lola”, a French single released in 2004, is a similar statement to her earlier works, yet presented in a more mature manner. In this video, Dana appears with two pairs of men and women. Each pair features one man and one woman, one of whom has blonde hair and the other, red. By quickly jumping between images of these men and women, the viewer is able to see how easily the lines between the sexes are blurred.

With her success and activism, Dana has managed to transform messages such as this into actual progress in the social scene for sexual and gender minorities. Due to her win at the Eurovision Song Contest, Israeli officials were forced to acknowledge Dana’s role as a spokeswoman for Israel in the global scene. This has led to public debate among religious leaders as to the religious views of transsexuality. Although still an unconventional subject, the general consensus, with the support of the Torah, is that sex is only defined by the external genitalia and that, with just cause, the gender of a person may be changed. It was also
determined that others do not have a right to judge Dana, or other transgendered individuals, for her transsexuality and that gender dysphoria is a medical matter, so should not be treated as if it were a social issue (Bauer).

Dana International’s success has created a myriad of possibilities for transgendered performers on a global scale. Although not well-known in America, Dana has a growing fan base throughout Europe and Japan, as well as a long-established career in Israel and the Arabic-speaking world. Even before her victory in the Eurovision Song Contest, Dana has raised eyebrows and conversations with her appearances. Through it all, however, Dana has continued to grow as a woman, shedding the need to overemphasize her femininity, as she has managed to develop her own personal identity.

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Similar to Dana International’s cross-cultural success is that of Harisu, South Korea’s most well known transgendered singer, actress, and model. Although many countries in the surrounding area have extremely high profile cross-dressing personae, such as Shingo Mama, alter ego of Shingo Katori, a member of Japanese boyband SMAP, Harisu was one of the first actual transgendered women to promote herself in a serious manner. With her immediate popularity came both success and permanent change, not only opening the minds of the youth of South Korea but also improving the situation of transgendered people in South Korea and several surrounding countries.

The name Harisu is a rough adaptation of the English phrase “hot issue”, and refers not only to Harisu’s looks but also the topic of her gender identity. Even from her debut, Harisu has never attempted to hide her past and has even used it to create a greater public discussion about both herself and the topic of transgendered individuals and their rights. For example, in her very
first advertisement for the South Korean cosmetics company DoDo, Harisu is shown sitting in a chair, staring at a point beyond the camera. After about fifteen seconds, she lifts her head and swallows, revealing an Adam’s apple sliding up her throat, at which point Harisu cracks a smile and begins to laugh (Soo-in).

Although the Adam’s apple in the commercial was digitally added, as Harisu never developed one, even before surgery, the message was the same. Harisu has stated herself that she had not planned to debut with her transsexuality at the forefront of her image, but when the chance appeared, she saw no reason to turn it down. The commercial itself was a huge success, much to the relief of the DoDo company, who had planned a worst case scenario of being forced to shelve the commercial. The public reaction, however, was that of both amusement and interest in Harisu and her unique background (Soo-in).

Following this debut, Harisu began her career in earnest, appearing in films, several more commercials, releasing cds, and publishing a mixture of a photobook and autobiography. Much of her early works continued to use her transsexuality as a type of a crutch to boost her popularity and keep her unique in a country mired with pop stars and pretty faces. Harisu’s first acting role, for example, was in a highly controversial film named Yellow Hair 2. In this film, Harisu plays a transsexual nightclub singer named J, whose life intertwines with two other individuals, Y and R, as their lives spiral downward into violence and crime (“Norang meori 2 (2001) – Plot summary”).

While Harisu is almost unanimously praised for her beauty and ability to look and act like a natural woman, her focus on using her sexual history to promote herself has backfired in a way. For many years following her debut, interviewers would fawn over Harisu’s looks and then immediately follow up with invasive questions asking whether she was male or female or why
she chose to be operated on. Although Harisu has stated she would no longer label herself as transsexual foremost, feeling herself fully transitioned and subsequently fully female, she has said that she believes the label helps the general public understand her situation more easily (Soo-in).

Along with being one of her biggest selling points, Harisu’s looks are also one of her greatest causes for criticism. Being almost immediately labeled upon debut with phrases such as “woman more beautiful than woman”, Harisu has avoided much of the discrimination that other sexual and gender minorities in South Korea have faced. For example, upon applying to have her gender changed on her birth certificate, Harisu found an incredibly expedited process, compared to the outright refusal that thousands of others have faced. While some claim that the example of Harisu will lead to a more open society, others claim that if Harisu were average or plain looking, then she would be treated no differently than other transsexual women.

Regardless of criticism against her, Harisu has created a unique position for transsexuals in South Korea and much of Asia. In 2005, the music group Lady debuted in South Korea, featuring four transgendered women. This group, accepted by the general public as a scheme to piggyback on Harisu’s success, failed to create any lasting impression on the music scene. In an attempt to achieve fame through any means possible, Lady released a nude photobook before ceasing official activities.
In 2006, a similar group, Venus Flytrap, was created in Thailand from five transgendered women. Due to a unique status held by transwomen in Thailand, where they are called kathoey, Venus Flytrap has found moderate success, appearing on many talk shows and variety shows to promote themselves. On these shows, the girls assume names, such as Posh Venus or Sweet Venus, much like the British girl group Spice Girls. While still heavily emphasizing their looks and sexual appeal, Venus Flytrap also promote their unique personalities and qualities that make them much like the “average woman”, including a penchant for chocolate and men.

Similarly, Harisu has greatly toned down her own emphasis on sexuality and especially on her gender. Since being granted the change of gender on her birth certificate, the outfits Harisu wears and the way she presents herself have fallen much more in line with other female performers in the region. Rather than wearing leopard-printed catsuits and outlandish wigs, she instead manages to create a similar sexual appeal in an outfit such as a skirt and halter top. There is still a sense of irony in several of her appearances, however, such as the choice of Taiwanese company UTF to hire Harisu to promote their line of menstrual pads.

Although she will always find the word transsexual attached to her name in whatever field she works, Harisu has managed to create a life for herself in a country known for its conservative values. Not only has Harisu given a face to an issue many South Koreans may have given very little thought to, but she has also given reason for change to many policies facing transgendered individuals. Beginning with her own very public battle to change her officially recognized gender and ending, for the time being, with her marriage in early 2007, Harisu has forced many to reevaluate their views of transsexuals, even if only for such a minor fact as her own beauty.

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Although only a few films and individuals are covered here in great detail, this type of representation if merely part of a larger trend. There are relatively few films that explicitly deal with transgender issues in a serious manner, yet these films all reach a similar conclusion, namely that there is something either inescapably foreign in the human body about being transgender or that the process causes a rift in a person that cannot be mended. One major example is the Chinese film *Farewell, My Concubine*, in which the main character commits suicide following his inability to deal with gender issues onset by a rigorous training to play female roles in the Chinese opera (Kim). Comparably, in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the main character, after attempting to live life as a woman following a botched sex change operation, is magically healed following a car crash and resumes life as a male (“Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001) – Plot summary”).

As previously states, the use of transgendered individuals in films as a comedic element is much more common. Although films such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* or *Sorority Boys* do not claim to treat the concept of their transgender performances as a serious matter, the simple fact that such films exist is testament to the way many people perceive transgender issues as being something to be feared or ridiculed (Addams). It can be assumed, then, that these films would not subscribe to the idea that transgendered individuals would be able to fully complete this metamorphosis and achieve gender performativity.

One reason why this is likely the case in these films is the fact that they are created by cisgendered individuals. As a result, what appears as a slight towards transgendered people is likely nothing more than a result of ignorance on behalf of the script writer or director. This in itself is just as damaging as if it were done intentionally, as no thought is then even given to the question of whether the individuals in question are able to truly become women.
Just as there are more examples of films, the number of transgendered women holding important positions in a global society is increasing. With role models such as April Ashley, a British transsexual whose fame from her own modeling career was augmented by marrying nobility, or Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a German transvestite notorious for her public persona and a habit of taking liberties with the veracity of the details of her own past, transgendered individuals have several positive figures to look up to. With the success of transsexual women in politics—Georgina Beyer, a New Zealand transsexual and the world’s first transsexual mayor—, sports—Nong Thoom, a Thai transsexual and former kickboxing champion—, and business—Calpernia Addams, an American transsexual and founder of Deep Stealth Productions, a business focused on the creation of realistic portrayals of transsexuals in media—it is apparent that regardless of their gender identities, these women are capable of maintaining successful careers while making advances for the status of transgendered individuals across the globe.

In addition to the success these women are having in their chosen careers, there is the fact that not one of these women reports any of the feelings of discord that are found in the media portrayal of transgendered issues. Although they are often faced with discrimination based on their gender and sexual histories, they do not internalize it and maintain their own well-adjusted lifestyles. As a result, these women present themselves as both fully transitions and able to internalize their new female roles. Contrasted with the transgendered portrayal in film, that they are capable of achieving little more than gender performance, these woman exude an overwhelming sense of normalcy and comfort in their new lives, living as women both internally and externally, and finally achieving gender performativity.
Works Cited


