

reports and debates

The *Boys Don't Cry* debate:

Pass/fail

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Boys Don't Cry is a tale of passing, of Teena Brandon's passing as a heterosexual male, as Brandon Teeria. Like other biographical accounts of the transgendered experience, it tells of an individual's 'natural' and necessary assumption of the appearance and identity of the 'opposite' sex. Indeed, the film contains numerous details which attach it to this 'outlaw' heritage: the protagonist's rescripting of 'his' past; allusions to medical intervention; a postscript thanking the transgendered community.¹ But it is as a fictionalization of this true and tragic tale that *Boys Don't Cry* demands interpretation within the context of film theory, and that passing becomes so telling a strategy not only for enacting the performativity of gender, but for divulging the knowingness or complicity at the heart of spectatorship.

It is in response to its generic and mainstream appeal, and *not* to Brandon's transgendered status, that *Boys* is to be considered here as ostensibly, a crossdressing or transvestite film. Such films feature a central character disguising him- or herself as the opposite sex, and fulfil a set of similar characteristics with regard to narrative structure and thematic concerns.² Like them, *Boys* builds from the initial assumption of disguise to its grand public disclosure; it prioritizes a love story, and (more inclusively than most) it is 'about the fixity of otherwise of gender identity'.³ As will be shown, this film reinvents the basic formula, and most significantly in terms of the disavowal of spectatorial implication which is central to the genre.

Primarily comedies, crossdressing films, such as *Some Like It Hot*

1 Jay Prosser, 'No place like home: the transgendered narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, nos 3-4 (1995), p. 503.

2 For discussions of generic characteristics, see Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995), pp. 48-73; Chris Straayer, 'Redressing the "natural": the temporary transvestite film', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995) pp. 402-27.

3 Kuhn, *The Power of the Image*, p. 55 (emphasis in original).

(Billy Wilder, 1959), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), derive their effect from the slapstick, sexually suggestive or supposedly absurd scenarios resulting from the central character's 'mistaken' identity, that is, from the gap between the character's passing within the diegesis and the audience's privileged position of knowledge (being in on the disguise). Fuelled by heterosexual imperatives, the narratives progress towards the climactic disclosure of the protagonist's 'true' identity. Simultaneously, the narrations repeatedly remind the spectator of this real identity, through the transparency of their disguise (Cary Grant/Henri in *I was a Male War Bride* [Howard Hawks, 1949]); the dropping of the disguise afforded by co-conspirators (Tony Curtis/Josephine and Jack Lemmon/Daphne in *Some Like it Hot*); or by the involuntary intrusion of an 'innate' gender (Anshel admiring the china in *Yentl* [Barbra Streisand, 1982]). But why does the spectator need reminding? On the one hand, such reminders reinforce the essentialism of gender even if the protagonists' (relatively) easy disguise confirmed its performativity. On the other hand, they make safe the gender play and, especially, the homoerotic implications arising from it. For some, therefore, the genre is insidiously conservative. It exploits transgression only to heighten the return to order, or, as Annette Kuhn writes, it 'problematise[s] gender identity and sexual difference ... only to confirm the absoluteness of both'.⁴ For others, it offers a rare and radical space for gender and sexual ambiguity – that is, for queerness – within the most mainstream of products. These reminders, then, these disruptions to passing, represent the spectator's disavowal of queerness: they both deny and acknowledge, contain and permit, the queer by-products of crossdressing. They halt the illusion, but in so doing they guarantee its full affect (and if this sounds awfully like the machinations of spectatorship in general, it does so deliberately). In this way, passing is shown to be intimately linked with failing to pass within the spectatorial experience of the crossdressing film. While *Boys* exploits a similar dynamic between passing and failing, their relationship is at once more pervasive, more explicit, and more fraught with liability.

Like these predecessors, *Boys* is, inevitably, about the spectacle of transvestism: despite its new queer cinema sensibility and elegaic thoughtfulness, it is Hilary Swank's crossdressed success, her 'stellar stunt performance' as Brandon, which made the film an international hit and garnered her an Oscar, amongst numerous other awards.⁵ Indeed, it was not so much Brandon's as Swank's passing as a man that was at stake in the reception of *Boys*, and she more than merely passed, she got gold. If her apparitional femininity at the Academy Awards ceremony sniffed of mainstream recuperation (here finally was that 'original' identity: the pre-disguise girl missing from the film's start), it did, nevertheless, consolidate the breadth and ease of gender performativity.⁶ It also served to reiterate the absence of those

ibid., p. 57

J. Hoberman, 'Use your illusion',
The Village Voice (29
 September–5 October 1999),
[http://www.villagevoice.com/issu
 es/9939/hoberman.shtml](http://www.villagevoice.com/issu

 es/9939/hoberman.shtml). Swank
 received her Oscar on 26 March
 2000. She also won the
 following, for best actress:
 RSCF award, BFCA award,
 DCA award, Silver Hugo
 award, DFWCA award, FFCC,
 Golden Globe, Golden Satellite
 award, Independent Spirit award,
 Sierra Award, NBR, FIPRESCI,
 AFCA. See the International
 Movie Database for details of
 these awards:

[http://www.us.imdb.com/Pawards
 Swank-Hilary](http://www.us.imdb.com/Pawards

 Swank-Hilary), p. 4.

This breadth, and its queerness,
 is even more apparent in Chloe
 Sevigny's role as a stone butch
 in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*
 (1997) (Martha Coolidge, 2000).

essentialist details and disclaimers from the film itself. While *Boys* is suffused with reminders of Brandon's disguise, these work to avow queerness and, despite the film's sensationalist appeal, they extend spectatorial implication within the sexual (and social) workings of the diegesis rather than seal it off.

Brandon's true identity, that is, his transgendered identity, is ever-present to the spectator. Brandon is not so much trying to pass as someone else as trying to be 'him' self. Passing is not, therefore, a means to an end, as in the comedies, but the end itself. In general terms, in the spectator's constant awareness of Brandon's ambiguous identity – in the simultaneity of he and she – passing *is* failing: the reassuring distance between these 'events' (and the spectator's experience of them) dissolves. In addition, in the film passing is tinged with the threat of punishment, symbolized by the speeding ticket and court summons stalking Teena, and reverberating on from Cousin Lonny's warning about Falls City: 'You know they shoot faggots down there'. It is always, then, haunted by failure as well. On a more local level, however, the fact that there is no before-Brandon for the spectator to 'forget', no essential singular gender to intervene into the narrative illusion, means the narrative reminders of disguise serve other purposes.

There are two key moments where Brandon's biology disrupts his passing: when Brandon's period starts, and when Lana views his cleavage. Both of these are reminders of the physical: Brandon's breasts and bleeding index sex characteristics and not gender. Thus, the film suggests, the body joins with the Law as the (contested) arbiters of identity. *Boys* will later offer the ultimate statement on the separation of gender from anatomy in the climactic scene of public disclosure where John and Tom force down Brandon's underwear. Rather than reifying Brandon's essential identity as John intends, Lana responds to John's taunts of 'look at your little boyfriend' with 'leave *him* alone'. The significance of this response is stressed as the frame seems to freeze, and a fantasy sequence begins which reifies instead the distinction between gender and sex, as the divested Brandon splits from and stares at a clothed Brandon standing watching behind the other witnesses. The tableau has an eerie but obvious resemblance to the crucifixion of Christ: a semi-clad, brightly lit Brandon has an arm over the shoulders of Tom and John on either side of him; Lana kneels below him looking up; a small audience gazes on. The composition's purpose is to invoke not the simple martyrdom of Christ/Brandon but the complicity of the spectators (both inside and outside the frame).

The two earlier reminders of disguise are used to underline rather than undermine the queerness of the encounters between the central couple, as well as Lana's and the spectator's consciousness of it. The shot of Brandon grappling with a box of tampons at a store is held just too long for the approaching Lana not to see what he's doing,

or, at least, for us to think this is so. She may have been, as she confesses, 'so wasted', but Lana knows that store well – she's on first-name terms with the teller, and she directs another customer to the beer at the back. Escorted home by Brandon, as their interaction gets more flirtatious she turns to look at him and says: 'wait a minute, what's your name again?' When Lana views Brandon's cleavage during sex, she does seem confused: she stares at the impression of his penis in his jeans, touches it gingerly, scrutinizes his hairless chin . . . and then forgets the whole thing and resumes their love-making. That she subsequently lies to her friends, saying that following sex she and Brandon took off their clothes and went swimming, testifies to her wittingness. Lana definitely knows. And she knows to keep it quiet.

In *Boys* these reminders also serve to unsettle the spectators' fixed position of superior knowledge about Brandon's identity; their supposedly sharp contrast to the duped characters. As a shift in privileged perspective, this occurs most emphatically when we share Lana's point of view in spying Brandon's breasts. In being made aware of the characters' suppressed knowledge about Brandon, the spectator joins them as a community of witnesses to Brandon's passing/failing. What is more, the concurrence of the heterosexual and homosexual implications arising from the crossdressed figure is explicitly conveyed here through Lana, who comes to represent the spectator's own inevitably unfixed or queer response to the crossdressed figure in general and to Brandon in particular.⁷ The queer implication of 'knowing' about Brandon is not only declared in every rejection of homosexuality in *Boys* (from Teena's 'I'm not a dyke' to Lana's 'I'm not a lesbian') but is also inscribed on the surface of the film. Candace, having discovered Brandon's disguise, comes to confront Lana, who is high and lying on her back on a spinning roundabout in a park. In a composition reminiscent of a certain sexual configuration (and one that occurred earlier when, similarly, Lana declared to Brandon she was 'in a trance'), Candace is framed centrally between Lana's open legs. It is not just that Lana is exposed as having a woman in that position, but that Candace, Brandon's earlier admirer, is also exposed, also queerly configured.

The awareness of Brandon's identity is not set up solely through Lana. In an early scene, Lana's mother beckons him over, peers at his face, and feels his smooth skin. As she does so, John looks on, squinting with similar suspicions. The scene is reminiscent of one found in *Yentl* where an old woman caresses the crossdresser's cheeks. Where her response, 'so young', is a convincing answer to the lack of hair growth, Lana's mother's exclamations at Brandon's handsomeness is not. That the old woman in *Yentl* has trouble seeing emphasizes Mom's voluntary sightlessness. In a similar vein, Brandon is not the only character straying from the idealization of gender (at the same time, however, only Brandon is 'so handsome' –

See Straayer, 'Redressing the "natural"', for a useful discussion of how these opposing desires interact within the mainstream transvestite film by way of the 'paradoxical kiss'.

8 Jyllanne Pidduck, 'Risk and queer spectatorship', debate on *Boys Don't Cry* in this issue, pp. 97-102.

9 Hoberman, 'Use your illusion'.

10 Xan Brooks, Review of *Boys Don't Cry, Sight and Sound* (April 2000), p. 44.

11 Pidduck, 'Risk and queer spectatorship', p. 99.

12 Brooks, Review of *Boys Don't Cry*, p. 44.

although this is, as Pidduck suggests, as much to do with class as with gender.⁸) Chloe Sevigny as Lana is far from the 'gangly' youth of J. Hoberman's description,⁹ but, instead, her downy fleshiness is in sharp contrast to the lithe hairlessness of Brandon, or as Xan Brooks suggests: 'her heavy-jawed beauty contrasts nicely with Swank's more refined, aquiline looks and further blurs the tale's gender roles'.¹⁰ Meanwhile Tom, with his pubescent flourish of facial hair, and John, doe-eyed and long-lashed, cuddly yet sociopathic, further promote the film's deliberate inscription of a spectrum of gender expression.

Neither is Brandon singled out in his irregularity. John's and Tom's excited embraces immediately after raping Brandon confirm their homosociality and an alternative network of implicated queerness. Brandon might, as he puts it, 'have this weirdness', but he is not alone. Tom is a self-mutilating ex-con with a pyromaniac past and John, Tom tells us, has 'no impulse control ... that's what the doctors say'. It could also be argued that there is a sense of an otherworldliness to Falls City which is conjured as general, as shared; grounded in the inclusivity of objects rather than the fleetingness of John's good moods or Brandon's life. This sense is created by a sci-fi quality which permeates *Boys*, from the cinematographic distortion of light, and time - periods of day and night are shown passing at warp speed - to the film's images of factories with the smoke and metallic splendour of space-stations, and of parked cars with the luminosity of flying saucers. These are not just the stoned aesthetics of a 'surreal dreamscape',¹¹ but, in their allusions to the iconography of popular sci-fi, they mean to invoke a community of aliens and dreamers, and to invoke it specifically for the spectator who oversees these extra-diegetic connections. (Just in case these allusions aren't clear: not only is the drunken Mom discovered in front of a black and white sci-fi television programme, upon which the camera lingers, but Lana, in her last moment of hopefulness, wishes that she and Brandon could just 'beam' themselves out into the beautiful blue yonder.)

Boys avoids rigid categories, ready answers or the supposition of singular responsibility. As Brooks argues, 'the perpetrators are never demonised as brutish monsters' and neither is Brandon 'a simple martyr',¹² but the film's anti-exclusivity goes much further than muddying the distinction between good and bad. Indeed, it is precisely because the apportioning of responsibility or, rather, the opening up of implication, that *Boys* seems so interesting and so important a film. Where in the crossdressing comedies the relationship between passing and failing reeked of reassurances for the no-less titillated spectator, in *Boys* their interaction constructs and confirms the knowingness, the implication, of *all* those witnessing Brandon's activities.

The *Boys Don't Cry* debate:

Risk and queer spectatorship

JULIANNE PIDDUCK

I first saw *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) the night it opened at the Glasgow Film Theatre. This was something of an occasion: an Oscar-nominated work of 'new queer cinema',¹ for which local 'queers'² (predominantly lesbians) turned out in force. That night there was a frisson in the air arising in part from a queer erotics sheltered by this cosmopolitan city, but this urban bravado was edged with risk. Queer cultural events always remind me of the high stakes, the symbolic, affective and corporeal risk of queer representation itself. Nowhere is this more evident than with *Boys Don't Cry*. Peirce's film transforms the last few weeks of Brandon Teena's life into the stuff of legend, and Hilary Swank brings him back to life as an androgynous pin-up boy. Cinema traffics in identification, desire and mythology, and *Boys* plays on these powers, mobilizing a tangle of allegiances.³ While Michele Aaron discusses 'the knowingness and complicity at the heart of spectatorship',⁴ I would like to raise some of the distortions of allegiance across differences of location, class, gender and sexuality. Further, the irreducible 'real' violence haunting this 'gold-getting' crossover new queer cinema film highlights the affective and corporeal risks of spectatorship.

Based on events that took place in Nebraska in 1993, *Boys* is, from the first, haunted by the real-life Brandon's bleak fate. The film projects fictionalized fragments of biography through a stylized hyperrealism, drawing the viewer into the corporeal, emotional and desiring flow of the protagonist's experience. Peirce uses the generic frame of the road movie to broaden the scope of address from

1 This term was coined by B. Ruby Rich in an article of that title in *Sight and Sound* (September 1992), pp. 30-34. In a recent update to that article, Rich suggests (controversially) that *Boys*, 'not about a lesbian at all', falls outside the remit of 'new queer cinema'. See 'Queer and present danger', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2000), pp. 22-5.

2 I use the term 'queer' as an inclusive shorthand to suggest an affective and political affinity among lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgendered people. Clearly, this term raises difficulties of assumed sameness, some of which are addressed below, and some of which exceed the scope of this essay.

3 I use the term 'allegiance' rather than identification advisedly, to suggest a recognition rooted partly in social experience.

4 Michele Aaron, 'Pass/fail', debate on *Boys Don't Cry* in this issue, p. 92.

'document' to 'entertainment'). The road movie's iconography, thematics and narrative structure impress a cultural legibility onto the residue of a life. In the process, Brandon Teena is transformed into an icon, a quintessential outsider whose transgressive choices are understood against the backdrop of the flat Midwestern landscape. The emotional power and problematic address of *Boys* spring from the tension between the dynamic mythology of the road movie and the persistent actuality of Brandon Teena's death.

Brandon is introduced in a big closeup while his cousin Lonny cuts his hair, short. Peirce comments: 'Knowing Brandon was destroyed for not being understood, I needed to bring him to life in a way that was universally understandable. [I did] that by creating a unified event, by having him stand in front of the mirror getting ready to go out. Gay or straight, male or female, you understand that.'⁵ This is a stock 'makeover' scene of the crossdressing film, but as Aaron demonstrates, the film eschews the 'heterosexual imperatives' lurking within many such narratives.⁶ The closeup a privileged point of cinematic identification, we are offered Swank's face first, her wide grin calculated to win over the audience. Although the film does not second-guess its hero's choice diegetically, the film inevitably relies on Swank's bravura performance as a bankable Hollywood actress. And it is this underlying (extra-diegetic) guarantee of Swank-as-Brandon's delicate features and fragile *female* body underneath the cowboy garb that ultimately will ensure the mainstream audience's sympathy.

On an intertextual reading, the closeup is haunted by the actual Brandon. The closeup rubs up against the residue of photographs widely reproduced in news reports, on the internet, or in the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (Susan Muska and Gréta Olafsdóttir, 1998). Roland Barthes suggests that 'however "life-like" we strive to make it, Photography is ... a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead'.⁷ *Boys* is littered with photographs: Brandon carries snapshots in his duffelbag,⁸ polaroid snapshots mark the romance with Lana, and Brandon ritually burns photos after the rape. An intertextual shadowplay between Brandon's and Swank's faces juxtaposes the fragmented record of lived experience and the conventions of fiction – and a more existential tension between the stasis of death ('Brandon' glimpsed only in truncated moments) and the dynamic intensities of cinema. As a leavener to the tale's brutality, Peirce incorporates the iconography and implied mobility of the road movie. From his initial makeover, Brandon becomes a dashing, sensitive outsider. His roller-skating date marvels that he seems like he's from somewhere else, 'some place beautiful'. The audience is drawn into Brandon's outlaw game of risk, of getting away with something dangerous and fine. Kissing a girl, narrowly escaping a beating or worse in Lincoln, Brandon's speedy state of mind is communicated

- 5 Danny Leigh, 'Boy wonder', interview with Kimberly Peirce, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2000), p. 18.
6 Aaron, 'Pass/fail', p. 93.

7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Noonday Press, 1981), pp. 31–2. Barthes's idiosyncratic 'phenomenology', highlighting photography as 'contingency, singularity, risk' and 'irreducible affect', informs my analysis.

8 Amongst these is an image of Swank in a gangster outfit copied from an oft-reproduced portrait of the real Brandon Teena.

through scenes of driving fast, almost floating – and in landscapes shot in time-lapse photography streaked with the light of passing cars. The soundtrack chooses otherworldly synthesizers over the realism of ambient sound (no cheerful chirping crickets here!), and country music adds a note of romantic yearning ('the bluest eyes in Texas are haunting me tonight'). Reminiscent of the dreamscapes of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Peirce uses driving sequences and landscapes to suggest the escapist power of fantasy.

Boys follows on the heels of a cycle of 1990s feminist and queer-themed road movies, including *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Leaving Normal* (Edward Zwick, 1992), *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995), *My Own Private Idaho*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (Gus Van Sant, 1994), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) and *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1997). These offset the road movie's masculinist hegemony, but to what degree does this generic frame allow for different stories to emerge? A self-proclaimed 'sexual identity crisis' at the root of his social alienation, Brandon is a beautiful drifter who waxes poetic about heading down the road. But as the dangerous psychodrama builds, the viewer can only watch with rising frustration: in a genre that turns on the thematics of mobility and escape, why doesn't Brandon leave? The overt answer lies in Brandon's relationship with Lana. This complexly poignant love story nimbly negotiates anxiety about Brandon's body, as Lana's knowing disavowal allows her to choose a gentle lover who may 'take her away from all this'. Tragically, class curtails the characters' horizons, defeating the transcendence of fantasy and the transformative powers of love. This exchange between Lana and Brandon reveals the gap between the mythology of the road and the lived social space of working-class Falls City.

Brandon: You are one cranky girl.

Lana: Yeah, well you'd be cranky too Mr 'I'm going to Memphis-Graceland-Tennessee' when you're stuck in a town where there's nothing to do but bumper ski and chase bats everyday of your evil fucking life.

Brandon: Hey, I've been bored my whole life.

Lana: Is that why you let John tie you to the back of a truck and drag you around like a dog?

Brandon: No, I just thought that's what guys do around here.

Symptomatic of the schism within the fabric of the film, the romantic impulse of trysts by moonlight and time-lapse photography of clouds scudding across the plains is on a collision course with the frenetic boredom of trailer parks, bonfires and beer-sodden tensions that may ignite into violence at any moment. Manohla Dargis notes that 'the road defines the space between town and country. It is an

9 Cited in Steven Cohan and Iva Rae Hark (eds), 'Introduction', in *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

10 As a case in point, the documentary *The Brandon Teensa Story* begins wryly with a shot of a road sign: 'Nebraska ... the good life'; this image is juxtaposed with three gunshots.

11 Victoria E. Johnson discusses the persistent stigma attached to the American Midwest as a counterpoint to urban 'lesbian chic' in 'This is no "Dayton chic": the abject Midwest in *Ellen and Roseanne*', Society for Cinema Studies conference paper, Chicago, March 2000.

12 For Peirce's discussion of class and performance, see <http://www.foxsearchlight.com/boysdon/cry/prod.html>.

13 Clearly, each of the films and cycles mentioned has insights, complexities and angle of critique that fall outside of this essay. For analysis of the road movie see Cohan and Hark (eds), *The Road Movie Book*.

empty expanse, a tabula rasa, the last true frontier'.⁹ If this blank expanse invites projection, the brutality of *Boys* connects with a widespread cultural articulation of small-town middle America with 'trailer trash' anomie, intolerance and murder.¹⁰ This image recurs in such diverse films as *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *Wild at Heart* (David Lynch, 1990), *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996), *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996), *Sling Blade* (Billy Bob Thornton, 1996) – not to mention a plethora of horror films from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) to George A. Romero's zombie trilogy that characterize 'white trash' as monstrous killing machines or disposable human waste. To specify the (primarily middle-class and urban) international audience of the new queer cinema, it could be argued that a cycle of recent queer-themed (if not necessarily authored) films (*Fun* [Raphael Zielinski, 1994], *Butterfly Kiss* [Michael Winterbottom, 1995], *The Living End*, and even *Idaho*, *Priscilla* and *Happy Together*) designate the tabula rasa of the road as a liminal 'elsewhere' for the exploration of violence and queer sexuality.¹¹

Subtle performances by Chloe Sevigny (Lana), Peter Sarsgaard (John) and Brendan Sexton III (Tom)¹² distinguish *Boys* from this tendency to flatten the geographical specificity of middle America and the humanity of its occupants.¹³ What comes across is not only small-mindedness and hatred, but the warmth, humour, fears and desires of the characters around Brandon. The film is particularly eloquent in its treatment of masculinity and violence. Bumper-skiing – a truck roaring round and round in a cloud of dust – crystallizes a 'redneck' ethos, a dead-end frenetic motion steeped in desperate bravado and brutality. From the bar-room brawl to the bumper-skiing scene to the heady chase along the 'dustless highway', from Tom's self-mutilation to John's mounting jealousy over Brandon's seduction of Lana, the film relates a series of painfully slow, erotically-charged and increasingly violent challenges between John, Tom and Brandon. At the centre of this vortex is the ethereal Brandon who, with his 'movie-star good looks', enigmatic body, a certain luminosity in the way his face is shot, promises to transcend the limitations of working-class masculinity.

As the film careers toward its terrible finale, the film's 'devil may care' dynamism increasingly shifts to gritty, claustrophobic interiors, captured in tight, edgy hand-held camerawork. In the emotionally-charged violation prefacing the rape, Brandon is pinioned, weeping, in a tiny bathroom as John and Tom examine his genitals. Tom's first sudden punch to the jaw snaps Brandon's delicate neck around, breaking any residual veneer of comradeship. The terrible humiliation of this moment is marked by two still shots, like snapshots. First, Tom, John and Brandon are frozen, motionless in a medium-shot. Cut to a reverse-shot with Lana and Lana's mother, and Brandon

14 Aaron, 'Pass/fail', p. 94.

15 Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 2-16.

16 For instance, see the sociological analysis of female spectatorship and *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) in Philip Schlesinger, R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash and C. Kay Weaver, *Women Viewing Violence* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), pp. 127-63. See also Anneke Smelik's insightful treatment of Marion Hänsel's and Marleen Gorris's films in *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (MacMillan Press: Houndmills, 1996), pp. 56-89.

17 Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, pp. 66-78.

himself, dissociated, watching. These stills mark a break in the flow of the film, a point of no return. This is the moment where, as Aaron suggests, Brandon's 'passing' fails.¹⁴ Steve Neale suggests that masculinity is encoded into film language through control of the gaze and the physical dominance of space.¹⁵ In the film's latter moments, Brandon is successively cornered and stripped of his already-tenuous access to the masculine privileges of mobility and to Lana's body.

From this surreal break, the film switches into flashback to portray the rape. The diegetic Brandon is doubly violated – both as self-identified male forced into sexual submission as a woman, and through the brutal police interrogation. Cinematic rape scenes present situations of extreme emotional danger. Onscreen rape can symbolically repeat the violation either by facilitating sadistic identification with the rapist, or traumatic identification with the victim. Further, as Anneke Smelik suggests, the rape of a film's protagonist can annihilate the subjectivity that offers the primary point of identification.¹⁷ Peirce negotiates this horrific moment by anchoring the narration in Brandon's voice and point-of-view. (Some viewers will recognize that the interview is based on the transcript of Brandon Teena's actual police interview. In using these transcripts, the film allows the silenced voice of the actual Brandon to narrate his story, retroactively.) Tom and John take Brandon to a deserted oil refinery, harshly lit with neon blues and greens. An extreme long-shot in slow motion distances us from the action as John picks up Brandon bodily and throws him into the back seat. John's attack is spliced into Brandon's account with four brutal closeups that flash on the screen like fragments of memory too painful to recall in its entirety. Tom's rape is depicted in greater detail. Shirt torn off, the camera holds on an excruciating sustained shot of Brandon's bruised face in profile, his thin, bare shoulders racked with the brutal thrusting motion from behind.

Effectively, the viewer is asked to experience the rape from the victim's point of view. The film invites political, emotional and corporeal allegiances linked to known and imagined risk, especially for female and/or queer viewers. An allegiance with Brandon's outsider status aligns the viewer with Brandon's initial exhilaration at his transgressive success as a boy, drawing us through to the film's disturbing finale. Actual attacks, threats and near misses, a familiarity with the continuum of hatred and violence, can intensify the disturbing recognition ('that could have been me') of watching such an event, especially an account of a 'true story', on screen. However, I would maintain that, as Brandon's boy's garb is torn away, it is the violation of Swank's lithe, recognizably female body that commands a much more 'universal' pathos. According to western representational codes of gender violence, the explicit beating and kicking of a woman's body (particularly a young, pretty, white,

18 Aaron, 'Pass/fail'.

19 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 5.

middle-class woman's body) is taboo. Watching this film as a feminist and a lesbian, in a queer context, I was torn between the recognition of Brandon as a gender outlaw, and a corporeal affinity with Swank-as-Brandon's residual 'female' body, both in the rape scenes, and in the erotic encounters with Lana. Aaron convincingly argues that the film privileges a 'queer' reading that can separate sex and gender.¹⁸ However, in the film's concluding scenes, such a fluid reading is confronted by John and Tom's violent re-imposition of Brandon's 'femininity', and by Swank's insistent physicality.

In this dense weave of diegetic and spectatorial risk, betrayals and violations, there is one more to mention. The violation and annihilation of the protagonist as object of desire and identification stretches the generic frame of cinema-as-entertainment. Writing about the Western (a close cousin to the road movie), Richard Slotkin has argued that 'the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience'.¹⁹ Confounding the road movie's preferred tempo of mobility and bravado, Brandon does not exit driving fast, in a shower of bullets. Landscapes and roads are deployed throughout *Boys* to contain the omnipresence of 'real' violence within the generic promise of 'regeneration'. Immediately before Tom and John first seize Brandon, there is a cut to a fantasy sequence: Lana says to Brandon, 'Look how beautiful it is. We can just beam ourselves out there', as she gestures to an imagined psychedelic sky sequence with the clouds rushing by. And again, after the murder, there is a landscape shot of a pink and strangely tranquil dawn, followed by a brief shot of Lana driving; accompanying these shots is Brandon's voiceover of his last love letter to Lana, 'I love you always and forever'. These closing clues signify, variably, the Western landscape ensuring regeneration; the power of true love to transcend even death; and ongoing possibility of escape. But given the resounding absence of the 'real' Brandon from the Nebraska landscape (the stasis of death), the film's ultimate return to generic requirements of mobility and transcendence is troubling.

As a crossover work of the new queer cinema and as an example of an increasing filmic and televisual trend towards the blurring of 'document' and 'drama', *Boys* is an important and provocative film. By highlighting risk, I have sought to foreground ethical issues about how the irretrievable 'raw material' of human experience (both pleasure and pain) is formed into preset narrative and generic patterns. The notion of life and death as 'haunting' the frame of entertainment insists on a limit to the pleasures of spectatorship as complicity or allegiance.

The *Boys Don't Cry* debate:

Girls still cry

PATRICIA WHITE

What is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. . . . For in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince, and not a man.

Djuna Barnes¹

An insistent link between the invert or transgendered figure and the romance genre is forged in *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberley Peirce, 1999), the independent narrative film based on the events leading to twenty-one-year-old Brandon Teena's rape and subsequent murder on New Year's Eve, 1993. Besides an eerie lighting and sound scheme that seem to envelop the film's desolate Falls City, Nebraska setting in an electrical haze – a motif highlighted now and again with speeded-up shots of traffic and power lines – Peirce's film does not answer to Djuna Barnes's lesbian modernist legacy on the level of baroque style. On the level of narrative, the film is also functional. In true-crime or biopic fashion, *Boys* sweeps inevitably – even, cruelly, satisfyingly – to its foregone conclusion, preserving tragic unity and eliciting pathos. But the film's transgendered hero (played by Hilary Swank) seems to be Barnes's 'prince' incarnate, and the anguished female desire that *Boys* encompasses within an authorial/spectatorial 'we' would not be out of place in Barnes's fiction.

If I say female desire, it is not because I am disavowing

¹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1937), pp. 136–7.

Brandon's transgendered identity. It is because for me the centring subjectivity of the film belongs to Brandon's lover, Lana Tisdel (Chloë Sevigny). Brandon is present in most of the film's scenes (with important exceptions); Lana is not, and there are many events that she does not observe. But whether Brandon is fucking up, desiring or desirable, he is seen from a perspective that could be Lana's. We do not experience his passing as a man as a deception, and I do not think this is only because we witness his gleeful self-fashioning in the film's first scene (complete with haircut and crotch stuffing). For when Lana 'finds out' much later, she does not feel betrayed. The film enunciates a 'we' who share 'this love ... for the invert', extending from teenage girl to audience through numerous narrational cues. For example, the optical point of view that opens the film – Brandon's gaze caught in his rear view mirror as he speeds away from a cop – is answered in the film's last shot by Lana's gaze ahead as she finally drives away from Falls City. The narrative throughline provided by Lana and Brandon's romance has angered some commentators looking for a more documentary fidelity to the circumstances and context of Brandon's life and death. But the strategy makes Lana's desire and way of seeing count. Brandon's wish for an 'elsewhere' becomes hers and ours. In an early scene at a roller rink in Lincoln, Brandon's date tells him, 'You don't look like you are from around here'. He teases out her idea of where she thinks he does come from: 'Someplace beautiful'. Brandon's world is strewn with clichés and disavowals, but like the bubble-gum-machine-quality ring he gives to Lana, they signify something beautiful.

Feminist psychoanalytic readings of the process of film spectatorship have analyzed the gendered dimensions of the fetishism and disavowal its pleasures require. Not only is the viewer's suspension of disbelief necessary to enjoy the film illusion, but 'his' spectatorial desire is also affirmed specifically by disavowing female lack.² Fetishism as a mastery of castration anxiety is an inadequate account of *female* visual pleasure, many feminist theorists have pointed out. *Boys* offers a chance to revisit issues of spectatorship and fetishism in relation to a quite literal scenario of genital (in)difference. Brandon may experience lack in his own body (in the remarkable scene of his stripping and exposure, the film portrays a second, intact Brandon looking on from the periphery), but for him girls are complete – and completely captivating. Brandon's (clean-shaven, small-boned, teen-magazine heartthrob) gender fiction sustains Lana's fantasy. When Brandon's persecutors force him to prove his sex to Lana, she tells him to keep his pants on: 'Think about it. I *know* you're a guy,' she insists.³ *Boys* marks a convergence of queer, feminist and what I would like to call (for reasons that will become clear) girl-viewer optics.

Fetishism is operative in the very form of the question 'what is

2 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982); Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975) pp. 6–18.

3 Interviewed in Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir's 1998 documentary, *The Brandon Teena Story*; Lana Tisdel says that she told Brandon not to show her. 'I'll tell them what they want to hear, what we believe.' The language in *Boys* merely substitutes 'what we know is true' for 'what we believe'.

this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?', which presumes and believes in 'love' without deciding whether the 'boy or girl?' is at stake. I'd like to analyze how fetishism shapes the formal construction of a scene that both consolidates the romance – it is the couple's first sex scene – and transfers vision, knowledge, desire and narration to Lana. Brandon has returned to Falls City to woo Lana (fleeing a court date in Lincoln that would officially register his identity as female and felon, and might cause his incarceration), and she joins him on the riverbank outside the plant where she works. As Brandon adjusts Lana's naked torso beneath him, she murmurs, 'I feel like I'm in a trance'. The line addresses on one level the prurient question of how the sexual partner of a transgendered or passing woman can avoid noticing the absence of the penis. But it works on a fantasmatic level as well. We watch a remarkable, lingering overhead closeup of Lana's face as she receives oral stimulation (in qualifying the film for an R rating, the censors objected to the shot's duration); her expression and the musical accompaniment rise in intensity and climax with a cut to a low-angle point-of-view shot of moving lights that resolve into streetlights seen from a car. A match cut to Lana's open mouth in the next shot shows her partying in a car with Brandon and her girlfriends Candace (Alicia Goranson) and Kate (Alison Folland) at her side. The slow-motion shot relays her sexual euphoria with Brandon into an image of pleasure felt in her female friends' company.

The next scene in Lana's bright yellow, teenager's bedroom strengthens this connection, as she narrates the sexual encounter to the girls. In response to their prodding, Lana sinks back between them where they lie on the bed passing a bong and covers her eyes: 'I can't talk about it, it is too intense!' The girls prompt her to continue and the camera cuts from a tight overhead shot of all three girls on the bed to an overhead closeup of just Lana that is strikingly reminiscent of the orgasm shot we've seen just a few moments before. Within what is now a subjective flashback to the sex scene, Brandon penetrates and pleasures her, and a shot from Lana's optical point of view reveals the hint of a cleavage in Brandon's chest. Lana doesn't verbalize this moment when the film cuts back to the closeup of her face on the pillow, but next a series of shots in flashback show her touching Brandon's jeans at the crotch, then tracing his jawline, and looking into his eyes. 'Well, did you do it?' her friends demand, the question seeming inadequately to grasp the pleasure that we have been able to see on her face, both in the protracted shot during the oral sex scene and in the shots in which she now recalls it. 'What do you think?', she answers with satisfaction.

Why is this a satisfactory answer? Lana's flashback is offered to us visually, so we know 'more' than her friends. If we credit her with now 'knowing' about Brandon's gender performance, we might understand why she leaves the question's presumptive 'yes' answer

4 Indeed, this undecidability between visual and verbal information, present and past, perception and fantasy, is what is crucial in the bedroom scene. When Lana removes her hands from her eyes she tells her friends: 'then we took off our clothes and went swimming'. Instead we see Lana climb on top of Brandon in a flashback shot, whispering 'Don't be scared'. As for the swimming story, Kate responds: 'Yeah, right'.

5 In the film's metatextual topography, the 'public' sphere is represented only by nightmarish law enforcement agents and nightclubs, its many outdoors locations are adjunct spaces to a desolate domesticity.

unspoken (it all depends what is meant by 'it'). But because the flashback transpires during screen time in which she is clearly narrating to her friends, I believe that its mise-en-scene is available to her diegetic interlocutors as well. In other words, both her pleasure (which we see in the act and in its later recollection in the company of the other girls at home in her bed) and her undecided question – 'what do you think?' (or even 'boy or girl?') – are conveyed to us *as if* we were among the girls.⁴ We are left to decide whether we think she did it and what we think 'it' is, whether and what we think she knows, and whether we think the knowing worth thinking about. Though the narration seems to disavow a genital 'fact' at this juncture, this is not presented as a costly disavowal, as tragic misrecognition; instead Lana's desire is renewed as she becomes the film's narrator. Thus, on a formal level, the film authorizes the investment of the girl auditors who are our stand-ins (stand-ins who at this moment are lying down – in bed talking about 'boys', a classic topos of girls' culture). Brandon's portrayal as 'one of the girls' partying in the car presents him not as 'castrated' but as a crucial link in a discursive circuit of pleasure and belief.

It is when we recall the implied presence of the 'boys', John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III), whom we have so frequently seen partying with the girls, that castration could be said to re-enter the fetishistic equation. Brandon's murderers are not long offscreen. The film's firm location in the 'feminized' realm of melodrama, romance and tears actually allows male inadequacy, impotence, rage and panic to be presented vividly and almost sympathetically.⁵ 'Boys don't cry' might be seen as a shaming performative mantra for Brandon – throughout his persecution he strives to 'take it like a man' (the film's original title). But his murderers also try to 'defend' themselves and define their masculinity through negative attributes (boys don't, for example, want to see how they depend on, resemble and fail to communicate with girls) and finally explode into violence. The scary, volatile intimacy with John and Tom that characterizes Lana's and then Brandon's lives also includes the viewer, a chilling reminder that it is also a 'we' who fear and despise the invert.

The box-office and critical success of *Boys* surprised almost everyone involved. But remember: *girls cry*, at least according to market wisdom. It seems to me that in the midst of a notable recalibration of popular entertainment to take into account the knowing genre tastes of adolescent and teenage girls and young women (from *Titanic* [James Cameron, 1997] to *Scream* [Wes Craven, 1996] and its sequels), *Boys*' success makes sense. Still, the film's crossover qualifications have been seen as trivializing the gender crossing that Brandon performed and died for, as well as the film's others' stakes in the real. Apparently the emphasis on a central love story left no room even to include a character representing

Philip Devine, another, African-American, victim of John and Tom's murderous rage that night (or indeed *any* people of colour in Nebraska). Even from within my emphasis on girls' perspectives, the murder of Candace (a composite character based in part on the third murder victim Lisa Lambert) – an even more obvious stand-in for the sympathetic female viewer than Lana – could be seen as curiously unmourned. She is gunned down in front of her baby, who then disappears from the last scene; the fate of neither is mentioned in the 'where are they now' titles that precede the end credits, titles that carefully elide the film's fictional world and the events upon which it was based. We *are* informed that Lana herself had a baby girl a few years after leaving Falls City and returned home to raise her.⁶ Candace's brutal and gratuitous murder and the shrinking of Lana's horizons exist on a continuum of everyday violence against women. These are themes that popular women's genres address; *Boys* rightly recognizes that Brandon Teena's story raised them too.

Rather than dwelling on the commercial constraints or mimetic responsibilities that dog independent films' attempts to tell queer stories, think of what a cultural sea change in imaginings of gender and sexuality we are experiencing if these attempts now resonate with popular forms and audiences. I am not surprised that girls and women in particular are receptive to radical permutations of romance such as *Boys*. Djuna Barnes tells us that it has always been the girl in the boy, the prince in the girl that galvanized our desire; perhaps the 'queerness' of romance need no longer be disavowed. *Boys* female performers themselves worked on some of the most progressive popular youth films and television shows (Swank was featured in the film version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kazui, 1992), Goranson grew up on the long-running ABC sitcom *Roseanne*, and Folland starred in Alex Sichel's *All Over Me* (1997), a lesbian independent feature depicting a somewhat more empowered element of female youth culture than that of *Boys*' dead-end teens. And Chloë Sevigny 'flipped' to play the butch opposite *Dawson's Creek*'s Michelle Williams in the made-for-HBO lesbian compilation film *If These Walls Could Talk II* (2000); the segment was authored by *All Over Me* writer Sylvia Sichel. Do youth audiences recognize the discontinuities as well as the continuum running from the WB Network to *Boys Don't Cry*? Do girl viewers today 'get' feminism, or grasp what I think is a cultural shift in the status of gay men, lesbians and transgendered people? Do they see beyond makeup and fashion, so aggressively marked to them in popular culture, to the refiguring of desire and agency also being provoked there by subcultures, activism and independent media? What do you think?

6 Lana Trudell's story has been, and will be, told in other ways. Although she signed a release early in Pierce's project, and another when the film was taking more definite shape, after being shown the finished film she filed a lawsuit. In the interim she had become involved in a competing production based on Brandon's story and was represented by its Los Angeles lawyer. The suit objected to her being depicted in *Boys Don't Cry* as 'unloved by the discovery' that Brandon, whom 'she thought was a man' was 'a female transvestite and/or transsexual who was later murdered'. The film's rendition of her relationship with Brandon as a 'modern-day, gender-bending Romeo and Juliet' was inaccurate, the suit claimed. 'In sum, the said motion picture falsely depicts plaintiff as a lesbian as well as someone who, rather symptomatically gives up or to reiterate, was "unloved by the discovery" that Brandon was "a female transvestite and/or transsexual who was later murdered"'. A Los Angeles judge refused to halt the film's opening, reasoning that Lana Trudell's story was public information, and the case was later settled out of court. Conversations with Associate Producer Bradford Simpson, quoting from the court papers, 3 and 4 January 2001.