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Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels

AS A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN, I am often confronted by people who insist that I am not, nor can I ever be, a “real woman.” One of the more common lines of reasoning goes something like this: *There’s more to being a woman than simply putting on a dress.* I couldn’t agree more. That’s why it’s so frustrating that people often seem confused because, although I have transitioned to female and live as a woman, I rarely wear makeup or dress in an overly feminine manner.

Despite the reality that there are as many types of trans women as there are women in general, most people believe that all trans women are on a quest to make ourselves as pretty, pink, and passive as possible. While there are certainly some trans women who buy into mainstream dogma about beauty and femininity, others are outspoken feminists and activists fighting against all gender stereotypes. But you’d never know it by looking at the popular media, which tends to assume that all transsexuals are male-to-female, and that all trans women want to achieve stereotypical femininity.

The existence of transsexuals—who transition from one sex to the other and often live completely unnoticed as the sex “opposite” to the one we were assigned at birth—has the potential to challenge the conventional assumption that gender differences arise from our chromosomes and genitals in a simple, straightforward manner. We can wreak havoc on such taken-for-granted concepts as *woman* and *man*, *homosexual* and *heterosexual*. These terms lose their cut-and-dried meaning when a person’s assigned sex and lived sex are not the same. But because we are a threat to the categories that enable traditional and oppositional sexism, the images and experiences of trans people are presented in the media in a way that reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes.

Trans Woman Archetypes in the Media

Media depictions of trans women, whether they take the form of fictional characters or actual people, usually fall under one of two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or the “pathetic transsexual.” While characters based on both models are presented as having a vested interest in achieving an ultrafeminine appearance, they differ in their abilities to pull it off. Because the “deceivers” successfully pass as women, they generally act as unexpected plot twists, or play the role of sexual predators who fool innocent straight guys into falling for other “men.”

Perhaps the most famous example of a “deceiver” is the character Dil in the 1992 movie *The Crying Game*. The film became a pop culture phenomenon primarily because most moviegoers were unaware that Dil was trans until about halfway through the movie. The revelation comes during a love scene between her and Fergus, the male protagonist who has been courting her. When Dil disrobes,

the audience, along with Fergus, learns for the first time that Dil is physically male. When I saw the film, most of the men in the theater groaned at this revelation. Onscreen, Fergus has a similarly intense reaction: He slaps Dil and runs off to the bathroom to vomit.

The 1994 Jim Carrey vehicle *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* features a “deceptive transsexual” as a villain. Police lieutenant Lois Einhorn (played by Sean Young) is secretly Ray Finkle, an ex-Miami Dolphins kicker who has stolen the team’s mascot as part of a scheme to get back at Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino. The bizarre plot ends when Ventura strips Einhorn down to her underwear in front of about twenty police officers and announces, “She is suffering from the worst case of hemorrhoids I have ever seen.” He then turns her around so that we can see her penis and testicles tucked between her legs. All of the police officers proceed to vomit as *The Crying Game*’s theme song plays in the background.

Even though “deceivers” successfully “pass” as women, and are often played by female actors (with the notable exception of Jaye Davidson as Dil), these characters are never intended to challenge our assumptions about gender itself. On the contrary, they are positioned as “fake” women, and their “secret” trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of “truth.” At this moment, the “deceiver”’s appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes the real identity.

In a tactic that emphasizes their “true” maleness, “deceivers” are most often used as pawns to provoke male homophobia in other characters, as well as in the audience itself. This phenomenon is especially evident in TV talk shows like *Jerry Springer*, which regularly runs episodes with titles like “My Girlfriend’s a Guy” and “I’m Really a Man!” that feature trans women coming out to

their straight boyfriends. On a recent British TV reality show called *There's Something About Miriam*, six heterosexual men court an attractive woman who, unbeknownst to them, is transsexual. The broadcast of the show was delayed for several months because the men threatened to sue the show's producers, alleging that they had been the victims of defamation, personal injury, and conspiracy to commit sexual assault. The affair was eventually settled out of court, with each man coming away with a reported 125,000 British pounds (over 200,000 U.S. dollars at the time).¹

In the 1970 film adaptation of Gore Vidal's novel *Myra Breckinridge*, the protagonist is a trans woman who heads out to Hollywood in order to take revenge on traditional manhood and to "realign the sexes." This "realignment" apparently involves raping an ex-football player with a strap-on dildo, which she does at one point during the movie. The recurring theme of "deceptive" trans women retaliating against men, often by seducing them, seems to be an unconscious acknowledgment that both male and heterosexual privilege is threatened by transsexuals.

In contrast to the "deceivers," who wield their feminine wiles with success, the "pathetic transsexual" characters aren't deluding anyone. Despite her masculine mannerisms and five o'clock shadow, the "pathetic transsexual" will inevitably insist that she is a woman trapped inside a man's body. The intense contradiction between the "pathetic" character's gender identity and her physical appearance is often played for laughs—as in the transition of musician Mark Shubb (played as a bearded baritone by Harry Shearer) at the conclusion of 2003's *A Mighty Wind*.

Unlike the "deceivers," whose ability to "pass" is a serious threat to our culture's ideas about gender and sexuality, "pathetic

transsexuals"—who barely resemble women at all—are generally considered harmless. Perhaps for this reason, some of the most endearing pop culture portrayals of trans women fall into the "pathetic" category: John Lithgow's Oscar-nominated portrayal of ex-football player Roberta Muldoon in 1982's *The World According to Garp*, and Terence Stamp's role as the aging showgirl Bernadette in 1994's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. More recently, the 1998 indie film *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* begins with its teenage protagonist learning that his stepdad Hank, who looks and acts like a roadie for a '70s rock band, is about to become Henrietta. A sympathetic character and the only stable person in Sebastian's life, Henrietta spends most of the movie wearing floral-print nightgowns and bare-shouldered tops with tons of jewelry and makeup. Yet despite her extremely femme manner of dress, she continues to exhibit only stereotypical male behaviors, overtly ogling a waitress and punching out a guy who calls her a "faggot" (after which she laments, "I broke a nail").

In the case of Henrietta, this extreme combination of masculinity and femininity does not seem designed to challenge audiences' assumptions about maleness and femaleness. On the contrary, Henrietta's masculine voice and mannerisms are meant to demonstrate that, despite her desire to be female, she cannot change the fact that she is really and truly a man. As with *Garp*'s Roberta and *Priscilla*'s Bernadette, the audience is encouraged to respect Henrietta as a person, but not as a woman. While we are supposed to admire their courage—which presumably comes from the difficulty of living as women who do not appear very female—we are not meant to identify with them or to be sexually attracted to them, as we are to "deceivers" like Dil.

Interestingly, while the obvious outward masculinity of “pathetic transsexual” characters is always played up, so too is their lack of male genitalia (or their desire to part with them). In fact, some of the most memorable lines in these movies are uttered when the “pathetic transsexual” character makes light of her own castration. At one point during *Priscilla*, Bernadette remarks that her parents never spoke to her again, “after [she] had the chop.” In *Garp*, when a man is injured while receiving a blow job during a car accident, Roberta delivers the one-liner, “I had mine removed surgically under general anesthesia, but to have it bitten off in a Buick . . .” In the 1994 fictionalized biography *Ed Wood*, Bill Murray plays another “pathetic transsexual,” Bunny Breckinridge. After seeing Wood’s film *Glen or Glenda*, Bunny is inspired to go to Mexico to have a “sex change,” announcing to Wood, “Your movie made me realize I’ve got to take action. Goodbye, penis!”

The “pathetic” transsexual’s lighthearted comments about having her penis lopped off come in stark contrast to the revelation of the “deceiver,” who is generally found out by someone else in an embarrassing, often violent way. A Freudian might suggest that the “deceptive” transsexual’s dangerous nature is symbolized by the presence of a hidden penis, while the “pathetic” transsexual’s harmlessness is due to a lack thereof. A less phallic interpretation is that the very act of “passing” makes any trans woman who can do so into a “deceiver.” Ultimately, both “deceptive” and “pathetic” transsexual characters are designed to validate the popular assumption that trans women are truly men. “Pathetic” transsexuals may want to be female, but their masculine appearances and mannerisms always give them away. And while the “deceiver” is initially perceived to be a “real” female, she is eventually revealed as a wolf

in sheep’s clothing—an illusion that is the product of lies and modern medical technology—and she is usually punished accordingly.

The Fascination with “Feminization”

In virtually all depictions of trans women, whether real or fictional, “deceptive” or “pathetic,” the underlying assumption is that the trans woman wants to achieve a stereotypically feminine appearance and gender role. The possibility that trans women are even capable of making a distinction between identifying as female and wanting to cultivate a hyperfeminine image is never raised. In fact, the media often dwells on the specifics of the feminization process, showing trans women putting on their feminine exteriors. It’s telling that TV, film, and news producers tend not to be satisfied with merely showing trans women wearing feminine clothes and makeup. Rather, it is their intent to capture trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman’s femaleness is an artificial mask or costume.

An excellent example of this phenomenon is *Transamerica* (2005), a “buddy” road-trip movie pairing up trans woman Bree Osbourne (played by Felicity Huffman) with a son that she was previously unaware she had. In the opening five minutes of the film, we see Bree practicing along with the instructional video *Finding Your Female Voice*, putting on stockings, padding her bra, donning a pink dress suit, painting her nails (also pink), and putting on lipstick, eye shadow, powder, and other cosmetics. This scene (not coincidentally) is immediately followed by the first dialogue in the movie, where Bree tells a psychiatrist that she’s been on hormone replacement therapy for three years, has undergone electrolysis,

feminine facial surgery, a brow-lift, forehead reduction, jaw recontouring, and a tracheal shave. This opening flurry of cosmetic and medical feminization is clearly designed to establish that Bree's female identity is artificial and imitative, and to reduce her transition to the mere pursuit of feminine finery.

Throughout the rest of the film, feminine apparel and cosmetics are repeatedly used as a device to highlight Bree's fakeness. There are excessive scenes in which Bree is shown in the act of dressing and undressing, as though her clothing represented some kind of costume. We also see her applying and fixing her makeup nearly every chance she gets, and it is difficult not to view the thick layers of foundation she constantly wears as a mask that is hiding the "real" (undoubtedly more masculine) Bree underneath. While many MTF crossdressers often wear heavy makeup to cover up their beard shadow, a trans woman like Bree—who has already undergone electrolysis and been on hormones for three years—would not need to do this. Indeed, the fact that her foundation begins to develop a sheen from perspiration at several points in the movie, and that she stumbles in her high heels on more than one occasion—faux pas that never seem to afflict cissexual women in Hollywood—makes it clear that the filmmakers purposely used these female accessories as props to portray Bree as "doing female" rather badly. And they certainly succeeded, as Felicity Huffman comes off seeming infinitely more contrived than the several real-life trans women (such as Andrea James and Calpernia Addams) who appear briefly in the film.

The media's willingness to indulge the audience's fascination with the surface trappings that accompany the feminization of "men" also tarnishes nonfiction and serious attempts to tell the

stories of trans women. For example, the 2004 *New York Times* article "As Repression Eases, More Iranians Change Their Sex" is not sensationalistic, describing the rise of transsexual rights in Iran.² Yet, one of the two photos that accompany the piece depicts an Iranian trans woman putting on lipstick. In 2003, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired a two-part special on transsexual women and their wives. The entire first episode featured a one-on-one interview with Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of the autobiography *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*. While Oprah Winfrey's conversation with Boylan was respectful and serious, the show nonetheless opened with predictable scenes of women putting on eye makeup, lipstick, and shoes, and the interview itself was interspersed with "before" pictures of Boylan, as if to constantly remind us that she's really a man underneath it all.

Mass media images of "biological males" dressing and acting in a feminine manner could potentially challenge mainstream notions of gender, but the way they are generally presented in these feminization scenes ensures that this never happens. The media neutralizes the potential threat that trans femininities pose to the category of "woman" by playing to the audience's subconscious belief that femininity itself is artificial. After all, while most people assume that women are naturally feminine, they also (rather hypocritically) require them to spend an hour or two each day putting on their faces and getting all dressed up in order to meet societal standards for femininity (unlike men, whose masculinity is presumed to come directly from who he *is* and what he *does*). In fact, it's the assumption that femininity is inherently "contrived," "frivolous," and "manipulative" that allows masculinity to always come off as "natural," "practical," and "sincere" by comparison.

Thus, the media is able to depict trans women donning feminine attire and accessories without ever giving the impression that they achieve "true" femaleness in the process. Further, by focusing on the most feminine of artifices, the media evokes the idea that trans women are living out some sort of sexual fetish. This sexualization of trans women's motives for transitioning not only belittles trans women's female identities, but encourages the objectification of women as a whole.

Of course, what always goes unseen are the great lengths to which producers will go to depict lurid and superficial scenes in which trans women get all dolled up in pretty clothes and cosmetics. Shawna Virago, a San Francisco trans activist, musician, and director of the Tranny Fest film festival, has experienced several such incidents with local news producers. For instance, when Virago was organizing a forum to facilitate communication between police and the trans community, a newspaper reporter approached her and other transgender activists to write an article about them. However, the paper was interested not in their politics but in their transitions. "They wanted each of us to include 'before' and 'after' pictures," Shawna said. "This pissed me off, and I tried to explain to the writer that the before-and-after stuff had nothing to do with police abuse and other issues, like trans women and HIV, but he didn't get it. So I was cut from the piece."

A few years later, someone from another paper contacted Virago and asked to photograph her "getting ready" to go out: "I told him I didn't think having a picture of me rolling out of bed and hustling to catch [the bus] would make for a compelling photo. He said, 'You know, getting pretty, putting on makeup.' I refused, but they did get a trans woman who complied, and there she was,

putting on mascara and lipstick and a pretty dress, none of which had anything to do with the article, which was purportedly about political and social challenges the trans community faced."³

Trans woman Nancy Nangeroni and her partner Gordene O. MacKenzie, who together host the radio program *GenderTalk*, described two similar incidents on one of their programs. In both cases, while they were being filmed, the media producers wanted to get footage of the two of them putting on makeup together (requests that Nangeroni and MacKenzie denied).⁴ I myself had a similar experience back in 2001, just before I began taking hormones. A friend arranged for me to meet with someone who was doing a film about the transgender movement. The filmmaker was noticeably disappointed when I showed up looking like a somewhat normal guy, wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. She eventually asked me if I would mind putting on lipstick while she filmed me. I told her that wearing lipstick had nothing to do with the fact that I was transgender or that I identified as female. She shot a small amount of footage anyway (sans lipstick) and said she would get in touch with me if she decided to use any of it. I never heard back from her.

When audiences watch scenes of trans women putting on skirts and makeup, they are not necessarily seeing a reflection of the values of those trans women; they are witnessing TV, film, and news producers' obsessions with all objects commonly associated with female sexuality. In other words, the media's and audience's fascination with the feminization of trans women is a by-product of their sexualization of all women.

The Media's Transgender Gap

There is most certainly a connection between the differing values given to women and men in our culture and the media's fascination with depicting trans women rather than trans men, who were born female but identify as male. Although the number of people transitioning in each direction is relatively equal these days, media coverage would have us believe there is a huge disparity in the populations of trans men and women.⁵

Jamison Green, a trans man who authored a 1994 report that led to the city of San Francisco's decision to extend its civil rights protections to include gender identity, once said this about the media coverage of that event: "Several times at the courthouse, when the press was doing interviews, I stood by and listened as reporters inquired who wrote the report, and when I was pointed out to them as the author I could see them looking right through me, looking past me to find the man in a dress who must have written the report and whom they would want to interview. More than once a reporter asked me incredulously, 'You wrote the report?' They assumed that because of my 'normal' appearance that I wouldn't be newsworthy."⁶

Indeed, the media tends to not notice—or to outright ignore—trans men because they are unable to sensationalize them the way they do trans women without bringing masculinity itself into question. And in a world where modern psychology was founded upon the teaching that all young girls suffer from penis envy, most people think striving for masculinity seems like a perfectly reasonable goal. Author and sex activist Patrick Califia, who is a trans man, addresses this in his 1997 book *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*: "It seems the world is still more titillated by 'a man who wants to

become a woman' than it is by 'a woman who wants to become a man.' The first is scandalous, the latter is taken for granted. This reflects the very different levels of privilege men and women have in our society. Of course women want to be men, the general attitude seems to be, and of course they can't. And that's that."⁷

Once we recognize how media coverage of transsexuals is informed by the different values our society assigns to femaleness and maleness, it becomes obvious that virtually all attempts to sensationalize and deride trans women are built on a foundation of unspoken misogyny. Since most people cannot fathom why someone would give up male privilege and power in order to become a relatively disempowered female, they assume that trans women transition primarily as a way of obtaining the one type of power that women are perceived to have in our society: the ability to express femininity and to attract men.

This is why trans women like myself, who rarely dress in an overly feminine manner and/or who are not attracted to men, are such an enigma to many people. By assuming that my desire to be female is merely some sort of femininity fetish or sexual perversion, they are essentially making the case that women have no worth beyond the extent to which they can be sexualized.