



Disidentifying with Gender Stereotypes: The Queer in Pop Culture Films

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Abstract

Pioneer of queer theory Judith Butler believes nothing is natural, not even sexual identity. She looks to uncover the assumptions that "restrict the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity" (Cain et al. 2536). What Butler calls "exclusionary gender norms" have constantly worked toward the detriment of both men and women, individuals behaving outside of what majority culture deems appropriate masculine and feminine behavior becoming targets of harassment. Films have been portraying the breaking of gender stereotypes, namely queer behavior, since as early as 1895. Queer, by definition, is anything strange or eccentric, in appearance or character and thus accommodates all, not just those engaging in same-sex practices. The portrayal of the queer in popular film has evolved just as the term itself has evolved to accommodate the diverse individuals of an ever-changing society. Unfortunately, the queer has always encountered resistance from majority culture. However, as a result of this resistance, it has become a growing trend in film to portray not just the queer, but the damaging effects gender binaries promulgated by patriarchal societies have on individuals who contradict them. Queer protagonists that challenge gender stereotypes and are, consequently, victimized include the transgender Brandon from *Boys Don't Cry*, the teenagers sent to conversion therapy camp in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and the young Billy Elliot struggling to overcome the stereotype of the male ballet dancer. Presenting these kinds of characters is a form of what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification, a mode of dealing with dominant ideology that works to reform the social norm. Thus, in presenting the psychological abuse queers endure, pop culture films disidentify with gender stereotypes and, consequently, work to transform dominant ideology to accept the individuals it excludes.

Keywords

disidentification, gender stereotypes, queer, film

Films have been portraying the breaking of gender stereotypes, namely queer behavior, since 1895 with the *Thomas Edison Experimental Sound*. However, because of a number of rather scandalous films, the Motion Picture Production Code was implemented in 1930 to determine what was and was not acceptable to present in films. It remained in place until 1968 when the film rating system of the Motion Picture Association of America replaced it. As a result, filmmakers concealed the queer leading the audience to play a sort of “spot the queer” game, as Nikki Sullivan calls it in her book *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, a practice taken up by Vito Russo in his exploration of homosexuality in movies, *The Celluloid Closet*. What Russo does is what Sullivan calls “queering popular culture” which “involves a range of reading/writing practices that are political insofar as they seek to expose and problematize the means by which sexuality is textually constituted in relation to dominant notions of gender” (Sullivan 190). Since the days of the Motion Picture Production Code, the queering has become more overt and both culturally and socially critical.

The portrayal of the queer in popular film has evolved just as the term itself has continued to evolve to accommodate the diverse individuals of a constantly growing society, *queer*, as it is used here, encompassing not just homosexuals, but also “other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels of lesbian or gay” (Sedgwick qtd. in Jagose 104). The constant evolution and growing popularity of the term has not changed the resistance the queer has met from majority culture. Because of this resistance, film has increasingly portrayed not just the queer, but also the damaging effects gender stereotypes promulgated by patriarchal societies have on individuals who contradict them. These gender stereotypes are what pioneer of queer theory Judith Butler calls “exclusionary gender norms.” These norms constantly work toward the detriment of both men and women, individuals behaving outside of what majority culture deems appropriate masculine and feminine behavior becoming targets of harassment.

Filmmakers such as Jamie Babbit, Stephen Daldry, and Kimberly Pierce portray queer protagonists that are victimized for challenging traditional gender norms in their films *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Billy Elliot*, and *Boys Don't Cry*, respectively, in order to disidentify with hegemonic gender stereotypes. In *But I'm a Cheerleader*, protagonist Megan and other homosexual teenagers are sent to conversion therapy camp to correct their so-called unnatural behavior. In *Billy Elliot*, the young Billy, refusing to box, struggles to overcome the masculine male stereotype as well as that of the male ballet dancer when he discovers his true

passion. Finally, transman Brandon from *Boys Don't Cry* must live up to the macho stereotype of the West in order to pass as male and be with whom he desires.

The aforementioned films portray the predominance of gender stereotypes in order to criticize on them. This is an example of what queer theorist and scholar José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. According to Muñoz, disidentification is a mode of dealing with dominant ideology that works to reform the social norm. The unabashed depiction of the detrimental effects of gender stereotyping in these films works with disidentificatory practices to create an uneasiness in the audience that forces them to think about the source and reasoning behind their discomfort, consequently, making individuals face their own prejudices and stereotypes. In presenting the psychological abuse the films' protagonists endure and how they manage to overcome it, these pop culture films disidentify with gender stereotypes and, as a result, work to transform dominant ideology to accept the individuals it excludes.

In *But I'm a Cheerleader*, this is demonstrated through Megan who is sent to a conversion therapy camp called True Directions for demonstrating same-sex desire despite doing all she can to abide by the dominant social order. The therapy consists of absorption by performance, all the participants being obligated to perform their gender to perfection believing that once the proper gender is internalized so too will the proper sexuality. They are required to practice performing behaviors and tasks expected of their gender like cleaning and cooking for the females and fixing cars and playing sports for the males. The only way to successfully graduate from the camp is, in essence, to pretend to be straight. This is particularly interesting if one entertains Butler's reconfiguration of gender as "a cultural fiction, a performative effect of reiterative acts" (Jagose 84). According to Butler, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler qtd. in Jagose 84). Of course, it is important to keep in mind that "Butler reiterates the fact that gender, being performative, is not like clothing, and therefore cannot be put on or off at will," (Jagose 87) thus the ridiculousness of the camp's "therapy."

Megan's family and friends get together to confront her about her "problem," her father admitting they are afraid she's "being influenced by a way of thinking [that's] unnatural" (00:08:00-00:08:07). Mike, the counselor from True Directions played by RuPaul, then reassures Megan that the program helps people like her "learn to understand the reasons behind homosexual tendencies and how to heal them" (00:08:27-00:08:38). The foundational belief of the camp is that there are intrinsic male and female roles that must be adhered to in

order to live a happy, successful life. Megan, then, appears to render the camp's philosophy moot since she arrives already performing her gender. Back home, Megan willingly dressed in "feminine" fashion and participated in an activity majority culture would agree is female appropriate: cheerleading. Additionally, she had a boyfriend with whom she engaged in all the "normal" activities heterosexual couples usually engage; this, however, she does out of obligation, as any time they kiss Megan is thinking of women. Thus, performing the role does not authenticate it or change Megan's desire for women, her inability to stop yearning for her same-sex suggesting it is an innate quality that cannot be changed by further emerging her into the appropriate "female role." The point made, then, is that neither gender nor biological sex dictates sexual desire, nor does biological sex dictate gender. Clearly, society dictates gender as the campers' parents and camp director make vividly clear.

The film problematizes heterosexual gender binaries, demonstrating, however hyperbolically, the way in which society marginalizes those that step outside the bounds of what is accepted. It is through hyperbole that the director manages to create a disidentificatory film in the style of Muñoz, which in the case of *But I'm a Cheerleader* is the majoritarian adherence to heterosexual gender stereotypes. Sullivan would classify the hyperbolic aesthetic and plot of the film as "camp." According to Sullivan, camp is "most often associated with parody, exaggeration, theatricality, [and] humor" (193), all elements prominently used in the film, and "insofar as it [camp] foregrounds the performative character of gender, sexuality, race, class, and so on, it [camp] functions – at least potentially – to denaturalize, or queer, heteronormative notions of identity" (qtd. in Sullivan 193). This is visible in the film's exaggerated representations of gay/lesbian individuals. In earlier years, "Hollywood films, content with easy laughs and cheap social comment, have perpetuated a lazy, stereotyped idea of homosexuals in the place of realistic characters who happen to be gay" (Russo 248). In reproducing these kinds of inaccurate stereotypes, the film disidentifies with this trademark of homosexual representation. That is, it adopts homosexual stereotypes in a campy manner to criticize them and show their falsity.

Upon coming to terms with her sexuality and choosing to defend it, Megan escapes to a "safe house" run by a gay couple that is a temporary shelter for queer young adults looking to find their way. Megan asks the couple to teach her how to be a lesbian to which Lloyd replies that there is no specific "way," she just has to be herself. For Megan, lesbian is a category within which she cannot be her "feminine" self for, by camp logic, femininity is linked to the sexual desire toward men. Megan's disidentification with "normalcy" climaxes in the final scene where dressed in her cheerleading uniform she proclaims her love for her

female love interest through cheer thus reclaiming femininity and transforming it to suit her needs.

Similarly, the protagonist of *Billy Elliot* problematizes what it means to be “masculine” in his social milieu, a working class town in Southern Yorkshire where ballet dancers are undoubtedly “puffs” or homosexuals. The dominant heterosexual culture in the film associates the fluidity, grace, and beauty required in ballet with femininity; thus, those who practice ballet must be either women or men who imitate the female, namely, homosexual men. By adopting “female” behavior, Billy embodies what Russo calls the “sissy” in *The Celluloid Closet*, sissies being men who “have always signaled a rank betrayal of the myth of male superiority” (Russo 5). Billy, like the sissy, disrupts traditional gender roles and makes those catering to a heteronormative social order uncomfortable and, at times, insecure. Consequently, Billy’s male-dominated community automatically labels him as homosexual. *Tea and Sympathy*’s protagonist, Tom Lee, faces a similar plight to that of Billy; he is called “sister boy” for engaging in “female” activities instead of “male” activities. His roommate and close friend tries to help and defend him, but fails and is eventually driven to move out and room elsewhere. Tom is then left alone disgraced, his only solace being the lady of the house, Deborah Kerr. Not surprisingly, Tom finds comfort in essentially “female” presences, his preferred engagement with them sealing his fate of marginalization. Since “there is something about a man who acts like a woman that people find fundamentally distasteful” and “men of action and strength were the embodiment of our culture . . . a vast mythology was created to keep the dream in constant repair” (Russo 4-5); this myth was the all-American male, the macho man, “strong, silent and emotional” (Russo 5). The sissy, whether hetero or homosexual, destabilizes this image by challenging deeply ingrained ideas of what it means to be masculine. Therefore, accessing emotion or any other supposedly “female” attribute immediately brings into question a male’s sexual orientation; not just in American culture, but also in any other heavily patriarchal culture such as that of Billy’s Southern English town.

Interestingly, the struggle in *Billy Elliot* is not one of closeted sexual orientation, but one of restrictive gender roles, which makes his community’s accusations all the more ludicrous. In contradicting gender binaries, Billy also challenges what Butler calls “gender performativity” and the resulting “true gender” fallacy in her book *Gender Trouble*; that is, he fails to produce the façade of a normal gender that is required to be socially acceptable. Billy’s struggle and inability to free himself of his “abnormal behavior” proves the falsity of “true genders” and instead suggests that individuals lie somewhere on a spectrum. If Billy’s

social milieu saw individuals as existing on a spectrum instead of having to adhere to one of two gender extremes, perhaps he would not have been hesitant to begin dancing and would have escaped the loathing of his brother and father. As this was not the case, Billy hides his love of dance.

Unable to part with his passion, Billy disidentifies with the male stereotype by continuing to pursue ballet as a presumably heterosexual male dancing in a way specific to him. Although Billy's sexuality is never explicitly defined, his reaction to his crossdressing friend's advances suggests he is straight. When his friend, Michael, comes on to him, Billy says, "Just because I dance ballet doesn't make me a puff, you know?" (01:07:42 - 01:07:47). This confirms that Billy's passion for ballet is not reflective of his sexuality. Once Billy becomes secure with his unique "masculinity," he, like Megan in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, transforms that which oppresses him, reworking it to suit his needs. Erica Mahon describes Billy's dance sequences as "strong, powerful and distinctly masculine" (78); this is evident in the scene where Billy confronts his father. His father walks into the boxing gym to find the cross-dressing Michael in a tutu and his son dancing. What ensues is a dance sequence, a bold statement not only of Billy's talent, but also of his determination to pursue his passion despite majority culture's social constructs of gender. It is a very confrontational dance that leads to his father recognizing Billy's talent and changing his mind about Billy pursuing ballet. His father's ability to see past a stereotype and focus on what is most important, his son, is later also accomplished by his brother who was initially as prejudiced as their father was. In presenting these British working class men overlooking the macho stereotype and instead seeing the individual struggling to live behind it, the film asks the audience to do the same. While Billy's father and brother have surely not completely let go of the gender stereotypes that have for so long been embedded in their culture, society, and person, they do get a step closer to understanding that perhaps things are not as black and white as gender binaries dictate. Thus, Billy manages to redefine what it means to be a male ballet dancer.

While Billy disidentifies with the gender stereotype that entraps him, emerging victorious after fervently pursuing his dream, *Tea and Sympathy's* Tom does not. Tom manages to publish his tragic story and marry, but never truly disidentifies with the bully of gender. Tom does not fight for himself as Billy does and his female solace is eventually punished for aiding and defending him. Conversely, Billy's female solace, his mother, ends up inadvertently being the benefactor that funds his audition and subsequent success, as his father pawned her priceless jewelry to pay for it. The time these films were filmed and released certainly played into the differing outcomes. *Tea and Sympathy* was released in

1956, a time when the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, was still active and censoring anything considered “inappropriate,” which included any inference of sexual perversion, any suggestive nudity, and pointed profanity. *Billy Elliot*, on the other hand, was released in 2000 after decades of LGBTQ struggle. At this point, Hollywood and independent filmmakers had come a long way in their portrayal of the queer, openly displaying that which disrupts the social norm. Though not always the most positive depiction, it was exposure nonetheless, exposure which would lead to empowering films like *Billy Elliot* and *But I’m a Cheerleader*.

Since Billy and Tom are not necessarily homosexuals, placing them within the queer may be disputed, for *queer* is still considered largely synonymous with *gay*. For this reason, considering those who do not engage in same-sex or “deviant” sexual practices queer has become problematic. However, this is a backwards way of thinking, as *queer* has been characterized by evolution and change since its etymological beginnings, and with the growing popularity of films like *Billy Elliot*, it will certainly outgrow its synonymy with *gay*. *Queer* is a transformative concept that evolves as the needs of individuals do. Anyone and anything that steps outside of both majority and minority binaries such as feminine/masculine and heterosexual/homosexual can be considered queer. After all, according to Robin Brontsema in her article “A Queer Revolution,” The Second Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner 1989; henceforth OED) identifies *queer’s* origin as the Middle High German *twer*, signifying ‘cross’ or ‘oblique,’ and provides several definitions, including the following:

Adjective: 1a. Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character.

Also, of questionable character, suspicious, dubious. (Brontsem 2)

By definition, anything odd or out of the ordinary is queer even though, eventually, *queer* became associated with “with non-normative sexuality,” specifically male homosexual practices (Brontsema 2). In the early ‘90s, queerevolved even further and became the name of a group made up of “several ACT-UP activists discontent with homophobia in AIDS activism and the invisibility of gays and lesbians within the movement” (qtd. in Brontsema 4). The group called itself Queer Nation; they chose to use the word *queer* “because of its confrontational nature and marked distance from *gay* and *lesbian*” (Brontsema 4), which Queer Nation believed were “exclusionary and assimilationist” terms. When ascribing the term *queer* to *Billy Elliot*, then, it is done with the term’s none-exclusionist nature in mind.

Therefore, Billy is queer as he breaks the culturally dominant male stereotype as well as the stereotype of the male ballet dancer, which he continues to struggle with when he

travels to the Royal Ballet Academy to audition. A fellow dancer who tries to comfort Billy is met with a punch to the face when he tries to place a consoling arm around him. While this in no way suggests the boy fancies Billy, the stereotype of the male ballet dancer has been far too ingrained in Billy by his social milieu for him to let the act pass sans confrontation. The violence demonstrated by Billy comes as a consequence of a fear similar to that of John Lotter in *Boys Don't Cry*, a fear that if he does not dissociate with questionable behavior he will be branded a “puff.”

The true story of Brandon Teena portrayed by Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* is a bit different from that of Megan and Billy. Brandon, originally Teena Brandon, is a transgender man from Lincoln, Nebraska whose “unorthodox” lifestyle gets him raped and shot to death by so-called-friend John Lotter and accomplice Tom Nissen. Brandon’s problem stemmed not just from his desire of females, but also from the fact that he was a man born in a woman’s body. When asked by friend Lonny, “why don’t you just admit you’re a dyke?” Brandon simply responds, “Because I’m not a dyke” (0:06:06-00:06:16), for he does not consider himself a female interested in females. Thus, beyond dealing with the female stereotype, Brandon has the additional lesbian stereotype to overcome with the added pressure of fitting into the prominent masculine male stereotype of Nebraska.

In adopting the masculine male stereotype he believes must enacted to seamlessly blend into society and pass, Brandon does away with two others, the lesbian and feminine female stereotypes. This is a way of disidentifying with dominant culture. Brandon, like Megan and Billy, neither fully assimilates nor opposes dominant ideology, but rather reworks it to accommodate and benefit him. The result is a man many women cannot resist as Lana, Brandon’s love interest, confirms when saying, “There’s just something about him” (01:03:43-01:03:45). That “something special” is what Brandon has created by fusing his “male” persona and “female” perspective, something his aggressors, John and Tom, cannot comprehend and refuse to accept. Confusion leads John and Tom to feel threatened which in typical macho fashion turns into anger and ultimately violence. But how much of this behavior is really organic and how much of it is dictated by the male stereotype? If people found out the truth about Brandon, their association with him might get them branded “faggots,” hence their overreaction and eventual murder of Brandon. John and Tom are just as trapped within the male gender stereotype as Brandon and their aggression comes partly as a result of fear and their constant struggle to live up to the homophobic, hyper-masculine persona they are expected to portray. As Sullivan states, “masculinity (like femininity) is an idea (1) that can never be achieved, but which men must nevertheless anxiously attempt to

(re)produce if the ‘heterosexual matrix’ is to remain intact” (196). Brandon, then, is not the only one that falls victim to the Western macho male stereotype. He is, however, the only one that manages to disidentify and fight the stereotypes that bind him.

Also problematized in *Boys Don’t Cry* is the concept of identity. Much in the style of the classic film genre “the highway narrative” that defines “the road as a masculine space of freedom and escape” (Schewe 39), Brandon takes to the open road to find his sense of self and establish his identity. Identity, however, is not something one can simply discover and set in stone for the rest of one’s life. This holds true for everyone, but is of particular importance for those who find themselves marginalized. Believing identity is fixed would imply that after a certain point an individual is unable to develop any further. This contradicts the very essence of what *queer* has come to represent: an ever-changing concept that inspired a theory marked by a constant “struggle against [the] straitjacketing effects of institutionalization,” that works to “resist closure and remain in the process of ambiguous (un)becoming” (Sullivan V). For Brandon, as well as Megan and Billy, then, identity should be seen as an “ongoing, and always incomplete . . . process rather than a property” (Jacques Lacan qtd in Jagose 79), not a one-time achievable goal which slips into stagnancy.

Though *Boys Don’t Cry* was created in the style of the traditional highway narrative, the coming of age journey Brandon embarks on is different from traditional hetero male and homosexual male identity-seeking narratives, as the film is also reminiscent of “what Kath Weston had called the ‘Great Gay Migration’” (Schewe 40). While Brandon seeks the freedom the road represents and the opportunity a new place affords him, he does not leave Nebraska; he merely travels a few miles southeast from the city of Lincoln to the small town of Falls City where friend Brian says they hang “fags.” The concept of the Great Gay Migration posits, “In order to find safe communities, queer people must leave rural homes and migrate to urban centers” (Schewe 40). Thus, in presenting a transman who migrates a short distance from the urban to the more rural, the film disidentifies with the stereotype of the highway narrative, that of the Great Gay Migration, and gender stereotypes.

Because I’m a Cheerleader, *Billy Elliot*, and *Boys Don’t Cry* are a social commentary on the gender stereotypes that oppress individuals that do not conform to them, disidentification being the tool used by the filmmakers to portray it. Affect and comedy also work alongside disidentification negotiating “a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously eludes or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Esteban-Muñoz 4). Regarding affect, the protagonists in all three films are presented, initially, as victims who must hide things about themselves to

avoid harassment and gain acceptance, something everyone at one point or another has been through and can sympathize with. To the audience's satisfaction, Megan and Billy come out on top, Megan standing up for herself and her so-called "unnatural" sexuality and Billy achieving his dream of becoming a professional dancer despite the social/cultural obstacles insisting he fail. Brandon, however, is not as fortunate and is raped and eventually murdered for not conforming to social convention. Whether or not individuals agree with Brandon's lifestyle, the intolerableness of what is done to him is irrefutable, Brandon's tragic end serving to shed light on the heinousness of hate crimes. This awareness is the beginning of understanding, of being willing to change mentalities plagued by majoritarian dictated gender stereotypes that trap individuals in exclusionary categories.

The comedic element is specific to *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Billy Elliot*. *But I'm a Cheerleader* borders on the ridiculous with its campy representation of the dominant social order, while in *Billy Elliot* the comedy is found amidst the prevailing drama providing the audience with momentary relief from serious subject matters. Through characters like the teens at conversion camp and the camp director in *But I'm a Cheerleader* and Billy Elliot and his cross-dressing friend, Michael, in *Billy Elliot*, the films disidentify with the gender stereotypes majority culture erroneously dictates should be upheld. Through laughter, viewers can experience a shift in perspective and awareness that unmask gender norms and unabashedly displays the detrimental fallacy they truly are. Additionally, it helps shed light on several social issues such as "machismo," discrimination, harassment, bullying, and religious fanaticism. The humor mediates this sharp social commentary making for powerful films able to attract and create open-minded audiences. Affect and humor, then, become tools that help facilitate the reception of the social and cultural critique taking place in the films.

These films promulgate the idea that "there is nothing authentic about gender," and that "gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality" (Jagose 83-84). Furthermore, they ask us to question "the hegemonic binarism of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality,'" and the stereotypes that come with them (Jagose 64), for what place is there for a transman and a heterosexual male ballet dancer within this binary? In the case of *Boys Don't Cry*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and *Billy Elliot* "the categories of gender are entirely complicit in the maintenance of heterosexuality" (Wittig qtd. in Jagose 55), the protagonists becoming problematic when they embody both the characteristically "male" and "female." They manage to survive and even thrive by disidentifying, taking that which oppresses them and transforming it to accommodate them.

The close release of *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), *Billy Elliot* (2000), and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) is certainly no coincidence, as the films emerged at the end of the decade which saw the emergence and rise of the queer, not just as a synonym for gay, but also as a concept and theory that empowers the marginalized and opposes dominant and exclusionary ideology. Each film portrays the queer in a unique way that guides the audience to achieving a malleable state of mind open to understanding. Furthermore, these films present the opportunity for “straight-identifying people” to “experience what he [Alexander Doty] calls ‘queer moments’ when engaging with such texts” (Sullivan 191), queer working as a verb “to describe a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them” (192). Experiencing a “queer moment” can turn fear and hatred of the queer into empathy for the queer individual’s plight; however, these queer moments can also cause homophobia, the hetero seeing the queer as a “lifestyle that is seductive and contagious, threatening to what’s good in the world” (Russo 261). The challenge for the film industry, then, is to continue making mass entertainment products that will push audiences to resist the urge to reject the queer and instead try to tolerate it and maybe someday even accept it.

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