



VNiVERSiDAD
D SALAMANCA

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Transsexuality as a Stigma in the Films *Boys Don't Cry* and *Breakfast on Pluto*.

Autora: Verónica Díez Martínez

Tutora: Olga Barrios Herrero

Salamanca, 2015



VNiVERSiDAD
D SALAMANCA

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Transsexuality as a Stigma in the Films *Boys Don't Cry* and *Breakfast on Pluto*.

This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies
June 2015

Tutora: Olga Barrios Herrero
Vº Bº

Signature

ABSTRACT: Transsexuality is one of the most misunderstood gender identities nowadays. Transsexuality is not as visible in society as homosexuality, and because of this, their situation is not yet normalised. In this paper I try to explain the social perception of transsexuality nowadays, demonstrating that these people are still stigmatised despite all the progress that has been made in the acceptance of different sexual and gender identities. To illustrate this stigmatization and its reasons and consequences, I have focused my paper on the analysis of two films, which I think portray very accurately the social reactions (very unfair most of the times) that transsexual people have to face. These films are: *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), directed by American filmmaker Kimberly Peirce and based on a tragic, true story and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), by Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan and based on the homonymous novel by Patrick McCabe.

KEYWORDS: transsexuality, film, stigma, Breakfast on Pluto, Boys Don't Cry.

RESUMEN: La transexualidad es una de las identidades sexuales o de género más incomprendidas. La transexualidad no disfruta de tanta visibilidad como la homosexualidad, y por ello su situación aún no se ha normalizado. Con este trabajo, pretendo explicar cuál es la percepción social de la transexualidad actualmente, demostrando que a pesar de todo el progreso conseguido en los últimos años, las personas transexuales siguen siendo estigmatizadas y excluidas de la sociedad. Para ilustrar esta idea, he centrado mi trabajo en el análisis de dos películas, que en mi opinión reflejan muy bien la violencia e injusticia con la que muchas veces las personas transexuales son tratadas. Estas películas son: *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), dirigida por la directora estadounidense Kimberly Peirce y basada en una trágica historia real y *Breakfast on Pluto* (Desayuno en Plutón) (2005), dirigida por el director irlandés Neil Jordan y basada en el libro homónimo del escritor Patrick McCabe.

PALABRAS CLAVE: transexualidad, cine, estigma, Breakfast on Pluto, Boys Don't Cry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, this paper is entirely dedicated to my father. I know that wherever you are, you are proud of me for coming this long way. I am proud of you as well. Thank you for fighting so bravely until the end. I admire you. I miss you a little more every day.

My mother deserves a deep thank you as well, for being one of the strongest women I know. Thank you also to the rest of my family for their unconditional help and support.

The most sincere thank you goes to my tutor, Olga Barrios, because without her suggestions and comments this paper would be just a series of ideas without any order or structure. Thank you for listening to my voice, though I do not speak very loudly.

I also would like to thank my friends for being always by my side and trying to cheer me up in my darkest moments. Especially I want to thank Naiara, the best, *best* friend I could ever ask for. Thank you for being always there for me. In our friendship I find the courage to overcome my limits and be a better person.

Finally, this is dedicated to all the members of the LGBT community. You have come a long way. Keep fighting. Never give up. You will win. All of you have my endless admiration and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. The Beginning of It All: Gender Studies	3
1.1. The Concept of Gender	3
1.2. Origins and Influences of Gender Theory	4
1.3. Relevant Gender Theories: Gender Performativity	7
2. Gender Boundaries Blurred: Transsexuality	10
2.1. Definition of Transsexuality	10
2.2. The Beginning of the Stigma: Transsexuality as a Mental Condition	10
2.3. Social view of Transsexuality. Can We Cope with Differences?	13
2.4. Transsexuality in Films: a Joke or a Critique?	14
3. Portraits of the Stigmatization of Transsexuality in the Films <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (1999) and <i>Breakfast on Pluto</i> (2005)	16
3.1. Stigma and its Tragic Consequences in <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (1999)	16
3.2. A Sign of Advancement and Hope: Patricia "Kitten" Braden in <i>Breakfast on Pluto</i> (2005)	21
Conclusion	26
Works Cited	27

INTRODUCTION

Transsexual people are the less known members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) community. They are not as visible in society as the lesbian and gay members, for instance, who have achieved certain rights over the years. Transsexual people are still misunderstood and undermined by society.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how even though the social attitude towards the whole LGBT community is slowly changing and becoming more positive and tolerant nowadays, transsexual individuals have yet to face violent behaviours especially targeted at them. In my opinion, this happens mainly because of misinformation.

Our society focuses only on the biological body to assign a sexual identity. Yet, there is an unknown concept named gender, which has proven to be equally as important (if not more) in the assignment of a sexual identity. In fact, our sexual identity is defined by both our biological features and our gender. The latter, however, is a troublesome concept because sometimes, the gender of a person is the opposite of their biological sex, as is the case of transsexual people.

Since society assigns a sexual identity only by taking into account the body of a person, transsexual people are not considered *real* women or men because they lack an essential part: the genitalia. Even though there is a possibility for them to undergo sex reassignment surgery, it does not solve the problems most of the times. In fact, even when their biological features match their gender, transsexual people have yet to deal with a lot of stressful situations, because in the eyes of society they still try to *deceive* people.

To exemplify this stigma, I will analyse two films: the first, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), is based on a true story and portrays the most extreme reaction: ending somebody's life just for being different. The second, *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), presents a rather utopian behaviour

towards transsexual people, without forgetting that gender identities are not yet socially accepted.

1. THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL. GENDER STUDIES

The first chapter on this paper on transsexuality will be devoted to defining the concept of gender. Gender plays a key role in the assignment of a sexual identity, yet it is a concept that is misunderstood and overlooked by society. It is thought to be equal to the biological sex, when in fact it may be the opposite. Understanding how gender differs from sex will help comprehend the concept of transsexuality and its related issues in the next chapters.

1.1. THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

Gender is a relatively new concept. For many years it has been thought to be a quality inherited from sex. However, since the recent appearance of gender studies, gender has begun to be studied as a separate concept. According to the American Psychology Association it is defined as “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (1). As this definition suggests, gender is still believed to be directly associated to the biological sex of one person, rather than considered independent. It is an independent concept in that it has its own definition, but even the definition itself considers gender to be linked to the biological sex.

Judith Lorber explains very accurately in *Night to His Day* what happens when people think about gender, if they think of it at all:

Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and recreated out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production. (54)

As I have stated before, in the popular opinion, a person is the same gender as his or her biological sex, to the extent that both concepts merge to be only one. Nobody stops to think

that gender is not the same as the biological sex. It just seems that way because what really happens is that most of the times both concepts match, that is, a woman behaves in a feminine way and a man behaves in a masculine way. But this does not happen every time.

The main claim of gender theory is that the concepts of sex and gender are actually different because they are created by society. A very illustrative analogy of the difference between these two concepts goes as follows:

Consider a play with actors. Gender is the role the actor plays and sex is the physical appearance of the actor Gender, at least according to gender theory, is something constructed, not something you are born with. Just as the actor is not born with the role but is rather assigned the role by the script, individuals are not born with gender but they are assigned gender by the “script” written by cultural norms and mores of their society. (“What is the Difference between the Terms Gender and Sex”)

I find this analogy to be very accurate to explain the idea that gender is not necessarily linked to the biological sex of a person, but rather a social construction. This analogy is also a very illustrative image for Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which I will mention later. Butler’s theory demonstrates very clearly why society believes that gender is the same as biological sex.

1.2. ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES OF GENDER THEORY

Gender theory is essentially a derivative of feminism, and thus shares many of its founding roots with these theories. Gender theory began to be considered a proper field of research approximately in 1970, which does not mean, however, that researchers did not address this issue before. They did, though their research was not considered specifically about gender. At its beginnings, gender was included in feminist theories. It was mentioned, yet not really considered a field interesting enough to conduct its own research.

Consequently, the founding roots of gender theory can be traced from many authors who also served as ground for the feminist theory. The most influential works that I will be reviewing are those of Simone de Beauvoir, the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.

Simone de Beauvoir is considered one of the most influential feminists of all time. Her essay *The Second Sex* was a major breakthrough. It was published in 1949 and had such acclaim that it is always mentioned by feminist theorists. In this book, Beauvoir discusses the role of the woman and dares to take a stand and fight against the oppression of women. More specifically, her claim was that “women have been defined by men and if they attempt to break with this, they risk alienating themselves. . . Women are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her” (qtd in Appelrouth 316-17). Therefore, a woman is always defined as someone who is not a man.

Most feminist theorists acknowledge the importance of *The Second Sex* and praise Beauvoir for daring to expose the oppression that women have to endure, though there are others, such as Luce Irigaray who, in Toril Moi’s opinion, “are openly hostile to Beauvoir, whom they cast as a champion of ‘male’ notions of equality as opposed to their own sinuous celebrations of feminine difference” (“It Changed My Life”). They argue that Beauvoir’s perception of equality still relies heavily on the figure of men.

Beauvoir is in fact one of the first persons to establish a difference between gender and sex, by stating “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301). What Beauvoir tries to say is that a woman is not defined by her biological sex but rather becomes one because of her behaviour. This idea will be of significant importance when addressing the issue of transsexuality and dysphoria in the following chapters.

Freud has also played an important part in the conception of gender. Psychology evolved because of his theories on psychoanalysis. He influenced other fields as well, even

gender theory, because as E. S. Person and L. Ovesey state “psychoanalysis was the first comprehensive personality theory that attempted to explain the origins of what we now call gender” (56).

In his book *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905), Freud explains that there is an innate bisexuality in all of us, which will eventually develop into a monosexuality. It is important to understand this because gender undergoes essentially the same development. Freud states that children are born with both genders as well, and their personality will evolve towards one gender or another throughout the years (web). Freud is one of the first people to state that gender can be developed rather than being established and fixed in the moment of birth.

Jacques Lacan alongside Freud developed many theories on psychoanalysis, but he approaches the same matter in a different way which, in my opinion, is more relevant to gender studies. Referring to Lacan and Freud, Dino Felluga explains in the “Module on Psychosexual Development”:

Freud continued to be tempted by organic models and with a desire to find the neurological and, thus, “natural” causes for sexual development, [whereas] Lacan offered a more properly linguistic model for understanding the human subject's entrance into the social order. The emphasis was thus less on the bodily causes of behavior . . . than it was on the ideological structures that, especially through language, [which] make the human subject come to understand his or her relationship to himself and to others.

This quotation makes a comparison between Freud and Lacan saying that Freud believed that the gender and personality development of a child took place in the body, in the mind of the child (in simpler words, for Freud, gender development was a mental process) whereas Lacan believed that this same development had to do more with social influences.

It is undeniable that Lacan's theories have influenced gender theory in its very foundation, because he was the first to describe gender as a social construction. However, there are different attitudes towards Lacan's theories. Many feminists and gender theorists believe that Lacan maintains a sexist attitude in psychoanalysis, instead of developing a more balanced approach. Thus, these feminist theorists refuse to use Lacan's theories. Nevertheless, there are other feminist critics that acknowledge the importance and relevance of Lacan's theories but still use them in a very critical way to develop their own theories.

Finally, Michel Foucault enlightened the field of sexuality with his book *History of Sexuality* (1976). This book changed significantly the way sexuality was regarded at the time. In *History of Sexuality* the author did not exactly focus on gender but it influenced feminism and gender theories nevertheless. Moreover, in *Les Mots et les Choses*¹, Foucault determines that the concept of sex is a social construction². This is an enormous advancement for feminist and gender studies because their theories are based on these concepts being social constructions. Therefore, all of these innovative ideas brought by Beauvoir, Freud, Lacan and Foucault marked the beginning of gender studies.

1.3. RELEVANT GENDER THEORIES: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

As I have stated before, the concept of gender became significant enough to conduct its own research in the 1970s. Despite being a relatively new field of research, many theorists have put forward many interesting theories that have helped shape the ways gender is perceived nowadays. I want to mention two theorists whose views on gender seem important and relevant to this paper on transsexuality. These theorists are Judith Lorber and Judith

¹ *Les Mots et les Choses* is literally translated to English as *Words and Things*, but editors chose to change its commercial name to *The Order of Things*.

² In *Foucault and Gender Feminism*, Deirdre MacNamara explains more extensively how Foucault's works influenced feminism and gender theorists. The article can be accessed through this web page: <http://spelunkephobes.4t.com/foucault_and_gender_feminism.htm>

Butler. Both of them share a common point in their theories. They both state that gender is a social construction. Consequently, they position themselves against gender roles.

Judith Lorber is a professor of Sociology in the University of New York, whose theories on gender may be summed up in two different points. The first point is that gender is neither masculine nor feminine but actually a combination of traits of both categories; and the second one, as I stated before, is that gender is a social construction. Lorber explains this theory in her collection of essays *Paradoxes of Gender*, where she states that gender is not only a social construction but even an institution, and compares it to institutions like family or religion.

The second and last gender theorist I want to comment on is Judith Butler. She based most of her books on her theory of gender performativity, a term that she herself coined and appeared for the first time in her book *Gender Trouble*. This theory generally states that people perform the gender norms assigned to their biological sex instead of behaving by their own norms. In an interview with Max Miller, Butler was asked to explain what she meant by the phrase ‘gender is performative’, to what she answered: “We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman . . . to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start” (“Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender”). Judith Butler suggests that our behaviour in social situations is what establishes our gender, though sometimes we may be acting to fit in a group.

To clarify Butler’s theory, I want to mention Hazel Reeves’s definition of gender. Reeves defines gender as “the socially determined ideas and practices of what it is to be female or male” (3). Having this definition in mind, it becomes clear that what Butler defends is that sometimes people act in ways that are considered proper of females or males in order to fit in the gender of their choice, because if they behave in their own way, they could step

out of their assigned gender and be harassed or bullied. Going back to the theatre role playing analogy mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we are the actors performing the script, that is, the social rules of our gender. Sometimes those rules may not be our preferred way of behaviour but we still act the way the script, that is, society tells us to.

In short, in this chapter I have tried to make clear that the concepts of sex and gender, though similar in practice, are actually different in theory. Gender theories were born to raise awareness of the difference between sex and gender. Understanding the differences between these two concepts is key to comprehend how transsexuality works. Some important gender theorists that have helped enlighten the differences between sex and gender are Judith Lorber and Judith Butler, though the latter must be given more emphasis. Her most important theory, gender performativity, is basic to understand why society thinks that gender is the same as biological sex.

2. GENDER BOUNDARIES BLURRED: TRANSSEXUALITY

One of the main points of the previous chapter was that gender is not necessarily linked to the biological sex of a person. A woman behaves in a feminine way and a man behaves in a masculine way but this is not always the case. There are people who are gender non-conforming, that is, they do not wish to behave by the social rules of the gender corresponding to their biological sex. This second chapter is devoted to one of these cases of gender non-conforming people: the transsexual community.

2.1. DEFINITION OF TRANSSEXUALITY

Transsexuality or transgenderism is defined once again by the American Psychological Association as “an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth” (“Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People” 1). In other words, a transsexual person’s biological sex may be female but her gender identity is just the opposite, that is, that person feels she is not a woman but a man. The genitalia are that of a woman, but the transsexual person feels like a man. This causes a discordance that, as I will explain later, generates a lot of trouble for these persons, particularly when facing society, as this discordance is not easily understood.

2.2. THE BEGINNING OF THE STIGMA: TRANSSEXUALITY AS A MENTAL CONDITION

Transsexuality is commonly known in medical terms as a gender identity disorder, though recently, the name has changed to be gender dysphoria, a more neutral term that does not suggest a mental condition. As in the case of homosexuality (or any other sexual identity that is not heterosexuality), at first transsexuality was diagnosed as a mental illness that could be cured. Even nowadays, when times have changed for the better, there are still people who

claim that homosexuality and transsexuality are illnesses that can be cured with the right treatments.

People suffering from gender dysphoria have always existed, even though most of them remained hidden. As J. Koh explains in the article “The History of the Concept of the Gender Identity Disorder,”

people who express a sense of discomfort with their anatomical sex and related roles have been reported in the medical literature since the middle of the 19th century.

However, homosexual, fetishism, gender identity disorder, and associated conditions were mixed together and regarded as types of sexual perversion that were considered ethically objectionable until the 1950s. (from Abstract)

This means that transsexuality, homosexuality and other *illnesses*, as some people like to call them, have existed since long before we became aware of them. As the quotation states, cases of gender dysphoria have been reported since the 19th century, though they were categorized as sexual perversions, thus not giving transsexual people the relevance they deserved.

The trace of gender non-conforming people can be found even in Greek times, long before the beginning of reports in medical literature. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the most important piece of literature in Greece, there is a myth about a man named Cæneus. Cæneus was a great warrior who joined Jason in the search of the Golden Fleece. But he was born Cænis. When Cænis was a little girl, Poseidon was very attracted to her and raped her. Then, Cænis asked the god to be turned a man so that no one would hurt her anymore. Poseidon granted her wish and she became Cæneus, the invincible warrior. Nestor, the narrator of this particular myth, says about Cæneus: “[He] could take a thousand strokes with unwounded body . . . and what made it more remarkable in him, he had been born a woman” (qtd in book

12, lines 146-209)³. Cæneus's myth challenges our preconceived notions of gender by arguing that a woman can become a man. It demonstrates that even in ancient times some people could feel desire "to live as though they have the opposite gender" (Koh). This means that the biological sex assigned to a person in the moment of birth may not agree with our mental image, our gender. Actually, there are many people like Cæneus, who are not comfortable with their biological sex and wish to be the opposite.

Even though the previous example demonstrates that there are cases of gender non-conforming people since ancient times, transsexuality was not considered an illness until the 19th century, when cases began to be documented in medical literature. Given the increase in the number of cases, psychologists enumerated a series of symptoms to diagnose this condition properly and effectively. Thus, for a person to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, he or she should "exhibit a strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex) . . . a strong preference for playmates of the other sex" and "a strong dislike of one's sexual anatomy" ("Gender Dysphoria Symptoms"). As this demonstrates, people diagnosed with gender dysphoria desire to be members of the opposite sex.

The desire of having been born with opposite sexual features can be fulfilled by undergoing a sex reassignment surgery. The first sex reassignment surgery was performed in 1952, shortly after transsexuality was given a medical name. It caused a lot of controversy at the time, but a lot has changed since then. Nowadays, the name of the term has changed from gender identity disorder to gender dysphoria (it was changed in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American

³ The University of Virginia offers an online version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, available both in Latin and in English. It can be accessed through its library (links in Works Cited page).

Psychiatric Association), and the process of transitioning nowadays is easier and available for many more transsexual people.⁴

Although the medical field is starting to become more open minded and has stopped labeling different sexual and gender identities as mental disorders, society still holds a very conservative view on this topic, considering transsexuality a mental condition even nowadays.

2.3. SOCIAL VIEW OF TRANSEXUALITY. CAN WE COPE WITH DIFFERENCES?

Society's views on a topic change really slowly. We are constantly bombed with biased news, opinions and ideas which modify our perception of life whether we want it or not. When the first cases of transsexuality saw the light of day, people were perplexed because it was a new concept for them and the fact that important institutions were categorizing the experiences of those persons as mental disorders influenced the society to see them as such. Transsexual people, like homosexual people, were seen by society as mentally unstable people, people who had to conceal their feelings. Society thought transsexuals had to suppress their true selves and live according to the rules of the sex they had been born into, because that is what everybody was supposed to do. Differences from any social conventions and norms were (and still are) seen as unnatural deviations that must be treated. People with unusual behaviours or feelings are most often mistreated and excluded by society.

Society finds persons who step out of the norm frightening. In my opinion, fear towards the unknown is what motivates prejudice and violence, and can even lead to hate crimes. Hate crimes are defined as “criminal conduct motivated in whole or in part by a negative opinion or attitude toward a group of persons” (“Psychology of Hate Crimes” 1). This kind of crime targets people of different races, sexual orientations and gender identities,

⁴ For further information on the process of transition nowadays, I recommend visiting AlexRR's channel on Youtube, a Spanish FTM (female to male) transsexual, who is recording and explaining his transitioning process (link in Works Cited page).

for instance. Hate crimes are more troublesome than other crimes because they “have an effect on both the immediate target and the communities of which the individuals are a member” (“Psychology of Hate Crimes” 1). This means that if a transsexual person is victim of a hate crime, for example, it will affect the whole transsexual community in that they will start living a double life, hiding their true self to avoid being the next target. A well known hate crime is precisely that of Brandon Teena, which would be brought to screen later in 2006 with the title *Boys Don't Cry*.

2.4. TRANSSEXUALITY IN FILMS: A JOKE OR A CRITIQUE?

Films and cultural manifestations in general have also helped change the way transsexuality is perceived nowadays. We are deeply influenced by the things we see in films. There are however, two types of portrayal of the transsexual character. The first one occurs in comedies. In this type of films, a transsexual character is used as a means to make the audience laugh. This character is, for example, a man who dresses as a woman to deceive someone. The important thing about these films is that the character is not transsexual per se because the man does not feel like a woman; he just dresses like one because he needs to accomplish something. Thus, these characters are actually transvestites.

A film that exemplifies this kind of parody is *Some Like It Hot*, directed by Billy Wilder. In this film, Wilder's main characters are two men who have to disguise as women to escape from the mafia. Although its main purpose is making the audience laugh by presenting masculine characters facing feminine situations, it is also an interesting film in terms of deconstructing gender roles. In this film, there is an important moment at the beginning of their journey with the girls' band, in which Joe and Jerry (disguised as Josephine and Daphne) have to talk to their bosses. They have to pass as women for the first time, so they behave rather stereotypically, talking with a high-pitched voice and being well-mannered and

charming. Those are the characteristics that the feminine behaviour must have in a patriarchal society, according to Joe and Jerry (the personifications of society).

As I have stated before, the characters in these films are created to make the audience laugh, but they indirectly influence the way society sees actual cases of transsexuality in that society extrapolates these fictional characters to real life and concludes that every transsexual that they encounter must be a transvestite, a person who dresses like the opposite sex just for fun. In my opinion, the confusion with transvestites is one of the main problems why the transsexual community is not given enough credibility.

Nevertheless, film directors have recently started to become aware of the problems faced by the transsexual community and films with a new focus are being produced. In these new films, actual cases of transsexuality are portrayed, without intending to make people laugh but rather highlighting the struggles of transsexual people against the stigma that society puts on them. The films I will be analysing in the next chapter belong to this last group.

To sum up, in this second chapter I have explained the concept of transsexuality and the main reasons why I think transsexual people (and gender non-conforming people in general) are not given enough credibility, thus stigmatising them. One of these reasons is that transsexuality was first diagnosed as a mental disorder, a fact that caused society to perceive it in the same way. Another reason is the appearance of transvestite characters in some films which led society to mistake transsexual people for transvestites. All these reasons and the fact that, as I explained in the first chapter, the concept of gender was thought to be fixed depending on the biological sex, developed a deep stigma towards transsexual people. The representation of this stigma in the films *Boys Don't Cry* and *Breakfast on Pluto* will be analysed in the following and last chapter.

3. PORTRAITS OF THE STIGMATIZATION OF TRANSSEXUALITY IN *BOYS DON'T CRY* (1999) AND *BREAKFAST ON PLUTO* (2005)

As I explained in the previous chapter, the number of films whose main purpose is portraying actual cases of transsexuality in order to make the audience aware of the social stigma placed towards these people has been recently increasing. There are many films which could be analyzed, yet I have chosen two which seem relevant and portray two faces of this stigma. In the first one, *Boys Don't Cry*, the stigma placed towards the main character is brutal, violent, concluding with the murder of Brandon Teena. In the second film, *Breakfast on Pluto*, the stigma is still there, yet society ultimately accepts the transsexual character.

3.1. STIGMA AND ITS TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES IN *BOYS DON'T CRY* (1999)

The film *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by American filmmaker Kimberly Peirce, is based on the tragic true story of Brandon Teena, a transsexual man who was brutally murdered in Falls City, a rural town in Nebraska, by a group of friends after realising he was in fact a woman. The film focuses on the last two weeks of Brandon's life, since he arrived to Falls City, where he met his girlfriend and the rest of his friends, until two of those friends killed him after discovering he was biologically a woman. This film is a clear example of how the stigma and prejudice towards transsexual persons influence society, to the extent that an innocent man can be killed just for being himself.⁵ Although the film is a dramatization of the case (and because of this, it has been discredited and criticized as if the director had chosen to exaggerate many things), Brandon Teena was actually murdered. That is a fact we have to keep in mind when analysing the strong stigmatization that transsexual people have to cope with.

⁵ The University of Colombia hosted a very interesting debate analysing *Boys Don't Cry*. A MP3 file can be found in the following web page: <<http://www.poderato.com/laclaqueta/la-claqueta-89-7-fm/boys-don-t-cry-ciclo-sexualidad>>

Judith Halberstam explains in her book *In A Queer Time and Place* how she first heard about the Brandon Teena story:

In December 1993, I remember reading a short story in the newspaper about an execution-style killing in rural Nebraska. The story seemed unremarkable except for one small detail buried in the heart of the report: one of the murder victims was a young female-bodied person who had been passing as a man. The murder of this young transgender person sent shock waves through queer communities in the United States. (22)

This quotation exemplifies how a hate crime like Brandon's also affects the whole transsexual community. After a crime like that, every member of the community feels like a target. However, not only the transsexual community was affected but gay and lesbian people as well. All of them tried to appropriate Brandon Teena's case for their own political claims (Halberstam 22).

As we can see, the assassination happened in 1993, at a time when there was little, but actual progress in the acceptance of the LGBT community. Halberstam explains the different reactions that this community had towards this brutal murder:

Some queers use Brandon's death to argue for hate-crime legislation; others have made Brandon into a poster child for an emergent transgender community dedicated to making visible the plight of cross-identified youth . . .; still others have pointed to Brandon's death as evidence of a continuing campaign of violence against queers despite the increasing respectability of some portions of the gay and lesbian community. (24)

This hate crime struck the whole LGBT community because it implied losing the rights that they had already achieved over the years. This community had been working really hard to be accepted, yet brutal murders like Brandon's kept happening. However, a very important detail

was overlooked: Brandon lived in a rural town. This is important because life in rural areas is not the same as life in the city. People in rural areas are more narrow-minded and conservative than those in the metropoly, and progress comes more slowly. This means that whereas in cities acceptance was being achieved, in rural areas like Falls City, where Brandon lived, people still had problems accepting diversity of sexual identities or even races.

After Brandon's assassination, Falls City became a place flooded with journalists, cameras and newspapers wanting to know the whole story. The reports they made, however, wanted to highlight a much darker side of Brandon. Referring to Brandon, Suzanne Woodward has stated:

His masculine appearance and behaviour is . . . depicted as a lie perpetrated in order to exploit naïve teenage girls sexually and financially . . . Newspapers foregrounded Brandon's 'criminality' (credit card theft, cheque forgery, gender 'fraud') in an effort to relegate him to a criminal underclass safely distant from 'normal' law-abiding citizens, and at times to produce an implicit revenge logic for his murder. (186)

As this quotation suggests, newspapers manipulated the information so that Brandon was seen as a criminal and a liar, thus providing an alibi, a reason for his murderers to commit the crime other than gender issues.

The film adaptation, however, places its entire focus and blame for the murder on the gender trouble that Brandon represents. We see how Brandon is perfectly accepted by his friends in Falls City when he looks like a man and behaves like one, yet everything changes when his friends learn that he has female physical traits and genitalia.

It is interesting to note that Brandon's girlfriend Lana learns about it first, yet she seems not to care about it. In the first love scene between Brandon and Lana in the film, we see a brief shot of Brandon's cleavage, suggesting that Lana has seen it too and is perfectly aware of Brandon's female body. Lana is, in fact, the person who supports Brandon the most.

She believes rather blindly that Brandon is a man, even when everyone tells her otherwise.

She trusts Brandon so much that when Lana volunteers to check Brandon's genitals to see if he is *really* a man, she stops him and says: "Don't show me anything, I know you're a guy".

She is the one who sees Brandon as he is and loves him no matter what his biological sex is.

Everyone else in Brandon's group of friends and acquaintances reacts in different ways, certainly not as supportive as Lana. However, the most shocking reaction is that of his male friends, Tom and John. When they discover that Brandon is biologically a woman, they react violently towards Brandon. At this moment we see the emphasis that society places on our physical traits, as if having female genitalia forced a person to be a woman and act like one. But there were other motives, as John Sloop points out: "Given Brandon's success with the local women, his 'true' gender was a matter of great concern to his friends, especially the men" (166). These words suggest that Tom and John were jealous of Brandon's numerous love affairs. This jealousy incited many doubts and questions about the identity of this successful newcomer. The people in Falls City (or any other place, for that matter) did not accept any other model than the binary, either man or woman (based on the biological sex), nothing in between. Consequently, John and Tom had to know their friend's *true* gender, the one assigned by his biological sex. They had to check if he was a *real* man like them.

After humiliating Brandon by exposing his female genitalia, John and Tom both rape him. This scene has been regarded by most authors "as a way of 'legitimizing' [John and Tom's] own masculinity as a self-evident and exclusive category" (Woodward 190). For John and Tom (and the binary society in general) a man is only masculine because of his genitalia. Brandon represents a threat to them, because his masculinity is not given by any biological trait. Brandon's masculinity comes from his behaviour.

As I have stated before, Lana is the most supportive person in Brandon's life. Yet, there is one last love scene between them, after the rape, in which Lana's perception of

Brandon seems to change. Lana starts undressing Brandon and says: “I don’t know if I’m gonna know how to do it”, suggesting that she now sees Brandon as a woman and what follows is a lesbian love scene. It is as if the rape had revealed Brandon’s true biological sex and therefore his gender. This scene implies that Brandon’s previous transsexual identification was a lie. The scene has been very criticized and to me, it seems out of place because it “seems to extend the violence enacted on Brandon's body by John and Tom since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*” (Halberstam 85). From Lana’s point of view and therefore the audience’s, Brandon is now a woman. Annabelle Willox tries to justify the inclusion of this troublesome love scene by saying that it is “a dramatic insertion by the director, rather than a recreation of actual events” (418), yet Kimberly Peirce herself confirmed in a radio interview that the real Lana had told her about this encounter, suggesting that it did happen in real life (qtd in Halberstam 85). Either way, that scene disrupts the narrative of the film because by consenting to that last love scene, Brandon identifies momentarily as a woman and a lesbian. This new identification feels inaccurate because Brandon himself denied quite energetically his lesbianism at the beginning of the film:

DONNY: Why don’t you just admit you’re a dyke?

BRANDON: Because I’m not a dyke.

He has been identified as a man throughout the film, yet in this last scene, by consenting to have *lesbian* intercourse with Lana, Brandon indirectly agrees with his aggressors and murderers, and with the binary sexuality system in that he is a woman because he has female genitals.

Despite its misleading ending, *Boys Don’t Cry* succeeds very effectively in raising awareness of the social stigma that is placed on transsexual individuals by presenting a true, tragic story that exposes how brutal the violence towards transsexual people can be. It demonstrates very accurately the tremendous importance that is given to our genitalia when

assigning a sexual identity.

3.2. A SIGN OF ADVANCEMENT AND HOPE: PATRICIA “KITTEN” BRADEN IN *BREAKFAST ON PLUTO* (2005)

The film *Breakfast on Pluto*, directed by Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan, is not based on real events as *Boys Don't Cry* but rather on a fictional, homonymous novel by author Patrick McCabe. The film tells the story of Patricia “Kitten” Braden, a young Irish transsexual woman who sets on a journey to London to find her biological mother.

Interestingly enough, this film is set during the decades of 1970 to 1990, before the previous film but, as I have stated a few lines before, we have to take into account the place where the film is set. In this case, the events in the film happen first in a rural town called Tyreelin, in Ireland and then in London. Patricia grows up in an Irish rural town and then starts her journey in search of her biological mother in London.

Unlike *Boys Don't Cry*, which presents absolutely no proof of Brandon's struggle with his gender identity, in *Breakfast on Pluto* we see Patricia's (born Patrick) struggle from a very young age, as the film covers her abandonment, childhood and coming of age. The first time that we see Patricia's crossgender identification is at her adoptive mother's house where, as a child (yet a boy), she borrows a dress and lipstick and tries everything on. In the novel, this scene goes as follows:

“Gone for at least an hour!” I cried, in . . . delightful excitement. But no! Hardly twenty minutes later – the pair of them [her mother and sister] back . . . None of this I was aware of, of course, being much too busy dabbing on Whiskers's [her mother's] lipstick (Cutex Coral Pink, would you believe!) and saying “Hello, Patricia!” into the mirror and pretending I was dancing. (11)

As the quotation demonstrates, Patricia is delighted that her mother and sister go to church because when she is alone, she is allowed to behave as she wishes. She can wear a dress and put on some lipstick without being afraid of her mother punishing her for not behaving like a boy.

In the film, however, this moment is more visual and later we can see the repercussions of this *childish* act. We see Patricia as a young boy trying on her sister's dress, some red lipstick and talking in a very high-pitched, girly voice, repeating the dialogue of the television in the background. When her mother and sister come home suddenly and find her behaving inappropriately, the mother punishes her:

MOTHER: I'll march you up and down the street and disgrace you in front of the whole town.

PATRICK: (In a girly voice) Promise?

MOTHER: (Looks at Patrick very surprised) Say "I am not a girl".

PATRICK: (Girly voice again) I am not a girl.

MOTHER: Say "I am a boy, I am not a girl".

PATRICK: (Still the girly voice) I am a boy, I am not a girl.

The fact that both her mother and sister refer to Patricia (Patrick) as *he* demonstrates that to them, Patricia is a man because she has male genitalia. They do not accept the way she sees herself and even force her to do *masculine* things, like playing football. Patricia's behaviour suggests that she clearly identifies with the feminine gender, yet society focuses more on her male biological features. For having been born with male genitalia, she is considered a man and every time she does something inappropriate or girly in front of an adult, she is punished, at home and also at school. The bullying becomes unbearable as Patricia grows up, and she decides to leave Tyreelin in search of a new place to belong.

Leaving Tyreelin is a fresh start, a new opportunity for Patricia. Trying to leave her old life behind, she changes her name to Kitten. Now finally a woman, she embarks on a road trip ⁶ to London where she meets many people. Her relationships with these new people help shape the way she sees herself, affirming more and more her identification with the feminine gender.

There is also another conflict, a historical one, apart from Kitten's own struggle, which is essential to the story: the conflict between the IRA and Britain. In this regard, Sara Villa has declared:

The IRA issue . . . is generally analyzed as another, additional form of trauma exorcised by the main character, Patrick-Patricia Kitten Braiden [*sic*], through an apparent fairy-tale ingenuity that allows him to survive both the psychological backlash of the guerrilla warfare and the one caused by the homophobic stigma that keeps despising, when not utterly negating, his transvestite identity. (The Irish Queer)

While I agree with Villa in that the political conflict is key to understand one side of the stigma, I think that the word *transvestite* is not accurate to describe the identity of Kitten, because she is not simply a man who likes to dress as a woman. She might be born a man but her gender identity is that of a woman, as “it is how Kitten refers to herself in the voice-over, and how the character, originally called Pussy, refers to herself in the source novel” (Woodward 207). If Kitten identifies as a woman, she is a woman, regardless of her biological sex. Calling her *transvestite* implies that the importance is once again placed upon her biological features rather than upon her own voice and identification.

A key scene in the film regarding this issue happens when Kitten is taken to the police station in London after a bomb explodes in the club where she was the previous night. She is the main suspect of placing the bomb after discovering in the hospital that she has male

⁶ This road trip formula is also used in *Transamerica* (2005), another film about a transexual woman in search of her family and a place to belong.

genitalia. The police think that she is a member of the IRA disguised as a woman. After the policemen have inflicted a lot of physical violence on her, she is told to make a statement about what happened the night of the bombing. Then she invents a story about her being a spy and killing terrorists by spraying perfume over them the same way she imagined a story about her conception back in school. Kitten's alternate stories can be seen as a "way of coping psychologically with the harsh and often violent treatment he receives from the people of his community, and as a result of his refusal to comply with the established gender norms" (Bowden). Every time Kitten has to face a stressful situation, she escapes to her own world, where she can be herself. It is her way of evading the stigma that surrounds her.

Breakfast on Pluto is, ultimately, a story about a transsexual woman finding support and acceptance. Unlike in *Boys Don't Cry*, where Brandon is not accepted, not even in the end, Patricia finds support and acceptance in the most unexpected place: her home town, Tyreelin. Surprisingly enough, this support comes from the most unexpected person: Father Liam, the town priest and Kitten's father.

Father Liam is actually a very interesting character who exemplifies the ideal, unprejudiced behaviour that society should have towards transsexual people. He helps Charlie (Kitten's best friend) when she gets pregnant and her husband dies, allowing her to stay at his house. Then, Kitten comes back to Tyreelin to help her father and Charlie and stays in Father Liam's house as well. Thus, a new family is created, formed by Kitten (a transsexual), Charlie (a single mother) and Father Liam. In this regard, Nicole Richter explains: "*Breakfast on Pluto* also posits an alternative model for the nuclear family. When Kitten's best friend Charlie becomes pregnant, they decide to raise Charlie's child as if they had created it together, biologically. In this relationship Kitten finds the love and intimacy she had been seeking all along" (165). Tyreelin is, surprisingly enough, the place where Kitten finds everything she longed for when she left.

As expected, the people in Tyreelin do not approve of this new family, as it is not the one they are used to seeing. Because of this, the people in town (especially old women) gossip about them. The old women in town (known for being extremely conservative) do not approve of Father Liam helping Kitten and Charlie, probably because his behaviour does not correspond with the dogma of the church, which is very intolerant. The old women in town expect Father Liam to condemn and exclude Kitten and Charlie, yet he does exactly the opposite. He helps them and embraces their differences.

In short, I think these two films portray very clearly the violence and stigma that the transsexual community is still facing nowadays, but there are important differences between them that need to be pointed out. While *Boys Don't Cry* chooses to raise awareness of these problems by highlighting the most violent and unjust behaviour that can possibly exist towards transsexuals, *Breakfast on Pluto* presents a more optimistic focus overall, demonstrating that different gender identities can and should be included in society, leaving old prejudices behind.

CONCLUSION.

Throughout these pages I have tried to enumerate all the issues that the transsexual people have to face, especially emphasising the violent stigma and discrimination placed upon them.

The main reason why transsexuality is stigmatized is because society assigns the sexual identity of a person by focusing only on the biological features. This implies that a person's sexual identity is fixed at birth. People can be either man or woman, depending on the genitalia they were born with. Moreover, this assigned sexual identity involves behaving in certain ways, following what gender theorists denominate gender roles. These roles are designated by society and must be performed at all times, as stated in Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, which explains that people behave by the rules of their assigned gender instead of behaving by their personal, preferred norms. Consequently, our behaviour is limited and completely conditioned by the sexual identity given to us at birth.

However, there are people who refuse to follow the social rules of gender. They are known as gender non-conforming people, as is the case of transsexuals. These people are not easily accepted by society, because the mental image of themselves (their gender) may not coincide with the sexual identity assigned to them and hence their behaviour is different from what is expected of them.

Thus, transsexuals have to face social exclusion, which can culminate in such ways as the brutal assassination of a transsexual person for no real reason other than close-mindedness and misconceptions, as shown in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. The fact that these brutalities can happen is enough reason to start educating society to become more open-minded towards different gender identities because, as *Breakfast on Pluto* demonstrates, transsexual people are actually ordinary people who do not deserve to be mistreated, but acknowledged and respected.

Works Cited

- Alex RR. Alex RR's channel. *Youtube*. Web. 27 Jun 2014.
 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvB_fqYWEoZnE6szHQMR8Ug/>
- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th Edition. Amer Psychiatric Pub Incorporated, 2013. Print.
- “Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression”. *American Psychology Association*. Web. 19 May 2014.
 <<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.pdf>>
- Appelrouth, Scott A. and Laura Desfor Edles. “Feminist and Gender Theories”. *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era*. California: Pine Forge Press, Sage Publications, Inc, 2011. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Bowden, Roisin. “The Paradigm of Gender in ‘Breakfast on Pluto’”. *Phylosophy Now*, NCAD. 27 Jan 2012. Web. 9 Jul 2014.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- . “Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender”. *Big Think*. 19 Feb 2011. Web. 19 May 2014.
 <<http://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>>
- “Definition of Terms: Sex, Gender, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation”. *American Psychology Association*. Web. 19 May 2014.
 <<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>>
- Felluga, Dino. “Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development”. *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. 31 Jan 2011. Purdue U. 16 Jun 2014.
 <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>>.
- Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

---. *Les Mots et les Choses (The Order of Things)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. Project Gutenberg. Web. 19 May

2014. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14969/14969-h/14969-h.htm#p36>>

“Gender Dysphoria Symptoms”. *PsychCentral*. 27 Jun 2014. Web. 27 Jun 2014.

Halberstam, Judith. “The Brandon Archive”. In *A Queer Time and Place*. New York: New

York University Press, 2005. 22-46. Print.

---. “The Transgender Look”. In *A Queer Time and Place*. New York: New York University

Press, 2005. 76-97. Print.

Jordan, Neil. *Breakfast on Pluto*. Perf. Cillian Muphy, Liam Neeson. Sony Pictures Classics,

2005. DVD.

Koh, J. “The History of the Concept of Gender Identity Disorder”. *Seishin Shinkeigaku Zasshi*

114.6 (2012): 673-80. *PubMed*. Web. 27 Jun 2014.

Lorber, Judith. “Night to his Day”. *Paradoxes of Gender*. Web. 19 May 2014.

<http://130.58.92.210/Students/phys29_2013/ElectronicReadings/Week%2012/Lorber.pdf>

---. *Paradoxes of Gender*. Yale University Press, 1994. Print.

MacNamara, Deirdre. *Foucault and Gender Feminism*. St. Peter’s College Philosophy Club.

Web. 19 May 2014.

<http://spelunkephobes.4t.com/foucault_and_gender_feminism.htm>

McCabe, Patrick. *Breakfast on Pluto*. Harper Perennial, 1998. Print.

Moi, Toril. “‘It Changed My Life’ (on the Relevance of Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second

Sex”) *The Guardian*. 12 Jan 2008. Web. 19 May 2014.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jan/12/society.simonedebeauvoir>>

Ovid. *Metamorphoseon*. University of Virginia Library. Web. 27 Jun 2014.

<<http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/metamorphoseonUVA.html>>

- Ovid, A.S. Kline (translator). *Metamorphoses*. University of Virginia Library. Web. 27 Jun 2014. <<http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm>>
- Peirce, Kimberly. *Boys Don't Cry*. Perf. Hillary Swank, Chloë Sevigny. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999. DVD.
- Person, E. S. and L. Ovesey. "Psychoanalytic Theories of Gender Identity". *The Sexual Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Print.
- "Psychology of Hate Crimes". *American Psychological Association*. Web. 30 May 2014. <<http://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/violence/hate-crimes-faq.pdf>>
- Reeves, Hazel and Sally Baden. *Gender and Development. Concepts and Definitions*. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Feb 2000. Web. 19 May 2014. <<http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/re55.pdf>>
- Richter, Nicole. "Trans Love in New Trans Cinema". *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*. Ed. Pamela Demory. 161-166. Google Books. Web. 5 Nov 2014.
- Sloop, John M. "Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation and Normativity". *Western Journal of Communication* 64.2, 2000: 165-189. Web. 8 Jul 2014. <http://discoverarchive.vanderbilt.edu/bitstream/handle/1803/3189/SloopDiscipliningTheTransgendered64.2_2000.pdf?sequence=1>
- Tucker, Duncan. *Transamerica*. Perf. Felicity Huffman, Kevin Zegers. Content Film International, 2005. DVD.
- University of Colombia. "Boys Don't Cry / Ciclo Sexualidad". *Podcast La Claqueta*. 24 Mar 2012. Podcast. Web. 10 Oct 2014.
- Villa, Sara. "The Irish Queer vs. the IRA Macho: The Subversive Tranny in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto*". *Bright Lights Film Journal* 68 (2010). Web. 6 Mar 2014. <<http://brightlightsfilm.com/68/68pluto.php>>

“What is the Difference between the Terms Gender and Sex?” *Saylor Academy*. The Saylor Foundation. Web. 19 May 2014. <<http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/themes/Edu/curriculum/curriculumQAAJAX.php?action=getcourseunitqas&courseunitid=8495>>

Wilder, Billy. *Some Like it Hot*. Perf. Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis. United Artists, 1959. DVD.

Woodward, Suzanne. *Imagining Possibilities: Trans Representations in Mainstream Film*. MA thesis. University of Auckland, 2011. Web. 6 Mar 2014. <<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/16575/02whole.pdf>>