

**How Images Reflect Complex Social Issues; Documentary Aesthetics and Contemporary  
Trans Representation in Media**

**By**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

When my younger brother came out to my family as transgender in 2020, he emailed us a letter. At the bottom of the email, he said, “I’ve included some links to helpful Instagram posts and I’m open to continuing the conversation if anyone wants to.” Today, some of the links no longer work. But one of them still takes you to a photo that describes “how to do better at getting new pronouns right.” His inclusion of Instagram links in his coming out letter made me feel as though he had spent a lot of time looking at these links himself, and that they would help me and my family to learn and support him in ways that he really needed.

When I think back to the months preceding his coming out, I can somewhat put together some behaviors and actions that I noticed in him that make the timing of his coming out make more sense. What was strange to me was that during this time, his screen time skyrocketed. He was always on his phone, and it was never clear exactly what he was doing or who he was talking to. He would put it down when I sat near him, almost like he didn’t want me to see what he was doing. As his older sister, I was concerned that he was dealing with cyberbullying or talking to strangers which was only ever a danger to young teens, or so I thought. After connecting the dots and talking to him about it, my brother told me his screen time was dedicated to researching in an attempt to make sense of his feelings about himself and his identity, whether that be on social media or by watching movies about trans stories.

Transgender and non-binary people face disproportionate mental health concerns, most prominently higher levels of depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide compared to the levels reported by their cisgender peers. A factor that significantly fuels this concerning disparity is the level of safety and acceptance that Trans and non-binary folks say they feel in environments in

which they exist each day. As a whole, society is very much a system that was built by and for cisgender people, and the binary structure is overwhelming to this day in schools, stores, local communities, and most physical spaces that are governed by rules and social standards.

Despite the increase of acceptance for LGBTQ communities, and increasing rates of people coming out as Trans and non-binary, the rules and spaces built on the basis of biological sex make it uncomfortable to be in. This is why many folks turn to different forms of media as places where they can reach people who they share commonalities with, see a representation of themselves and the issues that they face, and where they can go to form communities or ask questions. The purpose of this thesis is to identify how trans people and their struggles are depicted in modern media, specifically through contemporary documentary work, identifying how trans people are represented and how their stories are told to the world using aesthetics and different visual techniques.

In this thesis, I will analyze contemporary examples of trans representation in film by conducting a textual analysis on three films, studying how each documentary represents the trans subjects and trans experiences and focusing on the visual components that complement their spoken story. First I will research the harms faced by trans and nonbinary youth at home, in school, and in their local communities, and the impacts that these harms have on their mental health. Next I will study how film has acted as a space where trans folk can find representation. Here, I will study past documentary films, finding examples of groundbreaking and problematic portrayal of trans stories. Next I will conduct a textual analysis on three modern documentaries, focusing on aesthetics and how each story is told visually and verbally. Finally, I will argue what each documentary means in terms of the progress of trans representation in documentary film,

looking at how the filmmakers ability to manipulate aesthetics can insert their voices into the story.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The feeling of inclusion is of utmost importance today more than ever for all young people, but especially trans youth, who have “higher rates of depression, suicidality and self-harm, and eating disorders when compared with their peers” (Connolly et al., 2016). A risk factor that supports this statistic is a lack of support at home, in school, and in their communities. A high hate crime rate, a lack of anti-bullying rules in school that is specific to sexuality and gender expression, and verbal and physical abuse at home all contribute to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts in LGBT youth (Russel et al., 2016). At schools, a 2008 study from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reveals that “85% of transgender students reported verbal harassment, 49% experienced physical harassment in school, and 34% reported physical assault” at school (McGuire et al., 2010). While a 2019 version of this report shows that rates of harassment have dropped since 2008, the data have been stagnant since about 2015 (Kosciw et al., 2019).

### **Our Binary World**

While an increasing number of people are coming out as transgender or non-binary, many others, among them friends and family, are showing their support by sharing in these conversations. In particular, there seems to be a shared understanding that sex and gender are not the same things, but in the United States, there’s been resistance to adopting large-scale changes to many physical spaces; Bathrooms, clothes, and sports teams are still separated in compliance

with male or female genders; clothing stores still showcase a men's and a women's department, or a girl's and boys' department. While in some places, and for some brands, this certainly isn't the case anymore, it most definitely is in others. Many businesses have adopted "single-use" or "gender neutral" bathrooms, ordinarily with two for customers to choose from rather than just having a men's room and a women's room. But in places like K-12 schools, these changes are not that simple.

More Americans, however, are beginning to show acceptance and understanding of transgender and non-binary people, and issues related to gender, according to the 2022 Pew Research article, *Americans' Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues*. According to the article, while the majority of Americans think that a person's gender is determined by sex at birth, "nearly half of U.S. adults (47%) say it's extremely or very important to use a person's new name if they transition to a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth, and 34% saying they would use someone's new pronouns; eight out of ten Americans acknowledge that transgender people face some discrimination (Pew Research, 2022). There are disparities, however, in the notion that gender and sex assigned at birth can be different, the value of using a transgender person's new name and pronoun, as well as opinions on whether or not society has gone "too far" in accepting trans people, most notably when it comes to political affiliation and age. Democrats and younger Americans expressed greater support towards using new names and pronouns as well as supporting legislation to protect the rights of transgender people; Republicans and elderly Americans lean the opposite way (Pew Research, 2022). Although more people are showing their knowledge and understanding for trans rights and issues, support is still lagging. Overwhelmingly many people still believe that gender is determined by sex, that views on gender identity are changing too quickly, and that

transgender athletes should compete in sports according to their sex at birth. Ideologically, these numbers show that society is not yet at the point yet where people are willing to overwhelmingly vote in favor of protecting the rights of transgender people or of acknowledging the differences between gender and sex, and a lack of willingness to learn about transgender issues. “Moreover, rights guaranteed neither tolerance nor acceptance. And tolerance and acceptance often only benefit people who assimilate to dominant society values...The message of tolerance communicated: you can identify as LGBTQ, but don’t make a show of it. Rights and tolerance do not celebrate difference” (Robinson, pg 6, 2020).

### **The Home and Public**

Transgender and non-binary youth have been found to experience higher levels of child abuse in the home compared to their peers (Tobin & Delaney, 2017). A lack of family support has been found to promote higher levels of depression, substance abuse, homelessness, and other dangerous behaviors. This lack of family support, and the rejection of children after they come out, or when they show signs of their LGBTQ identity, contributes to the disparity in rates of homelessness of LGBTQ youth compared to cisgender, straight adolescents. In a 2012 study, researchers found that 68% of homeless youth are part of the LGBTQ community, who either ran away from home or were kicked out of their homes by their families (Robinson, 2020).

Transgender individuals reported high levels of family rejection in a 2016 study based on data from the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2008-2009)*. Data shared by 6,456 Transgender individuals found, “About 54 percent of participants experienced a low amount of family rejection, about 31 percent experienced a moderate amount of rejection and about 14 percent experienced a high amount of rejection”(Golub & Klein, 2016). Participants also

reported high levels of suicidal thoughts and struggles, and those who experienced high levels of family rejection were more likely to attempt suicide, over three times more likely than those who reported lower levels of rejection (Golub & Klein, 2016).

In his book, *Coming out to the Streets: LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness*, Brandon Andrew Robinson explains how homeless Transgender and Non-binary adolescents experience gender-based discrimination on the streets, due to the structures and rules of homeless shelters and similar programs (Robinson, 2020). Transgender individuals struggle to feel as though they belong in shelters and in programs that are supposed to support homeless populations, specifically gendered restrooms, showers and facilities, and clothing options that cater towards sex rather than gender, and ID cards that match old names (Robinson, 2020). These factors, combined with the mental health struggles that come with family rejection, lead to increased drug use, suicidality, depression, and further health concerns (Robinson, 2020).

Robinson begins by telling the story of Zoe, a young gender-expansive woman whom he met while volunteering on-site to study homelessness among LGBTQ youth in Texas. At a young age, Zoe turned to drugs after facing abuse from her father. In the seventh grade, she started living on the streets or with Child Protective Services. Zoe explained to Robinson that the abuse and treatment that she dealt with on the streets and in gender-segregated shelters is common for LGBTQ kids, who get “punished” for their gender expression and sexuality:

Zoe said police profiled her as a sex worker, a common experience of transgender and gender-expansive people of color on the streets. This ‘trans profiling’ led to police not only repeatedly stopping ZOE on the streets but also harassing her, ticketing her, checking her for warrants, and cycling her in and out of jail. Furthermore, social service

organizations and governmental services for people experiencing homelessness often segregate sleeping and showering arrangements based on the gender binary. As a consequence, Zoe experienced violence in shelter bathrooms. To ameliorate some of these difficulties she engaged in sex work and intimate encounters to obtain temporary shelter-ften at a hotel- and to earn money and get drugs. Essentially, she used her sexuality and gender expression to obtain resources that society failed to provide her. (Robinson, pg 5-6, 2020).

Later, Zoe found an LGBTQ shelter, where she had a place to shower and sleep, access to hormones, was able to change the name and gender marker on her ID, etc., but also had her sexual behaviors and gender expression controlled and policed (Robinson, pg 6, 2020).

While neglect and physical abuse pushed Zoe out of her house, fear surrounding a lack of family support on its own, even without direct rejection from the family, can also promote negative mental emotions and consequences and can affect the future outcomes of the child (Grossman et al., 2019). The Minority Stress Model, a phenomenon referenced in several psychological studies, argues that underrepresented populations, including transgender people, are “exposed to hostile and stressful social environments because of their minority status, leading to worse mental health outcomes than for cisgender and heteronormative populations” (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Minority Stress experiences that are common for transgender and non-binary people are “experiences of stigma, discrimination, and violence, which are linked to adverse health, particularly psychological distress” (Rood et al., pg 151, 2016). A 2016 study on this topic focused on the internal stressor of expecting rejection, which the research defined as, “an individual’s knowledge of society’s stance toward non majority individuals, and expectations



regarding the likelihood of stigma being enacted in a given situation as a result of having a minority status” found that this stressor is common among trans and non-binary individuals (Rood et al., pg 152, 2016). The Minority Stress Model and these internal stressors explain that trans and non-binary individuals avoid physical spaces to avoid being “outed against their wishes,” which included public restrooms, gyms, clothing stores, and public transportation (Rood et al., pg 152, 2016). One participant in the study, a 40-year old, white, gender-fluid person answered, “There is the knowledge that you’re going to walk into places and you will get treated differently; you will get looked at differently. It’s not like it might not happen. It’s not like it might happen. It’s going to happen at least at some point every day” (Rood et al., pg 157, 2016).

This internal stress was also found to be triggered when participants thought of being around people and family members who they knew before they transitioned. One participant answered, “Any time I’m in the presence of someone who knew me before— so, past family members, past friends, anybody like that—it’s almost like every muscle in my body is in a heightened state of alert and my blood pressure, I can almost feel it pumping. Every word they say, every word they don’t say, every flick of their eyes, everything they do is something that I’m focusing on and reading. So, constantly, I’m ready for them to say the wrong pronouns or use the wrong name or speak to me in some negative way even if they haven’t done it or aren’t going to” (Rood et al., pg 160, 2016).

## **The School**

At my old highschool in Connecticut, where my younger brother is a senior, he faces these uncomfortable binary systems every single day. There are no “gender-neutral” bathrooms at the school. If he needs to use the bathroom, he must plan to do so after school, or during class to ensure that he is alone and safe from bullying and harassment. Over the course of highschool, my brother has been harassed, yelled at with slurs in his direction while walking in the hallway, and much more. Unfortunately, there really isn’t anything systematically that he can do.

Sure, bullying has always been around in schools, but data suggests that this type of bullying is specific to having a non-cisgender identity that results in severe, adverse health and mental health concerns. Trans youth report disproportionate rates of harassment- both physical and verbal, and abuse at school compared to their cisgender peers. The school is historically a binary system where many do not have resources or accommodations for non-binary students, making these children feel out of place and potentially unsafe, which is a claim that has been showcased through my brother's experiences in school, and is a consistent finding among the literature on this topic (Paechter et al., 2021).

A 2008 study from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reports that the majority of trans students studied faced verbal harassment in school with 49% reporting physical harassment, and 34% reporting experiences of physical assault at school (McGuire et al., 2010). A 2019 version of this study shows that these rates dropped slightly from 2008 to 2015, but have since remained relatively stagnant (Kosciw et al., 2019). Trans students reportedly face bullying that is specific to their transgender or non-binary identity, usually in terms of being misgendered, deadnamed, called slurs, ridiculed, or having other hateful comments directed towards them. As reported in this specific study, teachers rarely stepped in to help (Paechter et al., 2021). Part of the reason why these rates are so high is due to the lack of rules against bullying in schools that protect or are expanded to include gender identity. 22 states, two territories, and Washington D.C. all have bullying laws that specifically prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2022). While this covers most of the west and east coasts of the country, only 51% of LGBTQ students are actually protected by these laws. 24 other states have no laws that protect LGBTQ students from bullying, and two additional states, South Dakota and Missouri, have laws that prevent schools

from making rules that protect LGBTQ students as a whole from bullying (Movement Advancement Project, 2022). Some of the states that do not have laws protecting LGBTQ students have school rules and orders, but data from the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey report suggest that these rules have no impact on promoting safer environments and successful protections from bullying (GLSEN, 2021). School laws and rules exclude LGBTQ students, and specifically trans and non-binary students from anti-bullying protections, which puts them at greater risk of being tormented and tyrannized while at school.

While bullying clearly contributes to mental health concerns, it is also difficult for children to navigate spaces in which they feel excluded, unrepresented, and accepted. Bills that censor curriculums in school, whether they take the form of “Don’t Say Gay” bills, or bills that focus on Critical Race Theory, have been in heavy circulation around the country. Hostile School Climate Bills, according to the Movement Advancement Project (2022), are bills that are included in this pool, many of which specifically focus on LGBTQ students and issues. The bills can “out” students to their parents at home regardless of the safety risk that may occur for the student, allow teachers not to respect a student’s pronouns or preferred name, and ban trans athletes from competing on sports teams. These bills were introduced in 40 states from 2020-2021 (Movement Advancement Project, 2022). In 2022, 280 bills were introduced by March alone, which is an exponential increase from the previous two years combined. Regardless of whether these bills are passed or not, the Trevor Project explains that many LGBTQ youths follow the debates and news covering bills of this nature online, which alone negatively impacts their mental health. This is driven by mostly fear and anger, and 85% of trans youth reported negative emotions evoked by these bills (The Trevor Project, 2022).

In terms of specific legal actions, transgender athletes are the targets of many recent media and legal news. Transgender athletes are pushed out of athletic teams and competitions, and it seems like there is no middle ground for them to have fun and compete. They are banned from competing with people who share the same gender identity as them, over fears of having an unfair physical advantage, not “really” having that identity and only wanting to win or having other negative ulterior motives. If they compete on a team that corresponds to the sex that they were assigned at birth, they may fear for their safety and open themselves up to feelings of loneliness, not belonging, etc. Currently, 18 states have laws in place that ban transgender kids from competing on sports teams that align with their gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2022). While 32 states have no laws that ban participation, this number may be a bit misleading. In numerous states that do not have a ban, discriminatory practices are in place that make it more difficult for trans students to compete. Most of these practices are legal barriers, such as requiring legal or medical documentation of the child’s transition, as well as approval from parents. States that exemplify this are Alaska, Delaware, Illinois, and Missouri, to name a few, with other states leaving the decision up to individual schools rather than having a consistent decision (transathlete.com, 2021).

Bathrooms, and who has the right to use a bathroom that aligns with their gender identity, are another problem for transgender students in schools. While Title IX of the Federal Civil Rights Act protects the right of anyone to attend school safely regardless of sex, religion, race, etc. But the Trevor Project argues that schools with strict bathroom policies are discriminatory because, “if transgender students cannot safely use the bathroom, they are effectively excluded from public schools” (2018). The Trevor Project, based on data from the 2015 GLSEN Report, explains that “70 percent of transgender students said they’d avoided bathrooms because they

felt unsafe or uncomfortable,” and, “60 percent of transgender students had been required to use a bathroom or locker room that did not match the gender they live every day” (Kosciw et. al, 2016). Since this data was collected, several court cases over this issue have been both as they relate to schools, but also general facilities in public spaces. Aside from living through these court cases and legislation, 85% of trans and non-binary kids report that even watching news reports that cover bathroom bills and similar laws negatively impacts their mental health (The Trevor Project, 2022). In response to laws that ban trans athletes from playing on the sports team that aligns with their gender identity, and laws that prevent LGBTQ youth from accessing hormone therapy and puberty blockers, 74% and 73% respectively said they felt “anger” when considering these laws (Trevor Project, 2022).

### **Resources at School**

Resources for LGBTQ students at schools that promote acceptance have positive impacts on mental health such as increased feelings of support and belonging. For transgender and non-binary students, it is important and beneficial to have clubs and resources that support the acceptance of gender identity when building a safer school climate. Student clubs, supportive faculty, inclusive rules and curriculum all work together to help LGBTQ students feel safe and included in school, according to the 2021 National School Climate Survey. The survey found that only about a third of schools have active GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) clubs, but a majority of students do not go to meetings because of scheduling or interpersonal conflicts (GLSEN, 2021). What almost all students shared, however, is that their schools have at least one supportive staff member, a sentiment shared by 96.3% of students (GLSEN, pg 52, 2021). This statistic is of great importance to mental health benefits, as having just one supportive person to talk with can

decrease feelings of exclusion and loneliness, according to GLSEN (2021). In case with supportive staff members, students reported the highest levels of comfortability when confiding in a teacher or mental health professional at school, but were the least comfortable going to a coach or P.E. teacher (GLSEN, pg 52, 2021). Students felt mostly neutral on having security personnel at their school, which includes their comfortability in confiding with these people. But students who report feeling comfortable with a supportive teacher or other members of the school staff said that it makes the world of a difference.

Having resources at school such as a GSA club helps the mental health and feelings of belonging in trans and non-binary students, as these clubs contribute positively to school climate. 34.8% of schools with a GSA in 2021 said that they experienced less frequent anti-LGBTQ remarks, less online and in-person victimization, they felt less unsafe, and were less likely to skip school (GLSEN, pg 59-61, 2021). As a whole, the National School Climate Survey found that LGBTQ students in schools with a GSA reported lower levels of depression and suicidal thoughts than students who attended schools without GSA clubs (GLSEN, pg 62, 2021). Teachers can also help students feel more comfortable and safer; GLSEN suggests that because of the importance a supportive teacher can have on a student's mental health, there are ways that teachers can show their support by promoting themselves and their classroom as a safe space for LGBTQ students (2021). This can be as simple as having pride flags and posters in the classroom or even just having "safe space" posters and stickers in their rooms. "Half of students (50.1%) who had seen a Safe Space sticker or poster were able to identify a high number of supportive staff (11 or more) in their schools, compared to less than a fifth of students (17.8%) who had not seen a Safe Space sticker or poster at school" (GLSEN, pg 68, 2021).

Despite resources and school members that make students feel like they belong, it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to ignore how binary structures and policies may unintentionally promote exclusion. For example, even though a student may have an amazing teacher, they may struggle to have another teacher treat them the same way. Only 8.5% of surveyed students in the 2021 report reported that their school or school district had policies in place that were specific to navigating a transgender or nonbinary student's school experience and resources, which could take the form of policies in place that addresses how to use preferred names and pronouns, how students go about updating this, how to change school records, or which bathroom to send a student to. Even if students are faced with acceptance and kindness from their teachers, our schools were built for a binary world, and many are not yet equipped to accommodate anyone who does not fit into this system.

### **Trans Representation in Media: Documentary Film**

The place that many trans and non-binary people have turned to, historically, is film. Documentaries have been a platform where viewers can look to find a representation of themselves in terms of their identity, as well as the struggles that they face in the real world. In a broader sense, trans representation in film has been complemented with issues that range from negative portrayals of trans people to issues of the casting of trans subjects of cisgender actors to play transgender ones, usually using stereotypes in order to portray the written subject. While instances of early representation in media are visible throughout history, the negative and sometimes transphobic nature of these portrayals harms the community misrepresenting trans individuals and their stories. Examples of film that negatively portrays trans subjects is *Dressed to Kill (1980)*, where the main subject, Dr. Robert Elliot “dresses up to kill women” and struggles with the inability to have gender-affirming surgery, and thus takes his anger out on



women through a murderous rage, a term also known as ‘femicide’. This is a dangerous representation because it paints trans men as dangerous to women, which is simply not factual (Henley, 2021). *Silence of the Lambs (1990)*, is very similar to *Dressed to Kill* in this sense, as the subject, Bill, also plays into the complications of “being born in the wrong body,” though it is still a dangerous depiction as it casts him to be a murderous, rage-filled villain who is taking his personal struggles out on women (Henley, 2021). This theme of gender dysphoria linking to femicide was a commonality of many trans films and subjects from the 1960s to 1990s. In the 1990s, we saw a shift from this negative, monstrous portrayal of trans subjects, to where trans subjects began to be represented more accurately, in a more humanistic way, in large part due to documentary film where trans subjects represented themselves, telling their own story on screen.

### **The Progression of Representation in Documentary Film: *Paris is Burning (1990)***

*Paris is Burning (1990)* is an example of the evolution of trans representation in film, where subjects are complex and multi-layered, sharing that there is more to them and there is more that they deal with in life than just the typical performative concept of “drag” and “drag queens.” *Paris is Burning* took an intimate approach to learning about the subjects themselves and components of the trans experience, taking time to discuss their dreams and desires, as well as hardships that they have had to face to get them to where they were, or what things brought them to the drag balls in Harlem. The film discussed issues that ranged from expulsion from family members of an early age, to the “houses” of the drag scene, which were families that individuals were accepted in to that offered mentorship, love, acceptance, and support, run by “house mothers” and “house fathers” like subjects Angie Xtravaganza and Willi Ninja, who attacked young members of the drag ball scene to fill the “void” of not having their family by their side anymore. It also discussed intersectional issues of race and gender, explaining how

many subjects had to learn how to live and survive in “white America” by modifying their behavior in terms of how they lived, looked, dressed, or spoke. The way that they “walked” at the drag balls was an outlet for them to fight for themselves and fight for their place in society, without actual violence by “reading” other individuals. “Reading” is different than “throwing shade” as multiple subjects explain, by identifying and playing on differences between people that extending past the person’s race, gender, sexuality, role, or even position in society, and instead learning about them at a different level before being able to poke fun. The subjects were humanized by expressing their hopes and dreams, with many of these dreams being typical for any regular person, or anyone in an artistic field like modeling or acting, saying that they just want to live a normal life, finding a perfect partner and getting married, earning enough money to live a comfortable life, or making a name for themselves in their field, finding acceptance from people in places all over the world for being themselves and being talented at what they do. All of these stories, and the ability for each subject to have the screen time to be able to speak for themselves, enabled the film to act as a groundbreaking example of documentary work that dives into the complexities of identity and the struggles that trans individuals face, presenting them in a more realistic light, as well as broader theme of the New York City Latinx and Black drag scene (Oishi, pg 252, 2015).

However, as monumental as this documentary is, it was met by its fair share of criticism. While the documentary brought with it a significant amount of cultural change, it fell short on having that same effect on the lives of the subjects in the film, leaving them behind after the documentary concluded. In the short-term, some subjects did receive recognition from stars like Madonna, who hired two members of the House of Xtravaganza to join her as dancers on her tour, as well as a few other dancing and modeling bookings here and there for other subjects.

Real life took over for many subjects, with issues such as the AIDS crisis and high murder rates for trans women of color taking over. Before filming had wrapped up, one of the main subjects in the documentary, Venus Xtravaganza was found murdered in a hotel room, and house mother Angie Xtravaganza losing her life to AIDS just seven years later (Green, 1993). Other members of the film spoke out against the director, Jennie Livingston, saying that they felt betrayed by her fame from the film, and how they saw none of these benefits (Green, 1993). In a 1993 New York Times article titled, "Paris has Burned," Pepper LaBeija, who was featured in the documentary, told the New York Times;

I feel betrayed. When Jennie first came, we were at a ball, in our fantasy, and she threw papers at us. We didn't read them, because we wanted the attention. We loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she told us that when the film came out we would be all right. There would be more coming. And that made me think I would have enough money for a car and a nice apartment and for my kids' education. Because a number of years ago, to please my mother, I took a little break from being a 24-hour drag queen, and so I have a daughter, 15, and a son ready for college. But then the film came out and -- nothing. They all got rich, and we got nothing.

Although the documentary itself exemplified the progression of trans representation in film over the course of the late 1900s, the production power and intentions of the director over the subjects brings into question the role of bias in documentaries. Specifically, ones that are supposed to elevate the voices of the underrepresented, which in this case, is trans folk and their stories. In this thesis, I will analyze contemporary examples of trans representation in film by conducting a textual analysis on three films, studying how each documentary represents the trans

subjects and trans experiences and focusing on the visual components that complement their spoken story. I will ask the following question; ‘How does the manipulation of visual elements of film such as color, film style and story structure portray the experiences and struggles of trans subjects in documentary film?’ And then follow-up by asking; ‘Can directors tell the story of trans subjects for them by having the power to manipulate these elements, and can their personal biases affect how the subjects and their stories are told?’ in order to identify whether or not the director was able to muffle the voice of the subjects with their own ideas or intentions.

### **Contribution**

When underrepresented communities are spoken for and about rather than enabled to speak, I argue that it reinforces a cycle of repression that many people are already stuck in. An element of visual storytelling that can enable this issue is the power of the director to manipulate visual elements of the story that complement spoken words. My method will expand on existing quantitative research on trans harms faced in society and issues of negative representation of trans individuals in film by evaluating existing documentaries that focus on transgender and non-binary subjects and issues that they face. The goal of this will be to investigate how trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people speak on these issues themselves, and how the many themes I have explored in my literature review thus far are portrayed visually, investigating the ways of which directors manipulate the production elements of documentary storytelling, and if this ability can muffle or promote the voice of trans subjects.

I will use the method of a textual analysis to investigate further how this community specifically speaks on this issue, and what methods are used to show their experience living through the many issues and topics outlined in my literature review. This will bring a new

perspective to my research thus far and enable me to better determine the progression of trans representation in media based on the techniques employed in contemporary documentary and how the visual components of the story affect the audience. Finally, I will evaluate the director's intention behind making the film to understand the overall efficacy of documentary aesthetics to represent trans experiences considering the control that directors have over this element of documentary film.

### **Chapter 3: Written Project Overview**

For my method, I will be conducting a textual analysis on documentary films that cover trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming subjects and their life experiences. I hope that watching these documentaries will provide a more realistic perspective that will better explain data and statistical information shared by quantitative research on issues faced by trans individuals as there will be subjects who experience these themes and topics first-hand in everyday life. The goal of this method is to identify how trans and nonbinary communities are represented by subjects in modern documentary film by analyzing the commonalities between their stories, and how their stories are told linguistically and visually.

In each documentary I will take the traditional routes of a textual analysis of By analyzing three documentary films on the themes explored in the literature review, I will gain a deeper understanding of the social structures and norms that surround them as well as get a first-hand account of how it feels to live through these themes and topics by listening to the subjects speak about their experiences, and viewing the visual elements that are employed to complement their words. Finally, I will research the director to try to determine their intentions

behind making the film to determine whether or not their biases affected the way that they aesthetically showed the themes shared in each story.

### **Textual Analysis**

A textual analysis is a methodology that consists of a set of data, ranging from newspapers, to paintings, to film, where the form of data serves as the “text” (Smith, pg 1, 2017). A textual analysis can involve content analysis and rhetorical criticism, where the material is analyzed in a qualitative manner, evaluating material of the text itself, and evaluating how the construct of the message can be improved, or what affect it has on the broader interpretation of the concept (Smith, pg 1, 2017). Textual analysis can be applied by film and broader media by evaluating the audience to understand the affect that the material has on the audience (Smith, pg 3, 2017). In this thesis, this will involve identifying how the aesthetics of the film makes the audience feel, exploring how manipulating visual production elements complement the spoken story.

I will conduct a textual analysis on three documentaries that include trans, non-binary and gender-nonconforming subjects and their stories as they relate to the variety of themes included in the above literature review. The themes that I am prioritizing are mental health, navigating physical spaces during teenage and young-adult years like schools, bathrooms, and other public areas, in-person groups and communities like sports teams and clubs, family, and social life. Within each documentary, I will use this method to understand at a deeper level the social constructs surrounding the trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming communities themselves and how these norms and societal expectations affect the daily lives of the subjects in each film. I will look at what they say verbally in terms of how they share their story and how

they discuss gender and gender identity, both negatively and positively, doing this for one documentary at a time. To expand on this, I will focus on the visual and structural parts of the film. This will add to the research conducted in my literature review, since instead of looking at the topic and subjects themselves, it uses a way of looking at how the subjects speak on issues and how the issues are portrayed visually and verbally, making the researcher evaluate the topic in a more three-dimensional way than you would without using this method (Hardey & Phillips, pg. 10, 2011). My topic itself requires an analysis of this type for these very reasons as traditional quantitative approaches fall short of helping us understand how newer and more modern concepts and will gain this understanding by considering both language and aesthetics. By the end of my analysis, I will have a greater understanding of the topics discussed in my literature review, by analyzing how the aesthetic elements of the film add to each story, and how they give the audience a wider understanding of each topic. Finally, I will consider the filmmaker's intentions to determine if their voice could be heard from the visual elements that they manipulated, which will speak to what trans representation looks like in contemporary media, and how much power the subjects have over the telling of their own story.

*In Practices of Looking* (2017), Sturken and Cartwright explain that we make meaning of the world through understanding different objects, images, and entities in their specific cultural contexts, meaning that we only "see" the world and make meaning of it through representation, rules, and conventions (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 18-19, 2017). Societal norms, gender, racial, and class-specific codes and expectations are formed in the individual based on their interpretation of the images that we see, and how we are trained by society to see them (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 33. 2017). Parts of the image that alter our interpretation of it are its color, composition, perspective, and sociohistorical contexts (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 33, 2017).

Brands take advantage of this when launching ad campaigns, using certain images and colors to get their audience to recognize what the brand is, but also take an emotional element away from viewing the image. When images are altered or composed in a way that are intended to have an impact, especially an emotional one, key audience member experiences that are targeted are feelings of belonging, resistance, agency, and autonomy (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 55, 2017). When we view a text, we see what we see based on what we actually see, and what we think we should see because of the context that we give an image. This context comes from social constructs and norms, but from the viewers themselves, whose interpretation of an image is informed by their class, identity, cultural background, education, and various other levels of their personas (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 60, 2017). Producers are aware of this and are aware that the concepts shown are created by the text's own specific ways of looking (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 104-105, 2017). Different images and their portrayal invite certain responses from certain viewers, in terms of the structure of the image, how the subject is put into their specific cultural context, and the aesthetic components of the text (Sturken and Cartwright, pg 105, 2017).

As I watch these films, the specific visual and structural elements that I will focus on are use of color, recurring themes, story structure, and film style. Color is an element of visual storytelling that can be manipulated in a variety of ways to create a certain mood or invoke a particular feeling from the audience. Color psychology explains that the audience perceives color before movement, it can be just as important as the narrative itself (Berens, pg 6, 2014). Color affects and invokes emotion from the viewer, as nerve centers in the brain are affected by the electric impulses of light and color, altering one's hormones and feelings (Berens, pg 11, 2014). In addition, different colors evoke different emotions. Warmer colors like red are exciting and



intense, while cooler colors like blue are calmer and more peaceful. When paired with language, the color used in a scene can be closely tied to the emotion that the audience is purposely pushed to feel. Viewers commonly tie yellow with happiness, blue with sadness, and red with anger (Bernes, pg 12-13, 2014). Color is used to move and affect audiences' emotions and can be just as complex as subjects and the storyline itself. I will analyze what colors are used to describe emotions when subjects discuss feelings and mental health, as well as what colors complement each topic. I will compare these findings across documentaries to determine if certain colors and tones are commonly chosen by the producer to make the audience feel a certain way about the different topics that are presented.

In terms of recurring themes, I will discuss how the same topics are shown visually across and within the documentaries, taking note of what these trends are both in terms of topic and aesthetic moves. For example, how is the emotion of exclusion and loneliness depicted across each film? This will likely include many different visual tools such as color, focus, camera moves and angles, and broader elements of symbolism. The story structure of each documentary is another component that I will focus on in my textual analysis. Most documentaries take the form of a three-act structure, with each part representing a different point of the subject's journey. Act One usually establishes the subject and the conflict or problem that they are facing. Act Two shows the subject battling these challenges and working to overcome them. Act Three shows the resolution, with the subject either achieving or failing to reach the goal that they set for themselves in the beginning. It also tends to follow a chronological order, with Act One set at an earlier point in time than Act Three. This structure does not necessarily have to be linear and in some cases can take a cyclical shape, where struggles come and go at different parts of the film, with conflict and resolution repeating more than once. In each documentary, I anticipate

that the structure will take the form of three acts as this is very typical, and I will note what struggles and types of subject growth take place in each act of the film. Lastly, I will analyze the film style itself, which can have some of the same effects on the audience that color has. The film style is the type of technique that a director uses to create the film and can include color, sound, lighting, camera angles and more general cinematic techniques. In documentary film, the camera takes a more passive approach, remaining in the background without drawing in much attention to itself, so that the audience can focus on the subjects throughout the film. The narrative and themes discussed within the documentary steer the style of the film, as color, sound, and camera focus are manipulated in a way that complements the emotion of each scene. I anticipate that in each documentary, close-ups will be favored in many scenes, as they capture the emotion of the subject as the camera is positioned at a more intimate angle than more-establishing medium and long shots. I also predict that the lighting of these documentaries will be softer because such lighting invokes a more comfortable, intimate mood. The tone of the lighting may differ depending on the context of the conversation, as warmer lighting can make the shot look active and uplifting, while cooler, more blue-toned lighting can make the shot feel sad, calm, or solemn, and the contrast of the light and shadows cast onto the subject can increase the severity of these emotions (Renée, 2017).

### **Aesthetics and Truth**

In his article, *Documentary Films and the Problem of "Truth,"* author, Richard M. Blumenberg discusses the effects that aesthetics can have on truth, whether that be the truth of an event or the truth of what an object looks like, and that filmmakers must keep this in mind when manipulating production elements and in the editing process to ensure that their biases do not scew the truth in this way,

A different camera angle produces a different “truth” of an action... So too, of course, with lenses, color, zoom shots, frame rate speed, framing, film stock, sound, and, especially editing. The very process fiction filmmakers use aesthetically to structure their works pose ethical considerations for the documentary filmmaker. The question, “How much of the truth of the actual event or object am I manipulating?” requires ethical answers not influenced by artistic decisions (Blumenberg, pg 20, 1977).

Blumenberg suggests that there are many ethical decisions to take into account, specifically, the choice of subject matter, separating an action from the action around it, the public showing of private events, the creation of legitimacy through means of cinematic manipulations, the imposed judgment of the filmmaker on a particular event, and “playing to the group” or editing the film in a way that caters to the intended audience, showing them what they want to see (Blumenberg, pg 20, 1977). If any of these elements are chosen in a way that promotes the intentions and beliefs of the filmmaker, rather than sticking to the story of the subject and the subject’s motivations behind participating in the documentary, then the truth may be warped (Blumenberg, pg 22, 1977). After conducting the textual analysis on each documentary, I will take Blumenberg’s concerns about manipulating the truth by manipulating aesthetic elements into account to determine whether or not any of the visual elements negatively impacted the subject’s storytelling.

#### **Chapter 4: Documentary Analysis**

For my textual analysis, I studied three different documentaries that focused on trans subjects and the struggles, discrimination, and positivity that they face and find in their day to day lives. The topics discussed in my literature review are visible in each documentary. The

main topics and themes that the documentaries focused on, regardless of the main theme of the documentary itself are mental health, bathroom legislation, politics, social relationships within the school, community, and familial relationships. While each of these documentaries show positive relationships and safety within the home for the overwhelming majority of the subjects, which is not a luxury that many LGBTQ children have at home themselves, each documentary shows the difficulties faced and toll that discrimination and adversity has on their mental health, even with a strong support system. When choosing which documentaries to analyze, I wanted to choose ones that were recent, and focused primarily on the past two to three presidential terms, focused on mainly U.S. subjects and U.S.-specific events such as legislation and news clips, that had the subjects telling their own stories without the disruption of cisgender narration. All these factors led me to choose three films that took place from 2014 to 2021, which checked all of these boxes, so that the diverse experiences and subjects in each film will follow and share some of the same experiences in terms of when they are growing up, and what they view in the media. The documentaries that I analyzed were; *Transhood* (2020), *Changing the Game* (2021), and *The Trans List* (2016). In my analysis for each film, I will discuss the general storyline and subjects, include quotations that show specific verbiage used for different themes, discuss story structure, camera moves, color, lighting, and similar film style techniques that alter how the visuals are interpreted by the audience.

### ***Transhood* (2020)**

*Transhood*, an HBO documentary, follows the story of four different families from Kansas City and their lives over the course of five years, navigating through transitioning, undergoing medical interventions, dealing with backlash from family, schools, and the media, and shows people discovering their gender and who they are while growing up as average

teenagers and children in America. While each child and family have unique experiences and face different struggles that are specific to them, they all share common experiences of being excluded from different areas of their community, cutting off family members who are not accepting of the child's transition and identity, undergoing medical interventions and emotional doctor's visits, and the struggles that come with starting high school and dating. The film focuses on four children, Phoenix, Leena, Jay, and Avery, who discuss their thoughts and feelings around growing up and transitioning. The documentary also applies an additional lens to the family members who are present every step of the way, and who also have to adjust and change.

Phoenix is the youngest subject, and his story takes a different turn from the rest. Assigned as male at birth, Phoenix was only four years old at the start of filming. He introduces himself to the camera proudly, and the people in the community call him a "girl boy." Before Phoenix was introduced, wide shots and medium shots of peace, love, and rainbow signs established the love and warmth of the home, accompanied by warm, yellow lighting. The following scene shows Phoenix and his mom reading *Jacob's New Dress*, which is a children's book about a boy who likes to wear dresses and explores challenging gender roles from the perspective of a child. A close up shot on Phoenix and his mom shows the viewer the love between them, and the peace that they feel with each other, which lets the audience see in detail their body language and eye contact. The lighting is warm further supporting this tone. Phoenix's parents were then introduced in a medium shot, but close enough to see the emotion in their faces. His father explains that Phoenix simply refers to himself as a "girl boy," and would correct people if they said he was a girl. They allowed him to wear dresses and explore his own gender and how he likes to express himself without too much interference, as he was still too young to

fully grasp what gender and identity mean. His parents referred to him as “gender nonconforming, non-binary, gender expansive, gender awesome,” etc.

They said that they didn’t have a good term to call him and tried to refrain from using the pronouns ‘his’ or ‘her,’ and instead focused on Phoenix just being Phoenix. The next scene with Phoenix was at a church service in their local community, honoring members who are part of the LGBTQ community. The lighting seemed defined with yellow tint, which led me to feel at peace and comfortable in the environment that was being shown. Phoenix, with the help of his parents, got up on stage and announced to the church that he is a “girl boy.” A close up on his face showed the smile that spread from cheek to cheek as the congregation cheered for him and shared their support. The camera was then positioned at Phoenix’s height, showing him walking hand-in-hand with other children, and the acceptance that radiated around the room. The motion that came with these shots felt carefree and offered almost a childlike joy as they bounced down the hallway.

This beginning is the first part of the classic three-act documentary structure, with Act One being the introduction to himself and his family, and the primary conflict, which is the disconnect between his gender identity and sex assigned at birth, but also Phoenix’s inability to fully understand who he is at this point in time. The parents contributed to this conflict by questioning whether Phoenix would identify as a “girl boy” forever, and they worried about what his gender identity might look like as he grew older.

About a year and a half later in the Spring of 2014, Phoenix started to share his fears about growing up, which took a toll on his parents. In a tight shot with gray and blue-tinted lighting, the parents said that Phoenix’s paternal grandparents refuse to accept Phoenix for

challenging gender norms and trying to figure out his identity. Additionally, Phoenix often informed his parents that he was afraid of them dying, because he didn't want to be left with someone who would make him use the boy's bathroom, or not let him wear dresses. Although the documentary did not show Phoenix saying this himself, the statement about his fears were accompanied by wide and medium shots of him sitting against the wall as his siblings played, or of him in a dark corner of the room, looking upset. The camera angle looked down on him, making him seem small. Hearing Phoenix express these fears led to emotional hardship for his mother, who was worried that dealing with Phoenix identifying as a girl, and potentially being transgender, was already too much for her to handle; she wasn't sure if she could manage it. Outside on the porch, the camera frames the mother as an extreme close-up. She shares worries that her older daughter is not getting enough attention from the parents, which is no fault of Phoenix's, but not fair to the older child. She also shares that their youngest son had already started wearing his sister's old clothes and that he played with her toys as a toddler, to which the mom remarks, "Please don't be a boy, don't be transgender, don't be gender non-conforming. I can't have two." This sound bite was accompanied by a tight shot on the mother's face and most prominently, her eyes, which showed the pain and sadness that came with feeling this worry, but also with saying such a comment out loud.

A few months later in the summer of 2016, the parents shared that they had cut off the dad's parents completely from their lives and the children's lives, and that they are considering getting a divorce or separating. They shared these updates in the kitchen, where the light was low-key. There was a red wall behind them, which led to the scene feeling tense and emotional without verbally sharing the intimate details of the decision and the changes that will come to their family. At the playground, Phoenix's older sister of two years, Lotus, shared that she hoped

her parents would not get a divorce, but that it would be okay either way. The motion of the camera following her around the jungle gym accompanied by the nature in her backyard and sunlight, made the scene feel a bit busy, but not necessarily negative, which seemingly matched Lotus' thought process and emotions regarding the divorce. Back at home, Phoenix was barely visible behind a clothing rack in his room, while the mom shared that Phoenix was "just kinda fine" to the whole divorce situation. While Phoenix did not add anything verbally to the scene, the close-up on his face as he stood behind racks of clothes, shadowed by the walls and shirts, the darkness and pain on his face suggested that he may not have been as "fine" about the change as his mother claimed.

Both of these scenes encompass Act Two, which is when the subject battles the main conflict of the story. For Phoenix and his parents, this conflict deals with family changes and divorce, as well as starting school and entering a new area of the community where he must deal with his ever-changing and developing identity. The third act and next part of this struggle, where he starts to overcome the issue, is foreshadowed in the next scene with Phoenix and his family in early 2017. The scene opens at a slow, yet fast pace of Phoenix's siblings playing in a darkened room in the house with red paint on the walls. A sudden cut to a medium shot shows Phoenix run into the room in red flannel-printed "boy" clothes, going about his business. As he joins his siblings, a voice-over from his mother explains that one day Phoenix decided to go back to living as a boy. She says that boys should not wear dresses or "boy clothes," and that he is a boy through and through, which he audibly shares with his mother, once again standing behind his clothing rack. As he plays outside, his parents we hear his parents blame each other for the fluidity in his early gender identity. His mother says that she thinks his father encouraged Phoenix the whole time, pushing him to seem gender nonconforming. But the father argues that



the whole thing is a mystery, and entering the school system and being around new people and peers at school might have made him think about what other boys do, or how they dress at school. During this back-and-forth, Phoenix plays outside, mostly in solitude but occasionally with his sister. The choice to interrupt the conversation by cutting to Phoenix positions him at the middle of the argument, literally and figuratively.

By the end of the act, the focus is more on the parents rather than Phoenix. The mom is shown first outside of the home with natural lighting, which feels gray and on the darker side despite the brightness of the sun, speaking in a way that contradicts her original point of view that she held in the beginning of the film. She makes her ex-husband out to be a monster, and shares that “children are not transgender,” and that “it was a mistake,” meaning allowing Phoenix to question and explore his gender identity. She also shared, with the camera zoomed into her face, that if Phoenix were to question his identity again, she would “strongly prevent herself from combusting like a volcano” and she would put him into therapy immediately so the questions and thoughts of gender identity would be repressed instead of considered. Next, the camera focuses on his father, who is still confused about what made Phoenix want to go back to being a boy, but if another change happens in the future, then he would support Phoenix with love no matter what. This conversation fades into the final scene of Phoenix’s journey, where he and his dad stand outside of their house on the porch, shoulder to shoulder. While his dad tells Phoenix this same sentiment, Phoenix chooses to hide his face when his dad mentions his boyhood and male identity, with the camera focusing on the tears that are held in his eyes, and his inability to make eye contact with his father. While Phoenix does not do anything verbally to hint at the fact that he is struggling with his identity or agrees or disagrees with the perception that he is a boy, the camera angle and focus on his hidden face gives the impression that there

may be more to Phoenix and his story than what is being shared to the audience, and maybe even his parents. Phoenix, a young and quiet subject, was presented as a more dynamic subject than he let on with the help of close-up shots and lighting moves that manipulated the color of the scene, playing with the types of emotion and intensity of each scene and topic shared. Phoenix's story shows the struggles that parents have with their children's transition, and the nonlinear fashion of gender and gender identity.

The second subject in this film, and closest in age to Phoenix is Avery, who was seven years old at the start of filming. Avery, a much more verbal subject and personality, shares a lot more emotion with the audience, as she simply says more than Phoenix over the course of her story. We first see Avery sitting on the edge of a pool dipping her feet in the water. The camera begins underwater, showing her legs swinging in slow-motion, suggesting to the audience that the subject is a child without giving any judgment about her gender. Before we get to know Avery, the camera pans up to her face and she is asked the question, "How have you changed as a person since we first started filming?" To this, we see Avery's face and pink hair for the first time in a tight-shot. She responds, "I started off not really knowing who I was 'cause, I mean, I was a kid. I was 7 and I'm 12 now."

Avery's mother then provides context about her daughter's transition. In a classic interview shot, she explains that Avery knew she was a girl since she was very young and began her social transition as early as pre-K. It was then that Avery started to assert herself to her peers and teachers, opting for pink dresses and sparkly shoes, and sharing that she would rather sacrifice her friendships and lose the people in her life who did not accept her instead of giving up her femininity and identity as a girl. Her mother explains that other parents might cry child abuse at the parents of young trans children, and that no child has a medical intervention before

they reach puberty, as it is simply impossible to do this before then. Instead, she says, the child goes through a social transition which is as simple as changing clothes, shoes and hair. At this mention, the camera focuses on Avery in a medium shot at her makeup desk, playing like any other 7-year-old child. In an extreme close-up, her mother shares what Avery always says, “I don’t want to be here anymore. I’ll give up all my friends. I would rather just be able to be a girl and not have any friends at all.” This hints at mental health troubles and concerns, with the most severe being hints of suicidal language, which is very common for trans youth. Avery is shown at the end of this sentence sitting on the couch talking to her mom, with the shaky camera focusing on her from afar, establishing a shot of them inside of their home. The shaky camera and yellow lighting contradict the negativity and weight of the emotion of suicidality, by showing Avery as comfortable and calm, perhaps hinting that she does not understand the weight that this statement carries. The end of this scene includes the two talking about a book that Avery is writing which details her transition from her own perspective, and a possible upcoming book tour to advertise and share the book, to which Avery is hesitant about. This scene is the first act of Avery’s story, as we are introduced to her and her mother, and get a hint of what is going on in her life and who she is as a person.

The next scene that relates to Avery takes place in the summer of 2015 and shows her mother in the car, using the camera to show her driving, and switching back and forth to her face. Her mother explains that she is driving to attend a memorial service for Tamara Dominguez, who was a trans woman of color who was killed by a car in a Kansas City parking lot in the dark of night on August 15, 2015. The documentary transitions into local news clips that covered the murder, with occasional voice overs from Avery’s mom, explaining the rise of attacks on the trans community, specific trans women of color, and the backlash that pro-trans legislation that

was put into place by the Obama administration was getting. There was not any significant expansion of this topic, as the next scene follows another subject.

Entering the second act of the documentary, Avery begins to grow up and understand both her intentions as a youth leader, but also the risks of putting herself out there and the backlash she could face. Her mother expands on the beginning of Avery's transition and the book that she is writing, saying "When we started with Avery and her transition, we didn't feel like there was anywhere to turn, we didn't know who to talk to or where to go and we felt desperately lost," as there was a lack of representation to look up to in media and even in their local community to reference or lean on for support. This motivated both Avery and her mother to become activists for trans rights and the rights of LGBTQ youth. Avery, shortly before filming began, asked her mother if she can tell her own story using YouTube, creating videos that showed how proud she was to be trans and said that she "wanted to change the world for other kids" by sharing her story on the platform. The camera shows some of the homemade video clips that show Avery as the average young girl making fun videos for other kids. Her entire goal for her YouTube channel, she says, is to show that she is a normal girl, who happens to be trans. Later in this act, Avery goes to a doctor's appointment with her mother, beginning with a wide shot of the office, followed by medium shots that reveal the emotions on the faces of Avery and her mother. Their main concern was to know the signs of puberty, so that Avery can begin taking puberty blockers before it is too late. The doctor shares that Avery still has time before puberty starts, as it should not start before the age of 9, which leads to immediate relief on her mother's face. The mom shares that the reason why she wants to be so proactive is because her and Avery have been reading books together about puberty and sex and the changes to come, and that Avery would get so anxious and upset at the thought of having hair on her face or a lower voice that it would

trigger major anxiety attacks. Avery does not share this or add to this herself, but the camera focuses on her face when her mom says, “hair on her face” and her face appears to be dull from the white lights as she attempts to hide the tears in her eyes by covering her face with her shirt. Even though Avery isn’t verbally sharing her concerns on this issue, the camera, lighting and color depict how emotional the topic is even to just think about. This is the peak of the three-act structure, as the looming thought of puberty starts to have an actual impact on Avery’s life, and hints at the changes to come as she continues to age and grow up.

Further conflict adds to this peak in the following scenes, where Avery participates in a photoshoot for a National Geographic story on gender, and Avery and her family deal with the continued fear of violence against trans people. At first, Avery is hesitant about the photoshoot, but quickly warms up to the photographers as she can be herself and pose in her space. The lighting is very blue in these scenes, which shows that even though she is having fun in the moment, the scale of the story is extremely difficult for her to stomach. The next time the story goes back to Avery, the headlines of the Orlando nightclub shooting are played on TV and we see them on screen. This scene is blue and gray, with very low-lighting to show how emotional this was to live through, and during the moment when Avery sits down at the kitchen table next to her mother, with the shooting on the front page of the newspaper in front of them. Her mother says that Avery is supposed to be a marshal in the upcoming city parade, but is worried about the target that might be on her back in the midst of the shootings and other local backlash. When she returns home, she sits down with Avery, and shares the news with her and asks her if she still wants to be in the parade, explaining that her safety is of the utmost importance. Her mother adds that she had met with local police and the FBI to ensure her safety, but that it was entirely up to her. Avery understands that she is a target as she is very well known, and simply responds with “I

don't want to go to the parade, I don't want to die." Her mom reassures her that it is absolutely okay, but the closeup on her face shows the shock and tears in her eyes that came from how casually Avery said such a thing, and how she clearly understood the state of the country and the danger that comes with being trans. This event is not expanded on, and the topic is not touched on again, as the documentary moves on to the next subject.

In the third act of Avery's story, the scene compares joy and hardship by showing Avery volunteering at a nature program and her love for the animals there, while also discussing the hateful comments she gets on her YouTube videos, and from her own family after she appeared on the cover of the National Geographic story. When the story came out, she faced major backlash from her grandparents, who refused to accept and support her gender identity. In addition, the grandparents place the majority of the blame on her mother, who they argue is exploiting Avery, which takes a deep toll on the mom. Furthermore, Avery begins to receive extreme levels of hate on her YouTube, with other YouTube creators and newscasts discussing the National Geographic story, referring to Avery using he/him pronouns calling her a "creature" and saying that the story as a whole is equivalent to "pedophilia." The third act begins with Avery and her mother having overcome this struggle and determining how to support themselves despite all of the hate and backlash. They figure out what to do next. The third act takes place in 2018 with Avery at the age of 10. This part begins with her at the nature program, feeding and interacting with the animals. The scene is well-lit, and appears to be bright yellow, with sunshine illuminating the scene, alluding to her joy, happiness, and peace. This scene represents the normalcy of this next stage in her life, and how she is pursuing passions and interests that other kids would follow as well, somewhat fighting the extreme toll that the hate and publicity had on her mental health. The next time we see Avery is two years later at age 12, in the opening scene,

when she sits on the edge of the pool, surrounded by sunshine with color and lighting interacting in a way that represents her inner peace. Avery's story concludes with her mother explaining that while she is still active in fighting for trans rights, as she feels as though that is important work, she is focusing on just being a kid and wants to be known as Avery, a normal 12-year-old girl. Avery's story showcases the highs and lows of fighting for trans rights at such a young age, and all the emotional blows that affect trans youth, despite having such a strong parental support system.

The third subject in this film is Jay. He is 12-years-old at the start of the film. Jay explains that he was meant to be a boy, but turned out to be a girl when he was born. He transitioned rather early, and his story begins with him playing outside on a swing with his girlfriend. In a dark close-up shot, Jay says he knows that he is different from other kids, but hopes that there are other people in the world just like him. The scene then cuts to the inside of the house, where Jay is taking puberty blockers for the first time. The lighting of the scene is blue, but well-lit. The angle is wide, establishing the environment while also showing both him and his mom, hinting at the fact that everything he is doing is a team effort. He has a lot of trouble with getting the shot as there's a rather large needle at the end of the syringe. An extreme close shows his tears and scrunched eyes. Once he's given the injection, the camera returns to a wide angle and he immediately smiles, so wide that his mom tells him that he is "glowing." His mom explains that by continuing the blockers, hopefully Jay can stop using duct tape and binders, which he uses to compress his growing chest. The camera is handheld during this scene, making it feel personal, as if the audience is in the room with the two.

The next scene follows Jay where he is playing on the swing with his girlfriend, Mildred. Here, the story structure starts to move from Act One where he is introduced to Act Two, where

he is battling the start of female puberty as a trans boy, and assimilating into a new school and navigating those relationships. Act Two is introduced as Jay explains the dynamic between him and Mildred, who he admits does not know he is trans and, like other people at his school, assumes that he is just a regular boy. Jay explains in a voice over that he doesn't want to come out to her and talk about it as he is scared that he might ruin or complicate their relationship. However, Jay is hopeful that if she really likes him like she says she does, then she will be accepting and, "won't be over the top with this." The visual of him playing outside while we hear him say this gives us the impression that as he tries to live his life as a normal boy, this fear and worry stays with him as a constant companion.

The next scene shows Jay and his mom travel to a surgery clinic to get an implant that is designed to block puberty. With this implant, Jay won't have to endure more shots. The camera is positioned from below, to show Jay's face while they are discussing the procedure, closing in on the worried expression he holds. Next, the shot is brighter, with Jay sitting looking uncomfortable and anxious, while his mother cries, prompting a close up on her face. His mother explains that these medical visits trigger a lot of emotions for her, with worries about costs and insurance coverage, but also battling the fact that her son is undergoing medical interventions. She then says in an interview outside of the clinic that she always knew that Jay was a boy, and while these changes are difficult for both of them, she has no doubt that Jay knows who he is. She says, "They're not becoming, they've always been that person. But for me, I've always seen that transition." She explains that when Jay was younger, he would say that he wants to be a boy, and now that he is older this has changed to him saying "I am a boy." A close up follows the mother explaining the other hardships that they face, specifically with family members who cut them out of their lives. She adds that her own mother thinks she's a "child abuser." With tears in



her eyes, the mother explains that she would not do anything different as supporting Jay is her priority. While the camera frames a medium shot of Jay sitting at the kitchen table with low lighting, the mother is heard in a voice over, “I would rather have a healthy son than a suicidal daughter,” and she wants to push him to be who he wants to be.

The climax of Act Two shows Jay in an extreme close up, with the main source of lighting coming from his phone screen illuminating his face. Kids from his school found old yearbook photos of him before he transitioned, outing him to his entire school, including Mildred. In a medium shot, Jay discusses that Mildred was texting him and wanting to call him, when he answers the phone and passes it along to his mom. In a medium shot, his mom is on the phone while Jay sits with his knees to his chest, with tears rolling down his face. This struggle is the most intense and emotional one shown in the story, encompassing the second act. The story continues into the summer of 2016. Jay explains in a voice over that Mildred’s mom doesn’t want her near him and she avoids him to the point where her mother refuses to park near Jay’s mom in the school parking lot. At the dinner table, a wide shot shows Jay’s mom attempting to reassure him by pointing out the silver lining, saying that at least he knows what kind of a person Mildred is, in light of how fast she dropped Jay and moved on. Jay sits quietly, with a close up that shows him playing with his food instead of holding eye contact. The camera widens to a medium shot, where Jay emotionally tells his mother that he does not like how she “outed him to Mildred’s mom.” He says that “it was my decision” and she took that away from him. His mother, in a close-up, feels terrible about the situation, but tells Jay that while that was wrong of her, she had told him from the beginning that he needed to tell Mildred and be honest with her. A wide shot follows Jay as he puts his dishes away and sits by himself at the counter. An over the shoulder shot allows the viewer to see him scrolling through his phone, and he talks about his

struggles with mental health. The shot is slightly blurred when Jay says, “You know how you feel, there’s not a reason to be here? That runs through my head a lot. I just think about all the times people haven’t accepted me. Sometimes I say that I’m going to take my life.” A close-up interview shot follows this with very cool lighting and dark shadows around his face, showing how tense and hard this emotion is to deal with.

The next part of Jay’s story shows his mother finding a girlfriend. They marry and quickly assimilate into Jay’s life. Part of the reason for such a quick move was mainly due to maintaining the insurance that covers Jay’s gender-affirming care. This leads to Act Three, where Jay starts to change physically due to testosterone, and emotionally as he lets his mom’s wife, Lanie, into his life and grows to love her. In the opening scene of this act, Jay jokingly asks his Amazon Alexa what transgender means, and flops onto his bed. We see that his face has changed, with facial hair beginning to sprout, and even a deeper voice. A wide shot shows him sitting next to his mom on his bed, with red, but low light, making the scene feel heavy, but not very tense. The two of them discuss college plans as they go through mail, and he shares that he is worried about coming out to people at college, as he would be going to a new place where no one knows him at all, and is worried about people attacking him physically if they find out he is trans. He shares that he had always dreamed of going into the military, but with the Trump-era legislation at the time, Jay would not be allowed to serve as a trans man and receive the current gender-affirming care that he receives at home by his local doctor. This scene shows that he is growing up and considering college, making plans for prom, and finishing high school like any other teenager, navigating his gender identity and embracing it more along the way. The last time we see Jay, he is shown in a close-up shot sitting on the floor under low-lighting where he shares that he was hesitant about participating in the documentary, as it will essentially out him to the

entire world, but he has grown to understand the positive aspects that can come out of sharing his story. He says, “there’s gonna be that one kid or that one teenager that’s gonna go to their parents and say, ‘hey look at this,’” and thinks that even if it just helps one person out there, it will be worth it.” Jay’s story shows the struggles that trans kids face during puberty, high school, and beyond, and shows that even with parental love and acceptance and access to medical intervention, being outed and different from your peers is extremely difficult to cope with and takes a toll on your mental health.

The final subject in this documentary is Leena, a 15-year-old at the start of filming. Leena’s story begins with a homemade video of her taking puberty blockers for the first time in the form of a pill that will block the testosterone hormone that her body started producing at the onset of puberty. The next scene shows her and her father entering a bathing suit store, where her dad helps her pick a suit that offers what he thinks is the appropriate amount of coverage for a 15-year-old girl. The scene is filmed in a wide shot with bright lighting to show the happiness that she feels in the scene, finally being able to do something as normal to a young girl as getting a cute bikini for vacation, until she enters the dressing room, where a medium shot and dimmer lighting suggests her discomfort and anxiety when she see herself in the mirror. Leena shares in a voice over that as she gets older, it’s more difficult to look in the mirror and look at her body and, “being a teenager is hard enough on its own. Going through puberty as someone that you’re not is a little harder.” She then visits the nail salon with her grandmother, where she discusses her dream of being a model who would one day walk for Victoria’s Secret, or she might even go to cosmetology school. This is the first act of her story, as we learn about who she is, when her transition started, and who her support system is.

When she leaves the nail salon, she starts talking about her new boyfriend, Brian, who she's about to go on a date with for Valentine's Day. This is the introduction to the second act of her story, where she battles relationships and sexuality, as a person whose sexual organs do not match her gender, and the toll that takes on her mental health. A year later, Leena is still together with her boyfriend, sitting close on the couch scrolling through social media. A close-up shows the two reading about a new bathroom bill law in Missouri, that would award a \$2500 bounty to those who report individuals entering a bathroom that does not align with their sex assigned at birth. The lighting is red but lowkey, to show that reading this bill is very tense, but the situation itself is not. In the next scene, she meets with a modeling agency for the first time, where she discusses her dream to model and battles with entering the field as a trans woman. She debates whether to tell the modeling scouts outright that she is trans, or if she should only provide them with that information if they ask. This scene includes an interview shot of her father at home, explaining how he supported her transition, most prominently over the summer between her eighth and ninth grade, telling him and his ex-wife that she was a girl every time she would go back and forth for visitation, staying consistent in how she thought about herself. The father is constantly shown in bright, white light, reflecting his positive, supportive subject.

Between the second and third act, Leena battles with entering the modeling industry after getting turned away time after time by designers once she tells them that she's trans, and begins the process of finding a doctor for her sex reassignment surgery (SRS), known today as gender affirming surgery. She says that while her genitals do not define her womanhood, this is a step that she feels is necessary for her to truly be herself, saying that she cannot continue to live in her current body for the rest of her life without it upsetting her. When discussing this with her father, the camera holds a medium shot with high key lighting to show the emotion and heaviness of the

conversation, without making it feel too tense or uncomfortable for the two to be able to sit down and have this talk. Her father is completely on-board with Leena's decisions, and they schedule flights to San Francisco to see a doctor whom she found online. This moment begins the third act of her story, where Leena undergoes surgery, becomes an adult, and moves on to the next chapter of her life. When she meets with the doctor who will later perform the surgery, the lighting is very dark, yet the scene is washed out a bit, making it seem like a monumental moment in her story, and a very serious decision to make. She tells the doctor in a medium shot that her gender dysphoria has only gotten worse as she grows up, and wanted to schedule as soon as possible. The next scene shows Leena sitting between her parents in the backseat of a car, with warm, dark lighting and shots of the warm sunset outside, showing feelings of peace and relief after a positive consultation and knowing that she will soon finally have her surgery. This is the last time we see Leena. The end of her story is told using text to recap her life after receiving the surgery, saying that when she woke up and looked over to her mom, she said "I am free." Leena's story explores struggles of sexuality and coming of age while navigating relationships, as well as exploring what her professional life will look like as a trans woman in a largely cisgender space.

### ***Changing the Game (2021)***

The second film I watched was *Changing the Game (2021)*, which was an original Hulu documentary. The film focuses on the theme of high school sports and the legislation that has been passed and proposed in states across the country as of recently, attempting to ban trans students from competing on the team that aligns with their gender identity. The movie focuses on

three students living in different parts of the country, each playing a different sport during their time in high school.

The first subject introduced is Mack Beggs, a trans man who happened to be the best female wrestler in Texas, given the requirement for him to compete based on his sex assigned at birth, which is female. The film begins by panning to a teenager doing pull ups, with a close-up shot moving with them as they went up and down. The shot was extremely dark, to the point where the subject looked like a boy, but the viewer could not be able to tell for certain. Each following shot is similar in terms of lighting and color and the editing moves at a very fast pace showing details of the equipment and different workouts, making it impossible to clearly see the face of the subject. We don't see Beggs until a minute and a half into the film, where he is shown with an extreme close-up and heavy shadow on his face. A voice-over follows him as he works out in slow motion, with tight shots following. Beggs provides the first dialogue of the documentary, ““I do train as hard as a man. I fight as hard as a man. I am a man..... And I'm the state champ of female high-school wrestling.” The action-packed, fast, dark, establishing shots quickly cut to shots of wrestling competitions, showing the competitors up close in red lighting, making them look aggressive and serious.

The next scene establishes that Beggs lives in Texas, with a drone shot of a water tower reading 'Eules, Texas'. He then meets with his girlfriend at an open ranch nearby, posing for a photo with her and hanging out with friends. The lighting is bright and yellow, showing how he feels when he is with her and his friends. Next, he is at home framed in an extreme close up in his room with dark lighting discussing his wrestling history. “Wrestling found me, I love it,” he explains, “Last season when I was wrestling in state, there was a huge uproar and controversy with me being trans...I am a male, so I should compete with the males.” It then cuts to a news

recording that says, “a junior at Euless Trinity who was born a girl and is now in the process of becoming a boy, wins the girls’ state wrestling tournament Saturday.” This scene transitions from the first to second act of the film where Beggs explains his struggle with the wrestling association, which says he has to wrestle girls since he was assigned female at birth. Beggs says he doesn’t think this is fair to anyone involved. On this news, Mark Steyn, a Canadian television presenter, shared his thoughts, “If somebody wants to transition into a boy, maybe that means that you should have gave up the wrestling, that you can’t have everything, that you should take up the violin instead, not wreck a state-wide sport for all the other participants.” Beggs faced similar sentiments from parents at competitions and other personalities on the news. The next scene of Beggs, includes voice overs and other interview clips of parents. We hear a compilation of the backlash, with the following comments discussing his upcoming performance at the state competition:

“It’s cheating, they allowed this one individual to shoot up testosterone...No one has a chance of beating Beggs. This policy has failed the entire girls’ division. It’s not failing Beggs; she’s still getting to wrestle and enjoy the sport that she loves. It’s only failing all the other girls...Beggs, a female student, lord knows how much testosterone she’s actually taking...will always be a girl...biologically female...here we have a young lady...female body parts...the birth certificate says female...She’s a woman. She’s always been a woman.”

During these comments, the visuals included compilations of wrestling training where Beggs went back and forth between being placed in a headlock to being on top of a competitor, which showed the inner dialogue that he hears all of the time, and that when he wrestles, this is constantly what he hears in his ears and in his head.

The next scene shows Beggs in a dark, close up interview shot in his home where he explains his battle with gender dysphoria and his struggle with mental health, “Before I was on testosterone I was really depressed, I was not in a good place. I was doing a lot of self-harm. I was battling gender dysphoria a lot and it can get super bad, really, really bad. Gender dysphoria is when you feel trapped inside your physical being. You want to be somebody else that you know deep inside that you are.” It then cuts to his coach, who says, “I never knew what transgender was before Beggs, but I would never turn my back on an athlete.” The pressure is on and all eyes are on Beggs not only because he’s a state champion but also because he’s trans, placing two targets on his back, yet showing the support he has for him no matter what. Next, Beggs explains, in low lighting, his relationship with his conservative, religious grandparents who adopted Beggs at a young age. His grandmother, in a scene at the shooting range says, “I’m hard-core Republican, but I don’t mind stepping on some toes either when it comes to transgender kids.” Back outside at home, his grandfather explains,

“Beggs is just like any other teenage boy. She’s just a typical teenager. She’s always telling me, watch the pronouns and as soon as I say it, I think about it. You’ve always call them one thing and then you have to go with what he wants. One of my pet peeves is these idiots who think you should take the gender you were born with and all that stuff. You gotta feel good about yourself. You gotta give the guy the right to say what he wants or be what he wants, but there’s always some redneck that don’t wanna agree with it.”

The peak of the second act takes place at the state competition, where Beggs is up for his second consecutive win in the female category. The competitors and news cameras are so loud that it’s even distracting to the viewer. Beggs touches on these comments, as well as a slew of hate comments that he received online along the lines of, “if you haven’t had surgery yet you’re



not a male...he is not a he...it's called mental illness...kill itself...it..." Beggs, in a dark, extreme close up as to not glorify the issue and instead to note how serious and dark the topic is, shared his experience with self-harm, and then eventually attempting suicide, "I was all alone and took way too many sleeping pills alone. I thought that maybe if I just close my eyes maybe it'll just be over."

The scene returns to the competition, where Beggs, in slow motion, eventually beats all the competition and wins the state championship once again. However, instead of soaking in the victory, a shaking camera and dark lighting shows Beggs rushed out of the arena before he was harmed, and then sitting on the wall in a close up with tears in his eyes, explaining how it wasn't fair and he knew that, and he couldn't compete with full strength like he should be able to if he were wrestling other men. The win did not feel good to him. This leads to act three of his story, where he finally gets accepted to compete against the men in the state championship. To get to this place, he and his grandma needed to supply the conference with a plethora of private information, including his personal and psychological media history and evaluations, and a letter he had to write about why "he thought he was transgender." The competition was tough, as shown by slow-motion extreme close ups and dark, red lighting, but he came out to win third place overall. While this was the first time he missed out on first-place in years, it was the best loss of his life. After he stepped down from the podium he explained, "Now, that I'm proud of. That's a third place I'm proud of. I wanted to be me and that's all I ever wanted to do." As he gets accepted to college on scholarship for male wrestling, he reaches the end of his third act, where he is embraced and accepted as who he is by himself and his peers. The closing shot was in my opinion the most emotional part of the whole film, where he is in a dark room with sweat dripping down his body at practice. His teammates surround him and are cheering for him and at

the end of his match he stands up, sporting scars from his top surgery along his chest. He says, “Going to college for male wrestling. Life university. All I ever wanted to do is wrestle men, and now that I am it’s freaking dope.” Beggs’s journey approached the trans athlete argument by showing that, yes, it was unfair that he was competing on a certain team, and he didn’t want to compete in an unfair match, he just wanted to be with other boys. It also showed his personal journey with his family on his side, all growing together to come to terms with and love Beggs for who he is.

The next subject in this film is Sarah Huckman, a Nordic skier from New Hampshire. Huckman is highly active in her local legislature, where she fights for trans rights and won the right to compete on the female ski team. The first act of her story starts with fast-paced editing, establishing shots of snow, ice, wind, icicles, skiing, lake, and “New Hampshire” plates. Next, we see Huckman in her home through her makeup mirror with an extreme close up of the side of her face as she applies eyeliner, surrounded by dark blue and purple lighting. She says, “There’s a lot of things that I experience like discrimination that other people don’t, and I would like to be able to experience freedom. When I got to high school, the policy was that you had to have gender-reassignment surgery in order to compete on the selected team that you would like to play on. Don’t tell me what I need, tell me that I’m allowed to do what I want to do on my own time frame.” Next, she gets out her new camera and we see her through the camera on her phone, using a ring light to film a makeup tutorial. The lighting is softer and more yellow, offering a peaceful, natural, happy feeling to the scene. She says, “I like to film all of these things going on in my day to day life and make my story accessible to other people in the world,” referencing the videos that she posts to YouTube. On the platform, she made a coming out video that took the position that although she is trans, she is “the same as any other girl” and shows moments of her

everyday life in hope that watching these videos, “Allows other people who are trans to feel validated and accepted just by watching one small video it can make a big impact.” In the first act, we get to know Huckman as a young athlete who is active in her local government and uses her online platform to promote acceptance and educate people on what it is like to be a trans girl by normalizing her daily experiences.

The second act of her story shows Huckman struggling to find her place in skiing, as she was not allowed to compete on the girls’ team at first given the state rules regarding transgender athletes. She fights this discrimination, as well as other instances of discrimination, with her central argument referencing the state motto of New Hampshire, which is “Live Free or Die.” Huckman says she thinks the freedom half of this motto doesn’t hold up given recent Trump-era legislation. In a close-up, she speaks on the sports rule: “Would it be fair for me to be competing on the boys’ team? No. I am a girl. That’s who I am, no matter what. The policy was really discriminatory. I need this policy to be changed, I need to be able to compete on the girls’ team.” She began overcoming this struggle by talking with her community, then the superintendent, then to legal advocates and defendants, refusing to back down from her fight. In an interview shot, the school principal explains that all of this fighting had an impact on the NHIAA policy, and that Huckman was eventually allowed to compete against the other girls, getting rid of what he called the “outdated” policy.

When Huckman is skiing, the camera follows her in a wide, airy and well-lit shot, showing the peace that the sport gives her. However, voice overs contradict this visual tone when Huckman says that she holds herself back at times during competitions so that she doesn’t look like she is winning because she has some sort of physical advantage as she doesn’t want other people to see her in this way, “I’m a normal human being, I’m not some monster that people

make trans people out to be.” Next, Huckman is shown in a medium, darker shot with white hues in the bathroom with her friends, making silly videos and laughing. She references recent bathroom bills that affected trans people around the country and in the state, which contradicted the feelings that these shots gave off once again via a voice-over, “We’re not a threat to people in the bathrooms. We can’t just use the bathroom without getting slammed with all this other stuff. I want to pee and poop in peace. And occasionally do my makeup,” where she follows up with humor again at the end of her argument.

Act three of her story shows her fitting in on her time and embracing herself, growing to act as an advocate who mentors and supports other young people in her government club. In this film, she was fighting for the passage of HB1319, which was designed to eliminate discrimination based on gender. Specifically, she said, this bill fought barriers that trans people face in areas like bathrooms, education, housing, and jobs. Her father, although he discusses his own conservative political leaning, supports Huckman in her efforts, and shares in a classic, well-lit, interview shot, “Your job as parent is to advocate for your child. We are pretty conservative, but people just need to be who they are and that doesn’t have anything to do with your politics. There are people who try to politicize it.” The debate of this bill is seen in dim lighting with close up shots going back and forth between Huckman and her father, to the legislative speaker, to the people speaking in opposition of the bill. Opponents share arguments citing that they had the right to know who their children are around and who are on their sports teams, painting trans youth specifically as negative, dangerous people who will harm their children. The resolution came at the end of her story, where she shared on her YouTube video excitedly that the bill had passed successfully, with a smile on her face. Huckman’s story shows the inner conflict faced by athletes when they are allowed to compete on the team of their gender

but are in fear of backlash and are scared to lose this opportunity. It also shows the power that the voice of our trans youth can have online and in community spaces, even on our House floor.

The final subject in this film is Andraya Yearwood. Yearwood, a track and field athlete from Connecticut. We are introduced to Yearwood with a scene of her sitting with her friends in her white, well-lit room, smiling with them and discussing what she loves about track, but we cannot see her very well. Then it cuts to an extreme close up of her practicing with dark shadows on her face, hiding her features. She says in a voice over, “I always knew that I was a girl, but I knew what to call it around seventh or eighth grade...If no one supported me, I don’t think I would run track because why run on a team where you don’t feel comfortable.” A classic interview shot of Dr. Karissa Niehoff, the District Executive Director of the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference, explains the current rules in Connecticut that says, “Connecticut high school students are free to participate in sports based on their gender identity” as this will “invite trans students into activities and schools to let you know that you are welcome.” Next, a drone shot of the field establishes the practice area, and an outside interview shot of her coach, Brian, gives us an insight to what Yearwood is like as a person and as an athlete, “Yearwood is out there competing with all the other girls, and that’s the way it should be.” He says in a voice over, with soft lighting and a wide shot of the practice, that Yearwood is a quiet leader who wants to understand and listen before she speaks and is not afraid to ask for what she wants. This all introduces us to Yearwood and where she stands on her track team, forming the first act of her story.

The second act shows the backlash that Yearwood gets at competitions, and the internal struggles that she faces growing up to begin with, but also as a trans woman of color in America. An extreme close up pans from the parents to Yearwood as she is screaming at the meet about

how people are too afraid of being discriminatory (as they were worried that they would look transphobic), so not enough people are speaking out about how letting Yearwood compete with the girls is unfair to girls and women everywhere. Another similar shot shows a parent arguing that since Yearwood isn't biologically a woman, she doesn't understand what it is truly like to be a female athlete, arguing that a huge part of this is not knowing what it is like to run a race while having period cramps. Yearwood speaks in a close up, with a facial expression that appears confused and taken aback by the public displays of disapproval and backlash. In the following scene, Yearwood is training at an indoor facility where she says in a close up shot, "how could you support an athletic policy that says that they are a gender 8-2:30, then a different gender after school, because it would not honor the student as a person. You cannot identify them as anything other than themselves."

Next, Yearwood is at the gym working out with her mother, where medium and close up shots show the emotion and relationship that the two share. In a voice over her mother explains, "When I heard transgender for the first time, I struggled, only because I didn't know what it was. For me, 'transgender' doesn't really change a whole lot. I'm still your mother." Yearwood, in an extreme, dark red closeup explains the gender dysmorphia she experiences, "For my dysmorphia at least, I feel uncomfortable, just out of place." This takes quite the toll on her mental health, as well as other everyday instances of discrimination, to which her mother says is where she steps in and acts as her "bodyguard," both physically and emotionally:

"There were no other trans African American role models for her to look up to. It's very important to share this story even if it just helps one person... We're talking about life or death. It scares me, the stats, the numbers, what she's up against. What my child won't be is suicidal. What my child won't be is on drugs. If track gives these young kids to be and

to live in their truth, how dare we take that away from them. My goal is to make this world a better place for her, and give her the right skills and right demeanor to survive in this world...She needs to be visible and live her own truth. Being visible gives her a voice and others a voice too.

During this voice over, the camera shifts back and forth between medium shots and extreme close ups of the two of them talking and exercising. The final sentence is followed by text on a black screen that reads, “an African American transgender female student is five times more likely to be murdered than her peers” showing this as a background and a graphic instead of showing her face, as to not showcase Yearwood as a representation of this statistic, a very powerful visual choice.

This text gives way to the third act of Yearwood’s story, where she becomes an inspiration to Terry, another young Black trans athlete who also competes in women’s track. The two are seen at practice, and then at a nail salon, chatting and getting their nails done like any other set of teenage girls. Terry, in a medium shot of their two faces, shares that she was inspired by Yearwood to come out and live her truth, because if Yearwood can do this and show that she is a girl and can run with the girls, then she could have the confidence to do that same. This is the last that we see of Yearwood, and this way of ending it shows that Yearwood is so much more than an athlete by having her finish off in a different setting than the track field and shows how much of an impact someone can have on another young trans person, just by having the confidence to be them and advocate for their right to be themselves.

***The Trans List (2016):***

*The Trans List* is an HBO documentary that interviews eleven individuals that identify as trans, non-binary, or gender nonconforming and follows their stories of growing up and discovering their identity. This film is quite different from the first two movies, as it focuses on adults and is much less visually compelling as most shots are simple interview shots, but I chose this documentary as it relates to the media and offers a wide range of backgrounds and lenses. For these movies, I will still focus on visual elements, but exploring language and similarities between how stories and themes are verbally discussed, as well as the structure that each story takes throughout the film.

The introduction is visually compelling, as it starts with a black and white screen with text that reads, "I've come to hate my body and all it requires in this world," followed by names of trans leaders and individuals that move across the screen to form the 'trans' in 'the trans list.' Janet Mock, a well-known trans rights activist, is the interviewer in this film. Janet Mock appears on screen first with her title and pronouns and she says, "We are at an evolutionary moment, one that pushes us to confront how we define ourselves and know one another." She continues speaking in voice-over while visually a gray background is shown, displaying black and white photos of trans individuals. She says, "these stories of triumph do not outweigh the tragedy faced by many trans Americans who struggle with limited access to shelter, healthcare, education, and employment. Susceptible to HIV, criminalization, suicide, and violence." Next, we see text on screen that reads in a serious, black and white font, "In the LGBTQ community, transgender women of color are at the highest rate of homicide in the US." Janet Mock then comes on screen again in a close up with high-key lighting to say, "We are a constellation of experiences, expressions, and identities."



The first subject is Kylar Broadus, a lawyer who uses he/him pronouns. He starts by explaining that he grew up in an extremely rural community, which convinced him that there was something wrong with him for not feeling like his brain matched his body. He said that he prayed for “unity of mind, body, and spirit,” not using these exact words as a child, but still praying to God with the same sentiment that said he knew his body and mind didn’t conform, and that was something that needed to be fixed by God. As he tells his story there is soft, blue lighting, which is not overly bright and visible, but you can still tell that the hue was there. This hue gives a tone to the scene and the language that is shared with it, as an emotional account, but one that he is able to talk about after the fact. The next topic he touches on is his appearance, ranging from his physique to the color of his skin. He has a “high yellow” skin tone, which left him vulnerable to a great deal of bullying and hate from his peers, making him feel like an outcast who didn’t belong. He felt like he always looked masculine, even before his transition, which made him very uncomfortable during his teenage years. Although his parents were supportive of him, and loved him unconditionally, he struggled to love himself as he had difficulty with his sexuality and gender, confused as to why he was attracted to women, but knew he was not a lesbian. This is the bridge between the first and second act of his story, as he establishes who he was growing up, and then explains the struggles he faced in terms of bullying and internal confusion. The climax of the second act is when he found an article about Billy Tipton, who died of an ulcer that he believed developed from the stress and internal toll of hiding his identity of a trans man, which terrified Kylar and pushed him to embrace his identity instead of holding it in. He did this as he navigated through the corporate world as a lawyer, swapping his female uniform out for a suit, and finally, one day, testifying before congress in support of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, showing that he was human just like anyone else despite his trans

identity. He wanted to “tell everyone’s story through my story” while advocating for the need to have “clear protection for trans people all around this country.” This is the third act of his story, as he comes to terms with who he is, and uses his voice to act as a leading figure to fight for trans rights and equality.

The next subject who is introduced is Caroline Cossey, a model who used she/her pronouns. Caroline explained that being trans in the 1960s-1970s was nothing like what it is today, and it was a huge deal when she was outed by News of the World, a tabloid newspaper at the time. While she had family by her side, she shared that she felt suicidal because the newspaper took away her right to choose whether or not to come out on her own terms. This is the second act of her story, following a very brief first act introduction, with this moment acting as the climax of her story. She then goes on to explain how she knew she was trans, almost cycling back to the first act in a way, saying that as soon as she had sexual awareness, she knew that she was attracted to boys, but she wasn’t gay. She began her career by working as a showgirl in Paris, and later became a model that was known by much of the world. As she grew into this role, she still struggled with coming to terms with her gender and sexuality, saying that she would be extremely uncomfortable during sexual situations, which drove her to undergo gender affirming surgery. This, she says, was just a choice that she felt would make a difference in her life but explained that the surgery in itself should not be seen as one that determines womanhood or would “make [her] a woman.” As she continued modeling, she made it a point to show that she was not a drag queen and was more than just a “transsexual model;” she was not a “monster or a criminal,” and while being trans was a large part of her identity, it was just a small part of who she was as a person, and who she was professionally in the modeling world. This acceptance represents the third act of her story, where she battles finding herself and takes power

over accepting herself and loving who she was. While she shared her story, she sat in front of a cool gray, but well-lit background, that set a calm tone to the story, yet ensured that the interpretation of each topic remained serious throughout.

The next subject introduced was Amos Mac, a photographer who uses he/him pronouns. Amos starts his story out by explaining that many films and film subjects, specifically Peewee Herman and *Stand by Me (1986)*, made him long for a typical male coming of age story himself, and tried to do anything he could in the confines of his community and home life to hide himself. The main way he did this, he said, was by choosing the most masculine clothes he could find in the Kmart girls' section, as this is the only place he was able to choose clothes from, and he used oversized clothing as a method of control to hide himself. As he grew up, he drank to drown out his problems, including his struggle with gender, which acts as the second act of his story. He was killing himself with the drinking and holding on to who he was and said that he was coming out because he "had to deal with" himself, "I really don't know what I was waiting for for so long," he said. "It just felt like it was no longer an option for my sanity or for my health. I was trying to make it through without transitioning, and I couldn't." Soon after this, he embraced his passion for photography, by photographing trans men in San Francisco. Amos argued that these trans men had experiences that were left out of the media at the time, "The models and the people being featured were speaking for themselves as trans people," they weren't just being photographed or talked about. At this point, he realized that he was at the point in his transition where he was passing, and grew his photo project into a quarterly magazine, "Original Plumbing." The point he argued was that gender is so much more than genitals, and that experiences are more than just male or female. This is the third act of his story, where he comes

to terms with and accepts who he is and uses his career to support and show the world the trans community by giving them a platform and agency to tell their own stories.

The fourth subject who is introduced is Bamby Salcedo, an activist who uses she/her pronouns. Bamby is a proud Trans-Latina immigrant, who feels left out by the LGB communities. Bamby said she knew that the moment she discovered being trans was when she dressed up in female clothes, describing the feeling as one of the best moments of her life. She found community in LA in 1988, where a group of 20-30 took her and other young trans girls under their wing to teach them how to do makeup, hustle, and survive the streets of Los Angeles. She quickly fell into drugs to “cope with sleeping on the streets, dealing with rape,” and this drug use led her to commit crimes that landed her in jail soon after. She was sent to a prison of 3000 men, where she was regularly abused, verbally and physically by other inmates. She did what she had to do to survive, fighting for her life until she got out. She continued to live her life normally until October 3, 2002, when Gwen Araujo, a trans teenager was murdered by three men. The background of this scene is blue and very plain, casting an emotional, heavy light on the topic, but allowing it to speak for itself without heavy interference of color or light. She said that in that moment, the murder changed her life, which leads to the second act of her story. Gwen said she felt pushed to elevate the voices of her community, disrupting anyone or any voice that stood in her way. This work, which she says is motivated by the feeling she gets when a young person transforms into themselves, combined with the acceptance that she found for herself internally, is the third act to her story, summarized by the final quote offered in her part of the documentary, “Yo soy un Milagro -- I am a miracle... There was a reason why I didn’t get killed when I was on the streets. There was a reason why when I overdosed in an alley, the paramedics came and got

me. There was a reason why I didn't get killed when I was in prison. I'm supposed to be here doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

The next act in this film is Buck Angel, an adult film star, who uses he/him pronouns. Buck Angel struggled with his identity and gender growing up, leading to his first suicide attempt at 16. He said he felt as though he had no future or tools to help him through the process. His only guidance was in bookstores, where he found a "'Who's Who & Resource Guide to the Transgender Community' for Male to Female Transsexuals, 1995.'" Shortly after, he found a hormone doctor who only dealt with male to female trans folk, who told him "you will be my guinea pig," in connection to testosterone and female to male gender affirming care. This scene acts as the second act in his story, as Buck begins to come to terms with who he is after confronting his inner struggles with identity. It was this moment that spurred the start of his career in the adult film industry, "Testosterone is a powerful hormone. It changed the way I think, it changed the way I interact with the world, it gave me confidence, and it also gave me confidence around my sexuality. Loving your own body can change your life." The third act of his story comes after this, as he accepted himself and his manhood, forming his own idea of what a man means, understanding that genitals do not define manhood. He ended by saying, "Sexuality and desire are a human thing...People are attracted to people. Connecting to body and body sexually is a huge part of coming to understand yourself." He comes full circle by tying in a metaphor that he made at the beginning of the film by saying he just wanted to be like GI Joe and the man that he represented, by saying, "you can be GI Joe, you can."

The next subject is Miss Major Griffin Gracy, an activist who uses she/her pronouns. She starts her story with a powerful statement, "I don't need your acceptance, I just need your respect." She explained what it was like growing up in the 1960s, an era that she says involved

“everyone trying to self-identify.” She lived in New York during this time in her life, leaving out the details of discovering her identity, but sharing that she found acceptance there, and felt like everyone could be anyone at any time. She spent a lot of time at Stonewall, a historical place in New York for transgender, nonconforming people “to meet and socialize and hangout.” This, she said, was their space where everyone felt safe to be who they were. It was very dangerous to live their lives publicly as trans folk at the time, as those who were found dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex were arrested for “fraud.” She was at Stonewall during the Stonewall Riots of 1969, when the space was raided by police and violence quickly broke out, or as she describes, “a case of the shit just hit the fan.” She said that this was a source of anger for her, as Trans individuals were leaders during this incident and were there when the fighting started, but it only “changed things for LBG community, not Trans. T should have been first, they were there when it started.” She then describes the struggles that she faced as a trans person on the streets of New York, saying that because of her gender she was unemployable, “...so it was a matter of doing what you needed to do to survive.” This led to her engaging in sexual solicitation and learning how to rob people, which landed her in prison after assaulting a police officer. She, like Bamby, felt the same abuse inside the prison as she did on the outside. She finished her story by expanding on how the abuse was more than just physical, saying that both inside and outside of the prison walls, “We are not safe. We are running around with targets on our back. We have to constantly be on our guard, constantly watching what anyone and everyone is doing around us.” Miss Major Griffin Gracy’s story is difficult to understand structurally due to the amount of information shared, but growth in terms of self-acceptance and fighting for the acceptance of others is still evident.

Nicole Maines, a student, who uses she/her pronouns, shares her story of growing up discovering her gender identity and navigating the school system amid legislation like bathroom laws, that cause harm and hardships in her day to day life. She starts by discussing the many bathroom bills in place around the country, saying “Bathrooms is sort of like the focal point of trans issues. It’s not the Pentagon, just a bathroom.” She then explains how the bathroom came to be a topic of contention when she started transitioning in the 5th grade, and was told by the school that it would be best if a staff member followed her around class, who would go with her if she had to go to the bathroom to make sure she didn’t go into the girls bathroom. This, she says, made her feel like an outsider, like there was something wrong with her, which she explains is “very common among trans youth everywhere.” After this experience, she filed a lawsuit saying that this violated Title IX, claiming wrongful discrimination based on her gender. The case, Susan Doe v. RSU 26, stood stagnant for about six years, until finally she got a text from her mom during school that simply said, “we won.” She explains that this case was a landmark case for trans youth and was one of the first times that a court had ruled in favor of trans youth, but meant that other states could follow suit. She then explains that while this was a major victory in her life, her personal struggles continued, as she navigated through puberty and hormone blockers, with mixed reactions from her parents at first. She explained that she got her dad on board by leaving a book about the topic in the bathroom, where he began reading it one day and immediately got on board. She says that this support meant a lot for her, saying, “It is good to watch the transformation of parents when you are also going through a transformation itself.”

She ends her story with a message to trans youth who are struggling to find acceptance at home, in light of her parents getting on-board and becoming extremely supportive of her journey,

“...to a young person whose parents aren’t necessarily on-board, I’d say you gotta advocate for you. That’s what I did with my parents. They wouldn’t have known if they really weren’t as vocal. Do not take no for an answer. Slay your own dragon. You can do it.” Nicole’s story went back and forth chronologically, with the first act coming at the end of her part in the documentary where she begins to transition in 5th grade, to the second act of facing and arguing against the situation in school that led her to sue, to the third act of her parents getting behind her with love and support, and finding it in herself to motivate other trans youth and fight for their rights like she did for her own.

Next was Shane Ortega, a US Army Sergeant who uses he/him pronouns. Shane joined the Army during the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell era. When he enlisted, he signed paperwork saying that he was not a lesbian, although he was unaware of what his sexuality truly consisted of at the time. He described the military as a “hypermasculine environment. There’s only three percent female so the United States Marine Corps is alpha male...” He gained the respect of his peers through high performance and a strong work ethic, despite his female gender at the time, saying that “people just didn’t care, [he] was just smaller than others. At age 18 he served overseas in Iraq, which took a high toll on his mental health given the state of war, including the detail that over one third of Marines were killed or wounded, and only twelve out of thirty people in his platoon came back to the U.S. with him. It is unclear from the documentary when Shane transitioned and what motivated him to do so, but he included details that he was uncomfortable with gendered rules, e.g., having to wear a female uniform to the Pentagon, and not knowing which bathroom to use when he is at work. Shane is legally a man and has been for five years at the time of the filming of the documentary, but since he entered into the military identifying as female, this gender is still listed in the system; military rules prohibit him from correcting his



gender or even pronouns, making it a very uncomfortable place for him to navigate. This moment leads into the second act of his story, as he works to overcome the trauma from serving in Iraq, alongside finding his place and space as a trans military member. He says that the armed services are not very accommodating when it comes to protecting members of the military from gender discrimination. Ortega says, “The United States military uses a medical definition based on the DSM-IV [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition] which is very, very outdated. It says that transgender is a psychosexual condition... You still have to pretend to be someone else who you are not, there have not been any accommodations made for anyone.” The third act came next, as he shared that he got involved in activism, advocating for military rights for trans folk in the military. He did not feel represented and protected by a division whose job is to serve and protect its people, and he grew in himself to a point where he can fight for this equality. He ended his story by saying, “I swore to serve and protect the people of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. What are you gonna do? You’re going to protect them right?” Shane’s story follows the three-act structure, but shows that growth is not quite linear, and even after finding self-acceptance, the fight is not over.

The next subject is Caitlyn Jenner, a TV personality and Olympian who uses she/her pronouns. Caitlyn, well-known by the American public for decades, shares that all of her life she struggled to understand who she was secretly behind closed doors. When she did come out, she says, it was very difficult due to how well known she was, and how she had to do it publicly in front of billions of people who looked at her with the perception of, “Bruce Jenner, the male athlete of the world.” This scene acts as the climax of the second act of her story, as she is faced with coming out to the public and all of the backlash with doing so in front of the world. Jenner says that she still struggles with determining what is female, or feminine, and what is ‘normal,’

hinting that the third act of her story may not yet be complete. She says she uses her platform to share stories, both hers and others, although she is not an expert on anyone else's story, she still sees value in uplifting trans voices and enabling them to have their stories and experiences heard.

The second-to-last subject that we meet is Alok Vaid-Menon, a Poet who is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. To introduce who they are and what their story entails,

Vaid-Menon explained that gender is an essence:

The power of gender is precisely that it can never be defined. I don't think that gender is fixed. I think that gender can actually change every single day. Myself is many selves.

One day I might feel really masculine, one day I might feel really feminine. The next day I might feel neither and every single day I should have the autonomy to self-determine who I want to be. I identify as non-binary, which means I don't identify as either a man or a woman, but I identify as femme and I understand femininity to not be the same thing as womanhood.

Vaid-Menon explains that a huge part of their femme identity stems from their ancestors, who valued femininity and societal roles that are looked down on for being viewed as "feminine" despite how crucial they are for all of society, such as caretaking, or emotionally-supportive roles. They explain that this is wrong and should not be the case, saying "...no thank you patriarchy, my strength comes from my femininity, and my femininity is not confined to just my body." Next, they explain that western culture's obsession over the human body makes understanding and accepting gender very difficult to do alongside cultural gender roles and expectations, asking, "Why are we so fixated on people's physicality? We literally have a women's movement today that says being a woman means having a vagina. That's the most

misogynistic equation I've ever had in my life. Patriarchal society has taught us that women are just vaginas, that women are just mothers, that women are just reproductive agents. Feminism should be about complicating that narrative." They argue that sex assigned at birth "should not be your fate," and that people should have the self-determination and ability to choose and discover who they are, without needing to conform to one category of norm or the other. They end their story by telling the audience, "You are so much more tremendous and incredible than something so simple as what you look like." Vaid-Menon's struggle is difficult to determine because while they explain how they identify and where their beliefs stem from, they use their story in this documentary to more-so explain their views, and make room for hope for liberation and understanding. It is clear that they want their third act to take place in a world where socially constructed gender roles do not matter and people are free to be who they are, but it is unclear how they will get there.

The final subject in this documentary is Laverne Cox, an award-winning actress and producer who uses she/her pronouns. She begins her story explaining how she grew up in Mobile, Alabama, a place that was not affirming of her and who she was, saying that she was ultimately saved from her imagination. As early as the age of five, Cox looked up to female Black performers and artists like Leontyne Price, and yearned for their dignity and elegance, while admiring Price's powerful voice. Cox always loved to perform herself, and started dance class at age five, where she said there was a great deal of "gender policing" from the local community, specifically her school and church, who would tell her mother, "dance classes are going to turn your child gay." Despite the hate and backlash, Cox stuck with dance and eventually got a dance scholarship, saying that following her passion of art saved her life and rescued her from violence. Cox eventually moved to New York City where she struggled to find

a job, until she found herself at Lucky Cheng's which to this day is known as the "drag queen capital of the world." She struggled heavily working there, as she felt as though her identity was a spectacle and mere entertainment for customers, but kept in mind that she was there working and doing a job, and needed to continue in order to survive. This is the second act in her story, as Cox struggles with identity as well as how her identity is profited on by others, and needs to continue in this work in order to survive and financially support herself and meet her needs. While the job itself was emotionally challenging, she said that the sisterhood experience at work built her up and motivated her to keep going and to believe in herself as an artist. Eventually, Cox entered the acting industry where she appeared in numerous movies and TV shows, although commonly acting in sexualized, stereotypical roles. Cox finally found success and respect when she was nominated for an Emmy in *Orange is the New Black*, which she says meant the world not only to her, but was a win for the entire trans community. Cox ends her story by saying, "I'm starting to believe in my own power. My voice matters, my truth matters. You're enough just as who you are," verbalizing the third act of her story, where she comes to peace with who she is, and uses her platform to fight for the rights of all trans people everywhere.

### **Chapter 5: Analysis Discussion and Conclusion**

A major finding that was not visible to me in my research was the transition that families and loved ones undergo as the subject transitions. From my own personal experience, I know that this transition happens. And this is the case for many people whose loved one is trans, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. The growth of non-trans subjects during the main protagonist's transition is consistent across each documentary. The best examples can be found in the first two films, which added an additional level of understanding about the dynamic nature of

the transition. These films showcase the rarities that are supportive home situations; realistically, trans and non-binary youth are overwhelmingly shunned and abused in the home. In my opinion, the documentaries boldened how apparent and severe the struggle is. Even with the utmost amount of love and support, the harm, hate, exclusion, and discrimination is so severe that it is virtually impossible for trans and non-binary folk to not be harmed.

As far as the visual and structural elements of each film, the manipulation of color and light, and the motion and angles of the camera made each story feel extremely personal, to the point where it felt like I was physically following the subject along, sitting in their space. In all three documentaries, blue-hues complemented emotional topics that showed the subject crying or sitting in solitude, and dark, or low-lighting was used alongside this. When the lighting was softer but the color of the scene was still blue, it offered a more calm, peaceful tone. Reds were visible in intense parts of the film, where emotions were high and the moment was life-changing. Yellow was used, often with high-key lighting, to show happiness and warmth, usually found in outdoor scenes. Medium shots of two subjects together, and extreme close ups were used when subjects spoke about their emotions, without using dialogue, as we were able to see the emotions in their face so clearly, letting viewers interpret what they were feeling. This was especially poignant when the subject was reacting to what someone else said, as in the scenes where they were getting medical consultations, or when they had to listen to hate and backlash at a sporting event or on the House floor, or remembering some story from their past. Without saying anything but the emotion written in their face, these subjects showed the viewer what was going on inside their head, which is not only a powerful visual but adds to the complexity and emotion of each topic or theme discussed. As a whole, the camera and lighting techniques in each documentary transported viewers into the world of the trans gender individual. Each subject told their own

story without interruption, which was not possible via academic literature, and provided so much more context and a deeper understanding by telling the story using their own lens. This first-person account, complemented by visual elements, added to the level of understanding enabled by academic research.

An element that was consistent among every single subject was the feeling of being alone in their journey of figuring out their gender and who they are, with a lack of representation in their communities to look to for guidance. Multiple subjects, such as Avery in *Transhood* and Huckman from *Changing the Game*, took it upon themselves to battle this lack of representation than filling online spaces themselves, in both of their cases, by using YouTube to showcase their stories and daily lives as trans youth. Each subject's struggle with feeling alone and not represented is just one struggle they face every day amid the everyday harm and hate that trans and non-binary people face in their schools, careers, communities, sports teams, etc., and social media is a space where they can connect with one another, and support each other while they continue or start their journey of understanding and accepting their gender identity. This inclusion of social media as an additional space for trans youth to turn to is consistent with modern society, considering the prevalence that social media has on young people. The inclusion of this in the documentary shows how new documentaries are including options such as this one as a place where young people can find additional representation and support, making the film an educational tool, perhaps, for young viewers, who may even take to social media to follow the continued journey of the subjects in the film. This shows that trans subjects and their journeys are ongoing, rather than make the issues shared at the film and the subject feel forgotten once filming is complete.

When considering the director's intentions for each film, I looked into the previous movies made by each of them to see if their backgrounds may have affected their approach in determining aesthetics and their reasoning behind making the film itself. Michael Barnett, the director of *Changing the Game*, describes himself as a director/cinematographer who "loves landing on that perfect combination of sound and image to make a feeling or moment hit just right. He enjoys telling visually evocative stories that feel poignant, whimsical, dark yet heartfelt" (Barnett, 2023). Barnett has not directed a documentary on this topic before, though he has directed a documentary with teenage subjects before, titled, *The Mars Generation (2017)*, it focused on aspiring teenage astronauts, and other films that focused on underrepresented communities, like his Western film, *Becoming Bulletproof (2014)*, which featured individuals with disabilities as the lead subjects. Barnett worked alongside producer Alex Schmider. Schmider is the Director of Transgender Representation at GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the world's largest LGBTQ+ media advocacy organization) and has produced a variety of films that all center around trans and nonbinary stories. One of his most well-known films is *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen (2020)*. The film discussed the history of trans representation in Hollywood by including trans actors and actresses like Laverne Cox. Schmider's participation in producing this documentary, I argue, combats elements of bias from Barnett as a cisgender director. Schmider's experience was able to protect the trans perspective behind the camera while overseeing the production and editing elements. This sheds light onto advancements of contemporary trans documentary film, as it shows how activists are making their way behind the camera and putting stories like *Changing the Game* into circulation, and ensuring that best practices in terms of how subjects are portrayed are followed. In an interview

with The Cut Magazine about *Changing the Game* and what sports mean to kids, Schmider explained the purpose of producing a film such as this one;

We were on the festival circuit for about two to three years before we landed on Hulu, and when we screened the film in rural towns, in big cities, in blue states and red states, for older and younger people, the majority [of people] who sat through the film and got to know Andraya, Sarah, Terry, and Mack were reminded that these are just kids who want to be themselves and play the sports they love with their friends. I think so much of how we're going to overcome the really harmful rhetoric and legislative attacks that are happening is for people to get to know the kids who are being politicized, and for people to understand they're implicated in these legislative attacks, because it doesn't just affect trans youth, it affects any child who in any way someone deems gender-nonconforming. I think we're on our way to changing hearts and minds, and it's because of the generosity of Andraya, Sarah, Terry, and Mack in trusting us to help them tell their stories (Heaney, 2021).

Based on Schmider's portfolio, his explanation of the point of the film, and the lack of negative instances of manipulating aesthetics that I was able to find while watching the documentary, I argue that the aesthetics of *Changing the Game* positively complemented the subjects and helped the viewers to understand their emotions and experiences, and do not think that the voice of the filmmakers took over. One change that I would propose is more related to scripting rather than aesthetics, and I would have liked to see the subjects respond to the hate more in interviews following shots where they are being taunted or yelled at (this happened to Beggs at the wrestling tournaments and Yearwood at track meets). While the subjects addressed that this was common, and aesthetics suggested that this negatively affected their mental health, I



would have like to see them discuss this further and offer their thoughts on it in more detail, or how they overcome it, as it seemed like all these comments did was weigh them down, and then the story would cut to the next scene. Addressing the hate would have given the subjects even more agency and show both sides of the arguments made by protesting parents, rather than just the side of the parents and a glimpse at the effect it has. Overall, *Changing the Game* exemplified how contemporary trans documentaries are moving towards a space where trans individuals are able to tell their story uninterrupted, supported by the aesthetics and filmmakers behind them rather than in front of them. Representation is progressing both in front of, and behind the camera.

When evaluating the intentions of the director of *Transhood*, Sharon Liese, I was unable to find this same sense of representation behind the camera. Many producers on the film have created works that focused on underrepresented communities before, specifically films about disabilities and the fight for reproductive rights, but I was unable to find a team member who had specifically worked on a film with similar subject matter, even a movie about LGBTQ+ individuals and their stories. In an interview with TIME Magazine, Liese explained that she is a Kansas City native, which is where the film took place, so she did have a connection to the community in a broader sense, and understood the political climate of the area and similar components of the community. She also shared her intentions behind creating the film, saying that documentaries on this subject largely focused on adults, and she wanted trans kids to feel represented as well (Haynes, 2020).

In addition, she wanted to show parents and families how to support their trans child through showing relationships like Jay and his mother, saying that her main message that she wants to get across “is that you really just need to love your kids, and let them lead, and that you

can never go wrong by affirming your child”(Haynes, 2020). While this definitely brings in her personal bias, I do not think that her views are harmful to the subjects in this film, and her intentions seem to align with the parents who were included alongside their children. The film also seems to have had a positive impact on some subject themselves after the fact, which is different from what we saw happen in the aftermath of *Paris is Burning*, with Jay sharing with TIME Magazine, “I’m excited, and now I have the mindset that if people don’t like it, that’s O.K. “I can’t make everyone like me and understand, but at least they can watch this film, and hopefully they can see that [being trans] is O.K. and they don’t need to judge me for it. I hope that the documentary opens people’s eyes and opens people’s minds”(Heynes, 2020).

The choice to highlight the experiences of trans kids shows that contemporary trans documentaries are diversifying the individuals that they include, in this film including a much younger cast, which could, and did, lead to backlash on the filmmakers and the parents for exploiting their children, sharing intimate scenes and emotions of young children to the whole world. I do not necessarily think that this has to do with a lack of trans representation behind the camera, but I question whether or not having this representation would have affected the ways in which the children’s stories were told, whether that be in terms of how much information was included, or in terms of aesthetics.

*The Trans List* was similar to *Changing the Game* in the sense that the production team included trans activists and individuals. The most prominent example of this is Janet Mock, who acted as a producer of this film, and participated in the opening scene, narrating the introduction and appearing on camera. She also was the main interviewer, asking questions to each subject from behind the camera. Mock worked alongside the director, Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, has directed a plethora of “list” documentaries, such as *The Black List*, *The Out List*, and *The Latino*

*List*, all taking a very straight-forward style with simple aesthetics, giving each subject an opportunity to tell their story without interruption, even from visual elements at times, a film-style consistent with the one employed in *The Trans List*. In an interview with GLAAD about the film and why people should watch it, Alok Vaid-Menon, who was one of the thirteen interviewees in *The Trans List*, summed up what the documentary reveals about trans and nonbinary representation in contemporary documentaries on these topics, specifically the effect that this representation can have on viewers and society;

In a media moment saturated by cisgender people telling transgender stories it feels really exciting and beautiful to have trans people telling our own stories. What the film shows is that there is no "one" trans narrative. We are all extraordinarily different and have different ideas about what gender even is! This film really complicates the idea that there's only one way to be trans. [...] I hope people take away that there are as many trans narratives as there are trans people -- that each of us is extraordinarily complex and unique. This film is bringing trans and gender non-conforming life to a wide audience so I hope that people will be confronted with ideas and narratives that they've never considered before.

*The Trans List* showed how simple aesthetics can also complement spoken story, by drawing the audience towards the subject and exactly what they are saying without distraction. It also shows the progression of trans representation by including a variety of voices on camera and behind the scenes, with a diversity of stories, subjects, and experiences shared and a trans individual working in production and asking questions to the interviewees in an intimate setting.

Contemporary trans documentaries show the direction that representation in media is headed, in the sense that it is broadening and expanding to include a diverse range of voices and experiences on camera and behind the camera on the production team. This helps to remove issues of filmmaker bias from someone who may not fully understand the material themselves, as the individuals that have the power to manipulate documentary components such as aesthetics are more and more commonly ones who share lived experiences as trans people themselves. This ensures, too, that the aesthetic elements of the film are edited and employed in a way that either aids the audience's understanding of the subject's story without taking away from the subject's ability to tell their story, or visually portray the issue differently based on assumptions made by individuals who may not understand the issue for themselves. The manipulation of aesthetics is a powerful tool in documaking, and representation behind the camera is important to promote trans voicentary filmes and stories accurately.

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