

Boys Don't Cry Discussion Questions

Kara DeMilio and Hannah Siegel

April 14, 2014

Question 1. The use of cinematic language and social disenfranchisement

The social-ecological model is used to examine effective areas for intervention, public health and otherwise. The model considers the complex interaction between these 4 levels:

society (public policy, laws, media)

community/institution (culture, norms, schools, built environment, space, economy)

interpersonal (family, friends, social groups)

individual (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs)

Brandon moves from Lincoln to Falls City to seek safer interpersonal relationships. Although Falls City is far for Brandon, it is not far enough. The new city parallels the social-ecological profile of Lincoln on the levels of community/institution, and society. As a viewer, we know that it is only a matter of time before people find out that Brandon is a trans male, and then the interpersonal relationships in Falls City will reflect those in Lincoln.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Kimberly Pierce uses interpersonal relationships and individual attitudes in BDC to highlight the underdevelopment of the top two layers of the social ecological model in Brandon's world. Pierce implants the idea of a trans-friendly utopia early on in the film when Brandon's roller rink date tells him that he seems like he is from "someplace beautiful," a place with a social ecology that supports trans men and women.

Linda Dittmar's essay *Performing Gender in Boys Don't Cry* (BDC) invites us to look critically at Brandon's world "through the lens of geography, history, and social class (page 148)." In addition to a film about gender, homophobia, and patriarchal power, BDC is also about violence bred by social disenfranchisement. She explains, "the circumstances surrounding the plot inscribe additional subtexts through the film's ancillary action, its treatment of social power, and its cinematic 'language' - mise-en-scene, photography, editing soundtrack, lighting, etc (148)."

Linda Dittmar's essay *Performing Gender in Boys Don't Cry* (BDC) invites us to look critically at Brandon's world "through the lens of geography, history, and social class (page 148)." In addition to a film about gender, homophobia, and patriarchal power, BDC is also about violence bred by social disenfranchisement. She explains, "the circumstances surrounding the plot inscribe additional subtexts through the film's ancillary action, its treatment of social power, and its cinematic 'language' - mise-en-scene, photography, editing soundtrack, lighting, etc (148)."

How does Pierce use what Dittmar calls cinematic 'language' to comment on Brandon's social ecology? Think of some examples to share with the class. Does Pierce examine equally all levels of the social ecological model, or are there some areas that are more emphasized than others? Try to think of one example for each level. Do you think such cinematic language can be universally interpreted, or is Pierce targeting a specific audience?

Question 2. Mulvey in question: the thin line between dominant male and female object

Brandon's story unfolds from his perspective. The audience is quick to identify with Brandon, including his gender identity. When other characters say "she" or "it" we want to correct them. Brandon is a "he" because that is how *he* identifies. (Side note: while watching this movie my friend kept using the term "she" in reference to Brandon. I could not help but to react, telling my friend, "you're supposed to say he!") We even identify with his needs and desires. When Brandon sees Lana for the first time we cannot help but to gaze at her as well, her blonde hair and jaded beauty make the viewer fall in love right along with Brandon.

According to Laura Mulvey's theory, the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, who serves as a "screen surrogate" for the viewer to participate in his power (FFT page 64). The viewer enjoys the feeling of omnipotence as the male protagonist controls the events of the film. The viewer also possesses the female figure, as she is the erotic object of the male gaze.

In BDC the same character plays both the role of the powerful male and the objectified female at different points in the film. While we initially view the film through Brandon's perspective (he is our "screen surrogate"), there is a power battle for the dominant male position between Brandon and Tom Nissen/John Lotter. The battle builds up to the dramatic "castration scene" where Tom and John officially take Brandon's place as the male screen surrogate, when the viewer is forced to look at the object (or lack there of) that makes Brandon female (Dittmar, 150). Using Mulvey's terms, this scene is the official switching point where Brandon is demoted from male screen surrogate to female object. As viewers, we have no choice except to take on the erotic male gaze of John/Tom and look at Brandon's femaleness.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

My question for the class is does Mulvey's theory of the viewer identifying with the powerful male erotic gaze apply to this film? Why or why not? Which male characters serve as "screen surrogates?" According to Mulvey's theory, does the viewer possess Brandon when he is the object of Tom/Johnny's gaze? (Hint: look at Cooper's discussion of Mulvey on page 47. Does she write "homosexuality out of existence? Or can we apply her film to read BDC?) Even if Mulvey's theory does not apply, is there still a strive for male power in BDC? If yes, give some examples.

Question 3. The paradox of language:

“The privileging of language as the arbiter of reality has been especially hard on gender. As we’ve seen, most non-normative experiences of gender are excluded from language, and what little language we have for gender transcendence is defamatory. Moreover, all aspects of gender that are not named are also assumed not to exist-to be make believe.” **Riki Wilchins, Queer Theory, Gender Theory (39)**

We create language to bring into existence the things that we see and feel inside, to inform others of these things, but this very tool can do the opposite. Words wield enormous power because they shape and inform our understanding of the world. Words such as white, heterosexual, or upper-class carry with them various rights and privileges that are denied to others who do not belong to these normative categories. These words are given power through binary oppositions. Wilchins does not take issue with norms per se, but “transcendent norms that masquerade as universal” (41). As viewers, we need to think critically about language and the creation of knowledge and reality. How does the body of language that we derive from inform meaning-making? In what ways do you think this shaped the various forms of discrimination and violence experienced by Brandon and the public’s perception and discussion of his murder?

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Newspaper Headlines:

“Death of a deceiver”

“Deadly Deception: Teena Brandon’s Double Life May Have Led to a Triple Murder”

“Cross-Dresser Killed Two Weeks After Town Learned Her True Identity

From ABC News Article:

PRODUCER’S NOTE: In producing this story, we struggled over how to best refer to Brandon, with the understanding that Brandon felt like a man. Ultimately, we use the name Brandon but use female pronouns because of the complicated nature of the story and the violence Brandon suffered because she was biologically female.

Question 4. The Media, Visibility, and Social Change

“The first problem of the media is posed by what does not get translated, or even published in the dominant political languages.” (**Jacques Derrida**)

Rigney notes that the film “brought mainstream media attention to the life and tragic death of Brandon Teena in addition to precipitating extensive academic debate. For the first time, audiences were introduced to a transgender character that was not demonized as either a killer, sexual predator, or deranged psychopath” (Rigney, 181). As a viewer, do you feel that this film is the best format to create a potentially transgressive debate about trans issues? What power do you think that this film had to inflict positive social change?

STAND UP FOR TRANS YOUTH



Transgender Awareness Week is dedicated to educating people about the transgender community and raising awareness of the issues facing trans and gender nonconforming people. Transgender youth, especially, face a number of challenges related to anti-transgender bias.

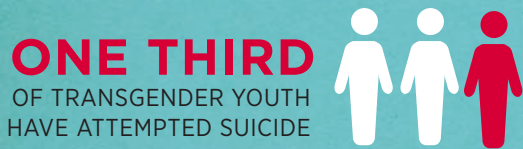
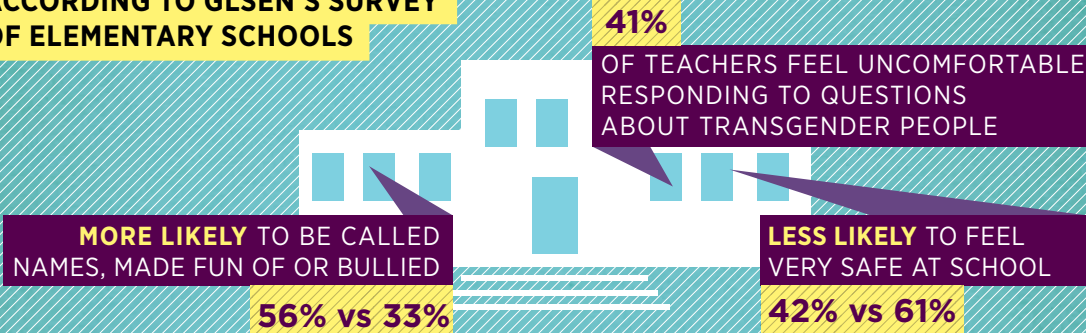
SIDNEY BORUM JR HEALTH CENTER

SidneyBorum.org

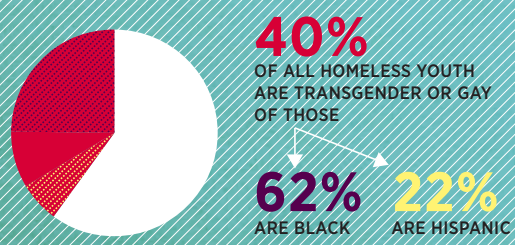


In recognition of this, GLSEN has posted resources for transgender youth and their allies designed to help make schools a safer place. You can find them on GLSEN's Transgender Day of Remembrance page online: glsen.org/tdor

ACCORDING TO GLSEN'S SURVEY OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



IN SURVEYS OF YOUNG TRANS WOMEN LIVING IN URBAN AREAS



RESOURCES

- nwhn.org/transgender-youth-providing-medical-treatment-misunderstood-population
- genderadvocates.org/Tyra/TYRARisk.html
- glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2832.html?state=research&type=research
- sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/SPRC_LGBT_Youth.pdf
- public.health.oregon.gov/HealthyPeopleFamilies/Youth/YouthSexualHealth/Documents/SexualHealthDisparities-LGBTQ.pdf

The Sidney Borum, Jr. Health Center is a program of Fenway Health

COM-30

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.640 Screen Women: Body Narratives in Popular American Film
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.