

Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television

Ralph J. Poole



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12093>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.12093

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Ralph J. Poole, "Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 12-2 | 2017, Online since 22 November 2017, connection on 09 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12093> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12093>

This text was automatically generated on 9 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television

Ralph J. Poole

1. Why Is Trans So Hot? The Transgender Turn in Television

“We are in the midst of a revolutionary moment.” (Laverne Cox)

- 1 The section “Hot List 2014” of *Rolling Stone* magazine announced the new television series *Transparent* as “Hot TV Show” (Glazer and Jacobson). The show’s hotness is based on the ‘real’ feeling provided, the flashback technique, the ingenuity of the scripting and the quality of the acting. Jill Soloway, creator of *Transparent*, says about the show: “There’s this zeitgeisty moment in the trans community, and this show happened to land in the right place, [it] couldn’t have been made five years ago” (Grow). *Transparent* is but one, if outstanding example of what has been called a present surge of trans TV: “TV is in the grips of a ‘trans’-formation,” writes Elio Iannacci. I want to pursue this claim to trans hotness and stake out some key issues that have popped up when looking at recent television productions which prominently feature transgender characters.
- 2 While some critics assert the hotness of trans, others are more critical, even talking of a backlash. Does Kay Siebler’s suggestion of 2012, for example, still hold true that we are actually far less comfortable with gender ambiguity than a few years ago? “We want [transgender people] to be either/or: pre-op or post-op, transvestite or transsexual,” says Siebler. “There are few representations in mainstream media of a transgender person who defies these categories.... ‘trans’ means ‘transitioning,’ not moving outside of systems defining sex and gender” (75-76). Siebler asserts that what we see on television are primarily “transgender-on-the-way-to-transsexual identities” (76) rather than characters that mess up the gender/sex binary. And since these are the representations we get, we “internalize” that people must be either/or: “Surgery and hormones are required in order to be a content transqueer and that means being a masculine male or feminine female. Capitulation to the sex/gender/sexuality ideologies

is neither transgressive nor queer,” concludes Siebler (76) perhaps polemically, but certainly with great commitment.

- 3 Another field of concern is the academic discourse on transgender. Whereas television critics in the mass media have picked up the trend and indeed furthered a discussion on transgender presence in television, television scholars are significantly slower to follow. So far, full-length studies on LGBT television presence have largely ignored the “T”,ⁱ neither Larry Gross’ *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (2001), Suzanna Danuta Walters’ *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (2001), Stephen Tropiano’s *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (2002), Ron Becker’s *Gay TV and Straight America* (2006) nor Samuel A. Chambers’ *The Queer Politics of Television* (2009) deal with transgender issues (and if so, as in Chambers, only in passing), while Steven Capsuto in his seminal study *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television* (2000) makes a noteworthy, if symptomatic preliminary remark on his use of terminology that may account for the lack of inclusion in studies such as Gross’ and Walters’:

Except in stock phrases such as ‘lesbian and gay,’ ‘gay’ means both men *and* women in this book. I use the terms ‘lesbians’ and ‘gay women’ interchangeably. In the later portions of the text, I sometimes use contractions and abbreviations like ‘lesbigay’ (for ‘lesbian, bisexual, and gay’), ‘GLB’ (‘gay, lesbian, and bisexual’), and ‘GLBT’ (‘gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered’). Though a bit colloquial, they reflect the era being discussed, and they make for faster reading than constantly repeating ‘lesbians, gay men, bisexual men and women, and transgendered person’ multiple times on the same page.’ (10)

- 4 While this somewhat flip remark sounds like a fair and above all pragmatic way to organize one’s writerly tactics, it discloses a crucial blind spot: when writing about “gays” this more often than not does lead to writing about gay men exclusively without explicitly stating so, even though it may at times include gay women, which then usually *is* specified as such. Above all, such seemingly neutral use of terminology mostly ignores bisexuals and it certainly overlooks trans persons, except in the context of drag and cross-dressing. Walters discusses the appearance of drag queens as commodity and marketing strategy suggesting that in “films and in popular culture generally, drag becomes a safe and circuitous way of dealing with gay subjects without having to reckon with the homophobia of heterosexual society” (142), and Gross referring to *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) similarly contends that such a “film’s popularity with straight audiences can be explained in part by the perennial appeal of men in dresses, whether gay or straight, and the complete absence of any threat to what Christopher Isherwood called the heterosexual dictatorship” (71). Stephen Tropiano mentions transgender characters on television more than the other survey studies, and he is skeptical about the many instances of “how transgender people are too often used for a cheap laugh” (173). Tropiano especially sheds a critical light on law and order dramas where “[t]ransvestites and transsexuals, usually hookers, are either witnesses to or victims of crimes” (88), whereas in medical shows the transsexual characters served as educational tool for the audience by drawing “a generally sympathetic and sensitive portrait of the male-to-female transsexual by focusing on his struggle to get others (including the audience) to understand how he feels like a woman trapped in a man’s body” (27).
- 5 There is another reason for channeling transgender issues primarily into the discourse on cross-dressing, which not only “illustrates a confusion commonplace in the media

between transsexuals, hermaphrodites, transvestites and drag-queens” (Phillips 7), but also queer theorists’ reluctance to include *certain* transgender issues other than cross-dressing, precisely because it brings sex back into the discussion about gender. According to Jay Prosser, “the transgendered subject has typically had center stage over the transsexual: whether s/he is transvestite, drag queen, or butch woman, queer theory’s appropriation has been directed toward the subject who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex” (Prosser 6, qtd. in Phillips 13). What Prosser claims to be queer theory’s blind spot, namely the rejection of the transsexual as a discordant element of the otherwise hailed gender performativity, leads to Judith Butler as the first and perhaps foremost advocate of such performativity. It is, as Phillips points out, above all “the post-op transsexual who disturbs the performativity theory, in that (s)he has undergone a transformation, not merely of gender, but of sex—physical changes that impact permanently on the body” (14).

- 6 Butler indeed has set a certain academic standard in famously choosing drag as illustration of her theory of gender performativity. In her 1991 seminal study *Gender Trouble* she explains that „[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (187, original emphasis), but in the new introduction to the 1999 edition she also concedes rhetorically asking: “What about the notion, suggested by Kate Bornstein, that a transsexual cannot be described by the noun of ‘woman’ or ‘man,’ but must be approached through active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which ‘is’ the new identity or, indeed, the ‘in-betweenness’ that puts the being of gendered identity into question?” (xii). Butler’s late and rhetorically clandestine acknowledgment that the transsexual defies conventional sex and gender categories is only proof of Susan Stryker’s assertion that transgender studies are queer theory’s evil twin: “it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim” (“Transgender Studies” 212, see also Heyes). Stryker’s use of the family metaphor is noteworthy, especially when looking into transgender representations in television that play on the family trope in a literal way as is the case in *Transparent*. Stryker mentions well-known dramas of familial abandonment (such as Frankenstein’s monster) to explain that transsexuals belong to the family of queers. While the field of transgender studies has begun to flourish both in the shadow of queer theory as well as adjacent to disability studies and intersex studies, Stryker—with a quip on Butler—remains disturbed about the fallacy that “transgender” has served as vessel for all gender trouble ensuring the normativity of homo- and heterosexuality:

While queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian,’ and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity. (“Transgender Studies” 214)

- 7 Even though, as could be seen in the examples above, the fields of queer TV studies and trans studies have not intersected much, “[t]ransgender histories and TV intertwine” according to Quinn Miller (216), who mentions several iconic historical television moments starting with Milton Berle’s drag performances or Mary Martin cast as Peter Pan in a NBC production of 1955 and leading up to shows such as *Soap*, *Bosom Buddies*, *Ugly Betty*, *All My Children*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, *America’s Next*

Top Model, *The Glee Project*, or *Drop Dead Diva*. While my own interest lies in scripted shows which feature transgender characters in lead roles, there are a whole host of reality shows with or about transgender persons on television and they have drawn the most media attention. Amongst the reality genres, there are for example bio documentaries such as Showtime's *The Opposite Sex* series (2004), *Transgenerations* (2005), *I Am Cait* (2015-present), *I Am Jazz* (2015-present), *Becoming Us* (2015-present), *New Girls on the Block* (2015-present), the dating show *Transamerican Love Story* (2008), and other reality shows such as *Brave New Girls* (2014, by Jenna Talackova who was the banned transgender contestant for Miss Universe Canada), *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) and Laverne Cox's *TRANSform Me* (2010). However, many of the trans appearances featuring above all drag queens have adhered to what José B. Capino has called "party[ing] on television" as a way of introducing and showing off gender "outcasts" in unexpected ways (qtd. in Miller 217). And while commercial television relies on "ciscentric market research strategies... television not only reinforces norms but also provides tools for nonconformity that people use to queer and feminist ends" (Miller 217). With this discourse of multiplicity relying on competing and conflicting representations of a wide range of experiences—including those of trans persons—television continues to offer important and helpful means for the transgender community: "gender performance, dysphoria relief, artistic expression, and queer family" (Miller 218).

- 8 A crucial point in current debates about transgender representation in current film and television revolves around whether the featured actors/actresses identify as transgender themselves or not. Recent Academy Awards nominations have been heatedly discussed in this respect since they included a perhaps surprising number of queer-centered films, amongst which were—maybe even more surprising—several films with transgender characters, most notably *Dallas Byers Club* (2013) and *The Danish Girl* (2015).ⁱⁱ Looking back a little further, the trans list includes *Transamerica* (2005), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *The Crying Game* (1992), and *The World According to Garp* (1982). Yet, as Daniel Reynolds points out, "the honors have uniformly gone to the cisgender actors who are cast in these roles. Even in 2016, Eddie Redmayne was nominated for Best Actor for his role as transgender pioneer Lily Elbe in *The Danish Girl*."
- 9 With regard to television, Laverne Cox is currently the most visible transgender person not least since *TIME Magazine* has featured her as "cover girl" in the June 9 issue in 2014 (see also the *TIME* article by Katy Steinmetz). Besides producing and starring in *TRANSform Me*, Cox at present is part of the cast—albeit not as one of the lead characters—of *Orange Is the New Black*, a Netflix TV series created by Jenji Kohan based on Piper Kerman's memoir *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* (2010) and launched in 2013 with plans to continue for at least seven seasons. The show is set in a women's federal prison and is well-received for its inclusion of portrayals of women stemming from all kinds of social backgrounds, including Cox from the start as a post-op transwoman, possibly "the first women-in-prison narrative that includes a real transgender woman, a character played by an out trans actress" (Anderson-Minshall). Cox was nominated for various awards such as the Critics' Choice Television Awards, the Primetime Emmy Awards, and the NAACP Image Awards. In their introduction to the inaugural issue of the journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, the general editors Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah link the popularity of *Orange Is the New Black*, especially referring to Laverne Cox, as a moment of cultural attention to transgender

phenomena to the case of Chelsea Manning, who made the news first as Wikileaks whistle-blower and then by announcing her gender transition while being incarcerated in a US military prison. Due to the high media visibility of this case, the editors claim that it has become impossible to ignore transgender issues for much longer, regardless of one's opinion on such issues, which in Manning's case may range from "the relationship of transgender identity to issues of state, to moral and political agency, to visions of social justice, and to strategies of social transformation" (Stryker and Currah 2). Most directly, her case points to the deplorable medical (mis-)treatment of transgender persons in American prisons, a case that the Cox character exemplifies in *Orange*. More generally, given the many instances of media coverage concerning transgender topics from the transitioning of the *Matrix* directors Lana and Lilly Wachowski, who have recently excelled in their Netflix sci-fi series *Sense8* (2015) that includes a transgender character played by trans actor Jamie Clayton, to daily news reports on global transphobic violence, the vast array of instances call for careful in-depth analysis and yet, taken as a whole these recent affairs can also be characterized as a significant "transgender turn" (Stryker and Currah 3).

- 10 While Cox's character Sophia has several key appearances from the show's start, season one's third episode of *Orange* stands out in that large parts of this episode, directed by Jodie Foster, deal with inmate Sophia, who works in prison as a hairstylist and provides beauty tips to fellow prisoners, for example on how to create your own shiny flip-flops with duct tape. While I agree that the series is "not the sexploitation women's prison of flicks" (Anderson-Minshall), the portrait of Sophia offers some moments to reconsider, especially if we want to see such representations as marking a transgender turn. The episode starts with a flashback scene showing the pre-op Sophia at work with the fire-department. While her colleagues change clothes in the locker-room, she seeks refuge in a restroom stall. She undresses to disclose pink lace underwear and the scene ends with a brooding look into the mirror and then blends into yet another scene of Sophia looking into the mirror, this time with long hair and without beard. Clearly, this marks Sophia's post-op condition, highlighted by a close-up showing her applying make-up and a full-body shot that reveals Sophia's female breasts which she admires in the mirror. This filmic transitional moment signifies Sophia's physical transitioning, a technique that is repeated several times in similar back-and-forth movements throughout the episode. Those flashbacks importantly include scenes of coming-out and transitioning which present Sophia's at times troubled interaction with her mostly supportive wife Crystal, her irritated son, and her disregarding colleagues. One such sequence shows Sophia and Crystal trying on dresses with Crystal saying, "Can't have my husband walking around looking like a two-dollar hooker." There are moments of intimacy, even kissing, between the two watched by their vexed son. Nevertheless, Crystal also pleads: "Please keep it.... I'm fine with the rest of it. The hair, the make-up. I'll teach you all of it. You'll be a pro. Just please keep your penis."
- 11 In another set of scenes of the same episode, we are shown disturbing moments of medical maltreatment and sexual harassment within the prison confines. A horny prison guard, who jokes about the female inmates, calls Sophia a "whole different species... a cyborg pussy" and proceeds to offer for Sophia to perform fellatio on him in exchange for favors. He brags to one of his colleagues that this would be an especially good blow-job, since "she used to have a dick, so she knows what it likes." But the guard is not the only person from the prison's administration whom a critical light is being shed on. When Sophia gets told that she will not be allowed her hormones

anymore for budgetary reasons, the new female supervisor in total disregard of Sophia's gender identity as the use of pronouns shows remarks: "He can suck it up. She ... Jesus.... This is a federal system. If he wanted to keep his girlish figure, he should have stayed out of jail. Why would anyone ever want to give up being a man. It's like winning the lottery and giving the ticket back." The Sophia story-line of this episode ends with yet another mirror shot. Sophia takes off her make-up, tears in her eyes, and pulling a hair from her chin with tweezers, suggesting the lack of estrogen is already showing effect. Although this is a melodramatic, even haunting moment, underlining Sophia's utter victimization within a totalizing system, it is relevant that the show calls for an empathetic response to Sophia's plight and disavows the supervisor's blatant transphobia, which tries to insert Sophia's body into a system of sexual economy reliant on phallic dominance which, according to Jean Baudrillard, is "organized entirely around the fetishization of the phallus as the general equivalent" (qtd. in Phillips 170, see also Serano). *Orange's* sexual politics resort to unearthing such "truisms" instead, vouching for diversified and respectful representations of ethnically and queerly marked individuals, communities, and families.

- 12 The show and especially this episode are important to sense the vagaries of the ongoing transgender turn. For Cox it is undoubtedly crucial to have a trans person playing a role such as Sophia's, not only for the sake of heightened realism ("I would rather see a trans person playing that character than a cisgendered male actor in a wig" [qtd. in Ryan]), but also to prove that such a person can really act. Cox remembers her first acting teacher Susan Batson who told her "it would be my job to bring truth and rawness" to stereotypical, two-dimensional roles (qtd. in Ryan), "[i]n other words," as Hugh Ryan explains, "to act—something that network executives and casting directors all too often believe trans people are incapable of doing." Cox believes that most directors think "all she could do was glamour" and "that trans actors can't or won't go deep, because... people think that our identities are not real. We are fake women" (qtd. in Ryan). But Cox at the same time is worried that this turn is but a fleeting fad remonstrating that "[t]rans people have been used as the new, cool thing—just as black or gay once was." Along with the idea of trans people "trending," she warns, comes the idea that one day "we may be 'out of fashion'" (qtd. in Iannacci).

2. Thrilling Trans Moments for New Queer Cinematic TV

- 13 'Transphobia' (literally, the fear of the subject in transition), the stigmatization of transsexuals as not 'real men' and 'real women,' turns on this conception of transsexual as constructed in some more literal way than nontranssexuals—the Frankensteins of modern technology's experiments with sexual difference. (Jay Prosser)
- 14 Laverne Cox's character Sophia gazing at her naked self in the mirror can be perceived in different ways. We can read this as a crucial moment of self-acknowledgment in the process of transitioning, or we might discern this as a dramaturgically superfluous instance of voyeurism for the sake of titillating the spectator. Yet another way of understanding such mirror moments is to succumb to a moment of identification by taking on the character's self-identifying perspective of her/himself. Analyzing *Boys Don't Cry*, Halberstam makes a claim for such a transgender gaze in "forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's gaze," which in turn "reveals the

ideological content of the male and female gazes and it temporarily disarms the compulsory heterosexuality” (294) of such a film. In the case of *Boys*, however, adopting the subversive gaze of transman Brandon ultimately fails collapsing into a female or rather lesbian gaze, according to Halberstam’s assessment of the final intimate encounter between Brandon and his girl-friend Lana. By first shifting to an empowered female, i.e. Lana’s, gaze, which still upholds the claim to Brandon’s authentic masculinity, the film eventually divests the transgender character of such legitimacy and disempowers Lana’s initial readiness to accept Brandon’s trans identity through representing their final love scene as a romantically clichéd lesbian coupling. Halberstam points out the problems that arise when the Brandon-Lana relationship shifts from an earlier explicit sex scene, in which Brandon uses a dildo and Lana willingly relinquishes a probing look at Brandon’s naked body, to a more romantically depicted love scene that features the characters as two women. This woman-on-woman scene thus gives up the transgender agenda altogether by fixating Brandon’s gender with the help of Lana’s now inquisitive gaze on his female body. Halberstam calls this shift catastrophic, since this scene takes place after the rape in which Brandon’s body was brutally violated by John and Tom, and Brandon “now interacts with Lana as if he were a woman” (297). Indeed, Brandon in these two scenes gets disrobed and reduced to her naked ‘true’ self as a woman. What in the graphic sex scenes between Brandon and Lana was depicted as a suspension of expected gender roles now becomes stabilized again “by a Hollywood-style dissolve as if to suggest that the couple are now making love as opposed to having sex” (Halberstam 297).

- 15 Halberstam’s observations are essential in that they question the sustainability of any such transgender gaze for more than just “a short time” and allow for a contrastive transfer to assessing the visual politics of other works, especially when belonging to the romance genre and asking “about the inevitability and dominance of both the male/female and the hetero/homo binary” (294). One such work is *Hit & Miss*, a British Sky Atlantic television production from 2012, yet whereas *Boys* “became a critical and commercial hit, propelling issues of transgender identities and homophobic violence into mainstream culture” (Gieni 1), *Hit & Miss* so far has remained a fairly unknown show. The most obvious link between the two is the casting with Chloë Sevigny as Brandon’s lover Lana in *Boys* now being cast as the transgender character herself. In *Hit & Miss* it is Sevigny’s transgender character Mia that is being looked at, variously by herself and others, including her male heterosexual lover Ben. And like in *Boys*, the transgender character was played by a cisgender actress. As for the choice of casting a cisgender actress as Mia instead of an actual transgender actor, creator Paul Abbott mainly argues for the selling points: “The idea is that selling a series like this that’s going to cost about a million an episode, you need an international name to hang it on. ... Chloë Sevigny is so enigmatically perfect for this” (qtd. in Egner). Contrary however to Abbot’s assurance that he did not want to create a stereotypically glamorous drag queen, I would argue that it is precisely Sevigny’s propensity to glamour which—perhaps fatally—makes her character Mia so fascinating that at least in some scenes she adheres to such a standard of glamour. I want to call Mia a “trans fatale” and a highly ambivalent one at that as is the case with most visual representations of femmes fatales. But what makes Mia’s glamorousness different from transgender characters “such as Laverne Cox on *I Want to Work for Diddy*, Carmelita on *Dirty Sexy Money*,ⁱⁱⁱ and Isis King on *America’s Top Model* [who] all fit the ‘chick with a dick, gay Barbie’ stereotype of MTF transqueers” (Siebler 91)?

- 16 *Hit & Miss* is a generic hybrid, part romance and family drama, and it also connects to the transgender thriller genre, a genre known for its prior trans-ploitation. Abbott admits that he mashed up two separate projects, one about a transsexual mother and the other about a hitman (Hale). Thrillers such as *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) feature men who, as Phillips explains, dress as women for psychological reasons. In these films as in the thriller genre in general, “[t]he narrative is driven centrally by the quest for knowledge of the killer’s identity” (85). Crucially, the unveiling of the murderer’s identity comes with the second unveiling of his gender. This ultimate comingling of criminal behavior and gender transgression is represented “as perverse or hysterical symptoms of a psychotic condition,” and transgender therefore remains delegated to negative associations with “castration, madness, murder and monstrosity” (85). Phillips importantly points to a consistent critical reading of the thriller as being misogynist, relegating the transgender appearance to the function as “metaphorical vehicle for the demonization of the feminine” (86). In contrast, he suggests that if one wants to read the transgender trope as a metaphor, “it is a metaphor for the psychotic erasure of the self” (86). All in all, such thrillers are concerned with the anxiety of transgender as gender-bending danger.
- 17 Just like in these thrillers, Mia in *Hit & Miss* conjoins criminal actions with transgender veiling: Mia is a contract killer whose transgender identity is unknown to most. She kills, however, not out of a psychic disorder or for gaining pure profit, but to earn money for her planned sex reassignment surgery, and her secret life is turned upside down when she receives a letter from her dying ex-partner not only telling her that she fathered a by now 11-year-old son, Ryan, she was unaware of, but also that it is her last wish that Mia should take care of all children left behind. In its earnest probing into the psyche of a transitioning person, *Hit & Miss* stands apart from the older psychotic model of the thriller, the anxiety is one that is plausibly linked to the character’s transgender development and not primarily a vehicle to thrill the audience. Also and importantly, in contrast to Mia’s fictional environment we know from a very early moment that Mia is transgender. Only minutes into the pilot episode of this six-part miniseries we witness a scene of unveiling that—like the mirror scene in *Orange* discussed earlier—may or may not be said to be gratuitous and in the tradition of prior thrilling transgender unveilings. After a kill, which shows Mia dressed in a gender-neutral jumpsuit outfit, Mia first puts on lipstick in the car before driving off the murder scene thus now marking her female gender and then undresses to full-frontal nudity after she gets home. We see a clearly transgender person with female breasts and a penis. The pills she takes explains the first, the way she tucks away her penis with a towel explains the disdain for the latter. The scene abounds with mirror shots which points not so much to split personalities as is usually the case in the noir genre, especially with regard to dangerous women, but rather to Mia’s difficulties in transitioning. This mood of complicated emotional turmoil is underlined—as in many other instances in the series—by the soundtrack. We see Mia’s mirror reflections against the musical backdrop of “Desperate Heart,” a 2012 song by the Californian psychedelic rock band Gram Rabbit, which instead of their otherwise overtly gloomy melodies has a happy sound to it. Given the fact of what we see are disturbing images, i.e. first a brutal murder and then a starkly naked trans person, the melody and lyrics clash, thus subtly commenting on the scene shown: “I don’t know which way you’re going / I don’t really care / I just need a new direction / Freedom’s in the air.”

- 18 There are several more scenes showing Mia clearly struggling with the physical reality of her penis, and one is reminded of similar disturbing scenes in films such as *The Crying Game* or *Transamerica*, where we see the disrobing of a transwoman revealing a penis. As Siebler rightly asserts, “displays of trans bodies were few and far between. In the film *The Crying Game* (1992), we get a short glimpse of the female trans body and how the character tucks his penis to appear female, but the scene was considered extremely sensational. Full frontal male nudity is not something to which American moviegoers are accustomed” (88-89).^{iv} Famously, *The Crying Game* includes the crucial ‘penis shot,’ where the trans character sheds the clothes to disclose the penis to a shocked lover as well as to many shocked viewers. In *Transamerica*, we get to see both the pre-op penis (actually a prosthesis) and the post-op vagina and breasts. There is an important difference, however, in that in *The Crying Game* the trans character is played by the—admittedly very androgynous looking—male actor Jaye Davidson, whereas in *Transamerica* it is played by Felicity Huffman otherwise known for her role in *Desperate Housewives*. Siebler suggests that we are dealing with a double standard here, and only the case of the male actor displaying his “real” penis would be considered truly shocking: “Perhaps because the MTF trans character in *Transamerica* is played by a female, the standards of ‘female body on display’ apply; the movie going audience needs to, wants to and insists upon seeing his body” (89). This logic of casting a legitimate voyeuristic gaze on the female body is even reinforced in cases such as *Boys Don’t Cry* and *The L Word* (more on the latter later) where FTM trans characters are stripped naked “for salacious public viewing” and we feel entitled to “see, analyze, and critique the female body” (Siebler 89).
- 19 In *Hit & Miss*, we have a similar scenario as in *Transamerica* with a female actor who has a prosthetic penis attached to her body. Contrary to the claim that such scenes need to be seen as essentially voyeuristic and intentionally titillating, Mark Lawson suggests that Mia’s nude scene “is dramatically crucial and completely non-gratuitous.” It is the mirror-scene discussed above in which we see Mia looking at her own genuine breasts and a prosthetic penis, which is shown not as a “freak-show,” but as a moment for us to realize that Mia is in the midst of transforming her body which in turn leads to a deeper understanding of troubling later scenes, for example when her son sees her naked in a bathtub. It is true, as Lawson argues, that we are used to seeing plenty of female nudity in film and television productions—many of which are gratuitous—and only recently a rare shot on a fully naked man, and that accordingly to present trans nudity makes a crucial comment on this long-standing debate. Abbott suggests that to present Mia’s penis right at the beginning of the series dignifies the composition as an “antishock” strategy, because saving such a shot until a later moment “would have made the organ the main shot. The children and her obligation toward them is the core of the series, not the [penis]” (qtd. in Egner).
- 20 Admittedly, the penis does come into play several times, one of which concerns the romance plot of the series. The very first time after her arrival in the village and meeting her “new family,” Mia goes out to the presumably only bar around, where she meets village beau Ben. In this scene, Mia is shown to be very glamorous and seductive, wearing a sexy red dress, which actually is a dress of her late lover she finds in the closet. In the bar, she dances and sings to Morrissey’s karaoke version of “Let Me Kiss You,” and while she seems to be doing this for her own sake and not to show off, she is being watched intently by Ben, who has an obvious interest in this beautiful and

mysterious unknown woman. In the course of the series, Mia immediately starts to flirt with Ben, who willingly accepts her advances until she decides to tell him about her trans identity. Unsurprisingly, Ben's reaction is one of appalled shock: "I don't get it. You've got a cock?.... How could it ever work?" After this initial phobic reaction, however, Mia shows Ben how things *could* work. The scene, serving as cliff-hanger of episode three, abounds with details that suggest a highly charged and dangerous eroticism, following the course of the trans fatale that Mia had initiated in the bar scene. She dresses up in fur coat and bodice, and having gained access to Ben's house she waits for Ben who comes back, all sweaty from his jog and clearly surprised to see Mia after their last meeting. "This is how it would work," she says, drops the fur coat to reveal the bodice, pulls off Ben's jogging pants, rips apart his underpants and kneels for a blow job. The last image before fading into the final credits is of a view of Mia's corset-laced back between the legs of Ben, who lays spread out and moaning on his sofa. Again, the ambiguous atmosphere of transgender heterosexuality is highlighted by the soundtrack with the lyrics of "Colours," a song by American indie rock band Grouplove from their album *Never Trust a Happy Song* (2011): "I am a man, man, man, man / Up, up in the air / And I run around, round, round, round this down town / and act like I don't care. / So when you see me flying by the planet's moon, / You don't need to explain if everything's changed / Just know I'm just like you." Whereas the lyrics claiming carelessness seem to refer to Mia, they are ambivalent in their assertion of manhood and sameness, affirming rather than undermining Mia's transness.

- 21 The evolving affair has more interesting moments playing with the tropes of sex/gender sameness and otherness, for example when Mia gets assaulted during one of her jobs and is tended to by Ben. This scene is noteworthy, because here Mia has lost all her former glamour and is de-eroticized instead and thus masculinized to a certain extent. Ben, however, does not resort to his earlier withdrawal, but genuinely cares for her. All in all, he develops from being shown as traditionally male, hetero and horny for a "hot chick," to a character that works through an identity crisis of his own. He really falls for Mia, and while he at first acts violently phobic at her admission to being a transsexual, he starts to befriend the idea of having such a lover and more importantly shows a great tenderness and caring for Mia, which puts him at times into a structurally female position. Given the pervasive transphobic and readily violent climate of the village they live in, his acceptance of Mia's increasingly visible trans identity and his willingness to give their relationship a try is one of the most transgressive moments of the show, especially given a genre that at this point moves from psycho-thriller to domestic romance, a generally devoutly heteronormative genre.
- 22 The positively evolving romance plot also helps to alleviate the otherwise disturbing trauma narrative, which is interwoven into the major plot and which disturbs the otherwise transgressive affirmation of trans autonomy. It seems that Mia has been the victim of child abuse by her brother and from this results, as the narrative suggests, much of Mia's corporeal ambiguity. On the one hand, this is a pitiful move on behalf of the scripting, since it all too easily complies with the heteronormative expectations of an audience that is more likely to empathize with a trans person who is victim of sexual violence than with a self-assured assassin. On the other hand, the series is radical in that a character like Mia confronts "the difficult questions all trans people must deal with in negotiating a place within society, family, and intimate relationships" (Richter 162). The frequent look into mirrors may reflect Mia's traumatized personality, but

with her the spectator gazes upon her trans body and the screen opens to a surprising and irritating transgender gaze, in the way Halberstam has described it. Furthermore, the exclusion of race in *Boys* that Halberstam finds crucial in critiquing the film's politics has given way to an inclusion in *Hit & Miss*. In both instances, it is the family background and not the main protagonists that are linked to a racial discourse. In *Boys*, Brandon's sister dated a disabled African-American man who also gets killed (Halberstam 298), in *Hit & Miss* Mia is thrown into a family that is mixed in many ways, including their varying racial background. The four children have different fathers (one of which is Mia herself) and two of them, judging by their looks, must have had a black father. The topic of race is not much discussed in the show, but it serves as one of the reasons why the mixed group of children initially resents their new "mother." This lack of overt discussion of race may be due to the fact that British cinema and television has traditionally shown a less phobic treatment of mixed race representations compared to the U.S. But more importantly, by not pushing the interracial issue to the forefront, the show makes a broader all-encompassing claim for inclusion: it is about Mia becoming a member in a small, conservative, rural and predominantly white working-class community.

- 23 The reason to include the British production of *Hit & Miss* in a discussion on American transgender television—besides the casting of an iconic American actress—is the link that I believe exists between this show and the New Queer Cinema, which was perceived as an American and British new wave in queer films propelling a postmodern aesthetics and politics that consisted of visual experiments, shocking plots, a radical turn away from moral norms, and excessive violence. Much of the energetic thrust of films such as *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Poison* (1991), *Swoon* (1992), and *The Living End* (1992) was derived from an artistically channeled anger against a pervasive conservative, heteronormative social climate: "Outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression: that simple, yes, and that complex.... the New Queer Cinema created a space of reflection, nourishment, and renewed engagement.... An invention. A brand. A niche market" (Rich xvi, xix). In her introduction to a reassessment of New Queer Cinema, editor Michele Aaron reclaims *Boys Don't Cry* as central example for a shift in spectator identification made possible by this then new wave: "No longer does popular culture have to seem to render queer configurations safe—through, for example, humour, homophobia (or other memos of heterosexuality) and, especially, closure. In the remarkably popular *Boys Don't Cry*, the queerness of Brandon's girlfriend (and the spectator by implication) is indulged rather than repressed, as time and time again the narrative constructs her complicity in Brandon's disguise as a man. Popular culture no longer has to disavow queerness, but, of course, it still does.... And, after all, such things underline mainstream entertainment. What is crucial to remember is that disavowal is a defensive mechanism; queerness must only appear to be quelled" (11). *Boys'* crossover position between mainstream and independence is similar to that of *Hit & Miss* in that, as Aaron explains, there has emerged within mainstream audiences a "new queer spectator" who is willing to suspend the usual attitudes of resistance: "New Queer Cinema's impact upon mainstream cinema can be measured not only in terms of the influx of lesbian and gay directors, or of 'defiant' characters or queer themes, but in terms of the audience's consensual flirtation with gender and sexual ambiguity within some of the most popular texts" (187). In a final comment on her own coining of the term "New Queer Cinema", B. Ruby Rich speculates that "it's become clear that trans is

the new queer, where energies are building and discoveries happening, reminiscent of the NQC's [i.e. New Queer Cinema's] long-ago emergence on the world stage" (xxvii). Nicole Richter, although bemoaning the fact the „the lives of transgender people are rarely represented, and when transgender characters do appear in mainstream film, they tend to be treated as caricatures“ (161), argues for the emergence of a “New Trans Cinema” with examples such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) and *Transamerica*.

- 24 *Hit & Miss* is perhaps most queer when it comes to the evolving relationship between Mia and her son that actress Sevigny has described as “a love story... that she discovers she has” (Garratt). It is here that a utopic element comes into play that has been an integral part of New Queer Cinema's aesthetics and politics from the very start. The mini-series ends without a resolution, we do not know—but are meant to hope for the best—what will happen to Mia and Ben. Similarly we can only speculate about Mia's quitting her killer job, settling down in the rural community, and tending to her patchwork family. And crucially perhaps, will she have her surgery, after all? Nevertheless, this openness precisely emphasizes the suspended state of “transition” in more than one way. Not only does Mia's gender transition remain undecided, since the sex change operation has been indefinitely delayed. What is more, in such moments of trans-queerness “spectators are themselves placed in a state of transition.... Doing intimacy is not something that is achieved or arrived at but rather something that must be constantly negotiated and actively participated in” (Richter 166). Muñoz calls such transqueer potential an undefined terrain of a future world which instead of a simplified fulfillment of the here and now points towards a queer futurity “that should be, that could be, and that will be” (64).

3. Bursting and Containing the Transqueer Family

- 25 We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. (José Esteban Muñoz)
- 26 *Hit & Miss* not only plays with alternative forms of established models of intimacy forging new coalitions across dichotomous borders of gender, sexuality, race and class. It also makes a bold foray into presenting new forms of family constellations that includes trans parenting. Whether “trans” is the new “queer,” as Rich has suggested, remains to be seen, but examples such as *Hit & Miss* certainly help to problematize the uses of “trans,” hopefully leading to further discussions on the potentials of media representation of “trans,” and to an affirmative answer to Rebecca Beirne's question: “When will television be ready for The T(ransgender) Word?” (36) Beirne's paper is included in Dana Heller's compilation of essays on *The L Word* under the rubric of “Lamentations,” and what she laments is the inclusion of the transitioning character of Max/Moira in the series. Beirne's complaint is not about the inclusion of a transgender person in a lesbian narrative, but the way this person is represented as problematic. She links such representation of transgender and other non-normative characters in the show to larger cultural and legal anxieties in the United States such as the exclusion of transgender persons from the first Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) proposal. In 2007, Representative Barney Frank proposed this bill to the US

Congress, and while it sought protection at workplace for gays and lesbians, it did not bar discrimination against transgendered people.^v Such “compromises” might appease anxious voters, but they remain compromises nevertheless.

- 27 *The L Word* includes at least three transgender or genderqueer characters, one of which moves momentarily center stage, while the others remain at the margins as rather comedic interludes. The first to appear is Lisa, who proclaims “I’m a lesbian-identified man” (1:4). When Lisa engages in sex with bisexual Alice, s/he wants to use a dildo whereas Alice insists on “the real thing,” which leads to a comically represented sexual act that can actually be also described as a sort of rape that in turn leads to expunging Lisa from the show altogether: “Lisa is clearly distressed by this insistence, and its dismissal of her identity, and the scene that follows reads as a sexual violation, after which we never see Lisa again: this non-normative character and identity have been wiped from the screen” (Beirne 26-27). The insistence on the physical body instead of Lisa’s genderqueer identity (here exemplified by Alice’s insistence on Lisa’s “real” penis instead of the “fake” dildo) is on a par with the show’s overall valuing of biological sex over gender identification. Like Lisa, the bi-gendered drag king Ivan Aycock first is set up as the love interest for Kit, one of the very few heterosexual women of the series, until she sees Ivan’s naked breasts rendering Ivan unambiguously female in the eyes of Kit and presumably much of the audience. While Lisa and Ivan have short appearances, being eliminated after their crucial scenes of disqualifying for proper love objects, the case is more complex if not ultimately different with Max.
- 28 Max enters the series in season three remaining with the cast until the end, albeit at times as an “absent-present character” (Beirne 28) with long stretches of disappearance into the background. At first Max is introduced as Moira, a butch lesbian, who transitions into a bisexual transman only to get pregnant in the last season by his gay partner. There are conflicting ways of reading this character development. Siebler considers fan reactions with many “online lesbians [expressing] frustration that finally there was a butch lesbian on *The L Word* and she turned out to be trans” (83), and she concludes that it “seems no one was willing to see Max as a transgender person, where binaries of sex and gender are queered” (83). In contrast to perceiving Max as genderqueer person, Beirne states that Max’s character development is an ultimately lost chance to provide a more daring view on gender identity variations. She highlights some important elements of Moira’s/Max’s story arc such as the potential homophobic violence Moira and Jenny encounter during their trip from the Midwest to Los Angeles as well as outspoken classicist resentments Moira faces when meeting the lesbian community of *The L Word*. Two moments, however, are especially troublesome in the way Moira transitions to Max “with the help of hormones, cross-dressing, and crotch stuffing” (Siebler 83). The first is once again a scene of nudity with Max undressing in front of a mirror. In what Beirne calls a “narratively unnecessary scene” (29), we see a clearly female body instead of a transitioning female-to-male body that the narrative so far has made us believe, especially through Max’s increased aggressive behavior induced by his testosterone dosages (which in itself is a taxing character development since it seems to reinforce the implicit reasoning that it is better to be a “nice” butch lesbian rather than a “bad” transman). But instead of a hairy chest we see female breasts, and after he has done away with the dildo he was wearing in his underpants, we see the female pubis. Max, the transgender man, is shown to be a woman after all, making his transition implausible. His fluid gendering becomes fixed once again. To top this elimination of a

potential for gender flexibility, Max gets impregnated against all medical knowledge. His steady use of male hormones would have precluded any chance for pregnancy, and yet the show insists on such a ruse to prove a basically essentialist view of gender by “associating transsexual men with the female body, and Max ends the series alone and pregnant with a child he does not desire to carry or raise—a strange fate for one of the longest-running transgender male characters on television” (Beirne 33).

- 29 In a very different reading, which due to its earlier publication date does not include Max’s pregnancy, Jennifer Reed argues that the story line of Max not only provides an education for the audience, but actually helps to destabilize notions of the coherent subject that is usually encountered on television. While adhering to one of television’s golden rules, namely to reach the lowest common denominator, *The L Word* also achieves to reach other sectors of the audience, most obviously the lesbian community to speak about gender transition, “a cultural story not often told in popular culture” (Reed 170). By emphasizing the process of transition that Max goes through the show triggers a spectatorial community based on a shared experience related to the plot that “helps to spark and fuel a perhaps more queer imagination” (178). This is not an identification with a character based on one’s own experience, but rather a “feeling of connection [that] happens only because the moments of connection do not depend on self-same identifications, but on transitory nodes of contact” (Reed 171). Taking the viewer through Max’s multiple transitions, starting out as a “stone butch” and moving on through the stages of “queer trans” and “FTM” to become a “queer hybrid,” allows for experiencing “the development of a manifold subjectivity at times fragmented, contradictory, and ambiguous, not dependent on an object and as an always ongoing project.... *The L Word* maintains its ability to speak to a heteroflexible, heterogeneous audience by creating a queer hybrid” that, as Reed concludes, is not tied “to unified, coherent, ‘authentic’ notions of self” but rehabilitates what she calls “a liberal humanist perspective that is activated by difference, not merely tolerant of it” (178). Whether such an argument is a credible assessment of a cultural turn in new trans TV or an unreasonable utopic wish will be a central question when looking at *Transparent*.
- 30 *Transparent* is a series from Amazon Studios about a father Morton Pfefferman, played by Jeffrey Tambor, who comes out to his family as transgender, now named Maura. Creator Jill Soloway admits that she was inspired by her own father’s coming out as transgender, but *Transparent* is not overtly autobiographical, it rather negotiates various crises of gender identity such as Ali’s, the youngest daughter’s, coming to terms with her potential for genderqueerness or Sarah, the older daughter’s, struggle with her bisexuality. Even though Soloway enacted a, what she calls, “transformative action program,” in that she favored hiring transgender candidates over nontransgender one (Brodesser-Akneraug), she nevertheless chose to cast the role of the transitioning father with a cisgender actor thus perhaps taking away some of the cutting edge of this otherwise trailblazing show. The title plays on a variety of associations, starting with the semantically most obvious: transparent as in clear, apparent, see-through, obvious, etc. The question here would be what kind of transparency the series wants to offer. Watching the show, it quickly turns out that it is rather about trans-*parent* with the stress of parent(ing), since a lot of what is going on and going wrong is filtered through the lens of parents being annoyed and indeed bored by their grown-up children behaving like lunatic adolescents. From the perspective of these grossly narcissistic children, however, the stress rather lies on the first part of *trans-parent*. It is their

father who is transitioning before their eyes from an elderly, retired man into a woman who is willing to reinvent more in her life than “just” her gender.

- 31 As cutting edge as the series appears with an older character as transgender parent, *Transparent* is not the first series to offer such a representation. *Tales of the City* is an interesting earlier example of a television series to include a lead transgender character in the role of aging parent. Based on the series of novels by Armistead Maupin, *Tales of the City* has been valued as a chronicle of pre-AIDS gay lifestyle in San Francisco in the 1980s to the '90s, winning the Peabody Award in 1994 for its “courageous frankness and buoyant humor.... *Tales of the City* chronicles the short-lived age of innocence and blissful ignorance. At the same time, it celebrates the hope and optimism of a time which now seems so long ago. For a miniseries which moves beyond nostalgia and which stretches the boundaries of television drama, a Peabody to American Playhouse: *Tales of the City*” (“American Playhouse”). Maupin himself had unsuccessfully tried to get it produced for 15 years. It finally materialized as a six part miniseries by the British Channel 4, San Francisco’s local PBS station KQED and PBS’ American Playhouse (released in the UK in 1993, in the US in 1994).^{vi} Walters’ amused remarks about the censorship that PBS had to face give credit to this anxiety: “Not only was a hullabaloo raised by conservative activists—causing PBS to offer two versions of the film, an uncut version and one edited to remove certain language and sexuality” (96). *Tales of the City* features the character of Anna Madrigal (Olivia Dukakis), flamboyant and mysterious landlady of 28 Barbary Lane, a picturesque apartment-house where most of the other lead characters live. She falls in love with Edgar, who is diagnosed with cancer. Their romance is overshadowed not only by his fatal illness, but also by some secret Anna harbors and which only is disclosed at the very end: until 44 she has lived as a man. In the sequel of the series, *More Tales of the City* (1998), we also learn that prior to her sex realignment operation Anna has fathered a child, Mona, who is one of the major characters of the series.
- 32 This transgender character is exceptional in many ways: clearly the emotional center of series, many characters flock to her for support, to exchange newest sexual conquests or losses, and to partake in her inexhaustible stash of marijuana. Her affair with Edgar is also remarkable in that it shows two elderly persons in love and having sex, one of which is post-op transsexual, albeit without the spectators knowing at the time. In this, *Tales of the City* follows a well-known scheme of deception, both the characters and the audience are deceived as to the gender/sex of one character and like in the resolution of a mystery in narrative, there is pleasure associated with such deception. But besides the mystery surrounding the character’s past, Anna Madrigal also stands out in that she is not treated dismissively or even being ridiculed. *Tales of the City* has many elements of soap opera’s central concerns, i.e. family and romance, but especially Anna as “mother” of the patchwork community of Barbary Lane mostly remains aloof to the daily petty emotional entanglements of the other characters and she usually has a humorous, if comforting remark.
- 33 The series *Transparent* certainly revolves around a Californian family as well, in this case however an “aggressively specific” family, as Emily Nussbaum puts it: “Jewy, screwy, L.A., upper middle class, not so much queer-friendly as queer-saturated” (71). Nussbaum calls Maura’s character one of the show’s “riskiest choices,” not for its cisgender casting, but for the way Maura “retains much of the cranky, entitled privilege of Mort” (72). In stark contrast to a figure like eccentric Anna Madrigal,

Maura Pfefferman—even in her outrageous and untimely costumes such as her flowing muumuus—is a character that is presented as not very likeable a lot of times. Perhaps this is, as has been argued, because Soloway’s “shows lack sympathetic characters” in general (Brodesser-Akneraug)^{vii} or it might be more specifically due to the installed female gaze, as Ariel Levy suggests, since all episodes of season one were directed “exclusively by women, and four of the five primary characters are female” (43), which includes Maura. Above all, we see much of the show reflected through the gaze of Maura’s children, “who are by turns baffled, disappointed, besotted, and enraged by the person who raised them” (Levy 43). Besides the family-centered bickering, I find two surprising and daring elements especially noteworthy, since they leave the immediateness of the here and now and point to decisive moments in trans history.

- 34 The remoter of these historical moments is already hinted at through the show’s opening sequence. Having the touch of a makeshift home video, the sequence refers both to the series’ prominence of the family as narrative center and to the feeling of realness that has been claimed to lie at the core of *Transparent*’s success. The first season’s opening titles could serve as introduction to a gender studies course, remarks Stephen Vider. Blending clips from bar and bat mitzvah videos from the 1960s to the last one ending with the time code “JAN. 1 1994” with a clip from Frank Simon’s 1968 film *The Queen*, this nostalgic montage at once refers to Maura’s own history of coming out as a Jewish transgender woman and to Simon’s documentary of the 1967 New York Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant, one of the earliest screen portrayals of the lives of drag queens. Vider acknowledges a similar tracking of “the pleasures and difficulties of seeking empathy, connection, and affirmation” both in *Transparent* as in the early *The Queen*, which can also be considered a predecessor of *Paris Is Burning*. The credit sequence of season two ups the ante by planting “real moments from the Pfefferman family history” into the titles. This is not done by using actual pictures of the Pfefferman characters but by inserting archival footage of historical moments relevant the family’s past such as transgender images from 1920s Berlin, from immigrants arriving in the U.S., and from the 1970s women’s movement, all of which paint “an authentic and essential context from the Pfeffermans” (“Crafting”).
- 35 As announced by this opening sequence, especially in the second season there are increasingly numerous instances that relate the presentness of the plot to a longer transgender history both in general terms and with regard to the Pfeffermans in particular. Accordingly, what first seem to be merely references to a prior climax in such a history, namely the much celebrated roaring twenties and early thirties of Weimar Berlin’s queer scene before the onset of the Nazi regime, turn out to also provide a direct link to the family history of the Pfeffermans. The youngest daughter of the present Pfeffermans, Ali, keeps having visions of such scenes taking place in Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science, up to the point where the infamous Nazi burning of Hirschfeld’s library and ransacking his institute occur in 1933. What we see is a mother who is fearful of her adolescent daughter Rose and her older son Gittel (born Gershon, played by transgender actress Hari Nef) who is shown as a transvestite, very much encouraged by Hirschfeld himself, who wrote *The Transvestites* in 1910 thus coining the term, and who was an outspoken and influential advocate of early homosexual and transgender rights. His institute also served as safe haven for many people challenging heteronormative standards, and it is here where Gittel can be seen to seek refuge. And whereas the mother and Rose being Jewish flee from the Nazis to the U.S., Gittel chooses to stay behind, where traces of her get lost and we can assume

that she was killed during the Holocaust. Rose, however, then turns out to be Maura Pfefferman's mother. Season two ends with Maura coming out to her mother as a transsexual, and while she is unaware of the full extent of their family history, i.e. she does not know about Gittel, the scene acknowledges an emotional tie between the family members that implicitly reaches back to their German ancestral relatives. In disclosing buried memories and unearthing forgotten family histories, the show indeed resorts to the first meaning of "transparent," i.e. making things apparent.

- 36 The other, more immediate instance of trans history that can be drawn from the opening credits lead to a further way of discussing transness in *Transparent*: it is the high visibility of the feminist tradition or, to put it more bluntly, the clash of radical feminist and transgender politics. Not only does Maura, the former Berkeley professor, meet her old feminist nemesis (modelled on iconic lesbian poet Eileen Myles), who is now her daughter Ali's women's studies professor and shortly Ali's lover, she also agrees to join her daughters to attend a women's festival that is clearly reminiscent of the legendary Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Maura, years back and still living a life as husband and father, had visited a cross-dressing camp, where we see Maura full of glee dressing up as a woman and enjoying the company of like-minded people. It is moments such as these where Ariel Levy attests a childlike pleasure to the show's visual strategies that otherwise more often resorts to acting out "the heedless egocentrism of adolescents," which according to Levy holds true for Maura as well as her children. In this camp, however, we can perceive the "upside of immaturity [of] guileless delight... a child's sense of amazement about the world—especially secret places where different rules apply" (Levy 43). Maura experiences a freedom and joy hitherto unknown to her, it seems. The scene also discloses Maura's long-lasting and long-delayed true trans identity that only comes to its full realization in her elderly age. In stark contrast, the festival experience with her daughters turns out to be comically nightmarish for Maura, who too late realizes that only "womyn-born-womyn" are allowed. This realization leads to a frantically paranoid reaction, she runs around trying to hide and find her daughters who are frolicking about, which makes her only more visible as an outsider leading to a melt-down scene where she again meets the women's studies professor Leslie who explains the feminist rules to Maura. Sitting around a camp fire, Leslie along with the rest of the group of "last remaining extremists," as they call themselves, in a collective voice that includes Maura's daughter Ali clarify the festival policy to a stunned Maura:

It's very simple: women born women.... It means people who were born with a vagina and a uterus.... Look, I drove the plow. I cleared these woods and we did it with one thing in mind: that we women could have one God damn safe space in the world.... A lot of people here are triggered by penises.... Because we've all been raped.... See, this is where it gets really weird, because, you know, suddenly the conversation is all around you, and all of us are trying to make you comfortable.... And I don't give a shit about your goddamn penis. It's about the privilege.... Your pain and your privilege are separate. And Berkeley was a great example of that.... [E]ven though you were suffering privately, which of course you were, you were still compensated as a man[.] (2:9)

- 37 This is a very different instance compared to the Hirschfeld episode where *Transparent* stakes out the long and often secret and forgotten LGBT history. One of the script writers, Bridget Bedard, comments on the decision of looking back and reflecting such moments in history to advance a present agenda: "It's an extremely tough line to walk. We're making a comedy—or a 'trauma-dy,' we've started saying—and comedy comes

from people being fallible” (qtd. in Levy 43). And while the Hirschfeld episode recalls “one of the earliest pro-gay, pro-trans research institutions” as well as remind us “that Jews weren’t the only ones in [Nazi] camps” (Nussbaum 72), the MichFest episode evokes the early days of the new transgender movement in the 1990s. The background to this episode is the ending of a 40-year tradition of the festival due to controversies over the inclusion of transwomen. As Stryker relates, the expulsion of transwoman Nancy Jean Burkholder from the festival “quickly came to function as a litmus test for whether ‘queer’ was indeed transgender inclusive.... The debates about transgender participation at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival remain an important touchstone in continually evolving queer, transgender, and feminist political discussions” (140). In *Transparent*, the conflict remains unresolved: Maura angrily leaves the group of women, feeling misunderstood and unwelcome as transwoman. Her disillusionment about the lack of inclusion in a female community leads her, however, into the arms of another participant at the festival, “earth mother” Vicki, played by Angelica Houston, with whom Maura for the first time has sex since her transition. This is an intriguing scene, not only because of the depiction of sex between two elderly people one of which being transgender, but also because it is multiply coded as a coming out scene. While Maura has to admit her inexperience and just like any virgin claims “I don’t know what to do” (2:10), Vicki comes out as a post-op breast-cancer patient, presenting the scars of her mastectomy to Maura and the camera. We do not know, whether Maura and Vicki will continue with their relationship, but the tenderness and eroticism they share is remarkable in a series that otherwise mostly lacks such joyful and mutual intimacy.

- 38 *Transparent* especially takes on bodies in transition—in more than one way—and links them to transnational transqueer histories. Asking in how far transgender enters the political field, Butler suggests that it does so by questioning what is real, how our notions of reality can be put to a test, and what new modes of reality might be instituted. In all this, Butler highlights bodies’ capacity to transformation, to always becoming otherwise: “Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification—depending on their interactions—and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future” (*Undoing* 217). While there is always a real threat of violence in our daily lives (“Make no mistake: each time a man plays a trans woman on screen, the end result is very real violence against actual trans women,” writes Jen Richards), there is also fantasy that “allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise” (Butler, *Undoing* 216), and Richard Dyer specifically discusses the entertainment-oriented genres as playground for utopian visions precisely because they work on a corporeal level. For him, such “utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than who it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production” (20).
- 39 One such utopian scenario would be, according to Phillips, the “subsuming of transgender in a plurality of sex/gender positions on a potentially unending continuum” (172). In subtitling the end of his study on transgender representations on screen with “The Future of Desire,” Phillips opts for a positive vision after showing many disappointing accounts of such representations, a vision that can also be taken as a political agenda for future works: “Transsexuality, a hybrid product of the present

binary system, defined by the very media images that depict it, is in this perspective only the beginning of a revolution that will transform our sexual habits in the west, leading to an explosion of multiple sexualities and genders beyond a reality that increasingly eludes meaningful definition" (173). Levy suggests this utopic vision already realized in *Transparent* as a world where "there would be no gender in the first place" (44), while Soloway herself puts it like this: "When we were little, we used to think that all women had vaginas and all men had penises, but now, of course, we know that's not true" (qtd. in Levy 44). *Transparent* makes a credible effort in reflecting the extent to which most of us are still thinking in terms of a "proper" distribution of vaginas and penises by including many moments of transgression, such as Ali's encounter with a transman or Maura's with various transwomen. It is their shared experiences with others that engenders the possibility of sharing as spectators. Television series such as *Transparent* and the others discussed above offer moments of a shared public, not meaning we viewers necessarily have the same experiences as the characters on screen, but that there is what Jill Dolan calls a "processual, momentary feeling of affinity, in which spectators experience themselves as part of a congenial public constituted by the performance's address" (14).

- 40 Kelly Kessler in 2011 could still complain about "the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transsexual (GLBTs) have been systematically omitted, vilified, marginalized, and/or homogenized on mainstream television" (139). Taking stock of recent shows Kessler concedes that despite some successes in queer representations, "I reject any notion that we have entered some kind of queer televisual utopia. What we have begun to take, however, are steps toward mutual mediocrity" (141). The shows I looked at seem to make a claim to surpassing mere mediocrity, but it also may be true that there "is usefulness in having the wider public presented with an accessible narrative," as Richards accedes, although "sympathizing with Maura Pfefferman" merely helps secure "a passive acceptance until more challenging demands can actively be made." On a more optimistic note and similar to Phillip's utopist wish, Stryker concludes her study on transgender history with asserting a growing acceptance of transgender representations in the media which she takes to suggest "that sometime in the future—perhaps the near future—transgender people will finally be accepted as full, equal members of society" (153). Maybe we are still a long way off from realizing such a trans futurity, but at least trans television has taken positively vital steps in that direction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aaron, Michele, ed. *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004. Print.

Aaron, Michele. "The New Queer Spectator." *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michele Aaron. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004. 187-200. Print.

"American Playhouse: Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*." 26 Aug 2016. Web.

<http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/american-playhouse-tales-of-the-city>

Anderson-Minshall, Diane. "Why You Should Watch *Orange Is the New Black*." *The Advocate* (10 Jul 2013). Web 5 Apr 2016.

<http://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2013/07/10/why-you-should-watch-orange-new-black?page=full>

Beirne, Rebecca. "The T Word: Exploring Transgender Representation in *The L Word*." *Loving the L Word: The Complete Series in Focus*. Ed. Dana Heller. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013. 23-36. Print.

Boys Don't Cry (Dir. Kimberly Peirce, USA 1999). DVD.

Brodesser-Akneraug, Taffy. "Can Jill Soloway Do Justice to the Trans Movement?" *New York Times Magazine* (29 Aug 2014). Web. 31 Mar 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/magazine/can-jill-soloway-do-justice-to-the-trans-movement.html?Src=longreads&r=0>

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

---. *Undoing Gender*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Capsuto, Steven. *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*. New York: Ballantine, 2000. Print.

"Crafting *Transparent*'s Evocative Opening Credits." *STALKR* (9 Dec 2015). Web. 26 Aug 2016.

<http://stalkr.com/crafting-transparentes-evocative-opening-credits/>

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005. Print.

Dyer, Richard. "Entertainment and Utopia." *Hollywood Musicals. The Film Reader*. Ed. Steven Cohan. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 19-30. Print.

Egner, Jeremy. "Dad's a Mom: That's the Killer." *New York Times* (6 Jul 2012). Web. 15 Apr 2016.

http://mobile.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/arts/television/hit-miss-with-chloe-sevigny-as-a-transgender-hit-woman.html?_r=0

Garratt, Sheryl. "Chloë Sevigny Interview for *Hit & Miss* on Sky Atlantic." *The Telegraph* (22 May 2012). Web. 26 Aug 2016.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9267261/Chloe-Sevigny-interview-for-Hit-and-Miss-on-Sky-Atlantic.html>

Gieni, Justine. "Queering Masculinity: Sexual Dissidence as Anti-Bullying Discourse in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*." *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* 3.5 (2012): 1-22. Web. 29 Jan 2017.

http://academinist.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/030501_Gieni.pdf

Glazer, Ilana, and Abbi Jacobson. "Hot TV Show: *Transparent*." *Rolling Stone* 1223 (2014): 60. Web. 14 Apr 2016.

<http://www.rollingstone.com>

Gross, Larry. *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. Print.

- Grow, Kory. "'Transparent' Creator Jill Soloway on Making the World Safer for Trans People". *Rolling Stone* (14 Dec 2015). Web. 23 Feb 2016.
- <http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/transparent-jill-soloway-20141020>
- Halberstam, Judith. "The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*." *Screen* 42.3 (2001): 294-298. Print.
- Hale, Mike. "She's Living a Double Life, In More Ways Than One." *New York Times* (10 Jul 2012). Web. 15 Apr 2016.
- http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/11/arts/television/hit-miss-with-chloe-sevigny-on-directv.html?_r=0
- Heyes, Cressida. "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender." *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. 201-212. Print.
- Hit & Miss* (Creat. Paul Abbott, Sky Atlantic 2012). DVD.
- Iannacci, Elio. "Transgender's 'Revolutionary Moment.'" *Macleans's* 23.127 (1 Jun 2014). Web. 13 Apr 2016.
- <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/laverne-cox-we-are-in-the-midst-of-a-revolutionary-moment/>
- Kessler, Kelly. "They Should Suffer Like the Rest of Us: Queer Equality in Narrative Mediocrity." *Cinema Journal* 50.2 (2011): 139-144. Print.
- Lawson, Mark. "*Hit & Miss* Bares Some Interesting Questions About Nudity on Television." *The Guardian* (17 May 2012). Web. 14 Apr 2016.
- <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/may/17/hit-and-miss-nudity-questions>
- Levy, Ariel. "Dolls and Feelings: Jill Soloway's Post-Patriarchal Television." *The New Yorker* (14 Dec 2015): 40-45. Print.
- McCabe, Janet and Kim Akass, ed. *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010. Print.
- Miller, Quinn. "Television." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (2014): 216-219. Print.
- Moore, Candace and Kristen Schilt. "Is She Man Enough? Female Masculinities on *The L Word*." *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*. Ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009. 159-171. Print.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York UP, 2009. Print.
- Nussbaum, Emily. "Inside Out: The Emotional Acrobatics of 'Transparent.'" *The New Yorker* (Jan 4, 2016): 71-73. Print.
- Orange Is the New Black* (Creat. Jenji Kohan, Netflix 2013-present). DVD.
- Phillips, John. *Transgender on Screen*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.
- Reed, Jennifer. "Reading Gender Politics on *The L Word*: The Moira/Max Transitions." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2009): 169-178. Print.

- Reynolds, Daniel. "Meet the Second-Ever Transgender Oscar Nominee." *Advocate* (14 Jan 2016). Web. 25 Mar 2016.
- <http://www.advocate.com/film/2016/1/14/meet-second-transgender-oscar-nominee>
- Rich, B. Ruby. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. Print.
- Richards, Jen. "What Trans Movement?" *Advocate* (14 July 2015). Web. 14 Apr 2016.
- <http://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2015/07/14/what-trans-movement>
- Richter, Nicole. "Trans Love in New Trans Cinema". *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*. Ed. Pamela Demory and Christopher. Pullen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 161-167. Print.
- Ryan, Hugh. "Transgender Characters Get a Transformative Moment on Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*." *Newsweek* (17 Jul 2013). Web. 14 Apr 2016.
- <http://europe.newsweek.com/transgender-characters-get-transformative-moment-netflixs-orange-new-black-237736?rm=eu>
- Serano, Julia. "Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels." *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. 226-233. Print.
- Siebler, Kay. "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age". *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 16.1 (2012): 74-99. Print.
- Steinmetz, Katy. "America's Transition." *TIME Magazine* 183.22 (9 June 2014): 38-46. Print.
- Stryker, Susan and Paisley Currah. "Introduction." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (2014): 1-18. Print.
- Stryker, Susan. "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004): 212-215. Print.
- . *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008. Print.
- Tales of the City* (Dir. Alastair Reid, Channel 4, 1993). DVD.
- The L Word* (Creat. Ilene Chaiken et al., Showtime, 2004-2009). DVD.
- Transparent* (Creat. Jill Soloway, Amazon Video, 2014-present). DVD.
- Tropiano, Stephen. *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema, 2002. Print.
- Vider, Stephen. "Why Is an Obscure 1968 Documentary in the Opening Credits of *Transparent*?" *Slate* (23 Oct 2014). Web. 26 Aug 2016.
- http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/10/23/transparent_s_opening_credits_are_a_lesson_in_the_history_of_gender.html
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *All the Rage: the Story of Gay Visibility in America*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2001. Print.

NOTES

- i. It is even more disturbing to see that a 2010 collection of essays such as Janet McCabe's and Kim Akass's on *Quality TV* does not have a single essay on any GLBTIQ-related topic, although claiming in their introduction that each contributor „aims to make sense of what quality TV means to our

present television cultural zeitgeist“ (2). Supposedly, the volume wants to emphasize difference and “deliberately promotes discordant voices” (2), assert the editors, who already in 2006 have edited their first edition of *Reading the L Word*, which includes a discussion of the character Shane in the context of female masculinity as “soft butch/inbetweener” (Moore and Schilt 160). So are we to believe that omitting a discussion on transgender (or queer, for that matter) television within the context of quality TV is supposed to indicate that there are no GLBTIQ-related quality programs, or is this ‘simply’ a gross oversight?

ii. See also Anohni, formerly known as Antony of Antony and the Johnsons, who was nominated for Best Original Song with “Manta Ray,” her collaboration with J. Ralph from the film *Racing Extinction*. Anohni was the second out transgender performer to be nominated for an Oscar after Angela Morley, a transgender composer, who received two nominations for *The Little Prince* (1974) and *The Slipper and the Rose* (1976) (Reynolds).

iii. *Dirty Sexy Money* has been said to be the first prime time series to cast a transgender person to play a transgender character.

iv. In this paper, I do not follow Siebler’s and some other transgender scholars’ use of gender-neutral pronouns such as “ze” and “sie” instead of “he” or “she,” or “hir” instead of “his” or “her.” Stryker refers to such practice given the fact “that the English language doesn’t allow us to refer to other individuals without gendering them” (*Transgender History* 21). I use the gendered pronoun, instead, which the characters at stake have chosen as appropriate to their gender identity and for the rare cases of undecidability I have used the more common variant “s/he.”

v. The second proposal, reintroduced in 2009 and again 2011, included gender identity as a protected category besides sexual orientation. In 2013, the proposal passed the Senate but not the House of Representatives.

vi. *Tales of the City* has two sequels, *More Tales of the City* (1998, here Channel 4 co-produced with Showtime) and *Further Tales of the City* (2001, produced by Showtime without Channel 4). The transgender character Anna Madrigal appears in all three installments and is played by Olivia Dukakis in all of them. As a consequence of the PBS-airing fuss, *More Tales of the City* was not shown on public television, however. Maupin himself was not unhappy about the decision, since “cable allows you the opportunity to tell grown-up stories without restrictions” (qtd. in Gross 193).

vii. See also Soloway’s contributions to the series *Six Feet Under* as well as *United States of Tara* (Showtime 2009-2011) about a woman with multiple – male and female – personalities.

ABSTRACTS

While gay and lesbian characters have a steady presence in American television series by now, this is not the case with transgender persons. Although there is a significant number of shows with such characters, sometimes even in leading roles, this still is a marginal phenomenon. Casting debates, depictions of sexual violence and transphobic harassment, generational conflicts, non-normative sexuality, and family constellations are amongst the most pronounced issues to be discussed, when asking for a queer futurity that these series possibly envision. Have series such as *Transparent*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *The L-Word*, or *Hit & Miss* started to exploit such a potential? The paper aims at both an assessment of the status quo of transgender representations in current television series and at evaluating their respective aesthetic and political potential for a re-queering the American nation under the sign of transgenderism.

INDEX

Keywords: transgender, LGBTIQ, television series, New Queer Cinema