

ENGLISH

Jack Thompson

Transcend

REFLECTION STATEMENT

“We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter, our tools shape us”
- Marshall McLuhan

Representation shapes perception: our television and cinema screens reflect culturally constructed images that contain the power to validate, choke, liberate, subjugate and transform its subject matter. This is not merely abstract conceptualising for “*when you see images that are reflective of your own life, it is a reminder that your life matters.*”

My ficto-critical essay, *Transcend*, uses Clark’s Model of the evolutionary stages of minorities in mass media to criticise the misrepresentation of transgender (trans) women through the dehumanising ‘monster’ trope that has pervaded Western television and cinema screens. Ultimately, *Transcend* exists to advocate for authentic, self-determining representations for “as trans women are given agency, and autonomy, their hands are able to shift the lens of the camera, move the pen on the script, and redefine the future of representation.”

NARRATIVE

I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me.

Mary Shelley¹

The transsexual body is an unnatural body ... It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. Like the monster [in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein], I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment.

Susan Stryker²

Representations reflect conceptions of contemporary culture which have been shaped by theoretical constructs that determine “one” from “the other”³. The growing emancipation of transgender voices in Western Film and Television is, in part, reflective of evolving transgender theory. Moving towards autonomous celebrations, the trope of ‘monstrosity’ has lingered. This archetype of ‘the monster’; a disturbance to humanity; wretchedly divisive, destructive, and demonised, has been inextricably linked to female transgender characters over the past decade, thereby, maintaining depictions of deviance.

Professor Susan Stryker, a leading transgender theorist accredited with articulating and popularising *Transgender Theory*⁴ extends upon Judith Butler’s *Queer Theory*⁵ by examining the association of transgender identities with notions of monstrosity. Stryker includes transgender individuals in the conceptualisation of ‘gender performativity’⁶, which Butler overlooked. As Stryker argues, “transsexuality challenges the conventions of legitimate gender and performance”⁷, suggesting that their construction confronts society in such a manner which destabilises the

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- 1 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, Penguin Books, 1817
 - 2 Stryker. S, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996
 - 3 De Beauvoir. S, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books, France, 1949.
 - 4 Stryker. S, *Transgender Studies; Queer Theory's Evil Twin*, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 2004
 - 5 Butler, Judith. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015.
 - 6 Ibid
 - 7 Stryker. S, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

perception of heteronormative normality, and therefore results in depictions which associate transness and monstrosity. However, when transgender women are given the opportunity to articulate their experiences, both inside and outside the realm of gender narratives, the complexity and nuance of the transgender experience can be fully realised.

Cedric C. Clark's '*Observations on the Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities*'⁸ articulates a model of the evolution of representation that minority groups experience over time. When applying this model to transgender women on screen within the last decade, different stages of representation; *ridicule*, *regulation* and finally, *respect*, are evident. Namely, the 'ridicule'⁹ inherent within the female trans characterisation of Rayon, in filmic drama, *Dallas Buyers Club*¹⁰ (2013), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, embodies the perceived inferiority of transgender women, painting their existence as deviant and malformed. The 'regulation'¹¹ of the character of Sophia, in Jenji Kohan's television series *Orange is The New Black*¹² (2013-2019) highlights significant issues which exist within the intersectional experience of transgender women, yet also affirms psychological deficiency and subhumanity through the plot. Finally, '*respect*'¹³ is evident in *Pose*¹⁴ (2018-2021), directed by transgender, executive director, Janet Mock. Respectful representations of the transgender community are apparent in the direction, scriptwriting and performance as the series celebrates transgender women. As such, their identity on screen is no longer "hideously deformed"¹⁵, but intricate, complex, and valued. Such evolution must cause us to ask, speculatively, what is possible when the perceived 'monster' reclaims their monstrosity to control their own creations?

A brief word on etymology

From now on, the term 'trans' and 'transness' are used in accordance with Stryker's¹⁶ terminology. Historically the term 'transvestite' and 'transsexual' have been used to describe drag performers, cross-dressers, or people who have had sex re-assignment

8 Clark, C., *Television and Social Controls: Some Observations on the Portrayals Ethnic Minorities*, Television Quarterly, 1969

9 Ibid

10 Vallee, J., *Dallas Buyers Club*, Voltage Pictures, 2013

11 Clark, C., *Television and Social Controls*

12 Kohan, J., *Orange is The New Black*, Netflix, 2013-2019

13 Clark, C., *Television and Social Controls*

14 Murphy, R., *Pose*, Fox Studios, 2018-2021

15 Stryker, S., *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

16 Ibid

surgery. Therefore, the umbrella term ‘trans’ encompasses a wide variety of gender identities and expressions.

(Trans)Formation

monster | ‘mɛnstə |

noun

a congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant.¹⁷

June 4th, 1943

April¹⁸ finds the medical tape. In a swift and almost effortless manoeuvre, she lifts her dangling genital and meticulously wraps it in a bandage, taping it under her groin, and cutting the tape off at her lower back, and then sliding some pink lace underpants up her legs to mask the sculpted art. She walks to the opposite end of her small room and into a museum of collected dresses, skirts, blouses, and high heeled shoes. Unfortunately, the collection is only on loan from her mother, not that she knows yet, of course. She selects a teal blue dress that flows down to the knees, pairing it with a silver bracelet, a pair of white shoes and a black purse. She turns to the mirror and stuffs some socks down the dress, creating the beautiful bust of ‘real’ women, the cleavage of ‘normal’ women.

“George! Come down please! Your grandmother has arrived!”

In a matter of moments, the shoes are flung under the bed, the socks replaced in the drawer, the dress covered with a button-down shirt and some trousers. Hidden.

“Oh, look how handsome you are! My grandson is becoming a young man!”

Within the last century, screen depictions have been preoccupied with physical monstrosity, using trans women to uphold a binary of normal and abnormal. For example, *The Danish Girl*¹⁹, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*²⁰ and *Dressed to Kill*²¹, all emphasise the physicality of their female trans character, limit their psychological complexity within their identity as trans individuals and use trans women as a comedic device.

17 Oxford Dictionary, 2018. As sourced at <https://www.lexico.com/definition/monster>. (Accessed 12/06/2021).

18 All vignettes loosely based off the life of trans activist April Ashley, one of the first scrutinised trans women in the media.

19 Hooper. T, *The Danish Girl*, Working Title Films, 2015

20 Shadyac. T, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, Morgan Creek Productions, 1994

21 De Palma. B, *Dressed to Kill*, Cinema 77: Film Group, 1980

Within the realm of transgender theory, Professor Stryker articulates, “[l]ike the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment.”²² One revealing aspect of Stryker’s commentary surrounds the notion of ‘embodiment’; namely, a preoccupation with biological features of trans individuals which negates the complex, lived experiences of trans women in their characterisation. This is evident in the filmic drama, *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), as Jean Marc Vallée, the director, reveals the relationship between the representation of trans women and their inherent possession of physical ‘deformity’, as well as the role of trans women on screen, who are used as tools to uphold heteronormative ideologies. This film emphasises the notion that trans women are symbolic of a conflict between the binaries of external and internal and normal and abnormal. Further, through the characterisation of Rayon, the association with her transness as a means of ‘ridicule’²³ of the feminine form, as trivialised by the inclusion of a cis male, Jared Leto, affirms Cedric C. Clarks theory on representation of minorities.

“I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created”²⁴

The character of trans woman, Rayon, is portrayed as mentally, emotionally, and physically unstable as she battles a drug addiction and AIDS. This only dramatises the nature of the trans experience, positing the idea that Rayon’s transness is the root of her mutation. This is highlighted in the intrusive ‘Exposure Scene’²⁵, which encapsulates the concept of transgender disgust and deformity, using the trans literary trope of a mirror²⁶ to reflect Rayon’s sense of self-hatred and inferiority.

Right ‘Exposure Scene’ as Rayon reflects on her physicality in the mirror in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée



Captured using an over-the-shoulder panning shot and key lighting, Rayon’s skeletal frame is shown in segmented close-ups to reveal her ‘wretchedness’. Cael Keegan, Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, in his article, *Moving Bodies*, articulates, “trans characters endlessly stand in front of mirrors, nude and in

22 Stryker. S, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

23 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

24 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein*

25 McLaren. J, *Recognize Me: An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation*, University of Windsor, 2018

26 Ibid

various stages of undress, examining themselves with a range of negative emotions running from dismay to wistful melancholy to pure disgust.”²⁷ Here, the purpose of the mirror trope is seen in its capacity to convey the concept that trans women are powerless vehicles of deviation and monstrosity, disempowering their identity to the limits of their transness, and therefore violating their humanity.



Left ‘Exposure Scene’ as Rayon applies makeup to her face in the mirror in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée

Moving into a close-up, Rayon examines her emaciated body in a costumed wig cap, and pair of underpants, showing her bare chest to portray her as a man which invalidates her femininity to focus on her distress with her trans figure. This emphasises her character’s torment, not merely with AIDS, but with her “dehumanising”²⁸ position as a trans female. Overlaid diegetic sound of Rayon’s breathing, with the soft voiceover of her private internal conversation with God, “God, when I meet you, *I want to be pretty* if it’s the last thing I do.”²⁹ The bathetic significance of Rayon’s life being reduced to a preoccupation with “being pretty”, the acceptance that beauty and physicality brings, summarises the characters struggle with ‘physical monstrosity’. Subsequently, the ‘mirror scene’³⁰ objectifies Rayon, exploring her dysphoria as the focalisation of identity, developing a narrative of physiological and psychological deterioration. Rayon’s character is thus ‘ridiculed’³¹ by her constructed embodiment of deformity as a result.

27 Keegan. C, *Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity*, University of Colorado, 2013

28 Kagan. D, “AIDS Retrovisions: *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Normal Heart*.” *Positive Images: Gay Men & Hiv Aids in the Culture of ‘Post-Crisis’*. Bloomsbury Collections, New York, 2018, pg 201-221.

29 Vallee. J, *Dallas Buyers Club*

30 Keegan. C, *Moving Bodies*

31 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

“Fairer than a garden rose among dark-leaved brambles”³²

Transgender characters increasingly function as the site in which to contain all ‘gender trouble’³³, thereby helping to “secure heterosexuality as stable and normative”³⁴. As Stryker notes, “[t]ranssexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders.”³⁵ Thus, screen portrayals reflect narratives whereby trans female characters are an unnatural digression of ‘natural’ humanity.

Rayon’s relationship with Ron, a ‘cisgender’³⁶ male character, is indicative of the hegemonic transphobia which underpins Western culture. Ron’s introductory conversation with Rayon includes the expressions; “Get the f*** out of here, *whatever you are*, before I kick you in the f***ing face”³⁷ where the connotations associated with the determiner “whatever” with the pronoun “you” implies that Rayon has an indistinguishable, sub-human form. In reply, Rayon normalises the conversation by suggesting, “(beat) You wanna play cards?”³⁸. Despite Ron’s rejection of Rayon which established her subjugation, her character continues to exaggerate femininity to the point of exhaustion, highlighting a reliance on white male affirmation.

Preconceptions of inferiority associated with the transness of Rayon’s character, in relation to Ron, are further represented through the ‘Trans mammy’³⁹ trope. The mammy trope stems from racist depictions of a “black nursemaid in charge of white children”⁴⁰, allowing dominant culture to assert power and affirm racist ideologies.

Right The trans ‘Mammy’ trope in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013)



32 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein*

33 Butler. J, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990

34 Stryker. S, *Transgender Studies; Queer Theory's Evil Twin*, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 2004.

35 Ibid

36 To identify with the gender assigned at birth

37 Vallee. J, *Dallas Buyers Club*

38 Ibid

39 Steinbook, E., *On not really being there: trans* presence/absence in Dallas Buyers Club*, Feminist Media Studies, 2017

40 Oxford Dictionary, 2018

Dr E. A Steinbock, Assistant Professor of Film and Literary Studies, in her critique, *On not really being there: trans* presence/absence in Dallas Buyers Club*, draws a connection between the two depictions, suggesting that comparative ‘care-giver’ and ‘prop’ are the most present storylines of trans women characters. Namely, inferior, dramatised plotlines which emphasise sub-human trans female characters. Further, as a cis male representing trans women, the casting decision to employ Jared Leto, affirmed the idea that Rayon’s characterisation is a form of ‘ridicule’⁴¹. As Steinbock notes:

*“Leto’s achievement of a starved feminine body performing non-threatening acts of seduction and care work shows the spectator once again damaging myths... that trans feminine bodies bear the brunt of sexism.”*⁴²

Leto’s degenerative and diminished depiction of the trans woman form highlights her as a weak and futile character, unable to exist outside the realm of Ron, demonstrating the dichotomy between the object of suffering and “white male heroism”⁴³. Vallée presents Rayon as an extension of heteronormative identity, used as a “dramatic instrument for the straight white male hero’s evolution from aggressively heterosexual homophobe to compassionate advocate for PLWHA”^{44,45}. This is indicative of the abuse to which trans women are subject to, chewed up and spat out by the mouth of the true monster.

In (Trans)it

monster | ‘mɛnstə |
noun

an inhumanely cruel or wicked person⁴⁶

June 4th, 1963

“Tonight, we cover the story of fashion model ‘April Ashley’ who, this morning has been outed as a transexual. Despite modelling for fashion houses, advertisements and the acclaimed ‘Vogue’ magazine, April confesses that five years ago she was a man. It has been confirmed tha-”

41 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

42 Steinbock. E, *On not really being there*”

43 Kagan. D, “*AIDS Retrovisions: Dallas Buyers Club and The Normal Heart.*” *Positive Images: Gay Men & Hiv Aids in the Culture of ‘Post-Crisis’*. Bloomsbury Collections, New York, 2018, pg 201-221.

44 People Living With HIV/AIDS

45 Kagan. D, *AIDS Retrovisions*

46 Oxford Dictionary, 2018. As sourced at <https://www.lexico.com/definition/monster>. (Accessed 12/06/2021).

The television in April's room is muffled by shuttering cameras outside. The report resumes... "I for one think it is a disgrace. Women have been fighting for our rights, and for a man to swoop in and take all the attention away from real issues is disgusting. He should be ashamed of himself."

A gentle wave of bile churns April's body into unimaginable contortions, forcing her to rely on gravity for the supple safety it provides.

"April, you 'ome love!?! There're some people 'ere for ya"

Rising from the crumpled sheets, April places a woollen, knitted cardigan over her shoulders.

"Mrs, or Mr, Ashley, I am here from the Sunday People, I have a few questions."

Her voice finally emerges through the doorway, "I have one statement for you all. I am not a monster. I am flesh and blood, and a human being with all the human feminine feelings of a woman."⁴⁷

She spoke but she wasn't sure if anyone had heard.

Within the trope of 'monstrosity' lies its association with criminality and deviance. Ralph J. Poole articulates, "[t]his ultimate comingling of criminal[ity] and gender transgression is represented as perverse or hysterical symptoms of a psychotic condition"⁴⁸. This notion is best revealed through Jenji Kohan's television series (2013-2019) *Orange is The New Black* as it unintentionally undermines the psychological validity of trans women. In accordance with the 'regulatory'⁴⁹ ideas of a heteronormative dominant culture, this series affirms societal perceptions which associate trans women with images of psychopathy, criminality, and 'monstrosity'⁵⁰. Historically, films, such as *Silence of the lambs*⁵¹ and *Psycho*⁵², have used trans antagonists as a means of embodying violence and insanity, thus enforcing social beliefs which categorise trans women as inherently deviant.

Orange is The New Black demonstrates a progression of representation as the series does explore the intricacies of intersectionality by examining race and class issues aligned with transsexuality. The casting director, Jen Euston's, choice to cast transgender

47 Ashley. A, *Goodby M'Sieu, Hello Mamselle, The Doctor Said, The Sunday People*, 1961

48 Poole. R, *Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television*, *European Journal of American Studies*, 2017

49 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

50 Stryker. S, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

51 Demme. J, *Silence of the Lambs*, Strong Heart Productions, 1991

52 Hitchcock. A, *Pyscho*, Hamley Productions, 1960

actress, Laverne Cox, as Sophia, is a positive reinforcement for the validity of trans women. However, Euston's storyline centres around the "archetypal criminal/deviant"⁵³ through Sophia's characterisation as a fraudulent criminal within the setting of Litchfield Prison. Thus, Sophia's characterisation as a criminal reinforces associations between transsexuality and criminality. Nikki Reitz analyses the characterisation of Sophia succinctly as "falling into the two most common tropes trans characters [experience]", namely, "both a criminal and a victim"⁵⁴.

"I was like a wild beast that had broken the toils"⁵⁵

How can wider audiences reflect on the beautiful complexity of the trans experience, if we are constantly shown images of rage and distress? The preoccupation with trans monstrosity is revealed and exacerbated in Season 3, Episode 12 (2015) when Sophia is subject to a hate crime. While the depiction does elicit empathy, when an inmate states, "Spanish been saying how you still got your dick"⁵⁶, the dialogue perpetuates notions of castration and the disembodiment of trans women as a focal and monstrous aspect of their identity.

Further, questions surrounding Sophia's physicality reflect the stratifications imposed on the trans identity as "negatively coded, associated directly with castration, madness, murder and monstrosity."⁵⁷ Sophia's attempt at self-defence leads only to another inmate commenting on Sophia's testosterone; "See, I told you she still had her *man strength!*"⁵⁸ This derogatory comment characterises Sophia as an imposter within her own identity, and therefore an 'inhumane creature' who is perceived as violent, rage driven and frightening. Director of this episode, Uta Briesewitz, incorporates jump cuts and a multicamera setup to depict a crazed *mis en scene* of Sophia's fury, emphasised through the non-diegetic ominous music.

Although the accuracy of such rage depicted in this scene is reflective of how transphobic notions manifest themselves in our contemporary Western zeitgeist, when this becomes the only image we see, trans women, in the mind of the viewer, are associated with a perpetual antagonism. Thus, by portraying the perceived inherent mental instability, and criminality of trans women, this depiction of Sophia is heavily 'regulated'⁵⁹ by the transphobic and harmful ideas of dominant culture.

53 Reitz, N, *The Representation of Trans Women in Film and Television*, *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 7: Issue 1, Article 2, Scholar Works, 2017

54 Ibid

55 Shelley, M, *Frankenstein*

56 Kohan, J, *Orange is The New Black*, Netflix, 2013-2019

57 Phillips, J, *Transgender on Screen*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

58 Kohan, J, *Orange is The New Black*,

59 Clark, C, *Television and Social Controls*

Right Sophia screaming at the other characters in retaliation



“Shall each man” cried he, “find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?”⁶⁰

Placed inside the Security Housing Unit (SHU), unable to access daylight, fresh air, and human connection, director, Briesewitz, uses the ‘SHU’ as a metaphor to explore the subjugation of trans women from dominant culture, using lighting and framing to posit Sophia as silenced and ‘imprisoned’ by her own monstrosity.

Further, Season 1, Episode 3 articulates the struggle of trans women with hormonal treatment. Jodie Foster, the director of this episode, explores the mistreatment of Sophia through the lens of others. The narrative focuses on the result of budgetary cuts in the prison which subsequently leave Sophia ineligible for oestrogen hormones. The misgendering and offensive dialogue of the prison warden emphasises the cultural hegemonic feelings towards trans women:

Natalie: “He can suck it up. She... Jesus.... This is a federal system...Why would anyone ever want to give up being a man. It’s like winning the lottery and giving the ticket back.”⁶¹

This dialogic commentary, while highlighting the misconceptions surrounding transgender individuals, equates Sophia’s transgenderism with the analogy of “giving the ticket back” from a “lottery” of manhood. Such comparative, figurative imagery, further perpetuates the notion of sub-humanity within the monstrous trope of trans representation. Sequentially, Season 1, Episode 3 continues to establish an antagonist

60 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein*

61 Kohan. J, *Orange is The New Black*



Left Sophia looks out of a cell at the prison warden in distress

within the character of heterosexual, Natalie, and thus creates a narrative of victimisation, evoking pity for Sophia. Trans director, Sam Feder, describes the appeal of this type of media where an “[e]motional response gets the audience’s attention and despair is the easiest emotion to evoke”⁶². The categorisation of trans identities within the victim narrative perpetuates a false perception of monstrosity. *Orange is The New Black*, whilst developing the agenda of queer representation by including a black, trans character, still does not evolve characterisation far enough away from monstrous tropes. More nuanced and complex characterisations that emphasise the multi-faceted experiences of trans women are necessary. Such representation is consequently ‘regulated’⁶³ by the constraints of dominant culture, as the experience of trans women, through screen, is minimised and disingenuous to the totality of trans narratives.

62 Feder, S, *Does Visibility Equal Progress? A Conversation on Trans Activist Media*, Jump Cut, 2016

63 Clark, C, *Television and Social Controls*

(Trans)pose

monster

/ˈmɛnstə/

verb [with object]

British informal criticize or reprimand severely: my mum used to monster me for coming home so late.⁶⁴

September 12th, 1982

Pairs of busy hands scuttle around my painted face, pressing brushes into my skin, softening it, sculpting it. Gentle fingers brush and style my hair, pull creases out of my dress, draw on sooty black eyeliner and meticulously arrange each detail of my figure for an artwork that will be displayed for the world.

“Beautiful April. Now, look into the camera. And.... pose.”

The director clears his throat, as if he is asking for permission to speak.

“Ms Ashley, are you ready?”

I sit on a stool, above the ground, above the world. My shoulder-length hair sits on the cusp of my shoulder; sharp and purposeful. I sit, adorned in the satin of an oversized suit that seems to caress my curves in an effortless way. No one else sees, but my pink lingerie panties sit under the walls of my trousers.

“Perfect Ms Ashley. We have all the photos we need. We think this one will be the front cover – what do you think?”

As a contemporary television series, executive produced by, Janet Mock, *Pose* (2018-2021), uplifts queer directors, producers, writers, and actors, embodying the importance of agency in controlling screen portrayals. *Pose* is retrospectively set during the 1990s, amidst the tumultuous context of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. This television drama reclaims the harmful narratives of transsexuality, narrating a story that shines a much-needed light on the nuances of the intersectional trans experience. Stryker identifies “the need to break the silence of [trans identities] and transform the textual

⁶⁴ Oxford Dictionary, 2018. As sourced at <https://www.lexico.com/definition/monster>. (Accessed 12/06/2021).

violence inscribed in the transexual body into a critical reconstructive force⁶⁵. By redefining monstrosity and acknowledging the ‘abnormality’ of the trans experience, difference can be depicted on screen as variety, rather than inferiority; complexity, rather than caricature; and celebratory, rather than deviant. Thus, in alignment with Clark’s theory on the representation of minorities, *Pose* embodies the final stage of representation: respect.⁶⁶

“It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.”⁶⁷

Unlike the limited characterisation of Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club*, a subversion of the ‘Exposure Scene’⁶⁸ is used as a celebratory motif throughout *Pose*. Rather than the mirror typifying abnormality and dissatisfaction, it serves as an introspective tool, reminding the leading character, Blanca, of her worth. There is a rejection of monstrosity through heteronormative reflections. Instead, Blanca can celebrate her unique beauty, and the intricacies of her identity, both inside and outside the realm of gender.



Left Blanca tries on a regal dress and looks pleasingly into a tri-fold mirror in Janet Mock’s television series, *Pose* (2018-2021)

The director, Mock, positions Blanca standing, in a regal sapphire gown, watching herself in a full-length tri-fold mirror. Unlike Rayon’s seated, decrepit nakedness, Blanca’s composure as a driver of action redefines the traditional inertia and

65 Stryker, S, *Introduction to Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2014

66 Clark, C, *Television and Social Controls*

67 Shelley, M, *Frankenstein*

68 Keegan, C, *Moving Bodies*

helplessness of trans characters in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Orange is The New Black*. *Pose* refutes the bodily conflict which trans women typically present in screen portrayals, ultimately criticising the harmful and divisive tropes of the past. This is emphasised in the dialogue within this scene:

*Blanca: "I'm about to go see my child, perform for all of those civilised folks, wearing this magnificent creation."*⁶⁹

The language of "my child" and "magnificent" shifts the rhetoric of trans women, constructing a storyline around Blanca's contentment with her life, outside of the realm of gender narratives. Further, the autonomy within highly modal action, "I am going", represents agency, adding to the television series' authentic depiction of Blanca as normative and capable of self-determining direction, thus redefining the traditional perceived inferior monstrosity of trans women on screen. Mock directs such 'Exposure Scenes' using a long take to ground the scene in realism, highlighting the diegetic sound of dialogue, rather than macabre non-diegetic sounds. This scene demonstrates the idea that the representation of trans women belong outside the fictitious, melodramatic and exaggerated storylines of Rayon and Sophia, in order to portray authentic experience. Thus, the use of a low camera angle, and close-up shots, establishes a renewed hierarchy of power placed within the hand of its trans characters. Overall, such a scene moves away from the sole physicality of Blanca being dependant on her transness, and diverges from ideas of mutation and deformity, into the realm of acceptance and emphasis on a uniquely nuance selfhood.

"Everywhere I see bliss"⁷⁰

The decision, by Mock, to subvert ideas of displacement, positively reinforce the idea that trans women can exist outside of their perceived 'monstrosity'. Instead, trans female characters can redefine their identity as human. Consequently, *Pose*, rejects the notion of the 'Trans Mammy' which Rayon presents, portraying the character of Blanca as caregiver through her role as mother, yet refuting the idea that trans women are props, used to develop the narrative of other characters. Blanca is a driver of action and attempts to improve her personal wellbeing but also the lives of others, jokingly being referred to as "Mother Teresa"⁷¹, and "Ma"⁷² throughout the series. This disputes the exaggerated and trivialised depictions which cannot be formulated by a cis-male actor.

69 Murphy. R, *Pose*, Fox Studios, 2018-2021

70 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein*

71 Murphy. R, *Pose*,

72 Season 2, Episode 2 *Pose*



Left Blanca in Janet Mock's television series, *Pose*, Season 2, Episode 2 (2018-2021).

Pose grapples with the idea of community and family, redefining and celebrating trans characters to emphasise their humanity, distinct from their transness, as being worthy of nurturing. The motif of the 'House', is symbolic of a queer subversion of traditional familial structures, centred around patriarchal notions. The language used to describe such families include 'Mother', 'Daughter', 'Son'⁷³ and suggest a rejection of the belief that family is formed by blood and emphasises queer love and acceptance. The casting choice and crew choice by Janet Mock boasts the 'largest transgender crew ever'⁷⁴, illustrating the power that autonomy has in reshaping and reconstructing narratives. This representation is not concerned with the struggle of heteronormativity accepting Blanca, but rather her strength in its adversity. She articulates her own existence by becoming a 'House Mother'⁷⁵, seated symbolically at the head of the table, and refuses to minimise her own experience or identity for the comfort of harmful binaries. Thus, such representation falls under the premise of 'respect'⁷⁶, by exploring the nuance of trans women.

"The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine."⁷⁷

Autonomy on screen is established through the agency of writers, directors, and producers, who can control screenplay, airtime, character development and the level of intersectionality, thus contributing to more positive images. The final episode of Season 2 'In My Heels' was written and directed by Janet Mock, who is both transgender and African American, which is indicative of the destabilisation of previous 'regulations', ultimately allowing trans voices to be heard. *Pose* embodies the idea that "trans women have a complex emotional landscape like everyone else"⁷⁸, unlike *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Orange is The New Black* which perpetuate monstrosity, resulting in

73 Murphy. R, *Pose*

74 Mock. J, *How 'Pose' Will Make History for Trans Storytelling*, *Variety*, 2018

75 Murphy. R, *Pose*

76 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

77 Shelley. M, *Frankenstein*

78 Mock. J, *On 'Pose,' Janet Mock Tells the Stories She Craved as a Young Trans Person.*, NPR, 2019

this “complexity [being] ignored or minimized by cardboard representations.”⁷⁹ Such portrayals disregard the realism of trans women’s multi-faceted identities.

When trans women have autonomy over their representation, beautiful and accurate portrayals are constructed that reflect their experience. Mock uses the Season 2 Finale as an opportunity to develop the protagonist, Blanca’s, storyline beyond monstrosity into the realm of queer celebration, redefining the way in which plot can be used to illuminate nuance rather than focus on the narrow lens of stereotypical gender narratives. This is illustrated in a scene between Blanca and her sister, where she is refused into the family house because of her identity, shown in the dialogue:

Carmen: “I don’t know what you are. What am I supposed to tell my ten-year-old? That his uncle is gay and runs around in women’s clothes?!”

*Blanca: “Tell her the truth. Tell her I am a woman.”*⁸⁰

Unlike “cardboard representations”⁸¹ of trans women, Mock decides to use the shame associated with transness in a positive way, using it as an opportunity to layer the character of Blanca and portray her refusal to be defined and formulated by aesthetics, or the perceptions of others. This redefines the perception that monstrosity and trans identities are interrelated, instead using queerness as the basis for Blanca’s strength and self-worth. Rather than allowing her transness to be dominated by inferiority, she recognises the ‘abnormality’ of her sister’s reaction, embracing her identity as beautiful rather than monstrous.

“At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror.”⁸²

Pose functions, in part, as a political statement against Trump-era media, exploring how the art of drag culture amalgamates with trans identities to show an embracing of queerness. This is best demonstrated in the Season 2 Finale with a solo vocal performance. Blanca lip-syncs Whitney Houston’s 1991 version of *Star-Spangled Banner*, the American national anthem. This performance is a metaphor for the reclaiming of citizenship, equality, and individual authority, using symbolic music to reveal a symbiosis between mainstream culture and the acceptance of queer culture. Mock uses wide shots of the audience to pan an entire community of intersectional and

79 Ryan. J. *Reel gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*, Scholar Works, 2009

80 Murphy. R. *Pose*

81 Ryan. J. *Reel gender*

82 Shelley. M *Frankenstein*

unique individuals, revealing the complexity of the trans community. This shot coincides with the prolonged musical crescendo and the lyric “land of the free”⁸³, as diegetic sounds of the music become interwoven with audible cheers. Symbolically, a wide shot, bird’s eye view camera angle constructs an image of a ‘free’ community for the viewer, unsilenced and a driver of action, rather than a receiver of abusive power. This encapsulates the importance of enabling trans voices to dictate the direction of trans representation.



As Bell Hooks, renowned film critic, announces, “men dressing as women’... has always been regarded by the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze as a sign that one is symbolically crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness”⁸⁴. *Pose* subverts the perceived inadequacy of trans women by creating “these [trans] women as the heroines”⁸⁵ within “the centre of their own stories”⁸⁶. Mock uses this scene to show the celebration of trans bodies and has explicitly expressed her intentions within her representations of the trans community since “[t]his is our country as well. We deserve to take up space”.⁸⁷ Thus, the power of representation and the importance of celebratory depictions that explore the complex nature of the trans experience is illustrated within this series. Mock refuses to romanticise the trans experience but also does not neglect the complexity and struggle of the trans embodiment, something that only a trans director could do. The importance of the series is summarised by Laura Stamm, identifying:

83 Houston. W, *Star Spangled Banner*, 1991

84 Hooks. B, *Black Looks: Chapter 9 - Is Paris Burning?* Routledge, 1992

85 Mock. J, *How ‘Pose’ Will Make History for Trans Storytelling*

86 Ibid

87 Ibid

“The series has made trans women visible in new ways, including love scenes, a romance narrative, and ballroom scenes that show trans women celebrating themselves and each other.”⁸⁸

Therefore, through the representation made visible in *Pose*, the intricacies and complexity of the trans experience is revealed, detaching from constructs that associate trans women with inferior or monstrous beings. Thus, rejecting notions of ‘ridicule’ and ‘regulation’, *Pose* uplifts queer agency, highlighting the importance of authenticity and ‘respect’⁸⁹ in portrayals of trans women.

(Trans)dimensional: an inconclusive conclusion

Whilst trans representation has significantly evolved within the last decade, *Pose*, is not the epitome of trans representation, but rather a peek into the possibility of future portrayals, a new dimension perhaps. As heteronormative gender theory is replaced by progressive transgender theory, so too will misrepresentative notions of monstrosity. We have moved from the ‘ridicule’⁹⁰ in *Dallas Buyers Club* and past the ‘regulation’⁹¹ of *Orange Is the New Black*, into a new era of respectful trans screen portrayals. The significance of such an era cannot be understated, as “screen depictions, and their ability to reach across class, education and language”⁹² offer insight to the masses, and it is this, that will “shape us”.⁹³ As trans women are given agency, and autonomy, their hands are able to shift the lens of the camera, move the pen on the script, and redefine the future of representation.

88 Stamm. L, *Pose and HIV/AIDS: The Creation of Trans-of-Colour Past*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2020

89 Clark. C, *Television and Social Controls*

90 Ibid

91 Ibid

92 McLuhan. M, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Mc-graw Hill, 1964

93 Ibid

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