

2022

## Transcinematheque: Defining Cinematic Language in the Trans New Wave

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### Recommended Citation

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TRANSCINEMATHEQUE  
DEFINING CINEMATIC LANGUAGE IN THE  
TRANS NEW WAVE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Film  
in the College of Sciences  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term, 2022

Thesis Chair: Betsy Kalin.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to analyze the films of the Trans New Wave in order to define tropes and motifs of cinematic language and structure. The language of the filmmaking itself presents a different approach from mainstream transgender films, and this changes how certain imagery of transness is contextualized in a larger narrative. In particular, the films of the Trans New Wave operate in contrast to both historical trans films and modern prestige/studio films to deliver more realistic portrayals of trans peoples' experiences and beliefs. This new language of the Trans New Wave serves to create a more accurate and profound portrayal of the daily lives of trans people, leading to a more enriching experience for trans audiences.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Biological sex:** The category into which a person is placed on the basis of their reproductive organs. These include male, female, and intersex.

**Cis/cisgender:** Refers to a person whose gender and biological sex are the same.

**Creepypasta:** Refers to a horror story or urban legend which is specifically spread through the internet.

**Deadname:** The name that a trans person was assigned at birth on their birth certificate.

**Deadnaming:** The act of referring to a trans person by their deadname, instead of their chosen name. This is seen as a deeply offensive act that ignores the trans person's gender.

**Gender:** The range of social identities that a person can identify with. These include male and female and a larger array of genders that exist outside of that binary.

**Nonbinary:** An umbrella term referring to genders which are not male or female.

**Sexual reassignment surgery (SRS):** A surgical procedure by which a trans person alters their body's characteristics to align more with their gender. Among trans women, the term is used interchangeably with vaginoplasty, which is the surgery by which a transfeminine person's penis is reconstructed as a vagina.

**Transfeminine:** Refers to a person whose biological sex is male, but whose gender is female or more closely aligned with femininity.

**Transgender/trans:** Refers to a person whose gender and biological sex are different.

**Transition:** The process by which a trans person changes themselves with the goal of presenting socially as their gender. This encompasses surgeries, voice training, purchasing new clothes, legally changing one's name, and other gender-affirming activities.

**Transmisogyny:** Discrimination against trans women.

**Transphobia/transphobic:** Refers to discrimination against trans people.

## INTRODUCTION

My earliest memories of transgender people in film and television stem from the late 2000's and early 2010's, an era where being a woman with a penis was seen as an acceptable punchline. Shows like *How I Met Your Mother*, *Family Guy*, and *Saturday Night Live* all partook in this form of mockery, and being subjected to these shows at a young age fueled my insecurities around coming out. It wasn't until 2019 that I fully processed the emotions that had been repressed by years of self-doubt and pessimism. There has been a mainstream push in the opposite direction, with major film studios trying to offset the harm they have caused with more complex and balanced trans characters in film and television. However, many of these seemingly more respectful characters suffer the same ills as the characters that only exist as the butt of the joke. Films like *The Danish Girl* or *Dallas Buyers Club* are full of choices that make them misrepresentative of trans people. This mischaracterization has an impact on the perceptions of cis people, but it also leads to an insecurity in trans people—a sense that all we are is a list of stereotypes.

The Trans New Wave, coined by Tristan Taormino in her 2008 article “The New Wave of Trans Cinema: The Latest Transporn Breaks Down Both Boundaries and Inhibitions,” is the antithesis of the mainstream trend in transgender films. Taormino's final statement in the article establishes the modus operandi of the Trans New Wave: “It's no mistake that films produced by, for, and about transfolk break down seemingly finite categories, create new iconography, and redefine sexual images and stories.” The Trans New Wave is defined as “independent trans films written, directed, produced, and exhibited since 2008,” coinciding with the time of writing of

Taormino's article (Ford). Films of the Trans New Wave are made by young trans filmmakers operating outside of the studio system, and are often biographical or autobiographical in nature. They can be narrative, documentary, or experimental films. These factors compound to create a cinematic movement which produces films that are largely authentic and compelling to the audience of trans people that watches them. On the surface, it seems obvious that trans films created by trans filmmakers would be more authentic than those created by cis filmmakers, and that films outside of the studio system would have less restraints placed upon them than films made within. Upon closer examination, however, the difference is not so clear-cut. A film like *The Danish Girl*, produced entirely within the studio system, which makes several mistakes such as the miscasting of a transfeminine character with a cisgender male actor, still intends to portray a sympathetic narrative, and succeeds in portraying the trans experience with some accuracy. If the filmmaker's intention is not the aspect of filmmaking that makes the films of the Trans New Wave more accurate and sympathetic to the trans experience, then there must be some other defining factor.

This thesis seeks to delineate that defining factor by analyzing the cinematic language of the Trans New Wave; specifically, the various tropes and motifs present in the language and structure of these films. These tropes and motifs range from certain types of scenes that recur between films to the granular details of editing and cinematography that inform the audience's perception of trans elements in these films. Understanding this difference in cinematic language will create a definitive separation between the trans representation in Trans New Wave films versus trans "prestige pictures" and/or trans films produced within the studio system. Further,

understanding the difference in the impact of this cinematic language on trans audiences will allow for a more thorough analysis of the impacts these filmic portrayals have in the real world.

Each chapter of this thesis will analyze a selection of trans films through a different model. These analyses are either organized around sub-models within the overall model, as is the case with the first chapter, or around the specific films discussed within the analysis, as is the case with the final two chapters. The three models were chosen because of their use by queer and trans films scholars to specifically analyze trans films.

The films to be discussed are: *Her Story*, *Lingua Franca*, *The Danish Girl*, *The Skin I Live In*, and *We're All Going to the World's Fair*. These films have been selected because they are apt examples of Trans New Wave films, as well as studio/prestige trans films. *The Danish Girl*, for instance, is a prototypical example of a studio trans film in that it exhibits many of the traits shared by those films: no trans creatives worked on the film, no trans actors were cast in it, and critically for the analysis, the film has a trans protagonist that the audience is meant to sympathize with. Since these films are emblematic of their specific type of film, whether that be Trans New Wave or studio/prestige, analyzing them through the three models and comparing them with other films will prove instructional in determining broader truths about the Trans New Wave. Summaries for these films are provided following the first mention of them within the chapters.

## CHAPTER 1: TRANS ON SCREEN

In this chapter, I will examine a selection of Trans New Wave and prestige/studio trans films through the model of TRANS ON SCREEN. The model, first coined by Helen Hok-Sze Leung in her contribution to *Transgender China*, outlines three sub-models with the purpose of showing “the varied and creative critical possibilities that the notion of trans has enabled” in Chinese trans cinema (186). Leung equates the study of transgender issues in Chinese cinema to firing at moving targets (185); in other words, to consider only one definition of trans cinema is reductive, as it is constantly shifting. Leung provides the three sub-models as a means of considering several aspects of trans representation on screen one at a time in order to conceptualize a more complete picture. These sub-models are TRANS OTHERS, TRANS RELATIONS, and TRANS PRACTICES.

Accordingly, I will be orienting the films *Her Story* and *The Skin I Live In* within each of the three sub-models in order to create a comparison point between Trans New Wave and studio/prestige trans films through the lens of the TRANS ON SCREEN model. These films were selected because of their differing portrayals of transness. *Her Story* offers a more sympathetic portrayal of trans women, whereas *The Skin I Live In* adopts the aesthetic of transness to evoke a reaction of horror and disgust in the audience. The stark contrast of these two portrayals will give the model the ability to interpret differing scenarios through the same lenses. Ultimately, a film that has a more fair and positive portrayal of trans people through the TRANS ON SCREEN model should adhere to less stereotypes, and therefore should be a more complex and interesting film for a trans audience.

## TRANS OTHERS

Leung's first sub-model is focused on "gender variant characters" and the various cultural associations that the audience may ascribe to them. Within this particular sub-model, many trans and gender non-conforming characters in cinema are seen as "disrupt[ing] the normative alignments" inherent in cultural conceptions of biological sex, gender, and gender presentation. Normative, in this case, is referring to cisgender people who strictly follow their assigned gender's role in society. Any deviation from these norms, according to Leung, only serves to further exoticize them. This can ultimately lead to these characters being less grounded—more like stereotypes and fantasies than real people (187). Leung refers to this sub-model as "TRANS OTHERS."

*The Skin I Live In* is a film that was released in 2011 and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. The film centers around Vera, a trans woman who is held captive by a surgeon named Robert. When Robert kidnapped Vera, she was a cis man named Vincente. Robert forced Vincente to transition by giving him sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and plastic surgery, altering his body into a woman's. *The Skin I Live In* calls attention to gender variance in a very forward and visceral manner. The film opens from the perspective of Vera, and as it continues, it also begins to show flashbacks to her time as Vincente. The film slowly reveals that Vincente was forcibly feminized, given vaginoplasty and several reconstructive surgeries to transform him into an exact replica of Robert's late wife. It is important to note that while Vincente and Vera are the same character, they are played by different actors pre- and post-transition: Vincente is played by Jan Cornet (a cis male actor) and Vera is played by Elena Anaya (a cis female actress). Leung highlights the importance of casting with trans actors as a way of influencing audience

perception: the audience's "nondiegetic recognition" (188) of a male actor playing Vincente and a female actor playing Vera allows them to infer that the gender transformation between one and the other was a complete swap, leaving Vera virtually indistinguishable from a cis woman. The film implicitly makes the assumption that transitioning completely changes one's biological sex. The purpose of this severe change is to impart the viewer with a sense of shock, leaving them with the horrifying idea of their body being completely transformed against their will. The transness has been otherized, and in that process it has become a terrifying spectacle for cis viewers.

It is also relevant to understand that Robert's purpose in transforming Vincente into Vera is to get revenge for his daughter's assault while simultaneously coping with the loss of his wife. This highlights another important facet of the TRANS OTHER: the fact that gender variance is either seen as the trait of a villain or the consequence of "obsessive or sacrificial love" (Leung, 188). Vera's gender variance is the result of Robert's obsession with his deceased wife, so in this instance the transition is the act of an obsessive lover. By Leung's model, Vera's transness is not a measure of her identification with the female gender, but a reflection of Robert's love for his wife and daughter. In this sense, the film "fall[s] short of providing any viable mode of recognition for transgender audience[s]" (189). By relating the trans experience as one of horror driven by obsessive love, *The Skin I Live In* alienates trans viewers, like myself, in a very visceral and derogatory way. In contrast, the film amplifies negative ideas of transness for cis people by pushing a narrative that a physical gender transition is a punishment.

*Her Story* is a film released in 2016 and directed by Sydney Freeland, a transgender woman. The film follows two trans women, Violet and Paige. Violet enters a romantic

relationship with Allie, a cis reporter who is profiling her for an article she is writing about trans people. They navigate their relationship in secret while Violet is stuck in a relationship with her abusive boyfriend. Meanwhile, Paige begins dating a man named James, but does not tell him that she is trans. Another relevant character is Lisa, one of Allie's friends who is vehemently transphobic. *Her Story* relates a much more grounded and realistic portrayal of trans lives, and this is in line with Leung's idea of "realistically realized" trans characters within the TRANS OTHER sub-model (189). For Leung, the rare instances of realistic trans portrayals are associated primarily with the characters' careers. The most vivid instances of trans visibility come from "trans specific professions," or jobs which are specific to or more prominent among trans people, such as sex work, drag, and trans activism. In the film, Paige works as an attorney at Lambda Legal who specifically represents trans women. Although Paige herself is not outed as trans until late into the film, her profession is one that the audience might reasonably suspect to be more prevalent among trans people. The film also portrays the gender identity of its two main characters as an actual self-identification with the female gender, rather than as a "monstrosity" or an obsession. The inclusion of a trans woman with a realistic profession, as well as trans women with realistic ideas regarding gender identity, bolsters the authenticity of the film. This is critical because, as Leung points out, a lack of accuracy regarding the trans experience is key in the formation of the TRANS OTHER. When trans characters are not grounded in reality, they run the risk of being detached, appearing "not as fully articulated subjects, but as objects of fantasy" (187). *Her Story* breaks this convention. Its trans characters are gender variant, but they are not otherized. The characters do not shy away from the issue of gender, and are open about their transitions. By grounding the film in a realistic scenario, *Her*

*Story* makes it clear that trans women exist in the real world, and that they are not merely objects of fantasy.

The TRANS OTHER is the dominant understanding of trans people in the eyes of cis people. Leung's sub-model outlines how trans people are excluded from the majority, how their gender variance is presented as exotic, and how their reasons for transition are almost always in terms of some ulterior motive. These traits are more common in prestige films such as *The Skin I Live In* even when the trans main character is a sympathetic figure. Conversely, the TRANS OTHER is less common in Trans New Wave films like *Her Story*, which portray trans people with realistic professions who are candid about their transness and their reasons behind transitioning. The model of the TRANS OTHER, then, serves as a litmus test of sorts; it separates portrayals of trans people into the categories of realistic and othering. In the majority of cases, Trans New Wave films fit in the former category.

## TRANS RELATIONS

Leung's second sub-model, TRANS RELATIONS, explores transness "not as an identity, but rather as a term of relationality" (186). In essence, the unique bonds of love and friendship that are formed in relationships where at least one character is trans can resonate more with the viewer and reveal more about the film's overall themes. Whereas cisgender relations, heterosexual or homosexual, are widely understood and recognized by most viewers as normal, TRANS RELATIONS are uncharted territory. There is not yet a standardized and universally accepted way to interact with trans people within society, and this makes relating to trans people

incredibly dubious. Even for the trans audience, relating to other people in a way that is seen as socially acceptable is a foreign concept. Revealing more information about these relations can provide insight, for both the trans viewer and the cis viewer, into the impact of transness on day-to-day interactions.

*The Skin I Live In* portrays almost every relationship that Vera has as being more strained by her transness. Her relationship with Robert takes on a new dynamic once her transition is complete. Since Robert has specifically feminized Vera with the appearance of his deceased wife in mind, he develops a romantic attachment to her and coerces Vera into having sex with him. Whereas before Robert wanted revenge on Vincente for assaulting his daughter, now Robert uses Vera as the object of his desire. This exemplifies the core idea of TRANS RELATIONS: defining “the ways in which the crossings of gender realign desire, affection, and affinity between people” (Leung, 190). The cross-over of Vera’s gender changes Vera’s relationship with Robert in a very tangible way—she attracts him now, whereas before she didn’t. This relays to the audience that the impact of transitioning on the relationship between a man and a trans woman is, primarily, that the man becomes sexually attracted to the trans woman. This is not the first time this notion is explored in *The Skin I Live In*: earlier in the film, Vera is sexually assaulted by Zeca, the housekeeper’s son. This assault, simply put, would not have happened if Vera hadn’t been feminized as Zeca is implied to be strictly heterosexual. The message to the trans audience here is clear, and it is a deeply offensive one: trans women are not deemed worthy of real love, only sexual assault. As far as other women are concerned, Vera’s interactions are sparse. The most notable interaction that Vera has with a woman comes at the very end of the film: Vera returns to her mother’s clothing store after escaping Robert’s captivity, and she

reveals to her mother and her former colleague Cristina that she is actually Vincente. Predictably, this provides for a reaction of shock at what Vera has become, along with relief that she is finally free after being missing for several years. The relation between cis and trans women as detailed by *The Skin I Live In* is rooted in the idea of the “true” identity of the trans woman—that before transition, they were socially perceived as a man. Before transition, Vincente had an unrequited love for Cristina, but an otherwise normal friendship. He also had a normal relationship with his mother. After transition, something has changed between the three of them, and it is implied that the state of normalcy from before can never be attained again. The transness of Vera disrupts normalcy. *The Skin I Live In*, on the whole, portrays transness as causing irreparable harm to Vera’s relationships.

*Her Story*, unlike *The Skin I Live In*, does not provide a pre-transition/post-transition comparison point that can be analyzed through the lens of TRANS RELATIONS. However, there are two important comparison points that are worth analyzing through this sub-model: those being the interactions that Paige has before and after she is outed. Before that point, Paige is mostly able to operate in cisnormative society without anything holding her back. The first time her identity alters her relationship with someone occurs after Paige’s run-in with Lisa. In this interaction, Lisa is unable to tell that Paige is trans just by looking at her, and asks her “woman to woman” if she would be okay with trans women in women’s spaces. Paige simply ignores her, and Lisa asks Allie if Paige is single. Allie, frustrated, exclaims that Paige is trans, calling out Lisa’s hypocrisy. Shortly after this, Lisa publicly outs Paige as trans in an attempt to discredit her work as a lawyer. The relational dynamic here is clear: transphobic people will treat trans people with respect if they don’t know about their transness. Once they do know, however,

they feel betrayed, almost violated, and may resort to retaliatory violence in order to express these emotions. This retaliatory violence includes public outings, which may place closeted trans women in danger with their friends, family, and significant others.

As I will explain in the analysis of the third sub-model, Lisa's conception of transness is rooted entirely in the idea that it is a form of sexual deviancy, and many transphobic people share this same mindset. For transphobes, any form of gender variance that deviates from the norm is seen in a sexual, perverse way. *Her Story's* approach to transness is meant to be firmly grounded in the reality of being a trans woman. This is further exemplified when Paige talks to James after her outing. James responds by telling Paige that he has a gambling problem, and that he didn't know when the right time to tell her would be. In doing so, he shows that he understands Paige's reluctance to come out to him, and that their relationship still holds value to him. The relational change between Paige and James after Paige's outing is a deeper interpersonal understanding between the two. This signals to a trans audience that trans people have a place in society, and that they are capable of entering healthy romantic relationships with cis people. Compare this messaging to that of *The Skin I Live In*, where transness disqualifies Vera from romance entirely.

TRANS RELATIONS are the ways in which transness can affect the friendly, romantic, and familial relationships between trans people and cis people. TRANS RELATIONS are largely negative in prestige/studio films like *The Skin I Live In*. By showing the impacts of Vera's forced transition as a net negative to her interactions with others, the film ultimately stigmatizes transitioning. In comparison, Trans New Wave films like *Her Story* portray trans relations in complex and realistic ways: showing the absurdity of transphobic people and how their logic

falls apart when they can't tell that someone is trans, and how trans people can realistically maintain relationships with cis people before and after they come out.

## TRANS PRACTICES

The final sub-model within the TRANS ON SCREEN model is TRANS PRACTICES. To be more specific, Leung refers to “various modification practices that transform bodily being” (187). In short, TRANS PRACTICES can be anything from piercings and tattoos to things more commonly associated with transitioning: sexual reassignment surgery, hormone replacement therapy, electrolysis/laser hair removal, and vocal feminization training. All of these practices serve to modify the body in some way. Leung posits that the aspects of transition should not be analyzed in a vacuum, but rather they should be used as a lens to discuss “somatic processes that modify bodily boundaries” (192).

This is especially clear in *The Skin I Live In*. Aspects of Vera's transition are sensationalized and hyperfixated upon. Her sexual reassignment surgery is of particular note in this regard. In one scene, Robert shows Vera several dilators—a tool used after feminizing SRS in order to maintain the inner lining of the vagina. Each dilator is of increasing length and girth. The dilators are portrayed in a way that takes advantage of their phallic shape. The audience knows that Vera is perpetually sexually assaulted later in the narrative, and so the dilator becomes a manifestation of Vera's sexual capacity. As Vera moves through progressively longer dilators, she is effectively assaulting herself first while preparing herself to be assaulted by Robert. Of course, dilators do not serve this function in real life—they merely help trans women

newly out of SRS to stretch their vaginas. However, this is their function in *The Skin I Live In*: a physical manifestation of Vera's transness that serves to horrify the audience, conflating Vera's transition with an assault on the body.

*Her Story* is notable with respect to TRANS PRACTICES because its main trans characters do not ever call attention to the physical aspects of their transitions. They are introduced simply as women, without any mention of sexual reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy. In fact, the only people who fixate on these bodily transformations are Allie's lesbian friends. In one scene, Allie's friends (including Lisa) discuss if they would ever date a trans woman. They talk about how long it's been since any of them had performed fellatio on a man, and about the absurdity of trans women "chopping" their penises off of their bodies. The purpose of allocating this fixation specifically to the transphobic characters is clear: to show how focusing too heavily on transitioning obscures the actual person behind the transition. Violet and Paige are real people leading complex inter- and intrapersonal lives, and it is antithetical to reduce them primarily to their genitals. This is not to say that understanding and analyzing the aspects of transition cannot be done in a constructive way, but specifically interrogating every trans woman's genitalia is not necessary to recognize them as people.

TRANS PRACTICES offer a way to analyze the importance of the specific bodily transformations that trans people can undergo. Doing so, however, is not necessary in a trans narrative. *The Skin I Live In* uses trans bodily modification as an object of horror. *Her Story* takes steps to distance its trans characters from the specifics of their bodies, and actively calls out those who do hyperfixate on these things as being invasive and dehumanizing. While many

Trans New Wave films do include some discussion of trans body modification, it is often not the primary focus. In prestige/studio trans films, it is almost always the focus.

## CONCLUSION

Leung's model of TRANS ON SCREEN provides a unique opportunity to analyze trans films through a uniquely trans lens: understanding their content specifically through the aspects of identity, society, and body. When analyzing *The Skin I Live In* and *Her Story* through the three sub-models of TRANS ON SCREEN—TRANS OTHERS, TRANS RELATIONS, and TRANS PRACTICES—it is clear to see that their approaches differ greatly. *The Skin I Live In* takes an approach that dehumanizes its main trans character. It otherizes her transness by portraying her with a different actor pre-transition and post-transition, and by justifying her transition as the result of Robert's obsessive love for this deceased wife; it shows how Vera's relationships are strained as a result of her transness, defining her relationships to men by sexual assault, and her relationships with women by the memory of her life pre-transition; and it calls attention to her bodily modification as an act of violation, aiding in her perpetual sexual assault. *Her Story*, on the other hand, offers a more realistic trans portrayal. It shows that its trans characters have realistic occupations for trans women and highlights that they are grounded in reality; it calls attention to transphobes' backwards logic in their actions towards trans women, and shows that trans women can have healthy romantic relationships with cis men; and it deliberately refrains from focusing on its trans characters' bodies, explicitly framing this focus as a dangerous invasion of privacy. *Her Story's* portrayal of trans people serves as an example of how Trans

New Wave films differ from studio/prestige trans films. Far from offering merely sympathy to their trans characters and nothing else, Trans New Wave films are grounded in reality, and do not sensationalize their trans characters' identities. Films like *Lingua Franca*, for instance, show a similar relation between trans women and cis men to *Her Story*: showing that these relationships are possible without transness being an impeding factor. Through the TRANS ON SCREEN model, it is clear to see that Trans New Wave films take more time to impart a sense of truthfulness to the viewer with regards to their trans characters, which ultimately serves to make them more relatable and complex to a trans audience.

## CHAPTER 2: SENSIBLE CINEMATIC INTRA-ACTIVITY

In this chapter, I will be analyzing another selection of trans films through Wibke Straube's model of "sensible cinematic intra-activity." The model, first established in Straube's dissertation *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes*, seeks to understand film not merely as an experience pertaining to the sense of sight, but also to the senses of hearing and, more notably, touch. Straube observes that "[i]n psychoanalytic, semiotic or structuralist approaches, film remains a visual medium, an external object..." in short, the classical approaches to film criticism fail to consider film as an object that interacts with the viewer (67). Sensible cinematic intra-activity is a model that considers the film viewer not merely as a viewer, but as an "entrant" (63); an active participant whose body becomes a part of the film's experience. Practically, this means that an entrant is literally an actor within the film's world; they become acquainted with its characters, form memories and associations, and feel strong emotions and sensations as a result. Straube utilizes a particular type of film phenomenon, the "exit scape," to analyze the effects of intra-activity on the entrant within trans cinema; these exit scapes are typically moments of respite for trans characters, breaks from the onslaught of the central conflict of the film which may "create fear and trauma for the trans entrants" (48). These moments are where trans entrants have the most receptive intra-activity with a film.

While Straube primarily utilizes sensible cinematic intra-activity to conceptualize exit scapes pertaining to "song, dream, and dance" (53), the idea can be more broadly applied to the whole of a work in order to ascertain its physical effect on a trans entrant. As such, I will be analyzing two films through the lens of sensible cinematic intra-activity: *We're All Going to the*

*World's Fair* and *Lingua Franca*. I have chosen these films because I believe them to be apt at directly affecting the trans entrant with a strong sensual and physical response that a purely audiovisual analysis would overlook. Analyzing the direct physical impact that these films have on the trans entrant will prove instructional, as it will provide insight into the specific techniques that Trans New Wave films use in order to provide such a strong response. In keeping with the model, I will be referring to the entrant/entrants instead of the audience/viewer.

#### WE'RE ALL GOING TO THE WORLD'S FAIR

*We're All Going to the World's Fair* is a film released in 2021 and directed by Jane Schoenbrun, a nonbinary transfeminine person. Although Schoenbrun themselves “[doesn’t] necessarily think of the character[s] as trans or not trans,” they admit that the film is “100% inspired by dysphoria” (Broadwell). Accordingly, while the film does not explicitly feature a transgender main character, is easily identifiable as an allegory for the process of transitioning in the digital age. The film follows Casey, a young girl who joins an Internet creepypasta role-playing game called the World’s Fair. The story of the game involves the player, in this case Casey, pledging to join the World’s Fair, and documenting the changes that it makes to her body. This is where the player is encouraged to experiment, uploading videos with visual and/or practical effects to provide the illusion that something strange or scary is happening to them. However, Casey is incredibly isolated, and she begins to take the game too far; she believes that her body is changing in real life in ways that she can’t control.

The film goes to great lengths to impart a sense of personal attachment to the entrant, and this fits in with the core of the narrative: Casey is never seen physically interacting with another person within the world of the film. She is only ever seen interacting with people on the Internet, or yelling at her father from another room. Much of the film is either shot on a webcam, made to look like it was shot on a webcam, or presented as though it were an internet video. This style is unconventional by traditional film standards, and it offers a greater sense of intra-activity for the entrant, as opposed to what the scenes might have offered if they were shot from a detached point of view. The film also engages in several long one-shot sequences; most notably, the opening scene, which consists of a single 8-minute static shot. In this sequence, Casey films herself performing the ritual that will induct her into the World's Fair: she says "I want to go to the World's Fair" three times, then pricks her finger, then watches a video of multicolor flashing lights. All of this is shown from the perspective of a webcam as she films herself, but the audience is also shown what Casey does when the webcam is supposedly not recording: she eats a snack, she stares off into space, and she makes her bed. The silence of this scene when Casey is not speaking into the camera imparts a sense of voyeurism, as though the entrant is viewing the intimate details of Casey's life without her knowing. At the same time, the entrant is also in the room with Casey, the audience to her presentation. This intimacy has the effect of nullifying any potential voyeuristic feelings; for all intents and purposes, the entrant is either experiencing the events of the film with Casey or as Casey.

Similar scenes throughout the film offer the same effect. In one particularly noteworthy sequence, Casey films herself dancing to a pop song, but suddenly and involuntarily begins screaming. This is shown to be an impact of her joining the World's Fair; many of the changes

that Casey undergoes are not physical, but rather a change in mindset and behavior. These changes mirror the changes present in trans people due to the onset of gender dysphoria and the methods used to alleviate it, such as hormone replacement therapy and binding of one's breasts. This is a key example: unexplained outbursts that occur seemingly out of Casey's control. The static shot from the POV of a webcam continues to impart the same sense of place and personal attachment as the opening shot. As Straube puts it, film allows for "a transposition of multiple sensorial sets to the entrants" (184); virtual audience member and main character surrogate. As Casey begins to change, the entrant calls into question whether or not Casey believes the World's Fair to be a game, or if she's actually taking it seriously. The entrant, then, begins to have the same doubts.

For the trans entrant, *We're All Going to the World's Fair* is easy to read as a trans allegory. The game of the World's Fair echoes the process of transitioning—the body begins to change in weird and unexplained ways, and so does the mind. By utilizing long, static shots from the POV of Casey's webcam, the film is able to simultaneously impart the sense that the entrant is both audience member and participant in the World's Fair themselves. For many trans people, especially trans youth growing up with internet access, this is their reality. The hyperspecificity of the trans messaging in the film is made more poignant by its efforts to impact the entrant with a personal connection to the narrative. Overall, the film creates an environment where ideas and sensations of transness can be directly imparted to the entrant by carefully controlling their point of view.

## LINGUA FRANCA

*Lingua Franca* is a film released in 2019 and directed by Isabel Sandoval, a transgender woman. Its focus on sensuality and visual storytelling make it a prime candidate for analysis through the lens of sensible cinematic intra-activity. The film follows Olivia, a Filipino trans woman who works as a caregiver for an elderly woman with dementia. She falls in love with the woman's grandson, Alex, and hopes to marry him so that he she can get her green card. Olivia does not tell Alex that she is trans, but Alex finds out anyway when his friend rummages through her things and finds her ID. The film is multi-faceted, exploring many aspects of Olivia's identity that extend far beyond her transness. However, I find it prudent for the purposes of the thesis to focus specifically on the trans elements of this story. As such, I would like to note that *Lingua Franca* is an example of a hopeful end-state for trans cinema: trans filmmakers being able to make films that are not explicitly about transness, or that only feature transness as a small aspect of a larger narrative. Accordingly, my analysis of *Lingua Franca* through the model of sensible cinematic intra-activity will focus on contextualizing the trans elements of the film as a part of a greater whole.

One particular scene of note with regards to transness in *Lingua Franca* occurs early on in the film. The scene is simple enough: without any dialogue, Olivia pulls a dilator out of her dresser drawer and uses it. She lays down on her bed and listens to music. The scene itself never makes note of the dilator's purpose so a hypothetical cis entrant might not even realize what it is or what it is used for. Sandoval herself admits that many cis critics believed the scene to be one where Olivia is masturbating since the dilator could potentially be mistaken for a dildo (personal communication). However, trans women know the difference between a dildo and a dilator, and

a trans entrant will easily be able to identify the object. The scene, while short and ultimately incidental, does play an interesting role in the film's plot: by showing Olivia using a dilator, the audience knows that Olivia has undergone SRS. This is prudent because Olivia later goes on to have intercourse with Alex, and afterwards he still doesn't know that she is trans. For a cis entrant, this may come across as confusing—after all, they might not even know what a dilator is. For a trans entrant, especially a trans woman, however, the dilator scene perfectly contextualizes where Olivia is in her transition, and in turn provides context to the later sexual encounter. Far from going in-depth about Olivia's transition, the film provides only the slightest nod to it that only trans entrants will be able to understand. The scene's quiet, muted atmosphere, devoid of any dialogue, also adds to this effect: the scene personally reaches out to the trans entrant, letting them know a piece of deeply personal information. As is evidenced by cis critics' confusions with the scene, this experience simply does not occur with the cis entrant. In this way, the trans entrant is aligned more closely with Olivia.

There is another scene that works to great effect later in the film which operates along similar lines. Olivia's friend Trixie visits the DMV in the hopes of changing the legal name on Olivia's passport as a favor. She provides Olivia's Philippine passport to, which still shows her deadname and a male gender marker, to the clerk. She attempts to pass this off as her own. The clerk claims that this process can only be done through the country of citizenship, thereby denying Trixie's request to change the name. This highlights an important intersection between being trans and being an immigrant: trans women are not legally able to change their gender markers in the Philippines. Trans immigrants to the US hope that they will be able to do so in America only to face a harsh and unforgiving system that cracks down hard on immigration. The

general premise of the situation is relatable to any trans woman: it is distressing to know that one's legal name and gender does not match the name and gender that they identify with. This legal situation is so hyperspecific to a trans entrant that it passes beyond merely being a relatable moment; it is deeply and horrifyingly personal. The trans entrant knows how it feels to not be legally recognized as who they are. What might be less obvious to an American trans entrant, however, is how the intersection of gender and nationality can compound that same problem. This scene draws American trans entrants in with a scenario that they are much too familiar with then broadens their perspective by showing how that problem is exacerbated for immigrants. Through the familiar, Sandoval invites white trans entrants to explore the unfamiliar.

*Lingua Franca* can be viewed through the lens of sensible cinematic intra-activity as specifically reaching out to its trans audience to deepen its complex themes regarding immigration. With its hyperspecific trans imagery that is inexorably intertwined with the film's narrative regarding immigration, trans entrants are given the opportunity to become more connected to the varying experiences of trans women beyond the dominant white, American narrative. These are experiences that cis entrants are not afforded, however, as the events in the film are so specific to transness. Therefore, the trans specificity of these moments is specifically designed to make the film appeal and effect trans (and especially transfeminine) entrants much more than cis ones.

## CONCLUSION

Straube's model of sensible cinematic intra-activity allows for a deep exploration of the physical and emotional reactions that a trans entrant undergoes while watching a Trans New Wave film. *We're All Going to the World's Fair* utilizes long, static shots and carefully chooses the POV of a webcam to place the trans entrant into the story as both spectator and participant, echoing the environment of transitioning in the digital age. *Lingua Franca* uses trans-specific imagery to draw in trans entrants, allowing them to have a more profound and personal experience with the film than cis entrants. While these films have very different approaches when it comes to situating the trans entrant, they are both still *explicitly catering to* the trans entrant. The emotions and scenery that these films hope to evoke are reliant upon the entrant being familiar with transness and the minutia of transition.

By focusing specifically on the elements and imagery of transness in ways that only trans people would understand, Trans New Wave films become remarkably poignant for trans entrants specifically. This type of alignment is simply not present in trans films made by cis filmmakers.

### CHAPTER 3: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In this chapter, I will be revisiting a selection of the films discussed in the thesis thus far by engaging in the practice of autoethnography. Autoethnography is a method of research that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 1). In essence, it is the process of using one’s own narrative to analyze other narratives; those of art and of society. Trans scholar Valérie Robin Clayman, in her dissertation *“I’m supposed to relate to this?” A Trans Woman On Issues Of Identification With Trans Moving Images*, utilizes the process of autoethnography in order to break down her complicated feelings about popular depictions of trans people in film, such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Dallas Buyers Club*. For example, she expresses her lack of identification of Jared Leto’s character in *Dallas Buyers Club*, analyzing how her reading of the character’s transness allows her to recognize the harmful trans stereotypes that the character embodies, subsequently allowing her to become stronger by rejecting the negative portrayal. She explains the anger she feels at Leto’s privilege as a cisgender man portraying an “interpretation” of transness, whereas Clayman’s actual transness “leads to marginalization and loss of privilege” (62). Through expressing these emotions, Clayman comes to the conclusion that *Dallas Buyers Club* incurs harm to the trans community by misrepresenting transness. Through the personal, Clayman expresses something universal.

Accordingly, I will be revisiting three of the films addressed in the thesis thus far, as well as the 2014 film *The Danish Girl*. My aim in adding *The Danish Girl* at this stage is to provide an equal balance between Trans New Wave films and prestige/studio trans films. It is my intent

that through analyzing the way these films made me feel specifically through a trans lens, I will reveal more about the differences in approach between these films, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of the type of film they represent.

## HER STORY

*Her Story* was one of the more refreshing films that I watched in preparation for writing my thesis. Its more grounded take on trans issues is something that I had never seen in any film previously. Although it is arguable that its primary POV character is a cisgender woman whose arc centers around understanding and learning to love trans people, this is never conveyed in a fetishistic or demeaning way. Allie's role as the introductory character into the film ultimately serves as an introduction to the world of the two trans leads, and this allows the voices of trans women to dominate the overall conversation of the film. It is hard for me not to view this as a subversion of the norm where cis people so often speak over trans voices. Especially as compared to the trans films directed by cis filmmakers that I will discuss later in this chapter, *Her Story*'s cis characters are especially secondary to the plot, and this serves to benefit the trans characters by affording them much more of a voice in their narratives.

As a lesbian, I felt much more compelled by Violet's side of the story: a trans woman in a relationship with a cis woman who also struggles with an abusive relationship with her boyfriend. Navigating a romantic relationship with a cis person is one of my greatest anxieties as a trans woman, and this anxiety is all the more exacerbated by the threat of intimate partner violence. Trans people are almost twice as likely to experience intimate partner violence within

their lifetime as cis people (Peitzmeier et al), and *Her Story* accurately illustrates the strain that is placed on trans women in this regard. Violet is forced into a cycle of abuse because she knows that there is no legal recourse for her: she reveals that when she called the police on her boyfriend in the past, they asked him if he knew Violet was a “man,” and simply laughed off the incident. Even when the violence escalates, Violet knows that transphobia is directly stopping her from taking action. At the same time, we see Lisa advocating against trans women being allowed in womens’ shelters and arguing that because they are “biologically male” they would be putting the other women at risk. The irony is not lost on me in this scenario: trans people are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence at the same time they are accused of perpetuating said violence.

Another compelling aspect of *Her Story* for me is the portrayal of Lisa, a Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF). I have to deal with TERFs all the time in my day-to-day life; self-proclaimed “feminists” who claim that trans women are invading women’s spaces, and that they obviously cannot be “real women” because of their biological sex. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Lisa is one of the only characters in the film who takes an issue with trans women’s bodies. The actual trans characters in the film have narratives that do not focus on their transitions or their genitals at all. This is all too familiar to me: time and time again, I see trans women who are harassed online simply for being trans. TERFs in the real world simplify trans issues down to biology when in reality they are much more complex: aside from the aforementioned increased rate of intimate partner violence, trans people also experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness, harassment by law enforcement, assault within the prison system, and a much higher rate of suicidality as compared to the general population (J.

Grant et al). To dismiss all of these things in order to reduce transness to simply “mental illness” is at best ignorance, and at worst actively harmful to trans people. All of this to say that *Her Story* contains, to my understanding, one of the first accurate portrayals of a TERF in any film. This stands out to me because it is equally as important to accurately depict trans discrimination as it is to accurately depict trans people. Lisa is not a nebulously defined villain, but rather a concrete example of a real type of person that trans people have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. This makes her presence in *Her Story* profoundly important, as it aids in making the narrative feel truer to real life.

*Her Story* was the most grounded film I watched in preparation for writing my thesis, and the one that most accurately depicted what life is really like for trans women. It spoke very strongly to my personal lived experiences as a trans woman, and this was achieved primarily through its specificity in targeting real issues that trans women face. *Her Story* is not a transition story, and the one character who cares about other characters’ transitions above everything else is explicitly the villain. As such, the film succeeds in portraying transness as the complex, multifaceted experience that it is.

## THE DANISH GIRL

*The Danish Girl* is a 2014 film directed by Tom Hooper. It is a biopic that follows the transition of Lili Elbe, a Danish painter who became one of the first recipients of sex reassignment surgery in 1930. The film follows Elbe as she experiments with her gender, which shakes up the lives of those around her, particularly her wife Gerda.

I struggled to finish *The Danish Girl*. It was a deeply traumatic experience. The strange thing, however, is that the film was not as offensive as I was expecting it to be based on what I had heard about it, at least at the outset. It begins with Lili, not yet understanding that she is a woman, beginning to experiment with the idea of womanhood as a sort of alternate persona. Gerda encourages her by letting her try on her clothing and taking her out in public dressed as a woman. In one particularly noteworthy sequence, Lili stares herself up and down in a mirror while she is completely nude, examining all of her features: she stares at her hands, fondles her chest, and tucks her penis between her legs. This felt like an elegant examination of the way gender dysphoria personally makes me feel, and it made me think that the film might not be a total misfire.

What ultimately turned me off of the film, however, was the consistent and unending deadnaming of Lili. I have made an effort not to include her deadname within this thesis because there is no circumstance wherein deadnaming a trans person is necessary. Lili Elbe's real deadname is mentioned consistently within the film, to the point where people call Lili her deadname about as much as they actually call her Lili. Effectively, critics have normalized deadnaming a historical trans woman on the virtue of her deadname being featured prominently in a film. This rhetorically frames Lili's deadname as being equally as important as her actual name, and this serves to the detriment of the film's failed attempt at positive messaging regarding the character. When I am referred to by my deadname, the feeling I get is akin to being stabbed in the chest. I feel the same way about other trans peoples' deadnames as well: being in possession of knowledge that could harm another trans person makes me feel extreme discomfort, and I am hardly alone in that. I could only just barely finish the film due to the pain it

caused me; pain that I felt at the expense of a trans woman who died nearly a century prior whose legacy was being disrespected.

Equally as upsetting is the casting of Eddie Redmayne, a cis man, to play Lili Elbe. As discussed in the first chapter, casting a cis man to play a trans woman exaggerates the trans character's masculinity, which makes it harder for the audience to actually accept her as a woman. This is especially disheartening in the case of *The Danish Girl* as, again, Lili Elbe was a real trans woman. Although I was initially able to buy into the idea that Eddie Redmayne's portrayal of a trans character was nothing out of the ordinary, I soured on it very quickly. To me, the film felt less like a celebration of the life that Elbe lived, but rather a vehicle for Redmayne to transform into a trans woman on screen. However, I feel that Redmayne is doing the bare minimum amount of effort to actually represent the trans experience. In one scene, Lili examines the movements of a female stripper in order to copy her mannerisms and motions. Redmayne's portrayal of Lili in this scene is "reduced to caricature," perceiving femininity in the way that *men* perceive it, not in the way that *trans women* do. The result is not an accurate portrayal of transness, but rather a "faux-transsexuality for cis people" (C. Grant).

*The Danish Girl*, while attempting to portray Lili Elbe in a sympathetic light to a modern audience, simply did not do her justice. Instead, it foregrounds Lili's masculinity by casting her with a cis male actor and frequently mentioning her deadname. I found the lack of respect for Elbe to be deeply shocking. The film, clearly, is not meant for a trans audience. It is meant for a cis audience to take a glimpse into a carefully manipulated, inaccurate view of transness.

## LINGUA FRANCA

My first experience with a film by Isabel Sandoval was her debut 2011 film *Señorita*. In *Señorita*, Sandoval plays a trans sex worker embroiled in the middle of a political scandal. The irony of this being the first film from Sandoval that I saw as opposed to *Lingua Franca* is that the majority of people likely saw *Lingua Franca* first, then Sandoval's older work. *Lingua Franca* is widely available to stream on Netflix, while *Señorita* was only available to stream for a brief time on the Criterion Channel with no other method of viewing at the moment. As such, I am in a position to analyze the stylistic changes over the course of Sandoval's career. Sandoval explains that her overall approach to filmmaking shifted beginning with her sophomore film *Apparition*, taking on a more spiritual and sensual tone as time went on (personal communication). This is especially apparent in *Lingua Franca*: the film's meditative approach is incredibly entrancing, and it drew me in immediately. Its slow pacing and naturalistic dialogue delivery, paradoxically, made the film feel both realistic and poetic at the same time. Through navigating its themes in a heightened space, it was able to convey more truth in a more impactful way.

This is most noticeable in a sensual scene Olivia shares with Alex. The background completely fades away, leaving the two in a black void. We see close ups of Alex's lips and legs, and a shot which accentuates Olivia's curves. Alex's and Olivia's hands meet, and Alex gradually moves his hand up to caress Olivia's breast. The two kiss, and then they begin to have passionate sex. This scene stood out to me for two very important reasons: firstly, it was the first time I have ever seen a sex scene with a trans woman in a film which was not completely fetishistic or demeaning. Secondly, it is a sex scene that, in isolation, does not care about Olivia's

transness at all. Olivia is just a woman who is having sex. The scene is sensual and beautiful, and that would not have changed regardless of whether the woman in the scene was cis or trans. Sandoval did not set out to create a “trans film,” she set out to create a film that spoke to her personal experience. The main character just happens to be trans.

That approach is why *Lingua Franca* is so important to me: it is a film that normalizes trans people in narratives that are not explicitly about transness. Transness is not a monolith; it is made up of the lived experiences of millions of trans people with their own unique lives. As a trans filmmaker, I am afraid of being pigeonholed by my transness in the film industry. I fear that there may be a circumstance where I am denied the resources to make a film simply because some producer believes I should “stick to trans films.” Isabel Sandoval and *Lingua Franca* assuage those fears. By creating a film that speaks to more than just transness, Sandoval creates space for trans people to thrive in the industry. *Lingua Franca* normalizes transness as just being another aspect of someone’s identity rather than being the totality of their identity.

Compare Olivia’s story in *Lingua Franca* to the way Lili Elbe’s story is approached in *The Danish Girl*: she is almost entirely defined by her transness. As is evident through the films discussed that were created by trans filmmakers as opposed to those created by cis filmmakers, it is clear that trans people are the utmost authority on the trans experience. Without trans writers, directors, and actors to accurately portray what it feels like to be trans, the best cis people can do is make an educated guess. More often than not, they get it completely wrong. Isabel Sandoval gets it right.

## THE SKIN I LIVE IN

I was skeptical about *The Skin I Live In* on my first approach. Every cis person that I had ever talked to about the film told me that it was a perfect example of trans representation in cinema. Every trans person that I talked to was either disappointed with or actively resentful of the film. I figured that I would land in the latter camp, and I was correct. However, I found myself appreciating Almodóvar's filmmaking more and more as the film went on. By the end of my initial viewing, I came to the conclusion that the film had suspect trans politics, but it was ultimately competently made enough that I couldn't possibly call it a bad film. As time went on, however, I gradually soured on how transness is portrayed in *The Skin I Live In*. The trans politics are not merely suspect, but actively offensive and harmful to trans people.

The film is, in some ways, a subversion of the trans serial killer trope: rather than the sadistic villain of the film being a trans woman, the villain is the doctor that forces someone to become a trans woman. I thought this might be a lead into more interesting thematic territory, but it ultimately just led to more transphobia. Far from being a subversion, the film is still a straight continuation of the "gender-as-monster trope" popularized by the likes of *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Thomas). The transition of Vincente into Vera is very explicitly played for shock value, where transness is portrayed as some sort of punishment.

As a trans woman, my first instinct is to say that transness is obviously not a punishment, nor is it some horrifying trait that only serial killers and trafficking victims share. However, I think I can understand why a cis person might identify with this film, and even walk away feeling that transness is indeed a punishment. Vincente is not trans; he is a cisgender man.

Vincente's forced feminization is portrayed in horrifying fashion, as discussed in the first chapter. He is perpetually sexually assaulted by multiple men throughout the film. The entire film's emotional impact hinges on the audience feeling sympathy for Vincente at the behest of his forced transition. For a cis audience, especially a cis male audience, I can't help but feel like they are imagining themselves in Vincente's shoes and recoiling in terror. For cis men, transness *is* a punishment, because they cannot fathom the idea of being as oppressed as a woman. Therefore, the film resonates with them more. However, for trans women, transness is *not* a punishment; it is simply who we are. This film is deeply offensive because it gets trans people completely wrong in a way that makes us seem like freaks.

*The Skin I Live In* can't help but give into the most shameless trans stereotypes. Although it starts out as a subversion of the trans serial killer trope, it ultimately "devolve[s] into spectacle" (Thomas), becoming a more exaggerated and tone-deaf portrayal of transness than any other example of the trope. The offensiveness of this film is incredibly disheartening to me, especially coming from a queer filmmaker like Almodóvar. His lack of understanding of the trans experience is painfully obvious in *The Skin I Live In*, and it informs my disdain and hatred for the film.

## CONCLUSION

By analyzing these films through an autoethnographic lens, I now understand more clearly why films of the Trans New Wave resonated more with me, and indeed why they may resonate more with trans audiences generally. Films like *Her Story* and *Lingua Franca* seek to

broaden and enrich the trans experience. Whether this is accomplished through detailing specific aspects of transness that cis people have zero familiarity with, or by normalizing transness as only one facet of a person's identity, Trans New Wave films are able to convey more about transness than a prestige/studio trans film ever could. Studio films like *The Danish Girl* and *The Skin I Live In*, while still portraying their trans characters as protagonists, make critical mistakes that hinder trans people's understanding of the films, and only serve to reaffirm a cis audience's skewed views of transness. Therefore, Trans New Wave films categorically approach the trans experience with more tact and depth than prestige/studio trans films.

## CONCLUSION

When analyzing the films of the Trans New Wave as compared to prestige/studio trans films in order to discern a defining factor of their cinematic language, it is clear that Trans New Wave films are more often than not grounded in reality, and portray hyperspecific aspects of transition that only a trans audience would understand. Although prestige/studio trans films make an effort to show their trans characters in a sympathetic light, they ultimately sensationalize transness in a way that only speaks to cis people. This is the exact opposite of the Trans New Wave. Trans New Wave films portray real trans people living authentic trans experiences, and confront issues beyond transition whether those are trans-specific issues or simply unrelated issues that just happen to be affecting a trans person. They also make an effort to authentically portray dysphoria and transitioning whereas prestige/studio trans films can only approximate this understanding. The Trans New Wave, like New Queer Cinema for the greater LGBT community, is made by trans people and for trans people.

A new and bold Trans Cinema has already begun, and it will only continue to evolve in exciting ways. Trans filmmakers are continuing to express transness authentically in their films, and new trans filmmakers are poised to keep up the momentum. One such example of a budding trans filmmaker is Mia Moore, a screenwriter who recently optioned her script *When I Tell You*, which is about a trans woman who time-travels to the past to help her pre-transition self. Although Moore herself is “cautiously optimistic” about the future of trans people in cinema, she asserts her belief in the tenacity of trans artists, saying that we are “incredibly passionate and so talented, and nothing is going to stop us” (personal communication, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022). Her hope is

to be making films “for the rest of [her] life,” and that she’ll always have the opportunity to “keep telling the meaningful stories [she] needed when [she] was confused and closeted.”

Another up-and-coming trans filmmaker is Casey Wendel, a film student at Ball State University with a passion for screenwriting and editing. Although her current writing projects do not contain any transgender characters, she “frequently opt[s] to instead explore transgender themes subtextually” (personal communication, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022), such as exploring transmisogyny through a butch lesbian character who is treated like a man despite also experiencing sexism. Wendel’s propensity to “relegate trans issues to subtext” demonstrates that trans cinema need not be trans-focused. Trans filmmakers can and should tell stories that do not necessarily have to revolve around their transness, and normalizing this will allow trans filmmakers to thrive in an industry where they have been historically mistreated.

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