Journal of LGBT Youth

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjly20

Celluloid Marginalization: Pedagogical Strategies for Increasing Students’ Critical Thought Through the Multiple (Re)Readings of Trans* Subjectivities in Film

Z Nicolazzo a

a Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA

Published online: 14 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Z Nicolazzo (2014) Celluloid Marginalization: Pedagogical Strategies for Increasing Students’ Critical Thought Through the Multiple (Re)Readings of Trans* Subjectivities in Film, Journal of LGBT Youth, 11:1, 20-39

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.840762

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Celluloid Marginalization: Pedagogical Strategies for Increasing Students’ Critical Thought Through the Multiple (Re)Readings of Trans* Subjectivities in Film

Z NICOLAZZO
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA

Critically analyzing films allows for the interrogation of how such binaries as normal/abnormal, good/bad, and moral/immoral are culturally (re)inscribed, who sets the boundaries of what is deemed socially legible, and who gets to decide where these boundaries are set. This article utilizes critical discourse analysis to explore the transgender look as it relates to films with negative, conflicted, and positive readings of trans* characters. The study concludes by considering opportunities for increasing student critical analysis and thought in curricular settings and how, through critical pedagogical practices, educators can use critical pedagogy to promote equity for all marginalized populations.

KEYWORDS Cinema, cisgender, critical discourse analysis, critical education, heteronormativity, pedagogy, transgender, trans*

In her book *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, bell hooks (2010) reflected, “By the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking. . . . In traditional higher education settings, students find themselves yet again in a world where independent thinking is not encouraged” (p. 8). This lack of critical thought and engagement could have deleterious effects. For example, Brookfield (2012) argued, “If you can’t think critically your survival is in peril because you risk living a life that—without your being aware of it—hurts you and serves the interest of those who wish to harm you” (p. 1). It would follow, then, that the development of critical
thinking skills, or the process of interrogating previously held assumptions from multiple perspectives to make better informed choices (Brookfield, 2012), is essential for college students.

To this end, this article utilizes Halberstam’s (2005) notion of the transgender look as a pedagogical method to increase students’ critical thinking. As Halberstam (2005) explained:

Whenever the transgender character is seen to be transgendered, then he/she [sic] is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future. The exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female, causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film’s past in order to read the film’s present and prepare themselves for the film’s future. (pp. 77–78)

Not only does the revealing of a trans\textsuperscript{1} character create tensions through time and space for the audience of the film, but it also calls into question who has control in defining the ways in which the character’s identity is understood and experienced: that of the viewer or the character hirself.\textsuperscript{2} Therefore, the transgender look is a liberatory framework by which a queer world unfolds in which the viewer is able to look with the characters rather than looking at them in a way that diminishes their humanity and gender identity. By using the transgender look to analyze films with various representations of trans\textsuperscript{*} characters, educators can promote increased critical thinking for all students. In addition, educators will be able to enter into conversations about gender identity, expression, enforcement, surveillance, and liberation that will influence all students’ lives.

WHY TRANS\textsuperscript{*} REPRESENTATIONS?

Trans\textsuperscript{*} subjectivities are ideal for the present analysis precisely because they are a marginalized population within both higher education and the broader public. In their report, titled Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, Grant and colleagues (2011) documented the myriad ways trans\textsuperscript{*} individuals still face social oppression and ostracism. These findings mirrored many of those found by Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) in the 2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People. Specifically, these reports indicate that, despite an increase in the positive portrayal of trans\textsuperscript{*} individuals—Whittle (2006) goes so far as to say that “[t]rans identities were one of the most written about subjects of the late twentieth century” (p. xi)—trans\textsuperscript{*} individuals face the threat and/or reality of violence, oppression, limited opportunities, and other negative social consequences
due to their gender identity and expression. Furthermore, both reports indicate the consequences increase for trans* people of color due to the intersection of racism and genderism.

In addition, when discussions of trans* individuals arise, many cisgender collegians view them as abnormal, deviant, or social aberrations. For example, gender-nonconforming students reported personally experiencing harassment at greater levels and having more negative perceptions of campus climate than their cisgender peers (Rankin et al., 2010). These findings are supported by the experiences and personal accounts of trans* college students (e.g., Fried, 2000; Gray, 2000; Quart, 2008; Rabodeau, 2000) as well as my own personal experiences as a trans* doctoral student who teaches undergraduate- and graduate-level courses. Throughout my experience, I have found that, although many students are well intentioned, my gender identity and expression causes confusion in the classroom. Moreover, on more than one occasion students have suggested that I am unfit to teach due to my identity as gender-nonconforming.

Increasing students’ critical thinking skills is one strategy to address and rectify the erasure of the trans* community from public view. Moreover, it allows an opportunity to trouble the dominant discourse surrounding trans* people when they become visible. Enhancing critical thinking is also a strategy by which educators can use critical pedagogy in advocating the establishment and maintenance of a more equitable worldview. By examining trans* characters through film, issues of normalcy and hegemony become understandable to the current generation of collegians—one understood to be an “entertainment generation.” This would have the benefits of promoting a broader understanding of who is a part of our communities, increasing students’ capacity for empathy, and encouraging students’ ability to communicate with those who are different, all positive outcomes linked to goals of higher education.

How can the notion of the transgender look have the potential to promote liberatory pedagogical practices for not only trans* subjectivities but also those characterizations of all marginalized populations in film? To answer this question, I explore how to apply critical thinking skills in curricular contexts, thereby benefiting all stakeholders in higher education. Through the critical analysis of the media messages we receive on a daily basis, one is able to deconstruct the hegemony implicit in them. In addition, one is also able to identify liberatory practices that allow for increased life chances for highly marginalized populations (Spade, 2011)—in this case, trans* college students—as well as those who have dominant identities. Without confronting and interrogating the underlying assumptions conveyed through film about trans* individuals, the master narrative that trans* people are abnormal remains intact.
By having students spend more time and energy focusing on and carefully examining the barrage of messages they receive through media, these students come to realize there is more going on than mere entertainment, a process that Freire (1970/2000) described as development of a critical consciousness. This process is good not just for cisgender students who hold disparaging views toward trans* individuals but for trans* people themselves. Just as Warner (1999) discussed homonormativity, or the notion that there was a proper way to be gay, some within the trans* community have expressed a need to proliferate further understandings of gender identities, expressions, and embodiments to work against transnormativity (Daddy, 2012). Therefore, all students, be they cisgender or trans*, have something to gain from educators using films with prominent trans* characters as a way for them to become savvier in how they make meaning of issues such as power, hegemony, and what counts as normal.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ITS CONNECTION TO CRITICAL THINKING

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as articulated by Wodak and Meyer (2009), “emphasizes the term ‘critical’” (p. 6). In doing so, CDA follows in the critical theory tradition, whereby “critical theories, thus also CDA, want to produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection” (p. 7). Therefore, the intent of CDA is to analyze discourse, be it through text, language, film, or another medium, as a way to emancipate individuals and communities from hegemonic paradigms. Seen in this way, the use of the term critical is not to be synonymous with negative. Rather, one should understand it as interrogating discourse that would otherwise be taken for granted (Kendall, 2007).

CDA is dialectical in nature, maintaining that the language being analyzed shapes life events while, at the same time, life events shape the language used. For example, heterosexual men deploy the phrase no homo in groups with other heterosexual men. This language, an example of what Pascoe (2007) refers to as “fag discourse,” stems from a virulent social homophobia while at the same time reinforcing homophobia by its very use. Therefore, the phrase—along with others such as fag, dyke, and gay—can be seen as both a product of our social context as well as a way to (re)enforce that context. The social, historical, and political contextualization of CDA as a form of analysis ties it to the critical theory from which it emanated. Furthermore, it also serves as a connection to how one understands the media one consumes. Thus, there is a direct relationship between increasing one’s critical thinking skills and the use of CDA as a process to lay bare the
multiple (re)readings of language, text, and in this case film. Although CDA and critical thinking are similar in nature, they are not synonymous. CDA is the methodology through which one enhances her ability to think critically.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANS* TROPES THROUGH FILM

Negative Representations

While there has been a growth in the number of films with trans* characters, the depictions of many of these characters remain problematic. Kate Bornstein (1994) emphasized this point when she wrote, “Dominant cultures tend to colonize and control minorities through stereotyping—it is no different with the transgender community” (p. 60). Two of the main negative archetypes are that of the deceptive transgender individual (Serano, 2007; Sloop, 2000) and the tragic/pathetic transgender individual (Halberstam, 2005; Serano, 2007). The central thrust behind the deceptive trans* individual is that the characters are not who they claim to be but rather, must be “found out” for who they “really are” during the course of the movie, thereby uncovering them as intentionally deceptive and selfish.

Two examples of films that utilize this trope are *The Crying Game* and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. In both films, trans* characters have their “true selves” uncovered, giving the impression that they are not who they said they were. In addition, when these characters are uncovered as trans*, there are collective feelings of disgust and anger from other characters, further reinforcing the misperception that the trans* individuals were not only deceptive but also selfish and harmful to others by not being their “true selves,” which in this case equates to being cisgender and heteronormative.

The setting of the film *The Crying Game* is that of the conflict between the British and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). During the course of the film, Fergus, a member of the IRA, befriends Jody, a British hostage. While getting to know each other, Jody mentions his girlfriend, Dil, who lives in London. Jody dies trying to escape, at which point a British battalion kills Fergus’s unit. As a result of this, Fergus decides to flee the IRA and heads to London to find Dil, who he finds out, as the film unfolds, is trans*. Upon this realization, the film takes a decided turn, depicting the world that Dil inhabits as strange, false, and untenable. Fergus, who had fallen in love with Dil, is suddenly disgusted. The film, cast through Fergus’s eyes, shows Dil to be deceptive, unreal, and freakish. Because Fergus, and not Dil, controls the transgender look, Dil is looked at by Fergus (and by the audience), and the site is one in which Dil is less than human. Even the trailer for the film casts an ominous tone, stating that the world in which Dil lives is one in which “nothing is at it seems” (*The Crying Game*, 1992).
It is clear the makers of the film never take into account the transgender look. Instead, their depiction of Dil is one that paints Dil as a fetishized freak of nature, one whose very being is set out to confuse and confound both Fergus and the audience. The screenwriters clearly intend the audience to see Dil as a fraud rather than validate Dil’s existence as a trans* person.

In elucidating the caricature of the tragic/pathetic trans* individual, filmmakers portray trans* characters as sad shells of individuals who are never able to pass and, through their attempts to “fit in,” become further castigated both by other characters in the film as well as by the viewer. An exemplar film that deploys this trope is Transamerica, where Bree, a transwoman, sets off on a cross-country trip to find her son. Throughout the film, the filmmakers portray Bree as a man trying desperately to pass as a woman but failing at almost every turn. Bree continually struggles to pass as a woman, with the film focusing on her masculine physical appearance, garish makeup, and difficulty walking in high-heeled shoes to emphasize her many unsuccessful attempts to pass. There are also multiple points in the film during which Bree’s being a “real woman” boils down to whether she has had sexual reassignment surgery. Because Bree has not yet had this surgery, she exists in a tragically liminal space, not wanting to be a man but not yet a woman. This point is driven home when she herself clearly states, “After my surgery, I will be a woman” (Bastian & Tucker, 2005). Bree’s being trans* is beyond her identifying as such, and instead rests in the gaze of the filmmakers and audience, who are compelled to see her as a man playing as a woman. Like Dil, Bree does not control the transgender look; therefore the viewer perceives them as someone other than who they are. At best, the viewer calls the trans* character into question; at worst, the viewer is compelled to erase the trans* character as a truly legitimate possibility.

The way Bree and Dil are not in control of how the audience views them as trans* characters—viewers are encouraged to see them both as deceptive rather than expressing their gender identity on their own terms—is a problem that increased critical thinking can confront. Rather than allowing students to accept this reading of Bree and Dil, educators can work to create alternate possibilities. For example, using Burke’s (1984) theory of perspective by incongruity—a theory promoting the flipping of scripts and storylines to show the incongruity of the original’s underlying assumptions—educators could engage students in creating a narrative that is told by Bree and Dil rather than about Bree and Dil. Positioning Bree and Dil as the authors of the stories would center their voices and encourage students to see the ways in which trans* people are reminded continually of their liminal existence being abnormal, deviant, and illegible within a world that is heavily regulated through a gender binary.
The Conflicted Nature of *Boys Don't Cry*

Despite the prevalence of the deceptive and tragic/pathetic trans* character tropes, they are not the only ways in which films portray trans* characters. In coming to a full understanding of the transgender look, there are films in which its deployment is not an all-or-nothing game but something used in degrees. The degree to which filmmakers use the transgender look corresponds to how much control they allow trans* characters to have in defining their identities, although they may never retain full control. This more nuanced understanding of the transgender look can help the critic make meaning of depictions of trans* characters who appear to be simultaneously positive and troubling during the course of the same film. This is the case in the film *Boys Don’t Cry*, about which Halberstam (2005) writes:

> Throughout a majority of the film, director [Kimberly] Pierce self-consciously constructs what can only be called a transgender look. *Boys Don’t Cry* establishes the legitimacy and the durability of Brandon [Teena, the main character]'s, gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his death by murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only provisionally, Brandon’s gaze, a transgender look. (p. 86)

Much of the sustaining force behind the transgender look created by Pierce comes across in the relationship between Brandon Teena, played by Hilary Swank, and his girlfriend Lana, played by Chloë Sevigny.

Many characters who encounter Brandon pressure him to “prove” he is a man. Despite this, Lana refuses to give credence to the rumblings that Brandon is not who he claims to be, instead choosing to believe what Brandon has told her and what she knows is true: Brandon is a man. Even when Brandon is pinned in a bathroom by several men and they yell at Lana to look at his vagina—thereby somehow substantiating prior claims by others in the film of Brandon not being a man—Lana refuses to look. Her reality is at one with Brandon’s reality: He is a man because that is how he identifies. Brandon is in full control of the transgender look, and the viewer is compelled to look *with* him rather than *at* him. No matter who else tries to control Brandon’s identity, the message to the viewer is that Brandon’s identity as a man is secure because he controls his own identity, and Lana only reinforces this perspective. While Brandon does not need validation from other men to reinforce his masculinity, Lana provides a powerful counternarrative to those who see Brandon’s sex as inextricably linked to his gender, thereby making Brandon a woman in their minds, regardless of how he identifies. In this way, Lana reinforces the transgender look, providing an important model by which the viewer sees trans* characters as autonomous, valid, and visible individuals.

As the movie continues, Brandon reveals he has been dishonest but wants Lana to know his “true” self, which leads to a sex scene involving
the two. At the outset of the scene, Lana shares that “she may not know ‘how to do this’” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 90). While the word *this* is slightly ambiguous, one possible reading is Lana, as Halberstam (2005) suggested, “seems to [be] refer[ring] to having sex with Brandon as a woman” (p. 90). In just one scene, Pierce unravels the transgender look she spent so much time developing throughout the film. The scene is out of context with the entirety of what has happened to this point in the film and reverts to a message that trans* characters ultimately need to be seen for who they “really” are, which is imposters and people who are playacting.

In responding to a critique of her film, Pierce claimed she was told this event happened by the real-life Lana. However, as Halberstam (2005) aptly pointed out, “In the context of the film…which has made no such commitment to authenticity, the scene ties Brandon’s humanity to a particular form of naked embodiment that in the end requires him to be a woman” (p. 90).

*Boys Don’t Cry*, for all it does well to promote a transgender look that Brandon controls and through which the viewer recognizes his humanity as a trans* character, ends up falling short. Despite this overall failure, this film is a major step forward in the promotion of a transgender look.

The very juxtaposition of the success and failure of the transgender look in *Boys Don’t Cry* holds much potential for pedagogical intervention. With educators working alongside students to unpack the ways that other male characters in the film objectify Brandon’s identity, while Lana validates his male identity, students are able to interrogate who establishes Brandon’s identity: him or others. Furthermore, educators could engage students in reflective practice, imploring them to think about times in which peers have ostracized them as a way to help students empathize with the marginalization experienced by Brandon. In these ways, the transgender look, and the ways in which it is both used and not used throughout *Boys Don’t Cry*, serves as fertile ground for increasing students’ critical thinking skills. In addition, educators could challenge students to reflect on their initial reactions and assumptions about the film and its characters. By allowing students—whether or not they identify as trans*—the opportunity to surface their own assumptions without the threat of being shamed, they may be more likely to explore and question their own internalized transphobia.

Positive Representations of Transgender Characters in Film

Although not plentiful, some films represent trans* characters positively. An exemplar is the film *By Hook or By Crook*, which deploys the transgender look throughout its entirety. The film follows Shy, who drives from Kansas to San Francisco and befriends Valentine. The remainder of the movie details their growing friendship as they float around the city in search of enough
money to eke out a living. Both Shy and Valentine are gender ambiguous and use both masculine and feminine pronouns throughout the film in reference to themselves and each other. In one scene, Valentine describes hir gender identity by telling Shy, “I do a decent interpretation of a man... I'm a special—two for one.” In another scene, when asked if Shy is a boy or a girl, ze states, “Both” (Dodge, House, & Howard, 2001).

The movie creates a world in which queerness is not only embraced, but made central to the storyline. The viewer is encouraged to read this queerness as a matter of fact rather than an oddity. Even the sex scenes, the point at which Boys Don’t Cry deviates from the transgender look, echo the ambiguity and lack of desire for articulating specific gendered identities for the characters involved embraced throughout the entire film. To this end, in an interview with the two directors of the film, Halberstam (2005) cited them as saying, “This is a movie about a budding friendship between two people. The fact that they happen to be queer is purposefully off the point” (p. 94, emphasis added).

The universality of queerness in the film, the unwillingness to compromise the transgender look to seek mainstream approval, and the overt playfulness with gender captured by the film is what makes By Hook or By Crook the trans* success it is. The film directors sought to make a film that centered and embraced gender fluidity, thus reinforcing the characters' subjectivity and voice in determining—or actively choosing not to choose—gender on their terms. This is further exemplified during an interview with one of the directors, Silas Howard, who said, “We take gender ambiguity, for example, and we don't explain it, dilute it, or apologize for it—we represent it for what it is—something confusing and lovely” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 96). This last comment is the epitome of the transgender look: one in which the viewer sees gender ambiguity and trans* characters as central and there is no need to explain, dilute, or apologize for their existence. A critical reading of this film sees it as both confusing and liberating in its unapologetic attempt to allow characters to determine who they are on their own terms.

While educators could use any of the films discussed here to increase students’ critical thinking, By Hook or By Crook is one in which students are confronted with a presentation of gender that may be distinct from their own. The intersection of gender identity and expression with other issues portrayed in the film (e.g., adoption, mental illness, poverty, confrontations with police, physical violence, institutionalization, and familial abandonment) create a world in which all students—whether cisgender or trans*—will relate to Shy and Valentine at points, while being exposed to something outside of their realities at others. In this way, the film is an excellent starting point from which educators can have critical and equity-based conversations. Shy and Valentine can serve as a wellspring for conversation, as they (re)position themselves and their identities in fluid ways throughout the film, challenging viewers to reflect on the ways in which their own
identities may be contingent, shifting, fluid, and flexible. Educators could encourage students to think about their own identities and how they may have shifted over time, reinforcing the fluidity expressed in the film. Therefore, viewers are encouraged to see Shy and Valentine as fully human rather than fictitious, deceptive, or tragic figures.

Moreover, the fact that this film was independent and therefore continues to receive far less attention and publicity than other films—with problematic and conflicted readings of trans* characters—could also be a point worth interrogating. Doing so would implore students to ask important questions: Who controls the messages to which viewers are able to gain access? To what extent are favorable readings of marginalized populations available in contemporary cinema/media? Why are positive portrayals of trans* characters, such as those in By Hook or By Crook, less visible than negative ones (e.g., Ace Ventura: Pet Detective) through film?

FROM THE SCREEN TO LIVED EXPERIENCES: WHY INCREASING STUDENTS’ CRITICAL THINKING MATTERS

In her article on trans* representations through media and its impact on education about the transgender community, Siebler (2010) points out that “because there are rarely any formal mention of queer history and politics in formal schooling, people are educated to queer culture, history, and identity through the media” (p. 324). Furthermore, mainstream media depictions of trans* characters are fraught with difficulties. For example, Siebler (2010) stated there are no characters in mass media, be it through film or on television, who fully embrace “a transgender identity, that of a person who resists reconstruction of their body or a person who is fucking with the gender system by saying, ‘I am what I am. You deal with your discomfort’ ” (p. 327, italics in original).

Admittedly, Siebler’s statements, made in 2010, are already in danger of being outdated, as the number and scope of portrayals of trans* characters in film, television, and literature is rapidly increasing. For example, the hit drama Glee, which airs on the Fox Network, recently introduced Unique, a trans* character. While there are concerns with Unique’s character, the inclusion of Unique on Glee, a show widely viewed and discussed by collegians—and a common source of conversation in my classroom discussions with undergraduates on gender identity and expression—shows a willingness to acknowledge and address trans* lives and issues. Coupling the conflicted nature of trans* characterizations through film with the fact that “queer youth (and perhaps adults) are seeing media representations as a script for becoming a ‘real’ queer” (Siebler, 2010, p. 330), some collegians
may be led to view trans* identities as a fallacy and/or something abhorrent and avoided.

To avoid taking an overly cynical and totalizing view of the diversity of collegians, I know this is not the case for all—and perhaps most—college students. However, the number of both graduate and undergraduate students I have met who do not understand, want to understand, or respect people who transgress or blur gender boundaries leads me to believe analyzing trans* characterizations in film is an essential step to increasing students’ critical thinking skills and, by extension, trans* equality and equity. For trans* people, the importance of this educational task intensifies, as we may internalize negative depictions of the transgender community, increasing the potential for self-hatred and self-harm. Given the unusually large discrepancy between the number of transgender individuals who attempt suicide (41%) compared to the general population (1.6%; Grant et al., 2011), the stakes are not just high but could be life changing.

**USING FILMS IN CURRICULAR SETTINGS TO INCREASE CRITICAL THINKING**

Siebler (2010) wrote, “When the representations are stereotypical, or in the case of transqueers, freakish and unsympathetic or rigidly cleaving to the gender binary, there are dangers” (p. 327). For this reason, analyzing media representations of trans* characters is one way for critical educators to increase equity. From here, the question quickly turns to how one uses films, such as those previously analyzed, in the classroom. (Possible discussion questions for all films discussed in this article are provided in the Appendix.)

Analysis of films in the classroom to increase one’s critical thinking skills can be encouraged in multiple ways. Utilizing Burke’s (1984) theory of perspective by incongruity, Rockler (2002) suggested educators help their students critically analyze media to “compare two concepts that seem unrelated; A and B, which previously seemed incongruous” (p. 18). In doing so, Rockler suggested three methods for engaging students.

The first method, which she called television/film parodic reversal, “satirizes a common hegemonic social practice by revering gender, race, class, or other roles to illuminate the problematic and socially constructed nature of those roles” (Rockler, 2002, p. 20). For example, an educator using this method with the film *Transamerica* may ask students to act out the scene in which Bree’s son finds out she is a transwoman by suggesting Bree be discovered as being cisgender instead. Students could act out this scene side by side with the original scene and then do a free write exercise where they write their reactions to each scene. After this, students could be broken up into small groups to share these reactions, which could then lead to
a large group discussion about the initial reactions to the two scenes, the differences and/or similarities between them, the effect of changing Bree’s gender identity had for the students, and why this had the effect it did. This type of activity could help students unpack some of the assumptions they may make about gender identity as well as how they view and respond to trans* people. It may also be especially poignant for those students who have never met or interacted with someone they knew to be trans* or who may not enact a trans* identity with which they are familiar, which, depending on the campus, may be a shared reality for cisgender and trans* students alike.

Rockler (2002) called the second pedagogical method for enacting perspective by incongruity the “villain” as narrator. Using this method, the villain’s perspective becomes the conduit through which the film’s plot is narrated rather than that of the protagonist. *By Hook or By Crook* provides a number of scenes with which educators can assist students to use this analytical method. For example, because Shy and Valentine are trying to make a life for themselves by any means necessary—hence the idiom “by hook or by crook,” as the title of the film—there is a sequence in which they discuss performing a robbery to get money. Instead of viewing Shy and Valentine as criminals, educators could use reports like *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Grant et al., 2011) to discuss the challenges of housing discrimination, job discrimination, poverty, and homelessness that trans* youth face. Juxtaposing these statistics with Shy and Valentine’s plots of robbery, educators can help students think through the complexities of whether they are crooks. Furthermore, educators could engage students in a discussion about who establishes and maintains laws and what happens to people once they are labeled criminals. The work of trans* legal scholars (e.g., Spade, 2011) could also be used to elucidate the complexity of how, once socially marked as criminals, trans* people have little chance of escaping this reality.

The third method of analysis using perspective by incongruity Rockler (2002) named the totalitarian government/media monopoly system. Using this method, educators invite students to imagine that a totalitarian government controls all the media to which they have access. Once the educator establishes this thought experiment, asking students to comment on what they think media would look like as a result, educators share the reality that a highly select group of national corporations controls much of the media. Sharing this fact creates the potential for dissonance between students’ perception of the access to accurate and positive portrayals of diverse others they believe they have with that which they actually have. One strategy for using this method, given the films previously discussed in this article, would be for educators to share the budgets and gross income for all films without saying to which films the figures correspond. Students would then be asked to match the figures to the corresponding films, which could lead to a discussion about why they chose the pairings they did. From here, educators
and students could engage in a conversation about how the investment of financial capital promotes some messages and portrayals over others as well as why that may be the case.

These three strategies provide a roadmap for educators worried about being overly prescriptive in their pedagogy on the issue of media literacy while still providing for alternate—and alternative—readings of the media collegians consume.

Similar to Burke’s (1984) perspective by incongruity, critical theory, specifically the counternarratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—a main tenet of critical race theory (CRT)—and critical trans politics (CTP; Spade, 2011) provide tools for educators to help students fully investigate media messages. Both CRT and CTP emanate from a critical theory tradition that is unapologetically confrontational and seeks to center the lives and experiences of marginalized populations—in this case, those of underrepresented racial/ethnic and trans* communities, respectively. These theoretical bases start with the assumption that institutionalized racism and genderism exist and work to resist and redress the social inequity fueling these forms of oppression (Bell, 1989; Spade, 2011).

Counternarratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—or narratives emphasizing the perspectives and viewpoints of marginalized populations, thereby making visible those populations previously rendered invisible by dominant narratives and histories—provide one method through which educators can encourage critical thought. Texts, films, and testimonials that give voice to marginalized communities can serve as starting points for educators and students to have conversations about whose stories, histories, and accounts are socially privileged and why. This practice also has the effect of helping trans* students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and is in line with CDA, as normative understandings and representations of gender would be challenged through guided analysis and conversations.

Pedagogical practices such as individual reflection and journaling, small group and large group discussions to uncover tacit assumptions regarding gender through film, and having students rewrite scripts to reflect a more positive representation of trans* characters are but a few methods to encourage critical analysis. This last suggestion is one I have previously used as an alternative option to writing a media analysis paper in an Introduction to LGBT Studies class. The students who chose this option were asked to rewrite a scene from a film using the transgender look to portray a trans* character positively. They then had to explain the changes they made, why they made them, and how their changes enhanced the way viewers would see the trans* character. In doing so, the students were effectively rewriting a scene of their choosing to allow the trans* characters to speak for themselves, which is the overall intent behind counternarratives.

Despite the effectiveness of this approach, it is important for educators not to promote the consumption of counternarratives without either
providing a context from which they emanated or understanding them as a story rather than the story of marginalized populations (Thompson, 2003). Without contextualizing counternarratives, educators run the risk of doing more harm than good in the name of increasing media literacy. Most notably, this harm has the effect of treating the voices of marginalized populations as mere tools for educational consumption rather than understanding the social, historical, and political realities from which these voices and experiences were formed.

An example of this type of harmful pedagogy would be educators who, while well intentioned, may show a film such as Boys Don’t Cry but do not spend time working alongside students to uncover the problematic ways in which Brandon’s gender identity and expression are continually negated by others throughout the film. Furthermore, some educators may give the impression that Boys Don’t Cry depicts a story indicative of all trans* experiences rather than seeing Brandon’s experience as one specific story. In this instance, the harm done by the reinforcement of this myth is that being trans* becomes equated to living a miserable, fearful, and tortured existence. This is not only a problem for those students who may identify as trans* but also teaches cisgender students that to waver from normalized gender identities and expressions in any way is unacceptable. By not interrogating these troubling readings of the film, educators run the risk of creating an environment in which they participate in the consumption of trans* subjectivities without challenging the problematic tropes of trans* people as tragic and pathetic individuals.

Similar to the possibilities embedded within CRT, CTP (Spade, 2011) provides a unique perspective from which educators can work to increase media literacy. Originating from CRT scholarship, Spade (2011) stated that CTP advocates for the ‘political potential . . . that refuses empty promises of ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘safety’ underwritten by settler colonialism, racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and xenophobic imprisonment, and ever-growing wealth disparity” (p. 41). This political potential lies primarily in the shared liberation that comes from marginalized groups working collaboratively to redress injustice and inequity. Therefore, while educators can use Halberstam’s (2005) notion of the transgender look to increase students’ overall understanding of the trans* community, there are two additional uses.

First, educators could take the lesson of the transgender look and apply it to other marginalized communities. For example, educators could have students engage in an activity that uncovers the ways in which the media portrays people with disabilities. This activity would focus on whether or not media sources either look at or look with people with disabilities. Moreover, the activity could serve as a provocative method to unseat the ways in which students are socialized to accept institutional ableism.

A second way in which educators could deploy the transgender look is to have students think about the ways in which marginalized identities
intersect and overlap. Extending the previous example, educators could have students think about how institutional forms of genderism and ableism interact to render a trans* person with disabilities all the more vulnerable. This analysis could even be set within the context of *By Hook or By Crook*, as Valentine has a psychological disability and is institutionalized as a result. Students could then begin to brainstorm ways in which the current policies, practices, and attitudes of others influence the trans* and disability communities, looking for instances of overlap. After students explore the lived realities of these two communities, as well as those individuals who experience both identities, which could occur in a number of ways, including through texts, films, or guest speakers, they could begin to think through how to change policies, practices, and attitudes for the betterment of both populations. For example, students may decide the availability of gender-inclusive restrooms would be a way for both trans* people and people with disabilities to have a viable option for a public restroom, not to mention trans* people with disabilities. This gets to the heart of CTP, in that it seeks to redress injustices not of one community but of all subaltern populations, many of which have overlapping needs (Spade, 2011).

The vast and varied array of media messages is not likely to slow down any time soon. Thus the importance of using critical pedagogy to increase one’s ability for critical thought and analysis becomes paramount. In doing so, critical educators compel students to question the veracity of the media they consume—even those who may already be particularly savvy at critique and analysis. As such, students not only become more perceptive in what messages to believe but also develop a heightened awareness of how marginalized populations continue to be ostracized and outcast by social norms that deem them as deviant, abnormal, and irrelevant.

NOTES

1. Killermann (2012) explained the use of the asterisk in the word trans* recognizes “all non-cisgender gender identities, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderfuck, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, bigender, and trans man and trans woman.” Commonly used in computer searches to signify searching for a term in addition to any characters after that term (e.g., searching for “trans*” would yield results for the prefix trans and any letters after it, such as transgender and transsexual), the asterisk represents an inclusive turn in discussing all who transgress, trouble, and/or resist gender boundaries.

2. The pronouns *ze* (pronounced “zee”) and *hir* (pronounced “here”) are gender-inclusive pronouns and are used by many who identify as transgender. These pronouns replace the he/she and him/her gender binaries, respectively, and are used by some but not all who identify as transgender and gender nonconforming. Throughout this article, I use these pronouns to slow down the reading process, which thereby serves to make transgender identities more visible and legible.

3. One could read this scene another way in that Lana’s statement could be understood as her not knowing how to have sex with Brandon, who she still views as a man, but who has a vagina. This reading would further reinforce the transgender look and would implore the viewer to confront their assumptions about the (dis)connections between one’s body morphology and gender expression. However, the film does not follow up on this alternative reading by asking the viewer to reconsider how they see, experience, and understand transgender bodies. Moreover, even if some viewers did read the
sex scene this way, many viewers came away believing Brandon was an imposter, a view widely shared throughout the media coverage of his murder (e.g., Hale, 1998; Halberstam, 2005). Therefore, despite the possibility of alternative readings, I believe the film, once set into social and historical context, provides a conflicted reading of the transgender look.

4. There have also been scholars who have interrogated the ways media outlets depicted this particular case, including the making of the film Boys Don’t Cry. For example, Hale (1998) detailed how using the name Brandon Teena, which was not the only name the individual in question used, or casting Brandon as trans*, an identity to which the individual in question did not use as a personal identifier, could be problematic. As such, these lines of inquiry could also be fruitful ways for educators to engage students in critically thinking about gender, identity, power, privilege, the reach of mass media, and what it means to search for and/or represent a “true” or “accurate” representation of any story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Peter Magolda, Dr. Daniel Tillapaugh, Hailee Gibbons, and Dr. Susan Marine for their careful readings and contributions to this piece.

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTOR

Z Nicolazzo, MS, is a doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

APPENDIX: QUESTIONS AS STARTING POINTS
FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

Following are lists of questions that educators can use to begin conversations in classes where students watch the films discussed throughout this article. These questions are meant to be a starting point and as such should not be seen as a comprehensive list.

The Crying Game

1. How do issues of race and class intersect with gender identity in this film? How might the narrative change if Dil and/or Fergus’s race and/or class were different?
2. At what point do you as a viewer stop looking with, and start looking at, Dil? Why?
3. What is the overall message this film sends about trans* people?
4. This film received six Academy Award nominations, winning one for best original screenplay. How might the intended international audience and commercial success of the film influence the representation of Dil as a trans* person?
5. Would your view on the characterization of Dil as a trans* person change if you knew the actor playing that role was trans*? Why or why not?

Ace Ventura: Pet Detective

1. Does the fact that this film is a comedy change your conception of how the transgender look is deployed in this film? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Throughout the course of this film, Lt. Lois Einhorn is portrayed as a deceptive transgender person (Serano, 2007). What is the impact of this characterization on the trans* community?
3. Could this script be rewritten to provide a more positive representation of trans* people? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. When Lt. Einhorn is discovered to be Ray Finkle, what is the response by other characters in the film? How does this response further encourage the viewer to look \textit{at} rather than \textit{with} the trans\textsuperscript{*} character?

5. What might this film’s script be like if it was told from the perspective of Lt. Einhorn?

\textit{Boys Don’t Cry}

1. Brandon Teena is played by Hilary Swank, a cisgender actress. What are the potential benefits/drawbacks to employing cisgender individuals to play trans\textsuperscript{*} characters in film? How might this relate to the deployment of the transgender look (Halberstam, 2005)?

2. How might you rewrite a scene of this film where the viewer is looking \textit{at} Brandon to encourage them to look \textit{with} Brandon instead?

3. Is historical accuracy important for this film? Why or why not? How does the director’s decision to leave out details influence how you understand the deployment of the transgender look throughout the film?

4. Hale (1998) suggests calling Brandon Teena trans\textsuperscript{*} as well as identifying this individual by exclusively using the name Brandon Teena may be an act of historical revisionism. How do media outlets influence how we come to know about people from marginalized identities? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of these media influences?

5. How do issues of class status intersect with gender identity in this film?

\textit{Transamerica}

1. In the film, Bree suggests she will become a “real” woman once she has gender confirmation surgery. How does the notion of realness influence the transgender look in this film?

2. What are the tropes of femininity Bree’s character uses to mark herself as a woman? What impression does this portray about what it means to be a woman, trans\textsuperscript{*} person, and a transwoman?

3. Would this film be any less compelling if Bree were cisgender? Do you think it would have still been made if Bree’s character were cisgender? Why or why not?

4. Throughout the film, three generations are shown. What are their responses to Bree being trans\textsuperscript{*}? How do these responses resist/conform to generational stereotypes?

5. Bree is portrayed as a transsexual. How might her character, and subsequent characterization, be different if Bree still identified as trans\textsuperscript{*} but not transsexual? How might this shift in gender identity and/or expression change the deployment of the transgender look in the film?
**By Hook or By Crook**

1. This film had a low budget and did not enjoy commercial success. Does this influence the use of the transgender look throughout the film? Why or why not?

2. Were you confused about Shy’s and Valentine’s gender identity and/or expression during the film? How did that make you feel?

3. The directors of this film set out to create a world in which gender was ambiguous and fluid. Why was this an important choice for them? How does this help viewers look *with* rather than *at* the main characters?

4. How do issues of mental health and class status intersect with gender identity and/or expression throughout the film? How do these intersections influence your understanding of the transgender look?

5. Do the gender identities and expressions of the writers/directors of this film (who are also the main characters in it) influence how the transgender look is deployed? Why or why not? Based on your answer, what can you extrapolate about the representation of marginalized individuals and/or communities in other films?