FINDING FEMININITY:

A REPRESENTATION ANALYSIS OF TRANS* FEMININITY ON SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the representation of trans* feminine women in popular media. This is done by presenting a theoretical background focusing on a specific minority group in society – namely, trans* feminine women – femininity, and heteronormativity, as well as by taking a poststructuralist approach to the applied theoretical framework in order to conduct a representation analysis of three trans* feminine characters from three different films.

The analysis consists of a discussion of how trans* femininity is portrayed in the films, using a theoretical toolbox covering existing tropes seen within trans* representation, as well as a broad discussion of what femininity is and does. What the analysis shows is that there is a clear relation between the stereotypical ideas of what trans* is and what femininity is, and how the trans* feminine characters are portrayed. While the media's representation of LGBT*Q+ identities dating back to the 1950s and up until more recent years has received scholarly criticism, I argue that while awareness surrounding these identities and issues is more present in popular media today, the heteronormative stereotyping of these identities is as present as ever.

Keywords: representation, trans* studies, popular culture, femininity
Nyckelord: representation, trans* studier, populärkultur, femininitet
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THANK YOU.

Thank you Lena Karlsson for your support and feedback. Thanks for helping me organise my thoughts, and for giving me many good ideas.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, the number of LGBT*Q+ characters in Western films and other mainstream media has increased – as has the support for LGBTQ*+ visibility and rights. LGB characters and their storylines are no longer exclusively used for comedic or shocking effect, as the trend once was (Serano 2007). However, in popular Western films, the trans* character's role is often used in this manner, as a surprising plot twist, or as an emphasis on freakiness and deviance in horror stories. This is especially true for trans* women (ibid.). Most people are probably familiar with the character of Buffalo Bill in the 1991 thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme). Bill feminises his own body and skins women in order to wear their skin. Not explicitly claiming to be a trans* woman, Bill is shown hiding his male genitals, putting on make-up and participating in other 'feminine practices', such as dancing. Portrayed as a 'psycho killer', his skinning of women and his wanting to become one is blamed on him wanting gender reaffirming surgery to become a woman, but being told by doctors that he is mentally ill.

While not focusing on Buffalo Bill and his endeavours, this thesis will focus on the stories of three films, namely *Dallas Buyers Club* (dir. Jean-Marc Vallée 2013), *The Danish Girl* (dir. Tom Hooper 2015) and *Girl* (dir. Lukas Dhont 2018). What these films have in common is that they are all recent,[1] they are all popular films, and they all feature a trans* character who plays a significant role in the film. Through a broad poststructuralist approach in combination with representation theory and a conceptual framework, this thesis analyses which representation(s) are given of trans* feminine women, and within which context these representations exist.

1.1 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the existing research on trans* representation in popular film, and to the field of trans* studies in general. More specifically, the aim is to analyse how trans* feminine women are represented in popular media, and to discuss whether or not this is related to the ruling heteronormative hegemony in popular media today. In order to achieve this, three characters from three different films are examined in a representation analysis. Theories of femininity and representation make up the theoretical and conceptual

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[1] One of the criteria set is that the films must be from a 5-year period, in other words no later than 2013 and no more recent than 2018.

framework, which as such also make up the tools used in the analysis of the thesis. In order to discuss the above, the following research questions are posed:

1. How are trans* women represented in popular films?

  2. How is (trans*) femininity construed?

  3. Do the characteristics of the representation of trans* (feminine) women play into heteronormative ideas and values?

1.2 OUTLINE

What follows in this chapter is a background on trans* women in film, on the importance of representation and visibility on screen, as well an explanation on the choice of writing about this topic. This is followed by chapter two, which offers an account of previous research focusing on trans* women represented on screen, as well as a brief account on already existing research on the films analysed in this thesis. Chapter three focuses on methodology, my own position in this research project, and data gathering. Why and how I chose to work with the films *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013)*, The Danish Girl* (2015) and *Girl* (2018) is explained here. Chapter four consists of a theoretical discussion on trans* theory, femininity theory, as well as some key terms such as Butler's heterosexual matrix and existing tropes in the representation of trans* women in popular media. Chapter five consists of the analytical discussion on the three films in relation to the theoretical chapter and the terms and theories presented in it. Lastly, a brief, concluding and summarising discussion is presented in chapter six.

1.3 BACKGROUND

Written in a European context in which there is rising violence against people who identify as LGBTQ+, the social and political environment(s) in which these representations are both produced and consumed is changing. In a report published by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in late 2014, it is revealed that trans* people are more likely to experience harassment, violence or discrimination than cisgender – but also LGB – people. 54% of trans* respondents to the survey expressed that they had experienced this due to being perceived as trans*, especially when visiting healthcare centres or similar settings (FRA 2014). Not only violence on a physical level is experienced amongst the LGBTQ+ community. On social media platforms such as YouTube, there have been reports of trans*

content being removed, blocked and demonetised.[2] On YouTube, something called 'restricted mode' is being placed on a lot of videos with trans* content (Farokhmanesh 2018, BBC 2017, Stokel-Walker 2018, Chokshi 2017, Lewis 2017). This, in short, means that these videos are filtered out, and in general makes them more difficult to find. It also might include an age limit or parental control. Trans* YouTube personality Chase Ross claims that several of his videos have been removed or demonetized, and that this is especially present in videos titled something containing the word 'trans' or videos that have to do with his transition (Farokhmanesh 2018). YouTube claims that this is not something done on purpose (ibid.), but the fact that their algorithms allow for this to happen is nevertheless inherently problematic, because it does not only harm the content creators, but also the spectators who find educational and emotional value and support in them.

Richard Dyer (2002) argues that people are treated the same way in real life as they are in cultural representations. What happens when these representations do not exist, or when these representations and images are removed, 'restricted' or filtered out? In 1987, Carlos Cortes wrote an article on exactly this, titled 'A Long Way to Go: Minorities and the Media'. In it, he uses an example from a 1986 television show where two pairs of contestants compete against each other. On a screen in front of one contestant from each pair, a word appears, and the contestant must give clues to their partner so that they can identify the word on the screen:

> On that special day, the word 'gangs' came up on the cluer's screen. Without hesitation, he fired out the first thing that came to his mind: 'They have lots of these in East L.A." (a heavily Mexican-American area of Los Angeles). Responding at once, his guest celebrity partner answered, gangs. (Cortes 1987)

Cortes links this event with what had recently been showed in American mass media at the time; both the entertainment and news media had been showing interest in 'Latino gangs' (ibid.) around the time of the occurring event:

> …the entertainment media have offered a comparatively narrow range of other Latino characters, while the news media have provided relatively sparse coverage of other Hispanic topics, except for such 'problem' issues as immigration and language. The result has been a Latino public image — better yet, a stereotype — in which gangs figure prominently. (ibid.)

The motivation for using Cortes' example today, over three decades later, is first of all that it is still a relevant example to use. Whether doing it intentionally or not, the media does affect

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[2] Demonetising a video means that the content's creator no longer can earn money on it.

how we see the world, and how we perceive our peers and ourselves. Secondly, a report by The Opportunity Agenda[3] published in 2011 shows yet another example of how negative stereotypes and (as well as in) representations affect us. Focusing on the representation and perception of black males in the United States, it shows how both underrepresentation, non-relatable figures and the way in which the figures are represented also affect the way we perceive the minority group in question. Black males are often, the report argues, shown as nameless victims of crimes and, opposed to their white counterparts, black males are often shown on screen in relation to violence in music videos. They are moreover often "absent from some important types of roles, *e.g.*, as fathers in parenting situations that audiences can relate to" (The Opportunity Agenda 2011: 22ff.), and that positive associations are often related to their masculinity and athletic contributions (ibid.: 24).

1.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION

That trans* content and trans* content creators are being blocked and 'restricted' on YouTube is only one of the examples of symbolic violence that trans* people are subject to. In 2016, a debate sparked in the American political climate when the General Assembly in North Carolina introduced a new law (named the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, or "House Bill 2"). This bill states that people should only be allowed to use bathrooms that were signified corresponding to their assigned-at-birth sex. The question of whether or not non-gendered bathrooms should be introduced to allow trans* people to use the bathrooms with the signification of the gender with which they identify, rather than what their sex (or assigned-at-birth sex) is, is still an ongoing debate (Steinmetz 2015, Barnett, Nesbit & Sorrentino 2018). Other kinds of violence include the *threat* of physical violence, physical assault, sexual violence, and transphobic laws (Blyth & McRae 2018) and legislation (of which "House Bill 2" is just one example).

So why does this happen? Are there any records in history of someone getting hurt because of a person using a differently signified bathroom than what their birth certificate states as their sex? "Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence" Stuart Hall argues (2013: 259). Stereotyping is, when practiced by a majority population (in this instance

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[3] The Opportunity Agenda is an organisation working to promote social justice in the world by focusing on communication through powerful messages and narratives, as well as working in collaboration with artists to "shift the public discourse" (The Opportunity Agenda 2019).

cisgendered, heterosexual people), a way for the majority to maintain their status as the most powerful in a society – in other words, to maintain the status quo. Richard Dyer argues, in his 1977 essay on stereotyping, that in order to understand how stereotyping functions as violence, it is necessary to understand the differences between *typing* and *stereotyping*.

Not only focusing on the (symbolic) violence stereotyping brings to the table, stereotypes are

> ... the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy. (Dyer 1999)

In other words, stereotyping – and the power it entails – also affects how we perceive ourselves, how others perceive us, as well as what we are *free* to do.

Dyer explains that certain "types" – or categories – exist, and that these are crucial when wanting to make sense of the world and the people who live in it. Referring to people, events or objects to "the general classificatory schemes into which – according to our culture – they fit" (Hall 2013: 247) allows this. We know that a seat placed on four legs means a chair, and that a flat surface on top of four others mean a table, and we decode these objects as such. "In other words, we understand 'the particular' in terms of its 'type'. We deploy what Alfred Schultz called *typifications*. In this sense, 'typing' is essential to the production of meaning" (ibid.). Dyer (1977) explains that we are always, constantly, trying to make sense of things in larger categories. We look at someone and try to figure out who they are:

> Thus, for example, we come to 'know' something about a person by thinking of the *roles* which he or she performs: is he/she a parent, a child, a worker, a lover, boss, or an old age pensioner? We assign him/her to the *membership* of different groups, according to class, gender, age group, nationality, 'race', linguistic group, sexual preference, and so on. (Hall 2013: 247)

From looking at individual people or objects, we position them within "these different orders of typification" (ibid.). In other words, we 'make sense' of who or what they are by placing them within recognisable categories.

Stereotyping, on the other hand, is what happens when we reduce and simplify a person or a group of people to certain memorable and simple characteristics (Dyer 1997). This, in the

end, also "essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'" (Hall 2013: 247) between *them* and *us.*[4] Stereotyping creates a boundary, a border, between what is perceived by the majority of what is acceptable and not, between what is 'normal' and what is 'deviant' behaviour and performance, and excludes "everything that does not belong" (ibid.). Another feature of stereotyping is as such, according to Hall (2013), that "*stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power*" (Hall 2013: 248, author's emphasis).

1.4.1 SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AND POWER

In the background section (1.3), a brief account of symbolic violence towards trans* people and -communities was provided. 'Symbolic violence' is a term closely connected to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He claims that symbolic violence is an exercise of violence that is not usually recognised as *violence*. In other words, this means that a dominant group in society imposes opinions and attitudes on other, subordinate groups or individuals, in a way that does not necessarily show the power relations hiding behind it (Esmark 1993). He furthermore emphasises that symbolic violence is not (necessarily) something that is done on purpose, but perhaps rather an unconscious act performed by the dominant group to maintain the status quo within the social context in question (Bourdieu 1990). In this context, cisgenderism and heterosexuality sits as the social norm, and thus presents us with the term heteronormative hegemony (borrowed from Gundula Ludwig 2011). The definition of hegemony – as used and developed by Antonio Gramsci – is used for describing the influence a dominant group has and exerts over a subordinate group, be it societal, economic, ideological or cultural influence. Ludwig's (2011) extension of the term to also include heteronormativity is fitting in this context (de Silva 2018).

Symbolic violence does not – necessarily – have anything to do with physical coercion, constraint or violence. Power can in this instance also be visible in questions of representation, for example by the hegemony (cisgendered heterosexual filmmakers and audiences) deciding who is being portrayed in media and how. Stereotyping, therefore, plays a key role in this exercising of power. Related to Edward Said (1978) (see footnote above) and his argument and discussion on Orientalism and the Other, it is also relevant to state here that power is not only constraining. It works, as Foucault also argues, in circular ways. Power produces new discourses, new knowledge, as well as new institutions. This means that

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[4] See also Edward Said (1978): *Orientalism.*

everyone, no matter a victim or an oppressor, is "caught up (…) in power's circulation" (Hall 2013: 251).

Representation matters; visibility not only matters for the cisgendered audience in order for them to be exposed to non-normative behaviour and identities, but also for those who identify as trans* in order to be able to foster a deeper understanding of their own selves as valid, as important and as everything but deviant. When trans* women are portrayed in films, their bodies are shown and portrayed in certain, specific ways that maintain the stereotypes surrounding their identities and that manifest their positions as 'others' in relation to the society's majority population. As the point of this thesis is not to show the effects of representation, but rather to be able to conduct a representation analysis, it is important to understand the foundation of what representation is and what it does.

1.5 WHAT IS TRANS*?

Trans* is an umbrella term including both people who identify their gender as that of the opposite sex (transgender), but also those who want and seek medical intervention in order to transition from one sex to a different one, and those who identify as genderqueer and/or non-binary, such as bigender or agender people (see GLAAD 2019: 10ff., Trans Student Educational Resources 2019, Halberstam 2017). This is also the ruling definition in this thesis.

1.5.1 WHY FOCUS ON TRANS* WOMEN?

The focus of this thesis lies on representation of trans* women in popular film. The reason as to why this point of focus does not extend to, and include, trans* men and other trans* identities, is because – as mentioned in the literature review in chapter two – a great deal of previous research misses out on what Julia Serano (2007) called "(…) more relevant issues: the ways in which traditional sexism shapes popular assumptions about transsexual women and why so many people in our society feel threatened by the existence of 'men who choose to become women'" (Serano 2007: 4). The belief that trans* women are "men who choose to become women" is not only a huge misconception, but also an idea that needs to be challenged. The idea of femininity as weaker than masculinity, even amongst those who praise themselves to believe in gender equality, is in other words still present.

1.5.2 THE ASTERISK QUESTION

When speaking of diversity, of representation and respect, language plays an indisputable role. Sarah Ahmed reminds us of this in her 2012 book *On Being Included*: the act of speech, the choice of words, is in and of itself precisely that – an act*ion*. Especially within LGBT*Q+ communities, terms that enable and open up for an understanding of one's own identity (regarding sex, sexuality, preferences and gender) are important.

The term 'trans' was originally shortened from transgender to function as an inclusive term for not only transsexuals, but for all of those who – in one way or another – fit under the large umbrella of trans identities. However, as language is anything but static, some argue that 'trans' is today an excluding term validating and referring only to the individuals that are under, are going to, or want to physically transition. Because of this, 'trans*' has been introduced. Unable to find out exactly where and when it was introduced, it seems as though it originated from 'computer language' in the 1980's (Ryan 2014). An asterisk can be used as a search function in search engines, if there is any doubt as to what it is that one is looking for. Typing trans* into the search engine could therefore present results regarding transsexuality, -sexuals, -gender, -formation, -parent, -port, -atlantic, and so on. Claiming the asterisk in a term to describe identity allows for a certain 'undefinability', and as such those that use 'trans*' as the ruling terminology, opens up an umbrella large enough to include not only transgender and transsexuals, but also genderqueers, transvestites, and other non-binary gender identities.

While – at this point – linguistically[5] and aesthetically unsure of the asterisk myself, I am cautious to criticise a term that I do not myself identify with, and a term that is someone else's identity and that belong to others than myself. Without language, it is impossible to make sense of the world around us, and if the term 'trans' has become a non-inclusive and excluding (these two are different!) term, that is a valid argument to try and create a new and more inclusive term. Following Jack Halberstam (2017), I have chosen to use the asterisk for now, with the intentions of showing the utmost respect and inclusivity for those that fall

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[5] Comments and critiques from trans (I omit the asterisk here out of respect for those that do not agree with it or identify with it) people have focused on namely the "wildcard" function it poses in search engines. Other than this, the asterisk has also been critiqued for making things difficult, for being an academic and elitist addition to an already inclusive term. There has also been comments on how the asterisk, in the world of sports, is being used when a result is invalid or needs correction.

under the umbrella of different trans* identities.

2.0 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

As mentioned in the introducing chapter, there are many examples of trans* identities represented in film, dating several decades back. However, the amount of scholarly literature dealing with trans* *femininity* on screen is scarce. This chapter deals with the literature that does exist. The focus and aim in each text may not specifically be that of trans* femininity on screen, but perhaps on trans* cinema or trans* representation in general.

One person who has contributed greatly to the field of trans* studies is Jack Halberstam. His latest contribution to the field is the book *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variability* (2017). In it, he uses examples from both mainstream film and media to more scholarly examples to discuss trans* politics, gender variability and difficult questions of identity and visibility. Furthermore, Halberstam has authored some of the most important works on trans* and gender variability that draws on examples from media and film, such as the 1995 book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters. In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) is another of his works. In it, Halberstam discusses (built on Chris Straayer's 1996 work)[6] the trans* narrative in films as non-temporary. He calls this narrative 'the transgender look' – a term for "films that challenge the binary ordering of gender and sexuality in order to affirm a trans identity and trans as desirable" (Steinbock 2017: 359).

Another author that offers interesting perspectives on trans* and gender variability is Eliza Steinbock. In their *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019), they discuss how cinema and film can offer other ways to show and understand gender transitions and -transitioning through what they call "a specific aesthetics of change" (Steinbock 2019). Steinbock shows how both sex and gender can appear like a mirage on screen, something they – as the title suggests – call 'shimmering', using examples from both older and more recent films, and from textual works such as autobiographies (ibid.).

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[6] Chris Straayer (1996) argues that most films featuring a trans* character treats the trans* narrative as temporary, and that it as such does not challenge normative ideas of sexuality and gender. This is explored further in chapter four.

While there arguably is a lack of full-length volumes on trans* femininity in film and cinema, there are a few published theses that offer interesting reads of trans* cinema and film. One of them is Wibke Straube's *Trans Cinema and its Exit Scapes* (2014). Straube analyses "scenes of dance, song and dream" (Straube 2014: 29) as examples of the possibility of reading trans* characters in different ways than what the "dominant cinematic regime" (Straube 2014) has set up. Another dissertation that discusses a similar theme is Joel Ruby Ryan's 2009 dissertation *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*. Ryan looks at how trans* images in films from 1950 and up until the year of publication show the social status of trans* people in (American) society. This leads me to Jeremy Russell Miller's dissertation *Crossdressing Cinema: An Analysis of Transgender Representation in Film* (2012), in which he draws examples from 24 films to show how visual codes and "narrative conventions" (Miller 2012) make it difficult for spectators to identify with the trans* characters. Miller argues that trans* representations do not challenge heteronormativity, but rather work in its favour. This argument is more closely considered in the final chapter of this thesis.

Previous research on the films analysed in this thesis also exists. Several scholars have discussed both *Dallas Buyers Club* (Copier & Steinbock 2017, Ford 2017, Keegan 2016) and *The Danish Girl* (Steinbock 2017, Keegan 2016, San Filippo 2016) in relation to trans* representation in media. However, at the time of writing, only a handful of scholarly discussions on *Girl* exists, one written by Beatriz Santos (2019)[7] on the representation of the trans* body, and one published in *The Lancet* focusing on femininity and the corporeal in relation to ballet dancing (Bianchi 2018).

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[7] I have, however, not been able to read this to its full extent, as I do not have an expert command of the French language.

3.0 METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND MATERIAL

This following chapter outlines the methodological framework and tools that will be used in the analysis of the representation of trans* feminine women in popular film. Lastly, an overview and motivation behind the choice of material is presented.

3.1 A POSTSTRUCTURALIST STARTING POINT

Within a research project like this one, it is important to understand the connections and relations between power, politics and discourse. A poststructuralist approach to this research project thus enables the idea that power and politics create practices, which in turn create socioeconomic and political discourses (Torfing 2013: 198f.). This is, within (poststructuralist) discourse theory, how we make sense of the world surrounding us. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – who are most famously known for their work on discourse theory – argue that as there is no universal centre or truth. Rather, a vast of heterogeneous discourses exist, and these discourses constitute spaces that are open for social and political actors. What these actors can then do, through various acts, is create change in one way or another (ibid.).

Poststructuralism, as such, "problematise[s] systems of thought and organisation" (Usher and Edwards 1994: 1). The problematisation of systems of thought and organisation happens in addition to problematisation regarding what the self is, as well as what identities and social relations are. These are phenomena that have before and otherwise been seen as determined and definite (ibid.). This is also, to a large degree, connected to language and linguistics. Language is within poststructuralism seen as a "relational system influenced by historical conditioned rules for how particular forms of signification and action should be bound together to produce particular forms of meaning" (Torfing 2013: 198, my own translation). What is argued here is that language, as well as the meaning(s) we find within it, is not determined but "historically and culturally specific" (Wright 2003: 34f.). This opens up for an understanding of social and political phenomena in relation to the socioeconomic and -political context that these exist within. Moreover, an approach like poststructuralism opens up for the possibility to include different types of material to be analysed as texts, such as video, film, spoken word, and so on. What a poststructuralist approach (and perhaps discourse theory in particular) cannot do, however, is explain why "some [discourses], rather than others, are taken up by individuals" (ibid.). This is, however, where my theoretical

background within gender studies helps me analyse the relations between gender, identity and power that exist within the chosen material, which also leads me to – and allows me to – discuss the power relations and structures that exist therein.

3.2 REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONING

Within poststructuralist research, and I would argue in particular within feminist and queer studies, the researcher's role is essential. Donna Haraway (1988) offers a critique of the term 'objectivity' and calls it the god-trick of science: everything is seen from a place of objectivity, a position of 'nowhere' both without a context and without a body. Haraway tells us that instead of believing that such a position exists within research, to rather take responsibility over the fact that our knowledge is affected by context and situation, and that this also affects the knowledge that is produced. This, she named situated knowledge (ibid.).

Almost 60 years ago, Erving Goffman reflected on his own gender and its accompanying limitations for his social research (Goffman 2017 [1961]: xviii). It is however important to note that gender is not the only identity factor that comes into play when conducting social research, or when trying to make any kind of sense of the time and space we are currently moving within. Identity factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality, as well as identity markers such as place and age (Ward 2016: ix) are undoubtedly also important to reflect on. I am a white, middle-class cis-woman born in one of the world's wealthiest countries. My vision, reading and understanding of the topic at hand is of course impacted by these factors.

3.3 METHOD AND MATERIAL

The method used in the analysis of this thesis, as well as the framework, is based on qualitative research. This means that in order to understand the representations of a specific minority group in popular media, a theoretical background is presented, and a representation analysis is formed out of this. The theoretical framework can be read in the following chapter, and is used as an analytical tool in order to analyse and explore the characters in the three films – as well as their characteristics – to answer the research questions posed in this thesis.

The material used in this study has been gathered through fulfilling the following five criteria:

1. The film must include a character identified as a trans* woman

The films chosen all include a character that is identified as a trans* woman. This is done to ensure that it is relevant for the topic at hand. The size of the role of the trans character is not being questioned, as this is not what is being focused on. The characters are identified as trans* in by the directors or by the stories they are based on. An exception is Rayon from *Dallas Buyers Club*, who is actually scripted as a cis-male cross-dresser, but who is played as a trans* woman by the actor.[8]

2. A five-year period is chosen, which means that the film must be released in 2013 or more recently[9]

Choosing to focus on the past five years is motivated by several factors – the more practical factor being the scope of this thesis – which only allows for a certain amount of material. At the same time, there are many good examples and films to be discussed regarding this theme prior to 2013 that could have been included as well, such as *The Crying Game (1999), Dressed to Kill (1980), The Skin I Live In (2011).* The more theoretical motivation as to why these films, amongst others prior to 2013 are not included, is due to a shift in politics. While the 1980s and 90s saw trans* characters cast as psychologically ill, or as killers or victims thereof, recent films have been portraying trans* persons in another way: the focus as of late has been on their personal stories and developments, on stories of transitioning and acceptance, as well as stories of coming of age.

3. To be considered a "popular film"

The film must have more than 7/10 rating on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). The IMDB is a web-based database focusing on all things related to films, TV programmes and video games. It is one of the most popular websites on the Internet, with around 83 million registered users. Being a registered user allows you to rate, review, comment and discuss films of all kinds with fellow film buffs, while unregistered users are limited to read what others have said about the material, including trivia, production crew, cast, summaries of the plot and so on. Seeing as the website has a high number of users – and is one of the most recognised sites to use when looking up information regarding films – it gives an indication

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[8] This is covered in greater detail in section 5.1.
[9] Seeing as this thesis is written in the first half of 2019, and the research for this thesis was begun in the last part of 2018, I have decided to set the five-year period from 2013-2018.

of what the general audience appreciates.

4. The trans* character's role must be relevant to the story
This is to make sure that the trans* character's story and role is more than a 'random person in the group of friends' or a 'waiter at the diner', which would make their character difficult to analyse.

5. The trans* character is played by a non-trans* actor
The actors playing the trans* characters does not identify as trans*, is the fifth and final criteria. That non-trans* actors play the roles of trans* characters (rather than trans* actors being cast in these parts) in films is nothing new. While this is undoubtedly problematic and worthy of debate, it is not to be further discussed in this thesis. It is of my belief that focusing on films in which non-trans* actors play trans* characters will highlight my points in the analysis, and this is the reason why I have made this choice.

Dallas Buyers Club (2013)
Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée in 2013, the American drama film *Dallas Buyers Club* tells the story of Ron Woodroff, an electrician in Dallas in 1985. After being diagnosed with AIDS and losing faith in the health care system, he works his way around it and starts selling medicine to others with the same diagnosis. Through this, he meets Rayon, a HIV-infected trans* woman who helps Ron with his business, and the two of them become friends.

The Danish Girl (2015)
The Danish Girl is a British and American biographical drama directed by Tom Hooper. It is (loosely) based on the real lives and story of Lili Elbe (born Einar Wegener) and Gerda Wegener. Elbe was one of the first people to ever undergo sex reassignment surgery, and Wegener was her partner. Elbe discovered her 'true' identity when being asked by her wife to stand in for a female model for a painting. Realising that she is a woman, a journey towards her new life begins – and unfortunately ends, too soon.

Girl (2018)
In the 2018 Belgian drama *Girl*, directed by Lukas Dhont, we meet 16-year old trans*girl Lara, who is an aspiring ballerina. Lara is undergoing hormone treatment, and while she

receives support from her father and her doctors, her fellow dancers are sceptical towards her body of a young male, and Lara is met with a lot of resistance.

All of the films analysed in this thesis, as well as their main characters, are (loosely) based on the stories of real people and "real stories". However, the character of Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* is fictive, though the main character Ron Woodroff is based on a non-fictive person. Another observation worth mentioning is that all of the three trans* women are played by cisgendered men. This is not something that will be discussed further, as it is not the topic of this thesis. I do, however, want to note that I am aware of the ongoing debate and discussion regarding this (see e.g. Talusan 2018, Adams 2016), and that I understand the implications that might have on the characters and the way that they are portrayed[10] in the films, as well as the issues of discrimination surrounding the fact that trans* actors do not get cast.

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[10] For example, *Dallas Club Buyers'* Rayon would not have been played by a trans* woman in the same manner as Jared Leto played her. Here I am referring to the fact that he himself decided to play Rayon as trans*. Read more about this in chapter 5.1.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis is written within a broad poststructuralist framework, and rests on the theoretical framework of trans*, representation, and femininity theory. This chapter consists of a discussion on these theories, focusing respectively on Stuart Hall (2013) and Richard Dyer's (1977) theoretical arguments on symbolic violence, stereotyping and representation, as well as an account of trans* studies and theory. These two lead the way to the next theory in question: a theory of femininity. However, an applicable theory of femininity has yet to be fully developed. Based on – among others – the thoughts and ideas[11] of Ulrika Dahl (2012) on femininity and critical studies of the phenomenon, studies on femininity in the working class (Skeggs 1997), as well Hannah McCann's (2018) theorising commentary on queering femininity, section 4.2 will provide a suggestion as to what such a framework could look like.

Some important terms for the analysis in this thesis will also be accounted for. In section 4.3, Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix" and its relevance to the questions at hand is explained and discussed. The following two final parts of this chapter (4.4 and 4.5) discuss existing tropes within trans* representation in media that are also important for the analysis chapter. Altogether, this chapter is what makes up the theoretical framework and the toolbox for the analysis.

4.1 TRANS* THEORY

The field of trans* studies is a relatively new field within academia. It focuses on gender non-normativity, and its theories and research mainly focus on (cultural) representations, politics and political movements, as well as lived experiences of those who live lives of gender nonconformity. "Identities of interest to transgender studies scholars include transsexuals, cross-dressers, transvestites, androgynous, drag kings, drag queens, sissy boys, tomboy girls, butch lesbians, nelly gay men, and so on" (Bryant 2009: 849). The academic interest towards and research on "gender-variant people and related social institutions and cultural forms" (ibid.) has not at all been scarce, but as Kyle Bryant argues in *Encyclopaedia of Gender and Society* (2009):

> [Trans* studies] has shared epistemological stakes and a moral and political vision that value transgender bodies, identities, behaviors, social collectivities, and cultural representations.

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[11] I am reluctant to use the word "theory" here, as Dahl herself claims that her thoughts should not be read as such.

Therefore, transgender studies produces knowledge with the goal of benefiting transgender people and communities. (Ibid.)

Even though trans* studies is a relatively new field, scholars have been studying trans* persons and identities for years. There are, however, many examples of "erasures and appropriations of transsexual/transgender subjectivity and history" (ibid.: 850), especially within the fields of medicine and psychology, but it is also apparent within feminist research. Because of this, one important task within trans* studies has been to theorise gender nonconformity and trans* subjectivity from a positive point of view. Trans* studies does thus not only focus on what has historically been the case according to Bryant – male-to-female trans* individuals – but all kinds of gender nonconformity (ibid.: 850ff.).

As mentioned in chapter two, there is an existing amount of literature on gender nonconformity and on trans* studies overall. However, there is a lack of specific research on trans* femininity – or, to be fair, femininity in general. The following part consists of a more in-depth discussion on this.

4.2 THEORISING FEMININITY

As mentioned in the introduction to this theoretical chapter, scholarly literature on femininity and theoretical discussions on femininity more generally, are scarce (Dahl 2012). There is a certain amount of research on women and *the feminine* (see e.g. Friedan 1963, Blaise 2005, Jackson 2004, Skelton & Francis 2003), but the concept of femininity is rarely discussed, especially when looking at it in relation to the amount of scholarly work on the concept of *masculinity* or *masculinities* (Paechter 2018: 121). In this text, I have decided to stick with the singular form of femininity, while being aware of the existing arguments on speaking of femininities in plural (see e.g. Scharff 2013, cited in McCann 2018: 3) and the different ways of discussing femininity. As Carrie Paechter (2018) argues, most research on gender has not "included specific and detailed consideration of femininity as a concept" (Paechter 2018: 121), as a contradiction to, for example Raewyn Connell's (1987), theorising of (hegemonic) masculinity.

Femininity has not been conceptualised to the same degree as masculinity, and – usually when femininity is mentioned at all – it is often in relation to or opposition to masculinity, or taken for granted (Paechter 2018: 122). Furthermore, Connell argues "there is no hegemonic femininity in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" (Connell 1987: 183). Connell instead suggests that there is something called "emphasised femininity"; especially performed to men (ibid.: 184, 188). This leads to femininity being perceived as "the Other of males and masculinity" (Paechter 2018: 122). With this approach, a conceptualisation of femininity free from its position as an opposite to hegemonic masculinity becomes impossible (Dahl 2012). Schipper (2007) tries to rethink Connell's theorisation of hegemonic masculinity to include hegemonic femininity, but fails in the attempt as there are too many slip-ups; she excludes the possibility of asexuals to be feminine, and argues for masculinity and femininity belonging to respectively male and female bodies (Paechter 2018: 122).

Hannah McCann writes in her 2018 book *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation* that femininity historically has "been discussed in a wide range of ways: in relation to roles, behaviours, desires and subject positions" (McCann 2018: 3). When looking at the *Oxford Dictionary*'s definition of femininity, it tells us that femininity is "the fact of being a woman; the qualities that are considered to be typical of women" (Hornby 2010: 565). Viewing femininity from a Freudian point of view, as something that is connected to that of having a 'woman' or female sex and body is today, as McCann argues, a mainstream Western idea (McCann 2018: 3f.), but becomes problematic because it defines femininity as "descriptive rather than normative" (ibid.: 4). The problem lies within the fact that not all women are feminine. Christina Scharff, in McCann's *Queering Femininity*, states that femininity is "a norm specifically associated with heterosexuality, middle-class status, White European appearance, an able 'sexy' body, and a rejection of feminism" (ibid.). In relation to discourse theory, there are some (see e.g. Milkie 2002; Hudson 1984; Smith 1998 in McCann 2018) that argue that femininity is a discourse, and that it is being defined by "cultural gatekeepers such as magazine editors" (ibid.).

An approach to femininity similar to Scharff's, is Beverly Skeggs' (1997). Her main argument is here that femininity is highly classed. Skeggs argues that the feminine ideal – or the ideal of femininity – came to be during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and especially "through the archetype of the lady" (Skeggs 1997 in Huppatz 2015: 45). Within

social hierarchy, it was the white middle-class femininity that ruled over all other forms of femininity. Those of lower classes, such as women from the working class, were seen as "robust and sexual" (Huppatz 2015: 45). Skeggs' furthermore found in her research, that femininity is "established through historical circuits of signs". This means that the white middle-class lady-like femininity of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is still framing working class women in a bad light. Skeggs explains that working class women as such tend to wish to be as glamorous as possible, because where they 'lack' other kinds of habitus and assets, "glamour produces desirable subjects" (ibid.).

Halberstam argues in his *Female Masculinity* (1988) that masculinity should never been seen exclusively in relation to the "male body and its effects" (Halberstam 1998: 1). I argue that we should use the same argument in relation to femininity; that we should not reduce femininity to the 'female body and its effects'. However, what I wish to do in this chapter and further on in this thesis is to discuss femininity in relation to looks and behaviour. This is an approach inspired by McCann, who argues that

> … exploring the idea of femininity as a style of the body, such that it can be separated from biologically 'female' bodies, allows for a conceptualisation if it as an aesthetic that also goes beyond the surface of the skin. This approach takes into consideration not only how the body is shaped socially but also the way it is enacted and felt as a gendered mode. (McCann 2018: 5)

This approach allows for the possibility to read all bodies as possible of being feminine, rather than it being connected to that of being a woman or having a woman's body.

4.2.1 FEMININE APPEARANCE/S

In the introduction to *Queering Femininity*, McCann argues that femininity – or "feminine styles of the body" (McCann 2018: 1), as she calls it – in feminist research has been criticised for being "part of the problem". Rejecting femininity and femininity "labour" – the work it takes for a body to be seen as feminine, beautiful and sexy (ibid.) – has been understood as a way of rejecting the patriarchal, oppressive gender system that women have been fighting against for decades. However, claiming that femininity is always a way of maintaining this oppressive system is to simplify things. While I am not claiming that femininity is inherently good, it is not necessarily bad either. Some may find that 'feminine styling' or feminine practices, such as putting on make-up, is empowering, while for others it may be experienced as bothersome and as something one is being forced to do.

McCann uses the example of feminine clothing to explain this: while women at some times and in some spaces might see long dresses as oppressive, other women (and/or other times/spaces) may find short dresses just as oppressive. In other words, it is not necessarily the attire, makeup or colours coded as female at that specific time and space that makes the issue, but the normative expectations surrounding what is feminine and what is not. Still, reducing femininity to a handful of normative expectations does not tell us anything about the what it is like to be seen as, or want to be seen as, feminine. "Perhaps this is why femininity is […] generally easy to identify, but difficult to describe" (ibid.: 4). Femininity is recognisable but difficult to pinpoint. Read in larger societal contexts, this means that an individual wearing what has been culturally coded as feminine attire (such as dresses) as a young girl can be said to be an effect of capitalism and its goal to create a division between "men and women in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality" (ibid.: 5f.). At the same time, McCann argues, this pleasure of being seen as a 'girl' at school may for other young girls be less pleasurable and may not feel *right.* In other words, it is not the dress itself that is the problem, it is the expectations of one wearing it that is.

4.2.2 SEXISM AND TRANS* FEMININITY

The negativity towards women and femininity as something that is seen as having a lower rank in the hierarchy than men and masculinity has been mapped out and researched in several instances (Lykke 2008, Serano 2007), but the negativity towards trans* feminine women focuses more on femininity itself, and the issues trans* women face in relation to "passing" as female and/or feminine. Trans* women and their femininity are – too often – seen as deviant, and trans* feminine women are seen as dupes or fakes.

Trans* activist Julia Serano, in her theoretical discussion and trans* manifesto *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), argues that there are two forms of sexism: *oppositional* sexism and *traditional* sexism (Serano 2007: 13f). Oppositional sexism, Serano argues, is directed towards those who fall outside of sexual or gender norms – "because our existence threatens the idea that women and men are 'opposite' sexes" (ibid.). The traditional sexism is on the other hand directed towards the "belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity" (Chamberland 2016: 109).

Inspired by both Serano (2007) and Alex Alvina Chamberland (2016), I argue that it is necessary to understand and analyse the differences between the two types of sexism mentioned above, because understanding the subordination of femininity with regard to masculinity is just as relevant of a question within gender studies as the subordination of women in relation to men. This is a point that will be further developed in the following pages.

4.3 THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

According to Michel Foucault, truth is a discursive construction in which what is true and false is decided (Stormhøj 2006: 59f). Within such regimes of truth, there are certain rules for what can be said and thought, and what is considered unthinkable and wrong. Within these regimes, power and truth form a circular relation; truth is connected to power, which produces and maintains it (Foucault 1972 in Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:12ff.) At the same time, truth also has powerful effects. The traditional discourse of gender suggests that those born with a male sex are men, and that men are extroverted and physical, physically strong and action-oriented. Boys are as such expected to play with tractors and cars, lasers and swords, and if they were to sit inside hosting a tea party for their dolls, chaos would reign. This is a truth that exists and that is contributing to maintaining traditional behavioural patterns. This is called discursive power. Of course, when one begins to accept and perform in favour of these ideas of gender, one becomes an actor that is both affected by these structures, but also a part of creating them.

Judith Butler argues for the idea that gender is something you do or perform, and with this she challenges the gender binary. The gender binary, according to Butler (2010) implicitly presupposes a heterosexual norm. Using the term 'the heterosexual matrix' (or heteronormativity), Butler shows how there is a forced connection between an individual's biological sex and social gender, as well as sexuality. In other words, the heterosexual matrix shows that there is a connection between gender, sex and sexuality.

In other words, if a person is born with a male sex, they will be expected to perform and express their gender in a masculine way, and to show sexual interest in persons of the

opposite sex. The heterosexual matrix in this way also exclude and interpret individuals who do not show this assumed connection in gender and sexuality as deviant and non-recognisable (ibid.: 84ff.). Butler argues that one, through performativity and citation recreates the heterosexual matrix in many ways. For example, being called degrading terms such as "tranny", "faggot" and so on may lead to a specific way of performing and expressing one's gender and sexuality. When doing this, it often gets done in a way that lies within the interest of the heterosexual matrix; we wish to be understood, and deviant sexual and gender related behaviour is normally not understood, unless we try to make it so. The hetero-centric discourse as such becomes limiting towards those who do not live up to the gender binary norms. Thus, trans* identification is excluded; as it is outside of the discourse and is therefore seen as abnormal and deviant.

4.4 TRANS* FEMININITY AS DECEIVING AND PATHETIC

The importance of representation of different bodies and identities in media is discussed to an extent in Eliza Steinbock's essay "Representing Trans Sexualities" (2018). Here, she does not only focus on trans* women in popular film, but all kinds of people in film, TV and pornography. Steinbock criticises the way in which trans* bodies have been sexualised and "de-eroticised" (Steinbock 2018: 28) in media, explaining that "many popular representations of trans sexualities continue to hark back to the ways in which psychomedical approaches hypersexualise and de-eroticise trans individuals" (ibid.).

The above quote draws our attention to the sexualisation of trans* women that takes place in a lot of films. The focus becomes not on the trans* woman as an individual with agency, but more as an object for the audience to view with pleasure – or perhaps disgust. At the same time, however, trans* women are in film often de-eroticised – their bodies are portrayed (and perceived by other characters) as wrong, deviant, as "other" (Steinbock 2018). A quote from Mira Bellweather in a zine (underground magazine) she created, gives us a good example of this:

> In most media, we're [trans women] either cast as sexual predators who prey on unsuspecting
> men (…) or we're looked down upon as objects of pity who do not and could not pass as
> women at all, who couldn't conceivably even HAVE a sex life. (Mira Bellweather in
> Steinbock 2018: 29).

What Bellweather argues above, is that trans* women are not only represented as sexualised, hyper-feminine or 'fake', they are also presented as deviant freaks, who cannot possibly (physically) engage in sexual activities, or have a sexual life in any way – bodies that have a wrong anatomy, "e.g. pregnant men and she males" (ibid.).

Steinbock's argument is as such that trans* women in media are either portrayed as sexualised or de-eroticised – or both, at the same time. Julia Serano, however, argues in her book (or manifesto) *Whipping Girl* (2007) that there are two ruling tropes for trans* women in popular media – namely the 'pathetic' and the 'deceptive' trans* women. The pathetic trans* woman is described by Serano as a trans* woman who fails to convince others that they are female, and the deceptive woman is someone who is perceived by others as a fake woman.

The pathetic trans* woman is always 'given away' by their masculine traits (Serano 2007: 40f.). This takes me to what has (by Steinbock 2018 and Seid 2014, amongst others) been called 'the reveal';

> ... most well-known fiction films in the trans cinema canon deal with the Western focus on genitals as the essential determinants of sex and sexual identity through a shock device known as 'the reveal'. (Steinbock 2018: 29)

Anette Kuhn (1985 [2013]) argues, in a similar manner, that trans* representations in popular media only exist to "hint at a possibility that is ultimately closed off in the revelation of the body beneath the clothes" (Kuhn 2013: 56f.). What both Kuhn and Steinbock discuss here is the reveal that happens in a film or TV series with a trans* character in it. It is what happens when the 'real identity' (I want to emphasise my quotation marks here – by 'real' we are talking within our Western gender binary standard) or the assigned-at-birth sex is uncovered. The deceptive trans* woman is believed to be a 'real' woman at first, but is later revealed to be 'fake'. In other words; it is revealed that she (for example) has a penis, or other 'male' or masculine traits. Where the deceptive and the pathetic tropes differ, is in their agenda. Whereas the deceptive trans* women are merely 'men dressed as women' in order to achieve something, the pathetic trans* women are people we 'should feel sorry for', as they are simply not convincing to the audience (Serano 2007).

4.5 TRANS* FEMININITY AS SEXUALISED AND ARTIFICIAL

According to Julia Serano (2005: 41), there is a general idea that trans* women want to adhere to stereotypical ideals regarding the feminine female. This is exemplified in many instances, for example trans* women being shown "padding their bras, putting on lipstick" (ibid.) and the like. Rachel McKinnon (2014) wants to expand the tropes for which Serano argues to also include that of "the artificial" trans* woman" (McKinnon 2014: 858). As argued by Serano above (4.4), McKinnon claims that there exists an idea of trans* woman as not being 'real', and that they thus need "all sorts of tricks and medical interventions in order to remotely 'pass' as women" (ibid.). This of course includes a certain amount of focus on sex-reassignment, facial feminisation, breast enlargement surgeries, as well as hormonal treatment and feminine attire and other physical alterations. This focus is clearly closely connected to that of the gender binary, because, there are some specific ideas to what counts as feminine and 'womanly' (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 3).

Trans* women are therefore often portrayed in film as

> (…) Falling over in heels, making poor fashion choices, having poor makeup skills, practicing walking with a feminine gait, and being overly careful about displaying 'feminine' mannerisms (…) Movements seem deliberate rather than natural. Trans women are thus *deliberately* female, not naturally female: they're constructed or manufactured females. [Author's own emphasis] (McKinnon 2014: 862)

Of course, this is also what most cisgendered women have gone through. A difference is, however, that our process often start at the time we are born. Judith Butler (1993) explains that:

> (…) the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he', and in that naming, the girl is 'girled', brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. (Butler 1993: xvii)

The interpellation, the gender doing, the 'girling' does not at all stop, but is on the contrary a never-ending line of repetitions. Butler explains how these interpellations play a key role in gender discourse, and as such also shapes and construes what is 'real' and what is 'other' or deviant, belonging to that of an outsider (Butler 1993).

This means that trans* femininity is often under the microscope, being questioned. As trans* feminine women are not assigned a female sex at birth, the pathetic, deceptive and artificial tropes suggested by Serano and McKinnon discuss and criticise the way that trans* women

are shown as being incapable, wrong or 'unreal'/fake women. Yet another problem is related to this: because trans* women face these questions of gender essentialism, they are at the same time also subject to being shamed for doing what society seemingly expects of them; adhering to the stereotypical notions of what is feminine and not, does not – according to gender essentialism – represent their 'real' gender, and therefore the audience (or society) waits for the reveal. Nevertheless, if a trans* woman decides to "[adopt] a less feminine gender expression, people may attribute her doing so to her 'real' gender: male" (McKinnon 2014: 865). This means that the trans* woman's feminisation itself is a subject to the artificiality trope, because the individual's identity is seen as unnatural and fake.

As discussed in this chapter, there are four ruling tropes when it comes to the representation of trans women in popular media: the pathetic, the deceptive, and the feminised and artificial trans* woman. What we learn from this is that the sexualised representation of trans women on screen is being subjected to the ideas of trans women as hyper-feminine or non-passing, and that the audience is often waiting for 'the reveal', which will be discussed in the following chapter.

5.0 ANALYSIS

The following analysis of how trans* women are represented in three popular films is structured in four main parts. Out of these four parts, three of them are dedicated to the relevant character in each film (and they are sorted in chronological order by the films' release dates). These chapters all contain a brief introduction to each respective character and their relevance to the plot of the film. The following is an analysis of each character, discussed using the conceptual framework and theoretical terminology and theory presented in chapter three. Working methodologically through each of the three characters, the question of how these trans* women are represented in three popular films is discussed through examples from the films.

Before continuing with the analysis, I want to note that the examples from the films written as quotes are taken from either the movies (and is as such transcribed by myself), or from the respective film's script – and will be cited accordingly. When citing a script, the characters names are marked in bold, and actions in cursive. This is done to make sure that quotes and actions are read as different things, and to make sure there is no misunderstanding regarding what is what.

5.1 FAILING HYPERFEMININITY – THE CASE OF RAYON

Working-class man Ron Woodroff became diagnosed with AIDS in Dallas, Texas in 1985. *Dallas Buyers Club* (dir. Jean-Marc Vallée 2013) is a biographical drama that tells Woodroff's (played by cisgendered Matthew McConaughey) story. His doctors tell Woodroff that he has thirty days left to live, as his illness is serious due to it having been left untreated for a long period of time. Being a taboo topic, especially at that time and in the particular socioeconomic context, Woodroff's co-workers and friends react to him being ill by calling him homophobic slurs and by excluding him from social settings, such as gatherings at the bar and so on. His health worsens, and he seeks alternative solutions to the treatments with which the American doctors can provide him. He creates the Dallas Buyers Club, which allows its members to receive medicine that helps more than what the doctors provide. Through this, he meets Rayon (played by cisgendered Jared Leto) – the relevant character for this analysis.[12] Rayon is a HIV-positive trans* woman addicted to drugs, and Ron does not

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[12] It is important to note that in the script of the film, written by Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack, Rayon's

get along very well with her in the beginning. After starting his Buyers Club, Ron realises that he needs Rayon's help to bring customers in, and the two finally become business partners and close friends.

5.1.1 THE PATHETIC RAYON

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are well-established tropes that exist and that are often employed in presentation and representation of trans* women in media. This is also the case for Rayon's character. While not out to deceive anyone, Rayon's immediate problem is often during the film that she fails to "convince" or "pass" as a woman, as Serano calls it (Serano 2007: 38ff.). This is clear throughout the film within various contexts and situations, which will be analysed throughout the following pages.

The first time we meet Rayon in the film is about half an hour in, when Ron is admitted to the hospital and is placed in the same room as her. Ron tries to make a move at his doctor, and we hear Rayon telling him that he has no chance with his doctor at all, followed by her telling him that she finds him "handsome, in a Texas, hick, white trash, dumb kind of way" (Borten and Wallack 2012: 24). Ron – feeling threatened by her attitude towards him – tells her to go away, but when Rayon asks him if he wants to play cards with her, he allows her to sit down and talk. Rayon, having a very loving and feminine way of talking (Serano 2007: 41, 61, 163), compliments Ron's feet. Ron, obviously again feeling threatened by Rayon's identity, snaps and yells at her that he is straight and not at all interested in her. Ron's reaction is closely connected to Butler's heterosexual matrix: convinced that Rayon is '*actually* male', and therefore should perform as such – in more masculine ways and with a more masculine tone of voice and choice of words. Rayon is visibly upset over this, but still seems more happy than sad over finally having someone to talk to at the hospital room she is in. To put it another way, to Ron, Rayon is not a woman, but a man dressed in women's clothing; a male who does not convince anyone that she is a woman. Going back to Serano and McKinnon's tropes, this is a typical example of a 'pathetic' trans* woman. As Tobias Raun argues, the

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character is referred to as a cross-dresser (Borten; Wallack 2012: 21, *Los Angeles Times* 2014) and as he/him (ibid.). However, by Leto who plays Rayon, the character is referred to as she/her (Anderson-Minshall 2013, *Los Angeles Times* 2014) because he decided to play the role as a trans* woman (Copier and Steinbock 2017: 928, Anderson-Minshall 2013). Other scholars who have written about the film also refer to Rayon as transgender (Ford 2016) and as a trans* woman rather than as a cross-dressing man (Copier and Steinbock 2017: 928, Lester 2015: 150, Raun 2016: 24). Based on this, the character of Rayon will in this analysis be analysed as a trans* woman and referred to as such, with the pronouns she/her, even though the pronouns "he/him" is used in the script.

popular assumption regarding trans* women such as Rayon is that they are "truly men and although they identify as/want to be female, their masculine appearance and *mannerism* always give them away (Raun 2012: 21, my emphasis).

Ron's (and others') convincing that Rayon is *not* a woman is especially present in the way that the different people around Rayon are talking to and about her, and which pronouns they use. In a scene where Rayon is very sick, Dr. Eve and Ron go to her house to pay her a visit:

> **EVE** What the hell do you think you're doing?!
> **RON** Helpin' him [Rayon], that's what.
> **EVE** He's a participant in a clinical trial, we need to get him to the hospital!
> **RON** So they can fuck him up even worse?
> *Ron disregards her protests, starts to inject Rayon.*
> **EVE** Are you out of your mind?! If anything happens to him--
> **RON** Relax, it's just a little vitamin boost, A, C, zinc.
> (Borten and Wallack 2012: 36)

In the quote above, both Rayon's doctor (Eve) and her friend Ron dismiss her identity as a trans* woman and treats her, talks about her and refers to her as if though she was male. Completely disregarding Rayon's identity, the two also laugh or disregard her when Rayon suggests that she wants to have breast (enlargement) surgery done, and when she tries to discuss her attire or makeup with them. While Copier and Steinbock (2017) argue that surgical or hormonal treatment, as well as Rayon's desire to pass, is never discussed in the film, I read her character as wanting to pass – or at least loosely dreaming of it – precisely because she asks Ron about what she would look like with breasts:

> [Ron and Rayon are sitting at a cafe.] A busty waitress floats by.
> **RAYON** How bout that size? Those would look good on me.
> **RON** You ain't gettin' tits, Rayon. (…).

Why the desire of passing (or not) is not discussed in the film, could be because Rayon's character, as Copier and Steinbock discuss,

> rather than reflect the fluidity of 80s trans cultures in which to be a queen[13] could include being gay or a partial bodily transformation, the character of Rayon appears a composite of sexualized stereotypes about various gender non-conforming identities, practices, and desires.

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[13] Here referring to drag queens, which Rayon's appearance and character is based on, according to Copier and Steinbock (2017). See also part 5.1.2.

(Copier and Steinbock 2017: 928)

Agreeing with Copier and Steinbock, I argue that the film does portray Rayon as a cluster of all the different tropes and stereotypes that exist regarding trans* women and trans* identities in general. However, I argue that the sorrow in Rayon's eyes when being called a faggot, or her sceptical looks when being referred to as male also hint at an unspoken wish to pass as a woman, rather than a male cross-dresser.

An example of this is when Ron and Rayon are at the supermarket together. Ron runs into an old (former) friend of his, T.J., and the two exchange their hellos. When Rayon appears in the same aisle as the two, the following conversation takes place:

> *Rayon appears at the other end of the isle. T.J. sees him[14] and laughs.*
> **T.J**. Jesus, faggots everywhere.
> *T.J. looks at Ron for confirmation. Rayon reaches them and throws a bag of chips in the cart.*
> **RAYON** Hi.
> *T.J. and Ron don't answer. An awkward beat.*
> **RON** This is Rayon. *(off T.J.'s silence)* He said hi to you.
> *Rayon sticks out his hand. T.J. doesn't respond.*
> **RON** Shake his hand, T.J.
> *He doesn't.*
> **RON** Come on, buddy, what's your fuckin' problem?
> *T.J. gives Ron the finger. Ron grabs T.J.'s hand and twists it behind his back. T.J. resists, tries to get out of Ron's grip but can't. He finally extends his hand. Rayon shakes it.*
> **RON** Good. Now get the fuck outta here and go back to your miserable life.
> (Borten and Wallack 2012: 47)

T.J., being one of Ron's former friends, who refused to have anything to do with him after it was revealed that he had the AIDS virus, is afterwards shown with a face that expresses humiliation and anger, and he leaves. Rayon almost tears up, and shows pride in that Ron stood up for her. Furthermore, T.J.'s choice of words is here important. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2018), the term "faggot" has several different meanings, but used in this context refers to a derogatory and offensive term used when referring to...

> a homosexual man, sometimes *spec.* one considered to be effeminate; (occasionally) a lesbian. Also more generally: any man considered to be effeminate; (as a term of abuse or

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[14] As stated earlier in this chapter, the writers Borten and Wallack did not write the character of Rayon as a trans* woman, but as a male cross-dresser.

contempt) a weak or cowardly man or boy; a sissy.

(Oxford English Dictionary 2018)

The term may also, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, be used in self-reference, or as an adjective for any man who is "lacking power or vigour; weak, cowardly; ineffectual" (ibid.). Douglas Harper (2019) argues that the North-American usage of the word (as quoted above) may derive from the English usage dating back over four hundred years, where the term has been used in an abusive manner towards women (Harper 2019). The choice of T.J.'s words is therefore not only important, but also relevant when analysing Rayon's character. She is not understood by T.J. as a woman, but as a homosexual man. The common misconception – here exemplified by T.J. – that trans* women are cross-dressers, or simply (homo- or heterosexual) men wearing feminine attire, is important to keep in mind, because male cross-dressers do not necessarily want to live their lives as women (GLAAD 2019), whereas trans* women most often do. So when Ron and his friends misgender her, and when they call her "faggot" and "Tinkerbell"[15] they are dismissing her and her female identity and recognise her only as a "failed attempt"; a pathetic trans* woman, unable to pass as a real woman. Ron and his friends do not have knowledge regarding her identity, and are therefore "disconnected from the lived experiences" (Pease 2010: 177) of Rayon. This could be one explanation – though not an excuse – as to why they react to her with homophobic slurs. Leslie Feinberg (1992) in line with Bob Pease (2010) discuss empowering the working class in order to become more understanding and accepting to minorities. This is of course easier said than done. Pease discusses what the dominating group of people (in this context the working class environment Rayon is surrounded by and partakes in) has to do in order for this to happen, and provides examples of alternatives of how this can be done by critical dialogue (Ron and Rayon *do,* after all, become friendly after a while of knowing each other). What is lacking in Rayon's instance, however, is for the working class men to *want* to talk to her. As the Ron and his friends are portrayed in *Dallas Buyers Club,* it becomes apparent that the working class men are a homogenous group of people. They share interests and worries, and these worries are material ones regarding their socioeconomic situation, and what it certainly is not is LGBT*Q+ issues, as they 'do not have time or interest' in prioritising this (McGinn and Oh 2017). Their perception of Rayon is that they do not recognise her and who – or *what* – she is, and therefore react with fear and ignorance.

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[15] This is also a derogatory term for a homosexual man.

5.1.2 Stereotypically Feminine Presentations of a Trans* Woman

Serano explains how the trans* women portrayed as 'deceptive' are in fact being shown as 'real' women in the beginning, and that later are revealed to be "fake" (Serano 2007: 37ff.). This is, however, not the case with Rayon; she never goes through a kind of 'reveal'. Her problem is, as discussed earlier, more the problem of 'convincing'. The people around her do not take her seriously. The distinction between what is real and what is fake (or artificial) will be further discussed in the following examples.

"In virtually all depictions of trans women, whether real or fictional, 'deceptive' or 'pathetic', the underlying assumption is that the trans woman wants to achieve a stereotypically feminine appearance and gender role", Julia Serano explains (Serano 2007: 41). The image Rayon represents in *Dallas Buyers Club* is indeed highly stereotypical. During the first scene in which we meet Rayon, Ron is pictured wearing his hospital gown and a tired look on his face, while Rayon is shown wearing makeup, ripped tights, a pink, floral headscarf, and a pink robe. Laura Copier and Eliza Steinbock (2017) criticise this:

> Rayon's scripted "girl" look borrows heavily from the iconography of the fabulous drag queen (wigs, heavy makeup, and sexy clothing) and cross-dressing (fetishistic shots of her at the mirror, caressing her clothing). (Copier and Steinbock 2017: 928)

There are many instances in which we are exposed to Rayon's stereotypical femininity and feminisation; she is shown putting on make-up, focusing on her feminine attire (for example, she asks dr. Eve whether or not the plunge on her dress is too deep, and becomes upset when being told that it is); she dresses in fur coats and fishnets, heels and jewellery. This is not to state that there is anything wrong in dressing feminine (as Serano ever so slightly hints at[16]), but when it is a part of this stereotype, when – as Parker Marie Molloy (2014), amongst others, discusses – hyperfemininity and hypersexuality is dangerous when it becomes expected of and/or forced upon someone. There is a reason as to why the feminised (and/or sexualised) trans* woman *is* a trope, and Rayon's character fulfils just about every 'criteria' to

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[16] In chapter two of *Whipping Girl*, Serano discusses that "there are certainly some trans women who buy into the mainstream dogma about beauty and femininity, others are outspoken feminists and activists fighting all gender stereotypes." (Serano 2007: 35). I find it important to note – though not necessarily relevant for this discussion – this is an important point where I disagree with Serano; it is my belief that you can indeed express your gender identity in a feminine manner and still be a feminist and an activist fighting against the patriarchy and sexist stereotypes. The problem is, as stated earlier in this essay, when it becomes demanded or expected.

this trope not only is Rayon a (former) prostitute, she also dresses feminine, she has HIV, and she is dying from it (Copier and Steinbock 2017). What is being focused on, however, is the fact that *she is a trans* woman*, and what her looks have got to do with this. Rayon is interested in flirting, home decor – she paints the Dallas Buyers offices "Cranberry Mocha for the [Christmas] holidays" (Borten and Wallack 2012: 58A). These seemingly small incidents throughout the film seem harmless, and at times also funny. Nevertheless, it is exactly these incidents that are dangerous due to the character of stereotyping. These images and these incidents feminise Rayon, and makes her an example of the trope that trans* women always want to be hyperfeminine. Surely a feminine (trans*) feminine woman could worry about other things than the colour on her walls or the plunge of her dress.

As such, the hyperfemininity of Rayon becomes even more prominent. The artificiality of her identity as a trans* woman is always underlined, not only because she is always referred to with the male pronouns, but also – as discussed – she is often seen putting on makeup and *doing* her femaleness and femininity. Even more revealing, is that her name itself – *rayon*, (which is today more commonly known as viscose) – is a manufactured fibre made from cellulose, in order to resemble silk and other fabrics, a fabric that is undoubtedly on the cheap end of the scale and available to those that might have less money to spend on fabric. In other words, *rayon* is created to *resemble the natural* fibre of silk (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019) – Rayon resembles a 'real' woman, but her name hints to that of the fundamentally synthetic and unnatural.

5.2 FEMININITY IN TRAINING – BECOMING LILI

The Danish Girl (dir. Tom Hooper) is a 2015 biographical drama film based on a novel by the same name, written by Davis Ebershoff (published in 2000). It is inspired by the lives of Lili "Elbe" Ilse Elvenes (played by Eddie Redmayne) and Gerda Wegener (played by Alicia Vikander). The painter couple Einar and Gerda Wegener live together in the early 1900's Copenhagen. One day, when Gerda (as a portrait painter) asks Einar to stand in as a ballerina model for her painting, Einar's hidden and undiscovered identification as a woman is slowly unveiled. This leads to a huge change for Einar, who then struggles with leaving Einar behind

and *becoming* Lili. Gerda, her wife, is supportive yet she lacks understanding of Lili's situation. She takes Lili to a doctor in hopes of "solving" the crisis, but this ends in Lili almost being committed to a mental hospital. After trying to find a solution, and after Gerda and Lili move to Paris to explore career opportunities together, one of Lili's childhood friends sets up a meeting between Lili and a Dr. Warnekros. This doctor suggests a new and controversial take: he suggests that Lili has sexual reassignment surgery done, an operation that (at the time) had never before been tried, and that was extremely dangerous. Lili agrees, and travels to Germany to undergo the surgery. Lili ends up dying from the surgery. The film has received criticism for its presentation of historical inaccuracy, and in real life, Lili Elbe died from complications regarding a uterus transplant – not the first surgery she had, as the film portrays (Sørensen 2016).

5.2.1 HOW TO BECOME A WOMAN

Rachel McKinnon argues, in her (2014) essay "Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women" that the feminisation process, the process of "girling" (see Butler in chapter 3.5) – or in other words; – the learning process of becoming a trans* woman, is often portrayed in media. She uses the example of the opening scene of the 2005 drama comedy *Transamerica* (dir. Duncan Tucker) which shows the main character practicing her female voice using a voice training video called "Finding Your Female Voice" (ibid.: 6, see also Serano 2007: 41ff.). In *The Danish Girl*, Lili is taught how to do these things by her wife Gerda. Gerda wants to go to a kind of a dance or social gathering in order to meet other artists and to network, but she finds it boring unless her husband comes with. Einar (Lili),[17] as he hates these kinds of events, refuses. Gerda, however, convinces him to dress up as Lili for fun and join her at the event. Over a number of days or hours before the event – no specific time frame is set here – Gerda teaches Einar/Lili how to wear dresses and how to walk in high heels, how to put makeup on and how to gesticulate as a woman. She emphasises the importance of *soft* movements and placements of hands when sitting down, and so on. I want to relate this to Serano's discussion on the feminisation of trans* women. She argues that there is an "underlying assumption" (Serano 2007: 42) that all trans* women want to adhere to stereotypical feminine norms, as well as to a stereotypical 'female' gender role. She argues that the media often "captures trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman's

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[17] At this point Einar is not yet identifying as Lili, and I have therefore decided that using both names is fitting in this context.

femaleness is an *artificial* mask or costume. (Serano 2007: 42) [Author's emphasis (former) and my own emphasis (latter)].

In the quote(s) above, Serano argues that not only does the media assume that all trans* women want to look a certain way (stereotypically feminine), but that the media also proves a point out of having trans* women characters on screen putting on makeup and choosing which dress to wear, and for example – just like Lili Elbe – practicing how to wear high heels. McKinnon describes these as "popular portrayals of gender transitions [which] focus on the learning process trans women often go through, sometimes to unlearn their socialized male mannerisms and to develop their own feminine selves" (McKinnon 2014: 6). This can be connected to the trope of the artificial trans* woman. As discussed in the theoretical chapter, most 'girled' individuals go through this kind of behaviour, through this learning of how to be (or act as, or perform as) a woman. The fact that this is seen as a point of artificiality in trans* woman identities, could as such be argued to be based on an assumption that trans* women do this more deliberately than cisgendered women, or because it comes later in life and as such is an act of more visibility or noticeability (ibid.: 6ff.).

As mentioned in chapter 4.5, McKinnon argues that popular media portray trans* women as "(...) falling over in heels, making poor fashion choices" (McKinnon 2014: 862), and in general practicing feminine 'skills' (such as "walking with a feminine gait "and showing "'feminine' mannerisms, such as in how one places one's hands, and so on" (ibid.). There are so many scenes in which this happens in *The Danish Girl*, you could almost be fooled to think that McKinnon based her article on the film. Gerda teaches Einar/Lili[18] how to put makeup on (though as a landscape painter, Einar/Lili actually proves to be a better makeup artist than their wife even though she has been doing it for – I assume – years, and works as a portrait painter – might this have anything to do with Einar's masculine capabilities?), and she also teaches Einar/Lili how to walk, how to smile in a more feminine way; how to do everything from walking in heels to sitting down *in a feminine way.*

When discussing this – the performance of femininity – I am brought to the scene in which

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[18] See previous footnote; Einar is here not yet identifying as Lili or fully embracing his/her female identity, so I have chosen to use both names in this context. This is also how the character is scripted at this point in the script (Coxon 2015: 22ff.).

Lili goes to a "whorehouse" and watches a peepshow of a female stripper. Leaning in close to the glass between them, Lili mimics the stripper's behaviour and gesticulations. However, as Amy Nicholson in a debate article (2015) also points out; peep-show strippers perform or playact "a faux femininity *for men*" [my own emphasis]. What is here referred to as "faux femininity" is that the peep-show stripper performs a type of femininity through body language, looks and behaviour that is generally seen as attractive and desirable by (heterosexual cisgender) men. When Lili mimics these movements, she thus also mimics femininity, which makes her look similar to a caricature, and more than anything, as a performance or an act.

Another example of how femininity in Lili Elbe's case becomes something more of an imitation is revealed in how the camera frames her when getting ready as Lili – when she puts on makeup, gets dressed and similar. The first time we meet Lili, Gerda helps her with putting on lipstick. Carol Grant writes in an opinion piece that:

> [there are] extreme close-ups of the lipstick rubbing against Redmayne's lips [the actor]. When Einar touches a dress for the first time, we get more extreme close-ups of the fabric rubbing against Redmayne's skin accompanied by heavy breathing and operatic strings courtesy of Alexandre Desplat. (Grant 2015)

Examples like the ones above (and the many more there are to be found in *The Danish Girl*), could lead to the audience questioning binary and mainstream ideas of gender, but due to the way that these images and characters are shown, this never happens. Instead, argues Serano, this is all undoubtedly linked to artificiality. When popular media show images of "'biological males'" (Serano 2007: 43) dressing in feminine attire (and/or wearing makeup) or behaving in another stereotypically feminine way, "the media neutralizes the potential threat that trans femininities pose to the category of 'woman' by playing to the audience's subconscious belief that femininity itself is artificial" (ibid.). Serano continues by claiming that while people in general think that femininity comes natural to women, they are still expecting them to spend hours every day on getting ready to meet societal standards by "putting on their faces and getting all dressed up" (ibid.), while men's masculinity comes from who they *are* and what they *do* (ibid.).

What this thus means, is that trans* women (such as Lili here is an example of) are portrayed in the media putting on feminine clothes and makeup without ever achieving "real" or "true"

femininity or womanhood. There are many cases in *The Danish Girl* in which we see Lili getting dressed or getting *un*dressed. The fact that we do not see her wife Gerda – or any other characters for that matter – doing the same thing in the same extent, further proves the point of the representation of Lili as artificial. By showing the act Lili performs when getting dressed, rather than just having her *wear* clothes in the same way as the other characters in the film, shows exactly what Serano criticises: as Lili puts on her lipstick and her dress, she becomes a woman, whereas a masculine ("'biologically male'" (Serano 2007: 43)) man would not have to do anything similar, because he already *is* a man.

There is a specific point within the film where Einar finally *becomes* Lili. This happens one evening when Gerda and Einar go to bed together, after having had a childhood friend of Lili and a recent friend of Gerda over. Lili asks to borrow a nightdress to sleep in, and this is when Gerda starts to accept her husband's female identity:

> **GERDA** Sleep now. We'll talk more tomorrow.
> **LILI** Can I borrow a nightdress?
> *Gerda's shocked.*
> **GERDA** No... we've never done that. Lili's never spent the night...
> *Einar confesses:*
> **LILI** It doesn't matter what I wear. When I dream, they're Lili's dreams...
> *Gerda struggles to accommodate this, very reluctant... But she gives in, nods. What else can she do?*
> *INT. PARIS APARTMENT, BEDROOM, LATER*
> *Gerda in bed. Lili's sleeping head on the pillow next to her, where Einar's once was.* (Coxon 2015: 54).

Not only do we as spectators see this as the moment in which Gerda accepts Lili's female identity, but the actual phrasing in the script suggests that this is the turning point for Lili: "Lili's sleeping head on the pillow next to her*, where Einar's once was"* (ibid. [My own emphasis]). Einar is no longer there.

Though Gerda somewhat reluctantly comes to accept Lili's identity, the context of the time, place and social circle the two of them were moving in also comes to mind. While Gerda and Henrik (see 5.2.2) come to accept Lili, the medical doctors and psychiatrists she meets with do not, they believe that Lili is mentally ill. Though Lili was one of the first people ever to undergo sex reassignment surgery, they did still live in the early 1900 century Europe, and even though trans* persons were not unheard of, it was not as 'common' as today.

5.2.2 SWITCHING FEMININITY ON AND OFF

Serano explains that as a trans* woman, she is met with confrontation by people who claim that she is not and will not ever be "'a real woman'. One of the more common lines of reasoning goes something like this: *there is more to being a woman than simply putting on a dress*" (Serano 2007: 35) [author's own emphasis]. However, in *The Danish Girl*, while it is not the defining point for Lili herself, the episode of the nightdress described above is certainly the defining point for Gerda, and also for us as viewersspectators. When she puts it on, her wife and closest friend accepts (though "reluctantly" (Coxon 2015:54)) who she is.

A couple of nights later, Gerda is upset that Lili did not come to her vernissage and the two argue about who needs the other's support the most. Gerda exclaims,

> **GERDA** You should have been there!
> **LILI** How could I be? Look at me!
> *This further enrages Gerda -*
> **GERDA** Not everything's about you!
> *Gerda is suddenly overwhelmed with emotion -*
> **GERDA** (cont'd) I need to see Einar.
> *Lili flinches, shakes her head, touches Gerda, tender.*
> **LILI** Let me help...
> *Gerda cuts her off sharply, desperation building:*
> **GERDA** I need my husband. Just get him!
> (Ibid.: 57f.).

In the quote above, Gerda seems to believe that Einar is hiding behind Lili – or perhaps within her – and that if Lili just 'gets it together', she can bring him out again. Gerda is in other words an example of people who believe that trans* women are in fact just men dressing up as women, that this is something temporary that Lili or Einar can choose. This is an idea that further contributes to the trope of trans* women as artificial. Gerda's thoughts makes it seem as though Lili's identity lies in the feminine attire; if she peels that off, perhaps Einar will come back too. Again, as with the case of Rayon, this can be connected to the heterosexual matrix. If everything outside of the heterosexual gender binary is deviant (Butler 2010), so is Lili.

This is apparent in the way that Lili acts in sexual situations. Just as Mira Bellweather (in Steinbock 2018) explains; trans* women are seen as someone – I quote again – "who

couldn't conceivably even HAVE a sex life" (ibid.: 29). Though her discussing Lacan and the "desexualized status of the lesbian", I find it fitting to include Butler here:

> [This is] the necessary result of a heterosexualized and masculine observational point of view that takes lesbian sexuality to be a refusal of sexuality per se only because sexuality is presumed to be heterosexual, and the observer, here constructed as the heterosexual male, is clearly being refused. (Butler 2000: 63)

When finding herself in sexual or romantic situations with her wife Gerda, Lili pulls away and refuses Gerda's advances and loving caresses, to Gerda's sadness and confusion. Another example on this sexual/romantic refusal happens during Gerda's social gathering – Lili's first night out as Lili. Here she meets Henrik:

> Lili sits at the edge of the dancefloor on a bench carved with mermaids, a nerve fluttering in her cheek. We see a young man, HENRIK SANDAHL, study her closely - closely enough to see she is *not everything she appears*, but this only seems to intrigue him. He sits beside her. (Coxon 2015: 24 [my own emphasis])

The two end up kissing, until Lili pulls away, shocked – over her and Henrik's actions. The two later spend more time together, and become closer and more friendly. In a scene in Henrik's own home – into which he has invited Lili – he tries to touch her more intimately, but Lili refuses at once when she feels his hand on her thigh. The point of bringing Butler into the discussion here, is that even though she writes about lesbian sexuality, it seems fitting to also include other forms of *deviant* sexualities into her argument. In the film, Lili does not act on her sexual and romantic desires, and this could perhaps be, as Bellweather (Steinbock 2018) argues, that in popular media, trans* women do not "have" this desire. "Sexuality is presumed to be heterosexual", as Butler argues (Butler 2002: 63). Later in the film, Lili tells Gerda that there is 'nothing between' her and Henrik, because he is homosexual (Coxon 2015: 81) – adding even more to the argument that 'deviant' sexualities have no place in popular film and cinema, and the heteronormative audience that these have.

5.3 LARA, THE 'FAKE' FEMME ON *POINTE*

In the Belgian[19] drama *Girl* (dir. Lukas Dhont 2018) we meet fifteen-year old Lara (played by cisgendered male Victor Polster) whose biggest dream is to become a ballerina. The film tells the story of the many complex issues she faces because of her being assigned male at birth, and of her starting hormonal treatment. Not only is the ballerina profession and education generally known for being notoriously harsh and demanding, but going through puberty as a trans* woman[20] does not at all make it any easier. The film is, as with the previously analysed *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*, inspired by a true story, and in this case it is that of Belgian Nora Monsecour, a trans* woman ballerina.

Lara lives in an apartment in a city in Belgium with her father and her younger brother Milo. Her father is supportive of her gender identity, and both he and Lara's younger brother call her "Lara", rather than the male name she was assigned at birth. Lara is starting hormonal treatment, and also wants sex reassignment surgery done. When Lara meets with a psychologist and a medical doctor routinely in between her dancing classes, her father comes along. This is not only to show his support towards his daughter, but also because he is aware of the fact that Lara finds that the progress is way too slow. Using tape, Lara tucks her penis against her medical doctor's advice during her ballet practices to hide her male genitalia from her classmates. Being a part of the girls' class at school, her fellow students are being made aware of her trans* identity and are asked by the teacher if anyone has any objections to her using the same changing room and restroom as the other girls. Being put on the spot like that, Lara is visibly upset, but there are no objections. There are however examples of humiliation and transphobia both within and outside of the classrooms. A critical moment in Lara's life and a tense moment for the viewer audience happens when Lara tells her doctor that she believes the hormonal progress is too slow, and that she wants to increase her dose. Because of her physical state due to hard work – both physically and mentally – and a decrease in appetite, her doctor refuses to allow this. This leads to a scene that has been heavily criticised by trans* audiences of the film for being "harmful" and "damaging" (Whitney 2018) , as well as "cinematic barbarism" (Brennan 2018): Lara calls the emergency services, grabs a pair of

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[19] As the movie is Belgian, and the film's script as such is written in mainly French and Flemish, I am not using quotes from the script in the analysis of Lara. Rather, I describe scenes and verbal exchanges.
[20] While Lara is only 15 years old (and the film is called *Girl*, I choose to call Lara a trans* woman in this analysis. This is because this is who she wishes to be, and this is who she is becoming. The societal norms for teenage girls are, after all, not dissimilar to those expected of young women.

scissors, and cuts off her penis.

5.3.1 FEMININITY IN TRAINING

The film opens with a scene showing Lara in her bed, leaning forward and doing her stretches while the yellow morning sunlight shines through the curtains, already setting a feminine, soft frame for Lara's character. While Lara stretches against the wall, the camera focuses for an uncomfortably long amount of time on the bottom half of her body, revealing the form of her male genitals covered by a pair of short, floral pyjama bottoms. Already here, the genitalia is in focus and the audience are, due to the camera angles and panning, made explicitly aware of Lara's identity, sex and gender. Dhont makes it clear that the audience needs to understand *what* they are looking at. When looking at Hall (2013) and Dyer's (1977) discussion on *types* and typifications, as well as that of categorisation – as mentioned in chapter four, it is clear that Lara's penis becomes a way for the audience to categorise her and familiarise themselves with who she is (or perhaps *what* she is). The gender binary, as well as the "Western, heterosexual hegemony" (Chinwuba 2014) as the norm, teaches us that having a penis means that you are male. While Dhont obviously knows – and forcibly wants to show his audiences – that Lara is a trans* feminine woman, his focus on Lara's genitals is undoubtedly a result of his cisgendered male gaze (finding male, aesthetic and sexual pleasure and interest in looking at something) (Mulvey 1975). Paired with the floral shorts and the soft movements and colours, Lara becomes *feminine* in the audience's eyes.

The next scene shows Lara piercing her own ears. Earrings are today seen as a typically feminine accessory, and the audience understands that Lara wants her body to physically change fast – not an uncommon desire for a teenager, but more understandably so when the film plays into the woman-trapped-in-a-man's-body stereotype. As Lara also is herself, the audience is constantly reminded of Lara's trans* identity. At her ballet school, she is told again and again that her *pointe*[21] is not as good as the other girls', because "the other girls started their pointe training at age 12" (exclaimed by her unnamed ballet teacher). This is another example of how Lara needs to practice, to build and work on her feminine traits – and her feminine body. However, only seconds later the same teacher tells her – referring to

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[21] A word deriving from the French "sur les pointes" used in ballet to describe dancing on the tip of your toes (Christensen 2019).

Lara's body – that "some things can never be changed". Here she hints at Lara's anatomy, and the enthymeme in what she says, is that she does not believe that Lara can ever be as good as a ballerina as the other girls, because she is not one, and *can never really truly be*.

Furthermore, Lara's way of behaving can undoubtedly be described as hyperfeminine: the way that she *gracefully* moves her hands and feet, with the caution and precision she dresses and puts on her makeup, and with the way that she talks and the tone of her voice, there is an obvious connection to what McKinnon calls the "feminisation process" (see McKinnon 2010, Serano 2007). Her entire profession can also be seen as a sort of feminisation process; ballet is a very gendered profession with strict rules regarding gender, but also regarding looks, all about moving gracefully and being feminine. Lara's femininity is, however, constantly being questioned due to, among other things, her biological sex. During ballet classes, the camera shows the other girls' upper bodies, showing young female bodies going through puberty and developing breasts, before showing Lara's flat chested body – again revealing that the focus is on the corporeal transition of Lara more than anything else.

5.3.2 LARA'S BIG REVEAL

There is in general an extreme amount of bodily focus in *Girl*. There are countless scenes in which she stares into a mirror at herself and her body – much like Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl*, but far more often. Caressing her own body, looking at her breasts, at her genitals, at her face and at her hair, the audience experiences an obsession with Lara's looks, coming from her. Furthermore – in not only one, but five – scenes, Lara is seen ripping tape from her genitals and her behind after tucking (a practice trans* women before bottom surgery sometimes turn to in order to hide their male genitals) during ballet class. While tucking is a reality for a lot of trans* women (Whitney 2018), the way that Dhont shows it in *Girl* is filmed in such a way that it is hard as a spectator to learn anything about what it could be experienced like to live as a trans* woman and rather, a feeling of "disgust" (ibid.) is evoked, as we watch the way the skin around her genitals turn red after slowly removing the tape, rather than sympathy or understanding.

At a sleepover party with one of Lara's female classmates, the girls present joke around and tries on clothes for each other. This also includes that some of them strip down to their underwear (in order to try on different items of clothing). One of the girls compliments Lara's bra, and the attention is turned to Lara. What follows is pressure from the girls to see Lara's penis. "Is it real?", "how does it feel to have one?" are amongst the questions asked. Eventually, Lara reluctantly drops her skirt and pants. The amount of pressure put on Lara in this scene can be described as an abuse of power from the other girls' side, a kind of violence towards Lara and her integrity, her privacy and her body, and once again reinstating Lara's position as an outsider and a freak, and as a *non-woman* (ibid.). The time for Lara's Big Reveal (Steinbock 2017, Seid 2014) has come.

Though Lara struggles with her body image, especially after the Reveal, she receives a great amount of support from both her immediate family (except from in one instance when her younger brother Milo is upset and wants to hurt her by calling her the masculine name she was given at birth) as well as the medical staff she encounters during her appointments regarding hormonal and sex reassignment surgery and treatment. Whether this is due to the film taking place in 2018 Belgium – a country where it has been legal to change one's gender since 2007 (Motmans 2010), or an increase in trans* awareness in general, is debatable, but I argue the two are entwined: with awareness comes acceptance. When discussing intersectionality, however, it is also clear that Lara's social situation as a white, middle-class trans* woman undoubtedly also plays a role in the way that she is accepted and treated by both medical staff and her family and peers (see for example Gehi and Arkles 2007).

5.3.3 THE CISGENDER GAZE
Going back to the male gaze, as discussed previously, this does resonate well with the heterosexual matrix to analyse Lara's character. Let us call this the cisgender gaze. When Lara is accepted into the ballet school, the first thing that happens on her first day of school, is a good example of this. Her teacher takes attendance and uses a few minutes to introduce the new students to the old ones, and the other way around. When he gets to Lara, he asks her what her name is and to tell something about herself. After Lara's brief presentation of herself, the teacher asks her to close her eyes, and asks the other (female) students to raise their hands if they have a problem with Lara sharing the showers and locker rooms with

them. Already now, Lara's position as 'other', 'deviant' and 'unnatural' (Steinbock 2017, Serano 2007, Seid 2014) is marked, as well as her status as an 'artificial' woman.

The (very) present cisgender gaze, then, – as an opposition to Halberstam's "transgender look"/gaze (Halberstam 2005) – is not only present in the plot and in Lara's character. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the way that she is positioned in the film, and the way the camera pans over her body, also underlines this. Samantha Riedel (2019), in a debate article for an online queer magazine, explains this very well:

> Most scenes that don't contain some amount of nudity are those which focus on dancing, and are almost always bookended by shots of Lara changing, showering, tucking and untucking, bleeding, and urinating. After only ten minutes, the feeling becomes claustrophobic; the cis gaze here is relentless, its morbid curiosity digging tenaciously into the viewer's own flesh. (Riedel 2019)

The way that Lara is filmed and the way that she is obsessing over her looks, makes it seem as though trans* issues are limited to the corporeal. Furthermore, it contributes to the idea that trans* persons are always suffering corporeally, and focusing on this. The ending scene in which Lara out of desperation for not being allowed to increase her hormonal dosage, turns to cutting off her penis, furthermore adds to this. Not only is this highly illogical, as she was explained to by her medical doctor that she would need her penis in order to undergo the vaginoplasty procedure, but also dangerous in that it could possibly be used as an example by other trans* youth who struggle under similar circumstances. Again, the stereotypical idea that all trans* people want to undergo surgery and hormonal treatment becomes present (Serano 2007: 229ff.), and that the process of becoming a trans* woman is purely physical.

5.4 THE HETERONORMATIVITY OF TRANS* FEMININITY ON SCREEN – IN SUMMARY
Jean Luc Godard argues that "the act of representation almost always involves violence toward the object of representation" (Watson 2018). When looking at the characters of Rayon, Lili and Lara, one might start to agree with his statement. The amount of time spent on portraying and presenting these three trans* women as *hyper*feminine is not only limiting to their potential and agency as human beings and as trans* feminine women, but it directly plays into the hands of the 'trans* woman in lipstick and heels' (Serano 2007) trope. When

femininity becomes so entirely focused on what it is and *where* it is in relation to what the masculine and masculinity is and *is not*, a problem presents itself: does one need femininity to be a woman? Is it femininity that makes the woman? Of course not – there are plenty of masculine women and "tomboys" (Serano 2007) in the world (Halberstam 1998). The characteristics of the three trans* women presented in the three different films are, in somewhat different ways, all portraying a stereotypical image of femininity. I discuss, throughout the analysis (5.1-5.3), to what extent this is present, as well as how the cisgender gaze and the heterosexual matrix is involved in this.

The way in which Rayon dresses, talks – as well as her personal interests, are all built on the heteronormative idea that femininity is something different than masculinity – as something 'other'. Rayon engages in a hyperfeminisation of herself, through wearing stereotypically feminine colours, deep plunges, lots of makeup, as well as adapting a feminine vocabulary and tone of voice. In *Dallas Buyers Club,* there is a hint at a former history between Rayon and Dr. Eve. When Rayon dies, however, Ron and Dr. Eve end up developing a closer relationship, and – at last – heteronormative peace is restored and a happy ending ensues. In Lili's case, the idea that anything remotely deviating from heterosexual relationships or heterosexuality could take place, is absolutely horrific for both Gerda (though she learns to come to terms with it) and the medical doctors and psychologists. Lili is taught by her wife how to present herself as feminine: she is taught how to 'walk the walk' and how to not be 'discovered' (in other words; how to pass!) as a woman – another example of a binary understanding of gender within the film, until she finally seeks medial help to achieve this. Lastly, Lara struggles with her body image and wants to physically alter it – just as both Rayon hints at, and as Lili goes through with. The femininity/-isation of Lara starts at a very young age, and she finds that self-mutilation is the only solution; another example of how trans* people are often looked at as mentally ill, as discussed in the first half of this essay. In other words, the ways in which heteronormativity and the cisgender gaze presents itself in these three films are many, and the tropes presented by Steinbock (2018), Serano (2007) and McKinnon (2010) are very much present. Elio Iannacci stated that "TV is in the grips of a trans-formation" (in Poole 2017), but by that he surely can only have meant that there are more trans* identities present on screen, both in terms of fictional characters but also in terms of actors – though there is still a long way to go in both of these instances – because even though the 70s, 80s and 90s treated trans* characters as psycho killers or victims thereof, the lack of trans* agency is still as present today as ever before.

6.0 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this thesis, the representation of trans* women is theoretically discussed using three different popular films as material for the analysis. The aim is to discuss whether trans* women and trans* femininity is portrayed in a stereotypical way due to the (cisgender) heteronormative hegemony we see in popular media today. The main argument is therefore that there is a certain way in which trans* women are represented and categorised through stereotypical images of what trans* is, and what femininity is – and what it does.

The questions of how trans* women are represented in popular films and how (trans*) femininity is construed, as well as whether this representation of the characters' femininity is affected by heteronormative ideas and values is discussed using a theoretical framework as tools for the analysis. These questions are discussed in a dialogue with Julia Serano's activist thoughts on femininity in a combination with Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix and gender performativity ideas, as well as Eliza Steinbock and Rachel McKinnon's discussions on (trans*) representation in popular media. The analysis is divided into four parts, where the three first ones are devoted to a character from a film each, and they each discuss the characters' (different) representations and portrayals of femininity. The fourth and last part of the analysis consist of a summary where the three characters are gathered in a final, summarising discussion on the heteronormativity of their representations. When it comes to the material is being analysed, the three different characters Rayon, Lili and Lara all show different ways of being feminine and showing femininity. However, they all fit into the tropes that are presented by Serano, Steinbock and McKinnon. These tropes are based on the heteronormativity of popular media's portrayal of trans* women using several examples from different time periods, and as such also lay the foundations of my theoretical chapter.

In the first part of the analysis – Failing Hyperfemininity – the character of Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* is examined. The title is chosen on the basis of what her character is portrayed as: she appears hyperfeminine, but is unable to *convince* her peers that she is a woman. In other words, a portrayal of Serano's pathetic trans* woman trope. The second part discusses *The Danish Girl*'s Lili and her 'femininity in training'. She can, through the way she performs femininity and appears amongst her peers, be seen as an example of the artificial trans* woman trope. The following third part focuses on Lara, the young trans* ballerina in

the movie *Girl.* She shows hyperfemininity in the way she performs, and is an example of the cisgender gaze and obsession with genitals as a reveal of *who* or *what* trans* women 'really' are. The three aforementioned parts all answer the two first research questions of how trans* women are portrayed and how femininity is construed in popular media. They also lead us towards the third question, which focuses on whether these portrayals are based on heteronormative values. The final part of the analysis summarises how the three women can be read as examples of heteronormative trans* women stereotypes, and as such answers the third question.

What is striking to me in this essay is that even though LGBT*Q+ awareness is becoming more and more present in our daily lives in the Western world, the stereotypes of these identities in popular media are still present. While decades ago, trans* feminine characters were portrayed as either psycho killer (or victim) tropes, or that trans* characters are only included as a comedy gimmick, the trans* characters portrayed in the films that are analysed are also highly stereotypical. I discuss that this could be because of the heteronormative hegemony that rules the popular media discourse and what we, as audiences, are exposed to.

As the previous research I discuss in this thesis proves – and as with any other representation analysis – when it comes to analysing films (and media in general), the choice of material will of course affect the analysis. If I would include films that have trans* characters played by trans* women and not cisgender men, the results would perhaps look different. This is something that would be interesting to work on further: would the heteronormative values still shine through in a completely different context?

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