

Becoming a Better Man as a Woman: The Transgendered Fantasy in 1980s-1990s Popular Films

Elizabeth Abele, SUNY Nassau Community College, USA

I was a better man with you as a woman than I ever was with a woman as a man—I just have to learn to do it without the dress.

—*Tootsie* (1982)

In response to cultural shifts in the 1960s and 1970s, late twentieth-century American men in the popular imagination seemed to go to great extremes to learn, like Michael Dorsey of *Tootsie*, to be a "better man." This included the extreme of experiencing life "as a woman" to escape the perils of being male. Following *Tootsie*, a stream of 1980s and 1990s Hollywood movies depicted transgendered adventures or male protagonists switching gender without surgery or major lifestyle commitment (see filmography). Not coincidentally, this period followed the major push of second-wave feminism, which permanently established the questioning of masculine privilege and gender roles, though the "answers" may still be in flux today. [\[1\]](#) As Rachel DuPlessis writes: "[...] the Women's Movement did change culture. And still has the capacity fundamentally to call social and cultural arrangements into question" (DuPlessis, 2006: 49).

What is striking about these films is their effort to address the crisis in masculine identity through femininity, brought on not only by the women's movement, but also the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Ironically, this temporary femininity saves the male protagonist from himself and society. Whether late twentieth-century men really needed saving is less interesting than the continual portrayal of their crises in American culture and press. David Savran writes: "The self-appointed guardians of male spirituality are unanimous in imagining masculinity as a fragile and vulnerable commodity—oppressed with 'internalized oppression'" (Savran, 1998: 296). Both cultural conditioning and the male body were alternately blamed for this failure of American manhood to thrive in a postfeminist society.

In looking at the 1980s recovery of American masculinity after the malaise of the 1970s, film critics have generally focused on the hyper-masculinity of action films and their heroes, as epitomized by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, that Susan Jeffords termed "Hard

Bodies" (1994). As Yvonne Tasker writes, this "over-developed body" functions as a "triumphal assertion of a traditional masculinity or hysterical image, a symptom of the male body in crisis" (1993: 109). Key to both Jeffords' and Tasker's work is that the male body exists as a problem, with muscle-building a cover-up for fragile masculinity.

Concurrent with the overdeveloped body in action films, transformations of the male body occurred in other Hollywood films, often working as a cure for "toxic" masculinity. There were the boy-to-man movies of *Like Father, Like Son* (1987), *Vice Versa* (1988) and *Big* (1988); identity-swapping in *Total Recall* (1990), *Shattered* (1991) and *Face/Off* (1997); holiday transformation in *Santa Clause* (1994), *Jingle All the Way* (1996), and *Jack Frost* (1998); and the miscellaneous physical trauma of *The Fisher King* (1991), *The Doctor* (1991), *City Slickers* (1991) and *Regarding Henry* (1991). By the end of the film's narrative, the male body is generally restored, carrying a revised masculinity.

These films represent a *forced* disruption, transformation, and/or masquerading of the male form as an essential step in the male protagonist's emotional journey. At the beginning of each narrative, the adult man is unable to sustain intimate relationships. Though these films all end with a celebration of the reformed, sensitive husband/father/lover/friend, Fred Pfeil (speaking specifically about the last four films noted above) rightly points out the profound distrust of the male body implied by these films:

If white straight men cannot be changed short of shooting them, there is not much use pressing them to do so; nor since their terrible behavior comes so naturally to them it might as well be rooted in their blood, is there much risk of turning into them *if you happen to be a woman*. (Pfeil, 1995: 61, my emphasis)

The boy-to-man films suggest gender may be less of a problem than the *adult* male body, implying that maturing physically leads to regressing emotionally. Tania Modleski notes that man-boy Josh in *Big* is positioned as more mature than his male colleagues ("He's a grown-up!"), but as he becomes more used to his adult body he becomes self-absorbed and boring (1991: 97).

This essay is specifically interested in how this hysterical anxiety over the American male body in the 1980s and 1990s paradoxically manifested itself in the opposite direction: male protagonists moving toward femininity, specifically as a means to recover their potency as men. Instead of seeing films like *First Blood* (1982) and *Tootsie* as being diametrically opposed, it may be more interesting to see them both as responses to a common set of anxieties about American manhood, equally focused on a transformation of the male body. Not surprisingly,

the most complex transgendered films of this period were independent or non-American productions (for example, *M. Butterfly* [1993], *The Crying Game* [1992] and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* [1994]). However, since I am examining mainstream attitudes toward American masculinity, my focus will be on major Hollywood releases. Hollywood's overt exploration of gender fluidity that achieved critical mass in the 1990s is worth studying, both as a sign of the active questioning of gender roles during this period and a key step toward the development of twenty-first century gender construction.

In addition to documenting the frequency of the transgendered fantasy in Hollywood, this essay interrogates specific gender values implied by these films. Judith Butler stresses the importance of unraveling the ways these "gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts" (1990: xi). The fable of the transgendered fantasy that occurs in films from *Tootsie* to *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Switch* (1991) and *Junior* (1994) surprisingly circulates less a progressive approach to sexuality than a deep ambivalence toward masculinity, particularly regarding a man's ability to respond to a postfeminist world. Repeatedly, the mature male body is portrayed as inadequate, presenting a barrier to the emotional growth and intimacy that is positioned as essential in contemporary society.

While these gender-ambivalent texts may appear to expand definitions of gender, it is disappointing that these films most often promote traditional, heterosexual positions, even if the "woman" in the relationship is physically or psychologically a man. Choosing to be female in these populist texts is not judged but is positioned as a mainstream-acceptable move. As Lynne Segal comments: "There can be few times in history when being female has been quite so fashionable a preference for men" (Segal, 1990: 279-280); but is this fashion necessarily good news for women (or men) if it reinscribes traditional constructions, merely changing who may adopt them?

The portrayal of literal transsexuals—individuals who choose to permanently change genders—in Hollywood films has been infrequent and ambivalent: the ex-football star Roberta (John Lithgow) in the picaresque *The World According to Garp* (1982); the scheming actress (Cathy Moriarty) in *Soapdish* (1991); the murderer in *Ace Ventura* (1994); and the serial killer Buffalo Bill (Ted Tally) of *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The few dimensional portrayals have been in the lower-profile dramas *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997) and *Transamerica* (2005), though *Transamerica* still made the choice to cast a familiar actress rather than an actor born biologically male. [2]

Despite this mainstream discomfort with transsexuals, as film characters or in person, the fantasy of transgender occurred frequently in Hollywood

films as a positive path for men toward emotional wholeness. In examining these transgendered fantasies, it is of value to note the version of masculinity/ies that borrowed femininity is used to recuperate, and for what if any benefit. As exciting as it would be if these mainstream films presented clear and insightful images of a gender/sexuality continuum, it is nonetheless of interest how the transgendered fantasy simultaneously critiques, celebrates, reforms and reinforces traditional constructions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity.

This transgendered fantasy has taken two basic forms in Hollywood films: the transvestite movie and the fantasy/paranormal movie. Though the transvestite film, from *Some Like It Hot* (1959) to *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), represents only the superficial change of gender, the narratives of these films frequently contain moments when the physical gender of the cross-dresser is ambiguous, presenting the possibility of gender change that is more than silk deep. In paranormal films such as *Switch* and *Dead Again* (1991), men psychically and/or metaphysically inhabit female bodies, as part of their journey toward personal development and intimacy.

Butler poses the question: "What other foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original and the inevitable?" (1990: viii). These gender fantasies deliberately expose and manipulate the production of gender, disrupting the inevitable to recapture the sensation of a gender identity that feels natural and original. The following sections document the range of these transgender explorations in the last decade of the twentieth century in both the transvestite and paranormal mode. At the same time, this essay interrogates their (often simultaneous) appropriating, recuperative, patronizing, progressive and reactionary impulses.

Clothes Make the (Wo)man

The most common stratagem for gender-bending films of the late twentieth century was transvestism, with male protagonists donning dresses for a wide variety of reasons. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* was a big-budget, highly-promoted Hollywood film that followed the adventures of three drag queens: Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze), Noczema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) and their protégé Chi Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo). As a guide to Chi Chi—and perhaps to the film's mainstream audience—Noczema offers the following set of definitions:

When a straight man puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks, he is a transvestite. When a man is trapped in a women's body and

has a little operation, he is a transsexual. When a gay man has too much fashion sense for one gender, he is a drag queen.

Despite this explanation, the three divas apparently have only one gender: that of straight (and celibate) women. Swayze's and Snipes' characters are only seen out of drag during the opening sequence, as the film cuts between the two emerging from showers and applying make-up and feminine attire. Swayze does a touch-up shave at a dressing table, before proclaiming, "Ready, Set, Go. Here comes Mama." Swayze and Snipes complete their transformation into Vida and Noczema to the song "Body Beautiful," which opens with the question "Where's the Body?"—as their male bodies disappear for good.

Like *To Wong Foo*, recent Hollywood films that feature cross-dressing or metaphysical gender-swapping are less interested in presenting clear and consistent definitions of transvestism, transsexualism, homosexuality or womanhood than in escaping the confines of the male body and American masculinity. Despite their seemingly open attitudes, these films are more interested in recuperating heterosexual, white men than they are in new constructions of gender.

As Pfiel notes, women are not in the same danger from their bodies as men. Even though there are female-to-male transvestite films—notably Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria* (1982), Whoopi Goldberg in *The Associate* (1996), Nia Vardalos and Toni Collette in *Connie and Carla* (2004)—the implied impetus of these films is very different. It is society that needs transforming, not women. Female-to-male transvestism is a straightforward move to gain power and access. What these female characters learn is neither surprising nor profound: as males, they enjoy more power and more freedom. Thus, female-to-male transgendered films do not serve the complex, psychological needs that occur in the male-to-female transgender move.

The male to female move is less *logical*, since it involves a move to a less powerful position. Its popularity therefore means the move provides something more valued than power. "Forced transvestism," where a character dresses as the opposite gender because of a plot necessity, has a long theatrical tradition from *Twelfth Night* (1602) to *Charley's Aunt* (1892). However, in these more recent incarnations, the cross-dressing male comes to value his temporary transvestite experience for the significant lessons learned: "to be male is not to be 'sexed'; 'to be sexed' is always a way of becoming particular and relative" (Butler, 1990: 113). By becoming female a man may move from the universal to the particular, construct a revised masculinity, and feel "just as proud to be a woman, that was the best part of my manhood, the best part of myself" (*Tootsie*).

Even actors that take on cross-dressing roles have commented on the effects of the experience, prompting critic John Simon to wish that Dustin Hoffman would stop saying how playing Dorothy Michaels changed his life, even if it did (qtd. in Bell-Metereau, 1993: 203). Like Simon, I am skeptical of the facile lessons these male characters (or the actors who play them) experience through a brief, elective sojourn in high heels. John Lithgow's comments on playing the transsexual Roberta may be revealing: "I had the feeling that I was conducting a prolonged, illicit love affair with myself" (*Ibid.*: 195). Lithgow's comments capture the elements of a temporary transgendered experience: the rediscovery of lost aspects of self; the forbidden nature of this union; and the revelation that a "unified" male may have less need for literal women.

As I have noted previously, *Tootsie* was the first Hollywood film to strategically blend the theatrical convention of forced transvestism with the postfeminist desire to reform a heterosexual man. In the foreword to the 1983 edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan heralded the box-office success of *Tootsie* as proof that America had "now clearly broken through and beyond the *masculine mystique* for man and woman to find such joyous adventure in being a woman" (Friedan, 1983: n.p.). Friedan credits the experience of Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) as Dorothy Michaels as "mak[ing] him a much better, stronger, more tender man" (*Ibid.*: n.p.).

Nonetheless, the gender victory of this 1982 film is not without its costs. Adrienne Auslander Munich accuses *Tootsie* of using "current attention given to new gender definitions in order to reassert old ones," noting the film's homophobia and the indecisiveness of the female characters. Munich finds particularly disturbing the unsympathetic characterization of the female producer: the only strong female character in this film is "tricked by a parody of herself" (Munich, 1984: 115). In addition, *Tootsie* establishes a plot construction repeated in later transvestite films like *To Wong Foo*, where a man (as a woman) teaches women how to be successfully female—re-inscribing patriarchy despite the feminist window-(cross?) dressing.

These crossed characterizations of *Tootsie* illustrate the challenges in examining images of the "feminized" man in popular culture. Feminist objections to the hypermasculinity of 1980s action film may be expected, but less obvious are the problems flashed by the gender-skipping male. These narratives tend to appeal to and flatter female audiences, while engaging male viewers by presenting a man's ultimate triumph. However, some victories are more costly to women than others, as these "georgy-porgys" who have run away from the other boys may attempt to rule the girls' playground. Instead of a valued resource, femininity may be merely a last frontier for the white male to colonize. After noting how the female body has been used to bear tasks beyond the "eternally

adolescent male," Tania Modleski warns: "an analysis of the manipulations of the female body in and through representation" is a vital task facing feminism (1991: 111).

Tootsie was followed by a wide range of films that use transgendered elements to address the perceived crisis in male maturity and emotional growth. Transvestism in *Tootsie*, *To Wong Foo*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire* explore the boundaries of sexual anatomy: "Does putting on a dress and a wig make you a girl?" (Munich, 1984:112). [3] By "becoming a girl," these characters gain the opportunity to learn more about themselves and the confines of masculinity.

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar was a much-anticipated film, promoted for the novelty of drag queens as protagonists in a big-budget Hollywood film. The roles of Vida and Noczema were highly sought after by major Hollywood stars, who even consented to screen tests. [4] This competition demonstrates that gender-switching has been seen not only as consistent with a (heterosexual) male star persona, but as enriching it. One trailer for this film featured Swayze and Snipes in action clips, supposedly from previous action roles, with the tag line: "Now they are taking on their most dangerous role!" After affirming their macho (heterosexual) status, their portrayal of "women" is presented as proof of their courage and manhood, rather than as a disparagement.

The marketing of the Swayze and Swipes as action guys on a "new" adventure is consistent with how notable drag performers Charles Busch and Susanne Bartsch viewed the film. Though they felt it was nice to see drag presented positively, with attention given to quality drag performances, Bartsch commented: "As far as realness, they didn't pass at all. They were guys, and they were all along guys to me." Busch likewise saw the film as an entertaining fantasy, rather than dealing with the protagonists as real (gay) men: "Even a woman takes off her girdle eventually. [...] This is *E.T.* with falsies" (*Entertainment Weekly*, 1995: 50). Overall, the three drag protagonists function as idealized dual-gender figures rather than offering coherent messages about societal restrictions on gender or sexuality.

In the course of their road journey, the "girls" of *To Wong Foo* gain a greater degree of confidence in their personal identities. However, greater importance is placed on their transformation of a small town. The trio teaches the female residents to find strength in their femininity and the men to be respectful protectors. Hence their role is more to reinscribe traditional gender roles (even teaching a young girl to flirt), rather than to break down barriers.

Surprisingly, the family-oriented *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) may offer a more progressive view of gender than the ostensibly gay-themed film *To Wong Foo*. *Mrs. Doubtfire* presents a male character as in need of transformation as Michael Dorsey, without feeling the need to promote homophobia or helpless women. The film's opening is very similar to *Tootsie*'s. Like Michael, Daniel (Robin Williams) is fired from an acting job for refusing to follow direction. After his professional failure, his failure as a father and husband is next demonstrated. As a father he is over-indulgent, not enforcing his son's grounding and throwing a party so over the top that the house is trashed. His wife, Miranda (Sally Fields), is forced to pick up the pieces after a hard day at the office. This is the last straw for his architect wife, who throws him out and restricts his visitation. He cross-dresses and accepts a job as his ex-wife's housekeeper to be with his children, though he did little to manage the household as a man. However, Daniel gains more than he expects from his increased commitment to the home while wearing a dress.

Significantly, *Mrs. Doubtfire* largely avoids misogyny or homophobia as it reforms its inadequate male protagonist. Miranda is not less of a woman or a mother for being a successful professional. She is committed to spending time with her children and quickly begins a romance with an old flame (Pierce Brosnan). The film also does not express the anxiety toward homosexuality that appears in *Tootsie*: a pass that an older man makes at Mrs. Doubtfire does not create the same anxiety as passes made at Dorothy; and a gay couple—Daniel's brother and partner—is presented positively. This integration of gay characters into a comedy without making them punchlines is unusual and significant.

As Mrs. Doubtfire, Daniel becomes a better father, a more supportive partner to his wife, and a successful actor. Mrs. Doubtfire, unlike Daniel, runs a strict household, insisting on homework being done and the house being clean before play, with the family sitting down when their mother returns from work. The eldest daughter thanks Mrs. Doubtfire: "I haven't seen my mother this happy in a long time." Like Michael Dorsey, Daniel is a better partner as a woman than he ever was as a man, truly supporting his wife for the first time. The Hilliards do not reconcile, with more importance placed on their becoming friends and partners in raising their children than on a traditional definition of family.

At the end of the twentieth century, the dress emerged in Hollywood as a powerful weapon that a real man could pull off and enjoy. Cross-dressing also became linked to other social progress. In the update of *Wild Wild West* (1999), James T. West not only wears a dress, but he has become black, played by Will Smith. [5] When asked how Will Smith looked in drag, producer Jon Peters commented: "Gorgeous! Sexy! Provocative! I'm sure his wife was a little upset but Will looked like he was having the time of his life." Transvestism is presented as useful and fun to the most

macho of men, if he has the courage. Unfortunately, instead of coming closer to a real understanding of themselves, gender or women, these films mostly present a new territory to be explored, mined and conquered.

Virtual Femininity

While transvestite films may imply a fluidity of gender, other 1990s fantasy films allowed male characters to fully inhabit female bodies, completing the separation between sex and gender to facilitate male individual growth. The fantasy nature of *Ghost* (1990), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992) makes the psychological nature of the gender transformation more apparent. These gender-swapping films seem to offer a wider playing field, moving from a parody of femininity found in transvestite films to a fuller experience: "the mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether" (Butler, 1990: 12). These films take transgendered fantasy further than transvestite films, exploiting "both the potential and the danger of the collapse of gender and sexuality" (Straayer, 1996: 70). The potential to experience individuality is not defined by a single gender but becomes genderless and dual-gendered.

These gender-swapping films allow their male protagonists to escape fully what they perceive as the confines of the male body. Susan Bordo writes in *The Male Body*: "there are still those associations, for many men, with the ugly, the instinctual, the 'primitive' nature of the penis's experience" (1999: 21). Through film's separation of sexed bodies and gender status, "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" (*Ibid*: 6). As free-floating artifice, transgender experiments become a more available learning experience. As transsexuals' ability to pass as female is constrained by the limits of surgery, so are transvestite films hampered by the limits of make-up, dependent on the suspension of disbelief. Fantasy elements allow gender-swapping films to transform their male protagonists without resorting to caricatures of feminine traits and dress. Their identification with the feminine also has more to do with how a woman thinks and feels than with external definitions of how a woman acts or behaves.

The gender-switching film that attracted the most attention from cultural critics was Blake Edwards' *Switch*, though it presents the most disturbing gender stereotypes. Steve Brooks (Perry King) is a womanizing ad executive who is murdered by three former lovers. Since God (portrayed as dual-gender) and the Devil (decidedly male) cannot decide whether Brooks belongs in heaven or hell, they make a bargain that he will go to heaven if he can find one woman who likes him; but he must find out in the body of a woman (Ellen Barkin). As Amanda ("a man-duh"), Brooks learns what women really thought of him, as well as what men like him put attractive women through.

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Unfortunately, it is hard to be too sympathetic to the women that the former Steve mistreated since they are a shallow, self-serving lot. In an attempt to succeed professionally (by landing a large account) and personally (by winning the Devil's bet), Brooks uses Amanda's sexy appearance to seduce a major client, Sheila Faxton (Lorraine Bracco). Brooks' behavior toward women as Amanda is no different than his behavior as Steve: women are a means to an end, bodies to be manipulated, and undeserving of love, respect or compassion.

Though Amanda fails to find a living woman who loved Steve Brooks, Amanda herself is loved, though she may not requite it. The only person who loved Steve Brooks was his best friend Walter (Jimmy Smits), who also seems to truly love Amanda. Brooks' female incarnation makes it not only easier for Walter to express his love, emotionally and sexually, [6] it also allows Brooks to become pregnant. Though Amanda is able to express love to her unborn child, she remains unable to accept Walter's love. Brooks as Amanda is no more capable of giving or receiving love to a partner than Brooks was as Steve. Though Steve is unredeemed as a man, Walter demonstrates that a man can be emotionally capable to be a true friend, lover, husband and father.

In *Switch*, Steve Brooks' male body is at least partially responsible for his boorish behavior. Jeffords notes that Brooks is only asked to change in the present, not to take responsibility for past misdeeds: "the logic seems indisputable: because they have been trapped in bodies not of their own making, men don't have to take responsibility for the acts those bodies have committed" (1993: 204). Jeffords' comments are consistent with the notion that mature male body is blamed for a man's difficulty to give or receive love.

While *Switch* may be clear that the gender system is destructive, and that male bodies may be in the way, other films that present fantasy gender transformations offer more hope of recuperation. Films such as *Ghost*, *All of Me* (1984) and *Heart and Souls* (1993) present ambitious men who are incapable of fully committing to their personal relationships. These men's bodies are disrupted by the fusion of a living body with a spirit/spirits of the opposite gender. In *Ghost*, Sam's ghost must function through the body of a black, female psychic. The protagonists of *All of Me* and *Heart and Souls* manage to keep their bodies, but they are personally transformed after sharing their bodies with female ghosts.

In *Ghost*, Sam (Patrick Swayze) seems a man who has it all: good-looking and successful, he has a great job, great apartment, a beautiful artist-girlfriend, and an equally handsome best friend/colleague (Tony Goldwyn). But Sam is incapable of telling Molly (Demi Moore) that he loves her or of discussing marriage; and he doesn't know that his best friend is using the investment firm to launder drug money. After Sam is

murdered he can only communicate through Oda Mae (Whoopi Goldberg), a medium who is both female and black. Only by inhabiting Oda Mae can Sam learn to fully express his love to Molly, first through her speaking his words, then later when he inhabits Oda Mae's body to touch Molly one more time. Expressing his love once and for all to Molly frees him to ascend to heaven, as well as freeing Molly to go on, secure in the knowledge of his love.

The fantasy films *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992) and *Junior* pick up on *Switch*'s womb envy, with reproduction presented as central to the advantage that women have over men. In *Prelude*, the old man who trades bodies with the new bride (a metaphysical switch triggered by simultaneous wishes) longs to become pregnant, and experience the closeness he witnessed between his wife and daughter. In the science-based romantic comedy *Junior*, Alexander Hesse (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is an antisocial research scientist who is merely an observer of people and reproduction. However, through hormone therapy, he becomes a mother and a real man.

Alex's transformation begins in the name of scientific observation. Alex is working with Larry Arbagos (Danny DeVito), an obstetrician/gynecologist who is also having trouble with his manhood, his marriage dissolving over his inability to impregnate his wife. Together, these celibate men have developed a drug to prevent miscarriage but cannot find a female test subject for the drug's approval. To further their research, they implant a fertilized embryo in Alex's body, with a booster of female hormones, originally planning to terminate the pregnancy as soon as they have sufficient data. Though Alex agrees to the experiment for coldly clinical reasons, the combination of hormone injections and pregnancy transform his personal outlook and awaken his "maternal desire." He therefore chooses to carry the pregnancy to term.

His move toward the feminine immediately transforms his relationships with others. As with Amanda and *Prelude*'s old man, pregnancy offers him human connections that he has never known. However, unlike Brooks, Alex also seeks a romantic connection with a partner. When he first meets fellow researcher Diana (Emma Thompson) he feels nothing for her, despite her accidentally landing full on top of him. Later, in his hormonal state, he finds Diana beautiful, falling in love with the woman who unbeknown to him is the mother (father?) of his child. Conversely, the work-obsessed Diana finds the estrogen-injected Alex irresistible. Female hormones improve Alex's ability to love and be loved.

Unlike *Tootsie*, this film is careful not to present Alex as superior to "genuine" women in allowing him to occupy a female position. Coincident with Larry's monitoring of Alex's pregnancy, Larry serves as the reluctant obstetrician for his ex-wife Angela (Pamela Reed), who became pregnant

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after a brief affair. Angela and Alex's pregnancies develop in parallel, without putting Alex in the position of the superior "woman"—unlike Dorothy Michaels and Vida Boheme. When Alex is forced to briefly cross-dress to hide in a health resort for pregnant women, these biological women teach Alex(andra) to be a better mother (as well as a better man for Diana) rather than his teaching them to be "proper" women. *Junior* manages to both confirm traditional heterosexual male/female relationships, while still allowing movement outside of traditional territories.

The richest and most complete transgendered transformation occurs in *Dead Again* [7]. In this romantic suspense thriller, it is assumed that detective Mike Church (Kenneth Branagh) and an amnesiac victim dubbed "Grace" (Emma Thompson) are the reincarnations of Roman and Margaret Strauss (also played respectively by Branagh and Thompson). In 1946, Roman was executed for the murder of his wife Margaret, who was stabbed to death by a pair of scissors. Grace's loss of memory and her voice in the present is tied to this old murder; her obsessive connection to this mystery is first revealed to us through her nightmares. [8] After an antique seller/hypnotist, Franklyn Madson (Derek Jacobi), regresses Grace, she discovers her vivid memories of the Strausses, regaining her voice and establishing the reincarnation theory. Despite her growing feelings for Mike, she feels destined to be murdered by him, as Margaret was by Roman.

To alleviate her fears Mike agrees to undergo hypnosis, where he learns he was actually *Margaret* in their previous shared life, not Roman. Since this revelation comes so close to the proving of Roman's innocence and the climactic struggle with the real murderer, the significance of this gender switch is left largely unexplored. Mike only confesses his previous identity as Margaret to a defrocked shrink. This film therefore contains two male-to-female transgender experiences: Roman's reincarnation as Margaret and Mike's experiencing his former life as Margaret. Grace never experiences her past as Roman, consistently and incorrectly identifying with Margaret during her past-life regressions.

This misrecognition is established for the audience from the beginning. The film opens in black-and-white, just before Roman's execution, with the scene presented as a flashback. Roman tells reporter Gray Baker (Andy Garcia) that he loved his wife and that he loves her forever: "This is far from over." As Roman takes the walk to his execution, Margaret stands at the end of the corridor. Scissors appear in Roman's hand and he begins to strike her, shouting "These are for you!" Grace, in color and the present, awakes screaming. This "flashback" told from Roman's point of view turns out to be Grace's nightmare. Since Margaret's screaming face dissolves into Grace's, the audience accepts the connection between the two women, ignoring the shift in point-of-view.

To minimize Grace's trauma, Madson had advised her to view the past as an observer, establishing her false identification with Margaret. The details of Roman's life consistently show him as passive: his fortune came from his first wife; his housekeeper Inga saved his life when he escaped Germany; and while Margaret's music career flourishes, Roman flounders, becoming in his words "a nobody." As Roman failed to protect his first wife, he fails to protect Margaret from being murdered by the housekeeper's son Frankie, who is jealous of Margaret's intrusion into the Strauss household. Roman's final passive act is to allow himself to be executed as penance for his wife's death, rather than telling the truth.

Roman's switch to Grace through reincarnation can be seen as a way of completing his love for his wife—"two halves of the same person"—as well as a choice to be the passive victim. This passivity is heightened in Roman's present life by Grace's spells of muteness and amnesia. In the nightmares, Roman/Grace occupies Margaret's position as the murder victim, with the Roman figure speaking Frankie's murderous words, "These are for you." Roman's guilt over not protecting Margaret transforms him into the actual murderer in the memory of his reincarnation, Grace. Rebecca Bell-Metereau notes that it may be easier for some "to mentally change one's sex into the naturally passive one than to live out one's own fully" (1993: 129). Roman's abandoning of the masculine and merger with his wife's form as Grace can be seen as stemming from his perceived failures as a man.

The relationship between the incarnations of Roman and Grace is complex and witty. Grace's real name is revealed to be "Amanda Sharp": *Roman/Amanda* and "Sharp" as in scissors, which the artist Amanda Sharp paints and sculpts. Both incarnations are creative personalities with a morbid bent: Roman was composing an opera about a monster; Amanda abandons painting seascapes to sculpt images of the murder weapon. Grace also shares Roman's suspicious nature: Roman is jealous of Margaret's friendship with Gray Baker; Grace is easily led by Madson to be afraid of Mike.

Like other female-to-male transformations, Margaret's incarnation as Mike is quite logical: she was always an active personality, without the doubts and self-recriminations to which Roman was prone. She is first introduced playing spiritedly at a concert, meeting Roman's passionate conducting head on: "Everyone was afraid of Roman, except for Margaret." As with the female-to-male transvestite films, Margaret's transgendered reincarnation merely allows her to occupy a position in life that is equal to her spirit and abilities. All of the women in *Dead Again* are portrayed as good, caring people, hampered only by their dependence on men. Reincarnated as Mike, Margaret has escaped this dependence. Although a former cop, Mike's specialty is not violence, but helping those

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in need by finding people. Mike likewise shares Margaret's appreciation for the arts, collecting antique furniture and playing the piano.

However, Margaret's spirit does not make the leap into a male body unscathed. Mike is first seen talking to a friend, backpedaling about how he's treated a woman he's been fixed up with: "I'm not looking for Miss Right; I am looking for Miss Right Now." His friends do not see his womanizing as amusing but an indication of his lack of maturity. Not coincidentally, Mike reveals the depth of his feelings for Grace just after learning his previous identity as Margaret. Seeing the world through Margaret's eyes, the faithful Mike becomes equally convinced of Roman's innocence and his love for Grace. While Roman failed to save Margaret from Frankie, Mike not only saves Grace's life but also solves his/her own murder. The conscious fusion of Mike and Margaret creates a man potent enough to save a woman and to truly love her. Unfortunately, Grace remains unconscious of her past either as Roman or as Amanda, learning little from her past experiences. While Mike aggressively follows a path of (self) discovery, Roman has chosen to withdraw from the responsibility of action through an unthinking merger with the beloved object of his wife.

Dead Again presents two very different emotional journeys of men through the female, while always maintaining a respect for the value of women. This film is a nice demonstration that not all journeys are equal. This suspense film may not discuss the significance of its gender-switching but instead, following in the steps of the master Hitchcock, the full psychological implications of these transgendered moves are embedded into the text, waiting to be explored.

These gender-swapping fantasies offer the experience of a more natural and sincerely internalized experience of womanhood than transvestite films that merely affect femininity through its trappings. With the exception of *Switch*, these films present wider definitions of gender roles, though uniformly presenting their "success" as the union of a heterosexual couple. While these films may avoid the homophobia of *Switch* and many transvestite films, they rarely acknowledge homosexuality as a possibility, so focused are they on recuperating men so that they may be worthy partners of contemporary women.

This article has documented the range and characteristics of transgendered images in American popular culture at the end of the twentieth century. What these films have in common most is a discomfort with contemporary masculinity. Though the attitudes toward women and gay men in transvestite and gender-swapping films may be ambivalent, confusing or downright hostile, they are consistent in presenting the transgendered fantasy as an avenue for a man to become a better *person*. These films resemble each other in narrative construction, showing a man trapped by his gendered body in patterns of boorish and

selfish behavior. Though these men may not freely choose their transgendered adventures, their experiences lead to a greater understanding of themselves and others. Femininity may often be positioned as a "lack," but in these films, femininity augments and enriches traditional masculinity.

These popular texts generally recuperate masculinity not by confronting how masculinity is constructed or why it is self- and other-destructive: the protagonists simply flee their maleness and/or their everyday lives, as well as any responsibility for the sins committed while their "true selves" were so confined. Thus, while these films celebrate the courage of those who cross gender, they accomplish little in real change and offer no solutions. Despite dabbling in ambiguous gender positions, by the end of the film, traditional constructions of gender are actually reinforced. Likewise, the version of femininity that men inhabit, the version of femininity that is their salvation, is generally a version of a female stereotype: feisty spinster (*Tootsie*), bombshell (*Switch*), glamour queen (*To Wong Foo*), or mother (*Switch, Junior*).

Ironically, these narratives of reforming/saving men are quite attractive to female audiences, even when they are insulting, patronizing or worse, because of women's own concerns about the "masculine crisis." Novelist Doris Lessing explains women's desire to bolster up men at any cost: "for the truth is, women have this deep instinctive need to build up a man as a man. [...] I suppose this is because real men become fewer and fewer and we are frightened, trying to create men" (qtd. in Segal, 1990: 23). Modleski similarly notes with concern the popularity among women of movies such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987):

While the desire to find alternatives to harsh notions of phallic paternity is entirely understandable, feminists need to be very clear about whether in endorsing these alternatives they are undermining patriarchal structures or, on the contrary, shoring up patriarchy against its ruins. (1991: 86)

These critics perceive women as so anxious to see and know potent men who are capable of some sensitivity that they are willing to accept whatever price they must pay, even disrespect or loss of position.

Films where the transgendered experience is limited—where only the trappings of femininity are experienced—have only minimal value for men or for women, and even less value to the lesbian, gay and transsexual communities. A deeper knowledge of other genders and sexualities can challenge and enrich an individual's constructed identity, yet few films actually capture the complexity of gender or sexuality. These Hollywood films were constructed to entertain their mainstream audiences, not to disturb their audiences by displaying truly open and flexible gender or

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sexuality. Some cinematic attempts at a more fluid gender identity may deserve applause, but always with caution and recognition of how far there still is to go.

Since the occurrence of the transgendered fantasy has slowed in the past decade, American men may have become more comfortable with their bodies' ability to function in contemporary society. The year 2000 marked the last major transvestite/transgendered films, with Martin Lawrence in *Big Momma's House* and Mel Gibson in *What Women Want*. Instead, Hollywood has turned to androgynous men like Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt and Johnny Depp, whose personas present a less rigid masculinity than Arnold Schwarzenegger or Mel Gibson, as their films often present fluid gender roles. For example, in *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999, 2003), Keanu Reeves as Neo is costumed to emphasize his similarity in appearance to Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), who fights as his partner. In *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), John (Brad Pitt) and Jane (Angelina Jolie) are both costumed in flowing white at their first meeting. Jane proves a more lethal assassin than her husband, with a greater fear of intimacy. However, the example of the 1990s transgendered fantasies remind us as critics and viewers to look closely at gender fables for their veiled sexism and homophobia as well as possibilities of incremental positive changes.

Notes

[1] I will use the term "postfeminist" in a historical sense, to refer to the period following second-wave feminism, at which point the concepts of gender awareness had been widely disseminated, without making any claims about their implementation. Likewise, "transgender" will refer to filmic presentations of gender fluidity, without making specific claims about the life experiences of transvestites or transsexuals.

[2] American television series that have presented male-to-female transsexual characters (*Ally McBeal*, *Just Shoot Me*, *Gideon's Crossing*, *The Education of Max Bickford*, *Nip/Tuck*, *Two and a Half Men*, *Entourage*, and *Ugly Betty*) have cast female actors, possibly to avoid a layer of sexual ambiguity and homophobic discomfort. In 2003, the Showtime film *Soldier's Girl* (Frank Pierson) cast male actor Lee Pace in a romantic, transsexual role. In 2007, *Dirty Sexy Money* cast Candis Cayne as the first transgender actress to have a recurring role on a prime-time series.

[3] A poster for *Tootsie* similarly asked: "What do you get when you cross a *hopelessly straight* starving actor with a dynamic red-sequined dress? America's hottest new actress" (emphasis mine).

[4] Despite his status after *Dirty Dancing* and *Ghost*, Patrick Swayze reported frequently how he had to beg for a screen-test: "I couldn't get

seen on it because everyone viewed me as terminally heterosexually masculine-macho" (*Sunday Star Times*, 1996: p. F11). Other respected actors who agreed to screen tests for *To Wong Foo* included Robert Downey Jr., James Spader, Rob Lowe, Viggo Mortenson, John Turturro, Willem Defoe and Kyle MacLachlan.

[5] Kevin Kline's Artemis Gordon begins the film in drag, which leads to a debate between West and Gordon about the proper filler for prosthetic boobs to have the right feel; their previous heterosexual experience with women's breasts leads to a suggestive homosexual moment. At different points in the film, both characters use their fake breasts as a weapon: Gordon's have a hypnotic device, while West's are flame-throwers.

[6] Amanda describes her sexual experience with Walter as date rape. Though I feel uncomfortable dismissing a female character's charge of rape, it seems totally inconsistent with the film's portrayal of Walter as the only decent character, male or female. It is more consistent with Steve/Amanda's character to deny feelings of attraction or love that Amanda might feel toward Walter.

[7] To discuss the full implications of this switch, it is necessary to read the film from the perspective of a surprise twist revealed three-quarters of the way into the film.

[8] The protagonists' connection to the murdered couple is not just established through casting, but through the Strauss mansion: Grace takes refuge at St. Audrey's, an orphanage housed in the former Strauss mansion; Mike Church, a graduate of St. Audrey's, is recruited by the principal to help her.

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Selected Transgendered Filmography**Transvestite Films** [chronological list]

Some Like It Hot. 1959. Dir. Billy Wilder. MGM.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show. 1975. Dir. Jim Sharman. Twentieth Century-Fox.

La Cage Aux Folles. 1978. Dir. Edouard Molinaro. MGM.

Victor, Victoria. 1982. Dir. Blake Edwards. MGM.

Tootsie. 1982. Dir. Sydney Pollack. Columbia Pictures.

Yentl. 1983. Dir. Barbra Streisand. Twentieth Century-Fox.

Just One of the Guys. 1985. Dir. Lisa Gottlieb. Sony Pictures.

Torch Song Trilogy. 1988. Dir. Paul Bogart. Sony Pictures.

Nobody's Perfect. 1989. Dir. Robert Kaylor. August Entertainment.

Nuns on the Run. 1990. Dir. Jonathan Lynn, 1990. Anchor Bay.

Ladybugs. 1992. Dir. Sidney J. Furie. Paramount Pictures.

The Crying Game. 1992. Dir. Neil Jordan, 1992. Miramax.

Mrs. Doubtfire. 1993. Dir. Chris Columbus. Twentieth Century-Fox.

M. Butterfly. 1993. Dir. David Cronenberg. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Mixed Nuts. 1994. Dir. Nora Ephron, Sony Pictures.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. 1994. Dir. Stephen Elliott.

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar. 1995. Dir. Beeban Kidron. Universal Pictures.

The Birdcage. 1995. Dir. Mike Nichols. MGM.

The Associate. 1996. Dir. Donald Petrie. Hollywood Pictures.

Wild Wild West. 1999. Barry Sonnenfeld. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Big Momma's House. 2000. Dir. Raja Gosnell. Twentieth Century-Fox.

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White Chicks. 2004. Dir. Keenan Ivory Wayans. Columbia Pictures.

She's the Man. 2006. Dir. Andy Fickman. Dreamworks.

Paranormal/Fantasy Transgendered Films [chronological list]

All of Me. 1984. Dir. Carl Reiner. Universal Pictures.

Ghost. 1990. Dir. Jerry Zucker. Paramount Pictures.

Total Recall. 1990. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. TriStar Pictures.

Dead Again. 1991. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Paramount Pictures.

Switch. 1991. Dir. Blake Edwards. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Prelude to a Kiss. 1992. Dir. Norman Rene. Twentieth Century-Fox.

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. Paramount Pictures.

Orlando. 1993. Dir. Sally Potter. Sony Pictures.

Heart and Souls. 1993. Dir. Ron Underwood. Universal Pictures.

Junior. 1994. Dir. Ivan Reitman. Universal Pictures.

Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde. 1995. Dir. David F. Price. Savoy Pictures.

What Women Want. 2000. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Paramount Pictures.