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**GENDER IN THE MAKING:
TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND PERFORMATIVITY IN FILMS
TRANSAMERICA (2005) AND *BREAKFAST ON PLUTO* (2005)**
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ABSTRACT

Film is a means of entertainment that has the power to influence people's perceptions on different topics, among them gender. This paper addresses transgender as it is expressed in film, which is a means of observing gender identities and social practices. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the extent to which one can apply a gender performative approach to transgender and how transgender identity and performativity are represented in films.

The introduction discusses the relationship between film and ideology as well as provides a brief overview of the historical representation of gender minorities in film. The first chapter is a theoretical analysis of transgender identity and performative subversion on the basis of Judith Butler's works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), criticism of her works, and a discussion of the experience of transgender. The second chapter provides a comparative analysis of the protagonists of two films, *Transamerica* (2005) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), based on the representation of their transgender identities, performative acts and communication with different social groups. The conclusion summarises the main findings of the analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Film has been one of the most influential examples of 20th-century popular culture. Frequently, film is perceived to be merely a means of entertainment and people do not critically think about the information presented to them (Gauntlett 2002: 2). Film is an important subject of analysis precisely because its impression of being only entertainment enables it to transmit ideologies covertly and influence the way viewers think and conduct themselves (Gauntlett 2002: 2). Ideology, in the context of this paper, is defined as the “organising and justifying ideas that people hold” that “seem to be universal truths, but are historically specific understandings that justify and maintain power” (Barker 2005: 85; 10). The relationship between film and ideology has been analysed in various ways. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2001: 74), a customer of the media is subjected to a controlled range of ideas presented by the culture industry. While these theoreticians of the Frankfurt School believe that the viewer cannot escape from the numbing ideology of popular culture (Horkheimer, Adorno 2001: 73), later theoreticians have argued that the influence of film is not so straightforward. John Fiske agrees to the extent that there is a ‘preferred’ reading of a cultural text; however, he believes that meanings are multiple and the audience can choose how they interpret popular culture and what they accept or reject (Gauntlett 2002: 24). According to this view, ideology does not have an unwavering and direct influence. This does not mean, however, that ideology loses its importance in the study of popular culture but rather that we need to analyse it in a nuanced manner.

Film theory has drawn upon many theoreticians of ideology. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1984: 44) states that “there is no practice except by and in ideology”, which feminist film scholars later adopted as a means of locating patriarchal ideology as the prevailing discourse in film (Hollows 2000: 45). He also states that “there is no ideology except by ... and for subjects”, which is linked to his notion of ‘interpellation’,

the hailing of an individual into subjecthood by ideology (Althusser 1984: 44; 48). The category of subject is necessary for ideology because subjects consequently function under its influence while believing ideology is natural. Film theory later uses Althusser's concept to explain the political effect of film, as film has a similar power to interpellate the viewer as a subject (also a gendered subject) and position the subject in a way that film's representations are seen as reality (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 12). The Althusserian perspective demonstrates that film not only transmits the existing ideology but also has the power to produce it.

Film theory has also drawn upon the work of semioticians, Umberto Eco and Stephen Heath among others. One of the discrepancies between them and Althusser concerns the latter's assumption that a pre-given individual is interpellated as a subject by a pre-given representation (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 54). Heath sees the viewer not in a fixed position but in relation to the film text which makes signs or meanings for the subject to read, as a result of which he believes that subject formation is a process (Heath 1978: 58). Eco emphasises the importance of context in reading the signs a film provides (Eco 1976: 604). In other words, different viewers can read a film differently. Both Eco and Heath see film as a construction of an imaginary reality (Heath 1978: 68; Eco 1976: 604). Film produces particular notions of reality while leaving the impression of being a window to the world (Hollows 2000: 45). It has this quality because it represents the imaginary reality through the lens of a prevailing "common sense" ideology and, as a result, a film can leave the impression of representing the truth to audiences immersed in discourses and ideologies (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 60).

Film is significant because it "transforms the world into discourse" (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 40). Both the subject and reality exist within discourse (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 21), which is the central concept of Michel Foucault's poststructuralist work.

Although critical of both Marxist and semiotics approaches, Foucault shares some points of emphasis with them, such as the constructedness of the subject and reality (Foucault 1978: 60). Foucault's approach is more productive than Althusser's due to its use of power as dynamic, not a fixed substance (Gauntlett 2002: 117). Power is not something that ideology has over the subject but something that is produced by discourse; it is fluid and enables resistance (Foucault 1978: 95). Power can be used by both the ideology and the subject. This paper uses a combination of the aforementioned theories, making use of Althusser's ideas on ideology and interpellation, while keeping in mind Heath and Eco's importance of context and how subject formation is as a process, in light of Foucault's theory of power discourse, in order to provide a more dynamic and agentic insight into the nature of ideology and its influence in film.

According to Foucault, discourses shape the way people perceive the world as well as how they perceive themselves and mainstream film is a widespread channel for disseminating prevailing discourses (Gauntlett 2002: 133). Cinema gives people access to narratives, identities and situations that they would not encounter in their everyday lives and film may provide the only image of certain identities the viewer comes into contact with. Consequently, film may influence viewers' perceptions on different topics. It has the power to make things visible but also keep certain issues invisible. Following Foucault, we could say that film can police what is made available to the viewer (Lapsley, Westlake 2006: 20). Although film is not a tool in the hands of the ruling cultural hegemony, it often represents a prevailing ideology in a concealed way, which results in some topics or identities being invisible or (mis)represented in a manner that leaves a limited image of reality. This is a key issue in the relationship between film and gender ideologies.

One of the ideologies that films represent is that of gender, more specifically the notion of normative binary heterosexual hegemony. The traditional gender system is based

on the opposition of men and women. Each individual is assigned a sex, either male or female, at the moment of birth, or even earlier nowadays. This identification is believed to be the foundation of their self-identity (Barker 2005: 283). Through this naming a person is interpellated, using Althusser's (1984: 44) term, as an exclusionary gendered subject on the basis of a cultural hegemony where the subject-status of a person depends on whether they have a stable gender identity. The traditional and essentialist view is that gender is directly derived from biological sex. The second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s argued for a sex-gender distinction (Barker 2005: 240), which distinguished between gender as a cultural construction and sex as a biological materiality. Gender is not something one is but "a set of meanings that sexes assume" (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 3). Gender is fluid in the sense that different societies identify particular gender behaviour differently: what is considered masculine in one may be feminine in the other. Moreover, all individuals exist on a gender continuum as they fill different social roles, not in its extreme ends (hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine).

However, the sex-gender distinction has been questioned by numerous authors (Barker 2005: 282). They point out that without contesting the essential binariness of the sexes, binary heterosexuality remains the norm, complicating the defence of the rights of sexual minorities that the norm invalidates. Later theoreticians, like Judith Butler, have found both gender and sex to be culturally constructed. As a result of this, a wider understanding of gender politics and its non-binariness, through the example of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, has emerged. This is the main subject of study of queer theory, which emerged when the feminist movement started asking radical questions about gender roles and brought marginalised groups into public attention. Queer is "an approach to sexuality and identity" that argues against the binariness of sexes, rejects the hetero-homo binary that limits sexualities and sees identity in general as fluid (Cranny-Francis et

al 2003: 76). The deconstruction of the sex-gender distinction has enabled to demonstrate normative sex as a cultural construction, which will be analysed in depth in the theoretical chapter of this paper, and offers an alternative reading of gender that challenges the currently ruling dichotomous system.

However, the gender system itself has generally remained binary due to the physical marking of sex on the body, which leaves the impression of naturalness. Following the binary ideology, intersex children, who have gender-ambiguous bodies, are raised as either male or female on the recommendation of medical experts (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 5). Transgender people, however, are not exhaustively representable by the gender assigned to them at birth and, according to Stephen Whittle (2002: 6) and Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000: 51), a significant number of people in general do not fit into the binary sites of sex. Since the dominant ideology does not recognise genders outside the binary, alternative gender representations are usually made to fit the two binary categories or are claimed unintelligible by presenting them as an exception or as a marginalised abnormality. It is in the interest of ideological institutions such as the patriarchal heterosexual hegemony to maintain fixed identities (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 55).

Film may also contribute to the stability of this hegemony as film not only transmits ideology but also (re)produces and upholds it, and, as a result, an iteration of gender as binary leaves the viewer with a limited image of gender diversity. It is important to study gender ideologies in film because its production of ideology is not obvious. Moreover, according to Joelle Ruby Ryan (2009: 5), film can both reinforce the dominant gender ideology as well as provoke a re-examination of it. The representation of transgender is the main subject of interest of this paper because trans is a complex gender identity, it has both the power to affirm and subvert the binary gender ideology, and it has been one of the most underrepresented gender identities in film.

Before continuing with the analysis of transgender in film it is important to make a distinction between the different terms pertaining to transpersons. Many terms, such as ‘third gender’, ‘transgenderist’, ‘genderqueer’, exist to describe these complicated identities (Ryan 2009: 7). ‘Transgender’ is a widely used umbrella term that covers all individuals whose gender identity does not conform to normative sex/gender relations; it includes a variety of identities: transsexuals, butch lesbians, cross-dressers, drag queens, etc (Namaste 2000: 1). ‘Transsexual’ is a subcategory that refers to transgendered people who feel a rift between their gender identity and their material body or sex (Namaste 2000: 1). One of the main things used to differentiate transsexual from transgender is that a majority of transsexuals want to go through sex reassignment surgery while transgender people may not feel such a need. Since ‘transsexual’ is a term not preferred by many transsexuals themselves (Whittle 2002: 7), this thesis will use ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ as a less-exclusionary term and make the difference with ‘transsexual’ when needed. Both terms are relatively new and complex due to the numerous fluid identities they comprise.

Heterosexual relationships, which are based on the opposition of men and women, have been one of the most popular topics of the film industry since its inception. Films have traditionally been very heteronormative and the representation of any transgressive or “deviant” behaviours has been strictly sanctioned (Ryan 2009: 84). Most alternative gender identities were almost invisible in television and film up to the second half of the 20th century. Before that, if they were represented, they were not “real” but stereotypes that made fun of the idea of alternative genders (Russo 1987: 28). When homosexuality finally appears in film, it is repressed, as in *The Children’s Hour* (1961) where lesbianism is a “dirty secret”, or incorporated as something alien or sinister, as in *The Boston Strangler* (1968), where the main suspects are homosexuals (Russo 1987: 72). Later films, which abandon this pathologising image, focus on the sexuality not the humanity of gays and

lesbians (Russo 1987: 133). The representation of gay becomes more “normal” only when films begin to show homosexuals as humans who face social difficulties (*Beautiful Thing* (1996)) and are placed in the context of love and relationships (*Making Love* (1982) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987)). According to Russo (1987: 221), films should explore not gay people but human beings who happen to be gay, and “how their lives intersect with the dominant culture”.

Homosexuality has gone through a myriad of representations in the cinema. While some aspects of gay as humorous remain in popular culture, for example the gay friend as an accessory in the series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), nowadays, gay has become normalised, which can be seen on the basis of series such as *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *Modern Family* (2009). Homosexuals now appear in television and films in the way that Russo believed they should – as persons not just as a sexual orientation. The normalisation of homosexuality was already a goal of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, who asked Hollywood to “reinforce the myth that homosexuals are just like heterosexuals except for their attraction to the members of the same sex” (Russo 1987: 134), which was then denied. This is closely linked to the fact that they were an invisible minority at the time, but have now become a visible part of society. Gays and lesbians no longer seem very different from heterosexuals in contemporary popular culture. Visibility and adaptability are key issues.

An analogy can be drawn between homosexuality and transgender, which has been similarly invisible or misrepresented in different genres, including television and film (Ryan 2009: 15). The media is one of the few places where most people come into contact with transgender, through people like Chaz Bono from the US television show *Dancing with the Stars* (2005) and Isis King from *America’s Next Top Model* (2008). However,

these examples are few and far between. The progress of trans representation and acceptance in society can be found by looking at the history of transgender in films.

In the second half of the 20th century the representation of transgender characters in films began as pathologising. Many characters were presented as deviant, monstrous or murderous as in *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). In *Psycho* a man dresses as a woman to commit murder; *Dressed to Kill* sees a trans woman killing the women who have scorned him; and the murderer in *Silence of the Lambs* skins his female victims in order to make a “woman suit”. The image of transgendered people is equated with being dangerous (Feinberg 2006: 220). Such a representation of transgender distorts the image of transpersons and potentially leaves the impression that their pathologies come from their non-normative gender identity. These films “contribute to a cultural climate that perpetuates transphobia” (Ryan 2009: 22). Another popular way of presenting transgender has been farce. Cross-dressing in the name of entertainment in *Tootsie* (1982) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) creates comic relief on the basis of drag. The characters may not be trans but the sign under which they operate is made abject (Ryan 2009: 117). Such a representation makes fun of the visual side of transgender people, even if they are overall represented sympathetically.

Similarly to homosexuality, transgender has been represented as comical, for example the embarrassing Las Vegas drag queen father of Chandler in the series *Friends* (1994–2004). However, gay has now become normalised in popular culture and transgender is likely to be on the same path, with sympathetic representations beginning to appear in series *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) and *Glee* (2009). The images of transgender have become more varied “since the beginning of the trans movement in the early 1990s” (Ryan 2009: 17). While several television series have shown trans people in supporting roles, some films have had transgendered people as protagonists, with both female-to-male

(e.g. *Boys Don't Cry* (1999)) and male-to-female (e.g. *Normal* (2003)) examples. More current transgender films tend to represent a more realistic and “normal” image of transpersons than the past pathologising or parodying, adding their perspective and everyday experience to the film. Ryan (2009: 18) calls the two films under analysis in this thesis, *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) and *Transamerica* (2005), films that “break new ground due to their more complex representations”.

Transamerica and *Breakfast on Pluto* are films by directors who have generally not made traditional mainstream films. Neil Jordan is famous for representing unconventional relationships, for example the incestuous attraction in *The Miracle* (1991). Jordan has, previously to *Breakfast on Pluto*, also represented transgender characters, as in his well-known film *The Crying Game* (1992). In addition to alternative gender and sexuality, the latter film shares the topic of the Troubles in the 1970s in Ireland. Similarly to Jordan, Duncan Tucker is known for representing alternative sexualities prior to *Transamerica*. His *Boys to Men* (2001) is a four-part anthology of homosexuality, which represents the development of gay love from young to old age. Due to Jordan's and Tucker's tendencies to represent queer identities and non-normative sexualities in a non-stigmatising manner, they can be well subjected to Butlerian analysis.

Transamerica and *Breakfast on Pluto* are a good point of comparison of the representation of transgender in contemporary film. They offer a sample of transgender films from both the US and the UK. Representing a transperson in a way that is not pathologising, comical or victimised is the first step towards presenting the audience with a more authentic image of trans and both these films abandon the over-simplified and highly stereotypical representations of the past. Analysing contemporary films on this topic is significant because they can show what image of transgender is presented to a wider audience and this, in turn, may influence people's opinions about transpersons. It is

important for people to gain a better understanding of transgender. The more people see them from an equal standpoint, the less likely they will be to marginalise or inflict violence on transpersons. Furthermore, the analysis attempts to identify whether popular culture is showing a tendency towards gender fluidity or whether transgender is used to verify the ruling binary gender ideology.

Gender and its representation have been an important topic in the feminist theory of the 20th century. This paper aims to discuss how theory is applicable to the representation of transgender identity on the basis of film. *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* are analysed in light of Judith Butler's theories of gender identity and performativity, based on her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Her poststructuralist approaches to gender, performativity and subversion continue to be some of the most influential writings in gender studies regardless of the criticism her work has received. Although Butler does not address the topic of transgender in depth, she states in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* that she should have included it. Butler readdresses transgender to some extent in *Bodies that Matter* and uses film analysis to illustrate her ideas. This paper places Butler's approach to gender in dialogue with approaches of transgender theorists and it is written in the context of critical commentary that Butler's writings have created.

1 THEORY

1.1 JUDITH BUTLER

Judith Butler is a poststructuralist philosopher, feminist and queer theorist, one of the best-known contemporary critical thinkers on the topic of gender whose work has been and continues to be quoted in a wide range of fields. Butler has drawn on the work of numerous theoreticians, among them psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, poststructuralists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. The theoretical part of this paper concentrates not on Butler's analysis of the aforementioned writers but her concepts of subjectivity, performativity and subversion that have emerged from her readings of these and many other theorists. In order to understand Butler's approach to gender it is necessary to place her theories in the historical context of general discourse on gender.

1.1.1 HISTORY OF THE BINARY

The binary heterosexual hegemony of Western culture originates from the historical patriarchal gender hierarchy (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 15). The discourse of power has made two genders, male and female, the only intelligible forms of gender. Science, which has the value of truth in Western culture, has been used as an ideological tool to maintain the binary cultural category of gender and to map other identities such as sexuality, race and class onto the binary system (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 39). When theories of gender equality appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries, challenging fundamental social and economic institutions (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 39), science was used to maintain gender hierarchy. Physical differences in the bodies and brains of men and women, whites and blacks, higher- and lower-class people, were emphasised to invalidate the marginalised groups' claims for social, economic, political and cultural rights (Laqueur 1992: 152). Biology cannot be separated from the political in this context. A look into the history of

scientific work on gender and sex provides insight into how the binary system has emerged and managed to appear both natural and true.

The binariness of sex can be dated back to the 18th century when “sex as we know it was invented” (Laqueur 1992: 149). Prior to this time, from the ancient Greeks to the 17th century, a one-sex model prevailed, according to which men and women had the same genital organs with the difference that women’s were internal while men’s were external (Laqueur 1992: 26). The scientific discoveries that distinguished male and female genitalia allowed the appearance of a two-sex model (Laqueur 1992: 149). According to Thomas Laqueur (1992: 151), there are two explanations as to how the two sexes were, and continue to be, invented: epistemological and political. The epistemological comes from the link between the symbolic and the natural; the hierarchical order is claimed to derive from nature. The political, explained in the previous paragraph, is in connection to limiting rights to white higher-class males. This does not mean that prior to the 18th century minorities such as women and black people had many social rights. Dichotomous categories that limited social and political rights can be dated back to the ancient Greeks (Gatens 1991: 92). The difference is that their lesser status was derived from gender in the one-sex model but devolved onto sex in the two-sex model (Laqueur 1992: 151). Turning to nature makes a stronger case for the social hierarchical division of genders and it was this binary framework of social gender deriving from natural sex that began to take hold in the 18th century (Goldner: 2011: 160). This division of natural and social later becomes central for the feminist sex-gender distinction, one of the most widely used concepts in later debates about gender (Gatens 1991: 98).

Since the 1970s, the categories of binary sex and gender have been debated in social sciences and gender studies. In the sex-gender model, sex is defined as the biological differences or “anatomically determined physical attributes” of a body, while gender is

seen as cultural or “the behavioural expression of the self” and “the social forces that mould [that] behaviour” (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 3; 4). Laqueur (1992: 124) argues that biological sex is not a concrete foundation for gender; nevertheless, sex constantly threatens to subvert gender. While arguing for the disjuncture of gender and sex, 1970s feminists failed to question the naturalness of binary physical sex, which led to challenges to feminist critique with the help of biological difference, cognitive function and behaviour as a result of sex difference in the brain (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 4). These arguments prompted some feminists to not return to biological essentialism but to also begin to question the category of sex, although some continue to support the sex-gender model (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 4).

Many theorists have found the need to collapse the distinction between sex and gender in order to show how sex as we know it is not as natural as it appears. In order to do this, it is not enough to recognise that the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not fixed in nature; it is necessary to recognise that they are not fixed by anything at all (Antony 1998: 74). This claim is linked to the deconstruction of the subject as the source of sex. Moira Gatens (1992: 144) argues that the sex-gender distinction creates a split between body and consciousness, as a result of which the body is seen as a neutral ground onto which gender is written. However, a body is never neutral; it is always already sexed, as is the subject, since social practices and behaviours are embedded in the subject, not just on the body or the consciousness (Gatens 1992: 145). This idea leads to a poststructuralist view that searching for a particular essence or identity as a core of sex leads back to looking for nature as the determiner that explains differences and similarities between people. In order to rid gender theory of biological determinism, it is necessary to trace back the construction of the appearing naturalness of sex.

1.1.2 DECONSTRUCTION OF SEX AND THE SUBJECT

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler begins her argumentation on the deconstruction of sex from the premise that gender is culturally constructed, which is a generally accepted idea in gender studies. Butler (1999: 10) sees gender as “cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes”. Similarly to many feminist theorists, Butler argues against the binary gender system. She states that even if physically there appear to be only two sexes, “there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two” (Butler 1999: 10). However, Butler takes this matter further by suggesting that if gender is a social construct then sex may also be seen as a cultural construct. According to Butler (1999: 10), the radical discontinuity between sex and gender has brought about questions concerning the binariness of sex. In *Bodies that Matter* she asks a valid question: if sex is nature and gender is culture then what is left of sex after it assumes its social character as gender (Butler 1993: 5)?

If sex assumes the role of gender then it is substituted by gender and itself becomes “a phantasmatic fiction”, as it is not possible to approach a sex prior to gender because the body is never interpreted outside of cultural meanings and language (Butler 1999: 6; 12). From a linguistic viewpoint, positing sex prior to gender would end up reading it as a construction of a construction – it becomes “a fiction ... at a pre-linguistic site to which there is no access” (Butler 1993: 5). Fausto-Sterling (2000: 4) concurs that the bodily signals and functions that are defined as male or female cannot be separated from our ideas about gender. Hence, Butler (1999: 11) reaches the conclusion that sex is as culturally constructed as gender. The claim that sex is a fiction does not mean that Butler denies the existence of a physical body but that this body cannot be claimed to be natural since nature has a history and history is culturally constructed. Butler collapses the formerly accepted

sex-gender distinction to argue that there is no pre-subject sex that is not already gender (Salih 2002: 62). This, in turn, enables a deconstruction of what constitutes a subject.

The 'subject' is usually defined as an individual self-identical autonomous being capable of action and rational thought; however, like many concepts it is not as natural as it appears (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 10). Judith Butler, like other poststructuralists, claims that there is no subject prior to its construction by discourse (Salih 2002: 44). Similarly to sex, there is no subject that is not already part of gender discourse because bodies cannot have "a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" (Butler 1999: 13). The previously mentioned notion of interpellation can also be applied to gender as the action of hailing a child as a 'boy' or a 'girl' into a subject (Butler 1993: 232). It links the status of subject closely with the category of gender so that a person's subjecthood becomes dependent on their stable gender identity. Subjectivity must be obtained in order for a person to be considered truly and viably human. However, the binary basis of subject formation is a political construction, which has been discursively produced through the use of exclusionary practices and then legitimised through concealment of the construction (Butler 1999: 5). The trouble is that once the subject has been produced the exclusionary practices are no longer visible, which enables the binary hegemony to leave the impression of natural subject formation (Butler 1999: 5). Butler's aim is to destabilise the category of subject in order to expose the limitations, contingencies and instabilities of existing norms (Salih 2002: 140).

The deconstruction of the naturalness of sex and the subject enables Butler to approach a new less constricted way of looking at gender identity. The ruling gender hegemony represents binary gender as a result of a natural gender identity and makes an individual's existence and acceptability dependent on their continuous upholding of normative gender behaviour (Butler 1993: 95). In order to reveal the fictitious formation of

gender identity, Butler (1999: 176) defines it as “a cultural history of received meanings that are subject to a set of imitative practices which refer back to other imitations, thus constructing the illusion of an original and primary gendered self”. Such an approach disrupts the notion of a fixed normative sex as the source of gender identity through which a subject is constituted. The idea that there is no pre-existing sex that is not already gender leads Butler to the conclusion that gender is not something one *is* but something that one *does*, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler 1999: 43).

1.1.3 PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

Judith Butler is not the first to discuss gender in a performative context. Previous theorists (Goffman 1956, Kessler and McKenna 1978, West and Zimmermann 1987), who can be collectively called ethnomethodologists, have similarly argued against the sex-gender distinction and analysed gender as *doing* instead of *being* (Brickell 2003: 158). Their approach can be linked to theatrical performance done by the subject. However, subjects are not free to perform gender whichever way they please as their actions are governed by social norms and restrictions (Brickell 2003: 160). Goffman (1956: 2) believes that social practices of gender are done in interaction in a way to gain favour among others, even though a person’s gender is not always as coherent as the performance suggests. The need to appear natural to others is further developed by Kessler and McKenna who believe this need makes gender performances necessarily stable, while Goffman maintains that they can be transgressive (Brickell 2003: 163). West and Zimmermann (1987: 126) look at gender not only in individual interaction but in wider social situations, which are shaped by the expression of gender. While gender displays, as Goffman calls them, can be optional, being seen by others as either male or female is not (West, Zimmermann 1987: 130). The issue of restricted mandatory performance of gender is further developed in Butler’s theory of performativity.

Differentiating between performance and performativity is of enormous importance for understanding Butler's theory and distinguishing it from others. Butler does not see the subject as the actor who chooses which gender identities they perform. While the performance of ethnomethodology presupposes a pre-existing subject, performativity contests the very notion of such a subject (Salih 2002: 63). However, Butler's (1993: 7) aim is not to "do away with the subject" but to question the conditions under which it emerges. According to Brickell (2003: 166), performativity in the Butlerian sense is linked to the process of invoking a subject, not to the performance by the subject. While 'performance' assumes the subject as the actor who performs gendered acts, 'performativity' sees discourse as the actor behind the deed (Salih 2002: 45).

Performativity involves the cultural, historical and linguistic aspects that present certain performances as male or female in the binary gender discourse. According to Butler (1999: xv), what people believe to be the essence of gender identity is actually something that we create by repeated acts that stylise the body in a gendered way. As mentioned above, an individual's status of being is dependent on continuously doing gender in relation to the norm. Butler (1999: 33) believes that the individual subject has the ability to perform expressions of gender but that there is no fixed gender identity behind these expressions. Rather, the repetitive gender performances which appear to be the results of gender identity are actually what constitute it (Butler 1999: 33). The idea that the subject is the effect and not the cause of gender is the main basis for Butler's theory of performative identity (Salih 2002: 48).

Understanding how subjects are formed is key to understanding how gender functions socially and psychically (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 55). Gender does not happen once at the moment of birth and remain fixed (Salih 2002: 66). Butler (1993: 2) takes Althusser's notion of interpellation further by claiming that the formation of a subject

is a process under the authoritative norms of sex. To make a more general conceptual rephrasing of the well-known statement by Simone de Beauvoir: one is not born, but rather becomes, a gender¹. As Butler rejects the distinction between gender and sex, ‘becoming a gender’ begins when one’s sex is performatively constituted by interpellation of the body as either male or female (Butler 1999: 3). Hailing, which leaves the impression of being an act of language that describes sex, actually constitutes it (Salih 2002: 80). Subject formation continues throughout the subject’s life through performing reiterative gendered acts. The subject does not have a choice of *whether* or not to perform gender so it is more important to ask *how* gender can be performed (Butler 1999: 187). If one is hailed into sex, not born into it, then it must be possible to perform sex in a way that undermines the binary heterosexual hegemony (Salih 2002: 80).

1.1.4 MARGINALISATION AND SUBVERSION

The ruling ideology polices the social appearance of gender by creating the illusion of necessary naturalness in the repeated acts of gender (Butler 1999: 43–44). The acts that do not fall within the gender categories accepted by the regulatory frame do not gain subject-status and result in exclusion. The naturalised knowledge of gender works as a preemptive and violent restriction of reality (Butler 1999: xxiii). As identity depends on the existence of stable sex, gender and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question with the appearance of people with incoherent gender who fail to conform to the gendered norms that have been claimed culturally intelligible (Butler 1999: 23). However, the existence of such people, such as intersex children, transgender persons and bisexuals, reveals the instability of the normative binary categories (Salih 2002: 49) and shows that the genders that are considered to be the norm are nothing more than constructs on the

¹ Simone de Beauvoir states in her work *The Second Sex* (1953) that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1993: 281).

basis of exclusion, because people exist whose very existence exposes the arbitrariness of binary gender and heterosexuality.

Thus, the ruling heterosexual hegemony has to somehow redefine the other in a way that does not allow it to subvert the existing system, while also keeping it as part of the system as a marginalised entity. The other has to be maintained in periphery, outside the status of subject, because it is not possible for a person to exist completely outside the discourse of gender (Foucault 1978: 18). Moreover, alternative gender identities can be exemplified as exceptions that reinforce the rule of binary heterosexual gender. Normative identity depends on the marginalisation of the excluded subjects as any norm is constituted through its exceptions (Boucher 2006: 113; 116). For example, heterosexuality's claim to original status is under threat from homosexuality (Brickell 2005: 26), which is why homosexuality is represented in the ruling discourse as a reversed copy of the original heterosexuality. However, Butler (1999: 41) asserts that "gay is not to straight as copy is to original, but rather as copy is to copy" because there is no such thing as a natural original sex. The concept of original heterosexuality comes from the discourse of procreation, which remains the only area in which it is relevant. The need to repeat heterosexual constructions in non-heterosexual frames shows the constructedness of the constructs themselves: binary heterosexual concepts such as 'butch' and 'femme' are not natural in homosexual context (Butler 1999: 41) but are ways in which the binary heterosexual model tries to articulate the other in an intelligible way. The normative produces an intelligible other and then renders it unintelligible by prohibiting it (Salih 2002: 60).

Although Butler states that gender is constrained by power structures that demand a constant repetition of normative gender, she also insists that it is possible to subvert these constraints (Salih 2002: 50). It is possible for a subject to operate from within the repressed interior of the matrix of power and repeat 'the law', the norms of the ruling hegemony, in a

way that displaces it by revealing its constructedness (Butler 1999: 40, 110). This claim supports Foucault's (1978: 18) idea that power both controls and produces resistance. Subversion is where Butler sees agency. If one follows Foucault's idea that power produces resistance, which creates other kinds of cultural intelligibility, then subversion has to exist within the practice of gender repetition (Butler 1999: 185). However, in order for subversion of identity to be possible it is necessary to abandon the discursively constructed concept of *being* a gender prior to culture, and "take up the tools" that enable gender performance (Butler 1999: 185). The system itself has produced prohibited identities that have the power to subvert its natural appearance. As a result, Butler (1993: 122) believes that possibilities of subversion emerge because the law turns against itself by providing the conditions for its own subversion.

Butler believes that an individual, in the automatic production of self-identity, can select from a restricted range of socially scripted alternative gender performances, even though institutional rituals have formed their subjectivity, and subvert the law (Boucher 2006: 118). Similarly to homosexuality's ability to disrupt heterosexuality's claim to originality, the binary distinction between men and women is under risk of subversion by dissident forms of gendering (Brickell 2005: 26). Butler sees drag, a type of transgender, as a potential instance of the subversion of ruling gender norms. Drag is a double inversion: a man dressed in drag as a woman has the outside appearance of feminine while the inside, the body, is masculine; at the same time, the outside appearance, the body, is masculine while the inside, the self, is feminine (Butler 1999: 174). Since both claims are true, they create a contradiction which displaces the discourse of true and false gender (Butler 1999: 174). Drag operates on parody and reveals that the identity that people believe to be original, what people think drag is imitating, is actually not the original at all (Butler 1999: 175). The naturalistic effects of genders are an imitation of an ideal heterosexual gender,

which is produced by the imitations as its effect (Butler 1993a: 313). Furthermore, the imitation of the ideal is bound to fail precisely because it is not natural but only appears so.

However, it must be kept in mind that parody in itself is not subversive; certain parodic repetitions are troubling while others become normalised and recirculated by the cultural hegemony (Butler 1999: 177). (For example, the cross-dressing performances of *Tootsie* and *Mrs Doubtfire* have been produced by the heteronormative entertainment industry.) Butler's discussion of the construction of naturalised knowledge shifts from the example of drag to transsexuality, where neither the clothes nor the body itself may allow a clear and conclusive judgement about a person's gender (Butler 1999: xxii). Subversion happens when cultural perceptions fail to read the body that one sees as either male or female, and when the reality of gender comes into question (Butler 1999: xxiii). Transsexuality could be seen as subversive due to the fact that it proves a discontinuity between gender identity and the biological body, but it has been used as a means of affirming the fixity of binary sex and gender as many transsexuals seek to reconcile their gender identity with their bodily sex. Hence, there are no acts that are always subversive since alternative gender performances can also work to uphold the normative. Consequently, subversive acts must be viewed within context (Butler 1999: xxi).

Based on Butler's examples of drag and transsexual in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, one should not assume that she claims that transsexual by definition re-establishes the binary normative ideology. Butler has later elaborated on transgender and transsexuality in *Undoing Gender* (2004). Transsexual people, similarly to intersex people, challenge the view that a natural dimorphism should be maintained (Butler 2004: 6). Although seemingly different (intersex people are opposed to the sex reassignment surgeries of children while transsexuals often demand them for themselves), both movements call for more autonomy in choosing one's body (Butler 2004: 7). However, as

Butler argues against an autonomous *being* or *having* a particular gender identity, since one's sense of gender is enabled and restricted through social norms, this creates a tension between queer theory's opposition to stable gender categories and the transsexual desire to conform to the binary (Butler 2004: 8). It is important to remember that the category of 'sex' is culturally framed and what constitutes a gender performance of male or female, feminine or masculine, changes in time, which means that the category of gender is open to remaking (Butler 2004: 9). Therefore, the desire of transsexuals to transform into a man or woman is driven by the culturally constructed idea that anatomy presumes gender (Butler 2004: 9); a biological essentialism that Butler, like most gender theorists, wants to avoid.

The binary heterosexual ideology does not perceive a transgender or transsexual person as male or female, as a result of which they are not always considered truly human. Like all subjects, transsexuals exist within gender discourse so they cannot choose whether or not to repeat gender performance; the question is *how* to repeat it (Butler 1999: 189). One option is to try to adapt to the binary normative, another way is to attempt to displace the ruling gender norms. Although Butler supports the latter, she admits that in order to remake what constitutes 'human' there is a certain departure from the human (Butler 2004: 3), which is a risk most people might not be willing to take. Nevertheless, a line must be drawn between not being able to live without recognition and the terms under which one is recognised being unliveable (Butler 2004: 4). What Butler attempts to do by deconstructing gender is to widen the field of what constitutes sex and gender in a way that trans would also be included. Butler (1999: 189) addresses the need for the denaturalisation of identities in order to show that dissonant performances of gender also come from a "natural" source. If gender politics is fixed on identity and the deconstruction of identity reveals that a subject is not ready-made but constructed, then a new type of politics might emerge which would accept different non-binary sex and gender as intelligible within the

ruling discourse (Butler 1999: 190). Butler's work aims to bring about social transformation and an end to sexual difference. However, her theories have come under criticism due to their approach to solving these issues.

1.2 CRITICISM OF JUDITH BUTLER

As one of the most influential writers of feminist and queer theory, Judith Butler's work has received much criticism from different perspectives. Some critics have argued against her use of complicated and highly abstracted language that creates ambiguity and possible misreading. Her approach to subjectivity and identity is another source of criticism because it deconstructs categories that enable political movements. Butler's theory of performativity has also been criticised by different authors, especially in connection to her idea of subversion. The latter, most pertinent to Butler's analysis of transgender, has been argued against in both the fields of feminist and transgender studies.

1.2.1 CRITICISM OF BUTLER'S SUBJECTIVITY, APOLITICALITY, PERFORMATIVITY AND SUBVERSION

One of the sources of criticism of Butler's work is her notions of agency and subjectivity. According to Brickell (2005: 26), Butler has changed her position on the topic within *Gender Trouble* as well as in later writings and interviews. First, it appears that Butler treats the subject and its agency as nothing more than discourse. However, as stated above, Butler does not completely do away with the subject since it is an important agent in her theory of subversion. While avoiding reference to a concrete self-identical subject with socio-political power, she takes the individual to a level of symbolic identity and pre-discursive attachment to one's existence (Boucher 2006: 133). The subject acts under the illusion of self (Brickell 2005: 27). In other words, although Butler claims that a subject is created in discourse, she believes in a pre-discursive desire to become a subject, which comes from the normative law but precedes subject formation. Boucher (2006: 121) sees

this as a problem because Butler does not in fact do away with the pre-discursive individual but renames it as auto-affection. Boucher (2006: 122) criticises Butler for producing a theory in which the 'I' as constituted through discourse and the auto-production of self-identity that precedes discourse are in contradiction. This contradiction in Butler's early analysis of agency has remained unsolved.

Another problem in Butler's work that derives from her concept of subjectivity is the apolitical nature of her theory. Firstly, Butler focuses only on the individual gendered actions of subjects and fails to see the collective dimension of the social field (Boucher 2006: 133; Lloyd 1999: 209), which results in Butler's ethics reversing her politics (Boucher 2006: 114). Secondly, although Butler aims to support minority genders, feminist activists have criticised her abstracted and linguistic-centred approach as unsuitable for solving real-life inequalities (Bordo 2003: 291). Seyla Benhabib (1995: 21) criticises Butler's concept of the subject, or rather lack of one, as a threat to autonomy, reflexivity and accountability, which she believes are necessary in order to bring about social change. Many activists have raised objections to Butler's treatment of the subject because it lacks political applicability in the defence of the rights of minorities (Boucher 2006: 112). According to Martha Nussbaum (2012: 210), Butler undermines the very cause she attempts to support. Agentive subjects and definable identity categories make it possible to speak and make generalisations about people in a political context. However, Butler's subject does not have the direct ability to criticise the ruling discourse; in her view, only marginal gender identities and subversive practices can supplant the hegemonic norm to a certain extent (Boucher 2006: 116; Nussbaum 2012: 211).

According to Brickell (2005: 25), Butler's concepts of performativity and subversion are marred by the difficulties that surround her understanding of agency and social structure. Brickell advocates the use of Erving Goffman's theory of performance,

which he believes has a more stable use of the subject than Butler. Similarly to Butler, Goffman (1956: 107) argues against the essentialist idea of the subject as pre-discursive but, unlike Butler, he believes that the subject pre-exists the deed and the interactive gender performances that the subject does under the influence of the power of ideology are what constitute identity. However, Goffman's view does not take into consideration the power of interpellation to hail a subject into a gender identity. Butler's contribution is remarkable because she explains how the very notions of where people's gender identities come from are already affected by the ruling heterosexual binary system. Revealing the illusion of naturalness, which the institution produces in a concealed way, is missing in Goffman's work (Bordo 2003: 290), which is why Butler's theory is more productive in connection to alternative gender identities, among them transgender.

A lot of criticism of Butler's performativity has come from the fact that many theorists have misunderstood and, thus, misrepresented performativity by reading it as performance (Lloyd 1999: 199), a voluntary act that the subject can do, which is against Butler's (1993: x) view that "there is no subject who decides on its gender". Moya Lloyd (1999: 195) argues that this misreading happens probably due to Butler's ambiguous representation of the differences between performance and performativity. Although Butler explicitly emphasises the need to separate the two terms, Lloyd believes that perhaps there is no need to distinguish between performance and performativity (Lloyd 1999: 202):

Since the performative produces that which it names, and since gender is understood in performative terms as the effect of the intersection of discourses and practices of gender, and since these discourses and practices also underpin performances, it suggests that a performance is itself performative.

Through this argumentation Lloyd wants to reconcile the two terms since she believes that the distinction creates more questions than it answers. She attempts to show how both concepts rely upon the reiteration of the same norms (Lloyd 1999: 206). The difference

between performance and performativity lies in the subject, the agent of subversive acts, which, as Lloyd (1999: 209) argues, creates problems in Butler's theory of subversion.

Butler (1993: 241) states, as a result of her understanding of the subject, that direct political opposition to the norm cannot be done; rather the subject must repeat actions that turn the norm against itself. However, Butler (1993: 241) also states that as discursive productions, performatives are open to interpretation and can signify different meanings: both the interpellation of the subject and the parodic performances that aim to subvert the norm have incalculable effects. Both Lloyd (1999: 208) and Shimizu (2008: 3) criticise Butler's approach because it requires recognition of the performance as either subversive parody or reinforcing the heterosexual matrix, which cannot be predicted due to the incalculability of reactions to performative acts. This ultimately creates a paradox in political intervention because Butler's approach leaves the impression that subversion is spontaneous (Lloyd 1999: 207). According to Akiko Shimizu (2008: 3), Butler also concentrates too much on the visible differences² that make subversion recognisable, which is not directly relevant in the context of this paper.

A lot of criticism of Butler's thought has come from misreading her theories, which has led her to explain and reconcile some of these claims in later works. Criticism of Butler's idea of the subject as an effect of discourse comes from the fact that previous theories call for agentive subjects in a discourse-ruled society. However, they fail to explain that the subject's actions are not only affected by discourse but also limited within its possibilities, something that Butler's theory of performativity illustrates. Butler's argument against a coherent gender identity comes from a problem that had arisen already prior to her work – that making generalisations about minorities on the basis of gender, although useful for political action, has drawbacks, such as disregarding the diversity

² Akiko Shimizu (2008: 3) argues that Butler's emphasis on visible subversion, such as transgender, tends to push invisible non-normative identities, such as femme lesbians, further into invisibility or non-existence.

within one gender identity. Butler's theory does not make generalisations that exclude anyone; rather she attempts to widen the discussion in order for different identities to be equally represented without the need to push some into the periphery. In regards to her subversion, which is criticised for its incalculable effects, the same can be said about direct political attempts at transcendence, as the effects of any action cannot be contained within the subject's intent because they depend on the context in which they emerge. Although Butler has received valuable criticism and some of these points remain unaddressed by her, the strengths of her theory outweigh its shortcomings.

1.2.2 CRITICISM OF BUTLER IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANS

Butler's criticism in trans-context is embedded in a history of tension between feminist, queer and transgender theories in their approach to transgender. Early feminist and queer activists tried to separate from transgender people who were seen as invading feminist and homosexual discourse (Whittle 2006: 196). Some examples of this are the policy of The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival to limit admittance to women-born-women and Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), which claims that "all [male-to-female] transsexuals rape women's bodies" by invading women's space "in order to exercise male dominance and aggression" and "to subvert the feminist movement" (Raymond 2006: 134; 131). Later theorists have abandoned this radical viewpoint but tension remains and can be observed in the different approaches that theoreticians have taken to trans. Kate Bornstein (1994: 72) argues against 'gender terrorists' who defend the "natural" gender system and sees transsexuals as either 'gender outlaws' or conformist with the dominant system. She seems to support the outlaws as "eventually the gender system lets everyone down" (Bornstein 1994: 80). Bernice Hausman (1995: 1) concentrates on mainstream transsexual experience and argues against the transsexual identity's high dependency of surgery because she believes that this risks reinstating

dichotomous gender. According to trans theorist Patricia Elliot (2010: 37), these views show how queer theorists value transgressive transgender identities more highly than conventional transsexual identities.

Queer theory has defined the terms of debate on transgendered people since the 1990s, which is why many transgender theorists have begun to criticise these approaches because of their limited views on transgender. Jay Prosser (1998: 59) argues that poststructuralist feminist and queer theories are altogether irreconcilable with transsexual narratives, as they ignore the particular experience of the body and its importance to the understanding of the self. Viviane Namaste (2000: 14–16) believes that queer theorists negate transgender identities by reading them only as tools of a theory and ignoring the political activism of the subjects within the transsexual community, the social context in which transgender practices are produced, and distorting the diversity within transgendered communities. Namaste (2000: 16) accuses queer theory of neglecting the individual transgender people and their everyday lives by reducing them to rhetorical figures that serve the feminist and queer agendas but offer nothing in return for transgender people. As one of its most influential writers, Judith Butler has received much criticism as a feminist and queer theorist. Prosser (1998: 24) sees Butler as the one who has most transformed transgender into a queer icon, which is why he chooses her work as his object of criticism.

Prosser (1998: 5) believes that theoretical approaches to transgender, such as Butler's, should be changed in order to better represent the materiality of transsexual narratives. According to Prosser (1998: 9), a transsexual is an authorial being, which is in contradiction with Butler's performativity. Furthermore, Butler's abstract and fluid approach to identity has led her to being accused of ignoring the materiality of the body. This is an issue of great importance in the context of transgender, especially transsexual experience, as the body is what "drives their understanding of themselves as transsexed"

(Devor 1999: 207). Prosser (1998: 40) criticises Butler for rejecting the materiality of the body, which she claims to be a phantasmic fiction. However, Shimizu (2008: 9–10) defends Butler in that she believes this criticism comes from misunderstanding and Butler's claim, that sex or the materiality of the body is a constructed fantasy, does not imply a negation of materiality altogether. What Butler (2004: 214) states is that "what operates at the level of cultural fantasy is not ... dissociable from the ways in which material life is organised". Prosser (1998: 43) opts for an ontological status of the body as *felt* by the self and argues for a narrative experience of transsexuality. Although his approach takes into consideration transsexual lives, Prosser himself has been criticised for reducing the experience of the body to the ontological materiality of the body, which is ultimately unsatisfactory because it conceals the subject (Shimizu 2008: 5; Elliot 2001: 312). According to Elliot (2001: 312), both Butler and Prosser make the mistake of judging either essentialism or transcendence: Butler sees essentialism as bad and subversion as good, while Prosser rather supports essentialism and criticises the demand for subversion. Neither approach is exhaustive as they do not describe the different varieties of transgender.

Butler's support and promotion of subversion has led Prosser (1998: 32) to accuse her of claiming that all transgendered people are by definition queer in that they disrupt the notion of binary gender. Prosser (1998: 45; 58) argues that many transsexed people are anything but queer and Butler does not consider to what extent transgender and transsexual people might not want to be included "under the queer banner". Furthermore, Prosser believes that Butler's argumentation of subversion makes transsexuals necessarily conformist, while transgender is represented as queer and subversive (Shimizu 2008: 13). While Butler does use drag as a possible example of revealing the unoriginal status of heterosexual binary gender and transsexuality as an example of how trans can be used to

reify the norm, she mentions already in *Gender Trouble*, and emphasises this in her later works, that subversion has to be viewed in context and not all transgender acts are subversive (Butler 1999: 177). However, some trans theorists, such as Namaste, have found that although Butler claims the importance of context she does not necessarily follow this idea.

According to Namaste (2000: 10), Butler's analysis of drag as revealing the imitative structure of gender fails to take into account the context in which drag performances occur – restricted to the stage in a gay male culture. Butler does not mention the already excluded situation in which drag exists in connection to homosexuals. Drag, as something that happens on stage, is reduced to only performance and denied identity. Transsexuals experience a similar staging: in order to represent their own identities as “natural”, lesbians and gays position others as ‘anomalies’ (Namaste 2000: 12). Namaste (2000: 13) claims that the moment that drag underlines the constructed nature of gendered performance, the subversion that Butler hopes for, drag is contained as a performance in itself and loses the right to a “true” identity, which gay has established. In order to refrain from being reduced to performance, transgender identities need to opt for normalisation within the ruling system. As a result of this, transgender identities that refuse to subvert the norm can be criticised for supporting the hegemony, which creates an anti-transsexual discourse (Namaste 2000: 14). Both Prosser and Namaste criticise Butler for making transsexuality an object of criticism.

Butler's theory of subversion and her aims to theorise on a subverted society are seen as idealist and trans activists are more concerned with the institutions in place at the moment (Elliot 2010: 43). While Butler (2004: 76) argues against the ruling discourse's insistence that transsexuality is a ‘gender identity disorder’, which positions transsexuals as abnormal, trans people see things from a more practical viewpoint since this medical status

is what allows them to gain access to sex reassignment surgery (Elliot 2010: 43). Trans people have to convincingly narrate their transsexuality in order to be diagnosed as transsexed and receive the right for surgery (Devor 1999: 208). The everyday interests of transsexuals are in contradiction with Butler's argument against the rhetoric in which trans people are represented. Butler (2004: 90) claims that if normative gender structures, which her work aims to deconstruct, did not exist then there would be no need for a diagnosis of gender identity disorder. Nevertheless, many transsexuals claim to have a conflict between the internal self and external body (Prosser 1998: 70), which does not fit well with Butler's idea that there is no internal gender identity.

Elliot, Prosser and Namaste, among other transsexual theorists and activists, argue against Butler's insistence that transsexuals' self-perception is controlled by the regulatory apparatuses of normative gender ideology, that they are "dupes of that gender order" (Elliot 2010: 47). Although Butler states this about all subjects, not exclusively transsexuals, and her aim is to liberate all people from the confines of normative gender, transgender theorists find this idea to be undermining of the transsexual experience. However, some arguments on the topic of transsexual feelings speak against this objection. According to Prosser (1998: 84):

The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for the perfect past – that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not to the return to home per se but to the romanticised ideal of home.

Calling stable gender the romanticised ideal shows that what transsexuals strive for is not a "real" sex but a social construction of ideal gender that has been created in historical context within the ruling gender ideology. This statement by Prosser seems to ultimately support Butler's claim that "sex is a regulatory ideal" (Butler 1993: 1). Butler (1999: 119) hopes that the culturally constructed body will eventually, through subversion and freedom from paternal norms, be liberated not to its "natural" past but an open future of cultural possibilities.

Although Butler's ideas advocate more freedom and diversity to transgender identities, the tension between Butler and transsexual experience remains as her ideas are too distant from the daily lives of trans people. According to Namaste and Prosser, the lives of transsexed people are already burdened by trying to live as male or female and they should not have to take up the "revolutionary burden to refuse gender" (Elliot 2010: 38). Furthermore, queering transgender identities goes against the aim of many trans activists who want to normalise trans within the norms of the law. Butler's aim is to normalise transgender in its queerness, which is more difficult to achieve. Prosser (1998: 80) argues against Butler in that a transsexual cannot be a person before they acquire a belief in identity and the continuity of the self in their own bodies. Butler (2004: 39) has later admitted that in order for life to be liveable, certain normative conditions, one of which is a degree of stability, are necessary. However, she concludes that a call to extend these norms is necessary.

A great extent of Butler's criticism from transgender theorists comes from a historical misrepresentation of transgender by feminist and queer studies. Trans critics, such as Prosser, Namaste and Elliot, aim to defend the conventional transsexuals from the demand for queerness. While it is true that Butler believes in subversion through queering gender, she does not demand subversion; rather she attempts to disrupt the system which demands conventionality in order to liberate identities that do not have a stable binary gender identity. While most transsexuals feel they have a gender core in contradiction with their body, the individuals wanting surgery have to narrate wanting to be the 'opposite' sex. It is important to note that exclusion exists between normative and alternative gender representations, as well as within and between minorities: normalising heterosexuality before homosexuality, gay before transgender, and traditional transsexuals before ambiguous transgender people results in a hierarchy based on exclusion. Many trans

theorists, such as Stephen Whittle and Joelle Ruby Ryan, support Butler's approach because it places all gender identities and their variants on an equal level.

Although there is an extent to which Butler's identity, performativity and subversion are applicable to the real lives of transgender people, her theories can be successfully analysed on the basis of film. This paper discusses the ways protagonists are interpellated as gendered subjects, how transgender characters are positioned in society, and whether the films under analysis follow a binary or queer approach to gender. Figuring out what type of gender identities transgender is associated with enables to see if and how the diversity of transgender is represented in films. In order to not fall under the same criticism as Butler, the film analysis attempts to avoid any judgement of either subversive or conformist gender performances and instead concentrates on how the films represent or conceal the issues surrounding transgender that have been discussed by Butler and her critics.

2 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *TRANSAMERICA* AND *BREAKFAST ON PLUTO*

The protagonist of *Transamerica* (TA), Bree Osbourne, is a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual who lives full-time as a woman but needs to receive her psychiatrist's and therapist's permission to get sex reassignment surgery. This desired outcome is postponed by the appearance of a teenage boy named Toby who calls Bree's home in search of Stanley, Toby's father and Bree's male identity. As a result, Bree's therapist withholds her signature because she wants Bree to come to terms with her past before making a finite change. The film takes Bree on a road trip across the US, as she tries to solve the situation with Toby and make it back home in time for her surgery. *Transamerica* has been generally well-received by the public as a transgender film. The themes of transgender identity, performance and social disapproval of transpersons are all represented in the film.

Breakfast on Pluto (BOP) is a *bildungsroman*, a coming of age story, of Patrick 'Kitten' Braden, an orphan living in a small town in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, during the time of the Troubles. This film represents the development of a male-to-female transgendered person from a young age as he discovers his identity, faces lack of social acceptance and begins to pass as a different gender than that of his birth. One of the main storylines surrounds Patrick's search for his biological mother who had abandoned him as a child. The main themes in *Breakfast on Pluto* are transgender identity, performance and the fluidity of gender in different contexts. Both films try to give authentic representations of transgender experience and offer the personal journeys of their protagonists as transgendered individuals. They present a positive image of the transgender viewpoint, although in different ways.

2.1 TRANSGENDER IN NARRATIVE

What makes transgender films potentially subversive is subject choice: representing transgender people makes visible marginal identities that do not easily fit into the normative frame. However, films can present transgender very differently, which is why it is important to analyse *how* transgender is represented. One of the first things that Butler (1993: 129) suggests should be asked when analysing a film is “What reading does the film encourage?” *Transamerica* concentrates mostly on *being* transgender. Bree’s visual performance of conventional gender, her aim of complete passing and her desire for sex reassignment surgery make the film conform to binary gender norms and, thus, it can be criticised for portraying only the most normalised type of transgender. *Breakfast on Pluto* represents transgender in a more ambiguous and less conformist way in that Kitten can be identified as differently gendered throughout the film, revealing different possibilities of transgender identity. *Breakfast on Pluto* also represents sexuality in a more elaborate way than *Transamerica*, which follows a very heteronormative model. As a result, *Transamerica* encourages a more normative reading than *Breakfast on Pluto*, which offers alternative possibilities of its protagonist’s identity. *Transamerica* is more stereotypical because it is centred on the desire of complete surgical transition.

2.1.1 SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY

Since the 1980s, transsexualism has been defined by psychiatrists as a mental disorder that requires professional intervention (Whittle 2002: 19). In 1994, the medical term ‘transsexual’ was replaced by ‘gender identity disorder’ which means that in order to obtain hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery (SRS), an individual is required to show signs of mental disturbance (Whittle 2002: 20). *Transamerica* offers an authentic representation of this medico-legal environment with which transsexuals have to communicate. The film shows how the Bree, in order to receive legal right for her surgery,

has to acquire a consent form signed by both her psychiatrist and her therapist. As her psychiatrist states, “The American Psychiatric Association categorises gender dysphoria as a very serious mental disorder” (TA). According to Charles Shepherdson (2006: 96), the medical institution has to discover *who they [transsexuals] really are*, based on which the decision is made whether or not to allow surgery. However, if one follows the Butlerian argument that there is no “real” subject or “authentic personality”, only the effect of various performances (Shepherdson 2006: 97), it is not possible for psychiatrists to decide on whether a transsexual is “truly” a man or a woman.

Historically, the desire for surgery led many transsexuals to tell a practiced story, which was known and accepted in SRS clinics, in order to get their surgery (Stone 2006: 228). Psychiatrists preferred a coherent transsexual experience, a transition from one end of the binary male-female scale to the other. However, the stories that individuals told were not necessarily authentic transsexual narratives but what the clinics wanted to hear. These stories of transsexuals were told within a highly regulatory frame which does not allow alternative representations of trans other than the one accepted by the ruling ideology.

Winning the right to surgical and legal sex changes, however, [has] exacted a price: the reinforcement of a two-gender system. By requesting surgery to make their bodies match their gender, transsexuals enact the logical extreme of the medical profession’s philosophy that within an individual’s body, sex and gender must conform. (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 107)

Transamerica indirectly refers to this tendency when Bree’s psychiatrist tells her, “There’s no such thing as a right answer in this office” (TA). Bree’s psychiatrist senses her willingness to be dishonest: Bree is willing to say whatever is necessary in order to obtain the right for surgery. Thus, Bree reinforces the traditional transsexual narrative.

In addition to asking what reading a film encourages, Butler (1993: 129) also believes that it is important to ask what a film conceals. *Transamerica* leaves an unquestioned impression that SRS is only the demand of the subject, not mentioning that this demand also exists within gender discourse. Similarly to Butler, Shepherdson (2006:

99) argues that surgery appears as a choice but in fact *comes from the other* and is a requirement with which the subject has agreed to comply. *Transamerica*, like its protagonist Bree, does not openly call into question the medical establishment, which requires the applicants of surgery to fit into certain moulds in order to obtain the right for SRS. There is only one instance when Bree asks her psychiatrist, “Don’t you find it odd that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?” (TA) However, she does not take this further as her desire for surgery is greater than her desire to protest against how she is treated by the medical institution. This coincides with Bornstein’s (1994: 83) claim that transsexuals will not attack the system until they are free of the need to participate in it. Bree is afraid to speak up because she does not want to be an outcast, which is why she prefers to conform to the society that does not accept her. While Butler argues against the abjectifying medical discourse, Bree’s example illustrates how Elliot (2010: 43) is right in claiming that Butler’s approach is too distant from the everyday lives and needs of transsexuals. If they did not conform to the conditions that are set for surgery, they would not be granted permission to have it.

Transamerica only represents transsexuals like Bree who want to exist within the current gender system as long as they are allowed access to surgery. The film does not discuss how “the medical regime permits only the production of gender-normative altered bodies” (Spade 2006: 319). All transgender people have to accept the label of ‘transsexual’ (and the status of mental disorder that comes with it) and, although there are people who may want to be the ‘opposite’ sex, others who do not have to pretend in order to obtain right for hormone therapy or any kind of surgery. It is made necessary to produce a coherent transsexual narrative that is based on the opposition of sexes and complete transition (Feinberg 1998: 63). Moreover, there are transgender people who prefer to

remain in transition and enjoy their in-between status³. Representing only the stereotypical transsexual transition story results in failing to address the fluidity that transgender identities often inhabit.

2.1.2 PERSONAL TRANSITION STORIES

According to Ryan (2009: 19), a media image is a double-edge sword that has the power to shape people's perceptions on transgender through either creating or challenging stereotypes. *Transamerica* does not take advantage of the opportunity to represent trans identities to the audience as "normal" already in the transition phase, which is outside the normative gender system, not just after surgery. According to Butler (2004: 64–65), "the point is to try to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed or indeterminate genital attributes might be accepted and loved without having to undergo transformation into a more socially coherent or normative version of gender". *Breakfast on Pluto*, which hardly mentions the idea of having surgery, gives a more "normal" image of its protagonist Kitten while in transition. It is not necessary for Kitten to completely erase her maleness in order to be perceived as female. While *Breakfast on Pluto* tries to represent transgender as acceptable in the form that it takes, *Transamerica* attempts to normalise transgender by complying with the ruling binary gender ideology. The normalisation of transgender, although widely supported by trans activists, has its limitations: labouring under the notion that normal equals binary results in the marginalisation of transgender varieties that do not fit the norm or over-stereotyping the identities that do.

The individual transition story, which has been the most common way of representing transgender in film, has several drawbacks (Ryan 2009: 18). Firstly, the overrepresentation of passing as a "real" gender can result in the demand for all transgender people to pass. However, many individuals, especially male-to-female

³ Michael Schulman addresses the issue of the numerous trans identities that exist without representation in his article entitled *Generation LGBTQIA* (New York Times 2013, January 9)

transsexuals, do not possess the physical attributes to pass as feminine. Secondly, if most films only represent transgender identities that want to pass then it leaves a false impression of the diversity of transgender identities that prefer to remain queer. Thirdly, most transition stories, among them *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto*, limit their representation of transgender to issues such as sexuality, sex reassignment surgery and non-accepting family members, but fail to address larger issues, such as the problems of the binary gender system and civil rights issues concerning trans people (Ryan 2009: 18). There is a need to find a balance between the representation of transsexual everyday experience, which trans critics believe lacks in Butler's argumentation, and the criticism of the binary gender system, which is underrepresented in transgender films. Ryan (2009: 18) believes that the social, cultural and political aspects of trans people's lives should be more represented in films; however, both Butler and the transgender films analysed in this paper mainly focus on individual identity and personal interaction.

2.2 TRANSGENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Personal transition stories usually concentrate on transgender identity, the representation of which is of interest to this paper. One way of analysing how a film can express transgender identity is by looking at how a transgender character is interpellated. For this, it is necessary to observe whether a transperson is represented as either male/female or as ambiguously gendered. *Transamerica* represents a binary view of gender and places its protagonist into this ideology. Since the film hails Bree as once having been male but now being almost female, transsexuality is represented as a transition from one to the other. *Breakfast on Pluto* provides an image of transgender that is queerer than the dichotomous model. Since Kitten is interpellated as both male and female in different parts of the film, transgender itself seems more fluid. As a transperson can be played in a film by

an actor, the choice of who to cast to play a transgender woman is an interesting subject of analysis from the perspective of interpellation.

2.2.1 INTERPELLATION

On the one hand, casting a famous actress like Felicity Huffman as a transperson in *Transamerica* shows how the representation of transgender in popular culture has gained importance, as a well-known face brings more viewers. On the other hand, the director Duncan Tucker has been criticised for casting a woman, not a man or an actual transsexual woman, to play a male-to-female transsexual (Roberts 2006: 34). In his defence, Tucker states in an interview that he did not think a transsexual looks like “a man in a dress” and that he had wanted to “honour where Bree was going instead of leaving her anchored in what she had left behind” (Roberts 2006: 34). Although Tucker’s idea seems like a compliment to transsexuals, it is based strongly on the idea of complete passing within the binary gender system. It leaves the impression that the transition period, most represented in the film, is only a means to an end, a temporary condition before becoming a “true” gender. However, many transsexuals delay or end up choosing not to have SRS, an option that this film does not consider.

Tucker’s choice to cast Felicity Huffman and concentrate only on Bree as a woman pushes her past as Stanley into invisibility. However, this goes directly into conflict with what Bree’s therapist tells her in the film. When Bree talks about the phone call she received from Stanley’s son Toby, the therapist corrects her, stating that Bree should not use third person as “Stanley’s life is [her] life” (TA). Tucker’s choice to emphasise Bree’s future as a woman leaves her past as a man and her present as a transitioning transsexual invisible. The past is an important and often underrepresented part of transsexual experience, as it reveals the possibility of being ambiguously gendered, which in turn disrupts the normative system. According to Butler (1993: 135), it is in the power of the

director to turn men into women. Although Tucker claims to represent Bree as a woman he does not make it a full transition. Even when Bree gets her surgery at the end of the film, she is not portrayed by Felicity Huffman as she would usually look like as a woman: Bree is not presented as attractive and her choice of make-up makes her look somewhat awkward. Thus, the film does not show Bree as “naturally” feminine.

Contrary to *Transamerica*, Kitten is never portrayed by Cillian Murphy as either a man or a woman in *Breakfast on Pluto* (although the character prefers to be called by feminine pronouns). As an actor, Murphy has physically good features to play a believable female character. However, director Neil Jordan has stated in an interview that Murphy’s attractiveness does not matter since “the character wasn’t trying to be a girl” (Future Movies 2005). This means that it is not the intention of Jordan, unlike Tucker, to present the transgender character as female. One could argue that the difference comes from the fact that Bree is a transsexual and Kitten is a transvestite. However, in the film Kitten mentions the idea of having a sex change so it is not obvious whether in later life she would want to get SRS. It is better to avoid reviewing surgery as the only decisive factor that differentiates transgender from transsexual. Firstly, it leads to an essentialist view of ontological biological sex and, secondly, it gives operations too much importance in trans identity. Transsexuals themselves have stated in interviews that they do not believe surgery itself is “the key to womanhood” (Schrock et al 2005: 328). Ultimately, Kitten is not interpellated as either male or female, which results in the denaturalisation of sex.

The protagonists of *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* are part of the gender ideology that supports the idea of stable gender identity. Kitten’s character’s identity is of central importance in the film. She creates fairy-tale-like stories and prefers living in them in order to cope with the serious world that surrounds her. Femininity and the attempt to avoid confrontation have been part of her life since childhood, as a result of which Kitten’s

identity seems fixed. However, she never exclusively defines her gender in the film. Bree is more specific in defining her gender identity. She tells her mother that she “never had a son” (TA), which emphasises how Bree denies her life as Stanley. Bree’s gender is represented as something “within” that she needs her body to match. Thus, the film follows Prosser’s (1998: 43) approach of *felt* transsexual experience. Bree further emphasises the difference between inner and outer gender when she tells Toby that, “My body may be a work in progress but there is nothing wrong with my soul” (TA). On the one hand, this statement supports the idea of internal gender identity. On the other hand, it suggests that a transperson deserves to be considered as a human being already in their gender ambiguity, which is inconsistent with Bree general lack of acceptance towards queerness. In this case the queerness is external. Neither film directly questions the idea of an internal gender identity. While both characters seem to have a stable self-identity, the films suggest that gender can change in time.

According to Butler (1999: 33), performances are what constitute gender. Both films represent situations in which gender can be read as performative. *Transamerica* begins with a voice training video where a woman instructs viewers how to speak like women, using a higher voice. Bree is shown practising this in a mirror. While Bree is shown to have to practise feminine speech, Kitten seems to have completely integrated it into her life. Consequently, *Transamerica* can be considered more subversive in that it reveals the difficulties of performing femininity, while *Breakfast on Pluto*, through making it look easy, fails to demonstrate the constructedness of femininity. Both films present Bree and Kitten walking a certain way, waving their hips and taking small steps as another way of performing femininity. It is a culturally constructed method of moving and all women need to make it look “natural” in order to be considered feminine. Again, it is Bree and not Kitten who reveals how this is a performance when, in a stressful situation, she forgets to

control her actions and sits with her legs apart (TA). As the audience is aware of her male identity, this act can either reveal how “unfeminine” Bree is when relaxed or show how performing femininity has to be constantly controlled. Kitten does not abandon her feminine movements even in situations of danger when she is attacked and has to run away (BOP). Kitten is represented as having mastered femininity.

In *Transamerica* the power of performative acts to constitute gender is represented in a situation when Bree is in a restaurant with her family. As both Bree’s father and Toby have already taken their seats and are in conversation, Bree’s mother forces her to help her to her seat. This is a traditionally gentlemanly, and thus male, act. Through forcing her to perform as a man she wants to reveal Bree’s male identity and possibly hopes that making Bree perform maleness will cause her to abandon trying to be a woman. In order to counter this forced gender act, Toby offers to help Bree to her seat in return. This is because he, unlike Bree’s mother, respects her female identity. This performance, which allows Bree to be a lady, regains her some of her femininity. This situation need not result in any threat to Bree’s gender; however, these acts are represented in the film and perceived by Bree as threatening her stable gender status, which suggests that the gender performances that one does are important in the construction of gender.

In addition to theatrical performances, performativity can also be linguistic. Binary ideology is strongly represented in performative speech acts which have the power to interpellate characters as male or female (Butler 1999: xxv). In a situation where Bree needs to explain to a policeman her relation to Toby she begins by saying “I’m his...” but realises that she would have to hail herself as male due to the gendered word ‘father’, so instead she chooses to say “He’s my son” (TA). Since her gender is difficult, or impossible, to explain in language, she opts for using a gender-specific name for Toby instead. The limited range of gender terms that language offers is also represented when a

little girl in a diner asks Bree “Are you a boy or a girl?” (TA) Bree does not answer her, and perhaps cannot answer her, as she is not “fully” male or female. Since Bree seems to support the binary gender system, she refrains from calling herself a “real” girl before her surgery, as she wants to be one after it. Another reason she cannot provide an answer is that she is upset for having been revealed by an eight-year-old girl, which shows that already children participate in policing gender. The problem with performative speech acts also occurs when using gendered terms in a neutral way. Toby continuously refers to Bree as “dude”, which Bree objects to, as it originally refers to men (TA). Bree is sensitive to being called anything that is associable with manhood. Performative speech acts are usually gender-specific and in the case of transgender, when one’s gender status is dubious, they may result in unwanted interpellation and they do not allow an exhaustive representation of gender diversity.

There are several instances in *Breakfast on Pluto* where the interpellation of Kitten though performative speech acts is made prominent. At the beginning of the film, Patrick is caught in girl’s clothes and his foster mother wants him to comply with the idea that gender derives directly from biological sex by forcing him to say “I’m a boy, I’m not a girl” (BOP). This supports the idea that performative hailing is actually what constitutes Kitten’s gender. Kitten only ever refers to herself as a boy once, when she tries to stop her magician friend from kissing her. She tells him, “The thing is, Bertie, I’m not a girl”, to which Bertie replies, “Well I knew that, princess” (BOP). Kitten is surprised that she has been read as male even though she has kept up a coherent female performance. However, Bertie continuing to call her princess suggests that her gender does not matter. Near the end of the film, when Father Liam, who is also Kitten’s biological father, comes to see her in London, he tells Kitten, “I knew a boy like you once”, to which Kitten replies, “Oh, I’m not a boy, sir, I’m a girl” (BOP). This brings the interpellation from boy to girl full circle.

However, the transformation from one to the other gender is not central in the film. When Kitten meets a gang of bikers in the first half of the film their leader talks about riding on the road with a druid at his back. Kitten asks him “Is a druid a man or a woman?” and the biker replies, “That doesn’t matter. All that matters is the journey” (BOP). This answer represents the message of the film, which is itself a journey; although, not a journey from boy to girl, but the journey of Kitten’s life in general. Kitten’s transgender identity as a part of the film but not as its main storyline, as in the case of Bree, makes *Breakfast on Pluto* more subversive than *Transamerica*.

2.2.2 SUBVERSION

Patrick’s potentially subversive identity begins with his choice of name. He chooses his nickname after St Kitten, otherwise known as St Cettin, who was an acolyte of St Patrick (BOP). According to Patrick, St Kitten has been referred to at different times as both he and she. She also claims that both St Kitten and St Patrick wore dresses. As no one questions St Patrick’s gender, Kitten does not see why she should not be allowed to wear a dress. An important difference between *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* is that Kitten’s male identity is not made invisible the way Bree’s is. Bree hides her masculinity and avoids the type of gender ambiguity that Kitten enjoys. Kitten’s story begins as Patrick and even when she has transformed into a woman, she refrains from being “all” woman. She deliberately makes her masculinity visible in certain situations in order to rid herself of unwanted male attention. Bree refrains from revealing her male identity at all cost. As a result *Transamerica* appears less subversive than *Breakfast on Pluto*, which allows queerer representations of gender.

According to Butler (1993: 231), drag “serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of affecting that

exposure”. Although neither protagonist classifies as drag, some of their apparel suggests high femininity that is very characteristic of drag, such as Bree’s insistence on wearing pink and Kitten’s preference of lace and fur coats. The characters can denaturalise gender originality and stability but they can also serve the re-idealisation of heterosexual binary gender norms. The effect of Bree’s all-pink clothing creates a feeling of artificiality even though she is a transsexual woman played by a female actor. Butler (1993: 231) states that exposing the naturalised status of the heterosexual binary might not lead to its subversion. Bree’s appearance is like an impersonation of what a feminine woman should be. If the audience sees Bree’s femininity as a result of her feminine identity then her denaturalising performance does not call heterosexual norms into question but rather reinforces them. This seems to be the encouraged reading of the film.

However, another reading is possible. Following from the claim that Bree’s femininity is perceived by the audience as artificial, this “unnaturalness” might not derive from the fact that she is not a “real” woman but rather that what she believes constitutes a “real” woman is strange and outdated. Her hyper-femininity could be read not as an imitation of an original gender but as revealing the unnaturalness of the demand of femininity; although, this is certainly not Bree’s intention. Bree actually seems not to perceive herself as out of the ordinary. In a situation where her sister offers her a pink feather jacket to wear, Bree states, “I’m a transsexual not a transvestite” (TA), which means she thinks transvestites “overdo it” when it comes to clothes. But her own “overdoing” femininity is what makes Bree somehow less feminine than a woman-born-woman – a “real” woman need not make that much effort. Bree’s failure to seem “natural” coincides with Butler’s (1993: 125) claim that the idealised gender performance that the norm demands cannot be fully achieved, thus revealing the problematic of heterosexual performativity.

In appearance Kitten represents a similar femininity as Bree, but unlike *Transamerica* the emphasis of *Breakfast on Pluto* is not so much on this outward appearance. Jordan has stated that “the emotional heart of the character” is much more important to him than “all the accessories” (Future Movies 2005). Actually, Kitten does not try to look like any woman; she most identifies with and tries to look like a famous actress named Mitzi Gaynor, who people have told her strongly resembles her biological mother (BOP). As a result, her desire for femininity, especially high-class femininity, might not result from an internal female identity at all but rather a desire to be like her mother, something considered usual for young girls. The similarity between mother and ‘daughter’ is also represented through Bree whose traditionally feminine behaviour, correcting people’s grammar and a dislike of swearing are traits that she shares with her mother, who is otherwise represented as an opposite to Bree (TA). As Bree’s behaviour is represented in the film as performative, her mother’s femininity is, through analogy, revealed as equally constructed. Reading Bree’s and Kitten’s femininity not as a naturalistic result of an internal female identity but as something that they have adopted from their mothers results in the possibility of subverting the idea of stable gender identity.

Kitten, who is actually played by a male actor, leaves a more “natural” impression on screen than Bree. Kitten’s male and female identities do not seem to contradict and exclude each other. While Bree’s in-between state is something that needs to be overcome (TA), Kitten is able to present the in-betweenness as a possible and viable option of living (BOP). The film includes the representation of trans people who exist within their ambiguity. One of the examples of Kitten’s ambiguousness is her clothing. Due to the era in which the film is set, the 1970s, it is not easy to differentiate between every outfit as either male or female. Firstly, the fashion of the time is more androgynous than contemporary clothing. Secondly, it is not easy for a contemporary viewer to distinguish

between male and female clothing: what appears as feminine today may have been a fashionable male outfit back then. Kitten wears dresses and skirts but also trousers, although seeming to become more feminine and ladylike as the film progresses. This is probably linked to her moving from her small Irish town to London where she is freer to visibly perform her femininity. The move to London is also necessary because she can blend in better in an urban community and avoid confrontations that are more likely to occur within her Catholic hometown.

2.3 MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Lacking social recognition as a binary heterosexual means losing a possible social identity and being categorised as the other, which results in being excluded from dominant culture (Butler 1999: 99). Trans people are often excluded not only by society at large but also within smaller communities, such as the workplace, their own families and circle of friends. Both *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* represent their protagonists and the problems that they encounter in connection with these communities. One of the important issues that Ryan (2009: 18) suggests should be addressed in films is discrimination against transgender people, which is a result of the marginalisation of trans identities. Due to their marginalised status transgender people are forced into situations that may not only be discriminatory but also potentially dangerous.

2.3.1 DISCRIMINATION

Previous films, such as “Psycho” (1960) and “Silence of the Lambs” (1991), have represented trans people as monstrous as a result of their marginalisation. *Breakfast on Pluto* makes reference to this murderous image that transgender people have been subjected to by society. When Kitten lives through an IRA bomb explosion in a London club, she is first treated as a victim. However, when her male identity is revealed she becomes the prime suspect of the bombing, also aided by the fact that she is Irish. The

newspaper headlines on screen read “Lady Killer”, “Killer Queen” and “Sweet Smile of Cross-dressing Killer” (BOP). Kitten is pathologised and immediately read as someone untrustworthy due to her decision to hide her identity. She is taken into questioning and the police try to beat a confession out of her. The police do not actually care if she planted the bomb or not, but they expect anyone to confess after taking such a beating. The newspapers have labelled Kitten the culprit; the police try to give the public the criminal they want. Although she is severely beaten she does not sign a confession. She actually feels safe in the hands of the police, as she has nowhere else to go. When they finally want to release her, Kitten begs to stay, “I just want to belong. I’d be your best prisoner” (BOP). This shows how Kitten feels unsafe in the world and demonstrates her inability to fit in.

As trans people often experience both acceptance and discrimination from society, it is important for a multifaceted film to represent both situations. Both *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* are rather positive in their representation of transgender identities compared to earlier films. One significant example of this is that their protagonists are still alive at the end of the films. In many previous transgender films, such as *Paris is Burning* (1990), *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (1998) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), the transgender characters die due to their non-conformist identities. As stated by Butler (1993: 133), “there are cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization”. Such an ending, from a symbolic perspective, suggests a certain impossibility of transgender, as though it would not be possible to represent in film a situation where the characters would be allowed to continue on their path of gender denaturalisation. *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* lack this symbolic suggestion and represent their protagonists as having viable lives regardless of their social exclusion.

Different types of marginalisation are represented in both films. Kitten falls victim to violent discrimination. She is on the street at night and is picked up by a man who

mistakes her for a prostitute (BOP). He seems to prefer her to others, which leaves the impression that he can read her male identity. However, his aim is not to sleep with her but to attack and possibly kill her, as he tries to strangle her with a wire. While her male identity is what gets her into trouble, Kitten's feminine side saves her: she escapes by spraying perfume in her attacker's eyes (BOP). The film represents a very real situation that transgender people end up in – when no one will hire them and they are in need of money, they turn to the streets. Actually, many transsexuals do this in order to fund their sex reassignment surgeries (Namaste 2000: 206). Although initially Kitten is mistaken for a street walker, she later deliberately tries to do it. However, she is rescued by a familiar police inspector who instead takes her to work at a peep-show, which is safer. In *Transamerica*, the issue of prostitution is represented through Bree's son Toby. Bree would never resort to prostitution but through Toby, as Bree's flesh and blood, the film creates a symbolic analogy between transgender and prostitution, hinting that one does not fall far from the other.

Resorting to prostitution is linked to an important problem in transgender people's lives: the difficulty of being employed, which shows how trans people are discriminated against in the public sphere. The inspector who rescues Kitten asks her, "Why don't you try to get a regular job?" and she replies, "To tell you the truth, inspector, I'm not that employable", to which he answers "So I gathered" (BOP). The fact that the peep-show is the best job that Kitten can acquire shows her limited options and the reluctance of institutions to hire trans people. The peep-show and her previous job as a magician's assistant are both built on the visualised performance of her appearance. The alternative is being invisible, as she was when working as a costumed mascot in a park. Kitten is never represented as having the possibility of a regular job. Bree's employment possibilities are similarly limited. She works as a telemarketer, which makes her invisible to the people she

is calling. Her second job is being a dishwasher in a Mexican restaurant kitchen. Both of Bree's jobs suggest that she is not suitable for direct interaction with people. Bree becomes a waitress in the same Mexican restaurant after her surgery, when she has a coherent gender. The representation of employment conditions in both films suggests that the protagonists' gender identities cannot be overlooked in the public sphere and that their jobs either have to hide their gender or be directly based on its performative nature. "The 'unthinkable' is thus fully within culture, but excluded from *dominant* culture" (Butler 1999: 99). Their lack of a coherent gender results in marginalisation.

2.3.2 COMMUNITY

In addition to the workplace, the communities with which transgender characters interact are an important subject of analysis. Kitten communicates with her adopted family, her school, people in her town, and rogue groups of people she meets during her journey (BOP). When Patrick's foster mother first catches him in a dress and wearing lipstick she tells him that his behaviour will humiliate their family and threatens to "march [him] up and down the street in disgrace in front of the whole town" (BOP). Patrick's school shows similar intolerance towards him. Although they do show some leniency when they allow him to take up home economics and needlework class instead of physical education in order to keep him from causing trouble, they also reprimand him when he leaves a note asking "Do you know any place that there's a good sex change?" in the school's problem box, where students are asked to address issues concerning puberty (BOP). Although the headmaster explicitly says, "No problem should be precluded" (BOP), Kitten's problem has no place among the acceptable issues of teenagers and she is suspended from school. Kitten's family and school represent the general view of the entire hamlet, which becomes evident towards the end of the film when they burn down the home of Father Liam who has offered Kitten shelter. Evidently, those who try to aid outcasts are punished for it. The

only tolerance Kitten sees is from other outcast communities such as the musicians and hippies he meets on the road, or her friends.

Breakfast on Pluto groups non-normative identities together. These social relationships are represented in the notion of 'symbolic kinship' (Butler 1993: 138). This kinship exists between transgender identity and other marginalised minorities, such as racial identity, mental disability and political radicalism. Kitten's circle of friends includes a black girl named Charlie, a boy with Down syndrome named Lawrence and an IRA-involved boy Irwin (BOP). These people accept Kitten for who she is, leaving the impression that tolerance is most likely to come from a source that understands social exclusion due to being non-normative themselves. Moreover, the film hints that the experience of transgender has certain similarities with the racial, disabled and political experiences of otherness. Kitten and her friends are all outsiders in the conservative environment of their small Irish town. One example of this is a scene where they try to enter a nightclub and the bouncer refuses to let them in, giving two reasons, "him and her", which references Lawrence and Kitten (BOP). Both Lawrence and Irwin end up dying as a result of their otherness: Lawrence is unable to understand warnings and walks into a bomb planted by the IRA; Irwin is killed by his fellow IRA members after telling the police about some of their plans. Only Kitten and Charlie remain together as two social outcasts, one a transgender woman and the other a single unwed mother.

A similar reading of symbolic kinship can be made on the basis of *Transamerica*. Although Bree strongly represents a white middle class culture, there are elements in the film that suggest an analogy between Bree's otherness and that of racial others. While Bree's apartment is mostly pink, there are a few African elements, statues and masks, decorating her home. In the beginning of the film she also chooses a book called *Civilizations of Black Africa* to place in her handbag, instead of choosing the women's

magazine under it, which would make more sense as light reading in her psychiatrist's waiting room. These elements introduce a symbolic connection between Bree and another minority culture, which is reinforced by the fact that Bree mostly interacts with racial others. She lives in a neighbourhood, which seems to be a suburb, but the people shown as she leaves the house are all non-white, mostly Mexican. Due to a lack of communication between Bree and the white middle class it is not clear if she would be accepted in dominant society. According to Butler (2004: 216), gender minorities can re-signify social bonds within communities of colour. In addition to hinting that Bree might be more able to pass or at least be accepted by other outcasts, representing Bree as analogous to racial others shows how transgender, similarly to race, is subjugated by the ruling discourse. However, the symbolic kinship in *Transamerica* is even more subtle than in *Breakfast on Pluto*, which means that the audience of the film might not notice this link, which is a way of queering an otherwise stereotypical film. In the end, this reading depends on the viewer.

Transamerica's representation of community response to Bree's transgenderism is generally restricted due to lack of interaction with others. Unlike Kitten, Bree does not have friends who understand and accept her. When her psychiatrist asks her at the beginning of the film if she has the support of friends, Bree replies, "I'm very close to my therapist" (TA). Bree's personal interaction is limited to her therapist and her son Toby. Bree's psychiatrist also asks her about her family and she untruthfully tells him that they are dead. They actually live in Phoenix and shun her. When Bree and Toby are forced to visit them on their road trip due to lack of money, Bree's mother insists on calling her Stanley. She also grabs her groin and, after realising she still has a penis, her mother states, "She's still a boy" (TA). However, when Bree forces her mother's hand on her breast she begins to cry and says, "Oh, Stanley, I can't look at you like this!" (TA) It is evident that her mother believes that gender should derive from biology and Bree's ambiguous state

repulses her. According to Bornstein (1994: 72), “the presence of gender outlaws is enough to make people sick”. The rejection of family members that is represented in both films is a common problem that transgender people face.

Bree’s solitude is further represented through the brief encounter with a transgender community in Mary Ellen’s home in Dallas, where Bree and Toby are forced to spend the night on their road trip. Bree does not have any connection to the transsexual community. She prefers passing while the trans people she meets at the party, although some of them “living stealth” (TA) in the public sphere, are openly transsexual in Mary Ellen’s home in the presence of Bree and Toby. As Bree cannot accept her own queerness she is bothered by how they flaunt their gender ambiguity. Bree not only refuses to identify with them but opposes herself to them in front of Toby by stating that they are “phony, pretending to be something they’re not” (TA). Bree searches for security in conformism: as she lacks a support structure, she resorts to excluding others in order to uphold her own identity. However, as the other transgender people are not stigmatised in the film, Bree’s claim can leave the audience critical of her since she judges someone who she resembles. Moreover, Toby states, “I thought they were nice” (TA), which suggests that Bree stands alone in her exclusionary views. The trans people at the party are represented as “normal people”; they are much more at ease than Bree who tries to pass at every moment of her life. While *Breakfast on Pluto* presents a more positive image of the possibilities of connection to others, *Transamerica* leaves Bree alone in her situation, but suggests that it may be a result of personal choice that comes from her inability to accept herself as she is or her need to feel secure in society. The film seems to represent a more accepting and fluid understanding of gender than its protagonist.

2.3.3 DESIRE

A type of communication that is often represented in film, and is a way of normalising certain sexualities, is relationships, which revolve around desire. Both Bree and Kitten being attracted to men reinforces the heterosexual binary; however, it is interesting to analyse how they are viewed by others. According to Laura Mulvey (1999: 837), films usually portray women as the object of the male gaze. This is somewhat distorted as the protagonists of *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* are transgender women. Mulvey (1999: 838) claims that the camera leaves the impression of being neutral while actually representing a heterosexual male gaze. Therefore, eroticism or lack of desire for the characters is telling. While Bree is played by an actual woman, she is rarely presented in a sexual manner, not to the audience nor any of the characters in the film. If women, as Mulvey believes, are objects of erotic gaze, then Bree is presented as a non-woman, as she does not create desire for her. Only a Native American man she meets on the road seems to find her attractive. The potentially romantic relationship between him and Bree is put off for an unknown period of time, suggesting that if they did meet again, Bree would then be post-surgical and a “real” woman. This helps to stabilise the heterosexual norm. Bree also upholds the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality, as she refers to the intercourse which resulted in Toby’s conception as “tragically lesbian” (TA). Bree is generally represented in a non-sexual and undesirable manner.

Unlike Bree, Kitten is in numerous situations as the object of male desire. The film begins with her walking on the street and a construction worker making sexist remarks towards her. She is also hit on in a London club by a man who puts his arm around her. However, when he realises she is not quite who she seems, he says, “Christ, you’re a bloke!” and backs off (BOP). The lack of interest in her as a transgender woman is a way

of reinforcing the binariness of desire. As Kitten is neither male nor female, she is represented as an impossible object of sexual affection. In the same club Kitten is later dancing with another man. Before the audience can guess where things will lead, a bomb explodes. It is possible that the director does not want to end up in a situation where Kitten would have to explain her condition. The film avoids allowing Kitten to enter into sexual relationships because that would end up revealing her other gender identity. Situations where trans people are revealed usually become dangerous and may result in physical violence. Kitten is also never shown kissing anyone, as this might appear a man kissing a man. It is not always clear whether or not the men who hit on her realise she is not a woman-born-woman. This ambiguity is what gives *Breakfast on Pluto* an air of queerness and produces potentially subversive situations.

Although Kitten becomes the romantic interest of several men, the desire is not represented as homosexual, nor is it entirely heterosexual due to her physical condition. According to Butler (2004: 142), it is always difficult in the case of transgendered persons to say whether their sexuality is homosexual or heterosexual. Therefore, the film represents “forms of love that are not reducible to a heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1993: 127). Men’s desire for Kitten reveals how the heterosexual matrix is not naturally binary at all. However, similarly to Bree’s Native American, her admirers are outcasts and people with alternative lifestyles, just like Kitten. Her love interests include a biker gang leader and a glam rock performer named Billy Hatchett; she is also seen as attractive and desirable by Bertie, who hires her as his assistant (BOP). Kitten’s relationships can be seen as both exotic fetishism, from which the audience can absent itself, and as a subversive performance which calls normative heterosexuality into question (Butler 1993: 137). Regardless of the men’s social standing, the film manages to queer desire. By making a transgender woman an object of desire, transgender people seem more “normal” in the

eyes of the audience. Even if Kitten is not represented as erotic to the viewer, the fact that other characters see her as desirable introduces the idea that a non-binary person can also be the object of love, which makes transgender people, as they are, seem acceptable in their queerness.

2.3.4 NORMALISATION

Being capable of giving and receiving love is a good way of normalising alternative gender identities and sexualities. This shows how people who have been classified as other have more in common with our values and lives than one might at first believe. According to Agid (2006: 24), it is important for films, like most mainstream media, to construct transgender bodies as “normal” in order to make trans people more understandable and tolerated. In addition to romantic love, normalisation can also occur through representing transgender people in the context of family. Representing Bree as a parent may be seen as a way of normalising her character. The love between child and parent is also represented through Kitten who searches for her mother but ends up finding her father. However, parenthood can, in addition to being normalising, also represent the possibility of new and queer kinship models.

Transamerica ends with a rather queer family model. Bree as a woman has never had sexual intercourse; however, she has a son who was conceived by Stanley. Toby does not know the truth for most of their road trip and actually ends up making a move on Bree (a twist on the story of Oedipus). Toby escapes after finding out who Bree really is and that she has been lying to him. In the end of the film, after Bree has had her surgery, Toby returns, which suggests that they may attempt to become a family. This family model would be extremely non-normative as Bree would simultaneously be and not be Toby’s father and mother. However, this queer solution seems the most acceptable option in the context of the film. The nuclear family model is subverted in *Breakfast on Pluto* as well.

Kitten is driven back to her father instead of her mother, which results in a queer family model: Father Liam taking care of Kitten and the pregnant unwed Charlie. Although they make it work, society cannot accept them and their home is burned down. In the end of the film, Kitten and Charlie have to start a new life in London, which promises more safety. They, upon the arrival of Charlie's baby, also create a queer image of a new family model.

Both films end with a hopeful future for their transgender protagonists. Bree and Kitten are shown as having a place in the world, although not the most conventional one. This aligns with Butler's (2004: 105) claim that legitimacy and illegitimacy are not the only two options for existence; there is an outside domain that has not yet been figured as either one or the other. This is the domain that Bree and Kitten seem to belong to, as they remain on the boarder of acceptance and rejection. A discourse that could fully represent the rest of their lives in film does not yet exist, but there is a promise of a positive outcome for transgender people. Although, at the end of the films, the protagonists remain marginalised by society in general, the directors have produced spaces in which the ruling hegemonic norms can be subverted and in which transgender people are accepted by other people. The subversion is further added to by the normalisation of the characters to the audience. It is not the following of binary gender or the subversion of gender identity that makes the characters more or less "normal"; it is the fact that the films interpellate their transgender protagonists as subjects who are truly and viably human.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to provide insight into the relationship between film and gender ideology, which is of great importance as films have the power to produce and uphold ideology. People perceive films as only a means of entertainment as a result of which they do not critically analyse whether the information represented in a film covertly represent the ruling ideology. As a film can provide viewers with topics that they might not otherwise encounter in their lives, it is possible to influence people's perceptions on these topics. Films can both make visible or conceal certain issues or gender identities, such as homosexuality and transgender, which means that the audience receives either a broader or more limited view on a particular topic. Therefore, analysing the relationship between film and gender ideology is necessary in order to reveal what type of information is transmitted to the audience. Since the meanings represented in a film are ambiguous and allow different readings, the viewer may provide multiple interpretations of the ideas a film conveys. Nevertheless, a 'preferred' reading is encoded into the text, necessitating the study of the dominant ideology.

The ruling gender ideology most represented in films is the binary heterosexual hegemony. In this system people are interpellated into subjecthood through the process of hailing them as either male or female and their subject-status is made dependent on their stable binary gender identity. Subjectivity itself is necessary in order for a person to be considered truly human. The ruling gender ideology is built upon the idea that the formation of subjects is a natural process that derives from an internal gender identity. However, it is concealed that this ideology is built on the basis of exclusionary practices. The ruling gender ideology does not recognise genders outside the binary, as a result of which alternative or transgressive genders are claimed unintelligible and are stigmatised and marginalised. Since subject formation is done in a way that the exclusions become

invisible and the process seems natural, any gender identity that does not fit into the binary mould is labelled unnatural.

In order to counter this exclusionary view of gender, it is necessary to reveal the constructedness of the seeming naturalness of sex and the subject, which is taken up by Judith Butler in her works *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. She believes that gender does not derive from an internal gender identity but that it is the result of reiterative gender performances. Her theory is based on the fact that one cannot access a subject or sex prior to the mark of gender. Therefore, gender ideology influences both the construction of the subject as well as its sex. According to Butler, interpellation as a gender is not a singular act that happens once at the moment of birth but a process that takes place based on the repetition of gendered acts. The ruling ideology demands repeated acts of gender to be performed according to the norm in order for subject-status to be achieved. However, since the norm is built on the idea of being natural, which Butler claims it is not, then everyone is bound to fail at one point and create permutations of the norm. This shows how the system works against itself by creating possibilities of subversion.

The existence of transgressive identities, such as transgender, intersex and bisexual, is subversive in that it reveals how the ruling gender system is constructed on the basis of exclusion. Although these identities exist in the periphery, they are still part of the gender system. For Butler, the idea of performative gender opens the possibility of performing gender in a way that undermines the system from within. This is best exemplified through transgender, which can expose the performative construction of the “natural” categories of gender and displace our understanding of the reality of gender. However, performing gender in a subversive way puts subjectivity under risk and transgender people, who already have difficulties safely existing within the gender system, may not be interested in or willing to risk their status of humanity for the aim of revolutionising gender.

Although Butler advocates the deconstruction of gender in an attempt to widen our understanding of how gender is constituted, which would allow the inclusion of trans people, her argumentation is often considered too distant from everyday life. Both feminist and transgender theorists have criticised Butler's approaches as unsuitable for solving real-life issues concerning political movements and gender minorities, which need labels in order for it to be possible to talk about them. Although this is seen as a weakness, it is also a strength that Butler does not try to group gender minorities together based on common identity, which tends to exclude differences. Butler takes into account the diversity within these minorities by criticising the concept of identity categories. Her theory aims to disrupt and queer people's understanding of gender in a way that would create a new type of politics through social transformation that would make non-binary gender identities accepted as well. However, Butler's theory of subverting the gender system is perceived as idealist and transgender theorists and activists suggest a more practical approach to the study of transgender. In order to keep Butler's criticism in the context of trans in mind, the film analysis of this paper was concerned with both the representation of Butler's theoretical concepts as well as the social issues that transgender people face in their everyday lives.

Both films analysed in this paper have abandoned the overly stereotypical and stigmatised representation that transgender has been subjected to in the past. However, these films still exist within the ruling gender discourse as a result of which they carry the ideas of binary heterosexuality. The films encourage a different reading: *Transamerica* seems rather normative in the representation of the transgender identity while *Breakfast on Pluto* appears queerer and less conformist to the binary system. Interpellation of the protagonists reveals what type of gender ideology the films follow. *Transamerica*'s protagonist Bree clearly upholds the norms of dichotomous gender identity, as the film

constantly emphasises her aim to pass as female and to erase her past as a man through sex reassignment surgery. Bree, who is played by a female actor, is interpellated as a woman and her male side is made invisible. Presenting gender as either one or the other reinforces the binary model. *Breakfast on Pluto* does not make its protagonist Kitten's transgender as prominent compared to other aspects in the plot. Kitten, who is played by a male actor, is interpellated as both male and female in different parts of the film, which suggests that she does not need to follow the binary system in order to be intelligible to the audience. Consequently, the interpellation of Kitten seems to follow a more subversive view of gender as it advocates the possibility of being simultaneously male and female.

Linguistic performativity is conveyed in the films through the limitations that performative speech acts have to represent transgender. Bree represents the impossibility of naming her, as language is gender-specific. While wanting to avoid being called by male terms, she does not feel completely able to refer to herself as "fully" female. Since Bree follows the idea of normative gender and wants to be accepted in society as female after her surgery, she refrains from demanding complete acceptance in her transition phase. This is a result of her fear of marginalisation, which is why she seeks security in conformism. Kitten is referred to in the film by both male and female terms; however, she prefers female pronouns. Although the film represents her as being called a boy at the beginning and a girl at the end of the film, its main emphasis is on the fact that it does not matter which gender she is. Hence, *Breakfast on Pluto* suggests that the speech act that hails one as a gender should not be made more important than the individual who it references.

Since films do not produce ideology in an obvious way and its effects on the audience are not direct, they can both reinforce the dominant gender ideology or subvert it. Many elements in *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto* can be analysed in a nuanced manner. One reading of the character's performances of femininity, based on their hyper-

feminine clothing, supports the claim of the ruling gender ideology that transgender attempts to imitate binariness, while another reading suggests the possibility of subverting the heterosexual binary system, as their overly feminine apparel can be considered as revealing the unnaturalness of the demand of femininity. The reading depends on the audience.

Both films represent the normative gender ideology as well as demonstrate the performative and subversive nature of gender. While *Transamerica* may seem to be full of gender stereotypes, it also contains moments of queerness; and *Breakfast on Pluto*, which seems to be highly transgressive in its representation of gender, also represents several values of normative gender ideology. Kitten is shown to perform femininity without any difficulty, unlike Bree, who reveals that acts such as a high voice, “feminine” posture and manner of walking are a culturally constructed demand made on all women who want to be considered feminine. This suggests, and coincides with Butler’s claim, that femininity does not come from an internal gender identity but is something that can be practised and taught and it is the performance of femininity that constitutes female gender.

The issues that trans people face, in addition to the problems of performing binary gender, concern their interaction with others. The films represent the discrimination that trans people face in society as well as in smaller communities. Neither character is shown to be able to find regular employment, which is suggested is because of their ambiguous gender. Their trans identities are also the reason that Bree and Kitten are shunned by their families. However, both films are more ambivalent than previous films with transgender characters since they show a more positive image of the possibility of having viable lives and personal contact with other people. A symbolic connection is made in both films between transgender and other marginal identities. Not only are the protagonists more accepted by outsider communities, as opposed to dominant culture, but the allegory

between trans identity and other minorities, for example race, show how they share a similar subjugation by the ruling ideology.

Outcast communities are also where the films represent the possibility of romantic relationships. Both films are heteronormative as the trans women protagonists are attracted to men. However, the desire that others have towards them is more interesting. Bree is not made sexually attractive to the audience nor is she an object of desire to other characters in the film. If the possibility of romance exists for Bree then it is postponed to a time after her surgery, which supports the binary heterosexual norm. Kitten is presented as attractive to the audience and sexually appealing to numerous characters in the film. Although the men who she has closer relationships with are conveyed as fellow outcasts, the film queers desire by making a trans woman the object of love. Therefore, *Breakfast on Pluto* represents sexuality in a more elaborate way than *Transamerica*.

Through the representation of transgender characters as the objects of romantic love and the possibility of them having a family, the films manage to normalise transgender in the eyes of the audience. Both protagonists, although marginalised by dominant culture, find a place of acceptance in the world. Bree goes through with her surgery as a result of which she is more freely able to interact with others and her seclusion in her in-between gender state comes to an end. She is also reunited with her son Toby who can become the accepting family she never had growing up. Kitten also creates a new family model with her friend Charlie and her baby in London. The big city provides more opportunities for Kitten to perform her ambiguous gender in a safer and more accepting environment. Thus, the films end with the idea that transgender people can have viable lives, which suggests that they encourage a non-marginalising reading of transgender.

This paper adds to the body of research done in the field of transgender film studies by analysing two contemporary films, *Transamerica* and *Breakfast on Pluto*, from the

perspective of transgender identity and performativity, which in turn enable to see what type of transgender images people are introduced to. It is not possible, based on the analysis of these two films, to make generalising conclusions about how transgender is represented in contemporary films. However, it is evident, based on the history of transgender in film, that the representation of transgender has made great progress in time: from lack of representation to stigmatisation to farce and now to these relatively normalising films. It seems that transgender follows a similar path to the representation of homosexuality in popular culture. Currently, transgender people are much less represented in films than gays but the tendency seems to be growing.

The films analysed in this paper show different degrees of ambiguous gender performances, some of them more subtle than others, which means that the audience might not notice all the subversive elements among the otherwise normative gender matrix that surrounds the films. Future research in this field is necessary in order to observe how the representation of transgender will evolve, whether transgender films take the direction of normalisation by presenting transgender people through a binary lens or celebrated in their queerness. Since there are a myriad of transgender identities, it is important for the body of transgender films to represent various identities in order for the audience to acquire a wider understanding of what trans can be like. Furthermore, future transgender film studies should pay more attention to the social, cultural and political reality that transgender exist in, which is not represented in this paper, as this would create awareness of not only what transgender people are like but explain why their situation is the way it is.

It is important to represent transgressive choices as viable in addition to normative genders since many transgender people do not, and should not be forced to, fit the binary norm. As films, and media images in general, are the first source of information on alternative gender identities that people, especially young people, can turn to, it is

important that they show acceptance towards diversity in order to make people realise that they are not alone in their difference. Moreover, for the acceptance and understanding of different transgender people to appear, it is necessary for films to not only normalise the traditional binary trans identities, such as Bree in *Transamerica*, but also represent ambiguous trans people as “normal”, such as Kitten in *Breakfast on Pluto*. This would ultimately coincide with Butler’s aim, which is not to queer transgender, but rather queer the way we think about gender and its modes of production in the first place.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
INGLISE FILOLOOGIA OSAKOND

Helen Peil

**Gender in the Making: Transgender Identity and Performativity in Films
Transamerica (2005) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005)**

**Soo loomine: Transidentiteedi ja performatiivsuse kujutamine filmides
„Transameerika“ (2005) ja „Homnikusöök Pluutol“ (2005)**

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Annotatsioon:

Antud töö eesmärgiks on uurida transidentiteedi ja performatiivsuse kujutamist kahes 2005. aastal ilmunud filmis „Transameerika“ ja „Homnikusöök Pluutol“. Töö annab ülevaate sellest, kuidas kujutatakse kahte trans-naist ning nende elu traditsiooniliselt binaarses heteroseksuaalses ühiskonnas. Teooria on üles ehitatud Judith Butleri teoste „Sekeldused sooga“ (1990) ning „Kehad, millel on kaalu“ (1993), mis uurivad sooidentiteeti ning subversiivset performatiivsust, mida esineb ka analüüsitavates filmides. Töö on üles ehitatud kahe filmi peategelaste kontrastiivsele analüüsile. Kui „Transameerika“ peategelane Bree on binaarsuse poole kalduv transseksuaal, siis „Homnikusöök Pluutol“ peategelane Kitten kujutab soo ja seksuaalsuse piire ebaselgemalt. Filmide süvaanalüüs näitab, et ideoloogia järgimist ning selle õõnestamist leidub mõlemas filmis. Tegelaste mittebinaarne identiteet ning käitumine põhjustavad pingeid, mille tõttu Bree ja Kitten on ühiskonna poolt tõrjutud. Varasemate trans-filmidega võrreldes kujutavad antud filmid aga peategelasi eelkõige positiivsete tulevikuväljavaadetega. Bree ja Kitteni tegelaskujude analüüs jõuab järelduseni, et ehkki üks film muudab trans-soolisust normatiivsemaks ning teine mitte-binaarsemaks, siis mõlemad filmid kujutavad oma trans-peategelasi vaataja silmis eluvõimelistena ning inimlikus valguses.

Märksõnad:

Transsoolisus, Judith Butler, transidentiteet, performatiivsus, subversioon, filmianalüüs

Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

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