

Issues of Representation in *Transamerica*

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ABSTRACT: This essay attempts to analyze *Transamerica* (Duncan tucker, 2005) chronologically and explore the dimensions of difference. By this means, some analytic aspects will be developed based on comments about passages of the film in an interwoven way. With this end in mind, some theories of representation-as-difference, applying them to social issues will also be pointed out. The choice of the topic and movie can be justified considering the outstanding way *Transamerica* deals with the trans-sexuality, some cultural assumptions and tough family relationships. To conclude, I will examine one aspect of the construction of ‘otherness’ and exclusion.

KEYWORDS: *Transamerica*; Representation-as-difference; Construction of ‘otherness’.

Introdução

This essay attempts to analyze *Transamerica* (Duncan tucker, 2005) chronologically and explore the dimensions of difference. By this means, some analytic aspects will be developed based on comments about passages of the film in an interwoven way. With this end in mind, I will draw on the theories of representation-as-difference, applying them to social issues. The notion of ‘stereotyping’, from the field of representational practices, will also be applied. To conclude, I will examine one aspect of the construction of ‘otherness’ and exclusion that can be interpreted according to Hall (2003) as reducing, essentializing, naturalizing and fixing ‘difference’, as well as a strategy of ‘splitting’.

Transamerica offers at least two perspectives on representational practices: (1) representation as difference and (2) ‘stereotyping’, which I intend to focus on by providing the reader with a chronological analysis of the film. My choice of permeating the chronological and the theoretical analysis was made in order to facilitate the understanding in a linear-like format and also as a way to guide those readers who have never seen the film or even the ones who might have missed or forgotten some relevant details of it. The film covers some ground and reality check such as: trans-sexuality and tough family relationships.

I decided to write an essay based on this film for two main reasons: on the one hand, *Transamerica* rests on and provides some widespread cultural assumptions of transgender people being oversexed, on the other it is also a clear example of a film that does not seek to change people’s ways of thinking. Instead, it tends to enhance a thought-provoking look at how we are

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defined by others and our perceptions of ourselves; it also tries to reinforce certain aspects of misconceptions, since it seems that a lot of people in our culture cannot acknowledge differences without condemning them.

Transamerica

Transamerica is an interesting independent melodrama. The film is the story of Bree's personal journey towards self-discovery while trying to fit in with society. She was punished by her family since she was born a genetic male, but she sticks to her goal of becoming the woman she always wanted to be and she does not give up her freedom. She is brave enough to face the risk of undergoing a surgery to fulfill her desires. The film is noticeable for the way in which Bree is represented; she could have been shown as a figure of ridicule, but instead she is taken seriously and presented as a rounded individual so that the film's underlying message about acceptance explores the complexities of a condition that is often misunderstood and ignored by mainstream society, and shows Bree's basic struggle for respect and a chance at happiness. In fact, the character of Bree is treated in a very tactful and non-judgmental stance. The director takes care to show Bree as a person and there is always an attempt to value rather than denigrate her. His individual scenes are very persuasive concerning this aspect.

In some films, such as *The Silence of the Lambs* in which Jamie Gumm played the character of a sexually confused transvestite, he represented danger and was identified as a perverse killer. *In and Out* delivers laughs by showing how Howard acts out his confusion representing the funny side of gayness. On the other hand, *Philadelphia* attempts to represent gays in a positive manner, although it has drawn some criticism for its representation of homosexuality. Finally, *The Adventures of Priscilla* deals with gender as performative, gender as a culture constructed by us. The characters in *Priscilla* alternatively play both roles and they have the capacity to flatter the gender in the sense that they feel pleased to perform any role by acting spontaneously. Nothing of the sort happens in *Transamerica*. Mainly, it avoids any association with freakishness, deviant or criminal behavior. The closest association that, in my opinion, could be made between *The Adventures of Priscilla* and *Transamerica* is the character who plays Bernadete in *Priscilla* and that of Bree, in some scenes, concerning behavior aspects. Understanding and reflecting on the gender issues in all those films, we are able to learn an important lesson in gender studies. That is, the issues are more complex than a matter of positive or negative images, and that, what we consider as positive can be accepted, rejected or questioned and what we conceive as negative should be evaluated within a context instead of just condemning it.

At first, Bree makes an attempt to ignore the reminder of her one and only sexual experience as a man, but since she had to face the truth she decides to confront the rebellious 17 year-old son and takes a long road trip back to the West Coast with him, planning to leave him with his foster parent. Since it is revealed that his foster parent molested Toby as a child, they embark on a bizarre cross country journey. Both Bree and Toby are characters whose representation includes disturbing genders and sexual elements which might have been caused by the negative experiences they had with their family, and also deep-rooted identity issues thanks to the unsupportive, abusive parents they had during their childhood. Despite the subject matter and unhappy moments, the film is far from being depressing. Instead, it is funny at several moments while she is traveling with the boy. This road trip is the purpose for both of them to search for their own identities and in order to get this achievement they have to conquer a totally new territory exploration.

One of the important means of unifying the film is its setting. Almost the entire narrative is played out on the journey. They stop in Dallas and meet a proud, transgender support group in a gathering party and there are also some pit stops at cafes along the journey. The fact that they move through America is part of the discourse and being in Mexico is part of the language of the film. It represents acceptance and freedom because no one would doubt or question about Bree's identity. At least, she can feel confident to have an ordinary life and escape the oppression forced upon her by the in-groups, since the Others considered by society will only be able to cease to be Others when they succeed in conferring upon themselves a positive, autonomous identity. The soundtrack selections are also excellent reflections of the environments the characters are in, and the Mexican and country music which is played continuously along the journey emphasizes the narrative development and also represents the exotic side. We might interpret the motif as suggesting the importance of independence and freedom.

In the middle of the road trip after having their car and cash stolen, they are forced to visit her parents' house in Arizona, looking for more financial help. With the support of the kindhearted, lonely Indian, Calvin (Graham Greene) who takes a liking to Bree, they make it as far as Bree's parents' house. This convenient romance between Bree and the Native American is one of the major points along her emotional journey, and it is played by both performers in a very natural and respectful way even though it ends up in an unintentional relationship. Once again, acceptance is being represented through the couple's connection since both of them share similar identities in which secrets are revealed between them and hidden beyond society.

When they finally get to her parents' luxurious home, Bree has to put up with the cruelty and prejudice of her own parents, who revisit their discomfort with her "change." Many stylistic devices build up a picture of a crazy family life in whose culture transsexuals are definitely not respected and are also represented in a totally conventional manner in which the negative stereotypes are reinforced. The Technicolor design contributes greatly to the lushness of the *mise-en-scene*, making the costumes, the surroundings, and the characters' hair color stand out over-appealing. Bree's mother, Elizabeth, is the eye-catching one who calls everyone's attention in her blond curls and exaggerated makeup. At this very specific moment beyond the vision of such a problematic family, it seems quite clear how Bree may have rebelled against her mother while she used to behave as the young Stanley in his childhood. Her mother's attitude of shouting and giving instructions shows clearly that she represents the male figure who commands the house. This passage, in my view, shows how stereotyping deploys a strategy of 'splitting'. It divides the acceptable from the unacceptable. It excludes everything that does not fit, which is different. (Hall, 2003:257) Bree is clearly excluded by her family (mainly by her monstrous mother) for being someone who does not fit, who is different, and for this reason, someone who does not deserve respect, since she does not follow the rules established by society. Bree's behavior is considered unacceptable from her family's point of view.

The concept of Representation has occupied a new and important place in the study of culture. Culture depends on all of us to give meaning to people, objects and things and also to interpret what happens around them in order to organize and make sense of the world in similar ways. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. And in order to understand this connection, we need to take into account some different theories about how language is used to represent the world, such as the reflective, intentional and constructionist approaches to representation. The constructionist approach is the one to be referred to here since it is this perspective, as Hall points out, that has caused the most impact on cultural studies lately (Hall, 2003:a). This approach acknowledges that we, as social agents, construct meaning, using representational systems. Even though there are two models of the constructionist approach, the second model, which is the discursive approach and is associated with the philosopher Michel Foucault, will be dealt with in this essay.

Michel Foucault studied discourse as a system of representation. Even though the term 'discourse' is normally used as a linguistic concept, Foucault gave it a different meaning. What interested him were the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods. By 'discourse' Foucault meant 'a group of statements

which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment...’ Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. (Hall, 2003:b).

Representation engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer. These questions have also been addressed in different ways and levels of analysis by different disciplines considered by four theoretical accounts – the linguistics, the social, the cultural and the psychic levels. The first explanation in the perspective of linguistics is that ‘difference’ matters, because it is essential to meaning. The social explanation takes into account that we need ‘difference’ because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the “Other”. The third kind of explanation is anthropological, and the argument is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. And, finally, the psychoanalytic explanation that relates to the role of ‘difference’ in our psychic life, uses the argument that the “Other” is fundamental to the constitution to our self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity (Hall, 2003:c).

My purpose in this essay is not to develop the four levels of analysis. Instead, I will focus on those of linguistics and culture and I will use the notion of representation as difference by applying it to social issues.

First of all, taking into account the perspective of linguistics, from the sort of approach associated with Saussure and the use of language as a model of how culture works, the main argument is that ‘difference’ matters, because it is essential to meaning: without it, meaning could not exist. (Hall, 2003:d) That is, one exists because we can contrast it with its opposite. Bree in the film can represent "femininity" because she can mark her difference from the traditional stereotypes of masculinity and, rather than flaunt her difference, she wants to be as everyone else but dissociating herself from her past as a man. In fact, Bree is perfectly adjusted and conservative, even though she is frequently avoiding the awkward stares and comments that follow her around.

Unfortunately, society is built on a very weak basis and it classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as “others”. On the other hand, this difference is both necessary and dangerous. There is an anthropological explanation which takes into consideration cultural analysis. The argument here is that culture depends on giving things meaning by

assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of ‘difference’ is the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture. ‘Difference’ is fundamental to culture meaning (Hall, 2003:e).

This ambiguity also applies Mary Douglas’ arguments that what really disturbs cultural order is when things turn up in the wrong category: or when things fail to fit into any category – such as a substance like mercury, which is a metal but also a liquid, or a social group like mixed-race *mulattoes* who are neither ‘white’ or ‘black’ but float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between (Stallybrass and White, 1986). Bree seems to fit both female and male stereotypes, which are used in order to create her character. On one hand, she has to be constantly on her guard. She is always made up and careful to be ladylike, properly contained, her nails appropriately polished and pink and never forgets her lipsticks. She does not curse instead, she cares for her grammar. She always folds her legs, sits neatly, but when things go wrong, the act slips. Then, she forgets all about it and behaves as a real man saying “Oh, shit” and she slumps onto the sofa, with open legs. On the other hand, she is awkward. Her make up is too dark. The lipstick is slightly outside her lip line. Her hands are too big and her Adam’s apple is protuberant. But her awkward mix of male/female mannerisms makes her utterly convincing in ‘both’ roles, since her acting is outstanding and she carries herself with such sensitivity and authority that you never doubt her performance for an instant. Bree is an example of those in-between categories that disrupt patterns.

The final scene, as most road movie genre suggests “finding home” since it shows Bree in her simple but cozy place being surprised by the visit of Toby that seems to be looking for a way to come back home. Interestingly, the beginning of the film is marked by the “inside home” scene too. Home can be represented by the outcome of this physical, spiritual journey in search for identity. It seems that they fulfilled their life achievements and can feel themselves part of the “insiders” and not “outsiders” as before. This specific moment at the end expresses an optimistic, realistic and understanding overview of life, since the final dialogue between them shows that they could finally reach a reasonable level of mutual respect and could come to an agreement of acceptance. That picture is also an example that meaning can never be finally fixed. If meaning could be fixed by representation, changes would no matter happen. Words and meanings always carry new connotations and replace old ones so that no one has ever the complete control.

Transamerica focuses on the light heartedness side as well as the difficult by exploring a serious and touchy subject in a lighter, suggestive and somewhat comic way so that the audience

can accept it more easily. Whatever standpoint we have it is quite impossible not to cheer for Bree since she tries to do her best to maintain harmonious environments, even though everything seems to happen against her, everyone in her family rejects her or makes fun of her or even when she forgets all about belonging to one gender or the other. It turns to be so difficult and confusing to her since she plays the character whose the rules are designed to exclude, those whose identity are devalued and susceptible to discrimination, that is, the opposing us, the other. The film carefully balances whimsy and seriousness without forcing the audience to approve the idea of transgender, instead, it privileges Bree's dignity in order not to reinforce such a conventional and oversimplified conception that is stereotyping. Regardless of what branch of the gender tree we grow on, we all have to make choices. We all suffer influences from our parents over our life choices. This means that, we all experience much of the same about life, fears and wishes, but above all, we are human beings and we should be respected as such, in spite of having our respect or legitimacy denied by members of our own group.

In sum, it is a real complex subject due to its ambivalence and ambiguity. On one hand, we all try to give transgender its real recognition of acceptance by treating everyone equally, on the other hand, we hear from doctor Spikowsky saying in the interview that Gender Dysphoria (according to the Medical Association of psychiatry) is considered a serious mental disorder. That means it is something that is historically and culturally constructed, judged and fixed by us. Then, we get to the point that Foucault called a power/knowledge sort of game. Knowledge linked to power not only assumes "the truth" but has the power to make itself true. The asymmetry in power relationships is crucial to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group has the power of imposing the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness). Also, power does not 'function in the form of chain' – it circulates. It is deployed and exercised through a net-like organization (Foucault, 1980:98). That means that we take part in this circulation as real agents because we are caught up in it as oppressors and oppressed.

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RESUMO: O artigo analisa Transamerica (Duncan tucker, 2005) cronologicamente e explora as dimensões de diferença. Para tal, alguns aspectos analíticos serão desenvolvidos baseados nos comentários sobre as passagens do filme de forma interligada. Algumas teorias de representação como diferença aplicadas as questões sociais serão também apontadas. A escolha do tópico e filme pode ser justificada considerando a maneira marcante que o filme lida com a transsexualidade, dilemas culturais relacionamentos familiares difíceis. Para concluir, um aspecto da construção do outro e exclusão serão examinados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Transamérica, Representação como diferença, Construção de Alteridade