

Television's Transgender Tipping Point

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If we have, indeed, reached a transgender tipping point on television, questions regarding the ways in which bodies may be encoded spill forth. Dramatic series like the Wachowski's *Sense8*, Jill Soloway's *Transparent*, Jenji Kohan's *Orange is the New Black*, Graeme Manson and John Fawcett's *Orphan Black*, or Paul Abbott's 2012 British drama *Hit & Miss*, insist that we abandon the distilling of binary gender roles, codified on screen since the inception of cinema.

Along with asking how transgender characters – and the actors and actresses playing them for that matter – have been made visible, we also need to ask how have these particular visibilities been problematic/problematicized? Given the history of a narrative necessity for reductive, constrained cinematic representations of gender, the question now becomes one of signification. How do we point to that which, in some cases, desires to defy circumscription? Is it possible to move into a trans-formed space in which traditional gender markers no longer reliably point to this or that, but still articulate what is essential to a visual narrative?

The hero, the villain, the vamp, the innocent, who classically inhabited the silent screen, were instantly recognized by a hairstyle, a sneer, a tall white hat, or by the seductive way that they walked. For the most part, we have not come all that far from those stereotyped codes.

The classic scene in Mike Nichols' 1996 *The Birdcage*, in which Armand tries to teach Albert to walk like a man, is a case in point. A failure at signifying manliness, Albert's errant pinkie floats elegantly above the rest of his hand as he sips his ice tea or butters his toast, and belongs to the strictly encoded feminine.

If Albert's pinkie could cause such a ruckus, imagine the havoc wreaked, decades later, by the appearance of bodies that break out of their boxes, bodies not under the thumb of intractable gender norms.

In Solloway's *Transparent*, parts appear where we least expect them, and are absent where we might. Dale, the bearded, flannel-shirted, transgender man that Maura's daughter Allie is dating tells her that he is a "man with a vag." And as Maura's son Josh tries to come to terms with his father's transition, he interrogates an online sex worker, who assures him that she is all woman and has the cock to prove it. Vicki, a breast cancer survivor, tells Maura, "They lopped off my tits. So what."

When "parts" can no longer be relied upon to define the whole, everything is up for grabs. Masculinities/femininities now reside, and are made visible, in all types of bodies. The phallus floats free. Or does it?

Why then does Maura need to heed her friend Davina's instructions on how she should now sit, and, like Albert, decades before her, how she should walk?

In addition to remixes of anatomy, we might also rethink the shifting signification of the phallus. Like cinema itself, the figure of the phallus sits comfortably within the oft explored absence/presence paradigm.

The phallus is both that which points to power and that which is pointed to. While often signified via the phallus, the penis itself has been, until relatively recently, rarely visible on screen. Nonetheless, its implied presence or absence has determined privilege and power. Take the cigar scene in *The Killing of Sister George*. Controverting the old adage that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, in the scene in which Childe feigns ecstasy while chewing up George's cigar, she is not only destroying George's power, but also reasserting the pull of heteronormative attraction.

As film goers and TV watchers, we have been inculcated in signifiers. However, following the death of a modernist penchant for discrete binary understandings of gender identity, we now are immersed in a dithered world where we can be, and films are learning to signify, a both/and.

As we explore the slippage of discrete identities, and as the performance of gender now rails against what came before, its semiotics by necessity must also rebel. Is there, therefore, some space between the hyper-feminized and the hyper-masculine in which we might find our appearances not only acceptable but lovable? In which our surfaces manifest in ways that resonate with our sense of self? Might it not be possible to imagine, to perform, and to represent, a world that one be born into with any old parts, but those parts would no longer determine or define us; not the way we walk, or dress, or talk; whether or not we scrape off body hair or paint our toenails and faces; our access to and use of our personal power, and ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, whom and how we choose to love and be loved.