

QUEER CAPITAL:
TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

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Abstract

From *The Crying Game*'s shocking gender reveal in 1993, to the resounding success of *Pose* in 2018, trans characters and narratives have become increasingly visible across media platforms. Most significantly, trans characters have become a key part of American Indiewood cinema. Films like *Dallas Buyers Club*, *The Danish Girl*, *Stonewall*, and *3 Generations* demonstrate the growing visibility of these roles within the American independent tradition. Moreover, these films' critical and financial successes, in particular those of *Dallas Buyers Club*, signal the potential value these characters offer studios as a marker of cultural progressiveness. However, while trans characters in Indiewood films inspire more mainstream conversations about queer identity and community, interrogating these representations reveals how these depictions may reinforce harmful myths about trans identities and experiences. Analysing these representational practices through textual, generic, and industrial analyses, I will demonstrate how trans performances benefit the wider film industry, and question the impact of cis-gender casting on these films' representational strategies. The purpose of this project is thus to examine performances of transgender identity in contemporary indie and Indiewood films, spotlighting industrial influences on transgender representations. By using *Dallas Buyers Club* as a case study to explore how queer Indiewood films appeal to mainstream audiences; and using *Tangerine* to illustrate alternative representational strategies, this thesis demonstrates how contemporary Indiewood cinema excludes most trans writers, directors, and actors, how this process benefits cis-gender industry elites, and how paratexts mitigate the potential threat that trans identities pose to gender categories. More specifically, I pose the questions: how are filmic performances of transgender identity informed by industrial power relations; and, what are the cultural implications of the dynamic between the two.

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Introduction

From *The Crying Game*'s (Jordan) shocking gender reveal in 1993, to the recent success of *Pose*¹ (Murphy et al.), trans characters and narratives have become increasingly visible across media platforms. This representational trend, which has seen trans figures shift from background characters in films like *The World According to Garp* (Hill 1982) to protagonists in work like *TransAmerica* (Tucker 2005), reflects the growing cultural value associated with these roles. Most significantly, trans characters have become a key part of American Indiewood cinema. Films like *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée 2013), *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2015), *Stonewall* (Emmerich 2015), and *3 Generations* (Dellal 2017) demonstrate the increasing visibility of trans characters within the American independent tradition. The success of these films, in particular *Dallas Buyers Club*, signals the potential value these characters offer studios as a marker of cultural progressiveness.

This cultural visibility is valuable in that it naturalizes trans identity, exposing mainstream audiences to more fluid gender discourses and queer politics. Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for civil rights protections by creating sympathetic portraits of the community and can be empowering for those “who have lived most of [their] lives with no validation from the dominant culture” (Hennessy 31-32). However, visibility in and of itself is not always beneficial for the community represented. For queer groups that have had to “combat the heteronormative tyranny of the empirical in order to claim a public existence at all, how visibility is conceptualized matters” (Hennessy 31). For Indiewood, representations of trans characters are influenced by a complex history of cinematic representation, where trans identity has been normalized through its relationship to class, gender, and racial categories. These characters often remain enmeshed in heteronormative frameworks that implicitly reinforce bi-gender structures and pathologize the trans body. Furthermore, cis-gender performers are almost always cast in these roles. This tradition perpetuates the harmful myth that trans people are simply men and women in drag, that their gender identity is a playful performance against the assumed authenticity of cis-gender identity. These representations are powerful, because media (both online and offline) “is the predominant source where people, both transgender and nontransgender, gain general knowledge about transgender issues” (McInroy and Shelley 606). Evidently,

¹ *Pose* features the largest trans cast ever for a scripted series (Andreeva)

mainstream depictions of trans characters have a “significant impact on transgender individual’s lives and experiences, including their development of their own gender identities” (McInroy and Shelley 606). The types of characters represented in films, and who performs these roles, thus shape mainstream cultural understandings of trans identity, experience, and the community.

While trans characters in Indiewood films inspire mainstream conversations about queer identity and community, interrogating these representations reveals how these depictions may reinforce harmful myths about trans identities and experiences. Analysing these representational practices through textual, generic, and industrial analyses, I will demonstrate how trans performances benefit Indiewood and the wider industry, and question the impact of cis-gender casting on these films’ representational strategies. The growing presence of trans figures in American independent films is not necessarily a reflection of the industry’s progressive development; it is certainly, however, evidence of the distinct cultural value of trans performances. The purpose of this project is to examine performances of transgender identity in contemporary indie and Indiewood films, spotlighting industrial influences on transgender representations. More specifically, I pose the questions: how are filmic performances of transgender identity informed by industrial power relations; and, what are the cultural implications of the dynamic between the two.

Context

Since the early years of cinema, Hollywood films have “been notorious for their portrayals of the transgendered [sic] as psychotic serial killers or as figures of fun and comic relief” (Rigney 4). Films like *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma 1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991) explicitly associate gender dysphoria and violent psychosis. By rendering gender transgressions as horrifying, they imply that “biological sex is fixed at birth, that the desire to change one’s biological sex is rooted in abnormality and psychosis, and that the ultimate and unattainable wish to change one’s sex leads to both madness and murder” (Rigney 5). Trans characters have also figured tragically. While cis-gender characters that cross-dress out of necessity usually serve a comedic purpose (as is the case in films such as *Some Like it Hot* [Wilder 1959] and *Tootsie* [Pollack 1982]), most trans characters reflect a melodramatic sensibility that utilizes gender

dysphoria as a source of pathos. Films such as *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet 1975), *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (Babenco 1985), and *TransAmerica* imbue their trans characters with a melancholic desperation that is explicitly tied to the trans body. This ‘trapped in the wrong body narrative’ epitomizes the pathologization of the trans figure in cinema.

While trans characterization has developed since the 1980s, with trans characters increasingly portrayed as protagonists rather than tokenistic background characters, these film traditions still shape contemporary representational strategies. Trans bodies are still closely associated with melancholy and trauma, and gender dysphoria still typifies trans difference. Furthermore, when examining recent trans performances in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*, industrial trends provide evidence for market place influences. Janet Wasko argues that “the profit motive and the commodity nature of film have implications for the kind of films that are produced (and not produced), who makes them, how they are distributed, and where/when they are viewed” (4). Market-based considerations are important for the American independent industry—and for Indiewood in particular—since they function as specialty divisions of the Hollywood conglomerates (King, Molloy, and Tzioumakis 2). Mainstreaming trans discourses and mitigating these films’ queer elements are thus key parts of producing and marketing films that include trans characters.

Indiewood’s broad audience appeal necessitates an assimilationist approach to queer discourses, one which highlights the shared experiences and ideologies between heterosexual and homosexual communities so that gay subjects can be included into mainstream, heterosexual society. Celebrating heteronormative impulses within gay culture, however, marginalizes queer folk who cannot (or will not) conform to assimilationist expectations (Benshoff and Griffin 89). Lisa Duggan describes assimilationist impulses in the 1990s as the “new homonormativity” (50). Homonormativity is a politics that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them,” thereby offering a sanitized version of queer with “the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture” (Duggan 50). Mainstream American films often reproduce homonormative discourses, “contributing to a media landscape that envisions gay and lesbian characters and issues through dominant heterosexist lenses” (Benshoff and Griffin 69). This cultural trend of ‘relatable’ or sympathetic LGBTQ characters combines with film industry trends to inspire the representational strategies deployed in

films such as *TransAmerica* and *The Danish Girl*. Within this context, *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine* (Baker 2015) demonstrate two possibilities for trans representations: one that mitigates queerness while pathologizing and spectacularizing the trans body, and another that eschews respectability politics and re-negotiates the trauma of dysphoria .

Case Studies

This thesis draws on a wide range of theorists and film study debates to establish the industrial and cultural contexts of recent trans performances, and uses two recent films with prominent trans characters to show how contemporary trans characters are shaped by industrial impulses. I will examine these films through textual, generic, paratextual, and industrial analyses to highlight the cultural impulses that shape their representational strategies. Jean-Marc Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club* has received extensive critical attention for its trans character. Jared Leto's performance as Rayon dominated the film's marketing campaign, and his festival and industry award successes demonstrate the potential cultural and financial value trans roles offer cis-gender performers and studios alike. The paratexts of films like *Dallas Buyers Club* tend to celebrate the transformation of actors like Leto, which suggests that such performances benefit the cis-gendered Hollywood elite rather than the trans community. Furthermore, the film's treatment of queer history and its melancholic approach to trans identity demonstrate Indiewood's reluctance to productively engage with trans discourses. By reframing the AIDS crisis as a celebration of capitalist ingenuity rather than a story about queer political activism, *Dallas Buyers Club* revises queer history for the benefit of mainstream audiences.

Sean Baker's *Tangerine*, on the other hand, demonstrates an alternative route for representing trans characters. The film's industrial context—in particular, the active role trans women of colour had in the film's production—makes it unique in contemporary American cinema. The film's alternative representational strategy foregrounds intersectional approaches and trans agency, while its depiction of state and individual violence—through Sin-Dee's recent incarceration and Alexandra's violent encounters with clients—allows for a systematic critique of hetero/homonormative practices that is elided in earlier trans films. *Tangerine* presents a grittier version of transgender

experiences that eschew respectability politics and revel in social transgressions. Sin-Dee and Alexandra's inability to access surgery does not undermine their claims to womanhood. I argue that the film's deployment of queer language and identity, as well as its darkly comedic tone, contribute to a radical representation that speaks directly to trans audiences. While *Tangerine* is progressive in multiple senses, the film's paratexts re-affirm the cultural value of trans characters in the film industry and demonstrate that trans performances accrue cultural and financial capital primarily for industry elites rather than the trans community.

This project comprises three chapters: the first establishes the industrial, cultural, and political contexts that shape contemporary trans representations; the second uses *Dallas Buyers Club* as a case study to explore how queer Indiewood films appeal to mainstream audiences; and finally, chapter three discusses *Tangerine*'s alternative representational strategies. Since both films' trans characters are women, my textual analysis focuses on the films' treatment of trans femininity specifically. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how contemporary Indiewood cinema excludes most trans writers, directors, and actors, how this process benefits cis-gender industry elites (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 51), and how the media neutralizes the "potential threat that trans femininities pose to the category of 'woman'" by playing to the audience's subconscious belief that trans femininity is artificial (Serano 230).

Methodologies

Much of my work in this thesis relies on textual analysis, and in particular, analysis of the representation and function of *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*'s trans characters. Given the strong associations between trans bodies, melancholy, and dysphoria in mainstream American cinema, generic analysis—with a specific focus on melodramatic discourses and conventions—will shape my case studies. This thesis also intervenes in the broader context of the American film industry, and the rise and development of independent and Indiewood cinema. I extend this industrial approach by considering paratextual instances which market, frame, and respond to the reception of these films and their trans characters. This approach contextualises the history of trans representation, while spotlighting the impact of cultural, political, and economic

discourses on films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*. This section of the introduction will introduce these methodologies and contexts.

Melodramatic discourses and conventions shape much of my project's textual analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*. According to Robert Lang, melodrama offers "an attempt to explore the 'other' point of view, to give it a chance to speak for itself" (11). Melodrama has thus been a productive genre for questioning social categories implicit within white heteropatriarchy. Films like *Stella Dallas* (Vidor 1937) and *Imitation of Life* (Sirk 1959), for example, explore the impact of social boundaries within rigid patriarchal systems. The evolution of the form "corresponds to shifts in the dominant ideology, since melodrama is an aesthetic that makes ideological contradiction its subject matter" (Lang 7). More recently, the genre has provided a useful framework for exploring queer identity. Melodrama's tradition of challenging social categories, as well as its evocation of sympathy for otherwise marginalized groups, is thus valuable for characterizing trans experiences.

However, melodramatic conventions—in particular the genre's treatment of spectacle—have not always been productively applied to trans representation. Spectacles in traditional Hollywood cinema present moments of aesthetic and emotional excess. While all cinema is invested in "the medium's spectacular component," melodrama has often been defined as an "ideology of the spectacle, propelled by narrative and powered by emotion" (Lang 26; 21). Films like *Stella Dallas* and *Gilda* (Vidor 1946) often treat these spectacles as opportunities to challenge or subvert the male gaze implicit within classical cinema.² Doane argues that these moments of excess destabilize the image by confounding the "masculine structure of the look" ("Film and the Masquerade" 82). The aesthetic spectacle that structures the audience's first glimpse of Gilda, for example, relies on both Gilda's excessive femininity *and* her acknowledgement of the gaze. Cinematic treatments of trans femininity, however, often undermine the agency inherent within the feminine masquerade. Julia Sereno's analysis of the 'pathetic transsexual,' in particular, demonstrates how the melodramatic spectacle has been used to mark the trans body as tragically inauthentic.

Trans performances in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine* are also informed by a specific industrial context. Therefore, this thesis takes a critical look at the history of

² Linda Williams and Mary Ann Doane discuss these films in relation to the male gaze in their respective works "Something Else Besides a Mother" and *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*.

queer representation and the rise of independent filmmaking in the American film industry. By outlining the development of Indiewood (alongside queer filmmaking practices), this project establishes the relationships between industrial market forces, queer politics, and trans representations. Geoff King, Yannis Tzioumakis, and Alisa Perren have outlined the history of the independent movement, and the complex relationships between the Hollywood studios and independent production companies. Their work explores the cultural value of independent filmmaking, its appropriation by the major Hollywood studios, and the impact on filmmaking and marketing strategies. Moreover, this thesis will explore the assimilation of queer filmmaking into more mainstream Hollywood cinema, illustrating the relationship between queer and independent filmmaking, and the early mitigation of queer discourses within mainstream American cinema. Stuart Richards' article "Overcoming the Stigma" describes the rise of new 'gay Indiewood' in the 21st century as the "result of a neoliberal hegemony embracing independent queer film" (21). His article analyses how Indiewood's queer content is mitigated through films' paratexts, and how "promotions for these films usually draw attention to the performances and transformations" of the performer (24).

In addition to this, Marijke De Valck's study of Cannes, Sundance, and other film festivals demonstrates how theories of taste function within the film industry. DeValck argues that "festival screenings typically serve a *cultural* purpose, not an economic one," and that "because of such emphasis in selection criteria, film festivals are able to offer what is called cultural legitimization" ("Fostering Art" 104-105). Alongside James English's *The Economy of Prestige*, which explores how prizes facilitate transactions between cultural, economic, and social capital, DeValck's work informs my arguments about the cultural and financial value of trans characters within the film industry. Given the historical success of trans performances at award shows, and in particular, *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*'s many accolades, examining the relationship between festivals, industry awards and cultural capital is critical to understanding how markers of prestige function within the American film industry.

Paratextual analysis plays an important role when approaching films from an industrial angle. Steve Neale and Jonathan Gray's work inform my use of paratexts, as does Andre Cavalcante's application of paratextual analysis to *TransAmerica*. Gray argues in *Show Sold Separately* that the "study of paratexts is the study of how meaning

is created” (26). He also argues that paratexts inform an audience’s entrance to the filmic text. Neale’s work supports this view, describing how the “discourses of film-industry publicity and marketing play a key role in the construction” of narrative images, and how other “institutionalized public discourses, especially those of the press and television, and the ‘unofficial,’ ‘word of mouth’ discourses of everyday life” form cinema’s intertextual relay (162). Understanding the function of paratexts is critical to discussions of Indiewood’s marketing strategies. Cavalcante’s study of *TransAmerica* demonstrates how paratexts “neutralize and domesticate the potential threats a narrative poses to a social or cultural status quo” (85). In particular, he suggests that paratextual strategies can contain transgressive content implicit within trans films. This mitigation of trans politics is reflected in the promotional campaigns of films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*, which illustrate how trans characters are used as prestige markers to attract viewers while also being rendered palatable to mainstream audiences.

Theoretical Frameworks

Queer and trans theorists will shape much of the theoretical framework deployed in this project. To begin with, Judith Butler’s analysis of gender identity establishes gender’s performative nature. While Butler has been criticized by some trans theorists for focusing on gender as an abstract concept and dismissing the materiality of the body (Prosser 24), her arguments are useful for exploring cross-gendered performances and filmic treatments of trans femininity. For Butler, “identity categories [like woman] tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 13). Early queer theory reacted against these arguments, theorising gender as a social, cultural, and economic process rather than an innate identity. In her article “Performative Acts,” Butler argues that

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily

gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (519).

This understanding of gender as a performance does not disavow the lived experiences of trans individuals. While gender has no ties to the physical body, Butler acknowledges that “discrete genders are part of what humanizes individuals within contemporary culture... [and] those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (“Performative Acts” 522). For trans theorists like Susan Stryker, Butler’s argument means that gender

does not need a material referent to be meaningful... A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means. The biologically sexed body guarantees nothing; it is necessarily there, a ground for the act of speaking, but it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 10).

The argument that gender bears no material relationship to the body does not delegitimize the dysphoria that defines many trans experiences, but it does complicate the relationship between gender and the trans body. More specifically, it broadens the notion of womanhood beyond essentialist understandings of gender. Since the trans characters in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine* do not have access to gender confirmation surgery (and not all trans folk desire medical transition), this deconstruction of the concept of womanhood is valuable to this project.

This thesis also draws on prominent trans theorists, like Susan Stryker, who describes trans theory as

concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood (3).

In calling attention to the normative structures that are still in place within LGBTQ discourses and feminist theory, this work productively analyses how such “differences are transformed into social hierarchies” (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 3). More importantly, trans theory acknowledges “that ‘difference’ and ‘hierarchy’ are never mere abstractions; they are systems of power that operate on actual bodies, capable of producing pain and pleasure, health and sickness, punishment and reward, life and death” (Stryker “(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 3). This approach to social theory is useful as it acknowledges the intersections of class, race, gender, disability, and sexuality, as well as the impact of these discourses in a real world context. Queer studies has been criticized for perpetuating homonormativity, “that is, a privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms, and an antipathy (or at least an unthinking blindness) toward other modes of queer difference” (Stryker “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 7). This approach has often displaced trans folk within the LGBTQ community, leading to the marginalisation of already marginal identities.

Respectability politics is another key discourse that this project addresses. Shaping media discussions of trans identity and experience since the 1950s, respectability politics validates and celebrates a particular kind of trans identity, one shaped by specific class and racial frameworks. The very question

of which transgender lives tend to be immortalized in film or covered by national media outlets is a racially charged issue, as the search for LGBT acceptance often leads to the valorizing of those transgender lives that most clearly fit models of white, middle-class respectability (Schewe 59).

Emily Skidmore outlines the history and impact of this movement within trans discourses in her article “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual.’” Her examination of trans discourses in popular news media “highlights the disciplining power of racialized gender ideologies, ideologies that regulate which bodies appear within the public sphere as legitimate and which bodies appear only in order to be disparaged” (272). This is significant, because it is through the mass media (rather than medical literature) that “Americans learned about transsexuality” (Skidmore 272). Julian Glover extends this discussion by examining the impact these discourses have on black trans narratives. She argues that the mass media—working collaboratively with trans women of colour like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock—“creates narratives of transgender women of color

(TWOC) that employ a compulsory appeal to respectability politics in order to situate them as individuals worthy of incorporation into heteronormative society” (340). Since *Tangerine* centres its narrative around the experiences of two black trans women, this work offers a valuable framework for analysing the film’s representational strategies.

Finally, Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s deployment of trans theory is valuable for examining how a film like *Tangerine* productively employs queer discourses. Their book *In a Queer Time and Space* uses the concept of queer time “to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” (4). Moreover, they explore how queer (and specifically trans) lives are pathologized because of their discord with heteronormative notions of time. Halberstam makes three claims about queer time and space:

first, that oppositional cultures... are not symmetrical to the authority they oppose; second, that the relations between sexuality and time and space provide immense insight into the flows of power and subversion within postmodernism; and finally, that queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility (13).

This argument complements Ki Namaste, David Bell, and Gill Valentine’s work on queer spaces, which explores the visibility of queer bodies and the production of particular places as implicitly heteronormative. While Bell and Valentine’s book *Mapping Desire* examines this topic from a broadly queer perspective, Namaste’s article “Genderbashing” looks specifically at trans experiences and the relationships between trans- and homophobic violence within hetero- and homosexual spaces. These arguments offer a unique framework for comparing *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*, both of which claim to depict underrepresented elements of queer history and culture.

Conclusion

The financial and critical successes of films such as *TransAmerica*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, and *The Danish Girl* reveal an ongoing relationship between Indiewood and transgender representation. While this has meant increasing visibility for the trans community, greater visibility does not necessarily translate into “social and political

legitimacy” (Richards 28). These trans characters are shaped by a long cinema tradition, one that has relied on the pathologized trans body and tragic narratives rather than stories that celebrate agency and solidarity. In these films, “transgender identity has been sutured to specific forms of negative affect – rage, sorrow, wishfulness, denial” – as instruments of pathologization and “expressions of what is imagined to be an inherently dysphoric ontology” (Keegan “Moving Bodies”). Furthermore, Indiewood iterations of trans characters are subject to similar market forces as those produced by the major studios. This means that the marketability of trans figures shapes representation, and suggests how traditional Indiewood films might be limited in their engagement with trans (and wider queer) discourses.

In this project I explore contemporary examples of transgender representation in American independent cinema, and analyse how these films are shaped by industrial and cultural forces. The performative nature of transgender identity, through its destabilization of binary gender essentialism, means that filmic representations of transgender characters lend themselves easily to visual spectacle. An infatuation with the tragic surface of the transgender body, however, and a reliance on cis-gender performers in these roles, undermine the radical potential of transgender performances. Through a close analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*, I hope to demonstrate the value of trans characters for the American film industry, and suggest how these performances could benefit the trans community. Developing new representational strategies that draw on trans experiences and discourses—and strategies that foreground the involvement of trans workers within the industry—would allow for more complex and progressive characters that challenge the victimization narratives that have historically shaped trans stories.

Chapter 1: Selling Queer to the Mainstream

Introduction

Hollywood has historically had a complex—and at times fraught—relationship with queer content and characters. As Vito Russo demonstrates in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, the American film industry has incorporated queer gestures and innuendos since the silent era (6). While the social acceptability of homosexuality and gender variant identities increased over the 20th century, American cinema was slow in reflecting these changes; openly queer characters were often relegated to exploitation and independent filmmaking,³ or depicted as a source of moral horror and villainy⁴ (Benshoff and Griffin 108). However, since 1989 and the rise of a new era of independent filmmaking, queer stories and characters have become more visible in mainstream cinematic spaces (Benshoff and Griffin 220). Queer representation has come to signify a particular kind of cultural prestige within the entertainment industry. Prestige, in this case, “denotes the admiration felt by a particular person or thing, and is linked directly to the idea that its bearer possesses some sort of exceptional quality” (Kennedy-Karp and Sandberg 3). The industry has traditionally applied the term to specific filmmaking practices. The original 1930s prestige-level films were high-cost productions, “based on firmly established, pre-sold properties to ensure audience recognition” (Tzioumakis 26). The studios relied on the cultural legitimacy of particular literary works, like Shakespearean plays or nineteenth century novels, to market their films as prestigious. In all its forms, prestige “has a determinative effect over which cultural artefacts are successfully circulated and which are doomed to languish” (Kennedy-Karp and Sandberg 8). The relationship between prestige and cultural value therefore has an impact on the critical and financial success of certain cultural texts.

This chapter aims to explore how the historical relationship between American cinema and queer narratives has informed trans representations. It will outline how Indiewood functions as a subsidiary of Hollywood, and the impact this has on the production and distribution of queer content. The reglomeration of major Hollywood studios in the early 1990s came about partly as a response to the success of the

³ John Waters, for example, pioneered some of the earlier independent queer exploitation films of the 1970s.

⁴ *Sleepaway Camp* (Hiltzik 1983)’s trans villain is a classic example of this trope.

independent movement. The 1990s and 2000s saw the creation, acquisition, and closure of independent production and distribution companies like Miramax, New Line Cinema, and Focus Features (Tzioumakis 262). The complex relationships between these ‘independent’ subsidiaries, their parent companies, and the wider film industry established a market for queer content, and marked an important turning point for LGBTQ visibility. The mainstreaming of queer narratives is a key part of producing and marketing films focused on trans characters, and the complex relationships between independent, indie, and Indiewood filmmaking will frame this discussion.

The tensions and transitions between independent, indie, and Indiewood cinema—processes shaped by the increasing viability of niche markets and changing studio practices—foreground the unique position queer filmmaking has within the American film industry. In particular, this chapter examines the influence of New Queer Cinema on what Stuart Richards terms ‘gay Indiewood,’ as well as the shifting marketing strategies that inform this period of independent filmmaking. Within this movement, the role of international film festivals and awards as cultural ‘taste-makers’ will frame discussions about the industry and cultural capital, or more specifically, how the value of cultural objects like film are defined. Beyond this, the chapter will explore how mainstream cinematic texts translate queer narratives. While gay Indiewood drew initially on the brief cultural and financial successes of New Queer Cinema, its interpretations of queer stories involve different aesthetic and political strategies. Indiewood films like *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005) and *Stonewall* rely on generic and historical frameworks that lack the ironic temperament of New Queer Cinema texts like *Edward II* (Jarman 1991) and *The Living End* (Araki 1992). While considered revolutionary in their own social, cultural, and industrial contexts, gay Indiewood’s use of queer can, from a contemporary point of view, appear limited. Queer Indiewood representations are reluctant to employ transgender (and wider queer) discourses, an ongoing issue that underscores the complex historic relationship between Hollywood and queer politics.

The new gay Indiewood, exemplified by films like *The Hours* (Daldry 2002), *Brokeback Mountain*, and *A Single Man* (Ford 2009), has been celebrated as a groundbreaking and revolutionary cinema for its inclusion of queer content, setting the groundwork for later productions like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*. The performance of these early gay Indiewood films at festivals and industry award shows,

as well as their achievements at the box office, attest to the cultural and economic profitability of queer narratives within the mainstream American marketplace. Furthermore, the case studies undertaken in this thesis demonstrate the industrial influence of gay Indiewood's narrative, aesthetic, and marketing strategies. More specifically, *Dallas Buyers Club* reflects gay Indiewood's predilection for historical dramas; the casting of well-known cis-gender, heterosexual, and predominantly white men in queer roles; and the mitigation of queer politics for the benefit of broader audience appeal. *Tangerine*, on the other hand, resonates with the aesthetics and politics of New Queer cinema, and the queer indie films that the movement inspired. The restrained production values, gritty cinematography, and edgy tone are reminiscent of the films of Greg Araki, or later indie films like *The Crying Game* and *Bound* (Wachowski sisters 1996). Ultimately, the complex industrial developments that this chapter explores will establish the social, political, and economic contexts from which these two films originated.

1. The Historical and Industrial Origins of 'Gay' Indiewood

Following the premiere of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* in 1989, definitions of the term 'independent' for American cinema shifted considerably. Soderbergh's film achieved both critical and financial successes on a relatively small budget,⁵ becoming one of the first independent American films to win the Palme d'Or at Cannes (Tzioumakis 236). For American film studios, these triumphs demonstrated the potential of cinema like *sex, lies and videotape* to enhance "the status and prestige of the organisations that nurtured or supported them and increase visibility both with the public and within the film/entertainment community" (Tzioumakis 226). The subsequent achievements of films like *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino 1992) and *Clerks* (Smith 1994) re-affirmed the economic and cultural worth of independent filmmaking, leading in part to the mass acquisition of independent distributors and producers in the 1990s. Within this period, where independent films began to be produced and/or distributed by the major studios (or one of their subsidiaries), the term independent began to describe "a particular brand of 'quality' filmmaking" (King, Molloy, and Tzioumakis 2). The commercialization of the term independent, and these productions

⁵ The film brought in a box-office profit of over (US) \$24 million on a budget of (US) \$1.2 million ("sex, lies and videotape").

increasing reliance on stardom, genre, and mainstream marketing practices, culminated in a new era of independent cinema, known as Indiewood. In this era the term independent connotes a more intense hybridisation of blockbuster and independent tendencies, and a shifting emphasis from acquisition to production (Tzioumakis 261).

At the same time as these developments in independent cinema, the industry began increasingly “embracing independent queer film” as a commercial product (Richards 21). Since the 2000s, the term ‘gay Indiewood’ has described films that fit within the Indiewood label while also dealing with queer themes, stories, and characters. As a subset of contemporary American independent cinema, gay Indiewood draws on cultural, industrial, and political strategies from both the independent film tradition and the New Queer Cinema of the early 1990s (Benshoff and Griffin 222). However, as Hollywood conglomerates produce and/or distribute these films, they are also subject to mainstream market pressures. Major studios are therefore often reluctant to support the politically subversive tendencies prevalent in films like *The Living End* and *Poison* (Haynes 1991), aiming instead to broaden their films’ audience appeal. While the films of the New Queer Cinema movement often bear little stylistic or thematic similarities to the gay Indiewood films they inspired, they contribute to the global reputation of Indiewood as a purveyor of culturally relevant cinema.

Shifting definitions of the term ‘independent’ in the 1990s reflected the film industry’s investment in a new brand of quality filmmaking (King 1). The successes of early independent productions at festivals like Cannes (and their encouraging performances at the American box office) attracted significant industry attention, highlighting the potential profitability of niche films outside of the art-house circuit. Building on this trend, small distribution companies like Miramax began to find significant financial and critical acclaim with independently produced films. The global recognition of *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1991) and *The Crying Game* underlined the profitability and cultural significance of these darker, edgier narratives. According to Alisa Perren, the rise of companies like Miramax intersected with

global media conglomerates’ increasing focus on producing and distributing niche products to specific demographic groups. This places Miramax’s growth and expansion within the context of a shift from a model of mass production and consumption that dominated

until the 1970s, and toward a late twentieth-century model of specialization and ‘just-in-time’ production and consumption. (6)

In other words, a shifting industry paved the way for Miramax’s successes, as the company benefited from the rise of local and international film festivals and technological advances that extended the afterlife of films beyond the theatre (Perren 56). Twenty-four-hour cable channels and the rising popularity of video stores “called for more product than the Hollywood studios could produce,” feeding into the demand for more niche content (Benshoff and Griffin 190). This new era of indie filmmaking culminated in a convergence of independent and Hollywood filmmaking, exemplified in the merging of Disney and Miramax in 1993 (Tzioumakis 29). This period, which saw many independent companies become subsidiaries of the major studios, meant indie divisions became “the primary means through which conglomerates financed, produced, and distributed a diverse range of niche-oriented films” (Perren 4). Indie divisions were thus valuable for exploring traditionally untapped markets and appealing to historically underrepresented demographics.

Consequently, the term independent became more of a cultural than financial marker. Hollywood marketed indie films as artistically superior to their more mainstream fare, as a “quality alternative to the blockbuster” (Richards 21). This dichotomy drew on a “commonplace arrangement of Western cinematic valorization” that considered independent, local, or foreign films as intellectually superior to mainstream Hollywood movies that critics argued lacked artistic and stylistic credibility (Evans 42). Indie divisions facilitated Hollywood studios’ engagement with this market and demonstrated their cultural credibility. However, as a subsidiary of the Hollywood majors, indie divisions were sometimes subject to the political or market demands of their parent studio. Following the Disney-Miramax merger, controversial films like Larry Clark’s *Kids* (1995) became a point of conflict between the indie subsidiary and parent studio. Despite the company’s interest in distribution rights, the film’s representation of under-age sex, HIV, substance abuse, and sexual violence clashed with Disney’s family-friendly image (Perren 114). This conflict between Miramax and Disney

provoked the press and industry to raise questions about the ways that the incorporation of small companies into publicly held global media

conglomerates posed a threat to artistic expression, individual autonomy, and the exercise of free speech. (Perren 114)

Disney's strict policy regarding NC-17 films meant that Miramax ultimately did not have the option of holding onto the distribution rights for *Kids*, highlighting the potential limitations of indie subsidiaries to experiment with controversial narratives and aesthetics.

Alongside shifting definitions of the term independent, a new queer cinematic movement arose in the early 1990s. Films like *Poison*, *Edward II*, and *The Living End* comprised a new era of filmmaking driven by openly queer directors and depicting explicitly queer topics and narrative strategies. Termed the New Queer Cinema by B. Ruby Rich, the movement drew on activist filmmaking practices established in the wake of the AIDS crisis. These films were designed to instigate an explicitly queer cinema, one that challenged mainstream LGBTQ representation and homonormative politics (131). Beginning in 1989 with the release of *Tongues Untied* (Riggs) and continuing with films like *Paris is Burning*, *My Own Private Idaho* (van Sant 1991), and *Swoon* (Kalin 1992), these films were made by and for queer audiences. They eschewed traditional formal and narrative conventions while creating a diverse range of queer images that rejected the limitations of traditional cinema and LGBTQ representation.

Gregg Araki's *The Living End* exemplifies the type of film that this movement produced. Araki creates a detached, nihilistic tone that challenges the sentimentality so often employed in mainstream attempts to humanise queer narratives.⁶ In the film, Luke and Jon's HIV diagnoses impact their understanding of time and space, sparking an existential crisis that propels them across the country. Faced with their own mortality and no longer driven by social responsibility, the two men embark on a road trip of booze, drugs, and violence while embracing the motto "fuck everything." The disjointed editing style and bleak California backdrop create an off-kilter atmosphere that rejects the pathos of traditional melodrama, accumulating instead in an anticlimactic limbo that embodies the reality of living with HIV (Grundmann 28). The infection itself, according to Roy Grundmann, blurs with the idea of infatuation, and the "disease becomes a metaphor for accumulating rage and impetus for social change" (27). This idea of "queer time and space" is not bound by heteronormative assumptions about life and

⁶ Thomas Piontek and Robert Corber outline the use of sentimental pedagogy in mainstream films to humanize queer characters (129; 113).

death, as the experience of HIV “does not necessarily offer the same kind of hopeful reinvention of conventional understandings of time” (Halberstam 3). Scholars have interpreted *The Living End* as a queer challenge toward “conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility” (Halberstam 13). As queer, HIV-positive men (without the hope of marriage, children, or a long life), their experience of time clashes with traditional heteronormative milestones.

While New Queer Cinema has a different genesis than the heterosexual independent movement, its brief success within film festival circuits and arthouse cinemas influenced the development of indie cinema (Rich 131). Scholars have categorized films like *Paris is Burning* as early examples of both the American independent and queer film movements (Perren 45; Benshoff and Griffin 220). While its involvement at the Sundance Film Festival and distribution by Miramax mirror *sex, lies and videotape*’s release strategy, the film’s intersectional queer subject matter also makes it a historically significant text for New Queer Cinema. The documentary chronicles the New York City ball scene from the mid-to-late 1980s. By focusing on African-American, Latinx, and transgender characters, the documentary creates a platform for under-represented elements of the queer community, detailing how race, class, and gender intersect with concepts of sexuality. The availability of cheaper, portable cameras also allowed the film’s director, Jennie Livingston, to film outside of the balls. In documenting the street lives of trans and gender fluid characters, the film highlights the poverty and violence experienced by the trans community, and in particular, trans sex workers.⁷

Exploiting the low-budget capabilities of new video technologies alongside their more mainstream, independent counterparts,⁸ queer filmmakers in this period were able to produce films that were edgy, inventive, unapologetic, and stylistically daring (Benshoff and Griffin 221; Rich 13; Aaron 3). These films did more than challenge heteronormative filmmaking; their defiance was also “aimed at bourgeois gay men and women and the very nature of homosexual identity” (Benshoff and Griffin 221). *Paris is Burning*, for example, was engaged in a queer negotiation between consumption

⁷ Venus Xtravaganza, a trans woman featured heavily in the documentary, was murdered during the films production.

⁸ Groups like Diva TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) established in the 1980s the potential of video technology as a means of driving activism and protesting queer representation (Pearl 25).

culture and the class limitations felt by the film's predominantly African American and Latinx performers. Furthermore, filmmakers like Gregg Araki, Derek Jarman, and Todd Haynes explicitly rejected the homonormative tendencies of earlier gay cinema, the politics of which promised "a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 50). New Queer Cinema instead produced films that were confrontational in both form and content, foregrounding the queer politics practiced by activist groups in the 1980s.

However, this politically-engaged queer cinema lost traction by the late-1990s. Since then, LGBTQ "political strategies have become more assimilationist and less confrontational. Many queers now work to be accepted into traditionally heterosexist institutions rather than work to subvert them" (Benshoff and Griffin 269). Consequently, lobbying, litigation, and legislation have replaced the disruption and confrontation of Queers Bash Back, Queer Kiss-Ins, and Mall Zaps that traditionally defined the direct-action movement (Duggan xviii; Hennessy 36). Many scholars attribute the gentrification and appropriation of queer identity and politics to the influence of late capitalism and its associated cultural and economic practices (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 52; Duggan 45; Sender 18). While the 1990s and 2000s saw increased visibility for queer stories and characters in the mainstream media, homonormative discourses heavily influenced these representations of gay life. For example, while television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Collins 2003-2007) promoted LGBTQ visibility, they did so through an image of cis-gender, affluent, white gay men that offered a sanitized and privileged image of gay existence (Sender 18). The 'gay market' became an in-demand niche for corporate America that encouraged visibility of a particular brand of queer identity, one that perpetuated the respectability politics and assimilationist rhetoric of the 1950s. Theorists like Suzanna Walters and Eric Clarke saw "gay consumerism as closely linked to an assimilation of gays into mainstream culture, posing a direct threat to gay political activism on both a local and a national scale" (qtd. in Sender 7). This emphasis on queer as white, cis-gender, and middle class inevitably excluded more radical sexual and gender identities, while eschewing the grassroots political work that had historically shaped queer history.

This increased attention towards certain queer demographics manifested within the Hollywood system, and in particular indie cinema. While queer characters had appeared on the cinema screen for decades, their representations were frequently

implicit and one-dimensional, often taking the form of grotesque villains or pathetic sissies.⁹ The successes of independent queer films like *The Living End* and *Paris is Burning*, however, demonstrated the cultural and economic value of both independent productions and queer narratives. This dual success saw the rise of indie films in the late 1990s that dealt explicitly with queer content. Film like *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999) contained notable gay (usually lesbian) scenes, while films like *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit 2000) and *Bound* foregrounded queer characters and themes. In particular, *But I'm a Cheerleader*'s subversive treatment of gender roles and the director's conscious effort to cast people of colour recalled the political strategies of New Queer Cinema (Fuchs).

In 1999, this consolidation of queer and independent filmmaking culminated in Kimberly Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry*, a work that follows the real-life murder of trans teenager Brandon Teena. The film's critical acclaim, relative box-office success,¹⁰ and historical links to both movements demonstrated the cultural and financial potential of queer indie (and later Indiewood) films for the next millennia. Thus, while Hollywood's attempts to mainstream queer images has at times fallen into "essentialist and stereotypical approaches to gay and lesbian lives," their independent subsidiaries offer unique opportunities to foreground more nuanced queer characters and stories (Benshoff and Griffin 243). In this way, indie subsidiaries of major studios have historically allowed Hollywood conglomerates to appeal to both niche and mainstream markets simultaneously.

The industrial shift from indie to Indiewood was marked by a movement away from acquisition and into production, which resulted in "an increasing number of indie films [that] did not hide their affinities with Hollywood cinema" (Tzioumakis 35). Films like *Traffic* (Soderbergh 2000), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Anderson 2001) and *No Country for Old Men* (Coen brothers 2007) were characterized by the presence of Hollywood stars, strong generic frameworks, and high-production values, with budgets as high as \$15 million. As Stuart Richards argues, Indiewood became "a demonstration of the power of hegemony... [and] the development of a mainstream gay Indiewood is the result of a neoliberal hegemony embracing independent queer films" (21). The new

⁹ Disney's Ursula the Sea Witch (*The Little Mermaid* 1989) and Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941) represent both versions of these traditional characters.

¹⁰ Despite the film's sexual violence and the focus on a transgender protagonist, the film managed to accrue (US) \$11.5 million from a budget of (US) \$2 million ("Boys Don't Cry").

generation of gay Indiewood films, with features like *A Single Man*, *Milk* (Van Sant 2008), and *Stonewall*, reflect some of the queer tendencies of earlier indie features like *Bound* and *But I'm a Cheerleader*. But while these later productions circle queer narratives and topics, but they often do so without the confronting politics of earlier films like *Edward II*, *The Living End*, or *Paris is Burning*. Given that Indiewood's aim is to expand market potential across *both* niche and mainstream markets, Indiewood aesthetic necessarily mitigates the abrasive tone and confronting discourse of early New Queer Cinema (Rich 132). Thus, while mainstream gay Indiewood has its genesis in the radical histories of both independent American films and New Queer Cinema, these films often feature mainstream political discourses and a return to homonormative representational strategies.

2. The Cultural Value of Queer

Since the early 2000s, Indiewood has fashioned a reputation for itself as the new prestige cinema, a reputation promoted by studios and filmmakers to legitimise their films as valuable cultural commodities. These films, distinguished by industry awards and advertised alongside film festival logos, attempt to bridge the gap between high art and mainstream cinema. Indiewood's early affinity for literary adaptations and period films can be ascribed to a desire to bring "legitimate culture within the reach of all, by combining two normally exclusive characteristics, immediate accessibility and the outward signs of cultural legitimacy" (Bourdieu 323). Film festivals and industry awards play an important role in defining and attributing cultural prestige to Indiewood products. Industrial prizes are an assertion of cultural worth within respective institutions, allowing consumers to "discriminate among an impossibly huge range of books, movies, television series, stage shows, etc. to focus on those that they believe will bring them the greatest personal enjoyment or social benefit" (Kennedy-Karp and Sandberg 5). Partly as a result of film festivals' and awards' conference of cultural capital, queer (and in particular trans) characters and stories have acquired cultural value. Joanna Mansbridge argues that the term queer has moved beyond a signifier of sexual identity to a "*quality*, an aesthetic strategy, and a condition of loving and thinking against the grain of dominant culture" (80). This quality allows those who produce and celebrate such work to accrue cultural capital, and to market themselves as progressive or ground-breaking institutions (Mansbridge 84). For Indiewood, trans

characters embody this quality and have thus figured as critically valuable markers of taste. Therefore, while queer narratives have established a familiar presence in both mainstream and arthouse cinemas, they have also become an increasingly visible feature at industry award shows. The many industrial prizes bestowed on *Philadelphia* (Demme 1993), *Brokeback Mountain*, and more recently *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016), demonstrate this correlation between queer and cultural value within the industry.

In cinema, capital involves more than economics; while every industry possesses its own forms of capital, the negotiations and transactions between symbolic and material forms of capital play a key role in the film industry (English 9). Hollywood thus trades on brands like ‘quality filmmaking’ to accumulate cultural and economic capital. Traditional prestige pictures of the 1930s, for example, often drew on the established reputation of literary texts like *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell 1936) or *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Nordhoff and Hall 1932). The term prestige in this period highlighted the “production values and promotional treatment” of a film, with particular emphasis on the budget, special effects, casting, and marketing potential (Balio 179). More significantly, later prestige films often relied on social issues to demonstrate their progressive values. Engaging with certain cultural discourses (for example, addressing issues related to race, gender, disability or sexuality) signified these films’ social and artistic value (Tzioumakis 26). Particular narratives and characters have thus acquired cultural worth within cinema’s economic systems.

Scholars like Stuart Richards regard contemporary Indiewood films as a new form of the traditional prestige picture, with films like *A Single Man* and *Brokeback Mountain* recalling the marketing considerations, literary origins, and social themes of these earlier films, albeit with smaller budgets. Building on this tradition, Indiewood films also use industrial ‘taste-makers’ as a form of cultural legitimization. Film festivals and awards act as markers of value that define for audiences culturally significant cinema (De Valck, “Fostering Art” 100). Their influence is a product of the industry itself: the assessment of what defines quality or art cinema “is in fact a largely arbitrary set of arrangements held up by the beliefs and practices of people” rather than an objective measurement of quality (De Valck, “Fostering Art” 109). However, institutions like Cannes and the Venice Film Festival are valuable because they act as an “accessible source of symbolic start-up capital for independent, avant-garde, documentary, short-form, and various sorts of minor and Third Cinema” (English 289).

In particular, films eventually categorized in the New Queer Cinema movement often relied on international film festivals to establish themselves. Because of the competitive nature of the selection process, inclusion in a top-tier international festival is often enough to bring “cultural recognition to the film and its makers” (De Valck, “Fostering Art” 105). For many films, premieres are critical to establishing a work’s initial cultural value and importance, making an opening at a festival like Cannes a cultural achievement for most filmmakers and studios.

For independent, indie, and Indiewood films, festivals are an effective tool for qualifying their films as quality cinema. Miramax, in particular, excelled in the 1990s at negotiating the film festival circuit to promote their films as critically deserving.¹¹ Miramax’s strategy, an approach that Indiewood would eventually repurpose, was to employ markers of good taste (like screening in competition at Cannes, the Venice Film Festival, and Sundance) to position semi-independent films as quality alternatives to blockbuster cinema (Richards 21; De Valck *Film Festivals*, 80). Examining the paratexts of key Indiewood productions reveals the role of festivals in consolidating cultural value, as these texts often highlight a film’s festival selection alongside other key markers of quality cinema. For example, Colin Firth’s *Coppa Volpi* appears on screen during the trailer for the Weinstein Company’s *A Single Man* well before the actor’s face is shown. The film’s posters also spotlight the film’s success at the Venice Film Festival by prominently displaying the same award. In a similar fashion, *TransAmerica*’s trailers, posters, and DVD cover reference the film’s participation at festivals in Berlin, Toronto, and San Francisco.

Alongside elite international film festivals, institutions closely affiliated with Hollywood, most notably the Academy Awards, offer additional means of attributing cultural capital to films (Crewe 55). The Oscars themselves are “broadly viewed to be the foremost awards of their kind, given that the almost 6,000 members of The Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences are among the most prominent figures in the film industry” (Pardoe and Simonton 253). Awards like Oscars have significant financial repercussions for the films involved and are often key in promoting more obscure films to a wider public. Miramax’s Oscar campaign for *The Crying Game* resulted in six nominations for the independent British import, and was partly

¹¹ Both *sex, lies and videotape* and *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino) won the Palme d’Or in (1989 and 1994 respectively).

responsible for the film's unexpected success in the United States (Perren 69). According to James English, prizes are the "best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital—which is to say that they are our most effective agents of capital intraconversion" (10). Studies suggest that an Oscar win for Best Actor can increase a male winner's salary by 81 per cent for subsequent films, and even a nomination for Best Picture has a significant impact on a film's box office returns (Kennedy-Karp and Sandberg 5). Within the film industry, prizes indicate cultural authority. They provide "an institutional basis for exercising, or attempting to exercise, control over the cultural economy, over the distribution of esteem and reward on a particular cultural field" (English 51). Awards like Oscars thus play a crucial role in regulating cultural value in cinema, meaning that the increasing presence of queer films at the Academy Awards is indicative of the industry's investment in queer topics.

Associations between Hollywood's industry awards and queer filmmaking can be mutually beneficial. Scholars like Joanna Mansbridge have linked the industrial successes of the New Queer Cinema movement in the 1990s with the increasing legal and cultural recognition of the LGBTQ community (76). Meanwhile, the popularity of television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk* (Davies 2000-2005) illustrate the rising visibility of queer characters in mainstream media at a time when state and federal laws began to address discriminatory practices in the private and public sectors (Hunt). In the 1990s, affluent gay populations began to be "described as part of a 'creative class' that enhance[d] the city's cultural life and cultural capital" (Halberstam 15). Queer or 'gay' identity and aesthetics slowly became synonymous with a cultivated and informed elite, and work that engaged positively with queer content began to be seen as progressive and edgy. Building on this cultural shift, positive representations of queer characters filtered into mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* was the first major studio film to deal directly with the AIDS crisis, and was considered ground-breaking by mainstream audiences at the time (Marlow Stern; Bloomer). The film's attempt at an "earnest examination of the bigotry directed towards gay people" was cutting-edge for early 1990s Hollywood, as was its humanization of queer experiences (Crewe 53). Upon its release, many saw the film as a response to protests of Demme's blockbuster film, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which generated controversy after its release two years prior for its conflation of

trans identity and mental illness in the film's serial killer, Buffalo Bill (Bloomer).¹² Demme's decision to build on *The Silence of the Lambs*' critical and financial successes¹³ by making a film with a gay protagonist helped reform his—and the wider industry's—image in the wake of significant criticism. *Philadelphia*'s success at the 66th Academy Awards demonstrates its cultural and industrial achievements, and reveals how “institutions themselves—and the funders that support them—accrue cultural capital by associating with ‘ground-breaking’ works that promise a more inclusive society” (Mansbridge 84). Awards like the Oscars celebrate forward-thinking filmmaking while also refining the industry's image, celebrating Hollywood while also promoting itself as progressive and culturally relevant (Crewe 55). Since the 1990s, queer has become an increasingly visible marker of progressive, quality cinema and is cited to illustrate the industry's progressive stance on social issues. The cultural prestige attributed to *Philadelphia* at the time evidences the increasing value of queer narratives, as well as the functions of queer content in films to offset criticism regarding Hollywood's conservatism and bolster the industry's image of itself as progressive.

While I've demonstrated the cinematic value of queer as a signifier of social progress, scholars and artists have also mobilized the term queer as a valuable aesthetic strategy. According to Mansbridge, the cultural capital of queerness “lies not in its aesthetic difference from the popular, but rather its ironic distance from dominant heteronormative culture” (80). Films like *Edward II* and *The Living End* use defamiliarization in their queer readings of classical work and popular genre. While *Edward II* uses a classical literary text as its source material, the film's anachronistic props, explicit violence, and overt homoeroticism invite a queer reading that disavows heteronormative practices, while still maintaining the familiarity of Elizabethan prose. *The Living End*, on the other hand, plays on narrative tropes reminiscent of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967) to produce a nihilistic, queer viewing experience. And, as in the Hollywood films mentioned above, these films' deployment of queer cultural capital contributed to their status as prestigious films. Works of art, theatre, and cinema have “meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu 2); therefore, certain “narrative strategies are associated with reading practices that require considerable cultural capital to

¹² Queer Nation and ACT UP organised protests of the film's production and the 64th Academy Awards ceremony.

¹³ *The Silence of the Lambs* won five Oscars, including Best Picture.

approach with confidence,” and these strategies signal the prestigious qualities of a text (Kennedy-Karpat and Sandberg 7). Films like *Edward II* and *The Living End* break from the traditions of mainstream cinema by rejecting aesthetic familiarity. Through their innovative editing, stylistic experimentations, and subversion of genre, these films pastiche and challenge popular film, thereby developing a queer aesthetic practice.

By the turn of the 21st century, the overwhelming success of queer films across high profile film festivals and award shows had validated the cultural value of queer content and characters. In the late 1990s, LGBTQ films won an “unprecedented number of Oscars” (Benshoff and Griffin 279).¹⁴ In some ways, these Oscar-winning films descended directly from New Queer Cinema; many New Queer filmmakers had a creative role in their production,¹⁵ and most are queer in form as well as content.¹⁶ In 2007 the Venice Film Festival adopted the Queer Lion, a trophy intended to celebrate the best LGBTQ film among those competing in the general competition, while in 2013 *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche) became the first queer film to win the Palme d’Or at Cannes. To some extent, these successes culminate in a progression toward queer chic that began with the critical achievements of documentary features like *The Times of Harvey Milk* (Epstein 1984) and *Common Threads* (Epstein and Friedman 1989) several decades earlier. By the beginning of the Indiewood era, the industry’s validation of queer as a cultural signifier had been established.

The increased representation of more marginalized LGBTQ identities stems in part from the film industry’s affirmation of queer narratives. Trans characters have, alongside more traditional cis-gender gay stories, become more visible on the cinematic screen and at festivals and awards shows. Films like *Southern Comfort* (Davis 2001), *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan 2005), and *Gun Hill Road* (Green 2011) contributed to the visibility of trans characters and narratives on the festival stage. However, the trend of cis-gender actors and actresses winning accolades for trans roles diminishes the sense of progress this visibility implies. William Hurt’s success at the 58th Academy Award ceremony and the 1985 Cannes Film Festival for his portrayal of Luis Molina in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* established a precedent whereby cis-gender performers playing trans

¹⁴ Other examples include *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliot 1994) and *Boys Don’t Cry*.

¹⁵ Gus Van Sant, director of the celebrated gay Indiewood feature *Milk*, first came to prominence through the New Queer Cinema movement with his film *My Own Private Idaho*.

¹⁶ Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* (2007) plays with non-linear narratives and gendered performances with its casting of Cate Blanchett as one of the film’s many iterations of Bob Dylan.

characters were able to capitalize on the cultural prestige associated with queer narratives. Films like *Dog Day Afternoon*, *The World According to Garp*, *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *TransAmerica*, and *Albert Nobbs* (Garcia 2011) are evidence of a film tradition wherein cis-gender actors have been nominated for (or awarded) prestigious awards for portraying trans characters. Ultimately, this tradition culminated in the many awards and nominations conferred on Jared Leto and Eddie Redmayne for their roles in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl* respectively.

Consequently, cross-gender casting has become a significant part of promoting these films as culturally relevant, with both studios and journalists emphasising the gendered transformation of these performances. Paratexts and wider industry discourses present cis-gender actors in trans roles as a media spectacle, and “promotions for these films usually draw attention to the performances and transformations by these actresses” and actors (Richards 24). Cis-gender actors and the discourse surrounding their performances approach transgender identity “as a costume” to “demonstrate the performative prowess of the actor and to place the actor’s cisgender (read: normative) identity in direct contrast to that of their character” (O’Rear 21). The many accolades received by Glenn Close (*Albert Nobbs*), Jaye Davidson (*The Crying Game*), Felicity Huffman (*TransAmerica*), William Hurt (*Kiss of the Spiderwoman*), John Lithgow (*The World According to Garp*), and Hilary Swank (*Boys Don't Cry*) for their cross-gendered performances highlights how valuable trans roles are for cis-gender performers. In more recent years, popular press writers have predicted Oscar nominations based solely on news of cross-gendered casting and long before a film has finished production. For example, articles published by *IndieWire* and *Variety* described Eddie Redmayne’s casting as Lili Elbe in Tom Hooper’s *The Danish Girl* as “Oscar bait” well before the film’s theatrical release (Nicholson; Lodge). This suggests that it is the cross-gendered nature of trans roles, rather than the performances themselves, that have value for the industry.

One of the effects of cross-gendered casting is that it prompts audiences to scrutinize the gender performance of the actor. For instance, many reviews of *Boys Don't Cry* focused on Hilary Swank’s performance of masculinity, celebrating her ‘bravery’ and ability to ‘transform’ into the role of Brandon Teena (Wolk; Tatara; Stack). Having these films (and their paratexts) focus on the performance of transness complicates the films’ approaches to gender. Part of the spectacle (and by extension the

filmic pleasure) of *Boys Don't Cry* comes from the film 'disguising' Swank's femininity, which inevitably draws out the associations between Swank's female body and Brandon's performance of masculinity. (Pidduck 101; O'Rear 49). The audience's attention is thus "riveted upon finding gaps in the performance of gender, comparing their knowledge of masculine gender characteristics with their knowledge of Brandon's biological sex" (Rigney 12). While only implicit, these approaches refigure trans identity as a drag performance. Finally, these roles—rather than generating profits for trans actors or trans communities—tend to benefit cis-gendered members of the Hollywood elite and limit opportunities for trans performers to represent themselves or influence trans discourses within the industry. Focusing on a performer's transformation and relying on the "extra-diegetic play" between the actor and character's gender (Pidduck 98) reduces the roles available to trans performers. Conversely, Jess O'Rear argues that performances of trans roles by trans actors inversely "center the bodies and experiences of transgender people in a way that argues for the value and worth of transgender lives," (73). An actor's gender thus plays a significant role in the marketing, representational strategies, and reception of trans films, their casting often a determining factor in whether they exploit or benefit trans communities.

Dallas Buyers Club's recent successes, particularly at the 86th Academy Awards, demonstrate the continuing celebration of queer films at award shows and festival circuits. As a means of attributing cultural capital to films, award institutions associated with Hollywood refine its image, celebrating Hollywood for its deployment of queer characters and thus promoting an image of the industry as progressive and culturally relevant (Crewe 55). Jared Leto's Oscar win, however, also illustrates how trans performances continue to be validated by the industry when performed specifically by cis-gender actors. O'Rear argues that the industry's celebration of cis-gender performers in trans roles disrespects transgender individuals who struggle "to survive in a society which continues to actively perform acts of emotional, physical, and systemic violence against them" (O'Rear 55). The economic motivations behind and the spectacle inspired by cis-casting severely limit Indiewood's representations of trans characters, which have tended to marginalize rather than promote the communities their films exploit to accrue cultural capital. Therefore, while the celebration of queerness by festivals and the Academy has positive effects, its practices limit the film industry's ability to address trans identity within the Hollywood system.

3. Queer Politics in the Mainstream

In an industrial context where gay and independent films are increasingly regarded as prestigious or culturally relevant, queer narratives are no longer produced and distributed solely for the benefit of a niche queer audience. Unlike New Queer Cinema, more recent films are designed to broaden the appeal of queer stories for the benefit of more mainstream, heterosexual viewers. In discussing his 2015 film *Stonewall*, Roland Emmerich commented on this trend explicitly, telling *Buzzfeed*'s Shannon Keating, "You have to understand one thing: I didn't make this movie only for gay people, I made it also for straight people." Broadening the appeal of queer cinema has positive repercussions, as it allows for greater accessibility and exposure for LGBTQ narratives, characters and histories. However, the means through which directors like Emmerich appeal to these audiences can be troublesome. Whitewashing historical moments like the 1969 Stonewall riots contributes to the marginalization of people of colour within the LGBTQ community, as does presenting gender-queer and trans characters through cis, straight-passing actors. These new gay Indiewood films, which draw on New Queer Cinema's successes, mitigate queer narratives to broaden their appeal. In negotiating the complex dynamic between the inherently subversive notion of queer and market considerations, the industry is often limited in its political engagement. These mainstream queer films thus tend to de-emphasize the political realities of queer stories or situate them within specific historical periods. As a result of this process, marginal identities are often erased, a process which disproportionately affects people of colour, trans, and non-binary characters. For these films, accessibility is congruent with both whiteness and bi-gender identity. What these films achieve, by simplifying queer histories and stories, is a predominantly white, heteronormative representation that privileges accessibility over intersectional representations of queer.

LGBTQ history exists within specific political contexts and has long been driven by activism and direct protest action. Places like The Tenderloin and Greenwich Village have historically acted as a hub for gender and sexually non-conforming individuals, building up a diverse population of poor, black, and latinx drag queens, sex workers, and trans people (Stryker, *Transgender History* 69). These groups "marked communal boundaries between the normative and the transgressive," and the oppression that they experienced at the hands of the state culminated in ground-breaking political

action in the 1960s (Stryker, *Transgender History* 152).¹⁷ Direct protest action erupted again in the 1980s in response to the federal government's failure to adequately address the AIDS crisis; its response to the epidemic was deemed too slow, inadequate in scope and coloured more by "homophobia than either scientific jurisprudence or common compassion" (Benshoff and Griffin 203). Subsequently, groups like Queer Action, ACT UP, and OutRage! began to redefine the notion of queer, expanding the term beyond gender and sexual identities to include protest against both "mainstream homophobic society [and] at the 'tasteful and tolerated' gay culture that cohabits with it" (Aaron 6). "Chants like 'We're here, We're Queer, Get Used To It' and actions like Queers Bash Back" became a means of making visible those identities that had been historically marginalised (Hennessy 36). In terms of representing or portraying queer stories, these historical developments are crucial in contextualising queer experiences. The international protests of the 1960s and 1980s invariably helped to shape contemporary queer identities and communities, as well as queer filmmaking in the early 1990s (Aaron 6). Moreover, this history of activism and transgressive behaviour has contributed to contemporary perceptions of queer as a radically subversive form of politics.

Within the film industry, however, these explicitly political discourses tend to clash with market considerations. As such, Hollywood films that deal with queer topics have historically avoided radical political commentary. *Philadelphia*, while celebrated by the mainstream press in its time for its sympathetic representation of homosexuality, does not adequately address the epidemic's social and political contexts. Given that the film is dealing with a prominent court case centred on the rights of someone with HIV/AIDS, the absence of ACT UP, Queer Nation, or any mention of direct action protest is conspicuous.¹⁸ Instead, the film deploys benign-looking protestors as stand ins for queer activists, underplaying the militancy of the AIDS activist movement in favour of "a discourse of civil rights that is less threatening to the liberal pluralistic framework of American political culture" (Corber 107). While ACT UP's iconic pink triangle can occasionally be glimpsed among the courthouse demonstrators, the symbol is decontextualized. Without explicit mention of the activism that forged the 1980s AIDS narrative, "the broader political implications of the AIDS crisis are never addressed"

¹⁷ Both the Compton Cafeteria and Stonewall riots marked a significant turning point in the queer liberation movement (Stryker *Transgender History* 64).

¹⁸ These groups were active well into the early 1990s (Brier 174).

(Benshoff and Griffin 254). In particular, Reagan's role in the crisis and his administration's demonization of queer communities remain unspoken, as are concerns around access to healthcare and the epidemic's disproportionate impact on the financially destitute, trans groups, and people of colour (Stryker, *Transgender History* 113). *Philadelphia* chooses instead to focus on the kind of liberal, middle-class narrative that groups like ACT UP explicitly rejected (Corber 107).¹⁹ The film thus fails to confront the structural issues and socially ingrained homophobia at the heart of the AIDS crisis.

The narrative choices apparent in the film—which emphasise individual strife over socio-political confrontations—differ significantly from the tendencies of the New Queer Cinema movement, which often foregrounded AIDS and its political contexts. Many of the New Queer Cinema figures were themselves directly involved in AIDS activism, and “AIDS issues and imagery—whether directly invoked or subtly implied—permeate New Queer film” (Benshoff and Griffin 220). *Edward II*, for example, engages with contemporary discussions about heteronormativity, cultural homophobia, and AIDS in spite of its 14th century setting. The hedonistic relationship between Edward II and Gaveston, and the violence that they are subjected to as a result of their union, acts as a “physical and symbolic affront to the continuation of hetero-dominance” (Quinn-Meyler 120). The visceral exchange of blood throughout Jarman's film is a visual referent to the filmmaker's own HIV-positive status.²⁰ In these scenes, *Edward II* interrogates asymmetrical power relations within heteronormative society and thus illustrates the political radicalism that traditionally shaped queer history. While a film like *Edward II* serve a different purpose than a film like *Philadelphia*, comparing them highlights Hollywood's troubling mitigation of historical AIDS narratives.

While *Philadelphia* does touch on some of the harsh realities of living as a gay man with AIDS, it doesn't challenge the political and cultural frameworks that inform queer experiences and institutionalized homophobia. The film focuses instead on the individual acts of homophobic aggression experienced by Andrew Beckett. Using melodramatic conventions, *Philadelphia* positions Beckett as a suffering victim whose non-threatening status as a white, cis-gender, middle class, and straight-passing man

¹⁹ ACT UP mobilised against government forces (including the justice system) and was “committed to the disruption of business as usual in order to end the AIDS crisis” (Pearl 25).

²⁰ Derek Jarman was diagnosed with the disease in 1986 (Garfield).

sets him up as a point of sympathetic identification for audiences. By mitigating Andrew's queerness through other normative identity categories (in particular, his race and class), the film engenders sympathy for his character despite his homosexuality. *Philadelphia* takes this process one step further, by defining Andrew's queerness in homonormative terms. The film presents Andrew as the antithesis of queer, and he is marked by his "lack of participation in the modes of association that are the traditional basis of the gay subculture" (Corber 116). He does not invest in any activist work, frequent clubs or bathhouses, or engage in camp behaviour or gestures. His middle class sensibilities, reflected in his formal costuming, well-furnished apartment, and interest in opera, re-affirm his normativity and distance him from queer signifiers. His martyrdom in the film "is contingent on his lack of resemblance to AIDS activists who are never represented in the film but whose militancy... nevertheless determines the shape of the narrative" (Corber 117). Andrew's humanity also draws explicitly on Tom Hanks' cultural capital, and on the actor's ability to perform a polite, inoffensive, straight-passing homosexuality that mainstream audiences can empathise with. It is therefore *Philadelphia*'s dequeering of Andy's sexuality that heightens audience sympathy for his story.

The film contrasts excessive queerness and tolerable homosexuality early on. In the sequence introducing Andrew as HIV-positive, he stands out from the group receiving HIV treatment. These men come across as both camp and frightening; their pink and blue plaid shirts and limp gestures in combination with their prominent cheekbones and facial sarcoma create the quintessential image of someone with HIV/AIDS.²¹ Andrew also seems uncomfortable in their company. A medium shot slowly tracks into a close up of his face as he watches a doctor interact with one of these patients. Studying the interaction subversively, with his head tilted down, indicates a voyeuristic disconnect, which implies that Andrew is not part of this group. These other gay characters provide "a foil for Andy, who, as the only character wearing a business suit, appears 'normal' by comparison, which in the film is tantamount to being white, heterosexual, and middle class" (Corber 117). The film's decision to elide explicitly sexual scenes between Andrew and Miguel reinforces neoliberal notions of 'tolerable homosexuality,' whereby queerness can be 'tolerated' as long as it refuses to be

²¹ One of the key goals of ACT UP was to "disrupt and challenge the representation of AIDS, and of people living with AIDS, in the mainstream media" (Pearl 25). *Philadelphia* is an example of this kind of representations, whereby the idea of 'gay' becomes associated with 'victim.'

confrontational (Duggan 50). Interactions between him and his partner are affectionate but never explicitly sexual: they slow dance and hold hands, but never kiss. To make *Philadelphia* accessible, the film thus reproduces homonormative frameworks that limit or censor queer content.

In facilitating heterosexual identification, the film avoids challenging homophobic tendencies that viewers of the film might have sympathised with (Corber 116). Heterosexual identification relies primarily on ‘sentimental pedagogy,’ which identifies

homophobia as a form of affect, not a social structure... Sentimental pedagogy aims low: its goal is not to change the audience’s ideas about heterosexual privilege, homophobia, and government policies on AIDS, but merely to generate pity and compassion for one particular individual (Piontek 128).

However, positioning Andrew as the face of this crisis does not account for the intersectional oppression that underpinned the epidemic. Having a white, homonormative, cis-gender male as a stand in for the crisis raises concerns about how Hollywood mitigates queer historical narratives. Depicting AIDS and AIDS activism through the lens of white male heroes despite “the extensive documentation that recalls the central role women and queers of color have played in AIDS activism” is a common strategy for representing the crisis (Cheng 73). This trend is concerning, as it marginalizes already underrepresented groups within the LGBTQ community. By disassociating Andrew from the more radical elements of AIDS activism, and characterising him as homonormative, Demme limited his sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality and queer experience. The film’s sentimental treatment of Hanks’ character focuses on the personal without addressing the socio-cultural or political realities that shaped the AIDS crisis.

New Queer Cinema, in comparison, rejects the polite, inoffensive homosexuals of mainstream Hollywood, epitomized by *Philadelphia*’s Andrew Beckett. These films “explode taboos, raise controversial issues, and celebrate a variety of queer sexualities” (Benshoff and Griffin 220). Derek Jarman, in particular, achieves the latter by foregrounding the sexual spectacle of the male body, which challenges the tame sexuality of characters like Andrew. His work employs “subversive homoeroticism as a

weapon against the oppressive sexuality implicit in his own medium and age” (Hawkes 115). Jarman uses the proliferation of half-naked men in films like *Caravaggio* (1986) as an explicitly queer statement. The character Ranuccio, whether posing for a painting or participating in underground fighting rings, is consistently framed as the sexualised object of the camera (and Caravaggio)’s gaze. The film’s lighting draws attention to his lean physique, while the camera cuts between close ups of his torso and Caravaggio’s intent look. Jarman’s portrayal of violent queer sex suggests that “queer love—even when it is privately performed—is always an act of subversion” with the potential to destabilize heterosexual norms (Quinn-Meyler 120). Work like Jarman’s thus highlights cinema’s ability to feature sexuality and homoeroticism even in narratives that reference the AIDS crisis.

While *Philadelphia* exists outside the purview of indie or Indiewood, its success in the 1990s established some of the trends employed later by Indiewood filmmakers such as Ang Lee, Roland Emmerich, and Jean-Marc Vallée. One of the key strategies for circumnavigating explicitly queer political discourses in gay Indiewood films is to fictionalize historical moments with queer relevance. While period dramas are not without political commentary as a matter of course, many queer historical films use their foreign settings to avoid contemporary social issues. This trend traces back to the British period dramas of the 1980s, with films like *Maurice* (Ivory 1987) and *Lair of the White Worm* (Russell 1988) using period costumes to “layer their queerness underneath high production values” (Benshoff and Griffin 194). Gay Indiewood films have continued this practice, adopting past settings to “conjure up a sense of nostalgia” and displace queer political realities (Richards 25). According to Stuart Richards, “because these characters are placed in environments where queer sexuality is abnormal and socially undesirable, it is easier for these narratives to be consumed by a wider audience” (25). These films locate homophobic ideologies and institutional structures in the past, without exploring their reproductions in contemporary contexts (D’Emilio 141). Therefore, they frequently refrain from acknowledging the audience’s complicity in heteronormative power structures, instead displacing their anxieties onto more comfortable historical settings.

One example of this tradition is *Brokeback Mountain*, which utilizes the American West of the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s as the backdrop for a gay cowboy romance. The film situates Ennis and Jack’s tragic love story in a ‘wrong place wrong

time' scenario, rather than as symptomatic of socio-cultural phenomena that continue into the present (Piontek 123). To minimize the film's queer content and enhance its appeal to mainstream audiences, the film's marketing developed two distinct advertising strategies, promoting the film simultaneously as a heterosexual and queer romance. Most of the 'For Your Consideration' posters released during the Academy Awards season, "depicted the men either alone or with their wives," with a particularly strong emphasis on the romance between Jake Gyllenhaal and Anne Hathaway (Richards 23). It therefore came as no surprise when the film's popularity among straight women was key to its commercial success (Piontek 126). Lee himself has insisted that he is not a queer filmmaker and in promoting *Brokeback Mountain* "consistently played down the queerness of his film. *Brokeback*, Lee would insist, *is* a love story first, a gay story second" (Leung 24). This approach, utilized specifically to market the film to mainstream audiences, is significant considering the film's critical and financial successes.²² Upon its release, critics hailed *Brokeback Mountain* as a breakthrough for queer cinema. They commended Hollywood "for its boldness in humanizing love between two men in a mainstream film" (Piontek 123). However, the film explicitly ties this 'humanizing' process to the film's historical setting and to the practice of sentimental pedagogy. Rendering homosexuality as a 'tragic flaw' allows straight audiences to

feel good about feeling bad for the gay characters on screen and their 'private' suffering while simultaneously resting assured that the cowboys' touching story poses no threat to their heterosexual privilege or the social order that requires that the movie's gay love story be 'tragic' in the first place (Piontek 129-130).

The film thus leaves the social and ideological structures that inform the film's tragedy intact by declining to interrogate homophobic practices imbedded within contemporary culture.

Historical settings for queer narratives do not necessarily negate a film's ability to address the contemporary realities of privilege or queer politics, as is evident in historical films in the New Queer Cinema movement. For example Jarman's films are often set in the past, yet manage to interrogate the power dynamics of contemporary

²² The film won three Academy Awards in 2006, and was nominated for Best Picture.

heteronormative society. His focus on Renaissance characters like Edward II and Caravaggio, while

partially reconstructing the ‘biography’ of queer men, never attempts to re-create or recapture that past... [instead] his use of Renaissance texts and historical figures enables him to recast the familiarity of contemporary events in an unfamiliar fashion; his focus always remains on the events of his own time (Quinn-Meyler 121-122).

The imprisonment and torture of the king’s queer lover, Gaveston, in *Edward II* is intercut with clashes between police and members of queer rights activist group OutRage!.²³ Jarman thereby uses a parallel montage to connect the persecution of historical gay figures to the experiences of contemporary queer people. This treatment of time fits with his anachronistic use of props and costuming, which explicitly links the eras of the film and the new Right of the Thatcher era. In rejecting period realism, Jarman discourages viewers from escaping into history and compels them to reflect on contemporary realities that resemble queer persecutions of the past.

While Jarman’s representations of queer history tends to antagonize rather than accommodate mainstream audiences, gay Indiewood directors prioritize accessibility. Although broadening the visibility of queer stories has positive ramifications for both queer and heterosexual viewers, some of the strategies used in simplifying queer narratives—especially those that adapt queer history—have troubling repercussions. As emphasized earlier, one of these methods involves the erasure or marginalization of already marginal identities,²⁴ in particular people of colour and those who identify as trans (Cheng 73). For instance, *Boys Don’t Cry* participates, perhaps unwittingly, in this process through its exclusion of Phillip DeVine, who played an important role in the story on which the film is based. While the film documents Brandon Teena’s story, the decision not to include the death of a black, disabled man and to feature only the two white victims reflects the white privilege apparent in queer and transgender politics (Schewe 41). The film therefore indicates a “larger pattern of leaving race out of the picture so that other identity categories appear stable and queerness is represented in a

²³ OutRage! was a British LGBTQ rights group that engaged in non-violent direct-action protests during the 1990s and 2000s.

²⁴ Trans groups and people of colour have experienced marginalization within both mainstream society and the LGBTQ community (Irving 51; Halberstam 4; Stryker, *Transgender History* 138).

way that makes it synonymous with whiteness” (Brody 94).²⁵ While Peirce’s decision to exclude DeVine was, by her own argument, down to narrative constraints²⁶ rather than politics, “the very possibility of seeing such a choice as apolitical rests on a position of white privilege and reflects a history of (often unexamined) white privilege in both queer and transgender politics” (Schewe 41). *Boys Don’t Cry* thus reinforces ideas around whiteness as a means of audience identification, and contributes to what is already an overwhelmingly white queer cinema tradition (Brody 93).

Alternatively, filmmakers’ adaptation of queer histories into mainstream narratives facilitates the exclusion of explicitly trans characters. Roland Emmerich’s comments cited in this section’s introduction demonstrate a wider industry practice of favouring cis-gender, white, middle-class men to facilitate audience identification with queer stories (Keating; Keegan, “History Disrupted” 51), which often involves rewriting queer histories and side-lining confronting sexual/gender performances. For example, *Stonewall* actively marginalized historical trans figures like Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera to position the fictional character Danny as the instigator of political revolution. The film shows him throwing the first brick, positioning Danny as a saviour for the poor queer hustlers. In fact, Danny’s white, bourgeois, college background contradicts historical accounts of Stonewall and the subsequent riots, which were dominated by poor, queer people of colour. Major Griffin-Gracie, a black trans woman present at the time of the riots, recalled that it was actually cis-gender people in the minority that night:

I’m sorry, but the last time I checked, the only gay people I saw hanging around [the Stonewall] were across the street cheering. They were not the ones getting slugged or having stones thrown at them (Keating).

Appropriating the lived experiences of actual queer people, and in particular queer and trans people of colour, for the purposes of an accessible narrative is harmful, in that it marginalises already marginal identities. Moreover, it reflects a trend whereby these kinds of historical films use “white, bourgeois, straight, and cis-gender bodies that then come to colonise the aesthetic space of the LGBTQ cinematic archive as its

²⁵ Issues around whitewashing and the lack of representation for queer people of colour extends to the New Queer Cinema movement (Brody 93).

²⁶ Peirce argued that she didn’t have room in the film for DeVine as she “already had seven main characters” (Harrison).

representational subjects” (Keegan, “History Disrupted” 51). Emmerich’s argument that “there were only a couple of transgender women in the Stonewall” and that “Stonewall was a white event” contradicts testimony from historians, but also reflects how films like *Stonewall* “transfer political imagination upward, away from poor people, trans people, and people of colour and toward middle-class white gay men” (Bernstein; Keegan, “History Disrupted” 54). Much like the white, bourgeois protagonist of *Philadelphia*, Danny’s role as identification for white, heterosexual audiences detracts from the lived realities of poor, gender variant queers of colour who overwhelmingly contributed to these historical moments.

Another implication of this narrative strategy is its tendency to revive essentialist gender stereotypes rather than represent the fluidity of trans identities. The dismissal of explicitly queer gender practices in *Stonewall* is one example of this tendency. However, even when such films acknowledge trans women *as* women, they often reduce them to archaic feminine tropes. In other words, these women appear as passive participants in their own stories, so while a film like *The Crying Game* transgresses “norms that tie biological sex to socially constructed gender, [it] nevertheless upholds conventional gender roles” (Cormack 173). The film positions Dil as the nurturing, vulnerable wife, incapable of protecting herself or engaging in the political struggles that drive the film’s plot. In keeping with her hyper-feminine position, Dil “never controls the gaze, and serves as a racialized fetish figure who diverts the viewer’s attention from the highly charged political conflict between England and Ireland” (Halberstam 81). While the film allows Dil a hyper-femininity usually denied to trans women, the dichotomy between her and Fergus normalises transgender identity and reaffirms the gender binary. This is unfortunate because “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” (Peil 41). Trans identities do not necessarily conform to a normative bi-gender system, yet filmic representations often fall back on gender essentialism in their representations of trans characters. Excessive femininity, in the case of Dil, helps audiences recognize her as a woman, but at the expense of more fluid gender representation.

While sharing queer stories with as wide an audience as possible helps promote acceptance and conversations about queerness, the strategies involved in making these films accessible can be prohibitive. Considering films like *Philadelphia* and *Stonewall*,

it is clear that the gentrification of queer filmmaking has an impact on the political questions that surround these narratives. In particular, the “cultural erasure of AIDS activism and of trans people’s important roles in LGBTQ culture and politics are among the deleterious shared outcomes of these texts” (Keagan, “History Disrupted 55). These films also traditionally involve the erasure of fringe characters, reinforcing the overbearing whiteness of queer cinema and the historic marginalization of intersectional identities. In negotiating the politics of queer and the expectations of the mainstream film market, Indiewood struggles to produce queer critiques of heteronormative society (Richards 28). While exposing heterosexual audiences to queer narratives and characters is a valuable way of challenging heteronormative thinking, it fails to go far enough as a political strategy, to the detriment of queer and trans representation. Furthermore, these strategies reinforce a whitewashed, normalized account of queer histories and people that is reluctant to address the politics of LGBTQ histories.

Conclusion

Indiewood, as a cinema that has long mediated the complex relationships between cinema as art and commodity, provides an interesting case study for the distribution of queer texts in a contemporary media context. Companies like Miramax have worked hard to capitalize on the associated cultural value of certain filmmaking practices and to recreate the prestige film in the post-classical era. With increasing production and marketing budgets, these films are now economically reliant on mainstream audiences. The inclusion of queer films within this industry indicates a historical turning point, wherein queer stories and characters have become a significant part of the mainstream, heteronormative media landscape. While the implications of this are multifold, the crossing of Indiewood and queer has in part led to the establishment of a new cinema movement, ‘gay Indiewood,’ which demonstrates the cultural value of queer narratives. While the homosexual elements of these films are mitigated to enhance their marketing potentials, trans narratives have a unique place in this movement. Marketing campaigns for *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Stonewall*, and, more recently, *3 Generations* (Dellal 2017) centre their advertising on trans figures, highlighting their roles in excess of their actual narrative functions, in a move that, ironically, reverses the historical marginalization of trans people within the LGBTQ community.

In establishing a cinema where trans identities and themes wield cultural value, gay Indiewood has produced a mainstream market for trans representation, thereby establishing the industrial context for films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine*. While it has enabled the critical and financial successes of these films, it has also influenced the representational strategies that these films employ. Many of the issues brought up in this chapter (including the mitigation of queer sexuality, the erasure of gender variant bodies, whitewashing, and a restrained approach towards queer history and politics) have an important role in these films and their treatments of queer discourses. Films like *Stonewall* exemplify how these representational practices are troublesome within the context of an already heteronormative film industry, by relying on whiteness as a normative category and marginalising already marginal identities. In catering to heterosexual mainstream audiences, these films struggle to maintain political and social critiques of heteronormative power structures, and to dynamically portray queer identities, communities, and histories. However, regardless of their critical and political limitations, these films have created space for other, more subversive queer representations to thrive.

Chapter 2: The Value of Trans Femininity in *Dallas Buyers Club*

Introduction

Dallas Buyers Club provides a valuable case study for exploring the industrial contexts and representational practices that inform gay Indiewood cinema. The film's interest in representing the past reflects the historical impulse of films like *Brokeback Mountain*, while its depiction of queer history provides interesting comparisons to work like *Milk*, *A Single Man*, and *Stonewall*. Vallée's film also reiterates some of the questionable strategies that these films employ, in particular the revision of queer history and the side-lining of non-normative gender and sexual identities. Its mitigation of queer experience, its marketing strategies, and, in particular, its characterization of trans identity also draw on the broader traditions established by films like *The Crying Game*, *The Hours*, and *TransAmerica*.

In development since the 1990s, *Dallas Buyers Club* underwent several rewrites, casting changes, and studio delays before the script was taken on by producer Robbie Brenner in 2009 (Ulaby). By 2013, and after Jean-Marc Vallée and Matthew McConaughey joined the project, Universal's independent division Focus Features acquired the film's American distribution rights (Deadline Team). Although Vallée made the film on a relatively small budget,²⁷ its high profile cast, high production value, and marketing strategies justify its classification as an Indiewood film. *Dallas Buyers Club*'s narrative follows the real life story of Ron Woodroof, an HIV-positive man who started a Texas version of the AIDS buyers clubs during the late 1980s. These organizations provided those struggling with HIV/AIDS with medications not yet approved by the FDA during the worst stages of the epidemic (Lune 53). The film partners Ron with a fictional trans character, Rayon, who assists his efforts to smuggle and sell unapproved medication to those with HIV. While the film's lengthy pre-production process and confronting subject matter²⁸ generated media interest early in the film's genesis, Rayon's casting garnered particular attention from both popular press writers and the queer community. Reviewers across media platforms simultaneously

²⁷ The film was reportedly made for around (US) \$5 million ("Dallas Buyers Club").

²⁸ In particular, the film explicitly addresses homophobia, AIDS, and queer identity.

condemned and applauded the decision to cast Jared Leto, a cis-gender male actor, in the role of a trans woman (Beaumont-Thomas; Fox; Van Syckle).

While *Dallas Buyers Club* is the “first major U.S. film since *Philadelphia* to address the AIDS crisis,” the film does not handle “actual queer and/or transgender experiences of AIDS” (Keegan, “History Disrupted” 52). Cael Keegan outlines the aesthetic gentrification of queer and trans cinema in his article “History Disrupted.” His work describes how American LGBTQ cinema “has become structured by disruptive narrative strategies that reroute the transformative power of queer and transgender histories upward and away from the most at-risk LGBTQ populations” (50). Utilizing Keegan’s argument as a starting point, this chapter will address Rayon’s role in *Dallas Buyers Club* formally and industrially. More specifically, I will examine how certain representational choices are used to appeal to mainstream audiences, and how Rayon’s character accrues cultural capital for the film. As a recent Indiewood film that has achieved significant cultural and financial recognition, in particular for Leto’s performance as Rayon, the film is a valuable example of how Indiewood mitigates and profits from trans histories and characters. The film’s depiction of the AIDS crisis shifts the epidemic into a broader, more mainstream historical framework to attract mainstream heterosexual audiences. These adjustments to queer history work in tandem with the film’s erasure of Woodruff’s bisexuality. Rewriting Ron as an aggressively heterosexual character directly affects the film’s treatment of the crisis and Rayon’s role within the narrative.

Rayon’s characterization also draws from trans performances in earlier independent and indie films, and in particular employs melodramatic tropes reminiscent of *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don’t Cry*. Melodramatic discourses about fallen women, feminine excess, and the masquerade (as outlined in the works of Lea Jacobs, Linda Williams, and Mary Ann Doane) illuminate *Dallas Buyers Club*’s representation of Rayon’s character. I will argue that these conventions structure Leto’s performance and the film’s interpellation of trans femininity. Finally, this chapter will examine the film’s paratexts to spotlight issues around trans representation. More specifically, I will explore how *Dallas Buyers Club* capitalizes on the recent popularity of trans characters, and the advantages and pitfalls that come with casting cis-gender performers in these roles. Ultimately, this examination of *Dallas Buyers Club* will analyze the relationship

between Indiewood and trans characters by exploring how the film industry uses trans characters as cultural markers.

1. Revising History and the Function of Transness

As argued in chapter one, gay Indiewood frequently uses the historical settings of period dramas to mitigate the radical potential of queer stories. Films like *Brokeback Mountain*, *A Single Man*, and *Stonewall* displace contemporary anxieties about queerness onto the past to mitigate the threats posed by structural homophobia and thus accommodate mainstream audiences (Richards 25). For historical gay Indiewood cinema, biographical dramas have provided an opportunity to address topics like queer identity, community, and history without alienating popular audiences. Many Indiewood biopics about historical queer figures—for example, *Capote* (Miller 2005), *Milk*, or more recently, *The Imitation Game* (Tyldum 2014)—have been critically and financially successful.²⁹ In many ways, *Dallas Buyers Club* is another iteration of this sub-genre.³⁰ In adapting the real-life story of Ron and his struggles with HIV/AIDS, the film purports to represent a defining moment of queer history. Taglines in posters and trailers (which advertise the film as a true story) and a screenplay constructed from interviews with Ron (before his death in 1992) support the film's historical legitimacy. However, in the tradition of earlier biopics about historical queer figures, the production team made significant changes to Ron's story in the 20 years the film was in development. While screenwriter Craig Borten argues that he adjusted the narrative for metaphorical and dramatic purposes (A. Harris), the revisions made to Ron's biography reflect the tradition, outlined in chapter one, of mitigating queer history for the benefit of broader audience appeal. The changes also involve the film's representation of the AIDS crisis and the film's characterization of Rayon. Of particular interest to this thesis is the film's treatment of Ron's sexuality—he is depicted as heterosexual in the film rather than bisexual—and the addition of a trans supporting character, which provides a unique opportunity to examine the value and purpose of trans roles in Indiewood.

One of the most striking adjustments the film makes to Ron's story is the erasure of his bisexuality. Several of Ron's associates (including his ex-wife and physician) have contested *Dallas Buyers Club*'s depiction of Ron as aggressively heterosexual

²⁹ All three films were nominated for an Academy Award.

³⁰ The film grossed (US) \$55.2 million dollars internationally ("Dallas Buyers Club").

(Jones; Wickman), a character trait that is established unambiguously in the film. *Dallas Buyers Club* opens with sounds and images that are disconnected: heavy breathing and grunting overlay point of view shots of a silent rodeo. Cutting rhythmically between these shots, a black screen, and the opening credits, the sequence eventually reveals the source of the diegetic sound to be Ron in a sexual encounter with two women. Throughout this sequence his movements are jarring and his body language impersonal while the faces of the women remain obscure. As the diegetic sound from this shot lingers, the sounds from the rodeo are muffled, bringing the heterosexual encounter aurally to the forefront. As an eerie ringing builds in the background, the rodeo cowboy falls to the ground, and the sexual encounter reaches a climax. The lack of an establishing shot in this sequence, along with the manipulation of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, disorient viewers and set up an association between bull-riding and sex that accentuates the scene's hypermasculinity. Timing the fall of the rodeo cowboy with Ron's climax makes the link between the two explicit, depicting an aggressive and confronting heterosexual encounter in these opening shots and foreshadowing the associations the film makes between sexual promiscuity and death—a common trope for media dealing with the AIDS crisis.³¹

This opening montage presents an aggressive performance of hypermasculinity, and by making Ron's identity as a cis-gender man manifest through his sexual exploits with women, the film immediately overdetermines his heterosexuality. While this signals an underlying anxiety about Woodruff's gender and/or sexual identity, it also hints at the ways that gender and sexuality intersect. Ki Namaste argues that anxieties about gender categories shape homophobic behaviour. For Namaste, it is the "perceived transgression of normative sex-gender relations [that] motivates much of the violence against sexual minorities" ("Genderbashing" 225), meaning that homophobia and transphobia are both rooted in bi-gender systems. For example, gender presentation is often "used as a cue to locate lesbians and gay men," and the gendered connotations of homophobic language like "sissy," "dyke," and "faggot" reinforce this intersection between gender and sexual transgressions (Namaste, "Genderbashing" 225). Ron's behaviour in the film reflects this overlap between trans/homophobia and the complex interweaving of sexual and gender identity by using his phobic behaviour as an assertion of his masculinity and heterosexuality. *Dallas Buyers Club* establishes Ron's

³¹ *Philadelphia* is one example of this trend.

homo- and transphobia early in the film. In one of his first lines of dialogue, he dismisses Rock Hudson as a “cocksucker” (in response to the actor’s AIDS diagnosis), before referring to HIV as “faggot blood.” He is then openly hostile in his first interaction with Rayon where he callously refers to her as “Miss Man.” He winces and pulls away instinctively whenever she gestures towards him and eyes her suspiciously throughout the encounter. The film thus interweaves Ron’s anxieties about gender fluidity and homosexuality in the same way that it ties his heterosexuality to his masculinity, by conflating gender and sexual identities. Ron’s sinewy body, rugged clothing, and aggressively macho demeanour are as much a part of his heterosexual identity as Rayon’s effeminacy connotes her queerness. While implicit, this suggests Ron’s toxic attitudes towards homosexual characters and Rayon is a symptom of his own sexual paranoia.

This affirmation of heterosexuality and masculinity through phobic behaviour is evident in earlier mainstream films about AIDS and is epitomized in Joe Miller’s character in *Philadelphia*. Early in the film, Miller (played by Denzel Washington) tells his wife, “you can call me old-fashioned, you can call me conservative, just call me a man... I think you have to be a man to understand how really disgusting [homosexuality] is.” His statement explicitly links his homophobia to his perception of his own masculinity and the discord he sees in men “trying to be macho and faggot at the same time.” Similar to *Dallas Buyers Club*’s characterization of Ron, Miller’s approach to homophobia also reinforces the complex intersections between gender and sexuality. In addition, Miller’s confronting trans/homophobia allows him to act as a point of identification for audiences that may be uncomfortable with the film’s queer elements (Corber 120). What is striking about *Philadelphia* is that despite Miller’s progressive transformation, he still relies on homophobic discourses and language during the film’s court scenes. In his opening statement, he aligns himself with the morally dubious actions of Beckett’s employers. When describing the “general public’s hatred, our loathing, our fear of homosexuals,” he uses the term “our” to locate himself within that group. His language affirms the potentially homophobic anxieties of the jury and strategically engenders their sympathy for Andrew Beckett’s case. *Philadelphia*’s jury acts as a diegetic substitute for the audience, and by acknowledging and catering to homophobic anxieties about queer folk and AIDS, Miller facilitates Beckett’s humanization (Piontek 128). This demonstrates how the “film interpellates its viewers

as *heterosexual*” (Holliday 110). The “‘audience surrogate’ who espouses homophobia” is therefore a useful tool for filmmakers dealing with queer topics while aiming for broad, mainstream appeal (Crewe 53). Consequently, the use of trans/homophobia as a marker of heterosexuality and masculinity is a reminder of mainstream film’s paranoiac treatment of fluid gender and sexual identities.

Characterizing Ron as homophobic has a significant impact on the film’s representation of the AIDS crisis. While AIDS did not exclusively affect queer groups, the epidemic’s disproportionate impact on the queer community (and people of colour) is crucial to accurately representing the epidemic (Schellenberg, Keil, and Bem 1790). Centring cinematic narratives about AIDS on cis-gender, white, male perspectives marginalises the experiences of those groups most affected by the disease (Cheng 73). One example of this erasure of queer experience is *Dallas Buyers Club*’s reluctance to depict queer spaces. David Bell and Gill Valentine define these as places that exist in opposition to heterosexual spaces and where queer bodies are made visible. They argue that

the presence of queer bodies in particular locations forces people to realize (by juxtaposition of ‘queer’ and ‘street’ or ‘queer’ and ‘city’) that the space around them, ... the city streets, the malls and the motels, have been produced as (ambiently) heterosexual, heterosexist and heteronormative (18).³²

The film thus produces the boardrooms, airports, and highways of the film as heterosexual by eliding visibly queer characters. In the rare instances when the camera does move into queer spaces, most of the queer figures remain obscure. These characters lack names, dialogue, or agency outside their facilitation of Ron’s business. The scenes filmed inside the gay club have a particularly shallow depth of focus, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere that literally pushes many of the queer figures into the background. Disembodied close ups of crotches and men’s hands reduce these characters to their genitals and sexual desires. The restrained use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in the rest of the film makes the saturation of sound in the club overwhelming. This combination of images and music prompts Ron’s retreat from the club, the atmosphere propelling him away from the queer community and to a local

³² The colonization and occupation of assumedly heterosexual spaces has been a key tactic of queer activism (Valentine 417).

motel. And while this scene reflects Ron's anxious heterosexual perspective, it also others queerness within the film. The token visibility deployed in the club, presented in this sequence as a visually and aurally excessive montage that plays on the concept of the exotic queer other, reinforces the film's disinterest in queer identity, community, and space in favour of a protagonist repulsed by queer environments.

In conjunction with the film's preference for implicitly heterosexual settings, the film depicts Ron's relationship with the queer community as largely antagonistic, an attitude that conflicts with the community ethos of the buyers clubs according to historical accounts (Lune 52-53). Ron explicitly defines his interactions with queer clients as business transactions, refusing to acknowledge clients outside of the confines of the club and rudely rebuffing their attempts to thank him. The film sells Ron's "profit-motivated drug smuggling as 'heroic,' but can only do so because the work of AIDS activist groups such as ACT-UP... [are] marginalised in the film" (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 52). Furthermore, his insistence that he runs a business and not "a goddamn charity" is antithetical to the ideals established by the first buyers clubs in New York, which were set up not only to sell or provide medication, but also to disseminate information regarding AIDS and safe sex practices and to provide advocacy and community for those afflicted by the disease (Lune 53-54). Moreover, AIDS buyers clubs collaborated with groups like ACT UP to challenge "social policy, drug approval and pricing, and the lack of federal AIDS funding" (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 52). In *Dallas Buyers Club*, the absence of these groups results in skewed attention to private capitalist innovation at the expense of political activism undertaken by queer communities in response to the AIDS crisis.

Consequently, the film positions Ron as an isolated entrepreneurial hero, and his ingenuity and determination in fighting the FDA as an individual rather than collective triumph (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 52). Shots of Ron in airports travelling between Mexico and Dallas and in the courthouse employ wide-angle shots and a shallow depth of field. When contrasted with Ron's emaciated build and the manipulation of diegetic sound, these shots accentuate Ron's disconnection from the community. The film's final shot, which depicts him as a solitary bull rider, reinforces the film's portrait of Ron as an isolated figure representative of the hypermasculine and heterosexual culture of rodeo. While the film presents Ron's cross-country journeys as part of his redemption arc, in which he eventually serves the queer community he initially rejected, it also

ignores the fact that many of the drugs he provided did not effectively treat HIV/AIDS (Mullard 592). Furthermore, the film does not acknowledge the neoliberal framework fundamental to its depiction of Ron's successes. He runs his version of the buyers club as a business, and the film conveys his progress through the accumulation of capital. New cars and suits become markers of success as characters like Rayon continue to get sicker. The film situates Ron as a quintessential neoliberal hero, "capitalising on the infection and dying of his own and others' bodies during the epidemic to amass profits from the HIV-positive community by distributing a less than effective product" (Keegan, "History Disrupted" 52), without allowing for a critique of the neoliberal values it promotes. By repurposing the tragedy of AIDS to dramatize a heterosexual figure, the film thus eschews the sense of community and activism that defined the AIDS crisis.

While most of the LGBTQ characters are background figures in *Dallas Buyers Club*, Rayon plays an important role as a symbolic substitute for queer culture and communities. She is introduced part way through the film as a counterpoint to Ron's aggressive heterosexuality. Her queerness is immediately apparent through her garish make-up, pink bathrobe, and camp gestures, and for Ron she provides the access to the community that he needs to expand his business. Early in the film Rayon uses public parks and bars to ferry drugs and money between Ron and his clients. In the club scene her drag aesthetic and exaggerated sexuality are a draw for the business, and she navigates these queer spaces with ease. However, even Rayon's interactions with queer groups are strangely limited, as the film doesn't represent emotional connections between her and other queer folk. Partly because of the film's general side-lining of queer characters, her only significant queer relationship is with a nameless young addict. Her death, which occurs alone in an anonymous hospital room, brings this lack of community support into sharp relief. Neither Dr. Saks nor Ron are present for her passing, and while it is her boyfriend that brings her to the hospital, he is also conspicuously absent from the scene of her death. By functioning as an isolated token queer character, Rayon becomes a bridge between Ron and the community, and between mainstream heterosexual audiences and queerness. However, while Ron and Rayon become friendly, Ron's phobic behaviour undercuts any intimacy between the two. He continuously reasserts his trans- and homophobic attitudes (and by extension, his own heterosexuality and masculinity) by referring to Rayon as a "lil bitch" and

jokingly threatening to castrate her. These moments paranoically reassert his normative gender and sexual identity, and their violent connotations betray an underling anxiety in their developing relationship.

As the film progresses, Rayon's relationship with Ron facilitates his character development. In one example (which also functions as a turning point in the narrative), Ron's friend T.J. refuses to shake Rayon's hand. While she dismisses his transphobia with a nonchalant gesture, Ron becomes immediately aggressive. Rayon looks alarmed, and then embarrassed and awkward, as Ron puts T. J. in a headlock and forces him into a handshake. Her reluctance to maintain eye contact and her visible discomfort in this moment starkly contrasts her earlier, confident dismissal of T. J.'s transphobic behaviour. The moment becomes a performative gesture of Ron's character development at the expense of Rayon's interests, as Ron demonstrates his new progressive attitude by side-lining Rayon's agency. In demanding a handshake from TJ, Ron forces Rayon into a confrontation that clearly makes her uncomfortable. In a similar way, her death later on in the film becomes a source of pathos for both audiences and Ron. It serves as another turning point, and as an opportunity for Ron to establish himself as the film's hero. In a compassionate moment immediately following Rayon's death, Ron signs a young man into the club without the required \$400 fee. However, this charitable gesture does not extend to the wider buyers club, and the film provides no evidence that this reflects a change in policy for the business. Rayon's purpose in the film is therefore to facilitate Ron's emotional transformation and his progression as the film's unlikely hero.

Rayon's deferential position and her role as the token queer character becomes particularly interesting considering the film's industrial context. As one of the film's few characters without a historical basis, her characterization suggests that Indiewood is primarily interested in trans characters as supporting roles and to perform token gestures. As per the film's paratexts, Rayon's story was a relatively late addition to the screenplay (considering the script's 20-year development). The first references to her character begin to appear in trade magazines in 2012, where articles describe her as a "showy... effeminate member of the club, a fellow AIDS patient who meets Ron in the hospital" (Siegel and Kit). Later that year *The Hollywood Reporter* announced that the character would be a "flamboyant cross-dresser" (Kit). It wasn't until the casting of Jared Leto in November 2012 that the filmmakers rewrote Rayon as a trans woman

(Benjamin). This late shift from camp homosexual to trans character suggests that her role may have evolved in response to the financial and critical successes of earlier indie and Indiewood films such as *TransAmerica* and *Albert Nobbs*. Glenn Close's Academy Award nomination for her performance as a trans man in the latter occurred in the same year that the *Dallas Buyers Club* script was finalised, and demonstrates the shifting attitude in Indiewood towards trans performances. As an explicit signifier of queer, Rayon thus becomes a symbol of not only Ron's progressiveness, but also that of the film's.

While *Dallas Buyers Club* claims to represent the true-life story of Ron Woodruff, there is a tension in the film between the historical reality of the AIDS crisis and the film's marginalization of queer people and spaces. The film's emphasis on heterosexual perspectives and experiences within the context of the epidemic, in a media landscape which already side-lines queer perspectives, is troublesome because it marginalizes gender and sexual identities. It also reflects a tendency among mainstream films like *Philadelphia* and *How to Survive a Plague* (France 2012) to depict AIDS and AIDS activism solely "through the lens of white male heroes" (Cheng 73), and thus erase the significant work done by women, people of colour, and non-normative gender identities.³³ In adapting and rewriting this narrative—as well as Ron's character—*Dallas Buyers Club* reveals Indiewood's interest in selling a mitigated version of queer to mainstream heterosexual audiences. Its historicization of the period is repurposed to celebrate a heterosexual man's heroism and entrepreneurial spirit, thereby side-lining the real activism of AIDS buyers clubs and the role of trans women in the crisis. Furthermore, Rayon's presence in the film illustrates the value of trans characters as token gestures that bolster heteronormative narratives. Ultimately, Rayon is a symbolic (and sacrificial) figure that attests to the progressive attitudes of Ron, the filmmakers, and Indiewood as a whole.

2. Trans Femininity as Visual and Emotional Excess

Dallas Buyers Club deploys several generic conventions in its depiction of Ron Woodruff's life and work. In particular, the film's aesthetics and representational

³³ *How to Survive a Plague* is an classic example of this, whereby ACT UP's diverse history is reconfigured through the perspectives of white men.

strategies draw on the melodramatic conventions present in earlier representations of trans characters. While melodrama has the potential to challenge and interrogate gender and sexual categories, its application in traditional representations of trans femininity has been limited. Melodramatic conventions have, more often than not, pathologized trans identity by depicting trans bodies as “vulnerable to or productive of extreme emotional states” (Keegan, “Moving Bodies”). *Dallas Buyers Club* repurposes these conventions in its characterization of Rayon by rendering her femininity through visual and emotional excess. Moreover, her performance complicates Mary Ann Doane’s notion of the masquerade, demonstrating the different approaches to trans and cis-gender femininity within the genre. Finally, the melodramatic trope of the fallen woman, seen in films like *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don’t Cry*, influences the film’s approach to Rayon. Her drug use, sex work, and death are implicitly tied to her identity as a trans woman. While these tropes are reminiscent of earlier cinema representations of trans characters, their use in *Dallas Buyers Club* illustrates how trans characterization has developed in a specifically Indiewood context as a symbol of emotional, aesthetic, and gendered excess.

Since Rayon operates in *Dallas Buyers Club* as a link to queer culture, history, and community, examining how the film establishes her queerness is useful for understanding the film’s treatment of her character. Her introduction occurs in a hospital setting where, much like Ron, the audience hears her before they see her. Her intonation and use of the term “honey” suggest a feminine disposition, setting up the assumption for Ron and the audience that she is a cis-gender woman. This delay between Rayon’s opening dialogue and visual introduction provides a dramatic reveal: while Rayon presents herself as a woman, the choice to cast a cis-gender man means that Jared Leto’s masculine body and face are still strikingly visible. The disconnection between her feminine dress, intonation, and masculine shape is initially jarring, and highlights the excessive femininity of her costuming and make-up.³⁴ Furthermore, Rayon’s ‘reveal’ refigures her opening dialogue and feminine presentation as a queer performance. Rayon’s effeminate gestures, sassy demeanour, and overt swinging of the hips evoke a camp sensibility that poses a direct threat to Ron’s anxious heterosexuality. In reaching out to stroke his foot, this threat becomes explicit and Rayon’s queerness is

³⁴ While passing is not a requirement of trans identity/experience, it is often considered a crucial survival strategy. In this case, the film’s treatment of Rayon is designed to undermine her female identity rather than demonstrate gender’s performative nature—or critique the social pressures that necessitate ‘passing.’

transformed into a sexual transgression. Rayon's garish dress, make-up, expressive gestures, and suggestive dialogue thus culminate in an introductory performance that is oversaturated with sexual and gendered excess.

Dallas Buyers Club utilizes gendered excess in this sequence to assert both Rayon's sexuality *and* her gender identity. In this first appearance her costuming and make-up are overwhelmingly pink, from her cotton candy bathrobe and headscarf, to her magenta eye-shadow and nail polish. While coded as hyper-feminine, the exaggerated contrast between Rayon's make-up, sickly pale face, and strong jaw line suggests that her femininity is little more than a tragic façade. In fact, her garish application of cosmetics becomes a visual motif for her character. The extreme contrast between Rayon's false eyelashes and shaved eyebrows gives her appearance an alien quality, while her poorly applied blush, failed attempts at contouring, and clashing eyeshadow colours create an almost kitsch-like aesthetic. This poor application of make-up is often unflattering and draws attention to her masculine features. For instance, heavy eyeliner on her lower lids exaggerates her sunken eyes and her application of lipstick accentuates her already thin lips. While Rayon's over-the-top use of cosmetics conveys a queer sensibility, it also undermines her gender presentation.

Rayon's cosmetics are ultimately not designed as a credible image of womanhood, and this becomes evident when she is compared to the film's cis-gender female character. Dr. Saks' frumpy clothes and minimalist make-up are the inverse of Rayon's feminine excess. Her lack of interest in hyper-feminine costuming is possible because, as a cis-gender woman, the film isn't interested in explicitly and dramatically demonstrating (or undermining) her feminine identity. Rayon's style in comparison foregrounds an unflattering clash of masculine and feminine features that ultimately re-affirms the idea that trans women are simply men in drag. This reduction of trans femininity to cosmetics and costuming is reiterated throughout the film, with many of Rayon's scenes showing her in the process of dressing up or applying make-up. This association becomes explicit in her final scene, where the film symbolically conveys her death through the fall of her foundation brush. Julia Serano argues that it is the intent of popular media to "capture trans woman *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman's

femaleness is an artificial mask or costume” (229).³⁵ Rayon’s costuming works in a similar manner, and as an exaggeration of excessive femininity that is always limited to a surface level.

This treatment of gender has ties to the melodramatic concept of the masquerade, which Mary Ann Doane argues draws critical attention to performative elements of female identity. She argues that the treatment of excessive femininity in melodrama “holds it at a distance,” creating a space for critical readings of gender and the power dynamics within gendered looking (“Film and the Masquerade” 81). Womanliness in these instances is a “mask which can be worn and removed” and, by restructuring the male look, can provide a threat to male systems of looking (“Film and the Masquerade” Doane 81-82). However, Rayon’s relationship with the masquerade does not function in this way. Rather than using excessive femininity to challenge the masculine structure of the look or the film’s conception of gender, her relationship with the masquerade refigures her female identity as a cosmetic mask without the critical distance Doane discusses. Rayon’s femininity is emptied of discursive power in part because the film treats it as a source of tragedy. Her excessive make-up undermines her gender presentation, drawing attention to Rayon’s failed performance of womanhood rather than the inherent power of the masquerade.

Rayon’s aesthetic relationship to drag is similarly problematic. While theorists like Judith Butler have discussed drag’s power to interrogate essentialist readings of gender (*Gender Trouble* 185), Rayon’s use of make-up and clothing falls short of challenging gender categories. Her melancholic performance of femininity doesn’t acknowledge gender’s social nature, or the subversive power that comes from challenging bi-gender systems. The deconstruction of gender identity that informs drag performances is often reversed in filmic representations of trans femininity, which claim “an ontological sense of gender that is innate, yet unembodied—that is felt and can only be expressed in symbolic language” (Keegan, “Moving Bodies”). The ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative implicit within *Dallas Buyers Club* re-affirms this impulse. Unfortunately, while melodramatic conventions have the power to interrogate social categories like gender, *Dallas Buyers Club*’s application of melodrama chooses to

³⁵ This tradition extends to films like *TransAmerica* where Bree Osbourne is introduced through an excessive focus on her cosmetics and costuming. Close up shots of pantyhose, foundation, and lipstick imply that Osbourne’s “female identity is artificial and imitative, and... reduce her transition to the mere pursuit of feminine finery” (Serano 229).

invalidate Rayon's individual femininity rather than deconstruct notions of womanhood as a whole.

Rayon's drag aesthetic and camp performance also reiterate slippages between homosexuality, cross-dressing, and trans identity in mainstream media. Marjorie Garber argues that this conflation is "fuelled by a desire to tell the difference, to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question" (Garber 130). Rayon's excessive campness in her introductory scene makes her queerness immediately recognizable for heterosexual audiences. While there can be visual and cultural cross-over between non-normative sexual and gender identities, the historical over-representation of queer sexuality as effeminacy in mainstream films often oversimplifies more complex understandings of these categories. Furthermore, these kinds of representations of trans women disregard "the reality that there are as many types of trans women as there are women in general... [and not] all trans women are on a quest to make [themselves as] pretty, pink, and passive as possible" (Serano 226). Films like *Breakfast on Pluto* and *TransAmerica* conceive of trans womanhood as a desire for these superficial feminine markers. The association *Dallas Buyers Club* makes between a drag-like hyper-femininity and trans women—a conflation that may draw from the script's original conception of Rayon as a drag queen—thus refigures trans femininity as a spectacle of feminine excess.

Moreover, the visual allusions to drag implicit within Rayon's costuming often draw attention to the disjuncture between her hyper-feminine aesthetic and her masculine body shape. Many of her dresses, while hyper-femme in their conception, draw specific attention to Leto's masculine body shape. For example, her green halter dress has a plunging neckline that accentuates the wide breadth of her shoulders while simultaneously emphasizing her flat chest. This discord symbolises the conflict between how Rayon perceives herself, and the gender that she was assigned at birth. In these moments Rayon embodies Julia Serano's description of the "pathetic transsexual," characters who evoke melodramatic sadness in their inability to personify traditional cis-gender womanhood (227). 'Pathetic transsexuals' like Bree Osbourne in *TransAmerica* and Roberta Muldoon in *The World According to Garp* represent a "strategically failed attempt at authenticity" and function "as a visual joke" (Keegan, "Moving Bodies"). In *The World According to Garp*, this comedy comes from the discord between John Lithgow's tall, masculine build and his character's poor

application of make-up and failed attempts at wearing high heels. While *TransAmerica* cast a woman in the role of Bree, the production team made Felicity Huffman look more masculine by using cosmetics to widen her jaw, coarsen her hair, and roughen her skin (Cavalcante 97). In Bree's case these visual cues remain a tragic reminder of her struggles to present as a woman, and are used to justify her character's obsession with pastel colours, cosmetics, and surgery.

While these representations of trans women operate partly as a visual joke, they also play a key role in evoking pathos within a story, since a crucial element of the 'pathetic transsexual' is their tragic inability to pass. The garish and ill-fitting costumes and make-up that Rayon wears play into this perception, which the film reinforces through the transphobic attitudes of Ron and T.J., and her misgendering by other characters. Rayon's excessive femininity draws attention to Rayon's perceived failures as a trans woman, which in turn facilitates her tragic spiral within the narrative. In one particular scene Rayon makes a spiritual appeal while applying make-up: "God, when I meet you, I'm gonna be pretty, if it's the last thing I do." She holds a lacy pink slip up to her naked boyish body and cries. Mirror scenes such as this are a common "symbolic display of dysphoric feeling" in mainstream trans representation (Keegan, "Moving Bodies"). They are designed to engender sympathy for trans experiences, but also label trans bodies as inherently tragic. Evoking pathos to humanize trans characters links back to sentimental pedagogies discussed in chapter one, and the affected treatment of characters like *Philadelphia*'s Andrew Beckett. The scene functions primarily as a site of emotional and bodily excess; Rayon's tears and the hyper femininity of the pink slip work in tandem to co-ordinate her gender dysphoria as a moment of tragedy and as a sympathetic appeal to the audience. In this moment, propelled by a confrontation with her father where she is forced into presenting as a man, the film explicitly ties Rayon's failure to attain an ideal femininity to her anguished downfall across the film's narrative, a painful journey that culminates in the fall of the foundation brush in her final scene.

Rayon and Ron's dual diagnoses and differing narrative trajectories provide a useful point of analysis when examining Rayon's function within the narrative. The film sets up an implicit comparison between the two that plays on complex assumptions about those with HIV/AIDS. While both receive terminal diagnoses, the film shows only Rayon's death on screen. The film vividly depicts her physical (and emotional)

decline; as the film progresses, Rayon develops scabs, a weathered look to her skin, and her costuming becomes increasingly untidy. In comparison, Ron appears healthier by the film's conclusion. His clear skin and increasing strength demonstrate the success of the buyers club and, more significantly, the power of self-discipline. His ongoing battles with the FDA are a symbolic stand in for his internal battle with the disease, implying that willpower and self-control play a vital role in surviving the epidemic. With this comparison in mind, the film presents Rayon's death not just as a result of the AIDS virus, but as a result of her inability—or her unwillingness—to look after herself. The film makes this explicit through verbal confrontations, where Ron refers to her as a “junky” and openly asks her why she can't be “a good friend to [her]self.” Ron's presumption that she “sold [her] ass” to obtain the money to keep the club open affirms this binary between Ron and Rayon. Unlike Rayon, Ron easily quits heavy drugs, and his ability to succeed within legitimate (albeit unapproved) markets allows him to become the film's neoliberal hero within a system that celebrates ingenuity, hyper-individualism, and entrepreneurialism. In turn, Rayon's narrative suggests that her lack of self-discipline, demonstrated by her failure to eat healthy or quit drugs, has a direct role in her death.

This treatment of Rayon also plays into discourses about ‘deserving AIDS victims’ that were prevalent in the 1980s. Media depictions of people with HIV/AIDS in this period often fell into two categories: people who contracted the disease through blood transfusions or cross-contaminated medical tools, and those who contracted the disease through homosexual practices and drug use (Keegan, “History Disrupted” 52; Hart 35).³⁶ This categorization implicitly demonizes queer people and drug users, demonstrating how “AIDS has been appropriated to medicalize moral stances” (Gamson 359). The term ‘AIDS victim’ has since been rejected by groups like ACT UP because of its role in perpetuating this kind of victimization narrative (Gamson 360). Ultimately, while melodramatic tropes like those used in *Dallas Buyers Club* can be useful for engendering sympathy for marginalised groups, in this context they complicate questions of agency. The film blames Rayon (at least in part) for her own death, increasingly presenting her as a victim incapable of change while Ron's willingness to fight the system (and his own demons) drives his redemption arc. Despite

³⁶ Media interest in Ryan White, Kimberly Bergalis, and the Ray brothers reflect this early tendency in the representation of people with HIV/AIDS (Keegan, “History Disrupted” 52).

the distance between the film's production and the period it depicts, *Dallas Buyers Club* lacks a critical self-awareness in its representation of Rayon. Instead, the film uses these melodramatic tropes to justify her downward spiral and, by extension, Ron's heroic successes.

This narrative trajectory recalls the concept of the fallen woman, a common convention in films about trans characters. In early melodrama, this trope was used to punish women who exceeded class, gender, or sexual boundaries (L. Jacobs 102). The narrative arc is "composed of the [fallen] woman's progressive abasement and decline," a progression which usually "takes the form of spatial displacement—a movement from the domestic space of the family to the public space of the street" (L. Jacobs 107). Rayon's confrontation with her father alludes to this banishment from the domestic space. Furthermore, since censorship in the late 1930s "required some form of suffering or punishment to offset violations of moral codes," the death of the fallen woman was often used to contain sexual or class infringements (L. Jacobs 107). This explains why traditional trans characters, whose gender identity within melodrama is a social transgression, often die before the end of the film. Therefore, while films like *Boys Don't Cry*, *Albert Nobbs*, and more recently, *The Danish Girl* challenge gender categories, they always—through the death of their trans protagonists—return to some form of gender stability. Rayon's subversion of gender and legal boundaries (through her drug use, sex work, and trans identity) are evidence of her social otherness and also must be contained by her death. While Ron likewise transgresses moral, legal, and social boundaries, his capitalist endeavours and return to legitimate markets allow him to subvert this tragic narrative.³⁷

The representation of trans characters as inherently tragic has been a key part of Hollywood's depiction of queer identity. In films like *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and *Albert Nobbs*, their deaths become a necessary containment of queer identity and behaviour (Rigney 5). This is in part because transgender characters "expose deeply rooted cultural anxieties, reflecting and contributing to uncertainty regarding gender ontology" (Cavalcante 89). *Dallas Buyers Club* expresses these anxieties through melodramatic tropes, in particular the visual and emotional excesses that define Rayon's character. While providing Ron's narrative with poignancy and

³⁷ Kylo-Patrick Hart discusses the use of melodramatic conventions in the traditional AIDS movie in his work *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*.

pathos, her characterization and narrative arc re-affirm the flawed traditions of mainstream trans representation. Her tragedy relies on reductive assumptions about trans femininity, and reinforces binary approaches to female identity. In these films the tragic transgender character “weeps because happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach” (Halberstam 81). For *Dallas Buyers Club* the conventions of melodrama provide, through the character of Rayon, a manifestation of queer anxiety and a containment of the gender transgressions produced by trans performances.

3. Paratextual Strategies and Gender Transformations

Many of the issues that arise from Rayon’s characterization in *Dallas Buyers Club* extend beyond the film’s diegetic narrative. The film’s paratexts, in particular its advertising and award campaigns, reiterate certain assumptions about Rayon and her role in the story. More specifically, these works reinforce trans characterization as a spectacle and as a token of the film’s progressive attitudes toward queer identity. So, while her role as both queer spectacle and counterpoint to Ron are crucial elements of *Dallas Buyers Club*’s internal narrative, they’re also important when addressing her function within the film’s external texts. The paratexts’ continuation of these representational strategies—which position Rayon as a queer other that struggles to pass as a woman—draw attention to how these practices operate within a wider cultural and industrial context. Paratexts are an important tool for marketing films as they play a significant role in shaping audience’s introduction to the primary text. Their “peripheral nature” helps dictate consumption choices, filling in the gaps between the main text, the audience, and the industry (Richards 27; Gray 26). A film’s paratexts thus mediate audience expectations about a film and structure their approach to its subject matter. Close analysis of *Dallas Buyers Club*’s trailers, posters, and cast and crew interviews reveal how conceptions of trans femininity may affect cultural understandings of trans women. In this section I will examine how *Dallas Buyers Club*’s paratexts frame Leto’s performance of Rayon as a transformative spectacle and how the cast and crew address the issue of trans representation. Interviews with Jean-Marc Vallée, Leto, and the film’s writers provide valuable insight into how the production team justified the casting of a cis-gender performer as Rayon. The emphasis on Leto’s performance, in particular his use of method acting, is reiterated throughout the film’s marketing campaign. However,

these texts also underscore the film's problematic characterisation of trans identity by presenting Leto's performance, as well as the character he plays, as an aesthetic and gender spectacle. Finally, this section will address how the film's treatment of Rayon exceeds the textual boundaries of the film, and examine how the paratexts' focus on Leto's performance relates to the industry's increasing interest in trans characters.

Many of *Dallas Buyers Club*'s advertising strategies focus on Rayon's character, and more specifically, discussions about Leto's performance. This paratextual interest in Rayon reiterates her role within the story, where she performs as a queer spectacle. Shots of Rayon in the film's trailer depict her sashaying down public streets, dramatically posing, sassily berating Ron, and dancing in gay clubs. These shots immediately draw attention to her queerness by highlighting her gender and sexual excesses, effectively reducing her character to a series of camp gestures that once again act as a counterpoint to Ron's excessive heterosexuality. Other paratexts reinforce Rayon's characterization as a hypersexual camp figure, describing in evocative language how Leto was "seduced" by Rayon. This sexualisation is extended to discussions about the film's casting process. In an interview with *Vogue*, Leto described his audition with the director over Skype:

He was feeling me out, so I used it as an opportunity. As soon as we connected, I put lipstick on and he was stunned. I undid the black jacket I had on, pulled a pink furry sweater over my shoulders and proceeded to flirt with him for the next 20 minutes. I woke up the next day with the part, so... a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do (Alexander).

These paratexts reiterate the discourse of sexual excess that the film projects onto her character. Using the term "seduce" is evocative in its sexual connotations, as is the implication that Rayon sells herself to Vallée in the interview. Her camp hypersexuality exceeds the boundaries of the film's narrative, as does Leto's performance. His flirtatious and affected behaviour in interviews draws Rayon outside of the filmic text and into paratextual spaces. During an interview with Paul Salfen, Leto responds to a flirtatious exchange with "my high heels aren't on buddy... but I can put 'em on if you like" (AMFM Studios). Rayon's excessive sexuality thus resurfaces in Leto's interviews, re-affirming her position as an exotic other and queer spectacle.

The film's treatment of trans femininity is also reiterated in *Dallas Buyers Club*'s paratexts. Articles tend to introduce Leto's performance through descriptions of him "tottering around in heels, wearing short skirts" (Gettel). These discourses mirror the film's representation of trans femininity by referring to Rayon through her make-up and costuming. This interest in hyper-feminine signifiers reinforces the film's conception of Rayon's feminine identity as an affectation, or as a collection of misapplied feminine tropes. Leto reinforces this practice by consistently discussing the role through references to tights, high heels, and body waxing (Vanity Fair; Lees). Moreover, throughout these interviews (and during his controversial Golden Globes acceptance speech), Leto refrains from referring to Rayon as a woman. He describes her a "beautiful creature," as an abstract idea, or as a genderless "person" (Lees; Los Angeles Times). This vague approach to gender reinforces Rayon's relationship to the 'pathetic transsexual' trope; by refusing to acknowledge her as a woman, Leto calls attention to her inability to pass and thus implicitly disavows her female identity. This hesitation around Rayon's gender is demonstrated in the film's reviews, where she is often misgendered and variously described as a "transsexual druggie," "drag queen," or "transvestite" (Travers; Robey; Jagernauth). Ultimately, the tension implicit in this fascination with Rayon as a spectacle of feminine artifice—and the reluctance to define her as a woman—re-emphasises the discord between Leto's male identity and Rayon's female one.

What remains unspoken in these articles is a fascination with not only trans performances, but those trans performances that specifically rely on cross-gendered casting. In these cases, much of the film's viewing pleasure comes from the knowledge that Leto, a cis-gender heterosexual performer, is ostensibly in drag. This discourse operates in much the same way as the paratexts for *Boys Don't Cry*, specifically those that celebrate Swank's transformation as Brandon Teena. Cross-dressing can interrogate gender categories, but there is a tendency for audiences to "look *through* rather than *at the cross-dresser*... to elide and erase—or to *appropriate* the transvestite for particular political and critical aims" (Garber 9). In the case of *Dallas Buyers Club*, the industrial interest in Leto's performance validates gender binaries by re-affirming his masculinity. This is evident in the ongoing fascination with Leto's physical "transformation." Much like the reviews of Hilary Swank's *Boys Don't Cry* performance, many of the critics describe Leto as "uncanny," "entirely transformed," "nearly unrecognizable," and with

an impressive “aptitude for drag” (Travers; Cornet; Seibert; Robey). While arguably unrecognizable as Rayon, however, there is no suggestion in these articles that Leto passes as a woman. The comparisons to drag instead demonstrate an almost fetishistic interest in the juxtaposition of Leto’s cis-gender male body and Rayon’s female garments. Furthermore, comments about his physical transformation (and in particular his weight loss for the film³⁸) are often explicitly linked to his interest in method acting (Slotek; Travers). Implicit within these discussions is an admiration for his dedication and ability to transform as an actor, and in particular, his ability (and bravery) to transform across gendered lines. This critical emphasis on Rayon as a cross-gendered performance re-affirms cross-dressing (and cross-gendered casting) as a cultural spectacle.

While *Dallas Buyers Club*’s paratexts draw on contemporary cultural interest in trans characters, there is another impulse within these discourses that seeks to contain and mitigate the film’s inherent queerness. Andre Cavalcante argues that paratexts have the ability to “neutralize and domesticate the potential threats a narrative poses to social or cultural status quo” (85). In the case of *Dallas Buyers Clubs*, the cast and crew interviews often underplay the film’s queer elements. This is most apparent in Leto, McConaughey, and Vallée’s reluctance to discuss the film as a depiction of the AIDS crisis or to directly address the trans community. Unless expressly addressed by interviewers, they often discuss the subject matter of the film in oblique terms. In an interview with *Los Angeles Confidential*, Leto vaguely ascribes the film’s appeal to audiences’ interest in healthcare (Crissel). Obtuse references to AIDS as “the epidemic” or more vaguely as “a film of this subject matter” avoid the film’s queer context (Variety; Mavity). This denial of the film’s queerer elements extends to Leto and McConaughey’s controversial Golden Globes acceptance speeches, neither of which acknowledged AIDS or addressed the queer community that the film represents (D’Addario).³⁹ This anxious treatment of AIDS echoes the film’s mediation of queer history, exemplified in the decision to rewrite Ron as heterosexual. When read alongside the paratexts’ treatment of Leto’s cross-gendered performance, these practices suggest that the film is both re-affirming its appeal to mainstream audiences and capitalizing on recent cultural interest in trans characters. Discussions about Rayon thus

³⁸ Leto lost between 30 and 40 pounds for the role (Gross).

³⁹ In contrast, Hanks’ acceptance speeches for his performance in *Philadelphia* foregrounded the issue of AIDS and the experiences of the queer community.

become limited to her aesthetics and hypersexual camp demeanour (or Leto's *performance* of Rayon), rather than the ongoing struggles of the trans community and the politics of representation.

One of the benefits of examining *Dallas Buyers Club* through its paratexts is the insight it provides into the ongoing issues associated with casting trans roles. While a film's representational strategies can reveal reductive assumptions about trans characters and communities, interviews with cast and crew highlight how these issues work in an industrial context. For *Dallas Buyers Club*, these paratexts play a key role in exploring how the film struggles with the politics of trans representation. In an interview with *Advocate*, Leto vaguely refers to conversations he had with "trans kids," but these discussion happened after filming completed (Anderson-Minshall) and the film's "full credits don't specify any particular transgender consultants" (Friess). The language the crew uses when discussing Rayon's character reflects this lack of discourse with the community. Both Leto and the film's writers use the term 'transgendered' in several different interviews (Gross; Los Angeles Times). This term is considered inappropriate by the community because 'transgendered' functions as a verb rather than an adjective, thereby implying that trans identity is something that happens to an individual as opposed to "an identity someone is born with" (Lopez; Herman). Furthermore, while Rayon's misgendering in the film could be justified in terms of the film's period setting, the film's writer Melisa Wallack misgenders Rayon in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. *Dallas Buyers Club*'s advertising and award campaigns thus consistently (although perhaps unknowingly) disregard appropriate trans terminology in favour of discourses that continue to spectacularize Rayon's trans identity. This demonstrates a lack of awareness regarding the politics of trans representation, while also illustrating the film's disinterest in appealing directly to queer or trans audiences.

In examining the backlash the film received from the trans community, these issues become more distinct. Following the film's release, sites like *Autostraddle*, *The Independent*, and *Time* published work by trans writers that criticized Leto's casting and performance in the film (Eleven; Lees; Fox). Beyond industrial concerns about the limited work available for trans performers, they also argued that despite the "pro-gay attitude, the film fails to break the pattern of transphobic narratives in cinema because it doesn't understand that trans people are not the same as cis gay people" (Hawkins;

Eleven). This is reflected in the film's conflation of cross-dressing, homosexuality, and trans femininity. Vallée's comments about trans casting also drew criticism: when asked whether or not he considered casting a trans performer in the role of Rayon, he responded: "Never... Is there any transgender actor? To my knowledge -- I don't know one. I didn't even think about it... I'm not aiming for the real thing" (Fox). These dismissive attitudes towards trans performers (despite the increasing visibility of artists like Laverne Cox, Harmony Santana,⁴⁰ and Candis Cayne) reveal a disinterest in engaging with the politics of representation. Since much of the trans discourse associated with *Dallas Buyers Club* is limited to Leto's experience on set, it means that these discussions are necessarily negotiated through a cis-gender perspective. The film's mitigation of queer history through the figure of Ron is thus reproduced in the paratexts' treatment of trans identity, albeit through the figure of Leto.

Rayon plays an essential role in *Dallas Buyers Club*'s marketing campaigns. The production's focus on her character, reflected in her strong presence among the film's paratexts, demonstrates a cultural interest in trans characters. Following the film's release at the 2013 Toronto Film Festival, discussions about Rayon, and by extension Leto's performance, dominated queer and film communities. What was unique about these debates was the media's interest in promoting articles about the film by trans writers. Publications like *The Independent* and *Time* provided a platform for disaffected trans reviewers, suggesting that queer discourses about representation were becoming more mainstream. In spite of this, Rayon (as a token of queer identity) still serves the film as a highly visible marker of 'progressiveness.' Her presence is an assertion of the film's cultural value, legitimizing the film as an edgy, queer product within a mainstream context. Furthermore, Leto's successes throughout the film's award campaign—which culminated in a Golden Globe and an Oscar for the actor—demonstrate how the industry re-affirms trans characters' cultural prestige. The intense media hype around Leto's Oscar campaign suggests that Rayon operates as a progressive symbol for both the film *and* the wider film industry. However, *Dallas Buyers Club*'s industrial success does not excuse the questionable discourses that plagued the film's marketing campaign. The film's paratexts reinforce many of the complex and harmful representational practices that the narrative employs. By focusing on the transformative spectacle of Leto, the film's paratexts reiterate the aesthetic,

⁴⁰ Santana won an Independent Spirit Award in 2011 for her role in *Gun Hill Road* (Green).

gender, and sexual excesses that structure the film's representation of Rayon, while reproducing the film's reluctance to genuinely acknowledge her as a woman.

Conclusion

Dallas Buyers Club's critical success bears some relationship to the cultural significance of the film's trans character, and by extension, the increasing visibility of trans characters in mainstream film and television. This visibility has been beneficial to the LGBTQ community: these images provide a valuable resource for examining queer identity and culture that extends beyond the boundaries of the community. Having a range of characterisations, both queer and explicitly trans, expands all audiences' cultural understanding of gender and sexuality. It is important, however, to address these representations as cinematic constructs and therefore to examine the underlying assumptions that shape these characterizations. When tracing the history of trans representation in American cinema, it becomes evident that certain representational practices have continued to resurface. In this regard, *Dallas Buyers Club*'s characterization of Rayon as a trans woman is often limited. Her function in the narrative, as a queer counterpoint to Ron that facilitates his development from bigot to hero, continues a tradition of token representation that relegates trans characters to the background. Her excessive queerness, her otherness in a film that is largely heterosexual, is intended to symbolise the film's progressiveness through tokenistic gestures.

The meta-narratives that *Dallas Buyers Club*'s paratexts weave illustrate the production team's interest in capitalizing on the growing cultural status of trans characters. The flurry of media attention following Jared Leto's award campaign demonstrates a contemporary fascination with not only trans roles, but the cross-gendered nature of the performance when produced by a cis actor. For an industry that is often criticized for its lack of diverse representation (Frank; McNary), trans characters continue to operate as a valuable signifier of progressive politics. In the year following *Dallas Buyers Club*'s release, Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl* and Gaby Delall's *About Ray*⁴¹ debuted at international film festivals. These films, while demonstrating the increasing visibility of trans characters, also highlight a growing

⁴¹ The film was pulled from cinemas just days before its theatrical release. It opened in theatres one and a half years later, following substantial edits and under the title *3 Generations* (Montpellier).

discontent towards trans representation. Audiences and reviewers criticized the use of cis performers in these roles (Kellaway; THR Staff), as well as the depiction of trans agency (Nicholson), and the films' reinforcement of respectability politics (Grant). In particular, the cultural response to Eddie Redmayne's performance as Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* suggested a continuing shift in attitudes toward the casting of trans roles, particularly for popular press writers. *The Danish Girl* struggled to attain the same level of cultural acceptance as *Dallas Buyers Club* in spite of the short period between the two films' releases, suggesting that while Rayon may have been a reductive representation of trans femininity, her success may have also sparked progressive change in cultural approaches to trans roles. These discussions about cross-gendered casting shaped much of the discourse about another trans film in 2015. *Tangerine*, an independent production about two black trans sex workers, approached its subject matter in markedly different ways than *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*. Boasting two trans performers in its lead roles, the film represents an alternative approach to trans representation, one informed by the lived experiences of trans people.

Chapter 3: *Tangerine*'s Subversion of Tradition and Tragedy

Introduction

While trans figures have gained increasing media visibility since the 1970s, these representations have almost exclusively been limited to white characters. Films like *Dog Day Afternoon*, *The World According to Garp*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and *TransAmerica* represent the continued erasure of trans people of colour from American cinema. Even when non-white queer people are depicted, representations tend to be tokenistic and relegated to the cinematic margins. Because only a few trans women of colour have found success in mainstream media, women like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock become representative of not only all black trans women, but all trans woman of colour. Such practices "are problematic in that they do not allow space for nuanced representations of the particular experiences that Asian and Latina transwomen [sic] face on a daily basis, in addition to assuming that all black transgender women have similar experiences" (Glover 339). This context illustrates *Tangerine*'s unique status. The film challenges and expands queer representational strategies by positioning two black trans women as the film's protagonists and depicting a range of non-white queer figures in supporting roles. While figures like Cox and Mock have been invaluable for increasing trans visibility and challenging transphobic media discourses (Glover 339), broadening cultural definitions of trans identity is crucial, making *Tangerine* a critical text for exploring trans representations in contemporary American cinema.

Sean Baker's film *Tangerine* is about two trans women of colour living and working in Los Angeles on Christmas Eve. The main narrative involves Sin-Dee's determined search for her fiancée's mistress and her close friend Alexandra's attempts to shore up support for her performance that night at a local bar. These stories are interwoven with vignettes of the city, told through the perspective of Armenian cab driver Razmik. The film provides a diverse, often funny, sometimes tragic snapshot of life for those living on the outskirts of Hollywood. *Tangerine* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival to glowing reviews, where it was praised for its humour, the performances of its transgender cast, and the filmmaker's innovative use of iPhones (Chang; Rooney). Given the similarities between the two film's production contexts, this chapter will argue that *Tangerine* demonstrates an alternative approach to trans representation than films like *Dallas Buyers Club*. Comparisons with *TransAmerica* and *The Danish Girl* further demonstrate how *Tangerine* challenges traditional depictions of

trans femininity. Intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality inform the film's characterization of queer identity, providing an intersectional approach to trans characters that is often absent from mainstream representations. While the film is partly shaped by a white, heterosexual, cis-gender perspective and continues to benefit from the cultural capital associated with trans roles, it presents an example of representation that challenges victimization narratives, the pathologization of the trans body, and appeals directly to queer and trans audiences.

As established in chapter one, Indiewood films often calibrate their queer elements with the perspective of non-queer viewers in mind. This chapter will examine how *Tangerine* overturns this trend through its queer treatment of genre and its characterization of Sin-Dee and Alexandra. The film's relative critical and financial successes, achieved in spite of the low profile of newcomers Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, demonstrate the value of casting trans performers in trans roles. While melodramatic tropes in *Dallas Buyers Club* contribute to the film's reductive characterization of Rayon, *Tangerine* draws on the queer potential of melodrama to weave a narrative that focuses on the agency of Sin-Dee and Alexandra rather than the tragedy of gender dysphoria. The film's characterization of these women also sidesteps the respectability politics that have traditionally shaped trans representation. While the film contributes to the overrepresentation of black trans women as sex workers, it doesn't depict Sin-Dee and Alexandra as passive victims of the sex industry. Finally, this chapter will address the film's paratexts, in part by examining how interviews with the film's cast and crew legitimize the film as a valuable cultural text. Sundance's initial hesitation in selling the film as queer reiterates ongoing anxieties about trans narratives in spite of the increasing cultural acceptance of trans characters. However, the overwhelmingly positive reception the film received at Sundance, in particular for its casting, led to significant changes in the film's advertising campaign. The distribution team's marketing of the film as an authentic representation of trans experience reiterates both the cultural value of trans stories and the potential benefit of advertising queer films as queer products. Ultimately, *Tangerine* offers an alternative route for trans representation that is grounded in queer politics and discourses. The film's progressiveness in this regard signals an interest in trans characters that extends beyond cross-gendered performances in traditional Indiewood films.

1. Trans Solidarity and the Melancholic Trans Body

Melodrama is a valuable genre for questioning social constructs implicit within heteronormative politics. Its historic treatment of identity categories often provides valuable insight into the intersections of gender, class, race, and sexuality. However, while films like *Dallas Buyers Club*, *The Crying Game*, and *Boys Don't Cry* use pathos to invoke sympathy for their marginalized trans characters, they also mark the trans body as inherently tragic. The deployment of melodramatic tropes in these films means that trans experiences are almost exclusively defined by gender dysphoria. Anxiety about the trans body, whether personal or cultural, has thus been the primary way that films have engendered sympathy for trans characters. Cael Keegan has outlined in his work how trans difference in films has often “been sutured, through the mechanism of sympathetic exchange, to the symbolic display of dysphoric feeling” (Keegan “Moving Bodies”). These symbolic moments, which rely on pathos and sentimental pedagogy to humanize trans experiences and characters, do little to “disabuse viewers of the assumptions that transgender people are tragic and that [their] bodies are medical anomalies” (Keegan, “History Disrupted” 55). By revising traditional Indiewood representations of dysphoria, and presenting trans bodies as a source of strength and even humour, *Tangerine* employs a broader characterization of trans identity that renegotiates assumptions about dysphoria and agency. Furthermore, the film’s treatment of family adapts the conventions of melodrama to refigure the domestic space and familial relations within an explicitly queer context. *Tangerine*’s treatment of melodrama is therefore useful for exploring alternative forms of representation, particularly when compared to *Dallas Buyers Club*’s deployment of the genre.

Spectacles in traditional melodrama present moments of aesthetic and emotional excess, and these excesses often challenge (perhaps implicitly) gendered ways of looking and patriarchal power structures. Cinematic treatments of trans femininity, however, often undermine the agency inherent within the melodramatic spectacle. As discussed in chapter two, *Dallas Buyers Club* refigures Rayon’s gender presentation as a form of affectation, and this representation lacks the critical distance and self-awareness implicit within classical treatments of the spectacle. Rayon’s earnest investment in womanhood as a performance of hyper-femininity ultimately re-affirms essentialist readings of gender. In films like *Dallas Buyers Club*, the “possibility that trans women are even capable of making a distinction between identifying as female

and wanting to cultivate a hyperfeminine image is never raised” (Serano 229). Rayon’s preoccupation with feminine signifiers (for example, her pink slip, pink eye-shadow, and pink headscarf) present a reductive conception of womanhood that highlights the discord between her masculine body and her hyper-femme aesthetic, reinforcing her position as the ‘pathetic transsexual.’ Consequently, moments of spectacle in traditional representations of trans femininity are imbued with tragedy rather than agency, and thus lack the subversive power of the masquerade.

Tangerine’s treatment of the melodramatic spectacle, however, is more productive. It’s most explicit application in the film comes with Alexandra’s performance of Doris Day’s “Toyland.” The scene provides a break from the frenetic narrative, a moment of pause for both audiences and the film’s characters. The red velvet curtains provide a dramatic backdrop for Alexandra’s performance, while the single piece of tinsel tied around the microphone stand acts as a somber reminder of the film’s holiday setting. Her rendition of the song, which has a natural melancholic style to it, draws attention to the gentle and feminine qualities of her voice. The sequence cuts often to extreme close ups of Alexandra’s face, where her glossy hair, contouring, well-defined brows, and lipstick work cohesively to depict a subtle femininity that highlights Alexandra’s feminine features. When compared with Rayon’s garish and poorly applied make-up, which often draws attention to her underlying masculinity, Alexandra’s application of cosmetics appears understated and natural. The sense of pathos implicit within Alexandra’s performance of “Toyland” does not stem from her inability to pass as a woman. The melancholic qualities of the scene are instead contextual, drawn from Alexandra’s unfulfilled dreams of working as a singer and the absence of her friends in the audience.

Rather than challenging Alexandra’s femininity, the film’s use of spectacle thus reaffirms her gender identity. Furthermore, the treatment of feminine excess and make-up in *Tangerine* often re-affirms Butler’s argument about gender’s performative nature (*Gender Trouble* 34). Unlike Rayon, make-up for Sin-Dee and Alexandra is empowering and helps them pass as woman. While passing is not necessarily an imperative part of trans identity, it’s often an important survival strategy (Muñoz 108). Passing works as a modality where a “dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form” (Muñoz 108). Alexandra’s ability to co-opt feminine signifiers and

successfully perform womanhood validates gender's performative nature and works against the stereotype of the 'pathetic transsexual' present in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

The characters' use of cosmetics in the film's bathroom sequence also demonstrates solidarity between the two trans women. While Alexandra prepares for her performance, Sin-Dee offers advice and helps apply foundation. The shot's tight framing calls attention to the shared intimacy of this interaction. As the shot continues and the women begin to banter, a slow pan reveals Dinah (one of the film's few cis-gender woman) sitting on a closed toilet. In spite of the small size of the bathroom, the space between Dinah and the other women is exaggerated. The colourful bulbs from the mirror drench Sin-Dee and Alexandra in a bright red light that doesn't quite reach Dinah. She is instead lit by an unflattering clash of red and green that draws attention to the bathroom's decrepit state. Dinah's seated position also means that the camera, which was at eye level for Sin-Dee and Alexandra, is tilting down by the end of the shot. The juxtaposition of the beginning and end of the pan affirms the sense of solidarity between the two trans women, and the sharing of make-up becomes a moment of shared intimacy rather than, as it is in *Dallas Buyers Club*, a symbol of tragedy.

Equally important to *Tangerine*'s representational strategies is its depiction of Sin-Dee and Alexandra as active agents within the narrative. Rather than being relegated to background characters that facilitate the heroic progression of a cis-gender protagonist, these women drive the film's story. McKinley Green describes Sin-Dee's search for Dinah as a classic hero's journey, a narrative which the film simultaneously embraces and subverts by "placing queer bodies into the role of the epic hero(es)" (120-121). Sin-Dee's determined search for Dinah (and her desire to confront Chester) structures the narrative and determines the film's frantic pace. This is initially established by timing her dramatic departure from Donut Time with the trap song "Team Gotti Anthem." The song marks a sudden change of tone and pace in the scene: the music's mechanical clicking and quick rhythms mirror Sin-Dee's aggressive pace, while the build-up between the song's baseline and gunshots heightens the urgency of her pursuit. In this short sequence the camera repeatedly rushes after and circles Sin-Dee. This quick and recurring movement, which disrupts the continuity of the sequence by breaking the 180-degree rule, emphasises the significance of this moment within the narrative and her position as the film's protagonist. *Tangerine* thus establishes its frenetic pace, at least in part, as a reflection of Sin-Dee's furious and dynamic energy.

While the choice to film on iPhones instead of traditional equipment was largely the result of the film's limited budget (M. Jacobs), *Tangerine*'s dynamic cinematography also queers the gaze. While film's like *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry* "rely on the successful solicitation of affect—whether it be revulsion, sympathy, or empathy—in order to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze" (Halberstam 77), *Tangerine*'s unusual recording method facilitates audience's access to trans perspectives. The size of the iPhone allows Baker to "shoot clandestinely" around Los Angeles and develop an intimacy with and between performers. The film's intimate bathroom scene, for example, was made possible by the iPhone's versatility within a confined space. According to Green, shooting the film on iPhones asks audiences to "identify with an unconventional viewpoint and unique method of filming, and centring this gaze on agentic transgender women of colour asks audiences to identify with characters rarely featured so positively, prominently, and honestly" (121). Furthermore, while traditional melodrama subverts the structure of the cinematic look through an excess of femininity, *Tangerine* uses the excess of black queerness to destabilize the male gaze. This is achieved through not only the film's adoption of trans protagonists, but also their gestures, clothes, and language. Sin-Dee's dramatic walk, her leopard crop top, and her use of terms like "trap" and "fish" draw on a black queer aesthetic rarely represented in American films. While Sin-Dee could be characterized as an exotic queer other, her aesthetic and emotional excess are balanced by Alexandra, who provides a counterpoint to Sin-Dee's dramatic performance and costuming. The inclusion of other trans characters as background figures also broadens the film's depiction of trans femininity, so that neither Sin-Dee nor Alexandra become a stand-in for the entire community. This foregrounds the relationships between trans (and other queer) characters in the film and facilitates the film's queering of the gaze.

While dysphoria nearly always plays a crucial role in trans representation, *Tangerine*'s treatment of dysphoria challenges the traditional melancholic approach to the trans body. Film's like *Flawless* (Schumacher 1999), *Dallas Buyers Club*, and *The Danish Girl* use gender dysphoria to define trans difference as a "question of 'feeling bad' about one's body or gender" (Keegan, "Moving Bodies"). For Rusty, Rayon, and Lili, anxiety about their gendered bodies defines their experiences, and their happiness is always determined by their access to surgery. However, not all trans people experience dysphoria in the same way, and gender confirmation surgery remains

inaccessible to much of the trans community (Stryker, *Transgender History* 112). This approach, while evoking sympathy for trans characters, limits cultural understandings of trans identity and pathologizes the trans body. Lili's transition in *The Danish Girl*, for example, is marked by physical illness—her dysphoria symbolically portrayed through stomach cramps and nose bleeds. Furthermore, films like *TransAmerica* represent the trans body as “a mere aberration that needs to be corrected” (Eliot and Roen 250), imbuing it with a tragic sensibility that extends beyond genre convention. While Rayon's character in *Dallas Buyers Club* is often defined in terms of her dysphoria, Sin-Dee and Alexandra's relationship with their bodies is much more complex. In *Tangerine*, dysphoria often operates as a source of comedy, and the trans body as a source of power. The film first references dysphoria in a sarcastic and off-hand comment during a casual conversation about a Barney doll. In this scene, Sin-Dee responds to a remark by Alexandra about life being cruel with “yeah... God gave me a penis.” The timing of this line and the context of the preceding conversation turn the comment into a punchline. The film's comedic tone thus accommodates references to dysphoria without having it dominate the conversation, creating a more organic representation of trans experiences.

More significantly, *Tangerine* refigures the trans body as a source of power rather than a symbolic display of tragedy. In one scene, Alexandra begins a fight with a client who refuses to pay for her services. After the man forcibly wrestles his car keys from her, there is a pause in the action: Alexandra stares, outraged, while the music slowly builds in the background. After a few beats she points her finger and responds, “You forget I got a dick too” before rushing off camera towards him. Alexandra's timing and the comment's subversive qualities are comedic, overturning the tragic associations with genital dysphoria. More significantly though, this sequence shows Alexandra using her penis as a source of strength. In allowing Alexandra to identify as a woman without disavowing her genitals, this scene challenges heteronormative gender conceptions. The trans body is repurposed here as site of power. This moment acts as a counterpoint to the dysphoric mirror scene that traditionally engenders sympathy for trans characters. Rayon's appeal to God, Lili's desperate tuck, and Bree's haunted reflection in *Dallas Buyers Club*, *The Danish Girl*, and *TransAmerica* respectively reinforce the pathologization of trans identity. For these women, dysphoria is characterized as self-hatred and their genitals are considered an aberration. Tragedy thus

becomes “the defining paradigm for narrativizing gender variance” (Cavalcante 88). Conversely, Alexandra using her penis as a weapon refigures the trans body as a symbol of toughness and tenacity, and she dominates her client in the subsequent fight.

Tangerine’s treatment of dysphoria is not limited to comedic asides, as a later scene in the film demonstrates. In this sequence, a group of men throw a cup of urine at Sin-Dee through an open car window in a display of transphobic violence. Alexandra rushes her to a nearby laundromat to clean her up. Once inside, Sin-Dee slumps against a wall, but as Alexandra tries to take the urine-soaked wig her body becomes rigid. She aggressively grabs Alexandra’s hand, and after a moment, winces and pulls the wig off herself. This presents a moment of extreme vulnerability for Sin-Dee, and the energetic confidence she exhibits earlier in the film gives way to silent defeat. Her experience of dysphoria thus becomes a moment of extreme pathos. As the scene in the laundromat continues, however, this tragedy is transformed into a moment of solidarity. The two women sit side by side in the laundromat as they wait for Sin-Dee’s hair and clothes to dry. The long take, lack of dialogue, and the absence of non-diegetic sound enhance Sin-Dee’s visible discomfort. She shifts constantly in her seat and obscures her face with her hands as the eerie sound of the dryers fills the space. Alexandra, sensing her discomfort, then takes off her own wig and hands it to Sin-Dee. As Alexandra fixes the wig on her and lightly brushes the hair off her shoulder, Sin-Dee begins to smile. In a moment of wordless thanks, she reaches out and touches Alexandra’s hand. The exchange of wigs becomes a symbol of their sisterhood and undercuts Sin-Dee’s anxious vulnerability. Dysphoria in this scene ultimately validates the relationship between the trans women. The tragedy of Sin-Dee’s assault, as well as Alexandra and Chester’s betrayal, is diminished in these final moments and the solidarity between these characters is re-affirmed.

The significance of this moment becomes more apparent when contrasted with earlier cinematic depictions of trans characters. The conspicuous absence of established queer groups or supporting trans characters in films like *The Danish Girl*, *The Crying Game*, and most significantly *Dallas Buyers Club* disregards the importance of solidarity within the trans community. In *Tangerine*, kinship “becomes defined along lines of support and intimacy, rather than traditional, cisgender notions of heterosexual coupling and reproduction” (Green 121). More importantly, the film “affirms these forms of intimacy as authentic and valuable, rather than as aberrant or ‘other’” (Green

121). This validation is evident through the film's comparison of Sin-Dee and Dinah. While the former is defined by her bond with Alexandra, Dinah's story has the most tragic ending. The final shots of her walking back to the motel show her cold and alone, the camera's framing emphasizing her small, vulnerable build. Her rejection at the motel door, and the final shot of her sitting outside, alone, and in the dark contrasts directly with Sin-Dee and Alexandra, who finish the movie sitting side by side in the laundromat.

Moreover, this scene demonstrates how *Tangerine* uses melodramatic tropes to queer familial relations. Robert Lang argues that if the "notion of family is conceived of flexibly, the family can be said to represent melodrama's true subject" (49). While melodrama often explores relationships between mothers, fathers, and children, these often rely on heteronormative structures that reinforce gender and sexual binaries. Even in films with trans characters, family ties often return to this basic system. In the case of *Dallas Buyers Club*, Rayon and Woodroof form an unconventional, but ultimately heteronormative family structure whereby each character acts as a stand in for the maternal or paternal figure. Woodroof's anxious heterosexuality is in part a reaction to this relationship dynamic, and for these characters the buyers club becomes the new domestic space. In *Tangerine*, however, the absence of home is conspicuous. Even Donut Time, which is one of the film's few recurring settings, is depicted as a liminal space. Sin-Dee and Alexandra's expulsion from the café highlights its transient nature. Instead, the film produces a queer version of the domestic that relies on the women's relationship rather than their physical surroundings. Home for Sin-Dee and Alexandra is wherever they are together, captured in moments across the city, on street corners, in bars, and in laundromats. This queer iteration of family, reinforced through the film's Christmas setting, consequently challenges melodrama's traditional heteronormative structures.

Judith (Jack) Halberstam argues that queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by "allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to the logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, death" (2). *Tangerine*'s queer treatment of the holidays, home, and family reflects this idea of queer subculture within the melodramatic mode. The film's treatment of the genre—and its simultaneous adoption and subversion of its tragic tendencies—establishes a complex representation

of trans communities and characters. The film's treatment of spectacle, dysphoria, and pathos use melodrama's capacity to challenge social categories to evoke sympathy for Sin-Dee and Alexandra without denying their agency or undermining their femininity. According to Steve Neal, melodrama is "full of characters who wish to be loved, who are worthy of love, and whom the spectator wishes to be loved" ("Melodrama and Tears" 17). While audiences of *Dallas Buyers Club* understand that Rayon will never be loved, not even by herself, *Tangerine*'s strength comes from knowing that Sin-Dee and Alexandra already love each other. This validation of queer solidarity and the film's representation of trans perspectives demonstrates how melodrama can productively engender sympathy for marginalized communities.

2. Questioning Trans Respectability Politics

Sin-Dee and Alexandra's sex work, their black queerness, and their rejection of domesticity challenge the hetero/homonormative respectability politics that have traditionally shaped Indiewood conceptions of trans identity. Respectability discourses are an appeal by marginalized identities to the mainstream that rely on an alignment with normative social values. While the term was initially applied to the experiences of black women during the progressive era, where "linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness... served a gatekeeping function" (P. Harris 213), it has since been productively applied to the narrativization of trans identity. In this case, respectability politics describes trans representation and discourses that reinforce particular class, gender, and racial categories. Historically, it has been the mass media's depiction of trans identity that has "allowed the [transgender figure] to have coherence within popular discourse" (Skidmore 272). Tabloid coverage in the 1950s of women like Christine Jorgensen and Charlotte McLeod established the frameworks through which trans identity has been widely understood (Stryker, *Transgender History* 49). However, the transition narratives put forward by women like Jorgensen and McLeod celebrate an exclusive version of womanhood. Emily Skidmore argues that comparing media representations of Jorgensen with black trans women like Delisa Newtown clarifies that "public narratives of transsexuality are not simply about gender but also about race, class, and sexuality" (271). Women like Jorgensen are able to articulate their womanhood through their relationship to white, middle-class sensibilities and by emphasising their own docility, demureness, and heterosexuality.

Films like *TransAmerica* and *The Danish Girl* embody respectability impulses within trans representation. These films' emphasis on trans women as submissive, docile, middle-class, and white normalizes transness through rigid class, gender, and racial categories.⁴² This history is in part what makes *Tangerine* anomalous in its focus on trans women of colour; by centring the narrative on the experiences of poor, black queer women who work outside legitimate economies, the film highlights the complex intersections of oppression that traditionally influence transnormative representations.

Scholars like Caél Keegan, Jennifer Brody, and Amélie Ollivier have critiqued the overrepresentation of white experiences in cinematic depictions of queer narratives and characters. Critics of New Queer Cinema, in particular, often draw attention to the movement's "erasure of blackness" (Brody 93), while mainstream LGBTQ characters have "been exclusive in so far as they mostly focus on white middle-class characters"⁴³ (Ollivier 59). This alignment of queerness with other normative identity categories reflects a need to make queer characters more palatable. By highlighting these characters' relationships to whiteness, these films invite points of identification between queer roles and white, middle-class audiences. Films like *Philadelphia*, *The Kids Are Alright* (Cholodenko 2010), and *The Danish Girl* demonstrate this by reproducing queerness within strict racial and class boundaries, presenting queer identity as non-threatening by reinforcing other normative identity categories. Andrew Beckett's middle class sensibilities—reflected in his formal costuming, well-furnished apartment, and interest in opera—re-affirm his non-threatening status despite his homosexuality. In terms of trans representation, Lili Elbe's hyper-femininity, extreme docility, and asexuality play a crucial role in making her character accessible to broader, more mainstream audiences. Her gender transgressions are thus mitigated through her class, sexual, and racial identity.

Queer cinema's overbearing whiteness is challenged in *Tangerine* as the film's black trans women take centre stage. Because of the industry's focus on white characters and narratives, intersectional politics are often absent from Indiewood films, contributing to the underrepresentation of non-white queer identities. Even when queer people of colour are present, they often perform as token characters. In *Tangerine*

⁴² While *Dallas Buyers Club*'s Rayon rejects this kind of middle-class sensibility, she is ultimately punished for her class and sexual transgressions.

⁴³ *Tongues Untied* and *Watermelon Woman* (Dunye 1997) are exceptions to this rule, as they depict black queer experiences as told by black queer filmmakers.

however, Sin-Dee and Alexandra's experiences as trans women of colour dominate the film. As Alexandra remarks, "out here it is all about our hustle." The film's opening plays on traditional Hollywood signifiers as it introduces this black queer perspective. The old-Hollywood-style credits, stylized font, and old-fashioned instrumental music draw up immediate associations with the classical film period, but are immediately juxtaposed with the scratched yellow surface of a table. The bullet hole and childish scribbles imbedded on its surface accentuate the jarring mix of aesthetics in this opening shot. Sin-Dee and Alexandra are gradually introduced here through close ups of their hands, their black skin standing out against the yellow backdrop. Sin-Dee's exclamation of "Merry Christmas bitch" at the end of this shot, the film's first line of dialogue, reinforces the subversive tone of this opening sequence. Her harsh language clashes with the traditional holiday phrase and marks the end of the classical music, refiguring both the Christmas setting and the old Hollywood mode in an undeniably queer way. Furthermore, this sequence explicitly links Sin-Dee and Alexandra's queerness to their racial identity. Unlike *Dallas Buyers Club*, where the main characters are heard before they are seen, Sin-Dee and Alexandra are introduced through close ups of their black, feminine hands. Because of Mya Taylor and Kitana Rodriguez's influence on the script, their dialogue also draws on jargon from black queer sub-cultures in the Los Angeles area. *Tangerine*'s opening thus immediately challenges the tokenization of black trans women, destabilizing assumptions about Hollywood, genre, and whiteness through its anachronistic—and queer—treatment of style

Tangerine's subversion of traditional Indiewood representation goes beyond the inclusion of trans women of colour as the film's leads. More than just black and queer, Sin-Dee and Alexandra challenge transnormative discourses implicit in earlier characterizations of trans identity, in particular through their relationships with domestic space. Respectability politics often emphasise trans women's domesticity through their relationship to the home. Within traditional heteronormative frameworks, the public space is considered masculine while "women are relegated to the private sphere" (Namaste 225). This is why expulsion from the domestic space is such a key part of the fallen woman narrative: it symbolises the moral degeneracy of such women, and their presence in the public sphere facilitates their tragic narrative arc.⁴⁴ On a surface level, the absence of a literal home for Sin-Dee and Alexandra in *Tangerine* limits their

⁴⁴ This process is reflected in Rayon's journey.

relationship with the domestic space. Home in the film is instead a series of transient places and liminal spaces. By working (and presumably living) on the streets, Sin-Dee and Alexandra thus reject (or are denied access to) the feminine domestic space. According to Ki Namaste, the “gendered nature of both public and private space upholds a binary opposition between men and women, and thus bolsters the ideological workings of heterosexual hegemony” (“Genderbashing” 227). While traditional representations of trans women tend to reassert this binary treatment of space, *Tangerine* challenges it. Not only are Sin-Dee and Alexandra’s home life not depicted, but the film represents a transgender public space. Traditionally referring to “areas of the city frequented by transgender sex workers,” these spaces are defined through the visibility of their trans populations⁴⁵ (Namaste, “Genderbashing” 231). In *Tangerine*, the inclusion of background trans performers and characters, in particular sex workers, refigures the traditionally masculine public sphere into a queer space conspicuously absent from films like *Dallas Buyers Club*.

Sin-Dee’s violence toward Dinah signals a more explicit rejection of the domestic. Sympathetic portrayals of trans women often convey domesticity through demure and submissive behaviour. For characters like Lili and Bree, passivity and docility signify their femininity. Lili’s shy demeanour post transition, demonstrated through her inability to meet people’s eyes and her tendency to cover her face with her hands, reinforces her non-threatening status. Sin-Dee is aggressive in comparison. After finding the “fish” that her fiancée has been sleeping with, Sin-Dee drags Dinah out of a motel by her hair. The two women fight as Sin-Dee violently pulls Dinah across town in an attempt to confront Chester with his infidelity. While some audiences may flinch at this scene, it is significant in its reversal of power structures. There is a historic tradition of cis women invalidating trans womanhood by excluding them from women’s spaces (Collado). As a cis, straight white woman, Dinah has access to privileges that Sin-Dee does not. Sin-Dee’s violence toward Dinah can thus be read as a response to the institutional violence that she is subjected to everyday, depicted in the film through the cries of “tranny faggot” during her assault later in the film. This scene is also important in that it rejects assumptions about femininity and submissiveness. Advocates of respectability politics “often question the utility of rage, especially that of the black

⁴⁵ Well known spaces include New York’s Meat District and the Tenderloin in San Francisco (Namaste 231).

underclass” (M. Smith). While this scene could be read as a problematic reiteration of the angry black woman trope, the violent behaviour doesn’t undermine Sin-Dee’s femininity or her sympathetic position. Her rage is justified within the film’s diegesis, and Dinah’s provocations and derisive attitude towards Sin-Dee negate her position as the story’s victim.

Comparing *Tangerine* and *The Danish Girl* also highlights *Tangerine*’s rejection of the middle-class sensibilities implicit within respectability politics. Lili’s access to hyper-feminine clothing, well-furnished apartments, and surgery are possible because of her privileged place within the class system. Not only do Lili and Gerda have the financial resources to fly to Berlin to meet with a gender specialist, their class status provides Lili with the cultural knowledge needed to navigate the fashion and art worlds that comprise most of the film. Sin-Dee and Alexandra, by virtue of their racial and class identities, do not have access to these worlds. The opening scene makes their limited socio-economic status explicit by showing the women share a single donut. Released from prison earlier that day with two dollars to her name, without a phone and without a ride from prison, Sin-Dee is economically vulnerable. Furthermore, her risqué clothing and language signal her class status. Unlike Lili, who favours silk stockings, detailed lace work, and delicate hats, Sin-Dee sports a crop top, torn tights, and tiny denim shorts that she wears undone at the waist. According to Glover, transnormativity “produces particular class-related implications, as a significant amount of material resources and capital are often required in order to achieve an appearance that enables transgender people to achieve gender congruity in the eyes of dominant society” (Glover 344). Rayon’s failure to pass, and her subsequent death at the end of *Dallas Buyers Club*, can be described in terms of her failure to adhere to middle-class respectability politics. Her cheap make-up, clothing, and drug use become class transgressions that define her as a fallen woman. Sin-Dee’s rejection of middle-class sensibilities, however, remains unpunished.

Moreover, while characters in both *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Tangerine* use street drugs, the film’s approach to addiction is very different. *Dallas Buyers Club* treats Rayon’s drug addiction as a symptom of her self-hatred and gender dysphoria. While this does engender sympathy for her character, positioning her as a helpless victim also undermines her agency. In *Tangerine*, however, drug use and addiction are part of the reality of living on the streets. While Alexandra is clean, many of the background

characters are shown with marijuana or amphetamines. This shifts the issue of addiction from the personal to the cultural, reflecting the difficulties of living as a sex worker, on the streets, and of being queer. While drug use isn't glamourized in the film, it is occasionally treated as a source of comedy. The increasing absurdity of Sin-Dee and Dinah's journey across Los Angeles culminates with them smoking methamphetamine in the bathroom of the bar. The sudden shift in tone as Sin-Dee realises that Dinah is carrying drugs, facilitated by the sudden introduction of trap music in time with the locking of the bathroom door, comically undermines the seriousness of the preceding conversation. This moment, while funny in its absurdity, does not romanticize meth. Dinah's frail body, limp hair, and poor complexion signify the destructive power of hard drugs. What is significant, however, is that Sin-Dee is never punished for smoking meth. Unlike Rayon, her drug use does not facilitate her downward spiral or justify her suffering. The film's tragedy instead stems from her and Alexandra's poverty, their experiences of transphobic violence, and interpersonal relationships.

Tangerine also challenges respectability politics' emphasis on gender normativity. Films like *TransAmerica* and *The Danish Girl* demonstrate how traditional trans characters normalize their own identity by appealing to bi-gender frameworks. These arguments demand inclusion into heteronormativity by emphasising the similarities between trans and cis-gender identities, which often leads to an infatuation with hyper-femme aesthetics and surgical intervention. Bree defines her womanhood in relation to her surgeries, while Lili's interactions with feminine garments are almost fetishistic in their intensity. Furthermore, it is Lili's desperation for gender confirmation surgery that leads to her death. Her contentment as she passes away suggests that it is better to die than live as an 'incomplete' woman. Lili's rejection of her wife post-transition also draws attention to relationships between gender and sexuality in the film. Gerda and Lili's healthy sex life is abruptly suspended following Lili's transition, and this shift in their relationship is presented as an affirmation of her gender identity.⁴⁶

This narrative echoes transnormative arguments, which contend that "transgender women should be included into dominant heteronormativity, especially with regard to their sexual and romantic attractions by suggesting that their identities as women are not substantially different from those of cisgender [heterosexual] women" (Glover 339). *Tangerine* challenges these discourses with a more fluid representation of

⁴⁶ The artist Gerda's character was based on was likely bisexual (Filippo 404).

gender, one where womanhood and femininity are not necessarily tied to the material body. Consequently, Sin-Dee and Alexandra are not defined by their access to gender-confirmation surgery. Julian Glover argues that trans figures like TS Madison disrupt “transnormative respectability” by refusing to disavow or dispossess their penises (Glover 347). In a similar vein, Alexandra uses her penis as a source of strength and pleasure. Therefore, while the women in the film experience dysphoria, their inability to access surgery does not undermine their claim to womanhood. Representations of gender and sexual fluidity spill over into the rest of the film: many of the film’s background characters are trans or genderqueer,⁴⁷ and often in different stages of transition. In their interactions with Sin-Dee and Alexandra, these background characters illustrate non-normative gender identities that disrupt binary gender frameworks. This broadens conceptions of womanhood beyond the hyper feminine heterosexuality seen in films like *The Danish Girl* and *TransAmerica*.

The most significant challenge this film presents to respectability discourse is its depiction of Sin-Dee and Alexandra as sex workers. Neoliberal ideas about legitimate and illegitimate markets have often disproportionately impacted the trans community as “society continues to pathologize employment in sexual economies” (Glover 347). Trans people are much more likely to be denied housing, work, and healthcare—meaning that trans folk are overrepresented in the sex industry. Historically, the idea of legitimate labour has played a significant role in deciding who gets surgery (Irving 40). Transgender people who were “engaged in more marginalized forms of labor—sex work and pornography in this case—were seldom able to access reassignment surgery as this form of labor was not viewed as productive” (Glover 347). While trans sex workers are overrepresented in the media, *Tangerine*’s approach to the topic is valuable. Sex work for Sin-Dee and Alexandra is depicted *as work*, as a legitimate form of labour. Alexandra’ exasperated interactions with clients like Parsimonious John and her casual rapport with Razmik normalize, rather than sensationalise, sex work. The police officer’s failure to support Alexandra during an aggressive encounter with a client also illustrates the potential problems that arise when sex workers are denied the safety net a legalized industry provides. While Sin-Dee’s assault and Alexandra’s fight are

⁴⁷ Genderqueer describes people who identify outside of the gender binary and/or who consider themselves gender fluid.

reminders of the implicit dangers of the industry, the film ultimately presents these as systemic rather than individual issues.

One of the striking qualities of *Tangerine*'s representation of the sex industry is its emphasis on Sin-Dee and Alexandra's agency. The film avoids victimization narratives that evoke pity rather than sympathy. The fallen woman trope, as seen in films like *Waterloo Bridge* (LeRoy 1940) and more recently *Moulin Rouge* (Luhrmann 2001), positions sex workers as tragic victims before punishing them—usually through their death. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, Rayon's employment as a sex worker plays a key role in her death. By comparison, *Tangerine* acknowledges the potential dangers and struggles of sex work without punishing Sin-Dee and Alexandra for participating in the industry and without compromising their agency. Alexandra's fight with her client demonstrates this point. Baker films Alexandra in a three-quarter profile during the early part of this encounter, while Parsimonious John is visible only in glimpses through the rearview mirror. Her point of view is constantly re-affirmed, and her dismissive attitude and sarcastic asides show that she is comfortable and in control. When he tries to kick her out of the car without paying, she firmly stands her ground and holds her own in the fight that follows. Furthermore, even though they are sex workers, "the audience views Sin-Dee and Alexandra not from a sexual or erotic viewpoint, but rather from a perspective that highlights their resilience and tenacity" (Green 121). The film's depictions of sex work are comedic or awkward rather than erotic. The choice to film Alexandra's encounter with Razmik over a single long take, shot from the back seat and without music, undercuts the scene's sexual nature. Baker elects not to show anything explicit by positioning the camera from behind, and the sounds of the car wash mask those of the two characters. Alexandra's encounters with clients therefore shift focus away from the erotic nature of her work, instead demonstrating her wit, tenacity, or compassion. Her interactions with Razmik, in particular, reveal a friendly familiarity that challenges the negative assumptions about the industry.

According to Dan Irving, it is not enough to only celebrate trans figures who conform to white, heteronormative expectations of womanhood. One must

acknowledge trans[gender] individuals who are excluded as subjects
and continue to exist on the margins of society, trans[gender people]
of color, those who do not pass as men or women, those with illnesses
or disabilities, those who are impoverished, those who are unable or

unwilling to be employed within the legal wage labor economy and thus work in the sex trade, as well as those incarcerated in prisons or mental institutions (50-51).

More often than not, it is these kinds of representations that are absent from the cinematic screen. *Tangerine* challenges this history of underrepresentation by depicting black trans characters who experience poverty, sex work, and incarceration. Sin-Dee and Alexandra's socio-economic struggles, their battles with transphobic institutions, and their violent encounters with clients and strangers address the complex intersections of oppression that shape black trans experiences. However, the film also subverts traditional victimization narratives. By emphasising Sin-Dee and Alexandra's agency, their tenacity, and their sense of humour, the film challenges assumptions about trans characters and narratives. Furthermore, Sin-Dee and Alexandra's subversion of rigid gender and class boundaries undermines the normative frameworks imposed by respectability discourses. The women are neither shamed nor punished for their sexual, gender, or class transgressions. Ultimately, *Tangerine* heralds a new form of representation for trans characters and narratives, one that subverts the traditions of indie and Indiewood cinema by foregrounding queer agency and overturning transnormative discourses.

3. Producing Authenticity through Queer Collaboration

Mya Taylor and Kitana Kiki Rodriguez's contributions to *Tangerine*, in terms of storytelling, dialogue, and performance, were invaluable to the film's representational practices and its marketing strategies. Their casting legitimized the film as a queer product, subverting traditions of cross-gendered casting seen in films like *Boys Don't Cry*, *TransAmerica*, and *Dallas Buyers Club*. Taylor and Rodriguez's involvement in the film, both on and off screen, has thus been a recurring focus of the film's paratexts. As a cis, straight, white male, the director's association with the film's trans women of colour consolidates the film's cultural value, creating an impression of queer comradery and collaboration that is missing from traditional indie and Indiewood productions. Alongside Taylor and Rodriguez's contribution to the film's representation of trans experiences and identity, their work has also been valuable in bolstering Baker's reputation and signaling the progressive nature of the wider film industry. By looking at

Tangerine's industrial context and paratexts, in particular the film's posters, reviews, and interviews with cast and crew, this section will address the film's collaborative nature, and explore Taylor and Rodriguez's impact on the film's marketing strategies. More specifically, I will examine the impact trans casting has on the film's reputation as an authentic treatment of queer experience. Looking at the film's reception, its advertisements, and its failed Oscar campaign, this section will question how this emphasis on queer collaboration plays into shifting Indiewood discourses about trans representation, and how the casting of actual trans performers impacts the cultural capital associated with trans roles.

While New Queer Cinema gained its credibility as a queer form of filmmaking through the identity politics of its filmmakers, *Tangerine*'s legitimacy as a queer product comes from Baker's collaboration with Taylor and Rodriguez. Following the film's premiere, its marketing campaign spotlighted the creative involvement of its two trans leads. Interviews and advertisements for the film present the production as a team effort, highlighting the women's creative contributions early in the production. This narrative is demonstrated in an interview with *Cultural Weekly*, where Baker discusses how he met with Taylor and Kitana "weekly at the local Jack In The Box and just talk[ed] about stories" (Stein). Baker describes how over the course of these meetings he

was hearing all these anecdotes from [Taylor]—stories about the way that girls work the block. So we kept those on reserve in the back. Then one day, [Kitana] said: 'Well – if you want a story about two people coming together, there is this one story, based on this semi-true story about a sex-worker who found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her with a fish'... and that led to us thinking, there's so many layers to that story – it's a journey story, it's a road movie. That can be our A-plot, and then we can take all those anecdotes that we have been hearing over the last month and sprinkle those in for our B-plot (Stein).

While Taylor and Rodriguez were not themselves sex workers, many of their friends were and their experiences shaped the film's narrative and characters (M. Jacobs; Chang). Critics like Matthew Jacobs argue that "as straight, white, cisgender men, [Baker] and frequent writing partner Chris Bergoch knew they needed a collaborator

familiar with the area's culture." This promotion of the film as a collaborative effort legitimizes its reputation as an authentically queer film, an approach that differs substantially from previous Indiewood productions. As discussed in chapters one and two, *Brokeback Mountain*, *A Single Man*, and *Dallas Buyers Club*'s paratexts often diminished queer content as an appeal to mainstream audiences. Ang Lee consistently mitigated *Brokeback Mountain*'s gay content, categorizing his film as a love story rather than a queer film (Leung 24). By comparison, *Tangerine*'s paratexts foreground its queer credentials, suggesting a direct appeal to queer audiences and drawing comparisons to the earlier, more radical work of the New Queer Cinema movement.

While interviews with *Tangerine*'s cast and crew have overwhelmingly focused on the film's trans performers, these elements of the film's production were not always clearly advertised. The gender identity of the protagonists and the film's queer subject matter were concealed by Sundance in their early advertisements for the film. The official synopsis describes a "working girl and her best friend" embarking on a "rip-roaring odyssey [through] various subcultures of Los Angeles" ("Tangerine"). The carefully worded abstract avoids identifying Sin-Dee and Alexandra as trans women, or the film's main subculture as a "trans street culture" (N. Smith). The film's main poster reiterates the power of paratexts as a tool for mitigating queer content, as it shows the backlit silhouettes of Sin-Dee and Alexandra without revealing them to be trans women *or* people of colour. This decision to side-line the performer's gender and racial identities reflects a long Indiewood tradition, whereby queer content is diminished to promote a film "to a mass public beyond queer niche audiences" (Richards 20). Sundance's initial treatment of *Tangerine* reflects the continuing anxiety of distributors when dealing with queer content. This suggests that *Tangerine*'s later marketing strategies were responding to the film's reception post-Sundance and, more specifically, the commendations the film received for its queer content and casting. Finally, this comparison between the film's early and later advertising strategies demonstrates how unconventional *Tangerine*'s later marketing campaigns were for appealing directly to queer audiences.

This marketing approach proved valuable for *Tangerine*, as the film was able to capitalize on cultural discussions about trans representation. The film's initial reception at Sundance was overwhelmingly positive, and critics specifically praised Taylor and Rodriguez's performances (Canfield; Chang; Rooney). These reviews acknowledged

the impact of the film's casting on its representation of queer experiences, arguing that the women brought a "punchy authenticity" to their roles (Kermode). This recognition by critics for the film's casting reflects changing discourses about trans roles in the wake of *Dallas Buyers Club*, and Baker himself has acknowledged Rayon's unwelcome reception among the trans community (Watercutter). *Tangerine*'s casting was, in the wake of growing discontent towards cross-gendered casting, widely regarded as a progressive statement and a reflection of Baker and the wider film industry's developing awareness of trans discourses. In comparing the *Dallas Buyers Club*'s reception with that of *The Danish Girl* and *3 Generations*, both slated for release in 2015, it's evident that trans casting has become a more mainstream issue. *Tangerine*'s marketing strategy, in particular the focus on Taylor and Rodriguez's production contributions, was thus able to capitalize on the cultural value of trans narratives and contemporary discourses about the casting of trans roles.

What's more, Taylor and Rodriguez's involvement in *Tangerine*'s pre-production processes had a significant impact on the film's queer representations and tone. In allowing the women to improvise and contribute much of their own dialogue (M. Jacobs; Matsomoto; Mullen), the film was better able to depict the street trans subculture that the characters were immersed in. The prevalence of queer and black slang (and the characters' disinterest in translating this dialogue) reflects the women's input and Baker's willingness to defer to their experiences. Furthermore, Taylor's insistence that the film be funny for trans women and sex workers significantly affected the film's tone. Before signing onto the film, Taylor asked Baker "to promise to show the harsh reality of what goes on out here... and [to] make it hilarious and entertaining for us and the women who are actually working the corner" (N. Smith). Baker acknowledges that Taylor and Rodriguez's input in this regard influenced the way he wrote and shot the film, and that it helped prevent him from "becoming condescending towards [the film's] characters and the world that [they] were focused on" (Lindsay). This comedic approach is one of the distinctive features of *Tangerine*, a tonal choice that challenges the inherent melancholy of trans representations in films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*. *Tangerine*'s rejection of the fallen woman trope, and its reluctance to present its protagonists as victims, is thus in part a testament to Taylor and Kitana's contributions. Finally, Taylor's request that the film be entertaining "for us" reiterates the film's investment in queer audiences. Ultimately, these discourses

demonstrate the value trans figures provide beyond tokenistic representations. By including Taylor and Rodriguez in the film's production processes, Baker was able to create a narrative that was shaped by trans perspectives and experiences. These paratextual discussions thus reveal how future film productions would benefit from hiring trans staff in creative leadership positions.

While Taylor and Rodriguez's input is invaluable to the film, the paratexts' narrativization of their collaboration with Baker isn't always straight-forward. In discussions about the film's casting, interviews and reviews position Baker as the active agent who discovered the two unemployed "aspiring entertainers" (Stein; M. Jacobs). The implicit relationship between Taylor and Rodriguez's work status and their identity as black trans women reinforces Baker's privileged position of power (a position defined by his status as a straight, cis gender, white man) and implicitly undermines their agency. This narrative of the straight white saviour privileges whiteness,

subordinates people of colour and gay individuals (represented by victims who need the help only their white straight benefactor can provide), [and] yet fails to address overriding oppressive structures (as only one person or group of color, or sexuality, is saved) (Bruce 6).

In this context, Baker becomes the straight, white, and cis-gender saviour to the film's black queer actresses, without acknowledging how the industry dispossesses trans workers. These discourses don't address the industrial marginalization of trans women beyond celebrating Baker's casting decision. Thus, while the film's paratexts highlight the film's collaborative nature, the narrativization of this back story often side-lines the agency of the film's trans performers without interrogating the industry's treatment of trans creatives.

While *Tangerine*'s premiere at Sundance was a resounding success, this triumph did not extend to the industry's mainstream awards. In spite of the production team's historic Oscar campaign for Mya Taylor—the first such campaign for a trans performer (Kimble)—the film's trans characters were not nominated for any major Hollywood prizes.⁴⁸ The industry's snub⁴⁹ disrupted a long history of Oscar nominated trans

⁴⁸ The film's most significant award was Mya Taylor's win for Best Supporting Female at the Independent Spirit Awards.

⁴⁹ While it could be argued that Taylor limited status within the industry influenced this decision, Jaye Davdison was nominated in 1993 for his first acting role as Dil in *The Crying Game*.

performances, beginning in 1975 with *Dog Day Afternoon* and continuing in 2016 with *The Danish Girl*. This dismissal of Taylor suggests that trans performances' cultural value is impacted by other factors, such as the gender or racial identity of the performer. Eddie Redmayne's nomination for *The Danish Girl*, in a role that was widely criticized by popular press writers and the trans community (Grant; Nicholson; Romney), implies a disinterest in trans performances that do not employ cross-gendered casting. Furthermore, *Tangerine*'s depiction of street trans culture and Taylor's identity as a woman of colour could have influenced the industry's decision. With the exception of Jaye Davidson, all of the previous Oscar nominated performers in trans roles have been white. As argued previously, Redmayne's middle-class, demure, hyper-feminine performance (and the characters' asexuality post-transition) mitigates Lili's transness through other normative categories. In contrast, Sin-Dee and Alexandra's work, costuming, and language undermine respectability discourses. This suggests that class, gender, and racial politics still limit the industry's celebration of trans characters and narratives. Taylor's failure to receive a nomination, considering the many glowing reviews her performance received and the Academy's tradition of nominating trans characters, ultimately suggests that the relationship between these roles and cultural capital is still informed by the transformative spectacle produced in cross-gendered performances, and in particular, performances done by well-known, heterosexual cis-gender actors.

Tangerine's ability to capitalize on the topicality of trans themes and characters likely played a significant role in the film's financial success. This increased level of exposure, for both the film and its trans performers, is valuable: it productively challenges traditional cinematic characterizations of trans identity and stands as a testament to the film's trans performers. However, *Tangerine*'s reception and its marketing campaign also demonstrate the limitations of the trans character's cultural value. The Academy's dismissal of Taylor (and recognition of Redmayne) suggests that it is only cross-gendered trans performances that have value for the industry. This also shows how trans roles can function as progressive markers for the benefit of indie and Indiewood cinema while withholding cultural and financial profits from the trans community. While Taylor and Rodriguez were given credit for their contributions to the film, the influence generated by *Tangerine*'s success largely lies with the film's director and producers. While Baker's next film, *The Florida Project* (2017), drew further

critical and financial successes for the filmmaker (including an Oscar nomination for Willem Dafoe as Bobby Hicks), Taylor and Rodriguez have yet to achieve mainstream recognition. Furthermore, films like *Anything* (McNeil 2018) have continued to cast cis performers in trans roles. Overall, while *Tangerine* offers new avenues for trans representation and is considered progressive in its inclusion of trans actors, the film is still limited by industrial tendencies that continue to side-line trans performers in favour of cis-gendered casting.

Conclusion

As a comparison to *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Tangerine* represents an alternative treatment of trans characterization, one shaped by the lived experiences of the film's trans performers and the filmmaker's engagement with the queer community. The film's deployment of melodrama allows the film to redefine cinematic conceptions of trans identity by developing a more nuanced sense of gender dysphoria and its relationship to the trans body. *Dallas Buyers Club*'s bleak depiction of dysphoria positions trans women as inherently tragic victims, capable of evoking sympathy but little more. This sentimental approach to representation, discussed in chapter one in relation to Andrew Beckett's characterisation in *Philadelphia*, positions homo- and transphobia as a personal rather than socio-cultural issue. However, Sin-Dee and Alexandra's sorrow in *Tangerine* stems not from their sense of self, but from their inability to access legitimatised employment, their relationships with friends and partners, and their socio-economic situation. By shifting the film's melancholic focus away from the trans body and onto the lived experiences of its trans characters, *Tangerine* implicitly challenges the cultural forces that shape transphobia. It implicitly identifies the source of pathos in trans experiences as individual and cultural acts of violence. More significantly, the film identifies the sense of humour and solidarity that the community shares. Unlike Rayon, Sin-Dee and Alexandra are defined by their agency, their wit, and their sense of community.

By avoiding traditional respectability politics in its gritty depiction of trans street subculture, *Tangerine* provides a new way of representing trans characters. However, the industrial context that has historically informed cinematic iterations of trans characters still has an impact on the film's reception, its marketing tactics, and its

treatment of Taylor and Rodriguez. While the film demonstrates the cultural and creative value of trans casting, the practice is yet to catch on. Taylor's failed Oscar nomination implies that the cultural capital associated with trans roles does not extend to actual trans performers. However, the film's success does suggest that there is a market for queer films populated with queer actors. *Tangerine*'s profitability, in spite of the unknown status of its actresses and its niche focus, demonstrates the advantages of queer collaboration. Taylor and Rodriguez's contributions to the film and *Tangerine*'s reception among film critics and queer groups suggest that future productions would benefit from placing trans people in creative leadership roles. Ultimately, while *Tangerine* benefits in many ways from the same cultural value Indiewood places on trans roles as *Dallas Buyers Club*, it still offers a new tradition of representation that productively deals with trans discourses.

Conclusion

Despite *Tangerine*'s critical and financial successes and the increasing awareness of trans politics and discourses, indie and Indiewood productions have continued to cast cis performers in trans roles. On July 2, *The Hollywood Reporter* announced Scarlett Johansson's casting in a new project about real-life transgender crime boss Dante 'Tex' Gill (Vlessing). When *Bustle* reached out to Johansson about the casting issue, her representatives responded, "Tell them that they can be directed to Jeffrey Tambor, Jared Leto, and Felicity Huffman's reps for comment" (Diller). While this response demonstrates a continued ignorance of trans discourses, it also illustrates how performances like Leto's legitimize cross-gender casting, and how industry members perceive the cultural value of trans roles. Johansson's casting—along with Matt Bomer's performance in the 2017 film *Anything*—seem to illustrate *Tangerine*'s limited impact on the industry. In spite of the critical acclaim Taylor and Rodriguez's casting received, trans folk are still being overlooked for roles in upcoming independent productions. Some filmmakers countered these critiques by emphasising the role of trans women elsewhere, either as consultants or as members of the production team. After the backlash Bomer's casting caused, *Anything*'s associate producer Kylene K. Steele came to the film's defence as a trans woman. She argued that the film was "about being human...not about being trans" (Wong), echoing the sentiments of earlier gay Indiewood films like *Brokeback Mountain* that downplayed their own queerness in favour of a more universal audience appeal.

The hiring of a trans producer, however, does not counteract the issues associated with cross-gendered casting. As Leto's performance as Rayon demonstrates, casting a cis-gender male performer in the role of a trans woman spectacularizes the trans body, reducing these roles to cross-dressing spectacles that reinforce transphobic associations between trans identity, transvestism, and drag performances. Scarlett Johansson's involvement in *Rub & Tug* seemed to suggest that trans characters' cultural value was still tied to cross-gendered casting, and reiterated how these films rely on high-profile performers. In the days following the announcement Johansson experienced intense backlash from online commentators (Sharf). While this negative response was not surprising (Leto, Redmayne, and Bomer all received varying degrees of criticisms for their casting), Johansson's response to the controversy was. Within two weeks of *The Hollywood Reporter*'s first article Johansson announced her withdrawal

from the project, acknowledging the casting as “insensitive” (Galuppo). While GLAAD’s description of the decision as a “game changer” is somewhat optimistic, Johansson’s departure does suggest that the cultural value of these performances is shifting (Nordine). Her withdrawal demonstrates how influential these discussions about trans representation have become, and how they might be productively used as a deterrent for high-profile celebrities taking on similar roles in the future. Moreover, these recent events justify the work done in this thesis, as they illustrate the importance of contextualising casting debates, and more significantly, they spotlight how essential the accumulation of cultural capital is for the industry.

This thesis has combined textual, generic, industrial, and paratextual analysis of recent American independent films to locate and interrogate cinematic representations of trans characters. By examining these films from both a textual and industrial angle, this work outlines how trans figures have accrued cultural capital for the industry, and how these value systems inform contemporary representational strategies. The accumulation of cultural capital plays an essential role within the film industry, and examining how value is ascribed to particular characters, identities, or communities is important when deconstructing more recent iterations of the trans figure. Given the issues associated with cinema’s treatment of trans characters, many of which have been outlined in this thesis, it’s important that these representations are interrogated and challenged, and that new forms of representation are developed. While this process demands some element of advocacy, it’s also important that these film’s contexts are taken into consideration, as they reveal broader structural problems at an industrial and cultural level.

As this project demonstrates, trans characters have held a unique position within the American film industry for many decades. Since the 1970s, trans characters functioned as a radical symbol of progressiveness, not just for the actors performing the roles, but for the films that showcase them. Since the late 1980s, however, and with the rise of American independent filmmaking and New Queer cinema, these roles became more significant. In a media landscape where social issues are a marker of prestige, and where queer characters function as a form of cultural capital for mainstream audiences, these characters have become increasingly valuable. Films like *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, and *TransAmerica* illustrate the ongoing relationship between American independent cinema and trans roles. Furthermore, the consistent inclusion of these films

at award shows like the Oscars demonstrates the value of these characters for the industry. While these early independent and indie films tapped into niche markets, the conglomeration of indie subsidiaries into major Hollywood studios has marked a shift in marketing strategies and production styles. This Indiewood era, defined by increased production values, high profile casting, and an appeal to more mainstream audiences, has relied on reductive characterizations and the mitigation of queer topics and identities, in part to cater to a broader demographic. Part of this process has been the marginalization of queer people of colour, the historicization of queer narratives, and an appeal to respectability politics that re-affirm bi-gender structures and homonormative discourses. Moreover, this cinema's reliance on sentimental pedagogy to humanize queer characters has limited these characterizations to melancholic performances that fail to challenge homo- and transphobic practices imbedded within the culture. Using the work of Stuart Richards and Robert Corber, this project argues that American independent cinema uses trans figures to accrue cultural capital, and, moreover, that its mitigation of queer politics and its casting of cis-gender actors undermines the industry's ability to employ productive representational strategies.

While the industry has re-affirmed the cultural value of trans characters and depictions of trans characters have become more common, the value of these roles and the cultural and financial profits that they generate are often limited to industry elites and high profile, cis-gender performers. As demonstrated by Rayon's character in *Dallas Buyers Club*, these characters are shaped by a long history of flawed representation that draws on tokenistic gestures and stereotypical figures like the 'pathetic transsexual.' Furthermore, the practice of casting cis-gender actors shapes perceptions of these characters. Transness in films like *Dallas Buyers Club* is reduced to a spectacle of transformation, and consequently, these works end up celebrating cis-gender bravery rather than challenging heteronormative practises and gender essentialism. More significantly, the exclusion of trans folk from these roles precludes trans people from industry discussions about representation, which limits opportunities for trans performers and creates a space where the actual experiences of trans folk are rarely represented. Trans performances, in these cases, are about fetishizing and pathologizing the trans body, creating sympathetic portrayals by reducing trans experiences to genital dysphoria, to tragedy, and to death. Utilizing Julia Serano, Mary Ann Doane, and Cael Keegan alongside melodramatic discourses, this project argues

that *Dallas Buyers Club* capitalizes on the increasing popularity of trans characters, and that its treatment of Rayon as a marker of Ron's progressiveness (and by extension, that of the film), its heteronormative approach to queer history, and its casting of Leto reproduce a reductive characterization of trans identity that disavows trans discourses.

Finally, *Tangerine* stands out as film that offers a new form of representation for the industry. Its successes, on both a critical and financial level, demonstrate the value of trans perspectives. By framing this work around the lived experiences of trans women of colour, this film develops a complex representational strategy that challenges the reductive representations of films past. It repurposes the trans body as a source of power, deconstructs notions of womanhood, and re-emphasises the agency of its trans characters. Utilizing theorists like Judith (Jack) Halberstam and Cael Keegan, and returning again to melodramatic discourses, this work demonstrates how melodrama can be used productively to depict trans experiences without pathologizing the trans body. The film's rejection of respectability politics and challenges to heteronormative frameworks draw on the impulses of New Queer Cinema and the early independent movement. This return to radical politics and guerrilla filmmaking—albeit in the hands of a cis-gender, straight, white male director—suggest that there is a future for more radical representations of trans experience in American independent cinema. The film's success, furthermore, should demonstrate to the industry that the cultural value of trans roles need not lie in the cross-gendered nature of those performances. While *Tangerine* did not win any mainstream industry awards, its value as an authentic depiction of black trans lives shows how the cultural value of trans characters can be refigured in the future. Ultimately, *Tangerine* demonstrates an alternative route for trans representation that is grounded in queer politics and discourses, and stands as a testament to the value trans workers can provide the film industry.

By looking at the industrial context of trans representation, and in particular, its intersection with the American independent film industry and notions of cultural capital, this project has argued that trans characters have traditionally been valued by the industry only as cross-gender performances, as a spectacle of gender bending that implicitly undermines the gender identity of those characters. Trans roles offer the industry a superficial marker of social progressiveness, one that bears no relation to queer discourses, politics, or the community. Given that media representations of trans characters “inform the general public about transgender communities and have a

significant impact on transgender young peoples' identity development and lived experiences," this reduction of transness to performative gestures and tokenistic representation is harmful (McInroy and Shelley 606). As a response to this cinematic history, this project argues for a new approach to representation, one shaped by the community represented. While *Tangerine* is somewhat limited in scope and its reproduction of certain stereotypes (in particular, the overrepresentation of trans women as sex workers), it demonstrates the importance of hiring and supporting trans members of the industry, and allowing them to shape representation, discourse, and discussions about trans identity. Furthermore, I argue that it is not enough to *cast* trans performers, but that trans workers must be included in all areas of the industry, and in particular, must be included creative leadership roles.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this project attempts an in-depth exploration of these issues, the work is limited by its scope. As my work focuses on only two films within a specific industrial context, future work could explore trans representation on a broader scale. In particular, the films of Pedro Almodovar, and more recent foreign films like *A Fantastic Woman* and *Girl*, demonstrate alternative approaches to trans representation. These works' relationship with foreign film industries present an interesting comparison to the American industrial model. Trans characters have also seen a resurgence on television, with shows like *Transparent* creating a platform for trans performers like Trace Lysette and Alexandra Billings. The show's casting (and firing) of Jeffrey Tambor, its large trans cast, and its many industrial accolades set up an interesting comparison to some of the work done in this project. *Sense8* and *Pose* provide a more radical engagement with trans representation, with trans women as creators, writers, directors, and performers. *Sense8*'s treatment of genre—and *Pose*'s representation of black and latinx trans characters in New York's 1980s ball scene—reveal television's potential to explore trans identity and politics. Finally, future work in this area could look more specifically at the reception and impact of trans representation within the community. According to Ki Namaste, queer theory often neglects individual transgender people and their everyday lives by reducing them to rhetorical figures (*Invisible Lives* 14). She demands that work dealing with trans topics acknowledge the social context in which transgender practices are produced (*Invisible Lives* 16). While this project attempts to link its

theoretical work to the social, cultural, and economic conditions that shape trans experiences in America, more work could be done to contextualise the lived realities of the community.

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Albert Nobbs. Directed by Rodrigo Garcí, Lionsgate, 2011.

Anything. Directed by Timothy McNeil, Great Point Media, 2018.

Being John Malkovich. Directed by Spike Jonze, USA Films, 1999.

Blue is the Warmest Color. Directed by Abdellatif Kechiche, Wild Bunch, 2013.

Bonnie and Clyde. Directed by Arthur Penn, Warner Bros., 1967.

Bound. Directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, Gramercy Pictures, 1996.

Boys Don't Cry. Directed by Kimberly Pierce, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.

Breakfast on Pluto. Directed by Neil Jordan, Sony Pictures Classics, 2005.

Brokeback Mountain. Directed by Ang Lee, Focus Features, 2005.

But I'm a Cheerleader. Directed by Jamie Babbit, Lionsgate, 2000.

Capote. Directed by Bennet Miller, United Artists, 2005.

Caravaggio. Directed by Derek Jarman, Cinevista, 1986.

Clerks. Directed by Kevin Smith, Miramax Films, 1994.

Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt. Directed by Rop Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, New Yorker Films, 1989.

The Crying Game. Directed by Neil Jordan, Miramax, 1992.

Dallas Buyers Club. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, Focus Features, 2013.

The Danish Girl. Directed by Tom Hooper, Universal Pictures, 2015.

Dog Day Afternoon. Directed Sidney Lumet, Warner Bros., 1975

Dressed to Kill. Directed by Brian De Palma, Filmways Pictures, 1980.

Edward II. Directed by Derek Jarman, Working Title Films, 1992.

The English Patient. Directed by Anthony Minghella, Miramax Films, 1996.

A Fantastic Woman. Directed by Sebastián Lelio, Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

Flawless. Directed by Joel Schumacher, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1999.

The Florida Project. Directed by Sean Baker, A24, 2017.

Gilda. Directed by Charles Vidor, Columbia Pictures, 1946.

Girl. Directed by Lukas Dhont, Netflix, 2018.

Gun Hill Road. Directed by Rashaad Ernesto Green, Motion Film Group, 2011.

The Hours. Directed by Stephen Daldry, Miramax Films, 2002.

How to Survive a Plague. Directed by David France, IFC, 2012.

I'm Not There. Directed by Todd Haynes, The Weinstein Company, 2007.

The Imitation Game. Directed by Morten Tyldum, The Weinstein Company, 2014.

Imitation of Life. Directed by Douglas Sirk, Universal Pictures, 1959.

Kids. Directed by Larry Clark, Shining Excalibur Films, 1995.

The Kids Are Alright. Directed by Lisa Cholodenko, Focus Features, 2010.

Kiss of the Spiderwoman. Directed by Héctor Babenco, FilmDallas Pictures, 1985.

Lair of the White Worm. Directed by Ken Russell, Vestron Picture, 1988.

The Little Mermaid. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Buena Vista Pictures, 1989.

The Living End. Directed by Gregg Araki, Cineplex Odeon Films, 1992.

The Maltese Falcon. Directed by John Huston. Warner Bros., 1941.

Maurice. Directed by James Ivory, Cinecom Pictures, 1987.

Milk. Directed by Gus Van Sant, Focus Features, 2008.

Moonlight. Directed by Barry Jenkins, A24, 2016.

Moulin Rouge! Directed By Baz Luhrmann, 20th Century Fox, 2001.

My Own Private Idaho. Directed by Gus Van Sant, Fine Line Features, 1991.

No Country for Old Men. Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, Miramax Films, 2007.

Normal. Directed by Jane Anderson, HBO Films, 2003.

Paris is Burning. Directed by Jennie Livingston, Miramax Films, 1991.

Parting Glances. Directed by Bill Sherwood, Cinecom Pictures, 1986.

Philadelphia. Directed by Jonathan Demme, TriStar Pictures, 1993.

Poison. Directed by Todd Haynes, Zeitgeist Films, 1991.

Pose. Created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Fulchuk, and Steven Canals, FX, 2018-present.

Queer as Folk. Created by Russell T. Davies, Tony Jonas Productions, 2000-2005.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. Created by David Collins, Bravo, 2003-2007.

Reservoir Dogs. Directed by Quentin Tarantino, Miramax Films, 1992.

The Royal Tenenbaums. Directed by Wes Anderson, Buena Vista Pictures, 2001.

Schindler's List. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1993.

Sense8. Created by Lana Wachowski, Lili Wachowski, and J. Michael Straczynski, Netflix, 2015-2108.

sex, lies and videotape. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Miramax Films, 1989.

The Silence of the Lambs. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures, 1991.

A Single Man. Directed by Tom Ford, The Weinstein Company, 2009.

Sleepaway Camp. Directed by Robert Hiltzik, United Film Distribution Company, 1983.

Some Like It Hot. Directed by Billy Wilder, United Artists, 1959.

Southern Comfort. Directed by Kate Davis, HBO Documentary, 2001.

Stella Dallas. Directed by King Vidor, United Artists, 1937.

Stonewall. Directed by Roland Emmerich, Roadside Attractions, 2015.

Swoon. Directed by Tom Kalin, Fine Line Features, 1992.

Tangerine. Directed by Sean Baker, Magnolia Pictures, 2015.

The Times of Harvey Milk. Directed by Rob Epstein, New Yorker Films, 1984.

Tongues Untied. Directed by Marlon Riggs, Frameline and California Newsreel, 1989.

Tootsie. Directed by Sydney Pollack, Columbia Pictures, 1982.

Traffic. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, USA Films, 2000.

TransAmerica. Directed by Duncan Tucker, The Weinstein Company, 2005.

Transparent. Created by Jill Soloway, Sony Pictures Television, 2014-present.

Waterloo Bridge. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, Loew's Inc., 1940.

The Watermelon Woman. Directed by Cheryl Dunye, First Run Features, 1997.

The World According to Garp. Directed by George Roy Hill, Warner Bros., 1982

3 Generations. Directed by Gaby Dellal, The Weinstein Company, 2017.