

Discuss the representation of gender in the film *Boy's Don't Cry* and the extent to which it reinforces a patriarchal ideology.

The discussion of gender in film owes its origins to early feminist film theorists who saw the medium as male-dominated and guilty of gender stereotyping. In my examination of the film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, US, 1999), I will apply popular gender theory to determine the extent to which the portrayal of gender in the film reinforces patriarchal norms.

Early feminist film theory was greatly influenced by psychoanalytical theories, in particular those of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Problems with psychoanalytic theory, however, namely its phallic-centric basis, led to other avenues of discussion, one of which was the cultural studies approach. In analysing *Boys Don't Cry*, I will discuss both approaches.

Psychoanalytic theory tends to see man as active while woman is passive. The male controls the 'look' (the male gaze), while the woman is the object of that look. In *Boys Don't Cry*, John and Brandon drive the narrative forward, dictating the events of the story, while the female characters of Candace and Lana are resigned to the background for most of the film, and defined by their appearance: Candace initially as the object of male gaze in the bar scene then later as a mother. Lana as the object of the voyeuristic gaze of both John and Brandon.

In contrast, the men in *Boys Don't Cry* are too active to become the focus of a voyeuristic gaze. In her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey (1989) says that this is necessary because of the male fear of acknowledging homoerotic desires and that man represented as spectacle is only acceptable when combined with narrative as this emphasises the man's active role in the film's story.

Uniquely, the character of Brandon, however, seems to contradict this view. Several times in *Boys Don't Cry* Brandon's (sexual) appearance is the primary focus of the narrative with little or no element of 'action.' If Brandon were a male this would raise questions of homoeroticism, however the understanding that Brandon is female plays down this suggestion. The attention to detail with which Brandon creates her male persona echoes Mulvey's comments on the construction of image:

The female body has become industrialised; a woman must buy the means to paint on (make up) and sculpt (underwear/clothes) a look of femininity, a look which is the guarantee of visibility in sexist society (Mulvey, 1989 : 54).

It appears that despite Brandon's move towards a more masculine appearance, because she is a woman, the same effort taken to sculpt an image applies.

Mulvey also discusses Freud's theories on the castration complex and its representation in film. A woman's lack of a penis, Mulvey argues, implies a threat of difference and raises male anxieties of castration. The male response to this threat has two possibilities: Either that the fear of castration is denied and replaced by a fetish object or the woman herself is fetishized (scopophilic fetishism); or the male attempts to clarify the object of the anxiety (the woman) and balances this investigation by punishing or forgiving the guilty object (voyeurism and sadism). (Mulvey, 1999 : 21)

Worryingly, it is this second reaction which arises in *Boys Don't Cry*. The three parts of this reaction can be recognised in John's search for the truth surrounding Brandon: The pleasure gained in the search for truth, the assertion of control (physically) starting with the bathroom scene, and the sadistic punishment of rape as a reaction to fears of difference.

While I believe that there is significant evidence in the media to confirm that women are reduced to fragmented aspects of their anatomy (for the pleasure to be gained from looking), and in some way would agree that this reaction has its origins in seeing women as different, I believe decades of social conditioning have reinforced the assumption that it is acceptable to reduce women to the status of objects. Furthermore, I do not agree with the suggestion that sadism is an inherently masculine trait (or that masochism is

an inherently feminine trait!) and again this could be the result of social conditioning: the encouragement of men to seek violence as confirmation of masculinity.

One of the problems feminists have with the psychoanalytic approach is its emphasis on the phallus as a symbol of power (Nelmes, 2007). In *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon gains recognition and power under the guise of a man, however this power is immediately lost once the lack of a phallus has been revealed. Although she still remains a major character in the film, she no longer has direct control of the narrative and this is represented by her physical lack of control in the plot.

Throughout the film the other female characters also exhibit this lack of control. This is most obvious with Lana's mother who seeks recognition through exhibitionism and can never directly challenge John's authority. Finally, the gun-phallus symbolism (Nelmes, 2007) at the end of the film, where John holds a gun to Brandon's head, is a further demonstration of the dominant male power.

In *Introduction to Film Studies*, Nelmes says that the portrayal of gender in film can 'reflect concerns and anxieties in our society about who we are.' (Nelmes, 2007: 221) If it is true that film is representative of the current dominant ideology, then the reaction of the family to Brandon's identity highlights the homophobic attitudes still prevalent in the US at the time.

While a psychoanalytical approach defines men and women as binary opposites (man is the norm and women the other), a cultural studies approach suggests that gender is fluid and therefore more complex than this. Nelmes (2007) argues that both masculinity and femininity are complex constructions. However, because man is seen as the norm, his masculinity is harder to recognise. The approach taken in the film is stereotypical because it attributes traits of voyeurism and sadism to the male characters, while defining the female characters through passivity and spectacle.

The sadism exhibited by the male characters is a form of initiation, a rite of passage to proving one's right to be a male. The bumper-skiing scene is an obvious initiation scenario designed to test Brandon's bravery (because a man should show no fear). However, this is also tested again when Brandon is offered a knife by Tom for self-harm. Brandon's refusal of the challenge is a symbol of her rejection of masochism and her ultimate rejection by her male peers.

Nelmes (2007) suggests that the male body has to be damaged in some way as evidence of its masculinity. This is evident in the previous action scenes discussed but also in the bindings Brandon is required to apply to her breasts to complete her male appearance. In choosing to live life as a male, Brandon must constantly suffer pain to maintain that choice.

In conclusion, applying gender theory to the film *Boys Don't Cry* has highlighted some worrying similarities between patriarchal stereotypes of male and female representation and power, and their representation in the film. While there is considerable complexity in the plot itself, the approach to gender is fairly limiting in terms of male and female relationships and ultimately, despite playing with sexual identity roles, patriarchal values are reasserted by the end of the film.

Filmography

Boys Don't Cry (1999). Directed by Kimberly Peirce [Film]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

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