

The *Boys Don't Cry* debate:

Girls still cry

PATRICIA WHITE

What is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read . . . For in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince, and not a man

Djuna Barnes¹

¹ Djuna Barnes *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1937) pp. 136–7

An insistent link between the invert or transgendered figure and the romance genre is forged in *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberley Peirce, 1999), the independent narrative film based on the events leading to twenty-one-year-old Brandon Teena's rape and subsequent murder on New Year's Eve, 1993. Besides an eerie lighting and sound scheme that seem to envelop the film's desolate Falls City, Nebraska setting in an electrical haze – a motif highlighted now and again with speeded-up shots of traffic and power lines – Peirce's film does not answer to Djuna Barnes's lesbian modernist legacy on the level of baroque style. On the level of narrative, the film is also functional. In true-crime or biopic fashion, *Boys* sweeps inevitably – even, cruelly, satisfyingly – to its foregone conclusion, preserving tragic unity and eliciting pathos. But the film's transgendered hero (played by Hilary Swank) seems to be Barnes's 'prince' incarnate, and the anguished female desire that *Boys* encompasses within an authorial/spectatorial 'we' would not be out of place in Barnes's fiction.

If I say female desire, it is not because I am disavowing

Brandon's transgendered identity. It is because for me the centring subjectivity of the film belongs to Brandon's lover, Lana Tisdell (Chloë Sevigny) Brandon is present in most of the film's scenes (with important exceptions); Lana is not, and there are many events that she does not observe. But whether Brandon is fucking up, desiring or desirable, he is seen from a perspective that could be Lana's. We do not experience his passing as a man as a deception, and I do not think this is only because we witness his gleeful self-fashioning in the film's first scene (complete with haircut and crotch stuffing). For when Lana 'finds out' much later, she does not feel betrayed. The film enunciates a 'we' who share 'this love for the invert', extending from teenage girl to audience through numerous narrational cues. For example, the optical point of view that opens the film – Brandon's gaze caught in his rear view mirror as he speeds away from a cop – is answered in the film's last shot by Lana's gaze ahead as she finally drives away from Falls City. The narrative throughline provided by Lana and Brandon's romance has angered some commentators looking for a more documentary fidelity to the circumstances and context of Brandon's life and death. But the strategy makes Lana's desire and way of seeing count. Brandon's wish for an 'elsewhere' becomes hers and ours. In an early scene at a roller rink in Lincoln, Brandon's date tells him, 'You don't look like you are from around here'. He teases out her idea of where she thinks he does come from: 'Someplace beautiful'. Brandon's world is strewn with clichés and disavowals, but like the bubble-gum-machine-quality ring he gives to Lana, they signify something beautiful.

Feminist psychoanalytic readings of the process of film spectatorship have analyzed the gendered dimensions of the fetishism and disavowal its pleasures require. Not only is the viewer's suspension of disbelief necessary to enjoy the film illusion, but 'his' spectatorial desire is also affirmed specifically by disavowing female lack.² Fetishism as a mastery of castration anxiety is an inadequate account of *female* visual pleasure, many feminist theorists have pointed out. *Boys* offers a chance to revisit issues of spectatorship and fetishism in relation to a quite literal scenario of genital (in)difference. Brandon may experience lack in his own body (in the remarkable scene of his stripping and exposure, the film portrays a second, intact Brandon looking on from the periphery), but for him girls are complete – and completely captivating. Brandon's (clean-shaven, small-boned, teen-magazine heartthrob) gender fiction sustains Lana's fantasy. When Brandon's persecutors force him to prove his sex to Lana, she tells him to keep his pants on: 'Think about it. I know you're a guy,' she insists.³ *Boys* marks a convergence of queer, feminist and what I would like to call (for reasons that will become clear) girl-viewer optics.

Fetishism is operative in the very form of the question 'what is

2 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1982); Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen* vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

3 Interviewed in Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir's 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*. Lana Tisdell says that she told Brandon not to show her: 'I'll tell them what they want to hear, what we believe. The language in *Boys* merely substitutes what we know is true for what we believe.'

this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?', which presumes and believes in 'love' without deciding whether the 'boy or girl?' is at stake. I'd like to analyze how fetishism shapes the formal construction of a scene that both consolidates the romance – it is the couple's first sex scene – and transfers vision, knowledge, desire and narration to Lana. Brandon has returned to Falls City to woo Lana (fleeing a court date in Lincoln that would officially register his identity as female and felon, and might cause his incarceration), and she joins him on the riverbank outside the plant where she works. As Brandon adjusts Lana's naked torso beneath him, she murmurs, 'I feel like I'm in a trance'. The line addresses on one level the prurient question of how the sexual partner of a transgendered or passing woman can avoid noticing the absence of the penis. But it works on a fantasmatic level as well. We watch a remarkable, lingering overhead closeup of Lana's face as she receives oral stimulation (in qualifying the film for an R rating, the censors objected to the shot's duration), her expression and the musical accompaniment rise in intensity and climax with a cut to a low-angle point-of-view shot of moving lights that resolve into streetlights seen from a car. A match cut to Lana's open mouth in the next shot shows her partying in a car with Brandon and her girlfriends Candace (Alicia Goranson) and Kate (Alison Folland) at her side. The slow-motion shot relays her sexual euphoria with Brandon into an image of pleasure felt in her female friends' company.

The next scene in Lana's bright yellow, teenager's bedroom strengthens this connection, as she narrates the sexual encounter to the girls. In response to their prodding, Lana sinks back between them where they lie on the bed passing a bong and covers her eyes. 'I can't talk about it, it is too intense!' The girls prompt her to continue and the camera cuts from a tight overhead shot of all three girls on the bed to an overhead closeup of just Lana that is strikingly reminiscent of the orgasm shot we've seen just a few moments before. Within what is now a subjective flashback to the sex scene, Brandon penetrates and pleasures her, and a shot from Lana's optical point of view reveals the hint of a cleavage in Brandon's chest. Lana doesn't verbalize this moment when the film cuts back to the closeup of her face on the pillow, but next a series of shots in flashback show her touching Brandon's jeans at the crotch, then tracing his jawline, and looking into his eyes. 'Well, did you do it?' her friends demand, the question seeming inadequately to grasp the pleasure that we have been able to see on her face, both in the protracted shot during the oral sex scene and in the shots in which she now recalls it. 'What do you think?', she answers with satisfaction.

Why is this a satisfactory answer? Lana's flashback is offered to us visually, so we know 'more' than her friends. If we credit her with now 'knowing' about Brandon's gender performance, we might understand why she leaves the question's presumptive 'yes' answer

unspoken (it all depends what is meant by ‘it’) But because the flashback transpires during screen time in which she is clearly narrating to her friends, I believe that its mise-en-scene is available to her diegetic interlocutors as well. In other words, both her pleasure (which we see in the act and in its later recollection in the company of the other girls at home in her bed) and her undecided question – ‘what do you think?’ (or even ‘boy or girl?’) – are conveyed to us *as if* we were among the girls.⁴ We are left to decide whether we think she did it and what we think ‘it’ is, whether and what we think she knows, and whether we think the knowing worth thinking about. Though the narration seems to disavow a genital ‘fact’ at this juncture, this is not presented as a costly disavowal, as tragic misrecognition, instead Lana’s desire is renewed as she becomes the film’s narrator. Thus, on a formal level, the film authorizes the investment of the girl auditors who are our stand-ins (stand-ins who at this moment are lying down – in bed talking about ‘boys’, a classic topos of girls’ culture). Brandon’s portrayal as ‘one of the girls’ partying in the car presents him not as ‘castrated’ but as a crucial link in a discursive circuit of pleasure and belief.

It is when we recall the implied presence of the ‘boys’, John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III), whom we have so frequently seen partying with the girls, that castration could be said to re-enter the fetishistic equation. Brandon’s murderers are not long offscreen. The film’s firm location in the ‘feminized’ realm of melodrama, romance and tears actually allows male inadequacy, impotence, rage and panic to be presented vividly and almost sympathetically.⁵ ‘Boys don’t cry’ might be seen as a shaming performative mantra for Brandon – throughout his persecution he strives to ‘take it like a man’ (the film’s original title). But his murderers also try to ‘defend’ themselves and define their masculinity through negative attributes (boys don’t, for example, want to see how they depend on, resemble and fail to communicate with girls) and finally explode into violence. The scary, volatile intimacy with John and Tom that characterizes Lana’s and then Brandon’s lives also includes the viewer, a chilling reminder that it is also a ‘we’ who fear and despise the invert.

The box-office and critical success of *Boys* surprised almost everyone involved. But remember *girls cry*, at least according to market wisdom. It seems to me that in the midst of a notable recalibration of popular entertainment to take into account the knowing genre tastes of adolescent and teenage girls and young women (from *Titanic* [James Cameron, 1997] to *Scream* [Wes Craven, 1996] and its sequels), *Boys*’ success makes sense. Still, the film’s crossover qualifications have been seen as trivializing the gender crossing that Brandon performed and died for, as well as the film’s others’ stakes in the real. Apparently the emphasis on a central love story left no room even to include a character representing

4 Indeed this undecidability between visual and verbal information, present and past perception and fantasy is what is crucial in the bedroom scene. When Lana removes her hands from her eyes she tells her friends then we took off our clothes and went swimming. Instead we see Lana climb on top of Brandon in a flashback shot whispering ‘Don’t be scared.’ As for the swimming story, Kate responds ‘Yeah, right.’

5 In the film’s melodramatic topography, the ‘public’ sphere is represented only by nightmarish law enforcement agents and nightclubs. Its many outdoors locations are adjunct spaces to a desolate domesticity.

Philip Devine, another African-American, victim of John and Tom's murderous rage that night (or indeed *any* people of colour in Nebraska) Even from within my emphasis on girls' perspectives, the murder of Candace (a composite character based in part on the third murder victim Lisa Lambert) – an even more obvious stand-in for the sympathetic female viewer than Lana – could be seen as curiously unmourned She is gunned down in front of her baby, who then disappears from the last scene, the fate of neither is mentioned in the 'where are they now' titles that precede the end credits, titles that carefully elide the film's fictional world and the events upon which it was based We *are* informed that Lana herself had a baby girl a few years after leaving Falls City and returned home to raise her⁶ Candace's brutal and gratuitous murder and the shrinking of Lana's horizons exist on a continuum of everyday violence against women These are themes that popular women's genres address; *Boys* rightly recognizes that Brandon Teena's story raised them too

Rather than dwelling on the commercial constraints or mimetic responsibilities that dog independent films' attempts to tell queer stories, think of what a cultural sea change in imaginings of gender and sexuality we are experiencing if these attempts now resonate with popular forms and audiences. I am not surprised that girls and women in particular are receptive to radical permutations of romance such as *Boys* Djuna Barnes tells us that it has always been the girl in the boy, the prince in the girl that galvanized our desire; perhaps the 'queerness' of romance need no longer be disavowed *Boys* female performers themselves worked on some of the most progressive popular youth films and television shows (Swank was featured in the film version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kazui, 1992), Goranson grew up on the long-running ABC sitcom *Roseanne*, and Folland starred in Alex Sichel's *All Over Me* (1997), a lesbian independent feature depicting a somewhat more empowered element of female youth culture than that of *Boys*' dead-end teens And Chloe Sevigny 'flipped' to play the butch opposite *Dawson's Creek*'s Michelle Williams in the made-for-HBO lesbian compilation film *If These Walls Could Talk II* (2000), the segment was authored by *All Over Me* writer Sylvia Sichel Do youth audiences recognize the discontinuities as well as the continuum running from the WB Network to *Boys Don't Cry*? Do girl viewers today 'get' feminism, or grasp what I think is a cultural shift in the status of gay men, lesbians and transgendered people? Do they see beyond makeup and fashion, so aggressively marked to them in popular culture, to the refiguring of desire and agency also being provoked there by subcultures, activism and independent media? What do you think?

6 Lana Tisdell's story has been and will be told in other ways. Although she signed a release early in Peirce's project and another when the film was taking more definite shape after being shown the finished film she filed a lawsuit. In the interim she had become involved in a competing production based on Brandon's story and was represented by its Los Angeles lawyer. The suit objected to her being depicted in *Boys Don't Cry* as unfazed by the discovery that Brandon, whom she thought was a man, was a female transvestite and/or transsexual who was later murdered. The film's rendition of her relationship with Brandon as a modern-day gender-bending Romeo and Juliet was inaccurate: the suit claimed. In sum, the said motion picture falsely depicts plaintiff as a lesbian as well as someone who, rather symptomatically, goes on to reiterate, was unbothered by the discovery that Brandon was a female transvestite and/or transsexual who was later murdered. A Los Angeles judge refused to halt the film's opening, reasoning that Lana Tisdell's story was public information and the case was later settled out of court. Conversations with Associate Producer Bradford Simpson quoting from the court papers 3 and 4 January 2001.