

Wibke Straube

Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film.

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Wibke Straube's dissertation offers a transfeminist approach to contemporary Trans Cinema, defined as a field of heterogeneous films that feature one or several "gender-dissident" characters. "Gender-dissident" refers here to "a range of gender non-normative embodiments that are rendered gender non-normative within cis-normative, binary gender system" (p. 21). The thesis examines utopian sensibilities in an impressive range of feature length films, produced in various cultural contexts (Europe, North America, and Asia) and released over a twenty years period between 1992 and 2012.

The glossary of transgender terminology included in the study demonstrates Straube's dedication to critical scholarly practice. As Straube notes, transgender terms are contextual and changing (p. 21). They involve multiple theoretical discussions, and a varied politics of sexuality and gender. Straube explains with careful deliberation the discussions around the terms. They also elucidate their personal and scholarly position as a transfeminist, and point out that "trans" has its own set of norms and involves exclusions just like any other category (p. 27). Accordingly, the

author sees their relation to terms as "an ongoing negotiation" (ibid.). Moreover, Straube mobilizes "trans" or "transing" as a verb and de-essentializing and anti-normative movement (p. 41). This theoretical move is adeptly manoeuvred between intersectional, queer theory and Transgender Studies. Yet, with its multiple tasks and positions – transing methodology/character/body/subject/performance/song/ – in the analysis, *transing* is granted perhaps more critical potential than it actually delivers. Terms bring all kinds of meanings with them and may have constraining effects depending on the context and what is considered to do transing.

The first chapter, "Topographies of Trans Cinema", introduces the topic, the central questions and the methodology. Straube delineates the growth of Trans Cinema and trans visibility in the early 1990s, the advent of queer and transgender politics, and lists some major political and economic transformations that effected a re-conceptualisation of social binaries, including sex and gender (p. 38). The vague account of the era (not to mention the geopolitical context) and its repercussions in the films give a limited if not Eurocentric picture of a progressive development. A more thorough elaboration of the ideological, epistemological and political conditions of the era would elucidate the emergence of trans visibility in particular in the (Western) mainstream culture, and assist the framing of the study.

Straube develops *the exit scape* as the central methodological tool together with *the entrant* and *sensible cinematic intra-*

activity. The exit scape is a scene that allows an escape from a film's constraining scenes. The entrant is a "particular form of relationality between the film scenes and those who get involved with them" (p. 63). It offers an alternative to oculacentric terms – such as "spectator" or "viewer" – and draws attention to the multi-sensorial, embodied engagement with a film. Sensible cinematic intra-activity draws on feminist film theory, in particular on the notions of haptic visually (Laura Marks 2000), cineasthetic spectatorship (Vivian Sobchack 2004) and kinaesthetic empathy (Jennifer Barker 2009). These are all phenomenology-inspired notions that emphasise multi-sensorial engagement in lieu of the privileged visual perception. Straube combines this strand with feminist materialism / posthuman performativity, in particular with Karen Barad's (2007) concept of intra-activity. Accordingly, film and the entrant are active agents that mutually co-constitute each other (p. 64). The methodology also draws on affect theory. Some of the components are not so much used in the analysis (affect theory), and others (Barad-inspired intra-activity and agential realism) could be further developed. Overall, the interdisciplinary approach draws on a variety of up-to-date theories, and suits Straube's examination of Trans Cinema very well.

As often happens in academic dissertations, the introduction is rather excessive. The description of the method is excellent, but parts of the conceptual discussion could have been saved for the analytical chapters. For example, the notion of the

exit scape is granted so many traits in the introduction that it seems all-encompassing: it offers movement of resistance, protest against norms, ethical element, utopian moment, and so on. The listing would suit its purpose better in the conclusions. In the analytical chapters, the extensive elaboration abates without losing the theoretical rigor.

The first analytical chapter, "Dancing Dissidence: Touch, Contact, and Contagion", focuses on touch in dance scenes with gender-dissident characters in *Ma vie en Rose* (1997), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005). Straube's analysis offers versatile insights into how touch / tactility works in exit scapes that disrupt normative storylines and unfold utopian moments. The subsequent chapters, "Song and the Politics of Listening" and "Dream, Utopias and Spacetime-mattering", offer equally rich analyses. At some points, I missed clarifications of how the affects between the scenes and the entrant are linked to where they are placed in the film and for what purposes. Most of these exit scapes (there may be exceptions) are intended to offer the entrant moments of identification. That is, these scenes are created by using particular engaging aesthetics to disrupt the storyline and encourage identification. Occasionally Straube-the-entrant identifies so strongly with a (trans)character in the exit scape that the character is given a surprising amount of agency *apart from the cinema apparatus*. All of the analysed exit scapes offer utopian becoming. It would be worth reflecting a little bit on *when the*

exit scapes are subversive if put in a context, and *when less so?*

The chapter on songs utilises the concept of *embodied listening*, and examines how it offers trans becoming for (trans) characters within the exit scapes. The analysis of *The Crying Game* (1992) leaves me unsettled. In the analysis of *Transamerica* (2005), Straube discusses the theme of race and white American imaginary, but ignores racial theme in *The Crying Game*. The events of the film are set in East End of London – historically known as an area populated by poor people and immigrants – and rural Northern Ireland. The scenery relates not only to the British colonial presence in Northern Ireland, but also to the colonial past in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The central characters, a white, Irish IRA-volunteer Fergus, a non-white British soldier Jody and his non-white (trans)girlfriend Dil, create a triangle of shifting power relations, because of intersections between nationality, gender, sexuality *and* race. Racialization affects the exit scene, where Dil performs her song in a queer bar to a dominantly white audience. The film itself creates a peculiar contrast if compared to the examined other films, because it was released in the beginning of the era of intensifying trans visibility. From the early 1990s to the turn of the millennium there are a lot of changes that affect the ways in which (trans)gender is represented and imagined. This could have been made more explicit in the thesis.

In the final analytical chapter, Straube focuses on dreamscapes and the potential of sight to disrupt visual discourse. The

chapter offers, again, attentive readings. The chapter could include more analysis of how sight may also evoke a multi-sensorial experience. In particular, the films *Cheonhajangsa Madonna* (2006) and *Lawrence Anyways* (2012) offer excellent material for further theorization of multi-sensorial embodied cinematic intra-activity. Overall, Straube's analysis is theoretically ambitious and original, and their passionate engagement with the exit scapes makes the argument palpable.

There is not yet much international scholarly work on the popular culture and art from trans critical lens. In the Nordic context, studies in Transgender Studies in general are rare. *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes* makes a significant contribution to Transgender Studies and to feminist film studies both in the Nordic and international context.

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