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FILM REVIEW ESSAY

THE REAL THING? SOME THOUGHTS ON *BOYS DON'T CRY*

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Director: Kimberley Pierce
Distributor: Fox Searchlight

Boys Don't Cry, written and directed by Kimberley Pierce, is a film provoked by the 1993 rape and murder of Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old transsexual. Brandon was killed in rural Nebraska, to which he had fled from Lincoln, where, Pierce sketchily, and light-heartedly, informs us, life had been laced with the intermittent pleasures and steady difficulties of trying to live as though a boy. Once relocated, Brandon won the friendship of a number of the town's young men, and the love of one of its most desired young women. When Brandon's neurotic penchant for acting out leads to yet another brief stay in a local jail, personal history and biological gender combine to expose her. This exposure eventually leads to her rape and murder.

Pierce, a New Yorker, dropped everything to attend the trial and, for months afterwards, lived amongst people who had constituted Brandon's last circle of intimates. The film, then, is a kind of case report. But rather than primarily study Brandon's transsexuality, the film presents her transsexual inclinations as a series of euphoric conquests. The film focuses on a range of anxious reactions to her transsexuality. Its strategy is comparable, perhaps, to using the particulars of the Dora case not for what they might reveal about female hysteria, but for what they might reveal about misogyny. The internal anguish wrought by and determining Brandon's sexual confusion is mostly left for the viewer to imagine and fill in. This gap will be particularly noticeable to a clinically inclined viewer. As viewers, we are given only intermittent glimpses into the costs of Brandon's daily sexual transgressions. These glimpses are, in part, meant to remind us of the costs of our own daily economies of transgression and compliance.

In her film, Pierce inserts the unconventional problems of transsexuality into a conventional narrative structure. Throughout the film Brandon is presented as a doomed, though beguiling and beautiful rascal, recognisably located in the lineage of well-known cinematic bad-boys like James Dean, Steve McQueen and Paul Newman. Like these predecessors, Brandon's heroic stature derives from her unwillingness to compromise her identity. Unlike them, though, the identity in question is in an unremitting and overt 'sexual crisis'. Pierce presents Brandon's struggles against biological determinism as the struggles of a dignified renegade.

Brandon's exhilarated state breaks down rarely in the film. The most poignant moments come when she is about to be revealed as a girl, or, more precisely, as a person with female genitals. Her euphoria is protected only while she can hide, and jeopardised only when her genitals might be seen by attacking men, by an examining doctor, or by her lover. These encounters between two different kinds of reality—one insistent upon hiding and one upon exposure—bring home the enormity of Brandon's crisis. The film presents these crises as

taking place in a transitional zone. Rather than focus on the problems of Brandon's isolated, private, and tortured, sexual identity, Pierce highlights the culture-wide problems associated with separating sexual identity from genital anatomy.

The weight of Brandon's masquerade does not break her. We see her manage it strategically—tampons stolen from a drug store and carefully placed out of sight, her body 'strapped and packed' for every encounter. From the standpoint of the film, what demands accounting for is not her 'masquerade', but rather the indignation and, finally, the murderous rage that the masquerade provokes.

In the most thoroughgoing psychoanalytic encounters, as our patients recount their more or less effective efforts to mitigate what Freud called 'the bitter experience of life', we painfully bear witness to the eventual capitulation of fantasies to what seems like material necessity. We bear similar witness when watching Pierce's film. Pierce presents Brandon as the incarnation of the elementally Utopian, and classically tragic, hope in the triumph of psychic over material reality. Bearing such helpless witness, whether as clinicians or citizens, compels us to think of our own complicity in the usually latent violence by which cultural order is maintained and its renegades punished.

Once Brandon makes it out of Lincoln, the film focuses on his relationships with five people there—two male friends, a female lover, the lover's mother and a female friend. When Brandon, whom the five have all warmly received as a boy, is discovered to have a female body, each of the relationships is put into crisis. The varying responses seem intended to mark out a full range of possibilities. The female friend feels betrayed but remains sympathetic, perhaps pitying. The female lover remains adamant; no matter the genital particulars—for her, Brandon was, is, and will always be a boy. The mother is disgusted; the figure she once adored as so 'handsome' is now transformed into someone 'sick' and despicable; she is indifferent to his fate. The two male friends feel they have been lied to, deceived; they react vengefully, furiously, first with rape, and then, when Brandon informs the police, with murder. These are the reactions that the audience must work to comprehend. Something about Brandon's comfort with her own erotic fluidity unearths the violence in these men. Anything but erotically fluid themselves, they each seem, instead, to be stuck in extremely restrictive prototypical versions of masculinity. For both, erotic competence is lived out, lock-step, primarily in the form of a preening, aggressive meanness—a competence grounded in resentful submission to the way things have to be. Meanness and resentment provide contact points for mutual identification and an effective cover for mutual love. Men are the primary audience for other men's preening. They alone are endowed with the power to judge each other's claim to be 'real' men. The film vividly illuminates this in a rodeo scene where men ride the tailgates of careening pick-up trucks so as to demonstrate their heterosexual virility to other men. The scene conveys a circus atmosphere—masculine exhibition, and an excited male audience. Women, meanwhile, occupy the position of mere coin in this barely concealed homoerotic economy. Brandon's erotic deftness, her capa-cities to 'pass' the rodeo test and still remain tuned in to feminine desire, exposes both the restrictive and the homoerotic dimensions of the oppressive masculinity with which these men are saddled. They want to pay her back and do it on sexual terms. Together, each the other's witness, they rape her, in an act of violence that seems intended to simultaneously affirm and deny their erotic commitments to each other while teaching Brandon and her friends a female's proper place, when Brandon, by pressing charges, resists the lesson, they kill her.

Pierce uses these five relationships to interrogate the structural interrelations linking identity to normativity, power to desire, sexual fantasy to genital endowment, and truth to violence. The film is organised around the reactions to the discovery of Brandon's genital status. As such, the particular focus of the film's enormously dense agenda is on the contested

relation between sexual authenticity and sexual masquerade. Pierce directs us, as viewers, away from the usual subject–object position underlying film spectatorship. We identify with Brandon, and with this, that traditional relation has been transformed into an identification. Dislodged from our customary position, we thus feel ourselves participating in the belief/delusion of Brandon's status as a boy. When we watch Brandon undress we find ourselves believing, with her, that in spite of anatomy, we are seeing the body of a boy. And when anatomy makes its claims on our eyes we wonder, with Brandon, how best to resist them. This internal conflict between perception and idea, in turn, reveals much about our assumptions concerning gender and gender prerogatives. Such is the driving effort of Pierce's film—to expose our desires and our hatreds even while it protects Brandon's from more exacting scrutiny.

Brandon's life history, as presented by Pierce, leads us to again assess the shifting balance of forces underlying the relations between sexual identity and genital anatomy, psychic reality and material reality. For Pierce, none of the elements constituting those relations are fixed. This is made clear by her intense focus on the ongoing interpersonal elements that dog each transsexually laden encounter.

The film's material, then, both derives from and illuminates features of the contemporary debates on sexuality that are enlivening both contemporary psychoanalysis and the culture at large. The ever-widening scope of this contemporary debate, instigated within psychoanalysis first by feminist and then by gay and lesbian activists, centres on the reading of the relations between sexual 'difference' and sexual deviance. The debate as presented by Pierce coincides with and illuminates the two apparently irreconcilable promises of an ongoing debate within psychoanalysis.

One premise reads the periphery—difference and deviance—from the vantage-point of a posited centre. That posited centre gives this reading its elemental point of stability and coherence. In principle, from this point of view, difference, as such, is distance from the centre, and distance, when marked, is deviance. From here, the centre is not the product of circumstance or convention; rather, it is the product of law, of necessity. Within psychoanalysis, a most articulate spokesperson of this point of view is Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel.

The other premise reads the centre from the point of view of the periphery. The centre, then, becomes merely a 'centre', a construction. From here, the pertinent task is not, primarily, a critical assessment of deviance, but rather a critical assessment of the centre's claims—its metaphysical sense of itself, and of the norms grounded in this metaphysics—phallocentrism, logocentrism, Eurocentrism etc. From the periphery, the centre ought not to serve as theory's source, but rather as theory's object. Difference, in principle, is to be read as a marker of multiplicity rather than of deviance. Here, we might locate the representative voices of Thomas Ogden, say, and Jessica Benjamin.

This contemporary debate, with all of its baroque postmodern turns, is a continuation of the one from which Freud extracted the elementary tenets of clinical psychoanalysis a century ago. It is one measure of the merit of *Boys Don't Cry* that both the problems it addresses and the rhetorical and narrative strategies it employs bear comparison to the problems faced and the strategies he used in writing his foundational text, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905, *S.E.* 7).

Freud's *Three Essays* ... are a marvel of rhetorical cunning. They invite the reader to participate in what seems a traditional and conservative approach to the so-called 'sexual deviations'. But Freud finally, and subtly, turns the entire classificatory project around on itself. Essays that begin by accepting the established divide between the classifying subject and the deviant object end by asserting a covert relation binding deviation to normality. While the traditional strategy of classification leads to a localisation and externalisation of deviance, Freud's leads to a universalisation and internalisation of it. If the deviant is enacting what the classifiers fantasise, then the direct

classification of manifest sexual deviance will correspond to an indirect classification of neurotic fantasy. Freud's essays have the effect of moving his reader from the secure position of disinterested subject to the less secure one of implicated object.

Like Freud's *Three Essays …*, *Boys Don't Cry* is a rhetorically sophisticated look at sexual deviance. The film's sophistication, like Freud's, is grounded in its reversal of normative grounding premises. Traditionally, transsexuals are situated as 'cases', people whose problematic sexuality potentially assists us in our ongoing effort at mapping the relations between sexuality and gender, mind and body, fantasy and reality. Like Freud, Pierce inverts the framing question. Freud established sexuality as the independent, and universal, variable and charted its formal variations in subjects and objects. Pierce presents transsexuality as a kind of unloosed sexuality, a sexuality apparently shorn of material constraint, and of all the signifiers that usually clothe it in reasonableness. She then charts the formal variations this wild card provokes in affected subjects and objects.

As did Freud, Pierce directs our attention not to an interrogation of the unbound sexual constant, but rather of its bound, and inconstant, variations. She wants us to ask: given the disruptions of an unadorned, tyrannical sexuality, what are the determinants that provoke disgust here, hatred there, violence there, love here; an affirmation of psychic over material reality here, its reverse there? As did Freud, Pierce uses such questions to illuminate the faultlines that undermine our every sense of sexual certainty. After all, Pierce seems to suggest, leaning this time on both Flaubert and Freud, for all of us, to the extent that we are all sexual, '*Teena Brandon / Brandon Teena, c'est nous*'.

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END.

OBITUARY

SELMA KRAMER (1920–2000)

Selma Kramer, the renowned child psychoanalyst and the pre-eminent exponent of Mahler's separation–individuation theory, died in Philadelphia on 9 January, 2000. She was just a few months short of her 80th birthday at the time of her death.

Selma was born on 27 April, 1920, in Philadelphia. She was the second of the three children of Morris and Jennie Kramer. Her sister, Carolyn, was three years older and her brother, Morton, was five years younger than she. Selma's parents' household was a conventional, middle-class, Jewish one. Her father ran a pharmacy and her mother, a part-time piano teacher, worked alongside her husband, 'the doc', in a café that was added to the pharmacy during the Depression years. Selma frequently spent long afternoons in the pharmacy and this had a significant impact upon her. In her own words: 'Growing up in my father's pharmacy taught me to become a quiet observer and listener, because of the multitude of interesting things I could take note of, as long as adults did not discover my curiosity'.

Two other factors channelled this curiosity towards the field of medicine. First was her beloved grandmother's death during her childhood. Second was her brother's bout of meningitis, which left him deaf when she was 9. Selma's burgeoning curiosity as a youngster thus became coupled with compassion (especially marked towards her brother). Early exposure to anti-Semitism (an elementary schoolteacher told her that she did not know that Jewish girls could be that smart) also sensitised her to the emotional aftermath of facing injustice and cruelty.

Her father's decision to enter medical school himself, to become a 'real doc' after all, further consolidated her identifications with industrious and self-sacrificing parents. To quote Selma herself: 'Regardless of the depth of the Depression, it was always clear that we children would be supported through college and any professional education we sought. We were encouraged to read, to learn, to seek knowledge'.

After graduating from Temple University in 1940, Selma applied to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania (now called the Medical College of Pennsylvania) and had another encounter with anti-Semitism. She was refused admission because the school had already filled its 'quota of Jewish girls'. Selma's mother came to her rescue and pleaded her case with a Jewish woman member of the College's board, whose intervention enabled Selma to get into medical school.

After graduating from medical school in 1944, Selma interned at St Luke's and Children's Medical Center in Philadelphia. The next year was highly important in her life. She met a young civil engineer, Ernest Witkin, and after a short and intense period of dating married him; always ahead of her time, she retained her maiden name. A few months later, she joined psychiatric residency at Norristown State Hospital in suburban Philadelphia. It was there that—in her words—she 'got "turned on" to psychoanalysis. Herbert Herskovitz, who was Assistant Superintendent then, was an advanced candidate in psychoanalysis. Robert Bookhammer had gone on to private practice by the time I arrived and his "analytic imprint" on residents and staff was indelible'.

Three years later she entered analysis with LeRoy Maeder and applied for psychoanalytic training at the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic Institute. There she came into contact with the distinguished theoretician, Robert Waelder, and also with a mentor who was to become a