Sexualizing the Transgendered Body in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Boys Don’t Cry*

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The representation of transgendered characters in cinema is littered with examples of victimization, prejudice, and pathos. However, cinema has been very slow to develop transgendered characters who are liberated and carefree enough to explore their own sexual pleasures. Transgendered bodies are still relegated to the role of sexless comic foil (*Midnight in the Garden*), sexless catalyst for family crisis (*Transamerica*), and as sexually troubled symbols representative of larger social ills (*Gun Hill Road*). *Road* actually includes a sex scene, but it is so riddled with guilt and shame that the director denies either of the characters the possibility of libidinal enjoyment. These movies are prototypical examples of the burdens carried by the transgendered body. Outside of the porn genre, transgendered characters are not allowed sexual pleasures. And while these movies might be given some credit for showcasing transgender culture, they do not provide a vehicle for these characters to explore their sexual desires and pleasures. The films *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* are exceptions to this trend, and insist on showcasing passionate transgender sexual desires, and enjoyable sexual contact on screen. Considering the unique position of these two films, this essay sets out to contextualize each through the means of close textual analysis. By interpreting the *mise-en-scène* of these films—and comparing the way each director shoots scenes of sexual contact featuring transgendered characters—I aim to show how particular types of surreal diegetic spaces are created for this kind of queer sexual contact. By mapping these spaces we can better gauge the degree to which these protagonists conform to or challenge notions of hetero- and homo- normativity.

Peirce and Mitchell invite their audience to adopt the perspective of their transgendered protagonists, which establishes a type of transgendered gaze. Through the directors’ utilization of this gaze, and having their characters engage in sex acts on screen, both of the protagonists in *Hedwig* and *Boys* become sexually empowered,
which works to undermine the masterdom of the male heterosexual gaze which typically dominates cinema. However, while *Hedwig* is able to maintain a transgendered perspective throughout its narrative, *Boys* wavers in the same subversive endeavor once its protagonist has been raped near the end of the film. The rape of the female-to-male Brandon (Hilary Swank) returns him to his original female gender by effectively “castrating” him (Swan 50). This metaphorical castration is exemplified when characters around Brandon refer to him as a female after he has been raped, despite the fact that he never altered his outward transgendered appearance. If Brandon’s body can be so easily redefined as female after being raped, it shows that his transgendered status was never regarded as equal to traditional male and female gender assignments—even within the safety of the diegetic world of the film. Brandon is forced to conform to heteronormative sexual codifications. Peirce also alienates Brandon from the sympathies of the mass audience by associating his sexuality with criminality, and separating his sexual contact from the narrative by adding surreal elements to his sex scenes. While Mitchell also uses surreal elements during Hedwig’s scenes featuring sexual contact, he conversely reinforces her transgendered status by empowering her through femininity and framing her story within the “queer” genre of the musical (Farmer 75). By filming her story within the queer context of the musical, Mitchell is able to situate alternative sexuality as a new typical practice. While Hedwig and Brandon are unique examples of transgendered characters not shy about indulging in their sexual desires, only the male-to-female Hedwig maintains her bravado, which works toward redefining her transgendered body on her own terms and does not become the victim of heterosexual prejudice. I argue that only movies which extract themselves from heterosexual notions of a “fixed gender” will be able to feature transgendered characters who are able to indulge in sexual pleasure to the same degree as their non-transgendered counterparts, and avoid the pathos and victimization which usually characterizes those who do not conform to sexual norms.

**Developing a Sexual Identity**

Before we are able to analyze how Brandon’s and Hedwig’s sex scenes work to either establish or diminish their agency as sexual beings, it is important to look at how their sexual identity is developed within the narrative. By looking at how Peirce and Mitchell introduce—and later identify—their transgendered characters, we are able to understand how an audience might eventually develop empathy for them.
Hedwig was born as Hansel in communist East Germany in 1961, and later undergoes a sex-change operation in order to marry an American G.I., Luther (Maurice Dean Wint), who has promised to take him to America. Before his sex-change Hansel had never considered having one. He never expressed a desire to become a woman before Luther’s proposition. One might argue that because a sex-change operation is forced upon Hansel he is a victim of transgendered conversion, which would make him reluctant to embrace the characteristics of a transgendered individual. However, in the song “Sugar Daddy,” Hedwig sings about how she is able to use her newfound identity as a woman to gain an advantage with men so they will buy her “Versace blue jeans” and “black designer underwear.” “Oh the thrill of control, like the rush of rock and roll” is the chorus that reveals her new female body as a source of power (“Sugar Daddy”). Even if Hedwig was forced into a transgendered body, she eventually comes to embrace it as her own. The botched operation that has left her with a “one-inch mound of flesh” actually empowers her more as a woman than she ever was as a man. As a man, she was taking orders from her older boyfriend and dominating mother. As a woman, Hedwig forms her own band, writes songs, and travels the world. Hedwig does not have the complete sexual organs of a man or a woman, and, as a result, could present herself in the gender of her choosing. The fact that she goes along with the transition—and embraces non-specific gender practices—shows how empowering being transgendered can be, and sets the audience on a course toward transgender empathy and acceptance.

Some might dismiss Hedwig’s transgendered status because she is a singer who might be simply exploiting her plastic body as a mere concert gimmick—such as those employed in the past by the likes of David Bowie or Elton John. However, in her non-performance life, Hedwig is shown dressed as a woman and is willing to talk about her transgendered status to anyone who is interested in listening to her. She acknowledges that she is transgendered but does not exploit any of her male qualities as a way to compensate any perceived weaknesses in her feminine appearance. A male drawing power from female clothing is not new in cinema. However, Hedwig’s confidence is not dependent on the fact that she reveals she was born genetically as a man. Chris Straayer writes that, “there is a lineage of cross-dressing male characters who draw their power from wearing women’s clothing, while maintaining the bravado and some obvious sexual characteristics of a man, including chest hair and showcasing a prominent bulge in their underwear” (80). Straayer claims that these overtly male characters donning female garb is empowering for the male and is, in fact, his source of power. She calls this character the “she-man” (Straayer 80). With
this definition at hand, Hedwig cannot be considered a “she-man” because she does not display any obvious male characteristics in her attire. Hedwig lacks chest/facial hair, and sings openly about the fact that her sexuality is in flux.

During the early part of the film, Hedwig is shown sleeping in bed with one of her band mates, Yitzhak (Miriam Shor), who is a drag-king. Hedwig is quite cruel to Yitzhak throughout the film. In subsequent scenes, she rips the cord out of his microphone during a musical performance and tears up his passport when he threatens to leave the band to join a traveling theater production Rent. It is interesting that for the production he is offered the role of Angel, who is a male-to-female drag performer. Yitzhak uses his casting in Rent as his power to escape Hedwig’s band and, ironically, it comes in the form of playing a man performing in drag. The power that Hedwig has discovered as a woman is the same type of subversive power embodied in the role of Angel, and she does not want Yitzhak to attain that same power and confidence. By showing that there is power in being female—while not relying on she-male characteristics—Mitchell is subverting the normative patriarchal sexual paradigm.

Further support of this subversion is featured in a deleted scene that shows Hedwig and Yitzhak’s first meeting in a Croatian cabaret where they were both performing. Yitzhak is dressed as a woman and, while backstage, asks Hedwig to get her out of “this hell hole.” Hedwig responds by removing Yitzhak’s wig and wiping off her lipstick, robbing her of the socially constructed signs of what it means to look like a woman. Mitchell then cuts to a scene where they leave the club together. It is assumed that Hedwig allows her to join the “The Angry Inch” band on the condition that she dress-up like a man. In this instance, Hedwig reveres her past narrative and is now the catalyst for someone changing their sex. Not only does Hedwig want to be the only woman in the band, but by robbing Yitzhak of her feminine signs, the film shows that Hedwig feels there is inherent power in being female. At the end of the film, Hedwig gives her own wig to Yitzhak, effectively returning her femininity. This is a joyous occasion for Yitzhak, because throughout the film she has resented Hedwig for robbing her of her female identity. Yitzhak is an interesting contrast to Hedwig because they both assumed the opposite sex in order to escape a trap in their lives. While Hedwig embraced femininity and emboldened herself through it, conversely, Yitzhak felt powerless as a man. Subverting patriarchal ideals of gender empowerment is the first way that Hedwig is able to wean the viewer off the notion that manhood is the ideal avenue to social power. These subversive gender ideals work to enhance a queer aesthetic which prefers flexible body formations and gender
practices.

As a way of emphasizing the idea that flexible gender practices are an embodied part of all gender formations, Hedwig explains in the song “Origin of Love” that three sexes were actually established when the earth was created. One looked like “two men glued back to back,” the other was “two girls rolled up into one” and the third was “part daughter, part son.” According to Hedwig’s lyrics, mix-gendered people were created along with man and woman when the earth was created. She also sings that when the pairs of “two men” and “two girls” were separated by the Greek gods they spent the rest of their lives “trying to shove [them]selves back together.” Essentially, Hedwig explains that this is part of the fabric that has composed our current gender structures, and this is the reason why she longs to be reunited with the other half of her male self—making homosexuality the norm in *Hedwig*. Her ideas about earth’s origins are contrary to what we know from heterosexual depictions of the Adam and Eve Biblical storyline. This shows that Hedwig is establishing sexual norms on her own terms through her musical talents. She takes ownership of gender and is not dependent on defining herself based on heteronormative notions. The confidence that Hedwig has as a woman and a homosexual is reflected in the faith that Mitchell bestows on her character by trusting that the audience will be sutured into the film based on their understanding of the narrative from her transgendered point of view. Mitchell’s dedication to a transgendered gaze is underscored when he allows the audience to see and hear the thoughts of Hedwig expressed in surreal moments throughout the narrative. The musical performance scenes include an animation sequence which plays during “Origin of Love,” and after Hedwig sings “Angry Inch” we follow her as she imagines herself flying over the raucous crowd. These visual interludes into Hedwig’s mind further encourage viewers to detach from heterosexual identifications and recognize a queer point of view where traditional sexual notions are inverted.

**Reading Differences in Transgendered Portrayals**

In *Boys*, Brandon is associated with danger from the first shot of the film. We initially see Brandon speeding away from a police car pursuing him. In a later flashback we see that he is guilty of stealing cars. From the outset, Brandon’s transgendered practice is intertwined with criminality. Julianne Pudduck suggests that “the audience is drawn into Brandon’s outlaw game of risk, of getting away with something dangerous” (98). Brandon is not only trying to get away from his criminal past, but is simultaneously trying to get away from his female gender. It is as if his sexuality is a crime
that is waiting to be found out by the straight characters he interacts with throughout the film. Everything that Brandon does—from lying to the girl he likes, running away from the police, getting into bar fights, and stealing money to pay for traffic tickets—helps to reinforce his criminal tendencies to the audience. Brandon runs away from the justice system when he has a chance to appear in front of a judge for stealing a car. This stands in stark contrast to his future killer, John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard), who has spent seven years in jail for a crime he has committed. The heterosexual male has “dutifully” served his time in jail while the transgendered individual is running away from the law. The one time that Brandon goes to the police is after he is raped by Lotter and his friend Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III). However, the cop is more interested in questioning Brandon about his gender than about the circumstances of the rape. The inimical interrogating officer can be read as a punishment for Brandon because he is asking for justice to be carried out on his behalf without ever having been held accountable for his own crimes. When he is being interviewed by the police after being raped, the policeman is excluded from all of the shots during the inquiry. When the officer asks Brandon how he was positioned while getting raped—“where did they try to pop it in first at”—the officer is off screen with his voice aimed at Brandon, effectively situating the officer in the same interrogative position as the audience. This scene epitomizes how Brandon’s actions work against the neoliberal ethos of crime and justified punishment. As a result, this forces an audience to dramatically question their own position amongst the pillars of our judicial norms before they can align themselves with Brandon’s criminal perspective.

When Brandon is running away from the police or stealing a car, we do not see the people against whom he is committing the crime. These are victimless crimes simply because we do not see the victim. However, we are intimately familiar with Candace (Alicia Goranson, playing Brandon’s roommate) when Brandon steals money from her clothing drawer to pay for a parking ticket. Candace has allowed Brandon to stay in her house while he is in Falls City Nebraska, and a viewer who sees this crime might find it difficult to sympathize with him. By seeing the hurt that is caused by Brandon’s crimes and mendacity, the audience is able to negotiate their own sympathies and perhaps develop suspect feelings towards Brandon. If his transgendered practice is associated with crime, the audience might consider his eventual death as its consequence, which is a punishment queer characters in cinema have long been subjected to.

If Brandon’s sexuality is entwined with his criminality, then it is important to understand how Peirce works to have the audience
eventually identify and sympathize with him. Towards this effort Pudduck points out that it is the “fragile female body underneath the cowboy garb that ultimately will ensure the mainstream audience’s sympathy” (98). This points to a contradiction in how Peirce decides to garner sympathy from the audience for Brandon: the weakness of his femininity is a crucial part of how an audience sympathizes with his masculine appearance. Judith Halberstam also notes that the film “establishes the legitimacy and durability of Brandon’s gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon’s gaze” (294). One example of this comes when Brandon first meets Lana Tisdale (Chloë Sevigny) at a bar and the viewer is able to see Lana through his perspective. The other example is when Brandon sees his phantom double after being forced by John and Tom to take his clothing off to prove that he was born as a man. However, these scenes, which subvert the traditional heterosexual male gaze, are tempered by reminders that Brandon was born as a female. We see his vulnerability as a female when observing the daily ritual of how he transforms into a man. During this process, we observe his nude female body and how he systematically reduces each feminine trait, by strapping down his breasts and stuffing a sock—or in anticipation of a sexual encounter, a dildo—into his underwear. However, it is not hard for the audience to imagine what his daily ritual of turning into a woman would be; as such, these scenes work more to reinforce Brandon as a woman rather than allow for flexible and reversible gender play. These constant reminders that Brandon was born as a woman robs the audience of a chance to view Brandon as the man he sees himself as. Peirce seems to assume that in order for an audience to sympathize with Brandon, they need to see him as a woman first. While the real Brandon Teena was defined by traditional heterosexual sexual conventions, there is no evidence that he tried to garner sympathy as a woman. The real life Lana claims that “she thought [Brandon] was a man” (White 221, footnote). This fact reveals that Peirce’s portrayal is not hampered by the burdens of filming a true story. The way the film relies on Brandon’s femininity to earn sympathies from the audience seems like a missed opportunity to have his transgendered practices considered on equal empathetic footing as familiar male and female gender roles would garner. Peirce does not trust the male gender appearance which was a fully incorporated part of Brandon Teena’s life and the way in which he engendered sympathy from those who knew him later in his life. Establishing the practice of being transgendered as a third gender option is an idea utilized to the most effectively subversive degree in Hedwig, and when looking at the sex scenes in each of the films, we see that Boys fails to push the boundaries of queer representation in the same way that Hedwig does.
Transsexuality

Hedwig and Tommy (Michael Pitt) meet while she is babysitting his younger sibling. The first time we see Tommy, he is masturbating in his bathtub with the door open. The fact that he has the door open—and is splashing about—serves as an invite for Hedwig to participate in his act of self-love. Hedwig complies by putting the baby down, sitting on the edge of the tub, and giving him a hand job until he orgasms. This occurs before there is any question in Tommy’s mind about her gender. As far as he knows, she was born as a woman. This scene establishes that Tommy is hyper-sexual and his sexual satisfaction can take place without the sex organs of a woman. Hedwig explains in an earlier scene that after her divorce from Luther, she lost her gag-reflex, which allowed her to give highly effective blow jobs for money. These two examples of sexual contact and storytelling show that Hedwig has not lost her sex drive despite losing her penis in the botched sex change operation (a reference as to why her band is named “The Angry Inch”). Being transgendered does not hamper her from having sexual desires; in fact, it is her desires that are her source of empowerment. Hedwig’s sexual boldness shows that transgendered and heterosexual sexual desire are on equal par in terms of their ability to satisfy others.

In a scene after the hand job, Hedwig reveals to Tommy in his bedroom that she is transgendered. The scene opens up with the camera looking down at Tommy over Hedwig’s shoulder. She is standing up, and he is on the bed looking up at her. This staging of the characters puts Hedwig in a position of power over Tommy. The transgendered individual is in a posture of power in the room, subverting any natural authority given to Tommy’s heterosexual male status. When Hedwig explains her transgendered status to him there is a look of surprise on his face. However, before she has a chance to leave the room, Tommy asks if she has accepted Jesus Christ as her lord and savior. After she says no, he explains how hypocritical it was for God to tell Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge, and then compares God’s excessive micromanaging to his own father. This comparison conflates Tommy with the Biblical Adam who also wants to eat from the proverbial “tree of knowledge.” Considering that he expresses this desire after finding out about Hedwig’s sexuality, he implies that he does not want to close himself off to new experiences and does not want to follow the rules of his domineering father. He is excited by Hedwig’s sexuality, and his desire for new sexual knowledge is signified in his new stage name, Tommy Gnosis (gnosis being the Greek word for knowledge). His desire to explore a sexual relationship with a transgendered individual—along with the subversive mis-en-scène accentuating the dominance of a transgendered person—shows the
preference that Mitchell shamelessly indulges in when showcasing subversive sexuality and wallowing in plastic gender roles.

Throughout their ensuing romantic relationship, Tommy is apprehensive about kissing Hedwig. In a voice-over, Hedwig explains that they have not kissed on the mouth for the duration of their now domesticated, and sexually consummated, relationship. Tommy eventually feels the urge to kiss Hedwig inside her trailer after she has helped him figure out how to play a particularly difficult chord on the guitar. He is sexually aroused by knowledge he gains from Hedwig, and he expresses it by finally kissing her. Before he does this, he asks her to “breathe through [his] mouth.” The camera pans down, showing their chests dilating with air, to convey that the kiss is more than lustful; they are sustaining each other’s breathing during this kiss. Surrealism intrudes on this moment because while they are kissing, Mitchell suddenly shifts locations within the scene through a jump-cut to show that they are outside of the trailer where the scene began. Hedwig and Tommy are abruptly situated against a backdrop of a garden with falling flower petals and triumphant music, which recalls the reference to Adam and Eve made earlier by Tommy. This is a moment of wish fulfillment for Hedwig because Tommy has abandoned his fear of oral sexual contact with a transgendered person. Showcasing this kissing as the climactic coup of the film shows that Mitchell was successful in creating a character who can be comfortable with her own sex and be sexually attractive to others.

While they are kissing, Hedwig forces Tommy’s hand down her dress so he can feel, for the first time, what is between her legs—they had previously only engaged in anal sex. After feeling it, Tommy quickly pulls his hand away and asks her “what is that?” She pauses and eventually says “it’s what I have to work with.” She refuses to classify herself as a man or a woman in this moment, and maintains her transgendered status despite Tommy’s questioning. Certain critics, like Amy Taubin, complain that Mitchell “cop[s]-out not to show full frontal” in the final shot of the film where Hedwig is walking down an ally naked. However, that argument misses the point of what Hedwig is trying to accomplish throughout her story arc. Hedwig wants to have people accept her as a transgendered person, not as a man or a woman. Being denied visual access to the mutilated “angry inch” between her legs, the viewer must empathize with her character, and not her sex organ.

Another way that *Hedwig* legitimizes subversive sexuality is by filming the narrative within the structure of a musical. By doing so, Mitchell is able to indulge in what Brett Farmer calls the “fantasies of queerness” (81). Farmer’s work expands on the ways in which gays have traditionally looked to musicals for moments of subversion in
order to fulfill their own gay-identified fantasies and wishes (81). As a musical, *Hedwig* indulges in those types of subversive ideals and highlights the fact that Mitchell is willing to utilize the structure of the film in an effort to undermine traditional notions of gender assignment. However, Mitchell also tries to appeal to heterosexuals in his own way. In the scenes where Hedwig is singing in restaurants during her tour, she only sings to heterosexual audiences, despite their lack of interest in her performance, and rants about her lost love Tommy. However, she never stops performing for them and works during the entire film to engage them in her act. For Hedwig, gender practice is emphasized through insistence.

In continuing this strand about the importance of music in each movie, the first time we see Brandon kissing a girl, the song “You’re Just What I Needed” by The Cars is playing over the scene. This musical cue gives the audience license to rejoice in Brandon’s first romantic conquest because it speaks to his success in finding a female to go on a date with him and believe that he is a man. Earlier, Brandon’s date says to him that it does not “seem like you’re from here.” This comment confirms that she suspects there is something different about him, but she later dismisses her suspicions by saying “you’re from some place beautiful.” This statement not only suggests that being transgendered has originated from an exalted place, but in the eyes of his date, he is an “ideal heterosexual male” (Swan 48). If Brandon is able to maintain his male appearance among the people whom he is most intimately involved with, then he will be able to pass as a person who was born as a man. After Lana and Brandon kiss for the first time, he thanks her for giving the police officer her address after they were pulled over for speeding earlier, instead of having to provide his own. This is the first time that Lana lies for Brandon. This is an important moment because Brandon’s life is dependent on Lana maintaining his series of lies which help to maintain the facade that he was born with male genitalia. This particular lie, related to the encounter with the police officer, links the two of them, and this link is solidified in their subsequent sex scenes.

During their first sexual encounter, Lana is able to see the cleavage from his strapped down breasts under his shirt. The curiosity from that moment causes her to touch his boxers and feel his “penis,” which is actually a dildo. Brandon does not allow Lana to see him completely naked and she continues to have sex with him without proof that he is a man. Later on in the scene, Peirce shows a close-up of Lana’s face while she orgasms from Brandon’s oral pleasure. The close-up of her face cuts to a shot of Lana, Brandon, and their friends in the backseat of a car taking a joy ride out of town. This cut reveals that Lana views Brandon as an excuse for escaping her
boring life in Falls City. Maintaining the lie means that she will be able to go with Brandon to Memphis and make money singing karaoke. Even after Brandon admits to her that he “has both girl and boy parts” she responds by saying that she “does not care if [he is] half monkey or half ape” (Boys Don’t Cry). Even though Lana may only view Brandon as embodying the escape that she desires from her mundane existence, she does not waiver in supporting him after he claims that he is a hermaphrodite. By showcasing a transgendered individual that can “rescue” a heterosexual from her humdrum life, Peirce places the transgendered individual in a position of power which would usually be afforded only to the heterosexual.

Peirce’s attempt to subvert the traditional heterosexual power structure through this savior narrative is undermined because she films the sex scenes between Lana and Brandon in a surreal space which visually segregates them from the aesthetics of the rest of the narrative, robbing their sexual encounters of the legitimacy that would be granted to a man and a woman engaging in the same act. Some critics have commented that there is a “sci-fi quality that permeates Boys” and many of these qualities are highlighted during the sex scenes (Aaron 96). Some of the signs include the “cinematic distortion of light, the images of factories with the metallic splendor of space stations and a parked car [where they have sex for the second time] that has the luminosity of a flying saucer” (Aaron 96). Melissa Anderson writes that “when Brandon and Lana first have sex, the mise-en-scène alone suggests the almost mythical nature of their union; the lovers themselves are the ones radiating light” (56). These allusions to otherworldliness imply that sexual fulfillment for the transgendered individual cannot occur within the world of the heterosexual. These elements also associate Brandon with an alien identity, suggesting that transgendered individuals do not originate from the same place that the rest of the population comes from. Brandon is a type of Foucauldian “monster” which emerges as a horrific type of alien entity that is not a cohesive part of the society in which it exists. Lana offers an additional excuse for not realizing that Brandon was born as a woman by saying that she was in a “trance” the first time she had sex with him. This admission further distances their sexual encounters from fully aware people who live on planet earth. Hedwig also places its transgendered sex scenes in a surreal space which undermines the boldness of the scenes with hyper-cinematic touches that suggest that they might be dream sequences. Both of these surreal sex scenes work to create a safe-space where transgendered persons can engage in a sex act without jeopardizing heterosexual norms. Despite both of the films having gay directors, they each conform to the idea that a transgendered sex act must be visually separated from the rest of the
incorporated visual continuity of the film, and, by default, concede that heterosexual sex between a man and a woman is the only act able to be filmed without surreal elements added to them. While a select portion of the audience might be looking for “a gay fix,” the directors seem to believe that the only chance they have of garnering sympathy from an audience is if the transgendered sexual contact is contained within this surreal safe-space or punished later on in the film (Straayer 42). While Hedwig does use the surreal safe-space for the kissing scene between Tommy and Hedwig, she is rewarded at the end of the film for maintaining her transgendered status—as opposed to Brandon’s gender instability at the end of Boys. After Tommy dumps Hedwig—the resulting aftermath of touching her sex organ—he steals her songs, which subsequently propel him to rock star fame. The theft of Hedwig’s songs represents an attempt to undermine her sexual empowerment. Her songs are part of her path to transgendered recognition throughout the narrative. In “The Origin of Love,” Hedwig sings about how transgendered practice is equal to a unified male and female gender. She does not forgive Tommy for this infraction and eventually sells the story of their love affair to a gossip magazine, which ruins his career. Hedwig is redeemed at the end of the film when she is lionized for writing the songs that Tommy has been performing. The film exalts, and legitimizes, the transgendered individual while exposing the heterosexual character as a fraud. The sympathy for Hedwig stems from her heartbreak at the hands of Tommy, and the struggle that society has with coalescing the male and female aspects of her personality. In contrast to Mitchell, Peirce not only films Brandon’s sex scenes in a surreal safe-space but also compromises his complex gender status, and reverts back into the traditional mold of sexual assignment by defining Brandon’s sexuality through a heterosexual gaze in the last third of the film.

Compromising the Transgendered Gaze

While the sex scenes—and the majority of the narrative—in Boys are shot through the transgendered gaze, this gaze depends on Lana maintaining the same perspective of Brandon in terms of how he understands his own gender. Halberstam notes that “Brandon can be Brandon because Lana is willing to see him as he sees himself and to avert her gaze when his manhood is questioned” (296). While it is subversive to establish a transgendered gaze, it is quite fragile to have that gaze depend on a non-trans individual. For Brandon, Lana is not the only heterosexual who it is important to convince that he was born as a man. When the people around Lana start to question Brandon’s sexuality, she begins to waver in her commitment to his gender preference. When Brandon reveals
to Lana that he is a hermaphrodite, it becomes a secret between the two of them. So as long as Brandon’s sexual status remains contained between the two of them, they are able to maintain both their relationship and the transgendered gaze. However, once evidence emerges that Brandon was born as a female, there are problematic associative “queer” implications for Lana and her friends because of their interaction with him (Aaron 95). Brandon and Lana have respectively declared that they are not “dyke[s]” or “lesbian[s].” Aaron points out that when Candice confronts Lana about Brandon’s sexuality, the camera is placed in such a way to frame Candice in between the legs of Lana, which implicates her with the “queer” identity of Brandon (95). There is a fear of being linked to Brandon’s queerness, and this eventually results in a kind of “homosexual panic” that engulfs everyone around him (Halberstam 298). The rape that is committed by John and Tom is their way of dealing with this panic and it works to return Brandon to a true identity that “comes to terms with an assigned anatomy” (Swan 50). As Brandon’s secret begins to be revealed to other characters, we no longer see the film from his point of view and the transgendered gaze is lost.

The culmination of this loss of the transgendered gaze comes after Brandon has been raped by John and Tom. While the viewer is asked to experience the rape from Brandon’s “point of view,” the post rape reaction by Lana—which includes referring to him as “she” and “pretty”—robs Brandon of his transgendered status and returns him to a female state (Pudduck 101). Rachel Swan writes that “our culture’s neurosis with regard to sex-gender symmetry demands that Brandon be castrated and re-positioned in a female body” which is facilitated by the rape (50). In the post-rape sex scene between Lana and Brandon, he admits that he had been untruthful to her about his past, and this confession sets up the expectation that he will now appear before her as his “true self” (Halberstam 297). As Lana is being disrobed by Brandon in their subsequent sex scene, Lana says she may not “know how to do this.” Considering that we have observed her having sex with Brandon two times before, this seems like a misplaced comment. However, Halberstam writes that “this seems to refer to having sex with Brandon as a woman” (297). The rape has facilitated a homonormative “achievement of lesbianism” (Butler 16-17). This sudden shift by Peirce shows her lack of commitment to the transgendered gaze, a queer understanding of gender, and reinforces the idea that the power of heterosexual sexual desire—which is expressed through the rape—dominates over the transgendered individual. This awkward shift in perception may be explained in how the scene came to be put in film. The producer of Boys writes that Peirce was only able to shoot this scene because the production was given
extra money after principle shooting was complete (Vachon and Bunn 101). It is unfortunate to imagine that a financial afterthought might have erased the subversiveness of the transgendered gaze established throughout the rest of the film.

**Conclusion**

Transgendered individuals present themselves to the world as the gender of their choosing. However, much of society will only acknowledge them as the sex they were physically born as. *Hedwig* and *Boys* are two examples of transgendered individuals fighting against being defined by heterosexual notions of sexual assignment. These two characters depict the ways that transgendered individuals can choose to live in a heterosexual society. Hedwig decides to empower herself by embracing both sides of her sexuality and forcing others to adapt to a new sex dynamic and a transsexual gaze. Brandon chooses to portray himself as a man and fight against people who would try to impose an assigned sexuality on him. Because of Peirce’s lack of commitment in confronting conventional gender assignment, she forces Brandon to conform to the heterosexual ideals before becoming a victim of those same ideals. The transgendered character can only be embraced as part of the greater society if the traditional notions of sexual identity are critiqued by media. *Hedwig* finds a way to transcend the parameters of male and female sex ideals, while *Boys* flounders in those notions heteronormative conventionality.
Works Cited


Vachon, Christine and Austin Bunn. A Killer Life. New York: Simon