

Listening to Transgender Utopia in *Boys Don't Cry*¹

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Abstract

Artikkelissa tarkastellaan transsukupuolisuuteen liittyvien merkitysten rakentumista *Boys Don't Cry* -elokuvan (ohj. Kimberly Peirce, USA 1999) musiikissa. Metodologisesti tutkimukseni ammentaa audiovisuaalisen musiikin ja transsukupuolisuuden tutkimuksesta. Keskityn tarkastelussani aikaisemmassa tutkimuksessa ohitettuun näkökulmaan: musiikin merkityksiin ja reparaatiiviseen tulkintaan (vrt. Sedgwick 2005). Reparatiivisen kuuntelun myötä korostan elokuvassa niitä ulottuvuuksia, jotka rakentavat tilaa transsukupuoliselle olemisen tavalle jopa väkivallan, sarron ja trauman esitysten keskellä. Analysoin tarkemmin transsukupuolisuutta rakentavia mekanismeja, joita ovat esimerkiksi (1) amerikkalaisen valtavirtakantrin ja kantrirockin ilmentämä hegemoninen maskuliinisuus, (2) vaihtoehtorockin, kuten psykedeelisen rockin, punkin ja uuden aallon rockin, viestimä vaihtoehtoinen maskuliinisuus, (3) transsukupuolista olemisen tapaa kaksijakoisen sukupuolijärjestelmän tuolla puolen rakentava kokeellinen ambient-musiikki sekä (4) kantriballadi *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, joka toimii johtoaiheena elokuvan päähenkilöiden väliselle rakkaudelle.

The drama film *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberly Peirce, USA, 1999) is among the most well-known and widely seen mainstream transgender films.² Undeniably, the critically acclaimed and commercially successful film has played a pioneering role in cinematic transgender representations. It was one of the first among the relatively recent mainstream transgender films to portray transpeople in a serious and trans-empathetic way and in a story revolving around transgender protagonist(s).³ The film has also received attention because it is based on the true story of Brandon Teena, a young transman who died as a victim of a hate-crime in Nebraska in December 1993 – a story that has been represented in the media and in the arts in many forms.⁴

- 2 The term *mainstream* here refers to films primarily targeted to all audiences with an emphasis on the dominant culture and which have commercial purposes, as opposed to the subcultural *queer/transgender cinema*, which is specifically intended for queer/transgender audiences and usually denotes identity-based, political, and non-commercial filmmaking. The division, however, is not unambiguous.
- 3 Other examples of mainstream transgender films include *Crying Game* (UK, 1992), *Different for Girls* (UK & France, 1996), *My Life in Pink* (Belgium, 1997), *Another Woman* (France, 2002), *Beautiful Boxer* (Thailand, 2003), *Normal* (USA, 2003), *Transamerica* (USA, 2005), *Breakfast on Pluto* (Ireland & UK, 2005), *XXY* (Argentina, 2007), and *Kerron sinulle kaiken (Open Up to Me, Finland, 2013)*.
- 4 About the narrative culture around Brandon Teena, see Halberstam 2005, 22–75; Sloop 2004, 50–82.

1 My thanks to the journal's guest editor Lotta Kähkönen for her useful insights, to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, and for Glenda Goss for helping me with the language.

Boys Don't Cry features protagonist Brandon⁵ (played by Hilary Swank) as a young, pre-, or non-operative female-to-male transman, who leaves his hometown and starts anew in a small Nebraska town, Falls City. Brandon is excited and optimistic about life in a place where no one knows his past or his gender history. He makes new friends and begins a romantic relationship with a young woman, Lana (Chloë Sevigny), who can be regarded as another protagonist in the story. Brandon hides his transgressiveness from those around him; telling is not an option in a conservative, trans-, and homophobic culture. However, his legal gender status and anatomically female body are brutally revealed, after which his male friends, the ex-convicts John (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom (Brendan Sexton III) humiliate, rape, beat and eventually murder him; they also murder Brandon's friend Candace (Alicia Goranson).

The film has received considerable attention in transgender, queer, and feminist studies. Various readings of the film's non-normative gender presentation have been proposed. The discussion has revolved more or less around the question of how or in what way *Boys Don't Cry* succeeds or fails in representing transgender identity (e.g., Cooper 2002; Noble 2003, 142–158; Willox 2003; Sloop 2004, 50–82; Halberstam 2005, 76–96; Phillips 2006, 138–146; Salamon 2010, 57–62; Cahill 2010; Motschenbacher 2010, 141–168).

It has been proposed, for example, that the film suggests gender transgression by constructing a “transgender gaze” (Halberstam 2005, 76–96) or that it offers transgressive female visual pleasure with its “girl-viewer optics” centered on the character of Lana (White 2001). Some readings have focused on issues of masculinity, especially as related to Brandon's

trans or female masculinity (Cooper 2002; Noble 2003), although the representation of the heteronormative macho masculinity by the cis-gender male characters John and Tom has been discussed as well (Siegel 2003). The portrayal of class (the working and poverty classes) and race (whiteness) and how these relate to the gender representation in *Boys Don't Cry* has also been examined (Henderson 2001; Noble 2003; Cunningham 2007). Furthermore, the film has been studied from the perspective of its representation of rape and the impact of the rape on the negotiation of Brandon's gender (Cahill 2010), as well as from the perspective of the linguistic gender construction in the film's dialogue and other verbal dimensions (Motschenbacher 2010, 141–168). Moreover, some readings have interpreted the non-normative gender representation in *Boys Don't Cry* in lesbian terms rather than in transgender terms (Eileraas 2002; cf. also Phillips 2006, 141–146), perhaps reflecting the feminist “border war” over the butch lesbian woman vs. the transgender man continuum (Halberstam 1998, 141–173; Halberstam & Hale 1998) or simply an inability or reluctance to confront transgender identity.

In the present article I propose a transgender reading of *Boys Don't Cry* that differs from previous interpretations in two ways. First, my reading is a *listening*, based on analyzing the film's soundtrack. This perspective is usually neglected in discussions about *Boys Don't Cry*, despite the fact that music is among the most powerful technologies in audiovisual culture for conveying gender. In fact, I make the crucial claim that it is through music that the film *Boys Don't Cry* succeeds in constructing, in an effective way, transgender subjectivity and transgendered meanings, including a transgender vision of a more progressive future. Here I am in line with contemporary film music research that emphasizes film as a sonic art and interprets films through their musical signification (e.g., Kassabian 2001; Donnelly 2005; Välimäki 2007, 2008, and 2013; Chion 2009; Richardson 2012, 54–200; Richardson, Gorbman, & Vernallis 2013). Likewise, I

5 I use the first name only (Brandon) when referring to the film's main character. When referring to the real-life person, I use the whole name, Brandon Teena.

intend to develop transgender music research as a transgender-conscious way of listening to and interpreting music.⁶

Second, my purpose is to listen to the film *reparatively* by emphasizing the dimensions therein that construct a safe space for transgender subjectivity. Here I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) psychoanalytical account of queer epistemological practices as reflecting a subject's fundamental constellations of object-relations, trauma, and mourning. As Sedgwick points out, our readings of cultural objects, such as films, take place in the oscillation between the paranoid and the reparative subject positions, which govern all our social being in the world.⁷ According to Sedgwick (2003, 126–152), queer readings have often tended to emphasize the paranoid (negative) mode of criticism that looks for faults in queer representations, which is understandable given that scholars of the subject frequently encounter oppression, phobia, and violence vis-à-vis queer people, especially in the study of mainstream cultural practices. Yet the reparative (positive) mode of criticism is just as important in the study of the objects of both the dominant and the queer culture, since reparative criticism is able to create space for queer-specific modes of being, even

6 Transgender music research can be understood as its own field arising out of or as part of the broader field of queer musicology: an implementation of transgender studies in the field of music research and queer musicology. Thus far, transgender music research has been sporadic. See, e.g., Swedenburg 1997; Braga-Pinto 2002; Halberstam 2005, 152–187; Namaste 2005; Peraino 2006, 246–252; Goldin-Perschbacher 2007; Hawkins 2007; Altinay 2008; Constansis 2008; Maurey 2009; Välimäki 2013.

7 Sedgwick's account is based on Melanie Klein's (1975) psychoanalytical theory of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions of an infant, characterizing the unconscious constitution of a subject and its relation to the outer world in adult life as well. These positions denote two basic ways of dealing with the traumatic fact of separation, which, however, is the pre-requisite for the formation of subjectivity: aggression that destructs the object into pieces (cf. hate) and the work of mourning that rebuilds the destroyed object (cf. love).

under the pressures, strictures, and effects of the heteronormative culture. In my analysis of *Boys Don't Cry* I aim for the kind of reparative listening that seeks transgender pleasure, meanings, and utopia, even in the midst of representations of oppression, violence, and trauma.

Below, I will concentrate on four musical strategies in the film's communication of transgender subjectivity. In listening to the film's music the audience is listening first and foremost to the voice of transgendered subjectivity: the music becomes (re-)signified from the point of view of transgender life. This kind of *transgendering*⁸ (queering) of music plays a major role in *Boys Don't Cry's* audiovisual construction of transgender meanings. First, I will discuss the use of country and rock-based music as establishing the story's milieu and the hegemonic masculinity inherent in the heteronormative culture of that milieu. At the same time, this music expresses Brandon's feelings as a young, heterosexual man. Second, I will consider the use of psychedelic, punk, and new wave rock as a critique of hegemonic masculinity that makes way for alternative masculinities, including Brandon's trans masculinity. Third, I will discuss the ambient-like, experimental music heard in the film as an auditory form of transgender utopia. Fourth, I will examine how Brandon and Lana's love story is narrated musically by means of a country ballad, *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, and how this music evolves into a representation of transgender utopia as well.

8 Here I am emphasizing the concentration of transgender studies primarily on non-normative genders instead of sexualities by using the notion of "transgender" as an equivalent theoretical term instead of or parallel to "queer": as an analytical concept that focuses on the demystification of (supposedly) stable sexes, genders, and sexualities, exposing the incoherencies and mismatches between these categories, and thus demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sex, gender, or sexuality, or any "natural" logic of identity politics (cf. Jagose 1996, 1–2). For transgender studies, see, e.g., Stryker & Whittle 2006; Stryker & Aizura 2013.

Alternative new wave masculinity

The soundtrack of *Boys Don't Cry* is overwhelmingly affective⁹ and music-rich. The score is a combination of compiled (i.e., pre-existing) and composed (i.e., original) music. The compiled music consists mainly of American country and rock songs. The original music, composed by Nathan Larson, draws on country and rock styles as well, but also on experimental ambient music. The most prominent musical styles in the soundtrack as a whole are country and rock. Some of the compiled songs are heard as diegetic music coming from radios and jukeboxes, and some are heard as non-diegetic music. The differentiation between the diegetic and non-diegetic music is not, however, important; whether diegetic or non-diegetic, the music functions in similar, basic ways, signifying the place and time, providing narrative cueing, and negotiating identities.

The compiled country (or country rock) music in the film includes, among other things, the pop country ballad *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, a rock'n'roll ballad, *New Shade of Blue* by Bobby Fuller (1964), and a southern rock classic, *Tuesday's Gone*, by Lynyrd Skynyrd (1973), all heard as diegetic music in a bar (though *The Bluest Eyes in Texas* is also heard in non-diegetic versions). This American mainstream country and rock style, which, from time to time, the original music too reflects, provides in sonic form the geographical and socio-cultural setting for the film. The country/rock music serves as an acoustic image of a small, midwestern, American town, with connotations of a rural (or rural-industrial) milieu of predominantly white people living in relatively poor conditions amidst provincial

9 By music's affectivity, I refer to the sensory quality of sound, its emotional intensity, and its overwhelming embrace of the listener together with its ability to enliven the bodily-based, non-linguistic, and pre-conceptual modes of experience. Affectivity has been much discussed in phenomenological and psychoanalytic music research. See, e.g., Schwarz 1997; Välimäki 2005; Thompson & Biddle 2013.

conservatism, including heteronormativity. This is the musical soundscape that seems to stem from the environment, from the bars, homes, trailers, cars, and other surroundings where the characters in the film dwell, as naturally as the roaring car engines on dusty roads or the hissing sounds of massive power lines in the open landscape.

For example, in an early scene, Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Tuesday's Gone* is heard in the background when Brandon walks into a bar to meet his new acquaintances, Candace, who is working there, and John and Tom, who are playing billiards and drinking beer. The piece is a hefty rock ballad characterized by the thick and powerful timbre of three electric guitars with a triplet accompaniment. It can be considered stereotypically "masculine" music: a sonic representation of hegemonic (macho and white) masculinity (e.g., Whiteley 1997; Ching 2008).¹⁰ This meaning is further enhanced by John and Tom's vulgar (and homosocially bonding) conversation, which concerns their sexual taste in women. When this music is played, Brandon and Lana see each other for the first time: heard from this perspective the music conveys Brandon's masculine identity¹¹ and heterosexual desire – his blending in, passing as one of the guys.

10 By hegemonic masculinity I am referring to a presentation of masculinity that is culturally dominant and exalted and is intended to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchy, i.e., the dominant position of men and the subordination of other genders. Physical strength, gender-normativity (non-transgenderness), heterosexuality, and readiness for violence, for example, are important features of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary western culture. Marginal or alternative masculinities, for their part, are masculinities that differ and are thus culturally marginalized and subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity. (Connelly 1995.)

11 Brenda Cooper (2002; cf. also Noble 2003) offers a detailed discussion of Brandon's non-normative masculinity as female masculinity. Though an important concept, female masculinity is not adequate for my purposes here, since I want to emphasize Brandon's gender identity and the related *internal body image* (male) rather than his actual body (female). This is why I talk about Brandon's masculinity as *trans* or *alternative* masculinity, but not as female masculinity. About the internal body image and the status of the body in transgender, especially transsexual, life, see Prosser 1998.

The socio-cultural dimension, in terms of class, age, gender conceptions, and social problems, is deepened by a more aggressive and noisy, hard-core rock style, which dominates the score together with country or country-rock styles. The musical landscape of the *Badlands* unfolds as a mix of American country and American hardline, psychedelic, punk, and new wave rock. As apt as it is for the subject matter of the film (gender non-conformity, i.e., alternative gender), the latter rock styles represent so-called *alternative* rock styles.

We hear, for example, such punk or new wave songs as *Just what I needed* by the Cars (1978), *Burning House of Love* by X (1985), *Space* by Butthole Surfers (1996), and *It's Alright* by the Dictators (1999). We also hear considerable number of psychedelic rock songs, such as *Codine [Blues]* by the Charlatans (1966), *Who Do You Love* by Quicksilver Messenger Service (1969), *Haunt* by Roky Ericson (1985), *She's Diamond* by Opal (1987), and *Fan Blades of Love* by the noise band Ed Hall (1995). Moreover, the original music draws significantly on this style as well. And some of these psychedelic and new wave songs are heavily country-inflected (e.g., *Burning House of Love* and *She's Diamond*), thereby fitting the basic setting of the film.

Psychedelic rock is a genre characterized by experimentation and extreme effects, extended solos and improvisation, heavy use of electric guitars and keyboards, early electronic instruments, complex song structures, and esoteric lyrics. It emphasizes wild, radical, and mind-altering experiences, imagination, and freedom from the oppressive constraints of society. (Whiteley 1992, 61–81; Zimmerman 2008; Charlton 2011, 144–155.) This counter-cultural ideology of the late sixties covered gender and sexuality too, manifested, for example, in androgynous styles and “beatnik sexuality.” From this point of view we may hear in the psychedelic rock of *Boys Don't Cry* Brandon's urge to be free of the oppressive gender norms of

society: thus we re-interpret the music's counter-cultural message as that of transgeneriness. The same naturally goes for the punk and new wave rock heard in the film as well, which are related to counter-cultural movements, social transgression, and desire for freedom, although in a somewhat more nihilistic and aggressive way, including more expressions of existential angst, alienation, and loneliness (Charlton 2011, 231–246; Sabin 1999).

In *Boys Don't Cry* this extremely energetic hardline rock becomes associated with Brandon's activities, his zest for life, his youthful enthusiasm and intense dreaming, his socializing with new friends, including dating a girl and building a life of his own. When heard in connection with Brandon, the reverberating, distorted, and noisy electric guitars, power chords, and throbbing beats narrate Brandon's feelings as a young man whose desires and problems in society are parallel to those of his gender (as a boy/man), his class (white, working, poverty class), and his generation (youth) in general. In this way the music constructs Brandon's transman masculinity as no different from cis-gendered male masculinity. We can say that Brandon's masculinity is just one instance of the various “new wave alternative masculinities,” which (post)hippies and (post)punk rockers represent. A gender outlaw – a man with a female body – is just one type of hippie/“deadhead”/punk outlaw.

Just What I Needed

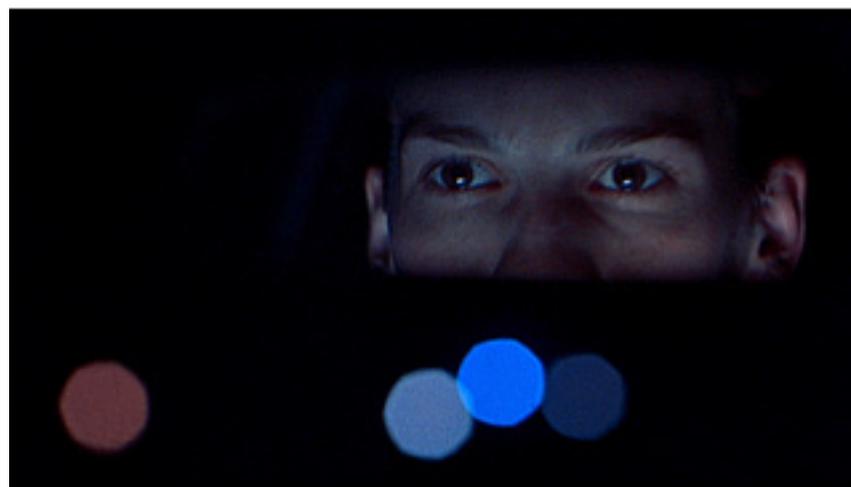
Accordingly, the hardline rock in *Boys Don't Cry* tells the audience two things: (1) most importantly, that Brandon is a man just like any other, and (2) that he is forced to fight the repressive power structures of society, namely, the dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative ideology. From the latter perspective, the music under discussion functions as a critique of the hegemonic masculinity

that dominates the film's social milieu; it plays out a critique of the patriarchal, heteronormative, homo/transphobic, and misogynist macho male masculinity. Thus the film's hardline rock also highlights the social problems of the present milieu, such as economic depression, destitution and poverty, unemployment, violence and domestic abuse, alcoholism and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and the overall gloomy or non-existent prospects of the have-nots: the flip side of the American dream and the trap of hegemonic masculinity as one of the constitutive power structures that create this social malaise.¹² The music reminds the audience of how fragile is the heteronormative, hegemonic, and patriarchal macho masculine (male) identity, which John and Tom, for instance, represent.

In my opinion, it is a clever solution, gender-politically speaking, to use a hardline rock style to communicate transgendered masculinity and heterosexuality. Hardline rock can be understood as promoting counter-cultural transgression, including alternative masculinities, but, at the same time, it is hyper-masculine music in its rock-rootedness, virtuous guitar playing, and overdrive energy.

A good example of the effective use of this alternative rock style takes place at the very beginning of the film. The title sequence mixes loud, hardline instrumental rock, the electronically manipulated and echoed sound of fast driving cars, blurred voices, and the wailing siren of a police car, with images of Brandon like a small town punk (see Figure 2). It is early night-

12 For discussions on the representation of the white working class in *Boys Don't Cry*, see Henderson 2001; Siegel 2003; Noble 2003; Cunningham 2007. These and other writers have pointed out that the film eliminates the question of race by omitting a third murder from the storyline, one that took place when Brandon Teena was murdered – an African-American man, Phillip DeVine. It could be added that the music in the film is completely “white” as well (we hear musical genres and styles that are dominated by white musicians and white audiences).



Figures 1–2. The film opens with a high-speed panorama of a blue, nighttime landscape, to reverberating ambient music: a powerful audiovisual space of possibility. Afterwards Brandon is seen driving a car, and the audio-space fills with hyper-energetic, hardline instrumental rock music that guarantees Brandon's masculine identity.

time on a deserted highway, and the lights of the cars enhance the sense of excitement constructed by the “testosterone-filled” instrumental rock music with distorted electric guitars, pumping bass, siren-like guitar figures, and heavy drumming (in the soundtrack release Larson called the piece *Boys*; see Larson 2005). The music signifies thrill, tension, and danger – and is stereotypically masculine. To put it simply: instead of the use of “weird,” science fiction-like music to introduce a transman to the audience for the first time, we hear hyper-masculine and highly energized music that wows the spectator with physical sensations and intense affects.¹³ The masculinity of a female-bodied transman can be as hyper-masculine, highly energized, and exciting as that of a cis-gender man.¹⁴

After about a minute, the image shifts to Brandon and his cousin in a trailer, and the music stops for a moment. The cousin has given Brandon a manly haircut, and the image segues to show Brandon on a date with a girl in a roller-skating rink. The music seems to have changed seamlessly to a new wave rock piece by the Cars called *Just What I Needed*. The piece moves in a fast tempo with a power pop beat, loud, distorted electric guitars and a penetrating synthesizer line representing masculine excitement, just as on the previous cue. Also, as in other places in the film, we hear the singing voice of a young man, which is easily identified with Brandon’s inner voice. Here the lyrics tell about a young man’s obsession with a girl (from a somewhat sarcastic perspective), which fits into Brandon’s dating activities. The repetition of the line “I guess you’re just what I needed” in

13 However, there is “outer space UFO” music when Lana’s mother (Jeannetta Arnetta) is introduced to Brandon and to the audience for the first time: the normatively gendered, alcoholic mother has passed out on the sofa in front of a television showing an old sci-fi program. Here the film obeys the rhetoric of queer inversion: the marginal (Brandon, transgender) is normalized and the normal (Lana’s mother, cis-gender) is pathologized.

14 The same music is heard later in the car chase scene where Brandon and his friends are fleeing from the police in Candace’s car, which Brandon is driving.

the refrain can be heard from a transgendered point of view as celebrating Brandon’s successful passing as a man and expressing the joy he feels in doing so. The passing is “just what Brandon needs.” The happy ending of his date, escorting the girl home, the goodnight kiss, and Brandon’s broad smile afterwards, is followed by the refrain in an ear-catching, emphatic way. The piece, as well as the title scene, ends here with the music being transformed into a hypnotically reverberating, ambient sound combined with a magical time-lapse shooting of a midnight blue landscape with dreamy clouds, all of which seem to affirm Brandon’s wish: *it is possible to be a man*. The reverberating echo is one of the many sonic constellations in the film that can be heard as a sonic space of possibility, a transgender utopia – a safe space for transgender subjectivity and a vision of a positive (transgender) future.

Boys don’t have vaginas?

The tension of hegemonic vs. marginal is distilled in the film’s title, *Boys Don’t Cry*. The title is a quotation from a song of the same name by an English alternative rock band, the Cure. One of the most famous of the band’s songs,¹⁵ it tells about a boy who has lost his love and is hiding his emotions, grief, and tears beneath his laughter, “because boys don’t cry,” i.e., owing to the dominant gender norms. As in the title of the film, the phrase expresses the conflict between accepted and non-accepted masculinity, and

15 The song is from the Cure’s first album, *Three Imaginary Boys* (1979), which was later reissued as *Boys Don’t Cry*. The title of the film and its relation to the Cure’s piece have been discussed earlier by Carol Siegel (2003). Siegel, however, does not write from a consistent transgender point of view, but instead emphasizes Brandon’s “biological femaleness” and his difference from “biological males.” According to Siegel, the film overemphasizes the gendered problems of transgender people at the expense of problems that “biological males” (like John and Tom) have in the violent hierarchy of masculinities – as if, according to Siegel, transmen did not belong to that same hierarchy.

the stereotypical heteronormative understanding of gender difference and the related hegemonic (patriarchal, macho) masculinity: girls/women are allowed to be emotional and fragile; i.e., they may cry, but for boys/men, crying is not allowed.

For many people in the film's audience, the well-known song is about the younger generation's sense of alienation and rage in a society that denies humanity (emotional expression) to boys/men (Siegel 2003, 2–3, 6). As Carol Siegel (2003, 4) writes, the Cure's song opens up "the hidden depression and defeats that traditional macho posturing attempts to hide," while conveying "a sense of the dark emptiness many young men feel as they perform culturally approved masculinity." References to this song are one example of the film's subtle ways of negotiating gender, hegemonic/alternative masculinity, and transgeneriness – portraying a transman's masculinity as an alternative masculinity. Brandon's masculinity is different from the hegemonic masculinity in the film, not only in the sense that he has a female body, but also in the sense that he does not express patriarchal ideology, machismo, and misogyny; rather he is expressive and talkative in his emotional communication, and he bonds well with women.

The song *Boys Don't Cry* is heard in the film in an important scene, although not in the Cure's original version but in Larson's cover version made specifically for the film.¹⁶ The song is played during a scene in which Brandon is in jail for small-time theft and fraud. It is precisely this episode that reveals to his friends that there is something unusual about him, since he is put into the women's department; the police officers act according to Brandon's legal gender status and the name on his identity card (Teena Brandon). Lana comes to visit Brandon in jail (and bail him out) and is

surprised to find him in the "girls' cell." Brandon whispers that he is a "hermaphrodite," having "both girl and boy parts," and "not quite a he." Lana responds that she does not care if Brandon is "half monkey"; she just wants to get him out of jail.

After this dialogue Lana reaches through the bars and takes Brandon's hand into her own, at which point the song *Boys Don't Cry* begins, as if in joyous, emotional outpouring following the pair's conciliatory and mutually approving conversation. The happy couple runs out of the jail to the accompaniment of the energetic and uplifting music, which seems to reinforce the bond between them and their overall optimistic attitude of overcoming all barriers erected between them, including those of gender (see Figure 3). The song works here as an emancipatory "power song." Undeniably, the image of the Cure at the time represented gender bending; the three boys who made up the band were known for their androgynous, pre-Gothic style with contrasting dark and light make-up.



Figure 3. Brandon and Lana run out of the prison to the sounds of a cover version of the Cure's song *Boys Don't Cry*, which works in the scene as a power song for alternative masculinity.

¹⁶ According to the director (Peirce 2002), the Cure's original version of the song sounded too British and 1980s to fit the film, which is why Larson was asked for a new version that would sound more American and 1990s.

And the Cure is still a popular band with younger audiences who reject traditional gender roles. (Cf. Charlton 2011, 294; Siegel 2003, 4.) Yet the Cure's music often uses explicitly heterosexual imagery. This too fits Brandon, who is heterosexual. In fact, we see later during this song Brandon and Lana making love in a car. Though punk and new wave music usually combine a sense of freedom with nihilism and aggression, this song is not by its overall affect angry, but rather lively and hyper-energetic, with catchy guitar lines, rhythmically pumping bass, an almost danceable beat, and a fresh young, boyish voice (Charlton 2011, 294).

Yet soon after the song begins, the music quickly quietens down and we see – as another montage line – John and Tom interrogating Candace in a sinister way about what she has found out about Brandon. The atmospheres in the two montage lines are contrary, and the music, shifting from loud to hushed, and then stopping completely, emphasizes the conflict between accepted and non-accepted masculinity.

Heard from the transgendered point of audition, the song's lyrics can be interpreted as depicting Brandon's loneliness, grief, and pain at having to hide his transgenderedness from his girlfriend:

I try to laugh about it
Cover it all up with lies
I try and
Laugh about it
Hiding the tears in my eyes
'Cause boys don't cry
Boys don't cry....

In the lovemaking scene in the car, these words are heard just before Lana says to Brandon that she would like to touch him in the same way he touches her, and she makes a move to do so. Brandon cannot respond

to her desire because “boys don't have vaginas.” He rejects her efforts and hides the tears that come to his eyes.

Another example illustrating transgendered re-signification of music occurs when Brandon is alone in his room in Candace's place. He is having periods. He puts in a tampon, binds his chest, and packs his crotch. There is no dialogue, only a loud, non-diegetic, psychedelic rock ballad. The piece is *Codine* [*Blues*] by the Charlatans (performed by a male singer).¹⁷ From Brandon's point of view, the depressing song can be heard as telling about his lonely struggle of transgenderedness in a female body that does not feel like his own:

An' my belly is craving, I got shakin' in my head
I feel like I'm dyin' an' I wish I were dead
If I lived till tomorrow it's gonna be a long time

[--]

You'll forget your woman, you'll forget about man
Try it just once, an' you'll try it again
An' it's real, an' it's real, one more time

Transgender hearing and sonic utopias

From the perspective of transgender subjectivity, perhaps the most interesting musical effects in the film are the otherwise silent (dialogue-free) sequences, in which Larson's original music builds a beautiful, quiet, slow, ambient-like, and experimental soundscape which buzzes electronically and “futuristically,” with strong, reverberating electric guitar sounds and “hallucinatory” echo effects. There are numerous variations

17 The piece was originally composed by Buffy Sainte-Marie in 1964.

on this experimental, ambient music in the film. Often it is characterized by wind chimes or other tinkling and humming elements, as well as by a drone and heavy reverberation. Its ambient nature is important: the music does not construct a linear progression, but a floating stillness and a sense of vast space, as if out of ordinary time and place. This music is joined with experimental and neo-surreal visual techniques of time-lapse photography showing static, night-time landscapes in an accelerated tempo, which results in stunning light phenomena. The audiovisual coordination constructs an imaginary space of possibility – queer time and space (cf. Halberstam 2005).¹⁸

The dreamy, floating, and quivering ambient music can be understood as the sonic equivalent of the “transgender gaze”, which Jack Halberstam (2005, 83) has traced in the film. According to Halberstam (2005, 77–78, 83–87, 91–92), the visually experimental moments in slow motion or at high speed create an imagistic counter-narrative in the film, a transgender gaze that enables seeing through the present to a future elsewhere. This form of transgender/queer audiovisual pleasure also forces the audience to adopt Brandon’s transgender gaze and thus to look *with* the transgender character and not *at* him. Likewise, we might speak of “transgender hearing,” which the experimental, ambient music constructs in the film. The music plays out a sonic realm of transgender dreams, hopes, and power, a sonic transgender utopia, a kind of acoustic “Wonderland of Oz,” where one can be whatever one feels is right:¹⁹ a safe space for a transgender mode of being in a world to which the audience is listening with Brandon.

18 Ambient music is an effective way to express queer identity, since it deconstructs many conventional binarities of musical discourse, such as movement vs. stasis, tension vs. release, or masculine vs. feminine (as traditionally understood in music) (see Välimäki 2007).

19 According to the film’s director Kimberly Peirce (2002), the idea of a Wonderland of Oz was important for the film’s audiovisual aesthetics. See also Phillips 2006, 144–146.

This experimental, ambient music is heard in many places throughout the film and always related in one way or another to dreaming about the future. The film begins with a short spurt of this music, an introduction to the hardline title music (*Boys*) and the driving sequence, discussed earlier. For the first 15 seconds we hear humming, tinkling, and whizzing ambient sounds with a strong reverberation and a pedal point that bounces like a mouth harp, conjuring up a sense of infinite space. Simultaneously, we see some production information against the black screen and then, just for a few seconds, a broad, nocturnal landscape in time-lapse photography: an audiovisual space of possibility (see Figure 1).

The next occurrence of this experimental, ambient music takes place in a scene in which Brandon is trying to fall asleep at Candace’s place and is thinking and dreaming of Lana with whom he has just become acquainted (shots of Lana cut between images showing Brandon in bed). Likewise, this music is heard when Brandon is taking photographs of Lana, and Lana tells Brandon, that she has dreamed about him. The same goes for the first sex scene between Brandon and Lana: the ambient music is heard at the beginning of the scene and later when Lana reminisces about their love-making. The music is also heard later, when Lana and Brandon talk about their shared future plans; Brandon has earned his first paycheck and is thrilled about the couple’s prospects.

This experimental, ambient music can also be thought to construct a safe haven for transgendered subjectivity outside cruel reality when Brandon – and the audience with him – experiences hard times and even in the midst of violence. In one traumatic scene, John and Tom humiliate Brandon at Lana’s home in front of people he has thought of as his friends. John and Tom strip Brandon and examine his intimate areas violently and force Lana to watch his exposed genitals. Just before this violent act, we hear for a brief moment experimental, ambient music like a protecting sonorous

envelope,²⁰ which remains “the true Brandon,” as long as it is, intact. The ambient music is heard when Lana tries to help Brandon by saying she knows that Brandon is a guy and he does not need to show her anything. Brandon explains that he was born with “this weirdness,” which is like a “birth defect.” Lana responds that she has “really weird stuff too” and looks out the window where the camera constructs the transgender gaze with a time-lapse shot of a spacious landscape with a blue, night sky and rapidly moving clouds. The music hums and floats in a gentle way with some guitar picking, a quiet vibraphone tremolo, and flute-like chords. Lana continues: “That’s us. We can beam ourselves out there.” The audiovisual transgender utopia reinforces the transgressive bond between the two protagonists, their urge for freedom, and their idea of a better world.

When a further humiliated and naked Brandon is shown in slow motion in a posture that reminds of the crucified Christ or the topic of *Ecce homo*, there is total silence for about five seconds. Silence is a traditional sign of trauma and death. Here it is an effective gesture: a way to “stop” the film for a moment and make the viewer to stop as well. In front of the painting-like image of a transgender martyr – an icon – the audience may reflect, mourn, and pay respect to the victims of transgender oppression and hate crimes.

Indeed, different kinds of silences are important to the film’s auditory narration; the scene described above is the most powerful of these and the only one with total silence. An interesting musical tranquillity characterizes the last sex scene between Brandon and Lana, which takes place sometime after the beating and rape of Brandon.²¹ This scene differs strikingly from the two earlier sex scenes between Brandon and Lana. It is shorter, more

allusive, and cautious in nature and nakedness is not on view as much as in the earlier scenes, despite the fact that, Brandon too is now naked. In the earlier sex scenes Brandon had not exposed his body to Lana and nor let her touch him in intimate areas. Now Brandon is without his clothes, chest binder, and penis prosthesis. Lana offers him oral or manual stimulation. She also asks about Brandon’s gender history as a “girl” – this is the first time they have met, just the two of them, to talk after Brandon’s forced “coming out” as a female-bodied (transgender) man.

In the previous two sex scenes the music graphically simulates sensuality, sexual tension, and orgasmic release. The first begins with experimental ambient music, but soon changes into a simple rhythmic beat with drumming and a guitar riff, the tempo and volume of which start to increase gradually together with Lana’s breathing and sighing – an acoustic image of sexual climax. The second sex scene (in the car) takes place against the pumping rock song *Boys Don’t Cry*. The third sex scene is musically less conventional. It plays out in a hushed and steady triadic chordal texture that undulates and reverberates almost unchanged throughout the scene. The static, minimalistic music sounds spiritual and delicate with ringing harmonics, open intervals, organ-like timbres, and a modal feeling.

Many scholars have interpreted this scene as portraying lesbian sex, even if they otherwise talk about Brandon as a transman (e.g., Henderson 2001, 300; Phillips 2006, 141–146). Halberstam (2005, 89–91), for example, criticizes the scene as differing from the film’s otherwise consistent f2m transgender-conscious narration by shifting from a transgendered point of view to a lesbian one. However, it is also possible to read this scene from a solid, reparative transgender perspective that takes into account the complexity of transgender sexuality (cf. Cahill 2010, 119–122).

Brandon does not refer to himself in this or any other scene as a lesbian or a woman. He is a transgender man even without his clothes, his packing,

20 I owe the term “sonorous envelope” to Didier Anzieu (1995; see also Välimäki 2005, 312).

21 Many writers have pointed out that it is surprising and even disturbing that Brandon is having sex so soon after being raped. See, e.g., Cahill 2010, 119.

and his binding. There is no “truth” under his clothing. Genitals do not define gender, and a man with a vagina does not turn into a woman (and a lesbian) if he lets his girlfriend touch his intimate parts; two naked, female-bodied persons having sex are not always lesbians. Indeed, we cannot control transgender people’s manifold ways of having sex and bodily experiences together by the genital-centered ideology of binary gender and hetero- vs. homosexuality. Transgender people may experience sex without caring about conventional conceptions of “appropriate” combinations of genitals, body parts, and genders.²² In this scene a reparative reading looks for transgender meanings and pleasure beyond all gender norms (including those of trans-normativity), regardless of the nature of anatomy or physical behavior.

This reparative reading gains force from the scene’s unconventional soundtrack. The auditory space is silent and bare, playing out fragile, almost inaudible ambient triads and the quiet sounds of kissing and breathing. There is no stereotypical musical simulation of (gendered) sexual processes, such as a teleological scheme of contrasting ideas, harmonic and rhythmic excitement, unification, and tension–release. Instead, there is a non-linear, steady, and sensitive musical stillness, where the focus seems to be on two people sharing something rather than an urgent need for satisfaction, fulfillment, or a particular kind of performance. The utopian music once again creates a kind of protecting sonic envelope: a “third space”

22 Transgender people often go stealth in public but they usually do not do so all the time with their partners, family, and intimate friends, i.e., at times they are feeling safe enough and knowing that their identity (gender) will not be questioned. Also, transgender persons, whether pre-, non- or post-operative, do not have to perform a similar kind of sex every time – even in a mainstream film (just as cis-gender people do not have to perform sex in one certain way). There are different kinds of men with vaginas; some may be willing to be touched in intimate areas and some may not, and this may vary during a person’s lifetime.

beyond the heteronormative, bi-gendered ideology. The scene seems to say that with Lana, it is possible for Brandon to be queer (transgendered) and that it’s all right, and that for Lana too it is possible and acceptable to be “weird” in the way she thinks she is. The scene also leaves more space for the audience’s imagination and response than did the previous sex scenes (cf. Cahill 2010, 122).

The music of healing and transformation

The evolving love relationship between Brandon and Lana is narrated musically in the film in a significant way. One particular country song, *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, serves as a *Leitmotif* for their love and develops into a sonic symbol of transgender utopia. Originally, the song was a country pop hit by Restless Heart (1988), a mix of mainstream country, rock, pop, and adult contemporary crossover. But in the film the original version is not heard. Instead, we hear various other versions made specifically for the film.

The song is a country ballad that tells about a lost love, which endlessly haunts the narrator:

The lonesome Texas sun was setting slow
In the rear view mirror I watch it glow
I can still see the wind and her golden hair
I closed my eyes for a moment I’m still there

The bluest eyes in Texas are haunting me tonight
Like the stars that fill the midnight sky
Her memory fills my mind
[– –]

Another town, another hotel room
Another dream that ended way too soon
Left me lonely praying for the dawn
Searching for the strength to carry on

The bluest eyes in Texas are haunting me tonight
[– –]

The song is first heard in an early scene, when Brandon and Lana meet for the first time. Brandon has entered the bar (during which Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Tuesday's Gone* is playing on the jukebox). After a while Lana, Candace, and Kate (Alison Folland) together sing *The Bluest Eyes in Texas* in a karaoke performance. As they sing Brandon and Lana exchange glances, a romantic atmosphere is thus attached to the song from its very first appearance. The relationship between Brandon and Lana begins with this song.

The second time we hear the song, Brandon is in bed at Candace's, trying to sleep and dreaming of Lana. The experimental, ambient music (discussed above) is here based on the material from *The Bluest Eyes in Texas* – and the same goes for the utopian ambient music in the photographing scene. In this way the experimental music and *The Bluest Eyes in Texas* are combined into a powerful, sonic symbol of transgender hearing and utopia.

The song is next heard when Brandon walks into a county courthouse to deal with his penalties or citations. Brandon and Lana have already become lovers, and, as he walks, Brandon dreams about his future with Lana; we hear Brandon's voiceover telling Lana about his plans to make a home with her. Simultaneously, *The Bluest Eyes in Texas* is heard in an instrumental arrangement, dominated by softly reverberating arpeggios on an electric guitar. Here too the music is attached to intense dreaming and love.

The piece is also heard at the end of the film, after the murders, when Lana wakes up next to Brandon's dead body. A static, fragmentary, and chaotic version of the theme is played in a minor mode (originally the song was in major) and with a strongly distorted electric (slide) guitar and robust tremolo effect: the song of Brandon and Lana is "broken."

After a while, at the very moment Lana begins to read the letter Brandon has written to her the day before, the music transforms into a humming ambient sound, and the letter is heard read by Brandon in a voiceover. At the same time, we see a landscape through the window of a moving car being driven by Lana. The focus has shifted to Lana alone and her future away from Falls City. At the precise moment when the letter (and Brandon's voice) ends, we see the highway – itself a symbol of freedom – at night and speeded-up motion, and the auditory space fills with powerful music. Here, at the very end of the film, we hear for the first time the entire song *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, in a relaxed and easy-going full-band version with the affecting voice of Nina Persson and a powerful guitar solo. Lana smiles and blue rays shine from her eyes (see Figure 4).²³ The audiovisual aesthetics that close the film affirm the transgender perception – the transgender gaze and hearing – Lana has adopted, and perhaps the audience too. The last few seconds of the image track (before the end titles begin to roll against a black screen) exploit the experimental visual techniques of speeded-up motion and graphics, which result in an explosion into a brightly lighted

23 Blue is the dominant color in the film, in the visuals (the set, the clothes, the nighttime landscape shootings, the blue camera lenses) and in the music (blue notes, blues influences and the song *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*). Blue seems to signify both the color of melancholy (tragedy) and the color of the future (the open sky, space) – the imaginative space of possibility. There is some symmetry in the film's overall structure: In the title sequence we see Brandon's (blue transgender) gaze in a close-up (looking back through the car's rear window) and at the end we see Lana's (blue transgender) gaze through the windshield (looking forward).



Figures 4–5. The film ends with a transgender gaze, transgender hearing, and a brightly lighted highway that leads to a better future; a country ballad, *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, constructs a sonic transgender utopia that continues to be heard during the end titles.

runway in radiant stripes of pastel colors, pointing to the future (see Figure 5). A transgender utopia as the end of a film that deals with oppression, violence, murder, and trauma is an effective reparative strategy.²⁴

Significantly, the song keeps going when the end credits start to roll. A song that begins at the end of a film and continues during the closing credits often has a ritualistic, meditative, and “religious” nature, prolonging the film’s message beyond its story and elevating it to a more general level (Chion 2009, 158–160). The music is tragic, since it reminds of Brandon’s lost life, but simultaneously it is an empowering and uplifting song in which transgender subjectivity continues to flow. In this way the film *Boys Don’t Cry* closes effectively with a reparative sonic space of transgender utopia, perception, and hearing.

Transgender politics

The aim of my analysis has been to show the importance of the musical dimension in the audiovisual construction of transgender identity in *Boys Don’t Cry* and through this case study to show thereby the importance of music in the audiovisual representations of transgenerness in general. Music is a powerful technology of gender because of its effective workings on the subject’s affective and bodily modes of experience to which conscious thought often pays little or no attention.

²⁴ Healing music at the end of a film that deals with traumatic content, offers the audience a non-verbal channel for the difficult affects evoked. In psychoanalytical terms, the music serves as an acoustic, reparative container (Bion 1962), which gives the fraught affects back to the perceiver in a bearable – and even beautiful – form, and by that gives the viewer power to confront the trauma. The music reconstructs the lost object (the transgender subjectivity) in symbolic form.

Boys Don't Cry is still an exceptionally interesting film, even fourteen years after its premiere, because it is one of those rare transgender mainstream films that has a transman as its protagonist; most of the transgender characters in the mainstream films and television series are still transwomen. *Boys Don't Cry* constructs Brandon's transmasculine identity by various musical strategies: by music attached to stereotypical as well as to alternative masculinity, by conventionally romantic music, and by ambient music that builds a transgressive space of possibility.

The various songs heard in the film guarantee Brandon's masculine identity by means of a careful gendering logic in the vocal parts. In particular, songs that accompany Brandon are sung by male voices: the music never imparts female vocal subjectivity to Brandon. Indeed, the first five songs in the film are sung by male singers; the first time we hear a female singer is when Lana is loafing at the gas station and Brandon watches her affectionately; there the music (*She's Diamond* by Opal, sung by Kendra Smith) embodies Lana. In one song we hear a female and a male voice singing together. Lana has come to meet Brandon who is going away for a while. The scene has a strong romantic feeling, and the music (*Burning House of Love* by X) resonates their mutual affection. The last song in the film, *The Bluest Eyes in Texas*, is sung by a female voice. Previously, it has been heard in the film in the girls' karaoke version and in various instrumental versions in which the melody is played by an electric guitar. The female voice at the end of the film emphasizes that the focus has shifted from Brandon (or Brandon and Lana) to Lana alone. The music represents her as the carrier of transgender utopia.

The narrative schema of romance, typical of mainstream cinema, plays a significant role in the representation of transgender utopia in *Boys Don't Cry*. However, the romance is atypical in many respects. There is no romantic closure in the film, nor is there a traditional love tragedy or a

Liebestod scheme. At the end Lana does not want to leave Falls City with Brandon; she seems to need more time, feels insecure, or has changed her mind, and Brandon is sympathetic and supports Lana's choice. Then, after Brandon is killed, Lana leaves her old life, largely because of Brandon's example and support. In this way, the film emphasizes personal choice (subjectivity) over romantic cliché.

Another issue related to mainstream narrative formulas is the tragic ending for the queer character: is the gender-politically liberal topic subjected to the prejudiced idea that queer life must always be tragic and violent in order to gain mainstream success for the film? Naturally, in a hate-murder narrative, the tragic ending is unavoidable. However, in my reparative listening, despite Brandon's death, *Boys Don't Cry* creates a transgender utopia that extends the gender-politically progressive message beyond the story. At the end of the film, the cis-gendered carrier of transgender perception reminds us that transgenerness is a subject that touches the whole of society, not just a small and marginal part of it.²⁵ Identities develop socially and require safe, shared spaces in order to be maintained. In a community that embraces gender variance, cis-gender people may also have transgender perception.

25 Moreover, Lana can be read as a queer character too and yet she survives.

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