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# *Psycho*, *The Danish Girl*, and *Disclosure* : Transgender Representation in Film

Grace Quinowski

Films during the 20th and 21st centuries have portrayed people of the LGBTQ community as killers, rapists, monsters, etc. These inaccurate depictions have been around as early as the 1910s and are still harmful in today's society. In this paper, I explore the problematic themes behind *Psycho* (1960) and *The Danish Girl* (2015), and demonstrate how the documentary *Disclosure* (2020) aims to highlight and correct the misrepresentation found in the media.

## **PSYCHO**

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is an early example of portraying gender non-conforming individuals as mentally ill. This 1960 film shows how secretary Marion Crane, desperate to start a new life with her boyfriend Sam, steals \$40,000 and winds up staying the night at Bates Motel. There, she meets Norman Bates who fights with his mother behind closed doors. A shadowy figure (which turns out to be Norman) emerges and kills the supposed heroine Marion 45 minutes into the film. According to Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffins,

Norman Bates is not just a serial killer; his behavior is connected to his mother's sexual choices and his own sexual ambivalences. *Psycho*, of course, does not support Norman's cross-dressing choice, and it places the blame on mother—both sexuality and bad mothers being common 1950s discourse. (p. 169)

This quote explains how in the movie *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates is portrayed as

a cross-dressing psychopath when in reality he is most likely suffering from multiple personality disorder triggered by him murdering his mother 10 years prior to the events of the film. Norman's choices are clouded by the alternate personality of his mother; the “mother” became jealous of Marion's affection towards Norman and killed her. Alas, being the devoted son, Norman then gets rid of Marion's car and disposes of the body.

The way Alfred Hitchcock depicts Norman Bates is troublesome; *Psycho* is the precursor for many trends in film, but most importantly the slasher horror genre. According to John Phillips, *Psycho*, “provides the original model of the mentally disturbed cross-dressed murderer” (p. 87). This leads to the harmful way we view people of the transgender community. When Marion's sister Lila Crane finds the corpse of Norma Bates, Norman (who is dressed in his mother's clothes) attempts to attack Lila before being stopped by Sam. Lila sees Norman and is horrified at the image of him in mother's clothes. *Psycho* portrays Norman as, “a weakling who is overpowered by his mother, who murders people. Norman's gender-bending, expressed by dressing and

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living as his mother, threatens gender binaries and thus creates a veritable monster” (The Scattered Pelican, 2018). The stereotype provided by Hitchcock in which all members of the transgender community are monsters and murderers is extremely misguided and very hurtful.

### **THE DANISH GIRL**

In the film *Disclosure*, actress Jen Richards states, “Having cis men play transgender women is, in my mind, is a direct link to the violence against trans women” and is referring to Eddie Redmayne's performance in *The Danish Girl*. The film shows how real-life transgender artist Lili Elbe embraces her gender and how she was one of the first recipients of a gender confirmation surgery. According to Keegan (2016),

*The Danish Girl* represents transgender identity as well as the transgender body as creations of the cisgender imagination. The presence of Redmayne in the film reinforces the evacuation of the historical Lili from her own narrative, producing a politically inferior product that is easily consumed by audiences who might assume that transgender women are actually mentally ill ‘men in dresses’ (p. 55).

This quote sheds light on just how problematic Eddie Redmayne's portrayal of Lili Elbe is. Redmayne is a cisgender white male portraying a trans-gender woman. This is problematic because the audience doesn't see Lili as transgender due to the fact that a *cis white male* is playing a *transgender woman*. If a transgender actress was cast as Lili, this wouldn't be a problem.

In *The Danish Girl*, Lili's wife Gerda grows increasingly uncomfortable with Lili's existence. The movie portrayal suggests that Gerda “created” Lili due to having her then-husband Einer pose as female figures for her paintings. This idea is immensely flawed and to viewers is damaging to their mentality on

how they perceive transgender people. From Lili Elbe's autobiography Gerda says, “In recent months I have felt prickings of conscience because I was, to a certain extent, the cause of creating Lili, of enticing her out of you.” In the film, Gerda even asks Lili, “Did I do this to you? Sometimes I wonder if it hadn't been for the paintings-” (*The Danish Girl* 1:21:40). This exhibits how erroneous the idea is that Gerda “created” Lili. It is taking away the importance of Lili and reducing her to merely a creation of Gerda, which is simply inaccurate and entirely false.

### **DISCLOSURE**

The 2020 Netflix documentary *Disclosure* exposes the misrepresentation in many films and TV shows by mostly interviewing different artists and actors of the transgender community. The intentions behind this documentary are to inform the viewers of LGBTQ history in Hollywood in order to correct and curb the years of misrepresentation within American media. The director of *Disclosure*, Sam Feder, stated in a 2020 interview with Decider, “I wanted to give trans and non-trans people alike more context to understand these public changes in our culture and how we got to this point of this visibility. I wanted to foreground that we couldn't lose sight of the fact that visibility in itself is not the goal.” This goes to show that when creating the documentary, he wanted to tell the history of the transgender community and how to correct the long-standing misrepresentation.

Feder's *Disclosure* was created with representation front and center. The film itself is very empowering and inspiring due to the diversity among the cast and crew. The artists interviewed for *Disclosure* are very diverse and Feder made it a point to interview POC (people of color) who are part of the LGBTQ community. Such artists include actress Laverne Cox, actress Sandra Caldwell, filmmaker Yance Ford and many

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more. Sam Feder is a transgender man himself, so it's safe to assume *Disclosure* is a very accurate portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community and how it exposes the egregious misrepresentation throughout history.

To conclude, *Psycho* (1960), *The Danish Girl* (2015), and *Disclosure* (2020), highlights the unacceptable representation in the media. The representation in *The Danish Girl* compared to *Psycho* is still very problematic. Films like *Psycho* and *The Danish Girl* are problematic representations and leave

viewers with false depictions and hurtful portrayals. Even though *The Danish Girl* was made 55 years after *Psycho*, the film and other films like it are immensely flawed. A documentary like *Disclosure* gives realistic representations that attempt to curb the misrepresentation rooted in our society since the 1910s. The representation of the LGBTQ+ community has come a long way since the 20th century, yet there is still a long way to go in terms of full and appropriate representation.

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