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Film Analysis

English 240

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Boys Don't Cry

Kimberley Pierce does not force her audience to identify with Brandon Teena but allows this identification to happen on its own through the character's connection with others, his strong desires, and the close proximity we are given to his life. Pierce uses close-up camera shots to establish a sense of emotional connection between her audience and the main characters and uses a confined setting to show the sense of limitation that Brandon feels. He is trapped not only in his female body but in the environment he lives in. As much as he talks about getting out and going to Memphis, he is stuck in Nebraska. He cannot escape the life he has been given, nor the body he has. The consequences of being trapped and longing for something just out of reach strike a sort of emotional link with audiences, which they come to feel even more closely and relate to more easily because of how close the camera places them in relation to the characters.

It does not seem plausible that the audience of the late 1990s was ready, much less eager to see a story of a transgender man. It is now almost twenty years after the film's release, and the society of today is still filled with animosity towards transgender people. Realistically, it is logical to assume that the atmosphere of the world when *Boys Don't Cry* came out would only have been worse than it is today. With this observation in mind, one would be right to wonder exactly what it is about this film that has made it so successful and relatable to an audience that should have been even more ignorant and adverse to hearing its message than the audiences of

today. To answer this question, look at what the director has accomplished in creating a character that is at once so alien and at the same time conveys emotions which are so easily contagious.

The idea of Brandon being a sort of “other” compared to a society that is so fixed in its conventional ways is nothing new. Being transgender obviously sets the main character far apart from the rest. And yet, the acknowledgment that even with this stigma, Brandon is somehow still a relatable character is still not so absurd. It is no mystery why Brandon is such a relatable character. He is kind, protective, a dreamer, and “there’s just something about him” (Pierce 1999). These are not traits that turn people off. So although it is no shock that Brandon is relatable, what is impressive and worth discussion is the director’s choices, which accomplish this relation to the main character. It is through the use of restricted setting and close-ups focused on the character’s faces that the audience is given the opportunities they need to connect with Brandon and his feelings, and so resonate with the film itself. *Boys Don’t Cry* obviously gives its audience an outcast; what is not so obvious are the subtle ways in which Kimberly Pierce leads her audience gently by the hand to the realization that they can feel an emotional bond with this outcast.

When looking at the setting of the film, it is impossible not to notice the overwhelming number of scenes that take place in confined spaces. Dimly lit bars, crammed cars, and tiny little houses are where the majority of the action takes place. These constricted places seem to be a sort of reference to Brandon’s sense of being trapped and his inability to get away from the oppression and constriction of the small towns of Nebraska. The setting seems to reflect his inability to break free and be his true self. By constantly looking at scenes where the spaces are limited, the audience can acknowledge the feelings of being constricted that Brandon feels.

Much of the action of the film takes place in the seats of a car, whether this action is good or bad. Also, Brandon's best and worst experiences happen on the seats of a car, in a very small space which he sometimes cannot escape from. From having sex with Lana to being raped by John and Tom, to the scene when the group of friends drives down the desert road fleeing the cop, these actions all take place in a cramped car.

When the group of friends is at Lana's house and John wants to talk to Brandon, he sits right next to him, puts an arm around his shoulder, and keeps touching him or rubbing his head. This close proximity could be seen as friendly in some respects, but the audience knows that something is off and this closeness is more an invasion of Brandon's privacy than it is a welcoming gesture from a buddy. The point here is that the uncomfortable feeling the audience gets from watching this scene comes from John looming over Brandon and taking up his space. Showing the main character constantly confined to a small vehicle or a crowded couch gives the audience a very obvious and recurring sense of being stifled or restricted. This is done to give a glimpse of how Brandon must live his life. He cannot be completely free.

This idea of confinement and limited spaces is infrequently but beautifully broken up by the few shots of the racing highway lights under the dark blue and wide open sky. These shots emphasize the dream of "getting out" and of making it somewhere that is not so cramped as Lincoln or Falls City; a place where it is safe to truly be oneself. Like the one in the opening sequence, these few shots are the most magical in the entire film. The highway lights race along at hyper speed and the sky is a beautiful dark blue. Even the clouds are rushing by fast and the camera moves up to show a wide night sky, full of open space and possibility, the exact opposite of the confined setting of the rest of the film. It is a refreshing pace change from the banal

landscape of Nebraska. Although these shots of the sky are picturesque, they represent a dream that simply isn't real. In fact, shortly after the scene where Brandon is shot, another shot of the landscape and sky is shown, but this time it is completely still; with no fast-moving cars and no beautiful dreamy shot up into the clouds. Brandon never makes it to Memphis.

Close-up and medium close-up shots are by far the most common in this film. This places the audience in a personal space with the characters. Amy Coplan expresses this idea of closeness expertly when she says, “a scene from a film that focuses on a character’s face, is typically shot in close-up, and during which the pace of the narrative slows down and the character’s interior emotional experience becomes the locus of attention” (Coplan, 29). In her essay, “Catching Character’s Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film,” Coplan talks about emotional contagion, which is described as “an automatic and involuntary affective process that can occur when we observe others experiencing emotions” (Coplan, 26). By seeing close-ups of the character’s faces, the audience is brought closer to the character’s thoughts and feelings.

There are so many close-ups of Brandon’s face, it is hard not to ask what these shots mean. The director is allowing her audience to get as close to Brandon as possible and to see the emotion in his eyes, the longing he has for Lana and for a different life. They see the anguish he is feeling in the jail cell when he must confess to Lana that “Brandon’s not quite a ‘he,’ Brandon’s more like a ‘she’” (Pierce, 1999). The two are shown extremely close-up in this scene, but Brandon is still somewhat concealed by the bars of the jail cell. He is opening up to Lana, but not completely yet. The audience sees a character who is desperate to connect, but who is still

flawed and isn't fully honest. This type of character is much more realistic and easy to connect with than if Pierce had made Brandon a portrayal of perfection.

Just as an audience attempts to 'figure out' the characters they are asked to connect with, there are three close-up scenes of other characters holding and intently examining Brandon's face. First, John grabs him and checks out the cut he got from the bar fight, not really looking much deeper than the surface. Then at the breakfast table one morning, Lana's mom asks Brandon to come to her saying, "closer where I can see you. Let me look at you in the light" (Pierce, 1999). She takes his face in her hands and looks at him as if she is attempting to figure out his secret or see who he really is. The mother can only take him at face value because once it is revealed that he is biologically female later in the film, she can no longer accept it. However, this 'examination' becomes sweet and tender when it is Lana who is looking at him. She caresses his face and tells him "you're so handsome" (Pierce, 1999) after they have sex for the first time, and she seems to be connecting with him instead of trying to see through him. Seeing this affection and acceptance Lana shows for him makes it easier for an audience to connect with Brandon when they may otherwise have a difficult time in doing so. He even looks a little scared when she's staring at him as if he doesn't believe that someone is really accepting him, but Lana accepts him until the very end.

When Brandon is telling Lana personal things about his life, even when these things are not completely true, the camera is right there, "up close and personal" to allow the audience to be let in as much as Brandon is letting in Lana. The audience can "converge emotionally" (Coplan, 27) with the character by observing his facial expressions so intimately. He opens up to Lana in ways he has never done with a woman. It is through moments like these that the director allows

Brandon's pathos to draw from the viewer a sense of feeling for this character, or maybe even a stronger sense of identification. One does not have to be transgender like Brandon or even be gay or lesbian for that matter to understand that sharing things which are deeply personal can be a frightening experience. When an audience can get as close to a character as Lana gets to Brandon, it becomes much more of a challenge not to identify at least somewhat with that character and their desires.

Furthermore, these close-ups allow the audience to connect with Lana's positive feelings for Brandon. If a person connects more with Lana than with Brandon, they are still brought to the same conclusion through her feelings for him. The scene in which Lana wakes up laying on her dead lover conveys so much profound sadness and anguish without using a word of dialogue. Coplan reminds her readers that it is not only through the facial expressions but also through the time length of a shot that the audience feels a connection when she tells them, "the kinds of scenes that elicit emotional contagion include shots of characters' faces that are of a much longer duration than the average shot" (Coplan, 29). The audience is asked to experience Lana's pain with her through the closeness of the camera, which stays right on her face for nearly a minute as she wakes up and gazes at his dead body.

In this scene, it is also impossible to miss the ring on Lana's finger that was given to her by Brandon. Although it is only a cheap gas station trinket which was stolen, Lana continues to wear this gift. Their love is sweet and very dear to Lana, and this is clearly shown in not only this scene but many others when the camera is close to her face. She doesn't care that he is locked up in the girl's cell and confesses to her that he is more of a woman than a man. When they first have sex, she definitely notices Brandon's cleavage through the top of his shirt but chooses not to

say anything about it and just accepts him. Even when she is telling Candice and Kate about this experience, she is giddy when she recalls it, almost like a girl in love for the first time. The camera stays very near to her face as she blushes and tells the girls about her night with Brandon. It is clearly established through these types of shots that Brandon brings happiness into Lana's dull life and it seems difficult for an audience to dislike a character that brings so much joy to someone else.

It is clear that the director is "able to guide and influence our perception of characters and their experiences" (Coplan, 29) through her choice of setting and close-ups focusing on the character's faces and expressions. Pierce has taken a character who seems to be far outside of the norm and almost without the audience's knowledge, leads them to connect with him. The director is trying to bring the audience as close to an emotional understanding of Brandon as she can. In doing this, they will find within them that human connection and understanding that can and should be expanded to all aspects of life. Understanding one another despite differences is an essential lesson everyone should embrace, and Pierce helps her audience learn this all over again in her wonderfully constructed film of the life and death of Brandon Teena.

References

Coplan, Amy. "Catching characters' emotions: Emotional contagion responses to narrative fiction film." *Film Studies* 8.1 (2006): 26-38.

Boys Don't Cry. Dir. Kimberly Pierce. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.