

Deconstructing Gender: Laurence Anyways and the Mise-En-Scene of a Transition

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Abstract.

Basing the analysis on Xavier Dolan's third full-length film *Laurence Anyways*, and its *mise en scene* of the main character's odyssey to become a woman and the struggles she had to overcome in order to find his true identity; the intention is to unveil the relations between the film, its context and some gender theories [specially **Judith Butler's**], touching subjects such as the need for freedom to the individual in order to reach empowerment, freedom only possible under the others acknowledgement of the difference. All the above trying to remark the importance of questioning the hegemonic- binary divided society at all fields: politics, education and art.

This short dissertation is an analysis of how the film propose both aesthetically and plastic portrait of the transgression of the rule, not only by portraying a character who refused to follow the binary division between men and women, male and female, but also, by proposing a transgressive and rebel poetic in various and complementary levels such as its narrative, tale and frame composition. By stylizing a bygone era- the nineties- with flamboyant ballroom dancing scenes, and sequences that looks more like music video-clips inlaying into it's almost three hours of length, the film main value it to put the spectator in the obligation to see, acknowledge and understand the painful reality that those in this condition have to go through, questioning his moral about difference.

Keywords: Laurence Anyways, Xavier Dolan, Judith Butler, Mise-en-scene, Gender, Transition, Transsexuality.

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Can one's writings, therefore, be great enough to exempt one from the rejection and ostracism that affect people who are different? One who, in another time-space, could be you or me?

Introduction

Can the cinema contain the rejection and ostracism that suppose the no representation of the difference?

In 2013 Xavier Dolan presents his third full-length film: *Laurence Anyways*. The movie is set in the nineties and narrates the history of a man, Laurence, who in the course of ten years accomplishes the transition to become the woman he was meant to be. The film is interwoven between the vicissitudes, difficulties and emotional pains of his transformation, taking as a transverse axis his relation with Fred, with whom the difficulties are the center of the plot.

From this film, there are multiple and different points for the analysis. For instance, we can examine its cinematography and the rejection to the norms and standard procedures established in the conventional cinema of the 20th century. Or, we can go deeply into its narrative, the time and the strategy used to tell the story; since it is through an interview to Laurence (carried out in Montreal in 1999 on the occasion of his new book) that the story is weaved. In this narrative the ellipses of time are given not only by means of a title "2 months later" or "Île au Noire, 1996" but also by means of elements of the cinematographic language such as the length or the cuts of the hair of the characters, the showing of calendars or the dialogs.

Although we can continue to scrutinize the cinematographic, aesthetic and narrative elements that the movie offers us –the non-diegetic elements falling from the sky for example, an usual device in Dolan's work– this story forces us to involve other disciplines, to establish a dialog between the cinematographic theory and gender studies, between art and social sciences, between art and humanism, because is the exploration of that what makes us human beings, and is perhaps one of the most pertinent starting points.

This article will look closely at the interiority of Laurence as a human being, his deep and complicated love relationship, the suffering that for someone like him represents life, the tension that he experiments for being in a body that he doesn't recognize, for transforming it and for questioning the sex-genre-desire system in which he doesn't have a place. In other words, we wonder in what way the movie *Laurence Anyways* proposes a representation of the transgression to the gender normativity, in an aesthetic, narrative and plot dimension, by an analysis of the non-hegemonic performativity of gender.

The first part will center in the question of the binary order and the break of the normative made both by the movie and by Laurence. The second part approaches the transformation of the order by *other* performativities. In both, the essential issue is the definition and performance of gender, identity and representation.

1. The question of the binary order and the break of the regulation

The order and the question of an order

In 1990 Judith Butler publishes *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, considered the foundational book of queer theory and pioneer in the development of a gender performativity theory. As his authoress indicates in the preface of the 1999 edition, "I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity". Butler questions the idea of the gender as constructed in correspondence with sex and desire, and also questions the naturalness of the sex and the body.

In other words, this means that the sex is a social product which is affected by gender normativity; this is to say that the body is only known by its gender appearance and through a social imaginary. Butler distinguishes between the material dimensions of the body and the process by which the body carries cultural meanings; the previous to affirm that the body is always an incarnation of possibilities simultaneously determined and circumscribed by the historical convention.

Consider that there is a sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex, or a areal woman, or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another. (Butler, 1988, p. 524)

Besides denaturalizing the idea of sex, Butler emphasizes that gender is not a fact but a repetition of acts instituted by the stylization of the body and enforced through certain modes of punishments and rewards. Hereby, Butler breaks the naturalized correspondence between sex and gender. And she continues: "Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis (...) The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" (Butler, 1988, p.522). In this way, masculinity and femininity ideals are constructed, ideals configured as allegedly heterosexual, which suggests an alignment between sex, gender and desire.

Now then, departing from Laurence's story, what does it mean to transcend that alignment between sex-gender-desire, not only because Laurence doesn't recognize the materiality of his body and intervenes in it in order to transform it, but also because he doesn't execute the distinction of gender according to his body's materiality, and also because even as a woman in a man's body he feels attracted by Fred? How does the society react and handle this situation?

The other and the look

Butler's work proposes a discussion on the *other*: that that is intelligible, illegible, impossible, unrealizable, unreal, illegitimate, inhuman, and incoherent; that that doesn't fit into the dominant codes and order. It is also a reflection on power relations

because there is an implicit division between what is acceptable and what is not. This implies that in certain cases the *other* is not considered as a human being, and the *other's* life is not considered worth of being lived, being wept, being felt. At last, it is a question about the panic that the unthinkable generates.

We might say that the first sequence of the movie, supported by a non-diegetic music, stages the society's regard to Laurence. The first sequence is composed by foregrounds of young people, women, mothers, elders; they look directly to the camera and they seem to follow Laurence, as she is walking in front of them. We can identify a similar sequence after Laurence's first appearance dressed as a woman at school (40:20). Laurence crosses the halls of the school and a subjective camera captures the fixedly looks of the students and teachers. Once again, those looks follow him, although in this opportunity there are middle-ground, short cut and *raccourci* shots. Both scenes stage the look to the different and illegible from the normative genre codes.

The movie is fulfilled with stylistic and aesthetic choices that connote by analogy the social horrors to which the different is submitted. We identify, for example, references to the classic art. One of these occurs when Laurence writes in the blackboard "Ecce Homo" (1:02:00) after he is fired from the school. The paintings that refer to the moment of Jesus' crucifixion are usually identified with this expression. Laurence writes these words after being 'crucified' by the school council for his gender/sex conversion, for being different. In the same way, we can observe the images of grotesque paintings –i.e., horrible faces who seem to be judging– after Laurence was hit by a man in the bar for looking different, while walking through the street looking for help (1:06:04).

Even though, perhaps the scene that more explicitly shows the tense relation between the society and what is different, occurs at the restaurant. The waitress who is attending them makes unpleasant and annoying comments on Laurence's looks.

Fred, very upset stands up and answers:

-“You stupid old bag! Who the fuck do you think you are? What's with the stupid fucking questions? Don't talk to me. Don't ask questions. [...] Do you walk in my shoes? Do you live my life? You and your questions, stay out of my life! You have no right over me! You don't have the right to talk to us! Serve coffee, bring food, pick up your dollar and shut the fuck up!”- (1:16:50)

This is one of those sequences where the film seems to address directly to his audience, as its narrative – Fred's speech- more than its aesthetics, puts the spectator facing what comes as a furious and weary response to the pressure Laurence and Fred are facing all through Laurence transformation.

The recognition of the difference

The present time in the movie is the interview to Laurence in Montreal in 1999. The movie is narrated in a not lineal way and it is the interview the one that spins such circularity. The movie finishes with the beginning of the story that is about to tell: the time in which Fred and Laurence meet back in 1987; and it begins moments before the interview with the journalist, that marks the end of the story that unfolds the

movie: i.e. the culmination of the relationship between Laurence and Fred, and Laurence's accomplished transition into a woman. That's why we can affirm that the *A-Z woman* (Fred and their relationship) is the best vehicle to mobilize his journey to transformation.

Throughout the movie, Laurence and the journalist have an interaction that comes and goes between cordiality and rebuff. In most part of the film, this conversation occurs exclusively in voice-off, the spectator can only hear them speak and narrate. The woman, elegant and refined, has an attitude towards Laurence that seems to represent what a western conventional and conservative spectator feels towards such a discord with the normativity Laurence embodies.

In the last part of the film, it is understood that during part of the interview, the journalist did not dare to look at Laurence in the eyes. She didn't admit her through the inclusion of the sight, which supposes being aware of the presence and existence of someone else. Even if she is respectful, it is clear her discomfort, her bewilderment and curiosity. The snub seems to happen at the beginning of the conversation, and the *reconciliation* seems to have place not long after Laurence and the journalist meet – although it is shown at the end of the film.

The film positions this character as a mirror of the spectator. In other words, the viewer is the interviewer as, it is not only throughout her that we found out what happened, but also, she asks what the spectator wonders; and the *mise-en-scene* reinforces this illusion because Laurence looks directly at the camera when she is talking to her, so it seems that she is talking directly to the spectator (us).

The viewer is placed on the skin of the journalist through the camera. Laurence is facing the camera, looking at us, winking at us, and after hearing the entire story we are obliged to accept the existence of his difference when the woman agrees to look at him into her eyes. The film seems to say at this point: these almost 3 hours of film should not be in vain, you should now understand that the difference exists, acknowledged it, and that gender norms are as ridiculous as the idea of an exclusively binary world.

At this point, it is pertinent to go back to the subject of the look. After being questioned by Laurence about not looking at her directly, the journalist says: "Do looks matter to you?" To which she responds: "And you? Does air matters to your lungs?"(2:25:30). This phrase shows the need for recognition by the look, to recognize its difference and if it is admitted under our consistent look, marginalization fades-out. In other words, the look is important because we are not accepting the difference when trying to do it without seeing it, without looking at it, by ignoring it. It is only really accepted when viewed and acknowledged.

Another important *mise-en-scene* of this argument is the relationship between Laurence and her mother. She, at first, partially *accepts* Laurence's announcement about his transition, but warns him that her door will be closed whenever he is dressed as a woman. For example, after being dismissed by the board and after the violent fight at the bar, Laurence calls his mother on the phone asking for help. His mother tells him she cannot leave the house. Laurence insists on a meeting, but she refuses and tells him: "You disappear from our lives, suddenly you show up at the office, you call out of the blue, did I ask you to?" Laurence replies: "I stayed away from you

because I didn't want to see you... until I'd be honest! [...] Until I was myself!”. However, over time their relationship changes. At a meeting in a cafe by 1995 the mother tells Laurence: "You could change your sex, I can change my address" (1:51:04) and laughs. And later she adds: "I never saw you as my son, but I can tell you that I see you as my daughter now" (1:53:32). This change demonstrates the final recognition of the difference and its acknowledgement.

2. Other performativities: to transform the order

The political character of gender

By deconstructing sex and gender, Butler introduces a political character in her theory, because she undoes and redefines the restrictive normative concepts of sexuality and gender; because she thinks the gender beyond the masculine-feminine binaries; because she reformulates the question about the human; because she refers to the existence of real people that experience the rejection and the violence for being different, i.e. by their sexual orientation; because she opens a gap for social transformation. Gender norms are subjected to re-negotiation, since they are unstable and depend on a stylized repetition of acts.

There is a prevalent violence against LGBTI community around the world. For instance, in Colombia, from 2006 until today, 433 cases have been reported. “This includes situations as homicides, sexual violence, intra-familial violence, threats, forced displacement and forced disappearances” (Martinez Hernández, 2015)

This frames us in another way of understanding power and power relations. Power does not limit to coercion or physical repression, because it also encompasses the production of meanings, of subjects, of speeches, of orders, of identities and of representations. Hereby, power becomes manifest in the representation, and also by imposing a determined organization of the word, by categorizing the human beings, by supporting a symbolic and social order that rejects the difference. And, in consequence, Laurence transition to become the woman he was meant to be has to be considered as a dispute: a dispute of the human being in the world, a dispute of the order of the things, in order to achieve control of one's own life and to question the normalized representations. Butler writes:

The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what is it to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question (Butler, 2001, p. 8)

This implies producing new possibilities for experiencing gender and “constructing a world in which people could live and breathe inside the sexuality and the gender they already live” (Belgrano Rawson, 2009). Gender is extra-moral and is it not appropriate to speak of *good* or *bad* genders (Birulés, 2008). Nevertheless, it is imperative to be careful of not falling into radical determinism or radical voluntarism.

In other words, we are not totally determined because there is a margin for practices of freedom and resistance. But simultaneously, we are located in a social, economic, cultural and political context that restricts and limits the horizon of possibilities.

The Transition

At the end of 1989, after turning 35 years old, Laurence confesses to Fred his real identity. "Why didn't you tell me you were gay?" Fred asks. Laurence answers: "I'm not gay, Fred! It's not that I like men. I'm just not made to be one. It's different." (00:23:19).

The first allusive image of the transition on the movie happens in the classroom. The students take an exam, Laurence sits in front of them, and we can see on the end of each of his fingers a paper clip that emulate long nails. The journalist on the interview asks him: "Was the transition... an overnight thing? Or a slow process? And from a professional standpoint? 'Cause that will be the central topic". To which Laurence answers: "Strutting out in a fabulous skirt wasn't enough, I had to go all the way. Dive right in" (00:37:21)

From this point Laurence undertakes an odyssey. The film shows the character crossing a deserted park in winter and before a bifurcation in the way, we see him take a decision and going until the end. This is how Laurence begins his process to change his body and his appearance. He begins to wear make-up, nail polish, to put on earrings and necklaces, to wear skirts, dresses and heels; he begins electrolysis to eliminate the body and facial hair and to take hormones.

In the part of the movie titled "Trois-Rivières 1995", some years after the separation from Fred and that she built a home, we can see that Laurence now has breast implants and long hair. It is important to notice that in this instance Laurence is still in transition. When they meet again, Laurence arrives to Fred's house wearing very masculine garments: No make-up on, no nail-polish, wearing trousers, shirt and man's shoes, with a sweater and gabardine. When Fred is about to touch him, Laurence seems to be uncomfortable and tries to hide his breasts with his arm. It is like if for Laurence, Fred represented a setback to his transition, and his wish to please her was bigger –at that point- that his will of being a woman.

It is in the present time of the movie, i.e. the interview with the journalist and the last meeting with Fred in 1999, that we can glimpse Laurence's complete transformation, 10 years after beginning his transition. This is the non-hegemonic performativity to which we refer to.

The Five Roses and the Black Island

The film presents in two key and specific moments the possibility for its characters to fit in, the possibility to belong and get out of their marginality, even if these spaces are marginal themselves.

One of them is The Five Roses, A group of friends that Laurence meets after having been injured at the bar dispute, and in addition, being rejected by his mother when he asked for help and support over the telephone. The Five Roses represents in many

ways the rejection to the hegemony of gender, because it is a eccentric group of old women and drag queens who look after themselves, where none of them respects the norm. Laurence found a great emotional support in this social group.

The other space is The Black Island, a place to which Laurence travels with Fred once they meet again in 1996, and where Laurence hopes that when they meet with friends, who are a transsexual couple, Fred conceives the possibility for them. The Island represents a break from the norm and the freedom of being in a place away from the daily life (specifically the family that Fred has formed with his husband), and this sensation is reinforced by the sequence in which clothing falls down from the sky while they walk. The transgression proposed by the movie with this type of improbable sequences (clothing falling from the sky) is a clear sign of the rebellion against one of the golden rules of cinema: verisimilitude.

Both the Five Roses and the Black Island are places in where the difference is accepted, in where Fred and Laurence can be a couple, in where being different is a value. Nevertheless, they are marginal. In other words, the Five Roses live in a place where it seems as if they are the only ones accepted, a place hidden from society. Throughout the movie, we do not see the Five Roses outdoors, they are always indoors. They are either in the enormous theatre that shelters them and simultaneously protects them; or in Laurence's house for the Christmas of 1995. The fact that it is a theatre must not be overlooked, given that somehow, when we perform gender, we are on stage; i.e., that acting in one way or another at ease and convenience of society is putting on the mask that forces us to the convention of gender matching with our born genitalia. This space might represent the safe stage where paradoxically, when they act as they really feel, they shed from this imposed mask.

In the same way, the Black Island is a geographically remote place, and because it's an island it has no frontiers and it is covered in snow. The desolation of its remoteness serves as the perfect shelter to escape and it seems as if there are not many people living there, reinforcing the idea of a place without a society. However, it seems that the freedom these people seem to enjoy in both spaces is not real.

When referring to freedom, I am not alluding to the idea of an individual subject, alone, since a subject is free to the extent that s/he is conditioned by conventions, norms and cultural possibilities that make freedom possible, though they do not determine it. They are the conditions of possibility of freedom. Who we are as subjects of freedom depends on non-voluntary forms of connection with others; I was not only born within a series of rules or conventions that form me, but also within a series of relationships on which I depend for my survival and which constitute me as an interdependent creature in this world. The questions of responsibility emerge in the context of this sociality, this interdependence. (Birulés, 2008)

We, as society, must fight for a freedom where the subject is not fastened and can get out of the box if it wishes to. This, without forgetting the need from the other's acknowledgement, as this too builds us; i.e. admitting our need to exist as others admits us as existent. It is not fighting for other boxes no matter how divergent they are from the conventional ones, because the disciplines that worry to define the new

boxes are powers that tie us, but rather to open all possibilities to live gender to its fullness. The movie succeeds to this extent, as they don't live at the Black Island, because this freeing acknowledgement from others is needed. The film is concerned to show this struggle, the constant back and forth between what it is and what it should be.

To Fred, the isolation in which Fanny and Alexander are living is not happiness. Later on in a discussion with Laurence she says to him: "Get real! Happiness! They live in a shitty shack! Baked as fuck on heap opium, surrounded by inbreed! They're buried here because over there, he'd be stoned to death!" (2:16:33). To refuse to live there, far apart, also implies wanting to transform the order but not through alienation and marginalization, but in society. And thus the importance of Laurence's return to Montreal, the relationship he establishes with the journalist and his mother, and going out on the street being what he always wanted to be.

Conclusion

Laurence breaks the limits that her environment imposes her in order to find freedom. He says: "I'm looking for a person who understands my language and speaks it, a person who, without being a pariah, will question, not only the rights and the value of the marginalized, but also of those who claim to be normal". (00:01:03). The movie takes Laurence to the place she wants to be, while she does everything to make her relationship with Fred resist; a relationship that though heterosexual at the beginning, breaks the mold by turning somehow into a form of lesbian love. Laurence transgresses the binary order and questions it with her body, because she can affect it by transforming it.

Laurence suffers, Fred suffers, her mother suffers, and not because her change towards the truth is bad, but because to the society the acceptance of the difference is difficult, especially in sexual matters. The movie does a portrait of the difficulties that represents one's change, clearly affirming the social position towards it, position that is precisely what makes it so painful and truncated.

Today there are many people with modalities of gender that are considered unacceptable - the sexual or gender minorities - and who are discriminated against, considered abnormal, by the discourses of psychiatry or psychology, or who are the object of physical violence. These people are not being given the opportunity of having their lives recognized as worthy of being protected or helped, not even as lives that deserve to be mourned. I question the norms of gender that prevent us or make us incapable of recognizing certain lives as being worth living, and which stop us providing the material conditions necessary for these lives to be lived, to flourish. For these lives to be publicly recognized also means their being understood as lives whose disappearance would be felt as a loss. (Birulés, 2008)

By stylizing a bygone era—the nineties—with flamboyant ballroom dancing scenes, and sequences that looks more like music video-clips inlaying into it's almost three hours of length, the film represents the tension, the blows, the fights, the tears of the transition, showing that such a change is anything but pink and easy and sensitizes the public on how brave and valuable Laurence's decision is.

Laurence Anyways proposes both aesthetically and plastic portrait of the transgression of the rule, from a character who refused to follow the binary division between men and women, male and female. Indeed, Laurence Anyways is a film that proposes a representation of a character who transgressed the rules of gender, by building her own identity as a woman. At the same time, it is important to note that Dolan's film also violates aesthetic and stylistic norms of the current mainstream cinema, proposing a sometimes unconventional treatment of verisimilitude, passing over a certain hegemony enjoyed by the dominant narrative cinema.

The film is then rebel in various and complementary levels, but its value does not rest on such rebellion. It seems to have achieved the *mise-en-scene* of the urgent and absolute need for freedom, but the freedom that admits its condition by the society's acknowledge and institutions to exist, the freedom that seems paradoxical but viewed up close, it is not.

In other words, the value of the film rests primarily on the representation it makes of the struggle for freedom of a human being on her transformation into the woman that she was destined to be. All this by putting the spectator in the obligation to see, acknowledge and understand the painful reality that those in this condition have to go through, people who in another space-time could be you or me.

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