

Conscious Beholding:  
Strategies, Methods, & Approaches Of  
Transgender & Gender-Nonconforming Filmmakers

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A Research Creation Thesis  
in The Department of Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Media Studies) at  
Concordia University

Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal, Quebec, Canada

April 2023

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
School of Graduate Studies

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Master of Arts (Media Studies)

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## Abstract

### Conscious Beholding: Strategies, Methods, & Approaches Of Transgender & Gender-Nonconforming Filmmakers

Quinn-Evelynn Drummond

Representation of transgender and gender non-conforming (T&GNC) identities in media is crucially important - it helps to form self-identity, contextualizes personhood, and cultivates community. However, we as T&GNC people are going to have to create much of this representation for ourselves. We cannot rely on most mainstream media producers and systems for meaningfully accurate or good faith depiction, as has been routinely historically demonstrated. This research-creation thesis thus works to answer the following question: in the context of film, what are non-mainstream transgender and gender non-conforming filmmakers doing to create more reflective, self-generated representations? Specifically, what unique strategies, approaches, techniques, and mobilizations are being employed to tell novel stories about transness and gender-nonconformity? Essentially: what are T&GNC filmmakers doing differently? Garnering data through qualitative interviews and interpreting it through the framework of experiential narrative, this thesis ultimately identifies a series of production and narrative-based strategies and phenomena - including funding issues, narrative incidentalism, commercial disavowal, and a communal shift - as key dynamics informing T&GNC-made film that, taken together, help to illuminate the practices, struggles, and aims of such filmmakers.

Keywords: narrative, story, transgender, gender non-conforming, film, community

## Acknowledgements

Though ostensibly the product of my own endeavour, this thesis would not exist without the many people who have helped me, in their own respective ways, bring it to full realization and I would be remiss if I failed to extend to them my infinite gratitude. Foremost, my thanks to my interviewees - TJ, Kaye, StormMiguel, and Ava. Thank you for taking the time to discuss and explore your lives, crafts, and passions with me. Further, thanks to my peerless supervisor, Krista Lynes, and to my committee: Liz Miller and Kim Sawchuk. Your collective patience, expertise, and guidance have helped whip this work into something that can actually pass muster. Thanks also to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their help in financing this undertaking, to the Feminist Media Studio for the equipment needed to realize my film, to Concordia's Department of Communication Studies for cultivating an inimitable learning environment, and to Owen Chapman and Lyne Dwyer for jointly convincing me to take a chance on this corner of the world. And finally - but by no means least - my eternal thanks to my family and friends. Mum, Dad; Andy, Nani, Jules (Portland), Storms, Jay, Julien; Justin, Jules (Montréal), Leo, Lau; Audrey. It is chiefly due to your combined efforts that I have survived the last two years intact. Thank you for keeping me sane (relatively speaking). I love each and every one of you.

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## Introduction

The stories we tell make us who we are. This is especially true when it comes to popular media: the way concepts, events, and communities are framed therein contribute significantly to the way those things are perceived in the public sphere. This phenomenon is a particular topic of concern, however, when it comes to the way modalities of personhood are portrayed in media. That is to say, the way a given identity and/or cultural experience is depicted in a given media artifact can have cascading consequences for how real-world people who hold those identities or are part of those cultures are treated. A particular narrative, skewed in the right way, can engender, encourage, and normalize unimaginably inhuman treatment.

The point here is that representation matters. The presence of a given mode of personhood in media not only shapes the way those people are seen, it further facilitates both the subjective and societal coherence and articulative capacity of the sort of people in question - it empowers them to recognize, understand, and organize themselves. There is an argument to be made that stories are amongst the most important and powerful forms of connection available to humankind - and it is thus of the utmost importance that we strive to capture and explicate how those stories function.

Which is where I enter the picture. Hello, reader. I have a particular passion for the role of stories in our lives: how they make and promulgate meaning for us, as humans. It is a process I have a profound desire to better understand - a desire that has given rise to the thesis you now behold. However, narrative in media is an unquantifiably vast topic of inquiry, so I must, inevitably, narrow things down - for your sanity and mine. I have therefore elected to focus on explicating the intersection of a community quite close to my heart - namely, transgender and gender non-conforming (T&GNC) folk - with a medium I consider to be particularly prevalent and impactful: film. Accordingly, I have constructed and conducted this thesis project with the aim of grasping what, in the specific context of film, trans and gender non-conforming filmmakers are doing to tell novel stories explicitly about, otherwise relating to, or in some way involving transness and gender-nonconformity; to try and understand what unique strategies, approaches, techniques, and mobilizations they are employing. For by doing so, I posit we might better comprehend the way the stories incarnated through film configure the way we understand those identities - and how those configurations might be changed for the better.

First, however, we must discuss the way I have undertaken this endeavour.

## Theoretical Framework

### Research Creation - What & Why

The written document you currently peruse represents but half of this thesis project's sum endeavour, as said thesis project is, in fact, one designed and realized in the vein of research-creation. Specifically, the other half has been effected in the form of a short film.

The decision to structure and execute my project as such was one influenced by a range of factors, the most initially salient of which is about as un-scientific a reason as reasons can get. It felt, for lack of a better phrase, right. After all, the key subjects of my research are film and filmmakers - is it not thus irresistibly apposite to incarnate my findings through a most ouroboric artistic encapsulation? I say it would be a woefully neglected opportunity if I didn't.

However, this - while moderately charming as a sentiment - does not sufficiently imbricate with properly fleshed out theoretical paradigms of fused research and creation. Thus, towards the end of meaningfully situating my guiding influences, I first orient this research-creation endeavor of mine in alignment with the processes of practice articulated by Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk in their 2012 text *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances"* - specifically in tune with their modalities of 'research-for-creation' and 'creative presentations of research.' Primarily, there is a host of individuals out there - including other filmmakers, T&GNC folks, and regular lay-people alike - that I feel could benefit from the knowledge garnered by and presented within my work. Unfortunately, the texts produced by the groves of academe are often dense in the extreme, to the point of incomprehensibility for the average individual. By making a short film as I have, I hope to circumvent this barrier by presenting the results of my work in an easily accessed and engaging format, such that anyone with an interest in learning about my findings can do so without having to wade through pages of academic jargon. Beyond this, however, the key point of active guidance I took from Chapman & Sawchuk's writings was the idea that a creative project not only has the capacity to serve as a means of knowledge circulation, it further has the potential to act "as an intervention in its own right in terms of the specific fields of inquiry, practice, history, et cetera in which it is embedded" (2012, p. 23). By executing a creative research project focused not only on subjectivity and embodiment, but one that draws therefrom, I simultaneously contribute to a redefinition and evolving meta-level understanding of how research into such is conducted within academe. Thus, not only do I change the way people understand T&GNC film, I, hopefully, help to change the way we approach researching these things.

In this endeavour, I take particular inspiration from the artistic practice of Alok Vaid-Menon, a nonbinary artist who, through their work, engages in a form of radically intimate self-articulation. They eloquently encapsulate their creative praxis as such as part of their poem "A Love Letter Apologizes to Itself," wherein they describe their aim of "trying to remember a practice of compassion - not consumption - a way of relating to the world that is not selfish or possessive" (Vaid-Menon, 2017). Throughout their work at large, they frame artistic endeavour as a fundamental act of connection, community-building, and unqualified love. They focus, if you'll pardon my waxing rhapsodic, on the beauty of not just the individual, but the beauty that is created by such individuals coming together in unabashed recognition, celebration, and love of one another. I find this artistic lens particularly motivating as a form of connectively liberatory

praxis and have aimed to structure my creative output - as well as my written output - in accordance with its logic.

The desire to emulate this form of connective self-articulation, however, is one ultimately fueled by my principal inspiration - namely, the theories of research-creation developed by Dr. Natalie Loveless. You see, my personal experiences of gender echo and reflect those included within the metaphorical nebula that is T&GNC identity. In not quite so many words, I am a transgender woman. Thus, in approaching this thesis, I have found it both profoundly grounding and generative to draw upon the concept of 'feminist theorypractice' articulated by Loveless in her 2019 book *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, framed and utilized in especial regard to the ultimate function of my undertaken research-creation work. Per Loveless, the concept describes a recognition of and encouragement towards a commitment to engaging the inherent entwinement of the research we do and the conditions within which we do it - an approach uniquely enacted through the framework of research-creation. This is because, in her own words, "research-creation, at its best, has the capacity to impact our social and material conditions, not by offering more facts, differently figured, but by finding ways, through aesthetic encounters and events, to persuade us to care and to care *differently*" (2019, 107). As approaches to research-creation go, Loveless' is consequently quite unique, in that it not only recognizes artistic expression as a form of social practice, it further avows the power of such expression in meaningfully challenging and reconstituting our fundamental understandings and engagements both within academe and the worlds we inhabit.

There are a great many other ways of conceiving and approaching the practice of research-creation, but as someone who has herself had to convey convincing and emotionally resonant stories of personhood to those around her in order to ensure her survival as a non-normative individual, my ultimate research-creation endeavour is, as Loveless so emphasizes, deeply situated in my own personal conditions and experiences (2019) and accordingly I find her paradigm the most generative for my purposes. My project has thus been engineered to function not only as a connection between, but as a symbiotic relationship, of sorts, that joins in a practical capacity the nuance of trans/queer theory and the messy, multifaceted stories that comprise lived T&GNC reality, while also interrogating the way those stories are pedagogically conceived and understood. In short, engaging in research-creation in the way that I have has best enabled me to understand and interrogate my own story as a T&GNC individual, as much as it has the stories of my interviewees.

You will note I have been using the word 'story' a lot. It's time to talk about why.

### Experiential Narrative 1 - Introduction

As I've said: I'm a transgender woman. It is a reality that, unequivocally, has had the most seismic impact of anything not only upon my research work but upon my entire academic ethos. You see, I have found that, speaking personally, my continued survival as a trans person has come not from persuading those around me of my personhood by way of any sort of objective biological, psychological, or other personal fact - rather, I have had to foster the ability to convince people of my validity by presenting them with the most compelling narrative possible. That is to say, I've had to learn how to tell sufficiently compelling stories about myself to other people for them to recognize and respect me in any meaningful capacity. Speaking from

first-hand experience, people only care about something if they forge an emotional connection with that thing - and thus only see transgender people as human if they can forge such a connection with them. Stories have been my way of making that connection - manifesting in the form of narrativized performances of selfhood tailored to elicit favorable perceptions and attitudes from the people around me, thereby affording myself a degree of preemptive harm mitigation. After all, if you like me, you have less reason to hurt me. This strategy of survivalist storying manifests even in the way I write. My prose, which you will have by now noticed is idiosyncratic to say the least, is constructed in the mildly jocular and semantically dense way that it is because I want you, dear reader, to trust me. I want you to find me credible. I want you, above all else, to like me. And by telling you a story about who I am through the very way I write - by showing you I'm humorous, knowledgeable, friendly - I do everything in my power to forge a positive connection between us. I think you're beginning to see what I mean. In essence, it has been my experience that the stories we tell to ourselves and to one another are the single most powerful communicative apparatus available to us as human beings; as what may or may not be objectively true pales in importance compared to what people find subjectively believable.

This understanding has given rise to a paradigm of my own creation, through which my research is approached: that of experiential narrative. Though first inspired by personal encounters, experiential narrative, as a conceptual framework, has come to draw, among other influences, upon frame theory as outlined by Goffman (1986) as well as the rhetorical tradition as elaborated by Burke (1969) in terms of identification, and Charland (1987) who builds on Burke with regard to rhetoric's socioculturally constitutive properties, alongside theories of queer/feminist storytelling that emphasize the importance of subjectivity and embodiment - most especially Haraway (2013), Ahmed (2006), and de Lauretis (1995); blending and synthesizing the works of these scholars with my own experiences to develop a critical lens designed for the purposes of apprehending the unique dynamics of narrative as it is experienced in its capacity as a foundational apparatus for the individual and collective generation of subjective meaning. As argued by Lakoff: "all of our knowledge makes use of frames" (2010, p. 71) and, when this understanding is in turn married to the rhetorical tradition's model of how people come to understand and identify with certain perceived realities and, further, combined with queer/feminist paradigms of subjectivity, stories - that is, mediated systems of fluid knowledge and experience relayed amongst or between and processed by a party or parties - are revealed to be highly influential instruments of meaning-making.

In short, the core contestation of experiential narrative is that stories not only hold power but, further, that power can take hold of the viewer's self; influencing the way that viewer interprets the world and moves through it. But how, exactly, does this contended power work as such? The argument is as follows: the way a given person models, processes, and associates meaning with the myriad facets of the world can be best understood through a combination of frame theory, rhetoric, and phenomenology. We begin with the first of these. Frame theory asserts that human cognition functions by means of our development of systems of frames which are subjective mental representations and interpretations of reality and that, thusly developed, frames empower us to make sense of the world (Goffman, 1986; Lakoff, 2010). Essentially, frame theory provides us a tangible way of modeling how people perceive and organize their experiences. Now, these frame systems are formed, affected, and shaped by a myriad of

biological, sociocultural, and ideological influences, as well as by dynamics and relations of power, but I argue they are most affected by the stories we tell to ourselves and to one another, given that, by telling a given story in a intentionally structured way, one can directly access and influence people's subjective frame systems.

The ability of stories to access, affect, and effect frame systems as such is attributable to the power of identifiatory rhetoric. As outlined by Burke, whenever one attempts to persuade someone of something, one must succeed in making that person 'identify' with oneself and/or with that of which one is attempting to convince them. One's argument needs to resonate and reconcile with one's audiences' subjective belief system (1969). This concept is further deepened by Charland's idea of constitutive rhetoric, which argues that "audiences are constituted as subjects through a process of identification with a textual position. This identification occurs through a series of ideological effects arising from the narrative structure of constitutive rhetoric" (1987, p. 147). This is to say that, essentially, one can arguably bootstrap one's target audience and the subsequent rapt attention thereof into existence by properly accessing the subjectivities of the people one wishes to turn into one's audience. Of course, it must be noted that, far more often than not, this process and its effects are largely unconscious: because these frames are so often ideological, the positioning effects they impart are, due to prevailing relations of power and knowledge, typically lived bodily rather than cognitively considered (de Lauretis, 1995). As well this more feminist perspective points out: any attempt to effect or encourage identification is inexorably linked to and ultimately shaped by the situated positionalities of both storyteller and audience member. This borne in mind, the key concept here is this: by drawing on the rhetorical tradition, one can effectively - be it intentional or otherwise - impact and mobilize frame systems through stories by playing to a given system via a narrative mechanism - or 'story' - in a way that subjectively and perceptively clicks with that system, thereby appealing to the people who hold those systems, arguably then motivating those people to a given end in the context of their lived realities. This functions much in the way of Stephen Colbert's emotivist concept of 'truthiness,' which describes the belief that a given statement is true simply by way of one's gut intuition that it feels true, rather than looking to any evidence, logic, or objective fact to confirm said statement's authenticity (Alfano, 2009).

When this rhetorical perspective is in turn fused with more phenomenological modes of critique - understanding that our gestalt consciousness functions not only cognitively, but also in an embodied capacity; implicated and imbricated with that which is manifestly felt and lived (Ahmed, 2006) - we see that stories are further contextualized and brought practically to bear via the audience's embodiment of that story: that a given narrative is not merely thought, but tangibly experienced. In this way, stories thus play an undeniable role in shaping and constructing people's world views by not only rhetorically constituting and subjectively reifying a story's message within their frame systems, but within the very fabric of their lived reality.

Why does this matter? It matters because the stories we tell thus forge the world we live in. By performing acts of storytelling as such, we contribute to the sort of 'speculative fabulation' outlined by Haraway and thereby engage in a process of world-making that, through stories, actively works to reconstitute the state of our existence (2013). Thus, experiential narrative identifies the act of storytelling in any medium as an act that, done either intentionally or otherwise, serves to mobilize narrative as a means of change.

I will expand on how experiential narrative is specifically deployed in service of this particular research project when discussing my findings. The point here, in terms of how experiential narrative impacts my overarching theoretical approach, is this: I have cultivated and am employing this paradigm as such due to what I perceive to be an insufficient amount of critical attention to stories as instruments of meaning making, for stories inarguably possess an inherent capacity for the formatting of perceptual subjectivity. What must be noted is that experiential narrative is not storytelling rendered as method - rather, it is a method of capturing and understanding how stories operate within and throughout our lives. Thusly deployed, this paradigm empowers me to be best able to grasp and explicate the representational nuances and sociocultural effects of the subject matter at hand.

## Literature Review

### Or: What's Been Seen On The Silver Screen And Said In Texts Thereabout?

#### T&GNC Identity In Film & Theory

Before we allow ourselves to delve too deeply into the wealth of extant postulations about the specific nuances of the relationship between transgender/gender non-conforming identities and film, however, we must first begin by grounding our discussion in a brief practical account of what that relationship has hitherto looked like - and there is perhaps nowhere more appropriate to begin our history lesson than with the 2020 documentary *Disclosure*. Arguably standing as one of the most widely known and expansive examinations of T&GNC depictions in popular film - and concomitant sociocultural impacts thereof - over the last several decades, the film provides an ideal jumping-off point for our purposes by demonstrating how thoroughly messy historical, Hollywood-made T&GNC film representation has been; specifically tracing how audiovisual media captures the attention of the populace to shape understandings of T&GNC identity in certain ways, often dehumanizing, occasionally amusing, sometimes even thoughtful, but always inescapably thorny (Cox, Scholder, & Feder, 2020). But what have these myriad depictions manifestly entailed, you ask? Let's conduct a more in-depth case study.

In recent years, we have arguably seen a shift in film, wherein prevailing stories about T&GNC identity have moved past outright transphobia to, instead, stories that arguably work to increase the 'visibility' of these identities. Unfortunately, these films often simultaneously depict T&GNC identity without meaningfully humanizing it and, thereby, continue to deal epistemic violence through their representations. *The Danish Girl* - a landmark, yet highly problematic, film from 2016 - is a prime instance of such. The film is a dramatized retelling of a true story; that of Lili Elbe, one of the first transgender women to undergo gender affirmation surgery. In real life, Elbe, a painter by trade, underwent a series of five experimental surgeries designed to ameliorate what is contemporarily referred to as gender dysphoria - a complex feeling of mismatch between one's assigned gender at birth and one's subjective experience of gender. Regrettably, Elbe passed away due to complications from the fifth of these procedures in 1931 (Blumberg, 2022). The film takes dramatic liberties in its retelling of her story: the fictionalized Elbe - who, questionably, is played by cisgender actor Eddie Redmayne - dies after only the second of these surgeries, depicted as being in excruciating pain mingled with a state of borderline rapturous euphoria. Perhaps most concerning, however, is the fact that this version of Elbe does not, after beginning her transition, continue in her career as a painter. Instead, she gives it up due to her preference to 'be a woman' (Hooper, 2016) - a sentiment so rotten with both misogyny and transmisogyny alike as to be utterly sickening. Ultimately, the film version of Elbe's story is presented in such a way as to be recognizable to T&GNC communities only as a form of glorified tragedy porn; as a story unnaturally focused on the transition process that does nothing to meaningfully or transformatively engage non-cisnormative experiences. The cost of gender affirmation is erroneously and irresponsibly shown to be death; no life exists beyond the strict confines of that transition process.

Accordingly, the fact that *The Danish Girl* was largely received on release as an example of relatively 'good' T&GNC representation by the public - with a average rating of 7.1 out of 10 on IMDb at time of writing (IMDb, n.d.) - is perhaps thereby telling of how utterly dire other

such representation has been. Indeed, refocusing our lens to a more general scale, T&GNC characters have been depicted *ad nauseam* as being violent murderers, treacherous deceivers, and dangerous deviants. Films like *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (Baker, 1971), *Sleepaway Camp* (Hiltzik, 1983), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Shadyac, 1994) and so many more have uncritically cast characters who are in some way, shape, or form gender non-conforming as villainous agents within the confines of their stories. In fact, per GLAAD - the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation - T&GNC characters in media that aired on television as tracked over a ten year period were depicted as murderers and/or villains in at least 21% of said media. On those occasions when such characters were not antagonists as such, they were cast as victims 40% of the time. And in 61% of cases, such media contained transphobic slurs, language, and/or dialogue (GLAAD, 2017). When it comes to T&GNC identity, mainstream media seems to high-exclusively promulgate stories that overwhelmingly focus on the act of transition as transgression, rather than the multifarious other experiences T&GNC lives entail. As general trends of representation go, what we have seen has thus been remarkably harmful.

However. GLAAD's study was, at this document's time of writing, conducted several years ago and in the time since then, especially in the years of post-transgender tipping point critical mass (Steinmetz, 2014), many filmic interpretations of T&GNC individuals have not only *not* been malign and/or insensitive, we have further seen an increase in representations of considerable merit. There exists a fair canon of film work that, through their arguably more nuanced, thoughtful, and agential T&GNC characters and stories thereabout, serve to fight against the above stereotypes or, at the very least, shine a light on T&GNC people that illuminates characteristics other than violence, deception, or deviancy. This trend can be observed both in more recent films like *For Nonna Anna* (De Filippis, 2017) and *Two 4 One* (Bradley, 2014), as well as in a few older films, such as *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1990) - though the latter of these has admittedly also received due critique for its questionably white perspective on black Ballroom culture; a critique fairly further applied to much of cinema, which is all too often racialized in favour of whiteness and white experience. Generally speaking however, the point here is that, though by no means prevalent or perfect, T&GNC identity has indelibly received at least a modicum of relatively positive airtime. Of course, it must be noted that visibility as such does not necessarily equate to the easing of sociopolitical maltreatment - indeed, despite this arguable increase in 'better' representation, we have nevertheless still seen an exponential proliferation of anti-T&GNC politics since the aforementioned trans tipping point, most especially in the United States (Keegan, 2022). 'Good' representation only gets us so far.

All that having been said, the key takeaway from our abridged history lesson here is this: T&GNC people have generally had a resoundingly rough go of it when it comes to being written for and depicted in film. It hasn't all been objectively 'bad,' but the overarching trend has inclined towards a sort of malign negativity that has ultimately, unquestionably contributed not only to the slander of T&GNC personhood, but to the ongoing denial of such people's agency. One must now, inevitably, wonder: why is this the case? Why has T&GNC representation in film developed in the way that it has? And what larger sociocultural effects are imparted thereby? Let us turn now to theory.

In the Western context, transgender and gender non-conforming identities have been both historically and contemporarily embroiled in intense sociopolitical contention. This contention is, perhaps, to be expected, for, as pointed out by Susan Stryker in her formative 2008 work *Transgender History*, to transition in gender, or otherwise violate normative expectations thereof, is to engage in “movement across a socially imposed boundary” (p. 1) and thus, failure to conform, in any manner, shape, or form to the strictures of traditional Western binaries of gender in either comportment or depiction is to be made subject to intense scrutiny and politicization of the self. As elaborated by Eva Hayward, trans identities - much in the manner of language and music - play quantifiable roles in the dynamic structuring of the world: shaping and reshaping our embodied materializations by dint of their drawing our focus to, immersing us in, and thereby affecting the materiality of being (2008); a process of transformation that takes place within and across a myriad of arenas, amongst which film is one of the most visible and thereby salient. It will thus come as little surprise that audiovisual depictions of gender-nonconformity, and of 2SLGBTQ+ identities in general, have long been a topic of academic inquiry, for such depictions are inarguably implicated in that aforementioned politicization and, thereby, have always had a role in shaping - at the sociocultural level - the way we conceptualize and view T&GNC individuals. In other words - and as illustrated by our encapsulation of T&GNC identity in film - T&GNC people have had, put politely, an almost overwhelmingly negative relationship with the filmic medium.

Tracing these dynamics is paramount for, as per Spade, the formulation of images depicting T&GNC people and their desires is foundational to the shaping of the systems that serve them. Inaccurate depictions result in the formulation and perpetuation of abusive institutional policies as opposed to substantively supportive ones (2015). Thus, inquiry thereinto has indeed gathered considerable steam in recent years, with contemporary research paying particular attention to the way media narratively instantiate T&GNC identity and, thereby, format subjective perception. To begin, a broad, initial encapsulation thereof can be found in Rebecca Louise Bell-Metereau’s 2019 book *Transgender Cinema*, wherein she details the dynamics of T&GNC representation as it occurs in a host of films that include, amongst others, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *A Fantastic Woman*, and various documentaries. Ultimately, Bell-Metereau works to cement the fact that audiovisual media have always had a profound and undeniable impact on the way in which both the public, and T&GNC peoples themselves, view and conceive of T&GNC identity (2019); illuminating how certain politics of representation have been cemented. It is a reality further demonstrated by Laura Horak, whose thoroughgoing exploration of cross-dressed women and the evolving perceptions thereof in early 20th century cinema demonstrates that the relationship between film and non-normative gender expression is not only nothing new, but something highly subject to ever-changing societal norms (2016).

For a more specifically applied example of such inquiry, consider Cael M. Keegan’s 2018 book *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, wherein he analyzes how the titular Wachowskis’ films essentially map, in various ways, forms of narrativized transgender journey. He argues that their collective cinematic oeuvre is formulated such that their films serve to transform the viewership experience in a manner similar to the way T&GNC identities transform sociocultural systems and structures of gender and sex (Keegan, 2018). Keegan’s work ultimately explicates the ways in which experiential actualities can be uniquely narrativized through film and how such

narrativizations are communicated to and received by viewers. Operating as such, these narrativizations challenge, to a degree, concerns surrounding ‘positive’ representation by demonstrating that, despite the failure of increased visibility to yield better sociocultural conditions for T&GNC people, film itself nevertheless holds a profound capacity to act as a space for incarnation and identification; to share T&GNC experience “as it is practiced” and, thereby, to also document how such cultural forms intertwine with T&GNC cultural production (Keegan, 2018, p. 5).

Keegan has further substantially engaged T&GNC media beyond the strict circumscription of the Wachowskis, however. In his earlier 2013 work, “Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity,” he touches on how certain narrative instantiations erroneously and/or deleteriously depict and engage T&GNC identity. In the specific context of the film *Transamerica*, Keegan uncovers how embodied, non-normative gender comes to be played for sensational effect and, thereby, how this specific film “[traffics] in the violent exposure and ridicule of the trans body” (Keegan, 2013, para. 13). It is a profundity drawn upon and further explored by Jackson Taylor McLaren in his 2018 work, “‘Recognize Me:’ An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation,” wherein he conducts a comparative analysis of the television shows *Orange is the New Black* and *The Fosters* with the aim of understanding how transgender characters therein are both constructed and narratively situated. McLaren ultimately demonstrates that, even though said characters constitute a generally more positive depiction of T&GNC identity, they are still yet presented in such a way as to rigidly affirm extant gender binaries (McLaren, 2018).

Of course, T&GNC people have not, nor have they ever, taken such mockery and restriction of their selfhood lying down, so to speak. In their 2019 book *Trans Exploits*, Jian Neo Chen undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the cultural practices of both T&GNC artists and activists of color and, as part thereof, maps the ways such individuals and communities respond to and disrupt - by means of various forms of cultural expression - the systems and structures of oppression that dispossess them (2019). Ultimately, Chen’s core theoretical focus hinges on the centrality, influence, and transformative potential of those who weave our cultural fabrics. It is a focus on which I intend to expand by homing in on a particular subset of weavers as such; capturing their particular articulative approaches and thereby grasping what overlaps and distinctions they bring to bear on the task of liberatory cultural production.

You see, much research has been conducted, and much theory constructed, about the nuances of T&GNC representation in film; its histories, its functions, its importance, *et cetera*, but the keen mind will by now have begun to consider a further critical question: a key route of inquiry that demands exploration. Namely: what are non-mainstream transgender and gender nonconforming filmmakers themselves doing? How are they not only disrupting, but subverting, and, perhaps, even ultimately reclaiming the medium for themselves and those like them? Certainly the Wachowskis factor as important landmarks, but they, as filmmakers, had achieved mainstream success before coming out as transgender. What about those more independent artists working while ‘out’ from the proverbial jump? In terms of independent cinema as such, one may look to the phenomenon of trans new wave cinema for answers - that is, the movement working to “build on feminist, postcolonial, and queer film criticism to assert significant groupings of films, contemporary directors, and types of spectatorship” (Steinbock, 2019).

Unfortunately, while the trans new wave is useful in positioning T&GNC filmmakers not only in relation to mainstream cinema, but also to other independent filmmakers, it does not necessarily shed light on the exact praxis those T&GNC filmmakers draw upon and enact. Thus we must ask: what distinctive methods might they be employing? What unique stories are they telling? What are they doing differently? These are questions of the highest import for, as the above researchers and theorists have so thoroughly demonstrated, film possesses a remarkable capacity for the conveyance of meaning - for storytelling - and, therethrough, a profound means for the articulation of personhood. Inescapably though, that articulation is also highly subject to being framed in ways that connote sometimes beneficial, oftentimes deleterious sociocultural impressions and effects; contributing to and/or challenging given politics of representation. Thus, we must ask: what does the self-articulation of non-mainstream T&GNC filmmakers look like and how does it function? How does it differ from the broader genre of independent cinema? How does it fight the mainstream ossification of negative narrative tropes? What change, if any, do they aim to make? It is precisely this critical contribution I aim to make to the field.

Before we can discuss the results of this endeavour, however, we must first discuss how I conceptualized doing so.

#### Experiential Narrative 2 - Context

You may ask why, exactly, I am bootstrapping a novel interrogative paradigm to help me approach, conduct, and interpret this research project. It's an excellent question with, fortunately for us, quite a simple answer. For my overarching academic purposes, experiential narrative serves as a theoretical and practical scaffold designed to most efficaciously encapsulate and mobilize my personal experiences of the real-world function of stories in conjunction with the miscellany of extant research into how meaning is communicatively cultivated and crystallized through narrative structures. In this way, I would argue, experiential narrative simultaneously contributes to an ongoing shift in the way we theorize media; namely, an increasingly widespread recognition of the crucial role of narrative in processes of meaning-making.

Now, where does this shift and the necessity thereof come from? Many places. Consider, for instance, Donna Haraway. Haraway has written much about the idea of 'SF': a compound narrative concept, a key part of which is her understanding of 'speculative fabulation.' What, exactly, does she mean by speculative fabulation? Well, in her own words:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

(Haraway, 2013)

It is an observation as inspired as it is incredibly impactful, in that - though she employs it to outline meaning-making via material semiotics - I posit it can be further extended to succinctly and generatively encapsulate the uniquely ouroboric relationship between the stories we tell and the world in which we live; how the two feed into, shape, and ultimately make one another. Media - and, thus, the stories contained therein - are material in and of themselves, after all, and the ways in which we think about reality - or, in a Foucauldian sense, the modes of knowledge and being that have heretofore existed - have an inexorable effect upon those future realities and

novel existential modes that will emerge in the fullness of time. In other words, what is, is known, and is visible within history sets the conditions of possibility for what is yet to come (Luna, 2019). History is, arguably, naught but a story unto itself (White, 1992).

Now, we have of course seen historical research into the intersection between narrative and media, especially in film (de Lauretis, 1995; Heath, 1976), but this awareness of the criticality of narrative seems to permeate so many realms of thought in terms of how we conceptualize and postulate about media at an ever increasing scale. For instance, Castillo most aptly observes, through a focus on the place and function of stories, how hegemonic infrastructures of cultural production have arguably hijacked certain aspects of substantively transformative liberation politics, remixing them into a brutally watered-down, easily commercialized form of ‘art’ that serves to placate and profit from marginalized populaces by framing them through the lens of extant power structures, rather than meaningfully contributing to the dismantling thereof (2022). Stories; as used for money and mollification. Another instance: by focusing on the dynamics of queer, non-mainstream media organizations and the storytelling they effect, Coon sketches an insightful understanding of how thusly formulated narratives function both socially and politically, specifically grasping how they bring together and empower communities, support the individuals thereof, and enable them to engage collectively in more substantive forms of activism; all achieved “by providing inspirational images of possible selves, sharing testimony that bears witness to the struggles and triumphs of LGBTQ people, and helping sustain and strengthen active queer counterpublics” (2018, p. 177). Stories; as used for connection and action. A further instance: Seymour demonstrates how, in the context of the television series *Transparent*, narrative is reductively used to frame transgender identity by presenting it through the narrow representational scope of linear gender transition; thereby forcefully articulating T&GNC personhood via normative story logics of heterosexual economy in such a way that it fails to meaningfully encapsulate lived experience and accordingly communicating a markedly erroneous understanding of T&GNC existence (2019). Again, stories; as used for positionality and, arguably, even forms of violence.

The list goes on, but our time together does not. The point to be gleaned here is this: narratives - that is, the stories we tell - are an inarguably critical factor in understanding both the politics and kinetics of historical and contemporary media landscapes alike. Accordingly, my paradigm of experiential narrative serves, in essence, to effectively further unearth, explicate, and advance how we approach thinking about such media and the messages communicated thereby; offering us a theoretical framework I feel is best able to yield and map the *sui generis* insights we need to better comprehend how we, as peoples, cultures, and societies, make meaning. This borne in mind, I do believe it’s high time we tear into the marrow of my research-creation undertaking.

## Chapter 1: Approach

### Methodology

The principal aim of this study was to grasp what, in the specific context of film, trans and gender non-conforming filmmakers are doing to tell novel stories explicitly about, otherwise relating to, or in some way involving transness and gender-nonconformity; to try and understand what unique strategies, approaches, techniques, and mobilizations they are employing.

Essentially, I wanted to determine what non-mainstream T&GNC storytellers are doing differently from that which dominates the mainstream. To this end, I elected to employ the method of qualitative interview, so as to facilitate the most thoroughgoing and introspective exchanges possible with my participant filmmakers. This method was particularly influenced by Dubois & Ford's actor-centric approach, in that I went about accessing the nuances of this highly politicized form of communication by framing them through the lens of my interviewee's subjectivities. I thusly took inspiration from Dubois & Ford's interview approach as I have used it with great success in previous research work that was also centered around participant subjectivity. Doing as such enabled me to circumvent predetermined assumptions of impact, influence, or value with regard to medium and tools utilized therefor (2015). Of course, this inevitably yielded the side-effect of my interviews flowing more like freeform conversations rather than strictly delineated interrogations, though this is a phenomenon I feel to have been ultimately beneficial, in that it encouraged greater elaboration of subjective experiences, perspectives, and opinions on the part of my interviewees. Thus, while no two conversations were exactly the same, each was guided by the same core set of topics, each thereby revealing unique insight from the respective participant. We'll expand more on the practicalities and nuances of this methodology as I applied it later in this chapter.

Additionally, by dint of my being a transgender individual making a film about transgender and gender non-conforming filmmakers, I have definitionally also engaged in aspects of the methodological approach of autoethnography. As I mentioned earlier when explaining my decision to engage in research-creation, this project relates profoundly to my own personal identities and experiences. Grounding for myself, then, from the proverbial jump - through the autoethnographical schools of thought - the fact that this would inevitably influence how I engaged, wrote, and created this project has enabled me to ensure I did so in a sufficiently rigorous academic capacity, while indeed also allowing me to be guided by that personal knowledge, instinct, and opinion (Wall, 2006). It has, in essence, empowered me to substantively engage the experiences of others without erasing or diminishing the presence and import of my own subjectivities; helping me to circumvent falsely masquerading as any sort of 'objective' authority (Gannon, 2006). Indeed, this written component on which you currently cast your gaze is utterly rife with my own subjectivity, visible in both its first-person perspective, as well as in the idiosyncratic nature of my prose - though this method of autoethnography will be most formally brought to bear below, in my reflection on my creative endeavour.

Speaking of the experiences of others, however, allow me now to finally introduce you to the filmmakers with whom I spoke.

### Interviewee Profiles

The filmmakers with whom I talked for the purposes of this project are presented as follows, in chronological order of interview:

TJ Cuthand (he/him), is a transgender man of Plains Cree and Scottish/Irish descent living in Canada who has been formally working in film for close to 30 years. Notable works comprise a very long list, but include, amongst others, *Woman Dress* (Cuthand, 2019), *Discretion* (Cuthand & May, 2021), and an upcoming, feature length adaptation of his extant short film *Kwēskosîw: She Whistles* (Cuthand, 2021).

Kaye Adelaide (she/it), is a white transgender woman living in Canada who has been formally working in film for approximately 6 years. Notable works include, amongst others, *Don't Text Back* (Adelaide & Sharp, 2020), *MonsterDykë* (Adelaide & Sharp, 2021), and her upcoming feature film *Transvengeance*.

StormMiguel Florez (he/him), is a Xicane transgender man living in America who has been formally working in film for approximately 10 years. Notable works include his documentary *The Whistle* (Florez, 2019), and his upcoming feature length film *Welcome to Roswell*.

Ava Davis (she/her), is a black transgender woman living in America who has been formally working in film for about 12 years. Notable works include her short film *The Duchess of Grant Park* (Mitchell, 2020), which she wrote and starred in, and her upcoming feature film *The Waltz*.

This ultimate list of participants was curated, identified, and contacted via several different methods. Cuthand was identified via the Carleton Transgender Media Portal's BIPOC Trans Filmmakers list and contacted via his personal website. I saw Adelaide's *MonsterDykë* screened as part of the 2022 HUMP! film festival and thereafter made contact via her personal website. I was put in contact with Florez via a mutual acquaintance. After interviewing Florez, he recommended I speak with Davis, whom he knew through a previous engagement, and kindly put me in touch with her. As part of this selection process, I took pains to ensure that participating filmmakers were of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, so as to make certain that the data was not unduly skewed by my accidentally over representing a given cultural group. Of course, there was a veritable laundry list of other potential filmmakers with whom, for various reasons, I did not ultimately speak: some did not respond to outreach, while others expressed interest but regrettably were too busy to be able to participate. Others yet I eliminated from the list because I simply did not have the time or resources to include that many participants.

In any case, what must be borne in mind about the above sample size is this: though relatively diverse in terms of experience, both with regard to identities and professional undertakings, this group of interviewees is, ultimately, comprised of four people and, accordingly, certain limitations of sample size must be acknowledged. The data I have gathered is thoroughly qualitative: rich and deep with participant subjectivity but grounded in their personal experience. Thus, while my findings can arguably be taken as insight into broader trends within the film industry, they should not be taken as blanket truths pertaining thereto as related to and experienced by T&GNC professionals.

This all having been said, let us now turn our attention to what I actually did with the interviews: namely, my creative component and the process involved therein.

### Process & Production

As I have by this point doubtlessly hammered into your psyche, I consider stories to be sites of profound power. However, I am also of the belief that a story's power is only as great as its interpretability: that is, the audience needs to be able to approach and engage it in the first place so as to derive any meaning therefrom. Thus, academic texts, papers, and theses (like this one) are not always the optimal apparatus for the wide-scale conveyance of meaning. Certainly, those individuals with the requisite background, sufficient patience, and/or necessary interest will be able to trawl the intricate depths of such writings to divine great scholarly insight, but for the average layperson? Dense academic material all too often represents an inaccessible and uninterpretable dead end, unless that material be consciously, actively written with a mind to reaching and moving the widest audience possible.

It is this understanding that has chiefly guided the way I've conducted the development and execution of my creative component. To this end, I have identified film to be the best companion media to the written text you currently peruse. Specifically, I have aimed to emulate a combination of feminist realist-style documentary film and contemporary video essay. This particular stylistic composite was selected for a few reasons. For one, documentary is a quintessential approach to narrativizing factual records - in this case, the interviews I have conducted - and the feminist realist style allows me to frame the findings of those interviews relative to the lived, real-world contexts in which they are enmeshed (Juhasz, 1999). This, combined with the video essay style - an emergent genre fusing in-depth academic analysis and performance with the accessible structures of video which, by its very nature, allows me to largely seamlessly translate the general flow of my written component to a new medium - ultimately empowers me to advance the same core argument of my thesis, just clad in appropriately simplified videographic trappings (Biemann, 2003; Mcwhirter, 2015; Stuckey-French, 2012). Considering that video as such has blossomed in popularity over the last decade with the proliferation of hosting platforms - YouTube, arguably the most popular such platform, is alone accessed by over 2.5 billion people a month (Iqbal, 2023) - means that I am producing a companion creative work in a medium that already enjoys widespread consumption so as to share my findings with the greatest number of people possible. One may, of course, further wonder why I elected to engage in and present interviews, of all things, for the purposes of this film, rather than, say, conduct and narrativize some form of content or discourse analysis of extant film work. The reasoning here is simple: such forms of media-centric analysis, while highly conducive to unearthing comparative representational nuances, would not, I feel, have helped my audience to learn anything new. People know that representation matters and that some media artifacts do it better than others - it is only by talking to professional filmmakers that I feel we might learn what specific tactics are being employed to do things better.

That all having been said, the key reason I chose to make a film as part of this endeavor is due to the delightfully cyclical fact that, by doing so, I am thereby positioned as a transgender filmmaker making a film about trans and gender non-conforming filmmakers. Not only is this wonderfully poetic, it also affords me further possible research insights by dint of

autoethnography: by tracking and reflecting on that which has informed and constituted my own filmmaking process, it is my hope that I will be able to shed further, first-hand insight on the observations and experiences voiced by my interviewees. By doing so, I aim to create and contribute to the sorts of narratives about T&GNC identity I, personally, would like to see more of - stories where such identities and lived experiences are taken seriously, given due respect, and contextualized in the wholeness of personhood, rather than being unnaturally fractured, isolated, and scrutinized as has so often been the case in mainstream media. However, before we can discuss that, we must first recapitulate my gestalt thesis development timeline.

The first of my interviews, all of which were conducted remotely and recorded via Zoom for reasons of practicality, was with TJ Cuthand, in September of 2022. Unfortunately, the specific questions I had formulated for the conversation were, in retrospect, suboptimal: they were too dense, too formal, and far too many in number. Using them as my guiding structure yielded an interaction that frankly felt more akin to a stilted interrogation as opposed to any sort of natural, introspective conversation. However, that first interview nevertheless proved fruitful, not only shedding some initial insight as to the unique filmmaking procedures Cuthand employs, but also helping me identify the weaknesses with my initial approach, thereby allowing me to redevelop my guiding list of inquires for my next interview with Kaye Adelaide later that same month. To this end, I cut down significantly on the number of questions I had prepared; boiling down to just the core issues to which I sought answers. This proved most felicitous. I was better able to engage Adelaide in deeper, more elaborative conversation that felt significantly more natural and insightful. I continued this processual evolution through the rest of my interviews with StormMiguel Florez, near the end of September, and with Ava Davis, in mid October; refining pertinent sites of inquiry based on what I had learned from the preceding conversations. The ultimate set of questions I produced efficaciously served to home in on a given interviewee's subjective career experiences in both personal and professional capacities; encouraging them to reflect on problems with the industry and medium in terms of production and narrative, the impact those problems have had on them and their craft, and the strategies they employed to deal therewith. The themes these questions revealed painted a picture of a professional experience characterized by tremendous difficulty, intense love of the art form, and a desire to change the way things are done. A more detailed examination of the specific findings therefrom will be undertaken in Chapter 2. A complete transcription of my ultimate discussion points is reproduced in the appendix.

Interviews thusly completed and subsequently transcribed, I set about identifying overlaps in my filmmakers' responses; taxonomically coding recurring themes with the aim of determining shared strategies and approaches. Now, I am far more competent a writer than I am a filmmaker: when articulating any sort of analytical argument, my thought processes tend to default to something akin to the flow of an essay. Accordingly, once I had my coded themes, I elected to jump immediately into drafting my written component before tackling my film, such that I could hash out the crux of my analysis and ultimate argument because, by doing so, I felt I would be able to best thereafter engage the film creation process with the greatest clarity of vision possible. This endeavour consumed the remaining months of 2022 - the results thereof (i.e.; my findings) are discussed below, in chapter two.

We thus now move our temporal lens to January of 2023. Analytical distillations completed and core argument incarnated in print, I set about translating the conceptual thrust of my text into film. I had hoped to begin this process by ‘chunking,’ as it were, my interview footage into those segments I felt best encapsulated and communicated the key takeaways from my conversations, around which I would then write a script. This initial strategy proved futile. Without first knowing the context in which a given clip would be embedded, it turned out that I couldn’t actually identify which clips were sufficiently pertinent. Certainly I had ideas, but they were too scattershot, too imprecise. I thus elected to attempt scripting and chunking in tandem: writing a given section of my plain language narration (the key concepts of which were predicated on the contents of the document you currently behold), then choosing interview clips to contextualize that narrative chunk as appropriate. This, I’m pleased to report, worked marvelously: it helped me to produce an overarching narrative structure for my film I feel efficaciously renders the core takeaways of my thesis interpretable and accessible to my target audiences - more on them shortly - by grounding my points of discussion in a logical, elaborative flow. Armed therewith, I elected to film myself delivering my script in a jury-rigged set in my apartment. Though not the most sophisticated of filming locations, this choice was intentional: contemporary video essays more often than not lack particularly complex production value and, by emulating that sort of barebones approach, I feel I have further enhanced the approachability of my film by playing into genre hallmarks. Filming took roughly a week, whereupon I moved promptly on to the editing process; marrying together the footage of my delivered spiel, the appropriate interview clips, and enough fine-tune editing magic to produce a film that I am, truth be told, quite proud of. In a runtime just shy of half an hour, it works to present the core concepts of my thesis in a way I feel audiences will find compelling and easy to grasp. The question then arises, of course: who are those audiences?

It behooves us now to consider just who I have made this film for; to whom I am attempting to communicate these concepts. As mentioned above, I have a few target audiences - three of them, specifically. Through this film, I specifically aim to relay the results of my study to other filmmakers, to regular T&GNC folks, and finally, to average lay-people. Now, this is, admittedly, a fairly wide selection, but this film is ideally supposed to make my work accessible to as many people as possible, as earlier stated. The breadth of these target groups is why I elected, in constructing the flow of my film, to take the liberty of presuming some degree of audience investment. That is, my structure and mode of address presumes someone watching this film - even if they don’t know much about film or trans/queer theory - is at least invested in learning about and better understanding film and/or T&GNC representation. That assumption has allowed me to break down my material in a way I feel the largest number of good faith audience members will be able to digest, while still preserving degrees of rigor and entertainment.

Film thusly constructed, it now comes time to consider what explicit strategies I, as a T&GNC filmmaker, have most consciously employed throughout this process. What things did I attempt to do differently from that which arguably constitutes the filmmaking norm? Having reflected on the gestalt undertaking, that which most immediately leaps to mind is my desire to have ensured community comfort from start to finish. Allow me to elaborate: as well we know by this point, the T&GNC community, both on screen and off, has been subject to a great deal of

critique, harassment, and suffering for holding the identities they do. I wanted not only to minimize any discomfort experienced by the T&GNC filmmakers who worked with me - or at least, to ensure that they felt supported while experiencing any discomfort the topics of discussion might connote - I further wanted their explicit approval on how they were depicted in the final product. This manifested in a few ways: I provided them the questions I planned to ask ahead of time such that they knew what to expect; I structured an extended exit clause into the participation consent form that allowed them to retract their consent without consequence at any time during the month following their initial interview; and, most especially, I sent them a rough cut of the film before finalization to get their sign-off on how I framed and presented them and their answers. Above all else, I wanted them to feel in control; as though their agency would be recognized and respected without question. For T&GNC people are, after all, a community - and if we don't provide support to one another, who will?

You might find it most interesting to learn that, in their own ways, my interviewees very much shared that sentiment. I think it's about time we discussed my findings.

## Chapter 2: Findings & Discussion

### The Problem With Funding - How Do These Movies Get Made In The First Place?

My conversations with these filmmakers quite rapidly brought into focus that, before any discussion can be had about in-media narrative strategies - which can only be enacted when a film exists to facilitate them to begin with - we must inescapably first contend with the fact that the creation of film demands a great deal of money. Unfortunately, it seems non-mainstream T&GNC filmmakers have little to none thereof. Now, this was not a topic of concern I originally anticipated or initially even calibrated for and, further, it might, at first, not seem relevant to our core avenue of inquiry, for, as has been made clear, I am endeavouring to ascertain what idiosyncratic approaches T&GNC filmmakers are utilizing for the purposes of their storytelling. After all, the economic conditions of production are different sociological considerations from the formal, aesthetic, and narrative traversals filmmakers face. Nevertheless, as I conducted my interviews, I found increasingly that all of my interviewees, to varying degrees but nonetheless universally, touched on the serious difficulties they often have with financing their filmic undertakings. It must be borne in mind that these filmmakers operate within a larger context: the overarching funding structures of the film industry encourage certain types of T&GNC representation and not others - meaning questionable films like *The Danish Girl* are enabled to enjoy relative success, while these filmmakers struggle to get their films into production in the first place. Thus, while it does constitute an unanticipated finding, given the fact that the issue in question directly relates to, impacts, and ultimately gates T&GNC filmmakers' ability to engage in their craft, questions of finance and access thereto unquestionably bear relevance to our ongoing discussion.

Film project funding first crystalized as a clearly pertinent issue during my second interview, with Kaye Adelaide. In our conversation, she laid out her experience of trying to finance film productions as an independent T&GNC filmmaker; an experience that was characterized by intense labour, emotional distress, and great detriment to her personal finances. You see, while she has, over the course of her career, received some funding for writing and the benefits of a few travel incubators, she has never actually received any proper production funding. She has had to self-finance every single production she has ever done; a financial reality that has forced her to max out every form of credit she has access to and left her with, at the time of our interview, 84 cents to her name. What is particularly galling about this account, however, is this: from what she's seen, it is not as though it is impossible to find funding to make a story about or involving T&GNC identity, one just has to have what Adelaide describes as the requisite social capital to get that money in the first place. In describing social capital, she emphasized the sorts of connections and work history that are necessary for a person to rise and succeed in the film industry. This capital largely makes up the kinds of things grant juries, distributors, and sales agents look at; who are in turn the sorts of people a filmmaker would look to work with for the purposes of funding gaps in their financing structure. Unfortunately, it is difficult for T&GNC people, as a socially stigmatized and economically maligned population, to find the opportunities to build this sort of capital. From what she's seen, Adelaide reported that the people who get funding for independent stories about T&GNC identity tend to be white, cisgender gay men who, because of the greater opportunity afforded to them by their more

privileged identities, had better curricula vitae and were presumed by funding institutions to have sufficient understandings of T&GNC experience by dint of their queerness. Most instances of such film projects she has observed are actually still works in-production against which she has personally competed for funding but she particularly noted Lukas Dhont's *Girl* as an instance of this phenomenon - an independent film that places an almost sensationalistic focus on the main character's linear biological and corporeal transition, wherein Dhont arguably eschews the opportunity to offer a nuanced exploration of T&GNC personhood in favour of visceral shock value in the form of extreme gender dysphoria and self-harm (Dhont, 2018). Adelaide, on the other hand, is, for lack of a better phrase, unproven and, unfortunately, struggling to find the opportunities that would enable her to thusly prove herself because of her stigmatized trans identity. One may point out the Wachowski sisters - who are, arguably amongst the most publicly known T&GNC filmmakers - as possible exceptions to this rule. As argued by Adelaide, however, the Wachowskis established themselves as popular filmmakers prior to transitioning, meaning their ability to make film was never subjected to the same kind of heightened scrutiny as burgeoning, publicly-out filmmakers.

Ava Davis echoed Adelaide's grievances when she succinctly summarized the process of securing film funding as being something that "requires therapy" to get through. Having applied to and been repeatedly rejected by a great many grant-awarding bodies, she elaborated the fact that she, too, is struggling to crack the problem of securing sufficient funding and that the process similarly causes her a great deal of stress and grief. In her account, Davis attributed the difficulties she has with film financing, at least in part, to the rapid changes the film world has undergone since the 1990s. The shift from physical media to streaming has, in her estimation, yielded a highly finite market; one that has only further narrowed the margins for already marginalized 'community work.' That is, those films that deal with or in some way involve 'minority' identities and, thereby, give those communities a voice. This is a keen insight and, perhaps, an unsurprising occurrence. When the average understanding of T&GNC personhood has been reduced to a focus on narratives of violence and/or coming out, which have, as we have discussed, become exhausted as tropes, what other stories are left to tell? T&GNC identity has 'been done' in film, as it were, in the eyes of many a funding entity. The availability of funding from those entities is thus subject to normative projections of narrative profitability - as well TJ Cuthand mentioned when describing the restraints of the bigger budget films he aspires to create. Based on these filmmakers' experiences, it seems that many funders hold in their heads a preliminary meta-narrative about what a T&GNC film is and/or should be and who is capable of undertaking such a project and are accordingly predisposed either to be unwilling to listen with a neutral filter - or are simply inaccessible in the first place - to T&GNC filmmakers who know otherwise. In this way, it seems many funding institutions perpetuate the sorts of questionable stories that so dominate cinema - both in more mainstream films like *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2016) that are most visible to the public and in independent works like *Girl* (Dhont, 2018) - which convey deeply skewed understandings of T&GNC experience.

Of course, contrary to such understandings, there are so many more stories of T&GNC experience that have yet to be told. As demonstrated by narrative incidentalism - which we shall shortly discuss - our existence is not, as it happens, solely pain and death. StormMiguel Florez's thoughts on the issue are particularly interesting. He too has struggled to secure funding from

grants for his ongoing comedy narrative feature film, finding that producers and investors who commonly fund such narrative films are often inaccessible to or uninterested in the narrative films of T&GNC people - strongly echoing Adelaide's experience. Meanwhile, he has also found that grant-based funding institutions only want to fund documentaries or other 'issues' based films. The exact institutions he has in mind are not named here for reasons of Florez's professional privacy, but research into public calls for funding nevertheless quickly reveals that nonfiction film as such does indeed seem to be particularly privileged in terms of available opportunities (FilmDaily.tv, 2023; Hot Docs, 2023; PBS, 2022). Florez argues that this latter phenomenon is fallacious reasoning on the part of such institutions. He posits that, irrespective of the type or form of film a T&GNC filmmaker may wish to make, be it narrative or otherwise, that film-to-be is, in a way, issues-based, in that it addresses the issue of how T&GNC people have been portrayed in film heretofore by dint of its being made by T&GNC people. Thereby, he asserts that funding T&GNC filmmakers in any genre constitutes a meaningful form of political action, a substantive act of change, in that it serves to help undo the damages of pervasive historical transphobia in film - a pervasiveness that endangers us still to this day. To this end, Florez hopes to see more funding going towards T&GNC-made cinema of all kinds.

The point to be taken away here is this: independent filmmaking has always been a challenge to fund, as any filmmaker can likely attest. However, as evidenced by the experiences of my interviewees, holding a T&GNC identity brings further barriers and complications to accessing such funding. The issues my interviewees outlined were not identical but, nevertheless, stemmed from the difficulties of marginalization that T&GNC identity can entail - difficulties that ultimately actively impact these filmmakers' individual and collective ability to tell meaningfully different, more resonant stories about and relating to T&GNC identity. Thus, any understanding of T&GNC filmmakers and their work would be incomplete in failing to take this into account.

#### Commercial Disavowal & The Communal Shift: Why Are We Doing This?

To best contextualize this next finding, there is a core aspect of the problem with funding which we must first foreground: industry expectations of profitability. As we previously discussed, part of the reason my interviewees struggle with financing their endeavours is due to the fact that established film industry institutions and entities often do not consider the projects of smaller and/or independent T&GNC filmmakers as being sufficiently profitable enterprises. These projects are seen as being too niche, too inflammatory, or simply too 'played out,' as it were. Though unfortunate, this is frankly unsurprising. The film industry is, after all, an industry - one with a bottom line to push and preserve - and, thus, contemporary filmmaking, as a practice, is in no small part built on the expectation of financial return as the ultimate purpose of a given film. Certainly, there exist filmic institutions and structures not especially driven by profit, but even then, the career filmmakers who interact with them must still be making enough money from their craft to put food on the table. It is thus a mindset one might fairly assume is held by many members of that industry - which makes the fact that each of my interviewees, in their own ways, strongly disavows this rampant commercialism all the more interesting. The fact that they are instead turning to community and connection as being the ultimate purposes of film makes it downright fascinating.

Ava Davis had a choice to make when she decided to pursue a career in film. Would she move to a place like Los Angeles or New York - hotspots of the film industry in the United States - and be “serious about filmmaking,” as many expect aspiring filmmakers to do, or would she stay in her home state of Georgia and make it work where she was? As it happens, she chose to remain at home for one critical reason: community. In Georgia, Davis had community, a support network, extant connections which she would not need to ‘start over’ building from fresh in a new city. This was a particularly critical decision for her because, as Davis sees it, the making of audiovisual content like film is an inherently communal process - one that further impacts the sorts of stories she tells. A film is an undertaking that demands a myriad of people doing a myriad of things towards a united, singular end. Closeness, connection, and shared values with those people thus make the filming process, in her estimation, far, far more feasible and enjoyable. Perhaps even more importantly, however, Davis not only sees community as an important part of the production process, she sees it as one of the core narrative purposes of making film. She argues that the stories we tell through the medium - when made with a mind towards depicting, honouring, and celebrating community - not only serve as a way of bringing T&GNC people together but as a means of helping those people heal from sociopolitical traumas and, further, stay safe in the face of danger. In her view, film is oriented less as a means to ultimate financial gain, so much as it is a way to help her share her experiences with her community, for her community to share their experiences at large, and for that community to be narratively seen and heard - a perspective not only very much in the vein of experiential narrative, but visibly reified, for instance, through her film *The Duchess of Grant Park*, wherein the story emphasizes the import and power of community support by chronicling how the titular Duchess gives back to her own community after her transition (Mitchell, 2020). It is a view that my interviewees universally shared and echoed, positioning their film practices as ways to make a living, certainly, but more importantly, as a way to forge meaningful and transformative connections through stories.

Each of my interviewees goes about this goal with definite intentionality, structuring their filmmaking techniques to best include and accurately reflect those communities both involved and implicated in their films. A first instance thereof: both Davis and Adelaide engage in exhaustive processes of script revision. Their approaches to writing, while idiosyncratic, share remarkable similarities, in that, having developed and drafted an initial written work, both then take that initial work and circulate it amongst their communities, asking other T&GNC filmmakers, writers, and people at large to cast their eyes thereupon for the purposes of garnering feedback. Armed therewith, they set about further building on that initial work to construct an ultimate narrative - and associated audience experience - that respectfully speaks to and reflects an amalgamation of multiple viewpoints and experiences, in a process of, arguably, communal filmmaking. Of course, it must be noted that this process can take a great deal of time and is by no means efficient or cost-effective, yet, rather than being primarily occupied with hammering out and subsequently implementing a profitable film script, they are foremost concerned with intersecting dimensions of harm to communities and preventative care. Operating in this way, they arguably work to incarnate a plurality of experience within their scripts - and accordingly within their stories - by engaging the communities those films represent from the outset and,

thereby, as such practically apply the paradigm of experiential narrative by working to synthesize and contextualize that lived experience within those stories.

StormMiguel Florez brought up a particularly interesting approach to engaging community as such when discussing his 2019 documentary, *The Whistle*. During our conversation, he argued that a great many historical documentary films are guilty of essentially strip-mining their subject matter, of engaging and presenting their topics in a capacity that is blatantly extractive and colonizing, thereby circulating deleteriously contextless narratives that do a marked disservice to those impacted by - or who may themselves be - the subject of the film. This sort of ‘extractive filmmaking’ has been a notable problem in recent years, with many documentarians engaging in “‘drive by’ doc-making - usually involving a white journalist [or] filmmaker swooping down on a community of color, nabbing some sensationalistic footage over a few days, then quickly returning to an editing home base far, far away” (Wissot, 2017). As filmmaking practices go, it is an extractivist paradigm characterized by deracination, unilateralism, and ravagement and, as a phenomenon, is heavily critiqued by indigenous and decolonial methodologies (Christian, Medel, & Mazawi, 2019; Shamash, 2022; Shaw, 2022). In making his documentary, Florez explicitly strove to circumvent narrative strip-mining as such; an end he achieved by, amongst other things, throwing a party. Upon arriving on location in his hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico, where his aim was to document aspects of its lesbian culture as it existed in his youth, Florez began by introducing himself to the contemporary lesbian community. To connect with the people therein, he created a distributable proof-of-concept that explained who he was and what the project was aiming to do. Further, he quite literally threw a party to bring together potential interviewees such that he could introduce himself in-person, further elaborate on the details of the project, and provide consent forms to those he wished to interview. It was an approach that had an obvious impact on the ultimate feel of the film: the interviewees therein demonstrated a degree of comfort, ease, and openness on screen that made *The Whistle*, as a story, feel intentionally respectful of agency in a way many other documentary films do not. This is arguably also in large part due to the fact that Florez took pains to ensure that everyone who agreed to participate had right of veto over the way in which they were presented in their section of the film. In his own words: “if I didn’t get it right, I [wanted] to hear it from [them].” By engaging the community depicted in the film with forthright transparency in all aspects of the project, he not only found that the members thereof were largely tremendously pleased with the process, the final product, and their having been explicitly consulted and included throughout - he had simultaneously thoroughly cultivated his own accountability to that community. In essence, he explicitly produced his film through a framework of interaction and benefit; that is, by a process of evaluating how his production process and ultimate narrative would interact with the impacted community and, more importantly, how it would benefit them. Notably, this practice not only borrows from extant co-creative frameworks that emphasize a disruption of more audience-focused anthropological approaches, it further contributes to that disruption by demonstrating a means of activating and centering participant agency in all stages of the filmmaking process - from the initial phases to the end product, his interviewees were informed and involved such that the film served them, rather than the other way around (Cizek et al., 2022). In this way, Florez’s work, when framed through the lens of experiential narrative, has effectively engineered a story that, when presented

to audiences, should ideally communicate a more holistic, nuanced, and impactful picture of the people and experiences it represents. You will note that, per my earlier account of my creative component's production process, this is a particular strategy he and I share - I have also personally found that the prioritization of my interviewees' comfort was a key factor in how I approached making my own film.

Of course, this approach demands a vast amount of labour on the various filmmakers' part. One may then ask, why do they bother paying such painstaking attention to the communities involved in their films? TJ Cuthand had an elegant and simple answer to this question: he explained that, at heart, he ultimately hopes that his work, when imbued with such mindfulness and love for his communities, serves in turn to touch and affect those communities, to help people learn to treat each other better, and to increase the respect we hold for one another. The T&GNC filmmakers I interviewed are, increasingly, choosing not to engage film as a commercial undertaking, that is, for money's sake but, rather, are moving towards engaging it as a communal undertaking; not only recognizing the importance of community in making film but also the importance of seeing it and respecting it in the narratives of those films: blurring and blending the line between that which comprises a story and the production that yields it. For many of them, filmmaking bears no resemblance to the hyper-optimized, Hollywood-esque process of creation dedicated to cutting all expense and generating the utmost profit on the shortest timeline. Instead, their craft includes processes of thorough reflection, accountability, and community engagement. In this way, the communal shift is perhaps not so much a shift from commercial film, as it is both a narrative and practical rebuttal thereof.

#### Narrative Incidentalism: Personhood Tacitly Understood

In our interview, TJ Cuthand mentioned that, when programming a queer film festival a few years ago, he noticed a great many of the film submissions the festival received were very 'trans 101' in nature. That is, they were dedicated to explaining extremely basic aspects of T&GNC experiences and life - such as terminology and coming out - and, unfortunately, that was about it as far as films submitted to the festival that involved T&GNC identity went. Kaye Adelaide, meanwhile, echoed this observation of reductive portrayal in a different capacity when she commented on how, in the greater mainstream context, there is an almost incredible lack of T&GNC characters visible on screen in spite of the astounding amount of media contemporarily produced and, while there's been some recent improvement in this regard, what depictions of T&GNC identity we do see are nigh always painted in tragic and martyred capacities. Ava Davis has experienced this firsthand. When she first started auditioning, the vast majority of the T&GNC roles she saw calls for involved violence against those characters, especially against transgender women. StormMiguel Florez similarly observed this phenomenon and elaborated it adeptly by positing that T&GNC people almost never get to be seen or portrayed as full human beings, as existing in any capacity beyond the non-normative nature of their gender identities.

In some way, shape, or form, every single one of my interviewees explicitly conveyed the view that most extant T&GNC characters are, in differing ways, limited and/or poor facsimiles of the real deal, if you will. Such characters lack agential narrative wholeness within their stories. They are not treated as complex, multifaceted individuals but are instead pared back to a singular, unnaturally isolated piece of their personhood: their transness. One may ask: why does

this matter? Davis succinctly answered this question during our conversation. It matters because such characters do not show the full gamut of T&GNC experience; they communicate warped ideas of what real-life T&GNC people deal with. In terms of experiential narrative, the narrative experience is dangerously rudimentary. Certainly, the process of understanding identity and coming out - or not coming out, as the case may be - is important, yes. The violence T&GNC people are inequitably subjected to is important, yes. But that is not the sum scope of the lives T&GNC people lead. There is so much more involved, so much more experienced. Each of my interviewees expressed a desire for more developed, more authentic, and more substantive T&GNC characters in film. It is a preference for an approach I have dubbed ‘narrative incidentalism.’

Narrative incidentalism is exactly what it sounds like: it describes stories wherein a given character’s T&GNC identity is incidental; important to the story, certainly, but not the sole focus when it comes to the character in question. Such characters exist and operate beyond the strict confines of their gender identity. Narrative incidentalism thus constitutes a significant component of that which the filmmakers I interviewed are doing differently from the mainstream. They are telling more nuanced and more compelling stories about and involving T&GNC identity that better and more wholly integrate characters holding such identities into the greater plot. Consider Adelaide’s *MonsterDykē*: while the main character begins the story dealing with conflict related to her transgender identity, namely being fetishized for it, said conflict is not the ultimate focus thereof, rather it is the supernatural sex in which she subsequently participates (2021). Further consider Cuthand’s *Woman Dress*: a film about the eponymous Two Spirit individual which discusses, through a story not subjected to colonial binaries, the importance and role of storytelling to indigenous cultures (2019). Finally, consider Florez’s upcoming *Welcome to Roswell*: as currently planned, the film is ostensibly about a transgender man coming out to his family but in true mockumentary form, will be wholly derailed by his partner’s obsession with the supposed spaceship crash of 1947 and, ultimately, come to focus on government conspiracies and, of course, aliens (Florez, n.d.).

All these films, while being about T&GNC people, explore those people living their lives in capacities that focus on aspects other than their transness. Their transness is narratively incidental. In terms of experiential narrative, they are substantive stories of gestalt actuality. This phenomenon is powerful in that it not only shows audiences that the lives of T&GNC folks are rich and multifaceted beyond the scope of their gender identities but in that it also defeats a key tactic of systemic power-denial: narrative incidentalism functions as a strategic counter to the constant demand placed upon marginalized populaces to justify the basic aspects of their identity and, thereby, their personhood. Narrative incidentalism in film takes marginalized personhood as a tacit truth and instead focuses on showing such people living their lives. The central theme of narrative incidentalism in relation to T&GNC identity, then, can best be summarized thusly: it’s time to stop telling stories about coming out and start telling them about being out.

### Experiential Narrative 3 - The Power Of Stories

We are left, now, with but one, final, question: to what does all this amount? While we have, thus far, distilled a most useful list of manifest strategies employed by transgender and

gender non-conforming filmmakers for the purposes of telling their own stories, we yet need insight into what those stories are working towards; what aim the filmmakers hope to achieve. To this end, let us more deeply consider a selection of our interviewees' films as narrative gestalts, with the aim of grasping what, exactly, they challenge about prevailing conceptions of T&GNC identity. To what end are the strategies we have identified above deployed? What ultimate effect do these filmmakers' stories, ideally, have?

Take Davis' *The Duchess of Grant Park* (Mitchell, 2020). The film has a simple premise that is, frankly, heartwarming: Grant Park - a city park and surrounding residential neighborhood located in Atlanta, Georgia - has been claimed by the titular Duchess as her very own duchy. The Duchess herself is a semi-fantastical figure who spends her time seeing to her community: bestowing crowns and titles to those who pass through her realm (i.e.; the park and surrounding neighborhood), endeavoring to spread a little more magic throughout the world. A transgender character played by a transgender woman - Davis, herself - the Duchess is depicted in such a way as to afford her substantive and grounded narrative agency by focusing within the film on things beyond the mere scope of her T&GNC identity; both notable improvements over the more mainstream films we have discussed that present constrained portrayals featuring cisgender actors. Indeed, as the story progresses, we learn that, not only is she transgender, she has had a rather rough go of things: her adoptive parents returned her when she began showing signs of non-normative gender expression as a child and, further, her husband - a stalwart supporter of her transition - has recently passed away. But as we find through the film, this hardship hasn't thrown too much of a wrench in the Duchess' works - far from it, in fact. It turns out that it was these very events that have ignited in her a desire to give back to her community, to make the lives of those around her better by encouraging them to carry and treat themselves as the nobility she considers them all to be. Besides being a tale equal parts touching and inspiring, *The Duchess of Grant Park* is especially notable for the way it approaches framing T&GNC identity and experience. Certainly, the Duchess' transness is an integral part of her character and the story but not in a way that reductively isolates and focuses thereon: rather, the film emphasizes that which she comes to achieve in the world as inspired by those experiences. That is to say, her love and idiosyncratic form of support for her community are shown to be things closely tied to her transgender identity, but it is those qualities that are the ultimate focus of the film, rather than her transness. Structured in this way, *The Duchess of Grant Park* - in terms of experiential narrative - presents its audience with a story of T&GNC identity that, in contrast to mainstream, transition-focused narratives, paints those identities not as linear processes but as rich and complex facets of a person that feed into and interact with their ultimate, gestalt personhood.

Further consider Cuthand's *Woman Dress* (2019). The film is a videographic rendition of a Cuthand family oral story, which tells the tale of the eponymous Woman Dress: an indigenous Two Spirit person who traveled the land, telling stories to those communities he came across. The film itself is comprised of archival footage and dramatized re-enactments, chiefly featuring narration in the form of a conversation between Cuthand and a family member recounting the story, who - based on Cuthand's grandfather's telling - uses both she and he pronouns to represent Woman Dress' Two Spirit identity. Through the story, we learn that Woman Dress was, from childhood, a wanderer who refused to settle down in favour of eternal itinerancy. As she traveled, he learned the goings-on, the news, and the stories of those she encountered - which he

would carry and share with those she subsequently met. We eventually learn that, because of the import placed on his stories by the communities Woman Dress came across, those communities came to agree to honour and protect storytellers like her, safeguarding them from conflict such that they could continue to connect communities through their stories. Cuthand's film is striking in its portrayal of T&GNC identity for two reasons. Firstly, *Woman Dress* presents the main character's identity in such a way that it is freed from colonial binaries, demonstrating the fact that there's more than one way to be and experience non-normative, non-binary gender - ways beyond the Western scope. It must be noted that this cements a striking overlap of uniquely BIPOC practices of community storytelling with the strategies of T&GNC filmmakers. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that many people simultaneously hold identities encompassed by both of these umbrellas, but also due to the fact that these strategies, taken together, ultimately work to fight the same thing: the dogmatic hegemonies so deeply encoded in Western representational forms. Secondly, while his Two Spirit identity is, indeed a lynchpin of the narrative, the ultimate focus of the story is Woman Dress' role as a storyteller and the impact that role had on her communities, demonstrating that the deep interface between story and cognitive/embodied experience - that is, narrative sense-making - is present in a multiplicity of different epistemologies, worldviews, and practices. Thusly told, the film *Woman Dress* ultimately further contributes to the ongoing repainting of T&GNC identity in film we have identified: reifying the value of depicting it without unduly scrutinizing it, thereby forming a transformative site of identification.

Of course, while dissecting their films for ultimate narrative function is useful, we must also discuss what these filmmakers themselves argue to be the generative possibilities of trans self-representation in film. What changes do these T&GNC filmmakers hope to see effected through their films? What do they say they're working towards? Kaye Adelaide had many thoughts about the purpose of stories in the films of T&GNC people. At the societal level, she identifies an ongoing, highly politicized tug-of-war. Ever since the transgender tipping point, there has been, in her estimation, a conversation of sorts conducted through mass media, wherein stories of embodied trans experience fight to be heard over reactionary outrage and pushback. In TJ Cuthand's view, our stories are increasingly working not to define who or what we are, but simply to show that we *are*, much as *Woman Dress* does, articulating the messy and multifaceted nature of our individual and collective selfhoods. StormMiguel Florez echoed and analogized this view by stating a desire simply to see "all the things we see in popular film and media, just featuring trans people." I feel Ava Davis, however, put it best. The films T&GNC people make, in her view, function as an ultimate reclamation of the medium. By telling stories grounded in, inspired by, and/or relating to the subjectivities of T&GNC people, T&GNC filmmakers promulgate those perspectives on a far greater scale than merely the personal. An exercise in storytelling not merely for spectacle but for the sharing of experience. In this way, these filmmakers align themselves with certain theoretical facets of trans new wave cinema by conceptualizing 'trans' not merely as a plot device in and of itself, but as a lens through which trans modes of being might be honoured and celebrated (Roskam, 2018). Thereby, they differentiate themselves and their stories not only from the mainstream, but also from the broader realm of independent cinema that focuses on more sensationalistic aspects of T&GNC identity; films like *Girl*, as discussed earlier.

Now, by framing their works and responses through the lens of experiential narrative, that is, by understanding the stories contained within these films as being lynchpin vehicles for the ultimately persuasive communication of meaning, effected through the mechanisms by which an audience subjectively experiences those stories in both embodied and cognitive terms, we can thus come to the following conclusion: the films that these T&GNC filmmakers create and the stories told therein serve to facilitate a sociocultural reclamation of agency by and for T&GNC people at large. In the face of a medium, a culture, and a society that has maligned and oppressed us, imperiled us in so many ways simply for existing, these stories serve to fight back, to fight against marginalization, to make it clear to the world through conscious and subconscious counter-narratives that we are here, we are not lesser, and we will not be ignored nor sidelined. Thus, it is revealed through the apparatus of experiential narrative that by structuring the stories they tell using the strategies we have outlined, by intentionally imbuing them with the understandings and the meanings that they do, these T&GNC filmmakers work to use their stories to change and better the world. Stories; as used for transformation and, perhaps, even revolution.

## Conclusion

This thesis has striven to grasp, encapsulate, and analyze the unique representational approaches and strategies employed by non-mainstream transgender and gender non-conforming (T&GNC) filmmakers to combat deleterious conceptions of T&GNC identity in their chosen medium, with an especial mind to discerning their ultimate impact. It has achieved this by means of qualitative interview with four such filmmakers, a research-creation film component documenting and rendering accessible the findings thereof to non-academic audiences, and an autoethnographical reflection on my own process as a transgender filmmaker making a film as such. Through these methods, it has revealed an underlying production-side concern with the availability of funding for non-mainstream T&GNC filmmakers; the phenomenon of narrative incidentalism, wherein a character's T&GNC identity is incidental to a given story, rather than the focus thereof; and a notable lessening of focus on the commercial side of film in favour of an increased emphasis on the role of community, not only in terms of how the production process is executed, but with particular regard to that which actually constitutes filmic narratives. Finally, through my analytical paradigm of experiential narrative, this thesis has demonstrated how these various concerns and strategies ultimately coalesce into an overarching movement to tell stories through film that better the sociopolitical conditions of the marginalized T&GNC populace by challenging prevailing public conceptions of T&GNC identity with representations that are more nuanced, more subjective, and more centered in lived experience.

Taken together, this collection of identified phenomena and paradigmatic musings is ultimately emblematic of one core reality: the playing field of creative endeavor, artistic expression, and shared culture is currently subject to extreme contest. Transgender and gender non-conforming communities are suffering heretofore unseen degrees of violence, hatred, and oppression in lived and legal arenas alike - a repression that especially manifests in the way we conceptualize and tell stories about these identities and those that hold them. At time of writing, the United States has an absurd 492 transphobic bills currently filtering through its legislation (Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.), while Canadian governments shutter clinics, cut funding for gender-affirming care, and, in the case of some provinces, pause it wholesale (Dalwood, 2023). Perceptions of T&GNC people are so bad, the likelihood of their being victims of violent crime is more than four times of that faced by cisgender people (Williams Institute, 2021). Yet, as brutally dire as the contemporary cultural and political contexts may seem, I would say that we do not find ourselves without hope. Filmmaking today and, I would argue, perhaps all forms of storytelling, are possessed of the ability to counter these sociopolitical forms of violence. Though both mainstream and independent cinema share the problem of frequently engaging sensationalistic approaches to depicting T&GNC identity, the people we have discussed here - Ava Davis, StormMiguel Florez, TJ Cuthand, and Kaye Adelaide - and the films they make; the strategies they use; the stories they tell, framed through the lens of experiential narrative, present a counter-effort, if you will: one that is, given the aforementioned context, characterized by both intrinsic risk and vital necessity as they fight to be heard. In the contemporary culture wars, they constitute a compassionate frontline; armed with the findings we have herein identified, working against hatred and division to instead connect, unite, and protect the beauty and sanctity of trans experience through their art. They are a quintessential component of the remedy we need to

address today's rampant transphobia and we all stand to gain by considering and implementing the strategies they employ.

As we have manifestly seen throughout this endeavor, stories interlink, affect, and constitute our perceptions, our understandings, and our experiences. They are the fabric from which we weave the collective tapestry of our lives. Thus, I now ask you: from what narrative material have you drawn to make up the story that is you? What story are you, in turn, telling to the world? For, as these filmmakers have shown us, we cannot afford to be passive narrative agents. We must each of us assert our own degree of authority over the plot of our existence, as we all deserve a tale of our own making. After all: the stories we tell make us who we are.

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## **Appendix**

### **Key Discussion Points**

- Introductions: name, pronouns, how long you've been working in film?
- What drew you to film as a medium, art form, and career?
- What relationships do you see between film and the way we understand our genders? How are audiences impacted by what we see on the big screen?
- What would you say the big issues with trans/GNC representation in popular film are?
- Tell me about your film work. How do you approach representing trans and GNC folk within it?
- Are there any specific methods or steps you take to help create better representation - tell better stories - in your films?
- What role would you say community plays in your approach to filmmaking?
- What has your experience been with securing film financing?
- Speaking generally, what are our stories of trans/GNC identity currently working - or, perhaps, failing to work - towards?
- Tell me about your proudest work in film involving trans/GNC stories?
- What's next for you? What're you working on now?