

Breathing Pockets of Hopes for a New World

Straube, Wibke *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film* (diss.).

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WITH TRANS CINEMA *and Its Exit Scapes* Wibke Straube makes an intervention into a cinematic tradition of portraying trans characters through a voyeuristic and often highly cisnormative gaze. Straube is critical of the ways that mainstream films with trans characters play on anti-trans violence, capitalizing on risk, trauma and the shock value of exposing gender non-conforming bodies, and aims to reappropriate trans representation in cinema through affirmative readings of films that are constraining in their narration of trans experiences. *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes* is a sharp critique of the privilege of visibility, in culture in general and in film studies in particular, a reformulation of what Straube (2014, 60) calls an “ocularcentric [*sic*] film terminology.”

Straube’s analysis departs from the conviction that critique drawn from gender-dissident embodiment and trans experience has transformative potentials. Ze relies on the work of trans scholars like Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, and Anthony Wagner, exploring disidentificatory and anti-assimilationist positions that make use of rage and monstrosity as productive categories for exposing cisnormativity. Straube points out that the field of Trans Cinema (loosely comprised of films with a focus on trans characters) is complicit in processes that stabilize cisnormative gender binaries, using visual strategies that tie into pathologizing narratives of trans embodiment and experiences, and hence overshadow-

ing the transformative political agenda of activists and scholars. Arguing that cinema can be read as part of mass negotiations of meaning, Straube understands Trans Cinema as “a popcultural archive of trans embodiment” (58) that negotiates reality and affects individual lives. In accordance with this understanding of cinema as world making material Straube states the need of an affirmative approach to Trans Cinema.

Methodologically Straube constructs an intricate analytical device with a combination of close reading of the films as cultural texts, and personal interspection, paying attention to his own affective reactions to the films at hand. These affective reactions play a fundamental role in the collection and analysis of the material, and could hence be described as both part of the methodological device and part of the material. Reading the films through affective reactions, and treating the films as objects of intra-action, Straube explores the material as cultural texts open to “transfeminist intervention, disidentification and re-imaginings of gender embodiment” (59).

One of the main aims of the dissertation is an exploration of transformative theoretical interventions into cinema. Straube draws on the affective turn in film studies and feminist and queer theory, and develops concepts addressing the fact that films are multisensory mediums and that spectatorship is equally multisensory, even haptic. Straube introduces the concept “entrant” to describe the embodied affective position of the spectator, wanting to get away from spectatorship as a metaphor privileging visuality and sight. Films both invite and imply the entrant; entrants are becoming in intra-action with multisensory images. Another important concept, that Straube coins, is “exit scape.” To Straube exit scapes are breathing pockets of hopes for a different world, utopian worldings undermining cisnormative structures. In the context of Trans Cinema, exit scapes offer possibilities for positive and affective identification with the trans character to “allow all entrants to be temporarily constructed as trans – they become transing subjects in their feelings for and with the character” (49). With the affirmative approach, simplistic understandings of representation as reducible to head counts are challenged, and trans politics is articulated as a politics of becoming.

Straube's phenomenological methodology leads to an understanding of mutual co-becomings, between entrants and characters, trans cinema and trans realities. As such the dissertation itself is transformative.

In three chapters Straube, the dissertation writer, goes into close readings of the film material, thematized according to different types of exit scapes and their sensory intra-actions with Straube, the entrant. In "Dancing Dissidence: Touch, Contact, and Contagion" Straube contextualizes the queer history of dance as contagious, and finds utopian figurations of trans embodiment in exit scapes that challenge experiences of disorientation and pain through dance. The films analyzed are *Ma vie en rose* (1997), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), and a typical exit scape is the one when Ludo, the leading character of *Ma vie en rose*, dances with his grandmother in an ecstatic, kinaesthetic connection of belonging and love. In "Song and the Politics of Listening" Straube explores embodied listening as a method for recognizing expressions of trans identities in a culture that puts focus on visual gender embodiment, and is biased to a cisnormative gender binary. Exit scapes of song in *Romeos* (2011), *Transamerica* (2005), and *The Crying Game* (1993) are contextualized through themes of siren songs and monstrosity, but also through what Straube calls trans hearing. In "Dreams, Utopias and Spacetime-mattering" the focus is exit scapes in *Cheonhajangsa Madonna* (2006), *Ma vie en rose* (1997), and *Laurence Anyways* (2012), all thematizing the power of seeing otherwise, of creating wishlandscapes and dreaming of a different world.

I experience some glitches in the intra-action with *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes*. For example the compilation of Trans Cinema as a body of work, in the context of the dissertation, could be clearer. Straube describes how the focus has been the production of cinematic trans narratives since 1992, mainly in Western European and North American contexts, and how ze have watched both documentaries and fiction films. But ze does not go into any description of the films that are not analyzed in the dissertation, nor does ze provide an extended description of how the selection of films that did make the cut was made.

The fact that Straube's own affective responses, as an entrant, are part

of the methodological device used to explore utopian sensibilities means that the situating of the writer and entrant is key. Straube draws on feminist and queer scholarly notions of situated knowledge in articulating a position of self-reflexivity. Ze talks about turning himself “inside out [...] to be accountable and transparent” (29–30). But the question lingers in my reading: What does transparency mean in textual world where Baradian and Braidottian becomings and co-constitutive intra-actions are the epistemological, ontological, and ethical points of departures? To paraphrase Latour, in a textual world devoted to a critique of the liberal, humanistic subject, have we ever been transparent? There are passages where the materiality of writing is addressed, but I would have loved to see an elaborated discussion about the ideal of transparency itself.

In the concluding chapter Straube describes how things constitute human subjectivity in an intra-active exchange of feelings (drawing on Sara Ahmed), and how things, especially things that are strange to us, disorient and reorient us. Being entangled in the field of trans studies, *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes* functions as a strange thing, in the sense that it disoriented and reoriented me, and for that I am thankful.

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