

# TRANSAMERICA AND QUEERNORMATIVITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005) conveys cinematic features – such as the *mise en scène*, the narrative, the structure, and the stereotypes - which can be related to cultural commodification of intentional subversive products. This essay draws on Judith Butler's study of binary of sex and gender and their cultural bases, such as the taboo of incest, as well as on Jean Baudrillard's ideas on power and cultural commodification. A main analytic role is played by the parodic depiction of the white patriarchal society in the film (Bree's parents who refuse to accept her identity), related to Fredric Jameson's pastiche and Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality. Both concepts interact in a simulacrum through which power is maintained. In addition, social minorities are portrayed unrealistically in the film, and their alliance embodies structural abilities of oppression and control, thus establishing itself as *queernormativity*, or as Butler said, "the illusion of identity".

## KEYWORDS

Transamerica, queernormativity, pastiche, commodification, incest taboo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Transamerica*, written and directed by Duncan Tucker in 2005, won numerous awards in international festivals, most of them not explicitly dedicated to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transsexual themes. It can be contextualized in the (New) Queer cinema, according to theorists who developed the term, such as B. Ruby Rich ("queer is hot") and Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2006). Understanding Queer as an ideological position which explicitly attempts to subvert hegemonic ideology, *Transamerica* develops its own critique of heteronormativity as one of the main parts of hegemony. Janes Baudrillard (2010: 35) contrasts a classical domination which "imposed a system of positive values," to "contemporary hegemony" in postmodern terms, which "relies on a symbolic liquidation of every possible value."

In this essay, I will demonstrate that *Transamerica* attempts to subvert hegemony rooted in heteronormative ideology, thereby establishing 'queernormativity', a new, ideal realm in which hegemony is still implied. The theoretical justification of this analysis comes from an implicit capacity embodied by the hegemonic system of commodification and incorporation, which establishes a situation in which any attempt to subvert the hegemonic ideology appears insufficient, quickly devoured by a structure that encloses it all.

This new hegemonic configuration (which is no longer the hegemony of capital) has absorbed the negative, negativity as a way of regaining the initiative. . . . the alienated, the

oppressed, and the colonized are siding with the system that holds them hostage. They are now 'annexed', in the literal sense, prisoners of the nexus, of the network, connected for better or worse. (Baudrillard, 2010, 50)

## 2. THEORETICAL BASES

The theoretical bases of the film analysis infer *Transamerica* as a cultural product which coincides with certain elements related to Hollywood narratives. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2009) study formal and narrative choices in film as reinforcing features of the traditional structure of power and oppression, "white patriarchal capitalism". In *Transamerica* this realm is solely depicted as a complete parody. The type of depiction the film embodies about whiteness establishes itself as a hyperreality that works as a "strategy of discrediting, of divesting from reality in the form of parody" (Baudrillard, 2010: 50). Understanding parody as a technique that "seizes on their [styles] idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original" still having "some secret sympathy for the original" (Jameson, 2011: 1035); pastiche implies a loss of reference, a lack of "satirical impulse" within the same imitation.

The concepts of parody and pastiche applied to *Transamerica* draw a line which dissects the film's structural narrative, showing how it portrays a certain alliance of minorities among groups that are considered "Otherness" within the white patriarchal capitalism, although establishing queernormativity ("prisoners of the nexus", as quoted from Baudrillard). The main issue which constitutes itself as norm revolves around the protagonist's own sexuality (her name is Bree Osbourne), whose analysis is presented beyond. According to Judith Butler, gender is a socially constructed performance: not a singular act or "an internal feature of ourselves", but a "repetition and a ritual . . . that we anticipate and produce through certain body-acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures." (Butler, 1990: 11)

Since the socially constructed gender is legitimated within the hegemonic ideology system by sex, taking Judith Butler's work on gender and sex allows an analysis of Bree's identity which shows the film's attempts to both subvert hegemony and creates a new (supposedly queer) one. According to Butler, "Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which sexed nature or a natural sex is produced and established as pre-discursive, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts." (Butler, 1990: 11)

Hence, the frame of references and self-realizations of the main characters are played within queernormativity, "a utopian beyond" (Butler, 1990: 39) freed from heteronormativity since it appears only as parody, not as problematic, which actually "postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself." (Butler, 1990: 40)

Furthermore, the attempts to subvert hegemony is partly subjected to the film's depiction of the incest taboo, since the plot, which will be explained later, is focused on Bree and her son's acknowledgment of each other. According to structuralist and psychoanalyst literature, the incest taboo as a general practice in human societies could imply a "pervasive cultural fantasy" (Lévi-Strauss, cited by Butler, 1990: 53) which presupposes "a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality. A prohibition against some heterosexual unions assumes a taboo against non-heterosexual unions." (Gayle Rubin, cited by Butler, 1990: 94) The incest taboo would originally establish the vehicles to create within a culture conceptions of gender and sex understood as prior to the culture itself, which would rather feed those internalized feelings. "The taboo might be understood to create and sustain the desire for the mother/father as well as the compulsory displacement of that desire." (Butler, 1990: 97) Therefore, one should wonder about what the film lacks, what is beyond that border that can help people to be free. Regarding Stanley Cavell's perspective of ethics on film, the answer revolves around actual acknowledge of the other, realization, empathy; coming from facing a barrier due to "the fact that I cannot reach this realm alone." (Cavell, 1981: 79)

From these theoretical bases, an analysis of the film will be carried out in order to stress queernormativity as an imaginary realm constructed through *Transamerica*.

### 3. FILM ANALYSIS

Bree Osbourne is a male-to-female transgender about to have surgery who, in the journey to Los Angeles, meets her biological son, Toby, an attractive 17 year old hustler with drug problems. These characters, for their actions and stories, exercise subversion on the hegemonic system that itself labels the movie as queer, as mentioned above. That "personal journey towards self- discovery"<sup>1</sup> is materialized in a trip from the East coast to the West coast, where Bree and Toby end up breaking the conflict the film narrates (Toby's ignorance about the identity of his father), and also fulfilling their goals (Toby working in the porn industry, Bree having sex surgery).

The white patriarchal capitalism mentioned above is represented by Bree's family, who do not accept (or do not normalize) her transgender. The vast majority of the other characters belong to different categories. Other members of this society are however neutral: as the police officers or the doctor, who do not judge (perhaps only by the lack itself) Bree anyway. The parody of whiteness can also be seen by how Bree introduces herself to Toby, pretending to be a missionary from the Church of the Potential Father; whose values Bree seems to be actually part of. Nonetheless, should be this type of parody rather become pastiche, in terms of Fredric Jameson? *Transamerica*, stereotyping a specific group of population which has been a main

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<sup>1</sup> That numerous webpages, including Wikipedia, expose -without any source found- as an idea taken from interviews with the film-makers.

theme of the American 20th century mainstream culture, but within a context of queernormativity, suggests a “fragmentation of reality” (Jameson, 2011: 1035) by which isolated groups maintain a socially constructed language.

The (problematic) critique on this old-fashioned hegemonic ideology through pastiche is supported by the narrative and formal importance of minorities, including Bree, a transgender person. Doing this, the film establishes a new ideal system of values in which the characters seem to feel fulfilled, parallel to the resolution of the story. This new system is founded by the alliances of minorities. It is the system of waitresses, Mexicans, native Americans, transgender people, hustlers, and homosexuals (one must say, queers); in opposition to the white stereotype embodied by Bree's family. The alliance of minorities embodies apparently brand-new types of interactions and sets of values. However, its nature regarding a constructed structure of knowledge about reality, along with certain power relations, can be understood as the product of the negotiation between the former hegemonic ideology and Queerness, giving as a result a queernormative system in which power is maintained, and the subversive elements, commodified. Power, understood here as a system of networks in which “individuals ... are the locus where the power and the resistance to it are exerted.” (Sergiu Băla) Throughout the film, the characters possess and exercise their powers over the others. The therapist over Bree, Bree over Toby (and vice versa, since both lie to each other), Bree's parents over Bree. None of them do actually break their boundaries of misunderstanding, do not renounce to the power of not communicating, which will be problematic in relation to self-realization, as I will explain later.

This new system is still a social construct, because it makes uses of stereotypes, which also apply to simple solutions to vital problems; elements we can find within the hegemonic system's cultural products. The fact that the character's sexual orientations are hardly fixed imply a conscious decision of putting that identity in a secondary place, which could be even considered part of queernormativity: sexual orientation does not matter as long as anybody gets what they want.

The social constructions and stereotypes revolve around, again, certain depictions of social groups and subcultures (Mexicans and native Americans; hustlers; transgender people; whites), from which Bree, as mentioned above, is the most outstanding one. Nevertheless, the fact that these minorities are portrayed as allies is problematic; not only because it could easily escape from the diffuse realm of realism, but also because it is a known solution for the problem of “Otherness” within the hegemonic system (tolerance for the Other as long as they keep being the Other). In addition, there is a conscious refusal to deal with problems which actually could question queernormativity: the Mexican restaurant where Bree works is represented as a completely safe space: the film does not include the problems Bree would face trying to get vacation in order to have the surgery. Both refusals to determine sexual orientations and expose daily problems around discrimination stress queernormativity, in which a completely safe space does not allow the questioning of gender since there is nothing to question anymore (otherwise

it would not be a safe space).

Bree is the extreme of this tendency: she performs the most stereotypical ideal of womanhood. What does it mean that the protagonist's film is explicitly reinforcing a binary of genders? Bree is represented throughout the film with pink as her idiosyncratic colour: the *mise-en-scène* is full of pink outfits and make-up, and even Felicity Huffman's performance is absolutely (and brilliantly) pink. How she reacts when interacting with dirt, profanity, or troubles imply a personality easy to relate to the Victorian conceptions of a delicate and innocent woman. This is significant because the protagonist is a stereotype of a certain kind of transgender person, who explicitly needs to have surgery. As a stereotype, even supposed to be needed for narratives, it gives us limited knowledge about a reality (transgender) included in Queerness, although still approaching Queerness as subversion (since the white patriarchal system does not accept her). The stereotype of a certain kind of transgender is being built: a transgender who is simply a transgender, who is not even aware of what gender means. It completely limits the subversive capacity of transgender, since it is depicted in the same terms (stereotypes) that any other reality already embodied in the old paradigm's system. Hence, her unawareness of the "gender trouble" positions her as part of a legitimated world, part of the queernormativity, in which one can be as happy as (people thought they could) in the former system without still getting the truth out of things, without getting themselves free from the bonds of power.

Furthermore, the simple solutions to vital problems (stereotypes of moral responses, in reality) suggest a simplification of life. A simplification implies a reduction, and explanation; a reduction means limiting the layers of an idea. The etymological origin of simple (*simplus*, *simplex*, from Latin) means unfold. One explanation. One side. Both Bree and Toby have different projects that are finally fulfilled at the end of the film, and both characters present a parallel structure of dreams.

Bree wants to have surgery, and Toby wants to work in the Hollywood industry. Actually, what Bree wants is to be a woman. The fact that the surgery is still depicted as the most explicit realization of her dream, implies that this stereotype of transgender is absolutely reinforcing the binaries of gender and sex through the material fulfilment of the embodiment of a gender by adapting the ideology's criteria itself (materializing the dream, literally). One could argue that the film depicts a type of transgender who, for whatever reasons, needs surgery in order to be stable; a reality absolutely legitimate to be portrayed by cinema. Nevertheless, cultural products' readings may be multiple and contradictory, especially within a system that commodifies its culture, as mentioned above.

It is not only that Bree is reinforcing the binary of sexes and genders, but also that the narrative of the film establishes a continuation of a whole set of values that are directly linked to a *modus operandi* we can find in the hegemonic ideology, that of the causes and effects, the solutions, the steps to follow, the actions that are supposed to bring better consequences. Her

fulfilment goes along to know Toby, her son, as the pre-condition to bring to fruition the step that is supposed to make her happy. She has to face her son (which seems pretty obvious and natural for anybody in order to know oneself and try to be happy), and, as a reward given by the therapist, she is going to be able to have surgery. Bree is not satisfied after having surgery because of how badly Toby reacted when Bree told him she was his father. However, a flash forward shows Bree absolutely satisfied within the stabilized “new system”: working happily in the unrealistic Mexican, transgender-friendly restaurant; and meeting Toby in her house, where she plays the role of both the father (having a beer) and the mother (taking Toby's feet off of the table), a kind of ambiguous reconciliation. What really happens in the ellipsis?

Toby follows a similar path: his dream, growing a career in Hollywood (in the porn industry), precedes the encounter with his father, Bree, who breaks the powerful idealization the boy had created around the paternal figure. Toby, unlike Bree, is an outlaw. His problematic behaviour is somehow justified by a troubled past: his father abandoned him, his mother committed suicide, his step-father abused him. He is a drug dealer, a drug addict, a convict, a liar, a hustler; violent, immature, too naïve, too handsome. He belongs to “the Other” for both heteronormative and queernormative worlds. He is not happy nor satisfied; there is hardly a development in his character's personality besides realizing Bree is his father, which does not even lead to a deep relationship with her, only to a weak suggestion of it. Nonetheless, he does not look completely fulfilled at the end of the movie. He is part of a porn film (in which he could not get an erection, or so we see), he agrees to meet Bree. Does he really get his life settled down within the queernormativity? In fact, Toby's relation to both systems is problematic. His naiveté and lack of *common sense* (if he is actually straight, working in the gay porn industry) could suggest that Toby belongs to the Otherness because he is too young, too immature to realize yet. Like in the white patriarchal capitalism, youth is still understood as an undeveloped stage of mind.

In addition, it is also necessary to analyse the film's attempts to cross the border that defines queernormativity. They depart from the East, from which the road trip's colour is clearly the green of the landscape (whose shots get often into the narrative, as reinforcing the normality of the type of interactions narrated). On the other hand, the West is progressively portrayed by landscapes of the desert. The desert in relation to the frontier, which carries a whole imaginary about realization, self-fulfilment, and also wildness in American identity, which contains both the salvation and the punishment: There Bree and Toby lose the car and other material goods, and are forced to stay at Bree's family's house, where Toby finds out Bree is her father/mother. The West is thus re-signified: it is the final goal, but also implies a problematic confrontation with oneself.

The relationship between Bree and Toby gives insights about how the film exposes incest as something implicitly troublesome. Bree, who feels awkward with Toby's attempts to create intimacy, has already seen Toby's nudity. Toby, on the other hand, is the one that breaks the wall of Bree's performance trying to kiss her, which reaches the peak of the conflict, bringing the

turning point of the story. In *Transamerica*, Bree displaces the incestuous desire for Toby as a way of reaffirming and realizing herself. Was the character not able to tell him before for the shame of breaking Toby's idealization of his father (not very strong, since it was not contextualized in a correspondent system of values)? Or was she just as attracted to him as he was attracted to her? Nonetheless, rejecting Toby made explicit a reality that even Toby could suspect before, applying a very fundamental pattern of the hegemonic ideology (the legitimization of the nuclear base, the family, as inherently lacking incestuous relationships) to queernormativity, making Queer a norm, a system of rules, and another structure of power interactions. Toby, who tries to break that barrier, is putted back; his action contextualized in his naivety.

The fact that the pre-condition to the surgery is facing the son suggests that Bree is going to face the cultural nature of her own sex as a male. We find ourselves on the border of queernormativity: there is a step of reality no longer hidden (the desire of switching gender), although the reasons are only suggested by the therapist (she needs to meet her son), as if it was a closed system with no answers. Are transgender people victims of the already-settled binary ideology? Are there not victims at all? Definitely, the certain type of transgender Bree embodies is. The border of queernormativity is normally settled as the simple naming of the real issue, as if that was all one could say about it. Bree cries after surgery, feels that it is not enough. The therapist wonders why she is not satisfied after the surgery, and also seems to understand. As it is said above, flash forward. End of the conflict.

There is an interesting scene in which Bree and Toby stay at a transgender meeting. In that scene, not only most of the characters look happy, but also it is difficult for an average spectator to even apply a certain already-constructed sex or gender (something that we are apparently lead to do) to some of the characters. It is also significant that Toby feels more comfortable in that environment than in any other; especially, more comfortable than Bree, who -due to the fear she feels about Toby finding out she is also transgender- is not able to interact, to get emotionally involved, to start a connection. Bree even stresses that those people "pretend what they are not", performing the role of a conservative woman in a transgender committee, but also expressing insights about herself and her never-faced doubts. None of these transgender characters, nor the topic itself, appear again in the film.

The last characteristic of queernormativity the film embodies as the hegemonic system of values is the way it is framed within a classic structure of happenings: there is an introduction, a conflict, and a resolution; resolution that is followed by a happy ending, in the sense that it openly shows how the characters have settled their lives, fulfilled their dreams (even if the natures of the dreams are completely different from the classic American dreams), and even initiated a starting point in order to know each other. This last point is, again, a border in which the negotiation with the hegemonic ideology stops. The hegemonic ideology does not accept anything beyond this point.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The lack of understanding (factual: both of them hide information from the other, both of them develop sexual feelings they repress) is resolved at the end of the movie as an ellipsis, as if both of them had resolved their interpersonal problems by themselves after Toby found out. Actual acknowledgement appears as a process that never happens in the film, except perhaps in the scene in which Bree's mother protects her when Toby hits Bree. Plus, the fact that what they embody is mostly a mere fulfilment of former dreams shows how far the characters are from freeing themselves through knowledge and introspection, vehicles to get out of an oppressive system, a system that does not easily allow someone to be happy in new, radical, personal, revolutionary conditions. "You have to act in order to make things happen, night and day; and to act from within the world, within your connection with others" (Cavell, 1981: 109) Cavell's idea applied to gender could precede Butler's claim about *real* subversion: "the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seem to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusion of identity." (Butler, 1990: 44)

The movie establishes a negotiation, to sum up, in which the hegemonic system is transformed -depicted as a parody or pastiche-, but also expanded, since it is still hegemonic and everywhere, stereotypical, culturally constructed rather than personally discovered, expanded in a new set of values enclosed in a queernormativity. That is how the hegemonic ideology commodifies a subversive and cultural element, even if the purpose was radically the opposite. By finding the mechanisms the system exercises to embody inherent ideas in intentionally subversive cultural products, we are more able to understand how power works within culture and also within us, whose difficult role resides in the recognition of the power we ourselves have. "Power itself must be abolished- and not solely in the refusal to be dominated, which is at the heart of all traditional struggles- but also, just as violently, in the refusal to dominate. Intelligence cannot, can never be in power because intelligence consists of this double refusal." (Baudrillard, 2010: 47)

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