So never judge a book by its cover
Or who you gonna love by your lover
Love put me wise to her love in disguise
Lord, imagine my surprise….
Oh, he was a lady.

Aerosmith, *(Dude (Looks Like a Lady)), 1994.*

The use of the gender disguise as a narrative device appears as far back as the *Iliad*, when Achilles’ worried mother Thetis dresses her young son in girl’s clothing in an attempt to protect him from his ultimate warrior fate. Through the Elizabethans, most prominently in Shakespeare and beyond, the device has endured, and only gathers more resonance as it appears in cinema, which has the power to visually construct—and then deconstruct—images of gendered bodies to give shape to both conscious and unconscious desires, fears and beliefs about our own sexuality.

The cross-dresser, clinically the *transvestite*, is indeed crossing boundaries— not merely of costume, but more profoundly of hegemonic constructs of masculinity and femininity; thus the act of cross-dressing is a sartorial *transgression* of cultural heterosexual norms which also contains the radical possibility of gender *transformation*. We will see how cinematic cross-dressing in turn creates many cross-conversations involving psychosocial as well as psychoanalytic understandings of gender identity and sexual difference as they intersect still other discourses about gender performance, acting, and masquerade.

Dress is literally a code, one of Umberto Eco’s “intentional” communications which serves as a signifier for how we wish to be “read” in terms of class, generation, politics, and most par-
particularly of gender. And for non-heterosexuals (whom Susan Sontag has included among society’s “creative minorities”) fashion is the sartorial semiotics of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity, as well as a hidden code meant to signal and be interpreted by members of a sexual sub-culture. In a pivotal moment in Von Sternberg’s *Morocco,* when Marlene Dietrich appears on stage dressed in a man’s tuxedo, Dietrich’s costume, much like the monocle or the cigarette, serves as a signifier of sexual ambiguity and her availability to both sexes, even before her subversive action of kissing a woman in the audience takes place on the screen. We might also take a moment here to note the existence of a cross-dressing “double standard” of sorts in cinema. As Mary Ann Doane points out:” Male transvestism is an occasion for laughter; female transvestism only another occasion for desire” *(1982).*

Since the borders of alternative sexualities are so much more fluid and permeable than those of the traditional heterosexual binary, fashion codes are constantly shifting from signifiers of the sexual sub-culture to mainstream appropriation, so that Marlene Dietrich’s or Judy Garland’s top hat and tails or the leather jacket, pierced earring and pastel shirts originally adopted as gay fashion become conventional couture a half-generation later. (Witness the recent phenomenon of the “metrosexual- an urban sophisticate male who carries a pocketbook, has facials, and is into interior design.)

Within this system of vestimentary signifiers, the transvestite occupies a particularly complex space. For one thing, he or she destabilizes not only the conventional gender constructs of “masculine” male and “feminine” female, but also confounds other binaries as well- of gay and straight, of anatomy and sexual orientation, of bimorphisms and polarities of any kind. In fact, the enormous literature emerging from efforts of psychiatrists, sociologists, and political activists to wrestle with differentiating the transvestite from the transsexual from the gender identity-disordered is best understood as what critic Marjory Garber *(1992)* has called a “crisis of category;” these efforts to disentangle the varieties of sexual identity represent an attempt to manage cultural anxiety about alternative sexualities by establishing systems of clinical diagnostic criteria or a fixed gender taxonomy. Nonetheless, confusion and misconceptions abound:
the most frequent of these is the conflation of transvestitism with homosexuality. (In fact the
majority of male transvestites are not homosexual –many are happily married to women–nor are
they to be confused with transsexuals or anatomically transgendered individuals or so-called
 genetic variants of hermaphroditism). Beyond classification, and ultimately central to the repre-
sentation of the cinematic cross-dresser, is how the transvestite through the iconography of dress
plays with the freedom outside of fixed gender representations and identities, and in so doing,
challenges and threatens, delights and arouses--often simultaneously--our own sexual sub-
jectivity.

The notion of play, of illusion, embodied by the cinematic cross-dresser renders gender a
 performative act, the creation of a self through the spectacle of dress. We wear our gender like a
costume, “trying on” different sexual identities and just as quickly discarding them. This gender
masquerade serves to support Judith Butler’s deconstruction of the solidity of the very idea of
gender , which turns out to be something that we do (perform- enact) , not what we are in any
immutable sense. The masquerade of femininity and masculinity deconstructed and “un-done”
culminates in cinematic images of the drag queen, whose exaggerated femininity serves as
parody, self-conscious irony, as well as both commentary and critique of establishment
rejection of gender bending. The parody of drag is not to copy or imitate heterosexuality, but
rather to expose gender as what Butler (1991) calls a “panicked imitation for which there is no
original .”

The gender disguise, through imitation and artifice, must by its very nature include the ele-
ment of deception. Indeed, drag queens, theatrical voguers, and professional entertainment cross-
dressers are referred to as impersonators, illusionists, practitioners of the art of artifice, and their
performances of gender illusions serve to destabilize our expectations: we are surprised, thrown
off balance, and may react with both pleasure and anxiety. But from a psychoanalytic perspec-
tive, we must also consider that films organized around the gender disguise narrative force us to
re-visit our early confrontation with the trauma of sexual difference. During the pre-oedipal
developmental phase we believe we can have both male and female genitalia, only to discover in
the subsequent separation-individuation phase the difference of the opposite sex’s body from our own. We are fascinated, shocked, but also distressed that we must give up the fantasy of “having it all” within our own bodies. Films which let the audience in on the secret of a character’s actual anatomy camouflaged by the gender disguise allow us to return to that early unsettling moment, this time with advance notice and an opportunity to master the anxiety it initially engendered. In mainstream Hollywood comedies like *Tootsie* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*, we laugh at the images of a male “temporary transvestite” who fools the unsuspecting women he is pursuing—or the men who are pursuing him. These popular films thus recreate Freud’s recipe for the dirty joke, whereby the woman (the object of desire and the sexual joke) is absent (from knowledge) while the spectator becomes the person to whom the sexual joke is directed.

No cross-dressing film better represents this psychodynamic function than Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1960), honored as the No. 1 comedy of all time by the American Film Institute. We get our first glimpse of the gender disguise of Jerry and Joe, two marginal musicians on the run from the mob in the roaring 20’s who dress up as girl band members, as they wobble on their high heels in newly-shaven legs rushing to catch their train. The viewer is given no preparation shots; Wilder’s abrupt editing here cuts immediately from Jerry and Joe to their transformation as “Daphne” and “Josephine,” precisely to emphasize the fluidity of their transformation. They are “quick change artists” who magically succeed in the ensuing identity charade. But by using also the camera view from behind, the film invites the spectator “in” on the joke of their true gender identity. In an ensuing scene, again the audience shares the “dirty joke” of Jerry/Daphne’s sexual arousal in bed cuddling with the Sugar, the Marilyn Monroe character, who as the woman is duped by the deception and thus “absent” from the knowledge of the true sexual identity of her bedmate. The cognitive dissonance between Sugar’s “lack” of knowledge and the spectator’s insider position allows us to recuperate our own childhood confusion about sexual difference as we laugh at her ignorance of the joke.

Later in the film, the camera view-from-behind privileges the spectator with foreknowledge of the gender identity revelation that is its narrative climax. We are first pres-
ented with a shot of Josephine/ Joe, wig now askew, his longing gaze at Sugar signalling unambiguous masculine desire, so we can then sit back and laugh knowingly when he kisses her, enjoying the astonishment of all the other characters in the scene who weren’t “in the know.”

The final-- and probably the most famous-- line in the film, “Nobody’s perfect!,” spoken by Daphne’s unflappable lover Osgood, captures Wilder’s cynical view of a world filled with con men and deceivers, but a world which he ultimately accepted with Osgood’s equanimity. More importantly, it suggests this madcap romp through a fantasy world of shifting gender roles and identities in which there are no “perfect” or solid gender categories might serve as a vision of a freer, far less boundaried world of human sexual expression yet to come.

Nonetheless, true to comedic form, traditional order is restored with the revelation of the lovers’ true gender identity; after all, the cross-dressing proved only a strategy for the guy to bed the girl and live happily ever after. In contrast, Neal Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1991) purposefully offers no such reassurance or reaffirmation of traditional gender constructs. Instead, the film is based on a series of deceptions and disguises designed to create disequilibrium. First, it destabilizes the viewer’s expectations of genre by beginning as an “action thriller” (the opening sequences focus on the narrative of IRA terrorists kidnapping a British black soldier in Ireland, and is filled with images of bombs and violence) which transforms abruptly into a “romance” set in a gritty London district. Not only does the protagonist Fergus change his name and his appearance (hair cut- neat shirt) but his expected behavior: instead of a tough IRA guerrilla he reveals himself to be a nurturant lover and compassionate caretaker. Meanwhile Jude, the terrorist brigade’s only female leader, emerges as its most lethal and “macho”— gun or knife in hand as she ruthlessly stalks and murders and menaces, showing no mercy to her victims.

The primary deception (which led to the film’s pre-release promotion about not “telling” the secret) is revealed in the scene when Fergus is confronted with the true nature of his lover’s anatomy. In contrast to the comedic “view- from- behind” discussed earlier, designed to provide narrative closure and re-assurance in the return to socially ordered gender binaries, here the spectator remains until this moment as uncertain about Dil’s sexual identity (in fact she is a biologi-
cal male who identifies as female) as Fergus/Jimmy and thus shares his limited point of view and subjectivity as the camera shoots him lying in dreamy sexual reverie of anticipation on the bed as Dil moves into the bathroom. And it is through his point of view that we share in the film’s revelation, as the camera slowly pans down Dil’s body to the moment of his gaze at the male genitals that concludes the shot. Here again not only Fergus but the spectator is jolted by the rude discovery of sexual difference, visually captured by the film’s abrupt shift in color tones from sensuous red to an aseptic blue while the soundtrack’s soft romantic music stops and is replaced by harsh street noises outside; but this time the shock would appear to be intensified by his revulsion at the awareness of his own possible homoerotic desire. From a psychoanalytic perspective, as Stoller (1975) has pointed out, Fergus is also nauseated and appalled at the image of the phallic woman the transvestite represents, embodying the boy’s childhood fantasy that his mother (i.e. the woman) is not castrated after all, and therefore could threaten and penetrate his vulnerability. The moment also sheds light on the gap between “seeing” and “knowing” not only in the film’s diegetic space, but also in the male child’s early sexual development, where Freud posits that during the boy’s first glance at his mother’s genitals he sees the difference but doesn’t really know its significance until castration anxiety endows it with meaning. Similarly many male audiences claim they never “saw” the shot of Dil’s penis- or insist it must have been a body double inserted into the scene (Gabbard, 2001). Perhaps they are in as much denial as Fergus, who managed to miss the suggestions and clues which precede the traumatic revelation.

Thus the motif of cross-dressing here is used to make the subversive statement that love and intimacy are not necessarily a function of anatomy; and that there need be no proscribed limits about the many ways people express their sexual nature. In the end, the deception of costume leads to more essential truths— that kindness transcends racial, political as well as sexual differences, and that true transformation does not reside in gender assignment. Instead the film offers a transformative vision beyond the constraints of culture—of the freedom to explore all “guises” of sexual expression, new territories and
erogenous “zones” that lie outside the borders of the heterosexual gender binary.

Works Cited


