

Making Trans Cinema: A Roundtable Discussion with Felix Endara, Reina Gossett, Chase Joynt, Jess Mac and Madsen Minax

Moderated and edited by Jules Rosskam

Abstract:

In conversation with Jules Rosskam, trans filmmakers Felix Endara, Chase Joynt, Reina Gossett, Madsen Minax, and Jess Mac explore the contemporary state of trans cinema production, trans methodologies and social practices, the corporeality of cinema, and the relationship between theory and practice. Like somatechnics complicates the term 'body modification,' cinema broadens the ways in which we think and talk about films to include the world around the film – the technologies, power(s), relationships, disciplines, spaces, and techniques. The filmmakers discuss the various ways in which their embodied experiences influence and necessitate particular modes of production, reception, and theorization. There is a dynamic and organic movement between the past, present, and future, between dominant and experimental cinemas; one deeply rooted in the urgent intersectionality of *trans*.

Keywords: trans, cinema, genre, production, aesthetics, experimental film.

Like somatechnics complicated the term 'body modification,' cinema broadens the ways in which we think and talk about films to include the world around the film – the technologies, power(s), relationships, disciplines, spaces, and techniques. In the roundtable below, Felix Endara, Reina Gossett, Chase Joynt, Madsen Minax, and Jess Mac discuss the various ways in which their embodied experiences influence and necessitate particular modes of production, reception,

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and theorization. Felix Endara is an Ecuadorian filmmaker producing short form documentary and narrative works highlighting stories of transformation and resilience; Reina Gossett is an activist, writer and emerging filmmaker whose work emphasizes the ways oppressed people are fighting back, surviving and building strong communities in the face of enormous violence; Chase Joynt is a writer and filmmaker whose work interrogates representations of gender and violence; Jess Mac is an artist and activist deeply invested in supporting queers, feminism, prison abolition and ending white supremacy; Madsen Minax is a filmmaker and multi-disciplinary artist whose projects are concerned with the collective socio-politics and the individual bio-politics of belonging. Throughout their conversation, there is a dynamic and organic movement between the past, present, and future, between dominant and experimental cinemas; one that is deeply rooted in the urgent intersectionality of *trans*.

This roundtable discussion took place between January 2017 and April 2017 through email. The first question was posed privately by the moderator to each member of the group. Subsequent questions were emailed to everyone in a CC email and included each group member's response from the previous question. As the moderator of the group, I carefully pulled together a group of people who I felt accurately represented the wide array of trans identities, experiences, and methodologies alive within contemporary trans cinema.

Over the four months we corresponded, participation levels varied, with some responding to each question and others moving in and out of the conversation. As the moderator, I continue to consider the ways in which my own identity as a white transmasculine person may have contributed to this, as well as the myriad ways in which people's abilities to contribute to the conversation regularly signals perhaps different kinds of agency and varied relationships to cultural and political capital, the need to publish (for those of us in tenure-track positions within academia), the physical and emotional capacity to engage in the prolonged activity of writing, and the energy to contribute to non-paying labor.

Jules Rosskam: *What does it mean to you – personally, politically, intellectually – to theorize trans cinema production and reception? Are there specific theories you find particularly exciting or useful in your own work?*

Felix Endara: I don't 'theorize' my own film output. I left academia behind many years ago, but as a student I took the requisite classes in feminist film theory, and became familiar with the 'male gaze' (2009).

I experimented with different techniques to disrupt this optic ownership; sometimes with some success (meaning, I liked the visual/message results). But ultimately, I always returned to Hollywood and the pleasure of pop culture. I don't believe in the high culture/low culture binary because it's elitist, and I embody an intersectional life. I don't want to deploy my energy and labor towards making challenging experimental work anymore, which can in itself also be elitist. So I purposefully choose to work in genre (such as porn), and other easily consumable products (that are also easy on a self-financed filmmaker's budget), such as short documentary and short narrative. My political and commercial goals dictate that I engage broad(er) audiences and to do so, I want to make work that entertains and educates. Most importantly, I want audiences to connect and make connections.

Reina Gossett: For much of my life I worked as a grassroots community organizer. The kind of community organizing I did was around really basic survival needs: stopping deportations, imprisonment and policing while increasing access to things like healthcare, welfare and legal support. The principle driving my work continues to be that people most affected by multiple forms of violence are powerful and capable of shaping the world and each other, and should be at the center of social change.

One challenge of being alive in this moment as a disabled black trans woman and doing this kind of social change work is that I was constantly surrounded by violence and death, so many of the people I knew and cared about are no longer alive. Statistically hate violence, especially against trans people of color is at a historic all time high. Being around so much violence left me really burnt out and desirous of other ways to continue to change the world.

Right now, that means focusing on my artistic and spiritual practice. As a writer and an emergent filmmaker my work focuses on bringing the people who are in the background to the foreground while trying to represent all our beauty and power. This means coming to the understanding that things like aesthetics, self-fashioning and glamour are deeply important qualities to me and to the cinema I am a part of. My work is produced in what I seek to reproduce.

Jess Mac: I don't know that I specifically think about theorizing trans cinema. My practice covers a wide array of mediums and topics that are all informed by my politics and identity, which includes trans representation, but has a more intersectional approach. That being

said I have been hyper aware of trans representation in mainstream media since the 90s, and early on was informed by gender bending I saw in music videos of the 80s.

Madsen Minax: Theory is overrated; it sucks the life force out of the act of making. It takes the gestural, the contingent, the inexpressible and attempts to render it legitimate through language. In my experience, contemporary artists use theory as a means to side-step intuition.

I don't know exactly what trans cinema is. Is it cinema that portrays trans bodies? Is it cinema that specifically (and usually literally) addresses a trans narrative? Is it cinema that is made by a trans person but maybe the content doesn't have anything to do with trans identity? Is it cinema that broadly challenges normative gender presentation?

In terms of reception, the world is still pretty hung up on trans narratives. By which I mean stories that outline how a person transitions, or stories that assume a person's transness is the central marker of their personhood. For example, a story about a transperson's love life (or ho life) is more appealing than a story about a trans person whose transness is never overtly addressed in relation to struggle. This is what I assume most people are calling 'trans cinema,' which I don't make. My disinterest in making this kind of work means that my work often falls outside of what is readily called or considered 'trans cinema.' I make trans films where transness is sometimes never addressed. Which sort of folds back on this theory thing: It isn't rendered legitimate (real) unless it is put into codified language. My work is often seen as 'not trans enough' because I do not assign a linguistic or referential identity marker to the body.

All of this said, I think about theory all the time. I am most interested in theory that can actively engage in some kind of a poetic. For example, I'd prefer to read Maggie Nelson over Sara Ahmed (who I also love; no shade). I think Felix's point about difficult experimental work having its own kind of elitism is something I think about a lot, because I make difficult experimental work! I love making the kind of work that really challenges my head and heart. But I also know that my work will not be accessible to everyone. Sometimes this inaccessibility has more to do with passive viewership (vs. active viewership) than it has to do with theory.

I understand my work to be informed by feminist theory, social theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory (specifically as it relates to the death drive), and film and media history. Corporeal existence and film are

inextricably linked as polar projections, one occupying a ‘real’ space and one occupying an ‘imagined’ space, on the temporal plane. My core interest is in time travel. Time moves, film moves, bodies move. Arguably forward. But by manipulating moving images we can make past perfect futures, bring back the dead, repeat a single moment indefinitely, and there is a very Western, capitalist, and imperialist drive buried in that desire to do so. It implies an ownership of and a power over the ephemeral.

Chase Joynt: I’ve long been inspired by the call made by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore to move beyond discussions of ‘trans-’ centered exclusively on gender (2008). I don’t interpret their proposal to *move beyond* to mean *move away from*, but rather to *move with* trans – toward new analytic, interpretive and intersectional possibilities. I recently finished reading Angela Davis’ *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016) wherein she argues for an understanding of intersectionality that extends beyond bodies toward social movements. What can Palestinian solidarity learn from Black Lives Matter and vice versa? I consider her charge when I ask: How can theorizing trans cultural production move beyond stable categorization to enable new pathways for creative and critical inquiry about violence and marginalized people? There are many people asking these questions. Right now I’m paying close attention to new work by Jasbir Puar and C. Riley Snorton.

Jules Roskam: *What strategies or practices are you using, inventing, or dreaming up to create your work?*

Chase Joynt: My current film project *Framing Agnes* envisions a cinematic world for hidden and untold archival histories. Here, I align my work with many artists who challenge assumed understandings of historical truth through artistic intervention. Resonant examples include Walid Raad’s *The Atlas Group* (2006), an aesthetic and spatial exploration of Lebanon’s war history, and Sarah Schulman and Stephen Winters’ *Jason and Shirley* (2015), a timely re-imagination of Shirley Clarke’s now infamous documentary *Portrait of Jason* (1967). Though I haven’t seen it yet, I know Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel’s forthcoming film, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* will soon be part of this collection. In each of these cases, artists are subverting the pervasive power of the dominant narrative through aesthetic means. As method, this kind of re-fashioning and re-enactment affords spectators an ability to look back at a lack.

Reina's motivation to bring 'the people who are in the background to the foreground' and Felix' attention to audience and access feel like methodological tools for asking similar questions: Who dominates any given representative field, and why? In what ways can art and activism – and art *as* activism – inspire critical, alternative and imaginative possibilities? Madsen's refusal to replicate a legible trans narrative, and Jess' inability to determine clear boundaries for the field remind me of José Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia* when he says 'Queerness is not yet here' (2009: 1). Reading their words reminds me that transness is – quite necessarily – not yet here, either.

Madsen Minax: I'm thinking a lot about magic, fantasy, day and night dreams, the violence of erotics, and how time and 'progress' march on through ideology (religion, the prison system, labor politics, etc.). Part of it is escapist and/or part of a utopian imaginary. Part is grounded in day-to-day existence and the reality of current human struggles.

I use found footage/the archive, animation, essay (as on-screen text and voice), performance documentation, music and audio to make my projects, most of which are considered experimental or video art. My conceptual methodology is GUTS. Make it so visceral, so emotional, so challenging, so unpredictable, so subtle, and still so real. Yes, I would spit into my lovers' mouth in real life. Why not put that on screen? In a short video I made in 2014 called *My Most Handsome Monster*, there is a close-up of two lovers in a racially charged BDSM scenario and the white top spits in the black bottom's mouth. Viewers interpret it as fantastical, or disturbing, or re-inscribing, or offensive or hot. And maybe it was all of those, but it was also real.

Felix Endara: My strategy is for the content of my films/art to be accessible. That in the mode of production, I engage in some form of mentorship and/or capacity-building with my collaborators (and this is a two-way relationship where the knowledge/learning flows many ways), especially as it pertains to nurturing QPOC talent. For example, in the *UNTITLED NAMES PROJECT*, one of my production assistants was a young non-binary POC who is studying film at school. While recognizing that I didn't have a budget that allowed me to pay crew, the exchange for me was that I would mentor them – by reviewing and advising on their film project, and making sure that their participation wasn't limited to running errands (as many PA gigs go), but rather that their tasks were substantive (taking still images, offering feedback on trailer, etc.). What I gained is that I became more deliberate and

thoughtful in what I shared with them of the process – so I wasn't just requesting assistance but was offering the 'why' of each task. I also recommended them for production assistance gigs that were paid.

I also advocate for trans folks to be agents in the production/reproduction of our images – not just subject matter or characters. By this I mean the current trend of trans visibility where it's surface level, and not real power-sharing (e.g. trans people directing, receiving grants, awards, residencies, etc.).

Jess Mac: My current practice includes gif-making and distribution of politicized images via Tumblr, as well as anonymous collective work that critiques the position of the art world and identity constructs within neoliberal capitalism and law. I have also participated in the AIDS ACTION NOW! POSTER/virus series, making work against the criminalization of HIV in Canada. With *Where We Were Not: Alexis' Story* I built on a longstanding friendship and collaboration with Alexis Young, a two-spirited Indigenous woman. In the video she tells the story of being taken on a 'starlight tour' by Saskatchewan police and left for dead. Alexis is an incredible storyteller and I illustrated her words with a combination of animation and found super 8 footage. The idea was to create a space for the audience to imagine and feel the ongoing genocide against Indigenous peoples, and more specifically the strength and resilience of this transgender woman within a corrupt justice system.

Jules Rosskam: *Do media formats and particular film genres attend to gender differentially? If so, which seem most amenable to trans viewing practices, or practices of transformative embodying?*

Chase Joynt: I think there are many useful comparisons between treatments of genre and treatments of gender (not to mention ample spellcheck opportunities). If we consider genre to be a recognized set of bounded, stylistic conventions, that when referenced by others produce a set of routinized associations or assumptions, we can see how gender is often considered in similar terms. Both gender and genre produce aesthetics and assumptions. For all the ways we think we know something about a person when they say, 'I like romantic comedies' – long live *Notting Hill* (Roger Mitchell, 1999) – we also tend to make conclusions when someone says, 'I like girls.'

Your question immediately inspires thoughts of the experimental, responsive, cinematic traditions born of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s – some of which are now referred to as New Queer Cinema.

I'm thinking specifically about work by Marlon Riggs, Derek Jarman, Cheryl Dunye, and Gregg Araki. In each case, we see the manipulation of genre conventions by queer and racialized media-makers – often through performance for the camera – as a method of political defiance. The democratization of technology – here defined as the movement of previously inaccessible professional formats and skills into the hands of the masses – has dramatically shifted the landscape of cultural production for minority communities. In the context of media-making by and about gender non-conforming people, we can look to YouTube and Tumblr as newer formats of community creation and connection, or to the recent trend of online crowd-funding as a way to realize projects outside the scope of industrial financing streams. In my opinion, 'attending to gender' in this context becomes a conversation about attending to access.

Felix Endara: Different genres can certainly aim to address different genders, at least in superficial ways. To wit: war and action appeal to young males; romantic comedies to middle-aged females (I'm only half-joking). I'm an unashamed fan of horror. Because it is treated as an abject genre anyway, and storylines are focused on the body – the grotesque body – I find it addresses me as a trans audience member. What is more emblematic of trans masculine experience than werewolf movies? I'm less interested in how it appears to penalize assertive sexuality. Because it is a neglected, bastard genre, it takes risks in how it handles gender and social relations. Some folks would ascribe similar properties to science fiction – I'm just not as interested in outer space or fantasy.

Madsen Minax: I love mixing formats, but feel like that's really an aesthetic, material impulse more than it is a theoretical gesture; a desire to see different textures engage each other. If I was to theorize it, I might frame it in terms of nostalgia for a former self or a former way of being. Especially when engaging multiple formats that visually reflect distinct time periods, which all formats do – mini DV tape looks like a specific moment in time, as do VHS, super 8, etc.

In terms of genre I have to go with the obvious: sci-fi. It is a genre that lends itself fully to the realm of imagination, where anything that can be envisioned, projected and constructed can be real, can be valid. In an imagined universe of cyborgs, a cyborg body is normal. Using the genre of sci-fi as a theoretical springboard has allowed me to construct the universes in which my films exist. I can construct a reality in which whatever I want to be real, is real. I don't have to play by the social laws

or physical properties of a gendered socialization, normative codes of ethics, chemistry, chronology, temporality, or gravity.

Jules Rosskam: *How are bodies like cinema? And how does cinema produce (and re-produce) particular bodies?*

Madsen Minax: Bodies are inherently cinematic. Or maybe cinema is inherently corporeal. I think Susan Stryker sums it up best when she talks about the notion of the cut as a rupture, a stop/start. It suggests that we have the power to manipulate our bodies as an editor manipulates film. We piece ourselves together how we see fit, whether that is physically Frankensteining or psycho-emotional transformation. I think Stryker's interest has to do more with the flesh, but I think psychological rupture is inseparable from physical rupture. The trans body in particular has a tenuous relationship with its own history. For example, if you refer to someone who has 'transitioned' in the past tense, which pronoun do you use? For most of us there is an obvious answer. But for folks outside of trans communities, this notion of an incongruent past, or an inconsistent present even, is troublesome.

In this way our bodies are the very essence of science fiction: incongruent pasts, indeterminable futures, unlocatable presents. We twist our own temporalities like Doc Brown's time continuum disruption (*Back to the Future* [Robert Zemeckis, 1985]) – making our own alternate timelines left and right as we make decisions in the present that scatter the reference points of the past. This sense of an a-temporal personhood is akin to the fact that cinema is always showing us something that *has been*, has already happened, even when it bills itself as the future.

The question of how cinema produces and reproduces particular bodies feels very different to me than the question of how bodies are like cinema. The former has a built-in power dynamic that relates directly to cinema as an institution. The institution of cinema dictates, hierarchically, what bodies on screens should look like. It is constantly re-enforcing mainstream politics and beauty standards even as it claims to be expanding them: this includes whitewashing, casting POC actors to play secondary characters, casting cis actors to play trans characters, casting fat folks to play roles that involve zero erotic identity, etc.

In terms of individual development, this conversation returns us to Guy Debord's 1994 question, do we invent cinema (media) or does it invent us? Are our existences based on the things we have seen during our lives? Or do we come from some kind of guttural, intuitive human

ethos (maybe even a collective consciousness or ancestral memory)? That feels a bit romantic for me, but I would like to think I'm more than just a construction. I would like to think there is an interweaving at play between input and output signals.

Felix Endara: Bodies are like cinema in that they are representation – what you see is what you get. Our bodies showcase physically what we construct – whether that is what we build at the gym, with diet, and/or with clothing, speech, and gesture. This isn't to say that bodies are only representation, to be clear. Cinema reproduces certain bodies in choosing who it highlights and how. For example, I see the work of some white trans masculine filmmakers, and they exclusively feature homonormative bodies (e.g., white, young, able-bodied, post-surgery and post-hormone, lean) placed in situations that seemingly ALL trans folks face. In turn, this type of work is lifted in the mainstream as voicing the concerns of a perceived unified trans community. The mainstream anoints spokespeople for a movement, while excluding the voices – bodies – of the folks who are on the front lines of the struggles of the trans community/ties. Trans women of color are dying and we organize around putting a white trans guy on the cover of *Men's Health* magazine.

Chase Joynt: I'd like to take up these questions by proposing Jess Mac's animated documentary, *Where We Were Not: Alexis' Story* (2011) and Jules Roskam's hybrid-doc *against a trans narrative* (2008) as urgent examples of moving-image that each produce trans-specific bodies through trans-oriented methods. Documentary theorists have long insisted that non-fiction projects be dependent on indexical relationships between images and events, therefore animation (*Where We Were Not*) and performance for – and of – the camera (*against a trans narrative*) propose challenges to many assumed generic ontologies. In the case of these films, animation and performance become epistemological projects that reveal depth and context to viewers far beyond the scope of live-action. It is here – in the 'beyond the scope' – that I locate the methodological orientations of both MacCormack's and Roskam's work. *Where We Were Not* mobilizes collaboration as a mode of defiance to disrupt colonial histories of authorship, while *against a trans narrative* makes visible the ways in which any attempt at self and/or community narration is intrinsically uneven and therefore demanding of refined sociopolitical and subjective attention. Returning to the question, 'How are bodies like cinema?' I see both as being reliant upon – and therefore trapped by – form. Transness, and its methodological next-of-kin

hybrid-practice, open up new pathways and potentials for lived and creative experience.

Jules Rosskam: *Since cinema is a place of imagination, I would like to end this conversation by asking you all to imagine the future of trans cinema (whatever you perceive that to mean). If we had this conversation again in twenty years, what do you hope we'll be talking about? What kinds of films do you hope to have made and seen in that time?*

Madsen Minax: This question feels impossible to answer. Any answer I give will tell us more about the current (now past/past again) moment than the future. I hope to see films that are not 'interesting,' as in made by a cis person who is just so darn interested in portraying the 'trans experience.' I would like for that to disappear entirely. As the hipness of 'trans' loses its shiny glow, as Chaz Bono and Laverne Cox become less exceptional, it may become possible for transness to take up space on screen differently. But this challenge is impossible to imagine because I can only base its projection on what I have seen henceforth, which is either invisibility or spectacularization (so long as it fits within a clearly defined narrative that addresses transition overtly). Neither of which I prefer. Yet I also don't prefer some kind of quiet integration. But these things (fights) don't really ever happen quietly.

I want to imagine a cinema wherein embodied experiences (trans, cis, brown, differently abled, etc.) are inherently valid and offer a widening of human perception; holistically so. Under the weight of consumer capitalism, American exceptionalism, the politics of representation, and the general lack of human compassion that comprises the present moment, most of me doubts that this is possible. I guess that's why it is utopic. It feels wonderful to imagine. And maybe a small kind of imagining renders it real. In twenty years, I hope we'll be talking about patience. I hope that the allegiances and collectives we will have built will have led us to embrace each other in a macro and meta sense. And in twenty years, I'm sure I'll be embarrassed of this response.

I hope to see films that are not afraid of genitals, of connection, of embrace, be widely accessible. I would like to see venues that actually want to show work because it is queer in its bones, and not because a well-connected straight white cis filmmaker got the great idea to make a film about brown lesbians. I want work to be allowed to make people upset and/or offend them. I think that offense is necessary and immanent, that boundary pushing is critical. It reminds us that embodied experiences cannot be essentialized within a rubric of

acceptable representation and unacceptable representation. This feels like an old point, yet also very of the moment.

In terms of the kinds of films that ‘get seen,’ I have to bring up programming here. So much of what gets seen is filtered through preference, allegiance, social capital, consumer capital and passive viewership: that is, the inability to sit with and really consider work that is difficult to place within a pre-existing framework. If programmers cannot understand a film within an existing set of parameters, it will not be seen. The film festivals of Gregg Araki’s heyday, when underground really meant underground, are gone. Now we have LGBT film festivals that essentially program straight films with gay characters. There is a look, a feel, an approach to cinema that must be followed. If it doesn’t the work will not be shown at LGBT film festivals (unless perhaps you have a well-connected publicist), which poses a barrier in reaching the communities we are a part of. Amazing, boundary-pushing, genre-redefining films are being made every day, yet very few of us (let alone the general population) will see them. It is my hope that within twenty years LGBT film festivals will have thrown out whatever ancient patriarchal handbook they are following that defines good and bad cinema and embraced the strange, the unclassifiable, the difficult, the clunky, the edge-pushers so that we can see those films.

Chase Joynt: Part of Madsen’s response to the question, ‘*How are bodies like cinema?*’ – ‘cinema is always showing us something that *has been*, has already happened, even when it bills itself as the future’ – reminds me of Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983). In the 2013 introduction to a *Women & Performance* special dossier on the film, Craig Willse and Dean Spade ask, ‘What futures does the film help us envision, and what actually existing political and social conditions does it document, including forms of activism and debates within activist communities?’ (2013: 4) I have similar hopes and questions about the future – and present – of trans cinema(s). What will end up being the cinematic texts that offer us both present documentary-driven worlds and speculative, fictional futures?

Felix Endara: The future of trans cinema is a pie-in-the-sky question; one that is intrinsically linked to a cinema of resistance and liberation because it’s difficult to think of the next twenty years when every day is a triumph in surviving a (presumable) four-year Trump term. Trans cinema is intersectional, so it’s never just about being ‘trans.’ In fact, trans is a lens and not a narrative or plot device. It recognizes and

celebrates difference, while aiming towards equity. Trans cinema will not always need to be produced by trans makers, but we must always have a hand in it. So not necessarily 'by us,' but always 'with us.' What this means is that cisgender filmmakers go through the hard work of examining why they want to tell our stories when they haven't exhausted their own yet. As for what kind of trans cinema I want to see...I'm hoping for the trans *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985).

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